

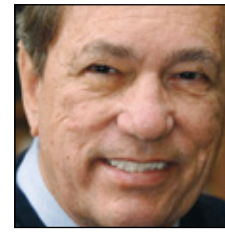
FREETHOUGHT TODAY



**John de Lancie's
speech at Darrow
statue dedication**
PAGE 17



**Winners of FFRF's
High School
Essay Contest**
PAGES 12-16



**Freethinkers are
winning struggle
for America's soul**
PAGE 18

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September 2017

Good News Club may get bad news

**Evangelical Christian group
targets Milwaukee area
schools; FFRF steps in**

Evangelically based "Good News Clubs" are trying to infiltrate nine school districts in the Milwaukee area, but FFRF is working with local groups and Protect Our Children to get information to parents and school officials before they even get in the door.



A screenshot from an actual CEF training video.

On Aug. 16, FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker sent a letter to the superintendents of all nine districts being targeted, informing them that the clubs are coming and reminding them of their obligation to protect their students from proselytizing adults.

Each year, "Good News Across America," a national children's outreach sponsored by Child Evangelism Fellowship (CEF), targets one major city for evangelism. For 2017, it has chosen Milwaukee. As part of this evangelical invasion, local churches backed by CEF will seek to establish Good News Clubs at 16 elementary schools in the Milwaukee area.

The invasion has been a long time coming, first planned for 2016 and then rescheduled to 2017. This means FFRF has had ample time to

See Good News on page 3

E Pluribus Unum



Photo reprinted with permission by AKM-GSI

Muslim models Bella Hadid (holding sign) and Gigi Hadid (red jacket) march in a New York protest.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation issued a statement after the Charlottesville, Va., rally, noting in part: "Along with the rest of the nation, we at FFRF watched, with growing horror and dismay, as the hate-mongering white supremacist 'Unite the Right' march in Charlottesville ended in hours of violence, mayhem and three deaths.

"FFRF works to uphold revered constitutional principles, which include not only religious liberty, but equality and equal justice under the law. We don't believe in gods, but we do fervently believe in the 'melting pot' of diverse peoples united together: E Pluribus Unum."

Check out FFRF's many timely press releases, blogs and action alerts or sign up to receive them in your inbox at: ffrf.org/news.

Freethinking perilous in a non-free country

FFRF's *Nonbelief Relief* gave a \$5,000 relief stipend to the author of this article, who is remaining anonymous because of threats against her. To save her life, she and a family member were brought over to the United States from Iraq in June, with the help of the State Department. She had appeared on the "The Rubin Report" to discuss her situation and the dangers of living in Iraq as a nonbeliever. She received death threats after the show aired, and the video has been removed from "The Rubin Report" site. The audio is still available, however.

This is her story.

By Lubna

My name is Lubna, and I am a 25-year-old Iraqi student who was living in Baghdad, where I was working toward a masters degree

in chemical engineering.

I was raised by my mother, who is a mechanical engineer and driven by the values of goodness, science and reason. As a rationalist, she believes that the human mind, rather than God, is the key to life and knowledge. It's not the most popular view in Iraq and it caused her to be scorned by her family. So my mother married not out of love, but to escape her family and the terror and abuse of her father and brother.

However, my father was a lazy, selfish and irresponsible person. So, it was my mother who worked hard to take care of her children and her family while

my father sat home like a king, taking her paycheck, treating her poorly, and repeatedly subjecting her and my older sister to beatings. After many

years of abuse, my mother applied for a divorce, which, in most parts of the Middle East, requires surrendering your rights and your reputation in the community.

Nevertheless, she did what she had to do to raise my siblings and me, teaching us to always rely on our intelligence and hard work. A brave and intelligent woman, my mother always rejected Islam. She has always been a role model, instilling in me the importance of believing in myself and my

own sense of reason and justice.

Controlled by militia

In 2004, militias took over governmental buildings, companies, and controlled virtually every aspect of life in the community. They also controlled social customs, including requirements for women to dress modestly and wear a hijab.

When my mother went to work one day, an al-Mahdi militiaman ordered her to put on a hijab or she would not be allowed to work. My mother always refused to wear a head cover, and in this case her passionate rebuff created a stir. Soon, his superior joined the fray and they both mocked and then physically abused her. Her instinct was to fight back, however futile, but

See Lubna on page 23

A brave and intelligent woman, my mother always rejected Islam. She has always been a role model.

— Lubna

Freedom from religion safeguards liberty

Historic conference in London brings together committed secularists

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

Since co-founding the Freedom From Religion Foundation in 1976 with my mother Anne Nicol Gaylor, I’ve never faltered from my conviction that freethought and secular government are each necessary for both human progress and survival.

Had I ever doubted the necessity of working for freedom from religion, those doubts would have evaporated after attending July’s historic conference of the single largest gathering of ex-Muslims in the world. The life and death experiences faced by global freethinkers working for secularism vividly brought home how vitally important our work is. I was buoyed, despite the staggering opposition to freethought on our planet, after meeting such brave, personable and committed secularists.

FFRF was proudly cosponsor of the historic International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression in the 21st Century in London July 22-24. The gathering was the idea of Iranian-born **Maryam Namazie**, a powerhouse activist with the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain and One Law for All. Maryam will receive FFRF’s Henry Zumach Freedom From Fundamentalism Religion Award, by the way, at our upcoming convention.

Maryam told us: “It’s really important for us to defend the right to leave and criticize Islam, especially when you can be killed for it. In 13 countries under Islamic rule, atheism is a crime punishable by death. Freedom of conscience also includes the right to freedom from religion . . . without fear, without threat and without intimidation.”

The conference’s compelling hashtag — #IWant2BFree — was the message of more than 220 individuals from more than 30 nations, including countries where it’s a crime to leave Islam or be an atheist. A variety of secular activists from other countries, including Dan Barker and myself, participated. The conference-goers were especially touched by the participation and presence of Britain’s atheist intellectual stars, **Richard Dawkins** and **A.C. Grayling**. Ironically, Dawkins



FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor with Bonya Ahmed. Zehra Pala is in the background.

had just got word, right before this conference on free expression, that a supposedly progressive radio station in Berkeley was de-platforming him due to his measured criticism of Islam. The conference issued a formal condemnation of radio KPFA’s action.

Demographically, it was exciting to see that the conference and its speakers were overwhelmingly young, and many activists and organizers female and feminist.

Unfortunately, a number of speakers were unable to get permission to travel to the event.

As a cofounder of FFRF, I was thrilled to meet so many others around the globe who have also founded freethought or secular organizations, but often in nations where such work is truly fraught with peril, where colleagues have even been murdered. In the case of **Bonya Ahmed**, a Bangladeshi-American, she survived, with grievous wounds, the machete-wielding militant Islamists who murdered her husband Avijit in cold blood in plain sight on the streets of Dhaka two years ago. The



Inna Shevchenko

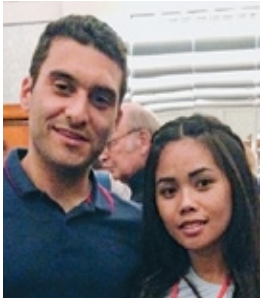
conference opened with the debut of a new film, “Islam’s Nonbelievers,” including chilling photos of that attack. Bonya was the first inspiring speaker on the program.

Other cofounders of secular groups in attendance included:

Zehra Pala, president of Atheism Association of Turkey, a nation where almost daily secular rights are being frighteningly curtailed. The slogan of the association, which is the first legally recognized atheist group in the country, is: “No atheists will be alone anymore.”

Mohammed Alkhadra, founder of Jordanian Atheists Group, in a nation where apostasy is illegal. Mohammad had the crowd on its feet with his first remarks in public. Mohammed was toying with radical Islam when he read one of those pirated Arabic translations of *The God Delusion*.

Armin Navabi, the Iranian-born founder of The Atheist Republic, which has one million fans and followers, and is dedicated to offering a safe forum for freethinkers to share ideas. He now lives in Canada.



Armin Navabi, with his wife, Charlyn.

Inna Shevchenko, Femen leader, who was kidnapped and threatened by the Belarus KGB in 2011 and given political asylum in France. Inna was speaking at a conference in Copenhagen when militant Islamists opened fire. After surviving the attack, Inna famously said: “Liberal voices should be louder than Kalashnikovs.” Inna stated at the conference: “Religion is not compatible with feminism.”

Fauzia Ilyas, a brave young woman who founded Atheist and Agnostic Alliance Pakistan, where apostasy can be punished by death.



Representing the United States at the conference as heads of ex-Muslim groups were **Sarah Haid-er**, co-founder of Ex-Muslims of North America, and Egyptian-American **Noura Embabi**, young president of Muslim-ish, whom we’ve interviewed recently for Freethought Radio. “The cost of silence for ex-Muslims is too high,” Noura counseled.



We also heard from **Zineb el Rhazoui**, the Moroccan-born French journalist and former Charlie Hebdo columnist who happened to be out of the office on Jan. 7, 2015, when terrorists burst in and murdered her colleagues (“Nothing is forgiven,” says Zineb): “I believe there is no way to get rid of dictatorships if we do not get rid of superstition and religious dictatorship,” she told us.

There were panels on Secularism as a Human Right, Women’s Resistance, the Veil and Religious Morality, “Out, Loud and Proud,” Religion in the Law and State, on blasphemy and a particularly fascinating panel on Art as Resistance. Entertainment included Australian singer **Shelly Segal** and **Shabana Rehman**, a Pakistani-Norwegian known as the “mullah-lifter.” (She explained that label during her act.)

Blasphemy is a victimless crime but blasphemy laws create all too many victims, first among them freedom of speech and freedom of thought. Bertrand Russell noted: “Every great idea starts out as blasphemy.” But in today’s world, there are still many countries with blasphemy laws, including not just Islamist nations.

The message of this conference is the message of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. The only way to safeguard liberty is to keep religion out of government.

To learn more about the conference, listen to the Aug. 10 broadcast of Freethought Radio (ffrf.org/radio) or watch the Aug. 9 “Ask an Atheist” on blasphemy (FFRF’s YouTube channel).

See all videos at secularconference.com.

ffrf

FREETHOUGHT
TODAY

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Last chance to register for convention!



The 2017 FFRF national convention is only days away, but there’s still time to register!

The event is Sept. 15-17 at the Monona Terrace in downtown Madison, Wis. Come see our great line-up of speakers and performers, including Paula Poundstone, Steven Pinker, Julia Sweeney, Michelle Goldberg, Katha Pollitt and many more!

Cost is \$60 if you are a member, or \$115 if you’re not. (If you’re not, it’s only \$40 to become a member!) Children and students are free. (Meals are extra.)

If you’d like to attend, sign up online at ffrf.org/outreach/convention. Or contact FFRF at 608-256-8900. Deadline to pre-register is Sept. 8. You may sign up on site during the convention, but meals will not be provided.

Longtime pastor loses his religion

Name: Bruce Gerencser.
Where I live: Ney, Ohio.
Where and when I was born: Bryan, Ohio, in 1957.
Family: Wife Polly; children Jason, Nathan, Jaime, Bethany, Laura, Josiah; 11 grandchildren. Married for 39 years.
Education: Attended Midwestern Baptist College in Pontiac, Mich. — a fundamentalist Baptist institution — from 1976-1979.

Occupation: Photographer, disabled.
How I got where I am today: I was raised in rural Ohio. My father moved us around a lot. By the time I was 21, I had lived in 16 different houses, lived in 10 communities, and attended school in six different districts. My parents divorced when I was 15. My father died at age 49 of complications from heart surgery. My mother, after spending decades suffering from mental illness, including two lengthy stays in the state mental hospital, killed herself at the age of 54. My wife and I married at the ages of 19 and 21, respectively. Polly is the daughter of a fundamentalist Baptist pastor. I spent 25 years pastoring evangelical churches in Ohio, Texas, and Michigan. In 2007, we returned to rural northwest Ohio and bought our first home. Our children and grandchildren all live within 20 minutes of our home. This was our last move. We intend to pass the latter years of life in Ney, a town with one stoplight, two bars, a gas station and one very outspoken atheist.
Where I'm headed: I am headed to the same place we all are — the grave. Knowing that this is the only life I will



Bruce Gerencser

ever have, I try to live each day to its fullest, committing myself to doing as much good as possible while I am among the living.
Person in history I admire and why: Wendell Berry. Berry's books taught me the importance of place/community and the symbiotic relationship humans have with all living things.
A quotation I like: "What do you most value in your friends? Their continued existence." — Christopher Hitchens
These are a few of my favorite things: Day trips with my wife, photography, dirt track auto racing, Cincinnati Reds baseball, Cincinnati Bengals football, Ohio State football, attending my grandchildren's school and sporting events.
These are not: Donald Trump, evangelical Christianity, preferential

treatment given to Christianity by local government and schools, current war on opioids that is hurting those suffering from chronic pain and need narcotic pain medication.
My doubts about religion started: I was born into the Christian church. I was baptized into the Lutheran church as an infant. In the early 1960s, my parents moved from rural Ohio to San Diego. While in California, my parents began attending Scott Memorial Baptist Church, pastored at the time by Tim LaHaye. Both of them had born-again experiences. While in California, they became members of the John Birch Society. At the age of 15, I asked Jesus to save me and a few weeks later told the church I believed God was calling me to be a preacher. I preached my first sermon at age 15 and my last sermon at age 48. I spent 25 years pastoring evangelical churches in Ohio, Texas and Michigan.

I was, in every way, a sold-out, on-fire follower of Jesus. I remained evangelical until the latter years of my time in the ministry. My beliefs and politics began drifting leftward, resulting in me being labeled a liberal by some of my colleagues in the ministry. After I left the ministry in 2005, I began reading books that challenged my beliefs. One author in particular, Bart Ehrman, had a huge impact on me, forcing me to reconsider what I believed about the nature and history of the bible. This resulted in me admitting that I could no longer believe that the bible was an inspired, inerrant, infallible text. My house of faith quickly came tumbling down, and in November 2008, I attended church for the last time and admitted I was no longer a Christian.
Before I die: I want to finish the book I have been working on for what seems like forever. I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia in 1997 and in 2007 I developed neurological problems that have forced me to use a cane or wheelchair to get around. I know, based on everything my body (and calendar) is telling me, that I am on the short side of life. Before I die I would like to spend time traveling along the upper Eastern seaboard with the love of my life.
Ways I promote freethought: I regularly write letters to the editor of the local newspaper, most often on the subjects of evangelicalism, atheism and politics. I also blog at "The Life and Times of Bruce Gerencser" (brucegerencser.net). Through my blog, I receive a large amount of email from evangelicals who have questions and doubts about Christianity. Some of the letter writers are pastors, many of whom have lost their faith.

MEET A MEMBER

Good news

Continued from page 1

prepare, and we've been using it. FFRF's Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow Chris Line has been working with Protect Our Children, a Portland-based group that helped protect Portland's children from the Good News Club's 2014 invasion, and local Milwaukee freethought groups to shine a spotlight on the Good News Club's activities in Milwaukee.
The Good News Club is an evangelical Christian program for children ages 5-12 that has often been criticized for its tactic of meeting in public elementary schools, blurring the distinction between church and state, and for masking its goal of proselytizing children. Its self-described mission is: "Child Evangelism Fellowship is a bible-centered organization composed of born-again believers whose purpose is to evangelize boys and girls with the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and to establish (disciple) them in the Word of God and in a local church for Christian living."
FFRF urges the districts involved to monitor these new Good News Clubs and ensure they are following all district rental policies and not getting access to students while classes are in session or as they leave school for the day.
It's certainly not the first time that FFRF has gotten involved with the Good News Club. Over the years, FFRF has written dozens of letters to districts regarding constitutional violations involving Good News Clubs. The most recent of which occurred as part of this current invasion, when club leaders entered an elementary school in Racine Unified School District while students were there for summer school classes and proselytized, asking them to join in the club they were holding outside the school.
On the plus side, it appears that a summer evangelizing project in Milwaukee did not work as well as it had in the past. In 2015, during its Indianapolis invasion, CEF partnered with 31 local churches, set up clubs in 92 locations across Indianapolis, evangelized 3,406 children and "counseled" 322 children. "Counseled" is the fellowship's term for conversion, meaning that a child has now been "saved." But in Milwaukee this summer, CEF was only able to partner with 20 local churches, set up clubs in 60 locations across the area, evangelize 1,838 children and "counsel" 88 children.

Many happy returns to Ken, 93



Photo by Dan Barker



Photo by Chris Line

Left: Kenneth Proulx. Above: Editorial assistant Molly Hanson, pictured in "Ken's Cupola," at FFRF's Freethought Hall office building in Madison Wis., where several weddings have taken place.

Ken Proulx, one of FFRF's oldest and longest-serving members, turned 93 on July 8. FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor visited Ken on his birthday to celebrate with cake. Ken, who served in World War II, thought his way out of Roman Catholicism, and still recalls what a relief it was when he was allowed to leave a parochial school and attend Wisconsin's public school system. A man of aphorisms, one of Ken's enduring lines is: "The Mafia and the Catholic Church are the largest crime syndicates on Earth. One of them is illegal." Portraits of Ken throughout his life are under the official titling, "Above Us Only Sky Kenneth Proulx Cupola" at Freethought Hall. Thank you, Ken, for your years and years of exemplary support. Many happy returns.

HEADS UP

A Poetry Column By Philip Appleman

THE WORM

Eyeless in Gaza, earless in Britain,
lower than a rattlesnake’s belly-button,
deaf as a judge and dumb as an audit:
nobody gave the worm much credit
till Darwin looked a little closer
at this spaghetti-torsoed loser.
Look, he said, a worm can feel
and taste and touch and learn and smell;
and ounce for ounce, they’re tough as wrestlers,
and love can turn them into hustlers,
and as to work, their labors are mythic,
small devotees of Protestant Ethic:
they’ll go anywhere, to mountains or grassland,
south to the rain forests, north to Iceland,
fifty thousand to every acre
guzzling earth like a drunk on liquor,
churning the soil and making it fertile,
earning the thanks of every mortal:
proud Homo sapiens, with legs and arms—
his whole existence depends on worms.
So, History, no longer let
the worms be an ignoble lot
unwept, unhonored, and unsung.
Moral: even a worm can turn.

—Philip Appleman, part of Darwin’s Bestiary
in “Darwin’s Ark”



© Philip Appleman.
From *New and Selected Poems, 1956–1996*

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.

Videographer gives FFRF more exposure



Photo by Chris Line

Bruce Johnson heads up FFRF’s video production area.

Name: Bruce A. Johnson.
Where and when I was born: Ann Arbor, Mich., in 1958.
Education: Bachelor’s degree in broadcasting and film from Boston University in 1981.
Family: Wife Cynthia Struye and daughters Mallory and Erin.
How I came to work at FFRF: Heard from a friend that the FFRF was looking to do more video communications. I have experience in building small video studios, and 35 years experience in commercial, public and corporate television, so it seemed like a good match.
What I do here: Shoot, edit, direct and produce multimedia content, including “Newsbites” and our Facebook Live program “Ask An Atheist.”
What I like best about it: It’s a job that needs to be done.
What gets old about it: Nothing yet!
I spend a lot of time thinking about:

Ethics and hypocrisy, solar energy, electric transportation.
I spend little if any time thinking about: The past.
My religious upbringing was: Catholic.
My doubts about religion started: When I was quite young, I started to see the disconnect between what was preached in gospels and how people actually lived.
And when I was kicked out of guitar mass for playing lead during “Michael Row The Boat Ashore.”
Things I like: Solar energy, electric transportation, bicycles, volleyball, alpine skiing, travel.
Things I smite: People who are irrationally wedded to gasoline. Harleys with ridiculously loud exhaust systems.
In my golden years: I have built a teardrop-style camper, and I want to tow it behind a Tesla and see the parts of the United States I haven’t gotten to yet.

MEET A STAFFER

OVERHEARD

Many described this time as the darkest period of their lives, dominated by violence, fear and helplessness.
Ulrich Weber, an attorney who led an inquiry into sexual and other abuse at a famous Catholic music school where the brother of former Pope Benedict directed a renowned boys choir, and where at least 547 children were abused. Former students compared the school to a “prison,” “hell” or a “concentration camp.”
New York Times, 7-19-17

You can pull a verse out to justify almost anything. When you read the bible fuller and in-depth, suddenly you realize that this book, especially by Christians, has been so brutally massacred and misquoted. And we need to call that out. . . . This is why lots of people want nothing to do with the Christian faith. They see it as an endless list of absurdities and inconsistencies and they say, ‘Why would I ever want to be part of that?’
Rob Bell, former pastor who was once called “the next Billy Graham” by the Chicago Sun-Times in 2006.
Miami Herald, 7-24-17

Obama was demonized for being a Muslim, which he wasn’t, while Trump is embraced for being a Christian, which he isn’t (in any meaningful way).
Hemant Mehta, “The Friendly Atheist” blogger.
Patheos.com, 8-2-17

America has lived a long time off its thin Christian veneer. That is all finally being stripped away by the combination of mass consumer capitalism and liberal individualism.
Sociologist Christian Smith, quoted by Rod Dreher, senior editor of The American Conservative, in Dreher’s op-ed, “Trump can’t save American Christianity.”
New York Times, 8-2-17

Often cults are seen as aberrations, or a psychological phenomenon. Psychologists would see cult leaders as having delusions of grandeur. But I see them as something different — as baby religions. I think people are unaware how many of them there are, how constant they are.
Susan Palmer, a sociologist and scholar of new religions at Concordia University in Montreal.
The Atlantic, 8-6-17

FFRF welcomes 26 Lifers, 5 Immortals, 1 After-Lifer

FFRF is excited and proud to announce its 26 new Lifetime Members, one new After-Lifer and five Immortals.
Jean Bettanny, Tom Fairhall, John Smail, Gail S. Smith, and John B. Stange are our latest Immortals, a designation for those members who have contacted FFRF to report they have made provisions for FFRF in their estate planning.
Cherie Ohlsson is our newest After-Life Member, a tongue-in-cheek donation category of \$5,000 for those

who want their donation to “live on” after them.
Our newest Life Members are Alice Anderson, Iva L. Bridwell (gifted by Bill Wade), Earl Coggins (gifted by Bill Wade), Jennifer L. Craven, Liz DuClous (gifted by Bill Wade), Dr. Donald W. Fellner, Albert Gouyet, CK Haun, Laura Holmes (gifted by Dr. James Wheeler), Todd Huegli, Matthew J. Kane, Charles J. Lavoie, William Maiden, Dr. Tracy Mento, Stuart A. Miner, Horace Nalle (gifted by Dr. James Wheeler), Ellen Nordsieck, Ken Nordsieck, Clifford Ponce, Ken E. Robbins, Marcee Schwenter, Huldie Scott (gifted by Bill Wade), Eric Paul Shaffer, James B. Watson, Richard Wirz, and one anonymous.
Individual Lifetime Memberships are \$1,000, designated as membership or membership renewal, and are deductible for income-tax purposes.
States represented are California, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Michigan, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Washington and Wisconsin.

