

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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MAILED & E-MAILED

MayorDeStefano@newhavenct.net

January 10, 2012

Mayor John DeStefano Jr.
165 Church Street,
New Haven, CT 06510

Dear Mayor DeStefano and Board of Alderpersons:

On behalf of New Haven members of our national organization, which works to protect the constitutional principle of the separation between state and church, I am writing to most strenuously object to the City Clerk Ronald Smith's proposal to "put prayer back in city schools." The Freedom From Religion Foundation is an educational group with 17,000 members nationwide, including more than 200 in Connecticut.

On January 1, 2012, at New Haven's inauguration ceremony Mr. Smith said, "You want crime to go down? Put prayer back in schools."¹ We would like to caution the New Haven government against taking Mr. Smith's proposal seriously — violating the Constitution will not decrease crime. Mr. Smith's comment is offensive, incorrect, and would be unconstitutional if put into practice.

Mr. Smith is Ignoring and Offending a Sizable Population

Mr. Smith is offending large numbers of young people and their parents with such inappropriate pronouncements. The American Religious Identification Survey shows that 14% of adults in Connecticut identify as "nonreligious," (up from 6% in 1998) and The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life Religion Among the Millennials, 2010, shows that "fully one-in-four adults under age 30" are atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular." In claiming that prayer would lower crime, Mr. Smith is implying that non-believers are criminals — an idea that is at once insulting and ignorant.

Mr. Smith is Wrong

Mr. Smith links a lack of religious belief with high crime rates. But his statements are countered by hundreds of scientific studies.² Dr. Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, a PhD in clinical psychology and an expert in cult religions, wrote, "The claim that atheists are somehow more likely to be immoral has long been disproven by systematic studies."³

Mr. Smith believes that increased religiosity lowers crime, but "When it comes to more serious or violent crimes, such as murder, there is simply no evidence suggesting that atheist and secular people are more likely to commit such crimes than religious people. After all, America's bulging prisons are not full of atheists... only 0.2 percent of prisoners in the USA are atheists — a major under-representation."⁴

¹ http://www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/smith_board_needs_black_leader/

² In a synthesis of the latest social scientific research concerning some of these issues see Zuckerman, Phil. 2009. 'Atheism, Secularity, and Well-Being: How the Findings of Social Science Counter Negative Stereotypes and Assumptions.' *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 3 Issue 6, 949-971.

³ Beit-Hallahmi, Benjamin. 2007. 'Atheists: A Psychological Profile.' Pp 300-317 in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, edited by Michael Martin. New York, NY.: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Zuckerman at 955 (internal citations omitted).

Mr. Smith's assertion, although bigoted, is scientifically testable. "If religion, prayer, or God-belief hindered criminal behavior, and secularity or atheism fostered lawlessness, we would expect to find the most religious nations having the lowest murder rates and the least religious nations having the highest."⁵ In fact:

"We find just the opposite. Murder rates are actually lower in more secular nations and higher in more religious nations where belief in God is deep and widespread. And within America, the states with the highest murder rates tend to be highly religious, such as Louisiana and Alabama, but the states with the lowest murder rates tend to be among the least religious in the country, such as Vermont and Oregon. Furthermore, although there are some notable exceptions, rates of most violent crimes tend to be lower in the less religious states and higher in the most religious states. Finally, of the top 50 safest cities in the world, nearly all are in relatively non-religious countries, and of the eight cities within the United States that make the safest-city list, nearly all are located in the least religious regions of the country."⁶

Furthermore, "studies of heroic altruism during the Holocaust, found that the more secular people were, the more likely they were to rescue and help persecuted Jews."⁷ In fact, when any given factor of societal health or wellbeing is measured it is invariably the *less* religious countries that score better. The *least religious countries* of this world:

- Have the lowest rates of violent crime and homicide.
- Are the best place to raise children
- Are the best place to be a mother
- Have the lowest rates of corruption
- Have the lowest levels of intolerance against racial and ethnic minorities
- Score highest when it comes to women's rights and gender equality
- Have the greatest protection and enjoyment of political and civil liberties
- Are better at educating their youth in reading, math, and science
- Are the most peaceful
- Are the most prosperous
- Have the highest quality of life.⁸

The pattern of lower religiosity to higher societal wellbeing is not limited to an international analysis. This trend also exists within United States. Those states that are the most religious also have a high occurrence of societal ills. States that tend to be among the *most religious* in the nation:

- Have the highest rates of poverty
- Have the highest rates of obesity
- Have the highest rates of infant mortality
- Have the highest rates of STDs
- Have the highest rates of teen pregnancy

⁵ Zuckerman at 955 (internal citations omitted).

⁶ Zuckerman at 955 (internal citations omitted).

⁷ Zuckerman at 955 (internal citations omitted).

⁸ Zuckerman at 960-61 (internal citations omitted).

- Have the lowest percentage of college educated adults
- Have the highest rates of murder
- Have the highest rates of violent crime.⁹

These studies show “that atheism and/or secularity certainly do not hinder societal well-being.”¹⁰ As you can see, Mr. Smith’s statements are demonstrably false. Even if the New Haven government were to reject the weight of science in favor of Mr. Smith’s erroneous statements they would be in direct violation of the United States Constitution.

Mr. Smith’s Proposal is Unconstitutional

The U.S. Supreme Court settled the unconstitutionality of school prayer more than 60 years ago. The Court continues in a series of strong decisions to shoot down every attempt by government or outside influences to influence students to pray. See *McCullum v. Board of Education*, 333 U.S. 203, 212 (1948) (striking down religious instruction in public schools); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962) (declaring unconstitutional school prayers); *Abington v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (declaring unconstitutional devotional bible reading and recitation of the Lord’s Prayer in public schools); *Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39 (1980)(declaring unconstitutional the posting of the Ten Commandments in classrooms); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 72 (1985)(overturning a state law requiring daily period of silence for “meditation or daily prayer”); *Lee v. Weisman*, 120 L.E. 2d 467/112 S.C.T. 2649 (1992) (ruling prayers at public school graduations an impermissible establishment of religion); *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe*, 503 U.S. 290 (2000)(barring student-led prayers at public school functions). Any resolution to “put prayer back in schools” would violate the Constitution.

The purpose of schools is to educate, not to promote religion. Schoolchildren are young, impressionable, and vulnerable to adult and peer pressure. It is the duty of the secular public school system to protect vulnerable children, not to expose them to pressure and predatory prayers. The exercise of religion must be left to the individual and religious education left to the family. Mr. Smith’s proposal is unlawful.

We hope that New Haven, a city facing an unprecedented economic crisis — high unemployment, foreclosures, and citizens in desperate need of practical benefits — will not misdirect precious time and resources in a diversionary and divisive attack upon our Constitution.

On behalf of our Connecticut membership — including parents, teachers and students, our organization urges New Haven to ignore the unlawful proposal of Mr. Smith.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor

Cc: City Clerk, Ronald Smith at sbrown@newhavenct.net
Board of Alderpersons

⁹ Zuckerman at 955, 961 (internal citations omitted).

¹⁰ Zuckerman at 960 (internal citations omitted).