

# Freethought Today

Vol. 32 No. 10

Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

December 2015

## FFRF sues to stop New Jersey church grants

The Freedom From Religion Foundation and its member David Steketee filed a lawsuit Nov. 30 in New Jersey state court suing the Morris County Board of Chosen Freeholders and other officials. The suit challenges public grants of tax dollars to churches to repair or maintain places of worship.

Steketee, a taxpayer in Morris County, is contesting grants to churches by the board's Historic Preservation Trust Fund. Since 2012, the board has awarded more than 55% of its total Trust Fund assets to churches — more than \$5.5 million. It's believed that 2014 and 2015 grants haven't yet been fully disbursed.

FFRF and Steketee are specifically challenging:

- Allotments to the Presbyterian Church in Morristown, which has been allocated more than \$1.04 million in public funds since 2012. The church's 2013 construction grant application specifically notes that funding would allow "continued use by our congregation for worship services."

- Allotments to the St. Peter's Episcopal Church. Its 2014 grant application states that a distribution from the fund would ensure continued safe public access to the church for worship, [and] periods of solitude and meditation during the week."

The board didn't respond to FFRF's February 2015 complaint letter about the grants. Steketee testified June 24 before the board and again on July 8 asking it to follow the federal and state constitutions and discontinue the

grants. Freeholder Hank Lyon has also objected to the practice.

The grants violate plaintiffs' rights under Article I, Paragraph 3 of the New Jersey Constitution, guaranteeing: "nor shall any person be obliged to pay tithes, taxes, or other rates for building or repairing any church or churches, place or places of worship, or for the maintenance of any minister or ministry, contrary to what he believes to be right."

These grants deprive Steketee of his constitutional rights, also in violation of the New Jersey Civil Rights Act, N.J.S.A. 10:6-2(c).

"Although preserving historic Morris County buildings is an appropriate use of taxpayer funds, the New Jersey Constitution must trump any other considerations regarding the distribution of public funds to churches, places of worship, or ministries," FFRF's legal complaint alleges.

The plaintiffs seek a declaration from the Superior Court of New Jersey, chancery division of Morris County, that grants of taxpayer funds to churches, places of worship and ministries disbursed within the past two years violate the New Jersey Constitution. They seek a preliminary injunction, later to be made permanent, requiring the defendants to rescind the challenged grants and enjoin them from offering such grants to churches in the future. Nominal and actual damages are sought for Steketee, and the plaintiffs seek attorneys' fees.

"It was an axiom when our secular



Andrew Seidel photo

### Reason's greetings

**FFRF staffers make merry at Freethought Hall with the new Bill of Rights "nativity" featuring the nation's founders. It will be displayed along with a solstice banner in Franklin County, Ind., to counter a crèche that had stood alone on public property in December for 50 years. The Bill of Rights was "born" (ratified) Dec. 15, 1791. See page 6 for more FFRF solstice activism.**

republic was founded that no citizen 'shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever,' to use the historic words of Thomas Jefferson," noted FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "Tax dollars should not be subsidizing religious worship. That's what many immigrants to this land came here to escape."

The lawsuit is being handled by attorney Paul S. Grosswald. FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew L. Seidel and Diane Uhl Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne are co-counsel.

FFRF also thanks its former Legal Fellow Katherine Paige for her work on the case.

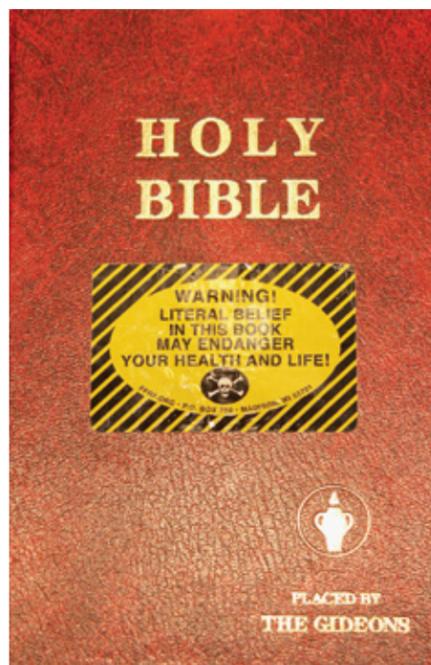
## FFRF requests 'bible-free' hotel rooms

An invasive species is defined as "not native to a specific location and which has a tendency to spread to a degree which causes damage in some respect upon exposure." You could say that sounds a lot like Gideon bibles in a bedstand drawer.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation thinks so, and is making a major consumer request to the hospitality industry, asking it to be more hospitable to non-Christian and nonreligious clientele by offering "bible-free" rooms.

Gideons International is "exploiting hotels and motels to proselytize a captive audience," FFRF has informed the American Hotel and Motel Association.

In early December, FFRF sent a letter to a number of companies, including Wyndham Worldwide, Intercontinental Hotel Groups (Holiday Inn), Choice Hotels International (Quality Inn), Hilton Worldwide, G6 Hospitality (Motel 6), Marriott International, Best Western, Carlson Rezidor Hotel



FFRF has bible warning stickers at [ffrf.org/shop](http://ffrf.org/shop).

Group (Radisson, Carlson, Country Inn) and Starwood Hotels and Resorts (Sheraton).

All told, the 15 companies contacted are responsible for more than 33,000 hotels in the U.S. and more than 4.1 million rooms internationally.

"Those who must read the bible every day will surely take precautions to travel with their own copies. The rest of us deserve a break from mindless evangelizing when we are on vacation," wrote Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor on behalf of FFRF's 23,000 nonreligious members.

"Many of your guests are freethinkers — atheists, agnostics, skeptics or 'nones' — who are deeply offended to be charged high fees only to be proselytized in the privacy of their own bedrooms. Not only that, the bible calls for killing nonbelievers, apostates, gays, 'stubborn sons' and women who transgress biblical double standards," FFRF

*Continued on page 21*

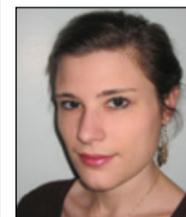
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## Meet an FFRF staffer



Annie Laurie Gaylor photo

Lisa Treu's smiling face greets visitors in the Freethought Hall lobby.

**Name:** Lisa Miller Treu.

**When and where I was born:** Plymouth, Wis., June 24, 1964.

**Education:** Random Lake High School, 1982; Trans-American Broadcasting School (now the Madison Media Institute), 1982-83.

**Family:** Husband Harry and twin

daughters Karinthia and Katrina, 18.

**My work background:** I started on-the-air broadcasting in 1983 at WRKR-FM in Racine. In 1986 I moved to Madison, where I was on the air at WIBA-FM for 15 years on and off. I also started a woodworking manufacturing company called Northwoods Mfg. Inc. with my

## FFRF welcomes 16 Lifetime Members

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is delighted to report 16 new Lifetime Members. They are:

Donald D. Edds, Timothy J. Gullicksen, Raymond A. Hellkamp, Katy Kaufman, Dr. David J. Lasalvia, Steven Molenaar, Mark Monninger, Kent Nelson, Paul Reilly, Douglas Ross, Bill Schneider, Greg Stuart, Carolyn Stuart, Robert E. Tucker, Paul Uebelher and Frank Wojcik.

States represented are California, Florida, Iowa, Indiana, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylva-

nia, Washington and Wisconsin.

Individual Lifetime Memberships are \$1,000 designated for membership or membership renewal, mean never another renewal notice and go into "rainy day" reserves. Dues and donations are deductible for income-tax purposes. "Lifers" receive a Lifetime FFRF lapel pin and Lifetime Membership card.

Warmest thanks to Frank, Paul, Robert, Carolyn and Greg, Bill, Douglas, Paul, Kent, Mark, David, Katy, Steven, Raymond, Timothy and Donald!

## Announcing a new 'Immortal'

FFRF's newest "Immortal" is long-time member Will Hunn.

"Immortals" is a slightly tongue-in-cheek category designating those who have made provisions for FFRF in their estate planning and have given permission to announce such plans.

Members were mailed an updated

FFRF bequest brochure in early fall. If you would like a copy or more information about estate planning, contact Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president, or Lisa Strand, director of operations, at (608)256-8900 or [info@ffrf.org](mailto:info@ffrf.org).

"FFRF Forever!"

husband. The customer base included Home Depot, Eddie Bauer and Blain's Farm and Fleet.

We closed the doors to Northwoods in 2000, when I went back to WIBA. I also did print, voice-over and television ads in the Madison area with companies such as Lands' End, Hilldale Shopping Center, East Towne and West Towne Malls, Fox's Jewelers, Rocky Rocco, American Family Insurance and more.

**How I came to work for FFRF:** I met Dan and Annie Laurie in 2009 as the Director of First Impressions for iHeartMedia in Madison, where they record their weekly radio show, and we became fast friends! It was such a joy to see them each week, and they always stopped to visit with me. Then Dan included me in his book *Life Driven Purpose* and gave me an autographed copy. After reading it, I knew that my life had a new purpose and that was to be more involved with FFRF.

**What I do here:** Director of First Impressions and whatever I can do to help the Foundation get the message out.

**What I like best about it:** All the knowledge that I've gained and all the people that I work with.

**What gets old:** What I call the "Bubba calls." They usually start with "Can I ask y'all somethin'?" and end with

them telling me that I am going to hell.

**I spend a lot of time thinking about:** The world that I brought my daughters into and what they have to face in the future.

**I spend little if any time thinking about:** What's on TV.

**My religious upbringing was:** Catholic.

**My doubts about religion started:** In first grade when Sister Andrienne yelled at me in front of the whole class for turning around in church. I told her that the little boy sitting behind me was pulling my hair. She said that was no excuse, that Jesus suffered for our sins and to be respectful of the altar in the front of the church. The little boy was *not* punished. It was my first taste of religious hypocrisy.

**Things I like:** Music (most of all), books and caring for my cats, Jasmin and Shadow, who also answer to Jazz, Shads or Tuna!

**Things I smite:** The Beltline Highway and drivers who cut you off or don't wait their turn to merge into traffic.

**In my golden years:** I hope to share my days with my husband and daughters, gardening, reading and staying healthy.

**I wish you had asked:** Who are the people that inspire me? My husband, my daughters, John Lennon, Peter Gabriel, Yoko Ono, Annie Laurie and Dan.



## Above us lullaby

Cosima Skye Hensley was born Nov. 5 to FFRF Kentucky Co-Organizers Mikel and Ed Hensley. She weighed a healthy 8 pounds, 4 ounces and measured 20 inches. Cosima is the Italian feminine for Cosmos, writes Ed, and Skye is a reference to the sky and the Scottish island of Skye. Mikel and Ed are fans of both the Carl Sagan and Neil DeGrasse Tyson "Cosmos" TV series. Parents and child are doing well.

### Freethought Today

published by Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.  
[info@ffrf.org](mailto:info@ffrf.org) • [FFRF.org](http://FFRF.org)

P.O. Box 750 • Madison WI 53701  
(608)256-8900 • FAX (608)204-0422

Editor: Bill Dunn, [fttoday@ffrf.org](mailto:fttoday@ffrf.org)

Assistant Editor: PJ Slinger

Production Editor: Jake Swenson

Executive Editor: Annie Laurie Gaylor

Contributors:

Philip Appleman, Holly Baer, Dan Barker, Casira Copes, Tim Earl, Emma Follmer, George Gold, James Lambert, Taslima Nasrin, Benjamin Oyakawa, Sara Schwabe, Lauryn Seering, Andrew Seidel, Paul Soglin, Julia Upchurch, Barbara G. Walker, Erika Walsh, Maddy Ziegler  
December 2015 | *The only freethought newspaper in the United States*

### A Note to Members

Your address label shows the expiration date of your membership in FFRF, which includes your subscription to Freethought Today and "Private Line." If it says December or earlier please renew! Your prompt renewal (\$40-single membership; \$50-household; \$100 gung-ho; \$250-sustaining) saves us time and postage, and is tax-deductible. Freethought Today is published 10 times a year, with combined issues in January/February and June/July.

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# FFRF's request to remove religious displays from Mississippi park upsets residents



The public park in Collins, Miss., contains numerous religious displays, including a globe reading "City of Collins" above a picture of Jesus and a bible verse, a statue of Jesus carrying a cross and a light-up display of Jesus preparing to walk on water.

Singing hymns and chanting, hundreds of residents of a small Mississippi town gathered on the street before a council meeting in early November to defend the city's pervasive religious park decorations. FFRF sent a complaint letter Oct. 19 about the unconstitutional displays.

"Before Tuesday night's board of aldermen meeting, downtown Collins quickly began to feel like a church," said television reporter Candace Coleman of WHLT in Hattiesburg in a Nov.

4 story. "Hundreds of people crowded the street to speak out against a complaint the city received from the Freedom from Religion Foundation."

Bettie D. Robertson Memorial Park is filled with life-size or larger religious displays. Included are three large Latin crosses, a statue of Jesus carrying a cross next to a lighted New Testament verse, a large globe with the "City of Collins" on a banner above a picture of Jesus, a display depicting Jesus walking on water suspended above the lake, a

mural cut-out of Jesus hanging from a tree, a small chapel with a cross atop it (with angels next to it) and a nativity scene.

The displays, many of which are lighted, are up all year. The nativity scene is unveiled in December. The sheer number of religious displays in the park is the most FFRF has ever encountered in one case.

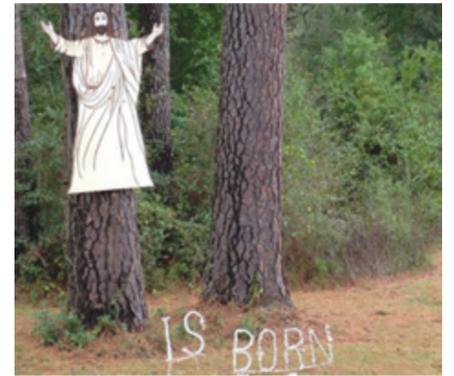
FFRF Staff Attorney Elizabeth Cavell sent the city (pop. 2,500) a letter on behalf of a local complainant: "Citizens of all faiths and no faith have an equal right to use city parks without being surrounded by symbols promoting any one religion. A city cannot have a 'Christian' park."

Dozens of Collins residents spoke at the city meeting in favor of keeping the displays up, apparently not realizing that the Constitution's Establishment Clause is not based on majority rule.

One woman told WHLT that non-Christians should more or less just ignore the decorations. "All they have to do is go through the park, not notice those figures and say, 'Well, that's a silly old man standing in water or a man carrying a cross on his shoulder,'" said Dot Donovan of Collins.

Another Collins resident said the city welcomes everyone, except apparently those who are offended by religious displays. "Everybody is welcome here," said Vickie Mooney. "We love everybody, but if you are offended by the way that we do things, then you can just leave."

FFRF is awaiting word from the city on what it plans to do about the displays. Collins Mayor V.O. Smith said he has no plans to take them down but said he's speaking with attorneys in case FFRF would pursue a lawsuit. Stay tuned.



A cut-out of Jesus is nailed to a tree with the words "is born" in a lighted display beneath.

## Study shows public becoming less religious

The numbers seem to be moving in the right direction for nonbelievers.

A survey recently found that the number of U.S. adults who believe in God, pray daily, or regularly go to church all have declined in the past several years.

The Pew Research Center surveyed more than 35,000 people in its 2014 Religious Landscape Study, a follow-up to a similar one done in 2007.

According to the study, the decrease in religious beliefs is due in large part to the increase in "nones," those who say they do not belong to any organized religion. The biggest jump among the "nones" was among those in the millennial generation, which is roughly described as those who were born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s.

The percentage of U.S. adults who say they believe in God dropped from

92 in 2007 to 89 in 2014. And those who responded that they are "absolutely certain" God exists dropped from 71% to 63% over the course of the two studies.

The religiously unaffiliated ("nones," not to be confused with "nuns"!) now make up 23% of the adult population, up significantly from the 16% in 2007. One-third of the "nones" say they do not believe in God, which is up 11 percentage points since 2007.

While the "nones" have grown since the last study, they have also become less religious. The share of "nones" who say religion is "very important" to them has fallen 3%, and those who say religion is "somewhat" important has fallen 4%.

Nearly two-thirds of the "nones" rated religion as "not too important" or "not at all important," which is up from 57% in the 2007 study.

## Study: Kids from nonreligious families more altruistic

In what amounts to good news for secular parents and nonbelievers, children who grow up in nonreligious environments appear to be more generous than those who are raised with religion, according to a new study.

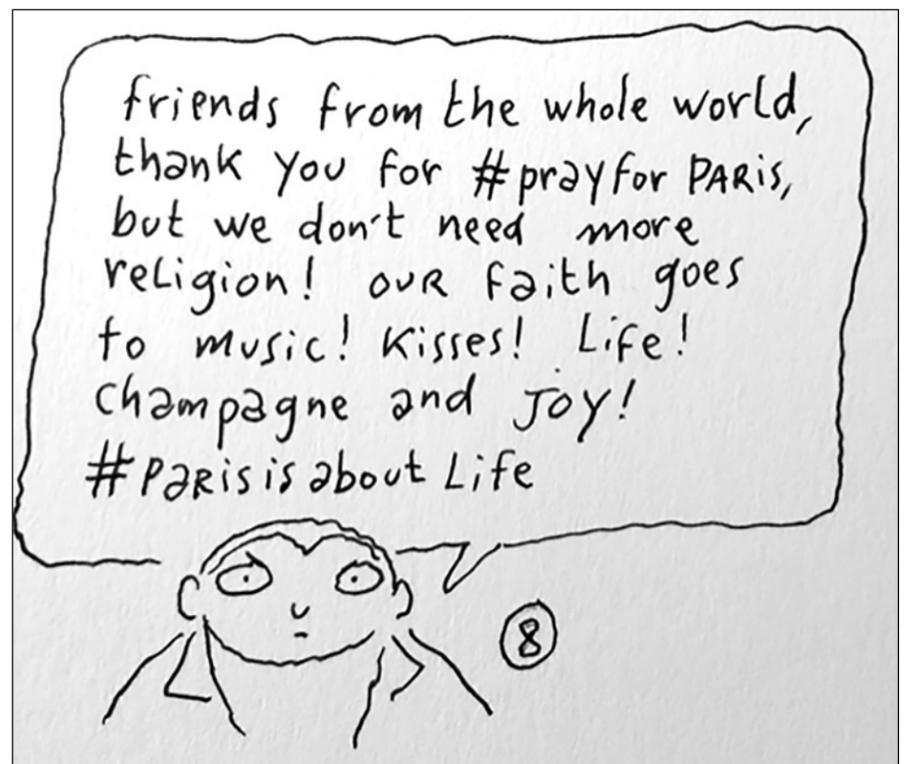
More than half of all Americans think that belief in God is required to be moral, but the results of the study published Nov. 5 in the journal *Current Biology* "contradict the common-sense and popular assumption that children from religious households are more altruistic and kind toward others," the authors wrote.

The study, which surveyed 1,170 children between ages 5 and 12 from several religious backgrounds in the U.S., Canada, Jordan, Turkey, South Africa and China, found that the kids from nonbelieving households were

more likely to share with their classmates and less likely to endorse harsh punishments for those who pushed or bumped into others.

The generosity scores for Christians and Muslims were basically the same, but the scores for the nonreligious children were 23% to 28% higher. It was also found that the more religious (any religion) the family, the less altruistic the child.

An analysis by Phys.org says "the results might be explained in part by 'moral licensing,' a phenomenon in which doing something 'good' — in this case practicing a religion — can leave people less concerned about the consequences of immoral behavior, the researchers say. They also come as a timely reminder that religion and morality are not one and the same."



## City of Light, and life

Joann Sfar, a cartoonist for the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, posted this on Instagram in response to the "Pray for Paris" social media hashtag. Sfar, 44, is the son of Jewish parents. The death toll from the Nov. 13 terrorist attacks in Paris was 130 with more than 350 injured.

## Cross, star to be moved off city property

The La Crescent (Minn.) City Council unanimously voted Nov. 23 to move a cross and star off city property that have been lit every season to celebrate Easter and Christmas, after FFRF contacted them about the constitutional violation.

Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert sent a complaint letter last July after getting a complaint from a La Crescent resident. The Lions Club owned and maintained the display, but it sat on city land.

According to WXOW, the plan approved was to light the display through Jan. 10 and then move it off city property. A yet-to-be-formed private group

will sponsor and maintain the display in the future on private property.

"Most wars are fought over religion and we didn't want to have a war with this situation," La Crescent Mayor Mike Poellinger said. The Lions Club will apparently relinquish control due to association rules prohibiting support of sectarian matters.

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor hailed the city's thoughtful action. "We are very pleased to hear the city of La Crescent will abide by the constitution and divest itself of this unconstitutional endorsement of religion," she said. "It's nice to see reason, and the Constitution, prevailing."

# Heads Up

A Poetry Column by Philip Appleman

## ARISE, TAKE UP THY BED, AND WALK

Mark, 2:9

Motel boozy-woozy you  
hardly hear the jangle or  
the robot voice: time /  
temperature / the brassy command,  
Have a Nice Day—and the old routine  
revs up again: the kegel-  
squeezing rush to the john /  
bleary wash / dry / comb /  
pants / shirt / socks /  
and then,  
bag crammed, jammed, and zipped,  
you tug and curse, and with a piggy grunt,  
roll the mattress up  
and squeeze it under your arm,  
scrunch through the door,  
down the hall, past  
the frog-eyed desk clerk,  
and out to the parking lot, where  
you huff and puff and stuff it all  
into the trunk.  
Sweating behind the wheel  
as the car burps into life,  
you think:

but He made it sound so easy  
in the book.

© Philip Appleman.

From the book *Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie*.



Philip Appleman is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Indiana University. His published volumes of poetry include *Perfidious Prov-erbs 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 newest book is *The Labyrinth: God, Darwin and the Meaning of Life*. 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 "After-Life" Members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Phil's books: [ffrf.org/shop](http://ffrf.org/shop).

## Overheard

Educated people are more likely to see science as being incompatible with religion, while people who are less educated might not see that conflict because they don't understand the terms that science uses, or the claims that religion makes.

**William Poire, Oklahoma state director for American Atheists, saying that a meta-analysis of 63 peer-reviewed studies suggests an inverse correlation between religiosity and intelligence and/or education**

*Tulsa World, 11-2-15*

I didn't want my daughter to choose the Church.

**Actress Leah Remini on leaving the Church of Scientology, which she called an "extremist religion." Remini told ABC's Amy Robach that she did not want her 11-year-old daughter Sofia to have to choose between her family and the Church, a decision she believes that actress Katie Holmes also made for her daughter Suri.**

*Daily Mail, 11-2-15*

For me, spirituality is a sense of connection. When I pray, I'm not praying to God, I'm praying to the people I'm looking at. My prayer is a naturalistic humanist prayer.



**Zachary Moore, who has given three invocations at the beginning of City Council meetings in Keller, Texas, which have all been followed by a Christian prayer because a pastor, who schedules the invocation speakers, says Moore's invocations are not prayers since he is praying to no one. FFRF sent a letter to the council requesting the city adopt a "fully constitutional policy" so that it doesn't appear to favor Christian messages over others.**

*Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 11-4-15*

Although [Ben] Carson is a celebrated physician, he has expressed several opinions that are contrary to scientific evidence and therefore call into question his logic ... His claim that sexual orientation is a choice is remarkably unscientific ... For a physician to ignore the preponderance of scientific proof in favor of his own religious beliefs is dangerous.

**Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, former NBA player**

*The Daily Caller, 11-5-15*

Our government values science and will treat scientists with respect. This is why government scientists and experts will be able to speak freely about their work to the media and the public.

**Navdeep Bains, Canada's new minister of innovation, science and economic development, after years of criticism that Stephen Harper and the former governing Conservatives "muzzled" scientists, barring them from speaking to the media**

*11-6-15, in a statement*

A non-Christian has the right to not be assumed to be celebrating a Christian holiday. Having store greeters say "Happy Holidays" isn't an erasure of Christian culture, it's an acknowledgement that people have the right to hold other religious beliefs. The constant reinforcement of Christianity

as the norm only helps contribute to prejudice and hatred towards other religions.

**College student Sean Connolly**  
*Huntington News (Northeastern University), 11-11-15*

Every time you see us sit in our seats during the Pledge of Allegiance, that we are in fact honoring and respecting our soldiers and those who have fought before them. We are also honoring the not so recognized soldiers like NFL player-turned-soldier Pat Tillman, an atheist who died for this country in the mountains of Afghanistan. We are sitting and showing our respect for every atheist in the foxhole, humanist, and freethinker veteran who served and is currently serving for this great country.  
**Al Holguin, speaking to the Mission Viejo (Calif.) City Council after council member Frank Ury said everyone needed to stand during the pledge because it was the respectful thing to do.**

*11-10-15*

We live in a great nation, where each of us is free to believe as we wish. Government employees, including police, need to remember that their salaries are paid by citizens of multiple faiths — and none — and they can't play favorites. If the use of "In God We Trust" decals was really about patriotism and not honoring a deity, you'd likely see bumper stickers with an earlier national motto, a Latin phrase for unity, translated as "out of many, one." In these divisive times, E Pluribus Unum has a particularly nice ring to it.

**Ken Paulson, dean of the College of Media and Entertainment at Middle Tennessee State University and president of the Newseum Institute's First Amendment Center**

*USA Today, 10-21-15*

As a Jew, I have found solace in prayer privately or in community in my house of worship. There is no place, though, for public prayer led by coaches, school officials or cheerleading squads. And a public school's football field is certainly not the place for a mass baptism for a coach and his players, a ritual a Georgia church performed recently. Those displays show a "majority rules" kind of attitude rather than a respect for all Americans and a respect for the First Amendment's call for government not to establish religion.

**Journalist Linda Wertheimer, open letter to Sen. James Lankford and Rep. J. Randy Forbes, "Why you shouldn't defend a high school coach praying on his football field"**

*The Washington Post, 10-29-15*

Those societies today that are the most religious — where faith in God is strong and religious participation is high — tend to have the highest violent crime rates,



while those societies in which faith and church attendance are the weakest — the most secular societies — tend to have the lowest.

**Phil Zuckerman, professor of sociobiology and secular studies at Pitzer College, Claremont, Calif.**

*Los Angeles Times, 11-2-15*

## FREETHOUGHT OF THE DAY

"I'm much more like the product of a doctor than I am a Jew. I don't believe in [an afterlife]. I believe this is it, and I believe it's the best way to live."

**Natalie Portman**

"The Private Life of Natalie Portman"  
Rolling Stone Magazine (2002)

Freethought of the Day is a daily calendar highlighting birthdates, quotes and historic tidbits. To get on the email list, edit your email settings online (My Membership) or email [info@ffrf.org](mailto:info@ffrf.org) and include your name for verification purposes. The service is limited to FFRF members or Freethought Today subscribers.

# County clerk, sheriff war on reason

FFRF took the Elbert County clerk and sheriff to task in Kiowa, Colo., for constitutional violations. Responding to a public officials' group email about how clerks opposed to same-sex marriage should deal with license issuance, Clerk Dallas Schroeder wrote how he had hung a religious poster where "There is no way to miss it if you are in for a marriage license."



Dallas Schroeder

Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel called out Schroeder in a Nov. 20 letter to members of the email group, which consisted of several county clerks, a state senator and state representative. "According to the email chain, some clerks or employees are uncomfortable issuing marriage licenses to gay couples," Seidel wrote. "Hopefully you all know by now that you must issue licenses to gay couples whatever your personal religion."

