

Freethought Today

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August 2016

FFRF floods school districts with warnings about ark park

FFRF is advising public schools in more than 1,000 school districts against visiting a new religious theme park.

The Ark Encounter, which opened the first week of July in Kentucky, is a Christian ministry run by the creationist Ken Ham, who also built the notorious Creation Museum. Among some of the “animals” on the ark are dinosaurs, which creationists believe lived during the same period as humans, when in fact dinosaurs have been extinct for 65 million years. Modern humans have only been around for about 200,000 years.

Ham has been clear about the proselytizing nature of this park from the beginning. In a recent letter entitled, “Our Real Motive for Building Ark Encounter,” he states it plainly: “Our motive is to do the King’s business until He comes. And that means preaching the gospel and defending the faith, so that we can reach as many souls as we can.”

FFRF is already receiving inquiries from concerned parents that overzealous teachers or principals may mistakenly believe it appropriate to schedule school-related trips to the Ark Encounter, as has happened with the Creation Museum. In order to allay such concerns and to remind public schools

See Ark park on page 2



Photo courtesy of Ex-Muslims of North America

Wegmans created this cake for the Ex-Muslims of North America and gave it to the group for free after a “rude bakery associate” initially denied the request to bake and decorate the cake.

Let them eat cake!

A group of ex-Muslims is finally getting to eat cake — and for free.

A Wegmans outlet in Fairfax, Va., initially refused to decorate and sell a cake to the group Ex-Muslims of North America. On May 31, the organization’s staff emailed the Wegmans bakery in Fairfax and requested a cake to celebrate the group’s third anniversary. The caption was to read, “Congratulations on 3 years!!” and the cake was to feature the group’s name and logo.

But when the group’s staffers called to confirm the design and status of the cake, they reported that a “rude bakery associate” denied the request, calling it “offensive.”

This denial raised serious concerns under federal,
See Cake on page 22



Photo by Lauryn Seering

Taking it to the streets

FFRF Staff Attorneys Sam Grover and Andrew Seidel hold up signs during a protest over Christian evangelist Franklin Graham’s speaking appearance at the Wisconsin State Capitol on June 15. (See more on Page 6.)

FFRF billboard campaigns

Reagan quote greeted GOP convention-goers

FFRF and its Cleveland chapter mounted an impressive billboard message to those who attended the Republican National Convention: Keep church and state separate.

That message on a highway billboard came from an unexpected source: President Ronald Reagan.

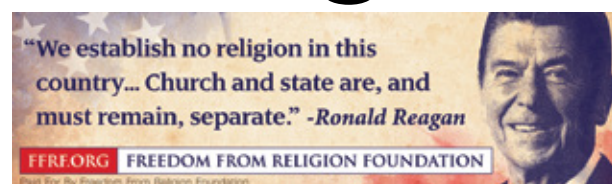
“We establish no religion in this country . . . Church and state are, and must remain, separate,” he said in the quote featured on the billboard.

The board was up in Cleveland on Interstate Highway 71 for a month, including throughout the Republican National Convention. FFRF, a nonpartisan nonprofit, will also be taking a message to the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia from July 25-28 with a billboard stating “I’m Atheist and I Vote.”

Reagan made the remarks in a speech on Oct. 26, 1984, to the Temple Hillel leaders in Valley Stream, N.Y.

The quote, in full, reads:

“We in the United States, above all, must remember that lesson, for we were founded as a nation of



openness to people of all beliefs. And so we must remain. Our very unity has been strengthened by our pluralism. We establish no religion in this country, we command no worship, we mandate no belief, nor will we ever. Church and state are, and must remain, separate. All are free to believe or not believe, all are free to practice a faith or not, and those who believe are free, and should be free, to speak of and act on their belief.”

The billboard got plenty of media attention, especially from conservative websites.

• On TheBlaze.com, its headline was: “There’s a new Reagan billboard outside the GOP convention — but conservatives probably won’t like it.”

• RawStory.com’s headline read: “This Ronald

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Conservative Catholics too influential
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‘You have rights, your beliefs do not’
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Submitted photo

FFRF’s extended family gets bigger

FFRF Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne and his wife, Colleen, show off their first child, Leona, along with the baby’s great-grandmother, Doris Jayne. Doris died just days later at age 90. Leona was born on June 1 and weighed 8 pounds, 9 ounces and measured 21 inches. “She has great pianist’s fingers and swimmer’s toes and is growing fast,” says Ryan. “She’s also getting along great with out two cats, Linus and Lucy.”

Overheard

Beyond pandering to the Christian religious right, it’s unclear what Iowa’s religious-scholar-in-chief intended to accomplish by formally asserting the Bible is “God’s revealed will for mankind.” What he did do: Offend and alienate many constituents while perhaps violating the Constitution.
Editorial ripping Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad for his proposal to hold a statewide, county courthouse bible-reading marathon
Des Moines Register, 6-7-16

No doctrine is more violent to the gay community than Islamic doctrine. It’s time to take on Muslim homophobia.
Ayaan Hirsi Ali, in response to the attack that killed 50 people in a gay nightclub in Orlando
Twitter, 6-12-16

We’re going to raise a generation of kids who are scientifically illiterate.
Scientist Bill Nye, discussing Ken Ham’s Ark Encounter park that teaches creationism
New York Times, 6-26-16

The strongly religious fear our capacity for moral reasoning that does not require a magical, invisible deity. They

fear our ability to be ethical without the threat of hell or the reward of heaven. They fear that our allegiance is not to this or that country, or this or that prophet, or this or that guru, but to humanity as a whole.
Phil Zuckerman, professor of sociology at Pitzer College, in a blog post
Psychology Today, 6-8-16

There is no tragedy so horrible that Congress can’t deflect it with pathetic moments of silence.
Tweet by U.S. Rep. Jim Himes, after Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell called for a “moment of silence” after the deadly mass shooting of a nightclub in Orlando. Himes also said: “We meet this tragedy week in and week out with smug, self-empowering moments of silence in the House that do absolutely nothing for anybody.”
ThinkProgress.com, 6-13-16

I join millions of Americans in reflecting upon and praying for the victims of this massacre, though I believe unequivocally that thoughts and prayers are not enough. Our time demands action.
Pennsylvania state Rep. Steve Santarsiero, reacting to the Orlando shooting
Bensalem Patch, 6-20-16

FFRF welcomes new ‘Immortals,’ ‘After-Lifer,’ Life Members

FFRF is pleased to announce and welcome 27 new Lifetime Members, one “After-Life Member” and two “Immortals.”
Roger Palecek and Elizabeth Fredricks are FFRF’s newest “Immortals,” a designation for those very kind members who have contacted FFRF to report that they have made provisions for FFRF in their estate planning.
Carsten Smidt is our newest After-Life Member. After-Life memberships of \$5,000 are a slightly tongue-in-cheek category of donation for those who wish their donations to live after them.
The new Lifetime Members are: Bryan Benjamin, Tony Bowman, Newman Brock, Jim Cohee, John L. Ditman, Rod Elser, John Fawcett, Tom Forss, Theresa Fulton, Dr. Eugene Garfield, Douglas M. Gilbert, Bill Haber, Michael Heinrick, Chris D. Hollis, Eric Howkins, Tim Kaiser, Gary Allen McDonald, Sr., Phillip Meade, David

Ostrem, Mark Rivkin, Craig S. Ross, Walter Sangaila, James Smart, Mary Tangari, Steve Tanksley, Richard Venti and M. Cecil Votaw.
Individual Lifetime memberships are \$1,000 designated as a membership or membership renewal and are deductible for income tax purposes, as are all dues and donations to FFRF, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Lifetime and After-Life memberships guarantee no more renewal notices, and go into a reserved “rainy day” fund. Lifetime members receive a card and pin, and After-Lifers a card and certificate.
States represented are Alabama, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia and Wisconsin.
Our warmest gratitude to Roger, Elizabeth, Carsten and our generous 27 newest Lifetime members.



Submitted photo

The Williamstown High School (Williamstown, Ky.) and Grant County High School (Dry Ridge, Ky.) marching bands performed at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Ark Encounter on July 5. Photos show band members marching by the ark wearing T-shirts that bear the Ark Encounter logo on the front and back and the names of the two bands.

Ark park

Continued from front page

of their constitutional obligations, it is sending a memo to every school district in Kentucky, Tennessee, Indiana, West Virginia and Ohio.
FFRF also protested the participation of two Kentucky public high school bands at a ceremony celebrating the park. The Williamstown High School (Williamstown, Ky.) and Grant County High School (Dry Ridge, Ky.) marching bands performed at the ribbon-cutting ceremony on July 5.
Ham is free to erect monuments to the bible, but public schools are not permitted to expose the children in their charge to religious myths and proselytizing. So, public schools cannot organize trips for students to either the Creation Museum or the Ark Park. Doing so would violate the students’ rights of conscience and the U.S. Constitution.
“Public schools may not advance or promote religion,” FFRF Co-Presidents

Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor wrote in the memo. “The obligation to remain neutral on religion includes not teaching creationism, intelligent design, or any of their creatively named religious offspring to public school students. Taking public school students to a site whose self-professed goal is to convert children to a particular religion and undermine what is taught in public school science and history classrooms would be inappropriate.”
And that any such field trip might be deemed “voluntary” (i.e., students may opt out of the trip) is irrelevant, FFRF contended. Courts have summarily rejected arguments that voluntariness excuses a constitutional violation.
FFRF also enclosed with the memo its “Top 10” brochure, which explains the most common state-church violations in public schools and why schools must avoid them. In the past two years, FFRF has addressed more than 1,300 violations in public schools and offered this constitutional guide with the hope to see fewer violations in coming years.

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

A Note to Members

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Meet our summer interns

FFRF has six new interns working at its Madison, Wis., office this summer, including five in the legal department. (Missing is Chris Line, here this summer but featured previously.) Here are their profiles.



Name: Mayan Essak.
Where and when I was born: Madison in 1996.
Family: Parents Sam and Jen (former plaintiffs!), younger brother and sister.
Education: Sophomore at Lawrence University with double major of piano performance and mathematics.
My religious upbringing was: Jewish.
How I came to work as an FFRF legal intern: Wanted a summer experience away from home (Milwaukee) and love FFRF — a perfect fit!
What I do here: Research projects for attorneys.
What I like best about it: The positive atmosphere! Everyone here believes in the cause and takes pride in working for it.
My future goals: To come up with some good future goals.
These three words sum me up: Indecisive, thoughtful, lucky.
Things I like: Running, biking, eating, thrift shopping.
Things I smite: Walking, inefficient group interactions.
I wish you'd asked me: Cats or dogs?



Name: Nathan Niemeyer.
Where I was born: Jefferson City, Mo.
Family: Parents Les and Brenda; siblings Zach, Michaela and Allie.
Education: B.A. in philosophy and anthropology from UW-Stevens Point, currently at UW-Madison Law School.
My religious upbringing was: Very Catholic.
How I came to work as an FFRF legal intern: UW-Law's Wisconsin Public Interest Interview Program.
What I do here: Research and draft legal complaints.
What I like best about it: Learning random trivia about the country, such as that Arkansas has quorum courts instead of county boards.
My legal interests are: Civil liberties

litigation and legal history.
My legal heroes are: Louis Brandeis and Hugo Black.
My future goals: Work for individuals' right to privacy, visit all of the New Seven Wonders of the World (already have checked off Machu Picchu).
These three words sum me up: Epistemology, sesquipedalophile, zymurgy.
Things I like: Bikes, cooking, brewing.
Things I smite: 24-hour cable news networks.



Name: Davin Skalinder.
Where and when I was born: Fortuna, Calif., in 1976.
Family: Sister, Brenna.
Education: Undergrad: Columbia University 2004–08; JD: University of Michigan 2015–18.
My religious upbringing was: Atheist.
How I came to work as an FFRF legal intern: It offered me the job!
What I do here: Write letters to schools and police departments asking them to stop dragging Jesus into everything. I hope it works.
What I like best about it: Keeps me off the streets during the day. I would only get into trouble.
My legal interests are: Contracts, compliance, arbitration and mediation.
My legal heroes are: The Sioux Nation, for refusing to take the money they won in a lawsuit against the United States for violating the Fort Laramie Treaty and stealing the Black Hills.
My future goals: Survive law school, get a truly decent job, and buy a really nice car — like a Bentley.

These three words sum me up: Misanthrope, indigent, outraged.
Things I like: Ice cream, rain squalls, Oregon coast, Chief Joseph, road trips, Bentleys.
Things I smite: Racists and other “-ists” of that ilk.
I wish you'd asked me: How many M&Ms can I fit in my mouth at one time? (Hint: It's a lot. Like, a LOT).



Name: Lucas Swank.
Where and when I was born: Wisconsin in 1993.

Education: B.A. in history and political science with certificates in Southeast Asian and European studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
My religious upbringing was: Occasionally going to church when we visited my grandparents on my mom's side.
How I came to work as an FFRF legal intern: I have an interest in First Amendment litigation and thought it would be a good place to get my feet wet in the area.
What I do here: Draft complaint letters and research a variety of topics for projects FFRF is working on.
What I like best about it: I have been able to work on issues in various areas of the law, which helps to keep the work from becoming monotonous.
My legal interests are: I am currently torn between criminal law and First Amendment work — free speech in particular.
My legal heroes are: There is no one I emulate, but characteristics of certain figures I respect. For example, I agree with FDR's approach to constitutional interpretation and appreciated Justice Scalia's candor on the bench.
My future goals: Use the skills I am developing in law school to eventually help people, whatever form that might take.
These three words sum me up: Not dead yet.
Things I like: Everything Wisconsin, English folk-punk, battle rap, wearing a suit.
Things I smite: Selfishness and hypocrisy.
I wish you'd asked me: To discuss the hypocrisy of U.S. foreign policy, particularly in Southeast Asia and the Middle East.



Name: Alex Zacharczenko.
Where and when I was born: Albany, N.Y., in 1991; grew up in Ballston Lake, N.Y.
Family: Parents Dr. Nicholas (dentist) and Sherelyn (pharmacist); sister Brigitte Zacharczenko.
Education: B.A. in history from Brown University; currently attending Duke University School of Law.
My religious upbringing was: Totally secular. I don't remember my parents ever bringing up religion, either for or against. Neither of my parents are atheists, although my sister and I are. The only times I went to church were for funerals.
How I came to work as an FFRF legal intern: I think that the separation of state and church is extremely important, and pursuing the kind of work that FFRF does is what primarily drove me to go to law school.
What I do here: Research and draft complaint letters. Also, background legal research for staff attorneys.
What I like best about it: Having an

actual impact on keeping religion separate from government.
My legal interests are: Constitutional law, the First Amendment, the Establishment Clause, separation of state and church.
My legal heroes are: Any lawyer who advocates for complete separation of state and church.
My future goals: To significantly strengthen the wall of separation between church and state as a lawyer.
These three words sum me up: Legally blind atheist.
Things I like: FFRF, sprinting, reading fiction, gaming, *Star Wars*.
Things I (would like to?) smite: Religious fundamentalists, especially megachurch pastors and creationists.
I wish you'd asked me: What my favorite color is. (I don't have one, because I'm totally colorblind.)



Name: Jill Zhe Zhang.
Where and when I was born: China in 1994.
Family: Parents and three siblings.
Education: Sarah Lawrence College.
My religious upbringing was: Buddhist.
How I came to work as an FFRF intern: I noticed the work in Career Services at Sarah Lawrence College. I'm interested in human rights and a lot of social issues.
I grew up in a Buddhist family but the education system in China in general doesn't provide any religion education, partly because Marxism promotes atheism and the Chinese government highly encourages a separation of religion and education. Governors and party members have to be atheists and free from religion. Even though there are some religious events in my hometown, it is more like a tradition and celebration. After studying in the United States, I encountered people with different religions and diverse backgrounds. I started to notice the impact of religion and am interested in the notion of atheism.

What I do here: As editorial intern, I write and compile Freethoughts of the Day and help the editor with an archiving project.
What I like best about it: I really appreciate reading the freethinkers' and atheists' speeches and about their experiences.
My interests are: Art and architecture, reading and writing.
My future goals: I'm planning to study architecture and continue my social sciences studies.
These three words sum me up: Composed, weird and skeptical.
Things I like: Arts, literature, sports, good food with close friends, vacations!
Things I smite: Boring movies, annoying upstarts and a gloomy and inefficient day.

Heads Up

A Poetry Column by Philip Appleman

SAID

Catch-as-can Appleman:
“Marjorie Haberkorn,
you with the daringly
dingdongy name,
somehow your sonorous
sesquipedalian
cognomenation just
sets me aflame—

syllables tinkling and
jingling like glockenspiels
tickle my ventricles
charmingly—but
dactyls are dangerous,
hyperconcupiscent,
polylibidinous—
we’d better put

both of our names in an
epithalamion:
think of the singular
medley you’d make—
Marjorie Haberkorn
Appleman couldn’t be
taken for anyone
else by mistake.”

Run in honor of Phil and Margie’s August wedding anniversary.
© 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), *Dar-win’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.

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HOSTED BY DAN BARKER AND ANNIE LAURIE GAYLOR

Slightly irreverent views, news, music and interviews

Meet a member



Name: Ron Herman.
Where I live: Albuquerque, N.M.
Where and when I was born: Las Vegas, N.M., the town that wouldn’t gamble, in 1947, the year the transistor was invented.
Family: My parents came to New Mexico from St. Louis and the Dallas area just after New Mexico became a state in 1912. I am the youngest child with a brother 18 years older and two sisters in between.
Education: Majored in music first, then shifted to physics and math to learn more about how the world works. Minored in earth science and education. Earned a master’s degree in mechanical engineering with an emphasis on solar energy systems. Later completed an MBA with an emphasis on non-profit entrepreneurship.
Occupation: For most of my career I was a designer of precision positioning mechanisms. Full-time activist for humanism, atheism and solar energy since 2005.
How I got where I am today: Outgrowing Catholic humility and timidity in favor of stronger self-confidence.
Where I’m headed: I plan to enjoy life — family, friends and places — and support the mission of FFRF until the day I die. After that, my two children and theirs can carry the torch.

The person in history I admire and why: Denis Diderot, author of the *Skept-ic’s Walk* in 1747, not published until 1830, long after his death, because it was seen to be an attack on Christianity. He was a prominent but persecuted natural philosopher. He also contributed to a very practical work as the main editor who translated and extended the first encyclopedia, a monumental task that took 25 years. Of course, I also admire Charles Darwin for his science and courage, Abraham Lincoln for preserving the union of the states, and Martin Luther King Jr. for his courage, nonviolent leadership and incredible speaking skills.

A quotation I like: “There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell. There is only our natural world. Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds.” — Anne Nicol Gaylor.
There are so many others that I have to add these: “Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities.” — Voltaire.
And my own sayings:
“Creationism is not even a theory!”
“Criticizing religion is not a negative position; it is reaffirming skepticism and intellectual analysis, which are positive things.”
“It is not human nature to believe in gods, it is human nature to believe snake-oil salesmen who claim to have a cure-all, and there have always been good talkers ready to take a dollar for their cure.”

Finally, to those who complain that a Madison group is interfering in local issues: “You live in the United States, and you don’t have a local right to violate the U.S. Constitution.”
These are a few of my favorite things: Romantic jazz, steak and lobster (for my birthday, maybe New Year’s Eve), getting away from home for freethought conferences, well-written books, especially on freethought, clever television, movies and mystery novels, and writing myself.
These are not: Excessive violence in media, faith-based anything!
My doubt about religion started: I was raised to be a serious Catholic, but as a teenager I saw that the church’s positions against birth control and divorce were nonsense. I saw the hypocrisy of Christian positions justifying aggression in different parts of the world, particularly against Native Americans and the Vietnamese, and other wrongs like slavery and discrimination in the United States.

Bertrand Russell’s *Why I am Not a Christian* gave me confidence to dissent. It was science that showed me that the existence of any “soul” or afterlife is highly improbable, and the power to understand ourselves and the world around us lies in the methods and results of science. It was learning history that caused me to doubt the existence of the God of the bible.
Through books, movies and TV, I have seen the long corruption of religions that continues today. Reading the bible helped me understand that it is not the word of God, but a compilation of men’s stories about their superstitions. But it took me until just a few years ago to decide I am comfortable calling myself an atheist.

Before I die: I want to return to Germany to see the region where my ancestors lived just north of the Alps.
Ways I promote freethought: In 2005, I actively supported the humanist advertising campaign by the AHA. Then an anonymous donor funded a dozen FFRF billboards in Albuquerque that provided some great publicity and brought a good group of freethinkers together. I helped to start the FFRF chapter here (FFR-ABQ) with a meetup group, officers, by-laws, a bank account and full registration with the state.
I see FFRF freethinkers as more like activists because we oppose religious faith itself, which most humanists see as intolerant. We feel it is time we shine a spotlight on the false claims of religion and challenge even the smallest violations of church/state separation, lest they be taken as license for further encroachments. We sponsor noted speakers, hold debates, and produce videos and other advertising. We are planning another round of billboards, too.

Want to help? Forget prayers — do something

By Andrew Seidel

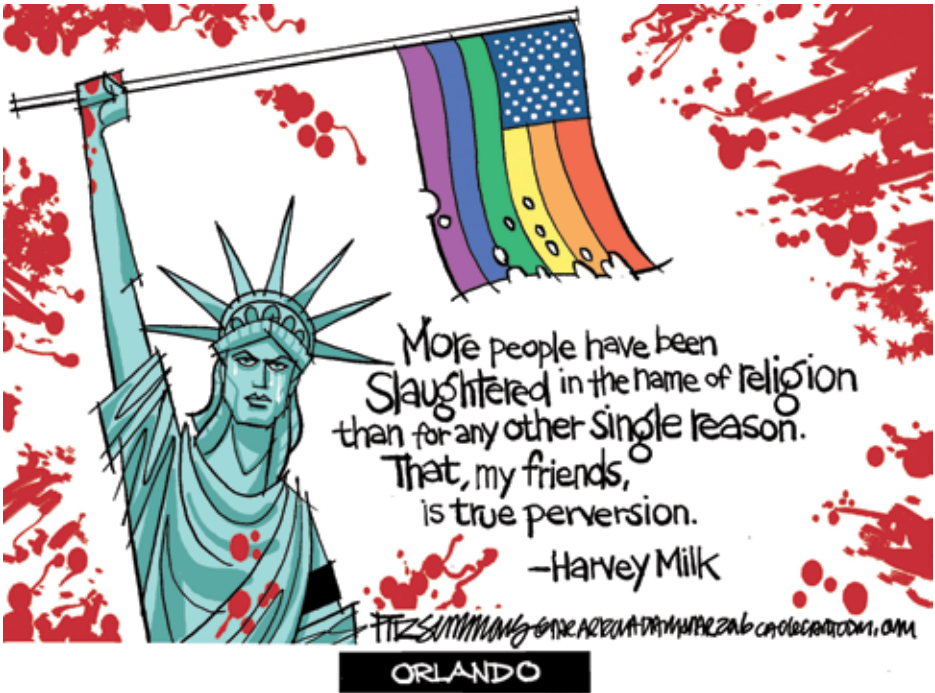
This blog post for FFRF was written the day after the horrific mass murder on June 12 at an Orlando nightclub and initially appeared on Seidel's Facebook page.

