



FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

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SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & FAX
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February 3, 2010

The Honorable Gerald D. Jennings and Members of the Council
The City of Albany
City Hall
24 Eagle Street, Room 102
Albany NY 12207

Re: Keep a Moment of Silence, Avoid Divisive Invocations

Dear Mayor Jennings and Members of the Common Council:

Our national organization, which works to keep state and church separate, is writing on behalf of our Albany members, who strenuously oppose the practice of commencing prayers at Common Council meetings. The Foundation has more than 800 nonreligious members in the state of New York, and more than 14,600 nationally.

It is our information and understanding that the Albany Common Council ("Council") is scheduled to review a proposal by Council member Anton Konev to include prayers at Council meetings. Konev's resolution would have Council members lead prayers or "invite a religious leader to lead the prayer on their behalf," and states: "An effort should be made to accommodate all religious beliefs and the prayer should not advance any one particular faith to the exclusion of others." As one Council member wondered: How would religious prayer represent nonbelievers?

Government prayer is unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive. Calling upon Council members and citizens to rise and pray (even silently) is coercive, embarrassing and beyond the scope of secular city government. Council members are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way. They should not worship on taxpayers' time.

The city should not lend its power and prestige to religion, amounting to a governmental endorsement that excludes the 15% of the population that is nonreligious (American Religious Identification Survey, 2008). The violation is inevitably compounded when a majority of prayers are to Jesus or a majority of the officiants are Christian or Christian clergy. Such prayer creates acrimony, makes minorities feel like political outsiders in their own community, and shows unconstitutional governmental preference not just for religion over nonreligion, but Christianity over other faiths.

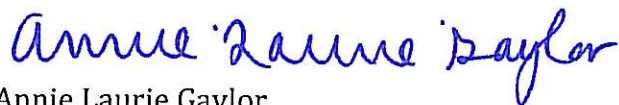
Citizens of all religions or no religion are compelled to come before you on civic, secular matters: variances, sewers, building permits, restaurant licenses, sidewalk repair, etc. They should not be subjected to a religious show or test, or be expected to demonstrate religious

obeisance at a city function. We fail to see why divine guidance is needed over such earthly matters anyway.

Christians who know their bible are familiar with the biblical injunction of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, condemning as hypocrisy public prayer. "Enter into thy closet and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret." (Matthew 6:5-13). Observing a strict separation of church and state offends nobody, and honors not only the First Amendment, but also the very tenets being professed during city prayers.

On behalf of our Albany membership and our secular Constitution, we urge the Common Council to concentrate on city matters. Your current practice of a moment of silence already accommodates private prayer, and does not exclude or offend anyone. Please avoid the divisiveness of religion in government by retaining your moment of silence policy.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor

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