

Freethought Today

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January/February 2012

Judge rules in favor of Jessica Ahlquist

Rhode Islanders go ape over prayer; freethinkers show floral support

The stream of hate and profanity previously aimed at Rhode Island teen Jessica Ahlquist increased by multitudes in the wake of a federal judge's order to permanently remove a Christian prayer banner at Cranston West High School. She received death threats and numerous obscene comments directed at her online after the Jan. 11 decision was released.

The 8-foot-tall banner, currently covered with a tarp while the School Committee of the city of Cranston and the city of Cranston decided whether to appeal the judge's ruling, is titled "School Prayer," addresses "Our Heavenly Father" and ends with "Amen."

"No amount of debate can make the School Prayer anything other than a prayer, and a Christian one at that," said U.S. District Judge Ronald Lagueux in a 40-page opinion. "Its opening, calling upon the 'Heavenly Father,' is an exclusively Christian formulation of a monotheistic deity, leaving out, *inter alia*, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and atheists alike."

Ahlquist, 16, received FFRF's Thomas Jefferson Student Activist schol-



arship award last year and spoke at FFRF's 34th national convention in October in Hartford, Conn., five days before Lagueux heard arguments in the case in which she was the plaintiff in an ACLU suit seeking removal of the banner.

FFRF announced on Jan. 19 the creation of its Atheists in Foxholes Support Fund, with Ahlquist receiving a \$10,000 scholarship as the fund's first recipient. She was also awarded \$2,000 from FFRF in January for her student activism. She's being treated as a pariah by many classmates and adults and has expressed a desire to graduate early from high school and attend college out of state.

Banner supporters argued it was more historic and artistic than religious. In his decision, Lagueux called the tradition argument "a murky and dangerous bog. While all agree that some traditions should be honored, others must be put to rest as our national values and notions of tolerance and diversity evolve. At any rate, no amount of history and tradition can cure a constitutional infraction. The Court concludes that Cranston's purposes in installing and, more recently, voting to retain the Prayer Mural are not clearly secular."

David Bradley, 65, who wrote the prayer in 1960 when he was in seventh grade, told the Westerly Sun that he's "absolutely incensed, disenfranchised and outraged. It's just one more example of secularism eroding the fabric of America."

The class of 1963, the school's first graduating class, had Bradley's prayer printed on heavy paper and hung it in the auditorium as a gift to the school. Bradley called Ahlquist a "trained seal." On WPRO Radio, Bradley said, "It's a shame that some judge with an appointment out of a Cracker Jack box can make a ruling like that." Lagueux, 80, was appointed to the federal bench



by President Ronald Reagan.

State Rep. Peter Palumbo, D-Cranston, went on WPRO to call Ahlquist an "evil little thing." He also called her a pawn "being coerced by evil people. . . She's being trained to do this."

FFRF sent an Action Alert protesting Palumbo's vicious attack: "If anything is 'evil,' it is your inflammatory words contributing to a situation in which an entire community, if not state, appears to be arrayed against one young, brave and diminutive teenager. Your reckless and unprofessional words as an elected state official endanger Jessica's standing and her security in the community."

Florists just say no

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, wishing to send a bouquet of roses to congratulate Ahlquist on the court victory, contacted a shop Jan. 17 in Madison, Wis., to assist with delivery. The results:

• Floral Express, in Cranston, on Wednesday messaged the Madison shop via Dove Network, an electronic order service, that it

was "closed on the requested delivery day" (which was Wednesday, Jan. 18) and said "I am not able to fill this."

• The Madison florist was contacted by Twins Florist in Cranston on Jan. 18 via Dove Network: "I will not deliver to this person."

• Flowers by Santilli in Cranston was contacted by phone. The owner, upon hearing the name of the recipient, said he would rather not get involved and refused to fill the order. "We chose not to make the delivery because first of all, most important, it's our belief system," Claudia Colardo-Santilli told WPRI News.

• Seeking to go outside Cranston, the Madison firm contacted Greenwood Flower & Garden in Warwick, which agreed to accept the order, then called back saying patrons were phoning and emailing threatening to boycott his business, so he refused the order.

FFRF filed a formal complaint Jan. 19 with the state of Rhode Island Commission for Human Rights, alleging "illegal discrimination based on religion" for failure to fill the order. Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert cited the state law that says it's unlawful for a place of accommodation to deny services "on account of religion."

Markert added, "Twins Florist violated this statute when it refused the order by FFRF and it stated in its refusal that it would not 'deliver to this person.'" FFRF is filing a separate

Continued on page 3

Inside This Issue

Prayer hazardous to pilot's health
Page 5



Student activist proud to be 'out'

Page 11

Freethought Heroine 2011

Pages 12-14



Atheist Clem Wiechecki frames FFRF's first-ever billboard in Rhode Island. See Page 23 for more on the billboard.

In Memoriam

James F. Crow, 1916 – 2012

James Franklin Crow, 95, Madison, Wis., died of congestive heart failure Jan. 4, 2012, at Capitol Lakes Retirement Community. The world-renowned evolutionary biologist and population geneticist was a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor for 48 years and a Lifetime Member of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Crow was born Jan. 18, 1916, in Phoenixville, Pa. His father was a biology teacher at Ursinus College, then moved to Friends University in Wichita, Kan., where James grew up. He received a bachelor's degree from Friends and did graduate studies at the University of Texas, where he earned a Ph.D. in genetics in 1941. After seven years at Dartmouth College, he moved to UW-Madison, where he stayed until the end of his career.

He met his future wife, Ann Crockett Crow, at the University of Texas, where he played viola and she played clarinet in the student orchestra. She died in 2001. He played viola with the Madison Symphony Orchestra for many years. He performed at a concert to celebrate his 90th birthday.

He was a Fellow of the Royal Society of London and the Japan Academy, a member of the American Philosophical Society, the World Academy of Art and Science, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the National Academy of Medicine and the National Academy of Sciences, where he has chaired several committees, including one to study forensic uses of DNA fingerprinting. That committee's report helped legitimize use of DNA testing in court.

"When the National Academy of Sciences wanted an exemplary report lucidly written and completed on time, it always called on Jim to chair it," said UW colleague Seymour Abrahamson in the journal *Genetics*, a comment reported in *The New York Times*' Jan. 10 story on Crow's legacy. Abrahamson is married to Wisconsin Supreme Court Chief Justice Shirley Abrahamson.

His most recent honor was the establishment in 2009 of the James F. Crow Institute for the Study of Evolution at UW-Madison. When Crow was an honored speaker at FFRF's annual national convention in 2010 in Madison, he joked about that use of his name.

"I take a great deal of pride in this, of course. But this usually happens after you're dead. And I'm refusing to take the hint."

He told the convention audience that he believed neither in gods, devils nor "intelligent design." In closing he said:

"I want to say a little bit about evolution and religious belief. My main personal reason for nonbelief is: Why would an all-powerful and especially benevolent creator permit so much sin and suffering? Most evolutionists are nonbelievers, but they all aren't. My favorite quotation on this subject, and often he is very quotable, is from Bertrand Russell. He was asked one time, 'Bertie, suppose that you're totally wrong about this? Suppose you die and there really is a God and you're taken up to the Pearly Gates, what would you say?' Russell answered instantly, 'I would say, "God, why didn't you give us better evidence?"'

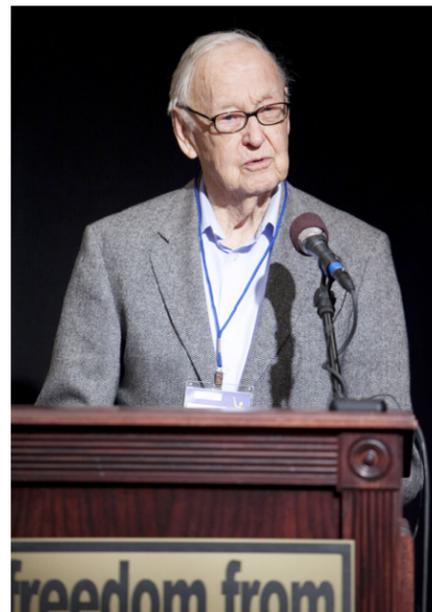
"Well, let me finally end this tirade, this screed, by asking do you need to be a nonbeliever to study evolution? Of course not! There are religious people who study evolution. I don't think there's anyone among them, though, who takes the Old Testament literally. For myself, I believe you don't have to be a nonbeliever to be an evolutionist, but I think it helps."

Another UW colleague, Professor Emeritus James Coors, who is an FFRF Executive Council member, paid tribute to Crow in introducing him to the convention. Coors noted his colleague's many professional achievements that broke new scientific ground, then spoke to Crow's humanity, calling him "a man who lights up every room with his smile."

"Dr. Crow was a downtown Madison fixture who still went to the university daily," said FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "He remained vibrant, tuned in and productive till the end."

"We are fortunate to have known him and are honored by his interest in the Foundation," added Co-President Dan Barker.

Survivors include a son, Franklin; two daughters, Laura Crow and Catherine Rasmussen; six grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.



Photos: Brent Nicastro

Meet a Volunteer

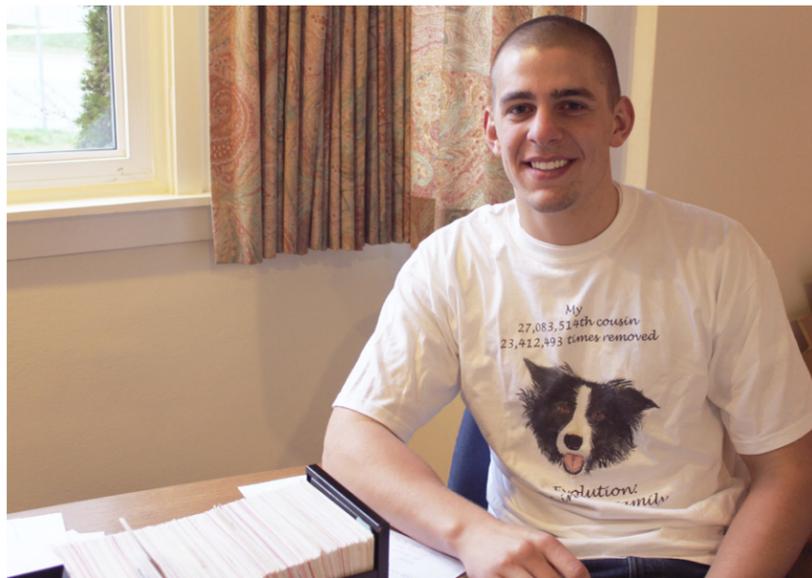


Photo: Dan Barker

Scott Carney's shirt notes that evolution is "All in the Family." Go to evogeneao.com for a good discussion of evolutionary genealogy.

Name: Scott Carney.

Where I live: De Pere, Wis.

Where I was born: Green Bay, Wis.

Family: Ann and Michael, mom and dad; two older brothers, Dan 25, Matt 24.

My religious upbringing was: Catholic.

Why I volunteer for FFRF: I had some time to kill until I leave for school in New Zealand, so I thought I would offer my services for a good cause!

What I do here: Organize membership cards, shred paper, fold cards, handyman around the building.

What I like best about it: I am able to see how many state/church violations happen on a daily basis and how much it disgusts me. Being around positive people who are making a difference is always a pleasure as well.

Something funny that's happened at work: The first day of volunteering, I was eating lunch upstairs in the conference room and broke a chair, which

made a loud noise and alarmed people. The chair was old (and maybe not ready for my 6-foot-6-inch frame), so it wasn't entirely my fault.

My day job is/was/will eventually be: I'm pursuing an international relations degree and will work in either the private or public sector.

Education: I finished my first year at Carroll University in Waukesha, Wis., last year. I'm currently waiting to go to school at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. I will be there for three years to obtain my degree.

These three words sum me up: Spontaneous, outgoing, worldly.

My freethought heroes are: Dan Barker, Richard Dawkins, Michael Shermer and the late Christopher Hitchens.

Things I like: Being around any body of water! Working out and any outdoor activity.

Things I smite: Religion, church, "GOD."

A Note to Members

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(608)256-5800 • FAX (608)204-0422

FTtoday@ffrf.org • ffrf.org

Editor in Chief: Bill Dunn

Executive Editor: Annie Laurie Gaylor

Contributing Editors: Dan Barker, Katie Stenz

Production Editor: Scott Colson

Contributors: Philip Appleman, Melvin Brantley, Dylan Galos,

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, Jeff Yardis

January/February 2012

The only freethought newspaper in the United States



Judge rules in favor of Jessica Ahlquist

Continued from front page

complaint with the commission against Flowers by Santilli.

Unbelievably, other shops noted on a Facebook page that “I stand with the Cranston florists,” seeking public support.

“They must grow ‘em mean in Rhode Island,” commented Gaylor.

FFRF was forced to go to an out-of-state business, Glimpse of Gaia, in Putnam, Conn., which not only agreed to deliver the flowers but threw in a second bouquet with its own message: “Glimpse of Gaia fully supports our First Amendment and will not be bullied by those who do not. Here’s to you, Jessica Ahlquist.” (See sidebar on Glimpse of Gaia.)

FFRF heard from people from as far away as Sweden and Denmark wishing to support Ahlquist, with some saying they would be ordering flowers for her from the Connecticut shop.

Ball in school’s court

A major factor in the School Committee’s decision whether to appeal is the cost. That doesn’t matter to people like Lisa French, who according to the Cranston Patch was removed from the Jan. 17 board meeting for rushing members and throwing fistfuls of cash at them to spend on an appeal. “Here’s your money. If you don’t defend the banner, you will not be reelected,” French shouted, “any of you!” An estimated 250 people attended.

School Committee Chairwoman

Andrea Iannazzi warned that anyone speaking ill of Ahlquist “clearly does not understand the intent of the banner and will be asked to leave,” adding that even if she doesn’t agree with Ahlquist, “we can all recognize her bravery for standing up for what she believes in.”

ABC-6 in Providence reported that Ahlquist was under police protection during and after school. Mayor Allan Fung said he supports the banner but said there’s no money for an appeal. Superintendent Peter Nero said the district has a legal budget of \$150,000. “I put no money into this budget regarding any litigation in the banner issue.”

At the board meeting in the auditorium, Ahlquist was led in and out by police. The crowd sang “God Bless America” and Christian hymns. (In his decision, Judge Lagueux said a March board meeting on the issue “at times resembled a religious revival.”)

Ahlquist urged the committee not to appeal. She noted that Lagueux is a Catholic and conservative. “This is not about religion. This is about the Constitution and it always has been. Religion does not have a place in public school and this country was not founded on the idea of Christianity and Christian principles. It was founded on the idea of religious freedom. If you want to defend the Constitution, you will remove the banner.”

The board’s next scheduled meeting is Jan. 25 (the day after this issue went to press).

Florist shop won’t be intimidated

‘Matter of fairness, decency’

Sean Condon and Stephanie Ewart-Condon operate Glimpse of Gaia, a floral business in Putnam, Conn. When no one else would deliver FFRF’s flower order to Jessica Ahlquist, Glimpse of Gaia (glimpseofgaia.com/), gladly did. (Gaia is the primordial Earth goddess in Greek mythology.)

Sean Condon said the business received two negative emails and 96 positive ones. He responded to them all. His response to the negative ones:

Thanks for writing. I realize that the Cranston West prayer banner lawsuit and resulting abuse of Jessica Ahlquist has been a heated issue in Rhode Island. I am sure that you respect our Constitution and the laws which prevent discrimination on the basis of race, gender and religion. I understand that you disagree with Ms. Ahlquist’s position on the banner, so I would invite you to perhaps think about it another way.

Imagine that instead of asking to take the banner down, she had asked for a Secular Humanist expression to be put up. Perhaps next, some Islamic students could request a prayer banner that reflects their beliefs. Likewise, Hindu students could ask for something to represent them. Perhaps Evangelicals would want a banner to distinguish from the Catholic message. I am sure you see the problem this creates. I suspect you would agree that we don’t want the walls of our public space littered with competing dogma, all of which would need to be paid for and maintained by those same public institutions. Instead we have private space, including your place of worship, car, home, Facebook and Twitter pages et cetera, which you can use as you like to express your beliefs, whatever they may be.

I would like you to imagine another small change to this situation. Instead of flower delivery being denied, it was something more important. Should this young lady be denied food be-

cause of her, legally expressed, opinion? What about housing? How about fuel when her car is close to empty and it’s a frigid evening? What about medical care?

Let’s go one step further and imagine that it is you or your loved one who needs to purchase something, but is denied the opportunity because the seller doesn’t like your beliefs. Is this the kind of society in which you would want to live?

Of course companies can deny service for certain grounds, but not any grounds. A store can refuse to sell products that they know you will use illegally. They can deny service if you are belligerent or intoxicated et cetera. However, they cannot deny you service because they don’t like how you think. This is not just a matter of opinion, it is the law.

Those laws are here to protect us. Our Bill of Rights guarantees fair treatment of everyone, even against the will of the majority. It is a foundational premise of our great country. We have rights. We’ve been incredibly lucky to have been born with those rights, hard won by our forebears. I think we should respect and protect them.

Thanks for your interest and attention. — Sean

It was a simple matter to decide to deliver FFRF’s order, Condon said by email Jan. 22. “We don’t discriminate or give in to intimidation. While we agree with Ms. Ahlquist and FFRF, we would make a delivery for senders and recipients with whom we vehemently disagree. It’s a matter of fairness and decency.”

What is driving people’s anger?

“It is not merely simple bigotry, although this is surely the foundation,” Condon said. “Our public education has, for decades, neglected to effectively teach civics. Our technology makes hurling insults and threats easy while simultaneously insulating the sender from the immediate consequences. Our news media is such that careful assessment is now reserved for niche markets, while cursory examination and irrational self-righteousness are rewarded with higher ratings and bigger paychecks. Our politics are dominated by sound bites and buzzwords, often with the intent to mislead.

“Many of our fellow citizens don’t have the skills they need to temper their emotional response, but instead have it inflamed in a variety of ways. We have a growing gap between those of us who use reason and fact to make decisions and those who employ emotion and opinion. If we hope to improve the situation, we’ll need to be more vocal, but still polite, in opposing the slow degradation of our rights and civil discourse.”

In a Providence Journal online poll Jan. 19 (one vote limit per person), readers weighed in on whom they agree with:

Florist who delivers to Ahlquist: 80.6% (8,611); Florists who refuse to deliver to Ahlquist: 16.0% (1,705); Makes no difference: 3.5% (372).

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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

New Year's Resolution

Well, I did it again, bringing in
that infant Purity across the land,
welcoming Innocence with gin
in New York, waiting up
to help Chicago,
Denver, L.A., Fairbanks, Hon-
olulu — and now
the high school bands are alienating Dallas,
and girls in gold and tangerine
have lost all touch with Pasadena,
and young men with muscles and missing teeth
are dreaming of personal fouls,
and it's all beginning again, just like
those other Januaries in
instant replay.

But I've had enough
of turning to look back, the old
post-morteming of defeat:
people I loved but didn't touch,
friends I haven't seen for years,
strangers who smiled but didn't speak — failures,
failures. No,
I refuse to leave it at that, because
somewhere, off camera,
January is coming like Venus
up from the murk of December, re-
virginized, as innocent
of loss as any dawn. Resolved: this year
I'm going to break my losing streak,
I'm going to stay alert, reach out,
speak when not spoken to,
read the minds of people in the streets.
I'm going to practice every day,
stay in training, and be moderate
in all things.
All things but love.

© 1996 Philip Appleman

Reprinted from *New & Selected Poems, 1956-1996*



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* (2012), *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 "Afterlife" Members 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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Freedom depends upon freethinkers

(Please specify whether the individual is a freethinker.)



Overheard

I hate that "God particle" term. The Higgs [boson] is not endowed with any religious meaning. It is ridiculous to call it that.

Pauline Gagnon, a Canadian physicist working at the Large Hadron Collider to find if the theoretical particle exists
Lansing State Journal, 12-27-11



I understand that if we rent to one religious group, we have to rent to them all. But I still don't like it. I'm going to put up a sign in front of the gym, "If you don't pray in my school, I won't think in your church."

Richard Sloan, a trustee of the Lagunitas [Calif.] School District, which co-owns the gym where Catholic Youth Organization leaders are asking basketball players to gather at center court to pray before games

Marin Independent Journal, 1-7-12

We convened with the idea that the Founding Fathers had it right. The separation of church and state, the establishment of the U.S. as a secular nation — those two concepts are our watchwords. We don't want government to impose a religion, and we don't want government to impose no religion. We want government to be silent with regard to religion.

Troy Boyle, Elsmere, Ky., co-founder of the National Atheist Party
Washington Post, 1-3-12

He even asked me, "Dad, if this guy attacked me, why would they dedicate a tree to him?"

Comment by father of a 14-year-old boy who alleges he was molested by

Msgr. Thomas Brady, to whom Good Shepherd Catholic Church dedicated its Christmas tree lighting in Brooklyn, N.Y.

New York Daily News, 1-3-12

You've been asked to leave, and you didn't. You can preach on your own property. You can preach on a street corner. But you're not allowed to preach here because this is a captive audience.

Darren Meyer, California Highway Patrol officer, before arresting two men at the Hemet DMV office, an action for which he's being sued

Valley News, 1-6-11

Among the blessings, four Protestant pastors laid hands on the Republican governor, who begins his second term Monday, and prayed for him to lead the state with wisdom and faith.

News story on preinaugural prayer service at a Baton Rouge Catholic cathedral for Louisiana Gov. Piyush "Bobby" Jindal

Opelousas Daily World, 1-8-12



The belief that religious institutions have the right to feed at the government trough while rejecting any government rules is the glue of the lobbying alliance between

the Catholic bishops and right-wing evangelical Protestant leaders — an odd coupling that has never before existed in American history.

