

National Day of Reason

by Herb Silverman

An annual abuse of the United States Constitution called A National Day of Prayer was signed into law in 1952 and, since 1988, observed on the first Thursday in May. This country was founded as, and remains, a secular nation, where individuals can pray to one, many, or no gods. Our nation's Constitution does not favor one religion over another, or religion over no religion.

The First Amendment freedoms of religion and speech empower people to promote or criticize religion without government interference. Our founders were a product of the Age of Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason. Both Thomas Jefferson and James Madison opposed government-sponsored prayer proclamations.

Here's a possible solution to the problem of having an official National Day of Prayer: Have the government sponsor two separate days — a National Day of Prayer and a National Day of Non-Prayer, a day on which Christians might then appreciate how atheists and humanists feel about our government taking a position on religion. That said, I don't need the government or anyone telling me to set aside a special day to not pray, because every day I happily do not pray. On the other hand, those who want to pray every day are free to do so without government urging. Our government should never tell its citizens when, how, or whether to pray.

A Hindu friend of mine would be both surprised and delighted if the government were to call for a national day to recognize the god Vishnu, to which Christians would object even more strongly than I would. Vishnu is as real to me as Yahweh, Zeus, or any other gods. National Vishnu Day would at least give Americans something to think about, and thinking is more effective than praying.

Some Americans believe we are a Christian nation and that the government should sponsor Christian prayers. Historically, the overwhelming majority of Americans have been Christians, and Christianity is still the dominant religious belief. However, the majority of Americans are also white, and most do not call America a white nation or ask the president to promote a National White Day.

Actually, in my home state of South Carolina, a former head of the Charlestown County school board objected to having a "Black History Month." So he proposed a "White History Month," which I'm pleased to say received proper public disapproval.

We tend to give priority to black history, women's studies, and LGBT programs over their race, gender, and sexual orientation counterparts. This is not because we know all there is to know about whites, men, and heterosexuals, but because we recognize how underrepresented have been the contributions of certain groups against whom we have long discriminated. Similarly, a Non-Prayer Day would be more enlightening than a Day of Prayer.

Another idea is that the government recognize the National Day of Reason on the same day as the National Day of Prayer. Enlightened people who started the National Day of Reason recognize that reason, not prayer, is what the world needs more of today. Unfortunately, most of our current leaders feel it is safer for them politically to promote prayer

rather than reason. If that trend continues, perhaps future generations will think of our time as the "Age of Dis-Enlightenment."

A 2012 article in the [*Christian Post*](#) described how the American Humanist Association and the Secular Coalition for America have joined forces to counter the National Day of Prayer by promoting a National Day of Reason. In the article, an irate Christian spokesperson, **Billy McCormack**, called the National Day of Reason "a blatant assault on Christi-anity." He added, "Secular fundamentalists believe in and serve their god called 'reason' and want the nation to equate it with the Lord Jesus Christ."

I expect some Christians may be uncomfortable hearing a Christian spokesperson describe "reason" as an assault on Christianity. Our founders, who wisely separated religion from government, would be appalled by those who call for the separation of reason from government.

I strongly support the National Day of Reason, although I wish it was not needed. There would be no need for a National Day of Reason if there was not a government-endorsed National Day of Prayer. It is disturbing that so many Americans seem to object to reason. Would these same individuals also complain about a National Day of Science? There was a time when Americans would feel embarrassed by their ignorance of science or their disdain of reason. Not so much anymore.

In 2003, the first year of the National Day of Reason, our local secular humanist group in Charleston, South Carolina helped persuade **Mayor Joseph P. Riley** to issue a proclamation for a Charleston Day of Reason. In addition to several whereas clauses, the proclamation stated, "I proclaim Thursday, May 1, 2003, as a DAY OF REASON and encourage all citizens, residents, and visitors to join in observing this day and focusing on the employment of reason, critical thought, the scientific method, and free inquiry to resolve human problems and care for the welfare of humankind."

Unfortunately, after the proclamation was issued I got an angry call from the mayor saying I should have informed him that the Day of Reason fell on the same day as the National Day of Prayer. I told him it was not my responsibility tell him that, and furthermore, it also happened to be on May Day.

