

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 20, 2012

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, DC 20250

Re: Praying for Rain

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On behalf of the more than 18,500 members the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) represents nationwide, we write to express our displeasure at your pious reaction to the current drought. FFRF is an educational association of freethinkers (atheists, agnostics) that works to safeguard the constitutional principle of the separation between religion and government, and to represent the views of at least 35 to 45 million adult nonreligious Americans.<sup>1</sup>

It is our understanding that you addressed the current drought at a July 18 White House press conference. This crisis is of grave concern to us here in Wisconsin, where farmers are so hard hit that a statewide drought emergency was just declared, as in so many other parts of the country. We understand at that press conference that you stated, "I get on my knees every day, and I'm saying an extra prayer now," and "If I had a rain prayer or a rain dance I could do, I would do it."

As Mark Twain said, "It is best to read the weather report before praying for rain." It is inappropriate for our government's highest officials to rely on or encourage prayer as a solution to crises. It is the strong feeling of our membership that public officials are in error to boast that they have prayed about a problem, which is tantamount to doing nothing. Nothing fails like prayer. Wishful thinking cannot suspend natural law, much less cause precipitation. Our farmers do not need prayers, they need real solutions. We feel pious politicians should get off their knees and get to work.

Faith that the environment and rainfall are controlled by a supernatural deity who listens to our pleas is one of the stumbling blocks that prevents our country from addressing challenges underlying environmental disasters, such as global climate change. According to a 2008 Pew Research Center survey, 31% of evangelicals believe there is no evidence to suggest global climate change is occurring while only 18% of those unaffiliated with religion believe the same.<sup>2</sup>

In 2009, U.S. Rep John Shimkus (R-IL) invoked the bible in his attempt to refute the mountain of

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<sup>1</sup> The American Religious Identification Survey, 2008, lists adult Americans who have no religious belief, "nones," at 15% of the population. According to USA Today recent Pew Center survey came up with 19%, or 1 in 5 adult Americans lacking religious belief. <http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/story/2012-07-19/no-religion-affiliation/56344976/1>

<sup>2</sup> Available at <http://www.pewforum.org/Science-and-Bioethics/Religious-Groups-Views-on-Global-Warming.aspx>

scientific data proving anthropogenic climate change. Reading from Genesis 8, the story of Noah and the Ark, Shimkus said: "The earth will end only when God declares it's time to be over. Man will not destroy this earth. This earth will not be destroyed by a flood. . . . I do believe God's word is infallible, unchanging, perfect."<sup>3</sup>

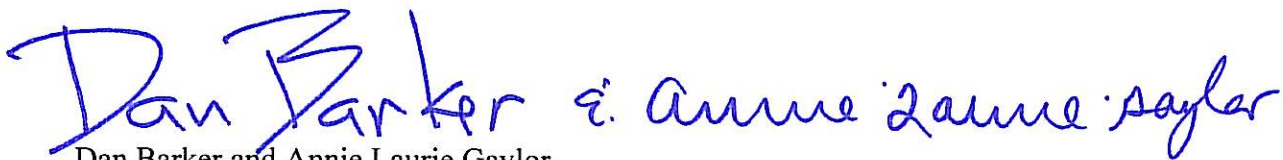
Earlier this year, Senator Inhofe, representing Oklahoma, one of the states hardest hit by the drought, appeared on "Crosstalk," a Christian radio show. Inhofe cited Genesis<sup>4</sup> to bolster his position: "my point is, God's still up there. The arrogance of people to think that we, human beings, would be able to change what He is doing in the climate is to me outrageous."

Senator Inhofe's remarks perfectly illustrate how religious blinders may obstruct environmental progress. Inhofe believes that humankind is powerless to affect genuine change, except by begging to his particular deity. Superstitious thinking will not help us surmount the obstacles our country faces. This kind of thinking is a betrayal of our historic confidence in American ingenuity, that our country is absolutely capable of accomplishing anything it sets its collective mind to. Had NASA adopted Inhofe's attitude, we never would have reached the moon.

We appreciate the concrete suggestions you offered, such as asking Congress to craft an aid package and lowering interest rates on farmers in disaster zones. But we think it is unwise and divisive to unnecessarily insert dogma and personal religious convictions into public policy and public statements on behalf of the secular Department of Agriculture. Already, the U.S. is scientifically and intellectually handicapped by its bias in favor of religious faith over scientific fact.

A superpower which looks to the supernatural — which engages in primitive thinking instead of critical thinking — is not going to remain a superpower.

Very truly,



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

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<sup>3</sup> Video available at [http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=5be\\_1291699374](http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=5be_1291699374).

<sup>4</sup> According to the Senator, Genesis 8:22 "'as long as the earth remains there will be seed time and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, day and night,"