

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: spencercox@utah.gov

The Honorable Spencer Cox
Governor's Office
350 N. State Street, Suite 200
P.O. Box 142220
Salt Lake City, UT 84114-2220

Re: "Day of Prayer and Fasting" proclamation

Dear Governor Cox:

We are again writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and our Utah membership to object to your most recent "Day of Prayer and Fasting" proclamation. As you may recall from our previous letters, FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 42,000 members across the country and more than 200 members and a chapter in Salt Lake City. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

We received complaints from our membership in Utah that you have continued your unconstitutional practice of issuing official prayer proclamations. You declared Sunday, June 29th a "statewide day of prayer and fasting for rain," and asked all Utahns to participate out of a need for "divine help."¹ This official call for prayer and fasting is an unnecessary and unscientific response to the severe drought conditions and wildfire risks that many Utahns are facing. (As this is written, it has notably produced no rain. As Mark Twain suggested, "It is best to read the weather forecast before we pray for rain.")

While we are sorry about the continuing drought situation in Utah and the hardships it creates, that is no excuse for disrespecting the First Amendment. We ask that you cease abusing your position as governor to promote prayer and religious belief. Extreme weather conditions call for real solutions, not prayer and superstition, such as addressing human-made climate change.

By issuing a proclamation calling on Utah citizens to pray and fast in response to the drought, you abridge your duty to remain neutral and to respect the freedom of conscience of all Utah citizens. Whether to pray, and whether to believe in a god who answers prayer, is an intensely personal decision protected under our First Amendment as a matter of conscience.

¹ Carter Williams, *Cox asks Utahns to pray for rain, as fire restrictions expand in Utah amid drought*, KSL.com (June 27, 2025), <https://www.ksl.com/article/51336575/cox-asks-utahns-to-pray-for-rain-as-drought-wildfire-risks-intensify>.

The separation between state and church is one of the most fundamental principles of our system of government. 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.” *West Virginia Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943). When the government urges its citizens to pray and fast, reasonable citizens will interpret this as official government support of religion.

As an elected official, you represent a diverse population from many religious backgrounds, including agnostics and atheists who do not believe in prayer. Any prayer proclamation or government-sponsored religious activity marginalizes many non-Christians and nonbelievers in the state of Utah and sends them the message “that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.” *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. at 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring).

The religiously unaffiliated, better known as the “Nones,” are the fastest-growing segment of the population by religious identification. Pew’s new Religious Landscape Survey not only reveals that 29 percent of the U.S. population is religiously unaffiliated, but that Utah has a higher than average number of “Nones” at 34 percent.² They, too, are your constituents, and care as much about the future of Utah as religious residents. They simply do not believe in the efficacy of appealing to supernatural forces in response to human-made climate change or any other challenges, and should not be subjected to the government instructing them to believe otherwise.

Government officials may worship, pray, and participate in religious events in their personal capacities. But they may not provide credibility or prestige to their religion by lending a government office and government title to religious events. As an elected official, you have taken an oath of office to uphold the secular U.S. Constitution and must avoid using your public office to promote or advance your personal religious beliefs.

As a matter of policy, an official day of prayer and fasting proclamation is inappropriate and unnecessary. Promotion of prayer by elected officials raises the distasteful appearance of political pandering to appeal to or appease a vocal religious constituency. Leaving religious exercise as a private matter for private citizens is the wisest public policy.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-Presidents

ALG/DB:sfl

² 2023-24 U.S. Religious Landscape Study: People in Utah, Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/state/utah/>.