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Protecting the Equal Rights
of Nonreligious Americans

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The Honorable Mike Johnson
Office of the Speaker
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Speaker Johnson:

The Catholic Mass held on January 23 in one of your Capitol offices could not be a clearer violation of the separation of church and state on which the nation was founded. As you know, this idea was spelled out in Thomas Jefferson's 1802 "Letter to the Danbury Baptists." Furthermore, Jefferson's "Statute for Religious Freedom" still stands as the north star for church-state separation over two centuries later. While you could dismiss the Danbury Letter as mail to constituents having no force of law, we could just as easily dismiss the mentions of Nature's God and the Creator in the Declaration of Independence as simply lines in a break-up letter with England.

When push came to shove and it was time to set up the government, the Founders purposely chose not to include the words God, Christian, or Bible in the Constitution. The decree mandating no religious test for any government office is the Constitution's only mention of religion other than in the First Amendment. The Founders put aside whatever religious beliefs they held and established a secular government.

The nation was founded by men skeptical, to say the least, of the confluence of religion and government. That should not just be ignored.

James Madison, the Constitution's primary author, wrote: "Religion and Government will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together." Does that sound like someone who would approve of a church service in the Capitol?

Jefferson wrote: "History, I believe, furnishes no example of a priest-ridden people maintaining a free civil government." Does that sound like someone who would support a service in the Capitol?

As today is Thomas Paine's birthday, let's hear from him as well: "All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit."


The idea for the Mass originated from the Arlington, Virginia Latin Mass Society as a way to show that House Republicans support traditionalist Catholics. January 23 was the first anniversary of the circulation of a memo from the FBI's Richmond field office concerning radical Catholics. This situation has been exhaustively examined already by House Republicans on two separate committees, and no

church service was needed to affirm their support. It would be difficult to come up with a flimsier reason for a Latin Mass in the Capitol.

While it does not matter to us that the Latin Mass is not sanctioned by the Catholic Church, it is surprising that you catered to the tiny minority of practicing Catholics who adhere to the Latin Mass, despite the mandate from church leadership that forbids it. Far from holding an event in which most Catholics would want to participate or would support, you sanctioned a clandestine service that the majority of 70 million Catholics find inappropriate regardless of the setting. They most likely don't agree with the "church" you chose to host at the heart of the American "state."

As for what happens next, it would not be surprising if you hear from mainline Catholics at a local church who want to hold their version of the Mass in the Capitol. Next might be the Episcopalians. Then one of the local megachurches, followed by a synagogue, then a mosque. Then hundreds of other churches who want to be treated equally. A problematic precedent has been set. If you need to come up with a reason to say "no" to other churches, we suggest something like, "That first service was a violation of the separation of church and state and I have decided not to repeat it."

Sincerely,


Steven Emmert
Executive Director

American Atheists

American Ethical Union

American Humanist Association

Association of Secular Elected Officials

Atheist Alliance of America

Black Nonbelievers

Camp Quest Center For Inquiry/Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science

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Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers

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