

June 18, 2012

The Hon. Lincoln Chafee
Governor
State House
Providence, RI 02903

RE: VETO 12-H 8143A AND 12-S 3035 as amended

Dear Governor Chafee:

The Rhode Island ACLU urges you to veto 12 H-8143A and 12-S 3035 as amended. In direct contrast to the principles that animated the founding of our state, these bills would establish a government commission with the blatantly inappropriate and unconstitutional role of deciding for religious faiths which symbols of theirs are religious and which ones aren't.

This legislation was prompted by the controversy surrounding a town-maintained cross in Woonsocket. But whatever one's views of that monument's constitutional validity, this legislation crosses a line that the First Amendment cannot tolerate. It not only extensively entangles government in religious matters, it epitomizes the worst fears of the founders of the Constitution, who believed that separation of church and state was needed as much, if not more, to protect religion from the state as to protect the state from religion. This bill would allow government officials to declare that even a sacred religious symbol, icon, inscription, or statue has attained a secular value. Thus, government could attack religion in the guise of protecting it, by degrading, minimizing and politicizing the sacred nature of religious symbols in order to "protect" them from those advocating separation of church and state. No government commission should be permitted to decree that a religious symbol no longer has a religious meaning or that it has become predominantly secular.

Further, rather than resolve disputes over government sponsorship of religious symbols, the establishment of a commission like this would only magnify them and politicize religion to an extremely uncomfortable degree. It is ironic that those who claim a desire to protect religion would promote a bill that essentially gives a state commission the power to strip religious symbols of their sectarian meaning.

We therefore respectfully urge you to veto this legislation. Thank you for your attention to our views.

Sincerely,

Steven Brown
Executive Director

cc: George Zainyeh
Kelly Mahoney
Claire Richards