Seidel also took issue with the poster bearing a verse from 1 Corinthians. "Mr. Schroeder is displaying words from his religion's holy book to issue a religious warning to all citizens in a government building. This is unconstitutional."

Elbert County Sheriff Shayne Heap contributed this to the discussion: "These conversations are initiated to pervert the truth and do whatever is necessary to get the results you want," Heap wrote. "I'm going to get back to work and I'm going to leave the cross in my office, the Bible on my desk and I support the clerk's constitutional rights."

Cheyenne County Clerk Patricia Daugherty sent out the first inflammatory email Aug. 7: "I have a dilemma [sic] in my office that I wish to get a little feedback on. In my office, everyone has personal objections to issuing same sex marriage licenses. . . . Am I the only office with this dilemma [sic]? What is your plan?"

Schroeder answered Aug. 9: "I pray for all the clerks across this country who have been made to make a terrible decision. I pray for our state legislators for them to use God's Holy Bible as a guide to govern. Prayer is the only

thing that will change the downward spiral our country is in."

Schroeder told the group this story: "I talked with a local artist, who is also a Christian, and he created a beautiful poster which I have had hanging for about a year. There is no way to miss it if you are in for a marriage license. It is a picture of a bride standing on a hill with the groom walking up the hill to meet her. . . ."

Schroeder wrote that he bought the poster with his own money, so in his mind it's legal. "I am not denying anyone service. My thought process is that they have to see the poster and if they choose to violate God's written Word, then that is on their head. I have warned them."

Seidel said who paid for the poster is irrelevant. "If anything, it proves the point that Mr. Schroeder is abusing a public office to further his personal religion."

Several other clerks have responded to FFRF that they either refused to hang the poster or have since removed it from government property.



The poster in Clerk Dallas Schroeder's government office. On a non-county website, he lists his favorite quote, attributed to President Ronald Reagan: "If we ever forget we're one nation under God, then we will be a nation gone under."

## FFRF asks to have cross in public park removed

Many residents in and around Port Neches, Texas, have come together to defend and support a cross that sits in a public park after FFRF requested that the city remove the Christian symbol.

The white 10-foot-tall cross, located in the city's Riverfront Park, has been there for 45 years. But tradition and length of time don't matter when it comes to the Establishment Clause of the Constitution.

"We ask you to remove the cross from Port Neches Riverfront Park immediately or direct the display to be moved to a more appropriate private location," FFRF Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert wrote in her letter to Mayor Glen Johnson on Nov. 5.

"The government's permanent display of a Latin cross on public land is unconstitutional," the letter states. "The inherent religious significance of the Latin cross is undeniable and is not disguisable. No secular purpose, no matter how sincere, will detract from the overall message that the Latin cross stands for Christianity and that the display promotes Christianity."

Johnson said he's received calls

from many people angry with FFRF, according to a report by KFDM in Port Arthur, Texas.

A prayer vigil was held in the park by cross supporters, but nonbelievers tried to diffuse the situation. "A letter signed by 'your friendly Port Neches atheists, agnostics and other non-Christians' was left at the cross along with cookies, asking to find an amicable solution," KFDM reported. "Members of Midcounty's Atheist and Agnostic Group say they found the letter torn up after the vigil."

Port Neches resident Sheila Ackley told a reporter, "We stand united to fight for what our beliefs are. They're our beliefs. It's our constitutional right to do so. If we don't stand for it, it's no more. It won't be long and they're gonna take our churches away. It won't be long and they're not gonna allow us to have our bibles. I was placed on this Earth by God to fight for Him and over my dead body."

There is also a group making and distributing small crosses for residents to place on their lawns.

## Nativity scene out of public park

The City Council in Wadena, Minn., voted unanimously Nov. 10 to no longer place a nativity scene in a public park after getting FFRF letters of complaint. Wadena, a city of about 4,000 residents 160 miles northwest of Minneapolis, annually placed the nativity in Burlington Northern Park.

"The city's display of a Christian message in the city's premier park unmistakably sends the message that the city endorses the religious beliefs embodied in the display," wrote Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott in the first letter to the city last January.

Mayor George Diess told KARE News that "when something is put up that many years, it becomes a tradition to the city." Board members expressed

concern about a potential lawsuit. The council meeting was packed with backers of the religious display. The city will turn it over to a ministerial association.

**REMINDER**  
The January / February issue is combined and will be received in February.

**ITASCA COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE**  
J. WILLIAMS, SHERIFF

SHERIFF  
ITASCA COUNTY

venue NE • Grand Rapids, MN 55744 • 218-326-3477 • FAX: 218-326-4663

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To: Itasca County Public Safety, Fire and Emergency Services November 2015

From: Itasca County Sheriffs' Chaplain Dale H. Kaiser  
440 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue NE.  
Grand Rapids, Mn. 55744 1-218-327-1052

Re: Day of Prayer for Law Enforcement, Fire, Emergency Services and The United States of America, Saturday November 21, 2015

Itasca County Law Enforcement, Fire and Emergency Services.

Our Land of the free and home of the brave appears to be on a course for a crash landing. It seems the evils our county was once protected from continue to invade our land. Public Safety is under attack both locally and nationally and needs our help.

In 2nd. Chronicles 6, King Solomon is crying out to the Lord to protect his land and his people. In Chapter 7, God answers The Kings prayer: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray to me and seek my face, turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin and heal their land."

The only answer our country has is God. It is up to us, his chosen, to stand up and pray for God to intervene, heal our country and protect all our public safety officers.

Saturday November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015 starting at 6am, we will be having a 24 hour prayer vigil at the Itasca Courthouse Law Enforcement Memorial, north side of the courthouse on 5<sup>th</sup> street. This will be an outdoor, informal mostly silent prayer vigil open to the public. Dress according to the weather. The courthouse will not be open for our use, prepare accordingly. Bring a folding chair if you desire.

Prayer will be focused on Law Enforcement, Fire, E.M.S. our country, our leaders and the people of this country. My request is even if someone can only spare 5 minutes, that's great. Outlying Churches can also have prayer meetings in their own churches and homes if desired. The main thing is for us to pray. If hunters wish to come in blaze orange, awesome. Or spend some time in prayer from the deer stand, even better.

God will heal our land, but as His faithful we need to do our part also. If you have any questions, please contact me directly. 1 218-327-1052

Gods' Blessings  
Dale H. Kaiser  
Itasca County Sheriffs' Chaplain

*Dale H. Kaiser*

### 'Inflammatory and proselytizing'

FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott sent a Nov. 20 complaint letter to Itasca County (Minn.) Sheriff Victor Williams in response to Chaplain Dale Kaiser's prayer promotion letter above, which was written in early November and apparently references the recent shooting of Deputy Steven Sandberg in St. Cloud and general anti-law enforcement sentiment. Elliott called for abolishment of the chaplaincy position and wrote, "Not only is the county's endorsement of this religious ritual and sectarian event unconstitutional, the inflammatory and proselytizing content in the letter is grossly inappropriate communication to be coming from a government office."

## FFRF counters religious displays

# Texas Capitol latest to get solstice message

FFRF acquired a five-day permit to place its Bill of Rights “nativity” display inside the Texas Capitol in Austin starting Dec. 18.

After a Christian nativity scene was placed in the Capitol last December, Staff Attorney Sam Grover worked to ensure that this year FFRF’s freethought message would receive equal treatment.

The metal cut-out display of the Bill of Rights “nativity” features images of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin standing or kneeling around the Bill of Rights. Area freethinkers are invited to attend placement of the display on Friday, Dec. 18, at 9 a.m.

“We’re very appreciative of state Rep. Donna Howard, who showed a lot of courage and integrity in agreeing to sponsor our display,” said Co-President Dan Barker. Rules require a legislative sponsor for displays.

FFRF is also working with a number of members and groups around the country to place freethought signs or displays in so-called public forums on government property to balance religious displays.

FFRF offers several displays and banners, including “Keep Saturn in Saturnalia” (a riff on “Keep Christ in Christmas”) and its classic equal-time protest of religion in governmental buildings, composed by FFRF principal founder Anne Nicol Gaylor. Her statement reads:

“At this Season of the Winter Solstice, Let Reason Prevail. There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell. There is only our natural world. Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens heart and enslaves minds.”

Additionally, the Bill of Rights “nativity” is pictured on a banner, which reads: “Happy Winter Solstice. As this season of the Winter Solstice, we celebrate the Birth of the Unconquered Sun — the true reason for the sea-

son. As Americans, let us also honor the birth of our Bill of Rights, which reminds us there can be no freedom OF religion without having freedom FROM religion in government.”

Below are the places where FFRF signs or banners are up this year or are expected to be displayed (in addition to ones mentioned in photo captions on this page):

**Florida Capitol:** Bill of Rights “nativity” banner. Placed by FFRF members Gary Whittenberger and Warren Brackmann.

**Franklin County Courthouse, Ind.:** “Bill of Rights nativity” metal cut-out. Placed by FFRF member Greg Stuart on Nov. 29. This display is the victorious outcome of FFRF’s lawsuit, with the ACLU of Indiana, against the county for a five-decades-long policy of placing a nativity scene by itself on the lawn. The settled lawsuit opened the lawn up as a “public forum” this year.

**Manassas, Va.:** “Let Reason Prevail” banner. Placed by FFRF member Steve King.

**Warren, Mich.:** “Keep Saturn in Saturnalia.” To be placed by FFRF member Douglas Marshall.

**Michigan Capitol lawn:** “Let Reason Prevail” banner.

**Milwaukee County, Wis., Courthouse:** “Let Reason Prevail” display. Placed by FFRF member Kurt Bocksbaum.

**Rhode Island Capitol:** “Let Reason Prevail” sign. Placed by FFRF member Debbie Flitman as part of several secular displays countering a nativity scene.

**Springfield, Ill.:** “Let Reason Prevail” sign, to be placed by a local FFRF member.

**Washington Capitol lawn:** “Let Reason Prevail” banner, to be placed by FFRF member Darrell Barker, in the event a nativity scene is erected there by a private religious group. A previous FFRF equal-time challenge chased the nativity scene (and all such displays) from inside the Capitol.



Brent Nicastro photo



## ‘No gods’ returns to Wisconsin Capitol

FFRF’s gilt winter solstice message returned for its 20th appearance in the first-floor rotunda of the Wisconsin Capitol in Madison through December. The message was composed by Anne Nicol Gaylor, FFRF’s principal founder. It’s the first appearance of FFRF’s Bill of Rights “nativity” scene to counter a display placed by a Religious Right group. “Religion in the Capitol is divisive, and the rotunda is getting very cluttered. But if a devotional nativity display is allowed, then there must be ‘room at the inn’ for all points of view, including irreverency and freethought,” said FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. “In celebrating the solstice, we celebrate reality.”

## ’Tis the season

FFRF Metropolitan Chicago Chapter members Mike Weeda (left), Rich Pope, Jose Alvarado, Rick Schuch and Bob Hunter with the solstice banner (and lighted Dawkins “A” for atheist/agnostic) in Daley Plaza on Nov. 23. It’s the fourth year for the display in the plaza’s public forum, placed to balance the traditional and divisive life-sized nativity scene and 20-foot-high menorah. Chapter President (and photographer) Tom Cara and his jolly elves also placed a smaller Dawkins “A” and Coalition of Reason “Good Without God” banner in Arlington Heights.

# Reason for the season predates Jesus

By Barbara G. Walker

We are approaching a date that ancient people often regarded as the most significant, perilous time of the year: the winter solstice. Two thousand years ago, it occurred around Dec. 25, but the change in the calendar now places it closer to Dec. 21 or Dec. 22.

The problem was that the sunlight seemed to weaken and retreat further into night as the solstice loomed, and the ancients feared that a time might come when it would keep going and fail to return—an unthinkable disaster that would destroy all life on Earth. Early in human history, rituals were devised to make sure of the sun's solstitial rebirth and renewal.

Rituals are invented according to the principle of sympathetic magic. That is, to make something happen, you symbolically imitate it. If rain is needed, you pour water. If you want to hurt an enemy, you mutilate his image. For success in hunting, you do dances imitating the kill. If you want the divine sun to be reborn, you light lamps and stage birth rituals.

When Christians adopted the solstitial birthday, they gave it the same hopeful title that Persian worshipers of Mithra had used centuries before: Birthday of the Unconquered Sun.

Throughout the Roman Empire, the worship of Mithra was more widely popular than Christianity for the first four centuries of the so-called Christian era. In 307 C.E., the emperor officially declared Mithra "Protector of the Empire." His birth was witnessed by shepherds and by the "wise men" or priests known as Magi: magicians.

Mithra performed the usual assortment of miracles: healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out devils, making the blind see and the lame walk. He celebrated a Last Supper with his 12 disciples (the 12 signs of the zodiac), died and rose again at the spring equinox, and originated a sacramental meal known as "mizd" (Latin *missa*, English *mass*) at which his worshipers ate bread marked with a cross. They looked forward to salvation in the Last Days, when the apocalyptic battle will result in conquest of the devil of darkness (Ahriman) by the solar god of light, the Sun of Righteousness, Ahura Mazda.

The temple of Mithra on Vatican Hill was seized by Christians in 376 C.E., but the bishops of Rome adopted even the Mithraic high priest's title of Pater Patrum, later Papa or Pope. Recently discovered vases from a Roman Mithraeum, dated in the third century A.D., bore the words "You saved us by having shed the eternal blood."

## Plagiarizing pagans

In fact, virtually all the details of the Christian solstitial legend came from much older pagan sources. In Egypt, 3,000 or 4,000 years ago, people knew that the all-important annual flooding of the Nile, on which their crops depended, coincided with the rising of the star Sirius, the brightest star in the heavens. They said this star represented the soul of the savior Osiris, god of both earthly crops and the after-life paradise. Like



Barbara G. Walker

the reaped and replanted grain, Osiris died every year and was reborn as Sirius rose.

His worshipers chanted, "The Virgin has brought forth! The Savior is born!" They believed that by eating the flesh and blood of Osiris, in the form of consecrated bread and wine, they would take his essence into their own bodies and thus become immortal like him. Egyptians described Osiris as the savior "to whom men and women turned for assurance of immortality."

During Osiris's death phase, his star-spirit Sirius was in the keeping of the jackal god of death, Anubis, the "Great Dog," whose constellation was and still is called Canis Major, the Great Dog, of which Sirius is the alpha star. The crucial rising of Sirius was heralded by the row of three stars in the belt of Orion, called the Three Wise Men, the same as the Persian Magi.

A line drawn through these three stars points directly at Sirius, so they became the annunciators who could say, "We have seen his star in the east," meaning that it rose, like all heavenly bodies, in the east. Later, Christians forgot the star lore and insisted on human Magi coming from Persia, but had trouble explaining how the Magi could travel so far westward to Bethlehem by following a star in the east.

In the Near East, it was said that Bethlehem was where the god Adonis was born of the virgin Myrrha. Her sacred plant, myrrh, was used as an aphrodisiac in the rites of Adonis in his later role as consort of Aphrodite, and thorny twigs of myrrh made up his

crown of thorns. Some early Christians referred to Jesus's mother as Myrrh of the Sea; other versions of her name were Marina, Mara, Maya or Mari-anna, possibly all derived from Maia, the Virgin Mother of Buddha, five centuries earlier said to have been derived from the sound of a baby's cry.

All over the world, the syllable Ma is ubiquitous in the names of Mother Goddess figures. Shepherds attended the birth of Adonis, who was the god of both crops and flocks. He too was known as the Good Shepherd.

Another contributor to Christian symbolism was the Phrygian god Attis, whose cult became very popular in Rome. Born of the usual virgin mother to bring back the light and the growing season, Attis was called "Most Holy God, Who Holds the Universe Together," and greeted with the phrase, "Hail, Bridegroom, Hail, New Light." He was crucified on a pine tree, which was said to be green all year round due to the infusion of his holy blood. Celebrants carried pine boughs in his rites.

Europeans continued to adore the winter greenery of the pine all the way up to Victorian times, when the Christmas tree was officially adopted in England, thanks to Queen Victoria's German consort, Prince Albert.

In northern Europe, an evergreen widely revered as a symbol of ongoing life was the holly, sacred to the underworld Goddess Helle, or Hohle or Hel. Her name gave us the English the word hell, though her underworld was not a place of torture but simply a place of the dead, prior to any rebirth.

The red berries of the holly represented drops of the Goddess's life-giving blood, an idea dating all the way back to the primitive perception of female blood as the source of all life. Holly and other evergreens were common in wreaths and other solstitial decorations. The Christmas hymn "The Holly and the Ivy" commemorates a very old tradition, as does the Yule log, lighted like other sacred fires to assist the rebirth of sunlight.

In the nineteenth century, however, some Christian ministers denounced the Yule "disorders . . . derived from these Roman Saturnalian and Bacchanalian festivals, which should cause all pious Christians eternally to abomi-

nate them." The pious Christians, apparently, didn't abominate them at all. Customs arising from the worship of many virgin-born pagan saviors around the beginning of the Common Era and continued to be practiced even after their original intent was long forgotten.

## Here comes Santa Claus

America's most popular symbol of the season, Santa Claus, also had a somewhat questionable background. He was described as a fourth-century bishop of Myra in Asia Minor. An official Christian version of his legend said that he gave three bags of gold to three women to "save" them from prostitution. But Christian Gnostics, some of whom still practiced sexual rites, may have been continuing the use of sacred priestess-prostitutes who perpetuated the traditional worship of Aphrodite and Adonis in the city dedicated to Adonis' mother Myrrha.

Later, Nicholas became identified with the Italian city of Bari, where bones said to be his were installed to serve as a focus of pilgrimage in the 11th century. Many adherents of St. Nicholas had taken over the old temples of the sea god Poseidon, popularly known as "the Sailor," a title inherited by Nicholas, who became patron saint of sailors.

His Bari temple was also dedicated to a female consort known as Befana, "the Grandmother," who annually filled children's stockings with presents and who was worshiped with gift-giving ceremonies. It was a common habit to give children gifts and treats on holy days so they would always remember the importance of such occasions.

St. Nicholas "the Sailor" was revered by the maritime Dutch, who called him Sinter Klaas, later Latinized as Santa Claus. Dutch immigrants brought him to America, where he was transformed into today's jolly symbol of the winter solstice, fat with feasting and overflowing with gifts, especially gifts for children.

All religious ceremonies that were perceived as important evolved into "Feast" days, so that even if people went hungry at other times, they were obligated to provide as much as they could on these occasions. On some level, always in the past million years or so, the life-essential function of eating had to be demonstrated to the deities on their special days so that food would continue to be provided.

Sympathetic magic is still with us, and at the time of the winter solstice, we still delight in it.

Today we are fairly sure that the sunlight will return in a few months' time to its former strength, and that eating a god's symbolic flesh will not necessarily make us immortal. And that Santa Claus is not real, even though we teach our children to think so while they are young. But the magical fantasies of the equinox continue, and probably will continue to be celebrated for centuries to come.

Merry Christmas.

Florida Life Member Barbara G. Walker is the author of *Belief and Unbelief, Man Made God, The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets, Feminist Fairy Tales, et al.*



# Mississippian fights for secular rights

Holly Baer is the first recipient of FFRF's \$1,000 Yip Harburg Youth Activist Award, generously endowed by the Yip Harburg Foundation and FFRF members Ernie and Margie Harburg, the children of the famous lyricist of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Holly's op-ed (below, under her byline) headlined "This misrepresentation of church and state" first appeared Nov. 3 in *The Daily Mississippian* (the University of Mississippi at Oxford student newspaper) and is reprinted with permission.

By Holly Baer



Holly Baer

On Thursday, Oct. 29, the city of Collins received a letter of complaint from the Freedom From Religion Foundation in regard to Christian statues in a publicly maintained and operated park.

I spent the first 12 years of my life living in Collins, and the vast majority of my maternal family still lives in the town.

A quick view into the dreaded comment section of the local news channel's website shows horrendous vitriol from the mouths of those who love Jesus and say they are his warriors.

They say: "Those nonbelievers need a city of their own to move to. Far far away from us." With a rousing agreement: "They will have their own city, it's called HELL."

They say: "I think the city should take the complainer down . . . So no, leave it up . . . And GOD Bless AMERICA."

They say: "how disgusting whoever filed this complaint should be run out of wherever they normally stay go to some country where there are other like-minded people and leave our country and our faith alone."

From the hellish comment section, you'd think that Mississippi is the center of a God-filled theocracy. In the past few months, my former high school received complaints because of an anti-atheist rant by a history teacher,

and my former school district received a cease and desist letter regarding marching band music. Each of these things were met with loud angry protests from Christians, saying that this was clearly discrimination. The reality is much simpler.

For the first time, Christians are being required to follow the law, and they are no longer allowed to show preferential treatment to Christianity.

Being a nonbeliever in Mississippi is rough. We're constantly being told that Christianity is under attack while simultaneously being treated as broken people by some members of the church. We're told that Christianity is the single most important thing, while one of the most Christian states has some of the highest rates of teen pregnancy, new HIV infections and gonorrhea and chlamydia infections.

This isn't meant to bash Christianity or Christians in general. Many Christians are good, kind people who work very hard to make the world a better place. But many Christians say awful things about anyone who doesn't be-

lieve. Many Christians take complaints about legal violations as personal attacks on Jesus. Some Christians believe an angry mob will solve any problems by eliminating those complaining.

Unfortunately, these people are just as Christian as the good people. Sometimes, the good Christians will say that these cruel people aren't really Christians, but that isn't fair.

We don't get to label them "non-Christians" just because they're mean. Even if good people could write them off as non-Christians, that continues the cycle that bad people can't be Christian, and that all nonbelievers have to be corrupt and bad.

As a nonbeliever, I'm not convinced. If Mississippi is a hotbed of religious beauty, then it makes religion look even less appealing.

Holly's blog "Sex, Religion, Politics and other topics to avoid at the dinner table" is at [hollybaer.com](http://hollybaer.com).

•••

Holly also writes:

When I enrolled in the University

of Mississippi to pursue a degree in religious studies, I intended to be a missionary and live abroad spreading the gospel. Three years later, I am an outspoken writer, columnist and blogger chronicling my own struggles and frustrations as an ex-Christian in the Deep South.

When my hometown of Collins received a complaint from FFRF for illegal Christian decorations, I watched and listened to family and acquaintances make combative statements toward the person who informed FFRF of the legal violations. Many called for the "complainer" to be run out of town and said they deserved to have their house burned down.

Almost the entirety of my family, including those who no longer lived in Collins, went to the "Rally For Christmas" at a town hall meeting to discuss how to handle the letter of complaint. Instead, it became a religious revival, with Mayor V.O. Smith pledging to keep the decorations up.

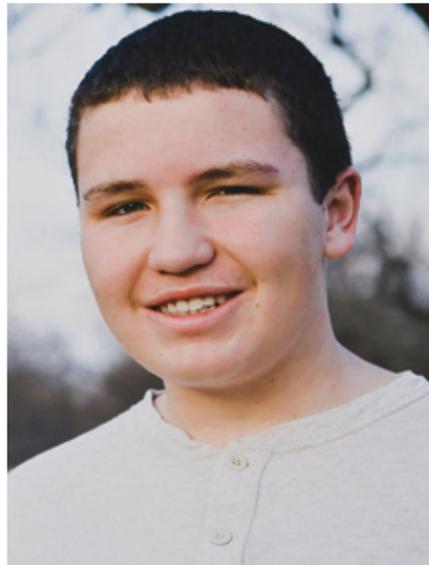
As an opinion columnist for *The Daily Mississippian*, I wrote a response condemning the behavior I had seen as well as the superiority complex of Christians in the state. Despite claiming to be one of the best, most Christian states, Mississippi mostly excels at teen pregnancy, obesity, lack of education and a slew of other negative things. Mississippi has a history of explosive responses to being required to follow the law. The persecution complex is fueled by the idea that Christianity deserves a special place in society.

After graduation, I plan to continue writing and speaking out as a nonbeliever. I am pursuing a master of fine arts in poetry, where nonbelief, subversion of religious themes and the conflict of my identity versus my upbringing have become central in my poems. I hope to continue to be involved with FFRF and to advocate for true separation of church and state.

# Texas 15-year-old wouldn't back down

FFRF has named Benjamin as a recipient of the \$1,000 Thomas Jefferson Student Activist Award endowed by Len and Karen Eisenberg, generous Oregon FFRF members. Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel's September complaint letter on Benjamin's behalf resulted in the school district reining in a proselytizing principal, committing to enforce its anti-bullying policy and barring display of religious items.

By Benjamin Oyakawa



Benjamin Oyakawa

It all started when I heard Mr. Wright, the principal, announce on the intercom that next week our school would have a See You at the Pole event and that the school was starting a new First Priority club. As much as this annoyed me, I never realized there was anything illegal about these two things. Why would I when I was in a public school that kept focusing on Christianity?

The day of the See You at the Pole [Sept. 25], Mr. Wright prayed, preached and promoted the new Christian club. My mom had called him to talk about the topic and he stated that he would not stop what he was doing. This an-

gered me, but I still did not think this would blow up the way it did. At this point my mom brought the problem up, commenting on a Facebook post that practically worshiped Mr. Wright and how he spoke the "word of God."

The post my mom made was perfectly reasonable and civilized, so how does the community of Prosper react? They get enraged and threaten my family. The community started to claim

at this point my family was trying to get Mr. Wright fired and then organized a prayer vigil against my family!

I went inside the school and noticed that over half the student body was gone. I went to the library and looked out the front window and saw a swarm of people. At this point, I texted my mom to come pick me up, but she was out of town, so a family friend took me home. I actually felt scared, but I still kept my cool and kept my house locked down.

The following weekend I was home alone with my sister. Everything was fine until Saturday night, when my sister started to read some of the hate posts on Facebook and saw one person talking about how someone knew where we lived. This made my sister burst into tears because she was scared. I stayed up almost the whole night making sure it was safe.

Nothing eventful happened until the next weekend. I had stayed home to take the SAT while my family went on a camping trip. I was up the night before the test looking for a calculator when I felt like I heard noises in the house. This terrified me so I went straight to my grandmother's house.

The next morning I found that my

house had been TP'd, with a Portals of Prayer flier stuck to my door and a typed note saying "'YOU NEED THIS MORE THAN WE DO.' GOD" was chalked on the driveway. My mother did multiple interviews for the news, but I was surprised when one reporter asked me. I agreed and answered his questions.

Finally, the whole thing came to a somewhat of a close when the school agreed to the Freedom from Religion Foundation's terms. I am also trying to start a secular student club with a close friend of mine. I want people at school to know there are freethinkers here and we deserve to be treated fairly.

Benjamin writes: "I am a 15-year-old sophomore at Prosper High School in Prosper, Texas. I am heavily interested in mathematics, science and engineering. I am an atheist and have no interest in joining a religion. I go to a summer camp yearly called Camp Quest where fellow atheists, agnostics and freethinkers meet other atheists in a friendly environment. I am in the process of starting a Secular Student Alliance club in my school with a close friend."

# We agree: Tim is ‘a great American atheist’

By Tim Earl

In September 2014, as I finished a bike ride on one of our city trails, I stopped by our veterans memorial. Like many other such memorials, it included a wooden silhouette of a soldier kneeling at the grave of a fallen comrade. What caught my eye was the fact that the grave was not marked by a cross. Instead, it was a “battlefield cross,” a rifle in a pair of boots, topped by a helmet.

