

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



Winners of the essay contest for college students
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What 'government schools' critics really mean
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This is what happens in a voucher school
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FFRF's 40th: Freethinking, fun, fanfare and friends!



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Comedian and atheist Paula Poundstone shows off her Emperor Has No Clothes Award and the stool she autographed following her 90-minute comedy routine on Sept. 15.



Photo by Andrew Seidel

A member of the Forward! Marching Band performs during FFRF's Tailgate Party on the Monona Terrace rooftop on Sept. 15.



Photo by Chris Line

Comedian Julia Sweeney regales the audience with her humorous takes on religious-themed movies during her convention speech on Sept. 16.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Renowned cognitive scientist Steven Pinker, FFRF's honorary president, speaks to the crowd of more than 700 on Sept. 16, giving them a sneak preview of his upcoming book, *Enlightenment Now*. Members from 48 states, plus D.C., the UK and Canada attended FFRF's 40th National Convention at the Monona Terrace and Convention Center in Madison, Wis. For more photos from the convention weekend, please see the special eight-page pullout section inside this issue.

Timely FFRF suit proceeds against church politicking

FFRF has filed an amended complaint to buttress the Johnson Amendment even as the House has taken measures to weaken it.

The Johnson Amendment evenhandedly bars any 501(c)(3) organization, including churches, from using tax-deductible donations for political, partisan purposes. The House of Representatives on Sept. 14 quietly passed a budget provision to defund enforcement of the amendment as it pertains to churches. (As of the publishing of this issue of Freethought Today, the Senate had yet to take up a similar measure.)

FFRF filed its original lawsuit the day of President Trump's May 4 executive order on religious liberty, which

Trump has repeatedly claims "stops" the Johnson Amendment as it applies to churches. Trump's executive order directs the IRS "to exercise maximum enforcement discretion to alleviate the burden of the Johnson Amendment, which prohibits religious leaders from speaking about politics and candidates from the pulpit."

In late August, the Department of Justice, seeking to dismiss FFRF's legal challenge, contradicted Trump's contention that he's overturned the Johnson Amendment. The department filed a document saying, "The order does not exempt religious organizations from the restrictions on political

See Suit on page 2



FFRF's "You're Sued" photo illustration was used by FFRF in press releases, news releases and videos referring to its lawsuit against President Trump.

Norma Cunningham to celebrate 100th birthday!

Norma Cunningham, a long-time member of FFRF, is celebrating her 100th birthday on Oct. 28.

Norma and her husband, Joseph, are Life Members of FFRF, and both have served on the Executive Board almost from its formation.

She grew up in St. Louis, where she was the valedictorian of the large Cleveland High School class of 1935, and earned a full four-year scholarship to Washington University in St. Louis. Norma earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1939, and the same year received the Jesse Bar Fellowship Award, with which she acquired a Master's degree in Latin in 1940. She also is a member of the Phi Beta Kappa honor society. In addition, she served as co-chair of the Arts & Sciences Century Leadership Club of Washington University.

After graduation, she taught in St. Louis area schools for four years before moving to Mascoutah, Ill., in



Norma Cunningham

1944. She worked in the Mascoutah High School for 31 years, teaching Latin, German and English. At Mascoutah, Norma was chair of the school's Fine Arts department, also served on the Mascoutah Library board for many years and as a member of the Literary Society.

In December 1953, she married Joseph Cunningham, who was also a teacher at Mascoutah High School. They have two daughters — Kathryn, an attorney; and Linda, a medical

doctor — and five grandchildren: Andrew, Sarah, Benjamin, Grace, and Alex. (Joe has just retired from FFRF's Board after serving for more than three decades.)

Norma and Joe spent many years traveling with their children, going to all 50 states plus Canada; also visiting Europe, Scandinavia, Russia, Japan and China.

Norma used her fluency in German to translate the detailed diaries and letters of her great-grandfather, Herman Steines, and great-great uncle, Frederick Steines, who immigrated from Germany, records which they compiled from 1830-1835. These documents were printed into two large volumes and were donated to the Missouri Historical Society, the St. Louis City Library, and many relatives.

Her other interests include reading classical literature, listening to classical music, working crossword

puzzles, and cooking. A few years ago, Norma entered the Southwestern Illinois Spelling Bee contest and won first place, often correcting the host's pronunciation of various words.

Norma spent many happy hours entertaining family and friends over large elaborate meals at her beautifully set dining room table. She also was a recipe tester for Betty Crocker, sending in her comments and suggestions on improving the originals.

She loves flowers, particularly roses, enjoys visiting the Missouri Botanical Gardens, and is skilled at flower arranging with blooms from her garden. Norma's favorite TV program is "Jeopardy!" She recently got all five of the week's Final Jeopardy questions correct.

Norma has resided at the Silver Creek Assisted Living home in Mascoutah for the past five years, where she will host family and friends at her 100th birthday celebration.

FFRF welcomes 26 Lifers, 3 After-Lifers, 1 Immortal

FFRF is pleased to announce its 26 new Lifetime Members, three new After-Lifers and one new Immortal.

The three new After-Lifers are: Barbara Foster (gifted by John Mosley), Karla Martin and Dr. Steven L. Solomon. After-Life Memberships are a tongue-in-cheek donation category of \$5,000 for those who want their donation to "live

on" after them.

FFRF's 26 new Life Members are: Douglas Barnes, Michael Botlo, James Blase, Dorothea Case, Brian Cook, Cherry Day, George Dunstan, Donna Douglas, Robin Ferguson, Richard Gordon, Linda Jackson, Richard Johnson, Roman D. Johnston, Tim Larmour, Rick McCollum, Cheryl McCutcheon, Katie Muhler,

David Nickel, Dennis Porter, Eugene Provost, David Roberts, Melanie A. Rush, William Sierichs Jr., Pamela Solomon, George Vacek and Rick Zawada.

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

States represented are California,

Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Texas, Utah, Washington, Wisconsin and West Virginia.

The new Immortal is Professor Paul Newman. Immortals is a designation for those members who have contacted FFRF to report they have made provisions for FFRF in their estate planning.

Suit

Continued from page 1

campaign activity applicable to all tax-exempt organizations."

The Justice Department averred that FFRF "misunderstands the purpose and the effect" of the order. "Clearly, it's Trump who misunderstands his authority," responds Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president.

FFRF concurs that Trump doesn't have the authority to selectively undermine enforcement of a duly enacted U.S. law or to engage in invidious discrimination against secular tax-exempt groups.

Nevertheless, as FFRF's amended brief documents, Trump continues to send "a loud message to the religious community" that it may openly violate the Johnson Amendment. Trump told the Faith and Freedom Coalition on June 8 that he had delivered on his campaign message to stop the John-

son Amendment: "This executive order directs the IRS not to unfairly target churches and religious organizations for political speech."

Trump has made similar statements elsewhere.

"I've gotten rid of the Johnson Amendment," Trump told Christian Broadcasting Network founder Pat Robertson on July 12. "You know, you couldn't speak politically before; now you can." He added that it is "going to be a great thing for Christianity, believe me."

News story after news story declared that Trump was allowing or making it easier for churches to engage in political activity. Reuters, for instance, ran a headline saying, "Trump order frees tax-exempt churches to be more politically active."

His executive order and statements

about it create great harm in perception, FFRF contends. Nan Aron, who heads the Alliance for Justice, comprised of more than 100 diverse nonprofits, expressed concern that the order "sends threatening signals about how certain religious speech and religious institutions might be allowed to skirt laws imposed on others."

The intended message is that the IRS will no longer enforce the Johnson Amendment against Christians, particularly evangelicals, who are being encouraged to electioneer, to the detriment of secular nonprofit groups held to a more rigorous standard of enforcement.

FFRF warns, "The president's speech and actions convey a message of pure religious endorsement, which indicates that religious officials are political insiders, while secular

groups and individuals are political outsiders."

The complaint notes that when Trump hosted a six-hour meeting with evangelical leaders this summer — which included the laying of hands on the president in the Oval Office — religious leaders made policy suggestions. One such recommendation, by Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, was to ban transgender people from serving in the military. Within days, Trump announced his transgender military ban via tweet and without first consulting military leaders.

As a result of the executive order, churches and religious organizations will be encouraged to blatantly and deliberately flout electioneering restrictions, including during the upcoming 2018 elections.

FFRF FREETHOUGHT TODAY

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Caption contest winner!

Congratulations to Alfie Kohn for winning FFRF's Caption Contest from the September issue.

The winning caption is: "And the tooth shall set you free." Alfie will receive an "Unabashed Atheist" T-shirt.

The top runners-up, in no particular order, are:

- Holy Molars! — **Roger Dumas**
- When you're our customer, we're all in the same boat. — **Barbara Weber**
- Tooth Fairy on Staff — **Jim Dunn**
- All dental plans accepted, especially flood insurance. — **Robyn Merchant**

Thanks to all who participated. We will have another contest in an upcoming issue. If you have any non-copyright-protected images (most likely that you took yourself) that you think would be good for a caption contest, please send them to caption@ffrf.org.



Photo by Dan Barker

Who's to blame for natural disasters?

By PJ Slinger

Forget climate change. Forget poor civic planning.

You wanna know what really caused Hurricane Harvey to devastate Houston? Or Hurricane Irma to up-end Florida? Yeah, it was God. An angry God.

But the real blame lies elsewhere, of course.

According to many on the Religious Right, God is upset with abortion and/or the LGBTQ community in this country. Therefore, he took out his vengeance on Houston and southern

Florida (for whatever reasons, but certainly none having to do with the fact that they are coastal areas prone to flooding after a major storm).



PJ Slinger

For those religious conservatives who think

that God is upset with the gays and abortion, do they truly believe that if our country would somehow stop all abortions and magically end homosexuality, these horrific storms would cease to occur in the United States?

Believers were quiet

In the immediate aftermath of Harvey, which caused tens of billions of dollars in damage and the deaths of at least 60 people in the Houston area, the zealots were surprisingly quiet. Kimberly Winston of Religion News Service even wrote a column about it.

She wrote that Peter Montgomery, a senior fellow at People for the American Way, said “the reaction from the usual finger-waggers ‘is different this time around.’”

Why was that?

“One theory is that Texas, with a few exceptions like the famously liberal Austin, is a Religious Right stronghold,” Winston wrote. “Gov. Greg Abbott is very popular with conservative Christians, so perhaps they are less willing to suggest God is unhappy with him. Another theory is that Christian conservatives don’t want to suggest



Houston deserves divine retribution. In 2015, city voters soundly struck down an anti-discrimination bathroom law with support from many conservative Christian groups and leaders.”

In her article, Winston also listed several other storms that were apparently God’s wrath.

“Usually, their logic revolves around LGBT themes — Buster Wilson of the American Family Association claimed God sent Hurricane Isaac to stop an annual LGBT festival; the Rev. Franklin Graham blamed Hurricane Katrina on ‘orgies’; and Catholic priest Gerhard Wagner called Katrina ‘divine retribution’ for New Orleans’ tolerance of homosexuality,” Winston wrote.

And here it comes

Her column was rendered moot shortly thereafter, however.

“I think that the entire state of Texas and the entire United States of America needs to take note of this, and realize that there is a God in heaven,” pastor Kevin Swanson said on his radio show. “He brings his judgments and he calls nations to repentance, as he is doing right now.”

Swanson said Harvey was, among other things, punishment for Texas failing to pass its “bathroom bill,” which would have restricted transgender people’s access to public restrooms.

“Unless you repent, you will likewise perish,” Swanson continued. “And repairing your houses in Houston after a hurricane is useless if you’re just going to go to hell.”

Ah. There it is.

And then there’s Christian radio host Rick Wiles. He blamed the hurricane on Houston’s “affinity for the sexual perversion movement.”

“This is a proud city that, in recent years, has boasted of its allegiance, its dedication, its devotion to the homosexual/lesbian agenda,” Wiles said on his TruNews radio program.

And Dave Daubenmire, the former Ohio high school football coach who was given the title “America’s Most Christian Football Coach” by Forbes magazine, blamed Harvey on the former lesbian mayor of Houston — and abortion. (Anise Danette Parker was mayor of Houston for six years, starting in 2010.)

“How’s it working out for them right now?” Daubenmire asked of Houston residents. “Here’s a city that has boasted of its LGBT devotion, it’s affinity for the sexual perversion movement in America. They’re underwater.”

But he wasn’t done.

“Isn’t it amazing? Katrina slammed New Orleans — we know about voodoo and the darkness in New Orleans,” he said. “Then it moved right down

the coast to Houston, Texas . . . Boom, here it comes, now it’s underwater. Water is a sign of judgment and cleansing. Is now not the time for the voice of the church to rise up and declare, ‘Let’s stop killing the babies!’”

Regarding Hurricane Harvey, televangelist Jim Bakker declared “This flood is from God,” punishment for the former mayor of Houston attempting to subpoena ministers’ sermons. Pastor Rick Joyner, who joined Bakker on his show, agreed that these huge storms don’t “happen by accident.”

What about other ‘sins’?

So how come it’s always the LGBTQ community or abortion that’s at fault? God doesn’t seem to care about many other “sins” when it comes to his major natural disasters. You don’t hear of people claiming that a deadly tornado was because God was mad at people for stealing.

God isn’t very discerning in his ability to mete out punishment, either. You’d think an omnipotent being might be able to better pick and choose who suffers though his weather catastrophes. We’re all familiar with the biblical flood story, where God killed nearly every animal and human on Earth, so yes, he’s being a bit more choosy here. But still, he’s killing the anti-choicers along with the pro-choicers. He’s flooding the homes of evangelical straight white men along with lesbians and gays and the transgendered.

And, finally, these people who claim to speak as if they know God’s mind clearly aren’t afraid of the hypocrisy inherent in their proclamations. After all, the true believers’ ultimate answer to anything is, “God works in mysterious ways.”

Instead of saying that hurricanes Harvey and Irma were those unknowable mysteries, they claim to know exactly what God was thinking. But if a child from a religious family is stricken with cancer and dies, they fall back on the “mysterious ways” answer.

Apparently it’s only mysterious if you can’t blame abortion or the LGBTQ community.

PJ Slinger is the editor of Freethought Today and a Lifetime Member of FFRF.

Nonbelief Relief awards over \$100K in aid

Nonbelief Relief, FFRF’s nonreligious humanitarian agency, announced Sept. 21 the disbursement more than \$100,000, including relief for victims of Hurricanes Irma and Maria and of the Mexican earthquake.

To aid people affected by Hurricanes Irma and Maria, Nonbelief Relief has designated:

- \$10,000 for **ConPRmetidos**, a Puerto Rican secular charity.
- \$10,000 for **UNICEF**, which is on the ground across the Caribbean and Florida to support children affected by the devastating hurricanes.
- \$10,000 divided into four local or statewide Florida charities: **Women’s Fund of Miami-Dade**; **Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida**; **Neighborhood Health Clinic** (Naples, Fla.) and **Boca Helping Hands**. All work in the affected areas of Florida and are highly rated by Charity Navigator.
- \$5,000 designated for hurricane relief to **Remote Area Medical Corps**, which is receiving an additional \$5,000

unrestricted designation for its work providing medical clinics in the United States to the underserved, largely peopled by volunteers.

• Nonbelief Relief previously donated \$10,000 to the **Greater Houston Community Foundation**

in the name of atheists and agnostics, following tropical storm Harvey.

• To aid recovery and victims after the earthquake in Mexico in the name of nonbelief,

Nonbelief Relief is giving \$5,000 to **Direct Relief, Inc.**

In other fall grants, Nonbelief Relief gave:

- \$10,000 to **Population Services International**, endorsed by ethicist and well-known atheist Peter Singer’s group, The Life You Can Save. That gift is a response to President Trump’s expanded global gag order. Population Services’

main purpose is to provide contraceptive choices internationally.

• \$30,000 to **World Food Program USA**, for top spots currently requiring famine relief, which include Nigeria, Sudan and Yemen, and whose lives and food supply is cut off or imperiled by Boko Haram and other religious militants.

• \$3,000 to **Atheists Fight Hunger**, an adjunct of PASTAHCon, the upcoming annual October conference of PA State Atheist/Humanist Conference.

• \$10,000 is being held in reserve to re-up a project with **Foundation Beyond Belief** for a campaign to help women accused of witchcraft in Africa.

• \$10,000 for **Team Rubicon**, which provides disaster relief by pairing military veterans with medical professionals. Nonbelief Relief was created by

Nonbelief Relief was created to remediate conditions of human suffering and injustice, and to provide a charity under the banner of freethought.

FFRF’s executive board as a separate 501(c)(3) nonprofit to remediate conditions of human suffering and injustice, and to provide a charity under the banner of freethought.

Nonbelief Relief has no ulterior motive of “conversion” to freethought. But in giving aid in cases of natural disaster and mass suffering, it does have a legal purpose: to challenge the IRS’ discriminatory favoritism of churches and church charities, which are exempted from accountability. All other 501(c)(3) groups, including FFRF and Nonbelief Relief, must file an annual, detailed tax return in order to sustain tax-exempt status. Nonbelief Relief has notified the IRS it will not file any forms churches or church charities are exempted from.

To ensure your donation to Nonbelief Relief remains deductible for income tax purposes, you may donate to Nonbelief Relief at ffrf.org/donate. Only donations so designated will be used for Nonbelief Relief. Nonbelief Relief has no administrative or other overhead.

HEADS UP

A Poetry Column By Philip Appleman

PHILOSOPHY

1. BLAISE PASCAL

Pascal, reflecting tearfully
On our wars for Holy Pigeon,
Said, "Alas, we do evil most cheerfully
When we do it for religion."

2. RENE DESCARTES

The unruly dactyls and anapests
Were thumping their wild dithyrambic
When Descartes with a scowl very sternly stressed:
"I think, therefore iambic!"

3. THOMAS HOBBS

Better at thinking than loving,
He deserved his wife's retort:
On their wedding night, she told him, "Tom,
That was nasty, brutish—and short!"

—Philip Appleman,
Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie
© 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.

OVERHEARD

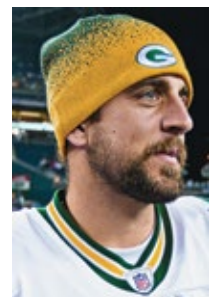
One of the things that we have to remember is that this is a public meeting, it's a public facility. We need to make sure we're open to all. I think we do have to be careful that we're not seen as promoting any particular faith. It's an emotional topic. People have very deeply held beliefs, but I do think we have to remember and respect the minority voices that may or may not believe the way any one of us believes. **Clark County (Wash.) Council Member Julie Olson, prior to the council voting to allow anyone, including the nonreligious, to give pre-meeting invocations.** *The Columbian, 8-22-17*



We have people of many different faiths. We want the chamber to be welcome for everybody who wants to speak. It wasn't something to put on the walls. **Warren Gubler, mayor of Visalia, Calif., on the city council voting down a motion to have the motto "In God We Trust" posted inside council chambers.** *Visalia Times-Delta, 8-22-17*

The mullahs are the enemy of the Afghan people, the enemy of happiness. **Afghan singer and international pop star Aryana Saeed, a London-based feminist who refuses to don the head**

scarf when she returns to Afghanistan wearing curve-hugging costumes. *New York Times, 8-20-17*



I think organized religion can have a mind-debilitating effect, because there is an exclusivity that can shut you out from being open to the world, to people, and energy, and love and acceptance. **Aaron Rodgers, former NFL and Super Bowl MVP of the Green Bay Packers.** *ESPN, 8-30-17*

When you're accustomed to religious exceptionalism, pluralism can feel like persecution.

Sandi Villarreal, in the column, "What's Behind White Evangelical Anxiety?" *Sojourners, 10-26-16*

It is not only evolution. Evolution is a test case. It is about rationality — about whether the curriculum should be built on whatever the government chooses to be the proper values.

Ali Alpar, an astrophysicist and president of Turkey's Science Academy, condemning the country's decision to no longer teach evolution in its schools. *NPR, 8-20-17*

Space enthusiast embraces life, wisdom



Gregory Kanel

Name: Gill Gregory Kanel

Where I live: I have lived in Orange County, Calif., my entire life, the last 26 years in Fullerton. Currently, it is just my 18-year-old cat Meg sharing my home with me.

Where and when I was born: February 1959 in Fullerton.

Family: I am lucky enough to have freethought in-laws and family members. My 91-year-old mother-in-law, Alice Haddock, and her partner of 40 years, Arthur Ellard, my niece Devri Speaks and my great-nephew Ulysses Mariner, and many more nephews and nieces. I have no children.

Education: K-12 in the Anaheim School District. Age 18 and up: The rough-and-tumble school of business and life.

Occupation: I've been a small business owner for 31 years. I own the Kanel Corporation, a machine shop specializing in aerospace and medical products.

How I got where I am today: Strong freethought parents, Vern and Jeanine.

They are gone now. A proud public education with thoughtful and tenacious teachers. A desire to never stop learning, and, most importantly, listening to wise people.

Where I'm headed: I am not sure where I am headed, but whatever the future holds for me, I am going to embrace it with enthusiasm and a smile on my face.

Person in history I admire and why: Carl Sagan. I grew up during the space age, humanity's first adventures into space. Sagan connected this exploration with the science of cosmology and astronomy. He made those subjects cool, just like him. Calm and articulate, Carl made me see the world and the universe in a new way. I came to understand that we are truly stardust, and so is everything this planet is made of. Our world is a grain of sand in the ocean of space. We live on a cosmic outpost, and there will be no resupplying us. We need to take care of what we have and each other. Carl Sagan was the messenger and I listened. Thanks, Carl.

A quotation I like: "Imagine there's no heaven, it's easy if you try. No hell below us; above us only sky." — John Lennon

These are a few of my favorite things: Hugs, family, music, cooking, my space collection, learning new things, reading, football, baseball, the ocean and the forest.

These are not: Ignorance, intolerance, injustice, televangelists, mega-churches, creationists, liars.

My doubts about religion started: When I was about 10. Every evening I would watch the news about the Vietnam War. They would discuss how many soldiers were killed or wounded. This continued for years and years. I asked myself

if there was a God, why would he let this happen? Why didn't he put a stop

to all the killing? I also saw violence in the streets, and at colleges here in America. I saw segregation and hate. These are the kind of things I couldn't believe would happen if there was a God.

Before I die: I want to see, in person, America's newest rocket with people on board, launched from Kennedy Space Center. I would also like the majority of this planet's energy to be provided by renewable sources.

Ways I promote freethought: Indirectly, by supporting FFRF through my contributions. Also, I certainly don't refrain when asked about my thoughts on religion and my athe-

ism, whether it is by someone at my front door or in other social settings.

I wish you'd have asked me: Why did I join FFRF? As a student of history, even by the age of 10, I came to realize that religion and the church had played a dominant role in shaping the world I was living in, and not for the good. From the Crusades to the Inquisition to the witch hunts, the unspeakable human cruelty that religion has served upon humankind needs to be recognized and stood up to, because it continues today. FFRF has the courage and conviction I appreciate to meet this challenge. After becoming aware of FFRF through your ad in *Scientific American* magazine, I joined your fine organization with great pleasure. Keep up the wonderful work you do.

The Constitution is on our side.

MEET A MEMBER

“By the age of 10, I came to realize that religion and the church had played a dominant role in shaping the world I was living in, and not for the good.”

— Gregory Kanel

The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible



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

Buy it from FFRF online
shop.ffrf.org

IN THE NEWS

Number of white Christians shrinking in U.S.

Less than half of the U.S. population now consider themselves white Christians, a stunning and seismic shift from 40 years ago, according to a recently released survey on religious identity.

The study also shows that less than half of all states are now majority white Christian. Just 10 years ago, 39 states had majority white Christian populations.

The 2016 “America’s Changing Religious Identity” study, released Sept. 6 by the Public Religion Research Institute, is the largest survey of American religious identity ever conducted. It included a sampling of more than 101,000 Americans from all 50 states.

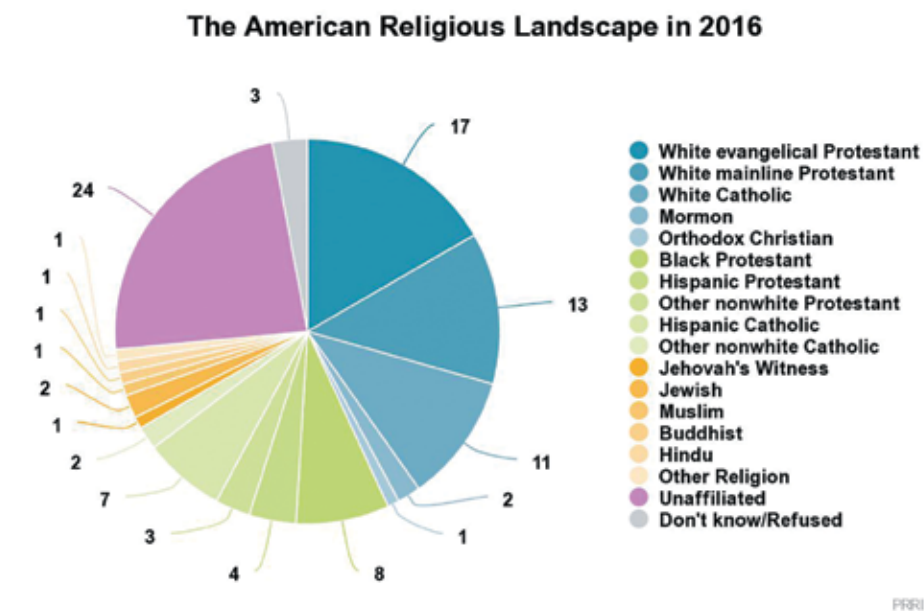
The biggest change from the past to the present is, not surprisingly, generational in nature.

