

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL

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John Kaufman
Superintendent
Mt. Vernon Independent School District
501 Highway 37 South
Mt. Vernon, TX 75457

Re: Religious / Inaccurate Quotes Displayed on MVISD Buildings

Dear Superintendent Kaufman:

I am writing again on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a continuing constitutional concern in Mt. Vernon Independent School District (MVISD). We originally wrote you on October 31, 2014, concerning MVISD's appearance of unconstitutional religious endorsement via quotations displayed throughout MVISD buildings. We wrote again on February 3, 2015, to request additional information regarding these quotes. Thank you for your timely response.

After reviewing the records provided by MVISD concerning the origins of the quotes in its schools, we have determined that a significant portion of the quotes currently on display unconstitutionally endorse religion. We write to ask that MVISD remove all quotes that unconstitutionally promote religion.

Bible quotes on school walls are unconstitutional

As we noted in our last letter, it is a fundamental principle of Establishment Clause jurisprudence that a public school may not advance, prefer, or promote religion. *See generally, Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000). Courts have continually held that public school districts may not endorse religious messages, including text taken from the bible. *See, e.g., Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39 (1980) (ruling that the Ten Commandments may not be displayed on classroom walls). MVISD is a public school district and its schools should not be in the business of advancing Christianity by displaying bible quotes on district property.

The numerous biblical quotes¹ currently displayed on MVISD property unconstitutionally promote Christianity, creating the appearance that it is favored by the district. When the district displays Mark 9:23 ("All things are possible to him that believes") or improperly attributes the "golden rule" to Jesus by quoting Matthew 7:12, it explicitly promotes Christian belief.

¹ Including: 1 Corinthians 16:14, Mark 9:23, Matthew 7:12, Proverbs 12:27, Proverbs 15:15, Proverbs 21:23, and Proverbs 29:18, et al. *via* Open Records Request Response from MVISD to FFRF, dated February 3, 2015.

The notion that people should treat others as they would treat themselves existed long before Christianity, or even Judaism – the Golden Rule existed in both ancient Eastern and Western thought,² as well as in world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, and many others.³ MVISD students should be exposed to ethical principles during the school day, but teaching students that a specific religion is the source of the Golden Rule, a near-universal ethical principle, is not only inaccurate, but legally problematic.

Just as the Supreme Court ruled that “[t]he pre-eminent purpose for posting the Ten Commandments on schoolroom walls is plainly religious in nature,” *Stone*, 449 U.S. at 41, a court would undoubtedly rule that the purpose behind posting numerous bible quotes on MVISD walls is to promote Christianity. These quotes must be removed.

Other quotes promoting religion also violate the Constitution

Displaying statements by prominent individuals that broadly endorse Christianity is also a constitutional violation. A public school district cannot endorse the religious preferences of prominent historical figures any more than it can promote the personal religious preferences of its administrators. Of all the things that President Ronald Reagan said, the district’s choice of selecting the quote “Within the covers of the Bible are the answers for all the problems men face” is dubious, and, incidentally, intellectually lazy since that is *not* a direct quotation.⁴ What possible purpose could there be for selecting that quote other than to promote the bible to students?

Other quotes displayed by MVISD further reveal an impermissible religious purpose behind their selection and manipulation. A display at Mt. Vernon Elementary, for instance, incorrectly frames John Adam’s views about the bible’s role in his individual philosophy as a general pronouncement about its metaphysical value. The displayed quote reads, “The Bible is the best book in the world. It contains more philosophy than all the libraries I have seen.” This snippet of an 1813 letter from Adams to Thomas Jefferson omits three important words and all relevant context, *changing the very meaning of the quote*. The quote in its proper context reads:

Phylosophy looks with an impartial Eye on all terrestrial religions. I have examined all, as well as my narrow Sphere, my Streightened means and my busy Life would allow me; and the result is, that **the Bible is the best book in the World. It contains more of my little Phylosophy than all the Libraries I have seen:** and Such Parts of it as I cannot reconcile to my little Phylosophy I postpone for future Investigation.⁵
(emphasis added)

When the quote is read in its original form, it is clear that Adams is discussing the bible in terms of his personal beliefs, not prescribing the bible as the best book for everyone. John Adam’s Christian

² See generally, *The Analects of Confucius – Lun Yu*, XV.24, V.12, and VI.30, available at <http://wengu.tartarie.com/wg/wengu.php?i=Lunyu&no=0>; JEFFERY WATTLES, *THE GOLDEN RULE* (Oxford University Press, 1996), at 15-20.

³ RUSHWORTH M. KIDDER, *HOW GOOD PEOPLE MAKE TOUGH CHOICES: RESOLVING THE DILEMMAS OF ETHICAL LIVING* 159 (Harper) (2003).

⁴ For the actual quote see Ronald Reagan, *Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters*, AMERICAN PRESIDENCY PROJECT (Jan. 31, 1983) available at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=40550.

