

Religious Freedom Act also protects atheists

by [Kimberly Winston](#) in the [January 18, 2017](#) issue

When President Obama signed a newly strengthened international religious freedom act, the intention was to protect religious believers around the world.

But the act, signed December 16, is being heralded by some legal scholars as a different milestone—for the first time, atheists and other nonreligious people are explicitly named as a class protected by the law.

Caroline Mala Corbin, professor of law at the University of Miami, noted that the new law “takes an expansive view of religious liberty, saying freedom of religion is not just about the right to practice religion. It is also about the right to have your own views about religion, including being agnostic and atheistic.”

The law, called the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, has been in place since 1998. The original version established the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a religious freedom watchdog group.

The new version of the law, named for a former Virginia congressman who championed its original version, specifically extends protection to atheists as well.

“The freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is understood to protect theistic and non-theistic beliefs,” the act states for the first time, “and the right not to profess or practice any religion.”

It also condemns “specific targeting of non-theists, humanists, and atheists because of their beliefs” and enables the State Department to target “non-state actors” against religious freedom, like the self-described Islamic State, Boko Haram, and other groups.

The new law has been heralded by both Christians and atheists. Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, called the legislation “a vital step toward protecting conscience freedom for millions of the world’s most vulnerable, most oppressed people.” And Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the American Humanist Association, called it

“a significant step toward full acceptance and inclusion for non-religious individuals.”

Getting the protections for atheists into the law was a four-year process, said Maggie Ardiente, communications director for AHA. In 2012, Ardiente and other atheist advocates met with members of the State Department to raise awareness of the persecution of nonbelievers. AHA legislative director Matthew Bulger took a seat—the first occupied by a representative from a nontheist organization—on the International Religious Freedom Roundtable, an informal group of religious leaders that consults with the State Department on religious liberty issues.

The AHA and other nontheist groups like American Atheists and Center for Inquiry have lobbied Congress on behalf of imprisoned and persecuted atheists in Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and elsewhere for several years.

Atheists in those countries have faced imprisonment, lashings, and execution, sometimes at the hands of violent mobs. In September, a Saudi man was sentenced to ten years in prison and 2,000 lashes for professing his atheism via social media.

The new version of the bill will strengthen the existing law in several ways:

- It directs the president to sanction individuals who carry out or order religious restrictions.
- It instructs the U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom to report directly to the U.S. secretary of state.
- It requires all foreign service officers to be trained in the “strategic value of international religious freedom.”

Corbin said the new language in the IRFA could influence how U.S. courts regard atheists at home. All Americans are protected by the First Amendment, she said, but “there has always been controversy about the degree to which [atheists] should be protected. This law makes clear they are to be protected to the same extent” as religious believers.

Corbin also links the president’s signing of this act to another first.

“President Obama was the first president to explicitly acknowledge nonbelievers in his inaugural address, so this seems to fit into his legacy vis-à-vis nonbelievers,” she said. “What the next administration is going to do with this law and nonbelievers is a completely different question.” —Religion News Service

*A version of this article, which was edited on January 3, appears in the January 18 print edition under the title "Religious Freedom Act also protects atheists."*