“The young are much less likely to believe this is a ‘Christian nation’ or to give preference to Christian identity,” said Daniel Cox, PRRI’s director of research. “Young people and seniors are basically inhabiting different religious worlds. It is no longer the case among young people that being religious is necessarily a positive attribute.”

Robert P. Jones, PRRI’s CEO and author of *The End of White Christian America*, said one of the biggest changes is the loss of many of the white evangelical Protestants.

“This report provides solid evidence of a new, second wave of white Christian decline that is occurring among white evangelical Protestants just over the last decade in the U.S.,” he said. “Prior to 2008, white evangelical Protestants seemed to be exempt from the waves of demographic change and disaffiliation that were eroding the membership bases of white mainline Protestants and white Catholics. We now see that these waves simply crested later for white evangelical Protestants.”

Among the major findings of the study:



- White Christians are now less than half of the public. Only 43 percent identify as white and Christian, and only 30 percent as white and Protestant. In 1976, roughly eight in 10 (81 percent) Americans identified as white and identified with a Christian denomination.

- White evangelical Protestants are in decline, along with white mainline Protestants and white Catholics. Fewer than one in five (17 percent) Americans is a white evangelical Protestant, but they accounted for nearly one-quarter (23 percent) in 2006. Over the same period, white Catholics dropped five percentage points from 16 percent to 11 percent, as have white mainline Protestants, from 18 percent to 13 percent.

- America’s youngest religious groups are all non-Christian. Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists are all younger than white

Christian groups. At least one-third of Muslims (42 percent), Hindus (36 percent), and Buddhists (35 percent) are under the age of 30. Roughly one-third (34 percent) of religiously unaffiliated Americans are also under 30.

- The Catholic Church is experiencing an ethnic transformation. In 1991, nearly nine in 10 (87 percent) Catholics were white, non-Hispanic, compared to 55 percent today. More than half (52 percent) of Catholics under the age of 30 are Hispanic.

- Self-described atheists and agnostics account for a minority of all religiously unaffiliated. Most describe themselves as secular. Atheists and agnostics account for about one-quarter (27 percent) of all religiously unaffiliated Americans. Nearly six in 10 (58 percent) religiously unaffiliated Americans identify as secular, someone who is not religious.

“It is no longer the case among young people that being religious is necessarily a positive attribute.”
— Daniel Cox

Washington county opens invocations to all

In the state of Washington, the Clark County City Council on Aug. 22 unanimously approved a resolution allowing groups or individuals “having no religious affiliation” to offer a brief statement prior to the start of the meeting.

The guidelines also allow any group or individual to request a moment of silence in place of an invocation.

Earlier versions of the revisions drew concerns from some secular-minded residents of the county and FFRF that they improperly excluded non-religious people from offering an invocation.

Arkansas mandates ‘In God We Trust’ motto

A new law in Arkansas says that elementary and secondary schools shall display a framed picture or poster of “In God We Trust” above an American flag in their libraries and classrooms.

But taxpayers won’t be fronting the bill for the new displays. Act 911 states they either have to be donated from a private organization or purchased with funds made available through voluntary contributions to the local school boards or the Building Authority Division of the Arkansas Department

of Finance and Administration.

The law also requires the motto to appear in any public building that’s maintained or operated by state funds.

Trump voters: Christians, whites most oppressed

Public Policy Polling’s newest national survey finds that Donald Trump’s supporters think whites and Christians are the most oppressed groups of people in the country.

The PPP survey shows about 40 percent of voters approve of the job Trump is doing compared to 53 percent who disapprove.

The poll also shows some of his supporters agree with some of the beliefs that inspired white supremacists to rally in Charlottesville, Va. Asked what racial group they think faces the most discrimination in America, 45 percent of Trump voters say it’s white people, followed by 17 percent for Native Americans.

Asked what religious group they think faces the most discrimination in America, 54 percent of Trump voters say it’s Christians, followed by 22 percent for Muslims.

Blasphemy laws on books in one-third of nations

Laws prohibiting blasphemy are

“astonishingly widespread” worldwide, with many laying down disproportionate punishments ranging from prison sentences to lashings or the death penalty, the author of a report on blasphemy announced.

Iran, Pakistan and Yemen score worst, topping a list of 71 countries with laws criminalizing views deemed blasphemous, found in all regions of the world, according to a comprehensive report issued in August by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The bipartisan commission called for repeal of blasphemy statutes, saying they invited abuse and failed to protect freedoms of religion and expression.

Lesbians win \$10K in suit against county clerk

A deputy clerk in Gilmer County, W.Va., allegedly chastised Amanda Abramovich and Samantha Brookover as the clerk processed their marriage license, calling them an “abomination” and telling them God would “deal” with them, according to a complaint filed in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of West Virginia.

A year and a half later, the Gilmer County clerk’s office is paying the two women, who have been together for

- There are 20 states in which no religious group comprises a greater share of residents than the religiously unaffiliated. These states tend to be more concentrated in the Western United States, although they include a couple of states in the Northeast.

- The cultural center of the Catholic Church is shifting south. In 1972, roughly seven in 10 Catholics lived in either the Northeast (41 percent) or the Midwest (28 percent). Today, a majority of Catholics reside in the South (29 percent) or West (25 percent).

- Jews, Hindus and Unitarian-Universalists stand out as the most educated groups in the American religious landscape. More than one-third of Jews (34 percent), Hindus (38 percent), and Unitarian-Universalists (43 percent) hold post-graduate degrees. Notably, Muslims are significantly more likely than white evangelical Protestants to have at least a four-year college degree.

- Nearly half of LGBT Americans are religiously unaffiliated. Nearly half (46 percent) of Americans who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender are religiously unaffiliated. This is roughly twice the number of Americans overall (24 percent) who are religiously unaffiliated.

- White Christians have become a minority in the Democratic Party. Fewer than one in three (29 percent) Democrats today is a white Christian, compared to half (50 percent) one decade earlier. Only 14 percent of young Democrats (age 18 to 29) identify as white Christian. Forty percent identify as religiously unaffiliated.

- White evangelical Protestants remain the dominant religious force in the GOP. More than one-third (35 percent) of all Republicans identify as white evangelical Protestant, a proportion that has remained roughly stable over the past decade.

seven years, \$10,000 in damages and issuing them an apology.

During processing, Deputy Clerk Debbie Allen slammed the paperwork on the desk, said she was a Christian and called the couple an “abomination” in a rant that continued for several minutes, according to court documents. Another clerk joined in, shouting that it was Allen’s “religious right” to harass the couple, according to the complaint.

Most in Britain say they have no religion

More than half of the British public (53 percent) say they are not at all religious — a figure that has increased by five percentage points since 2015 and by 19 percentage points since 1983, when just three in 10 people deemed themselves non-religious.

The news has prompted renewed calls for the government to cut the amount of public money going to the church and reduce the church’s influence in society.

The decline in religious affiliation is hitting the Church of England particularly hard, with the number of people considering themselves Anglican having halved since 2000 — at just 15 percent. Young people were particularly underrepresented, with just 3 percent of those aged 18-24 describing themselves as Anglican.

FFRF NEWS

FFRF tells Rubio to silence his bible tweets

FFRF has taken on Florida Sen. Marco Rubio for regularly tweeting bible verses.

Rubio uses Twitter, the popular social media website on which he has nearly three million followers, to communicate with constituents and keep them informed about his official duties as “U.S. Senator for Florida,” as the account biography describes him.

Rubio is not tweeting “an errant bible verse or two, but more than 60 bible verses in three months. That’s enough verses to tweet the entire Book of Jude. Twice,” writes FFRF’s Director of Strategic Response Andrew Seidel, also a constitutional attorney.

One of Rubio’s tweets, quoting Exodus 10:21, suggests that the solar eclipse on Aug. 21 was a sign from God. Darkness is the second to last plague the biblical god inflicts on Egypt, before sending the final plague to murder every firstborn male.



Marco Rubio
@marcorubio



Yahweh then said to Moses, Stretch out your hand towards heaven, & let darkness, darkness so thick that it can be felt cover Egypt. Exodus 10:21
1:34 PM - Aug 21, 2017
294 303 1,680

“We have no issue with people reading and discussing the bible,” notes Seidel, “The road to atheism is littered with bibles that have been read cover to cover. But it is not for the government in our secular republic to promote one religious book over others or to promote religion over nonreligion.”

In anticipation of Rubio claiming that this is his personal social media account, FFRF explains why that argument fails: “The private social media

accounts of people who assume government office can become accounts that appear to speak for the government, unless these officers carefully distinguish their public and private roles. The @MarcoRubio account has not been scrupulous or thorough in this regard.”

FFRF documents that @MarcoRubio is tied to Rubio’s identity as a government actor, and has almost exclusively been used to keep constituents

informed of “Marco Rubio the senator, not Marco Rubio the private citizen.”

FFRF’s letter lays out a compelling case, based on copious legal precedent, that government actors are not confined to making official statements only from one platform, and that Rubio’s personal Twitter account would be perceived by readers as primarily a platform to update Rubio’s senatorial duties.

The simplest solution “is to stop tweeting bible verses or any other religious message,” FFRF suggests. Either that, or Rubio can remove all traces of his public office from the @MarcoRubio Twitter account.

Adding a little religious authority to appeal to the good senator, FFRF concludes by suggesting that Rubio might consider rereading Matthew 6:5-6, in which Jesus condemns public displays of piety.

FFRF questions transfer of park land with cross

FFRF is greeting with guarded optimism an announcement by the city of Neosho, Mo., about how it is remedying a state/church violation.

FFRF had sent a complaint letter in May, informing the town that its display of a cross at Big Spring Park runs afoul of constitutional law, which bars displays of religious symbols on public property.

The large cross, approximately 60 feet in length, lies on the side of a hill at the public park and has been illuminated every night by the city.

On Sept. 7, the city announced it has transferred the land containing the cross to the Save Our Heritage Foundation.

“We are pleased the city is moving in the right direction,” notes FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert,

“but there are serious issues with these type of land transfers.”

In a statement, City Attorney Steve Hays writes: “The city of Neosho, taking into account the concerns of one of our citizens, the current findings of law as it relates to stand alone religious symbols on public land and appreciating the costs which could be incurred due to lengthy court proceedings, has taken actions which it believes satisfactorily resolve the issue at hand.”

Markert sent a letter to the city expressing concern that the transfer, if handled with intent to “save the cross,” rather than fairly and openly, may be “a legally problematic sham remedy.”

Notably, FFRF is seeking assurances that the divested parcel be enclosed and contain disclaimer sig-

“We are pleased the city is moving in the right direction, but there are serious issues with these type of land transfers.”

— Rebecca Markert



Submitted photo

This cross in Neosho, Mo., at Big Spring Park, is about 60 feet long and lies in the side of the hill, where it is illuminated every night. The city announced that it was transferring the land from public ownership to the Save Our Heritage Foundation.

nage, in compliance with legal dictates. Without fences and disclaimers, the transfer does not relieve the continued perception of government endorsement.

It is not clear, FFRF notes, whether the city sold or gave away the land. “The city must ensure that it is getting a fair market price for this

prime real estate.”

Markert sent an accompanying open records request seeking records on communications between the private foundation and the city, copies of city codes or policies governing the sale of city property, and other records related to the proposal to sell or transfer the land.

South Dakota prison gets freethought books

FFRF just made another 11-book donation to a freethought prison group. This time it’s to the newly formed Secular Humanist Study Group at Mike Durfee State Prison in South Dakota.

FFRF has now donated a total of 44 freethought books to four different correctional centers in the United States.

FFRF first wrote to the South Dakota Department of Corrections in May 2014 about an inmate who was seeking to form this group within the South Dakota State Penitentiary system. At least

four project applications later, after additional letters from FFRF in 2015 and 2016, and after the inmate’s transfer to the Mike Durfee State Prison, his Secular Humanist Study Group was ultimately approved in May 2017. The group had four members at its first meeting in June, but the group has been growing rapidly since then — after being allowed to advertise its meetings — and it had 15 members participate at its most recent meeting in mid-August.

The Secular Humanist Study Group at the prison has been given a one-hour weekly time slot for group meetings in a small classroom. It has been allowed to establish two official secular holidays, which it will observe with special meals on Feb. 12 (for the birthday of Charles Darwin) and Sept. 17 (in honor of the signing of the U.S. Constitution). It has also been designated a group account

to which money can be donated for group events and the purchasing of reading materials.

“I need to thank both FFRF and Associate Attorney Sam Grover for all the time and energy spent helping establish a secular humanist study group in the South Dakota state prison system,” the inmate writes. “I would also like to thank Dan Barker and Sam for the contribution of books for our group library.”

“Unfortunately, as much as I would love to beg for books to build up our library, we are only allowed to receive financial contributions for the group, and that leaves me feeling uncomfortable.”

He wrote back a few weeks later to update FFRF on the book donations. He said two of the books have to be returned because the illustrations are “not sufficiently prude enough.”



Sam Grover

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FFRF files Supreme Court brief against travel ban

FFRF has filed an amicus brief before the U.S. Supreme Court opposing President Trump’s travel ban on immigration from several Muslim-majority countries.

FFRF argues that the executive order, “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,” issued on Jan. 27 this year and then reissued on March 6, violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. FFRF notes that the order’s underlying purpose is religious: to ban a religious minority (Muslims) and to favor Christians. The brief also makes the contention that the travel ban contravenes Article VI of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits a religious test for office.

It would create precedence that could be used to target not only religious minorities, but also the significant minority today that identifies as nonreligious.

“Never in the history of the United States have our immigration policies and procedures been used to deny opportunity to religious groups and to favor a particular religion,” FFRF



Shutterstock/Rena Schild

asserts. “Executive Order 13780 sullies that history with a ban on travel targeting six majority-Muslim nations and motivated by the religious make-up of those countries.”

The order is not tailored to address the president’s supposed purpose, FFRF maintains. Less than a quarter of Muslim-Americans involved in violent extremism of any kind have family ties to the six countries designated in the order. And, in fact, only four

asylum seekers, or 0.0006 percent of the 700,522 admitted from 1975 through 2015, later committed acts of terror.

Consistent public statements by the Trump administration coloring the executive order as a “Muslim ban” suggest an underlying religious purpose. Clear repeated statements by the president show the order was motivated by a desire to give preference to a religion and to discriminate

against unpopular religious minorities. This impermissible intent is an unconstitutional endorsement and advancement of religion and fails the Supreme Court’s so-called *Lemon* test.

The history and effect of this executive order conveys Trump’s message loud and clear: “We don’t want them here.” The executive order effectively establishes Christianity as a favored religion and Christians as favored members of society, while overtly discriminating against Muslims. The Trump administration has engaged in a campaign of religious discrimination and favoritism that will not stop until the Supreme Court unequivocally strikes down its religious purpose as unconstitutional, FFRF concludes.

FFRF’s lead counsel for the amicus brief is its Legal Director Rebecca Markert. The state/church watchdog wants to thank Immigration Law Attorney Huma Ahsan for approaching it about the brief and inspiring it to get involved, and Russell Busch, a summer law clerk with FFRF from the University of Michigan, who also helped with research and drafting.

Coach prayer ruling by 9th Circuit lauded

The termination of a public school coach who was fired for proselytizing was just upheld by the 9th U.S. Court of Appeals.

As an assistant football coach at the Bremerton School District in Washington, Joe Kennedy abused his position, often praying with students on the field.

On Aug. 23, the 9th Circuit ruled in favor of the school district, finding that Kennedy “took advantage of his position to press his particular views upon the impressionable and captive minds before him.”

The school district told Kennedy that he could not use his position as a school employee to promote religion to

a captive audience of school children who depend on his good will for playing time, access to scholarships and more. He was ordered to stop praying with students on Sept. 17, 2015.

FFRF backed up the district when Kennedy hired First Liberty Institute, a Religious Right law firm, to represent him. Kennedy announced that he would pray at the game despite the district’s order.

In an Oct. 15, 2015, letter, FFRF urged the district to stand by its earlier decision to prohibit a coach from praying with students. FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler asked the superintendent to continue upholding

the parameters laid out in the Constitution — coaches can’t impose prayer on students.

Kennedy was eventually placed on administrative leave and was not rehired the following year. Kennedy then sued and sought a preliminary injunction against the school system.

As the lawsuit progressed, First Liberty Institute sought to fundraise off the coach’s case. It portrayed him as persecuted, creating a circus-like atmosphere around the case. FFRF chastized the 47 members of the Congressional Prayer Caucus for grossly mischaracterizing the law in a 2015 letter to the district.

“The Prayer Caucus’ letter is mislead-

ing and fundamentally misunderstands the law,” FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel wrote. “Several other federal courts have examined this precise issue and all have come down on the side of students’ right to an education free from proselytizing and not on the side of a predatory adult seeking to use a position of power to impose their religion on other people’s children.”

The court ruled: “Kennedy spoke as a public employee when he kneeled and prayed on the 50-yard line immediately after games while in view of students and parents. Kennedy therefore cannot show a likelihood of success on the merits of his First Amendment retaliation claim.”

FFRF calls out Sixth Circuit for prayer ruling

FFRF is blasting a ruling by an appeals court that blesses Christian prayer at governmental meetings.

The 6th Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati issued on Sept. 6 a divided decision declaring constitutional the practice of opening meetings with prayer by the Board of Commissioners in Jackson County, Mich. The ruling unfortunately reversed an earlier decision by a three-judge panel declaring the practice unconstitutional. Board members on a rotating basis deliver prayers at the start of each meeting. The decision even notes that these prayers are “generally Christian in tone and often ask ‘God,’ ‘Lord’ or ‘Heavenly Father’ to provide the Commissioners with guidance.”

The majority opinion rests on the same convoluted appeals to “tradition” and “history” used to justify other legislative prayer practices. Such unpersuasive arguments are rejected by courts when addressing other historically accepted practices, such as slavery or the denial of women’s suffrage. The court assertion that “the Framers considered legislative prayer a benign acknowledgment of religion’s role in society” minimizes the divisive nature of prayer, going as far back as the Constitutional Convention, when Benjamin Franklin’s



call for prayer was rejected. While the founders of our nation were, at best, of mixed opinion on governmental prayer, James Madison, the primary author of our godless and secular Constitution, weighed in solidly against congressional chaplaincies.

Six judges, including Chief Judge Guy Cole, laudably dissented from the majority opinion. The dissent notes that the Jackson County Commissioners “refused to allow any non-Commissioners to give prayers . . . in order to avoid hearing prayers they would not like.” When a member of the public voiced an objection to the prayers, one commissioner “made a disgusted face . . . and turned his chair around, refusing to listen” and another called the objecting citizen a “nitwit.” This reprehensible behavior culminated in an objecting citizen being denied a seat

The majority opinion rests on the same convoluted appeals to ‘tradition’ and ‘history’ used to justify other legislative prayer practices.

on the county’s Solid Waste Planning Commission and the Board of Public Works.

In a footnote, the 6th Circuit majority ruling acknowledges that its decision runs counter to the 4th Circuit’s decision in *Lund v. Rowan County*, handed down in July, which ruled that county commissioner-led prayers violate the Establishment Clause by impermissibly advancing religion. Far from clarifying the law, the 6th Circuit decision muddies the waters for the rest of the country.

FFRF continues some major challenges to government prayer. FFRF’s ongoing challenges include lawsuits against courtroom prayer imposed by a justice of the peace in Montgomery County, Texas; prayer by the Chino Valley School District in California (now before the 9th Circuit); and censorship of opening invocations by nonbelievers in a case with Americans United and the ACLU in Brevard County, Fla.

What Is a Freethinker?

freethinker *n.*

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

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FFRF VICTORIES

By Molly Hanson

Superintendent won't lead prayers in Texas

FFRF was able to get a superintendent to stop leading prayers at school-related functions.

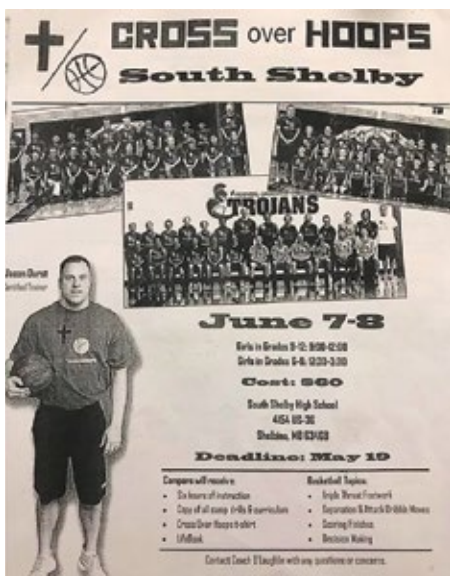
FFRF learned the superintendent of Crosby Independent School District in Crosby, Texas, had led a prayer at an awards ceremony for students and led similar prayers at Crosby High School graduation ceremonies.

Furthermore, it was reported that the school was regularly scheduling prayers to be announced over public loudspeakers before home football games.

FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover wrote to a legal representative of the school district on July 12, informing the district of its constitutional violations. Grover also explained that it is illegal for a public school to include prayer at school athletic events.

On Aug. 11, a representative of the school district informed FFRF that the district had agreed to meet its legal obligations to remain religiously neutral.

Missouri school coach won't give prayers



FFRF has put the kibosh on coached prayers at a school district in Shelby, Mo.

It was reported to FFRF that the South Shelby High School football coach, Rob Wilt, was leading prayers with student-athletes after games last year.

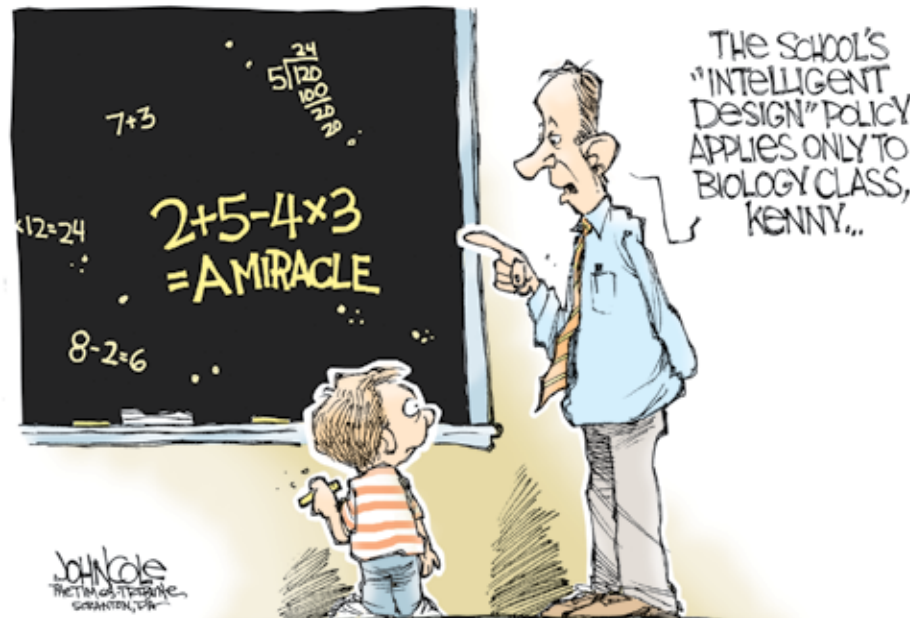
FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott wrote to the Shelby County R-IV School District superintendent on May 11, warning that it is illegal for public school athletic coaches to lead their teams in prayer. FFRF requested that the district take action to ensure Wilt would cease praying or organizing prayer with athletes.

FFRF was informed in August that Wilt and other staff had received training by the school legal counsel on their obligation to keep religion out of school events.

FFRF pushes for secular school supplies

FFRF has ensured that an elementary school in Texas will no longer be partnering with a religious organization for school supplies.

It was reported to FFRF that Glen Rose Elementary School in Glen Rose, Texas, had partnered with a Christian organization, School Tool Box, to sell school supplies to parents through the organization's website. The school was advertising School Tool Box's services and, indirectly, its religious mission.



FFRF Associate Attorney Sam Grover sent a letter to the Glen Rose Independent School District superintendent to ensure that the school district would not continue to illegally promote religion, encouraging Glen Rose Elementary to partner with secular organizations in the future.

A legal representative of the school district replied on Aug. 18, informing FFRF that the district would request that Glen Rose Elementary School partner with different, non-religious organizations going forward.

Ohio school won't teach creationism anymore

FFRF and Americans United have ensured that creationist myths will no longer be taught at an online Ohio public charter school based out of Akron.

A concerned parent of an Ohio Distance & Electronic Learning Academy student contacted FFRF to report the school's biology classes include a unit on "biogenesis" that teaches the biblical view of creation. The class readings for this unit reportedly include young-Earth creationist Walter Brown's book, *In the Beginning: Compelling Evidence for Creation and the Flood*, which was promoted exclusively by Brown's own religious ministry, the Center for Scientific Creation.

In a letter sent to Ohio Distance & Electronic Learning Academy Superintendent David Bowlin on July 24, FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover informed the academy that the Supreme Court has struck down the teaching of "scientific creationism" in public schools. Grover also noted that federal courts have consistently rejected other efforts to undermine evolution or to supplement its teaching with religious ideology in the public schools.

Bowlin responded to FFRF Aug. 24, writing that all the public school's teachers had been reminded that using religious materials for any reason is prohibited in public schools.

