

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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January 11, 2024

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & FAX: (225) 342-7099

The Honorable Jeff Landry
Governor of Louisiana
P.O. Box 94004
Baton Rouge, LA 70804

Re: Religion in Civic Inauguration Ceremony

Dear Governor Landry:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to the inappropriate inclusion of religion in your inauguration ceremony on January 7, 2024. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization based in Madison, Wisconsin. We represent over 40,000 members, including members in Louisiana. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and educate the public about nontheism.

Elected officials may, of course, attend private functions on their own time as private citizens. That includes your absolute right to hold a religious commemoration of your inauguration at your church of choice, which is frequently done by public officials. But as the state's highest elected executive, we ask that you remember you are charged with great responsibility and have been given significant trust, including from those citizens who do not share your personal religious views. Leaving religion as a private matter for private citizens is the wisest public policy.

We understand that the January 7 inauguration ceremony at the Louisiana Capitol included a prayer delivered by Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, an evangelical Christian organization that is deemed a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.¹ This prayer was overtly Christian, citing the bible and reading passages from it. Perkins even posted his prayer on his personal YouTube page.²

The prayer:

Father, we thank you for today. We thank that we can approach your throne of grace because of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. We are grateful to you, Almighty God, for the civil, political, economic, and religious liberties we enjoy. In desiring to protect individual rights to life, liberty, and property, we recognize today that these are not political rights or ideals that emanate from government,

¹ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Family Research Council*, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/family-research-council>, (last accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

² Tony Perkins, *Tony Perkins Delivers Inaugural Prayer for Gov. Jeff Landry*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNpY1NzfKj8> (last accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

but spiritual blessings that you have granted us, that we must nurture and protect by acknowledging and yielding to your divine authority and truth. Thank you for the leadership assembled here today which you have raised up at this moment in the history of this state and Nation. Leaders who are committed to this noble task and we commit to pray for them as the citizens of this state not just today but each day, as their responsibilities are great and the challenges that they will face over the next four years, may at some times seem overwhelming.

But as you declared to the leadership of Israel in Zechariah 4 “not by might nor by power but by my spirit says the Lord of hosts.” Father we break with the ways of the past where we leaned on governmental schemes and political power. Today we declare that we will look to you and the power of the Holy Spirit. Today we pray for Jeff Landry, who in just a moment, will become our state’s 57th governor. We pray for his god-fearing counselor, his wife, Sharon. We pray for our statewide elected officials: Secretary of State Nancy Landry, Attorney General Liz Murrill, Treasurer John Fleming, Commissioner Mike Strain, Commissioner Tim Temple, Lieutenant Governor Billy Nungesser, and we pray for the members of our new legislature in our legislative leadership. We’re grateful for them, Lord, and we thank you for raising them up at this time. Lord, we pray for them. We pray for wisdom, wisdom to understand that which they don’t know. Humility to serve the greater good. Patience to bear all things. Compassion and gentleness to uphold justice and fairness and respect for all. Above all we pray that the words and the deeds of our leaders would glorify you, so that your blessing upon this state will be so bountiful, it will be undeniable to the rest of the nation. Thank you for your grace, we ask these things in Jesus’s name. Amen.

Note that Perkins concluded the inaugural prayer by asking for blessings to fulfill your administration’s goals “in Jesus’s name.” Among a plethora of disturbing features of this prayer, a few are noteworthy. First, Perkins claims individual rights do not emanate from the government, but because of divine intervention. In fact, such rights are due to human-made law. Second, Perkins’s outright political message should give pause: Perkins prays for the audience to stop leaning on “governmental schemes and political power,” and instead look to a deity that many do not share. Reduced government is a purely political goal and preachers should refrain from such divisive messages — particularly at an inauguration for all citizens. Third, Perkins said that his god, not the voters of Louisiana, placed you and various elected officials in office. Finally, and certainly the worst — Perkins prays to his god that the “words and deeds of our leaders would glorify you...” This is the *opposite* of what any government actor should do. Government office is not a medium for individuals to receive a spiritual kickback. Rather, it is an avenue to better society—irrespective of religion. Your words and deeds should be about upholding your respective oaths of office, which includes the duty to uphold our secular Constitution.

As governor, you represent a diverse population that consists not only of Christians but atheists and agnostics who do not believe in prayer or deities. The inclusion of sectarian prayer in an official government swearing-in ceremony at the Louisiana State Capitol sends an official message of preference for religion over non-religion and of exclusion to many of your

constituents. We urge you to refrain from sponsoring, promoting, or participating in any religious events in your official capacity. It is unnecessary, divisive, and not within the scope of a civil government official.

The non-religious is the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification, now making up three-in-ten Americans.³ Turning an event which should be secular into an event replete with religion “sends the ancillary message to . . . nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309–10 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. at 668 (O’Connor, J., concurring)).

If the oath of office you have taken to uphold our secular Constitution does not cause you to question the appropriateness of scheduling a Christian prayer at your public Inauguration, then surely the New Testament injunction against public prayer ought to. Christians who are acquainted with the bible are familiar with Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, condemning public prayer as hypocrisy. “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. . . . when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Matthew 6:5-6).

Unfortunately, some public officials inject religion into public life to raise easy political capital. However, those given the privilege of serving Americans, in any capacity, must be guided by our godless and entirely secular Constitution, barring religious tests for public office and any establishments of religion by government. Observing a strict separation of church and state offends no one. It also respects the First Amendment.

We appreciate your attention to this timely matter, and encourage you to stand up for the precious constitutional principle of the separation between church and state, which unites and protects us all, believers and nonbelievers alike.

Very truly,



Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-Presidents
Freedom From Religion Foundation

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³ 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/.