

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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August 13, 2015

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: Michael.nutter@phila.gov

The Honorable Michael Nutter
Office of the Mayor
City Hall, Room 215
Philadelphia, PA 19107

Re: Iftar Dinner Co-Sponsorship

Dear Mayor Nutter:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding the City of Philadelphia's co-sponsorship 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 700 members in Pennsylvania, including members in Philadelphia. We also have two Pennsylvania chapters, Nittany Freethought and Central Pennsylvania Rationalists. FFRF's purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our understanding that the Mayor's Office co-sponsored an "Interfaith Ramadan Festival" on June 19, 2015, which included an Iftar dinner. We were informed that the City helped to plan aspects of the event and invited local community members to the dinner. We further understand that this event took place at the center courtyard of City Hall. An advertisement for the event included departments of the Mayor's Office—the Mayor's Office of Immigrant and Multicultural Affairs and the Mayor's Office of Faith Based Initiatives—as two of the six listed sponsors. This advertisement is enclosed for your review.

An Iftar dinner is a religious event. Iftar is an Islamic religious observance at the end of the Ramadan fast. We understand Philadelphia's Ramadan Festival involved fifteen minutes of "reflections by various faiths." 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

If devotional prayer was part of the "reflections by various faiths," that is problematic because the City must not engage in religious rituals or endorse religion over nonreligion. Prayers at events co-sponsored by the city would cross this line because a reasonable observer would understand the government as endorsing the religious message of the prayers. Calling upon

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

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 co-sponsorship, hosting and apparent coordination 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 inappropriate for the City to host, organize, support, or otherwise promote a patently religious event like an Iftar dinner.


The City's endorsement of religion, whether "interfaith" or Muslim, also alienates nonreligious citizens in Philadelphia by turning them into political outsiders in their own community, including the one in five Americans, and one in three Americans under 30, who 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, co-sponsored, and helped to organize the event, and the Mayor's Office appeared on the event's advertisements. The City should refrain from using publicly funded employees, and drawing on any other publicly funded resources, to promote, organize, sponsor, or host the religious Iftar dinner in the future, or any similar devotional event. This includes publicizing the event on the City website, appearing as a sponsor on event advertisements, and inviting guests to the event.

We think the appropriate response when invited to co-sponsor 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 Philadelphian Muslims and other diverse citizens, not limited to the "faithful." We can all get along in a secular republic.

Philadelphia ought not to lend its power and prestige to any religion. Any events that the City chooses to co-sponsor, host, organize, or promote should be neutral with respect to religion and nondevotional in nature. Kindly inform us in writing of the steps you are taking to address these concerns.

Very truly,

Handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dan Barker & Annie Laurie Gaylor". The signature is written in a cursive style.

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

ALG:rsm:rdj

Enclosure

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

Interfaith Ramadan Festival

June 19, 2015 7:15 PM

City Hall - Center Courtyard

Free dinner will be served

Open to the public!

Program

7:15 Reception - Light Refreshments

Cultural Arts & Crafts Exhibit

Live Music

Cotton candy

Face painting

8:00 Reflections by various faiths

8:15 Buffet dinner served

8:30 Sunset Break Fast

