

Is having 'In God We Trust' on U.S. currency unconstitutional?

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) An atheist activist wants to remove the phrase, “In God We Trust,” from U.S. currency, and he plans to take his case to court.

Michael Newdow, who in 2004 unsuccessfully sued his daughter’s school district over the words “under God” in the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance, said he will use the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act as the basis of a series of lawsuits against the motto printed on U.S. coins and paper bills. His efforts, while singular, reflect a growing push for tolerance by the nation’s atheist and religiously unaffiliated populations, who are among the least accepted groups in American society today.

About 40 percent of Americans responded in the negative when asked how they viewed atheists. One survey found that more Americans would vote for an adulterous candidate than an atheist one. Eight states have laws that technically ban atheists from holding office—and while a 1961 Supreme Court ruling prevents these laws from being enforced, there are no openly atheist members of Congress.

“Like a light switch, it’s, ‘You’re immoral, you’re gonna raise evil children, you’re a bad parent,’” Todd Stiefel, a former Catholic who now leads a nationwide campaign called Openly Secular, told CBS News in April. “They’re questioning your whole existence. It’s painful. It’s discrimination.”

In March, atheists scored a victory at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington, where they occupied an exhibitor’s booth and had a representative address the assembly for the first time. Less than a month later, lawmakers in Madison, Wisconsin, voted to include atheists in the city’s list of protected classes. Other groups have also taken up Newdow’s previous cause in protesting the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Lately, however, Newdow’s mind is on money. In a post for the blog “The Friendly Atheist” he invoked the RFRA clause that lets government put a substantial burden

on religious activity only when that burden furthers “a compelling governmental interest.”

“There is obviously no compelling government interest in having ‘In God We Trust’ on our money,” Newdow wrote.

He added:

We did fine for the 75 years before the phrase was ever used at all, and continued to do fine for the subsequent 102 years before such inscriptions were made mandatory on every coin and currency bill. Similarly, the vast majority of nations manage to function without religious verbiage on their money.

"In God We Trust" did not appear in American currency until the 1860s, when it was introduced into American coinage as a response to increased religious sentiment during the Civil War, according to the Department of Treasury. In 1956, Congress passed a resolution, approved by the president, making the phrase the official national motto. The first paper bills bearing the new motto entered circulation the following year.

Newdow plans to file lawsuits in seven federal court circuits using the RFRA claim as the lead argument and has urged interested parties to participate as plaintiffs for these cases.

While Newdow’s use of RFRA as a defense against religion is a new tactic, his historical argument is not. Atheists have repeatedly noted that the original Pledge of Allegiance did not contain the words “under God,” which was added in 1954.

When atheists in Massachusetts sued to declare the phrase discriminatory last year, defense attorney Eric Rassbach disagreed, saying that the bar needs to be set high for what is considered discrimination.

“Someone is always going to object to something the government is saying,” he said. “It doesn’t mean they get to decide what the rule is for everybody else. Then it turns into minority rule, instead of majority rule.”