The Born Again Skeptic’s Guide to the Bible

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

Buy it from FFRF online shop.ffrf.org

Taxpayers on hook for ‘pro bono’ lawsuits

Religious law firms cost taxpayers millions, even if they claim to be free

By Andrew L. Seidel

Kentucky taxpayers owe the ACLU nearly \$225,000 because Kim Davis, the Rowan County clerk, wanted to use her public office to impose religious law. In the name of her god, she wanted to deny LGBT couples a right guaranteed to them by the Constitution and upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court. Davis wanted her religious belief to trump our secular law.

From the beginning, the case was insurmountably and fatally defective. As Columbia Law School professor Kath-



Photo by Ingrid Laas
Andrew L. Seidel

erine Franke memorably put it, “The claim she’s making is a clear loser. It’s a political claim, it’s not a legal claim. That’s why she lost on the district level and the circuit level and she will continue to lose. She’s fighting for justice on the level of religious law. But we don’t live in a theocracy.” How is it that the taxpayers are paying so much for a case that was a foregone failure?

Davis took her unprincipled stand after the Supreme Court decided the Obergefell marriage equality case on June 26, 2015. A conservative Christian law firm, Liberty Counsel, then wheedled its way into Davis’ case.

Liberty Counsel, run by Mat Staver, fundraises by scaring the credulous with stories of Christian persecution in America, as a glance at its budget for “email alert” and “printing and mail” services shows. Liberty Counsel is not alone — it’s joined by a who’s who of organizations with names that could’ve been plucked from a dystopian Orwell novel: Liberty Institute, the Alliance Defense Fund, now operating as Alliance Defending Freedom, the American Center for Law & Justice, among others.

A cash cow for firms

No doubt Davis has been a cash cow for Staver & Co. According to Liberty Counsel, it represented Davis “at no charge,” or, as other reports said, “pro



Illustration by Hafakot/Shutterstock.com

bono.” But that waiver only applies to Liberty Counsel’s legal fees, and I’d wager they made far more fundraising off Davis than they would have made from charging her an hourly rate. Liberty Counsel’s fee waiver does not apply to the other side, to the ACLU, and — this is the critical point: The other side can recover fees from the government when it wins.

Here’s another example. FFRF sued the Chino Valley School Board for its unconstitutional prayers, bible reading and proselytizing. We did this after many attempts to resolve the case without going to court, but the Pacific Justice Institute, a West Coast version of Liberty Counsel, offered to represent the school board pro bono. This free lunch proved too tempting. But when the board lost in the district court, the court awarded FFRF more than \$200,000 in attorney’s fees and court costs.

So all the talk of pro bono representation by groups like Liberty Counsel is a bit disingenuous. They create and foster a public impression that court battles to privilege religion will cost the taxpayers nothing and give the firms a gloss of magnanimity and generosity. In some cases, these groups seem to deliberately conflate pro bono representation with no cost to the taxpayers. In one of the cases enumerated below — a case in which the government had to borrow money to cover the costs — a local paper reported that “Staver stated that the battle is costing Pulaski taxpayers ‘zero’ dollars, since Liberty Counsel is working ‘pro bono’ for the county governments.” In reality, they’re fighting losing cases so that they can fundraise on the Christian persecution narrative and pass on all the risks and costs of litigation to the taxpayers.

Staver is desperate to keep this strategy hidden. So desperate, in fact, that he actually tried to blame the \$225,000 bill, which was a direct result of his firm extending a losing legal fight, on anybody else, no matter how far-fetched he sounded:

“If, at the end of the day . . . the state of Kentucky has to pay for attorney’s fees, whose responsibility is that? It’s not Kim Davis, it’s not Rowan County, it’s not the current legislative body . . . it’s certainly not Gov. Matt Bevin. . . . It is the former liberal Democratic governor, Beshears [sic] . . . Had he [provided a religious lib-

erty accommodation to Kim Davis, this case never would have gone anywhere. Had he done that, Kim Davis never would have spent any time in jail. Had he done that, the ACLU would never have had a case because it would have ultimately been derailed at the very beginning. But because he was so ideologically sided with, blinded with if you will, the same-sex marriage agenda and he wanted to force Kim Davis down this path, he would not lift a finger to give a religious liberty accommodation.”

There are really only two people to blame: the clerk who refused to do her job and vowed to discriminate — and Staver. He dragged out — is still dragging out — a losing case

that allows his group to fundraise and further a mythical narrative of Christian persecution in America (where it is the majority religion and is grossly over-represented at all levels of government).

Squandering taxpayer funds

The costs that are passed on to taxpayers because of this strategy can be huge. Here are a few that can be verified with publicly available information:

- \$1,000,011 wasted defending “intelligent” design.
Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District.
- No court has ever upheld teaching creationism or any of its creatively re-branded offspring in public schools. But the Thomas More Law Center represented the Dover School District “pro bono” to defend the teaching of “intelligent design” in public school. The school board lost and had to pay out \$1 million dollars in legal fees and \$11 in damages (\$1 for each plaintiff). The plaintiffs’ attorneys, Pepper, Hamilton, kindly cut their bill down from the \$2,067,226 to which they were entitled.
- \$1,000,000 squandered by trying to hold public school graduations in a church.
Does v. Enfield Public Schools.

The school district unconstitutionally held graduations in churches and insisted on litigating the case, causing the plaintiff to accrue “about \$1 million” in legal fees. The Enfield Board of Education eventually decided to settle the lawsuit after losing a preliminary injunction and was responsible for those fees, though it did not disclose exactly how much it paid. The

American Center for Law and Justice represented the school board after the chair “was contacted by the ACLU and they wanted to represent [the board] pro bono.”

- \$500,001 consumed for a city to fly a Christian flag.
- In a desperate attempt to keep a Christian flag flying on city property, the city of King (N.C.) turned to the Alliance Defense Fund, which encouraged the city to adopt a policy it promised to draft pro bono. Once the issue was taken to court, however, the city of King quickly racked up more than \$50,000 in legal fees and costs and ultimately settled with the plaintiffs, agreeing to pay \$500,001 to plaintiffs.
- \$451,662 blown in a misguided attempt to display the Ten Commandments.

McCreary County, Ky. v. ACLU of Kentucky.

This case involved two different Ten Commandments displays in Kentucky county courthouses. Pulaski County lost and paid the ACLU \$231,662. The county was forced to take out a loan to pay the legal fees. Mat Staver of Liberty Counsel represented the county. Previously, “Staver stated that the battle is costing Pulaski taxpayers ‘zero’ dollars, since Liberty Counsel is working ‘pro bono’ for the county governments.”

Staver also represented McCreary County. Fundraising efforts, including sending requests to “national religious organizations, such as Focus on the Family and the Trinity Broadcasting Network” and local Christian radio broadcasting, raised less than 10 percent of the more than \$220,000 McCreary County owed.

- \$248,000 drained to pray before board meetings.

Joyner v. Forsyth County, N.C..

Forsyth County was unconstitutionally opening board meetings with sectarian prayer. This constitutional violation cost the county \$248,000. The group now known as Alliance Defending Freedom was “representing Forsyth County pro bono in the case.”

Liberty Counsel and groups like it are not looking out for the taxpayers’ interests. In Santa Rosa, Fla., a school district was found liable for attorney’s fees after the ACLU challenged some of its practices under the Establishment Clause. The court entered a consent decree between the ACLU and the school board. Several school employees intentionally violated the terms of that decree. Liberty Counsel represented those employees and when invited to work with the ACLU and the school to make the terms of the decree more clear, Liberty Counsel “rejected these invitations out of hand,” increasing costs and causing litigation to drag on for years. In the end, the school district owed the ACLU over \$150,000 and the ACLU agreed to waive its fee. Liberty Counsel did not waive its fee, requiring the school to pay \$265,000.

Religious law firms like Liberty Counsel exist to push their own agenda. They don’t care about the costs that are passed on to public schools and local taxpayers.

The Kim Davis case is the perfect example. Taxpayers and their elected officials need to be leery of groups that come along offering to defend losing cases.

Attorney Andrew L. Seidel is FFRF’s new Director of Strategic Response.

A note to FFRF Members
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FFRF awards \$10,000

Four earn Catherine Fahringer scholarships

FFRF is pleased to announce that it has awarded \$10,000 in scholarship awards in memory of Catherine Fahringer to four students chosen by the Black Skeptics of Los Angeles, an African-American atheist community-based group.

The scholarship is part of the First in the Family Humanist Scholarship program, which focuses on undocumented, foster care, homeless or LGBTQ youth who will be the first in their families to go to college.

According to BSLA founder Sikivu Hutchinson, “Secular African-American youth disproportionately come from religious backgrounds and communities. These youth are often marginalized in K-12 and higher education due to their non-conformity. This scholarship program provides a platform for their voices and experiences.”

Fahringer was a San Antonio feminist and freethinking activist who ran a long-lived FFRF chapter and served on the executive board for many years. She was especially interested in nurturing the next generation of freethinkers. She died in 2008.

Here are excerpts from the winners’ essays.

By Dia Brown

Humans have constantly cooked up new ways to explain what they perceive in the world. When there are things they can’t explain, they let it stew in their heads and eventually a way to explain it is served. One of those ways is religion. Religion has been used to understand and to moralize since the earliest days of humans.

But of those ways to solve problems, religion is only an optional ingredient.

For me, I have always been passionate about the environment. My mindset for caring is that there is an aesthetic value to keeping the Earth clean. It is also a concern for public health, and I concern myself with the well-being of the people and animals on this planet. When passion is mixed in with action, a healthy serving of effective change is made.

When I tell people I am atheist, they often ask how I got that way. It started when I was 5 years old. I was sitting in a local Baptist church with my family. People in the church were dancing and shaking as they “felt the Lord.” My sister exclaimed, “I feel him; I feel the Lord,” and in that moment, I realized I didn’t. I waited. Waiting turned to wondering. In that moment of isolation, I decided. From then on, I never went to church unless I had to, and I stopped reading the religious books. As a young mixed girl in a conservative county, I kept this hidden from everyone. When I was called rude names for the color of my skin, I just thought of the good in people because in my eyes, “everyone means well,” as my late grandfather would always say.

I had faith in humanity, but I had no faith in God. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was an atheist. This past year I helped to start an interfaith group and made sure that my voice as an atheist was heard. Despite my beliefs — or maybe because of them — I have an appreciation for religion because it is like a leftover soup. For me, I didn’t care for all the extra ingredients and went straight for the broth, and I enjoy it just the same.

Dia graduated from Huntingtown High School in Huntingtown, Md., and now attends the University of Vermont.

By Lydia Mason

I, like many people, had abused religion to excuse my immoral behavior and inaction in the face of injustice. When I did things that were unjust, I convinced myself that God had forgiven me. When I turned a blind eye to all the wrong in our world and sat by idly, I convinced myself that if I simply prayed or waited patiently enough that God would fix it, even if I did nothing.

But there came a day when I got tired of waiting for a god to fix the world for me. I realized that I had the ability to set my own standards for the



Dia Brown



Lydia Mason



Sydney Steward



Elijah Willig

kind of person I wanted to be, and that I had the responsibility for upholding those standards.

As I entered high school, I embraced humanism wholeheartedly, and began fighting for justice for all people on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, and the like.

I started the first high school Black Student Union in my city, through which I organize numerous vigils, protests and forums. I started a mentoring program between my school and the Boys & Girls Club.

I also have been chairperson of the Mayor’s We Day/Give A Day Board, through which I raised over \$30,000, collected more than 60,000 personal care items for refugees, and organized a Compassion Walk with over 3,000 in attendance. I have done multiple speeches about the way that poor sex education disproportionately harms people of color, queer people, and people of lower incomes. Furthermore, I started a club devoted to the inclusion and empowerment of people with disabilities, and hosted a fundraiser for that club which raised over \$40,000. Lastly, I started the first Girl Up chapter (a United Nations Organization dedicated to empowering women and girls globally) in my state and raised thousands of dollars for girls seeking education and healthcare in Guatemala.

If I had not chosen to embrace humanism and take responsibility for my morality rather than leaving it up to religion, I likely never would have become the activist I am today.

Lydia graduated from duPont Manual High School in Louisville, Ky. She is attending New York University and plans to major in politics and economics. She was the first-place winner in FFRF’s 2017 Essay Contest for Students of Color, announced in the August issue of Freethought Today.

By Sydney Steward

A little girl sat at her desk and crafted a paint-splattered masterpiece. The other children chatted about the little things that consumed the common sixth-graders’ attention: who was crushing on the cutest boy, the latest shenanigans of the class clown, and hopes of the cafeteria serving ravioli for lunch. But she was different, and she knew it. So she remained quiet, consumed in her own mental world.

She continued filling the spaces of her existence with pastels just as bright as her mind. Then, she overheard comments of a deeper context. “I love Jesus.” “I go to church every Sunday!” “Do you read the bible?” She twitched. She silently cringed. She felt dangerously brave.

I looked up and said, “God isn’t perfect.”

During my youth, I attended a church that often left me feeling empty inside. Sermons were boisterous, beautiful in the way that hymns captivated the broken souls sitting in the pews.

I sat and watched people pour their problems into a mysterious being. The same god who claimed to promote peace and love desecrated the lives of millions of people every day.

Confusion and anger plagued my conscience. With every Sunday that passed, I realized a raw truth: Blind trust is intoxicating.

When asked the question, “Do you believe in God?” I awkwardly reply, “I don’t know,” or “I am trying to figure that out.” Rarely am I asked, “What do you believe in?”

I do not live without a moral compass. None of us do; the human propensity consists of the need to delineate good and evil.

Why attach divisive religions to this natural phenomenon? Good and evil mingle inside each and every one of us.

With empathy as my fuel and passion as my road map, I navigate life fiercely fighting for all that I think is right. What truly warms my soul, I get to define that. Not society, not a deity, not a centuries-old tome, and certainly not a little kid sitting across from me in art class. I am free. My morality isn’t based in blind trust; instead, my morality is simply, utterly and beautifully, mine.

Sydney graduated from Loomis Chaffee High School in Windsor, Conn. She is attending the University of Pennsylvania with plans to major in nursing.

By Elijah Willig

As a child, I attended weekly church services with my parents, two progressives who, while not self-righteous churchgoers, believe in God and support religious institutions.

As I started to learn more about poverty, racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia and the many atrocities that occur across the globe, I began to develop an identity as a nonreligious person.

I not only grew up in rural Iowa as an agnostic, I grew up as a gay, African-American male.

It was not uncommon for me to see, hear and feel firsthand how my peers used religion as a means of stigmatizing and sometimes excluding those whom they deemed to be living an unholy life — namely gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender individuals.

Naturally, my lived experiences have shaped my views on social issues and the world. More so, they have taught me much about the work that humans must do to ensure equality for all. Working to ensure social justice for everyone, particularly those most vulnerable in our society, is of critical importance to me.

Recognizing that human action is the only means for creating social change, I have worked hard to make contributions that can help make our society more just. My primary contributions have come through my service as co-chair of the Diversity Alliance and as a student council class representative in my high school. For instance, this spring, I led a collaboration between the Diversity Alliance, Student Council, and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes that was designed to address the post-election rise in hateful comments by students in my school. These efforts culminated in a week of activities called “Own Your Words Week” that helped to educate students about the impact that derogatory language can have on others. Additionally I helped support and run the Invisible Closet, a secret thrift store that low-income students could visit on campus to obtain needed clothes free of cost and stigma.

In all, I have tried to abide by the principles of humanism, acting each day with full knowledge that, if our world is to become a site of justice and equality, it is I, along with others, who must take the steps to make it so.

Elijah graduated from Grinnell Community Senior High School in Grinnell, Iowa, and now attends Middlebury College, where he plans to major in sociology and study Spanish and Portuguese.

Black atheists: A minority within a minority

By Brandon Withrow

This article, edited for length, originally appeared on The Daily Beast website on Nov. 12, 2016, and is reprinted with permission.

While honesty is said to be the best policy, for American atheists who are still in the metaphorical closet, it may also come with a price tag. And this can especially be the case for African-American atheists — often referred to as a minority within a minority.

“This has been a valid observation and experience for me and others,” says [FFRF Member] Mandisa Thomas, president of the Atlanta-based organization Black Nonbelievers.

“I was raised in what is known as the ‘Conscious/Black Nationalist’ community,” she says. “I was educated early on about black history and culture, as well as the effects of institutionalized racism and injustice that was committed against marginalized groups in the United States.”

Thomas notes that black nonbelievers are a minority among African-Americans. Past studies of African-Americans and faith show that at they are demographically (87 percent) the most religious group in the nation. Additionally, she notes, “the number of blacks and other ‘minorities’ who openly identify as atheist, while growing, is still small.”

[FFRF Member] Candace Gorham, author of *The Ebony Exodus Project: Why Some Black Women are Walking Out on Religion — and Others Should Too*, also sees African-American atheists as a double-minority.

“When I’m around a lot of black people,” she says by email, “I ‘pray’ that religion doesn’t come up! I don’t want to have to answer questions and I don’t want to be expected to pray or agree or whatever else. But if you’re around black people for long enough, it will come up.”

Gorham was raised a Jehovah’s Witness until (by age 9) her parents separated. She stayed curious about religion and joined a Methodist church, later becoming involved in a nondenominational church ministry.

“I eventually was ordained as a prophetess and evangelist,” she says, “and was involved in things like casting



out demons, speaking in tongues, and faith healing.” She’s had many personal life challenges, she adds, but “what started the decline for me was when I started learning about the errancy of the bible.” Discovering that the bible wasn’t infallible “really wreaked havoc” on her faith.

Leaving is an option

Regardless of the difficulties, there are many black nonbelievers who want to assure others that leaving the church is an option.

“Exodus: The Documentary,” for example, is a full-length film from Christian journalist David Person and Chuck Miller (regional director for the American Atheists), and it looks at the increasing number of African-Americans becoming nonbelievers and the difficulties they face in doing so.

“Today, more than ever, black people . . . particularly our young people, are leaving the church, religion and God,” says [FFRF Member] Bridgett (Bria) Crutchfield by email. She’s the founder of the Detroit affiliate of Black Nonbelievers and is interviewed in “Exodus.”

“Unlike atheists of yesterday, we’re for the most part . . . vocal,” Crutchfield says. “‘Exodus’ focuses on African-Americans and their exodus-exit from the church. It’s honest, raw, and intimate.”

Crutchfield was raised in a conservative Jehovah’s Witness family until she was 18. She later became a Pentecostal Christian in her 30s, and then the doubts about her faith began.

She says that it was ultimately her re-evaluating of the bible “objectively” and what she sees as the overall “hypocrisy” in church that drove her out. “I believed in God, but I had enough of God’s goddamn people,” she emphasizes.

Her family still prays for her. “There’s no way to wrap a bow around unbelief and present it as beautiful to a (black) religious family,” she says.

“I think we’re nearing another of many tipping points where we’ll see the normalization of black atheism,” says Alix Jules, who also appears in “Exodus.” “Telling our stories helps with that.”

Baptized and confirmed Catholic, Jules spent time in a Seventh-Day Adventists school until fourth grade, after which — due to his love of math and science — he was transferred to a Lutheran school in Brooklyn. He loved debating theology and even studied Islam. He later returned to his faith as an

adult, only to find the big questions unanswered. He took on the label “spiritual but not religious” until he eventually accepted the fact that he was an atheist.

This new identity brought family tension.

A new community

“Belief is often inextricably tied to race in the black community,” says Jules. “Although I disagree with the message, for many it’s a source of hope, connection, history, and sometimes empowerment.” Distancing from that means losing resources and adding burdens, which, he says, curtails any decision to leave the church.

“I don’t hide my atheism,” he says. He chairs the Dallas-Fort Worth Coalition of Reason’s Diversity Council and is an organizer for the Dallas wing of Black Nonbelievers.

But as a result of his openness, he’s been forced to look for — and to help create — a new community. And now, he adds, “My wife and I have friends that have become staples in our lives and sources of boundless support.”

Another side of the double-minority dilemma comes from within the secular and atheist world — a segment of society that is part of the growing religiously unaffiliated — a sizeable 23 percent in America.

Statistically speaking, the face of atheism in the United States leans strongly toward a male (68 percent) and largely white (78 percent) demographic, a number that is 12 percent higher than the general U.S. population.

The recent study, “Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion — and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back” from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), shows that among the religiously unaffiliated, numbers by race vary. The study divides the demographic up by three groups: Rejectionists (58 percent), who say that religion is not personally important and does more harm than good; Apatheists (22 percent), who say that religion is also not personally important for them, but believe it is more help than harm; and the Unattached Believers (18 percent), who say religion is important to them.

Among these three segments of the religiously unaffiliated, the majority is white. “Fewer than one in 10 Rejectionists (4 percent) and Apatheists (8 percent) are black, compared to 27 percent of Unattached Believers,” according to the study.

As a result of this makeup, African-American atheists within the secular world have a variety of experiences, some finding stronger community than others.

Gorham says she feels very connected to the secular world. “I have an amazing atheist network in my city and surrounding area. Our local chapter of the Freedom from Religion Foundation is very active and there are other really active social groups.”

Racism still exists

But there remains a constant reminder that racism is a universal human problem, regardless of one’s opinions of religion.

“Atheism, like any other demographic or group, is subject to the biases visible everywhere else,” says Jules. “Although more liberal and left-leaning in the U.S., I haven’t found racism, sexism, or many other socially unacceptable labels significantly ‘less represented’ in atheism.”

Jules, however, has found a place in the atheist world, which he pinpoints “at the three-way intersection of controversy, race-relations and rational discourse.”

“One may not see many of us well-represented at secular related events,” adds Mandisa Thomas. “There is still a tendency for the secular community at large to center the attention on the ‘celebrities’ of the movement, most of whom are white. However, we are working to turn this around.”

Secular atheist organizations like The Center for Inquiry (CFI) also have programs to support black nonbelievers, such as African-Americans for Humanism (AAH). The Freedom From Religion Foundation hosts an annual “Freethinkers of Color Student Essay Contest.” (Winners are announced on the following pages.)