"Spirited Atheist" Susan Jacoby, in her final column, which she is giving up to concentrate on writing a book

Washington Post, 12-28-11

YOUR WEEKLY ANTIDOTE TO THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

TUNE IN TO FREETHOUGHT RADIO

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

Atheist in foxhole memory

Prayer hazardous to pilots' health



Melvin Brantley during primary flight training in 1943 at the Naval Air Station near Livermore, Calif.

By Melvin Brantley
Lt. Cmdr. U.S. Navy, retired

I had elementary training in prayers, but Leon had a master's degree.

runway heading. Still accelerating at full power, he crashed into parked aircraft along the runway but was unhurt. Leon was deeply troubled by the crash and declined to go on another ferry flight.

In about two days the fleet arrived. What had been an empty lagoon was filled with three carriers, four cruisers, two battleships, about 20 destroyers and 30 service ships along with ammo, fleet oilers, refrigerated, etc. — a complete supermarket for the fleet.



Melvin Brantley in 1960 as executive officer of the Navy's first COD (Carrier Onboard Delivery) Squadron, VRC-40.

Leon and I packed our belongings and reported aboard to our units. Our briefings were intense. Our flight discipline was worrisome for Leon. This meant when taking a wave-off from the LSO (landing signal officer), we were to turn right or left and fly away from the ship a few hundred feet so as not to worry the bridge that you might crash into it. We were told we would get two refresher flights. The third flight would be in the combat zone. We were cautioned that a combat-ready fighter with drop-fuel tank and full ammo required a higher landing approach speed and that overall performance was sluggish.

I finished my first flight and I went below to our ready room. The duty officer announced that one pilot was having trouble getting aboard. I suspected it was Leon. He finally came in but crashed into the barrier. In two flight attempts, his damaged aircraft count was eight.

Leon asked after dinner if we could talk in private. He started unloading all his fears and was crying. He told me what happened on the takeoff crash.



A North American FJ-4 Fury, the aircraft Melvin flew to break the sound barrier.

He was reverting back to his initial flight training. He was told if the nose is right, apply opposite rudder and the same thing if the nose was left. This is true, but he never figured out that when the nose was coming close to straight ahead, opposite rudder must be used to stop the swing.

It quickly came to me that Leon had not really learned to fly. He asked to hold hands while he prayed. He asked God to guide his limbs so he could safely complete the required maneuvers. His prayer shocked me. I had elementary training in prayers, but Leon had a master's degree. He asked God for guidance on aircraft control that he should have already mastered hours ago. It was obvious he was a danger to himself and everyone in his path.

I saw him the next morning at breakfast. He was in good spirits and thanked me for my support. I was not convinced that the prayer had the ef-

signed to a six-pilot team. One member was an outstanding athlete. He also had an "attitude" and would not conform. He rejected all criticism with either denial or by saying, "I have God in my cockpit." I appealed to the commanding Officer to have him removed from the team. My request was rejected with a review of my record and a mandate to "train him."

One night off the Korean coast on a four-plane mission in snow showers, we were on our descent. The problem pilot radioed for me to turn my lights on bright as he had lost sight of me. I immediately ordered him to climb, but he repeated his request. I again ordered him to climb.

There were no more radio transmissions. no debris found the next day. I feel he flew into the water looking for the lights of our formation in defiance of my order to climb.

His faith failed to save him.



Lt. Cmdr. Brantley conducts personnel inspection as VRC-40 executive officer.

fect he felt, so I went to our commanding officer to tell him of my fears. I was promptly dismissed with a warning on procedural steps to take in the future: first go to the division officer, the squadron safety officer, etc. I never saw my friend again. On July 11, he got slow in his landing approach, applied power to wave-off, went into a torque roll, hit the water and cartwheeled until the plane sank.

Leon died because he believed his prayers were going to be answered. There is no doubt in my mind that the main cause of the accident was the substitution of faith for proficiency.

During the Korean War, I was as-

Melvin Brantley was born in 1921 in Colorado, where his father was a chicken and egg wholesaler. After moving to Oregon, Melvin grew up in the trucking business. He enlisted in the Navy during World War II and earned the Distinguished Flying Cross, five Air Medals, racked up 7,500 hours of pilot time and completed 525 carrier landings (190 at night), all accident-free.

Gout forced his military retirement in 1964. He then worked in various management positions and real estate sales. After his two daughters and son finished college, Melvin retired to a roving motor home. He has 11 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

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.

FFRF making a scene about nativity displays pays off

In December, FFRF renewed its complaint from 2010 over the Ellwood City, Pa., nativity scene that was annually placed in front of the Ellwood City municipal building. In response to FFRF's complaint and potential litigation, the Borough Council voted 4-2 to remove the nativity display from government property for future years.

The favorable conclusion was surprising given that the community held a large rally earlier in the month to keep the display. Initially, officials invited FFRF to send its Winter Solstice banner to be placed near the nativity. FFRF sent the banner, but the offer to place it was rescinded.

At a Dec. 19 council meeting, Borough Attorney Edward Leymaire presented the board with the two options: keep the display and include the FFRF banner or maintain the display this year and move it to private property next year. The council voted to move the display in 2012 and all future years. Council President Anthony DeCarbo voted in favor of moving the nativity to private property because, "We took an oath to uphold the Constitution of the United States and of the state of Pennsylvania."

Mayor Anthony Court disagreed with the decision and attempted to rescind the vote. About 100 people attended the Jan. 10 meeting to support putting the display back on borough property, but the council refused to revote. Councilwoman Judith Dici said, "The vote is done and over with. Let's look toward 2012."

FFRF was inundated with complaints in December from citizens objecting to nativity displays at courthouses, city parks and even in school buildings. FFRF sent more than 25 letters of complaint about displays last holiday season. In other instances, FFRF attorneys requested records from local governments to learn their display policies.

"Challenges to these longstanding traditions that violate the Constitution can take time to resolve," noted Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott. Several municipalities that received FFRF complaints about nativity displays in both 2010 and 2011 came to either remove them or now allow all displays, including FFRF signage.

Pa. district agrees to abide by law

In September 2010, a student complained to FFRF about prayer before Cornwall-Lebanon School District board meetings in Lebanon, Pa. Prayers were most often Christian in nature.

Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert wrote to the district, informing them "it is beyond the scope of a public school board to schedule prayer as part of its monthly meetings." Markert cited a strong case from the 6th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals



Rebecca Markert

(*Coles v. Cleveland Board of Education*), which struck down prayers at school board meetings as violative of the First Amendment.

In response, the board refused to change its practice, opting to instead wait to see how the 3rd Circuit U.S.



Persistence pays off

FFRF Lifetime Members Maria and Edward Susterich were initially stopped by security from bringing FFRF's sign into the Milwaukee courthouse in December. The sign was temporarily confiscated. After further discussion, the facilities management director allowed it to be placed in a "free-form display area" that required no permit.

FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott had contacted the county in advance to seek approval. FFRF also wrote a letter of complaint in 2010 to the Milwaukee County Board protesting the devotional display in the lobby every December. Then-County Executive Scott Walker helped private individuals first place the crèche in the rotunda in 2009. FFRF's letter went unanswered.

Court of Appeals ruled on a similar case, *Doe v. Indian River School District*. In August, the 3rd Circuit ruled against the school district.

FFRF Staff Attorney Stephanie Schmitt followed up with a Nov. 15 letter to Cornwall-Lebanon, noting the decision in *Doe v. Indian River*. On Nov. 30, 2011, school attorneys confirmed that "there has been no prayer at the beginning of any subsequent public School Board meetings. Cornwall-Lebanon School District is abiding by this Third Circuit decision."



Stephanie Schmitt

FFRF 'goes Grinch' on Texas violation

FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott's Dec. 14 letter to the South Texas Independent School District in Mercedes about a proselytizing teacher resulted in action by the district, including an investigation of the teacher.

According to FFRF's complainant, a physics teacher at South Texas Science Academy put up a nativity scene in his classroom for "people of my faith, fellow Christians." He also put up a "Grinch Who Stole Christmas" display for "every other religion, people who aren't Christians," according to the complainant.

The grade 9-12 academy is part of the school district and is geared to students pursuing careers in science, technology and engineering.



Patrick Elliott

Elliott wrote, "It should go without saying that, if the allegations are founded, it is highly inappropriate for a public school teacher to demean a student's religious beliefs or lack of belief by likening them to a cartoon villain. [The teacher]'s alleged statements and these displays exceed not only the bounds of courtesy, but also the bounds of the First Amendment."

Two days later, FFRF received a letter from the school district's attorney, advising that "the referenced displays have been removed from the classroom and appropriate directives have been conveyed that protect religious freedoms." Furthermore, "[w]hile the outcome of the investigation is confidential," the district was investigating the allegations against the teacher.

A solid victory for the Constitution.

FFRF ends prayer in Carolina school

Clifdale Elementary School in Glendale, S.C., will no longer schedule prayer during assemblies.

District residents complained to FFRF after learning that a child was asked by school officials to lead the school in a prayer at a Nov. 11 Veteran's Day ceremony. In a Nov. 17 letter to Clifdale Superintendent Jim Ray, Staff Attorney Stephanie Schmitt responded to this gross violation of the First Amendment and exploitation of an elementary school student.

The school district's legal counsel replied Dec. 8: "Dr. Ray is aware of the prohibitions on such prayers at school-sponsored events and has met with the principal of Clifdale to make certain that there is no misunderstanding about proper protocol in the future, such as having a student offer a moment of silence."

FFRF work made settlement possible

The Chesterfield County School District board, Chesterfield, S.C., voted 6-3 Jan. 12 night to adopt a settlement agreement to end the practice of school-sponsored prayer, preaching and religious activities aimed at students.

The agreement, subject to court review, would end a lawsuit filed by the ACLU of South Carolina on behalf of a student and his father who objected to religious activities at New Heights Middle School in Jefferson and at other district schools.

The violations first came to light publicly in 2011 due to the efforts of FFRF, which worked with several local complainants in preparing letters protesting the activities. The violations included a Sept. 1 school assembly featuring Christian Chapman, a preacher and evangelist, and Christian rap artist B-SHOC. The initial letter Sept. 19 by Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert was followed by several other formal complaints pointing out constitutional violations, along with Freedom of Information Act requests.

The district canceled a student assembly featuring a presentation by a faith-based drug rehabilitation center after Staff Attorney Stephanie Schmitt's Oct. 17 letter on behalf of a local complainant. The assembly was set for Oct. 27 at New Heights Middle School.

The district also responded to an FFRF open records request for the lease agreement and fee schedule for B-SHOC's performance at McBee High School on Oct. 28, a staff development, no-student day. The school leased the gym, canteen and restrooms for \$210 (\$15 an hour), from noon to 2 a.m.

FFRF displaces Illinois Baby Jesus song

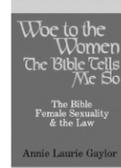
The Sandburg Elementary School's winter concert in Wheaton, Ill., will no longer feature at least one Christian song.

Before FFRF's Dec. 2 complaint, Sandburg Elementary hosted a musical program in November at which children performed the Christian tune "There Was a Little Baby" ("They laid him in a manger, oh my Lord.")

District parents were concerned that sectarian songs were being taught in a public school by a public school teacher. FFRF wrote to Superintendent Brian Harris, calling attention to the constitutional violation.

On Dec. 27, Harris responded: "Please know that the song in question was pulled from the program before the performance and replaced with a secular song choice. This piece of music will not be used again."

Woe to the Women The Bible Tells Me So By Annie Laurie Gaylor



Delightfully illustrated by Alma Cuevas, it contains a valuable compendium of more than 200 sexist verses.

Members — \$16
Non-members — \$20
Shop online at: ffrf.org/shop

Clergy Project participant:

His 'call' turned out to be wrong number



Secular jobs are not easily come by for former pastors.

to a secular humanist position as well. We are raising our young son to value critical thinking, rational discovery and humanitarian compassion.

My personal journey is far from complete. In fact, I am only beginning to discern where I go from here. I do not identify myself as an atheist, since atheism is a statement about what one does not believe. That label is fine for many, but for me it is more important to define myself by what I do believe.

I am working to rebuild my life based on critical thinking, naturalism and humanism. I am reshaping my ethics around what is best for the human community, rather than what is arbitrarily dictated by ancient texts. I am rediscovering what it truly means to be human — not made in the image of a god, but formed as an integral part of the beautiful, unfolding story of evolution.

And for me, that is enough.

Craig lives with his family in the southeast United States. For more information on the Clergy Project, go to clergyproject.org/.

My name is Craig. I'm a former pastor, and I'm not alone. In fact, there are dozens, hundreds, perhaps even thousands of ministers across all denominations in the U.S. who are reaching the same conclusion that I have reached: I can no longer intellectually or ethically maintain a belief in the supernatural.

My path to this point was long and gradual. I grew up in a loving, supportive home, with parents who were never fundamentalist or demanding. The Christianity I knew was one of love and grace. My formative theology was a balance between classic Wesleyanism and mild versions of the Charismatic movement.

After college and a few years of marriage, I experienced what I felt to be a call to pastoral ministry. I know now that the guiding "signs" I received were due to confirmation bias on my part, yet I accepted the "call." I entered into what would be over 15 years of ministry as the senior pastor of a couple of medium-sized evangelical churches.

Early on, even while in seminary, I encountered challenges to my faith. The first came, ironically, through a deeper study of the bible. I was confronted for the first time with higher biblical criticism, and I learned that the biblical text that I had always taken as the revealed word of God was filled with editorial, historical, textual and ethical problems.

Yet I accepted the resulting onslaught of cognitive dissonance as a test of my faith. I immersed myself in biblical apologetics to deal with my confusion, and this was enough to satisfy me for a while.

Gradually, over the next decade or so of serving as a pastor, other issues became more threatening to my faith. The doctrine of hell became more and more difficult for me to sustain. This was due mainly to my learning that the whole concept of hell is an amalgam of Greek mythology mingled with Jewish apocalypticism. The illogical and indefensible nature of the idea of hell led me eventually to maintain a universalist position, yet I still retained a belief in a supernatural God.

As I continued to serve in ministry, other challenges began to emerge. I was cut deeply by the incompetency and ineptitude of many religious leaders that I had met. Certainly, all people are subject to failure, yet I wondered why the Holy Spirit had not been able to create a more mature church leadership.

The supernatural claims of the bible were the next to fall. The scientific record demonstrated clearly that the

Earth is billions of years old, not just a few thousand. Humans have demonstrably evolved from earlier species. If the church had been wrong on the geocentricity of the universe, couldn't it also be wrong on issues such as evolution, cosmology or sexual orientation? How could the bible's claims ever be trusted?

Possibly the final issue that confronted my supernaturalist beliefs was the problem of evil and suffering. The common evangelical position that evil is due to the fallen nature of humanity, which spills over to affect the innocent, was no longer sustainable for me. If God could do anything, why would God allow the will of sinners to triumph over the will of the righteous?

I intensely studied all major models of theodicy [why a "good" God allows evil] that have ever been proposed, and none of them held any water for me anymore. All models and analogies eventually fell apart, and suggested a god who was either impotent, evil or uncaring. None of those options was viable for me.

That left only one conclusion: God, or at least the God I had always imagined, was not possible. My supernatural beliefs were gone. For the past couple of years, I struggled over where this left me as a pastor. For pastors like myself, the choices are not often clear and easy, and the way out is often hard to obtain.

I finally decided that since there are not many churches that are open to a fully nontheistic religious interpretation, I had to leave the ministry. But this would prove to be a challenge of its own.

Secular jobs are not easily come by for former pastors. Many employers simply don't understand what goes into earning a master of divinity degree. That degree requires nearly triple the credit hours of most master's degrees and demands competence in such disciplines as administration, business, counseling, public speaking, literary criticism, ancient languages, marketing, financial management, human resource management, etc.

This knowledge, combined with the experience and discipline many pastors possess, would be invaluable to most employers. Unfortunately, many employers don't yet understand this.

The ethical quandary of staying in the ministry as an unbeliever can be devastating. Yet, we are often faced with the higher ethical requirement of feeding our families and providing a healthy transition for the congregations we serve. Added to this is the existential crisis that many pastors face; after investing our lives in a worldview that no longer rings true, how are we

now to understand ourselves? The answer varies for each person.

Only recently, I have finally found my way out of the ministry, through meaningful work with a nonprofit organization. It's not a perfect fit, but it's far better than staying where I was. But many pastors are still trapped, anguished by the uninformed criticism coming from the atheist community, as well as by the attacks coming from the religious community.

I was fortunate to become involved in the Clergy Project since its very early days. The community and camaraderie I have found on the forum have literally kept me going on some days. It is an invaluable resource for those who are still enslaved to a system that no longer makes any sense in their lives.

And, fortunately, my wife is in full agreement with my change in outlook, and has undergone her own transition

Wisconsin city votes to stop praying

The Ashland, Wis., City Council, convened as a committee of the whole, voted 9-2 on Jan. 10 to replace prayer at meetings with a moment of silence, which was the practice before Mayor Bill Whalen took office in April 2010. Whalen has ties to the Christian ministry Intercessors for America, which promotes prayer to preserve what it calls America's Christian heritage.

FFRF Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert first wrote Whalen and the council last July 14 to object to the exclusively Christian invocations. She followed up with a letter faxed to city officials Jan. 10, the day of the vote to return to silence. The full council still has to formally approve the committee of the whole decision.

"[Constituents] are concerned about the separation of church and state," Councilor Linda Scott said Jan. 12 in the Ashland Current.

The prayers left such a bad taste in Councilor Joyce Kabasa's mouth that she would leave council chambers until they were finished. "I don't think religion should be a show of force."

A Jan. 19 Current editorial called the switch to silence "good news." The paper said although Whalen's prayers may have started with good intent, "their evolution over time seems to have taken a different tack. . . . Councilors are right to say that doing away with governmental prayer would allow for meeting preparations without prompting controversy."

FFRF sidelines Kentucky prayer

FFRF won out over athletic prayer in Inez, Ky., for the second time. The first victory at Sheldon Clark High School was last fall after the school sanctioned illegal prayers over the public address system before both football games.

Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert first wrote to the School District on Sept. 6, 2011. Two weeks later, FFRF received a response from School District Attorney John Triplett, who claimed the prayers weren't being said before games.

A few weeks later, local complainants

again took issue with pregame prayers, only this time before basketball games. The prayers were student-initiated and broadcast over the intercom system. Markert wrote a Dec. 21 letter asking SCHS again to end school-sponsored prayer.

In a Jan. 10 letter of reply, Triplett wrote: "[I] was assured that the principal understood the correct procedure 'no school supported prayer at school events' and was assured that this would not happen in the future at either or any other events at the school."

FFRF Complaints

FFRF schools Maine on prayer caucus

FFRF sent an educational memo Jan. 23 to Gov. Paul LePage and the Maine Legislative Prayer Caucus to highlight the historical fallacies, contradictions and inaccuracies in the "Call to Prayer for Maine" signed on Jan. 17.

The memo represents a viewpoint shared by the 25% of Maine citizens who self-identify as nonreligious. The memo discusses how the caucus is a misuse of civil power and how it ignores the 45 million Americans who "do not draw hope, strength, or comfort by supplicating to invisible means of support."

"It is a perversion of history to claim that our Constitution stems from 'faith-based principles,'" the memo said. "Our government is based on the idea, an anti-biblical idea, that 'Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the consent of the governed.' Both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution repudiate the idea of a god-given government. The Prayer Proclamation renounces the democratic ideal in favor of the divine right to rule that our country rebelled against in 1776."

The Maine Legislative Prayer Caucus is affiliated with Pray USA, an initiative of the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation Inc., which seeks to "preserve the Judeo-Christian heritage of our nation and protect American religious liberty."

More than 150 people, including about 50 legislators — mostly Republicans and a few Democrats — participated in a ceremony Jan. 18 to announce that Maine is the sixth state to formalize a legislative prayer group.

"Not only is it untrue that our 'rights come from almighty God,' as the proclamation declares, it is a shameful negation of the true cost of freedom," FFRF's memo said. "This idea ignores the sacrifice of those who gave their lives to secure our freedom and by attributing to God what our forebears worked so hard to achieve denigrates what is arguably the greatest human triumph in all of history — our country."

FFRF also debunked the idea that "In God We Trust" somehow lends credence to the "Christian nation" myth and instead shows that the motto is the divisive result of fearmongering. "The Prayer Caucus offensively and incorrectly asserts that people need religion to be moral. This statement shows far more about those who ascribe to it than those who don't (and it's not pretty)."

FFRF invited the Prayer Caucus "to get off your knees and get to work."

The Associated Press reported Jan. 23 that four Republican Mississippi state senators introduced a resolution to create a Legislative Prayer and Ministry Caucus.

The resolution said the caucus would "encourage, train and support legislative leaders in every field who believe in the power of prayer and ministry, and to highlight the vital role that prayer and Judeo-Christian principles have played in the history of our Nation and our state in strengthening the fabric of our society, at all times consistent with the progress of our state and with the well-being of our fellow Mississippians."

Without debate, the Senate sent the resolution back to the Rules Commit-

tee, a move that likely killed the resolution. Thanks to Andrew Seidel, Constitutional consultant, for his work on the Maine memo.

FFRF warns about prayer in schools

In a Jan. 10 letter of complaint to Mayor John DeStefano of New Haven, Conn., FFRF cautioned against "taking an unconstitutional proposal to 'put prayer back in schools' seriously." Newly elected City Clerk Ronald Smith proposed prayer as a technique to lower crime rates at his inauguration ceremony.

"Mr. Smith is offending large numbers of young people and their parents with such inappropriate pronouncements. In claiming that prayer would lower crime, Mr. Smith is implying that nonbelievers are criminals, an idea that is at once insulting and ignorant," wrote Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president.

Studies have shown that there is no scientific data to support Smith's claim tying heightened crime rates to non-theism. One study found atheists are only 0.2% of prisoners, highly under-represented.

FFRF's letter cited research by prominent sociologist Phil Zuckerman, who says, "Murder rates are actually lower in more secular nations and higher in more religious nations where belief in God is deep and widespread. And within America, the states with the highest murder rates tend to be highly religious, such as Louisiana and Alabama, but the states with the lowest murder rates tend to be among the least religious in the country, such as Vermont and Oregon."