You've just heard the terrible news about the shooting in Orlando. About 50 are dead, many more injured in this "domestic terror incident." Because you are human, you feel a deep and powerful empathy toward our brothers and sisters in Florida.

Families are broken, children are orphans. The violence is quite literally senseless — we aren't equipped to make sense of it. And you want to "do" something. Anything. You want to help. You "need" to help.

But don't squander that overwhelming compassion on prayer. The affinity you feel, the sympathy that drives you to help, is what makes us human. If you pray that sympathy away, you've not only done nothing to help, but you've assuaged the motivation to do something while doing nothing. You've replaced our shared humanity with whis-pers to your fictional friend.

Yes, the prayers will make you feel better. But only because you're over-coming your humanity in the name of religion. And know this, the prayers will do nothing but make you feel better.



They will have no impact — none — on the real world. More religion is not the answer to the world's problems. We could do with a lot less, in fact.

So instead of wasting your humanity on your god — the same god who, I might add, let this happen — actually do something. Here are a few options:

1. Donate. Find a secular charity like Doctors Without Borders/ Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) or Oxfam GB or the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence or Foundation Beyond Belief or

the Foundation For Peace or any one of the hundreds of charities that spend their money helping people and not promoting a religion.

If you can't afford to donate . . .
2. Call, write a letter or email your elected officials at every level of government and ask them to protect LGBT citizens, change the ease with which the mentally ill can get a gun, and enact a ban on assault weapons. If you can spend two minutes praying, you can spend one minute googling

their information and another making a call. Do it.

3. Do literally anything else. Speak out against anti-LGBTQ bigotry on social media or in your family. Be kind to a stranger. Hold the door for someone. Give up your seat on the bus. Smile at someone who looks sad. Give someone a compliment. Or tell someone a hard truth. Or donate blood. Any of these will have a bigger impact than all the prayers ever uttered.

Stop fantasizing that talking to yourself will change things. Start living in this world and help us work to make it better.

Andrew Seidel is a staff attorney for FFRF.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Andrew Seidel

After tragedies, why don't media seek atheists' perspective?

By Brian Lambert

This article first appeared on Minn-post.com on June 14 and is reprinted with permission.

The aftermath of our all-too-regular mass homicides follows a familiar pattern. "Thoughts and prayers" are with survivors, victims' families and the affected city. There are defiant assertions from the horror-struck: "We will not tolerate this any longer."

Some politicians call for an end to hate and better coordination between law enforcement agencies. And others, when there's a whiff of Islamic heritage involved, play the "enemy is here" card, recklessly injecting accelerant into the roiling emotions of the moment.

For the media, standard reaction reporting involves transcribing pretty much all of the above. In the case of the Boston Marathon bombing, the Fort Hood shooting, Paris, San Bernardino and now Orlando, it's also standard practice to log the response from leaders of various religious faiths, most of whom encourage restraint and emphasize that Muslims themselves are collateral victims of these atrocities. The good, dutiful notion is to develop a body of sympathy that reflects solidarity among the broader local religious community.

And all that is fine insofar as the objective is to register the solidarity of the community at large. But if the intention is ever to discuss the "perversion of religion," a common enough refrain today and in past incidents involving radicalized Muslims, there's at least one group — silent but no longer all that small or irrelevant — that the media rarely draws into these discussions, such as they are: atheists.

"I think we were called once, some time after 9/11," says August Berk-



Brian Lambert

shire. "And no, no one else has called today."

Berkshire is the founder and past president of Minnesota Atheists. He's been active in the cause of challenging the belief systems of organized religions since the mid-1980s and jokes that current membership in the state is "probably around 250,000, although most haven't paid their dues yet."

Humor aside, Berkshire, a local delivery truck driver by day, is serious about the value of inserting an atheist perspective into conversations about religiously inspired violence.

"Look, prayer didn't do anything to stop this latest attack, and prayer won't do anything to stop this kind of violence from happening again," he says. "All it may do is make some people feel good for a while."

The underlying point of his organization, and that of international atheist figures like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, is that a submissive dedication to the tenets of an organized religion has the downside of people outsourcing their critical thinking.

Dawkins and Harris are both problematic personalities, offering conventional thinkers no end of opportunities to paint them as Islamophobes for their view that even conventional Islam

imbues irrational, counterproductive, anti-science attitudes toward women and homosexuals.

But if the point is to engender an honest debate, you'd expect the atheist view to at least have a seat at the media table in moments like this.

"Look," says Berkshire, "at their origin, all three of the Abrahamic religions — Christianity, Judaism and Islam — preach and warn against homosexuality. They're anti-gay. A lot of their followers today may be cafeteria Christians, Jews and Muslims, picking and choosing what they want. But I'm talking at their scriptural origins. We reject that. Atheists reject the teachings of religions for a lot of reasons, but among them is the lack of respect for science. Atheists, if I have to point it out, are very accepting of gay equality and other minority issues."

With 23 percent of Americans in 2014 describing themselves as "nones," which is to say as having no religious affiliation, a nearly 50 percent increase since 2007, the atheist, or agnostic or "nothing in particular" perspective would seem to warrant at least as much

regular reporting as what we get on priests, ministers and rabbis, certainly more than the "almost never" Berkshire describes.

Perhaps the problem with pulling atheists into a conversation about the "perversion of religion" is that spokespeople like Berkshire lack the curriculum vitae of traditional religious leaders. I mean, a guy who drives a truck cheek by jowl in a discussion with a priest, a minister and a rabbi?

But maybe the real issue is that the taint of taboo that still hangs to the word "atheist." Conventional journalism is partial to conventional wisdom and despite the steadily slumping numbers in church/synagogue/mosque attendance — and the rapid increase in those tuning out traditional religious messages — conventional journalistic wisdom has not yet reached a comfort point with overt atheism. Until that point is reached, speculation here is that mainstream news organizations will probably continue to treat it like a semi-reputable curiosity.

Longtime Twin Cities journalist Brian Lambert covers media issues for MinnPost.



Photo by Lauryn Seering

FFRF's electronic marquee called for unification against hate and terrorism in the wake of the Orlando nightclub massacre.

Here’s why FFRF complained about Hondo’s signs

Sam Grover is a staff attorney for FFRF.

By Sam Grover

With all the media attention surrounding FFRF’s recent letter to the city of Hondo, Texas (see sidebar), I thought it might be useful to respond to some Frequently Asked Questions about the letter and FFRF’s reasons for sending it.

But after wading through the comment section on Facebook, I realized there aren’t a lot of legitimate questions to respond to. So instead of an FAQ, here’s an FAC — responses to the Frequently Asserted Claims about the signs in Hondo, as culled from Facebook.

It’s just a sign.

Well, it’s actually two signs, one at either end of the city. You don’t see the need or value in FFRF complaining about “just” a couple of religious signs when there are so many other issues that we could be addressing. But the reality is that we do address those other issues. FFRF works on well over 1,000 state/church issues each year. And, yes, some of those issues seem small compared to preferential treatment for churches, religious promotion in public schools, or discrimination against atheist speech. But even ignoring the sheer volume of our legal complaints and victories, there’s still a good argument for why we must “sweat the small stuff.” The point is that each small violation that we suffer in silence becomes the justification for larger violations in the future.

The sign has been there since the 1930s.

True. The signs have been there for a long time. But the thing about the law is that illegal things don’t become legal just because they’ve been around for a long time. Just look at the Catholic Church’s child sexual abuse scandals. The church has been covering them up for decades, but that doesn’t make them suddenly OK.

Nonbelief Relief aids Orlando victims, others

Nonbelief Relief has made a major donation to help with the Orlando tragedy.

Its latest round of grants include \$10,000 earmarked for Orlando.

Nonbelief Relief is a new humanitarian agency created by FFRF to enable charitable donations by nonbelievers. It seeks to remediate conditions of human suffering and injustice and also aims to provide assistance for individuals targeted for nonbelief, secular activism or blasphemy.

Nonbelief Relief’s Orlando donation is to the Human Compassion Fund. The Fund, via the National Center for Victims of Crime, funnels all money directly to the family victims of mass casualty crimes. All donations earmarked for the Orlando fund go directly to affected individuals and families.

In other aid, Nonbelief Relief is giving:

- \$40,000 in aid to eight Bangladeshi freethinkers, who are on hit lists as secular activists. The Bangladesh aid



This sign greets motorists as they head into Hondo, Texas.

The sign doesn’t promote any specific religion.

The U.S. Supreme Court has actually addressed this sentiment on a number of occasions. In addition to prohibiting government endorsement of a specific religion or religious sect, the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment also prohibits promotion of religion over nonreligion, which is what is at issue here.

What about freedom of speech?

That is actually irrelevant to this situation. The Free Speech clause of the First Amendment does not regulate speech made by the government. Individuals are welcome to promote religious messages on their property, but thanks to the Establishment Clause, the government is not free to endorse religion when it speaks. This is important because the freedom of religion that we enjoy in this country would not be possible without freedom from government-endorsed religion.

The sign is funny.

Let’s not get carried away. OK, sure, I’ll grant you that these signs are whimsical, maybe even a bit clever. But that doesn’t excuse the underlying message. Tied up with the “drive safely” message is another message — this is God’s country — that many may

choose to overlook, but is hard to ignore if you don’t believe in any god.

If you don’t like it, don’t look at it!

First of all, are you kidding me? These are massive signs posted directly on the roadside, painted to look like other informational road signs that drivers need to read. They’re hard to ignore if you drive through Hondo (like the complainants who contacted FFRF).

Second, ignoring the signs doesn’t solve the underlying problem, which is that the government is taking a position on religious matters. It also doesn’t refund the taxpayers who just paid to have the signs refurbished.

If you don’t like the signs, LEAVE!

Comments like this one fundamentally misunderstand the problem. Their thought is that if they just get rid of the people who spoke up, then the legal violation can continue. This toxic “run ’em out of town” reaction is precisely why FFRF protects the identities of our complainants.

I’m proud to work for an organization that gives a voice to those who live in aggressively religious areas where they are bullied into silence by those asserting their religious privilege. I’d prefer to live in a world where everyone feels free to openly express their

FFRF asks city to remove ‘God’s country’ signs

FFRF has objected to religious highway signs that greet people when they enter Hondo, Texas.

Signs proclaiming “Welcome — This Is God’s Country Please Don’t Drive Through It Like Hell — Hondo, Texas” are displayed prominently by U.S. Route 90, at the city borders.

“It is inappropriate for the city of Hondo to display religious signs that convey government preference for religion over nonreligion,” FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor wrote to Hondo Mayor James Danner. “The display of the religious message ‘This Is God’s Country’ on public property violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which prohibits public bodies from advancing, supporting, or promoting religion. It is also needlessly divisive, since it sends the message that nonbelievers are not welcome in the city.”

Also, the signs could very well be misconstrued. It needs to find an alternative way to promote safe driving.

“Some people may want to flee ‘God’s Country’ faster than hell,” Gaylor adds. “Hondo officials could actually be encouraging drivers to speed with such signs.”

FFRF is asking the city of Hondo to immediately remove these signs from public property and refrain from displaying any messages that endorse religion in the future.

religious or nonreligious beliefs without fear of retaliation. But until then, FFRF will continue to write letters on state/church violations — big and small.

This article originally appeared on the FFRF blog site [Patheos.com](#).



Photo by Chris Line

Protesting hate speech

FFRF Co-President Dan Barker holds up a sign in protest of Christian evangelist Franklin Graham’s speaking appearance outside the Wisconsin State Capitol on June 15. Hundreds of anti-Graham protesters turned out to picket his appearance. Franklin, son of Billy, is visiting all state capitols to “urge Christians to vote” and to “stand up for the things of God and his Word.” Madison was his 28th stop on his nationwide tour with the purpose of fusing religion and politics. Graham Jr. has made outrageously anti-gay and anti-immigrant statements in the past. For instance, he has warned members of the LGBT community “that if they want to continue living like this, it’s the flames of hell for you.” After the Orlando nightclub massacre, Graham renewed his call to tighten the borders.

“Contrary to Franklin Graham’s hysterical claims, the LGBT community is not a threat to the United States — but his campaign to legislate religion-fostered discrimination is,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

FFRF legal complaints

NYC public pool discrimination opposed



FFRF is objecting to gender discrimination at a New York public pool.

At the Metropolitan Pool, owned and operated by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, there are women-only hours on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. The hours were temporarily eliminated but were brought back under pressure from N.Y. Assemblyman Dov Hikind.

Hikind claims that the Parks Department is being “culturally sensitive” in allowing women-only swimming sessions. But in actuality, it is catering to a tiny segment of the population whose religious tenets require separation of the genders for such activities: the Orthodox Jews. By being “culturally sensitive” to one group, the Parks Department is being culturally insensitive to everyone else, and is depriving men access to the pool at certain times. This sends a message to all non-Orthodox Jews that they are outsiders.

FFRF is asking that the women-only hours at the Metropolitan Pool be discontinued.

“In catering to the religious desires of a portion of the population, New York City is ignoring the U.S. Constitution,” says FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. “The city cannot bend and twist the law to accede to the political clout of one group.”

NASA asked to withdraw religious grant

FFRF wants NASA to revoke a grant in excess of \$1 million to a Christian-focused religious institute.

In May 2015, NASA’s astrobiology program awarded \$1.108 million to the Center of Theological Inquiry for “an interdisciplinary inquiry on the societal implications of astrobiology, the study of the origins, evolution, distribution, and future of life in the universe.” Center Director William Storrar stated at the time, “The aim of this inquiry is to foster theology’s dialogue with astrobiology on its societal implications, enriched by the contribution of scholars in the humanities and social sciences.”

The principal thrust of the grant is theological — and therefore religious. And though ostensibly ecumenical, the Center of Theological Inquiry is “rooted in Christian theology,” according to its website. NASA is giving money to a religious organization to determine how the possible future discovery of extraterrestrial life might impact Christian theology and religious beliefs.

The grant is patently unconstitutional, FFRF asserts. Government-funded scientific studies of theology create state-church entanglements.

Then there is the issue of use and misuse of scarce taxpayer dollars. The utilization of a significant amount of tax money to determine how theology — by definition a faith-based belief system — might respond to speculative

future scientific discoveries is wasteful for two reasons.

First, religion deals in matters of faith, not fact, and faith-based arguments inevitably boil down to arguments that cannot be settled by appeal to empirical evidence. Second, history shows that religion does one of two things when presented with scientific discovery: denial or incorporation of the fact as “evidence” or “proof.”

FFRF alarmed about Tennessee school

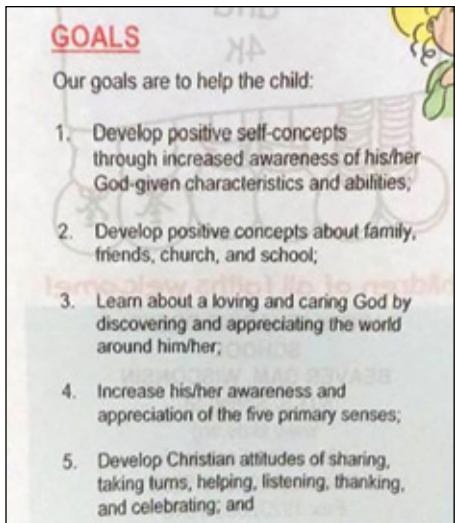
FFRF is alarmed about multiple constitutional violations occurring in a Tennessee high school.

A Christian club called FISH meets every Friday during lunch at David Crockett High School in Jonesborough. An employee at the high school, Jerry Day, leads this group. Community church members frequently attend these meetings, and they bring fast food to entice students to attend. FISH meetings include Christian songs, prayers and other Christian content. Guest speakers from fourteen local churches often speak, as well. Teachers also reportedly participate, sometimes leading prayers with students. Under the federal Equal Access Act, religious clubs must be student-led with no involvement from school staff or outside adults.

Members of a Christian group called Young Life also frequently enter the school shortly before school starts in order to pass out fast food biscuits and proselytize to students. Part of Young Life’s mission is “sharing the truth of God’s love with adolescents.”

Additionally, there is a bible verse displayed on the high school’s website. The David Crockett Lady Softball team webpage includes the following: “Philippians 4:13 — I can do all things through him who gives me strength.”

FFRF wants school tie-up to end



FFRF is asking for an end to an unconstitutional tie-up between a Wisconsin school district and a parochial preschool.

In Beaver Dam Unified School District, 3-year-old public school students with developmental delays are often sent to private preschools. FFRF’s complainant, who has an eligible child, was offered only one choice: a Catholic school, St. Katherine’s, whose preschool is named God’s Little Miracles. To quote the school itself, its “program is based on the theme ‘Thank you, God.’” Materials the complainant received from a Beaver Dam Unified School District teacher contained many religious references and images.

The teacher reportedly assured the FFRF complainant that the God’s Little Miracles program does not involve religious instruction. But the materials show that this is not the case.

From the name itself to the pervasive nature of religion in its goals and teachings, God’s Little Miracles is not an appropriate place for a public school to send children for learning. The current policy is especially egregious, with a captive audience of impressionable 3-year-olds with developmental delays.

FFRF is requesting that the Beaver Dam Unified School District cease any partnership with St. Katherine’s, unless and until it completely revamps its program to make it totally secular.

Catholic Church’s ‘vote shaming’ denounced

FFRF condemns the Catholic Church targeting Pennsylvania legislators who have shown support for stronger child sex-abuse laws.

Of 195 members of the Pennsylvania House, 180 recently voted in favor of a bill designed to prevent those accused of sexually abusing children from claiming legal immunity due to the existing statute of limitations. Church leaders have singled out specific legislators and publicly humiliated them for backing the bill.

The archdiocese recently printed bulletins and had its priests call out legislators by name from the pulpit in order to stir up opposition against the bill. As the bill moves forward to the Senate Judiciary Committee, the message is clear: Oppose this child sex-abuse bill or face the church’s wrath.

“It’s outrageous that the church would go to such lengths to kill this bill,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “The Catholic Church has systematically protected sexual predators from legal authorities for decades while claiming to have children’s interests at heart. If the church were really concerned about victims of sexual abuse, it would be doing everything in its power to support this bill.”

Under the proposed House Bill 1947, victims would have until they are 50 years old to seek legal redress.

Violations aplenty at charter school chain

FFRF is raising red flags about a publicly funded Texas charter school chain.

Newman International Academy, which has frequently breached the constitutional wall separating state and church, operates a number of charter schools in Texas. In August, it is opening up yet another one inside Walnut Ridge Baptist Church in Mansfield. The charter school sponsor is Saint Servers International, a Christian organization run by the Rev. Lazarus George, who is the husband of Newman International Academy founder Sheba George.

Sheba George is an ardent evangelist. On a website for her proposed Newman George College, George explains that she has a “longing for the strongest spiritual revival the world has ever known.” It appears that George’s desire for a spiritual revival has warped her treatment of Newman International Academy in constitutionally impermissible ways.

The Academy also promotes and

endorses religious events in its schools and on its website. Its 2015-2016 calendar includes a school holiday on March 25 for Good Friday, an explicitly Christian holiday, a See You at the Pole event that the Academy described as “a day committed to global unity in Christ and prayer for this generation,” and a schoolwide assembly for the National Day of Prayer.

Publicly funded charter schools, like public schools, have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion, FFRF points out.

Church property should be taxed



Photo by Andrew Seidel

FFRF is trying to make sure that a Madison, Wis., Catholic congregation pays its fair share of taxes.

The state/church separation watchdog group filed an amicus curiae brief in Dane County Circuit Court to support the city of Madison levying taxes on property that the St. Raphael’s congregation owns. The church sued the city last year to recover more than \$98,000 in taxes it paid in 2014 on a downtown Madison lot assessed at more than \$4 million.

FFRF asserts in its brief that since the property is vacant and merely being held for future development, it does not qualify for a tax exemption under Wisconsin law.

The lot was once the site of St. Raphael’s Cathedral, destroyed by fire in 2005, as well as a dilapidated school building that was purchased by the church in 2011 and torn down in 2012. Because the conjoined lot was vacant, the city began taxing the property in 2012. That prompted the church to add a “Way of the Cross” walking path on the lot later that year.

Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott highlighted the lack of use of the property in FFRF’s brief and questioned how St. Raphael’s could retain an exemption while it was really just hanging on to the lot as a future site of a \$50 million cathedral.

FFRF opposes religious grants

FFRF wrote the Sussex County Council on Feb. 9 regarding a \$10,000 grant to Delmarva Teen Challenge, a religious ministry that purports to help drug addicts by converting them to Christianity. The money was used for a fundraiser for the religious group.

On June 21, the council voted unanimously to award \$2,500 from Councilman Samuel Wilson’s discretionary grant account to Grace-N-Mercy Ministries, a Christian church in Greenwood, “for youth camp expenses.” In its grant application, the ministry stated that the grant would be utilized for expanding its summer youth camp, which “combines the social recreation and team building activities of a traditional summer camp with the faith-based principles of a vacation bible school.”

FFRF delivers

Post offices follow letter of law

U.S. Postal Service facilities across the nation will stop distributing religiously themed cartoons after FFRF sent a letter of complaint to the nation’s postmaster general.

FFRF was notified of the issue when a customer noticed Easter-themed coloring pages stamped with the Postal Service’s logo being distributed at the post office in Davisburg, Mich. The pages included a drawing of three crosses. The cartoons were made by Earl Musick, an Ohio postmaster, and disseminated to Postal Service locations nationwide.

“Easter is a sectarian holiday celebrated only by Christians, and the Postal Service therefore should not put out publications promoting it,” contended FFRF Legal Fellow Madeline Ziegler. “Postal regulations specifically prohibit crosses because they are a symbol identified with a particular religion.”

USPS responded on June 16, informing FFRF that Musick apologized for violating postal regulations and that all postal facilities had been requested “to discontinue distribution and to destroy all remaining Easter coloring pictures.” Additionally, the cartoonist will no longer distribute any



Submitted photo

The Spanish Fort Post Office in Alabama removed this religious literature from a public display area.

holiday coloring pages.

