

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [sgreene@wilkescounty.net](mailto:sgreene@wilkescounty.net), [cjohnson@wilkescounty.net](mailto:cjohnson@wilkescounty.net), [kelmore@wilkescounty.net](mailto:kelmores@wilkescounty.net), [bsexton@wilkescounty.net](mailto:bsexton@wilkescounty.net), [gminton@wilkescounty.net](mailto:gminton@wilkescounty.net)**

Stoney Greene  
Chairman  
Wilkes County Board of Commissioners  
Wilkes County Offices  
110 North Street  
Wilkesboro, NC 28697

Re: Unconstitutional Christian nationalist proclamation

Dear Chairman Greene and County Commissioners:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to your recent “Christian Heritage” proclamation. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including 900 members and a local chapter in North Carolina. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It is our understanding that on December 19, 2023, the Board issued a “Christian Heritage” proclamation that twists American history to paint a false narrative perpetuating the myth that we are a Christian nation:

Whereas, the preamble of the Constitution of the State of North Carolina states that: “We, the people of the State of North Carolina, grateful to Almighty God, the Sovereign Ruler of Nations, for the preservation of the American Union and the existence of our civil, political and religious liberties, and acknowledge our dependence upon Him for the continuance of those blessings and to us and our posterity, do. For the more security thereof and for the better government of this State, ordain and establish this Constitution;” and

Whereas, Benjamin Franklin, at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 stated: “It is impossible to build an empire without our Father’s aid. I believe that sacred writings which say that ‘Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that built it’ (Psalm 127:1);” and

Whereas, George Washington enunciated “animated alone by the pure spirit of Christianity, and conducting ourselves as the faithful subjects of our free government, we may enjoy every temporal and spiritual;” and

Whereas, Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, wrote: “Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed the conviction of these liberties are the gift of God;” and

Whereas, James Madison, father of the U.S. Constitution, advocated; “the diffusion of the light of Christianity in our nation” in his Memorial and Remonstrance; and

Whereas, the recognition of God by our Government was further established when Congress, in 1954, added the phrase “one nation under God” to our Pledge of Allegiance, followed in 1956 by the official establishment of “in God we trust” as our National Motto; and

Whereas, these and many other truly great men and women of America, giants in the structuring of American history, were statesmen with high caliber and integrity, who did not hesitate to express their faith; and

Whereas, Christian Heritage provides our citizens with an opportunity to acknowledge blessings to contemplate and offer solutions to the numerous challenges’ society faces, and to be rededicated to our nation’s spiritual ancestry; and

Whereas, the influence of Christianity upon American communities is evident by the presence of many churches, Christian charities, ministries, missions, schools, and the upcoming Christmas Holiday season; and

Now, therefore, be it proclaimed, that the Wilkes County Board of Commissioners proclaim and recognize our Christian Heritage and urge all citizens to proclaim Christianity’s important influence in the foundation and life of our County, State, and Nation,

In witness whereof, the Wilkes County Board of Commissioners approve this proclamation as a testament to our Christian Heritage during the upcoming Holiday Season and all year long in Wilkes County, North Carolina.

The proclamation, like most attempts to rewrite our nation’s history, attributes any generic reference to religion or “God” as supporting our “Christian heritage.” This is further exemplified by the fact that the Founding Fathers quoted in the proclamation were not Christians. Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson were deists, and George Washington was likely a Christian deist, but his religious affiliation is debatable.

This proclamation is a clear breach of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. By issuing this proclamation advancing Christian nationalism and the debunked myth that we are a Christian nation, Wilkes County is ironically violating the country’s

*true* heritage of religious liberty based on a secular government. Cherry picking facts, many of them distortions of the truth, does not change the fact that the United States was founded as a secular nation. We are a country where you are free to be a Christian if you choose, not a Christian nation.

The United States was founded by Enlightenment-inspired thinkers, including those mentioned in the proclamation, who valued reason and skepticism. If the Framers had wanted to establish the U.S. based on Christian principles, they would have said so in the Constitution, the founding document of our nation. Instead they did the opposite. Our Founders made the United States the first among nations to adopt a godless and entirely secular Constitution, one that invested sovereignty not in a divinity but in “We the People” and whose only references to religion are exclusionary (e.g., Article VI’s prohibition of any religious test as a qualification for public office).<sup>1</sup>

In reality, many of the Founders were particularly wary of forming a country that commingled religion with government. That is why they drafted a Constitution that effectively formed “a wall of separation between church and state.” This is perfectly exemplified in George Washington’s response to a letter from Presbyterian Ministers in Massachusetts and New Hampshire expressing their disappointment in the absence of “some Explicit acknowledgement of the only true God and Jesus Christ” in the Constitution. Washington replied “that the path of true piety is so plain as to require but little political direction. To this consideration we ought to ascribe the absence of any regulation, respecting religion, from the [Constitution] of our country.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1791, America famously signed a treaty with Tripoli declaring that the “government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.” This treaty—drafted during George Washington’s presidency, approved unanimously by the Senate, and signed by John Adams—is a reminder that the Founders explicitly held out the United States as a government that separated state from church. It is pure misinformation to suggest that our nation is founded on biblical principles. The Bill of Rights was adopted the same year, with its First Amendment barring any religious establishment of religion by government and protecting rights of conscience.

This proclamation alienates nonreligious and non-Christian citizens in Wilkes County by turning them into political outsiders in their own community. Wilkes County has a diverse population with diverse religious beliefs, including Jews, Muslims, atheists, and agnostics. Thirty-seven percent of the American population is non-Christian.<sup>3</sup>

Your proclamation is problematic because it perpetuates the myth that America is a Christian nation. Every reference to religion in the U.S. Constitution is exclusionary, including prohibitions on religious tests for public office, implicitly in the godless oath of office prescribed for the presidency and later, in the First Amendment’s historic bar of any congressional

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. CONST. art. VI, § 3.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from George Washington to Presbyterian Ministers of Massachusetts and New Hampshire (Nov. 2, 1789).

<sup>3</sup> Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated*, Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), [www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/](http://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/).

establishment of religion (a bar extended to state governments under the 14th Amendment). The United States was first among nations to invest sovereignty not in a deity, but in “We the People.” The proscription against religion in government has served our nation well, with the U.S. Constitution now the longest living constitution in history, and our nation spared the constant religious wars afflicting theocratic regions around the world. Keeping religion out of government has in fact allowed religion to flourish on our continent, because it protects freedom of conscience. Keeping divisive religion out of the government is a fundamental American ideal, is essential for true religious freedom, and has been a tremendous asset to our society. This is a principle to revere, not tarnish or destroy.

The separation between state and church is among one of the most fundamental principles of our system of government. The United States Supreme Court has held that public officials may not seek to advance or promote religion. The Supreme Court has specifically stated, “If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.” *W. Va. Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943).

As elected officials, you are charged with great responsibility and have been given significant trust by Wilkes County’s citizens, including those citizens who may not share your religious viewpoints. FFRF asks that you rescind the “Christian Heritage” proclamation and refrain from issuing similar proclamations in the future. Please respond in writing about the steps the County will take to respect the rights of conscience of its citizens and the true secular heritage of our great country.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line  
Staff Attorney  
Freedom From Religion Foundation