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18TH DISTRICT, FLORIDA

CHAIRMAN  
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SELECT COMMITTEE ON AGING  
CHAIRMAN  
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House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

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July 27, 1984

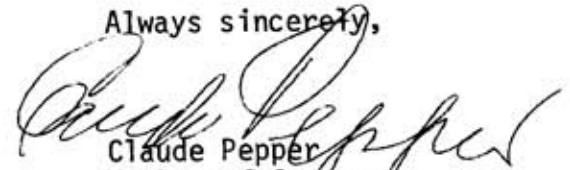
Dear Mr. Olsen:

Enclosed please find the response to your letter that was forwarded to the Drug Enforcement Administration January 31, 1984.

Please contact this office if I can be of further assistance to you, Mr. Olsen.

With all good wishes, I am

Always sincerely,



Claude Pepper  
Member of Congress

Mr. Carl Eric Olsen  
43 Star Island  
Miami Beach, Florida 33139

Enclosure



U.S. Department of Justice  
Drug Enforcement Administration

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Washington, D.C. 20537

JUN 26 1984

Honorable Claude Pepper  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D. C. 20515

Dear Congressman Pepper:

This is in response to your inquiry, dated January 31, 1984, on behalf of Mr. Carl Eric Olsen of the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church.

The Federal Government, as well as a number of states, is a defendant in litigation initiated by Mr. Olsen and his church. This litigation relates to the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church's claimed religious, but nonetheless illegal, use of . . . marijuana. Accordingly, we are unable to comment on some of the matters raised by Mr. Olsen.

As a general principal, the Drug Enforcement Administration cannot grant exemptions to the enforcement of the Controlled Substances Act with respect to the claimed religious use of various controlled substances by groups who claim that such substances are integral to their religious practices. The compelling governmental interest in protecting the public from the obvious danger of drugs and drug trafficking would be substantially harmed by permitting members of the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church to freely possess and distribute marijuana. Extended to its logical conclusion, the kind of exemption Mr. Olsen seeks would apply to all drugs, not just marijuana, if any group chose to use them as religious sacraments. The granting of such exemptions would indeed render the laws relating to controlled substances meaningless. Under the circumstances, the private interest of Mr. Olsen and his brethren in using marijuana for arguably religious purposes must give way to society's more compelling interest in controlling the abuse and trafficking of the drug. See United States v. Middleton, 690 F.2d 820 (11th Cir. 1982), cert. denied, 103 S.Ct. 1497 (1983); Peyote Way Church of God v. Smith, et al., 556 F.Supp. 632 (USDC N.D. Texas, 1983).

Please do not hesitate to contact the Drug Enforcement Administration if we can be of further assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,

Francis M. Mullen, Jr.  
Administrator