“If the secular community wants to be sure that we’re building a strong movement,” says Debbie Goddard, director of AAH and of Outreach for CFI, “then representation and diversity must be important to us.”

Goddard says that a one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t work. “I’ve been glad to see more representation and a growing number of local groups in the last few years and look forward to seeing more in the future.”

Others also see significant room remaining for substantive improvement within the organized secular world.

“My work focuses on emphasizing and encouraging a more inclusive secular humanist framework,” says Sincere Kirabo, the social justice coordinator for the American Humanists Association (AHA) and blogger at Patheos.

When it comes to diversity, he says, many “conflate representation with inclusivity.” For the former, “the secular community overall has made incremental strides forward, though some diversity efforts result in tokenism, which is a lot of things but not true diversity.”

“Meaningful diversity,” he argues, “requires authentic inclusion — a seat and voice at the table. This means a fundamental upgrade in organizational leadership, mission principles, and agenda expectations.”

The double-minority status is repeatedly affirmed as a real and complicated place to be.

Brandon Withrow is a freelance journalist and the author of nine books, including his latest (co-authored with Menachem Wecker), Consider No Evil: Two Faith Traditions and the Problem of Academic Freedom in Religious Higher Education.

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IN THE NEWS

Anti-atheist bias still exists over morality

Study shows respondents think nonbelievers more likely to be serial killers!

Even with the number of nonbelievers increasing worldwide, there's still an inherent bias against atheists when it comes to questions of morality.

Specifically, a new report shows that most people around the world, including nonbelievers, presume that atheists are more likely to be serial killers than believers. The study, which included more than 3,000 people in 13 countries, appeared in the journal *Nature Human Behaviour*.

Previous studies had found evidence of public suspicion of non-

believers in smaller samples within religious countries, like the United States. The new survey suggests the findings may extend globally, and it finds those same suspicions happen even in highly secular societies.

The study, led by Will M. Gervais, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Kentucky, had a team of researchers sample about 100 or more adults in 13 countries, including countries in North America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

One of the questions asked of the respondents began with a description of a sociopath: a man who, having tortured animals when young, later began hurting people and "has killed five homeless people that he abducted from poor neighborhoods

in his home city. Their dismembered bodies are currently buried in his basement." It was followed with one of two questions, where half the participants got one and the other half got the other.

One group got this question: "Which is more probable? 1) The man is a teacher; or 2) The man is a teacher and does not believe in any gods."

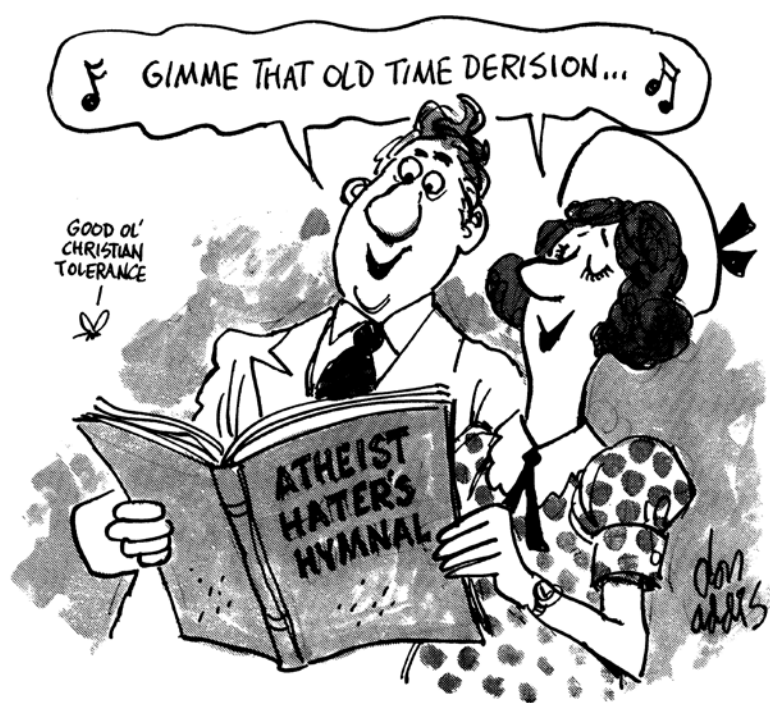
The other half got this question: "Which is more probable? 1) The man is a teacher; or 2) The man is a teacher and a religious believer."

"We used this psychopathic serial killer because we thought that, even if people didn't trust atheists enough to let them babysit their children, they wouldn't necessarily assume

them to be serial killers," Gervais told *The New York Times*.

But nearly 60 percent of the people who had the choice to pick the teacher as an atheist did so; just 30 percent of those who had the option to flag the teacher as a religious believer did so. Self-identified atheists were less biased than the average, but not by much, the study found.

The anti-atheist bias was stronger in highly religious countries, such as the United Arab Emirates, than in more secular ones. Gervais, whose work explores bias against nonbelievers, had publicly backed off some of his own earlier studies, finding them too small to be convincing. "This time we got the numbers, and the effect was clear," he told the *Times*.



Christians are more likely to blame poverty on effort

Nearly half of all Christians in the United States think that a person's poverty is due to lack of effort.

A poll by *The Washington Post* and the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 46 percent of Christians see poverty as the result of individual failings.

"There's a strong Christian impulse to understand poverty as deeply rooted in morality — often, as the bible makes clear, in unwillingness to work, in bad financial decisions or in broken family structures," Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, told the *Washington Post*. "The Christian worldview is saying that all poverty is due to sin, though that doesn't necessarily mean the sin of the person in poverty. In the Garden of Eden, there would have been no poverty. In a fallen world, there is poverty."

Those who are atheist, agnostic or unaffiliated were more than twice as

likely than Christians to claim that difficult circumstances are more to blame for a person's poverty than lack of effort (65 percent to 31 percent).

In the poll, 29 percent of all non-Christians said that a lack of effort is generally to blame for a person's poverty, compared with 46 percent of all Christians.

Among specific Christians sects, the numbers widen: 53 percent of white evangelical Protestants blamed lack of effort, while 41 percent blamed circumstances; and 50 percent of Catholics blamed lack of effort while 45 percent blamed circumstances.

The question is also highly political, not just religious. Among Democrats, 26 percent blamed a lack of effort and 72 percent blamed circumstances. Among Republicans, 63 percent blamed lack of effort and 32 percent blamed circumstances.

Ark park transfers land back to for-profit entity

Officials at Ken Ham's ark park have sold their main parcel back to their for-profit entity for \$10, likely because it was cheaper to pay a safety fee than lose an \$18 million tax incentive.

The issue began in June after Ark Encounter LLC sold the land to its non-profit affiliate, Crosswater Canyon, for \$10, even though the property is assessed at \$48 million.

The move coincided with Ham's refusal to pay a safety assessment tax levied by the city of Williamstown, Ky. City officials feared the sale could be the first step in the park claiming non-profit status, which would exempt it from property taxes.

But on July 18, state tourism officials said the land sale breached the sales tax rebate incentive agreement, which was with Ark Encounter LLC, not Crosswater Canyon, meaning the park would not be able to collect the \$18 million in incentives.

On July 21, the parcel was switched back to Ark Encounter LLC, again for \$10.

Michigan community sued over property ownership

A Michigan housing association community is being sued for allowing only Christians to own property within the community.

According to the suit filed by the Bay View Chautauqua Inclusiveness Group, the Bay View Association of the United Methodist Church is guilty of violating the First Amendment, the federal Fair Housing Act, Michigan's Constitution, and civil rights laws.

In 1942, the board of the association said that anyone who owned a cottage on its property had to meet two requirements: They had to be white and they had to be Christian.

The board dropped the "white" requirement in 1959, but the Christian one remained. Even now, prospective buyers have to include a recommendation letter from a pastor.

The lawsuit argues that Bay View isn't affiliated in any meaningful way with the UMC. It operates independently from the church and it's owned by a for-profit company. It also pay taxes, an admission that it's not a church property. And it maintains and uses "state-delegated police power."

Kentucky allows public schools to teach bible

Kentucky Gov. Matt Bevin recently signed a bill allowing bible courses in public schools.

The law, which easily passed the state House and Senate, gives local school boards the option of developing a bible literacy class as part of their social studies curriculum. The course would be elective, not required.

"The idea that we would not want this to be an option for people in school, that would be crazy. I don't know why every state would not embrace this, why we as a nation would not embrace this," Bevin said at the signing of the bill.

The ACLU of Kentucky said it's concerned about how the law might be used in schools.

"A bible literacy bill that, on its face, may not appear to be unconstitutional, could in fact become unconstitutional in its implementation," said Advocacy Director Kate Miller.

All anti-abortion groups not exempt from ACA

Nonreligious anti-abortion organizations are not exempt from the Affordable Care Act's mandate that their health insurers cover birth control in employees' insurance plans, a federal appeals court has ruled.

On Aug. 4, a split three-judge panel of the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals held that secular groups — even if their stance on abortion aligns with religious groups — are not entitled to religious exemption from the contraceptive mandate in the ACA, often called *Obamacare*.

The court's ruling affirms a federal judge's dismissal of a challenge to the mandate under the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution filed by Real Alternatives Inc. "Real Alternatives is in no way like a religious denomination or one of its nontheistic counterparts — not in structure, not in aim, not in purpose, and not in function," 3rd Circuit Senior Judge Marjorie Rendell wrote in the court's majority opinion, joined by Judge Joseph A. Greenaway Jr.: "We do not doubt that Real Alternatives's stance on contraceptives is grounded in sincerely held moral values, but religion is not generally confined to one question or one moral teaching; it has a broader scope."

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



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FFRF NEWS



Screenshot from Fox News

FFRF Attorney Andrew Seidel, left, appeared on “Fox & Friends” to discuss the problems with a bible study being held at the White House. The opposing side of the discussion was by Jay Strack, right, a Christian, whose main talking point was that the bible study is OK because it may provide the participants with much-needed wisdom.

White House bible study a big waste to taxpayers

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is appalled that the Trump administration holds weekly bible study sessions at the White House.

The list of attendees reportedly contains the names of several officials whose appointments FFRF objected to because of their inability to keep their personal religion separate from their public office. These include Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, CIA Director Mike Pompeo and Energy Secretary Rick Perry. Vice President Mike Pence sponsors the club.

The bible study is led by an outsider, Ralph Drollinger. He formed Capitol Ministries with the mission to “birth ongoing outposts for Christ.” Drollinger’s access to high-level officials with what he calls “para-church ministry” is disturbing. He has said, “Homosexuality is a sin. It is an abomination in the eyes of God.”

Mothers who work outside the home are sinners, according to Drollinger: “Women with children at home who either serve in public office, or are employed on the outside, pursue a path that contradicts God’s revealed design for them. It is a sin.”

Last year, Drollinger attacked social welfare programs as unbiblical, un-Christian, and based on “the bad

theology of theological liberalism.”

That Drollinger has unfettered access to the highest levels of our government is scary and raises serious state-church concerns.

For instance, all these messages have a direct impact on public policy, including on LGBTQ rights, women’s rights, the social safety net, the right to choose, environmental issues, and global climate change, among others.

This access and ability to affect policy might run afoul of lobbying regulations, something FFRF attorneys are investigating.

Drollinger’s website also has a hypocritical note that lacks all self-awareness: “Privacy Notice: Please note that it is the strict policy of Capitol Ministries not to comment on any public servant who is involved with our organization. We protect the privacy of all who attend our bible studies.”

So Drollinger gets access to public officials in a government building, but refuses to discuss which officials join in. If those officials want privacy, the solution is simple: Study the bible in your private capacity, not in your official capacity and at your government desk. Do it on your own time, not the taxpayers’. In short, get off your knees and get to work.

FFRF aided in church-funding case

FFRF is grateful for the backing of kindred organizations in a New Jersey case it is fighting against the unconstitutional funding of churches.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the American Civil Liberties Union recently submitted an amicus brief in support of a suit that FFRF and member David Steketee filed in state court in late 2015 against Morris County, N.J., challenging major grants of tax dollars to repair or maintain churches. FFRF is specifically objecting to \$1.04 million in allotments to Presbyterian Church in Morristown.

FFRF contends the grants clearly violate Article I, Paragraph 3 of the N.J. Constitution that guarantees: “nor shall any person be obliged to pay tithes, taxes, or other rates for building or repairing any church or churches, place or places of worship, or for the

maintenance of any minister or ministry, contrary to what he believes to be right.” The amicus brief agrees with that contention.

The case is currently before the New Jersey Supreme Court, which has accepted a direct appeal of a trial-level decision allowing Morris County to disburse millions in taxpayer funds for church repair, despite the state Constitution provision barring such use.

FFRF is hopeful that the New Jersey Supreme Court will confirm that Morris County cannot compel taxpayers to support or repair churches by upholding the plain language of the state Constitution. With strong national groups rallying to its side, its confidence has received a boost.

FFRF’s lawsuit is being handled by attorney Paul S. Grosswald. FFRF Staff Attorneys Andrew L. Seidel and Ryan Jayne are co-counsel.

FFRF condemns Berkeley radio station for disinviting Dawkins

FFRF condemns one of the nation’s most well-known community radio stations for canceling a talk by legendary scientist and freethinker Richard Dawkins.

Dawkins was scheduled to give a talk and a book presentation on Aug. 9 sponsored by KPFA in Berkeley, Calif. Then, the station abruptly changed course. According to its explanatory statement, KPFA “booked this event based entirely on his excellent new book on science when we didn’t know he had offended and hurt — in his tweets and other comments on Islam, so many people. KPFA does not endorse hurtful speech. While KPFA emphatically supports serious free speech, we do not support abusive speech.”

There is a significant difference between criticizing Islam and casting aspersions on all Muslims. Our media — including community radio — should embrace and promote that distinction, not blur the lines between ideas and people.

The true test of an idea or belief is not how sincerely it is believed, but the facts upon which it rests. Ideas are not immune from criticism simply because some people believe in them truly and deeply. Beliefs matter far less than the evidence for those beliefs.

People deserve protection, ideas do not. This maxim, which should be a guiding principle for every nation and

society that wishes to flourish, is being turned on its head. Congress, with its misguided Religious Freedom Restoration Act, and the Supreme Court, with its *Hobby Lobby* decision, have exacerbated the problem.

As Dawkins pointed out in his response to KPFA, “I am known as a frequent critic of Christianity and have never been deplatformed for that. Why do you give Islam a free pass? Why is it fine to criticize Christianity but not Islam?”

Tied up in this disinvitation is a fear of being labeled racist. But race and religion are very different, one being an unalterable characteristic of birth while the other, though often an accident of birth, can be altered simply by changing one’s mind. And that makes open, honest, and incisive criticism all the more important. Especially when, as the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Weinberg observed of religion, “With or without it you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.”

No idea is above criticism, certainly not an idea as bad as religion.

Every year, FFRF co-presidents and attorneys speak at hundreds of events around the country, discussing the First Amendment and often criticizing religion and its tendency toward theocracy. We could easily be next. Indeed, we’ve felt the sting of being banned in the past from venues and billboards. KPFA broke no law when it deplatformed Dawkins, but kowtowing to a pious heckler’s veto is no less stunning or craven.



‘You’re Sued!’ ad debuts

FFRF released a new video ad, “You’re Sued!” announcing a lawsuit challenging President Trump’s executive order to legalize church politicking, in violation of the U.S. Constitution.

“President Trump wants to convert churches into the next political super PACs, but he better check the Establishment Clause of the Constitution first,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “FFRF filed our lawsuit and launched this ad campaign to raise awareness of the dangers of church politicking.”

The ads ran in August on Facebook, Google and Instagram targeting secular Americans nationwide.

Trump signed his “Religious Liberty” executive order in early May with great fanfare during a National Day of Prayer ceremony in the Rose Garden. FFRF filed suit shortly after in the U.S. District Court, Western District of Wisconsin.

FFRF’s suit argues that Trump has used his order to usher in a new era of church politicking, greenlighting endorsements from the pulpit and opening the door for dark money political spending. Meanwhile, the order discriminates against secular organizations such as FFRF, which must follow strict guidelines to maintain their 501(c)(3) tax status.

FFRF VICTORIES

By Molly Hanson

Ohio county’s plan ends over faith-based services

FFRF has stopped an Ohio county’s attempt to divert public dollars to exclusively religious organizations.

In August, it was brought to FFRF’s attention that Cuyahoga County had issued a “request for proposal” so that it could offer outreach services limited to faith-based organizations or coalitions of faith-based organizations. The request was intended to seek “proposals from faith-based organizations interested in providing outreach and referral activities to drive enrollment in Cuyahoga County’s Universal Pre-Kindergarten Program.”

In a letter to the county administration, FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line warned the county against the violation of the First Amendment.

The county responded that it would comply with constitutional requirements to be entirely neutral on matters of religion.

FFRF nixes religion from state event

FFRF has ensured that the Wisconsin Department of Health Services will not entangle itself with religion when sponsoring events.

The Aging and Disability Resource Center of Southwest Wisconsin (ADRC) sponsored a dementia workshop on June 15 exclusively for faith community leaders. Religion was advertised in a flyer of the workshop, which indicated that Pastor Carolyn Kennedy led the 15-minute opening worship and that it was held in the United Church of Christ in Barneveld.

In a letter sent to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne requested assurance that future Aging and Disability Resource Center events would not include religious rituals. FFRF also asked that any future events the center sponsors be open to all community leaders, not just clergy.

The Department of Health Services responded on July 26, agreeing that resource centers should not prohibit any interested community leader from attending its informational events.

Wisconsin school ends religious ties

FFRF has snipped the ties between a Wisconsin elementary school and a religious financial firm.

It was brought to the attention of FFRF that Bristol Elementary School in Bristol, Wis., had partnered with Thrivent Financial, a Christian financial services firm that openly discriminates based on religion.

FFRF’s Elaine and Eric Stone Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne sent a letter to the Bristol School District asking that it investigate Establishment Clause concerns.

The school and financial firm had collaborated on a “Feed My Starving Children” event. Feed My Starving Children is a Christian nonprofit with a mission to nourish “God’s starving children hungry in body and spirit.” After the students packed food, they were invited to participate in a Christian prayer over the food. In exchange for the funding, Thrivent transported students to the event. Students all wore T-shirts with

the religious firm’s logo that includes a Christian cross.

Bristol School District #1 Administrator Michael Juech informed FFRF in an email that the district had contacted Thrivent Financial to let the group know that no future partnerships would take place. Additionally, the school district has taken steps to remove social media posts from the Bristol School District pages highlighting the relationship with Thrivent Financial.

Christian message replaced in Md. school



Thanks to FFRF, an elementary school in Frederick, Md., has agreed to expunge a proselytizing message to its students.

A concerned local resident informed FFRF that Lincoln Elementary had been displaying a religious sculpture in its foyer that had been donated by a Rotary Club. The sculpture was in the shape of a key and included printed advice to students to “be good Christians.” FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott sent a letter on June 21 to the Frederick County Public Schools superintendent objecting to the overt promotion of Christianity on behalf of the school and asking that the sculpture be modified to remove the message.

A representative of the school district responded on July 11 informing FFRF that the principal of Lincoln Elementary school had been advised to remove the word “Christians” from the message. It now contains a secular message to “be good.”

FFRF seals up victory in Florida post office

A U.S. post office in Miami, Fla., will no longer be unconstitutionally promoting religion after receiving a letter from FFRF.

FFRF was informed that a poster reading, “To all South Florida District Employees who have been called to serve, our thoughts and prayers are with you. God Bless America” had been on display at the Quail Heights Post Office. On Nov. 4, 2016, FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote a letter warning the post office that U.S. postal regulations prohibit the display of nearly all religious materials and that the First Amendment prohibits government sponsorship of religion.

Ziegler asked that the post office comply with the constitution and remove the sign. The Quail Heights Post Office district manager responded on July 20, informing FFRF that the sign had been immediately removed following the reception of the warning letter.

Indoctrination removed from hunter training

Due to the FFRF, there won’t be any Christian indoctrination permitted during official hunter training in New Hampshire.

The New Hampshire Fish and Game Department facilitates hunter safety classes throughout New Hampshire. A person who contacted FFRF attended a class on April 6-8 hosted by the Heritage Free Will Baptist Church in Laconia, N.H. The complainant reported that everyone who attended the class received religious flyers with prayers and information about church services. A pastor taught this class. The religious materials were enclosed with all of the official hunter’s safety documents and study packets.

FFRF learned that the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department will make certain that future classes co-sponsored by the department do not involve the distribution of such religious materials.

FFRF has religion fished out from Illinois contest

An Illinois statewide fishing competition will not be angling for religion, thanks to FFRF.

A concerned Illinois resident informed FFRF that the Illinois High School Association, in conjunction with the Fishing League Worldwide, started this year’s 2017 IHSA Bass Fishing State Finals for member Illinois schools with a Christian prayer that included “Thanks for your son Jesus.”

This sectarian prayer was inappropriate and unconstitutional, FFRF Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne told the association.

The Illinois High School Association responded quickly by ending the prayers.

California post office tosses prayers

A U.S. post office plant in Richmond, Calif., has agreed to end government-endorsed prayers after receiving a letter from FFRF.

At a potluck held by the post office plant in December 2016, a pre-meal prayer was led “in Jesus’ name.” At a luncheon four days after, the plant manager asked for an employee to lead a prayer. FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote to the plant manager, Severo Garza, on April 3, warning that the prayer practices had violated the constitutional separation of church and state by imposing prayer on employees and endorsing religion on behalf of the government.

Garza responded in a letter to FFRF on July 21 agreeing that the post office would be in compliance with the First Amendment in the future.

Kansas school agrees to be religiously inclusive

A Kansas school district superintendent has agreed to restrain himself from praying with his employees at school functions.

A concerned employee informed FFRF that at an awards meeting for retiring staff, Independence Unified School District Superintendent Rusty Arnold asked the audience to join him in prayer and to bow their heads. FFRF Legal Fellow Christopher Line sent a

letter to Arnold on July 7 warning the school district that imposing prayer on employees at a district-sponsored event violates constitutional limits on government religious endorsement. Furthermore, Line explained to Arnold that such prayers inappropriately alienate non-religious employees, or those who practice a minority religion.

On July 20, Arnold assured FFRF in a letter that he did not want to alienate staff members and would no longer be praying with his employees during school events.

University of Florida program sets it right

FFRF has ensured that a program at the University of Florida in Gainesville will remain neutral regarding religion.

FFRF contacted the university over a mandatory program it planned to implement for all undergraduate students called “UF Quest,” which contained aspects that appeared to advance or favor religion. The university’s associate provost of undergraduate affairs explained that all students in the program would be encouraged to meditate on their spiritual tradition — which she equated with prayer.

