

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 19, 2023

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: Ryan.Walters@sde.ok.gov

Ryan Walters
State Superintendent of Public Instruction
State Department of Education
2500 N. Lincoln Blvd.
Oklahoma City, OK 73105

Re: Stop misusing your office to preach Christian nationalism or resign

Dear Superintendent Walters:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and our Oklahoma membership to once again request that you stop using your civil office to undermine secular education by promoting Christian nationalist misinformation, myths and agendas. FFRF is an educational nonprofit that exists to uphold the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public about nontheism. Our 40,000 members, including more than 200 in Oklahoma, are atheists, agnostics, freethinkers and nonreligious individuals.

We have also recently written you (May 11, 2023) regarding your book censorship advocacy and promotion of the bible in schools, as well as urging you to disband your religion-pandering committee for freedom of worship in schools.

Supporting public education is supposed to be the purpose of the office of the state superintendent of public instruction. Below we lay out more concerns about the continuing misuse of your office to spread irresponsible disinformation and denigrate public, secular education.

Your troubling public statements and tweets

No “state sponsored atheism.” In retweeting an interview you gave to Fox TV, you commented on July 11: “In Oklahoma we are ending state sponsored atheism.” It’s absurd to allege “state sponsored atheism,” an accusation for which you offer no evidence, of course.¹

Our secular Constitution, which you took an oath to uphold, requires government neutrality when it comes to religion, including in our public schools, where children of all and no religions are welcome, and which exist to educate, not to indoctrinate students into the personal religion of the state

¹ Tweet, July 11, 2023
<https://twitter.com/RyanWaltersSupt/status/1678835541901713409?s=20>

superintendent. Keeping public school curriculum free from religious proselytization does not mean the government is promoting atheism. You should retract this false statement, among many others.

Culture war tropes versus facts. In the Fox TV interview,² you perpetuated “culture war” tropes, primary among them: **“The bible is a foundational document in our nation’s history.”** The bible is not a foundational document. Whether or not the Framers read it or believed in it is in fact irrelevant — although the most prominent founders were largely Deists in the classical sense of the Enlightenment — because they adopted an entirely secular Constitution. You might try reading it — and you will discover for yourself that there is no god, no bible, no Ten Commandments mentioned in our foundational document.

The Framers were first in history to adopt a godless Constitution, and to grant sovereignty not to a divinity, but to ‘We the People.’ The Constitution’s only references to religion are exclusionary, such as that there shall be no religious test for public office. Aware of the bloody history of religious wars, schisms, inquisitions and pogroms in the Old World and religious persecutions in most of the original colonies, they wanted to create a nation where citizens were free to believe — or disbelieve — as they wish. To achieve true religious liberty requires the government stay out of the religion business. To propose that public schools treat one religion’s holy book on par with the Constitution or the Federalist Papers is preposterous.

Declaration of Independence not based on bible. You cite the Declaration of Independence as if it were evidence that our nation was predicated on the bible. The Declaration is a significant historic document, but it has to be pointed out we are not governed by it. Even if we were, its contents belie your interpretation. Its purpose was to “dissolve the political bands,” not to set up a bible-based theocracy. Its authority was based on the idea that “governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,” *which was a profoundly radical notion and entirely contrary to the biblical concept of rule by divine authority.*

It deals with laws, taxation, representation, war, immigration, and so on, never discussing religion at all. The references to “Nature’s God,” “Creator,” and “Divine Providence” do not endorse Christianity. Thomas Jefferson, its author, was a Deist who opposed orthodox Christianity and the supernatural. In fact, Jefferson’s original “draught”³ mentions only “nature and nature’s god” once, with no reference to “Creator” or “Divine Providence.” Those references were added by others (and his original condemnation of the slave trade, which Jefferson blamed on “the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain,” was, similarly, deleted by others).

There *are* atheists in foxholes. Regarding students, you said: “Try explaining why the greatest generation stormed the beaches of Normandy if you don’t explain to them that they believed that your rights came from God and they believed in protecting those rights.”

² <https://www.foxbusiness.com/video/6330989727112>

³ Jefferson’s original draught of Declaration of Independence, Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/declara/ruffdrft.html>

This is deeply insulting to the 32 percent of the military today who have no denomination.⁴ One-quarter of the membership of the Freedom From Religion Foundation are veterans or actively serving members of the military. When FFRF was founded in the late 1970s, the majority of military members were World War II veterans, i.e., they were living evidence that there are indeed “atheists in foxholes,” contrary to the old nutshell. Many of them at the time of service objected to having to identify a religion on their dog tags. My own father, a nonbeliever, served in World War II and was most certainly not fighting to install a theocracy in the United States, but rather was fighting against the theocratic Nazis and their allies, and for the true religious freedom guaranteed under the First Amendment. The Nazis, too, insisted their rights came from God, and even emblazoned the words “Gott mit uns” [God with us] on the buckle soldiers’ belts.⁵

