

# THE RUTHERFORD INSTITUTE

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February 3, 2025

By Electronic Mail (swelch@isabellacounty.org)

Scott Welch  
Jail Administrator  
Isabella County Sheriff's Office  
207 Court Street  
Mount Pleasant, MI 48858

Re: Display of "Blessed are the peacekeepers" phrase in new jail

Dear Mr. Welch:

For more than 40 years, The Rutherford Institute<sup>1</sup> has championed the First Amendment rights of all Americans to not be silenced. We have also been vocal advocates of the role of law enforcement as peace officers, especially at a time when our nation is sorely in need of law enforcement officials prepared to advocate for a peacekeeper mindset rather than a warrior mindset.

Thus, we were sorely disappointed to learn that the Isabella County Sheriff's Office is being pressured by the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to remove the display of the phrase "Blessed are the peacekeepers for they shall be called the children of God" from the wall of its as-yet-unfinished new jail out of a concern that it constitutes a government endorsement of religion.<sup>2</sup> While the FFRF certainly has the right to *complain* about a phrase displayed on a wall of the jail, to *compel* the Sheriff's Office to censor such speech because FFRF finds the mere reference to God in violation of the First Amendment suggests a misunderstanding about the Establishment Clause.<sup>3</sup>

First, it appears that the jail is neither directly quoting a Bible verse nor attempting to promote religion.

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<sup>1</sup> The Rutherford Institute is a nonprofit civil liberties organization which seeks to protect individuals' constitutional rights and educate the public about threats to their freedoms.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.themorningsun.com/2025/01/30/non-profit-asks-for-removal-of-bible-quote-from-isabella-jail/>

<sup>3</sup> See *Bormuth v. Cnty. of Jackson*, 870 F.3d 494, 522 (6th Cir. 2017) (en banc) (Sutton, J., concurring) (involving legislative prayers, and noting that in the complainant's view, "[a]ll references to any one faith or to religion in general, he says, must be removed from governmental proceedings. Who is coercing whom under that approach? And what are we establishing?").

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Based solely on the display, the phrase seems to have a primarily secular purpose of promoting the image of law enforcement officials as peacekeepers rather than endorsing a particular religion. It is unclear whether the jail is even quoting a Bible verse: there is no reference to any Bible verse, like “Matthew 5:9,” which FFRF cites and claims. In fact, the statement on the jail wall does not appear to be a quote from any translation of Matthew 5:9 that we can find. Every translation we’ve looked at (18 of them) uses the term “peacemakers.” None use the term “peacekeeper.”

While the phrase on the jail wall appears to employ a common literary device of borrowing its inspiration from a well-known saying, in this case a Bible verse, it seems to be an intentional alteration to specifically promote the idea of law enforcement officers as “peacekeepers.” Making a statement by twisting and altering well-known Bible verses would not appear to promote or endorse Christianity.

Second, the jail appears to promote and endorse its peacekeeping efforts as law enforcement officers through an allusion to a commonly recognized saying.

The phrase displayed on the jail alludes to the role law enforcement officers are supposed to play in society as peacekeepers. Policing is not simply about crime; it is also about keeping the peace. This is why police officers are often also called “peace officers.” Historically, law enforcement officers have been entrusted with keeping the peace and stopping criminal activity which disturbs the peace.<sup>4</sup> People generally recognize a difference between the terms “peacekeeper” and “peacemaker” in other contexts as well.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the *choice* of the word “peacekeeper” directly relates to the law enforcement function. In fact, the term “peacekeeper” is commonly used and understood in law enforcement contexts; hence, the phrase on the jail wall appears to emphasize the police’s role in maintaining peace and order, and does not seem to promote religion.

- **“Peace Officer” Designation:** Many law enforcement officers, particularly at the state and local level, hold the official title of “peace officer.” This designation emphasizes their role in keeping the peace, not just enforcing laws, highlighting their primary duty to maintain peace and order.
- **Police Mission Statements:** Many police department mission statements include language about “keeping the peace,” “preserving order,” or “protecting the community.”

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/peacekeeper> (“2. a soldier, military force, etc., deployed to maintain or restore peace”), whereas a “peacemaker” could be defined as “someone who reconciles people with God and with one another” (<https://www.christianity.com/wiki/bible/the-phrase-blessed-are-the-peacemakers-mean.html>).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/difference-between-being-peacekeeper-peacemaker-your-you-powell-phd>.