At the next meeting of our city Park Board, of which I was a member, I used my closing remarks to say that I was proud to live in a city where our memorial was inclusive of all veterans, and that I was especially touched by it as a non-Christian veteran.

The following June, on a similar bike ride, I again stopped at the memorial and noticed that the silhouette had been replaced. The new silhouette featured a Latin cross where the battlefield cross had been. I immediately drove across the street to the city manager’s office at City Hall. When I explained the issue to the deputy city manager, he agreed and said he would look into it. He also asked if I had a picture of the old memorial, which I provided.

While city business never moves at a very rapid pace, the city manager and his deputy handled this in what I considered a fairly expeditious manner. Over the next few weeks, I received updates from them as they investigated who was responsible for the memorial and why it had changed. It turned out that a group of veterans organizations had funded it, and one veteran built the silhouettes.

As the city manager told me the next time I saw him, “We Googled it and found two versions of this silhouette, one with a cross and one without. So we told him he was welcome to put



Tim Earl

up the noncross version (again), but the cross had to go.”

He told me there was a little push-back, but he reminded the memorial builder that it was a veteran who complained, and that he himself, also a veteran, agreed that it had to go. The city manager agreed to allow the cross silhouette to remain while a new silhouette was built but gave him a deadline of about four weeks.

So it seemed to be fairly noncontroversial. I later learned from the parks director (who did not know I was the source of the complaint) that the builder was actually a bit more upset than I had been led to believe, but they handled it. As it turned out, he chose not to provide a new, noncross silhouette.

## ‘A strange incident’

In July, I was asked by some concerned citizens to run for City Council. Given the factionalism that had recently divided our council, I agreed. From the beginning, we wondered if my atheism would be used as a campaign issue. (I had given four secular

invocations by this point, beginning in 2012, and had won FFRF’s “Nothing Fails Like Prayer” award in 2014). We prepared for it, just in case, but my opponents had supported my invocations in the past, so we thought that might help. In fact, our mayor pro-tem (one of my main opponents) had complimented my invocations in a Wall Street Journal article in July 2014.

My Park Board term was due to expire Oct. 1, just over a month before the election, so in order to be reappointed to another term, I had to attend a meeting where board and commission candidates would be interviewed. (I would have to step down if I won the election.) It was here that a strange incident occurred.

When it came time to discuss the Park Board, the mayor stated that two current members had asked to be reappointed, which is automatic if their attendance and performance is considered acceptable. The city clerk confirmed my attendance and the Park Board chair said I contributed quite a bit to the board. Then, the mayor pro-tem said he had an issue he wanted to discuss.

He produced several large photos of the silhouette with the cross, which had been relocated to a local VFW post, and said he had “received complaints from veterans” about the removal. He asked if I had used my position as a Park Board member to have it removed. He made this statement in a tone laced with vitriol, getting a surprised reaction from many people present.

I calmly explained that I had brought the issue to city administration as a private citizen, and it had nothing to do with the Park Board. I said that our public memorial must honor all veterans, even nonbelievers such as myself. I was pleased to see nods of approval around the room as I spoke. I asked the city manager, whom I had criticized during my campaign

(for reasons unrelated to the cross issue), to confirm my statement, and he did. The Park Board chair stated that it had never been brought to the board and she did not see it as an issue. I was reappointed to the board, but I was disturbed by this attack.

There was one more attempt to make my atheism an issue, but it wasn’t very sophisticated. Someone created a fake Facebook account and posted a video which combined Ron Reagan’s FFRF commercial with one of my secular invocations. He shared it on our local newspaper’s Facebook page with comments that included “Tim Earl is not afraid to tell it like it is to adults who believe in fairy tales” and “Tim Earl is a great American atheist.” It didn’t appear to gain much attention.

Other than that, the incumbents didn’t bring up my atheism during the campaign, at least not publicly. I’m not sure why, but three reasons come to mind: (1) their prior support for my invocations; (2) my ability to clearly articulate my position and explain how I support tolerance of all religions (which they had seen firsthand on more than one occasion); and (3) my status as a war veteran, which might make personal attacks backfire.

On Election Day, the three incumbents easily defeated me and the other challenger. Sadly, the state of affairs on our council is unlikely to improve, and I’ve now made enemies of two council members who previously supported me. But I did have some support, and I’ve been encouraged by many people to run again.

In the meantime, I won’t back down on advocating for the separation of church and state.

*FFRF member Tim Earl lives in Portage, Mich., with his wife and two daughters. After leaving the U.S. Navy as a lieutenant commander in 2004, he started work as a fire safety consultant.*

## Secular invocations



George Gold

### Chico City Council

Chico, Calif.

Nov. 3, 2015

“Over the past two years,” writes George Gold, “we had been petitioning the mayor of Chico, Calif., to be included in the invocation rotation.

On Aug. 26 [2014], we received the official invocation schedule for 2015, and we were invited to deliver an invocation on three occasions throughout the year.”

George delivered Chico’s first-ever secular invocation in January and gave another in April.

Mr. Mayor, members of the City Council and the Chico Community:

In January 2015, I was honored to deliver the first-ever secular invocation right here at a City Council meeting. Soon after that invocation, the council adopted a new rule that all invocations must be 60 seconds or less.

A 60-second rule? Here is another first, a secular invocation haiku:

maybe no god talk  
time for reason and logic  
let’s go for ice cream.

*FFRF member George Gold, president of Atheists of Butte County, was born and raised in Sydney, Australia, and is a computer systems engineer.*

## Nothing Fails Like Prayer contest

The U.S. Supreme Court unwisely “blessed” sectarian prayers at local government meeting in its *Town of Greece v. Galloway* decision. If the Supreme Court won’t uphold our godless and entirely secular Constitution — adopted at a prayerless constitutional convention — it’s up to us.

It’s up to you!

We’d like to see secular citizens flood government meetings with secular invocations that illustrate why gov-

ernment prayers are unnecessary, ineffective, embarrassing, exclusionary, divisive or just plain silly.

The “best” secular invocation will be invited to open FFRF’s annual convention, receiving an all-expenses-paid trip (next year in Pittsburgh on the weekend of Oct. 7–9, 2016), a plaque and an honorarium of \$500.

Learn more at:

[ffrf.org/outreach/nothing-fails-like-prayer](http://ffrf.org/outreach/nothing-fails-like-prayer)



## One is the looniest number

David Whitsett, Texas, called the grammar police upon seeing this in Kerrville.

## Meet a foxhole atheist



Col. Ken Lynn in 2007.

**Name:** Ken Lynn.

**Where I live:** Fleetwood, N.C.

**Where and when I was born:** Jacksonville, Fla., in 1959, reared in Greer, S.C.

**Family:** Monica, my wife (also an FFRF member), and Tank, our English bulldog.

**Education:** B.S. in recreation and park administration, Clemson Univer-

sity; M.S. in international relations, Troy State University; M.S. in national resource strategy, National Defense University.

**Professional military education:** Marine Corps Command and Staff College, U.S. Air Force Squadron Officer School, USAF Air Command and Staff College, USAF Air War College.

**Occupation:** Online adjunct instructor with the USAF Air University's Air Command and Staff College graduate program. Areas of expertise are airpower studies, warfare studies and leadership and command.

**Military service:** 26 years in the USAF (1981–2007), retiring at the rank of colonel.

**How I got where I am today:** Great parents, hard work and a commitment to public service.

**Where I'm headed:** Many will say I'm headed for hell, but I know it doesn't exist.

**Person in history I admire:** Benjamin Franklin for his wit, intellect and many contributions to humankind.

**Quotations I like:** "The hands that help are better far than lips that pray." (Robert Green Ingersoll) "The United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion." (Treaty of Trip-

oli, 1797)

**These are a few of my favorite things:** America's active-duty troops and veterans, long-distance bicycle riding, caffeine-free Diet Mountain Dew, classic rock music.

**These are not:** Writers who confuse plural/possessive punctuation, politicians who use elected office to advance their personal religious beliefs, squash and bees.

**My doubts about religion started:** Very early. When I was a kid, my dentist had a children's bible in the waiting room. Once I read the story of Abraham binding his son Isaac for sacrifice, I developed serious doubts about religion. I knew my dad would never do that to me, and it was my first real critical thinking experience.

**Before I die:** I'd like for Bojangles' restaurants, headquartered in Charlotte, N.C., to respond to my many letters asking about the proselytizing that's occurring in some franchised restaurants. Can't I get my "Bo-to-Go" without religion being involved?

**Ways I promote freethought:** Rather than promote freethought directly, I focus on church/state separation. In the military, I led and followed people of all beliefs, and I respect a person's right to believe whatever they choose. I promote church/state separation through opinion and other types of writing, modest philanthropy and with

membership in organizations that advocate for separation.

**I wish you had asked me:** Are there really atheists in foxholes? Yes, they're in foxholes, in aircraft cockpits, on ships, inside tanks and working in every military career field with the exception of the Chaplain Corps. However, we're working on getting the first secular humanist chaplain in the Navy right now, although it's requiring a lawsuit. Atheists have honorably served in the U.S. military since the Continental Army.



Ken Lynn today.

## Meet a Florida member

**Name:** Michael Kaye.

**Where I live:** Safety Harbor, Fla.

**Where and when I was born:** Rockville Centre, Long Island, N.Y., March 4, 1951.

**Family:** Virginia, my wife of 33 years, a retired accountant; son, JJ, a civil engineer and guitar/keyboard player in an Orlando rock band named Undercover Bandits.

**Education:** Great Neck South Senior High School, Great Neck, Long Island, N.Y.; B.S. in education, State University of New York at Cortland State; M.S. in education, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.

**Occupation:** Retired physical education teacher. I owned various small businesses before that. I've written two books, a few magazine articles (jazz and business-related) and a lot of newspaper letters to the editor on humanism, freethought, athletics and politics.

**Person in history I admire:** Some of my well-known favorites would include the "four horsemen" (Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens), Neil deGrasse Tyson, Bill Maher, George

Carlin, Penn and Teller, Greydon Square, Robert Ingersoll, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Thomas Paine.

**How I got where I am today:** Philosophically, I was an atheist, freethinker and humanist since birth. It was constantly confirmed throughout my life by my encounters with the numerous worldviews that made no sense to me.

**Where I'm headed:** Besides trying to self-improve through ongoing learning and staying physically active, I'm just trying to do my small share to halt the imposition of religious dogma into our educational, political, social and economic systems by promoting reason in any way one average citizen is able to.

**A quotation I like:** "To explain the unknown by the known is a logical procedure. To explain the known by the unknown is a form of theological lunacy." (journalist David Brooks)

**These are a few of my favorite things:** Family, promoting freethought, competing in sports/activities (particularly bowling, 215 tournament average), playing my trumpet daily, travel, birding and cheering for our almost 2014-15 Stanley Cup champions, the Tampa Bay Lightning.

**These are not:** The abundant use of "Godspeak" (I try to never use phrases such as "god bless you, oh my god, act of god," etc.); people assuming you are a believer just like them or who misrepresent atheists due to their lack of obtaining sufficient knowledge to understand what atheists are about; indoctrinating children with superstitious religious beliefs (threats of hell, being born sinners); mingling state and religion; and right-wing politics.

**My doubts about religion started:** At age 4 when passing a large church in a car and asking what do people do in that building? My parents explained it's where people go that believe in their god. After I asked what was a god, my parents said that some people believe it's a being in the sky that can't be seen, knows everything and can do anything. My immediate response of



Michael Kaye in Rapid City, S.D., at a statue by sculptor John Lopez of President John F. Kennedy and John Jr., whose father was assassinated three days before "John-John" turned 3.

"you gotta be kidding!" was followed by my parents' laughter, probably amazed I had an opinion on such matters at that age.

**Before I die:** I would like atheists to be at or near the top of the list of the most liked and admired group of people in the United States instead of at the top of the most hated or mistrusted list. People would finally understand how much that freethinkers and atheists have contributed positively to society and because the scientific method would be recognized as the most rational means of obtaining knowledge and solving problems.

**Ways I promote freethought:** By writing and keeping up with issues through organizations like FFRF and local freethought and humanist groups. (I met Richard Dawkins when he signed his

autobiography *Brief Candle in the Dark* for me when he visited Clearwater on Oct. 10). I also came out on "Openly Secular Day" in April before an audience of 50 or so mostly strangers as I read one of my freethought poems at an open-mic celebration of poetry month.

**I wish you'd have asked me:** About my new book, *Thoughts of a Freethinker: A Late Sunday Morning Sleeper's Revelations*, and how to get it (Amazon, Barnes and Noble, IUniverse Publishers, etc. The e-book/Kindle version is only \$3.99). My earlier book, *Summer Camp Race of Horror* (2002), is a science fiction/horror story for ages 8-15 approximately.

You also could have asked if I've ever bowled a perfect 300 game, and I'd have answered: "Yes, twice!"



## Soglin welcomes conventioners to Madison

# Mayor: Nonbelief deserves equal treatment

### FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor:

*We've been holding the Nonprayer Breakfast for 30-some years, and guess what? We have never had a mayor attend one until today. It's my pleasure to introduce "Hizzoner" the Mayor, Paul Soglin.*

*I remember campaigning for you, Paul, when I was a high schooler before I could vote. Paul Soglin was a very famous anti-war activist. If you have never seen the documentary "The War at Home" about the Vietnam protests at the University Wisconsin-Madison, it is super. Paul then went on to get his law degree.*

*The first time that he ran for mayor, the incumbent was Mayor Dyke. I was at the public forum at West High School where Dyke said, "The decent people would only vote for Mayor Dyke." That was a turning point in Paul's first campaign. He's also the person who oversaw construction of Monona Terrace Convention Center, and boy, was that a fight! Aren't we glad we're here?*

*And I'm very pleased that the mayor is here. He's going to add a little bit of welcoming.*

### Mayor Soglin:

Thank you very much and for that reminder. Bill Dyke *did* include in his opening comments at West High that evening that he hoped there were enough decent people left in Madison to reelect him. I followed and started my introduction, which I guess is suitable for this audience, saying that I don't care if you're decent or indecent,



Ingrid Laas photo

**Paul Soglin welcomes the audience to Madison at Monona Terrace Oct. 10.**

I want your support.

I grew up in the 1950s during the height of the Cold War. There were a number of us in the classroom who would say, "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation" — and then there'd be silence — "indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

There were those in this country who felt quite strongly that we could only survive if they imposed their moral and their religious standards on the rest of us. And of course it was to continue during our lifetimes, during the

war in Vietnam, continued into the 1980s and '90s, and now.

You can't go to a baseball game without seeing tens of thousands of people rise [for the seventh-inning stretch, when after 9/11 the song "God Bless America" replaced "Take Me Out to the Ball Game"]. To again, feel compelled to abide by a standard, which is clearly and historically not in the best interests of this country.

I don't have to share with you the horrors of what goes on today throughout the world, and has for centuries. Where in the name of religious fervor, we don't just kill but we brutalize, we

maim and we inflict enormous trauma in regards to the spreading of religious fervor.

It seems to me, as one who's held elected office over the years, that if we're going to change this country there has to be an understanding that the imposition of one's views about morality is a very private matter. And while there will be debates over issues such as reproductive choice and free speech, which I think is critical to this discussion, to do it in the name of some supreme being is contradictory to the fundamental premise upon which this nation was founded.

When we look at our history, we know that there were some very, very grave mistakes and political compromises that were made. Some of those compromises had to deal with the role of government for people who had property and for those who didn't, for those who were men and those who were women. And certainly for those who were slaves and those who were not.

Another of those compromises was made in the name of religion and the belief or lack of belief in a supreme being. It's time that we recognize that those compromises have to end in modern-day America as well as throughout the world.

So with that, I welcome you to what many of us fondly refer to as 77 square miles surrounded by reality. Thank you for having selected Madison for your annual convention. Have a good time.

## They said what?

The secular school system is a puppet of atheists even though they claim to be neutral. Christian free speech is being attacked as most educators are trained at universities that have put God on the shelf and have accepted different forms of Marxism without God. However, many Christian teachers have not bought into the system.

**4 WINDS President Steve McConkey**  
*Christian NewsWire, 11-2-15*

The Bible means a lot to me, but I don't want to get into specifics. ... I wouldn't want to get into it because to me that's very personal. You know, when I talk about the Bible, it's very personal, so I don't want to get into verses.

**Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, when asked by a Bloomberg Television reporter about his favorite passages in what he has said is his favorite book, the bible.**  
*The Daily Beast, 10-30-15*

We recognize the shortness of the hour, and that's why we as a remnant want to be faithful in these days and do what it is that the Holy Spirit is speaking to each one of us, to be faithful in the Kingdom and to help bring in as many as we can — even among the Jews — share Jesus Christ with everyone that we possibly can because, again, He's coming soon.

**Michele Bachmann, the former presidential candidate and former congresswoman from Minnesota, trying to get Jews to convert to Christianity during a trip to Israel**  
*New York Daily News, 11-8-15*

On an eHarmony profile reportedly belonging to Harpham, he described himself as a Christian, insurance salesman and recovered alcoholic. He listed his family as the first thing he's "passionate about." The second thing: "the incessant and endless task of ego destruction and working to seek, understand, submit to, and apply God's will in my life."

**Noah Jacob Harpham, who killed three people in Colorado Springs before being killed by police on Oct. 31**  
*New York Daily News, 11-2-15*

I refuse. I flat refuse, in America, to be forced into hiding as a Christian!

**Pastor Mike Welch of Bistineau Baptist Church, who was upset because on Sept. 24, the American Civil Liberties Union sent a warning to the Bossier Parish School Board stating that Airline High School principal Jason Rowland had engaged in a "pattern of religious proselytization." Among other things, Rowland had sent out newsletters with religious messages and, over the school's intercom, urged students to "pray to the almighty God." Airline High is a public school in Bossier Parish, La.**  
*Slate.com, 11-2-15*

The Court's flawed wall-of-separation jurisprudence has kept religion out of the public square and fed the idea that religion is a private matter to be practiced within the confines of one's church or home. Legal and social pressure have taken their toll, and the results are stark:

No prayer in school;



No new Ten Commandments displays — or even Christmas or Hanukkah displays — unless carefully secularized;

A widespread prejudice in many quarters against public officials talking about God or about their beliefs in public;

And even the crusade every December to replace the phrase Merry Christmas with Happy Holidays.  
**Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah**  
*A speech given on 11-4-15*

Any president who doesn't begin every day on his knees isn't fit to be commander-in-chief of this nation.

**Presidential candidate Ted Cruz, when asked if religion was an important quality for a president**  
*11-9-15 from "Freedom 2015: National Religious Liberties Conference"*

"For tens of millions of parents it would be better that a millstone be hung around their children's neck and they be drowned at the bottom of the sea" than reading JK Rowling's Harry Potter books.

**Pastor Kevin Swanson, speaking at the National Religious Liberties Conference**  
*11-7-15*

People of faith make better leaders. Faith gives us humility.  
**Presidential aspirant Carly Fiorina, speaking at the Presidential Family Forum, Des Moines, Iowa**  
*11-20-15*

There is no meaningful risk of Christians committing acts of terror.  
**Ted Cruz, on possibly allowing Syrian refugees into the U.S. as long as they are Christian and not Muslim**  
*11-15-15*

# FFRF Legals sweep Bible Belters, 2-0

Northern Illinois University DeKalb promptly removed all Gideon bibles from the Holmes Student Center Hotel after getting an Oct. 20 complaint letter from FFRF Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne, who wrote, "Certainly, if guests want to read this religious text during their stay, they can bring their own copy or access any of the numerous churches or libraries near the university."

The next day, Gregory Brady, deputy general counsel, responded that the university "will be removing any such bibles from their hotel guest rooms."

"We're grateful to NIU for so promptly making a decision to respect all of its hotel guests and stay above the

religious fray," said FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. She and her husband, Co-President Dan Barker, were staying at the hotel while in town to speak to a Secular Student Alliance chapter when they discovered the bibles in the room.

"The bible calls for killing nonbelievers, apostates, gays, 'stubborn sons,' and women who transgress biblical double standards. What's obnoxious in a private hotel, however, becomes inappropriate and unconstitutional in state-run lodgings," commented Gaylor.

State universities in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Oregon and Iowa have also recently removed bibles from guest rooms after being contacted by

FFRF.

(You can purchase bible warning labels online at [ffrf.org/shop](http://ffrf.org/shop).)

•••

Colorado Mesa University in Grand Junction will no longer distribute bibles to nursing school graduates as part of their "pinning" ceremony after the Freedom From Religion Foundation and the Western Colorado Atheists and Freethinkers sent complaint letters. FFRF learned of the Gideon bible distribution in November from several CMU students and community members.

College President Tim Foster announced on Nov. 18: "I have sought legal counsel and researched legal

precedent. I have listened to the divergent viewpoints of others. Taking all that into consideration, the bible giveaway at the pinning ceremony will be discontinued."

Nursing students had apparently been told the bible distribution was a "non-negotiable" part of the ceremony.

"Thrusting bibles at students — who may be of varying faiths or no faith — at graduation is coercive, embarrassing and beyond the scope of our public higher education system," wrote Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel in his complaint letter to Foster. "This matter is especially troublesome in light of the wide range of cultures and faiths that were represented at graduation."

## More legal victories

### Praying teacher learns lesson

A kindergarten teacher at Arab Primary School in Arab, Ala., will no longer lead students in prayer after FFRF sent the superintendent a letter of complaint.

The teacher lined up the students before lunch and made them recite, "God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for this food. By his hands, we all are fed, give us Lord our daily bread. Amen." Staff Attorney Sam Grover wrote to Arab City Schools Superintendent John Mullins on Sept. 25 objecting to this practice. "Public school teachers may not lead their students in prayer, encourage students to pray, participate in student-initiated prayer, or otherwise endorse religion to students."

On Oct. 1, Mullins informed FFRF that "a brief investigation into this matter confirmed the validity of the complaint. We have corrected the situation and educated our kindergarten teachers to assure future compliance with the Establishment Clause."

### Standing for pledge no longer required

Teachers within Plaquemines Parish Schools in Louisiana will no longer force students to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance after FFRF wrote two complaints on behalf of a Belle Chasse High School student.

Previously, students who refused to stand had been informed they were required to stand, taken out of class, and punished. In addition, prayers at football games, Veterans Day events, and other school events will not occur in the future.

"Students must not be singled out or punished in any way for choosing not to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance," wrote Staff Attorney Sam Grover in a letter on Oct. 1. "The Supreme Court ruled over seventy years ago that compelling a student to recite the Pledge and salute the flag infringed upon a student's First Amendment rights."

Superintendent Denis Rousselle called Grover on Oct. 7 and said that he "took care of the situation" immediately after receiving FFRF's letter. Rousselle said he would not tolerate students being punished for exercising their free speech rights, even though he doesn't agree with the decision.

Grover wrote about the unconsti-

tutional prayers on Nov. 6. "While it is laudable for Belle Chasse High to organize an assembly to honor veterans, it is unconstitutional to allow any religious message or prayer to be part of a school-sponsored event," he said.

Rousselle responded by email on Nov. 9, telling Grover that the district would no longer include prayers at school events.

### Coordinated signups for religious club ended

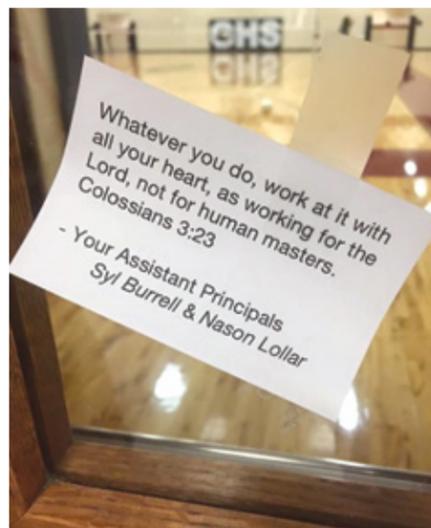
Audubon Park Elementary School in Florida will no longer coordinate signups for the Good News Club, an evangelical Christian children's group, after FFRF filed complaints with the Orange County Public Schools, one of the largest school districts in the country.

FFRF has lodged many complaints and even filed a lawsuit against OCPSS over the past several years. Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel sent the latest letter on Sept. 23 to the district's two attorneys objecting to a permission slip from the Good News Club, which directed students to return the form to an assistant principal at the school.

"When school employees collect registration forms for a religious club, that teacher appears to endorse that club," Seidel said.

Attorney John C. Palmerini informed Seidel on Oct. 12 that the principal would no longer facilitate registrations for the Good News Club.

### Religious messages removed from school



Bible verses posted by school officials have been removed from Germantown High School in Madison,

Miss., following an FFRF complaint.

A note reading "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters. Colossians 3:23" and signed "Your assistant principals Syl Burrell & Nason Lollar" was posted on the high school gym doors.

"This is an egregious violation of the Establishment Clause and of students' rights," wrote Staff Attorney Sam Grover. The school district "must ensure its employees are not unlawfully promoting their personal religious beliefs to students by using its schools as a platform to proselytize."

In a letter of response on Sept. 29, an attorney for the school district denied that a constitutional violation had occurred, but noted that the message had been removed and said the district would "monitor any messages left in the school and remove any message that is proselytizing for any particular religion."

### Texas principal won't attend prayer event

Prosper (Texas) High School Principal Greg Wright will no longer participate in See You At The Pole, an annual Christian student prayer event, after hearing about the issue from FFRF. Wright's involvement in a religious student club is also ending, and a cross and plaque about God displayed by an assistant principal have been removed.

FFRF notified Prosper Independent School District Superintendent Drew Watkins of these constitutional violations in a letter on Sept. 28. "It is important that PISD staff members understand that, as government officers and state actors, their personal rights of free exercise and free speech are not unlimited," said Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel. He pointed out that even See You At The Pole's official website acknowledges that it is illegal for adults to lead the gatherings.

In addition, damning admissions on Facebook that Wright was founding a First Priority Club for students meant any claim that the club was student-led as required by law was "disingenuous," said Seidel. Also, "Public schools may not display religious messages or iconography," the letter stated.

On Oct. 14, an attorney for the school district informed FFRF that all complaints had been resolved. Principal Wright will not speak at future See You At The Pole events or form the First Priority Club, and school officials will no longer display religious materials in the school. (See student activist on page 8.)

### FFRF secularizes school's pep rallies

On Aug. 26, 2015, Little Elm High School in Texas began a pep rally with a prayer from the pastor of a local church, but it won't happen again after FFRF got involved.

An Aug. 27 letter from Staff Attorney Sam Grover reminded the Little Elm Independent School District that it is unconstitutional for a school to invite a preacher, or anyone else, to lead a prayer at a school event.

Superintendent Lowell Strike told Grover on Oct. 16 that he had discussed the matter with the planners of the pep rally and "ha[d] been assured this will not be repeated in the future."

### Religious sign removed from class

After receiving a letter from FFRF, a teacher at Indian Springs Elementary in Blountville, Tenn., has removed a sign from her classroom that read, "I can do all things through God who strengthens me."

The Sullivan County Schools District "violates the Constitution when it allows its schools or public school employees to display religious symbols or messages," said Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert on Oct. 6. "This display alienates those nonreligious students, families, teachers, and members of the public whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the school."

Director Evelyn Rafalowski informed FFRF by email on Oct. 19 that the bible verse had been removed.

