

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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April 25, 2017

Sheriff Travis Patten  
Adams County Sheriff's Office  
306 State St  
Natchez, MS 39120

Re: Unconstitutional religious endorsement on Sheriff's Office badges

Dear Sheriff Patten:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) concerning the inclusion of a biblical reference on the Adams County Sheriff's Office (Sheriff's Office) Special Operations Group logos. FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit organization with more than 28,000 members across the country, including members in Mississippi. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional separation between church and state.

We are informed that the Sheriff's Office's Special Operations Group has unique logos that include a biblical reference to "Romans 13:4" from the New Testament. Romans 13:4 reads, "For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil."<sup>1</sup> We are aware that these logos have been featured in recent news stories about the Sheriff's Office,<sup>2</sup> as well as on the letterhead for press releases by the Special Operations Group. A picture of one such press release is enclosed.

Referencing a biblical quote on Adams County Sheriff's Office property violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. The logos must be changed.

The Supreme Court has repeatedly recognized that the First Amendment "mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion." *McCreary Cnty. v. ACLU*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947). Referencing the New Testament on law enforcement property fails to respect either constitutional mandate of neutrality.

Federal courts have regularly ruled that religious references on government logos violate the Establishment Clause. The Special Operations Group logos are akin to numerous other unconstitutional municipal seals and logos. *See, e.g., Robinson v. City of Edmond*, 68 F.3d 1226 (10th Cir. 1995) (city seal containing Latin cross in one quadrant violated Establishment Clause); *Ellis v. City of La Mesa*, 990 F.2d 1518 (9th Cir. 1993) (city insignia

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<sup>1</sup> That's the King James version. The New International Version reads: "For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

<sup>2</sup> *See, e.g., Adams County officials seize medical marijuana*, WAPT 16 NEWS (Apr. 14, 2107), [www.wapt.com/article/adams-county-officials-seize-medical-marijuana/9274767](http://www.wapt.com/article/adams-county-officials-seize-medical-marijuana/9274767).

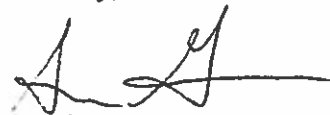
depicting “well-known local feature” containing a Latin cross violated the “No Preference Clause” of the California Constitution); *Harris v. City of Zion*, 927 F.2d 1401 (7th Cir. 1991) (Latin cross on city’s seals violated the Establishment Clause); *Friedman v. Bd. of Cnty. Comm’rs of Bernalillo Cnty.*, 781 F.2d 777 (10th Cir. 1985) (Latin cross with Spanish motto meaning “With This We Conquer” on county seal violated Establishment Clause); *Webb v. City of Republic, Mo.*, 55 F. Supp. 2d 994 (W.D. Mo. 1999) (religious fish symbol in one quadrant of city seal violated Establishment Clause).

As in the cases cited above, placing a bible verse on Sheriff’s Office property is a clear endorsement of Christianity, especially when the meaning of the quote is to state that those in power are servants of the Christian God and that their purpose is to “execute wrath” upon those who violate the law. Your authority as sheriff of Adams County does not come from God at all, it comes from the citizens of the county. The backwards sentiment expressed in Romans 13:4 sends the message to county residents who are not Christian “that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.” *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring). When a sheriff changes department property to reference his preferred religious book, not only does he unconstitutionally endorse religion, but also risks alienating the nearly 30% of Americans who are non-Christian.<sup>3</sup>

As you are aware, citizens interact with and rely on law enforcement officers during some of the most urgent and vulnerable times of their lives. These citizens should not be made to feel offended, excluded, and like political outsiders because the local government they support with their taxes oversteps its power by prominently placing a religious statement on government property. Nor should the Sheriff’s Office turn religious citizens into “insiders.” We think you’ll agree that law enforcement must be even-handed and avoid any appearance of bias toward some citizens, and hostility toward others.

Citizens of Adams County trust their law enforcement officials to attend to their secular duties. Placing religious references on Sheriff’s Office property is beyond the scope of secular government. The Romans 13:4 references must be removed from all department logos immediately. Please inform us in writing of the steps the Sheriff’s Office takes to protect the right of conscience of the citizens it protects by ending this constitutional violation. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Sam Grover  
Staff Attorney

Enclosure (1)

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<sup>3</sup> *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015), available at [www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/).



## **ADAMS COUNTY SPECIAL OPERATIONS GROUP**

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### **Press Release**

After several months of investigations, the Adams County Sheriff's Office Special Operations Group executed three different search warrants this morning that resulted in the seizure of 22 pounds of medical grade marijuana (with a street value of \$256,425.00), 31 weapons, 2 vehicles, and \$7382.00.

Agents executed the first search warrant at 58 Stirling Road and recovered approximately 21 pounds of medical grade marijuana that was brought in from California. Wilmer "Dub" Rogers was at the residence at the time of execution and claimed ownership of all the marijuana, 22 different weapons, and \$3,550.00. Agents also seized a laptop computer, two cell phones, packaging material, and digital scales.

Agents then went to one of Roger's businesses and located at 13 Ridgway Road and seized another ½ pound of medical grade marijuana that was hidden in the business. Rogers allowed agents to search another four locations that belonged to him. Agents seized additional property, a hard drive, and a truck that belonged to Rogers from Smoot's Bar, located at 319 N Broadway St.

Agents also executed a search warrant at 1116 Main St, Apartment C, and found David Anderson in possession of approximately ½ pound of medical grade marijuana, paraphernalia, a hand gun and \$3,832.00.

Wilmer "Dub" Rogers has been arrested and charged with Trafficking a Sch I Controlled Substance to wit: marijuana and two firearm enhancements of Possession of Narcotics while in possession of a weapon and possession of a firearm while in commission of a felony.

David Anderson was arrested and charged with Possession of Sch. I Drug to wit Marijuana with a Church Zone enhancement and Possession of Drug Paraphernalia.