



The Impossibility of Religious Freedom

By Winnifred Fallers Sullivan

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The Constitution may guarantee it. But religious freedom in America is, in fact, impossible. So argues this timely and iconoclastic work by law and religion scholar Winnifred Sullivan. Sullivan uses as the backdrop for the book the trial of Warner vs. Boca Raton, a recent case concerning the laws that protect the free exercise of religion in America. The trial, for which the author served as an expert witness, concerned regulations banning certain memorials from a multiconfessional nondenominational cemetery in Boca Raton, Florida. The book portrays the unsuccessful struggle of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish families in Boca Raton to preserve the practice of placing such religious artifacts as crosses and stars of David on the graves of the city-owned burial ground.

Sullivan demonstrates how, during the course of the proceeding, citizens from all walks of life and religious backgrounds were harassed to define just what their religion is. She argues that their plight points up a shocking truth: religion cannot be coherently defined for the purposes of American law, because everyone has different definitions of what religion is. Indeed, while religious freedom as a political idea was arguably once a force for tolerance, it has now become a force for intolerance, she maintains.

A clear-eyed look at the laws created to protect religious freedom, this vigorously argued book offers a new take on a right deemed by many to be necessary for a free democratic society. It will have broad appeal not only for religion scholars, but also for anyone interested in law and the Constitution.

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

The First Amendment is stirring second thoughts among scholars wary of the social and legal consequences of religious liberty. Herself a witness for the plaintiffs, Sullivan recounts the tangled courtroom drama in a Boca Raton case in which a group of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish families unsuccessfully sought a religious exemption to city ordinances prohibiting any vertical cemetery memorials (including upright crosses, statues, candles, and Stars of David). What emerges from Sullivan's carefully documented analysis of the case is the irreducible diversity of American religions-and the profound difficulty of accommodating such a wide range of beliefs, especially when individual convictions and practices diverge from official orthodoxies. Consequently, in reluctantly ruling against the Boca Raton plaintiffs, the judge voices perplexities now all too typical of American jurists trying to balance the rights of individual conscience against the demands of public order and democratic governance. *Bryce Christensen*

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Review

"A smart-and in the present circumstances, sobering-little book."--**Christopher Caldwell**, *Financial Times*

"Sullivan's book has the great virtue of placing abstract legal dilemmas in the concrete realities of everyday life."--**R. Laurence Moore**, *American Scholar*

"Scholars or lay-people intrigued by the status of religion in contemporary developed nations will find Sullivan's study very useful."--**John M. McTaggart**, *International Review of Modern Sociology*

"Drawing on her expertise in law and religion, Sullivan argues that religious freedom in America is impossible. . . . [She] succeed[s] in arguing that religious freedoms are not as free as one might think."--**Library Journal**

"Sullivan's examination of the judicial process is only one important aspect her book. The most important contribution is her discussion of the problems of how law defines religion and through its definition impedes religious liberty."--**Bryan K. Fair**, *Journal of Law and Religion*

From the Inside Flap

"This is a remarkably fine work that discusses the way religion is perceived and dealt with in the United States. The subject is of great moment not only in America but also in the world at large, and Sullivan has treated it with considerable analytical skill and ethnographic detail. The result is a powerful and convincing argument."--**Talal Asad**, City University of New York Graduate Center

"Provocative. Engaging. Valuable. Sullivan has created a kind of analytical triptych that captures some of the most important features of religions and law in the United States. It is a finely crafted portrait of an incredibly suggestive trial, a meditation on the political/legal status of folk religions in the United States, and a theoretical intervention into contemporary studies of religion jurisprudence."--**Jason Bivins**, North Carolina State University.

"*The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* is an astonishing book. Winnifred Sullivan once again demonstrates her flair for extracting a big lesson from a seemingly small event--in this book, a controversy over the

allowable style of grave markers in a public cemetery in Boca Raton, Florida. To the town, the issue was the ease of mowing the cemetery and making it look tidy; for the survivors of the dead buried in the cemetery the issue was the appropriate expression of religious faith. This case looks like a simple church-state controversy, but Sullivan (an expert witness in the case) deftly explains why the federal court and the First Amendment really cannot cope with the issues involved. Separating church and state requires defining what religion is. The devil here is in the definition. Sullivan offers an important challenge to the easy assumptions to the current propensity of federal courts to accommodate religion. What is religion anyway? Read this fascinating story to see how challenging that question is."--Stanley N. Katz, Princeton University

"Sullivan's exploration of unofficial religion is elegant, moving, uncompromising, and profoundly important. By examining religion literally from the ground up, it challenges all of the familiar pieties about religious liberty in America."--Philip Hamburger, author of *Separation of Church and State*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Samuel Stratton:

Why? Because this *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* is an unordinary book that the inside of the guide waiting for you to snap that but latter it will zap you with the secret that inside. Reading this book close to it was fantastic author who write the book in such incredible way makes the content inside easier to understand, entertaining means but still convey the meaning totally. So , it is good for you for not hesitating having this any more or you going to regret it. This phenomenal book will give you a lot of positive aspects than the other book have such as help improving your ability and your critical thinking method. So , still want to hesitate having that book? If I have been you I will go to the guide store hurriedly.

Armando Lemaire:

The Impossibility of Religious Freedom can be one of your nice books that are good idea. Most of us recommend that straight away because this book has good vocabulary that will increase your knowledge in terminology, easy to understand, bit entertaining but nevertheless delivering the information. The article writer giving his/her effort to place every word into pleasure arrangement in writing *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* nevertheless doesn't forget the main level, giving the reader the hottest as well as based confirm resource details that maybe you can be one among it. This great information can drawn you into brand new stage of crucial contemplating.

Anne Hernandez:

This *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* is great reserve for you because the content which can be full of information for you who always deal with world and have to make decision every minute. This book reveal it info accurately using great coordinate word or we can claim no rambling sentences within it. So if you are read that hurriedly you can have whole data in it. Doesn't mean it only will give you straight forward sentences but tricky core information with wonderful delivering sentences. Having *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* in your hand like having the world in your arm, information in it is not ridiculous a single. We can say that no guide that offer you world within ten or fifteen small right but this e-book already do that. So , this really is good reading book. Hey there Mr. and Mrs. occupied do you still doubt this?

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