### Students spared more bible distributions

The Bienville Parish Schools in Arcadia, La., will ensure that schools do not allow Gideons to distribute bibles to students after FFRF alerted the district to the constitutional violation. Members of the evangelical Gideons group passed out bibles to Crawford Elementary School students on Sept. 22, physically placing a bible on each student's desk.

"When a school distributes religious literature to its students, or permits evangelists to distribute religious literature to its students, it entangles itself with that religious message," wrote Staff Attorney Sam Grover in a letter to Superintendent William Britt.

Britt assured FFRF on Oct. 19 that he would "meet with school principals/administrators to insure compliance with court decisions regarding the distribution of Bibles in public schools."

## Gideons no longer allowed in district

The McConnellsburg, Pa., school district has banned the Gideons from repeating the unconstitutional distributions of bibles in the future after FFRF alerted the Central Fulton School District of the illegal act.

Staff Attorney Elizabeth Cavell wrote a letter on Oct. 15 objecting to Gideons roaming the halls at McConnellsburg Elementary with a cart of bibles and Principal Alicia Mellott's statement to students that anyone interested could take a bible.

Superintendent Dixie M. Paruch wrote to Cavell on Oct. 21 saying that the Gideons would not be distributing bibles in the school district in the future.

## School prayer stopped in Alabama school again

A third Prattville Primary School teacher has been stopped from praying with students after FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover ensured that two praying teachers at the school were educated on the Constitution in February. FFRF's local complainant reported in September that a third teacher was also praying with students before lunch.

"Needless to say, we are concerned about how quickly Prattville Primary has had this same issue resurface," Grover wrote to the Autauga County School District's attorney. "Given the district's earlier representation that Prattville Primary administrators had addressed this issue, we would expect all school employees to be aware of their obligation to remain neutral on matters of religion."

Attorney James R. Seale wrote back to FFRF on Oct. 26. The principal "addressed your concerns with the staff at Prattville Primary School," wrote Seale. "I trust that your concerns will have been resolved and I do not anticipate you will receive any additional complaints."

## No more mealtime prayer at senior center

Seniors at the city of Chandler Senior Center in Chandler, Ariz., will no longer be subjected to prayers at meals after FFRF got involved. A senior center employee had led the prayers in the past, and later started selecting a member of the audience to do so.

"Federal regulations prohibit senior centers receiving federal funding to engage in religious activities at government-sponsored functions such as senior meals," wrote Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne. "The center cannot engage 'in inherently religious activities, such as worship, religious instruction, or proselytization.'"

FFRF's complainant reported on Oct. 29 that the center had replaced the prayer with a moment of silence.

## Illinois school board to end meeting prayers

The Windsor Board of Education in Illinois will no longer pray at its meetings after getting a complaint from FFRF. Local clergy typically led the Christian prayers.

"It is beyond the scope of a public school board to schedule or conduct prayer as part of its meetings," wrote Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne in a Nov. 2 letter. "Federal courts have struck down school board practices that include this religious ritual."

Superintendent Gavin Sronce told

FFRF on Nov. 6 that the school board would not include prayer at its next meeting, and said that although the board had not yet discussed the topic at a meeting, he anticipates the board would permanently cease the practice.

## Religious posts from school come down



**After getting a letter from Staff Attorney Sam Grover, Facebook posts by an elementary school in New Caney, Texas, promoting the "See You at the Pole" event have been removed.**

Facebook posts and pictures promoting a See You At The Pole event at Kings Manor Elementary School in New Caney, Texas, have been removed after FFRF complained in a letter.

One post invited readers to join "us" for See You at the Pole, describing it as a time to "pray with our children." A photo of the event showed adults holding students' hands in a group prayer.

"Any religious events in any of the district's schools must be entirely student-initiated and student-run," Staff Attorney Sam Grover wrote in a letter to the New Caney Independent School District. "When a school district promotes religious events to its students, it has unconstitutionally entangled itself with a religious message."

An attorney for the school district responded on Nov. 9, informing FFRF that the posts had been removed.



## Freudian slip?

**It's rather hilarious that this screenshot of a Nov. 13 news story about an FFRF legal victory was still up on Nov. 23 (and maybe still is). ABC-TV affiliate KAIT is in Jonesboro, Ark., where Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert sent a Nov. 12 complaint letter on behalf of a local resident to Craighead County Assessor Hannah Towell about religious crosses on office walls. Towell told KAIT that employees were told to remove crosses and video in the news clip shows none in evidence.**

## Kansas school district ends bible distribution

Geary County Schools in Kansas will no longer allow Gideons to distribute bibles following an FFRF complaint. FFRF first dealt with this issue in 2012, but it resurfaced this year.

FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott sent a request for records on distribution policies on Nov. 6. Prompted by the records request, parent action, and an additional complaint from the American Humanist Association, the school district's attorney sent written assurance on Nov. 13 that the district would "no longer facilitate the Gideons in distributing bibles in our school district."

## Alabama district updates prayer policy

Dallas County Schools in Selma, Ala., took action to end prayers over the loudspeaker before football games after hearing from FFRF.

FFRF sent the district a letter on Sept. 30. "The Supreme Court has specifically struck down invocations given over the loudspeaker at public school athletic events, even when student-led," wrote Staff Attorney Sam Grover, citing the 2000 case, *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe*. "Like the prayer practices in Santa Fe, the prayers at Dallas County High School football games are also inappropriate and unconstitutional."

Christmas Y. Green-Williams, Dallas County Schools attorney, wrote a response on Nov. 17, noting that the school had updated its policies to reflect the state of the law. "We appreciate any individual or organization that makes us aware of an alleged violation" of the law, Green-Williams said.

## Reciting prayers halted at school

Pursuant to a Freedom From Religion Foundation complaint, Decatur City Schools in Alabama will ensure that students are not required to recite prayers in the future.

During a grandparents' day event on Sept. 11 at Walter Jackson Elementary, a kindergarten teacher led students in the prayer, "Thank You for the World So Sweet," in front of their assembled guests. The students had been taught the prayer with hand movements to accompany each line.

Staff Attorney Sam Grover wrote Superintendent Ed Nichols on Oct. 29, pointing out that not only have the

courts struck down prayers in school, but one court even specifically struck down "Thank You for the World So Sweet" even after the school removed the words "God" and "Amen" from the prayer.

William E. Shinn, Jr., attorney for the school district, admitted that FFRF's account of the prayer was "substantially correct." Shinn said the district would "start by providing principals additional education on constitutional restrictions relating to school prayer," and that the principals would be directed to make a similar presentation to staff members.

## It paid to complain



Carole Beaton

A long legal challenge by FFRF Life Member Carole Beaton paid off in November as the City Council in Eureka, Calif., voted unanimously to eliminate prayers to start its meetings as of Jan. 1. Attorney Peter Martin filed a lawsuit in January 2013 on Beaton's behalf to get the council to stop praying and to stop Mayor Frank Jager from using his position and city resources to promote his annual Mayor's Prayer Breakfast.

City officials wouldn't say if the change was due to the suit. "I don't think the city wants to give us the satisfaction of having been right on this one," Martin told the Eureka Times-Standard on Nov. 20.

The city agreed to a September 2014 settlement that barred use of its resources, city seal and the title of mayor to promote or support prayer breakfasts and paid the plaintiff \$16,500 for attorney's fees.

•••

The Greece (N.Y.) Central School District Board voted 5-4 against a proposal Nov. 10 to consolidate polling sites from 11 elementary schools to two churches and a fire station. The proposed church sites were at Our Mother of Sorrows Catholic Parish and Hope Lutheran Church.

Linda Stephens, FFRF Life Member and co-plaintiff in *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, alerted FFRF to the proposal Nov. 10 and spoke against it at the public hearing that night. Four residents spoke against the plan. No one spoke in favor.

A school district release said: "Some were concerned consolidation could make it more difficult for voters to get to the polls; others feared voting at non-school sites could influence the vote."

Stephens commented to FFRF legal staff after the meeting: "Maybe speaking out at public hearings does work sometimes?"

FFRF took no action due to late notice about the proposal and because the board voted it down but will continue to monitor the situation.

## Emperor Has No Clothes acceptance speech

# Fighting oppression in Muslim world

*This speech was delivered before the 38th annual FFRF national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 9, 2015.*

By Taslima Nasrin

I am grateful to the Freedom From Religion Foundation for giving me The Emperor Has No Clothes award. I am also grateful to Annie Laurie Gaylor for having previously selected me for the Freethought Heroine award in 2002 and for a grant more recently. This organization has been standing by me during my trials and tribulations.

A few days ago, the Bangladeshi jihadist group Ansarullah Bangla Team published what it called a “global hit list” of bloggers who have denigrated Islam, and vowed to take action against such writers. I am on the list. At the bottom of the list, was this chilling threat: “Enemies of Islam and madrassa education, atheists, anti-Islamic apostates, Shahbagi bloggers, acting on behalf of India, are trying to set obstacles in the path of establishment of Islamic caliphate. We demand that the Bangladesh government cancel the citizenship of such enemies of Islam, otherwise we will liquidate them wherever we find them across the world. Our jihad will continue, Inshallah. Amen. — Ansarullah Bangla Team”

There have been reports in the media recently that Ansarullah activists are trying to cross over from Bangladesh to India to kill me. Ansarullah believes in the ideology of Anwar Al-Awlaki, a Yemen-based al-Qaeda activist, and has been involved in the brutal murders of at least four Bangladeshi freethinkers and bloggers.

It's a matter of pride to be a freethinker, atheist and blogger in a civilized society; as the rights of such people are respected by the people and the government. However, in a country like Bangladesh, where society is still in its primitive and brutal state, such intellectuals are killed for being progressive and speaking their minds or writing what they wish to say. Such societies silence the voices of atheists who try to wake people to a new dawn.

### No atheist support

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh and her son Sajeeb Wazed, who acts as her information and communications technology adviser as well as political campaigner, have announced that they will not stand with the atheists. But the point is that the atheists are not aliens, they too are citizens of the country. So, it is apparent that the government of the day stands with the bigots.

Atheism became such a hated word that everybody in Bangladesh chooses to maintain a safe distance from atheists even though the government is bound by its own policy to not differentiate between citizens on the basis of their religion, color, gender or language. Sadly, in order to safeguard its own interest, the government has turned its back on rationalists, secularists and atheists who need its support the most.

The Bangladesh government is silent about the murder of freethinkers. Sheikh Hasina does not want to stand



Ingrid Laas photo

**Taslima Nasrin speaks at FFRF's 38th annual national convention.**

by the side of atheists. She does not say that murdering anyone is illegal. She does not want to punish the murderers. She gave a statement against the murderers of innocent people but made no statement against the murderers of atheists.

Bangladesh has never been a true democracy, because a democracy does not have affinity to any particular religion, whereas Bangladesh has an official religion. Until the time this country gets rid of that state religion, until the time atheists become as accepted as theists, Bangladesh cannot be called a democratic country.

There has always been a marked conflict between religion and science, and every time science emerges as the winner, as science bases itself on facts, not faith. It supports what is tested and is true and truth cannot be hidden by lies for a very long time. To abolish all kinds of hypocrisy from my country, we need more atheists to speak the truth.

The silence of the government on the death of the bloggers is a strong indication that this is going to be the new norm for in Bangladesh. At times, I really feel that one shouldn't expect

anything worthwhile from Bangladesh. Its political parties will turn it into a fundamentalist Islamic state. And the commoners will just sit and watch the unfolding horror. A rational mind might say this is strongly condemnable, but for the masses, it is not such an appalling place to be. They have been so blinded by religion that they wouldn't mind being another cog in the giant wheel turning Bangladesh into “Darul Islam.”

### Resisters are punished

Citizens who are resisting this anarchy with courage will be slowly and systematically eliminated by those who will never be punished because they serve the vested interests of shrewd politicians.

Bangladesh was earlier known to the world because of the annual floods that devastated the population. From a country that suffered from natural calamities, it is now emerging as a nation that suffers from man-made catastrophes, remorselessly butchering atheists and bloggers. Unless politicians stop the business of using religion to get votes from masses, many enlightened youngsters will bleed to death in the country.

At one time Sheikh Mujibar Rahman had moved the people to reject the Pakistani soldiers who massacred the Bangladeshi intelligentsia. Today, his own daughter is indulging criminals whose hands are red with the blood of bloggers. I no longer feel ashamed to say I feel scared to think of myself as a Bangladeshi.

Four bloggers were hacked to death. Among them was Niloy Neel, the secular humanist blogger who was a member of the Taslima Nasreen supporters group. He was brutally killed by Bangladeshi Islamists only because he was an enlightened critic of Islam. Niloy Neel criticized all religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc. But he was killed only for criticizing Islam. The Bangladesh govern-

ment did not take any action against the killers. Like others, he had to die for his crime of being a freethinker.

A few days ago Islamic State (or ISIS) claimed responsibility for the fatal shooting of an Italian citizen on a street in the diplomatic quarter of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Then a few days later, a Japanese man was also killed there.

Islamophobia is something coined by fundamentalists. If you criticize Islam, you will be called Islamophobic. It's a political tactic. You won't find Hindu-phobics or Christian-phobics. It's as if you can criticize all religions, but not Islam, even if there are widespread killings and oppression of women in the name of this religion. I don't criticize Islam only—I criticize and speak up against anti-women elements in all religions. But I criticize Islam more because I have grown up in a Muslim country and I witnessed the violation of human rights and women's rights under Islam. My voice cannot be gagged.

Is there any other writer in the world whose five books are banned and who has been banned from entering her own country for more than two decades and also banned from entering a place where people have the same language and culture? It is unfortunately me.

## My voice cannot be gagged.

### Banished from country

In 1993, when my work started drawing the ire of Islamic fundamentalists, there were widespread protests in Bangladesh. Huge rallies were organized against me, fatwas issued and a price was put on my head. Eventually I was banished from my own country. Needless to say, the concept of freedom of speech was violated in all possible ways at that time. Some authors stopped writing books criticizing religion issues because they didn't want to face what was inflicted on me. Therefore, we can say that self-censorship became a norm right from that time.

Over the years, a generation of progressive youngsters, who are well-educated and called themselves liberal, atheists and humanists, has been making their presence felt in the country. I wouldn't say that all youngsters are progressive because some of them are joining radical groups too. But there are others who have begun to challenge religious orthodoxy through their blogs or otherwise. Many such bloggers speaking up against bigotry, superstition and fundamentalism are being targeted. In fact, it doesn't matter whether a blogger is a Hindu, Muslim or Christian; whoever is criticizing Islam is being targeted. Many of them have no option but to flee the country. Those who are staying are scared of writing. So there is again a stifling form of self-censorship. Those who are trying to start life afresh abroad would find it hard to write again because in those countries they have to earn their livelihood first and fight for survival. So such a struggle for existence in an



Ingrid Laas photo

**Taslima holding her Emperor award, reserved for public figures who “tell it like it is” about religion, like the child in the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale.**

alien land could kill creativity.

A large section of Bangladesh is deeply religious. If Shaikh Hasina is seen punishing killers in order to protect atheists and rationalists, this part of the population might consider the leader to be atheist herself. This perception might be detrimental to her electoral prospects. The politicians need to protect their voting bloc at the end of the day.

Islam is not a race. Just as Christianity has spread from its source of origin, Islam too has traversed a similar path. Those who have hatred or fear against Muslims suffer from Muslim-phobia.

### Illegal arrests, imprisonment

Today, hordes of innocent citizens are being illegally arrested, handcuffed and imprisoned across the world. And while we are not making them celebrities, we have made Ahmed Mohammed, the Texas clock boy, a hero just after he spent time in a police station. The real reason for that is Ahmed is a Muslim boy. If Ahmed was a Jew or a Christian or a Hindu, would “good people” the world over have protested as much against racism in the U.S. as they have in Ahmed’s case, and would they have supported him in this manner? Would he have been invited to the White House? I don’t think that would have been the case.

Several white-skinned racists are Muslim-haters. But why do they only hate Muslims and are not Hindu-haters, Sikh-haters or Buddhist-bashers? Can we really argue that they hate Muslims just like that? Is there no reason for their hate whatsoever?

Many American kids have killed their schoolmates. Many such shooting sprees are reported with regularity. Yet I suspect that if the school in Texas came across a situation where an American or a white kid came to class with a toy pistol or a toy rifle, the school authorities would have alerted the police only after assessing the nature of the item in question.

When people suspect Muslims or criticize Islam, they are quickly branded as Islamophobics. But most people are afraid of being labeled such and so they mostly keep quiet. The faster this word disappears, the better. We cannot have this word and, at the same time, voice our support for freedom of speech. It’s extremely difficult to ascertain if talented Muslims are being collectively brainwashed into becoming terrorists, as were the Tsarnaev brothers of Boston bombing.

If people carry a pressure cooker bomb in their backpack, or a clock bomb in a pencil box, then it is reasonable to fear these objects in public places. I do not see anything wrong with such thinking. But please don’t make critical statements like “Ahmed was harassed only because he is a Muslim” or “white people are racists” or “Americans are Muslim-haters.” If you are aware of past and present circumstances, you will easily know why suspicions against Muslims exist.

### The religiously blind

When people from a particular community use terrorism to subjugate others, then their religion also becomes suspect. It’s time to understand that. To rid themselves of such suspicion, Muslims must strongly protest against those who use Islam for jihad. We have to stop being religiously blind and be scientific in our approach. No enemy has ever inflicted the amount of damage that Islamic terrorists have done to fellow Muslims.



Portrait of Taslima Nasrin by Ingrid Laas.

In Mecca, about 1,300 people were killed in a stampede. You saw how Saudi officials were bulldozing bodies of dead Hajj pilgrims like garbage and dumping them into a pile. Saudi Arabia, the world’s most brutally repressive regime, was chosen to head a U.N. Human Rights Council panel! I tweeted: “Think twice before going to hajj. You can be killed in a stampede. You won’t be sent to heaven if you die in Mecca, because there is no heaven.”

Muslims believe they will go to heaven if they die in hajj. The families of those pilgrims are so happy that they died in hajj.

Throwing stones at Satan, kissing a black stone believing it absorbs sins! All these childish things performed by adults? Grow up, people!

Religion is a profitable business. You do not need to invest anything but ignorance.

Rituals which were OK in 7th century’s Mecca are now outdated, obsolete, not OK for a huge crowd in the 21st century. Stop hajj.

By supporting women’s rights everywhere, I have criticized all kinds of religions, traditions, cultures and customs. To Muslims, I am labeled as being anti-Islam. This has led to some people’s saying that I am a Muslim-hater. But they are wrong. By no means am I a Muslim-hater! I always stand beside oppressed people. I stood beside Muslims when they were oppressed in Gujarat in India, in Palestine and in Bosnia. I defended their rights to live, just as I stood beside the Hindus who are oppressed in Bangladesh and by the Christians in Pakistan. To me, their religious identity is not important. Human beings either believe in religion or they do not. Nobody should be oppressed because of her or his belief or nonbelief. I have always stood for this. The criticism I make of the religions, I do by writing. I do not go to harm the believers physically with a sword. I do not believe in violence. The fanatics never accept the idea to have a dialogue or debate with me, or write articles or books opposing me; they

come to kill me, for they are convinced by their belief in their religion that an apostate must be killed. Some people still like to believe that Islam is a religion of peace. But since my childhood, I have witnessed the opposite.

Some Western-educated, veiled Muslim women have started speaking up, claiming that embracing Islam is still their choice. But then why is it that I have no choice to criticize Islam, and why can’t anybody else freely do so? Without criticism of Islam, it would never be possible for Islamic countries to separate state and religion, never possible to have a secular education instead of a Quranic education, never possible to stop Islam-based politics. And if such did not happen, Islamic states would remain in darkness forever. Women would not enjoy the right to live as human beings.

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**Religion is a profitable business. You do not need to invest anything but ignorance.**

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### Women without rights

As I grew up, I realize that, like other religions, Islam is not compatible with human rights, women’s rights, freedom of expression and democracy. There is no way in a real democracy that separation of religion and state can be neglected. There is no way we can have women’s rights if we have religious law. There is no way we can enjoy human rights if we allow religious rules to regulate society. Without the right to offend, freedom of expression cannot exist. And without freedom of expression, democracy will not work.

Islam does not consider woman to be a separate human being. Man is the original creation and womankind

is created secondarily for the pleasure of man. Islam considers a woman as a slave or sexual object, nothing more. Women’s role is to stay at home and to obey her husband. Women are considered weak so they should be taken care of. Islam treats women as intellectual, moral and physical inferiors. In marriage, Islam protects the rights of men and men only. Once the marriage is consummated, women have no rights whatsoever in this field.

Islam considers women psychologically inferior. A woman’s testimony is not allowed in cases of marriage, divorce and hudud. Hudud are the punishments set by Islamic law for adultery, fornication, adultery against a married person, apostasy, theft, robbery, and so forth. If any woman is raped, she has to produce four male witnesses to the court. If she cannot, there is no charge against the rapist. In Islamic law, the testimony of two women is worth that of one man. In the case in which a man suspects his wife of adultery, or denies the legitimacy of the offspring, his testimony is worth that of four witnesses. A woman does not have the right to charge her husband in a similar manner.

And after all the rights and freedoms, after obtaining all the sexual pleasure and having the pleasure of being the master, Allah will reward men with wine, food, and 72 virgins in Paradise, including the wives they had on Earth. Allah said, “They relax on luxurious furnishings, and we match them with beautiful virgins” (52:19-20). “Near them, shall be blushing virgins with large beautiful eyes who will be like hidden pearls.” (37:48-49).

And what is the reward for the pious woman? Nothing. Nothing but the same old husband, the same man who caused her suffering while the two were back here on Earth.

It was easy for me to become an atheist. I was a student of science, so it was hard to accept that the sun moves around the Earth, that the moon has its own light, and that the purpose of mountains is to support the earth so that it will not fall down somewhere. I came to suspect and be sure that the Quran was not written by someone who has at all any knowledge of the sciences.

Not only did I read the Quran, I read the Hadith, the words of Muhammad. I found different events of Prophet Muhammad’s life in which, when he had problems, Allah was able to solve them right away. For example, when he was sexually aroused after seeing his daughter-in-law, Allah sent him a message saying that he could marry her because his son was adopted and thus not his real son, so that marriage was therefore justified.

It became clear to me that Muhammad had written the Quran for his own interest, for his own comfort, for his own fun. When I studied other religions, I found they, too, oppressed women.

In my society, I have witnessed that women are flogged. They have been stoned to death. Women are not considered as human beings. For a typical Muslim couple, the most unwanted thing is a female baby. If a woman fails to conceive a male child, either she is forced into a divorce for her crime of having given birth to girls or else she must spend her life with disgrace.

I am sure you have heard many times that Islam does not support the killing of innocent people. Allah of the Holy Quran never advocates killings. The killings are the work of a few

*Continued on page 12*

## 2015 Michael Hakeem Memorial College Essay Contest winners

# FFRF awards \$9,250 to student essayists

FFRF congratulates the 10 college students who won this year's essay competition and thanks all of the many entrants. FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994 and graduate students since 2010.

Students were asked to write 700 to 900 words on the topic of "Proud to be an atheist: challenging stigmas against nonbelievers." Recipients, scholarship amounts and schools are:

- First place: **Sara Schwabe**, 23, Indiana University (\$3,000)
- Second place: **Casira Copes**, 20, Rochester Institute of Technology

(\$2,000)

- Third place: **Julia Upchurch**, 22, University of South Carolina (\$1,000)
- Fourth place: **Erika Walsh**, 19, Ithaca College (\$750)
- Fifth place: **Emma Follmer**, 20, Virginia Commonwealth University (\$500)
- Sixth place (tie): **James Lambert**, 21, University of Waterloo (Ontario) (\$400)
- Sixth place (tie): **Sunita Kolarth**, 18, University of Missouri-Kansas City (\$400)

### Honorable mention

### (\$200 each):

- **Chan Sai (Samuel) Hay**, 21, De Anza College
  - **Martin Cheung**, 18, University of Pennsylvania
  - **Julianna Bauman**, 19, University of Washington
  - **Mariesa Robinson**, 20, Mercyhurst University
- "We truly consider our scholarships for freethinking students to be among FFRF's most important investments in the future of freethought," said Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "There are thousands of scholarships for religious students, and hardly any

rewarding critical thinking and the use of reason in forming an opinion about religion."

The contest is named for the late Michael Hakeem, a sociology professor who was an FFRF officer and active atheist known by generations of University of Wisconsin-Madison students for fine-tuning their reasoning abilities.

FFRF also thanks Dean and Dorea Schramm of Florida for providing a \$100 bonus to students who are members of a secular student club or the Secular Student Alliance. The total of \$9,250 reflects bonuses.

## First place: Michael Hakeem Memorial College Essay Contest

# Challenge misconceptions about atheism, morality

FFRF awarded Sara \$3,000.

By Sara Schwabe

Recent American social movements have increased acceptance of many oppressed groups. But studies show that atheists are still regarded with aversion and distrust. In a 2014 survey, the Pew Research Center found that atheists and Muslims were the most negatively viewed groups in the U.S. A study by the American Psychological Association found that, among communities with a religious majority, atheists are viewed with as much distrust as rapists!

Are these views justified? If atheists are so immoral and untrustworthy, they should be more likely to commit crimes. But according to recent studies, atheists make up as little as 0.07% of federal prisoners. When compared to the estimated 2.4% of Americans who are atheist, nonbelievers in prison are very underrepresented.

Studies have also found that violent crime rates are lower in secular nations and that life expectancy, economic stability, health care quality, education and standards of living are higher. Even divorce rates seem to be lower among nonreligious couples. Apparently, atheism does not lead to



Sara Schwabe

the ruined societies that many believers expect.

What then leads to these stereotypes? As part of a religious family that attended the Church of Christ, I was raised assuming that atheists must be selfish and immoral. But this idea changed rapidly when I began to lose faith myself. Ironically, it happened when my family tried to come closer to God.

We studied the bible together diligently and I began to find many inconsistencies. I became more open to associating with people I would have

previously avoided, including several atheist families. I was shocked to find that they were more polite, intelligent, compassionate and moral than many Christians I knew.

Many believers would argue that morality only exists because of God. Without God's commandments, how are we to know right from wrong? The problem with this is that it ignores human well-being and suffering; unless it is in relation to God and his apparent plan for humankind, the welfare of the individual and of society as a whole is irrelevant.

This belief can be dangerous. If one believes that his or her God commands something that may harm another human being, the fact that this order comes from God negates the fact that it will cause human suffering. This can lead to persecution of all sorts, from the mistreatment of women and gays to religious wars and terrorism.

How is this perspective, which is based on expectations of eternal punishments or rewards, more "moral" than the belief that our actions should be judged in accordance with how they impact others?

Religious believers argue that God's commandments are absolute and eternal, but nonbelievers' "morality" changes with the whims of society. But this argument collapses on closer inspection. Few Christians today would argue that slavery is moral, but many in the past used the bible to argue for slavery. Some Christian denominations today argue that men and women are equal, or that God is accepting of homosexuals, although the bible directly disagrees on both points and Christians historically have never approved of either.

In contrast, an atheist's view of morality is based on living "right" for oneself and for others, as the consequences they must live with are here and now. This idea does not change with the times.

