

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



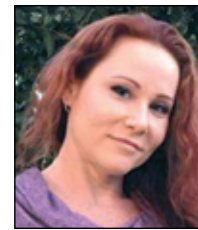
**Graduate / 'older'
student essay
contest winners**

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**Why do we
portray atheists as
broken believers?**

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**The bible
taught me that
God is a jerk**

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Associated Press

President Trump shows off the “religious freedom” executive order he signed on May 4, 2017, in the Rose Garden, surrounded by members of the faith community and Vice President Pence.

New Treasury report vindicates FFRF’s stance on politicking ban

FFRF welcomes a new report highlighting deficiencies in the IRS’ enforcement of a rule that prohibits churches and other 501(c)(3) nonprofits from engaging in electioneering.

The U.S. Department of the Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration — which is an independent arm of the federal government that oversees the IRS and acts as an IRS watchdog — recently published a report criticizing the IRS for failing to enforce the politicking ban, known as the Johnson Amendment, and for employing subjective standards to determine what constitutes political activity.

“This report confirms what FFRF has been warning about for years,” comments FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “While most (c)(3) nonprofits follow the law, many churches

openly flout the law and are not held accountable.”

The report is particularly timely because President Trump and Vice President Pence continue to repeat their lie about “destroying the Johnson Amendment,” a provision FFRF has long worked to uphold.

In May 2017, FFRF sued Trump over his executive order on religious freedom, an order that he claimed “stops the IRS from revoking a church’s or nonprofit’s tax-exempt status if it chooses to support a political cause.” Trump signed the executive order with great fanfare during a National Day of Prayer ceremony in the Rose Garden before a largely clerical audience. He said: “This executive order directs the IRS not to unfairly target churches and

See Politicking on page 3

FFRF sues IRS on behalf of Nonbelief Relief

Preferential treatment given to churches over annual financial report

FFRF is taking the Internal Revenue Service to court over yet another religion-related tax privilege.

The national state/church watchdog filed a federal lawsuit Oct. 10 in D.C. district court to challenge the preferential exemption of churches and related organizations from reporting annual information returns required of all other tax-exempt groups. The defendant is David J. Kauter, acting IRS commissioner.

The plaintiff is Nonbelief Relief, a humanitarian group created by FFRF’s executive board in 2015 as a separate 501(c)(3) entity for atheists, agnostics and freethinkers to remediate conditions of human suffering and injustice on a global scale “whether the result of natural disasters, human actions or adherence to religious dogma.” That relief includes assistance to individuals targeted for nonbelief, secular activism or blasphemy.

The IRS refused a request by Nonbelief Relief to be excused from registering the annual Form 990, which cited the discriminatory

treatment of churches vis-à-vis other tax-exempt nonprofits. Nonbelief Relief’s tax exemption was revoked on Aug. 20 for failure to file the Form 990 return for three consecutive years. Nonbelief Relief “has and will suffer harm, detriment and disadvantage as a result of the revocation of its tax-exempt status, including tax liabilities and loss of charitable donations which are no longer tax-deductible by donors.”

Nonbelief Relief is asking the court to reinstate its tax-exempt status, and to enjoin the IRS from continuing to preferentially exempt churches and

other affiliated religious organizations from annual information filings required of other 501(c)(3) nonprofits.

From 2015 through August 2018, Nonbelief Relief has given out nearly \$600,000 in charitable grants — work which will now be injured and imperiled by the government’s actions.

The significant tax benefits to charitable organizations under the IRS code include exemption from federal income taxes and deductibility of donations for income-tax purposes, incentivizing contributions. In return, tax-exempt groups are expected to annually show that they deserve to retain these benefits by filing the Form

See IRS on page 19



Survey: Secular voters could offset Religious Right

Editor’s note: This survey and article were completed prior to the Nov. 6 election.

A new survey of 8,500 secular voters reveals a bloc of highly educated, frequent voters determined to counter the Religious Right’s hold over the U.S. government and who would strongly support nonreligious candidates.

FFRF conducted the digital survey of registered United States voters in early October to help educate the public about secular voters in advance of the 2018 midterm elections in early November.

“The Religious Right controls all three branches of government, but secular voters are fired up like never before and ready to vote,” says FFRF

Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Our survey shows that politicians can tap into this potent force with the right message, and leave the religious pandering behind.”

According to Pew Research, one-quarter of Americans and one-third of Millennials are now nonreligious, but of the 535 members of Congress, only one — California Rep. Jared Huffman — is openly nonreligious.

When asked why so few atheists or other nonbelievers are serving, more than half of FFRF’s respondents cited widespread discrimination against atheists, and more than a third cited a belief that many atheists are

See Survey on page 24

Question 4 (8,736 total responses)

What is the most dangerous threat to the separation of church and state?

ANSWER CHOICES:

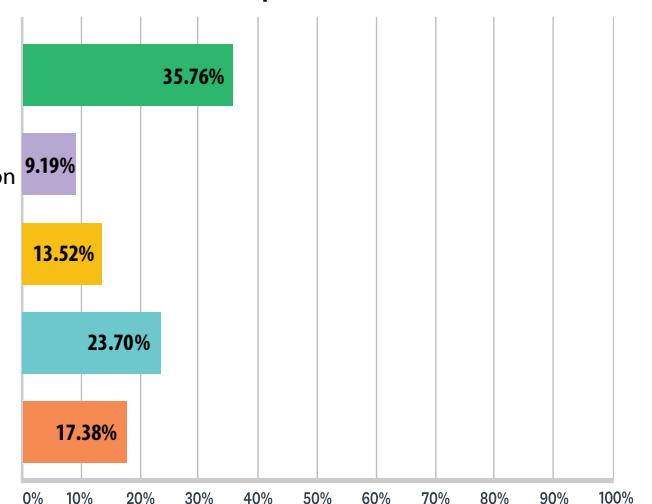
President Trump's Supreme Court nominees

Betsy DeVos's religious takeover of public education

FOX News & the Christian Nationalist echo chamber

"Religious Freedom" bills in state legislatures across the U.S.

Political inaction of freethinkers



Freedom From Religion Foundation survey

Supreme setback won't deter FFRF

This column first ran on the Free-thought Now! blog at patheos.com/blogs/freethoughtnow.

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

The suspenseful on-again, off-again confirmation hearings were grueling, raising hope until the end that despite all the odds, Brett Kavanaugh might be defeated. His unfortunate confirmation as the newest Supreme Court justice is a game changer for our causes and our country. Shortly after the U.S. Senate shamefully approved Kavanaugh, a photograph was tweeted of an older woman poignantly crying at the site of the protests in Washington, D.C. She was asking: “How are we going to find the strength to keep fighting? Are we going to be out here for another 30 years? I don’t have 30 years left.”

I, too, was sickened watching the male-dominated U.S. Senate ignore the will of the people and confirm a man who stands against true religious liberty and women’s rights, a nominee whom more than 2,400 law professors opposed, and whose behavior even prompted former Justice John Paul Stevens at age 98 to speak out against his confirmation. Like the woman in the photograph, I, too, know that everything I’ve spent my life working for — abortion rights, freethought, secular government — is imperiled.

We at the Freedom From Religion Foundation have been heart-warmed by support since Kavanaugh’s confirmation, from individuals and freethinkers who’ve sent emails, messages, new memberships and donations, telling us they know what a vital role FFRF has played and will need to play in the future. Thank you. We cannot tell you how much your messages and your support mean.

FFRF’s important purpose of guarding the separation between religion and government deeply intersects with women’s battle for reproductive liberty. As FFRF’s principle founder Anne Nicol Gaylor sagely observed: Without separation of church and state, the battle for women’s rights “would never end, because the root cause of the denial of those rights was religion and its con-



trol over government. Unless religion is kept in its place, all personal rights will be in jeopardy.” Abortion rights on the Supreme Court have been hanging for years by a 5-4 thread, and now with Kavanaugh replacing Anthony Kennedy, it looks dubious that “religion will be kept in its place” on our highest court.

Dangers of new court

This is the appointment we’ve been dreading for years — the essential takeover of the Supreme Court by a majority of Religious Right justices that could last at least a generation. The dangers Kavanaugh poses to true religious liberty and the work of FFRF can’t be overstated. From the moment that Kavanaugh’s nomination was announced, FFRF has rigorously documented his extremist positions, rulings and work.

This is a judge who concurs with former Chief Justice William Rehnquist that the vaunted constitutional wall of separation is a “bad metaphor,” who actively intervened trying to undo decades of Supreme Court precedent against school-imposed prayer, and who has sided with Catholic and religious organizations against abortion

and contraceptive rights. The Christian Supremacists aren’t playing around. Led by zealous Vice President Mike Pence, who journalists Michael D’Antonio and Michael Eisner call “The Shadow President” in their chilling new biography, today’s emboldened Christian Nationalists in and out of our government openly seek to repeal or cripple *Roe v. Wade*, even the right to contraception, and to do away with 65 years of firm Supreme Court precedent against the imposition of devotions and prayer upon a captive audience of schoolchildren, among other agendas.

The Christian Nationalists who openly scorn our secular government and Constitution have become emboldened since the 2016 election. As President Trump stacks the federal district and appeals courts with more and more extreme appointments, it is simply inevitable that the courts will grow increasingly hostile to Establishment Clause freedoms. Although nothing comes easy in our work to protect the wall of separation, FFRF has been able to generally rely on strong Supreme Court precedent protecting the freedom of conscience of young, impressionable school children and their parents from government-fostered religious indoctrination. Kavanaugh’s appointment and Trump’s lower court selections will have a chilling effect on liberal judges, just as it emboldens reactionary ones.

We’ve already witnessed this in our current winning case over a 34-foot cross in a park in Pensacola, Fla. Even though we’ve triumphed at the district and ap-

peals court levels, both courts took the unheard of opportunity to actively urge higher courts to overturn precedent they are bound to follow but disagree with. We’ve never seen anything like this before.

Not an abstraction

This case law is not an abstraction to us. We know, admire and work with many of the champions of the First Amendment who have brought and won Establishment Clause challenges before the Supreme Court. Vashti McCollum, who brought the winning lawsuit, *McCollum v. Board of Education* (1948) against religious instruction in the public schools that all the other school-related Supreme Court decisions are built on, was an FFRF honorary director and friend. Her son, Jim, the erstwhile young boy pressured and bullied to attend religious classes that brought about the landmark challenge, is now himself a retired constitutional attorney and FFRF Lifetime Member. Ellery Schempp, who as a high schooler protested bible reading in his public schools and brought about the resounding ruling *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* (1963), is also a friend and FFRF Lifetime Member.

We knew Roy Torcaso, another FFRF honorary director, who brought *Torcaso v. Watkins* (1961) affirming Article 6, Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution that there can be no religious test for public office. Ishmael Jaffree, the Supreme Court victor in *Wallace v. Jaffree* (1985), who successfully challenged prayer in the guise of meditation in Alabama schools, was FFRF’s first Freethinker of the Year in 1987.

We were honored to meet the Weisman family that sued over clergy prayer at public school graduations, winning their case, *Lee v. Weisman* (1992). They became FFRF’s Freethinkers of the Year. William Cameron Stone, the attorney who fought and won the landmark case, *Stone v. Graham* (1980), is a longtime FFRF Life Member. Other Establishment Clause greats we knew included Alton Lemon of the famed “Lemon Test,” who won that famed 1971 case that Kavanaugh has declared he wants to overturn.

Every day, our nine constitutional attorneys invoke these cases.

While political winds may shift every two to four years, terms on the Supreme Court are for life. But already there is speculation about how a Democratic Congress could add justices or otherwise take action to dampen the power of a Religious Right-controlled Supreme Court.

And let’s not forget what the younger woman replied as she photographed the crying woman despairing over the prospect of losing decades of progress for civil liberties in our nation: “I’ll be here. I’ll keep fighting.” So, with your help, will FFRF.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-president of FFRF.

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FREETHOUGHT
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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

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
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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.
Published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online
shop.ffrf.org

FFRF’s editorial assistant is a woman of action (alerts)

Name: Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey
Where and when I was born: Madison, Wis., in 1995.
Education: I graduated from UW-Madison in 2017 and majored in journalism and mass communication and political science with a certificate in gender and women’s studies.
Family: Both my parents still live in the house I grew up in and my two older sisters also live in the area.

How I came to work at FFRF: A very lucky Google Jobs search!
What I do here: I am the editorial assistant and have a pretty wide range of responsibilities. I am a part of the Strategic Response Team, so I work closely with our Legal Team to coordinate all of our Action Alerts, as well as our responses on developing news. I assist Communications Director Amit Pal with a number of press releases and coordinate sending those to media. I write up the FFRF legal victories for Freethought Today. I also manage most of the content on FFRF’s Twitter page, as well as jump in on other random tasks as I am needed.

What I like best about it: I like getting to work across teams and have a hand in so many different areas of the work we do. I also love having the opportunity to help people get involved and take action on important issues.
What gets old about it: Keeping up with social media can be a bit draining on days when there is an overwhelming amount of bad news.
I spend a lot of time thinking about: Climate change and also the prevalence of ugly typefaces.
I spend little if any time thinking



Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey

about: Professional athletics.
My religious upbringing was: Non-existent. I never went to church or observed a religion and my parents always championed my curiosity and discernment. I am so grateful for that.

My doubts about religion started: I never had a religion to doubt. But, when I pronounced the “p” in “psalm” during a class presentation once and everyone snickered, I started to get the inkling there was something I missed.
Things I like: Graphic design, traveling and reading about history.
Things I smite: When people say, “I just don’t read the news, it stresses me out!” and decaf coffee.
In my golden years: I will have outgrown my dog allergy as everybody has promised me I will someday and will own three English Cream golden retrievers and have a full library in my house.

Politicking

Continued from page 1

religious organizations for political speech.”
Trump also told churches that, with his new order, they would not lose their tax exemption for violating the rule and could say whatever they wanted: “This financial threat against the faith community is over. . . . You’re now in a position where you can say what you want to say.”
FFRF won that lawsuit. Trump’s own Department of Justice explained to the court that the executive order did not do what Trump claimed and, in other words, that Trump was all talk.
The Washington Post, in an article cheekily titled, “Critics said Trump’s ‘religious liberty’ order does nothing. The administration’s lawyers seem to agree,” explains: “Department of Justice attorneys defending the order argued in court that it doesn’t change any existing laws or alter any policies to benefit churches or clergy.”
That lawsuit was not FFRF’s first to seek enforcement of the Johnson Amendment. FFRF sued in 2012 because the IRS had failed to fill the position that enforces the politicking rule against churches. That case was settled in FFRF’s favor in 2014, when the IRS demonstrated it had resumed investigations of political churches. FFRF renews its claims of nonenforcement in

its newest lawsuit against the IRS filed Oct. 10 in D.C. District Court on a related matter of preferential treatment. (See story on page 1.)
Despite FFRF’s lawsuits and Trump’s attorneys admitting that he lacked authority to overturn the Johnson Amendment, the report reveals that the IRS has been ignoring a multitude of complaints alleging illegal tax-exempt politicking. The IRS’ own watchdog reviewed a sample out of more than 6,500 complaints between July 2015 and August 2016 and determined that “a significant number of allegations involving impermissible political activity were not forwarded to the [investigative body] as required.”
The report looks at 11 sample complaints that should have been submitted for further review because they alleged impermissible political activity. None of them were.
The reports recommends several sweeping changes to IRS practices so that churches and other tax-exempt organizations will be held accountable when they break the law.
FFRF is a national state-church watchdog with more than 32,000 members. Its purposes are protecting the constitutional separation between state and church, and educating the public about matters relating to nontheism.

OVERHEARD

Until they allow professional investigators inside the secret archives, there will be no real transparency. They are incapable of handling this internally.
Jeff Anderson, a Minnesota lawyer who has handled many sex-abuse lawsuits, commenting on plans announced by U.S. Catholic bishops, which notably don’t include stopping their lobbying against expansion of statutes of limitation laws.
Associated Press, 9-19-18

The bottom-line is that while church and state are formally separated, religious legislators are still driven by their religious beliefs when voting in the Senate on all issue areas. This mechanism circumvents the formal separation of church and state and brings religion into politics through the back door.
Daniel Arnon, Emory University professor, who did a study called “The Enduring Influence of Religion on Senators’ Legislative Behavior.”
PsyPost, 9-26-18

The extremists have shown what frightens them the most — a girl with a book.
Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani activist and the youngest Nobel Prize laureate, after 12 schools were burned to the ground in Pakistan in early August.
Twitter, 9-19-18

What is really at stake here is less about the identity of these petitioners and more about curtailing the grand jury act and protecting powerful institutions like the Catholic Church.
Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro, speaking about the lawsuit in the state Supreme Court to make public the names of those who had their names redacted from the grand jury report.
Washington Post, 10-7-18

There are a lot of ways to express gratitude and appreciation for the country and its citizens. This is how I plan to do that.
Stevon Cook, new president of the San Francisco School Board, after beginning the board meeting with a

quote from Maya Angelou rather than reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. Cook said he plans to select quotes from a range of inspirational Americans to begin future meetings.
The Hill, 10-11-18



Rachael Denhollander

The damage done [by abuse] is so deep and so devastating, and a survivor so desperately needs refuge and security. The question an abuse survivor is asking is “Am I safe?” and “Do I matter?” And when those in authority mishandle this conversation, it sends a message of no to both questions.
Rachael Denhollander, after telling her church leaders that former SGC president C.J. Mahaney’s return to ministry was inappropriate because he had covered up sexual abuse within the church in the past. (Denhollander was also the first to go public with accusations against Larry Nassar of Michigan State University, who was sentenced for molesting hundreds of girls.)
Washington Post, 10-11-18

There is no God. No one directs the universe. For centuries, it was believed that disabled people like me were living under a curse that was inflicted by God. I prefer to think that everything can be explained another way, by the laws of nature.
Theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking, in his posthumous book, Brief Answers to the Big Questions.
CNN, 10-16-18
There’s a public face of this government, which is very protective of religious liberty, and then the real work they’re doing is only protecting the religious liberty rights of those who are religious conservatives, not of religious progressives.
Katherine Franke, director of the Public Rights/Private Conscience Project at Columbia Law School, following the arrest of Scott Warren, a U.S. citizen, for harboring two Central Americans. Warren said his faith compels him to offer assistance to people in dire need.
NPR, 10-18-18

FREETHOUGHT OF THE DAY

“I had left God behind years ago. I was an atheist. My moral compass was within myself, not in the pages of a sacred book.”

Ayaan Hirsi Ali
Infidel (2007)

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Would you like to start your day on a freethought note? “Freethought of the Day” is a daily freethought calendar brought to you courtesy of FFRF, highlighting birthdates, quotes, and other historic tidbits.

If you would like to receive the “Daily Freethought,” e-mail us at info@ffrf.org.

HEADS UP

A Poetry Column By Philip Appleman

EVE

Clever, he was, so slick
he could weave words into sunshine.
When he murmured another refrain
of that shimmering promise, “You
shall be as gods,” something with wings
whispered back in my heart,
and I crunched the apple—a taste so good
I just had to share it with Adam,
and all of a sudden
we were naked.
Oh, yes, we were nude before, but now,
grabbing for fig leaves, we knew
that we knew too much, just as the slippery
serpent said—so we crouched all day
under the rhododendrons, trembling
at something bleak and windswept in our bellies
that soon we’d learn to call by its right name:
fear.
God was furious with the snake
and hacked off his legs on the spot
And for us
it was thorns and thistles,
sweat of the brow, dust
to dust returning. In that sizzling
skyful of spite whirled
the whole black storm of the future:
the flint knife in Abel’s heart,
the incest that swelled us into a tribe,
a nation, and
brought us all, like driven lambs,
straight to His flood.
I blamed it on human nature, even then,
when there were only two humans around,
and if human nature was a mistake,
whose mistake was it? I didn’t ask
to be cursed with curiosity, I only wanted
the apple,
and of course that promise—to be
like gods. But then,
maybe we are like gods.
Maybe we’re all exactly like gods.
And maybe that’s our really original
sin.