Alabama office removes religious lit

Following a complaint letter from FFRF, the post office in Spanish Fort, Ala., removed religious literature from

a public display area. The literature included proselytizing pamphlets from the Little Book Ministry.

FFRF’s Ziegler sent the postmaster a letter on June 3, stating that the display “violates post office regulations and the Constitution and must be removed

immediately.”

Three days later the postmaster informed FFRF that the literature would be removed immediately.

Religious magazine rack removed

A U.S. post office in Harrison, Tenn., has removed a magazine rack featuring a Christian magazine after FFRF wrote a letter of complaint.

The Sign of the Times magazine “encourages readers to lead joyful Christian lives as they await the soon return of Jesus,” according to its website.

In a letter to the local postmaster, FFRF’s Ziegler pointed out that the distribution was in violation of post office regulations and encouraged “appropriate action to ensure this illegal literature distribution does not recur.”

Upon learning of the violation, the postmaster called FFRF. She was displeased that the magazines were there without her knowledge, and promised to remove them herself if the organization did not remove them.

On June 22, FFRF’s complainant confirmed that the rack had been removed.

FFRF legal victories

Fire department takes down sign



A fire department in the state of Washington has agreed to stop posting religious messages on its outdoor marquee, following an FFRF complaint.

Grays Harbor Fire District #1 in Oakville had put up a sign last holiday season reading: “Unto us a savior is born, Merry Christmas.” It was temporarily taken down after a citizen complained, but was then put back up. FFRF Legal Fellow Madeline Ziegler pointed out its inappropriateness and unconstitutionality in a letter to Oakville Fire Chief Kevin Witt in December. The department recently responded that it has complied with FFRF’s request.

“I am pleased to inform you that at the commission’s meeting in January 2016, it is noted in the minutes that there will not be any more religious messages on the Fire Department reader board,” replied Deanna Lindholm, secretary of the Oakville Fire Department. “It reads in the minutes that the Fire Department will uphold the laws of the state of Washington and the Constitution of the United States of America.”

Nevada school to end violations

A Nevada school district has agreed to halt several constitutional violations at a local high school after being alerted by FFRF.

Mojave High School Principal Antonio Rael and Grace Point Church Pastor Ty Neal were seen chatting in a video about the church’s “partnership” with the principal. Rael said he felt there was a “kingdom-moving opportunity inside the walls of Mojave.” Rael also spoke about bringing the Young Life organization (a Christian youth outfit) into the school to mentor the students, a move he claimed was “totally legit legally.”

“Principal Rael’s comments in this video raise many constitutional concerns,” FFRF Legal Fellow Madeline Ziegler wrote late last year to Carlos McDade, legal counsel for the Clark County School District (with a follow-up letter in April).

FFRF had requested that the School District (headquartered in Las Vegas) make certain that Rael abides by the restrictions that the U.S. Constitution places on him as the administrator of a public school. In addition, it asked that Mojave High School no longer permit Young Life or other such groups to preach to students, and ensure that Rael was not involved with student religious groups.

In a recent response, Clark County School District indicated that it had heard FFRF loud and clear.

“At the principal’s request, Grace Memorial Church has removed the video from vimeo.com,” McDade replied. “The Young Life organization no longer accesses the school during instructional time/schooldays but instead rents out space as an outside group. The district has also recently amended its regulation regarding student-led clubs and organizations.”

School district halts proselytizer access

FFRF and its Kentucky chapter have blocked a Christian organization’s infiltration into athletic programs

throughout a Kentucky school district.

The Fellowship of Christian Athletes had embedded itself into athletic programs all over the Jefferson County Public Schools system (located in Louisville), including in elementary schools. The group sent adult representatives to lead “voluntary” chapel or religious services during athletic practices at district schools, in some cases with the role of an officially designated “team chaplain.”

In a letter to Jefferson County Public Schools Superintendent Donna Hargens, FFRF Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert requested that the school district investigate the matter immediately and put a stop to such behavior.

In response, Hargens outlined in a letter to the head of the local chapter (Edwin Hensley) a number of steps it has put into place to curtail Fellowship activities in local schools.

Religious school message removed

A large religious message in an Oklahoma public school was taken down after an FFRF complaint.

One of the walls in the teachers’ lounge in East Side Elementary School in Chandler, Okla., had a 5-foot-by-5-foot stenciled message that read: “Miracles alter flow unseen through our lives, so let us remember to thank God for our daily blessings.”

FFRF reminded school officials that this was a violation of the First Amendment.

“As you know, public schools may not advance, prefer or promote religion,” FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel wrote to Wayland Kimble, superintendent of Chandler Public School

District.

FFRF asked that the message be removed and the School District reacted swiftly and affirmatively.

“Thank you for informing me of this,” Kimble replied in an email within a day of receiving Seidel’s letter. “We have taken it [the message] down.”

School ‘chaplaincy’ makes changes

A California school district has taken a number of steps to conform with the U.S. Constitution following an FFRF complaint.

The Turlock Unified School District had a partnership with the Turlock Chaplaincy, a group of ordained ministers. Some of these ministers and other volunteers were labeled “school chaplains” and permitted to work with elementary school kids on school property during the school day.

FFRF raised objections to the partnership.

“It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for the School District to offer religious leaders unique access to befriend students during the school day on school property,” FFRF Legal Fellow Madeline Ziegler wrote to Turlock Unified School District Superintendent Dana Salles Trevethan.

An attorney for the school district promptly phoned Ziegler after receiving the letter. He informed FFRF that the training for the program was completely secular, but acknowledged that the name of the program needed to be changed and that the volunteering opportunity needed to be available to everyone, not just religious people.

Trevethan replied in writing to inform FFRF that the School District is making several alterations to the program to make sure that it does not violate the First Amendment. This includes changing the branding (including on volunteers’ shirts) to “Character

FFRF legal victories

Coach” from “School Chaplain.” The district will also issue a new Religion in the Schools policy to emphasize neutrality in religion and will provide details of all these changes to the staff and community. Trevethan also assured FFRF that no religious affiliation would be required to participate.

Creationist movie removed from school

An FFRF complaint about a creationist movie has made sure that it will not be shown again in a Colorado public school.

Carl Christianssen, a science teacher at Dakota Ridge High School, showed a video in class called “Unlocking the Mysteries of Life” that has been endorsed by the Campus Crusade for Christ. The video unequivocally endorses the false opinion that the natural universe “can only be explained by intelligent design.”

Teaching creationism or any of its offshoots, such as intelligent design, in a public school is unlawful, because creationism is not based in fact, FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel reminded the Jeffco Public Schools system.

Jeffco Public Schools proved to be responsive to FFRF’s concerns. School officials confirmed FFRF’s account and stated that they’re making certain the video is removed from the classroom.

“The district staff members develop approved list of videos for curriculum content,” McMinimee replied to Seidel. “The video was not on our approved list, and, therefore, we have taken remedial actions designed to ensure that this video is not shown again.”

Indiana religious sign taken down



A religious public school marquee was quickly taken down after an FFRF complaint.

Morristown Jr./Sr. High School in Morristown, Ind., posted “MAY GOD BLESS YOU” as part of its 2016 congratulatory message for its graduating students. Public schools may not endorse a religious message, FFRF reminded the Shelby Eastern Schools Corporation.

FFRF asked that the message be removed from the school marquee. The school district responded immediately to FFRF’s request.

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention,” Evans emailed the day after receiving FFRF Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne’s letter. “The marquee will be changed promptly.”

School will move ceremony venue

After FFRF contacted Cincinnati Public Schools, Covedale Elementary School will no longer hold its annual awards ceremony at a local church.

FFRF Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca

Markert contacted the school district on May 12 to complain about the civil-rights violation. “The selection of Western Hills Church of Christ as the site for the commencement ceremony demonstrates the school’s preference for religion over nonreligion, and more specifically, Christianity over all other faiths,” Markert wrote.

On May 24, FFRF received word that the Covedale principal was advised to identify a different venue for the awards ceremony in future years.

FFRF stops prayer events in Kansas

The Sylvan-Lucas Unified School District will no longer allow prayer at school-sponsored events following a complaint from FFRF.

A student at Sylvan-Lucas High School contacted FFRF after the class president read a pre-written prayer at prom and a teacher gave an invocation at the school’s award night. The prayer at prom ended with “through Jesus, our lord, we pray. Amen,” and the invocation referenced “our lord Jesus.”

“The district has a duty to remain neutral toward religion,” wrote FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel. “By including prayers at school-sponsored events, the district abridges that duty and alienates the 35% of millennials—born after 1981, i.e., your students—that are nonreligious.”

The superintendent replied to FFRF on June 6 saying the principal, teacher and sponsors would no longer allow prayer at school events.

FFRF ends multiple violations in Kansas

Chisholm Public Schools in Kansas will no longer permit teacher-led prayer and has terminated an elementary school bible class thanks to objections from FFRF.

A student notified FFRF that a history teacher at the high school led all the students in praying for a different teacher who had fallen ill.

FFRF also noticed a fourth-grade teacher listing a bible class on his schedule. Seidel asserted, “These bible classes are unconstitutional. Public schools may not provide religious instruction.... The district may not take away from instructional time to indoctrinate students in Christian dogma.”

On June 7, FFRF received a response admitting that the prayer “was not han-

dled appropriately.” The district said it has discontinued the class “to prevent any further confusion.”

Religious decals removed from cop cars



A Kansas police department has removed religious decals after FFRF complained about them.

The police department in Harper, Kan., had placed a decal on the back of patrol cars stating: “Romans 13:4.” The New Testament verse in question reads as follows: “For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil” (King James Version).

Displaying a decal referencing this ominous Christian threat violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, FFRF had maintained. The Harper Police Department’s choice of verse to display was particularly disturbing. There was something alarming about an official allusion to a verse that talks about “revengers,” “bearing swords” and “executing wrath,” when the job of the Harper Police Department is to protect and serve, not to mete out biblical punishments or divine anger.

“Placing decals referencing biblical quotes on the back of a law enforcement vehicle fails to respect either constitutional mandate of neutrality,” FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel wrote to Harper Police Chief Doug Murphy.

With FFRF’s letter generating a flurry of media coverage, the city of Harper swiftly backed down.

Michigan roadside cross removed

Thanks to an FFRF complaint, travelers on Interstate 69 near Bath Township, Mich., will not have to view a

memorial with a Latin cross along the road.

The change proceeds from a letter from FFRF Legal Fellow Madeline Ziegler in which she wrote, “It is unconstitutional to allow a religious symbol like a Christian cross to be displayed on a public roadside. The cross . . . unabashedly creates the perception of government endorsement of Christianity.”

The Michigan DOT replied on June 17, notifying FFRF that the cross would be removed in a timely manner.

School cuts ties to baccalaureate service

The North Mac Community Unit School District in Illinois has promised not to promote or fund a religious baccalaureate service for graduating high school seniors. A letter written by FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover prompted the move.

FFRF first contacted the district back in 2014 to complain about the district’s promotion of a religious baccalaureate service. At the time, the district replied that the service was organized by the North Mac Ministerial Association and assured FFRF that “no high school staff or administrators attended or participated in the event.”

In June 2016, FFRF again contacted the district after a complainant notified FFRF that the district was promoting yet another baccalaureate service on both its website and Facebook page. The service included school-approved speech that quoted from the bible multiple times.

After the service had already occurred, the superintendent informed FFRF that the promotions were taken down.

California council nixes huge grant

A California city council nixed a multimillion-dollar grant to a private religious school after FFRF objected.

The Santa Ana City Council was considering a \$2.5 million grant to Mater Dei High School, a Catholic institution, for construction of a new building and parking garage. FFRF called attention to the fact that the funding would have been a violation of the U.S. Constitution, as well as the California Constitution.

“The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits the government from supporting religious activities with public funds,” FFRF Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne wrote to Santa Ana Mayor Miguel Pulido and City Council members. “The city of Santa Ana violates this principle when it funds the expansion of a private parochial school.”

Jayne additionally detailed how the California Constitution prohibits such funding and urged the Santa Ana City Council not to disburse any money to the Mater Dei High School.

After receiving FFRF’s missive, the Santa Ana City Council had second thoughts.

“Please be aware that the City Council agenda item referenced in the letter from Mr. Ryan Jayne has been removed,” Daniel Soto from the city manager’s office responded in an email. “City staff has not suggested that the item be placed back on any future City Council meeting agenda for consideration.”

FFRF wins suit over school censorship

FFRF has prevailed in a court battle over a school district’s censorship.

In a legal settlement signed by U.S. District Judge Manuel Real, the Antelope Valley Union High School District in California consented to distribute scholarship opportunities offered by FFRF and Antelope Valley Freethinkers. It also agreed to reimburse \$10,000 in attorneys’ fees.

The district had claimed announcements for essay contests on nonreligious themes would upset parents and even rejected offers to modify the wording. Yet the district listed scholarships offered by religious organizations.

FFRF is satisfied that the Antelope Valley Union High School District will not engage in invidious view-

point discrimination in the future or censor scholarship programs catering to nonreligious students.

“We’re sorry it took a lawsuit to get the school district to agree to equal treatment of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and Antelope Valley Freethinkers,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “But we were confident we would prevail. It’s also heartening to get a victorious settlement so quickly.”

The lawsuit was filed in April in the U.S. District Court, Central District of California, Western Division. The case was litigated for FFRF by California attorney David J.P. Kaloyanides, with FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel and FFRF Legal Fellow Madeline Ziegler serving as co-counsels.

U.S. Supreme Court ruling

Pharmacy's religious claim rejected

The U.S. Supreme Court on June 28 denied an appeal by a Washington pharmacy that cited Christian beliefs in objecting to providing emergency contraceptives to women.

The justices kept in place a July 2015 ruling by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that upheld a state regulation requiring pharmacies to deliver in a timely manner all prescribed drugs, including contraceptives.

Three conservative justices (Samuel Alito, John Roberts and Clarence Thomas) argued that the court should have agreed to hear the appeal by the Stormans family, which owns Ralph's Thriftway grocery store and pharmacy in Olympia.

"When a woman walks into a pharmacy, she should not fear being turned away because of the religious beliefs of the owner or the person behind the counter," said Louise Melling, the deputy legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Washington allows a religiously objecting pharmacist to deny medicine as long as another pharmacist on site pro-



Ralph's Thriftway pharmacy and grocery store in Washington was denied an appeal by the Supreme Court over the store's objections to being required to provide emergency contraceptives to women.

vides timely delivery. The rules require a pharmacy to deliver all medicine, even if a pharmacist or pharmacy objects.

In 2014, the Supreme Court allowed certain businesses to object on religious

grounds to the Affordable Care Act's requirement that companies provide employees with insurance that pays for women's contraceptives. The court in May sent a similar dispute brought by

When a woman walks into a pharmacy, she should not fear being turned away because of the religious beliefs of the owner or the person behind the counter.
— Louise Melling, ACLU

nonprofit Christian employers back to lower courts without resolving the main legal issue.

The Stormans family is made up of devout Christians who associate "morning after" emergency contraceptives with abortion. Thirty-eight state and national pharmacy associations had urged the court to take up the case, saying pharmacies generally get to choose what products they stock.

The appeals court said the rules further the state's interest in patient safety, as speed is particularly important considering the time-sensitive nature of emergency contraception.

In the news

Judge: Clerks can't recuse themselves

A federal judge ruled on June 27 that clerks in Mississippi may not recuse themselves from issuing marriage licenses to gay couples based on religious beliefs, despite a bill passed by the state Legislature intended to carve out that exception for them.

U.S. District Judge Carlton Reeves said that the recusals on religious grounds violated the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark 2015 ruling legalizing gay marriage.

"The marriage license issue will not be adjudicated anew after every legislative session," Reeves wrote.

Abortion access law struck down in Texas

The Supreme Court on June 27 reaffirmed constitutional protections for abortion rights, striking down parts of a restrictive Texas law that could have drastically reduced the number of abortion clinics in the state.

The 5-to-3 decision was the court's most sweeping statement on abortion since *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* in 1992, which reaffirmed the constitutional right to abortion established in 1973 in *Roe v. Wade*. It found that Texas' restrictions — requiring doctors to have admitting privileges at nearby hospitals and clinics to meet the standards of ambulatory surgical centers — violated *Casey*'s prohibition on placing an "undue burden" on the ability to obtain an abortion.

The following day, the court then ruled that it would not hear appeals from either Wisconsin and Mississippi over similar decisions, meaning clinics in those states may remain open.

Ark replica damaged in harbor collision

A full-size replica of Noah's ark crashed into a Norwegian Coast Guard patrol boat in the Port of Oslo, Norway, on June 11.

The ark was being towed when the crew lost control and it suffered a huge gash after striking a Norwegian coast guard vessel. No animals were aboard and no one was injured. The ark, which serves as a museum, will remain in the harbor until repairs can be carried out.

The vessel is 427 feet long, 95 feet wide and 75 feet high. It included displays of animals, including sculptures of tigers, giraffe, an elephant and a bison.

Daughter burned to death over marriage

Police in the Pakistani city of Lahore have arrested a woman suspected of murdering her daughter for marrying without family consent.

Police say the body of Zeenat Rafiq was doused with fuel and set on fire. Her mother Parveen is accused of luring her back from her in-laws.

It is the third such case in a month in Pakistan, where attacks on women who go against conservative rules on love and marriage are common. A post-mortem examination may establish if she was still alive when she was set on fire.

Police Superintendent Ibadat Nisar said officers were looking for her brother, who is "on the run." Her mother was found in the house with the body.

Faith-free rehab program OK'd

The California Department of Corrections is no longer requiring parolee Taylor Bast, a nontheistic Buddhist, to attend a religious treatment program as a condition of his parole.

The American Humanist Association's Appignani Humanist Legal Center contacted the state Department of Corrections on June 8 to inform them that Bast's First Amendment rights were being violated when he was required to attend one of three faith-based substance abuse programs

or face arrest and jail time. Bast requested secular alternatives twice, but his requests were denied. The officers also required that Bast provide written documentation for his Buddhist and philosophical worldviews. On June 17, AHA received assurances from the Department of Corrections that Bast will be referred to the non-faith-based Day Reporting Center and that he will also be given the option of attending a secular treatment program.

Avijit Roy murder suspect killed by cops

One of the key suspects in the hacking murder of Bangladesh-born American blogger and writer Avijit Roy was killed in a gunfight on June 19.

"Shariful is dead in a gunfight with police on early Sunday in Dhaka," said Abdul Baten, joint commissioner of the detective branch of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, at a press briefing.

Shariful, 25, was on a motorcycle with two others and failed to stop at a police signal, arousing suspicion. Police gave chase and were fired upon. Police returned fire and killed Shariful. The two others escaped.

Roy was hacked to death and his wife, Rafida Bonya Ahmed, was seriously wounded as they returned from an annual book fair on Dhaka University campus in February last year. Ahmed will be speaking at FFRF's convention in October.

Courtroom 13 renamed due to superstition

A Canadian courthouse has done away with Courtroom 13 after complaints that it felt unlucky.

People in Saint John, N.B., had raised concerns about the number since the Saint John Law Courts opened three years ago, Don Higgins, regional director of court services in Saint John, said.

Officials quickly took down the sign, but it was still known as Courtroom 13 on dockets and other official

documents.

Now, though, a new sign has gone up declaring it Courtroom 14.

"People only come here once or twice in their lives, so we're hoping to make it easier. We didn't do any investigation or analysis to see how many people it impacted," said Higgins. "I'm not a superstitious person by nature, but it was an easy fix to remove these distractions."

Curfew violators will be sent to church in N.J.

A trip to church is in store for city children who violate curfew in Trenton, N.J.

"Right now, we're having a difficult time," Police Director Ernest Parrey. "We have a lot of interaction with juveniles and because of that, there has to be some enforcement action taken on our part."

Children under the age of 18 who are caught out on the street from midnight until 6 a.m. will be taken to a house of worship. Police will then notify the parents or guardians to pick their children.

The police director expects some pushback.

"The way I look at it is, what is the better idea: You get woken up in the middle of the night for bringing your child home or you get woken up in the middle of the night to get a terrible notification that your child isn't coming home," Parrey said.

Atheist group's ideas put in Dem's platform

The Secular Coalition for Texas introduced three resolutions during the Texas Democratic Convention, and all are now part of the official platform.

The resolutions were to repeal religious exemptions to child protection laws, to strike discriminatory language from the state Constitution that bars nontheists from holding elected office, and to support secular reproductive health care policies.

Julia Sweeney’s Reason Rally speech

Conservative Catholics too influential

Actress and FFRF Honorary Director Julia Sweeney spoke at the June 4 Reason Rally in Washington D.C. Here is the edited transcript of her speech.

By Julia Sweeney

Hello Reason Ralliers, I’m so happy to be here.

Who are we? What unites us here? We are people who use reason to make sense of the world, and use reason to advocate for the laws of the land. We resist superstition and supernatural explanations. We enjoy these things in art, in stories and in fantasy, but we understand the difference between our creative fictional imagination and the world as it really is. We are a big part of the citizenry, and we are people who want our voice heard here in the capital.

The religious fundamentalists and religious conservatives who base their worldview on the bible have a ridiculously outsized influence on the laws of this land. Part of the reason we’re here is to correct that.

I was born in Spokane, Wash., and was immediately baptized a Catholic. I loved being a Catholic. I loved the ritual of the Mass, I loved the priests and the nuns. (I always wanted to be a nun, and now, here I am, finally, a None!) And I loved the music of the church. (Bach probably is responsible for at least 10 years of my Catholicism.)

But then, as an adult, I decided to take a bible study class. And frankly, everything went downhill from there. We all know the Old Testament is a crazy jumble of legends, a grab-bag of myths that reinforce the tribalism of the Jewish people. But not that many people know that the New Testament often portrays Jesus as anti-social, obtuse and shockingly mean.

Jesus’ parables are often foggy, meaningless and even offensive. For example, Jesus helps us understand God’s relationship with humans by telling us a story about how God treats people the people treat . . . their slaves. They beat some more than they beat others.

In fact, the bible refers to slavery all over the place. And not only does the bible not say slavery is wrong, the bible actually gives lots of advice about how you’re supposed to keep your slaves and how slaves should behave obediently at all times to their masters. I thought the son of God would say that slavery was wrong. But no. Jesus does not say that. In fact, he uses slavery as an example of how God treats his people.