### 'Protecting' children

A common accusation against atheists is that they are undermining the morals and foundation of society, determined to destroy religious liberty and force secular ideas on everyone. America was built on the idea of questioning and criticizing powerful insti-

Apparently, atheism does not lead to the ruined societies that many believers expect.

tutions and traditions. This should be encouraged, not demonized. If people are willing to examine something as powerfully established as religion, then they are certainly more willing to question practices and traditions that may be harmful to the rest of society.

Why should children be "protected" from this type of intellectual reasoning? If religion is as infallible as believers claim, then they should not be wary of those teaching their children to analyze it themselves.

Sadly, these arguments are unlikely to change the minds of many believers, since the belief that atheists are harmful to society is very deeply ingrained in their minds. What then can be done? From experience, I know that the only thing that convinced me that atheists could be compassionate and moral was personal observation. Until I saw nonbelievers behaving benevolently toward me and others, such arguments would not have changed my preconceptions.

Nonbelievers need to prove that they are behaving morally without a god; they can help the poor, treat others with respect, demonstrate honesty and work for the betterment of society without the promise of eternal reward or the threat of never-ending punishment. They need to behave in a way that believers would consider "Christ-like," until they realize that such conduct does not require a "Christ" at all.

*Sarah Schwabe, 23, is a sophomore psychology major at Indiana University in Bloomington, where she's involved with the Secular Alliance. She's interested in research in neuropsychology involving autism and other learning disabilities. "During my first semester in college, I had certainly walked away from my faith but was still hesitant to use the term 'atheist.' It had too many negative connotations due to my upbringing. It was only after meeting and befriending other self-proclaimed atheists that I was able to use the title myself."*

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## Second place: College essay contest

# Agnostic 'hearts' aggressive atheist

FFRF awarded Casira \$2,000.

By Casira Copes

I attended a high school that had a fairly diverse student population. My favorite class was media publications, and it was comprised of only a few students. Among those students were a few Christians, one Mormon, some agnostics and one person I often thought of as the aggressive atheist.

He was known for being particularly passionate and relentless when it came to religious debate. He was never rude, but he argued with a conviction I had never witnessed before. I grew up in a Christian home, going to church with my grandmother most Sundays. I slept with a bible next to my bed, and somewhere in my jewelry box, there was a cross on a chain.

I knew what my opinions were supposed to be regarding religion. But rather than engaging this person in debate, I spent a lot of time watching him debate others.

Watching, I realized several things. The first was that we had a lot in common regarding our views on the nature of the bible and the role of religion in society. I also noticed that he had the qualities of a very good friend. He was honest, valued communication and, most important, he was open-minded. Yet too often he was called "heathen." Too often he was told he would "burn in hell" because he questioned what many people accept blindly.



Casira Copes

The more time I spent with him, the more unjust treatment I witnessed. As our friendship grew, so did my fear. For the first time in my life, I was really beginning to reevaluate my beliefs. He was the first person to ask me what I thought about the universe, as opposed to telling me what I should think.

In church, I was afraid to ask questions. I was afraid to admit that I couldn't feel the Holy Spirit and that the idea of being baptized felt dishonest to me. I was afraid to ask why certain things that I knew to be facts didn't quite line up with the chronology of the bible. Soon I was afraid of facing the kind of vilification I saw my friend go through.

Becoming his friend led to a lot of

internal conflict. I had strayed from the beliefs of my family, most importantly my grandmother. She is the most loyal, loving and generous person I have in my life. The bible gives her comfort when she needs it, and the thought of Jesus watching over her makes her feel safe. I would never want to take those feelings away from her. Introducing her to the aggressive atheist was one of the most stressful moments of my life.

But she has since welcomed him into our lives with as much love and respect as she would any family member. Her treatment of him was so different from how he was treated by other religious people. It made me stop and wonder why atheists are treated like the natural enemy of religion.

I don't know if there is a higher power. I don't think it is possible to know. I suppose that makes me agnostic. But I am sure that if a deity of some sort created this vast universe, Earth is nothing more than a marble that rolled under its couch. It doesn't care what we wear, eat or do on Sunday.

It is our responsibility to make the world we live in a good one. Regardless of beliefs, every person has the freedom to choose how he or she will treat others. I do not know of any religious text that would condemn the choice to be kind and compassionate. It is up to us, not a god, to maintain our morality for ourselves.

I have seen firsthand that people with drastically different religious ideologies can love and admire each other. The vast array of beliefs and opinions is what makes humanity wonderful. It is

I was afraid to admit that I couldn't feel the Holy Spirit.

what makes communication engaging and worthwhile. It gives color to what would otherwise be a very monochromatic world.

I met the aggressive atheist five years ago. He is my very best friend in the world. The qualities I saw all those years ago, the honesty and open-mindedness that drew him into so many debates, have made him my most trusted ally and closest confidant.

I came across as Christian when I met him. Now I realize I could have been Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish or anything in the world and he would not have denied me his friendship. If I had denied him friendship, based on his atheism, I would have made one of the biggest mistakes of my life.

*Casira Copes, 20, Elkton, Md., is a third-year student at the Rochester (N.Y.) Institute of Technology, where she's pursuing majors in advertising and public relations and graphic design. "I have always admired the aesthetic quality of media design. My ultimate goal is to graduate two years from now with two bachelor's degrees and a master's and then pursue a career as a graphic designer."*

## Third place: College essay contest

# The atheist's never-ending task



Julia Upchurch

FFRF awarded Julia \$1,000.

By Julia Upchurch

Religion is inescapable in the Southeast. Each day, as I walk from one end of our campus to the other, I encounter two men peddling religious pamphlets: one Christian, the other Islamic. Each asserts that only the pious are redeemable, which means that every day I am told that I am irredeemable.

My nonreligious mother does not discuss religion with her friends out of fear that they will harass her for her lack of faith. My younger nonreli-

gious cousins told me that their friends keep trying to bring them to religious services at the insistence of their parents. Were we members of any other religious group, such as Judaism, this would be seen as persecution. But because we are individuals without faith, it is considered customary.

In a 2011 study titled "Do You Believe in Atheists? Distrust is Central to Anti-Atheist Prejudice," participants were read a description of an individual engaging in abhorrent behavior and asked if it was more likely that the individual was Christian, Muslim, a rapist or an atheist. The results were telling: People were more likely to believe atheists would engage in immoral actions than religious individuals or even rapists.

I wish I had been surprised by the results. I have informed many acquaintances of my personal beliefs, only for them to respond that I seemed such a morally upstanding person. They appear to be incapable of understanding what my morality is based upon, if not religion.

I am a secular humanist, which is basically a fancy way of saying that I am an atheist who believes all living things should be treated the way that I would like to be treated if I was in their place, and they in mine. I believe actions that are seen as societally acceptable and

Empathy has been documented in at least two nonhuman species: elephants and crows.

unacceptable have less to do with organized religion and more to do with this principle, which Christians have dubbed "The Golden Rule."

Many have argued that "The Golden Rule" is a religious construct; however, empathy has been documented in at least two nonhuman species: elephants and crows. Both have been shown to mourn their dead. Elephants will carry the bones of any deceased they encounter back to their burial grounds, and crows will host a wake whenever they come across remains. Neither do this because of religious mandate; they do it because they empathize with others of their species. Nonbelievers base their morality on this same empathy, instead of on the belief that they will be rewarded or punished after they die.

Moreover, there have been studies that have demonstrated that nonreligious individuals are equally as moral as their religious counterparts. One such study in 2014, "Morality in Ev-

eryday Life," asked participants who were religious, nonreligious, liberal and conservative to report moral and immoral actions that they themselves committed, received, witnessed or heard about within an hour's time.

The only difference between the reports of religious and nonreligious people was the depth of emotion religious people experienced with each moral and immoral act: They felt more pride in their moral deeds and more embarrassment in their immoral deeds. Clearly, a lack of religion does not denote moral depravity.

Despite all of the scorn that nonreligious people are faced with every day, they have made indelible, and oft celebrated, contributions to the arts and sciences over the years. Examples include Frank Lloyd Wright, a well-known architect; Samuel Clemens, an author better known as Mark Twain; Albert Einstein, a renowned physicist; and Katharine Hepburn, a beloved actress.

To be the source of near-universal scorn, yet to still dedicate one's life to uplifting humanity, is the atheist's continual task. If that is not worthy of respect, I fail to see how anything else could ever measure up.

I was not always a nonreligious person. My parents believe in informed

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choice, so I attended a Lutheran church as a child. I was a voracious reader, and little appealed to me more than traditional fairy tales. Many people are unaware, but traditional fairy tales deliver morals through threats of magical intervention and death, and I found an odd number of parallels to

the bible.

One day at Sunday school, I pointed out to my teacher that the intervention of fairies and those of angels were extremely similar. My teacher cautioned me that fairies did not exist, so I should be wary of putting too much stock in fairy tales. When I asked her how she knew fairies weren't real,

she told me that they had never been observed. I asked her if angels had ever been observed, and she informed me they hadn't. When I asked her how she knew for a fact that angels existed, she told me that it was because angels were mentioned in the bible.

That was the day that I lost all respect for Christianity. I never again

could place any stock in blind faith.

*Julia Upchurch, 22, Camden, S.C., is a sophomore environmental science major at the University of South Carolina. She's interested in a career in limnology and plans to pursue an advanced degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Freshwater and Marine Sciences.*

## Fourth place: College essay contest

# Nature, creativity are my religion

*FFRF awarded Erika \$750*

By Erika Walsh

There are countless examples of atheists, agnostics and nonbelievers who not only exhibit morally upstanding behavior, but also have made crucial contributions toward the betterment of our planet, and humanity itself. Regardless of nonbelievers' significant influence on history, science and politics, atheists in the U.S. are generally perceived as having no morals and often suffer from blatant discrimination.

Historical evidence points to the fact that most of our founders did not follow organized religion. James Madison stated that Christianity brought about "pride and indolence in the clergy; ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution." John Adams condemned Judaism and Christianity as being among the bloodiest religions ever, and Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson expressed similar sentiments.

The irony of this, considering the lack of acceptance of atheists, is astounding. Former President George H.W. Bush once publicly said, "I don't know that atheists should be considered citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God."

It is virtually impossible for an atheist to win a public election, and to "come out" would equate to instant political suicide for a presidential candidate. The reality of atheists' modern-day isolation from politics would be disheartening to the founders, to

say the least. The Constitution clearly calls for separation between church and state.

The forward-thinking founders did not see a place for religion in government, and this was a crucial aspect of their intention to establish a free nation.

A personal code of moral conduct is more easily achieved when the individual is not being seduced by the promise of salvation, or deterred by the fear of condemnation. Albert Einstein once stated that "a man's ethical behavior should be based effectually on sympathy, education, and social ties and needs; no religious basis is necessary."

**Even as a child, the tenets preached in Sunday school did not sit well with me.**

Einstein himself, arguably one of the most brilliant individuals in the realm of both scientific and social issues, condemned the idea of a personal god. His ideas concerning not just physics, but war and peace, the education system and the nature of humankind, were undeniably groundbreaking, regardless of, or perhaps in part due to, his agnosticism.

Perhaps it can be said that distance from organized religion ignites a sense of freedom and individualism, which better equips people to explore the mysteries of the universe, and question why things are the way they are. The astrophysicist Stephen Hawking states

that he identifies as an atheist, and that science offers a "more convincing explanation" for the creation of the universe, and the miracles of religion cannot coincide in harmony with the facts presented to us by science.

Hawking might never have dared to explore the science surrounding the creation of the universe if he had been constrained by blind faith. He might have been too consumed by fear of what might happen to his soul, should he dare question this idea, to explore alternative possibilities.

In my own experience, I was never fully convinced by the rationalizations presented by standard religious teachings. Even as a child, the tenets preached in Sunday school did not sit well with me. I remember one incident where my teacher proclaimed that people who commit suicide go to hell. I was only 9 or 10, but I knew injustice when I came across it. I argued with her statement, refusing to accept that a loving god would punish someone for committing an act unto their own self, born out of pain and desperation.

This altercation somewhat solidified my feeling that Christianity wasn't for me, and yet I continued to say my prayers before bed each night for some time afterward, holding on to attachments born out of fear of the unknown. I am aware of a spiritual connection to myself, my surroundings and other sentient beings, akin to the "cosmic religious feeling" that Einstein describes experiencing.

I know now that my spirituality cannot be expressed within the confines of a church, temple or mosque. I experience this cosmic feeling primarily when I am submerged in nature or expressing myself creatively.



Erika Walsh

By owning my agnosticism and distancing myself from organized religion, I have found ways to express myself that may have been deterred or warped by the beliefs of Christianity, which I was baptized into and expected to practice.

Identifying as a nonbeliever simply means that a person is not content with the answers presented to them, and wishes to seek their own truths instead. I hope that our society will be able to overcome its fear and fully accept nonbelievers into our nation, recognizing that the individual choice *not* to believe is just as valid as the decision to believe.

*Erika Walsh, 19, was born in Kings Park, N.Y., and is a sophomore writing major at Ithaca College. "I am a member of Feminists United at Ithaca, and I am on the executive board of IC Animal Rights. I am a vegetarian and am very passionate about ethical eating and living."*

## Fifth place: College essay contest

# Proud to be a heathen, where at least I know I'm free

*FFRF awarded Emma \$500.*

By Emma Follmer

When I was 7 years old my family moved to a city I now swear I will never return to: Birmingham, Ala. My initial excitement at a new place had completely vanished by my third day of school. In those three days everyone I met had a question for me: "What church do you go to?" I would naively and cheerfully respond: none.

This was not the correct response. By day three I was a confirmed heathen, the worst possibility in an Alabama elementary school.

My classmates had, of course, picked this question up from their parents, who were quick to ask it on their



Emma Follmer

own. As to the inevitable follow-up, "But where do your children get their morals?" my baffled parents would say, "From us, of course."

The idea that life experience and its lessons could be just as effective in teaching morals as a centuries-old fable was apparently a revelation to these steadfast believers. After a while, my astute parents, when asked about church, answered in complete seriousness, "Our Lady of Spain Park." Spain Park was the school campus where the whole family would spend Sunday mornings riding our bikes.

I am similarly baffled as a young adult by the assumption that morals can only be learned from religion. Life experience, history, literature and interaction with peers teach us what our morals should be. This process leaves us room for growth and improvement. We can explore the gray areas, question the standards and norms and push the boundaries. We can adapt.

Those who have learned their mor-

**God was a fraud, and religion was the world's most successful and most harmful con.**

als from a bible and preachers do not have this skill and luxury. They have right and wrong presented to them with little room to deviate and their strict adherence to an unchanging system has left them outdated. So while nonbelievers have been stigmatized as lacking morals, it is the religious who are left with a set of morals that no longer apply to our time and culture. We nonbelievers have been dismissed by the very people who could learn most

from our ideas.

My early experiences with the religious secured my dislike of their practices and a disbelief in a judgmental god. Disbelief was solidified by the works of Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins and by regularly watching Bill Maher. For the sake of fairness, I looked into religion, read the literature, listened to sermons and researched various churches.

I found intolerance, hypocrisy, a holier-than-thou attitude and a distinct lack of logic, reason or critical thinking. My lack of belief went from a vague personality trait to one of my core values. God was a fraud, and religion was the world's most successful and most harmful con.

### Don't pray for me

When voicing this opinion to religious friends, I hear back, "I'll pray for you." Nothing is more infuriating. The act itself is harmless and laughable; the idea behind it is insulting and controlling. Those who do it truly believe that it will have some kind of effect on me and are in essence trying to seriously interfere with my life.

They are asking a higher power to influence me without my knowledge or consent. They do this with the misguided belief that I must be saved.

Can I say with absolute certainty that God does not exist? I can only attempt to convince others through reason and arguments of my absolute pride and comfort in being a nonbeliever. I will respect the rights of others to think dif-

ferently until their beliefs actively and negatively affect me and those around me. I want to do what is right for those who exist in the here and now.

Believers' certainty in the existence of God and an afterlife is absurd, but the most dangerous aspect is their insistence in forcing the practices of their beliefs on me. Their beliefs should have no bearing on my ability to choose what is right for my body or whom I choose to legally marry.

Having to pledge allegiance to my country while affirming the existence of God is evidence of the insidious historical creep of religion. They *must* spread the word and *must* convert all, and do so with the misguided and selfish belief that their god is the one true god and that their religion is the only

way to live. When they fight for what they believe, they do it for a reward, for the promise of an afterlife instead of what it will accomplish on Earth.

I have learned to respect the beliefs of others even though I may disagree with them. I want to do what I can to improve the world we live in for everyone, and I expect no reward. Yet somehow, I am looked down on for these qualities.

It is a good thing that I enjoy irony.

*Emma Follmer, 19, Richmond, Va., is a sophomore at Virginia Commonwealth University. "If all goes according to plan, I will graduate in the spring of 2018 with degrees in English and political science. I will probably throw in a minor in journalism for good measure."*

## Sixth place: College essay contest

# Courage as the prime virtue of atheism

FFRF awarded James \$400.

By James Lambert

I was raised Catholic, which is to say I was baptized and endured the Ontario Catholic school system. God was as real to me in elementary school as the government of Canada, which is to say it existed somewhere well beyond the sphere of what I actually cared about at the age of 8.

A series of events, beginning with my grandfather's death, kindled a profound doubt. This was fueled by the command and authority expressed by the priests at the mandatory school Masses. Who were they to tell me how to behave? What did they know about my life?

The mild inconvenience of Mass and religion class began to evolve into a pressing discomfort. I could not, would not, stand for a moment longer to be told that I was being watched and judged by some divine invigilator, especially one who had as much evidence in favor of his existence as Santa Claus. (I stopped believing in both fairy tales around the same time.)

There is no substance to atheism. Almost by definition it is the absence of substance. It is not itself an ideology, it forces no injunction, it demands no submission. It is a term that has meaning only in juxtaposition to the absurdity of its necessity.

In a world void of theism or deism, the word "atheist" would not exist. Everyone would be an atheist, but we would not need a word to set ourselves apart. In this sense, atheism as a concept is hardly worth defending, as it does not entail anything which can be verified scientifically.

We have all heard the impotent and revealing challenge, "Well, can you



James Lambert

prove God doesn't exist?" Of course not, if only because whatever is meant by "God" is so malleable as to be almost meaningless. So what should we be defending? Why should somebody be proud to be an atheist? After all, atheism is so reviled by some and so lauded by others that it must entail something ideological.

I submit that atheism is an ideological corollary, and it is the principles of logic and reason from whence it stems that causes this conflict. Herein is found the most admirable quality of the atheist position: intellectual courage.

### Fearing god

As an atheist, even as an anti-theist, it is not at all perplexing to me why one could or would believe in the supernatural and, in particular, a god. The phrase "god-fearing" is a brilliant one. It compactly expresses the belief and the motive. Fear is the root of all intellectual and moral capitulations. Out of the terrifying possibility of oblivion was birthed the ancestors of today's superstitions. "What is right

or wrong? Where do we come from?" And, most importantly, "What happens after death?"

One need not be concerned with the strenuous task of answering these questions if one only surrenders his or her intellectual integrity and accepts, without complaint, the authority of a god. At best this manifests as a small blind spot where rational thought is overlooked; at worst it constitutes the complete incapacitation of one's critical faculties. Rather than looking courageously into the face of uncertainty, supernatural claims provide a framework of self-deception. This constitutes a pernicious and insidious threat to human civilization, now more than ever.

Consider the horrors that are explained away by annihilating one's own moral agency out of fear. Global warming? Fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Suicide? Murder? You've transgressed upon our prophet's sanctity. Gay marriage? An abomination. Evolution in science class? A preposterous fabrication. Atheism? A dangerous ideology.

At the heart of the confrontation between faith and reason lies a single question. When we are faced with the most profound existential questions, should we confront them with honest doubt or blind faith? We are all inevitably filled with doubt and fear when confronted with the question of death. Herein lies the deepest motive of blind faith.

Some are willing to accept any tenet, surrender any freedom, sacrifice any integrity if only the fear of death can be assuaged. In this question also lies the most admirable quality of an atheist. The courage of an assertion of ignorance, and of uncertainty, is the key attribute that must be common to all nonbelievers.

We have spent most of recorded history honoring the sacrifice of human moral agency and intellectual integ-

At the heart of the confrontation between faith and reason lies a single question.

rity in the interest of preserving the precious illusion of immortality. We now sit at a crossroad. No longer can we straddle the chasm between what is true and what is "respectful," between what is honest and what is comforting.

Freethinkers appear to be the only ones with the stomach for this conflict. When Danish cartoonists are condemned for drawing, novelists for writing, and magazine editors for satirizing, it seems that the only group willing to stand up and risk life and reputation for intellectual integrity are atheists, agnostics and secularists informed by scientific skepticism and humanism. These together constitute the only group who have maintained their moral responsibility, rather than sell it for the cheap price of false comfort.

My atheism stems from the insistence that no question is too terrifying, no answer is too daunting, no fear is worth surrendering the most wonderful aspects of human existence. The greatest virtue of atheism is the courage to speak the truth.

*James Lambert, 21, was born in Ottawa, Canada. He attends the University of Waterloo (Ontario), where he's in his final year of an honors physics degree program. "I intend to pursue graduate studies in theoretical physics. As a specialization, I'm considering either relativistic quantum mechanics, high energy physics or plasma physics. I have the good fortune of working in a field where literally every subject is fascinating!"*

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## In the news

### 'Out' atheist seeks Texas office



Cristin Padgett

One young Texas woman running for statewide office not afraid to declare her religious nonbelief is Cristin Padgett of Frisco, who has a sales and marketing background and is a Democrat running for the legislature in District 33, which is heavily Republican and includes a small portion of Dallas.

Padgett told the Texas Observer on Nov. 24 that she has "no religious affiliation or belief in a higher being." Her campaign had sent out an email with the subject line "Will Texas Elect an Atheist?"

"I don't want to make it a big deal, but I do want people to open up and think critically about it," Padgett told the Observer. She said she wanted to strike preemptively: "It's going to be a concern for people. People are afraid of what they don't understand."

The blatantly unconstitutional Texas Constitution says in Article I: "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office, or public trust, in this State; nor shall any one be excluded from holding office on account of his religious sentiments, provided he acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being."

"Ethnocentric beliefs" turn people off from the democratic process, Padgett said. "We keep seeing the wrong people put into office by default. Not by choice, by default. And it's sad to watch."

About 25% of voters in the district are millennials, "but the issue is that they don't vote," Padgett said.

### Rare 'Wicked Bible' nets big bucks

Bonhams auction house in London sold one of an estimated 10 extant copies of the "Wicked Bible" Nov. 11. Also known as the sinners' bible, 1,000 copies were printed in 1631. Either a misprint or sabotage resulted in the exhortation "Thou shalt commit adultery" in Exodus 20:14.

All copies were ordered destroyed upon discovery about a year later, and Charles I fined the printers £300 and took away their royal franchise.

The undisclosed purchaser paid \$47,131 for the rare find.

### Amicus brief OK in Ark Encounter

A federal district court refused Oct. 30 to let four Kentucky taxpayers intervene as defendants in a lawsuit brought by promoters of a Noah's ark theme park who are suing the state for refusing to grant the park sales tax rebate incentives designed to promote tourism.

Ark Encounter promoters say the exclusion is viewpoint-based discrimination. The intervenors strongly oppose use of taxes to promote a religious ministry and seek to enforce provisions of the Kentucky Constitution that bar use of funds for that purpose, reported Religion Clause.

Kentucky officials in 2014 awarded the park's developers tax incentives potentially worth more than \$18 million over 10 years. The state later pulled the credits after developers said they would only hire Christian fundamentalists. Ark Encounter officials then sued to get the incentives reinstated.

"[T]he Court is deeply concerned that too permissive a standard for intervention would allow any Kentucky taxpayer to intervene in nearly any suit involving the administration of the state's tax laws," the court ruled. "The proposed intervenors have not identified how the Commonwealth's interest in upholding the Kentucky Constitution differs from theirs such that the Commonwealth cannot represent their interests in the constitutional use of Kentucky residents' tax dollars."

The proposed intervenors will be allowed to file an amicus brief.

### Judge nixes Christian Science claim

The District of Columbia federal district court on Nov. 3 upheld a ruling by the Center for Medicare Services that four Christian Science nursing facilities were not entitled to Medicare reimbursement for furnishing "approved educational activities."

The court concluded that while the plaintiffs' Nursing Arts Training Programs are accredited by the Commission for Accreditation of Christian Science Nursing Organizations/Facilities, the commission's standards do not meet those required by Medicare regulations.

### Hamtramck first with Muslim council

The Christian Science Monitor reported that Hamtramck, Mich., in November became the first U.S. city to elect a majority Muslim city council. Half of the six seats were open, and all three Muslim candidates won, joining one other Muslim on the board.

Hamtramck (pop. 22,000) was historically Polish but now has about 40% of residents from Yemen and Bangladesh. About 19% are African-American and 12% Polish.

### Teacher made senior swear on bible

School officials in Jackson, Ga., admitted a high school teacher was wrong to force Chastity Norwood, 17, to swear on a bible in August that she wasn't pregnant in order to participate in her fourth year in the Student Government Association. Even though Chastity complied and handed over \$25 for dues, the teacher still kept her



### Thy wool be done

"Spend the holidays under the covers with the Virgin Mary," writes Brian Wales, Wisconsin, about this find at Walmart. (Raschel is a type of fabric and a knitting method unrelated to the Abrahamic Rachel, who married her cousin Jacob and gave birth to Joseph and Benjamin.)

out of SGA.

On Nov. 9, Butts County Superintendent Robert Costley announced that Chastity would be allowed to participate. He said the investigation into the incident is ongoing and the teacher has been reassigned. FFRF wrote a complaint letter to the district.

"She knew she had gained weight, but she knew she wasn't pregnant, so it didn't bother her," said Tammy Williams, Chastity's mother, of the initial question. But after the adviser repeated the allegation to Chastity in early September, "that really hurt her. [The teacher] said, 'Your check will be refunded. I hope you graduate and have a nice life.'"

### Courthouse crèche can't be exclusive

U.S. District Judge Timothy Brooks ruled Nov. 12 that the nativity scene on the Baxter County courthouse lawn in Mountain Home, Ark., violates the First Amendment.

The suit was brought by Dessa Blackthorn and the American Humanists Association against the county and Baxter County Judge Mickey Pendergrass. The judge awarded nominal damages of \$1 and said the county must either (1) refrain from placing any religiously sectarian seasonal display on the courthouse grounds or (2) create a public forum for a seasonal display "open to persons of all faiths as well as of no faith at all, without discrimination on the basis of viewpoint."

"The only reason the display is on the courthouse square is that's what the people want," Pendergrass told Ozarks First. While Jesus' birth is depicted, Pendergrass said he considers the display to be secular. "There is also the Christmas tree, the Santa Claus, the sleigh, the lights."

### Canada sets example for America

"Friendly Atheist" Hemant Mehta reported Nov. 5 that more than half of new Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Cabinet (16 of 31) members chose to exclude God from their oath of office. They each said: "I, (name), do solemnly and sincerely promise and swear/declare that I will truly and faithfully, and to the best of my skill and knowledge, execute the powers and trusts reposed in me as (cabinet title)."

Individuals had the choice to replace "swear" with "declare" and to omit "So help me God."

Mehta noted that Arizona U.S. Rep. Kyrsten Sinema is the sole religiously "unaffiliated" member of Congress and chose to take her oath on the U.S. Constitution.

"Stop showing off, Canada. You're embarrassing us," commented Mehta, tongue in cheek.

