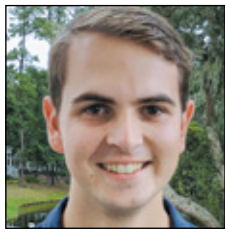


FREETHOUGHT TODAY



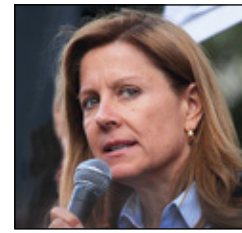
Right-wing Christianity in the age of Trump

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2017 Essay Contest for Graduate/ 'Older' Students

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SNAP founder Barbara Blaine's death a great loss

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Vol. 34 No. 9

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Victorious!

Freedom From Religion Foundation wins four lawsuits

- **Clergy housing exemption ruled unconstitutional.** [\(Story on this page\)](#)
- **Court rules county must allow atheist invocation.** [\(Story on back page\)](#)
- **Texas Gov. Abbott loses censorship suit to FFRF.** [\(Story on this page\)](#)
- **Judge decrees cross must come off county seal.** [\(Story on back page\)](#)

FFRF wins housing allowance challenge

A federal judge for a second time has ruled in favor of FFRF's historic challenge of a housing tax allowance that uniquely privileges clergy.

At issue is the constitutionality of a provision in the tax code that excludes from gross income a housing allowance paid to a "minister of the gospel."

Rep. Peter Mack, sponsor of the 1954 law challenged by FFRF, argued that ministers should be rewarded with a clergy allowance for "carrying on such a courageous fight against this [a godless and anti-religious world movement]." The clergy allowance is not a tax deduction but an exemption — allowing housing allowances paid as part of clergy salary to be subtracted from taxable income.

In 2013, U.S. District Judge Barbara Crabb ruled in FFRF's favor in its original challenge. Crabb's finding sent



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor stand with Ian Gaylor, right, who holds a photo of President Emerita Anne Nicol Gaylor, after they had won a court victory challenging the clergy housing tax allowance.

"shockwaves through the religious community," according to the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, which bitterly fought the ruling, along with just about every religious denomination in the country.

In November 2014, the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals threw out that victory — not on the merits, but on the question of standing — arguing that

FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor hadn't yet sought a refund of their housing allowance from the IRS. Accordingly, they sought them and when denied, went back to court.

FFRF renewed its challenge of the housing allowance in April 2016. Sued are Steve Mnuchin, U.S. secretary of the

[See Housing on page 9](#)

FFRF defeats Gov. Abbott over Capitol nativity display

FFRF has prevailed in federal court against Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who ordered the removal of FFRF's Bill of Rights Nativity display from the Texas Capitol in 2015.

In his decision, handed down Oct. 13, U.S. District Judge Sam Sparks for the Western District of Texas — Austin Division, ruled that Abbott violated FFRF's free speech rights.

FFRF had placed a duly permitted display celebrating the Winter Solstice and Bill of Rights Day, in response to a Christian nativity scene in the Texas Capitol. The display, depicting three Founding Fathers and the Statue of Liberty celebrating the birth of the Bill of Rights (adopted Dec. 15, 1791), had the requisite sponsorship from a Texas legislator (state Rep. Donna Howard).

Abbott, as chair of the Texas State Preservation Board, ordered FFRF's display taken down only three

[See Abbott on page 9](#)

Judge rules against Barker on House invocation

Chaplain barred FFRF co-president from delivering invocation

A federal district judge in Washington, D.C., issued a ruling Oct. 11 that legitimizes the exclusion of non-believers from the nation's legislative chambers.

U.S. District Judge Rosemary M. Collyer, a Bush appointee, ruled against plaintiff Dan Barker, co-president of the FFRF. Barker sued House of Representatives Chaplain Patrick Conroy, a Roman Catholic priest, for barring him as an atheist from delivering a guest invocation. Also named as

a defendant was Paul Ryan, speaker of the House, who oversees the chaplain's office.

"To decide that Mr. Barker was discriminated against and should be permitted to address the House would be to disregard the Supreme Court precedent that permits legislative prayer," Collyer wrote. Although the court found that Barker was injured, and that the defendants did not have legislative immunity, she ruled that none of the defendants was ultimately responsible for that injury.

The judge claimed that the chaplain was powerless to allow Barker to give the invocation, due to House



Barker



Ryan



Conroy



Collyer

rules, yet also dismissed Barker's claim against the House itself. The decision fails to identify who, if not the House chaplain and the House itself, could be sued for implementing a rule excluding nonbelievers from participation.

Under her ruling, the program — in

which members of the House invite a religious leader of their choice to open a session with an invocation — remains closed to community leaders representing the 23 percent of Americans

[See Barker on back page](#)

How great thine art!

Artist, filmmaker, novelist Scott Burdick isn't afraid to challenge authority

I was born and raised in 1967 in a working-class neighborhood in Chicago. I attended the same Catholic grade school as my mother had, and the same Jesuit high school as my uncle had. As an altar boy, I felt God's eyes on me night and day. Everyone I knew believed in God, so it was just an obvious fact — until my junior year of high school when I decided to read the entire bible. That was when the first cracks appeared.

Catholic schools taught the basics of Darwinian evolution and accepted that Genesis was not literal. I wondered how to separate the myths from the facts. So I read books on comparative religion, the history of how the Catholic Church formed, and the historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Within a year, I realized all religions were equally man-made.

I never had any bad experiences with priests, nuns or the Jesuit brothers — I simply didn't believe anymore. I didn't tell anyone I was an atheist, but I did stop going to church, which caused some problems, especially since I was still in Catholic school. Mostly, I felt relief that Big Brother was no longer watching and deciding if I deserved heaven or hell.

After winning a full scholarship to attend The American Academy of Art in downtown Chicago, a famous artist named Richard Schmid asked a group of us young students what we thought about the existence of God. One after the other, each classmate affirmed their belief in God. I was last. My heart was pounding, but I stated my disbelief out loud for the first time. All the other students were shocked. One of them said, "But you're such a good person!" Then, to my utter surprise, Richard Schmid said, "That's what I think, as well." It was the first time I realized I wasn't alone.

While in art school, a girl in my class told me that her mother gave all their savings to Oral Roberts when the televangelist said God would "call him home" (kill him) if he didn't raise \$8 million. This was in 1987, and the girl had to leave school because of this family disaster. It was the first really negative consequence of religion I witnessed. Years later, while staying at



Scott Burdick works on a drawing of a tribe called the Himba in Namibia, Africa.

a collector's house in Tulsa, we were invited to attend an event at a country club where Roberts was a member. I warned our hosts that if I met Roberts, I would tell him the story of my classmate, since I'm not the kind of person who can simply say nothing in the face of such a con artist. I left it up to them if they wanted me to go with them. They decided to take us to a restaurant instead.

After art school, I attended Columbia College for writing and film, and then made a living as a gallery painter,

while occasionally doing paid jobs for film. (I worked on a development team for an animated feature called "Spirit" for DreamWorks, as well as writing a couple screenplays for them that never got made.)

Tired of the city, my wife and I moved to North Carolina about 20 years ago. We spend a lot of our time traveling. While in Africa, India, Tibet, Peru, Turkey or wherever else, I love reading the history and religious texts of the culture we're visiting and then talking to people about their beliefs. Many of those stories and images work their way into my novels and paintings.

I wasn't active in the freethought movement until a controversy erupted in King, N.C. (the town we live next to). A very brave Afghan veteran, [FFRF Life Member] Steven Hewett, complained about a Christian flag hanging on a veteran's memorial in our town's public park. After the City Council took the flag down under threat of a lawsuit, near-continuous protests flared up. At a rally attended by 5,000 flag-waving Christians, speaker after speaker said there was no such thing as separation of church and state and anyone who disagreed should be "encouraged" to leave town. People told local businesses that if they didn't hang a Christian flag in their window, they would be boycotted. Everyone complied.

I was so angry that I decided to make a documentary called "In God We Trust?" in my spare time. It took me a year to film and edit entirely on my own. I released it on YouTube simply to feel like I had at least stood up these bullies and exposed them for what they were. To my surprise, the documentary was widely seen and ended up as evidence in a lawsuit brought by Americans United against the town of King's fake public forum that was used to put the flag back up.

A week before I was scheduled to testify in federal court last year, the town finally gave in on all counts. They removed the Christian flag and other statues from the memorial, and the town's insurance company paid half a million dollars in court costs to Americans United (and \$1 to Hewett). All the threatening emails I received as a consequence of the film and trial are merely a bonus, but the most gratifying thing about that film were the handful of religious people in town who told me that watching it changed their mind about why the separation of church and state makes sense even for believers.

Because of this film, Sue Kocher of The Triangle Freethought Society contacted me and asked if I'd film a documentary of the first Reason Rally, which I did with her help. Then she talked me into doing another one with the society and Katherine Stewart on The Good News Club — and then the first interviews for the Openly Secular project.

The most exciting part was interviewing so many of my atheist heroes like Annie Laurie Gaylor, Dan Barker, Richard Dawkins, James Randi, Lawrence Krauss, Adam Savage, and on and on.

Because I make good money from my paintings and novels, it's nice to be able to donate my time to a cause I feel is essential for our future. At every museum show or book signing I do, there are always a few people who come up to me (sometimes with tears in their eyes) and say how thankful they are for my openness about being an atheist, since they cannot come out of the closet for fear of retaliation.

On one panel discussion moderated by George Gallo (writer of "Midnight Run"), I was asked if I ever worried that being so openly atheist might hurt my career. I replied that if you're afraid to express your honest thoughts and ideas, you probably shouldn't be an artist, writer, or filmmaker — at least not if you want to do anything of value. Even though George said this was a very good answer, we clashed a few years later when I saw a film he wrote and directed called "Local Color." In the film, his main character says, "In my opinion, an atheist can never be a great painter. In order to create great art, man must make peace with his own mortality and bow to a higher power." I called him out on this publicly, and we had quite an extended and heated exchange, though I never succeeded in getting him to see how insulting and ridiculous such a statement was.

My newest novel (*The Immortality Contract*) is the first one I've written that focuses entirely on religion. I give Annie Laurie and Dan credit on the Acknowledgements page, since it was while listening to one of their podcasts that I first came up with the story idea. In the novel, a billionaire atheist scientist (Theon) offers a fountain-of-youth pill to the world free of charge — under condition that the recipient abandons any and all support for religion (especially financial). The pill will only be available in countries with strictly secular governments. Almost overnight, every person on the planet must decide if they have more faith in science and life in this world — or religion and the promise of life in the next. Theon's goal is the destruction of organized religion and ushering in a golden age of reason and science. Unfortunately, things don't go as smoothly as he'd hoped. Probably, there won't be as large an audience for this book as for my science fiction novels, but it was fun to write!

To me, questioning and continuing to learn is what art and living is all about. We're all works in progress. The saddest thing would be to mistakenly think you know all the answers and give up searching.

To see Scott's work, visit his website (ScottBurdick.com), his YouTube channel (ScottBurdickArt) or read his novels (*Nihala*, *The Immortality Contract*).



FFRF Life Member Scott Burdick

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TODAY

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Volunteering for RAM an eye-opening experience

By Jackie Douglas

In what can only be described as an eye-opening experience, I recently volunteered at a mobile volunteer clinic to help those in need of free medical, dental or vision care.

My friends Cate Adams and Katie Pajac joined me in volunteering for the Remote Area Medical Volunteer Corp. (RAM) from Sept. 29 to Oct. 1 at Camp Jordan in East Ridge, Tenn.

RAM was founded as a nonprofit organization in 1985 by Stan Brock. If that name sounds familiar, it's because he starred in "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom." The mission of RAM is to "prevent pain and alleviate suffering by providing free quality health care to those in need." RAM also does disaster relief in the United States and other countries.

Since 1985, RAM has had more than 100,000 humanitarian volunteers, including licensed dental, vision, veterinary, and medical professionals. It has treated more than 700,000 individuals and 67,000 animals and delivered \$112 million worth of free health care services.

FFRF's Nonbelief Relief has donated \$10,000 to RAM.

This particular clinic focused on dental, vision and general health services. It also had a women's health exam area the final day.

We were there for three days, which included the setup day on Friday. Even though we wouldn't open until Saturday morning, patients were already camped outside in the parking lot.

On Saturday, I arrived at 5 a.m. to get acclimated and assigned a job, and the doors opened about 45 minutes later. I was sent to the Mobile Optical Lab, where I was trained on the machines that cut lenses, how to



The Chattanooga.com

FFRF's Membership Manager Jackie Douglas prepares a set of eyeglasses for a patient during the two-day RAM clinic in East Ridge, Tenn.

assemble glasses, and how to use the lensometer, which verifies the eyeglass prescription.

The Mobile Optical Lab that I worked in can make about 200 pairs of glasses a day when it is running at top efficiency. Unfortunately, not all eyeglasses can be made on site. If a child needs polycarbonate lenses or if

the prescription is too high, then the glasses are made at RAM headquarters in Knoxville and then mailed to the patient.

Besides working in the optical lab, I also handled patient registration on Sunday for a couple of hours. It was nice to put faces to the eyeglasses I would make later.

During the course of the weekend, the 510 volunteers who helped that weekend saw more than 800 patients (432 for dental work, 191 for medical reasons and 353 for vision issues), some who needed to be seen in more than one field.

I had an amazing time volunteering for RAM. Everyone was friendly and passionate about what they do. All patients were treated with respect and kindness. I am already planning my next volunteer expedition with RAM in spring of 2018. If you get a chance to volunteer with RAM, please do it. You won't regret it!

Jackie Douglas is FFRF's membership manager.

To find out more about RAM, go to ramusa.org or find them on Facebook.

What Is a Freethinker?

freethinker n.

1 A person who forms opinions about religion on the basis of reason, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief.

NOTHING FAILS LIKE PRAYER CONTEST

Our goal is to see secular citizens flood government meetings with secular invocations that demonstrate why government prayers are unnecessary, ineffective, embarrassing, exclusionary, divisive or just plain silly.

The person who gives the best secular invocation will be invited to open FFRF's annual convention in San Francisco, from Nov. 2-4, 2018, receiving an expenses-paid trip, along with a plaque and an honorarium of \$500.

MORE INFO AT:

ffrf.org/nothing-fails-like-prayer

Freethought Today caption contest!

This month's caption contest comes to you courtesy of FFRF volunteer Kati Treu, who drew the cartoon at FFRF's request. To enter, please write a humorous or witty caption to go along with this picture. Email your response to caption@ffrf.org by Nov. 24.

The winner, chosen by FFRF staff, will receive an "Unabashed Atheist" T-shirt! We will announce the winners and top runners-up in the December issue.

FFRF adds 'Beyond After-Life' category for donations

FFRF has a new donation category, proposed by Board Member Jim Zerwick and approved by FFRF's Executive Board on Sept. 14.



Jim Zerwick

The "Beyond After-Life" category is "for those seeking atheist nirvana" and is a donation of \$10,000 (or more), designated as such.

Zerwick, after proposing the idea and voting for its passage, then promptly turned around and wrote a check to become the first "Beyond Afterlife" member.

The other categories of FFRF membership are:

\$25 — Student.

- \$40 — Individual.**
- \$50 — Household.**
- \$100 — Gung Ho.**
- \$250 — Sustaining.**
- \$500 — Sponsoring.**

The three levels of extra-generous support ensuring never another renewal notice are now:

\$1,000 — Lifetime.

\$5,000 — After-Life, "for those who want their gift to live on."

\$10,000 — Beyond After-Life, "for those seeking atheist nirvana."

Members can also become "Immortals" by contacting FFRF to report that provisions have been made in their estate planning for FFRF.

Dues and donations to FFRF are deductible for income-tax purposes. Dues and donations of any amount are gratefully accepted.

FFRF thanks Jim for his wonderful support and oversight as a Board member.

FFRF welcomes 17 Lifers

FFRF is pleased to announce its 17 new Lifetime Members and five new Immortals.

FFRF's 17 new Life Members are: Theresa Baldock, Ronald Brady, Greg Brown, Allison Byrum, Tessa R. Clayton, Sugarboy Cannon, Lauren Deitch, Gary Garb, Hrant George, Jack Hartley, Erica Inderlied, Jeffrey Nitka, Stacy D. O'Connor, Robin Roark, A.P. Shepherd, Dave Siev, Susan C. Steinkraus.

States represented are Arizona, California, Iowa, Idaho, Maryland,

New Jersey, New York, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Texas and Wisconsin.

Individual Lifetime Memberships are \$1,000, designated as membership or membership renewal, and are deductible for income-tax purposes.

The five new Immortals are Linda Beyer, Earl L. Marble, William E. Mastrocola, David Schwartzman and Michael T. Simmons.

Immortals is a designation for those members who have contacted FFRF to report they have made provisions for FFRF in their estate planning.

NOT AFRAID OF BURNING IN HELL

Your photo here

Your name here

"Your Nontheistic label here" UNABASHED

FFRF.ORG **FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION**

New! Make your own nontheistic billboard at ffrf.org/unabashed.

HEADS UP

A Poetry Column By Philip Appleman

READING THE HEADLINES

Lusty priests paw kids in dusty Texas.
In floral Florida, where love goes oral,
Preachers group the organs of their organists.
Oh, why can't pious people just be moral?

In Maine a pastor snitches widow's pennies,
In court his *mea culpa* is pathetic.
Church trustees embezzle from the many.
Oh, why do pious people have no ethics?

In Brooklyn rabbis can't disguise their Greed,
In Georgia, *Envy* causes priests to quarrel,
In Tehran, mullahs' *Wrath* makes many bleed.
Oh, why can't pious people just be moral?

Religious people have their explanations, and
They don't *need* morals like, say, you and me,
For Protestants elect "Predestination," and
When Catholics mouth Hail Marys, they're home free.

From *Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie*
© Philip Appleman.



Philip Appleman is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Indiana University. He is editor of the Norton Critical Edition of *Darwin*. His published volumes of poetry include *New and Selected Poems: (1956-1996)*, *Perfidious Proverbs and Other Poems: A Satirical Look at the Bible* (2012), *Darwin's Ark* (new 2009 edition) and *Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie* (2009). His newest book is *The Labyrinth: God, Darwin and the Meaning of Life*. He and his playwright wife, Marjorie Appleman, are both "After-Life" Members of FFRF. Phil's books: ffrf.org/shop.

OVERHEARD

The consciousness of the church arrived a bit late, and when the consciousness arrives late, the means to resolve the problem arrives late. Perhaps the old practice of moving people around, and not confronting the problem, kept consciences asleep.



Pope Francis
Pope Francis, on the Catholic Church sexual abuse scandal.
Associated Press, 9-22-17

Saudi women are gaining the right to drive. American women are losing the right to employer-provided birth control. The first development signifies a theocratic kingdom's bow to the inex-

orable onslaught of modernity. The second is a cynical bow to the forces of reaction against modernity.
Court watcher Linda Greenhouse, in her op-ed, "On contraception, it's church over state."
New York Times, 10-15-17



Dianne Feinstein
The dogma lives loudly within you. California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, to judicial nominee Amy Coney Barrett during her Senate hearing. Barrett is a member of the Catholic group, People of Praise, whose members swear a lifelong oath of loyalty, called a covenant, to one another.
New York Times, 9-28-17

It will be remembered as our Emancipation Day. It is every bit as monumental as Aug. 26, 1920, was for American women, the date the 19th Amendment, giving them the right to vote, was ratified.
Manal al-Sharif, in an op-ed, after the Saudi Arabian monarchy finally decided on Sept. 26 to allow women to drive.
New York Times, 9-28-17

The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible

By **Ruth Hurmence Green**

A Missouri grandmother debunks the bible as no one has debunked it since Thomas Paine.

Buy it from FFRF online
shop.ffrf.org

Ship it! FFRF office assistant handles various support tasks

Name: Monica Schwartz
Where and when I was born: I was born in Beloit, Wis., in the early '90s.
Education: I graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a B.S. in community and nonprofit leadership and an entrepreneurship certificate.
Family: With my mother, father and sister, I grew up in what I consider to be the most supportive and communicative family I know.
How I came to work at FFRF: I wanted to build my nonprofit acumen by working for a national nonprofit whose mission aligned with mine. I feel lucky to have found that at FFRF.
What I do here: I am the office assistant at FFRF, meaning I pick up the support tasks that help the office stay focused and diligent. Bought anything from the FFRF store? I probably shipped it to you! Received a new-member packet? I may have stuffed it for you! Whatever helps the overarching goal of keeping state and church separate.



Photo by Chris Line

Monica Schwartz is FFRF's office assistant and helps ship items, such as the "Ask an Atheist" T-shirt, from the FFRF store (shop.ffrf.org).

What I like best about it: I get to work with incredibly intelligent and passionate people where there's endless coffee and witty banter.
What gets old about it: Remember the aforementioned shipping and stuffing? That has resulted in quite a few paper cuts, although I'm learning how to avoid them.
I spend a lot of time thinking about: What it means to be an atheist and how to label my own religious identity.
I spend little if any time thinking about: Whether the Constitution is worth working to uphold. It is.
My religious upbringing was: I was baptized Catholic, but when my mother refused to raise her daughters in a church that didn't allow women to lead the congregation, I was confirmed in a Methodist church.

My doubts about religion started: One of my earliest memories is of walking up the stairs in my childhood home during the Christmas season wearing my puffy red jacket and thinking, "Jesus . . . God . . . that can't ACTUALLY be real, right?"
Things I like: I like community. I get the biggest thrill when I know I've been a part of something that brought people together. As a loyal Wisconsinite, I also really like cheese.
Things I smite: Close-mindedness, racial and economic disparities, injustice — the usual.
In my golden years: Whenever I'm lucky enough to hit my "golden years," I hope I will feel as though I've done enough — as though I've positively impacted lives. Maybe I will reflect on that on a warm beach somewhere . . .

The write stuff!



Photo by Chris Line

During FFRF's protracted office expansion, principal founder Anne Nicol Gaylor's executive teak desk had been put in safekeeping to be used in redecorating the final new office this spring. The company that has provided all of FFRF's furniture, unfortunately, was unable to acquire matching teak pieces of the correct height. Anne hated waste and would have approved of turning the situation into a fundraiser for FFRF. So the desk was auctioned off at the FFRF convention in Madison recently. Jim Briggs, right, standing next to Annie Laurie Gaylor, was the winner of the desk Anne sat behind from 1990 until 2004, leading FFRF into the future. Jim indicated he bid on it not because he needs a desk, but to preserve the history. Anne died in 2015. Thank you, Jim!

IN THE NEWS

U.S. votes against death penalty ban for gays

A United Nations resolution banning the death penalty for homosexuality was opposed by a total of 13 countries in the U.N. Human Rights Council. While several were in Africa and the Middle East, the United States shockingly voted against the measure, as well.

The resolution passed on Sept. 29 despite U.S.’s vote, with 27 countries voting for the measure.

It was brought forward by eight nations — Belgium, Benin, Costa Rica, France, Mexico, Moldova, Mongolia, and Switzerland — that have made global LGBT rights a priority.

“It is unconscionable to think that there are hundreds of millions of people living in states where somebody may be executed simply because of whom they love,” responded the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association.

Previous efforts by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Russia to block or water down the resolution failed.

Good without God? More are saying it’s possible

Most U.S. adults now say it is not necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values, according to the Pew Research Center.

The latest survey shows that 56 percent of Americans believe you can be good without God, up 7 percentage points since the last survey in 2011. Pew also reports that almost every religious group is more likely to say you don’t need God to be good than they did in 2011.

