

# Freethought Today

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## FFRF objects to university football team chaplaincies

By PJ Slinger

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is renewing its objection to several public university football chaplaincies.

FFRF initially contacted the schools in August of last year to complain about their respective chaplaincy programs as part of a broad national report titled “Pray to Play.”

This August, FFRF contacted five major universities still not in compliance with the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Those schools are Georgia Tech, the University of Wisconsin, Virginia Tech, the University of Missouri and the University of South Carolina. FFRF plans to contact more non-compliant universities throughout the fall.

Most of the schools involved try to get around the unconstitutionality argument by claiming that any religious services or activities are purely voluntary. But the idea that such religious activities are truly optional is questionable, at best.

FFRF’s “Pray to Play” report concluded that “athletes do not view coaches’ suggestions as optional.” Moreover, “coaches add to this pressure by sending chaplains to talk with players going through difficult times, instead of allowing players to seek out their own religious or professional counseling.”

“Courts have summarily rejected arguments that voluntariness excuses a constitutional violation,” FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor wrote in a letter to Georgia Tech President G.P. Peterson.

See Universities on page 2



### Pretty as a picture

This new rendering of the Freedom From Religion Foundation’s office building in downtown Madison, Wis., is by artist Kathleen Parr McKenna, who had created a painting of FFRF’s original building many years ago. A renovation and five-story addition was completed last year — thanks to many generous FFRF members.

## Final call for FFRF convention

We’re just days away from the 2016 FFRF annual national convention in Pittsburgh the weekend of Oct. 7-9!

If you haven’t registered already, you may still sign up at the door, although you cannot order meals.

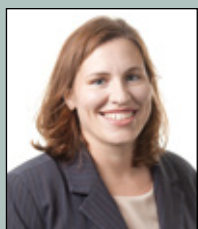
Join us for a weekend of great speakers, food, music and more! FFRF has pulled together an exceptional lineup of speakers, including Daniel Dennett, Lawrence Krauss, Susan Jacoby and Jerry Coyne. Many of the other speakers have intriguing, interesting and/or heartbreaking stories to tell about their

personal battles or fighting state/church separation. You’ll learn a lot and be entertained. What more can you ask for?

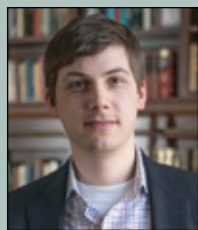
Because of the popularity of this year’s convention (and the fact that there’s a Steelers game in town that Sunday), hotel rooms at the Wyndham Grand Downtown, site of the convention, are now sold out for that weekend. To find a place to stay nearby, go to [hotels.com](http://hotels.com) or your favorite online booking site.

We hope to see you in Pittsburgh! For more information, go to [ffrf.org/outreach/convention](http://ffrf.org/outreach/convention).

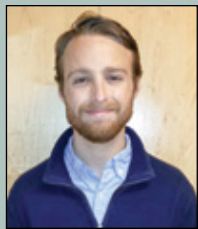
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### Nonbelief Relief aids threatened atheist

## Bangladeshi writer finds asylum in Canada

By PJ Slinger

Raihan Abir lived in a constant state of fear that he would be killed.

And for good reason. Which was for bad reasons.

Abir is co-author of *Philosophy of Disbelief*, a book promoting atheism that became a bestseller in Bangladesh in 2011. He is now the latest Bangladeshi nonbeliever aided by Nonbelief Relief, which serves as the charitable arm of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Abir’s co-author, Avijit Roy, was hacked to death in February 2015 on a street in Dhaka by religious extremists.

Rafida Bonya Ahmed, Avijit Roy’s wife, survived the assault and is a prominent voice at global forums and the



Photo by Samiul Alam Anik  
Raihan Abir holds his baby Sophia after escaping from Bangladesh.

United Nations, calling on the Bangladeshi government to do more to protect atheist writers. She will be speaking at FFRF’s convention in Pittsburgh

on Saturday, Oct. 8.

On May 12, 2015, Abir’s book editor and friend, Ananta Bijoy Das, had stepped out of his home for the daily commute to his job when men wearing masks and carrying machetes chased him and killed him.

“When he was killed, I said there is no way I’m not next,” Abir told the Toronto Globe and Mail. “They will target me, of course.”

Three people involved in the publishing of the book have been brutally murdered. Three others have been seriously injured, as religious extremists in Bangladesh target atheist and secular writers. Since 2013, religious extremists have killed more than 50 bloggers, secularists and LGBT activists, according to Human Rights Watch.

“Whenever we started out of the  
See Abir finds asylum on page 5



# Universities

Continued from front page

Additionally, these schools employ only Christian chaplains, showing an unconstitutional preference for Christianity. This is in spite of the fact that 44 percent of college-aged Americans are non-Christian and fully a third of millennials identify as nonreligious, according to the Pew Research Center.

In order to aid these universities in protecting their students from religious discrimination, FFRF is also recommending the adoption of a model policy, which includes the maintenance of complete official neutrality in matters of religion. If adopted, this model policy would not only bring the schools into compliance with the law, but would send the message that the universities value the right of every student athlete to hold his or her own religious or nonreligious views, free from direct or indirect coercion or contrary endorsement.

## Georgia Tech

At Georgia Tech, it appears that Derrick Moore continues to serve as its football chaplain and receives compensation from the school for his religious services. Moore prays with the team before games while wielding a sledgehammer at times.

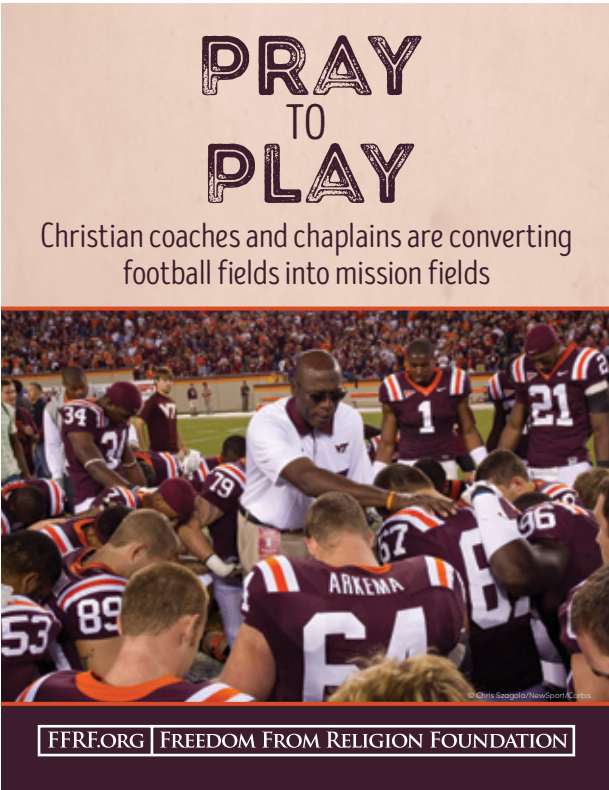
“Apparently, we need to sledgehammer Georgia Tech officials in order to get any meaningful response,” Barker adds.

## Missouri

The University of Missouri last year quickly replied to FFRF’s letter, stating that it had no intention to change its program.

As with the other schools, it contended that Miz-zou’s football chaplaincy is acceptable because it is voluntary. Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin wrote that “interaction with the chaplain and attendance at these services is strictly voluntary.” But former coach Gary Pinkel invited a chaplain to deliver prayers for the whole team in the locker room.

Also, chaplains Shay Roush and Nathan Tiemeyer are not uncompensated or purely “volunteer.” As FFRF’s report details, both have received per diem payments for their services, as well as Mizzou-sponsored flights for themselves and their families to bowl games. Such benefits send a clear message to players and the community that these chaplains are working for Mizzou.



**FFRF released a “Pray to Play” exposé last year, condemning more than 25 public universities for letting football coaches impose their personal religion on players by hiring Christian chaplains.**

## South Carolina

FFRF is pleased to report the departure of Chaplain Adrian Despres, about whom it complained last year.

However, it appears that the new University of South Carolina football head coach, Will Muschamp, has decided that he wants “multiple voices available to assist with the spiritual development of student-athletes,” as he was quoted in an official statement on Despres’ exit. Furthermore, he told a Rotary Club meeting earlier this year, “There’s no question being a Christian is very important to me. . . . That’s not something I push on our players. It’s something I make readily available for our players.”

As an initial matter, it is improper for a public university program to “assist with the spiritual development” of students. This cannot be a task of the government under the First Amendment, which excludes government entities from sponsoring religious activity. Whether or not to engage in religious activity is squarely left to private individuals.

## Virginia Tech

Virginia Tech’s Director of Athletics Whit Babcock’s response to our letter, dated Oct. 15, 2015, indicated that Virginia Tech has taken positive steps regarding its chaplain, but that the program continues.

Following FFRF’s exposé, money was repaid to the university after team Chaplain Dave Gittings and his family traveled with the team and stayed in team hotels, received per diem payments for bowl games, and received complimentary season tickets.

However, Virginia Tech appears to have retained its chaplaincy program as a whole. Gittings continues to serve as the team chaplain, and he apparently provides “weekly large group meetings open to the student athletes, small group team bible studies, one on one discipleship, coaches bible studies and a ministry to the ladies who love and support the coach called Behind The Bench.”

According to Virginia Tech’s Gobbler Connect Organizations Directory, there are more than 60 religious organizations for students to choose from. There is no need for the Virginia Tech football program to provide Christian chaplains in order for the student-athletes to freely exercise their religions.

## Wisconsin

FFRF has been badgering the University of Wisconsin about its chaplaincy program for many years, however, it has yet to issue a formal response to FFRF’s newest concerns.

Father Michael Burke, a Catholic priest, continues to serve as the UW football chaplain. For decades, Burke has traveled with the team, led team prayers and provided religious services, among other chaplain duties. He has access to team facilities and has even participated in recruiting.

Burke has a history of leading the team in pre-game prayers. These prayers are coercive. A former Jewish player told a reporter that he had to opt to sit with the group while it was praying and listen silently so as to not appear socially out of place.

FFRF is particularly concerned that the UW football program has been subsidizing Burke’s travel with the team. FFRF first exposed the subsidization in the early 1990s. Recent public records that FFRF requested revealed that in the past couple of years UW again paid for Burke’s hotel rooms for bowl games, which totaled nearly \$2,500. Following FFRF’s request for records of Burke’s reimbursement, UW belatedly submitted an invoice to Burke for such travel.

# Seniors: A way to help FFRF

If you are age 70 1/2 or older, you may now donate up to \$100,000 to FFRF as a qualifying 501(c)(3) charitable organization directly from your Individual Retirement Account (IRA). The distribution will not be treated as taxable income, provided the distribution is made directly.

To qualify, contributions must come from a traditional IRA or Roth IRA, and they must be made directly to a public charity. Additionally, the donor may not receive goods or services in exchange for the donation, and they must retain a receipt from each charity to which a donation is made.

The IRA rollover became permanent in December 2015, which is very good news for senior citizens. The donation benefit had been allowed to expire in 2008 and then renewed, temporarily by Congress several times at the last minute, creating uncertainty and confusion.

Because it is available to taxpayers whether or not they itemize their tax returns, the rollover helps older Americans, who are more likely not to file itemized returns.

FFRF will send a “non-tax” letter receipt that documents your lovely charitable rollover gift! Thank you so much.

# 14 new Life Members welcomed

FFRF is happy to announce and welcome our 14 new Lifetime Members.

Warmest thanks to Dean R. Brown, Roger Busse, John Fantz, Maggie Freespirit, Yair Harel, Dave Huntsman, Caroline Markfield, Paul Mueller, Dr. Kathryn Pettit, Robert Phelan, Jr., Sherry L. Smith, Stephen Strickler, Collette Wendt and Marian Wiggins.

States represented are Alabama, California, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Ohio, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin. Lifetime memberships are \$1,000, designated as membership or membership renewal and are deductible for income tax purposes, as are all dues and donations to FFRF, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

# Donate now to FFRF through CFC

If you are a federal employee, you may now make donations to FFRF through the CFC (Combined Federal Campaign) until Dec. 15.

If you wish to help FFRF through this campaign, please use EIN number 1302520.

From the CFC website: “The CFC is

the official workplace giving campaign of the federal government. The mission of the CFC is to promote and support philanthropy through a program that is employee focused, cost-efficient and effective.”

FFRF thanks you for your continued support!

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P.O. Box 750 • Madison WI 53701  
(608)256-8900 • FAX (608)204-0422  
Editor: PJ Slinger, *fttoday@ffrf.org*  
Editor Emeritus: Bill Dunn  
Executive Publisher: Annie Laurie Gaylor  
Graphic Designers: Jake Swenson & Roger Daleiden  
Contributors:  
Philip Appleman, Dan Barker, Daniel Cox, Paul Davis,  
James A. Haught, Chris Line, Rebecca Markert, Amit Pal,  
Lauryn Seering, Andrew Seidel, Lisa Treu, Maddy Ziegler  
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*The only freethought newspaper in the United States*

### A Note to Members

Your address label shows the expiration date of your membership in FFRF, which includes your subscription to Freethought Today and “Private Line.”

**If it says October or earlier please renew!** Your prompt renewal (\$40-single membership; \$50-household; \$100 gung-ho; \$250-sustaining) saves us time and postage, and is tax-deductible. Freethought Today is published 10 times a year, with combined issues in January/February and June/July.

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# The problem of voting in churches

By Rebecca S. Markert

W

e're only weeks away from the November election and this means many of us are finalizing our voter registrations and pinning down where we're supposed to go to vote. You may be surprised to find that your polling location is in a church. Every election year, FFRF receives questions about the legality of houses of worship being used as polling places.



Rebecca Markert

Only three courts in the entire country have spoken on this issue, and those three have found it to be a permissible practice so long as there are reasonable alternatives available for those who object to voting in a church, such as early voting or absentee voting. However, because only a minority of courts have deemed the practice permissible, it's not well-settled law.

In many places, one-third to one-half of all polling locations are churches. In Rockford, Ill., churches constitute an incredible 80% of the city's polling locations. In Eau Claire, Wis., 53 of 66 wards use houses of worship. In Fayetteville, Ark., churches are used for 16 of the 17 polling places!

**Objectionable practice**

FFRF takes the position that this practice is objectionable on many grounds.

There are a whole host of problems with churches being used as polling sites. First, many of these sites are utilized for Christian worship. Religious imagery is pervasive in a lot of these venues and oftentimes are in direct view of voters. FFRF receives complaints of voting booths being underneath paintings of Jesus, large Christian crosses and nearby bibles and posters with biblical verses on them. A church in Eau Claire put the voter registration table at the

**Jesus laughingly watched voters at this Brown Deer, Wis., church polling location in 2011. After receiving a complaint from FFRF and one of its members, the Village Board approved moving the voting site to a newly built community center in 2013.**

foot of an 8-foot tall Christian cross. Wisconsin has same-day registration, allowing voters to register on Election Day. Our complainant described his experience as “disconcerting, as if that was the focus of the event, instead of the primary election.” As our country becomes more religiously diverse, Christian images and iconography are seen by many as symbols of political intimidation.

At a minimum, if churches are going to be used as polling locations, religious imagery should be removed or covered in voting areas.

Furthermore, there are numerous cases across the country of churches exploiting their position as polling sites to promote their churches or causes. We’ve received reports of churches handing out literature about their services and posting sign-ups for their bible studies.

In the 2008 election, Shawnee Tabernacle Christian Church in Tobyhanna, Pa., used its status as a polling place to hand out “goodie bags” for voters. These bags were distributed to voters as they were entering or exiting the polling place. Bags contains religious literature included a “Welcome” pamphlet that listed worship services and prayer meeting times, a magazine entitled “PoconoParent,” which described a charter school opened and run by the pastor; and an invitation to

Thanksgiving dinner sponsored by the church. Following a letter of complaint by FFRF, the Monroe County director of elections indicated they would not use the Shawnee Tabernacle as a polling location in the future.

Just this year, FFRF sent a complaint to Lehigh County, Pa., over its use of churches as polling places. Voters reported that, along with religious imagery, there were tables with displays of church activities. In a partial victory, the county agreed to place portable walls and dividers to cover up some of the religious images voters encountered in the polling area.

**No proselytizing**

The takeaway from these stories is this: churches should not be able to exploit their positions as a polling place in order to advertise themselves and distribute proselytizing materials.

The most egregious abuses, however, come when churches used as polling places also take the opportunity to speak out on ballot initiatives at issue in the election, or take the time to endorse or oppose a candidate. This came up frequently in the past as same-sex marriage bans were considered in states across the U.S.

Using houses of worship as polling places is particularly problematic knowing the psychological consequences of voting in a church. Where you vote can

affect how you vote. In a 2008 study, “Contextual Priming: Where people vote affects how they vote,” professors Jonah Berger, Marc Meredith and S. Christian Wheeler found that those voting in a school were more likely to support a measure that increased sales tax to fund education. A similar study in 2010, “Deus ex machine: The influence of polling place on voting behavior,” by Abraham Rutchick, found that 83% of those voting in churches supported a measure defining marriage as between one man and one woman, while 81.5% of voters in secular locations supported the same measure.

**Take action!**

If you have to vote in a church, complain! Usually your city or county representative has the authority to suggest changes to polling places. A local rep is more apt than a bureaucrat to respond to a citizen complaint. Suggest secular alternatives (particularly those with access to persons with disabilities): libraries, public schools (it’s educational for students to witness Election Day), fire stations, malls, etc.

If you are forced to vote in a church, take notes or photographs (if allowed by law), especially if you are forced to walk by signs, brochures or posters which would influence voters on issues such as gay rights or abortion. You have the right to vote in an auditorium or hall free of religious messages, crucifixes, etc. Document such violations when you complain to local officials.

FFRF members have been successful in getting officials to choose secular over religious sites. Being a “squeaky wheel,” doing homework about available alternatives, and working with local government representatives can yield results.

FFRF does not have the resources to complain about every church used as a polling site, but if the circumstances you encounter are extreme, we can do a backup complaint.

*Rebecca S. Markert is FFRF senior staff and managing attorney.*

## Overheard

I’m going to tell you what my religion is. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Period. Terminato. Finito. I have no other religion. I feel very Jewish and I feel very grateful to be Jewish. But I don’t believe in God or anything to do with the Jewish religion. **Actor Gene Wilder, who died on Aug. 29, in the book *Stars of David: Prominent Jews Talk About Being Jewish*** *Patheos.com, 8-30-16*

After years of dealing with the homophobic comments aimed at me by the preacher, I felt I needed to stand up against these false prophets spewing bigotry. I am a gay bagpiper and I’m proud. **Brice Ehmig, who played bagpipes to drown out the homophobic rants of a university preacher at Florida Gulf Coast University** *The Daily Mail, 8-30-16*

Those [young Catholics] that are leaving for no religion — and a pretty big component of them saying they are atheist or agnostic — it turns out that when you probe a bit more deeply and

you allow them to talk in their own words, that they are bringing up things that are related to science and a need for evidence and a need for proof. **Mark Gray, a senior research associate at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University** *National Catholic Register, 9-6-16*

It creates an atmosphere where it is expected from everybody to say a prayer regardless of their faith or no faith. It’s like me as the superintendent of the Corps of Cadets saying, ‘Let’s take a knee and say a prayer together.’ I don’t have the authority to do that. I cannot use my position of authority — my public position of authority — to direct my subordinates to do something that is inconsistent with their rights. So, that’s probably where we crossed the line. **Lt. Gen. Robert L. Caslen, the top general at West Point Military Academy, after Army football coach Jeff Monken was shown in a video directing a member of his staff to lead a prayer after an upset victory over Temple on Sept. 2** *Washington Post, 9-10-16*

Menso

by Brian Kent



Heads Up

A Poetry Column by Philip Appleman

S\*X AFTER S\*XTY

Forget about flowers that bloom in the spring  
and hillocky bulls in the swelter of summer, this  
is no skittish April day, this is ripe  
October, flashing its crimson and gold  
over vistas of voluptuous hills;  
this is the endless sea, the tempting waves  
swelling to climax on the shore,  
the wreath of the long-distance runner,  
the ultimate marathon, flood tide  
of the Ninth Symphony, Ulysses  
come at last to the Happy Isles,  
Paradise Regained!  
You kids in your fifties, listen,  
if you think it's perfect now, just hang around:  
the best is yet to come.

© 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](http://ffrf.org/shop).

Meet a member



Bernard Barwick poses with "Musing," his sculpture originally commissioned for the garden of Rose Zerwick by her son, Jim, FFRF Board Member. "Musing" appropriately now lives in Freethought Hall, also home to the Rose Zerwick Memorial Garden and Courtyard.

**Name:** Bernard (Ben) Barwick.  
**Where I live:** Madison, Wis.  
**Where and when I was born:** Milwaukee, Wis., 1945.  
**Family:** Wife, Marie Barwick.  
**Education:** Finance degree, self-taught sculptor.  
**Occupation:** Accountant for 27 years, sculptor for 15 years, and took more than 100 volunteers to teach spoken English in China for 11 summers between 2002 and 2013.  
**Military service:** Three years in the Army as records clerk in Alaska and Colorado.  
**How I got where I am today:** It was 90% luck and 10% perspiration.  
**Where I'm headed:** A long and adventurous retirement.  
**Person in history I admire and why:** Lord Bertrand Russell. He was instrumental in clarifying my thinking on religion and the purpose of life. He was also one the most brilliant and prolific writers in history, on everything from mathematics and science to philosophy and ethics and morals.  
**Quotations I like:** "Live to experience, experience to live." — myself  
"To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance." — Oscar Wilde  
"There is no sin except stupidity." — Oscar Wilde  
**These are a few of my favorite things:** Non-material things: love, experience and knowledge. Material things: art. I practiced sculpture as a hobby for about 28 years. I was passionate about it. I read many books, studied many styles and went to very many muse-

ums, galleries and exhibitions. I got to be a pretty good sculptor of various materials. When I turned 50, and believed that I was financially OK, I quit accounting and became a professional sculptor. I could not wait to get up in the morning and often worked late into the night, seven days per week. By this time, I was tired of lifting stone and breathing stone dust, so I switched from stone sculpture to clay sculpture and cast my work in bronze and high tech resins. During the course of my sculpture career I obtained relative success, won many awards, exhibited and sold in several countries. It was a great journey.  
**These are not:** Arrogance, ignorance and procrastination.  
**My doubts about religion started:** I was raised a strict Catholic. When I was 20 years old, I was confined to a hospital bed for 1 1/2 years. I had a lot of time to read and learn. When I left the hospital, I was an atheist. I had questions about my faith before that, but this was an opportunity to really study and challenge what was taught to me.  
**Before I die:** Experience, experience, experience! I have had a very fortunate and wonderful life. I experienced and accomplished a thousand times more than I ever thought that I would. But there is so much more to experience and challenge and enjoy.  
**Ways I promote freethought:** I'm a Life Member of FFRF. I live my beliefs, defend them and support FFRF.  
**I wish you'd have asked me:** Am I afraid to die? Absolutely not!