From *Perfidious Proverbs and Other Poems: A Satirical Look At The Bible*

© Philip Appleman.

Philip Appleman is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Indiana University. He is editor of the Norton Critical Edition of *Darwin*. He and his playwright wife, Marjorie Appleman, are both “After-Life” Members of FFRF.



FFRF welcomes new Life Members

FFRF is excited to announce our 34 newest Lifetime and After-Life Members.

Our new After-Life Members are John De Lancie, Ray Stefanski and Donald T. Tober. An After-Life Membership is a \$5,000 donation for those who want their donation to “live on” after them.

FFRF’s newest Lifetime Members are Peter Antonowicz, Ruth Bragman, Jeremy J.G. Brown, Rick B. Brumfield, Alice Byers, Doug Campbell, Tom Cara (2nd Time Lifer), David Carter, Tom Gengler, Geoffrey Gervase, Chris Hagen, Michael B. Healy, Bruce Johnson, Jamila Kisses, John Mayer, James A. Mayo, John McIntyre, Paul Premack, John Roberg, Johann C. Rode, Dan Selle, Ivan Smith, Judith L. Smith, Gayle Teague, Vicki Wallshein, Jerry Walters, Laurian Webre, Gene Werden, Laurie Wermter, Warne White and Craig C. Wruck.

States represented are Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Washington and Wisconsin. Individual Lifetime Memberships are \$1,000, designated as membership or membership renewal, and are deductible for income-tax purposes.

Studying the bible turned Wes Bieritz into anti-theist

Name: Wesley G. Bieritz.
Where and when I was born: Born in 1936 in a small farming town in northern Illinois.
Family: I have been married three times and widowed twice. I have three daughters by my first wife Laurel; and seven grandchildren.
Occupation: I’m a retired veterinarian, having graduated from the University of Illinois in 1963.
Military service: I served in the Army Reserves for 5 1/2 years.



Wes Bieritz

My doubts about religion started: I was born into a Lutheran farm family in Illinois where my dad was a sharecropper. I was baptized, confirmed and married as a Lutheran and was a devoted churchgoer for decades. I thoroughly enjoyed the camaraderie and the music in my church family.

After graduating and working as a veterinarian in central Illinois, I was asked to teach an adult Sunday school class. I reluctantly agreed, but as my studies into the bible progressed, I found serious questions regarding the New Testament. Then, after years of reading and study I became an anti-theist. I’ve maintained that belief status to this day despite living, working and retiring in a Christian community for more than 50 years. However, like many nontheists today, I struggle with my beliefs in my relationships with my Christian friends.

These are a few of my favorite things: I am an enthusiastic tennis player and

a devoted barbershop singer and have sung in a barbershop chorus and several barbershop quartets over the past 50-plus years. I’m still active in my community serving on our county board as well as on several other significant boards.

Person in history I admire and why: I admire the work of Richard Dawkins, the late Christopher Hitchens, Richard Carrier and Sam Harris and the hundreds of other remarkable people who have opened our world to biblical research, secular archeology and to reason.

Ways I promote freethought: It is my hope that my gift will help FFRF to pry open the minds of the people of the world from the clutches and oppression of organized religions that paralyze minds and inhibit progress. There is no greater cause! Perhaps my contribution to FFRF’s Legal Fund will encourage others to do likewise.

MEET A MEMBER

Freethought Today caption contest!



Chris Benedict spotted this sign at an auto dealership in Independence, Mo. To enter the contest, please write a humorous or witty caption for this photo. Email your response to caption@ffrf.org by Nov. 28. The winner, chosen by FFRF staff, will receive an FFRF T-shirt! We will announce the winner and top runners-up in the December issue.

Yip Harburg, from his book: Rhymes for the Irreverent

Illustrated by Seymore Cwast



Shall I Write A Letter To My Congressman?

Each Congressman has got two ends,
A sitting and a thinking end,
And since his whole success depends
Upon his seat — why bother, friend?

Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation

Buy it from FFRF online - shop.ffrf.org

Why do we portray atheists as broken believers?

This article was first published Sept. 19 in Washington Square News, the student newspaper of New York University. It is re-published with permission.

By Mickey Desruisseaux

One of this fall’s new TV shows is CBS’s dramedy “God Friended Me,” the premise of which is exactly what the title suggests. An aggressively atheistic podcaster named Miles (Brandon Micheal Hall) accepts a friend request on Facebook from the big guy upstairs.

‘God’ starts suggesting more friends for doubtful Miles to add, whom he starts running into almost immediately afterward in real life. Each of



Photo courtesy of CBS
Mickey Desruisseaux

them has problems that Miles seems uniquely attuned to solving, and each, in turn, seems to possess a quality that can teach Miles something about the world around him. But while the schmaltzy premise is surprisingly well executed, the pilot episode ends up reinforcing a paradigm in which belief is viewed as the norm, disbelief as an aberration and atheists as errant members of the flock waiting for a shepherd to guide them home.

It turns out that, as the son of a pastor, Miles was a devout child until his mother was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer. He prayed endlessly for God to cure her, only for her to die in a car accident after making a miraculous full recovery. The tragedy shattered Miles’ faith and his relationship with his father, pushing him into becoming



Photo courtesy CBS

“God Friended Me” is a new TV show on CBS about an atheist who gets a friend request from God on Facebook.

the oh-so-sour atheist he is today. I nearly chucked my laptop across the room, before remembering that in the real world, exaggerated displays of exasperation are pretty expensive.

In a vacuum, this wouldn’t be a bad storytelling decision; I’ve known a few people in my life who’ve lost their faith for similar reasons. But when you consume enough media, you start to pick up on some of the tropes that keep rearing their heads regarding vocal atheists. Atheists are usually smugly lording their supposed intellectual superiority over people of faith, or faux-Nietzschean nihilists hell-bent on world destruction. And while Miles’ depiction as an ex-believer nursing his faith within a cocoon of cynicism is not quite as bad as that, it can be just as harmful, because these dynamics begin to bleed back into the real world and negatively affect people’s perceptions of the nonreligious.

About 10 to 25 percent of Americans identify as atheist, agnostic or otherwise nonreligious. But studies show that the general populace distrusts nonbelievers’ morality. Of the 535 current mem-

bers of Congress, exactly one identifies as religiously “unaffiliated.” No professed atheist has ever been appointed to the Supreme Court, nor has one ever been elected president. Don’t count on it happening anytime soon, either. Gallup polls have suggested an atheist candidate would enjoy less support than a candidate from any other religious group in the country, even in an age of resurgent neo-Nazis and judicially upheld travel bans that are Definitely Not Targeted Toward Muslims. Americans may not trust believers equally, but we distrust nonbelievers most of all.

But there’s no reason to. No one’s born with an innate knowledge of the catechisms and doctrines underpinning the world’s major religions; it’s something we’re either taught as children or discover and embrace later on. Some people never experience either, and still, others decide later in life that the framework they’re used to no longer suits them for reasons entirely unrelated to a personal tragedy. Either is perfectly fine, and neither is the equivalent of rejecting morality outright. Atheists are no more

prone to good or evil behavior than anyone else of any other faith, and evidence suggests that America’s pervasive anti-atheist attitudes make people less likely to express their doubt in the divine.

The marketing for “God Friended Me” claims that it wants to spur conversations about faith without prescribing a concrete answer, and it’s a very worthy goal. It would’ve been better served with a prickly, but still a fundamentally good main character whose atheism was a result of a self-directed reflection on the big questions, and whose possible turn to faith was another step in that journey.

Choosing to root his disbelief in childhood trauma instead feels like a wasted opportunity to showcase that a life without belief in God can be every bit as moral and meaningful as a life with one. It’s very possible that some twists lie ahead for Miles, including whether or not he’s actually been friended by God. But after its first episode, it feels very much like the show is already steering him, and the conversations it wants to foster, in a particular direction.

I’m pulling for “God Friended Me,” in no small part because it stars one of my favorite actors, Joe “Monologue” Morton, as Miles’ estranged father. In an age of hyperpolarized animosity driven in no small part by social media, there’s something comforting about a show that wants to represent it as a force for good and speaks to our better angels. I’ll be back when it premieres to see how Miles’ journey toward Personal Growth™ and quite possibly True Love™ plays out.

Here’s hoping that viewers of all stripes understand that you can find both of those things without being a believer.

Mickey Desruisseaux is a student at NYU’s School of Law. He was a political science major with a creative writing minor.

THEY SAID WHAT?

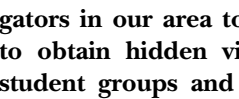
The devil is the “Great Accuser, who roams the Earth looking for ways to accuse.”

Pope Francis, who asked for daily prayers to protect the Catholic Church from what he says are “attacks by the devil.” The Vatican wouldn’t say if Francis was referring to its former ambassador, Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, who has thrown the papacy into turmoil by accusing Francis of rehabilitating ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick from sanctions imposed by Pope Benedict XVI over accusations he slept with seminarians.

Associated Press, 9-29-18

Sadly, Bossier schools will have to endure this legal harassment from the atheist groups for a while now, so everyone needs to be prepared.

Louisiana state Rep. Mike Johnson, who claims that “atheist litigation groups in California have contacted private investigators in our area to try to hire them to obtain hidden video of Christian student groups and activities at Ben-



Mike Johnson

ton High School and potentially other Bossier Parish schools.”

RollCall.com, 9-19-18

There are a lot of things behind it that have nothing to do with government. They have things to do with . . . things like removing God from the public square.

Sen. Ted Cruz, in a debate with Texas Senate candidate Beto

O’Rourke, talking about mass shootings after being asked about gun safety.

C-Span, 9-21-18

It’s a kind of theocracy run by atheists, where the minor, smallest peccadillos from your teen years are now disqualifying.

Fox News bloviator Tucker Carlson on the Brett Kavanaugh hearings.

Friendly Atheist, 10-4-18

Is it right to hire a hit man to solve a problem? You cannot, it is not right to kill a human being, regardless of how small it is, to solve a problem. It is like hiring a hit man to solve a problem.

Pope Francis, speaking about abortion

in St. Peter’s Square for his weekly general audience.

The Irish Times, 10-10-18

This man does not need this job, he took this job because God provided him the intellect he has to help our country and to help the world. . . . I love that he mentions God. He has a family. He respects people — whether people disagree with that or not.

Sister Maryann, a nun, speaking about President Trump to a reporter during Trump’s rally in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Channel 4 News, 10-10-18

There is a bent toward throwing off the rule of God.

Corona (Calif.) City Council member Randy Fox, who called the local November election “a spiritual battle” and said to vote for three Christian pastors who are “running together” for council.

Los Angeles Times, 10-13-18

It’s a lot of state workers, a lot of government workers, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Freedom From Religion Foundation is here. This is a very liberal city and a high percentage of people here promote the gay agenda.

Steve McConkey, president of 4 Winds USA, complaining about Madison, where the federal court there ruled that it’s discriminatory for insurance cover-

age to fail to cover gender reassignment surgery for a government employee.

OneNewsNow, 10-15-18



Jody Hice

in the battle that we’re facing, which at the heart is a spiritual battle.

U.S. Rep. Jody Hice of Georgia, on wanting to end the Johnson Amendment.

Right Wing Watch, 10-16-18

SES [Southern Evangelical Seminary] is delighted to be able to offer Christians both here and overseas this unique opportunity to be taught by one of the most significant evangelical leaders of the past half-century.

Richard Land, speaking about Paige Patterson, who is set to teach, ironically, a Christian ethics course. Patterson is the former president of Texas’ Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary who was fired in May over his handling of seminary students’ rape allegations.

Religion News Service, 10-4-18

The bible taught me that God is a jerk

By Erin Louis

Warm, safe, snuggled in my bed and listening to my one of my brothers reading to me, I shivered with absolute terror. Death and destruction surrounded a small family while they desperately tried to rescue two of each kind of animal from certain death on a handmade boat. A huge storm and flood was coming that was guaranteed to kill every living man, woman, child and animal, with the noted exception of this family and the animals they could rescue.

The scariest thing? I believed it to be true. This was no Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella or other made-up fairy tale, this supposedly really happened. Why did it happen? Because all the people and animals that God created were bad and had to die. And that wasn't all. Because they were bad, not only would they drown, but they would also burn and suffer forever in a really bad place called hell. At 4 years old, I realized I needed to be good or I would go to hell and burn forever, too.

This story was supposed to teach me morals, but instead it taught me that God was a jerk. I knew that people could be jerks and I supposed that maybe they deserved this punishment. But what did all those animals do? Did they go to hell, too, or was their punishment simply being drowned? Did they not love God enough either?

Of course, I heard all about how good people like my wrinkly old auntie Margaret went to heaven, where they lived in the clouds with all the other good people. Even with the promise of heaven, the punishment seemed a little harsh, and to a little kid, absolutely petrifying.

I would also come to learn during endless Sunday mornings that it wasn't just innocent animals that would suffer God's wrath, but anyone who simply didn't believe in him would also burn in hell. God would sentence you to an afterlife where a red-horned devil would endlessly poke you in the behind with his pitchfork.

My thoughts went to the little kids around the world who were taught to believe in other gods than our own Christian one, or worse yet, no god at all. Would God punish them for simply not knowing about the true god they were supposed to worship? The nice lady at my Sunday school said "Yes, indeed, they would suffer in hell if they didn't believe." From a very early age, I learned to be afraid of, and to obey this very powerful jerk. I was taught to fear God.

Then, one day, while playing with my plastic ponies and pondering life, I thought, "If I am only being good so I can go to heaven and not go to hell, am I really being good?" And then an even more horrifying thought occurred to me: "What if God finds out I'm only being good to avoid hell? Will he punish me for that too?"

Panic enveloped me at that point. I knew that if I was bad I could ask for forgiveness and still go heaven, but what if I died right before I had a chance to? I could just see the red guy with the horns and pitchfork twisting his black mustache, wearing an evil grin, hoping for me to steal a cookie just before getting hit by a bus. What if I thought I was being good, but God decided that I was just pretending so that I wouldn't go to hell? Was anybody really good if



Erin Louis

they were only doing it to go to heaven and not hell? Could this just be some sort of sick game God was playing and we would all really end up in hell? He did, after all, drown the whole world.

I thought once again that this God fellow was a real jerk, then I knew I was definitely going to hell. God loves me and all the sinners, I was told, even the ones he had to send to hell. Somehow, that information failed to provide any comfort or alleviate my anxiety.

Christmas revelation

On Dec. 25, 1986, my world would come crashing down. I was 6, and had awoken early, just like every other Christmas morning, and rushed out to the family room to see what Santa had brought. Properly threatened with hell, I had been a good girl all year. Despite my best efforts, the space under the tree was bare. I had failed; I was bad. No presents meant I had upset Santa, and likely God, too. I would have no new toys and I would almost certainly be going to hell. I began to cry.

My mother heard me and came out of her room to find a devastated little girl sobbing in her pink Care Bear nightgown. "I have to tell you something," she said. She then explained that Santa Claus was a story, and she had been the one that put out the presents every year, and this year, she simply forgot.

I felt deceived and angry. Those feelings dissipated quickly after I opened the box which held what would be my very most prized possession for the next three years. My brand new My Little Pony beauty parlor made forgiving my mother for her deception and forgetfulness easy enough. Santa Claus as a story to get kids to behave made sense, if a little messed up, and I could accept the ruse. However, my belief in this jerk otherwise known as God was another story.

Were these stories of heaven and hell also a way to get people to be

good? I was not bold enough to ask the question of the adults, but the seed of doubt had now been planted and would soon grow into a big beautiful tree of logic and reason, and surprisingly, personal morality.

If there was no God, devil, heaven or hell, which I now suspected to be the case, why be a good person at all? Why were there not an enormous number of robbers and murderers running around the world? I knew there were bad people, but it would seem to me that if everyone suspected like I did that there was no God, why weren't there more bad people than good? Most of the people I knew were nice and good. I was only 6 and thought I was pretty smart, but I couldn't be the only one to wonder if God was just a scarier version of Santa Claus.

No longer as scared of the big bad red guy with the lake of fire and pointy stick, I left most of these questions unconsidered for a while. After all, there were a few plastic ponies with hair in dire need of braiding.

Morality from within

The question of my own personal morality ended up answering itself for me. After a particularly grueling day of elementary school, I spotted my big brother's elderly cat in our backyard. Princess was hobbling a little too close to the edge of the pool, and, in my bad mood, I decided I would push her in. She howled and cried as she splashed around in the clear blue water. I immediately fished her out and started to dry her off and tried to console the poor old thing. As she looked up at me with her large milky confused eyes, I knew that I never, ever, wanted to do something like that again. I had watched Jiminy Cricket on TV and had a basic understanding of what a conscience was, but this was real world experience not a cartoon.

Never before had I felt such crippling guilt. I'd swiped a coin or two from the coffee can in my brother's closet, stuck a finger in a birthday cake, then carefully smoothed over the hole, but never before had I deliberately caused a living being such fright and pain.

At that moment I was the lowest of the low, the very worst person on the face of the planet. If anyone in the history of the world deserved to be poked in the butt for all of eternity with sharp stick, it was me at that moment. That was when I knew I didn't need God to be good. I simply didn't want to be a bad person. I didn't like

the way it made me feel, and I couldn't stand the look in that poor cat's eyes. There wasn't a big bad boogiemán in this world or beyond that could make me feel as bad as when I did when I pushed that cat into the pool. I understood very clearly that I was very capable of understanding right from wrong without silly scary stories.

My 40th birthday is lurking around the corner, and since my great moral epiphany at age 6, I have done some things that wouldn't be considered good. But, for the most part, I am proud of my life and the good I do for other people. When I have done things that are wrong, I have no one or nothing to turn to for absolution. I can't march down to the church and tell a guy behind a screen what I did, mutter a few words and, poof, that dark ugly lump of guilt is magically gone. When I do something wrong, that feeling stays with me, like an ugly stain on a favorite sweater. It reminds me not to do it again. The same thing is true when I do things that are good. That feeling stays with me and reminds me I like doing good for other people.

Teaching my son how it feels to do good for other people also makes me feel good. He is 13 and has never lived with the concept of a reward or punishment in the afterlife, although my husband and I do use real-world rewards and consequences. For instance, a donut after a vaccination, or a loss of his Xbox for a week for saying a four-letter word. He knows that we give blood on a regular basis for the simple fact that it helps people. He knows of and has an active role in which charities we donate to. We celebrate Christmas as a time to give to each other and appreciate what we have. So far it seems we have managed to raise a moral human being without the fear of God or the devil.

When I donate blood, money or time, it makes me feel good. When I make someone smile when they're having a rough day, maybe saving some poor old cat from the same fate as Princess, it makes me feel good. I don't need the threat of punishment or promise of reward in an afterlife that I'm not sure even exists to do good for other people. I just need to know that deep down, I don't like being a jerk.

FFRF Member Erin Louis lives in northern California with her husband and son. She's a classically trained pastry chef, writer and unabashed atheist.

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IN THE NEWS

Freethought Caucus expands rapidly

The Congressional Freethought Caucus is growing quickly. In April, Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Calif., the only openly nontheistic member of Congress, announced the formation of the Congressional Freethought Caucus to focus on promoting secular values and give a voice to freethinking voters. Other founding members of the Congressional Freethought Caucus include Reps. Dan Kildee, D-Mich., Jerry McNerney, D-Calif., Mark Pocan, D-Wis., and Jamie Raskin, D-Md. In the few months since then, the caucus has doubled in size. With Reps. Steve Cohen, D-Tenn., Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., Hank Johnson, D-Ga., Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., and Eleanor Holmes Norton, D-D.C., joining in to defend science and rationality, the Congressional Freethought Caucus has now achieved double-digit membership.