I'm happy to say that the mayor did not hold a grudge and always greeted me afterward in a friendly manner. He even agreed to donate to the Secular Coalition for America after my wife and I gave a nice contribution to the International African American Museum in Charleston, a much-needed project spearheaded by Mayor Riley.

In 2014, just before I went to our Secular Humanist Reason Fest meeting, out of curiosity I stopped by the nearby National Day of Prayer rally on the steps of the city's historic Exchange Building. Intended to unite all who pray, the rally turned out to be more divisive than I had anticipated. The rally theme came from Romans 15:6: "So that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." The minister who led the rally decried the mounting godlessness and prayerlessness in America, adding that our national government has called for a National Day of Christian Prayer.

Rally helpers handed out a "prayer list" calling for prayers asking God to send angels to our city to kick demons out (perhaps me); to defeat witchcraft, false prophets, and Baphomet (who is a devil, another deity, or whatever); to end

Baphomet (who is a devil, another deity, or whatever); to end secret societies; to save Muslims and close mosques; and to promote prayer in all schools and at government functions.

While at the rally, I also talked to Orthodox **Rabbi Yossi Refson**, whom I had met when we were on a public panel to discuss **Bill Maher's** movie *Religulous*. When Rabbi Refson told me he was scheduled shortly to offer a prayer at the rally (possibly as the token non-Christian), I asked if his congregation might be uncomfortable seeing a photo of him praying with a large cross behind him. He said he hadn't noticed the cross, and looked chagrined. As I was leaving, I invited him to our more inclusive Reason Fest event that was about to begin.

Some participants at our Reason Fest described their paths to reason, telling why and how they left religion. Stories from former Catholics, Baptists, Mormons, evangelicals and other "formers" were often moving and sometimes funny. Many had first questioned their faiths after learning about what seemed to be incredible doctrines of other faiths, and then recognized that their own made no more sense.

Rabbi Refson decided not to speak at the prayer rally and came, instead, to our Reason Fest. When our event ended, he told me how much he had enjoyed being with our group. He thanked me for pointing out the large cross under which he would have spoken, and said that my kindness had been a real "mitzvah" (a good deed). My reasonable non-prayer for America is that we all treat every day as a National Day of Mitzvah.

Here's one final difference between the National Day of Prayer and a National Day of Reason, which for some has morphed into a Secular Week of Action. Many secular groups observe the National Day of Reason (or the week) with social, political, and charitable actions that make a positive impact on their community. Secular groups are coming together to demonstrate our shared commitment to making this world a better place in the here and the now.

Robert Green Ingersoll, a 19th century Republican known as "The Great Agnostic," said it best "The hands that help are better far than the lips that pray."

About the author:



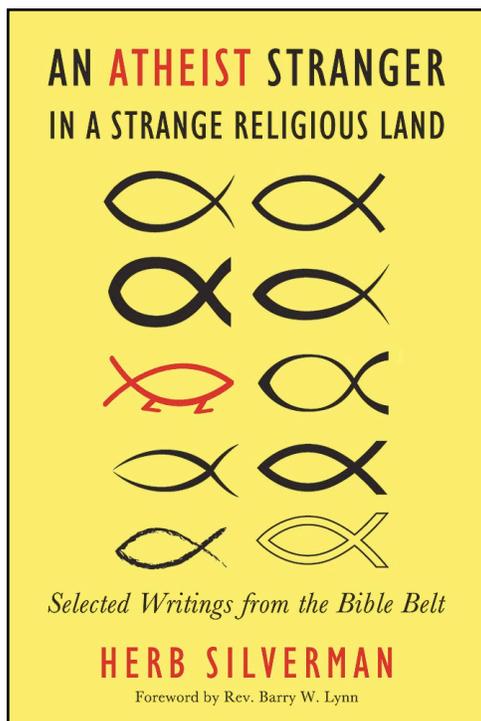
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Silverman ran for Governor in 1990 to challenge the provision in the South Carolina State Constitution that prohibited atheists from holding public office. After an eight-year battle, Silverman won a unanimous decision in the South Carolina Supreme Court, striking down this religious test requirement. His books include *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Browse through a collection of his public speeches and debates at:

<http://www.lowcountryhumanists.org/default.php?page=videolibrary>

and

<https://www.herbsilverman.com>



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