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## Activist Justin Vacula speaking up again through 'secular invocation' at Wilkes-Barre City Council meeting

June 08, 2014 11:32PM  
By James O'Malley [jomalley@civitasmedia.com](mailto:jomalley@civitasmedia.com)

WILKES-BARRE — Justin Vacula wants to talk with the members of Wilkes-Barre City Council, but he doesn't think they're listening.

Vacula, 25, said he plans to take another shot at capturing the council's attention Thursday, when he reads a "secular invocation" during the public comment period of its next meeting.

The invocation, he said, will be offered as an alternative to the Christian prayer traditionally given at the opening of meetings and will not be intended to offend or insult any religious individuals or their beliefs.

"It's going to be inclusive, and something that applies to everyone," said Vacula, the leader of an area group that promotes atheism.

Originally, he wanted the chance to read his invocation at the beginning of a meeting, he said, but the council told him it does not allow the public to speak during the opening.

His goal, he said, is to open "respectful discourse" in a community he said is split on the inclusion of prayer in meetings. Some believers he has spoken to, he said, find the opening prayer blasphemous because of the dishonesty in government.

Councilman Tony George said Vacula's complaint is the first he has heard regarding the prayer during his three years on the council.

The short prayer, he said, has always opened the meetings.

"That's tradition," he said, "since the beginning of the constitution, and that hasn't really changed."

### Allotted five minutes

George said he has no problem with Vacula or anyone else delivering any prayer or invocation during the public-comment period.

"Everybody gets five minutes and you can do what you want with that five minutes," George said, adding, "as long as it's not disruptive to the meeting."



VaculaVacula

1 / 3



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At this time, he said, all the members of the City Council identify as Christians, so they chose a Christian prayer to open their meetings.

"If someone from the council wanted to add something else to it, that's also fine," he said.

Still, since he began voicing his concerns at meetings in 2013, Vacula said, the council has been steadfast in dismissing him.

"They really haven't budged on the matter at all," he said.

If the council will not discard the opening prayer, Vacula said, he hopes it will begin inviting representatives of local religious groups to diversify the prayers and invocations offered.

"While I might disagree with their perspective, I find it important that the meetings be more inclusive," he said.

Wilkes University associate professor of political science Kyle Kreider said a town board in Greece, New York, does just that, and the Supreme Court recently upheld its right to do it.

To find a religious official to give a prayer at its meetings, Kreider said, "they just went through the phone book." This assured, he said, that all religious groups in the area would eventually be represented.

When a group challenged the tradition, the Supreme Court found no issue with the town's practice as long as it preserved diversity, he said.

But that doesn't clear every prayer tradition.

"The legality of the prayer tends to ride on the facts of the case," Kreider said. "If the Wilkes-Barre City Council is only allowing one person or inviting one person, there may be a problem."

Especially, he said, if the prayer comes with a "coercive aspect," such as an understanding that everyone in attendance must stand or participate, an expectation George told Vacula he does not hold during the May 29 meeting.

Vacula said this isn't the first time the city has treated him unfairly.

In response to this year's Circle the Square with Prayer event, held May 1 in concert with the National Day of Prayer, he said he approached the city about hanging a banner on the scaffolding structure in Public Square.

Provided by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the banner read "Nothing Fails Like Prayer." The city hung the banner (three days after the agreed upon date, he said), but placed it on the reverse side of the scaffolding, away from the "National Day of Prayer" banner and out of sight of the event Vacula said it was meant to oppose.

When he asked why his banner was hung this way, City Administrator Marie McCormick told him the prayer group had rented the entire square for its event, necessitating that his banner be displayed where it was.

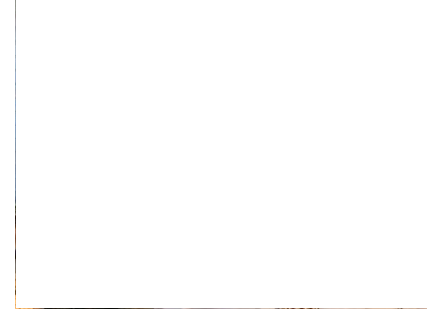
And when asked why some banners would be hung on the front with the pro-prayer banner, including "May is Mental Health Month," while his was alone on the back, he said McCormick offered little more than, "Sometimes we just do that."

