

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 14, 2022

**SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:**  
**Ron.DeSantis@myflorida.com**

The Honorable Ron DeSantis  
Office of the Governor  
PL 05 The Capitol  
400 South Monroe Street  
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

Re: Recent inaccurate statement regarding religion's correlation with violence

Dear Governor DeSantis:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to correct your recent broad generalizations implying that people who lack a “religious foundation” are prone to criminal violence. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 36,000 largely nonreligious members across the country, including more than 1,800 members in Florida and a state chapter, the Central Florida Freethought Community. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

We write to urge you to immediately retract your misleading comments and apologize to your nonreligious constituents.

Last Thursday at your press conference in Fort Walton Beach, you stated that there are some so-called “lunatics” who lack a “religious foundation” or any type of “relationship with God.”<sup>1</sup> You specifically made remarks regarding the person who allegedly attempted an assassination on U.S. Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh.<sup>2</sup> Further, you stated: “And so, you’re doing that and I think there’s a lot of really, really crazy people out there, unfortunately, that really get consumed with ideology...[t]hese are people that don’t really have, I think, a religious foundation or any type of, of, of relationship with God, and so they turn to radical politics as kind of what they’re going to do.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Watch: Gov. DeSantis signs 6 bills for veterans in Fort Walton Beach*, ABC 3Wear-TV (June 9, 2022), at 33:06, available at <https://weartv.com/news/local/watch-live-gov-desantis-press-conference-in-fort-walton-beach>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*, at 33:10.

Your comments unjustly paint the nonreligious in a deeply unfavorable light. There is apparently no evidence that this particular suspect was in any way motivated by a lack of religion, or even whether he is nonreligious at all. In fact, he reportedly had a religious upbringing, and mental health issues seem to be an obvious factor in the case.<sup>4</sup>

Statistics show that lack of religion does not correlate with an increased amount of violence; in fact, it shows the opposite. It is important that politicians, such as yourself, are aware of facts and statistics before confusing your opinions with the truth.

### **Religiosity does not reduce crime.**

Apparently, you believe that violence stems from a lack of “religious foundation” or any type of “relationship with God.” The members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation disagree, and believe rather that morality based on religion alone is dubious. Actions should be judged based on their consequences, rather than whether such actions show blind obeisance to a claimed supernatural authority, or whether the actor is religious. It’s not what you believe that makes you a good person, but what you do. “God said it, I believe it, that settles it” is a morally bankrupt position that is at the root of much violence historically and today. There will always be disparate and conflicting claims to supernatural authority, and it is not the business of government officials to take sides on religious questions.

Significantly, scientific studies<sup>5</sup> show that societies that are *less* religious 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 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.”<sup>7</sup> In

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<sup>4</sup> Matt Hamilton and Christian Martinez, *A California man’s journey to kill Justice Kavanaugh ended with a desperate plea, feds allege*, Los Angeles Times (June 10, 2022).

<sup>5</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>6</sup> Zuckerman at 955 (internal citations omitted).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

fact, 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
- 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.<sup>8</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. 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
- Have the lowest percentage of college-educated adults
- Have the highest rates of murder
- Have the highest rates of violent crime.<sup>9</sup>

These studies do not prove that religion causes *all* of society’s ills, but do reveal that Christianity, more faith or prayer are not a panacea. If anything, they 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>10</sup> The notion of “original sin” can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is highly ironic that you made those statements implying a “relationship with God” ensures individuals will not commit violence, in the midst of the hearings by the House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6, 2021 Attack on the United States Capitol. The video clip shown last week ended with a Trump 2020 sign next to the Christian flag, which was flown by many during the putsch, where Jesus signs, crosses and other religious symbols were prominent.<sup>11</sup> In fact, white Christian nationalism was

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<sup>8</sup> Zuckerman at 960–61 (internal citations omitted).

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

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Paine, A Letter to Camille Jordan (1797), in *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, (GP Putnam’s Sons, 1896) IV:252. Available at [books.google.com/books?id=srpGH65Zl9kC&pg=PA252](https://books.google.com/books?id=srpGH65Zl9kC&pg=PA252).

<sup>11</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3\\_O91gyj9o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3_O91gyj9o).

very much at the root of that violent insurrection, as the special report<sup>12</sup> produced by the Freedom From Religion Foundation and the Baptist Joint Committee documents. Christian nationalism bolstered, justifying and intensified the attack on the U.S. Capitol, as BJC President Amanda Tyler notes in the report.

A recent arson on a place of worship further illustrates the point. On June 10, a man wearing a T-shirt that simply said “GOD” reportedly attempted to burn down the headquarters of The Satanic Temple in Salem, Massachusetts, and left bible pages at the scene.<sup>13</sup> The problem with this arsonist was plainly not a lack of “religious foundation” or a lack of “relationship with God.”

As governor, you swore an oath to uphold the godless and entirely secular U.S. Constitution. It is unhelpful to the civic debate that you are making confused, dubious, overbroad generalities regarding religious involvement in individuals’ personal lives. You were elected governor, not Florida Pastor in Chief.

Your remarks are an undeserved smear on many of your own constituents who are nonreligious. Non-religious Americans are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification — 3-in-10 adults today (29 percent of the population) identify as atheists, agnostics or “nothing in particular. Overall, 35 percent of Americans are non-Christian.<sup>14</sup> A recent survey found that 21 percent of Americans born after 1999 are atheist or agnostic.<sup>15</sup> While the growth of non-religious Americans quickly increases, atheists and humanists remain one of the lowest sectors represented in federal prisons.<sup>16</sup>

Please retract your baseless comments. You owe your nonreligious constituents an apology.

Very truly,

A 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:ks

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<sup>12</sup> Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2022 Insurrection, FFRF and BJC, available at [ffrf.org/uploads/legal/Christian\\_Nationalism\\_and\\_the\\_Jan6\\_Insurrection-2-9-22.pdf](https://ffrf.org/uploads/legal/Christian_Nationalism_and_the_Jan6_Insurrection-2-9-22.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Brandon Truitt, *Man arrested after starting fire at Satanic Temple in Salem*, CBS Boston (June 11, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” (Oct. 17, 2019) at [pewrsr.ch/2VPiFS7](https://www.pewrsr.ch/2VPiFS7).

<sup>15</sup> *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), [www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/](https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/).

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Prisons [www.dropbox.com/s/ouab04gqzvj08hg/2022FOIABureauofPrisonsMehta.pdf?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/ouab04gqzvj08hg/2022FOIABureauofPrisonsMehta.pdf?dl=0).