In a letter sent on June 6, FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel spotlighted the constitutional state-church concerns with the program and requested that all program curriculum be approached from a secular standpoint. FFRF also asked that the program include all students by representing the nearly 35 percent of millennials who do not identify with religion. The university’s attorney responded on July 14, assuring FFRF that the program would not promote religion and that the university would work with FFRF to find humanist or atheist representatives if necessary in the future.

FFRF fixes up Texas school’s religion policy

A Texas high school will no longer be using graduation events to unconstitutionally promote Christianity after FFRF contacted the school district over several state/church violations.

FFRF was informed that the graduation events at Big Sandy High School were laced with religion. During a senior banquet prior to the school’s graduation ceremony, the principal led a Christian prayer in which he made multiple references to the bible and “warned” about Satan. On the day of graduation, a faculty member gave students a copy of the Christian book “God’s Promises for Graduates.” The graduation ceremony itself began with a Christian invocation and concluded with the principal asking everyone to stand up to join hands and recite the Lord’s Prayer. Moreover, a local religious group was invited onto school property before the ceremony to distribute bibles to students.

FFRF Associate Counsel Sam Grover wrote to the school district’s superintendent, Jay Ratcliff, on June 22 to remind the district of its duty to remain religiously neutral and protect the rights of conscience of students. Public school graduations, Grover pointed out, are not the place to preach personal religious beliefs. Ratcliff responded on July 27 agreeing that the district would comply with its legal obligation to keep religion out of its schools.

School bus advertising Jesus hits roadblock

A public school bus rolling through Tennessee will no longer be doubling as Christian propaganda on wheels. A concerned resident informed FFRF that a school bus for the Bedford County School District in Shelbyville, Tenn., was showcasing a large bumper sticker that read, “Easter is all about JESUS!” The district violated the constitution by allowing its resources to display religious messages and promote religion. FFRF sent a letter to the district superintendent on May 12 requesting that the bumper sticker be removed.

The school district responded on July 24 that it had immediately complied with FFRF’s request and that an in-service training would be provided for drivers to address the violation.

Bible banished from view at Virginia college

The Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine has removed a religious text from a display after receiving a warning letter from FFRF.

An employee reached out to FFRF over a bible being displayed on the table outside the office of the director of the teaching hospital. The bible was placed next to the seating for visitors. FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert sent a letter on July 21 to the university’s dean explaining that displaying the bible to visitors of the director’s office sends the message that the college endorses the religious text, which is a constitutional violation. A legal representative of the university informed FFRF in a letter sent on July 25 that the bible had been removed from public view.

Michigan town ends school-endorsed prayer

FFRF has taken action to ensure that students in Breitung Township Schools in Kingsford, Mich., will no longer be socially pressured into participating in religious rituals.

This past spring, the district’s Eighth-Grade Dinner Dance included a prayer that students were instructed to recite before a meal. The prayer had been organized by Mrs. Hofer, a teacher in the district, who had pressured and shamed students at the event to join in the religious ritual by saying that refusing to do so would be poor manners. FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert wrote to Superintendent Craig Allen on May 25, warning that it is a constitutional violation for public school teachers to involve themselves in prayer.

Allen responded on July 28 that the incident had been discussed with the violator.

FFRF removes dogma from Missouri school

The Parkway School District in Chesterfield, Mo., will not be teaching misleading, faith-based curriculum in the future after FFRF raised constitutional and health concerns.

A local faith-based organization, Thrive St. Louis, has been teaching sex education in district schools. The group operates “crisis pregnancy centers,” which label themselves as general-purpose medical clinics for pregnant women, but in reality spew fallacious advice and provide services that further a religious agenda. Thrive’s sex education lessons, called “Best Choice,” is made up of scare and shaming tactics to discourage students from using



contraception, choosing to have sex or having an abortion — all of which crisis pregnancy centers oppose for purely religious reasons. The group’s employment policy clearly aims to spread Christian dogma.

“It would be inappropriate and irresponsible for a public school district to encourage students to visit a crisis pregnancy center, much less invite such a group to teach sex education,” wrote FFRF Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne in a letter to the Parkway School District on April 7.

On July 31, the district superintendent responded that beginning with the 2017-18 school year, all sexual health instruction would be delivered by the district’s certified health educators.

Pennsylvania manor gets secular makeover

The Palmyra Interfaith Manor in Lebanon, Penn., has removed a large collection of Christian iconography that had decorated its common areas.

A resident of the manor reported to FFRF that Latin crosses, angels and depictions of Mary, Joseph and Jesus decorated the lobby and community room, making the resident feel alienated in her own home. Because the manor is funded by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, the religious displays raised constitutional concerns. FFRF Legal Fellow Christopher Line sent a letter on June 29 asking that the decorations be removed from the common areas of the residency to avoid the promotion of Christianity.

The housing authority responded on Aug. 1 informing FFRF that the religious items had been removed.

Missouri school steps away from religion

A community member contacted FFRF over a promotion of religion at Cole Camp High School in Missouri during the school’s Senior Awards Night, and FFRF promptly took action. A school staff member had promoted a religious baccalaureate service scheduled immediately after the school-sponsored award ceremony.

FFRF Associate Counsel Sam Grover wrote to Cole Camp School District administration to ensure that religious services were not being organized or promoted by the district and reminding the public school district of its constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion.

Superintendent Tim Rolling responded on Aug. 9 to inform FFRF that the district would review all policies and practices to ensure that the

school district employees would not promote any religious activity.

Banners removed from Georgia school



The Lowndes High School in Valdosta, Ga., will not be promoting an evangelical group or displaying Christian symbols in its cafeteria after FFRF sent a letter over a constitutional violation.

FFRF was informed by a troubled parent that two large, seemingly permanent banners showcasing Christian iconography and ideology were affixed to either side of the stage in the school cafeteria. The banners were for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes’ Southeast Georgia Chapter, which includes a prominent Latin cross in its logo. The group’s mission is to give coaches and athletes “the challenge and adventure of receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, serving Him in their relationships and in the fellowship of the church.” FFRF Associate Counsel Elizabeth Cavell wrote to a representative of Lowndes County Schools on June 19, warning the district that displaying religious symbols or promoting religious organizations with a clear evangelical mission is a constitutional violation.

FFRF was informed on July 31 that the school had complied with its request that the banners be removed.

FFRF turns off Georgia school’s Christian music

FFRF has ensured that a teacher at Whitewater Middle School in Gainesville, Ga., has changed his tune and will keep religion out of his classroom.

A parent of a student attending the middle school informed FFRF that an eighth-grade science teacher, Matthew Mundock, was playing Christian music in his classroom during his examinations. When the student informed Mundock that the music was distracting, he suggested the student go to the library. FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler sent a letter to Fayette County Public Schools on June

30 warning that it is illegal for public school employees to promote Christianity by playing religious music in classrooms. FFRF requested that Mundock be directed to cease exposing students to Christian music.

On Aug. 3, the school district responded that Mundock had been made to understand that playing Christian music unconstitutionally endorsed religious messages and that he would only play secular instrumental music going forward.

FFRF ends prayers at Michigan school

After learning of a state/church violation that occurred at Delton Kellogg Schools in Michigan, FFRF took action to ensure religious rituals are kept out of school events.

FFRF was informed that the district held a Veterans Day concert in November 2016 at Delton Kellogg High School. The event included a prayer led by a middle school student. In a letter sent on Nov. 22, 2016, FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert wrote that while it was laudable for the school to honor veterans, it is unconstitutional to allow a religious message or prayer to be a part of a school-sponsored event. FFRF asked for confirmation that future school assemblies would not include prayer.

A legal representative of the school district responded on Aug. 3 that the district would comply with the law going forward.

Idaho school district complies with FFRF

FFRF has ensured that a school district in Twin Falls, Idaho, will keep religion out of its assemblies.

A district parent reported to FFRF that in February all district secondary schools in the Twin Falls School District held a mandatory student assembly featuring a guest inspirational speaker who referenced God and prayer as her source of support. Her presentation to students included a slide with a bible verse, Philippians 4:13. While FFRF Associate Counsel Elizabeth Cavell lauded the school district’s goal of motivating students, she reminded the district in a letter sent July 26 of its First Amendment obligations to neither advance nor promote religion as the speaker did.

The district assured FFRF that it would comply with the First Amendment and refrain from sponsoring assemblies with religious content in the future.

Christian radio station on bus gets turned off

FFRF commends a Wisconsin school district for turning off a Christian broadcasting station on a school bus.

Early in the spring, FFRF Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne sent a letter to the Stevens Point Area Public School District due to concerns over a bus driver who was incessantly playing devotional Christian music on a bus taking students to P.J. Jacobs Junior High School.

The school district responded with a brief, but laudable, response: “The practice has ceased.”

Correction

In the August issue in the FFRF Victories section, there were two instances in which a state was erroneously identified. The FFRF victories occurred in Elkins, Ark., and Harrison, Ark.

FFRF awards \$10,150

2017 Essay Contest for High School Students

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 17 winners of the 2017 William Schultz High School Essay Contest.

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

High school seniors were asked to write a personal persuasive essay about what they would like to tell a believer in their life about why they chose freethought (atheism, agnosticism).

After carefully reviewing more than 170 essays, FFRF awarded six top prizes and 11 honorable mentions.

Winners are listed below and include the award amount and the college or university they will be attending. FFRF has paid out a total of \$10,150 in award money for this contest this year.

First place
Zakaria Sharif, Stanford (\$3,000)



Second place
Allison Wheeler, Centre College (\$2,000)

Third place
Daniel Vogler, Princeton (\$1,000)

Fourth place
Evan Muskopf, Rochester Institute of Technology (\$750)

Fifth place
Ian Garvie, University of Northern British Columbia (\$500)

Sixth place
Quinn Freidl, undeclared (\$400)

Honorable mentions (\$200 each)
Donald Fasce, Franklin and Marshall
Audrey Godwin, Vassar College
Phoebe Greene, University of North Carolina-Wilmington
Alisha Griffin, Bucknell University
Hannah Hanson, Berklee College of Music
Alexander Hernandez, undeclared

Aya Keller, University of California-Berkeley
Luke Makram, University of Alabama-Huntsville
Lindsay Philcox, Brandeis University
Tori Roberts, California State University-Stanislaus
Taryn Waite, Colby College

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

FFRF also thanks Dean and Dorea Schramm of Florida for providing a \$100 bonus to students who are members of a secular student club or the Secular Student Alliance. The total of \$10,150 reflects those bonuses.

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

FIRST PLACE

Stepping off the tightrope

FFRF awarded Zakaria \$3,000.

By Zakaria Sharif

Mom, it is not because you raised me wrong. Dad, it is not because you did not take me to the mosque enough as a child. For the first time, this is all on me.

My father is a Muslim immigrant from Bangladesh, and for him, religion is a lifestyle. In my father’s eyes, the spicy scent of curries roasting in the oven and the romantic hymns of South Asian music meld together with the stories of Noah’s Ark and the parting of the Red Sea. His cultural identity, his very being, is tied in with his religious belief. Without Islam, my father is not himself.

My mother is a small-town African-American woman raised in the pews of the church. She attended Christian school until high school, did not wear pants un-

til she was 16, and had to sneak over to her friend’s house if she wanted to watch television. My mother is the most honest and humble person I have ever met. With every movement, she espouses her morality, never satisfied to pay lip service if her actions will not follow suit. For her, God is the source of all goodness. Without God, there is no morality, no reason. My mother defines righteousness by the bible she reads.

Growing up, I learned that my already complex identity was inextricably linked to religion. I was Zakaria, of course, but that meant that I was both black and Asian, both Muslim and Christian. I navigate the treacherous terrain with great care, sure to never offend one part of my being as I tiptoe across the tightrope of identity. However, my balance always wobbled. The truth is, I cannot define myself by an imaginary force. I cannot envision life based upon preordination by some unknown power. I had to step off the tightrope and allow my true be-

liefs to be displayed for the world to see.

Dad, I no longer believe in God, but I have not lost touch with our history. My culture, my Asian pride, is located in my bloodstream, in my very DNA. I do not need to justify my heritage by subscribing to a doctrine that does not fit me. Mom, I am a good person, or at least I try my hardest to be. That is not because I fear God or Satan, it is because I fear failing myself. You taught me to always be my best, to treat others with respect and demand nothing less in return. Those ideals did not come from an otherworldly being; they came from you.

I love working on being the best version of me possible. That will never change. Mom and Dad, I love you, too, but for once I have to make a choice for me, and I choose to not believe. I choose instead to embrace who I am and reject any masks that obfuscate my real self. It is nothing you did wrong; it is everything you did right. And for that, I thank you.



Zakaria Sharif

Zakaria, 18, graduated from Pickerington High School in Pickerington, Ohio. He was president of the student council, captain of the mock trial team, founder and president of Youth in Government and president of the school’s JSA chapter. Zakaria graduated first in his class and was a National Merit Finalist. He will be a freshman at Stanford University.

SECOND PLACE

Tragedy was catalyst for understanding

FFRF awarded Allison \$2,000.

By Allison Wheeler

When I was younger, I was enrolled in a Christian academy. My first years of schooling were filled with stories of Moses, Noah’s Ark and Jonah. I learned that God was the default answer to any question I did not know the answer to. Who loves me? God. Why am I here? God. What is my purpose? God.

I continued my half-hearted relationship with Christianity for the next 10 years until, on May 23, 2015, I helplessly watched two of my friends get pulled under by a current in the Umpqua River. I called 911, and realizing the authorities wouldn’t get there in time, I did the only other thing I was taught to do — I began praying. I appealed to God, promising to devote the rest of my life to him if only my friends could resurface and



Allison Wheeler

swim to shore. For the next two hours, I watched the water for any sign of them, but it was all for naught.

I began to comprehend something important that day. Instead of wasting my time begging for salvation from an unproven supernatural entity, I could have been helping my friends. This tragic event acted as a catalyst for a greater

sense of understanding.

I began to take notice of problems in the world and how many of them were caused by religious beliefs. In all of human history, more wars have been waged because of religion than anything else. More than 50,000 “witches” have been burned at the stake in the name of God by people preaching messages such as “love one another” and “thou shalt not kill.” The ancient Aztecs pulled beating hearts from their people as a ceremony to the gods.

The time of sacrificing our own people is over. Religion and government have been entwined for far too long, and in order to tackle domestic and foreign issues, we must approach them with the best interests of the people in mind, not with the appeasement of a deity.

Every day people spend countless minutes worshipping various alleged deities,

begging for forgiveness, a sense of fulfillment, or even a promotion at work. I am not certain if God exists in the same way that I am not sure God doesn’t exist, but I am certain that my time can be better spent helping a friend, making someone smile, or cherishing the time I have with the ones I love. If I could say one thing to all the believers in my life, it would be that, as a nonbeliever, I’m not unsympathetic or lacking morals, but rather I value human beings over religious doctrine.

Allison, 18, graduated as valedictorian from Roseburg High School in Roseburg, Ore. She was active in theater as a performer and technician, and served as four-time chapter officer in the Family, Career and Community Leaders of America. She is attending Centre College in Danville, Ky., and plans to study foreign languages, and international studies and is expecting to spend the 2019 school year in Segovia, Spain.

THIRD PLACE

I question too much

FFRF awarded Daniel \$1,000.

By Daniel Vogler

“Why the hell are you a nonbeliever?”

Not long ago, a devout believer, good friend and frequent intellectual sparring partner of mine tried to answer this question for me. I hope she’ll forgive me for saying that her tone was rife with the sort of condescending certitude that seems to accompany the belief that one’s spot in heaven is already reserved. Her analysis of the fundamental reason for my skepticism of religion was the following:

“You’re too smart for your own good. You question too much. You can’t just let your doubts go and surrender to God.”

Sandwiched between a backhanded compliment and a nearly nauseating platitude (delivered only halfway ironically) was an actual insight. If I could, in a terse sentence, tell believers why I am not one of them, I would repeat her

words: “I question too much.”

I question why a perfect and benevolent God would choose, seemingly at random, a few Middle Eastern tribes of highly evolved primates — on a blue spot of cosmic dust orbiting an unremarkable star in an unremarkable star system — to hear his revelations. I question where this God’s supposed perfection is derived when he is said to have created humans in his image — an image that includes properties such as rage, jealousy and irrationality. I question why religion’s practitioners preach moral absolutism when humanity’s sense of right and wrong has fluctuated considerably throughout history. (For simplicity’s sake, I have directed my interrogation only at the dogmas of monotheistic religion, but a similar line of questioning could be applied to the mythical texts of the Greeks, Hindus, Romans, etc.)

The truth is, that’s it. I am skeptical of



Daniel Vogler

religions because they make astounding claims for themselves, and offer nothing in the form of evidence. I am not (nor are most atheists) angry at God or some religious institution, as some believers assert. Nor was I dispatched, as I have been quite amusingly accused, by God’s less savory counterpart to test the faith of nonbelievers. I see insufficient evidence for divinity. That’s it.

I am skeptical of religion because I see no evidence that it is true; I reject religion because I see no evidence that it is good.

I oppose the intrusion of religion into governance, an arena in which it is historical-

“I am skeptical of religion because I see no evidence that it is true.

— Daniel Vogler

ly responsible for fomenting witch hunts, religious wars, oppression of women and sexual minorities, genocide, death threats against novelists, suppression of scientific discovery contradictory to its fantasies, and countless other — there is no more appropriate word — sins.

I would like to tell believers that they are welcome to surrender their critical faculties privately, but I stand with my fellow secularists and humanists, with those who value free expression and the ideals of the Enlightenment, in vehemently opposing the religious infiltration of our shared public life.

Daniel, 18, graduated from James Clemens High School in Madison, Ala. He has coordinated “STEM Fairs” for elementary students to reach out to the demographic groups underrepresented in the sciences. He will be attending Princeton University, where he plans to study physics and math.

FOURTH PLACE

Horrors of religion can’t be justified

FFRF awarded Evan \$750.

By Evan Muskopf

If there was one thing I could tell my family or a believer about why I’m a nonbeliever, it would be that, throughout history, the belief in a higher being has caused much harm, destruction and even death. Even if you ignore all the science, even if you ignore the complete lack of facts, even if you ignore the total absence of hard evidence and proof, there is no way that “God” would promote and sanction the horrors committed in the name of religion.

It there was one thing I could ask a believer, it would be: How can you defend the brutality and hatred of religion?

Why were millions of people killed in the Holocaust? Why were Muslims killed in the Crusades? Why do Sunnis and Shias fight? Why did Roman Catholics kill thousands of Protestants in the St. Bartholomew Day’s Massacre? Why did the Roman Catholics and Huguenots fight a war that resulted



Evan Muskopf

in the death of over 3 million people? Why did 8 million people die in the Thirty Years War? Why did Osama bin Laden mastermind the 9/11 terror strikes? Why are atrocious human rights violations occurring amidst the conflict in Africa between the Muslim Seleka and Christian groups?

Why? Because of religion.

If there was one thing that I would want a believer to think about, it would be: Why do they believe what they believe? I would want them to examine the source

of their belief. I would ask them to challenge their beliefs as ideas that were indoctrinated in them by their parents since birth, not truths to be blindly accepted. Believing in something just because you are told you should does a disservice to humanity. If people are going to be hurt and die in the name of a god, there must be more to base this on than being raised to believe. There has to be proof, evidence to continue to support the bigotry and financial waste that are found in religious organizations.

If there was one thing that I would want a believer to imagine, it would be to imagine the world without religion. The world would be such a better place if efforts currently made to satisfy a deity were instead spent on helping our fellow human beings. Instead of donating to the weekly collection plate, donate to a food pantry. Instead of building large temples, build a homeless shelter. Instead of teaching catechism, volunteer at a library and teach someone

to read. Instead of supporting the clergy, support cancer research. Instead of going to church, temple or mosque every week, clean up an elderly neighbor’s yard. Instead of instilling bigotry in children, instill the value of friendship and community. Instead of judging someone on their beliefs, judge them on their deeds. Instead of hating someone because of their faith, love someone because they are human.

Evan, 18, graduated from North Rockland High School in Thiells, N.Y. He was born with autism and learning disabilities, but through perseverance, Evan became an AP Scholar and a member of six honor societies. He has been involved in numerous extracurricular activities and has volunteered at several nonprofits, including one that helps children with autism and other disabilities learn to ride horses. He will be attending the Rochester Institute of Technology and has been accepted into the aerospace mechanical engineering program.

FIFTH PLACE

Yes, I know I’m going to hell

FFRF awarded Ian \$500.

By Ian Garvie

“Thanks! I know I’m going to hell and I’ll be in good company!”

I’ve been told I am going to hell throughout my life, even by some of my kindergarten peers. I never understood the gravity of this statement until middle school, when I realized I am an atheist.

Whenever friends, peers or teachers asked if I believed in God or went to church, I simply said, “No,” only to have them turn against me in disapproval. I was befuddled and disheartened that people I knew so well would easily spurn me over what seemed irrelevant. I am not sure how many friends I have lost due to my outspoken atheism.

Looking back, I should have asked them a simple, “Why?” Why is their way of life so much more important or better than

mine? Was it really that different? Why does believing in God make you better if we live our lives almost the same way? And by the way, doesn’t your God say he will be the judge? And what about those other religions whose “false” god or gods don’t look like yours?

Though raised in a secular family, my parents intentionally exposed my brother and me to many religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam. I rejected them all. Being more interested in science, none of them passed the evidentiary test and I wasn’t buying the “you have to have faith” argument.

Back to being told I was going to hell . . . I always thought this was such an odd threat. It seemed my believer friends wanted to scare me with “going to hell” to make me want to join their club, or would they sadistically want me to burn and suffer for

all eternity? Thus, the next question is, “Do you really want me to suffer in pain and agony forever, and if so, why?” Nothing like loving your neighbor by wishing the most painful thing imaginable upon them.

My endless barrage of questions would continue: Even if there was any scientific evidence for the existence of God or a supernatural Jesus, which there clearly isn’t, why would you choose to follow and support them? Have you actually read the bible — both testaments? What kind of loving and benevolent creator would make a realm of intense suffering for those who don’t worship him, and still have the audacity to claim the moral high ground?

But no. I haven’t raised these questions outwardly with many of my Christian friends. I believe it would be pretty futile, as most of them are so ingrained it wouldn’t make a difference and would probably alienate us



Ian Garvie

even further on the topic. Instead, I chose a different path. I started a Secular Student Alliance club at my high school, the first in Northern California, to support students like me. By our presence and example, we want our believer friends to know, “We are here. We are good people.”