Following the conversation, he said city workers moved the banner to the front.

**Seeing a political reaction**

Jonathan Malesic, associate professor of theology at King's College, said he might understand why individuals in government to publicly back religion.

"There's a kind of public reward for presenting a Christian identity," Malesic said.



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When one promotes such an identity, he said, it plays to a false, yet popular perception of oppression in American Christian culture. The idea that an increasingly secular society is persecuting Christians or trying to ban Christianity, he said, adds to the importance of public figures standing up in defense of the religion.

He said politicians who make such moves often stand at the polls, but he can't speak to the motivations of members of the Wilkes-Barre City Council.

"I have no reason to think they're anything but sincere Christians," he said.

Vacula said he's not frustrated, upset or angry with the city. He said he has learned better in his five years of activism.

"I understand that it's quite the uphill battle," he said, and he doesn't expect overnight change, but he maintains that the Wyoming Valley is a diverse place.

Vacula is the spokesperson and co-organizer of the NEPA Freethought Society. He said he grew up in a Christian household and began questioning his beliefs in college.

The Exeter activist entered the region's spotlight when he petitioned the ACLU regarding the constitutionality of the nativity display outside the Luzerne County Courthouse in 2009. He said he endured much "name-calling and nastiness" for his actions, and one area disc-jockey called him the county's third most hated person.

He also has been a subject of scrutiny from various groups on the Internet, he said.

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Jeepster5 · 6 minutes ago This idiot is at it again? He's not an Activist, he's a P.I.T.A. Reply Share

**Aggie95** · 19 minutes ago

\*SHRUG \* ..... I find it amusing that he spends so much of his time fighting against something he says does not exist

^ | v · Reply · Share >

**Franker** · 3 hours ago

This fellow's mission is as self-righteous and attention-seeking as fanatical fundamentalist religious zealots who try to force their particular beliefs on others in the name of their belief. It's one thing to engage in an act so as to raise awareness for a particular purpose and thereby encourage discourse on said topic. It's quite another to do something just for the sake of doing something. As far as I can see, it's little more than a 'look at me'-type of grandstanding gesture.

8 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

**DaveR55** → Franker · 3 hours ago

The evangelical atheist movement!!!

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

**Bill "Danger" Robinson** → DaveR55 · 2 hours ago

^Exactly.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

**mzak69** · 3 hours ago

Maybe this guy should do something constructive with his life instead of making a career out of being offended by prayer and other peoples beliefs.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

**johduk** → mzak69 · 3 hours ago

If Justin did something meaning full he might make money and get more girls. Not his goal, he would rather offend people's beliefs.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

**Danny Darcy** · 4 hours ago

If there is a God it appears he really hates Wilkes-Barre.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

**reallystupidpeople** → DannyDarcy · 3 hours ago

He left years ago.

He was one of the first to get out.

He could see what was happening to the area.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

**Mr\_Loo\_Read** → reallystupidpeople · 3 hours ago

Well now, Jesus just left Chicago and he's bound for New Orleans. Yeah, yeah.

Workin' from one end to the other and all points in between.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

**Mr\_Loo\_Read** · 4 hours ago

If I were still a resident of W-B I would be praying every day that some slumlord would buy my house so I could make a graceful exit.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

**msacras** · 4 hours ago

Why does this Bag of Air have to get this publicity, when he could have gone to the meeting, let his gas out and not a soul would have known about it, unless you attended the meeting -----he has absolutely nothing positive to offer to society, yet media keep giving him ink. If his Dad was around, he'd have pounded him into submission. Activist, I'm thinking more sensationalist.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

**Giovanniisolani** · 6 hours ago

What planet did this guy come from? A "respectful discourse? Tough road to hoe in NEPA?

