

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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**SENT BY EMAIL AND MAIL TO:** [andy.harris@mail.house.gov](mailto:andy.harris@mail.house.gov)

The Honorable Andy Harris, M.D.  
2334 Rayburn HOB  
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Religion at town hall event

Dear Congressman Harris:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to point out serious flaws in remarks you delivered at a March 18, 2019 Wicomico County town hall at the Black Diamond Lodge. FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit organization with nearly 31,000 members around the country, including many members in Maryland. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters related to nontheism.

According to reports,<sup>1</sup> you “suggested that ‘increased violence’ could be caused in part by video games,” also noting that those games are “graphic,” and “celebrate[] violence.” Then, for that same violence, you “blamed ... an overall decrease in ‘religiosity.’” The reports quote you, “You literally double the risk of committing suicide if you don’t have religious belief,” and that you “add[ed] that the United States was ‘founded on religious principles.’”

We write to correct the record in three respects. First, a decrease in religiosity does not cause violence. In fact, less religious states and less religious countries tend to be less violent and generally better overall. Second, if you truly believe media that celebrates violence is problematic, we suggest you look first to your bible. Finally, the United States was not “founded on religious principles.”

## **1. Lower religiosity correlates to better societal health and wellbeing.**

It is entirely possible to express concern over violent crime in an evenhanded and objective manner. By blaming a rise in violent crime on those who do not worship a god, you ostracize a significant portion of the community and distract from the real problem. You condemn the 24 percent of American adults who identify as nonreligious, including 38 percent of millennials and younger Americans.<sup>2</sup> This is not only exclusionary, but also factually wrong, as numerous studies have shown.<sup>3</sup> Morality does not require religion. As Dr. Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, wrote, “The claim that atheists are somehow more likely to be immoral has long been disproven by systematic studies.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Gamard, “Andy Harris town hall: Guns, immigration are hot topics,” *Salisbury Daily Times* (Mar. 18, 2019) available at <https://bit.ly/2CLGvFD>.

<sup>2</sup> Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America’s Changing Religious Identity*, PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017), available at [www.prii.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf](http://www.prii.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See Phil Zuckerman, *Atheism, Secularity, and Well-Being: How the Findings of Social Science Counter Negative Stereotypes and Assumptions*, 3 SOCIOLOGY COMPASS 949–71 (2009).

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *Atheists: A Psychological Profile* in THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO ATHEISM 300–17 (Michael Martin, ed., Cambridge Univ. Press) (2007).

A variation of this assertion has actually been evaluated and rejected by social psychologists. “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.”<sup>5</sup> But “[w]e 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.”<sup>6</sup>

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 in the world:

- Have the lowest rates of violent crime, homicide, and corruption;
- Are the best place 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; and
- Are the most peaceful, the most prosperous, and have the highest quality of life.<sup>7</sup>

The pattern of lower religiosity to higher societal well-being is not limited to an international analysis. This trend also exists within the United States. 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.”<sup>8</sup> Those states that are the most religious also have a high occurrence of other 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.**<sup>9</sup> The claim that increased religiosity would lower crime is simply nonsense.

Your heartless comment on suicide also lacks the nuance necessary to understand the issue. It is not religious belief, but church attendance—and perhaps the community associated with it rather than the religious aspects—which correlates to lower rates of suicide. More importantly, religion can also have the opposite effect. Religious people “with distress and strain related to religious or spiritual concerns” are *more likely* to take their own lives than the nonreligious.<sup>10</sup>

## **2. There are few stories more violent than those told in the bible.**

If you worry about the celebration of violence in video games and think that it needs to be regulated as a result, which is your reported position, we wonder if you intend to regulate other celebrations of violence, such as your bible. Dr. Steven Pinker, Harvard neuroscientist and FFRF’s honorary president, summed it up nicely in *The Better Angels of our Nature*:

The Bible depicts a world that, seen through modern eyes, is staggering in its savagery. People enslave, rape, and murder members of their immediate families. Warlords slaughter civilians indiscriminately, including the children. Women are bought, sold,

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<sup>5</sup> Zuckerman at 955 (internal citations omitted).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 960–61 (internal citations omitted).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 955

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 955, 961 (internal citations omitted).

<sup>10</sup> Colucci, E. and Martin, G. (2008), Religion and Spirituality Along the Suicidal Path. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 38: 229-244. doi:10.1521/suli.2008.38.2.229. See also, Jesse Bering, “No, Being Religious *Will Not* Save You from Suicide,” *Skeptic Magazine*, available at <https://bit.ly/2V4hJJE>.

and plundered like sex toys. And Yahweh tortures and massacres people by the hundreds of thousands for trivial disobedience or for no reason at all. These atrocities are neither isolated nor obscure. They implicate all the major characters of the Old Testament, the ones that Sunday-school children draw with crayons. And they fall into a continuous plotline that stretches for millennia, from Adam and Eve through Noah, the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua, the judges, Saul, David, Solomon, and beyond. According to the biblical scholar Raymund Schwager, the Hebrew Bible “contains over six hundred passages that explicitly talk about nations, kings, or individuals attacking, destroying, and killing others. . . . Aside from the approximately one thousand verses in which Yahweh himself appears as the direct executioner of violent punishments, and the many texts in which the Lord delivers the criminal to the punisher’s sword, in over one hundred other passages Yahweh expressly gives the command to kill people.” Matthew White, a self-described atrocitologist who keeps a database with the estimated death tolls of history’s major wars, massacres, and genocides, counts about 1.2 million deaths from mass killing that are specifically enumerated in the Bible. (He excludes the half million casualties in the war between Judah and Israel described in 2 Chronicles 13 because he considers the body count historically implausible.) The victims of the Noachian flood would add another 20 million or so to the total.<sup>11</sup>

Genocide, slavery, slaughter and sacrifice permeate the bible. FFRF Co-President Dan Barker wrote an entire book on the evils of the bible, *God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction*. There are chapters on the bible’s genocide, infanticide, and filicide, among many other wrongs, including the biblical god’s racism, slavemongering, and sadomasochism.

### **3. The United States was not founded on religious principles.**

Our country and our Constitution are based on reason and secular, Enlightenment values, not on Judeo-Christian principles. The central claim of Christian nationalism is the one you repeated at this town hall: that the United States is founded on Judeo-Christian principles. And it is fundamentally wrong. More often than not, Judeo-Christian principles conflict with America’s founding principles in irreconcilable ways. One would be hard pressed to name a single principle that is unique and original to Judeo-Christianity that positively influenced American law and government.

This claim is disturbingly common and often goes unchallenged, but I’ve written a book debunking the idea that our nation was founded, as you claim, on religious principles. We’ll send you a copy of *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism Is Un-American* when it comes out this May.

We understand that sometimes reports can lack the nuance intended by a speaker, but either way, these statements demand a correction from someone who wishes to maintain a reputation for honesty and integrity. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Andrew L. Seidel  
Director of Strategic Response  
Constitutional Attorney

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<sup>11</sup> Steven Pinker, *Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (Penguin Books, 2012) page 10.