

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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January 5 , 2022

**SENT VIA FAX AND U.S. MAIL:
(202) 228-6965**

The Honorable Ron Johnson
328 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Retract dangerous anti-vaxx religious advice

Dear Senator Johnson:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to reckless comments you recently made regarding Covid-19 vaccinations. FFRF is a Wisconsin-based national nonprofit organization with more than 35,000 members across the country, including more than 1,500 members in our home state. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

On Monday, January 3, you reportedly appeared on the Vicki McKenna Show and gave the following “medical” advice to listeners:¹

By the way, I not only tested positive [for COVID-19], but then I tested for antibodies and had a whopping level, so I had it, but **I didn't have any symptoms. How do you explain that!?** Why would we just automatically assume that our natural immunity is going to be awful, gonna be non-existent, when generally you'd think the default position would be, “hey if you've already had it, you're probably pretty well protected?” Why do we assume the worst, why have we assumed that the body's natural immune system isn't the marvel that it really is? **Why do we think that we can create something better than God in terms of combating disease?** There are certain things we have to do, but we have just made so many assumptions, and it's all pointed toward everybody getting a vaccine.

¹ Vicki McKenna Show (Jan. 3, 2022), *available at* twitter.com/HeartlandSignal/status/1478394275973025803 (emphasis added).

The first part of your comment demonstrates a basic lack of medical understanding, and the latter part would be bizarre and dangerous anti-vaxx theological advice even coming from a preacher. Coming from an elected official, speaking in your official capacity as a U.S. senator, it is not only shocking, but also runs afoul of your obligations under the U.S. Constitution “to promote the general welfare” as opposed to your religious zealotry. We ask that you retract these comments immediately and urge your constituents to consult with medical professionals, rather than pious politicians, on the efficacy of vaccines. You should be a purveyor of facts, not “alternative facts.”

The medical phenomenon that apparently baffles you is well understood. From the earliest onset of the pandemic, medical experts knew that a minority of those infected would be asymptomatic, but would nevertheless develop antibodies against the virus.² Your experience, while fortunate, is not at all inexplicable, but, unfortunately, is relatively rare. Suggesting to a wide audience that they would all similarly suffer no symptoms from Covid is reckless in the extreme.

You suggested that doctors had “assumed” that being vaccinated would produce higher antibody levels than contracting the virus, but the truth is precisely the opposite. While *you* are assuming that your “whopping level” of immunity must be at least as effective as a vaccine, medical professionals have long since *measured* the difference and found that your assumption is incorrect.³ Your core message, that Americans should not make assumptions about medical treatment, is correct, but then you urge them to do exactly that. Instead, you should urge Americans to follow the science and data rather than relying on hearsay and anecdotes from elected officials.

Finally, your assertion that modern medicine is an arrogant attempt to improve on a divine creation has been rightly and widely ridiculed for the nonsense that it is. The obvious fact is that medical science, including vaccination, has improved human health almost immeasurably compared to when church and state were united, when scientific advancement was condemned as heresy and witchcraft. At that time, fittingly called the “Dark Ages,” life expectancy was low in large part

² See, e.g., Leister, I., Ponocny-Seliger, E., Kollaritsch, H. et al., *Antibody seroprevalence and rate of asymptomatic infections with SARS-CoV-2 in Austrian hospital personnel*, BMC Infect Dis 21, 915 (2021), doi.org/10.1186/s12879-021-06586-7.

³ See, e.g., *Science Brief: SARS-CoV-2 Infection-induced and Vaccine-induced Immunity*, CDC (Oct. 29, 2021), <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/science-briefs/vaccine-induced-immunity.html> (“Whereas there is a wide range in antibody titers in response to infection with SARS-CoV-2, completion of a primary vaccine series, especially with mRNA vaccines, typically leads to a more consistent and higher-titer initial antibody response.”).

because natural immunity was the only defense humans had. Millions of prayers went unanswered as powerful churches condemned those who dared to try to “create something better than God,” as you put it.

In part due to these harsh lessons, America’s founders realized that letting churches dictate government policy was unwise, and took the momentous and revolutionary step of adopting a godless and secular constitution that officially separated state and church. We should all take pride that the United States was first among nations to recognize that freedom from religion in our government is essential for true liberty and progress. While preachers may spout whatever nonsense they like from their pulpits, government officials ought to use their civil position to advance only evidence-based solutions, and certainly not to make ignorant recommendations that endanger constituents.

Your comment also sends a message to nonreligious Wisconsin citizens that they are outsiders because they don’t share the religious beliefs preferred by their elected official. About 30 percent of Americans today are nonreligious.⁴ Wisconsin is similar, with 25 percent of adult Wisconsinites identifying as having no religion.⁵ Younger Americans are not just religiously unaffiliated, but many identify explicitly as atheist or agnostic. A recent survey found that 21 percent of Americans born after 1999 are atheist or agnostic.⁶ These constituents deserve, and increasingly demand, a government that represents *all* Americans by remaining secular.

Spreading misinformation, with an absurd theological justification, is reckless. Please retract these comments and, in the future, urge Americans to trust in science and the advice of medical professionals.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker

Co-presidents

ALG/DB:rdj

⁴ Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated*, Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), available at www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.

⁵ www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/wisconsin/.

⁶ *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.