

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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August 8, 2018

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL: info@shelbycountysheriff.com

Sheriff John R. Lenhart
Shelby County Sheriff's Office
555 Gearhart Road
Sidney, OH 45365

Re: Religious display on deputies' uniforms

Dear Sheriff Lenhart:

I am writing on behalf the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to alert you to state/church concerns over religious patches on Shelby County Sheriff's Office uniforms. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 32,000 members across the country, including more than 800 members and a chapter in Ohio. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It is our understanding that Shelby County sheriff's deputies have patches on their uniforms that display the phrase, "For God and Country." Please see the enclosed photos.

It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for the Shelby County Sheriff's Office to promote or endorse religion. Anyone viewing these patches would understand the Sheriff's Office to be endorsing religion and belief in a god. We request that these patches be removed.

Displaying "For God and Country" on sheriff's deputy uniforms demonstrates a preference for religion over nonreligion on behalf of the Sheriff's Office. By endorsing belief in a god, the Sheriff's Office sponsors a religious message, which is "impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to . . . nonadherents '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.'" *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309–10 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O'Connor, J., concurring)).

Furthermore, it is unconstitutional and coercive to require Sheriff's Office employees to display a religious message on their uniforms. Even if displaying this patch is not mandatory it is still coercive and intimidating to require nonreligious employees to either make a public showing of their nonbelief by choosing not to display this religious message on their uniforms, or else to endorse a religious message in which they do not believe, but which their employer clearly does.

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 religious patches convey a message to nonreligious citizens that they are not favored members of the political community. These citizens should not be made to feel excluded, like outsiders in their own community, because the local law enforcement they support with their taxes prominently displays religious messages on their uniforms. We hope you will agree that law enforcement must be even-handed and avoid any appearance of bias toward some citizens, or hostility toward others. Overall, 24% of Americans identify as nonreligious.¹

We strongly urge you to keep in mind your obligation not to promote or endorse religion and we ask that you remove these religious patches from Shelby County Sheriff's Office uniforms. May we hear from you at your earliest convenience?

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President
Freedom From Religion Foundation

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Enclosures

¹ Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America's Changing Religious Identity*, PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017), available at www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.