South Carolina transit to run on 'Good Friday'

Thanks to FFRF, a South Carolina transit system will be up and running on Good Friday.

It was reported to FFRF that the Spartanburg Area Transit System in South Carolina did not run on the Christian holy day, Good Friday, on April 14.

FFRF's Legal Director Rebecca Markert wrote to the transit system general manager on May 18 informing the city that it is an unconstitutional promotion and favoritism of Christianity to shut down the transit services for this Christian holiday.

Spartan Area Regional Transit Agency General Manager Luis Gonzalez responded Aug. 25, informing FFRF that the transit system would no longer be closed on Good Friday.

Virginia school division ceases staff prayers

A Virginia school division in Smithfield will no longer include prayer in its mandatory employee convocations.

It was reported to FFRF that every year at the Isle of Wight County School Division convocations, a guest speaker would lead the staff in a Christian prayer.

At the 2016 convocation, the speaker had asked employees to stand up if they believed in Jesus Christ during the prayer. FFRF Senior Attorney Patrick Elliott wrote to Superintendent Jim Thornton Aug. 23, requesting that the division end the unconstitutional prayers.

Thornton responded Aug. 28, informing FFRF that the 2017 convocation speaker had been told not to pray, which he had complied with. Thornton further informed FFRF that going forward the division planned to eliminate convocation speakers from outside organizations to avoid future violations.

FFRF gives Alabama school lesson on law

An Alabama school district will not be promoting religious events, thanks to FFRF's involvement.

FFRF was informed that Fairview High School in Cullman, Ala., had used its televised morning announcements to advertise a religious event, the "Decide" Youth Rally, which took place in January at the public school. The event was also mentioned in the school's morning announcements for several days leading up to the event, including one with a promotional video from a pastor speaking at the event.

FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line wrote to Cullman County Schools Superintendent Shane Barnette Aug. 28 informing him that the advertisements had impermissibly entangled the school and district with a religious viewpoint and violated the principle of state and church separation.

The schools superintendent responded Aug. 28 to inform FFRF that he would address the violation appropriately with the administration and ensure that the law was followed in the future.

Texas school shuns Gideons from campus

Students at a Texas elementary school won't be herded to receive

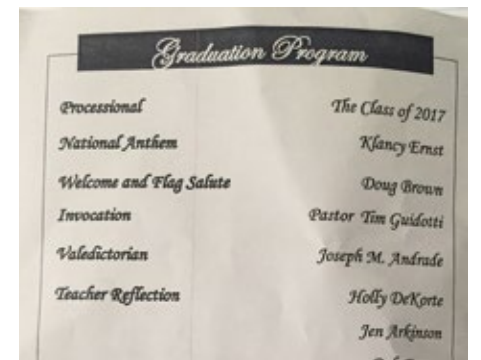
Gideon bibles after FFRF sent a warning to the school district over the constitutional violation.

It was reported to FFRF that teachers at West Fountain Elementary School in Wichita Falls, Texas, had lined students up and escorted them out to the edge of school property to receive a bible from the Gideon Society, a male proselytizing group.

FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover wrote to Wichita Falls Independent School District on March 17, informing the district that advancing the Gideon's religious mission was a constitutional violation of the separation between church and state.

FFRF was informed on Sept. 5 that Executive Director of School Administration Debby Patterson had addressed the violation by sending an email to district staff, reminding them of the guidelines regarding sidewalk bible distribution. Patterson informed the staff that the Gideons are never to be allowed on school property to distribute bibles.

California school expels prayers



A California elementary school will no longer be including prayers in its graduation ceremonies after receiving a warning from FFRF.

A concerned parent informed FFRF that an elementary graduation ceremony at Blochman Union School District in Santa Maria, Calif., included an invocation and benediction led by a local pastor.

The prayers had begun with the pastor instructing the audience to bow their heads in prayer, and had thanked and praised "Father God," "Lord God," and "Our Heavenly Father." FFRF Staff Attorney Elizabeth Cavell wrote to the school district on June 29 requesting that future graduations do not include unconstitutional prayer.

Superintendent Doug Brown responded Aug. 30, assuring FFRF that both the invocation and benediction would be removed at future graduations.

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Freedom depends on freethinkers

Hoosier favorite state-church protector? FFRF!

FFRF was able to remedy three state-church violations in Indiana in the past several weeks.

Mission completed

A public school soccer team won't be attending coach-organized religious mission trips after FFRF took action.

A local resident informed FFRF that the NorthWood High School girls' soccer team, part of Wa-Nee Community Schools in Nappanee, Ind., had gone on a mission trip to Panama in June. The trip had been organized by the team's head coach, Phil Ummel, along with a mission organization named SCORE International. Ummel had publicly promoted the trip and encouraged the girls to go as a team. On June 28, FFRF sent a letter informing the school dis-

trict that such religious promotion was a constitutional violation and requesting that the coach refrain from encouraging religious activities or taking students on mission trips in the future.

FFRF received a response on Aug. 15 from the new superintendent at the district, who wrote that immediate action would be taken to correct the legal violation and assured FFRF that the school wouldn't promote or sponsor religious activities going forward.

Prayer expunged

A school in Hope, Ind., will not be scheduling prayer into school-sponsored events after receiving a letter from FFRF.

A parent within the Flatrock Hawcreek School Corporation in Hope re-

ported to FFRF that school events in the district often included scheduled prayers and that staff members were regularly encouraging and participating in student prayer. FFRF wrote to Superintendent Shawn Price on June 2, informing him that these practices are illegal entanglements of state and church. FFRF requested that immediate action be taken by the school district to ensure that district-sponsored events do not include prayer in the future.

FFRF was informed Aug. 31 that the school district had taken steps to comply with the constitutional principles of separation of church and state in the future.

Averse to the verses

A teacher at a high school in Greenwood, Ind., will not be prosely-

tizing students with bible verses after FFRF contacted the school.

A community member informed FFRF that a science teacher at Center Grove High School in Greenwood was regularly displaying bible verses on his classroom projector while students were entering the class. FFRF wrote to Center Grove Community Schools Superintendent Richard Arkanoff on Jan. 27, warning the district that teachers displaying daily bible verses in a classroom violates the constitutional prohibition of schools not advancing or endorsing religion. The teacher's displays created the appearance that the school district promoted the bible's religious message.

FFRF was informed Sept. 3 that the school district had corrected the violation immediately after having received FFRF's legal letter.

FFRF helps relieve 'Aimless' prisoners

FFRF has ensured that religious tests are no longer part of the Virginia correctional system.

FFRF received multiple reports, from more than one correctional institution, that Virginia's nonreligious inmates were being penalized on their COMPAS Assessments for indicating that they do not participate in organized religion. COMPAS Assessments are given during inmates' annual review processes in order to evaluate areas that need improvement or attention prior to inmates' release. In the "Goals" category, inmates had been designated as "Aimless," based on selecting "Mostly Disagree" to the two following statements: "I plan to attend religious activities regularly when I am released," and "I have found a religion or spiritual path that I truly believe in."

Being designated as "Aimless" often led to additional burdensome programs being added to an inmate. For an inmate who conscientiously elected not to participate in organized religion and did not consider himself or herself to be "spiritual," the choice presented was unworkable.

To compound the problem, some inmates designated as "Aimless," were being assigned by prison officials to the problematic Matrix program. Matrix is designed to provide "intensive outpatient treatment for

people with stimulant use disorders," yet these inmates were not incarcerated for drug- or alcohol-related offenses. Instead of using Matrix as an addiction recovery tool, prison administrators appear to have been using it to promote religion to "Aimless" inmates.

In practice, the Matrix program was being led by instructors who focused the program on the 12-step system of recovery championed by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which is inherently religious. While the worksheets claim that "None of the 12-step programs are religious" and that "Each person decides for himself or herself what the term 'higher power' means," federal courts have consistently disagreed, ruling that the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step model is inherently religious.

FFRF's concerns about the COMPAS Assessment and the Matrix program have been addressed.

"The Virginia Department of Corrections has decided to remove [the problematic] questions from the [COMPAS] questionnaire," Virginia Senior Assistant Attorney General and Chief of the Correctional Litigation Section Diane M. Abato recently confirmed to FFRF. "The [Matrix] manuals will have any references to 12-step programs removed, and staff will continue to be trained not to refer to 12-step programs."



Bible verse removed from school

A local resident informed FFRF that a bible verse was on display above the front desk at Comanche Elementary School in Comanche, Okla. It read: "Welcome, The Lord bless you and keep you. Num. 6:24."

"Public schools may not advance, prefer, or promote religion," FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line wrote to Comanche Public Schools Superintendent Terry Davidson. "This display violates this basic constitutional prohibition by creating the appearance that the district prefers religion over nonreligion. Courts have continually held that school districts may not display religious mes-

sages or iconography in public schools."

Religion is a divisive force in public schools, FFRF added. The religious display at Comanche Elementary was particularly inappropriate given the young and impressionable age group that the school serves.

Comanche Public Schools agreed with FFRF's contention and reacted swiftly and appropriately.

"Please be advised that the display has been removed," Davidson recently replied in an email. "It is always our intent to be fully compliant with the Constitution and I appreciate your letter making us aware of this violation."

Utah school pledges to follow Constitution

FFRF has notched a victory in Utah for the freedom of conscience.

FFRF was contacted by a concerned parent regarding a serious constitutional violation occurring in the state's Canyons School District. On the first day of school, Maureen Howe, a math teacher at Hillcrest High School in Midvale, Utah, singled out and rebuked a student for choosing to remain seated during the Pledge of Allegiance. The complainant reported that when her child didn't stand for the pledge, Howe approached the child and told her she needed to be respectful and stand.

Howe's action was a violation of the Constitution, FFRF informed the Canyons School District.

Multiple courts have reiterated that students have a constitutional right not to be forced to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance.

"The Supreme Court ruled over 70 years ago that compelling a student to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance infringed upon a student's First Amendment rights," FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line wrote to Canyons School District Superintendent James Briscoe.

FFRF added, "Multiple courts have reiterated that students have a constitutional right not to be forced to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance and that any punishment administered in reaction to a student exercising that right violates the Constitution."

That's why students may not be singled out, rebuked, told they must stand, or otherwise penalized for following their freedom of conscience, FFRF contended.

The school district has found FFRF's rationale so persuasive that it has made its own parallel case for the freedom to dissent in its response.

"Teachers need to teach students to show respect for any student who chooses not to participate by modeling that respect themselves," states the district's general counsel, Daniel Harper, in his reply.

The letter acknowledges that Utah state statutes and state board of education regulations forbid compelling a student to stand up for the Pledge of Allegiance.

"Ms. Howe has indicated that she will no longer require students to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance in the future," the letter says. "Principal Leavitt has sent out an email to all of the teachers at Hillcrest High School reviewing Utah law regarding the Pledge of Allegiance."

FFRF awards \$11,200

2017 essay contest for college students

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 18 winners of the 2017 Michael Hakeem Memorial College Essay Contest.

College students were asked to write a personal persuasive essay about why their morality does not come from religion or God.

After carefully reviewing more than 160 essays, FFRF awarded seven top prizes and 11 honorable mentions.

Listed below are the winners, the college or university they are attending and the award amount. FFRF has paid out a total of \$11,200 in award money for the contest this year.

First place

Max Stinson, University of South Carolina Upstate (\$3,000)

Second place

Jacey Anderson, Washington State University (\$2,000)

Third place

Jamie Moffa, Washington University School of Medicine (\$1,000)

Fourth place (tie)



Gabrielle Goldworm, Seton Hall University (\$750)

Fourth place (tie)

Hampton Gibson, University of Oklahoma (\$750)

Fifth place

Violet Richardson, University of Wisconsin (\$500)

Sixth place

Kaylee Payne, University of Virginia's College at Wise (\$400)

Honorable mentions (\$200 each)

Christopher Bednarcik, North Central

College

Michael Brown, Dartmouth College
Catherine Evans, James Madison University

Nicholas Giurleo, Tufts University
Jordan Green, University of Arizona
Melissa Juarez, University of California-Fresno

Anne Mickey, Arizona State University
Chenoa Off, Russell Sage College
Mackenzie Schneider, Smith College
Omolola Smith, University of Vermont
Katelynn Thompson, University of Georgia

The college contest is named for the

late Michael Hakeem, a sociology professor who was an FFRF board chair and active atheist known by generations of University of Wisconsin-Madison students for fine-tuning their reasoning skills.

FFRF 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 \$11,200 reflects those bonuses.

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

In the September issue, FFRF announced the 17 winners of the William Schultz High School Essay Contest and the \$10,150 it awarded to those students. In the August issue, FFRF announced the 14 winners of the David Hudak Memorial High School Contest for Students of Color and the \$10,050 it awarded to those students. The graduate student essay winners will be announced in the November issue.

First Place

The most reliable form of morality

FFRF awarded Max \$3,000 for his first-place essay.

By Max Stinson

As an African-American child growing up in the Bible Belt, I was given only one option for a religion to follow: Christianity. The amount of Jesus-related instruction I received was suffocating; people of other religious groups (or those without religion) were demonized both in my church and at home.

At the age of 7, I began asking questions, something that was strongly discouraged in my church. By age 11, I decided there was not enough evidence for the “truth” of the bible, or the existence of the god therein. By age 17, I realized that there wasn’t enough evidence for the existence of any gods, and declared myself an atheist.

During my freshman year of college, an on-campus organization held an event called “Destereotyping Day.” They handed out T-shirts with the words, “I am . . . but I am not . . .” with blank spaces after the ellipses, which were to be filled with a minority group and a stereotype associated with that group. Mine read, “I am an atheist, but I am not a moral reprobate.”

I wore the shirt to my classes the next day. When I sat down at a desk in my psychology class, the girl in the seat next to mine read my shirt and promptly moved to the other side of the room. This was a girl with whom I’d conversed and even had a few study sessions. Why was she suddenly so repulsed?

At lunchtime that day, I spotted her, eating alone. I took a deep breath and sat at her table without asking permission. She seemed nervous, fumbling with her fork in one hand and fidgeting with the cross dangling from the chain of her necklace with the other. I wasted no time with pleasantries.

“Why’d you run from me this morning?” I asked, attempting to make eye contact, but failing to capture her shifting gaze.

“I didn’t run,” she said in defense. “I just kinda . . . well, you know, I’m a Christian. I just can’t hang out with someone who has no morals.”

“I have plenty of morals,” I responded, fighting to keep my temper under control. “You can be moral without having a religion.”

“I mean, sure, you can.” She finally let her eyes meet mine. “But there’s no basis for it. Mine is based on the bible. Yours

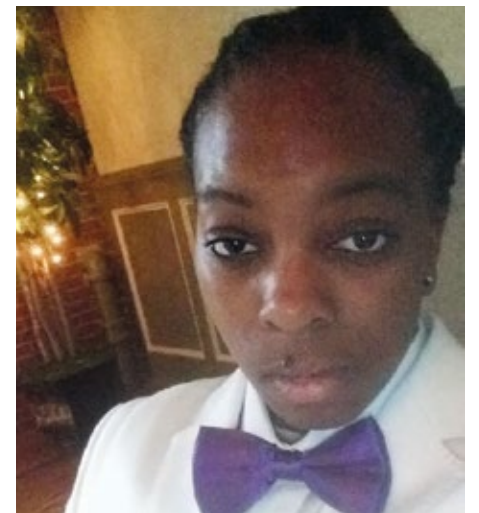
is based on what feels right to you, and that’s just . . . unreliable.”

I pondered that statement that night. I thought about my morality, the things I considered to be wrong and the things I considered to be right, and why I held those opinions. Eventually, I figured it out.

My morals are based on treating people like people — that is, treating people in the way that causes the least harm and the most good. Morality should be based on a recognition that all people intrinsically deserve the right to life, liberty, property and health care; thus, murder is wrong because it violates a person’s right to life, and volunteering to charity organizations is good because it helps to secure the rights of others.

This type of morality, one that is based on people rather than a book, is superior to one that is based on a religious text. Slavery, rape, and child abuse are deemed immoral by our society, but are permitted or even encouraged in the holy books of countless religions worldwide. Following the basis of what is fair has no downside, except to those who wish to oppress.

The purest morality is one that is based on fairness, and this is the moral code to which I subscribe. America has a history



Max Stinson

of stripping people of their rights based on things as trivial as skin pigmentation, gender, and sexual orientation, and those centuries of oppression were justified by using the bible.

An equality-based moral code is one that disallows such injustice, and therefore is the most reliable form of morality.

Max, 19, is from Spartanburg, S.C., and is a sophomore at the University of South Carolina Upstate. He is a member of the Upstate Freethinkers Club, president of the university’s Gay-Straight Alliance, a tutor in the Writing Center, and a published poet. He is looking to publish his first novel within the year. After graduation, he plans to pursue a Ph.D. in English.

Second Place

My dog is more than just my co-pilot

FFRF awarded Jacey \$2,000 for her essay.

By Jacey Anderson

I did not construct my morals in the pew of a church or find them crouching between psalms in the bible — rather, they arose primarily from the time I have spent with my dog (which, suspiciously, is “God” spelled backwards).

My dog has proven to be a teacher of infinite patience and enthusiasm, and has imparted countless pearls of wisdom about how to live and treat others that serve as my guiding philosophy to this day. The most profound of his teachings are as follows.

Everyone has a job to do and it’s important to work hard at your job.

In the case of my canine companion, it seems to be guarding the yard against squirrels, while mine is to achieve all that I can in school. But I have found that harnessing genuine enthusiasm for your work goes a long way in accomplishing it. My dog’s commitment to his job admittedly puts mine to shame, but I constantly strive to emulate his dedication.

It’s important to get to know people before you form opinions about them.

My dog accomplishes this with admirable tenacity by sniffing butts. I try to use conversation (people tend to react poorly if you imitate your dog too close-

ly), but we both do our best to properly acquaint ourselves with people we meet and form social connections. I’ve found that it’s much more difficult to fear or dislike people if I truly take the time to get to know them, particularly in the divisive times that we live in. A simple open-minded conversation can mean the difference between parting in anger or camaraderie, and my dog has repeatedly shown me that the latter is infinitely preferable.

Treat those around you with respect, because they might be having a bad day and bite your face off.

Fortunately, my dog has never been a victim of this particular happenstance,



Jacey Anderson and her dog, Blink

Essays continued on next page

but his awareness of the possibility encourages him to approach unfamiliar situations with caution and consciousness. Think how many times we as individuals, communities, or even nations have failed to treat those around us with dignity and respect and how many conflicts have arisen because of this. Following a simple philosophy of recognizing that you do not exist in a vacuum and that the perspectives of others have value does a great deal to improve relationships and avoid causing unnecessary offense.

Life is not just about work — smell the roses!

Or, in my dog's case, a bread crust dropped days ago by the neighbor kid,

a freshly used litter box or whatever seizes his immediate attention. My nose is less adept so I take a more metaphorical approach, but I observe the simple joy that my dog derives from the walk we take every day and think that, perhaps, I also have an obligation to appreciate this endlessly fascinating world that I have barely begun to understand.

We are at our best when caring for others.

When I wearily return home after a

trying day, my dog tries to help by bestowing big, sloppy kisses or dutifully bringing me some crusty, worn toy. While

I have little use for the objects themselves, I am always touched by the gesture. It is a gentle yet invaluable reminder that, oftentimes, a simple gesture to someone who is suffering can mean the

world even if it seems trivial to us.

Lastly, treasure the time you spend with the ones you love.

Life is unpredictable and no guarantees of future happiness exist, so my

“A simple gesture to someone who is suffering can mean the world even if it seems trivial to us.”

—Jancey Anderson

Third Place

Following in my father's footsteps

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

By Jamie Moffa

I was raised Catholic. When I was growing up, my mother took my siblings and me to church every Sunday. We learned “God's teachings,” many of which pertained to morality and how we ought to treat others.

Despite my early doubts about God's existence, many of these teachings rang true for me: that we ought to treat our neighbors as we would like to be treated, be accepting and respectful towards others, practice forgiveness, and selflessly give our time and money to those less fortunate seemed like obvious moral guidelines.

Yet I saw precious few examples of my church's leaders and parishioners living according to these teachings. Instead of treating their neighbors with kindness, I saw judgment and intolerance. Instead of acceptance and respect, I saw outright hostility and condescension toward women, LGBTQ people, and people of other (or no) faiths. Instead of forgiveness, I saw people shamed for breaking from the church's teachings.

Observing this, the noble teachings of the Catholic Church fell flat for me; I couldn't accept the morals taught by a hypocritical institution. However, I still

yearned for moral guidance.

I found this guidance not from any religion, but from my father, a secular humanist. He taught me how to show respect and kindness to everyone, not just in his words, but through his actions. His humble conviction in his ideals provided me with the best possible foundation for my own morals, better than any religion could have accomplished.



Frederick Moffa

Ever since I was young, I admired my father, a hard-working man devoted to his family and dedicated to his work as an optometrist. His first lesson to my siblings and me was that family comes first, and he lived up to that with every fiber of his being. He showed that he cared in small ways, like always being home to have dinner with the family, and larger commitments, like coaching most of our youth sports teams.

On top of being an excellent parent, he also owned his own optometry practice. As a child, I spent many afternoons at his office and got to see the amazing work he did there. I was fascinated by the medical aspects, but what stood out more was the

way he treated his patients. He greeted everyone as if they were his friends, and treated them all with the utmost care and respect. The compassion and acceptance he showed to patients of all races, economic situations, genders, political affiliations, and religious beliefs touched something deep within me, a knowledge that this was the sort of behavior I wanted to emulate in my own life.

As I grew older, I had many discussions with my father about religion, and expressed my doubts about my belief in God and the hypocrisy I saw in the church. He never pushed me to abandon the beliefs I had grown up with. Instead, he simply listened to my doubts, and discussed humanism — his guiding philosophy — with me.

He told me that humanism is a faith in the accomplishments of people, and the basic goodness within our fellow men and women. He explained that to be a humanist is to treat others with respect, kindness, tolerance and to look for rational and effective solutions to the problems faced by humanity.

As he explained this over many years and many more conversations, I could see that his moral code was not merely words. My father truly lived the lessons he spoke every day of his life. He gave to charity, did good deeds, and showed devotion to his family and his work, not in the name

dog puts his whole heart into our time together and I strive to do the same by internalizing these priceless lessons. No holy book can match the warmth a glance from his warm chocolate eyes imparts, and I would not have it any other way.

Jacey, 19, is from Lynwood, Wash., and attends Washington State University, where she is majoring in animal science. She is planning to become a veterinarian with a specialty of wildlife medicine. Jacey has been active in groups including 4-H, National Honor Society, Hi-Q, Key Club and ZooCorps. She was a National Merit commended Scholar and was salutatorian of her high school class. She is a member of the Secular Student Alliance.



Jamie Moffa

of some God, but out of knowledge that what he was doing was right, and dedication to improving humanity as a whole.

It is his moral example I follow as I make my own way in the world, proud to call myself a secular humanist, and, more importantly, his daughter.

Jamie, 22, is from Granby, Conn., and attends Washington University School of Medicine. She graduated in May from the University of Connecticut with a degree in physiology and neurobiology in the honors program. She earned a full scholarship to UConn for her exemplary academic career and leadership potential. She volunteered in Hartford at the Hospital for Special Care as a recreational aide. She was also a member of the UConn Marching Band.

Fourth Place (tie)

Morality of God doesn't hold up to scrutiny

FFRF awarded Hampton \$750 for his essay.

By Hampton Gibson

I trust that it wouldn't come as news to any FFRF member if I were to remark that religion is without merit and almost certainly false: Jesus casting out devils into a herd of pigs and Muhammed ascending to paradise on a winged horse are both absurd. One finds Carl Sagan's dictum “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence” useful in dismissing religion altogether.

Likewise, I assume it'd be trivial for me to observe that religion's encroachment into the public sphere (e.g., giving creationism a platform alongside evolution in public schools) must be thwarted. Such things, to us, are a given, but the prejudices atheists face are seldom discussed.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky put forth the following idea in his novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*: “If God does not exist, everything is permitted.” Dostoyevsky's idea that without God there can be no morality still pervades public opinion, fueling the stereotype that atheists are immoral.

The most obvious — and perhaps most



Hampton Gibson

effective — way to combat this public sentiment is by continuing to oppose religion as an irrational and untenable enterprise. There's a symbiotic relationship between religious belief and prejudice toward atheists. Hence, if we see a decline in religion, we will also see a decline in hateful attitudes toward atheists.

The greatest challenge I've faced as an atheist has been having my honest expression and free inquiry stifled, particularly when I was younger. I dared not voice any questions or doubts about religion — not to my parents, not to my teachers,

not to my peers — for fear of generating outrage and being reproached. This has lessened with age, but I still occasionally find myself in situations where I'm effectively forced to swallow my objections for the sake of tact and propriety. Feeling so ideologically isolated that it's as though you're virtually sequestered from human sympathy isn't congenial to a healthy psychological development or forging meaningful relationships, especially in one's youth.

The idea that God is the necessary bedrock on which to ground morality is one that many people are sympathetic to, but it's one that ultimately doesn't survive the rigors of historical or philosophical scrutiny. Christopher Hitchens actually flipped Dostoyevsky's classic adage, pointing out it's not the case that without God everything is permitted. To the contrary, Hitchens said, only with God can the most vile and wicked things be permitted — and done with conviction.