⁵ *From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 25 December 1813*, Founders Online, The National Archives, available at <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6217>.

beliefs are complex and idiosyncratic; quoting him in narrow fragments to support broad religious positions invites misunderstanding and confusion.

When MVISD manipulates historical quotes by removing context and isolating lines that promote Christianity or religion in general, it violates the right of conscience of its students. Courts investigating similar situations have rejected the argument that religious quotes were merely “well-known historical, patriotic phrases and slogans central to our Nation’s history” and looked to the actual religious message being conveyed. See *Johnson v. Poway Unified Sch. Dist.*, 658 F.3d 954, 965 (9th Cir. 2011) (approving removal of historical quotes referencing God from public school walls). Though the court in *Poway* found the selected quotes—including “In God We Trust,” “One Nation Under God,” and “God Bless America”—to be historically significant (while many of the quotes on the walls of MVISD arguably are not), they were still deemed unconstitutional due to the clear religious motivation behind their selection.

There is no justification for the religious quotes as part of a forum

The quotes on the walls of MVISD are school district speech subject to the Establishment Clause, not private speech posted as part of a public forum. In *Poway* the plaintiff argued that the school had established a “public forum” for the display of quotes and that the quotes were therefore private speech. *Id.* at 964. The court rejected that argument because the plaintiff’s speech owed its existence to his position as a school employee. *Id.* at 967. The records we’ve reviewed from MVISD make it clear that, like the quotes found unconstitutional in *Poway*, the quotes on MVISD walls are the speech of the school district. Each quote was selected through the combined efforts of the superintendent and a school board member, with school employees invited to give suggestions, but with the district exercising ultimate authority and veto power.

Only school district employees, acting in that capacity, were permitted the right to request specific quotes for school walls. A district employee, for instance, specifically requested that Proverbs 29:18 (“Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he”) be displayed on his office wall. This employee was afforded the opportunity to make this request solely because of his position within the school district. And this quote was the exception to the rule. Most quotes were selected from a master list created by Superintendent Kaufman and Steve Assay, a school board member.

For some of these quotes there is no justification that they even have educational value

The quotes on MVISD walls are school district speech and there is no justification for the selection of several of the quotes, except that they were clearly chosen because they promote Christianity. The district cannot even fall back on the argument that these quotes have educational merit, given the many examples of misquotes, misattributions, and entirely fraudulent quotes displayed on its walls.

The following quote appears at Mt. Vernon Junior High School and is erroneously attributed to George Washington: “It is impossible to govern a nation without God and the Bible.” According to the George Washington Digital Encyclopedia, this quote is frequently misattributed to President Washington’s 1796 farewell address.⁶ Given that the district shares its name with President Washington’s estate, this is a conspicuous misattribution that should be corrected immediately.

⁶ *Spurious Quotations*, The George Washington Digital Encyclopedia, available at www.mountvernon.org/research-collections/digital-encyclopedia/article/spurious-quotations/.

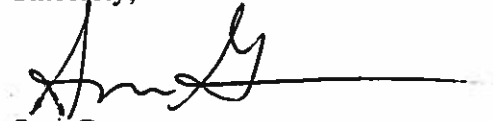
Similarly, the following quote attributed to Thomas Jefferson located at Mt. Vernon High School is incorrect: "The democracy will cease to exist when you take away from those who are willing to work and give it to those who would not." According to the Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia, this quote "has not been found in any of the writing of Thomas Jefferson;" it appears to be a recent creation and was attributed to Jefferson in the 1980's.⁷

The district sets a poor example for its students if it cannot be bothered to fact check the messages it chooses to endorse. The misquote from Ronald Reagan, the deceptively modified John Adams quote, and the historical revisionism involved in attributing the Golden Rule to Jesus are all examples of worrisome intellectual dishonesty by the district. And significantly, all of these inaccuracies, save for the erroneous Thomas Jefferson quote, are being used to promote religion to students. This is simply unacceptable.

Displaying biblical or otherwise religious quotes throughout the Mount Vernon Independent School District impermissibly entangles the district with a religious point of view, violating the principle that state and church must remain separate. FFRF has received complaints from multiple MVISD community members that these quotes make them feel excluded from the school or like outsiders. Beyond being illegal, displaying religious quotes is simply unnecessary and divisive. There are plenty of positive, educational, historically accurate quotes for the district to choose from. By promoting religious and Christian quotes on school property, MVISD does a disservice to the nearly 30% of Americans who are non-Christian, either practicing a minority religion or no religion at all.⁸

We ask that all quotes that endorse religion be removed from MVISD buildings. Please reply with the steps you are taking to remedy this matter. Thank you for your continued time and attention to the concerns of your community members.

Sincerely,



Sam Grover
Staff Attorney

STG:scw

⁷ *Spurious Quotes – The democracy will cease to exist... (Quotation)*, The Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia, available at www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/democracy-will-cess-exist-quotat.

⁸ *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.