According to the Pew report, “This increase reflects the continued growth in the share of the population that has no religious affiliation, but it also is the result of changing attitudes among those who do identify with a religion, including white evangelical Protestants.”

The growth in the share of Americans who say belief in God is unnecessary for morality aligns with the growth in the share of the population that is religiously unaffiliated. In the 2011 Pew survey, religious “nones” constituted 18 percent of the sample. In 2017, the share of “nones” rose to 25 percent.

Not everyone in U.S. has First Amendment rights?

Nearly one in five Americans incorrectly believes that Muslim citizens don’t have the same First Amendment rights as other American citizens. Also incorrectly, one in seven believes that atheists aren’t protected by those rights.

These are among the findings of a new study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylv-

vania, which also found that a fraction of Americans surveyed — 15 percent — named freedom of religion when asked to name the rights guaranteed under the First Amendment.

Those rights are: freedom of religion, speech and the press, and the right of assembly and to petition the government.

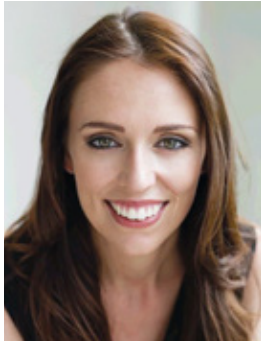
“These results emphasize the need for high-quality civics education in the schools and for press reporting that underscores the existence of constitutional protections,” said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center.

More than one-third of those asked (37 percent) could not, unprompted, name a single First Amendment protection.

And only a quarter of Americans (26 percent) could name all three branches of the government (legislative, executive and judicial).

New Zealand’s new prime minister agnostic

Jacinda Ardern, the head of New Zealand’s Labour Party, is set to become the



Jacinda Ardern

country’s next prime minister. She is a former Mormon who became an agnostic in her 20s.

Ardern, 37, will be the youngest leader in New Zealand in more than 150 years.

A staunch feminist, Ardern refused to answer whether she has considered having children, saying no male politician would be forced to answer that question.

She said that she left Mormonism because of its anti-gay prejudice. “Even before the Civil Union Bill came up, I lived in a flat with three gay friends and I was still going to church every so often, and I just remember thinking ‘This is really inconsistent — I’m either doing a disservice to the church or my friends,’” she said.

Clergy abuse records released in New Mexico

The Archdiocese of Santa Fe has released hundreds of pages of court records regarding sexual abuse allegations against clergy members following an order by a New Mexico judge, marking the largest disclosure of such records since alleged victims began suing the archdiocese nearly three decades ago.

The documents, released Oct. 18, include letters showing church leaders knew of sexual abuse allegations that had been leveled against three priests from the 1960s through the 1980s. The records show that the diocese repeated-

ly assigned priests accused of sexually abusing children to areas where they could abuse again, the Albuquerque Journal reports. The records include letters and reports from psychologists to church leaders that detail allegations against three priests.

New Mexico restores science standards

New Mexico’s public education agency announced Oct. 17 that it would restore references to evolution, global warming, and the age of the Earth that had been stripped out of the state’s proposed science education standards. The reversal comes after an outcry by teachers, scientists, students, and others — the culmination of which was a day-long public hearing on Oct. 16 in which scores of people spoke out against the draft standards, according to Mother Jones.

Christopher Ruskowski, the state’s education secretary, initially responded to critics by saying that his agency had crafted the proposed science standards — including the ones omitting evolution, human-caused global warming, and the age of the Earth — after hearing from “business groups, civic groups, teacher groups, superintendents.” He refused to name the groups specifically.

20% of countries have official state religions

More than one in five countries has an official state religion, with the majority being Muslim states, and a further 20 percent of countries have a preferred religion.

A majority (53 percent) of countries has no official or preferred religion, and 10 (5 percent) are hostile to religion, according to a report by the Pew Research Center.

Most of the 43 countries with state religions are in the Middle East and North Africa, with a cluster in northern Europe. Islam is the official religion in 27 countries in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, as well North Africa and the Middle East.

Thirteen countries — including nine in Europe — are officially Christian, two (Bhutan and Cambodia) have Buddhism as their state religion, and one (Israel) is officially a Jewish state.

Christianity is the favored faith in 28 of the 40 countries with a preferred religion.

Museum of the Bible to open in November

The Museum of the Bible, just a few blocks from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., is set to open in November.

The \$509 million nonprofit museum is the fruition of an idea by Steve Green, the evangelical president of Hobby Lobby. The 430,000-square-foot museum is bigger than the Smithsonian Museum of African-American History and occupies one-fifth the space of the Library of Congress, which has 164 million holdings.

Among the museum’s relics are first editions of the King James bible, fragments of the Dead Sea Scroll and the first bible to travel to the moon.

“They seem to be excluding a great deal of diversity that makes early history much more interesting than the mythologized version of history,” said Jeffrey Robbins, professor of religion



and philosophy at Lebanon Valley College. “It traffics in myth rather than history, and perpetrates the chasm that has opened up in American intellectual and religious life between faith and knowledge.”

Supreme Court sides with court over monument

The U.S. Supreme Court on Oct. 16 sided with a lower court that ordered a New Mexico city to remove a Ten Commandments monument from the lawn outside City Hall.

In Bloomfield, a concrete block that displays the Ten Commandments sits alongside other monuments related to the Declaration of Independence, Gettysburg Address and the Bill of Rights.

In a victory for the separation of church and state, ACLU of New Mexico Executive Director Peter Simonson said it sends a “strong message that the government should not be in the business of picking and choosing which sets of religious beliefs enjoy special favor in the community.”

The city claims it avoided endorsing a particular religion by placing disclaimers on the lawn stating the area was a public forum for citizens and that the privately funded monuments did not necessarily reflect the opinions of the city.

The Ten Commandments monument was erected in 2011 and challenged a year later by the ACLU. Lower courts concluded it violated the Constitution’s ban on the government endorsing a religion.

Roy Moore gets \$180K per year from charity

Former Alabama Supreme Court Justice Roy Moore, a Republican candidate for U.S. Senate, once said publicly that he did not take a “regular salary” from the small charity he founded to promote Christian values because he



Roy Moore

did not want to be a financial burden.

But privately, Moore had arranged to receive a salary of \$180,000 a year for part-time work at the Foundation for Moral Law, internal charity documents show. He collected more than \$1 million as president from 2007 to 2012, compensation that far surpassed what the group disclosed in its public tax filings most of those years.

When the charity couldn’t afford the full amount, Moore in 2012 was given a promissory note for back pay eventually worth \$540,000 or an equal stake of the charity’s most valuable asset, a historic building in Montgomery, Ala., mortgage records show. He holds that note even now, a charity official said.



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. 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.

FFRF VICTORIES

By Molly Hanson

California school gets constitution lesson

The staff in a California school district has been educated by FFRF on constitutional concepts after a First Amendment violation was addressed.

FFRF was informed that a teacher at Roseville High in Roseville, Calif., had been pressuring students to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance and favoring students who complied. FFRF Staff Attorney Elizabeth Cavell wrote to the Roseville Joint Union School District on Aug. 23, telling administrators that students have a constitutional right not to be coerced into participation in the pledge.

FFRF was informed on Sept. 7 in a letter from Principal David Byrd that he had met with the teacher to let her know that she could not compel any student to recite or stand for the pledge, nor could she reward students for participating in the pledge. Byrd also reported to FFRF that the entire school staff would be reminded of the law surrounding students’ rights regarding the pledge.

FFRF squashes godly speech in Texas school

After receiving a legal letter from FFRF, a Texas school district has taken steps to keep its commencement speeches secular and lawful.

It was reported to FFRF that during a commencement speech in the Quitman Independent School District in Quitman, Texas, a parent speaker quoted multiple bible verses in what should have been a secular speech. The parent also infused the speech with religious instructions, such as telling students to “seek the Lord for wisdom.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover wrote to Superintendent Rhonda Turner on June 16 informing the district that the unconstitutional speech alienated non-Christian members of the school, and that graduations are not the place for a personal promotion of religion.

On Sept. 8, FFRF received confirmation from an attorney representing the school district that future commencement speakers and subject matter would be reviewed to avoid another constitutional violation.

Church recruiters in school told to scram

A Louisiana middle school has heeded FFRF’s warning over a serious constitutional violation.


FFRF took action after it learned that a “Field Day” event hosted by Scott M. Brame Middle School in Alexandria, La., was sponsored by the school’s Fellowship of Christian Athletes and staffed by the Philadelphia Baptist Church.

During the school-day event, the church representatives, stationed at tents, proselytized students. FFRF was further alerted that the school had plans to begin a partnership with the church in the fall. FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover sent a letter to Rapides Parish Schools Superintendent Nason Authement on Aug. 3, warning the district that inviting, or allowing, a religious organization into the school to indoctrinate students is a far-reaching constitutional violation. FFRF requested that

the district investigate the situation and halt any planned church-school partnership with the Philadelphia Baptist Church.

On Sept. 8, Authement responded, informing FFRF that the violation and other Establishment Clause issues would be addressed with district administrators at a scheduled in-service.

Oklahoma sheriff’s office removes quote



A bible quote has been removed from an Oklahoma sheriff’s office building after FFRF warned against promoting religion on behalf of the government.

The bible passage quoting Matthew 5:9, “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God,” was on visible display in the Sequoyah County Sheriff’s Office. Additionally, a photo of the quote was being used as the Facebook cover photo for the office’s official page. FFRF Legal Fellow Christopher Line wrote to the sheriff’s office on July 21, explaining that it is inappropriate for the office to display the religious message, a clear government sponsorship of Christianity. FFRF requested that the bible verse be immediately removed from the sheriff’s office and from its Facebook page.

On Sept. 26, FFRF was informed that the photo had been taken down from the office and that the post had been removed from Facebook.

FFRF muffles prayer in Arkansas school

A principal at an Arkansas elementary school will no longer be pushing prayer after the district received a letter from FFRF addressing a constitutional complaint.

A concerned community member informed FFRF that a principal at Allen Elementary School in Siloam Springs, Ark., had invited first- and second-grade students to say a prayer during an announcement. On Aug. 30, FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott wrote to the Siloam Springs School District, informing administrators that public school employees may not legally encourage or lead students in prayer.

Superintendent Ken Ramey responded on Sept. 8, informing FFRF that the school district would refrain from crossing the line into prayer promotion or religious endorsement in the future.

Texas district to halt teacher-led prayers

A school district in Texas has taken precautions to ensure that it does not endorse Christianity after receiving a letter from FFRF over staff meeting prayers.

A district employee contacted FFRF to report that during an in-school training day at Brewer High School in Fort Worth, Texas, a school official led the

teachers in prayer. A few days later, an auditorium full of district employees assembled for a mandatory staff convocation event that was led in prayer. FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover wrote to the White Settlement Independent School District on Aug. 23, warning that the promotion of religious ritual was a violation of the Establishment Clause.

A legal representative of the school district responded on Sept. 13, informing FFRF that the district would comply with the constitutional principle of separation of church and state.

Teacher to stop pushing student prayers

A concerned parent alerted FFRF that a kindergarten teacher in the Booneville School District in Booneville, Miss., was selecting a student each day to lead her class in a pre-lunch prayer.

On Sept. 7, FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover wrote to the school district, cautioning that public school teachers may not encourage students to pray or otherwise endorse religion to students. FFRF asked that district immediately investigate this situation and ensure that its employees are not illegally promoting religious practice to their students.

On Sept. 21, Booneville School District Superintendent Todd English responded, informing FFRF that the teacher and the rest of the faculty had been met with regarding the reported violation.

Alabama school ceases unlawful prayer

After a concerned community member reported that a principal in an Alabama public school district organized a prayer event, FFRF took action.

FFRF learned that a principal at Mill Creek Elementary School in Huntsville, Ala., invited the public to pray for the school district community to start off the school year. The principal had also posted an invitation on Facebook for people to join her at the school on Aug. 6 to pray. In a letter sent to the school district on Sept. 22, FFRF Legal Fellow Christopher Line wrote that the principal’s invitation to community members and students to join her for an event held at the school creates the appearance of school-sponsored prayer — which is unconstitutional.

FFRF requested that the district ensure that the principal no longer host prayer events at the elementary school. On Sept. 27, the school district superintendent responded, informing FFRF that the violation had been discussed with the principal and that she was reminded of her duty to keep religion out of her role as principal.

Texas district won’t promote religion


A Texas school will no longer unlawfully promote religion after receiving a legal letter from FFRF.

A parent contacted FFRF to let it know that at Judson High School in Live Oak, Texas, a religious invocation and benediction had been delivered at the school’s graduation ceremony. The official program for the ceremony indicated that the school designated a “student chaplain” to deliver the opening invocation, which began “Dear heavenly father” and ended with a ref-

erence to “our Lord Jesus Christ” and an “Amen.”

FFRF sent a letter to the school district on June 13, warning the district against personal religious promotion. In order to protect the freedom of conscience of all students, Staff Attorney Sam Grover wrote, high school graduations must be secular events. On Sept. 13, an attorney representing the district responded by informing FFRF that district staff in charge of graduation ceremonies had been reminded to not promote religion.

FFRF halts religious promotion in school



Thanks to FFRF, a public school district in Texas has ceased its distribution of Christian propaganda.

A concerned community member informed FFRF that administrators at Wood River Elementary in Corpus Christi, Texas, sent an email promoting the event “See You at the Pole,” a Christian-oriented prayer rally organized each year around a bible verse. FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover wrote to the Calallen Independent School District on Sept. 26, warning the district that allowing any religious message or prayer gathering to be part of a school-sponsored event is unconstitutional.

FFRF was informed in an Sept. 27 faxed message that the district had counseled its teachers on not promoting “See You at the Pole” events.

Religion in Texas district exterminated

FFRF put the kibosh on future unconstitutional religious events hosted by a public school district in Texas.

It was reported to FFRF that the Burkburnett Independent School District in Texas was advertising a “Family Night” event with the first scheduled activity titled “YOUTH GROUPS Gather for Worship.” The advertisement for the event was displayed on the district’s website. FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover wrote to the school district on Sept. 20, warning it that proceeding with the event would be an illegal endorsement of religion, and a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment

An attorney representing the district responded on Sept. 27, informing FFRF that the district administration had taken measures to certify that district staff in charge of scheduling and hosting events would be reminded of the district’s obligation not to promote religion.

FFRF protects students’ freedom from pledges

Thanks to FFRF, a Wisconsin teacher has a better understanding of students’ First Amendment rights.

It was brought to FFRF’s attention by a concerned parent that a third-grade teacher at Frank Allis Elementary School in Madison, Wis., was forcing students to stand up for the Pledge of Allegiance and scolding students who would not comply. She reportedly told students that sitting during the pledge was unpatriotic and required that they bring a written and signed parental permission to sit during the recitation.

FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne wrote to the Madison Metropolitan School District on Sep. 21, notifying the district that, as the Supreme Court has ruled, students have a constitutional right not to be forced to participate in the pledge, and cannot be singled out or penalized for following their freedom of conscience. FFRF received word on Sept. 28 that the school principal had warned the teacher to end her unconstitutional classroom policy.

Texas school district to make secular changes

FFRF has halted religious promotion taking place in a Texas school district.

FFRF learned that the Lyford Consolidated School District in Lyford, Texas, was sending home permission slips with fifth-grade students so that the students could take bibles distributed by the district. FFRF was also alerted that students were being called to give invocations at Lyford High School graduations, with the 2016 prayer having mentioned Jesus.

FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover wrote to the district on June 8, requesting that the unconstitutional promotions of religion end. Grover cautioned that courts have held that distribution of bibles to students during the school day is prohibited, and that the Supreme Court has continually struck down prayers as school-sponsored events including graduations.

On Sep. 29, a district representative responded informing FFRF that a review of the high school graduation format and fifth-grade practices was underway.

New Jersey school halts promotion of worship

After receiving warning from FFRF, a New Jersey school district will cease its unconstitutional sponsorship of divisive religious activities.

It was reported to FFRF that the Millville Board of Education co-sponsored an event that included Christian worship. The event, Millville Elk’s Donald “Ducky” Sharp Youth Week, had scheduled a Sunday morning church attendance for “all Millville boys and girls in grades 1 through 6.” FFRF took swift action to inform the school that the display of favoritism for Christianity by the district was unlawful. FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne sent a letter notifying Millville Public Schools that it is unconstitutional for the district to encourage students to attend church.

A representative of the school district responded on Oct. 2, informing FFRF that the district would not sponsor the event in the future.

FFRF removes biblical game in Florida park

Thanks to FFRF, children in a Florida town can enjoy a public playground free of religious propaganda.

A resident informed FFRF that on a visit to R.E. Olds Park in Oldsmar, Fla., she had stumbled upon a small playground with a picture game that depicted the biblical tale of Noah and the ark. Each section of the game contained a passage from the legend, paraphrased directly from the book of Genesis to be more easily absorbed by children. FFRF Staff Attorney Elizabeth Cavell wrote to the city parks superintendent on July 27, informing the city that the display equated to a government endorsement of Christianity, which the city cannot legally do.

The city’s director of leisure services responded on Oct. 2, notifying FFRF that the panel had been permanently removed.

FFRF mends violations in Texas school district



A Texas school district will comply with its constitutional duty to remain neutral in matters of religion after hearing from FFRF.

It was reported to FFRF that West Elementary School in Lubbock, Texas, had been advertising a private Christian-orientated prayer rally event, “See You at the Pole,” on the school calendar. FFRF was also informed that the annual Lubbock-Cooper Independent School District staff convocation included a scheduled opening prayer.

On Sept. 27, FFRF wrote to a school district representative, Ann Manning, concerning the violations. FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover asked that the district ensure that its schools cease scheduling “See You at the Pole,” or other religious events, on campus. Grover also warned that the inclusion of prayer at staff training events violates the district’s obligation to remain neutral on matters of religion.

On Oct. 11, Manning responded, informing FFRF that the district superintendent undertook a thorough investigation into the violation. FFRF was told that going forward no outside adults will participate in “See You at the Pole” events. Manning assured FFRF that in the future convocation procedures would be reviewed with appropriate changes made to ensure compliance with constitutional law.

Religious event ends at Alabama school

An Alabama principal has been given a lesson on the First Amendment, courtesy of FFRF.

It was reported to FFRF that Roger Wilkinson, the principal of Mitchell Elementary School in Gadsden, Ala., sent a message out to all parents and students promoting a “See You at the Pole” rally — a Christian event. In the message, Wilkinson said that he would be holding the rally. In a letter sent to Superintendent Ed Miller on Sept. 26, FFRF Legal Fellow Christopher Line cautioned that public school employees may not lead, direct or encourage students to engage in prayer.

On Oct. 4, the school district superintendent responded in an email informing FFRF that he had shared

the complaint with the district administrative staff and advised that they follow all constitutional law going forward.

Kansas team guidelines given secular update

FFRF has ensured that a Kansas school football staff will prioritize its constitutional duty to keep personal religion out of coaching tactics.

FFRF was informed that the guidelines in the Eisenhower Middle School football program indicated that God is the team’s first priority. FFRF Legal Fellow Christopher Line wrote to the Liberal Unified School District on Aug. 30 warning the district that listing God first on the school team’s list of priorities illegally imposes religious sentiments upon students and demonstrates that the EMS football coaches refer religion over nonreligion.

On Oct. 5 the district attorney responded, notifying FFRF that the school board adopted a policy regarding religious expression and prayer and the coaches handbooks would be approved for no references to God, Christianity or religion.

Professor receives lesson on constitution

A professor at a Kansas public university will no longer be holding classes in a religious setting after FFRF took action.

It was reported to FFRF that a professor at Wichita State University was holding her chemistry classes in a religious coffee shop that described itself as “an outreach ministry of the Lutheran Student Center.” FFRF was informed that the shop is filled with bible quotes and other religious iconography.

In a letter sent to Wichita State University President John Bardo, FFRF expressed concern over students being required to enter a religious establishment in order to attend a science class at a secular, public university. FFRF requested that necessary and appropriate steps be taken to ensure the professor’s classes will be held in secular locations. On Oct. 1, FFRF was notified by a legal representative of the university that the violation had been remedied.

Baccalaureate service no longer promoted

FFRF was informed that Warwick Valley High School in Warwick, N.Y., was continuing to promote a baccalaureate service for graduating seniors that FFRF had raised constitutional concerns about in the past.

The Warwick Valley Central School District’s official website and calendar promote the religious event. In an Oct. 5 letter, FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert warned the district that the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits public schools from sponsoring any type of religious practice, and baccalaureate programs are religious services that include prayer and worship.

Superintendent David Leach responded on Oct. 10, informing FFRF that the school district would dissociate itself from the baccalaureate service.

FFRF earns victory in Iowa high school

A concerned parent informed FFRF that a football coach for Waukee High School in Waukee, Iowa, had instituted team prayer and devotionals.

The team’s head coach, Scott Carlson, had been praying with the team before and after every game, and requested that players join him. Reportedly, at one recent away game, the players were instructed to “take a knee” in the end zone and join Carlson in a prayer before they could leave. Furthermore, it was reported that other members of the coaching staff hold religious devotional sessions prior to every game, and encourage members of the team to attend a weekly Christian youth outreach program, “Ignition.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott wrote to the Waukee Community School District warning that public school employees may not organize and advocate for team prayer.

The school district superintendent responded on Oct. 11 notifying FFRF that the First Amendment violations had ended.

Tennessee football team prayers to end

FFRF has ensured that public prayers will not be announced during football games in a Tennessee school district.

It was reported to FFRF that at the start of a football game at McEwen Junior High in Waverly, Tenn., a Christian prayer was delivered over the loudspeaker. FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert wrote to the Humphreys County School District on Sept. 29, notifying the district that it is illegal for a public



school to sponsor a religious message at school athletic events. Markert requested that immediate steps be taken to end the use of district resources to project prayer to the public.

On Oct. 13, the school district superintendent informed FFRF that the McEwen Junior High principal had addressed the issue with the school staff to ensure the violation would not recur.

Michigan schools stop holding prayer circles

FFRF has equipped a coaching staff in a Michigan school district to have a better understanding of the First Amendment.

On Sept. 28, a prayer ritual was performed after a football player was injured in a game between Bay City High School and H.H. Dow High School in Bay City, Mich. Both teams and coaches took a knee at the 50-yard line while the athlete was given medical attention. Afterward, a “prayer circle” was formed as the players and coaching staff on both teams joined hands on the field.

FFRF sent a letter to Midland Public Schools on Oct. 11, in which FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert informed the school district that the coaching staff’s conduct had been an unconstitutional endorsement and promotion of religion. Coaches can neither lead their teams in prayer nor can they organize students to lead team prayer.

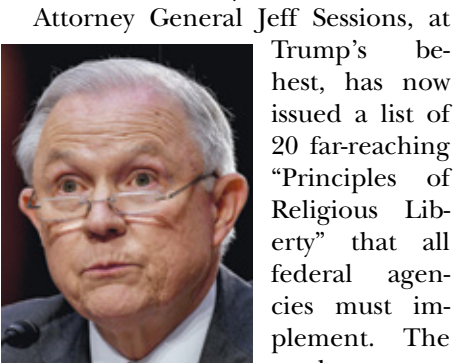
On Oct. 17, Superintendent Michael Sharrow responded, informing FFRF that the staff had explained the law to the coaching staff and remedied the violation.

