

Atheists Target Restaurant That Offers Discount for 'Praying in Public'

A Winston-Salem, North Carolina, diner no longer will dish out discounts along with dinner to praying customers.

Mary's Gourmet Diner had been offering a 15 percent discount for customers seen offering grace before meals during the past four years.

The practice stayed under the radar until a Christian music radio station in Orlando, Florida, uploaded a photo of a receipt with the discount to Facebook on July 30. Then it went viral.

The restaurant said the discount was given to customers at the discretion of the wait staff and was open to people of all religious beliefs. But that left out discounts for the nonreligious.

Elizabeth Cavell, staff attorney at the Freedom From Religion Foundation, began hearing complaints about the discount from state and national members. The Freedom From Religion Foundation is the largest national association of so-called "freethinkers," or people of no religious beliefs.

She then wrote a letter to the diner's owner, Mary Haglund, on Aug. 4, asking her to stop offering the discount.

"As a place of 'public accommodation,' it is illegal for Mary's Gourmet Diner to discriminate, or show favoritism, on the basis of religion," the letter said. "Your restaurant's restrictive promotional practice favors religious customers, and denies customers who do not pray and nonbelievers the right to 'full and equal' enjoyment of Mary's Gourmet Diner."

On Thursday, a handwritten board near the front door announced that the restaurant no longer would offer the prayer discount.

“While you may exercise your right of religious freedom at this restaurant by praying over your meal to any entity or non-entity. We must protect your freedom from religion in a public place,” the sign said.

The restaurant declined to comment.

This is not the first such restaurant promotion.

In 2012, Prudhomme’s Lost Cajun Kitchen, a Pennsylvania-based restaurant, was offering discounts to individuals who brought in a church bulletin on Sundays. After complaints, the restaurant was forced to give the discount to anyone with a bulletin from any congregation, including atheist ones.

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