Ian, 18, graduated from Laguna Creek High School in Elk Grove, Calif. As founder of his school’s SSA, he helped host Darwin Day events, screenings of the Chris Johnson movie, “A Better Life,” and had a table at Freethought Days at the California Capitol. Ian’s activism has earned him several prestigious awards and scholarships. He will be attending the University of Northern British Columbia.

SIXTH PLACE

A Scout’s revelations

FFRF awarded Quinn \$400.

By Quinn Friedl

The room was a repurposed play area, whitewashed and generally abandoned. A table separated me from the five adults who formed my Eagle board. Seven years of camping, studying and leadership as a member of the Boy Scouts of America had brought me to this point. I had completed all other requirements, and this final obstacle to the greatest success of my life was quickly falling away, despite my fears. I was just beginning to breathe easy when the dreaded final question was asked.

“Do you believe you deserve to be an Eagle?”

Taken aback, I paused. Every question before this I had answered with complete honesty, as an Eagle candidate was expected to do. I remembered the hours of community service, the stresses of

leading a troop, the endless frustrations of an ineffectual bureaucracy. Through it all, I had prevailed. So why did I know hesitate to answer this simple inquiry?

As each member stared at me thoughtfully, it suddenly dawned upon me why I had such difficulty answering — I did not share their faith.

Every Boy Scout — be he a Catholic, Jew or Muslim — must demonstrate some sort of faith in a god. I realized suddenly that the years of previously inexplicable mistrust I experienced toward my fellows, and dislike of the program as a whole, stemmed from this simple truth. Now I understood why I felt the need to keep my head held high during grace. Now I understood why I never wished to engage in discussions of faith with my fellow scouts.

Now I understood what it was to be alone.

I raised my head. I took a breath, and



Quinn Friedl

prepared to say the word that would render my work meaningless.

No.

It never came out. Before I could speak, my mind flashed back and forth, to memories of success and failure, joy and sorrow, camaraderie and competition. I remembered racing down a sodden, ruined trail in the middle of a snowstorm. I felt the compass in my hand, as I guided my troop through a dense thicket. I recalled the happiness of sitting round the fire with friends, sharing jokes and watching the stars in

“To be a freethinker is a privilege and a burden, especially in this terrifying day and age. — Quinn Friedl

the dark sky. I had another revelation, perhaps more powerful than the first — what it was to be an Eagle.

Grimacing subtly at this truth, I looked up, and with complete confidence, said “yes.” To be a freethinker is a privilege and a burden, especially in this terrifying day and age. Those that choose to not believe must constantly fight against those that would remove freedom of thought from this country. The faith does not make the man— it is the man that makes the faith, in more ways than one. To place the future of humankind in the hands of “God” is to absolve oneself of all responsibility toward one’s fellows. If there was one thing I was taught to do in the Boy Scouts, it is to take responsibility.

Quinn, 18, graduated from Lane Technical High School in Chicago. He enjoys writing and co-creates works of fiction daily. He has earned his Eagle Scout badge and will be attending Wright Community College.

FFRF Student Essays honorable mentions

FFRF selected 11 essays from the high school students essay contest it deemed worthy of honorable mention status. Each of the following students received \$200 from FFRF. Here are edited excerpts from each of them.

Fear holds you back

By Tori Roberts



Tori Roberts

If I could say one thing to my family members who are still strong believers in Christianity, it would be that their fear of the unknown is what holds them back. I am not a Christian despite being raised in the middle of the “Bible Belt” under strong Baptist beliefs. Most of my family remains in this religion and follows it closely and, as a result, our relationship has become strained. Politically, we cannot agree, as they will elect whichever candidate is the biggest Christian, with little regard for their actual beliefs or stances on any issue. They will not accept the fact that I am both an atheist as well as gay, and refuse to speak to me over these issues. It is almost pathetic that someone would allow religion to take over their family, but the devotion is too strong for some people and they cannot break free from it.

Religion is the result of fear of the unknown. Homophobia is the result of fear, voting with little care is the result of fear, cutting family off is the result of fear. They

are terrified of losing their “salvation,” and having to face the fact that perhaps we just die. Instead of facing this and learning to accept it, they choose to stay locked in their religion and oppose anything that challenges it. Fear holds you back, and that is the one thing I wish my family would truly understand.

Tori, 18, graduated from John F. Kennedy High School in Fremont, Calif. She will be attending California State University-Stanislaus and hopes to have a career in science in research or forensics.

Religion is not innately good

By Alexander Hernandez



Alexander Hernandez

Religion has long claimed that it is not only helpful, but needed for social and moral progress. This of course is easily disputed by the persecution of “sinful” people who had done nothing wrong besides believing in another religion. The most famous example of this behavior is the Crusades in the 11th to 13th centuries.

One of the biggest challenges that I have faced as an agnostic atheist is to explain to believers that religion is not inherently good or required for morality. Taking orders on morality from a 2,000-year-old book is absurd. Society has changed significantly since then, in spite of religion, not because of it. Reli-

gious texts have not changed in the last 2,000 years for the most part, yet our societies have exhibited tremendous social and moral progress. This includes the abolition of slavery, the acceptance of homosexual people, the equality of races, and the equality of the sexes. All of this has happened despite religion’s attempts to maintain the status quo that keeps them in power.

The advances of science and technology have thankfully helped the development of freethinkers grow exponentially. Thanks to organizations such as FFRF, religious control in our governments and society will diminish over time and disappear. I am proud to be a freethinker and on the right side of history as people everywhere learn to look past religion’s lies and move to acceptance and celebration of all people regardless of race, sex or sexual orientation.

Alexander, 18, graduated from high school in Coral Springs, Fla. He plans to study political science in college and become part of the solution against religious control of our government.

There’s a clear divide

By Hannah Hanson

I remember trying to pray, but never understanding what I was praying to, only that everyone else did it and it was something I was supposed to do to go to heaven. People told me that I needed a relationship with God if I wanted to be happy, fulfilled and have a purpose. They told me that I would be going to hell, especially after I came out as gay. They were a constant reminder that some people hated me for what I was. I decided, after a long time of not knowing where I stood with God, that I wasn’t going to worship anything or anyone.

Rejecting religion has made me see things clearer and helped me come to terms with myself, in terms of who I am. I find it so much easier to rational-



Hannah Hanson

ize and make sense of the world without it. I listen to facts and what I feel, not what I am told by a religious leader. Personally, I feel like religion does a better job dividing us as people rather than uniting us. I find that it’s hate that gets amplified the most.

All I ever saw was a bunch of people praying to something that may not exist and shaming others for being different. Religion has never given me anything good; it has only made me hate myself. It creates a divide and if you’re not on the right side, you’re in danger.

Hannah, 18, graduated from Lawrence High School in Fairfield, Maine. She will be attending Berklee College of Music in pursuit of a vocal performance and music education double major.

Freethought bolsters progress

By Aya Keller

This past summer, I worked at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University as a research intern. Throughout my stay, there was not a single meeting in which I presented my research proposal without rounds of questions, doubts and unconvinced faces. I



Aya Keller

learned to accept these challenges and use them to my advantage, constantly rethinking, reorganizing, reinventing ideas until a solid scientific question had been posed. Had I become defensive and dismissed my skeptical colleagues, as many fundamentalists do, I would not have made the progress that I made.

Just like science, participation in society requires an open mind. As the president of my school’s Secular Student Alliance, I often receive comments from believers questioning the purpose of our club. At each event where we advertise, I embrace any person who seeks to poke holes in my foundation because they permit me to answer questions about my beliefs and ultimately reach an even more meaningful conclusion.

To me, uncertainty paves the way to exploration and knowledge. When we close our minds off to doubt, we trap ourselves in a dark cave of ignorance. Religion exemplifies the effects of firmly held convictions; as the world changes in a wonderful progression of scientific breakthroughs, the ancient notions stay deeply rooted in people’s minds. How can we delve into our individual moral philosophies, thus embarking on the quest to ultimately understand our existence?

Aya, 18, graduated from Foothill High School in Pleasanton, Calif. She co-founded the Foothill Secular Student Alliance and has been president for the past two years. She will be attending the University of California-Berkeley to pursue a degree in neurobiology.

To admire the view

By Phoebe Greene



Phoebe Greene

My mom is a Southern Baptist born and raised, and she raised me the same way. As I grew, I began to explore other religions and branches of thought. I eventually told my mom that I did not believe in the Christian God, but she couldn’t accept it. I still don’t think she has.

I struggle to explain my views to her. It is like we are both looking at a sunset, but we can’t let each other admire it in our own way. Mom has to explain to me where it came from and why it is beau-

tiful and what it means. I try to tell her that I can enjoy the majesty of it without knowing how it relates to its creation, just as I can enjoy my life without knowing exactly why I exist.


If her belief gives her some peace, I don’t begrudge her of it. Belief is a powerful thing. I choose to believe in the innate good of humanity, in the beauty and chaos of life, and above all, the pursuit of happiness.

There are many things I wish I could say to my mom, but in the end, I know they would only cause her pain and worry. I can only continue to hope that some day she can let herself see how happy I am to look at the sunset, not because of a God behind it, but because of the woman I love and admire who sits beside me.

Phoebe, 18, graduated from Caldwell Early College High School in Hudson, N.C. She will be attending the University of North Carolina-Wilmington, where she plans to continue her involvement in film-making, theater, writing and music-making.

Do not think I am inhuman, immoral

By Alisha Griffin



Alisha Griffin

Do not think that because I am a nonbeliever that I am inhuman. My identity as a human being has not changed simply because I lack faith. I am no less of a person than you because it is vacant in my thoughts.

Do not think that because I am a nonbeliever that I am immoral. I treat people with more respect than I sometimes think they deserve. In a conversation, I make sure everyone has a chance to voice their opinions and thoughts. I humor people, even if I think they are ridiculous, just to see people smile.

Do not think that because I am a nonbeliever that I have been swayed by devils and demons. My lack of faith came as a result of my broad studies and interests. I am fascinated with foreign cultures and religions and ideas and philosophies and traditions and beliefs. Human beings are not swayed by demonic things, but our own wants and needs and thoughts.

Do not think that because I am a nonbeliever that I lack beliefs. I’ve learned that in one way or another, everyone’s beliefs are truth and in one way or another, everyone’s beliefs are fiction. I’ve learned that I can never completely understand another person. In that way, I have gained a sense of respect for others.


I am still kind. I am human, same as any of you. Nothing will change that.

Alisha, 18, graduated from Rahway High School in Rahway, N.J. She enjoys writing fan fiction, original short stories and short

plays, and plays video games, reads, and makes and watches YouTube videos. She will be attending Bucknell University and plans on double majoring in animal behavior and anthropology.

Questions answered

By Audrey Godwin



Audrey Godwin

I was raised in a devout Christian family. The doctrines under which I was brought up were not simply the best option, but the only option. I learned atheism was a dirty word. When, after years of internal conflict regarding my own beliefs, I revealed my own lack of belief in a higher power, I was met with scorn. My religious identity is not discussed or acknowledged by my family.

I have been ever the inquisitor from a young age, but when it came to religion, I was discouraged from asking questions. It felt as though in this area of my life I was being encouraged not to expand my knowledge of the universe, to suspend my own disbelief, to put aside all factual evidence and remain willfully blind to the glaring inconsistencies in logic.

In my experience, religion encourages individuals to think within the established lines of a group rather than form their own opinions; this enables complacency and closed-minded traditionalism. Additionally, it opposes change and progress, both of which are crucial to the improvement of society.

I resent that I was placed into a metaphorical box before I possessed the intellectual maturity to even comprehend what was happening, and I resent that I was subject to such disdain for breaking out of that mold once I did. However, these experiences have only served to strengthen my convictions, and I have emerged from this journey a proud atheist.

Audrey, 18, graduated from Kent Place School in Summit, N.J. She is interested in politics, philosophy and economics. She writes poetry and prose, creates visual art and sings in a music groups. She qualified for the Chinese National Honor Society. Audrey will be attending Vassar College.

Love to love

By Donald Fasce

Being raised in rural upstate New York, I know that skeptical and agnostic thought is a rare virtue among the local population. Just about everybody is a Catholic or Protestant, with maybe a single percent of the community being “other.” To the massive majority, this group of “others” is made up of freaks and geeks, the lambs led astray. To them, a Sikh, Muslim and atheist will all burn in the same hell.



Donald Fasce

My dad was the main believer in our family. After he and my mom divorced, I opened myself to different and new information.

My mother was the first person to find out about my beliefs. She was accepting, yet apprehensive. My father believes it’s a childhood phase. Similarly, my extended family members are just straight appalled or in denial. They can’t believe a boy who did so well in school could have done it without faith. They think that I can’t possibly have morals if I don’t have a book to tell me what to do.

I’ve learned that morals are beyond belief. I’ve learned those who have to be told to act based on a book rather than on their respect for others are missing the point. My extended family preaches about their charity and compassion, but judges and hate anybody who believes anything slightly different. I hope that one day they will learn to love others for the sake of loving others, not just because their god told them to.

Donald, 18, graduated from Livonia High School in Livonia, N.Y. He is a longtime volunteer and computer aide in his community and helped set up a recycling drive and robotics competition at his school. Donald will be attending Franklin and Marshall College and plans to study and eventually teach astrophysics.

The rationale of a 10-year-old

By Luke Makram



Luke Makram

After years of posing universal questions to my religious family members and obtaining unsatisfactory responses, I finally decided to investigate the claims of Christianity myself.

This increased examination of religion eventually led to my abandonment of the faith. As a naive 10-year-old, my understanding of ethics, philosophy and the natural world was somewhat limited. However, I knew the difference between right and wrong. I became a nonbeliever mainly due to the moral dilemmas associated with accepting the claim that an interventionist god exists.

My family still believes that science

somehow “corrupted” me, when, in fact, it was a closer reading of religious texts that ultimately changed my mind. Even if the masses who adhere to the main monotheisms are completely benign, the belief is not. There is something fundamentally reprehensible about the notion that an omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent prime mover watches the suffering occurring on Earth with little compassion.

A peaceful nonbeliever, an ignorant foreigner, and the most heinous criminals in history are bound for the same eternal punishment. It took no more than the morally conscious mind of a 10-year-old to recognize there was something terribly wrong with this worldview. This belief would essentially be harmless were it not for the fact that it directs one’s fundamental outlook on life and has very real effects on society’s welfare.

Luke, 18, graduated from Marshall County High School in Lewisburg, Tenn. His two passions are academics and basketball. He has traveled throughout the world, including France, Italy and Canada. Luke will be attending the University of Alabama-Huntsville with a goal of getting a degree in aerospace engineering.

I do not need your God

By Lindsay Philcox



Lindsay Philcox

I tried to be religious for a long time. I went to church on Sundays and sang hymns next to my grandmother. But there was always something within me that doubted what I was trying to believe. I took more interest in doodling on the prayer request cards in the pews than I did the Sunday sermons. Yet, even through my doubt, I desperately wanted to be religious. I wanted to fit in. I wanted God to be a safety net for me. But he never was.

To the believers, I say, I do not need your God. Go right on believing. I don’t mind. You do not offend me with your belief as I offend you with my lack of it. I have discovered a world of freethought, outside of the walls of the church. I have found my own set of beliefs, which do not revolve around an all-knowing man in the empty sky, looking down upon me with judgment and a predestined map of my life’s course. I believe in energy — a positive, soulful energy — within us that neither has, nor needs, any name. I believe my life will go where I direct it, based on each and every individual

choice that I make, and that no one has already decided those choices for me. I believe in myself, and my own power to bring change and good into the world, more than I ever did when I believed in your God.

Lindsay, 18, graduated from Ponte Vedra High School in Ponte Vedra, Fla. She works at a family-owned eatery. During high school, she was involved in several theater productions. Lindsay will be attending Brandeis University, where she plans to study psychology and theater arts.

Living in the present

By Taryn Waite



Taryn Waite

I woke up with a start and opened my eyes. I fumbled around in the tent until I found the zipper, then stepped out. A faint glow enveloped the ridge around me, so I looked up and abruptly forgot all about my full bladder. The sky was speckled with millions of sparkling pinpricks of light, forming a blanket that extended as far as I could see in every direction. It swallowed me up in its quiet grandeur. I was floating, suspended in this moment of time, on this mountain ridge at midnight, under the stars, far from all that had ever bothered me.

To some, this experience would stir a spiritual or religious response, strengthening their belief in God and heaven. For me, however, it meant something entirely different. In that moment, I existed entirely in the present. All that mattered as I looked up at the night sky was the here and now, and all at once I felt calm, invincible, and truly free.

When people ask me why I don’t believe in God, my answer is simple. While I’m alive, I don’t want to worry about what happens after death. Instead, I want to work on living life to its fullest while I am here. I don’t need something after death to live for. I just need myself, the people I love and the beautiful world around me.

Taryn, 18, graduated from Lexington High School in Lexington, Mass. She swam competitively throughout her youth and plans to continue swimming in college. She enjoys hiking, skiing, traveling, origami and teaching swimming lessons. Taryn will be attending Colby College, where she plans to study neuroscience.

CRANKMAIL

Here’s another sampling of the less-than-pleasant mail FFRF received in the past several weeks, presented to you unedited. Note: Some of the language used is offensive.

Fish and Game mailer: You should just ignore the material like everyone does with flyers for hearing aids or political ads. People like you need to get a life and stop wasting tax payer money on stupid things. No one is telling you to read the material. I am not at all religious but I am fiscally responsible and it burns my ass to see morons like you waste my tax payer dollars on things that can easily be ignored. You really should get a fucking life. — *Mark Bogacz*

Stay away: Please stay out of our state. Churches host these events for free. Unless you’re willing to pony up the money to rent out a place to hold these classes, then please kindly piss off. I’m not even religious, but it’s groups of assholes like you that ruin shit for everyone else. Go be an activist elsewhere in your own state. Stay out of ours. Thanks. — *John Dion*

Fuck you: You are a bunch of sick fuckers. I hope that all of you die a terrible death. — *Bob Parker*

Losers: Suck my ass, you heartless creeps. You are not happy unless you are in some bodies business — *Kathy Romine*

Disgusting!: You people disgust me with your separation of church and state. Get a real job and stop causing problems. If you don’t like Jesus and his word go to a different country. — *Terry Jarrett*

go away: Please stop, this site and what it stands for is absolutely disgusting-please leave this country - this country was founded on God and if you don’t like that go else wherebut there is another place you’ll go if responsible for this crap of which I pray is not the case and you see the error of your ways — *Derek Broadhammer*

Get a life: Following your rules, I can’t honor the dead anywhere in public because it’s all “government” property. Well guess what, the government doesn’t get to say what goes on the land because they want to. They can’t own the land. The people own the land. If that cross gets removed, I’ll put 10 up in its place, and 10 up by your headquarters. Get a life losers. — *Nick Poulter*

You suck: When you die, I hope people piss on your grave. Worry about our schools and homeless. Disgusting so called American. Trump has a line of people wanting to build his wall, get in it. That’s where you belong. — *Tasha Daniel*

God is good: God is on the throne. He is the king of King and The Lord of lords and one day every knee will bow and profess him as God. Satan is at work in these last days to remove God from every facet of life. But I know, God is good. Good will reign forever. — *Starr Lyn*

LAKE OF FIRE: YOU WILL WEEP AND BEG AND MOAN AND BEG AND WEEP AND BEG AND MOAN AND CRY AND WEEP AND BEG AND YOU WILL NEVER EVER GET OUT OF THE LAKE OF FIRE YOU WILL CRY AND MOAN AND BEG AND CRY AND MOAN AND WEEP AND GHNASH YOUR TEETH AND BEG AND THEN ETERNITY HAS JUST STARTED FOR YOU = UNLESS YOU REPENT AND STOP WORKING AGAINST ME YOU ARE GOING TO BE SORRY = I AM THE LORD AND THERE IS NO OTHER AND YOU ARE WORKING AGAINST ME AND IVE HAD ENOUGH AND UNLESS YOU REPENT YOU WILL BE SORRY FOREVER IVE HAD ENOUGH REPENT — *Chris Acheson*

FFRF: Fuck your ass motherfucker im not a christian but this website is a fucking pot of steam-ing shit — *Jesse Paul*

Cross: How can u force ur thoughts and believes on us but we don’t have the same rights you are hypocrites wouldn’t want to face your judgment on judgment day — *Troy Goad*

Complaint: What a waste of time,money,and breath. — *George Miller*

FFRF: Why can you not leave some things alone. Are you really so insecure that you must try to tell all of us free people how to live. Why do you feel so entitled to determine what all others must think? You have gone a step too far. We are Americans... a free people who have the right to see things as we see them and draw our own conclusions. We do not need a watch-guard to tell us how to think, act and grieve. This is insulting. We do not need you to tell us how to live. — *Paul Pappas*

GOD IS GOOD: You will get your freedom for a 3 and a half y.then GOD will show Himself and your plaques begin.Hardened sinners are all SELFISH people.Gays are all SELFISH people.Atheists are all SELFISH people.People like you hate anyone to tell them and point out to you that you are taking things from others. This GOD who gave the 10 Commandment ,HE gave them to HIS PEOPLE not you.Why are they bothering you if you are so good? You are not good and you want this world to destroy all good people so that you can enjoy fully every sin there is. Well,you are already doing that and GOD has allowed you to live because when HE takes your life away you will never live again. GOD IS GOOD isn’t HE?;) — *Natalie Holand*

You will be sued!: You do not have to listen to church you do not have to go to church you do not have to listen to church music. If you don’t believe you have the right to not believe but you do not have the right to stop me from having the right to do those things. And whenever you and infringe upon my rights as a Christian then you will be sued. You are nothing more than traitors to this country and the American people. You are forcing your atheist beliefs on me and I will not stand for it. FFRF EXPECT TO BE SUED!!! — *Michelle Williams*

A pox on your house (of worship)



David Williamson of Florida sent us this photo that was posted to the Atheists of Bay County (Florida) Facebook page. The Christian Church at Panama City’s sign reads, “Christianity is like chicken pox. If you have it, you can give it to others!” FFRF staff members had a good time commenting on the church marquee, including such quips as, “And it leaves scars,” “It’s much worse if you have it as an adult,” and “Science has led to its significant decline.”

Scopes trial narrative would be same today

Actor John de Lancie gave these remarks at FFRF's pre-dedication dinner in Chattanooga, Tenn., on July 13, the night before the unveiling ceremony for the statue of Clarence Darrow outside the Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton, Tenn., site of the 1925 Scopes trial.