FFRF NEWS

‘Religious liberty protections’ to create chaos

FFRF has come out against a series of theocratic interpretations of “religious liberty protections” that will unleash legal chaos and discrimination.

President Trump’s executive orders and memos largely redefine religious liberty as the right to discriminate and deny others civil rights. President Trump signed two executive orders under the auspices of religious liberty, permitting employers to deny women workers contraceptive coverage, in a move condemned by FFRF.



Jeff Sessions

Attorney General Jeff Sessions, at Trump’s behest, has now issued a list of 20 far-reaching “Principles of Religious Liberty” that all federal agencies must implement. The goal appears to be to exempt Christians and other religionists from the rules and regulations of civil society, including rules that prevent discrimination.

Trump instructed the attorney general “to issue guidance interpreting religious liberty protections in federal law” when he issued his May 4 order on religious liberty. That executive order, in part claiming that churches no longer had to obey the Johnson Amendment barring 501(c)(3) entities from engaging in politicking, is under court challenge by FFRF.

The unprincipled “principles” signal that the U.S. federal government will look the other way when discrimination occurs, so long as it is religiously motivated. The attorney general’s memo seeks to redefine religious free-

dom, a strategy FFRF has warned about for years. It seeks to morph a right to freely exercise one’s religion into an absolute right that can be used to harm and even discriminate against other Americans.

While some of the principles simply reiterate obvious and accepted constitutional provisions, many carve out new rights for religionists, such as:

- Saying private associations and even businesses have free exercise rights.

This would imply that secular businesses may discriminate based on religion, e.g., by refusing to hire or promote LGBTQ individuals or unmarried mothers who are considered transgressive of some religious dogma. (Principle 3)

- Repealing federal mandates pertaining to grants to faith-based organizations, saying that “the federal government may not condition federal grants or contracts on the religious organization altering its religious character, beliefs, or activities.” (Principles 4, 6)

This would appear, for example, to allow adoption or foster care agencies working with the government to discriminate against LGBTQ or interracial couples, so long as that discrimination stems from a religious belief. It would allow churches to get FEMA funding (a timely issue, with Trump tweeting support for litigation against FEMA by some Texas churches seeking hurricane relief). Principle 6 explicitly states that the government may not deny religious schools the right to participate in voucher programs, thereby seeking to bypass Congress’ role in passing such legislation.

- A religious adherent can deprive another citizen of a benefit. (Principle 15)

Allowing a religionist to deny a ben-



efit would be acceptable because the federal government must accommodate this religious belief. This clearly speaks to ongoing challenges involving cake bakers who refuse to bake cakes for same-sex weddings, plus any number of other kinds of discrimination.

At the root of the attorney general’s memo is not the First Amendment, but the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a broad and misguided act passed by Congress in the early 1990s. RFRA, not the First Amendment, was the basis of the Supreme Court’s infamous *Hobby Lobby* decision enabling some secular corporations to deny women workers contraception based on corporate “religious belief.”

Citizens may believe whatever they like, but the right to act on those beliefs is by no means absolute, FFRF points out. “Laws are made for the government of actions, and while they cannot interfere with mere religious belief and opin-

ions, they may with practices,” the Supreme Court ruled 130 years ago. The court asked: “Suppose one believed that human sacrifices were a necessary part of religious worship; would it be seriously contended that the civil government under which he lived could not interfere to prevent a sacrifice?”

Somewhere on the spectrum of religiously motivated action, civil law can step in. That line should be drawn where the rights of others begin. As Thomas Jefferson put it, “The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

But if religion mandates picking pockets and breaking legs, it comes under the purview of our secular law. And no belief, however fervent, should change that.



States side with appeal of cross decision

Fourteen states have filed a friend of the court brief siding with the city of Pensacola, Fla., in its appeal to keep the 34-foot tall Bayview Park cross, which was ruled unconstitutional after FFRF and the American Humanist Association filed suit.

FFRF and AHA filed a lawsuit against the city in May 2016 on behalf of four people who had objections to the cross being on city-owned property. A federal district judge ruled earlier this year in favor of FFRF and AHA.

On Oct. 3, Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi joined 13 other states’ attorneys general in signing on to a brief written by Alabama Attorney General Steven Marshall’s office. The brief supports the city of Pensacola’s appeal of a federal judge’s ruling that the cross in the city-owned park violated the separa-

tion of church and state.

In addition to Florida and Alabama, other states joining the friend of the court brief are Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Utah.

In addition to the 14 states, five Jewish groups, a municipal attorneys group, the Foundation for Moral Law and JCI Florida — the descendant group of the Pensacola Jaycees that placed the cross in the park — have all filed friends of the court briefs supporting Pensacola’s appeal.

The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty is representing the city in its appeal of the lawsuit. FFRF and AHA have until Nov. 16 to file their legal brief. After that, Becket will have until Dec. 14 to file a reply.

Trump’s contraception order is ‘religious liberty’ run amok

FFRF condemns President Trump’s executive orders that virtually overturn the Affordable Care Act’s contraceptive mandate by exempting any employer with a religious or “moral” objection from covering contraception.

Under the new rules, which took effect in May, any employer, including publicly traded companies and even universities, can claim a religious objection to providing birth control to employees. The Trump administration claims the twin executive orders “protect religious liberty.”

This is religious liberty run amok, contends FFRF. Religious liberty does not mean the freedom to force dogma upon unwilling employees who themselves do not share these scruples.

“As it has for millennia, religion is being used to oppress women,” notes FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Employers have no business sticking their noses into intimate health decisions by women workers. It’s outrageous.”

The contraceptive mandate has given more than 55 million women access to birth control without additional co-payments. Under these new regulations, hundreds of thousands will lose that coverage.

One executive order exempts an employer or insurer from covering contraceptive services “based on its sincerely held religious beliefs.” The other exempts employees with “moral convictions” from covering contraception.

“It’s a legal fiction — frankly absurd — that a company can have a religious belief,” says FFRF Co-President Dan Barker.

FFRF award-winner sues high school

A former student from Delta High School in Colorado has sued the school district for sabotaging her college applications because of her secular views and opposition to religiously based instruction in the public school.

On Sept. 25, two Denver attorneys filed a civil lawsuit on Sidney Fisk's behalf in U.S. District Court in Denver against the district and school officials. She is seeking compensatory and punitive damages for economic losses, emotional distress and humiliation.



Sidney Fisk

(Sidney Fisk was awarded FFRF's Richard and Beverly Hermesen Student Activist Award of \$5,000 for her outspoken questioning of authority at the school. Her story ran in the May issue of Freethought Today.)

Fisk says that teachers in the Delta County Joint School District gave the straight-A student a failing grade and denied her the ability to get scholarships because of her outspokenness.

At a meeting, a counselor warned her that she could be removed from her student government position and lose college scholarship opportunities, the lawsuit also states.

Fisk was quoted in an April 1, 2016, Daily Sentinel article about her opposition to a middle school program called "Donuts with Dan," in which a teacher gave students doughnuts and Gideon bibles.

After the article was published, the teacher dropped Fisk's grade in his class to an F. She then spoke with the teacher and the principal. Both expressly said that her grade was because of her comments in the paper. They said that if she wanted to improve her grades, she should "shut up."

FFRF scolds Gov. Bevin

FFRF has admonished the Kentucky governor for exhorting students to carry bibles to class.

In a highly inappropriate Oct. 3 Facebook video post, Gov. Matt Bevin encourages schoolchildren to bring their bibles to school. The video, which is clearly tagged as "GOVERNOR.KY.GOV," promotes *www.BringYourBible.org*, a scheme pulled together by a national evangelical outfit. The governor's video and posting encourage children to "bring your bible" into classes to convert other students to Bevin's particular brand of religion: Protestant Christianity.

In the video, Bevin erroneously calls the drive "a student-led initiative." This is not, in fact, a student-led initiative, FFRF points out. It's sponsored by Focus on the Family, as the website cap-



Matt Bevin

tioned on the video clearly shows.

Bevin claims that the bible saturation will end "all the division, and all the vitriol, and all the animosity that's striking us in this nation," an assertion that also doesn't withstand scrutiny. Nothing is more divisive for schoolchildren than injecting religion into public schools, FFRF responds.

The Supreme Court has been even more proactive in safeguarding the constitutional rights of conscience of schoolchildren, FFRF adds. More than 65 years of firm Supreme Court precedent bars officials from imposing religious ritual and indoctrination in our public schools.

FFRF imparts a history lesson to Bevin in pointing out bibles have even led to violence when forced into the public schools. In the 1840s, riots broke out in Philadelphia as Protestants and Catholics fought over which version of the bible ought to be taught in public schools. Some 20 citizens were killed, another five dozen injured, hundreds fled their home, and churches and property were burned down.

Housing

Continued from page 1

treasury, and John Koskinen, IRS commissioner. The case also had religious intervenors as defendants.

Plaintiffs are Barker and Gaylor, and Ian Gaylor, representing the estate of President Emerita Anne Nicol Gaylor, whose retirement was paid in part as a housing allowance.

"Although defendants try to characterize [this provision of the tax code] as an effort by Congress to treat ministers fairly and avoid religious entanglement, the plain language of the statute, its legislative history and its operation in practice all demonstrate a preference for ministers over secular employees," writes Crabb, for the Western District of Wisconsin.

"As I noted in the earlier lawsuit," Crabb writes, "there is no reasonable interpretation of the statute under which the phrase minister of the gospel could be construed to include employees of an organization whose purpose is to keep religion out of the public square."

Any reasonable observer would conclude that the purpose and effect of the statute is to provide financial assistance to one group of religious employees without any consideration to the secular

employees who are similarly situated to ministers, Crabb noted. "Under current law, that type of provision violates the establishment clause," she adds.

"In reaching this conclusion, I do not mean to imply that any particular minister is undeserving of the exemption or does not have a financial need for one. The important point is that many equally deserving secular employees (as well as other kinds of religious employees) could benefit from the exemption as well, but they must satisfy much more demanding requirements despite the lack of justification for the difference in treatment."

Crabb also discusses financial benefits to even wealthy ministers: "'Thus, an evangelist with a multimillion dollar home is entitled under § 107(2) to deduct the entire rental value of that home, even if it is not used for church purposes. ('Joel Osteen lives in a \$10.5 million home and is entitled to exclude the fair rental value of that home so

“The manner in which our housing allowance has been used borders on clergy malpractice.

— Pastor William Thornton

long as he spends that money on the home and his church allocates that amount to housing.”)

The benefit of the tax exemption to the clergy is enormous. The congressional Joint Committee on Taxation has reported that the exemption amounts to \$700 million a year in lost revenue.

Religion News Service calculated the allowance increases the take-home pay of some pastors by up to 10 percent. This is because churches benefit, since tax-free salaries lower their overhead. Christianity Today found that 84 percent of senior pastors receive a housing allowance of \$20,000 to \$38,000 in added (but not reported) compensation to their base salary.

"The manner in which our housing allowance has been used borders on clergy malpractice," William Thornton, a Georgia pastor and blogger, told Forbes magazine in 2013. "A growing subset of ministers who are very highly paid and who live in multimillion dollar mansions

are able to exclude hundreds of thousands of dollars from income taxation."

Clergy are permitted to use the housing allowance not just for rent or mortgage, but for home improvements, including maintenance, home improvements and repairs, dishwashers, cable TV and phone fees, paint, towels, bedding, home décor, even personal computers and bank fees. They may be exempt from taxable income up to the fair market rental value of their home, particularly helping well-heeled pastors. The subsidy extends to churches, which can pay clergy less, as tax-free salaries go further.

Becket, the law firm that represents a group of intervening clergy, released a statement labeling Crabb's decision "a devastating blow" that "threatens churches across the country with nearly \$1 billion in new taxes."

Becket said an appeal will be filed with the Chicago-based United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit.

The case was filed on behalf of FFRF by litigator Richard L. Bolton. *Gaylor et al v. U.S. Treasury* has case number 3:16-cv-00215.

Abbott

Continued from page 1

days after it was erected, lambasting it as indecent, mocking and contributing to public immorality. Abbott tweeted that he ordered the display removed because "mocking the Capitol Nativity scene is offensive."

"Defendants have justified removal of FFRF's exhibit by arguing the exhibit's satirical tone rendered it offensive to some portion of the population. That is viewpoint discrimination," writes Sparks in a 24-page ruling. "Because the ostensibly mocking tone of the FFRF exhibit is defendants' sole reason for removing the exhibit from the Ground Floor Rotunda, the court finds defendants have engaged in viewpoint discrimination as a matter of law."

The court also held that a reasonable official in Gov. Abbott's position would have known that removing FFRF's display based on its viewpoint

would violate FFRF's First Amendment rights, thus FFRF can sue Gov. Abbott in his personal capacity.

Ken Herman, an op-ed writer for the Austin American-Statesman, agreed with the judge's ruling.

"The foundation is a church-state separation group with a knack for making its points in ways that can upset some people who sometimes can benefit from a periodic upsetting," Herman wrote.

Sparks did not find that Abbott's actions violated the Establishment Clause, but also ruled in FFRF's favor that FFRF has the right to depose the governor for one hour. Abbott had fought the request for a deposition.

Rep. Howard, who sponsored the display, noted that Abbott's intervention came only one day before FFRF's display was supposed to come down. "That does appear to make this more

of a political statement," she said. "It was going to come down anyway."

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor praised the ruling as a very strong decision for FFRF, for free speech and for the rights of nonbelieving citizens.

"We'd rather keep divisive religious — and irreligious — views out of state capitols. But if the government creates public forums, and permits Christian nativities in them, there must be room at the inn for the rest of us."

Abbott says the state of Texas isn't done with this issue.

"Be assured," Abbott tweeted after the ruling, "this will be appealed."

The case is *Freedom From Religion Foundation v. Governor Greg Abbott*, Case No. A-16-CA-00233-SS. FFRF was represented by Attorney Richard L. Bolton with FFRF Attorney Sam Grover as co-counsel.



FFRF's Bill of Rights nativity display was removed by Texas Gov. Abbott, but a court decided that Abbott's action was unconstitutional.

FFRF’s Forward Award recipient

Right-wing Christianity in the age of Trump

Here is an edited version of the speech given by Katha Pollitt at FFRF’s 40th annual convention in Madison, Wis., on Sept. 15. She received FFRF’s first Forward Award.

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor introduced her:

We created this new and important award dedicated to freethinkers who are significantly moving society forward. We’re just so delighted that we will be giving this to one of my favorite people. Making a life-long contribution to moving society forward is a very remarkable woman, Katha Pollitt.

Katha is a poet and an author and the heralded columnist of the “Subject to Debate” column in The Nation, which for so many of us is a biweekly touchstone. The column, which has won numerous awards, has aptly been named the best place to go for “original thinking on the left” by the Washington Post.

Katha, throughout her career, even back when it wasn’t fashionable, has forthrightly volunteered her atheism and defended rationalism and the separation of church and state in her columns and in interviews on national TV. At a time when women’s rights, particularly reproductive rights to choose contraception and abortion, have never been more in jeopardy, we really need Katha Pollitt. [Hands her the Forward Award] Here it is. It says, “Forward Award 2017, Katha Pollitt, Freedom from Religion Foundation.”

By Katha Pollitt

I’m very grateful for the Forward Award and also for this lovely statue that goes along with it. And she, the statuette, will keep company with my Emperor Has No Clothes award that I received a few years ago, which sits in full naked glory on a table in my living room, and I think they’ll get along very well — even though she’s fully clothed, and she looks very serious. He looks kind of ridiculous. In fact, he looks a lot like a certain president and so it’s a “match made in heaven.” Let’s hope she influences him.

I want to begin with the elephant in the room, any room — Donald Trump. There is so much wrong with him, it’s just hard to know where to start. You know he’s a racist, he’s a know-nothing, he’s a sexual predator, a misogynist, a grifter, a nepotist, a climate change denier, a booster of Nazis and white supremacists. He doesn’t seem to know anything about government, and he doesn’t want to know. He spends his days tweeting and watching “Fox and Friends.”

He makes George W. Bush look like Pericles. We made a lot of fun of Bush for being unintelligent, ignorant and lazy, but that wasn’t quite fair. He read a lot. He had a whole book list. He read all the time. He read history and biography. He had some sense that he needed to get up to speed on being the leader of the free world. He couldn’t just wing it. Trump has read virtually nothing. His favorite book (at least he had the decency not to say it was the bible) is his own *The Art of the Deal*, and he didn’t even write that. And it isn’t clear he’s even read it cover to cover.

It’s staggering to think how much power he has and how much of it is detached from rationality, information and long-range thinking. He is still litigating the election via Twitter on a daily basis, trying to prove that, although



Photo by Ingrid Laas

FFRF Honorary Director Katha Pollitt reacts after hearing a question from an audience member following her speech.

he lost the popular vote to Hillary Clinton by almost 3 million votes, those votes don’t count because they were cast illegally.

This is the man who claimed for years, on the basis of no evidence whatsoever, that President Obama had not been born in the United States and was therefore an illegitimate president. And this is also the man who, despite mountains of evidence and the consensus of almost every scientist in the world, has yet to grasp the reality of climate change, and that matters when it’s the president.

Trump and religion

There are many angles from which to discuss Donald Trump’s election and its consequences. It’s such a multi-faceted disaster. I could go on all day and I’m sure so could most of you, but I’d like to look at it from the perspective of Trump’s relationship to right-wing Christianity, because that is truly a match made in hell, unlike my statues.

Evangelical Protestants are all about personal morality, by which they mean sexual morality. That’s all they care about, just sex, sex, sex . . . and religious faith. They care about that, too, as paramount. And yet they ended up supporting a twice-divorced, thrice-married flagrant philanderer and pussy-grabber who is accused of multiple acts of sexual molestation, who exemplifies everything sinful and worldly. I mean, for heaven’s sakes, the man owned gambling casinos and he boasted to Howard Stern that avoiding sexually transmitted diseases in the 1970s while sleeping with as many women as possible was his personal Vietnam. He said, “I feel like a great and very brave soldier.”

This is the same man who belittled John McCain as a loser because he was a prisoner of war during the real war in Vietnam, which Trump himself avoided. Of course, evangelical Protestants have supported many men who turned out to be not so pure and righteous, including politicians and many pastors. But those men at least had the decency to be hypocritical about it and to apol-

ogize, often tearfully, when the truth came out.

The great thing about those denominations is you can always confess your sins, claim to have received forgiveness from a phone call from God, and start the salvation clock all over again. At least men can do this. I’m not sure if women can.

Trump, by contrast, never acknowledged he’d done wrong. In fact, he boasted to an evangelical audience that he’d never ask God for forgiveness, which is the main thing Christians are supposed to do.

Moreover, he barely went through the motions of claiming to be Christian. At Jerry Falwell Jr.’s Liberty University, he referenced the book of the New Testament as Two Corinthians, when any churchgoer, and I’m sure everyone in this room, knows it’s Second Corinthians. He also cursed, which you’re not supposed to do. And in deference to the fact that he was speaking on Martin Luther King Day, dedicated the size of his crowd to King, claiming it was the biggest crowd ever at the university.

Here’s the interesting thing, as NPR reported, the loudest applause line came when he promised to defend the Second Amendment and pledged to stop the so-called “war on Christmas” by having stores say “Merry Christmas” instead of “Happy Holidays,” because, as Jesus always said, “Thou must have a semi-automatic weapon in thy home.”

Trump was not always the favorite candidate of the Christian right. Ted Cruz had a lot of support, and all the candidates toed the Christian-right line. They fell all over themselves trying to outdo each other in opposing abortion. And several were clearly more pious at the personal level, John Kasich and Marco Rubio, for example. You wonder how Christian conservatives chose from such an embarrassment of riches.

An unlikely candidate

Indeed, of all the candidates, you would think Trump was the least likely to get their support. Throughout the primary, and during the campaign it-

self, the media kept producing stories about evangelicals who doubted and complained and deplored and dithered over whether they could vote for this terrible sinner who said such awful things about women and had led such a depraved life. But, really, the doubt was all in the mind of the media, which, overcompensating for its own perceived secular-liberal-urban-bicoastal bias, which they’re always worried people are going to criticize them for, tend to cast religious Christians in a positive light.

In the end, only a handful of evangelical pastors rejected Trump and he won 80 percent of the white evangelical Protestant vote.

And just the other day, The New York Times reported that over the last five years, white evangelical Protestants went from being the least likely to say that a person could be a good leader despite a faulty private life to being the most likely to say that a faulty private life was no bar to being a good leader. They went from 30 percent five years ago to 71 percent today, and it isn’t hard to figure out what provoked this remarkable change of heart. It was Donald Trump.

I think that part of this had to do with Obama being such a personally virtuous person. He really was “No-Drama Obama.” There were no personal scandals, there were no girlfriends, there were no fights between him and his wife on the front page of the National Enquirer. The Obamas were a wonderful ideal family to have in the White House and brought great dignity and charm to it.

And I think that the evangelicals could not vote for Trump unless they had decided that these things don’t matter anymore, because then they would have had to vote for Obama, which they had not done. And they were very dedicated to being against him.

Eyes on the prize

Now, what was this all about? While the Democrats obsessed over purity politics — was Hillary Clinton evil or just very bad? — right-wingers kept their eyes on the prize. In the end, they were the practical ones. Trump made no secret of his commitment to fulfilling right-wing Christian hopes. He said he would throw their theological enemies — Muslims — out of the country. He telegraphed his misogyny on a daily basis. He attacked the so-called liberal



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Katha Pollitt



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Katha Pollitt shows off her new Forward Award, which she says she will place next to the Emperor Has No Clothes Award she received previously from FFRF.

media, the “failing” New York Times, the Washington Post, CNN, which the Christian right sees as the standard bearers for the wrong side in the culture wars. He attacked universities, those hotbeds of far-left politics and sex.

He said several times he was pro-life, acknowledging that he hadn’t always been so. He promised to nominate Supreme Court justices who would overturn *Roe v. Wade* and appoint pro-life justices to the federal bench. He chose as his running mate Mike Pence, a true religious fanatic whose main cause in life is shutting down Planned Parenthood and opposing gay rights. (Mike Pence won’t even have dinner with a woman who is not his wife. I just think that’s so weird.) This was music to the ears of the anti-abortion movement, which has been frustrated for decades by its inability to ban abortion throughout the land and has had to content itself with chipping away at abortion rights and access, little by little, a strategy that has been remarkably successful in many states, I might add.

Strangely, a surprising number of voters — pro-choice Republican women, for example — did not take Trump’s courting of the Christian right very seriously. There’s some evidence that Trump’s libertinism and vulgarity actually inoculated him.

Michelle Goldberg wrote in *Slate* that one pro-choice woman told a Planned Parenthood focus group that she wasn’t worried about Trump’s anti-abortion statements because he probably paid for a few abortions himself. Many people don’t realize that no matter what a politician really thinks, he can’t just screw over the people who put him in office. A deal’s a deal, as Trump would be the first to acknowledge, and Trump, personally blessed by a bevy of important pastors, cannot so easily dump them now.

Theocracy of dunces

By a curious irony of history, I could never get over this — the least religious president in decades is doing his best to remake America as a theocracy of

dunces. How is he doing this? Well, let me count the ways. The total is so much more than the sum of its parts. He has filled his administration with ardent right-wing Christians.

