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European Court to Rule on Fate of Religious Icons in Greek Courtrooms

The European Court of Human Rights is deliberating a landmark case challenging Christian Orthodox icons in Greek courtrooms. The ruling could reshape religious symbol displays across 46 European nations, potentially redefining the boundaries of cultural heritage and judicial neutrality.

The European Court of Human Rights is deliberating a [case that could fundamentally transform the visual landscape of justice systems across Europe](#), as it weighs whether Christian Orthodox icons displayed in Greek courtrooms violate fundamental rights to fair trial and religious freedom.

The case, [Union of Atheists v. Greece](#), reached a critical juncture this month when the Strasbourg-based court completed its review of third-party interventions and [entered the deliberation phase](#). A ruling is expected in the first half of 2026.

The dispute originated when atheist applicants challenged the presence of religious icons—including images of Jesus Christ—during hearings before Greece's Supreme Administrative Court in 2018 and 2019. In both instances, the applicants argued the symbols violated their rights under Articles 6 and 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantee fair trial and freedom of religion.

The challengers contend that standing before a court adorned with religious imagery creates an inherently biased environment. For religious minorities and non-believers, they

argue, these symbols signal that judicial authority flows not from secular law but from religious tradition, making them feel like outsiders before the law has even spoken.

Greece's Defense

The Greek government and supporting interveners, including the religious liberty organization ADF International, maintain that icons are passive cultural symbols deeply rooted in the nation's Orthodox heritage. They argue the images do not impose beliefs or influence judicial reasoning, comparing them to historic religious artwork found in courthouses across Austria, Spain, and Bavaria.

“The display of religious symbols in public spaces is in no way incompatible with human rights law. Public spaces should not be stripped of crosses, icons or other symbols with religious, cultural, and historical significance in the name of pluralism,” said Adina Portaru, Senior Counsel at [ADF International](#), whose organization filed a brief defending the icons.

Greece has invoked the principle of “margin of appreciation,” arguing that European states should have latitude to respect their own cultural and religious traditions in public spaces.

The case echoes a 2011 European Court of Human Rights ruling in [Lautsi v. Italy](#), where the Grand Chamber determined that crucifixes in Italian classrooms did not violate human rights. The court characterized the crucifix as an “essentially passive symbol” that did not amount to indoctrination.

However, legal experts note a crucial distinction: the Greek case involves courtrooms rather than schools. While children in classrooms have parental guidance to contextualize passive symbols, defendants and litigants in courtrooms face the direct, coercive power of the state, potentially requiring a higher standard of visible neutrality.

“A courtroom should be a sanctuary of secular law,” argue those supporting removal. “Judging a citizen beneath a religious icon suggests that the court is not neutral.”

A decision against Greece could reverberate across the 46 member states of the Council of Europe, potentially affecting religious displays in Poland, Romania, and other nations where Christian symbols remain prevalent in government buildings. The Atheist Union of Greece, posting on social media earlier this month, emphasized that the case raises novel questions about courtroom symbols and the right to a fair trial that extend

beyond educational settings.

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