Meet a staffer

**Name:** Timothy Nott.  
**Where and when I was born:** Milwaukee, Gen X.  
**Education:** UW-Madison, B.A. in English with an emphasis in creative writing.  
**Family:** Wife Michelle and daughter Violet.  
**How I came to work at FFRF:** I was looking for a change in career when I heard about an opportunity for a technologist at FFRF. Days later, evangelist Franklin Graham came through town on his "Decision America" tour. I don't believe his speech had the desired effect where I am concerned.  
**What I do here:** I'm here to make sure our digital efforts are as effective as our legal team, our support of community activists and our print publication.  
**What I like best about it:** I believe strongly in making decisions based on data and feel very at home at an organization brimming with people who favor proof over fantasy.  
**What gets old about it:** Stairs. This place is riddled with stairs.  
**I spend a lot of time thinking about:** How we can

use technology to allow our members to make a bigger impact on their communities.  
**I spend little if any time thinking about:** Wondering whether I might be drinking too much coffee.  
**My religious upbringing was:** A fairly liberal — and therefore conflicted — brand of Catholicism.  
**My doubts about religion started:** I started to question religion as a child once I realized all people didn't believe the same thing. How could we all be right in our methods of telling others that they are wrong?  
**Things I like:** Science fiction — I need a break from hard data once in a while. Coffee. My wife. My daughter. My pets. In no particular order.  
**Things I smite:** Things that beep. Why does every electronic device have to beep and have LEDs that don't turn off when not in use?  
**In my golden years:** I intend to be an unappreciated artist of some sort. Retirement seems like the optimal time to do something that pays nothing.



Tim Nott



Help FFRF help others

# Nonbelief Relief aids bloggers, flood victims

Nonbelief Relief, a charity established last year by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, recently gave a \$5,000 stipend to a prominent Bangladeshi writer who has found asylum in Canada. (See story on front page.)

Nonbelief Relief’s aid will tide over Raihan Abir and his family as they establish themselves in Canada and obtain visas for study and work. He received previous aid from the Center for Inquiry to help in his first year in Canada.

Abir is the 11th Bangladeshi nonbeliever or blogger aided to date by Nonbelief Relief in the face of hit lists going after atheists. Most of them are still in transition and cannot be named. The Islamic State and al-Qaida have claimed credit for recent vicious executions of those targeted for nonbelief.

Nonbelief Relief is working with a loose international coalition, including Center for Inquiry and Rafida Bonya Ahmed, to vet those needing assistance.

Nonbelief Relief exists as a humanitarian agency for atheists, agnostics, freethinkers and their supporters to improve this world — our only world. Nonbelief Relief seeks to remediate conditions of human suffering and injustice on a global scale, whether the result of natural disasters, human actions or adherence to religious dogma. Such relief is not limited to, but includes, assistance for individuals targeted for nonbe-



The website for the Livingston Parish Public Schools showed that flooding forced the closure of the schools in the district. Nonbelief Relief donated \$10,000 to help get the district back up and running.

lief, secular activism or blasphemy.

The charity this year has now spent about \$50,000 in grants to individuals whose lives have been imperiled because of public atheist activism.

To help Nonbelief Relief help others in the name of the community of nonbelievers and replenish its coffers, please make tax-deductible donations to Nonbelief Relief via FFRF. Indicate “Nonbelief Relief” in the memo of your check payable to FFRF (mailed to FFRF, PO Box 750, Madison WI 53701) or use the handy drop-down designation on FFRF’s website donation page ([ffrf.org/donate](http://ffrf.org/donate)), to ensure your gift goes to the charity. (If you wish, you may further designate your gift for endangered nonbelievers in Bangladesh.)

### Aid for flood relief

On behalf of nonbelievers, Nonbelief Relief gave \$10,000 in flood relief to a hard-hit school district in Louisiana.

FFRF has asked that it be used for the repair or rebuilding of Livingston Parish Public Schools infrastructure or buses.

On the same day \$10,000 was funneled to help the Livingston public school district, which suffered loss of many school buses and other major flooding damage, FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor also sent a polite but pointed letter to Superintendent Rick Wentzel.

The letter says, “It has come to our attention that the parish public schools website has a banner message reading in part, ‘Praying for all of our Livingston Parish people – Superintendent Rick Wentzel.’” FFRF, extending “sincerest sympathies for the tragedy facing the school district” and greater area, notes that the school district has an obligation to concentrate on secular, not religious, needs.

“A famous freethinker of the 19th century, Robert Green Ingersoll, once wrote, ‘The hands that help are better far than lips that pray,’” Gaylor adds. “To that end, Nonbelief Relief is very pleased to provide the practical assistance of \$10,000 in flood relief to the Livingston Parish Public Schools.”

## Abir finds asylum

Continued from front page

house, he used to ride the motorcycle and I used to look backward all the time to make sure no one’s following us or going to do anything to us,” his wife Samia Hossain said.

Even as he got off the bike and walked to his job at the university, Abir would leave his helmet on because he feared an attacker would target his head with a machete.

“At least I’ll survive the first attack,” Abir told the Globe and Mail.

### Mukto-Mona

What got Abir into this dangerous predicament began in 2007, when he found comfort in the online world with places like Mukto-Mona — meaning “free thinking” — a website started by Avijit Roy that became a gathering spot for atheist and secular writers.

The people he met through Mukto-Mona became his co-authors, publishers, editors and fellow bloggers. He and others tried to debunk parts of the Quran, bible and Hindu sacred texts. They said religion was a virus that breeds extremism and threatens freedom.



Photo by Samiul Alam Anik

Raihan Abir received threatening texts and emails while living as a blogger in Bangladesh.

But, in recent years, Islamic extremists began targeting those writers and, in 2015, the violence increased dramatically. Abir would get death threats by text message and email.

“It’s not uncommon for Islamic extremists to attack writers and secular people, so I was keeping myself away from going to public meetings and rallies so people don’t track me,” he told Michael Petrou of Maclean’s magazine. “I was taking these kind of precautions because we have to. But in 2015, it got out of control.”

It was so bad that Abir decided he had to get out of the country.

### Leaving for Canada

Abir went to Canada in June of 2015 to attend a biomedical engineering conference, leaving behind his wife, who was six months pregnant. Neither had any idea when they would see each other again. “I knew that I might not be able to see her for three or four years,” Abir told The Guardian.

But, according to The Guardian, Hossain was pleased to see him leave Bangladesh. “When the plane left and was in the air, I knew he would be alive. I was so happy,” she said.

It wasn’t long before she was able to join Abir in Canada. She applied for a visa to attend an architect’s conference and within two months — by then eight months pregnant — she was on a plane to Toronto.

“I thought it would be the happiest day of my life,” Abir told The Guardian.

But while his wife was traveling to Canada, he learned that another of his friends, blogger Niloy Neel, had been hacked to death in his home on Aug. 14, 2015.

“It was a really stressful time,” Abir said. “We were losing the brightest minds of Bangladesh one by one.”

Then, shortly after finding a home to live in, their daughter Sophie was born. His family was then given refugee status in November.

“I kept it very secret that I was in Canada, but somehow they knew,” he told Maclean’s. “I can’t say 100 percent that I am safe. But I feel safe. In Dha-



Photo by Samiul Alam Anik

With his life in danger, Raihan Abir fled from Bangladesh to Canada. His wife Samia Hossain eventually followed, and days later she gave birth to their daughter Sophie.

ka, I used to wear a helmet all the time and look back while walking forward, but here I don’t do that.”

### Won’t give up the fight

He continues to write and edit Mukto-Mona from his Toronto home. He plans to complete his Ph.D. in biomedical engineering. He says he won’t give up the fight for secularizing Bangladesh.

“Because this dark side, this kind of thing, never [wins],” he told Maclean’s. “Maybe they do atrocities, maybe they will kill us. But they won’t be winning in the long run. So we’ll have to keep on doing what we do — keep informing people about science, about reason, about humanism.”

Abir also is focused on helping the many Bangladeshi writers who are still

hiding and fearing for their lives.

“We’re trying to make connections with the outer world and get them to safe places,” he told The Guardian. “We don’t have any resources, we’re just trying to do what we can. But it is really difficult to fight off machetes with a pen.”

The goal of getting back to Bangladesh is on Abir and Hossain’s minds. But they know it won’t be soon. Abir hopes to go back in two years, while Hossain thinks it will be closer to five years. But they both agree that the murders will have to end before they go back.

“It’s not over yet,” Abir recently told the Globe and Mail. “Because within this month we’ll wake up one day in the morning and say, ‘That’s our friend. He has been killed.’”



# Is diversity making U.S. less religious?

*This article was first published by FiveThirtyEight.com on Aug. 23 and has been reprinted with permission.*

By Daniel Cox

In the United States, diversity has generally been considered an asset. It is frequently cited by public figures as both a source of national pride and a worthy ambition. It is an oft-stated goal of Fortune 500 companies, private colleges and entire sectors of the U.S. economy. And even if Americans don't claim much diversity in their own social networks, few believe that our differences are not something to be celebrated. At one point it was even argued that America's religious vitality hinged on its diversity — greater competition between places of worship would contribute to a more vibrant religious culture. However, new evidence suggests that religious pluralism could work in the opposite direction — undermining the vitality of America's religious communities.

The American religious landscape is transforming rapidly. At one time, religious diversity meant Baptist, Methodist and Episcopalian. Today, it encompasses a multiplicity of religious traditions such as Sikhism, Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism, as well as an increasing variety of noninstitutional belief systems such as humanism, skepticism, atheism and subjective spirituality. Racial and ethnic shifts have also changed the face of Christianity. The U.S. was once a predominantly white Christian country, but fewer than half of Americans (45 percent) identify as white Christian today.

We don't know for sure that America's religious pluralism is causing a drop in religious vitality — there are reasons to think the two might simply be related — but there are a number of different ways diversity might erode commitment. The practical effect of rising religious diversity is to expose

Americans to ideas and views that could challenge their religious beliefs. This weakening of America's religious consensus means there is far less social pressure to conform to religious norms. For young people coming of age today, America's Christian heritage is no longer a given, and being Christian is not viewed as a critical component of national identity.

Geographically, states with greater religious variety tend to exhibit lower levels of overall religiosity. No state is more religiously uniform than Mississippi. Half of the state's population identifies as Baptist and 54 percent are evangelical Protestant. It's probably no coincidence that Mississippi is also one of the few states with constitutions that prohibit atheists from serving in elected office. According to Gallup's 2016 rankings of the most and least religious states, Mississippi has the honor of being the most religious state in the country. In contrast, Oregon ranks high in terms of religious diversity — no one religious tradition makes up more than 20 percent of the state's population — and falls near the bottom in Gallup's ranking. Only four states are less religious.

Diversity within our immediate social networks may also serve to weaken our ties to a religious community or strengthen our resolve to remain unattached. Americans who report greater religious diversity in their social networks demonstrate much less regular religious involvement. A new analysis based on a Public Religion Research Institute study of Americans' social networks found that Americans who report greater religious diversity among their close friends and family are less likely to engage in religious activities. Sixty-three percent of Ameri-

cans who have religiously diverse social networks say they seldom or never attend religious services, compared with only about one-third (32 percent) of those who count coreligionists as their closest friends and family members. This is true for religious Americans as well. In fact, even when controlling for different demographic attributes, including religious identity, Americans with more religiously diverse social networks demonstrate lower rates of religious participation and are less apt to say religion is important in their lives than other Americans.

Religious diversity could even subvert our initial exposure to religion. Religiously mixed marriages are more

common than ever, and Americans raised by parents of different faiths report much lower levels of religious activity in childhood than those raised in religiously unified households. Nearly 6 in 10 (58 percent) Americans raised by parents who shared the same religious background say they attended religious services weekly or more often. Only

40 percent of Americans raised in religiously mixed households report attending services regularly as children. Americans raised in mixed religious households are also less likely to have prayed regularly with their family and to have attended Sunday school.

Of course, it is possible that religious diversity is not directly precipitating a decline in religious identity and engagement. Parents of different faith backgrounds might de-emphasize religious activities in an effort to reduce conflict in the home — a phenomenon supported by social network theory — but it might also be that people who marry outside their particular denomination or tradition care less about their religious identity in the



Daniel Cox

first place. Religiously diverse states might attract more secular residents because they offer a more accepting and tolerant religious climate. And yet, it is difficult to imagine that weakening social pressure and greater exposure to diverse religious perspectives, including those that are critical of religion, would have no effect on the decisions we make about our own religious lives.

Diversity is now simply a fact of American religious life. It does not signal the end of religion, but it may make it easier for Americans to abstain from religious involvement and encourage other types of spiritual and philosophical explorations. It may also make atheists more willing to "come out," something that can be exceedingly difficult, especially in very religious communities.

Organized religion has never been in jeopardy of dying out due to a single traumatic event. Instead, it is a cumulative series of unanswered challenges that pose the greatest risk. Religious diversity might not represent a dramatic threat to religion, but it may represent another small hole in an already sinking ship.

*Daniel Cox writes for Public Religion Research Institute and specializes in survey research, youth politics and religion. He has co-authored several academic book chapters on topics relating to religious polarization and gay and lesbian issues in the black church.*

# Religious 'nones' may decide election

*This article first appeared in the Spartanburg (S.C.) Herald-Journal on Sept. 5 and is reprinted with permission.*

By James A. Haught

Western civilization has entered the long-predicted Secular Age, when the power of religion over society gradually recedes.

Europe started the shift after World War II. Churchgoing diminished until only a fringe of Europeans attend worship services today — fewer than 10 percent in some nations. The young especially ignore faith.

The secularizing trend spread to Canada, Australia, Japan and other democracies.

Now it's occurring in America. People who tell pollsters that their religion is "none" have increased rapidly to one-fourth of the U.S. population. They're expected to continue rising because one-third of Americans under 30 have ceased worshipping.

This trend has political significance because those who don't attend church often tend to be strongly liberal, progressive and Democratic in their val-



James A. Haught

ues. The "none" segment may decide the Nov. 8 national election.

"The Decline of Religion is the GOP's Real Demographic Crisis" is the title of a research report by journalist Matthew Sheffield, who is writing a book on the trend. He points out that Republican Mitt Romney clearly won the 2012 presidential election, as far as U.S. churchgoers are concerned — but churchless voters killed Romney in state after state.

Sheffield wrote: "In seven key states — Pennsylvania, Florida, Virginia, Wisconsin, Michigan, Iowa and New Hampshire — Mitt Romney won the majority of the Christian vote but ended up losing overall because he was defeated so soundly among non-Christians."

Polls show that "none" voters backed

Romney's opponent, then-Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama, in 2012 by these huge margins: Virginia, 78 percent to 22; Pennsylvania, 74 to 25; Florida, 72 to 26; Wisconsin, 73 to 25; etc.

"It is safe to say that the Godless Gap cost Mitt Romney the election," Sheffield concluded.

Young "nones" generally are tolerant and humane. They support the right of gays to marry. They support women's right to choose to end pregnancies. They would halt the death penalty. They would legalize marijuana. They support universal health care.

They reject most of the Puritanism embraced by many within the GOP and its fundamentalist wing. They instead embrace Democratic values.

White evangelicals vote Republican as forcefully as "nones" vote Democratic. Currently, both segments are evenly balanced — each comprising one-fifth to one-fourth of U.S. voters.

But here's a crucial difference: White evangelicals are shrinking, while the churchless grow relentlessly. The trend bodes a brighter future for liberal politics (although many "nones" don't bother to vote).

It's fascinating to watch the culture

evolve.

When I became a young reporter in Charleston, W.Va., during the 1950s, Appalachian Bible Belt taboos were locked into law. It was a felony to be gay. It was a felony for a desperate girl to end a pregnancy. It was a crime for stores to open on the Sabbath. Mixed-race marriage was against the law.

It was a crime to sell a cocktail, lottery ticket or anything akin to a Playboy magazine. Schools had mandatory teacher-led prayer. It was a crime for an unwed couple to live together or even share a bedroom.

All those religion-based laws slowly vanished as society turned more secular. Few people noticed because we all were too busy with daily life — but morality gradually flip-flopped. Former crimes became legal.

The secularizing trend seems unstoppable. It gradually bolsters progressive values of the Democratic Party. White evangelicals remain the heart of the GOP — but they're losing ground as "nones" slowly outnumber them.

*James A. Haught is editor emeritus of West Virginia's largest newspaper, the Charleston Gazette-Mail.*

*FFRF does not endorse or promote any candidates for public office.*



## A critical analysis

# Christian foundation crumbles under scrutiny

By Paul Davis

Today's major religions — Christianity and Islam — make absolutely contradictory and irreconcilable claims. Each faith believes its holy book is the literal “word of God,” accepted on faith that everything in it is historical fact infallibly written by scribes inspired by God.



Paul Davis

Christianity says Jesus is a god; Islam states Jesus is not a god. This means that one of them is dead wrong. Worst of all is the claim by both Islam and Christianity that those who believe in the wrong god will be condemned to hell. Such idiocy.

The Christian tale has always been difficult to swallow by other religions, just as the dogmas of other religions can't be accepted by Christians. So let's look at Christianity critically from the perspective of other faiths and see if their skepticism is justified.

### Paul's writings

The earliest writings known in the New Testament are letters believed by Christian scholars to have been written by the apostle Paul between about 50 and 70 CE (Common Era), which is a few decades after Jesus' alleged death around 30 CE. Paul traveled extensively between Jerusalem and Rome from 5-67 CE, and authored the “Pauline Letters,” or epistles — seven books in the New Testament.

What is absolutely remarkable about them is they do not portray Jesus as a historical person. All of Paul's sources are divine — no human sources whatsoever. Paul only mentions his source of knowledge of Jesus as God or God's revelation, or indirectly from the Old Testament.

In the more than 300 references to Jesus in Paul's seven authentic letters, Paul does not mention even one single fact that “connects Jesus with an earthly life.” We hear nothing about his virgin birth, the date he was born or died, whether he was married or single. Nothing about Mary, Joseph, Bethlehem, his sermons, his miracles or anything about his personal appearance. Paul's silence on Jesus' history and earthly accomplishments is unthinkable. The simplest explanation is that there never was a historical Jesus.

### Historical Jesus

The heart and soul of Christianity is the belief in a supernatural and historical Jesus. The New Testament gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John — believed to have been written anonymously between about 70 and 110 CE — all insist that Jesus was well-known throughout Jerusalem and the Mediterranean world. And his unprecedented miracles were allegedly “witnessed by multitudes.” The entire city of Jerusalem reportedly went wild acclaiming him as he entered triumphantly. He was dramatically arrested and placed on trial before the whole city of Jerusalem. His death and resurrection were supposedly accompanied by spectacular supernatural events: angelic appearances, earthquakes and a supernatural darkness that covered an

entire region for hours.

Christians have always claimed that the events in Jesus' life were the best-attested events in human history. And, additionally, the first century is known as one of the best-documented historical periods. Yet we have no texts of anyone who says anything whatsoever about the “incredibly famous events” declared in the gospels..

### Eyewitnesses to Jesus

Jesus supposedly lived from about 4 BCE (Before the Common Era) to 30 CE. Yet there is not a single mention of him by his contemporaries — not by Romans or Jews — during his entire lifetime.

For instance, Seneca the Younger, in his book *On Superstition* (where he criticizes every known cult and religion) makes no mention whatsoever of Jesus or Christianity. And Gallio, Seneca's older brother, also never heard of Jesus or Christians. Yet this makes no sense, since he was the magistrate who heard Paul's case (Acts 18:12-17). And there is the Jewish historian Justus of Tiberias, who lived in Galilee not far from Jesus' hometown and wrote a history of the kingdom of Judah, covering the entire time when supposedly Jesus lived. But there was not one mention of Jesus.

And, finally there was Philo-Judaeus, one of the most prolific writers in the ancient world, most of whose works were preserved. He lived before, during and after the alleged time of Christ, and was in or near Jerusalem when Christ reportedly made his triumphal entry and when the crucifixion and resurrection occurred, and during the alleged earthquakes and supernatural darkness. It is astonishing he never once mentioned Jesus, the crucifixion, resurrection or the miraculous events associated with him.

This pervasive silence of Jesus occurred in spite of the fact that the Christian church doggedly preserved every scrap of documentation that mentioned him or Christianity. Many ancient Christian scholars, such as Origen and Eusebius, were near fanatical in referencing or quoting authors who attested to Jesus or Christianity. Any mention of Jesus in first- or second-century literature would therefore have had the highest probability of preservation.

Thus, we can be certain that Philo or any other first- or early second-century author never spoke of him. Yet the same writers had much to say about other less interesting messiahs — but nothing about Jesus.

It is inconceivable that all tens of thousands of Romans and Jews living in Judea during the first century could have missed everything about Jesus' life and his miracles. And if you assume Jesus was the son of God and therefore “the most important historical person to walk the Earth,” the complete omission by all his contemporary writers is deafening. We simply have no eyewitness record of Jesus ever existing.

### Non-biblical mentions

Aside from having no proven eyewitness of Jesus, there is absolutely nothing written outside of the bible to confirm Jesus' life, death and return from the dead during the first century and most of the second century. From Jesus' death until at least 112 CE, not a single word of Jesus is mentioned in



any non-biblical source. He is never discussed, challenged or talked about in any surviving Roman or Greek source of the period.

Not until 112 CE, when the author Pliny the Younger, governor of a Roman province, in a letter to his emperor, asked how to handle secret meetings of a group called “Christians.” And in 115 CE, Tacitus, in writing his history of Rome, mentions a “Christus” who was executed at the hands of Pontius Pilate. However, the word “Christians” in Pliny's letter is believed to have originally been “Essenes,” and later changed by Christian forgers. And the passage by Tacitus is also believed by Christian scholars to be a forgery and is not quoted by ancient historians until the 15th century. Everything else referring to Jesus outside of the bible dates later than 120 CE, long after any eyewitness would have died.

### Biblical fraud

Literary fraud was rampant in the early years of the Old and New Testaments. After about 120 CE, the quantity of bogus literature about Jesus and early Christianity exploded to an immense scale, making the task of sorting truth from fiction almost impossible. And, beginning about the second century and continuing for hundreds of years, almost any literature that disputed the existence of Jesus or Christianity was methodically destroyed or deleted from references by church officials.

One of the greatest crimes in human history was the total destruction of the library at Alexandria in 391 CE, perpetrated by Christian fanatics. They destroyed absolutely priceless scrolls and documents that hid the truth about the pagan origin of their religion and its alleged founder. As many as 700,000 hand-written manuscripts were lost, and it is believed to have set back civilization at least 1,000 years.

Presenting myth as fact became popular under the Roman Empire. Thus, a large part of faith literature is fabricated, yet passed off as true. Letters were similarly forged. This was the norm, not the exception. In fact, based on all of the references cited, most Christian faith literature in its first three centuries is fabricated. The phrase “pious fraud” was coined to describe what Christian fathers deemed a pious act to employ deception and fraud. Tom Harper, an ordained priest and professor of New Testament studies, said, “The great world religion actually rests on a foundation of falsehood and forgery.”

### Josephus' Jesus reference

Embarrassingly for Christians, the closest historical support for the bible in all of the first century is an outright forgery. In the year 93 CE, Flavius Jo-

sephus, a respected Jewish historian from Judea, published his *Antiquities of the Jews*. Josephus lived in the same area where Jesus allegedly lived and taught. *Antiquities* contains a disputed paragraph many Christians believe as historical evidence for Jesus. The short passage, three sentences long, presents a glowing summary of Jesus' miraculous career. This paragraph is obviously a Christian fabrication inserted into the text where it is totally out of context, and is so blatantly counterfeit that no historian today can deny it as a later Christian forgery.