## Overheard

I see more local groups of nonbelievers organizing themselves. There are local groups that did not exist when I arrived at Iowa State in 1993.

**Hector Avalos, Ames, professor of religious studies (and FFRF member), "Experts: The stigma of atheism has faded in Iowa"**

*Des Moines Register, 10-25-15*

People might think it's because the attendance is down, which it is, but really what's driving the train right now is there are not enough priests to go around.

**Fr. Patrick Ratigan, on plans by the Catholic Diocese of Ogdensburg, NY, to stop having Masses at two parishes**  
*North Country Public Radio, 10-23-15*

## In memoriam

### Herbert H. Bushong, 1916–2015

FFRF Life Member Herbert Harry Bushong, 98, San Antonio, died Oct. 19, 2015. He was born in Catlettsburg, Ky., to John and Laura Bushong and was one of 10 children. In 1940 he married Sally Boggs. He joined the Army Air Corps at the start of World War II and was trained as a radar-jamming technician, receiving numerous service decorations, including the Air Medal and four battle stars.

He earned a B.S. in English from Ohio University and was certified to teach. After earning a master's from the University of Kentucky, he continued to teach high school English. During their 68-year marriage, he and Sally lived throughout the U.S. and in Germany. He was an avid tennis player, continuing to play into his 90s.

Sally preceded him in death in 2008. Survivors include his children: Perry, Bonnie, Cheryl, Sonya, Angela and John, 15 grandchildren and 18 great-grandchildren. He was buried beside his wife in a family plot in the Appalachians of eastern Kentucky.

Herbert very generously sponsored FFRF's high school essay contest in 2010, 2011 and 2012. Sincerest condolences go out to his family and friends.

### Robert H. Nienkirk, 1927–2015

Robert Henry Nienkirk died June 20, 2015, in St. Louis Park, Minn., after an extended illness. He was born Dec. 18, 1927, in Woodstock, Minn. He joined the Navy as soon as he was of age and was proud of his service. He was against the Vietnam War and became a peace activist, twice going to

the Paris Peace Talks in 1970 and 1971 with other activists.

Bob planned to be a farmer, but a car accident left him with severe injuries, so he became a private investigator for an insurance firm, where he worked until 1964. He then moved to Minneapolis, where he became an independent investigator.

Bob was a lifelong atheist and co-founded Friends Free of Theism, which led to him being a co-founder of Minnesota Atheists in 1991. He and his wife Marilyn have been FFRF members since 1985.

"I was never indoctrinated into any supernatural or metaphysical religion," he said. "I have a lot of respect for people who are able to break away from that early indoctrination."

Survivors include three sons, six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Sincerest condolences to Marilyn, his wife of 50 years, and to all who knew Bob.

## FFRF requests 'bible-free' hotel rooms

*Continued from front page*

noted. As an organization whose members embrace reason and science, FFRF would prefer placement of Charles Darwin's "On the Origin of Species" to the invasive Gideons (though the letter doesn't request that).

FFRF does ask the hotel industry to follow the lead of Gansevoort Hotel Groups, which, to provide a friendlier environment, removed religious materials from guest rooms but provides such materials upon request. Many boutique hotels have likewise stopped serving as a conduit for Protestant missionaries. Travelodge (UK) removed bibles from more than 500 hotels last August "in order not to discriminate against any religion."

Thanks to Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel for his research help.

## They said what?

Starbucks removed Christmas from their cups because they hate Jesus. Do you realize that Starbucks wanted to take Christ and Christmas off of their brand new cups? That's why they're just plain red.

**Former pastor Joshua Feuerstein, in his video about the new Starbucks cups**  
11-7-15

Since science is becoming a propaganda machine for liberal causes, we can no longer simply trust scientific research on controversial subjects.

**Writer Tom Trinko, after a study showed that children raised without religion were more altruistic than children of people of faith**

*American Thinker, a conservative website, 11-10-15*

So many in the media want to bring me down because I represent something that they can't stand. But the fact of the matter is, in Romans Chapter 8 it says, 'If God be for you, who can be against you?'

**GOP presidential candidate Ben Carson**  
*Liberty University in Virginia, 11-11-15*

When you go to a concert of death metal, somebody might get killed! You know, you're worshiping death, and then, all of a sudden, people start dying!... Well, you love death so much, you bought the ticket, you love worshiping Satan! Well, let's have some of Satan's religion come in and shoot you!

**Pastor Steven Anderson, in a sermon two days after the attacks in Paris, telling his congregation that the concertgoers at the Bataclan theater who were there to listen to the band Eagles of Death Metal, may have had it coming**

*Raw Story, 11-15-15*

Its job would be fundamentally to revive what we used to do . . . We need

to beam messages around the world about what it means to be . . . part of a Judeo-Christian society.

**Presidential wannabee John Kasich, governor of Ohio, proposing the creation of a new governmental agency to promote Judeo-Christian values**  
*NBC, 11-17-15*

WARNING: Harris County is politically incorrect. We say: Merry Christmas, God Bless America and In God We Trust. We salute our troops and our flag. If this offends you . . . LEAVE!

**Wording added to "Welcome to Harris County, Georgia" sign by Sheriff Mike Jolley**  
*WLTX NBC-TV, Atlanta, 11-24-15*

## Taslina Nasrin convention speech

*Continued from page 15*

misguided individuals at the fringe of society. Islam, the real Islam, is against violence. Islam means peace. Islam means tolerance.

But is this true? Does Islam really preach peace, tolerance and non-violence? Those Muslims who perpetrate crimes in the name of Allah think differently. They believe that what they do is a jihad or holy war. They say that killing the nonbelievers is mandatory for every Muslim. They do not kill be-

Continued from page 15  
cause they break the laws of Islam but because they think this is what a true Muslim should do. Those who blow up their own bodies to kill the people of different faiths do so because they think they will be rewarded in paradise. They hope to be blessed by Allah, eat celestial food, drink pure wine, and enjoy the company of those 72 virgins.

### What the Quran teaches

Are they completely misguided? Let's see what the Quran really teaches.

The Quran says: "Not to make friendship with Jews and Christians" (5:51), "Kill the disbelievers wherever you find them" (2:191), "Murder them and treat them harshly" (9:123).

The Quran says that all those who disbelieve in Islam will be thrown into Hell (5:10), they are filthy, untouchable, impure (9:28), and Muslims are ordered to fight the nonbelievers until no other religion except Islam is left (2:193). It prohibits a Muslim to be a friend to a nonbeliever even if that nonbeliever is the father or the brother of that very Muslim (9:23), (3:28).



Andrew Seidel photo

**Taslina signs a book at the national convention in October.**

It says that the "nonbelievers will go to Hell and will drink boiling water" (14:17). It asks the Muslims to "slay or crucify or cut the hands and feet of the non-believers, that they be expelled from the land with disgrace, and that they shall have great punishment in the world hereafter" (5:34).

He promises that in the fight for His cause if the followers win, they will go to heaven, to the garden of paradise (9:111). There, they will be given

pure beautiful pink-colored large-eyed virgins (56:54).

When the Prophet was in Mecca and he was still not powerful enough, he called for tolerance. He said, "To you be your religion, and to me my religion" (109:6). This famous quote is often misused to prove that the general principle of the Quran is one of tolerance. He advised his follower to speak well of their enemies (2: 83), exhorted them to be patient (20:103), and said "there is no compulsion in religion" (2:256). But all that changed drastically when he came to power. Then killing and slaying the nonbelievers was justified in innumerable verses with harshness and without mercy. The verses quoted to prove Islam's tolerance ignore many other verses that bear no trace of tolerance or forgiveness. Is it normal that a book revealed by Allah, the supernatural god, should have so many serious contradictions?

These are not stories but records from authentic Islamic history and the Hadiths. One can argue that these behaviors were not unknown or unusual for the conquerors and leaders of the medieval world, but these are not the activities befitting a peaceful saint and certainly not of someone who claimed to be the Mercy of God for all the creation.

There is a conflict in the world, the conflict is between two different ideas: secularism and fundamentalism. I don't agree with those who think the conflict is between religions or between the East and the West. To me, this conflict is basically between rational, logical thinking and irrational blind faith. To me, this is a conflict between modernity and anti-modernism.

## When I studied other religions, I found they, too, oppressed women.

While some strive to go forward, others strive to go backward. This is a conflict between innovation and tradition, between those who value freedom and those who do not.

I have been fighting every day against injustices and inequalities, against religious terrorism and superstition, against bigotry and obscurantism. Fighting for human rights, women's rights, freedom of expression and humanism. I do not fear to tell the truth, come what may. When the emperor has no clothes, I do not hesitate to say that the emperor never had any clothes.

*Taslina Nasrin received FFRF's Emperor Has No Clothes Award. She has been living under a death fatwa for blasphemy by Bangladesh imams since 1993. She became an anesthesiologist, poet and syndicated columnist. Her novella, Shame, which deals with Muslim discrimination against Hindus, was banned, then brought bounties on her head. She fled to Sweden for asylum, then settled in India. After escalating death threats and street executions of other Bangladesh atheist writers this year, she left India, with the help of FFRF and CFI. She received a Freethought Heroine Award from FFRF in 2002. Other books include French Lover, Mayebela: My Bengali Girlhood, No Country for Women, All About Women.*

## Letterbox

### Why founders separated church, state

Religion provides emotional comfort, support and charity to billions of people around the world, so why did America's founding fathers go out of their way to separate church and state and why did they choose to challenge religious authority and power by doing so? Our founders recognized throughout human history that kings, dictators, demagogues and clerics seeking earthly power often used an indoctrinated "divine" right to coerce, persecute and make war on their rivals and/or enemies.

Our founders addressed the threat and potential for a supremacist totalitarian religious ideology in America by brilliantly and purposefully separating church and state in our Constitution. Shortsighted activists on America's Religious Right who tirelessly work to tear down or subvert Jefferson's iconic wall of church/state separation would do well to consider the bloody sectarian wars raging through our world today where church/state separation and the religious freedom that accompanies it are not the order of the day. There are some things our founding fathers just got right and the separation of church and state, our most important guarantor of religious freedom, is perhaps foremost among them.

**Bruce Baldwin**  
Pennsylvania

### Jewish Kapparot ritual should be ended

I think it is horrible that Hasidic groups would have ordered 50,000 chickens for a mass slaughter (as part of Kapparot, the Jewish ritual on the eve of Yom Kippur). It is illegal to torture animals anywhere in the U.S. They should save the chickens' lives and not torture them. If I could, and knew how to sue, I would sue them for the amount of money for the amount of chickens they already have killed. Just because it is a religion which they are practicing does not mean that they should. It is very inhumane. By the way, I am not a vegetarian, but I disagree with their customs because I think it is horrible what they are doing. I don't think that people who don't like what these Hasidim are doing are attacking their religious freedom. They are just trying to give the chickens a longer life, and, of course, to stop even more inhumane things from happening.

Also, if they do continue, they should at least clean up the carnage themselves and not have other people clean up their tortured dead chickens.  
**Lilli Jacobsen, age 11**  
Ohio

### Thanks to all for FFRF convention

The speakers at the recent Madison conference contributed so much important information to us.

Steven Hewett's presentation was excellent and the visuals really added to the impact his story had on us. His understanding of law and our constitution were clearly strengthened by his former position as a police officer and as a war veteran. When he saw that a Christian flag was placed at a war memorial, he took action to make it legally right. We are so lucky to have someone stand up and win an injustice.

After hearing Hewett's story, perhaps they can be further challenged by watching the film by Jeremiah Camara, "Contradiction: A Question of Faith." Jeremiah made no judgments in his documentary. Simple and logical questions were very effective and often stumped the subject.

Ron Reagan lit up the room and is a great person to help give voice to letting reason and science prevail.

Taslina Nasrin's story is a jaw-dropping horror. Taslima, you may not have a country to claim, but you belong to and are part of our world. We're glad to have you!

I can't wait to read Kevin Kruse's book *One Nation Under God, How Corporate America Invented Christian America*. The title alone makes so much sense.

And to Douglas Marshall, Dan Barker, Brooke Mulder, Rita Swan, Thomas Sheedy, Anita Weier and Senator Chambers: You persevered in stressful situations and created change that we needed.

To the staff attorneys and legal fellows: You're incredible. I'm so glad you have actual offices to do your "ginormous" workloads! The new headquarters is something to be proud of.

To Annie Laurie and the unforgettable memory of your mother, look what you started and accomplished!

**Deborah Hilpipre**  
Minnesota

### Contact magazine about 'power of prayer'

(Sigh.) Not too long ago, we had to upbraid AARP for publishing an article praising prayer in its magazine. Now, we've gotta do it all over again to the Saturday Evening Post.

The cover article of its Nov./Dec. issue is "The Power of Prayer," by Ellen Michaud, author of *Blessed: Living A Grateful Life*. Dig this subheading: "Communal prayer is a joyous experience that can take us to higher ground." (Groan.)

To compound the headache, the article is immediately followed by "Evidence of Angels," by — wait for it — Billy Graham.

I just got the magazine, so I haven't read the complete articles yet. I may have to nerve myself up to do that. But once I've read them, I'll write to the Post and forward my message to you as well.

**Andrew C. Jones**  
Michigan

P.S. It was a great idea to publish all the convention coverage in a separate insert. As much as I enjoy the coverage (and envy the people I see in the pictures), it did tend to overwhelm everything else in the paper.

*Editor's note: Thanks for the heads up, Andrew! FFRF sent out an Action Alert last month asking members to contact the Saturday Evening Post about its cover story. Go to [ffrf.org/news/action](http://ffrf.org/news/action).*

### Digging deeper, atheism is *not* a choice

Thank you for publishing the winning essays in your contests for high school students. It was edifying to read them, especially the ones from freethinkers of color. I'm not sure the way Joeline Kuaana characterized the difference between discrimination against atheists and discrimination against people of color is quite right though.



### Magnetic sign

This scene would be perfect if only Minnesota "Lifer" Bill van Druuten could have snared a 666 license plate! Bill (founder of FFRF's Lake Superior Freethinkers Chapter) writes: "Two or three people a year come over and get information from me when I'm parked. I carry pamphlets to give them. I've never had any adverse commentary or car damage."

She suggests that atheism is a choice, whereas race is not. I do not feel, however, that I could choose to believe in God any more than most adults could choose to believe in Santa Claus. I wonder if the difference is more in the fact that atheists can choose where, when, and to whom they reveal their atheism, whereas color is essentially impossible to keep secret.

I realize that atheism is also a conclusion of our own thinking, whereas our race is not, but I can't quite figure out why that difference would make a difference. I think the main reason it is offensive to equate the two is not because it is worse to discriminate on the basis of one than on the other, but because discrimination against people of color is hugely more pervasive and pernicious in this country than discrimination against atheists.

My atheist ancestors were not slaves. The police haven't been busying themselves killing atheists. I have not suffered any educational or occupational disadvantages based on my atheism. In fact, I have suffered absolutely no discrimination based on my atheism, and I doubt there is one single person of color in our country who can say they have suffered absolutely no discrimination based on being a person of color.

If atheists were treated as badly as persons of color, I think it would be just as bad, but, the fact is (maybe in part because we can keep it secret), we're not.

**Gail Merten**  
Washington, D.C.

### Thanks for the great Madison convention

I want to thank you, as well as your staff and supporters, for the terrific convention. It was enjoyable, entertaining, and most of all, informative. Kevin Kruse's talk on "How Corporate America Invented Christian America" was a big eye-opener for me, and I mean to talk that around my fellow atheists whenever I get the chance.

Here's looking forward to Pittsburgh next year. All my best to the gang at Freethought Hall.

**Loren Miller**  
Ohio

several decades, I have daily read two newspapers and assorted journals and magazines. My only recollection of a Jew using a car bomb was a revenge killing of an assassin.

Perhaps I missed a couple more, but certainly this was not a common or widespread practice. I do remember, however, thousands of injuries and deaths caused by Arabs using car bombs against our troops in the Middle East and their continued use there against civilian targets.

**S. Sheldon Katz**  
New York

### Welcome mat includes agnostics

I was glad to see that in our last issue you did mention agnostics being included. I wish you would emphasize that a little more. Atheists are always mentioned in your headlines, but I would really like to see you emphasize that agnostics are welcome.

**John Schepman**  
Missouri

*Editor's note: FFRF has no litmus test and was purposefully created to welcome freethinkers of all stripes. No matter what we call ourselves, we all disbelieve in the same gods!*

•••

In "Time for agnostics to get real?" [Nov15] David Morse says, "The 'god' or 'no god' question is an unprovable." He may not realize that it's not his responsibility to try to disprove the wild claims made by supernaturalists. It's their responsibility to provide credible, objective evidence to back their claims. There is no such thing as a burden of disproof to be foisted onto the skeptic.

Also, I applaud David Lubeck's effort to raise public awareness of the number of nonbelievers out here. I, too, ink out the religious graffiti on currency that passes through my hands, but I've also found a way to remove it from coins: a hand-held Dremel grinder!

**Lee Helms**  
Michigan

### Why we truly need the Constitution

"True evil" can only survive in this world if it is well-camouflaged. There are few, if any, better places to hide than the irrational invisible god worship of Jesus, Allah and Yahweh.

For our country it has always been an issue that, while the U.S. Constitution attempts to be tolerant of all religious beliefs, very few religions are tolerant

of the humanist, rational and, yes, liberal principles of the Constitution.

The major religions are all tied to rigid dogmatic beliefs passed along by one of the invisible gods. It is ironic that many of these beliefs are contradictory or ambiguous, and often open to bizarre fragmented interpretation with no checks or balance. It's the perfect breeding ground for "true evil."

To put another way, one of the primary reasons we even need a constitution is because long ago these religions failed to offer a moral social order that works. The U.S. Constitution provides a process for orderly change often based on compromise, change that meets the will of the majority while maintaining basic rights. Imperfect, perhaps, but that is all I need.

**John Mathwick**  
Wisconsin

## Benefits of pot, even for 98-year-old

I am about to receive my state marijuana card that makes me eligible to receive marijuana in medical form in hopes it cures my unsteadiness that has resulted from the Percocet I've taken for back spasms. I have been informed that I will be the oldest (98) person who has been prescribed marijuana in Connecticut and likely the whole U.S. Of course, that's legally.

While I will probably take it in solid form, I'm already planning to have my picture taken smoking it to be used as a testimonial for how I attribute my longevity. How I can attribute my longevity to having used it such a short time? I will state that I was on the verge of committing suicide, with Percocet being no help, but now am pain-free and life is worth living again. It should be worth a lot of money to one of the pot dispensaries.

Hopefully, the first thing I do with that money will be to get a Life Membership in FFRF. That's one way of using a drug for beneficial purposes.

Our primary care doctor and pot doctor were in hysterics imagining my 100-year-old wife and her 98-year-old husband pictured smoking pot. They envisioned it being distributed worldwide. To add to the humor, I told the girl taking my picture, a necessity for receiving the card, to try to make it look good since it will probably be used with my obituary.

Hope this gives you a little humor to brighten your day.

**Alton Eliason**  
Connecticut

## Why not the welcoming hand of Plato?

How can "Jesus welcome[s] you to Hawkins"? Could Plato welcome you to Hawkins?

**John Carley**  
Missouri

## Offer readers historical info as well

Challenging religious invocations is fine. An alternative is positive. I suggest Freethought Today regularly publish short quotes and commentaries from our history that are instructive and appropriate for learning the history of our nation. These could be available for civic and school ceremonies and replace prayers. No one could object to hearing from Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Paine, etc. They need not comment on separation of church and state, but on the principles of our nation and civilization.

Example: "A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason." (Thomas Paine, "Common Sense")

**Don Ryan**  
California

**Atheists not a religion, just asking for neutrality**  
Fred Hayse is completely wrong when he says "religion of atheism" ("Atheists trying to stack laws in their favor" Sept. 25). That is like saying bald is a color of hair, not collecting stamps is a hobby.  
All we atheists ask is the government remain neutral. Anytime it favors religion in any form it causes trouble. The world owes much to atheists, turn on a light, watch a movie, listen to recorded music, use an Apple computer, thank an atheist. All invented by atheists.  
**Ben Hart, Delhi Township**

## Nice job, Ben

In this recent letter to the Cincinnati Enquirer, Ohio member Ben Hart sets the record straight.

## Why don't they pray for extra nuns?

The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in La Crosse, Wis., have been continuously praying since 1878. The nuns take two-hour shifts and then fresh "pray-ers" take their places.

Now there are fewer Franciscan Sisters. The nuns are dying faster than replacements come aboard. The solution has been to allow for the laity to take up the slack. One can only imagine in horror how war, poverty, criminality and dread disease would increase if the pray-ers would stop their prayers.

Fortunately, I have developed a perfect solution to the dilemma. The nuns need to pray for more new nuns. I don't know why they didn't think of that.

**Michael Burton**  
Michigan

## FFRF right about Texas park cross

I read about the hysteria in Port Neches, Texas, about a cross in the park. I am with you that you advise the city of First Amendment issues. It's funny how FFRF calmly and lawfully tells local governments that their PDC (public display of Christianity) is unlawful. Yet the hysteria continues just to die off quickly.

Keep up the hard work.

**Pierre Nadeau**  
North Carolina

## It's true: Jesus had four dads

Pastor Roy Herberger got it partially right when he stated (on a sign outside his church in Buffalo): "Jesus had two dads." Thinking clearly, if that is possible regarding religion, Jesus had four dads. His dads were:

1. God the Father
2. God the Holy Ghost
3. Joseph
4. Jesus himself, since the Catholics claim there is only one true god, then Jesus must also be his own father if he is also a god.

It's a dizzying thought, isn't it?

**George Saunders**  
New York

## Better use for Gideon bibles seen

I love hearing about FFRF's work but hate the constant need for the work to be done. So, to lighten the atmosphere of the atheist/holier-than-thou war, I offer the following:

A few years ago, a friend of mine told me about a summer he spent about 20 years ago as a volunteer at a Russian orphanage. He has a doctorate in psychology and had always wanted to help children and visit Russia. So it was a win-win for all involved.

He was assigned to work at a small orphanage for boys in a rural area. It was so rural there were no indoor bathrooms. In fact, there were no outhouses either. To relieve oneself, a deep trench was dug and two logs were placed horizontally and parallel to each other over the trench. The trick to using this primitive privy was to walk into the logs and squat. The desired result was twofold: to not soil the logs and to not fall in when the logs were wet or icy.

The main reason in passing on this bit of trivia is this: The orphanage was extremely low on funds and toilet paper was very low on the list of items on which to spend money. In place of toilet paper, the orphanage consumed cases and cases of Gideon bibles that were donated for the purpose of spreading Christian values.

I feel the use of each page was fulfilling its destiny. Feel free to think of this and smile whenever you see a Gideon. How you choose to use it is up to you!

**Kent Nielsen**  
California

## Scream reminds me to donate to FFRF

A woman's scream reminded me, in a roundabout way, that I have not made a contribution to FFRF in a quite a while.

A toad had found its way into my shop area, just as a woman co-worker walked back into the shop. This woman startles very easily and has a piercing scream. So on seeing the toad, she of course screamed.

This made me wonder about the evolution behind that scream. It certainly would have survival value. It is so loud and piercing that it would carry a long way, bringing help. It may not bring help in time every time, but it seems to have helped often enough that the trait was passed along.

That somehow reminded me that I have not sent a contribution to FFRF recently. Perhaps it was science, schools and keeping things like intelligent design out of schools. So I am enclosing a small contribution. I wish it could be more.

**Robert Harjamaki**  
Minnesota

## Hypatia would welcome your helping hand

Freethought fiction is pretty hard to find. Getting it published isn't easy either. I'm trying to publish my new novel *Mythos Christos* using Amazon's Kindle Scout under the pen name Edwin Herbert. I have to get a sizable number of nominations by Dec. 13 to be accepted for publication. (You can nominate it at [kindlescout.amazon.com/p/108Q6BH7GRRQ](http://kindlescout.amazon.com/p/108Q6BH7GRRQ) if you have or can set up an Amazon account.)

Hypatia (a name familiar to many FFRF'ers) is a strong female character who plays a key role in the novel. From the online description: "A Vati-



## 'Día de los Muertos'

"Bless you Father, for you have Sinned" is the name of this 59-inch-high "mixed media on wood" work by California artist Esteban Ismael Duran displayed at the Chico Art Center's "Day of the Dead" show commemorating the Hispanic festival. It includes clippings about clergy sex abuse and is a work that Duran considers unfinished. FFRF member Dan Fregin, who is a gallery docent, visited with Duran and shared a recent black collar crime blotter with him. "He expressed some hope that this would lead to further exposure of this problem," notes Dan.

can team invites the young scholar Lex Thomasson to Egypt to help solve a sequence of puzzles left by 5th century philosopher Hypatia in her attempt to preserve the truth about the hidden origins of Christianity, information the Church did not want exposed."

If *Mythos Christos* is accepted for publication, all nominators will receive a free eBook copy shortly before your solstice celebrations! Thank you.

**Ed Neumann**  
Wisconsin

## Cult of Christians is overbearing, rude

I am proud to be a member of FFRF. I have moved back to Arizona. Unfortunately, I ran into some really aggressive members of that cult called "Christians" again in Colorado — evangelical, overbearing and just plain rude.

No, I don't want them to "witness" to me. I don't want to hear their "testimony." Don't those people know that their religion was started in 325 A.D. at the Council of Nicaea? Why do those people believe those lies?

I think I know what it is: They are weak. They need something to believe in because they cannot believe in themselves. All this "Jesus" person is something to focus their energy on. When they say, "I overcame cancer because Jesus performed a miracle," what they are really saying is that they did it themselves. But they don't understand that. They're not evolved enough or smart enough to realize that.

Thank you for sticking up to those people. We nonbelievers need your organization.

**Michael Mroz**  
Arizona

# Black Collar Crime Blotter

Compiled by Bill Dunn

## Arrested / Charged

**Joseph Raleigh, 34, Miller, SD:** Attempted commercial sex trafficking of a child, attempted enticement of a minor using the Internet and 2 counts of soliciting a minor for sex. Raleigh, pastor at First Baptist Church, faces state and federal charges.

In an affidavit, investigator Jason Jares said he posed online Oct. 16 "offering a 15-year-old female for prostitution," quoted prices for various services and shared an "age-regressed photograph of an adult female portrayed as a juvenile." Raleigh had \$300 in cash when they met later in Blunt and agreed to pay for "30 to 40 minutes," Jares alleged. *Source: Pierre Capital Journal, 11-17-15*

**Paul McLachlan, 82, Brisbane, Australia:** Procuring indecent practices between males, four counts of indecently dealing with a boy under 17 and 2 counts of unlawful indecent assault. McLachlan headed the Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane's media office in the 1970s, when the crimes allegedly occurred. He didn't appear at arraignment due to medical issues. *Source: 9news.com.au, 11-16-15*

**Sherman R. Smith Sr., 56, Algiers, LA:** Aggravated rape, sexual battery, molestation of a juvenile or person with a mental or physical disability and 2 counts of indecent behavior with a juvenile. Smith, pastor at Second Highway Baptist Church in Marrero, is charged with molesting 3 female juveniles more than 10 years ago, including an adult relative who alleges she was assaulted as a child. *Source: WVUE, 11-12-15*

**Khaled al-Mughrabi, Jerusalem:** Incitement to violence. Al-Mughrabi, a Palestinian imam who preached at Al-Aqsa Mosque, reportedly said in a video, "We will go after the Jews everywhere. They won't escape us, they won't be able to escape us. The children of Israel will all be wiped out."