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

**FedupwithNEPA** · 6 hours ago



Not even a good prayer (Christian or other) is going to help Wilkes-Barre!

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**johduk** · 6 hours ago

Give the God hater his 5 minutes of stupid and the fame that goes with it.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**relativelyinane** → johduk · 6 hours ago

If you don't believe God exists, how can you hate God?

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**johduk** → relativelyinane · 3 hours ago

Ask Justin.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**relativelyinane** → johduk · 3 hours ago

I don't see hate there. I see AWing.

But that aside, he's not wrong.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**johduk** → relativelyinane · 3 hours ago

Well if he is not wrong than he is right, in your opinion.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**StopGripping** → relativelyinane · 5 hours ago

Sorry, meant to reply to the person above you.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**StopGripping** → relativelyinane · 5 hours ago

Your assumption that Atheists "hate" god rather than just do not believe is common, but is also incorrect.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**johduk** → StopGripping · 3 hours ago

Justin claims to be an atheists but his actions suggest otherwise. I said Justin hates God not atheists since atheists don't know and are not proactive.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**DaveR55** → johduk · 3 hours ago

Certain atheist groups are proactive about the separation of church and state, but not as 'in your face" insulting as some of Mr. Vacula's actions.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**DBow** → DaveR55 · an hour ago

What is insulting here?

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**DaveR55** → DBow · an hour ago

Nothing in this particular case. I actually agree with him re the city council. I'm quite frankly surprised that he's advancing any invocation. It's past acts... like the banner that may be considered insulting.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**mzak69** → StopGripping · 3 hours ago

When an atheist group puts up a banner like that it certainly appears that they "hate".

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**DBow** → mzak69 · an hour ago

But christians can put up all the banners they want and not be hateful?


2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**mzak69** → DBow · an hour ago


 I don't agree with anyone who promotes the putting down of another person's beliefs. Most Christian symbols and banners promote Christianity, not "knock" somebody else. This guy put up a banner that said "Nothing fails like prayer". That was offensive and stepped over the line.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **hoggett** → [mzak69](#) · an hour ago


You have to explain that one to me.  
How does a banner "Nothing fails like prayer" offend?

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **mzak69** → [hoggett](#) · an hour ago


No one knows for sure if there is a higher power and if praying makes a difference, so to say "nothing fails like prayer" is a totally ignorant statement. He is implying that anyone with faith and prays is a failure. If you can't see where that is offensive then maybe you need to try to respect other people's point of view. If Justin wants to promote atheism that's his right but don't attack what other people believe.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **hoggett** → [mzak69](#) · an hour ago


Well sunshine, that's what makes this country great. The First Amendment. I don't see anything in "Nothing fails like prayer" that promotes atheism. I do see thing that are offensive. People holding banners condemning dead solders at their funerals in the name of a religion. I see one religion burning the holy book of another religion. I see a lot of things that are offensive. "Nothing fails like prayer" is not one of them and that phrase does not promote anything. The statement may be ignorant, in your view, but so be it.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **mzak69** → [hoggett](#) · 43 minutes ago


Listen Hoggett you just justified bad behavior with more bad behavior. If you replace the word "prayer" in the banner with "being gay" see how many people would be offended. I suppose you think it is ok to offend people of faith, Well it's not.

^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **hoggett** → [mzak69](#) · 39 minutes ago


You better open the good book to the part where it talks about turning the other cheek.  
Maybe you wouldn't have been offended if it said "Nothing fails like Muslim prayer"?

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **mzak69** → [hoggett](#) · 34 minutes ago


Muslims would be offended, and I would join them. You just don't get the difference between promoting one's beliefs and attacking someone else's. I feel sorry for you that you cannot comprehend and see how that is offensive. I don't know what you believe, but I will not tell you that your belief is a big failure. That's just being respectful of one another.

^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **hoggett** → [mzak69](#) · 33 minutes ago

Don't worry about my beliefs. I just respect his right.  
Gota go, time to get to mass!

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

 Guest · 7 hours ago

Can we also have a choir and some incense burning?

