

# Is “Secular” Humanism a Religion: A Constitutional Lawyer’s Take on the Debate between Coyne and Staddon

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John Staddon asked on April 11, 2019: “[Is Secular Humanism a Religion?](#)” He concludes that it is because it takes positions on how life should be lived ethically and morally. Jerry Coyne’s April 22, 2019 response emphatically disagrees: “[Secular Humanism is not a Religion.](#)”

Staddon is correct, but for somewhat different reasons.

The answer to Staddon’s question lies in the true and Constitutional definition of the word “religion.” Coyne’s conclusion is wrong because he uses an inadequate theistic definition that excludes non-theistic and pantheistic religions. Although Staddon is right, his definition of religion needs more precision.

Coyne defines “religion” as: “Action or conduct indicating belief in, obedience to, and reverence for a god, gods or similar superhuman power.” This is a narrow theistic definition that necessarily excludes non-theistic belief systems such as Atheism, Agnosticism and “Secular” Humanism. It is inadequate, because it excludes many recognized religions, including non-theistic and pantheistic belief systems, which do not posit belief in a supernatural god or gods.

Coyne’s conclusion that “Secular” Humanism is not a religion also conflicts with the Manifesto that established it. The [1933 Humanist Manifesto](#) refers to the belief system as “Religious Humanism,” no less than six times. Charles Potter, a founder of the religion, explains in his 1930 book titled “Humanism: *A New Religion*,” that it is a religion designed to be taught in public schools. After the Supreme Court ruled in 1948 that public schools cannot promote a religion, the Manifesto was amended to delete the “religious” modifier. The deletion was ignored by the [subsequent rulings of a number of courts](#) that have found “Secular” Humanism to be a religion.

The fact that “the Courts” consider non-theistic belief systems to be religious was recently recognized by the City of Portland. The City revised its [Civil Rights ordinance](#) to modify its definition of “religion” to specifically include “atheism, agnosticism, and non-belief in God or gods *as has been recognized by the Courts.*”

The ordinance’s reference to the fact that that the “Courts” have “recognized” that the word “religion” includes non-theistic belief systems is correct. In [Torcaso v. Watkins](#) the Supreme Court held that the belief system of an Atheist was religious. In his concurring opinion Justice Black noted that “Among religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God are Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, *Secular Humanism* and others.” (emphasis added). Similarly, Justices Souter, Stevens and O’Connor in a 1992 concurring opinion in [Lee v. Weisman](#), explained that the “settled law” is that the First Amendment which forbids religious discrimination applies “to each of us, be he Jew or *Agnostic*,

Christian or *Atheist*, Buddhist or *Freethinker*.” In *Lee* the Court held that a theistic invocation at a high school graduation was not religiously neutral as it was offensive to non-theistic religion.

I discuss a number of other cases which similarly hold that Secular Humanism and other non-theistic beliefs are religious in a [law review article published in 2018](#).

In *God is Not One*, Stephen Prothero, a professor of religion at Boston University, identifies eight “rival religions” that “run the world.” Of the eight, only three are entirely theistic: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The other five non-theistic and pantheistic religions are Atheism, Confucianism, Hinduism (certain sects), Buddhism, Yoruba, and Daoism.

So what is religion? Dr. Staddon gets close by arguing that all religions have three elements. However, I find his discussion of each not entirely consistent with the views of the courts and religious scholars.

In *Africa v. Pennsylvania*, Judge Adams was asked to determine whether a prisoner’s belief in a particular diet was religious such that the prison had to accommodate it. Adams held it was not religious. In doing so he explained, as does Staddon, that all religions do have three elements. However, Adams defines them somewhat differently than Staddon:

*“First, a religion addresses fundamental and ultimate questions having to do with deep and imponderable matters. Second, a religion is comprehensive in nature; it consists of a belief-system as opposed to an isolated teaching. Third, a religion often can be recognized by the presence of certain formal and external signs.”*

For our purposes the key element is the first – religions address “fundamental and ultimate questions.” So what are the “ultimate questions?” [Judge Adams explains](#) that those questions reduce to “questions having to do with, among other things, life and death, right and wrong, and good and evil. Not every tenet of an established theology need focus upon such elemental matters, of course; still, it is difficult to conceive of a religion that does not address these larger concerns. For, above all else, religions are characterized by their adherence to and promotion of certain *“underlying theories of man’s nature or his place in the Universe.”*

In my [review of religious scholars and legal authorities](#) about the ultimate religious questions addressed by religions, I find they generally reduce to the following:

- (1) Where do we come from – what is the origin of life and the universe?
- (2) What is the nature and purpose of life, if any, and what happens when it ends?
- (3) How should life be lived ethically and morally?

If one examines the [current Humanist Manifesto](#) you will find that it answers all three questions. Then compare the Manifesto’s answers with those provided by the Christian religion, and you will find starkly different conclusions.

For a theist, we come from a God that has created life for a purpose. Life does not end on death and it is to be lived ethically and morally per reason and the wisdom of the God we worship.

For a non-theist we are not creations, rather we are merely occurrences – the products of physics, chemistry and chance. Thus, we have no inherent purpose and our lives end on death per the laws of entropy. Life should be lived consistent with reason and materialistic science rather than reason and the wisdom of a non-existing God.

Staddon, is correct that religions ultimately focus on the third ultimate question – how should life be lived ethically and morally. This is because, once the issue of God is decided, the practical question that all of us face daily, is about what we should do today and tomorrow. How should we live our lives individually and collectively?

The issue raised by Staddon is exceedingly important! If your belief system is classified as religious in the [U.S., government cannot endorse it or abridge](#) it. However, if it is classified as secular, then the state can promote it to the hilt or shun it.

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