Earlier this year, he was questioned by police after a video surfaced in which he told worshippers that Jews kidnap non-Jewish children to extract their blood and that Jews use their control of the pharmaceutical industry to spread disease. *Source: Times of Israel, 11-12-15*

**Neru Leuea, aka Amitaunai Neru, 49, Narandera, Australia:** Aggravated sexual assault/victim under age 16. Leuea, pastor at St. Mel's Catholic Parish, is charged with molesting a 10-year-old girl between September 2002 and January 2003. Magistrate Erin Kennedy denied bail.

"I acknowledge that this news will cause a great deal of shock and distress within the diocese," said Bishop Gerard Hanna of the Diocese of Wagga Wagga, New South Wales. *Source: Bega District News, 11-12-15*

**Anthony Waller, 39, Jonesboro, AR:** 2 counts of rape. Waller was youth minister at First Assembly of God from 1999 until last May, when he was fired after being charged with 50 counts of video voyeurism.

Police Detective Brandon King said the alleged rape victims were 10 and 11 years old. The rape and voyeurism charges are intertwined.

It was reported in May that his computer had "thousands of images of prepubescent girls either completely nude or scantily clad," court papers said. Waller's wife found the images on a computer they shared. They have a 5-year-old daughter. It's also alleged he took secret videos of girls in bathrooms and showers.

"I was completely shocked," his mother told a reporter. "I mean, he's always been a good man." *Source: Democrat-Gazette, 11-10-15*

**Roy Lovatt, 70, Redcar, England:** 5 counts of indecent assault and 7 counts of serious sexual offense. Lovatt, a retired Catholic priest, is charged with alleged abuse at the former Thorp Arch Grange Children's Home in Wetherby in the 1970s and 1980s. *Source: Yorkshire Post, 11-10-15*

**Samuel Kee, 39, Lake Zurich, IL:** 4 counts of aggravated criminal sexual abuse. Kee resigned as pastor of teaching and discipleship at North Suburban Free Evangelical Church in Deerfield after being charged.

Kee walked into the police station and said he wanted to confess to a crime, said Deerfield Detective Rick Bernas. "This is not the way it usually happens. We started with the confession and kind of worked backwards."

Bernas alleged Kee admitted touching a girl, who was 16 in 2014, on the genitals. "We talked to the juvenile victim to confirm the facts and the next day he was charged." *Source: Daily North Shore, 11-9-15*

**Mario Condis, 60, Ocala, FL:** Grand theft and 3 counts of petit theft. After getting a call from Blessed Trinity Catholic Church about an usher suspected of stealing, deputies set up



surveillance cameras.

According to the Marion County Sheriff's Office, the video showed Condis taking money from collection baskets while parishioners' heads were bowed in prayer during Spanish Mass. He had \$350 in cash when arrested at church. *Source: WKMG, 11-9-15*

**Sean P. Aday, 38, Lake Forest, CA:** Rape, sodomy, penetration with a foreign object and sexual assault. Aday is accused by several females in their late teens to early 20s of assaults while he was youth pastor at Grace Community Church. Assaults are alleged over a period of years inside the church, on church property, in various Orange County locations and during church-sponsored trips to Costa Rica, Moldova and South Africa, according to the Sheriff's Office. *Source: KTLA, 11-7-15*

**Dino Rustin, 35, Bradenton, FL:** Willfully abusing a child without great harm. Rustin, lead pastor at First Presbyterian Church, allegedly grabbed a 10-year-old boy "by the back of his neck, lifted him off the ground and then pulled him from the sidewalk into the grass." The boy broke free and called 911. The incident was witnessed by others, the police report said. *Source: Bradenton Patch, 11-7-15*

**Camerius J. "Minister" Mills, 29, Edison, GA:** 2nd-degree sodomy and 3 counts each of 2nd-degree rape and traveling to meet a child for the purpose of having sex. Mills was pastor of St. Luke Baptist Church in Abbeville, AL, when he met the alleged victim, a 15-year-old female church member, in late 2014.

Led from the courtroom after arraignment, Mills told reporters he apologizes to the victim and seeks forgiveness from God.

"I questioned him, and he eventually admitted to everything," said investigator Keith Cauthen. "He knew better, he was a pastor. He befriended her and he took advantage of her." *Source: Dothan Eagle, 11-6-15*

**'[Camerius Mills] knew better, he was a pastor. He befriended her and he took advantage of her.'** — investigator Keith Cauthen

**Terry D. Ruebush, 56, Albert, KS:** Sexual exploitation of a child. "In June, our office had received a report from the Sedgwick County cyber-crimes unit that there was some suspicious Internet traffic," said Barton County Sheriff Brian Bellendir. The charge involves alleged possession of child pornography.

Ruebush at the time was pastor at Great Bend Seventh-day Adventist Church, which also operates a K-8 school, and at several other Adventist churches. *Source: Great Bend Tribune, 11-4-15*

**Stephen Pohl, 57, Louisville, KY:** Accessing and viewing child pornography. First charged in August by criminal complaint, Pohl was indicted by a federal grand jury for alleged illegal computer use as pastor at St. Margaret Mary Catholic Church earlier this year.

A parent whose child attends the church told police the child was uncomfortable when Pohl asked the child to pose for a photo. Authorities then started investigating. *Source: Courier-Journal, 11-3-15*

**Jairon Pena, 36, Somerville, NJ:** Making a false public alarm, false swearing and making a fictitious police report. Pena, pastor of New

Covenant Missionary Baptist Church, told police a story that started to unravel after they responded to a 911 call at the church.

Pena said 2 men and a woman stomped on bibles and ridiculed God while tying him up, stuffed a rag in his mouth and taped a paper with misspelled Arabic words to his body. Police suspicions were aroused by the lack of marks on his body. *Source: Courier News, 11-2-15*

**Lucio Angel Vallejo Balda, 54, Vatican City,** is charged by the Vatican with misappropriation and disclosure of classified documents and information. Msgr. Balda, a Spanish prelate, served on a commission set up by Pope Francis to advise him on economic reform. Commissioner **Francesca Chaouqui, 33,** dubbed a "sex bomb" by media, was also arrested. Vatican prosecutor Roberto Zannotti said Chaouqui was released from custody because she agreed to cooperate and isn't considered a flight risk. *Source: AFP, 11-2-15*

**Richard A. Patton, 70, Mecosta, MI:** 2 counts each of using computers to commit a crime and possessing sexually abusive material involving children.

Patton resigned as music minister at New Hope United Methodist Church after allegedly admitting to police he typed certain search entries. The investigation started after he brought a computer to Best Buy for repairs. *Source: mlive.com, 10-29-15*

**David Murphy, Vienna, OH:** Misdemeanor or cruelty to animals. Murphy, pastor at Apostolic Bible Church, is charged with shooting a 15-month-old black Lab named Tucker. Kimberly Ellis, Tucker's owner, said he had to be euthanized due to a shattered vertebrae.

Murphy said he was just trying to scare Tucker and another dog away from his chickens. "I shot at the dogs, and I did not intend to hit them. I'm sorry that happened."

The complaint said Ellis reported 4 shots fired, with 3 of them striking Tucker. *Source: WKBN, 10-26-15*

**Kevin G. Sloniker, 30, Coeur d'Alene, ID:** Rape and 2 counts of felony lewd conduct. Sloniker, a long-haul trucker, allegedly admitted to molesting 9 boys during the past 10 years while involved with youth camps at Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, affiliated with the conservative Society of St. Pius X.

Sloniker, who was arrested in Menomonie, WI, and extradited to Idaho, also took part in altar boy training through the Guild of St. Stephen.

Investigators learned Sloniker attended St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary in Winona, MN, but was removed from the seminary in 2005 after he allegedly tried to circumise himself. *Source: Spokesman-Review, 10-26-15*

**Yosef Y. Aronow, Tel Aviv:** Fraud, fraud under aggravating circumstances, breach of trust, tax evasion and falsifying corporate documents. Aronow, the U.S.-born head of the Orthodox Jewish group Chabad Youth, is accused of embezzling millions from the charitable organization, which also gets government funding.

Allegations first surfaced in 2007, but the investigation repeatedly stalled due to intense pressure brought by Chabad and its political allies in the State Prosecutor's Office, reports said. As much as \$60 million may be involved. *Source: Failed Messiah, 10-25-15*

**An unidentified assistant principal, 34, River Grove, IL:** The suspect, an administrator at Guerin Catholic High School, was arrested for allegations of inappropriate sexual contact in September with a 17-year-old student. He has not yet been charged.

He was also musical director at St. William Catholic Church in Chicago, where the incident is alleged to have occurred. "We are monitoring the situation and will continue to cooperate with

the civil authorities," said a statement from the Archdiocese of Chicago. *Source: Chicago Tribune, 10-23-15*

**Maqsood Harrington, 28, Bethlehem, W.VA:** Sexual abuse and sexual abuse by a person of trust. Harrington, head counselor at Chambers YMCA in Elm Grove, is charged with assaulting his 17-year-old assistant.

The complaint alleges he pulled down her pants in the hall while she was taking a photo of a chart on the wall, exposed himself and forced her to touch him. She declined to go into another room with him when asked. *Source: AP, 10-23-15*

**Edwin White, 39, Mobile, AL:** 3 counts of child sex abuse. White, associate minister at First Baptist Church of Prichard, is accused of acts against 3 victims younger than 12.

Court records list 12 arrests on various charges for White. He was accused of child sexual abuse in 2009 but not prosecuted. Church members told Fox10 News off camera they don't think White is guilty. *Source: WALA, 10-22-15*

**Bobby Barnhill, 59, Rye, CO:** Domestic harassment. Barnhill, pastor of First United Methodist Church of Trinidad, was arrested at home after deputies were called. The complaint includes allegations he was drinking and verbally abusive with children present.

The church announced it was cutting ties with Barnhill, who has a 2004 felony drug conviction. *Source: Chronicle-News, 10-22-15*

**David Pesci, 24, East Brady, PA:** Sexual assault and corruption of minors. Pesci, youth pastor at First Baptist Church, is accused of starting a relationship with a 9th-grade girl in his youth group. The complaint alleges kissing and fondling, including sexual touching on the outside of the girl's clothes in August at a city park. *Source: KDKA, 10-22-15*

**Shimon Amar, 36, Okafim, Israel:** Sexual assault. Amar, a Sephardic rabbi, is accused of a string of assaults, including penetration, on girls who came to him for guidance over a period of years. *Source: Arutz Sheva, 10-21-15*

## Pleaded / Convicted

**Aryeh "Larry" Dudovitz, 48, Chicago,** was found guilty at a bench trial of criminal sexual assault of a minor. Dudovitz, an Orthodox rabbi and father of 9, was convicted of orally copulating a 15-year-old boy while he slept at his home, where the rabbi had joined the family after a Sukkot service.

The victim reported the incident in 2006 and a state agency substantiated allegations involving the boy and 7 other victims in 2007, but prosecutors didn't file charges until 2013. Dudovitz rejected a plea deal calling for 5 years in prison and now faces up to 15 years. *Source: dnafo.com, 11-16-15*

**Mack C. Andrews, 55, Thomasville, AL:** Pleaded guilty to multiple counts of rape, sexual abuse, attempted rape, sodomy and sexual torture the day his trial was to start. A plea agreement calls for him to serve 15 years in prison.

"My ex-pastor is my rapist," alleged victim "Jane" told a reporter. She said she lost her virginity to Andrews, pastor of United Pentecostal Church, on her father's grave when she was 9. "He told me if I didn't say anything, he would come back and put flowers on the grave. If I did, he said demons would come and get me from my bed."

Andrews was arrested in 2013 on charges involving at least 4 underage girls. Jane alleged he started grooming her for intercourse when she was 7 with drumsticks, pens, letter openers, the talons of a brass eagle and a flashlight. The church "was like a cult," she said. "He was the leader, and we were the sacrifices." *Source: al.com, 11-16/9-22-15*

**Willie Littleton, 63, Algiers, LA:** Pleaded guilty to aggravated battery. Littleton, pastor of Greater Morning Star Baptist Church, was charged with firing a gun at 2 men who were trying to steal copper from an air-conditioning unit by the church. One was struck in the head. Both were charged with theft and criminal damage.

Louisiana law says deadly force "must be reasonable and apparently necessary" to stop a would-be robber. Prosecutors determined Littleton's actions fell short of that standard. *Source: New Orleans Advocate, 11-10-15*

**Christopher R. Olague, 43, Buena Park, CA:** Guilty by jury of kidnapping for child molestation, lewd acts on a child, attempting to dissuade a witness and possession of child pornography. Olague was a pastor at Refuge Southland Church and youth soccer coach in 2011 when he allegedly molested an 8-year-old girl in a parking lot after picking her up on the pretense of playing with his children.

After the girl started crying, he gave her \$40 and told her to keep quiet, court records said. Police later discovered over 1,000 images and 16 videos of child porn in his possession.

Source: *OC Register*, 11-3-15

**Michael Mensah, Legon, Ghana:** Pleaded guilty to 2 counts of power theft and intentionally interfering with supply of electricity. Mensah, founder of the Global Prayer Palace, agreed to repay the state-owned utility about 4,000 cedis (\$1,000). Source: *Ghana Web*, 11-2-15

**John Thomas Matthew Lee, 50, Millsboro, DE:** Pleaded guilty to production and distribution of child pornography. Lee, a Navy chaplain with the rank of lieutenant commander, was charged after the Center for Missing and Exploited Children passed along a tip in 2013 showing Lee had tried to upload an image of 3 naked boys on a bed.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Edward McAndrew alleged in court that Lee possessed tens of thousands of child porn images, hundreds of videos and social media chats with minors.

He was court-martialed in 2007 on charges including forcible sodomy and failing to tell a sex partner he was HIV-positive and was sentenced to no more than 2 years in prison. Source: *News Journal*, 10-30-15

**Vickery House, 69, Handcross, England:** Guilty of 5 counts of indecent assault. House, a retired Anglican priest, was first accused of molesting young males in 1970, when an alleged victim was 14.

Four boys alleged they were assaulted when they took part in a church program called Give a Year for Christ. Source: *Belfast Telegraph*, 10-27-15

**Kong Hee, 51, Singapore:** Criminal breach of trust. Kong, founder of City Harvest megachurch, and 5 aides were found guilty of misappropriating millions of dollars to promote the singing career of Hee's wife, Sun Ho, who was not charged.

A scheme called "round-tripping" was used to channel money from a building fund and investments into sham bonds. The trial dragged on for 2 years. Source: *The Guardian*, 10-21-15

## Investigators learned Sloniker attended St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary in Winona, MN, but was removed from the seminary in 2005 after he allegedly tried to circumcise himself.

### Sentenced

**Roger Wakely, 73, Exeter, England:** 13 years in prison after being found guilty of 25 counts of indecent assault and 2 counts of attempted buggery, all involving 4 male victims under age 16. Crimes were alleged from the 1960s to early 1980s while Wakely was a pastor and teacher at Bishop Wand Church of England School and Ealing Grammar School.

Prosecutor Jonathan Davies said Wakely groomed the boys and offered them money, fish and chips and model airplanes to "keep them quiet." Source: *Get Surrey*, 11-12-15

**Brian Kandare, 30, and Precious Kandare, 37, Wolverhampton, England:** 112 months and 96 months, respectively, in prison after being found liable for the 2014 death of their daughter Rebecca at 8 months. The Kandares belong to the Apostolic Church of God, which eschews medical treatment.

Rebecca weighed 11 lbs., 11 ozs. when she died of pneumonia and malnutrition at the church. Testimony said the couple believed "evil spirits" were the source of her condition. Source: *Express & Star*, 11-11-15

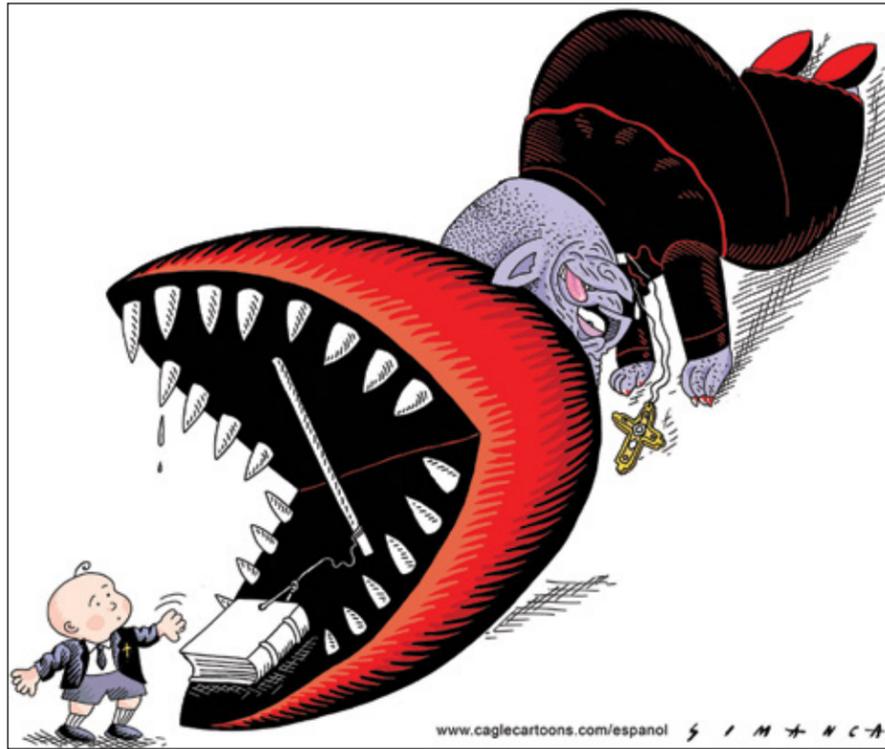
**Craig Tarbox, 56, Colonie, NY:** 4 years in prison and 10 years' probation after pleading guilty to 1st-degree sexual abuse.

According to District Attorney P. David Soares, Tarbox on May 3 "subjected a 7-year-old child to sexual contact during church services. While the child was sitting on his lap, Tarbox touched him sexually. The child was known to him through church."

The church was not identified. Tarbox also has a 1985 sodomy conviction. Source: *WYNT*, 11-9-15

**Corey L. Bryant, 26, Norton, OH:** 7 1/2 years in prison after pleading guilty to engaging in illicit sexual conduct with a minor in foreign places. The abuse took place between 2011-14 with boys ages 9-15 in Honduras, where Bryant was a volunteer with Breaking Chains, an Oklahoma-based ministry "committed to sharing the love of Christ and reaching out to those we serve spiritually."

Bryant turned down lodging with host families so he could live in the orphanage and be readily available, court records said. Source: *Talk Radio News Service*, 11-9-15



**Husein Bosnić, 43, Bosnia:** 7 years in prison for recruiting militants to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq in 2013-14. Bosnić, an imam with 17 children who is unofficial leader of the ultra-conservative Salafi movement, was found guilty "from the position of religious authority, [of] publicly inciting, recruiting people and organizing a terrorist group." Source: *Reuters*, 11-5-15

**Dawid Volmer, 41, Perth, Australia:** 10½ years in prison after pleading guilty to indecently dealing with a child, sexual penetration of a child and stupefying in order to commit an indictable offense. Volmer, an evangelical preacher who headed the Western Australia Prison Fellowship, was accused of raping and drugging with amyl nitrate a 12-year-old girl in encounters set up by her father in 2014.

The girl's father responded to Volmer's Craigslist ad offering sexual massages. Volmer told police that as soon as he saw her, he knew "in his heart" she was underage despite the father's insistence she was over 16. Source: *Perth Now*, 11-5-15

**Gabriel Bodenheimer, 72, Monsey, NY:** 3 years' probation with sex offender conditions after pleading guilty to misdemeanor endangering the welfare of a child. Rabbi Bodenheimer, a longtime educator at an Orthodox school, was also barred with working with persons under age 18. More serious charges were dropped at the behest of the 7-year-old victim's family.

He was indicted for allegedly molesting the boy at his school office in 2009-10. Bodenheimer has 14 children and 100 grandchildren. Source: *Journal News*, 11-4-15

**Orlando A. Caldera, 65, Charlotte, NC:** 14 to 21 years in prison after pleading guilty to 1st-degree sex offense and 5 counts of indecent liberties with a child. Caldera, associate pastor at Memorial United Methodist Church, was charged in incidents with 6 girls. He served the Spanish-speaking population of the church. Source: *Charlotte Observer*, 11-2-15

**Stanisław G. (full name withheld under privacy laws), Zamość, Poland:** 2 years in prison suspended, 5 years' probation, 3,000 zloty (\$752) fine and a lifetime ban on overseeing minors. The Catholic priest was convicted of fondling girls while preparing them for their first communion.

Prosecutor Bartosz Wójcik called for an appeal: "The sentence is too low." Source: *Radio Poland*, 10-29-15

**Heather E. Cook, 59, Baltimore:** 7 years in prison after pleading guilty to manslaughter by automobile, drunk driving and leaving the scene of an accident. Cook was bishop suffragan of the Episcopal Church of Maryland when her Subaru fatally struck a bicyclist in 2014. Her blood-alcohol level was 0.22 percent, almost 3 times the legal limit. Source: *NBC*, 10-27-15

**Abdurraouf Eshati, 29, Wrexham, Wales:** 6 years in prison after pleading guilty to collecting information for terrorist purposes. Eshati, a native Libyan who lived and led prayers at the Islamic Cultural Centre, was convicted for his part in an alleged plot to fly 1,100 tons of ammunition to Tobruk, Libya.

Eshati was caught with 19 others in the back of a truck in November 2014 trying to enter France via the port of Dover. Source: *BBC News*, 10-27-15

**Waldir Pérez Salias, Ate district, Peru:** 35 years in prison and 8,000 soles (\$2,439) in reparations. Salias, a Redemptorist Catholic priest and chaplain, was convicted of sexual assaults in 2010-12 at San Alfonso School of a boy who was 10 when the assaults started. Source: *Yahoo News*, 10-27-15

**Eric Dejaeger, 69, a defrocked Canadian Catholic priest,** had 5 years added to his sentence for sex offenses committed in the mid-1970s when he was studying at Newman

Theological College in Edmonton. He is already serving 19 years in prison for sexual abuse of native Inuit children but won't serve more time because the sentence was made concurrent with the earlier one.

The victims were a 9-year-old aboriginal boy and an 8- and 6-year-old brother and sister. Justice Susan Cooper noted how the victims all have substance abuse problems and said it remains to be seen what effect Dejaeger's crimes will have on his victims' children. Source: *CBC*, 10-22-15

### Civil Lawsuits Filed

Alleged pedophile priest **Linus Bastien**, 89, and the Catholic **Diocese of London, Ontario**, are being sued by 3 men who allege Bastien molested them in the early to mid-1970s at St. Paul's Parish in LaSalle. Arrested in 2011, Bastien faces 30 sexual assault charges. To date, he's had 22 court appearances, with the criminal trial scheduled for March. Source: *Windsor Star*, 11-16-15

**King's Way Baptist Church and Christian School, Douglasville, GA**, and former pastor **William Winger Sr.** are being sued by a couple and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Teacher Marsha Pearson and her husband allege she was fired after rebuffing Winger's sexual advances in 2012-13.

Winger resigned as pastor in October 2013 after several women, who as children attended his former church in Michigan, alleged he molested them, after which he attempted suicide on his teenage daughter's grave in Douglasville.

Winger pleaded no contest in October to 2 simple battery charges stemming from Pearson's allegations and received a sentence of 4 years' probation, \$2,000 fine and 200 hours' community service. Source: *Atlanta Daily Report*, 11-13-15

Catholic priests **Henry Slade and Philip Dederer** and the **Diocese of Joliet, IL**, are defendants in a suit filed by "John Doe," now 50, who alleges he was molested at age 11. Doe alleges in 1976 he was caught skipping Mass at St. Pius X in Lombard and was ordered by Slade to go to the rectory, where he was raped.

Dederer was allegedly outside Slade's bedroom but did nothing to stop it, later taking Doe to his room and giving him marijuana to help him "forget what happened." Doe asserts he repressed the memory until 2004, when he told his mother. Source: *Glen Ellyn Patch*, 11-10-15

The **Salvation Army National Corp.**, Alexandria, VA; the **Salvation Army Northern Division**, Roseville, MN; **Little League Baseball Inc.**, Williamsport, PA; and **Lake Park Little League Inc.**, Duluth, MN, are being sued by "Doe 49" in Ramsey County, MN. Doe alleges **Peter Jay Olson**, now 49, molested him 3 times in 2010-11 at ages 10 and 11 when Doe was on teams Olson coached.

Olson was sentenced to 12 years in prison in 2013 for abusing Doe and another boy he coached. At sentencing he said, "I'll never be able to undo what I've done, and my reverent prayer for them is that over time they will find healing." Source: *Pioneer Press*, 11-5-15

The **Moody Bible Institute of Chicago** is accused in a federal lawsuit filed in Atlanta of financially preying on an elderly woman. Lisa Higdon, court-appointed guardian for Hazel Turner, 89, filed the suit on behalf of Turner, who has dementia. Higdon alleges Turner unwittingly made Moody the trustee of her estate and a beneficiary and executor of her will.

Higdon filed a proposed class action suit. "We know they've been doing this in the state of Georgia since at least 1997," said Jonathan Hawkins, Higdon's attorney

A Moody spokesperson denied the claim, saying that a nearly identical suit filed by the

same firm was dismissed earlier this year.

John Melvin, a Cobb County assistant D.A., isn't so sure. "The Lord said feed my sheep. He didn't say fleece my sheep, and what this looks like is some people fleecing some elderly adults."

Melvin said that while Moody accomplishes some good, "that doesn't mean that everyone working for them is good. They may have some rogue agents." Source: *WSB-TV*, 11-4-15

**The Principia**, a Christian Science organization that operates schools in **Town and Country, MO**, and **Elsah, IL**, is being sued for \$1 million for alleged failure to supervise a former employee who is charged with sexual assault of the plaintiffs' daughter.

The suit alleges Principia employee **Zachary Retzlaff**, 33, a widower with 2 sons, met the girl through the school and began assaulting her while she baby-sat and cleaned house for him in 2014-15 when she was 16. He faces criminal charges, including statutory rape.

The suit also alleges Principia knew Retzlaff had sex with at least 2 other students and that school officials interfered with the civil and criminal cases.

The suit says the girl has filed for a protective order against her parents, who both have ties to Principia, and wants to marry Retzlaff and raise his children. Source: *Post-Dispatch*, 10-22-15

**The Institute in Basic Life Principles**, at one time a leader in the Christian homeschooling movement, is being sued in **DuPage County, IL**, by 5 women who allege IBLP enabled and covered up sexual abuse and harassment of interns, employees and other program participants in its programs. Defendants include **David York**, pastor at Crossroads Community Church in New Berlin, WI, who's also an IBLP board member.

The group's founder, **Bill Gothard**, 81, resigned last year after more than 30 women accused him of sexual harassment. Press reports earlier this year said reality TV star **Josh Duggar**, who has admitted molesting 4 sisters, was sent to an IBLP treatment center as a teen. Source: *Washington Post*, 10-22-15

The Catholic **Archdiocese of St. Louis**, **Archbishop Robert Carlson** and former priest **Leroy Valentine** are being sued in connection with alleged sexual abuse of a student at the Church of the Immacolata in Richmond Heights, MO, between 1977-81, starting when the boy was 11.

