

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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March 6, 2013

SENT VIA EMAIL rcole@wynnewood.k12.ok.us

Mr. Raymond Cole
Superintendent, Wynnewood Public Schools
702 E. Robert S. Kerr Blvd.
Wynnewood, OK 73098

Re: Your March 4, 2013 email

Dear Mr. Cole:

I have received your March 4, 2013 email. I can assure you that this matter has not "been dealt with to the satisfaction of all concerned parties." As I mentioned in my initial letter, the poster issue was dealt with before I wrote you. But I contacted you at the request of a parent whose remaining concerns were ignored by Principal Carter and Mrs. Carter. I do not share your confidence that the situation is resolved.

You addressed our concerns about a public school teacher injecting her religion into the classroom by instructing the teacher "to stay strictly with the information presented in the text book." I truly appreciate your prompt response, but remain concerned that the Carters may not understand this reasonable requirement for three reasons.

First, when the parent raised these concerns, we understand that the principal asserted that his wife had a First Amendment right to discuss her religion, denigrate evolution, and Christianize our Constitution. In my initial letter, I cited numerous cases, mostly Supreme Court cases, which prove the falsity of the Carters' position. It is important that the Carters understand that they do not have a free speech or free exercise right to inflict religion upon a captive audience of public schoolchildren. There is no indication that this was made clear to them and we fear the problems will continue.

Second, you wrote that "the Text Book makes reference to religious principles." It is difficult to believe that Carter's patently false claims about the biblical foundations of our Constitution are in a state textbook. If this lie is in a textbook it must be immediately removed from the curriculum. And it is strange that she "discussed" biological science in her social studies class. Clearly, she was not following the textbook, indeed she wasn't even on subject, when these previous violations occurred. We are concerned that her lack of respect for her state-prescribed subject area, state textbook, and the First Amendment, extend to instructions from your office.

Third, the second half of your letter exhibits little remorse for Carter's attitude; in fact, it shows a certain approval for her unconstitutional actions. I appreciate your assurances that you do not share with students, the "things in this e-mail ... because I try to obey the law even if I dont [*sic*] agree with a particular law. I think teaching students to be good citizens is our greatest responsibility and obeying the law is part of good citizenship." But the "things" in the rest of your letter are disturbing and undermine your assurances. I will quote you in full:

I respect people who stand for what they believe in, although I dont [*sic*] really know what you believe in I only know what you dont [*sic*] believe in. Out of curiosity, I would like to ask you what you believe and I'm honestly not trying to be argumentative (it would be foolish to argue with a lawyer) I'm honestly interested in your views.

A couple of questions I would ask you is [sic];

If you believe in evolution, why did we stop evolving? I mean, people are generally larger today than 2000 years or millions of years ago, but we haven't lost a toe or little finger, etc. What happens when you die, if you're [sic] wrong? If I'm wrong, when I die I just die, but if you're wrong, when you die....

I have a degree in science and I'll admit some things were very confusing, or hard to understand, but in the end my faith in God forms my belief. I have seen God work in my life and I truly feel his presence. There have been many times in my life where I have fallen short but I know in my heart that God loves me and forgives my short comings, or sins.

I don't [sic] want to jump to any conclusions, perhaps you and many of your group are Christians and are just trying to keep Church and State separate. I would submit that the single greatest reason for the violence in our schools today is this so called separation, and that the further we separate God from our schools the nearer we bring violence and evil.

What do I believe?

Please understand that my personal beliefs have no bearing on the illegality of the Carters' actions. But since you asked, I believe in the First Amendment. I believe in protecting minorities from the tyranny of the majority. I believe that religion is the single most divisive force on this planet and that it has no place in our public schools. I believe that ideas should be subjected to reason, debate, and inquiry, not blindly accepted. I believe that a public education is the key to a successful country because a democracy only works if the electorate is informed and educated.

I believe in selflessness, and in fighting for causes bigger than oneself. I believe that every American, no matter what their beliefs, should strive to uphold and enforce the First Amendment. I believe in love, in family, and in making the most of this life because it's the only one we have. In short, I am an atheist.

Evolution

I think it is a telling, and disturbing, comment on the state of our public education system that a superintendent, with a degree in science, does not understand or "believe in" evolution. Evolution is as much a fact as gravity. I would suggest that if you do not understand evolution, you read up on the subject. Start with *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution* by Richard Dawkins and *Why Evolution Is True* by Jerry A. Coyne.