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- **Police Training and Education:** Law enforcement training often emphasizes the importance of de-escalation techniques, conflict resolution, and community policing, all of which are related to embodying the skills and strategies needed to be effective peacekeepers in their communities.
- **Community Policing Initiatives:** Many police departments have implemented community policing programs that focus on building relationships with residents and addressing community concerns. These programs often emphasize the role of police officers as problem-solvers and peacekeepers, working collaboratively with the community to address issues that could lead to conflict.
- **Historical Context:** The phrase “peacekeeper” evokes the historical origins of policing, where officers were tasked with “keeping the King’s peace,” a fundamental responsibility that continues to shape the mission of law enforcement today.

Thus, this emphasis on the “peacekeeper” role is deeply rooted in the history of law enforcement and reflected in modern policing practices.

Third, the scope of the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause is often misunderstood.

A misunderstanding of the Establishment Clause, which prohibits the government from establishing a religion, often seeks to erase any vestige of religion from the public sphere. As the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals has explained “a majority [of justices of the U.S. Supreme Court] agreed that ‘[o]ffense...does not equate to coercion’ because ‘[a]dults often encounter speech they find disagreeable; and an Establishment Clause violation is not made out any time a person experiences a sense of affront from the expression of contrary religious views.’”<sup>6</sup>

While the “peacekeeper” term does not seem to endorse religion, the government can acknowledge and refer to religious traditions and language without violating the Constitution. The Establishment Clause was never meant to eliminate all religious references from government. For example, our national motto, “In God We Trust,” appears on our currency and is a prominent part of our national identity. Its use has been challenged in court, but it has repeatedly been upheld as constitutional, not as an establishment of religion, but as a recognition of the role of faith in American history and culture. *See Doe v. United States*, 901 F.3d 1015 (8th Cir. 2018).

As the Eighth Circuit noted in *Doe*, “historical practices confirm that the Establishment Clause does not require courts to purge the Government of all religious reflection or to evince a hostility to religion by disabling the government from in some ways recognizing our religious heritage,” but “[p]recluding general references to God would do exactly that.” *Id.* at 1022

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<sup>6</sup> *Doe v. United States*, 901 F.3d 1015, 1023-24 (8th Cir. 2018) (citing *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, 134 S.Ct. 1811, 1826 (2014), *id.* at 1838 (Thomas, J., concurring in part and concurring in the judgment)).

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(internal quotation marks omitted). The Seventh Circuit had likewise rejected a similar challenge to the placement of the national motto on money, “not because [the court] think[s] that the phrase ‘In God We Trust’ is absolutely devoid of religious significance, but instead because the religious content that it carries does not go beyond statutory or constitutional boundaries.” *Mayle v. United States*, 891 F.3d 680, 687 (7th Cir. 2018). The Seventh Circuit explained that “if, as the Supreme Court has held, public or legislative prayer does not force religious practice on an audience, it is difficult to see how the unobtrusive appearance of the national motto on the coinage and paper money could amount to coerced participation in a religious practice.” *Id.* at 685 (citation omitted).

Thus, the Eighth Circuit held in *Doe* that the “[U.S.] Constitution does not prevent the Government from promoting and celebrating our tradition of religious freedom, even if the means of doing so—here, adding the national motto to U.S. money—was motivated in part because of religious sentiment.” 901 F.3d at 1023 (cleaned up) (citing *Mayle*, 891 F.3d at 685-86).

Just as “In God We Trust” can be displayed by the government, the phrase “Blessed are the peacekeepers for they shall be called the children of God” might also be permissible, particularly within the framework of law enforcement’s role of doing good work through which they themselves and the community benefit or are blessed.

Fourth, the term “children of God” is a vague and broadly used term not specific to Christianity.

Apart from the generic reference to “God” (much like the Declaration of Independence and the Pledge of Allegiance refer to God without endorsing a particular faith), there is nothing in the phrase on the jail wall that symbolizes or promotes religion.

