

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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September 10, 2024

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: jim.washam@kingstontn.gov

Chief Jim Washam
Kingston Police Department
900 Waterford Place
Kingston, TN 37763

Re: Unconstitutional bible reference in government communications

Dear Chief Washam:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in the Kingston Police Department. FFRF is a national educational nonprofit with more than 40,000 members across the country, including over 400 members and a chapter in Tennessee, FFRF East Tennessee. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

A concerned community member informs us that the Department places a bible reference in official press releases. KPD's August 15, 2024 press release notes "Proverbs 20:7" right underneath your name. That reference in the New International Version reads "The righteous lead blameless lives; blessed are their children after them." Please see the enclosed screenshot.

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). Placing a biblical reference on government press releases fails to respect either constitutional mandate of neutrality. This is explicitly a Christian verse, and only a Christian verse. Using Christian scripture endorses religion over nonreligion and Christianity over all others.

Biblical scripture in government communications 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.

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 alienated, like political outsiders, because their local tax-supported government oversteps with religious messages. Nor should the police department 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 Kingston trust their law enforcement officials to attend to their secular duties. The Department's use of religious scripture in official communications is beyond the scope of secular government.

The "Proverbs 20:7" citation must be removed from KPD's official communications immediately. Please inform us in writing of the steps the police department takes to address this constitutional violation and respect the right of conscience of all Kingston citizens. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Hirsh M. Joshi".

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

Enclosure



Kingston Police Department

Office of the Chief of Police
Codes Enforcement and Animal Control



865/376-2081 Office
865/354-8045 Dispatch

Jim Washam, Chief
Proverbs 20:7

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Press Release 08/15/2024

On 08/14/24, officers with the Kingston Police Department arrived on Woodlawn Drive in response to a call of a hit and run of a pedestrian. Officers spoke with the victim, a 12-year-old male.

Upon further investigation, officers learned that a black sedan had came up behind the victim and struck the victim on his left side with the passenger side and mirror of the vehicle.

Officers reviewed video footage from a neighbor's camera system. A dark gray Chrysler 200 was seen in the footage driving at a high rate of speed. While checking the area, a gray Chrysler 200 was found nearby at 115 King Circle. The vehicle had damage consistent with the victim's injuries and statements.

Contact was made with Nicolas Debord, 34. Nicolas Debord admitted to officers that he had struck the victim and left the scene due to his license being suspended.

Nicolas Debord was placed under arrest for reckless driving, driving on a suspended license, leaving the scene of an accident and reckless endangerment. This incident is still under investigation and more charges may be filed.

The Kingston Police Department is thankful to report that the 12 year old victim appeared to have minor injuries.

We would like to thank the officers and detectives for their hard work and quick response that resulted in the arrest of Nicolas Debord. We would also like to thank the citizens that helped in the investigation.

The Kingston Police Department would like to take this opportunity to remind motorists to slow down, drive safely, watch for pedestrians and keep our roadways safe.