By John de Lancie

About 10 years ago, I had the unusual experience of touring our country with a show about the Scopes “Monkey” Trial. Ed Asner played William Jennings Bryan and I played Clarence Darrow. This was not “Inherit the Wind” — it was from the actual trial transcripts.

It was one of the most interesting theatrical experiences of my life. I had no idea what I was getting myself into.

During rehearsals, we concentrated on the legal details — the maneuverings of the lawyers and the judge. Our job was to give the audience the “experience” of the trial, while at the same time arriving at the same conclusions we held — that this was all an intellectual exercise: a historical/pastoral curiosity which took place long ago and far away. That is, until our first performance, when a man abruptly stood up and screamed at the top of his lungs that we were damned and going to hell. We froze. The show came to a screeching stop as we stared into the audience, wide-eyed and dumbstruck. Suddenly, we weren’t in Kansas anymore — although, actually, we were!

That performance was my first, full-throated encounter with the realization that some people take this stuff seriously. And so, as we moved from town to town, and each performance brought out new and more vocal outbursts, I began to listen more closely to what was being said. Not what I was saying — I was in complete agreement with Darrow’s words — but to what Bryan was saying. And after a time, I began to “hear” his argument and to understand in a more visceral way that both of these men were talking across a great gulf. Darrow’s reasoned, rational approach was having no effect whatsoever on Bryan. Nor would it ever.

I’m going to read a few paragraphs of Darrow’s text and then I’m going to read Bryan’s rebuttal. Listen to the ideas and the buzz words that are still in play today.

Darrow’s words

Darrow said: “I am going to argue this law as if it were serious and as if it were a death struggle between two civilizations. What we find here today is as brazen and bold an attempt to destroy learning as was ever made in the Middle Ages. The only difference is we have not provided that Mr. Scopes shall be burned at the stake.

“The people of Tennessee adopted a piece of legislation that says you shan’t teach any theory on the origin



Photo courtesy of the Chattanooga Times Free Press

John de Lancie speaks to the crowd as part of the dedication ceremony for the statue of Clarence Darrow in Dayton, Tenn., underwritten by FFRF.

of man, except the divine account contained in the bible.

“Now I ask you; what is the bible? It is a book primarily of religion and morals. It is not a book of science — never was and never was meant to be. There is nothing prescribed that would tell you how to build a railroad, or a steamboat, or how to make anything that would advance civilization.

“It is not a book on biology — they knew nothing about it. They thought the Earth was created 4,004 years before the Christian era. We know better. They want the bible to be the yardstick to measure every man’s intellect; to measure every man’s intelligence; and to measure every man’s learning.

“Every bit of knowledge that the mind has must be submitted to a religious test, and that is a travesty of justice and of the Constitution. If today you can take a thing like evolution and make it a crime to teach it in the public schools, tomorrow you can make it a crime to teach it in the private schools and then at the hustings or in church.

“At the next session, you may ban books and newspapers. If you can do one, you can do the other, and after a while it is the setting of man against man, and creed against creed, until with flying banners and beating drums, we are marching backwards to the 16th century when bigots burned the men who dared to bring any intelligence, enlightenment, and culture

to the human mind.”

Bryan’s response fascinated me. It drew a clear, concise line in the sand. And as I sat there, night after night, I began to realize that no level of “exquisite detailing” about fossils or, in later years, DNA or carbon dating was or would have convinced Bryan to change his narrative — his fantasy.

While Darrow argued law, intelligence and enlightenment, Bryan talked magic.

And when your audience is primed for a magic show (as invariably a religious audience is), you’re not going to get very far with lessons on biology.

Bryan’s rebuttal

Here is Bryan’s rebuttal: “Mr. Scopes tells the children to copy this diagram on evolution, which effectively detaches the children from the throne of God and links their ancestors with the jungle.

“And then if these children believe it, they go back home to scoff at the religion of their parents! But these parents have a right to say that no teacher paid by them shall rob their children of faith in God and send them back to their houses skeptical infidels, agnostics, or atheists!

“Atheists think life is a mystery that nobody can explain. Not one word about God. They want to come in with their little padded up evolution that commences with nothing and ends nowhere.

“They do not explain the great rid-

dle of the universe; they do not deal with the problems of life; they do not teach how to live. There is no place for miracles.

“They eliminate everything supernatural from the Old Testament and the New.

“They don’t tell us where man became endowed with the hope of immortality. They believe that man has been rising all the time; that he never fell from grace and that when the savior came, there was no reason for his coming, and that he was born of Joseph and that he lives in his grave.

“Evolution is a doctrine that not only destroys their belief in God, but takes from them every moral standard that the bible gives us.

“This issue, between believer and unbeliever, is bigger than any court and we are not going to settle that issue here.

“The bible is the word of God. The bible is the only expression of man’s hope. The bible is not going to be driven out of this court by ‘experts’ who have come hundreds of miles to testify that they can reconcile evolution and its ancestor in the jungle, with a man made by God in his image and put here for the purpose of a divine plan.”

There you have it — Bryan’s argument: “Stay away from our beliefs . . . stay away from our children . . . your ‘education’ turns them against us . . . our beliefs are non-negotiable . . . our sacred text is literal . . . and we have the answers to all the questions you will ever need to ask.”

Sound familiar? The chasm between us is as stark today as it was then — maybe more so. Red/blue; urban/rural; guns/no guns, life/choice; a closed vs. open world are all embodied in the subtext of that speech.

Add the “fear of God” into this fundamentalist mindset and you’ve got a system that will never change.

‘Death of wisdom’

As Darrow said, “The fear of God is the death of wisdom.” Educated arguments supported with facts are now suspect, if not dismissed out of hand. And so today we are forced to live in a world of “alternate facts,” a world of conspiracies and nonsense.

A world where critical thinking and healthy skepticism are vehemently attacked. Where the notion that kidnapped children living on Mars is no longer the silly scribbling of some comic book writer but finds traction in a voting population that brought us our latest occupant of the White House.

And let’s not forget the self-righteous VP, that bible-thumping sidekick who gives hypocritical lip service to, as Bryan said, the “bible’s moral standards” while stripping the poor of their dignity and health care. These two posers are more aligned with the vengeful persona of the Old Testament than with the enlightened founders of our nation, or the men and women who got us to the moon, or who deciphered the human genome.

We are in for a bumpy ride, but we will figure it out. We are up to the challenge. Don’t forget, over the long run we’ve been winning all along. After the Dark Ages came the Enlightenment. Through the Civil War came emancipation and then suffrage and civil rights. After Dayton came Dover.

Some people are afraid of knowledge. But Darrow believed in the amazing, astounding and extraordinary power of the human mind.

And so do I, Clarence. So do I.

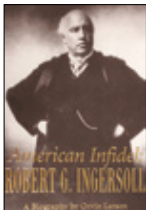
What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

Founded in 1978 as a national organization of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics), the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc. has 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.

FFRF.ORG FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll



Prof. Larsen writes with affection and respect of this illustrious 19th century freethinker.

By Orvin Larsen

Buy it from FFRF online shop.ffrf.org

Freethinkers are winning struggle for America’s soul

By James A. Haught

This is a heady era for freethinkers — we nonconformists who doubt supernatural gods, devils, heavens, hells, miracles, angels, demons, prophecies, apparitions and other magical claims of religion.

Finally, after thousands of years of church domination, the cultural tide of Western civilization is flowing our direction. Religion is losing its grip on democratic societies. The Secular Age is blossoming rapidly. Doubters no longer need to conceal their mental honesty.

Ever since ancient Greece, some scientific thinkers questioned supernatural dogmas. But it was risky. The priesthood wielded great power, and killed nonconformists. During many periods, you could be executed for questioning invisible deities. Skeptics and other misfits were burned at the stake for a dozen centuries. After burnings ceased, you still could be thrown in prison for “blasphemy.” Even today, people are killed in some Islamic lands for questioning holy dogmas.

Making progress

However, Western civilization began to evolve away from religious control after The Enlightenment fostered scientific logic and reason. Ever since, in halting steps, gradual progress has been made toward intellectual inquiry. A breakthrough erupted in the 1850s when Charles Darwin postulated that all living things, including humans, evolved from simpler life forms. This jolted the church and triggered strong freethought in the late 1800s.

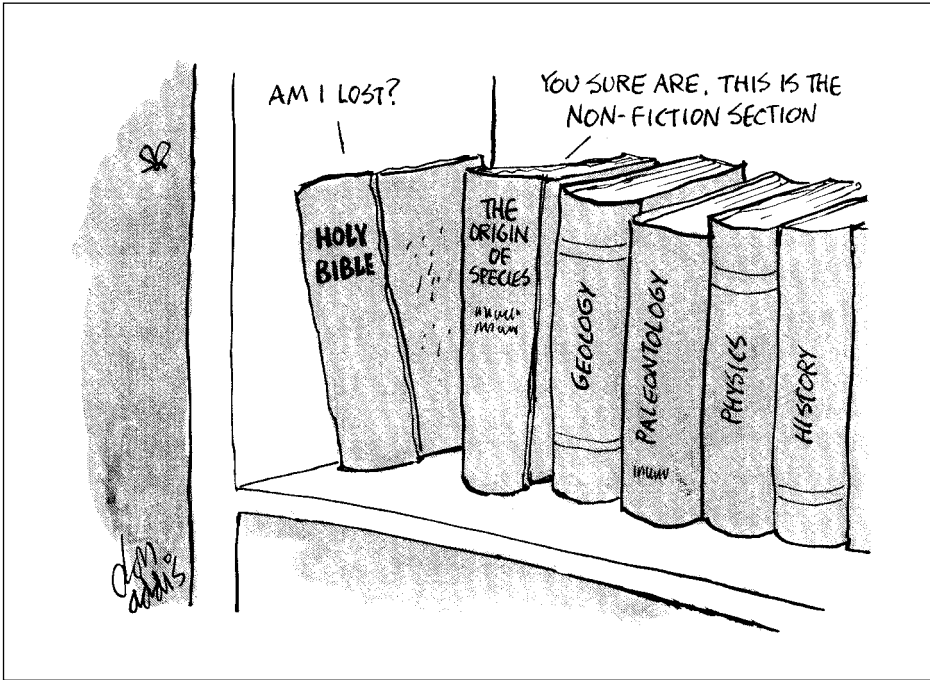
Regardless, religion kept an iron clutch on much of the culture. When I came of age in the 1950s in Appalachia’s Bible Belt, church taboos ruled. It was a crime for stores to open on the Sabbath. It was a crime to buy a cocktail — or a lottery ticket — or look at the equivalent of a Playboy magazine or an R-rated movie, or even read about sex. Our Republican mayor in Charleston once sent police to raid bookstores selling “Peyton Place.”

It was a crime for an unmarried couple to share a bedroom. It was a felony for a desperate girl to end a pregnancy. In some states, even birth control was illegal. School classes began with mandatory prayer. Jews weren’t allowed into Christian-only country clubs. Divorce was hush-hush. Back then, anyone who didn’t belong to a proper, respectable church was held in contempt.

Gradually, the right to doubt and elude church suppression crept into daily life. The Supreme Court banned government-ordered school prayer in 1962 and mandatory classroom bible-reading in 1963. It allowed married couples to practice



James A. Haught



birth control in 1965 — and unwed couples to do so in 1972. A long series of rulings halted bluenose censorship of sexy books, magazines and movies. And religious displays on government property have been partly banned.

All those Bible Belt strictures of my youth slowly slipped away — thanks partly to the sexual revolution. Liquor clubs and lotteries became legal. Sexy magazines and movies were allowed. Sunday shopping blossomed. Unwed couples began living together. Abortion became legal. Church taboos simply evaporated.

Post-war secular surge

A secular surge swept Europe after World War II. Church attendance plummeted. Nations that had spent centuries killing people over religion — in Crusades, Inquisitions, witch hunts, pogroms, Reform

mation wars, persecutions, holy wars and massacres — decided that religion was inconsequential. Europe’s transformation spread to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and other advanced democracies.

At first, it seemed that America was an exception, a place where religion remained strong. But, in recent decades, America rapidly caught up with the Western world. Religion lost its grip on the country.

Church decline started in the 1960s when tall-steeple mainline denominations began losing members, then the erosion spread to evangelicals and Catholics. The Southern Baptist Church has lost 1 million members in the past decade. And so many white followers left Catholicism that one-tenth of U.S. adults now are ex-Catholics.

The number of Americans who say their faith is “none” soared remarkably since 1990. Now the “Nones” are America’s largest group, almost 25 percent of the adult population — outnumbering Catholics (21 percent) and white evangelicals (16 percent).

Barack Obama was the first president to welcome skeptic groups to the White House and cite “those who have no religion” in his speeches. The Supreme Court ruling in favor of gay marriage was a crippling blow

The Secular Age is blossoming rapidly. Doubters no longer need to conceal their mental honesty.

to hidebound Christianity.

Abruptly, almost overnight, the Secular Age has hit America like a tsunami. We who crusade for the scientific mentality, opposing supernaturalism, are winning the culture war, month after month, year after year. New studies find that skeptics have higher IQ than believers.

Sociologist Phil Zuckerman says Scandinavia has progressed until the populace generally assumes that only small children believe in invisible spirits, while intelligent adults are expected to outgrow this infantilism. I think America is creeping in that direction. Someday, I hope, it will be embarrassing for any American in educated circles to avow supernatural religion.

In his landmark book, *The End of White Christian America*, Robert P. Jones of the Public Religion Research Institute states that young Americans who say their religion is “none” generally are socially liberal, supporting gay rights, universal health care, women’s right to choose, and the like. But they hardly vote. Apparently they shun politics as much as they shun religion. This gives white evangelicals — although fading — an advantage. White evangelicals turned out overwhelmingly in 2016 to put Donald Trump into the White House.

In a New York Times commentary, Jones wrote: “The waning number of white Christians in the country today may not have time on their side, but as the sun is slowly setting on the cultural world of white Christian America, they’ve managed, at least in this election, to rage against the dying of the light.”

In an updated paperback of his book, Jones said white evangelicals abandoned their morality to support an uncouth, twice-divorced, gambling billionaire who boasts of grabbing women’s genitals. He said the 2016 election may be the “death rattle” of fundamentalism in America.

I certainly hope so — and I hope secularism keeps snowballing until we scientific-minded freethinkers stand proud as the intelligent majority in this country.

James A. Haught is editor emeritus of West Virginia’s largest newspaper, *The Charleston Gazette-Mail*. This essay — a talk he delivered to the Pittsburgh Freethought Community — expands upon his 2014 book, *Religion is Dying*.

THEY SAID WHAT?

President Trump is the greatest thing that’s happened to this country. I consider it a biblical miracle that he’s there.

Sen. Luther Strange, R-Ala., the lawmaker appointed to fill the seat vacated by Attorney General Jeff Sessions. *The Hill*, 7-11-17

It is assumed that the inspired word of the bible, in its various translations, reflects what actually happened, but using words that were most appropriate at the time of writing.

Controversial toxicologist Michael Dourson, who self-publishes science-inspired bible books and has been nominated to lead the Environmental Protection Agency’s work on chemical safety and pollution prevention. *BuzzFeed*, 7-18-17

We do not defend this position as the proper response for a Catholic judge to take with respect to abortion or the death penalty.

Amy Coney Barrett, President Trump’s nominee for a seat on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, criticizing Justice William Brennan’s statement about faith, in which he said that he took an oath to uphold the law, and that “there isn’t any obligation of our faith superior” to that oath. *Alliance For Justice*, 7-19-17

When it comes to how we should deal with evil doers, the bible, in the book of Romans, is very clear: God has endowed rulers full power to use whatever means necessary — including war — to stop evil. In the case of North Korea, God has given Trump authority to take out Kim Jong Un.

Robert Jeffress, one of President Trump’s evangelical advisers. *Washington Post*, 8-8-17

He is unashamed in standing up for increasing an awareness of God in the United States. He recognizes how important that is and that that is a basis of Western civilization . . . As a believer in Jesus Christ, I could not be more happy with what I am seeing coming out of the Trump White House. This is beyond my wildest expectations. He is a man who, I do believe, understands who the God of the bible is and he wants to lift up the God of the bible here in the United States . . . The Lord is working mightily in our government and I believe it is because God is being revered, God is being lifted up. Prayer is not foreign in the White House, it’s not foreign in the Executive Office Building; looking to God, looking through bible studies, this is not foreign anymore.

Former Minnesota congresswoman Michele Bachmann as a guest on Jan Markell’s “Understanding The Times” radio program. *Right Wing Watch*, 7-24-17



Michael Dourson



Photo by Gage Skidmore
Robert Jeffress

LETTERBOX

Save taxes — donate to FFRF and other causes

It's clear that only conservative Christianity gets special consideration in this country — the rest of us are second-class citizens. They see to it that no tax dollars (not just their own) go to abortion, for example. They demand opt-out after opt-out, but more and more these days, non-Christians and the nonreligious are still expected to subsidize conservative Christianity. No consideration for OUR principles. So until secular government is respected once more, I recommend tax avoidance. Give to organizations that fight political religion — FFRF is one — and write it off on your taxes. If you can afford to live on your savings, give all your earnings this year, and every year of the “fascist era.” Starve them of funds. It's simple. You can give to organizations you support, or to a government you do not.

Stephen Van Eck
Pennsylvania

World could use more Evidentiarians

Maybe David Connell (the letter writer in your June/July issue who feels uncomfortable with the term “atheist”) is an Evidentiarian — one who believes in those things for which there is evidence. We could use more of those!

Gail Merten
District of Columbia

Member's poem asks question: 'God Who?'

Religious are many, but which God to adore?
In quest of achieving, life evermore.
Who knows the “Real God” beyond number to choose?
“I do!” claim the faithful of differing views.
Each so certain only theirs is the way,
And heathen forsaken, on judgment day.
Intolerance of others sacred stand,
Has incited more wars than riches or land.
Perhaps the devout and atheist, too,
When meeting their maker, shall ask;
“God Who?”

Name withheld upon request
Illinois

God could have been 'good guy with a gun'

Wayne LaPierre, president of the National Rifle Association, said “if only there was a good guy with a gun, the tragedy at Sandy Hook would not have been so drastic.” Whereas former Gov. Mike Huckabee said, “If only the pres-

Holy balls, Batman!



Val Johnson of Wisconsin sent FFRF the packaging for a bag of golf balls. She writes: “How ‘holy’ can golf balls be? Only to be used on Sunday mornings?”

ence of God was not eliminated, the tragedy would not have been so deep.” We have to deduce that God, obviously in the “good guy” column as LaPierre would surmise, had to have a gun to blast away the shooter. This contradiction is quite confusing!

G.M. Chandu
New York

Crank Mail section amusing, entertaining

Just a short note to let you know that I really enjoy the Crank Mail section of the paper. It's very entertaining, as well as amusing.

There are more lies in the bible than there is in a speech given by President Trump. If we were able to take the money out of religion today, tomorrow there would be no religion.

Reading the Crank Mail, I get a very strong feeling that I am not dealing with mental giants.

Jack Henley
Texas

In pledge, 'God' divides the 'indivisible'

I was born in 1935. When I was school age, we had to say the Pledge of Allegiance every morning and we felt very patriotic about it.

There was no “under God” in the pledge then. At that time my mother was trying to indoctrinate me with her belief, a religion that caused me to view God as a big nasty tyrant who was intent on destroying my individuality.

If “God” had been part of the pledge then, I wouldn't have felt patriotic about it at all.

As it was, I learned my ethics, sense of right and wrong from American history, not my mother and her church. The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, especially the Bill of Rights and other writings of the Founding Fathers — those are the sacred texts of my beliefs.

I still say the pledge when called on to do so, but I say it the way it

was learned, when “one nation, indivisible,” was undivided and meant something.

Marcia Millington
Wisconsin

In court, be ready to counter religious oath

In the past, I have noted letters from nonbelievers who faced the situation of being required to take a religious oath (“... so help me God”) when involved with the court system in some states.

As an emergency physician, I am, on occasion, required to appear in court. Living in New Mexico, the oath offered was simply, “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?” One time, however, the judge threw in the objectionable words. I told the judge that I couldn't take the oath in that form and asked him to remove the last phrase.

He looked at me like I had put a slice of lemon in his mouth, but repeated the oath without the objectionable phrase and we moved on. Somehow, word must have got around, because the next time I appeared in court, the judge (who, for some reason, remembered me from grade school) said, “Do you swear to tell the truth?” After waiting for an instant for the rest, I realized that he was done and said, “I do.”

I can't remember how much time passed before my next appearance in court, but ever since then, the oath has been, “Do you swear or affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth under penalty of law?”

As an aside, I'm one of those people who run through “what if” scenarios in my mind.

I thought about what I would do if a judge insisted that I take the oath with the objectionable words. My thought was to say, “Your Honor, if I take the oath in that form, you couldn't trust anything I would say, because that would be my first lie.” What is he (or she) going to do, refuse to let me testify?

I would think that the courts would

have long since removed religious oaths, but with the current dominance of conservative Christians, I'm not sure we can count on judges to recognize that there are a growing number of nonbelievers who are unwilling to take religious oaths. I appreciate the fact that the FFRF attorneys are working hard on this situation. I hope this will help those who face that situation.

Martin Boyd, M.D.
New Mexico

Teen's 'protest' poem gets deserved high mark

Greetings. Below is a poem our 14-year-old daughter Danielle wrote for her eighth-grade history class. The assignment was to write a protest song/poem as part of their review of '60s culture. We (as her “completely unbiased” parents) thought it was quite good.

Despite her teacher probably being a “person of faith,” she still gave Danielle an “A” on the project.

It's Just Religion Letting Us Down

There is one disease that this whole world has,
And it's going on faith, denying the facts.
Believing what we're told,
Too blinded to ask,
It's just religion letting us down.

Hating on people of nonbinary genders,
Then preaching in churches to love one another.
Denying evolution, despite the evidence,
Then expecting us to believe the lies.
It's just religion letting us down.

Forty two hundred religions,
And no one can agree,
Who “God” is, or how he came to be
While I'm stuck here with my science and history.
It's just religion letting us down.

Bibles in hotel rooms,
Crosses in the park,
Leaving people wondern', just sitting in the dark
Why not believe something from 3500 years ago?
It's just religion letting us down.

When something wrong happens,
people should stand and fight
But sitting, hoping, praying, steals the limelight,
Undermining the natural world,
Destroying free thoughts,
It's just religion letting us down.

Thanks for all of the good work you do.

