



## On National Religious Freedom Day, Trump Expands Religious Freedom

President Trump chose Thursday — National Religious Freedom Day — [to announce](#) a flurry of guidance from nine Executive Branch agencies that not only confirms Americans' freedom to worship under the First Amendment but rolls back incursions on that freedom that occurred under previous administrations.

The guidance empowered students who want to pray at school by reaffirming their right to do so, including reading religious materials or praying during non-class periods, organizing prayer groups, and expressing their religious beliefs in their school assignments. It warned state governments not to discriminate against religious organizations and affirmed that the granting of federal funds by Executive Branch agencies likewise will not discriminate against them.



The president said:

From its opening pages, the story of America has been rooted in the truth that all men and women are endowed with the right to follow their conscience, worship freely, and live in accordance with their convictions....

In public schools around the country authorities are stopping students and teachers from praying, sharing their faith or following their religious beliefs. It is totally unacceptable.

Tragically, there's a growing totalitarian impulse on the far left that seeks to punish, restrict and even prohibit religious expression....

While I'm president ... we will not let anyone push God from the public square. We will uphold religious liberty for all.

His Education Department's secretary, Betsy DeVos, expanded on the guidance: "Our actions today will protect the constitutional rights of students, teachers and faith-based institutions. [My] department's efforts will level the playing field between religious and nonreligious organizations competing for federal grants, as well as protect First Amendment freedoms on campus and the religious liberty of faith-based institutions."

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Kelly Shackelford, president of the legal nonprofit First Liberty Institute, applauded the guidance: "The religious freedom of America's public school students and teachers does not stop at the schoolhouse



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on January 17, 2020

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gate. Today's guidelines affirm that promise." Shackelford added: "We are also grateful to the President for his actions today protecting the rights of Americans by ending religious discrimination by state and federal agencies."

Heritage Foundation President Kay C. James celebrated the announcement: "Today's announcement is a welcome response to a serious national problem. For too long Americans have faced restrictions on their ability to live according to their religious beliefs. Government policies have infringed on the freedom of students, social service providers and other religious organizations to act according to their beliefs in the public square."

In the guidance on prayer and religious expression in public schools, the relationship between religion and government was explained:

[That] relationship ... is governed by the First Amendment to the Constitution, which the Supreme Court has held both prevents the government from establishing religion and protects privately initiated religious expression and activities from government interference and discrimination....

The Supreme Court has repeatedly held that the First Amendment requires public school officials to show neither favoritism nor hostility against religious expression such as prayer.... As the Court has explained in several cases, "there is a crucial difference between government speech endorsing religion, which the Establishment Clause forbids, and private speech endorsing religion, which the Free Speech and Free Exercise Clauses protect."

An Obama-era intrusion was rolled back. The rule regarding the equal treatment of faith-based educational organizations ensures that they are now treated equally with non-religious groups, "removing unequal, burdensome regulatory requirements imposed by the Obama administration," according to the department's press release.

Missing from any of the backgrounders provided by the agencies was the reason why: Why is freedom of religion so important to the health and strength of the Republic?

John Adams is famous for stating, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." Or, as William Penn opined, "If men will not be governed by God, they will be ruled by tyrants."

George Washington went further. In his Farewell Address, he said, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.... Let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education ... reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in the exclusion of religious principle."

The danger is that, in the "exclusion of religious principle," citizens leave the way open for government increasingly to rule their lives when they refuse to do so on their own. President Harry Truman warned, "The fundamental basis of this nation's laws was given to Moses on the Mount.... If we don't have a proper fundamental moral background, we will finally end up with a totalitarian government which does not believe in rights for anybody except the State."

It was Jedidiah Morse who came closer to answering the question of why religious freedom is so important. In his sermon "Exhibiting the Present Dangers and Consequent Duties of the Citizens of the United States," preached in 1799, he said,

To the kindly influence of Christianity we owe that degree of civil freedom, and political and social



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happiness which mankind now enjoy.

In proportion as the genuine effects of Christianity are diminished in any nation, either through unbelief, or the corruption of its doctrines, or the neglect of its institutions; in the same proportion will the people of that nation recede from the blessings of genuine freedom, and approximate the miseries of complete despotism.

I hold this to be a truth confirmed by experience. If so, it follows, that all efforts made to destroy the foundations of our holy religion, ultimately tend to the subversion also of our political freedom and happiness.

Whenever the pillars of Christianity shall be overthrown, our present republican forms of government, and all the blessings which flow from them, must fall with them.

It was the Holy Scriptures that answered the question best: "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Psalm 11:3).

*Photo: AP Images*

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