EPA to dissolve office that advises on science

The Environmental Protection Agency plans to dissolve its Office of the Science Adviser, a senior post that was created to counsel the EPA administrator on the scientific research underpinning health and environmental regulations, according to a person familiar with the agency's plans. The person spoke anonymously because the decision had not yet been made public. The science adviser works across the agency to ensure that the highest quality science is integrated into the agency's policies and decisions, according to the EPA's website. The move is the latest among several steps taken by the Trump administration that appear to have diminished the role of scientific research in policymaking while the administration pursues an agenda of rolling back regulations.

Atheist loses challenge against 'so help me God'

The Naturalization Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America will continue ending with the words "so help me God," after an unsuccessful legal challenge to its constitutionality. Olga Paule Perrier-Bilbo filed a federal lawsuit against the United States last year. Perrier-Bilbo, a French citizen, has lived in Massachusetts since 2000 and wanted to become an official U.S. citizen. Her application was approved and the oath was the final step. Because she's an atheist, though, she

Freethought award winners



U.S. Rep. Jerry McNerney and FFRF's Greater Sacramento Chapter President Judy Saint each accepted a prestigious award at the annual California Freethought Day on the grounds of the State Capitol building on Oct. 14.

McNerney helped found the Congressional Freethought Caucus to promote legislation based on science and reason and was honored with the Freethought Day Award. Saint received the Freethought Day Community Service Award for "vigorous promotion of secular values to the Sacramento community, the media and elected officials, while tirelessly defending secular rights."

McNerney spoke about the urgency for defending secular values in legislation, saying "I do not come before you as an atheist, but as a defender of reason." Saint says McNerney privately thanked her for her service, which she says encouraged her. She spoke to the audience about an event in childhood that taught her to have a positive attitude about taking on problems rather than assuming they are someone else's responsibility. She says she "takes life by the horns" and this attitude helps her be a happier, more optimistic person.

said she could not "in good conscience include those words in her oath." But U.S. District Judge William Young of the District of Massachusetts said in his ruling that while Perrier-Bilbo had proper standing, her arguments weren't convincing. Was the phrase "so help me God" a violation of the Establishment Clause? No, Young said, because it was ceremonial and a "well-established tradition."

Senator sued for blocking atheists

American Atheists has filed a lawsuit against Arkansas state Sen. Jason Rapert for blocking four Arkansas residents on Facebook and Twitter after they made statements critical of his policy positions. The lawsuit itself cites Rapert saying he blocks "liberal extremists," rather than using neutral criteria. It also mentions how, even though profanity is listed as a reason Rapert might ban someone from seeing his social media posts, users who curse but agree with his views have not been banned. Neither have people who agree with Rapert but "encourage oth-

ers to commit criminal acts," "disparage others for their religious views," or "accuse others of crimes."

Atheist group forms in Utah middle school

The Secular Student Alliance broke new ground by getting its first middle school chapter. Bailey Harris, 12, has begun one at Open Classroom Charter School in Salt Lake City, Utah. Bailey, who was a speaker at FFRF's convention in San Francisco and earned FFRF's Richard and Beverly Hermesen Student Activist Award, has written a book, with her father Doug, *My Name is Stardust*, the first in a series. Doug told Hemant Mehta ("The Friendly Atheist") that "Bailey is most excited by the idea of creating a safe community for secular students at her school," Mehta writes. "There are so many secular students that feel that they are alone and she believes that this will help them find each other and build a positive community. . . She feels that having SSA on campus will help secular students feel that they are a part of something special as well."

Few young adults identify with Church of England

The Church of England is facing severely reduced numbers, with only 2 percent of British young adults identifying with it, while seven out of 10 of those under age 24 say they have no religion, according to the British Social Attitudes survey. Church of England affiliation is at a record low among all age groups, and has halved since 2002, according to the survey. And far fewer actually attend church services on a regular basis. Meanwhile, the trend toward a sec-

ular society has increased over recent years. The BSA survey found that 52 percent of people had no religion in 2017, compared with 41 percent in 2002. While the figures are starkest among younger people, in every age group the biggest single group are those identifying with no religion.

Woman is denied her miscarriage prescription

A Michigan woman wants a pharmacy to discipline a Petoskey pharmacist and implement a company-wide policy for how pharmacists should handle religious and moral objections to dispensing medication after she was denied a prescription to help complete a miscarriage. Rachel Peterson, 35, alleges a pharmacist at the Meijer store refused to fill her prescription for misoprostol in July because of his personal religious views. She says he also refused to transfer the prescription to another pharmacy. Misoprostol can be used to prevent stomach ulcers and also can be used to induce labor during pregnancy, to aid in the completion of a miscarriage and in the treatment of postpartum hemorrhage. When combined with another drug, it can be used to induce an abortion.

Group to spend \$1M probing cardinals

"The Better Church Governance Group," an organization that includes six former U.S. cardinals on its board of trustees, announced that it would spend more than \$1 million over the next year to investigate every current member of the College of Cardinals — the people who elect popes — in an effort to shine a light on anyone credibly accused of child sexual abuse or covering up that abuse. The goal is to produce a comprehensive report by April of 2020, presumably while Pope Francis is still in office and before his successor is chosen. Organizers say it will be conducted by a team of nearly 100 researchers, academics, investigators and journalists.

Court: Belfast bakery can refuse to bake cake

Britain's Supreme Court supported the right of a Belfast bakery to refuse to bake a cake with a message supporting same-sex marriage, finding that its Christian owners could not be compelled to reproduce a message contrary to their beliefs. Although the person who requested the cake was gay, a five-judge panel found that the bakery owners' refusal was based not on sexual orientation, but on their Protestant faith's opposition to gay marriage. "There was no discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation," said the judgment, which overturned the rulings of two lower courts. It cited the United States Supreme Court's decision in June in favor of a Colorado baker who had refused to create a wedding cake for a gay couple, a narrow decision that left open the larger question of whether a business can discriminate against gay men and lesbians based on First Amendment rights.

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New York City	WPIX-IND	(Ch. 11)	8:30 a.m.
Phoenix*	KASW-CW	(Ch. 61)	8:30 a.m.
Portland	KRCW-CW	(Ch. 32)	9:00 a.m.
Sacramento	KQCA-MY	(Ch. 58)	8:30 a.m.
Seattle	KONG-IND	(Ch. 16)	8:00 a.m.
Washington, DC	WDCW-CW	(Ch. 15)	8:30 a.m.

*(In Phoenix: Ch. 61 or 6 or 1006 for HD)

Go to: ffrf.org/news/freethought-matters for more information

FFRF NEWS

Court dismisses FFRF case on standing, not merits

A federal court judge has dismissed a lawsuit by FFRF and three local plaintiffs against a Texas justice of the peace who imposes prayer at the beginning of court sessions.

FFRF and three plaintiffs directly affected by Montgomery County Justice of the Peace Wayne Mack's religious rituals filed suit in March 2017, naming him in his official capacity and Montgomery County. U.S. District Court Judge Ewing Werlein, Jr., for the Southern District of Texas in Houston, issued a ruling on Sept. 28.

The court dismissed the case based on standing (or right to sue), not on the merits.

Werlein said FFRF could not sue Mack in his official capacity, then dismissed FFRF's claims against Montgomery County, saying the county has "no power to stop Mack from employing the prayer practice to which plaintiffs object" because the Texas



Wayne Mack

Constitution establishes county commissioners courts.

Werlein dismissed the case without prejudice, meaning FFRF can refile the case, naming Mack in his personal capacity.

"This decision does not bless Mack's unconstitutional actions, or

in any way get him off the hook," explains FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. She said FFRF will study the decision and confer with local plaintiffs who continue to be injured by the prayer practice, to decide how best to remedy the violation.

Both of the attorney plaintiffs have appeared before Mack multiple times on official business, including "Jane Doe," a Christian who "objects to a government official telling her when or how to pray" and "John Roe," a self-employed attorney who regularly represents clients in front of Mack, and who "is religiously unaffiliated and objects to being subjected to religious prayers" in a courtroom.

Mack, as Montgomery County justice of the peace, has jurisdiction over minor misdemeanor offenses and lesser civil matters.

All three of the individual plaintiffs felt compelled to remain in the court-

room during Mack's prayers at risk of jeopardizing their cases and careers, or their clients' cases.

Mack, a graduate of the Jackson College of Ministries, where he majored in theology, ran for justice of the peace in 2014 on a platform of reinstituting religious values within the office, partly by implementing a chaplaincy program. He established a volunteer chaplaincy program involving "visiting pastors" who start each of his court sessions with prayer, within his first weeks of office.

FFRF first sent a complaint letter to Mack in 2014 asking him to cease his courtroom prayers, receiving no reply, then filed a formal complaint with the Texas State Commission on Judicial Conduct, whose investigation lasted over a year. In November 2015, the commission declined to discipline Mack, citing lack of authority but cautioning Mack to end or substantially change the practice.

Work it at the circuit



Oral arguments were heard Oct. 18 before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia in *Barker v. Conroy*, FFRF's case against House Chaplain Patrick Conroy and Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, who oversees the chaplain program. Pictured are Attorney Richard Bolton, who wrote the appeals brief, FFRF Director of Strategic Response Andrew Seidel, who gave the oral argument, and FFRF Co-President Dan Barker, plaintiff. FFRF seeks to open up our nation's legislative chambers to atheists and freethinkers after being denied by Conroy. FFRF has documented that Conroy relies on many "guest chaplains," with such guests delivering about 40 percent of invocations, or more than 800 in the past 15 years. Yet when an atheist was invited to give the opening remarks, Conroy imposed discriminatory requirements. Barker was initially invited by his member of Congress, Rep. Mark Pocan, D-Wis., to give an invocation, before being barred as an atheist by Conroy.



Oral arguments were heard Oct. 24 before the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Chicago in FFRF's historic clergy housing allowance challenge, *Gaylor v. Mnuchin*. Pictured are FFRF Patrick O'Reilly Legal Fellow Chris Line, Associate Attorney Patrick Elliott, outside litigator Richard L. Bolton and tax law Professor Adam Chodorow, who both represented FFRF in the oral arguments, and plaintiff and FFRF Co-President Dan Barker.

FFRF has won a historic victory in district court declaring unconstitutional a provision in the Internal Revenue Code that preferentially permits "ministers of the gospel" to subtract from taxable income a housing allowance paid as part of their salary. The special privilege amounts to \$700 million a year in lost revenue, and increases the take-home pay of some pastors by up to 10 percent. The 1954 law was enacted, according to the sponsor, to reward ministers for "fighting godlessness," which FFRF points out is not a secular purpose.

Peoria newspaper editorial backs FFRF on school prayer

An editorial in the daily newspaper of Peoria, Ill., strongly supported state-church separation when commenting on a case involving FFRF.

A district parent reported to FFRF that the Dunlap High School boys cross country coach joins his team in a group prayer prior to each meet. The prayer is reportedly initiated by a student but the team's coach participates by standing with the students and holding his hat across his heart during the prayer, making any students who opt out feel like they are disappointing their coach.

It is well-established law that it is illegal for public school coaches to lead their teams in prayers, or to otherwise promote religion to students. Additionally, the U.S. Supreme Court has routinely struck down school-sponsored prayer.

On Oct. 6, the Journal Star of Peoria backed FFRF's claim when it ran an editorial titled, "Separation of church and state must be respected."

"In today's America, we are learning the hard truth of what it means to be an individual and to demand your rights, as well as the cost of not being one of the group, even if your rights are outlined in the Constitution," the

editorial began. "Feedback from that story leaned toward commenters saying the parent should get over it. But that's not what the law states," the editorial continued.

"The Constitution allows for keeping religion out of public business, including in schools and government buildings. Simply put, religious views should not be forced upon an individual or their children while they are in school."

FFRF did receive word from the district's law firm that "unintentional constitutional violations can occur if actions of school representatives cross the line from showing deference and respect to actually 'endorsing' religious exercises. In that regard, we have counseled school representatives to insure that the coaching staff maintains an appropriate distance from any student initiated prayer circle so not to send any unintended message that the district endorses the religious exercise."

The Journal Star concluded its editorial with strong words of constitutional truth.

"However unintentional, a change needed to be made. Separation of church and state is the law and should be acknowledged and respected."

“Separation of church and state is the law and should be acknowledged and respected.”

— Journal Star of Peoria

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FFRF urges belief in science with new billboards

In October, FFRF placed 14-by-48-foot billboards in Atlanta and Denver that state, “In Science We Trust,” which is a secular play on the national motto. “‘In God We Trust’ is a johnny-come-lately motto adopted by Congress during the Cold War,” FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor points out. “The motto, to be accurate, would have to be worded, ‘In God *Some* of Us Trust,’ and that would be very silly.”

In Atlanta, the billboard is up at the corner of Marietta Street and Simpson Street. That billboard is part of a year-long media campaign in the South’s most bustling metropolis. FFRF is grateful for the support of Georgia FFRF Member Jack Egger, who is graciously funding the campaign.

Egger notes that it’s satisfying to counter the godly motto, “In God We Trust,” which optionally appears on many Georgia license plates.

“If all of us had faith in science and humanism, we would improve life on Earth so fast,” urges Egger.

FFRF and Egger additionally have two rotating billboards featuring pic-



FFRF’s newest advertising campaign includes the “In Science We Trust” billboards that were placed in Atlanta and Denver in October.

tures of several young atheists with the message, “I’m Atheist & I Vote.”

One of these digital billboards is located along Highway 141 just north of McGinnis Ferry Road. The second is located along Interstate 75 just south of Delk Road.

Previous billboards that FFRF and Egger have placed this year in the vicinity include a bulletin telling people to “Enjoy life — there is no afterlife,” a timely billboard reminding residents

of our nation’s foundational wall with the message, “The only wall we need is between church-state,” and a provocative message proclaiming, “supernatural belief — the enemy of humanity.”

In Denver, the billboard is on the corner of Broadway and Fourth Avenue. FFRF Member Monty C. Cleworth generously funded the billboard.

“With a host of real and pressing challenges facing society today, our leaders need to be making evi-

dence-based policy decisions,” says Cleworth. “Our world would be quickly improved if we all gave up supernaturalism in favor of belief in science and humanism.”

This is the second billboard message in the Mile High City hosted by FFRF this fall. In September, with the help of the Denver chapter of FFRF, the “I’m Atheist & I Vote” billboard went up on the corner of Lincoln Street and Eighth Avenue.

DOJ begins probe of Catholic Church

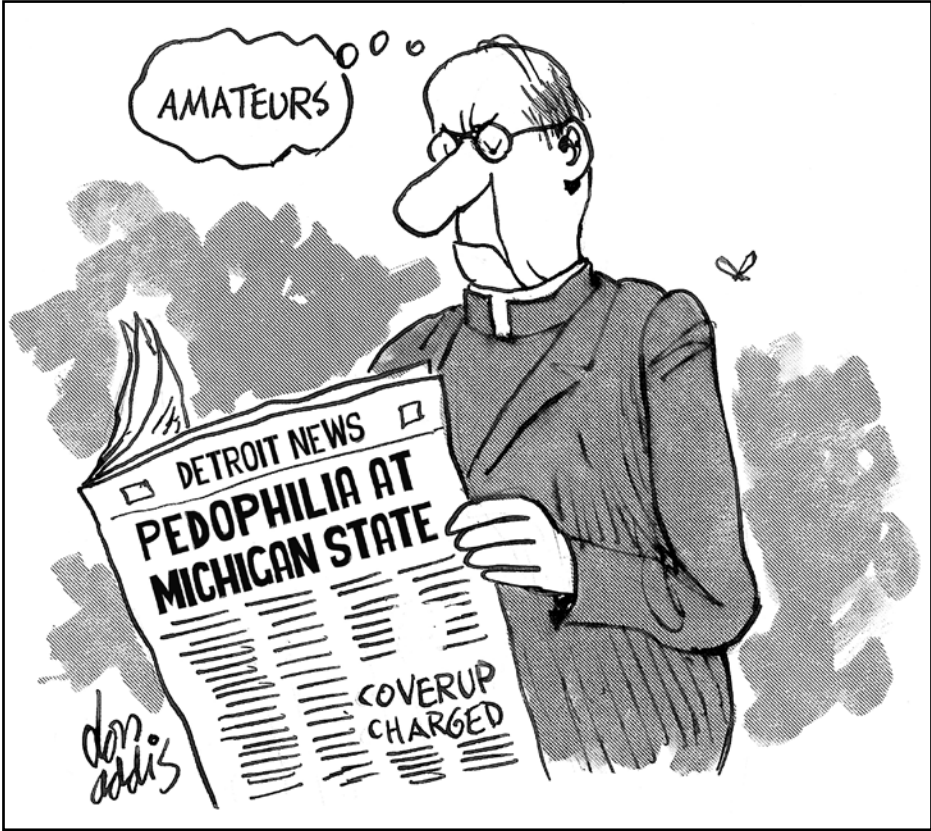
After receiving a letter from the Freedom From Religion Foundation, as well as letters from victims’ rights groups, the Justice Department has launched a probe of the Roman Catholic clergy’s horrific sex abuse scandal.

“The U.S. Justice Department has opened an investigation of child sexual abuse inside the Roman Catholic Church in Pennsylvania, using subpoenas to demand confidential files and testimony from church leaders, according to two people familiar with the probe,” the Associated Press reported Oct. 10.

Then, on Oct. 26, the DOJ sent a request to every Catholic diocese in the United States not to destroy documents related to the handling of child sexual abuse, which signals that the investigation could grow far more extensive.

FFRF had recently asked for a federal probe into the Church’s massive wrongdoings.

The 1,400-page Pennsylvania grand jury report detailing thousands of instances of sexual abuse by clergy in six of the states’ eight dioceses made major headlines. A federal investigation was especially fitting, FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor contended in a letter, because the Church’s “musical chairs” history of deliberately moving offenders to new locations



— shielding them from local outrage and providing them with fresh victims — creates an interstate crisis that required federal action.

“U.S. Attorney William McSwain of Philadelphia, who issued the subpoenas, wants to know if priests, bishops, seminarians or others committed any federal crimes,” says the AP story. “He demanded the bishops

turn over any evidence that anyone in their ranks took children across state lines for illicit purposes; sent sexual images or messages via phone or computer; instructed anyone not to contact police; reassigned suspected predators; or used money or other assets as part of the scandal.”

FFRF is pleased that the DOJ is finally acting decisively.

FFRF calls out Roy Moore for reckless advice

FFRF has called out the wildly misnamed Foundation for Moral Law for encouraging Alabama public schools to violate students’ rights and the Constitution.

On Sept. 21, the Foundation for Moral Law, led by disgraced former Alabama Supreme Court Justice Roy Moore, held a press conference, during which he and his representatives encouraged Alabama public schools to risk financial and legal liability by continuing to broadcast prayer over the loudspeaker before football games in defiance of well-established Supreme Court precedent.

Moore’s foundation subsequently announced it had sent a memo to all Alabama school district superintendents erroneously informing them that they can skirt the Constitution by simply claiming that these school-sponsored prayers are student-led.

This press conference and accompanying memo came in response to school attorneys advising and educating the school boards they represent about how best to refrain from endorsing religion in public schools after FFRF warned many school districts that they were violating the Constitution.

Moore’s foundation incorrectly states that FFRF “insists that prayers at the public school football games violate the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.”

“It is the Supreme Court that ‘insists’ that public schools adhere to the Establishment Clause, and that ‘insists’ on protecting student freedom of conscience,” FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor write in their Sept. 25 letter. “The Foundation for Moral Law can bury its head in the sand and deny court precedent, but it is reckless and unethical to then counsel public school officials to do the same.”

FFRF urges IRS to end private school tax handout

FFRF is urging the IRS to approve a proposed rule change that would terminate a massive voucher-like tax break.

The Internal Revenue Service was seeking public comments on a rule that would, among other things, put a stop to a widespread practice of taxpayers legally profiting by donating to private religious schools.

The tax loophole works this way: First, some states provide dollar-for-dollar tax credits for donations to educational scholarship programs, which keep some of the funds for themselves and pass the rest on to private schools, most of which are religious. So, if

you donate \$100,000, the state takes \$100,000 off of your state tax bill. Next, the federal government gives a deduction on federal taxes on the same donation. After donating \$100,000 and having the state pay you back in full, you also get to deduct \$100,000 from your federal taxes. The vast majority of private schools benefitting from such programs are religiously affiliated. Tuition tax credits almost entirely subsidize religious schools with overtly religious missions. For example, in North Carolina, 92 percent of students receiving public money through “opportunity scholarships” have used it to attend re-

ligious schools.