Far from encouraging its devotees to conduct themselves morally, religion instead offers its adherents the ultimate conviction that they are commanded by God. Indeed, to read the history of any religious tradition (or even scripture itself) is to be

confronted with a litany of divine decrees mandating slaughter, war, genocide, subjugation and slavery, torture, raping and pillaging, misogyny, tribalism, intolerance, persecution of dissidents, greed, corruption and hypocrisy — to name a few.

To read the history of religion, in other words, is to read a history of God commanding inhumanity toward others. Only when one is enlightened to this hateful history of butchery and bloodlust can one see Dostoyevsky's claim as morally and intellectually vacuous.

Historical criticism aside, the notion that morality collapses into nihilism without God is just bad philosophy. And even most religious people are compelled to realize this when asked the following question: How would you behave differently if you found out there is no God? Chances are, their morals wouldn't suddenly collapse into nihilism or depravity. They would still be, as it were, “good without God.”

Hampton, 21, is from Norman, Okla., and attends the University of Oklahoma, where he is majoring in philosophy and Judaic studies. He plans to pursue a Ph.D. in philosophy, but also is interested in religious studies, particularly historical and textual criticism of the bible.

Fourth Place (tie)

Empathy, not God, is basis for morality

FFRF awarded Gabrielle \$750 for her essay.

By Gabrielle Goldworm

It is not an exaggeration to say that my father and I were likely the only “true” atheists in my town. I grew up in a red state — one of the reddest, in fact. Idaho was one of only four states that would have still gone red had Millennials voted en masse, and like most deeply red states, life there comes with a healthy dose of guns, gumption and God.

There were two big groups in my tiny town of Sandpoint: the Mormons and the Mennonites, though the Jehovah’s Witnesses could give them a run for their money.

Then there was the odd Lutheran, Baptist, Catholic, or pseudo-spiritual hippy dippy church that housed all the non-committal folks scattered across the landscape. In Sandpoint, even if you weren’t religious, you were spiritual.

My parents moved to this picturesque town from the East Coast, bringing with them a cynicism that made them stick out like sore thumbs and that made me come off as just a bit odd to my spiritual, western classmates. I was born there; I grew up in the pretty incubator that was



Gabrielle Goldworm

Sandpoint, Idaho, but growing up different admittedly made it hard.

Growing up atheist made it even harder.

I can remember in shining detail what it felt like at age 6 to tell my classmates that I didn’t believe in God, and have them look horrified or confused. I can remember what it was like to have missionaries show up on my doorstep every other weekend and ask me if I was sure I didn’t want to just change my whole perception of reality.

I remember sitting in class in third grade, refusing to apologize to a girl who claimed that a joke I had made had been attacking “her God,” and having my parents called because of it. I can remember my first boyfriend, a Mormon, dating me because I was a form of rebellion, and knowing that his parents hated me, even though they would never say it.

Kids hate feeling left out, and nothing makes for a less attractive friend than someone who doesn’t even perceive the universe in the same manner as you.

One would think that all this would have worn me down. Actually, it was quite the opposite. I firmly believe that growing up in that environment reinforced my conviction that you don’t need God to have morals, and you certainly don’t need to be a nonbeliever to lack them.

The Mennonite men in my town walked around in modern clothing, smoking, drinking and swearing all they liked, while their wives and daughters trailed behind them, dressing and speaking like something out of “Little House on the Prairie.” Many of the Mormons in my high school were hardcore potheads, who smoked and snuck out to eat coffee ice cream at the beach as their own form of teenage rebellion. Many of the Mormon

men in my town had converted in order to marry hot women who wouldn’t sleep with them otherwise.

Many of the most staunch believers were former abusers, drug addicts or basic misanthropes who found themselves at rock bottom and climbed onto the pedestal of organized religion so that they could look down on the nonbelievers, those still “fumbling in darkness,” and shake their heads.

I never did drugs in high school. I never stole, never bullied and never treated someone differently because of what they believed. I cannot say the same for most of my God-fearing peers. My morals come from empathy and a deep desire to see the human race succeed and better itself, influenced by my family and close friends.

I do not “hate” the concept of God; I consider myself ambivalent. But I didn’t need God to be a good kid, and I don’t need him to be a good adult.

Gabrielle, 19, is from Sandpoint, Idaho, and attends Seton Hall University, majoring in international relations. She enjoys writing and reading fiction and nonfiction, especially regarding atheism. After graduation, she hopes to work in the field of national security and travel around the world. She is a member of the Secular Student Alliance.

Fifth Place

Caring, compassion are the moral standards

FFRF awarded Violet \$500 for her essay.

By Violet Richardson

I grew up in a household that could accurately be described as “godless.” I was not educated by religious scholarship or kept in line with reminders of divine consequences. I was not set on a path of righteousness paved with bible stories nor was my sense of justice instilled on the basis of any god’s will. As such, I do not believe that the moral code that I follow can be credited to God.

Instead, my understanding of right and wrong has been formed via the choice to practice empathy and compassion in my everyday life. When considering my own behavior, I imagine how it will affect the people around me rather than how it will be judged by God. I imagine the feelings of others based on how I would feel in their shoes. I do not need a cosmic middleman to tell me that I possess no right to make other people suffer.

Despite what I consider to be an inherent human trait, many people of faith



Violet Richardson

do not believe that those outside of their religion, or any other religious following, have the ability to lead just and moral lives. Godlessness is associated with violence and chaos, which leads atheists and agnostics to be stereotyped as dangerous undesirables. Given humanity’s long history of war and aggression committed by

those among the ranks of believers, and frequently in the name of God, this assessment appears patently unfair.

Conflating piousness with morality is far more dangerous than the choice to live a life without religion. To do so allows for the justification of wrongdoing by those who claim to act in line with the word of their god. To do so opens the door for pre-emptive persecution of anyone deemed a nonbeliever, whether that is how they identify themselves or not.

Personally, I do not consider myself a believer. I do not discount the possibility that a higher power may exist, but if so, that truth has failed to reveal itself to me. Though I sometimes long for the comfort of believing that everything happens for a reason, that I am watched over by a kind, all-knowing being, and that I am destined for an eternity of happiness in the afterlife, I have yet to be convinced.

Regardless of whether we possess immortal souls, each of us is given the opportunity to make the best of our finite time as the people that we are. Instead of viewing this reality through a

negative and nihilistic lens, I and many others take this to mean that we are all responsible for making our time and the time of those we live with as positive as possible. In recognizing that our own life is finite, we can recognize that the same is true for every other living creature and that they all deserve to experience the same happiness and security that we want in our own lives.

If we are to live but once, we should do so in a loving and generous way. Choosing a life of positivity, of caring for your community as you care for yourself, is the best way to not only dispel the negative stereotypes surrounding “godlessness,” but it is also the best way to set an example for anyone who wants to live their lives in a moral way. My morals do not come from God, they come from understanding this fact.

Violet, 22, is from Madison, Wis., and attends the University of Wisconsin, majoring in international studies and political science. She is currently spending a semester abroad in France. She hopes to attend law school to become a lawyer to help people who are vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Sixth Place

Morality exists within ourselves, not religion

FFRF awarded Kaylee \$400 for this essay.

By Kaylee Payne

One would think it would be easy enough to discount the notion that a person who is religious is inherently more moral than anyone else. After all, there are many cases, both historically and in the modern day, of religious individuals who are dishonest or cruel.

Yet bringing up this point generally earns a rebuttal along the lines of “They’re not actually representative of the religion if they do those things,” helping to keep the “No True Scotsman”

fallacy alive and well and endlessly frustrating nonbelievers. What, then, is a person to do when faced with the myth that morality solely belongs to, and is a direct result of, religion?

Part of the difficulty of dispelling this idea is how firmly ingrained it is in the public consciousness.

Revealing that I am an atheist has been at times met with revulsion. Other times, well-meaning but tactless individuals can’t help but express shock that someone “as nice as I am” fails to harbor belief in any sort of deity. It doesn’t seem to occur to such people that perhaps my lack of faith has nothing to do with my

personal moral compass, but is simply my acknowledgment that there is little to no evidence of the existence of mystical deities. The skeptical side of me refuses to believe anything without sufficient proof.

Nor do I believe that thousand-year-old texts written in the context of different times are a reliable source for my morals. Never mind that behaving in a moral manner only because of commands in an ancient book is a rather dubious attitude. Rather, I don’t feel I need any excuse to treat my fellow human



Kaylee Payne

Essays continued on next page

beings well beyond the fact that I am one of them, and am capable of feeling an emotion that presumably has been present since the days of our earliest ancestors: empathy.

Every person who has ever lived has been hurt. They have experienced misery and suffering and the unfairness of the world. I am no exception. Some in such a position become bitter and hard, and close their hearts off to all.

“ We are all the heroes of our own stories, but also the supporting characters of someone else’s. ”
—Kaylee Payne

Some, though, use their pain as inspiration to become better people, to work to create a world where no one else has to suffer as they did. I hope to fall in the latter category.

We are all the heroes of our own stories, but also the supporting characters of someone else’s, and when the people I have known reflect back on the sagas that are their lives, I wish that they will find no reason to see me as their sto-

ry’s villain, who worked at every turn to harm them. No deity told me to be concerned with the welfare of others; I do so completely of my own free will.

However, as time has passed, I’ve found that fewer and fewer people who know me express dismay at my lack of faith upon learning of it, despite living in a rural area where my beliefs are at odds with most people’s. Perhaps it is just a matter of learning to look past such trivial differences as religious beliefs in order to see what really matters: how we treat others.

I’ve seen both theists and atheists alike

concerned with nothing but deriding all members of the other party as stupid and immoral, and such behavior benefits no one. Whether morals are from within or are claimed to be derived from a god, the important thing is that they are based on goodwill, something the world could always use a little more of.

Kaylee, 19, is from Fort Blackmore, Va., and attends University of Virginia’s College at Wise. She is working toward earning certification in teaching English as a second language (ESL). She plans to spend her junior year in Chile and then work in the Peace Corps after graduation.

FFRF College Student Essays honorable mentions



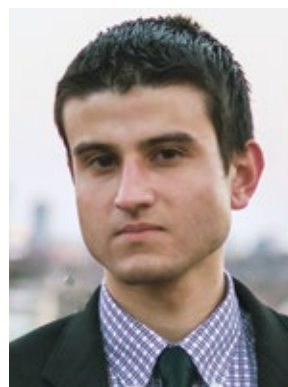
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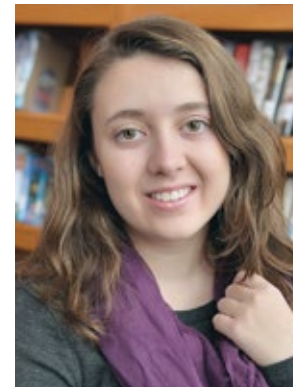
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Catherine Evans



Nicholas Giurleo



Jordan Green



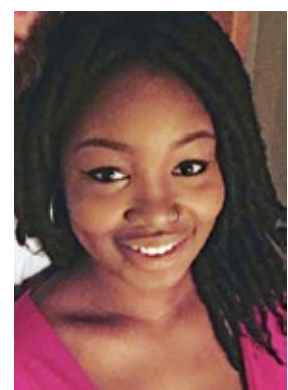
Anne Mickey



Chenoa Off



Makenzie Schneider



Omolola Smith



Katelynn Thompson

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

Reason can solve moral problems

By Christopher Bednarcik

Asserting that one’s morals should come from God requires a person to first believe that God exists, and if so, believe that God actually cares whether we’re moral or not.

Most followers of religion, especially in the United States, believe that God does exist and that he communicates his rules for appropriate living through the bible. However, upon personal examination, I’ve determined that the bible is not an acceptable moral compass.

I think the best source of morality is human reasoning, structured around skepticism and a scientific approach to solving complex ethical issues.

We should focus on outcomes of our behavior — the consequences. Rather than seek solutions through a revealed religion, we should ask ourselves whether our actions are just and fair. Who, if anyone, will be harmed by my actions?

When I encounter a tough decision, I take a cost-benefit approach. I ask myself if my actions would violate any of my personal virtues, and if not, I apply a variety of other frameworks, such as utilitarianism or individual rights. By taking a broad

approach, I try not to harm others.

I’m an atheist because following a revealed religion based on the existence of a deity that I cannot prove exists doesn’t make sense to me. I’m an atheist because religious texts don’t hold up to reasoning and science. Mathematics describes the world the way it is. We don’t need the god of an ancient text to guide us.

Christopher, 19, is from Lockport, Ill., and attends North Central College. He is majoring in mathematics and plans to be a high school math teacher. He is an Illinois State Scholar and a member of the National Society of Leadership and Success.

The truth about morals set me free

By Michael Brown

I was told that all were equal in God’s eyes, but I was despised for my mixed heritage. I was told that God’s plan shouldn’t be altered with medicine or vaccinations, yet when the pastor needed a triple bypass, it was found to be within both God’s will and the church’s pocketbook.

By the time I was removed from my home, placed in the foster care system and ultimately emancipated, I had realized that morals are inherently human creations. I stripped away my religious upbringing and sought to form my own code of conduct, without the threat of eternal damnation.

When we attach morals to godliness, the interests of a single perspective take

on a divine, generational immortality and proliferate absolutist ways of thinking as a dominant social force. This allows antiquated ideas to stunt social development for centuries, leading to oppression of minority populations.

It became clear to me that religious codes are genuinely inadequate to direct society because their perversion of morality convolutes the “moral” course of action, and fundamentally deals in absolutes that do not allow for diversity of thought.

I discovered agency, embraced empathy, and leveraged my experiences with racism, homelessness, and trauma to create a moral code that put humanism and compassion above any ethereal, imagined restrictions on who deserves to be treated as a human being.

Michael, 21, is from Hanover, N.H., and attends Dartmouth College. He had a tumultuous time growing up in the foster care system, but overcame those struggles and is now seeking a degree in biology. Eventually, Michael would like to earn a degree in osteopathic medicine.

Choose the Right

By Catherine Evans

Choose the Right. CTR.

Those three letters held a significance to me growing up, whether I was singing about them in Mormon children’s songs or wearing them around my finger on a child-sized green ring. A daily reminder that God was always watching, blessing

me when I was obedient and taking notice when I chose the wrong.

Choose the Right was confirmation that my lifestyle was dictated by the words of God, while everyone else was choosing the wrong. My decisions had already been made for me, and I just needed to follow the plan.

Over time, though, CTR started to lose some of its weight. I started to question what it was that made an action “right” and what made my non-Mormon friends’ actions “wrong.” I started to realize that my friends based their decision-making on similar grounds, yet they ultimately came to different conclusions.

For example, I was taught that homosexuality was wrong, and it was not until I met people who identified as queer that I began to recognize the moral ambiguity of this belief. My “Choose the Right” moral compass is always present, but it evolves when I meet people who cause me to question my ideas of right and wrong.

Morals come from within, shaped by experiences and interactions. They evolve through feelings of empathy and guilt, imbued by the society of which we are a part. They guide decision-making, though our ideas of right and wrong vary dramatically.

Though its meaning has changed, and will never stop changing, the phrase “Choose the Right” still reflects how I strive to live my life.

Catherine, 20, is from Herndon, Va., and attends James Madison University. She is involved with the university’s College Democrats organization. She is majoring in rhetoric and technical communications and will graduate a year early from the Honors College at JMU.

Essays continued on next page

Essays

Continued from previous page

Helping as a matter of course

By Nicholas Giurleo

One day, two female missionaries had approached me, trying to hand me a pamphlet. I noticed one of the women, as the other was talking, had very noticeably and suddenly become pale. She took a step back and seemed extremely disoriented. As I asked her if she was OK, she collapsed onto her knees.

Her companion immediately panicked and backed away in fright. I knelt down and lifted the woman's head up. She didn't lose consciousness, but she seemed very weak. I reached into my bag and offered her water and a granola bar. I stayed with her until two police officers arrived.

"Thank you. It is so comforting to know that there are good Christians like you in the world who go out of their way to help their brothers and sisters in need," she said.

I smiled and said, "You're welcome, ma'am, but I have to say, I'm no Christian. I'm just a guy with a conscience. Hard to believe an atheist could do something good for a stranger?" Before she could respond, I turned and disappeared back into the flow of Boston's pedestrian traffic.

Regardless of who you are — the staunchest nonbeliever or the pope himself — it was morally right to help. I do what I perceive is morally right because I place value in acting unselfishly and helping those in immediate need.

Nicholas, 20, is from Medford, Mass., and attends Tufts University. He is studying international relations and hopes to attend law school to study international law. He is a member of the Model United Nations team, and actively involved in the History Society and Alliance Linking Leaders in Education and the Services. Nicholas has interned at the United Nations Association of Greater Boston and the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the U.S. Senate.

Plasticity helps tune our morality

By Jordan Green

In the study of neuroscience, there is a concept called "plasticity." Plasticity refers to the brain's ability to change and rewire itself — even through adulthood — through new experiences and learned skills.

I think experience can influence not just a few of the trillions of synaptic connections in the human brain, but whole people. From my own life, I can say that my morals do not come from a god, but are shaped from a conglomerate of experiences including the family in which I was brought up, places I've been, books I've read, and more.

Religious belief is not needed for mo-

ality, and the world around us proves it: Countless nonbelievers exhibit good morality through their everyday treatment of others and charitable work. Additionally, most modern theists will reject at least a few tenets of their respective religious texts (like slavery, marriage laws, cruel punishments), indicating that they have some set of morals independent of the religion that compels them to do so, even if they don't explicitly recognize it.

For all my neuroscience books and deliberative discussions and philosophy classes, I have yet to find some evidence compelling enough to merit religious belief.

I think the best thing nonbelievers can do to combat negative stereotypes about their morality is to do good, and be seen doing it. Providing positive examples of secular morality might compel others to look at nonbelievers and form new opinions — and new (synaptic) connections.

Jordan, 20, is from Reynoldsburg, Ohio, and attends the University of Arizona. She is studying for two degrees: neuroscience & cognitive science, and creative writing. She has traveled to several countries and is planning to study abroad at some point during college. She hopes to earn a graduate degree in neuroscience and have a career as a scientific researcher.

'Good Book' clearly a misnomer

By Melissa Juarez

I was an active Jehovah's Witness, better known as the person who knocks on your door at 9 a.m. on a Saturday to preach to you. My life was highly regulated by the cult-like organization, so naturally I believed everything I was taught until I actually started reading "The Good Book."

In my reading of the bible, I discovered, to my dismay, that Jehovah was the bad guy. This discovery triggered an onslaught of research on my part, which led me to discover scientific and logical impossibilities, other immoralities, and a multitude of contradictions all found in what I thought was God's perfect word.

By age 15, I realized that I was an atheist.

However, for most of my life, I was taught that religion possessed a monopoly on morality and that you couldn't be an upstanding person without God. Consequently, when I realized I was an atheist, my new mission was to find out why we are viewed as such immoral people and to truly accept that my own morals do not come from God, but from someone who is very real — me.

Although it was lack of evidence that made me select the terribly stigmatized word "atheist," I will never forget what made me start questioning: My morality clashed with the very book I was supposed to be getting my morals from. Trying to reconcile my morality with the teachings in the bible felt like trying to mix oil and water. It just couldn't be done. So, I removed the oil and now flow freely as water, thanks to freethought.

Melissa, 21, is from Madera, Calif., and

attends the University of California-Fresno. She was raised as a Jehovah's Witness until she became an atheist at 15. She is seeking to become a registered nurse and then hopes to become a nurse practitioner for women's health or pediatrics.

One nation, under Voldemort

By Anne Mickey

One day during my junior year of high school, it occurred to me that standing for the daily Pledge of Allegiance went against my beliefs as an atheist because I had to pledge to the nation "under God." The next day, I continued sitting while the pledge was recited and was immediately reprimanded by my teacher.

My teacher took offense at my (non) action, believing I was being disrespectful toward U.S. troops, which was absolutely not my intention. I took the issue to the school administration, which threatened me with discipline if I continued to sit during the pledge.

When I was making my case, I asked them how they would feel if the pledge instead said "one nation, under Voldemort," referring to the villain from the Harry Potter series. My point was that they would likely feel uncomfortable standing up, putting their hands over their hearts, and pledging their allegiance to the Dark Lord Voldemort — a fictional character who's downright evil — day after day, and that this was how I felt.

In the end, I reached a compromise with my school that if I stood for the pledge for the rest of my junior year, I would be placed with a fourth-period teacher during my senior year who would allow me to sit without punishment.

So much immorality (and even amorality) has been rooted in religion that I find it ridiculous to believe that morals originate in any sort of belief in a higher power. The fact that I'm a good, kind and fair person is not in spite of my atheism; rather, it is at least partially because of my atheism.

Anne, 20, is from Scottsdale, Ariz., and attends Arizona State University. She is passionate about civil rights and many consider her a "social justice warrior." She hopes to serve in the AmeriCorps Public Allies program after graduation before having a career as an advocate for marginalized people and communities.

I don't need a god to help someone

By Chenoa Off

When I was a child, my mother had a painting on her wall of her savior; he had light hair and a crown of thorns that caused blood to drip down his face. Next

to him, she had a photo of the Buddha, and on her bedside table was a little statue of the Hindu elephant god Ganesh.

In my room, I had my saviors: Charles Xavier of the X-Men, Doctor Who, Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Starship Enterprise. With them stood their people — some women, some men, some blue, each one unique. These were my heroes, the ones showing me how to fight discrimination, to value education, to understand friendship, to cherish life and listen to my own moral compass.

My mother is a very spiritual person, and when I told her I was a nonbeliever, her eyes grew sad. She seemed to think that because I am an atheist that I could not see the astonishing beauty of our existence. On the contrary, I marvel every day at the immensity of the universe, at the complexity of living organisms.

I've seen religion bring a community together through hard times. But

I have also seen religion throw my gay friend out on the streets. I have had religion tell me what decisions I cannot make for my own body. I have seen religion start fights over

the name of the man in the sky. Religion is the world's greatest oppressor.

My most beloved moral is truth. I don't need a god to know hurting others is immoral. I don't need a god to know what kindness and charity is. I don't need a god to help someone.

Chenoa, 19, is from Crestone, Colo., and attends Russell Sage College. She enjoys traveling, singing jazz, skiing and river rafting. She plans to be an occupational therapist and working with special education school children.

Falling into the dogma trap

By Mackenzie Schneider

Contrary to popular belief, I am not an atheist because I'm angry with God. I don't believe in God; how can I be angry with an entity that I don't believe exists?

Also, nothing traumatic happened to me that caused me to lose faith in God. And my atheism wasn't motivated by my sexuality nor did anyone's death cause me to question God.

I considered the fact that since Christians are able to so easily dismiss every other religion in the world, I ought to be able to dismiss Christianity just as easily. So I did.

At 16, I dismissed the "necessity" of religion, and decided I would live my life how I see fit and follow the morality that I decide upon. In the years since then, I have developed a working definition of morality.

Morality for me means doing my best not to harm others and providing empathy and understanding.

The issue with religion is that it relies on dogma to maintain strength. This dogma allows hatred for people who are different to fester. It's why the Westboro Baptist Church believes that its members' behavior is moral.

However, atheists are not exempt

from falling into dogma, either. I have met atheists who are so firm in their beliefs that they actively try to make theists feel like idiots.

Perhaps the first step in reversing negative stereotypes about nonbelievers is combatting our own dogma. Recognizing the value that someone's beliefs may have for them and being willing to admit that you may be wrong can help facilitate a more peaceful and tolerant environment for all.

Mackenzie, 21, is from San Antonio and attends Smith College. She is an English and philosophy double major. She has served two years on the Smith College Social Justice and Equity Committee. She enjoys painting and drawing.

Morality without hypocrisy

By Omolola Smith

The idea of a person without a god or some gods was entirely incomprehensible to me growing up in Lagos, Nigeria. Such persons were vilified by others in my society.

In 2014, Mubarak Bala was forcibly

drugged and committed into a psychiatric institution in Kano, Nigeria, for expressing his lack of belief in a deity. This launched a wave of inquiry within me that no religious book or organization could answer adequately.

Later that year, I boarded my flight headed for the Home of the Free, where I would be introduced to a human right I did not know I was denied: freedom of thought.

Still, every Sunday, I found myself suspending reason for the sake of the church and its teachings, which remained an important part of my routine and identity. With each passing around of the flesh and blood of God, I knew I was being untrue to myself.

Then I said it out loud for the first time in a phone call to Kudzie, my childhood friend. "I just don't believe this sh*t," I said.

He let out his familiar bubbly laugh and confessed his own recent loss of faith. We spent the next half hour nervously laughing at each other for all the things we once believed.

When I ended the phone call, the lightness of our conversation was soon followed by an existential crisis. I spent the next week mourning the faith I had possessed my whole life.

I realized I could either give up or re-

learn how to exist. Within me was the hope of finding fulfillment without delusion. I looked internally for what remained after religion was taken out of the equation and found true morality without hypocrisy.

Omolola, 22, is from Lagos, Nigeria, and attends the University of

Vermont. She has lived in England, South Africa, Nigeria and the United States. Omolola plans to become a civil engineer and eventually would like to pursue a doctorate in physics.

“Within me was the hope of finding fulfillment without delusion.”

— Omolola Smith

Morality attainable to all

By Katelynn Thompson

Growing up in a small town, where God is great and Jesus is the reason, it was hard to admit to atheism.

For me, atheism was less a choice than a realization. Religion is a purely cultural construct, and wields only as much power as its society allows it.

After a while, I started to refrain from mentioning my beliefs at all, dreading

the expression that seems to curtain every face when the word "atheist" is mentioned. No decent, God-fearing soul wants to spend too long with a heartless nonbeliever.