"The purpose of schools is to educate, not to promote religion. Schoolchildren are young, impressionable and vulnerable to adult and peer pressure," Gaylor said. "The exercise of religion must be left to the individual and religious education left to the family."

The letter cited other studies debunking Smith's "insulting" smear of nonbelievers. "In fact religious belief is linked to immorality. The unwholesome doctrine of 'original sin' can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rejection of religious claims is intellectual and respectable," Gaylor added.

FFRF files complaint about church rally

FFRF filed a complaint in early January with the Internal Revenue Service over questionable campaign intervention activities at Jubilee Family Church in Oskaloosa, Iowa.

Rep. Michele Bachmann appeared at the church in what appeared to be a quest to garner last-minute votes, days before the Iowa Republican Caucus. On Jan. 1, she arrived to a crowd bearing "Bachmann for President" signs and buttons. A table at the back of the church displayed election material.

Pastor Bill Tvedt and Bachmann addressed the Sunday worship service with a mixture of campaign rhetoric and prayer. Tvedt's final remarks to Bachmann were, "God bless you, you're awesome."

"Pastor Bill Tvedt inappropriately used his position as pastor of Jubilee Family Church to intervene in a politi-



What a (l)ark

Ron Herman, FFRF Albuquerque chapter director, saw this in Flagstaff, Ariz., and writes: "So, the message is don't trust professionals because the Titanic ran into an iceberg, but trust prayer because of an ancient myth about a boat that carried every animal (and all the plants that wouldn't survive underwater) and all their food until the planet dried out! Don't raise your children to be professionals, just teach them mythology."



You're very welcome!

Joey Carabetta, treasurer of the Triangle Freethought Society in North Carolina, spotted this Dec. 26 in Rocky Mount, Va.: "Finally, a church promoting reason!" [Editor's note: The church website says it observes the Sabbath on Saturday. So they can sleep in on Sunday?]

cal campaign. He violated IRS regulations by voicing his support for Michele Bachmann," wrote FFRF Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert in the IRS complaint.

The race for the Republican nomination had been a topic of interest at Jubilee Family Church for several weeks prior to the Iowa Caucus. Tvedt had previously personally endorsed Bachmann and Tvedt had given a politically themed sermon series, "Spirit of Big Government." Tvedt also urged the congregation to "Choose a Leader of Biblical Standards."

No church statement indicated other Republican candidates had ever been invited to address the congregation.

The IRS strictly prohibits 501(c)(3) organizations, which include churches and other religious organizations, from taking part in political campaigns.

Video taken after the service (available on C-SPAN) captured Bachmann lobbying for votes: "I'm glad you came this morning. I'd love to have your vote on the 3rd."

"FFRF respectfully requests that the IRS commence an immediate investigation to determine whether Pastor Tvedt violated IRS regulations prohibiting Jubilee Family Church from participating in and/or intervening in a political campaign," wrote Markert.

Water tower crosses draw FFRF scrutiny

FFRF sent a Dec. 20 letter of complaint to Mayor Patrick Kitching in Alsip, Ill., asking for removal of an unlawful Latin cross that is displayed annually on the village water tower. An area resident took issue with the

cross after it was erected in the weeks leading up to Christmas. The cross is illuminated at night and visible from Interstate 294.

"The display of a cross on government buildings and water towers has long been found to be a violation of the Establishment Clause," wrote FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott.

Earlier in December, FFRF brought suit against Whiteville, Tenn., on behalf of one of its members who objected to crosses at the Whiteville municipal building and on the water tower.

"The government must stay out of the religion business. Private individuals remain free to celebrate holidays as they see fit," noted Elliott.

FFRF Alert protests franking misuse

FFRF sent an Action Alert to members in December about U.S. Rep. Diane Black, R-Tenn., who sent an inappropriate religious message to her constituents Dec. 24. Her letter started with "Wishing You a Merry Christmas. . . Even if I'm not supposed to" and ended with a rant in support of religion and her dislike for the Franking Commission.

"Franking" is a tax-supported "free postage" privilege for members of Congress. Franking resources may only be used to inform constituents of an important matter. Taxpayers should not have to subsidize communications that pander to religion.

Franking law "prohibits the use of the frank for any card or message expressing holiday greetings for any traditional holiday, for example, Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving."

Goodbye Hitch, and thank you

By Andrew Seidel

"You don't so much as become an atheist as find out that's what you are. There's no moment of conversion. You don't suddenly think 'I don't believe this anymore.' You essentially find you don't believe it."

Christopher Hitchens said the above in an interview with Sally Quinn. Like so many of his words, this really hit home for me. On Dec. 15, freethought lost a giant. Christopher Hitchens died at age 62. He leaves a hole in FFRF's Honorary Board that no one can fill.

Hitch is one of my three favorite writers, along with Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain. I started each week by reading his Slate.com articles and eagerly awaited any Vanity Fair pieces or new videos of his debates. His article on the Ten Commandments inspired me to write a law review article comparing the Decalogue to our Constitution.

He was prolific, witty, brilliant and a



whole host of other adjectives that writers with more talent and more knowledge of Hitch as a man will use to describe him. When I read Hitch, I wished I could write like him. When I heard him speak, I wished I could sound like him.

Though I never met him personally, it was hard not to feel like Hitch was a

friend. His writing demolished the crumbling walls of my religious cognitive dissonance. Thousands of people realized that they were atheists and gathered the courage to say so because of his words. Without a doubt, that will be his greatest legacy. Though he died, his ideas will endure and help free thousands of future readers from the

same-sex couples the right to seek civil unions, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported.

Illinois oversees the foster care system but contracts 80% of cases to private agencies, many of which are faith-based.

Catholic agencies refuse to license same-sex couples in civil unions as foster parents and say the law impinges on their religious freedom. That's discriminatory against gays and lesbian, the state says.

Tim Kee, a teacher in Marion, said he was turned away by Catholic Charities three years ago when he and his longtime partner tried to adopt a child. "We're both Catholic, we love our church, but Catholic Charities closed the door to us. To add insult to injury, my tax dollars went to provide discrimination against me," Kee told The New York Times.

County funding for Jesus Fest contested

The ACLU of West Virginia sent a letter Dec. 20 to the Harrison County Commission objecting to the \$2,000 per year county funding each of the last five years for Jesus Fest in Clarksburg. They call a religious event aimed at promoting Christianity.

The commission is studying the issue, Commissioner Ron Watson said the Charleston Daily Mail.

Jesus Fest organizer B.K. Vanhorn said the county funds others festivals. "And you don't have to be a Christian to come to Jesus Fest."

Iowa faculty stops sham biblical course

A proposed course titled Finance 290X: Biblical Insight into the Management of Business/Organization at Iowa State University in Ames was canceled after faculty members objected, the Iowa State Daily reported Jan. 16.

Professor Roger Stover proposed the course last semester, pointing to companies such as Chik-fil-A and Hobby Lobby, which "openly display their use of spiritual and often Christian principles in their organization."

"This is a public institution where we can teach world religion, but we can't promote it. This class was promoting it and looking at it through one evangeli-

mind-forged manacles of religion.

The only immortality any person can hope to have is in the minds of our friends and family and in the words we pass on. Hitch had an almighty gift for both writing and speaking. Fortunately, he left us a library of literature and debates. Tonight, I'll watch you trounce the Catholic Church, raise a glass of Johnny Walker Black and toast you, Hitch.

Thank you for all you have done. I'm going to miss you.

Andrew Seidel is the newest member of FFRF's legal team and our first constitutional consultant. He joined FFRF in November. Read or listen to Hitchens' "God Is Not Great" speech at the 2007 FFRF convention:

ffrf.org/outreach/convention/past-conventions/ffrf-2007-convention-speeches/



Photo: Brent Nicastro

State/Church

SCOTUS denies appeals in prayer cases

The U.S. Supreme Court on Jan. 17 refused to give government bodies more freedom to open sessions with prayers by denying to hear appeals in a North Carolina case — *Forsyth County v. Joyner* — and a Delaware case, *Indian River School District v. Doe*.

Religion Clause summarizes the first case: "The 4th Circuit, in a 2-1 decision, held that the prayer policy of a county commission violated the Establishment Clause even though the policy was neutral on its face. All congregations in the community were invited to send a religious leader to lead an invocation at one of the commission meetings. As implemented, however, 80% of the prayers referenced Jesus and no non-Christian religious leader ever offered the invocation."

In the Delaware case, justices left intact a 3rd Circuit decision that barred prayers at Indian River School Board meetings in Selbyville. The three-judge panel likened the meetings to school graduations, which the Supreme Court said in 1992 couldn't be a forum for organized prayer, unlike legislative invocations.

Anti-evolution bills pushed nationwide

Oklahoma Senate Bill 1742 is the sixth anti-evolution bill of 2012, according to the National Center for Science Education. Two bills each in New Hampshire and Missouri and one in Indiana have also been filed.

The Oklahoma bill requires the state Board of Education to help teachers and administrators promote "critical thinking, logical analysis, open and objective discussion of scientific theories including, but not limited to, evolution, the origin of life, global warming, and human cloning" on request of local school districts. The bill also lets teachers "use supplemental textbooks and instructional materials to help students understand, analyze, critique, and review scientific theories in an objective manner."

In a Durant Daily Democrat column, Sen. Josh Breechen, R-Coalgate, wrote: "I have introduced legislation requiring every publicly funded Oklahoma school to teach the debate of creation vs. evolution using the known science, even that which conflicts with Darwin's religion."

High court upholds ministerial exception

On Jan. 11, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously upheld the right of religious organizations to hire and fire clergy and other mission-related employees without government interference.

In *Hosanna-Tabor v. EEOC*, the court ruled that employees hired to carry out the mission of a religious organization are barred by the First Amendment from suing over employment discrimination. It marks the first time the court has endorsed the so-called ministerial exception to employment protections that has generally been accepted by lower courts.

The case involved a Lutheran teacher who sued for wrongful dismissal.

Gov. Beshear rejects hospital merger

Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear said he opposes the planned merger of the University of Louisville Hospital, Jewish Hospital & St. Mary's Health-Care, and Saint Joseph Health System. Beshear has concerns about religious influence on care at the state-owned university facility exerted by Catholic Health Initiatives, the parent of Saint Joseph, which would have owned 70 percent of the proposed 14-hospital network, the Chronicle of Philanthropy reported Jan. 3.

Illinois Catholic charity doesn't extend to all

Catholic Charities in Springfield, Ill., said Jan. 9 that it will transfer its foster care staff, foster parents and children to other child welfare agencies because of a state law that gives

cal perspective," said Warren Blumenfeld, a professor in the department of curriculum and instruction. "This was basically a Sunday school course where the students are getting university credit, and what that does is it lowers the standards of our university."

Indiana judge OKs religious vouchers

Indiana Superior Court Judge Michael Keel upheld the state's school voucher law Jan. 13, rejecting arguments that the largest such program in the nation unconstitutionally uses public money to support religion.

Keele ruled the program is constitutional because it gives scholarship vouchers to parents and doesn't directly fund schools. The Associated Press reported that Indiana State Teachers Association President Nate Schnellberger said opponents will keep fighting the law.

Florida prayer bill advances in Senate

The Florida Senate Rules Committee voted 12-2 on Jan. 23 in favor of Senate Bill 98 allowing school boards to adopt policies "allowing the use of an inspirational message, including prayers of invocation or benediction, at secondary school commencement exercises or any other noncompulsory student assembly."

The legislation specifies that "the purpose of this act is to provide for the solemnization and memorialization of secondary school events and ceremonies, and this act is not intended to advance or endorse any religion or religious belief."

The bill further says inspirational messages will be given by students and school personnel may not participate. Benjamin Stevenson, ACLU of Florida, called the bill unconstitutional political theater. "Legislators will score political points at the expense of school boards that actually implement such a policy and are left to defend it in court."

FFRF wrote letters and sent action alerts on what it called a mischief making and unconstitutional proposal. See our news release:

ffrf.org/news/releases/florida-bill-sanctions-unlawful-prayer/



Solstice scene in the Evergreen State

FFRF member Darrell Barker stands by the Winter Solstice banner he erected Dec. 20 at the Washington Capitol grounds in Olympia to counter a large nativity display erected there for several Decembers. Darrell, who improvised the sturdy frame himself, was previously involved in posting the same message inside the State Capitol in 2008. The FFRF gold sign was stolen, vandalized and recovered, so Darrell has taken special pains to safeguard the new banner. The sign successfully created such a firestorm that the governor barred public displays inside the Capitol. Many thanks to Darrell, who is the brother of FFRF Co-President Dan Barker.



Holding them accountable

Members of Hawaii Citizens for the Separation of State and Church, PFLAG-Oahu and Hawaii Pacific University's Secular Student Alliance protested the Catholic Red Mass celebrated by Bishop Larry Silva of the Diocese of Honolulu on Jan. 19. FFRF member Holly Huber (right) of HCSSC and the other protesters (several not pictured) were directly across the state from Our Lady of Peace Cathedral. Red Masses are a Catholic tradition that mix politics and religion.

They Said What?!

Governor Romney over a long political career has earned the title: "Dangerous Homosexualist" — one who constantly advances the militant anti-religious, anti-society, immoral homosexual agenda to the detriment of family people.

Rabbi Yehuda Levin, Rabbinical Alliance of America

World Net Daily, 12-30-11

Alcohol does things to people. When you have so much, gin makes you sin. . . . She had a lighter, but it wasn't like she was trying to light me up or something. She wasn't trying to kill me. She's a Christian lady.

Dennis Phinisee, Indianapolis, on being doused with rubbing alcohol by his wife Esther, who has a prior manslaughter conviction and is a registered violent sexual predator

The Indy Channel, 12-29-11

Q: Do you think we'll ever know if there's life on other planets? My 8-year-old son (who is fascinated by space travel) asked me this question, but I didn't know how to answer him. Does the bible say anything about life on

other planets? — Mrs. D.A.

A: No, the bible doesn't directly address the question of whether or not there is life on other planets. It doesn't say there is, nor does it say there isn't; it's simply silent on the subject. Instead, the bible's focus is on this world, and how we can know God's will for our lives right now. If there is life elsewhere in the universe, then you can be sure that God created it and put it there.

Q&A in "My Answer" column

Chicago Tribune, 12-28-11

Wherefore David arose and went, he and his men, and slew of the Philistines two hundred men; and David brought their foreskins, and they gave them in full tale to the king, that he might be the king's son-in-law. And Saul gave him Michal his daughter to wife.

1 Samuel 18:27, "Wednesday-Weird-Bible-Verses and being careful of how we use single bible verses" by Dan Kimball, Vintage Faith Church, Santa Cruz, Calif.

dankimball.com, 12-14-11

In Memoriam

Lee R. Hren, 1940-2011

Lee Roy Hren, 71, of Newton, Ill., died Oct. 2, 2011. Lee was a dentist, Air Force veteran and Lifetime FFRF member. He was a lifelong freethinker and attended several national FFRF conventions.



University of Illinois in 1975. He practiced in Texas and Iowa before settling in Newton.

Lee loved his dogs (the last one being Pluto) and traveling, especially to Costa Rica, where he visited many times. He served in the U.S. Air Force for six years and rose to the rank of captain.

Lee was married briefly once but had no children. He enjoyed activities with his brother Bob (another freethinker) and his nieces/nephews Barry, Julie and Dave.

FFRF puts on a 'Capitol' Solstice event



Photos: Scott Colson



FFRF hosted an "equal time" Winter Solstice celebration at noon Dec. 23 in the Wisconsin Capitol rotunda. FFRF put on an irreverent and lively celebration of the "real reason for the season" to counter the numerous religious concerts in the Capitol. About 200 area freethinkers turned out to eat sugar cookies, drop off food donations to Second Harvest food bank and hear a concert.

Entertaining (top photo) was FFRF Co-President Dan Barker, a piano player and songwriter who has produced two musical CDs — "Friendly Neighborhood Atheist" (a double CD), and "Beware of Dogma." Dan performed his "Solstice Tribute," and a song for children about the passage of time. Special guest Ken Lonnquist (with guitar), a Madison songwriter, performed his crowd-pleasing "O Isthmus Tree," and the pair teamed up for Lennon's "Imagine" and "Auld Lang Syne."

FFRF student activist awardee Proud to be 'out' about his lack of belief

Dylan Galos gave these remarks Oct. 8, 2011, at FFRF's 34th national convention in Hartford, Conn., where he received a \$1,000 student activist award for his work with FFRF's "Out of the Closet" billboard campaign in Columbus, Ohio.

By Dylan Galos

I want to start by thanking the Freedom from Religion Foundation. It's an honor to receive this scholarship. I thought about calling my speech "Good without God" or "Teleportation without magic," but I really just want to talk a bit about my thoughts about this whole thing.

Yesterday as I was coming to the hotel on the shuttle bus from the airport, the driver asked what I was here for. I told him I was here for a conference, and he kept asking more questions. I've been living in the Midwest for so long that I really didn't want to come forward with anything. Then, I told him it was the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

He asked for more details. I said that one of the main things the group does is advocate for separation of church and state. He started talking about how it would be horrible if churches start being taxed.

I said, "Well, if churches can influence public policy, then why shouldn't they be taxed? Why are they tax-free if they're influencing government policy?" The conversation pretty much ended there.

The main thing I want to talk about is the context of my billboard, which says, "I can be good without God." It's all in that context of freedom from religion. It's interesting that it's always in the context of religion that one person in the blogosphere talked about how they didn't like the quote so much just because it's still in the context of God, and how being an atheist or being a freethinker in this country is always in the context of God. You can't just be who you are; it's always in the context of being the opposite of religious.

I guess that was the main reason that I participated in the billboard campaign. I'm usually quite a shy person, and I don't talk very much about my

It was interesting how many hateful things were said by the religious community.

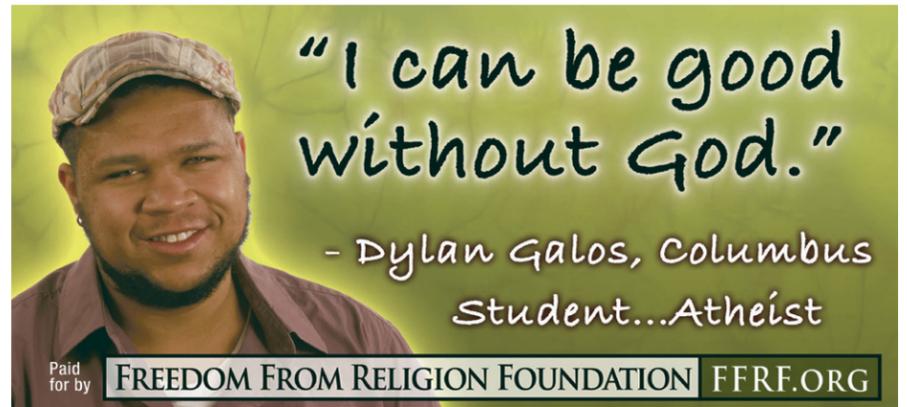
religious beliefs with colleagues or co-workers. So I was really quite surprised to find out what a warm reception I got from people with whom I volunteer at a suicide crisis line and people I worked with in the public health department at the university.

It's so important now after I've participated in this that I am open about my lack of belief, or what I do believe in, because people make a lot of assumptions. People assume that if someone does something that is labeled in our society as heroic, they're religious. If someone's a police officer, if someone's in the military, if someone's a doctor, people always tend to make the assumption that this person is somehow religious.

The main thing is that that we should be open about who we are, because not everyone has to believe in God to have ethics. I think that personally it takes a lot more courage and a lot more introspection to find your own ethical code in life without having it ascribed to you by a book that you're following.

It's important to have experience and to think for yourself and find your own way to know what's right and wrong and to think about moral situations in a context of gray instead of things being so black and white. I think that's something that we all value here, and it's something that I've found to be so great as I've come out as an atheist, as I've come out as a secular humanist. I've met so many other people who think similarly. It's an honor to be here today in such a large community and to know that the community is out there.

It was interesting how many hateful things were said by the religious community. I had my contact information blocked, so I didn't hear any of them personally, but the community was saying that this was somehow an attack on churches.



By my saying that I'm an atheist, I'm a good person without God, somehow that's me trying to proselytize, that somehow we're all trying to ruin religion or something just by being ourselves. By saying that I'm an atheist, somehow that diminishes someone else's belief in their own religion. I think that's ludicrous.

Christian groups tried to say that this was an attack on the black community, or on the black church, because it happened to be on a black church's property. I'm also black, so therefore the Freedom From Religion Foundation is now trying to undermine the African-American community. Well, the mole is here in our terrorist cell since atheists are the most distrusted group in the United States, and I guess it's out in public now.

It's an honor to see all of you here. It's an honor to receive this scholarship. I think that we should all be open because it's just better to have people understand that the assumptions they make about the person that they meet

aren't always true.

Just because the person that you meet is friendly or educated or knows something about religion doesn't mean that they are religious, and it's so great to see and meet so many other people who think similarly. Thank you.

Dylan Galos, who recently earned his master's in public health from Ohio State University, has an undergraduate degree from New Mexico State University in biology. He's enrolled in the Ph.D. public health program at the University of Minnesota. As a student in Columbus, he was active with the Student Secular Alliance. His "Out of the Closet" billboard had to be relocated twice, once at the behest of a church which owned the land the billboard was on. FFRF discovered that the church had not been paying property taxes on that parcel, and its complaint to the city remedied that situation. Then a businessman complained about the billboard on his property, and it was moved to a third home! Dylan did a lot of positive media, and the censorship of his message engendered lots of publicity.



Posing with FFRF staffer Melanie Knier.

Freethought Heroine 2011

Strong resistance to God's existence

Convention photography by Jeff Yardis

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, author of *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction*, gave this speech Oct. 8, 2011, at FFRF's 34th national convention in Hartford, Conn., where she was named Freethought Heroine 2011.



By Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

Thank you so much for that introduction. Not only do you have the best music of all freethinking organizations, but you also have the best way with words: "Freedom from Religion Foundation," "The Emperor Has No Clothes Award," "Freethought Heroine." These words have a playfulness to them that only underscores their seriousness and honesty.

Actions are very important, but so are words. I'm a writer, so I would never say that words are cheap. Searching for the right words — words that are precise but also startling — certainly costs me dearly. So I just want to savor, for a moment, the flavor of these words that you've applied to me: freethought heroine. They're very sweet on my tongue.

My being named a freethought heroine is a small vindication of one of the core assertions of Steven Pinker, who just spoke to you and humorously described himself as the warm-up act for me. Steve, in his defense of human nature and his rejection of the blank-slate metaphor for the human mind, has stressed the genetic contribution not only in our generic human nature but in our individual natures as well.

When it comes to nature or nurture, it's not a matter of either/or, as Steve has told us again and again in his best-selling books, but nevertheless nature does often exert a very surprising hegemony over nurture. It turns out to be nature over nurture in numerous surprising ways.

This assertion of Steve's means a lot to me because there was absolutely nothing in my nurturance that would have led me to have ever been associated with an organization like FFRF, much less being honored by it. I was reared to look in horror at all of you godless people. In fact, in some sense, the *a priori* improbability of such an honor being conferred on me has induced in me a strong feeling of impos-



Rebecca Newberger Goldstein accepting her "Freethought Heroine" plaque from Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president.

terhood in accepting this award. I'm reeling from the sense of unreality.

My sense of unreality derives from my birth family, which is Jewish and strictly Orthodox. I come on my paternal side from a long line of rabbis and of rabbis' wives. I never want to forget the rabbis' wives. I like to fantasize that maybe there were some freethought heroines hidden among them.

My father, who was from Poland, had rabbinical ordination but he was too self-conscious about his accent to sermonize for American worshippers and in general lacked confidence. So he became a cantor instead, as a result of which he could barely support his family. We were as poor as synagogue mice. We were four children. I was inauspiciously positioned in the middle of three girls, and the oldest was a boy, which has great significance in a family like mine.

There were high intellectual expectations placed on my brother, who was expected to carry on the family tradition of producing Talmudic scholars, and my brother did, in fact, become a rabbi, which reminds me of one of my favorite jokes. Question: "Why was Jesus the perfect Jewish son?" Answer: "He lived at home for a long time, he went into his father's line of work, his mother thought he was god, and he thought his mother was a virgin."

Unlike my brother, I was a girl, and as a girl there were no expectations for me other than that I be sweet and docile, unassuming and modest. Modesty, or *tzniut* as it's called in Hebrew, is the premier virtue indoctrinated into Orthodox females.

Girls gone mild

I'd attended an all-girls school in Manhattan, an extreme all-girls school, by which I mean extremely backward. It was a member of a loose confederation of schools that were started in Europe about 100 years ago called Bais Yaakov schools. These schools were considered progressive at the time when they were first instituted, since, although Orthodox, they instructed girls in some of the sacred texts. This

was considered radical. One medieval sage had written that, rather than have girls ever study from the holy books, it would be better for the books to be burned.

We didn't study the Talmud, which is the intellectual zenith in Orthodox Judaism. It's the menfolk's highest pride, the very means of conferring status, so that the best in Talmud are simply the best, full stop. Talmudic brilliance is the standard used even in arranging marriages. An outstanding Talmudic scholar, no matter what his other failings, can get a very desirable bride.

Especially when I was younger, I would play in my mind with the counterfactual: "What would it have been like if I had been born a boy?" I know that I might have become immersed in the world of Talmudic scholarship, which happens to be a world of intellectual ethereality and deftness in splitting a hair at least 20 different ways — which is, I confess, just the sort of intellectual exercise that I've often enjoyed as an analytic philosopher. I think I would have made a rather good Talmudic scholar, but, being a girl, I didn't get the chance, which I'm now grateful for.

Tzniut, female modesty, on the other hand, was stressed to such an extent

We were actively discouraged from going on to college.

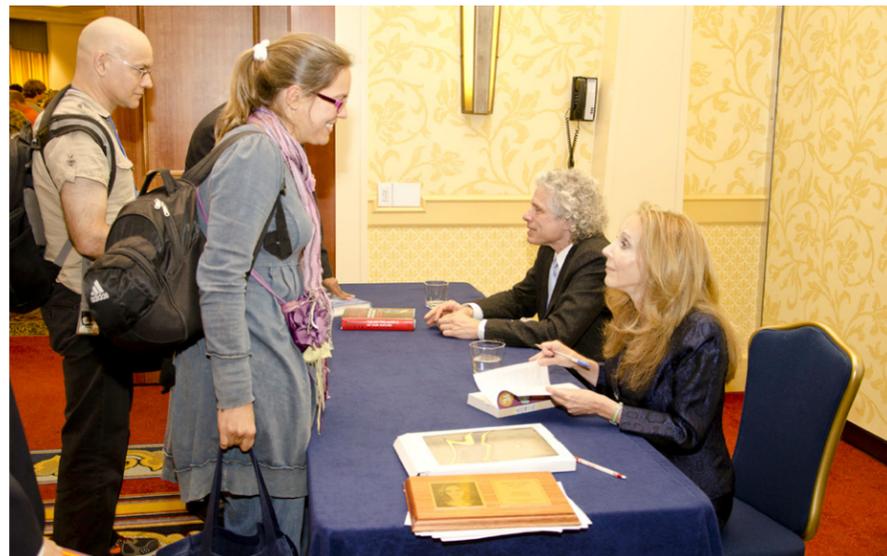
that in my high school instead of having pop quizzes we used to have pop hemline inspections. This was in the late '60s, so hemlines were showing plenty of leg. We were supposed to be wearing our skirts down to mid-calf. Teachers would come in to check our hemlines, and if it was a little too short, you were sent home.

But this was only the external *tzniut*, the external modesty — inducing body shame, of course, but that was not the worst of it. Far more invidious was the internal inculcation of female modesty, which meant doing nothing to attract undue attention to oneself, including in one's very speech. I mentioned how hard I struggle for the words that manage to be both precise and startling. Well, this inclination of mine, especially the startling part, was actively discouraged.

There is a Talmudic prohibition against a woman's voice; the prohibition is known by the Hebrew phrase *kol isha*, the voice of a woman. Men outside her family can't hear her voice because it is in itself, the Talmud says, an instrument of seduction. The law has been interpreted by almost all scholars to cover only the singing voice of women.

In my family, this was a very active issue. Since my father was a cantor, we were all musical. My older sister in particular had a voice that might have made her known in the greater world had she not been born an Orthodox female.

It was such an extraordinary voice that she was actually given voice lessons by my parents, very peculiar in our background. When her teacher heard her sing, she said, "I have very little to teach Minda. God taught her how to sing." But that voice, which was professionally trained, was never heard outside our house or outside her own household when she got married. She used her voice strictly to sing lullabies



Autographing books with Steven Pinker at FFRF's 2011 national convention in Hartford.



‘Are you actually saying that you’re an atheist?’

mourn the loss. While I was studying philosophy, I came to understand (and I have to say for me this understanding had the feel of salvation), that it is no sign of moral or spiritual strength to believe that for which one has no evidence, neither *a priori* evidence as in math, nor *a posteriori* evidence as in science. Quite the contrary. Religious epistemology has it all backward.

What I took from my philosophy classes, the persistent if unstated norm, is that it’s a violation almost immoral in its transgressiveness to shirk the responsibilities of rationality. There are obligations that are placed on us by being propositional creatures who are able to formulate truth-valued propositions, to consider them, to reflect on them, to assert them or deny them, and then to act on our considered beliefs when those beliefs are such as to support actions.

Bertrand Russell said about the practice of postulating in mathematics: “The method of postulating what we want has many advantages. They are the same as the advantages of theft over honest toil.”

One can very easily adapt Russell’s statement about postulating in mathematics — and it’s an adaptation I know that he wouldn’t mind (uncompromising atheist that he was) — so that it describes not what’s so wrong about postulating in mathematics but what’s so wrong about an epistemology that sacralizes faith, which is what religious epistemology does. So to paraphrase Russell: The practice of believing on faith what we want has many advantages. They are the same as the advantages of theft over honest toil.

I’ve been hanging around these atheist circles for a while now, and it seems to me, especially coming from the background I do, that some of my fellow atheists sometimes underestimate the intellectual sophistication of religious believers, speaking of them all as if they’re just dimwitted. They’re wrong in this, and I know that they’re wrong, because there are people in my family whose IQs I would match against anyone’s. They’re not dimwitted, and they know how to reason.

They don’t require that we enlightened ones point out the fallacies of their religious arguments, because they eschew religious arguments. They’ve got an epistemology that makes religious arguing appear as naive in their eyes as it is in ours.

My last book was called *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction*. When I was on my book tour, they would often leave off that very important subtitle, so it was just, *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*, and I would often have very enraged audiences. They thought I was going to be delivering a rejoinder to Dawkins and Hitchens.

I actually had interesting discussions with the audience, and there was one woman, in the Free Library of Philadelphia, who said, “Are you actually saying that you’re an atheist? Why would you just come out and say something so terrible about yourself?” It was as if I had just said that I eat babies for breakfast.

I ended up having probably one of the greatest dialogues of my tour, or maybe of my life, with that outraged woman. As we went back and forth, it became clearer to her that she and I had common ground, that both of us believed in objective morality and had similar ideas about what was right and wrong. Babies for breakfast was definitely out.

At the book signing at the end, she handed me a little scrap of paper and said, “Well, I don’t agree with what you say, so I’m not going to buy your book, but you seem like a nice lady so I want your autograph.” I considered that a great triumph. She came away thinking that she’d met a nice, albeit godless, lady.

Three dozen arguments

In this book, although it’s a novel, I attach an appendix which gives 36 arguments for the existence of God, but with all of their fallacies. I lay them out in the way that we philosophers like to do, very clearly, stating the premises and then showing what’s wrong with each of the arguments.

There are all the classic arguments that philosophers and theologians have been debating for a long time: the cosmological argument, the ontological argument, the teleological argument, the moral argument. I also wanted to formulate the vaguer and more emotive lines of reasoning that I’ve never seen explicitly formulated, so I have — for example, the “argument from answered prayers” and the “argument from the intolerability of insignificance.”

The point of the novel, the storytelling that precedes the appendix, is that religious faith and religious adherence, at least in my quite intimate experience with them, very often have little to do with arguments. None of the Talmudic scholars in my family put much faith in any arguments. There are believers who see through these arguments just as well as you and I do.

Continued on next page

to her children, or to sing her prayers in synagogue under her breath, trying hard not to let her love of music take over so that her voice might soar.

Kol isha is almost always interpreted as referring to a woman’s singing voice, but there is a Talmudic discussion as to whether it extends even to a woman’s speaking voice. I quote here from the *Journal of Halacha* (Jewish law): “Perusal of the Talmudic sources thus establishes the undisputed principle that a woman’s voice is *erva*” (an instrument of sexual incitement), “but leaves unclear whether a speaking or a singing voice is intended. And, in fact, some authorities do ban even the speaking voice of a woman.”

To come from a background like that, in which such questions are even debated, even if the more liberal interpretation which prohibits only a woman’s singing voice is accepted, is to have a very special set of problems in attaining one’s personal freedom from religion.

Imagine, if you can, how difficult it is for me to speak up, the special hurdle of convincing myself to overcome the embarrassment of undue attention, whether it’s in the fray of philosophical combat — and philosophy happens to be one of the most combative academic fields — or before an audience such as this one. Then, of course, I’m a writer, and writers are supposed to be engaged at least as much in self-promotion as they are in writing. This business of self-promotion is an especially difficult aspect in the life that I’ve chosen for myself, given my background. This was my nurturance, and it was intensified in that high school, that abominable high school that I went to.

Forget about evolution

It was, however, a state-accredited school, which meant — and I have to say hallelujah — that we were required to take the New York State Regents exam. I am so grateful for that accreditation, because it meant that there was some control over the secular curriculum. I consider those religious schools which don’t have accreditation, and there are a slew of them, to be a form of child abuse. I wish they could be outlawed.

In 10th grade, when I took biology, our rabbi/principal came in and solemnly spoke to us on the first day of class to warn us that the teacher, who was a moonlighting public school teacher — almost all of the secular teachers were moonlighting public school teachers — was required to teach us the theory of evolution because it was going to be on the Regents’ exam, but it was only a theory, which means un-

proven, and since it contradicted the story of creation that we all knew was true, we should learn the theory for our test and then we should forget all about it. But instead I promptly forgot all the holy nonsense I had to learn just as soon as the test was over, while the theory of evolution shined on in me as the luminous model of a thoroughly satisfying explanation.

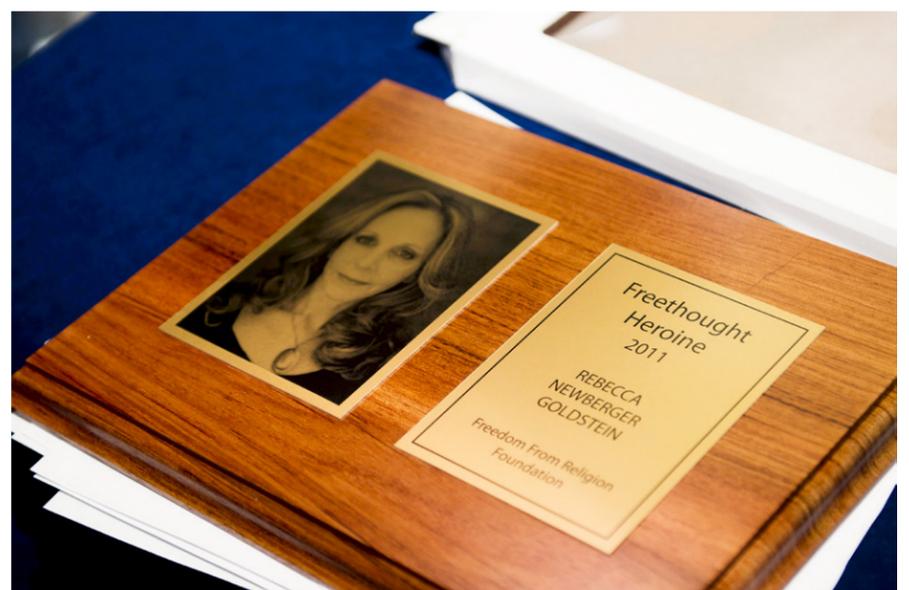
We were actively discouraged from going on to college, especially those among us who were considered the best students. Instead we were urged to go to a seminary that was connected with the high school and was a sort of way station to bide our time until the all-important event in our lives, which would be getting married. But I did go to college, and eventually, after I got married — I got married very young the first time — I transferred to Barnard College, Columbia University, which is the place where I was born into consciousness. It was the first time I experienced what it was like to have my nature nurtured.

I could study anything I wanted, even the subjects considered mostly for boys, which were math and physics. I have to say I was a little disappointed that that category — subjects that were considered mostly for boys — existed even outside of that insular world that I was trying so hard to escape from, but at least I could study those subjects. Nobody was saying I couldn’t, nobody was going to burn the books before I got to study them, and my professors were encouraging.

Then there was philosophy, which I got into because I was interested in philosophy of science and philosophy of math. I was learning very strange and baffling things in my physics classes, especially quantum mechanics, and I wanted to understand what these theories meant, what they were saying about reality. There are outstanding questions in the foundations of quantum mechanics — they exist still — and often when I would ask my professors, I would get a version of the answer that you sometimes get in physics classes when you ask what does this all mean: Don’t ask what it all means; shut up and calculate.

I was also interested in questions about foundations of mathematics. Mathematics is so different from all other knowledge. It’s *a priori* — we can prove things conclusively. Mathematical results are immune to empirical revisions, and this delighted but also baffled me. So math, too, led me to seek out some philosophy classes.

But I found far more in these classes than I could ever have anticipated. I found a way to completely distance myself from religion, to lose it and never





Continued from previous page

Rather, they put their faith in faith, which is what I mean by “religious epistemology.”

Epistemology is the area of philosophy that has to do with knowledge itself. What counts as knowledge, what kinds of grounds we need in order to have license to believe. There’s an almost ethical or normative component to epistemology, just as in questions of ethics, having to do with the evaluation of standards, of what counts as right. In ethics, we consider the standards for evaluating actions and determining the right sorts of actions. In epistemology, the normative questions revolve around the standards for evaluating beliefs. What counts as the right sorts of grounds for beliefs? Do you have to have grounds at all, and for all one’s beliefs?

Philosophy has been concerned with these sorts of questions from the very beginning, from Plato 2,500 years ago. It was Plato who stressed, as philosophers have continued to stress, how conscientious we ought to be in these matters of belief, as much as in our actions — and not only because beliefs are implicated in our actions but because the truth itself is important, and there are so many ways in which we get duped.

Plato stressed how many irrational and subjective forces are always lying in wait to take the place of good grounds, these dark forces of the ego that incline us toward wishful thinking and fantasizing, coming up with visions of the world that flatter our own senseless sense of self-importance in this world, so that we come up with worldviews, with *weltanschauungen*, that, flattering our own egos, incline us toward divisiveness.

The demand for compelling and objective reasons to believe arises as a way to combat these self-deluding tendencies. Religious epistemology, with its enshrining of faith, rejects the epis-

temology shared by both science and philosophy, demanding compelling reasons, that are compelling to everybody who submits herself to reason, which get at what “objectivity” means.

Beware of philosophy

Here’s something that Bertrand Russell really did say, without any paraphrasing: “A habit of basing convictions upon evidence and of giving to them only that degree of certainty which the evidence warrants would, if it became general, cure most of the ills from which the world suffers.”

There’s an ethics to epistemology, there’s an ethics to taking our beliefs seriously to demand objectivity. This is a continuous theme in philosophy, from Plato on, and it’s why the spirit of philosophy has always been seen as inimical to the spirit of religion.

These epistemological and ethical considerations are part of the sphere of reason even though they’re not strictly part of science, but rather of philosophy. We shortchange reason when we identify reason only with the empirical sciences. Reason has science at its disposal, but it has more than only science. We have philosophical reasoning as well. And realizing the greater resources of reason undermines the great chasm which is supposed to exist between facts, on the one hand, and values, on the other.

Many religious accommodationists exploit this alleged distinction, most famously, Stephen Jay Gould, who magisterially proclaimed the existence of the “nonoverlapping magisteria” (often abbreviated as NOMA). I think this phrase is nonsense, but it sounds awfully good.

These two nonoverlapping magisteria that Gould laid out are both, he said, mutually exclusive and co-jointly exhaustive categories of propositions. On the one hand we give to the authority of the empirical science the dominion over all facts, facts of the matter, propositions which are either true or false.

On the other hand, we give over to the authority of religion dominion of all values, which presumably do not concern propositions which are either true or false. This distinction between facts and values lines up, Gould says, with the distinction between science and religion. It’s religion, in other words, which is to tell us how we are to live our lives, what are the values that matter, what it is to live a life well-lived.

According to NOMA, there is no work for reason to do here at all. So we have to leave it to the authorities of religion and religious codes of ethics.

Someone like Gould can think that reason has nothing to say on matters of value only because, with a certain degree of arrogance not unknown to scientists, he equates reason with the empirical sciences, which makes it almost unavoidable then to hand over to the authority of nonreason, also known as religion, all things having to do with value.

NOMA ignores the long history going back to Plato and Aristotle and onward to Spinoza and Hume and Kant and into our own day, which has been steadily offering us trickle-down arguments establishing the foundations of morality in reason. Steve gave away a little bit of how I think that this is accomplished in his own talk, the sorts of arguments which don’t belong to the empirical sciences but rather to moral reasoning, that professional philosophers have been developing

The practice of believing on faith what we want has the same advantages of theft over honest toil.

and expanding upon, building on each other’s work — just as scientists build on each other’s work. And just as practitioners in the sciences have had their practical and beneficial effects, furthering the flourishing of human lives, so too have practitioners in the abstract work of moral reasoning, furthering the flourishing of human lives.

Philosophers have been hard at work, laying out arguments that clarify the objective nature of morality, laying out arguments that extend the intrinsic value of life to previously excluded groups — women, people of different races and religions, children, even animals — using rigorous reason, showing the inconsistency of conferring intrinsic value on some lives — certainly one’s own! — and not on others. And the force of the rationality of these rigorous arguments gradually trickles down.

People may not be able to reproduce the exact abstract logic of the philosophers, but their moral sensibilities have been transformed nevertheless. This process has helped to move us along, painfully slowly and often regressing, but still slowly going further in the process of moral progress. It’s a lovely aspect of our species that we don’t enjoy the feeling of being caught in inconsistency, and so much of our moral abominations involve inconsistency, which it has fallen to philosophers to point out.

Secular moral arguments

There’s a lot of disagreement among philosophers, who are split into the camps of Kantian deontologists and Millian utilitarians. The two camps argue whether there are certain acts — torture, for example — which are intrinsically immoral, no matter what good results might ensue from them, or whether an act’s moral character derives from its consequences.

