

Freethought Today

Complimentary Copy
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Vol. 28 No. 10

Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

December 2011

FFRF sues mayor over crosses

The Freedom From Religion Foundation filed a federal lawsuit Dec. 9 against the town of Whiteville, Tenn., and Mayor James Bellar to challenge crosses on the water tower, in front of City Hall and on the city-owned sidewalk.

FFRF is suing on behalf of a member who regularly comes into unwelcome contact with the cross displays. Whiteville has about 3,000 people.

FFRF, a national state/church watchdog, began complaining about a prominent lighted cross on the water tower a year ago. The only apparent response was that at some point in the

spring, the town stopped lighting the cross. After writing three unanswered letters of complaint, FFRF, with Tennessee attorney Alvin Harris, sent a letter of demand Oct. 3 warning Bellar if he didn't move the cross, FFRF would sue by the end of the month.

Bellar announced Oct. 3 that he would move the cross, although he referred to FFRF and its members as "terrorists" in local media reports.

But Oct. 17, Bellar told reporter Daniel Wilkerson of WBBJ-TV in Jackson, Tenn., that "Somebody has to stand up to these atheist sons of bitches, and you can quote me on that."

In late October, Bellar used nearly

\$4,000 of taxpayer money to hire a crane service to inexplicably break one arm off the cross. Then he began lighting what remained of the cross. On or about Nov. 28, the town installed two large crosses in front of City Hall. About Nov. 30, defendants decorated the crosses with Christmas wreaths.

"Mr. Doe's contact with the cross in front of the Whiteville City Hall is unwelcome and offensive to Mr. Doe," notes the legal complaint. "The crosses on public property signify to Mr. Doe that Whiteville is only welcome to religious people (specifically Christians) and that as a nonreligious person, he is unwelcome in Whiteville."

FFRF seeks a declaratory judgment that the policy and practice of defendants' installation of religious symbols on Whiteville property is a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and deprives FFRF and its members of their civil rights.

FFRF seeks preliminary and permanent injunctions requiring immediate and permanent removal of the crosses, along with an injunction barring crosses and other religious symbolism on town property in the future.

According to a Nov. 21 article by Eric Snyder, Nashville Business Jour-

Continued on next page



Sending 'Reason's Greetings'



Photo: Andrew Seidel

Inside This Issue



Steven Pinker:
Rationality
reduces
violence
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above
Page 14



"Faith without reason
is true blindness."
James Woods, Chandler Student Agnostic

Coming 'Out of the Closet'
in Tucson and Phoenix

Pages 12-13

Warmly wishing you a superb Solstice and secular New Year are the staff and volunteers of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, pictured by FFRF's traditional Winter Solstice motto on a banner at the Wisconsin Capitol. (To see FFRF's official Capitol sign, up for the month of December, turn to the back page.) FFRF staffers are smiling despite being in the thick of the annual "War on the Constitution." The motto was coined to challenge the encroachments of nativity scenes and religion on public property in December.

From left are Patrick Elliott, attorney; Andrew Seidel, attorney; Dan Barker, co-president; Scott Carney, volunteer; Jackie Douglas, office manager; Scott Colson, webmaster; Katie Daniel, bookkeeper/executive assistant; Katie Stenz, publicist; Bill Dunn, editor; Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president; Charlotte Stein, office staff; Phyllis Rose and Wendy Goldberg, volunteers and FFRF officers; Stephanie Schmitt, attorney; and Melanie Knier, office staffer. (Not pictured: Rebecca Markert, senior staff attorney, on maternity leave; and several legal interns and part-time student staffers.)

In Memoriam

Candace D. Lang, 1950–2011



Joe and Candace Lang, with Helena and Tiny.

"It is with profound sorrow that I report to you the death of my dear wife and one of FFRF's most avid supporters and newest Life Members, Dr. Candace D. Lang," writes FFRF member Joseph Wilkins of Atlanta, Ga.

Candace died Oct. 31, 2011, in her bedroom in Atlanta, surrounded by family and friends, with her two beautiful cats, Helena and Tiny, curled at her feet.

Up until a few months before her death, she served as chair of the Department of French and Italian at Emory University. She received her undergraduate degree from Agnes Scott College and her Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins. She taught briefly at Reed College in Portland, Ore., and spent several years as professor of French at Tulane University before joining the Emory faculty in 1989. She also served two terms as president of the study-abroad consortium, EDUCO (Emory, Duke and Cornell) in Paris.

Candace, a great lover of France and French culture, was often mistaken for a native when living there. A dedicated swimmer and fitness athlete, she won the Masters champion title in the 200-meter backstroke (in her age group) in France. She held the title "for almost fifteen minutes," recounted Joe.

After descending from the awards podium, she mentioned to a race official that she thought it unusual that an American could hold a national title in France. The official looked at her with intense discomfort and asked, "You're an American? But your French is perfect!" before stripping her of the medal.

In spite of the fact that Candace was slim, fit and watched her diet carefully, she was diagnosed with lung cancer in December 2009. She had quit smoking 30 years earlier.

Her very favorite thing was to travel,

Joe noted. Five weeks before Candace's death, they made a final pilgrimage to Paris and rented an apartment overlooking the Seine across from le Pont Neuf. During that unforgettable 10 days, they wined and dined all their Parisian friends.

Their last trip was in October when they attended the FFRF annual convention in Hartford, Conn. The day before the trip, Candace had undergone emergency surgery to put a drainage stent in her chest. "All the nurses and attendants looked at her like she was crazy when she announced that she intended to leave the hospital that night so she would be able to pack for her trip to Hartford," Joe said.

A nurse trained him to drain the fluid. They arrived in Hartford and even participated in the Mark Twain House tour. Although Candace was very easily fatigued, they managed to attend every single function at the convention, from the nonprayer breakfast to the final banquet with the moving and inspiring musical performance by Charles Strouse. "I even won a 'clean' \$2 bill," Joe said.

Candace specified that her remains be cremated and any memorial service be nonreligious. She further asked that, in lieu of flowers, donations be sent to two charitable organizations, the first of which was the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

FFRF, which received several memorials in Candace's name, sends sincere condolences to Joe.

In a later note, Joe added that despite the "poignant articles and inspiring legal triumphs that are chronicled in Freethought Today, by far Candy's and my favorite section is the Crank Mail! Having spent her life studying the intricacies of language, Candy would always roar with laughter at the spelling and grammar displayed in those curt missives."



Mayor James Bellar of Whiteville, Tenn., calls FFRF members "terrorists" for advocating separation of City Hall and church.

Tennessee mayor lashes out at FFRF

Continued from front page

national managing editor, Whiteville ranks toward the bottom in "brainpower" of 271 Tennessee cities, ranked by a "brainpower index" including high school graduation rates and percentage of residents with college degrees.

Many residents responded to FFRF's October demand letter by placing hundreds of crosses on private property.

"What they don't seem to understand is that there is no constitutional objection to crosses on private property. That's where they belong — howev-

er distasteful crosses planted on lawns in the South are, particularly in a town called Whiteville," commented Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president.

"On government property, crosses send a message of exclusion and even intimidation," Gaylor said.

In an interview with WBBJ, the mayor even denied that the First Amendment's Establishment Clause applies to states or cities.

The legal complaint can be read at FFRF's website:

ffrf.org/legal/challenges/ongoing-lawsuits/

FFRF welcomes 22 'Lifers,' one 'After-Lifer'

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is delighted to welcome Alfred Contarino as FFRF's newest After-Life Member and also sends warm thanks to its 22 newest Lifetime Members:

Steve Aldrich, Dr. R.J. Baken, Roger Clery (gift from his spouse, Lifetime Member Carolsue Clery), David Cottun, David Dunning, Joe Fiorino, Diane Haack, Betty Harris, George Liepart, Karla Martin, Mary Anne McCarthy, Csaba Mera, Robert Mistretta, Danial Neveau, Richard Phillips, Lynn Rodriguez, Aloysius J. Schneider, Evelyn Sheldon, Cathi Soriano, Fred Thorlin

and Charles Wieland. One new "Lifer" preferred not to be named.

States represented are:

California, Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin.

Individual Lifetime Members are \$1,000 designated as a membership or renewal. After-Life Memberships — a slightly tongue-in-cheek membership category for those who want their donation to live after them — are \$5,000. All dues and donations to FFRF are deductible for income-tax purposes.

A Note to Members

Your address label shows the expiration date of your membership in FFRF, which includes your subscription to Freethought Today and "Private Line." If your label shows December or earlier, your subscription has expired. Your prompt renewal (\$40-single membership; \$50-household; \$100 sustaining; \$25-student) saves us time and postage, and is tax-deductible. Freethought Today is published 10 times a year, with combined issues in Jan/Feb and June/July. Send to FFRF, Box 750, Madison WI 53701.

Send Us Your Address Change Promptly!

Don't miss a single issue! If you move, notify us directly and promptly. **The Post Office does not forward third-class mail.** FFRF cannot be responsible for replacing back issues if we have not been notified prior to your move. Back issues, while they last, may be ordered for \$2 each.

Freethought Today

published by Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

P.O. Box 750 • Madison WI 53701

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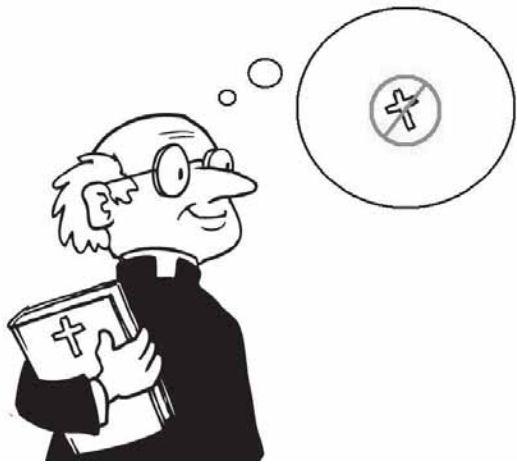
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Steven Pinker, Jeff Yardis

December 2011

The only freethought newspaper in the United States



tintin.com

Clergy Project helps clergy move on

When faith no longer moves mountains



Dan Barker



Daniel Dennett



Richard Dawkins



Elizabeth Cornwell



Linda LaScola

The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Science and Reason and the Freedom From Religion Foundation have announced the formation of a new group to help clergy who have “seen the light” to move beyond faith.

The Clergy Project — a private, invitation-only “safe house” community of current and former pastors, priests, imams and rabbis who no longer hold the supernatural beliefs of their religious traditions — was started in March 2011 with 52 members. It has now grown to more than 125 “apostates,” including 34 who are active clergy. Since the unveiling of the public informational website — clergyproject.org — on Oct. 7, the group has received 75 applications for membership, 33 of whom have been accepted into the group, with more applications being processed by a screening committee from within the group.

“We know there must be thousands of clergy out there who have secretly abandoned their faith but have nowhere to turn,” says Dan Barker, a former evangelical preacher who “lost faith in faith” after 19 years of preaching the gospel. “Now they do have a place to meet, a true sanctuary, a congregation of those of us who have replaced faith and dogma with reason and human well-being.”

“The Clergy Project: Moving Beyond Faith” was started by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, philosopher Daniel Dennett, researcher Linda LaScola and Barker. Dennett and LaScola’s 2010 study, “Preachers Who Are

Not Believers,” was the source of some of the initial members. Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion* (whose foundation provided most of the initial support for the project), has been concerned for many years about helping ministers who no longer believe. Elizabeth Cornwell, executive director of the Dawkins Foundation, was very instrumental in getting the project off the ground.

Barker, who is now co-president of FFRF, which also provided some of the initial support, has been collecting records on former preachers for decades, and was the source of dozens of clergy members. These include many still-active pastors who have contacted Barker after reading his book *Godless: How An Evangelical Preacher Became One of America’s Leading Atheists*, and his previous book, *Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist*.

Current project administrators are “Adam” and “Chris,” both active pastors in Southern U.S. states, though “Chris” has recently left the ministry (read his story in an upcoming issue). The logo for the group was designed by “John,” another active U.S. preacher.

Another participant, “Lynn,” writes: “The Clergy Project has been a life-saver for me. I am an active Methodist pastor who is also an atheist. I began the ministry full of great dreams and full faith in what I preached. However, over time I began to realize that the ‘truth’ I was preaching wasn’t so true. I resisted my doubts at first, but the nagging in my brain wouldn’t stop. So I embarked on a journey of researching

and discovering that what I had believed for so long wasn’t true.

“I’m still in the pulpit, as I stated above. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, I made a commitment to my church

and my denomination to serve this appointment. Second, the financial issue. If I walk away now, my family will suffer greatly. Trust me, this decision to stay for now hasn’t been an easy one. Every week I feel like a fraud. Every week I struggle with the fact that I’m lying when I stand before my congregation. I’m leading a double life.”

Double jeopardy

The toughest issue for these religious leaders is financial. Most of them would leave the pulpit immediately if they were able to change careers readily. Former clergy help by sharing their own success stories of finding gainful secular employment.

Welcoming new members to the project, Dawkins writes:

“It is hard to think of any other profession which it is so near to impossible to leave. If a farmer tires of the outdoor life and wants to become an accountant or a teacher or a shopkeeper, he faces difficulties, to be sure. He must learn new skills, raise money, move to another area perhaps. But he doesn’t risk losing all his friends, being cast out by his family, being ostracized by his whole community.

“Clergy who lose their faith suffer double jeopardy. It’s as though they lose their job and their marriage and their children on the same day,” Dawkins says. “It is an aspect of the vicious intolerance of religion that a mere change of mind can redound so cruelly on those honest enough to

‘If I walk away now, my family will suffer greatly.’

— Pastor ‘Lynn’

acknowledge it. The Clergy Project exists to provide a safe haven, a forum where clergy who have lost their faith can meet each other, exchange views, swap problems, counsel each other — for, whatever they may have lost, clergy know how to counsel and comfort. Here you will find confidentiality, sympathy and a friendly place where you can take your time before deciding how to extricate yourself and when you will feel yourself ready to stand up and face the cool, refreshing wind of truth.”

Membership currently includes many evangelical Christian pastors, some liberal clergy, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Roman Catholic priests, a deconverted rector in the Church of Ireland, missionaries to Africa, Southern Baptist pastors, a Mormon elder, a number of Pentecostal preachers, three rabbis, an Orthodox monk who was thrown out of his monastery when he announced his lack of faith and a missionary in Southeast Asia. A former imam who lives in the U.K. may also join.

Jerry DeWitt, a former Pentecostal preacher in Louisiana who can now use his real name, was the group’s first “graduate.” He publicly announced his rejection of faith and left the ministry this summer. Some of the project members have been interviewed on Freethought Radio and on other media. (Those interviews can be heard at clergyproject.org.)

All applicants are carefully screened to protect the confidentiality of existing members. “If the identities of the active ministers were revealed to their congregations and community, all heaven would break loose,” quips Barker. No more than two “screeners” (who are current project members) know the actual identity and location of each member (held in strict confidence), and each active clergy must use a pseudonym within the group.

The Clergy Project exists in three parts: 1) a confidential, invitation-only forum; 2) a public website announcing and describing the project, with instructions on how to apply for membership; and 3) a Facebook page where nonclergy members can potentially interact with the project.

“This is exciting,” says Barker. “It’s not often we get a chance to ‘Save a Preacher!’”

Breaking the Spell author Daniel Dennett, who is currently working on part two of the “Preachers Who Are Not Believers” study, adds: “I am very happy to witness the launching of this vessel and to offer my wishes to all who are getting on board for a safe journey to better places.”

Include FFRF In Your Estate Planning

Arrange a bequest in your will or trust, or make the Freedom From Religion Foundation the beneficiary of an insurance policy, bank account, or IRA. It’s easy to do.

For related information (or to request a bequest brochure), please phone Annie Laurie Gaylor at (608) 256-8900.

FFRF

P.O. Box 750

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Freedom Depends on Freethinkers



FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

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What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

Founded in 1978 as a national organization of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics), the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc., works to keep state and church separate and to educate the public about the views of nontheists.

The Foundation’s e-mail address is info@ffrf.org. Please include your name and physical mailing address with all e-mail correspondence.

Foundation members wishing to receive online news releases, “action alerts” and “Freethought of the Day” should contact info@ffrf.org.



Declare and share your nonbelief in FFRF’s online “Out of the Closet” campaign! ffrf.org/out

Heads Up

A Poetry Column by Philip Appleman

This X-mas at Dingley Dell

Our coach is thundering four-in-hand
down snowy roads, through
cobble streets of villages . . .

(And were we happy back then,
on our two-week excursion flight,
the all-expense Holiday Package to Vegas?)

. . . through cobble streets of villages,
kids in red scarves waving us round
the tight, half-timbered corners —
cinnamon grog at a roistering inn
while the horses change,
then off again, the big wheels clanking
over the frozen roads, the coachman's bugle
mellow across the fields —
and at last the cheers of arrival,
and the hot punch steaming out
its brandy and wine and spices —
and later on, the innocent
lusty mistletoe: confusion and screams
and pretty faces in a glow —
and crackling logs and supper: goose
and suckling pig and ale
and the crusty plum pudding, and wassail
and songs and tales till midnight . . .

(Were we happy back then, roaring home
six miles above the clouds?)

Outside, the snow is silver, clean
as the untrodden moon —
the Century of Progress
is a century away.

© 2011 Philip Appleman

Freethought Today is pleased to publish this new poem.



Philip Appleman is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Indiana University. His published volumes of poetry include *Perfidious Proverbs and Other Poems: A Satirical Look at the Bible* (2011), *Darwin's Ark* (new 2009 edition) and *Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie* (2009). His nonfiction work includes the widely used *Norton Critical Edition, Darwin*, and the *Norton Critical Edition of Malthus' Essay on Population*. His poetry and fiction have won many awards, including a fellowship in poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Castagnola Award from the Poetry Society of America, the Humanist Arts Award from the American Humanist Association and the Friend of Darwin Award from the National Center for Science Education. His work has appeared in *Harper's Magazine*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, *The Paris Review*, *Partisan Review*, *Poetry*, and *The Yale Review*.

He and his playwright wife, Marjorie Appleman, are both Lifetime Members (four times over) of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. They recorded an excerpt of "Noah," "New and Selected Poems" is available for sale from FFRF for \$23 ppd., *The Norton Critical Edition, Darwin*, is \$22 ppd., *Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie*, \$27 ppd., *Darwin's Ark*, \$23 ppd., and *Perfidious Proverbs*, \$20 ppd. (ffrf.org/shop/).

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Sample Copies for \$2

Send \$2 with the name and address of each person you wish to receive a sample copy of Freethought Today to:

FFRF, P.O. Box 750, Madison WI 53701

Freedom depends upon freethinkers

(Please specify whether the individual is a freethinker.)



Overheard

We don't bite.

Sign held by a freethinking student in Pittsburgh to protest a decision by Duquesne University to not formally recognize a secular group on campus
Post-Gazette, 11-18-11

I'm not someone who likes to throw it into people's faces because it's a shocker. The first thing they say is, "Oh, you're so nice."

Susan Harrington, 47, Nampa, Idaho, on the surprise people express when they find out she's an atheist
Idaho Press-Tribune, 11-21-11

If you don't back down, we will help you meet [Jesus] quicker.

Statement that two Minnesota street preachers allege a Duluth police officer made after they refused to stop preaching at a 2010 holiday lighting display

Duluth News Tribune, 11-23-11

We just find ourselves here. With our individual birth we just "wake up" and discover ourselves in the midst of an extraordinary world of beauty and sorrow. All around us we see exquisite and exquisitely subtle orders played out effortlessly. From the lazy descent of fall leaves to the slow unfolding of cloudscapes in empty blue skies, it is all just here and we are just here to see it.

Commentary by astrophysicist Adam Frank, atheist and author of *About Time: Cosmology and Culture at the Twilight of the Big Bang*

National Public Radio, 11-25-11

Count the number of religious holidays, national and sectional, then add up the number of hours people spend every day saying their prayers and visiting temples, mosques, churches and gurdwaras, the days spent in pilgrimage to holy places, the hours taken up by satsangs or religious gatherings, discourses, kirtans, bhajans, jagratas (all-night singing of devotional songs), and so on. It will come to a staggering total.

