

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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October 8, 2018

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL:

governor@ky.gov

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

Re: Promotion of “Bring Your Bible to School Day”

Dear Governor Bevin:

We are writing to you once again on behalf of the largest freethought association in North America. FFRF has more than 32,000 members, including members in Kentucky and a Kentucky chapter. FFRF defends the constitutional separation between state and church and educates the public on matters relating to nontheism.

We were dismayed to learn that you recently posted a video message on your official Twitter feed encouraging all students in the Commonwealth of Kentucky to participate in “Bring Your Bible to School Day” on October 4, 2018.¹ As you know, “Bring Your Bible to School Day” is a pet project of the religious fundamentalists at Focus on the Family. The name is misleading, as students can just as easily bring a bible to school *any* day of the year. However, Focus on the Family makes clear that the real purpose behind the day is evangelism: “The event is designed to empower you as a student to express your belief in the truth of God’s Word—and to do so in a respectful way that demonstrates the love of Christ.”² “Proselytize Your Friends and Teachers Day” might be more accurate.

In promoting this contrived day of evangelism, you recited a litany of Christian Nationalist talking points, saying: “the Bible is an amazing document. It has an incredible amount of history, knowledge, wisdom, guidance—things our Founders understood and took to heart as they set this entire nation in motion.” You espoused similar platitudes while touting your signing of H.B. 128 into law last year, a statute that gives public schools in Kentucky the option of teaching “bible literacy” classes: “This elective class explores many interesting topics, such as the Bible’s influence on historical, political and social movements. It recounts how our Founding Fathers used biblical principles to draft the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, [and] the Bill of Rights.”

¹ twitter.com/GovMattBevin/status/1047259937238220801.

² “What’s Bring Your Bible to School Day All About?” Frequently Asked Questions, FOCUS ON THE FAMILY, www.bringyourbible.org/frequently-asked-questions#7.

We write to request that you not abuse the power of your public office to promote your personal religious beliefs, and not abuse history in the process.

It is beyond the scope of executive power to promote evangelism.

As an initial matter, we reiterate that it is a fundamental constitutional principle that our government cannot in any way promote, advance, or otherwise endorse religion. The Supreme Court has said, “The touchstone for our analysis is the principle that the ‘First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.’” *McCreary Cty. v. ACLU*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005), (quoting *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Board of Ed. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985)).

Likewise, the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, which you took an oath to uphold, guarantees that:

No preference shall ever be given by law to any religious sect, society or denomination; nor to any particular creed, mode of worship or system of ecclesiastical polity... No human authority shall, in any case whatever, control or interfere with the rights of conscience. KENT. CONST. § 5.

The freedom of conscience enshrined in the First Amendment and the Kentucky Constitution means that the government has no business telling citizens which god—if any—to believe in, or which holy book to read and propagate. Citizens in every state of this nation are free to believe, or disbelieve, whatever they like when it comes to matters of religion. As a free people, we have no need for a government chiming in to tell us which “sacred” texts are worthy of study and discussion.

Such arrogant overreaching of governmental authority is unacceptable. Imagine the uproar if you had encouraged the schoolchildren of Kentucky to bring their Korans to school and tell their friends and teachers all about Allah and the Prophet Muhammad. We think you can see why a state government promoting such an event would be legally problematic, as well as a breach of good taste.

Your statement contains multiple historical falsehoods.

Your statement promoting “Bring Your Bible to School Day” contains a mixture of opinion, half-truth, and outright lies.

- The Bible is an amazing document. It has an incredible amount of history, knowledge, wisdom, guidance...

Not quite. The bible is a book of myths and fables, and accordingly contains the expected mixture of historical fact and whole-cloth fabrication. Where it contains “history” and “knowledge,” much of it is contradicted by actual scholarship (*e.g.*, the non-existent enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt) and some is just patently absurd (*e.g.*, a flood covering all of the Earth, Jonah surviving in the stomach of a whale, etc.). Where it contains “wisdom” and “guidance,” such as moral teachings and parables, it is often vague, confusing, or internally contradictory (contrast “thou

shalt not kill” with god’s multiple, explicit commandments to commit genocide in Gen. 6:6–8, Deut. 20:16–17, Deut. 2:32–34, 1 Samuel 15:2–3, Joshua 10:28–40, etc.). Wisdom and guidance can be found in greater purity in the works of great philosophers from both before and after the bible’s conception and compilation.

But we digress. In fairness, this portion of your statement is essentially little more than your own opinion about the value of the bible to the modern reader. While we disagree with your assessment, you are nonetheless entitled to that opinion. However...

- “...things our Founders understood and took to heart as they set this entire nation in motion.”

...you are not entitled to your own “alternative facts.” Our nation was founded on the radical new ideas of the Enlightenment, not the antiquated orthodoxy of the bible. Our Founders rejected divine tyranny and instead set out on a grand experiment in self-government and self-determination that necessarily required the severance of the church from the state. No longer would rulers be allowed to invoke divine authority to justify their every whim; no longer would clergy sit as legislators and dictate policy; no longer would professing piety toward the state-sanctioned religion be a necessary condition of participation in civil society. This was a drastic departure from the sort of society championed in the bible. There is no democracy, no jury trials, no government “of the people, by the people and for the people” to be found anywhere in scripture.

