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Posted by Barry Gerharz, ACLU of Louisiana at 6:33 pm

Prisoners' Rights, Religion & Belief

# **Challenging Angola Prison's Religion Policies**

(Originally posted on Daily Kos.)

Warden Cain, the head of Louisiana State Penitentiary, more commonly known as <u>Angola</u>, is famous for promoting what he calls "<u>moral rehabilitation</u>."

Although the ACLU strongly supports anyone's efforts to encourage prisoners to look forward toward changing their lives for the better, we also expect those efforts to be done in a way that will not endorse one religion over another, or religion over non-religion.

Unfortunately, that is not happening at Angola.

Just under two years ago we had to file a lawsuit on behalf of a Norman Sanders, a Mormon prisoner who simply wanted access to publications from sellers of Mormon materials, including the bookstore at Brigham Young University. Unfortunately Warden Cain repeatedly denied Norman's requests, so we had to file a lawsuit. We eventually <u>settled</u>, allowing Norman access to simple religious materials.

Today we filed lawsuits on behalf of a Catholic and a Muslim prisoner, each being denied the right to practice his religion freely. As Yogi Berra would say, it's déjà vu all over again.

Donald Leger is a practicing Catholic on Louisiana's death row. He's devout, often praying the novenas. Starting in April 2007, the prison began locking the televisions on death row to a particular station on Sunday mornings. The televisions, located directly outside death row prisoners' cells, are locked to predominately Baptist programming on

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Sunday mornings. The images of the religious programming pour into the prisoners' cells and can't be escaped. In some tiers, the televisions blare.

From April 2007 until December 31, 2007 and from mid-2008 until December 31, 2008, Donald didn't have the opportunity to watch a single Catholic Mass, although scores of Baptist services were shown. Donald and the other death row prisoners are told that they will be written up and tossed in lockdown if they try to have anyone change the television station.

Donald has no problem with religion, it's just that he is a Catholic, and he simply wants the ability to turn from the mandated Baptist programming to a Catholic Mass that also airs on Sunday morning. Donald's written the Warden for almost two years now, and has filed complaint forms with the prison. His requests have gone unanswered. Worse yet, he's suffered retaliation because he's complained, and he fears for his safety.

The other suit we filed yesterday also involves a man who just wants to worship his God as he sees fit. Shawn Anderson is a Muslim prisoner who, much like Mormon prisoner Norman Sanders, is being denied access to religious literature and publications. Anderson, a member of the Nation of Islam, also wants to gather with fellow believers to worship. It's not a novel request: In prisons and jails across the country, members of the Nation of Islam are able to get publications and gather to worship.

Religion is a matter that should lie solely in the hands of individuals and their chosen faith. Prisons may not control the private practice of religion unless it clearly poses a safety or security risk, which is not an issue in these cases. Unfortunately, the prison is rearing its head into these men's relationships with their God.

In *Baptist Press*, Warden Cain recently was quoted as saying that he "would never again put someone to death without telling him about his soul and about Jesus." Although it's a kind sentiment, Cain's job is to be Warden of Angola, not the Chaplain of Angola. He shouldn't impose his religious views on those who do not share them. Catholics and Muslims prisoners just want the same opportunities to worship freely that Baptist prisoners are given.



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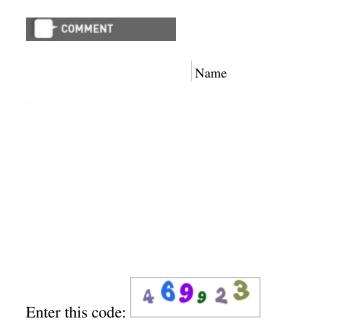




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