



January 12, 2010

The Honorable Pam Iorio  
City of Tampa, Mayor's Office  
306 East Jackson Street  
Tampa, FL 33602

3614 S MANHATTAN AVE  
TAMPA, FL 33629

RE: Tampa City Council Invocations

[www.AtheistsofFlorida.org](http://www.AtheistsofFlorida.org)

Dear Mayor Iorio:

**(813) 902-2420**

**Executive Director**

Ed Golly

**Chairman**

John Kieffer

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*President:* Robert Curry  
*Vice President:* Nan Owens  
*Secretary:* Julia Scott  
*Treasurer:* Ed Golly

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Jack Basart  
Steve Brown  
Jacqueline D. Jordan  
Gloria Julius  
Steven Miles  
Jim Peterson  
Joe Reinhardt  
Christos Tzanetakos, *Founder*

**Legal Affairs Coordinator**

Christos Tzanetakos

**Publications Coordinator**

Jim Peterson

**Marketing Coordinator**

John Kieffer

**Atheist Forum Producer**

Ed Golly

As president of Atheists of Florida, I urge you to consider that official prayer is not the proper role of city government. Simply put, Tampa will never advance until religious rituals are disentangled from secular government functions. The proper role for government with respect to religion is strict neutrality—neither advocacy nor discouragement. We need a strong and courageous voice in the mayor's office to make this truth abundantly clear.

Atheists of Florida represents a significant, growing community of people who passionately affirm the value of those basic liberties we all share in common. This means we will fight for the rights of others (no matter what their worldviews) with the same steadfast determination that we will fight for our own. Atheists of Florida supports freedom of speech for all citizens, regardless of their beliefs or lack thereof, including those invited to speak before government bodies. This is a basic human right acknowledged in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America.

We are shocked that the Tampa City Council would establish formal government guidelines for religious speech at public meetings. How can the Council dictate rules for prayers and invocations? Government officials have no legal authority to decide that one way of expressing religious feelings is better or more tasteful than another. Not only would that be a clear breach of constitutional norms, these matters involve intensely personal emotions, deeply held principles, and highly subjective opinions where adults may reasonably be expected to differ. When it comes to faith, one size does not fit all.

Atheists of Florida is a non-profit, educational organization dedicated to freedom of thought and expression and to the First Amendment principle of complete and absolute separation of state and church.

Government endorsement of a generic prayer is just as inappropriate and offensive as preferential treatment for some religious leaders to the exclusion of others. It is not the business of city officials to pick and choose which religious views will be granted *de facto* preference, and which beliefs will be discouraged, disparaged or otherwise suppressed.

When and how often will the Council invite atheists, Native American shamans, Muslims, Scientologists, Mormons, Hindus or Secular Humanists? Will there be equal time for the practitioners of Shinto, Confucianism, Wicca, Buddhism and Santeria? How does the Council plan to balance the number of times Jesus Christ is invoked in official city prayers as opposed to Lord Krishna or L. Ron Hubbard? Does the City of Tampa really want to place itself in the middle of irreconcilable religious differences? Such is the inevitable outcome of undue government entanglement.

In 2004, half the Council rudely stormed out of the room when an Atheists of Florida member attempted to offer the invocation after being invited to do so. How can atheists feel that we are being treated equally when our personal worldviews are singled out for such official disdain? Not everyone prays. For those who do, prayer is a personal dictate of conscience. It must not become a government power where politically correct language is imposed on religious minorities by an aggressive majority.

Allow me to suggest a better alternative. A moment of reflection provides an opportunity to solemnize special occasions, with each citizen reflecting in his or her own preferred way. A moment of reflection does not subvert any faith, does not demean anyone's intellect, does not single anyone out, and does not tempt city officials to censor speech by making up rules (however well-meaning) to establish how the government wants us to pray. A moment of reflection respects everyone equally because it is completely neutral, showing neither favor nor disfavor to any worldview.

In the name of fairness and respect for every Tampa citizen, I ask that you encourage the Tampa City Council to abolish the unconstitutional practice of city-sponsored invocations. They should return to the proper business of government, refocusing their energy on the secular duties they were elected to perform.

Sincerely,

Rob Curry  
President, Atheists of Florida

cc: Tampa City Council

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