

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [dist1@tulsacouncil.org](mailto:dist1@tulsacouncil.org), [dist2@tulsacouncil.org](mailto:dist2@tulsacouncil.org),  
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Jeannie Cue  
Chair  
Tulsa City Council  
175 E 2nd St S Fourth Floor  
Tulsa, OK 74103

Re: Concerns Regarding Future Treatment of Non-Christian Invocations

Dear Chair Cue and City Council members:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to encourage you to stand up for true religious freedom by ensuring that the Tulsa City Council continues respecting religious plurality and does not start discriminating against non-Christian citizens. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including members in Oklahoma. 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 Tulsa City Council opens its board meetings with an invocation and that it allows residents to sign up to deliver the invocation. On November 20, 2024, the city council allowed a “priestess of the goddess” to deliver the opening prayer.<sup>1</sup> She delivered a pagan prayer that made several references to deities such as Medusa, a figure from Greek mythology. She urged the council to “protect[] the sovereignty and autonomy of all our people,” and “to be champions for all in this city, not just those in power.” She continued, “Shine a light for them that they may walk the path of justice, protected and prepared, illuminating the darkness. Endow them with the fire of courage, the waters of compassion, the air of truth, and the strength of the earth itself.”

This pagan prayer has caused a lot of stir in Oklahoma and on social media, and is being wrongly described as “satanic.” Governor Kevin Stitt addressed the prayer on X, putting pressure on council members to discriminate against non-Christians and imploring citizens to vote out those members who support allowing “actions like this”:<sup>2</sup>

Satan is trying to establish a foothold, but Oklahoma is going to be a shining city on the hill.

Tulsa City Council needs to stand strong against actions like this, and Tulsans need to remember who allowed this at the ballot box.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://x.com/TheOklahomaLion/status/1860404755769741803>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://x.com/GovStitt/status/1860765341770563876>.

State Superintendent Ryan Walters also chimed in on X, threatening “the person who allowed” a non-Christian prayer to be delivered:<sup>3</sup>

Satanic prayers are welcome in Hell but not in Oklahoma. Satanism is not a religion. Tulsa should immediately move to ensure this never happens again and the person who allowed it should be held accountable.

Attorney General Drummond referred to this non-Christian prayer as “sacrilege.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite this inappropriate pressure from officials in Oklahoma, we urge you to continue upholding the constitutional rights of all Tulsa residents by allowing invocations from any resident, regardless of their personal religious beliefs. If the council begins its meetings with invocations, it must treat invocation speakers equally. Singling out a religious denomination by denying them an opportunity to deliver an invocation, or only allowing Christian prayers, is a clear violation of the First Amendment. If the city council continues to allow prayer before its meetings, it may not constitutionally restrict opportunities to give invocations to the faith traditions of which the city approves.

As the over the top reactions from Governor Stitt and others in Tulsa and around the country demonstrate, prayer at government meetings is unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive. The best solution is to discontinue invocations altogether. Council members are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way. They do not need to worship on taxpayers’ time. Citizens, including Tulsa’s nonreligious citizens, are often compelled to come before local government bodies like the council regarding important civic matters. Christian prayers exclude the nearly 30 percent of adult Americans who are religiously unaffiliated, as well as the additional six percent of Americans adhering to non-Christian faiths.<sup>5</sup> It is coercive and intimidating for these nonreligious citizens to come to a public meeting and be required either to make a public showing of their nonbelief or to show deference to a religious sentiment they do not believe in, but which their city council members clearly do.

If the city council insists on continuing to host prayers at public meetings, it must not discriminate against any person delivering an invocation on the basis of religion. Secular invocations and those from pagan and other minority religions must be treated the same as Christian prayers. The Supreme Court addressed the issue of legislative prayer in *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, 134 S. Ct. 1811 (2014). The Court identified several important elements in the town’s invocation practice that, taken together, ensured that the practice did not impermissibly advance one religion over others or promote religion over nonreligion. Over time, the town of Greece “compiled a list of willing ‘board chaplains’ who had accepted invitations and agreed to return in the future.” *Id.* at 1816. Additionally, the town of Greece “at no point excluded or denied an opportunity to a would-be prayer giver.” *Id.*

The fact that Greece “represented that it would welcome a prayer by any minister or layman who wished to give one” was a critical factor in the Court’s conclusion that the practice in *Galloway* did not violate the Constitution. *Id.* at 1824. The Court clearly stated that the purpose of legislative invocations must be

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<sup>3</sup> <https://x.com/RyanWaltersSupt/status/1860836270697537925>.

<sup>4</sup> [https://x.com/Okla\\_OAG/status/1860758442744459649](https://x.com/Okla_OAG/status/1860758442744459649).

<sup>5</sup> Gregory A. Smith, *Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe*, Pew Research Center, Jan. 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>.

inclusive: “These ceremonial prayers strive for the idea that people of many faiths may be united in a community of tolerance and devotion.” *Id.* at 1823. The Supreme Court’s decision would have been different had the town used the prayer opportunity to discriminate against minority religions. The Court made clear that governmental bodies must “maintain[] a policy of nondiscrimination” with respect to invocation speakers and must not act with “aversion or bias . . . against minority faiths.” *Id.* at 1824.

The Establishment Clause thus requires that a pagan, satanist, or atheist who delivers an invocation be treated the same as someone who delivers a Christian prayer. Furthermore, it is unconstitutional discrimination to treat similarly situated persons differently: “[t]he Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment . . . is essentially a direction that all persons similarly situated should be treated alike.” *City of Cleburne, Tex. v. Cleburne Living Ctr.*, 473 U.S. 432, 439 (1985) (citing *Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202, 216 (1982)). Treating a “priestess of the goddess” or a nonbeliever who delivers an invocation differently from a Christian citizen constitutes discrimination.

Furthermore, “[t]he government, consistent with the Constitution’s guarantee of free exercise . . . cannot act in a manner that passes judgment upon or presupposes the illegitimacy of religious beliefs and practices. The Free Exercise Clause bars even ‘subtle departures from neutrality’ on matters of religion.” *Masterpiece Cakeshop, Ltd. v. Colorado C.R. Comm’n*, 584 U.S. 617, 638 (citing *Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. Hialeah*, 508 U.S. 520, 534). In *Masterpiece Cakeshop*, the Supreme Court found that “official expressions of hostility to religion” in comments made by government officials, especially when those comments are “not disavowed . . . at any point,” are “inconsistent with what the Free Exercise Clause requires.” *Id.* at 639. This includes hostility to minority religions, not just Christianity.

We agree that government-sponsored prayers to a deity that you do not believe in are alienating. That you do not wish to hear a prayer referencing Medusa and other mythological elements is understandable. Many Americans similarly don’t want to hear prayers that end “in Jesus’ name” at their government meetings. It alienates them in the exact same way. The best policy, the most inclusive policy, is to stop prayers altogether and get straight to the business of working for Tulsa.

We urge you to concentrate on civil matters and leave religion to the private conscience of individuals by ending the practice of hosting prayers at your meetings. But as long as the council continues to invite citizens to deliver invocations to begin its meetings, it must continue to treat all invocations the same regardless of the religious viewpoint expressed, and disregard calls to do otherwise. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Christopher Line  
Legal Counsel  
Freedom From Religion Foundation