

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Wilkes County Commissioners
FROM: Freedom From Religion Foundation
RE: Distortions, errors, misquotes, bowdlerizations in “Christian Heritage” proclamation

***Paragraph 1:** 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*

Contextually and legally incomplete. First and most significantly, there is no reference to Christianity in this preamble to justify your conclusion of “Christian heritage.” Article I of the North Carolina Constitution states: “No authority should, in any case whatever, control or interfere with the rights of conscience.” That prohibition certainly applies to a county board singling out the Christian religion or any religion to proclaim.

The proclamation ignores our nation’s controlling legal document: the U.S. Constitution, an entirely secular document whose only references to religion are exclusionary, and which bars any religious test for public office. The framers of the Constitution notably invested sovereignty not in a deity but in “We the People.” The First Amendment of the Constitution bars the government from establishing any religion, and that proscription, under the incorporation of the 14th Amendment, likewise protects state citizens from such establishments, including from your proclamation, which is certainly “respecting an Establishment of religion,” as the First Amendment puts it.

***Paragraph 2:** 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*

Misquote. This is a bowdlerization of some remarks by Franklin during a fraught moment at the Constitutional Convention, when he made an unpopular suggestion to pray. The only online source

we could find with this exact quotation online appears to be from another bogus Christian Heritage proclamation issued by Sarah Palin.¹

Franklin in fact said: “*And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?*” The misquote in the proclamation changes the meaning drastically.² Similarly, the wording in the next sentence, “*I believe that sacred writings which say that ‘Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that built it’*” in your Proclamation is likewise incorrect. Franklin was referencing Psalm 127:1, but actually said: “We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings, that ‘except the Lord build the House they labor in vain that build it.’” At least in this case the meaning has not been perverted, but it is mortifying that the county can’t fact-check.³

The action and correct version of the remarks reveal that Franklin was a somewhat religious man. But the private religious views of the founders are irrelevant to the actions of the Constitutional Convention that adopted our Constitution. The real significance in terms of the historic precedent is the fact that after Franklin called for prayer, he was ignored. There was a motion for adjournment and the meeting ended. There were never any prayers during the four-month-long, acrimonious Constitutional Convention, which shows the intent of the framers of the Constitution to leave religion out of government. As Franklin himself duly recorded, “The Convention except three or four Persons thought Prayers unnecessary!!” James Madison likewise reported that the convention adjourned for the day “without any vote on the matter.”⁴

Franklin was a man of science and the Enlightenment, and gave advice that the Wilkes County Board ought to heed: “When a religion is good, I conceive it will support itself; and when it cannot support itself, and God does not take care to support it, so that its professors are oblig’d to call for help of the civil power, ‘tis a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one.”⁵ Citizens, religious groups and churches are free to promote their so-called “Christian heritage,” but the government is not. Its role is terrestrial and temporal, not sacred. If the Christians of Wilkes County are “oblig’d to call for help of the civil power” to support their religion, Franklin would call it a “bad one.”

Paragraph 3: *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*

¹ Sarah Palin’ distorts the founders’ religious views by Professor Howard P. Segal, September 2008: <https://ffrf.us/3U2Ksy5>

² Benjamin Franklin, Prayer, and the Constitutional Convention: History as Narrative, by Louis A. Sirico, Jr., Professor of Law, Villanova University School of Law, P. 92, footnote 8. <https://ffrf.us/4bcsWOj>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, P. 93 and 94.

⁵ Benjamin Franklin, Letter to Dr. Richard Price, October 9, 1780, in *The Private Correspondence of Benjamin Franklin*, part I (ed. William Temple Franklin, 2nd ed., Henry Colburn, London 1817) p. 69. Google books. <https://ffrf.us/422GWWy>

Misquote. This quote is modified and taken out of context. Washington was in fact addressing a group of Catholics, whom he referred to as being animated by the “spirit of Christianity.” The actual quote is: “And may the members of your Society in America, animated alone by the pure spirit of Christianity and still conducting **themselves** as the faithful subjects of our free Government, enjoy every temporal...”⁶

Need we point out the deception in the county proclamation, which changes the word “themselves” to “ourselves” to make it appear that Washington was speaking of his own views about the role of religion in government? Similarly, the fake words “we may” were interpolated before “enjoy” with the dishonest intent to make Washington appear to be talking about his *own* beliefs, rather than addressing Catholics about *their* beliefs.