Then ask yourself whether a poor developing country like ours can afford to lose so many millions of man-hours in pursuits that produce no material benefits.

Khushwant Singh, op-ed, "Prayer is useless"

The Times of India, 11-28-11

The number of organizations engaged in religious lobbying or religion-related advocacy in Washington, D.C., has increased roughly fivefold in the past four decades, from fewer than 40 in 1970 to more than 200 today.

Report by Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, "Lobbying for the Faithful"

pewforum.org, 11-21-11

It is very nice to have our own space.

Cadet 1st Class Nicole Johnson, 21, a pagan, on the outdoor site the U.S. Air Force Academy built to accommodate "Earth-based" beliefs

Los Angeles Times, 11-26-11

It's like Black Friday for religious schools, except without the long lines and pepper spray.

News story, "Christian colleges hurting for students," on how religious colleges are slashing tuition to attract students

Deseret News, 11-29-11

Outward displays of belief in God may be viewed as a proxy for trustworthiness, particularly by religious believers who think that people behave better if they feel that God is watching them.

While atheists may see their disbelief as a private matter on a metaphysical issue, believers may consider atheists' absence of belief as a public threat to cooperation and honesty.

University of British Columbia psychologist Ara Norenzayan, co-author of a study titled "Do You Believe in Atheists? Distrust Is Central to Anti-Atheist Prejudice"

Huffington Post, 12-1-11

YOUR WEEKLY ANTIDOTE TO THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

TUNE IN TO
FREETHOUGHT RADIO

produced by the
Freedom From Religion
Foundation



Hosted by Dan Barker and
Annie Laurie Gaylor

Broadcasts and streams Saturdays at 11 a.m. Central, Progressive Talk The Mic 92.1 FM, Madison, Wis., and over several other stations.

iTunes or podcasts archived at: ffrf.org/news/radio

**Slightly irreverent views,
news, music & interviews**

Theocracy Quotes

Ladies and gentlemen, America is in trouble. America's tax code is 10 times the length of the bible, and it is far less inspirational.

GOP U.S. Senate candidate Tommy Thompson, kicking off his campaign in Waukesha, Wis.

channel3000.com, 12-2-11

A country that has been since 1963 relentlessly in the courts driving God out of public life shouldn't be surprised at all the problems we have. Because we've in fact attempted to create a secular country, which I think is frankly a nightmare.

Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich, speaking at a forum at First Federated Church, Des Moines, Iowa

thinkprogress.org, 11-19-11

That person terrifies me because they completely misunderstand how weak and how limited any human being is.

Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich, on the thought that an atheist could be president

The Daily Beast, 11-20-11

I had an opportunity to read the speech, and I almost threw up. In my opinion, it was the beginning of the secular movement of politicians to separate their faith from the public square, and [Kennedy] threw faith under the bus in that speech.

Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum, speaking at the College of Saint Mary Magdalen about John Kennedy's 1960 speech on the importance of keeping state and church separate

NPR, 11-21-11

Santorum said teachers should be allowed to "teach the controversy" between the theory of evolution and any gaps in the study that would allow for dialogue on a divine beginning. "What I was advocating was teaching the intellectual debate in a classroom that most children would love to have," Santorum said. "Where do we come from? How did we get here?"

Presidential candidate Rick Santorum, advocating teaching creationism in schools

Nashua [N.H.] Telegraph, 11-29-11

I prayed and prayed and prayed. I'm a man of faith, I had to do a lot of praying for this one, more praying than I'd ever done before in my life. And when I finally realized that it was God saying that this is what I needed to do, I was like Moses, 'You've got the wrong man, Lord. Are you sure?'

Presidential candidate Herman Cain, telling the Young Republican National Federation in Atlanta why he's running, before suspending his campaign

National Journal, 11-12-11

Yesterday, 396 members agreed to reaffirm our national motto. Congressman Stark was one of nine members of Congress who disagreed. The 15th

Congressional District deserves a member of Congress who is in touch with its people, can work well with others and can honor our national motto.

Eric Swalwell, Democratic primary challenger to Rep. Pete Stark, D-Calif., on Stark's vote against "In God We Trust"

Contra Costa Times, 11-7-11

In the House of Representatives, what have you guys been doing, John [Boehner]? You've been debating a commemorative coin for baseball. You've had legislation reaffirming that "In God We Trust" is our motto. That's not putting people back to work. I trust in God, but God wants to see us help ourselves by putting people back to work.

President Barack Obama, speech urging action on the American Jobs Act

Huffington Post, 11-3-11

We need to bring [bible instruction] back into the schools because kids now, the new generation, just have so many issues. Whether you believe in God or not, it's still the word of God, and kids need to have that experience.

Wendy Labat, whose son is an eighth-grade student in public school in Clayton County, Ga.

Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 10-21-11

I think — look, anybody who's honest about it knows that no person except Christ has ever been perfect. So I don't claim to be the perfect candidate. I just claim to be a lot more conservative than Mitt Romney, and a lot more electable than anybody else.

GOP presidential candidate Newt Gingrich, South Carolina radio interview

"Charleston's Morning News with Kelly Golden," 11-28-11

There is a crisis in America. The solutions aren't going to be found politically. The solutions aren't going to be found economically. The solutions will be found in heaven.

Lewis Cataldo, director of The Response, an evangelical Christian group meeting in Cedar Rapids at River of Life Ministries ahead of the Iowa GOP presidential caucuses

Associated Press, 12-6-11

In the land of Islam, I can't let people decide what is permissible or what is prohibited. It is God who gives the answers as to what is right and what is wrong.

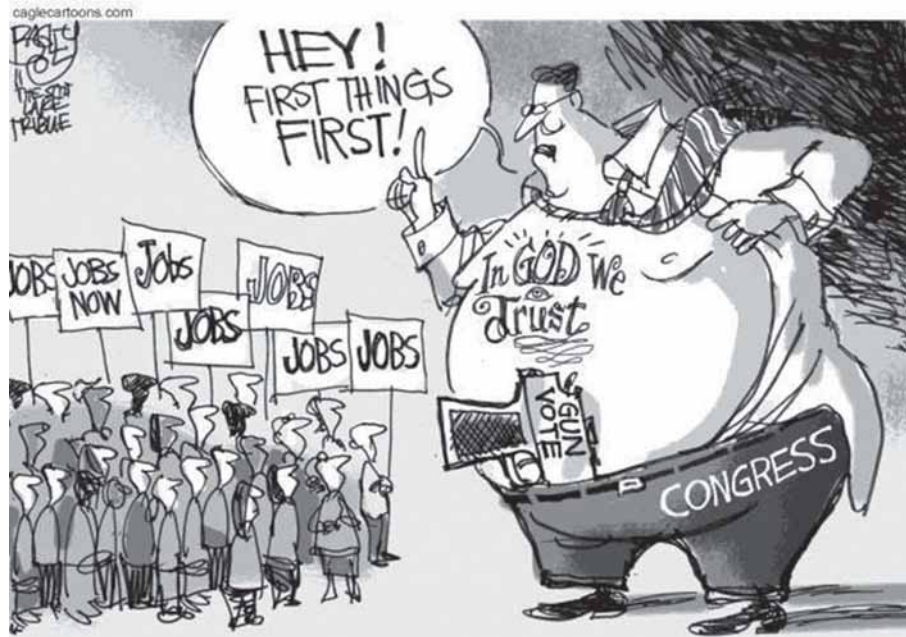
Yousseri Hamad, the spokesman for Egypt's Nour Party, political arm of the hardline Salafist Muslim movement

Associated Press, 12-3-11

And he grew up to become a leader with a servant's heart who taught us a message as simple as it is powerful — that we should love God and love our neighbor as ourselves.

President Barack Obama, referring to Jesus during the lighting of the National Christmas Tree in Washington

New York Daily News, 12-2-11



FFRF complaint: Priest robocall broke federal law

It took three years, but a complaint by FFRF resulted in action by the Federal Election Commission, which has deemed a priest's robocall a violation of federal law.

In November 2008, Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert wrote a letter to the FEC on behalf of a Colorado resident about a robocall message made by Fr. Bill Carmody, who has a Colorado Springs parish and was working with Informed Catholic Citizens (ICC).

Carmody exhorted citizens to vote "pro-life" for John McCain. Other calls were made targeting Democratic Senate candidate Mark Udall. The call by Carmody included this exhortation:

"Regardless of the spinning that some politicians have done, the Catholic Church's opposition to the evil of abortion has always been the same and is crystal clear. Why is it important in the election? John McCain has a record of supporting life. But in the words of Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput, Barack Obama is the most committed abortion rights presidential candidate of either major party in 35 years."

Markert's letter called attention to ICC engaging in illegal advocacy. Carmody, on ICC's behalf, clearly identified the federal candidates, outlining their positions on abortion and asked voters, in effect, to vote for a particular candidate.

The FEC's Factual Analysis confirmed FFRF's allegation that ICC violated several reporting codes in the Federal Campaign Act. ICC failed to disclose its independent expenditure, failed to file a 24-hour notice of its independent expenditure and failed to include the required disclaimer. ICC was a 501(c)(4) group headed by former U.S. Rep. Bob Beauprez, R-Colo. Its avowed purpose was to "assist you in finding the truth about the candidates and information necessary to make an educated choice consistent with Catholic doctrine."

ICC aimed to provide information on candidates regarding "the five non-negotiable doctrines of the Church: abortion, euthanasia, homosexual marriage, embryonic stem cell research, and human cloning." The FEC found that there was reason to believe that ICC violated the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, wrote FEC Attorney April Sands in an Oct. 27 letter to FFRF. "[It] appears that at least one of the ICC recorded calls — the Carmody call — contained express advocacy."

Because the Carmody call contained advocacy and ICC likely spent over \$250 on it, ICC was subject to independent expenditure reporting requirements, FEC's analysis said.

All of the Carmody calls were made by ICC within a week of the Nov. 4, 2008, election. ICC was a new lobbying group whose only major undertakings appeared to be the robocalls to Colorado citizens concerning two federal races.

"Lobbying groups spending more than \$250 on an independent political expenditure have an obligation to report to the FEC. Any such group spending \$1,000 or more within 20 days of an election on such calls is required to report the independent expenditure within 24 hours," noted Markert in her letter.

FEC found that ICC spent over \$1,000 in connection with the Carmody call after the 20th day of the election, adding to their repertoire of violations. The final piece of analysis further substantiated Markert's initial concerns:

"The Carmody Call did not contain the full required disclaimer, as it did not clearly state the address, telephone number, or website address of ICC and did not state that the communication was not authorized by any candidate or candidate's committee." The FEC has notified ICC, cautioning them about future elections, but it appears to be defunct.

"It seems the Informed Catholics group was highly misinformed," observed FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. "Congratulations to Rebecca Markert for a major victory."

Losing Faith In Faith: From Preacher To Atheist

by Dan Barker
"An arsenal for
skeptics.
A challenge to
believers."

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What Is a Freethinker?



free-think-er n. A person who forms opinions about religion on the basis of reason, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief.

'Merry Christmas, you sacrilegious sons of bitches'

Complaint ruffles Texans' feathers

"Don't you know what fucking Christmas is all about?"

"Merry Christmas, you sacrilegious sons of bitches."

— Crank callers to FFRF office, Dec. 14, 2011

After FFRF's letter Dec. 1 objecting to a nativity scene at the Henderson County Court House in Athens, Texas, and resistance to removing it, FFRF sent its Winter Solstice banner to go up as part of the holiday display.

A county commissioner said in a TV interview that the board "wouldn't object to other religious displays being put up on county property."

FFRF Staff Attorney Stephanie Schmitt wrote to County Attorney Clint Davis: "In response to the recent commissioners' statements indicating this is a public forum, we note that we plan to erect a display near the nativity scene. We have a local resident who has offered to put the display up on behalf of our county members."

FFRF's initial complaint set off a firestorm of controversy in the area, with hundreds of people rallying to support integration of church with state. FFRF was flooded with hate mail and phone calls in what appeared to be an orchestrated campaign.

Keep Athens Beautiful is the private group that has erected holiday displays that have included secular elements. The large nativity scene complete with an angel is a relatively new addition and is located by one of the four corners of the courthouse lawn. It is lit at night and isolated from the other decorations.

"The nativity is not integrated into an overall holiday display. Anybody walking by is going to say, 'Hmmm. This is a Christian government building. I'm not welcome here if I'm not Christian,'" said FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

FFRF sent a series of letters to Henderson County officials starting on Dec. 1 and Dec. 8, which included an open records request on Dec. 7 regarding any permits and policies the county may have employed or obtained.

FFRF discerned that the county created a de facto public forum by letting a private group erect the display year after year on government property.

"But even in this part of Texas it's not the Wild West," Gaylor wrote. "The county may not engage in content-based discrimination by allowing only Keep Athens Beautiful to erect a pro-Christian display.

"It must adopt a written even-handed policy and reasonable rules. That means 'finding room at the inn' for us nontheists, for Festivus poles or the Flying Spaghetti Monster."

A commissioner told media it would place FFRF's banner "when hell freezes over."

North Carolina sheriff plays God

FFRF is awaiting a response from the Onslow County Board of Commissioners in Jacksonville, N.C., regarding Sheriff Ed Brown's decision to violate the Constitution by distributing an overtly religious message.

Brown placed an ad in the Jacksonville Daily News on Oct. 23, 2011. The ad, signed by the sheriff himself, was addressed to "All Decent and Respectable Citizens of a Decent and Respectful Society." The top right hand corner of the ad displays the sheriff's official badge and seal.

The ad is a religious rant, warning "Wisdom comes from God." Brown wrote: "Remember there are no loopholes or places of opinion in the Law of God, The Ten Commandments."

Local complainants notified FFRF. Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott sent an advisory letter to the County Board on Nov. 16, requesting immediate action be taken to correct this transgression.

"This letter, endorsed by the county government in the person of the sheriff, is a violation of the Constitution. The sole purpose of the letter is to proselytize, to urge people to 'stand and be counted for the Cause of God,' and to bring people to the 'Truth of God,'" wrote Elliott.

FFRF requested that the Board of Commissioners confirm that no taxpayer funds were used for the ad.

FFRF keeps pressure on Jesus shrine

FFRF issued a formal request Nov. 22 to the U.S. Forest Service to uphold its original decision to deny the Knights of Columbus renewal of a special use permit for the Jesus shrine atop Big Mountain in Flathead National Forest, Montana.

FFRF has been involved with the case since May. The Forest Service heeded FFRF's advice and chose not to renew the permit this summer, but under pressure from influential Christian officials, agreed to revisit the issue and take formal public comments.

Designating the shrine as a phony "war memorial" or historical place, as well as proposing legislation to "swap" the public land the shrine is on for private land is unnecessary and in direct violation of the Constitution, FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor said.

Gaylor noted that the National Register Criteria for Evaluation requires that in order to qualify for a historical place, properties "are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history." The "Criteria Considerations" specifically bars "properties owned by religious institutions or used for religious purposes."



The leaning sign at the left of the Ellwood City nativity scene contains the First Amendment. It was placed by an individual, not by the borough.

FFRF sends banner to counter nativity

Last year, on behalf of local residents, FFRF protested a nativity scene that is owned, stored and has been erected annually by the borough of Ellwood City, Pa., for 50 years by the entrance to its Municipal Building.

The borough added a picture of a menorah half-hidden in a window and a cardboard Kwanzaa sign in a feeble attempt to make the nativity scene conform to Supreme Court precedent, which bars religious displays as the sole focus of displays on government property.

In late November, Mayor Anthony Court told CBS-TV in Pittsburgh that although he would not stop displaying the crèche each December, he was inviting FFRF to put up its own display.

On Dec. 1, Borough Manager Dom Vicarri phoned FFRF and said to send its Winter Solstice banner, adding that he would put the banner on the agenda for a vote at the Dec. 12 meeting.

FFRF duly mailed its banner, which reads: "At this season of the Winter Solstice, may reason prevail. There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell. There is only our natural world. Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds." (See a photo of the banner on the front page, taken before it was mailed.)

Area media circulated rumors that FFRF was "headed to Ellwood City in busloads" and noted that a motorcycle gang "with the stated objective of using the motorcycles to drown out the voices of any atheists with the temerity to

protest would show up." FFRF did not arrange for any such protests.

Instead, on Dec. 2, when the borough put up its display, 400 to 500 area angry citizens, armed with bayonet-sized crosses, attended a rally with public officials. The rally began with a Christian prayer. The mayor said, "I want everyone to realize the real reason why we're here today — that's for the nativity scene on our borough grounds."

A minister asked the crowd to pray with him and to tell the "Lord we thank you that you sent your son Jesus into this world." Norina Owens, Ellwood City resident and Founder of Women of Faith International Inc., joined the mayor in leading the rally. "We believe that God belongs in our city, and no one is going to remove Him," she said. Also speaking was State Rep. Jaret Gibbons, who issued an open letter against FFRF.

On Dec. 13, Ed Leymarie, an attorney representing the borough, called FFRF to say the board had not held its promised vote and would not consider the question until Dec. 19. "I question whether the content of your sign is too much," he said.

"This appears to be viewpoint-based censorship," said Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. "The town has created a public forum, invited us to send a sign to be displayed, and is not honoring its offer. It appears to simply be stalling us."

Stay tuned . . .

FFRF scrutinizes Camp Pendleton cross

An unauthorized Latin cross suddenly appearing at Camp Pendleton in California must come down, FFRF said in a Nov. 28 letter to Commanding Officer Col. Nicholas Marano. A military chaplain and several other people erected the cross Nov. 11 on a hill in the Camp Horno area.

"No court of final resort has ever upheld the government's permanent display of a Latin cross on public land as constitutional," wrote FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, who added

that "the Latin cross stands for Christianity and the overall display promotes Christianity."

The cross "conveys the message to the 24% of the U.S. population who are not Christians that they are not 'favored members of the political community,'" noted Gaylor.

Up to 23.4% of military personnel identified as atheist, agnostic or have no religious preference, according to a 2010 Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers study.

FFRF victories

FFRF stops school assembly prayer

Zachary Community School District in Louisiana promised to refrain from prayer at district events after receiving a letter of complaint from FFRF.

On Oct. 17, Zachary High School held a district-wide assembly to celebrate its recent ranking in the state's accountability plan. Before the start of the assembly, parents and students were asked to bow their heads in prayer as an invocation was given over the PA system.

Patrick Elliott, FFRF staff attorney, sent a letter to Superintendent Warren Drake on behalf of a concerned parent. Elliott requested that Drake commence an immediate investigation into the illegal prayer. Elliott pointed out that prayer at a school-sponsored event violated the district's own policy, which states that "no student attending the school shall be required to participate in any religious activity at school."

In a Dec. 2 response, Drake said he apologized "if anyone was offended, as this was not our intent and [we] will refrain from saying a prayer at any such event in the future."

Texas school drops addiction to Jesus

The North Lamar Independent School District in Paris, Texas, promised to end school-sponsored religious messages at school assemblies after receiving a letter of objection from FFRF.

At an assembly in October, North Lamar High School Principal Paul Allen discussed drug abuse by high school students. Allen recited passages and teachings from the bible, telling students that "Christ died for the just and the unjust." Allen also implied that "people that don't have God in their life, and people that don't believe in something more" are manufacturing or selling addictive substances.

On Nov. 16, FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott wrote a letter to Superintendent James Dawson, informing him that, "It is coercive and inappropriate for a school official at a school function to promote religion to a captive group of impressionable students

in attendance."

In his Nov. 21 response, Dawson said, "Since the assembly, I have had discussions with administrative staff on the topic and offer assurance that there will be no more school-sponsored religious messages at assemblies in the North Lamar Independent School District."

FFRF advocates for nonreligious seniors

The Senior Center at Eules Family Life Center in Texas no longer hosts a religious display, thanks to FFRF.

The religious display included a Latin cross with patriotic symbols and a U.S. flag under a sign that read, "When you can't see God's hand, trust his heart."

The Family Life Center is a public facility. On behalf of several local complainants, FFRF Staff Attorney Stephanie Schmitt wrote a Nov. 22 letter to Recreation Center Supervisor Heidi Taylor. In her letter, Schmitt noted the religious display, "is particularly offensive to veterans and other seniors who do not believe in the Christian god."

