

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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September 24, 2024

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: governor@govreeves.ms.gov

The Honorable Tate Reeves
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 139
Jackson, MS 39205

Re: Unconstitutional and Deceptive Christian Heritage Week Proclamation

Dear Governor Reeves:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to your recent “Christian Heritage Week” proclamation. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including members in Mississippi. 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 you have proclaimed September 22–28, 2024, as Mississippi’s “Christian Heritage Week.” Your August 14, 2024 proclamation twists American history to paint a false narrative perpetuating the myth that we are a Christian nation:

WHEREAS, the Constitution of the State of Mississippi states that *We the people of Mississippi in convention assembled, grateful to Almighty God, and invoking His blessing on our work, do ordain and establish this Constitution...no preference shall be given by law to any religious sect or mode of worship; but the enjoyment of all religious sentiments and the different modes of worship shall be held sacred. The rights hereby secured shall not be construed to justify acts of licentiousness injurious to morals or dangerous to the peace and safety of the State, or to exclude the Holy Bible from use in any public school of this State;* and

WHEREAS, Benjamin Franklin, at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 stated: *And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings that ‘except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it. (Psalm 127:1);* and

WHEREAS, George Washington enunciated: *Animated alone by the pure spirit of Christianity, and conducting themselves as the faithful subjects of our free government, enjoy every temporal and spiritual felicity;* and

WHEREAS, Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, wrote: *And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, the conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are 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;* 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, Patrick Henry quoted Proverbs 14:34 for our nation: *Righteousness alone can exalt a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people;* and

WHEREAS, George Mason, in his Virginia Declaration of Rights, forerunner to our U.S. Bill of Rights, affirmed: *That it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love and the charity towards each other;* and

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

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Tate Reeves, Governor of the State of Mississippi, do hereby proclaim September 22 – 28, 2024, as Mississippi’s 30th Annual Christian Heritage Week.

Your proclamation uses deceptive, distorted, and debunked quotes to perpetuate the myth that America is a Christian nation.

While Benjamin Franklin was a somewhat religious man, 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.”¹

Franklin was a man of science and the Enlightenment, and gave advice that the State of Mississippi 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

¹ Benjamin Franklin, Prayer, and the Constitutional Convention: History as Narrative, by Louis A. Sirico, Jr., Professor of Law, Villanova University School of Law, P. 93 and 94.

call for help of the civil power, 'tis a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one.”² 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 Mississippi are “oblig’d to call for help of the civil power” to support their religion, Franklin would call the religion a “bad one.”

While George Washington did address a group of Catholics, whom he referred to as being animated by the “spirit of Christianity,” he was discussing their views and not his own personal views. The full 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...”³

Washington also 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.”⁴ 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.”⁵

If you wish to issue a proclamation citing Washington, who supported our secular government, we would suggest:

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.⁶

² 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>.

³ From George Washington to Roman Catholics in America, c.15 March 1790, [founders.archives.gov: https://ffrf.us/47ICNrP](https://ffrf.us/47ICNrP).

⁴ Letter from George Washington to Presbyterian Ministers of Massachusetts and New Hampshire (Nov. 2, 1789): <https://ffrf.us/3U0EvlE>.

⁵ Treaty of Tripoli, signed November 4, 1796, ratified and proclaimed by US Senate June 10, 1797: <https://ffrf.us/3Si8aVU>.

⁶ Washington letter to Edward Newenham, October 20, 1792: <https://ffrf.us/48AtyeM>.

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

Inserting into a Christian Heritage proclamation a quote by Thomas Jefferson, 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.⁷ 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..."⁸

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."⁹

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."¹⁰ 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."¹¹ Because he rejected so much of the New Testament, including miracles and the resurrection, he literally took a razor to it to excise its supernatural teachings and produced what is known as the "Jefferson Bible."¹² He compared the sections he removed (including some teachings of Jesus) to "dunghills."¹³

⁷ Thomas Jefferson Memorial Inscriptions: National Park Service:
<https://ffrf.us/3SighSn>.

⁸ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Richmond: J.W. Randolph, 1853), P. 174:
<https://ffrf.us/4aVHKAZ>.

