

[Employment Division, Department of Human Resources of Oregon v. Smith, 494 U.S. 872 \(1990\)](#)

**Context and Legal Question:** This case addressed whether the state of Oregon could deny unemployment benefits to two Native American counselors who were fired for using peyote, a hallucinogenic drug, as part of their religious ceremonies. The core legal question was whether the state's interest in banning the use of illegal drugs outweighs individuals' First Amendment rights to freely exercise their religion.

**Decision and Reasoning:** The Supreme Court ruled in a 6-3 decision that the state could deny unemployment benefits. The Court held that the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause does not require states to accommodate the use of illegal drugs for religious purposes. Justice Scalia, writing for the majority, argued that allowing exceptions to criminal laws for religious practices would undermine the ability of the government to enforce such laws. The decision significantly narrowed the scope of protections for religious practices, stating that neutral, generally applicable laws do not violate the Free Exercise Clause even if they incidentally burden religious practices.

**Implications:** This decision marked a pivotal shift in the Court's approach to the Free Exercise Clause, emphasizing the importance of general applicability of laws over individual religious accommodations. It led to significant legal and legislative responses, including the passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) in 1993, aimed at restoring the higher level of scrutiny for laws that interfere with religious practice.

[Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act \(RLUIPA\) of 2000](#)

**Context and Purpose:** RLUIPA is a federal law that protects individuals, houses of worship, and other religious institutions from discrimination in zoning and landmarking laws, and protects the religious freedoms of inmates and other persons confined to institutions. It was enacted in response to limitations on religious freedoms imposed by land use regulations and the need for protecting religious exercise for institutionalized persons.

**Key Provisions:** RLUIPA prevents governments from imposing a substantial burden on the religious exercise of persons in custody or through land use regulation, unless there is a compelling governmental interest at stake and the least restrictive means are used to further that interest. It aims to ensure that religious practices are accommodated in these contexts, recognizing the particular vulnerabilities of institutionalized persons and the unique challenges they face in exercising their religious beliefs.

**Implications:** RLUIPA has been instrumental in protecting the rights of religious minorities, ensuring that zoning laws do not discriminate against religious groups and that individuals in custodial settings can practice their faith. It underscores the balancing act between individual religious freedoms and governmental interests, providing a framework for assessing when and how government regulations can impinge on religious exercise.

[Myers v. Commonwealth, 43 Va. App. 113 \(2004\)](#)

**Context and Legal Question:** This case involved a challenge to the process and standards used in Virginia for determining the mental competency of defendants to stand trial. While not directly related to religious objections to medication, it provides insight into the judiciary's considerations regarding mental health evaluations and the rights of defendants in these proceedings.

**Decision and Reasoning:** The appellate court in this case addressed the broader issues of how mental competency evaluations are conducted, emphasizing the need for individualized assessments and the rights of defendants to fair treatment under the law. The decision highlights the judiciary's recognition of the complexities surrounding mental health in the legal system and the importance of ensuring that defendants are competently able to participate in their defense.

**Implications:** Myers v. Commonwealth underscores the legal system's evolving understanding of mental health and competency. It reflects a broader legal and societal acknowledgment of the need for nuanced approaches to mental health in the criminal justice system, recognizing the critical balance between upholding the rights of defendants and ensuring public safety and the integrity of the legal process.