Ben Carson. I always had a soft spot for him. He always looked so kind of nice and lost up there. He’s the secretary of Housing and Urban Development who actually admitted he knows nothing about housing and urban development. Most of these know-nothings don’t do that. He believes that the pyramids were grain silos built by Joseph to prevent famines mentioned in the bible. He believes the Earth was created in six days. He has tried to connect Hillary Clinton with Lucifer, denies the reality of climate change, which is another continuing theme here, and does not think a Muslim should ever be president because ours is a Christian nation. He also believes, maybe a little bit more relevantly, that government support for poor people makes them lazy and that is a very strange position for the person in charge of public housing to hold.

And then we have Betsy DeVos as secretary of education, who knows nothing about education, and she is so underqualified and was such an unpopular choice that Vice President Pence had to break the tie in the Senate over her confirmation. She’s all for public vouchers for charter schools and religious schools.

And here’s an interesting thing. The Christian right is not just a bunch of people who believe certain things. They’re very connected with big business.

It’s very convenient for big business to have them there. And right-wing Christianity is very useful to them. If everybody went to a religious school, you wouldn’t need public schools, right? Then all the priests and nuns could teach them. According to Mother Jones, in the last 15 years, the Dick and Betsy DeVos family foundation has given \$100 million dollars in charity. Of that, nearly half has gone to Christian organizations, including the Christian school she and her children attended. And no wonder she has said

she wants to advance God’s kingdom through education.

Then we have Rick Perry, the secretary of energy who knows nothing about energy. And he was even surprised, like “Why me? Oh, well, sure I’ll do it.” He is such a devout evangelical that in 2014 he had himself baptized again. “I’ve been called to the ministry” he said in his 2012 stump speech when he was running for the presidential nomination. “I’ve just been really stunned by how big a pulpit I was going to have. I truly believe that with all my heart God has put me in this place at this time to do his will.” I guess he was wrong about that. He, like most evangelical Christians, is a climate change denier. And in an energy secretary, that matters more than anything.

And Scott Pruitt, head of the Environmental Protection Agency, he’s a fanatical anti-birth control person and anti-gay. He is also a climate change denier.

Anti-choice fanatics

Anti-choice and anti-birth control ideologues now sit in virtually every relevant position. Here we are in 2017, fighting for birth control with an administration that has stocked government agencies with anti-choice fanatics who see contraception as the enemy and funding it as a con.

Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price claims, get this, not one woman has struggled to afford birth control. FDA head Scott Gottlieb opposed the birth control provisions of the Affordable Care Act.

Title 10 is the government program that funds family planning for low-income people. The head of Title 10 is now a woman named Teresa Manning, who once said that contraception doesn’t work. Katie Tolento, health policy aide to the White House Domestic Policy Council, claims contraception leads to infertility and miscarriages. Charmaine Yost, who is the former head of Americans for Life, is now an assistant HHS secretary. She thinks the IUD and emergency contraception are abortifacients.

And the latest, as Trump promised early in May, the administration is moving to roll back the ACA birth control provision by allowing any employer to refuse on religious or moral grounds to cover birth control. Here is where you see that things that start out as really little, like the nuns of the Little

Sisters of the Poor. How many people work for them who need birth control anyway? Before you know it, it’s everybody. Before you know it, all you have to do is say, “Oh, I don’t like birth control, I think it’s immoral” and you get the ability to deny it to your workforce. So, these things that start out as little religious exceptions often balloon into much larger things.

The most important, though, is Attorney General Jeff Sessions. He’s an open racist who was denied a federal judgeship because of his obvious prejudice, and he’s a Christian extremist who has said that secularists are unfit to work in government. Here’s a quote from a 2014 speech: “Ultimately, freedom of speech is about ascertaining the truth. And if you don’t believe there’s a truth, you don’t believe in truth. If you’re an utter secularist, then how do we operate this government? How do we form a democracy of the kind I think you and I believe in?”

Sessions has claimed that the separation of church and state is an “extraconstitutional doctrine and a recent thing that is unhistorical and unconstitutional.” At his confirmation hearing, he said he wasn’t sure if a secular person understood the truth as well as a religious person. Of course, what’s weird about that is that he, as a good Christian of the sort that he is, also believes that only one religion has the truth. I doubt he would say, “Oh, yeah, Muslims, they have the truth, too. They don’t believe in Jesus, but they have the truth.”

The right to discriminate

No, he only talks about secular people, but it’s bigger than that. We don’t hear much about Christian charity when it comes to ramping up sentencing and civil forfeiture on people who are prisoners. But under the guise of religious liberty, and the Supreme Court case of *Masterpiece Cake Shop vs. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, he is throwing the weight of the Justice Department behind an evangelical cake baker’s right to discriminate against gay couples when it comes to making their wedding cake.

And this is such a good example because I know a lot of people say, “Let the baker not make the cake. What’s the big deal? They can go to another cake shop.” But, before you know it, this expands, too. How is that different from saying “Well, OK, let the restaurant not admit gay people. Let them

Continued on next page



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Katha Pollitt speaks to the FFRF audience about the unlikely alliance between right-wing Christianity and Donald Trump.



Katha Pollitt signs a copy of her latest book, *Pro: Reclaiming Abortion Rights*, following her convention speech.

Continued from previous page

go to another restaurant. Let people at the hotel not let them share a room. Let them go to another hotel.” I mean, these things expand.

It’s like with the Little Sisters of the Poor, who I’m sure were chosen because of their cute name, it sounds so harmless. But it starts with the wedding cake and it ends with civil rights. Although covered by the Colorado civil rights statutes along with race and ethnicity and all the other things that are standard in those statutes, if you can say, “Well, Colorado doesn’t have to obey its own civil rights statute,” then there is nothing to protect another state from saying “Well, OK, fine, we want to let people not make cakes for black people, or not let them into the restaurant, etc.”

This little case can have enormous ramifications. Given all these appointments, it should not surprise us that, as Slate’s Dahlia Lithwick puts it, “Members of the Trump cabinet are attending bible study with a religious leader who says, ‘God only hears the prayers of leaders and citizens who are upright, who live righteously through faith and faith in Jesus Christ.’”

He shouldn’t be listening to Donald Trump, should he? He’s definitely not living righteously through faith in Jesus Christ. The House Appropriations Committee voted to bolster Trump’s executive order weakening the Johnson Amendment, which is the tax provision that conditions the tax-exempt status of religious and other charitable institutions on not endorsing candidates for public office. People talk about the chaotic White House and the inability of Trump to enact his agenda. But when it comes to the wish list of the Religious Right, he is on the ball and very effective.

It’s like either someone is constantly there telling him what to do before he forgets or, I don’t know why, but the Religious Right is getting a lot out of this presidency and they knew they would. And that’s why they voted for him.

Demographics changing

But here’s the strange thing. Even as the Religious Right flexes its political muscle in the White House and in state legislatures, and Republicans control fully half the states completely, demographers and sociologists tell us Americans are becoming less and less religious.

There was just a major study by PRRI that I’ll just summarize a few things from.

White Christians now account for less than half of the public. White evangelical Protestants are in decline along

with mainline Protestant and white Catholics. Fewer than one in five Americans, 17 percent, are white evangelical Protestants, and even in 2006, they were nearly one-quarter. That’s quite a remarkable decline. And one reason for it is that young people are moving away from evangelical Christianity.

So, interestingly, no religious group is larger than those who are unaffiliated from religion. Nearly one in four Americans, 24 percent, are now religiously unaffiliated. And this, too, is by a generation where young adults are more than three times as likely as seniors to identify as religiously unaffiliated. In theory, demographics is our friend. In another generation or less, right-wing Christians will be too small a group to maintain their iron grip on politics. And that would be nice, but, unfortunately, it’s more complicated.

While the Democratic Party is increasingly eclectic, with 40 percent calling themselves religiously unaffiliated, white Christians have migrated into the Republican Party, where they now make up around three-quarters of the party’s membership, with more than one-third of the party’s membership being evangelical Protestant, while progressives flirted with the idea of abandoning the Democrats for a third party.

The Religious Right said, “No we’re staying here. We’re going to take over.” Because of geography and the Constitution, which, in a terrible mistake, gives every state two senators — so Idaho, which has the population of, I don’t know, Staten Island, and California each get two senators — and also because of voter disenfranchisement

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The new Forward award is a replica of the statue that stands outside the State Capitol in Wisconsin, whose motto is “Forward.”

and gerrymandering, which the Republicans are very good at.

The Republicans are punching well above their weight in the voting booth. And I’d love to believe this state of affairs is only temporary. I would love to believe that all this crazy right-wing stuff we’re seeing is the last gasp of an old order. But when Nazis and white supremacists march in Charlottesville, chanting “Jews will not replace us,” which is, of course, true, I’d like to think this is the death rattle of those who know they’ve been defeated by history.

When evangelical leaders sign a nutty document called the Nashville Statement, which is so anti-gay, anti-trans and anti-gender egalitarian, it even declares that it’s not possible for a Christian to fail to condemn any sex outside of heterosexual monogamous marriage. No forgiveness, no “we love you,” no “love the sinner, hate the sin.” You have to just hate the whole thing! It’s all so extreme and narrow that even some conservative evangelicals are upset about it and, of course, people are pointing out that several of the signatories have close ties to Donald Trump.

When Trump said during the campaign to ban abortion as murder with punishment for women and doctors, all the evangelicals, all the anti-abortion people said, “Oh, that’s terrible, we’d never do that.” In fact, they were already advocating it. And in countries where they can, they do do that. But they all said they wouldn’t. But now there is a petition for a referendum in California explicitly calling for this. I would like to believe that all this is a desperate rear-guard action by people who know they’ve lost the battles over sexual freedom, women’s autonomy, the patriarchal family, and general patriarchy, but I’m not so sure.

Does the arc of the universe bend toward justice, or is that just another religious belief? What is the evidence? In my optimistic youth, I believed in the secularization theory, which held that as the world became more modern, people would become less religious. In some countries, mostly in Western Europe, that has indeed happened. In the UK, for example, over 70 percent of those 18 to 24 say they have no religion. But it’s hardly a sure thing.

Modernity not all positive

Modernity can be quite frightening. Old hierarchies and securities collapse, communities fracture, support systems vanish, people feel adrift. Under some circumstances, modernity seems to make people more religious, and in a more reactionary way around the world, many countries have become more fundamentalist, less democratic, and more oppressive to women.

And contrary to what you might think, not all of these countries are Muslim. We always hear about them. But it’s happening in Russia, India, Israel, as well as Turkey, Pakistan and many other countries. A lot of this is political.

Most Israelis, for example, are thoroughly secular, but religious parties hold the balance of power in government. In Russia, the once nearly moribund Orthodox Church has hitched itself to Vladimir Putin’s star and he is happy to have its help to promote his nationalistic family values conservatism. In the U.S., fewer people may be religious, but the ones who remain seem pretty adamant. We’re seeing a fusion of fundamentalist religion and

right-wing politics. Not so long ago, after all, evangelical Protestants avoided politics as worldly and sinful. Those were the days.

Now they’re an organized and active political bloc. And the point of it all is to turn back the clock and bring back patriarchy and “the bible holds the answer to every question.” Obviously, evolution would not be true. Global warming is not happening unless it’s the will of God, in which case there’s nothing you can do. And how convenient that these views coincide with the big business wing of the Republican Party, where oil and gas companies rule and have promoted global warming denialism for decades.

That these positions are a reaction to modernity can be showed by a look at birth control and abortion. It’s interesting historically that Protestants tended to favor birth control. Their small families showed that they were not like those careless improvident immigrant Catholics. And historically, although not keen on abortion, it wasn’t a defining issue for them. And at the very beginning of the 1970s, right before *Roe v. Wade*, the Southern Baptist Convention issued a statement calling for possible loosening of anti-abortion laws. Flash forward to now and we find evangelicals uniting with their old enemy the Catholic Church to call for a total ban on abortion and restrictions on birth control. Who thought that that would happen?

As secular culture grows stronger, theological disputes about baptism and the pope fade away. The patriarchal denominations come together politically to turn back the tide of feminism, gay rights and sexual liberation. Women should not have power over themselves. They can all agree on that. Even that “nice” Pope Francis.

I’m going to close with the thought that nothing good will happen if people don’t fight for it. And that’s where you all come in — the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the ACLU, a whole bunch of other wonderful civil liberties and civil rights organizations.

We can’t give up the fight, even though things look pretty gloomy right now. And I’m happy to say that we aren’t giving up the fight. I think a lot of people have been very energized by this. And they’d better stay energized, because it’s going to be a bumpy four years . . . or eight years. [Audience groans] Oh no, it won’t be, it won’t be, no, no.

Thank you.

PRO: RECLAIMING ABORTION RIGHTS

— By Katha Pollitt —

Buy it from FFRF online
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FFRF awards \$9,450

2017 Essay Contest for Graduate/‘Older’ Students

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 13 winners of the 2017 Brian Bolton Graduate/“Older” Student Essay Contest.

Graduate students were asked to write a personal persuasive essay on the topic, “Why religious liberty shouldn’t mean the right to impose your religion on others.”

After careful consideration, FFRF awarded six top prizes and seven honorable mentions.

Listed below are the winners, their ages, college or university they are attending and the award amount. FFRF has paid out a total of \$9,450 in award money for this contest this year.

First place

Alexander Reamy, 22, grad student at Arizona State University (\$3,000)

Second place

Isaac Haniiff, 24, grad student at University of Illinois-Chicago (\$2,000)

Third place

Jamie Pizzi, 25, grad student at Villanova University School of Law (\$1,000)

Fourth place

Kelly O’Hay, 28, undergraduate at Alverno College (\$750)



Fifth place

Michael Crawford, 22, grad student at Temple University (\$500)

Sixth place

Ayoola White, 26, grad student at Simmons College (\$400)

Honorable mentions (\$200 each)

Peter Brown, 27, grad student at Columbia Business School

Jeffrey Fielder, 24, grad student at The Creative Circus

Sean Hansen, 26, undergraduate at Kettering University

Sarah Henry, 21, grad student at

American University

Megan Oslund, 25, undergraduate at St. Catherine University

Jake Pierog, 27, undergraduate at University of Massachusetts-Boston

Alyssa Pires, 26, grad student at University of Arizona

The graduate/“older” student contest is generously and singlehandedly endowed by Lifetime Member Brian Bolton, a retired psychologist, humanist minister and professor emeritus at the University of Arkansas. The contest is open to graduate students up to age 30,

or undergraduates ages 25-30.

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 \$9,450 reflects those bonuses.

FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994 and graduate students since 2010, and this year made permanent a contest directed specifically to freethinking students of color.

In the October issue, FFRF announced the 18 winners of the Michael Hakeem Memorial College Essay Contest and the \$11,200 it awarded to those students. In the September issue, FFRF announced the 17 winners of the William Schultz High School Essay Contest and the \$10,150 it awarded to those students. In the August issue, FFRF announced the 14 winners of the David Hudak Memorial High School Contest for Students of Color and the \$10,050 it awarded to those students. This is the final of the 2017 essay competitions. All told, FFRF awarded a record total of \$39,850 to the student essayists this year.

First Place

The meaning of religious liberty

FFRF gave a \$3,000 scholarship to Alexander for his winning essay.

By Alexander Reamy

For the past several decades, sensing that they have lost the culture war, Christian evangelicals have attempted to recover ground by redefining religious liberty as “the right to impose my Bronze Age values on your lifestyle.”

In *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, the Supreme Court cited the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) in ruling that organizations are not only people, but people with sincere religious convictions, which may restrict how employees use their medical insurance. In 2015, then-Indiana Gov. Mike Pence (now the second-most powerful man in the world) provoked nationwide protests by signing an enhanced state version of the RFRA, which allowed businesses to deny service to customers



Alexander Reamy

for religious reasons. (Most people are unaware that 20 other states have similar legislation in place.) All around the country, the concept of religious liberty is being used as a jackhammer to tear down the wall separating church from state.

The true purpose of this movement, of course, is not to defend the rights of ordinary citizens, but to give Christian fundamentalists the power to ignore inconvenient laws.

The First Amendment already guarantees citizens the right to believe whatever bizarre end-of-times story piques their interest, making the RFRA either (at best) redundant, or (more likely) a deliberate assault on secularism.

It is useful to remember as a rule of thumb: Your rights end where mine begin. Individuals are free to behave however they like, assuming they cause no harm to others. The same principle applies to religious belief. You are perfectly free to think that Jesus traveled to America to dictate his final gospel, or that Muhammad ascended to heav-

en on a winged horse — as long as you do not demand special protection for these beliefs, or require others to act as if they were true. The moment the religious start to receive legal exemptions for beliefs which are not only false, but morally repugnant, oppression and misery are bound to follow.

There is a clear difference between practicing one’s religion as a private citizen and exploiting that religion to place an unfair burden on one’s neighbors.

Take, for example, the case of Kim Davis, who became a hero to legions of the faithful (including former presidential candidates Mike Huckabee and Ted Cruz) by utilizing her “religious freedom” to deny marriage licenses to gay couples. Davis maintained that, as a Christian, she regarded homosexuality as a sin, and therefore could not be forced to violate her conscience

by condoning the union of two men or two women. (This argument lends itself well to *reductio ad absurdum* — imagine a vegetarian steakhouse employee who refuses to work because he

is morally opposed to the consumption of meat.) The simple fact remains that in her capacity as county clerk, Davis was representing the state of Kentucky, which is not permitted to discriminate against its citizens on the basis of sexuality.

Similar cases involving the conflict between private belief and public responsibility occur every day, ranging from pharmacists who refuse to fill birth control prescriptions, to public school teachers who insist on presenting the pseudo-science of creationism as an “alternative” to Darwinian evolution.

We will soon discover whether Christian lawmakers are so eager to expand the definition of “religious freedom” when they are not the sole beneficiaries; already, Muslim interest groups are borrowing their tactics, using precisely the same arguments of religious sensitivity to defend child marriage and female genital mutilation. The idea that all people are equal before the law — which, one may point out, is the foundation of liberal democracy — becomes meaningless if different religious groups are held to different standards of behavior.

Given the current administration, it is essential that freethinkers step forward to defend the original meaning of religious liberty. President Trump is working to repeal the Johnson Amendment, which prevents tax-exempt organizations (in particular, churches) from engaging in political speech. This represents merely one stage in an ongoing quest to elevate the status of religious belief above federal law.

The U.S. Constitution — which was the first in the world to establish a clear boundary between divine and temporal power — guarantees that no religious sect will receive preferential treatment from the government. It does not, however, allow religious practices to supersede common law, especially when those practices are socially harmful (e.g., restricting abortion access to women with life-threatening conditions).

As always, the best defense against the rise of theocracy is the recognition that no belief, however sincerely held, is above scrutiny.

Alexander, 21, of Hilton Head, S.C., is a graduate of Arizona State University and now attends ASU in his first year as a Ph.D. candidate in applied mathematics. He hopes to become a professional writer and researcher.

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Second Place

An awful form of religious liberty

FFRF awarded \$2,000 to Isaac for his essay.

By Isaac Haniff

Semantic shift is the concept that words change their meaning over time. A simple example of this is the word “awful,” which used to mean “awe-inspiring,” but has since taken on a primarily negative connotation. Some semantic shifts are benign and have consequences on nothing more than word choice, but in a more drastic direction we can also see this happening to a fundamental phrase woven into the American fabric.

“Religious liberty” used to mean the freedom to peacefully practice or abstain from practicing any religion of one’s choosing. Now it has become an effective weapon brandished by the Religious Right to impose its beliefs on others in the political sphere. This corrupted form of religious liberty is being used to safeguard self-labeled Christian institutions from the unfavorable legal implications of intolerance. The gradual morphing of what true religious liberty is runs counter to historical American values and has a distinctly harmful impact on current domestic policy issues.

In the mid-to-late 1700s, the Founding Fathers and their contemporaries had to establish new federal and state governments. It should be acknowledged that most either belonged to a denomination of Christianity or were Christian deists. For example, Thomas Jefferson poetically referenced “Nature’s God,” “[man’s] Creator,” and “Divine Providence,” in the

United States Declaration of Independence. George Washington’s “Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1789,” was imbued with even more religious sentiment: “And also, that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to . . . render our national government a blessing to all the people, by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws.”

Even so, the Founders promulgated the tenet of religious freedom as they set up the country’s framework. Alexander Hamilton cautioned perceptively in 1774: “Remember civil and religious liberty always go together: if the foundation of the one be sapped, the other will fall of course.” In the Virginia Legislature, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison worked tirelessly to pass the “Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom” in the early 1780s. Their accomplishment was a precursor to the first article of the Bill of Rights, which says that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The importance of religious liberty is apparent throughout the Founders’ writings; that they placed it at the forefront of the Bill of Rights broadcasts the significance they placed on it.

Today, we see the meaning of reli-

gious liberty being distorted, ironically beginning with the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993. The RFRA was passed by Congress to preserve religious liberty after the unpopular U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Employment Division v. Smith* (1990). The court ruled on the side of Oregon after the state refused to provide employment benefits to two Native Americans fired after testing positive for a psychoactive compound present in peyote. The defendants had used the illegal

substance in a religious ceremony. The outrage over the ruling pushed Congress to enact the RFRA, with the support of groups across the political spectrum, including the Amer-

ican Civil Liberties Union. However, recent developments have caused concern over the direction of the law and its application with regard to civil liberties.

In *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* (2014), the Supreme Court ruled that, through the RFRA, businesses can deny their employees insurance coverage for contraception if the company objects on religious grounds and a “less restrictive” alternative exists. The owners of Hobby Lobby successfully argued that providing insurance for contraception to their female employees violated their religious liberty as Christians.

It is lamentable that, today in America, “religious liberty” is egregiously

This corrupted form of religious liberty is being used to safeguard self-labeled Christian institutions from the unfavorable legal implications of intolerance.



Isaac Haniff

being used by companies worth billions of dollars to yank away basic rights from the American people. Unfortunately, the destruction of the wall between church and state continues elsewhere, as well. North Carolina’s discriminatory House Bill 2 and the rhetoric surrounding a “travel ban” on select countries indicate the political right’s cavalier disregard of this central principle, one that was emphasized by the Founding Fathers as key to the nation’s operation.

If they were alive today, the Founders would certainly express pride that their democratic, republican experiment was a success. But their joy would promptly be replaced by shame upon learning that religious liberty — one of their most touted, beloved ideas — was being contorted into an implement of brash prejudice.

Isaac, 24, is a grad student at the University of Illinois-Chicago working on his master’s degree in bioengineering. He graduated from the University of North Carolina with a degree in biomedical and health sciences engineering. He hopes to become a doctor.

Third Place

Sincerely held oppressive beliefs

FFRF awarded Jamie \$1,000 for her essay.

By Jamie L. Pizzi

Thomas Aquinas believed that a woman who denied her husband sex was committing an offense graver than the act of raping a stranger. Pope Pius’ writings from the 1930s conveyed that when it came to consent, a husband had veto power over whether his wife could effectively say “no” to sexual intercourse with him. This is because non-contraceptive, vaginal-penile, penetrative sex within marriage has historically been viewed as the gold standard when it comes to the type of sex acceptable in the eyes of the Lord.

The deeply heteronormative viewpoint staunchly condemns non-procreative sex for pleasure, and zealously overrules any autonomy a woman has over own body by chastising the use of contraceptives as affirmatively negating the will of God. These are the long-standing beliefs that have translated into the narrative Hobby Lobby and other religiously affiliated organizations have used to justify their abstention from complying with aspects of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) specifically created to provide women in the United States

with access to life-saving contraceptives.

