

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 › MADISON, WI 53701 › (608) 256-8900 › WWW.FFRF.ORG

December 13, 2023

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: kim.reynolds@iowa.gov

The Honorable Kim Reynolds
Governor of Iowa
1007 East Grand Avenue
Des Moines, IA 50319

Re: Offensive statements regarding the Satanic Temple's display in the Iowa Capitol Building

Dear Governor Reynolds:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and our Iowa membership to object to your recent statements denigrating the Satanic Temple's religious beliefs while promoting your own Christian beliefs. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including members in Iowa. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

Each year, the State of Iowa chooses to open the Capitol Building as a public forum for holiday displays. Many different groups take advantage of this forum, including FFRF, the Iowa Atheists and Freethinkers, and the (conservative Catholic) Thomas More Society. Our Bill of Rights "nativity" display was recently installed on December 12 by a local FFRF member. Our display celebrates the "real reason for the season" — the Winter Solstice — and depicts founding fathers and the Statue of Liberty gazing at a manger in which a Bill of Rights is displayed, thus honoring the "birth" of the Bill of Rights, which was approved on Dec. 15, 1791. Our display, too, has been attacked by a governor, and FFRF was proud to have prevailed against that censorship by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott in a lawsuit we won earlier this year.¹

Sadly, it seems you have ignored your duty to uphold the spirit of the Bill of Rights in your vitriolic attack against another display. This year, the Satanic Temple applied for, and duly received permission to erect a display, which features an altar and depicts the "seven fundamental tenets" of Satanism, which include calls for compassion, bodily autonomy, and freedom of expression:

One should strive to act with compassion and empathy toward all creatures in accordance with reason.

One's body is inviolable, subject to one's own will alone.

The freedoms of others should be respected, including the freedom to offend.

¹ FFRF wins its lawsuit against Gov. Greg Abbott, January 27, 2023:
<https://ffrf.org/news/news-releases/item/41893-breaking-ffrf-wins-its-lawsuit-against-texas-gov-greg-abbott>

Every tenet is a guiding principle designed to inspire nobility in action and thought. The spirit of compassion, wisdom, and justice should always prevail over the written or spoken word.

As soon as this display was installed, there were already calls for it to be taken down from Christian lawmakers. Some intolerant Christians have shown their true colors by calling for the display to be vandalized or forcefully removed.² Rather than firmly standing up for free speech and the free exercise of religion in a public forum, you instead joined with the mob mentality and lashed out against a minority religious belief, using your gubernatorial office to privilege some believers and viewpoints over others, in this case promoting Christianity.

On December 12, 2023, you released a statement, using official state communication channels, in response to the Satanic Temple display in which you denigrated the religious beliefs of members of the Satanic Temple and promoted your own personal religious beliefs:³

Like many Iowans, I find the Satanic Temple's display in the Capitol absolutely objectionable. In a free society, the best response to objectionable speech is more speech, and I encourage all those of faith to join me today in praying over the Capitol and recognizing the nativity scene that will be on display — the true reason for the season.

Later that day, you made a post via your official gubernatorial account on X suggesting that the Satanic Temple is evil and Christianity is good:

Today, faithful Iowans gathered in the Capitol rotunda to display the Nativity and pray for peace.

Free speech is a right afforded to all. But how we use it matters.

Today's event is proof that in the battle between good and evil, good will always prevail.

Please see the enclosed screenshot.

We request that in the future you refrain from using your elected position as governor to denigrate minority religious beliefs while promoting your own personal religious beliefs. You are free to practice your religion in your personal capacity, but you cannot abuse your position as a government official to push a state-sponsored religion. It is true that the best response to objectionable speech is more speech, but the government, including governmental actors such as governors, may not take sides over a religious matter. The government must maintain neutrality over religious matters.

As governor of Iowa, you are tasked with upholding the U.S. Constitution — including the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. By promoting Christianity in your official capacity as governor, you do the opposite. You serve a religiously diverse state that consists not only of Christians, but also Jewish, Muslim, atheist and other non-Christian constituents. When you promote Christianity through official actions, you also alienate many of your constituents and treat them like second-class citizens. Thirty-seven percent of Americans are non-Christian, including nearly one-in-three Americans on a

² <https://twitter.com/JoelWBerry/status/1733524056048099483>

³ <https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2023-12-12/gov-reynolds-statement-satanic-temple-display>

national level who are now religiously unaffiliated.⁴ The religiously unaffiliated specifically comprise 29 percent of Iowa's population.⁵ You send the message that you and your office not only prefer those citizens who are religious, but that you prefer those who subscribe to Christianity over all other religions.

The separation between state and church is one of the most fundamental principles of our system of government. The Supreme Court has specifically stated, "If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein." *West Virginia Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943). Prescribing what shall be orthodox in religion is exactly what you have done by calling minority views "evil" and Christianity "good."

Elected officials can worship, pray and practice their religion however they wish when acting in their personal capacities. But they are not permitted to provide prestige to their personal religion through the machinery of a government office. The governor's office belongs to "We the people," not the office's temporary occupant. As governor, you are charged with great responsibility and have been given significant trust by citizens in your community, including those citizens who do not share your religious viewpoint.

We ask you to honor the Bill of Rights and the Constitution you were elected to uphold and respect your Establishment Clause obligations to defend and support the religiously diverse citizens of Iowa, not to promote your own religion or ask citizens to engage in prayer. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-Presidents

Enclosure

⁴ Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated*, Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), available at www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.

⁵ PRRI: American Values Atlas:
<https://ava.prri.org/#religious/2022/States/religion/m/US-IA>



Gov. Kim Reynolds 
@IAGovernor



Today, faithful Iowans gathered in the Capitol rotunda to display the Nativity and pray for peace.

Free speech is a right afforded to all. But how we use it matters.

Today's event is proof that in the battle between good and evil, good will always prevail.

