

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 · MADISON, WI 53701 · (608) 256-8900 · WWW.FFRF.ORG

July 31, 2015

SENT BY MAIL AND FAX TO: (334) 671-8775

Sheriff Donald Valenza
Houston County Sheriff's Office
144 North Oates Street
Dothan, AL 36303

Re: Unconstitutional Religious Endorsement on Houston County Property

Dear Sheriff Valenza:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) concerning the inclusion of a biblical quote on the Houston County Sheriff's Office (Sheriff's Office) patrol decal. FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit organization that represents more than 22,500 members across the country, including members in Alabama, as well as a local chapter, the Alabama Freethought Society. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional separation between church and state.

We are informed that the Sheriff's Office has a new decal that appears on the rear of Houston County Sheriff patrol vehicles that features a quote from Matthew 5:9, which reads: "BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS . . ." ¹ We understand that you ordered the new decals be placed on vehicles because you believe it "symbolizes" the Sheriff's Office. ²

We are writing to inform you that displaying a biblical quote on Houston County Sherriff's Offices patrol vehicles endorses a religious message in violation of the Establishment Clause of the Constitution. These decals must be removed.

The Supreme Court has long recognized that the First Amendment "mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion." *McCreary County 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). Quoting the New Testament on a law enforcement vehicle fails to respect either constitutional mandate of neutrality. It endorses religion over nonreligion and Christianity over all other faiths.

Placing decals that literally quote chapter and verse on Houston County property is a clear endorsement of Christianity, especially when the quote is viewed in its full context. Matthew 5:9 reads "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Referring to government employees are children of God, or otherwise quoting a specific religious text on patrol vehicles sends a message to the nonreligious citizens of Houston County "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)

¹ Houston County Sheriff's Office patrol decal, available at www.houstoncountysheriff.org/index.php/patrol-decal.

² Greg Phillips, *Houston County Sheriff's vehicles adorned with new biblical decals*, Dothan Eagle (July 30, 2015) available at <http://goo.gl/buE4mS>.

(O'Connor, J., concurring).

When the Sheriff's Office mandates the display of a quote from one religious book on County property, using as justification the belief that it "symbolizes" the entire department, the office not only unconstitutionally endorses religion, it also alienates the nearly 30% of Americans who are non-Christian.³ This religious display undermines the credibility of the Sheriff's Office in the eyes of nonreligious and minority religious citizens.

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 outsiders in their community because the local government they support with their taxes oversteps its power by prominently placing bible quotes on government vehicles. Nor should the Sheriff's Office suggest that it favors religious citizens. We hope you'll agree that law enforcement must be even-handed and avoid any appearance of bias toward some citizens, or hostility toward others.

Spending time and taxpayer money placing religious messages on patrol cars is beyond the scope of the Houston County Sheriff's Office's law enforcement duties. The "BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS" decals must be removed from department vehicles immediately. Please inform us in writing of the steps the Sheriff's Office intends to take to address this constitutional violation. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Sam Grover
Staff Attorney

STG:scw

³ *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.