“There is no legitimate reason for the federal government to encourage taxpayers to donate to educational scholarship programs,” FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor write in a letter to the IRS. “The government should be focused on promoting secular public education and should never incentivize taxpayers to fund religion. Allowing taxpayers to profit from a donation to an educational scholarship program directly encourages taxpayers to support religion.”

Plus, this tax scheme invites fraud due to a lack of accountability.

FFRF VICTORIES

FFRF stops ‘Unstoppable Man’ in Indiana

FFRF has stopped an Indiana school district from violating the U.S. Constitution in several ways. The superintendent of Cloverdale Community Schools has assured FFRF it will stop prayers at staff meetings and will not invite back an “inspirational” speaker who proselytized at a school event.

A concerned Cloverdale Community Schools employee informed FFRF that the school district recently hosted multiple events by Craig Conrad, an inspirational speaker who performs as ‘Unstoppable Man,’ including presentations to both teachers and various groups of students. The session for teachers was apparently a mandatory professional development meeting that lasted approximately two hours in the afternoon on Aug. 31 at Cloverdale High School. Conrad reportedly concluded the session with an instruction to teachers to look at an image of Jesus and “realize that we are teaching for ‘Him’ and not for any other reason.” Conrad pressured the teachers to stay for this final portion of the session by telling them that if they were “easily offended snowflakes,” then they could leave.

FFRF’s complainant was uncomfortable leaving the session after this bullying



Craig Conrad

taunt because the school’s principal, H. Sonny Stoltz, has a practice of leading prayers before some staff meetings. The complainant was concerned that leaving the professional development meeting in order to avoid Conrad’s promotion of Christianity would invite retaliation from the principal.

This is not the first time that FFRF had received complaints about Conrad, who sells himself as a patriotic anti-bullying motivational speaker but ironically bullies and belittles those who do not share his views of Christian nationalism.

Providing Conrad with a captive audience presented a risk of legal liability to the district if Conrad again promoted religion during a presentation, FFRF pointed out. In a letter to Superintendent Greg Linton, FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne urged the district to not allow Stoltz to inject religious promotion into staff meetings, and to not invite Conrad to speak at future district events.

FFRF’s reasoning proved to be highly persuasive.

“In short, Mr. Conrad will not be invited back in the future to provide any type of convocations for students, or in-service for staff,” Linton responded. Linton stated that even prior to receiving FFRF’s letter, school administrators concurred that “parts of [Conrad’s] message were not appropriate for a public school setting.” The letter continued, “In addition, I have shared your letter with Mr. Stoltz and have requested that he discontinue praying prior to staff meetings.”



The coach for the Prattville (Ala.) High School football team is shown leading a prayer with his players.

FFRF ends coach-led prayer in Alabama high school

An Alabama high school football coach will cease the unconstitutional practice of leading his team in prayer prior to games after receiving a letter from FFRF.

FFRF contacted the Autauga County Schools’ counsel in early October after it was reported that the Prattville High School football coach regularly led his team in prayer. A video published by the Montgomery Advertiser showed the coach standing over his kneeling players with bowed heads, reciting a prayer.

It is well-established law that it is illegal for public school athletic coaches to lead their teams in prayer, since it constitutes a government endorsement of religion and violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, FFRF’s letter reminded the Autauga County School District.

“[The coach’s] conduct is unconstitutional because he endorses and promotes his religion when acting in his official capacity as a school district employee,” wrote FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Christopher Line. “Certainly, he represents the school and the team when he acts in his official role as head of the Prattville High School football team.”

FFRF received a response from the school board’s counsel assuring FFRF that the matter had been addressed and that the coach will cease the practice of leading the team in prayer.

School to cease coach-led prayer

FFRF has received confirmation that coach-led prayer will not continue in a Georgia public school system.

FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line sent a letter to the district in September, after a concerned area resident reported that Dawson County High School employed a “character coach” to regularly pray with its football team.

A video posted on Facebook on Sept. 7 showed the character coach, Pastor Russell Davis from Etowah Church, leading the football team and several young children in prayer in what appears to be the school locker room.

“The Word says when they compelled him to carry the cross, and then Jesus went to the hill and he won the victory on the cross. Your goal tonight is not to die on the cross. It’s not to die on the field of battle,” Davis says in the video. “We’re calling you tonight to carry their cross.”

“Let’s pray together, Lord, we thank you, God, for another day,” Davis continues. “We thank you for an opportunity to play the game that we call football. Father, I pray that everything tonight will be for your glory.” He then leads the team in the Lord’s Prayer.

In its letter, FFRF reminded the school that it is well-settled law that a school cannot appoint or employ a chaplain, seek out a spiritual leader for students or agree to have a volunteer teach other people’s children that character centers on religious belief. This constitutes a public school endorsement of religion, a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

On Oct. 15, FFRF received a response from the district’s attorney assuring FFRF that coach or “character coach”-led prayer will no longer occur in Dawson County Schools.

Massachusetts school district to stand up for secularism

FFRF has received assurances from a Massachusetts school district that religion will not be allowed to intrude into its graduation ceremonies from now on.

Canton Public Schools officials invited the Rev. John Tomilio III to give a sectarian religious invocation at the 2018 Canton High School graduation ceremony. Principal Derek Folan introduced Tomilio by stating: “At this time I’d like to invite Reverend Dr. John Tomilio III to the stage . . . to deliver the invocation.”

“The Supreme Court has settled this matter—high school graduations must be secular to protect the freedom of conscience of all students,” FFRF Robert G. Ingersoll Legal Fellow Colin McNamara wrote in June to Canton Public Schools Superintendent Jennifer Fischer-Mueller. “As the Supreme Court has said, ‘Fundamental rights may not be submitted to vote; they depend on the outcome of no elections.’”

FFRF heard back from Canton Public Schools.

“I am writing to confirm that steps have been taken to ensure that there will be no prayers or religious rituals as a part of any school ceremony (e.g., graduation) or any other school-sponsored event,” Fischer-Mueller wrote.



The sign with a biblical phrase has been taken down at Jarrettsville Elementary School in Maryland.

FFRF remedies constitutional violation in Maryland school

A Christian sign has come down from an elementary school lunchroom in a Harford County, Md., school following a complaint from FFRF.

A concerned parent contacted FFRF to report that Jarrettsville Elementary School displayed a portion of the Lord’s Prayer on a large plaque in its cafeteria. Between the doors where students pass to receive their lunch, a wooden sign, approximately 3 feet wide by 6 inches tall, read “Give us this day our daily bread” in old English-style lettering. This phrase is from Matthew 6:11 in the New Testament.

FFRF sent a letter asking that the school remove this sign to comply with the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

“Elementary students should not have to view material promoting a Christian message,” FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott wrote in his Sept. 26 letter to Superintendent Sean Bulson. “There is no educational or academic component or motive for such postings; their presence is proselytizing a captive audience.”

FFRF recently received an e-mail from the district reporting that the plaque has been removed.

By Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey

Georgia school won’t post prayer walk on Facebook

Following a letter from FFRF, the McDuffie County School System in Georgia has taken action to ensure that a prayer walk will no longer be endorsed by the school.

FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Chris Line sent a letter to the school on July 19 after a concerned area resident reported that it was promoting a religious “prayer walk” on the school’s official Facebook page.

The district’s attorney sent a response on Sept. 24 apologizing for the promotion of the event which had been, they said, “erroneously and improperly included on a Facebook post on the School’s website.”

Tennessee public utility won’t endorse religion

A Tennessee public utility department will cease endorsing religion on its utility bills, after FFRF pointed out that doing so is in violation of the Establishment Clause.

A concerned local resident contacted FFRF to report that the Russellville Whitesburg Utility District regularly printed bible quotes on its utility bills.

FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line reminded the utility in a letter that it is “tasked with serving all citizens, regardless of their personal religious beliefs,” and asked that they refrain from including bible verses on its utility bills in the future.

FFRF received a response on Sept. 21, ensuring it has, “ceased its practice of placing religious messages or other similar messages on its utility bills.”

Religious speeches not part of graduation

A Pennsylvania high school will take further measures to ensure religious speeches are no longer part of graduation ceremonies or other school-sponsored events, thanks to an FFRF letter of complaint.

FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler sent a letter to the district first in July, then again in September, calling attention to a complaint from a district resident who attended the 2018

Kiski Area High School graduation and reported that the ceremony included a prayer led by Josh Westurn of the Kiski Area Youth Network (KAYN). KAYN’s mission is “Connecting Kiski Area Students to Christ, Church, and Community.”

FFRF received a response letter from the district’s superintendent on Oct. 1 ensuring FFRF that the district will be “taking steps to vet and analyze the graduation speakers and to ensure that religious rituals are not part of the graduation ceremonies or any other school-sponsored events.”

Cross to be removed from city property in Iowa

A cross has come down from city property in Maxwell, Iowa, after FFRF brought it to the attention of city officials.

FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert submitted an open-records request in August after a local resident reported a cross was on display in Maxwell City Park. The city’s attorneys replied to the records request, ensuring that the cross was placed on city property without city approval or knowledge.

Additionally, a letter was included from Maxwell Mayor Steven Gast asking the owner of the cross display to remove the cross within seven days.

N.J. school removes event from Facebook

A New Jersey school district has removed school endorsement of a religious event after an FFRF letter of complaint.

In September, a complainant alerted FFRF to a post on the High Point Regional High School Facebook page in Sussex, N.J., promoting a national “Prayer at the Pole Day on Wednesday, Sept. 26.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler sent a letter to the district, and received a prompt response from the district superintendent that ensured the post had been removed from the school’s official Facebook page and that no district staff were sanctioned to participate in the student-led event.

School reminded it can’t allow Gideons in class

FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line reminded a Tennessee school district of its prior resolution to not allow Gideons to distribute bibles in Tullahoma schools.

A concerned parent reported that Gideons were allowed to distribute bibles in East Lincoln Elementary School. All three 5th-grade classes reportedly gathered in one classroom where a Gideon spoke to the class while a teacher handed out bibles. The Gideons reportedly told

students they should keep the bibles for 60 years.

FFRF originally contacted the same district in 2012 regarding a similar issue, at which time the district assured FFRF it would advise principals to prohibit any like distribution of materials in the future.

District Superintendent Dan Lawson sent a response to FFRF, confirming the event took place and acknowledging the unconstitutionality of such an event. Lawson informed FFRF that the principal was relatively new to the position and that the district conducted a professional development activity to ensure “all current principals and all clearly understand their obligations and responsibilities in this regard.”

Kansas school takes down bible verse

FFRF Legal Fellow Christopher Line sent a letter to a school district in Kansas asking that they remove a bible verse from school property.

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Philippians 4:13,” the note read, affixed to a bulletin board in a classroom at Shawnee Mission North High School.

On Oct. 1, FFRF received a response from the school’s attorneys that, while the note’s messages are chosen by the students rather than the teacher, the bible quote had since been removed from the board.

Religious testimony at football camp is not OK

Athletic coaches in an Oklahoma district will be advised not to involve their students with religious camps after an FFRF complaint.

In June, a complainant reported that the Keys High School football team in Park Hill, Okla., attended a football “team” camp at Hackett High School in Arkansas. At the camp, the players were reportedly subjected to religious “testimony” by evangelist Tyson Simon, an area representative for the Western Arkansas Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

FFRF wrote to the district to remind it that its football program should not be used as a captive audience for evangelists.

The school district’s counsel sent a reply to FFRF, stating that while the coaches of the Keys School District were unaware that the intention was to include religious messages in the camp, the school district has taken measures to insure this violation will not recur.

Religious quote on sign taken down in Florida

A religious message has been removed from an elementary school office in Panama City, Fla., after a com-

plaint from FFRF.

A concerned parent at Southport Elementary school informed FFRF of a religious quote prominently displayed in the school office.

FFRF Associate Counsel Elizabeth Cavell wrote a letter to the school, reminding it of the unconstitutionality of public school endorsement of religion, and requesting the removal of the bible quote from the main office.

The school’s attorney sent a letter letting FFRF know that the sign has been removed.

Secular alternative replaces religious picture

A religious profile picture has been substituted for a secular alternative on a Wisconsin police department’s official Facebook page after receiving an FFRF complaint letter.

FFRF Associated Counsel Sam Grover sent a letter of complaint to Rusk County Sheriff Jeffery S. Wallace asking that the department remove a cross from its profile picture.

Wallace sent a response to FFRF that the photo was in memoriam of an officer who was shot and killed in the line of duty, but nevertheless the department would remove the photo from their profile. FFRF sent a contribution to the fallen officer’s memorial fund.

No more faculty praying at flagpole

An Illinois public school superintendent initiated an investigation into FFRF’s complaint of teacher involvement in a rally around the pole event.

A concerned FFRF member reported that a teacher at Carterville Junior High School posted a picture on social media of students and faculty praying around the school’s flagpole, along with the statement: “Our first #syatp and kickoff event of our FCA chapter at Carterville Junior High School was a HUGE success! . . . #blessed #fca #stumin.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne sent a letter reminding the district of its constitutional obligation to remain neutral on matters of religion.

Carterville CUSD #5 Superintendent Keith A. Liddell sent a response letter, thanking FFRF for bringing the matter to his attention and assuring FFRF that the Carterville School District, like FFRF, “takes the freedoms empowered by the First Amendment very seriously.”

‘God bless’ sign taken down in New York

A sign with the phrase “God Bless Our Veterans” has been removed from public property in New York, thanks to an FFRF letter.

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor sent a letter in July to Mayor Michael J. Newhard of Warwick, N.Y., after a local resident reported that the religious sign was placed on village property.

“FFRF has no objection to honoring our veterans — in fact, over 24 percent of our members are either active duty military or veterans,” Gaylor wrote in the letter. “Our objection is to the endorsement of religion in violation of the Establishment Clause.”

FFRF asked that the sign be removed and replaced with a message that is inclusive of all veterans, such as “Support Our Veterans.” The mayor sent a response on Oct. 10 informing FFRF that the sign had come down.

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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. FFRF has more than 32,000 members. FFRF is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and donations are tax deductible for income tax purposes.

FFRF’s email address is info@ffrf.org. Please include your name and physical mailing address with all email correspondence.

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

FFRF awards \$10,450

2018 graduate students essay contest winners

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 15 winners of the 2018 Brian Bolton Graduate/“Older” Student Essay Contest.

Graduate students were asked to write a personal persuasive essay about “The dangers of bibliolatry in the United States.”

FFRF has paid out a total of \$10,450 in award money for this contest this year. This is the last of the 2018 essay competitions. FFRF awarded a record total of \$46,750 to the student essayists this year among the four different competitions.

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

- First place**
Clayborne Cook, 26, University of Pittsburgh (\$3,000)
- Second place**
Kelly Chen, 22, University of Alabama School of Medicine (\$2,000)
- Third place**
Samuel Davidson, 22, California Institute of Technology (\$1,000)



- Fourth place**
Tricity Andrew, 27, North Carolina State University (\$750)
- Fifth place**
Jarred McCleese, 26, University of Kentucky (\$600)
- Sixth place**
Garrett Dare, 28, University of Oregon (\$500)
- Seventh place**
Nat Rogers, 24, Johns Hopkins University (\$400)

- Honorable mentions (\$200 each)**
Shelby Burton, 26, Touro University Nevada
Elizabeth Cullen, 29, Michigan State University
Meghan Fuller, 26, Purdue University Global
Andrew Haws, 31, University of Missouri-Kansas City
Richard Lyda, 30, Winthrop University
Ethan Morrow, 21, University of

- Missouri-Columbia
Ashley Podplesky, 28, University of Washington
Elizabeth Ruelle, 28, College of Creative Studies

The graduate/“older” student contest is generously and singlehandedly endowed by Life Member Brian Bolton, a retired psychologist, humanist minister and professor emeritus at the University of Arkansas. The contest was open to graduate students up to age 30 or undergraduates ages 25-30 at the time of entry.

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

FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994, graduate students since 2010 and since 2017 a contest geared specifically to students of color.

FIRST PLACE

‘For the Constitution tells us so’

FFRF awarded Clayborne \$3,000.

By Clayborne Cook

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the bible tells me so.” As an impressionable youngster, I was unknowingly duped into belting songs like this throughout my childhood during weekly Sunday school lessons. As I grew older and worldlier, I began to discover all the other things “the bible tells me so,” and how incredibly dangerous and restricting many of these notions are to my personal freedom and that of others. Yet, despite these dangers, the bible, in direct violation of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, has continually shaped the political decision-making process, thus increasing inequality and negatively impacting the general welfare of the American people. Now more than ever, we must take long-needed action to effectively ensure that public policy is developed and enforced in an equitable and constitutional manner, absent of biblical teachings or other religious doctrine.

Personally, I have read the bible in its entirety, not out of pleasure, but out of a personal motivation to better understand the content of the world’s best-selling book. As a human, and also as a human-rights advocate, this was not an easy feat. What was most difficult was not getting through the actu-



Clayborne Cook

al content of the book, but coming to terms with the fact that millions of U.S. citizens, including public officials, accept its contents as “the word of God” and support the sinister instructions laid forth. Two particularly abominable verses I encountered in my reading include Leviticus 20:13, which states that “if a man lies with a male [...] they shall surely be put to death,” and 1 Timothy 2:11-12, which declares that “a woman should learn in quietness and full submission [and should not] assume authority over a man; she must remain quiet.” These two commands, among a slew of others, openly promote the persecution of gay community members and women. Moreover, as a public-health student earning a certificate in health equity, with a specific focus on bridging health disparities related to sexual orientation and gender,

I know that this inequity would likely not exist today had there been a true “wall of separation” between public policy and biblical teachings. For example, one could argue that this very oppression endorsed by the holy scripture was the cause of insufficient action during the early stages of the HIV epidemic, as well as the long-accepted belief that domestic violence is a private family matter; both of which led to a great deal of unnecessary suffering that is still felt to this day.

What makes matters even worse is that the tide of biblically bolstered legislation is not receding but strengthening, much like the tides caused by human-generated climate change, another phenomenon that has unfortunately been denied using bible-based arguments. This year alone, bills requiring bible instruction have been introduced in West Virginia and Iowa.

Likewise, over the past several years, similar bills have been enacted into law in Kentucky, Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Texas, while additional states have debated following suit. Such legislation is extremely dangerous to the future development of our country, and is in violation of the Constitution. We as a nation must assure and foster the capacity for freethought, and imposing “bible-literacy classes” upon our children is completely counterintuitive to this ideal.

Overall, bibliolatry has no place in

the realm of government affairs, and “no law [should be made] respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” In order to guarantee that our constitutional rights and the constitutional rights of our children are not infringed upon, we must collectively be better informed and resist political decisions that blatantly contradict our Constitution. Additionally, we have to establish an environment in which citizens are not concerned with their state and national representatives’ religion when deciding who to vote for, but with the solutions that they promote to improve the general welfare of the American people.

Lastly, I believe it critical that we support organizations that are devoted to challenging unconstitutional decisions which disregard the separation of church and state. Together we can reverse the tides, and in doing so, we must constantly remember that what “the bible tells [us]” should not be equated with what the U.S. Constitution tells us.

Clayborne, 26, of Norfolk, Va., attends the University of Pittsburgh and is seeking a master’s degree in public health. He is the first member of his family to attend college. He has participated in the Peace Corps Master’s International Program, in which he served for three years as a health education and promotion specialist in Moldova. He plans to return to Moldova after earning his graduate degree.

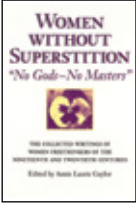


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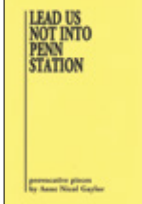
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SECOND PLACE

Keep the bible out of public policy

FFRF awarded Kelly \$2,000.

