

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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February 2, 2022

**SENT VIA FAX AND U.S. MAIL:
(573) 751-1495**

The Honorable Mike Parson
The Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 720
Jefferson City, MO 65102

Re: Inappropriate social media post implying a religious test for office

Dear Governor Parson:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to a recent social media post on your official government Twitter account. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 37,000 members across the country, including about 500 members in Missouri. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

Several of your constituents have contacted us to object to this tweet that you sent on February 1, 2022, on your official government Twitter account:

Missourians know that **I share this belief and would not have nominated someone who does not share the same Christian values.** Yet, Senators choose to believe baseless rumors and outright lies on social media rather than the facts in front of them.¹

We understand that you posted a statement via Twitter regarding your frustration that Missouri senators refused to confirm your nominee, Donald Kauerauf, as director of the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services.² We share your frustration and agree the Senate acted in a “disgraceful” manner by capitulating to an anti-vaccination fringe and commend you for saying so publicly. Government

¹ @GovParsonMO, Twitter (Feb. 1, 2022, 6:02 AM), available at twitter.com/GovParsonMO/status/1488664133230899201 (emphasis added).

² Kurt Erickson, *Anti-vaccination forces push for ouster of Missouri’s public health chief*, St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Feb. 1, 2022).

officials denying science have interfered with the country's ability to combat a deadly global pandemic for two years now. With 1.3 million cases reported in Missouri to date, including more than 17,000 deaths, the Senate's refusal to confirm Kauerauf is indeed disgraceful.

However, in your tweet in question, you needlessly and inappropriately inserted religion into the discussion of whether or not Kauerauf should have been confirmed. You imply that only Christians are fit to serve in Missouri as public officials or appointed officials. Additionally, you appear to be saying that sharing your same Christian beliefs is a prerequisite to be appointed to a high-level position in your state. This is unacceptable coming from your secular office.

Your implication that only Christians are fit to serve as Missouri public officials is not only inappropriate, it is un-American. The ban on religious tests in the United States Constitution is one of the truly great and original bulworks for freedom of thought and expression. Our Constitution is godless, omitting any mention of god or Jesus—a unique contribution of our founders. Art. 6 Clause 3 of the Constitution clearly dictates: “No religious test Shall ever be required for any office or public trust...”

As Justice Joseph Story explained, “This clause is not introduced merely for the purpose of satisfying the scruples of many persons, who feel an invincible repugnance to any religious test, or affirmation. It ***had a higher objective: to cut off for ever every pretence [sic] of any alliance between church and state in the national government.***”³ This is the better path. There is no freedom of religion without a government that is free *from* religion.

Further, by defending Kauerauf's fitness for office by pointing to his Christian beliefs, you are falsely equating Christian belief with competency, suitability and even morality generally. In fact, studies have consistently found that nonreligious individuals are arguably *more moral* than believers, on a variety of grounds.⁴

³ Joseph Story, *Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States*. 3 vols. 3:§1841 (Boston, 1833) In *The Founders Constitution*, (The University of Chicago Press) Vol. IV, Article 6, Clause 3, Document 27, available at http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a6_3s27.html.

⁴ See, e.g., Phil Zuckerman, *Staunch atheists show higher morals than the proudly pious, from the pandemic to climate change*, Salon (Aug. 21, 2021).

Ironically, the anti-vax movement that appears to have blocked your nominee is strongly correlated with Christian nationalism.⁵ One recent study, for example, found that “Christian nationalism is one of the strongest predictors of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy and is negatively associated with having received or planning to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.”⁶ By insisting that you and your nominees must share these religious beliefs, you are lending credence to the anti-science, anti-vax movement that so wrongly refused to confirm your nominee.

Instead, you should stand up for *all* Missourians by promoting secular, science-based values. 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 one in four Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.⁷ A recent survey found that 21 percent of Americans born after 1999 are atheist or agnostic.⁸ These are not only your constituents, they are the citizens most likely to reject anti-vax misinformation and to support a strong response to the pandemic, and nominees like Kauerauf.

FFRF asks that you delete this inappropriate tweet and apologize to non-Christian Missourians for the implication that they are unfit for government office.

Very truly,



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

⁵ Corcoran, Katie E et al. “Christian nationalism and COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy and uptake.” *Vaccine* vol. 39,45 (2021): 6614-6621. doi:10.1016/j.vaccine.2021.09.074

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” (Oct. 17, 2019) at <https://pewrsr.ch/2VPiFS7>.

⁸ *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.