



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on June 24, 2011

Atheists Complain Over NYC Street Sign Honoring Fallen 9-11 Firemen

A group of atheists in New York City are up in arms because a street in Brooklyn has been renamed using the word “heaven” in honor of seven firemen who were killed in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center. FOX News reported that the street, renamed “Seven in Heaven Way,” was “officially dedicated ... in Brooklyn outside the firehouse where the firefighters once served. The ceremony was attended by dozens of firefighters, city leaders, and widows of the fallen men.”



But an organization known as [New York City Atheists](#) is complaining that the street’s new designation somehow runs afoul of a supposed government separation of church and state. “There should be no signage or displays of a religious nature in the public domain,” Ken Bronstein, president of group, told FOX. “It’s really insulting to us.” He noted that his group had “concluded as atheists there is no heaven and there’s no hell.”

He said the use of the word “heaven” made the sign “a totally religious statement. It’s a question of separation of church and state.” He added, “It’s irrelevant who it’s for,” referring to the seven fallen fire fighters whom the community considers heroes. “We think this is a very bad thing.”

Another Atheist spokesman, David Silverman of the [American Atheists](#), told FOX the city should remove the sign, noting, “People died in 9/11, but they were all people who died, not just Christians. Heaven is a specifically Christian place. For the city to come up and say all those heroes are in heaven now, it’s not appropriate.”

Silverman argued that such memorials “should celebrate the diversity of our country and should be secular in nature. These heroes might have been Jews, they might have been atheists, I don’t know, but either way it’s wrong for the city to say they’re in heaven. It’s preachy.”

That a group could contrive a grievance over something as well-intentioned as a memorial to fallen heroes seemed an annoyance to Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, who told FOX, “When you think you’ve heard it all, you haven’t. These seven brave souls who put their lives on the line and ultimately gave up the most precious gift that could be given — believe me are in heaven for serving us so admirably.”

Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention’s [Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission](#) noted,



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“There are cities that have religious connotations in their names. Why not a street. Do they want us to rename Los Angeles, Corpus Christi, and St. Joseph?” Added Land, “In a country where 85 percent of the people say they are Christian or claim to be Christian, should it be surprising that you name cities and streets with religious terminology?”

The [Brooklyn Paper](#) reported that the new sign, which officials of Brooklyn’s Red Hook neighborhood hung June 18th at Seabring Street, honors seven firemen on the scene at the Twin Towers who were assigned to Engine 202 and Ladder 101: Joseph Gullickson, Brian Cannizzaro, Salvatore Calabro, Thomas Kennedy, Patrick Byrne, Joseph Maffeo, and Terence McShane. The men were “among the first firefighters called to the towers, making it there before the second airplane hit,” recalled the paper. Said Joseph Gullickson’s brother Ralph, “They gave up everything to help — and that’s what sets them apart.”

“Tearful widows, dozens of uniform-clad firemen, and civic leaders paid respects outside the firehouse at the intersection, explaining the men were killed while pulling victims from burning rubble,” reported the neighborhood paper. “They are heroes and should be rewarded in a place like heaven,” said Tom Miskel, one of the community’s officials. “Almost every religion has some form of heaven. It’s not just specific to Christianity.”

Speaking through a spokesman, another city official, Sara Gonzalez, noted that the seven firefighters “have long been known as the ‘Seven in Heaven.’ That’s something that we didn’t have any hand in, it is the way the community and their families chose to remember them. So if that is their desire then we are happy to continue to remember them in the way that their family and fellow firefighters prefer to call them.”

In response to the atheists’ charge that the street sign violates the supposed separation of church and state, Jay Sekulow of the [American Center for Law and Justice](#) said, “The claim that somehow ‘Seven in Heaven Way’ violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment is absurd. Acknowledging religion is not an endorsement of religion, and to suggest that this street name somehow crosses the constitutional line of establishing a religion is nonsense.”

Photo: New York firemen amidst the ruins of the World Trade Center: AP Images



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