You seem unaware of the fact, although we’ve previously pointed it out, that the fastest growing segment of the population by religious identification is the religiously unaffiliated at nearly 30 percent. Meanwhile, those identifying as Christians have dropped from 90 percent in 1970 to 64 percent today.⁶ This has never been a legally-founded Christian nation and Oklahoma has never been a Christian state, but the demographics clearly show that as a population, the United States is growing ever more diverse when it comes to religion. In fact, Pew Research Center postulates that less than half of Americans will identify as Christians by 2070.⁷

Shameful remarks at June Board of Education meeting

At a June state Board of Education meeting, you irresponsibly and recklessly called openly for the promotion of Christianity in every classroom, including the unconstitutional display of the Ten Commandments, whose first commandment, dictating which gods must be worshiped, is the antithesis of the First Amendment, guaranteeing freedom to believe or not to believe. Having a government dictate which god must be worshiped would be religious tyranny indeed. These unconstitutional proposals came from the Oklahoma Advisory Council on Founding Principles FFRF opposes.

The promotion of faith in classrooms to restore morality bogus claim. Oklahoma, which has a religious reputation, ranks #43 overall on quality of life. It is 48th, almost at the bottom, on health care.⁸ It ranks among the bottom ten for child well-being.⁹ Oklahoma is among the states with the worst rates of

⁴ Demographic and military service characteristics of military families, NIH:
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK547615/#:~:text=More%20recent%20DoD%20administrative%20data,an%20Eastern%20religion%2C%200.4%20percent>

⁵ National Archives:
<https://jfk.artifacts.archives.gov/objects/13354/gott-mit-uns-nazi-belt-buckle?ctx=121bbe5e9a2a9993e14d19e5df1e5c527c372e7c&idx=5>

⁶ Modeling the future of religion in America, Pew Research Center, Sept. 13, 2022:
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>

⁷ Modeling the future of religion in America, Pew Research Center, Sept. 13, 2022:
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>

⁸ Overview of Oklahoma, US News and World Report 2023:
<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/oklahoma>

⁹ Oklahoma ranks among bottom 10 states in 2021 child well-being report
<https://www.oklahoma>

maternal deaths in the U.S.¹⁰ Is this moral? Presumably of most concern to you should be the fact that Oklahoma ranks 45th in education.¹¹ Maybe education would improve if Oklahoma's superintendent of education spent his time promoting education, instead of religion. Maybe if Christian nationalist politicians concentrated more on making *this* world a better place, instead of worrying about converting others to their religion, we'd all enjoy better lives. That sounds like a moral plan.

Your support of a Catholic public-funded charter school. You wrote an opinion piece supporting the extremist vote to, for the first time in the nation, have public taxpayers entirely support a Catholic school. You opined: "Our Founders believed in a godly nation. In recent history, we've drastically changed the Founders' hopes and beliefs in a nation under God." Interesting that the motto "In God We Trust" was a Red Scare-era act of Congress, Our founders adopted the motto "E Pluribus Unum" (from many, [come] one), which recognizes diversity, not just a diversity of states under one flag but a diverse population whose freedom of conscience, to worship or not worship, was to be respected.

Your state attorney general has said it best when he warned that a Catholic charter school will drive "a stake in the heart of religious liberty." He also noted: "The clear result of this approach is to compel Muslim Oklahomans to fund Christian and Jewish schools, force Jewish Oklahomans to fund Christian and Muslim schools, and mandate that Oklahomans of no faith must fund religious schools for all faiths. There is no 'religious freedom' in compelling Oklahomans to fund religions that may violate their own deeply held beliefs. The framers of the U.S. Constitution and those who drafted Oklahoma's Constitution clearly understood how best to protect religious freedom: by preventing the state from sponsoring any religion at all."

In conclusion: Superintendent, it is clear you don't want to teach history in Oklahoma schools, you want to preach. Stop using your office to perpetuate the Big Lie that this is a Christian nation, or resign.

Yours very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President, Freedom From Religion Foundation

n.com/story/news/202/06/28/oklahoma-low-ranking-child-well-being-2021-kids-count-report/5304345001/

¹⁰ Maternal Mortality Review, Oklahoma State Department of Health:

<https://oklahoma.gov/health/health-education/children---family-health/maternal-and-child-health-service/perinatal-and-reproductive-health-/maternal-mortality-review.html#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20CDC%2C%20Oklahoma,deaths%20per%20100%2C000%20live%20births.>

¹¹Survey: Oklahoma ranks 40th in child well-being and 45th in education, KFOR.com4:

<https://kfor.com/news/local/survey-oklahoma-ranks-40th-in-child-well-being-and-45th-in-education/>