Photo by Andrew Seidel

Julia Sweeney speaks to the crowd at the June 4 Reason Rally outside the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Here are some of Jesus’ words in the New Testament: In Luke, Chapter 19, Jesus says that he is like a king who says, “Anyone who does not recognize me, bring them here and slaughter them before me.” Or, in John, Chapter 15, Jesus says, “Anyone who does not believe in me is like a withered branch that will be cast in the fire and burned.” In Matthew, Jesus says, “I come not to bring peace, but a sword.” And in Luke, he says, “If you don’t have a sword, sell your clothes and buy one.”

Christians who find the Koran filled with murderous and hateful language would do well to look at their own bible. Sometimes the stone in your own eye is so enormous you are completely blind.

It’s ironic that the “family values” Christian Coalition, which has much political clout, bases its morality on a religious leader (Jesus) who discouraged his converts to have any contact with their own families, who did not marry or have children himself, and explicitly told his followers not to have children, and that if they already had families, they should just abandon them.

When it comes to the topic of women, the New Testament is offensive. St. Paul writes, “Man is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or have any authority over a man. She must be silent. If there is anything a woman desires to know, let her ask her husband at home.”

This is in the bible. The bible. The Good News.

And yet, much of our political culture is based on these archaic myths. This has translated itself into law — laws that negatively affect millions of people.

Because I come from the Catholic tradition, I’m going to use an example from that religious tradition.

About 20 percent of Americans are Catholic. Conservative Catholic organizations, such as The Catholic League and the U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference, lobby hard and have an outsized influence in U.S. politics and law. But most Catholics themselves are not conservative, at least when it comes to issues like birth control and abortion. In fact, 60 to 65 percent of American Catholics are pro-choice, about the same as the rest of America.

But conservative Catholics have a big influence on American law. Five of eight Supreme Court justices are Catholic, and it was six out of nine when Scalia was alive.

While the *Hobby Lobby* case was filed by evangelical Christians, it was the Catholics Conference of Bishops who engineered the *Hobby Lobby* Supreme Court case to block contraception as a standard health care insurance benefit by employers who object, regardless of the desires of their employees.

This has enormous impact. Seventeen percent of people who work at a hospital are working at a Catholic hospital.

You may say the new lovable Pope Francis is leading the Catholic Church toward sanity. Not exactly. At least not when it comes to women and reproductive control. With the Zika virus spreading, and many urging the pope to relax his views of contraception, he said that abortion was absolutely evil and that contraception is slightly less evil. Then he offhandedly referred to a special dispensation argued for by John Paul in the 1960s where he claimed it was permissible for nuns in the Congo to use birth control pills because they were being raped so often by the local militias that they were becoming pregnant and unable to continue their work.

Just let that sink in a moment. That’s the only case where the Church, or

Pope Francis, can possibly imagine where contraception could be ethical. He seemed to halfheartedly and even blithely imply that might also be the case for women trapped in the Zika virus tragedy.

My mind boggles over that one. But then the pope did nothing to clarify, let alone codify, these sentiments. In the meantime, millions of poor women in South America who are Catholic, where abortion is illegal (mostly because of the Catholic Church) are at risk for bearing Zika babies that will, among other things, surely keep them and their children condemned to poverty. Not only that, the Zika virus is making its way here, and our own government is making birth control choices for women more and more limited. This

is because of the Religious Right, including the Catholic Church.

Many of my Catholic friends tell me privately that they are nonbelievers — atheists — but they are still going to church for cultural and sentimental reasons. I get that. I really do. Some are even part of great groups like Cath-

olics for Choice. But most are silent. Because of this, they allow themselves to be counted among the number that the conservative Catholic organizations say they represent.

I think conservative religious influence does not represent the American public. I think there are a lot of people out there, formally part of one religion or another, and by their silence they lend themselves to a very insidious political pressure toward fundamentalist, patriarchal, superstitious laws. As Edmund Burke said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.”

This needs to change.

We here today, just by showing up at this rally, are counting ourselves among those without gods or masters, but as freethinking individuals, free from superstition and supernaturalism. Let our voices be heard. We are the Nones, and our voices are loud and clear. We want a separation between the church and state, just as our forebears envisioned. Let’s succeed at this great American experiment.



Photo by Lindsey Ford

At the Reason Rally, Julia Sweeney talked about how conservative Catholics wield too much control over all Catholics, and also over U.S. politics and law.

Michael Nugent’s FFRF convention speech

‘You have rights, your beliefs do not’

Michael Nugent is a co-founder of Atheist Ireland and campaigns for the right to assisted dying for terminally or seriously ill people. He has previously campaigned against terrorism in Northern Ireland, including founding and chairing the peace group New Consensus.

Michael’s speech, edited for space, was delivered on May 3, 2014, at FFRF’s regional convention in Raleigh, N.C.

He was introduced by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor:

Dan and I have been privileged to attend several events in Ireland with Atheist Ireland and Atheist International. It was a valuable perspective to see that, although half of our nation believes Jesus is in our Constitution, in the Republic of Ireland Jesus really is in their constitution. So it’s a different kind of battle between church and state. We’re very pleased to have Michael Nugent here.

By Michael Nugent

Thanks to everybody here for being part of the growing international movement for what we at Atheist Ireland describe as promoting atheism and reason and secularism. As individuals move from survival values toward self-expression values, societies move toward secular rational values and away from traditional religious values. So we are swimming with the tide of history with the work that we are doing.

Until very recently, Ireland was a monolithic Catholic state. Northern Ireland is different, but south is a monolithic Catholic state, dominated by two institutions: the Catholic Church and the Fianna Fáil, which is a populist political party infested with corruption.

For most of the last century, those two institutions have worked to keep Ireland Catholic. We have a clause in our constitution that says that the state acknowledges that the homage of public worship is due to almighty God. If you think about it for more than a second, it’s not even a clause vindicating the rights of citizens to worship a god, it’s a clause vindicating the right of this god to be worshipped by the citizens. As if the creator of the universe needs the Irish Constitution to vindicate his rights.

I was born in an Ireland in the 1960s where, in the first census after I was born, 95% of people said they were Roman Catholic; 99.5% said they were Christians of some variety. Less than half of one-tenth of one percent said that they had no religion. Divorce was illegal, abortion was and still is illegal, contraception was illegal. The Catholic Church, in the meantime and in the background, was covering up the rape and abuse of children with the active complacency of the Irish state in many cases.

But Ireland has changed a lot. The most recent surveys in Ireland showed that 47% of Irish people say they are religious. That’s less than half, which is a massive, massive change in a short period of time. And that’s compared to 59% internationally.

Ireland is now one of the least re-

ligious countries in the world. So the Catholic Church has lost the moral influence that it had claimed and pretended to have for so long. Fianna Fáil is also out of power. Ireland, once a Catholic country, is a pluralist country, but unfortunately still has Catholic laws.

Still a ways to go

We still have that constitution that I was telling you about. And there are other things in that constitution, including the offense of blasphemy. The president, judges and members of the council of the estate, which includes the prime minister, are required by the constitution to swear a religious oath in order to take office. Which means that a conscientious atheist cannot legally hold those offices in Ireland.

The Catholic Church officially runs 90% of the primary schools in Ireland, funded by the state. Teachers’ salaries are paid by the state, run by the Catholic Church with an official Catholic ethos that is not restricted to the religious instruction classes, but permeates the entire curriculum. So you cannot even opt your child out of the formal religious instructional elements because in nature study they’ll be taught that God created the birds and the bees and in the music classes they’ll be singing hymns. That’s just a really difficult situation to deal with.

We also have a clause that was largely influenced by the Catholic Church, put into our constitution in the 1980s making abortion unconstitutional. The situation in Ireland with abortion is that the government has been forced by a combination of legal factors to bring in the most restrictive version of abortion laws that they could get away with and that the citizens could respect. Even in cases like rape and incest and fatal fetal abnormalities, abortion is still illegal in Ireland. We still have such a long way to go.

Also in Ireland, assisted dying is illegal, and I know that’s the case in a lot of parts of America, as well. But that’s a campaign particularly close to my heart because my wife died a few years ago of cancer. And she had made preparations to take her own life if she needed to, to avoid unnecessary suffering. And what’s really important for people to understand is that it’s portrayed as if it’s about people wanting to die. But it’s not about people wanting to die, it’s about people wanting the peace of mind that they can have from

knowing that they have the option to avoid unnecessary suffering. And when you’re talking about people who are terminally ill and it is purely a question of when and how they die, rather than whether they die, the only argument against that is theological. And it is a purely secular issue to have assisted dying in those circumstances made legal.

Atheist Ireland

So that’s the context in which Atheist Ireland was founded five years ago. We campaign to promote atheism and reason over superstition and supernaturalism. We campaign for an ethical secular state where the state doesn’t give any support or preference to either religion or to atheism. We involve ourselves in political lobbying both of the government and opposition political parties. We provide briefing documents to parliamentarians when bills are going through that are relevant to secularism. We regularly make submissions to and appear before both parliamentary committees in Ireland, but also international human rights regulatory bodies like the United Nations and the European Union.

As Annie Laurie was saying earlier on, we are kind of like in the opposite position to what you have here. You have secular laws that you are trying to have enforced. We are still trying to get secular laws implemented.

One of the most serious is the blasphemy law. Ireland passed a new blasphemy law in 2009, and on that day, Atheist Ireland published 25 blasphemous statements on our website. What we said is, “One or two things will happen: Either we will be prosecuted, in which case we could challenge the constitution, or we won’t be prosecuted, in which case that strengthens the political case for appeal of the law, because if they are not going to implement it, then it brings the Parliament and the laws into disrepute.”

We take a human-rights-based approach to all of the political positions that we argue for, particularly in terms of blasphemy laws. Our position is that we can respect their right to hold their beliefs, but we don’t have to respect the content of their beliefs. And a slogan that we used to articulate: “You have rights, your beliefs do not.”

Rights infringed

It’s astonishing how fundamental the infringements of human rights

are, particularly in Islamic states. I’ll give you one quick example, which is a woman named Aasia Bibi, a middle-aged mother who is currently in jail in Pakistan awaiting execution by hanging for allegedly blaspheming Muhammad. And two politicians in Pakistan who spoke up for her — the Muslim governor of Punjab and the minority’s Christian minister in the government — were murdered.

In Aasia Bibi’s case, as is the pattern for most blasphemy cases, it was because of a trivial dispute — a goat broke a trough in a neighbor’s garden. That had created tension between this woman and her neighbors. And then when she was out working in the fields picking fruit, she went to get some water. But because she had drunk from the water bowl and she was a Christian, they said she had contaminated the water. And when she said something about Jesus doing more good for people than Muhammad, she was accused of blasphemy. A mob gathered to attack her. The police were called, and instead of dispersing the mob or arresting the mob, the police arrested her. So this is really important.

Normalizing ‘atheist’

I’ve had a lot of discussions just over the last few days here with people from the Triangle Freethought Society about the work that they’re doing, work that atheist groups are doing similarly in Ireland. I’m going to suggest that we need to normalize the use of the word “atheist.”

I think that we need to be seen to be doing good things while self-identifying as atheists. And that’s the only way and practice that we are going to chip away at the prejudice about the word “atheist” that exists. Because if we retreat from the word atheist while we are doing good things, then people never see self-identifying atheists do good things. The prejudice continues.

In theory, atheism can be any position on a scale from passively not believing in gods to actively believing that there are no gods. I believe that atheism in real life is necessarily more than a dry disbelief in an assertion about gods. If you don’t believe in gods, then it necessarily follows that you don’t believe that morality comes from gods.

That is a significant position to take. It’s a significant worldview in a world where the majority of people do believe that morality comes from gods. Morality does not come from supernatural commands, it comes from our natural compassion and empathy and cooperation and reciprocity and sense of fairness and sense of justice. Atheism doesn’t guarantee that you will reach the right decisions morally, but what it does do is it removes a significant obstacle.

That obstacle is not actually religion. It’s an underlining obstacle — faith. Faith and dogma. By “faith,” I mean believing something disproportionately to the currently best available evidence. And by “dogma,” I mean believing in things without questioning them.

Those faiths and dogmas can be applied just as easily to secular projects as they are to religious projects. But the difference between religious faith and dogma and secular faith and dogma is that with secular faith in dogma,



Michael Nugent gives FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker a tour in Ireland.

eventually it bumps into reality. And you notice that it's not working and you notice the consequences, whereas religious faith and dogma hides its testability in an imaginary afterlife. And so you don't get to notice whether it's working and can perpetuate itself more easily.

Obviously, another issue is that religious faiths and dogmas promote these kind of fantastic rewards for eternity that atheism doesn't. It can seem like a negative thing, and it's one of the things that portrays atheism as a negative concept. But I don't think it is. That argument is largely based on etymology. I believe that it is reasonable to say that atheism is a positive concept.

Four principles

Now, I'll briefly go over four principles that I think we should use to promote ethical secularism.

The first is promoting reason and science over faith and dogma. If I was to wander around the town of Raleigh today and tell people I had good news for them, that I had just been talking with Bill Gates, who said he's going to give every person \$10 million if they do what I say, they would apply their critical thinking skills and probably wouldn't believe me.

But if I was to go to the same random group of people, tell them I have good news for them, that I was talking to the creator of the universe and that he has promised an eternity in paradise if they do what I say, a significant proportion of those people would actually believe me.

That's because religion corrupts our sense of reality. Normally, when we are asked to believe something, we weigh it against the evidence: What is most consistent with the evidence? And as the claim becomes more implausible, we raise the bar of the evidence that we need in order to satisfy ourselves that it is true.

But with religion, we do the exact opposite. As the claims become more implausible, we lower the bar of evi-



Photo by Chris Johnson

Michael Nugent at his home in Ireland, with his cat Boris on his shoulders and a photo of his late wife Anne on his desk.

dence. Religion encourages us to believe not only implausible claims, but literally untestable claims. And then it insists that we live our lives on the basis of those untestable claims. And that corrupts our sense of reality.

That leads into the second principle that I think we should promote: our sense of morality.

Morality is a natural function of our brains. We have evolved morality in order to live together as social animals, as have other non-human animals. Cooperation and competition are useful in terms of survival. So we feel empathy for each other, we feel compassion for each other, we cooperate, we feel a sense of fairness and a sense of justice. It's not something that is just unique to humans. We increasingly respect the rights of the non-human animals. We just generally refine and increasingly nuance our sense of morality.

It's a difficult enough thing to do. What religion does is add in a corrupting factor to that which is already a difficult task. What religion tells us is that even if this is the compassionate thing to do, even if this is the fair thing to do, even if this is the just thing to do, you shouldn't do it . . . because somebody wrote something down in a book 2,000 years ago.

And so many Catholics use that to

justify denying condoms to potential AIDS victims in Africa. And many Muslims use that to justify the command in the Koran that husbands can beat their wives. In Surat 24-2, it says: "The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication, flog each of them with a hundred strikes, let not compassion move you in their case, in a matter prescribed by Allah."

So clearly the reason that this is in there is they were having a problem with people who were supposed to be flogging adulterers, but those people were allowing their compassion to prevent them from doing it to the satisfaction of the people that were making the rules. And so they had to add in another rule that they said was supposedly sent from Allah saying, "Don't let your compassion prevent you from doing what we are telling you." So not only is religion not necessary for morality, but religion actively corrupts morality.

The third of the four principals I want to talk about is promoting exclusive and caring and supportive atheist groups. This is one of the things that the Triangle Freethought Group is doing very effectively.

We should try to communicate with each other as respectfully as people. We can disagree with principles and

we can disagree with each other. But we can respect each other as individuals while disagreeing with the content of our beliefs. I think that we've got to start treating each other with respect.

The final point I want to make is that I think we should be promoting fair societies with secular government, working in terms of improving our own ethical behavior within our organizations, but also tackling specific injustices within society that are relevant to religious dogma.

And also we should campaign actively to separate church and state. That should continually be the basis of what we are doing politically.

However implausible the claim I made earlier — the one about Bill Gates and the \$10 million — surely it's even more implausible to suggest that the creator of the universe — with a hundred billion galaxies, each of which consists of a hundred billions stars — created it so that he could tell one member of one species on one planet to stone a man to death for gathering sticks on the Sabbath and then impregnate a virgin in order to give birth to himself.

On the basis of absurd claims like that, Aasia Bibi is currently languishing in prison in Pakistan awaiting execution by hanging for allegedly blaspheming against Muhammad. So I think we have to redouble our efforts to challenge blasphemy laws.

We should promote reason and science over faith and dogma. We should promote natural ethics over religious commands. We should promote inclusive caring support of atheist groups. We should promote fair societies with secular government and in doing that we should be optimistic about what we are doing. We live in an era where in my lifetime there have been massive changes in world geopolitics that we would have never thought would happen.

We can be optimistic that we are swimming with the tide of history in promoting atheism and ethical secularism.

Billboards

Continued from front page

Reagan billboard outside the Republican convention is going to infuriate conservatives."

- AddictingInfo.org wrote: "Billboard with Reagan quote stands outside GOP convention and conservatives REALLY won't like it."
- On DownTrend.com, it was: "Atheists twist Ronald Reagan's words to make their godless point."

FFRF wishes to thank Loren Miller, a chapter member of the Northern Ohio Freethought Society, for suggesting the Reagan quote.



Censorship in Mississippi

FFRF put up its first-ever billboard in Mississippi on July 1, but it was removed five days later. Lamar Outdoor yanked FFRF's digital display, contending it was getting "a lot of hate."

The election-year billboard at the intersection of Main and Gloster in Tupelo displayed a patriotic-looking message depicting Uncle Sam saying, "God Fixation Won't Fix This Nation."

A representative from Lamar told FFRF there was significant "backlash from the community" and "too much heat."

Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president, expressed dismay over "this heckler's veto."

"It's more than disappointing that there is no alternative or dissent permitted in Mississippi, that the claims of religion cannot even be questioned or debated," she says.

FFRF thanks its lifetime member in Tupelo, who had underwritten the advertisement.

Mississippi is tied with Alabama as the most religious in the nation, with 77 percent of adult Mississippians saying that they are "very religious," according to the Pew Research Center. At the same time, it consistently ranks at or near the bottom in quality of life.

FFRF has successfully put up billboards in more than half of the states in the country since 2007. FFRF began attempting to display billboard messages in the late 1970s and met only censorship until the past 10 years, when there started to be more openness to freethought ideas. Not in Mississippi, though. Gaylor says it is "distressing and shocking" to be met with such censorship in this day and age.

'God Less America'

FFRF also has a billboard in St. Paul near where the local minor-league baseball team plays. On July 16, the St. Paul Saints became, for one day, the Mr. Paul Aints as part of "Atheist Night." The game was co-sponsored by FFRF and the Minnesota Atheists.

The sign states: "God-Less America. July 16 CHS Field #MrPaul."



Photo by Dan Barker

Happy 92, Ken!

Ken Proulx, one of FFRF's most longtime members, turned 92 in early July and waxed philosophical about humanity's tendency to credulity: "The human race has paid a high price for that vulnerability: bloodshed and misery all over the world, and it isn't over yet." And about those prayer breakfasts, pragmatic Ken adds: "They're talking to outer space, plaster and pancakes." After a near lifetime of freethinking, Ken concludes: "You can make a sound case, but if people don't want to think rationally, their mind is just like cement. People aren't satisfied with a lifespan, so they invent a place to go and a way to get there. And, voila, you've got religion."

FFRF AWARDS \$9,950

2016 William J. Schulz High School Essay winners

The Freedom From Religion Foundation congratulates the 16 college-bound high school seniors who won this year’s essay competition.

FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994 and graduate students since 2010.

Seniors were asked to pick from two topics: “The challenges of growing up a freethinker,” or “Why Boy Scouts of America should welcome atheists and nonbelievers.”

After carefully reviewing 140 submissions, FFRF awarded seven top prizes (including a tie for sixth place) and nine honorable mentions.

“FFRF is proud to offer these scholarships to deserving freethinking students,” FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor said. “We are glad to support them as they head off to college and begin this new chapter in their lives.”

Winners are listed below and include the award amount and the college or university they will be attending this fall.

FIRST PLACE

A hymn of my own

FFRF awarded Avery \$3,000.

BY AVERY BOLTWOOD

I was 14, and my religion was on an IV drip. While my friends sang proudly at Sunday service, heads upturned and eyes closed in reverence, I stared straight ahead, reading the lyrics in silence. These hymns were nothing new. After all, I had been home-schooled in the faith. But by now, the melodies were losing their hold on me. Even the Christian apologia that I’d been subjected to over the years now seemed out of tune. The watchmaker argument, the cosmological argument, the supporting chords of intelligent design — for years I belted these hymns to unbelievers and whispered them to my own doubts.

After 14 years, I stopped whispering.

For the time, I believed in a god, but the god I now saw defied religion. This god was unprovable. Though he may have heard our hymns, the hymns themselves were hollow arguments, fumbling at an untouchable truth. Yet, the crowd expected me to sing them. As an assignment for my “Christian worldview” class, I was to give a speech and argue that unarguable question: Does God exist?

My friends answered the same way I had for years. They rejected evolutionary theory and the Big Bang, while claiming the cosmos, the Earth and the soul as God’s fingerprints. They chorused those familiar arguments, voices lit with certainty and, in that certainty, comfort that their childhood beliefs still stood unbroken. But their hymns were no longer my hymns, and their god was no longer my god. I had to give my answer, and so I did.

“There are no fingerprints,” I said. “We can’t prove God.”

The room offered up polite applause and awkward glances, but words would wait until Sunday. Then, in a quiet hallway, between the sermon and



FIRST PLACE
Avery Boltwood, Duke University (\$3,000)

SECOND PLACE
Mahad Olad, Ithaca College (\$2,000)

THIRD PLACE
Mary Breedon, Illinois Wesleyan University (\$1,000)

FOURTH PLACE
Kaylor MacLaughlin, Oregon State University Honors College (\$750)

FIFTH PLACE
Bethany Wasilik, College of William and Mary (\$500)



Avery Boltwood

lunch, the pastor’s wife had to talk to me for a moment. She told me that my speech was inappropriate, that I should not have played “devil’s advocate.” Others told me that I was rebellious, wrongheaded, just looking for a fight.

For years, my religion had been the heartbeat of my friendships. Now, that heartbeat flatlined. Since then, I have become familiar with that voice of reprimand, the voice that says, “Sing the hymns. Stay the path. Do not wander.” The voice comes from well-intentioned friends and from the back of my head — a voice that tells me the worldview I was born into is the only one I will ever need.

But this same voice tells Galileo to forget his telescope for the sake of his church, and tells French revolutionaries to forget their ideals for the sake of their king. It is the voice of a stagnant world, whose countless ideas are left unexplored, like a field left uncultivated, all to preserve a more familiar ignorance. I ignore this voice when it calls for me, the so-called prodigal son. When I was 14, I left myself to wander, to disown comfort, to sing my own hymns and find my own truth. And today, I am still wandering.

