

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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Sent via U.S. Mail and Email: terry.branstad@iowa.gov; Michael.Bousselot@iowa.gov

The Honorable Terry Branstad
Governor of Iowa
1007 East Grand Ave.
Des Moines, Iowa 50319

Re: Bible reading proclamation

Dear Governor Branstad:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation regarding the unconstitutional bible reading proclamation issue by your office. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 23,500 members across the country, including Iowa. We protect the constitutional separation between state and church.

We have read the Iowa proclamation “encourage[ing] all Iowans” to join the 99 County Bible Reading Marathon, which will occur in front of all 99 courthouses at the end of this month. We read with shock the admonition for all “individuals and families in Iowa” regardless of their religion “to read through the Bible on a daily basis each year until the Lord comes.”

The proclamation violates Iowa’s constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion.

By issuing this intensely religious proclamation and encouraging bible-reading, you send a message that Iowa prefers and endorses the Christian faith over other religions and over nonreligion. The proclamation “send[s] the ancillary message to members of the audience who are nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’”¹

This proclamation excludes the 23% of Americans who identify as nonreligious.² That 8 point increase since 2007³ and 15 point jump since 1990 makes the “nones” the fastest growing identification.⁴ It also exclude the 30% of Americans who are not Christian, either practicing a minority religion or no religion at all, and the 44% of millennials who are not Christian.⁵

The separation between state and church is among the most fundamental principle of our system of government. The U.S. Supreme Court has held that public officials may not advance or promote religion. The Court has specifically stated, “If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that *no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.*”⁶ Our founders valued this principle and your proclamation betrays their sacrifice.

The bible-reading proclamation violates this very clear tenet. It makes explicitly theological declarations:

- “the Bible is recognized as the one true revelation from God, showing the way of Salvation, Truth, and Life,”
- that the bible is “God’s revealed will for mankind,”
- “all Scripture is essential to prepare us to be the people God wants us to be and to accomplish the purpose for which he created us.”
- “to read through the Bible on a daily basis each year until the Lord comes.”

These statements violate the government’s most sacred obligation—to let citizens worship freely without any governmental pressure or coercion whatsoever. This is why our founders prohibited religious tests for public office and why the First Amendment reads: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” language Iowa’s founders reiterated in sections 3 and 4 of the Iowa Constitution, article I.

Daniel Carroll, a Catholic representative to the Constitutional Convention from Maryland, put it best when he said that, “the rights of conscience will little bear the lightest touch of the governmental hand.”⁷ This proclamation is anything but light. It’s a heavy-handed attempt to elevate one particular set of faith-based beliefs over every other. And you’ve used “the name and . . . authority of the State of Iowa” to issue it.

In short, this proclamation is an abuse of your office and power.

The proclamation contains several historical and factual errors.

Leaving aside the blatantly unconstitutional theological endorsements, the proclamation is based on several erroneous statements. For instance:

President Andrew Jackson called the Bible “the rock upon which our republic rests.”

There is no primary Jacksonian source that mentions this alleged deathbed quote. The earliest source is a report published by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1868 more than 20 years after Jackson’s death.⁸ The quote appears unsourced and uncited in a footnote attached to a sermon preached by Luther Townsend—he was arguing for government funding of his religious schools.

There is also something perverse in citing Jackson as a motivation for a religious proclamation because he absolutely refused to issue such proclamations himself. Jackson was a strict secularist. When asked to proclaim a national day of prayer he replied, “I am constrained to decline the designation of any period or mode as proper for the public manifestation of this reliance. I could not do otherwise without transcending the limits prescribed by the constitution for the President, nor without feeling that I might in some degree disturb the security which religion now enjoys in this country, in its complete separation from the political concerns of the General Government.”⁹

Jackson would unequivocally condemn your proclamation.

WHEREAS, lawmakers, law enforcement, social scientists, civic and church leaders are searching for solutions to the critical problems facing our nation, such as the drug crisis, violence, and social injustice, all of which can be found within God’s revealed will for mankind.

The idea that the bible is a panacea is nothing short of silly. The bible contradicts important modern discoveries and ideas from evolution to heliocentricity to global climate change to the germ theory of disease. Not only that, but scientific studies show that societies with less religion show far more progress on nearly every factor of societal health or well being. Invariably the *less* religious countries score better. The *least religious countries* of this world:

- Have the lowest rates of violent crime and homicide
- Are the best place to raise children and be a mother
- Have the lowest rates of corruption
- Have the lowest levels of intolerance against racial and ethnic minorities
- Score highest when it comes to women's rights and gender equality
- Have the greatest protection and enjoyment of political and civil liberties
- Are better at educating their youth in reading, math, and science
- Are the most peaceful and the most prosperous
- Have the highest quality of life.¹⁰

The pattern of lower religiosity to higher societal well being also exists within United States. Those states that are the most religious also have a higher occurrence of societal ills. States that tend to be among the *most religious* in the nation:

- Have the highest rates of poverty
- Have the highest rates of obesity
- Have the highest rates of infant mortality
- Have the highest rates of STDs
- Have the highest rates of teen pregnancy
- Have the lowest percentage of college-educated adults
- Have the highest rates of violent crime and murder.¹¹

These studies do not prove that religion causes society's ills, but it certainly does not solve them.