The major giveaway is that the Jesus passage does not appear in Josephus' works until the fourth century. There was absolutely no reference to the Jesus passage anywhere for the first 200 years of Josephus' works, in spite of the fact that Josephus' histories were immensely popular by ancient scholars and their writings are filled with references to him. The passage could not be referenced, obviously, as it did not exist.

The Jesus passage is first quoted repeatedly by the notorious Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea — known to have been responsible for many revisions and blatant forgeries. The bishop was an advocate of what he called “holy lying.” Over two dozen complaints from his contemporaries still survive. Eusebius apparently altered and doctored the facts constantly, and is believed by many Christian scholars today to have inserted the entire Jesus passage.

### Mythical, invented Jesus

The earliest writings in the New Testament by Paul portray a celestial, mythical Jesus rather than a real and historic one. The only reason people believe that Jesus really existed as a historical person lies in the contents of the New Testament that were written decades after Paul, when Christian apologists had time to embellish his story with earthly characteristics. There were no eyewitnesses and no other source, document or otherwise, that independently corroborates the historical reality of Jesus.

So we are left with two choices: Either much or all of the New Testament was fabricated to grossly exaggerate Jesus' fame and accomplishments — which went completely unnoticed by society — or he was an outright mythical character that the gospels clearly succeeded in inventing.

We can now more easily understand why billions of people in other religions believe Jesus was mythical, and, with it, the foundation of Christianity.

*FFRF member Paul Davis is an engineering geologist in southern California, specializing in earthquake fault and landslide investigations.*



# Mt. Soledad cross case ends after 27 years

After more than a quarter century of legal battles, the lawsuit over the Mount Soledad cross in La Jolla, Calif., has come to an end.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on Sept. 7 ruled an end to the case because the issue is now moot — the 29-foot-tall cross (43 feet with the base) is no longer on public grounds after a private organization purchased the land.

“Once again, courts have definitively ruled that the government may not place permanent Christian crosses on public land,” said FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “That’s a major victory. But taxpayers have been cheated of their view, and prime real estate, by nearly three decades of machinations by the city of San Diego, members of Congress and even the Pentagon, interceding to ‘save the cross.’”

In July 2015, the Mount Soledad Memorial Association agreed to pay \$1.4 million to buy the cross and the land beneath it from the Department of Defense. It took more than a year from that point for the plaintiffs, which included FFRF Life Member and California State Representative Steven Trunk, to review the sale and other details.

Trunk testified that he was “a veteran who served his country during the Vietnam conflict [but] I am not a Christian and the memorial sends a



**FFRF Life Member and California State Representative Steven Trunk stands near the Mt. Soledad cross in La Jolla, Calif., in this 2011 photo. Trunk was a plaintiff in the case to have it removed from public property.**

very clear message to me that the government is honoring Christian war veterans and not nonChristians.”

The controversial case began in 1989 when the city of San Diego and the federal government were first involved. It traveled throughout the court systems several times, including twice to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Opponents of the cross said that it violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibiting the government from endorsing one religion over another. Proponents said that the cross is a local landmark and a secular sign of service and sacrifice by veterans.

“I think this now resolves the case,” said David Loy, the legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union of San Diego & Imperial Counties. “The government doesn’t own the cross or the land underneath it any more. The government is no longer in the business of endorsing religion.”

The cross site initially was on land owned for decades by the city of San Diego. And it was the city that was the first defendant in the initial suit in 1989 filed by Vietnam War veteran and atheist Philip K. Paulson, who earned FFRF’s premiere Atheist in Foxhole award.

In 1991, U.S. District Judge Gordon Thompson ruled that the cross was unconstitutional and had to be moved off public land.

After that, the city tried to sell the

property, but the courts wouldn’t allow that, stating that the terms of the sale were unconstitutional because they gave a preference to buyers who planned to keep it as a religious symbol.

In 2006, the U.S. Congress intervened and took the property by eminent domain, then turning it over to the Defense Department for use as a war memorial.

More litigation followed, including by Trunk, who replaced Paulson after his death in 2006. Then, in 2008, U.S. District Judge Larry Burns in San Diego ruled that the cross was not a religious symbol, but one of service and sacrifice. So again that ruling was appealed, and in 2011 the 9th Circuit ruled in favor of Trunk, saying the cross was a “distinctively Christian symbol.” Trunk earned FFRF’s third Atheist in Foxhole award for his work on this case.

Another appeal followed before last year’s sale of the property went through.

Jim McElroy, the lawyer for Trunk who has been involved in the case for two decades, said the long battle was worth it.

“From our perspective, I think I can say that after 25 years we finally got the message through, that a 40-foot, 20-ton ubiquitous symbol of Christianity on public property is not constitutional,” he told the Los Angeles Times.

## Ten Commandments mural covered by flag at school

A Ten Commandments mural at O’Donnell (Texas) High School was covered with dark paper after the school got a letter from FFRF challenging the constitutionality of the painting.

Shortly thereafter, the paper covering was torn down by the students. School staff then placed an American flag over the mural, hoping no one would rip that down. So far the flag remains up, but students have been posting sticky notes around the flag with bible verses and faith-based messages.

O’Donnell School District Superintendent Cathy Amonett even went so far as holding a school assembly that day so she could explain that the covering was due to fear of a lawsuit by FFRF.

While a lawsuit is an option, it’s is not the preferred choice and is normally a last resort. FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover sent the letter Sept. 7 to the school, asking for a written re-

sponse on what steps it will take next. “By displaying a religious message in its entryway, O’Donnell ISD infringes on its students’ constitutionally protected religious freedom,” he wrote in the letter.

“The whole point is to educate the school district on why this is illegal and ask that they voluntarily remove the display,” Grover said. “At this point, we’re very hopeful the school district will do the right thing.”

But Amonett isn’t sure yet what the school will do.

“The next step is I’m going to do some more investigation,” she said, “and get with the school leadership, and the community, and the students, and we will decide what we need to do to protect the school, while also honoring it.”

Texas state Sen. Charles Perry even got involved, stating, “I am proud of the hundreds of students at O’Donnell



Screen shot from NBC4i

**An American flag rests over a mural of the Ten Commandments at O’Donnell (Texas) High School.**

that are standing up for their faith and starting a movement to save the Ten Commandments at their school. Our office is working to ensure the school is in touch with the necessary experts to explain their rights and determine a plan of action.”

So far, the school is not taking further action. At a public forum on Sept.

13, all of the speakers (students and residents) were in favor of keeping the mural up. But, as Grover points out, “Everyone’s not happy with it. First of all, because someone locally contacted us . . . Our constitutional rights in this country are not subject to majority rule. The Constitution protects from the tyranny of majority rule.”

# Judge rules school’s non-live nativity OK

While pleased that a live nativity pageant in an Indiana public school has stopped for now, the Freedom From Religion Foundation is disappointed following a federal ruling Sept. 14 saying a school may employ mannequins in a Christian manger scene during a Christmas celebration.

U.S. District Judge Jon E. DeGuilio for the Northern District of Indiana issued the 37-page ruling in a case brought by FFRF and the American Civil Liberties Union, with parent and student plaintiffs. The federal suit challenged a live student tableau of students as part of Concord Community Schools’ annual “Christmas Spectacular.”

The ACLU and FFRF won a preliminary injunction Dec. 2, 2015, against the live nativity. The nearly 50-year violation involved students reenacting the supposed birth of the Christian savior, as school officials read passages from the New Testament and devotional Christmas hymns dominated the musical program.

The district responded to the lawsuit by adding one Chanukah song and one Kwanzaa song to its program. After the preliminary injunction, it replaced the student actors in its nativity scene with mannequins, but kept the usual 20 minutes of devotional Christmas songs performed by students during four public concerts.

The decision held that the 2015 change from a live nativity enactment to a static nativity display did not violate the Establishment Clause. The ruling left untouched the court’s earlier decision enjoining the live nativity.

The court’s ruling was predicated on what it saw as significant changes to the school district’s program, brought on by the litigation. The judge called the changes sufficient to avoid any constitutional problem with the 2015 concert.

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor said, to the contrary, that in fact the unannounced inclusion of a manger scene was a disturbing shock and offense

to the plaintiffs observing the concerts.

FFRF and the ACLU note that staging a nativity scene, live or otherwise, during a school event has no secular or educational purpose.

“The nativity scene and the concert’s heavy focus on the religious aspects of Christmas send an exclusionary message to our clients and others that the school prefers Christians over nontheists and people of other faiths,” noted ACLU Senior Staff Attorney Heather Weaver.

The case is still ongoing. Judge DeGuilio has asked the parties to submit supplemental briefing on how to remedy the violations to plaintiffs’ rights occurring in 2014 and earlier. Those issues should be fully briefed by the end of October.

FFRF thanks its local plaintiffs, who are under a protective order, for their willingness to challenge this longstanding violation despite community uproar and threats delivered against anyone perceived to be involved in the case.



# In the news

## Burkini ban overturned by French court

A court in Nice suspended the city’s burkini ban, citing insufficient grounds to justify the controversial decree.

In the ruling Sept. 8, judges from Nice’s administrative tribunal court said the full-length swimsuit worn by some Muslim women did not pose a risk to public order on the French Riviera city’s beaches.

The case was brought by the Collective Against Islamophobia — a group of human rights activists who have been helping a number of women challenge fines. They argued that the ban is discriminatory, unconstitutional and that there has been no evidence to suggest that wearing a burkini has contributed to any acts of public disorder.

More than 30 towns — largely situated along France’s southeast coastline — initially imposed a ban on the divisive swimwear.

## ‘8THEIST’ license plate OK’d in settlement



A New Jersey woman, whose request for a license plate reading “8THEIST” was denied two years ago when state officials said it might be considered offensive, will now be allowed to display it.

A settlement filed in federal court on Aug. 12 resolves a lawsuit filed in 2014 by Shannon Morgan. As part of the settlement, the state Motor Vehicle Commission also will issue the following vanity plates or “combinations that are substantially similar”: SECULAR, RATIONL, HUMANST, ATHEISM, GODLESS, HEATHEN, HERETIC, SKEPTIC, BLASFMR, REASON, EVOLVE, TRANS, LGBTR.TS, LGBTQ, PRIDE, QUEER, GAYPOWR, LGBTALY, FEMINISM, FEMINST, EQUALITY and 4WOMEN.

Morgan’s lawsuit said the Motor Vehicle Commission violated her First Amendment rights when its website rejected the 8THEIST vanity plate. Morgan said she then filled out the online application using the phrase BAPTIST, which the website accepted.

## Judge rules firing transgender worker OK

A federal judge ruled on Aug. 18 that a Detroit funeral home that “operates as a ministry” was exempt from a law protecting transgender employees because of its owner’s Christian beliefs.

U.S. District Judge Sean Cox dismissed a 2014 lawsuit by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission that said RG & GR Harris Funeral Homes unlawfully fired funeral director Aimee Stephens when she told her bosses she would transition from male to female.

The EEOC said Harris violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits employment discrimination on the basis of gender stereotyping. Harris said it had a religious right to fire Stephens and that she was also biologically male and violated a dress code requiring men to wear suits. Cox agreed with Harris on both points.

## Catholic hospitals’ docs may not refer women

According to interviews with U.S. physicians, some Roman Catholic hospitals not only refuse to provide some women’s health services such as abortion, but may also prevent doctors from referring women to facilities that would provide them.

Services including sterilization, contraception and fertility services can be similarly prohibited, according to the study.

Catholic health care institutions make up 15 percent of acute care hospitals in the U.S., and clinicians employed in them are bound by the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services issued by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Professional ethics guidelines from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommend that clinicians who deny patients reproductive services for moral or religious reasons provide a timely referral to prevent patient harm, but whether physicians at Catholic facilities actually make these referrals is unclear, the authors write in Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health.

## Man fired after ‘anointing’ office

A man was fired from his job for putting cross-shaped oil smears everywhere in his place of employment, including on the “walls, doorways, and cubicles.” The department even had to shut down so authorities could investigate.

Eric Cheeley, a Pentecostal employee of the city of Miami’s Capital Improvements Program (CIP) department, admitted that he was the one who did it. He was fired the next day.

Cheeley argued in court that he was a victim of religious discrimination, but U.S. District Judge Robert N. Scola Jr. said he had no case.

“Cheeley’s application of the oily substance caused actual damage to his employer’s property and disrupted its business,” Scola wrote in his decision. “These facts are undisputed.”

## Did FLDS leader get taken in the Rapture?



A lawyer for Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints Church leader Lyle Jeffs says the fugitive may not have escaped from home confinement, but perhaps “experienced the miracle of rapture.”

In a filing about whether to continue the food stamp fraud trial for 11 members of the FLDS Church, Jeffs’ defense attorney said she can’t reach him to ask his input, and then slyly offered some alternative ideas to explain his fugitive status.

“As this Court is well aware, Mr. Jeffs is currently not available to inform his counsel whether or not he agrees to the Continuance. Whether his absence is based on absconding, as oft alleged by the Government in their filings, or whether he was taken and

secreted against his will, or whether he experienced the miracle of rapture is unknown to counsel,” Kathryn Nester wrote.

Nester, who appeared to be kidding in the filing, told the judge she did not have an objection to delaying the trial.

Jeffs vanished from home confinement in June, perhaps using olive oil to slip out of a GPS monitoring device. The U.S. Attorney’s Office for Utah conceded that Jeffs cannot be found.

## Insurer won’t pay after ‘act of God’



In an ironic twist, an insurance company refuses to pay for floodwater damages at a Pennsylvania church, claiming the damage is considered an “act of God.”

Connellsville Church of God Rev. Nelson Confer said he was denied coverage by Church Mutual Insurance because of God’s hand in the devastation. The church’s basement was destroyed after water destroyed an outside wall, flooding the basement with four feet of water.

“Act of God” is a common term in insurance contracts seeking to lessen the liability of insurance companies to pay customers for unavoidable events stemming from natural causes.

## Mother quotes bible in defense of striking son

An Indianapolis woman who beat her 7-year-old son with a coat hanger is citing Indiana’s religious freedom law as a defense against felony child abuse charges, saying her choice of discipline comes straight from her evangelical Christian beliefs.

The woman quoted biblical Scripture in court documents. She said that a parent who “spares the rod, spoils the child,” and: “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol.”

The state Religious Freedom Restoration Act, enacted in 2015, says the government cannot intrude on a person’s religious liberty unless it can prove a compelling interest in imposing that burden, and can do so in the least restrictive way.

A doctor at Riley Hospital for Children at IU Health found 36 bruises across the boy’s back, thigh and left arm. Three photographs submitted to the court show deep purple lines stripping the boy’s back and several welts on his arm.

Mom accused of killing ‘possessed’ daughter

Juanita Gomez, 49, was arrested on one count of murder related to the death of her daughter.

On Aug. 27, officers were called to a home in Oklahoma City after callers asked officers to check on the welfare of a woman inside the house.

According to court documents, officers arrived at the home and found 33-year-old Geneva Gomez lying on the

floor with a large crucifix on her chest. Geneva was pronounced dead at the scene.

Juanita, Geneva’s mother, told investigators Geneva “was possessed by the devil.”

Court documents claim she admitted to punching Geneva repeatedly “and forced a crucifix and religious medallion down her throat until blood came out of her daughter’s mouth. Juanita saw her daughter die and then placed her body in the shape of a cross.”

## Prayer Caucus founder Forbes loses in primary

Scott W. Taylor stunned Rep. J. Randy Forbes on Aug. 7 in Virginia’s 2nd District Republican primary, thwarting the 15-year representative’s effort to stay in Congress by switching to a more favorable district.

Forbes created the Congressional Prayer Caucus in 2005, which includes about 90 members of the House (nearly all Republicans), one U.S. senator and one paid staff member.

Two years after Dave Brat shocked House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in a 2014 GOP primary in the 7th District, another senior member of the Virginia congressional delegation went down to an upstart rival.

## Charity shuns atheist’s \$28,000 donation



Atheist Matt Wilbourn wanted to donate \$100 to the Baptist-run Murrow Indian Children’s Home in Muskogee, Okla., because he appreciated the work they did.

After he gave the money and filled out the form, saying the donation would be made on behalf of the Muskogee Atheist Community, he received a call from the charity group saying it couldn’t accept his money because “it would go against everything they believe in.”

So he started a GoFundMe campaign to see how much he could raise, and to see if the charity would still refuse it. The fund gathered more than \$28,000 in donations, but the charity still refused it because it was offered in the name of atheists.

So Wilbourn plans to give almost all of it to Camp Quest Oklahoma, a camp for children of atheist parents. He said he would hold \$5,000 back to attempt to get the children’s home to accept it, perhaps by sending it anonymously.

## Transgender bathroom rules blocked

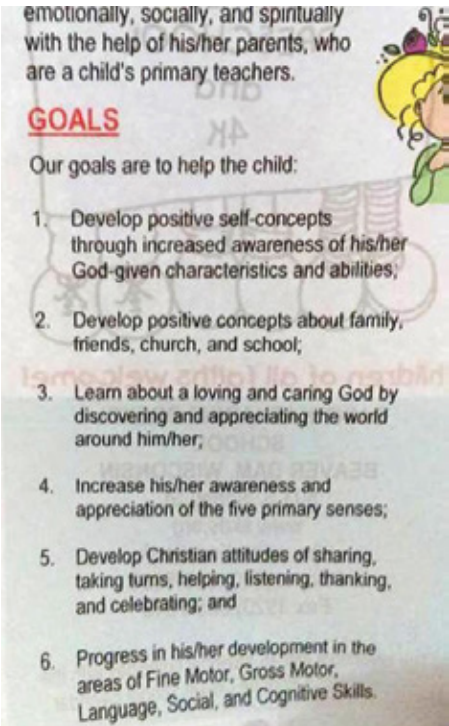
A federal judge in Texas has sided with school districts opposing the Obama administration’s directive on transgender bathrooms, temporarily blocking the directive just before the first day of school in Texas on Aug. 22.

The ruling prevents the U.S. Department of Education from implementing guidance that required school districts to allow transgender students to choose which restroom and locker facilities to use.



## FFRF state/church victories

### Unconstitutional tie-up in preschool ends



An unconstitutional tie-up between a Wisconsin school district and a parochial preschool has been nixed following an FFRF complaint.

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

“It is wildly inappropriate for the School District to send 3-year-old public school students to private schools for religious instruction,” FFRF Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne wrote in June to Stephen Vessey, superintendent of the Beaver Dam Unified School District.

The School District investigated the situation and told St. Katharine’s what it would have to do to comply with the law and district policy. St. Katharine’s decided to stop participating altogether in the 3K program rather than make any changes, revealing that religious instruction was its primary goal.

“After being advised of the changes that would have to be made to the 3K program, [St. Katharine Drexel] School indicated it no longer wished to provide the Early Childhood (3K) program to district students, and the district has accepted the school’s withdrawal from participating in the program,” Vessey recently replied. “Any students who were enrolled in the school’s Early Childhood program by the district for the coming school year have since been moved to a program offered at a different site.”

### Elementary school bible club shut down

FFRF has caused a religious club to be disbanded at a California elementary school.

Club Monarch, an afterschool bible club, was run in part by teachers and routinely given preferential treatment at Mariposa Elementary School in Brea, Calif. The club was mentioned in the weekly newsletter and listed in the school calendar. There were posters around the school exclusively advertising the club. At a back-to-school night, the principal effusively praised and recommended the club.

FFRF reminded the school

that this sort of collaboration was unconstitutional.

“It is a well-settled principle of Establishment Clause jurisprudence that public schools may not advance, prefer or promote religion,” FFRF Legal Fellow Madeline Ziegler wrote to Brea Olinda Unified School District Superintendent Brad Mason back in March.

After reviewing school records obtained through an open records request, including over 2,500 pages of emails about Club Monarch going back only two years, FFRF wrote a follow-up letter in May stating that its apprehensions had been confirmed.

FFRF has now received confirmation that its advice has been followed. “Club Monarch has ceased to operate at Mariposa Elementary School and does not operate at any other district school sites,” the school district’s legal firm has written to FFRF.

### FFRF ends religious film screenings

The Christian movie “Facing the Giants” won’t be shown to Medina Middle School’s seventh-graders in the future, FFRF has ensured.

A parent of a student at the Dyer, Tenn., school brought the issue to FFRF’s attention. The film follows a struggling high school football coach who inspires his team to believe in the God and to use faith to win football games.

Showing “Facing the Giants” in a public school “promotes Christianity over all other religions and nonreligion and violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment,” FFRF Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert informed the Gibson County Special School District.

Eddie Pruett, the district’s director of schools, replied that the teacher was reminded that multimedia must be approved by the principal, and was told that “Facing the Giants” was not an appropriate movie to show the class.

### FFRF gets religious group to pay fees



FFRF has made certain that a Wisconsin religious organization will pay full rental fees at local public schools.

Mission of Hope has held several events at public schools in Waupaca, Wis. Among other activities, the events include a prayer tent staffed by local church members to “pray with and for” visitors. Records that FFRF obtained revealed that the School District of Waupaca forgave Mission of Hope the \$180 facility fees and \$100 nonprofit kitchen use fees for past such events at the Waupaca Learning Center Elementary School.

FFRF Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne wrote earlier this month to Waupaca School District Superintendent Greg Nyen. FFRF’s complaint was taken seriously and received an appropriate response.

“I understand your concern regarding the need for separation of church and state,” wrote Nyen. “I am hereby

providing you said assurance that in the future, charges for facility usage will be applied to Mission of Hope as it would any other outside organization.”

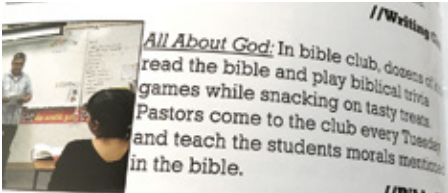
### Prayer discontinued at N.D. graduations

After including multiple prayers to Jesus at its 2016 graduation ceremony, Watford City High School in North Dakota has assured FFRF that the constitutional violation will not be repeated.

“High school graduations must be secular to protect the freedom of conscience of all students,” FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliot wrote to McKenzie County School District Superintendent Steven Holden. “It makes no difference how many students wouldn’t want prayer or wouldn’t be offended by prayer at their graduation ceremony. As the Supreme Court has said, ‘Fundamental rights may not be submitted to vote; they depend on the outcome of no elections.’”

Holden responded on Aug. 2, explaining that, after consulting with the school board and school district attorney, the district would ensure prayer would not be part of future ceremonies or other school-sponsored events.

### No more pastors at school bible club



A bible club at a Nevada middle school will no longer be led by pastors, thanks to FFRF. A parent of a Bob Miller Middle School student contacted FFRF after reading the club’s description in the yearbook: “Pastors come to the club every Tuesday and teach the students morals mentioned in the bible.”

“It is illegal for public schools to allow adults to lead religious instruction on school property during the school day,” wrote FFRF Legal Fellow Madeline Ziegler in a July 21 letter to the Clark County School District. The Equal Access Act forbids adult participation in student religious clubs.

General Counsel Carlos L. McDade told FFRF on Aug. 2 that administrators were “reminded that the bible club must be student-led and that the club must not be directed, conducted, controlled, or regularly attended by nonschool persons.”

### Teacher instructed to stop praying

The Academy for Scholarship and Entrepreneurship in the Bronx, N.Y., will stop including teacher-led invocations in its graduation ceremonies.

