

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 1, 2025

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: sean.duffy@dot.gov

The Honorable Sean Duffy
Secretary of Transportation
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Re: Unconstitutional sermon at Merchant Marine Academy commencement

Dear Secretary Duffy:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a sermon you recently delivered at the 89th Commencement Address for the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 41,000 members across the country, including many active-duty personnel and veterans. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

On June 23, 2025, you were invited to give a commencement address to graduates of the Merchant Marine Academy.¹ Rather than delivering an inclusive and inspirational message to more than 200 graduates, you used your official position to deliver a Christian sermon. This included promoting prayer, the Virgin Mary, and your personal religious beliefs. You also explicitly denigrated nonbelievers by claiming that people either “believe in God” or “think they are God.” You closed with an unmistakable call to faith: “Stay faithful and never underestimate the power of prayer.”

We write to request that you refrain from using your official position to push your personal religious beliefs through the Department of Transportation in the future.

The Supreme Court has held that public officials may not seek to advance or promote religion, specifically stating, “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. If there are any circumstances which permit an exception, they do not now occur to us.” *W. Va. Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943). As a representative of the federal government speaking in your official capacity, you are bound by our secular Constitution to remain neutral on matters of religion. Instead, you sent an exclusionary message to non-Christian graduates, including the many atheists, agnostics, Jews, Muslims, and others who have chosen to serve their country.

¹ <https://ffrf.us/44ubQJ9>.

Americans have a constitutional right to be free from government coercion to observe religious practices. As the Supreme Court has put it, “the First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cty. v. ACLU*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947).

It is especially troubling that you implied nonbelievers are arrogant or morally deficient. This rhetoric is not only inaccurate but also deeply offensive. Your remarks alienate the growing number of religiously unaffiliated serving in the Merchant Marine. As more members of Gen Z join, it becomes all the more important to respect their non-belief. At least a third of Generation Z (those born after 1996) have no religion,² with a recent survey revealing almost half of Gen Z qualify as “nones” (religiously unaffiliated).³ These people serve their country with distinction, integrity, and courage.

The Merchant Marine Academy’s commencement ceremony should unite, not divide. To avoid further Establishment Clause concerns and out of respect for the country’s religious diversity, please ensure that Merchant Marine Commencement and other events refrain from including religious remarks in the future.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line
Legal Counsel
Freedom From Religion Foundation

² Samuel J. Abrams, *Perspective: Why even secular people should worry about Gen Z’s lack of faith*, Deseret News, Mar. 4, 2023, <https://www.deseret.com/2023/3/4/23617175/gen-z-faith-religious-nones-civic-life-volunteers-charity/>.

³ Ryan P. Burge, *2022 Cooperative Election Study of 60,000 respondents*, Apr. 3, 2023, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/>.