

the government promote religion so long as it does not promote one religion over another?

Not having religion is a decision about religion, even though it is not a religion in and of itself. For this reason, atheism should be protected under the Constitution even though it is not a religion. Similarly, if there were a constitutional requirement that the government not interfere with individuals' choice of a car, the government could not pass a law requiring people to purchase a car, since having no car is a legitimate automobile choice.



# IS ATHEISM A RELIGION?

A Question of Moral Atheism

from *blog.iamanatheist.com*



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If atheism is not a religion, is it protected by the U.S. Constitution, which bans the government from making laws concerning the establishment of religion? Or may

about the universe's purpose is that there isn't one. has been given to the universe, so the atheist belief also a religion. Atheists do not believe that a purpose not be a religion on these grounds unless science is cause and nature of the universe, so atheism would *universe*. Atheists generally stick with science on the

## LEGAL ISSUES

and that clearly would be problematic.

- *A moral code*. Atheism does not have a moral code of its own. Such things are up to the individual atheist.
- *Devotional and ritual observances*. Atheists have no being to be devotional to, but some do participate in ritual observances as part of their culture or for a feeling of community.
- *Creation of a superhuman agency*. Not something an atheist believes in.

Let's start with what religion is. Dictionary.com defines religion as, "a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, esp. when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs."  
Let's take these elements one at a time.  
• *A set of beliefs*. Atheism is the lack of belief in a deity and nothing more. If it is a set of beliefs, it is an empty set.  
• *Concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe*. Atheists generally stick with science on the

**I**S ATHEISM A religion? Can atheists speak against religion without speaking against themselves? If atheism is not a religion, is it still legally protected?

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- *A set of beliefs.* Atheism is the lack of belief in a deity and nothing more. If it is a set of beliefs, it is an empty set.
- *Concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe.* Atheists generally stick with science on the cause and nature of the universe, so atheism would not be a religion on these grounds unless science is also a religion. Atheists do not believe that a purpose has been given to the universe, so the atheist belief about the universe's purpose is that there isn't one.

- *Creation of a superhuman agency.* Not something an atheist believes in.
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Because atheism fails to meet most of the criteria in the definition of a religion, it would seem to not be a religion. The only way to consider atheism a religion would be to define religion as any set of beliefs about the nature of the universe, no matter where they come from. But to do that would be to invite the possibility of astronomy or physics being classified as a religion, and that clearly would be problematic.

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# QUESTIONS OF MORAL ATHEISM: INSTRUCTIONS

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1. Print pages one and two of this document, one on each side of the same piece of paper (if you don't have access to a duplex printer, print page one, put the page back in the paper tray upside down, and print page two — depending on the type of printer, you may have to experiment a bit).
2. Cut the printout in two, using the thin rules across the middle of the page as a guide.
3. Fold the two pieces of paper in half, making a pair of small pamphlets.
4. Keep one of the pamphlets to read, and give the other away to an interested friend or stranger.

That's it! If you have any questions, suggestions, or comments, we invite you to share them by leaving a comment on [blog.iamanatheist.org](http://blog.iamanatheist.org). Thanks!

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