

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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March 16, 2018

Sent via Email and U.S. mail:

governor@ky.gov

The Honorable Matt Bevin
Governor
700 Capitol Avenue Suite 100
Frankfort, KY 40601

Re: Rescind inappropriate and Inaccurate Christian Heritage Week Proclamation

Dear Governor Bevin:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and our Kentucky members, who were appalled to see your outrageous “Christian Heritage Week” proclamation for the week of March 18–24. FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit educational association that works to uphold the constitutional principle of separation of church and state, and to educate the public about nontheism. FFRF represents more than 32,000 members across the country, including more than 200 members in Kentucky, and a chapter in Louisville.

On March 14, 2018, you signed a deceptive proclamation that twists American history to paint a false narrative about the country’s founders. Unfortunately, you are misusing your position as a government official to promote your personal religion, ironically violating the country’s *true* heritage of religious liberty based on a secular government.

First, the proclamation states that George Washington said, “Animated alone by the pure spirit of Christianity, and conducting ourselves as the faithful subjects of our free government, we may enjoy every temporal and spiritual felicity.” This quote is both modified and taken out of context. It stems from a letter Washington wrote to Roman Catholics in 1790. The beginning of the quoted sentence is actually, “And may the members of your Society in America, animated alone . . .” Washington was describing a group of Catholics, not himself, as being animated by the “spirit of Christianity.”

Even more brazenly, the quote is altered to further this deception. Here is the actual quote:

And may the members of your Society in America, animated alone by the pure spirit of Christianity, and still conducting **themselves** as the faithful subjects of our free Government, enjoy every temporal and spiritual felicity.¹

¹ From George Washington to Roman Catholics in America, c.15 March 1790, *available at* founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-05-02-0193 (emphasis added).

Your proclamation dishonestly tampers with the quote, changing the word “themselves” (referring to Catholics) to “ourselves” and inserting the words “we may” before the word “enjoy” is simply dishonest. This is transparent revisionism. In fact, the nominally Anglican Washington was most likely a deist,² as were many of the founders, believing in a god that created the universe but plays no active part in it, including answering prayers or rewarding theocratic governmental proclamations.

Washington avoided using sectarian Christian language in his many writings: Washington deleted Congressional references to “Jesus Christ” in Thanksgiving Day proclamations, showing his concern to avoid sectarian preference. *Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers*, Brooke Allen, pgs. 26–48. More importantly, Washington was keenly aware of the divisiveness of religion. President Washington wrote:

“Of all the animosities which have existed among mankind, those which are caused by a difference of sentiments in religion appear to be the most inveterate and distressing, and ought most to be deprecated. I was in hopes that the enlightened and liberal policy which has marked the present age would at least have reconciled Christians of every denomination so far that we should never again see their religious disputes carried to such a pitch as to endanger the peace of society.” George Washington’s Letter to Sir Edward Newenham; October 20, 1792.

Second, the proclamation states that Thomas Jefferson wrote, “Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed the conviction that these liberties are the gift of God?” This quote, too, is altered to misattribute the religious content to the founder when he was, in fact, not speaking of himself. The real quote is: “And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction **in the minds of the people** that these liberties are the gift of God?”³ Jefferson was emphasizing the importance of the people’s secure trust in unalienable rights. He was not promoting a belief in a god—much less the Christian god specifically—nor referring in any way to his own religious beliefs.

Thomas Jefferson coined the phrase “wall of separation between church and state” and was highly skeptical of Christianity. He famously took a razor to his bible to remove all its supernatural claims. Jefferson rejected the virgin birth, the divinity of Jesus, and the trinity.⁴ It is deeply misleading to refer to Jefferson as a Christian without any caveat of the myriad Christian claims and teachings that he vehemently rejected, or to hold him up as an ancestor of modern Christianity in America.

Jefferson would emphatically object to your proclamation. During his presidency, he refused to issue Thanksgiving proclamations. As the U.S. Supreme Court noted,

² See, e.g., www.britannica.com/topic/The-Founding-Fathers-Deism-and-Christianity-1272214 (“Washington’s refusal to receive communion in his adult life indicated Deistic belief to many of his pastors and peers.”).

³ *Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XVIII*, available at www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/quotations-jefferson-memorial#footnoteref5_gdtfrkq (emphasis added). Original manuscript available at goo.gl/V5YAnR.

⁴ See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_views_of_Thomas_Jefferson.

“President Jefferson . . . steadfastly refused to issue Thanksgiving proclamations of any kind, in part because he thought they violated the Religion Clauses.” *Lee v Weisman*, 505 U.S. at 623, 112 S.Ct. 2649 (1992) (Souter, J., concurring).

Furthermore, this proclamation perpetuates the myth that our country was founded as a Christian nation. This is patently false. The United States of America was the first nation to adopt a secular and entirely godless constitution, where the only references to religion are exclusionary, such as the prohibition on religious tests for public office. Our government, resting on the Constitution, is secular. As President John Adams noted, “...the government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion...” Treaty of Tripoli (1797). It also ignores the reality that many of our founding fathers were not Christians — George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who are quoted in your proclamation, were at most deists.

Finally, the separation between state and church is among one of the most fundamental principles of our system of government. The United States Supreme Court has held that public officials may not seek to advance or promote religion. The Supreme 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.” *W. Va. Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943).

This proclamation would more appropriately be called “Christian Heritage Revisionism Week.” You owe your constituents an apology for deliberately misleading them.

As the elected official, you are charged with great responsibility and have been given significant trust by its citizens, including those citizens who may not share your religious viewpoints. We ask that you immediately rescind the “Christian Heritage Week” proclamation, acknowledge and apologize for its deliberate historical inaccuracies, and refrain from issuing similar proclamations in the future. May we hear from you at your earliest convenience?

Very truly,

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker
Co-Presidents

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