Avery Boltwood, 19, lives in The Colony, Texas, where he recently graduated from The Colony High School. He will be attending Duke University in Durham, N.C., with plans to pursue a degree in public policy. Avery’s interests include writing, debate, music composition and “Star Wars.”

SIXTH PLACE (TIE)
Erin McCoskey, Wichita State University (\$400)

SIXTH PLACE (TIE)
Elizabeth Robbins, Tisch School of Arts (\$400)

HONORABLE MENTIONS (\$200 EACH)
Niha Ahmad, University of Illinois-Chicago

Christian Beveridge, University of Pittsburgh

Kristian Harrell, Missouri Southern State

SECOND PLACE

Growing up as an ex-Muslim

FFRF awarded Mahad \$2,000.

BY MAHAD OLAD

My journey away from Islam began in the slums of Eastleigh, a suburb of Nairobi, Kenya. During my walk home from the mosque one morning, I heard a thunderous eruption off in the distance. Petrified, I sprinted to a relative’s compound to seek refuge. A grenade had been thrown into a local church in the midst of a Sunday school session by Al-Shabaab. The explosion killed a child and wounded nine others.

That evening, a local religious leader delivered an energetic speech sanctioning the grisly attack. He cited numerous verses from the Quran and scads of reportings from the Hadith (deeds and sayings attributed to prophet Mohammed) as divine sources of inspiration for the jihadists.

I realized I couldn’t overlook the fact that today’s Islamic extremists are driven by a political ideology, an ideology derived from Islam’s most sacrosanct texts. That event, including the imam’s speech, propelled me to critically examine my faith, eventually leading me to renounce Islam altogether. It was a traumatizing experience to reject a religion whose doctrines I’d been conditioned to believe as the literal truth.

My mere existence as an ex-Muslim is radical and controversial. Many Muslim-majority nations retain laws that criminalize apostasy — the renunciation of Islam by a Muslim. Even in the secular West, where the freedom to change religions is recognized, ex-Muslims like me continue to fear for their lives. While I have not explicitly acknowledged my atheism to loved ones, they’ve figured out my disbelief due to my lack of observance of Muslim rituals. As a result, my older siblings no

University
Matthew Joy, Chapman University
Alexandra Lauria-Daley, Northeastern University
Brody McNutt, Dartmouth College
Noelle Shaw, San Diego State University
Kayla Spitzer, Northwest Arkansas Community College
Conrad Wright, California Polytechnic State University

The high school contest is named for William J. Schulz, a Wisconsin member who died at 57. He was a mechanical engineer and cared deeply about FFRF’s work, leaving a bequest that funds the awards.

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 \$9,950 reflects bonuses.

The college student essay winners will be announced in the September issue and the grad student essay winners will be announced in the October issue.



Mahad Olad

longer speak to me. My parents believe that by turning my back against the religion, I’ve turned my back against them. To them, I will always be a great disappointment.

There’s this paradoxical challenge I face whenever I speak up about my experiences as a former Muslim. Well-intentioned liberals often label my criticism of Islam as racist or Islamophobic. These views stem from a place of genuine concern for Muslims who are victims of Islamophobic crimes. However, I can’t help but feel a sense of betrayal whenever I’m silenced by liberals when I advocate for ideas we cherish: freedom, justice and equality.

I left Islam around the age of 13 and thought I was alone. Then I stumbled upon an internet forum catering to ex-Muslims. We discussed our experiences, vented to one another and sought advice on how to deal with issues often faced by ex-Muslims, such as family abandonment, loneliness and persecution. This virtual community served as my support group and helped me cope during rough times. A year after joining the online forum, I began attending local meetups through a nonprofit organization called the Ex-Muslims of North America. There, I’ve formed lasting bonds with members who understand the struggles I go through. This organization has had a tremendously positive impact on my life. I finally feel as if I belong.

Mahad Olad, 18, is a recent graduate from Brooklyn Center Secondary in Brooklyn Center, Minn. He will be attending Ithaca College with plans to double major in political science and journalism. He enjoys running, reading nonfiction books and spending time with friends.

THIRD PLACE

No reason to apologize for my nonbelief

FFRF awarded Mary \$1,000.

BY MARY AMANDA BREEDEN

Imagine you don’t care for milk. You don’t have anything against it, you just prefer not to drink it. You live sans lactose without mentioning it, thinking about it much, or persuading others to adopt your milk-less ways.

But some kid in your class really wants you to drink milk. “It’s good for you,” he says. “Milk will help you find yourself, because you’re clearly living a life devoid of purpose by avoiding it. You’ll keep others from drinking it and ruin their lives, too! Are you vegan? Are you morally opposed to milk? Have you tried it and seen how much it can change your soul?”

Imagine your classmate heckling you like this about religion.

It started in middle school. Apparently, being a nonreligious person who generally minded her own business was unacceptable to Jake, a devout Christian who would badger me into livid arguments during our lunch period.



Mary Breedon

He would go on and on about how I was going to hell and how I still had time to repent. If I changed my mind and converted right then, he said, I’d be saved from my “sinful ways.” By my first year in high school, it got

to the point where I couldn’t sit with my friends at lunch because Jake was there, too. If I so much as approached the table to ask someone a homework question, he would promptly launch into a one-sided “friendly discussion” about Christianity. It usually devolved into him lamenting how desolate my life must be without any spiritual influence. I told him I found my life very fulfilling, thank you very much, and that I didn’t feel I was morally depraved at all.

That summer, Jake began sending letters to my house and filling my inbox with long-winded Facebook messages.

Jake was an extreme case; our interactions felt almost like a sitcom — satirical, even. Most of my friends were religious to some degree, and completely respected my atheism, but after receiving what was essentially hate mail disguised in flowery words, I found it very difficult to voice my stance on religion. Religion simply didn’t make sense to me. How could anyone devote themselves so fully to an entity that likely didn’t even exist? Why was spirituality often synonymous with

moral adjustment? Who was Jake to declare he was right about something that had been adamantly debated for centuries?

Thankfully, my family was supportive. I grew up in a house that encouraged freethought and celebrated autonomy. My parents let me navigate spirituality at my own pace and arrive at personal conclusions independently. Ultimately, I learned to climb above petty arguments and dead-end discussions to move on with things more worth my time.

I know that in the future my lack of religion will inevitably and repeatedly be challenged. However, when that time comes, I will stand tall. I have no reason to apologize for my nonbelief.

Mary (Amanda) Breedon, 18, recently graduated from Normal Community West High School in Normal, Ill. She was the leader of her school’s Pride Club, and enjoys painting, playing violin and piano, and doing humanitarian work. She will be attending Illinois Wesleyan University and plans to major in women’s/gender/sexuality studies.

FOURTH PLACE

Losing the church, but finding myself

FFRF awarded Kaylor \$750.

BY KAYLOR MACLAUGHLIN

I am not the homogenized, upper-middle-class, Republican, Christian city I come from. I once was, though.

Sucked in by the death grip of organizations like Young Life and Youth for Christ, I succumbed to the path of my peers. At 12 years old, I was indoctrinated into a church of people who refused to ask any real questions. At first, it was lovely. It was the first time in my life I had ever felt such a strong sense of community. I thrived in the church: I made friends, I understood biblical ideas, I knew how to speak the language.

Then, the fear came.

It didn’t matter how many nights I stayed up with a flashlight on my bible or prayed, at the end of the day, I just

couldn’t believe it. I was told it’s sinful to deny God. I had tried so hard, pushed myself to every extreme, but it wasn’t real to me. So, I was going to hell. How is a 15-year-old supposed to take eternal damnation? I, for one, didn’t take it well.

When I reflect on the Christian season of my life, I can only see one thing: shame. I was shameful about everything. I was ashamed that I like to kiss girls, even though I am one. I was ashamed of my sexual desires. I was ashamed of my forward personality. I was ashamed of my anger, my feelings, myself.

When I left the church, I found myself. I found my passion for science. I found my political opinions. I found real friends. I even found love. It was so liberating, to just simply be — without footnotes or guidelines or guilt.

Looking back on it now, I am angry. I am angry with the brainwashing, the

lies, the carefully perfected techniques of sugarcoating. I am angry with the people who are caught up in it all. I want to shake them free of it. I am angry with people who refuse to take control of their own lives. I am angry with myself for not waking up sooner.

I am not ashamed of my anger. I’m not angry because I think it’s an ideal state of being; I’m angry because I’m paying attention.

I am an atheist because I am not going to take the easy way out. I want to ask the hard questions. I want to experience all of my feelings and wishes, simply because they’re mine. I am an atheist because anything else would be a lie.

Kaylor MacLaughlin, 18, graduated from West Linn High School in West Linn, Ore. She was born in Marietta, Ga. She will be attending Oregon State University Honors College after spending a term



Kaylor MacLaughlin

in Southeast Asia. She hopes to get a degree in biology with a minor in social activism.

FIFTH PLACE

Two white dresses, one freethinking mind

FFRF awarded Bethany \$500.

BY BETHANY WASILIK

I wore the first white dress when I was 7. It was my First Communion, and I knew almost nothing about the Catholic Church except that my mom brought me there every Sunday. I felt pretty in my little white gloves and shoes, but I hated the taste of the wine I was forced to drink. I still believed in Santa. I still believed in the Tooth Fairy. And I still believed in God.

I wore the second white dress when I was 17. It was my confirmation, and I knew way too much about the Catholic Church, but still my mom said it was good for me. For a year, I’d fought with her, told her I didn’t want to do this. Poor stupid lost sheep. Hush now, and Jesus will hook you by the neck, yank you back into this mindless herd. Just a phase. Maybe try praying about it?

I wanted to tear myself out of that white



Bethany Wasilik

dress, hurdle over the pews, and run straight out the church’s double doors. I felt like a cornered wild animal; I was desperate to escape the rituals and bigotry.

But I didn’t run away. I submitted, and a part of me died that day as I was paraded down the aisle and presented

to an old man who laid his hands on my head and pronounced me a child of a god I no longer believed in.

It’s been difficult to have two things which I feel so differently about be so tightly interwoven in my life. Family is the most important thing in the world to me. I’ve been lucky to have such close and loving family relationships, including with my mother. But twisted into my family is a religious tradition that I cannot accept as my own. To reject it openly would destroy my mother. To stay silent and resign myself to attend weekly services is slowly destroying me.

My mom still thinks I’m a Christian. I feel foolish for wondering if she’d love me less if she knew the truth, but I wonder nonetheless. I’ve been reading about other faiths and non-faiths in secret. I’ve tried meditation. I’ve researched interfaith clubs and secular organizations at the college I’m

attending in the fall and am counting down the Sundays until I leave home and am free from that weekly reminder of how alone religion makes me feel.

On the outside, I’m still trapped. But since making the decision to let go of my religious upbringing, my mind has been freer than ever. My religious neutrality has allowed me to appreciate diverse religious beliefs with a humanist zeal and to connect with Buddhists and Muslims and Jews and atheists in a much more meaningful way. I recognize that there is value in religion for many people, and I respect that. I just don’t happen to be one of them, and I hope that my decision to be a nonbeliever will be equally respected.

Bethany Wasilik, 18, graduated from Hermitage High School in her hometown of Richmond, Va. She will be attending the College of William and Mary, and is interested in biology, health and neuroscience.

SIXTH PLACE (TIE)

The best kind of citizen

FFRF awarded Elizabeth \$400.

BY ELIZABETH ROBBINS

Dear Sir or Madam,

It has come to my attention that despite your recent successes in ending discrimination within your organization, there is still a large population of potential Boy Scouts that you are barring from membership.

You refuse to allow nonreligious boys to participate in your organization, citing that “no member can grow into the best kind of citizen without recognizing his obligation to God.” I feel the need to dissuade you from this misguided policy. Although they say no prayers and attend no services, atheist and agnostic boys can still develop into outstanding citizens, and programs such as yours should help them in that endeavor, not exclude them based on their beliefs.

I, personally, have no religion. When I look at all the horrors of the world, I cannot bring myself to believe that all is as a god wills it. I cannot devote myself to someone who would let these things happen just to test us. For my own part, I must reject that belief system. That doesn’t mean I reject your values; it just means I’ve had to define my own.

Like your organization, I care for others and work to help those in need. I value selflessness, charity and integrity, even though no religion told me to do so. Please understand, I am not against your religion or your beliefs. I admire your faith, just as I would admire any of your qualities. It is simply not a quality we share. And you must recognize that it is a quality you do not share with millions of young boys who would greatly benefit from your organization if given the chance.

I may admire your faith, but I do not admire your using it to exclude these boys. Several years ago you



Elizabeth Robbins

set a precedent for yourselves. By allowing openly gay men and boys to become members and leaders in your organization, you sparked a wave of equality, and for that I thank you.

However, you are trying to stop the wave. You agreed just a few years ago to accept those boys, even though they had different beliefs than you. Now, I ask you to extend that same acceptance and understanding to atheist and agnostic boys across the country. They are no different. They may not believe in a god, but they are still wonderful, caring people that want the best for their community. My best friend, an atheist, hugs his rivals after competitions and congratulates them. My grandparents, both agnostics, volunteer for Habitat for Humanity on a regular basis. I, an agnostic, keep notes of the beautiful things I see in people to remind me to forgive them when they test my patience.

Even without religion, we can all be the best kind of citizens that you strive to cultivate. And if you give us a chance, we can prove it to you.

Please let our boys prove it to you.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Robbins

Elizabeth Robbins, 17, was born in Richland Center, Wis., and graduated from James Madison Memorial High School in Madison, Wis. She was a member of her high school forensics team, math team, specialty choir and is also an avid piano player and writer. She will attend Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, where she hopes to earn a degree in acting.

SIXTH PLACE (TIE)

My secular testimony

FFRF awarded Erin \$400.

BY ERIN MCCOSKEY

I wholeheartedly believe that I have been secular since birth. I was born an independent, fiery young girl in a strictly conservative, evangelical household.

As evangelical Christians, my parents believed in the literal translation of the bible — that every word in the text is written by God and therefore is the inevitable truth.

My inward battles with the church came on at a young age. I vividly remember sitting on my mother’s lap during Sunday service at the age of 5, observing as the communion plates were being passed around. Only those who had openly “accepted” Christ and had been baptized could participate in communion. I watched as my father, my 8-year-old brother and my mother all took the little pieces of bread. I did not. After swallowing her piece of bread, my mother leaned closer to me as I sat in her lap, and whispered, “Andrew [my brother] accepted Christ when he was way younger than you are now.”

The themes of shame and rejection continued to plague my youth. I learned quickly that as a female, through both God’s and the church’s eyes, I was a second-class citizen. I once inquired why there were no female pastors at our particular church and was told that “in the bible, God says that men were meant to have leadership roles to guide women to be holy.”

I was told by Sunday school teachers and pastors to dress modestly to be sure not to tempt boys’ thoughts with my body. Standing at 5 feet, 10 inches, it was almost impossible to find a Sunday dress that would cover my knees as I was told to do. My breaking point came when I was sexually harassed by older boys in the youth group. When my mother notified the youth pastor about the bullying, she was told it was her fault for letting her daughter “dress in



Erin McCoskey

that way.”

Growing up in the church negatively affected my self-image and self-esteem. I saw my body as shameful, and was constantly worried about committing another sin. Religion also warped the way I viewed others. In the church, I was taught that anyone who is not a believer in Jesus is evil and needs to be saved.

Many people say they find freedom in religion, but I did not. Religion was like an abusive relationship for me. With all my being, I thought it was the right thing for me. I thought it made me a better person. But in all actuality, I lost my true self in the religious way of life.

Now, as a young adult, I have started to get my parents to accept that their beliefs are not mine. No longer am I forced to participate in church events. Nor do I purchase skirts that purposely hit me below the knee.

Finding my own identity outside of evangelicalism was a rocky path. Throughout my early teens, my parents continuously punished me for being “rebellious,” when all I did was refuse to agree that the bible was law. I no longer feel ashamed of my gender or my past mistakes or actions. Without Christianity, I have found confidence in myself.

Erin McCoskey, 18, was born in Wichita, Kan., and graduated from Northeast Magnet High School as valedictorian and was named a 2016 Kansas Governor’s Scholar. She will be attending Wichita State University, where she plans to study dance performance and musical theatre and hopes to attend grad school to obtain a doctorate in physical therapy.

High school essay honorable mentions

FFRF selected nine high school essays that it deemed worthy of honorable mention status (and \$200!). Here are edited excerpts from each of them.

Becoming free of religion

BY NIHA AHMAD

Growing up in a Muslim household affected me. I was a girl. I was imprisoned. From a young age, I was forced into covering my ankles and elbows. I was forced into being inferior. But now that I am a young adult able to be independent, I choose to show my ankles or elbows. I choose to be free.

Growing up as girl in a Muslim household was hard. I had two older



Niha Ahmad

brothers who were always superior to me. My parents thought that my brothers were more important, because in religion, that is just how it goes. I was disgusted by this idea. I began losing the religion my parents forced on me, frustrated that my ankle had to be covered or that my wrist was showing too much, while my brothers were able to get their drivers’ licenses and apply for jobs. I hated that this religion was nothing more than a rulebook.

But because I’m a freethinker, I believe in gender equality and that women can succeed as well. As I go off to college, I can finally be free from this religion and live free.

Niha Ahmad, 18, is from Elgin, Ill., and graduated from Larkin High School. She will be attending the University of Illinois-Chicago and plans to major in computer engineering.

Learning to trust myself

BY CHRISTIAN BEVERIDGE

I was born into a Mormon family, and my path to atheism was long and filled with stress and guilt.

Until I was 10, I lived in the Mecca of Mormonism: Utah. I remember when Hurricane Katrina happened, I felt horrible about the innocent lives lost and homes destroyed in Louisiana. I had been taught that God makes everything happen for a reason, so I wondered what these victims had done to deserve this tragedy? After much thought, I realized that these people did nothing to deserve this, God wasn’t trying to teach



Christian Beveridge

them a lesson, and I came to the first major conclusion of my secular journey: not everything happens for a reason.

Two years ago, I officially resigned my LDS church membership. Without learning to trust myself, this act would have felt impossible. It’s sobering to think that rather than starting classes at the University of Pittsburgh this fall, I could be a doubt-filled, proselytizing Mormon missionary somewhere. It was a long journey and it wasn’t easy, but I am proud to have chosen the freedom of life without God and religion.

Christian Beveridge, 18, was raised near Salt Lake City, then moved in 2008 to Pennsylvania, and graduated from Kennett High School in Kennett Square, Penn. He will be attending the University of Pittsburgh and plans to major in economics and statistics.

Being atheist in the South

BY KRISTIAN HARRELL

Here in the Bible Belt, it’s virtually impossible to voice a problem or concern without hearing the oh-so-helpful phrases “God will help you” or “It’s all in God’s plan.”

But the most important religious issue is that of the bludgeoning of children into artificial conformity by the church. An appallingly high percentage of children in the South learn the words “god” or “heaven” before they even hear the words “science” or “space.”

What is different in the South compared to the rest of the civilized world is the reminder that we must grovel at the feet of our creator for affection despite his supposed unconditional love. Surely, if there were a celestial and sentient being that created the universe, it would have the mind of a scientist and an artist. It would want us to enjoy its creation and experience as much as possible, as opposed to begging forgiveness all our days for eating pork, or loving the wrong person in the wrong way, or thinking the wrong thoughts.

Kristian Harrell, 18, was born in Fort Smith, Ark., and spent the last eight years in Siloam Springs, Ark. He will be attending Missouri Southern State University and plans to major in physics and minor in mathematics.

No more flying under the radar

BY MATTHEW JOY



Getting rejected en masse by your peers and teacher in fifth grade due to your lack of belief in God quickly colors your perception of humanity.

However, there came a time when I realized that I couldn’t hold my head low and attempt to fly under the radar anymore. I began to realize that I wasn’t alone, as I had felt in the past. Fellow freethinkers, similarly unwilling to face the hostility of the vocal religious community in my town, privately shared their disdain with me at the suppression of their opinions, all while being forced to drive by the town hall nativity scene every December, or endure bible distributions by various nonprofits visiting the high school campus.

I became very vocal about my nonreligious affiliation, specifically my belief in secularism, attempting to alleviate the stigma surrounding atheists in my community.

It may be my wistful perspective, but I feel like I have made an impact on my community. Hopefully, a day will come when fifth-graders won’t fear being ostracized by the most important social groups in their lives for their nonreligious affiliation, but until then, I feel I helped make progress.

Matthew Joy, 18, recently graduated from Glendora High School in California and plans to attend Chapman University in the fall.

Being an atheist in a Catholic house

BY ALEXANDRA LAURIA-DALEY

My atheism became an increasing source of family strife, which was exacerbated by my relationship with my first boyfriend in high school. Naturally, the chasm in my household only deepened when I requested a prescription for birth control pills. My grandmother even accused her daughter of raising an “immoral demon.”

After years of lowering my eyes during family prayers, skipping church and failing to accept my religious teachings, it was time for my confirmation in the Catholic Church. I considered participating in what I considered a silly dogmatic ritual, in order to appease my relentless mother and grandparents, who I feared were on the verge of disowning me entirely in response to my deviance. I lost sleep grappling with the decision until I was finally hit with an epiphany: To live my life successfully means to live it honestly and remain true to myself. I refused to lie to myself and to the world about my freethinking. One religious sacrament might not carry much weight, but officially rejecting Christianity gave me a sense of agency in my life that strengthened my will to maintain integrity, not only with regard to my atheism but in all facets of my identity.

Alexandra Lauria-Daley, 17, graduated from Kent High School in Connecticut. Originally from Manhattan, N.Y., she will be attending Northeastern University in Boston, where she plans to major in economics and mathematics.

I’m an atheist and an Eagle Scout

BY BRODY McNUTT

The idea that a person must be religious to have good morals is baseless and one of a number of antiquated remnants from a time when religion dominated both social and political life in America. If organizations like the Boy Scouts of America can realize that there’s nothing wrong with being gay, they shouldn’t have any problem admitting that a person can live a life of service and benevolence without believing in any higher power.


I have been a Boy Scout for over seven years, even going so far as to become an Eagle Scout, and I can say that my atheism has never once interfered with my ability to be the “best kind of citizen” that I can be. Other scouts restored church gardens and built nativity scenes for their Eagle projects; I chose to remove invasive species along a popular trail and lay down a seedbed of native grasses instead.

Based on my scouting experience, replacing the phrase “duty to God” from the scout oath with a phrase like “duty to my community” is the only formal change that would need to be made to accompany the lifting of the ban on atheists.

