

Our Legal System Facilitates Religious Humanism in State Classrooms

By James Boyes

(with editorial assistance by Microsoft Copilot)

Religion Defined by the Courts

The modern legal treatment of religion in the United States reveals a deep shift from the assumptions of the Founding era. The Founders operated within a broadly theistic framework grounded in natural law, where rights were understood to come from a Creator and where civil authority was accountable to a moral order beyond itself. They did not attempt to define religion narrowly, nor did they imagine a future in which the state would attempt to educate children without reference to God. Their concern was preventing the establishment of a national church, not the exclusion of religious influence from public life. The First Amendment was written to protect religious liberty, not to create a secular public square.

Over time, however, the Supreme Court began to reinterpret the Establishment Clause in ways that departed from the Founders' assumptions. The Court's early cases did not define religion at all, because the cultural context made such a definition unnecessary. But as the nation secularized, the Court was forced to confront the question of what counts as religion under the Constitution. The result was not a single definition but a set of shifting definitions that expand or contract depending on the needs of the case. This inconsistency is not accidental; it is the mechanism by which the Court maintains a secular public order while still protecting individual conscience.

In cases involving individual rights, such as conscientious objection or prisoner accommodation, the Court adopted a broad definition of religion. In *United States v. Seeger* and *Welsh v. United States*, the Court held that a belief system could qualify as religious even if it did not include belief in a traditional deity. What mattered was whether the belief occupied a place in a person's life parallel to that filled by God in traditional religions. This definition was expansive enough to include non-theistic systems such as Buddhism, Ethical Culture, and humanism. In these contexts, the Court recognized that religion is not limited to theistic doctrines but includes any comprehensive worldview that addresses ultimate questions of life, morality, and purpose.

In Establishment Clause cases, especially those involving public schools, the Court adopted a much narrower definition of religion. In these cases, religion is treated as theistic, doctrinal, and institutional. Under this narrow definition, secular humanism, atheism, and other non-theistic worldviews are not treated as religions. This allows public schools to teach from a secular humanist framework without being accused of promoting religion. The Court does this intentionally to preserve the secular character of public education. If the Court admitted that secular humanism is a religion, then the entire structure of public schooling would be vulnerable to Establishment Clause

challenges. The Court avoids this outcome by redefining religion in a way that excludes the worldview that actually governs the system.

State Education's Facade of "Neutrality"

This dual definition creates a structural advantage for secularism. When individuals seek protection, the definition of religion expands to include non-theistic belief systems. When the state seeks to maintain secular institutions, the definition contracts to exclude those same systems. The result is a legal framework in which secular humanism functions as a worldview but is not treated as a religion for constitutional purposes. This allows the state to present its own worldview as neutral, even though it is grounded in philosophical commitments that are anything but neutral.

This shift marks a departure from the Founders' natural-law assumptions. The Founders believed that rights come from God and that civil authority is accountable to a higher moral order. The modern Court, shaped by a secular educational system, interprets the Constitution through a lens that excludes transcendent authority. The text of the Constitution has not changed, but the interpretive framework has. And because worldview governs interpretation, the meaning of the Constitution has shifted even though the words remain the same.

The result is a legal system that treats secularism as the default and religion as a special category requiring restriction. This is not because the Constitution demands it, but because the worldview of the interpreters has changed. The Court's jurisprudence reflects the intellectual formation of the culture, and the culture has been shaped by an educational system that teaches children to think about morality, authority, and human nature without reference to God. Over time, this produces a legal order that diverges from the Founders' vision, not through formal amendment but through philosophical drift.

This is the foundation upon which the modern legal treatment of religion rests. The Court's shifting definitions are not merely technical distinctions; they are the reflection of a deeper transformation in the nation's understanding of truth, authority, and the source of rights. The legal system has not created a new worldview, but it has absorbed one, and that worldview now shapes the interpretation of the very document that once assumed a different moral foundation.

Are State Schools Truly Neutral?

The modern public education system presents itself as neutral, but neutrality is impossible because every system of education rests on a worldview. A worldview is not merely a set of opinions; it is the interpretive structure through which a person understands reality, morality, authority, and purpose. It answers the same questions that religion answers, even if it does so without reference to God. When the state claims neutrality by excluding theistic frameworks, it does not create a vacuum. It simply

elevates a different worldview to the position of authority. In the case of American public education, that worldview is secular humanism.

