

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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April 24, 2017

Sent via email and U.S. mail to Sandra.Vidaurri@sanantonio.gov

The Honorable Ivy Taylor
Mayor
City Hall
100 Military Plaza
San Antonio, TX 78205

Re: Denigrating, blaming nonbelievers for poverty is factually, ethically wrong

Dear Mayor Taylor:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to address your insensitive and mistaken response to a question at the forum organized by The Nonprofit Council and Clarity Child Guidance Center and moderated by Gilbert Garcia on April 3. We were contacted by several local residents. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with 27,000 nonreligious members across the country and more than 1,200 members in Texas, including members in the San Antonio area.

At that forum, you were asked what you thought were the deepest, systemic causes of generational poverty in San Antonio. Your unedited response was:¹

Well, since you [, the questioner,] are with the Christian Coalition, I'll go ahead and put it out there that to me, it's broken people, you know? People not being in relationship with their Creator, and therefore not being in a good relationship with their families and their communities and, you know, not being productive members of society. So, I mean, I think that's the ultimate answer, that's not something that I work on from my position as mayor of the community, though I try to be an example.

On April 23, you released a Facebook statement calling this “video clip . . . a dishonest, politically motivated misrepresentation of my record combatting poverty.” It is not. The video shows your unadulterated words. The rest of your answer does not mitigate scapegoating nonbelievers.

Your shocking response is indefensible and triply wrong. First, you act as if declaring yourself a member of the Christian majority and denigrating an unpopular minority somehow requires a measure of courage: “I’ll go ahead and put it out there.” It doesn’t. It would require far more courage to stand up for that unpopular minority, rather than scapegoating them for something as complicated and pervasive as poverty. Parading membership in the religious majority is popular—that’s why it’s called pandering. But those who are serious about their faith should be alarmed when politicians cheapen their religion by using it as a political trick to score points with voters. Certainly the father of the Constitution, James Madison, would not approve. Madison thought “to employ Religion as an engine of Civil policy” was “an unhallowed perversion of the means of salvation.”²

¹ The video can be seen here: <https://youtu.be/7417pVwzPYc?t=1h7m38s>. The question begins at approximately 1:07:39 and the portion of your answer excerpted above stretches from 1:07:51 to 1:08:55.

² *A Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments*, Article 5.

Second, your answer, to put it mildly, is factually wrong. In fact, when any given factor of societal health or well-being 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, homicide, and corruption.
- Are the best places to raise children and be a mother.
- 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, the most prosperous, and have the highest quality of life.³

The correlation between lower religiosity and higher societal well-being 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. **The most religious states in the nation tend to have the highest rates of: poverty, obesity, infant mortality, sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy, murder, and violent crime.**⁴ Your claim that increased religiosity lowers poverty is simply nonsensical.

Nonbelievers are police officers, firefighters, nurses, doctors, librarians, teachers, scientists, volunteers, parents, and students. We are part of your community and to call us "unproductive members of society" because we don't believe as you do is the height of religious arrogance.

Finally, scapegoating an unpopular minority as you did is inappropriate. As mayor, you represent a diverse population that consists of not only Christians, but also atheists, agnostics, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus. Overall, 23 percent Americans identify as nonreligious.⁵ That eight-point increase since 2007⁶ and 15-point jump since 1990 makes the "nones" the fastest growing identification in America.⁷ Nationally, about 35 percent of millennials are nonreligious.⁸

Imagine for a moment a mayoral candidate making such undeserved and broad accusations against Jews or Muslims instead of nonbelievers. The outcry would properly be swift and severe. It should be no different for nonbelievers. We look forward to your apology to our San Antonio membership and other San Antonio freethinkers.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-Presidents

ALG/DB:als

³ 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, at 960-61.

⁴ Zuckerman at 955, 961 (internal citations omitted).

⁵ *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

⁶ *Nones on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation*, THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE (October 9, 2012), available at <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>.

⁷ Barry Kosmin, *National Religious Identification Survey 1989-1990*.

⁸ *America's Changing Religious Landscape*.