Brody McNutt, 17, graduated from Boulder High School and will be attending Dartmouth College, where he plans to earn a degree in economics, political science or international affairs.

No limiting myself as a freethinker

BY NOELLE SHAW



I am told day after day that I need to believe in God or to find Jesus. It’s especially hard to see the look in my grandmother’s eyes as I say that I reject her fictional idol, for she fears that I will burn in hell. I explain that my soul cannot burn because it is not a physical entity and I try to change the subject to one of the many problems that actually need solving in the real world.


Science has taught me about gathering evidence and analyzing results, and that the bible has spewed lies to me. History has taught me that people were told false truths and manipulated by the church. Religion is nothing more than several stories that men wrote and continue to use in order to gain power over people and control them. It’s nothing but a way to deal with the fear of death and the end. It is nothing but a security blanket for some people to hide under rather than

growing up and taking responsibility for the realities of the world. I am not going to limit myself so that I can feel safe in ignorance. That is why I am a freethinker.

Noelle Shaw, 18, lives in Arcata, Calif., and will be attending San Diego State University, where she plans to major in environmental engineering.

How Wikipedia changed my life

BY KAYLA SPITZER



In the middle of my sophomore year, I found myself looking up on Wikipedia this weird underground thing called “atheism.” While I may not remember what led me there, I do remember the growing elation I had skimming each sentence. It was a life-changing experience to have an ideology to back up what I had contemplated for years. Also to know that I am not alone. I wanted so badly to confide in someone about this revelation, but I soon realized that religion is a topic which divides instead of unites us.


While I was not physically bullied for being an atheist, the scrutiny, isolation and lack of resources in the community at large made it feel like I was a victim of a crime much bigger than myself.

Now I know that I can make my impact on the world through participation in a global community of my choosing. I denounce religion because from my perspective it has been a corrupt experience I don’t want to go back to. Today I believe that who I am is a human who values fact over mythology. And that’s not God’s plan.

Kayla Spitzer, 18, graduated from Bentonville High School in Arkansas. She will be attending Northwest Arkansas Community College and plans to transfer to a four-year public university to get a dual degree in broadcast journalism and computer science.

Harnessing the power of freethinking

BY CONRAD WRIGHT



Just last month, I was made to sit in the principal’s office for over an hour because of my refusal to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance. My teacher had pressured us to stand for the pledge throughout the year, threatening us with punishment for refusing to participate.

Finally, I made the decision that I should not stand for a practice in which I do not believe. I decided that we should not be required to pledge our allegiance to “one nation under God” if we choose not to. In response to this, my right to an education was taken away from me. I was punished by deliberately being made to sit in the office, used as an example for others who choose to stand up for what they believe in.

It is the subtlety of intolerance that poses a threat to the freedom that we have left. It is the power of freethinking and the spreading of awareness that will change the backward ways of our culture. I will continue to fight for this freedom until our nation is truly free of religious persecution.

Conrad Wright, 18, graduated from Arcata High School in California and will be attending California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, with plans to major in economics and minor in political science, focused on pre-law.

Letterbox

New member seeks truth, not fairy tale

As a new member of FFRF, I wanted to let you know how much the organization, and especially your book *Women Without Superstition*, has meant to me.

I couldn't put that book down! I cried at what our foresters had to endure and felt proud to see how much they accomplished.

I grew up in an ultrareligious home, but I started feeling doubt as a teenager. But I continued believing. It wasn't until my son died six years ago at age 29 that I had had enough of the pretending.

My son had just received his license for becoming a pastor while he was sick and in the hospital on a Tuesday. He died the next Friday. He had worked so hard to be a God-fearing, good Christian, and look what that got him. This was what finally made me say: Enough of this fairy tale! I wanted the truth. The past six years have been given over to research and finding FFRF and my emotional and mental freedom.

Marilyn Gratz
Ohio

Another transformation from preacher to atheist

Like Dan Baker, I was ordained, first as a United Methodist, then for the last 17 years as an evangelical Lutheran.

Then, after lots of reading and reflecting, I read Dan's book *Godless*, and saw myself, especially in Part I, "Rejecting God." I was trying to preach and lead liturgy week after week in a fairly large Lutheran church in Charlotte, N.C. Finally there was someone who artfully articulated his story from faith to reason. I left the church in 2010. My wife and I joined FFRF that same year!

We really appreciate the extraordinary and necessary work FFRF is doing on behalf of making America a more just and reasonable place to live.

Mike and Ruth Deal
South Carolina

Prayer isn't going to solve anything

I have become totally fed up with our idiot politicians falling to their knees, praying and calling for moments of silence after each new mass murder, rather than actually doing something to make our country safer.

Here is a major bulletin for these people: Prayer does nothing except make the person who prays feel good about himself/herself. So if that's the goal, go for it.

Like they used to say about illegal drugs back in the 1960s and '70s, "If it feels good, do it." So, please, if it feels good, pray your little behind off. But as a nontheist who long ago chose to live in the real world, please forgive me for subscribing to the 1980s slogan that replaced it: "Just say no."

James Lonczak
Connecticut

Homophobia's roots are in religion

In attempting to understand the horrific events of Orlando, please remember that virtually all homophobia has its origins in religion, as do the efforts to control women's reproductive rights. Unfortunately, it is considered bad form to point this out.



I fear that little will change until the public and the media have the courage to examine, discuss and confront this connection.

Homophobia and the repression of women withers in the world's least religious places, and seems to thrive in the most religious. Think of the Scandinavian countries.

Richard Kirschman
California

Be smart about your reproductive choices

I had an abortion for health reasons. I did not feel guilty. I felt overwhelming relief. Lots of women who are not intimidated by men in the religion business do.

You cannot use every egg you have. You can't even choose the ones you want. It's basically biological roulette. So if you can't have one this year, wait a year or two, and you may even have a genetically healthier baby.

Have children you want and can give reasonable care to. If you can't afford basic necessities and medical care, and you don't have quality time to share with them, delay your child bearing or freeze your eggs. Don't bring a child into the world who will suffer because you are too immature to put that child's well-being before your own. If women would do this, many societal problems would fade away.

Marjorie H. Holden
California

Terrified of superstitious nuts

As I stood in the red-lit ballroom, surrounded by hundreds of Satanists, I was terrified for my life.

It's not what you think. I trusted the people in the room; it was the ones outside who worried me.

We were celebrating the 50th anniversary of the world's first codified "atheist religion," and the concentration of hundreds of Church of Satan members in one room created a risk for all of us. Superstitious nuts regularly threaten our group of rational, if a bit eccentric, atheists. For example,

conspiracy theorists highlighted this event, claiming it was part of the 240th anniversary of the Illuminati and coming of the apocalypse and new world order. If people are motivated to bomb abortion clinics, what schemes might they have for an international assembly of "satanists"?

To plan a large-scale gathering like this, we had to be secretive. The city was revealed only to registered attendees, who weren't even given venue addresses until a couple of days before the event. We had dedicated event security, but still, when the fire alarm went off at 2 a.m. at one of our host hotels, I briefly worried that someone had pulled it to round us up on the sidewalk. Luckily, it was just faulty wiring. All this paranoia simply from using the word "Satan," and metaphorically at that!

I am not writing this in order to paint us as victims — we are not. This label was something we chose willingly, and we understand the risks. I'm drawing your attention to this because it demonstrates that 50 years later, our country seems to be growing more, not less, superstitious and reactionary. Now, virulent internet comments attempt to incite violence in what feels like a more radicalized America. The freethinkers, iconoclasts and heathens of America certainly are better off than those in countries with religious governments and blasphemy laws, but we still have far to go.

Stephanie May
Rhode Island

Kiryas Joel may be one of worst communities

I was just reading the letter in the June/July issue, "Which Texas county is most religious?" It made me think of another place that is extremely religious: Kiryas Joel, an ultra-Orthodox Hasidic Jewish village in Orange County, N.Y. Not only is it comprised of families where the moms take care of their many children (10 or more is not unusual — Kiryas Joel has the youngest median age of any U.S. municipality) while the dads study Torah instead of earning a living, and English is a sec-

ond language (Yiddish is first); it also has the distinction of being named the poorest place in the country. Not to mention all the charges of internal and external corruption associated with the community (they adhere to their own legal system, which is very bad news for women and sexually abused children, among others). This is what happens when people who prize reading read only one book.

Joan Reisman-Brill
New York

Let no unwanted child be born

You can quote me: Let no unwanted child be born.

This will solve many problems, including overpopulation, climate change, resource depletion, fracking, prison crowding, etc.

John Ditman
Maryland

Freethought stickers were torn off vehicle

Some weeks ago, I received separately in the mail stickers by FFRF and the American Humanist Association. The one from the AHA was blue and worded, "I Believe in Good." Nice sentiment, since hopefully we should all try to be good and respect goodness. The one from FFRF stated, "I'm Secular and I Vote." Again, a nice statement, since this is a secular country, with a secular Constitution, secular laws and regulations (mostly) and secular (sometimes) officials. And we should vote.

I placed the "I Believe in Good" on the lower left side of the rear window of my van, the "I'm Secular and I Vote," on the lower right of the large window.

Several days later, I found both stickers torn, cut up and destroyed. I can't prove it, but I suspect that it was caused by a neighborhood Christian. Who else would do such a thing to destroy innocuous positive statements in a sticker? I wonder what they would have done had they known about my recently released book, *No Proof At All — A Cure For Christianity!* I would be interested in members' thoughts about this.

Boyd Pfeiffer
Maryland

Country needs a thinking citizenry

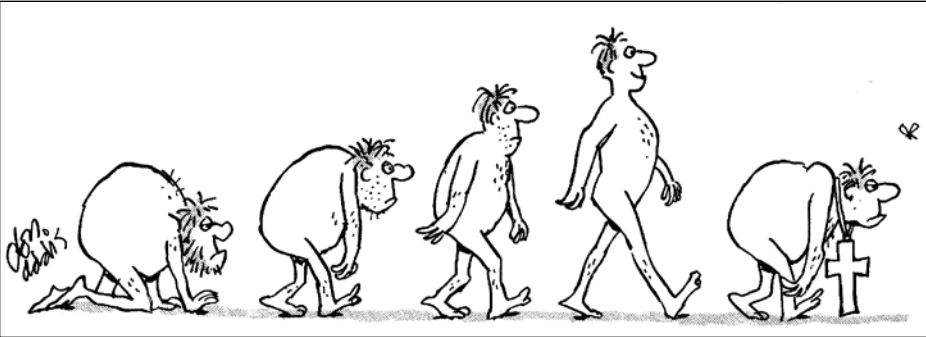
Our country is under siege by an enemy far more insidious than any lurking terrorists among us. The real threats are the citizens who have lost their political gag reflex. The too-credulous public seems satisfied to look on in a near comatose state of mind.

In 1920, writer H.L. Mencken must have sensed something when he wrote, "As democracy is perfected, the office of president represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day the plain folk of the land will reach their heart's desire at last and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron."

There is no longer doubt that our nation requires a critical, conscious public that questions everything, rather than a nation of blind patriots who too often question nothing.

Gary Grubb
New Jersey

Letterbox



N.J. religious counseling is insanity run amok

Other than the fact this so-called religious counseling in Trenton, N.J., is illegal — as well as usurping parental authority — it has to be one of the biggest stretches of someone’s imagination to think that preaching to teens and praying with a youngster who has committed a crime will make everything better! Teachers are getting beaten up in schools by kids who are not held accountable for their horrific actions. So, exactly how many crimes does a kid have to commit before he/she is held responsible? If a kid stole a candy bar, how much praying will that kid get? An hour, two hours? If

that kid stole a computer or a TV, how much praying does that kid get? Have they got a schedule already in place? A stretch of the imagination? More likely insanity run amok!

Jeanne Owers
Texas

A poetic tribute to Anthony G. Arlen

Our fellow atheist Anthony G. Arlen has lived a rich life filled with knowledge and love, and I couldn’t help but paraphrase the last stanza of William Cullen Bryant’s beautiful poem, “Thanatopsis,” to harmonize with how that remarkable man views the expiration of his lease on life:

Sharing the crank mail

Here is another installment of some of the letters and emails we get at FFRF. Printed as received, including foul language, foul grammar and foul ideas.

I am a Christian: If you don’t believe in God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit you don’t see believers taking you to court over your emblems representing what you do believe. I find it so sad that back a few years ago when the government decided that the Bible had no place in school, was the beginning of America’s down hill slide. Now, because of you and your organization, and others like yours, Americas down hill slide is totally out of control. I pray for you and those that think like you to find truth, repent and do something to rebuild Americas reputation as a Christian nation. She is falling fast, as was the case in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Where I am, well, I am safe. — *Jerry Shepherd*

Your group: The United States of America is a democracy where the wishes of the majority rule. That is why we have elections. The fact that you and other minority groups use the courts to thwart the wishes of the majority in this country is despicable. Especially you athiest. When you think that you are about to die, who is the first person that you call on ? GOD, that who. Keep up the good work of trying to destroy our counry one court case at a time. — *John Mitchell*

Separation of church and state: I read your interpretation of the ten commandments. Seriously, that was propaganda not a scholarly critique, and it was bad propaganda at that. For being free thinkers, you are not very good at thinking. You might want to consider a change of occupation.

And before you give the typical knee-jerk response about Christians being weak-minded, know that I graduated first in my class from Duke University, with a degree in engineering and a 4.0 GPA, and that I have an IQ that exceeds 160, which was the upper test limit for the particular test I took. And yet, despite all this intellectual horsepower, I am a Christian. Hm-mm. — *Todd McFarland*

David Crockett H. S.: With ISIS killing Americans, you goal in life is to kill religion in pubic. What a disgusting bunch of people you are. Take on a project to PROTECT our religion for our people, not take it away. ISIS will kill you because you don’t believe in Islam. Get your priorities straight. — *Bud Lake*

Go away: Go away you people just can’t leave well enough alone If you don’t like it look the other way — *Steve Scoots*

Why don’t you do something productive with yourself: Go back to school. Learn a trade. Or go into real public service and serve. But mind your own fucking business. Assholes. — *Jeff Nelson*

Hondo sign: Stay out of Hondo, your not welcomed here at all. We love our sign and will fight tooth and nail to keep it, even if we have to surround our sign and send off anyone trying to

take it down. I don’t care what you think, period. I don’t like or respect you or your opinion and I was born to fight, I like the taste of blood in my mouth. So bring it on, you’ll get your welcome to Hondo. Keep your sloppy unasked for bad breathed liberal opinions to your self. Your not even from Texas, your a bunch of cheese heads from wimpy Wisconsin, stay there. They say everything is bigger in Texas. I say everything is meaner in Texas, so please by all means, come on down. — *Joel Rios*

Removing Decals From Police Vehicles: You people are so wrong, may you see the light soon before you damn this country beyond repair! In Jesus Name I claim Victory. Amen — *Jackie Warren*

FFRF: Before you utter your next 1st amendment defense of your actions, why don’t you read it. You just might learn something. Here’s a hint. The first amendment is not a freedom from religion. It is the establishment for the freedom of religion. Sort of the opposite of your claim. The Bill of Rights is a wonderful document. You should read it sometime. I personally highly recommend it. — *Sean Hargetts*

Crosses: Hi assholes, You slimy fucking scum of the earth need to go to hell. You bastardly pricks are trying to ruin our country, Someday you will meet your maker. Fuck you slimy cunts — *Mike Pahl*

Chase you out of the country: You are not worth defending militarily. Why don’t you move to China or Iran , then you wouldn’t have to worry about crosses! — *Bonnie Luedtke*

Baptist church: I informed the local church that i am about to join your fine organization so i can be around other dumb fuck fags that are also mentally retarded. — *Rob Long, Texas*

God’s country: NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! NO MORE! If you don’t like it LEAVE! Our country is founded by Godly people. If you don’t like please LEAVE!!!!!! Go away. There are plenty of other places that don’t worship God. Gooooooo there! — *Pat Granger*

Hondo, Texas: I do not tell you how to practice your religion (or lack of), so please do not tell us TEXANS to take GOD out of ours. I think GOD belongs in eeryones life and you may call GOD by any name you desire. Buddah, Mohammed, God, etc., I dont care, but leave us alone!!! the reason this country is in the shit hole it is, is due to people and orgsnizations like yours, trying to remove God. If you don’t believe in him, then fine, I can’t change you, but don’t expect me to change for you!! AND NO I DO NOT WANT TO BE A MEMBER OF YOUR ORGANIZATION BECAUSE GOD IS IN MY LIFE AND I DO BELIEVE IN HIM. — *Kathie Graustein*

Thank you: Hey why don’t you losers get a life and stop trying to ruin what made America great to begin with. Funny thing; back when we still allowed God in our country or country was feared. Back then even those that dared to attack us came back with comments like I

“Now that your summons has come to join the innumerable caravan that moves to the realm of silent death, you will not go like the quarry slave at night, scourged to his dungeon. But sustained and soothed by an unfaltering trust, you approach death like one who wraps the drapery of his couch about him, and lies down to a pleasant sleep.”

Farewell, Anthony! Thank you for your priceless lesson.
David Quintero
California

Congrats on stopping school grant

Regarding FFRF’s stopping of a \$2.5 million grant by the city of Santa Ana to a Catholic school, well done! May there be many more such victories, until there are no more battles remaining to be fought.

Excellent use of my membership dues! I’m very happy!
Margaret Cliver
California

Complaint hopefully will shut up mayor

FFRF made the Hondo Anvil newspaper with three different articles regarding your letter to the city. I have your sticker on the back of my work trailer and had a customer throw a fit with me. I won’t be going back there. The mayor said that no residents had ever complained, so I called and left a voice mail telling him I was complaining so he couldn’t say that anymore.

Denise Lynn
Texas

Thanks for publishing Freethoughts of the Day

Thank you so much for the thought and effort that goes into the Freethought of the Day! It helps me feel I am in good company. I often send these on to freethinkers in my family in France, since so many people cited are French. It renews my pride in national origin.

Janet Tuthill
Virginia

Freethoughts of the Day can be found at: ffrf.org/news/day.



fear we have awoken a sleeping giant. Now after folks like you and your organization have become involved we have terror attack left and right, idiots blowing up kids, and a country that is a laughing stock across the world. Why don’t you all just shove your heads back up your butts where they belong and go jump off a bridge. somewhere? This country doesn’t need you. GO AWAY YOU HYPOCRITES AND THANK YOU FOR RUINING OUR COUNTRY!!! — *Carl Brown*

your views: You are the scum of the earth... nothing your organization does means a damn thing to intelligent people...you are disgusting but I’m sure you already know that...get a life or a job for CHRIST sakes!! — *Bobby Risinger*

Sign: I’m so sick and tired of you liberal right wing psychos trying to change the way of our lives. We people in this country and my great state of TEXAS, will not give in to your demands or your feelings. I be damned I’ll give you what you want just to satisfy your needs. Go after the president about letting these Muslims and terrorist in this country trying to destroy our way

of life. If your so hell bent about religion stand up about that. You all are such Hippocrates and just want people to give in to something that is so minor. If y’all don’t back off I will file a lawsuit and will not let up on that. I’m a Christian and no what is right and wrong. People are so sensitive about anything. Well not me.. Call me and come face me face to face. Stay the HELL out of my state. — *Shane Place*

ellington: what a bunch of bullshit, your 23,500 people can all kiss my ass. you know whats wrong with our country today our government letting this kind of bullshit happen. — *Barry Crocker*

Our atheistic beliefs have no place in America nor do you have any right to impose them on me or my family: I suggest you take your organization to Syria and explain your beliefs face to face with ISIS where I am sure you will be greeted warmly . Explain to them your complete separation of church and state . Once you are successful there and all of ISIS embraces your beliefs then come back here to preach your unethical propaganda. — *Tony Moherek*

Black Collar Crime Blotter

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

Pedro M. Moussongela, 56, Ondangwa, Namibia: Rape, human trafficking, benefit fraud, sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, domestic violence, incest, assault by threat and forgery. Moussongela, the founder of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church in Namibia who operated 3 church schools, is charged with trafficking several children to London, including one he allegedly fathered with his daughter.

He's also accused of impregnating at least 6 women in his congregation and making misrepresentations to receive state subsidies for his schools. *Source: Namibian Sun, 6-27-16*

Gregory L. Lucy, 59, Dixons Mill, AL: 5 counts of 1st-degree sexual abuse and attempted rape. Lucy is pastor of El Shaddai Apostolic Overcoming Holy Church of God, where his wife is first lady. The alleged victims are underage church members. *Source: alabamaneWS.net, 6-24-16*

Paul Cunningham, 54, Los Alamos, NM: 2 counts of sexual exploitation of children. Cunningham, pastor at First Baptist Church, came under suspicion after Colorado police allegedly traced a pornographic video to his internet address. An affidavit said more than 400 child porn images and videos were found on his computer. The church fired him in March. *Source: New Mexican, 6-22-16*

Samuel A. Sutter, 26, Tampa, FL: 5 counts each of sexual battery and lewd and lascivious behavior with a victim age 12 to 16. Sutter, youth pastor at Openwater Church in Odessa, is accused of starting a sexual relationship with a girl in his youth group last October. He also books acts for the church's concert ministry.

The girl's mother contacted police after she found sexual images and text messages, an affidavit states. *Source: Fox 13, 6-19-16*

Yoel Oberlander, 35, Monsey, NY: Abusive sexual contact. Oberlander, an ultra-Orthodox Jew, is charged with touching a woman's thigh and breast while she was trying to sleep on an overnight flight in May from Israel to Newark, NJ.

He was convicted of molesting an 11-year-old girl in 2002. In 2012, while employed at the kosher food firm Golden Taste, Oberlander was arrested for trespassing at an Orthodox boys camp in the Catskills while delivering milk late at night. He allegedly went into a bunkhouse and tickled the feet of sleeping boys. *Source: Haaretz, 6-18-16*

Markus Q. Bishop, 56, Panama City Beach, FL: Felony possession of more than 20 grams of marijuana. Bishop, pastor of Faith Christian Family Church, was arrested after police got a tip someone was openly smoking pot at the Casino Beach Bar in Pensacola.

Bishop was arrested in 2014 for allegedly giving a 16-year-old girl marijuana while trying to seduce her. He eventually pleaded no contest to misdemeanor battery and was sentenced to a year of probation, a \$1,050 fine and 100 hours' community service.