Secular humanism is not merely the absence of religion. It is a comprehensive belief system that affirms human autonomy, moral relativism or moral self-determination, materialistic explanations of origins, and the rejection of transcendent authority. It teaches that meaning is self-constructed, that morality is socially negotiated, and that human beings are the ultimate arbiters of truth. These are not neutral positions. They are philosophical commitments that shape how students understand themselves and the world. When these commitments are taught as truth in a compulsory system, they function as an established worldview, even if the courts refuse to call them religious.

Compulsory attendance and compulsory funding amplify this effect. When parents are required to send their children to a school system that teaches a worldview contrary to their own, and when they are required to fund that system through taxation, the state is effectively establishing that worldview as the normative framework for society. The courts avoid this conclusion by defining religion narrowly in school cases, but the philosophical reality remains: the public school system teaches a belief system that answers the same questions religion answers, and it does so with the authority of the state.

This has profound consequences for the culture. Children educated in a system that excludes God from the moral and intellectual framework of learning will naturally grow into adults who interpret law, rights, and liberty without reference to the transcendent foundations that once grounded the American experiment. The Founders believed that rights come from God and that civil authority is accountable to a higher moral order. A generation educated in secular humanism will believe that rights come from the state and that civil authority is accountable only to itself. This shift does not require constitutional amendment; it occurs through the gradual formation of the moral imagination.

Global Citizenship Rises at the Expense of America

The rise of globalism in public education further accelerates this shift. Beginning in the late twentieth century, many school districts adopted global citizenship frameworks influenced by UNESCO and international education standards. These frameworks emphasize global identity over national identity, collective responsibility over individual liberty, and international norms over constitutional principles. They teach students to see themselves primarily as members of a global community rather than as citizens of a constitutional republic. This is not a neutral educational choice. It is a philosophical reorientation that reshapes how students understand sovereignty, rights, and the role of the nation-state. (See **School District Logo**, pg 4).

The result is a generation increasingly detached from the principles that once defined American liberty. If students are taught that truth is subjective, that morality is fluid, that rights are granted by human institutions, and that global governance is the highest

authority, then the constitutional framework becomes unintelligible. The idea of natural rights loses its meaning. The concept of limited government becomes archaic. The belief that individuals are accountable to a Creator rather than the state becomes foreign. In this environment, the legal system naturally drifts toward interpretations that reflect the worldview of the culture rather than the worldview of the Founders.



School District Logo, Circa Mid 1990s

This is why the courts increasingly interpret the Constitution through a secular humanist lens. The judges themselves were educated in the same system that shaped the culture. They absorbed the same assumptions about morality, authority, and human nature. They read the Constitution not as a document grounded in natural law but as a flexible instrument to be adapted to contemporary values. The text remains the same, but the meaning changes because the worldview of the interpreters has changed. This is how a secular educational system results in a parallel legal system—not by creating new laws, but by reshaping the interpretive framework of the existing ones.

The consequences of this shift are visible in the erosion of individual liberty, the expansion of state authority, and the growing hostility toward religious expression in public life. A system that excludes God from education will eventually exclude Him from law, culture, and public discourse. It will redefine freedom as self-expression rather than moral responsibility, and it will redefine equality as uniformity rather than equal dignity

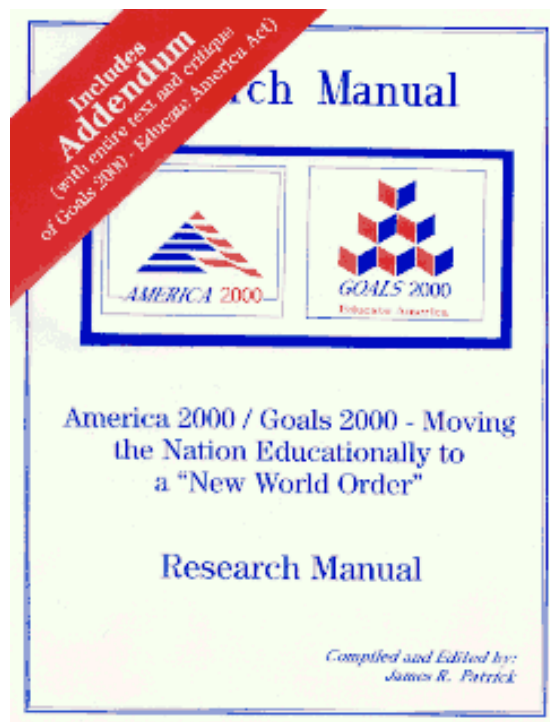
under God. It will teach children to see themselves not as bearers of God-given rights but as subjects of a global order that values conformity over conviction.

