

Texas flip-flop: UUA is church after all: Unitarian Universalists win tax exemption

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The Unitarian Universalist Association prides itself on having no official creed and boasting an unorthodox mix of religious beliefs. As such, the Texas state comptroller recently denied tax-exempt status to a UUA congregation in Denison because it “does not have one system of belief”—then reversed the ruling after the unusual denial became widely known.

The Red River Unitarian Universalist Church was one of 17 groups denied tax-exempt status by Comptroller Carole Keeton Strayhorn since 1999, according to the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. At issue was whether the church qualified as a religious organization with a belief in “God, or gods, or a higher power.” Strayhorn had also rejected bids from New Age, atheist and witches groups to qualify as religious.

On May 24, Jesse Ancira, chief lawyer for Strayhorn’s office, told the church the earlier ruling had been reversed. Ancira said he had determined the church “is an organization created for religious purposes” and would be tax-exempt. The Denison church was formed in 1997 and does not own any property or assets.

“We obviously are a church and [are] meeting for religious purposes, and [ours is] a long-established denomination,” church member Scottie Johnson told the *Austin American-Statesman*. “We are not just a recent player on the religious scene in any way, shape or form.”

Strayhorn is currently battling another UUA group, the Ethical Society of Austin, in court. Her predecessor, John Sharp, said the group is ineligible for tax-exempt status, but in April the Texas Supreme Court ruled for the group. Strayhorn said she would appeal the case to the U.S. Supreme Court. —*Religion News Service*