As noted in our earlier letter to the Board, Washington responded to a letter from Presbyterian Ministers in Massachusetts and New Hampshire who had expressed 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.”⁷ As also previously noted, under Washington’s presidency, the Treaty of Tripoli was drafted (later approved unanimously by the Senate and signed by John Adams), declaring that the “government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.”⁸

If the Board wishes to issue a proclamation citing Washington, who supported secular government, we would suggest using a statement Washington actually made:

“Of all the animosities which have existed among mankind, those which are caused by a difference of sentiment in religion appear to be the most inveterate and distressing, and ought most to be deprecated. I was in hopes that the enlightened and liberal policy which has marked the present age would at least have reconciled Christians of every denomination, so far that we should never again see their religious disputes carried to such a pitch as to endanger the peace of society.”⁹

Sadly, we are seeing that religious disputes today continue to endanger the peace of society, and fake quotes and actions to undo the constitutional separation between religion and government are part of the problem.

⁶ From George Washington to Roman Catholics in America, c.15 March 1790, founders.archives.gov: <https://ffrf.us/47ICNrP>

⁷ Letter from George Washington to Presbyterian Ministers of Massachusetts and New Hampshire (Nov. 2, 1789): <https://ffrf.us/3U0EvlE>

⁸ Treaty of Tripoli, signed November 4, 1796, ratified and proclaimed by US Senate June 10, 1797: <https://ffrf.us/3Si8aVU>

⁹ Washington letter to Edward Newenham, October 20, 1792: <https://ffrf.us/48AtyeM>

Paragraph 4: *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*

Taken out of context. Inserting into a Christian Heritage proclamation a quote by the historic figure who was most adamantly opposed to uniting church and state is ironic and adds insult to the historic injury of your proclamation.

The source of this quote appears to be an inscription at the Jefferson Memorial, which is a mishmash of writings from multiple sources.¹⁰ The actual full quote is from Jefferson’s “Notes on the State of Virginia,” and it is in the context of a warning about slavery and what the continuation of slavery would mean for the future of the United States: “And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever...”¹¹

Notably, in the same book, Jefferson makes some of his strongest arguments against religion in government, writing: “The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”¹²

Jefferson emphatically was not a Christian, making his inclusion into a “Christian Heritage” proclamation inexplicable. He was a Deist in the classical sense of the Enlightenment. He fondly predicted in 1822, although he did not join that denomination, that “Unitarianism [will] become the general religion of the United States.”¹³ More to the point, he advised his nephew Peter Carr in 1787, “Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear.”¹⁴ Because he rejected so much of the New Testament, including miracles and the resurrection, he literally took a razor to it to excise the supernatural teachings and produced what is known as the “Jefferson Bible.”¹⁵ He compared the sections he removed (including some teachings of Jesus) to “dunghills.”¹⁶

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson Memorial Inscriptions: National Park Service:
<https://ffrf.us/3SighSn>

¹¹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Richmond: J.W. Randolph, 1853), P. 174:
<https://ffrf.us/4aVHKAz>

¹² Extract from Thomas Jefferson’s “Notes on Virginia,” monticello.org:
<https://ffrf.us/3U2MluB>

¹³ Jefferson’s religious beliefs, monticello.org:
<https://ffrf.us/422Vt4I>

¹⁴ From Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, with enclosure, 10 August 1787, founders.archives.gov:
<https://ffrf.us/47HZVXA>

¹⁵ Jefferson’s religious beliefs, monticello.org:
<https://ffrf.us/4b1H4JS>

¹⁶ Thomas Jefferson to Francis Adrian Van Der Kemp, 25 April 1816, founders.archives.gov:
<https://ffrf.us/420qPZr>

Most significant to this discussion is Jefferson's authorship of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, in which he denounced in strongest terms church/state entanglements, warning that it is "sinful and tyrannical" to tax citizens to support religious opinions, and crafting the language that now appears in many state constitutions ensuring that no citizen "shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities."¹⁷

Finally, Jefferson as president famously explained the meaning of the Establishment Clause of the Constitution, advising that it built "a wall of separation between Church & State."¹⁸ Clearly a wall the Wilkes County Board is eager to dismantle.

Paragraph 5. 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

Misquote. This is an altered quote, used out of context, which deliberately distorts Madison's meaning. Madison, the architect of the secular U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, authored the 1785 "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments," whose entire purpose was to argue that complete religious liberty requires that the government cannot support religion in any form. Madison was petitioning the General Assembly of Virginia against a bill that would have imposed a general tax on Virginians to pay teachers of Christianity. The Memorial contains 15 strong points and in the 12th point, Madison appeals to Christian readers that if the state imposes Christianity it is doing a disservice to "the light of Christianity." The exact quote is: "Because the policy of the bill is adverse to the diffusion of the light of Christianity."¹⁹

What else did Madison say in his "Remonstrance" that is notably missing from your Christian Heritage proclamation? Madison's passionate denunciation of unions of church and state argued that if the state could force citizens to contribute even "three pence only of his property for the support of any one establishment, [it] may force him to conform to any other establishment." He warned that "torrents of blood have been spilt" when the government seeks to proscribe religious opinion. "During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the clergy, ignorance and servility in

¹⁷ Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, monticello.org:

<https://ffrf.us/3tWU9DI>

¹⁸ Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists, Jan. 1, 1802, Library of Congress:

<https://ffrf.us/48AUivx>

¹⁹ Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments ca. 20 June 1785 founders.archives.org:

<https://ffrf.us/47EsVzA>

the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution.”²⁰ Madison couldn’t have been more clear that he abhorred any governmental promotion of Christianity or religion.