The complaint alleges Valentine told the boy he was getting "special training" required to become an altar boy and included sodomizing him in the rectory.

Valentine was removed from the ministry in 2002 but hasn't been laicized or criminally charged. Source: *Post-Dispatch*, 10-20-15

### Civil Lawsuits Settled

The Catholic **Archdiocese of Milwaukee** will pay \$21 million to victims of clergy sex abuse under a plan approved by U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Susan Kelley. Most of the money will be split by 355 victims, with a separate class of 104 victims getting about \$2,000 each.

"Something is terribly wrong with a process in which lawyers, especially church lawyers, [are] going to end up taking twice the amount of money out of this bankruptcy than all the victims combined," said Peter Isley of the Survivors Network for Those Abused by Priests.

"It is very clear to us that the bankruptcy court has been neither an instrument of healing or resolution, much less justice," said a letter from victims addressed to Pope Francis. Source: *AP/Fox 6*, 11-9-15

**A 6-person jury found the Catholic Diocese of Duluth, MN**, negligent in supervision and awarded "Doe 30" \$8.16 million for alleged abuse by pedophile priest **James V. Fitzgerald** in 1978. Fitzgerald, now deceased, had taken Doe, now 52, on a two-week camping trip despite earlier allegations of inappropriate behavior.

Documents that were part of the case show the diocese gave at least 4 priests second chances. A 1960 letter from **Bishop Francis Schenk** showed the diocese was willing to accept **Charles Gormly** as a priest after he spent time at a New Mexico treatment center. "I would like to give him one more chance," Schenk wrote.

Less than a year later, Schenk asked Gormly to report to a Milwaukee hospital for psychiatric care for a "dual problem: one is that of alcoholism and the other is a sex problem which prompts him to molest small girls." Source: *Pioneer Press*, 11-4-15

**The Church of England** settled an abuse claim for an undisclosed amount and apologized for child sexual assaults committed by **George Bell**, the former bishop of Chichester, who died in 1958.

The accusations against Bell, once in the running to become archbishop of Canterbury, were alleged to have been committed in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The victim first complained in 1995 to **Eric Kemp**, then bishop of Chichester, who offered "pastoral support but

Continued on next page

# Black collar crimes

Continued from previous page

did not refer the matter to the police or, so far as is known, investigate the matter further," according to a church statement.

The statement said that after the victim complained again in 2013, Sussex police investigated and determined there would have been enough evidence to arrest Bell had he been alive. *Source: Financial Times, 10-22-15*

## Finances

**The U.S. Catholic Church** paid out at least \$3.99 billion in costs related to the clergy sex abuse crisis between 1950 and August 2015, according to a National Catholic Reporter investigation. Separate research recently published calculates that other scandal-related consequences such as lost membership and diverted giving have cost the church more than \$2.3 billion annually for the past 30 years.

Dividing the \$3.99 billion among the nation's 197 dioceses would net each about \$20 million. For a variety of reasons cited in the report, "the \$3.99 billion figure is almost certainly a low estimate."

An example is efforts by the church in several states to block legislation to lengthen statutes of limitations. "The cost of this work, done through bishops' state Catholic conferences, is not publicly reported and can't be included in cost estimates." *Source: National Catholic Reporter, 11-2-15*

## Legal Developments

Bail was denied for **Joseph Dhanaswami**, 44, a priest and school principal from the Catholic Diocese of Ambikapur, India, after prosecutors presented evidence of semen in the underwear of a 9-year-old girl he's accused of raping.

Bishop Patras Minj told a reporter the charge was fabricated in order to defame the Catholic Church, "which is popular among poor people because of its services." Chhattisgarh state is governed by the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party, which Catholics claim wants to make India a Hindu nation. *Source: ucanews.com, 11-*

11-15

**Faith Church, Lower Macungie, PA**, is under investigation after a 2-year-old girl walked away in September from its preschool and wasn't noticed by staff as missing for at least 30 minutes. State police want to determine if "recklessly endangering another person" applies. The girl, who had gone out through an unsecured playground gate, was noticed along a busy street near a stormwater detention pond.

The state Department of Human Services then issued a cease-and-desist order to the church to stop operating a day care without a license.

Jason Troutman, the girl's father, commented, "Obviously, it wasn't done intentionally or knowingly, but it screams negligence." *Source: Morning Call, 11-7-15*

**James P. O'Connell, 62, Troy, MI**, sentenced to 25-50 years in prison last year for molesting a girl between the ages of 2 and 5 as a volunteer at St. Augustine Lutheran Church, had his sentence upheld by the state Court of Appeals.

O'Connell appealed on multiple grounds, including ineffective counsel, all of which were denied. He also took issue with the way he was arrested, stating he offered to turn himself in but instead was boxed in by 2 police cars while on a bike ride with his wife.

His earliest possible release date is in 2039 when he would be 86. *Source: Oakland Press, 11-6-15*

**Michael Cheshire**, former pastor of Journey Community Church, **Conifer, CO**, was ordered to appear before the Colorado Securities Board to answer allegations of securities fraud tied to church issuance in 2013 of \$1.1 million in bonds to build a recreation center.

A state petition alleges the prospectus failed to disclose \$12,500 owed in back rent to Jeffco Public Schools and said the church had no debts or liabilities. The church ended services in Conifer in fall 2014. Bondholders were told in February the church was facing foreclosure on the bonds. *Source: High Timber Times, 11-2-15*

**Marion Milton-Otis Toehay Sr., 82, Carnegie, OK**, pastor of Washita Full Grace Church, had his bond revoked after 5 new counts of child

sexual abuse charges were added to 10 similar counts filed in September.

Toehay is newly accused of improprieties with 4 other children dating back to 2001. The youngest alleged victim was 5 years old. *Source: Lawton Constitution, 10-26-15*

## Allegations

**Eric Siroka, 48, Seattle**, was quietly expelled last spring from the Central Conference of American Rabbis. CCAR said then it was for refusing to comply with an ethics investigation, but now confirms that Siroka, a Reform rabbi and married father of 2, had several sexual misconduct allegations made against him by women in Indiana, New Jersey and Washington state.

Yohanna Kinberg of Seattle's Congregation Kol Ami said that at the time of Siroka's arrival in 2014, it was assumed that he did not take a pulpit position because he was "burned out."

Then questions started making the rounds about why he was teaching in Jewish schools, given his alleged inappropriate behavior with women. "There is a whole underground network of women warning each other [about Siroka]," Kinberg said. "In this world, that's how women really protect themselves." *Source: The Forward, 11-2-15*

**Edwin Figarez, 41, Puthenvelikkara, India**, a Catholic priest accused of molesting a 14-year-old girl, is still being sought. Police have arrested his brother, **Silvestro Figarez, 58**, who allegedly helped Figarez flee to the United Arab Emirates about 8 months ago.

He later returned to India for a bail hearing, then disappeared again. "We have received evidence showing that the accused had been holed up at some of his close relatives' houses and they are still in constant touch with him," a police statement said. *Source: The Hindu, 11-3-15*

## Removed / Resigned

**Andrew Peter Stabback Johns, 89**, aka Brother William, was deposed from Holy Orders by the Anglican Diocese of **Brisbane, Australia**.

**lia**. Johns was convicted arrested in 2014 after more than 1,000 child pornography images were found on his computer. He was given a 15-month jail sentence, which was suspended due to his age. *Source: Brisbane Times, 11-6-15*

**Desmond Royappen, Durban, S. Africa**, was suspended for a year as pastor of Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church over the alleged mismanagement of almost 3 million rand (\$215,720). Cardinal Wilfrid Napier, head of the Archdiocese of Durban, said Royappen was sent for "a period of reflection" to a parish in Mariannhill and had paid back some of the money after an Ernst and Young forensic audit.

"Royappen admitted his negligence and wrongdoing in some very serious areas and his failure to observe correct procedures," Napier said. *Source: Sunday Tribune, 11-1-15*

**Mark Huberty, 45, Mendota Heights, MN**, a Catholic priest acquitted last year of sexual misconduct with a parishioner, has been removed from ministry by the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis while the church determines if he broke canon law.

Huberty cannot "wear a Roman collar or present himself as a priest publicly," said a statement from Archbishop Bernard Hebda.

Hebda said "some serious allegations" have come to his attention and a review board "found that there was sufficient evidence to suggest Rev. Huberty may have committed a serious offense under canon law."

While a jury found Huberty not guilty of both misconduct counts involving a woman who had gone to him for counseling and entered a consensual relationship, doubts remain. "Investigators were able to identify what appeared to be some repeated conduct of inappropriate relationships with women," said Maplewood Police Chief Paul Schnell.

None of those cases resulted in criminal charges, often because the women didn't want charges filed, Schnell said. *Source: Pioneer Press, 10-12-15*

Email: [blackcollar@ffr.org](mailto:blackcollar@ffr.org)

## Sharing the crank mail

Just in time for the holidays, a good helping of Haterade from correspondents, with their comments printed as received.

**Christian flag in Tennessee:** Your day in hell is coming in the future so you need to stop telling us to submit to your atheist demands. You are a minority and th majority will rise up and crush your agenda. — *Paul Gaunt*

**Portland grotto choir:** I cannot believe you people want to wreck a tradition that doesn't effect you in a state you don't live in. Why don't you fuck right off and leave fucking people alone. I would like to add that I am an atheist. If your going to attack something go after in god we trust printed on our money or the mention of God I our pledge of allegiance. Just fuck off from Portland grotto its a fucking tradition. — *Stephen M. Ewald, Portland, Oregon*

**Wadena, Minnesota:** Why do you people feel that it is your business To tell Us as a people what we can put in our Parks? I don't tell you how to live don't tell us. That is just wrong and don't tell me how illegal it is. I'm not going to tell you that you have to work on Christmas because you don't believe. And if you do work no double or triple time for you. No presents — *Karen Raskie, Hewitt, Minnesota*

**Disgrace:** Yall are a disgrace to humanity. Everyone one of you should be placed on the same level as isis. Yall is what's wrong with this country and to believe you even exist is sickening. We need God more then ever now and you people try to stop it. You need to mind your own business if it defends you stay away from it. You bunch of pathetic cowards. — *Travis Bach, New York*

**Stay out of schools!:** I hope to see a continued kickback of stupid initiatives including school prayer . We are a nation under God.. Get it? Back off creeps... — *Kevin Barnes*

**Gotto Xmas ban:** I totally disagree w/your unfortunately successful efforts to intimidate the limp dicked school council to deny students to participate in xmas choirs at the grotto. SHAME ON YOU!!! What you did is no different than any other BULLY who FORCES others to their ideology through coercion and intimidation. — *Dianne Whitney, Oregon*

**Why are you afraid of Christians??:** Do you support ISIS? Why are Christians more dangerous than radical Muslims? Why is it OK to have Muslim prayers in schools and not

Christian prayers? — *Jeanne Perdue, Texarkana, Texas*

**Stop the Nonsense:** Your group just absolutely disgusts me, with your perverted, convoluted misinterpretation of the Constitution and what is and isn't legal. You go around throwing the threats of protracted legal action at small towns, which many can't afford, and you get your way. Your bully tactics violate the 1st amendment that you claim to uphold. The separation of church and state has long been misrepresented by the atheistic, liberal agenda to further their Godless causes, and it is pitiful and disgusting. — *Jeff Fassett*

**God sent his son for the world:** JESUS IS THE ONLY WAY TO HEAVEN. JESUS IS THE ONLY WAY TO HEAVEN. JESUS IS THE ONLY WAY TO HEAVEN. YOU'RE A FOOL TO SAY THAT THERE IS NO GOD. WAKE UP AND SMELL THE COFFEE AND REPENT OF YOUR UNBELIEF. — *Jason Hutton*

**Antagonism:** What a divisive and deceitful organization you have. Yes, I'm a Christ-follower. I pray you will someday have your eyes opened before it's too late. The bottom line is if I'm wrong, I've lost nothing and I've had a blast. But if YOU'RE wrong, you've lost everything. — *Nave Nitram, Indiana*

**Christianity:** If I were violent, which I am not (but you are) I would do violence to you, but alas, I believe in a loving God. HE WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU. Again, what you are doing is no surprise to us. It has already been revealed. You are doing exactly what the enemy of God wants. How sad. God doesn't want you to be throw in into the Lake of Fire...think of a volcano that has been activated and it rolls all over you... yet, your soul will live on throughout eternity in unbelievable excruciating pain with no way out. How sad. — *Carrie Johnston, Elkhart, Indiana*

**Thank you, Pastor:** My friend...thank you for showing us the full face of satan's influence in the minds of depraved and self-centered (his favorite personalities) men and women. You truly are sick. From your extensive pastoral training you would recognize a more specific diagnosis as the correct refinement, "Sin Sick." — *Donald Milton, Chipley, Florida*

**hypocrisy:** bunch of sick bastards! in spite of your illness, you hypocrites pray to god when nothing else helps to ease a pain of a mental or physical nature. — *Pete Smolan, California*

**Violation:** U R A VIOLATION OF CHURCH & STATE...STAY IN WISCONSIN OR WHER-

EVER U R 7 OUT OUT OUT OF OREGON...U FAGS! — *Paul Munsell*

**A suggestion:** how obnoxious are you disgusting bullies--go top yourselves and do the country a favor How's that for "freethought" — *Jan Elder*

**1st Amendment:** Last time I checked the 1st amendment says nothing about freedom FROM religion, it says that we have FREEDOM OF RELGION. Also last time I checked America was founded on CHRISTIAN values and beliefs. As well as the recent fuss in Collins, Ms if that person with the complaint did not won't to deal with religion they should not live in the Bible Belt of America. — *JM Duke, Collins, Mississippi*

**How offensive your organization is!:** What you are doing is a shame, and a crime against tolerance and freedom. How do you hope other people to respect you, when you are not even respecting them? Constitution or no constitution. — *Pierre Jacques*

**Shame!:** You are a sad group of people, especially for what you did in Wadena, MN! Shame on you, and I hope that you rot in hell in eternal damnation! — *Carlie Morin, St. Cloud, Minnesota*

**Are you folks for real?:** You fight so hard to be atheism so there must be a God that you are trying so hard to strike him out of peoples mind! I figure you believe in the big bang theory and so that makes your mind so small it really can't think clearly. Have any of you actually read the Bible? When you folks are in trouble what are the first thing that comes out of your mouth "Oh God please help me!" — *Sam Germann*

**Get a LIFE!:** I AM SUBMITTING A REQUEST THAT TO BE A NON PROFIT TO HELP THOSE IN NEED NOT TO GAIN MONEY TO SUE A BUSINESS OR GOVERNMENT ENTITY! YOU ARE COSTING TAXPAYERS MONEY JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN NOT EXCEPT FREEDOM OF FAITH!

I AM COMPLAINING ABOUT YOUR GROUP AND HOW IT IS WRONG TO COLLET DONATIONS FOR LAW SUITES!! — *Angel Martin, Savage, Minnesota*

**Isms:** I have EVERY right to WANT a prayer said before a meeting where important decisions are made. Generals Washington, Lee, Sheridan, Meade, Patton and others - all asked for "divine" guidance before making a major decision. I could name many more, as well, but I think you get the point. If you don't like "prayer" in America, why not move to a country that agrees with your perspective ? You would be welcomed with open arms, I'm sure and..... we would be happy to see you go ! It is sad that people like you are trying to tear down the very

things that helped BUILD America. If you don't like prayer, it is your choice to NOT listen, but if anything is NEVER said, is there any "choice" at all ? I think you are controlled by Satan !! — *Jim Bandfield, Shalimar, Florida*

**You are a bunch of fuck sticks:** You people are full of shit, and only looking for some bullshit to hang your hat on. Get a life. — *Frank Butiste, South Bend, Indiana*

**POS:** You God damn crooked goat fucking pieces of shit! This country was found on Christianity and if you and your cronies don't like get the hell out. — *Jake Winkler*



## Texas vandalism

**The Orange County Atheists in the Beaumont-Port Arthur area joined the Texas DOT's Adopt a Highway program in July. Members noticed this sign vandalism Oct. 27 along Highway 1135. "Aside from being angry and frustrated, it makes me scared, scared to know that us going public could lead to this," said OCA member Clara Gilley. A *gofundme.com* campaign to raise \$300 to place a camera by the sign raised \$620 in one day. (On a related note, a similar Atheists United/San Luis Obispo sign along Highway 101 in California was vandalized a second time Oct. 6 after first being defaced three weeks earlier.)**

# FFRF's Nonbelief Relief makes year-end gifts

Nonbelief Relief, a new humanitarian agency to enable nonbelievers to make charitable donations under the banner of freethought, has announced some end-of-the-year grants.

Nonbelief Relief seeks to remediate conditions of human suffering and injustice, whether the result of natural disasters, human actions or adherence to religious dogma. It also seeks to provide assistance for individuals targeted for nonbelief, secular activism or blasphemy.

The grants are:

- \$20,000: **World Food Program USA**, designated for Syria. WFP, the largest humanitarian agency (affiliated with the United Nations) fighting hunger worldwide, notes, "Since fighting first broke out in 2011, the crisis in Syria has become WFP's largest and most complex emergency worldwide. Today, more than a third of the country's

population has fled the ongoing civil war. More than half of the refugees are children."

The Nonbelief Relief board felt this gift will help save lives jeopardized in part by a major religious conflagration.

- \$10,000: **Camp Quest** scholarships to help needy students who could not otherwise afford to attend 2016 camps.

Although Nonbelief Relief is not primarily a local charity, the board agreed it's important to contribute to one's community and voted for these local or statewide grants:

- \$12,000: **OM Tiny Houses**. This will pay for a "tiny house" for a homeless person who contributes "sweat equity." A community of Tiny Houses shelters is a project of Occupy Madison Inc. and is being built in Madison, Wis.

- \$10,000 additional pledge to the **city of Madison**, contingent on city approval of a proposal to spend \$10,000

to place permanent lockers for the homeless in or near downtown.

"As FFRF has downtown residency, we are acutely aware of the homeless crisis here in Madison," said Annie Laurie Gaylor, Nonbelief Relief administrator.

- \$2,500: **Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin**.

- \$25,000 pledge: **Women's Medical Fund Inc.**, believed to be the longest continuously operating abortion rights charity in the nation, helping more than 20,000 needy Wisconsin women pay for abortion care. The board voted to give the money on Jan. 22, 2016, in honor of FFRF's principal founder Anne Gaylor, who died in June, and also co-founded WMF and administered it from 1976 to March 2015.

In October, Nonbelief Relief gave \$20,000 to **Doctors Without Borders** (Medecins Sans Frontières), raising

several thousand additional dollars from FFRF donors. The grant was earmarked for the charity to use in Afghanistan after the Oct. 3 aerial bombing by the U.S. military of the group's hospital in Kunduz, killing 22 people and injuring 37 others.

Nonbelief Relief was incorporated in 2015, with the Freedom From Religion Foundation as its sole member. The board is made up of Gaylor, FFRF Co-President Dan Barker as vice president, FFRF's Director of Operations Lisa Strand serving as secretary/treasurer, and Jim Zerwick and Stephen Hirtle, who also serve on FFRF's board.

Donations can be made via FFRF, either by explicitly earmarking your check for Nonbelief Relief or by selecting "Nonbelief Relief" from the designation dropdown at [ffrf.org/donate/](http://ffrf.org/donate/). If given via FFRF, the donations are deductible for income-tax purposes.

## Are you missing FFRF news and views?

The Freedom From Religion Foundation does a lot in between issues of Freethought Today. If you don't want to miss news, views and activism and you're a member of FFRF, you can sign up for news releases, general action alerts, blog notifications and a daily calendar highlighting famous freethinkers called Freethought of the Day.

If you've created a membership profile, simply check the boxes to get various releases in your inbox. Or email Jackie Douglas, membership manager, at [info@ffrf.org](mailto:info@ffrf.org) to specifically request posts. Be specific, e.g., specify "news releases." Include your full name and mailing address for verification purposes.

FFRF recently switched its blog to the Patheos website to enhance visi-

bility. Recent Freethought Now! blogs include "Open Letter to Sheriff Jolley," "'Christian truth' will not solve Islamic terrorism: We need less religion, not more," "Je suis Paris, je t'aime Paris" (by Andrew Seidel); "Fiorina smears nonbelievers at forum," "Here's to more Mormons waking up," "Good works instead of long prayers," "FFRF to Kasich: Bill of Rights, not bible, grants civil rights," "Blind spots: Religion's pervasive 'holy terror,'" "I love Paris, and detest terrorism" (by Annie Laurie Gaylor); and "Repeat after me: The absence of religion is not atheism" (by Madeline Ziegler).

Go to [ffrf.org/news/](http://ffrf.org/news/) to check out what's new. The blog is at [patheos.com/blogs/freethoughtnow/](http://patheos.com/blogs/freethoughtnow/).



### Whitewater, Wis.

Co-President Dan Barker (center) debated Tom Ross (second from left) Nov. 17 at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater with about 120 people attending. The resolution was "The Old Testament Is Fiction, Not Fact." The event was sponsored by the Philosophy Club, the Secular Student Alliance and Set Free, a Christian campus group. Others pictured (left) are Paul Rains, Set Free president; Matthew Shultz, Philosophy Club president; and Scott Janis, SSA chapter president. (Guess if Dan took the affirmative or the negative.)



### FREEFLO

About 250 skeptics of religion attended Freethought Florida 2015 in Orlando on Nov. 6-8 and heard a stellar schedule of secular speakers. FREEFLO is the

annual conference of the Florida Humanist Association. FFRF was a co-sponsor, and David Williamson, who directs its Central Florida chapter, hosted the event with Joyce Williamson. Speakers included FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel (reclining, front and center) and Co-President Dan Barker.



### Blind alley

Richard Cain, South Carolina, says he was working at an agency that shall remain nameless when he came across this on a road leading to a state corrections facility.



FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

P.O. Box 750 • Madison, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • [FFRF.org](http://FFRF.org)

#### 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 email address is [info@ffrf.org](mailto:info@ffrf.org). Please include your name and physical mailing address with all email correspondence.

Foundation members wishing to receive online news releases, "action alerts" and "Freethought of the Day" should contact [info@ffrf.org](mailto:info@ffrf.org).

# FFRF defends besieged Texas teacher

FFRF stood up for a middle school teacher in Katy, Texas, who came under fire for a critical thinking exercise that appeared to offend some people for its questioning of whether God is real.

As part of the West Memorial Junior High classroom exercise, the teacher had students respond to simple phrases, asking whether they were factual claims, opinions or commonplace assertions. "The fastest land dwelling creature is the Cheetah," read the first prompt on the exercise worksheet. "There is a God," read the second.

A 12-year-old student was apparently so distraught that she went to a school board meeting and complained that she had an "assignment that questions my faith and told me God was not real."

"It appears this young student ex-

pected the teacher to profess that God is a fact," FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker wrote in an Oct. 30 letter to Katy ISD Superintendent Alton Frailey. "Yet famous passages from the bible as well as many denominational doctrines would agree with this teacher's categorization that God is not taken on fact or evidence. 'Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.' — Hebrews 11:1."

Two days after the board meeting, the district held a press conference and confirmed that after discussing the situation with the teacher and 11 students, it found that "the teacher did not ask students at any point to deny God. According to the teacher and students interviewed, she emphasized to the students that there are different

cultures, religions and views."

But Frailey also said, "No student should ever be forced or threatened with a failing grade for not denouncing his or her faith. I will not tolerate that at all."

Based on the report from the district FAQ page online, no mention of a failing grade was given to any student (because the exercise was not to be graded) and no one was forced to denounce their faith.

KTRK reported that the worksheet will not be used again in class.

Gaylor and Barker defended the teacher and the exercise. "It is a pity that confused thinking and thin skins by some believing students and their parents can rule the day at your junior high school. The exaggerated fallout from this exercise clearly demonstrates

the great need for more, not less, instruction on critical thinking skills. It should not be verboten or controversial to ask students to assess whether a claim is factual. It is this kind of 'head in the sand' attitude that accounts for the deplorable state of science understanding in our nation, including the fact that about half of all adults reject evolution, which is a fact."

Frailey also stepped close to the church/state line when he proclaimed in his statement that he's "a life-long Christian."

"It is unfortunate . . . that you as superintendent felt incumbent to disclose you are a 'life-long Christian,' which should be entirely irrelevant in overseeing the district's secular public schools," the letter said.

FFRF has 790 members in Texas.

## Freethinkers of note

By Paul Heffron and Jerry Rauser

It was 20 years ago today, Mr. Barker taught the band to play. Yes, it was Dan's inspiration that help start the Freethought Band almost 20 years ago. We played for the parties, picnics and other atheist-humanist community events in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota.

We used Dan Barker songs, other songs we'd located and sometimes modified, and some we'd written ourselves. To be freethought songs, they had to have a vocal with a freethought message. Fortunately, we had a good vocalist.

We played not only for the social events of Minnesota Atheists and Humanists of Minnesota, which were often joint, but also for the American Atheists national conference when it was in Minneapolis, for Camp Quest Minnesota and for the wedding reception of two local freethinkers. We always performed as volunteers, without compensation. Music clearly added a lot to our local activities.

We eventually made a CD and gave one to each of our fellow freethinkers

at our solstice party. We decided not to charge anything for the CD and to make it part of a new project of promoting freethought music. Dan and Annie Laurie Gaylor interviewed Paul on their Freethought Radio program in 2012 when he said he'd send the CD free to listeners who requested it. This was the beginning of sending the CD without charge to people all over North America.

We created a website, *FreethoughtMusic.org*, for the project. It has resources for those interested in freethought music. The website for our CD, *FreethoughtBand.org*, makes some of our songs available.

Recently, we did a national survey on the use of music by atheist and humanist groups. Results are posted on the "Articles" page of *FreethoughtMusic.org*. A significant number of groups answered that they were using or wanted to use music in their meetings. As you would expect of freethinkers, there was a variety of approaches to the use of music.

We also noted the addition of music at most national and regional freethought conferences, the continued production and performance of music by Dan Barker, the coverage of music and musicians in Freethought Today



From left are Jerry Rauser, Paul Heffron, Dan Barker and Don Harrer (who died in 2014). Paul writes, "We were always volunteer and never charged for playing or for our CD. I'm still willing to send the CD to anyone without charge." (Contact information is at [freethoughtband.org/comments.php](http://freethoughtband.org/comments.php).)

and Freethought of the Day, coverage in other national atheist and humanist magazines, and coverage in some recent freethought books.

The good news is that the new secular movement has acquired a noteworthy musical dimension that seems likely to grow.

Highlights for us were the times when Dan came to the Twin Cities to

speaking and entertain and play with the Freethought Band. The most recent highlight was hearing Dan play the Steinway grand piano at the new FFRF building open house in October. He invited Paul to play a number, and he chose to play Dave Brubeck's signature song, "In Your Own Sweet Way" because that's the way we freethinkers do it.

### Special Winter Solstice / New Year's Gift Membership Offer!

Gift Memberships 2 for the price of 1— only \$40!

Memberships regularly start at \$40. Offer applies only to current FFRF members giving **new U.S. gift memberships to freethinkers—not renewals** for yourself or others. No exceptions please. Offer expires Jan. 10, 2016. Recipients will receive a Winter Solstice card notifying them of your gift. Gift is deductible for income-tax purposes to donor.

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