

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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May 15, 2013

**SENT BY US MAIL & FAX:  
(404)-657-7332**

The Honorable Nathan Deal  
Governor  
Office of the Governor  
206 Washington Street  
Suite 203, State Capitol  
Atlanta, GA 30334

Re:           Bibles in State Park Cabins

Dear Governor Deal:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to respectfully urge you not to order religious materials to be placed in state park cabins. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 19,000 members nationwide, including members in Georgia. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to represent to views of nonbelievers.

It is our information and understanding that after a recent local complaint, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources ("DNR") appropriately ordered bibles to be removed from all lodge rooms and cabins in Georgia state parks. We further understand that you have ordered bibles to be returned to state park guest rooms. The DNR was right to remove bibles from state park rooms. We urge you to rescind your order to return them, thereby placing the Georgia Office of the Governor's stamp of approval on one religion's so-called "holy book," over other religion's teachings and over nonreligious viewpoints. Imagine the uproar were you as Governor to order that all Georgia parks stock korans, much less copies of Richard Dawkins' "The God Delusion"? It is equally offensive for the State of Georgia to take sides in matters of religion by proselytizing a captive audience of park guests in the privacy of their own bedrooms.

It is a fundamental principle of Establishment Clause jurisprudence that the government cannot in any way promote, advance, or otherwise endorse religion. Permitting members of outside groups the privilege of placing their religious literature in public-owned and maintained state park cabins constitutes state endorsement and advancement of these Christian publications. Providing bibles to state park guests sends the message that they are expected to want to read the bible. If they are non-Christian or non-religious, it sends the message that they are in need of salvation by the Christian bible. Certainly, if a guest wants to read this religious text during their stay, they can bring their own copy. The State of Georgia should not promote certain religious beliefs by allowing bibles to be placed in state lodges.

Government-run parks have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion. When a park allows distribution of such material to visitors, it has unconstitutionally entangled itself with a religious message, in this case a Christian message. State sponsorship of a religious message “is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to members of the audience who are nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community and accompanying message to adherents [sic] that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309-10 (2001)(quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. at 668)(O’Connor, J., concurring). Such a practice alienates non-Christian park visitors whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the bibles. This also alienates the 19% of American adults who are non-religious, the 27% of American adults who are non-Christian<sup>1</sup>, and the 13% of Georgia adults who are non-Christian<sup>2</sup>.

It is not legally relevant that private groups paid for and donated the bibles. *See Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39, 42 (1980)(“It does not matter that the posted copies of the Ten Commandments are financed by voluntary private contributions, for the mere posting of the copies under the auspices of the legislature provides the ‘official support of the State ... Government’ that the Establishment Clause prohibits.”). Regardless of private donation, the placement of a holy book in state lodges, under your direct orders, demonstrates government endorsement of that religious message.

In the event that the State of Georgia ignores our request and the wall of separation between church and state and returns these bibles to state-owned cabins, we formally request on behalf of our Georgia membership that you affix one of FFRF’s bible warning labels on them.

FFRF’s bible warning label (see enclosed), bearing skull and crossbones, reads:

“Warning! Literal belief in this book may endanger your health and life!”

We would of course prefer that the State of Georgia just say no to the Gideons or whatever evangelists are providing the bibles. We would prefer that the State of Georgia ensure bible-free rooms at state parks. But since the Governor’s Office has announced its intention to promote one religion’s teachings over other religions and over non-religion, we must insist that the State of Georgia provide our nonreligious group equal time. Fifty million Americans are free from religion, and millions more follow other faiths which do not revere the Christian bible.

May we hear from you at your earliest convenience?

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Cavell

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, October 2012

<sup>2</sup> American Religious Identification Survey, 2008