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **reallystupidpeople** · 7 hours ago



Why not have an invocation for each religious belief that is present in Wilkes Barre. That would take about two hours. Then you could adjourn the meeting and start over again the next day.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**joeyj** · 8 hours ago

a good bowel movement is more productive than the garbage this guys spews.....

16 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**joeyj** · 8 hours ago

now hes bringing the racist, communist ACLU into the mix. this guy is a trouble maker i would suggest that council just forget about opening the meetings with any type of "prayer". that should keep everyone happy. then the a'hole atheists will be happy.

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**relativelyinane** → **joeyj** · 8 hours ago

Just because Justin is targeting this issue from an atheist's point of view doesn't exclude other people from being as bothered by this. If council wants to begin session with an invocation, they should not limit it to one particular belief system.

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**joeyj** → **relativelyinane** · 8 hours ago

this council has enough problems to deal with, without having to address this topic. cancel any invocation and let that settle the matter. the athiests win, at least we dont have to deal with this crap.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**relativelyinane** → **joeyj** · 8 hours ago

Agree. Although, it's not just atheists that win. It's everyone who believes religion should stay out of government.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**joeyj** → **relativelyinane** · 7 hours ago

i really dont see how religion has been effecting the administration of the council and their business. its just been traditional for centuries....long before the atheists and ACLU reared their ugly heads and spewed their venom.

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**DBow** → **joeyj** · an hour ago

Explain how hate is spewed because he wants to give a counter-invocation.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**relativelyinane** → **joeyj** · 7 hours ago

Prayer can have a chilling effect on participants who do not follow that particular belief system.

If the beginning prayer were to ask for Allah's blessings, would you have a problem with that? If you had to handle snakes before the meeting began, would you have a problem? What about a goat sacrifice?

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**DaveR55** → **relativelyinane** · 6 hours ago

Serpents before would be a bit of overkill... there are enough snakes to deal with during...

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**joeyj** → **relativelyinane** · 7 hours ago

having this discussion is a waste of time and takes away from the difficult tasks that the city council has to address. religion and religious beliefs will have no bearing on what the council has to deal with. just eliminate any type of invocation and that should settle the matter. lets move on.

besides what you suggest here would amount to live

besides what you suggest here would amount to live entertainment....get the popcorn out. they could do it in the parking lot and sell tickets and 50-50. and they could all dress up in their robes. invite the KKK also. the people so concerned about prayer should get jobs....and a life.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**relativelyinane** → joeyj · 6 hours ago

"...what you suggest here would amount to live entertainment."

I'm sure there are some people who consider symbolic cannibalism a form of entertainment, too.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**DaveR55** → relativelyinane · 5 hours ago

Is that anything like imitation crab meat?

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**joeyj** → relativelyinane · 5 hours ago

add it to the list....let em get in line

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**relativelyinane** → joeyj · 5 hours ago

It's already on the list. In fact, it's the only thing on the list.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**joeyj** → relativelyinane · 4 hours ago

hmmmm....then we'll have to serve more than the popcorn....

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Crook\_Hater** · 8 hours ago

Oh goody! Maybe next we can have a Wiccan prayer.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**kingstonguy9** → Crook\_Hater · an hour ago

Maybe a happy hour. Now that would be funny.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**DBow** → Crook\_Hater · an hour ago

I'd go to that meeting.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**relativelyinane** → Crook\_Hater · 8 hours ago

Why not?

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Paul Quigley** → relativelyinane · 7 hours ago

We could all hold hands and sing Kum Ba Yah... let the meeting begin!

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**DaveR55** → Paul Quigley · 5 hours ago

They already do that but it's behind closed doors... and it's

Come buy ya... as in

Come buy ya carpet cleaning contracts here

Come buy ya... road paving contracts here.

Come buy ya teaching jobs here..... you know the drill.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**relativelyinane** → Paul Quigley · 5 hours ago

I'd join in but my my singing voice would make your ears bleed. :)

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Paul Quigley** · 9 hours ago

I'd say something, but it's just Justin...

