



Freedom of Religion & Belief

In America, we respect all religious beliefs, but we are not governed by them. The ACLU has worked since its inception to ensure that religion remains the purview of individuals, families, and religious communities, and that Americans have the right to practice their religious beliefs in public and in private. We seek to guarantee that all people are free to follow and practice their faith—or no faith at all—without governmental influence or interference, and that the government neither prefers religion over non-religion nor favors particular faiths over others. Our work currently focuses on preventing the government from sponsoring religion, ensuring that taxpayer funds are not used to conduct or support religious activities, and protecting everyone’s right to practice their religion without governmental interference.

The Evolution of “Intelligent Design”

As teachers at Pennsylvania’s Dover High School, Bryan and Christy Rehm were shocked by their school board’s plans to require science classes to include lessons on “intelligent design,” a modern-day version of creationism. The Rehms, whose children attended Dover schools, were active church members and ran a summer Bible camp—but that didn’t mean they wanted the school injecting religious beliefs into a science classroom.

Tensions mounted after the Rehms joined the ACLU’s challenge to the policy; previously friendly neighbors called them atheists— “with a lot of words added on,” Bryan Rehm testified in court. Another parent in the lawsuit received a death threat. They were vindicated in December 2005, when a judge found that the school board had acted to promote its own religious views rather than advance science education.

The Dover case harkens back to the famous Scopes “monkey trial,” the ACLU’s challenge to Tennessee’s ban against teaching evolution. Attempts to inject religion into science classrooms have continued over the years, from the promotion of “creationism” as a valid scientific theory in the 1970s and 1980s to more recent efforts to validate “intelligent design.” The ACLU recently helped defeat anti-evolution bills in Kentucky, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Missouri; however, religious groups are unflagging in their efforts to force religious doctrine into the classroom.



Bryan Rehm (right) challenged the teaching of intelligent design at a rural Pennsylvania public school. (Photo: Ryan Donnell Photography, LLC)

Keeping Church and State Separate

The founders of our nation strongly believed that government, whether on the national or local level, should not become involved—in any way—in religious activities. But even they could not have imagined the onslaught the church-state barrier would face in modern times.

In public schools, officials seek to promote religion via school-sponsored prayers, the teaching of creationism, and Bible distribution to young children. In the public square, communities battle over Ten Commandments monuments, Christian crosses, and nativity scenes. In government-funded social service programs, supporters insist that “faith-based” groups be allowed to discriminate in hiring using taxpayer dollars. And, in a new twist, institutions and individuals cite religious objections as a basis for flouting anti-discrimination laws and other protected liberties. For example, some pharmacists say filling birth control prescriptions would compromise their religious beliefs, and some counselors-in-training claim religious objections to counseling lesbian or gay people because doing so would affirm acts they view as immoral.

In combating these efforts to tear down the wall between church and state, the ACLU has won groundbreaking victories, set important precedents, and reinforced existing protections. In the face of old and new challenges, we continue to advocate vigorously to protect the most fundamental of our Constitutional rights.

Defending Freedom of Religion and Belief

- In one of the most sensational cases of the 20th century, the ACLU came to the defense of high school biology teacher John Scopes in 1925 after he defied Tennessee’s statewide ban on teaching Darwin’s theory of evolution. Forty-three years later, the ACLU defended Arkansas biology teacher Susan Epperson in the U.S. Supreme Court, winning an historic ruling in 1968 that struck down all state bans on the teaching of evolution.
- The ACLU defended Jehovah’s Witness children who declined to recite the Pledge of Allegiance under threat of expulsion because it conflicted with their faith. The U. S. Supreme Court’s 1943 ruling in favor of the children set an important precedent.
- In 1962, the ACLU represented New York students and parents to challenge an official “nondenominational” prayer, winning a landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling that banned government-sponsored prayer in public schools.
- In the decade since 9/11, the ACLU has challenged anti-Muslim discrimination, winning multiple cases on behalf of Muslims wrongly denied the opportunity to open prayer centers or challenged for wearing religious garb on the job or in public facilities. We also defeated Oklahoma’s anti-Sharia law—an unconstitutional measure serving no other purpose than to further demonize Muslims.

Would there even be a controversy if this weren't a mosque?

51 Park Place

In America, religious freedom knows no boundaries.

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