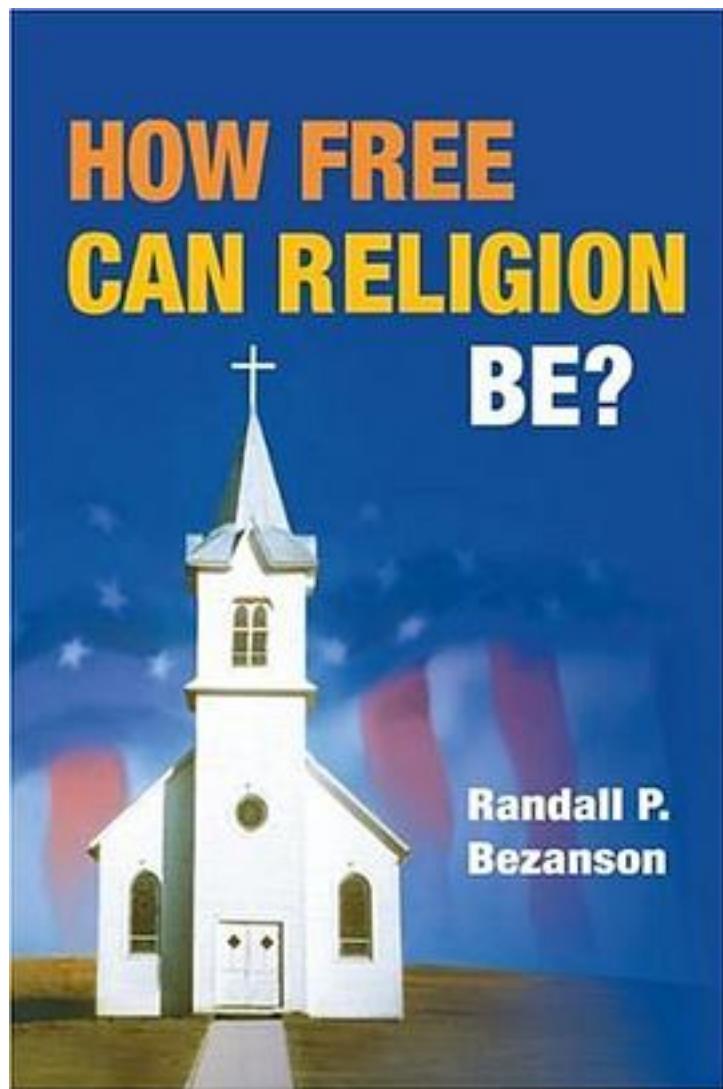


How Free Can Religion Be?



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Randall P. Bezanson's "How Free Can Religion Be?" explores the Supreme Court's varied history of interpreting the religious guarantees outlined in the First Amendment. The book discusses eight provocative Supreme Court decisions to track the evolution of Free Exercise and Establishment Clause doctrine, focusing on the court's shift from strict separation of church and state to a position where the government accommodates and even fosters religion. Understanding the First Amendment as a complex stew of untested political theory, fear of unlimited central government, universal acceptance of Christianity, uncertain ideas about liberty, and the backbone of a secular democracy, Bezanson evaluates the way that the Supreme Court has invoked historical perspectives to follow the shifting threads of judicial theory through a series of detailed case studies. Beginning with cases in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the cases present new problems and revisit some old ones as well: the Mormon Church's claimed belief in polygamy; state support for religious schools; the teaching of evolution and creationism in public schools; Amish claims for exemption from compulsory education laws; comparable claims for Native American religion in relation to drug laws; and rights of free speech and equal access by religious groups in colleges and public schools. Historical but not a work of history, "How Free Can Religion Be?" invites readers into a rewarding examination of the contested and ever-changing role and meaning of religion in America. Rather than aiming at conclusions about whether the Court's varied enforcement of the First Amendment's ambiguously worded guarantees is right or wrong, Bezanson instead works to identify the principles underlying the changes. Using transcripts of oral arguments before the Supreme Court accompanied by his own editorial narration, he engages the reader in a revealing Socratic discussion of the issues and encourages them to draw their own conclusions.

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