

Religion v. religions

By [Matt Hedstrom](#)

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When scholars of religion are feeling provocative, they like to point out that there is no such thing as “religion”—only “religions.” Like language, religion cannot be merely an abstraction; it must always be expressed in a particular way. When one is acting religiously, one is inevitably doing religion in a specific, culturally determined manner, as a Lutheran or Zen Buddhist or Reform Jew.

An upcoming Supreme Court case about prayer at local government meetings brings this point to mind. The case involves the Town of Greece, New York, which has since 1999 invited a local minister to [open its monthly meeting with a prayer](#). In 2008 two residents—one Jewish and one atheist—sued, arguing that such prayers violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. (The fact that Christians had been invited to offer the vast majority of such prayers did not help the Town’s case.)

The Second Circuit Court of Appeals ruled last year in favor of the plaintiffs, and the case now heads to the Supreme Court. The Obama Administration and the Congress have, remarkably, each filed briefs [supporting the Town](#).

So has the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the ERLC brief gets at the question of *Religion v. Religions*. It [claims](#) that the Second Circuit’s requirement that any further legislative prayer in Greece adopt a “perspective that is substantially neutral amongst creeds” is impossible. Such a prayer, the Baptists contend, would amount to state-sponsored Unitarianism.

In other words, *all* religion is a religion of one sort or another. The Baptists have simply given a name to the proposed government-issued religion. “We shouldn’t have a state-sponsored Baptist church, I agree,” said ERLC President Russell D. Moore, “but we shouldn’t have a state-sponsored Unitarian church either, and that’s what some are attempting.”

Peanut-gallery critics might quip that contemporary Unitarianism would more likely include an interpretive dance than a prayer, but the question remains: is *all* religion a religion? Do the supposedly neutral prayers and invocations, and even moments of

silence, that mark many state-sponsored functions in the United States amount to an establishment of religious liberalism?

It's a question with significant historical resonances. As Stephen Prothero recently reminded me, many evangelicals and fundamentalists actually supported—for this very reason—the landmark 1962 Supreme Court ruling in *Engel v. Vitale*, which banned school-sponsored prayer. Fundamentalist leader Carl McIntire made this point clearly: “Prayer itself without the name of Jesus Christ”—whom the [prayer in question](#) did not name—“was not non-denominational prayer—it was simply a pagan prayer.”

McIntire continued: “No Government agency or power in the United States can be used to establish a religion.” Prayer without Jesus represented a religious orientation, one McIntire found objectionable.

The pejorative terms used by conservative critics may have changed—“pagan” has been softened to “Unitarian”—but the argument remains: there is no religion-in-general. Whether called paganism or Unitarianism or, as scholars often prefer, ceremonial deism, the religion of American public life—the religion McIntire despised and the Second Circuit advocates—is a religion too, these critics contend.

They have a good point. The roots of American religion-in-general are found within a religious tradition: religious liberalism. In its various forms, American religious liberalism stems from the ambition to adapt faith traditions to the conditions of modern life, whether that means to advancements in science and biblical criticism or to growing social diversity. One common tactic of this accommodation has been to strip religion down to its core. Friedrich Schleiermacher located this core in religious emotions; William James looked to personal religious experience. One thing liberals have generally agreed on is that traditional dogma was not the answer. In a famous 1922 sermon, Harry Emerson Fosdick blasted fundamentalists for their obsession with “the tiddlywinks and peccadillos of religion.”

The proposal of the Southern Baptists and the Obama Administration is to let the local clergy pray, each in his or her own specific way—yet the track record shows the limits of this come-one, come-all civic tolerance. Christianity predominates. But the Second Circuit's proposal—that the Town of Greece establish something in the lineage of Schleiermacher and James and Fosdick—seems no better.

More than 200 years ago, Baptist leaders and Thomas Jefferson worked together to lay the legal foundations of religious freedom in the new United States. Though Jefferson famously [claimed that one day Unitarianism would become the dominant religion in America](#), historians have generally recognized that the Baptists got the better of the deal. That matter is now before the Court.

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