Seven days later, Recreation Superintendent Mike Davenport confirmed that the display has been removed.

Gideons shown door after FFRF letter

On Nov. 4, members of Gideons International were allowed to enter Liberty-Eylau Middle School in Texarkana, Texas, to distribute bibles to fifth graders at lunch.

After being contacted by a concerned parent, FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott wrote a Nov. 11 letter to Superintendent Nick Blain, informing him of the constitutional violation.

In a Nov. 22 response, a school attorney told FFRF that the district had already stopped distribution of "unauthorized materials on its school campuses. . . . If you receive information that there have been some unauthorized distribution of bibles at any of the Liberty-Eylau school campuses, please contact me immediately."

Elliott further noted that Jefferson allegedly urged congregants to bring their absentee ballots to him so he could help them fill out the ballots.

IRS regulations prohibit 501(c)(3) organizations, including churches, from "[participating in or intervening in] . . . any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office."

While leaders of churches or religious organizations may express their opinions on political matters as individuals, they are precluded from making "partisan comments in official organization publications or at official functions of the organization."

Jefferson was speaking as an official of the church and introduced himself as "pastor," using an official church website to endorse candidates.

"The IRS should take appropriate action to remedy any violations of 501(c)(3) regulations," Elliott said.



Have a cuppa Joe on Jesus



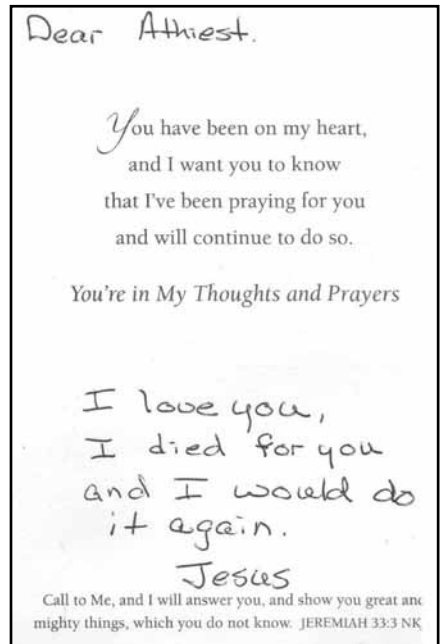
Jim Bach's Jesus-free Jeep.

Jim Bach writes from Ohio: I frequent Dunkin' Donuts and usually end up there at the same time and in the same parking spot. Apparently, one of my friendly neighborhood saviors also regularly partakes of Dunkin' and had planned an intervention of sorts. As I enjoyed my coffee one morning, I noticed an SUV that had just patronized the drive-through had backed into the space next to mine. The driver disembarked and scurried to the rear hatch of her vehicle. After fumbling around for a minute or two, she climbed back in and sped away.

That seemed a little strange, but I thought little of it. I finished my coffee and went out to find this greeting card (see photo) under my wiper. She also wrote on the card, "By your license plate, I see you do not believe in me. That's OK. I still believe in you. Enjoy your next cup of coffee on me. I'll be waiting to talk to you anytime, just call on me." Attached was a free Dunkin' beverage card.

I got a chuckle from the thought of this woman wasting her time, money and energy planning and executing this little mission. But after putting a little more thought into her actions, three things occurred to me:

- This card was given to me under false pretenses by a con artist. I think even the most devout would agree that the writing in the card was penned not by Jesus but by the woman who left it for me. I'm no theologian, but passing



yourself off as Jesus Christ seems a little blasphemous.

- She did not purchase this free coffee card; it was provided to her by a coffee shop. The beverage is not on Jesus or her. If anything, it is on Dunkin' Donuts.

- Given this woman's apparent level of righteousness, it's likely she does not condone or support abortion. Yet she gladly purchased a card made in communist China, a country in which abortions are not only state-funded, but state-mandated for population control.

Fighting graduation prayer, and winning

Harrison Hopkins, 18, who graduated in June 2011 from Laurens District High School in Laurens, S.C., gave this speech Oct. 8 at FFRF's 34th annual convention in Hartford, Conn. Harrison, with FFRF's help, had warded off a vote by his senior class to allow prayer at graduation, which caused a furor in the community and the region. He received a \$1,000 FFRF student activist award at the convention.



By Harrison Hopkins

Before I get into my story, I should probably tell you all a little about my religious background [pause. . .] Well, that was easy.

I was never forced to go to church, and I can't say that I ever really believed. Sure, at the time, I would have called myself a Christian, but only because I didn't know of anything else. It wasn't until middle school that I found out about the term "atheist," and then I finally knew what I could call myself.

Looking back, the only time church was ever suggested to me was during the summer when I would visit my grandma, but even then it wasn't forced on me. I can remember pretending to be asleep on Sundays to avoid having to go to church.

School was a different story. Being in the South, state/church violations aren't too much of a surprise. In fifth grade, the Gideons came and passed out little red New Testaments. In eighth grade, a prayer was said over the intercom at our "graduation" ceremony. Finally, in my senior year, the school was giving the senior class the chance to vote on whether to have a prayer at graduation.

I learned of the vote during my junior year. The teacher who mentioned it claimed that because it was being voted on by the students, it wasn't a problem. That didn't sound legal to me.

I went home and did some research, and lo and behold, it wasn't. On Hemant Mehta's Friendly Atheist blog, I found out about a case extremely similar to mine in Indiana. Some of you may remember Eric Workman, who received an FFRF award at last year's convention. I followed his case, and once the ruling was made in his favor, I got a bit of a boost of confidence, thinking that maybe I'd file a complaint against my own school.

It got pushed to the back of my mind until the second semester of my senior year. Knowing that the time for the vote had to be coming up soon, I



Harrison receives a \$1,000 scholarship check from staffer Katie Daniel on behalf of FFRF.

started doing research again. I found a few more related cases, one of which was the case of Jessica Ahlquist, who as a sophomore was speaking out against a prayer banner displayed in her Rhode Island high school. She had created a Facebook group for supporting her cause, so I joined it and watched it progress.

In early April, I found out from a member of student government that the vote was scheduled to take place at a senior class meeting April 19. I started looking up who I could file a complaint with. I knew of ACLU's involvement with Eric's case. Coincidentally, as I was looking for organizations, Jessica messaged me.

Back when I had joined her group, I mentioned the violation at my school in a chat. She remembered that and messaged me to ask about it. After we talked for a while, she told me how to file a complaint with FFRF.

That night, April 13, I filed a complaint with both the ACLU and the FFRF.

FFRF's quick response

I didn't expect to hear anything for at least a few weeks, but much to my surprise, FFRF responded the very next day and sent a letter to the school's principal and superintendent. The letter basically told the school, "Hey, what you're planning to do is illegal. Quit that."

With that, I got a bit excited. The five days until the meeting passed at a snail's pace. Finally, the day arrived. Seniors were dismissed from class and congregated in the auditorium. The meeting went on, and then, there was no vote!

Things seemed great! But then I looked through the papers that had been handed out. On a page entitled "Tips for Graduation" was the sentence, "The ceremony is not over until after the prayer and recessional."

As soon as I got out of school that day, I called Rebecca Markert, the FFRF staff attorney who had sent the letter and was handling my case. I told her that there was no vote, but also told

her about the sentence on the "tips" page. She sent the school a letter about the handout.

After a few more days, FFRF received a response. The letter was a bit of a laugh. The school had written back stating that after talking to their lawyers, they had decided to end the tradition of holding a vote for prayer at graduation in order to avoid creating a basis for a legal challenge. But, they went on to say, according to a state law called the South Carolina Student-Led Messages Act, they were unable to prevent speakers from saying whatever they wanted during the opening and closing remarks.

After that, they mentioned that their understanding is that "no court with jurisdiction over South Carolina has held that a student-initiated prayer at a . . . graduation ceremony is unconstitutional."

I guess they forgot about the Supreme Court.

I figured that after that response, it would be all over. I was wrong.

It took a couple of days, but people finally realized "Hey, what about the prayer vote?" Student government was the first to know of its cancellation since the student body president was supposed to lead the prayer, and the

All photography: Jeff Yardis

Graduation tip: 'The ceremony is not over until after the prayer and recessional.'

news trickled down from there.

Being the only outspoken atheist at the school, it was quickly connected to me. When asked about it, I was honest "Yeah, I filed the complaint."

A few arguments arose at my lunch table after this, but nothing too serious. Things seemed to quiet down for a bit, until — someone called the local news channel.

Complaint fallout

It wasn't until a friend spotted a news van in front of the school that I knew about this. She stopped, thinking it was possibly related to the prayer. Guess what? It was. She asked if they'd be interested in interviewing the person who filed the complaint. Of course they were, so I was called, and the next thing I knew I had to abandon my dinner in order to get to the school in time to be interviewed.

That night, the interview with me and a student who was in favor of the prayer aired. Things blew up again, this time even bigger than before.

That night I was flooded with friend requests on Facebook, and started to see people's reactions to it. I started taking screenshots of the reactions, the vast majority of which were negative. Some examples:

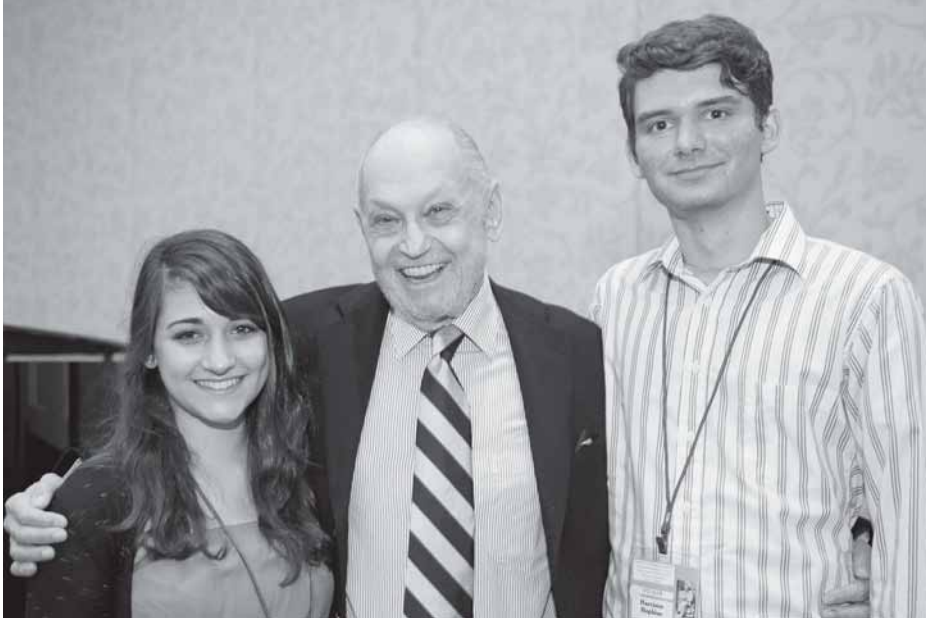
"I think it's ridiculous that a prayer can't be said at our graduation because someone doesn't feel 'included.'" "For those who got prayer taken out of MY graduation, I'll pray for YOU!" My personal favorite: "Now I'm no fan of senseless violence, but . . . this kid needs to be taken out back and have his ass kicked to beat some sense into him."

Christian love, right there.

I decided to take it all in stride. A person posted on my wall, asking "Why I wasted my money on that" and calling me devil boy. Someone else called me the "antichrist." Later, I decided to sign yearbooks with those nicknames.

Over the next few weeks, tensions





Student activist honorees Jessica Ahlquist and Harrison Hopkins with fellow honoree Charles Strouse (center), Broadway composer and atheist.

On my way to my ride home, someone yelled ‘Jesus loves you!’

were high in school. A petition started circulating within the school and community to get prayer added back to the ceremony. A “prayer chain” was planned to surround the school during the graduation. Anytime I walked through the halls, all eyes were on me. “God loves you!” was shouted at me from behind my back.

Arguments flared up again during lunch, this time getting to the point where they were just shouting matches, resulting in me being called “close-minded” and one girl refusing to sit with us for a week. Rumors of people planning to beat me up circulated throughout the school. Luckily, nothing ever came from those.

Not all of the reactions were bad, however. People would come up to me at times and tell me “Hey, I’m an atheist, thanks for standing up for us.” Sometimes, even Christians would come up and say that they agreed with what I did. Messages on Facebook starting coming in from people who had graduated in the years before, saying that the prayer had made them uncomfortable and applauding me for being the person who finally took a stand against it.

Over the next few weeks, I started speaking out more about it. I was interviewed for the local newspaper, which ended up writing what I consider the most unbiased coverage of

the issue locally. I was interviewed for two radio shows — one in Rhode Island and the other being FFRF’s very own Freethought Radio. I was also interviewed for two books about student activists.

I started working with other student activists as well. Jessica Ahlquist and I reached out to Damon Fowler after first hearing about his case on the website *reddit.com*. Later, the three of us ended up doing a sort of interview on the site, which ended up with more than 3,000 comments.

Graduation day

Soon enough it was June 2, the day of graduation.

The prayer chain I mentioned earlier ended up being moved to a parking lot down the road. We just happened to drive by it on the way to the school, and there were only about 20 people there.

The ceremony started, and the student body president began to speak.

“I’d like to thank our administration, our teachers, our parents, but there’s one more person I’d like to thank, and that person is God. Will you join me in prayer?”

Cheers erupted from the crowd both before and after the prayer, and people turned to look at me. I wasn’t surprised; he had stated in an interview that he was still going to pray when he spoke. People had also been bragging on Facebook that all four student speakers were going to pray.

But that was the only prayer at the ceremony. The only other mention was made by the valedictorian, who at first said that we should not have been so divided over the prayer controversy, and that we were all still classmates. A nice sentiment, but he then went on to state that he disagreed completely with those against the prayer, and that it served only to strengthen his faith.

Of course, he was met with cheers as well.

After the ceremony, a friend came up to tell me he’d overheard people again planning to beat me up. Luckily, it didn’t happen, although on my way to my ride home, someone yelled “Jesus loves you!”

And with that, my story at Laurens District 55 High School ends. But my story in the secular movement had only just begun.

In late June, I spoke at the Center for Inquiry’s Student Leadership Conference on a panel with other student activists: Jessica Ahlquist, Damon Fowler and Zack Kopplin. [Zack, a Baton Rouge senior, successfully challenged teaching creationism in Louisiana.] In July I attended the Secular Student Alliance Annual Conference. Over the

summer I was starting to look into what I needed to do to start an SSA affiliate at the college I was going to attend, Presbyterian College in Clinton, S.C., only 10 minutes away from my former high school.

That has just paid off. As of last Sunday [10-2-11], the Secular Student Alliance at Presbyterian College is an officially recognized group. Already I’ve received messages and emails from upperclassmen and even from alumni who have said that they had wished the group was around when they were freshmen.

With my group, I hope to continue to remain active in the secular movement and help get others more active. I hope to see nonreligious students more accepted, not just on my own

campus but at least in the surrounding community.

I hope to help people see that they aren’t alone, and that even in the bible belt there are nonbelievers just like them, and that they don’t have to remain silent about it.

Harrison Hopkins, 18, graduated from Laurens District 55 High School, in Laurens, S.C. He contacted FFRF to complain about a scheduled senior class vote in April over whether to pray at graduation. That vote was officially stopped, although students organized protest prayers. He is attending Presbyterian College. His interests include computers and the internet, marksmanship, and as of recently, activism. He is an atheist.

After complaint, FFRF tackles teaching creationism in Kiel, Wis.

FFRF is warning the Board of Education in Kiel, Wis., to reject a proposal to teach creationism in public schools.

A concerned parent notified FFRF that the board intends to take up the issue at its meeting Feb. 1, 2012. Last September, the board discussed “alternate theories on the origin of man/life, namely providing a balanced view of the subject.” The discussion of “alternate theories include[d] creationism.”

In a Dec. 8 letter to the board, FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott wrote that teaching “creationism, intelligent design, or any of their creatively named offspring in public school” is unconstitutional. “Time and again, courts exposed these proposals as an attempt to foist religious beliefs onto vulnerable schoolchildren, often after a costly legal battle.”

After citing numerous court cases “consistently reject[ing] the promotion of creationism and its ilk in the public schools,” Elliott wrote: “Every

attempt to smuggle religion into science classrooms by means of ‘alternative theories’ has failed.”

Elliott also clarified the difference between a “theory” in the layperson’s sense of the word” and a “scientific theory” by quoting the American Association for the Advancement of Science: “A scientific theory is a well-substantiated explanation of some aspect of the natural world, based on a body of facts that have been repeatedly confirmed through observation and experiment. . . . The theory of biological evolution is more than ‘just a theory.’”

The “misunderstanding of these terms often leads to a misunderstanding of evolution, the vast weight of evidence supporting evolution, and of its overwhelming acceptance in the scientific community,” noted Elliott.

FFRF asked the board to “reject any irresponsible proposal to inject religious dogma into the science curriculum.”

In Virginia case, judge grants protective order in FFRF suit

U.S. District Court Judge Michael Urbanski granted the plaintiffs’ motion to proceed using pseudonyms and a protective order in FFRF’s and the ACLU of Virginia’s lawsuit against the Giles County School Board for unconstitutionally displaying the Ten Commandments at Narrows High School.

The plaintiffs, a student and parent on whose behalf the suit was filed in September, will continue to be known as Doe 1 and Doe 2, Urbanski ruled Dec. 12. Earlier, Urbanski had refused to dismiss the case.

“The Court further instructs that no harassment, threats, intimidation or interference with the Plaintiffs will be tolerated and violators will be subject to contempt proceedings,” the order said.

Mathew Staver of the Christian-based Liberty Counsel, representing

the school district, wanted the names made public: “You can’t shadow box when you don’t know who’s punching.”

“Don’t you think [anonymity] might be appropriate when you have the chairman of the Board of Supervisors calling these people anonymous cowards?” Urbanski asked Staver during oral arguments, the Roanoke Times reported. “That didn’t just come from a man on the street, that came from a public official.”

ACLU lawyer Rebecca Glenberg cited other comments made at public meetings or in emails to FFRF and ACLU. “Keep up the good work, you’ll have a special place in Hell,” one person wrote. Another said, “Sure sounds like non-Christians ought to move out of Giles County before things get ugly over there.”



Professor Steven Pinker:

Rationality reduces violence

This is an edited transcript of a speech given Oct. 7, 2011, at FFRF's 34th national convention in Hartford, Conn. Online audio is at ffrf.org/outreach/convention/. Pinker, a Harvard University evolutionary psychologist, is an Honorary Director of FFRF and is married to Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, who accepted a Freethought Heroine award from FFRF the same evening.

By Steven Pinker

I don't have a right to be speaking to you tonight; I'm a parasite. I intended to be in the audience for the award to be given to Rebecca Newberger Goldstein. But when I had the opportunity to do something that might entertain you and help the Foundation, I couldn't say no.

Rebecca and I have been to all the secular, humanist and freethinker conventions and this one, by far, has the best music. Tom Lehrer, referring to the Spanish Civil War, sang "They won all the battles, but we had the best songs." But the Freedom from Religion Foundation won all the battles and has the best songs.

I would like to explore the implications of my new book, *The Better Angels Of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, for the topic that concerns all of us here, namely, religion. It's a little-appreciated fact that violence at scales large and small has been in decline for thousands of years. We may be living in the most peaceful era of our species' existence. The decline has not been smooth, to put it mildly. It hasn't brought rates of violence down to zero. And it isn't guaranteed to continue. But it is a phenomenon that can be documented on scales from millennia to years, from world wars and genocides to the spanking of children and the treatment of animals.

The first historical decline of violence accompanied the first major transition in human history—from the small-scale anarchic bands and tribes in which our species spent most of its evolutionary history, to the first settled states with cities and governments. This resulted, according to estimates from forensic analysis of prehistoric skeletons and estimates of death rates in tribal warfare from recent hunter/gatherers, in about a five-fold decrease in the rate of violent death.

There was a subsequent decline in rates of homicide during the transition from medieval times to modernity, at least in Europe, where homicide statistics go back seven or eight centuries. A medieval Englishman had about a 35 times greater chance of being murdered than his modern descendants.

