



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on September 1, 2013

## Atheists Call Poignant N.J. 9/11 Memorial “Grossly Offensive”

An atheist group has challenged the plans of Princeton, New Jersey, to place a piece of the World Trade Center destroyed in the 9/11 attack on city property because the memorial has a cross cut into it. The godless group, the American Atheists, argues that the cross cut into the steel beam that makes up the memorial is “grossly offensive” to non-Christians and would “alienate many people” if allowed on public property. Instead the group is proposing that the beam be placed in a “free speech zone” in the city, where non-religious individuals would be allowed to erect their own supposed memorials to those who died in the terrorist attack.



Nine individuals from Princeton perished in the attack that destroyed the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Princeton’s Deputy Fire Chief, Roy James, arranged to have the 10-foot length of twisted steel beam from the Twin Towers wreckage moved to the city and was working with city officials to have it erected as a memorial on city property. The beam includes the cross-shaped hole that was cut in it by welders during the recovery efforts following the attack. According to the [Christian Post](#), welders cutting up the beams “cut small crosses from many of the beams found in the wreckage from the World Trade Center, and placed them on the stretchers of fallen firefighters and police officers as their bodies were removed from the site to honor them and their sacrifice.”

James told a local TV news team that “we didn’t take this piece of steel and carve out the cross ourselves. We didn’t ask for it to be there. This is the way this steel came to us.” He added, however that “as a Jew, it doesn’t bother me.”

Predictably, however, it does bother the atheist group, which promised to take legal action against the city if it went ahead with erecting the memorial on city property. “If they put it there they are breaking the law,” said the group’s spokesman Dave Silverman. “And yes, American Atheists will take all legal actions including a lawsuit to stop it from happening.” He insisted that “placing religious symbols on public land and excluding others is clearly illegal and unconstitutional.”

In a letter to Princeton Mayor Liz Lempert, American Atheist attorney Bruce Afran wrote: “While the intention to commemorate those who died at the World Trade Center is admirable and appropriate for a community, the use of such a singular religious image will be grossly offensive and alienating to many people.” Afran said that although “the image of the cross on the girder is the space remaining after a cross was carved from the girder, it nonetheless presents the indisputable image of a cross on a memorial for those who died in the attacks of 9/11 — a religious image in remembrance of the dead. It goes without saying that the image of the cross is a common religious feature on the graves of the deceased who adhered in life to a Christian faith.”



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[NewJersey.com](#) reported that Deputy Fire Chief James was working with donors to raise the estimated \$100,000 needed to place the memorial on public property, with the preferred site being on public land where another monument, memorializing the Battle of Princeton during the Revolutionary War, also stands. Some proponents of the memorial suggested simply covering the cross, but James protested that option. "If you hide it ... you're taking someone's story away," he said. "You're taking someone's life that may have been lost that day and your taking it for granted."

James told [Fox News](#) that the issue is not one of religious faith, but of history and of honoring the memories of those who died, as well as those who worked in the recovery efforts afterwards. "We got a historic piece," James said. "There's so much behind that. If we do not show the cross, we are leaving out someone's story. We are basically saying someone's emotions that day didn't matter."

Princeton city officials are exploring their options and weighing the legal risk of allowing the memorial. Fox News recalled that in March atheists were unsuccessful in their efforts to force the removal of a cross constructed from World Trade Center beams from a 9/11 memorial museum in New York City. A judge disagreed with the atheists' argument that the memorial amounted to "government enshrinement of the cross" and threw out their case.

Similarly, the city of New York refused to bow to the demands of atheists sore over the re-naming of a street in honor of seven firefighters killed in the 9/11 attack. The atheists charged that the name of the street, "Seven in Heaven Way," was demeaning to those with no faith. The city, however, refused to change the name of the street.

Deputy Chief James told Fox News' Todd Starnes that the memorial, which is presently being stored at one of Princeton's fire stations, is all about "trying to remember those who died that day." He added that "I'm not forcing people to go and visit the memorial. If people get offended by it, they don't have to go."



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