In *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores* (2014), Hobby Lobby argued that providing forms of contraceptives it believed were abortifacients through its company-wide insurance plan would make it complicit in conduct it opposed on religious grounds. While modern science flatly contradicts that belief, the Supreme Court upheld Hobby Lobby’s ability to deny its female employees access to a full range of health care options under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) of 1993.

The court held that provisions of the ACA that imposed an obligation to provide certain forms of contraception that violated the sincerely held religious beliefs of the company’s owners were at odds with the RFRA, which “prohibits the federal government from taking any action that substantially burdens the exercise of religion unless that action constitutes the least restrictive means of serving a compelling government interest.”

The forms of contraception believed by Hobby Lobby to be abortion-inducing — intrauterine devices (IUDs) and Plan B emergency contraception — are not classified as abortifacients by the medical community. The fact that Hobby Lobby claimed to “sincerely believe” these forms of contraception were abortion-inducing

was persuasive enough for them to succeed in their RFRA claim. Thus, a scientifically inaccurate religious belief grounded in the idea that women’s bodies are primarily to be of use for reproduction was given greater deference than the law of the land by the Supreme Court.

As shocking as this decision was for many defenders of the separation of church and state, even more concerning are the dangers this precedent sets for women across the country, especially those of minority and lower-income status. According to a widely-cited study by the American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology, black and Hispanic women face a higher percentage of unintended pregnancies compared to their white counterparts, with lack of education and lower income only widening this discrepancy. Women who experience unintended pregnancies and their children are more likely to face a myriad of serious health and economic issues throughout their lives, limiting their ability to experience equal opportunity in society.

The study went on to attribute “healthcare system factors” as one of the main dynamics contributing to this phenomenon. Some of these issues include limited access to family planning services among the most vulnerable sects of the population due to a lack of federal funding, as well as a disproportionate number of lower-income and minority women lacking health insurance to offset the steep cost of contraception.

The ACA sought to remedy these gaps

A scientifically inaccurate religious belief grounded in the idea that women’s bodies are primarily to be of use for reproduction was given greater deference than the law of the land by the Supreme Court.



Jamie L. Pizzi

in healthcare access by further expanding Medicaid and ensuring large private businesses provided certain levels of insurance coverage for their employees, including contraception. Yet, even though increasing the availability of contraceptives would likely decrease the amount of unintended pregnancies for all women, the precedent set by the *Hobby Lobby* decision presents a major roadblock in obtaining universal access to contraception and proves there is still a “sincerely held belief” that women do not deserve full autonomy over their own bodies.

Jamie, 25, from Bryn Mawr, Pa., is a third-year law student at Villanova University School of Law. She graduated from Rollins College, with a double major in anthropology and political science. In the summer of 2016, Jamie worked for the Philadelphia Bar Association’s Delivery of Legal Services Committee, where she completed policy research focused on access to justice issues. She was an intern for the Villanova Law Institute to Address Commercial Sexual Exploitation and has become a research assistant for one of its founders.

Fourth Place

We are all different

FFRF awarded Kelly \$750 for her essay.

By Kelly O’Hay

I remember sitting in a women’s group one evening when a volunteer looked me in the eye, and asked “Do you believe in God?” In that instant, I tensed. In a place I’d come to feel safe, surrounded by other abuse survivors, it felt wrong to have to put on my armor. However, I took a deep breath and replied “No, I consider myself spiritual, but do not believe in God.”

You could feel the tension as the counselor tried to move the conversation away from religion. The women’s group was supposed to be a safe place for survivors of domestic abuse, a place where survivors could honestly be themselves. But here a volunteer was trying to bring me to God. It felt like she was telling me I was wrong. I understood where she came from. She was a survivor, too. Finding God had helped her find peace. It wasn’t that way for me.

This woman didn’t know me, but she felt comfortable telling me what to believe. As odd as it might sound, I loved that she shared her experience with religion and how it healed her. After all, maybe someone in that group needed to hear it. However, I didn’t appreciate that

she judged me for healing differently and pressured me to change my beliefs. “Why don’t you believe?” she sneered. Suddenly I felt like I needed a valid reason not to believe in God. “It just doesn’t work for me” wouldn’t be acceptable.

I felt the need to justify my healing process. Even after I explained myself, she handed me a card to her church, ignoring my wishes, and insisting I try to find God. In that moment, I put on a brave face and thanked her — but I hurt inside. She didn’t realize she had triggered the same feelings I would get from my abuser, when he’d tell me the way I remembered an event was wrong, making me question my own experience. She’ll never know that I went home and cried because I felt like my safe place had been violated. She’ll never know that whenever she was there, I stopped sharing my abuse stories because I didn’t want to have to explain myself.

As humans, we have so many different experiences and beliefs. What works for me may not work for you. That is why it’s important to protect our rights to equality.

Imagine if you applied for a job one day, and someone denied you because you were an unwed parent. You’re outraged, but have to accept it because premarital sex is against the employer’s religion. That might seem crazy with the number of single parents we have in the country, but some religions see premarital sex as a sin. If we allow people to discriminate because

of religion, where do you draw the line?

We have already seen businesses being allowed to turn away gay couples.

One story I often think about is the county clerk [Kim Davis] who denied a gay couple a marriage license because it was against her beliefs. What if doctors refused to give you or your children care unless you converted to their religion? Would you feel OK with living a lie so that you could get in to see the doctor? I wouldn’t.

When we are all so different, how can one religion or belief work for everyone? If one religion isn’t for everyone, how could we possibly create laws based on one?

Simply put, everyone should be free to believe in and follow the religion of

If we allow people to discriminate because of religion, where do you draw the line?



Kelly O’Hay

their choosing, or none at all. For life is not “one size fits all.” We all have different struggles and different ways of healing from those struggles. Your belief, no matter what it is, is valid. However, it is not OK to impose that belief on someone else. Pressing them to join your religion might do more harm than you realize, like the woman from my group who just wanted to help me heal, but caused me so much pain.

Kelly, 28, from Janesville, Wis., attends Alverno College in Milwaukee with a goal of getting a degree in business with a focus on human resources. She has worked at Grainger for two years and has helped lead an ally program for LGBT team members, and brought Equality Alliance Business Resource Group to the company’s Janesville office.

Fifth Place

The expansion of religious influence in the *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* case

FFRF awarded Michael \$500 for his essay.

By Michael Crawford

In 2014, The Supreme Court issued a 5-4 ruling, *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores*, a landmark decision that exempted closely-held businesses from adhering to laws that are contrary to the owner’s religious beliefs.

While the issue at hand involved coverage for contraceptives in the insurance plan offered by Hobby Lobby under the Affordable Care Act, this decision has far-reaching implications that pose a threat to individuals, the separation of church and state, and equal justice under the law. Although it applies only to “closely-held businesses,” such businesses constitute 90 percent of United States corporations and employ 52 percent of the workforce. The breadth of this decision cannot be overstated.

Individuals freedoms are curtailed by this case. The vast majority of U.S. corporations, some employing as many as 100,000 people, now have legal grounds for imposing the owner’s religious beliefs on his or her workers. This will in-

evitably coerce workers to adhere to a religious viewpoint that they may not agree with.

In the *Hobby Lobby* case, the company removed a service that would otherwise have been given with the purchase of the employer-provided insurance plan. One may argue that contraceptives are readily obtainable elsewhere; however, those faced with financial difficulty will find the cost prohibitive. The religious convictions of the business owner should not affect the choices that the employees make in their private lives.

The most problematic aspect of this case is its potential for expansion. Considering that more than 70 percent of the nation was Christian (as of 2014), it comes as no surprise that this ruling in favor of the evangelical Christian Hobby Lobby owners was applauded by many. This religious exemption applies to all religions, however. Consider a hypothetical case where a Muslim-owned business requires female employees to wear a hijab to work. The owners feel that they would be complicit in the alleged immorality of western culture if they allowed their workers to wear what they please. Christians would balk at this, condemning it without hesitation; however, the *Hobby Lobby* decision has set a precedent that may permit this if applied consistently. Religious people must realize that they do not have the authority to control the private lives of others, especially when those choices do not have an adverse

effect on anyone else.

The decision also undermines separation between church and state. In the *Hobby Lobby* case, the government acknowledged and accommodated a specific religious belief. While the government must regard all religions as equal, this may not happen in practice. It is more likely for Christian beliefs to be favored over those of underrepresented religious groups, such as Muslims or Jews.

A further issue arises from the potential for government to be swayed by

religious entities. Since the vast majority of corporations can now become exempt from a law that they do not agree with, the government may be forced to bend

over backwards to accommodate them. This damages the integrity of the law in question, which no longer applies universally. Religion has been given too much influence, and the government cannot be expected to cater to the innumerable religious beliefs that people hold.

Equal justice under the law comes under attack when the government gives religion privileged standing. In the *Hobby Lobby* case, the court granted the owner a religious exemption. It is important to consider what would have happened if this same belief that condemns contraception was not based on religion. If an atheist business owner attempted to strip his employees of coverage for contraceptives, he would immediately be refused. Similarly, if a nonreligious person was found in possession of peyote,

Equal justice under the law comes under attack when the government gives religion privileged standing.



Michael Crawford

an illicit drug consumed in some Native American religions, he would be convicted. Merely on the merit of being religious, people may be exempt from following certain laws. This clearly demonstrates favoritism toward religious beliefs over secular ones and a lack of equal standing under the law.

The *Hobby Lobby* case brings with it troubling implications for the influence of religion in American society. Through acknowledging the legitimacy of Hobby Lobby’s actions, the court has reaffirmed the Religious Right’s redefinition of religious liberty as a principle that permits them to impose their religious beliefs on others.

Michael, 22, is from Loganville, Ga., and attends Temple University’s Boyer College of Music and Dance, seeking a master’s degree in music composition. He graduated from Emory University, majoring in music. Michael was concertmaster of the Emory University Symphony Orchestra as a senior and was the winner of the 2015-16 Concerto and Aria Competition at the Barber Violin Concerto. He is a two-time recipient of the Department of Music’s competitive Blumenthal Award, and was recipient of the prestigious Louis B. Sudler Prize in the Arts.

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By Dan Barker

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Sixth Place

Death and deceit: The effects of the imposition of religion

FFRF awarded Ayoola \$400 for her essay.

By Ayoola White

The concept of religious liberty, as defined in the First Amendment, is a two-headed beast.

On the one hand, it seeks to avoid placing limits on people’s free exercise of religion. On the other, it forbids the establishment of a state religion. The latter measure is clearly directed at the government.

But what of private citizens? There is certainly no shortage of missionaries, proselytizers and evangelists endeavoring to expand their influence beyond their already captive audiences. They travel door to door, distribute fliers on street corners, broadcast their messages over airwaves, and, most concerning, promote legislation and government policies that reflect their belief systems.

Although religious individuals who engage in these behaviors often do so with the intention of helping other people, in reality, they are infringing on others’ freedom. The imposition of one’s own religion onto another — whether on an individual basis or at the government level — is unethical. Such an action necessitates a paternalistic denial of the agency of others to direct their own lives,

The imposition of one’s own religion onto another is unethical.

which can and does lead to lower quality of life and, in extreme cases, violence.

Of all of the Religious Right’s attempts to legislate morality, the promotion of abstinence-only sex education in schools has had a particularly wide reach. Proponents of abstinence-only education argue that if middle- and high school-age students receive accurate information about contraception, consent, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and reproductive health, they will feel encouraged to have premarital sex. As a consequence of the spread of this thinking, currently 19 states require that sex education classes focus entirely on abstinence. In the past 20 years, abstinence-only education programs have received a total of \$2 billion in federal funding.

The problem with the widespread nature of this form of education is that it has the opposite effect of what is intended. The states with the highest teen pregnancy rates and rates of STIs are those where abstinence-only measures are in place. Moreover, students who are exposed to accurate information about sex and sexual health are actually more likely to delay sex than their counterparts who do not. Thus, U.S. taxpayers — regardless of their beliefs — are consistently paying for the continuation of programs that are known to be ineffective.

The reach of the Religious Right is,

of course, not limited to the bounds of the United States. One chilling example of the international reach of U.S.-based evangelical Christianity is the uptick in persecution of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in Uganda and other African countries. In countries such as these that have had a history of being colonized by European powers, it is already common for colonial-era anti-sodomy laws to remain on the books. As such, LGBT individuals risk imprisonment and death for simply being themselves. It is common for human-rights advocates to find fault with African cultures for enforcing these laws. However, what is not commonly known is that many pre-colonial African civilizations designated esteemed societal roles for people whom we would refer to today as gay or transgender. One example is a special class of women of the Ankole people in Uganda who dressed as men to act as oracles to the gods. When religious European colonizers arrived, they treated these identities with special hostility, rendering them illegal and encouraging other colonized subjects to disparage them as well.

This trend of subjugation of minority sexualities and genders has continued in recent, postcolonial history, with evangelists from the United States such as Scott Lively taking trips to Uganda in order to warn against what they perceive to be the dire peril of homosexuality. The result has been a tenfold increase in violence toward LGBT people inspired by anti-LGBT legislation. While it is true that Lively and



Ayoola White

others have gone on record stating that they never intended for such violence to happen, their intentions are irrelevant in light of the toll that has occurred and continues to occur.

The dangerous effects of specific groups imposing their religion upon others are more numerous and well-documented than can be enumerated here. In both of the examples described here, the actions of the Religious Right violate not only the First Amendment, but also another constitutional principle, found in the Preamble: the edict “to promote the general welfare.” It is impossible to force all people to hold the same beliefs. Therefore, religion should be a private matter that is not imposed upon others.

Ayoola, 26, is from Detroit, and attends Simmons College in Boston, seeking dual master’s degrees in history and archives management. She graduated in 2013 from Mount Holyoke College, majoring in anthropology. She has won several prestigious scholarships, including the Mosaic, Spectrum and the Sarah Rebecca Reed scholarships. She hopes to become a library director.

FFRF Graduate Student Essays honorable mentions

FFRF awarded \$200 to each of the honorable mention winners. Their essays are excerpted here.

Downfall of equal rights

By Peter Brown

The past few decades have seen a dramatic rise in American right-wing power, with millions of conservatives advocating for religious freedom. Their Judeo-Christian viewpoint is not inclusive of all Americans, and instead is used to justify widespread discrimination.

The Hobby Lobby ruling, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and state-level discrimination laws represent the greatest modern-day danger to American individuals and the U.S. Constitution.

The first dangers of redefined religious freedom are to individuals, especially women. With an overwhelming majority of political lawmakers and justices being male, it is clear that our system of government does not have the appropriate perspective to protect the



Peter Brown

health of women. Instead, the Religious Right uses state law and judicial opinions to limit women’s access to contraception and abortion.

Religion has been a justification for discrimination throughout history, but recent events show the endangered status of many Americans’ civil rights. Individuals face discrimination, diminished resources, and systemic inequity when these practices are allowed to continue. Both government intervention and active citizens can protect civil liberties and the Constitution.

Peter, 27, from Easton, Mass., attends Columbia Business School. He graduated from Boston College in 2012 with a degree in history. He joined Teach For America in 2012 in Las Vegas as a corps member, then worked for the group in a finance and development role. Peter eventually would like to run a large urban school district.

Hoosier hysteria

By Jeffrey C. Fielder

Religious liberty is often misunderstood to give agency to abusively impose faith on those living outside of it. Unfortunately, this is what many Hoosiers intended to do when in 2015, then-Gov. Mike Pence signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) into law in Indiana. The bill sparked outrage throughout the

state and permanently tarnished the reputation of the Hoosier State.

Shortly after the bill was signed, a man simply referring to himself as Ryan called the “Kyle and Rachel” radio show to proclaim his support as a Christian. He did not want LGBTQ individuals coming into his restaurant and making his customers feel “uncomfortable.” The man later went on to describe how he has discriminated against gay people in the past, pretending there were issues in the kitchen so that he could prevent serving them.

As the call continued, the man referred to homosexuality as “just not right” and backed up his assertions with his beliefs as a Christian and his ability to do as he pleases with his own restaurant. Unsurprisingly, Ryan did not reveal the name of his establishment for fear of boycotts. This instance clearly displays how the RFRA emboldened people like Ryan and supported their worldview that religiously motivated discrimination is acceptable.

From an even larger perspective, the bill’s passing is a lens through which one can see many believe religious liberty justifies discrimination. Both Ryan and those who agreed with him across the state displayed a clear misunderstanding of what religious liberty truly is. The idea that denial of service to certain individuals based



Jeffrey C. Fielder

on religion is acceptable is both blatantly erroneous and undermines what it means to live in a free society.

Jeffrey, 24, from Elkhart, Ind., attends The Creative Circus and plans to graduate with a certificate in art direction. He graduated from Indiana University in 2016 with a degree in journalism. During his high school and undergraduate years, Jeffrey helped bring art programs to underprivileged schools and helped children develop early literacy skills. He hopes to become an art director at an advertising agency.

I am at liberty to take your liberty

By Sean Hansen

There is no logical or justifiable reason for religious groups to impose their edicts on those who don’t want to follow their religion, as so doing violates their freedoms.

If an employee refuses for religious reasons to do a job for which he/she was hired, he/she must be fired. The employer cannot be expected to pay the employee for not doing his/her job.

The consequence for catering to this person’s religious law would mean that the other nonbelieving workers must work harder for the believer’s sake, likely without extra compensation. In

addition, what’s to prevent other employees from claiming that they, too, are of the same faith and demand the same deal?

Why can’t it be ordered to punish someone who commits an infraction against their religion? So long as it is a “sincerely held religious belief” that apostates, critics and sinners must be killed, and their argument is that their holy text commands it, then it would be a violation of their “religious liberty” to stop them.

The truth behind religious liberty is that we are free to believe what we choose to believe, but we cannot force others to do so or capitulate to the demands of said religion. That is a violation of all other freedoms. Religious followers demand subjugation, indoctrination and enslavement of everyone outside of their religion, while crying that resisting their dictatorial oppression is a violation of their “religious liberty.” Their version of religious liberty is a weapon to take away all other liberties from everyone else.

Sean, 26, from Brighton, Mich., is an undergraduate at Kettering University, seeking a degree in electrical and mechanical engineering. He enjoys reading, learning physics and working at his engineering internship.

Religious freedom threatened across America

By Sarah Henry

Our understanding of religious liberty, a concept developed by the Founding Fathers and carried through American legal and judicial systems, may soon go the way of the black rhinoceros.

It is clear that the Trump administration favors destroying the wall between church and state.

President Trump does not just threaten the relationship between the church and the state; he threatens the very concept of religious freedom, the soul of the First Amendment.



Sean Hansen

Trump cares not about the religious freedom of the Sioux population, as they work tirelessly to protect sacred lands from the Dakota Access pipeline.

Trump cares not about the religious freedom of Muslims traveling to America, instead putting massive immigration bans on groups of people determined by the predominant religion of their home country.

Trump cares not about the religious freedom of women who choose from a bevy of contraceptive and birth control options, putting into place a worldwide gag order against nongovernmental organizations that provide women with honest medical advice.

Trump cares not about the religious freedom of sanctuary congregations, houses of worship across America that have pledged to protect all those who come to their doors.

Trump cares about religious freedom as it extends to white, Christian men, and that is not religious freedom at all.

Sarah, 21, from Georgetown, Ind., attends American University, and seeks a master’s degree in public administration. She graduated summa cum laude from Lynn University in 2016 with majors in political science and photography.

Freedom of religion does not mean freedom to discriminate

By Alyssa Pires

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act places nebulous religious beliefs above reason and scientific evidence, and effectively turns existing federal and state anti-discrimination laws on their heads, by redefining religious freedom as “freedom from discrimination” to “freedom to discriminate.”

And the *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* majority opinion is an unmitigated disaster from a scientific and medical perspective. A person or corporation’s sincerely held religious beliefs outweigh what the scientific or medical evidence says.

The potential for discrimination is not just limited to LGBTQ individuals, although as a visible minority group, they face more hostility than most. Under this interpretation of religious freedom, one could imagine using religious objections as a license to discriminate against anyone. Such thinking would ef-



Alyssa Pires

fectively nullify existing civil rights laws protecting discrimination by way of race, gender, sex, marital status, citizenship status, and even other religions.

A shop owner could religiously object to hiring African-Americans based upon a belief that they are descendants of the biblical figure Cain, who was cursed with a mark that some have presumed to be dark skin. An Orthodox Jewish businessman could religiously object to having women in the office when they are menstruating, as Orthodox Jews believe that women are ritually impure during menses. A Muslim hotel owner could refuse lodging to an unmarried couple on the basis that unmarried men and women cohabitating is immoral. The list goes on.

No sincerely held religious belief should be used as the basis to undermine reputable scientific evidence used in the courts, or as a method to circumvent hard-earned protections for women, people of color, and LGBTQ individuals.

Alyssa, 26, of Tucson, Ariz., attends the University of Arizona as a master’s student in animal and biomedical industries. She graduated from Arizona in 2014 with a bachelor’s degree in chemistry. She works at a pet hospital, where she helps triage emergencies and ensures the smooth flow of patients through the clinic. Alyssa is applying to a doctorate of veterinary program after her master’s program is completed. She hopes to someday work at a zoo as an exotic animal practitioner.

Human rights before religious liberties

By Megan Oslund

When I was 8 years old, my 91-year-old great-grandmother told me, “Child, you must learn that your rights end where mine begin.”

Now, as an adult existing in a time where there is an ever-deepening divide between the Liberal Left and the Religious Right, I find myself joining the rest of the country in wondering where exactly that invisible line in the sand is drawn. As church pews empty and conservative Christianity proceeds to age out of relevance along with its parishioners, it’s unsurprising that the Religious Right is circling the wagons and hunkering down against the onslaught of cultural change rising up from every side. It’s easy to confuse equality with persecution when you’ve held privileged status as “the norm” for so long.

In a free democracy, we must accept that our status as humans outweighs our status as Christians or Buddhists or atheists. This is where the *Hobby Lobby* decision and the redefined RFRA have trampled all over the aforementioned line.

In a capitalist system, for-profit businesses are intimately entwined with the public and the fabric of society. By giving corporations that provide services to the public the ability to pick and choose how

to dispense those services and to whom — based on religious liberties formerly reserved for individuals and nonprofit institutions — we set up an enormous power imbalance against groups that are already marginalized.

It’s time that we as citizens rise up and elect leaders who believe that an individual’s unalienable rights come before religious liberty.

Megan, 25, from El Paso, Texas, attends St. Catherine University in Minneapolis as an undergraduate student. She is seeking an associate’s degree in occupational therapy assisting. She was one of only four female operators at an oil refinery in west Texas. She has visited nine countries on five continents while on humanitarian missions. She became interested in occupational therapy when her son, who was born with a chronic liver disease, began needing intervention to improve basic motor functioning skills.

American judicial theocracy

By Jake Pierog

America finds itself very overdue for a reckoning with the increasingly overwhelming influence of evangelism in our political, social and cultural systems.

As a gay man, what expectation of equal protection under the law can I reasonably have when, for example, hospitals deny me the right to visit my spouse, as was common practice before President Obama and is very likely to become common again?

Do I lose my 14th Amendment rights because a medical emergency happens in close proximity to a Catholic hospital whose directors and doctors happen to disapprove of my union?

Consider also the way an atheist, or even a member of a religious minority, would feel while entering the court of a judge as brazenly pro-Establishment as the infamous Roy Moore, who lost his judgeship over his adamant refusal to remove a Ten Commandments statue.

