

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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April 21, 2015

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL AND EMAIL TO: governor.office@nc.gov

Governor Pat McCrory
Office of the Governor
20301 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 26799-0301

Re: National Statuary Hall Replacement

Dear Governor McCrory:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to urge you to decline a proposal to place a statue of evangelist William Franklin “Billy” Graham, Jr. in the National Statuary Hall Collection. FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit with more than 22,000 members, including over 500 in North Carolina and a local chapter, the Triangle Freethought Society. FFRF’s purpose is to protect the constitutional separation between state and church.

House Bill 540 proposes replacing a statue of former governor Charles Brantley Aycock in the United States Capitol with a statue of Billy Graham. We applaud North Carolina for its decision to replace the Aycock statue, as the former governor was a well-known opponent of equal rights and a bastion of discrimination.¹ However, replacing Charles Aycock with Billy Graham only swaps one divisive figure for another. North Carolina has far more worthy candidates.

The bill’s authors reveal their bias by describing Graham as “admired and beloved by both Christians and non-Christians.” Despite supporters’ desperate insistence that Graham is a universally beloved figure, he has a checkered history including anti-Semitism and other alienating and divisive views. After Rep. Charles Jeter, one of the bill’s sponsors, reported that Graham was “by far the least polarizing of all the people who are worthy of consideration,” one can only wonder whom Jeter considered alongside Graham. Even were this true, it must be recognized that choosing one of Christianity’s most well-known figureheads to symbolize a secular state inevitably sends a message of exclusion and religious endorsement.

In 1994, Graham fiercely denied accusations that 20 years prior he had told President Nixon that the nation’s problems were rooted in the country’s “satanic Jews.” Ten years after Graham’s denial, a recording of the conversation revealed that he had indeed blamed the country’s problems on the Jewish people, even more offensively than originally suggested, telling Nixon that “they’re the ones putting out the pornographic stuff.” The recording captured Graham stating that the Jewish “stranglehold has got to be broken or the country’s going down the drain . . . a lot of the Jews are great friends of mine, they swarm around me and are friendly to me because they know that I’m friendly with Israel. But they don’t know how I really feel about what they are doing to this country.

¹ See, e.g., Charles Aycock, *Address Accepting the Democratic Nomination for Governor, April 11, 1900* (“When we say that the negro is unfit to rule we carry it one step further and convey the correct idea when we declare that he is unfit to vote. To do this we must disfranchise the negro.”).

And I have no power, no way to handle them, but I would stand up if under proper circumstances.”²

Graham has also showed utter disdain toward nonreligious Americans, who make up 19% of adult Americans and fully one-third of those under 30.³ When a fan asked for Graham’s thoughts on an atheist who was “the kindest, most thoughtful person I know,” Graham dismissed the atheist’s kindness as merely a “sunny personality,” commenting that “a true atheist has no reason to believe in right and wrong, or to behave sacrificially toward others.”⁴ This is, of course, absurd. Rather than acknowledging that an atheist could be a good person, Graham smugly declared that morality requires a god belief. In doing so, Graham showed his intolerance for anyone who does not share his particular brand of theology.

It is also dubious for a state to revere a Christian minister who is known primarily for his religious views. By selecting such an individual as a symbol of North Carolina, the state implicitly endorses that icon’s religious message, which is inappropriate for a secular state. It thereby turns Christians, particularly evangelical or fundamentalist Christians, into political insiders, and the rest of us into political outsiders. It would be different were Graham known mainly for secular achievements, as was the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., for instance. Graham is principally known for his soul-winning crusades and his eponymous, evangelical association, the Billy Graham Evangelical Association, a multi-million dollar empire. The ministry’s Statement of Faith includes: “We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God,” “We believe in the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood on the cross,” “We believe . . . that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation,” etc.

Furthermore, in recent years Graham has been associated with anti-gay bigotry, taking out large ads during the presidential election against marriage equality that read:

“On November 6, the day before my 94th birthday, our nation will hold one of the most critical elections in my lifetime. We are at a crossroads and there are profound moral issues at stake. I strongly urge you to vote for candidates who support the biblical definition of marriage between a man and woman, protect the sanctity of life and defend our religious freedoms. The Bible speaks clearly on these crucial issues. Please join me in praying for America, that we will turn our hearts back toward God.”

Our organization filed a complaint with the Internal Revenue Service in 2010, noting that the ads, paid for by Graham’s ministry, crossed the line into political advocacy. In keeping with this, the ministry’s Statement of Faith expresses this narrow perspective: “We believe God’s plan for human sexuality is to be expressed only within the context of marriage . . . that God instituted monogamous marriage between male and female . . . exclusively”⁵

² See David Firestone, *Billy Graham Responds to Lingering Anger Over 1972 Remarks on Jews*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Mar. 17, 2002), available at www.nytimes.com/2002/03/17/us/billy-graham-responds-to-lingering-anger-over-1972-remarks-on-jews.html.

³ Pew Research Center, *Nones on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation*, THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE (October 9, 2012), available at <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>.

⁴ Billy Graham, *Atheist May Be Sunny on the Outside, but Feel Empty Inside*, BRADENTON HERALD (Aug. 7, 2010), available at www.bradenton.com/2010/08/07/2489786_atheist-may-be-sunny-on-outside.html?rh=1#storylink=cpy.

⁵ <http://billygraham.org/about/what-we-believe/>.

The Statement of Faith is also explicitly anti-abortion, anti-contraceptive and anti-death with dignity, reading: “We believe that human life is sacred from conception to its natural end” At least one in four U.S. women have had an abortion by age 30, and 95% use some form of contraception during their lifetime.⁶

Graham was a noted war hawk known for blessing every U.S. war or act of aggression. Notoriously, Graham once urged President Nixon to “bomb the dikes” in North Vietnam during the height of the Vietnam protests.⁷

Choosing Rev. Billy Graham, a divisive and polarizing figure, to represent North Carolina would be a disservice to many North Carolina non-evangelicals, nonbelievers, women, gays, and the families who love them.

Selecting Graham’s likeness to represent North Carolina will only lead to future demands that the new statue be replaced. Instead, North Carolina should agree on a historical citizen who is not known for intolerance, dishonesty, and close-mindedness. Although the bill for Graham’s statue subverted the committee process, thus avoiding any real debate on the topic, several state representatives suggested reasonable candidates: furniture maker Thomas Day, “Father of the U.S. Army Airborne” Gen. William Lee, and civil rights pioneer Julius Chambers.

We urge North Carolina to seriously consider selecting a female historical figure to represent the state. Currently only 9 of the 100 state-owned statues in the Statuary Hall Collection depict female Americans. One excellent candidate is Maya Angelou, the late, well-known author, poet, actor, dancer, singer, and civil rights activist, famous since her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), and recipient of over 50 honorary degrees. Angelou is strongly associated with North Carolina as a full-time professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C. It would be so fitting (and poetic justice) for the statue of an African American woman poet to replace a former governor who sought to keep voting rights exclusively in the hands of white men.

Billy Graham is indeed a well-known North Carolina citizen, but fame alone is not enough to be honored as a symbol of the state in the National Statuary Hall Collection. Rather, a worthy candidate should represent the values of tolerance, honesty, open-mindedness, and inclusivity, not exclusivity.

Sincerely,

Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President

ALG:pce/rdj

⁶ http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.html.

⁷ Cecil Bothwell, *The Prince of War*, 109–115 (2007).