By Kelly Chen

Growing up attending Alabama public schools, I remember opening my biology textbook to find a prominent sticker placed on the inside cover. This page-long insert, conceived by conservative Christians and implemented by the Alabama Department of Education, emphasized that evolution was a “controversial theory” and “always subject to change.” While the sticker’s message claimed to encourage an “open mind,” it was clearly a closed-minded attempt to question science-based teaching that contradicted creationism.

I went on to major in biology in college, learning to value empirical evidence and the scientific method over competing and contradictory religious claims. Science fascinated me for its objectivity and burdens of proof, and I put my faith in facts, rather than in a single spirituality. Now, as a medical student, I can appreciate moments when patients derive comfort or strength from the bible. But I cannot overlook the threat bible-based public policy poses to the health of Americans.

Alarmingly, bibliolatry deems the bible inherently and irrefutably correct. Former Congressman Todd Akin is one of many religious politicians who cites meritless claims rather than evidence simply because they adhere to the bible. During an interview, Akin scoffed that rape victims did not deserve access to abortions because, “If it’s legitimate



Kelly Chen

rape, the female body has ways to try to shut the whole thing down.” At best, public officials such as Akin are lazy or ignorant. At worst, they are hypocrites like former Congressman Tim Murphy, who held a very public and religiously justified anti-abortion stance, yet privately urged his mistress to have an abortion. Public officials with this holier-than-thou mindset impose their views on others even though they themselves do not practice what they preach.

The beliefs of some should never apply to all. Atrocities like the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem Witch Trials and subordination of Untouchables show the dangers of zealous religious belief. A famous medical ethics case makes this point potently clear. In 2014, Herbert and Catherine Schaible were jailed after they chose “divine healing” over medical treatment for their two children. Tragically, these children suffered from

the hubris and damaging influence of their parents. The parents had the right to make decisions regarding their own care, but they had no right to force these views onto their helpless children, who died unnecessarily as a result. Similarly, policymakers are free to hold religious beliefs, but should not support bible-based laws that impose those beliefs on all Americans. Evangelism is particularly dangerous when combined with political power. Two lives were lost due to the Schaible’s biblically based actions; millions more have been affected by policies rooted in religion.

Most of all, I mourn the scientific progress lost to bibliolatry. Imagine what treatments for devastating diseases would already exist if the church had not outlawed the study of human anatomy during the Middle Ages, if the Reagan administration had not waited for more than 20,000 Americans to die of AIDS before addressing the crisis, or if the Bush administration had not killed eight years of stem-cell research from 2001-2009, excused as “deficit reduction.” President Reagan won the presidency with the staunch support of “The Moral Majority,” led by the Rev. Jerry Falwell, who later preached, “AIDS is the wrath of God upon homosexuals.” When Reagan finally acknowledged AIDS in 1987, his message to Americans was to promote religious principles like marital fidelity and sexual abstinence, rather than fund medical advances. Years later, President George W. Bush justified his decision by saying it was “shaped by deeply held

beliefs . . . I also believe human life is a sacred gift from our creator.” Bibliolatry blinded Bush to the public support of embryonic stem cell research and to the hopes of patients desperate to enroll in clinical trials. Bible-based policies have consistently stymied scientific inquiry and innovation.

To remedy these problems, policies should be informed by experts. Ask statisticians to analyze the outcomes of comprehensive versus abstinence-only sexual health education. Have OB-GYNs testify to the merits and faults of abortion policy. Assemble a team of public health officials, businesspeople and physicians to tackle health-care reform. Find experts trained to consider evidence-based work to integrate comprehensive, transparent and unbiased data into laws. Any policymaker who thinks citing the bible is equivalent to citing data should be excluded due to conflict of interest. Years of painstaking learning and investment by our scientists, at the world’s highest standard, should remain untainted by bibliolatry. Bibliolatry is not inherently bad; it is only when the bible is weaponized to implement a belief system over well-informed policy that it becomes toxic.

Kelly, 22, of Vestavia Hills, Ala., attends the University of Alabama School of Medicine. She graduated with distinction from Stanford University with a degree in biology. She published neurology research in peer-reviewed scientific journals and served on the national leadership board of United Students for Veterans’ Health.

THIRD PLACE

Modern-day witch trials and tribulations

FFRF awarded Sam \$1,000.

By Sam Davidson

From the 15th century through the 18th, the bible excerpt “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” inspired Europeans and Americans to try, convict and execute tens of thousands of innocent humans. In Europe, burning was the preferred method of slaughter because of the pain it causes. Witch trials demonstrate the usual result of bible-based policy — needless suffering and harm to innocents.

In the past few months, purpose-

less cruelty resulted partly from the bibliolatry of the current presidential administration. Attorney General Jeff Sessions defended the separation of immigrant families and detention of children through the biblical notion that all laws and their enforcement are inherently good. Such a defense could be used for any government action, no matter how heinous. This belief essentially provides the government with unlimited power. In a nation that values rights afforded to the people, where the government and its policies may be freely criticized, worshipping the bible requires contradictory behavior and thinking.

Such nonsensical thoughts were espoused by then-EPA chief Scott Pruitt in February, when he defended oil-friendly policy as the biblical responsibility to harvest the Earth’s natural resources. For many reasons, excessive burning of fossil fuels has been predicted to harm all of humanity in the coming century. Nevertheless, bible-based policy supports unfettered use of this contentious technology. Continuing to elect evangelical politicians, or politicians who would appoint evangelicals to seats of power, will certainly lead to ecological disaster.

While there are many similarities between different ideologies, they are not all created equal, and bibliolatry is one of the worst common belief systems because of its basis in ancient ideals and its promotion of “faith” over evidence and reasoning. Deuter-



Sam Davidson

onomy states, “If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you embrace, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, ‘Let us go and worship other gods’ . . . you must surely kill him.” Furthermore, if the inhabitants of a town have begun to worship other gods, “you must surely strike down the inhabitants of that city with the sword. Destroy with the sword all its people and livestock. And you are to gather all its plunder in the middle of the public square, and completely burn the city and all its plunder as a whole burnt offering to the Lord your God. The city must remain a mound of ruins forever, never to be rebuilt.” This passage serves to demonstrate the chasm between ancient and modern morality. Very few Americans today would recommend launching nuclear missiles to annihilate all lands in which the biblical God is not worshiped; however, the bible fully endorses such a policy. My personal moral code, which is largely

based on utilitarianism, motivates me to denounce bibliolatry as an inherently malevolent ideology based on this passage and many others.

In order to defeat this source of evil activity, it must be understood. Ideologies take root wherever people are struggling, because they offer concrete explanations for problems and potential solutions. In order to beat back bibliolatry, public policies must be enacted that make life easier for the common citizen. When people receive a living wage and work reasonable hours, they have little reason to cling to irrational hope. Another problem is the spread of bibliolatry by parents and religious institutions. Secularists must encourage religious children to question beliefs and to learn to think critically about religion.

There is great hope for a world in which secularism is on the rise, but further activism is necessary to prevent modern-day equivalents to the witch hunts (and I am not referring to the Russia investigation). When church and state are fully separated, and “church” is reduced to an extremist minority, everyone will be better for it.

Sam, 22, from Highland Park, Ill., attends the California Institute of Technology. He graduated from Northwestern University with a degree in chemical engineering. He spent three years conducting research at Northwestern’s Jewett Lab and now has a publication under review and a pending patent. His career goal is to conduct research in synthetic biology.

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Fourth PLACE

Bibliolatry sabotages education

FFRF awarded Tricity \$750.

By Tricity Andrew

Bibliolatry at many Christian schools sabotages students’ education. Evangelicalism flirts with anti-intellectualism, maligning reason as lacking faith and rewriting science or history when in disharmony with the bible or its interpretation. This anti-intellectualism causes subpar education, especially for girls, due to sexist biblical interpretations. My Christian private school’s teachings and attitudes sabotaged my education, but growing intellectualism allowed me to relearn topics. Our curriculum often presented religious beliefs as scientific fact and practiced massive revisionist history. Our Earth science textbook taught Young Earth Creationism, stating that the Earth received no rain before Noah’s flood, which was presented as fact. We never learned that scientific dating methods show the Earth to be much older, nor that the geologic record contains no evidence of a worldwide flood. Evolutionary theory was not only denied, but also grossly misrepresented. We were taught that evolution was “just a theory,” as if “theory” meant conjecture, rather than scientific consensus supported by much evidence. Our history textbooks contained misinformation, if not racist, sexist, xenophobic undertones. Instead of teaching how important religious freedom and separation of church and state was to our Founding Fathers, textbooks taught that they sought to establish a Christian nation, ignoring the



Tricity Andrew

fact that some were deists and many early immigrants were fleeing religious persecution. Since slavery is in the bible, we were taught that slavery was not necessarily immoral, just practiced incorrectly in America. Our texts justified separating Native American children from their families, stating that they needed to be re-educated into Christianity. World history covered ancient cultures, but chapters always indicted their practices as evil; however, the Crusades were whitewashed as “trying to save sinners.” Textbooks were motivated by belief that the bible is inerrant — science that casts doubt on biblical stories cannot be true; history that teaches of different cultures without stressing how evil they were might lead astray Christians. It was often difficult to discern if we were reading fact, misinformation or opinion. In college, I needed to relearn certain topics to catch up to my peers. In my evolutionary biology course, all the

information was new to me, whereas my classmates already knew the basics of evolution. I still lack knowledge in topics such as world history. For girls, the educational sabotage was greater because of our school’s understanding of “traditional gender roles.” My school implied that colleges — if they were not Baptist — should not be a primary goal since they had a liberalizing effect on students, and girls’ education need be only enough to raise and potentially homeschool their kids. Boys would one day choose careers that interested them, but girls were to primarily focus on homemaking. These sexist views came from tradition and bible passages praising women for well-organized homes or well-behaved children. Sexism stemming from tradition was defended with bible verses declaring the man the head of the household or Pauline epistles telling women to submit and be quiet in church. We were discouraged from science and math and encouraged to only take the minimum three math classes required for graduation. I was discouraged from taking more math because “precalculus would be too hard.” I was later shamed for a high math test score because it would intimidate boys and cause difficulty dating. To move beyond bibliolatry, we need to become comfortable critiquing religious texts while still respecting believers. Evangelicalism encourages insularity,

compounding bibliolatry’s educational sabotage. I had no non-Christian friends and few non-Baptist friends. The teachings and anti-intellectualism seemed normal and even reasonable. Difficult questions that could raise doubts were either not discussed or were dismissed as lacking faith. In adulthood, I developed friendships with people from diverse backgrounds. Their friendships prompted me to reassess my faith. I no longer believe in the divine inspiration of the bible, but I still recognize how well-intentioned or intelligent many believers are. I see the bible as a reaction by Bronze Age people to harsh, unpredictable lives. Bibliolatry defends itself with anti-intellectualism, but we can combat bibliolatry with intellectualism. While developing friendships with nonbelievers, I allowed myself to be interested in previously forbidden topics. Learning about the actual mechanisms of evolution taught me that evolution was not a far-fetched idea, but a reasonable scientific theory with much evidence. Increasing intellectualism led me to a more accepting, less dogmatic form of Christianity until I eventually left Christianity entirely. Intellectualism, along with friendships with nonbelievers, can combat others’ bibliolatry. Tricity, 27, from Raleigh, N.C., attends North Carolina State University, where she is working on a Ph.D. in applied mathematics. Tricity graduated from the University of Tulsa in 2013 with a B.S. in mathematics.

“In college, I needed to relearn certain topics to catch up to my peers.” — Tricity Andrew

FIFTH PLACE

God: America’s favorite author

FFRF awarded Jarred \$600.

Editor’s note: The deadline to enter this contest was Aug. 1, prior to the confirmation vote of Brett Kavanaugh.

By Jarred McCleese

President Trump has nominated his second Supreme Court pick for consideration, which has many Americans worried about the future of secularism in the United States. The possibility of overturning past decisions on abortion and gay rights is a real threat, a threat which ultimately stems from American bibliolatry. “There are people on the right that want to impose Christian Sharia law in this country,” said comedian and radio host Dean Obeidallah during a discussion on Trump’s nominee Brett Kavanaugh. “They want to turn the bible into the law of the land.” Obeidallah’s words were apparently so provocative that they caused conservative radio host Steve Deace to walk off mid-exchange. Yet Obeidallah said what should already be obvious to anyone paying attention to the modern political climate. There are indeed many people who would have Americans follow biblical law, effectively establishing a Christian theocracy in the place of our secular

government. They use the bible as an excuse to treat women as inferior to men, to discriminate against LGBT persons, and to hold back societal progress with anti-scientific propaganda. The most egregious threat posed by unquestionable devotion to the bible has been its role in the mistreatment of minority groups. The LGBT community has been especially vilified by Christians who allow ancient texts written and compiled thousands of years ago to dictate how they treat people today. In the aftermath of the 2015 Supreme Court decision to strike down gay marriage bans nationwide, in what should have been a joyful occasion, my Kentucky county made news headlines everywhere because our clerk decided to deny gay couples their hard-fought right to finally marry their partners. Kim Davis cited her bible-based beliefs as her rationale that marriage may only be between a man and a woman, and ultimately threatened the gay couples with judgment from God. After many lawsuits, the couples eventually received their licenses, but not before being shamed by their own community, which seems poised to reelect Kim Davis this November. It is clear that the bible enjoys a privileged status in America over other “sacred” scriptures. One example of this



Jarred McCleese

privilege comes from my home state of Kentucky, where Gov. Matt Bevin has signed a “bible literacy bill” into law. Similar bills concerning the Quran or the Vedas have yet to be drafted. While it may be important to study the bible from a literary standpoint, it should be just as important to study and compare literature from a wide selection of faiths and cultures. There is nothing particularly special about biblical mythology, which has itself been formed in part from myths of other more ancient cultures. Why, then, should the bible get its own class if not to set it apart from other religious texts as exceptional? It is not enough for the bible to have its own class in the public school system. Many Christian parents pull their children out of the system completely and place them in bible-based private schools to avoid exposing them to evolution and

other unbiblical scientific facts. Unfortunately, I experienced this scenario first-hand and did not come to accept the overwhelming body of evidence supporting evolution until adulthood. It saddens me to know that today, millions of students attending faith schools across the nation are being cheated out of a real science education because the science does not comport with a literal interpretation of the bible. The bible is a collection of 66 books (73 for Catholics), and not all them are threatening to social and cultural growth. Indeed, with over 31,000 verses, it would be improbable not to find something of merit in the collection. But those merits can be found elsewhere without the baggage of the horrific stories of sanctioned genocide and hundreds of outdated commandments that cannot apply to a free and secular society. One can certainly live a good and moral life without believing that the bible is a divine book dictated by God. That belief continues to do lasting and unnecessary harm to millions of Americans. We owe it to the progress of our species to cast off ancient myths which have divided us for millennia and focus instead on improving our human condition through science and reason. Jarred, 26, from Wallingford, Ky., attends the University of Kentucky, where he plans to get a degree in modern and classical languages, literatures and cultures. He noted that “coming out as an atheist was more difficult than coming out as gay.” He plans to study in Japan next year.

“Millions of students attending faith schools across the nation are being cheated out of a real science education.” — Jarred McCleese

SIXTH PLACE

The harm of the willfully ignorant

FFRF awarded Garrett \$500.

By Garrett Dare

Since the age of 10, I have considered myself to be a freethinker. I am one of the lucky few who was never pressured to be religious, despite attending church and Sunday school. After learning that Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy were all make-believe, I decided the same must be true for God. I began to take everything I heard at church with a hefty grain of salt.

On Sundays, I was taught lessons on morality and heard fun stories about talking snakes and burning bushes, but I treated them the same way that I treated animated Disney films. Unfortunately, this kind of breakthrough does not occur for many individuals.

Instead of taking bible lessons and Sunday sermons as metaphorical, many people will take every word from the bible as law. This worship of the bible is known as bibliolatry and it is incredibly dangerous for the future of our society. Basing one's political and social viewpoints on the words of an ancient and heavily flawed book is reckless, harmful and incredibly ignorant.

Examples of the negative impact of bibliolatry can be seen just about anywhere in the current sociopolitical landscape. The more obvious examples include the bigoted legislation being proposed against LGBTQ



Garrett Dare

people, the never-ending attack on women's reproductive rights, blaming school shootings on the lack of God in schools, and the ever-growing anti-science movement. Our current administration's policies and crass behavior have helped to bolster the confidence of many closed-minded individuals and hate groups. The constant fear-mongering and scapegoating has brought many closeted bigots and religious fanatics out into the open. It seems that more bible-based legislation is being pushed now than any time in recent history.

The major problem with basing one's morals on the bible is that it lacks genuine and consistent morality. The bible was put together from a variety of writers in an attempt to unite an empire under one religion. It was not

expertly crafted or written by a supernatural being. It does not follow a moral compass, nor does it stay consistent in its messages. It is flawed and should not be taken seriously. Many incredibly dated and horrifying ideals are presented in its pages.

Religious people tend to cherry-pick the ideals that are most convenient for them or their political party. Their favorites include gay sex being an abomination (Leviticus 18:22), but they tend to avoid other horrible verses, such as selling a daughter into slavery (Exodus 21:7). The bible is filled with archaic rules, horrible punishments for silly transgressions, uneducated ramblings, blatant disregard for human life and God's favorite: misogyny.

I believe that bibliolatry stems from fear and a sort of extreme laziness. People are afraid of change, and they are afraid to admit when they do not understand something. It is far easier to join a group of like-minded individuals from your community than it is to spend many hours researching and thinking critically. The willfully ignorant masses that reject critical thinking, avoid books and believe every clickbait title they see are the same people who spread fear

and misinformation. People fear what they do not know, and they attack what they fear. They fear other races, nationalities and ways of thinking. Most of all, people fear what they perceive as threats to their religion.

The bible should not have any power over the modern world. Individuals, corporations and political parties have absolutely no reason to turn to the bible for guidance or inspiration. The

modern world does not need the dogmas of the ancient world to guide us into the future. These dated ideals would only serve to entrench us in the past and drive us into a dystopian society based on

fear and hatred. If we are to prosper and grow, then we must educate ourselves and sever our ties with the dated principles of the bible. To this end, I believe we must focus on educating our children in the ways of critical thinking and open-mindedness.

Garrett, 28, from Eugene, Ore., attends the University of Oregon, where he plans to graduate with an art and technology degree. After graduation, he hopes to work on children's books that get kids excited about education and freethinking. A children's book that features his illustrations will be self-published soon on Amazon.

“Basing one's political and social viewpoints on the words of an ancient and heavily flawed book is reckless, harmful and incredibly ignorant.

— Garrett Dare

SEVENTH PLACE

Logic and myth in American schools

FFRF awarded Nat \$400.

By Nat Rogers

When it comes to discussing the dangers of bibliolatry and the burgeoning American theocracy fostered by unprecedented access of evangelical Christians to the current White House administration, there are countless examples of bigotry, misogyny and attacks on reason from which to draw. However, the overt attempt to install the bible into public school curricula should be met with outrage and condemnation by citizens across the United States.

Aside from lauding the amorality displayed in the infanticide, rape and genocide ordered and condoned by the Christian God, this challenge to secular education will subvert students' ability to cultivate robust critical-thinking skills, especially in the sciences. Christian apologists contort themselves in a vain attempt to fend off the ever-growing mountain of scientific evidence against their myths, and Intelligent Design embodies the latest in a long line of pseudoscientific impediments that Christians have hap-

“Christian apologists contort themselves in a vain attempt to fend off the ever-growing mountain of scientific evidence against their myths.

— Nat Rogers

hazardly proffered to stanch the exodus from the church in favor of reason. Intelligent Design matches evidence to a predetermined conclusion, and, to a

mind raised free of this brash breach of scientific integrity, this assault on logic is readily apparent. Therein lies the reason that bibliolatry in schools must be stamped out.