The decision was prompted by a July 14 letter from FFRF Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert, who pointed out that the Supreme Court has specifically struck down prayers at public school graduations. “The district has a duty to remain neutral toward religion,” Markert wrote. “By scheduling prayers at graduation, the district abridges that duty and alienates the 35% of young Americans who are not religious.”

Carron Staple, superintendent of Bronx High School Districts 8, 9 and 11, responded that the teacher’s ac-

tions were against New York City Department of Education regulations. Staple said the prohibition had been discussed with the school’s administrative staff, who understood the invocation could not recur.

### Principal won’t pray with students

Bakersfield High School Principal Connie Grumling will not pray with students in the future. Grumling had met with students to pray at the flagpole.

FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel lodged a complaint with the Kern High School District in Bakersfield, Calif., in August 2015. “Federal courts have held it is unconstitutional for public school employees to participate in the religious activities of their students,” he said. This is “to avoid any perception of government endorsement of religion.”

On Aug. 9, Seidel spoke with the district’s general counsel, who said that the prayer was an “isolated incident” that had been addressed by the administration.

### FFRF downs religious signs at Florida school

The Osceola County School District is now limiting church advertising on its property.

The My Grace Fellowship Church holds its services at the Westside K-8 School, and previously was permitted to leave lawn signs promoting the services on the school’s grounds. FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel objected to this practice in a June 13. “Advancing, preferring, and promoting religion is exactly what a school does when it allows a church to prominently place a permanent advertisement for students, parents, school employees, and anyone passing by to see,” said Seidel. “[The church] must put up the signs no earlier than when the rental time begins and take them down when the rental time ends.”

An attorney for the school district reported the matter resolved on Aug. 24.

### Softball coaches leave prayer circle



After receiving a letter from FFRF last year, West Virginia’s Putnam County Schools has finally instructed softball coaches at Buffalo High School to stop praying with students. A photo from the state championship game showed players, coaches and fans holding hands in a circle around the field for a post-game prayer.

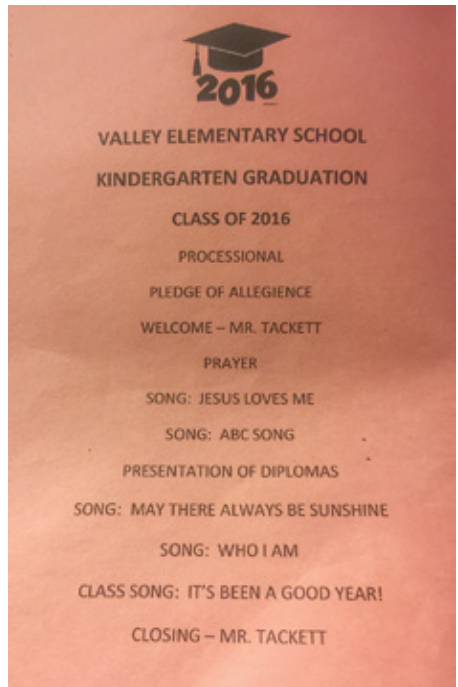
“While students may engage in prayer on their own, school staff, including coaches, cannot lead, direct or participate in such religious activities,” FFRF Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert reminded the district in June 2015.

After FFRF followed up several times, the district replied on Aug. 11 that the incident was addressed by administrators and that the district was obtaining legal training on the Establishment Clause.



# FFRF state/church victories

## Elementary school graduations secularized



FFRF has put a stop to several egregious constitutional violations at a kindergarten graduation ceremony at Valley Elementary School in Pikeville, Ky.

The school’s 2016 ceremony included a teacher-led prayer and the students singing, “Jesus Loves Me,” which they had reportedly been singing in their music classes for most of the school year. “It is coercive and inappropriate for a teacher to lead a prayer at a school function, and then to order the performance of ‘Jesus Loves Me’ by the students,” wrote FFRF Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert in a June 9 letter to the Pike County Schools.

General Counsel Neal Smith wrote back to FFRF on Aug. 23, saying he “cautioned our administration that open prayer at school-sponsored events should not take place and that faculty-led singing of hymns, such as ‘Jesus Loves Me,’ should also be avoided.”

## FFRF quashes Utah school board prayer

The Wasatch County Schools in Heber City, Utah, have reluctantly agreed to stop praying at School Board meetings.

Previously, meetings regularly included Mormon-style prayers delivered by the superintendent, School Board members, and other district employees. FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel wrote to Superintendent Terry Shoemaker and School Board President Mark Davis on May 3. “Federal courts have struck down school board practices that include this religious ritual,” he said, citing several cases, including FFRF’s recent victory against the Chino Valley (Calif.) Unified School District’s praying school board.

Superintendent Paul A. Sweat replied Aug. 23 that he believed the cases FFRF cited were “wrongly decided,” but said the board had stopped

conducting prayer for the time being. Sweat concluded by expressing his hope that the Supreme Court would soon extend the *Greece v. Galloway* decision approving of some prayers at meetings of legislative bodies.

## School district cuts religious presenter

Staff in the Little Rock (Ark.) School District won’t be subjected to religious lessons at staff meetings in the future.

At Mabelvale Middle School’s Aug. 9 teaching staff meeting, the school invited a Baptist pastor to give a presentation, which included retelling biblical stories and other religious remarks. FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott called out this unconstitutional presentation in an Aug. 18 letter. “By imposing religious messages on its employees at district-sponsored events, the district is violating constitutional limits on government religious endorsement,” he wrote.

Replying promptly on Aug. 23, an attorney for the school district acknowledged that part of the presentation could be perceived as an endorsement of religion, and said the superintendent would send a written notice to all district principals “to remind them not to allow presentations at mandatory teacher meetings or in-service training which endorse a particular religious position or message.”

## Lunchtime religious school group disbanded



FFRF has gotten an outsider-led lunchtime religious group at an Illinois public school disbanded.

School administrators at Harrisburg Middle School were allowing a Baptist minister to lead a religious session during lunch hour. He offered free pizza and soda to students who joined the group.

It was inappropriate and unconstitutional for the district to offer religious leaders access to befriend and proselytize students during the school day on school property, FFRF stressed. No outside adults should be provided carte blanche access to minors — a captive audience — in a public school.

After waiting for months for a response, FFRF Legal Fellow Jayne sent a reminder letter, and this time Harrisburg School District Superintendent

Michael Gauch responded.

“Following the school board’s directive, school administration instructed the local minister that he would no longer be allowed to come onto school property and meet with students during the lunchtime or anytime during the instructional day,” Gauch wrote.

## Ohio commissioners to find secular inspiration

The Lorain County Board of Commissioners in Ohio is replacing invocations with secular quotations at its meetings after hearing from FFRF.

Christian prayers and bible readings by the commissioners were prior staples of the meetings. “It is coercive, embarrassing, and intimidating for nonreligious citizens to be required to make a public showing of their nonbelief (by not rising or praying) or else to display deference toward a religious sentiment in which they do not believe, but which their Board of Commissioners members clearly do,” FFRF Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert said in a letter to the board.

Markert explained that unlike the prayers by outside religious leaders approved by the Supreme Court in *Greece v. Galloway*, federal courts have struck down prayers led by commissioners themselves.

A county attorney said the board disagreed with FFRF’s position, but had decided to discontinue the prayers anyway, replacing them with a secular “quote of the day.”

## FFRF ends Louisiana prayer violations

Thanks to FFRF, the Calcasieu Parish Public Schools have resolved two constitutional violations. Westlake High School will no longer broadcast prayers at football games. Vinton Elementary School will not repeat an incident that occurred on Aug. 7, when the community was invited to come to the school for prayer and a tour of the facilities.

FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover first wrote to the school district in September 2015 about the football prayers, receiving no response despite several follow up letters. Grover wrote again on Aug. 26 about the elementary prayer event. “Hosting a prayer event at a public school alienates non-religious students and families, as well as those who practice a minority religion,” he said. “A public school district should seek to be inclusive of all students and families, not just those in the religious

majority.”

Gregory Belfour, the school’s attorney, responded just a few days later this time. He said the superintendent would communicate the “constitutional limitations” on government-sponsored prayer to the Vinton principal, and school administrators at Westlake had been advised to stop promoting prayers at football games.

## Florida police prayer event canceled

The Ocoee, Fla., Police Department will no longer host a “Prayers for Police” event after FFRF sent a letter of complaint.

The department put on the event in May at a church, listing the purpose on a flier as “a period of unity as police chaplains, community leaders and members of the community join together to pray for the police profession.” The event was advertised on social media and hosted on police property. FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel notified the department that this entanglement with religion was unconstitutional. “Although we fully support remembering fallen police officers, it is OPD’s constitutional obligation to find a religiously neutral means of doing so,” said Seidel.

An Ocoee City Attorney responded on Aug. 2, saying the city would no longer host the event.

## FFRF stops school’s Christian music

Students in the weight room at Tecumseh High School in Tecumseh, Mich., won’t be forced to listen to Christian music, thanks to FFRF.


FFRF received a report from a local resident that a physical education teacher played the religious music during workout sessions in the weight room during the summer. “Playing Christian music to an audience of students using the weight room is a violation of student and parental rights,” wrote FFRF Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert in a letter to the Tecumseh Public Schools superintendent. “It is illegal for a district employee to promote Christianity through religious music while acting in his or her official capacity.”

Superintendent Kelly M. Coffin thanked Markert for bringing the matter to the school district’s attention and said that the school principal reminded the teacher of “his constitutional duty to remain neutral toward religion while in a public school setting.”



Photo by Sue Schuetz

**That’s why we worry!**  
FFRF member Sue Schuetz saw this marquee in Mercer, Wis., recently.



**FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION**

P.O. Box 750 • Madison, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • FFRF.org

### What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

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

The Foundation’s email address is [info@ffrf.org](mailto:info@ffrf.org). Please include your name and physical mailing address with all email correspondence.

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



FFRF AWARDS \$11,450

College Essay Contest winners announced

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is delighted to announce the 2016 Michael Hakeem Memorial College Essay Contest winners.

The list of awardees has seven top places and 13 honorable mentions from colleges located all over the country. Students were asked to write 700 to 900 words on the topic of “Why I am a freethinker.” FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994 and graduate students since 2010.

The winners of the competition are listed below and include the award amount, age and college or university they are attending. Students who are a member of a secular student group received \$100 bonuses.

**FIRST PLACE**  
Adam Simmons, 19, University of Tennessee (\$3,000)

**SECOND PLACE**  
Alex Reamy, 21, Arizona State University (\$2,000)

**THIRD PLACE**  
Katherine Gramling, 19, University

FIRST PLACE

Cathedral flame grows dimmer by the day

FFRF awarded Adam \$3,000.

BY ADAM SIMMONS

I remember staring at it. The moon lay shrouded behind a trail of clouds, which cast streaks across the grey stone as they passed. On either side, towers loomed over the face of the courtyard. I remember looking up at its broad, Gothic windows and fixing my attention on what appeared to be a single candle that flickered on one of the upper floors. It reminded me of my youth — the days where I would sit quietly in church, listening to the pastor deliver his sermon on the grace of God and crucifixion of his son.

I never liked church as a boy; I could never wrap my head around the concept of salvation. In truth, there was little to nothing I could wrap my head around. It all seemed so foreign and complex. God creating man, setting up the perfect scenario for him to sin, then condemning all of his progeny to eternal damnation, saving only those few whom he had predestined. Why punish them for something they had no control over? Better yet, why create a hell in the first place and why make it eternal? But as the mind of a child is vulnerable to the slightest impressions, I became the mold of my parents’ desires.

I was sent to a Christian “school,” where I was limited to Christian “science” and was forced to attend daily chapel services and take bible classes. Like a rat in a glorified Skinner box, I was taught what to say, what to do, and, most importantly, what to think. And when the evil demon of rationality came in to “test my faith,” I was warned of the fire and brimstone that was to face me



of Minnesota (\$1,000)

**FOURTH PLACE**  
Leah Kennedy, 22, New York University (\$750)

**FIFTH PLACE (TIE)**  
Karl Yee, 19, University of Maryland (\$500)

**FIFTH PLACE (TIE)**  
Elias Rodriguez, 22, University of Texas-Dallas (\$500)

**SIXTH PLACE**  
Adrick Tench, 21, Northwestern University (\$400)



**Adam Simmons**

if I continued to question The Almighty. So, with the threat of hell always at my side, I took it upon myself to understand the bible. Sure, my parents had me read through all 66 books of the Old and New Testaments by the time I was 9, but I had yet to learn of the philosophy. In consequence, I read everything from Aquinas to Kierkegaard, still driven by Pascal’s Wager to elude my fate. Yet even this was not enough to convince me. The arguments were unsound, and the evidence was as solid as the communion wine.

A few weeks later, as the pastor began one of his polished sermons that I had heard at least 20 times before, I came to a realization. I recognized that even if I spent my whole life going to the seminary and the most prestigious divinity school in the United States trying to rationalize a belief in God, it would always be just that — a rationalization stemming from nothing more than a fear of hell. It would be a life founded upon confirmation bias and voluntary ignorance.

I realized that even if I “devoted my life to Him” and at the end of it all I still felt that I didn’t actually believe — that the holy spirit had never entered me — then I would just end up in hell anyway. After relating these thoughts to my pastor,

Continued on the next page

**HONORABLE MENTIONS (\$200 EACH)**  
Cheyenne Barger, 19, Gannon University

Savannah Flusche, 23, Texas Woman’s University of Denton

William Gardner, 24, University of Delaware

Syd Gettier, 21, Notre Dame of Maryland University

James Harder, 23, Athabasca University

Camille Kaiser, 19, University of New Mexico

Jonathan Ortiz, 18, University of Florida

Fallon Rowe, 19, Utah State University

SECOND PLACE

Arguments for God just not credible

FFRF awarded Alex \$2,000.

BY ALEX REAMY

Religious believers like to pretend that atheism is the result of personal trauma orfrustration with God, but this was not the case with me. I have had heterodox opinions concerning religion for as long as I can remember.

When I was 7, I decided that Christ was most likely an ordinary rabbi and not a god in human form. My reasoning was as follows: “Jesus said he was the son of God, but he also said that we are all God’s children. So, maybe Jesus was not the literal son of God; maybe he was just a mortal man.” The next year, I discarded the doctrine of hell, since I could not believe in a just God who sentenced his creations to eternal damnation.

Gradually, my criticisms of religion became more refined. I observed that thousands of religions have existed throughout history, each with its own pantheon and set of moral teachings.

While studying history, I learned that the bible, which Christians consider a divinely inspired text, contained passages that condone slavery and the subjection of women. I wondered why a loving and all-powerful God would allow millions of innocent people to die of disease and natural disasters. If God created human beings knowing in advance that they would commit evil actions, is he not partly responsible for that evil?

In my junior year of high school, I examined all the common arguments for the existence of God, and saw that they all contain serious faults. Religious apologists claimed that only God could be responsible for the elegant design of the universe; but where, I thought,

Aiden Sorge, 20, Arizona State University

Elizabeth Turovsky, 19, Barnard College

Manon von Mil, 24, Queen’s University

Camille Sanchez, 19, Pomona College

Alexis Serra, 20, Drexel University

Next to be announced will be the winners of FFRF’s graduate student essay competition.

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

FFRF also thanks Dean and Dorea Schramm of Florida for providing the \$100 bonus to students who are members of a secular student club or the Secular Student Alliance. The total of \$11,450 reflects bonuses.

FFRF congratulates the 20 college students who won this year’s essay competition and wishes them all the best for their future endeavors.



**Alex Reamy**

was the evidence for this design? Most of the universe is indifferent, if not hostile, to human life.

Yet we are expected to believe that this vast cosmos was created for the sole purpose of fostering human life? If God exists, he must be extremely wasteful or indifferent.

There is also the First Cause argument, which states that everything in the universe has a cause, therefore there must be a first cause, which we label God. There are two objections to this line of reasoning.

First, particle physics has shown that “nothingness” is unstable, therefore it is plausible to imagine a universe in which “something” arose from nothing due to purely mechanical processes.

Second, the argument is obviously self-contradictory. You cannot start from the assumption that everything has a cause and obtain the result that there exists an uncaused cause (i.e., God). If it is true that everything has a cause, then God must also have a cause. If there is something without a cause, then there are no logical grounds for believing that this so-called “First Cause” is the vengeful, jealous God described in the bible. It is equally likely that the universe had multiple first causes, or that the universe was set in motion by some impersonal, natural force.

Continued on the next page



THIRD PLACE

Following the path of my moral compass

FFRF awarded Katherine \$1,000.

BY KATHERINE GRAMLING

Growing up in the Deep South, I was expected to be an observing, unquestioning Christian. As a young freethinker, I was criticized for my nonbelief. This social norm of Christianity is a large reason I traveled north and went to college in Minnesota. When my family moved to Georgia in 2006, we started attending church, which was something we had never regularly done before. I became very involved in the Methodist church, eventually attending multiple Christian youth groups a week, participating in a Christian club at my high school, and even working in the church nursery for two years. This intense exposure to the Christian faith was at first fulfilling, but as I grew older I started questioning the things I once accepted as truth. I began on a freethinking journey that would end in atheism, all the while finding more certainty and happiness along the way. Since I had been very involved with the church in my younger years, I had ample exposure to modern Christian theory. As I got older, I started questioning several biblical themes that preached misogyny, genocide and slavery. I could not rationalize these atrocities. Christians are supposed to love and rejoice in the fellowship of all people, yet I often felt there was an undercurrent of distaste and misunderstanding toward nonbelievers. My feelings were greatly intensified as I started to identify less with the church and more with nonbelief. There were several times throughout my high school experience when I felt ostracized for being a freethinker. At one point, I was completely excluded from my high school swim team for declining to pray with them before a meet. It was an extremely public display. Bleachers of parents and friends watched as one girl sat alone, apart from her team, while everyone else participated in a communal prayer that blurred the line between church and state. These exclusionary practices repel not only nonbelievers, but everyone who is not a Christian, and therein lies a huge problem with religion in general.



**Katherine Gramling**

When I look at our world today, I see a world in which religious affiliation merely serves to divide our people and extend modes of power and historical conflicts. Because of this destructive legacy, it was important for me to find a moral compass that does not carry thousands of years of hurt. I found that moral code within myself. Many religious people ask us atheists how we can be moral humans without a religious canon to abide by. I always answer that it is quite simple: We are rational beings who are able to distinguish right from wrong. Even when there are infinite shades of grey in the moral spectra, each person learns through both nature and nurture how to act in society, regardless of religious affiliation. Religious concern for morality culminates in another common question, this one regarding the afterlife. As an atheist, I don't believe in an afterlife. As a person of science, I know chemistry answers our questions on eventuality. Our very beings decompose to replenish the Earth in a natural cycle that allows humanity to sustain itself. Yet many will ask how I operate without hope for an afterlife. I do not need the looming promise of an afterlife in paradise to be a good person. I do not need the threat of eternal damnation to act humanely. I also do not need either of these promises to ease my fears of death. When nothing is there, there is nothing to be afraid of, and that's a freeing feeling. Despite the comfort I have found in atheism, atheists are labeled as one of the most distrusted minorities in America. As a happy freethinker, this is a sobering thought. Therefore, my goal is to enlighten others so that they may see that we are not immoral beings, but simply those who have found a moral compass outside the divisive reigns of religion. *Katherine, 19, grew up in Warner Robins, Ga., and is a student at the University of Minnesota. She is a member of Campus Atheists, Skeptics and Humanists (CASH) at the U of M and enjoys walking, movies, swimming and science.*

FOURTH PLACE

My wishes have changed for the better

FFRF awarded Leah \$750.

BY LEAH KENNEDY



**Leah Kennedy**

When I was in second grade, my teacher gave the class the following journal prompt: "If you had three wishes, what would you do?" I wrote that I would use the wishes to ask for more wishes until I had as many wishes as there are people in the world. Then, I would wish for each individual person to be "saved," I stated. In other words, as a 7-year-old, I wanted to make the entire world Christian. As I was in a conservative Christian school located in the South, my teacher wrote a note on the assignment about how sweet my thoughts were. I was raised as a nondenominational evangelical Christian, and prior to the age of 16, I never would have imagined that one day I might question the beliefs that I had been taught. I considered my faith to be the foundation of everything I knew. It was my duty to bring nonbelievers to the light of Christ. I'm embarrassed to admit that each atheist, agnostic and gay person I knew was put on a list that I read in my prayers every night. My intentions were never evil; I simply hated the idea of any person going to hell and wanted to prevent it through prayer. Midway through high school, my perspective unexpectedly shifted. I was struggling with depression, and rather than finding me the help I needed, my mother insisted that it was a spiritual problem and told me I was influenced by demons. My relationship with my parents began to crumble, and during a philosophy class, I found myself faced with alternate ways of thinking for the first time. As I began to think more critically, however, I realized that I did not know for certain that God existed. I struggled with my doubts for months, until finally, I began to call myself agnostic, first in private and then publicly. At first, I thought this was a temporary "crisis of faith." I had realized that my beliefs came solely from indoctrination. Surely God was real, and by wiping my slate clean and entering the world with no beliefs, I was giving God a chance to reveal himself to me. I figured that God would send me a sign that would lead me back into the faith stronger than before. No signs ever appeared to me, however, and I have now been an atheist for six years. In truth, I like myself better as an atheist than I ever did as a Christian. As a Christian, I constantly felt inadequate. I was raised to be humble, but this translated to denying any sense of self-esteem as pride. My straight-A report cards and artistic achievements were brushed aside as gifts from God rather than the result of my hard work. In the specific brand of Christianity in which I was raised, there was a sense of impending doom that seemed to justify inaction. Although I felt passionate about many issues of social justice, I rarely took action because I thought that Jesus would soon return and end this "broken" world. As an atheist, however, I have assumed the responsibility to fight for social justice. In college, finally away from my family, I took on projects to fight human trafficking, labor rights violations, sexism and homophobia. I became empowered and passionate about empowering others. Because I am all too familiar with evangelical mindsets, I do not try to convert those around me to atheism. I do, however, try to set a good example of what an atheist is by working with people of diverse beliefs in order to bring about social change. I have met Christians who are empowered by their faith. I have also met atheists who do harm to the label through their rudeness to those who are religious. Although my experiences led me to atheism, I ultimately believe that a person's worldview, whether secular or religious, should empower them. That is my only wish. *Leah, 22, was born in Baton Rouge, La., and attended the University of Oklahoma, where she graduated as the Outstanding Senior of the Weitzenhoffer Family College of Fine Arts. She is now studying at NYU's prestigious Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program. She is active in labor rights, LGBTQ+ advocacy, anti-human trafficking and women's rights.*

**First place essay**  
*Continued from the previous page*

he told me that I simply had to wait for the Lord to reveal himself to me. "So," I said, "all I have to do is wait until I am so desperate that I begin to tell myself that he has shown himself to me and eventually, through self-fulfilling prophecy, become so deranged that I actually come to believe it." I broke out in a loud laugh and continued. "And even if I could convince myself through years of self-abuse and conditioning, the faith would still be false and I would still be destined for hell." The laugh turned into a cathartic cry. I had finally disencumbered myself of religion.