A third major transition was the Enlightenment-era humanitarian reforms: the abolition of what our Constitution calls cruel and unusual punishment. They weren't all that unusual in those days, but they were plenty cruel, including breaking on the wheel, burning at the stake, disemboweling, impalement and mutilation. These punishments were meted out for such crimes and misdemeanors as heresy,



All photography: Jeff Yardis

'Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.'

blasphemy, unconventional sexual practices, criticizing the royal garden and robbing a rabbit warren. During this humanitarian revolution, growing parts of the world saw the abolition of slavery, debt bondage, blood sports, the persecution of religious heresy and execution for frivolous reasons.

For example, in the 18th century, England had 222 capital crimes, including stealing cabbages and moral turpitude in children. By the 19th century, those had been whittled down to four. In the U.S., a majority of executions in colonial times and in the early years of the republic were for nonviolent crimes like concealing birth and counterfeiting. Even though the U.S. is an outlier compared to other western democracies and still has the death penalty, we execute people at a tiny fraction of the rate that our ancestors did.

A fourth transition is what historians call the "Long Peace." It is a remarkable and seldom-appreciated fact that since 1945, developed states have stopped going to war with each other. We take it for granted that war is something that happens in poor parts of the world. But any student of European history knows that was not always true. It was the powerful, rich, most developed states of their times that were constantly at each other's throats. That ended after World War II. Most dramatically, the two biggest superpowers, the U.S. and Russia, never fought a war directly with each other.

One might reply, "What's so great about a Long Peace if they're still fighting wars in poorer parts of the world?" Well, it has taken a while, but the idea that peace is better than war is spreading to the rest of the world. Since the end of the Cold War in 1990, there has been a plummeting of the number of wars and the rate of death in war all over the world. During the peak years of World War II, the worldwide rate of

death was about 300 per 100,000 per year. In the late '40s and early '50s, it was about 20 to 25 per 100,000. In the 1960s through the 1980s, it averaged 4 per 100,000 per year. In the 1990s, it was 1.5.

In the 2000s, it's been a half a person per 100,000 per year. So the dreams of the 1960s folk singers are starting to come true: the world is almost putting an end to war.

Finally, there are the various "rights revolutions" of the postwar period: civil rights, women's rights, gay rights and children's rights, and now animal rights. This has resulted in reductions in lynchings, hate crimes, rape, spousal abuse, spousal homicide, child abuse, spanking, corporal punishment in schools, laws that criminalize homosexuality, hunting, callousness to laboratory animals and the eating of meat.

Religion's role

What does any of this have to do with religion? One of the questions I am frequently asked is, "Hasn't religion been responsible for a lot of the violence in human history?" And another is: "Hasn't the decline of violence been pushed along by religion?"

The Better Angels of Our Nature is a book about numbers. It has a hundred graphs, and whenever I take up questions like "Was the 20th century the worst in history?" or "How bad was religion in human affairs?" I try to find numbers collected by the people called "atrocitologists" or "necromatricians." The terms come from one of them, Matthew White, author of the highly recommended *Great Big Book of Horrible Things*, which reviews the hundred worst things that people have done to each other that we know of.

White recounts a friend of his musing aloud, "I wonder what percentage of the world's suffering has been caused by religion?" He answered,

"Ten percent." White had calculated the death tolls from various causes such as greed, exploitation, decadent emperors and megalomaniac conquerors, and estimated that about 47 million deaths over the course of history can be attributed to religion. Now, of course, defenders of religion can say, "We're responsible for no more than 10% of the world's mass murders!" But given the pretensions of religion to be a force for peace, to have caused 10% needs a little bit of explaining.

Religious "multicides," as White calls them, are easy to find. If we consider the events narrated in the bible to be not literally true but as recording common practices of the time, then we find one genocide after another, many of them commanded by Yahweh, who generally commands the Israelites to massacre every last man, woman and child, though he sometimes allows them to spare the attractive young women so they could rape them and take them as wives.

The New Testament, for its part, is a valorization of the practice of human sacrifice. This custom was exercised with relish by all of the early states and civilizations, some of which placated their gods by massacring people by the hundreds of thousands, generally after a long period of torture. The theory of causation was that the world is full of nasty surprises, like wars, pestilence and famine. What kind of a god would create a world like that? It must be a bloodthirsty god. Maybe if we satisfy him by killing people proactively, we'll save ourselves from being his next victim.

Human sacrifice did die out in most civilizations. Judaism was founded in large part on the rejection of human sacrifice: goats and cattle took the place of children. But human sacrifice did survive in one of the breakaway sects of Judaism. The basis of Christianity is that the most wonderful event in human history, the "Good News," was



an instance of human sacrifice: God allowed an innocent man to be tortured to death in exchange for not visiting a worse fate on the rest of humanity.

Incidentally, when someone today complains about violent entertainment, such as video games or Hollywood splatter flicks, they should look at the lives of the martyred saints, described with pornographic relish in the early hagiographies. They are by far the most revolting, prurient form of violent entertainment I have ever seen. The early saints were depicted as having been subjected to hideous torture and mutilation, much of it sexualized.

From the Crusades on

The Crusades killed an estimated 1 million people, mostly Jews and Muslims. The world's population at the time was one-sixth of what it was in the middle of the 20th century. That works out on a prorated per capita rate to about 6 million deaths, a number which has a chilling resonance.

The European Wars of religion, such as the 80 Years' War, the English Civil War, the 30 Years' War, and the French Huguenot War, were among the bloodiest events in history. The 30 Years' War in Germany had a death toll that, adjusted for the world's population, was greater than the death rate in World War I and approaches that of World War II in Europe.

Then there was the annihilation of native peoples, especially Native Americans, who were often given the choice to convert or die. Sometimes the choice was recited to them in Latin. Oddly enough, they did not see the light. When the Pequot Indians in New England were exterminated, the Protestant minister Increase Mather offered a prayer thanking God for sending 600 heathen souls to hell. This



did not hurt his career: He went on to become the president of Harvard University.

Many faculty at Harvard are affiliated with a residential house; I'm affiliated with one named after him. I asked the master of Mather House if it was named after Cotton or Increase. She said, "Oh, Increase, for sure — I know that because our motto is 'Increase Mather's spirit.'"

Many of the humanitarian reforms of the Enlightenment were vigorously opposed by the Catholic Church. One of the most important, liberating books in human history was Cesare Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764). Beccaria laid out a meticulous case against torture as a form of criminal punishment, which laid the rationale for the criminal justice system we have today, with its graded series of punishments

The Crusades killed an estimated 1 million people, mostly Jews and Muslims.

calibrated to the severity of the crime, rather than using torture, mutilation, and execution for even the most frivolous offense. Beccaria reasoned that if you mete out a severe punishment for a minor crime, anyone who commits a minor crime will figure, "Well, I may as well commit a major crime. I'm going to get punished the same anyway." Beccaria argued that instead of prescribing horrific punishments and applying them unpredictably, a criminal justice system should set up deterrents designed to reduce the aggregate amount of violence. And to do so, it's better to have small, reliable punishments than horrific, unpredictable ones. His treatise was placed on the papal index of forbidden books.

Superstition and ideology

Why did religion so often lead to violence, instead of preventing it? There are a number of reasons.

One is the perpetuation of superstition. If you believe that there is a cruel god whose thirst for blood must be regularly slaked; if you believe Jews killed Jesus; if you believe that children are possessed by the devil, which must be beaten out of them; if you believe that God created a hierarchy of races; if you believe that soulless animals were put on Earth for humans to exploit; if you believe homosexuality is a sin — then you have plenty of moral reasons why violence is not only permissible but mandatory. As Voltaire said, "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities."

Another dangerous feature of many religions is a utopian ideology (a feature shared with certain nonreligious ideologies that have licensed vast amounts of violence, such as Nazism and communism).

One might ask, "Who could be against utopia? Granted, a utopia may not be practical for all kinds of practical reasons, but shouldn't our reach exceed our grasp? Wouldn't 10% of a perfect world be better than what we have now?" The answer is no, for two reasons.

First, if you have a belief system that holds out the prospect of infinite good, then you can commit arbitrary amounts of violence in pursuit of this infinitely good world, and you're always ahead of the game. The benefits exceed the costs; the ends justify the means. Second, if you're convinced that you have the formula for obtaining infinite good forever, and there are people who learn about your plan and oppose it, then how evil are they? They are the obstacle to an infinitely good world. Which means that they are arbitrarily evil, and deserving of arbitrarily severe punishment.

That's why demonizing, utopian ideologies led to many of the largest death tolls in history. A common meme circulating among opponents of the New Atheism and defenders of religion as a source of morality is that atheistic regimes of the 20th century killed far more people than religion. Well, that's probably true. Perhaps 70 to 80 million people were killed by communist regimes, and only 40 million by reli-

gion. But is coming in only at second place (or third, or fourth) in history's list of great atrocities really something to be proud of? In any case, the "atheist regime" meme is propagandistic and highly misleading. For one thing, Nazism wasn't an atheistic movement. Hitler wasn't an atheist, and many Nazi leaders were devout Christians.

Indeed one prominent movement, documented in Stiegman-Gall's *The Holy Reich*, fused Nazism and Christianity. More importantly, neither Nazism nor communism defined their ideologies as a rejection of God; they were defined in terms of race and class conflict. It's only a religious mindset that divides political systems into those that believe in the Judeo-Christian God and those that don't. It is no more sensible



than dividing belief systems into those that are Zoroastrian and those that aren't, or those who believe in astrology and those who don't.

There's a clear divide between toxic and benevolent belief systems. The toxic ones posit a utopia, together with demons that stand in the way. Some of these demonizing ideologies are religious, some are not. The more benevolent ones, which grew out of the Enlightenment but had roots in ancient Greece, one can call classical liberalism, enlightenment humanism or secular humanism.

Charting the trends

It was an appreciation of Enlightenment humanism that gave me something of a coherent narrative for the historical trends that I document. It seems spooky that so many historical trends seem to be pushing in the same direction. Why, at the same time as states stopped waging war with each other, did they also decriminalize homosexuality and stop spanking their children? You can imagine a history in which some trends went in one direction and others went in the opposite direction. Why does there seem to be an arrow pointing away from violence in the course of human history? Some people even see it as a vindication of the idea of divine purpose — though that raises the question of why the divine agent allowed so many people to be tortured and slaughtered in the first place. If you're a divine planner, why not build peace in from the start?

It is fitting that I am the warmup act for Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, because it was she that shaped the line of thinking that allowed me to make sense of all the history I review. Rebecca is an analytic philosopher, a scholar of modern Western philosophy — of Spinoza in particular, but also a fan of David Hume and of Bertrand Russell. And she showed me that there is a co-



herent moral system that comes out of a commitment to rationality and objectivity.

It begins by making sense of the word "ought." What ought we to do? How ought we to arrange our affairs? There's something in nature of logic that is going to push you in the moral direction. As soon as you're part of a community of rational agents interacting with one another, you can no longer say that my needs, my goals, my interests are special just because I'm me and you're not, at least not if you want anyone to take you seriously.

That means that is impossible to justify a rationale for exploitative violence: for rape, for colonial conquest, for torture as a form of entertainment, for war insensitive to its human costs. These rationales start to evaporate as a society organizes itself along rational lines. And that is our best interpretation of the great arrow in the sky that seems to be pointing peaceward.

I'm not a philosopher; I got most of my philosophy from Rebecca. I'm a social scientist, so I look for cause and effect in the empirical world. My professional question is not whether there is a rational pathway that leads away from violence, but how our not-always-so-rational species has been able to find it. The best answers I came up with are that certain material and cultural changes have allowed humans to better approximate the rational ideal over the course of history.

Enlightenment projects such as universal literacy, freedom of speech and assembly, freedom of movement with its cosmopolitan mixing of people, and universal education, have haltingly, lurchingly, slowly, with lots of local reversals and exceptions, managed to get people to reason their way out of superstition and ignorance and to see the follies of the tribalism and deference to authority and puritanism that are part of human nature.

Over time, as these rational facilities were honed in the crucible of debate and free speech, more and more of the world realized that nonviolence was really a more rational way to organize our affairs.

*Steven Pinker, published extensively in the fields of linguistics and experimental psychology, taught at MIT for 21 years and now is Johnstone Professor of Psychology at Harvard. He is a 2004 Emperor Has No Clothes award recipient. Along with *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011, available for \$40 from ffrf.org/shop), his books include *The Language Instinct* (1994), *How the Mind Works* (1997), *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (2002), and *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* (2007).*

Phoenix, Tucson FFRF'ers 'Out of the Closet'

Nine myth-dispelling billboards featuring Phoenix-area nonbelievers and families, plus two billboards in Tucson, went up for a month in November as part of FFRF's personalized "Out of the Closet" project.

Phoenix and Tulsa are the fifth and sixth cities in the "friendly neighborhood nontheist" PR campaign.

The colorful billboards, organized with the local chapter, FFRF Valley of the Sun, and its director Anne Mardick, feature the friendly faces of atheists, agnostics and freethinkers along with their personal freethought "testimonials." Members in Tucson, Tempe, Phoenix, Chandler, Scottsdale, Avondale and Sun City composed their own thoughts. They are identified by name, profession and location so they are truly "out of the closet."

"Atheists work to make this life heavenly," says Dr. Stephen Uhl, of Tucson, a FFRF Lifetime Member, former Catholic priest and author of *Out of God's Closet*. His wife, Diane Uhl, a retired teacher, Lifetime Member and member of FreeThought Arizona, proclaimed on hers, "I respect people for their deeds not their creeds."

FFRF is indebted to Dr. Uhl for a \$25,000 contribution to the national campaign, which not only paid for the Arizona campaign but helped FFRF with its "Out of the Closet" campaigns in Raleigh, N.C. (with its Triangle Freethought Society chapter), and in Columbus, Ohio, earlier in the year. Steve and Diane were interviewed by two TV stations in Tucson with very positive coverage.

The Arizona Republic put the campaign on its front page Dec. 10, focusing on the Schineller Family of Tempe. Holly, a stay-at-home mother, and Freddie, a math professor, are pictured with their four smiling children, Tanner, 12, Hunter, 10, Skylar, 9, and Jasper, 8. They chose a slogan about their family values: "Love + critical thinking = open minds." They identify as "Freethinkers."

Noted Holly, "We lead by example



Tucson FFRF members (left) Jerry Karches, Bob Swango, Carole Karches, Richard Johnson, Diane Uhl, Steve Uhl, Glenn Hoover and Garry Loucks pose in front of Diane's freethought statement.

with love and exploration, and believe love and critical thinking create open-minded children."

"I don't necessarily want to change minds. I just want to dispel some of the myths," Holly told the Arizona Republic.

Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president, told the Republic she hopes the campaign will bring nontheism into the mainstream and help people understand that atheists are regular people. "We're saying, 'This is your friendly neighborhood atheist.' It's harder for people to be hateful when they know you. Would you be hateful to the Schineller family, to their lovely children?"

This is the first time FFRF has placed a billboard in Spanish. "Creo en la ra-

zon, no en la religion" ("I believe in reason, not religion"), is the statement of Lifetime Member Zenadio Quintana of Phoenix.

"Faith without reason is true blindness," is the slogan of James Wood, a blind student from Chandler.

Ronald Weinert, identified as an "Airline and USAF pilot" and atheist, notes: "Airplanes fly without faith and so do I."

A green billboard features the smiling face of Joe Hernandez of Phoenix, who says: "Good for goodness sake — no gods required." Joe is identified as "Vegan, Microbiologist . . . Atheist."

Kyle and Amy Ruby of Tempe, a young married couple, quip: "We're too old for imaginary friends!"

Former Mormon Samuel Patterson, 33, of Sun City, advises: "Serve humanity, not a fictional god."

Jim McCloud, of Avondale, identified as "Bus driver . . . Atheist," notes: "Morality does not require religion."

Physician and Lifetime Member David Reichert, 69, wears a trademark cowboy hat and notes: "I'm a childhood Christian indoctrination survivor and atheism convert."

FFRF, a state/church watchdog based in Madison, Wis., is the nation's largest association of atheists and agnostics with more than 17,000 members, including more than 400 in Arizona. "The nonreligious are 17% of the Arizona adult population, yet there are many Arizonans who have never knowingly met an atheist or unbeliever, much less someone who is proud to advertise their nonbelief," said Dan Barker, FFRF co-president. Barker, author of *Godless*, is a former evangelical minister who "just lost faith in faith."

"We are your neighbor, your classmate, your colleague, the person who opens the door for you at the grocery store, the parent you meet at the playground," he said.

FFRF most warmly thanks all 11 participating individuals and families, Stephen Uhl, Anne Mardick (volunteer director of FFRF Valley of the Sun), Jim McCloud, who spent hours approving billboard locations, and JB Wright, talented volunteer photographer.

"This was a complicated project, and it was made possible thanks to all of these generous people," Gaylor added.

Because FFRF can't put all of its members on a billboard, it offers an interactive web application as part of its campaign. Any nonbeliever may coin a phrase, upload their photo, choose an "Out of the Closet" appellation and post a billboard look-alike at FFRF's website.

Build your own virtual billboard and spread the word at

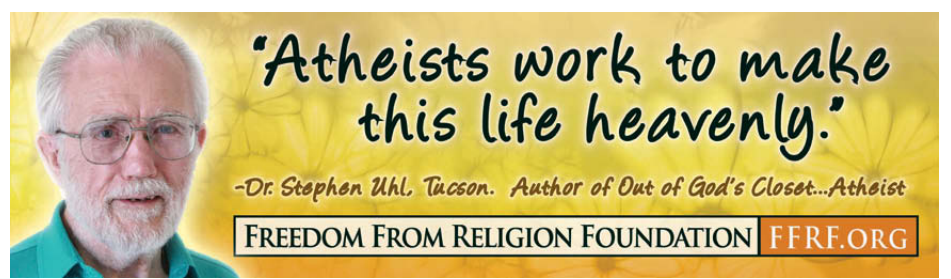
ffrf.org/out/



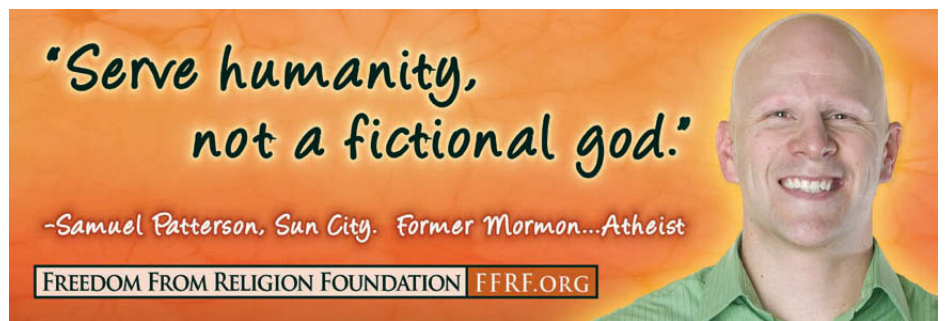
Arizona gets reasonable

Members of the new chapter, FFRF Valley of the Sun, and other FFRF members, gathered for a photo by one of the Phoenix "Out of the Closet" billboards in early December. Special thanks go to Anne Mardick, chapter director. The freethinkers then enjoyed a group brunch. Billboard benefactor Stephen Uhl (center in white jacket and beard) and his wife, Diane, drove from Tucson to be part of the event.

Tucson billboards



Phoenix billboards



Meet a Member

Nun of the above



Elizabeth Murad with Azziza (“beloved friend” in Arabic).

Name: Elizabeth Murad.

Where I live: Fort Pierce, Fla.

I was born: In North Bergen, N.J., in 1939, the eldest of six children. My father was a CPA, my mother an at-home multitasker. Our family was devoutly religious but not painfully so. Mass on Sunday and macaroni and cheese on Friday were as natural and normal as any weekly events.

Family: Marann, my best friend and fellow humanist; Azziza and Jack, our Jack Russell terriers; and Romeo and Boots, our cats.

Education: I went all the way to a degree in elementary education in Catholic schools. Everything seemed to center on sin and punishment. Hell and purgatory were as real as Earth. Heaven was our goal. I was well-indocinated.

