

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 9, 2020

**SENT VIA FAX AND U.S. MAIL:
(202) 225-5907**

The Honorable Bill Johnson
2336 Rayburn HOB
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Divisive religious promotion on social media

Dear Representative Johnson:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to alert you to citizen concerns over religious promotion on your Facebook page. FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit organization with more than 33,000 members throughout the country, including over 800 members in Ohio. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional separation between state and church and to educate the public on matters related to nontheism.

Multiple concerned residents of your district have contacted us to report religious promotion on your official Facebook page. It is our understanding that you regularly post religious messages each Sunday, as well on other occasions. For instance, on June 28, 2020, you posted “A Prayer for the heart of America based on Solomon’s Prayer For Israel in 1 Kings 8:23-53.” See enclosure.

As a congressman, you represent a diverse population that consists of not only Christians, but also minority religious and nonreligious citizens. Religious endorsements made in your official capacity send a message that excludes the 26 percent of American adults who identify as nonreligious.¹ Religious endorsements coming from your office needlessly alienate the non-Christian and nonreligious citizens you represent, turning them into political outsiders in their own community.

It would be entirely possible, of course, for you to send uplifting and motivational messages to your constituents without ostracizing a significant portion of those you represent. By couching your sentiments in exclusively religious terms, and by quoting exclusively from one religion’s holy book, you unnecessarily exclude a significant portion of the community. Regardless of your intent, these social media posts send the message to your minority

¹ *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Oct. 17, 2019), available at <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

religious and nonreligious constituents that their participation in the political process is less valued than that of their Christian counterparts.

The Supreme Court recently described the power of social media sites as “the principal sources for knowing current events, checking ads for employment, speaking and listening in the modern public square, and otherwise exploring the vast realms of human thought and knowledge.” *Packingham v. North Carolina*, 137 S. Ct. 1730, 1737 (2017) (internal citations omitted). Government officials must be particularly diligent not to entangle their personal religious beliefs with official government pronouncements made in this “modern public square.” Even the private social media accounts of people who assume government office can become accounts that speak for the government, unless these officers carefully distinguish their public and private roles. Courts are willing to treat accounts that politicians believe to be private as official government accounts when they are used to disseminate official government communications. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals recently noted that the President’s Twitter feed is composed of “official statements by the President of the United States.” See *Hawaii v. Trump*, 859 F.3d 741, 773 n. 14 (9th Cir. June 12, 2017), *vacated on other grounds*, 874 F.3d 1112 (9th Cir. Nov. 2, 2017). We see no legal reason why your Facebook Page would be treated differently.

Government officials can worship, pray, or quote any religious text they wish when acting in their personal capacities. But they are not permitted to provide prestige to their personal religion by lending a government office and government title to religious ideology. Their offices and titles belong to “We the people,” not the offices’ temporary occupants. As a congressman, you are charged with great responsibility and have been given significant trust by citizens in your district, including those citizens who do not share your religious viewpoint.

We ask that in the future you disassociate your government office from your personal religious beliefs and refrain from posting religious endorsements on your official Facebook page. Please inform us in writing of the steps taken to respect the rights of conscience of all Ohio residents, regardless of their religious or nonreligious beliefs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dante CH Harootunian". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Dante Harootunian
Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

DCHH:kg



Bill Johnson ✓

June 28 at 9:33 AM · 🌐



In 1 Kings, the Bible tells us the story of the building of the Temple. King David, the lineage through which Jesus Christ was born, who was, as God described him, "a man after my own heart", wanted to build the Temple. But he had sinned against God with his illicit affair with Bathsheba, one of his most loyal commander's wives. So, God told King David that it would not be him that built the Temple, but rather it would be his son, Solomon. After Solomon completed the Temple, 1 Kings 8 tells us the story of how Solomon brought the entire community of Israel together, stood before the altar of the new Temple, and offered a prayer to God on behalf of the entire nation.

As I read that prayer of thanksgiving, repentance, and redemption, it occurred to me that America is today in a similar place ancient Israel was so many times... wandering, wavering, questioning their heritage, and struggling to find their true identity and purpose. Today, I am just as convinced that God spoke America into being as I am that he chose the nation Israel to be his people at the beginning of the human experience. I believe God inspired our founders, who so strongly believed in him, to begin the building process for the greatest nation on the planet, that "shining city on a hill" that would become the guardian of the gate of real freedom to people all over the world. I say "begin the building process", because just like the Temple in ancient Jerusalem, the idea of America has been built over generations...and, we will forever be under construction. In fact, I believe America is as much simply an idea today as it was when our founders penned the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution...and we are just as fragile. The idea of America is like a vapor that can vanish like a whisper on the wind if we do not treasure it, protect it, and keep it in our hearts...and, teach it to the hearts of our children.

