

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 › MADISON, WI 53701 › (608) 256-8900 › WWW.FFRF.ORG

May 27, 2022

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL: rgray@azleg.gov

The Honorable Rick Gray
Arizona State Senator
1700 West Washington
Room 212
Phoenix, AZ 85007

Re: Your shocking and inappropriate remarks blaming atheists for school shootings

Dear Senator Gray:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and our Arizona membership to object to your appalling recent comments on the senate floor blaming atheists 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 900 members and a local chapter in Arizona. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

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 a state legislator can bring about.

Instead of focusing on legislative actions that would bring real solutions to our country's gun violence problem, on May 25, 2022, you took to the senate floor to irrationally blame atheists for the slaughter of 19 children and 2 teachers:

The real core issue—and I'll be honest, this may be my bias, but this is how I see it—for decades, for decades, we've been teaching our children in school there is no God. You can't pray. You can't even pray on the field! There is no God. There are no absolutes. We live in a post-modern world, so whatever you think is right is right, and if somebody else has a different view, you're still right. There are no absolutes.

That we're animals. And we're just animals. It's survival of the fittest. But then we're shocked when they act that out! But we say, "Don't act that way!"

These kids—and it's usually been kids that are shooting kids in school—what have they been taught?

Friends, we have a state religion in the United States of America, even though there's supposed to be separation of church and state, there is a state religion. It's Human Secularism, a.k.a. Atheism.

First off, you are correct that this dangerous and erroneous perspective is a result of your bias. You ignorantly claim that schools are teaching atheism. Your solution to the rampant epidemic of gun violence in our country, particularly in our schools, is that the government must push religion onto a captive audience of school children and other Americans to stop school shootings. But the evidence does not bear this out. (Students are already free to pray privately, read the bible in their free time, and even attend Christian clubs in public schools. More than 65 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.)

Scientific studies¹ 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.²

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

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).

- 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.³

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.⁴ States that tend to be among the *most religious* in the nation have the highest rates of violent crime and murder.⁵

These studies do not prove that religion causes *all* of society’s ills, but do reveal that Christianity and more religion 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.”⁶

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, dating as far back as public schools themselves, and there was no spike in school shootings immediately following the ruling.

Furthermore, we hasten to observe that the biblical deity, which you imply would prevent mass shootings, is depicted as one of the greatest mass murderers⁷ in all literature.⁸ In 2 Chronicles alone, the villain of the Old Testament killed a million Ethiopians⁹ and half a million Israelites.¹⁰ That’s in addition to destroying every

³ Zuckerman at 960-61 (internal citations omitted).

⁴ 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).

⁵ Zuckerman at 955, 961 (internal citations omitted)

⁶ 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>

⁷ See unpleasantgod.ffrf.org/#/ (Check out in particular the links for bloodthirsty, ethnic cleanser, infanticidal, genocidal)

⁸ See, e.g., www.vocativ.com/news/309748/all-the-people-god-kills-in-the-bible/index.html.

⁹ 2 Chr. 14:12–13 (“The Lord smote the [thousand thousand] Ethiopians ... they were destroyed before the Lord”).

¹⁰ 2 Chr. 13:17 (“There fell down slain of Israel five hundred thousand chosen men”).

human on earth, save eight,¹¹ razing entire cities,¹² and repeatedly committing and commanding genocide.¹³

School shootings are a real-world problem that requires a real-world solution, not a plea for nonexistent supernatural intervention. Atheists and agnostics are some of the most avid supporters of gun control, while Evangelical Christians are among the least.¹⁴ In fact, 94% of FFRF's members support stricter gun safety laws.¹⁵

As a state senator, your duty is to support the constitution and protect the right of **all** Arizonians to free exercise of religion, not to advocate for one particular religious view. Your promotion of religion in the face of this serious issue is insulting and dangerous 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 that you "Get off your knees and get to work!"

Very truly,



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

ALG/DB:cal

¹¹ Gen. 6:9–9:17.

¹² Gen. 18–19.

¹³ *E.g.* Deut. 20:16–18 (commanding his people to "not leave alive anything that breathes... completely destroy them ...").

¹⁴ <https://religionnews.com/2019/08/29/which-religions-support-gun-control-in-the-us/>

¹⁵ <https://ffrf.org/news/news-releases/item/37966-ffrf-releases-major-secular-voter-poll-we-are-the-real-values-voters>