

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 • MADISON, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • WWW.FFRF.ORG

June 12, 2020

SENT VIA EMAIL ONLY: Scott.Plakon@myfloridahouse.gov

The Honorable Scott Plakon
Florida House Representative - 29th District
Suite 222
1855 West State Road 434
Longwood, FL 32750-5071

Re: Divisive Religious Promotion on Social Media

Dear Representative Plakon:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to alert you to citizen concerns over religious promotion on your official Facebook page. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 32,000 members across the country, including more than 1,600 members in Florida and a local chapter, Central Florida Freethought Community. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

A concerned Florida resident contacted us to report that on May 24, 2020, while trying to honor our veterans for Memorial Day, you posted a religious message and bible quote on your official Facebook page:

Friends - We all should thank God every day that He somehow chose us to live in the greatest, most free, safe and prosperous nation ever conceived by man where our dreams really can come true...

Jesus, in John 15:13 said, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

The post included a photo that displayed the same bible verse. Please see the enclosed screenshot.

While you can, and should, post messages honoring our veterans, you cannot use your position as a Florida State Representative to promote your personal religious views. We write to request

that you issue no further endorsements of religion in your capacity as an elected official and that you remove any posts endorsing religion on your official Facebook page.

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits government sponsorship of religious messages. The Supreme Court has said time and again that the “First Amendment mandates government neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cty., Ky. v. Am. Civil Liberties Union of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Ark.*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947).

As a Florida State Representative, 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 35 percent of Americans who are non-Christian, turning them into political outsiders in their own community.¹

It would be entirely possible, of course, for you to send messages honoring veterans to your constituents without ostracizing a significant portion of those you represent. Your post also entangles support for our military members with belief in the Christian god and has the undesirable effect of diminishing the commendable work performed by those members of our armed forces who are nonreligious. In today’s military, over 23% of service members are atheists, agnostics, or have no religious preference.² Your post sends the unfortunate message that the only veterans worth memorializing are Christians. Many “atheists in foxholes” have served our country with distinction, and they deserve to be honored as well.

The Supreme Court recently described the power of social media sites as “the principal sources for knowing current events, . . . 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). Accordingly, government officials must be particularly diligent not to entangle their personal religious beliefs with official government pronouncements made in this “modern public square.”

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 state representative,

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/>.

² *MAAF Department of Defense Religious Preference and Chaplain Support Study* (July 2012), available at <http://militaryatheists.org/demographics/>.

you are charged with great responsibility and have been given significant trust by citizens in Florida, 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 messages on your official Facebook page. Please inform us in writing of the steps taken to respect the rights of conscience of all Florida residents, regardless of their religious or nonreligious beliefs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Chris Line", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation



Rep. Scott Plakon

May 24 at 2:59 AM

Friends - We all should thank God every day that He somehow chose us to live in the greatest, most free, safe and prosperous nation ever conceived by man where our dreams really can come true. We even have a name for it...The American Dream.

But a great price has been paid for us to be able to enjoy the blessings of liberty...which we remember today on Memorial Day. Since the American Revolution, more than 1.3 million Americans have paid the ultimate price, giving up all of their tomorrows, so that we could continue to live in freedom over the centuries. Let us never forget or take for granted the price these fallen heroes have paid.

Jesus, in John 15:13 said "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends".

Ronald Reagan, in his 1982 Memorial Day Speech at Arlington National Cemetery said "Words are even more feeble on this Memorial Day, for the sight before us is that of a strong and good nation that stands in silence and remembers those who were loved and who, in return, loved their countrymen enough to die for them." He continued, "Yet, we must try to honor them -- not for their sakes alone, but for our own. And if words cannot repay the debt we owe these men, surely with our actions we must strive to keep faith with them and with the vision that led them to battle and to final sacrifice."

Let us never forget to honor them, not only with our thoughts...but with our lives and deeds.

In Liberty,

Scott Plakon

Oh, beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life!
America! America! May God thy gold refine,
Till all success be nobleness, and ev'ry gain divine.

GREATER LOVE HAS
NO ONE THAN THIS,
THAN TO LAY DOWN
ONE'S LIFE FOR HIS
FRIENDS.

remember

MEMORIAL DAY

JOHN 15:13