There is substantive controversy here, but that shouldn’t blind us from seeing the far more fundamental consensus. Both the deontologists and the utilitarians are joined to a common sense of what the moral point of view is—an entirely secular understanding of the moral point of view as requiring an effort of distancing from one’s own particular identity. That you happen to be you — as important as that is to you — is of minimal moral consequence. Everybody else happens to be themselves as well, and feels about that self as fervently as you do about yours. Kant’s famous categorical imperative — that before you perform any action, you should try to perform this test in your mind: could you universalize it, make it a rule for everybody to follow — is getting at the distancing from the strong pull of the self, a distancing which is of the essence of the moral stance. If you want to perform some act — say cheating somebody out of his fair share — and you find you wouldn’t be able to universalize it, then what you’ve revealed is that you’re giving too much weight to your own identity

in the situation. You only think the cheating is justifiable because it’s you who will be performing it. And utilitarians, in asking us to consider the greatest good for the greatest number, ask us to perform a similar distancing from the pull of the self, in which you view yourself as just one among many, and it’s the consequences for everybody — not just yourself — that constitutes the moral aspect. So deontologists and consequentialists, as divided as they are on important issues, still build on a common understanding of the nature of morality. Just as there are disagreements among scientists on the correct interpretation of quantum mechanics, but still they all know how to use it, and nobody but a fool would say there’s no established knowledge here just because controversy remains; so, too, there’s a tremendous amount of agreement among philosophers, and nobody but a fool would deny that there is shared genuine knowledge about the nature of morality secured through philosophical reasoning. And this secured knowledge has impacted on the world outside of professional philosophers, gradually changing opinions and sensibilities. It’s impacted even the moral sensibility of religion, so that people read the bible differently now, according to moral arguments that have been brought to them through secularism. It’s because of secular philosophy, at least as much as because of secular science, that all but the most fundamentalist of religious believers resort to claiming that the bible is, in various places, to be interpreted metaphorically, as much when it talks in moral ignorance about slavery as when it talks in scientific ignorance about the creation of the world in six days.

The division between facts and values that Gould’s touted NOMA supposedly rests on is a false division. Facts have been established in the world of values, secured through sound ethical reasoning. For example, it’s a fact that slavery is wrong. It’s a fact despite the fact that no religion was able on its own, without the input of secular philosophical arguments, to discover that fact.

It’s a fact that slavery is wrong despite the many laws concerning the keeping of slaves that are to be found in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, just as it’s a fact that the voice of a woman, whether speaking or singing, is not to be regarded as in itself a sexual incitement. And if it is so regarded, that’s not the moral problem of the woman who’s speaking. It is, rather, the problem of the men who can’t hear it as anything but sexualized.

In any case, I thank you very much for listening to this woman’s voice.

*Rebecca Newberger Goldstein is a philosopher and novelist. She received her Ph.D. in philosophy from Princeton University and taught philosophy for most of her life. She is the recipient of many awards for both her artistic and scholarly works. In 1996 she was named a MacArthur Fellow (the “genius” award). She is the author of six novels, including *36 Arguments For the Existence of God*, *The Mind-Body Problem and Properties of Light: A Novel of Love, Betrayal and Quantum Physics*, a book of short stories, *Strange Attractors*, and two award-winning nonfiction books: *Incompleteness: The Proof and Paradox of Kurt Gödel*, and *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity*. She has retired from teaching to write full time and lecture.*

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FFRF, PO Box 750, Madison WI 53701

Sharing the Crank Mail

A sampling of recent comments to FFRF from the Christian righteous, printed as received:

Voice mail to Dan Barker

I have a message for you. Jesus said "Go fuck yourself, you fucking dick!" — 520 Franklin Ave.

Hello

Gov. Scott Walker wishes you all a very Merry CHRISTMAS!! — Billy Cyrus

gutter

If you do not like Christmas and Church go fuck yourself and I will continue to 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 motherfucking eyes or shut your door and crawl back under a rock gutter slut., — L.B.

God is Great

God is the most beautiful being. There are angels, devils (you are an example of one), heavn and hell. That is your future home. also saw pictures of you, you look like a slut. Have you had sex with any childrem lately? Go fuck yourself. God Bless America Nd keep Christ in Christmas. Ps Go to hell — Santa Claus

Christmas time

You're a miserable fat, cunt, you're afucking disgrace to the human race and you smell of piss. PS merry Christmas and God Bless — Saint Nick

Sample issue of Freethought Today

I pray daily that all you self righteous bastards die of long painful lingering illnesses. You will be in hell. — Ken books

Texas Nativity Scene

Dear FFRF Maggots Dan the Carnival Barker, Annie Get Your Atheist Gun Gaylor, your atheist mom and Company: My, my, we all got our panties in a wad, don't we? A man named Adolf would be proud as well as Stalin and Mao. You guys have bastardized the Constitution to serve your own wicked agenda. Enjoy your solstice season, Gaylord and company. May your solstice stockings be filled with coal and hot air, and of course, unwadded panties. — NK in NW Indiana

atheistism

I OPPOSE HOMOSEXUAL BEHAVIOR, RACE MIXING, WEED SMOKERS, COERCION @WALL STREET, CORRUPT CONGRESS, ACLU, LYING MEDIA.... — gt chisholm

Sample issue

Fuck you faggots — JHF DJFJ, Beverly Hills, Calif.

Merry Christmas!

I just wanted to let you know that I and most of the rest of the majority of people believe that you and your members are insignificant shreds of human debris, using air that real people could use. I believe you and your members being, are reasons why abortion should

always be legal. I believe there should be a law against parents like you and your members from being able to procreate. — your mama

MERRY CHRISTMAS FROM ATHENS TEXAS

I pray that you will change your thoughts and ways soon, for you will have ever lasting life in burning he'll and damnation. GOD LOVES YOU — Kim Farguson

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

your WRONG!!!!: GET REAL!!!!

You have no right to force your unfounded views on anyone! You want a fight with Christ's followers, well you'll get one. — Tony Hill

Your organization sucks!!!

You all need to get a life: Fuck you and your attempts to stop freedom of religion. — Enjoy Hell

you r STUPID

you have a FUCKIN STUPID org. you need to move to another country we do noit want you in our country because we llove GOD, and he will punish you some way — mike cannon

You people suck dick

Hell won't be hot for you. You people are fucking tools. — Matt fuckyou

State/Church Quiz response

Your silly quiz is wrong, and you know it. I am NOT Christian, but I hate you filthy ass rapers with every thing I have. FUCK YOU, and FUCK COMIE ATHIESTS!!!! Eat my shit, and fucking kill your selves, NOW, you fucking child molesters!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! FUCK YOUR GAY NIGGER, lil barry NIGGER BOY soetoro, too. — Kurt Anderson, Ogden, Utah

You are assholes

You people are very sick assholes. Do not contact me repeat, don't do it. — M Chierepko

YOU ARE A MUSLIM

Dear Dan, We know that you are really a muslim! Don't pretend that we don't know. Your real name is Mohammed Atta. — DJ Via

God still loves you, but I'm not that perfect... Fucking idiots! — Guy Fawkes

What a bag of dicks

Fuck you. Go back to the slimy hole you came from. — Mark Jackson

We're coming

We're coming.... Christ and his troops. — guesswhat@christiscoming.net

Texas Nativity Scene

Fuck you all. In GOD we trust, Merry Christmas, burn in

HELL. — John Casale, Warren, Ohio

Texas Nativity scene

you guys are pussies lol. grow up and get a real job — Ron Perry

Texas

You fucking morons need to worry only about your own black area! Come to Normal and try that shit and you'll wish you didn't! — Rob Mauer, Normal, Ill.

TEXAS

For the sake of the Lord's people, please join your species in Hell. — Betty Ramirez

Stick it up- well you know where

Im now going to put a religion theme in my yard. and print you web site so my bird can shit on it ha ha — l2d2@live.com

Shitheads

Fuck you and stay out of my religion asses — John@playboy.com, San Diego, Calif.

Saw the article about Athens Texas

Know that as an atheist you are an Enemy of God. Not a good place to be for Eternity. — Carol Polischak

SAD STATE OF AFFAIRS

You are all a bunch of whackjobs. You pick a fight, do not cry when you get your asses handed to you. You do not own this country either. Go be miserable somewhere else along with the tree huggin liberals, and gay marriage proponets. MERRY CHRISTMAS — Jeff Hankins

Rotten Apples: Athesis

Rotten apples in a baslet, just take a athesis drop them on the ground and let them rot where they belong..IM LOOKING FORWARD TO THE DAYS I CAN PUNCH ATHE-SIS IN THE FKN FACE!!! THE DEVEL IS COMING AFTER YOUR GROUP! IMMEDIATLY!! — Wnkinc Wnkinc

Religion

Keep your noses out of other people's beliefs. You're like the gays, complaining about wanting to be accepted but not accepting other views. BACK THE FUCK OFF. — Anna Davis

Athens Texas

I propose, that when you attended school, Ms. Gaylor, you either skipped math class altogether, or, if not, you were either drunk or stoned at your desk, or both...! It's painfully obvious to me that you are 'freeloaders' to the economy and a Pain in the Ass to Christians everywhere! You do not work, you do not hold a REAL job to speak of, and yet; you've this sense of entitlement, reserved only for the working class, placing demands upon them to bend toward your wishes, OR ELSE...! You can go to HELL as far as I'm concerned. — Mr. Rick Schlecht, U.S. Army/U.S. Air Force, retired

Athens Texas

FUCK YOU and your 17%!!

Majority rules bitch!! I'm sick to DEATH of fucking idiots like you who are offended by what makes THE MAJORITY happy and THE MAJORITY has to cave for you, FUCK YOU!! MOVE TO RUSSIA!! When you are burning in Hell...YOU'LL BELEIVE!! — Larry Pickett, Sun Lakes, Ariz.

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. You stupid atheist Bastards shove it up your damn ass crossways. — Michael Mazar

Ahens Texas Nativity scene

You bastards stepped on your dicks by screwin with Texas! — Ron Loven, Mesquite, Texas

A Fool's Errand

Your 'god', Nobama, is about as popular as a Shy-Town, junkyard dog, right now. Yes, I've lived in beautiful Wisconsin, and such mini-brain, minority delusions, are quite rare, save in some Madison & Milwaukee hovels. Also worked in Shy-Town's South Side combat zone, where your hero was raised. What a bombed-out, burned-out, marxist, hell-hole. — Gary Hurd, Mineral Wells, Texas

God is Great

I will pray for God to send you directly to hell which unfortunately will be a step up from Madison. — Jesus Christ

ATHESIS SCUMS SHOULD DIE!

Im coming after your group with a mighty Pen., Lets begin to tell the true stories how athe-sis scums love to rape kids! — Wnkinc Wnkinc

Athens, Texas

you stupid dumbfucks. you ignorant assholes. STOP attempting to impose your values on THE MAJORITY OF THE POPULATION. now, lets see how many of you pathetic SOB's try to take advantage of any day off work due to all the Good People. FUCK YOU. FUCK... all of you. — Thomas Acton

Athens, Texas

Why don't you inept morons stay the hell out of Texas! Maybe you need a large hunk of cheese shoved up your ass? Us Texans will be happy to help all of you out with that. — Jeff Lewellen, Texas

athens tx:

annie . Shut the fuck up! We don't need to hear from dumb cunts running a scam. — Steve Sloan, Madison, Wis.

Subject: fuck you.

Who the fuck are you to file a human rights suit for a lil teenage cunt who has no rights cuz she is a fucking skank who has no right to impede on the rights of the rest of people in that school fuck all you communist bastards burn in hell fuckas — gosuckadick@yahoo.com

You faggots

You fags need to grow up and get a real job! Who gives a shit if the govonor of az supports the national prayer day. Take the fuckin tampon out of your ass and find something else to cry about you baby back bitch! It's liberal jews like yourself that are ruining this country! niggersnspicks@whitepeopleule.com



Inside this card from Texas it said, SANTA CLAUS: SATAN CAL(L)s U! Did you answer him?

Go Back to Your Cave, Because He is Really Going to light UP the Sky. You Better Be Ready, The Japanese Became Believers After Hiroshima And Nagasaki. "Those Who Forget The Past Are Condemned to Repeat It" God told Me to tell you, A Son of God #1 The Bible Written By Men Inspired By God

This history lesson for FFRF was postmarked Memphis, Tenn.

They Said What?

I want the full portrait of evolution and the people who came up with the ideas to be presented. It's a worldview and it's godless. Atheism has been tried in various societies, and they've been pretty criminal domestically and internationally. The Soviet Union, Cuba, the Nazis, China today — they don't respect human rights. As a general court we should be concerned with criminal ideas like this and how we are teaching it. . . . Columbine, remember that? They were believers in evolution. That's evidence right there. N.H. state Rep. Jerry Bergevin, R-Manchester, on his bill requiring school to teach evolution as a theory and include "the theorists' political and ideological viewpoints and their position on the concept of atheism." Concord Monitor, 12-29-11

My answer to that was we always need a Jesus candidate. GOP presidential candidate Rick Santorum, telling a New Hampshire town hall how he responded to an interviewer saying, "We don't need a Jesus candidate, we need an economic candidate." ABC News, 1-5-11

★AJ St. Angelo★ @AJSaint 11m
We can make so many jokes about this dumb bitch , but who cares #thatbitchisgoingtohell and Satan is gonna rape her. ☐☐

REK @RachelKnight 3m
"@jvezina022: @jessicaahlquist I hope there's lots of banners in hell when your rotting in there you atheist fuck #TeamJesus"

A sampling of the hate speech and death threats directed at Jessica Ahlquist, 16.

Graduate/Mature Student Essay Contest

Honorable Mentions

A Personal Constitution



By Ana-Margarita López-Ospina

FFRF awarded Ana-Margarita \$200 for her essay.

I come from a Third World country in the Western world, which means we look up to the United States of America. We dream about being you when we grow up. In my country, Colombia, we are celebrating our new Constitution's 20th anniversary.

It was huge for us that just 20 years ago the state and the Catholic Church split up, at least on paper. The young people achieved it. They organized themselves to promote the new order and they made it. They won that battle against the traditional power, at least on paper. The truth is that paper can deal with anything, but real changes have to take place inside us, inside the people.

We should see these acts of words and declaration as a divorce. Sometimes, a divorce is just a piece of paper because the spouses still love each other. That is what happens in our countries: We have a paper that says the state has separated from religion, but the people are still very religious. Most of the time, they even use their creeds to get votes.

In the last election in Colombia, there was a presidential candidate who was an agnostic, which his opponents and the churches repeatedly used against him. Everyone has the right to their faith, even a president, but they should keep their faith as part of their private life. I respect symbols and rituals, but I also think that the person who is a symbol of a secular state should wear their crucifix or Star of David under their clothes.

On the 20th anniversary of the Colombian Constitution, all the speeches thanked the Catholic god for all the progress in implementing the Great Law, even when this Great Law says we are a secular state now. It has been two decades, and still in all the government buildings there is a Catholic symbol to welcome you. I admit they are sometimes beautiful pieces of art, and as such we should admire and enjoy

them. But most of the time, they are just reminders of what we are no longer, or at least of what we are not supposed to be.

A law was passed in 2006 which allows women to have an abortion in three instances: rape, to save the mother's life or if the fetus has a serious malformation. A city mayor tried to open a clinic to help women in these situations. But the Catholic Church has stopped the clinic from operating for two years.

I think we all should write a Personal Constitution to guide our lives. I am a good citizen. I pay taxes, I respect the law, I vote, and I help my community. I do not believe in heaven or hell. I do not believe someone "up there" is watching my every move. I am a good person not because I fear punishment, but because I have natural compassion.

Compassion is what differentiates us from other species. We act justly because we believe this is the only way to live in society. We accept the law under which we live, not because we like it, but because we know we have to organize ourselves in order to get more harmony in our day-to-day lives.

In any scenario, you can separate your values from your beliefs. I urge public figures to proclaim freethought and show the values in which we live and how we live them. That way, we can prove that you do not have to believe to behave, and that you do not have to show your personal faith to be clear about who you are and be respected.

Ana-Margarita López-Ospina, 36, a native of Medellín, Colombia, is in her first year of graduate school at New York University, where she's pursuing a degree in creative writing in Spanish with a focus on fiction writing. She has previously earned degrees in international business and literary hermeneutics.

Separation protects us all



By Chris Redford

Chris received \$200 from FFRF for his prize-winning essay.

"Separation of church and state" in the U.S. refers to a phrase attributed to Thomas Jefferson and quoted by the Supreme Court in interpreting

the First Amendment's Establishment Clause: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." In largely Christian America, separating religion from government meets with resistance from some Christians.

The primary source of resistance stems from failing to understand why separation is necessary in a pluralistic society and how it protects everyone. There are many reasons why modern promotion of the Establishment Clause has been perceived as an attack specifically against Christians. One is that most modern legal disputes pertaining to the Establishment Clause are meant to abolish practices established by Christians. State-sponsored prayer in schools, the National Day of Prayer, teaching intelligent design or creationism, inserting "under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance, changing the national motto to "In God We Trust" and adding it to our currency, placing Ten Commandments monuments on public property. Each was proposed and promoted by Christian citizens.

So the issue is framed: the religious versus the godless, the Christians versus the nonbelievers. It's seen as one side having their personal, secular convictions present in government and the other side having their own personal, religious convictions suppressed. For all the controversy, the U.S. government is largely secular. Christians ask why can't the government represent both sides?

The answer: There are more than two sides in a pluralistic society where religious identities abound. When Christians see daily prayer over the school intercom abolished, they may perceive it as an attack on Christianity. But in reality, it's protection for non-Christian students, who enjoy the same protection because they will never have to endure a Muslim prayer over the intercom or sit through a reading of the Quran at their graduation ceremony. They will never have to listen to a Scientologist teacher explain how modern psychology is invalid because mental health is a matter of reaching a higher thetan level. They will never have to listen to a Jain teacher explain how evolution is false because all creatures have perpetually reincarnated souls that have always existed. Time will never be spent on these activities. Time will only be spent on the common values held by all students — the secular values.

The word "secular" has been used pejoratively by believers to denote an anti-religious sentiment. In reality, the dictionary definition of the word is "denoting attitudes, activities or other things that have no religious or spiritual basis."

When a public official makes an appeal to "the common bonds of our humanity" and "the pursuit of knowledge and good will," he or she is expressing a sentiment that can be appreciated universally by all people, regardless of religious beliefs or lack thereof. But when a Christian public official appeals to "our unity as children of God," the sentiment cannot be appreciated universally, because Buddhists, Jains

and secular humanists do not believe in God.

The government we build together should represent all of us without giving preference to any single group. We are united in our belief in education, freedom of speech, equality, democracy, liberty, justice, a healthy economy and the pursuit of happiness.

We can pursue those values together publicly without favoring or alienating anyone's private beliefs.

Chris Redford, 29, Lawrence, Kansas, has a B.S. in computer science and is continuing as a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Kansas. He has a passion for substantive dialogue and negotiation. The focus of his dissertation is the use of computational argumentation as a tool for conflict resolution.

Crumbling wall threatens basic rights

By Robin Spoehr

FFRF awarded Robin \$200 for her essay.

The state-church wall of separation is in danger, largely due to conservative Christians. Many U.S. citizens want church and state to be more intertwined and, in support of this dangerous idea, falsely claim that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation. They commonly cite the Declaration of Independence as evidence.

The preamble states: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Many use the creator reference to justify the Christian nation claim. The wording mentions a creator but doesn't specify a specific religion or indicate the Christian god in any way. It is not unreasonable to define the term creator as "nature," which makes the phrase mean that as human beings we have certain rights, which were not given to us by anything other than the fact of our birth. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson did not want to mention a creator at all; the wording was changed later by the Continental Congress.

Furthermore, the U.S. Constitution, our actual governing document, makes no mention of Christianity or even the concept of a supernatural creator being. In fact, the only mention of religion at all comes in the Establishment Clause, which states, "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

One example of how religion in government is harmful is the issue of gay rights. There's simply no rational, secular basis for denying gay couples the right to have their relationships recognized by the state. Twelve states prohibit same-sex marriage by law, and 29 constitutionally bar it.

In the News



Gaylor, Barker join March Reason Rally

Nineteen humanist groups are planning for a Reason Rally on March 24 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Go to reasonrally.org for a complete list of speakers and entertainers, which includes Richard Dawkins, PZ Myers, Tim Minchin, FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker, Taslima Nasrin, James Randi, Greta Christina, Jamila Bey, Bad Religion, Jamie Kilstein, Hemant Mehta, David Silverman, Todd Stiefel, Roy Speckhardt and many more.

Jessica Ahlquist, successful plaintiff in a Rhode Island case against the Cranston School District over a prayer banner, will also speak.

The free rally, which starts at 10 a.m. and ends at 5 p.m., is slated to be the largest secular event in history. The goal is to unify, energize and embolden secular people nationwide. See page 24 to attend an FFRF dinner party before the rally.

Birth control gets federal victory

The Obama administration announced Jan. 20 it will give religious groups another year to comply with a rule requiring employers that offer employees health insurance to include coverage of birth control without out-of-pocket costs. However, the Washington Post reported, the rule and types of employers covered by it remain unchanged, which angered groups like the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which want a permanent exemption for employers who think Jesus would hate birth control.

The delay option isn't available to religious institutions that already offer contraception coverage, including many Catholic universities and hospitals in states that have their own birth control requirements.

While most Catholic leaders oppose birth control, about 98% of sexually active Catholic women use contraception, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a New York group that supports the use of contraception, the Wall Street Journal reported.

Indonesian beaten for Facebook post

An Indonesian civil servant who posted "God does not exist" on his Facebook page was taken into protective custody after being badly beaten, the Jakarta Globe said Jan. 19. The man, identified as Alexander, 31, now could lose his job or be jailed for up to five years unless he accepts one of six official state religions.

Alexander said he was born a Muslim but stopped all religious activities in 2008.

Cop whose wife died needlessly sues

Caleb Horner, a police officer in Lee's Summit, Mo., whose wife died at home without seeing a doctor, has sued the city, claiming he was fired because of his religious beliefs. Horner alleges the department refused his repeated

requests to return to work after Misty Horner died in January 2007, 31 days after she home-delivered a stillborn fetus.

Police officials, friends and family pleaded for weeks with Horner to get help for Misty, the Kansas City Star reported Jan. 8. He claims she didn't want medical attention. She was a Lee's Summit police dispatcher.

Horner was fired in 2008 for failure to contact the medical examiner to report the death. Reports said he and friends spent 14 hours trying to raise Misty from the dead.

Misty's brother, Brian Pierson, said he went to see her as she lay dying, but was threatened by Caleb Horner and his friends. "He didn't feed her, didn't get her a doctor and kept her family away. He should have been [criminally] charged."

