

January 6, 2005

Dear Providence City Council Member:

We understand you have on tonight's agenda a resolution "Requesting City Leaders to cause the return" of the Ten Commandments monument that had been in Roger Williams Park. We urge you to reject the resolution.

First, we are somewhat surprised to see a resolution like this in the first place, in light of the fact that a representative of the Fraternal Order of Eagles has publicly been quoted as saying that he is happy to have the monument on display at the Eagles' hall. It certainly raises questions about the motivation behind the resolution.

In any event, the City did the right thing in having the monument removed from city property, for the problem with government displays of religious symbols is that they ultimately benefit neither government nor religion. After all, government represents all the people, not just Christians, or even Christians and Jews. The First Amendment was designed to ensure a complete neutrality in religious matters, not to place government officials in the role of promoting particular religions or religious symbols. Providence, as the most pluralistic city in a state founded on religious freedom, should be particularly sensitive to the divisiveness of government-sponsored displays which promote religion.

Despite the claim of some that the Decalogue forms the basis for American law, it is in fact a plainly religious document. The Ten Commandments are a sacred text in the Jewish and Christian faiths. The first part of the Commandments exclusively concerns the *religious* duties of believers: worshiping the Lord God alone, avoiding idolatry, not using the Lord's name in vain, and observing the Sabbath Day. These are hardly the foundation of a system of law that believes in the inviolability of individual religious conscience. It was, after all, Roger Williams himself who expressed most forcefully the view that the government had no right at all to punish people for the violations of the religious tenets contained in what he called "the first table" of the Ten Commandments. It is thus more than a little ironic to hear some city officials justify government support of the display on the grounds that it is the foundation of our civil laws.

The brilliance of the First Amendment principle barring government entanglement with religion is that it protects not just minority religions from the will of the majority, but it also protects majority religions and religious symbols from being trivialized or politicized by governmental actions. And so here, we have a request to return to city property a monument depicting a sacred religious document that used to sit next to city tennis courts and that largely owes its origins to a Hollywood publicity stunt – the promotion of a Charlton Heston movie.

Religious freedom thrives so well in this country and this state precisely because the founders of both wisely recognized the importance of keeping religion and government in their separate spheres. Thus, religious groups are guaranteed the right to practice their beliefs without government interference. Individuals and churches are free to put up Ten Commandments on their front lawns or other private property. But the power of government should not be used to promote its display.

In short, promotion of the Ten Commandments, the Five Pillars of Islam, the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism and all other religious codes belongs to the leaders of those religions, not to politicians. We encourage you to support religious freedom by opposing efforts to return this monument to city property.

Sincerely,

Steven Brown
Executive Director