

No Rights: The Life of an Atheist

By Krystal Myers

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As a current student in Government, I have realized that I feel that my rights as an Atheist are severely limited and unjust when compared to other students who are Christians. Not only are there multiple clubs featuring the Christian faith, but youth ministers are also allowed to come onto school campus and hand candy and other food out to Christians and their friends. However, I feel like if an Atheist did that, people would not be happy about it. This may not be true, but due to pervasive negative feelings towards Atheists in the school, I feel that it would be the case. My question is, "Why? Why does Atheism have such a bad reputation?" And an even better question, "Why do Christians have special rights not allowed to non-believers?"

Before I even begin, I just want to clear up some misconceptions about Atheism. No, we do not worship the "devil." We do not believe in God, so we also do not believe in Satan. And we may be "godless" but that does not mean that we are without morals. I know, personally, I strive to be the best person I can be, even without religion. In fact, I have been a better person since I have rejected religion. And perhaps the most important misconception is that we want to convert everyone into Atheists and that we hate Christians. For the most part, we just want to be respected for who we are and not be judged.

Now you should know exactly what an Atheist is. Dictionary.com says that an Atheist is, "a person who denies or disbelieves the existence of a supreme being or beings." However, this does not mean that Atheists do not believe in higher causes; we just do not believe in a higher being.

With that being said, I can move on to the real issue. Before I begin, I want you to think about your rights and how your perceived "rights" might be affecting the rights of others.

There are several instances where my rights as a non-believer, and the rights of anyone other than a Christian, have been violated. These instances inspired me to investigate the laws concerning the separation of church and state, and I learned some interesting things. However, first, I would like you to know specifically what my grievances are against the school. First and foremost is the sectarian prayer that occurs at graduation every year. Fortunately, I am not the first one to have thought that this was a problem. In the Supreme Court case, *Lee v. Weisman*, it was decided that allowing prayer at graduation is a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment that says, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Special speakers can pray, but the school cannot endorse the prayer or plan for it to happen.

Public prayer also occurs at all of the home football games using the public address system. This has, again, been covered by the Supreme Court case *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe*. The Court ruled that school-sponsored prayer is an unconstitutional violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. If a speaker prays, it is fine. However, as soon as the school provides sponsorship, it becomes illegal. Sponsorship can be almost anything, even something as simple as saying that the speaker can pray or choosing a speaker with a known propensity to pray or share his or her religious views.

However, it is not just the speakers who we have to fear at Lenoir City High School. We also have to fear some of the teachers and what they might say about their own religious beliefs. On at least two separate occasions, teachers have made their religious preferences known to basically the whole school.

One teacher has made her religious preferences known by wearing t-shirt depicting the crucifix while performing her duties as a public employee. Also, Kristi Brackett, a senior at Lenoir City High School, has said that the teacher, “strongly encouraged us to join [a religious club] and be on the group’s leadership team.” Yet again, this violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. When asked if this was true, the teacher replied, “As a teacher I would never use my power of influence to force my beliefs or the beliefs of [a religious club] on any student in the school.” Regardless, the religious t-shirts are still inappropriate in the school setting. Teachers are prohibited from making their religious preferences known; the Constitution requires them to be neutral when acting in their capacity as a public school teacher.

Not only are religious preferences shown through shirts, but also through a “Quote of the Day” that some teachers write on the boards in their classrooms. One teacher has Bible verses occasionally as the teacher’s “Quote of the Day” for students. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment has been violated, yet again with no regard for non-believers.

But perhaps I would have more hope in our school and the possibility of change on the horizon if our own school board did not open their meetings with prayer. A person who wished to remain anonymous that has been present at school board meetings says, “They do have prayers. They pray to ‘Our Heavenly Father’ and end with ‘In Jesus’ Name We Pray.’” Not only is this a violation of Supreme Court law, but also a violation of the board’s own policy that prohibits prayer at school-sponsored events. The whole foundation of how our school is conducted is established by obvious Christians. Somehow, this is unsurprising. If our School Board chooses to ignore the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and the Supreme Court, then it is no surprise that teachers choose to do the same.

I know that I will keep trying to gain my rights as an Atheist and as an American citizen, but I also need your help in educating other people to realize the injustice done to all minority groups. The Christian faith cannot rule the United States. It is unconstitutional. Religion and government are supposed to be separate. If we let this slide, what other amendments to the Constitution will be ignored? I leave you to decide what you will or will not do, but just remember that non-believers are not what you originally thought we were; we are human beings just like you.