Faith Christian is currently suing the county to regain tax exemption on 3 properties, including a \$3.7 million home Bishop claimed as a parsonage. One building was operating as a nightclub hosting lingerie, foam and "anything but clothes" parties during spring break in 2015. *Source: NWF Daily News, 6-16-16*

George W. Cole, 55, Albany, KY: Sexual abuse/victim under age 12 and 2 counts of misdemeanor unlawful imprisonment. Cole, pastor of Jennie's Chapel United Methodist Church, is accused of alleged crimes in 2015. *Source: Casey County News, 6-16-16*

James N. Bailey Jr., 66, Three Rivers, MI: 6 counts of criminal sexual conduct. Bailey, pastor of Three Rivers Bible Church, is accused of using his position of authority to coerce a girl he was counseling at church since 2014 into having sex in April and May. Police believe the incidents when the girl was 18 were consensual.

Court documents allege that on May 19 the girl had suicidal thoughts and cut her leg, after which Bailey had her come to church, drink some wine and have sex. *Source: mlive.com, 6-16-16*

Dennis H. Bell, 60, Graham, TX: 6 counts of possession of child pornography. Bell is the former pastor at Bethel Baptist Church. *Source: Times Record News, 6-15-16*

Armand Henault, 63, St. Johnsbury, VT: Sexual assault on a child, sexual assault/no consent, promoting recording of sexual conduct, contributing to juvenile delinquency and 3 counts of enabling consumption of alcohol by a minor. Henault, a mental health counselor specializing in children and families, is accused of having 3 minor victims. In 2013, he was placed on leave as a deacon at St. Andrew's Episcopal



Photo by Randy Lifshotz

Keep pushing

Member Randy Lifshotz sent us this photo from the Fort Lauderdale Seventh-Day Adventist Church. We think PUSH actually stands for “Prayer Useless, Stuff Happens.”

Church after a sexual misconduct allegation. *Source: hellovt.com, 6-10-16*

Joseph LeClair, 58, Guelph, Ontario: Impaired driving and open liquor container. LeClair, associate pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church, was pulled over in a 2008 Volkswagen at a sobriety checkpoint on the Victoria Day (May 23) long weekend.

LeClair pleaded guilty to theft and fraud in 2014 and was sentenced to a year in prison for stealing more than \$130,000 from his previous parish to fuel a gambling habit. At the time, his lawyer said LeClair was drinking 6 to 8 scotches a night to quell anxiety. *Source: Ottawa Citizen, 6-8-16*

Matthew Holman, 35, Odessa, TX: 2nd-degree felony online solicitation of a minor younger than 15. Holman, youth ministry director at Westwood Baptist Church, and 5 others were arrested in a sting involving police posing online as minors. *Source: Odessa American, 6-9-16*

James E. Love, 45, Brooklyn, NY: Sexual abuse of a child. Love, pastor of New Mount Zion Baptist Church, allegedly molested a 6-year-old girl multiple times while his wife was babysitting her between March and June.

The girl's mother told police Love exposed himself to her daughter, put her hand on his genitals and rubbed his crotch against hers while both were clothed. *Source: NY Daily News, 6-7-16*

Pastor Leyva tried to engage ‘S.R.’ in conversation, but she wasn’t interested ‘because he had horrible breath.’

Three Buddhist monks, Sai Yok, Thailand, and 17 board members of Wat Pha Luang Ta Bua Temple, were charged with trafficking and wildlife possession. Charges came after 40 dead tiger cubs were found in a temple freezer and a monk was caught trying to leave with a truckload of tiger skins.

The “Tiger Temple” is a major tourist attraction. Repeated efforts to shut it down have been stymied by monks. Thailand is a notorious trafficking hub for illicit wildlife products, including ivory. Officials found 137 tigers inside the temple. *Source: Reuters, 6-6-16*

Kennis A. Rolle Sr., 59, Middle River, MD: 2nd-degree assault, 4th-degree sex offense and misconduct in office. Rolle, a chaplain at the Harford County Detention Center in Bel Air, is accused of molesting 2 females, ages 31 and 26, who allege he touched them inappropriately during counseling sessions. *Source: ABC2 News, 6-3-16*

Thomas P. Ross, aka Brother Ambrose, 62, Ambridge, PA: 3 counts each of theft by unlawful taking and receiving stolen property. Ross, a Catholic brother who was director of music and liturgy at Good Samaritan Parish, is accused of stealing \$220,000 in parish contributions from 2006-15. After suspicions were

raised, the church installed hidden cameras.

Court records show Ross had an annual salary of about \$28,000 and lost over \$331,000 gambling at Rivers Casino from 2010-15. *Source: Post-Gazette, 5-28-16*

Christopher A. Hogge, 48, Battery Park, VA: 8 counts of distribution of child pornography. Hogge, pastor at Battery Park Baptist Church and social services director for the city of Franklin, was arrested after investigators monitored his internet use for a month, said Lt. Tommy Potter, Isle of Wight County Sheriff's Office. *Source: WAVY, 5-24-16*

Jason E. Kennedy, 46, Knoxville, TN: Patronizing prostitution and human trafficking. Kennedy, children's minister at Grace Baptist Church in Karns, allegedly answered an ad placed by undercover agents on the escort site *backpage.com* and agreed to pay \$100 for half an hour of sex with 2 underage females.

Zubin Parakh, 32, Oak Ridge, TN, an unpaid volunteer “creative pastor” at Lifehouse Church, was similarly charged. *Source: WBIR, 5-20-16*

Micah A. Pretlove, 21, Greenville, SC: 2 counts of criminal sexual conduct as an adult. He also faces a similar charge for an alleged incident while he was a juvenile, which is being heard in family court. Police said 3 females allege he molested them at Bob Jones Academy, a K-12 Christian school he attended before enrolling at Bob Jones University, where he worked as a landscaper. *Source: WYFF, 5-20-16*

Michael S. Casabella, 37, Corinth, MS: Computer luring, 3 counts each of fondling and exploitation of a child and 2 counts of sexual battery. Casabella, principal of N. Corinth Christian Academy and a Baptist youth pastor, is accused of touching a girl younger than 16 between January 2013 and June 2015 and of receiving sexually explicit photos of a child under 18. Another charge alleges he had inappropriate contact twice with another underage girl between July 2010 and June 2012. *Source: WDM, 5-19-16*

Luis U. Carrasco, 54, El Paso, TX: Conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute a controlled substance (over 100 kg of marijuana). Carrasco, a deacon at Corpus Christi Catholic Church, and 20 others were allegedly moving drugs in horse trailers from El Paso to Phoenix. *Source: KVIA, 5-12-16*

Alan W. Little, 48, Colonial Heights, VA: 3 counts of aggravated sexual battery and 2 counts each of taking indecent liberties with a child and aggravated sexual battery by a custodian or parent. Little, senior pastor at Colonial Christian Church, is charged with alleged offenses in July 1999 and in July of 2011 and 2012.

“The police did him dirty. They waited until Mother's Day to come and get him,” said Leonard Newman, a church member and Little's neighbor. “I'll stand behind him till doomsday unless the Lord takes me away before then.” *Source: WRIC, 5-12-16*

Timothy Lawrence, 30, South Haven, IN: 3 counts of sexual misconduct with a minor. Lawrence, youth pastor at Emanuel Baptist Church, is accused of sexual contact with 2 girls under age 16 from the church between November 2013 and July 2014.

One girl said “she felt like she had to comply to Tim's requests in order to keep him as a

friend in her life,” an affidavit said. *Source: nwi-times.com, 5-12-16*

Kenneth D. Worley, 56, Salisbury, NC: Sexual battery. Worley, senior pastor at New Hope Baptist Church, is alleged to have wrongly touched a woman after he came to her house to counsel her after they had talked in the hospital. *Source: WBTV, 5-11-16*

David G. Reynolds, 40, Sherwood, AR: 70 counts of distributing, possessing or viewing of matter depicting sexually explicit conduct involving a child. During the investigation, Reynolds was removed as Cornerstone Bible Fellowship pastor.

Images on his phone included some of a 13-year-old church member in a swimsuit, court records said. *Source: KARK, 5-11-16*

Clarence Cherry, 49, Windsor, NC: 51 counts of embezzlement. Cherry, treasurer of Zion Bethlehem Missionary Church, is accused of using a church debit card to steal about \$80,000 from 2008-12. *Source: WAVY, 5-4-16*

Pleaded / Convicted

Jose Lopez, 37, Passaic, NJ: Guilty by jury of luring, endangering the welfare of a child and criminal sexual contact. Lopez, assistant pastor at 2 Catholic parishes, was accused of molesting a 14-year-old girl in 2013 in his living quarters, where she had come for counseling. *Source: nj.com, 6-28-16*

Jermaine Evans, 32, Milwaukee: Pleaded guilty to 2nd-degree sexual assault of a child. Evans, dean of students and girls basketball coach at HOPE Christian High School, is accused of having sex with a girl “approximately six times when she was 16,” “approximately 10 times when she was 15,” “approximately 10 times when she was 14,” “seven to eight times when she was 13” and “one time when she was 11 or 12,” according to the complaint.

HOPE Christian is a network of 6 schools that participate in the Milwaukee and Racine voucher programs. *Source: WITI, 6-27-16*

Nelson C. Machado Jr., 50, Bradenton, FL: Guilty by jury of 3 counts of wire fraud. Machado, who preached Portuguese services at First Assembly of God Church before moving to Brazil, is accused of making false representations to obtain mortgages for 2 Florida residences. *Source: Bradenton Herald, 6-27-16*

Anthony Walsh, 62, Dublin, Ireland: a Catholic priest already imprisoned for pedophilia, was found guilty by jury of 5 counts of indecent assault of a boy from 1980-82, starting when the boy was 10. The victim, who complained to police in 2011, alleged Walsh put his finger and penis inside him on several occasions. *Source: Irish Times, 6-14-16*

Daniel J. Moreno, 25, Santa Maria, CA: Pleaded guilty to continuous sexual abuse of a child and lewd and lascivious acts with a child. Moreno, youth pastor at an unidentified church and an aspiring Christian rapper, agreed to plead guilty and serve an 8-year prison sentence in exchange for several other charges being dropped. One was dissuading a witness, Katrina Moreno (his wife), from making a report to police. They have a son and a daughter.

It's alleged he started having sex with the 14-year-old girl in September 2015, including intercourse “multiple times.” *Source: Santa Maria Times, 6-13-16*

Juan Carlos Del Carmen Leyva, 41, Caliao, Peru: Pleaded guilty in Los Angeles to abusive sexual contact for touching a woman in April who was sitting next to him on a flight from Denver to L.A. He is pastor of Iglesia Bíblica Bautista Fundamental.

Leyva admitted touching the sleeping woman, whom he did not know, on the outside of her pants for about 3 minutes “with the intent to arouse and gratify his sexual desire,” said his plea agreement.

Leyva had tried to engage “S.R.” in conversation, but she wasn't interested “because he had horrible breath,” an affidavit said. She later woke to feel him squeezing her right buttock. *Source: WGTV, 5-23-16*

James C. Spain, 24, Walton, NY: Pleaded guilty to misdemeanor sexual misconduct for engaging in intercourse with a person who was less than 17 years old. Spain, pastor at Riverside Alliance Church, was initially charged with 3rd-degree rape. *Source: Delhi Reporter, 5-18-16*

Michael Clark, 66, Aberfeldy, Scotland: Guilty by jury of 5 counts of sexual assault and indecent exposure. Clark, an elder at Dailly Parish Church of Scotland, allegedly lured a 16-year-old girl into his bungalow and groped her in 2004.

A 55-year-old woman described him as “Jekyll and Hyde” and said his “circus trousers” were “always up like a big tent.” She testified he grabbed his crotch and pleased himself while chatting to her over the fence. *Source: Daily Record, 5-6-16*

Sentenced

Sam Kayode, 60, Ilford, England: 9 years in prison on theft and fraud convictions involving nearly \$5.5 million he diverted as accounts manager for Haberdashers’ Aske’s state schools in south London, where he also worked as a pastor at Christ Apostolic Church. *Source: Christian Today, 6-27-16*

Barry J. Greaves, 79, Brisbane, Australia: 1 year in jail with 9 months suspended after pleading guilty to indecency with a child under 14 years. Greaves, an Anglican priest, was accused of masturbating a 13-year-old altar boy after showering with him and having the boy masturbate him. Other incidents with the boy occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. *Source: AAP, 6-20-16*

Michael Higson, 34, Bolton, England: 8 years in prison after pleading guilty to 8 counts of sexual activity with a child from 2009-16 while working as a youth leader and deacon at West Houghton Pentecostal Church. His victims were girls, ages 13 and 14. *Source: BBC, 6-15-16*

Jerry W. Cox, 72, Pine, LA: 5 years’ probation and \$100 fine after pleading guilty to structuring financial transactions to avoid reporting requirements of cash withdrawals over \$10,000. Cox, pastor of Faith Tabernacle Church, made 14 withdrawals in 2011-12 totaling \$102,050 in amounts between \$7,650 and \$9,500. *Source: nola.com, 6-15-16*

Graeme Bell, 41, Saltcoats, Scotland: 10 months in jail after pleading guilty to embezzling \$130,000 to feed an addiction to online roulette while he was pastor at Our Lady Star of the Sea, a Catholic parish. *Source: Daily Record, 6-15-16*

Benjamin R. Hollifield, 26, Salisbury, NC: 15 to 23 years in prison for convictions on 7 counts of felony statutory rape/sex offense and 4 counts of felony indecent liberties with a minor. Hollifield, youth pastor at Piedmont Baptist Church, was charged with having sex with a 13-year-old girl. *Source: WGHP, 6-3-16*

Richard Watson, 51, Salem, MA: 2 years in prison after pleading guilty to possession of heroin with intent to distribute. Watson was removed after his arrest as a minister in the Our Lord and Lady of the Trinacrian Rose Church, a Wiccan congregation. *Source: Salem News, 5-31-16*

Larry DuRant, 61, Sumter, SC: 20 years in prison after a jury found him guilty of criminal sexual conduct with a minor. DuRant, pastor of Word International Ministries, was accused of molesting a 13-year-old female member of his church on multiple occasions in 2011-13. *Source: The State, 5-27-16*

Scott Morey, 43, Shevlin, MN: 33 years, 10 months in prison for 13 convictions for criminal sexual conduct from 2009-14. Morey, a pastor at 3 Lutheran churches, molested 2 juvenile males while in a position of authority. *Source: Pioneer Press, 5-26-16*

Robert Gamel, 66, Los Banos, CA: 11 months in jail and 4 years’ probation after pleading no contest to possession of child pornography. He was pastor at St. Joseph Catholic Church in 2014 when inappropriate relationships were alleged between Gamel and young males at the church, leading to the discovery of pornography. *Source: KBAK, 5-24-16*

Gerald Harris, Sellersburg, IN: 180 days’ home incarceration after pleading guilty to 3 counts of criminal recklessness for physical abuse of children as young as 8 at a boarding school operated by Crossroads Baptist Church, where Harris is pastor. **Christopher Williams, 22,** student coordinator, also faces charges.

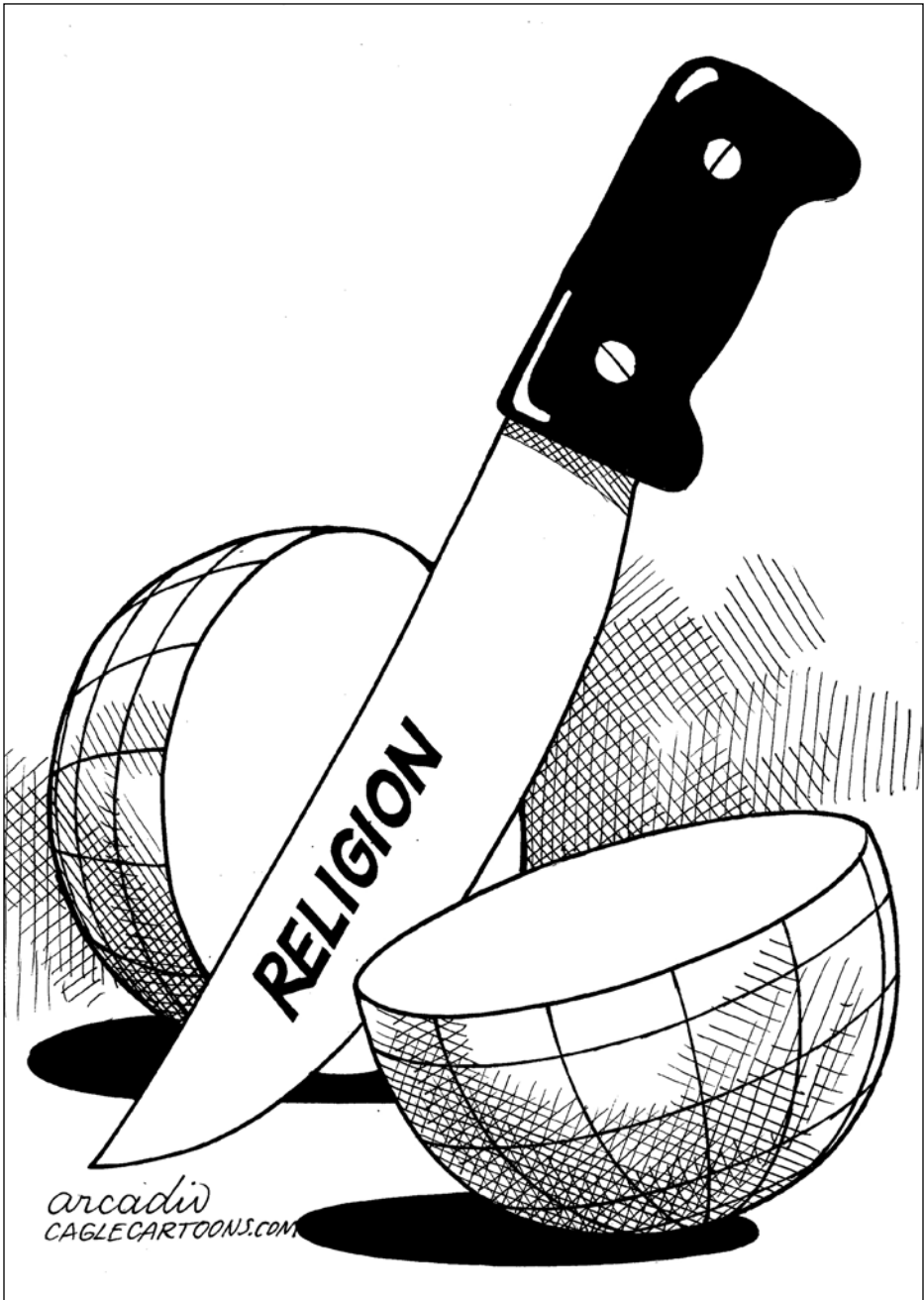
“The facts in this case were a little atypical in that you had pastoral staff of a church facility that were very calmly disciplining individuals in a way that they believed to be appropriate, but in fact was excessive,” said prosecutor Jeremy Mull. *Source: News & Tribune, 5-24-16*

Zekerija Qazimi, Ferizaj, Kosovo: 10 years in prison for inciting hate and terrorist recruitment. Qazimi, imam at El-Kuddus Mosque, was responsible for recruiting several Kosovars to join ISIS, prosecutors alleged. Evidence included a 2013 video in which he proclaimed, “The blood of infidels is the best drink for us.” *Source: Balkan Insight, 5-20-16*

Luke A. Cooke, 34, Bartlett, TN: 11½ years in prison after pleading guilty to rape and aggravated sexual battery. He was youth pastor at an unidentified church when he fled the U.S. after being indicted in 2007 for molesting boys aged 8 and 14 between 2003-06. He was extradited from Albania in September 2015 after living in China, Morocco and Spain. *Source: WREG, 5-17-16*

Jose Vazquez, 37, Jones County, MS: 10 years in prison followed by deportation to Mexico after pleading guilty to 2 counts of sexual fondling. Vazquez served several Catholic parishes as pastor in the Diocese of Biloxi. Sheriff Alex Hodge said a 10-year-old boy’s mother found him and Vazquez engaged in a sex act at the family’s home in 2015. *Source: WLOX, 5-16-16*

Jean-Claude Bergeron, 76, Quebec: 4 years in prison for sexual abuse of 7 students at Saint-Alphonse Catholic Seminary in 1976-80 when Bergeron was a Redemptorist priest. *Source: Times Colonist, 5-16-16*



Dennis V. Wright, 67, Oak Hill, OH: Life in prison after a jury found him guilty of 7 counts of rape, 2 counts each of sexual battery and unlawful sexual conduct with a minor and 3 counts of gross sexual imposition. Wright, former pastor at Old Emory Church, had 3 victims, including his 10-year old son in 1989, and a teen girl and mentally challenged woman in 2009-12. *Source: Times-Journal, 5-16-16*

Jeffrey B. Mobley, 24, Ocala, FL: 45 years in prison after pleading guilty to 6 counts of production/distribution of visual depictions of sexual exploitation of minors. Mobley, youth minister at The Grace Place, admitted coercing an underage girl into having sex activity and producing images of their activity.

U.S. District Judge Jose Martinez noted that while the sex was consensual, “he did rape her because she is too young to give consent.” The girl was 15 and Mobley is married. *Source: tcpalm.com, 5-12-16*

Michael T. Patrick, 60, Scappoose, OR: 4 months in jail with work release and 12 months’ probation after pleading guilty to attempted luring of a 14-year-old girl in 2014. Patrick, a native Sri Lankan and pastor of St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church, pulled alongside the walking girl in his Honda Pilot, opened the door and repeatedly asked her to get in the vehicle, saying “Come on, cutie.” *Source: The Oregonian, 5-12-16*

Peter Allott, 37, Ealing, England: 33 months in prison for possession of child pornography and the drug MDMA. Allott kept porn on his iPhone and on a hard drive found in his office at St. Benedict’s Catholic School, where he was deputy headmaster. *Source: The Guardian, 5-12-16*

Faizul Ismailov, Belgorod, Russia: 3 years in prison for storing weapons, ammunition and explosives in the mosque where he served as imam in 2015. He was previously found guilty of spreading extremist materials and fined 4,500 rubles (\$70). *Source: TASS, 5-11-16*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

The **Catholic Archdiocese of St. Louis** is being sued by Tom Viviano of Kansas City, MO, who alleges he was forced to perform oral sex multiple times as an altar boy by deceased priest **Charles DeGuire**. *Source: AP, 6-22-16*

The **Altoona-Johnstown Catholic Diocese** and former **Bishops Joseph Adamec** and **James Hogan** are being sued by 2 women who allege they were molested at ages 8 and 9 by **Charles Bodziak**, who was removed in January as pastor at St. Michael’s Parish in Johnstown, PA. *Source: WTAJ, 6-20-16*

The **Catholic Diocese of Erie, PA,** is being sued by a woman who alleges she was fired in 2013 after complaining about sexual harassment by parish priest **Dan Kresinski**, who is on paid administrative leave.