Ignatius of Loyola is credited with saying, “Give me a child until he is 7 and I will give you the man.” Modern psychology has demonstrated the truth in this disquieting aphorism of the power to brainwash children from a young age. Children are incredibly trusting of familiar adults and will generally accept information without question, right or wrong, that becomes integrated into how the child processes its surroundings.

In society, teachers are implicitly afforded additional trust in regard to the accuracy of the information they present, so when a teacher presents pseudoscience and myth as fact, one can recognize the potential for a heightened propensity to poison a child's ability to view the world in a rational manner. Thus, the danger of an authority figure presenting the bible as fact is evident. Yet, however unpalatable it may be, the interweaving of myth and fact pales in comparison to the deleterious effect of convincing children that the bible is beyond reproach.

To those who preach Intelligent Design, the bible is unassailable, and all evidence must be cowed into submission such that it aligns with scripture. Drag-



Nat Rogers

ging Intelligent Design into classrooms promulgates the insidious notion that mountains of scientific evidence can be freely discarded should that evidence diverge from scripture. Instead of teaching students to gather evidence and subsequently develop a theory based on that, Intelligent Design suggests to students that fitting evidence to match a predetermined conclusion is an acceptable standard. The importance of keeping that notion separate from our secular school system cannot be overstated. Freedom of religion is protected by the First Amendment. Yet, American children in the public school system have a right not to be subject to enduring the death throes of demonstrably false religious claims as they are (slowly) eclipsed by reason.

Students taught at a formative age that it is admissible to reject evidence-based theories in favor of faith-based delusions will persist in this mindset as they be-

come eligible voters. Prominent politicians in respected political offices depart from reason by brushing aside climate change, evolution and any number of well-vetted scientific theories. Believers can then feel legitimized when they reject the evidence due to inconsistencies with their religious beliefs. For instance, reliance on the bible as fact has given rise to the wholly unsubstantiated claim by evangelical Christians that God controls the climate. When it comes to climate change, pinning the source of rising temperatures on God not only relieves them of responsibility, but allows Christian leaders to instill fear in the populace by claiming these changes signal an impending apocalypse. By teaching children the correct way to reach a conclusion based on evidence, such assertions will hold sway with an ever-decreasing percentage of the population.

Supplanting superstition with reason is inherently a gradual process that must be predicated on sound logical foundations taught in schools. We must make every effort to convince the American public to push back against pseudoscience and to remove bibliolatry from public school curricula. Unless we teach young Americans how to detect faulty reasoning, the United States is doomed to a future where science continues to be ignored when it casts light on inconvenient truths.

Nat, 24, of Baltimore, attends Johns Hopkins University as a second-year student in the biochemistry and molecular biology master's program. He does volunteer work with underserved community members in Baltimore and is also an avid hiker and photographer.

FFRF student essay honorable mentions

FFRF selected eight essays from the graduate/“older” competition that were worthy of honorable mention status. Each of the following students received \$200 (plus an additional \$100 for those who are members of a secular student club).

To read each of the honorable mention essays in full, go to freethoughttoday.com.

Here are edited excerpts from each (in no particular order).

Laughing at the Lemon test

By Shelby Burton

In founding America, the Constitution’s framers strived for the United States to become a secular nation where no one would be subjected to



Shelby Burton

the theology of the rulers. Unfortunately, we have a surplus of rulers who have trained our citizens to see “religious freedom” as freedom for the religious majority to suppress the will of the rest of the country, as opposed to “freedom from religion,” as it was intended.

Despite the *Lemon* test, a ruling by the Supreme Court in 1971 that the government cannot specifically endorse a religious belief that doesn’t fulfill a secular purpose, officials are pandering to a base that intends to create laws that fulfill exclusively religious purposes.

As a future medical provider, I’m particularly concerned about the continued teaching of creationism in public schools. Unfortunately, when we keep misinforming students in even basic science courses by failing to explain evolution, anyone pursuing a future profession like mine is at a disadvantage among peers by being introduced to such a crucial topic late in her education. Furthermore, when the public has no grasp of evolution, they’re subject to a lack of understanding of mechanisms that directly impact them, such as antiretroviral therapy, antibiotic resistance and climate change. Less benign than ignorance is the outright contempt and discrimination justified in the name of religion, codified into laws.

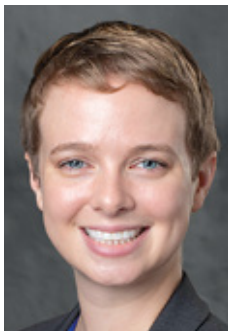
Religious voters recently have been electing individuals who will fight for their “religious freedom” at the expense of true religious freedom or, in some cases, any freedom at all. When people are willing to select candidates carrying out unconstitutional goals, as in the case of Roy Moore and Mike Pence, we arrive in our current state of affairs. It’s this lack of concern for those unlike us — especially in a country that was intended to allow equal rights for all — that points to a much deeper problem. This imposition of one set of beliefs upon others who do not share those beliefs denies them the true freedom they were promised as Americans.

Shelby, 26, from Henderson, Nev., attends Touro University Nevada. She is working toward a D.O. degree in osteopathic medicine. As an undergrad, she attended Rocky Mountain College and graduated with a degree in biology. She hopes to become a pediatric oncologist.

Women’s rights and bibliolatry

By Elizabeth Cullen

It is well-known that men and women are prescribed different roles by the bible. Those Christians who practice a literal interpretation of the book preach that women should be submissive and seen but



Elizabeth Cullen

not heard. This has historically caused hurdles for women in the workplace and limited domestic protections. The #Metoo movement represents a drastic move away from the biblical oppression of women, and by harnessing the momentum of the movement, we as a society may be able to resolve many of the issues women face.

In addition to marriage roles, the bible presents numerous rules and guidelines for women’s behavior in public and places in society. According to Leviticus, women are forbidden to become priests. Other classes excluded from the priesthood include the sick and disabled. Proverbs 11:22 restricts the types of behaviors that are becoming for women, “like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.” First Corinthians has much to say about women’s behavior, including in verse 14:34: “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submissions, as the law says.”

Both the Old and New Testaments provide dress codes for women that are stricter than those for men.

Deuteronomy 22:5 (Old Testament) states: “A woman shall not wear man’s garment, nor shall a man put on a woman’s cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the lord your God.” First Corinthians mentions several times that women should keep their hair long, and First Timothy 2:9-10 states: “Likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control.”

All of these examples from the bible have long informed public policy in the United States, but there has been a dramatic change in recent discourse. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 inaugurated the fight for gender equality in the workplace, but there is still work to be done as a society through legislation.

The #Metoo movement has brought women’s rights to the forefront of public discussion, and there is momentum to tighten harassment laws through bills such as the Me Too Congress Act of 2017. Our country is poised for dramatic change in the protection of women, as the current liberal galvanization provides both a widespread desire for change and strength to move forward.

Elizabeth, 29, from Shepherd, Mich., attends Michigan State University and is seeking a master’s in finance and supply chain management. She graduated from Grand Valley State University

with an undergraduate degree in music education. Elizabeth already holds a Master’s of Music degree from Central Michigan University.

Bibliolatry? Not for me

By Meghan Fuller

The much more pleasing definition of “bibliolatry” is an “excessive love of books,” and any avid reader would claim there is nothing wrong with the occasional shunning of friends and family while staying up until 2 a.m. to finish a good book. But the second dictionary definition, “an excessive adherence to the literal interpretation of the bible,” creates a significantly larger problem than sleep deprivation or antisocial behavior.

Many who are opposed to bibliolatry love to point out the obvious hypocrisy in people who claim the bible’s disdain for

homosexual marriage while simultaneously eating shellfish, growing beards, having tattoos and extramarital affairs, all of which are condemned in the book’s teachings. While those points are often fun to make and can give an enjoyable sense of superiority, the actual problems with bibliolatry go much deeper and are often subtler.

Take the recent ruling of *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*. The Supreme Court ruled in June that a bakery in Colorado was justified in refusing to bake a gay couple a wedding cake because it violated “deeply held religious beliefs.” This and the *Hobby Lobby* case from 2014, which allowed craft store chain Hobby Lobby to refuse to provide birth control to employees because of “deeply held” beliefs, are examples of lawmakers using the bible’s teachings to slowly make it legal to discriminate against people who don’t fit someone’s interpretation of a “good Christian.”

Individually, these two cases are easy to brush off for those who aren’t paying attention; after all, there are hundreds of other bakeries in Colorado that will bake wedding cakes for anybody, and you don’t have to work at Hobby Lobby if you need birth control under your insurance plan. But those people are missing the point.

Like the popular cautionary tale of the frog in slowly boiling water, steps toward a domineering religious society are done incrementally, rather than in a large and instant change. Inch by inch these inflections on our democracy creep into law. Yesterday it was birth control, today it’s cake, but what happens tomorrow when a Muslim child is forced to recite a Christian prayer in school? The phrase “under God” has been on our money and in our schools’ morning pledge for decades now, so who’s to say it’s not already happening?

Meghan, 26, from Austin, Texas, attends Purdue University Global where she is working toward a master’s of science degree in higher education leadership. She graduated from Penn State University with a bachelor’s degree in special education. She hopes to become the dean of students for a large college, where she can continue her mission of helping others.

Free from religion, full of thought

By Andrew Haws

As a high school teacher in a diverse school district, I am passionate about spreading knowledge to my students. Quite often, our daily conversations lend themselves to developing the critical-thinking skills needed to promote a socially just society.

More than any other generation, the students I teach are keenly aware of the social state that surrounds them. They are frustrated by the lack of understanding

from the elected officials who have pledged to serve the people, and my students reach a point where they feel as if their voices will go unheard.

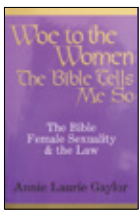
Part of what I try to do is help their voice reverberate by showing them the power of a collective, unified message. When Missouri decided to fund a private school playground with taxpayer money, and that decision was upheld by the Supreme Court, it was my job to help my students see that dollars were being stolen from their education, creating an unequal playing field and raising their college tuition. Interracial marriage was legal during the lives of many of my students’ parents, same-sex marriage only recently became legal, and Missouri is one of the states where private companies can still fire an individual for being gay.

So where do these laws stem from? They are all derived from the teachings of the bible and are set in place to unfairly discriminate against those who hold differing beliefs. Moreover, they indoctrinate the minds of our children, the individuals that we seek to develop their own opinions and beliefs in order to help society progress forward.

The best way to fight the conservative sentiment of “In God We Trust” is to arm the next generation with the tools they need to see beyond the hateful rhetoric the bible promotes and see that the phrases “Black lives matter,” “Women’s rights are human rights,” “No human is illegal,” “Science is real” and “Love is love” are more than just words on a bumper sticker.

Andrew, 30, from Kansas City, Mo., attends the University of Missouri-Kansas City, where he is seeking a doctorate of education in urban leadership. He went to Truman State University as an undergrad, getting a degree in mathematics. He is the father of a 1-year-old child.

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.

Published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online shop.ffrf.org

Bibliolatry and fighting the future

By Richard Lyda

A textbook is given a new edition when new information about the subject matter is understood. Yet the bible, perceived as the ultimate source of sociopolitical guidance by Christian politicians and lawmakers, basically has not had



Richard Lyda

a new edition in a hundred generations. The danger of such an archaic text is its literal interpretation and attempted enforcement in the modern world. Hundreds of years of science, politics and philosophy have dramatically improved our understanding of the world and the people around us. Clinging to stories that might have been meaningful 1,000 years or more ago is irresponsible and dangerous in the modern world.

Since obviously, or at least hopefully, no one would literally live according to the bible, believers are likely to pick and choose which verses promote their agenda and pursue those ends with righteous indignation. The greatest danger to hypocrites is someone drawing awareness to their internal and unresolved conflict, therefore the ultimate comfort for a hypocrite is to surround themselves with people who share their unresolved internal conflict. One might call a large group of people with a shared moral ideal a voter base.

With a voter base which finds itself morally salient, and rhetoric supported by almighty indignation, a politician can be nearly unstoppable in promoting legislation regulating healthcare, social mobility and the personal liberty of people not represented in their bibliocentric reality. The bible was written well before modern gynecology, and has no place being referenced when discussing reproductive health care. When introducing abhorrent legislation, such as South Carolina's recent Personhood Bill, politicians will cite the bible for moral grounding in their attempt to strip funding from women's health clinics.

Although these dangers are perilous on their own, they are symptomatic of a much larger threat. With the rise of biblical literalism is the rise of anti-intellectualism, disregard for science in lieu of outdated

text. Bibliolatry in public policy is a direct attack on years of progress moving humanity from a time of superstition and misinformation to the modern age, governed by reason and research. Years of progress for women, gays, people of color, persons with mental and physical disabilities, trans individuals and others could be struck down by a salvo of bills and proposals cut and pasted from relic of a time when haircuts could be considered a punishable offense.

Richard, 30, from Rock Hill, S.C., attends Winthrop University, where he is working toward a political science degree. His goal is to obtain a master's degree in peace and conflict resolution. Richard hopes to work as a researcher on either the United Nations' education or environmental policy panels.

Handwriting on the wall

By Ethan Morrow

The United States, according to the Pledge of Allegiance, is a "nation under God." However, after sustaining God's weight for so long, the nation has started to collapse beneath him.

According to a 2017 article by the Pew Research Center, 91 percent of legislators describe themselves as Christian. Non-Christian minorities have not only had their political voices drowned out, but also have been subjected to the law in unimaginable ways.

In addition to the bible's outdated (and often inconsistent) teachings, it includes many commands which are not based on reason. Do not take the Lord's name in vain, a colloquial version of the third commandment, is an example of a baseless demand. Without a clear purpose as to why not to take the Lord's name in vain, the believer who conforms to this commandment does so for one reason: because God said so. This blind trust requires the believer to set aside his or her own rationality to essentially become a mindless worshipper.

While the loss of logic could be catastrophic in an average citizen, it would be significantly more dangerous in the case of a leader. Societies require a powerful, intellectual leader, but if the leader relinquishes his or her power or ability to think rationally, he or she is no leader at all.

When Christianity and worship of the bible become extreme, three very

real societal threats emerge. Firstly, when Christianity is the only voice, or the only one capable of being heard, it causes issues for minorities and marginalized groups. Secondly, when the antiquated teachings of the bible are applied to modern times, modern knowledge and ethics are neglected. Finally, when one only conforms to the bible's words, he or she must relinquish his or her own ideas of ethics and logic for God's, which causes followers to become mindless believers, incapable of dealing with reality rationally.

The only solution to the issue of bibliolatry is to put the bible into perspective to show what it truly is: a book, a collection of bound pages, that is simply unworthy of worship.

Ethan, 21, from Columbia, Mo., attends the University of Missouri-Columbia where he is seeking a master's degree in communication. He also graduated from that university in May with an undergraduate degree in communications and a minor in romance languages. He hopes to get a Ph.D. and become a professor.

Cherry-picking the bible

By Ashley Podplesky

Like most people, I was not surprised when President Trump implemented the travel ban on citizens of seven predominantly Muslim nations. As a paralegal at an immigration law firm, I was furious that government officials were so blatantly discriminating against people assumed to be followers of a non-Christian religion. This displays



Ashley Podplesky

a mind-blowing level of hypocrisy, considering they follow a book that states: "You shall have one statute for both the resident alien and the native" and "I was a stranger and you welcomed me," statements that encourage believers to welcome and treat everyone as their equal.

As someone who works in the legal field, I understand the importance of creating laws that are as unbiased as possible, so that when the implementation of said law is questioned, one can seek out precedent set in similar cases to determine how the law has historically been put into effect. When biblical teachings are used to create and implement public policy, this level of precedent is missing, as the bible is all left to interpretation.

Similarly, when a law is implemented, all aspects of the law must be put into place; you cannot pick and choose which parts of the law you want to follow while blissfully ignoring the rest. This requirement does not sit well with those who see the bible as law, as it is all too convenient for them to cherry-pick the verses and stories they use to justify their actions. You cannot claim that your belief in the bible gives you authority over certain things because some verses support your argument if you also decide that certain aspects of that same book, like the requirement that one should not wear fabrics of mixed material or sit in the same chair as someone who is cur-

rently menstruating, do not need to be followed.

Public policy based on this hypocrisy is just as effective as a scientific study that was not peer reviewed; it is nothing more than opinion with no real supporting evidence. This type of study would never be respected in the scientific community, and it is exactly why the bible should not be used to draft or influence policy at any level of law.

Ashley, 28, of Seattle, attends the University of Washington, with the goal of earning a master's degree in public administration. She graduated from Eastern Washington University with a bachelor's degree in international affairs. Ashley is working as a paralegal at an immigration law firm.

Love and the bible

By Elizabeth Ruelle

I am a socially liberal bisexual female, but my liberal upbringing shielded me from any real understanding of LGBTQ discrimination or the effects of bibliolatry until my senior year of high school.

That year, I had a crush on a girl named Ashley. She was nervous to date someone of the same gender because her father was a very conservative pastor. He made rules and his word was law, based, tellingly, on words equally important in their home, the bible. In Leviticus it says: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (Leviticus 18:22). Ashley's father defended that statement with a fervor.

After our third date, Ashley's father caught her coming home. He flipped out. This time her father was not only physically, but also emotionally, abusive.

That night, Ashley spoke to no one and went to her room. The next morning, she was found in her bed with her wrists slit.

Losing Ashley drastically changed my relationship with religion. I became aware of how literally people would read the bible. Creating social policy and especially law based on the bible is particularly dangerous. Individual's rights and freedoms cannot be protected by such a contradictory text.

The bible was written in Hebrew and Aramaic, translated first into Greek, then Latin, before finally appearing in the vernacular, which now counts 3,312 languages. It would be absurd to form policy based on such an unstable document.

For every law based on Corinthians 6:9-10 or Leviticus 18:22, the story of Jonathan and David would challenge it: "The soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:1) and "Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women (2 Samuel 1:26)."

Elizabeth, 28, from Troy, Mich., attends the College of Creative Studies where she is seeking a bachelor's of fine arts degree in fibers and fashion accessories design. She is just returning to school after taking years off because of a serious illness that led her to become paralyzed. She writes, "After a gauntlet of intense surgery, the caring guidance of health professionals at every level, and immense amounts of occupational and physical therapy, I am literally learning to live my life over again."

Your weekly antidote to the Religious Right

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LETTERBOX

South Carolina governor prays, quotes scripture

South Carolina’s Republican Gov. Henry McMaster prayed and quoted bible scriptures on every televised conference he had during the hurricane. I actually laughed and emailed the governor’s office and reminded him of church and state separation. He should not be quoting bible scriptures or having other people quoting scriptures at any time, especially during a disaster like Hurricane Florence. If they felt they should pray to a fairytale god, they should do it on their own time and not in public. That’s not why you get paid from taxpayers’ money.

Stewart Singletary
South Carolina

Thanks, FFRF, for the ad in the N.Y. Times

Thank you, a bit late, for the great full-page ad (“It’s time to consider quitting the Catholic Church”) in The New York Times. It really catches your eye! It’s a great public service. I hope you received some good responses to it.

I have been getting my copies of Freethought Today and reading them cover to cover. I am so glad I rejoined FFRF. What great articles, letters and bios! It makes me feel like I could picket again!

Jan Moffitt
Massachusetts

Message of hope more comforting than prayers

Karen Barron is a Life Member of FFRF. Some of Karen’s friends sent her religious prayers of hope to help sustain her in her fight against cancer. However comforting these prayers may be to those who sent them, they are of no help to Karen, so she wrote her own, needs-no-god, inspirational “prayer of hope.”

I Will Keep Hope
I will keep hope,
however slight it is;
hope for a good week,
hope for a good day,
hope for a good moment.
Hope for more ease.
I will keep hope through all suffering and loss and darkness.
I will keep the last hint of hope close to my heart.
Hope for simple comfort, for peace, for acceptance.
I will hope for those left behind, hope for all life.
I will hope that tomorrow is yet a chance for more hope.

