

# Atheist entitled to 'religious' accommodation

Employers have to reasonably accommodate their employees' religious beliefs and practices. But what if the worker happens to be an atheist? Is he also entitled to reasonable accommodation of his beliefs?

**Recent case:** Paul was a mechanic for Christian Heating and Air Conditioning in Pennsylvania. The company owner, a born-again Christian, gave employees identification badges with their name and photo on the front and the company's mission statement on the back: "This company is not only a business, it is a ministry. It is set on standards that are higher than man's own. Our goal is to run this company in a way most pleasing to the Lord."

Paul taped over the mission statement on the back of his ID badge because he is an atheist. No one asked about his religious beliefs during his job interview, but he did discuss the issue later with co-workers. He explained that he had been an atheist since he was a teenager. When the owner sometimes urged Paul to go to church, Paul declined and said that he didn't appreciate the pressure.

Then the owner saw the back of Paul's ID badge and ordered him to remove the tape or lose his job. Paul refused and was fired.

He sued, arguing that his right to religious freedom had been violated and that taping over the badge back was a reasonable accommodation.

The employer argued that atheism isn't a religion and therefore doesn't have to be accommodated.

The court ruled otherwise. It said a sincerely held belief that there is no God fits the Title VII definition of religion and must be reasonably accommodated. Paul's lawsuit can go to trial. (*Mathis v. Christian Heating and Air*, No. 13-3740, ED PA, 2016)