To people like this, it seems that the only thing keeping humanity from depravity, crime and death itself is a centuries-old doctrine housed in a leather-bound book. They harbor the cynical belief that the only thing keeping humankind from doing wrong is a fear of retribution. Personally, I prefer being a decent person just for the sake of it, and I don't need the threat of eternal damnation to keep me out of trouble.

Perhaps it's unfair that the onus of proving morality falls to nonbelievers, but people have always disliked things that they don't understand. Therefore, it is important for atheists and nonbelievers to try to show by example that morality is not synonymous with piety.

Morality is not the watchful eye of a god weighing one's every decision on a scale of righteousness. Morality is independent from any one creed, and equally attainable to all.

Katelynn, 24, is from Hanover, Pa., and attends the University of Georgia. She is seeking her second bachelor's degree, this one in linguistics and comparative literature. Her first degree is in anthropology. She is a writer and aspiring novelist and hopes to have a career in language conservation.

THEY SAID WHAT?



Michele Bachmann

I believe that God is starting a new thing and because the time is short before Christ comes again to this Earth, he is giving everyone one more chance.

Michele Bachmann, former U.S. representative, now Skyline Church's "pastor to the U.N.," predicting the imminent return of Jesus.

Right Wing Watch, 8-16-17

I advise this atheist group not to cause uneasiness, particularly among Muslims who reject atheism.

Malaysian Inspector-General of Police Khalid Abu Bakar, who says the country's constitution recognizes Islam as the official religion without any provision for atheism.

Free Malaysia Today, 8-16-17

Someone who engages in LGBT behavior — I don't know what the science is on this, I think it's still out — but as far as we know, LGBT behavior is a choice they make. So we're being asked to provide constitutional protections for behavior, a choice in behavior as opposed to a primary characteristic.

Sam Clovis, conservative radio host, nominated by Trump to be the "chief scientist" for U.S. Department of Agriculture.

CNN, 8-21-17

If elected, I will do everything in my power to bring this evil to an end and take executive action to ensure that all Oklahomans are equally protected, including the preborn. I will disregard any unjust rulings or perversions of the U.S. Constitution that claim that there is a right to murder preborn human beings in the womb.

Dan Fisher, Oklahoma Republican gubernatorial candidate.

Rewire.com, 9-19-17

He's been raised up by God because God says that he raises up and places all people in places of authority. It is God that raises up a king, it is God that sets one down and so when you fight against the plan of God, you're fighting against the hand of God.

Televangelist Paula White, President Trump's key spiritual adviser, claiming that opposition to Trump is opposition to God.

Right Wing Watch, 8-21-17

Churches in Texas should be entitled to reimbursement from FEMA Relief Funds for helping victims of Hurricane Harvey (just like others).

President Trump in a tweet. CNN,

9-9-17

Ron Reagan ad returns to 'Rachel Maddow Show'

An ever-popular FFRF ad featuring a presidential son recently returned to premier television.

The commercial with Ron Reagan inviting viewers to join FFRF aired over several weeks on one of the nation's most prominent news commentary programs, the "Rachel Maddow Show" on MSNBC.

In the 30-second spot, Reagan, the progressive son of President Ronald and Nancy Reagan, says:

"Hi, I'm Ron Reagan, an unabashed atheist, and I'm alarmed by the intrusion of religion into our secular government. That's why I'm asking you to support the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the nation's largest and most effective association of atheists and agnostics, working to keep state and church separate, just like our Founding Fathers intended. Please support the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Ron Reagan, lifelong atheist, not afraid of burning in hell."

FFRF's ad has been refused by CBS,

NBC, ABC and Discovery Science. FFRF has previously been able to place it on some regional network markets, as well as on CNN and Comedy Central.

Reagan has received FFRF's Emperor Has No Clothes Award and addressed FFRF's national convention in Madison two years ago. He has publicly identified himself for years as an atheist.

The commercial has spawned a popular FFRF T-shirt, lapel pin and a soon to be announced "virtual billboard" for social media use.

FFRF advertising is made possible by kind contributions from members. Donations to FFRF are deductible for income-tax purposes.

JUST PRETEND
A freethought book for children

A fun book allowing children of all ages to explore myths like Santa Claus and compare them with ideas like the existence of God.
By Dan Barker

Buy it from FFRF online
shop.ffrf.org

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

What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

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

The Foundation's email address is info@ffrf.org. Please include your name and physical mailing address with all email correspondence.

Foundation members wishing to receive online news releases, "action alerts" and "Freethought of the Day" should contact info@ffrf.org.

What ‘government schools’ critics really mean

Roots of the phrase lie not in libertarianism economics but in Confederate rebellion

This op-ed first appeared in *The New York Times* on July 31 and is reprinted with permission.

By Katherine Stewart

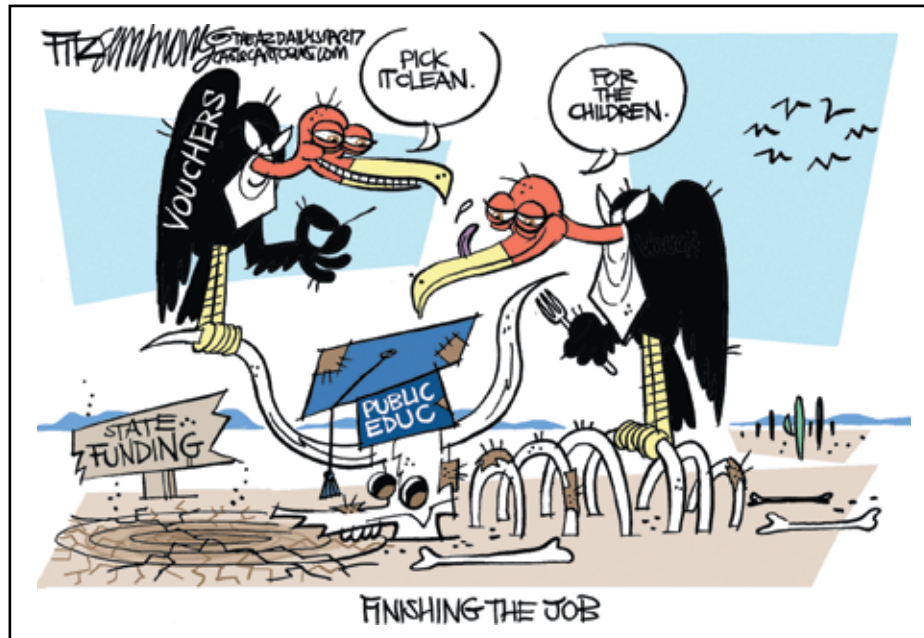
When President Trump proposed his budget for “school choice,” which would cut more than \$9 billion in overall education spending but put more resources into charter schools and voucher programs, he promised to take a sledgehammer to what he has called “failing government schools.”



Katherine Stewart

That is harsh language for the places most of us call public schools, and where nearly 90 percent of American children get their education. But in certain conservative circles, the phrase “government schools” has become as ubiquitous as it is contemptuous.

What most people probably hear in this is the unmistakable refrain of American libertarianism, for which all government is big and bad. The point of calling public schools “government schools” is to conjure the specter of pathologically inefficient, power-mad bureaucrats. Accordingly, right-wing think tanks like the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, the Heartland Institute and the Acton Institute have in recent years published screeds denouncing “the command and control mentality” of “government schools” that are “prisons for poor children.” All of these have received major funding from the family of the education secretary, Betsy DeVos, either directly or via a donor group.



Friedman’s legacy

The libertarian tradition is indebted, above all, to the Chicago economist Milton Friedman, who published a hugely influential 1955 paper, “The Role of Government in Education.” A true believer in the power of free markets to solve all of humanity’s problems, Friedman argued that “government schools” are intrinsically inefficient and unjustified. He proposed that taxpayers should give money to parents and allow them to choose where to spend education dollars in a marketplace of freely competing private providers. This is the intellectual foundation of DeVos’s voucher proposals.

But the attacks on “government schools” have a much older, darker heritage. They have their roots in American slavery, Jim Crow-era segregation, anti-Catholic sentiment and a particular form of Christian fundamentalism — and those roots are still visible today.

Before the Civil War, the South was largely free of public schools. That changed during Reconstruction, and when it did, a former Confederate Army chaplain and a leader of the Southern Presbyterian Church,

Robert Lewis Dabney, was not happy about it. An avid defender of the biblical “righteousness” of slavery, Dabney railed against the new public schools. In the 1870s, he inveighed against the unrighteousness of taxing his “oppressed” white brethren to provide “pretended education to the brats of black paupers.” For Dabney, the root of the evil

in “the Yankee theory of popular state education” was democratic government itself, which interfered with the liberty of the slaver South.

Secular culture

One of the first usages of the phrase “government schools” occurs in the work of an avid admirer of Dabney’s, the Presbyterian theologian A. A. Hodge. Less concerned with black paupers than with immigrant papist hordes, Hodge decided that the problem lay with public schools’ secular culture. In 1887, he published an influential essay painting “government schools” as “the most appalling engine for the propagation of anti-Christian and atheistic unbelief, and of antisocial nihilistic ethics, individual, social and political, which this sin-rent world has ever seen.”

But it would be a mistake to see this strand of critique of “government schools” as a curiosity of America’s sectarian religious history. In fact, it was present at the creation of the modern conservative movement, when opponents of the New Deal welded free-market economics onto bible-based hostility to the secular-democratic state. The key figure was an enterprising Congregationalist minister, James W. Fifiel Jr., who resolved during the Depression to show that Christianity itself proved “big government” was the enemy of progress.

Drawing heavily on donations from oil, chemical and automotive tycoons, Fifiel was a founder of a conservative free-market organization, Spiritual Mobilization, that brought together right-wing economists and conservative religious voices — created a template for conservative think tanks. Fifiel published the work of midcentury libertarian thinkers Ludwig von Mises and his disciple Murray Rothbard and set about convincing America’s Protestant clergy that America was a Christian nation in which government must be kept from interfering with the expression

of God’s will in market economics.

‘Theonomy’

Someone who found great inspiration in Fifiel’s work, and who contributed to his flagship publication, *Faith and Freedom*, was the Calvinist theologian Rousas J. Rushdoony. An admirer, too, of both Hodge and Dabney, Rushdoony began to advocate a return to “biblical” law in America, or “theonomy,” in which power would rest only on a spiritual aristocracy with a direct line to God — and a clear understanding of God’s libertarian economic vision.

Rushdoony took the attack on modern democratic government right to the schoolhouse door. His 1963 book, *The Messianic Character of American Education*, argued that the “government school” represented “primitivism” and “chaos.” Public education, he said, “basically trains women to be men” and “has leveled its guns at God and family.”

These were not merely abstract academic debates. The critique of “government schools” passed through a defining moment in the aftermath of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, when orders to desegregate schools in the South encountered heavy resistance from white Americans. Some districts shut down public schools altogether; others promoted private “segregation academies” for whites, often with religious programming, to be subsidized with tuition grants and voucher schemes. Dabney would surely have approved.

Many of Friedman’s successors in the libertarian tradition have forgotten or distanced themselves from the midcentury moment when they formed common cause with the Christian right. As for Friedman himself, the great theoretician of vouchers, he took pains to insist that he abhorred racism and opposed race-based segregation laws — though he also opposed federal laws that prohibited discrimination.

Rearmed Christian right

Among the supporters of the Trump administration, the rhetoric of “government schools” has less to do with economic libertarianism than with religious fundamentalism. It is about the empowerment of a rearmed Christian right by the election of a man whom the Rev. Jerry Falwell Jr. calls evangelicals’ “dream president.” We owe the new currency of the phrase to the likes of Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council — also bankrolled in its early years by the DeVos family — who, in response to the Supreme Court’s ruling allowing same-sex marriage, accused “government schools” of indoctrinating students “in immoral sexuality.” Or the president of the group Liberty Counsel, Anita Staver, who couldn’t even bring herself to call them “schools,” preferring instead to bemoan “government indoctrination camps” that “threaten our nation’s very survival.”

When these people talk about “government schools,” they want you to think of an alien force, and not an expression of democratic purpose. And when they say “freedom,” they mean freedom from democracy itself.

Katherine Stewart is the author of *The Good News Club: The Christian Right’s Stealth Assault on America’s Children*.

Church promotes atheism?



A Reddit user posted this photo on the social media platform recently, showing why spacing between words is important.

This is what happens in a voucher school

A former student tells of her six dismal years in an unaccredited religious school

By Marianne Arini

Education vouchers allow parents to choose what type of school their child goes to.

Often, parents choose to send their child to a religious school, and this diverts public dollars from accredited public schools into unaccredited religious schools. My parents chose to send me to a fundamentalist Christian school from grades 7 through 12 to “protect” me from the dangers of public school.

Here’s the bizarre, behind-the-scenes account of what transpired in that school and likely what occurs in many other religious schools across the country.



Marianne Arini

I attended a one-room school in the basement of our church in Brooklyn, N.Y. Our desks were lined up

in one large room. The children aged 5 through 11 were kept on one side and adolescents aged 12 through 18 were on the opposite end.

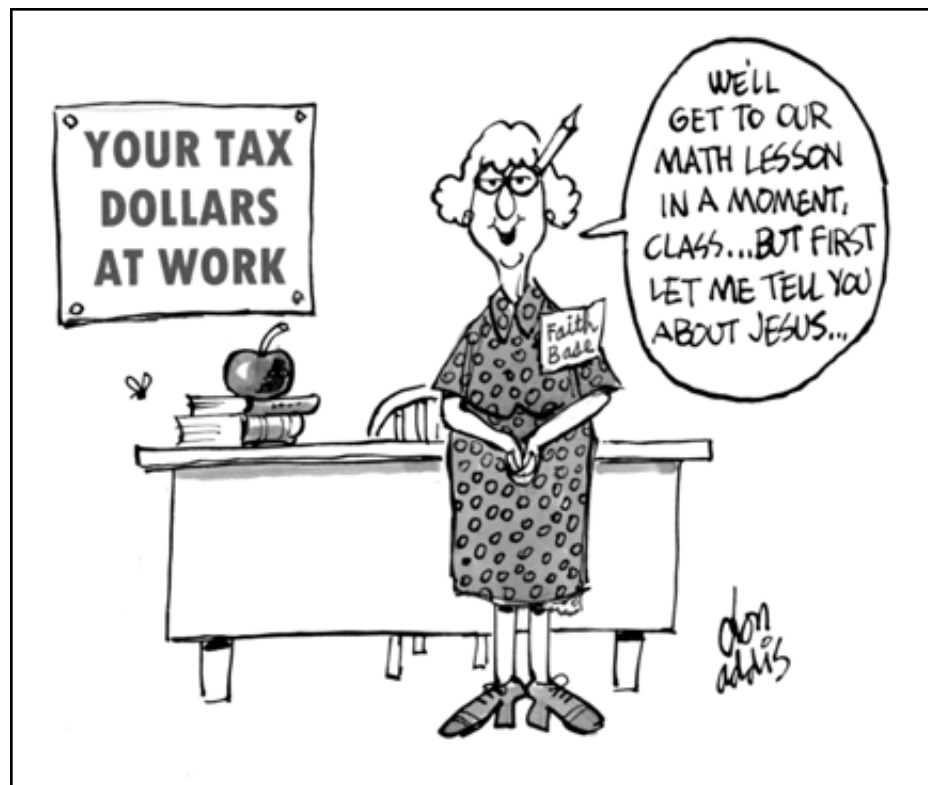
Oppressive basement

Once one descended the steps into the basement, he or she was usually struck by the sheer oppressiveness of the space. There were only four windows, and they were eye level with the pavement outside, the only view being people’s feet as they walked by. The fourth window was eye level with the dirt of the church graveyard.

The beige walls, linoleum floors and dropped ceilings all had a plain, worn-out look to them that wasn’t enhanced by the florescent lighting. Nothing adorned the walls. Student work was never displayed, and there were no pictures or artwork of any kind exhibited.

The maximum enrollment for this school was 50 students. Most of the time, the number ranged anywhere between 35 and 45 students. We were each jailed off in our dull, brown cubicles that were partitioned on both sides, and were strictly forbidden to speak to each other.

We didn’t have teachers, lessons, blackboards or dialogues about what we were learning. Instead of lessons taught by professionals trained in their subject areas, we were given five “paces,” one for each subject. These paces were thin, poorly designed



workbooks, created by the Southern Baptist fundamentalist fountainhead, Bob Jones University, a place famous for its sexism, racism and homophobia.

Our subjects were math, language arts, history, science and either New or Old Testament survey. Math was the only subject that bore any resemblance to the standard curriculum of public schools. In the history paces, I learned a version of American history in which the forefathers were portrayed as having exactly the same religious beliefs as present-day Christian fundamentalists, and in which the Holocaust never happened. We learned Spanish from videotapes, and the school secretary taught us typing on some old typewriters. We were taken to the public park twice per month to play volleyball as our “gym class.”

Self-expression banned

That was it. There wasn’t any art, creative writing, music, drama, clubs or dance. All creative self-expression was strictly forbidden. We were taught that the self, our selves, could not be trusted. We were inherently sinful from birth. Newborn babies were sinful. Since we could not trust ourselves, we should only trust God, or rather, the fundamentalist Christian idea of God. Anything that was not directly connected to their patriarchal God or their interpretation of the bible was deemed unworthy of any time, and so, the lessons in each pace, no matter what the subject, were always skewed to contain bits and pieces of religious propaganda.

We did not discuss what we learned in these paces; we were just supposed to accept it all as fact. We were handed a goal chart every Monday, which had the days of the week marked out on it. Every student was required to write down a goal of completing three to five pages in each subject per day. If we had a question about the work we were

doing in our paces, we put up a tiny American flag into the hole on the top of our desk to signal that we needed to ask a question.

When the principal had a moment, he would come by, take down the flag, and try to answer the question. Most of the day was spent waiting for our flags to be answered. The principal was the only “teacher” we had, only he didn’t have a teaching degree. He was a pharmacist by trade.

Once we reached a self-test in a pace, we completed it, and then were required to get up, go to the scoring table, look up the answers in the score key, and score the test. Before we could get up, we had to insert a tiny Christian flag into the hole on top of our desks. If you haven’t seen a Christian flag, it’s white with a blue box in the left-hand corner and a red cross inside the blue box, signifying the blood that, according to the New Testament, was drained from Jesus’ body when he was crucified on the cross. The Christian flag alerted the principal that we needed his permission to get up. He would eventually come over, take our flags down, and grant us permission. If we had to use the bathroom, we had to use the Christian flag again to obtain permission.

Upon the completion of each pace, we had to take a test at the testing table, a long brown folding table. If we passed the test, we received a star to put on our personal, plastic-covered star chart, which hung inside each of our cubicles. Other than these three instances, we were not allowed to stand up and walk around. We were not allowed to leave the building at any point. We had two 15-minute breaks and a lunch break, during which we’d gather around to talk, starved for communication. At 2:30, the day was declared over — after the principal prayed.

Every day the same

Every day in Metropolitan Baptist Academy was exactly like the last. In describing one day to you, I’m really portraying seven years’ worth of days that were all exactly the same. Each morning, we would go up to the sanctuary for “chapel.” We would first pledge to the American flag and then turn to face the Christian flag. We would then recite:

I pledge allegiance to the Christian Flag,

And to the Savior, for whose Kingdom it stands,

One Savior, crucified, risen and coming again,

With life and liberty for all who believe.

Next, we would have to pick up the bible in front of us, lay our hand on it and say,

“I pledge allegiance to the bible, God’s holy word. I will make it a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. I will hide its word in my heart that I might not sin against God.”

After that, we’d sing “Onward Christian Soldiers,” complete with all the “us vs. them” military motifs. “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before!” Or, some days, it was, “The Lord’s Army,” with the lyrics, “I may never march in the infantry, ride with the cavalry, shoot the artillery. I may never zoom on the enemy, but I’m in the Lord’s Army.”

When we sang the words: “march in the infantry,” we would have to march in place; ride in the Cavalry, we had to pretend we were riding a horse and bounce up and down; and “shoot the artillery,” we had to pretend we were shooting off a machine gun.

After our half-hearted singing, we’d sit through a 45-minute sermon in which we were castigated for being sinful, evil creatures, all of who owed everything to God who sent his son to be murdered for us.

The church could get away with all this because the school was unaccredited. When I asked why the school didn’t seek accreditation, I was told that if the school complied with an accrediting institution, it would have to change its curriculum to include evolution as a valid theory and would permit people who are not Christians and possibly homosexuals to work in the school.

Even as a 17-year-old, that sounded ridiculous to me.

When I was 17, 10 of the 13 girls in the school became pregnant, since there was no sex education and abortion was not an option because we had had it drilled into our heads that it was murder. Once those children were born, these girls went on government assistance and lived at or below the poverty line.

The vast majority of the students who attended this school remain Christian to this day. For me, witnessing the brainwashing, fear and control tactics, and the many lives ruined was enough to convince me of the great threat religious schools are to our youth, and the sanity of our country.

It’s imperative that we work hard to keep the separation between church and state, and keep public money out of these religious schools.

FFRF Member Marianne Arini of Arizona teaches writing and critical thinking to college students; her writing can be found at mariannearini.com/blog.

What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

Founded in 1978 as a national organization of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics), the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc. with 29,000 members, works to keep state and church separate and to educate the public about the views of nontheists.

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

FFRF.ORG FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll



By Orvin Larsen

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

Buy it from FFRF online shop.ffrf.org

LETTERBOX

Inspiration on the way home from the market

I love all the good work you do. It's so sad that so many people are delusional.

Here's a bit of doggerel I wrote on the way home from the market:

Here's a truth I'd like to share:

There's no such thing as answered prayer

If you get what you prayed for,
You're full of praise.

If you don't,

"He works in mysterious ways."

Allan Provost
Florida

Definition of 'Christian' pretty well sums it up

One-sentence definition of a Christian: A Christian is one who believes in a male god who had himself born on Earth in human form in order to have himself killed to induce himself to forgive humans for committing the sins he knew they would commit, having decreed that otherwise they would spend eternity being tortured in a hell he had created for the purpose, even though he loves them all; still, in spite of his self-sacrifice, most of them will spend eternity being tortured in that hell anyway, especially those who don't believe in a male god who . . . (and so on, over and over), and yet has the gall to talk about common sense.

Barbara G. Walker
Florida

Old Testament was taken directly from Sumerians

I wish people would read more than the Jewish history book known as the Old Testament. They would discover how much the Israelites plagiarized from the older cultures.

History began when the Sumerians invented writing. Anything before that is prehistory and can only be deduced by archaeologists.

The Sumerian story of Gilgamesh is known as the world's first literature. In it, the story of the flood first appears. The flood story was then "borrowed" by many subsequent cultures, each changing the survivors' names to fit their language.

It may come as a surprise to know how little the Israelites changed the story to "make it their own."

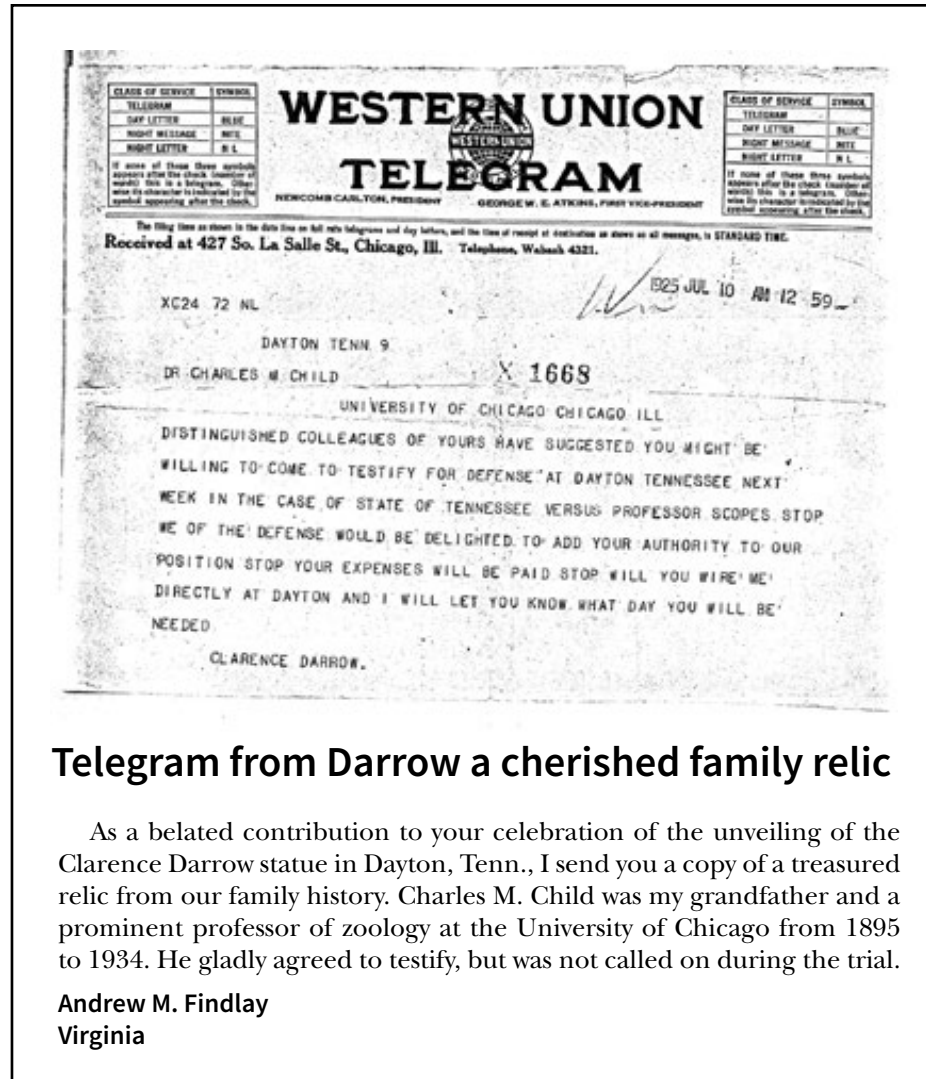
We still use Sumerian inventions today, without giving a thought to who started them: writing, schools, libraries, mathematics, astronomy, law, judges, irrigation, to name a few.