Madison, were he alive today, would be writing another “Remonstrance” — against *your* proclamation.

Paragraph 6. *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*

Context required. *“In God we Trust” was not our original motto.* The original motto, “E Pluribus Unum,” chosen by a committee of Franklin, Jefferson and Adams, meaning “From many, [come] one,” celebrates strength and unity through diversity. Congress, at the height of the Red Scare in the 1950s, misguidedly adopted the more recent phrase “In God We Trust,” which isn’t even accurate. To be accurate it would need to say, “In God *Some of Us* Trust,” and that would be a very silly motto, not to mention exclusionary. Today, almost one-third of U.S. adults²¹ are religiously unaffiliated, among them many good Americans who do not believe in a deity. Even in Wilkes County, 9 percent of residents today have no religion.²²

Likewise the Pledge of Allegiance, originally written in 1898 with no reference to a deity, was tampered with at the behest of clergy, the Family and the Knights of Columbus, and was amended by Congress in 1954.²³ It inappropriately links piety with patriotism and is divisive. The granddaughter of the author of the original Pledge, who was, by the way, a clergyman who composed a secular pledge, objected to the insertion of “under God.”²⁴

Regardless of the objections to tampering with the pledge and motto, they are very evidently not Christian, but deistic (what is known as “ceremonial deism”). Contrary to the intent of your proclamation, they notably do not say “In Jesus We Trust” or “one nation under Jesus.”

Paragraphs 7, 8 and 9: *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*

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ About three-in-ten U.S. adults are now religiously unaffiliated, Pew Research Center, Dec. 14, 2021: <https://ffrf.us/3U9LBns>

²² Religious affiliation by county, PRRI: <https://ffrf.us/prri>

²³ Why Eisenhower added ‘under god’ to the Pledge of Allegiance during the Cold War, history.com: <https://ffrf.us/47BFQIU>

²⁴ The Pledge of Allegiance, ushistory.org: <https://ffrf.us/41Zi562>

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

Response. While it is true that *some* influential Americans have expressed faith, many truly great men and women in America, giants in American history, who were statesmen or women with high caliber and integrity, *did not hesitate to express their lack of faith.* These include patriot Ethan Allen, who wrote the first book rejecting religion in America, *Reason: The Only Oracle of Man.*²⁵ Great American dissenters from religion include Thomas Paine, without whom the United States likely would not exist, who fomented the Revolution, named our very nation the “United States of America” and wrote *The Age of Reason* rejecting revealed religions. The list of abolitionists, reformers, suffragists, artists, writers, scientists who have or had no truck with religion is impressive.²⁶ As John Stuart Mill wrote in his autobiography, “The world would be astonished if it knew how great a proportion of its brightest ornaments — of those most distinguished even in popular estimation for wisdom and virtue — are complete skeptics in religion.”²⁷

The influence of nonbelieving American citizens, many of whom did not hesitate to proclaim their dissent from religion, is also felt in our communities, as is the influence of non-Christian religionists such as Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Buddhists.

In terms of heritage, it would be far more appropriate for the Board to proclaim North Carolina's debt to the beliefs of the indigenous peoples who first occupied the region (most of whom were run out of the state by truly great Christian statesmen).

Proclamation: *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.

²⁵ Reason: The Only Oracle of Man by Col. Ethan Allen:
<https://ffrf.us/422JYK1>

²⁶ Freethought of the Day, FFRF:
ffrf.org/day

²⁷ Autobiography, by John Stuart Mill:
<https://ffrf.us/3S8Fz4e>

In conclusion. No governmental body in the United States has the moral right or constitutional authority to dictate to citizens which religion they must “proclaim” as an “important influence” or themselves to declare a “testament to our Christian Heritage” all year round. Honesty, integrity and the Constitution make it incumbent that the Wilkes County Christian Heritage proclamation be rescinded. Wilkes County Christians enjoy the liberty to worship in their churches and homes, but the County Board must not take sides on religion. Religion *in government* is always divisive. That’s why James Madison warned, “Religion and government will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together.”²⁸

²⁸ Letter from James Madison to Edward Livingston, 10 July 1822, founders.archive.gov:
<https://ffrf.us/41Z6q70>