Jim Barron
Washington

Catholic League rating poor compared to FFRF’s

Of the more than 1.5 million non-profit organizations evaluated by Charity Navigator, fewer than 30,000 earn a four-star rating, the highest bestowed. I was pleased to discover that the FFRF has earned that sterling rating for eight consecutive years, with an overall score of 97.17 (out of a possible 100) assigned in February 2018. Meanwhile, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, a constant critic of the FFRF, has



FFRF’s Greater Sacramento Chapter President Judy Saint hands literature to a lifelong local activist during the annual California Freethought Day Festival.

Sacramento chapter represents

FFRF’s Greater Sacramento Chapter participated in the California Freethought Day Festival, handing out or selling FFRF noncontracts, stickers, shirts and Dan Barker’s books. Chapter President Judy Saint remarked, “We spoke with so many more people this year at our booth than in previous years. The public definitely counts on FFRF to act for all of us in this time of heavy religious infiltration into government.”

Judy reports that some visitors took her aside to tell their horror tales, and even slipped cash into her hand for the chapter as their sign of appreciation and encouragement.

Speakers and attendees at the festival included notable leaders such as Debbie Allen of Secular Coalition for America, Rebecca Friedman of

Ask an Atheist radio show, U.S. Rep. Jerry McNerney, who co-founded the Freethought Caucus, Rebecca Hensler, founder of Grief Beyond Belief, Evan Clark and Ryan Bell of Secular Student Alliance, and others. This annual freethought event gives freethinkers throughout the state a venue for encouragement, insights, hope, leadership training, and entertainment of a secular nature, on the public tree-lined grounds of the California Capitol building. The Sacramento Chapter also participated in the annual Leadership Conference always held the day prior to the main event.

Thanks to Janet Thew and John Lucas, chapter board members, and Kathy Johnson and Marc Thew for their steadfast help!

Contest winner gets at how Christianity began

I cannot stop chuckling to myself about the caption contest winner from the October issue.

I memorized the limerick. It is so clever and so well done.

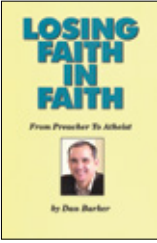
Then, I got to thinking: So, this is how the Christian religion got started!

Pat Hall
California

Editor’s note: Here is the limerick, written by Steve Haack, that Pat references:

“There once was a woman named Mary,
Whose impotent husband was wary,
So she claimed it was God,
Who slipped her the rod,
It was really a shepherd named Larry.”

**Losing Faith in Faith:
From Preacher to Atheist**



By Dan Barker

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

Published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online
shop.ffrf.org

‘In Reason We Trust’ stamper a great buy

I love my “In Reason We Trust” stamper! For years, I would carefully mark out “God” and print “Good” in its place on my money. Now it just takes a nanosecond to de-God my cash.

Before my friend went on a vacation in Utah, I stamped all of his bills that he was going to hand over to the Mormons. It felt great!

I think all of our members should purchase this stamper. It not only spreads the word, it also feels so good.

Ed Burk Colorado

Editor’s note: To order a stamper, go to shop.ffrf.org. See our ad on page 11.

Student essayists were eloquent, poignant, brave

It was with great pleasure that I read the “Students of Color” essays in the September edition.

The eloquence displayed by every single entry left me spellbound, and my emotions were further moved by the poignance of each writer’s personal challenge of being a freethinker in a heightened environment of bigotry and prejudice. I think it’s hard enough being an atheist as a privileged white person.

Because of the social ostracism and loneliness that that people of color must face to embrace logic and reason, these young people rise to the level of heroes in my eyes. And because they have come to their level of reason in more of a vacuum, it makes their words even more powerful.

To all the essayists, you have moved me, and this letter is a dedication to your convictions and bravery. I look up to you all.

Cliff Cuhna
Idaho

Making good on a pledge to support FFRF

I made a pledge to myself, and to a very conservative friend, that if Brett Kavanaugh was approved by the Senate for the Supreme Court, I would become a Lifetime Member of FFRF. I have done so. Go to work.

John Roberg
Minnesota

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I enjoy every issue of Freethought Today

Thanks for your wonderful newspaper! I always enjoy it a lot!
Steven Roesch
California

Thanks to everyone at FFRF for all you do

Many thanks to all of you at FFRF to free us from the utter nonsense of religion.
Joanie Barker Nichols
Washington

Essay winners are role models for nonreligious

I was deeply moved by the “Students of Color” essays and congratulate them on their bravery. A time will come when you are free of economic dependence on religious families, and can operate freely to build a sensible society.
It is sad to read of many of you being ostracized by family and friends. You may find it safer to be alone, at least for a while. You are already role models for all nonreligious youth.
On another topic, I saw this sign at the local Baptist church: “All of creation shows the beauty of God.” Really? Alligators, rats, lice, poison ivy?
David M. Shea
Maryland

We need more women in leadership roles

Pedophilia is a crime. Discrimination against women is inhuman and morally nauseating. Awarding tax advantages to organizations practicing these notions is repulsive, against common sense and possibly in con-



Larry Roszkowiak sent us this shot of the sign at Big Springs Community Church in California. “I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry,” he writes.

tradiction of the law. I would like to propose a new law significantly decreasing the probability of both of these menaces: Any tax-exempt organization should prove that at least 50 percent of its leadership is female. That’s it.
Being reasonable, existing religious tax-exempt groups will lose only 20 percent of their tax-exempt status each year until they satisfy this simple criterion. I firmly believe that the Vatican wouldn’t cover up the crimes of pedophile clergy under the leadership of a female pope. A female mullah won’t send her children to holy war, etc. Everybody wins!
Dr. Peter Szabo
Florida

Youth may save us from theocratic rule

As indicated by a recent survey of freshman students at University of

California-San Diego, every cloud has a silver lining. The category for religious affiliation shows that nearly 50 percent of our young population shares the nonbelief of FFRF. If a majority of them vote, we may save this country from theocratic rule.
Warren Dunn
California

So that’s what was meant in Leviticus!

For those who haven’t heard, Washington state recently passed two laws. It legalized gay marriage and legalized marijuana.
The fact that gay marriage and marijuana were legalized on the same day makes perfect biblical sense. Leviticus 20:13 says: “If a man lies with another man, they should be stoned.” Apparently we just hadn’t interpreted it correctly before!
Madison Arnold
New York

IRS

Continued from page 1

990, which explicitly details income, expenditures, balance sheet, staff compensation, fundraising, lobbying expenses etc., thus ensuring there is no diversion of funds from the organization’s exempt purpose. The Form 990 is made public by the IRS. Yet churches are automatically exempted from filing these returns.
Such preferential treatment results in obligations and penalties imposed on secular nonprofits that are not imposed on churches, in violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and equal protection rights, FFRF charges.
Not only do churches receive preferential treatment over filing requirements, but the IRS preferentially does not enforce restrictions on political campaign activity by churches, the complaint notes. Many churches, FFRF alleges, “are quite deliberate and open in their defiance of the politicking prohibition,” such as coordinating “Pulpit Sundays.”
The complaint cites a recent violation involving President Trump’s evangelical adviser Paula White, who engaged in explicit partisan politicking from the pulpit on Sept. 18.
FFRF is also in federal court challenging the discriminatory clergy housing allowance, whereby “ministers of the gospel” can be uniquely provided a housing allowance as part of their salary, which is subtracted from taxable income.
Representing FFRF in the suit is outside litigator Richard L. Bolton, with FFRF Attorneys Patrick Elliott and Sam Grover serving as co-counsel. The lawsuit was filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.
FFRF is a 501(c)(3) educational nonprofit, created as a national group in 1978.

SECULAR INVOCATIONS

Nick Lee
San Antonio Council
Sept. 13, 2018

Mayor, Council Members: This morning, I do not ask you to bow your heads in prayer. Rather, I draw your attention to the citizens who are gathered here today to do business with the city. They come from all parts of the city, and from different economic circumstances and ethnic backgrounds. Yet, they all



Nick Lee

hope to receive from you an equitable hearing of their concerns.
And beyond this room, I ask you to remember all one-and-a-half million people whom you are collectively pledged to serve. Bear in mind the diversity of cultures, economic interests and religious backgrounds which are represented in this community. In terms of religion, this includes not only the many varieties of Christians, but also Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, atheists and others. At this point, I draw your attention to the religious leaders who are gathered behind me here this morning in support of this secular invocation.
Every citizen of San Antonio looks to each of you to apply wisdom, integrity, and rational thinking to the affairs of the city, and to treat all fairly and without favor. As a secular humanist, I believe that we have the power within ourselves to solve life’s problems and challenges through logic, reason, compassion, and compromise. As our elected representa-

tives, we hope your decisions today will be based on the common good and with an eye to their impact on all citizens and on future generations.
On behalf of the many atheists, agnostics, freethinkers and secular humanists who live and work in this community and contribute to its prosperity, I thank you for this opportunity to present what I believe to be the first secular invocation in the 300-year history of the city of San Antonio. I hope it will not be the last.
Thank you.
Nick is the past president of Freethinkers Association of Central Texas, a past vice president of Texas Freethought Convention, a past president of Atheist Alliance International, and a past Chair of Secular Coalition for Texas.

A note to FFRF Members
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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 2019, receiving an all-expenses-paid trip to Madison, Wis. Oct. 18-20, 2019, along with a plaque and an honorarium of \$500.

MORE INFO AT:
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Freedom depends upon freethinkers

BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

David English Jr., 33, Joanna, SC: 2nd-degree domestic violence and unlawful conduct toward a child. English, pastor of New Hope Baptist Church in Clinton, is accused of assaulting his wife, **Jennifer Bunting English**, and of being aware of her drug addiction and of taking her to buy illegal drugs.

Bunting English, 31, is charged with kidnapping and unlawful conduct toward a child for taking a 2-month-old child she was babysitting to her home and refusing to communicate with the mother. The child was recovered 3 hours later. *Source: WYFf, 9-24-18*

Franco Mulakkal, 54, Jalandhar, India: Rape. Mulakkal, bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Jalandhar, is accused of raping a Missionaries of Jesus nun in her 40s at least 13 times in 2014-16. The Vatican relieved him of his duties at his request.

The alleged victim filed a 114-page police complaint in June and also accused Mulakkal of sending her inappropriate text messages and obscene photos. He denied the allegations and said he'll accept the death penalty if they're proven. India has about 27 million Christians, about 2.3% of the population. *Source: BBC/ Washington Post, 9-21-18*

Gary Miller, 41, Springfield, IL: Forcible rape and forcible sodomy. Miller was pastor in 2012 at Sycamore Baptist Church when his accuser said she got a letter from an anonymous sender that threatened harm against her loved ones if she didn't video herself having sex with Miller. After she told Miller, they met and he allegedly told her he didn't want to have sex but felt like he had no choice.

The woman eventually gave in and Miller recorded the encounter, an affidavit said, and he then tucked her into bed and prayed with her. Police only recently became aware of the alleged scheme while they were investigating other abuse allegations against Miller. *Source: News-Leader, 9-19-18*

James C. Landes, 28, Bryan, TX: Online solicitation of a minor. Landes, junior high youth minister at First United Methodist Church, is charged with arranging to have sex with an undercover officer he thought was a 14-year-old girl. He allegedly agreed to meet at a public park during a work break but later messaged the officer that he couldn't because of time constraints, adding he would "make it up to you." *Source: Bryan Eagle, 9-16-18*

Shin Ok-ju, pastor of Grace Road Church, and 3 senior church leaders were arrested in S. Korea and charged with beating church members in Korea and others who had relocated with them in 2014 to Fiji to escape a predicted famine. It's also alleged she confiscated passports, forced people to work without pay and perform ritual beatings on each other on so-called "threshing floors." The church has branches around the world, including in the U.S.

Videos show Shin calling members forward during her sermons, hitting them on the face and pulling and cutting their hair. In one she tells a girl to slap a woman, believed to be her mother, while saying "you're hitting the cheeks of the enemy." The girl hits the woman 25 times. Later the woman is shown repeatedly hitting the girl and pulling her hair. *Source: The Guardian, 9-16-18*

José U. Rendon, 52, Nacogdoches, TX: Continuous sexual abuse of a child. Rendon, pastor at Iglesia Templo De Fe, is accused of more than 50 assaults on a child in 2004-05. Rendon had agreed to meet with investigators but never showed up and is considered a fugitive from justice. *Source: Morning Telegraph, 9-13-18*

Manuel La Rosa-Lopez, 60, Richmond, TX: 4 counts of indecency with a child. He's accused of offenses when he was pastor at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Conroe. A girl who attended the parish school where he taught alleged in 2001 to the Archdiocese of Houston-Galveston that La Rosa-Lopez kissed her and touched her breasts in April 2000 in the church kitchen after a rehearsal for "The Passion of the Christ" play. He allegedly told her they couldn't have sex until she turned 16.

In August 2018, a 36-year-old man alleged to the archdiocese that the priest molested him when he was a high school student between 1998 and October 1999.

Daniel DiNardo, archbishop since 2006 and now a cardinal, has come under fire recently. The woman alleged DiNardo promised her several years after she reported the abuse that La Rosa-Lopez would be removed from any contact with children but later found out he remained in active ministry at St. John Fisher Parish, about 70 miles away.

The man said he was told that reports were filed with civil authorities but, according to court documents, a police investigator searched for those records and didn't find any. *Source: KTRK, 8-12-18*



Dmitri J. Daniels, 18, Miami Gardens, FL: Sexual battery. Daniels, a parishioner and youth volunteer at Mt. Pisgah Seventh-day Adventist Church, allegedly assaulted a 5-year-old girl. "He had shown the victim in this case pornographic materials and in essence demonstrated or showed her what he wanted her to do," said police Capt. Al Xiques, adding that Daniels "had the opportunity to be around children on a regular basis." *Source: CBS Miami, 9-11-18*

Christian Ohazulume, 50, Dorchester, MA: 3 counts of aggravated indecent assault and battery of a child under 14. Ohazulume, a Catholic priest and chaplain at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, is accused of assaulting a girl when she was 7 or 8 in 2007 when he lived with her family after coming from Nigeria. *Source: KTRK, 9-11-18*

Kristina L. Casey, 48, Vermilion, OH: 3 counts of theft. Casey, treasurer at Saints Peter and Paul Orthodox Church in Lorain, is charged with writing about \$80,000 worth of unauthorized checks to herself. *Source: Morning Journal, 9-10-18*

Sean E. Gaines, 43, Hampton, VA: 3 counts of indecent liberties with child by custodian and 7 counts of carnal knowledge of a child 13 to 15 years old. Gaines, pastor at Empowerment Temple and former pastor at Rising St. James Pentecostal Holiness Church, allegedly took a girl who was living with his family to a hotel to have sex. He's married with 2 children. The girl told police their relationship started in May 2017 and ended in February. *Source: WAVY, 9-7-18*

Pāvels Zeila, 73, a Catholic priest in eastern Latvia, is accused of sexual abuse of a person in a state of helplessness. "One of the suspects delivered the defenseless victim for a fee. The church representative, who was the end buyer, paid the fee and then committed violent sexual crimes against the victim," said Armands Lubarts, chief of a police task force on human trafficking in Riga. *Source: Radio Latvia, 9-6-18*

Charles T. Hanel, 61, Pewaukee, WI: 2nd-degree sexual assault. Hanel, pastor at Queen of Apostles Catholic Parish, is accused of groping a 13-year-old girl's breast and leg in the confessional in December 2017. He denies the allegation.

The girl, who was a lector and altar server, reported the incident to police as Hanel was preparing to return to the parish from a month-long sabbatical, the complaint said, and she told her father she thought Hanel was "creepy" and "weird." *Source: Journal Sentinel, 9-5-18*

Robert W. Rector, 29, Vancouver, WA: Assault with sexual motivation and 4 counts of child molestation. Rector, a volunteer youth leader at New Heights Church and with other church and civic groups, is charged with assaults on 3 teen boys on church trips or sleepovers at his home as long ago as a decade.

One boy alleged he woke up with his genitals exposed and Rector standing over him with a camera. *Source: KGW, 9-5-18*

Diego L. Berrio, 39, Arlington Heights, IL, and **Edwin G. Cortez**, 30, Chicago: Lewd and lascivious behavior. Cortez is also charged with indecent exposure. Both are Catholic priests and are accused of having oral sex in a parked black Volkswagen at South Beach in Miami Beach, FL. *Source: WTOP, 9-4-18*

Kevin Berry, Sedgwick, KS: Aggravated indecent liberties with a child between 14-16 years old. Berry, pastor at First Christian Church, is accused of inappropriate behavior with a girl "on numerous occasions" in 2016-17,

starting when she was 14.

The girl told investigators Berry talked about his lust for women in her youth group "while looking right at her and her cousin." Another time, she alleged, he opened up her jacket and stared at her breasts while commenting "Not too bad," adding that "his hand cupped the side of her breast and that he was fondling his penis on the outside of his clothes." *Source: KWCH, 9-4-18*

Kehinde S. Omosobi, 49, and **Titilayno A. Omosobi**, 48, Reedsburg, WI: Child neglect causing death and child neglect causing great bodily harm. The husband and wife are charged in the death of their 15-year-old son, who died Aug. 31 during a 44-day religious fast. He and his brother, 11, hadn't eaten since mid-July, police said. The brother was so weak he couldn't walk out of the home.

Titilayno Omosobi was also emaciated but refused medical treatment for religious reasons. Her husband described himself as a pastor affiliated with Cornerstone Reformation Ministries, but authorities believe he made that up and was never ordained.

Kehinde Omosobi told police this was the family's longest fast and that they were waiting for a "blessing from God" that would ease their impending move to Atlanta. The younger son was holding a bible when police arrived. *Source: WISC, 9-3-18*

Dennis R. Creason, 48, Bonner Springs, KS: 3 counts of aggravated indecent liberties/lewd touching of a child under age 14. Creason, co-founder with his wife Robin of Oaklawn Christian School, is charged with incidents involving 3 girls between January 2015 and August 2018 when they were about 6, 8 and 10 years old.

"In 2003 God led them to build their first school," Oaklawn's website said, announcing a building project. "For the last two years we have been 'pregnant' with Church for Children, and have reached the season to birth that vision." *Source: Kansas City Star, 8-30-18*

Kevin "Scott" Heffner, 48, Pelham, NC: 12 counts of disseminating obscene materials and 2 counts of statutory sex offense. Heffner, pastor of Victory Baptist Church and principal of Victory Baptist Academy, allegedly sent "photographs of his genitalia" to a person younger than 15 between June 15 and Aug. 29. *Source: Charlotte Observer, 8-30-18*

Seven residents of Monsey and Kiryas Joel, NY, including **Rabbi Aron Melber**, face various counts of conspiracy to commit wire fraud from 2010-16 for an alleged scheme to fraudulently obtain \$14 million from a federal school technology program meant to help underprivileged children. Others charged are **Peretz Klein**, **Susan Klein**, **Ben Klein**, **Simon Goldbrener**, **Sholem Steinberg** and **Moshe Schwartz**.

The suspects are accused of using the money "to pad their own bank accounts," said William Sweeney, FBI assistant director in charge, calling it especially brazen because Hasidic religious schools often bar students from using the internet and other types of technology the funding covers. *Source: NBC New York, 8-29-18*

Ryan T. Pick, 40, Woodbridge, VA: Proposing sex to a minor and 4 counts of sex offense with a minor by computer. Pick is choir leader at St. Paul United Methodist Church and a music teacher at Cameron Elementary School. Authorities didn't release details of the alleged offenses. He was choral director in the 2010 fall semester at Pope John Paul the Great Catholic High School but resigned for personal reasons in December 2010. *Source: WTOP, 8-29-18*

Murray Ramnarine, 67, Ocala, FL: Lewd or lascivious offenses committed upon or in the presence of persons younger than 16 and sexual offenses against a student by an authority figure. Ramnarine, an administrator and teacher at Shiloh Seventh-day Adventist Church School and a church elder, is accused of making sexual advances on at least 4 occasions to a 12-year-old girl and telling her he wanted to marry her when she turned 18.

