

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

July 28, 2023

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: bosthree@edcgov.us, bosone@edcgov.us,
bostwo@edcgov.us, bosfour@edcgov.us, bosfive@edcgov.us**

Wendy Thomas
Board Chair
El Dorado County Board of Supervisors
330 Fair Lane, Building A
Placerville, CA 95667

Re: Unconstitutional Christian History Month Proclamation

Dear Chair Thomas and County Supervisors:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to your recent “American Christian History Month” proclamation. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including more than 5,200 members and two local chapters in California. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

We have received multiple complaints about the proclamation that the Board of Supervisors issued on July 18, 2023 declaring “that the month of July each year is designated as ‘American Christian History Month.’” The proclamation twists American history to paint a false narrative perpetuating the myth that we are a Christian nation:

WHEREAS, Religious faith was not only important in American life during the periods of discovery, exploration, colonization, and growth, but has also been acknowledged and incorporated into all three branches of American Federal Government from their very beginning; and

WHEREAS, The Supreme Court of the United States affirmed this self-evident fact in a unanimous ruling declaring “This is a religious people... From the discovery of this continent to the present hour, there is a single voice making this affirmation”; and

WHEREAS, the first act of America’s first Congress in 1774 was to ask a minister to open with prayer and to lead Congress in the reading of four chapters of the Bible; and

WHEREAS, The Liberty Bell was named for the Biblical inscription from Leviticus 25:10, which passage of scripture is emblazoned around it: “Proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all the inhabitants thereof”; and

WHEREAS, President John F. Kennedy declared that “The rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God”; and

WHEREAS, All sessions of the United States Supreme Court begin with the Court’s Marshal announcing, “God save the United States and this honorable court”; and

WHEREAS, When taking the oath of office for the President of the United States, George Washington concluded the oath by adding the phrase, “So help me, God,” and this has been included in many oaths by those taking public office since that time; and

WHEREAS, There have been attempts to change and distort our history;

THEREFORE, BE IT BE PROCLAIMED, That the month of July each year is designated as “American Christian History Month,” to recognized the impact of religious beliefs on America’s history; and be it further

PROCLAIMED, That the rich spiritual and diverse religious history of our nation, from its founding to the current day be affirmed; and be it further

PROCLAIMED, That any effort to remove, obscure, or purposely omit such history from our nation’s public buildings and educational resources be rejected in the strongest manner.

The proclamation, like most attempts to rewrite our nation’s history, attributes any generic reference to religion as supporting our “Christian heritage.” This is further exemplified by the fact that the proclamation describes this “American Christian History Month,” which is clearly intended to recognize Christianity as an attempt to “recognize the impact of religious beliefs on America’s history.”

This proclamation is a clear breach of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. By issuing this proclamation advancing Christian nationalism and the debunked myth that we are a Christian nation, El Dorado County is ironically violating the country’s *true* heritage of religious liberty based on a secular government. Cherry picking facts, many of them distortions of the truth and some, outright falsehoods, does not change the fact that the United States was founded as a secular nation. We are a country where you are free to be a Christian if you choose, not a Christian nation.

This proclamation alienates nonreligious and non-Christian citizens in El Dorado County by turning them into political outsiders in their own community. El Dorado County has a diverse population with diverse religious beliefs, including Jews, Muslims, atheists, and agnostics. Thirty-seven percent of the American population is non-Christian,¹ including the 31 percent of El Dorado County residents who are religiously unaffiliated.²

As you may not be aware, efforts to pass “Christian Heritage Week,” or “Christian Heritage Month” proclamations are part of a broader movement formerly known as Project Blitz. The overarching goal of Project Blitz and similar Christian nationalist efforts is to legislate Christianity, starting with seemingly innocuous laws, such as the posting of the national motto and issuing historically dubious Christian proclamations, like this one, then progressing to laws that privilege the Christian majority, often by

¹ Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated*, Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.

² *The 2020 Census of American Religion*, Public Religion Research Institute (July 8, 2021), available at <https://www.prii.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion>.

deceptively portraying it as a persecuted minority. This proclamation, like all of these efforts, is Christian nationalism and historical revisionism masquerading as religious liberty.

One of the main driving forces behind this Christian nationalist rewriting of our history is Wallbuilders, an organization committed to twisting history in order to sell a false narrative based on Christian exceptionalism. Wallbuilders' founder and CEO, David Barton, is a disgraced pseudo-historian. Barton never apologized after getting caught repeatedly lying about earning a Ph.D. in history.³ He wrote a book, aptly titled *The Jefferson Lies*, that was so divorced from reality that the book's own publisher pulled it from bookstores after noting that "basic truths just were not there."⁴ That year, a poll by the History News Network concluded that the book was "the least credible history book in print."⁵ Undeterred, Barton shamelessly continues to sell this deceitful book, now published by Wallbuilders itself. These are just a couple examples; there are myriad more.⁶ Adopting Christian nationalist legislation allows grifters like this to dictate policy. The people of El Dorado County deserve better.