What of apartment complexes owned by deeply religious persons who claim a right to exclude gay or trans tenants, or government officials who refuse to certify or recognize the marriage to which I am constitutionally entitled, much in the same way that Kim Davis did?

As a diverse nation full of homosexual, trans, atheist, agnostic and deeply religious persons, we must come to terms with the fact that our pluralistic society is, at its core, incompatible with the demands of fundamentalist religions that seek not only to impose a personal code of behavior, but a mandatory societal one, the free will of others be damned.

Jake, 27, of Binghamton, N.Y., is a political science major at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. While a student at Broome Community College, he helped form the Binghamton University Guide for Racial Justice Deliberation. Jake earned the BCC Economics Scholarship. He aspires to be involved in state-level politics.



Jake Pierog

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. with 29,000 members, works to keep state and church separate and to educate the public about the views of nontheists.

Foundation members wishing to receive online news releases, “action alerts” and “Freethought of the Day” should contact info@ffrf.org. Please include your name, email and physical mailing address.

LETTERBOX

Fight political religion with your donations

I was inspired by the letter to the editor from Stephen Van Eck, calling for people to give to organizations that fight political religion. The Christian Coalition and the B.S. of persecution has to be corralled. My donation is minor, but I plan on giving more later and sponsoring new members.

Mike Straub
Arizona

A poem for the victims of Las Vegas massacre

I wrote this poem in memory of the 600 victims of the Oct. 1 mass shooting in Las Vegas.

Thoughts and Prayers
The tears will flow,
As we watch the show.
Once again, insanity lays bare,
Once again, it's thoughts and prayers.

Church bells will ring,
Families will sting.
Once again, it's the same old fare,
Once again, it's thoughts and prayers.

Silent vigils, with candles aglow,
All are sad, in their time of woe.
Once again, bullets will tear,
Once again, it's thoughts and prayers.

Some will want the gun on trial,
Others remain, in stubborn denial.
Once again, the debate will flare,
Once again, it's thoughts and prayers

"It's people, not guns," the NRA say,
But it's people, not guns, that always pay.
Once again, the blame we must share,
Once again, we give only thoughts and prayers.

Nothing will change no matter what,
As America is governed by a gang of nuts.
Once again, not enough will care,
Once again, all we get is thoughts and prayers.

Surely by now, all must swear,
That nothing fails, like thoughts and prayers.
Once again, people have faith in these two pairs,
Once again, we see the failure of thoughts and prayers.


Brian Hinkley
Ontario, Canada

‘Clean’ money donation can help FFRF

Years ago, I had a friend who was a bank teller and I requested that the bank hold the “clean” (pre-“In God We Trust”) bills for me and I would buy them. As a result, I was fortunate to be able to access a number of them. I have donated many of those bills to fundraisers locally, but I neglected to donate to FFRF for its annual convention auction. I know this may not be your biggest fundraiser, but the “clean” money drawing is a tradition that attendees enjoy and participate in.

For that purpose, I would like to

License numbers like winning atheist lottery



Both my husband Al Bruno and I are members of FFRF. When I purchased my new car, I was surprised to see what was on my license plates. Of course, my luck at receiving three consecutive sixes was randomness, like winning the atheist lottery. A religious person might say all my years of blaspheming finally paid off!

Julie Fausette
New York

donate \$130 in three “clean” money denominations: \$100, \$20, \$10. I look forward to future conventions and the possibility of purchasing tickets to win back my donated bills!

Shirley Moll
Minnesota

Weekly report highlights great accomplishments

Thanks for your positive weekly report (by Communications Director Amit Pal). When I read about FFRF’s accomplishments, I am always rather amazed at how so few of you accomplish so much.

Please keep us members informed. And thanks for the newspaper that you send. Again, I don’t know how you manage to do that.

Warren N. Razak
Colorado

Grateful for the work FFRF does every day

Enclosed is my second and final gift of 2017 — \$800. Words are not adequate to express my gratitude for your work. I hope the one-page advertisement in The New York Times generated much interest. It was outstanding.

Thomas Johnson
California

‘Equal Means Equal’ is important documentary

First of all, I’d like to tell all of you at FFRF how much my husband and I enjoyed the conference! Thanks for all of your efforts to pull it together this year in Madison.

Secondly, if you have not viewed the documentary “Equal Means Equal,” it is worth your time! This national effort to bring women’s rights to the forefront is amazing. These efforts overlap with a number of things FFRF is trying to achieve.

The current emphasis is on Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and her blatant, ignorant efforts to deny data that define the massive rape epidemic on college campuses.

Clara Kahle
Michigan

Convention was wonderful, especially Poundstone

I just wanted to let you know how much my husband and I enjoyed the convention. I’ve had to plan things myself in the past and I know the work it takes. Every presentation was good and meaningful. And I have to tell you, we both loved Paula Poundstone. My thanks to everyone.

Janet and Preston Dollar
Louisiana

FFRF earns top rating, unlike Catholic League

Once again, Charity Navigator has awarded FFRF its highest four-star rating for accounting and financial transparency in 2017. And once again, Bill Donohue’s “Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights” receives a mediocre two-star overall rating. The Vatican must be ashamed! What is loudmouth Donohue hiding?

Also, this letter by Edna M. Carter of Queens was published in the Oct. 12 “Voice of the People” in the New York Daily News: “No one, not even God, knows when Jesus shall return.”

I have been reading the Voice of the People for over 50 years for entertainment, and have come across legions of truly moronic statements. However, this one takes the cake for hilarious stupidity. Let’s see, Jesus is keeping his overdue return a secret from . . . himself? The trinity is so confusing sometimes. Anyway, so much for God’s alleged omniscience!

Dennis Middlebrooks
New York

My Freethought Today gets shared with others

When Freethought Today arrives, I drop everything and start reading the latest and greatest issue. For inspiration, I first check out the member profiles, then I move on to the student essays and letters to the editor. Last, but certainly not least, I read the rest of the publication for enlightenment. Yes, I even read the Crank Mail and I slog through the Black Collar crime

section. I devour the entire paper in a day or two and hunger for more. In the process, I share articles and essays of special interest with my husband. (He reads FFRF news updates online for his “fix” of freethought news, sharing some of the articles with me.)

Now, what do I do with the papers after reading them? Well, for years now, I have been leaving them in medical office waiting rooms, where there is a “captive audience” always eager for something stimulating to read. The other day, after leaving my copy on the table, I decided to return a bit later to see if it had been noticed, and sure enough, a gentleman was indeed reading it. I watched him read page after page, obviously quite interested in the articles! I had to leave before he did, but I’d like to think that perhaps he took that copy home with him to finish it, and perhaps even contacted FFRF to become a member. You never know!

I plan to keep on sharing Freethought Today with strangers in waiting rooms — one paper at a time — and in the meanwhile, I’m waiting impatiently for my next issue to arrive!

Donna Barski
New York

Never too late to be a member of FFRF

I wish I had heard of your organization much sooner in my life! I’m 83 and recently learned of FFRF through your Ron Reagan ad. I immediately joined. Now I read every article thoroughly in Freethought Today. Truly inspiring!

As a child, I always questioned the beliefs of the church. When I was 15 or so, I asked my minister about the holy ghost, and he would not give a logical answer. He just said, “Ours is not to question what or why,” and walked away. After that, I attended church less and less and finally not at all. I became an agnostic and remain one today. I have friends and family who try to change me, but I won’t budge.

I will end by saying, “Thank you for being you!” Every issue of Freethought Today brings me new insight!

Bette Bessette
Nevada

Convention is a great time for many reasons

I attended my fourth FFRF convention, this time in Madison, Wis., and it was, as always, worth my time and money. Everything, from the tour of Freethought Hall to all the interesting speakers, made it one of the most enjoyable experiences I have ever had.

One of the things about FFRF conventions that I enjoy and look forward to so much are the great conversations and time spent with the friendly and wonderful members of FFRF. To be able to sit with strangers on the relaxing boat cruise, the meals together, and never hearing, “What church do you go to?” is priceless.

I am enclosing a donation to go toward your legal fund. Your attorneys’ work and dedication is outstanding!

I hope to see you all at next year’s convention!

Raymond Greenbank
Ohio

Original poem asks an existential question

Here’s an original poem for you.
“I am not a Buddhist,
Though I’ve learned to let things go
I am not a Christian,
Though I feel their undertow
I am not a Hindu, a Muslim or a Jew,
‘God’ made me an atheist
What did he do to you?”
Keep up the good work! I hope your
Ron Reagan ads are producing decent
results for us.
Judd Hermann
Minnesota

Donation should go to FFRF’s worthy goals

Circumstances allow me to be more generous than usual to worthy causes, and there are few causes more worthy than state-church separation. Theocracies have been ripped to pieces many times over the centuries because of absurd religious beliefs. I don’t want to live through such horrors, and no one else should have to endure superstition-driven oppression either.
So here is my check for \$2,500. I’m giving \$1,000 as my second Life Membership to use as you need.
The second \$1,000 is for Nonbelief Relief. I’m looking for ways to help victims of Harvey, Irma and who knows what other disasters may be coming. If you need it more for other purposes, such as helping atheists escape countries, or for waging legal battles to protect people’s rights to

contraception and abortion, devote any of that contribution to that.
Finally, I want to contribute \$500 to the Catherine Fahringer Scholarship Fund. I had the privilege of meeting Catherine several times when I traveled to freethought events in the South and exchanged letters with her until her death.
Bill Sierichs
Louisiana

‘Losing your religion’ not the correct phrase

In regard to “Longtime pastor loses his religion” in the September issue, I object to the use of the term “losing one’s religion/faith.” Losing implies the loser may want to find faith/religion again. Many of us had faith imposed upon us as a “gift” we never asked for. Now we are finders, not losers.
I suggest we redefine our terms. Rather than speaking of losing, we might instead say we discarded, dumped or recycled faith, the latter definition meaning we take our religious experiences and knowledge and use them to help others also discard their religion. Religion recyclers: Sounds cool and eco-friendly!
Carl Scheiman
Maine

Let’s send Trump FFRF’s Winter Solstice cards

The ad for the Winter Solstice cards in the October issue gave me an idea: How about we send such cards to Don-

ald Trump c/o the White House (using his unadorned name, no title). Remember, during the campaign when he said, “When I’m elected, we’ll all be saying, ‘Merry Christmas’” (What — at gunpoint?). He brought the issue up again recently during the Values Voters Summit. Let’s remind him that Christians don’t own the holiday season and we’re still free not to conform.
Stephen Van Eck
Pennsylvania

What can we do to stop Trump’s religious push?

The elimination of birth control funding by Donald Trump on the basis of his supposed endless support for the First Amendment is contradictory and ludicrous.
The media’s endless appeal for everyone to pray and their regular offerings of prayer is one thing, but our government’s doing that same thing — and much worse, including bible study groups of government members and paid ministers to branches of government — is insulting and clearly in stark conflict with the Establishment Clause. Why can there not be some effective movement to end this nonsense?
I am most offended by the general dismissal of my beliefs and the presumption that I welcome all of their occult behavior. Something needs to be done, especially now that we have a sociopath as president. The attorney general, who, of course, is in full agreement with our president in promoting Christianity, is still another force denying my

constitutional rights. What can we do? I am frightened.
David Ziglin
Wisconsin

Save use of ‘religionists’ for the true zealots

I have a comment regarding the wording in your news bulletin (“Sessions’ theocratic memo”): “The goal appears to be to exempt Christians and other religionists from the rules and regulations of civil society, including rules that prevent discrimination.”
I would have worded it slightly differently: “. . . religionists (in particular, Christianists) . . .”
Although referring to Christians as “religionists” is technically correct, the term “religionist” does carry the connotation of zealotry. Therefore, I believe the word is best used to describe not merely religion subscribers, but religion subscribers who are also motivated and operate to foist their religious beliefs and practices onto everyone else.
Let me clarify: Moderate religion subscribers, including Christians and Muslims, accept secular governance, recognize the value of the separation of church and state, and fairness and compassion toward women.
But religionist Christians (such as Attorney General Jeff Sessions) and Muslims are the ones who threaten our rights and our democracy, and who therefore require our concerted efforts to oppose them.
Jaime Hunter
Texas

CRANKMAIL

Here is the latest installment of mail FFRF has received from our detractors, published as we received it, unedited and uncensored.

Leeds High school Christian themed half-time: If you don’t like Leeds high school’s CHRISTIAN themed football halftimes (Leeds Alabama). May I suggest you or your minions NOT ATTEND THE GAMES ! You can answer to GOD later. — *Jim Ray*
God: You bunch of jackasses have nothing better to do in life but screw with all the Christians in the USA. Why don’t you turn you heathen hatred to jacking off. maybe that would give you as much pleasure and leave the rest of us to go about our daily lives with out having more Communism moving to the USA. — *Randy Gage*
Athiest America: Question? Do you believe your cause is of the Utmost Importance? If you answered yes, then this is a RELIGION. Just saying, Google it... What is a Religion: “a pursuit or interest to which someone ascribes supreme importance.” Since you have developed a web page and have taken your beliefs to court and sued others then this must be of supreme importance to you and your faith, beliefs and your Church. Just saying, maybe I should sue you for Violating my religious rights to be FREE of your Religion. Why can you force your religion on me! That’s against my Civil Right 1964 Title VII section 201,202 and 203. IF I want to exercise my religious rights in a PUBLIC Place, like say a SCHOOL and you are attempting to stop me by threatening me, I can sue you. This is a two way street. So the next time you think of forcing your religion on me/us be aware, you will be the defendant and I/my team will be holding you accountable because I will freely exercise my Individual RIGHT to to be FREE FROM your RELIGION — *Fred Blakesley*
Faith: You people are sick fucks who will most assuredly rot in the pits of hell. Disgusting and ignorant fools. — *Hank Reardon*
Religion: I would like to ask all you freedom thinkers, how do you suppose we as humans , was put on this earth? Do you think that the first humans were hatched here or maybe aliens brought us here? See I believe whole heartly that our heavenly father, Almighty God is how mankind came to be. But I can only imagine how disappointed he must be to see people like you trying to take him out of everything magnificent he has made for us! — *Carla Ford*
Violation of rights: stop violating my religious rights and the rights of my daughter that is in school I want her to learn about both sides , if you



persist I will take other measures to make sure that you do not violate my amended rights, people have a right to believe what they want even if you don’t agree with it and for the record it takes an idiot to think the earth is only 6000 years old by the way what happened to the 5000 saying what we have a 1000 years in just 10 years lol seriously anyone that thinks that the earth is only 6000 or 50000 years old is a complete Moron and anyone that things that there is no supreme being is a moron... — *Kelly Miller*
Why: Explain to me why you only attack Christians and you are so gutless when it comes to going after other religions such as Islam, prove me wrong. You target Christians because you figure we are an easy target and you hate God. The funny thing is you say you don’t believe in God but work so hard on getting Him out of everything as if He really does exist. Funny how Christians are targeted so much and yet we are the most loving, giving, and caring out of any other religion. I don’t see Hindus or Islamists going to help hurricane victims. Christ died on the cross for us because He loves us and as Christians we display that love and yet we are the most hated. I don’t stand for what you do but lets be real you are more about freedom from God and Christian values. — *Kenny Baumann*

Pray At Football Games Over Loud Speaker:
Hello Someone from your Devilish Group sent the superintendent of Lee County Schools a letter about someone praying over a loud speaker at a football game. No. 1 we are in Alabama so our matter in Alabama in no concern to what we do at a football game being your all the way in Wisconsin you yall need to concerned what they do in Wisconsin not Alabama. No.2 This my view on the prayer over the loud speaker a football game who ever sent you that letter that didn’t like the prayer going forth over loud speaker just because they was offended well the majority of people wants the prayer over the loud speaker for safety of their kids playing football so if that one doesn’t then don’t come and try to stop what the majority wants stay at home or set in your car and we are in process not having our senate leader in Alabama to approve it for prayer over loud speaker at football games so yalls business in Wisconsin and stay out of what happens way down in Alabama — *Joseph Aikens*
First amendment: You idiots wouldn’t know the first amendment if it came and slapped you across your pathetic heads fuck you and your bullshit GOD BLESS AMERICA — *Pete Saad*
You people suck: You are the stupidest people in existence. Please kill yourselves. You have NO FUCKING IDEA what is in the Constitution. The only thing the Constitution says, in case you mo-

rons can’t read, is that the Government cannot create a state religion. What the fuck is wrong with you grade school dropouts? Can you just go kill yourselves and quit bothering normal people? — *Jim Wood*
Money: If you are so damn set about religion and government, stop using US currency NOW. If you don’t, it will show your group to be bigger hypocrites than politicians. You are nothing but another HATE group who have nothing better to do than be the social guardians of religion. Every thing that you do is filled with HATE so you fit right in with AN-TIFA and the liberals. I guess in your case, simple things for simple minds if what you do is all you do. You disgust me. By the way, I help spread the word about your holiday, APRIL 1. Happy April Fools Day to you. — *Mary Skovera*
Religion: You guys are a bunch of fucktards best thing is to bring religion and prayer back to schools the kid has a right not Come people we got worst things to worry about then schools praying look at our country it’s coming apart from within open your ducking eyes and tour nonsense brains!!!!!!!!!!!! — *Kenneth Wasson*
Education: Cease to exist! Everyone in your organization needs to pick up a real law book called holy bible, start the learning process over because what you have been fed by our so called modern culture are all lies. Your fighting a losing battle. — *Frita Fletcher*
Your a fuck tard: Stay the fuck out of Texas you dumb shits. Don’t you dare come to my hometown area and say you have a problem with religion in schools. If it bothers you that schools pray at football games or any events then just don’t pray. Grow the fuck up. Life is hard and it sucks at times. Yes I’m a Christian and yeah I’m dropping f bombs but like you I can voice my opinion. Plan and simple if you don’t agree with something then leave it alone. — *Roy Vance*
Muslim True Theocracy: Why are you such cowards? You blame a U.S. citizen for running for a position and you dare to brand him with the title of Theocratic. You are such phonies. Go after the Muslims; or, is it that the Muslims are backing your organization? That makes sense. — *Gail Connerty*
Christianity: You are a Jewish organization and very soon you and the Jews will be eliminated. Jesus Christ is coming soon, and you better be prepared. Margaret sanger was a filthy lesbian, and now she is burning in the Lake of Fire. You will soon be there. — *Terry Gabrich*
Fredoom: Start off with you can go hell, Take care of you on business. you bunch of liberals jerks. you have enough to worry about, clean your on shit up. — *Charles Isbell*

BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

Kenneth H. Butler, 37, Toledo, OH: Sex trafficking of a minor. Butler is senior pastor at Kingdom Encounter Family Worship Center. A spokesman for the U.S. Attorney's Office said the case is connected to previous arrests of 2 other pastors connected to the church, **Cordell Jenkins**, 46, and **Anthony Haynes**, 38. They are charged with trafficking and production of child pornography. *Source: Toledo Blade, 10-5-17*

Sheikh Mostafa Faraj Saqr, Mahalla al-Kubra, Egypt, faces trial for marrying as many as 27 underage girls as an imam at Al-Arbaeen Mosque. The legal marriage age in Egypt is 18.

The mother of a 16-year-old said on television she begged Saqr not to marry off her daughter after her father and male relatives arranged the union with an older man. The girl also spoke out on television. "I married thinking my husband and his family would treat me well because we're related. They didn't," she said. "Now I am a divorced single mother. I don't even know how to handle my own child, my mother helps with that." *Source: Egypt Independent, 10-5-17*

Cheong "Alec" Park, 49, Neptune, NJ: Criminal sexual conduct. Park, pastor at Memorial United Methodist Church and West Grove United Methodist Church, is accused of sexually fondling a woman he was counseling as a social work professional in July.

Park "had engaged in physical contact with the woman during prior sessions by hugging and massaging her face, neck and shoulders and upper chest, telling her it was 'relaxation therapy,' " said a press release from the state attorney general. "During the session in question, after the victim had shared that she had difficulty setting boundaries, Park allegedly proceeded to massage her chest and breasts inside her bra." *Source: Asbury Park Press, 10-4-17*

Samuel Emerson, 34, Surrey, BC: Sexual touching of a person younger than 16, 13 counts of sexual assault and 11 counts of being in a position of authority and touching a person for a sexual purpose. Emerson, pastor of Cloverdale Christian Fellowship Church, is accused of assaults in 2014-17. His wife, **Madelaine Emerson**, 37, is charged with 1 count each of sexual assault, being in a position of authority and touching a person for a sexual purpose, and threats to cause death or bodily harm. They have 5 children, now in the custody of Samuel's parents. Samuel's father took over pastorship after allegations surfaced in May.

Police Cpl. Scotty Schumann said charges involve "several other young adults" and that 4 complainants were church members. *Source: CBC, 10-3-17*

Michael "Mitch" Walters, 62, South Orange, NJ: 1st- and 2nd-degree sexual assault. It's alleged he molested a boy in the 1990s when he was pastor at St. John Nepomucene Parish in Guttenberg. Walters was removed from ministry at Our Lady of Sorrows in 2016 following allegations he molested a 12-year-old boy at St. Cassian Parish in Montclair in 1982 and a 13-year-old girl in 1982 and 1983. Charges haven't been filed in those cases.

At least 8 civil suits alleging abuse by Walters have been filed by plaintiffs claiming they were victimized as children between 1982-94. *Source: nj.com, 10-2-17*

Rachel J. Piland, 30, and Joshua B. Piland, 36, Lansing, MI: Involuntary manslaughter. The Pilands, who are associated with the nondenominational Christian organization Faith Tech Ministries, are charged in the February death of their 3-day old daughter Abigail, who died of a jaundice-related condition called unconjugated hyperbilirubinemia.

The day after Abigail was born at home, a midwife told Rachel the baby needed medical care, Detective Peter Scaccia testified at a hearing: "Rachel declined to seek any medical treatment for Abigail, stating God makes no mistakes. She indicated to the midwife that the baby was fine."

The midwife scheduled a doctor's appointment but Rachel canceled it even though the baby was coughing up blood. After they found her "lifeless and not breathing," Scaccia testified, the Pilands "reached out to fellow church members to come to their home and pray for Abigail's resurrection but never called the police."

Joshua Piland has posted online videos of missionary trips to Kenya and in 2016 was listed as a speaker at a Divine Healing Conference sponsored by Faith Tech. *Source: Detroit Free Press, 9-28-17*

Fernando Cristancho, 61, Bel Air, MD: Creating and possessing child pornography. Court documents said investigators found pornographic images of a 3-year-old boy and 5-year-old boys in Cristancho's possession. He's an inactive Catholic priest who was removed from ministry in 2002 for fathering triplets by in-vitro fertilization of a woman in Colombia.

The mother lived for a time with Cristancho's mother and then with him in the rectory of St. Ignatius Parish. One of his sons alleged in 2005 that Cristancho was molesting him and his brother. *Source: WBFF, 9-28-17*

Exclusive engagement!



Photo by Alison Holt

FFRF member Alison Holt took this photo outside the Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, Calif. "I'm not sure if they think God will actually talk on Saturdays at 5 p.m., or if they are advertising a series of meetings," Holt writes.

Lakhan Dubey, 30, Delhi, India: Premeditated murder. Lakhan, a Hindu priest, is accused of strangling and burning his wife's lover. She also faces charges for the killing of Chandra Shekhar, 35, in late September.

