

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

April 13, 2020

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [kim.reynolds@iowa.gov](mailto:kim.reynolds@iowa.gov)**

The Honorable Kim Reynolds  
Governor of Iowa  
1007 East Grand Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50319

Re: “Day of Prayer” Proclamation

Dear Governor Reynolds:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and our Iowa membership to object to your recent “Day of Prayer” proclamation. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 31,000 members across the country. FFRF’s purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

Multiple concerned Iowa residents have reported that you signed a proclamation declaring April 9, 2020, as a “Day of Prayer” in Iowa. It is our understanding that this proclamation urges Iowans to “unite in prayer in light of the COVID-19 pandemic,” and invites Iowans to participate in the 59th Annual Iowa Prayer Breakfast.

We understand the proclamation includes several false or misleading statements and a clear endorsement of Christianity:

Whereas, our nation’s motto is “In God We Trust,” with America being founded upon Biblical Judeo-Christian principles and values; and

Whereas, God’s word teaches us to “Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying;” and

Whereas, throughout our history Iowans have found peace, strength, and unity through prayer to God in humbly asking for His strength during times of difficulty; and

Whereas, prayer provides peace that surpasses all understanding and wisdom in times of crisis and conflict, turning us to God for His comfort and blessed assurance; and

Whereas God's unconditional love by sending His Son, Jesus, to be Savior of the world is remembered and celebrated by Christians during Holy Week of Easter each year;

Now, Therefore, I, Kim Reynolds Governor of the State of Iowa, do hereby proclaim Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2020 as a Day of Prayer in the State of Iowa...

We agree that it is important to "protect medical care workers, first responders and all who are serving during this crisis," but your message egregiously crosses the constitutional line. It is written as though you are presiding over a Christian theocracy, rather than a civil state that is part of a secular republic. It assumes all citizens are Christian and religious, thereby excluding many citizens who do not believe in a deity, much less one who answers prayer. For this and the reasons spelled out below, we ask that you refrain from making similar religious proclamations in the future, and ensure that the state's response to the pandemic is based on methods grounded in science.

One of the most egregious misstatements is the lie that America was "founded upon Biblical Judeo-Christian principles and values." The United States was in fact founded upon a godless and entirely secular constitution, whose only references to religion are exclusionary, such as that there can be no religious test for public office. Looking at the history of persecution, discord, division and warfare over religion in the Old and New Worlds, the founders deliberately and purposely made our country the first among nations to separate religion from government. The bible has no place in our secular laws, despite theocrats who insist on attempting to dictate their religious views upon other unwilling citizens, thereby jeopardizing personal and civil rights.

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution wisely prohibits government sponsorship of religious messages. The Supreme Court has

said time and again that the “First Amendment mandates government neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cty., Ky. v. Am. Civil Liberties Union of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Ark.*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947). By issuing a proclamation calling on Iowa citizens to pray and referring to the resurrection as a fact, you abridge your duty to remain neutral and to respect the freedom of conscience of all your citizens. Whether to pray, whether to believe in a god who answers prayer, and which, if any, religion to follow is an intensely personal decision protected under our First Amendment as a matter of conscience.

Non-religious Americans make up the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification – 35 percent of Americans are non-Christians,<sup>1</sup> and this includes the more than one in four Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.<sup>2</sup> Any prayer proclamation or activity “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, 309-310 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*).

The separation between state and church is one of the most fundamental principles of our system of government. 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.**” *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943) (emphasis added). When the government urges its citizens to pray and presents Christian doctrine as factual, reasonable citizens will interpret this as government endorsement of religion.

During times of crisis, citizens look for leadership. You were elected governor, not preacher. People look to you for civic leadership, not religious support. They may decide to turn to a church, but the state may not turn into a church. Instead you should be instructing Iowans to stay at home, engage in social distancing, and take other recommended precautions. It is incumbent on the governor to impart practical

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<sup>1</sup> *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Oct. 17, 2019), available at <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

and medical advice, not religion. Your actions are not only inappropriate and unconstitutional, but counterproductive to public health.

In conclusion, we ask that you, as governor of Iowa, remain cognizant that you have taken an oath to uphold and defend the U.S. Constitution, and are charged with great responsibility over citizens, including those citizens who may not share your personal religious viewpoints. Leaving religion as a private matter for private citizens is the wisest public policy. Observing a strict separation of church and state offends no one and honors the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

We appreciate your attention to this matter, and encourage you to stand up for the constitutional principle of the separation between state and church, which unites and protects all citizens, in good times and in bad.

Very truly,

Handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Annie Laurie Gaylor Dan Barker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker  
Co-Presidents

ALG/DB:cal