I entered the “juniorate” in my sophomore year of high school to prepare for “real” convent life, which started in the Felician Sisters novitiate in 1957 in Lodi, N.J. Even in the early years, I had doubts. They were labeled “dark night of the soul” or “tests from god.” Life became a daily struggle to hang on to my faith, to banish logic and reason and temptations. I was told to be patient, but year after year went by with no change.

Finally, with the advent of Vatican II and some degree of openness, I realized that the god these nuns adored was a miserable construct of a puritanical mindset. I believed in a much friendlier god. I left the convent in

1971 and tiptoed back into the world. My family welcomed me home with open arms. I had one course left to complete my education degree, which I did. Then I completed an accelerated master’s in clinical social work in 18 months at Rutgers University.

Occupation: I spent the first 11 years of my work life as a teacher and then 30-plus years as a social worker.

How I got where I am today: There was a concept in the convent called “custody of the eyes” (and of the ears and other senses) to shield us from worldly sights and sounds. The “holy” habit covered us from head to foot. So I walked with my head bowed, my eyes cast down, my ears covered and “protected” by the habit. When I left, I was free of all that!

I walked tall, swung my arms, looking at everything with a big smile on my face. I touched everything: the rough bark of a tree, cool green grass, puppies and, most of all, people. As my sensual freedom increased, so did my reason and logic. There are still some sniggles of “nuniness” left in me, but that’s all they are — sniggles. In the convent, my free will and ego were crushed, deliberately, and with my cooperation. It took years to recover.

Still, I believed in god, a nice one but still a god. I explored other religions and philosophies but nothing fit. I finally threw it all away, and there was no baby in that bathwater! Five years later, I moved to Miami Beach and met Jim Murad, the love of my life. He introduced me to humanism and to nudism. We had 29 years together. He died, as he wished, at home in my arms.

At first I wanted to die, too, but found reasons to live as time went on. My new neighbors took me into their hearts and groups. I joined FFRF in 2007, my first contact with organized freethinkers. I became active in local atheist and humanist groups, and in between, I found a best friend. Now we own a home together.

Where I’m headed: Straight for my 101st birthday! Life itself is my goal, to live as fully and freely and as long as possible. My mind has become a vast playground where I joyfully read, listen, watch, speak and write. Unlike brilliant theologians, my mind is not



Elizabeth and Jim Murad were thrice-wed: civilly, in the Syrian Orthodox Church and finally, the marriage was blessed by a Catholic priest. “Thus, we were happy, his mother was happy, and my parents were happy,” notes Elizabeth.

Stardust

By Elizabeth Murad

A star is born in chaos,
lives in glory,
dies in splendor;
then there is only stardust.

Stardust — tiny, yet with immense promise,
lighter than a feather,
yet the stuff of all matter
in the universe.

Stardust — so fragile, yet so powerful,
giving birth to galaxies,
to stars and planets,
to our own Earth.

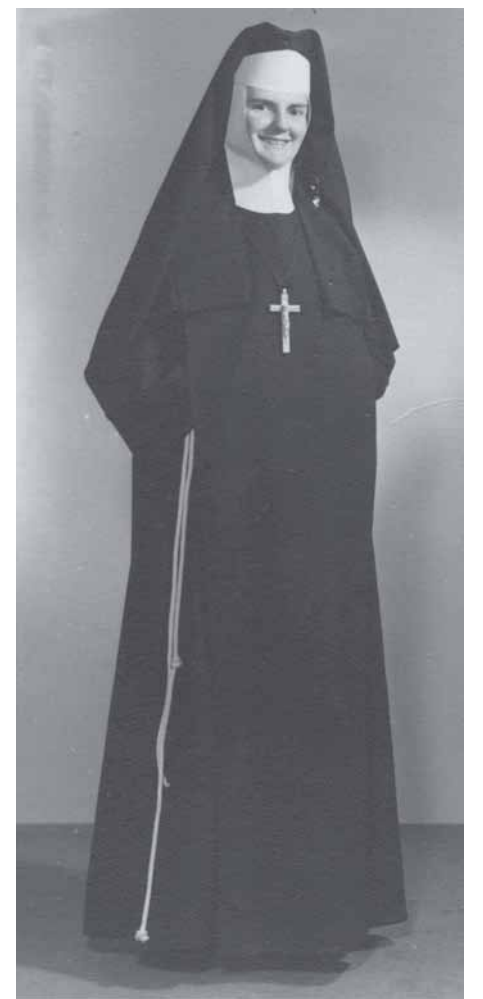
Stardust — the stuff of the Grand Canyon,
of the smallest virus,
the majestic sequoia,
the roaring tiger,
and me!

constricted by such bugaboos as faith and infallibility. There are no “Do not trespass” signs. Every idea is grist for the mill of my mind.

I especially love to write. It was the only way I could express myself at first. Once I joined local freethought groups, I could also use my voice.

Person in history I admire: One among many is Robert Ingersoll. His writings inspire me, spin my mind and warm my heart. I only wish I could have heard him speak.

A quotation I like: Humbly, two of



Elizabeth at her first profession of vows as a nun in the order of the Sisters of St. Felix of Cantalice in 1958.

my own. “What a wonderful feature, for such a small creature, to have my own mind as a teacher.” And, “Theology is the never-changing, faith-filled study of superstition. Science is the ever-changing, logical and reasonable study of reality. I choose science.”

These are a few of my favorite things: Meetings of the Treasure Coast Humanists and Atheists, new issues of Freethought Today, having a best friend, my garden, science shows, my computer (sometimes), books by Dawkins, Hitchens, Barker, etc.

These are not: My computer (sometimes), weeds, the Religious Right, “reality” shows, the tea party movement, TV ads for medications.

Ways I promote freethought: Without being pushy. I wear my humanist pin and talk about freethinking. I’ve given talks to my groups (preaching to the choir?), and I’m starting a freethought writing group.

I’m a hospice volunteer and emphasize that I’m a humanist who’s especially interested in assisting nontheistic patients. I’ve written a children’s story on freethinking called “Scio and Theo,” which is being illustrated by Marann.

They Said What?

God bless income disparity and those who have succeeded, and shame upon the Occupy Wall Street crowd who take us to task for our success and wallow in their own failure.

Financial analyst Dennis Gartmann, on how he feels about the growing gap between rich and poor

Financial Times, 11-17-11

The consumer society was laid down by the late Steve Jobs coming down the mountain with two tablets, iPad one and iPad two, and the result is that we now have a culture of iPod, iPhone, iTunes, i, i, i.

Lord Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, on the dearth of faith compared to consumerism

The Daily Mail, 11-2-11

As a Christian, I agree with the biblical condemnation of the homosexual lifestyle (this is the place in which one could insert a cleverly placed piece of scripture). However, to defend traditional sexual morality against the encroaching threat of homosexuality and other aberrant forms of sexual immorality, Christians need to be able to do more than cite bible verses.

Rev. Steve De Jong, Shelter of His Arms pastor, opposing a city of Appleton proposal for domestic partner benefits

Appleton Post-Crescent, 11-18-11

The 30-year-old blogger and author from Dayton, Tenn., decided to spend

a year attempting to follow the Bible’s instructions for women as literally as possible. In that time, she slept in a tent outside of her house while she was having her period (Leviticus 15:19-33), praised her husband at the city gates (Proverbs 31:23), made her own clothes (Proverbs 31:22) and, yes, spent some time on the roof contemplating her contentious ways. (“It is better to dwell in a corner of the housetop than with a contentious woman in a whole house.” Proverbs 21:9)

News story on Rachel Held Evans, who “reluctantly” calls herself a Christian feminist

Toronto Star, 10-12-11

[W]hen boarding a crowded bus with standing passengers in the front, wom-

en should board the back door after paying the driver in the front.

Notice posted by Private Transportation Corp. on its city-franchised B110 bus in an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn, N.Y.

New York Times, 10-20-11

We’re not trying to make people wet their pants or have a heart attack. It’s not our heart to scare people into a relationship with Christ. We just want to present what the bible teaches about life after death in a compelling way.

Rev. Jeff Schofield, Hudson, Ohio, on Hope Community Church’s Judgement [sic] House walk-through drama that centers on teens caught in a house fire

Akron Beacon Journal, 10-26-11

One Nation Under God: A Bible History

by Mike Konopacki



We are pleased to present the next installment of "One Nation Under God: A Bible History," written and illustrated by Mike Konopacki. It was part of the coursework for his master of fine arts degree in 2010 from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and was also presented at FFRF's 33rd annual convention in October 2010.

War

In **Exodus 20:13** God hands Moses the fifth (or sixth, depending on what Bible you read) Commandment; Thou Shalt Not Kill. In **Exodus 32:27-28** God changes his mind, "And he said unto them, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Put every man his sword by his side, [and] go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor. And the children of Levi did according to the word of Moses: and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men."

As the subjects of brutal empires, early Christians taught peace and love to attract followers. After Christianity became the official religion of empire things changed. In fact, Christianity became the official religion of Constantine's empire because he won a crucial battle under the symbol of the cross. Christian empires soon adopted the pagan Roman legal system, including its reliance on interrogatory torture. Torture was used against traitors and heretics. Traitors were enemies of the state, heretics were enemies of the Church. St. Augustine declared that, "God gave the Church the powers of empire to assist it in forcibly returning the heretics to the real banquet of the Lord."

Church and state became inseparable. Thou Shalt Not Kill now meant that killing was sanctioned by God. Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne's court theologians justified his killing of the Saxons by comparing his victory to Christ's defeat of death through his crucifixion. **Pax Dei** soon became **Bellum Dei**, or War of God. His priests set up tents where soldiers lined up to confess their sins. They would now be saved if they died in battle. Pope Urban II declared in the **First Crusade** that killing Christians remained a sin, but killing Muslims was not. The rules kept changing like the laws painted on Animal Farm's barn.



The War Prayer

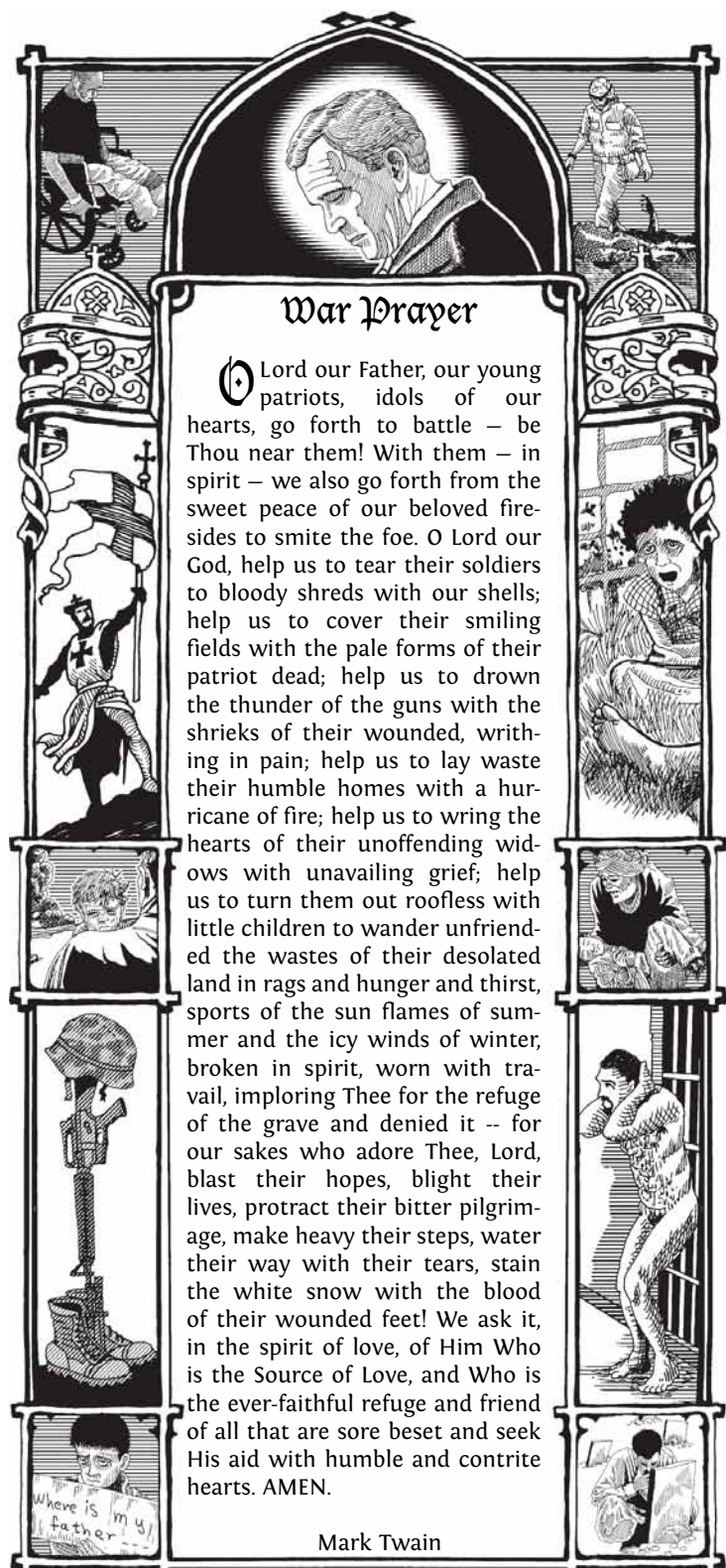
Samuel Clemens, or Mark Twain, was a leading writer and humorist in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But Twain spent the last ten years of his life fighting against the U.S. occupation of the Philippines as a member of the **Anti-Imperialist League**. It was during this time that he wrote some of his angriest essays, including *To The Person Sitting in Darkness* and *The War Prayer*. He was criticized for having lost his sense of humor.

His *War Prayer* was a biting satire written around 1905 during the U.S. war in the Philippines. Twain was disgusted with the patriotic and religious fervor that motivated support for the war.

The short story takes place on a Sunday morning in a church filled with the faithful. The preacher prayed that God would bless the young soldiers, keep them strong in battle, encourage them in their patriotic work, and help them smite their foe.

Then an aged stranger, dressed in white robes, walked up to the preacher's side and spoke to the congregation. He explained that he was a messenger from God:

"You have heard your servant's prayer – the uttered part of it. I am commissioned of God to put into words the other part of it – that part which the pastor – and also you in your hearts – fervently prayed silently. And ignorantly and unthinkingly? God grant that it was so! You heard these words: 'Grant us the victory, O Lord our God!' That is sufficient. The 'whole' of the uttered prayer is compact into those pregnant words. Elaborations were not necessary. When you have prayed for victory you have prayed for many unmentioned results which follow victory – 'must' follow it, cannot help but follow it. Upon the listening spirit of God fell also the unspoken part of the prayer. He commandeth me to put it into words. Listen!"



College essay contest

Honorable mentions

Why I'm not a theist

By Vicky Weber

FFRF awarded Vicky \$200 for her essay.



Walking to work one day, I was handed a brochure titled "Your Moment of Truth." It told me to imagine myself on a game show with a chance to win \$1 million. All I had to do was answer 21 questions. The catch: Everyone in the whole world was watching, and you had to tell the truth.

Questions got harder along the way, with the last one asking, "Are you a good person?" The brochure said that everyone's reality is facing the Creator on Judgment Day. How could the answer to the final question be anything but a resounding "no"?

There are many well-documented arguments against religious faith. We can approach religion from the perspective of logic, reasoning about the probability of teapots circling Mars. We can delve into the science and explore the wonders of biology and natural selection. We can parody religion, worship Invisible Pink Unicorns and share stories of being touched by His Noodly Appendage.

I am not a theist because the arguments against faith are overwhelming, and because the benefits of freeing one's mind and society as a whole from dogma are enormous.

Religion spends its energy making us feel guilty instead of encouraging us to improve ourselves and our societies. No matter how much a person works to please God, God will never be satisfied. So why bother?

Instead of making people feel guilty for being alive, imagine a world in which people viewed this life as their only life and their only judgment coming from the society around them. In such a world, people would be free to think and dream and do "good works" for the merit of doing good works, not any eternal reward.

To the person handing out proselytizing brochures on the street corner: Yes, I think I am a good person, because while I am not perfect, I work to make this world a better, more rational place. To do that and seek truth in a world saturated with religious superstition is hard.

As a proud atheist, my moment of truth is every moment of every day.

Vicky Weber, 21, grew up in Fort Atkinson, Wis., and will graduate in 2012 from Ripon College with a communication major and minors in politics and government and nonprofit business management. She plans to attend graduate school for library and information science. She serves as secretary for Ripon's newly formed chapter of the Secular Student Alliance. Her interests include sewing, knitting and following politics.

Why I'm not a spiritualist

By Molly Hernandez

FFRF awarded \$200 to Molly for her essay.

The kids on my street attended church every Sunday, bible study on weekends

and, as we got older, youth group on Wednesday nights. While they were singing hymns and praying, I was listening to ancient Tibetan chants that drifted from one room to the next in our feng shui house.

My parents would discuss the latest path to enlightenment over breakfast and ponder which energy seminar to go to on the weekend. I remember helping my father lay copper around our home, to shield against geographic stress lines, whatever those might be. I'm not sure he even knows why we put them there.

Religion creates a feeling of control.

My mother was far more emotional and was convinced that every bad thought or feeling was a psychic connection. She called it "tapping in," almost as if she were hacking a computer.

As the years passed, I grew to recognize the unorthodox environment in which I was raised. As my awareness of psychological behavior grew, my parents' spirituality became more eccentric, and with it, our backyard. What started with a copper perimeter developed into a garden of stone pyramids, sculptures of angels and a tree that they believed had the spirit of Ganesh, due to its elephant-like shape. Every year on holiday visits, I observe more energy devices and effigies, mirroring the rising household tension. An exponential equation: Stress equals statues squared.

The concept of relying on an unsupported theory for peace of mind is puzzling, but people continue to seek answers within their faith. It's no surprise why people feel at ease after prayer or meditation. Religion provides a false sense of stability, which, in turn, creates a feeling of control.

It is science that governs our world. Evident in every grain of existence, science rules the processes and systems of our universe, including belief systems. Religion is nonsensical and unsupported! This is why I choose logic over faith.

Molly Hernandez, 21, attends Front Range Community College, Westminster, Colo., and is pursuing a geology degree. Raised in San Antonio, Texas, she enjoys snowboarding, playing guitar and making jewelry.



A different approach to religious debate

By Jacob Kovacs

Jacob was awarded \$200 by FFRF for his essay.

To understand why my father is religious despite having a master's degree in engineering and why it was so easy for me to lose my religion at age 16 — with virtually no exposure to atheist sentiment and scientific argument — I've had to go beyond the simple explanations usually offered in discussions among atheists.

I discuss religion in terms of need. I don't debate the existence of god or the source of morals or many other things, although I could. I don't debate those things with religious people, but I think about them or discuss them with nonbelieving friends. I don't confront people about broad aspects of religion, although I'll confront vigorously any specific applications they make that I disagree with: gay rights, reproductive rights, tax policy, etc.

Instead, I ask myself: Why do they need religion?

I look at my dad's religious conversion as a process driven by trauma that he didn't know how to cope with any other way. Trauma from family abuse (far too common), trauma from war (ditto), insecurity as a new husband, new father, new graduate and newly deployed soldier. Religion was his fallback option for addressing those issues.

Religious arguments are camouflage, and atheists' counter-arguments never seem to get to the source. They're largely wasted energy. You can't argue needs into disappearing. What you can do is skip the argument and attack the needs head-on.

I'm not a Christian because I don't need to be. I've found many other things that address my needs far more specifically and effectively. I don't mean to give people the sense that my atheism isn't logically supported in my mind. I've had the opportunity to be in college, study science, major in mathematics and economics, and I definitely could contest religion on those grounds.

But given my experience of exiting religion, I prefer not to. I focus not on argument but on problem solving. I'm vocal about my lack of belief, and about what has taken its place in my life.

Jacob Kovacs, 23, Olympia, Wash., attended South Puget Sound Community College for two years and is transferring to Evergreen State College. His goal is to complete a B.S. in applied computing and mathematical sciences (mathematical economics track). "I'm interested in bringing my quantitative, analytical perspective to the cause of social justice, particularly civil rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. My hobbies are blogging and working out."