Fetal personhood pushed in states

Arkansas Attorney General Dustin McDaniell rejected on Jan. 3 a proposed constitutional amendment that would ban some abortions. McDaniell cited ambiguities in the measure submitted by Personhood Arkansas. He said the text was misleading about the relationship between the amendment and federal law.

The president of Personhood Arkansas, Preston Dunn Jr., said the amendment will be resubmitted. "We are determined. We will try to overcome any obstacles that come before us." If the proposal is certified, Personhood Arkansas would have until July 6 to collect 78,133 signatures.

Efforts are underway in at least seven states to adopt fetal personhood laws via constitutional amendments, including Wisconsin, according to NARAL Pro-Choice America. Voters in Mississippi and Colorado defeated personhood initiatives in 2011 and 2010. Federal lawmakers are circulating similar measures.

Sect: 'Western education is sinful'

Shortly before 8 a.m. Dec. 25, a Toyota stopped in front of St. Theresa's Catholic Church in Madalla, near the Nigerian capital Abuja, just as hundreds of worshippers were coming out. The driver then suddenly plowed into the crowd and the vehicle exploded, Der Spiegel reported. At least 39 people died.

President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian, called it "an ugly incident." Boko Haram, a Muslim sect whose name means "Western education is sinful," claimed responsibility for the attack.

Swedish Kopomists say CTRL+C is sacred

Since 2010, the Swedish group Kopomi has been trying to gain official recognition as a religion to remove the legal stigma from file-sharing. According to PC World, the Missionary Church of Kopomism is now officially registered in Sweden.

Kopomi is Swedish for "Copy Me." Kopomists hold CTRL+C and CTRL+V as sacred symbols and believe "com-

munication is sacred." Founder Isak Gerson, a philosophy student, said the church has more than 3,000 members.

Poll: Would you vote for atheist?

A phone survey conducted Dec. 15 by Poll Position asked 1,133 registered voters, "Would you vote for a U.S. presidential candidate who was an atheist?"

The poll found 58% said no, 27% said yes, and 15% were undecided or had no opinion.

Democrats (36% yes, 45% no) and independents (35% yes, 49% no) were more inclined than Republicans (12% yes, 78% no) to say they'd vote for an atheist to be president.

Ultra-Orthodox males spit on girl, 8

Naama Margolese, 8, is another victim in the struggle in Israel over religious extremism. A Dec. 27 New York Times story told how ultra-Orthodox men spit on Naama on her way to school in Beit Shemesh and called her a prostitute because her modest dress did not adhere to their very strict dress code.

Riots broke out in the area where her tormenters are thought to have come from. Hundreds of men and boys poured out of a synagogue and a seminary holding signs calling for the exclusion of women.

Can't convert 'em? Then kill 'em!

"Left Behind 4: World at War" went on sale in the U.S. just in time for Christmas. It's the latest video game based on Rev. Tim LaHaye's Left Behind series of novels.

Players assume the role of Christian gang members roaming post-apocalyptic Manhattan, according to publiceye.org. To score points and advance to higher levels, players must convert as many Jews, atheists or others who serve the Antichrist. If unable to convert the nonbelievers, players may kill them.

Christian video game publisher Left Behind Games Inc. is offering a free demonstration model to churches. "We see it as a beacon of light that could shine in the dark world of video games," said Director of Outreach Ministries Jerome Mikulich.

Hawaii, Delaware extend civil rights

CNN reported Jan. 2 on same-sex couples in the first minutes of New Year's Day in Honolulu becoming the first in Hawaii's history to enter into civil unions.

"We really don't want to wait any longer, because we have been together for 33 years waiting for the opportunity and our rights and everything that goes with it," said Donna Gedge, who was with her partner Monica Montgomery.

Delaware also on Jan. 1 became the seventh state to recognize same-sex civil unions.

Two churches are suing Hawaii state officials over the law: Emmanuel Temple the House of Praise and Lighthouse Outreach Center Assembly of God.

In *Perry v. Schwarzenegger* (the California Proposition 8 case), Chief Judge Vaughn Walker ruled: "Moral disapproval, without any other asserted state interest, has never been a rational basis for legislation. Tradition alone cannot support legislation."

The issue of personal freedom and religion in government extends to public education. In the 1987 case *Edwards v. Aguillard*, the Supreme Court held that teaching creationism in public schools violated the Establishment Clause. Since then, 11 states have made the teaching of creationism in public schools an issue, with five states adopting standards that promote teaching creationism or intelligent design.

In 2005, U.S. District Judge John Jones III, ruled in *Kitzmiller v. Dover School District*, a landmark case, that intelligent design "cannot uncouple itself from its creationist, and thus religious, antecedents."

The right to practice one's religion is an important one. But citizens also have the right to choose *not* to practice a religion. Separation of church and state is a cornerstone of living in a free society, and therefore must be defended.

Robin Spoehr, 24, Neenah, Wis., is an M.S. student in medical laboratory science at Rush University in Chicago. He earned a B.S. in genetics, cell biology and development from the University of Minnesota and is pursuing a career in vaccine or drug development.

Overheard

In order that each student recognize the importance of spiritual development in establishing character and becoming a good citizen, the governing body of a school corporation or the equivalent authority of a charter school may require the recitation of the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of each school day. The prayer may be recited by a teacher, a student, or the class of students.

Indiana Senate Bill 251, which directs local boards to choose the preferred version of the prayer but allows students to opt out

www.in.gov, 1-9-12

In response to the statement, "I believe the Earth is approximately 6,000 years old," 34% of pastors strongly disagree. However, 30% strongly agree, 9% somewhat disagree, and 16% somewhat agree.

LifeWay Research 2011 survey of 1,000 U.S. Protestant pastors

www.lifeway.com, 1-9-12

Black Collar Crime Blotter

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

Laura Lee Salazar, 39, Maryville, TN: Conspiracy to commit statutory rape by an authority figure, sexual battery by an authority figure and 7 counts each of statutory rape by an authority figure and sexual battery by an authority figure. Salazar was a youth leader at Lord's Disciples Ministries of Whosoever Will.

The indictment said she and her husband, **Michael Salazar**, engaged in unlawful sexual penetration and sexual contact with 3 teen girls in 2008 when they were in the 8th or 9th grade. Michael Salazar, also a church youth leader, pleaded guilty in 2010 and was sentenced to 20 years. All 3 girls testified they were in love with him. *Source: Knoxville News Sentinel, 1-10-12*

Anthony L. Drumgoole, 26, Rochester, NY: Kidnapping, armed robbery and 4 counts of financial transaction card fraud. Drumgoole, pastor at Free From All Chains Outreach Ministry Inc., is accused of robbing a man at knife point in the restroom at Buffalo Wild Wings in November in Myrtle Beach, SC.

He's also charged in Rochester with 2nd-degree criminal impersonation stemming from a traffic stop. *Source: Democrat & Chronicle, 1-10-12; WMBF News, 1-9-12*

Daniel Acker Jr., 49, Alabaster, AL: 4 charges related to child sexual abuse. Acker, an elementary teacher, was arrested after a former female student accused him of molesting her 3 times in 2009. Then another alleged victim came forward to accuse him of multiple assaults starting when she was 11. Police said he admitted molesting at least 20 children through the years.

He was cleared in 1992-93 of similar allegations while he was teaching and also working as a youth pastor at Westwood Baptist Church. Beverly Watson said she remembers a neighborhood girl saying Acker molested her then.

Watson recalled an incident when Acker allegedly gave a test to the alleged victim's class that contained a question about the color of the girl's underwear.

Watson said after Acker was accused, the First Baptist Church of Pelham held spaghetti suppers to raise money for his support. "We held a candlelight vigil for the victim, and five people came," Watson said. *Source: WBRC News, Shelby County Reporter, 1-5-12*

Gwanda K. Tribbet, 47, Springfield, IL: Aggravated criminal sexual abuse and criminal sexual assault. Tribbet, described as the "first lady" of Lively Stone Temple, where her husband is pastor, is accused of having intercourse with the couple's 16-year-old foster child.

The boy and another male foster child were moved to a different home after her arrest. The alleged crimes came to light when a police officer happened on them in a parking lot by the rose garden of a public park.

Police said Tribbet admitted having sex 3 or 4 times with the boy in the month he'd lived with the family. *Source: Peoria Journal Star, 1-4-11*

Jose Davila, aka Fr. Alexis, 53, San Diego: Suspicion of sexual assault. Davila, associate pastor at St. Jude's Shrine of the West, is accused of assaulting a 20-year-old woman at his home. Police wouldn't say if she was a member of St. Jude's. *Source: KGTV-TV, 1-3-12*

Arthur Pearson Sr., 38, Grand Rapids, MI: Embezzlement. Pearson, pastor at Pilgrim Rest Missionary Baptist Church, is suspected of stealing more than \$200,000 from the church, which discovered the shortfall after finding questionable expenditures in an audit. *Source: Wood TV, 1-3-12*

Joe David Bray, 46, Chickasha, OK: DUI and assaulting an officer. Bray, a Pentecostal pastor, was stopped for speeding and running a stop sign. Police said he used Axe body spray after he was stopped with a bottle of McCormick vodka with the seal broken on the front seat.

According to the complaint, Bray told the officer, "You're gonna pay when you're judged and I'm going to tell God how much of a f---ing a-hole you are, you mother-----."

Police Major Elip Moore said Bray also tried to kick out a window of the squad car. *Source: KFOR-TV, 1-1-12*

Darlene Vodvarka, 57, Oak Creek, WI: 2 counts of felony theft of more than \$10,000. Vodvarka, secretary at St. Matthew Catholic Church is accused of embezzling more than \$200,000 from the church, where she's worked for 14 years.

According to the complaint, the fraud involved falsifying payments for "scrip" gift cards merchants donated and which were sold to raise funds. *Source: Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 12-27-11*

Francisco A. Hernandez, 53, Austin, TX: 2nd-degree indecency with a child by contact (following earlier charges of aggravated sexual

Calamities of Nature by Tony Piro

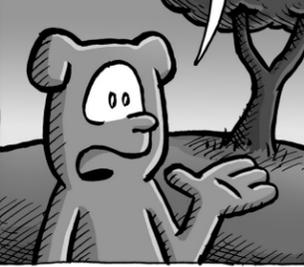
PEOPLE SAY THEY FOLLOW THE BIBLE, BUT MOST AGREE THAT IT'S WRONG TO STONE CHILDREN, FORCE WOMEN TO MARRY THEIR RAPISTS, OR OWN SLAVES.



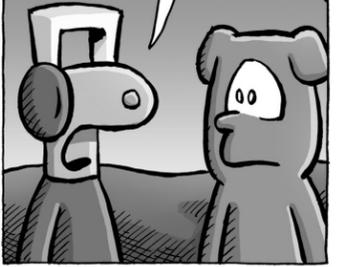
REALLY PEOPLE JUST PICK AND CHOOSE WHICH PARTS OF SCRIPTURE TO TAKE LITERALLY AND WHICH TO WRITE OFF AS SYMBOLIC, ALLEGORY, OR JUST OUTDATED.



SO WHEN PEOPLE DECIDE TO NOT FOLLOW CERTAIN SCRIPTURE, WHAT CRITERION ARE THEY USING?



MODERN SECULAR REASONING.



assault of a child and indecency with a child by sexual contact). Hernandez, aka Pastor Javier, held services in private homes in the Austin area for a nondenominational church with no name. Earlier, 4 women alleged Hernandez molested them as children, going back to the 1990s.

The new charge is from a woman who alleges he abused her when she was 7. *Source: American-Statesman, 12-27-11*

Bede R. Jagoe, 77, Chicago: Criminal sexual abuse. The Dominican Catholic priest, assigned to the chapel at Midway Airport, is charged with making an advance toward a man who attended services before a flight.

Prosecutors allege Jagoe tried to kiss the man and grab him in an elevator after services. *Source: Chicago Tribune, 12-25-11*

Arnold Mathis, 40, Winter Haven, FL: 5 counts of sexual battery. Mathis, pastor at Higher Praise Ministries, is accused of engaging in oral sex with a 14-year-old boy 6 years ago when Mathis was pastor at Saint City Power and Praise Ministries.

Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd called Mathis "a monster. Arnold Mathis was the master of grooming. He had grooming children down to an art."

Mathis had to register as a sexual offender after a 1997 conviction for which he served 4 years. Judd added, "The shock of this investigation is, he's already a sex offender, he's already been to prison, and he's still a youth pastor or associate pastor? That's terrible." *Source: Central Florida News 13, 12-18-11*

Jasmine "J" Omar Brown, 29, Mesa, AZ: 2 counts of sexual conduct with a minor and 3 counts of child molestation. Brown, a youth minister at Family of God Christian Fellowship, who also worked as a teacher's aide for special-needs children, is charged with molesting a juvenile male at summer church camp. *Source: Ariz. Republic, 12-15-11*

Bartley A. Sorensen, 62, Churchill, PA: 4 counts of possessing child pornography. Sorensen, pastor at St. John Fisher Catholic Church, admitted storing images of naked prepubescent boys having sex with other boys or men, the complaint said.

He was arrested after an employee said she saw him watching porn on a church computer. An arrest affidavit said the female employee saw an image of a boy who appeared to be 5 to 10 years old, naked from the waist down, under the caption "Hottie Boys." *Source: Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 12-14-11*

George A. Smith, Truro, NS: 13 counts of gross indecency, 11 of indecent assault on a male, 7 of sexual assault, 4 of unlawfully committing a gross indecency and 3 of unlawfully assaulting with intent to commit an indictable offense. The Catholic priest is accused of molesting 9 boys over 20 years in 6 Newfoundland parishes.

He was removed in May 2010 from St. Malachy's in Kinkora, PEI. *Source: Canadian Press, 12-14-11*

Edward Demoreta, 30, and **Ricardo Navarro**, 27, Mulberry, FL: Respectively, 3 counts of lewd battery on a victim between 12 and 15 years old, and 3 counts of lewd or lascivious behavior with a victim between 12 and 16 years old. The men were both youth pastors at First Assembly of God Church and are accused of molesting the same female, who was also Demoreta's student at Florida Virtual School. *Source: Orlando Sentinel, 12-14-11*

Paul Kim, 39, Chino Hills, CA: Felony willful cruelty to a child. Kim is charged with beating a boy, 15, with a metal pole because his parents caught him smoking. Kim works at Emmanuel Lutheran Church in La Habra, where parents take their children to Kim to be disciplined, officials said.

The boy's severe bruises were noticed by his teacher. *Source: Daily Mail, 12-13-11*

Darryl L. Taylor Jr., 25, Auburndale, FL: 3 counts of lewd molestation of a child under 12, 8 counts of lewd molestation of a child 12 to 16 and 2 counts of lewd battery of a child under 15.

Taylor, ministry leader of musicians and youth worship coordinator at Born Again Church of God in Christ, was charged after a father reported to police that his son was molested. At least 3 other alleged victims have come forward. *Source: Bay News 9, 12-13-11*

Uriel Ojeda, 32, Redding, CA: 7 counts of lewd and lascivious acts with a child younger than 14. Ojeda, pastor at Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church, allegedly had sex in 2007-09 with a female victim.

Bail was set at \$5 million due to fears he'll flee to his native Mexico. When it was later reduced to \$700,000 and he was freed, about 50 supporters released balloons at the jail.

Ojeda is one of the few Spanish-speaking priests in the Diocese of Sacramento. *Source: Salem Statesman Journal, 12-6-11*

Pleaded / Convicted

Nicholas Dimitris, 37, Asheville, NC: Pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit fraud as a "straw borrower" (stand-in for real recipient) to get an \$825,000 bank loan. Dimitris leads C3 Church, a charismatic congregation affiliated with Christian City Church International.

Prosecutors said he also recruited others to serve as straw borrowers. *Source: Citizen-Times, 1-9-12*

Cyprian Meier, 67, Bismarck, ND: Pleaded guilty to exploitation of a vulnerable adult. Meier, who was forced to resign in 2005 as pastor of Spirit of Life Catholic Church for spending parishioners' money, admitted making unauthorized transactions totaling \$29,000 from accounts of a paralyzed man he was providing home health care for. The man died Dec. 3. *Source: Bismarck Tribune, 1-4-12*

Michael Moynihan, 59, Greenwich, CT: Pleaded guilty to obstructing a federal investigation. Moynihan, who resigned in 2007 as a priest in the Catholic Diocese of Bridgeport, was charged with using \$300,000 of parish money to pay personal bills.

He was stripped of his priestly authority in 2008 after the diocese learned he shared a New York City apartment with another man and failed to end the association. *Source: AP, 12-14-11*

James M. Donaghy, 53, Lisburn, N.IRE: The Catholic priest was convicted of 2 counts of attempted buggery and 18 counts of indecent assault. He was charged with molesting a fellow seminary student and 2 altar boys.

One of the incidents allegedly occurred the night before Donaghy was ordained, another while Donaghy's superior lay dead in the rectory. *Source: Belfast Telegraph, 12-15-11*

Sentenced

Kevin McAuliffe, 59, Las Vegas, NV: 37 months in prison and \$650,000 restitution. McAuliffe, a Catholic priest, pleaded guilty to mail fraud and falsifying document and told the court he had a weakness for casinos and video poker.

Judge James Mahan credited him for accepting responsibility but chastised him for "hedging his bet" by blaming the theft on a gambling addiction. *Source: National Catholic Reporter, 1-17-12*

Michael C. Fewell, Gorseinon, WALES: £500 fine and banned from driving for 2 years for driving with excess alcohol. Fewell, a Catholic priest, was reported swerving and driving erratically. A breath test showed he had 3 times the legal limit.

Fewell's lawyer told the court that the night he was arrested, he had visited a terminally ill parishioner and drank some alcohol with her. *Source: South Wales Evening Post, 1-12-12*

Christopher Iruke, 61, Los Angeles: 15 years in prison and \$6.7 million in restitution on health care fraud and conspiracy charges for bilking Medicare. Iruke and his wife convinced churchgoers at the couple's Arms of Grace Christian Center to give them personal information used to open fraudulent medical equipment supply operations. *Source: AP, 1-9-12*

Eliahu Ben Haim, 60, Long Branch, NJ: 5 years in prison. Ben Haim, rabbi at Congrega-

tion Ohel Yaacob, using his network of religious charities to illegally launder \$1 million for a man who turned out to be a federal informant. *Source: Washington Post, 1-4-12*

Daniel Ledford Jr., 28, Flagstaff, AZ: A year in jail for sexual conduct with a minor. The youth leader at Lamb of God Bible Church admitted having a sexual relationship for several months with a 16-year-old female church member. Ledford was arrested after he accidentally sent a text message to a church employee. *Source: Ariz. Daily Sun, 12-23-11*

Phillip Joubert, 50, Queens, NY: 5 years in prison for sexual assault of his 13-year-old daughter. The pastor at Community Baptist Church was acquitted of rape and incest charges.

A former church member called Joubert "Satan's server," adding that the Jouberts have made no major improvements to the building for years. "They just lined their pockets." *Source: Queens Chronicle, 12-22-11*

Luiz M. Barbosa, Raimundo Gomes, and Edilson Duarte, Algoas, BRA: 21 years, 16 years and 16 years, respectively, in prison. The Brazilian Catholic priests were convicted of molesting altar boys and buying their silence with money and threats.

One victim taped a sex act between Barbosa and another victim, which was posted online and sold at street fairs. *Source: AP, 12-20-11*

Jeremy Fulton, 29, Manhattan, NY: 22 years in prison on sexual abuse charges, including rape, for molesting 5 girls who attended Mariners' Temple Baptist Church, where he was youth minister.

"I trusted my most prized possession in your hands, my daughter, and you stole her innocence," said one woman at sentencing. *Source: AP, 12-20-11*

DieuGrand Jacques, 40, Boynton Beach, FL: 10 years in prison for lewd and lascivious molestation. Jacques, pastor at New Alliance Haitian Church, was convicted of assaulting the girlfriend of one of his church members. He was counseling the girl for relationship and family problems. *Source: Palm Beach Post, 12-14-11*

Christopher Wenthe, 47, St. Paul, MN: 1 year in jail for criminal sexual conduct. Wenthe, pastor at Nativity of Our Lord Catholic Church, was sentenced for sexual contact with a female parishioner 17 years his junior.

Judge Margaret Marrinan called Wenthe "an extremely narcissistic individual."

He became involved with the woman, then 21, when counseling her for an eating disorder and past sexual abuse. Prosecutors said he introduced her to anal sex after showing up at her apartment with Vaseline. *Source: Pioneer Press, 12-14-11*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

At least 21 young Haitian men are suing **Douglas Perlitz, Fairfield University** (a Jesuit school in Iowa), former school chaplain **Paul Carrier**, the **Society of Jesus** and the **Haiti Fund Inc.** The men allege Perlitz, 41, sexually abused them while they lived at a Cap Haitien facility for the needy.

Perlitz, once hailed as a hero at the school, was sentenced to nearly 20 years in prison in 2010. Perlitz took homeless boys off the street and gave them education, meals and a place to sleep.

"When I met Mr. Douglas, he appeared to us like Jesus Christ himself come to rescue us," said Francilien Jean-Charles, who was 12 when he was taken off the street by Perlitz and brought to the school. *Source: CNN, 1-7-12*

Stephen E. Galiher, a pastor employed by Pat Robertson's **Trinity Broadcasting Network**, and TBN are being sued by the family of David Rhodes, 71, who died 6 months after being hit by Galiher in a TBN-owned BMW in Costa Mesa, CA.

Galiher was found guilty in 2010 of driving 3 times over the blood-alcohol limit and causing injury. He received 5 years' probation and 120 days in jail.

‘You’re gonna pay when you’re judged and I’m going to tell God how much of a f----ing asshole you are, you mother-----.’
 — *Pastor Joe David Bray*

Rhodes’ family alleges TBN “turned a blind eye” to Galier’s drinking problem and continued to employ him and provide him with a car. *Source: L.A. Times, 1-4-12*

“John Doe HT,” VA, is suing the Catholic Diocese of St. Cloud [MN] and a former deacon, **Michael Weber**, accusing Weber of sexual abuse and the diocese of covering it up.