Barton has explained one of the purposes of promoting "Christian heritage" is to push back against proclamations meant to highlight the contributions of oft-ignored minorities. On the Wallbuilders radio show, Barton lamented the existence of Black History Month,⁷ Native American Heritage Month, Asian Pacific American Heritage Month,⁸ Jewish American Heritage Month, LGBT History Month,⁹ National Hispanic Heritage Month, and Women's History Month,¹⁰ based on the relatively small size of these groups compared to American Christians, who make up more than two-thirds of the population.¹¹ This is a typical tactic of white supremacists: insisting that every celebration of minorities is a veiled attack on the white Christian majority. This dog whistle justification taints all "Christian Heritage" proclamations.

Your proclamation is problematic because it perpetuates the myth that America is a Christian nation. Every reference to religion in the U.S. Constitution is exclusionary, including prohibitions on religious tests for public office, implicitly in the godless oath of office prescribed for the presidency and later, in the First Amendment's historic bar of any congressional establishment of religion (a bar extended to state governments under the 14th Amendment). The United States was first among nations to invest sovereignty not in a deity, but in "We the People." The proscription against religion in government has served our nation well, with the U.S. Constitution now the longest living constitution in history, and our nation spared the constant religious wars afflicting theocratic regions around the world. Keeping religion out of government has in fact allowed religion to flourish on our continent, because it protects freedom of conscience. Keeping divisive religion out of the government is a fundamental American ideal, is essential for true religious freedom, and has been a tremendous asset to our society. This is a principle to revere,

³ See, e.g., Mark Woods, *Did These Top Evangelicals Really Earn Their PhDs?*, Christian Today (Oct. 10, 2016) (after it was revealed that Barton's degree came from a school with no history program, "Barton has not commented, and did not return requests for clarification from Christian Today.").

⁴ See, e.g., Elise Hu, *Publisher Pulls Controversial Thomas Jefferson Book, Citing Loss of Confidence*, National Public Radio (Aug. 9, 2012) (the publisher noted that "There were historical details — matters of fact, not matters of opinion, that were not supported at all.").

⁵ historynewsnetwork.org/article/147149.

⁶ See, e.g., Southern Poverty Law Center, *David Barton*, www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/david-barton.

⁷ Barton incorrectly calls it "African-American Heritage Month."

⁸ Barton incorrectly calls it "Asian Pacific Heritage Month."

⁹ Barton incorrectly calls it "LGBT Pride Month."

¹⁰ Barton incorrectly stated that "percentage wise [American women] are a minority, remember they're a minority."

¹¹ David Barton on Wallbuilders Live! (Mar. 13, 2017), *available at* wallbuilderslive.com/christian-heritage-week/.

not tarnish or destroy. This proclamation would more appropriately be called “Historical Revisionism Month.”

The separation between state and church is among one of the most fundamental principles of our system of government. The United States Supreme Court has held that public officials may not seek to advance or promote religion. 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.” *W. Va. Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943).

As elected officials, you are charged with great responsibility and have been given significant trust by El Dorado County’s citizens, including those citizens who may not share your religious viewpoints. FFRF asks that you rescind the “American Christian History Month” proclamation and refrain from issuing similar proclamations in the future. Please respond in writing about the steps the County will take to respect the rights of conscience of its citizens.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure



PROCLAMATION
of the Board of Supervisors of the County of El Dorado
In Declaration of American Christian Heritage Month

WHEREAS, Religious faith was not only important in American life during the periods of discovery, exploration, colonization, and growth, but has also been acknowledged and incorporated into all three branches of American Federal Government from their very beginning; and

WHEREAS, The Supreme Court of the United States affirmed this self-evident fact in a unanimous ruling declaring "This is a religious people... From the discovery of this continent to the present hour, there is a single voice making this affirmation"; and

WHEREAS, The first act of America's first Congress in 1774 was to ask a minister to open with prayer and to lead Congress in the reading of four chapters of the Bible; and

WHEREAS, The Liberty Bell was named for the Biblical inscription from Leviticus 25:10, which passage of scripture is emblazoned around it: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all the inhabitants thereof"; and

WHEREAS, The constitutions of each of the 50 states, either in the preamble or body, explicitly recognize or express gratitude to God; and

WHEREAS, President John F. Kennedy declared that "The rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God"; and

WHEREAS, All sessions of the United States Supreme Court begin with the Court's Marshal announcing, "God save the United States and this honorable court"; and

WHEREAS, When taking the oath of office for the President of the United States, George Washington concluded the oath by adding the phrase, "So help me, God," and this has been included in many oaths by those taking public office since that time; and

WHEREAS, There have been attempts to change and distort our history;

THEREFORE, BE IT BE PROCLAIMED, That the month of July each year is designated as "American Christian History Month," to recognize the impact of religious beliefs on America's history; and be it further

PROCLAIMED, That the rich spiritual and diverse religious history of our nation, from its founding to the current day be affirmed; and be it further

PROCLAIMED, That any effort to remove, obscure, or purposely omit such history from our nation's public buildings and educational resources be rejected in the strongest manner.

Passed by the Board of Supervisors of the County of El Dorado at a regular meeting of said Board, held this 18th day of July 2023.

Attest:

Kim Dawson
Clerk of the Board of Supervisors

Wendy Thomas, Chair, Board of Supervisors