Too much work to turn reason off

By Sofia Ross Voloch

Sofia was awarded \$200 by FFRF for her essay.

As one of the lucky few raised without religion, I remained pretty unclear on the concept until about age 12. I seem to remember keeping a strange internal distinction between the concepts of "believing in something" and "thinking something was real."



Hey, believers: Becoming an atheist is easy. Just consider the question of the existence of god and take the null hypothesis. Sleep in on Sunday.

Believing, I thought, was like clapping for Tinker Bell during a production of "Peter Pan" — you clap not because anyone is literally dying, but because you agree to pretend that someone was. You clap because if you don't, the woman playing Peter won't be able to say her next line, and the play will grind to a halt. I knew that Christians clapped for eternity in heaven, but I just didn't fully grasp that they thought Heaven.Was.Real.

I have an atheist (culturally Jewish) father and a mother who recently converted to Buddhism. Being anything other than a nonbeliever would have required actual exertion on my part, waking up early and schlepping to a synagogue or church. I am definitely lazy. I'm an atheist, but I haven't put in the work necessary to be an effective member of the freethinking community. Or have I? This is supposed to be a persuasive essay, so let's see if I can't persuade.

Hey, believers: Becoming an atheist is easy. Just consider the question of the existence of god and take the null hypothesis. Sleep in on Sunday. Stop worrying and enjoy your life.

With minimal effort, you, too, can make sense!

Sofia Ross Voloch, 20, grew up in Austin, Texas, attends Austin Community College and plans to transfer to a four-year school. "My major is French. I'm fascinated by French history and literature. I enjoy reading, writing speculative fiction and drinking coffee."

State/Church Bulletin

Full court to hear graduation case

The full U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit on Nov. 17 vacated a three-judge panel's 2-1 ruling in September in favor of the Elmbrook [Wis.] School District and agreed to review the question of whether the district can hold graduation in a church.

The district has held graduation for years at Elmbrook Church, a non-denominational Christian church in the town of Brookfield, the Brookfield Patch reported.

Superintendent Matt Gibson had asked the church to cover a large cross above the graduation stage, but the church refused. Other religious symbols were present, and families sat in pews.

Elmbrook moved its graduation ceremonies back to the high school in 2010 after building a new fieldhouse. But the plaintiffs want to ensure ceremonies don't return to the church in the future. The issue of holding public school graduations in religious settings had never been heard before at the federal appellate level.

High court rejects Bronx Faith appeal

The U.S. Supreme Court rejected on Dec. 7 the evangelical Bronx Household of Faith's appeal to overturn New York City's ban on after-hours religious services at public schools. The justices left in place a federal appeals court ruling that upheld the city's policy.

According to the city, about 60 congregations used public schools for religious services in 2009.

German court nixes Muslim prayer room

Germany's top administrative court has ruled that students don't have the right to pray while in school if a religious conflict is created.

The court on Nov. 30 upheld a deci-

sion by a lower court which had denied that right to a Muslim student who had demanded a private prayer room at his Berlin high school. The court also said creating a separate prayer room taxed the space capacity of the school.

Mojave double cross doesn't fool rangers

Federal rangers on Nov. 15 removed a cross Nov. 15 on Sunrise Rock in the Mojave Desert east of Baker, Calif., the same spot where another cross was taken down in a legal battle over whether a religious symbol should be allowed on public land, the Riverside Press-Enterprise reported.

To comply with a court order to remove Mojave Cross, placed on the rock in 1934 (and which proponents attempted to rebrand as a war memorial), the surreptitiously placed new cross had to go, said Linda Slater of the National Park Service. "You can't go putting things up in national parks," she said.

The original cross was stolen last year.

Utah state troopers try to skirt ruling

Utah's 14 memorial highway crosses got a makeover to stop their court-ordered removal, The Associated Press reported Nov. 18.

The Utah Highway Patrol logo was removed from the 12-foot-high crosses that bear the names of troopers who died on duty, UHP Association attorney Frank Mylar said.

"We're hoping we can keep the memorials as much intact as possible but change them so that it complies with the [court]," Mylar said. "They really feel strongly that that without the cross, there's no memorial."

A three-judge panel of the 10th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals ordered the crosses removed last year. The U.S. Supreme Court has declined to hear the case.

Sermon on a plate



By a 4-3 vote Dec. 8, the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles' governing board OK'd an application by a Nacogdoches ministry called Glory Gang for this license plate design. Texas Freedom Network, a religious liberties watchdog, called the plate "disrespectful of Christianity and the religious freedom of people of all faiths." Baptist Pastor Larry Bethune, Austin, said, "I'm disappointed to see the state endorse a particular faith, even if it's mine, and to see Christians trivialize our faith into slogans and symbols on the back of a bumper."



Lawsuit: Principal proselytized staff

A Clay County [Fla.] School District principal used her work email to proselytize and espouse her political views, including sending emails that called President Barack Obama a "jackass" and joked he had cousins in the Taliban, according to a lawsuit, the Florida Times-Union reported Nov. 29.

Patrick Capriola, an assistant principal at Bannerman Learning Center, claims in a federal lawsuit filed Nov. 18 that Bannerman Principal Linda Turner and the district violated the Constitution and his right to "be free of state-sponsored religion."

Capriola alleges that at least 16 times, Turner emailed faculty asking them to pray and have faith in God and alerting them to religious petitions.

Overheard

Saint Barbara is the Patron Saint Against Death by Artillery and the Patron Saint Against Mine Collapse. Saint Mark the Evangelist is the Patron Saint of Insect Bites.

Catholic Fun Facts
Cultural Catholic, 11-1-11

It's the same institutional reaction: scandal prevention.

Seattle attorney Timothy Kosnoff, comparing Catholic cover-ups of clergy sexual abuse to the confidential "perversion files" held by the Boy Scouts of America that include the names of 5,000 suspected child molesters

Los Angeles Times, 10-29-11

In the News

Bullying law drops religious exemption

State Senate Republicans abandoned an anti-bullying bill dismissed as a "license to bully" by Democrats, and on Nov. 29 instead adopted a version approved by the state House, the Grand Rapids Press reported.

The measure, which requires all school districts to have anti-bullying policies, was signed into law Dec. 6 by Gov. Rick Snyder. The bill was named "Matt's Safe School Law" for Matt Epling, a teen who killed himself in 2002 after years of bullying.

The Senate's first version had a provision that exempted from the law "a statement of a sincerely held religious belief or moral conviction of a school employee, school volunteer, pupil, or a pupil's parent or guardian."

Democrats said that language "gutted" the bill and wouldn't have protected gay students. Schools must institute a bullying policy within six months. Parents of all parties involved in an incident must be notified.

UK Girlguides could be God-free

The London Telegraph reported Nov. 20 that the Guide Association, aka Girlguiding UK, is considering dropping the phrase "to love my God" from its pledge for members. The pledge is optional, but girls who don't take it

are barred from receiving some badges.

Several families objected to the current wording. Caroline Mason told the Association, "As a family, I am bringing up my children with strong morals, but no religious belief. This is our choice as parents, and I do not understand why my daughter should be excluded from something because of it."

A spokesman said the Scout Association for boys doesn't plan to review its pledge to do "duty to God and to the Queen."

Man says refusing '666' got him fired

Billy Hyatt alleges in a lawsuit that he was fired from a plastic plant near Dalton, Ga., because he wouldn't wear a "666" sticker.

The Associated Press reported Nov. 18 that the sticker said the plant had been accident-free for 666 days, a number some Christians call "the mark of the beast," meaning Satan.

Hyatt alleged he got more and more nervous as the number of accident-free days neared 666, fearing he would "be condemned to hell" if he wore it. He was suspended for three days for refusing to wear it and fired several days later, the suit claims.

He filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which granted him the right to sue in August.

Black Collar Crime Blotter

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

Rev. Thomas Archie Wiggins Jr., 54, Wilmington, **DE**: 5 counts each of 1st-degree sexual offense and 5 counts of indecent liberties with a minor. Wiggins, pastor at Faith Temple Church of God and Christ, is alleged to have committed the crimes in 1998, the same year he became pastor at Faith Temple. *Source: Star News, 11-29-11*

Heather N. Daughdrill, 28, Westlake, **LA**: 4 counts of carnal knowledge of a juvenile, 8 counts of sexual battery, 3 counts of 2nd-degree kidnapping, contributing to the delinquency of a juvenile and indecent behavior with a juvenile. Daughdrill is accused of having sexual contact with a 13-year-old boy who was attending a summer bible camp where she was a teacher's aide.

Daughdrill is alleged to have picked the boy up from school without his parents' knowledge. Detectives discovered several explicit text messages between her and the boy. *Source: Calcasieu Parish Sheriff's Office, 11-29-11*

Christopher R. Olague, 39, Westminster, **CA**: Kidnapping for child molestation, attempting to dissuade a witness, using a minor for sex acts and possession, control of child pornography and 2 counts of lewd acts on a child under 14.

Olague, pastor at Refuge Southland Church, allegedly molested an 8-year-old girl in a grocery store parking lot after picking her up at home on the pretense of taking her to play with his children. He's also a coach for the American Youth Soccer Organization.

The complaint said thousands of images of child porn were found on Olague's computer. The girl told police he gave her \$40 to keep quiet. *Source: Torrance Daily Breeze, 11-29-11*

Samuel Mullet Sr., Johnny Mullet, Lester Mullet, Daniel Mullet, Eli Miller, Rev. Levi Miller and Emanuel Shrock, Bergholz, **OH**: The men, who belong to a breakaway Amish sect, were arrested at the compound on hate-crimes charges tied to a series of beard-cutting attacks against other Amish. Cutting beards is meant to degrade and humiliate.

Jefferson County Sheriff Fred Abdalla of Jefferson County described Samuel Mullet as a dangerous cult leader with about 100 followers, almost all of whom are related to him. *Source: Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 11-23-11*

Fr. Paige Blakely, 61, New Smyrna Beach, **FL**: Indecent exposure. Blakely, who retired "in good standing" from the Catholic Diocese of Orlando, was arrested in a police sting in a park bathroom where he allegedly showed his genitals to an officer. *Source: Dayton Beach News-Journal, 11-23-11*

Rev. Richard J. Kurtz, 67, **Chicago**: Sexual assault and attempted sexual assault of a male under the age of 18. Kurtz, a Jesuit priest, allegedly committed the crimes while working a chemistry teacher at the University of Detroit High School in Detroit. It's alleged they happened in 2001 in Colorado.

Kurtz has been removed from public ministry, a statement from the Society of Jesus Chicago-Detroit Province said. *Source: Reuters, 11-22-11*

Shareca Latoya Jones, 28, Kershaw, **SC**: Trafficking cocaine, distribution of a controlled substance, providing contraband to an inmate, possession with intent to distribute marijuana, possession with intent to distribute a Schedule IV controlled substance, unlawful carrying of a handgun and possession with intent to distribute a Schedule I controlled substance.

Jones is accused of mailing a package containing razor knives, a cell phone, 30 Ecstasy pills and 28.8 grams of cocaine hidden in a bible. *Source: Rock Hill Herald, 11-21-11*

Terah Allyn Rawlings, 32, Colorado Springs, **CO**: 4 counts each of sexual assault on a child by one in a position of trust and allegedly had sex with a boy who was 15 in 2007-08 while he was a student and she taught at Hilltop Baptist School, which is now closed.

Three others affiliated with Hilltop Baptist were charged with failing to report the abuse: Senior Pastor **Franklin "Wayne" Knight**, 63, who is Rawlings' uncle; her father, Associate Pastor **Raymond "Allen" Knight**; and **Jan Ocvirk**, 51, former principal. Wayne Knight was also charged with felony accessory to abuse.

The indictment said Rawlings first seduced the boy in her car. *Source: Colorado Springs Gazette, 11-17-11*

Rev. John Brothers Jr., 42, Henderson, **KY**: 2 counts of 1st-degree sexual abuse. Brothers, associate pastor at Hyland Baptist Church, is charged with inappropriate behavior with several children.

ANOTHER WAY TO KEEP AN EMPTY SEAT BESIDE YOU ON THE TRAIN.



He resigned Nov. 7, citing job demands that had become a challenge physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally. He was arrested Nov. 18. *Source: Tri-state News, 11-20-11*

Paul LaDuke, 75, Schaumburg, **IL**: Felony sexual exploitation of a child. LaDuke, a math teacher at Schaumburg Christian School, allegedly was masturbating in front of about 13 students with an apron on his lap in the classroom. The school has fired him.

Cook County Assistant State's Attorney Dave Weiner said prosecutors have a handwritten note from LaDuke, in which he admits to masturbatory fantasies about female students during class for the past 10 years. His wife of 54 years said he leads a churchgoing life and is a good family man. *Source: CBS Chicago, 11-6-11*

Chad Foster, 32, Cypress, **TX**: Sexual assault of a child. Foster, a youth minister at Community Faith Church and at Second Baptist Church, is charged with molesting a 16-year-old girl he met at the church. *Source: Springfield News-Leader, 11-10-11*

Rev. Billy Owen Minix, 46, Scottsville, **KY**: Theft by unlawful taking of more than \$10,000. Minix, pastor at Gospel Outreach Church, is charged with embezzling about \$300,000 from the church he founded 12 years ago. *Source: Louisville Courier-Journal, 11-9-11*

Fr. Philip Jacobs, 61: Sexual assault, sexual exploitation and 2 counts of sexual interference. Jacobs, a former Ohio Catholic priest, is charged with molesting 3 children under age 14 in Victoria, **BC**, when he was a priest there in 1996-2001.

He was removed from the ministry by the Diocese of Columbus, OH, after sexual abuse allegations were made. After treatment, he worked as a priest in Victoria, where he was removed from the ministry in 2002 after the Ohio allegations came to light. *Source: Montreal Gazette, 11-8-11*

Rev. Steven Poole, Okawville, **IL**: Felony retail theft subsequent offense. Poole, a priest serving as sacramental minister at St. Barbara Catholic Church, is charged with stealing a \$28 ashtray from a Belleville store. The charge was upgraded from shoplifting due to Poole's previous theft convictions.

Store owner Jason Buss said he also watched Poole allegedly take a \$6 novelty coffee mug from his pants and return it to the shelf. The mug depicted intertwined snakes, one telling the other, "I knew you when you didn't have a pit to hiss in." *Source: News-Democrat, 11-8-11*

Nathan D. Moore, 24, Fayette County, **GA**: Enticing a child for indecent purposes and 6 counts each of child molestation and aggravated child molestation. Moore, youth pastor at Heritage Christian Church, was fired "some time" before the church learned of allegations he molested a boy under age 16, said Pastor Doug Fultz.

A document online said Moore also served as team chaplain for a high school boys basketball team in 2009. *Source: Fayetteville Citizen, 11-8-11*

Pleaded / Convicted

Mark Archibald, 56, Lacombe, **ALB**: Pleaded guilty to 3 counts of indecent assault. Archibald admitted molesting 3 male youths in 1978-79.

"He was their youth pastor at a youth church camp near Gull Lake at the time," said Prosecutor Robin Joudrey.

The Crown encourages victims to come forward no matter how many years have passed, she said. "Sometimes it takes a while for students to grasp what has happened to them and come forward." *Source: Calgary Herald, 12-1-11*

Msgr. Robert Borne, 63, Pembroke, **ONT**: Guilty after a trial on counts of indecent assault and gross indecency for a 1979 incident with a 16-year-old boy. Borne was removed from the active ministry after his arrest in 2009.

He testified he'd engaged in mutual fondling in bed at the rectory, but said no force was involved. He testified he had no sexual motive for fondling the teen's genitals and the activity ceased shortly after it started because neither was "getting anything out of it."

The victim testified he was in bed when Borne started kissing him and went on to perform oral sex.

Justice Julianne Parfett called Borne's testimony evasive and said his answers defied credibility, logic and common sense. *Source: Ottawa Citizen, 11-26-11*

Rev. Phillip Joubert, 50, Bayside, **NY**: Guilty of 2 counts of 1st-degree sexual abuse, 2 counts of 2nd-degree sexual abuse and endangering the welfare of a child. Joubert, pastor of Community Baptist Church, was accused of assaulting his daughter, then 13, in 2009. The girl testified he raped her, but the jury found him not guilty of rape. *Source: Bayside Times, 11-23-11*

Daniel Ledford, 28, Flagstaff, **AZ**: Pleaded guilty to sexual conduct with a minor. A plea agreement calls for a year in jail. He was charged with 15 counts for a relationship with a 16-year-old girl he met at Lamb of God Bible Church, where he volunteered.

"They're going to say he's not a pastor, but he spoke up at the altar," a family member of the victim said. "She was only 15 years old when he started trying to charm her over with knowing Jesus." *Source: Arizona Daily Sun, 11-22-11*

Brent Giroux, 32, Council Bluffs, **IA**: Pleaded guilty to 3rd-degree sexual abuse. He was initially charged with 61 counts of sexual exploitation by a counselor or therapist and 28 counts of 3rd-degree sexual abuse for alleged acts while he was a youth pastor at Victory Fellowship Church.

He was accused of exploiting 4 teen boys by telling them he was helping them gain "sexual purity in the eyes of God." *Source: Omaha World-Herald, 11-22-11*

Rev. Michael Angeloni, 62, Brandywine Hundred, **DE**: Pleaded guilty to theft for stealing more than \$300,000 over 3 years from an elderly parishioner at Church of the Holy Child. Angeloni was suspended by the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington from exercising his priestly duties or dressing as a priest. *Source: News Journal, 11-19-11*

Rev. Scott K. Voss, 43, Jonesboro, **AR**:

Pleaded guilty to bank fraud and willful failure to pay over tax. Voss, pastor of First Pentecostal Church, was involved in a scheme to defraud an Oklahoma bank in 2007-10. He also withheld tax payments from church employees' paychecks without remitting them to the IRS. *Source: Arkansas News, 11-15-11*

Rev. Christopher Wenthe, 47, St. Paul, **MN**: Guilty of 3rd-degree criminal sexual conduct. Wenthe was pastor at Nativity of Our Lord Catholic Church when he started a relationship in 2003 that included oral and anal sex with a woman who was 21.

He had never disputed the sexual relationship, only the claim that it occurred while he was offering spiritual aid or comfort, the necessary element in the new law he was charged under. The woman testified she never called him anything but "Father Wenthe."

District Judge Margaret Marrinan told Wenthe "to bring his toothbrush" to sentencing Dec. 14. *Source: Star Tribune, 11-15-11*

Sentenced

Enrique Alcaraz, 45, Elsie, **MI**: 5 to 20 years in prison on child pornography charges. Alcaraz, a youth pastor at Church of the Living Word and a former school board member, used fake identities online to solicit nude photos of minors. *Source: Lansing State Journal, 11-29-11*

Fr. William Casey, 77, Greeneville, **TN**: 35 to 45 years in prison for 1st-degree sexual misconduct and 2 counts of aggravated rape. He'll be eligible for parole after 10½ years. The charges alleged he started to molest a 10-year-old altar boy at St. Dominic's Catholic Church in Kingsport in the 1970s. *Source: Kingsport Times-News, 11-23-11*

Rev. Robert Meredith, 50, Hazel, **KY**: 8 years in prison for 1st-degree sexual abuse of a child under 12. Meredith, pastor at Green Plains Church of Christ, apologized at sentencing and said he was "ashamed, embarrassed and mortified" for the harm he'd caused. *Source: Murray Ledger & Times, 11-15-11*

Fr. Jose Afonso De, 77, Franca, Sao Paulo, **BRA**: 60 years in prison for molesting 8 altar boys as young as 12, some of whom were studying to be priests. The teens told police that bible study would turn into genital kissing and touching. *Source: AFP, 11-9-11*

Rev. Gary T. Wheeler, Wentworth, **NC**: 24 to 31 months in prison for indecent liberties with a child. Wheeler, pastor at Pentecostal Holiness Church, was found guilty of sexually assaulting a minor girl multiple times since 2009. *Source: WFMY, 11-8-11*

Colin Jarvis, 49, St. Jude's, **UK**: A year in jail after pleading guilty to 12 counts of possessing and distributing child pornography. Jarvis, a child safety coordinator since 2002 for the Catholic Diocese of Plymouth, allegedly had more than 4,000 pornographic images, mainly of boys, on a flash drive and church laptop. He's married with 4 children.