The phrase “children of God” is very vague and a broadly used common term which is not specific to Christianity. For example, during an iftar meal for Muslims at the White House in 2010, President Barak Obama stated “Here at the White House, we have a tradition of hosting iftars that goes back several years, just as we host Christmas parties and seders and Diwali celebrations. And these events celebrate the role of faith in the lives of the American people. **They remind us of the basic truth that we are all children of God**, and we all draw strength and a sense of purpose from our beliefs.”<sup>7</sup> Yet the president’s use of that phrase and hosting religious celebrations at the White House did not seem to violate the Establishment Clause. It has also been reported that Mahatma Gandhi referred to the Dalits as *Harijan*, or “children of God,” as a way “to refer to all devotees of Krishna [a major deity in Hinduism] irrespective of caste, class, or sex.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://youtu.be/2gDLvzr5fCo> at 0:37 to 1:05.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalit#Harijan> and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children\\_of\\_God](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children_of_God).

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There are likely other uses of the term “children of God” generally and in other religions. And, as mentioned previously, the word “God” is used in the Declaration of Independence,<sup>9</sup> on our money (“In God we trust”), and in the Pledge of Allegiance (“one nation under God”) without violating the Establishment Clause.

While the term “children of God” is often associated with religious contexts, it also carries broader secular meanings related to shared humanity, moral equality, and community connection. In the context of a diverse community, the term can be understood as referring to the fundamental human connection shared by all, regardless of belief, emphasizing our common origin and inherent worth. It also affirms the moral equality of all individuals, a principle that guides law enforcement in its duty to serve and protect.

Furthermore, it can be seen as a metaphor for the interconnectedness of the community, highlighting the bonds that unite people despite their differences and reminding officers of their role in serving and protecting all members, regardless of background or belief. The phrase can also acknowledge the inherent potential for good in every individual, a principle that informs the work of law enforcement in promoting rehabilitation and positive change.

Finally, it can be understood as a reference to universal values such as compassion, justice, and peace, which transcend specific religious traditions and guide the work of law enforcement in building a just and peaceful society.

Finally, the Supreme Court has recognized that religious symbols and references can take on secular meanings.

In *American Legion v. American Humanist Assn.*, 139 S.Ct. 2067 (2019), the Supreme Court held that the Bladensburg Peace Cross memorial for 49 soldiers who gave their lives in the First World War did not violate the Establishment Clause. The Court noted that while the “cross is undoubtedly a Christian symbol,” it has “multiple purposes” and there are “many contexts in which the symbol has also taken on a secular meaning.” *Id.* at 2074, 2083, 2090.

Similarly, it would seem that mere references to well-known Biblical stories or passages could be made for secular motivational purposes—here, stating that law enforcement officers are a blessing by doing good work to keep and maintain peace in the community. And in *American Legion*, the Court noted that “tearing down monuments with religious symbolism and scrubbing away any reference to the divine” or “amputating the arms of the [Bladensburg] Cross” memorial “may evidence hostility to religion.” *Id.* at 2084-87. And a “relentless and all-pervasive attempt

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<sup>9</sup> “[T]he Founding Fathers believed devotedly that there was a God and that the unalienable rights of man were rooted in Him.” *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 213 (1963).

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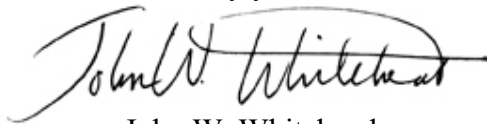
to exclude religion...could itself become inconsistent with the Constitution.” *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577, 598 (1992).

Although FFRF has expressed a concern about spending taxpayer time and money placing religious messages on County property, FFRF's complaint appears to be an attempt to impose their narrow interpretation of this phrase on the community, potentially wasting taxpayer resources on a divisive issue. Surely there are more pressing issues for the Sheriff's Office to address than a motivational phrase on its wall.

However the Sheriff's Office chooses to proceed with its display, on behalf of The Rutherford Institute, we commend the leadership within the Isabella County Sheriff's Office for choosing to emphasize its commitment to the peacekeeping role of police officers in this unique display. To further clarify the secular or nonsectarian intent of the display and *underscore* the Sheriff's Office's commitment to its role as keepers of the peace, you might also consider the addition of a plaque explaining the meaning of the quote in this context.

Should your attorney desire any assistance in formulating a response to FFRF, please do not hesitate to call upon The Rutherford Institute.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John W. Whitehead". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

John W. Whitehead  
President

CC: Michael Main, Isabella County Sheriff: [isbellasheriff@isabellacounty.org](mailto:isbellasheriff@isabellacounty.org)  
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