

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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February 28, 2023

**SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL**  
**eadams@cityhall.nyc.gov**

The Honorable Eric Adams  
Mayor of New York City  
City Hall  
New York, NY 10007

Re: Shocking hostility to the core principle of separation between state and church

Dear Mayor Adams:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and our New York City membership to object to remarks you made at the New York Library interfaith prayer breakfast this morning that evince shocking hostility to a core principle of our secular republic: secular government. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 largely nonreligious members across the country, including more than 2,000 members in New York. FFRF works to defend the constitutional separation between state and church and to educate about nontheism.

During the New York Library interfaith prayer breakfast, you made remarks denigrating the separation of church and state, suggesting that prayer in school can solve gun violence, and affiliating your office with God and Christianity. You said:<sup>1</sup>

**Don't tell me about no separation of church and state.** State is the body. Church is the heart. You take the heart out of the body, the body dies. **I can't separate my belief because I'm an elected official.** When I walk, I walk with God. When I talk, I talk with God. **When I put policies in place, I put them in with a God-like approach to them.** That's who I am. And I was that when I was that third-grader, and I'm going to be that when I leave government. I am still a child of God and will always be a child of God and I won't apologize about being a child of God. It is not going to happen...

Cause if we are bringing our best fight in the ring, we would not have homeless in this city. We would not have a crisis of domestic violence.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/139-23/transcript-mayor-adams-hosts-delivers-remarks-interfaith-breakfast>

**We would not have children because when we took prayers out of schools, guns came into schools...**

That's only God. That's not man. That's only God. **And so today we proclaim that this city, New York City, is a place where the mayor of New York is a servant of God.** Thank you. Continue to pray for us.

Mayor Adams, your remarks are disgraceful. Not only is New York City not a place where the mayor of New York must be a “servant of God,” but as mayor you are in fact a servant of the people. While as a private individual you are free to worship as you like, you are not free to use your secular office or its podium to promote those beliefs, while deriding your constitutional duties to keep religion out of government. You took an oath of office “to support and defend” the U.S. Constitution, which is an entirely godless secular document. Your duty as an elected official is not to be “a servant of God” but to the Constitution and the people who it represents.

A rabbi in attendance, Abby Stein, said that she and other clergy members in attendance were disturbed by your comments:<sup>2</sup> “There was a lot of people who were like, ‘No, no, no, no, what is happening? What is he talking about? At least half of the room was not with him when he talked about separation of church and state.’”

The United States and its elected officials should be proud that ours was first among nations to separate religion from government. The Constitution’s only references to religion are exclusionary, such as barring any religious test for public office. The First Amendment’s Establishment Clause separates church from state at the federal level, extended to state citizens by the 14th Amendment. This was a revolutionary and deliberate act by the Founders, who were aware of the centuries of wars, pogroms, inquisitions and crusades in the Old World, and of religiously-based persecution in almost all of the original colonies in the “New World.” Wanting no part of this, they purposefully adopted the first constitution in the world not predicated on a divinity, but on “We the People.”

Attempting to impose your personal religious beliefs through your elected position is an insult to all New Yorkers, as well as to the core American value of separation of state and church.

Your remarks claimed that many social problems are due to a lack of faith. Like the rest of the nation, we are appalled and saddened by the rampant gun violence in our country, and especially in our schools. We join others in decrying this senseless violence and in demanding *meaningful* reform to protect our school children — something you as mayor of America’s largest city can actually help bring about.

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/new-york-elections-government/ny-nyc-mayor-adams-no-t-believe-separating-church-and-state-20230228-zyjekes2aves3hvej3k7fk3c2y-story.html>

Instead of meaningful action, you have insinuated that the removal of forced prayer in school is the reason for our gun violence epidemic. The members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation believe that nothing fails like prayer. Prayer is the ultimate cop-out, the ultimate admission that the invoker is giving up, by transferring personal responsibility to an imaginary being. Your implied “solution” to the rampant epidemic of gun violence in our country, particularly in our schools, is that the government must “instill” in a captive audience of children, i.e., *indoctrinate* them in “faith and belief.” This would be an egregious misuse of city and school authority against the rights of conscience of students and their parents. More than 70 years of compelling Supreme Court precedent exists to protect the rights and freedom of conscience of children from school-sponsored and imposed prayers or indoctrination. (Anyway, students are already free to pray privately, read the bible in their free time, and even attend Christian clubs in public schools.)