Jo Martin, his attorney, said Jarvis was abused as a child and has low self-esteem. "These crimes were committed in part out of loneliness and frustration," she said. *Source: Plymouth Herald, 10-29-11*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

Attorney Scott Beard has filed suit on behalf of "Joshua Doe" against **Full Word Ministries**, North Charleston, **SC**, for allegedly covering up sexual abuse by its former pastor **Tyrone Moore**, 44. Moore is serving 30 years for serially molesting 2 boys in 2004-06. The lawsuit is the third filed in Charleston County against the church. *Source: Charleston Post & Courier, 11-22-11*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

Fourteen Delaware men have settled for \$7 million total their child sexual abuse suits against the Catholic Capuchin friars, St. Edmond's Academy and the Brothers of the Holy Cross. The abuse allegedly occurred in the late 1970s and '80s. Claims were made against former Capuchin Friar **Paul L. Daleo** and former St. Edmond's teacher and wrestling coach **John J. Fleming**.

The settlement requires the Capuchins and St. Edmond's to release the names of others in their institutions with proven, admitted or credible accusations of abuse. *Source: delawareonline.com, 12-1-11*

The Catholic **Archdiocese of Chicago** will pay \$3.2 million to a man, now 18, who alleged he was molested by **Fr. Daniel McCormack**, who pleaded guilty in 2007 to abusing 5 boys and was sentenced to 5 years.

Plaintiff's attorney William Martin said the archdiocese and **Cardinal Francis George** failed to remove McCormack from access to children although they had knowledge he'd molested minors. McCormack has been removed from the ministry. *Source: Reuters, 11-15-11*

Sharing the Crank Mail

A small sample of FFRF's recent fan mail, grammar and spelling uncorrected:

gutter

If you do not like Christmas and Church go fuck yourself and I will continue the believe and will not stand for some panty waste to interfere with my live or any one else's. If you do not like it close your motherfunkin eyes or shut your door and crawl back under a rock gutter slut. — *lb*

Fox news

After watching you on Fox News (and disinfecting my TV screen) I wish you everything thing bad that could possibly happen to you and your family. It is because of pieces of shit like you that America is where it is today. Our founding fathers based this Country on Christianity, if you dont like it or believe in it, please leave. I fought in a war to protect the right of you to say what you would like to. What a waste in your case. — *Richard Hervieux*

Atheists Are Bastards

You stupid atheist Bastards are really insane Bastards for thinking it is any of your business that there are nativity scenes set up in the public squares around the United States. You stupid atheist Bastards shove it up your damn ass crossways. — *Michael Mazar*

Go fuck yourself

Athens Texas has NOTHING to do with you faggat whores so I know this will not chage anything it makes me feel better. — *John Doe*

Donation

I would send some money but I don't care for your silly ideas. I will however pray for God to send you directly to hell which unfortunately will be a step up from Madison. — *Jesus Christ*

Athens, Texas nativity scene

Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you. Gosh, it's great to have free speech in this country! Pump off and take your politically correct, cry baby, I'm a victim agenda and stick where the sun don't shine! Pussies!!! — *Carolyn Workman*

Athens, tx

Learn to keep your damn mouth shut. This is america, just because you don't like doesn't mean the rest of America has to agree with you. I hate stupid people but I have to put up with them all the time. — *Micky Mouse, 101 America drive*

FFR

GET A LIFE ARE YOU GUYS LAP DOGS OF THE DEVIL ? WHAT THE FUCK, DONT TELL PEOPLE WHAT THEY SHOULD BELIEVE IN YOU SUCK TURD. GET A REAL JOB, WORK YOU DONT KNOW WHAT THAT WORD IS, HITLER WOULD B PROUD TO KNOW YOU SILLY FUCKS ARE KEEPING HIS NAME ALIVE /LEAVE CHRIST MAS ALONE SCUMBAG NAZI,S I HOPE SOMEONE RUNS

YOU DOWN WITH THE GET A CLUE TRAIN OR GO TO GET A CLUE DOT FUCK YOU — *Tom Reynolds, 06660 vulture ave, boise idaho*

Freedom of Speech and Religion

God is not mocked, whatever you so that you will reap." — *Ed Fleagle, Jacksonville NC*

your idiocy

Leave us alone in Montana If you want to legislate here run for office otherwise keep the fuck out of our world. And please do stay in the shithole you live in — *S Bennett*

STAY OUT OF MONTANA

You flat land freaks in the midwest should mind your own business and leave the mountains alone. Go protest cheese and the fact that its holy you. Life is so boring there watching the badgers play that you have to stick your noses where it does not belong. Oh my whah whah a little statue 3000 miles away from my home has my underwear all bunched up my ass and lam gonna cry about to the press, whah, whah, whah. Get a life. — *david coc*

montana statue

Why dont You axxholes mind Your own business, and leave Our Statue of Jesus alone. — *Ed tomicek*

Jesus in Montana

Stop worrying with our Jesus. Its none of your Goddamn business what we do here in Montana. Stay the hell away. — *Suck it, Tad Hilton*

Thanks

On the eve of Thanksgiving I want to thank you for persecuting Christians. If you study history you will realize that persecution only helps Christianity because we respond to persecution with agape love. Remember Jesus loves you, he forgave you from the cross. — *Robert Marx*

New World Order

Your pathetic organization is undoubtedly a part of the New World Order and is probably funded by globalists like the Rothchilds, Rockefeller, and Bill Gates. It is miscreant filth like yourselves that got the pledge of allegiance removed from schools. You should educate yourselves about the agenda of the NWO; who wants to reduce the world's population. Do you think you will have a seat at that table? NO YOU WILL NOT. Go take one of those vaccines that Bill Gates pushes that are full of mercury, cancer, and other poisons. He's pathetic, and so is this organization. Are you fools in cahoots with the southern Poverty Law Center? I THOUGHT SO. You people are SCUM. — *Smedley Butler*

montana ski hill

Your organization is an act of war. God loves you and you cannot do a thing about it.....other than love him back of course.....that iis your choice. — *mark h*

Montana Jesus statue

EAT SHIT AND DIE WORTHLESS COCKSUCKERS. IF YOU WIN THE MON-



TANA SUIT, BE READY TO CONVERT. — *Tom Simpson*

montana

Stay out of Montana, did we ask you here, No! We have a lot of crazy fuckers here that might send you a donation that goes bang!! Better start checking your mail a little closer. — *Brett S*

fuck u

fuck you all — *fucker fuck, fucker aevenue, fucker city, fucker state, fucker zip*

FOOLS

You people offend me more and more every day. You need to read and understand the foundation of AMERICA is GOD...IN GOD WE TRUST...ONE NATION UNDER GOD...so my advice is if you dont like or want hear about god

I am the God of hellfire!

Linda Allewalt, Kentucky, writes: "I took these photos during the summer in a town near mine. These two churches are within a half of a block of each other, and I thought the symmetry was really funny!"

go to where is not. Its about time to start a class action lawsuit to pit a stop to yall..God bless and remember stop, drop and roll dont work in hell — *Leslie Fox*

cocksuckers

phuck u! — *bobo shit*

Cease to Exist

I challenge you atheists to stay away from our schools, our churches, our ballgames, and everywhere else we choose to worship God if you choose not to honor Him. — *I.g. spence, Brookhaven, Ms*

Big Mountain Jesus

Find an nice partner, adopt some great kids and move to Canada when they can stand your self serving, entitlement laced, government take care of me and my hurt feelings, ignorant of History, dumb ass. In answer to the question below I heard about you and your stunt in the New York Times; your 15 min of fame is over, shut up and go away. — *Bradshaw John*

dont like my God? GET OUT OF MY COUNTRY

SOME LOW CLASS MAGGOTS ARE TRYING TO SAY CHURCHES CANT DISPLAY OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST. DONT YOU THINK IF THEY DIDNT LIKE IT, THEY SHOULD MOVE TO A SMALL PRIVATE ISLAND TO BE NUKED? — *JESUS LOVER*

Teabaggers

need teabaggees. You fit the bill. — *Clay Wilson*

Black Collar Crime

A Miami jury returned a \$100 million verdict Thursday against retired Catholic priest **Fr. Neil Doherty**, who's accused of sexually abusing dozens of boys over many years. The plaintiff, Andres Susana, Lansing, MI, alleged he was 14 when Doherty started molesting him in Florida in the 1980s.

Doherty, 68, is jailed awaiting trial on criminal charges involving another alleged victim. More than 20 people allege Doherty trolled for victims behind a clerical collar while offering boys drugs and alcohol. *Source: AP, 11-10-11*

Legal Developments

Bishop Robert Finn of the Catholic Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph agreed to meet monthly for 5 years with the Clay County prosecutor to review every episode involving child abuse allegations in the diocese. The meetings are part of a deal to avoid more criminal charges.

Finn was indicted in October for failing to report allegations **Fr. Shawn Ratigan** took upskirt pictures of girls. He was the first U.S. bishop so charged.

"It cuts out the middleman," said Prosecutor Daniel White. "He's the bishop; I'm the prosecutor. We're going to meet, he's going to tell me what's going on, and I'm going to decide whether to call law enforcement."

Finn will also visit every parish in the county to tell members how to report suspicious behavior. *Source: N.Y. Times, 11-16-11*

John P. Feeney, 84, Appleton, WI, was released from prison after serving less than half of his 15-year sentence for molesting children. He's living in a halfway house.

His 2004 convictions stemmed from assaults of brothers Troy and Todd Merryfield when Feeney was parish priest at St. Nicholas Catholic Church in Freedom in 1978 and the boys were 12 and 14. The brothers' 2008 civil suit against the Diocese of Green Bay is set for trial in May.

Feeney was moved 14 times in 14 years by the diocese. Feeney was defrocked in 2005. *Source: Appleton Post-Crescent, 11-11-11*

Fr. Bede Parry, Las Vegas, NV, wrote and signed a 2-page confession last May, admitting he repeatedly told superiors he was molesting children in the 1970s and '80s, but that it was covered up. He continued to have access to children, including a boys' choir at Conception Abbey in Missouri.

Barbara Dorris, Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests outreach director, called the church's attitude "beyond reckless and beyond callous."

In his letter, Perry said he was dismissed from the Catholic Church and then ordained Episcopalian in 2002. *Source: Fox News, 11-7-11*

The British High Court of Justice, in a landmark judgment, ruled the **Catholic Church** can be held liable for crimes committed by pedophile clergy. The decision came in the case of a 47-year-old mother of 3 who alleges she was re-

'She was only 15 years old when he started trying to charm her over with knowing Jesus.'

— Family member of Arizona abuse victim

peatedly raped by the late **Fr. Wilfred Baldwin**.

She was first raped when she was 7, the woman alleges. One alleged molestation occurred in a church robing room on the day of her First Communion, she told authorities. *Source: Daily Mail, 11-8-11*

Removed / Resigned

Rev. Shawn Harris, associate pastor at Mentor [OH] United Methodist Church, had his license to practice ministry revoked and is under investigation by police, a message on the church's website said. He's suspected of stealing prescription drugs from at least 5 people he knew through the church. *Source: Mentor Patch, 12-1-11*

Cardinal Bernard Law, 80, resigned as archpriest of the Papal Basilica of Saint Mary Major in Rome. Law left the **Archdiocese of Boston** in 2002, the first and only bishop to ever resign for his handling of abuse cases.

"It's unfortunate that Bernard Cardinal Law was not held accountable for allowing innocent children to be sexually molested," said attorney Mitchell Garabedian, who said Law oversaw the shuffling of accused priests between parishes.

He'll still be a member of several Vatican congregations, including the office that helps

the pope select bishops.

"Who cares about what he does from his retirement at the rectory?" said Bernie McDaid, 55, Peabody, MA, alleging he was molested when he was 11. "The man is still in power. It's ludicrous. I'm really offended." *Source: Boston Herald, 11-21-11*

Joel W. Hochmuth, 52, Wauwatosa, WI: The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod fired Hochmuth as communications director a day after he was charged with 3 counts of possessing child pornography at his home and church office.

The complaint said Hochmuth told police he'd been "struggling with an addiction to viewing pornographic photos and videos of young boys in sexually explicit poses," and that he went to counseling after his wife caught him. *Source: Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 11-18-11*

Rev. Thomas P. Shoback, Jermyn, PA, was removed by the Diocese of Scranton as pastor at Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary after allegations were made he molested a minor more than a decade ago.

Shoback was ordained in 1977. His brother Edward was defrocked by the Vatican in 2009 for sexual misconduct with minors. *Source: Scranton Times-Tribune, 11-16-11*



Letterbox

'World's Need' now: Love, sweet love

A couple of weekends ago, I heard Annie Laurie and Dan recite the Ella Wheeler Wilcox poem, "The World's Need," on Freethought Radio and thought it was just wonderful. So I decided to make it into a sign, also including a short verse from Anne Gaylor's Winter Solstice sign (hope she won't mind!).

The sign is perched right by our front door, and I look forward to having guests inquire about it. Many of my Christian friends and family most likely have no idea about the roots of their Christmas traditions, which Christians so often like to claim for their own. My hope is this sign will be a "conversation starter."

Perhaps someday I'll even get the courage to march into my Village Hall and ask to have this placed right next to the nativity scene they insist on setting up each year on taxpayer property!

Thanks so much for everything you do and have an enjoyable Reason's Greetings!

**Tom Cara, Life Member
Illinois**

Grad student essays were all grand

Third-place winner Christina Speck's essay ["A secular call to arms"] is what schools should be teaching in history classes.

Religion brainwashes and enslaves people. Give me freedom from religion, and truth and rationality.

**Hulda Pelzl
Texas**

•••

The graduate/mature student essays in the October issue were all so good that the order of prizes could be reversed — awarding one of the honorable mentions the first prize — and I would not have noticed or objected.

**Katherine Hilden
Illinois**

Bequest in memory of Massachusetts member

Enclosed is a \$1,333 donation made in memory of my father, James W. Russell, who died in 2010. He requested I sent a portion of his estate to your organization, which he strongly supported over the years.

He wished for the donation to be for the billboard/bus sign fund.

**Deirdre Russell
Massachusetts**

'Lifer': FFRF is 'candle in the dark'

These days I'm so reminded of Carl Sagan's frightening warning about society's eroding value of knowledge. I see FFRF as a candle in the dark. I recently sent my membership renewal but later realized it didn't express my deep gratitude.

Therefore, I'm extending my renewal to Lifetime Membership of \$1,000. I cannot thank you enough!

**Evelyn Sheldon
California**

Police officer sees religion's damage

Enclosed is a check for the second half of my Lifetime Membership. I love listening to Freethought Radio or podcasts and reading Freethought Today.

As a police officer, I see all too often the false hope people place in religion and the destruction and despair that blind faith causes in their lives. Keep up the great work.

**Paul Fleischauer
Wisconsin**

FFRF, alto sax are music to my ears

I received the October issue of Freethought Today and read about even more FFRF litigation and other forms of vigilance against superstition, at which point I decided to send the enclosed paltry check to be applied to whatever needs a taste of green.

If I can spend cash on cats and Italian classes and ham radio goofiness and a Vietnamese alto saxophone, I should be able to spend some on things certainly less fickle than cats, easier to work out than Italian, way the hell more productive than ham radio and much less complex than a saxophone.

Thus far the words of my ratiocination. It makes more sense than a creation myth, I'd say.

**Nils Young
Ohio**

FFRF members pan Big Mountain Jesus

Below, two members share their letters to the U.S. Forest Service objecting to a permit for a Jesus statue on Big Mountain on public land in Montana. Quite a few members shared their comments to the government on this issue, and FFRF thanks all who wrote.

It doesn't matter how loud the outcry or whether this statue is of great public concern. The U.S. Constitution is not a Chinese menu from which you take the parts you like and reject the rest. You cannot, must not and are forbidden to erect religious icons on federal land. Period. Full stop.

People can squawk and scream and carry on, but the bottom line is that they can do all their worshiping in private, in churches erected for this purpose, without setting up gigantic and relatively unattractive statuary where the rest of the world is forced to look at it.

You are a government agency. You don't get to cave in to narrow private interests. Deny the permit. Legally you can make no other decision.

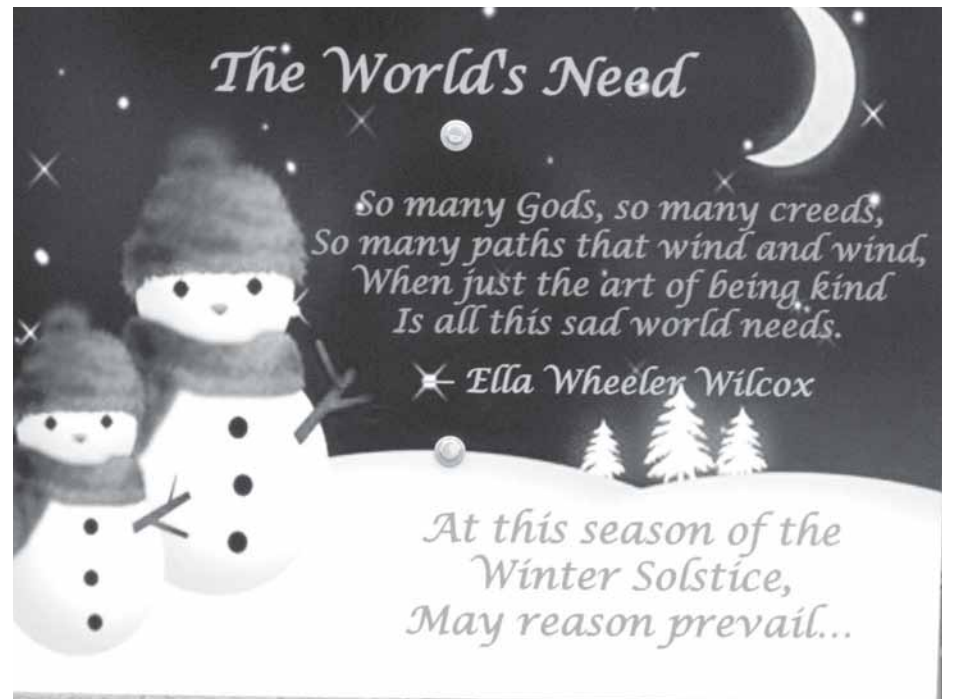
Thank you.

**Judy Ellis
Florida**

•••

As a veteran (U.S. Army, Korea), I would like to submit my comments on the Jesus statue. I am not a Christian. I was cited for meritorious service. I resent Christians appropriating government resources to further their agenda.

Christians have ample opportunity in this country to utilize their own assets to promote their religion. Let them erect statues and crosses on their



The solstice sign in Tom Cara's front yard.

own untaxed land. This statue is an affront to the Golden Rule, common courtesy to taxpaying non-Christians and the First Amendment.

When these Christians try to rewrite history and claim the statue is a war memorial, this tissue-thin lie exposes their lack of commitment to the truth. The Jesus statue is a monument to hypocrisy.

**Ron Taggart
Ohio**

•••

If I went up to the mountain in Montana and took a sledgehammer to the statue of Jesus (which would be so healing for me), would I be in trouble more with the feds or the Knights of Columbus?

**Dennis Lurvey
Arizona**

Some ways to not say Merry Christmas

As an atheist, I endorse the "don't say Merry Christmas" efforts, but I'm not sure saying "Happy Holidays" is an improvement, because "holidays" is just an abbreviation for "holy days!"

Is "Happy Holy Days" somehow better than "Merry Christmas?" (More than a few academic theologians may be inwardly smiling at that thought.)

I prefer "Season's Greetings" because historically, the whole idea originated with the Winter Solstice, the Solstice Season.

But I'm stuck when it comes to a better name for the Christmas tree, er, the Holiday Tree, er, the Holy Days Tree, er, whatever.

**Don Lewellyn
Texas**

[Editor's note: For the tree, evergreen works for me!]