The woman alleges that during every meet-

ing, Kresinski “would cup his hand under his” genitals and pull them “up towards his waist no less than six times per meeting.” *Source: WJAC, 5-26-16*

Door of Hope Community Church, Lawrenceville, PA, and **Light of Life Ministries,** Pittsburgh, are being sued for hiring **Steve Ramsier** as pastor. He was convicted of sexually assaulting a girl for 3 years, starting in 2008, when she was 9. Ramsier was hired without a background check, the family’s suit alleges, which likely would have revealed his 1995 convictions for indecent assault and burglary.

Door of Hope is affiliated with the evangelical Primitive Methodist Church. *Source: WPXI, 5-25-16*

St. Scholastica Parish, New Prague, MN, is being sued by a man who alleges molestation in 1965 when he was 12 by Catholic priest **Louis Heitzer**, now deceased. Attorney Patrick Noaker said when his client’s father died in a car wreck, Heitzer accompanied police with the news. “Heitzer used that connection with the family to isolate this kid and ultimately sexually abuse him.”

In a 2002 letter, Vicar Gen. Kevin McDonough of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis called Heitzer “perhaps the most abusive priest to ever be a part of this archdiocese. I now believe he abused boys every place he went.” *Source: Free Press, 5-24-16*

‘Come on, cutie.’

— Fr. Michael Patrick, trying to talk a 14-year-old girl into getting in his vehicle.

Lawsuits against the **Seattle Catholic Archdiocese** detail alleged sexual abuse by 6 priests as far back as the 1960s. The accused are **James Gandrau, Dennis Muehe, Theodore Marmo, Harold Quigg, Jerome Dooley** and **David Jaeger**. All were on the list of 77 pedophiles released by the archdiocese in January. Only Marmo is still alive.

James Funnell, a youth minister at St. John Vianney in Kirkland, is among the accused. The suit alleges that after he abused their son, his parents went to Marmo, who never confronted Funnell and didn’t restrict his access to children. *Source: KIRO, 5-23-16*

Catholic priest **Arnold Kelley, Haverhill, MA,** and the **Archdiocese of Boston** are defendants in a suit alleging Kelley molested a boy who was 10 to 13 in 1973-76 at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Jamaica Plain. *Source: Eagle-Tribune, 5-17-16*

Catholic priest **Michael Reilly** and **2 male administrators** at St. Joseph By the Sea High School, Staten Island, NY, are being sued by 3 plaintiffs who allege they created a hostile work

environment and tried to fire older employees.

It’s alleged that Reilly called women “b----es” or “tw-ts,” gays “f-gs” and certain teachers “d---heads.” Plaintiffs claim Reilly once threatened to boot a black man “back to the jungle” and to kick a cancer patient “to the f---ing curb.”

Reilly “unleashed a constant stream of rude, crude and inappropriate remarks, including saying the word f--- in almost every sentence in some form,” the filing says. *Source: NY Daily News, 5-11-16*

Gregory Yacyshyn, Mastic Beach, NY, is accused in a lawsuit of molesting Sean Kiefaber, now 20, when Yacyshyn was pastor at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Parish in Greenlawn from 2001-03. He’s now pastor at St. Jude Parish.

A judge in December permitted a similar suit filed in January 2015 to proceed. Kaitlyn Monaghan, now 21, claims Yacyshyn assaulted her in 2003 when she was 8 and was preparing for her First Communion. *Source: NY Daily News, 4-26-16*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

Abundant Harvest Church International, Upper Marlboro, MD, has been ordered to pay a woman \$656,000 for alleged sexual abuse during about 6 months by senior pastor and “apostle” **Jean Auguste**, a Haitian native, when she was 13 in 2008 and she and her mother moved in with the married Auguste.

“He used to tell me he was casting out demons,” the girl told a reporter. “The first time he did it, he told me that if I told anybody he was going to curse my family, and I actually did believe him. That’s why I never said anything.” *Source: WJLA, 6-21-16*

Mauro Inzoli, 66, an Italian priest awaiting criminal trial for molesting 5 minors in 2004-08, agreed to pay \$140,000 to their families. He was defrocked in 2012, but Pope Francis reversed that decision in 2014 and ordered him to stay away from minors and retire to “a life of prayer and humble discretion.” *Source: thelocal.it, 5-13-16*

Removed / Resigned

Kevin J. Downey was placed on leave as pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Triangle, VA. The Diocese of Arlington said in a statement that Downey was recently accused of molesting a boy in 1990 while he was vice president of development at Quincy University in Illinois, a Franciscan school. *Source: The Record, 6-20-16*

Frank Parisi stepped down as pastor at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Parish, Malverne, NY, during investigation of allegations of inappropriate behavior with a minor 20 years ago. He’s been a priest for 31 years. *Source: Long Island Herald, 6-20-16*

Freddie Byrd is on leave as pastor of St. Ann’s Catholic Parish in Morganfield, KY, due to an allegation of sexual misconduct in 1983 with a boy of 17 before Byrd was a priest.

In 2011, David Jarboe fatally shot himself outside Blessed Mother Catholic Church in Owensboro after accusing 3 priests of abuse, including Byrd, who was cleared after an investigation. *Source: WVVE, 6-12-16*

Pedro Corces, pastor of St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church, Miami Shores, FL, has been asked to resign by Archbishop Thomas Wenski after a parish group compiled a 129-page report filled with allegations of sexual impropriety. But parts of Wenski’s letter angered the group, which calls itself Christifidelis.

“Slanderous gossip, calumny, detraction — all sinful behaviors — have fomented division in the parish and school communities,” he wrote, blaming “a small group” for the turmoil.

The report accuses Corces of improper relationships with a male maintenance worker and 3 others associated with the parish, including a deacon. *Source: Miami Herald, 5-27-16*

Kevin Grimes, Spencer, IA, resigned as pastor of DaySpring Assembly of God Church and executive director of the Spencer Dream Center. The center’s discipleship program offers faith-based options to deal with problems such as drugs, alcohol, sex addiction, gambling and anger.

Clay County Attorney Kristi Kuester said a criminal investigation centers around Grimes’ role as a pastoral counselor, referring to a section of state law regarding sexual exploitation by a counselor, therapist or school employee. *Source: Daily Reporter, 5-19-16*

Gerald Baker, 59, pastor of Catholic parishes in Whitesville and Fordsville, KY, was suspended by the Diocese of Owensboro after an allegation of improper sexual conduct with a minor from St. Mary of the Wood Parish, where Baker has served since 2012. Trooper Corey King of the Kentucky State Police confirmed that his agency is investigating. *Source: The Gleaner, 5-18-16*

Gregory Poser was suspended by the Catholic Diocese of St. Cloud during an investigation of an allegation he molested a minor in the 1970s at St. Odilia Parish in Shoreview, MN. Poser is a Crosier (Canons Regular of the Holy Cross) priest. *Source: St. Cloud Times, 5-10-16*

Email: blackcollar@ffrf.org

In memoriam

Marilyn Ross Adams, 1937–2016



By Ed Gogol

Marilyn Ross Adams, longtime member of FFRF and my partner and spouse of 38 years, died on April 12, 2016, of acute leukemia. She was 78.

Marilyn was a pioneering feminist of her generation, and an activist and tireless campaigner for many causes, including peace, safe energy, environ-

mental protection, and human rights (especially abortion rights) and the right to aid-in-dying. She was a woman of extreme compassion, with a tremendous passion for justice. Professionally, she had several careers, especially in the fields of marketing communications. She was a world-class copy editor and shaper of marketing messages, and was obsessed with helping the nonprofit organizations she cared so much about.

In addition to various corporate jobs, her extensive resume included stints with the American Civil Liberties Union, Citizens for a Better Environment (an agency of the city of Chicago during the administration of progressive Mayor Harold Washington), Hull House, and Solar Service Inc. She claimed partial credit for stopping an ill-conceived plan to build an airport in Lake Michigan, and came up with the campaign’s slogan, “Don’t Do It In the Lake!”

Marilyn was a font of wisdom to her large circle of friends, relatives and colleagues. She was generous and touched many lives. Devastated by the death of her beloved son Ross from melanoma in 2001, she slowly recovered, and helped many others through their grief. Besides me, she is survived by her daughter, Didi, and four grandchildren.

Like me, the product of a classic Eastern European Jewish background on both sides, Marilyn was also exposed to the Methodist and Catholic churches as a child. And, like me, she became a fervent atheist. John Lennon was one of her favorite individuals, and “Imagine,” with its lyric “And no religion, too,” one of her favorite lines. She and I attended and thoroughly enjoyed many wonderful conferences of the FFRF and of the American Humanist Association. Her loss leaves a large hole in our hearts, and an obligation to carry on her work.

INFINITY BLUE

Written by Marilyn Ross Adams | May 30, 2011

Look up and see infinity blue
Our earthly view of eternity
Right there above us in the sky
The most amazing show on Earth
A difficult idea for small minds to grasp
No beginning, no end
Space that extends forever
We are trapped here in our tiny finite lives
That end too soon — too fast

How can we comprehend the vastness of it all
How can we imagine forever
A universe that endlessly extends
Even the scientists try to find the boundaries
Oh — Give it up
Jump in and lose yourself
We are just atoms floating
In the beautiful great infinite blue.

Parvin Baharloo, 1953–2016



By Jack M. Pedigo

My wife, Parvin, died (she hated the word “passed”) suddenly and unexpectedly from an aggressive form of brain cancer. While she was not a member of FFRF, she was a member of the Humanists and gave some help to the Brights. She also attended the FFRF convention in Portland and made it possible for me to become an After-Life Member.

Parvin was born and raised in Iran in a moderately Islamic household and was the only girl with four brothers. Her mother gave special attention to her only daughter and supported her in every way, including her questioning of religion. From the beginning, Parvin could not understand the hold of religion and was a lifelong atheist. When she was diagnosed with

cancer, she knew this was the end and embraced it totally, much to the chagrin of her siblings, although her three children supported her unquestioningly. She refused any treatments because she knew the quality of her life would be compromised. Lots of people said she must consider all life-preserving measures and one niece told her miracles do happen. One question we had is that if so many believe in an afterlife, why are they so determined to avoid it? We hear “don’t play God” when one seeks to end their life, but one never hears this when one is going through extraordinary, unnatural means to extend it. Whenever Parvin heard “I believe,” her response was, “You want to believe.”

Parvin was upbeat and wanted her final days to be joyful. She sent out a message of “no tears, no prayers” (which caused some consternation). She chose to participate in Washington state’s Death with Dignity program after which one of our neighbors — an FFRF member — told her, “You know you are going to hell.” They both had a good laugh. Unfortunately, just before the end of life medications could be delivered, she went into a coma and died some hours later. The pricey medications were donated back into the system to help someone who could not afford them. It was also asked that donations go to our local DVSA (domestic violence program), of which Parvin was an active board member. Her will was changed to include DVSA and the Humanists.

In life, Parvin was a dedicated teacher. Even her death has caused a whirlwind of conversations about death and religion (like offering prayers to an atheist) in Lopez Island, a one-of-a-kind close-knit community of 2,400 residents in Washington.

Overheard

As more and more Americans suffer the impact of gun violence, the pathetic response of politicians — “thoughts and prayers,” anyone? — cannot endure forever.

Editorial, after the mass shooting at the Orlando nightclub
Boston Globe, 6-12-16

I’ve heard from a lot of constituents that say thoughts and prayers aren’t working. And they’re right. Thoughts and prayers haven’t worked. That’s a tradition. We offer thoughts and prayers after shootings like this. What we need to offer is real action to prevent them from happening again.

U.S. Rep. Seth Moulton, D-Mass.
WBUR, 6-14-16

I am running for office to help fight the biblical-based requirements that women should be silent and subservient. I am running for office to show that women can serve equally without being affiliated with any ideological or religious organization. I am running for office to be the voice of all the people in Arizona who are not represented by the current legislature for ideological or religious reasons. It is time to elect people who refuse to bow down to ideologues, religious lobbyists or organizations that promote hate over humanity.

Cara Prior, an open atheist running to become an Arizona state representative, in an email response to Center for Arizona Policy asking for her stance on policy positions
6-23-16

So this July 4, join me at the Church of Baseball by not rising and not doffing your cap for a song that is not the national anthem of a nation that is not uniquely blessed by some deity that doesn’t exist anyway.

Gersh Kuntzman, on trying to get Major League Baseball to stop playing “God Bless America” during the seventh-inning stretch.
New York Daily News, 6-30-16

Why would anyone want to pray to the same God who knew this massacre was coming, allowed it to take place, and did nothing to stop it?

Hemant Mehta, “The Friendly Atheist,” in response to people offering prayers to victims and families of those killed in Orlando
Facebook, 6-13-16

I don’t think we should be repairing any church. If we do one, we would have to do all. There’s a separation of church and state. Let’s keep it that way.

Camden, Maine, resident Steve Dunn, at an annual town meeting where the city debated whether to spend \$75,000 to help restore a clock located in a church steeple
Bangor Daily News, 6-16-16

Cake

Continued from front page

state and local civil rights laws, as FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel pointed out in a letter to Daniel Wegman and Colleen Wegman, CEO and president, respectively, of the chain.

Wegmans quickly apologized after learning of the refusal of service.

“Danny Wegman was very concerned about the incident described in your letter today, and asked me to look into it, which I have done with the Virginia division manager and the Fairfax store manager,” Stephen Van Arsdale, senior vice president and general counsel of Wegmans, emailed to Seidel. “We have concluded that the bakery department made the wrong decision and that they should have made the cake as ordered. Our employees typically do an incredible job of serving our customers, but occasionally they make mistakes. This was one of those times, unfortunately, and we apologize.”

Wegmans made up for the snub by giving the cake to the group for free.

“The corporate office acted quickly and correctly to compensate for the misbehavior from employees at one store,” said Seidel. “I wish some of the government officials we contacted were as conscientious about doing their jobs.”

FFRF on the road



At Claremont Colleges on April 19, Dan Barker spoke on “Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist.” Claremont Colleges are made up of Pitzer College, McKenna College, Scripps College (all female), Harvey Mudd College and Pomona College. Students from all the campuses attended the event.



Photo by Jonny Brotherton

Dan and Annie Laurie spoke in Austin on May 22 before the Center for Inquiry Austin, directed by Steve Bratteng (left), at the Little Walnut Creek Public Library. They also appeared on Matt Dillahunty’s (center) “Atheist Experience” live national TV webcast from Austin. The couple thanks Steve for his generous hospitality.



Photo provided by Eric Lane

FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, pictured with Dr. Deborah Baruch-Bienen, president of Freethought Association of Central Texas and Eric Lane, director of the San Antonio chapter of Americans United. FACT and Americans United sponsored a talk by the co-presidents on May 21 at the San Antonio Unitarian society. Dan and Annie Laurie send thanks to Deb for special hospitality, including hosting them in her home and arranging other social events. They also thank Sally Chizek, Ruth Lett and other longtime FFRF members for a delightful brunch.



Dan Barker spoke at Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., on April 18. Pictured, left to right, are FFRF Life Member Mark Monninger, Chaffey Philosophy Club President Patrick Jimenez, Dan Barker and Billie Guerrero, president of Chaffey’s Club of Secular Understanding.



The Kentucky FFRF is one of the groups that joined to protest the Ark Encounter on July 7. Sitting next to Dan Barker (in white shirt) are Ed Hensley (black shirt) of Kentucky and Justin Scott (red shirt) of Iowa. “There were a couple of hundred protesters with signs and chants, and lots of media,” Barker said. “There were also protesters of the protest, so it was pretty lively.”



FFRF Staff Attorney Elizabeth Cavell speaks at the State Bar of Wisconsin’s annual meeting on June 16 in Green Bay. Cavell spoke on the topic of “Staying Fit to Practice: How Young Lawyers Meet Their Challenges.” Cavell says she discussed new research that shows younger lawyers have higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression and substance abuse than lawyers generally and the population as a whole, how these issues affect young lawyers and how lawyers can cope with these issues and maintain their ability to practice.

FFRF’s 39th annual convention, Oct. 7–9 in Pittsburgh

Clergy Project principals to speak

You aren’t going to want to miss the 2016 FFRF convention in Pittsburgh!

After eight years as a closeted atheist in the Bible Belt, a former conservative pastor will be coming out publicly at the convention.

“**Adam Mann**” is co-founder of The Clergy Project, a group for current and former religious professionals without supernatural beliefs. Richard Dawkins, a Clergy Project co-founder, is sending a congratulatory video and media outlets are interested in covering Mann’s announcement.

Another co-founder of the Clergy Project who will speak at the convention is **Linda LaScola**. She is co-author, with **Daniel C. Dennett**, of *Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind* and *Preachers Who Are Not Believers*. She is also editor of the Patheos blog, “Rational Doubt: With voices from the Clergy Project.” Linda is a clinical social worker with years of professional experience as a qualitative researcher and psychotherapist.

The Clergy Project was also founded by FFRF’s **Dan Barker** and Dennett, who will be one of the convention’s keynote speakers. His Saturday night speech is titled, “Has the dam broken? Omens and worries.”

The other keynote speaker will be **Lawrence Krauss**, the internationally known theoretical physicist. He will receive the Emperor Has No Clothes



award from FFRF.

Other notables speaking at this year’s convention include author **Susan Jacoby** and science professor **Jerry Coyne**. Jacoby is the author of 11 books, most recently, *Strange Gods: A Secular History of Conversion*. Jacoby is a previous recipient of FFRF’s Free-thought Heroine award. Coyne is professor emeritus in the Department of Ecology and Evolution at the University of Chicago. He has written a trade book about the evidence for evolution — *Why Evolution is True*, and more recently, *Faith vs Fact: Why Science and Religion Are Incompatible*.

Humanist activist **Rafida Bonyahmed**, who survived a machete attack

in Bangladesh, will receive FFRF’s new “Forward” award. Author **Lauri Lebo**, who covered the *Kitzmiller vs. Dover* trial, will be named 2016 Freethought Heroine. **Marie Schaub** will speak after being honored as an “atheist in a fox-hole” by FFRF for her work as plaintiff in a case against a school district for having a granite Ten Commandments monument in front of a high school.

And, of course, FFRF’s Barker will take to the podium to discuss his lawsuit against Congress and his new book, *God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction*.

And before you get to see and listen to all these great speakers, don’t forget about the tour of Frank Lloyd Wright’s



LaScola



Dennett



Krauss



Jacoby



Ahmed



Coyne

Fallingwater on Friday. It’s a great way to kick off convention weekend! Sign up below for the tour and convention.

Check FFRF’s website at ffrf.org/outreach/convention for convention updates and the schedule.

Hotel info

Reserve hotel rooms **now**. Convention coincides with Steelers game, so rooms will go fast! Individuals may call the hotel or go online to register. FFRF has reserved a block of rooms at the Wyndham Grand Pittsburgh Downtown at 600 Commonwealth Place. Room rates for FFRF guests are \$159 single or double occupancy. Phone 412-391-4600 (direct) or 888-317-0197 (toll-free). Refer to the group name “Freedom From Religion Foundation” to receive the guest rate. The cut-off date to reserve rooms is Sept. 12, but reserve now to avoid disappointment.

General schedule

After the optional tour of Fallingwater, there will be a reception from 3-5 p.m. with complimentary appetizers and afternoon legal workshops. Friday dinner is on your own.

The formal program begins at 7 p.m. Friday, ending with complimentary dessert and hot beverages. The convention resumes Saturday morning with an optional Non-Prayer Breakfast at 8 a.m. The morning program starts at 9:30 a.m. After a two-hour lunch on your own, the program resumes at 2 p.m. An optional dinner banquet will be followed by evening speaker/entertainment.

Annual meetings of the membership and the state representatives are Sunday morning, ending before noon.

Fallingwater tour

On Friday, Oct. 7, prior to the start of the convention, FFRF is hosting a tour of the impressive **Frank Lloyd Wright**-designed Fallingwater site. The \$40 ticket includes admission and coach bus transportation. There is also an optional, although highly recommended, box lunch available for \$12. (The cafeteria is expected to be too busy.) The 43-mile route to the captivating Fallingwater is through scenic Pennsylvania countryside. Buses depart from Wyndham Grand every 30 minutes beginning 7:50 a.m., with returns beginning 2:10 p.m. Expect to be gone for about 7 hours.

Extra rooms have been set aside at the Wyndham Grand for FFRF members for Thursday night for those interested in going on the tour. FFRF will assign your time.

Note: The tour can physically challenging for some. There is a ¼-mile walk to and from the home on uneven gravel paths, a one-hour walking tour, and more than 100 steps (although not all at once). There is no wheelchair access and children under the age of 6 are not allowed.

2016 CONVENTION REGISTRATION

ONLINE: ffrf.org/outreach/convention/2016-registration

MAIL: Return with payment to: FFRF, Attn: Convention, P.O. Box 750, Madison, WI 53701

CONVENTION OCTOBER 7–8

FFRF members	_____ x \$60	\$_____
Non-member spouse or companion accompanying a member	_____ x \$65	\$_____
Non-members	_____ x \$105	\$_____
New-members	_____ x \$100	\$_____
Save \$5 by becoming an FFRF member. (\$40 individual membership, \$60 registration)		
Child/Student(s) – Free with copy of student ID	_____ x FREE	\$_____

FOOD

Indicate number of orders per entrée.

Saturday Non-Prayer Breakfast Buffet	_____ x \$30*	\$_____
____ Grand Breakfast	____ Vegan Tofu Scramble	
____ Grand Breakfast Gluten Free	____ Vegan Tofu Scramble Gluten Free	
Saturday Night Dinner	_____ x \$45*	\$_____
____ Herb Grilled Chicken	____ Tuscan Grilled Vegetable Stack (vegetarian/vegan)	
____ Herb Grilled Chicken Gluten Free	____ Tuscan Grilled Vegetable Stack (vegetarian/vegan) Gluten Free	

*Includes 20% Gratuity & Sales Tax

FALLINGWATER FRIDAY BUS TOUR FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7

Bus tour and entrance fee	_____ x \$40	\$_____
Box Lunch Indicate number of orders per box lunch	_____ x \$12	\$_____
____ Turkey sandwich on whole wheat	____ Greek wrap with hummus, veggies	
____ Gluten-free chef salad		
		Total \$_____

Name _____ Please include names of all registrants

Address _____ City / State / ZIP _____

Phone / Email _____

Contact information for in house use only.