



# AMERICAN ATHEISTS

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March 28, 2016

*Via Email*

Sheriff Eric Watson  
Bradley County Sheriff's Office  
2290 Blythe Ave.  
Cleveland, TN 37311

Dear Sheriff Watson,

On Sunday, March 27, 2016, American Atheists Legal Center received a complaint about a Facebook post that the Bradley County Sheriff's Office (BCSO) posted about the Christian holiday Easter.

American Atheists Legal Center (AALC) is part of American Atheists, Inc., a national nonprofit dedicated to the separation of religion and government and the equality of atheists. American Atheists has more than 350,000 members and supporters across the country, including in Cleveland, Tennessee and Bradley County, Tennessee.

American Atheists Legal Center found that on March 27, the BCSO posted on its official Facebook page an image stating "He Is Risen" with a message that quotes the bible and evangelizes the meaning of Easter.

Earlier on March 27, another Facebook post on the BCSO page reprints "A Chance to Breathe", this week's article from Sheriff Watson in the *Cleveland Daily Banner*, in which the sheriff proselytizes about Easter and Jesus and quotes the bible.

A quick look back on the BCSO Facebook page and website found additional references to Christianity by the sheriff, including:

- Feb. 29: In a post entitled "The Time We Live In", the sheriff states that "Living today is best done with a lot of prayer." Sheriff Watson also writes that he is aghast that used tires were dumped in a church lot, and notes that a "man of God" he knew has died recently.
- Dec. 21, 2015: In a post about the Winter Solstice, Sheriff Watson ends by stating "Moreover, as we say at the BCSO, Merry Christmas!"
- On the official BCSO website, Sheriff Watson offers a 12-second video welcome that ends with him saying "God bless you."

I would like to make clear that neither the person who complained nor American Atheists has any issue with Sheriff Watson's personal religion. We believe strongly in the rights of individuals to their personal beliefs—religious or non-religious.

However, the instances we have specified above are not about Sheriff Watson's personal religious beliefs—they are all done in his official and professional capacity as sheriff: postings on the official BCSO Facebook page, a video message on the official BCSO webpage, a weekly article in the *Cleveland Daily Banner* in his capacity as sheriff.

“The U.S. Supreme Court has recognized that the Establishment Clause prohibits government from appearing to take a position on questions of religious beliefs or from making adherence to a religion relevant in any way to a person's standing in the political community.” *ACLU v. McCreary County*, 354 F.3d 438 (6th Cir. 2003) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668 (1984); see also *Allegheny v. Am. Civil Liberties Union*, 492 U.S. 573, 593-94 (1989).

We ask that Sheriff refrain from making statements promoting Christianity in his capacity as sheriff. According to U.S. Census data, at least 40% of Cleveland, Tennessee residents are non-religious, making them the single largest religious community after evangelical Christians. With official statements that demonstrate the sheriff's preference for Christians in the county, there may be cause to question the allocation of resources based on religion in the BCOS.

For example, in the sheriff's article “The Time We Live In”, he wrote that he was particularly upset about the tires being dumped at a local church. As a non-religious person, I am curious if Sheriff Watson would have been just as upset if the tires had been dumped at a school? At a private business, such as a grocery store? What if the tires had been dumped on a private citizen's lawn? There were several postings on the Facebook page about this incident with the sheriff quoted multiple times—more postings about tire dumping at a church than about meth labs, assaults, and other crimes. The crime seemed to be solved very quickly. Was this case given more resources and manpower because the sheriff was upset it occurred at a church?

In the same article, the sheriff mentioned a “man of God” who died recently—a local minister. While I'm sure he was a good person and his family grieves their loss, why is it appropriate for the sheriff, in his official capacity, to laud the accomplishments of a Christian minister? Would the sheriff do the same of a Jewish rabbi? A Muslim imam? A Humanist celebrant? What about an atheist who was simply a good person in the community? The sheriff's personal beliefs appear to be informing his choices as a government official.

Finally, in the Winter Solstice article on Dec. 12, 2015, the sheriff wrote that the BCSO says “Merry Christmas.” That is a potentially litigious statement for a state employer to make. It is illegal to ask your employees what their religious views and practices are, and with 40% of the local population not having any religious beliefs, it also likely makes that statement an imposition of Sheriff Watson's religious beliefs on his employees. The Tennessee Human

Rights Act, TN Code Sec. 4-21-401, et seq., prohibits discrimination based on religion in the workplace.

The AALC is not attacking Sheriff Watson. We respect law enforcement and the efforts of the BCSO to reach out into its community. However, we are hopeful that after this letter, the BCSO will see that its community includes many non-religious persons too, and they deserve to be treated with equal respect, dignity, and recognition as Christians. We believe the best way to do that is to stop using the BCSO as a platform to evangelize the sheriff's personal religious beliefs.

Sincerely,

Amanda Knief

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Amanda Knief".

National Legal & Public Policy Director  
American Atheists Legal Center