



February 2, 2011

The Honorable Allen West
1708 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative West,

As leaders of national Jewish, Christian and interfaith organizations that celebrate religious freedom and diversity, we write to you today with deep concern over your recent criticisms of Islam and its adherents.

In a recent interview with the “Shalom Show,” you underscored that your mission is to represent and uphold the values of your constituents; this is an unquestionably noble goal. However, your subsequent statement that Representative Keith Ellison, one of your colleagues in the House of Representatives, is the “antithesis of the principles on which this country was established” because he is Muslim, shows a frightening lack of understanding for these values. Regardless of the specific “principles” you intended to reference, it is an indisputable fact that one of those principles is religious freedom for all, memorialized in the United States Constitution—including, of course, Article VI’s prohibition on any religious test for public office. Your remarks disrespect not only your Muslim colleagues in the Congress, but also all of your constituents of the Muslim faith. This is neither appropriate, nor true to the American values that you reference.

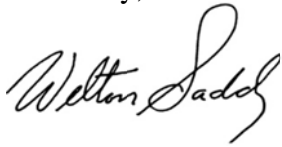
Regrettably, this is just the latest example of your tendency to offer intemperate comments about Islam. At a town hall meeting during your campaign, you characterized Islam as America’s enemy and asserted, “Islam is a totalitarian, theocratic political ideology; it is not a religion.” Such untrue and inflammatory remarks intensify an unsettling trend of anti-Muslim rhetoric and fear in our country. They are also likely to confuse your constituents as to the differences between radical, Islamic extremists and non-violent adherents to Islam. Many peaceable Muslims live in your district and two serve alongside you in the House of Representatives. At a time when Islamophobia is on the rise, it is the responsibility of our elected officials to promote dialogue, understanding and civility in the public forum.

In the “Shalom Show” interview, you spoke of the need for our nation’s children to be educated about our Constitution and our history; this is a goal we of course share and a pursuit in which we hope you will participate as well. It is essential that America’s children learn of our Founders’ commitment to the venerable religious freedoms that for more than 200 years have protected all persons of faith and of no faith. Equally important is the role that diverse peoples have had in forming our nation, including the oft-attacked American Muslim community whose members have been part of our nation since its inception.

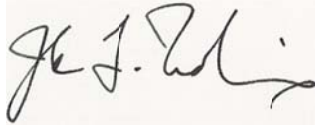
Although your laudable decision to offer yourself for public service in no way disqualifies you from discussing your own faith, we urge you not to use the prestige of your position in the U.S. House of Representatives to proselytize for one religion or demonize another. Rather, we hope that you will seek opportunities to uphold the religious freedom of all of your colleagues and constituents, including Muslims, to believe in or to reject any religious faith, as they choose. This freedom is an integral part of American democracy and promised by the First Amendment to our Constitution. We also hope that you will issue an apology, not only to Representative Ellison, but to the Muslim citizens of your district.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Rev. Welton Gaddy
President, Interfaith Alliance



Rabbi Jack Moline
Director of Public Policy, The Rabbinical Assembly



Rabbi David Saperstein
Director and Counsel, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism



The Rev. J. Brent Walker
Executive Director, Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty