Godless group gets religious exemption; Comptroller's office - says

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The silver atheist necklace against his black T-shirt tells you that David Bagley claims no god. But Bagley, a member of Austin's tiny Ethical Culture Fellowship, claims he has religion.

And now the State of Texas agrees.

Last month, it looked like the Ethical Culture Fellowship -- a nontheistic religion" that includes atheists and believers -- didn't have a prayer of gaining tax-exempt status as a religious organization.

This week, Comptroller John Sharp's office reversed itself and put the godless group in the same category as Baptists, Jews, Catholics and others that do not have to render unto Texas.

For Bagley, an Ethical Culture Fellowship board member, it's a major step toward redefinition of religion.

The idea is that we have a group that's a nontheistic religion that provides guidance, ethics or morals without someone saying some god is going to strike you dead and burn you in hell forever," he said.

The comptroller's office originally ruled in a May 14 letter that while the Ethical Culture Fellowship espoused worthy goals, such as creating a more humane society and a better world," it could not be considered a form of religious worship.

The comptroller's office changed its mind after reviewing court decisions in other states that said the Ethical Culture Fellowship is a religion, said Ross Ramsey, a spokesman for Sharp.

There aren't clear, bright lines between whether yours is a religion and mine's a sect and somebody else's is a cult," Ramsey said.

The state uses a variety of criteria. Belief in a deity is among them but is not a requirement.

It's just one of the things we look at," Ramsey said.

The Ethical Culture Fellowship has many of those but no god. The organization traces its beginnings to the teachings of Felix Adler, a rabbi's son driven to search for something else. He founded the movement in 1876.

Adler declared that Ethical Culture replaced the God-idea by that of a universe of spiritual beings interacting in infinite harmony."

Since then, Ethical Culturists have been trying to explain themselves to a society that generally believes a religion should have a god.

While our beliefs are not rooted in any single tradition, nevertheless we walk in fellowship with all those who believe in the golden rule, or as we say, who spell God with two o's," Sharon Sarles, consulting leader" of the Austin group, says in a statement on the group's World Wide Web site. (www.doorway.com/ei/html/sselthic.htm)
Being declared a religion is a significant win for up to 30 people who meet two Sunday mornings a month at the Lamar Senior Activity Center.

You can call it religion because it provides very clear, respectful guidance, and it answers the idea that the only way you can have morals is to have Jesus," said Bagley, a retired military man living in Killeen. Our morals and our ethics are more reliable and are more concise and caring than the supposed Judeo-Christian morals."

Joel Feinglass of San Antonio, president of the Ethical Culture Fellowship of Austin, welcomed the revised ruling as a modern way" of interpreting state law on what is a religion.

The statute on religious organizations was written by Christians who regarded Christianity as the model," he said. If you get into a set of beliefs that does not involve the supernatural, then the Christians have trouble in how you can call that a religion."

The Ethical Culture Fellowship is the first group to gain religious exemption without believing in a supreme being.

The Unitarian Universalist Church, to which Ethical Culture likens itself in some ways, is tax exempt and does not make belief in a supreme being a basic tenet.

Our worship service would not necessarily include a supreme being," said the Rev. Bill Zalazny of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin. Some people in our movement may believe there is a supreme being."

Weston Ware of the Baptist General Convention of Texas said the comptroller is correct in defining religion broadly.

We don't want to be in a position of trying to use government either to support our faith or to encumber what somebody else says is their faith," he said.

But Bobby Tyler, pastor of the Hilltop Baptist Temple in Cedar Park, said the comptroller's decision is a move in the wrong direction.

My definition of religion would be faith in Christ," he said. They are getting out of the area of religious organizations. That's all there is to it."