The flame had grown a little dimmer now in the cathedral, and I wondered if it would ever die out. What has kept it alive for so long? After years of thought, we are no closer to proving the existence of God. All the arguments — cosmological, teleological, ontological, moral — merely derive God as a necessity from false premises and circular claims. Yet the flame burns on a brittle wick. *Adam, 19, was born in Nashville and attends the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. He enjoys reading and writing poetry, short stories, aphorisms, novels and philosophical treatises.*

**Second place essay**  
*Continued from the previous page*

The First Cause argument has several other fallacies, but these are the most blatant. Casting aside my religious belief was not a slow or painful process, as it is for someatheists. I was raised in a secular household, so I was not punished for questioning the validity of a 2,000-year-old sacred text. If children were taught to value logic and skepticism rather than obedience and blind credulity, religion would quickly become obsolete. This is a goal we should strive toward, since dogmatic religious belief is one of the primary causes of

hatred and suffering in the world. In order to guarantee the survival of the human race in a postnuclear age, we must be willing to confront hard truths, instead of surrounding ourselves with comfortable lies. We must abandon ancient superstitions, and rely on our own intelligence in creating a more rational, humane world. *Alex, 20, lives in Hilton Head Island, S.C., but spends most of the year in Tempe, where he is studying mathematics at Arizona State University. He is a member of the ASU chapter of the Secular Student Alliance and enjoys reading classic literature and swimming with the local masters team.*



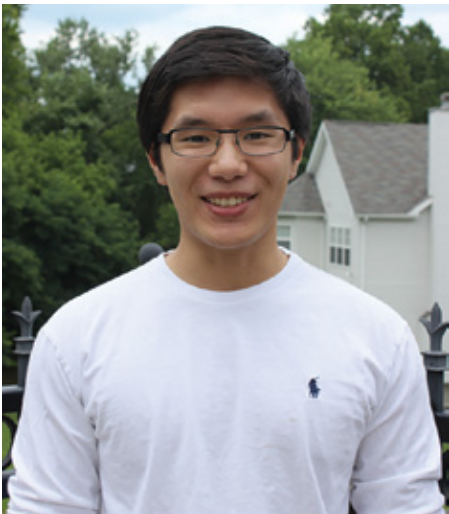
FIFTH PLACE (TIE)

When it comes to beliefs, it’s a parent who decides

FFRF awarded Karl \$500.

BY KARL YEE

I was raised by parents who, during my childhood, were trying to find their religious identity. They were both born in China and exposed to some Buddhist teachings, although not enough for them to declare themselves Buddhists. Eventually, they immigrated to Maryland. Moving to America, a largely Christian nation, was a major culture shock for my parents; they did not expect religion to be so influential here. Given the ubiquity of Christian churches in America, it is no surprise that my parents began exploring Christianity. As a child, I had no choice but to follow my parents’ religious journey. At the height of their involvement with Christianity, I was enrolled in a Sunday school. My enrollment was short-lived, as my parents decided to turn back to Buddhism. While I did not understand the concept of religion, I knew that they made a change and chose one thing over another. I simply could not rationalize their decision; I could only follow in their footsteps. Despite choosing Buddhism, my parents did not become religiously active and only practiced quietly. Parents are undeniably the major force behind spreading religion. Children



Karl Yee

rarely find religion on their own; their parents introduce them to religion. According to research by the National Study of Youth and Religion, 82 percent of children raised by highly religious parents were religiously active as young adults. In contrast, only 1 percent of teens raised by nonreligious parents were religiously active as young adults. Parents are authority figures, and children do not know any better but to listen and follow their parents uncritically. If my parents stayed with Christianity, I have little doubt that I would have become a Christian. My confusion with religion continued to grow throughout middle school. My middle school was a melting pot

of religions — there were Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Mormon students. Ironically, the exposure to many different religions is what caused me to question the entire institution. I could not help but to wonder why there were so many religions and different deities. Mormons believe in their worldview just as much as Catholics believe in theirs. What makes one religion more likely to be true or valid than the other? Is there evidence to support the claims theists make? I asked my middle school friends why they believed in their religions, but their answers were unsatisfactory. The most common answer was a reference to a religious text, like the bible or the Quran. Children are taught to believe extraordinary claims — such as turning water into wine — without any concrete evidence, leaving them unable to justify their “beliefs.” The problem with teaching children religion is that they are taught what to think instead of how to think. Using a religious text as evidence is nonsensical because theists try to support claims made in a book with the same book, a prime example of circular reasoning. Religious texts are not accepted as credible or authoritative because theists have yet to satisfy the burden of proof. For example, many of the stories in the bible are purely fantastical, and there

is no credible evidence supporting supernatural events that happen in the bible. Some theists try to shift the burden of proof on atheists, but atheists, by definition, do not make any claims about the existence of deities. A common misconception and important distinction to make is that atheism is not the belief that deities do not exist, but rather the lack of belief in deities. Theists, conversely, claim the existence of a deity and are thus responsible for satisfying the burden of proof. No religion is more valid than another, as no theist has provided the necessary evidence to substantiate his or her claims. Despite the lack of evidence, religion remains a powerful force throughout the world. Unfortunately, many children are born into their parents’ religion and are taught that questioning their faith is a sin, creating an endless cycle of credulous believers. The primary mechanism through which religion continues to survive is indoctrination. If religion were as infallible as some theists claim, there would be no need to involve children with religion while they are still impressionable. *Karl, 19, was born in Silver Spring, Md., and is attending the University of Maryland, College Park. His interests include solar energy, control systems and electrophysics.*

FIFTH PLACE (TIE)

Education led to my deconversion

FFRF awarded Elias \$500.

BY ELIAS RODRIGUEZ

“All I know is that I know nothing.” This phrase encompasses how I felt during my deconversion from Catholicism to atheism. As an immigrant from Mexico, I did not have any choice in the religion that I would be brought up in, but I did have a choice about whether to continue believing in it. Although my deconversion happened slowly and over the course of a couple of years, there were three main stages to it: breaking away from the church; moving away from a theistic mindset; and embracing the agnostic-atheist position. As a child in Mexico, I went to church every Sunday with my family. Church was such an integral part of my upbringing that I was actually allowed to deliver part of the sermons during Mass. It was around the age of 15, now living in the United States and working on my education toward Confirmation, that I began having a crisis of faith. Until that point, I had been raised to believe that the church was a beacon of morality and that the pope, the central figure of the church, was infallible as God’s spokesperson. As I learned more about history, I discovered many of the atrocities that had been committed by the church in the past, including the Inquisition and the imprisonment of Galileo. These facts, along with evidence of systematic cover-ups of pedophilia by priests, led me to abandon the church completely.



Elias Rodriguez

I became enamored with philosophy once I entered high school. It was during this time that I learned of many philosophical arguments that would help with my deconversion. The most notable was Pascal’s Wager. Ironically, this argument is used by theists to highlight the supposed pitfalls of atheism. However, I did not see it that way. Pascal’s Wager states that it is better to hedge your bets and pray to God because if he does exist, then you won’t go to hell. This argument helped push me toward atheism for two reasons. First, this wager states subtly that God is more concerned about how much praise is given to him rather than the good deeds performed by people. Second, it commits the fallacy of assuming the Judeo-Christian god is the only possible god to exist, but does not take into account that this very argument could be used for a myriad of other deities. My final step toward deconversion came when I read Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*. I had always had a deep love for science, but it was after reading this book that I understood just how

SIXTH PLACE

Time to put away childish things

FFRF awarded Adrick \$400.

BY ADRICK TENCH

My deconversion from religion was gradual, creeping in like that process by which a man looks into the mirror one day with the sad realization that he has left his youth behind him, though he knows not when. In my case, the realization was indeed a sad and painful one. Believing that the creator of the universe is just and merciful, that he loves you, that your death will not be the end but that you will live happily again with those you love in a world free of pain, is no small thing to part with. While I cannot remember when precisely I lost my faith, I can at least remember the answer I gave to one of my friends who was curious how I had gone from being so devoted to Christianity to being so completely separated from it. “Well, I had my doubts,” I said, “and I suppose when you have doubts, you can either stifle them, or follow them wherever they lead you. And I followed mine.” Follow them I did. From the writings of the “Four Horsemen” (Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens), the countless debates and videos to be found on YouTube, and the online rants of “militant atheists,” I flooded myself with the thoughts and arguments of freethinkers. It became remarkable how little water the arguments of Christian apologetics held in comparison.



Adrick Tench

I doubt now that if I had not been predisposed by my parents’ teachings to believe in the words of the bible that I ever should have taken them seriously. To my mind, the most important argument for atheism is simply the lack of a good argument for theism. What is difficult for many believers is simply realizing that the burden of proof lies with them, and they have none. What would impress me most would be to find believers who were dragged kicking and screaming into belief in the same way so many of us are dragged into unbelief. There could be no surer test that they had tried their hardest to disprove their religion, but were in the end still taken in by the force of its arguments and its evidence. Where might I find such a person? Surely only among the ranks of freethinkers. I have come to look back on religion as a slave looks back on a set of manacles. What was at one time so uplifting became, with time and reflection, horrid. For every beautiful thought that religion gives to the readily faithful mind of a child, it must first give far more untruth, far more aversion to the true freedom of the mind, and, in all too many cases, far more fundamental misanthropy. Some people are told that their judgments are



# College essay honorable mentions

The following college essays earned honorable mention status. Each author was awarded \$200 by FFRF. These essays have been edited for space.

## I’m an atheist at a Catholic university

BY CHEYENNE BARGER

When I was a child, raised in conservative rural Pennsylvania, my mother taught me the basics of Wicca. I was raised to be attuned to nature, celebrating holidays based upon the turn of the seasons and believing in two gods. These beliefs did not sit well with my predominantly Christian classmates, and, in second grade, my best friend told me that she would never speak to me again because I wasn’t Christian. This was my first negative experience with religion, and was the first event marking my progression to atheism.



Cheyenne Barger

As I got older and learned more about how scientists believe life as we know it came to be, my belief in gods and infallible creation diminished. By ninth grade, I had completely abandoned any belief in gods. However, I rarely spoke of my nonbelief, fearing more reactions like the one I received in second grade.

Despite being an atheist, I decided to attend a private Catholic university, determining that the opportunities it could give me as a biology major overrode my trepidation about being in a religious environment. Interestingly enough, while at this university, my atheism flourished. I was surrounded by people who seemed genuinely interested in my nonbelief. I had many intellectually stimulating conversations with my Catholic classmates, my resident ministers, and other religious people about how my views differed from theirs, and how they were at times quite similar. In one of my classes, we discussed “new atheism,” and I was introduced to the ideas of Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. These conversations and my research into these famous atheists helped develop my convictions, and I feel they have made me a better atheist.

*Cheyenne, 19, is from Parker, Pa., and attends Gannon University, where she is a member of the Secular Student Alliance. She enjoys writing short stories, playing fantasy video games, and restoring furniture.*

## Loving despite Zombie Jesus

BY WILLIAM M. GARDNER

I am an atheist, despite the harshness that word inspires, because I have always been more attached to people than ideas. I am a skeptic because I love; and when I love I don’t need a god to inform my desire to be good to my fellow humans.

A novelist by hobby, I tell stories and understand the telling of them; in this understanding can be unraveled the biology of the fantastical and the mythic.



William M. Gardner

A good little Catholic boy, I went to Sunday school and religion class where they would delight me with tales of a boy who slew a giant and a kindly man who overcame death. An undying god was a fascinating tale to a quizzical mind that toyed and

tinkered with every other story he came across. This boy put the Lord of the Rings’ hobbits into his notebook with the Star Wars’ Jedi, and his teachers applauded his cleverness. But when he detailed how Frodo met the zombie-god named Jesus, the teachers scolded. I knew something was wrong.

If a god were a truth, why the panicked defensiveness? If his messages of love were so important, why was there so much hate in the world, so many people terrorizing each other in his name? And if god is the one true god, why do people who call him by different names hate each other?

Humanity is a delicate, complex creature, but you are just like me. You don’t deserve a god, dear neighbor, simply because you hope for one, but you do deserve, and have earned, my admiration and love.

We all want to reach out and be connected, especially in this modern era when it’s harder and harder to deny the evidence that there isn’t anything more. I love you because you try, you need to hold onto something. I love you despite Zombie Jesus.

*William, 24, attends the University of Delaware and plans- to earn a degree in linguistics.*

## The reality of believing the imaginary

BY SYD GETTIER

My questioning of organized religion started relatively young and was likely a response to my deeply religious grandmother.

My grandmother and her friends believe that there are certain people who are “seers,” meaning that they can see and communicate the wishes of angels. My grandmother claims to speak in tongues.



Syd Gettier

When we were children, we periodically helped my grandmother empty and then refill dozens of water jugs with which she lined her basement stairs. I always assumed that it was preparation for a hurricane or some other sort of natural disaster, but my father later told me that she did this to be ready for the apocalypse when Jesus Christ inevitably decided to wreak havoc upon the sinners and nonbelievers. Even as a middle schooler, these things seemed pretty wacky to me. After all, I had witnessed a group of adults elatedly bathing in a nonexistent fountain in my grandmother’s living room because their god compelled them to do so.

Now, as a college student, I major in psychology and have taken a few sociology and philosophy classes. I like to think about cognition and what motivates people to behave in the ways they do. From this perspective, I am able to understand religion’s appeal. It is in our nature to want answers.

Religion is, above all, a social tool and humans crave social interaction. I can see the appeal that religious groups offer to those who are young and impressionable, or those of any age who are looking for a place to belong. The desire for human connection is one of the most powerful psychological drives known to humankind, and when you consider the continued popularity of organized religion from this perspective, maybe it isn’t so difficult to understand why otherwise intelligent people are willing to jump into imaginary fountains.

*Syd, 21, lives in Darlington, Md., and attends Notre Dame of Maryland University in Baltimore. She is interested in social justice issues such as gender equality, LGBTQ rights and the Black Lives Matter movement.*

## Atheism, deep in the heart of Texas

BY SAVANNAH FLUSCHE

As an atheist and freethinker, life in the trenches of the Bible Belt has been an intimate journey in an abrasive environment.

My first introduction to religion and God was through the Christian day care I began attending at the age of 5. I came to realize that these stories were taken literally by many, and were “not ALL literally true, but mostly” for many others. I’ve come to understand biblical interpretation as the art of cherry picking.



Savannah Flusche

I then attended public schools, yet the teachers were unashamedly religious and the student body mostly aggressively Christian. An experience I still remember clearly was during the fifth grade when my best friend, a rare bird and fellow atheist, was casually talking about how she did not attend church. A classmate was utterly disturbed and began to explain how bad it was that she was absent on Sunday. As this exchange unfolded, I found a disturbing new wrinkle to the loneliness that blanketed me. I did not feel safe or comfortable in my community.

As an atheist, it is important to me that other like-minded atheist, secular, or agnostic thinkers understand that they are not alone. Books, podcasts, public interviews, even the perhaps counterproductive debate format offer those who are unsure of where and how to step next to know that they welcome. We must reduce the stigma and show that a freethinker’s arms are wide open, that you don’t have to be afraid of someone because they do not accept Bronze Age ethics as infallible.

For a time, we are borrowing this planet from those who will come later. Let us make sure we are returning it better than we received. We speak for Earth. I implore that we must be able to think freely.

*Savannah, 23, grew up in Dallas and attends Texas Woman’s University in Denton, Texas. Her interests include science, animals and animal rescue, roller skating, history, podcasts and reading.*

## Empathetic skepticism

BY CAMILLE SANCHEZ

As a child in a Filipino Catholic household, I unquestioningly accepted Catholicism as truth. I did not know there were other ways of living.

In fifth grade, I transferred from my Christian school to a public school, where I was exposed to people of different walks of life and different belief systems. As I made friends who were neutral toward religion, Catholicism became more and more unappealing. When I studied philosophy in high school, I began to confront my beliefs.



Camille Sanchez

I learned that in contemporary times, religion is not so much a source of truth as it is a source of social interaction; religious ritual is identical with social ritual. This is especially true for Filipinos in America. The common sentiment is: If you are Filipino and you don’t go to church, what kind of Filipino are you?



However, I do not consider religion necessary to be a good person. I believe that religious morals are simply outward manifestations of something that is innate to people. Followers of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and many other religions strive for the same ideals — peace and love. And more often than not, these ideals are attained by relinquishing selfish desires, by serving others, by being empathetic and compassionate, and by living modestly rather than excessively.

Additionally, all the meaningful things I have done did not require religion; rather, they required empathy. I did not volunteer at homeless shelters because God called me to do so — I volunteered because I knew what it was like to be hungry. I did not create art dealing with topics of body image and mental health because of God — I created art because I knew what it was like to suffer alone and wanted to reach out to others. Sometimes, followers of religion forget to be empathetic and exert their subjective perspectives onto others without considering different perspectives. Sometimes, followers are blinded by their religion’s teachings. At least I question — perhaps I suffer because of the uncertainty and insecurity, but that is better than to thoughtlessly accept whatever I am told.

*Camille, 19, was born in Rockford, Ill., and attends Pomona College. She is interested in illustration, community service, social justice, blogging and writing about her thoughts.*

## Standing up for freethinking

BY FALLON ROWE

“Oh, you’re an atheist? I hate atheists.”

I stood speechless in the university cafeteria. I hardly knew my dorm neighbor who had joined me for lunch, yet he already made a sweeping generalization of my entire community. It was my first semester at Utah State University, an overwhelmingly religious public university made up mostly of Mormons. Although I grew up as an atheist in a Mormon-dominated environment in Idaho, I was unaccustomed to the exclusion and judgment I would, and still do, experience in Utah. (To clarify, not every Mormon treated me this way, and some devout members would become my best friends.)



Fallon Rowe

For as long as I’ve identified as an atheist, I’ve tried to stand up for freethinking principles. It’s tough to remember a moment when I realized I was atheist because my father raised me to come to my own conclusions about the world and religion. I was “Fallon Rowe: Secular Scientist,” thrust into no church, indoctrinated with no religion, and given freedom to decide on my own, something for which I’m forever grateful.

Growing up, I refused to say “under God” during the Pledge of Allegiance. I participated in a movement in high school to distribute a banned book after a student’s relative called it “anti-Christian.” In my college English class, I chose atheism as my writing topic for the semester, continually surprising my Mormon-dominated peers with my alternative perspectives. These experiences as a young nonbeliever have made me the young woman I am today.

To those who frown on atheism, such as my neighbor that first semester of college, I advocate that they open their minds and examine where their negative views of atheism are rooted. I argue that atheists rarely, if ever, incite violence, and note how most atheists are tolerant and educated individuals with valuable perspectives. Those who dislike atheism should take the time to get to know an atheist; they may be pleasantly surprised by the intelligent discussion and meaningful ideas we share with them.

*Fallon, 19, lives in Meridian, Idaho, and is attends Utah State University. She enjoys rock climbing, mountaineering, hiking, playing the fiddle and reading.*

## Embracing complexity of thought

BY MANON VAN MIL

I read a lot. I read the news. I have read Terry Pratchett’s *Small Gods*. I even read into the patriarchal structure of Catholicism. And when I read, my vocabulary grows so that I can call the problems I notice by name: racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and unsound arguments, willful ignorance, corruption, conspiracy.



Manon van Mil

It took me longer to realize that dogmatic thinking comes in shapes and sizes other than organized religion, and that confirmation bias is real, big and scary. For example, I am studying to become an educator, so I was interested to learn that teachers’ expectations of students significantly and importantly impact their achievement. Being aware of confirmation bias means that we nonbelievers must mind our thinking in order to call ourselves freethinkers; otherwise, we support our theories on the same shaky grounds as religious folk compiling so-called evidence of the supernatural.

Furthermore, a worldview that is responsive to diversity and complexity must be shaped by one’s consideration of evidence.

I graduated high school devoutly atheist, but not yet a freethinker, a reaction to my circumstances in a Catholic institution instead of a thoughtful response. When well-intentioned, well-read folks argued for religion, I shut down their arguments with more strength than flexibility. Thankfully, I have learned how to challenge others’ dogmatism and my own.

Although I did not consciously decide to become a freethinker, I choose to be proud of that identity every day. It is an honest, open-minded way of honing a worldview that affords many benefits and costs me nothing — least of all my curiosity.

*Manon, 24, grew up in Ontario and attends Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. She is an avid reader, writer, knitter and powerlifter, and is also passionate about popular education and cognitive science.*

## Living by the Golden Rule

BY ELIZABETH TUROVSKY

I have been a nonbeliever for as long as I can remember, as I was raised by parents who are also nonbelievers. From a very young age, my father, who is an avid reader, took me to the library on weekends to pick out books to borrow.

My mother often joked that instead of going to church or temple on weekends, like many of our friends, our weekly pilgrimage to the library served as a place of spiritual renewal. Instead of worshipping a supernatural being, knowledge for the sake of knowledge was the essence of what was revered in our home.

Similarly, the idea that one should live a good and moral life, not because God commanded it, but because it’s the right thing to do, was very much espoused. I was brought up on the Golden Rule, as paraphrased by Hillel the Elder: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow.”

But it is not so with religion. Throughout the history



Elizabeth Turovsky

of humankind, religion was often a catalyst of much strife. From the Crusades to the Spanish Inquisition, to more modern conflicts in the Middle East, religious differences often led to death and destruction.

If God were an omnipotent and a just being concerned about the fate of individual humans, it’s unfathomable to me how God could allow such evils as the Holocaust to occur. If God is not concerned with the trials and tribulations of individual human beings, then organized religion is irrelevant.

I believe that as long as people behave in an ethical and moral fashion they fulfill their social contract with fellow humans, and don’t need to seek approval of the supernatural, as their reward is self-fulfillment and inner peace here on Earth.

*Elizabeth, 19, grew up in Scarsdale, N.Y., and attends Barnard College. She is interested in books, politics and women’s rights.*

## Choosing reason over religion

BY CAMILLE KAISER

As a scientist, my mother served as a definitive figure in my avoidance of the organized religion that so many of my friends fell into.

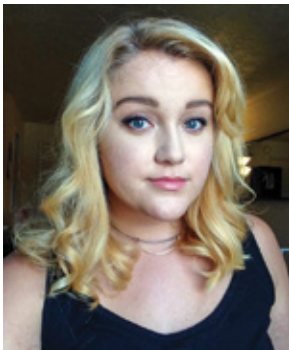
My mother would often explain things to me in ways I could understand. When I asked about bible stories, she would start off by saying “Well, honey, Christians believe . . .” and then she would go on to tell me some crazy-sounding story. The disclaimer preceding the story didn’t affect the “morals” that some take from these stories, but I recognized evolutionary impossibilities and felt shock at the violence in some of stories.

When I started high school, my mother and I began participating in a community of freethinkers. The crowd was a bit older than at a lot of the churches I’d been to, but I recognized the same sense of community. At the same time, I began volunteering for various service projects, and these situations also promoted a sense of community.

With growing numbers of people who are unaffiliated with religion, the opportunity to participate in secular communities to improve people’s lives could attract people of all ages.

While the religious may suffer through sacrifice or take comfort in imagining untold riches or happiness in their “next life,” I believe we should help others, and take and spread joy in this life — the only one we have. If we make positive influences in bettering the world and those in it, then the world will be a better place even after our lives are over. Indeed, there cannot be a more “heavenly” feeling than being part of a community that is working to make the world a better place.

*Camille, 19, grew up in Mesa, Ariz., and attends the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. She enjoys family, baking, her 1970s music collection and speaking Spanish.*



Camille Kaiser

## My faith was built on circular reasoning

BY JAMES HARDER

Growing up as a conservative Christian, most of my ideas were not really my own, but rather statements by people who could ardently defend what was already deemed as the “right” way of thinking.