⁹ Extract from Thomas Jefferson's "Notes on Virginia," monticello.org:
<https://ffrf.us/3U2MluB>.

¹⁰ Jefferson's religious beliefs, monticello.org:
<https://ffrf.us/422Vt4I>.

¹¹ From Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, with enclosure, 10 August 1787, founders.archives.gov:
<https://ffrf.us/47HZVXA>.

¹² Jefferson's religious beliefs, monticello.org:
<https://ffrf.us/4b1H4JS>.

¹³ Thomas Jefferson to Francis Adrian Van Der Kemp, 25 April 1816, founders.archives.gov:
<https://ffrf.us/420qPZr>.

Most significant to any discussion of Jefferson is his 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.”¹⁴

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.”¹⁵ Rather than celebrating Jefferson, this proclamation eagerly dismantles the wall of separation he supported.

The James Madison quote is altered and 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.”¹⁶

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 the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution.”¹⁷ Madison couldn’t have been more clear that he abhorred any governmental promotion of Christianity or religion.

¹⁴ Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, monticello.org:
<https://ffrf.us/3tWU9DI>.

¹⁵ Jefferson’s letter to the Danbury Baptists, Jan. 1, 1802, Library of Congress:
<https://ffrf.us/48AUivx>.

¹⁶ Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments ca. 20 June 1785 founders.archives.org:
<https://ffrf.us/47EsVzA>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

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

While it is true that *some* influential Americans have expressed their 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*.

¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.”²⁰

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.

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, you are 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.

This proclamation alienates nonreligious and non-Christian citizens in Mississippi by turning them into political outsiders in their own community. Mississippi has a diverse population with diverse religious beliefs, including Jews, Muslims, atheists, and agnostics. Fourteen percent of Mississippi’s citizens are unaffiliated with religion and another two percent belong to non-Christian faiths.²¹

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 establishment of religion (a bar extended to state governments under the 14th Amendment). The United States

¹⁸ Reason: The Only Oracle of Man by Col. Ethan Allen:
<https://ffrf.us/422JYK1>.

¹⁹ Freethought of the Day, FFRF:
ffrf.org/day.

²⁰ Autobiography, by John Stuart Mill:
<https://ffrf.us/3S8Fz4e>.

²¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/state/mississippi/>.

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. This proclamation would more appropriately be called “Historical Revisionism Week.”

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

STATE OF MISSISSIPPI

Office of the Governor



PROCLAMATION

WHEREAS, the Constitution of the State of Mississippi states that *We the people of Mississippi in convention assembled, grateful to Almighty God, and invoking His blessing on our work, do ordain and establish this Constitution... no preference shall be given by law to any religious sect or mode of worship; but the free enjoyment of all religious sentiments and the different modes of worship shall be held sacred. The rights hereby secured shall not be construed to justify acts of licentiousness injurious to morals or dangerous to the peace and safety of the State, or to exclude the Holy Bible from use in any public school of this State;* and

WHEREAS, Benjamin Franklin, at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 stated: *And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings that 'except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it. (Psalm 127:1);* and

WHEREAS, George Washington enunciated: *Animated alone by the pure spirit of Christianity, and conducting themselves as the faithful subjects of our free government, enjoy every temporal and spiritual felicity;* and

WHEREAS, Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, wrote: *And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, the conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are 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;* 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, Patrick Henry quoted Proverbs 14:34 for our nation: *Righteousness alone can exalt a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people;* and

WHEREAS, George Mason, in his Virginia Declaration of Rights, forerunner to our U.S. Bill of Rights, affirmed: *That it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love and the charity towards each other;* and

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

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Tate Reeves, Governor of the State of Mississippi, do hereby proclaim September 22 – 28, 2024, as Mississippi's 30th Annual

CHRISTIAN HERITAGE WEEK

in the State of Mississippi.



IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Great Seal of the State of Mississippi to be affixed.

DONE in the City of Jackson, on the 14th day of August in the year of our Lord, two thousand and twenty-four, and of the Independence of the United States of America, the two hundred and forty-ninth.

TATE REEVES
GOVERNOR