

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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March 25, 2021

**SENT VIA U.S. MAIL AND FAX  
(202) 224-5321**

The Honorable Cindy Hyde-Smith  
Senator to the State of Mississippi  
702 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510-2405

Re: Christian nationalism, “In God We Trust,” and voter suppression

Dear Senator Hyde-Smith:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to your defense of voter suppression measures with Christian Nationalism. Many of our members contacted us regarding your statements. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 35,000 members across the country, including members in Mississippi. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

During the Senate Campaign Finance Committee hearing on March 24, you defended a voter suppression bill in Georgia. Georgia had allowed Sunday voting and even held elections on Sundays past.<sup>1</sup> Yet you defended a voter suppression measure that would disallow such voting because: “Georgia is a Southern state just like Mississippi, and I cannot speak for Georgia, but I can speak for Mississippi on why we would never do that on Sunday or hold an election on a Sunday.” Holding up a dollar bill, you continued:

This is our currency, this is a dollar bill. This says, “The United States of America” In God We Trust.” Etched in stone in the U.S. Senate chamber is “In God We Trust.” When you swore in all of these witnesses, the last thing you said to them in your instructions was, “so help you God.” And God’s Word in Exodus 20:18, it says ‘remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.’”

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Janel Davis, “Sunday Voting Begins in Georgia,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Oct 20, 2014) <https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/sunday-voting-begins-georgia/KUJ4gLB8DCYIPbJ7nDYZz/>

Exodus 20:18 is about trembling and lightning and thunder. The verse comes immediately after the prohibition on coveting your neighbor's livestock, wives, and slaves—and a book that treats humans as chattel to be owned is not one on which to base our public policy. You meant to cite Exodus 20:8. But that sabbath commandment is also followed by a recognition that owning other humans is acceptable: “the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave....”

That you turn to a book and its passages permitting slavery to defend the Georgia voter suppression bill was apt. In one way, it was refreshing to hear a politician tie Christian Nationalism to voter suppression so explicitly—few have the courage to admit this tie so clearly. On the other hand, justifying public policy on the back of Christian Nationalist disinformation is unacceptable and we urge you to recant.

1. In God We Trust is not a good justification for public policy.

The idea that we “trust” in a god is not a founding principle, rather, like “under God” being added to the Pledge, it is a recent addition to the national vernacular. It was added to coins in 1863 and paper currency in 1956, both times of national peril when people were more concerned with the country tearing itself apart, and not focused on a few zealots putting their god on our money.

The phrase isn't even accurate. More Americans than ever before do not subscribe to religion or believe in any god at all. Non-religious Americans are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification — 35 percent of Americans are non-Christians, and this includes the more than one in four Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.<sup>2</sup> Younger Americans are not just religiously unaffiliated, they are largely atheist or agnostic. A recent survey found that 21 percent of Americans born after 1999 are atheist or agnostic.<sup>3</sup>

The cornerstone of our government is our secular democracy. The nation's original motto, *E Pluribus Unum*—“From many, one”—embodies the value of a robust democracy, while underscoring how inappropriate it is for a lawmaker to impose her personal religious beliefs in the form of voting restrictions. The whole point of our system is that *everyone* gets to have a say in how our government works, whether or not they agree with you and regardless of whether they trust in your god or any god.

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<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” (Oct. 17, 2019) at <https://pewrsr.ch/2VPiFS7>.

<sup>3</sup> *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.

2. Basing legislation on your holy book is unconstitutional.

Your statement that the purpose of prohibiting Sunday voting is to enforce the Mosaic Law in Exodus 20:8 casts serious doubt on whether the ban is constitutional at all. As you know, for a law to survive an Establishment Clause challenge, it must have a primary purpose that is secular. *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602, 612 (1971). It is hard to imagine a less secular purpose than requiring residents to follow a religious decree. Lawmakers should recognize this obvious point and rescind this religiously motivated law, or else denounce your ham-handed defense of it.

Exodus 31:15 plainly calls for the death penalty as punishment for breaking the sabbath. Fortunately, we live in a country where these barbaric, superstitious laws are not enforceable by our secular government.

3. The Georgia bill that targets Sunday voting is discriminatory.

Some Black citizens cast ballots after church services in a “Souls to the Polls” campaign. The Georgia house has passed HB531, which you defended by citing the “Sabbath commandment,” to prevent early voting on weekends. Bald racial restrictions to suppress minority votes would be condemned out of hand, but by cloaking the voter suppression in a biblical mantle, you defended it. It’s particularly interesting that you presume a violation of the constitutional principle of separation between state and church will survive judicial scrutiny where a racist restriction would not.

Race is not the only issue here. You’ll notice that in the bible passage you miscited, the sabbath is not defined as Sunday. It’s just that you and your religion read it as such. Other religions read the Sabbath to be Saturday. A bill outlawing voting on Sunday also targets observant Jewish voters, whose Sabbath is Saturday. The bill would also make it harder to vote in terms of ID, drop boxes, absentee ballots and deadlines, runoffs — and much, much more.

4. Mississippi is a “southern state,” but it is not a Christian one.

Among the states, Mississippi has the highest percentage of Christians according to most studies. Not coincidentally, Mississippi scores terribly on measures of societal health and well-being. This is part of a larger trend globally and within America, “the states with the highest murder rates tend to be highly religious, such as Louisiana and Alabama, but the states with the lowest murder rates tend to be

among the least religious in the country, such as Vermont and Oregon.”<sup>4</sup> Those states that are the most religious also have a high occurrence of other societal ills. **The most religious states in the nation tend to have the highest rates of poverty, obesity, infant mortality, sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy, murder, and violent crime.**<sup>5</sup> Of the ten states that score the worst in a comprehensive health assessment,<sup>6</sup> eight are also among the ten most religious<sup>7</sup> states: Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Louisiana, Arkansas, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Oklahoma. By contrast, the least religious states also tend to be the healthiest.

Fortunately, Mississippi is not only constitutionally required to remain officially secular, but it is also becoming more secular demographically, along with the rest of the country.

The short statement you gave in defense of voter suppression was based on Christian nationalism and is deeply problematic from historical, legal, and equality standpoints. We urge you to revisit and correct this misinformation at the earliest opportunity.

Sincerely,



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Constitutional Attorney  
Director of Strategic Response  
Freedom From Religion Foundation

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<sup>4</sup> See Phil Zuckerman, *Atheism, Secularity, and Well-Being: How the Findings of Social Science Counter Negative Stereotypes and Assumptions*, 3 *SOCIOLOGY COMPASS* 949–71 (2009) at 955.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 955, 961 (internal citations omitted).

<sup>6</sup> America’s Health Rankings, *available at* [www.americashealthrankings.org/learn/reports/2018-annual-report/findings-state-rankings](http://www.americashealthrankings.org/learn/reports/2018-annual-report/findings-state-rankings).

<sup>7</sup> Pew Research Center, “How Religious is Your State?” (Feb. 29, 2016), *available at* [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/29/how-religious-is-your-state](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/29/how-religious-is-your-state).