

Tennessee Governor Vetoes One of the 'Controversial' Bills on His Desk

Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam, a Republican, vetoed a bill Friday that would have made the Bible the "official book" of the state.

While concerns over the constitutionality of such a measure played a role in his decision to veto the bill, it wasn't his only concern. He expressed his thoughts on the bill in a letter to Speaker of the House Beth Harwell (R-Nashville):

"In addition to the constitutional issues with the bill, my personal feeling is that this bill trivializes the Bible, which I believe is a sacred text.

"If we believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, then we shouldn't be recognizing it only as a book of historical and economic significance. If we are recognizing the Bible as a sacred text, then we are violating the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the State of Tennessee by designating it as the official state book.

"I strongly disagree with those who are trying to drive religion out of the public square. All of us should and must bring our deepest beliefs to the places we are called, including governmental service.

"Men and women motivated by faith have every right and obligation to bring their belief and commitment to the public debate. However, that is very different from the governmental establishment of religion that our founders warned against and our Constitution prohibits."

Haslam had until Tuesday to act upon the bill. This was just his fourth veto in five years in office. None of his previous vetoes have been overturned by the legislature. This bill, which would have made Tennessee the first state to name the Bible its "official book," faces an uncertain fate with legislators.

That doesn't mean the bill's sponsors, Rep. Jerry Sexton (R-Bean Station) and Sen. Steve Southerland (R-Morristown), won't try. A veto override vote in the Senate was expected to be scheduled for Monday or Tuesday.

They said polls show a majority of Tennesseans support the measure.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, based in Wisconsin, has pledged to fight the legislation, if it becomes law. She applauded Haslam's veto.

"Government shouldn't take sides on religion," FFRF President Annie Laurie Gaylor said. "I think we're turning a corner in our country that we are seeing a Republican governor in the South write a very firm defense of separation of church and state and understanding of the establishment clause and not apologizing about it."