

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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September 26, 2022

**SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL**  
**bill.lee@tn.gov**

The Honorable Bill Lee  
Governor  
State Capitol, 1st Floor  
600 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.  
Nashville, TN 37243

Re: Rescind improper and offensive prayer proclamation

Dear Governor Lee:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to your recent Day of Prayer proclamation on behalf of our Tennessee members and to ask you to rescind it. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 38,000 members across the country, including hundreds of members in Tennessee and a chapter, FFRF East Tennessee. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

You recently proclaimed September 30, 2022, as a “Day of Prayer, Humility, and Fasting” in Tennessee.<sup>1</sup> Your proclamation began by “acknowledg[ing] God’s sovereignty and the need for God’s grace over our state and our nation,” then stated that “we walk humbly together with God,” and that “we seek forgiveness for our many transgressions.” You then paraphrased Prov. 10:27, “the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord,” and finally stated that “the people of Tennessee . . . seek God’s guidance for the days ahead.”

Every one of these religious assertions may be personal beliefs of yours, but they are not the beliefs of all Tennesseans or related to the entirely civil duties of your secular office. You have no basis to speak for “the people of Tennessee” on personal religious matters, such as seeking forgiveness or guidance from the deity that you personally believe in. It is divisive to suggest that all Tennesseans share your religious beliefs and it is wildly inappropriate for you as governor to encourage citizens to pray, fast or feel “humility.” That is reason enough to rescind your inappropriate religious proclamation.

Even more fundamentally, though, this religious proclamation is unAmerican. The framers of the U.S. Constitution took the revolutionary step of adopting a godless and entirely

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [tnsos.net/publications/proclamations/files/2377.pdf](https://tnsos.net/publications/proclamations/files/2377.pdf).

secular constitution, whose only references to religion are exclusionary, such as that there can be no religious test for public office. They placed sovereignty not in a divinity, but in “We The People,” rejecting the historic theocratic idea of divine mandates. America has no kings, including your biblical overlord.

When Thomas Jefferson as president was urged to issue a day of thanksgiving and prayer, he refused,” noting:

I consider the government of the United States as interdicted by the Constitution from intermeddling with religious institutions, their doctrines, discipline, or exercises . . . . Certainly no power to prescribe any religious exercise, or to assume authority in religious discipline, has been delegated to the general government. . . . But it is only proposed that I should recommend, not prescribe a day of fasting and prayer. That is, that I should indirectly assume to the United States an authority over religious exercises, which the Constitution has directly precluded them from. . . . civil powers alone have been given to the President of the United States and no authority to direct the religious exercises of his constituents.<sup>2</sup>

What Thomas Jefferson as president could not do, you as governor of Tennessee certainly may not do. As you are doubtless aware, with the incorporation of the 14th Amendment, state citizens have the same rights as federal citizens to be free from established religion.

Religious freedom requires a secular government. When a governor attempts to speak for their entire state on religious matters, it sends an official message to those who do not share the governor’s personal religious beliefs that they are political outsiders, as though they are unimportant because they have the “wrong” religion. The only way to avoid this is to honor the uniquely American tradition of keeping state and church separate.

Let individual churches urge their members to pray and fast, but you — as the governor of Tennessee — must act on behalf of the entire state, including those who practice a different religion than you and those who practice no religion at all. Today, non-religious Americans are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification — 35 percent of Americans are non-Christians, and this includes the more than three-in-ten adult Americans (29 percent) who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.<sup>3</sup> A recent survey found that 21 percent of Americans born after 1999 are atheist or agnostic.<sup>4</sup> To the nearly third of adult Americans who are atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular,” your proclamation is a slap in the face. The idea of seeking forgiveness for “our many transgressions” (*i.e.*, sins) is something many nonbelievers regard as primitive and

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<sup>2</sup> Letter from Thomas Jefferson Rev. Samuel Miller, Jan. 23, 1808, *available at* [press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amendI\\_religions60.html](https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amendI_religions60.html).

<sup>3</sup> *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults are Now Religiously Unaffiliated* Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), *available at* [www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/).

<sup>4</sup> *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.

unhelpful. Original sin is a concept that for some believers unfortunately often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We regard it as offensive to brand a newborn baby or young child as having “transgressions.” We do not consider “fear” to be “the beginning of wisdom,” but rather often the inspirer of neuroses and negative attributes, such as xenophobia, racism, homophobia and sexism. As FDR famously put it, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Fear paralyzes, and needs to be overcome; it does not enlighten.

Likewise most nonbelievers consider the “lord” of the bible, who demands that worshippers fear him, to be an unsavory role model. As forgotten founder Thomas Paine put it in his “Age of Reason”:

Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon, than the word of God. It is a history of wickedness, that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind; and, for my part, I sincerely detest it, as I detest everything that is cruel.

Thank you for considering our perspective. Please rescind this misguided and erroneous proclamation, and refrain from signing similar proclamations in the future.

Very truly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of two names: "Annie Laurie Gaylor" and "Dan Barker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker  
Co-presidents  
ALG/DB:rdj