Phyllis Bullmer
North Carolina

To the essay winners: Stay strong and wise

Congratulations to all the 2017 student essay winners!

I am a 51-year-old disabled black man. I was introduced to Christianity in the form of Sunday school, but my parents never forced religion on us. They made us feel responsible for our direction in life. My overall belief since childhood is that everything the bible claims to teach is already in our hearts.



Telegram from Darrow a cherished family relic

As a belated contribution to your celebration of the unveiling of the Clarence Darrow statue in Dayton, Tenn., I send you a copy of a treasured relic from our family history. Charles M. Child was my grandfather and a prominent professor of zoology at the University of Chicago from 1895 to 1934. He gladly agreed to testify, but was not called on during the trial.

Andrew M. Findlay
Virginia

The first thing that struck me when I saw the high school essay winners is that most of them are women. But I was not surprised. Religion is oppressive to women.

I can't believe how many reverends place all the responsibility of maintaining a marriage and happy home on women. It is ridiculously stupid, and far too many women still are unhappy and suffer.

So to the essayists, stay strong and wise, know you are not alone and never surrender the moral high ground just because someone is religious.

Floyd Thompson
Ohio

We should try to know where our money goes

The first Letterbox item in the August issue, titled "Secular company stands out among religious ones," is most instructive. It illustrates that we inadvertently spend our consumer dollars daily in support of those who would fundamentally do us harm, or who, at the very least, support causes that we as secularists know to be harmful.

My eye-opener came when my insurance company recommended a large, well-known automobile body shop to handle my repair claim after an accident. I subsequently did use that company for the work.

Later, as I was driving by its facility, I noticed huge 6-inch white letters on the back window reading, "In God We Trust" on the owner's truck. Had I seen that earlier, I would never have spent my dollars at that company, and now I vigilantly watch (and listen!) whenever possible to determine a vendor's religious proclivity.

Boycotting businesses such as Home Depot, Chick-fil-A, Hobby Lobby and others is easy, but assessing smaller contractors who come into your home or others who provide services to us daily takes some effort and alertness . . . but it is worth it.

If we could generate local databases so that members could see reports

from other members like the one I described above (or simply a list by type of vendor) it would be an incredible resource for us all.

Robert Laub
Missouri

Christian references are ubiquitous in U.S.

The article in the August issue regarding the removal of a Christian cross from a public park in Pensacola and the resulting comment from Fox News contributor Todd Starnes prove that we have a huge task ahead of us.

According to Starnes' reasoning, FFRF's next targets should include hundreds of towns, cities, rivers, mountains and national parks that contain any reference to Saint, Santa, Santo or San. Your legal staff would have lifelong security.

When I lived in Washington, Mount St. Helens was nearly in my backyard. I also lived in Santa Fe, which is at the base of the Sangre de Christo (Blood of Christ) mountains. I now reside on the banks of San Luis River (in San Diego County), just south of Los Angeles.

Christian references are emblazoned on our money, in public meeting facilities, in government swearing-in ceremonies and pledges to our flag. Jesus has been granted a national holiday, and even a sneeze warrants the requisite "God bless you."

Eradicate Christianity from the public, Mr. Starnes? Give me a break.

Warren Dunn
California

Should atheists define themselves differently?

I have come to realize that the term "atheist" is meant to cast nonbelievers in a negative light by defining them based on what they don't believe. It is meant to imply that they have no beliefs.

I think nonbelievers should reject

the word "atheist" and define themselves by what they do believe. They could easily call themselves rationalists or naturalists.

Religion began as a primitive form of philosophy. When philosophy evolved away from religion, it incorporated the best of religion. For example, the "golden rule" is common to both religion and philosophy. Philosophy hasn't supplanted religion, only improved upon it.

John Morgan
Wisconsin

It'd be tough to take away Good Friday holiday

In the August issue, a letter writer says that Good Friday should not be observed as a civic holiday.

In Maryland, the Friday before Easter has been a civic holiday since colonial times.

I'm pretty sure the governor isn't going to change a 300-year-old tradition because I object. If FFRF wants to send a letter of complaint, I wish you success.

David M. Shea
Maryland

Editor's note: Among FFRF's many successful lawsuits is one removing Wisconsin's Good Friday state holiday.

Not all evangelicals are tied to hate speech

Kudos to the Liberty University alumni who have returned their diplomas in protest of university President Jerry Falwell, Jr.'s unwavering support of Donald Trump — and Trump's conflating peaceful protest with white supremacist violence.

Falwell, like his father, practices a very odd form of Christianity. In his worldview, turning a blind eye to racism and white supremacy is OK. Falwell, Trump and their evangelical supporters live in a world of racial parsing. I say this as someone who was force fed fire and brimstone hysteria and evangelical hypocrisy in my youth.

Today, I'm an older (white) guy, much closer to my seventh decade than sixth. I was raised in a fundamentalist church and well versed in its unorthodox religious practices: speaking in tongues, frantic "holy rolling," faith healing, revival tent rallies, and dire fear of "666."

I'm also quite familiar with its pulpit politics.

During the 1964 presidential campaign, our ministers' sermons were largely devoted to scaring the bejesus out of the congregation — if Roman Catholic John F. Kennedy is elected president, the pope would move his headquarters to the White House and assume the presidency.

Also, there was the not-so-subtle ministerial racism.

The ministerial message was ironically both opaque and clear: Caucasians are the superior race; it's in the bible.

I can't say all evangelicals are like the Falwells. Clearly, the brave action taken by the Liberty University alumni demonstrates that evangelicals can distance themselves from their leaders' hate speech.

Paul Bartlett
Wisconsin

FFRF will spend my money better than IRS

As a supporter of FFRF and the great work it does, I have gone as far as becoming a Life Member. Now I have reached an age that requires me to withdraw money from my IRA and pay income tax on it. I would rather FFRF than the IRS get that money. It is wonderful that any IRA money sent to you can be balanced against the tax I owe on my withdrawal. You will do such a better job of spending it!

Enclosed is a check for \$5,000. Please upgrade my membership to Afterlife. Since I do not have an actual afterlife, I can have this virtual one that I can enjoy while I live.

Keep up the wonderful work!
Karla Martin
 Washington

Ask believers questions to get them thinking

I said to a friend, "Do you realize the only reason you are not a Jew or a Muslim is simply because you were raised by Christians?" He asked me, "Why do you care what I believe about religion?"

I told him it's because I care about him and am trying to free him from the constraints of religious belief. I told him all the religious people I know who have become atheists say they are leading happier, more fulfilling lives. And that they also say things like: "I feel as if a weight has been lifted off of my shoulders," or "Now, for the first time in my life, I have total freedom of both thought and action."

I also know formerly religious people have thanked those who have either done or said something which caused them to begin to seriously think about their religious beliefs. Once they do begin to question, they are on their

Lots of freethinking at Burning Man



FFRF Lifetime Members Julie and George Iddon hold up a recent copy of Freethought Today at the Burning Man festival, which was held Aug. 27 through Sept. 4 in Nevada's Black Rock Desert. The Iddons go by Artemisia and Braveheart during the festival, which attracts tens of thousands of people to Black Rock City, "a temporary metropolis dedicated to community, art, self-expression, and self-reliance," according to the Burning Man website. In 2016, the Burning Man census showed under "Religion and Spirituality" that 71.5 percent of "Burners" (Burning Man attendees) have no religion. Further broken down, Burners are made up of those who claim themselves to be religious (6.1 percent), spiritual but not religious (46.5 percent), atheist (24.8 percent), agnostic (14.7 percent) and deist (0.8 percent).

way to becoming atheists. For some, it is a fairly easy transformation, while yet for others, it is sadly, one of the most difficult things they ever do.

So I am hoping I have started him, as I have others, to seriously think about why they believe what they do.
Neil C. Reinhardt
 California

New Life Member excited about FFRF's work

I am excited to become a Lifetime Member!

I'm very proud of the excellent work that FFRF is doing, including suing Trump over his religious liberty executive order.

I love Freethought Today and happily read it cover to cover on airplanes, hoping it might influence somebody to question their faith.

Cheryl McCutcheon
 Wisconsin

Pre-meal 'grace' can have lasting effects

I just read about your secular invocation contest, and thought you might enjoy this story of my saying grace before a meal.

Many years ago, my evangelical friend and her husband came to visit.

We sat down to dinner, which I cooked and served in my house, and the husband immediately began a long come-to-Jesus type of grace. When he finally said, "Amen," they picked up their forks to eat.

I smiled and said that if they could say their grace, I could say mine. Shocked I would say a grace, they bowed their heads and I said, "Gentle Beings, we thank you for dying for us that we might live. We shall strive to do you honor as you become human."

A few years later, she and I were having lunch together in a crowded restaurant. Now, back in the day, when I was a good bible-toting Baptist, I had learned to pray quietly. Her, not so much. She wanted to be sure everyone within earshot knew she was a good Christian. This time, she turned to me and asked if it would be all right with me if she said grace. I smiled and said, "Sure. Then I'll say mine."

Alas, no one in the restaurant had a chance to hear mine. But we also weren't subjected to hers.

Lenora Good
 Washington

CRANKMAIL

Caution: Reading these unedited emails can leave you frustrated, or laughing in tears.

School prayer: Sick Nazi pigs, Jesus isn't a lie and those children deserve the truth. — *Alexandria Ledgerwood*

Church and state: Iran and other Muslim countries are run by Muslim leaders, using Koran law, so why can't this country be run by Christian leaders, using Bible law? Good Christians would not cause us to lose any political rights — like the Muslims do, so STOP trying to separate Church and State! — *Steve Clark*

Marco Rubio: If you don't like Senator Rubio's Tweets, don't read them. Surprise, even congressmen have first amendment rights. — *Jack Wohner*

Prayer: I'm very blessed from God and all He has done for me and my family. I have 5 children that are actively serving the Lord and 11 grandchildren that will be brought up to do the same. If you don't like what the born again believer do, move out the the United States. I will be praying that y'all at ffr get saved. My heart goes out to your children missing out on the blessings of Christmas and Easter. Maybe I should sue y'all for trying to destroy America — *Lorira Loomis*

Franklin highschool: The only way you could assist me is by removing yourself from the planet. You wanna threaten to sue some high-school girls cause of a banner they made? Freedom of religion and speech these girls are not bothering anyone. If it bothers you all that bad get hit by a fucking truck. — *Christian Bryant*

FFAF: If you want freedom from religion, that's your business: however; you and your buddy Satan need to keep your split tongues, reptilian eyes, and side-nared noses to yourselves. FFAF (Freedom From atheist Foundation) — *Kevin Jepsen*

YOU!: Why do you spend all your time and efforts fighting something you don't think exists?! "Every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." — *Phil Merhalski*

Taking our religious rights away: Close operations of your organization — *Timothy Flowers*

Remove plague at school: Atheist is crybaby...stupidity...Lets GOD judge them..DUH — *Tena Markham*

Freedom OF religion: While we all sure have the freedom to believe how we want, your article almost left me speechless. How sad and unhappy you must be. So intolerable of prayer and Christianity. And your understanding of the 1st Amendment really shows your ignorance. You don't even quote it right. It says, Freedom OF Religion, not Freedom From Religion. From and of have two different meanings. And this is the LIE people have believed. And this lie has wreaked havoc in our schools; look what's going on with our youth and young adults: violence, riots, no respect for authority, and the list goes on. After trying to take Christ out of the "public square/school," look at the world around you now. I truly feel sorry for you because evidently you've never experienced the blessing that comes from serving Jesus Christ... and to know Him and His love on a personal level. — *Deb Erickson*

Alabama: I noticed your address is Wisconsin. How about keeping your comments in Wisconsin. We know our rights in Alabama. And for the record, I'm offended by your organization's purpose and mission. So according to your statements, stop pushing your beliefs on me!! — *Traci Roberson*

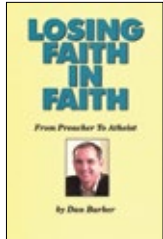
You and Satan: Satan comes to deceive, steal, kill, and destroy. Islam comes to deceive, steal, kill, and destroy. FFRF comes to deceive, steal, kill, and destroy. Day of the Lord begins Yom Kippur in 2017. Fire comes now for one year and you will die during this upcoming year. Once you die, then comes your judgment day before the Messiah and then to the lake of fire and brimstone. The Bible brings hope and joy to millions and all you want to do is destroy it so fire comes down from Heaven in 5778 for the Millennium to begin at Sukkot 5779 (Feast of Tabernacles 2018 — *John Ashcraft*)

LEAVE PEOPLE ALONE: Leave people alone. Stop being little whiney snowflakes. YOU are the ones that disrespect others, not the other way around. Bunch of whiney little babies who want things just the way THEY want it and can't handle it when one teeny ounce of life doesn't go their way. Grow up. Get the hell out of town. — *Jane Dorzweiler*

The signs in Oconomowoc: I love the signs and if you fruit cakes don't stand down. I will put up 4 more signs. Please find something worth while to do — *Shawn Miller*

Treason!: I am declaring freedom from religion a terror group for threatening the right to freedom of religion and I am accusing freedom from religion of treason of the constitution. Freedom from religion is the enemy of the United States of America from this day forward — *John Bowman*

Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist



By Dan Barker

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

Buy it from FFRF online shop.ffrf.org

Your weekly antidote to the Religious Right

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BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

Four unidentified Israeli rabbis were arrested on suspicion of fraudulently obtaining police "fitness certificates" and passing exams enabling them to qualify for the post of "City Rabbi."

The suspects are alleged to have obtained certification by various fraudulent means, including falsifying scores of tests they never took, using impostors to take their exams or appealing directly to the examiner to give them passing grades. *Source: Arutz Sheva, 9-6-17*

Michael R. Hands, 51, Easton, NY: Criminal sex act, use of a child in a sexual performance, sexual abuse, endangering the welfare of a child and possessing and distributing child pornography. Hands, a former Catholic priest on Long Island who was defrocked after a 2003 sodomy conviction involving a 14-year-old boy, is charged with assaults on a teen boy he met online in July.

He lives and works at Easton Mountain, a resort that bills itself as a sanctuary and retreat "created by gay men as a gift to the world." *Source: Post-Star, 9-5-17*

Matthew J. Phelps, 28, Raleigh, NC: Murder. Phelps is charged in the Sept. 1 stabbing death of his wife, Lauren Phelps, 29, in their bedroom. On his 911 call to police, he said, "I had a dream and then I turned on the lights and she's dead on the floor. . . . I took Coricidin Cough & Cold because I know it can make you feel good and sometimes I can't sleep at night."

They were married Nov. 11, 2016. "Oh my God," Phelps told the dispatcher. "Oh God. She didn't deserve this. Why?" He's described as an aspiring preacher in several news stories but worked for a lawn service. His Facebook page says he graduated in 2011 from Clear Creek Baptist Bible College, formerly Clear Creek Mountain Preacher School in Pineville, Ky. A friend told a reporter Phelps came from a conservative Christian family.

There was no mention of Phelps in his wife's obituary, which used her maiden name Hugelmaier, or during her funeral service. *Source: News & Observer, 9-1-17*

Abdullah el-Faisal, 53, St. James, Jamaica: Soliciting or providing support for an act of terrorism and 4 related counts. El-Faisal, a Muslim cleric known for advocating jihad, was indicted in New York on charges he assisted an undercover officer pretending to be trying to join ISIS in Syria. He was arrested in Jamaica and faces extradition.

He was imprisoned in England from 2003-07 for promoting violence and later deported from Kenya to his native Jamaica, where he has continued proselytizing. *Source: NY Times, 9-1-17*

Amanda Weiss, 28, Kingston, NY: Grand larceny, scheme to defraud, falsifying business records, criminal possession of a forged instrument and stolen property. Weiss, assistant administrator at St. Joseph Catholic Parish, allegedly stole almost \$69,000 from accounts of the church and a parish priest over a span of about 20 months. *Source: Times Herald-Record, 9-1-17*

Eugene Katcher, 71, Canton, MI: 3 counts of larceny in a building. Katcher, who retired in July as pastor of Resurrection Catholic Parish, allegedly stole collection plate and votive candle donations and numerous items of property, including communion wine and a TV between February 2016 and July 2017. *Source: Detroit News, 8-31-17*

Wayland Y. Brown, 74, a defrocked Catholic priest convicted of child sexual offenses in Maryland, is now charged in **Jasper County, SC**, with 9 counts of criminal misconduct with a minor (sexual battery) involving 2 boys between 1978-88.

Chris Templeton alleges he was a victim when he was in 7th grade. "He raped me right on my mom and dad's couch. I can still see the fibers of the couch pressed up in my face. I can still feel it like it was yesterday."

Templeton received a \$4.5 million settlement in 2016 from the Savannah Diocese for covering up his abuse. *Source: WSAV, 8-28-17*

James Irwin, 68, Plymouth, IN: Promoting prostitution, dealing a controlled substance, dealing a substance represented as a controlled substance and 2 counts of patronizing a prostitute. Irwin directs Care and Share Ministries and is a former Methodist pastor who's now retired. His wife is also a retired pastor.

Court documents say that on Aug. 3, "Informant A asked Irwin 'what do I have to do to get a room?' Irwin responds 'just lay there in front of me naked.'"

"On 8/17/17 Informant C was given 'two white oval pills later identified as a schedule II narcotic drug as a payment for a sexual act to occur the following week.'" *Source: WNDU, 8-25-17*

David Pugh, Phillipsburg, KS: Indecent liberties with a child and sexual exploitation of a child. Pugh resigned in May as pastor of First Assembly of God Church. Allegations stem from between November 2016 and March 2017. *Source: KWCH, 8-23-17*

Menso

by Brian Kent



The first person to "find Jesus"

Peter Green, Deborah Green, Joshua Green and Stacey Miller, Fence Lake, NM: All are members of the Aggressive Christianity Missions Training Corps. Peter Green faces 100 counts of criminal sexual penetration of a minor. Charges against the others include child sexual abuse, bribery of a witness and not reporting a death.

Deborah Green and her husband James Green started the sect in 1981 in California. It's self-described as "aggressive and revolutionary for Jesus." The investigation started in 2015 after 2 members who left the commune told authorities that Miller's 12-year-old son had died of an infection in 2014.

According to arrest warrants, no one took the boy to the hospital, even though pus was leaking from his forehead and he'd lost his ability to speak and move his right side. He was buried on the property. The sheriff's office said about 18 children still live in the commune. *Source: AP, 8-22-17*

Phillip Miles, 66, Conway, SC: Carrying a weapon in a restricted place. Miles, pastor of Christ Community Church, was arrested at an airport after security found an unloaded .380-caliber handgun in his bag. Miles said he was on his way to a religious conference in Kentucky and "completely forgot the gun was in my bag."

Miles was jailed for several months in 2008 in Russia on charges of bringing ammunition into the country during a missionary trip. *Source: myrtlebeachonline.com, 8-19-17*

Elozer Porges, 43, and Joel Lowy, 29, Brooklyn, NY: Mail fraud and conspiracy to commit mail and wire fraud. Porges and Lowy, director and assistant director, respectively, of Central United Talmudic Academy, were indicted for bilking a federal meal program out of \$3 million in 2013-15 by submitting claims for meals never served.

The men claimed they were serving suppers 5 nights a week at 3 of their schools. Bus drivers at the Wythe Avenue yeshiva told a reporter that school is dismissed by 4:45 p.m. and no supper is served. *Source: NY Post, 8-18-17*

Mohammad Jammal, 49, Denmark: Making comments deemed threatening, insulting or degrading to a group of persons because of their race, color, national or ethnic origin, belief or sexual orientation. Jammal, a Danish imam, is accused of calling homosexuality "unnatural" and "comparable to having sex with animals" in June 2016 remarks to newspapers after the shootings in Pulse nightclub in Florida.

"The remarks were so gross that we want the courts to rule whether Danish law has been violated," state prosecutor Jan Reckendorff said. *Source: Deutsche Presse Agentur, 8-18-17*

Robert J. Dando, 53, UK: Assault of a male by penetration, 8 counts of indecent assault of a boy and 2 counts each of assault of a boy by touching, rape of a boy and sexual assault of a male.

Allegations are from 1986-2009 in England and Wales when Dando was a senior minister at Worcester Park Baptist Church, Surrey, and Orchard Bap-

tist Church in Bicester. *Source: BBC, 8-17-17*

José F. Bernal, 52, N. Richland Hills, TX: 2 counts of continuous sexual assault of a child. He's accused of assaults on 2 female juveniles between 2007-13 while he was their pastor at Tabernaculo de Vida, a Pentecostal church in Ft. Worth. *Source: Star-Telegram, 8-16-17*

Kenneth Blake, 52, Kingston, Jamaica: Rape, forcible abduction, grievous sexual assault, sexual touching and sexual intercourse with a person under 16 years old. Blake, pastor of Harvest Temple Apostolic Church, is accused of assaults on a 12-year-old girl and impregnating her when she was 14 while he was dating her mother. *Source: Jamaica Gleaner, 8-15-17*

Robin Knox, 52, Nashville, TN: Indecent exposure. Knox allegedly displayed his genitals July 22 to a woman smoking a cigarette outside Clean World Laundry. Surveillance video recorded it, an affidavit said.

Knox moved to Nashville in April from Russellville, KY, where he taught Sunday school and preached as a seminarian at Trinity Episcopal Church. His LinkedIn account said he served in 2003-04 as director of the school of business at Belmont University, Tennessee's largest Christian college. *Source: The Tennessean, 8-12-17*

Christopher L. Stansell, 48, Princeton, W.Va.: Embezzlement of more than \$10,000. Stansell, pastor of First Christian Church, allegedly deposited into his personal accounts multiple checks written to and by the church, said State Police Sgt. M.S. Haynes. *Source: Daily Telegraph, 8-10-17*

Elvin Taveras Durán, Villa Mella, Dominican Republic: Suspicion of murder. Durán, pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Parish, is accused of fatally stabbing Fernely Carrión Saviñón, a 16-year-old altar boy, Aug. 4.

The boy was last seen alive by a taxi driver who gave him and Durán a ride. His body was found by the side of a road. It's also believed they were involved in a sexual relationship. *Source: Catholic News Agency, 8-10-17*

Marcin A. Nurek, 37, Boonton, NY: Endangering the welfare of a child and criminal sexual contact. Nurek was ordained July 1 as a Catholic priest but is now on administrative leave. Nurek, an immigrant from Poland in 2015, is accused of putting his hand under a girl's skirt and fondling her buttocks on Aug. 3 while telling her she was sexy. The girl is 13 or older but younger than 16. *Source: Daily Record, 8-7-17*

Eugene Haminda, 38, John Laing Township, Zambia: 2 counts of murder. Haminda, pastor of Door of Heaven Ministry, is accused of causing the deaths of his 10-year-old stepson and 9-year-old nephew, who died from head trauma. "The pastor whipped the two male juveniles after he discovered that some money was missing in the house," alleged police spokesperson Esther Mwaata Katongo. *Source: Times of Zambia, 8-8-17*

Pleaded / Convicted

John Wilson, 70, Keighley, England: Guilty by jury of 18 counts of sexual and indecent assault against 6 women and girls while he was pastor of Liberty Pentecostal Church between 1980 and 2010. His wife, **Mary Wilson, 79**, and his assistant pastor, **Laurence Peterson, 59**, were convicted of aiding and abetting indecent assault and conspiracy to commit indecent assault.

Wilson told police he was amazed by how many women had evil spirits inside them and that God told him to "go into the womb to release evil spirits" and perform "internal ministries."

His first victims were 2 orphaned sisters in their mid-teens, said prosecutor David McGonigal: He would shout "Come out in the name of Jesus" as he assaulted the younger sister.

McGonigal told the court that not long after Wilson married a couple, the wife came to him for counseling, and from 1990-98 he tried to "help" her with her "sexual demons." Wilson would tell her to "spit out" the demons after she performed oral sex on him, McGonigal told the jury. *Source: Daily Mail, 9-1-17*

Barbara L. Snyder, 59, West Salem, WI: Pleaded guilty to wire fraud and filing a false income tax return. Snyder, secretary and accounting clerk at St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Onalaska, admitted stealing \$832,000 from the church between 2006 and 2015 and underreporting her income from the embezzled proceeds. Prosecutors said much of the money went for gambling. *Source: WXOW, 8-28-17*

Nikolay Kalka, 75, Parma Heights, OH: Guilty by jury of kidnapping and 2 counts of gross sexual imposition. Kalka, a Ukrainian-born pastor of an unspecified denomination, was convicted of groping a 10-year-old girl at a public pool in March. According to the prosecution, the girl and her 10-year-old friend were swimming and splashed water on Kalka, who splashed back and asked them to come over to him. They instead moved to a different part of the pool.

Later, as the victim swam by, it's alleged he grabbed her and set her on his lap for about a minute. Kalka testified he didn't grope her but said he held her head under a water fountain to teach her a lesson about splashing people. The girl's friend tried to pull her away but couldn't.

