

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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August 13, 2015

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: mike.rawlings@dallascityhall.com

The Honorable Mike Rawlings
Office of the Mayor
City Hall
1500 Marilla Street, Room 5EN
Dallas, TX 75201

Re: Dallas Iftar Dinner

Dear Mayor Rawlings:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding the City of Dallas's hosting and funding of an Iftar dinner. We were contacted by a concerned local resident. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 22,500 members across the country. We have more than 900 members in Texas, including members in Dallas. FFRF's purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our understanding that the Mayor's Office paid approximately \$1,000 toward setup, cleanup, and security for an Iftar dinner, which was held at the Dallas City Hall. We further understand that this is the second year the Mayor's Office has hosted the event. One report of the event stated that two Imams spoke "on the importance of fasting in Ramadan."

An Iftar dinner is a religious event. Iftar is an Islamic religious observance at the end of the Ramadan fast. Typically, Iftar involves prayers praising Allah and declaring a religious purpose for the fast and its breaking. For example, one common Iftar prayer (or "dua") is: "O Allah! I fasted for You and I believe in You [and I put my trust in You] and I break my fast with Your sustenance."¹

The City must not engage in or subsidize religious rituals or endorse religion over nonreligion. Prayers at events hosted by the city would cross this line because a reasonable observer would understand the government as endorsing the religious message of the prayers. Paying for a gathering that calls upon citizens to rise and pray (even silently) is coercive, embarrassing, and beyond the scope of secular government.

Beyond any prayers that may have been part of the event, the hosting and funding of an Iftar dinner by the City poses concerns for the constitutional separation of state and church. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution prohibits the government from endorsing, advancing, or promoting religion. Due to this prohibition, it is

¹ See, e.g., <http://haqislam.org/dua-for-iftar/>; <http://www.islamcan.com/ramadan/ramadan-dua-fasting.shtml#.VcTT-4up3rk>.

inappropriate for the City to host, organize, support, or otherwise promote a patently religious event like an Iftar dinner.

The Texas State Constitution explicitly bars such subsidy:

No man shall be compelled to attend, erect or support any place of worship, or to maintain any ministry against his consent. No human authority ought, in any case whatever, to control or interfere with the rights of conscience in matters of religion, and no preference shall ever be given by law to any religious society or mode of worship.
Art. I, Section 6


The City's endorsement and subsidy of the Iftar dinner forces those of other religions or no religion to promote someone else's religion. Such endorsement and subsidy further alienates and excludes nonreligious citizens in Dallas, turning them into political outsiders in their own community. Today one in five Americans, and one in three Americans under 30, do not identify with any religion.²

Given the high degree of City involvement and entanglement in the event, any reasonable person would interpret this conduct as government espousal of religion. The City hosted, funded, and helped to organize the event. The City should refrain from using publicly funded employees, and drawing on any other publicly funded resources, to promote, organize, or host the religious Iftar dinner in the future, or any similar devotional event. This includes offering City Hall as a venue for the event, providing funds for the event, publicizing the event on the City website, and inviting guests to the event.

We think the appropriate response when invited to fund or host this event would have been to suggest a city appearance at a more suitable forum that was not devotional in nature, but which sought to welcome or involve Dallas Muslims and other diverse citizens, not limited to the "faithful." We can all get along in a secular republic.

Dallas ought not to lend its power, prestige, or subsidy to any religion. Any events that the City chooses to host, fund, or promote should be neutral with respect to religion and nondevotional in nature. Such a violation of our First Amendment must not recur. Please inform us in writing at your earliest convenience what steps you are taking to address these concerns.

Very truly,


Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-Presidents
Freedom From Religion Foundation



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² *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.