Free of leprechauns, gods in Idaho

I was raised Catholic in northern Maine. I served almost 14 years in the U.S. Navy nuclear propulsion program, then graduated summa cum laude from the University of Idaho. I now work for the U.S. Department of Energy conducting oversight at the Idaho National Laboratory. I have a son attending University of Idaho, and my wife, Kathy, is the most wonderful stepmom a child could ever want.

I was always a skeptic and can still recall sitting in church as a very young boy and how it appeared that this was all playacting and make believe. I fell in love early with science and think that subconsciously, I realized that the

material world offered a more reliable compass for truth than what was being offered by my religious indoctrination.

Throughout my life, until 12 years ago, I spent time popping in and out of different Christian religions, most of which were very much fundamentalist. I continued to study science and read history and literature. I frequently discovered very big differences between what I knew to be true and what was to be accepted through faith.

I have a hard time accepting things just on faith, and I do not play well in that sand box. I truly questioned my religious beliefs after reading the bible cover-to-cover (twice) during those long Navy deployments.

The full realization that truth came through reason started 12 years ago on a hot summer evening when my 6-year-old son asked me about the stars we were observing — how they got there and what they were made of. That evening I believe I became agnostic to faith in a god. Later, I moved on to atheism.

There is no evidence for the existence of leprechauns, which does not mean that leprechauns do not exist; however, the lack of evidence to the degree of 99 percent confidence interval means that we are pretty damn sure leprechauns do not exist. The same goes for a god or gods.

**Jeffrey Duplessis
Idaho**

Penn State pedophile: 'the perfect storm'

The perfect storm in the most culturally religious and naive country in the industrial world: a covey of unprotected young boys held captive in an environment of great athletes with access to their dressing rooms and showers, along with the privilege of checking them out of class to "hit the showers." "Soap up, young man, and let me show you how real men share their love."

Shame on Penn State.
**Ken Dunn, foxhole atheist
California**

Crank Mail too tempting to resist

I'm always tempted to read the Crank Mail. The writers have such a beautiful command of the language and are no doubt all holders of master's and doctoral degrees in English.

Reading them only confirms my nonbelief and my opinion of believers.
**Elliott Berenson
Ohio**



Secular California

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor (left) and Debbie Allen, San Diego Community of Reason coordinator, smile after a standing-room-only presentation at the Chula Vista Library on Sept. 18. Over 130 FFRF'ers and other local freethinkers attended. Annie Laurie also addressed the "Toward a Reasonable World" conference hosted by San Diego State University. The international conference was held in honor of the 500th anniversary of the birth of Michael Servetus (whom Calvin had burned at the stake for heresy). Annie Laurie, as editor of *Women Without Superstition: No Gods — No Masters*, an anthology of women freethinkers, spoke about women and unbelief.

FFRF website like a support group

Thank you so much for having your website. I have been told numerous times that I have no feelings because I am an atheist. They tell me I will burn in hell. They go on and on about things science has proven are wrong. Thank you for having a website I can go to for support.

JB
Michigan

Repo man claims what's not his

Should a so-called "born-again" person be considered repossessed?

Just wondering.
Jorg Aadahl
California

Be wary about using AA's steps

Regarding the 12 steps for non-believers [Oct 11], I don't think it's a good idea. Emulating Alcoholics Anonymous seems as pointless to me as emulating the Ten Commandments. It mystifies a bad document.

The very first step, for example, beats down the sufferer, telling them they are powerless. This is the classic method of a cult: Break them down be-

fore rebuilding them. No wonder AA has such a terrible success rate.

As for removing Gideon bibles from places of lodging, it will have the opposite effect. Gideon International regularly solicits "donations" from the hotels and motels whose rooms it helps stock. The more bibles the hotels and motels require to furnish their rooms, the more money Gideon will get.

Tsee Lee
New York

Evangelicals push new 'bible amendment'

I recently read *America Aflame* by David Goldfield. It's about events leading up to, through and after the Civil War with an emphasis on religious influence. As many may know, "In God We Trust" on coins and the Thanksgiving holiday were instituted in the Civil War due to religious groups' lobbying efforts.

What I did not know was that evangelicals from 11 Protestant denominations from seven northern states tried to insert a so-called "bible amendment" to modify the preamble to the U.S. Constitution. Thus, the preamble would have said, "We, the people of the United States, humbly acknowledge Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, the Lord Jesus Christ as the Ruler among the nations, His revealed will as the su-

Marquee Madness



Ron Fredrickson, California, writes: "The sign didn't make sense (less so than the bible itself), and it read the same on both sides. When I checked the reference, I found that the church used the word statues but Psalms reads statutes." The church is in Zion, Ill.

preme law of the land, in order to form a more perfect union. . ."

It failed, but efforts continue to change the Constitution's original intent by inserting religious nonsense in it.

Peter Chistekoff
Hawaii

'So be good for Jesus' sake'

Sing this at your Solstice party (after a few drinks?):

You better not cuss
You better not lust
You better not lie
I'm telling you why
Jesus Christ is coming to town.

He's makin' a list
And boy, is he pissed
Everyone's naughty
Nobody's nice
Jesus Christ is coming to town.

He knows with whom you're sleeping
He knows if you love bling
He knows about that porno "thing"
So be good for Jesus' sake.

You better pick one
Jekyll or Hyde
Hell is no fun
You're gonna get fried
Jesus Christ is coming to town.

Edward Killian
Florida

Thanks for help during lean times

I want to express my sincerest appreciation for your generous complimentary FFRF subscription during my extremely tenuous financial situation. Things are much better now, and I'm happy to have been able to renew my membership.

I appreciate all the hard work FFRF does with outreach, the atheist visibility movement and perhaps most importantly, your vigilant legal work. I know member support makes this possible.

Thank you again from the bottom of my lil' atheist heart.

Dan Burke
California



Like lies with that?

One order of salvation coming right up, brought to you by the miracle of yeast! Keith Hughes, New York, saw this in Frisco, Colo., near Breckenridge.

They Said What?

Skepticon is NOT welcomed to my Christian business.

Sign posted by Gelato Mio owner Andy Drennen, announcing that attendees at a religious skeptics' conference in Springfield, Mo., should go elsewhere for ice cream

Associated Press, 11-22-11

They wanted me to get some of the Christianity out of the program and we just couldn't do that. The meat of what we do here is the bible studies.

Marilyn Vyzourek, executive director of Liza's Place, a women's shelter which will lose federal funding for mandating that residents participate in religious worship

Fox 21, 11-7-11

Society is in the bind that it is because we got away from one nation under God.

John Stefanski, Murfreesboro, Tenn., holding an "Occupy the Altar" sign to urge people in Nashville to pray instead of protesting Wall Street

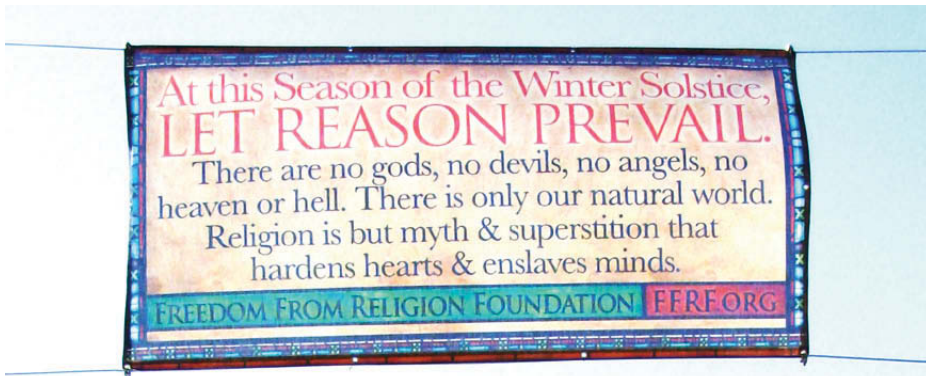
The Tennessean, 11-3-11

Christianity in 105 words

The belief that a walking dead Jewish deity who was his own father although he always existed, commits suicide by cop, although he didn't really die, in order to give himself permission not to send you to an eternal place of torture that he created for you, but instead to make you live forever if you symbolically eat his flesh, drink his blood, and telepathically promise him you accept him as your master, so he can cleanse you of an evil force that is present in mankind because a rib-woman and a mud-man were convinced by a talking snake to eat from a magical tree.

— Anonymous

Vix nixes Christian-only holiday scenes



FFRF member Damon Vix, California, with other freethinkers, preempted the December dominance of the grounds at Palisades Park in Santa Monica by churches by reserving the space for freethought displays. Among the first of the displays placed was FFRF's Winter Solstice banner, written to counter Christian nativity scenes and Jewish menorahs on government property. For the past 57 years, churches and a police association have erected 14 life-size nativity displays along Ocean Avenue. Competition forced the city to use a random lottery system. A Jewish group received one space, churches got three spaces and Damon and another atheist snagged 18 spaces for "solstice greetings." FFRF's banner was torn down almost immediately. Damon sewed it and reposted it, awaiting FFRF's replacement banner. The vandalism was reported to police.

FFRF counters Mississippi crèche



For a second year in a row, FFRF has placed its Winter Solstice message in the rotunda of the Mississippi Capitol in Jackson. With the Jackson Skeptical Society, FFRF is protesting a decision by the state to permit a life-size nativity display in the rotunda. "We don't think religion, or irreligion, belongs in state capitols," noted Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. "But if a state is going to permit a nativity display, then we want to be sure that the views of the 16% of the U.S. population that is not religious are also represented." At left is Patrick Jerome of the skeptical society being interviewed by a CBS affiliate. Thanks also to Brent Cox for his help.



Not naughty, just nice

FFRF placed this 14x48-foot billboard off the Bruckner Expressway at 149th Street in New York City in December, greeting vehicles heading toward Manhattan and Queens via the Triborough Bridge. See photo of FFRF's second billboard, near Time Square, Page 24. (Thanks to Artie Johnson for the photo.)

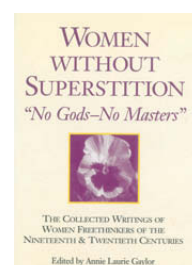
Students get a taste of freethought



Students from the World Religions class at Sauk Prairie High School, Sauk City, Wis., visited Freethought Hall, FFRF's office in Madison, Wis., on Dec. 7 for a brief introduction to the views and activities of atheists and agnostics. FFRF Co-President Dan Barker is kneeling at left. World Religions teacher Dan Halling and his wife, Heidi, are at right. Halling has made Freethought Hall a class field trip for at least a decade.



Students from Beloit College, Beloit, Wis., joined students from Maranatha Baptist Bible College, Watertown, Wis., and members of Atheists, Humanists and Agnostics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for an "interfaith" dialogue Dec. 3 at Freethought Hall.



Women Without Superstition No Gods — No Masters

The Collected Writings of Women Freethinkers of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.

The first anthology of women freethinkers, with more than 50 activists and writers critical of religion. Includes biographical sketches, selected writings

Edited by Annie Laurie Gaylor

Members — \$24/Non-members — \$30

Shop online at: ffrf.org/shop

Away with the manger, in with the solstice!



FFRF protested a devotional nativity on display in the Wisconsin State Capitol for the first time by seeking a permit to place its own "anti-creche." Pictured: FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor.



"Question with boldness even the existence of a god," says Thomas Jefferson. "IT'S A GIRL!" Venus proclaims. Below, an astronaut plays the part of an angel.

Statement by the Freedom From Religion Foundation on placement of its Winter Solstice nativity at the Wisconsin Capitol:

For a fact, the Christians stole Christmas. We don't mind sharing the season with them, but we don't like their pretense that it is the birthday of Jesus. It is the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun — *Dies Natalis Invicti Solis*.

Christmas is a relic of Sun worship.

For all of our major festivals, there were corresponding pagan festivals tied to natural events. We've been celebrating the Winter Solstice, this natural holiday, long before Christians crashed the party. For millennia, our ancestors in the Northern Hemisphere have greeted this seasonal event with festivals of light, gift exchanges and seasonal gatherings.

The Winter Solstice is the reason for the season. The Winter Solstice, on Dec. 22 this year, heralds the symbolic rebirth of the Sun, the lengthening of days and the natural New Year.

We nonbelievers are quite willing to celebrate the fun parts of anybody's holidays. We just want to be spared the schmaltz, the superstition, and the state/church entanglements.

The customs of this time of year endure because they are pleasant customs. It's fun to hear from distant family and friends, to gather, to feast, to sing. Gifts, as freethinker Robert Ingersoll once remarked, are evidences of friendship, of remembrance, of love.

The evergreens displayed now as in centuries past flourish when all else

seems dead, and are symbols, as is the returning Sun, of enduring life.

In celebrating the Winter Solstice, we celebrate reality.

We are unveiling a tableau that celebrates the human family, reason and the Winter Solstice.

- Our wisepeople depict the atheists and scientific giants, Darwin and Einstein, who have enlarged human understanding of the natural world far more than the bible or any "holy books." They were both nonbelievers as was progressive reformer Emma Goldman, representing wise women everywhere. The irreverent literary genius Mark Twain is added for good measure.

- Although Venus, like Mary, was a mythical fertility figure, this image, after which a planet was named, represents our solar system.

- Thomas Jefferson, a Founding Father, was a passionate advocate of separation of religion and government and would have disavowed Christian devotional scenes on state property.

- Our "angels" are also natural. The Statue of Liberty symbolizes freedom, and the astronaut represents the human achievements of science unfettered by religious dogma.

- Our baby was chosen partly for simple egalitarianism, and partly because it's high time we adore female children as much as male children, and to acknowledge that humankind was birthed in Africa.

FFRF would vastly prefer that government buildings and seats of gov-

ernment be free from religion, and irreligion. It is divisive. The rotunda is getting very cluttered. But if a devotional nativity display is allowed, then there must be "room at the inn" for all points of view, including irreverency and freethought.

FFRF gratefully acknowledges the exceptional carpentry work and enthusiasm of Andrew Seidel. Thanks also to Katie Daniel, Melanie Knier and Scott Carney for their invaluable help in creating the natural nativity on very short notice. Part of this statement was adapted from a 1985 Winter Solstice speech by Anne Nicol Gaylor, FFRF president emerita.



FFRF contests 'sweetheart deal' for Madison church

A new Madison, Wis., public charter school set to operate in a former church has drawn the attention of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

FFRF is a national state/church watchdog with more than 1,350 Wisconsin members, including several hundred in the Madison Metropolitan School District.

In a Nov. 23 letter to Superintendent Daniel Nerad, FFRF noted that the district has signed a letter of intent with Mount Olive Lutheran Church to operate Madison Preparatory Academy at 4018 Mineral Point Road. The property has been for sale since 2009. The church has moved to Whitney Way.

"Representatives for the school have said that the plans include spending more than \$1 million dollars on improvements to the church property in addition to monthly rent," said FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "The school has not offered any details publicly on how the \$1 million would be spent. The school's financial plans state that rent would be \$12,600 per month for the first year and nearly \$24,000 per month for the second and third years. The charter school lease would be for three years, and thereafter the school 'intends to move one or both of its schools into one or more permanent facilities that can appropriately handle the school's growth to 820 students.'"

Gaylor called that "a windfall" for the church. "Public funding would be used to finance permanent improvements to the church. Simply put, public funds should not be used to renovate churches. The property is listed for sale for \$1.45 million. By the end of three years, the church would receive upwards of \$725,000 in rent in addition to the benefit of \$1 million in improvements, no strings attached, with no further use or benefit to the taxpayers."

When the agreement ends, Madison Prep will be homeless, and Mount Olive will have been enriched by \$1.75 million in taxpayer funds, noted Gaylor, calling it an unlawful public subsidy of a ministry and a place of worship. The Wisconsin Constitution (Article I, Section 18) states, "[N]or shall any money be drawn from the treasury for the benefit of religious societies, or religious or theological seminaries."

FFRF is hearing from many members who oppose merging public education with religious institutions with school vouchers and charter school church locations. "Supporters of these changes say they are justified as they offer cost savings," Gaylor said. "The principle of keeping public education public is far more important than short-term cost savings, but in this case, the MMSD proposal would waste, not save, public funds. It is fiscal folly and unacceptable."



FFRF constitutional consultant Andrew Seidel builds the solstice manger scene.

Solstice message returns for 16th year in Wisconsin Capitol

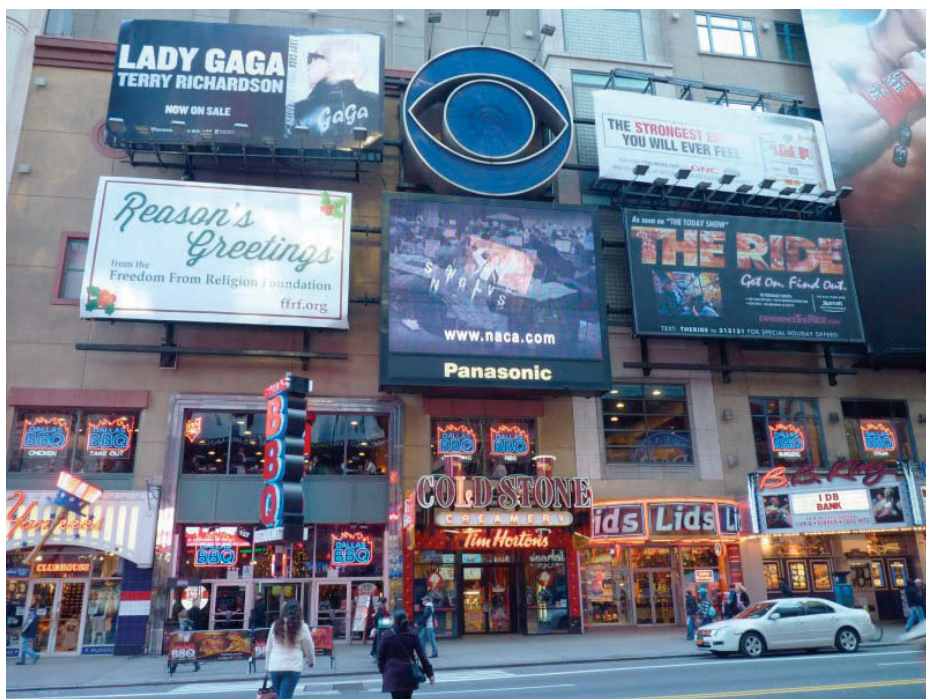


FFRF staff and volunteers pose by the Freedom From Religion Foundation's gilt Winter Solstice message, which returned in December for its 16th visit to the first-floor rotunda of the Wisconsin Capitol. FFRF placed the sign to ensure a freethought perspective at the Capitol's religion-dominated December public forum. The message was composed by Anne Nicol Gaylor, Foundation co-president emerita, and says: "At this season of the Winter Solstice, may reason prevail. There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell. There is only our natural world. Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds." The back of the sign says "Keep State and Church Separate!" and reprints a poem by celebrated Wisconsin poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox, "The World's Need":

*So many Gods, so many creeds,
So many paths that wind and wind,
When just the art of being kind
Is all this sad world needs.*

(Photo: Andrew Seidel)

'Reason's Greetings' to New Yorkers



New York photos: Marco Casazza (member)

FFRF sent "Reason's Greetings" to New Yorkers, placing two of its seasonally irreverent greetings in New York City. This jaunty 18x30-foot sign is on an illuminated wallscape in the heart of the theater district on 42nd Street at 7th and 8th avenues near Times Square. (See daytime view at left and lit up at night, above. A photo of FFRF's billboard on the Bruckner Expressway is on Page 22.) FFRF had its eye on a flashy three-panel wall in Times Square, but the owner refused permission for any of FFRF's messages.



FFRF enlightens Salt Lake City

In its first advertising foray into Mormon-dominated Salt Lake City, Utah, FFRF posted four billboards in mid-December. Three proclaimed a seasonal "Reason's Greetings from the Freedom From Religion Foundation," and a fourth asked onlookers to "Imagine No Religion." The billboards recall

"the real reason for the season — the Winter Solstice, a 'natural holiday,'" says FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. For more photos, a map and billboard locations for the billboards, go to: ffrf.org/news/releases/ffrf-brings-reasons-greetings-to-salt-lake-city/

Reminder:
January / February
is a combined issue
to be received in February.