But aside from the inappropriateness of your entering into this legal fray, the evidence does not bear out your claim. Scientific studies<sup>3</sup> show that societies and states with less religion have less violence:

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 nonreligious 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.<sup>4</sup>

When any given factor of societal health or well-being is measured, invariably the *less* religious countries 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 and 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

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Zuckerman at 955 (internal citations omitted).

- Are the most peaceful and the most prosperous
- Have the highest quality of life.<sup>5</sup>

The pattern of lower religiosity to higher societal well-being also exists within the United States. Those states that are the most religious also have a high occurrence of societal ills.<sup>6</sup> States that tend to be among the *most religious* in the nation have the highest rates of violent crime and murder.<sup>7</sup>

These studies do not prove that religion causes *all* of society's ills, but do reveal that Christianity and more faith or prayer are not a panacea and are actually counterproductive. As Thomas Paine said, "Accustom a people to believe that priests or any other class of men can forgive sins, and you will have sins in abundance."<sup>8</sup>

Many politicians cite the 1962 Supreme Court decision *Engel v. Vitale*, which ruled that school-sponsored prayers in public schools violate the First Amendment, as the point where we "removed God from schools," blaming this for school shootings ever since. In reality, there were school shootings before that case, and there was no spike in school shootings immediately following the ruling. There were shootings in school in the United States as early as the 1840,<sup>9</sup> despite its being during the "Great Awakening" Christian fervor in the United States.

School shootings are a real-world problem that requires a real-world solution, not a plea for nonexistent supernatural intervention. Atheists and agnostics and others unaffiliated with religion — who now comprise three-in-ten adult Americans at 29 percent of the population,<sup>10</sup> including 34 percent of New York County residents<sup>11</sup> — are some of the most avid supporters of gun safety reform, while evangelical Christians are among the least.<sup>12</sup> In fact, 94 percent of FFRF's members support stricter gun safety laws.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Zuckerman at 960-61 (internal citations omitted).

<sup>6</sup> States that tend to be among the *most religious* in the nation have the highest rates of poverty, obesity, infant mortality, STDs, teen pregnancy, as well as, the lowest percentage of college educated adults. Zuckerman at 955, 961 (internal citations omitted).

<sup>7</sup> Zuckerman at 955, 961 (internal citations omitted)

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Paine, A Letter to Camille Jordan (1797), in *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, (GP Putnam's Sons, 1896) IV:252. Available at <https://books.google.com/books?id=srpGH65Zl9kC&pg=PA252>

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_school\\_shootings\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States\\_\(before\\_2000\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_school_shootings_in_the_United_States_(before_2000))

<sup>10</sup> About Three-In-Ten U.S. Adults are Now Religiously Unaffiliated, Pew Research Center, Dec. 14, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>

<sup>11</sup> *The 2020 Census of American Religion*, Public Religion Research Institute (July 8, 2021), available at <https://www.prrri.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://religionnews.com/2019/08/29/which-religions-support-gun-control-in-the-us/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://ffrf.org/news/news-releases/item/37966-ffrf-releases-major-secular-voter-poll-we-are-the-real-values-voters>

As mayor, your duty is to support the U.S. Constitution, which is godless and entirely secular, and to protect the rights of *all* New Yorkers regardless of their religious or non-religious beliefs. We are asking you to publicly rescind your ill-advised remarks that the mayor of New York is officially a “servant of God,” which seemingly suggests a belief that you are anointed by God. After all, you have previously said that “God” told you to become mayor.<sup>14</sup> In the face of an active campaign by Christian nationalists to declare the United States a Christian nation, and undo many First Amendment protections, we consider these remarks insensitive and reckless. The mayor’s office is in fact constitutionally barred from imposing a religious test to be mayor (e.g., being a “servant of God”). We know that many New Yorkers likewise will find your remarks alarming. We await your response.

Very truly,

Handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Annie Laurie Gaylor Dan Barker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker  
Co-presidents  
ALG/DB:cal

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/02/10/adams-faith-based-office-00007805>