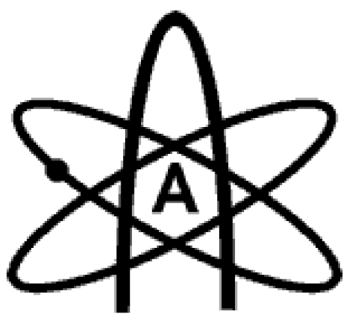


# THE RIGHT TO BE AN ATHEIST



*By Defending The Rights of  
Non-Believers, ”*

*Insists This*

*Distinguished Clergyman,*

*“We Are Strengthening*

*Liberty for All”*

**By The Rt. Reverend James A. Pike**

Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of California

**THERE IS NO** such thing as an atheist. But there are people who believe they are atheists, and they have as much right to their “religion” as other believers. They are of positive benefit to the church. What is more, there are many atheists within the churches. Do these statements confuse you? What they say certainly does not jibe with the customary understanding of atheism as the denial of God. Atheism a religion? A benefit to the church? Many atheists within the churches? The answer to each question is yes, I believe, and this belief indicates why I am concerned about the protection of the rights of atheists. Let me explain.

As a Christian and a bishop I am, of course, interested in the promotion of my faith and church. But I long ago learned that real faith cannot be forced, that real religious allegiance, to be of any worth, must not be compelled. I learned this from personal experience. I chose, as a young man, to leave the church in which I was born and raised. I became an agnostic, believing in no consciously accepted credo. Then, after further study and maturity (as I now see it) I joined the Episcopal Church, left the practice of the law and in due course was ordained an Episcopal priest.

I value the freedom I had to be “nothing” as highly as I do the freedom I had to become “something” again. To me, religious freedom is hollow unless it includes freedom to be not “religious.”

This freedom is not always fully granted to atheists in our country today. Despite the fundamental guarantees of our Constitution, many state and local laws limit the right of atheists to hold office, teach school, even to testify in court. I earnestly believe that to defend the rights of this group in our national

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You know it's a myth...  
and you have a choice.

تعرفون انها خرافة... ولكم أيضا حرية الاختيار.

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family is to strengthen liberty for all.

Actually there are fewer and fewer announced atheists anywhere. They have largely gone underground—not in a scheming sense, but with a “couldn’t care less” apathy. More admirable, and useful to the cause of sound religion, is the articulate, self-conscious atheist. His concern with fundamental issues is important and what he has to say to the “religious” is important.

About ten years ago, when I was Chaplain of Columbia University, a Barnard sophomore told me with sadness (and, I suspect, a touch of pride) that she no longer believed in God. “Tell me,” I retorted, “about the God you don’t believe in.” When she had finished I was able to say reassuringly, “Cheer up. I’m an atheist too—as far as *that* God goes. Now let me tell you about the God I believe in.”

What had happened to this young lady has happened to many others who have lost faith. The God she didn’t believe in was something like the one confronting me from a persistent correspondent who calls himself an atheist. He delights in quoting to me from the most blood-thirsty passages of the Old Testament. He wants to “make a thing of disbelief in the God he heard about as a child.

So-called “atheists” have a good deal in common with a heavy proportion of “believers.” The God is which many adult Christians and Jews believe is as inadequate as the one the “atheists” deny. The point is well summed up in the title of J. B. Phillips’ book, *Your God Is Too Small*. For many it is the image of their overly stern father; for some he is their overly indulgent grandfather; some see him as a tribal god a protector of Americanism or a regional way of life (white supremacy,

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for example); for still others he is a “Mr. Fixit”—not generally relevant, but useful in emergencies.

Atheists are good for churchmen because they are a challenge to allegiance to too small a God.

What is a god? A focus of aspiration and meaning. The pagan and mythical gods of antiquity met this definition. The worshippers of Baal were preoccupied with the multiplication of flocks and crops, and of people to tend them. Venus, the goddess of love; Ceres, goddess of the harvest; Mars, god of war; Mammon, personification of material riches—all served the func-

## *Defending Non-Believers*



“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction.”

—RICHARD DAWKINS

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tions of a God for people of various temperaments. This is not just ancient history: today we are not lacking in Baal-worshippers (we call it production); Venus-worshippers (sex and beauty); Mars-devotees (nationalism); Mammon-followers (money). For some—the least attractive of the lot—*self* is the God.

**T**HE RECENT presidential campaign served to remind us that the atheist is America’s “forgotten man” when it comes to equality and tolerance. Richard M. Nixon, in repudiating anti-Roman Catholic bias, expressed this when he said that anyone *except an atheist* should be eligible for the presidency.

No one spoke up for the estimated 36.6 percent of our people who are affiliated with *no* church. Since no atheist was running, the issue wasn’t debated. It is, however, a clear contradiction of the Constitutional prohibition (Article VI, paragraph 3) against a religious test for public office. Very few today would flatly assert that the rights of atheists should be suppressed; but many Americans—including most of the “atheists” within the churches—would agree that an atheist should not be eligible for the presidency.

### **GOD IS AN IMAGINARY FRIEND.**

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The problem is not merely one of popular prejudice. It is actually written into state law. In Maryland, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Arkansas, in order to hold public office a man must believe in the being of God. In many places, testimony of a witness in court may be impeached if it can be shown that he is an atheist.

In Maryland a would-be notary public named Torcaso, who has alleged he could not in good conscience take the oath of belief in God, was, after a series of court contests, barred from the office by the State Court of Appeals. The question is now going up before the U.S. Supreme Court, where I hope Torcaso will be vindicated.

The status of atheists under our Constitution needs clarification not only in cases like Torcaso’s, but also in regard to courtroom testimony, conscientious objection to war (which, to be recognized for draft exemption, must be religiously motivated) and qualification of teachers. In New York City not

## *Defending Non-Believers*

long ago, the Board of Superintendents of the public schools sought to require all teachers to manifest a belief in God before their classes. Fortunately the plan was defeated—through the combined efforts of the Episcopal diocese, the Protestant Council, the American Jewish Congress as well as other groups.

It's not what a man says he is, but what he puts first in his day-to-day choices that counts.

As Jesus said, "Not everyone that saith unto me Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of Heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in Heaven." It is quite possible for a man to be conspicuously "religious" and still assiduously seek to frustrate the will of a God who has "made of one blood all nations," and with whom there "is neither Jew nor Greek . . . neither bond nor free," and who is "no respecter of persons," to quote some familiar Biblical texts.

This is a powerful reason why the man who calls himself an atheist should not be deprived of any rights in our society. If rights are limited to Christians and Jews, then by all means let's really enforce this test and in each case be sure that the supposed "religious" man really is what he professes to be.

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This obviously carries the point to absurdity. It would require a team consisting of an expert theologian, psychoanalyst, biographer and perhaps a private detective to guess at the truth. For it is only to Almighty God "all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid." That is why we shouldn't say that a candidate for public office should be barred because he doesn't profess a standard-brand religion. Who knows finally what any candidate's god really is—or are? We can only look at his record on particular issues.

In my ecclesiastical life I have met many "Christians" who, when it came right down to it, couldn't care less about what their faith really involved.

I have met fewer "atheists," but many of them really cared about ultimate questions, and this is an important part of being religious. Often their real god or gods, worshipped unconsciously, were the same as those worshipped (out of church) by many Christians. One could wish for these atheists that they knew the real God of the Bible. But one could wish this for many Christians and Jews as well!

**Coronet**

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