



# Interpreting the Free Exercise of Religion: The Constitution and American Pluralism

*Bette Novit Evans*

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A generation ago, all of the big questions concerning religious freedom in America seemed to have been resolved. At the very least, the lines of division between proponents of a wall of separation between church and state and advocates of religious accommodation seemed clearly drawn. Since then, increasing religious diversity and changing functions of government have raised new questions about what it means to allow the free exercise of religion. In this book, Bette Novit Evans explores the contemporary understandings of this First Amendment guarantee in all of its complexity and ambiguity. Evans situates constitutional arguments about free exercise within the context of theological and sociological insights about American religious experience. She surveys and evaluates several of the most well considered approaches to religious freedom and applies them to contemporary legal controversies, examining problems in defining religion and claims concerning the autonomy of religious institutions. Her conclusions about religious liberty are embedded in an appreciation of American pluralism: the guarantee of religious freedom, she argues, can be understood as an instrument for fostering alternative sources of meaning within a pluralistic political community.

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