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >





Wellwaddayaknow · 9 hours ago

Take your Atheism to the Muslims. See how that goes. Wyoming Valley is so diverse that the residents no longer have a say. <http://patriotupdate.com/artic...>

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



notyourmomma → Wellwaddayaknow · 8 hours ago

From 2007, so sort of old news, but here's the final outcome. "A San Diego public school that became the focus of international attention after it agreed to set aside time for Muslim students to pray in class has reversed course..." "Americans United addressed the controversy on several occasions. AU urged school officials not to carve out special prayer periods or set aside special rooms for prayer." Americans United got it reversed. Maybe you can write to the Patriot Update and let them know they are looking like fools bringing up false scare tactics to reinvigorate their base.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Wellwaddayaknow → notyourmomma · 8 hours ago

No scare tactics. Go to Detroit then. All I said is take your Atheism to the Muslims. See how that works out for him. My money says In God We Trust. What does yours say. <http://themuslimissue.wordpress...>

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



notyourmomma → Wellwaddayaknow · 7 hours ago

You want me to go to Detroit and see the problems created when religion is brought into politics and then come back here and do what - tell you how religion shouldn't be in politics? Do I really need the trip out there to tell you something it sounds like you already know. And by the way, the article is a scare tactic. Re-read it from a laymans point of view. Finally, do Muslims really treat Atheists worse than Christians in the US. According to my research it's a draw. Both are hostile.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



relativelyinane → Wellwaddayaknow · 9 hours ago

You're confusing "having a say" with "mob rule".

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Wellwaddayaknow → relativelyinane · 8 hours ago

Mob Rule is not putting any of this on the Ballot. Let the people vote on these issues. Guaranteed this would be voted down. Just saying.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



relativelyinane → Wellwaddayaknow · 7 hours ago

That's Rule of Majority vs Rule of Law. I'll go with Law every time.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Wellwaddayaknow → relativelyinane · 7 hours ago

Majority makes the laws. All 9 of them. Supreme Court doesn't even get elected. They get appointed. Maybe when the Presidents who chose them leave office they should get in the car and leave with them.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Ralph\_Edmunds → Wellwaddayaknow · 4 minutes ago

Whoops - you really got this one wrong. I'm surprised!

^ | v · Reply · Share >



relativelyinane → Wellwaddayaknow · 7 hours ago

SCOTUS doesn't make law, they are the final say on whether those laws, enacted by Congress, fall within the Constitution. We live in a Republic. Laws are for the protection of everyone, not the majority.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



TripleSchwartz → relativelyinane · 4 hours ago



Speaking of the rule of law, is it not "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."? The WB city council is not Congress and their invocation before meetings is not establishing state-sponsored compulsory religion for all.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**relativelyinane** → TripleSchwartz · 3 hours ago

It's a public forum. Once the forum is opened to prayer, it's open to any prayer or invocation. It's not just praying to a Christian God that is allowed.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**LetMeTellYou7** · 9 hours ago

Just go away.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**TheJoeValley** · 10 hours ago

How did he drop to the 3'd most hated in the county? Since he micturated on the nativity scene on the square, he has been my No. 1

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**FriendlySkeptic** → TheJoeValley · 8 hours ago

That wasn't him, but you know that already. What an odd little man you are with your urine-fixation.

<http://citizensvoice.com/news/...>

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**larrydallas** → TheJoeValley · 9 hours ago

Where does that put the disk-jockey on that list.?

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**BullStein** · 10 hours ago

How could someone be offended by a God he doesn't believe exists?

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**johduk** → BullStein · an hour ago

Ask justin

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**relativelyinane** · 10 hours ago

You attract more flies with honey than vinegar.

Justin isn't wrong, but his method is alienating people who might otherwise support him.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Bill "Danger" Robinson** · 10 hours ago

Once again we're going to have to suffer through Vacula's endless, self-important blathering.

15 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**gclmex** · 15 hours ago

Hey Vacula crawl back under the rock you came out from and leave us alone.

15 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**joeyj** → gclmex · 8 hours ago

yea, hes more of a slimy slug than a productive member of the community.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

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