

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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August 30, 2021

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [governor@govreeves.ms.gov](mailto:governor@govreeves.ms.gov)**

The Honorable Tate Reeves  
Office of the Governor  
P.O. Box 139  
Jackson MS 39205

Re: Your inappropriate and callous religious remarks

Dear Governor Reeves:

We are once again writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and our Mississippi membership to object to recent troubling religious remarks suggesting that Mississippians are all religious, and that as such they are not afraid of, and thus less willing to take adequate precautions against, the current pandemic. As you are aware, FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 35,000 members across the country, including members in Mississippi. 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.

As Mississippi is being decimated by COVID-19, you callously and outrageously told attendees at a Republican Party fundraiser in Memphis, Tenn., on Thursday, Aug. 26, 2021, that Mississippians “are a little less scared” of COVID-19 than other Americans because most share Christian beliefs.<sup>1</sup> You reportedly said, “When you believe in eternal life—when you believe that living on this earth is but a blip on the screen, then you don’t have to be so scared of things...” You made these comments just the day after the Mississippi State Department of Health confirmed the sixth COVID death of a child in the state. Your remarks reveal a breathtaking devaluation of the very human lives you, as the highest elected executive in Mississippi, are entrusted to protect.

Your personal belief in eternal life, and the apparent lack of fear created by it, has unfortunately led to devastating results under your watch. Mississippi now has witnessed the most Covid-19 deaths per capita in the United States. It lags behind the nation in vaccinations, ranking as the second least-vaccinated state behind Alabama,<sup>2</sup> which, to date, has led to more than 8,361 Mississippians dying from

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.mississippifreepress.org/15321/mississippi-passes-nys-covid-death-rate-as-gov-reeves-says-mississippians-a-little-less-scared/>

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

complications of the virus and 435,611 contracting the virus.<sup>3</sup> Yet, Governor Reeves, throughout the pandemic, you have criticized measures to slow the spread of the disease introduced by public health officials and have declined to issue a mask mandate at schools, where the disease is spreading rapidly. You regularly direct citizens to “pray together” over the pandemic, yet eschew directing them to follow science by taking basic public health precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19. These deaths and your state’s desperate hospitalization rate are on your hands, if not, as is evident by your reckless leadership, on your conscience. Other Republican governors, such as in Ohio, Alabama, Arkansas and Utah, have acknowledged the urgency of promoting vaccinations. The science of inoculation is in fact not “an individual decision,” it requires communitywide compliance.

You will recall that we wrote to you in March 2020, April 2020, and again in December 2020 regarding your unconstitutional requests to Mississippians to pray, leading them in prayer and reading from the bible on Facebook live on multiple occasions. Your repeated prayer requests and proclamations have been counterproductive, in actively discouraging “those who believe in eternal life” from taking practical and scientifically supported actions to protect themselves and their fellow Mississippians from illness and death. As governor, you have many tools to actually help protect Mississippians, yet you have eschewed using your “bully pulpit” for good and instead, because of your religious blinkers, have misused your office and state resources to discourage responsible COVID-19 mitigation. Your repeated prayer requests, prayers, bible readings and religious remarks are not only useless, but also convey that you believe all Mississippi citizens are religious. This is insulting to citizens who do not believe in a deity, much less one who answers prayer. Nonreligious Americans make up the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification — 35 percent of Americans are non-Christians,<sup>4</sup> and this includes the more than one in four Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated. The nonaffiliated in fact are now the largest demographic by “denomination.”<sup>5</sup>

Your actions constitute inappropriate endorsements of religion by the highest executive in the state. We, *once again*, ask that you refrain from making these ineffective and exclusionary requests, proclamations, and statements and instead take real, meaningful actions to ensure that the state’s response to the pandemic is based on methods grounded in science that will protect our healthcare workers, teachers and students and the other citizens of Mississippi.

Any prayer proclamation “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

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<sup>3</sup>[https://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/\\_static/14,0,420.html](https://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/_static/14,0,420.html)

<sup>4</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>5</sup> *Id.*

political community.” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309-310 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*).

You were elected governor, not preacher. Individuals may decide to turn to a church, but the state may not turn into a church or take sides over religious matters. Rather than boasting about your state’s religiosity, you should be instructing Mississippians to get vaccinated, engage in social distancing, wear masks, and take other recommended precautions.

In conclusion, we ask that you, as governor of Mississippi, remain cognizant that you have taken an oath to uphold and defend the U.S. Constitution, an entirely godless and secular document, and are charged with great responsibility over citizens, including those citizens who may not share your personal religious viewpoints. It is incumbent upon you to lead your state out of religious ignorance by encouraging citizens to get vaccinated, and enacting appropriate mandates on social distancing and masking. In short, get off your knees and get to work.

Very truly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Annie Laurie Gaylor Dan Barker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker  
Co-Presidents

ALG/DB:cal