

November 29, 2017

The Honorable John Barrasso, Chairman
Republican Policy Committee
Senate Republican Caucus
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Barrasso,

We are writing to you today regarding the tax reform bill that will be before the United States Senate later this week. As you may know, the House version of the tax reform bill (H.R. 1) contains a provision (Sec. 5201) that will effectively repeal the Johnson Amendment, a provision in U.S. Code (26 U.S.C. §501, paragraph (3) of subsection (c)) that was established in 1954 to prevent nonprofit 501(c)(3) organizations from engaging in partisan political campaigns, including endorsing or opposing specific candidates.

The Secular Coalition for America and our 18 national nontheist member organizations strongly oppose any changes to the Johnson Amendment, as do thousands of nonprofit organizations, secular and religious, large and small, across the country.

Every major religious denomination, along with more than 4,500 nonprofit organizations, strongly opposes efforts to repeal or weaken the Johnson Amendment. The only supporters of overturning the Johnson Amendment are religious political organizations like Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, and the Alliance Defending Freedom. This year, we have worked with a broad coalition of nonprofit organizations to protect the Johnson Amendment, including charity watchdog groups, educational organizations, and faith-based organizations from major Christian denominations to local clergy across the country. All have come together to say that changes to the Johnson Amendment would be perilous to the nonprofit and charitable sectors. We are proud to stand with them.

One pastor in particular, the Rev. Chris Legg, lead pastor of South Spring Baptist Church in Tyler, Texas, went so far as to write an Op-Ed about explaining why he supports the Johnson Amendment. He was clear to say that:

“I obviously disagree with nearly every aspect of the agenda of the Secular Coalition for America. However, as a teacher of the reasonable truth of the gospel, I feel it is always appropriate to speak the truth...I do not think that pastors or churches should seek to be apolitical, but I think the boundary of ALL non-profits being held to the standard of not supporting a specific candidate is reasonable...I see the [Johnson] amendment as allowing me to focus on the moral and eternal issues that it is my calling to focus on, without the distractions of people’s political agendas.”

Pastor Legg represents thousands of clergy across the country who recognize the dangerous impact of weakening the Johnson Amendment. We encourage you to read his Op-Ed in its entirety, which we have attached.

Repealing the Johnson Amendment would threaten the integrity of religious and secular nonprofits, which will likely be offered large donations at the cost of their political independence. It will have devastating effects on transparency in electoral politics. Given the privileged exemption from financial reporting granted to houses of worship, repealing the Johnson Amendment would allow them to accept untracked and unreported donations while engaging in partisan political activities. Since houses of worship do not have to publicly disclose their donors, this opens the door to unprecedented levels of abuse in political campaigns and invites political dark money to be laundered through houses of worship. Furthermore, Americans across the political spectrum, of all religious denominations, as well as clergy and leaders in the nonprofit sector support the Johnson Amendment and the principle of nonprofit nonpartisanship.

We are counting on Republicans *and* Democrats to recognize the importance of protecting the First Amendment, recognizing that religious freedom requires religious independence from politics and government. So we reach out to you today, not just on behalf of the secular community, but standing with our allies in the religious community. This is bad policy. It will wreak havoc on the nonprofit and charitable sectors and exacerbate the influence of dark money that causes millions of Americans to lose faith in our political system.

While we recognize that there are many deals and negotiations that will take place in the coming days to pass a tax reform bill, our plea is that you do not allow the integrity of the non-profit sector to be used as a bargaining chip. Please stand up to ensure that any discussion of changes to the Johnson Amendment are a non-starter. We implore you to not send the President a bill that includes this language.

Sincerely,

Larry T. Decker
Executive Director
Secular Coalition for America
www.secular.org

David Silverman
President
American Atheists
www.atheists.org

Bart Worden
Executive Director
American Ethical Union
www.aeu.org

Roy Speckhardt
Executive Director
American Humanist Association
www.americanhumanist.org

CW Brown
Executive Director and Social Media Director
Atheist Alliance of America
www.atheistallianceamerica.org

Mandisa Thomas
President and Founder
Black Nonbelievers, Inc.
www.blacknonbelievers.wordpress.com

Kim Newton
Executive Director
Camp Quest
www.campquest.org

Robyn Blumner
Executive Director
Center for Inquiry
www.centerforinquiry.net

Terry Waslow
Executive Director
Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations
www.csjo.org

Muhammad Syed
President
Ex-Muslims of North America
www.exmna.org

Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President
Freedom from Religion Foundation
www.ffrf.org

Margaret Downey
Executive Director
Freethought Society
www.ftsociety.org

David Tamayo
Executive Director
Hispanic Americans Freethinkers
www.hafree.org

Jennifer D. Kalmanson
President
Institute for Humanist Studies
www.humaniststudies.org

Jason Torpy
President
Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers
www.militaryatheists.org

Gayle Jordan
Executive Director
Recovering from Religion
www.recoveringfromreligion.org

Kevin Bolling
Executive Director
Secular Student Alliance
www.secularstudents.org

Paul Golin
Executive Director

Society for Humanistic Judaism
www.shj.org

Adam Gonnerman
Board Member
Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association
www.huumanists.org

CC: Members of the Senate Republican Caucus

Attachments