The public school system is not neutral. It cannot be neutral. It teaches a worldview that is fundamentally opposed to the biblical understanding of humanity, morality, and truth. It teaches against the idea that human beings are created in the image of God, against the idea that rights come from a Creator, and against the idea that truth is objective and grounded in divine revelation. It teaches a religion of its own—one that denies it is a religion, but functions as one in every meaningful sense.

The result is a culture increasingly unable to understand or defend the principles of liberty that once defined the nation. A people educated without reference to God will eventually be governed without reference to God. And a legal system interpreted through a secular humanist lens will inevitably drift away from the natural-law foundations upon which it was built. This is not the result of a conspiracy. It is the natural consequence of worldview formation. The state schools teach a worldview, and that worldview shapes the culture, the courts, and the future of the nation.

A Related Resource

Related and somewhat dated, Rev. James Patrick's lengthy educational research journal provides further analysis of this transition away from objective toward subjective truth. Here, you will find a pdf version of this manual, titled: [America 2000 / Goals 2000 - Moving the Nation Educationally to a "New World Order" - A Research Manual](#).



Essay Reference Sources

1. **Torcaso v. Watkins (1961)**

<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/367/488/>

Here the Court has acknowledged non-theistic belief systems—such as Ethical Culture and secular humanism—as “religions” in some contexts. The famous footnote lists them explicitly. This demonstrates the Court’s willingness to treat humanism as religious when protecting individual rights, but not when evaluating public institutions.

2. **United States v. Seeger (1965)**

<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/380/163/>

Here the Court adopted a broad definition of religion in Free Exercise contexts. Seeger held that a belief system can be “religious” even without belief in a traditional deity, so long as it occupies a place in a person’s life parallel to that filled by God. This undergirds your point that religion does not require theism.

3. **Welsh v. United States (1970)**

<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/398/333/>

Welsh expands Seeger and reinforces non-theistic moral frameworks can qualify as “religious” for legal protection. This supports your argument that atheism and humanism function as religions in the legal sense when individuals seek accommodation.

4. **“The Public School Curriculum, Secular Humanism, and the Religion Clauses” (Yale Law Journal)**

<https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7432&context=yjlj>

This scholarly article deals with how secular humanism influences public school curricula and that courts have struggled to classify it. It provides historical and legal analysis showing how secular humanism became embedded in educational philosophy while avoiding Establishment Clause scrutiny.

5. **“A Political History of the Establishment Clause” (University of Virginia School of Law)**

https://scholarship.law.virginia.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1130&context=faculty_publications

Here the Court’s interpretation of the Establishment Clause shifted dramatically in the 20th century, moving away from the Founders’ natural-law assumptions toward a secularist framework. It documents the philosophical drift you describe.

6. **“Establishment Clause Jurisprudence and the Constitutional Limits on Religion in Public Schools” (Yale)**

<https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7433&context=yjlj>

In this article we see that the Court uses a narrow definition of religion in school cases, allowing secular frameworks to operate as “neutral.” It explains how the Court’s tests (Lemon, neutrality, endorsement) privilege secularism over theistic worldviews.

7. **“Secular Humanism vs. Religion? The Liberal Democratic Education Tradition and the Battle over Vouchers” (ERIC)**

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED490355.pdf>

This article provides support for the argument that secular humanism is embedded in modern educational theory and that public schools operate from a worldview rather than a neutral position. It also discusses how this affects debates over school choice and religious liberty.

8. **“The Original Meaning of the Establishment Clause and Its Application to Education” (Liberty University Law Review)**

https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=lu_law_review

This source supports the claim that the Founders did not intend for the Establishment Clause to secularize education. It contrasts original intent with modern jurisprudence, reinforcing your argument that the legal system has drifted from its natural-law foundation.