Joseph Wuest

Title: “Madalyn Murray O’Hair and the Atheist Movement for Political Legitimacy”
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Joseph Wuest is currently pursuing BA degrees in both Political Science and History here at IPFW. During this past year, he was awarded the Withers Scholarship Grant and had a paper he wrote for the 2011 Summer I session nominated for the Sharon Alt Piepenbrink Award. Just last month, he presented his research, “Treating Everyone as Abled: The Americans with Disabilities Act as Opportunity,” at the East Central Writing Centers Association 2012 conference. Some of his academic interests include the study of civil rights and liberties, judicial politics, and international law. Joseph plans to apply to joint J.D./Ph.D. programs in the fall to continue studying law and politics.

Abstract

Much of the historical analyses of the United States in the 1960s concern themselves with movements for political legitimacy. During this era, critical masses of disenfranchised minorities led by an assortment of charismatic leaders organized protests and fought legal battles in order to secure and exercise their civil rights. These civil rights movements were instrumental in gradually altering the public perception of these minority groups; prejudices and notions of racism that had once dominated public policy and majority opinion began to erode and be replaced by more liberal laws and precedents and more tolerant societal perceptions. This, however, was not the case for American atheists. The 1960s witnessed an opportunity for atheists to unite themselves under a leadership and challenge the unconstitutional prevalence of government-endorsed religion—particularly endorsements of Christianity—that plagued the public school system and other various publicly funded institutions. Unfortunately for their cause, American atheists’ initial success in the 1963 U.S. Supreme Court case, School District of Abington Township v. Schempp, was quickly overshadowed by the poisonous personality of one of its chief litigants, Madalyn Murray O’Hair, and her inability to secure political legitimacy for the movement.

This paper focuses predominately on Madalyn Murray O’Hair and her significance in the failure of American atheists to achieve political legitimacy during the 1960s. O’Hair’s initial victory in the Schempp case to remove the recitation of prayer in public schools was a success for atheists, but only a fleeting one; it was more of an isolated incident rather than a foundational event comparable to the Birmingham Bus Boycott. Once Madalyn Murray O’Hair seized the attention of the American public, she squandered any chance of legitimacy for American atheists with her outlandish behavior, uncharismatic personality, and subsequent failures to overturn other varieties of government-endorsements of religion. As a result of the character of Madalyn Murray O’Hair and her inefficiencies as a leader, a critical mass of atheists united under one, influential movement was never formed, and American atheists were unsuccessful in their attempts to eradicate publicly-endorsed religion and change public opinion from a standpoint of prejudice to tolerance.

Bibliographical Note:
In order to present the negative public perception of Madalyn Murray O’Hair and the damage this perception inflicted on the atheist movement for political legitimacy, this research relied predominately on articles from the *New York Times* that tended to characterize O’Hair in a negative fashion as “the Atheist.” These and other articles, such as one from the Baltimore Sun the day of the *Schempp* decision, consistently casted O’Hair as a vulgar and offensive woman who sought to eliminate as much of Christianity’s influence in America as possible. A disclosed FBI investigative report that included documents collected over several decades was also utilized to further demonstrate the kind of threat most Americans—and supposedly the federal government as well—saw in O’Hair. Finally, this research was guided by secondary sources such as Bryan Le Beau’s *The Atheist* and Anne Rowe Seaman’s *America’s Most Hated Woman*; these works were especially useful in providing a narrative of the quick devolution of O’Hair from potential leader to a polarizing, fringe character.