It's alleged that after Lakhan discovered the affair, his wife of 9 years promised to end it and help murder Shekhar, whom they allegedly sedated before strangling. *Source: The Hindu, 9-28-17*

Donn Sunshine, Wytheville, VA: Assault and battery. Sunshine, pastor of First Church of God, is accused of striking Carlton Dickinson after allegedly calling him a "child abuser, a son of a bitch and a n---r, which blowed me out because he was a preacher," Dickinson told police. Sunshine is white. Dickinson also received an emergency protective order. *Source: SWVA Today, 9-27-17*

Michael Walker, 51, Huntsville, AL: Violation of mandatory reporting laws for failure to report suspected child sexual abuse. Walker, pastor of Southside Baptist Church, is accused of not reporting alleged assaults on a 12-year-old girl by **Roland Campos Jr., 63**, a Madison County deputy sheriff who has since resigned.

Police said the girl told Walker about the alleged abuse in March. Campos was charged in August with 2 counts of felony sexual abuse. *Source: al.com, 9-25-17*

Masautso Mwanza, 32, Petauke, Zambia: Defiling a minor. Mwanza, a Baptist pastor, is accused of impregnating his 14-year-old niece in June, said Police Commissioner Alex Chilufya. *Source: Lusaka Times, 9-25-17*

Paul Jordan, 31, Sioux City, IA: Soliciting prostitution. Jordan, pastor of Biblical Restoration Ministries, was among 11 men arrested in an undercover sting. **Sharita Berry**, 24, Milwaukee, was arrested for prostitution after allegedly agreeing to perform sex acts with an undercover agent for \$140. *Source: Globe Gazette, 9-20-17*

Ernest Zalamea, 26, Yonkers, NY: Endangering the welfare of a child and 1st-degree unlawfully dealing with a child. Zalamea, a youth minister at St. Joseph's Catholic Church, is accused of buying a 6-pack of beer at 7-11 and drinking it in a school parking lot with a 16-year-old boy he knew from the church.

Levelt Germain, senior pastor, said Zalamea was fired in July for insubordination before he was arrested in September for the beer incident. *Source: Journal News, 9-20-17*

James W. Cooksey, 22, Jacksonville, FL; Samuel J. Tebos, 22, Allendale, MI; Kyler S. Kregel, 21, Grand Rapids, MI; Benjamin Pettway, 21, Lookout Mountain, GA; and Noah R. Spielman, 21, Columbus, OH: The men, all students and football players at Wheaton College, a Protestant school in Illinois, are charged with aggravated battery, mob action and unlawful restraint for assaulting another student in March 2016.

The accused allegedly duct-taped the student's wrists and ankles, put a pillowcase over his head and took him to a baseball field, where they tried to sexually assault him with an object and punched and slapped him.

The police report said his cellphone was taken and he was left partially naked at the field. He told school investigators he sustained torn cartilage in both shoulders. *Source: ABC News, 9-19-17*

Sandra I. Cortes, 53, Annandale, VA: 3 counts of grand larceny (theft of at least \$200). Cortes, a volunteer at Queen of Apostles Catholic Church in Alexandria, is accused of stealing money from church collections while counting it. The amount is not known. *Source: WTOP, 9-19-17*

Promise Dlamini, 45, Lupane, Zimbabwe: Rape. Dlamini, pastor of Light of God Apostolic Church, is accused of raping a 15-year-old girl at his home while purporting to cleanse her of evil spirits. Another underage girl told police she had consensual sex with him. That investigation is continuing.

Dlamini allegedly had the girls sleep with him after telling them he didn't have enough blankets for them to sleep separately. Their parents had asked him to rid their daughters of demons. *Source: Nehanda Radio, 9-18-17*

Kenyatta L. Spencer, 42, Wake Forest, NC: Sexual battery and 2 counts of forced sex offense. Spencer, a volunteer basketball coach for at Trinity Christian Academy, is accused of alleged incidents on July 20. They did not involve a Trinity student or occur on Trinity's campus, a spokesperson said. *Source: News & Observer, 9-18-17*

Catholic priests **Fidelis Moscinski and Stephen Imbarrato and 4 women** were arrested for trespass and obstruction of justice at the Women's Health Clinic in Alexandria, VA, as part of a campaign called "Red Rose Rescue."

They approached women in the clinic to hand them red roses and cards with details on how to contact pregnancy "help" centers. A similar "rescue" took place at a Michigan clinic. *Source: Christian Times, 9-18-17*

Rodney E. Smith, 63, Mars, PA: Theft by failure to make required disposition of funds. Smith, pastor of Chippewa United Methodist Church, is accused of purchasing more than \$30,000 in gift cards with church money to be given to people in need, then using them himself. *Source: WPZI, 9-13-17*

Paul Burress, 43, Henrietta, NY: 2 counts of forcible touching. Burress, pastor at Victory Church and a mixed-martial arts fighter who operated a fight club at the church is accused of touching "the sexual or other intimate parts of another person" in separate incidents last February. Two young adult females are the complainants. *Source: USA Today, 9-11-17*

Arnel Lagarejos, 55, Taytay, Philippines: 2 counts of qualified trafficking. Lagarejos, pastor at St. John the Baptist Catholic Parish and president of Cainta Catholic College, was arrested on the way to a motel with a 13-year-old girl.

"They had met before. According to the girl, [Sept. 8] would have been the third time," Marikina Police Supt. Roger Quesada told a reporter. "The girl went with the priest because there was money involved. She said the priest paid her [\$50] per booking." *Source: GMA News, 9-11-17*

Daniel G. Little, 40, Lexington, NC: Indecent liberties with a child, 13 counts of sexual offense with a child, 11 counts of child abuse by committing a sexual act and 2 counts each of rape of a child and incest with a child younger than 13. Little, former pastor of Yadkin College Baptist Church, was also

charged in May with 1st-degree sex offense, allegedly involving a girl under 17.

The new charges are alleged to have occurred in 2010-15 and include anal, vaginal and oral sex with 2 boys and 2 girls between the ages of 4 and 12. *Source: Lexington Dispatch, 9-8-17*

An unidentified man, 27, Rondebosch, S. Africa: Possession of child pornography and failing to report knowledge of the commission of a sexual offense with children. The man, a youth pastor at Common Ground Church, is accused of duping as many as 60 teen boys into sending him explicit photos.

"The suspect allegedly hacked into his victims' social media accounts and exchanged naked photos with some of the boys in his church under the pretext that he was a girl," court documents said. "When the boys, aged between 14 and 17, decided to stop, he would then threaten them with online exposure of their pictures." *Source: news24.com, 9-8-17*

Rick Nelson, 62, Stillwater, NY: Promoting a sexual performance by a child and possessing a sexual performance by a child. Nelson, a deacon and officer at Stillwater United Presbyterian Church and village mayor, was arrested after authorities linked his internet address to the downloading of child pornography. *Source: WNBC, 9-5-17*

Aimee Chevalier, 40, Brooksville, FL: Unlawful sexual activity with a minor and transmission of harmful material to a minor. Chevalier, a cafeteria employee at Hernando Christian Academy, allegedly exchanged over 100 sexually explicit text messages with a male student. She's also charged with having sex on multiple occasions in the kitchen with the boy.

It's the same school where **Bruce McAllister, 68**, a volunteer and husband of the former principal, faces 32 sexual assault charges involving 3 foreign exchange students. *Source: Tampabay.com, 9-7-17*

Pleaded / Convicted

Edward Pasternak, 59; Lori Pasternak, 52; Joel Pasternak, 28; Jared Pasternak, 23; and Joshua Pasternak, 32, all of Newport, TN: Pleaded guilty to multiple federal charges involving the illegal manufacture and distribution of anabolic steroids and money laundering. Edward Pasternak is former pastor of Life and Praise Worship Center. He and his wife and sons "derived more than \$2.8 million in sales income, in literally thousands of transactions," court documents said.

Joel Pasternak, the purported ringleader, has been sentenced to 9 years in prison. *Source: Citizen Tribune, 9-19-17*

Sentenced

Walter G. Lewis, 64, Powhatan, VA: 1 year in jail with all but 10 days suspended, \$500 fine and 3 years' restricted license after pleading no contest to driving while intoxicated. Lewis, pastor at St. John Neumann Catholic Church, was arrested after a breath test showed his blood-alcohol level was 0.11. A deputy stopped him at 10:23 p.m. in June after his vehicle "crossed the center line and went into head-on traffic."

Lewis was previously arrested for DWI in November 2011. *Source: Times-Dispatch, 10-4-17*

David W. Farren, 42, Texarkana, AR: 15 years in prison on each of 9 sexual assault counts, to be served concurrently. The 2 victims approved the plea agreement. One victim met Farren while she was a student at Trinity Christian School and he was her youth minister at Heritage Baptist Church.

In high school, she told Farren she'd been molested as a child. Instead of reporting it as required, he started to groom her when she baby-sat and had sex with her for the first time on her 17th birthday in 2013. They had sex about 20 times when his wife was away and on a piece of carpet in the garage when she was home. She told investigators Farren said he couldn't divorce his wife because it would be a sin.

The other victim said Farren became close to her after her father's death and started touching her sexually when she was 15 and was her youth minister at Faith Baptist Church. *Source: Texarkana Gazette, 10-4-17*

Hien Minh Nguyen, 57, San Jose, CA: 3 years in prison and \$1.9 million restitution. Nguyen, a priest and director of the Vietnamese Catholic Center, was found guilty of tax evasion and bank fraud and was ordered to pay \$1.45 million to the Diocese of San Jose and \$435,000 to the Internal Revenue Service.

From 2005-10, he deposited checks made payable to the center into his bank accounts and stole cash donations to St. Patrick Cathedral. Because the embezzled funds sat largely untouched, Nguyen has been able to fully repay the diocese, prosecutors said.

He believed he could make better use of the money for his parishioners than the diocese could, his attorney claimed in a sentencing memorandum: "How else can we explain why he failed to spend a dime of the money and leave it all as deposits in his own bank accounts," Jay Weill wrote. *Source: Mercury News, 10-4-17*

Samuel Sutter, 27, Tampa Bay, FL: 19 years in prison and 25 years' probation after pleading guilty

to lewd and lascivious battery, unlawful sexual activity with a minor and use of a computer or device to solicit illegal acts. At the time, he was a 25-year-old youth pastor at Openwater Church in Odessa, TX.

“He shoved her face into bare, sweaty mattresses, so the evidence wouldn’t be on the sheets when his wife came home,” the teen victim’s mother said in court. “He obsessively reviewed every social media account she had, every text on her phone, every email, every photo.”

She also told the court Sutter forced her daughter to take morning-after pills and threatened to leave her for one of her friends if she didn’t do what he wanted. *Source: Tampa Bay Times, 9-29-17*

Kamran Hussain, 40, Tunstall, England: 6½ years in prison after being found guilty by a jury of supporting ISIS and encouraging terrorism. Hussain, a native Pakistani who is imam at Faizal Ellahi Mosque, was secretly recorded giving a series of inflammatory sermons between June and September 2016, including telling children that martyrdom was the “supreme success.” *Source: The Guardian, 9-28-17*

David M. Thorne, 36, Picayune, MS: 25 years in prison without parole after pleading guilty to sexual battery of a juvenile and touching a child for lustful purposes. Thorne, a youth minister at Goodyear Baptist Church, assaulted a 15-year-old girl twice in a church van in 2016, prosecutors said. *Source: WLOX, 9-26-17*

David E. Fisher, 70, Grand Forks, ND: 5 to 15 years in prison and \$127,000 restitution for stealing money from St. Joseph Catholic Church in Owosso, MI, where he was pastor for 23 years before retiring in 2015.

Church secretary **Nancy DeFrenn** pleaded guilty in August to stealing from the church’s St. Vincent de Paul charity account between April 2011 and June 2015. *Source: State Journal, 9-23-17*

Jonathan Graves, 60, Eastbourne, England: 12 years in prison for torturing and sexually abusing 2 boys in the 1980s and ’90s while he was vicar at St. Luke’s Anglican Church. The victims were between the ages of 12 and 14.

Graves used the children as “play things” to satisfy his “perverted sexual desires,” Judge David Rennie said, noting that he urinated on their heads and forced them to lick toothpaste from between his toes. *Source: BBC News, 9-18-17*

Luther Feltus-Curry, 69, Fairfield, CA: 23 years, 8 months in prison for convictions on 29 counts of theft and fraud while he was pastor of Revival Center Ministries. Feltus-Curry between 2008-10 promised church members big annual returns for investing in his company. At least 9 church members entrusted him with over \$1 million. *Source: Daily Republic, 9-15-17*

Eric D. Jones, 49, Bryson City, NC: 1 month in jail, 90 days’ house arrest and 3 years’ probation after pleading guilty to indecent liberties with a child. Jones, a longtime family friend, started molesting the victim in 2002 when she was 9. He most recently was pastor at Beaver Creek Baptist Church before resigning after his arrest earlier this year. *Source: Citizen-Times, 9-14-17*

Lynn M. Warner, 35, Rockford, IL: 180 days in jail suspended and restitution of \$340,000 after pleading guilty to theft from a place of worship. Warner was secretary at St. Paul Lutheran Church until resigning in 2014 after working there about 10 years. A civil case is pending. *Source: Register Star, 9-14-17*

John S. Mraz, 67, Bethlehem, PA: 6 to 23 months in prison after pleading guilty to possession of child pornography, illegal use of a communication facility and obtaining obscene/sexual images. Mraz was removed from public ministry as pastor at St. Ann’s Catholic Church in Emmaus after being arrested. A friend and parishioner discovered images of nude children on his computer while updating it in July. *Source: Morning Call, 9-14-17*

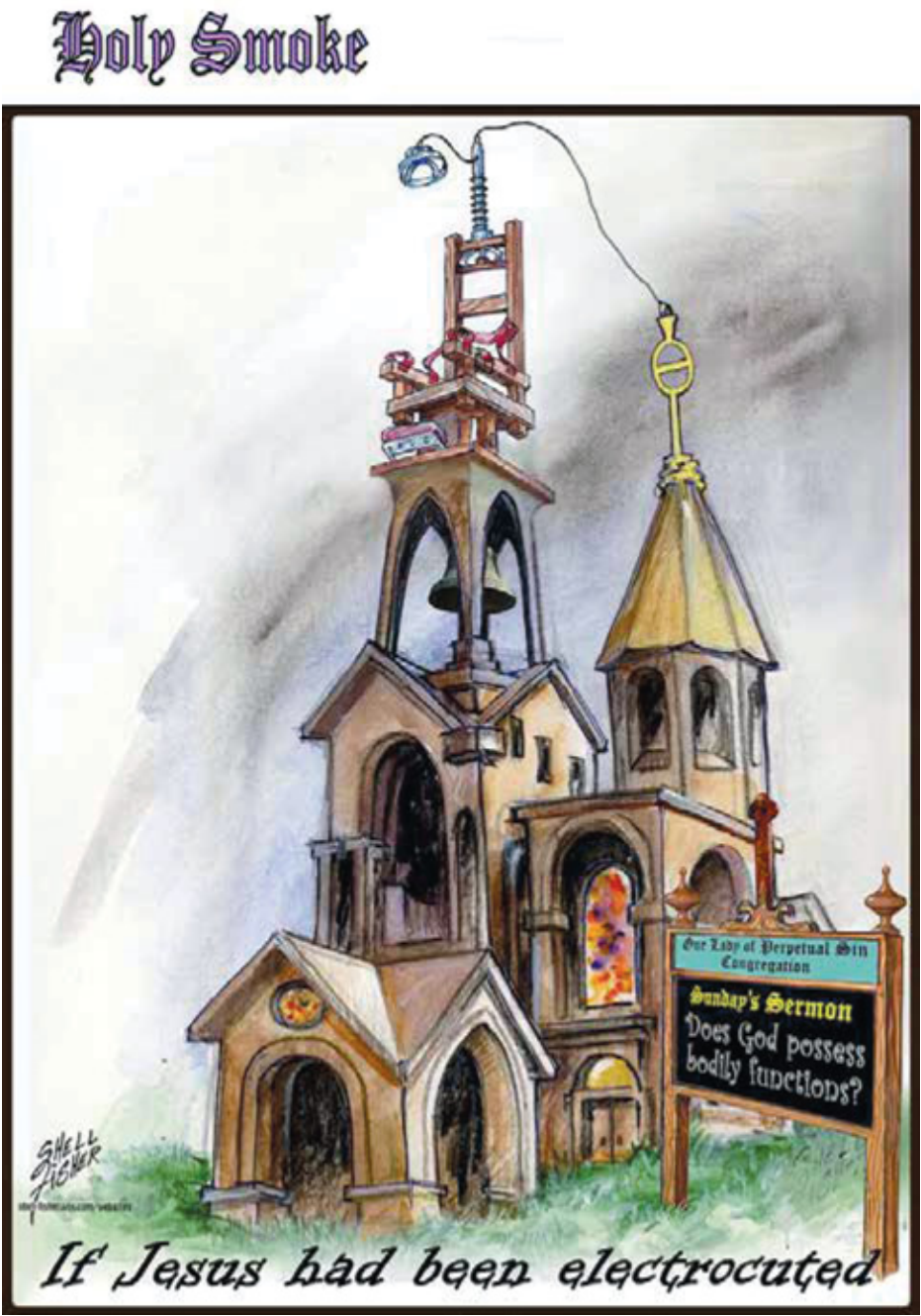
Daniel Hoffman, 31, Jenison, MI: 3½ to 15 years in prison after pleading guilty to 2 counts of criminal sexual conduct. The male victim alleged Hoffman molested him from 2003-08, starting when he was 5 or 6. At the time, Hoffman was a counselor at a “Christ-centered” camp. Most recently he was a youth pastor at Alive Ministries. *Source: WOOD, 9-12-17*

William Haymaker, 64, Bexhill, England: 200 hours’ community service and \$4,900 costs after a jury found him guilty of possessing an article for use in a fraud. Haymaker, an Anglican priest, was accused of using a disabled parking permit issued to a woman who had been dead for 2 months. *Source: The Telegraph, 9-11-17*

Adrian Van Klooster, 75, Maddington, Australia: 1 year in jail for possessing a CD with comic book images downloaded from the internet that showed children being subjected to abuse and incest. In 2003, Van Klooster was sentenced to 8 years for sexually abusing 2 boys and 3 girls while he was a Catholic priest in the Bunbury Diocese.

He claimed he downloaded the comics not for sexual gratification but because he wanted to get insight into incest that happened in his own family. *Source: ABC Online, 9-8-17*

Giorgi Mamaladze, Tbilisi, Georgia: 9 years in prison for plotting a murder with mercenary pur-



poses. Mamaladze, property director of the Georgian Orthodox Church, was accused of planning to use sodium cyanide to poison Shorena Tetrusvili, secretary to Patriarch Ilia II, the head of the church, in order to advance his career. *Source: Christian Today, 9-7-17*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

Gordon Dominey, an Anglican Archdiocese of Edmonton priest from 1980-90, is being sued by 10 plaintiffs who allege sexual abuse, including forced intercourse, while they were incarcerated at the Edmonton Youth Development Centre between 1985-89. Co-defendants are the archdiocese and province of Alberta.

Dominey also faces 30 sexual assault and gross indecency charges. His criminal trial is set for January 2019. *Source: CBC, 9-26-17*

The **Archdiocese of Agana/Guam, San Vicente Catholic School** and **up to 50 other defendants** are being sued for alleged sexual abuse by now-deceased priest **Zoilo Camacho**, who died in 2007. Plaintiff R.A.J., a California resident, alleges he was locked in a closet by a nun as punishment for leaving the playground to buy snacks when he was 6 or 7 in 1961 and 1962.

“After being in the closet for quite some time, Camacho opened the closet door, reached in, and started touching R.A.J.’s private parts outside his pants,” the lawsuit states. It’s the 125th suit filed against the archdiocese and other religious orders for sex abuse by clergy or others affiliated with the Catholic Church on Guam. *Source: Pacific Daily News, 9-25-17*

The **Catholic Diocese of Santa Rosa, CA**, and the **Hanna Boys Center** in Sonoma are being sued by a teen, now 18, who claims the defendants failed to prevent his sexual abuse by a counselor who took advantage of his troubled past.

Counselor **Angelica Malinski**, 22, was found hiding inside the boy’s dorm room last year and charged with misdemeanor unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor. Weeks earlier, center officials were put “on notice” about the pair meeting at night but did little about it, the suit alleges.

The facility, founded by the diocese, advertises that it takes “at-risk” youths and changes them through “faith, education and caring.” The boy enrolled in June 2016 and his “vulnerable” history was shared with school staff, it’s alleged. *Source: Mercury News, 9-19-17*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

Bishop Michael Hoeppner of the Catholic Diocese of Crookston, MN, has settled a suit filed by

Ronald Vasek, who alleged he was blackmailed into signing a 2015 letter retracting his allegation he was molested by a priest in 1971 when he was 16. An undisclosed amount will be paid by insurance. A claim against the diocese is still pending.

Vasek claimed Hoeppner threatened to block his path to becoming a deacon and to harm his son’s career in the priesthood if he didn’t sign the letter. The priest, **Roger Grundhaus**, a former diocesan vicar general, remains suspended from public ministry. *Source: St. Cloud Times, 10-1-17*

The **Seattle Catholic Archdiocese** settled for \$1.3 million a suit filed by a man who alleged he was molested as an elementary student at a public school by **Edward Courtney**, a member of the Christian Brothers who was removed from the Catholic school system due to molestation allegations. Another suit is pending.

As a Catholic brother, Courtney was transferred among schools in Illinois, Michigan and Washington in the 1960s and 1970s. He was never charged criminally until 1988, when he pleaded guilty to indecent liberties with a minor after public school officials reported him.

The archdiocese never reported the multiple allegations and transfers to the state, although it was required to do so. In his early 80s, Courtney is believed to be living in Hawaii. *Source: KIRO, 9-25-17*

Daniel Kresinski, Dubois, PA, pastor of St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Parish, was ordered to refrain from public ministry to settle a sexual harassment suit filed by Kathleen Clement, 60. She alleged she was forced to resign as parish religious programs facilitator in 2013 due to a hostile work atmosphere, including Kresinski repeatedly touching himself inappropriately in her presence.

Other settlement terms weren’t released. A clergy review board recommended removing Kresinski “until further notice for the good order of the church.” *Source: Courier-Express, 9-11-17*

Legal Developments

The 2015 sexual abuse conviction of **Michael Sperou**, 66, was upheld by the Oregon Court of Appeals. Seven women accused Sperou, co-founder of North Clackamas Bible Community, of assaults in the 1990s but he wasn’t charged until 2013, when the statute of limitations had expired on 6 of the cases. The 6 women were, however, allowed to testify in the other woman’s case about their experiences with Sperou. *Source: The Oregonian, 10-3-17*

Carlo Capella, 50, the Vatican diplomat recalled from service in Washington because of child pornography allegations, is wanted in Canada. A statement from Ontario authorities said, “Investigators believe that the [child pornography] offenses occurred while the suspect was visiting a place of worship in Windsor.”

Although the Vatican hasn’t publicly confirmed Msgr. Capella’s identity, it didn’t object when news outlets identified him as the diplomat recalled to

Italy. The Vatican denied a U.S. request to lift his diplomatic immunity. *Source: Catholic News Service, 9-29-17*

John Yelton, 36, Gastonia, NC, a Baptist pastor on the run from child abuse charges, was arrested in Florida. He skipped bail in July and was tracked down by a bail bondsman to Panama City, where he was working at a manufacturing plant.

