

Reynolds v. United States, 98 U.S. 145 (1878)

<https://lawcasesummaries.com/knowledge-base/reynolds-v-united-states-98-u-s-145-1878/>

Facts

- At the time of the decision, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints had a practice of polygamy.
- George Reynolds, a member of the Church, was charged with bigamy under the Anti-Bigamy Act ("**the Act**").
- Reynolds challenged the Act in the US Supreme Court, arguing that the Act was unconstitutional in that it conflicted with the First Amendment right of freedom of religion; as a Mormon, Reynolds was religiously required to marry multiple wives.

Issues

- Was the Anti-Bigamy Act unconstitutional?

Held

- The US Supreme Court upheld Reynolds' conviction.
- The US Congress cannot pass a law that prohibits the free exercise of religion.
- However, the Court considered that there was a distinction between religious belief and action that flowed from religious belief. A person's religious belief "*lies solely between man and his God*". Accordingly, "*the legislative powers of the government reach actions only, and not opinions.*"
- The Court believed the First Amendment forbade Congress from legislating against *opinion*, but allowed it to legislate against *action*.
- The First Amendment protects the right to hold any religious belief, but not the right to engage in any religious activity whatsoever.

Full Text

The full text is available here: <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/98/145/>

Law case summary from www.lawcasesummaries.com