WHEREAS, America, being founded upon biblical principles and Judeo-Christian ethics, as taught in the Bible, paid tribute to the Bible for its important influence upon the development of our Nation by many of our great national leaders such as Presidents Washington, Jackson, Lincoln, Wilson...

This perpetuates the fallacious notion that our country was founded as a Christian nation. In fact, the United States is the birthplace of one of liberty's most fundamental principles: the separation between state and church.

The Founders feared what would happen when government officials brought religion into the statehouse. That is why they drafted a Constitution that effectively formed "a wall of separation between church and state." This is perfectly exemplified in George Washington's response to a letter from Presbyterian Ministers in Massachusetts and New Hampshire expressing their disappointment in the absence of "some Explicit acknowledgement of the only true God and Jesus Christ" in the Constitution. **Washington replied "that the path of true piety is so plain as to require but little political direction.** To this consideration we ought to ascribe the absence of any regulation, respecting religion, from the [Constitution] of our country."¹² You ought to heed his wise council.

The proclamation also holds up Washington as a Christian. But many of the founders, including Washington, had a low opinion of orthodoxy. On the rare occasions he actually attended church (perhaps twelve times a year pre-presidency and only three times in his last three years) Washington refused to take communion, even though his wife did. Bishop William White, who officiated in churches Washington occasionally attended wrote, “truth requires me to say that Gen. Washington never received the communion in the churches of which I am the parochial minister. Mrs. Washington was an habitual communicant.”¹³

Washington refused to have a priest or religious rituals at his deathbed. As historian Joseph J. Ellis put it, “there were no ministers in the room, no prayers uttered, no Christian rituals offering the solace of everlasting life. . . . He died as a Roman stoic rather than a Christian saint.”¹⁴ In all of Washington’s correspondence, including several thousand letters, the name of Jesus Christ never appears, and it is notably absent from his last will.¹⁵

Instead of issuing a proclamation celebrating a specific religious text, you should instead issue a proclamation celebrating our freedom of conscience, or that our nation invented the separation of state and church. At the very least, Iowa must send a clear message to all Iowans that the government does not favor Christianity over other religions or religion over nonreligion.

Sincerely,



Andrew L. Seidel
Constitutional Attorney

¹ *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309-10 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668 (1984)).

² *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

³ “Nones on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” Pew Research Center, The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (October 9, 2012) available at <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>

⁴ Barry Kosmin, National Religious Identification Survey 1989-1990.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *W. Va. Bd. of Ed. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943) (emphasis added).

⁷ *Annals of Congress. The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States*. “History of Congress.” 42 vols. 1:729--31, 755, 766 (Washington, D.C.: Gales & Seaton, 1834—56).

⁸ Rev. Luther T. Townsend, “Address at the Freedman” Aid Society,” in *Third Annual Report of the Freedmen’s Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (1868), p. 77 available at <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo.31924011851858>.

⁹ Edward Thomas Coke, *A Subaltern’s Furlough: Descriptive of Scenes in Various Parts of the United States, Upper and Lower Canada, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia during the Summer and Autumn of 1832* (1833) vo. I, p.145. Available on the Library of Congress website at <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/lhbttm.0265a>.

¹⁰ In a synthesis of the latest social scientific research concerning some of these issues see Zuckerman, Phil. 2009. ‘Atheism, Secularity, and Well-Being: How the Findings of Social Science Counter Negative Stereotypes and Assumptions.’ *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 3 Issue 6, 949-971 at 960-961.

¹¹ Zuckerman at 955, 961.

¹² Letter from George Washington to Presbyterian Ministers of Massachusetts and New Hampshire (Nov. 2, 1789).

¹³ Bishop William White, “Letter to Colonel Mercer, Aug. 15, 1835,” <https://books.google.com/books?id=fsTTAAAAMAAJ>.

¹⁴ Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington*, (Knopf, 2004), Vintage paperback edition (2005) page 269.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Gordon Wood, *The American Revolution: A History*, 129–30 (New York: Modern Library paperback, 2003) (“in all his voluminous papers he never mentions Jesus Christ.”)