

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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April 4, 2019

**SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL**

**Pete.Ricketts@nebraska.gov**

The Honorable Pete Ricketts  
Office of the Governor  
P.O. Box 94848  
Lincoln, NE 68509

Re: Statewide Day of Prayer proclamation

Dear Governor Ricketts:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to object to your recent prayer proclamation. We were contacted by several concerned residents. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 31,000 members across the country, including members in Nebraska. FFRF's purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

In your official capacity as Governor of Nebraska, you issued a prayer proclamation declaring April 7 a "statewide day of prayer." This raises several concerns.

First, it is not the business of public officials in our secular nation to attempt to direct the prayers or consciences of constituents. You took an oath of office to uphold our entirely godless and secular constitution, predicated not on a deity but on "We, the People." Public officials should avoid taking advantage of their office to impose their personal religion on citizens.

Second, the proclamation is scientifically ignorant, which is embarrassing. We understand that you deny the existence of anthropogenic climate change but the proclamation notes that your citizens are feeling its effects: "Nebraska is suffering from an unprecedented disaster caused by blizzard conditions, widespread flooding, and high winds, which has profoundly affected the livelihoods and living conditions of our fellow citizens." It is incumbent on the state's highest elected official to model

scientific literacy, especially in a state than is “far below average” in scientific literacy.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, this proclamation exemplifies the divisiveness that occurs when religion mixes with the government. This proclamation says that it “seems right and fitting that the citizens of Nebraska are urged to pray,” a sentiment which excludes and marginalizes nonreligious Nebraskans.

Today, nearly one-quarter of Americans, 24 percent, are religiously unaffiliated and nearly 30 percent are non-Christians, either practicing a minority religion or no religion at all.<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 call to prayer excludes one in four citizens, who do not believe that wishful thinking can suspend the natural laws of the universe. It would be best to rescind this proclamation. Rather than encouraging people to pray, consider encouraging citizens to get off their knees and get to work and to accept scientific facts, such as human-caused global climate change.

We ask that in the future you follow the advice of Thomas Jefferson, who as president refused to issue prayer proclamations. He considered that his executive powers did not extend to “meddling with religious institutions, their doctrines, discipline or exercises” or to “indirectly assume to the United States an authority over religious exercises, which the Constitution has directly precluded them from.” Jefferson noted that “civil powers alone” have been given to executive office holders “and no authority to direct the religious exercises of his constituents.”<sup>4</sup>

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker  
Co-Presidents

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<sup>1</sup> Remy Melina, “States Ranked Best to Worst on Science Education,” *Live Science* (July 7, 2011) based on data from Statistical Research Center at the American Institute of Physics’s Science and Engineering Readiness Index. Available at [www.livescience.com/14950-state-science-education-ranks-announced.html](http://www.livescience.com/14950-state-science-education-ranks-announced.html).

<sup>2</sup> Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America’s Changing Religious Identity*, Public Religion Research Institute (Sept. 6, 2017), available at [www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf](http://www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf).

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

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Rev. Samuel Miller, January 23, 1808 in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*. Collected and edited by Paul Leicester Ford. Federal Edition. 12 vols. New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904--5.