He faces up to 20 years to life in prison because the kidnapping charge carries a sexual motivation enhancer. The girl's mother said she thinks the potential sentence is too harsh. *Source: Plain Dealer, 8-17-17*

Gerald Ridsdale, 83, Australia: a defrocked Australian Catholic priest already imprisoned for sexual assaults on over 50 children, pleaded guilty to molesting 12 more children. Victims include 11 boys and a girl he assaulted between 1962-88.

Twice the girl's father took her to Ridsdale at the church in Ballarat. "[The 10-year-old's] father carried her to the confessional booth and took her clothes off her, then carried her to the altar and lay her down," crown prosecutor Jeremy McWilliams said. Ridsdale then assaulted her.

"I feel like a piece of meat handed around for anyone to take a bite of," she said in a victim impact statement read by McWilliams. *Source: The Age, 8-15-17*

Daniel Hoffman, 31, Jenison, MI: Pleaded guilty to 2 counts of criminal sexual conduct. Hoffman, youth pastor at Alive Ministries, was charged with assaults between 2003-08.

In a search warrant affidavit, a detective wrote that Hoffman was being treated in a hospital for a "psychotic break" in October 2016, and he told a nurse that he first fondled the victim when the boy was 6 and he was 17 or 18. The victim told the detective it happened at Hoffman's house, in his camper and at Camp Ao-Wa-Kiya, where Hoffman was a counselor. *Source: WOOD-TV, 8-14-17*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

The Catholic Church on Guam and separate defendants have now been sued by 104 plaintiffs for molesting them as children, with 16 priests named as abusers. **Louis W. Rink**, who died in 2013, is the latest to be accused. The alleged victim claims Rink molested him when he was 10. *Source: USA Today, 8-29-17*

The Mormon Church has been sued by 3 Native American plaintiffs who allege the church failed to protect children from sexual abuse. Thousands of Indian children, mostly Navajos, participated in a church foster program from the late 1940s until about 2000.

A Navajo woman identified as "A.H." said at a press conference in Phoenix that she told her local bishop about abuse by her foster father in Mesa, AZ, but was told to keep quiet and that it would be handled. Another Navajo woman identified as "J.C." alleges she was molested in Enterprise, Utah. A Crow woman identified as "Jane Doe 1" alleges she was abused 4 times by her foster grandfather in Chelan County, WA.

Five other suits against the church have been filed since 2016 on behalf of Navajo tribal members.

Source: AP, 8-16-17

The Basilian Fathers of Toronto, Canada, are being sued for \$3 million by a 53-year-old Connecticut man who alleges he was molested by **Frederick Cahill**, a Catholic priest who died in 1983. The plaintiff, first name Brian, accuses Cahill of abusing him sexually for several months in 1981 when he was a student at Bishop Grandin High School in Calgary.

Brian alleges Cahill took him to an empty Knights of Columbus summer camp because “he wanted to show me something. He laid on top of me. He told me he had the same experience when he was younger from a priest with red hair who loved him and respected him and got him into the priesthood. I froze. The next thing I knew he undid my pants.” Source: *Calgary Herald*, 8-11-17

Brentwood Academy, Brentwood, TN, and several employees are being sued for \$30 million by a Nashville parent and her son, who allege the Christian prep school downplayed sexual assaults and refused to report them to police.

Four 8th-grade students are accused of assaulting the boy during the 2014-15 academic year when he was 12. Headmaster Curtis Masters allegedly told him to “turn the other cheek” and “everything in God’s kingdom happens for a reason.”

The suit claims that after a football game, students restrained “John Doe” and put their buttocks on his face and their scrotums on or in his mouth. It’s also alleged that in January and February 2015, 2 boys barred entrance to the unsupervised locker room while another boy forced his penis into Doe’s mouth and between his buttocks. Source: *The Tennessean*, 8-9-17

Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church, San Diego, and pastor **Bryan Stamper** are defendants in a suit filed by youth minister Dawn Neldon, who alleges Stamper sexually harassed her and that she was forced to resign in August because she complained about it. Neldon was hired in 2008.

The complaint alleges that on a church bus trip, Stamper called Neldon “honey, baby, and sweetheart” and compared his body to a Lamborghini that “couldn’t be kept in the garage.”

It’s also alleged he had her dance with him in front of the congregation during his first sermon, commenting on her clothing, kissing his biceps and calling them “pythons.”

Neldon claims he later ran up to her while singing a song from “Grease” and tried to dance provocatively with her. She said she would raise her arms to avoid touching him. Source: *San Diego Reader*, 8-8-17

Civil Lawsuits Settled

The Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut settled a suit for an undisclosed amount in which a woman alleged she was sexually assaulted at age 12 at St. Peter’s Church in Milford by the pastor’s adult son **Jesse Osmun**. The parish and former pastor **Andrew Osmun** are co-defendants.

Jesse Osmun is serving a 15-year prison sentence for sexually assaulting girls between the ages of 3 and 6 at a school in South Africa while he was in the Peace Corps. The suit alleged he assaulted the plaintiff in 2007. Andrew Osmun was pastor from 1999 to 2012.

Jesse Osmun allegedly admitted to his father in 2007 that he had assaulted the plaintiff, but it wasn’t reported to police and he later joined the Peace Corps. Source: *CT Post*, 8-24-17

Sentenced

Wayne Buchanan, 62, Southwest Harbor, ME: 1 year in prison after pleading guilty to possessing sexually explicit material involving children under age 12. Buchanan resigned as pastor of Tremont Congregational Church and St. Brendan’s Anglican Mission in 2016 and was defrocked after being charged.

Buchanan was active in boy scouting and at one time was president of the Katahdin Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America. Source: *WABI*, 8-28-17

Terry W. Dobbs, 54, Yorktown, IN: 13 years in prison with 4 years suspended after pleading guilty to sexual misconduct with a minor and child solicitation for having a sexual relationship with a 15-year-old member of Old Fashion United Baptist Church, where he was pastor. The girl had gone to him for counseling about personal problems in July 2016.

Prosecutor Doug Mawhorr said Dobbs once got “down on bended knee” and proposed to her, giving her a ring and declaring her his “promise wife ... so the sex could be legitimized.”

Dobbs’ wife testified there was “blame to be shared” by her husband and his victim. Dobbs’ son said the girl’s parents shouldn’t have let her meet alone with his father. Source: *Star Press*, 8-25-17

Larry M. “Mike” Thorne, 53, Ft. Walton Beach, FL: 30 years in prison after a jury found him guilty of lewd and lascivious battery and sexual battery on a victim between the ages of 12 and 18. Thorne, pastor of Abundant Life Church, was charged with having sex, including intercourse, with a girl starting when she was 14 and ending when she was 17.

The church was founded by his parents. “Mike



Photo by Larry Peplin

“I thought this sign was unusually candid for a church, any church,” writes FFRF Member Larry Peplin, of the sign from St. Clair Shores, Mich.

has a heart for evangelism, spiritual growth and building families,” says a cached version of its website. Two other victims testified they were subjected to similar grooming and molestation in their teens. Source: *nwfdailynews.com*, 8-25-17

Kevin Gugliotta, 55, Mahwah, NJ: 11½ to 23½ months in jail, with credit for 10 months already served. Gugliotta, pastor of Holy Spirit Catholic Church, was charged with 20 counts of possession of child pornography and 20 counts of disseminating images of children involved in sexual acts. He pleaded guilty to 1 dissemination count in return for 39 others being dismissed.



Kevin Gugliotta

Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, 50, Sirsa, India: 20 years in prison after a court convicted him of raping 2 women at his ashram in 2002. After Singh, leader of Dera Sacha Sauda — a breakaway sect of Sikhism — was convicted, riots broke out that left at least 38 people dead and property looted and burned.

Seven members of his security squad were charged with sedition and attempted murder for an attempt to free him at the court. A lawyer for the victims said “40 to 50 women” have come forward with rape allegations. Source: *Times of India*, 8-28-17

Rose Amadasun, 49, London: 16 months in jail, suspended on good behavior, 150 hours community service and 25-day rehabilitation course after pleading guilty to 5 counts of child cruelty. Amadasun, pastor of Shine Forth Evangelistic Ministry, was charged with hitting children with a belt and wires while shouting “Jesus” as punishment for misbehaving in June 2016. Source: *metro.co.uk*, 8-22-17

Francis Brophy, 87, Brisbane, Australia: 8 years in prison with parole eligibility in August 2019 after a jury found him guilty of molesting 9 “vulnerable and marginalized” boys at an orphanage between 1978-83. The court heard how in 1982 Brophy, a member of the Catholic De La Salle Brothers, sodomized a boy who had gone to him for guitar lessons. Source: *Brisbane Times*, 8-21-17

Mark M. Brown, 74, Hamilton, New Zealand: 26 months in jail after pleading guilty to indecent assault on a boy aged 12 to 16, attempted sodomy and indecent assault on a male. The 3 victims ranged in age from 6 to 16 in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Brown was jailed for 15 months in 1990 for sexual offenses against altar boys at St. Mary’s Catholic Parish.

One boy testified that when he was 9 and vomited in church, Brown took him to a separate building where he started throwing up again in a toilet. Brown rubbed his back as he vomited, then started fondling his genitals. Brown’s sister was a nun who taught at an Auckland orphanage, which Brown frequently visited. The boy testified that Brown told him what happened was “our special secret” and if he told anyone, he would be separated from his siblings, who were also wards of the orphanage. Source: *Waikato Times*,

8-21-17

Amado Miranda, 68, Sugar Land, TX: 12 years in prison after a jury found him guilty of 2 counts of indecency with a child. Miranda fled to Mexico in 2004 after being indicted for fondling a 9-year-old girl’s genitals at Agape International Baptist Church, where he was pastor from 1997 to 2001. Source: *Avalanche-Journal*, 8-10-17

Jon M. Paquette, 57, Birchwood, WI: 3 years’ probation, \$1,300 restitution, maintain absolute sobriety and no contact with his former church or any of his victims. 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: *WQOW*, 8-8-17

Legal Developments

Warren S. Jeffs, 61, the imprisoned leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was ordered by a Utah judge to pay \$16 million to Elissa Wall, whom he forced to marry his cousin Alan Steed in 2001 when she was 14. Jeffs also pressured Wall to have children with Steed. Several miscarriages and a stillbirth followed.

Jeffs is serving life plus 20 years in Texas for sexually abusing 2 girls he married as plural wives. One gave birth at age 15.

Wall’s attorney, Alan Mortensen, said they will pursue church assets in several states and Mexico. “It’s so the church feels the pain of what their doctrine has been as to the rape of young girls.” Source: *UPI*, 9-6-17

Sam Wagner, a Catholic priest from **Sleepy Eye, MN**, was barred by a judge from contacting a teen girl or her family until August 2019. The New Ulm Police Department started investigating his relationship with the girl in early 2017 but has suspended it without charges. It could be reopened if new allegations surface. Wagner was ordained in 2014 and first served in New Ulm.

The restraining order request filed by the girl’s mother said they exchanged 1,500 Facebook messages between March 2015 and December 2016. It also detailed medical treatment supposedly received by the girl as a result of the relationship. Wagner “continues to break it off but keeps coming back,” the request said. Source: *Mankato Free Press*, 8-28-17

Geronimo Aguilar, 47, a Virginia Protestant pastor sentenced to 40 years in prison in Texas, had his final appeal of child molestation convictions denied. The victims were 11 and 13.

“How do we know that the harlot didn’t lead him [on]?” his uncle, Mel Aguilar, asked when “Pastor G” was sentenced in 2015 for assaults in the 1990s. Source: *WRIC*, 8-23-17

Illinois Gov. Bruce Rauner signed a bill removing the statutes of limitation for sexual abuse crimes. Previously, victims had to report crimes within 20 years after they turned 18. The legislation, opposed by the Catholic Church, went into effect immediately. Source: *AP*, 8-13-17

An unidentified Ethiopian imam at An’Nur Mosque, **Winterthur, Switzerland**, should receive an 18-month suspended sentence and be banned from the country for 15 years for inciting violence, prosecutors told a Swiss court. He was arrested in 2016 and the mosque was closed in June but a trial is still pending. Video surfaced in October 2016 in which he “called for the murder of Muslims who refuse to participate in communal prayer.” He’s also accused of distributing online images of executions and working without a permit. Source: *swissinfo.ch*, 8-11-17

Allegations

Abel Perez, a Chilean Marist Catholic brother, molested at least 14 minors at the order’s schools from the 1970s until 2000, according to a Marist statement sent to parents and teachers. “These acts cannot be repeated ever again in our community,” said the Aug. 8 statement, which said Perez admitted the abuse to his superiors in 2010 and was later transferred to Peru.

The Associated Press reported that the case would be investigated by prosecutors dealing with sex crimes and domestic violence.

Asked about Perez’s future, Brother Mario Varona said he would remain a Marist even if convicted. “You have to have mercy and also worry about the abuser,” Varona told CNN Chile. “Abel Perez is a person. He has all our respect despite what he’s done.” Source: *AP*, 8-30-17

Miguel Luna, a Texas Catholic priest ordained in 1982 and removed from ministry in 2013, has allegedly admitted to sexual misconduct with a young girl in the 1980s, said a statement from the Diocese of El Paso. The woman reached out to the diocese in November 2016.

“We have informed the El Paso Police about this case, about Luna,” said Bishop Mark Seitz: “They’re ready with their Crimes Against Children that respond and would help any victims who come forward to them after this notification.” Source: *KVIA*, 8-21-17

Nana Dar, 67, Steven Dar, 37, and Richard Dar, 41, Pune, India, are accused by a parishioner at Emmanuel Church Assembly of God of misappropriating church funds by creating a bogus trust. Nana Dar, the church pastor, and his sons are accused of fraud dating to 2007.

Vikas Waghmare, an attorney representing the 82-year-old parishioner, alleged the family kept false records and used the church’s name to promote their business that catered food and beverages and provided entertainment for celebration events such as weddings. Source: *Pune Mirror*, 8-14-17

Mitchell Olson, Kimball, MI, is being investigated for alleged criminal sexual conduct in 2016 involving a member of Grace Ministry Center, where Olson is lead pastor. Justine Morden, 19 at the time, went to police in June.

“We will review the statute to see if the facts alleged are in violation of Michigan law and then we will move forward with the review,” said county prosecutor Mike Wendling

Morden had sought counseling from Olson, who is married with 5 children. She said she agreed he could come to her apartment at night to anoint her with oil to cleanse her of her sins and get closer to God. The police report states:

“Olson then asked if he could put the oil on her breasts, [she] said yes and Olson put his hand down the front of [her] shirt making skin to skin contact with [her] breasts. . . . Olson then put his hand down the back of [her] pants and made skin to skin contact with [her] buttock cheeks. Olson then asked if he could put oil on [her] pubic area, [she] responded yes. Olson then put his hand down the front of [her] pants and made skin to skin contact with [her] pubic region.”

Former assistant pastor Justin Mcburney stated in the report that Olson told him “the oil bottle had broken, getting oil all over. Olson said it was possible his hand had slipped and his hand might have gone in her pants.”

Morden alleged Olson told her that because she had committed sexual sins he would have to anoint the sexual parts of her body.

A church member at Hillside Wesleyan Church said when she was 15 in 2001, she attended a “purity” overnight for girls to talk about keeping their virginity. “[She] recalled Mitch Olson doing the message and talking about him and his wife having sex together and breaking a couch,” the report said. Source: *Times Herald/WXYZ*, 8-10-17

Removed / Resigned

William Aitcheson, 62, Fairfax, VA, is on voluntary leave as pastor of St. Leo the Great Catholic Parish after disclosing he belonged to the Ku Klux Klan 40 years ago. He was convicted in 1977 of a criminal misdemeanor and sentenced to 60 days in jail and 4 years’ probation for burning a 7-foot cross in the yard of Barbara and Phillip Butler in 1977 in College Park, MD. At the time he was a 22-year-old student and “Exalted Cyclops” of a Klan chapter.

He said images from the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville reminded him of a time he’d prefer to forget. The Diocese of Arlington granted his leave request “for the well-being of the Church and parish community.”

In a later statement, the diocese said “a freelancer reporter, who introduced herself as a parishioner, contacted the Diocese and stated that she learned that Father Aitcheson’s legal name matched that of a man arrested in the 1970s.”

“He came forward only after he was going to be exposed,” said the Butlers’ attorney Ted Williams.

He was sentenced for mailing threatening letters to Martin Luther King Jr.’s widow, Coretta Scott King, and for several cross burnings. He was also ordered to pay the Butlers \$23,000 in damages but never has. The diocese said it’s working with Aitcheson to make restitution. Source: *CBS News*, 8-23-17

Email: blackcollar@ffrf.org

FFRF improves experience online for our members

FREETHOUGHT BOOKS

By Tim Nott

At FFRF, we are always looking for ways to improve our membership experience. In the August issue of Freethought Today, we unveiled the Unpleasant Companion website (unpleasantgod.ffrf.org), the first of a series of updates to FFRF's digital offerings.

This time around, we're lifting the curtain on a much bigger project that began back in the summer of 2016: our new and much-improved online membership system. The system has allowed FFRF to enhance our service to members and will also allow for the development of new features for members to enjoy.

The system went live on March 1, and we have spent the last few months getting all of our staff comfortable with the new features. Now we are ready to launch a self-serve option for making donations, renewing one's membership, and updating information, such as change of address.

To access these features and more, our members will need to login with an account username and password.

We understand that keeping track of logins for all the services our members use can be overwhelming. To ease the pain, we have tried to make the system as user-friendly as possible — and we're always open to feedback on how to make the system better! Plus, we are focused on making the login a valuable tool.

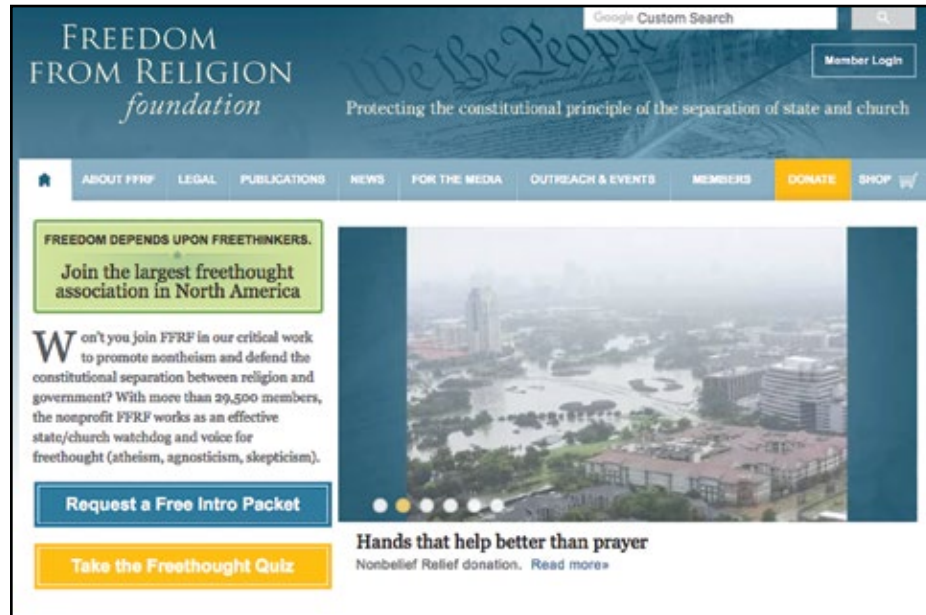
Here are some highlights:

- While FFRF has always had an option online to donate, join and renew, our new, reliable login feature makes those processes much faster and easier. No need to type in your contact information since it is already stored in the system.

- Members can also update personal information like a change of address, updates to communication preferences — including email subscriptions, and managing household members any time of day or night.

All of this also makes the organization more efficient, since less data entry means fewer typos. We pride ourselves on our extremely low administrative overhead.

In addition to what is already available, the login will be a member's pass to all-new, members-only



content and features. We are hard at work building FFRF's digital future.

If you would like to help test our digital products and give feedback on products under development, send an email to agnostech@ffrf.org (WARNING: Virtual hard hat required!).

We anticipate there will be questions about the new login. As always, you can contact FFRF with membership concerns at info@ffrf.org or call the main office line. But, here are some Q&As members might find helpful.

- Don't I already have a login?

If you created your login on or after March 1, then yes. Logins created on the prior version of our member database did not transfer correctly as the method by which we keep your password encrypted has been upgraded.

- How do I create a new-fangled login?

Go to ffrf.org and click the "Member Login" button in the top-right portion of the screen (see image of website at the top of the article).

Click the "Forgot Password?" link to retrieve either a username or a

password.

Follow the on-screen instructions to receive an email that will guide you through recovering your information.

- How do I retrieve my username and password?

Same as above. You will receive slightly different instructions based on what info you are missing.

- I'm logged in! What can I do?

There are several member information features available. One can:

- Donate, manage recurring donations, and review donation history.*
- Renew membership and update household member information.

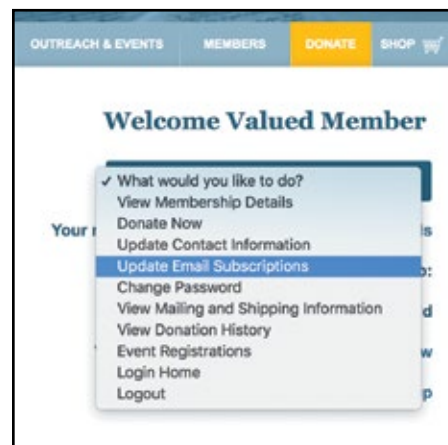
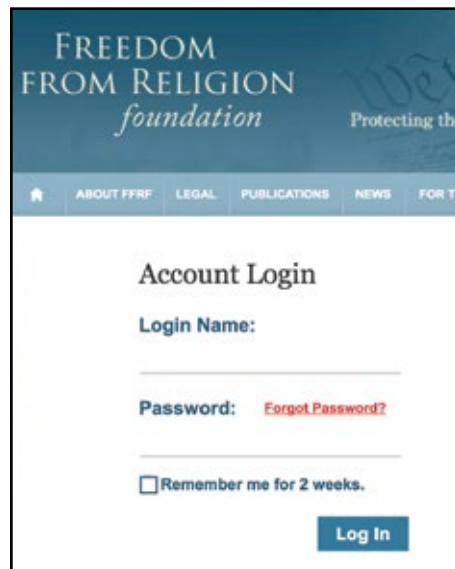
- Update your profile information and communication preferences, including how you'd like to receive Freethought Today.

- Check on your event registration information. (That might have been helpful last month!)

- Get the email content that matters to you. (See photo below.)

* We are still transferring donation history from our previous membership database. If you notice something amiss in your history, send an email to agnostech@ffrf.org.

Tim Nott is FFRF's digital product manager.

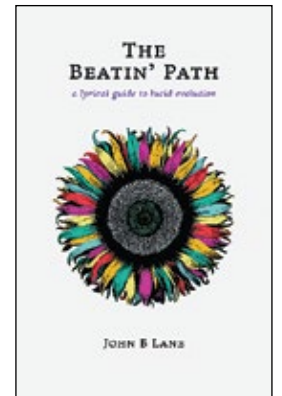


The following books have been received by FFRF members on the topics of religion or freethinking. FFRF does not do traditional book reviews.

The Beatin' Path: A Lyrical Guide to Lucid Evolution

By John B Lane
\$18.00 (paperback)

Which part of the human mind will finalize our fate? The part that wrote the Gettysburg Address — or the part that murdered Abraham Lincoln? *The Beatin' Path* levels a look at both the enemies of human progress and the better angels of our nature.

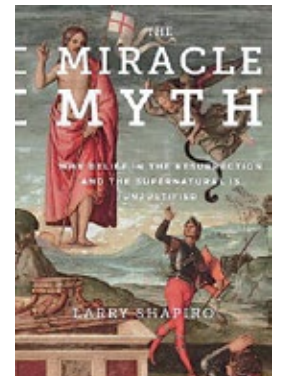


Presented in short bursts of truth, this book is an illustrated, inspirational kaleidoscope of poetry and prose, of heroes and villains, of humor and hope.

The Miracle Myth: Why Belief in the Resurrection and the Supernatural Is Unjustified

By Larry Shapiro
\$27.95 (hardcover);
\$15.49 (Kindle) 2016
Columbia University Press

Helping us to think more critically about our belief in the improbable, this book casts a skeptical eye on attempts to justify belief in the supernatural, laying bare the fallacies that such attempts commit. Through arguments and accessible analysis, Professor Larry Shapiro's investigation reminds us of the importance of evidence and rational thinking as we explore the unknown.



Our Lady of the Hot Mommas

By Rex Quinn
\$29.95 2017

In his book, a comedic novel of religious satire, the author tells a tale of the handmaid of Mary, the mother of God. But it's not "as blissfully idyllic as everyone has been led to believe." "When will she ever learn that the only way of finding inner peace is through unshackling the bond of hate by forgiving and not, for example, torching the police station?"



Woe to the Women: The Bible Tells Me So

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

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

Buy it from FFRF online shop.ffrf.org

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

Candle Power

Why fret about a little scandal?
Go to church and light a candle.

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

Buy it from FFRF online - shop.ffrf.org

Government free from religion is best

These are the remarks FFRF Co-President Dan Barker made to the Religion News Association convention on Sept. 7 in Nashville, Tenn. FFRF was a co-sponsor of the event.

