

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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April 4, 2023

SENT VIA FAX & U.S. MAIL: 202.225.6440

The Honorable Tim Burchett
U.S. House of Representatives
1122 Longworth HOB
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Your shocking and inappropriate remarks suggesting religion is the solution to school shootings

Dear Representative Burchett:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and our Tennessee membership to object to your recent comments blaming irreligiosity for the horrific shooting that took place at the Covenant School and advising that a “true revival” would end school shootings. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 39,000 members across the country, including more than 400 members and a local chapter in Tennessee. 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 carnage at the Covenant School. We join others in decrying this senseless violence and in demanding *meaningful* reform to protect our school children — something you as a United States representative could help bring about.

It is our understanding that on March 30, 2023, you clarified controversial remarks that you had made earlier in the week (i.e., that “we’re not going to fix it” in regard to ending school shootings). You told Knox News:¹

... we need a spiritual awakening in this country, and if we had that, a true revival, this type of thing would not happen...

You have also said:²

Repenting of your sins and having some sort of reform in this country seems to me to be the way we’re going to have to turn this way around, because we

¹<https://www.knoxnews.com/videos/news/politics/2023/03/31/congressman-tim-burchett-expands-his-were-not-gonna-fix-remark-shootings/11577423002/>

²<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/tim-burchett-repenting-sins-solution-school-shootings-1234706287/>

have some sick and evil people doing some very vile things ... Revival seems to be the way to go for me.

You also went on to claim that the reason you received backlash to your comment that you would do nothing to end school shootings is that “there is hatred toward [you] and [your] beliefs.”³

You ignorantly claim that a “spiritual awakening” will solve the rampant epidemic of gun violence in our country, particularly in our schools, but the evidence does not bear this out. Scientific studies⁴ 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.⁵

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
- Are the most peaceful and the most prosperous
- Have the highest quality of life.⁶

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.⁷

³ *Id.*

⁴ 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.

⁵ Zuckerman at 955 (internal citations omitted).

⁶ Zuckerman at 960-61 (internal citations omitted).

⁷ 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).

States that tend to be among the *most religious* in the nation have the highest rates of violent crime and murder.⁸

These studies do not prove that religion causes *all* of society's ills, but do reveal that Christianity and more faith 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."⁹ The religious concept of sin — and easy absolution or forgiveness for sin based on profession of faith — can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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 population¹⁰ — are some of the most avid supporters of gun safety reform, while evangelical Christians are among the least.¹¹ In fact, 94 percent of FFRF's members support stricter gun laws.¹²

As a U.S. representative, your duty is to support the U.S. Constitution, which is godless and entirely secular, and to protect the rights of *all* citizens 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 suggest you "Get off your knees and get to work!"

Very truly,



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

⁸ Zuckerman at 955, 961 (internal citations omitted)

⁹ 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>

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

¹¹ <https://religionnews.com/2019/08/29/which-religions-support-gun-control-in-the-us/>

¹² <https://ffrf.org/news/news-releases/item/37966-ffrf-releases-major-secular-voter-poll-we-are-the-real-values-voters>