

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

July 16, 2024

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: CCS102@hotmail.com

Sheriff Blair Weaver
Chester County Sheriff's Office
333 Eric Bell Drive
Henderson, TN 38340

Re: Unconstitutional religious display

Dear Sheriff Weaver:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding an ongoing constitutional violation on the Chester County Sheriff's Office's website. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including a chapter in Tennessee. 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 community member informs us that the main page of CCSO's official website displays a bible quote surrounding a "Thin Blue Line" flag, directly adjacent to uniformed jail employees.¹ The reference is to Matthew 5:9: "BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS, for they shall be called the children of God." Please see the enclosed image.

Use of religious imagery by important government offices risks unnecessarily isolating dissidents and undermining confidence in those offices' function. We ask that the Sheriff's Office remove the religious iconography from its website.

The Supreme Court has long recognized that the First Amendment "mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion." *McCreary Cnty. v. Am. Civil Liberties Union 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 Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947). Posting a biblical quote on an official government website fails to respect either constitutional mandate of neutrality. This quote from the New Testament is explicitly a Christian quote, and only a Christian quote. This image endorses religion over nonreligion and Christianity over all other faiths.

Referencing the bible on government websites sends the message to minority religious and nonreligious citizens "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." *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309–10 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O'Connor, J., concurring)). This is unnecessarily divisive.

¹ www.chestercountytn.org/sheriff.html.

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 alienated, like political outsiders, because their local government they support with their taxes oversteps its power by placing a religious statement on government property. Nor should the Sheriff's Office privilege religious citizens. Such a show of religious preference undermines the credibility of the police department and causes religious minorities—including the nonreligious—to question the impartiality of their law enforcement officials.

We hope you agree that law enforcement must be even-handed and avoid any appearance of bias toward some citizens, and hostility toward others. Citizens of Chester County trust their law enforcement officials to attend to their secular duties. Spending taxpayer time and money placing religious messages on police department property is beyond the scope of secular government.

Other police departments have removed this same bible citation from department property after receiving letters like this one from FFRF. Failing to respect this constitutional right can be costly: FFRF settled a lawsuit against the Brewster County, Texas Sheriff's Office after that office put crosses on police vehicles and ignored our letters of complaint. Brewster County ended up removing the crosses and paying about **\$20,000** in fees and costs to FFRF.² CCSO's posting is similarly unconstitutional.

The religious image on the Sheriff's Office's website must be removed from CCSO property immediately. Please inform us in writing of the steps the Sheriff's Office takes to address this constitutional violation and respect the right of conscience of all Chester County citizens. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Hirsh M. Joshi
Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

² See ffrf.org/news/news-releases/item/26774-ffrf-hails-speedy-victory-for-constitution-in-texas.

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS



For they shall be called the children of God.