Attorney Jeff Anderson said at least 3 male victims have accused Weber of molesting them in 1968-70. The Virginia man accuses Weber of abusing him when he was 6 on a camping trip his family took with other Catholic families. As a deacon, Weber wore a Roman collar.

The suit alleges that a Caritas Family Service Agency counselor told the boy’s parents he had treated Weber for pedophilia. Weber was laicized by the Vatican in 1972. *Source: St. Cloud Times, 12-13-11*

Legal Developments

Darrell Gilyard, Jacksonville, FL, finished his 3-year prison sentence for sex crimes against 2 girls in his congregation at Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church and began serving 3 years’ probation. As a registered sex offender, he listed a hotel as his address.

“I’m happy to have that dark part of my life over,” Gilyard said.

After his 2009 conviction, he admitted fathering the child of a woman who accused him of raping her during a 2004 counseling session, court documents showed. *Source: Florida Times-Union, 1-3-12*

Bad Girl Bailbonds, Las Vegas, NV, is offering a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of **Otis Holland**, 55, pastor at United Faith Church. Holland jumped \$30,000 bail a year ago after being charged with sexually assaulting 3 girls under age 16. One alleged victim was 7. *Source: AP, 12-26-11*

Michael J. Kelleher, 83, Winston-Salem, NC, confessed to touching a 14-year-old boy in 1977 while at Our Lady of the Annunciation Catholic Church in Albemarle, according to new court documents. The priest was arrested in 2010 on 2 counts of indecent liberties with a child. The male victim alleges Kelleher molested him repeatedly in the rectory. *Source: WBTV, 12-6-11*

Allegations

A new report says thousands of children suffered sexual abuse in **Dutch Catholic institutions** during the past 65 years, and church officials knew but failed to adequately address it or help victims. Release of the report was followed by an apology by Wim Eijk, archbishop of Utrecht, who said the revelation “fills us with shame and sorrow.”

Abusers included clergy and laypersons, said the report, putting the number of victims as high as 20,000. About 800 persons, about 100 still alive, were named in the complaints.

About 29% of the population of 16 million identified as Catholics in 2008, making it the largest religion in the country. *Source: AP, 12-16-11*

Brooklyn, NY, authorities have arrested 85 people in the **Orthodox Jewish community** on child sex abuse charges in the last 3 years. D.A. Charles Hynes said 38 cases have been closed, with 14 convictions and 24 dismissals.

The rest of the cases are pending under a program called Kol Tzedek, or Voice of Justice, which tries to get victims to speak up about abuse. *Source: Jewish Daily Forward, 12-11-11*

Removed / Resigned

Gary Craanen, Racine, WI, resigned from a 30-year career as a religion teacher at St. Catherine’s Catholic High School after abuse allegations dating to the late 1970s were raised. The author of an upcoming book about sexual abuse in the Diocese of Trenton, N.J., notified St. Catherine’s officials of allegations involving Craanen.

The book alleges Craanen solicited 2 teen boys for sex and performed a sexual act in front of one of them while he was vice principal and at Divine Word Seminary in Bordentown. Author Bruce Novozinsky will self-publish the book through Amazon in May. Novozinsky went to school with the alleged victims.

The Racine Police Department is conducting an investigation based on information provided by St. Catherine’s staff. Craanen did not want to be present during the investigation and retired, said Brendan O’Brien, St. Catherine’s spokesman. *Source: Journal Times, 1-18-12*

Lt. Col. Moshe Ravad, chief chaplain of Israel’s Air Force, was fired after making what some saw as misogynistic comments. Rabbi Ravad, in charge of a program to recruit ultra-Orthodox Jews, said he feared for the volunteers’ “piety” if they were forced to attend mixed-sex military events, including events where women sang.

The military had for some time quietly excused Haredi men from attending mandatory functions when women were present. After that was made public, the policy was reversed, bringing on Ravad’s comments. *Source: Reuters, 1-10-12*

Gabino Zavala, 60, an auxiliary bishop in the San Gabriel region of the Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles, resigned after it came to light he has a secret family, including 2 teen children. The children live with their mother in another state.

“Let us pray for all those impacted by this situation and for each other,” Archbishop Jose Gomez said in a letter. *Source: Reuters, 1-4-12*

Jeremiah Healy resigned as head of the Columban Fathers missionary society’s operation in **Chile** after 2 men reported alleged abuse to the society.

A native of County Kerry, **IRE**, Healy was known as “Padre Derry” in Chile, where he’d worked since 1981.

Claudio Ramos alleged Healy molested him when he was 16. “[W]hen we were alone, he abused this confidence I had in him.”

Another alleged victim, Jorge Salas, said when he was 23, Healy told him he would teach him “new sexual techniques, and with all this I would be protected from women.” *Source: Irish Echo, 12-14-11*

Thomas C. Lombardi, 62, Fort Wayne, IN, was removed as pastor at St. Joseph Catholic Church-Hessen Cassel after an allegation of sexual abuse of a minor. Fort Wayne-South Bend Bishop Kevin Rhoades, in a letter to parishioners, wrote that the church’s “commitment to the safety of our children and young people” required Lombardi’s removal pending the outcome of canonical process. *Source: Journal Gazette, 12-7-11*

Brendan Doyle, Jefferson City, MO, was put on paid administrative leave by the Diocese of Jefferson City after “inappropriate Web pages” were found on the priest’s computer at Helias Catholic High School, where he teaches.

Deacon Dan Joyce, diocesan spokesman, said Doyle reported a suspected virus on the computer. “Out of an abundance of caution, Father Doyle’s computer was forwarded onto a law enforcement agency for further review.” *Source: California Democrat, 11-30-11*

Piotr Bialkowski, 36, Suffolk, VA, resigned as pastor of St. Mary of the Presentation in Suffolk and Church of the Good Shepherd in Smithfield after being charged with assault on a woman who alleges she gave birth to his child.

Police spokeswoman Debbie George said Bialkowski is accused of slamming the woman against a wall in her home. The woman’s friend pulled Bialkowski off her, the police report said. The child is 2 years old.

Diocese of Richmond Bishop Francis DiLorenzo said Bialkowski “confirmed that the accusation is true.” *Source: Virginian-Pilot, 12-6-11*

Overheard

Exactly what kind of people imprison responsible citizens for using what God said is good?

Letter to the editor from Stan White, Dillon, Colo., “Legalizing marijuana has biblical support,” citing Genesis 1:12, “And the earth brought forth grass, [and] herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed [was] in itself, after his kind: and God saw that [it was] good.”

Port Huron Times Herald, 1-8-12

Women should be seen *and* heard. **New Israel Fund posters advocating equality, singalongs and concerts featuring women to counter ultra-Orthodox Jewish prohibitions against women in public in Israel**

New York Times, 1-15-12

One of my neighbors . . . turned to me and asked how I was. “Fair to middling,” I responded. “And you?” I queried. “I’m very sad that Christopher Hitchens died,” he said. “A great loss. There was no one like him,” he said. He uttered a deep sigh and turned back toward the elevator door momentarily before he continued, “Well, maybe Bertrand Russell.”

Metropolitan Diary entry by Harriet Forman, New York City

New York Times, 1-16-12

For lack of a better term, let’s normalize, even secularize, our approach to the next election. Ask all candidates to drop the God talk. Recognize and reject all forms of religious pandering. Punish candidates who make base appeals to religious tribalism. Evaluate candidates according to their past performance and current policy proposals related to the major challenges facing our nation. Read the Declaration of In-

dependence and Constitution for a refresher. Pastors, stay home and preach the Gospel rather than being precinct captians.

David Gushee, Mercer University professor of Christian ethics [don’t laugh!], op-ed, “Christian politics create unholy alliances”

USA Today, 11-6-11

At this point, the archdiocese has become an alumni association for former assistant district attorneys.

Archdiocese of Philadelphia lawyer Robert Welsh, denying that a new policy ordering whistleblowers to talk to church officials before reporting a crime is meant to protect sex abusers

Philadelphia Inquirer, 12-21-11

After months of dedicated prayer and endless negotiation, Our Lady of TMZ has revealed her ultimate secret. She has communed with the tarnished saints, Norma Jean et al.

Description of Lindsay Lohan’s nude pictorial

Playboy, January 2010

Faith had a place in every locker room I was in. When I played for the New York Giants, team owner Wellington Mara, a devout Catholic, invited half the priests in New York City into the locker room before games. Sometimes it was hard to find my teammates among all the priests. I’m sure Mara hoped it would somehow help the team win, but it was never enough to get us into the playoffs.

Hall of Fame quarterback Fran Tarkenton, son of a Pentecostal Holiness minister, “Does God Care Who Wins Football Games?”

Wall Street Journal, 1-12-12

Theocracy Alert!

At this point in the game, the candidates in the GOP primary don’t have the time or the money for subtlety. They will light a fire and stand by a burning bush in order to send a signal to evangelicals, “I’m one of you, vote for me.”

Mark McKinnon, Republican media strategist, “Appealing to Evangelicals, Hopefuls Pack Religion Into [Iowa caucus] Ads”

New York Times, 12-28-11

In these difficult times, we cannot abandon the core values that define us as unique — We are One Nation, Under God.

Prepared text of Mitt Romney’s victory speech in the New Hampshire GOP presidential primary

Wall Street Journal, 1-11-12

Will Americans vote for the best candidates, or are Americans just scared of more Obama failures and willing to settle for anything, including Mormon Mitt Romney? Mormonism is a false cult that doesn’t follow the biblical Jesus. Romney brought Massachusetts away from God.

Pastor Steven Andrew, president of USA Christian Ministries, San Jose, Calif., urging people to vote for either Michele Bachmann or Rick Santorum for president.

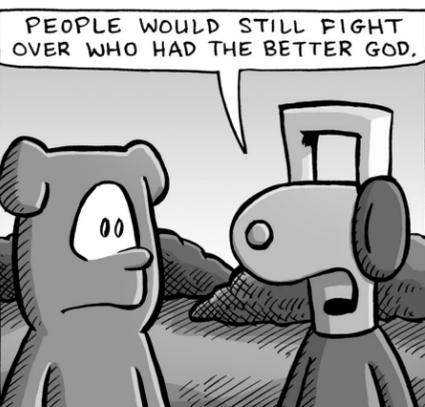
Christian Newswire, 12-28-11

How can you have judgment if you have no faith? How can I trust you with power if you don’t pray?

GOP presidential candidate Newt Gingrich at a debate in Las Vegas, Nev.

youtube.com, 10-19-11

Calamities of Nature by Tony Piro



FFRF Factoid

In 2011, FFRF’s Legal Department sent 565 letters of complaint (up from 358 in 2010), according to Rebecca Markert, senior staff attorney.

These letters went out to government agencies in 47 states, including the District of Columbia. The top states were 1) Texas; 2) Wisconsin; 3) California; 4) Michigan; and 5) Ohio.



Letterbox

'As atheist as the day I was born'

I find great comfort and pride in what the FFRF is doing, bringing us all together. The billboard campaign is a brilliant way to attract members, and I make a point of donating to the cause every year at this time, besides being a Lifetime Member since 2005. I am enclosing a donation on behalf of member Richard Halasz's T-shirt project.

I keep some noncontracts and Gideon bible stickers in my purse for traveling. My fondest wish is to find a bible in a hotel room that has already been "doctored" by a rational person. My library is filled with books by Dan Barker, Richard Dawkins, Judith Hayes, Robert Buckman, Sam Harris, etc., and no subject is off limits for me in any discussion. I'm quite happy to challenge authority and expound on the virtues of thinking for ourselves, as opposed to believing any old crap that we're fed.

I've also written dozens of letters to the editor of our local rag, stirring up controversy over the years, and getting lots of positive feedback (when they deign to print my letters). The customized plate on my truck says, "Free-thinker — no gods, no masters," and everyone here knows I'm as atheist as the day I was born.

Our eldest daughter (37) chose to embrace Christianity, and she's opened a few eyes in the church with her honesty and intelligence (she's had her eyes opened to the hypocrisy and idiocy in the church, too). She's a good ambassador when the sheltered flock is often curious about us heathens and needs to be enlightened. We don't let the subject come between us, or destroy the love and respect we have for each other.

Judy Loewen
Alberta

Priceless: FFRF helps Montanans find Jesus!

It's always a tough decision on how to split up the Winter Solstice donation — all such great projects!

My daughter tells me the Mountain Jesus shrine issue back in Montana really got the rednecks stirred up. (Actually most of them didn't even know it was there before.)

Keep up the good work!
Marle Brandt
Washington

Keep wall to show respect for all

It gives me great pleasure to submit my payment for a Lifetime Membership on this Winter Solstice.

I've been a member since 2009 and have observed the impressive amount of work done by Annie Laurie, Dan and the staff on our behalf. Thanks for giving us a collective voice defending the principle of separation of church and state.

Happy Winter Solstice
Respect for all
Between church and state
Keep a wall.
Ron Locatelli
California

•••

Love your Natural Nativity Scene in-



side the Capitol — brilliant! It makes me, your friend and neighbor, proud (once again) to be a citizen of this great town and state.

Merija Eisen
Wisconsin

Clergy Project brings doubt to fore

Women in general, and mothers in particular, can often be heard boasting about their "instinct." After reading "When faith no longer moves mountains" [Dec11], I realized we atheists have a special "instinct."

For example, even before I had any proof, I instinctively knew that there had to be more than a few priests and other ministers of god who no longer believe in the supernatural. And I was right!

How commendable that in just the past nine months, more than 125 clergy have abandoned superstition to embrace intellectual honesty and join the newly established Clergy Project. Considering all the knowledge and logical arguments that have exposed religion as a fallacy, I wonder how many thousands of priests, monks, nuns and others who outwardly devote themselves to god are living a lie?

Imagine the despair that surely afflicts these doubters. They face, each day, the torment of knowing they are trapped and shackled in a prison of falsehood, from which not many can escape.

David Quintero
California

•••

The Clergy Project article brought memories of a Catholic priest I met at a camp where we spent our summers in the early 1950s. He confided to me that he was a priest and no longer believed what he preached and wished he could leave the church, but wasn't capable of even pushing a broom in a factory, having spent his entire life from altar boy to priest in the church.

Alton Eliason
Connecticut

Young freethinker shows us the way

I much enjoyed reading Jessica Ahlquist's speech [Nov11]. I greatly admire her for having the courage at 16 to do what I couldn't bring myself to do until I was 60: publicly acknowledge being an atheist. That takes a lot more guts at



Photo: Jeff Yardis

Jessica Ahlquist



New York City practicality

When FFRF Co-President Dan Barker was a believing minister, he often prayed to find a parking space. Now, decades later, he finally gets an answer to his prayers! Dan and Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor (who took this photo) spotted this billboard promoting a parking garage as they were hiking along the new High Line walkway through Chelsea at 17th Street in New York City in early January.

16 than it does at 60.

For some 50 years I was a victim of what I call the Pascal/Graham Syndrome — in other words, fear. Coupled with my inherent lack of self-confidence, it made me a hypocrite for all those years. Finally I could stand it no longer (I hate hypocrisy) and made the break. It has been the most intellectually rewarding and liberating experience of my life.

So congratulations, Jessica. You've got a 44-year headstart over me, and I'm sure you'll make good use of it.

If humanity is to be saved from self-destruction, it will not be by God. It will be through the efforts of people like you.

Jerry Brown
California

Reinvigorated at 82 by FFRF efforts

Last year, you surpassed yourselves in so many intelligent, clever and ingenious ways that I am inspired to donate again to encourage further efforts.

I love the lawsuits you have brought and the Ohio complaint that cost the church its tax-free status for commercial property. As a Lifetime Member, age 82, I feel reinvigorated in my efforts and more incensed by the stupidities brought on by religion than ever.

I see in my awful local newspaper much ado from family who have had someone recently die. They advertise to tell the dead person (in heaven) of their grief, and to god, who is clearly not omniscient, since he needs an ad to advise him/her.

I enclose \$200.

Jo-Ann Miller
Colorado

New York Times ad much appreciated

I thought the full-page New York Times ad was stunning! The lyrics by Dan are brilliant.

I've been sending out the Winter Solstice cards that I got at the FFRF conference. It's wonderful to have an alternative to all those sugary sweet cards and religious image cards. Best wishes for a successful, happy and healthy New Year.

Fairfid Caudle, Life Member
New York

Believers overdose on own addiction

Sincere and well-meaning persons (or not) who enjoy their beliefs and

insist you must also share them insist on sending you religious Xmas cards. These are the same believers who would slam the door on the Jehovah's Witnesses on their porches, or turn ice-cold in the presence of a Mormon or atheist, or revile a Muslim. Yet they don't "get it" that you couldn't care less what they believe.

And still, every year, we are expected to shut up and accept their "gift" as if we wanted it, just about everywhere we go, inundating our communications, as they O.D. on their addiction. No other religion — Muslim, Jewish, Mormon, Buddhist, etc. — demands that we go along with such insistence.

And they say that we are joy-killers and persecute their religion if we don't allow them to bully their way into our public schools and other public places!

Carl Scheiman
Lifetime Member
Maine

Amazed, dismayed by religion pushers

Here you have our Winter Solstice letter that mentions a few incidents in the lives of an old geezer and his wife of 59 years. I want to tell you that I've enjoyed Freethought Today telling of your downright patriotic efforts to keep religion out of government and schools. I'm constantly amazed and dismayed at the number of so-called religious types who make the Black Collar section and the sad display of ignorance and illiteracy found in the hate mail.

On the other hand, it is so rewarding to read about your young people who tell their interesting stories of independent thought and future plans. We old-timers, World War II veterans if you please, have done most of our planning, and as the letter says, try to keep body and soul together while encouraging the likes of you to keep doing the good work.

Enclosed please find a check aimed along the lines of Life Membership for use as best you see fit, preferably toward keeping religion out of schools and government.

At age 88, I'm happy I could manage to round up enough to send it to you after reading about all your efforts, as well as those of some of our fine young people, and the intransigence of a good many others.

Tom Johnson
Colorado

•••

I want to let you know that as a fairly well-educated fan of your excellent or-

ganization and newspaper, I am struck by the singular degree of paucity of vocabulary of the average Christian letter writer. They are certainly so Christian in sentiment. They seem to have great difficulty in appropriately expressing themselves, or in communicating their precise message. As an active atheist, I simply want to submit, as an example, a more appropriate letter of praise for your wonderful newspaper.

Donald Havis
California

FFRF helps assure minority voices heard

FFRF Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert helped me last Christmas season with an issue I had with the city of Waltham, Mass., which had a crèche on public property. We both exchanged letters of complaint with the Mayor's Office.

I want to thank you for all of the help. I've been keeping my eye on the park. All of the other secular holiday decorations went up, and while they did put up a crèche, this year they left out the holy angel and the reference to "Glory to God," so I think we definitely made a difference!

I recently renewed my membership, as I always do, because I really appreciate the work the FFRF does. It feels great to have my voice heard even though I'm in the minority.

Thanks again and Reason's Greetings!

Mary Brock
Massachusetts

Illinois diocese gets debaptism notice

I sent the Catholic Diocese of Rockford, Ill., my debaptismal certificates signed by Dan Barker. The bishop only sent a one-line answer back to me. He probably said to himself, "We are losing more money."

This is what I sent him:

Dear Sirs:

I have been an atheist since I graduated from Boylan Catholic High School in 1964. I went to Boylan for three years, and the only god I ever saw or heard and talked about was money.

I am an atheist, freethinker, humanist, realist and refuse to talk to dead people (that is, pray to some saint).

I have not gone to church for probably 40 years (unless some relative dies; I do have respect for them). I would like to get off your records as a Roman Catholic person. I do not want to be counted as one of you.

I am sending you my debaptismal certificate from the Freedom from Religion Foundation.

- Hitler was a Roman Catholic.
- Pope Pius XI and Pope Pius XII knew about the concentration camps.
- Jesus was killed by the Romans (Italians now), not the Jews.
- Talking to dead people and thinking they understand you is mental deficiency.
- Holy communion means drinking human blood and eating human flesh, which is cannibalism!
- Ten cents buys a bowl of rice for the poor starving children of the world, but yet you keep building churches that cost millions of dollars.
- You have faith, which needs

no proof of anything physical or real.

- You had the Inquisition; what kind of religion do you have now? Glad to get out. I am free.

I feel very proud of being a Lifetime Member in such a great organization. Keep up the good work. We have a tough battle in 2012. May reason prevail!

Virgil Buss Jr.
Illinois

Editor's note: The diocese sent Mr. Buss a one-line reply: "Dear Sir, You are not eligible for excommunication according to Canon 1323. Sincerely in Christ, Monsignor John C. Fritz."

God theory simply defies logic

I would like to share with readers my favorite argument against the illogical god theory.

It is more likely that the universe sprang into existence spontaneously, out of nothing, than it is that a god sprang into existence out of nothing and then created the universe out of nothing. The former calls for only one marvel, whereas the latter calls for two marvels. It is more likely that one marvel occurred than it is that two did.

And it is impossible to conceive of a god as having always existed. This would mean that you could go back in time a million years for every grain of sand on Earth, which would not be a drop in the bucket, and the god would then be floating around in empty space, thinking about creating something.

The god theory is impossible.

Robert A. Bloomes
Kentucky

Year in Review well worth viewing

I have been out of the U.S. for several months, as I live and work in other countries. Upon my return two weeks ago, I found in my mail a gift of Dan Barker's "Night at Nakoma" music CD that you sent as a thank-you. I want to express my appreciation for your superb musical talent. This is an outstanding CD, and I have listened to it at least 50 times already. It is rare to find any music album of any genre where every track is exceptional, but this one does it!

Your album is a great conversation piece and a way for me to introduce people to FFRF. I play your music on my home theater system when I have friends over. The first group of people to visit asked, "Is that Liberace I hear on the piano?" To which I replied, "No, it's the great Dan Barker!" and I show them the CD case with your picture and introduce them to the FFRF website.