Terry, Lisa and Danielle Connacher
Arizona

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Slightly irreverent views, news, music & interviews

FFRF.ORG **FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION**

BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

Roscoe Cooper III, 43, Richmond, VA: Driving while intoxicated. Cooper, pastor of Rising Mt. Zion Baptist Church and vice chair of the Henrico County School Board, was arrested about 1 a.m. on I-64. Police wouldn't release his blood-alcohol level. *Source: WTVR, 8-6-17*

Robert DeValle, 74, Richland, WA: 2 two counts of 1st-degree child molestation. DeValle, a deacon at Christ the King Catholic Parish, is charged with assaults on 2 sisters between 8 and 9 years ago.

Court records say the younger girl told her youth group leader that DeValle kissed and licked her breasts and put his hands inside her underwear when she was in 2nd grade. The older sister told her parents DeValle fondled her breasts inside her shirt while kissing her neck. Documents stated DeValle admitted assaulting another girl when she was about 10. *Source: KEPR, 8-3-17*

Timothy C. Peterkin, 43, Ruskin, FL: Lewd and lascivious behavior/victim age 12 or older and younger than 16. Peterkin, who operates a youth ministry out of his home, is accused of an incident with a 13-year-old girl who asked him for some medicinal cream for an allergic reaction on her legs. She was spending the weekend at his home.

According to the police report, he applied the ointment in his bathroom and asked the girl to remove her shorts so he could check for other affected areas. It's alleged he then put her on his lap and put his hands inside her underwear. *Source: WFTS, 8-3-17*

Anthony Mauro, 45, Beachwood, NJ: Possession and distribution of child pornography. Mauro is a volunteer youth team leader at St. Barnabas Catholic Church. A search of his home turned up more than 100 explicit movies and images, including prepubescent children engaged in sexual acts, said Ocean County prosecutor Joseph Coronato. *Source: nj.com, 8-1-17*

Guillermo Quintanilla, 47, Canal Winchester, OH: Rape, sexual battery and 2 counts of gross sexual imposition. Quintanilla, pastor at El Shadai Church of God in Columbus, is accused of assaults over a 4-year period on a girl, starting when she was 8. Two other girls later came forward. All attended the church. *Source: WSYX, 7-31-17*

Arnel F. Lagarejos, 55, Taytay, Philippines: Violation of the Anti-Human Trafficking in Persons Act. Msgr. Lagarejos, a Catholic priest, was arrested in the company of a 13-year-old girl while they were allegedly on their way to a motel. She was allegedly being pimped out by a 16-year-old boy. *Source: GMA News, 7-30-17*

Daniel Greer, 77, New Haven, CT: 2nd-degree sexual assault and risk of injury to a minor. Rabbi Greer, dean at Yeshiva of New Haven, is accused of assaulting a high school student at the school for 3 years in the early to mid-2000s.

The alleged victim, Eliyahu Mirlis, was awarded \$15 million by a jury in May in his suit against Greer and the school. The verdict is under appeal. *Source: Hartford Courant, 7-26-17*

John T. Sweeney, 74, Greensburg, PA: Involuntary deviate sexual intercourse. Sweeney is accused of molesting a 10-year-old boy during the 1991-92 school term while he was pastor at St. Margaret Mary Catholic Parish. The alleged victim didn't report it until September 2016.

According to the grand jury presentment, the boy was sent to Sweeney because he'd been disruptive on a school bus and was forced to perform oral sex in a conference room next to Sweeney's office. It's alleged that the parish secretary brought the boy milk and cookies after the assault. *Source: Tribune-Review, 7-25-17*

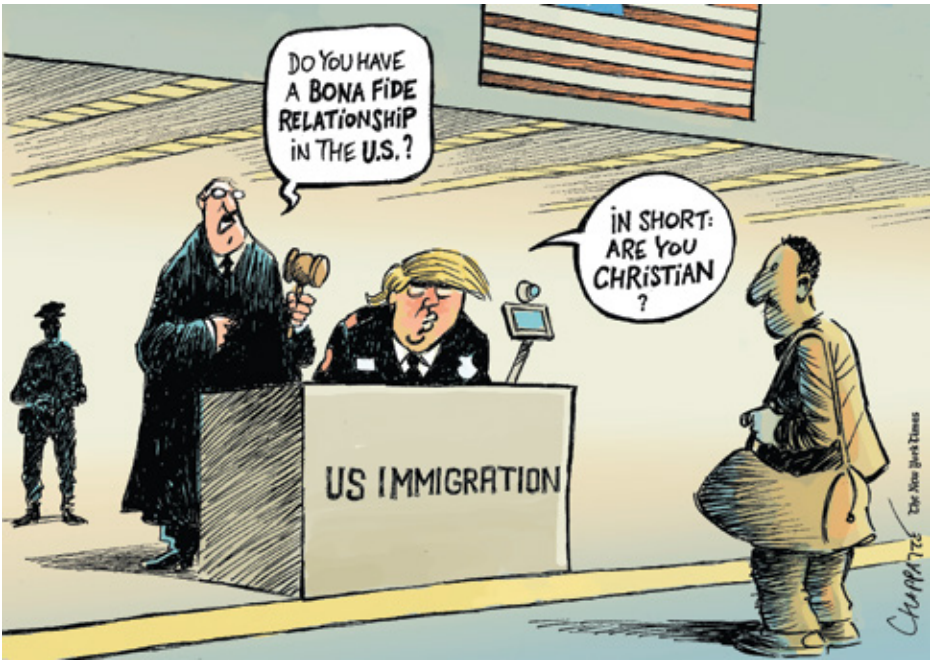
Hollis A. Vaughn, 67, Houston: Continuous sexual abuse of a child. Vaughn operates God's Awesome Army Ministry and El Shaddai World Outreach Church from his home. The girl told a family member Vaughn had been touching her sexually for several years. *Source: Houston Chronicle, 7-25-17*

Scott Kallal, 35, Overland Park, KS: 2 counts of aggravated indecent liberties with a child. Kallal, associate pastor of Holy Spirit Catholic Church, is accused of "boundary violations" in 2015 by 2 separate sources. He's a member of the Apostles of the Interior Life, an order of priests whose primary ministry is to provide spiritual direction and help young people discern their vocations. *Source: fox4kc.com, 7-25-17*

Edmond T. Baird, 19, Roanoke Rapids, NC: 4 counts of statutory rape of a child and 6 counts of statutory sexual offense with a child. Baird, a summer ministry intern at East Tenth Street Church of Christ, is charged with having an ongoing sexual relationship with a minor for the past several months.

Pastor David Chapman said there's no indication Baird's charges involve anyone connected to the church. He said Baird just completed his freshman year at a bible college. *Source: Daily Herald, 7-23-17*

Brandon Jacobs, 21, Benicia, CA: Rape with a victim under 16 years old, oral copulation with a minor child, forcible sexual penetration, arranging a meeting with a minor for lewd purposes and misdemeanor sexual battery. Jacobs, a youth volunteer at



Northgate Christian Fellowship, allegedly assaulted a 15-year-old girl he met at the church. *Source: East Bay Times, 7-23-17*

Eddie Hilburn, 52, The Woodlands, TX: Soliciting prostitution. Hilburn, associate pastor at First Baptist Church, is charged with paying an undercover officer \$80 for sex.

His website bio says he's married with 3 adult children and has planted a church in Wisconsin. "Eddie coaches other staff members as they live out their calling . . . and feels like he wins when the other staff members win." He resigned as pastor a week after his arrest. *Source: KTRK, 7-20-17*

William Conn and Tonya Conn, Jeffersonville, KY: 7 counts of benefit fraud. Conn, pastor at Jeffersonville Assembly of God, and his wife allegedly defrauded Social Security Disability Insurance and Medicare of more than \$100,000 over 6 years.

The church board agreed to pay the pastor's salary to his wife after he had a heart attack. In doing so, the indictment states, "William 'Robbie' Conn could receive Social Security benefits while still receiving a salary from Jeffersonville Assembly of God." *Source: lex18.com, 7-20-17*

Alexander R. Roesly, 19, Union City, IN: Roesly, youth leader at Chapel Church of God is accused of asking a 13-year-old girl and a 15-year-old girl if they wanted to become "friends with benefits." The older girl attended the church.

He's charged with child solicitation for messages sent to the 13-year-old. In Indiana, a person must be over 21 for child solicitation to apply to a 15-year-old victim. *Source: Fox 59, 7-19-17*

Ellis W. Simmons, 38: 3 counts of criminal sexual conduct. Simmons was arrested in California and is accused of assaulting 2 girls, then 11 and 14 years old, between 1999-2005, when he was living in Duluth, MN. He was their pastor at St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal Church and Calvary Baptist Church. The contact allegedly included penetration.

He was released from prison in Illinois in December after serving 5 years of a 7-year sentence for sexual assault of 3 girls ranging in age from 7 to 10. *Source: News Tribune, 7-18-17*

Roshad Thomas, 41, Tallahassee, FL: 9 counts of sex offense against a child. Thomas, director of student programs at Live the Life and youth pastor at Calvary Chapel for 13 years, is charged with lewd and lascivious acts with at least 5 alleged victims, all boys, between 2007-14. *Source: Tallahassee Democrat, 7-18-17*

Chad Robison, 36, Lecanto, FL: Knowingly promoting sexual performance by a child and 3 counts each of lewd and lascivious exhibition and video voyeurism for own use. Robison, worship director at Seven Rivers Presbyterian Church, is accused of victimizing girls online using the chat website Omegle.

Law enforcement found hundreds of videos featuring "young girls performing virtual sex acts with Robison," a sheriff's press release said. A church member allegedly discovered 3,000 videos and 350,000 photos on Robison's computer. He's also charged with secretly recording girls in a bathroom. *Source: Gainesville Sun, 7-15-17*

Ann Elmore, 49, and Jeffrey Elmore, 55, Manteo, IL: 3 counts and 2 counts, respectively, of felony theft for an alleged embezzlement scheme totaling \$102,000 at St. Paul's United Church of Christ in Monee, where Ann Elmore worked from 2011 until recently. *Source: Manhattan Patch, 7-13-17*

Fernando M. Ponce, 24, Doral, FL: 20 counts of lewd and lascivious battery and sexual activity with a child. Ponce, youth pastor at Sembrador de Fe (Sower of Faith), allegedly started a sexual relationship with a 14-year-old girl that lasted about 9 months. It's alleged he warned the girl not to tell

anyone or "her family would suffer." *Source: CBS Miami, 7-13-17*

Clayton Hand, 25, Zachary, LA: Indecent behavior with a juvenile. Hand, youth minister at Feliciana Baptist Church, is accused of sexual conduct with a minor female about 4 years ago.

Police Chief David McDavid said there are at least 2 similar allegations but investigators were unable to confirm they involved juveniles when the contact is alleged.

The church website lists Tony Hand as pastor. *Source: WAFB, 7-12-17*

Blaine Faircloth Jr., 33, Cleveland, TN: 4 counts of criminal sexual conduct. Faircloth is accused of using his position of authority in 2012 as a youth pastor at Riverview Church of God in Riverview, MI, to assault a 14-year-old girl.

"The sexual contact started originally on this trip overseas in Bangkok and continued on a plane ride overseas to Chicago," Michigan State Police Detective Sgt. Edward Price told the magistrate. "The sexual assault continued to take place on a train ride that started in Chicago ... with that train passing through Ann Arbor."

The victim, now 19, testified at a July hearing that Faircloth told her repeatedly he wanted to find a place on the train where she could give him oral sex and that he touched her breasts and genitals throughout the trip. He also read her "raunchy" texts from his wife, she said. "He was touching me while sexting her." *Source: Ann Arbor News, 7-10-17*

Erik Hughes, 51, Mapleton, UT: Witness tampering and 2 counts of forcible sexual abuse. Hughes, a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints bishop, is accused of multiple assaults on 2 teen boys from his church ward over a period of years starting in 2012. On multiple occasions, Hughes "touched and measured [my] penis" and gave him Viagra, an alleged victim told police.

Mormon bishops have duties similar to those of a pastor, priest or rabbi but are unpaid. *Source: Gephardt Daily, 7-8-17*

James R. Martin, 68, Hot Springs Village, AR: Theft of property more than \$2,500. An audit concluded that Martin, secretary of Leonard Street Baptist Church, completed \$140,155.49 in unauthorized disbursements, withdrawals and charges on church accounts from 2012-16. *Source: Sentinel-Record, 7-7-17*

William R. Adams, 35, Fletcher, NC: 2 counts of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon in connection with a road-rage incident. Adams, rector of Calvary Episcopal Church, is charged with pointing a Glock .22-caliber pistol at a driver passing Adams' Corvette after Adams "brake checked" him for following too closely on Florida's Turnpike near Palm City. *Source: Yahoo! News, 7-7-17*

Pleaded / Convicted

David E. Fisher, 70, Grand Forks, ND: Pleaded guilty to embezzlement at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Owosso, MI, where he was pastor for 23 years until retiring in 2015. The Diocese of Lansing estimates \$450,000 is missing. An investigation was mounted after the new pastor noticed financial discrepancies. *Source: AP, 7-17-17*

L. Micah Dexter, 47, Syracuse, NY: Guilty by jury of possessing and filing a forged instrument, both felonies. Dexter, pastor of Greater New Salem Missionary Baptist Church, filed the deed in 2013 during a long landlord-tenant dispute with a South Carolina man, James Greene.

Dexter is accused of forging Greene's signature on a deed giving Dexter ownership of a residence valued at \$50,000.

Greene had entered a "contract for deed" (rent

to own) agreement with Dexter, but never transferred the deed after Dexter failed to make payments, the lawsuit says. Dexter is accused of copying Greene's signature from the contract for deed. *Source: Post-Standard, 7-17-17*

Jonathan C. Good, 39, Sandy Ridge, NC: Pleaded guilty to 4 counts of indecent liberties with a minor in which he had a custodial interest. Good, a teacher at Westover Christian Academy, was charged with having an inappropriate relationship via phone and in his classroom from January to April with a 16-year-old girl. *Source: News & Record, 7-12-17*

Menachem A. Chinn, 40, East Windsor, NJ: Pleaded guilty to 2 counts of endangering the welfare of a child, with 2 counts of sexual assault dropped in a plea agreement. Chinn, a rabbi and teacher at Shalom Torah Academy, is accused of assaults on a 12-year-old boy in 2012 and on another underage male in 2010-11. He also directed the Twin Rivers chapter of the National Council of Synagogue Youth.

Agreement terms call for a 5-year suspended sentence, parole supervision for life and a lifetime ban on teaching. He's a native of Israel. *Source: nj.com, 7-7-17*

Jon M. Paquette, 57, Birchwood, WI: Pleaded guilty to 5 misdemeanor counts of theft. Paquette, pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church, admitted breaking into 4 homes to steal pain medication, including the residence of a couple he knew from the church who had installed a video camera after a previous burglary. *Source: Pioneer Press, 7-7-17*

Sentenced

William L. Helker, 47, Pine City, MN: 12½ years in prison after pleading guilty to distributing child pornography. Court documents said Helker's collection included images with superimposed photos of members of All Saints Lutheran Church, where he was youth pastor.

Prosecutors found correspondence between Helker and a Finnish man who was using children to produce pornography. Helker encouraged and "sometimes suggested" forms of abuse, said Katharine Buzicky. *Source: Star Tribune, 7-31-17*

Gregorio Martinez, 49, North Bergen, NJ: 4 years in prison minus 351 days for time already served. Martinez, pastor at the Pentecostal Elohim Church, was convicted in 2015 of child abuse, endangering the welfare of a child and aggravated criminal sexual contact involving a 13-year-old boy before fleeing to Central America.

During and after his trial, he was charged with sexual assaults on 3 other males, all age 19. *Source: nj.com, 7-28-17*

James M. Cox, 68, Rocky Top, TN: 6 months in the county jail and \$89,217 restitution after pleading guilty to property theft over \$60,000 as longtime treasurer at Longfield Baptist Church.

Cox said his financial problems mounted in 2011 when he lost his seat on the county commission and retired from teaching. He started using a church debit card to withdraw cash: "Oh, \$300, \$400, \$500 sometimes, and I have to say, I admit it, I gambled some. I used it to pay bills." *Source: Oak Ridger, 7-25-17*

Paul M. Bane, 57, Bellingham, WA: 5 years in prison after pleading guilty to 3 counts of child molestation. Bane, music director and bus driver at Bellingham Baptist Church, admitted assaulting a girl starting when she was 12 and continuing for about 8 years.

The victim never reported the assaults, which including tying her up with clothesline during sex, but told Bane she was considering it. In October 2015, he walked into a police station to confess. She eventually told a detective how Bane abused her regularly, sometimes daily, through her teen years.

It's the same church where youth pastor **Christopher Trent, 37**, a married father of 7, served until his July 2016 arrest. He was also sentenced to 5 years recently for sexually abusing a girl for 2 years. Current pastor Josh Carter took issue with the length of the sentences, saying they were too short. "It's lawmakers that have made it possible to prosecute these guys in this manner. Their sentencing doesn't fit the crime." *Source: Bellingham Herald, 7-19-17*

An unidentified imam, 53, Dubai, was sentenced to 3 months in jail and deportation to his native Egypt after being found guilty of sexual assault of a woman whose husband had asked him to come to their home in July to read healing verses from the Quran to his wife, 40.

The woman told prosecutors that the imam stopped reciting when her husband went to the bathroom and started fondling her buttocks, back and neck. *Source: The National, 7-15-17*

Cesar Lopez, 60, Avoca, AR: 15 years in prison after a jury found him guilty of sexual assault of a 15-year-old girl in May 2016 who was a member of Ministerios Soldados de Jesucristo, where Lopez was pastor. She had known him for about 9 years. Another female church member, age 16, later made similar allegations. *Source: Democrat-Gazette, 7-12-17*

Toby Willis, 46, Nashville, TN: 40 years in prison after pleading guilty to 4 counts of child rape. Willis, leader of the Willis Clan singers — who specialized in

Irish-flavored Christian country songs — and former TLC reality star, has 12 children, whose names all start with J (the 4 sons’ middle names are all Scott). Media have reported that a family member was the victim about 12 years ago.

His wife, Brenda Willis, told People magazine in 2016 that she and her husband raised their children by “staying true to the Bible.” That summer, their eldest child abruptly left the band. Her boyfriend posted a photo of a lamp at sunset on Facebook with the words “Speak truth boldly” the day after Willis’ arrest. *Source: The Tennessean/The Daily Beast, 7-12-17*

Reuben Chizor, 56, Queens, NY: 15 years in prison for raping 12- and 14-year-old sisters who were members of his church, Hope Restoration Ministries. According to trial testimony, on July 27, 2011, Chizor raped the older girl in the church basement, where he lived, and raped her sister Aug. 22, 2011. He continued molesting one or both of the girls through May 2013, said prosecutor Richard Brown. *Source: NY Daily News, 7-12-17*

Aaron T. Payne, 21, Princeton, W.VA: 12 months in jail with 10 months suspended after entering Alford pleas to contributing to the delinquency of a minor and misdemeanor sexual battery. Payne, student ministries pastor at First Assembly of God, was originally charged with felony indecent acts with a child for having a sexual relationship with a juvenile in his care at the church. *Source: WTVR, 7-6-17*

Mohammed H. Sadiq, 81, Cardiff, Wales: 13 years in prison after being found guilty of 14 counts of sexual and indecent assault. Sadiq, a part-time imam at Madina Mosque from 1996 to 2006, denied the charges involving 4 girls between the ages of 5 and 11, blaming mosque “politics” for the accusations. *Source: BBC, 7-7-17*

Heath C. Vandevender, 49, Fayetteville, NC: 3 months in jail, \$45,000 fine and 100 hours of community service after pleading guilty to embezzlement of state property. Vandevender, a teacher, basketball coach and vice president of Trinity Christian School’s parent organization, admitted embezzling \$388,000 from the state Department of Revenue by failing to turn over money withheld from employee paychecks from 2008-16.

He used the money to pay the school’s expenses when it struggled with finances. Trinity participates in the taxpayer-funded Opportunity Scholarship Program. In the 2015-16 school year, the voucher program paid the school \$519,750 on behalf of 130 students, the most in North Carolina. *Source: The Observer, 6-28-17*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

Thomas O’Brien, 81, Tucson, AZ, is accused in a suit of molesting a boy on several occasions in 1977-82 while serving as pastor at 2 Catholic parishes. O’Brien later served as bishop of the Diocese of Phoenix before resigning in 2003 after being charged in the hit-and-run death of a pedestrian. The accuser, now 47, started having flashbacks of the abuse in 2014 when preparing for his son’s Catholic baptism, his attorney said.

O’Brien acknowledged in a 2003 immunity deal to avoid a possible indictment that he protected priests accused of sexual misconduct. Weeks later he resigned as bishop after being accused of striking 43-year-old Jim Reed with his Buick Park Avenue but was only sentenced to community service and probation for leaving the scene of an accident. He told police he thought he had hit an animal or someone had thrown a rock at his windshield and never reported the accident but a witness wrote down his license plate number. Reed was jaywalking and after being hit by O’Brien’s car was struck by another vehicle and dragged 70 feet. *Source: AP, 8-3-17*

Clovis (NM) Christian School, superintendent **Ladona Clayton** and assistant track and field coach **Scott Fly, 23,** are defendants in a suit filed by “Jane Doe,” 14, who alleges Fly sexually groomed and molested her for several months starting last February. Fly had attended the school as a student.

The suit alleges: “Without contacting Plaintiff’s parents or allowing them to be present, administrators from Clovis Christian School interrogated Plaintiff at the school for several hours, accusing her of seducing her adult coach and telling her that if she sent nude pictures to her adult coach, she would be going to jail.” *Source: KRQE, 7-28-17*

The **Catholic Diocese of Orange, CA,** and **Alex Kim** are being sued by “Jane Doe,” who alleges Kim sexually assaulted her in the rectory in 2016 while she was his assistant and he was pastor at St. John Neumann Parish in Irvine.

The suit alleges that Kim, ordained in 1991, has a long history of assaulting female parishioners and was sent to a treatment facility in 2012 before being named pastor at St. John Neumann in 2015. *Source: OC Register, 7-25-17*

The **Catholic Archdiocese of Ottawa, Canada,** is being sued for \$2 million by Robert Sullivan, 51, Ottawa, who alleges he was molested at age 10 by convicted pedophile priest **Dale Crampton,** who



jumped to his death from a high-rise building in 2010. Four other alleged victims sued earlier.