That’s not to say that the bible hasn’t influenced American history. The unthinkable bloody Civil War that tore our nation asunder might well have been prevented had clergy, many Christian denominations, and slaveholders not turned to their god and their bible for justification of the institution of racial slavery—and they did not lack textual support. *See, e.g.*, Exod. 21, 1 Tim. 6:1–3, Ephes. 6:5, Luke 12:47, etc. The racists of the day found further textual support in the bible’s prohibition on intermarriage between races or sects. *See, e.g.*, Deut. 7:1–6; Num. 25, Neh. 13:23–30.

Even setting aside the bible’s countenancing of racism, religious zealotry undoubtedly stoked conflict on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line. The words of Lincoln from the Second Inaugural address, inscribed at the Lincoln Memorial, astutely observed that the North and South “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.” No less a Founder than George Washington wisely warned against the dangers of such fanaticism: “Of all the animosities which have existed among mankind those which are caused by a difference of sentiment in Religion appear to be the most inveterate and distressing and ought most to be deprecated.”³

- “It recounts how our Founding Fathers used biblical principles to draft the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, [and] the Bill of Rights.”

³ Letter from George Washington to Edward Newenham, Oct. 20, 1792.

If this is what the Kentucky Board of Education intends to teach to the children of Kentucky, they will be teaching a bald-faced lie. This reads as a not-so-veiled attempt at trumpeting the thoroughly debunked myth that our nation was founded as a “Christian nation.” It was not. Our nation is founded not on Christian doctrine, but on our secular and godless Constitution, which grants sovereignty not to a deity or a “holy book” but to “We, the People,” and whose only references to religion are exclusionary. There is no reference to the Christian god, the bible, the Ten Commandments, Jesus, or any facet of Christian dogma anywhere in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, or the Bill of Rights.

The Declaration of Independence is based on the idea that “governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,” contrary to the biblical concept of rule by divine authority. Primarily written by famed skeptic and deist Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration does not contain a single mention of “God,” “Jesus,” or “biblical principles” anywhere. There are references to “Nature’s God,” “their Creator,” “the Supreme Judge of the world,” and “Divine Providence,” but not a single one of these is overtly Christian. Jefferson, along with editors Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, could have explicitly referenced Jesus or Christianity, but they chose not to. In any event, the Declaration of Independence, significant as it is, does not govern this nation. The purpose of the Declaration was to “dissolve the political bands” tying us to Great Britain. It did not create a nation, let alone a religious nation.

Our true founding document, the United States Constitution, is similarly devoid of any mention of Christianity. This was done by design. Our Founders recognized that divorcing religion from government was a necessary precondition of true religious freedom, something which you often claim to value. This ideal was perfectly expressed in George Washington’s reply to a letter from ministers 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.”⁴ In a similar vein, James Madison, primary author of the Constitution, succinctly wrote that, “religion and government will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together.”⁵

The notion that biblical principles influenced the Bill of Rights is the most laughable portion of all. The myriad ways in which the principles of fairness, equal justice, and the rule of law encapsulated in our Bill of Rights contradict “biblical principles” are far too numerous to list here, but for starters, compare the First Commandment (“Thou shalt have no gods before me”) to the First Amendment (“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”). Our Bill of Rights was written to safeguard the liberty and autonomy of a free people in a free society. The bible contains no such principle, instead teaching that the only path to salvation is through total submission to a divine dictator.

⁴ Letter from George Washington to Presbyterian Ministers of Massachusetts and New Hampshire, Nov. 2, 1789.

⁵ Letter from James Madison to Edward Livingston, Jul. 10, 1822.

Conclusion

Secular government is a proud part of our national heritage. The Founders, well aware of the holy wars and holy horrors of the Inquisition, Crusades, Hundred Years' War, etc., wanted no part of religion in government. They understood that a government free from religion is the only guarantor of religious freedom for all. The abuse of your government position to endorse the bible shows a clear lack of understanding of this bedrock principle of American government. The lies you spun along the way demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of history.

As we often say around our office, "there is no freedom of religion without freedom from religion in government." If you won't hear it from us, perhaps you will heed the words of one of Kentucky's most celebrated sons, Senator Henry Clay: "All religions united with government are more or less inimical to liberty. All, separated from government, are compatible with liberty."⁶

We ask that you take a stand for the First Amendment and cease using the office of governor to promote your personal faith.

Very truly,

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker

Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker
Co-Presidents

ALG/DB:cem

⁶ Henry Clay, "Speech on the Emancipation of South America," House of Representatives (24 March 1818) from *The Life and Speeches of the Hon. Henry Clay*, vol. I (1857), ed. Daniel Mallory.