

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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September 15, 2015

**SENT VIA U.S. MAIL AND FAX
202/225-5110**

The Honorable John Boehner
Speaker of the House
H-232 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Pope Francis' Address to Congress

Dear Mr. Speaker:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to Congressional offices giving away tickets to see the Pope's address to a Joint Session of Congress, and to ask that you balance this invitation by inviting Richard Dawkins to address a future joint session of Congress. As you know, FFRF is a national nonprofit organization representing over 23,000 members across the country, including members in every state of the union. FFRF's purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and to represent the rights and views of nonbelievers.

We wrote to you in September of last year objecting to the invitation to Pope Francis to address Congress. This invitation, and resulting address to a joint session of Congress, is completely inappropriate under our secular Constitution. We further understand that members of Congress are allowed one ticket for a guest to view the address in the gallery, and additional tickets are being given away by Congressional offices for a public viewing of the address on the West Lawn of the Capitol. We understand that some of the offices are giving away the tickets on a first come, first served basis while others are holding lotteries for the viewing. Pope Francis will also make an appearance on the Speaker's balcony or the Capitol steps.

This event is creating a series of unconstitutional entanglement between religion and government. Naturally, many members of Congress are choosing to give their tickets to Catholic constituents or officials. By singling out adherents of one religion for this event, our government appears to be endorsing Pope Francis' sectarian religious message. The sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to those who are nonadherents "that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community and accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders,

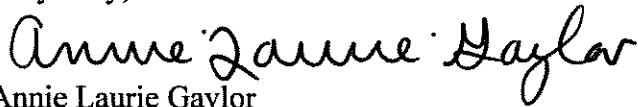
avored members of the political community.” *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1985) (O’Connor, J., concurring).

Further, it is well settled that the First Amendment “mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cnty., Ky. v. Am. Civil Liberties Union of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005) (quoting *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985)). In this case, Congress is showing favoritism to one religion, Catholicism, over all minority religions and nonreligion by giving away free tickets to see a religious dignitary. This practice violates the well-established constitutional principle that the government must remain neutral toward religion.

As you may be aware, the growing freethought movement — made up of atheists, agnostics, skeptics, humanists, rationalists of whatever stripe — do not accept holy texts, believe in deities or anoint popes. However, Richard Dawkins is the world’s most famous atheist, as author of the international blockbuster, “The God Delusion,” which has sold over 3 million copies. Dawkins, emeritus professor for Public Understanding of Science at Oxford, is one of the world’s most distinguished scientists, an evolutionary biologist whose books include “The Selfish Gene,” as well as many popular books on science and evolution. You can be assured that excitement by the public to receive tickets to this truly historic address would more than match that surrounding the pope’s address.

May we hear from you at your earliest convenience about balancing the pope’s address that that of an atheist dignitary?

Very truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Annie Laurie Gaylor". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President