Seven women have told authorities they were in abusive relationships with Yelton, including his ex-wife April Justice, who met him through a youth group at Canaan Land Baptist Church. *Source: News Herald, 9-29-17*

Philippe Barbarin, 66, the most senior French Catholic leader to be tried for allegedly failing to report a predator priest, will go on trial next April. Barbarin, who is a cardinal and the archbishop of Lyon, is accused of covering up abuse by **Bernard Preynat**.

Barbarin has said he learned in 2007 that Preynat had been accused of sexual abuse in the 1980s. He wasn’t removed from ministry until 2015 except for a brief suspension in the 1980s and wasn’t charged until last January. *Source: The Local, 9-19-17*

Robert Poandl, 76, lost his appeal of a 2013 conviction for raping a 10-year-old altar boy in 1991 in a church rectory in West Virginia. Poandl claimed his attorneys made mistakes and argued that no Catholic priest accused of pedophilia could receive a fair trial at the time.

The appeals court dismissed all of his claims, describing them as “insignificant in relation to the evidence of Poandl’s guilt.” He’s serving a 7½-year sentence and is being treated for kidney cancer. *Source: WCPO, 9-12-17*

Daniel McCormack, 48, a defrocked Illinois Catholic priest imprisoned at Rushville since 2007, was declared by Cook County Judge Dennis Porter to be a sexually violent person, clearing the way for him to be incarcerated indefinitely even though he has served his entire sentence and was eligible for parole in 2009.

“I think it is much more likely than not that, without treatment, you will commit further acts of sexual violence,” Porter told McCormack at the conclusion of a 3-day hearing. Another hearing to determine his fate will be conducted by Porter in November.

The Chicago Archdiocese has paid out \$139 million in clerical sexual abuse claims. So far in 2017, the church has agreed to pay \$7.5 million to settle suits involving McCormack, with 8 still pending. *Source: Chicago Tribune, 9-8-17*

Michael “Derek” Jones, 35, Conway, AR, arrested in July for 3rd-degree domestic battery, is now charged with 2nd-degree battery instead. Jones, founder of Sold Out Church and father of 6 children, served 7 years in prison for shooting 2 men in 2002 while he was in the Air Force.

According to a probable cause affidavit, police responded to a call about midnight July 13: “[The victim] was bleeding from his head, ear, mouth, nose and elbows. [The victim] informed me the pastor of his church (Michael Jones) came to his house and beat him up and fled away in a black vehicle.”

After learning the victim suffered a fractured eye socket, prosecutors upgraded the misdemeanor charge to a felony and noted Jones’ history of anger management problems. *Source: Log Cabin Democrat, 8-27-17*

Allegations

At least 15 women have come forward to allege sexual abuse by former Catholic priest **Adam Prochaski** at Holy Cross Parish and school in Queens, NY, between 1973 and 1994. The women are represented by Boston lawyer Mitchell Garabedian, who said victims were between the ages of 5 and 16 at the time. Prochaski left the priesthood in 2003 after being on sick leave for 7 years. He’s married and lives in Queens.

Many of the accusers were teens who came to the U.S. from Poland. *Source: NY Daily News, 9-26-17*

Sriram Sharma, Nacharam, India, is under investigation for an allegation by a 45-year-old woman that he tried to molest her while performing a Hindu ritual called a puja.

According to a police report, “On September 14, Sharma went to the woman’s house. He told her that only she alone should be inside the house while the ritual is being performed, and asked her husband and son to move out. He then attempted to outrage her modesty. However, the woman raised an alarm, following which her husband and son came to her rescue.”

It hasn’t been determined whether Sharma will be charged, said police official B. Vittal Reddy. *Source: Press Trust of India, 9-25-17*

The **Archdiocese of Santa Fe, NM**, released a list of 74 Catholic clergy credibly accused of sexual misconduct over the last several decades. More than 2 dozen U.S. dioceses have released similar lists, but the Santa Fe archdiocese had never taken such a step until now. Thirty-eight of the men listed are dead.

“It’s about time,” said Diana Abeyta, an Albuquerque woman who says she was in the 2nd grade when she was assaulted by a priest. She called for the church to also release the abusers’ records and not just their names. *Source: New Mexican, 9-12-17*

IN MEMORIAM

SNAP founder Barbara Blaine’s death a great loss

This article first appeared on the Free-thought Now! section of Patheos.com.

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

I’m saddened that I only recently met Barbara Blaine, an activist for survivors of priest abuse and a survivor herself. We got together after Barbara invited me to a meeting this summer, and rued the fact that we’d lost so many years we might have been collaborating on our shared goals.

During a gathering that included survivors, activists and parents of survivors, many expressed the concern that they might die before they finally saw the Vatican held accountable. None of us could have imagined it would be Barbara who would die in less than two months.

A youthful, fit 61-year-old who looked more like 45 and had recently completed a half-triathlon race in Chicago, Barbara died Sept. 25 after suffering a massive heart attack the previous week. Apparently it was a random anomaly, a spontaneous tear in a blood vessel in her (very generous) heart.

Barbara felt like a “kindred non-spirit.” She had founded a pioneering national group, Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, in 1988, and had recently retired, after building it up to more than 20,000 members.

She once told media she didn’t expect SNAP to be around for more than



Barbara Blaine

a year or so, imagining justice would be swift — that the Catholic Church would do the right thing. But the justice Barbara had every right to expect was not to be. The monstrous callousness and complicity of the Roman Catholic hierarchy propelled Barbara into lifelong activism.

As a junior school student, Barbara had been groomed and sexually preyed for years upon by a priest at her Catholic school in Toledo, Ohio. Like many devout victims of predator priests, she had not told anyone at the time. Only in her late 20s did she begin to seek answers, then justice, as much for others as for herself.

Barbara made things happen, growing a group, educating congregations and international committees, leading pickets, protests and media events against countless Catholic churches

around the world to “out” predator priests and the higher-ups that coddle them. She cultivated media understanding of the crimes and covers-up over many years. SNAP evolved from a self-help group under her leadership to an international presence, thanks to Barbara’s persevering drive.

Dan Barker and I were able to interview Barbara on Aug. 31 for Free-thought Radio. After the show, we spoke about Barbara’s plans to drive up next month to Freethought Hall, FFRF’s office in Madison, Wis., to be a guest on our upcoming new TV show. We planned to strategize with our attorneys about ways FFRF could help Barbara continue to seek Vatican accountability. Barbara had invited me to testify about separation of church and state at a meeting of survivors in Poland later this fall. Barbara had agreed to speak at FFRF’s convention next year. We at FFRF, including our Board, were extremely eager to collaborate with her on ensuring that churches, priests and popes are not above the law.

Barbara told me she had vowed to herself never to marry, never wanting, after her experience with the priest, for a man to have authority over her as she expected would happen in a marriage. In later years, she did meet the right man and told me how happy she was, greatly enjoying being a step-grandmother. My con-



Photo by Chris Line

This is FFRF’s Emperor Has No Clothes Award that was to be given to Barbara Blaine. FFRF updated the inscription to note her death, and Blaine’s husband accepted the award in her honor. It was on display at the Oct. 28 memorial service in Chicago.

dolences to her bereaving family.

The rest of us must step up our resistance against the cover-up of Catholic crimes and demand accountability in Barbara Blaine’s memory.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Harlan Hayes was Army officer, forester

Lifetime Member Harlan L. Hayes, 83, died Aug. 14, in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho.

Born in Tacoma, Wash., he was raised in Missoula, Mont, and was a longtime resident of the “Inland Empire.”

A “smoke jumper,” he graduated from the University of Montana in 1956 with a B.S. degree in forestry. He was a Reserve Army Officer (Air Defense Artillery) and alternated military postings with working for the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management in Montana,



Harlan Hayes

Oregon and Colorado. He retired in his early 50s and enjoyed amateur radio, computing, hunting and never passed up a chance to share a shaggy dog story.

He was a member of the National Active and Retired Federal Employees, the Inland Northwest Freethought Society and FFRF.

He is survived by his beloved wife of 63 years, Kay; three sons, Rick (Cathy), Dave and Pat (Trish); two daughters, Kathi (Dewayne) and Kari (Ed); 10 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Life Member Helen Posey dies at 101

Lifetime Member Helen M. Posey died Sept. 22 at age 101.

Helen was the second of four children born on Aug. 19, 1916, to Gertrude and William Markel in Circle, Mont. Her family moved to Missoula a few years later, where she grew up and went to school. During World War II, she worked as a draftsperson in Seattle. There she met



Helen Posey

her husband Robert Posey. They lived many happy years in Long Beach, Calif., before moving to Eugene, Ore., in 1989. Helen and Bob were married for more than 50 years and had no children. She was known for her quick wit and wry commentary.

She was a member of FFRF since 1985.

Helen is survived by her younger brother Wesley Markel, also of Eugene.

Have a seat, Shane!

Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Member Shane Scott of Arkansas (but moving to Wisconsin in November) was the high bidder to win the stool that Paula Poundstone used, autographed and then donated following her FFRF convention performance on Sept. 15. He is shown here picking up the stool at Freethought Hall in Madison, Wis. The writing on the stool says, “I believe in love. you. Paula Poundstone.”



Watch for FFRF’s ‘Imagine No Religion’ ad campaign on Patheos.com this month.

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Freedom depends upon freethinkers

Post-debate banter can be exhausting

By Dan Barker

On Oct. 13, I participated in my 128th publicly moderated debate. It took place in the huge Calvary Church in Charlotte, N.C., where I had been invited by the Southern Evangelical Seminary (founded by Norman Geisler) to debate Richard Howe on the topic, “Is there a God who speaks?” It was part of the seminary’s National Conference on Christian Apologetics. The event that evening, sponsored by the American Family Association, was intended to show attendees how to debate an atheist.

It was fun to be standing in a pulpit again. I told the large mainly evangelical Christian audience that I was feeling some of those old feelings wash over me. “I have an almost irresistible urge to take up a collection,” I said. To their credit, they laughed heartily.

The most exhausting part of a debate is not the event itself. Nor is it the preparation. If you are prepared, the debate can be relaxing and fun, an “in the moment” adventure where you feel very much alive.

The most exhausting part is when it is over. Because it isn’t really over. After Howe and I had finished debating for two hours, the moderator (Christian author Frank Turek) told the audience that we would be available to talk personally with anyone who still had questions. When we got out into that huge megachurch foyer, we were mobbed by people wanting to “have a go” at us. It was mostly friendly and polite — maybe because I had reminded them that their key apologetic verse (I Peter 3:15) commands Christians to do it with “gentleness and reverence” — but since it was very noisy and my



On Oct. 13, FFRF Co-President Dan Barker (left) debated Richard Howe (right), who teaches philosophy at Southern Evangelical Seminary, from the pulpit of the Calvary Church, in Charleston, N.C. Moderating the debate was Frank Turek (center), a popular Christian author and debater. The debate, sponsored by the American Family Association, was part of the National Conference on Christian Apologetics put on by the Southern Evangelical Seminary, founded by popular Christian apologist Norman Geisler. More than 1,000 people were in the audience that night, including a handful of FFRF members and other freethinkers who ponied up the conference registration fee in order to attend that event.

voice was getting hoarse, I basically had to shout to be heard. This went on for more than an hour.

It was nice to meet some FFRF members and local freethinkers. But most of the crowd pressing around me were young Christians. A couple of them were argumentative and intense — one guy insisting loudly that “existence is a property!” — but most were genuinely polite and appreciative.

One pleasant young man who looked like a college student approached me with a concerned look. “How is your left knee feeling?” he asked.

“My left knee? That’s a strange question. My knees are fine.”

He looked confused. “Are you sure

your left knee is OK? Are you feeling any pain?”

“No. My knees are just perfect.” I did a little kick in the air to show him. “Why do you ask?”

“Because I was led by the spirit to pray for your left knee,” he replied. He came closer, as if to perform faith healing. I did a little jig to show him that my legs were in good working order.

“Well, the spirit deceived you, didn’t it?” I said.

He took a step backward. “No. I guess it was my sinful mistake.”

“If my knees actually were hurting,” I continued, “you would have counted that as evidence for a spiritual world, wouldn’t you?”

He nodded.

“Then you should count this failure as evidence against your belief.”

He just stared at me.

“If you would count all of your prayers, not just the few apparent successes, you will see that they add up to no more than random chance.”

“I’m a broken sinner,” he said quietly.

“No,” I replied. “You are simply deluded.” As he and his friends turned to leave, I almost had to yell to be heard in that noisy room. “But there’s a cure for that! It’s called reason.”

Then another young man of high-school age came up to me with a nervous smile. “Thank you for coming,” he said excitedly. “I agree with everything you said.”

“Thank you,” I replied, shaking his hand.

“I’ve had those same thoughts for a long time,” he continued, “and I have never heard anyone say them like you did.” We talked for half a minute, and then he asked if he could take a picture with me.

“Sure!” I said. His friend held up a camera as he moved to stand beside me, but before the shot could be taken, a woman grabbed the boy’s arm and rudely pulled him away from me. “No, you don’t,” she said. “We’re leaving now.” She dragged him out of the building before we could say goodbye.

That must have been a humiliating experience. But I’m sure he will never forget it. When he gets into college, I hope he emails me to tell me that freedom of thought is not so easily suppressed. Maybe I will give a talk to his secular group on campus someday, and we can finish taking that photo.

Dan Barker is co-president of FFRF.

THEY SAID WHAT?

Duty is Ours – Results are the Lord’s!
Tom Price, former HHS secretary who resigned Sept. 29 over travel expenses, in the sign-off of his resignation letter.
Washington Post, 9-29-17

I am warning you against calling this a matter of personal freedom! This is about religions! This is about morals!
Influential Egyptian talk show host Ahmed Moussa, endorsing the Egyptian crackdown on gay and transgendered. At least 34 persons were arrested there following a rock concert last month where audience members waved a rainbow flag.
New York Times, 10-4-17



Jeff Landry

Family Forum gala in Baton Rouge.
The Times-Picayune, 9-22-17

The cake baker has more than just a personal view here. He has a religious view and he feels that he is not being able to freely exercise his religion by being required to participate in a ceremony in some fashion that he does

not believe in. So, we think that right is a fundamental right.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions, when asked about a hypothetical “Christian baker” who didn’t want to make a wedding cake for a gay or lesbian couple.
Christian Broadcasting Network, 10-12-17



Jeff Mateer

a May 2015 speech titled “The Church and Homosexuality,” on transgender children.
CNN, 9-20-17

The state has no business telling us who we should love and how, sexually or otherwise. The only kind of friendship the state has a proper interest in recognizing and regulating is heterosexual marriage, because that’s what leads to children — new citizens — and gives them the best start in life.

Archbishop Anthony Fisher of Sydney, seemingly contradicting himself in back-to-back sentences, in a homily to the St. Mary’s Cathedral congregation.
The Guardian, 10-15-17

A godless gene?

Here is some food for thought to consider during this Thanksgiving season. FFRF founders Anne Nicol Gaylor and Annie Laurie Gaylor are directly related to a pilgrim named George Soule (also spelled Soule) who came over to America on the Mayflower in 1620. Anne’s mother was named Lucie Soule.

On March 1, 1658, Goodwife Soule, the wife of George Soule, their son John, and about 10 others were fined for frequent absence from the public worship of God. They were fined 10 shillings each.

Kudos to Goodwife Soule for kicking off a tradition of irreverence and rebelliousness that lives on today in her descendants.



Adobe Stock / Jim Curran

Mayflower II, a full-scale reproduction of the tall ship that brought the Pilgrims to Plymouth in 1620.

Yip Harburg,
from his book:

Rhymes for the Irreverent

Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation



Federal Reserve

In ’29 when the banks went bust,
Our coins still read “In God We Trust.”

Yip Harburg wrote the lyrics for ‘The Wizard of Oz,’ ‘April in Paris’ & ‘Brother Can You Spare a Dime?’

Buy it from FFRF online - shop.ffrf.org

Florida board must allow atheist invocation

Federal judge rules that atheists can give opening invocations

A federal judge ruling in a case involving FFRF and its central Florida chapter has provided a huge victory to those fighting for state-church separation.

In a decision released Sept. 30, U.S. District Judge John Antoon II, in the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida, struck down the Brevard County, Fla., Board of County Commissioners' exclusion of non-theists from giving pre-meeting invocations. In its ruling, the court says a local governing body cannot limit invocation officiants exclusively to those from monotheistic traditions.

"The great promise of the Establishment Clause is that religion will not operate as an instrument of division in our nation," the court states in its concluding section, quoting another recent decision. "Regrettably, religion has become such an instrument in Brevard County."

The plaintiffs in the case include the Central Florida Freethought Community (a chapter of FFRF) and its Chair David Williamson; the Space Coast Freethought Association and its President Chase Hansel; the Humanist Community of the Space Coast and its President Keith Becher; and Brevard



The plaintiffs in the Brevard County case are, from left, Ronald Gordon, David Williamson, Chase Hansel, Keith Becher and Jeffrey Koeberl.

County resident Ronald Gordon.

Williamson, an FFRF member, said Brevard County is the only government body not to give his organization an opportunity to present an invocation. He said more than 20 counties, cities and towns in central Florida have agreed to do so.

"Nobody has given us the grief or the pushback that Brevard County has given us," Williamson told Florida Today. "It's been unsettling and disappointing to be treated like second-class citizens."

According to Courthouse News, court documents show that between 2010 and 2016, all but seven invoca-

tions at county board meetings were given by Christians. The others were prayers given by those of the Jewish faith. In depositions, some commissioners expressed an unwillingness to allow Muslims or Hindus to give the pre-meeting prayer.

"It is unconstitutional for any governing body to discriminate against people who don't believe in God," says Alex J. Luchenitser, associate legal director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State and lead counsel in the case. "Yet that is exactly what Brevard County did through its prayer policy. We're pleased that the

court put an end to the county's discriminatory practice."

Brevard County Attorney Scott Knox said he will recommend to the County Commission that the county appeal the judge's ruling.

The *Williamson v. Brevard County* lawsuit was filed in 2015 by FFRF, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida on behalf of multiple plaintiffs. It asserted that Brevard County's rejection of atheists, humanists and other nontheists who sought to deliver solemnizing messages at the beginning of board meetings violated the U.S. and Florida Constitutions.

The civil liberties groups noted that in its 2014 decision, *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, the U.S. Supreme Court made clear that local governments cannot discriminate based on religion when selecting who will deliver invocations to open government meetings. Yet the Brevard board argued that it had no obligation to include nontheists. The court disagreed.

The lawsuit is being litigated by Rebecca S. Markert and Andrew L. Seidel of the FFRF; Luchenitser and Steven Gey Fellow Bradley Girard of Americans United; Nancy Abudu and Daniel Tilley of the ACLU of Florida; and Daniel Mach of the ACLU Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief.

Barker

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overall — including 38 percent of millennials — who are nonreligious.

"We're deeply dismayed that atheists and other nonbelievers are being openly treated as second-class citizens," says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "Our government is not a theocracy, and it needs to stop acting like one."

"Conroy's personal biases against the nonreligious have prevented me from participating in my government," Barker says. "The judge's acquiescence in this inequity sends a crystal clear message that our government, founded upon our entirely secular Constitution, may discriminate with impunity against atheists and freethinkers."

The case began when U.S. Rep. Mark Pocan, who represents Barker's district in Madison, Wis., requested that Barker give the opening invocation before the House. Barker is a former minister.

Although the chaplain had no written requirements for guest chaplains, Conroy not only re-

quired proof of ordination, as well as representative backing, but other documentation. Barker, who retains a valid ordination, met each of the ad hoc requirements the chaplain's office invoked to bar him.

After Conroy decided that Barker could not deliver the opening invocation because he lacks belief in a higher power, Barker submitted a draft of his invocation, in which he noted that he could indeed invoke a "higher power": "There is no power higher than 'We, the People of the United States.'" His remarks also invoked the spirit of the founding patriot Thomas Paine, who promoted "common sense over dogma."

In his legal complaint, Barker noted that from the years 2000 to 2015, 96.7 percent of all guest chaplains have been Christian, although Christians are 70.6 percent of the U.S. population; 2.7 percent were Jewish, compared to 1.9 percent of the population, and other religions were underrepresented. Fully 99.8 percent of recent invocations have been by those stemming from Abrahamic religions.

No atheist or agnostic has been allowed to officially offer the opening invocation before Congress.

Speaker Ryan hailed the decision, saying that Congress has always sought to acknowledge God.

"Since the first session of the Continental Congress, our nation's legislature has opened with a prayer to God. Today, that tradition was upheld and the freedom to exercise religion was vindicat-

ed. The court rightfully dismissed the claims of an atheist that he had the right to deliver a secular invocation in place of the opening prayer," he wrote. "I commend the district court for its decision, and I am grateful that the People's House can continue to begin its work each day as we have for centuries: taking a moment to pray to God."

"Shouldn't the House of Representatives — the People's House — be representative?" Barker asks.

Congress spends about \$800,000 a year on its opening prayers, including Chaplain Conroy's annual salary of \$172,000, as well as a salary and office for the Senate chaplain. Conroy's sole duty, Barker points out, is to "offer a prayer at the commencement of each day's sitting on the House" — roughly 135 times per year — a duty that Conroy delegates to a guest chaplain approximately 40 percent of the time. For 2011, FFRF calculates that Conroy earned \$1,659 per prayer.

"No atheist has ever been allowed to give an opening invocation in Congress, and a federal court has just blessed suppression of our views and rights by a taxpayer Roman Catholic chaplain," Gaylor says.

Barker is represented by FFRF Staff Attorneys Andrew L. Seidel and Sam Grover, with Richard L. Bolton serving as a consultant. *Barker v. House* has case number 1:16-cv-00580.

“There is no power higher than ‘We, the People’ of the United States.”
— Dan Barker

Judge rules against cross on county seal

A federal judge on Sept. 28 sided with FFRF and its local members in declaring unconstitutional a Latin cross on a Pennsylvania county seal and flag.

U.S. District Judge Edward Smith's decision against Lehigh County, Pa., can only be described as begrudging. But he concedes that "a reasonable observer would perceive the county seal as endorsing Christianity." Smith noted that the yellow Christian cross, which both parties agree is "the pre-eminent symbol of Christianity," dwarfs other symbols on the seal and therefore shows unconstitutional county endorsement.

"The undisputed facts demonstrate that the county's original purpose for including a cross on the seal is not secular," Smith writes. "The county's stated reason for retaining the seal in 2015 was to honor its original settlers who were Christian, and the county clarified that it based this reasoning on an interpretation of Commissioner [Harry] Hertzog's statements."

The federal lawsuit was filed in August 2016 in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, naming Lehigh County as sole defendant. FFRF's co-plaintiffs are four of its local members who've objected to encountering the religious symbol on county property. The seal is on documents, letterhead, many official county forms and reports, the county's website, in a display in the Board of Commissioners meeting room and even on flags displayed prominently at the entrance of county buildings.

The county commissioners voted to appeal the decision, which will be filed in the 3rd U.S. Court of Appeals.

FFRF warmly thanks its four local plaintiffs who made the lawsuit possible: John Berry, Stephen Meholich, David Simpson and Candace Winkler. The litigation is being handled by Marcus B. Schneider of Pittsburgh, with assistance from FFRF Staff Attorneys Patrick Elliott and Elizabeth Cavell.



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