The change came about later in my young adulthood, after watching a documentary on the *Kitzmiller v. Dover* trial. When I saw the real arguments for and against my previous position of intelligent design put forward in a honest and objective trial, I immediately came to recognize that my whole system of thinking had been built on a deference to authority.

After my rejection of fundamentalism, I became more



curious as to the grounds that my faith in God stood on. My beliefs were further eroded after a group of Mormons visited my Christian non-Mormon friends. I accepted a copy of the book of the Mormon and went through it, hoping to prove the ridiculousness of the Mormon faith to the missionaries the next time we should meet. Going through the book, though, I noticed a disturbing pattern. The entire faith was built on circular reasoning. The holy book is true because its God says so. God says so, because it is revealed in the holy book. My own faith was no different.

Eventually I had to ask myself, what sort of evidence would lead me to believe in my own religion, if I hadn't been raised with any assumptions. This process of examination eliminated the Old Testament from being able to stand on its own proof. All I had left was the occurrence of the resurrection. And my inquiry into that "miracle" was the final nail in the coffin. No Christian apologist could made a good enough case for the resurrection without circular reasoning or probability methods that would make any professional statistician or historian cringe. My religion was founded upon grounds which were no more impressive than the dozens of religions that I believed were false.

*James, 23, was born in Regina, Saskatchewan, but spent most of his childhood in Hamilton, Mont. He is enrolled in Athabasca University's online program. He enjoys reading and strength training*

# Comfortable lie doesn't beat truth

BY AIDAN SORGE

*Author's note: The lack of capitalization of religious terms is deliberate.*

I have always been a logical person. As a toddler, I got into a shouting argument with a fellow preschooler over the fact that he was playing with dinosaurs and toy people at the same time. I found that to be offensive as it was not the "truth."

In elementary school, my best friends were members of a charismatic church, so I attended some youth groups with them. I liked to go there with them, the music and games were fun and, most importantly, there were always great snacks. But then, one day, the priest started to mock Carl Sagan. I became really uncomfortable and wondered if anyone was thinking about what the priest was saying. I no longer went with them to church. Mocking Sagan meant ignoring the truth.

And then there was a history class: the Crusades and the Dark Ages. I learned that scientific progress was banned by the catholic church. Truth again was being squashed and I began to evolve away from a nonchalant attitude about religion towards seriously considering its drawbacks.

The final straw that moved me from apathy to atheism was observing the ways power in the church is used



Aidan Sorge

to hurt and control others. The vatican is filled with obscenely expensive art and objects covered in gold. Why not liquidate and help the poor? Televangelists con others out of their hard-earned money in the name of god. Religion speaks of helping the poor and downtrodden, while fighting equality, condemning the different, using loopholes in the law to avoid prosecution for abuse and killing in the name of god.

Sagan once said, "When Kepler found his long-cherished belief did not agree with the most precise observation, he accepted the uncomfortable fact. He preferred the hard truth to his dearest illusions, that is the heart of science." Unfortunately, for many, the loss of the comfortable lie would be too painful for them to face.

*Aidan, 20, lives in Albuquerque, N.M., and attends Arizona State University. He enjoys the interaction of science and technology with society and its ethical implications. He is also interested in martial arts.*

# Stopped believing in Santa, then God

BY ALEXIS SERRA

When I was 9, I noticed the handwriting on the Christmas presents was the same as my mother's. I said something, and she made up a lie, "Santa asks me to help him with the presents sometimes."

It was then that I became fed up with the silly answers my parents were giving me about this mystical man who lives in the coldest place on Earth. I was scared not to believe in Santa because I was worried I wouldn't get any more presents. But my parents loved me, and I was a good kid, they weren't going to stop giving me presents because I knew the truth. So I outright told them that I didn't believe in Santa Claus anymore.

It was also when I was 9, raised as a Catholic Latina, that I stopped believing in God, too. Growing up, living with my parents and my grandma, I was made to be scared of not believing in God. I received my First Communion, and I had absolutely no idea what was going on, just that if I didn't do it, and if I didn't pray every night, God would hate me.

Then I just stopped praying, and nothing happened. I did not believe in God anymore, just like I did not believe in Santa. But I went years pretending that I did believe because I was worried what my family would say or do.

I worked hard for my grades, and when school became tough, it boggled me when my peers said, "I have to pray to get an A in this class." I never understood this because I took pride in myself for getting that "A" because I didn't waste my time praying; I was studying instead. With the exception of the support of my parents and friends, my accomplishments are thanks to me, not because they were handed to me by God.



Alexis Serra

It was not in God's plan for me to be in college, it was my plan. I put myself here through studying and taking on leadership roles. I am where I am today because of my hard work.

*Alexis, 20, attends Drexel University and works as a marketing assistant at Morgan Lewis & Bockius. She is a member of Alpha Kappa Psi business fraternity and enjoys coffee, running and reading about American history.*

# Questions are the cure for religion

BY JONATHAN ORTIZ

Growing up as a Catholic, I remember how shocked I was when I first learned that there are more than 50,000 sects of Christianity alone, and that there are hundreds of religions. I started asking myself, why is it that I am a Roman Catholic and not a Protestant? Why is it that I am a Christian and not a Muslim? Why is it that I so readily reject Aega, a Greek goddess of war, Corus, a Roman god of the wind, and so many others, but make an exception for mine?

What convinced me, in due time, was something Richard Dawkins once said: "We are all atheists about most of the gods that societies have ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further." Eventually I took my crucifix off for the last time and ever since then I have been an agnostic atheist.

All religion is — and ever was — is our attempt to explain what we do not understand.

It is only human nature, but just because it is our nature does not mean it is right to conjure up falsehoods. When I encounter theists who ask me about what happens after death, or how the universe began, it is this point that I raise: We may not understand something now, and perhaps we never will, but that does not exclude a natural explanation, and if our past is any indication, things we think to be unexplainable — supernatural — always end up with natural explanations.

There is another important argument that I think many theists do not often encounter, and it is that they almost always have the same religion as their parents. Humans are not born with a belief in God: They must learn it, and they do so from their parents, so if you were born to different parents you would believe different things. I ask them: Would you be a Christian if you were born in 3,000 B.C. in the time of the Egyptians? If you would not be one back then, why should you be one today? I asked myself this very same question, and I'm freer and happier today because of it.

*Jonathan, 18, was born in Birkenfeld, Germany, and spent most of his life in that country. He attends the University of Florida.*



Jonathan Ortiz

## Fifth place essay

*Continued from page 14*

useful and powerful science and the scientific method could be. Removing feelings and biases and relying on testable evidence was the best way to find the truth. I also learned more about genetics and evolution and I realized just how imperfectly beautiful the world around me was. I realized that the evidence used to support God failed to pass scientific scrutiny. I believe strong evidence is required whenever a falsifiable claim is made. Whenever someone asks me why I became an atheist, I always feel compelled to quote Christopher Hitchens in order to answer them. "That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence." Faith is subjective, scientific evidence is not.

My road to deconversion was long and mentally arduous, but I would not trade this experience for anything in the world. I have learned more in the past couple of years than I could have ever thought possible. However, all I know is that I know nothing. My experiences as a nonbeliever have led me to look at my life and the world in a completely different manner. I feel empowered knowing that I was able to reach this decision by asking questions and by challenging my belief system. I feel humbled knowing that there is still so much left to learn about the world and that I have the rest of my life to learn as much as I can.

*Elias, 22, lives in Frisco, Texas, and attends the University of Texas at Dallas. He enjoys playing the guitar, running long distance races, and researching philosophical and scientific concepts.*

## Sixth place essay

*Continued from page 14*

inadequate, that they must not doubt, and therefore they esteem blind faith as a virtue; others are told that they are wretched and much in need of saving, and therefore they esteem God's mercy.

If, in weaker moments, I still look back longingly on the false comfort provided by the assurance of an afterlife, or of a final justice that would right the wrongs of this world, I would do well to remember the biblical words attributed to Paul: "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things." — 1 Corinthians 13:11.

*Adrick, 21, was born and raised in Louisville, Ky., and attends Northwestern*

*University in Evanston, Ill. He enjoys philosophy, music and tabletop RPGs (role-playing games).*

## RECRUIT A MEMBER

### Sample copies for \$2

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

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

Freedom depends upon freethinkers



## Letterbox

### Grateful for mother’s article on grieving

Julie Stahl’s article in the September issue was devastating, touching and helpful. I’m grateful that she felt motivated to write it, even in the midst of her grief.

**Kit Fry**  
**Alabama**

### Fighting fire with biblical fire

I frequently review LinkedIn and see a lot of proselytizing on the site. My pointing out that it’s inappropriate to use a professional networking site to further one’s religious fervor is met with remarks such as, “If you don’t like what you see, just scroll past it.”

So I’ve decided to comment on those religious promos I come across, such as one that thanked God as the giver of life, to which I commented: “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things. — Isaiah 45:7.”

Now that I’ve decided to fight fire with fire, I think I’ll enjoy using my *Skeptic’s Annotated Bible* to counter the incessant proselytizing on Linked-In as my way of asserting my right to be free from religion.

**Russ Collins**  
**Nevada**

### Thanks for restoring Ingersoll statue

I’d like to tell FFRF how much I appreciate your wonderful help in preserving the statue of Robert Green Ingersoll in Peoria, Ill., for future generations. Without Annie Laurie Gaylor and FFRF, it probably would not have happened in time to save the only completed statue of the Great Agnostic!

And another thank you to Dan Barker and all the staff at FFRF for the very important work you do every day to help preserve our freedoms, and reverse the tyranny of those who wish to enslave our minds.

**Ken Hofbauer**  
**Illinois**

### Young essay writers give hope for future

It is so gratifying to see so many bright young people (in Freethought Today) refusing to be chained to this shameful strain on civilization called religion.

I am an 83-year-old grandfather who is very happy to be associated with so many intelligent people through FFRF and Freethought Today. I am also happy to be in possession of the great book, *Women Without Superstition*, by Annie Laurie Gaylor, whom I had the pleasure of meeting several years ago at a convention in Portland.

I see the best hope for a more civilized world in people like the staff at FFRF and the bright young people who refuse to be a part of this scourge on humanity and those that lead their flocks into the world of make-believe, such as the ark park and other proselytizing enterprises.

I thank you all for the work that you do toward reason over myth and superstition.

**Fred Rakevich**  
**Washington**



### Happily married despite judge

I just wanted to drop you a line and say thank you for the support you showed to us and the efforts you put in to contacting the judge in Kentucky who did not marry us because we were atheists.

It was really nice and helpful to have the support of the FFRF community.

Once I have paid back the wedding and have some disposable income again, I will be donating to your organization to help others.

Here is a cute picture of us. By the way, this picture was taken while we were trying to take cute photos, but then “Sweet Caroline” came on and we got distracted.

**Mandy Heath**  
**Tennessee**

### Donation to help FFRF fight the good fight

Enclosed you will find my donation for 2016. Rather than specify a purpose, I leave it to your judgment about where it would be most effective.

I want to mention a few things that helped elicit this donation. I’ve been to Dan Barker’s presentations in Moscow, Idaho, and Pullman, Wash., and Freethought Today shows me that he visits many other places, too, often to encourage young people to become active in supporting freethought. The newspaper itself is a valuable resource for information about your activities and for what is going on in the non-theist world. I am proud to read about your billboard campaigns and other ways of advertising. I must say that the skill and determination you show in rebuking the incursion of religion into public schools makes me happy.

**Jim Wallis**  
**Idaho**

### Are most freethinkers left-handed?

I wonder how many freethinkers are left-handed. We as children are forced to learn to function in a right-handed world. Left-handers have to use reason in order to survive and function.

The tutor for King George IV of England forced him to use his right hand and he developed a stammer. To make up for that, do you think that’s why they drive on the left side of the road in England? Many of our presidents have been left-handed, including President Obama.

**Irene Stephenson**  
**California**

*Editor’s note: We’re sorry to report that Irene died in September. P.S. Anne Gaylor, FFRF’s principal founder, was a southpaw.*

### Proud Lifetime Member appreciates FFRF

I appreciate so much what Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor and the entire staff of FFRF do to keep church and state separate and to reduce the influence of religion in American society. Please keep it up!

I read your interesting news articles and essays via email and read the newspaper “religiously.” Andrew Seidel is one of my favorite writers. I even listen to an occasional podcast.

Today, via the FFRF website, I became a Lifetime Member. I’ve been thinking about it for a while and just decided that now is the right time.

I would be proud to see my name listed as a Lifetime Member of FFRF. What a wonderful organization the two of you (and Anne Nicol Gaylor) built!

**Gary Whittenberger**  
**Florida**

### A worthy reason to be a Life Member

Please find my check for \$1,000 for my upcoming membership renewal. I believe this entitles me to become a Lifetime Member.

I enjoy reading and hearing about your much-needed and good work you do with such diligence. Thank you so much for your dedication to this worthy cause.

I’m a proud member.

**Roger Busse**  
**California**

### Are all religions superstitions?

The definition of “supernatural” is something that is not explainable by the known forces or laws of nature. The definition of “superstition” is any belief that is inconsistent with known facts or rational thought.

Based on that, one must conclude that the supernatural is superstition, and that means that all religions are superstitions.

The definition of “faith” is an unquestioning belief in God or religion, and the word “unquestioning” is the most important because it assumes we can neither question God or religion.

Yet that is exactly what bible studies and sermons are for: to answer questions asked of priests or pastors. They have a vested interest in promoting their particular religion.

Religion may have done much charity work, but is that overwhelmed by its many wars?

**John Van Huizum**  
**California**

### No tax money for creation museum

I recently had the chance to visit with friends who are Christian creationists. They are nice people who are suffering from the human psychotic condition that afflicts a large percentage of the human population. This psychosis will never be adequately addressed without worldwide education and more equitable wealth distribution. But this will never happen. Therefore, I am resolved to FFRF’s practice of trying to prevent this psychosis from being proselytized to our vulnerable population segments. To that end, I do not want tax money to be collected for the construction of a creation museum. When a tax exemption is granted, the reality is that tax money is being collected for the exemption. This practice is corrupted by religious promotion of the public good to be in each sect’s idea if how reality, or lack thereof, appears to them. As every FFRF member knows, the final result is the promotion of religious psychosis on all other groups, religious or not.

Please look into the Institute for Creation Research and its 501(c)(3) status.

**George Dakin**  
**Wisconsin**

### Closeted atheist finally comes out

When I was 10 years old, I was sent to summer bible school. When the minister said there was creation, I asked, “Who created God?” He slapped my face and said, “Shut your mouth!”

I remained a closeted atheist the rest of my life. But no longer!

Thank you FFRF!

**Terence Ripmaster**  
**Florida**

### Last issue had great articles, news

Julie Stahl’s article provides the perfect response to those well-meaning believers who honestly, truly think their bromides will comfort us nonbelievers. I had to endure some of that — though not as intensely as Julie — when my brother and mother both died within days of each other in February 2014.

Your story about FFRF Staff Attorney Elizabeth Cavell’s stopping the movie “Woodlawn” from being shown in a Georgia public school reminded me of the similar movie “Facing the Giants,” which FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel kept out of a New Mexico school in 2013. Gosh, how many football-team-finds-God-and-wins films are there? And to think that “Woodlawn” apparently co-stars Sean Astin (what would his parents say?) and Jon Voight (what would his daughter say?)!

**Andrew C. Jones**  
**Michigan**

### Thanks for recognizing minority students

As a person of color, I am mightily pleased to see you recognize students from minority backgrounds, who face even more disadvantages than other freethinkers. The September issue will hopefully demonstrate to your membership that there is a big and untapped opportunity in reaching out to people of color.

**Tsee Lee**  
**New York**



Letterbox

Reading leads to loss of faith

I have researched and studied most of the major religions of this world and some of the minor religions. I have had a religious library of over 26 books, which I recently donated to a larger private library.

Few Christians have read the entire bible. They absorb what is presented or told to them. I still have about 17 notebooks I kept on my biblical readings.

Most church members fear reading about other religions. However, once you begin reading the histories of religions, you begin losing faith in just one. The more extensive your reading becomes, the less faith you have in the entire galaxy of faiths, doctrines, scriptures, gods and religions. Soon, you begin to think of this ensemble as nothing but consumer fraud that should be eliminated in the 21st century.

**Scott A. Hunter**  
Arizona

Why pray if God is all-knowing?

As a single mother of a child who is close to the age of Julie Stahl's son when he died, I completely understand her feelings of anger and frustration when the "well intentioned" attempted to ease her pain (when it seems they were really more interested in maintaining an appearance of being caring and helpful).

I think the same holds true when someone offers to pray for me or others when we are in crisis. What does "I'll pray for you" really mean? Apparently, they are offering to seek the help of God, but for what purpose? It can't be to call its attention to my troubles, because supposedly God is all-knowing. Therefore, I can only presume they are begging this deity to fix something, because it first needs to hear some groveling to take action.

Like Julie, I don't want or need the help of a deity who is so callous, nor do I need someone conducting useless rituals on my behalf. Instead, I would be grateful if someone did their best to learn about my needs, and if I didn't need their help at that time, graciously accepted the burden of feeling useless.

**Jan Heimlich**  
Texas

Humanists believe in love, doing good

Santa John knows everyone at FFRF has been good, so enclosed is my check for \$1,000 to become a Life Member.

My grandson asked me what it's like to be retired. I told him that every day is Sunday and I don't go to church. My bible is Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and I look forward to every issue of Freethought Today.

I was asked recently if I believed in God. My stock answer is to ask if they believe God is love. When they answer "yes," with my Santa smile I respond, "Well, I believe in love."

Who dares to say we atheists/agnostics are nonbelievers? We humanists believe in love and doing good for all.

As a secular humanist, I am enveloped with love for life. I have cancer and no fear. I don't believe in heaven, but just in case I'll take an extra pair of underwear.

**(Santa) John Fantz**  
California

Constitution's covenant protects all people

As a new member, I was fascinated by the article, "Reagan quote greeted GOP convention-goers," in the August issue.

For me, this so clearly captures the root problem between organized religions and civil governance.

Specifically, I refer to "All are free . . . to practice a faith or not at all . . . and act on their belief."

Our Constitution, as the national covenant between those who govern and those governed, clearly separates the two social conditions.

While Americans are free to practice their faith, the essential caveat is that it depends on the priority of legal governance.

Our laws are set so that the covenants serve all people, not just the composite majority of the vast numbers of cults, large or small.

The hypocritical absurdity is that the religious often demand freedoms to practice and act, while denying such rights to others due to their belief.

For example, when a government employee (a custodian of the covenant) denies the right to marry those who do not share her faith or personal belief, which competent supervisor would not fire this government employee on the spot?

Or, when government employees permit constructing symbols of a cult's icon on government (our) property, which judge would not have this illegal act corrected immediately?

**Harold Chanin**  
Florida

'Hope meter' rises with every issue

Every time I open a new edition of Freethought Today my "hope meter" spikes, from reading the fearless essays of young people across the country to the courage and vigilance of the legal work you pursue. Thanks for all your hard work.

**Dean Brown**  
Utah

Condolences aren't substitute for action

I was deeply moved by Julie Stahl's essay in the September issue, and wish to extend her my deepest sympathy. While I have not suffered the kind of personal tragedy she has, I have been offended by the religious tone of memorials for victims of 9/11 and other acts of Islamic terrorism, particularly when clerics extoll the wonders of the afterlife achieved by the victims, a fantasy that of course contributes mightily to the rationale for these criminal acts.

Also, the fatalism of religious condolences seems to act as a substitute for taking concrete action on gun control, traffic safety and other actions that might actually help reduce the frequency of untimely death.

**Zachary Snow**  
New York

Thanks to FFRF for all it does!

Thank you all for your tireless, excellent work. It makes me proud!

**Arnie Stenseth**  
South Dakota



Sharing the crank mail

*An unedited sampling of the mail we get here at FFRF shows that not everyone understands the separation of state and church, correct grammar or how to be a decent human being.*

**Freedom for religion. Pun intended:** Please investigate all members of the ffrf group. There have been numerous stabbings at churches and on the Ark. We all know that this group does not care ANYTHING about loved ones. Your children die...it's just science..they are in the ground..Nothing else. This group is way too ignorant to realize what is happening has already been explained. Are you happy that you are not giving your family a chance to become as ignorant as you? Thank you for all the killings and bullying...may your children endure the same as you FORCE on others. LOL as ya'll say. AND BY THE WAY...DO NOT SHOP FOR CHRISTMAS SALES AND TAKE OFF FOR CHRISTMAS...THIS BEHAVIOR SHOWS YOUR IGNORANCE AND BIAS. LEAVE THE SALES FOR CHRISTMAS PRESENTS. WORK FOR THOSE THAT WANT TO SPEND TIME WITH THEIR CHILDREN AT CHRISTMAS. Again do not take off at Christmas and do not get in the way of Christmas shoppers. Your kids do not get Christmas presents ...lol ignorant — *Jay Beecher*

**Frivilous npnsense:** Your organization is engaging in frivolous nonsense by filing a law suit against Lehigh County ... If the people collaborating with you are recent arrivals in Lehigh County how dare they be offended and seek to destroy the historic roots of our county ... I suppose you with sit back and approve should ISIS take over our county and demand that men wear beards and females wear Muslim regalia... And behead anyone that continues to be an infidel or make them pay a special tax or fee to stay alive... My family has lived in Lehigh County since its beginnings and before ... So don't tread on us ... or anyone in Lehigh County by forcing higher taxes to pay for your frivolous amd machievous law suit. — *Dennis Pearson*

**removal of cross:** You people are the reason the world is the way it is today. You want to sue just to make money to support your bullsh\*t causes. A cross in the Lehigh County Seal comes from the history of this county. Although I disagree with some of Lehigh Counties ways of resolving issues, stop trying to take more money out of the taxpayers pockets and earn money any other organization would..... not by suing to get money for your very LAME and CHILDISH organization. Raise money through members like other REAL organizations. You can all go to HeLL — *Scott Haas*

**Freedom:** ONE NATION UNDER GOD. IN GOD WE TRUST. THIS NATION WAS FOUND-ED ON RELIGIOUS BELIEFS. DON'T LIKE IT GET THE FUCK OUT OF THE USA. THE ONLY THING YOU PEOPLE DON'T TAKE CREDIT FOR, IS THE INVENTION OF THE WHEEL. — *Roy Caravenga*

**Congratulation:** Description: 11 year girl killed by dad. Get the felon out of jail while relatives cheer. Shootings ...yay..just what this ffrf group loves. Congrats for being bullies. Aren't you proud of going against good people and being too ignorant and scared to go against the

satanism after school clubs. Appreciate your ignorance screwing this country even more than all your loving criminals have. Pat yourselves on the backs (or wherever you pat yourselves) you are effectively responsible for these kids getting killed. The parents of most of these kids must be in your bully group ...not even a tear for killing their own kids. Congrats! — *Dave Conner*

**prayer in public schools:** Unlike what you lie-beral communist traitors say, students and teachers DO have the right to pray in public schools if they so wish to! People like you are what's wrong with our country and bring about God's wrath upon our nation. When Trump gets elected, will you scum be leaving our country!? I sure hope so!!! — *Lester Rees*

**well I want to take a min to say fuck you:** your company is almost a big a piece of shit as Barry Marshall Davis AKA Barry Soetoro or B Hussian Obama — *Jeff Skinner*

**Satans work:** Keep doing satans work and you will be rewarded, you folks will not need grills to cook your meat as you will be the meat andlucifers grill is hot. — *George Henson*

**Trigg:** I'm a concerned citizen that hates fucking fags like you trying to mess with the 10 commandments. Why don't you go fuck your dog like you have been doing and wait til your time to rot in hell where you belong fucking in-bred trash. Stay the FUCK out of ky. U understand? — *Robert Merry*

**Ashamed:** checked your site doing some routine research Your site although perhaps well-equipped and well versed, is a blasphemy! You people even went as far to quote the bible and Christ himself in your works to further your causes for arguments of separation of church and state? I'm sorry but our country is in disrepair would you like to blame the churches or the states? — *Richard Hart*

**Trigg Co.:** You people are assholes! People like you are the reason sooo many people are being murdered in this country. Some belief in things unseen is exactly what we need to straighten this country out!!!! Fuck off!!!! — *Lisa Dawes*

**Include FFRF In Your Estate Planning**

Arrange a bequest in your will or trust, or make the Freedom From Religion Foundation the beneficiary of an insurance policy, bank account or IRA. It's easy to do. For related information (or to request a bequest brochure), please phone Annie Laurie Gaylor at (608) 256-8900.