Dan Barker

I see that Pat Boone is registered for this conference. I accompanied Pat Boone on the piano once, back in the early '70s at a huge Christian rally in Phoenix. At the time, I was an associate pastor in a California church, leading music worship and preaching. I am certain Pat Boone would never have imagined that that young man at the piano would go on to become the co-president of the largest association of freethinkers in the country, or that he would work with Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola to co-found The Clergy Project, which helps ministers, priests, rabbis and imams to leave the pulpit after they have abandoned belief in the supernatural. I call it "Save a Preacher."

After that rally with Pat Boone, I went on to pastor in two more churches. I was a missionary to Mexico, a cross-country evangelist, and a Christian songwriter with Manna Music, Word Music, and Gospel Light Publications, for whom I wrote vacation bible school musicals. In fact, I am still receiving royalties for some of those songs.

In 1983, after 19 years of preaching, I lost faith in faith. I threw out the bathwater and discovered there is no baby there.

Beginnings of FFRF

FFRF came into existence in the mid-'70s, initially as a result of feminism. Anne Gaylor, FFRF's principal founder, had been working for years for birth control, abortion rights and women's equality. During her activism, she noticed that the main organized opposition to women's rights was religion. The church was in league with the government, putting the brakes on progress.

So in 1976, the year of the bicentennial, Anne and her college-age daughter, Annie Laurie, formed a local group in Madison, Wis., working from their dining room table. After hundreds of people joined the group, the Freedom From Religion Foundation became a national educational nonprofit in 1978.

FFRF has two purposes: 1) to keep state and church separate, and 2) to



Presenting at the Religious News Association convention on behalf of FFRF were, from left, Andrew Seidel, Rebecca Markert, Amit Pal and Dan Barker, pictured with RNA Director of Marketing Wendy Gustofson. Seidel and Markert gave a legal panel and Pal spoke briefly.

educate the public about the views of nontheists. Not only are we people who are personally free from religion, but we also think the First Amendment mandates that our government should be free from religion.

I met Anne and Annie Laurie Gaylor on Oprah Winfrey's talk show in 1984. Annie Laurie and I were married in 1987, and in 2004, she and I were elected co-presidents of FFRF.

Today, with almost 30,000 members, FFRF has a staff of 25, including nine full-time attorneys. In the last two years alone, we have won eight lawsuits, not to mention stopping hundreds of state/church violations every year without going to court, simply by writing letters to government and school officials.

Complaints come to us

Contrary to what you may have read, we are not roaming the country looking for violations. We don't have to. The complaints come to us — thousands every year — usually from nonbelievers or people in a religious minority who are subjected to unwanted governmental religious intrusion.

We are not fighting religious freedom. We don't complain about nativity scenes in people's front yards or the Ten Commandments at a Christian school. We don't climb church steeples to remove crosses that are visible for miles.

We only sue the government. There is a difference between free speech and government speech. If the government promotes any religion,

that creates an "out group." The First Amendment, which prohibits any governmental action "respecting an establishment of religion" — was written precisely to protect the minority from the "tyranny of the majority," as John Adams and James Madison put it.

Not just an 'out group'

I'm sure everyone in this room knows that the fastest-growing religious identification in the country is nonreligion. Currently, about a fourth of the nation is nonreligious, and if we look at younger people, at Millennials, one-third do not identify with religion. This is clearly not an "out group." Our nonbelief is just as precious to us as religious belief is to church-goers.

Contrary to what you might hear, we atheists and agnostics are not "wallowing in despair," leading sad, empty lives. We simply don't see any good evidence or hear any good arguments for a god.

But more important, we don't see any need for a god. In this country, there are tens of millions of good people — and around the world, it is hundreds of millions — who lead meaningful, moral, joyful, productive, hopeful, loving and charitable lives without religion. Nonbelievers are songwriters and authors. We are in the police force, the fire department and the military. We are educators and entertainers, scientists and scholars, actors and artists, reformers and revolutionaries, doctors and dancers, nurses and Nobel Prize winners, filmmakers and philosophers.

We have an annual "Nothing Fails Like Prayer" contest. In light of the *Greece v. Galloway* decision that allows prayer at city council meetings as long as atheists are also welcome, we encourage nonbelievers to deliver a secular invocation at governmental events that include prayer. Each year, the winner is flown to our annual convention to deliver their secular invocation to us, in person.

Current lawsuits

And that touches on one of our current federal lawsuits. Although the Supreme Court and local governments recognize that atheists can participate in solemnizing a public meeting, the U.S. House of Representatives does not. The chaplain of the House, Father Patrick Conroy, has rejected the request of Rep. Mark Pocan to invite me to deliver a secular invocation before Congress. After putting up many

ad hoc roadblocks — which he has not done with other guest chaplains, and which I actually passed — Conroy finally said that the "prayers" before Congress must address a "higher power." In the draft of my invocation, which I sent to him, I point out that in the United States, there is no power higher than "We, the people."

As an officer of our secular government, Conroy's denial violates the Constitution, which declares there shall be "no religious test" for public office.

We are also suing President Trump over the executive order he signed on the National Day of Prayer, assuring religious leaders — after promising to "repeal the Johnson Amendment" — that they are now free to politicize from the pulpit. As you may know, in the government's motion to dismiss our lawsuit, it admits that Trump got it wrong. His executive order does nothing, changes nothing, and actually upholds the Johnson Amendment, which most religious organizations say they like. In any event, we think all nonprofits should be treated equally by the IRS.

Which is why we are also challenging the unfair IRS code that allows "ministers of the gospel" to exclude their housing expenses from income, lowering their tax liability. When I was a minister working for a church, a religious nonprofit, I got a nice tax break. But now that I work for FFRF, a secular nonprofit, I no longer get that advantage. The government should not be picking sides.

Don't stereotype atheists

When writing about nonreligion, be careful that you do not unwittingly stereotype atheists. We sometimes see headlines such as "Atheists outraged by city prayer" or "Nonbelievers furious at nativity scene," portraying us as a bunch of angry thin-skinned malcontents whose feelings are so easily hurt. In reality, we are defending a precious American principle. When Trinity Lutheran Church sued the state of Missouri over its refusal to pay for playground equipment, did the headlines scream, "Lutherans outraged over state denial!"?

When you are looking for balance, be sure that it goes both ways. I once flew to Seattle to be a guest on a TV show to talk about atheism, and when I got to the set, I discovered that not only was the host unsympathetic, but there was also a minister, priest, and rabbi — no joke — on the stage with me, all of whom were very talkative, crowding me down to only a minute or two to make my case.

When that same show does a story about religion, do they bend over backwards to invite an atheist or secular humanist — even just one? — for "balance"? A couple of years ago, Annie Laurie went on a Fox News show to talk about one of our lawsuits, and found that she was on with three long-winded theocrats — Bill Donohue, Todd Starnes and a priest, not to mention the hostile host Sean Hannity — leaving her time to squeeze in only a quick sentence or two. That was unfair and unbalanced.

But, that is free speech in the public sphere. In the public square, however, a secular government that is free from religion is our best hope for a world with less violence and more understanding.

NOTHING FAILS LIKE PRAYER CONTEST

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

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

MORE INFO AT:

ffrf.org/nothing-fails-like-prayer

Freethought wedding of Joan and Steve

FFRF Treasurer and State Rep. Steve Salemsen and Joan Wallace were married on Aug. 19 in Freethought Hall, FFRF's office in Madison, Wis., in a romantic, nonreligious ceremony. FFRF Co-President Dan Barker was the officiant at the service, held in the Charlie Brooks Auditorium. Here is the transcript of the ceremony:

Prelude

Joan's niece, Rose Wallace-Smith, will perform "The Song of Wandering Aengus," by W.B. Yeats, accompanied by her parents, Joan's sister Donna Wallace on the fiddle and brother-in-law Curt Smith on the guitar.

Introduction

A marriage and a wedding are two separate things. A marriage is a personal, private thing. A wedding is a public event, an announcement to the world. Joan and Steve have invited you to this wedding because they value each one of you and want you to witness their love and to celebrate with them as they join their lives together. Their lives are intertwined in the fabric of many other lives, and they cherish that fabric.

Invocation

An invocation is when we ask the help of someone outside of ourselves. Today, we are going to ask you, the family and friends of Joan and Steve, to give your support, approval, and love, as well as your intelligence, experience, and good will to this new marriage.

Song

Now, Joan's sister Carol Wallace will perform the song "Gracias a la Vida," by Violeta Parra, accompanied by Curt Smith on the guitar.

'Sermon'

I [Dan Barker] belong to a tribe of Native Americans, the Lenni Lenape. Part of the tradition of my ancestors is to view life as a cycle, as a series of repeating seasons rather than a straight line of history. In the book of Ecclesiastes, we find these words:

"To everything thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted. . . A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance."

So, now Joan and Steve would like to perform for you a lovely Israeli couple dance, "Dodi li."

Where does the cycle start? At what point do we say, "This is the beginning"?

Today is that beginning.

Promises

Joan, will you have Steve to be your wedded husband, to share your life with him, and do you pledge that you will love, honor, and care for him in tenderness and affection through all the varying experiences of your lives?

Joan: I will.

Steve, will you have Joan to be your wedded wife, to share your life with her, and do you pledge that you will love, honor, and care for her in tenderness and affection through all the varying experiences of your lives?

Steve: I will.



FFRF Treasurer Steve Salemsen and Joan Wallace exchange wedding vows, with FFRF Co-President Dan Barker officiating.

Vows

(A poem by e.e. cummings)

Joan recites:

i carry your heart with me (i carry it in my heart) i am never without it (anywhere i go you go, my dear; and whatever is done by only me is your doing, my darling)

Steve recites:

i fear no fate (for you are my fate, my sweet) i want no world (for beautiful you are my world, my true) and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant and whatever a sun will always sing is you

Both recite together:

here is the deepest secret nobody knows (here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows higher than soul can hope or mind can hide) and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart)



Joan and Steve performing an Israeli wedding dance.



FFRF's marquee celebrated the occasion.

Unity candle

Carl Sagan said, "We are all star stuff." And, in a very real sense, we are all little stars, each one burning and reburning the energy from the sun, radiating the energy of life in our own way. Today, Joan and Steve are shining for each other. True love embraces the differences between two burning stars — allowing each to contribute to the warmth and light that the fire of family life radiates — but it also amplifies the spark, creating a flame that is brighter and stronger than when the two were separate.

Now, will the ringbearers, Zoe Alice Salemsen and Connor Patrick Knuffke, please join us.

Rings

Joan: Steve, with this ring, I pledge my love.

Steve: Joan, with this ring, I pledge my love.



Pronouncement

Now that Joan and Steve have publicly pledged their love to each other before this community of witnesses, I hereby pronounce, by the authority vested in me and in accordance with the laws of the state of Wisconsin, that they are husband and wife.

Joan and Steve, you may now have your first kiss as a married couple.

Now Joan and Steve would like everyone to take hands in a circle and join them a simple Balkan line dance representing the connections that bind us all together.

Closing

I want to close with these words by "The Great Agnostic," Robert G. Ingersoll:

"Love is the only bow on Life's dark cloud. It is the morning and the evening star. It shines upon the babe, and sheds its radiance on the quiet tomb. It is the mother of art, inspirer of poet, patriot and philosopher.

"It is the air and light of every heart — builder of every home, kindler of every fire on every hearth. It was the first to dream of immortality. It fills the world with melody — for music is the voice of love.

"Love is the magician, the enchanter, that changes worthless things to Joy, and makes royal kings and queens of common clay. It is the perfume of that wondrous flower, the heart, and without that sacred passion, that divine swoon, we are less than beasts; but with it, Earth is heaven, and we are gods."



The wedding cake

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION
40th NATIONAL CONVENTION
 MADISON | SEPTEMBER 15-17, 2017

40TH ANNUAL | SEPTEMBER 15-17 | MONONA TERRACE CONVENTION CENTER



(A) The Forward! Marching Band performed for FFRF convention guests during the Tailgate Party dinner on the rooftop of the Monona Terrace and Convention Center in Madison, Wis., on Sept. 15. The Wisconsin State Capitol looms in the background. (B) FFRF Co-President Dan Barker sings and plays the piano during the Friday evening welcoming session. (C) The wildflowers on the rooftop gardens made for a nice backdrop for photographer Ingrid Laas and sculptor Zenos Fudakis during the Tailgate Party. (D) Rows of chairs were in place prior to the start of the convention. (E) FFRF sold many of its “Unabashed Atheist” pins during the two days. (F) Flowers brightened up the open house at Freethought Hall. (G) FFRF Attorney Liz Cavell describes one of FFRF’s legal victories during her presentation as part of the “Legal Accomplishments” portion of the convention.



A member peruses a book in the Joel B. Landon and Wanda Y. Beers Freethought Library.

Freethought Hall



Open House



Lifetime Member Francois Boucher kneels over his engraved brick in the Rose Zerwick Memorial Garden and Courtyard.



FFRF Director of First Impressions Lisa Treu, right, welcomes Michael and Carolyn Golojuch of Hawaii to FFRF's open house in Madison, Wis.



Guests check in to the conference in the Anne Nicol Gaylor lobby of Freethought Hall on Friday, Sept. 15, during the all-morning open house, with more than 450 visitors!



Lifetime Member Claudette StPierre of Colorado holds a discussion with FFRF Communications Coordinator Lauryn Seering and FFRF Editorial Assistant Molly Hanson in the Patrick O'Reiley editorial wing.



Judy Bell and Brian Cislak, both of Wisconsin, make a Mimosa toast in the Charlie Brooks Auditorium.



Life Members Diane and Stephen Uhl of Arizona chat with FFRF Attorney Ryan Jayne. The legal wing is named for Diane and the new studio for Stephen.



George Naidl and Barbara McClelland of Arkansas stand in front of the Atheist in Foxhole monument in the Rose Zerwick Memorial Garden and Courtyard.



FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line takes a photo of K.C. and Krishnaveni Goranthla of Indiana posing with FFRF's life-like Charles Darwin mannequin in the freethought library.



FFRF Lifetime Members, from left, Stefan and Jane Shoup of Wisconsin, Dr. Rachel Shoup and Joe Rogers, both of California, enjoy the warm September weather in the Rose Zerwick Memorial Courtyard.



FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne takes a break from playing the Steinway piano, a gift from Diane Uhl, to talk with a member.

FFRF's Annual 'Clean Money' Drawing



The winners of this year's "clean money" are: Lifetime Member Judy Lansky of Arkansas and Carolyn Golojuch of Hawaii, who each won four Buffalo nickels from 1934-1937, donated by Steve Dippolito of Colorado; Nancy Brehm of Arizona, \$1 Series 1935G, donated by Paul Swanson of Minnesota Atheists; Lifetime Member Matthew Sypherd of Illinois, who won both a \$1 Series 1935F, donated by Nancy

Harris of Wisconsin, and \$1 Series 1935E, donated by JoAnn Kremers of Minnesota; Lifetime Member Aleta Ledendecker of Tennessee, \$2 Series 1928G, donated by Raymond Greebank of Ohio; Shane Scott, \$2 Series 1928D, donated by Lamar and June Hankins of Texas; Lifetime Member Larry Tanner of Connecticut, \$5 Series 1934D, donated by Charles and Sheri Bender of Indiana; Lifetime Member

Laura Rothkopf of Pennsylvania, \$10 Series 1934A, donated by Warren Smith of New York; Lifetime Member Tom Kozlovsky of Wisconsin, \$20 Series 1934A, donated by Ray W. Johnson of Nevada; Lifetime Member Larry Wright of Illinois, \$50 Series 1950E, donated by Lynne Hills of Connecticut; and grand prize winner Carolyn Golojuch (again!), \$100, Series 1934, donated by "a Tennessee member."



"Clean money" drawing emcee Buzz Kemper speaks with, from left, Sidney Novak, Mulan Blum and Kelly Helton as they picked winners from the chances wheel. FFRF Co-President Dan Barker announced the winners, and FFRF Editorial Assistant Molly Hanson, right, helped with the wheel. Winners (see above) won money that was printed prior to 1957, when the words "In God We Trust" were added. Thanks to Todd Peissig and Eric Lawrence for handling ticket sales.

Meet the Freedom From Religion Foundation's Executive Board



Front row: Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker, co-presidents.

Middle row: Stef Moritz, secretary; Jim Zerwick, director; Cheryl Kolbe, director; Joseph Cunningham, outgoing director.

Back row: Mike Cermak, director, Stephen Hirtle, chair; Steve Salemsen, treasurer; Todd Peissig, director.



FFRF Awards



Maryam Namazie’s dramatic convention speech had the audience in rapt attention as she detailed the horrors of being a secularist in Muslim countries. She is a London-based ex-Muslim, an Iranian-born secularist, feminist and human rights activist. Maryam received the \$10,000 Henry H. Zumach Freedom From Fundamentalist Religion Award from the very benefactor himself.



Author Katha Pollitt, the respected and influential columnist for The Nation, received FFRF’s Forward Award. Katha is an FFRF honorary director.



Paula Poundstone accepted the Emperor Has No Clothes Award from FFRF Co-President Dan Barker.



Cara Santa Maria, an award-winning journalist, science communicator, television personality, and podcaster of “Talk Nerdy with Cara Santa Maria,” received FFRF’s Freethought Heroine Award from FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert.



Freethought Today Editor PJ Slinger, left, presents Tom Waddell with 2017’s Nothing Fails Like Prayer Award, for his freethought invocation before the Maine House.



Jesse Castillo, left, was named one of FFRF’s “Freethinkers of the Year,” as a plaintiff in FFRF’s successful lawsuit against Brewster County, Texas, to remove Christian crosses on police vehicles. FFRF Attorney Sam Grover presented the award.



Jerry Bloom was named one of FFRF’s “Freethinkers of the Year.” He was the plaintiff in FFRF’s successful lawsuit versus the city of Shelton, Conn., filed to stop censorship of FFRF’s winter solstice display. He’s pictured with FFRF Attorney Ryan Jayne.



Marie Schaub was named one of FFRF’s “Freethinkers of the Year,” as the successful plaintiff in FFRF’s lawsuit against a Pennsylvania school district over a Ten Commandments monument outside her daughter’s school. Attorney Patrick Elliott bestowed the award.

FFRF’s 2017 State Representatives



FFRF’s State Representatives gathered at the Madison, Wis., convention to participate in their annual meeting. Front row (seated): Douglas Marshall, Mich.; Todd Peissig, Wis.; Mikel Hensley, Ky.; Annie Laurie Gaylor, Wis.;

Dan Barker, Wis.; Stephen Hirtle, Pa.; Michael Cermak, Pa.; Fairfid Caudle, N.Y. Back row: Cheryl Hofbauer, Ill.; Claudette StPierre, Colo.; Chris Calvey, Wis.; Ken Hofbauer, Ill.; David

Williamson, Fla.; Ed Hensley, Ky.; Cheryl Kolbe, Ore.; Steve Salemsen, Wis.; Dianne Cooper, Iowa; Steve Trunk, Calif.; Paul Novak, Iowa; Ken Eck, Minn.; Stefan Shoup, Wis.; Jane Shoup, Wis.; Pamela Morris, Mont.;

Aleta Ledendecker, Tenn.; Kevin Gough, Conn.; Robin Buckallew, Neb.; Gary Stormo, S.D.; Stef Moritz, Wis.; Bonnie Stormo, S.D.; Sheridan Chapin, N.Y.; Rob Moore, Wis.; Darrell Barker, Wash.



Brent Michael Davids' speech was titled, "Do You Know an American Indian Atheist?" Davids is a citizen of the Mohican Nation and a multi-award-winning composer of concert music and film scores.

Convention Speakers



Kelly Helton, 13, a middle school student, earned FFRF's Thomas W. Jendrock Student Activist award for taking a stance against religious promotion in her school.



Zenos Frudakis, the renowned sculptor, spoke to the FFRF convention crowd about how he created the Clarence Darrow statue for FFRF that now sits on the lawn of the Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton, Tenn.



Kimberly Veal's convention speech was titled, "Metamorphosis." She is the president of People of Color Beyond Faith, and of the Black FreeThinkers Radio Network.



Comedian Julia Sweeney, the final speaker, dissected several recent religious-themed movies she watched (so we didn't have to!) and had the audience laughing at the silliness of it all.



Steven Pinker, FFRF's honorary president, gave the audience a preview of his upcoming book, *Enlightenment Now*, showing how the world has progressed in almost all measures of health and prosperity, due in part to humanist values.



Michelle Goldberg held the audience's attention for an hour on the topic of "Donald Trump and Christian Nationalism." She is the newly appointed columnist for The New York Times.



Roy Zimmerman performed several of his irreverent songs for the convention attendees. He has written a series of satirical musical revues and toured extensively at the nation's major folk venues.



FFRF's Attorney Liz Cavell, Program Assistant Kristina Daleiden and Digital Product Manager Tim Nott are all smiles at the start of the convention.

FFRF Staff & Volunteers



Communications Director Amit Pal, left and Freethought Today Editor Emeritus Bill Dunn take a stroll outside during the Tailgate Party.



Administrative Assistant Monica Schwartz listens to a member at the check-in table at the Monona Terrace Convention Center.



FFRF administrative staff welcome members to the convention and got them checked in. From left, Director of Operations Lisa Strand, Administrative Assistant Monica Schwartz, Director of First Impressions Lisa Treu, Membership Manager Jackie Douglas and Bookkeeper Eleanor McEntee.



Legal Fellow and Photographer Chris Line and Attorney Patrick Elliott work the literature table, which included copies of Freethought Today.



Video Director Bruce Johnson checks the sound levels during a speech.



FFRF's legal team includes Patrick Elliott, Madeline Ziegler, Rebecca Markert, Sam Grover, Liz Cavell, Andrew Seidel and Ryan Jayne.



Photo by Andrew Seidel
Clerical Assistant Renee Oberhart works a sales table.



Membership Manager Jackie Douglas chats with a member during check-in.



Buzz Kemper handles all the audio during the convention.



FFRF Volunteer and Board Member Todd Peissig works the "Clean Money" table, offering tickets for members to have a chance to win pre- "In God We Trust" money.



Communications Director Amit Pal, Attorney Sam Grover and Legal Fellow Colin McNamara helped sell books, including Steven Pinker's *Better Angels of Our Nature*.



FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker emceed the 40th annual convention.



Staff members, from left, Editorial Assistant Molly Hanson, Legal Assistant Whitney Steffen, Attorney Ryan Jayne, Communications Coordinator Lauryn Seering and Freethought Today Editor PJ Slinger gather for a photo at a sales table.

Convention Moments



Members of the Forward! Marching Band perform on the Monona Terrace rooftop (above and at right) during the Tailgate Party dinner.



Ed and Mikel Hensley, co-presidents of FFRF Kentucky, brought their daughter Cosima to her second convention.



Donald Ardell of Florida gets animated during the "Moment of Bedlam" at the Saturday "Non-Prayer Breakfast."



Photo by Chris Line
Lifetime Member Henry Zumach, right, stands with his grandson, Kyle Heisler. Henry has endowed the Freedom From Fundamentalist Religion Award, which this year went to Maryam Namazie.



Photo by Andrew Seidel
Enjoying the warm Madison weather during the Tailgate Party are, from left, FFRF Board Member and Lifetime Member Todd Peissig of Wisconsin, Life Member Eric Lawrence of Illinois, Board Member Stephen Hirtle of Pennsylvania and Board Member Michael Cermak of Pennsylvania.



Members laugh at the antics of the Forward! Marching Band during the Tailgate Party on Sept. 15.



Bumper stickers, books, pins, T-shirts and a whole lot more were for sale during the convention.



During the convention, science communicator Cara Santa Maria, standing, hosted a town-hall style television production for FFRF featuring members from all over the country.

Photos by Ingrid Laas

I stand with Darwin!



Photos by Chris Line

Convention speakers Maryam Namazie (above), Brent Michael Davids (center) and Cara Santa Maria (right) were all happy to get their photo taken with the life-size mannequin of Charles Darwin in the Freethought Library.

Freethinkers ‘ahoy’

FFRF’s convention shoves off with Madison lake tours



The Betty Lou, as seen from the motoryacht Excellabella, on scenic Lake Monona.



Passengers board the Betty Lou and the Excellabella at the Machinery Row boat launch site on Lake Monona.

About 150 FFRF members enjoyed relaxing and scenic boat rides on a beautiful day prior to the start of the convention on Friday, Sept. 15. FFRF rented all four Betty Lou Cruise boats simultaneously: the Betty Lou, the Betty Lou II, the Grand Mariner and the Excellabella. Two of the boats traversed Lake Monona, which included gorgeous views of the Monona Terrace and Convention Center, site of FFRF’s convention, and two others cruised Lake Mendota on the other side of Madison’s isthmus. A delicious lunch of clam chowder, sandwiches, salads and dessert bars were included.



Steve and Sheila Schmitz have their picture taken as a yacht approaches the Monona Terrace Convention Center on Lake Monona.



“We hope to put sunshine in your smile and spring in your heart.”
—Betty Von Rutenberg



Conventioners chatting with ‘Clarence Darrow’ sculptor Zenos Frudakis (right) seated on the bow of the Excellabella.



Two convention attendees enjoy a cup of Betty Lou’s famous clam chowder.



Guests relax on the open bow of a yacht on Lake Monona.



Nautical embellishments warm the interior of one of the four yachts.



The comfy interior of one the Lake Monona yachts with snacks served (right).



A convention-goer takes it all in from the foredeck of the yacht Excellabella.



FFRF cruise guests seated on the upper deck of the Excellabella enjoy a spirited discussion.

Photographs by PJ Slinger