Sullivan alleges the assaults occurred in 1975-77 and included masturbation and oral sex. Crampton pleaded guilty in 1986 to molesting 7 altar boys from 1973-82 but was sentenced to just 8 months in jail. *Source: Ottawa Sun, 7-24-17*

St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church, Portland, OR, is being sued for \$3.1 million by a former altar boy who alleges he was repeatedly molested in the early 1960s by choir director **Jay Shisler,** who died in 2001 at age 60. The suit contends that church executive director **Eric Gratian** took no action despite reports of abuse, which then continued. *Source: AP, 7-22-17*

“John Doe III” has sued the **Catholic Archdiocese of Newark, NJ,** the **Order of St. Benedict** and **St. Elizabeth’s School** in Linden, alleging he was sexually abused numerous times by **Timothy Brennan** in 1968-71. Brennan is believed to be living at a Congregation of the Servants of the Paraclete facility in Dittmer, MO.

Brennan was convicted in 1987 of molesting a 15-year-old boy and has been accused in other lawsuits of abusing more students as a Benedictine monk and priest. Doe alleges Brennan sent him on missions to have sex with other students and then report back to him and that he masturbated in the teen’s presence. *Source: nj.com, 7-7-17*

Lewis Clemons, Columbus, GA, Church of God in Christ Inc. and 5 other parties are being sued by a Columbus woman who alleges Clemon sexually abused her for several years, starting in 2002 when she was 15. Clemons is now senior pastor at Kingdom Awareness Ministries.

Plaintiff Lequita Jackson said she’s coming forward now because she recently learned “about seven other women” who were in relationships with Clemons.

“Defendant Clemons subjected Plaintiff to a practice that he called ‘body anointing’ in which he took off Plaintiff’s clothes and rubbed her body with oil” before they had intercourse, the suit alleges. “... Defendant Clemons told the Plaintiff his actions were authorized by the Bible.” *Source: Ledger-Enquirer, 7-5-17*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

The Claretians, an order of Catholic priests, settled a suit filed by Eric Johnson, 52, Colorado, alleging he was molested for about a year starting in 1973 by former priest Bruce Welles, now 60, when Johnson was 6 and Welles was 14 in Albuquerque,

NM. The Claretians agreed to pay Johnson \$25,000 but admitted no wrongdoing.

Welles later became a prominent priest in Chicago but was removed from the ministry in 2012. He works as executive director of a nonprofit that offers youth mentoring, alternative schooling and other programs for children. Its head office is located in the church where he served as priest for about 20 years.

Johnson said he became alarmed when he heard Welles was working with children, so in 1995 he contacted the Claretians and Archdiocese of Chicago, detailing his allegations.

Joelle Casteix of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests said Welles’ employment is indicative of the phenomenon of abusers parlaying lingering good will to secure or keep jobs involving children. “The Catholic Church has long cut predator priests loose on the public when the church could no longer handle the liability.” *Source: Sun-Times, 7-11-17*

Legal Developments

Paul R. Shanley, 86, a notorious defrocked pedophile priest from Massachusetts, was released from prison after serving 12 years. He was convicted in 2005 of raping a boy at St. Jean l’Evangliste Catholic Church in Newton from the time the child was 6 until he was 11, often pulling him out of catechism class. He was also accused of numerous similar sex offenses with children and adults dating to the late 1970s while the Boston Archdiocese ignored the allegations.

Mitchell Garabedian, who represented dozens of victims, rejected the notion that Shanley’s age means he’s no longer a threat. “Age is not a factor when it comes to a pedophile priest victimizing innocent children. It’s not necessarily about sex. It’s about control.”

Rodney Ford, a victim’s father, said if he ran into Shanley on the street, he’d be tempted to hurt him. “What father wouldn’t have those thoughts [about someone] that destroyed his son? I have to be real and tell you that.” *Source: Boston Globe, 7-26-17*

Allen and Verna Lehmann, both 79, Valparaiso, IN, had a mistrial declared in their cases involving the sexual abuse of 3 sisters between 1993 and 2000. Allen Lehmann was pastor then at Trinity Chapel Assembly of God in Louisville, Ky. He’s charged with rape, 9 counts of sexual abuse and 3 counts of sodomy. His wife is charged with 3 counts of complicity sexual abuse and facilitating rape and sodomy.

“She took active steps to isolate the girls so he could have his way with them,” prosecutor Courtney Straw told the jury before Judge Barry Willett declared a mistrial. Willett had previously ruled that prosecutors couldn’t introduce evidence of other allegations of sexual abuse by Lehmann, allegations he admitted to in a 2011 handwritten letter. It was then that other alleged victims came forward.

The youngest sister, now 25, had testified for more than 2 hours, recounting how the pastor had touched her sexually, starting when she was 6. Not

until 2013 when the sisters were at a wedding did they tell each other about Lehmann’s alleged abuse. A date for retrial hasn’t been set. *Source: Courier-Journal, 7-21-17*

Wirapol Sukphol, 38, Ban Yang, Thailand: Abducting and raping a minor, fraud, money laundering and violating the Computer Crime Act. Sukphol, a former Buddhist monk, was extradited from Lake Elsinore, CA, where he had started a temple after being defrocked in 2013 in Thailand after being arrested on the above charges. The rape charge involves a 14-year-old girl.

Thai authorities estimate he had assets of \$32 million at one point and owned 22 Mercedes vehicles worth \$2.8 million. *Source: AP, 7-20-17*

Mendel Epstein, Jay Goldstein and Binyamin Stimler, all New York Orthodox Jewish rabbis, had their 2015 convictions for conspiracy to commit kidnapping upheld by a panel of the 3rd Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals. The crimes stemmed from their attempt to kidnap and beat 3 men to force them to give their wives a religious divorce called a “get.” It’s suspected they may have participated in more than a dozen similar extortions.

The men argued that FBI agents violated the 4th Amendment by using cellphone data gathered from providers with a court order instead of a warrant and appealed on several other grounds, including violation of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act because the prosecution put a “substantial burden” on exercising their religion. *Source: nj.com, 7-7-17*

Giuseppe Profiti and Massimo Spina, Rome, former president and treasurer, respectively, of Bambino Gesù (Baby Jesus) Hospital will go before a 3-judge Vatican tribunal for allegedly diverting about \$485,000 of hospital funds in 2013-14 to renovate an apartment owned by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone. The Vatican owns the hospital.

Bertone, who faces no charges, was secretary of state during Benedict XVI’s papacy, a position that came with a residence, which he lost when Pope Francis took office. It’s also alleged that the contractor was paid an additional \$400,000 for the work, money that came from the Vatican. *Source: The Telegraph, 7-13-17*

The **Guam Catholic Church** announced it may sell up to 41 properties to help settle 96 clergy sexual abuse suits. Archdiocesan Finance Council member Chris Felix said the list was whittled from about 300 properties. The archdiocese, through its Hope and Healing initiative, is trying to settle the cases out of court, with a retired California judge as mediator. *Source: USA Today, 7-13-17*

Jonathan W. Wehrle, 66, Williamston, MI, the pastor of St. Martha Catholic Parish charged with embezzlement of \$100,000 or more, may have stolen nearly \$5 million, up from the original estimate of \$1.8 million, according to a continuing audit. Prosecutors have said they have enough evidence to add 4 more embezzlement counts.

Wehrle, founding pastor of St. Martha’s in 1988, has been placed on administrative leave by the Diocese of Lansing. He owns or has owned 10 residences in 6 cities since that time. *Source: State Journal, 7-7-17*

Arthur Schirmer, 69, a Pennsylvania Methodist pastor serving life sentences for killing 2 wives in 1999 and 2008, had his appeal denied to overturn his conviction in the 2008 death of Betty Schirmer. Prosecutors contend he bludgeoned her with a crowbar and staged a car accident to cover it up. The judge rejected Schirmer’s claims of ineffective counsel and prosecutorial misconduct.

It’s alleged he also beat Jewel Schirmer to death and claimed she fell down their basement steps. *Source: AP, 7-3-17*

Allegations

At least 547 members of the Regensburger Domspatzen boys choir in Germany were subjected to physical and sexual abuse from 1945 to the early 1990s, said a report that accuses **49 members of the Catholic Church** of carrying out the abuse. The alleged perpetrators are unlikely to face criminal charges because of the amount of time that has elapsed.

Among those singled out for criticism was former choirmaster **Georg Ratzinger,** now 93, elder brother of Pope Benedict XVI, for “looking the other way and failing to intervene.”

Nine of the 49 alleged abusers were found to have been involved in sexual abuse. The report takes former Regensburg bishop **Gerhard Müller,** now a cardinal, to task for weaknesses of the initial review when allegations first came to light in 2010. *Source: BBC, 7-18-17*

Removed / Resigned

Anthony J. Petracca, 61, Altoona, PA, was placed on leave as pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Parish by the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown due to an accusation of misconduct with a minor that allegedly occurred in the mid-1980s. *Source: WJAC, 7-6-17*

Thomas Feltman, Wyndmere, ND, was put on leave as pastor of 2 Catholic parishes by the Diocese of Fargo. Spokesman Paul Braun said the investigation involves Feltman’s “interaction with youth” and the matter has been reported to Richland County Social Services. *Source: Fargo Forum, 5-27-17*

Email: blackcollar@ffrf.org

Climate change *is* a state/church issue

The following is a statement by FFRF on climate change.

FFRF is dismayed at the executive order President Trump has signed to roll back vital regulations to curb climate change and his backing out of the Paris accord.

Trump has directed the Environmental Protection Agency to revoke the Clean Power Plan. The Obama administration program was poised to close existing coal-fired power plants and freeze construction of new ones, replacing them with wind and solar farms.

Trump has appointed an active climate change denialist, religionist Scott Pruitt, to head the EPA. The New York Times documents in an article boldly titled “Denialists in Charge” how federal posts are now filled with officials “who have a record of openly denying the established science of human-caused climate change.” These include the fundamentalist Christian Rick Perry, our secretary of energy, known for mocking climate science.

Denying anthropogenic climate change is based on the rejection of facts and reality in favor of blind faith, wishful thinking or willful denial. Many of the climate denialists in politics, such as Vice President Mike Pence, Sen. James Inhofe and former Senators Michele Bachmann and Rick Santorum, deny climate change for explicitly religious reasons.

There seems to be a correlation between religiosity and climate denial. While other factors, such as political party affiliation, race and eth-



Photo by Elizabeth Lies / Shutterstock.com

nicity are stronger predictors of views about climate change, Pew Research found “it is the religiously unaffiliated, not those who identify with a religious tradition, who are particularly likely to say the Earth is warming due to human activity. . . White evangelical Protestants stand out as least likely to have this view.”

Sen. Inhofe, R-Okla., cited Genesis to bolster his denial of reality: “My point is, God’s still up there. The arrogance of people to think that we, human beings, would be able to change what He is doing in the climate is to me outrageous.” Inhofe, who wrote a 2012 book, *The Greatest Hoax: How*

the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your Future, serves on the Senate’s standing committee on science. That’s outrageous.

A few months ago, the conservative Christian radio host Bryan Fischer tweeted, “Jesus would be for whatever is best for the poor. A warmer climate — if it’s even happening — is better for the poor.”

And who can forget the infamous moment in 2009 when Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., invoked the bible in his attempt to refute the scientific data proving anthropogenic climate change. Reading from Genesis 8, the story of Noah and the ark, Shimkus said: “The Earth will end only when God declares it’s time to be over. Man will not destroy this Earth. This Earth will not be destroyed by a flood . . . I do believe God’s word is infallible,

unchanging, perfect.”

It’s not just that more zealous believers deny climate change; their religious blinders prevent them from viewing reality. Those following literalist strains of religion are particularly primed to reject clear facts, such as the fact of evolution, the fact that virgins don’t give birth, that human beings don’t resurrect themselves. Many believers are perfectly willing to reject claims without evidence — or even in spite of the evidence. “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,” says Hebrews 11:6. Proverbs 3 urges: “Lean not on your own understanding.” Martin Luther counseled, “Whoever wants to be a Christian should tear the eyes out of his reason.” Mark Twain skewered such denial when he quipped, “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.”

It’s not just the casual denial of reality that impacts views on climate change, but also the influence of apocalyptic religiosity. The virulent strain of evangelicalism that tends to infect our current government welcomes the end of this world as a fulfillment of prophecy and “the second coming.” Ken Ham built an entire ark park to revere worldwide destruction. The danger of belief in an afterlife is that believers are often indoctrinated to consider this world, our only world, as far less important than an unprovable “hereafter.”

The only afterlife we ought to care about is leaving our descendants and our planet a secure and pleasant future. Systems that deny facts and reality must not be used to dictate public policy.

We have a duty to our children and grandchildren, to posterity, to the other species we share our planet with, to ensure our world is habitable for the future.

It’s not just that more zealous believers deny climate change; their religious blinders prevent them from viewing reality.

Freethought Today caption contest!

There was so much enthusiasm for our initial caption contest, we’re gonna do it again! To enter, please write a humorous or witty caption to go along with this photo, taken by Dan Barker, of a building in Fowey, Cornwall, UK. Email your response to caption@ffrf.org by Sept. 15. The winner, chosen by FFRF staff, will receive an “Unabashed Atheist” T-shirt! We will announce the winners and top runners-up in the October issue.

Woe to the Women:
The Bible Tells Me So

A concise, easy-to-read book that will challenge your concept of the bible as “a good book.” Illustrated. 264 pages.

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

Buy it from FFRF online shop.ffrf.org

Losing Faith in Faith:
From Preacher to Atheist

How Dan “threw out the bathwater and discovered there is no baby there.”

By Dan Barker

Buy it from FFRF online shop.ffrf.org

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/outreach/nothing-fails-like-prayer

Lubna

Continued from page 1

fortunately her fellow employees held and protected her. Though she did not tell us at the time, I soon found out from other students in school who were laughing about it and insulting me in school.

A couple of years later in 2006, my mother and I had to pass through an al-Qaida checkpoint on the way home. As the bus pulled to the side of the road, a number of passengers admonished her to put on a hijab for fear the militants might execute her as an apostate. Again, she refused and instead looked at me, fully aware of the consequences. “Lubna, I’m sorry, but I will not do it!” she said.

Her convictions were more important to her than her life. And in that moment, with the real possibility she might be executed, she not only refused to surrender her principles, but scolded others for asking her to do so. I will always remember that moment vividly — perhaps the most significant in my life.

At an early age, and particularly from that point forward, I wanted to emulate my mother. My sense of curiosity and justice had me asking more questions about religion, God and Islam. Of course, we were forced to study Islam in school, including the Quran and hadiths. But the teachers would always get angry when I asked questions or refused to accept that girls should be forced to wear headscarves when boys had no such obligations.

For this, I was kicked out of two different schools and instead studied Islam on my own, where I quickly found the teachings ridiculous, as nothing compared to science, reason and the possibilities of the human mind.

Declared my nonbelief

While my mother understood this well before I did, she encouraged my siblings and me to attend the required religious instruction in order to focus on completing our education. I resisted initially, but later understood and accepted her advice. Still, I felt the need to declare my nonbelief to my friends in high school and my community, which caused a great deal of conflict. I lost virtually all of my friends and became a somewhat hated figure.

In spite of this rather significant impediment, I was a good student and managed to gain acceptance into a chemical engineering program in college. I had hoped for a minimal level of acceptance for my views in college, but when I declared my atheism to fellow students, I was once again isolated and subjected to repeated verbal abuse.

Though I lived under very dangerous and poor conditions, I refused to renounce my atheism. I refused to be escorted by my brother in public. And I refused to wear a hijab.

Predictably, I was subjected not only to verbal abuse, but physical violence. I had been assaulted many times, not only because of my refusal to wear a hijab, but because I was not particularly shy about arguing for my rights or criticizing the Quran and Islam, which is illegal under the Sharia. There have been many circumstances where the al-Mahdi militia had asked me to wear a hijab and, like my mother, I refused. On one particular occasion, I was slapped for telling a militia member he had no right to tell me what to believe. And, like my mother, I tried to fight back until others intervened to separate us.

Though I was consistently stopped at checkpoints and verbally and sometimes physically abused, and though one cannot help but experience moments of gloom and despair, I was proud and fortunate for my mother and my family and happy with the person I became. I chose not to worship an imaginary being but to respect and emulate human beings such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Steven



Shutterstock

Women in Iraq and other Muslim countries are often required or encouraged to wear headcoverings, known as hijabs, when out in public. Lubna has faced verbal and physical abuse for refusing to wear a hijab.

Hawking, Neil deGrasse Tyson, Carl Sagan and Sam Harris. My beliefs are fortified by my upbringing and the values imparted to me by my mother. My passionate embrace of science and my contempt for an oppressive and irrational belief system work in synergy to foster a relentless pursuit of logic, reason and desire to learn.

Follies of religion

It was thus I came to realize the follies of the Quran and hadiths, and the obvious fact that the Quran was written not by “Allah,” but by human beings — and human beings of very limited sophistication. Where women are reduced to slaves; where we are encouraged to believe in absurdities rather than to ask questions; and to fear and hate non-Muslims. Everything in Islam seems designed to freeze the brain rather than allow it to flourish in its own natural logic.

Unlike religion, science compels us to believe not because of faith, but because of reason and evidence. And while science does not explain all phenomena in nature, religion explains nothing. There is nothing more to learn, where in science the search is never-ending!

I have spoken my mind and my thoughts without fear. I’ve discussed my opinions about religions and Islam and how religions affected our lives, and how Islam is an aggressive and radical ideology, how it’s destroying our lives, our future, how it built the darkness and fear in our life for centuries and still does.

I openly shared my thoughts. I do believe it’s our duty to speak and show people we can change. We can build a free space where everyone has the choice to choose what they believe in, when the logic and sense are our guides in this universe. We have been born without knowing “God” and religions. We came into this world where our families and communities taught us what is “God.” What are religions? We have been taught to accept what others wanted us to think and that completely destroyed the human sense of curiosity.

Constant death threats

In Baghdad, I was known for my activities and opinions. I openly discussed atheism. I criticized Islam and called it an ideology of terrorism that created all the discrimination we live in nowadays. Born a female and insisting on continuing my education without fear, I was under constant death threats. I was hit for being a girl, not wearing a headscarf. It’s very dangerous for a girl to be publicly atheist. Why must I hide my true identity while Muslims are free to kill atheists and freethinkers and criticize and discriminate against Christians and Jews and all the religions and beliefs that are not Islam?

Why is it important for me to declare that I’m an

atheist, knowing the situation is deadly? For me, it’s important to show my identity; otherwise I’m just like them. It’s important for us humans to have our own identities and principles. I faced death threats and received threats that they want to kill me and kill all the atheists and seculars — whoever dares to speak up against Islam. I tried to be focused on what I do and on my studies, but at the same time I couldn’t sit and do nothing.

I believe when one starts to talk to others, we can make a movement in my country. I continued to do what I believe in, to share, talk and post in social media. It was horrible to live a life when death and darkness is all that I saw and felt. But that didn’t stop me from my goal: to get people to act and speak up now, to save what’s left, to save the humanity.

Shared my story

In February of 2016, I got to share my story, my thoughts with the world in an interview by Dave Rubin of “The Rubin Report.” I explained how my mother, a divorced woman, raised four children by herself and how my father would hit her and treat her very badly, like many stories women have in my country and the Middle East. I shared my thoughts about Islam and Iraqi government.

The interview was shared widely after receiving positive feedback from people. Lots of people started to realize how it’s important for me and individual activists, atheists and freethinkers like me in the Middle East and in closed societies to speak up and act now.

But at the same time it was potentially deadly for me. I received a lot of death threats. There was an order to shed my blood. It was horrible for me and for those who are close to me.

I’m still struggling to describe how I felt and how I feel now. I spent days and nights alone, always changing places. I couldn’t speak or talk. I missed my own voice. I was convinced that I would end up being killed — it was only a matter of time. I didn’t care about myself, but the one I love and about the cause. I tried to stay alive so that I have the chance to speak again and share my story with people, to open their eyes about what is going on.

Great people and friends were the light to me to stay alive and to have hope in this world. I couldn’t believe how this universe gave me the chance to know these great people. I owe them my life, for their patience, for their endless efforts and support, for their humanity, for their kindness, their love. I’m very grateful to all of you.

I’m trying to heal myself from what I have been through and focus on living normally. I will continue what I do to the end. I do believe in what I do. I hope all of the free people in the free world will help and act to save humanity for future generations.

Some are merely amateurs



The staff and interns of the Freedom From Religion Foundation posed in front of the Freethought Hall's electronic marquee recently to showcase a quote from a critic of FFRF.

Thomas J. Craughwell, writing for the conservative news site The American Spectator, went into detail about a Belle Plaine, Minn., park veterans memorial that included a cast iron silhouette of a grieving soldier kneeling in front of a cross.

FFRF had originally successfully complained, and the city acquiesced by removing the cross. However, after a public outcry, the city declared the park a "free speech zone," where any religious group could put up a marker. When the Satanic Temple and FFRF said they would add their own monuments, the city decided that was too much, and ended the "free speech zone."

In Craughwell's article, "Bedeviled, Bothered, and Bewildered in Minnesota," he writes, "I have this suspicion that engraved over the FFRF's headquarters are the words, 'Professional Pains in the Ass Since 1978.'" Engraved, not so much. But on our marquee? You bet!



The FFRF editorial staff: Freethought Today editor PJ Slinger, Editorial Assistant Molly Hanson, Communications Director Amit Pal, Graphic Designer Roger Daleiden, Communications Coordinator Lauryn Seering, Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor and Graphic Designer Jake Swenson. Not pictured: Black Collar Crime compiler Bill Dunn.



The FFRF administrative staff: Program Assistant Kristina Daleiden, Membership Manager Jackie Douglas, Bookkeeper Eleanor McEntee, Program Assistant Alyssa Schaefer, Director of First Impressions Lisa Treu and Director of Operations Lisa Strand. Not pictured: Clerical Assistant Renee Oberhart.



The FFRF legal team: Front row, seated: Director of Strategic Response Andrew Seidel, Legal Director Rebecca Markert and Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott. Standing, left to right: Legal Assistant Whitney Steffen, Intern Evan Stang, Intern Cory Paul, Associate Counsel Liz Cavell, Intern Ryan Christiansen, Associate Counsel Sam Grover, Intern Ben Becker, Elaine and Eric Stone Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne, Intern Mark Noel, Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler. Not pictured: Patrick O'Reilly Legal Fellow Chris Line (photographer).



The FFRF digital/video staff pictured with Charles Darwin: Digital Product Manager Tim Nott, Video Producer Bruce Johnson and Co-President Dan Barker.

Photography by Chris Line