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

*Freedom Depends on Freethinkers*



# Black Collar Crime Blotter

Compiled by Bill Dunn

## Arrested / Charged

**Torace D. Weaver, 37, Dayton, OH:** Murder, involuntary manslaughter, felonious assault, reckless homicide, obstructing official business and 2 counts of endangering children. Weaver, pastor of King of Glory Church, is charged with the November 2015 death of 2-year-old Stanley Thomas, who was his foster child. The death was ruled a homicide in March due to blunt force trauma.

First responders were called to the church on a report of a toddler not breathing. Weaver allegedly said he had fallen from a table. Injuries included bruises, scars and a large burn, according to the Montgomery County Prosecutor's Office.

Yvonne Letne, who lives across the street from the church, said she knows the family well. "I knew there was more to what they were telling us." *Source: Daily News, 8-27-16*

**Kenneth Adkins, 56, St. Simons Island, GA:** Child molestation and aggravated child molestation. Adkins, pastor of Greater Dimensions Christian Fellowship, which has 3 campuses, is charged with alleged incidents in 2010. On his Twitter account, he calls himself an author, pastor and business coach who "has become one of the most Respected Black Conservative Voices in America."

Adkins controversially tweeted after the Pulse nightclub shootings in June that gays got "what they deserve" in Orlando, FL. *Source: Brunswick News, 8-26-16*

**Steven Jesmer, 37, Manchester, NH:** Witness tampering and 3 counts of felonious sexual assault. Jesmer, pastor of The Dialogue Church, is accused of assaults on a 13-year-old girl in June in his church office.

Dawn Jesmer, his wife, told police he admitted skin-to-skin contact with the girl, an affidavit said. They have 2 daughters in grade school. *Source: Union Leader, 8-24-16*

**Derrick R. Trump, 28, Nokesville, VA:** Indecent liberties by a custodian. Trump, director of youth ministries at Greenwich Presbyterian Church, is accused of inappropriate contact with a 16-year-old girl at his home and at the church. He faces similar charges in another county. The church fired him in June. *Source: WRC News, 8-19-16*

**Jordan D. Baird, 25, Warrenton, VA:** 2 counts of indecent liberties by a custodian. Baird, youth pastor at Life Church in Manassas, is charged with sexually touching "on numerous occasions" a 16-year-old girl at the church between January and September 2015. His father is senior pastor. *Source: WUSA, 8-19-16*

**Kari Khalid, Saharanpur, India:** Assault against decency. Khalid, imam at a local mosque, is accused of inappropriate touching of a 7-year-old girl at the mosque and biting her on the face when she resisted. He fled after the girl's family filed a complaint. *Source: Times of India, 8-9-16*

**Christopher Santos, 31, Buckeye, AZ:** Voyeurism and surreptitious recording. Santos, a youth pastor at Grace Fellowship Church, is accused of putting his cellphone camera under the door of a Bealls Outlet's changing room and recording a 15-year-old girl who was only wearing underwear.

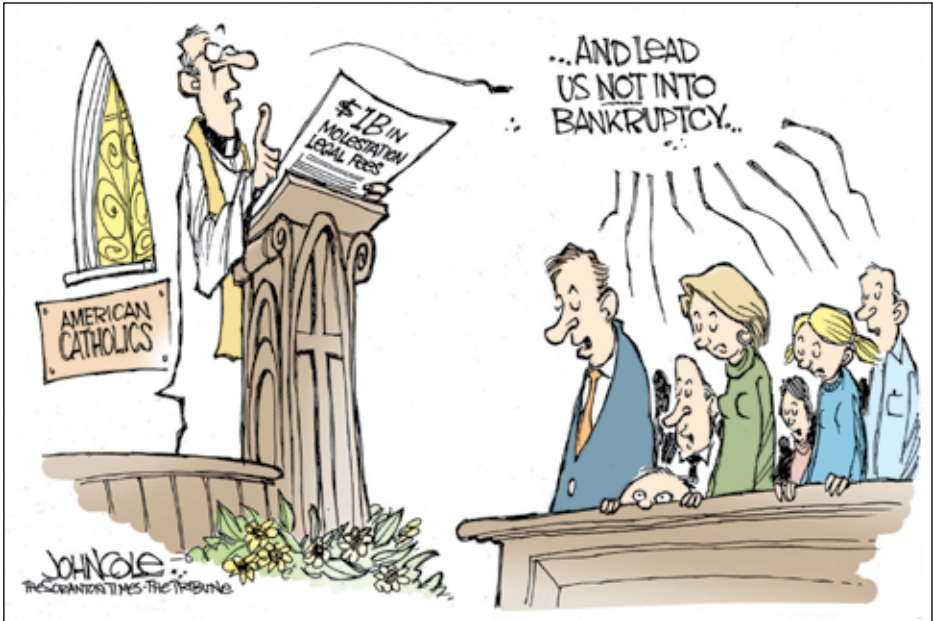
The girl's mother allegedly saw Santos bending over with his phone. She confronted him and her daughter grabbed the phone. *Source: KPNX, 8-9-16*

**Olawale Olabinwonu, 35, Igbogbo, Nigeria:** Attempting to sell a stolen vehicle. Olabinwonu, an administrative officer at Cherubim and Seraphim Church, was arrested while allegedly trying to sell a 2015 Nissan Sentra, which had been stolen at gunpoint at a hotel. The car was advertised for sale online, which led police to the suspect. *Source: Punch, 8-8-16*

**James C. Parkhurst, 56, Beaverton, OR:** Production of child pornography, stemming from a federal warrant in Denver. Parkhurst, a Kentucky native, is executive director of camp and retreat ministry programs for the Oregon-Idaho Conference of the United Methodist Church. When he was hired in April 2015, the conference said in a statement that "He enjoys spoiling his twin nephews on annual trips to our national parks in the West." *Source: Portland Patch, 8-5-16*

**James B. Briley, 54, Greenville, SC:** Criminal sexual conduct. Briley, campus pastor at Summit Church, allegedly fondled a 12-year-old girl's breasts and buttocks July 31 at his home.

Shauna Galloway-Williams, executive director of the Julie Valentine Center, which advocates for sexual assault victims, told a reporter Briley called the center's hotline to detail his alleged crime. She said he indicated during the call that others had urged him to report it. In her



20-year career, no one had ever called to report their own crime, she said. *Source: WYFF, 8-5-16*

**Colin Skeele, 30, Florham Park, NJ:** Enticement of a minor to engage in criminal sexual activity, distribution of child pornography and 2 counts of production of child pornography. He also faces state charges for allegedly having sex with an underage ambulance corps volunteer and viewing child pornography. Skeele taught at Catholic schools in 2009-10 and 2012. A spokesperson for the Diocese of Paterson verified he worked at Our Lady of Mount Carmel School in Boonton and St. Vincent DePaul School in Stirling.

It's alleged Skeele became Facebook friends in 2011 with a boy he met while working at a summer camp for boys in Hardwick and offered him money for sexually explicit photos. Prosecutors also alleged that in 2012, he communicated with people in the Philippines to produce live sex shows. Skeele allegedly requested specific sexual acts by girls and boys as young as 3. *Source: CBS New York, 8-5-16*

**David W. Farren, 41, Texarkana, TX:** 2nd-degree sexual assault, violation of mandatory reporting requirements and 3 counts of 1st-degree sexual assault. Farren's alleged misconduct with a girl who belonged to Anchor Church, where he is youth pastor, occurred at a residence when she was 16 and 17 years old.

Prosecutor Connie Mitchell said Farren has also headed youth groups at 3 Baptist churches. *Source: txktoday.com, 8-3-16*

**Jose Figueroa Irizarry, 55, Trujillo Alto, Puerto Rico:** 39 counts of fraud and illegal appropriation of public funds. Irizarry, pastor of City of Refuge Inc., also works at Banco Santander, where he allegedly conducted a scheme from 2012-15 in which he transferred \$97,868 to personal accounts. *Source: El Nuevo Dia, 8-3-16*

**Dillon J. Russell, 33, Russellville, AR:** Robbery and theft of property. Russell, senior pastor at Free Will Baptist Church, is accused of robbing a Walmart Neighborhood Market at 2:30 a.m.

An employee told police that a white male bought a pack of gum, grabbed the money as the cash register opened and fled, damaging the automatic doors. Video showed him leaving in a vehicle. *Source: River Valley Leader, 8-2-16*

## Fr. McGovern allegedly responded that 'celibate means not married.'

**Eliezer Berland, 79, chief rabbi of the Breslov Hasidic community in Israel,** was charged in Jerusalem with aggravated assault, indecent acts and indecent acts against a minor while abusing a position of trust. He allegedly carried out sexual acts against several women and a 15-year-old girl.

According to the indictment, he enlisted 2 followers in 2012 to attack a person making allegations and then fled. He was arrested in Amsterdam last year but escaped. He was extradited from S. Africa in July and has been denied bail. *Source: Haaretz, 8-2-16*

**Gerald Heard, 64, Carencro, LA:** Molestation of a juvenile. Heard, pastor at Temple Baptist Church since 1997, is charged with inappropriate touching of 2 family members "when they were very young" in 1995-96, according to Iberia Parish Sheriff's Office records. The arrest came a week after a complaint was lodged. It's unclear where the incidents allegedly happened.

Heard was World Missionary Support Ser-

vices president from 2009-12. Temple Baptist also operated a home-school program. *Source: KATC, 7-28-16*

**Felix D. Broussard, 50, Breaux Bridge, LA:** 500 counts of possessing child pornography. Broussard is pastor at St. Bernard Catholic Church and oversees St. Bernard School. A repair shop reportedly discovered porn images when Broussard brought his personal computer in for service.

Former Bishop Michael Jarrell, who retired in February, acknowledged in 2004 that the Diocese of Lafayette and its insurers had paid out \$26 million in settlements to victims of 15 priests. He refused requests in 2014 by a victims group to release the names of the abusers. *Source: Acadiana Advocate, 7-27-16*

**Luckner Lorient, 78, Brooklyn, NY:** 2nd-degree manslaughter, criminally negligent homicide, 2nd-degree reckless endangerment, 3rd-degree assault and endangering the welfare of a child. Lorient, pastor of Eglise Baptist Church, was arrested in Miami, FL, after being on the run for a year. Charges stem from a 2014 fire in which a man died and 14 others were injured in an apartment building Lorient owns. The church is on the ground floor. Two months before the fire, Lorient was cited by the city with 3 violations for subdividing the basement and 2 upper floors. One tenant had 21 people living in a subdivided apartment. Luckner, a native Haitian, lied about rectifying the violations, prosecutors said. *Source: WPIX/NY Daily News, 7-27-16*

## Pleaded / Convicted

**Philip Temple, 66, London:** Pleaded guilty to 7 counts of sexual abuse committed in the 1970s after pleading guilty to 20 similar charges in April. Victims were 12 boys and a girl who lived at homes for children where he was a social worker.

After he was ordained as a Catholic priest in 1987, he served at Christ the King Monastery in Cockfosters. He also admitted lying under oath in April during trials in 1998 and 1999, when he was acquitted of charges of child sex abuse involving a boy from the church. *Source: BBC, 8-10-16*

**Hien Minh Nguyen, 56, San Jose, CA:** Pleaded guilty to 4 counts of tax evasion. Nguyen, a Catholic priest, has been on leave since 2013 and still faces trial on bank fraud charges. The indictment alleges he had parishioners write checks to the Vietnamese Catholic Center but instead diverted donations to his personal bank account. *Source: Mercury News, 8-9-16*

**Jonas J. Moses Jr., 62, Brimley, MI:** Guilty by jury of 7 counts of criminal sexual conduct involving teens as young as 13 from Anishinabe Baptist Church in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, where Moses was pastor. His first trial in June ended in a hung jury.

Another prominent church member, **Steven E. Alexander, 52, Sault Ste. Marie,** was sentenced to 45 to 70 years in prison in January after pleading guilty to 3 counts of criminal sexual conduct involving a 14-year old girl.

The victim's mother said Alexander played the role of a good Christian family man to fool everyone but characterized him as "straight from Satan." During the investigation, authorities pursued leads which led to Moses' arrest. *Source: Evening News, 8-8-16*

**Granville Gibson, 80, Darlington, England:** Guilty by jury of 2 counts of indecent assault and acquitted of 5 other charges. He was accused of "sinister and deliberate" abuse in the 1970s and 1980s of 2 men ages 18 and 26 while he was vicar at St. Claire's Anglican Church in Newton Aycliffe. The Church of England issued an "unreserved apology" to the victims. *Source: BBC, 8-4-16*

## Sentenced

**Dell I. Godkin, 48, Willis, TX:** Life in prison with no parole possible until 2046 after being found guilty by jury of aggravated sexual assault of a child. Godkin, a volunteer youth pastor at an unidentified church, still faces sexual assault charges involving an alleged victim in another county.

The girl, who is related to Godkin, testified abuse started when she was 13 and continued until just before her 17th birthday, when they "made a deal" that he would stop if she would not tell anyone.

"He would say lots of things about God being OK with it," said prosecutor Monica Cooper, adding he used bible verses about men's and women's roles to justify it. *Source: Morning News, 8-17-16*

**Allen D. Miles, 58, Little Rock, AR:** 13 years in prison after pleading guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud and aggravated identity theft. Miles, an evangelical pastor formerly living in Ohio, was part of a scam which netted \$4.8 million in federal tax refunds. Miles personally netted more than \$240,000 since the scheme was launched in 2010, investigators said.

Miles' role was to get other pastors to collect personal information from low-income church members, which was used to file phony tax returns. Prosecutor Carole Rendon said Miles "took advantage of their religious faith and their faith in the government to enrich himself." *Source: Canton Repository, 8-15-16*

**John Farrell, 73, and Paul Kelly, 64,** former teachers at St. Ninian's School in Falkland, Scotland, were sentenced to 5 and 10 years in prison, respectively, for indecent assaults on students in the 1970s and 1980s at the school, which was run by the Catholic Congregation of Christian Brothers. *Source: Plymouth Herald, 8-12-16*

**Roy D. Pruett, 63, Gadsden, AL:** 20 years in prison after pleading guilty to 3 counts of sexual abuse of a child less than 12 years old and 2 counts of 1st-degree sodomy. Pruett was arrested for incidents in 2011-14 with 4 boys while he was activities director at Eagle Rock Boys Ranch, a faith-based facility for "at risk" youth.

Eagle Rock touts "Respect For God's Creation" on its website and says, "We will go the extra mile with our children even when they may not deserve it. We will seek to issue mercy in the same measure as Christ gives mercy to us."

Pruett was accused of taking boys from the ranch overnight to the house he shared with his elderly mother. *Source: WAAY, 8-12-16*

**Christopher Williams, 22, Sellersburg, IN:** 180 days' home incarceration after pleading guilty to 3 counts of criminal recklessness. Williams, a staff member at Well of Grace Boarding School, operated by Crossroads Baptist Church, and pastor **Jerry Harris, 48,** both negotiated plea deals in which charges of battery and neglect were dropped. Harris pleaded guilty in May to criminal recklessness and received a similar sentence.

Prosecutor Jeremy Mull said the men didn't mean to hurt the children they had punished for things like wetting the bed. "Our investigation simply revealed that these were troubled youths, that [Williams] was trying to help them the best way that he knew how but ultimately he went too far and paddled them too hard."

The school is closed. *Source: Jeffersonville News & Tribune, 8-9-16*

**Jonathan Bailey, 35, New Orleans:** 10 years in prison after pleading guilty to obstruction of justice, 5 counts of molestation of a juvenile and 6 counts of indecent behavior with a juvenile. Bailey, a youth pastor at First Baptist Church, wept while the 15-year-old victim's father spoke in support of a plea agreement so she wouldn't have to testify.

Judge Robin Pittman called the plea deal "a hard pill for me to swallow" but said he accepted the family's wishes. *Source: The Advocate, 8-8-16*

**Chad Calhoun, 33, Longview, TX:** 11 years and 3 months in prison and 10 years' probation after jury convictions of receiving and possessing child pornography. Testimony showed that pornography was available on a peer-to-peer computer network from Calhoun's home and from Lake Highlands Baptist Church in Sulphur Springs, where he was senior pastor. A laptop had hundreds of explicit videos of minors. *Source: Houston Chronicle, 8-4-16*

**Earl Simone, 75, Huber Heights, OH:** 5 years in prison with no early release for stealing \$1.92 million from St. Peter Catholic Church, where he was pastor for 23 years. Full restitution was also ordered after he pleaded guilty to 1st-degree aggravated theft.

Steve Angi, Archdiocese of Cincinnati chancellor, read a statement in court calling Simone's theft a "betrayal" and said he not only stole parish funds but also money "from special collections for the nuns' retirement, earthquake



relief and other special causes.”

Simone also faces a civil suit filed by the archdiocese, which alleges he actually stole \$4.1 million, but because bank records are retained for just 7 years, the level of proof was less than for the \$1.92 million he was charged with taking. *Source: Dayton Daily News, 8-3-16*

**Donnie Ray Schultz, 45, Del City, OK:** 27 years, 3 months in prison and \$4,266 in restitution to the victim’s father after pleading guilty to sexual exploitation of a child. Schultz admitted he started a sexual relationship with the girl when she was 14 through a bible class he taught at Calvary Christian Church. He was also in a relationship with the girl’s mother at the time, in 2014-15.

Schultz, a self-employed handyman, took about 180 photos of his sex acts with the girl, prosecutors said. They had sex at homes where he would do repairs, in their own homes, at the church and in a storage unit. Schultz was convicted of rape in 1995 and was a registered sex offender until 2013. *Source: The Oklahoman, 8-3-16*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

**Lawrence McGovern, Stockton, CA,** pastor of Presentation Catholic Parish, is accused in a suit of sending photos of his genitalia to a man who maintained the parish’s swimming pool. The plaintiff, a parishioner and married father of 2, alleges he was fired after filing a police report.

After getting the photos, the man told McGovern he thought he was celibate and asked why he sent them. McGovern allegedly responded that “celibate means not married.” The Diocese of Stockton has placed him on leave. *Source: New-Sentinel, 8-12-16*

**Verity Baptist Church, Sacramento, CA,** its pastor **Roger Jimenez, Johnny Cervantes III** and **about 100 unidentified parishioners** are being sued by Spenser Fritz, who alleges he was assaulted outside a church service. Fritz, who is gay, has been protesting at the strip-mall church since June because of Jimenez’s comments about the 49 murders at Pulse nightclub in Florida.

In a sermon posted online, Jimenez said he wished the shooter had killed more gay people. “There’s no tragedy. I wish the government would round them all up, put them up against a firing wall, put a firing squad in front of them, and blow their brains out.” *Source: Sacramento Bee, 8-12-16*

Taj Patterson, 25, is suing the **city of Brooklyn and the New York Police Department and individual officers** for giving “favorable and preferential treatment” to a Hasidic neighborhood watch group (Shomrim) and for negligently investigating his 2013 beating by group members.

Patterson, a gay African-American, alleges influential Shomrim members placed calls to the 90th Precinct and that one of the men eventually charged was even given a tour of the 19th Precinct after the attack. The precinct was run at the time by ex-NYPD Deputy Chief James Grant, since indicted for conspiracy, bribery and fraud for allegedly accepting payola from Jewish businessmen. *Source: NY Post, 8-9-16*

**Sik Chi-ding, 48, Honk Kong,** a Buddhist nun accused in 2015 of embezzling \$1.3 million from Ting Wai Monastery, is being sued by monastery director Mary Jean Reimer. The suit seeks an accounting of income and expenditures since Sik became head nun in 2005 and alleges she broke her vows by being married twice, in 2006 and in 2012, to monks from mainland China so they could legally immigrate to Hong Kong. *Source: EJI Insight, 8-8-16*

The **Catholic Archdiocese of Santa Fe, NM,** is being sued by “John Doe 63,” a former parishioner at Our Lady of Assumption Parish in Albuquerque who alleges he was molested in 1975-77 by the priest, **Arthur Perrault**, now thought to be living in Morocco. Perrault also taught ethics at St. Pius X High School.

The suit contends church officials knew Perrault was abusing boys and had been transferred from Connecticut in 1965 due to misconduct allegations. He later went to Canada and disappeared in 1992. *Source: New Mexican, 8-5-16*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

The **Catholic Diocese of Portland, ME,** settled a suit filed by 6 sexual abuse victims for \$1.2 million. They were molested from 1958-77 by **James Vallely**, a Bangor-area priest who died at age 75 in 1997. Attorney Mitchell Garabedian said he knows of 8 Vallely victims (7 men and 1 woman) who have come forward.

Documents show **then-Bishop Daniel Feeney** was made aware of initial allegations in the late 1950s, but instead of investigating, Feeney transferred Vallely. *Source: Press Herald, 8-15-16*

**St. George’s School, Middletown, RI,** agreed to an undisclosed but “very significant” financial settlement with as many as 40 former students who say they were victims of sexual abuse during the 1970s and 1980s, with about a dozen staff and student perpetrators involved.

The Episcopal prep school, founded in 1896, first admitted girls in 1972.

“Our spirits are renewed on our forward healing journey,” survivor representative Anne Scott said in a statement. A field hockey player during her sophomore year in 1977, Scott alleges she was raped by athletic trainer **Alphonse Gibbs** in the locker room and told by school officials not to report it. Scott alleges the rapes continued for 2 years, starting when she was 14 and he was 67. “I’ll never forget the sound of the lock clicking.”

At least 20 other students allege abuse by Gibbs, who was fired but allowed to move on with no reports made to authorities or other educational institutions. In fact, he was given a pension and a letter of recommendation.

Choirmaster and music teacher **Franklin Coleman** was also accused of predatory interest in male students. He was forced out in 1988 but his departure was announced as a voluntary resignation for health reasons. No reports were made to police and Coleman received \$10,000 and extended health insurance coverage. He went on to become choirmaster at Tampa Prep in Florida.

Attorney Carmen Durso alleged male and female students were victimized and that girls were routinely belittled and harassed by staff members. One told Durso there was a school event at which staff asked girls to dress like Playboy bunnies. *Source: Providence Journal/Vanity Fair, 8-5-16*

The **Catholic Archdiocese of Hartford, CT,** will get \$945,000 plus interest from **Interstate Fire & Casualty Insurance** as reimbursement for payments made to 4 victims of sexual abuse by priests. U.S. District Judge Janet Bond Arterton found that Interstate breached its 1978 contract by refusing to make the payments.