Also, I want to commend you for the excellent "Freedom From Religion Foundation: 2011 Year in Review" YouTube video. Watching it made me feel honored and proud to be a Life Member.

Wishing a happy Solstice Season and New Year to the entire FFRF team. I love you all.

Sean Wilks
Washington

Editor's note: View the Year in Review video at youtube.com/watch?v=q6Y3AmsgTQvA or search for "Freedom from Religion Foundation: 2011 Year in Review" at youtube.com. For a PDF review, go to ffrf.org/about/



year-in-review/.

Robert Burns tribute much appreciated

Thank you, Annie Laurie and Dan, for a lovely year-end podcast. Being Scottish and away from home for a while, it was so nice to have that tribute to Robert Burns.

Burns is not often recognized in the freethought-humanist movement. I once wrote a humanist booklet for schools in which I included many of his writings.

June Maxwell
Island of Jersey

Design scheme was not so intelligent

Let's see now (and please bear with me here). At last count, our universe contains about 100 billion galaxies, each with 100 billion stars, more or less. If you do the math, there are roughly 10,000,000,000,000,000,000 (that's 22 zeroes!) stars in the universe. Of course, not all of these stars have habitable planets in orbit around them, but we know that many stars do support solar systems like ours. The current estimate of earth-like planets in our average-sized Milky Way galaxy alone is at least 50 million.

We also know of at least one planet that does (currently) support life. Some would have us believe that it is the only one, a special place created just for us. If it is, then I'd have to say that having to create 5,000,000,000,000,000,000 (or so) habitable planets in the universe just to get the right one for us seems a little inefficient (dare I say inept?) on the part of the "designer." As Mark Twain observed, that would be like building the Eiffel Tower for the sole purpose of supporting a thin layer of paint (us) at the top.

Now let's take a closer look at our fragile little planet Earth and the life it supports. We know from DNA analysis and a rigorous examination of the fossil record that the number of plant and animal species alive today represents only about 10% of the total number of species that have ever inhabited Earth. With approximately 2 million (or more) multi-cellular species alive today, including the one that supposedly was "made in the image of," this means that at least 18 million species of plants and animals of obviously inferior "design" (or they might still be with us) have had to pack their bags and leave the planet forever, "Jurassic Park" notwithstanding.

Now I am aware of the old adage that says "practice makes perfect," but wasn't the "designer" supposed to be perfect in the first place (I'm sure I heard that somewhere)? Seems like an awful lot of wasted time, energy and DNA to me. Unless, of course, Darwin

was onto something. Oh well, I'll think about that tomorrow. Maybe.

Howard Horton Jr.
North Carolina

AA, not religion, my higher power

I am an FFRF member and have been an active member of Alcoholics Anonymous for many years. I feel I am alive and well because of the understanding and direction shown to me by the men and women in AA. I didn't have to believe in any god, sign any pledge or pay any money. I was desperate enough to give it a try and it worked.

A letter writer [Dec 11] stated that admitting being powerless over alcohol "beats down the sufferer." But it doesn't. I recognize the reality of my problem. Whatever alcoholism is, I've got it. I cannot safely take that first drink and proved that to myself thousands of times.

If there is an organization less cult-like than AA, I don't know about it. There is no leader or overarching organization. There are literally no rules, only "Traditions" members are asked to follow. If they do not follow them, there is no retribution. Even the core of the AA program, the 12 steps, are suggestions, not orders. Members are expected to be part of the world, to enjoy life, not turn their backs on family and friends as cults demand.

I felt I needed help because I had failed on my own to stay sober. AA became my higher power. So began a 39-year journey of an atheist in AA. I stay sober by continually looking at myself, where I should try to improve, making amends to those I have hurt and helping others. If this is Jonestown stuff, pass the Kool-Aid.

AA is a self-help group, not a religion. AA doesn't keep statistics on who comes, goes or stays. A success rate isn't part of its thinking. Many are forced to attend AA meetings by courts, their families or employers. AA does not endorse this practice, but there are no rules on who can attend. Some forced individuals will stay and find help. Most will drift away quickly after the pressure is off.

FFRF and AA are both trying to free men and women from a type of bondage, be it fables or alcohol or drugs. FFRF does not need to endorse AA nor does AA want any endorsement.

John Finnegan
Ohio

P.S. An AA tradition is remaining anonymous at the media level so that no one is deemed a spokesperson, which I am not. If you must use full names, you have my permission.

Thoughts on Pinker research on violence

Steven Pinker's excellent research ["Rationality Reduces Violence," Dec11] on the evolution of violence over the ages clarifies the relationship between rationality and violence and is much needed in today's ongoing debate with religion. However, while I agree with most of his conclusions, there are two which I have difficulty with and would like to offer my views in the spirit of collaboration.

The first concerns the proposition that Judaism was founded "in large part" on the rejection of human sacrifice, while the second regards the evidence that atheism was implicated in more deaths than religion. While I

Continued on next page

Meet a Member



A woman (left) lectures Debbie Allen (center) at a Christian rally for the Mount Soledad cross. Debbie, counterpicketing a January 2011 rally, featuring prayers, songs of praise, politicians and preachers, reacting to the 9th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals ruling that the cross was indeed a religious symbol, and must be removed from public property.

Name: Debbie Allen.

Where I live: Downtown San Diego. More specifically, on the 27th floor of a high-rise with a view of the ocean to the west, mountains to the east and Mexico to the south. I feel like I live in a treehouse with a bird's eye view of the jungle!

Where and when I was born: San Diego, 1956. On my mother's side, my great-great grandfather moved here in 1902 to work at the lighthouse on Point Loma. On my father's side, my great-grandparents moved from Boone, Iowa, to start a business.

Family: I'm married to a loving and patient man who enthusiastically (and financially) supports my volunteer work in the freethought movement. I never had children of my own, but have several wonderful nieces and nephews whom I love to pamper.

Education: Humboldt State University, B.A.; UC-Santa Barbara, educational psychology M.A.; doctoral work (all but dissertation) in clinical psychology at the California School of Professional Psychology. I also studied abroad one year in Macedonia when it was part of Yugoslavia. This was a life-altering opportunity to broaden my knowledge of another culture, society and political system.

Occupation: Psychotherapist and clinical researcher in neuropsychology, now retired.

Military service: None, but I finally established the first-ever meeting of humanists on a military base in San Diego. We met Jan. 13 at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar.

How I got where I am today: I've always been the kind of person who wants to be involved — in student government, music groups, volunteering for causes and organizations. I've also been relatively progressive and concerned about civil rights and human rights.

I converted to Reform Judaism, as an atheist, in my 30s. This was inspired by a desire to be part of a community actively working for social justice. I served two terms on the board of directors of my synagogue. While becoming more involved in leadership positions in the Jewish community, I was also becoming acquainted with various atheist, humanist and secular organizations and joined them all. I've been director of the San Diego Coalition of Reason since 2009 and also head two other local chapters of national humanist

groups.

Where I'm headed: I'd like to be hired as executive director of a U.S. freethought organization.

Person in history I admire: Susan B. Anthony for her devotion to several causes that have, in every instance, advanced civilization and changed millions of lives for the better.

A quotation I like: I have two. "Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputation and social standing, never can bring about a reform. Those who are really in earnest must be willing to be anything or nothing in the world's estimation, and publicly and privately, in season and out, avow their sympathy with despised and persecuted ideas and their advocates, and bear the consequences." (Susan B. Anthony)

"With all due respect, then, to the metaphysicians and religious idealists, philosophers, politicians, or poets: The idea of God implies the abdication of human reason and justice; it is the most decisive negation of human liberty, and necessarily ends in the enslavement of mankind, both in theory and practice." (Michael Bakunin)

These are a few of my favorite things: The beach, reading, dancing, the Beatles, Motown, R&B, films, my iPad.

These are not: People who promise to do something, then disappear.

My doubts about religion started: Early in elementary school. I remember lying in bed wondering, "If god created the world, who created god?" By the time I was in eighth grade, I was a self-identified atheist.

Why I'm a freethinker: Because I love to learn about the world by applying reason, logic and the scientific method. I am determined that "Truth" should not be determined by authority, tradition or other dogmas.

Ways I promote freethought: Through my leadership positions in secular groups mentioned above. I'm a certified humanist chaplain, organizer of the Recovering From Religion meetup, atheist blogger and leader of a task force to create a San Diego freethought/humanist center.

I never pass up an opportunity to fight for civil rights and scientific literacy. I'm also a passionate atheist who thinks that nonbelievers must become more influential in every aspect of our culture and society.



Ready for fire flames

FFRF members and firefighters Ron and Ryan Hettinger, Madison, Wis., pictured during a recent visit to FFRF's offices.



Truth be told

Jason Thomas, Georgia, writes that it looks like this Savannah church has not seen a lot of use lately. Would that make it useless as well as meaningless?

Letterbox

Continued from previous page

agree that Judaism has been the least violent of the Abrahamic religions, nevertheless you don't see this in one very important aspect of its scripture, the story of Abraham and Isaac.

Abraham, the father of Judaism, showed little reluctance to follow the command of Yahweh that he sacrifice his son. It was Yahweh, not Abraham, who stopped the sacrifice. If Judaism was founded on a principle of nonsacrifice of humans why is this key biblical story of the willingness of the founder of the religion to kill his children for god's sake still revered and taught to young people?

The message to children is that the religion and god of your parents are more important than even your lives, and that you had better keep this faith or else! An implicit threat of violence based on sacrifice has been and is still being used to convey the dire consequences to children of not following the parents' faith.

Regarding the comparison of deaths due to atheism and religion, I think that the numbers that Pinker cites [based on Matthew White's *Great Big Book of Horrible Things*] are based on an unfair comparison. This holds atheism as responsible for all the killings done by atheists but does not hold religion responsible for all the killings done by god-believing leaders.

The latter number cited by Pinker (48 million) is only that fraction specifically killed in the name of religion or for heresy, which is a small proportion of the total killed by all believing leaders. If one is going to hold atheism responsible for all the acts of atheists, one must also hold religion responsible for all the acts of believers. Virtually all leaders of the past 3,000 years have

been believers in god. The total number of killings caused by them totals about 1 billion [1,2] or about 20 times the number used by White and Pinker.

One believer, Genghis Khan, in fact, murdered some 40 million [3]. Since these killings occurred over vastly different time frames, eras and technologies, they cannot be rigorously compared. Yet the proposition by religious apologists such as D'Souza [4], Warren [5] and Donohue [6] that religious deaths constitute a miniscule proportion of those caused by atheist dictators is a falsehood being used to vilify atheism and nonbelievers.

It is a desperate attempt by guilty religionists to smear us because we are the only group on the planet that dares to oppose the tyrannical rule of religion and refuses to grovel before their "royalty" and "king."

Eric A. Stone
New York

[1] The Luxury of Protest. Everyone ever in the world. 2011; behance.net/gallery/Everyone-Ever-in-the-World/591921

[2] Quentin, Blog at Wordpress. Deaths Over History: Religious and Non-Religious. 2011; bookrate.wordpress.com/2006/07/22/deaths-over-history-religious-vs-nonreligious/

[3] Wikipedia. Genghis Khan. 2011; en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genghis_Khan

[4] Stone EA. Anti-atheism hate blog of Dinesh D'Souza being spread high school students. 2011; atheistnexus.org/forum/topics/anti-atheist-hate-blog-being-spread-to-schools-by-dinesh-d-souza

[5] The Friendly Atheist. Rick Warren Explains the New Atheism. 2009; patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2009/04/12/rick-warren...

[6] Atheist Oasis — A Rational Refuge. Bill Donohue — Atheists must apologize for Hitler. 2011; atheistoasis.wordpress.com/



Hello, Rhode Island freethinkers!

Members of FFRF and the Humanists of Rhode Island gathered Jan. 15 in front of FFRF's first billboard of 2012, and its first caveat on election-year theopolitics. FFRF has placed more than 700 billboards in 34 states since late 2007. This was its first billboard in Rhode Island. The 14x48-foot billboard is highly visible off Interstate 295 at Route 2 in Warwick. It will stay up until March. The photo shoot was arranged by FFRF member Steve Ahlquist (uncle of teen state-church litigant Jessica Ahlquist) and FFRF member Debbie Flitman, who scouted the billboard site). Steve is kneeling, front row, in suit and tie, and Debbie is beside him with Gus the dog. A smiling Jessica Ahlquist is in the second row, third from right. The photo was taken only days after Jessica's Jan. 11 resounding federal court victory ordering her high school to remove a prayer banner (see front page story).

Debbie Weisman Claise (standing, wearing a scarf at far right in the second row) was the student plaintiff in the historic 1992 *Lee v. Weisman* Supreme Court 5-4 decision, which ruled that prayers at public school graduations are unconstitutional. Debbie and her parents, Daniel and Vivian, and her sister Merith, the original complainant, were honored as Freethinkers of the Year at FFRF's 1992 convention in San Antonio, Texas.

FFRF co-ed day care



Dexter Markert (left) and Clara Douglas visited the FFRF office on the same day. Dexter, 3 months, is the son of Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert and Michael Markert. Clara, 5 months, is the daughter of Office Manager Jackie Douglas and Matt Douglas.

It's the hammer of justice



Joe Chavez (right) and "Black Jesus" pose after putting up FFRF's Winter Solstice banner Dec. 23 at the Gladwin County Courthouse in Gladwin, Mich. Joe said the hammer came in handy to install the posts and as a photo prop. "I thought it would be symbolic (Jesus nailed to a cross) and also for Thor's hammer. Oddly, no Christians were around to stone us as per their instruction manual (aka the bible)."

FFRF has been sending nativity scene complaint letters to the Gladwin County Board for more than a year. The decision to include the freethought banner was a direct result of a Dec. 6 ultimatum by FFRF Staff Attorney Stephanie Schmitt, who advised the county to either remove the unconstitutional Christian display or open the grounds as an open forum to other holiday displays, including secular ones.

Educating Indiana



FFRF member Greg Stuart stands in front of one of three FFRF billboards put up in December in Brookville, Ind. The billboards say "Reason's Greetings from the Freedom From Religion Foundation" and "Imagine No Religion." FFRF sent several legal letters of complaint in 2010 about a nativity scene at the Franklin County Courthouse in Brookville. The town owns a large nativity display and set it up in the middle of the lawn with a flagpole in the center. An angel and star affixed to the pole appeared to be sprouting from the manger scene. The display was illuminated at night with no other decorations nearby. FFRF found the juxtaposition of the flagpole with a Christian manger scene particularly disturbing, saying that it appeared to tie patriotism to Christian beliefs. Franklin County made some nominal moves last Christmas (photo above) to better comply with Supreme Court rulings, moving reindeer closer to the crèche and moving the display away from the flagpole.



FFRF brings new Arizona prayer challenge

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, its Valley of the Sun chapter and several FFRF members and Maricopa County citizens brought suit Jan. 4 against Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer, challenging her annual Arizona Day of Prayer.

The new lawsuit focuses on two protections in the Arizona Constitution. Article II, Section 12, provides: "No public money or property shall be appropriated for or applied to any religious worship, exercise, or instruction, or to the support of any religious establishment."

Article XX, Section 1, provides: "Perfect toleration of religious sentiment shall be secured to every inhabitant of this state, and no inhabitant of

this state shall ever be molested in person or property on account of his or her mode of religious worship, or lack of the same."

FFRF Co-President Dan Barker said that all citizens, not just nonbelievers, have an interest in protecting their rights of conscience. "This suit was brought by Arizonans who identify as atheists, Christians, Muslims and Buddhists."

Brewer issued an Arizona Day of Prayer proclamation each of the last three years. The legal complaint says, "These days of prayer coincided with the Christian-based National Day of Prayer proclaimed by President Barack Obama, and as promoted by the National Day of Prayer Task Force, a

private evangelical Christian organization."

Brewer also issued a Day of Prayer for Arizona's Economy and State Budget in 2010 encouraging "all citizens to pray for God's blessings on our State and our Nation."

"Exhortations to pray in official gubernatorial proclamations, directed at all the citizens of the State of Arizona, including these plaintiffs, promote and endorse religion, thus advancing religion in violation of the Arizona Constitution," FFRF asserted in its legal complaint.

The suit asks the court to declare the prayer proclamations unconstitutional and to issue an injunction against future ones.

FFRF's federal suit against Brewer's prayer proclamation was dismissed on Dec. 9, 2011, when District Judge Roslyn Silver ruled that the plaintiffs did not have standing to bring the Establishment Clause challenge. The order did not address the merits of the case or state constitutional claims.

FFRF criticized the ruling and vowed to continue to challenge this violation of the constitutional rights of its nearly 500 Arizona members.

"We warmly thank our diverse plaintiffs and Arizona Attorneys Richard Morris and Marc Victor who are taking this lawsuit on FFRF's behalf pro bono," said Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president.

FFRF sues Michigan city over banner denial

On behalf of a Michigan member, FFRF filed a federal lawsuit Dec. 22, charging Mayor James Fouts of Warren with government censorship of its non-religious views and unlawful endorsement of religion.

FFRF sought to enjoin the mayor from continuing to establish religion "by allowing public displays of only religious symbols" and to order him to allow placement of FFRF's Winter Solstice display.

FFRF v. City of Warren was filed in the Eastern District of Michigan, Southern Division, by the firm of Butzel Long in Bloomfield Hills, which is representing FFRF and its member plaintiff pro bono. FFRF alleges censorship, estab-

lishment of Christianity and denial of equal protection under the law by the city of Warren.

The mayor had responded Dec. 21 to a demand letter sent by attorney Danielle Hessel with a letter that called FFRF's sign "highly offensive." Fouts, amusingly, compared FFRF's request to place its sign saying "There are no gods" to putting up a "sandwich board saying that there is no Santa Claus." Fouts stated, "I cannot and will not sanction the desecration of religion in the Warren City Hall atrium."

The complaint summarizes the chronology of the mayor's endorsement of religion and censorship of the views of FFRF and its member Douglas

Marshall of Warren, a named plaintiff. FFRF protested the nativity display in the atrium more than a year ago, eventually receiving a response on Dec. 8, 2010, in which Fouts wrote that "all religions are welcome to celebrate their religious seasons with a display in City Hall." Marshall tried in vain repeatedly to obtain permission to place the FFRF sign there.

The complaint called Fouts' denial of a permit to Marshall "an unconstitutional, content-based restriction on plaintiffs' expression in a traditional public forum." The mayor's preference for the nativity display, and discriminatory practice against the plaintiffs also denies them equal protection under

the law.

FFRF asks the court to find that the city has violated the rights of FFRF and its member, and to award nominal damages and reasonable attorney's fees.

Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president, commented, "The mayor appears to operate under the mistaken belief that he's a mini-pope or religious grand pooh-bah who may use his secular office to bless or veto religious expression. Using government power to promote religion and hinder criticism of religion is tyrannical, and is precisely what our secular Constitution prohibits."

FFRF welcomes 31 'Lifers,' 4 'After-Lifers'

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is delighted and grateful to announce many new and end-of-the-year Lifetime and After-Life Memberships.

Generous After-Lifers, who contributed \$5,000 designated as a membership or renewal so their donation "may live after," include:

Philip Appleman, Marjorie Appleman, William Davis and Paul Fishkin.

The 31 new Lifetime Members, who kindly donated \$1,000 each designated as a membership or renewal, include:

Richard Boardman, Sally Bradford, Virgil Buss Jr., David Carroll, Ian Chart, Gerald (Jerry) C. Cummings, Geoffrey Dietz, William Fagan, Andrew Filipowski, Michael Grabe, Ryan Grisso, The Yip Harburg Foundation, Wayne Ha-

thaway, Julie Iddon, William Kohn, Edward H. Kolner, Russell La Claire, Sandra Laurenson, Ron Locatelli, Linda Mahan, Shyama Mandal, Marla Shane McCain, Jake Pittman (gift from his mother, Donna Pittman), Ross Rubenstein, Ethan Ruby, Richard Sandler, Matthew Stark, Richard Thomas, Sharon Thompson, Jeremiah Walker and A. James Watt.

States represented are: Arizona, California, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin.

All dues and donations to FFRF, an educational 501(c)(3) charity, are deductible for income-tax purposes.



Meet up with FFRF in D.C.!

You're invited to attend an FFRF Dinner Party preceding the Reason Rally at the elegant Phoenix Park Hotel at 6 p.m. Friday, March 24. A \$55 banquet dinner can be ordered via FFRF, taking place at the pretty Irish-run hotel. See the registration form on inside back wrap or sign up online at ffrf.org/outreach/reasonrally.

The dinner party will be hosted by Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, with Dan entertaining at the piano with a new "Reason" song and freethought favorites.

D.C. accommodations

Both the Phoenix Park Hotel and the Washington Court Hotel by Union Station, one block from the U.S. Capitol (and around the corner from each other), are holding a modest number of rooms for FFRF members. Both hotels are offering \$139 plus tax for Friday night, March 23, and Saturday

night, March 24. Ask for "FFRF."

To contact the Phoenix Park Hotel, 520 N. Capitol St. NW, phone 800-824-5419 or make reservations at 202-638-6900. It's holding rooms through at least Thursday, Feb. 23, for FFRF. Or register online with the hotel using the code 16515.

To reserve rooms at the Washington Court Hotel, 525 New Jersey Ave. NW, phone 800-321-3010 or 202-628-2100 and mention "FFRF." The cutoff, for now, is Monday, Feb. 27.

FFRF will have a table on the Mall and Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor will speak at the rally.

If you would like to march to the National Mall on Saturday, March 25, with an FFRF contingent, plan to meet Dan and Annie Laurie in the lobby of the Phoenix Park Hotel at 9 a.m.

Please check back periodically for updates and any new announcements at:

ffrf.org/outreach/reasonrally

Mark Your Calendar!

**35th Annual FFRF Convention
Weekend of October 12-13, 2012**

Portland, Oregon

*Hilton Portland & Executive Tower
921 SW Sixth Avenue*