



December 7, 2015

OPEN LETTER REGARDING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN JEFFERSON PARISH

By email BenZahn@JeffParish.net
And by regular mail
Mr. Ben Zahn
Jefferson Parish Council
Joseph S. Yenni Building
1221 Elmwood Park Blvd., 10th Floor
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AMERICAN CIVIL
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Dear Mr. Zahn:

According to the Advocate, with the return of the religious name “Christmas” to the holiday celebration in LaFreniere Park is a ban on the expression of religious views that, in your opinion, are not “within reason.” See <http://theadvocatc.com/news/neworleans/neworleansnews/14188281-70/jefferson-parish-returns-christmas-to> (December 5, 2015).

This letter is to advise you that neither you nor any other government official has the legal authority to determine what religions are “within reason” or to ban or otherwise restrict religious expression of any kind where one religion is promoted.

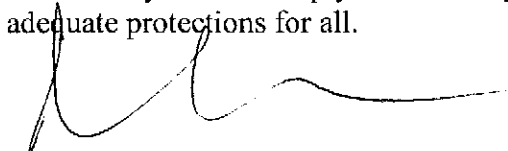
I’m sure you’re aware of the language in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (as applied to the states via the 14th Amendment): “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” As applied to Jefferson Parish, this means that the Parish Council cannot establish a single religion over others, or determine what religions are “within reason.” This is echoed in Article 1, Section 8 of the Louisiana Constitution, which reads in its entirety: “No law shall be enacted respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Singling out Islam as a disfavored religion not only violates the Constitutions of the United States and of Louisiana, it also discriminates against the many Muslim residents of Jefferson Parish who have the right to equal protection for their religion. Your statement that symbols related to the Islamic State are not welcome confuses politics with religion, because the Islamic State is not, in itself, a religion. To ban legitimate symbols of the Muslim faith that might also be associated with a political entity is both unlawful and harmful to those peaceable practitioners of Islam who want nothing more than their legal right to full equality for their religious beliefs.

In short, government may not express a preference for one religion over others or ban any religion where others are allowed. It is not for the government, or a government official, to determine what religions are “within reason.” All religious groups in Jefferson Parish must have equal treatment within LaFreniere Park and in all aspects of life.

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I trust that you will comply with the requirements of our Constitutions and ensure adequate protections for all.



Sincerely,

Marjorie R. Esman
Executive Director

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