What happens when you die? Or, Pascal's wager

Pascal's wager is nothing more than an attempt to pressure others into your religion. This is proselytizing at its most puerile. First of all, I do not believe in things because of threats or rewards—I believe in things because of evidence. The suggestion that I should believe in your god because it might be beneficial or save me from eternal torture is insulting. I will not compromise my intellectual honesty on the basis of a threat. And if your god is as loving as his followers claim, I doubt he will punish me for an honest disbelief—but he might for a life of dishonest fawning over him.

Second, you need only answer that question about every god you do not believe in to understand my position. I do not believe in your god for the same reasons you don't believe in the Muslim god. People believe in thousands of gods. Why is yours the right one to save me from eternal torment? Why do you not believe in those other gods: it costs you nothing and might save you from eternal torture?

Violence and Religion

Finally, your assertion that the "single greatest reason for the violence in our schools today is this so called separation, and that the further we separate God from our schools the nearer we bring violence and evil" is

appalling. Hundreds of scientific studies prove you wrong.¹ Morality does not require religion. Dr. Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, a PhD in clinical psychology, wrote, "The claim that atheists are somehow more likely to be immoral has long been disproven by systematic studies."²

A variation of your assertion has actually been scientifically tested. "If religion, prayer, or God-belief hindered criminal behavior, and secularity or atheism fostered lawlessness, we would expect to find the most religious nations having the lowest murder rates and the least religious nations having the highest."³ But "We find just the opposite. Murder rates are actually lower in more secular nations and higher in more religious nations where belief in God is deep and widespread. And within America, the states with the highest murder rates tend to be highly religious, such as Louisiana and Alabama, but the states with the lowest murder rates tend to be among the least religious in the country, such as Vermont and Oregon."⁴

In fact, when any given factor of societal health or well-being is measured it is invariably the *less* religious countries that score better. The *least religious countries* of this world:

- Have the lowest rates of violent crime, homicide, and corruption.
- Are the best place to raise children and be a mother
- Have the lowest levels of intolerance against racial and ethnic minorities
- Score highest when it comes to women's rights and gender equality
- Have the greatest protection and enjoyment of political and civil liberties
- Are better at educating their youth in reading, math, and science
- Are the most peaceful, the most prosperous and have the highest quality of life.⁵

The pattern of lower religiosity to higher societal well-being is not limited to an international analysis. This trend also exists within United States. Those states that are the most religious also have a high occurrence of societal ills. **The *most religious* states in the nation tend to have the highest rates of: poverty, obesity, infant mortality, sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy, murder, and violent crime.**⁶ Your claim that school violence is a result of our secular government is simply nonsense.

Student-led prayer is unconstitutional

You also wrote: "as I understand the law, prayer can be student led as long as no adult from the school solicits the student to lead the prayer." This is not accurate. The Supreme Court has continually struck down formal and school-led prayer in public high schools. See, e.g., *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Abington Township Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985). **Even when student-initiated**, the Supreme Court has found these prayers unconstitutional. See *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000) (struck down a school policy that authorized student-led, student-initiated prayer at high school football games).

If students want to pray privately, on their own time, they are free to do so. They are not allowed to organize or lead school prayer. If this is occurring in your schools it must cease immediately.

I renew my request that you inform the Carters and all district employees to refrain from promoting religion in the public school. Please inform them that they have a duty as employees to keep religion in the private sphere, where it belongs, and not a First Amendment right to impose it on vulnerable school children. We appreciate your continuing work to resolve our concerns.

Sincerely,



Andrew L. Seidel
Staff Attorney

¹ In a synthesis of the latest social scientific research concerning some of these issues *see* Zuckerman, Phil. 2009. 'Atheism, Secularity, and Well-Being: How the Findings of Social Science Counter Negative Stereotypes and Assumptions.' *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 3 Issue 6, 949-971.

² Beit-Hallahmi, Benjamin. 2007. 'Atheists: A Psychological Profile.' Pp 300-317 in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, edited by Michael Martin. New York, NY.: Cambridge University Press.

³ Zuckerman at 955 (internal citations omitted).

⁴ Zuckerman at 955 (internal citations omitted).

⁵ Zuckerman at 960-61 (internal citations omitted).

⁶ Zuckerman at 955, 961 (internal citations omitted).