

## **AMERICAN ATHEISTS, INC.**

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### **MOVE TO INCLUDE CHRISTIAN "MIRACLE DEBRIS" CROSS AT WTC MEMORIAL INVITES LITIGATION, WARNS FIRST AMENDMENT WATCHDOG GROUP**

A move to include a Christian "miracle debris" as part of a World Trade Center memorial to the victims of the 9-11 terrorist attacks promotes religion and invites legal challenges, an Atheist First Amendment watchdog group warned today.

On Friday, officials with the WTC Memorial Foundation said that artifact -- two intersecting metal beams -- "will be treated with utmost respect" and would be placed in the underground WTC museum set to open in 2009, or at an outdoor memorial on the property.

The 20-foot-high "miracle debris cross" was found by a construction laborer who described its presence as an "act of God." It quickly became an object of religious veneration, religious services were held, and the metal structure was blessed with holy water. A priest labeled the cross, "our symbol of hope, our symbol of faith..."

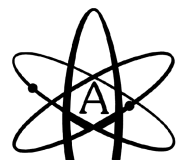
Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists, said that her organization has been opposing efforts to "religionize" the WTC memorial for the past four years.

"The property is owned by a public entity, and any memorial must avoid the promotion of religion," said Johnson. "It is odd that from all of the debris left from the 9/11 attacks on the Trade Center, officials have conveniently decided to include a pair of intersecting metal beams that form a cross and have become the focus of religious passions."

Johnson said that if groups want to display the cross, it should be located on private property.

Dave Silverman, Communications Director for American Atheists said that the "miracle debris cross" as part of a memorial ignores the diverse background of those victims who perished in the 911 attacks. "It wasn't just certain types of Christians who died that day," said Mr. Silverman. "Jews, Muslims, Atheists and others were victims of the terrorists. A memorial should be inclusive and remind us what we share in common as a nation, and not promote religious differences."

AMERICAN ATHEISTS is a nationwide movement that defends civil rights for Atheists; works for the total separation of church and state; and addresses issues of First Amendment public policy.



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