So, I started with King Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 8, and I modernized it as a prayer for our nation today. I call it "A Prayer for the Heart of America". My hope is that people all over America will read this and begin praying this prayer every day...a prayer of thanksgiving, repentance, and redemption for the United States of America.

A Prayer for the heart of America based on Solomon's Prayer for Israel in 1 Kings 8:23-53.

Oh Lord, the God of all creation, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. Throughout American history, in fact, human history, you have kept your promises to those who follow and obey you; with your mouth, you have promised and with your hand, you have fulfilled America's destiny—as it is today.

Now Lord, the only true living God of the universe, in 2 Chronicles 7:14, you told your servants in Israel that 'if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.' And now, God of all creation, let your word that you promised to them be applied to your servants here in America today, and may your words come true for us as it did for the nation Israel. Come, oh God, and inhabit the praises of your people.

But will God really dwell on the earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. Yet please give attention to your servants' prayer and our plea for mercy, oh Lord our God. Hear the cry and the prayers that we are praying in your presence this day. May your eyes be open toward America night and day; this nation, this place that you spoke into being, this country that proclaimed from the beginning that it was you - oh God - who grants mankind those inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; so that you will hear the prayer we pray for our nation. Hear the supplication of your people when we pray for our nation. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, oh God...forgive us.

When anyone in America wrongs their neighbor and is brought forward for accountability, then hear from heaven and impart on us your wisdom to exact justice for all people. Judge between us, oh God, condemning the guilty by bringing down on their heads what they have done, and vindicating the innocent by treating them in accordance with their innocence.

When America is facing adversity and is being attacked by our enemies, because we have sinned against you, and when we turn back to you and give praise to your name, praying and repenting for our sins, then hear from heaven and forgive the sins of your people and bring us back into righteous fellowship with you, oh God.

When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain, or when floods and natural disasters come on America because you have taken your protective hand of mercy from us because we have sinned against you, and when we pray, give praise to your name, and turn from our sin, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people in America. Teach us the right way to live, and nurture the land you gave us with which to build that 'shining city on a hill', the nation that you chose to be the light of freedom to the world.

When plagues like COVID-19 come to our land, or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers, or when an enemy besieges us in any of our cities, whatever disaster or disease may come, and when a prayer or plea is made by anyone among your people in America—being truly aware of the afflictions of their own hearts and spreading out their hands toward you, oh God— then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Forgive and act; deal with everyone according to all they do, since you know their hearts (for you alone know every human heart), so that they will fear you all the time they live in this great land that you spoke into being.

As for foreigners who are not citizens of America but have come from a distant land because your Name has called them here—for they will hear of your great Name, and our great shining city on a hill will show them your mighty hand and your outstretched arm; when they come and they embrace your teachings and your values here in America, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigners ask of you, so that they will take America's message of faith and freedom to all the peoples of the earth, so that they may know your great Name and fear you, as do your own people in America, and so they may know that our nation we have built bears your Name.

When America goes to war against our enemies, wherever you send us, and when we pray to the Lord, then hear from heaven our prayer and our plea, and uphold our cause.

Oh God, we have sinned against you; we have removed you from our schools, from our courtrooms, and from the public square in America; we have failed to teach our children your ways, failed to teach them about your greatness, and failed to teach them about your infinite mercies that are new every day. So, oh God, when we sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you become angry with us and withdraw your hand of protection and mercy from us; and if we have a change of heart and repent and plead with you and say, ‘We have sinned, we have done wrong, we have acted wickedly’; and if we turn back to you with all our heart and soul, and pray earnestly to you for this great nation that bears your Name; then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear our prayers and our pleas, forgive us and uphold our cause. And forgive our people, who have sinned against you; forgive all the offenses we have committed against you, and cause all the demons that are trying to rip us from your protection to flee; for we are your people and your inheritance, the people you caused to form this great nation out of a desire to worship you freely and to follow your plan for redemption.

May your eyes be open to our plea, oh God, and to the plea of your people in America, and may you listen to us whenever we cry out to you. For you called us out from all the nations of the world to be one of your own inheritances, just as you declared through your servant Moses when you, Sovereign Lord, brought your people Israel out of Egypt.

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