The company argued it wasn’t liable because the archdiocese knew that 3 accused priests were predators but did nothing to stop them, which the archdiocese denied.

David Clohessy, executive director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, said churches bought policies to protect them from paying large sums to settle abuse cases. “I don’t think they bought these policies because they anticipated a lot of heavy snowfall and a lot of people slipping on the church steps and suing. Bishops knew about predator priests more than 50 years ago. Even back in the ’70s, they knew they had a big problem on their hands.”

In 2005 the Archdiocese of Hartford paid \$22 million to 43 victims, about half of which was covered by Interstate. “Insurance companies are appalled at what they’ve seen by way of the deliberate deception by bishops, and it simply makes financial sense for them to fight,” Clohessy said. *Source: WNPR, 8-4-16*



**Diane Ryszewski, Marian High School** and the **Catholic Archdiocese of Boston** are being sued by a 55-year-old woman who alleges Ryszewski “engaged in continuous acts of sex abuse and rape” in 1975-77 when the plaintiff was a student at the Catholic high school in Framingham, MA.

Staff members were aware that Ryszewski lived with the student but “took no action to protect [her] or to end the relationship,” the suit claims.

Ryszewski, who now lives in N. Carolina, was about 28 when the woman attended Marian High. She taught physical and health education and coached several girls sports teams. The woman said her relationship with Ryszewski started “probably 10 minutes into freshman year.” She soon moved into Ryszewski’s home due to family issues. “It’s not very hard to impress a 14-year-old,” she said. “I felt very special, but it was also kind of awkward.”

She dropped out of school after her sophomore year in an effort to end the relationship. *Source: Boston Globe, 8-3-16*

Legal Developments

A suit against the **Catholic Diocese of Peoria** may proceed, an Illinois appeals court ruled. The male plaintiff alleges he was molested by now-deceased priest **Norman Goodman** of Holy Family Catholic Church in Lincoln between 1991-94. A lower court had barred the suit due

to the statute of limitations, a ruling which was overturned due to an exception in the law for repressed memories. *Source: WHOI, 8-26-16*

**Timothy Bariteau, 39, Brookings, SD,** lost his appeal of an 8-year prison sentence on a 3-2 vote by the South Dakota Supreme Court. Bariteau, worship pastor at Morningside Abundant Life Church, started grooming his victim when she was in 6th grade in 2012, testimony showed. He was convicted of a 2014 incident in the music sound booth at the church when he “pressed his groin and erect penis against her buttocks” while both were clothed. A month later, he sent her photos of him holding his erection through his shorts.

His appeal was based on a phrase in the law which defines sexual contact as “any touching, not amounting to rape, whether or not through clothing or other covering, of the breasts of a female or the genitalia or anus of any person with the intent to arouse or gratify the sexual desire of either party.”

Bariteau argued he didn’t touch those body parts, but prosecutors argued that the statute’s language also includes the pastor’s penis. The court majority agreed.

The dissenting opinion by Justice Steven Zinter said the statute is faulty. “[T]he majority has rewritten the statutory definition of sexual contact.

These quoted words prohibit a defendant’s ‘touching of’ — not a defendant’s ‘touching with’ — the specified body parts.”

Bariteau will be eligible for parole after serving 4 years. When convicted he was married with children. *Source: Capital Journal, 8-10-16*

“British citizen **Andrew Charles Kingston Soper** should not be extradited because offenses he has been charged with exceeded the statute of limitations,” a court ruled in Pec, Kosovo. It’s the second time a court there has refused to extradite Soper, 73, who jumped bail in 2011 after he was accused of molesting 5 Catholic school students in London in the 1970s and 1980s. Soper was abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Ealing Abbey. *Source: b92.net, 8-9-16*

**Niranjan Bhat, 25, Nitte, India,** a Hindu priest accused of helping dispose of the body of allegedly murdered businessman Bhaskar Shetty, attempted suicide the day before he was arrested by swallowing a pair of earrings and a diamond-studded ring. Hospital X-rays showed the items in his intestine. “It has to come out naturally. We will have to wait till then. He is under observation,” said a doctor who didn’t wish to be named.

Police have charged Shetty’s wife and son with his murder. The body hasn’t been found and may have been burned. *Source: The Hindu, 8-9-16*

‘I don’t think they bought these policies because they anticipated a lot of heavy snowfall and a lot of people slipping on the church steps and suing.’ — victims advocate David Clohessy

tion he heads. Bracha committed suicide in July 2015. *Source: Haaretz, 8-4-16*

**Mohammed Madad, 52, Noventa Vicentina, Italy,** imam at the Islamic Center, was deported to his native Morocco on national security grounds and banned from reentering Italy for 15 years for allegedly giving anti-Western sermons calling for violence. Madad is a father of 4, including a daughter named Jihad. *Source: NDTV, 7-29-16*

**Fred J. Neulander, 74, Cherry Hill, NJ,** former senior rabbi at Congregation M’kor Shalom now serving a life sentence for plotting the 1994 murder of his wife, has lost another legal appeal. He won’t be eligible for parole until he’s 89.

Carol Neulander was bludgeoned to death at home by 2 hit men, who much later implicated her husband, who was allegedly having an affair with a local radio personality. He didn’t go on trial until 2002.

An appeals panel rejected each of Neulander’s 7 arguments that he was denied a fair trial and errors were made in post-conviction proceedings. *Source: philly.com, 7-29-16*

**William J. Lynn, 65, Philadelphia,** the first senior Catholic Church official convicted in the U.S. for failure to adequately supervise priests accused of molesting children, must get a new trial, ruled the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, upholding a 2015 lower court ruling. An hour after the ruling, after posting 10% of his \$250,000 bail, Lynn walked out of Waymart State Correctional Institution.

District Attorney Seth Williams then announced he will retry Lynn on the same charge of child endangerment. A tentative trial date of May 1 was set.

To establish that Lynn was part of a long-standing cover-up, prosecutors introduced about 2 dozen examples of clergy sex abuse, some dating to the 1940s. But in ordering a new trial, the Superior Court ruled that the “prior bad acts” evidence tainted the jury. *Source: Morning Call, 7-29-16*

Allegations

**Howard W. “Howdy” White Jr., Bedford, PA,** a retired Episcopal pastor, is accused by a former student at St. Paul’s School in Concord, NH, of molesting him. White served as a chaplain and teacher in 1967-71 at the school. He’s also been implicated in sexual abuse claims by students at St. George’s School in Middletown, RI, where he later worked.

St. Paul’s rector Michael Hirschfeld said the school has notified police about the allegation. White has now been accused of sexual abuse in at least 5 U.S. states and Nova Scotia over 4 decades but has never been criminally charged, partially due to statutes of limitation. *Source: Providence Journal, 8-10-16*

The godson of **Australian Anglican priest Peter Rushton**, who was exposed by the church as a pedophile in 2010 after dying in 2007, broke down on the witness stand before the Royal Commission into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse. Paul Gray, now in his 60s, testified he was repeatedly raped at a boys home in New South Wales.

Gray also told how he was first raped by Rushton when he was 10. In the mid-1960s, Rushton began taking him to St. Alban’s Home for Boys, where he and other boys were anally and orally raped by groups of men.

Rushton and his lover, **Brother Jim Brown**, had infiltrated St. Alban’s, becoming board members and taking boys home for weekends. They also fostered orphans. Brown was imprisoned in 2012.

Gray recalled another time Rushton took him to a church camp, where there were about 5 men and another boy. He said he knew what was going to happen so he ran. Two men caught him, and while he was being raped he heard the other boy screaming. *Source: The Guardian, 8-2-16*

Removed / Resigned

Peter Zuni, 54, Kakuri, Nigeria, was removed as pastor of Queen of Apostles Catholic Church for affairs with women. One of the women’s allegations spurred an investigation, said Ndagoso Manoso, archbishop of Kaduna. “It is true that he had affairs with 2 women and they both had children by him,” Manoso said. *Source: Daily Post, 8-15-16*

Email: blackcollar@ffr.org



In memoriam

Dr. Frederick Jefferson Davis, 1922-2016



Lifetime Member Dr. Frederick Jefferson Davis died on Aug. 18, 2016, at Attic Angel Place in Madison, Wis., his home for the past few years.

Jeff was born on Oct. 23, 1922, in Madison and attended West High School and the University of Wisconsin for his undergraduate and medical degrees. After completing his residency in New York, he joined his father at the Davis & Duehr Eye Clinic in 1950. He was stationed at Camp Pendleton, Calif., from 1954-1956, where he was the chief of ophthalmology for the Naval Hospital. He retired from the medical practice in 1985 to focus on his other interests, including motorcycling, golf and travel. He was especially fond of his many People to People trips that combined travel with friends to exotic locations with golf at challenging and fun golf courses.

Jeff married Mary McGuire on Dec. 27, 1944, and they enjoyed 64 years of marriage until her death in 2008. He is survived by his three sons, Jeff (Deb), Chris (Kathy) and Bill (Nancy); his seven grandchildren, Greg, Sammy, Jen, Brian, Mark, Will and Hanna; and his great-granddaughter, Aubrey. He is also survived by his brother, Matthew.

He first joined FFRF in 2010.

Pat Brda, 1953-2015

FFRF member Pat Brda was born in Berwyn, Ill., on July 8, 1953. She had degrees in dance, math, computers and earned an MBA from University of Illinois-Champaign.

She worked in information technology, most recently as a project manager at Bio-Rad. For 31 years, Pat and her husband Carl enjoyed exploring Seattle and the Northwest, movies, travel, music and even road rallies with Pat playing navigator to Carl's driver. Pat was active in community issues.

Pat enjoyed cooking and baking, and created jewelry through beadwork. She loved growing plants and was one of the rare people who could nurture orchids to rebloom. Most of all, she enjoyed sharing her plants, creations and interests with friends and family.

Pat died peacefully at home last year surrounded by friends after a rapid and cruel bout with cancer. Daughter of Anthony and Therese Brda, she is survived by her sister Marilyn and brother Bill.

"We are so grateful that Pat bequeathed \$40,000 to FFRF to help secure our future, among other worthy causes she helped," said FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

FFRF statement

Candidates pander to religion

This is a statement released by FFRF to its members.

The two presidential candidates from the major parties are doing little to court the growing secular vote.

Hillary Clinton took to religious pandering on the campaign trail. She asserted to the 136th annual National Baptist Convention on Sept. 8 that: "We need a president who understands the powerful role that faith — and communities of faith — have always played in moving our country toward justice . . . A president who will pray with you, and for you . . . Yes, we need a president who will do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God."

FFRF disagrees. We've long said that we don't need pious politicians who spend valuable time on their knees. We need politicians who will get off their knees and get to work. Prayer doesn't fix anything, but it does waste time and energy. And it also lets pandering public officials congratulate themselves on accomplishing something, when they are really just talking to themselves. Prayer doesn't heal the sick or rebuild cities after natural disasters. As Robert Ingersoll said, "The hands that help are better far than lips that pray."

Donald Trump, appearing at the Values Voters Summit on Sept. 9, promised that "our Christian heritage will be cherished, protected, defended, like you've never seen before." He also reiterated his call to overturn the Johnson Amendment, part of the GOP platform: "The first thing we have to do is give our churches their voice back. It's been taken away. The Johnson Amendment has blocked our pastors and ministers and others from speaking their minds from their own pulpits. If they want to talk about Christianity, if they want to preach, if they want to talk about politics, they're unable to do so. If they want to do it, they take a tremendous risk that they lose their tax-exempt status."

"All religious leaders should be able to freely express their thoughts and



Donald Trump

feelings on religious matters. And I will repeal the Johnson Amendment if I am elected your president, I promise. So important."

Named after then-Sen. (later President) Lyndon B. Johnson, the amendment prohibits tax-exempt organizations from engaging in political campaigns. The law is a safeguard that prevents any 501(c)(3) nonprofit, which include churches, from participating in or intervening in any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office if it wishes to retain tax-exempt status. In short, the IRS prohibition against endorsing or opposing candidates for elected office applies equally to pastors and church officials.

The amendment absolutely does not silence the free speech rights of pastors. Ministers and congregations are free to engage in church electioneering — if they forego their tax-exempt privilege. Religious leaders are free to endorse whomever they choose — so long as they do so on their own time and dime as citizens (a right that many Religious Right leaders take full advantage of). They simply cannot do so from the pulpit as church officials, or expend church resources to



Hillary Clinton

electioneer.

Tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofits are afforded a special privilege, which amounts to an indirect but "huge" public subsidy. If an organization profits from tax-exemption, it forfeits the right to engage in political campaign intervention in exchange for this subsidy. Were unaccountable, tax-exempt churches allowed to politick, watch out! Churches and their congregations would turn into political money-laundering operations. And our secular republic, not just our elections, would be imperiled.

The Johnson Amendment provides an important safeguard. It must be preserved and enforced, something FFRF helped maintain in our lawsuit against the IRS.

To pandering candidates everywhere, may we quote some sage advice from Ben Franklin: "When a religion is good, I conceive that it will support itself; and, when it cannot support itself, and God does not take care to support, so that its professors are oblig'd to call for the help of the civil power, it is a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one."

NOTHING FAILS LIKE PRAYER

Contest

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

It's up to you!

We'd like to see secular citizens flood government meetings with secular invocations that illustrate why government prayers are unnecessary, ineffective, embarrassing, exclusionary, divisive or just plain silly.

The "best" secular invocation will be invited to open FFRF's annual convention, receiving an all-expenses-paid trip (next year in Madison, Wis., on the weekend of Sept. 15-17), a plaque and an honorarium of \$500.

LEARN MORE AT:  
ffrf.org/outreach/nothing-fails-like-prayer

Yip Harburg, from his book  
*Rhymes for the Irreverent*

Before I was born, I seemed to be  
Contented with being non-be-able;  
So after I'm gone, it seems to me  
My lot should be not less agreeable.

Buy it from FFRF online  
shop.[ffrf.org](http://ffrf.org)





You be the judge

Supportive FFRF member Monty Cleworth sent us this photo. “Here is a picture of me at Chernobyl. Interesting combination of a radioactivity sign in the foreground and a crucifix in the background. Religion is toxic? Religion is radioactive? Religion can be hazardous to your health? You be the judge.”



Gary King, president of the Colorado Springs FFRF chapter, sent us this photo from the Pueblo Pride Parade. “Some of our group, with the flyer I made of ‘Why Gays Need Freedom From Religion,’ went to the parade and carried these banners,” Gary writes. “Two of them were a gift from the Maine chapter. Back in the ’90s an unconstitutional amendment was passed with the slogan ‘no special rights for gays,’ so I made up the other two signs and they are still popular today.”



I love Lucian

FFRF Co-President Dan Barker and Chad Brown marched in the Skeptics in History section of the DragonCon parade in Atlanta on Sept. 3.



The Wisconsin Newspaper Association inducted Anne and Paul Gaylor into its granite memorial pylon in Eagle River, Wis., on Aug. 19. Their children (from left) Andy Gaylor, Ian Gaylor and Annie Laurie Gaylor were proud to be part of the memorial celebration. Anne Nicol Gaylor was the principal founder of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Her husband, Paul, served for more than three decades as its principal volunteer, also serving off and on as a board member or state representative. The couple edited and published The Middleton Times Tribune for three years, a weekly community newspaper, in the late 1960s. Anne’s 1967 editorial, the first in the state of Wisconsin calling for the legalization of abortion, created shockwaves in the conservative community, and ended up catapulting her into a decade of activism as an early abortion rights proponent and then freethought activist.



FFRF employees, members and friends walked in the 2016 Outreach Pride Parade/Rally in Madison, Wis., on Aug. 20. From left, Lauryn Seering, Seth Wrinkle, an unidentified member, Renee Oberhart and Sarah Lewis.



The women of FFRF raised their glasses and toasted our freethinking, feminist foremothers on Women’s Equality Day, Aug. 26. Women in the United States were granted the right to vote as the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was certified as law on Aug. 26, 1920. FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor holds up a photo of suffragist and activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton.



These aren’t religious nuts

FFRF Co-President Dan Barker has a friendly and furry visitor stop by frequently when he is relaxing on his backyard patio. Dan has offered the chipmunk peanuts, almonds, pistachios and sometimes fruit.



A visit to a correctional institution

Speaking to a captive audience

By Dan Barker

I used to preach in prisons years ago as a Christian minister. This summer, I got to speak for the first time in a prison as an atheist.

FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover has been dealing with religion in the prison system. An FFRF member who is an inmate in the Jackson Correctional Institution, a medium-security prison in Black River Falls, Wis., with about 1,000 inmates, had asked Sam to help him get a humanist club started there. Apparently, in order for prisoners to form an association, it has to be run by an outsider. This is to avoid any leadership hierarchy among the inmates.

It's easy to get a religious group started. All it needs is a local church or religious organization to come into the prison as volunteers. There are many churches in Black River Falls, but there is no local humanist group, so the non-believers in the prison were unable to organize. Sam wrote to the prison to ask what might be done to accommodate the needs of all inmates, including nonbelievers. Prison Chaplain Myron Olson told him that if we could find a local person to come in to hold a humanist event, he would be happy to facilitate.

When I heard that, I volunteered to drive up there to meet with the humanist inmates. The very obliging and accommodating Chaplain Olson called me and we set a date for Aug. 25. I had to fill out a number of forms to become a volunteer — they wanted to know if I had been convicted of a crime, if I had a family member in that facility, and so on.

**Entering the prison**

I drove up to Black River Falls that day and discovered it was almost harder to enter the prison than to leave it! The officers, who were very nice but firm and professional, told me I had to leave my camera, phone, and watch in the car. After checking my keys, wallet and identification in a locker, I removed my shoes and belt to pass through a very sensitive metal detector. It took four attempts. Apparently, the little metal clasp in my pants was



Chaplain Myron Olson (left) and FFRF Co-President Dan Barker pose for a selfie outside the Jackson Correctional Institution in Black River Falls, Wis.

enough to set it off. They told me to hold my hand over that area and walk sideways through the detector very slowly, tiny steps at a time. I never felt so happy to finally be inside a prison.

Chaplain Olson is a Christian minister who was born and raised in Black River Falls and has been working in Jackson Correctional for 16 years. He took me through the security gates to the chapel. There were bibles and religious literature everywhere, pictures of Jesus and other religious leaders, and what looked like a rack of religious videos. An old spinet piano was against one wall, and I could picture a church lady playing hymns before the weekly sermon.

The chapel has a library of faith-based resources, including material for inmates of Eastern religions, Catholicism, Islam, Judaism, Native American, paganism and Protestant backgrounds. It now has books for humanists and atheists. Chaplain Olson took all of the FFRF books I had brought and spread them out on a table in the room. These included Ruth Green's *Born Again Skeptics' Guide to the Bible*, Annie Laurie Gaylor's books about women and religion, Anne Nicol Gaylor's *Lead Us Not Into Penn Station*, Yip Harburg's *Rhymes For The Irreverent*, Orvin Larson's *American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll*, *One Woman's Fight* (the story of the *McCollum* deci-

sion), and my books *Losing Faith in Faith* and *Life Driven Purpose*. I told him he could keep what books he thought appropriate, and he kept them all.

**An eager audience**

At 6:30 p.m. sharp, about 35 or 40 inmates came into the room, all very eager to listen. I had a truly captive audience! However, the FFRF member was not there. Several days earlier, he had been transferred to another facility, which they told me was a low-security prison, one step away from being released. So that is good news. When I asked the crowd if they knew him, many hands went up. Someone said he is a great, intelligent guy. "Well," I said gravely, "it seems he has gone on to a better place." They all laughed. "It is a better place," said Keith, a freethinking friend of his.

I talked for an hour about FFRF, my preacher-to-atheist story, and about humanism and freethought. I congratulated Chaplain Olson for respecting the needs of all inmates. I told the group that he is doing a better job than the chaplain of the U.S. House of Representatives, who has denied me an opportunity to open Congress with a secular invocation. When I pointed out that the House of Representatives should actually be representative, Chaplain Olson nodded his head.

After my talk, we spent another hour taking questions. Nobody wanted to leave. Where were they going to go?

Some of the men asked if we could do this more often, and I suggested that maybe Sam could come next time to talk about religion and government. One guy in the back row said, "Grover?" I was surprised. "Yes," I said. "Sam Grover, one of FFRF's attorneys." So I guess Sam is famous in the prison community!

**Freethinkers and skeptics**

It seemed that about half the crowd were open freethinkers and skeptics. The others were mildly and politely interested, with honest questions. Some of them were taking careful notes. "You are a breath of fresh air!" one fellow said. They asked about the historicity of Jesus, about the Constitution, the early Christian church, religion in politics, Adam and Eve, inner religious experience, miracles and prophecy. They also grilled me about my reasons for leaving the ministry. It was all very enjoyable.

One man, near the end of questioning, said he was out in the hall for the first part of my talk with another inmate who was looking at the poster for the event. Pointing to my picture, he said, "That is the devil," and refused to enter the room. "But you don't look at all like the devil," he said, with a twinkle in his eye. I explained that we non-believers don't believe in God or the devil. They are flip sides of the same counterfeit coin.

After the meeting, many went to browse the FFRF books. It was very satisfying to shake hands with some of the inmates who came up to thank me.

Since my camera was in the car, I could not take any photos. However, Chaplain Olson was a good sport and accompanied me to the parking lot where we took an unprofessional selfie with my iPhone. Walking to the car, the very tolerant minister said, "It can be very difficult to listen to a point of view with which you disagree." He might have been talking about the inmates, but I think he was talking about himself.

It's good to see not everyone is imprisoned by their beliefs.

Dan Barker is FFRF co-president.

They said what?

I see that at the end of the day, God raised up, I believe, Donald Trump, who was going to be the nominee in this election. I don't think God sits things out. He's a sovereign God.

**Former U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann**  
*Huffington Post*, 8-31-16

We're Catholic school kids. We don't do this. He's a good guy.

**Alvin Morel, brother of Oscar Morel, who is charged with the cold-blooded shooting deaths of a Queens, N.Y., imam and his aide.**  
*New York Post*, 8-15-16



lieve that it puts our very eternal lives in jeopardy.

**Followers of Christ member Dan Sevy, who takes advantage of Idaho's faith-healing religious exemption and who said he won't change his practices even if the law does.**  
*Spokane (Wash.) Spokesman-Review*, 8-5-16

We assumed God was on our side.

**Phyllis Schlafly, arch anti-feminist, who died at 92, arguing against the Equal Rights Amendment**  
*New York Times*, 9-12-16



**Ohio Gov. John Kasich, after seeing the latest Harry Potter book while in a bookstore with his entourage**  
*Concord Monitor*, 9-4-16

The quality, richness of and exquisite content of the messages, and what they produced in terms of conversions, life changes and healings, cannot be the

result of mere human action.

**Argentine Bishop Hector Cardelli, who declared that a woman's visions of the Virgin Mary beginning in 1983 were of a "supernatural character."** The woman, Gladys Motta, claims to have had more than 1,800 visitations from Mary and another 68 from Jesus.  
*Religion News Service*, 8-15-16

COMING NEXT MONTH

GRADUATE  
STUDENT  
ESSAYS



CONVENTION  
COVERAGE