

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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May 31, 2022

The Honorable Dan Patrick
Office of the Lieutenant Governor
P.O. Box 12068
Austin, TX 78711

Re: Your shocking and inappropriate remarks blaming godlessness for school shootings and suggesting prayer is the solution

Dear Lt. Gov. Patrick:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and our Texas membership to object to your abhorrent recent comments blaming irreligiosity and lack of prayer for the horrific shooting that took place in Uvalde, Texas. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 37,000 members across the country, including more than 1,500 Texas members, as well as a local chapter in Dallas. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism. Our membership is comprised of atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, humanists and other nonbelievers.

Like you and the rest of the nation, we are appalled and saddened by the shooting at Robb Elementary School. We join others in decrying this senseless violence and in demanding *meaningful* reform to protect our school children — something you as lieutenant governor can help bring about.

It is our understanding that during a recent appearance on Fox News, you said that the problem of mass shootings in America is a “much larger problem” than guns or mental health:

...we are in a sick society where we are at each other's throats all the time...Everywhere you look, whether it's on the internet, whether it's any walk of life, people are just at each other every day and we have to ask ourselves who we are, and I believe we're a nation of godly people, and godly people need to pray.

You then cited a bible verse, 2 Chronicles 7:14: “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and heal our land.” You added:

Christians have to pray for God to heal our land, and we have to take a stand. If there are some people in this country who are not believers, that's fine, I respect their right not to believe, but for those of us who are Christians, we need to take hold of our country and we do that through prayer.

You cannot change the culture of a country without changing the character of the people, and you just cannot change character without changing a heart, and you can't do that without turning to God.

You ignorantly claim that “we're a nation of godly people,” and your solution to the rampant epidemic of gun violence in our country, particularly in our schools, is that Christians should pray more. 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.

The evidence does not bear out your knee jerk assertion that prayer and religion are the answer to mass shootings. Significantly, scientific studies¹ show that societies with less prayer 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.²

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.”³ In 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:

¹ 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.

² Zuckerman at 955 (internal citations omitted).

³ *Id.*

- 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.⁴

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.⁵

Prayer is ineffectual. Public, government prayers not only conflict with the secular nature of the U.S. Constitution, which explicitly bars a government establishment of religion, but also with biblical teachings. Christians who know their bible are familiar with the injunction of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, condemning public prayer as hypocrisy. “Enter into thy closet and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret.” (Matthew 6:5-13).

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 population⁶ — are some of the most avid supporters of gun safety

⁴ Zuckerman at 960-61 (internal citations omitted).

⁵ Zuckerman at 955, 961 (internal citations omitted).

⁶ “About three-in-ten U.S. adults are 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/#:~:text=Currently%2C%20about%20three%2Din%2D,asked%20about%20their%20religious%20identity.>

reform, while evangelical Christians are among the least.⁷ In fact, 94 percent of FFRF's members support stricter gun safety laws.⁸

As a lieutenant governor, your duty is to support the U.S. Constitution, which is godless and entirely secular, and to protect the rights of **all** Texans regardless of their religious or non-religious beliefs. Your promotion of religion, prayer and Christianity as a false panacea for this crisis is insulting and demeaning to non-religious and non-Christian citizens. Young Americans are less religious than ever, with atheism doubling among Generation Z, and they are demanding real action to stop the school shooting epidemic. Rather than advocating for more prayer, we ask you to "Get off your knees and get to work!"

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-presidents
Freedom From Religion Foundation

ALG/DB:cal

⁷ <https://religionnews.com/2019/08/29/which-religions-support-gun-control-in-the-us/>

⁸ <https://ffrf.org/news/news-releases/item/37966-ffrf-releases-major-secular-voter-poll-we-are-the-real-values-voters>