

January 27, 2012

SENT VIA MAIL & FAX

Hon. Samuel Smith
139 Main Capitol Building
PO Box 202066
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Hon. Frank Dermody
423 Main Capitol Building
PO Box 202033
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Speaker Smith and Minority Leader Dermody:

On behalf of our 17,500 members, including more than 600 in Pennsylvania, we are writing to protest the General Assembly's unanimous adoption this week of a patently unconstitutional resolution calling 2012 the "Year of the Bible." Our educational association works to uphold the separation between religion and government required by our Constitution, and to represent the views of America's growing population of nonreligious citizens. What a discredit to the legacy of William Penn, one of the earliest champions of freedom of conscience, that the resolution most inappropriately exhorts all citizens to recognize "our national need to study and apply the teachings of the holy scriptures."

House Resolution No. 535, bizarrely classified as a "noncontroversial resolution" by House leadership, violates the federal and state constitutional proscriptions against alliance of state authority with religion.

Pennsylvania's state Constitution clearly guarantees that no citizen:

Can of right be compelled to attend, erect or support any place of worship, or to maintain any ministry against his consent; no human authority can, in any case whatever, control or interfere with the limits of conscience, and no preference shall ever be given by law to any religious establishment or modes of worship. *Art. 1, Section 3.*

The Pennsylvania Assembly has no business telling citizens which god to recognize, which so-called holy book to "study," much less directing citizens to "apply its teachings." Such arrogant overreaching of governmental authority is unacceptable. It is no more permissible for members of the Assembly to "bless" the bible than it would be for them to endorse the koran.

The House's declared "Year of the Bible" is not only unconstitutional, but is simply wrong:

- The Assembly officially proclaims the bible "the word of God."

Wrong. The Pennsylvania House has no authority to determine what is "the word of God," or if there is a "word of God," or if there is a "God" at all! Government is forbidden by the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment from taking sides on religion. Nearly 15 percent of Pennsylvanians and citizens nationwide identify as nonreligious and reject the very concept of a "word of God" (American Religious Identification Survey 2008).

- Your resolution states the bible has "made a unique contribution in shaping the United States."

Wrong. Our nation is founded not on a bible but on a secular and godless constitution, which grants sovereignty not to a deity or a "holy book" but to "We, the People." There is no reference to God, the bible, the Ten Commandments or Jesus in the U.S. Constitution, just as there are no references to "consent of the governed," "civil liberties" or "democracy" in the bible.

Perhaps, however, we should pin the bloodiest page of U.S. history on the influence of the bible. We likely fought the Civil War in part because of the bible's sanctioning of slavery, with most U.S. church denominations supporting slavery almost to the bitter end.

- Your resolution credits "deeply held religious convictions springing from the holy scriptures . . . to the early settlement of our country."

Wrong. Jamestown, the first English-speaking colony, was settled in 1609 for trade, not religious reasons. Fewer than half of the 102 Mayflower passengers in 1620 were Pilgrims. The secular United States of America was founded more than a century and a half later. If tradition requires us to return to the views of a few early settlers, then we should instead adopt the polytheistic and natural beliefs of the Native Americans, the true founders of the continent.

A government resolution blessing one holy book, does, however, most ironically ignore the fact that many immigrants came to this land seeking freedom *from* religious tyranny in government. The Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony were explicitly fleeing governmental orthodoxy in religion — the very kind of orthodoxy that this resolution tries to reinstate. Americans don't need to be told by a king or governor — or state legislator — what to believe.

- Your resolution falsely claims “biblical teachings inspired concepts of civil government that are contained in our Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.”

Wrong. While the Christian scriptures declare that governments are instituted under the rule of divine authority, the Declaration of Independence is based on the anti-biblical concept that “governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” There is no democracy, no jury trials, no Bill of Rights, no civil rights, no Bill of Rights, no government “of the people, by the people and for the people” to be found in scripture.

- Your resolution claims “many of our great national leaders, among them President Washington, President Jackson, President Lincoln . . . paid tribute to the influence of the bible.” (James Madison, primary architect of the U.S. Constitution, and Thomas Jefferson, ardent advocate of the Bill of Rights, are conspicuously absent from this list.)

Washington, who seldom attended church, has been claimed by many religions, but kept his private beliefs to himself. He warned: “Religious controversies are always more productive of more acrimony & irreconcilable hatreds than those which spring from any other cause.” (Letter to Sir Edward Hewenham, Oct. 20, 1792)

President Andrew Jackson, along with Jefferson, considered that presidential Thanksgiving proclamations violated the First Amendment. The words of Lincoln from the Second Inaugural address inscribed at the Lincoln Memorial, astutely observed the irony that in the North and the South: “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.” While a robust Deist, Lincoln was firmly rationalistic, and not an avowed Christian.

- Absurdly, your resolution claims, “Renewing our knowledge of and faith in God through holy scripture can strengthen us as a nation and a people.”

Nothing is more divisive than religion in the state. The U.S. founders, well aware of the holy wars and holy horrors of the Inquisition, Crusades, Thirty Year War, Hundred Year War, the fierce anti-Catholicism of the Puritans, the persecution of various faiths in the individual colonies, etc., wanted no part of religion in government. The modern-day permutations of religious terrorism is lesson enough in why “God” and government are a dangerous mix.

As a state justice wisely warned:

“There is no such source and cause of strife, quarrel, fights, malignant opposition, persecution, and war, and all evil in the state, as religion. Let it once enter our civil affairs, our government would soon be destroyed.”
Weiss v. District Board, 44 N.W. 967, 981 (1890)(Orton, J. concurring).

The Pennsylvania Senate must have the enlightened sense to bury this vacuous, posturing and pandering resolution.

Here is our message to electioneering politicians in Pennsylvania and everywhere: The economy is in shambles, many Americans are jobless and homeless. Quit with the gratuitous religion. Get off your knees and get to work!

Very truly,

Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor
FFRF Co-Presidents