

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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December 26, 2019

**SENT VIA U.S. MAIL AND FAX:
(202) 225-0562**

The Honorable Bradley Byrne
United States House of Representatives
119 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Incorrect media statements

Dear Mr. Byrne:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to respond to recent incorrect comments you made about FFRF and about the U.S. Constitution. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 30,000 members across the country, including more than 200 members in Alabama. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

As you know, we recently wrote to an Alabama public school district to object to a coach using his government position to promote his personal religious beliefs to his students, even going so far as to *baptize* some students while they were waiting to start football practice. Our letter explained that the U.S. Constitution prohibits government actors from endorsing religious messages, a standard the U.S. Supreme court has consistently maintained and this coach undeniably violated.

Apparently without reading our letter or investigating the relevant legal standard, you made the following statements to media:¹

¹ Sean Ross, *Byrne defends Reeltown High School from Freedom From Religion Foundation*, Yellow Hammer (Dec. 26, 2019).

“Helping bring a person to know Christ should be praised, not attacked. The core values that made our country great are under attack, and we need more leaders who aren’t afraid to stand up for what is right!”

“The Freedom from Religion Foundation needs to pack it up and stop forcing their ungodly, un-American views down our throats The foundation says they want separation of church and state, but what they really want to is to rip God out of our nation altogether.”

Every sentence above is wrong in the context of the government endorsing religion. Imagine if a public school coach were a Satanist and was “Helping bring students to know Satan” by leading students in Satanic rituals. Would you still say the government seeking to convert other people’s children “should be praised, not attacked”?

We suspect not. The reality is that when you refer to the “core values that made our country great,” you are not referring to religious freedom, which *is* a crowning achievement of America’s founding. Rather, you are referring to the promotion of your personal religion, which happens to be the same religion that was being promoted by Coach Johnson.

Government officials using their position to push their personal religion on everyone else is precisely what the Founders sought to avoid by creating a secular Constitution and prohibiting any law “respecting an establishment of religion.” They recognized that there can be no freedom *of* religion without a government that is free *from* religion.

Your misguided attack on FFRF is directly contrary to this constitutional principle, and your description of a secular government as “un-American” is wrong. The “wall of separation” between state and church is an American original. The idea was floating around in the Enlightenment, but it was first implemented in the American Experiment. America invented the separation of state and church, and we ought to be proud of that fact.

Today, more than one-quarter of Americans, 26%, are religiously unaffiliated and nearly 30% are non-Christians, either practicing a minority religion or no religion at all.² Younger Americans are not just religiously unaffiliated, they are largely atheist or agnostic. A recent survey found that 21 percent of Americans born after 1999 are atheist or agnostic.³

Representative Byrne, you represent a diverse population that have a right to a *secular* government, and you do your constituents no favor by publicly defending flagrant violations of the Constitution while condemning those working hard to defend it.

Sincerely,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker

Co-presidents

ALG:DB:rdj

² Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America's Changing Religious Identity*, Public Religion Research Institute (Sept. 6, 2017), available at

www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.

³ *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018),

<https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.