

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

January 17, 2023

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: DOTExec@dot.wi.gov

Craig Thompson
Secretary
Wisconsin Department of Transportation
4822 Madison Yards Way
Madison, WI 53705

Re: Inappropriate religious display

Dear Mr. Thompson:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring at a DOT rest stop. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 39,000 members across the country, including more than 1,600 members and our headquarters in Wisconsin. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

A concerned Wisconsin resident reported that there is a Latin cross and a bible verse displayed inside Coloma Rest Stop #81 on Highway I-39. We are told that the Latin cross and bible verse, “blessed are the peacemakers,”¹ are displayed on bulletin boards in the rest stop’s lobby. It is our understanding that the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (“the DOT”) owns and runs this rest stop. Please see the enclosed photographs of the cross and bible verse.

We write to request that this religious symbol and message be removed from the bulletin board in the Coloma rest stop’s lobby. It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for the DOT to display religious iconography and bible verses in a public building.

It is a basic constitutional principle that the government cannot show favoritism towards religion. The First Amendment’s Establishment Clause requires that the government remain neutral between religion and religion, and between between and nonreligion. *See McCreary Cnty., Ky. v. ACLU of Ky.*, 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 Ed. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947). By displaying a Latin cross, an unmistakably Christian symbol, and a bible verse in a public building, the DOT displays favoritism towards religion over nonreligion and Christianity over all other faiths. This religious display sends an exclusionary message that needlessly alienates

¹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God,” Matthew 5:9, New Int’l Version, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%205%3A9&version=NIV>.

Wisconsinites and travelers who are non-Christians, including the nearly thirty percent of the population who are not religious.²

We ask that the DOT remove the cross and bible verse from the Coloma rest stop's lobby and see that religious displays are not allowed in DOT owned buildings moving forward. Please respond in writing with the steps the DOT is taking to remedy this matter so that we may inform our complainant.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosures

² Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Dec. 14, 2021), available at www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.

Thank you for the sacrifice you make to serve our community.

We Back the Badge

— Blessed are the Peacemakers —

