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January 25, 2024

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: Rep.EWernerReschke@oregonlegislature.gov

Representative E. Werner Reschke
Oregon House of Representatives
900 Court St. NE, H-385
Salem, OR 97301

Re: Divisive Religious Rhetoric

Dear Representative Reschke:

I am writing on behalf of the FFRF Action Fund regarding your recent statements about Christians being the only people able to effectively govern in this country. The FFRF Action Fund is the legislative affiliate of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including more than 1,100 members in Oregon. We work to protect the constitutional separation between state and church and the rights of America's growing population of nonbelievers.

As an elected official, you took an oath to uphold the principles of the constitutions of the state of Oregon and the United States. Despite having taken this oath to represent all of your constituents you made the following divisive, ignorant comments during a recent interview with notorious Christian nationalist Jason Rapert:

“Those [people like George Washington, James Madison, Abraham Lincoln, and Ronald Reagan] are the type of people that you want in government making tough decisions during tough times. You don't want a materialist. You don't want an atheist. You don't want a Muslim. You want somebody who understands what truth is and understands the nature of man, the nature of government, and the nature of God.”

As I'm sure you are aware, every reference to religion in the U.S. Constitution is exclusionary, including: a direct prohibition on religious tests for public office, an implicit prohibition in the godless oath of office prescribed for the presidency and later, in the First Amendment's historic bar of any establishment of religion by the government. The Framers of the Constitution made the United States 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.

Christianity and religion in general are inherently divisive. Your comments prove that to be true. Keeping religion separate from government is a fundamental American ideal, essential for true religious freedom, and has been a tremendous asset to our society. Lawmakers should represent their constituents regardless of religious beliefs or lack thereof. Simply put, your advocacy for strictly Christian governance is unAmerican.

While the personal religious views of the Founders are irrelevant, because what counts is that they created a secular government governed by a secular Constitution, it's important to correct the historic record regarding some of the great Americans you mention. It is especially ironic and offensive that you cite James Madison, the primary architect of our godless Constitution, *which explicitly bars any religious test for public office*. Madison would consider your philosophy deeply unAmerican.

Most probably a Deist,¹ Madison was an ardent and public critic of religion in government, writing an entire "Memorial and Remonstrance" to successfully protest a scheme to tax Virginians to support religious education. Madison 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."²

Similarly, George Washington was a nominal Anglican, often criticized for leaving church before communion was offered. He indubitably believed in a deity, and referred to a deity, but his personal views on Christianity have been robustly debated by scholars for centuries.³ Washington supported the separation of state and church, responding 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

Similarly, Abraham Lincoln, although he grew up in a highly religious family, never joined a Christian church. He was certainly a strong Deist, but his views were unconventional.⁵

¹ James Madison and the social utility of religion, by James Hutson, Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/loc/madison/hutson-paper.html>

² Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments ca. 20 June 1785
founders.archives.org: <https://ffrf.us/47EsVzA>

³ Religious views of George Washington, Wikipedia
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_views_of_George_Washington

⁴ Letter from George Washington to Presbyterian Ministers of Massachusetts and New Hampshire (Nov. 2, 1789): <https://ffrf.us/3U0Evle>

⁵ Religious views of Abraham Lincoln, Wikipedia
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_views_of_Abraham_Lincoln

⁶ Letter from George Washington to Presbyterian Ministers of Massachusetts and New Hampshire (Nov. 2, 1789): <https://ffrf.us/3U0Evle>

Aside from the historic inaccuracies, your assertion that only Christians are capable of serving in our government runs counter to America's founding principles and the views of most Americans, including Christians.⁷ Many American Christians respect the diversity of our culture, and understand that their fellow Americans may not share their religious values, as evidenced by groups like Christians Against Christian Nationalism.⁸ Anyone who respects American values *must* oppose comments promoting Christian nationalism, as the two ideologies are fundamentally at odds.

Non-religious Americans are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification at 29 percent, with 37 percent of Americans overall being non-Christian.⁹ You represent *all* of the constituents in your district, including those who do not share your personal religious beliefs. Your comments convey that you consider non-Christians second-class citizens simply because of their religious identity or nonreligious identity. That too is unAmerican.

As a state representative, your duty is to support the state and federal Constitutions and to protect the rights of conscience of your constituents, not to promote your personal religious views, much less a Christian theocracy. Your oath of office has charged you with great responsibility over citizens, including those citizens who may not or do not share your personal religious viewpoints. You have shown that you are unfit for this responsibility. You should either apologize to all non-Christian and nonreligious citizens of your district, or you should resign.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor
President, FFRF Action Fund

⁷ Americans' Views of Government: Decades of Distrust, Enduring Support for Its Role, Pew Research Center (June 6, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/values-and-expectations-of-government/>

⁸ www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org/statement.

⁹ Gregory A. Smith, About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated, Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.