She told authorities she spurned his advances. Once, she alleged, he gave her a Twix ice cream bar and asked if he could get bits of it off her lips by kissing her. *Source: ocala.com, 8-29-18*

Bhante S. Sujay, Bodh Gaya, India: Child sexual abuse. Sujay, head monk at a Buddhist meditation center that's a popular destination for pilgrims, is accused of molesting an unspecified number of children and beating them if they didn't cooperate. Most are between age 6 and 14. *Source: NDTV, 8-29-18*

Pleaded / Convicted

W. Thomas Faucher, 72, Boise, ID: Pleaded guilty to possession of a controlled substance and 4 counts of possession and distribution of sexually exploitative material. Faucher, pastor at St. Mary's Catholic Church, was charged in February with 24 counts after police allegedly found thousands of files containing child pornography, as well as marijuana, LSD and ecstasy at his home.

"I do not remember sending that," Faucher said in court about an email he sent with child porn. "I was not in good shape. I was drinking a great deal and under an alcohol-induced depression and dementia." The judge refused to lower Faucher's \$1 million bond, even though he's confined to a wheelchair, because he fantasized about "sexual violence toward children." *Source: State Journal, 9-28-18*

Andrew Matheason, 65, Graettinger, IA: Pleaded guilty to wire fraud after being charged with misappropriating about \$480,000 over 13 years from Bethel Lutheran Church, where he was treasurer and created false financial reports to cover it up. *Source: AP, 9-15-18*

Jamel Carelock, 28, Baltimore: Pleaded guilty to arson, felony destruction of property and insurance fraud. Carelock, pastor of LEAP Church (Leading, Evangelizing, Assimilating, Proclaiming), admitted setting fire to his apartment in December 2017 and filing a claim for \$11,000 damage on a policy he took out 8 days before the fire.

He claimed he was in Georgia at the time of the fire but company records showed his cell-phone was a mile away about 5 minutes after the alarm was pulled. *Source: WTOP, 8-29-18*

Sentenced

Rodney W. McManus, 50, E. Palestine, OH: 3 years in prison after pleading guilty to engaging in sexual conduct with a minor. He was charged with molesting a girl from NewLife Outreach Church, where he was pastor, from January 2014 to July 2017. *Source: Morning Journal, 9-22-18*

Joshua Clemons, 35, Parker, CO: 4 years in prison after pleading guilty to sexual exploitation of a child and attempted sexual assault on a child by a person in a position of trust. Clemons was a youth pastor at Crossroads Community Church from 2006-15. Sentencing is pending in a related case. *Source: KDVR, 9-21-18*

John M. Scheline, 41, Pasco, WA: 58 months in prison after pleading guilty to attempted rape of a child. Scheline, executive director of Ignite Youth Mentoring and former pastor at Faith Assembly, was among 26 men arrested in a 2017 online sting that used ads to identify would-be predators. *Source: AP, 9-21-18*

José V. Morales, 51, Phoenix: 13 years in prison and lifetime probation after pleading guilty to molestation of a child, sexual abuse and 3 counts of attempted molestation of a child for assaults on multiple underage girls while he was pastor of Iglesia Cristiana Impacto De Fe.

Court records said assaults occurred in the 1990s and from 2007-11 with victims as young as 7. He was also accused of impregnating a girl when she was 13. *Source: AZ Republic, 9-16-18*

Roger D. Williams, 52, Shelbyville, KY: 63 months in prison and \$1.3 million in restitution after pleading guilty to mail fraud and tax evasion. Williams, pastor at King Branch Road Church of Christ, started offering bogus investment opportunities in 2001 as part of membership in an "investment club." He provided victims, many of whom were elderly or church members, fake IRS forms to document their supposed investments. *Source: News Sentinel, 9-15-18*

Jason E. Kennedy, 48, Knoxville, TN: 30 days in jail and 6 years' probation after pleading guilty to solicitation of a minor for commercial sex. Kennedy was children's minister at Grace Baptist Church in May 2016 when he offered an undercover agent \$100 to have sex with an un-

derage girl. Upon completion of probation, the father of 3 could have the felony conviction removed from his record and his name removed from the sexual offender registry.

Zubin Parakh, 34, Oak Ridge, volunteer creative minister at LifeHouse Church, was arrested in the same sweep. Resolution of his case is pending. *Source: News Sentinel, 9-4-18*

Michael S. Grieve, 74, Naracoorte, Australia: 3 years in prison with 2 years suspended after pleading guilty to 9 counts of indecent assault against 9 underage boys from 1982-85 when he was a Presbyterian pastor.

At sentencing, Judge Gordon Barrett said the conduct involved “getting them over your lap and smacking them on the bottom while they were clothed.” He mentioned previous convictions, including 2 convictions for which Grieve was sentenced in 2003. *Source: Naracoorte Herald, 8-31-18*

Chauncey Walker, 48, Wichita, KS: 95 months in prison after pleading guilty to aggravated indecent liberties with a child and aggravated indecent solicitation of a child for molesting a 15-year-old girl while he worked at Word of Life Church as a youth pastor, teacher and soccer coach.

Her civil suit alleges Walker molested her “at least two to four times a week from June 2012 to June 2015” (288 times at minimum) and that the church and senior pastor **Robert Rotola Sr.**, neglected to supervise him and tried to cover up allegations once they surfaced. *Source: Wichita Eagle, 8-29-18*

James Rankin, 79, Hurst, TX: 8 years’ probation and \$800 fine after pleading guilty to possession of child pornography. Rankin, associate pastor at Bellevue Baptist Church, was also ordered to post a sign at his home saying “A person on probation for a child sex offense lives here.”

He was arrested after Best Buy employees alerted police about images on a computer he’d brought in for repair. He told police he used the porn to research “a possible lesson involving Cupid, love and human trafficking.” *Source: Star-Telegram, 8-29-18*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

A Hawaii man suing the **Diocese of Honolulu** and the **Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers** alleges he was molested in the 1980s as a child by Catholic priest **James Jackson**. It’s at least the 6th such accusation against Jackson, who died in 2005. It’s the first suit under a new law that opens a retroactive window for sexual abuse suits even if statutes of limitations have expired. *Source: Hawaii News Now, 9-10-18*

Michael Giordano, O’Fallon, IL, and 4 other Catholic Church employees are being sued by “Jane Doe,” who alleges Giordano harassed and molested her from 2009-14 while he was a coach at St. Clare Catholic School. He was 58 in 2009 and she was in 8th grade. Defendants include **3 former school principals** and current athletic director **Thomas Fischer**, alleged to have covered up the abuse. *Source: News-Democrat, 8-29-18*

Brad Tebbutt, a youth pastor on leave from the International House of Prayer in Kansas City, is accused by Jennifer Graves Roach of sexually abusing her for 2½ years in the 1980s, starting when she was 15. Roach, 47, now an ordained Anglican minister and therapist, also alleges in the suit that **First Baptist Church** officials covered up her abuse in Modesto, CA. *Source: Kansas City Star, 8-24-18*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

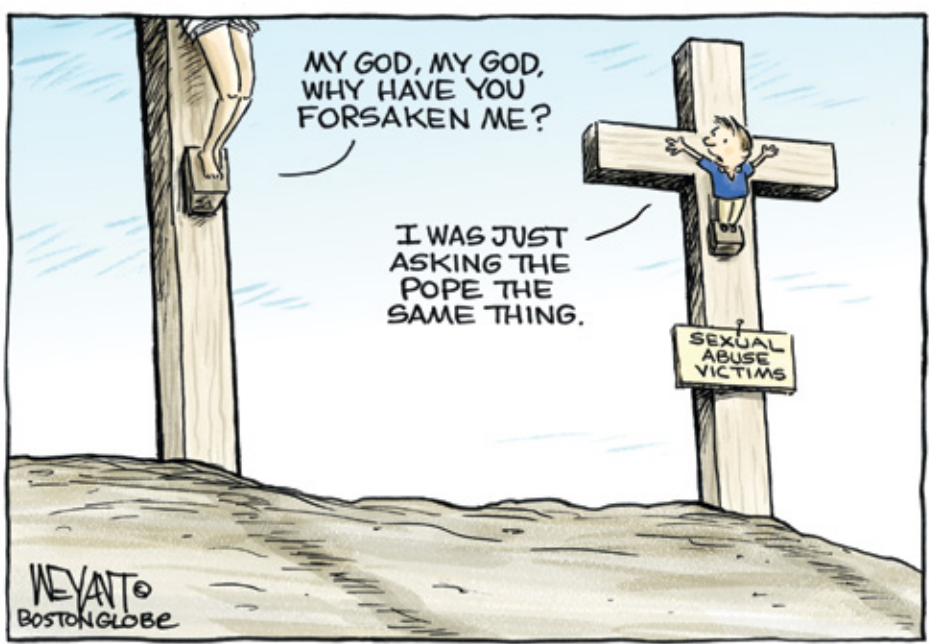
Two Jehovah’s Witnesses entities must pay \$35 million to a Montana woman, now 21, who alleged national church leaders told local leaders not to report her sexual abuse as a child by a Thompson Falls congregation member, a jury ruled. A judge has yet to approve the award.

The ruling involved another woman, now 32, allegedly abused by the same family member. The jury dismissed the older woman’s claims because church elders didn’t get notice of her abuse in 1998 as she said they did. Another family member who claimed abuse was not a plaintiff. Elders expelled the abuser in 2004 but reinstated him a year later, the suit alleged, and the abuse continued. *Source: AP, 9-28-18*

The **Archdiocese of Chicago** agreed to pay \$2.9 million to a victim of pedophile Catholic priest Daniel McCormack. The man, now in his 20s, alleged McCormack abused him twice as a child. A judge in July ordered McCormack to remain indefinitely at a state mental facility, even though he’d served his sentence, after he was deemed a “sexually violent person.” *Source: AP, 9-25-18*

Four Jewish groups have settled for \$14.25 million a suit that included convicted Washington rabbi **Barry Freundel** as a defendant. Keshet Israel Congregation, the National Capital Mikvah, the Rabbinical Council of America and Beth Din of the USA will have their liability covered by Travelers Insurance.

Freundel was arrested in 2014 for secretly recording about 150 women in a ritual bath. Different classes of victims will get different payments. Victims who prosecutors confirmed



had been videotaped will get \$25,000 each and some will also be eligible for a supplemental amount. *Source: AP, 8-28-18*

Legal Developments

A judge in Bergen County, NJ, threw out multiple counts of a lawsuit accusing Bergen Catholic High School wrestling coach **David Bell** of sexual and verbal harassment of wrestler Anthony Asatrian, now 18. Bell has countersued, accusing Asatrian of negligence, false complaint of unprofessional conduct, intentional infliction of emotional distress and other acts.

Bell alleges Asatrian’s father, Harry Asatrian, was aggressive toward wrestling coaches, made anti-Semitic and racially charged comments, secretly switched a scale for weigh-ins and threatened to transfer Anthony to a rival school because Bell took him out of the lineup to give another wrestler a chance.

In an August interview, Anthony said Bell never molested him but made numerous suggestive comments. The county prosecutor’s office announced there would be no criminal charges against Bell. The judge declined to dismiss claims that Anthony suffered emotional distress due to allegations of unwanted sexual advances and text messages from Bell and that Bell disrupted his attempts to transfer to rival high schools. He urged both sides to settle the case before trial. *Source: North Jersey Record, 9-8-18*

Catholic Church offices in Chile of the Archdiocese of Concepción and the dioceses of Valparaíso, Chillán and Osorno were raided by the state prosecutor’s office as part of the investigation into sexual crimes against minors allegedly committed by church officials. Six other church entities were raided earlier.

Prosecutor Emiliano Arias said his office is investigating 119 cases, about triple the number announced in July. A total of 167 bishops, priests and lay members are under investigation for either committing crimes or covering them up. A recent poll showed 96% of Chileans believe the church systematically covers up abuse. *Source: ACI Prensa, 9-15-18*

The former nanny of **Andy D. Turner**, 43, Dallas, GA, was granted a restraining order after she accused the Baptist youth pastor of choking her and threatening her life while they were having consensual sex. Turner’s wife Heather, 35, died of a gunshot wound in May 2017 in their home. Turner claims it was suicide but the medical examiner ruled the cause of death as “undetermined.” The investigation continues, with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation calling her death “questionable.”

Christy Crupp told a reporter that she went out for dinner and drinks with Turner, who has 4 children, about 2 weeks after his wife died. She alleged that in addition to choking her, he said during intercourse that “he told me I should hold Heather’s ashes — that way he could be having sex with both of us.” *Source: WGCL, 9-8-18*

Allegations

The Catholic **Diocese of San Diego** added 8 priests to the list of those credibly accused of molesting children: **José Chavarin, Raymond Etienne, J. Patrick Foley, Michael French, Richard Houck, George Lally, Paolino Montagna and Mark Medaer**. In 2007 the diocese settled 144 claims of child sexual abuse by 48 priests and 1 lay employee for \$198.1 million.

The newly listed priests were accused since the 2007 settlement or reported to the diocese earlier in files that had been tucked away or mislaid, said Bishop Robert McElroy: “They never kept good records on this stuff until recently. They kept records, but not in a very systematic way.” *Source: L.A. Times, 9-14-18*

Two leaders of the Sistine Chapel Choir in the Vatican are being investigated for money laundering, fraud and embezzlement. **Massimo Palombella**, a priest and choirmaster, and **Michelangelo Nardella**, administrative director, deny any wrongdoing.

The Vatican Insider, a website affiliated with the Turin daily La Stampa, wrote that the men are suspected of siphoning money from concert tours. The choir was founded in the 6th century by Pope Gregory the Great and consists of 20 adult professional singers and 35 boys aged 9 to 13. *Source: NY Times, 9-13-18*

Documents from the **Antonio Provolò Institute** in La Plata, Argentina, were seized in a raid during a probe of sexual abuse at the Catholic-run school for youths with hearing disabilities. The raid was ordered by a prosecutor investigating “possible crimes against sexual integrity,” an official said. Documents covered the 1987-2018 period. *Source: AP, 9-5-18*

Removed / Resigned

Donald Wuerl, 77, resigned as Catholic archbishop of Washington in the wake of claims he ignored or downplayed sexual abuse while he was bishop of the Diocese of Pittsburgh. While accepting the resignation, Pope Francis praised Wuerl’s “nobility” in stepping down.

Wuerl will be allowed to retain his place in the section of the Roman Curia that helps pick bishops. Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro criticized that decision: “He is now able to retire seemingly with no consequences for his actions.” Catholic school teacher Jack Devlin expressed similar concerns. “The way Pope Francis worded it, it was how you’d word somebody making a little mistake. This is not a little mistake.”

Plaintiff’s attorney Mitchell Garabedian added, “Instead of portraying Cardinal Wuerl as a victim who made some mistakes, Pope Francis should be instructing Cardinal Wuerl to fully reveal [his] role in the coverup while bishop of the Diocese of Pittsburgh for about 18 years.” *Source: NBC News, 10-13-18*

Jason Webb, senior pastor at Elmbrook Church since 2014 in Brookfield and Hartland, WI, resigned after admitting to “multiple marital infidelities,” said a letter to parishioners, adding that he’s seeking inpatient treatment for addiction. The nondenominational church founded in 1957 dropped its Baptist affiliation in 1968. Webb’s wife Heather will remain as global partnership director at Elmbrook.

Executive pastor **Brodie Swanson** resigned in February amid revelations of infidelities with another church staffer, who also resigned. Elmbrook is Wisconsin’s largest faith community and has planted a dozen sister churches. *Source: WITI, 9-20-18*

José Manuel Ramos, a Catholic priest in the Spanish Diocese of Astorga, was suspended for 10 years and ordered to live in a monastery outside the diocese for alleged child abuse. A church probe concluded Ramos “had committed a serious crime of sexual abuse of minors” between 1981-84. *Source: AP, 9-17-18*

Sal Caraviello, Winchester, MA, director of ministries for 23 years at St. Mary’s Catholic Parish, was put on leave for unspecified reasons. Richard Erikson, St. Mary’s pastor, called it a “personnel matter” that’s being kept private out of respect for Caraviello.

A church business manager in 2016 raised concerns after noting collections were lower than usual and appeared to always be round numbers. No criminal charges have been brought. *Source: Winchester Star, 9-17-18*

Rogelio Martinez, pastor of St. Genevieve Catholic Parish in Las Cruces, NM, was put on leave with pay due to multiple accusations of sexual misconduct with adults. Allegations have

been reported to the district attorney. *Source: Sun-News, 9-16-18*

Cristian Precht Bañados, a Chilean Catholic priest serving in the Archdiocese of Santiago, has been defrocked by the Vatican. He was accused of sexual abuse of minors as part of a church probe into allegations against members of the Marist Brothers order. *Source: Reuters, 9-16-18*

Mark Darling resigned as pastor of Evergreen Church, which has 4 campuses in the Minneapolis area, after a church investigation found he had inappropriate conversations about sex with a woman who was 19 at the time. Other women made similar allegations. Darling, who founded the church, denied the allegations, but the board rescinded his ordination based on its findings. *Source: Star Tribune, 9-14-18*

Retired Catholic priest **John J. Sardina**, 86, Depew, NY, was placed on administrative leave due to a sexual abuse complaint, details of which weren’t released. *Source: Buffalo News, 9-13-18*

Michael J. Bransfield, 75, resigned as bishop of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, W.VA. Pope Francis has ordered an investigation into allegations of sexual harassment of adults by Bransfield. He’s also been accused of covering up abuse by other priests. *Source: Catholic News Agency, 9-13-18*

Barry J. Harmon, 55, a priest from the Catholic Diocese of Springfield, IL, has taken steps to remove himself from the clergy due to “immoral activity inconsistent with the life of a priest,” announced Bishop Thomas Paprocki. He’s been accused of misappropriating about \$29,000 from parishes in Vandalia and Ramsey and of possessing pornography that didn’t portray minors. He was also charged with DUI July 31 in Decatur. *Source: State Journal-Register, 9-12-18*

Mark Inglot, E. Lansing, MI, is on leave from St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Parish and St. John Student Center during a probe of “credible” sexual harassment claims by an adult co-worker. *Source: State Journal, 9-11-18*

David Fleck, Vincennes, IN, was suspended from his duties as a Catholic priest and high school religion teacher due to a sexual abuse allegation from “decades ago,” the Diocese of Evansville announced. *Source: WIBC, 9-10-18*

Charles Schmitt, 86, a retired priest from the Catholic Diocese of Erie, PA, is prohibited from public ministry and contact with minors because of an allegation of sexual abuse from the 1960s, the diocese said in a statement. *Source: WJAC, 9-10-18*

Mark Hession, Seekonk, MA, was removed as pastor of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Catholic Church due to financial irregularities, announced Edgar da Cunha, bishop of Fall River. A “thorough financial review” was conducted with an “emphasis on changes in cash position over the last four years,” he said. “The financial review did find excessive spending by Father Hession in areas such as dining and personal expenses that does not meet acceptable standards.”

Hession must repay the church, da Cunha said, and will be reassigned to a job as a canon lawyer in the Diocesan Tribunal. *Source: Sun Chronicle, 9-9-18*

Patrick Doyle, Indianapolis, was suspended as pastor at Nativity Catholic Parish due to alleged sexual misconduct from “several decades ago.” He’s been a priest for 44 years. The Archdiocese of Indianapolis also suspended **John Maung** due to a recent allegation he abused a child when he was pastor at St. Joseph Catholic Church from 1986-88. *Source: WTHR, 9-5-18*

Noah Levine, 47, was removed as a teacher and board member by Against the Stream Buddhist Meditation Society based in California, an organization he founded. An internal investigation found Levine likely broke “the Third Precept of the Teacher’s Code of Ethics, namely, ‘to avoid creating harm through sexuality.’ ” a statement said. Levine has been accused of misconduct by “between seven and ten” people. *Source: tricycle.org, 8-29-18*

Gerard Sudol, Jersey City, NJ, and **James Weiner**, Westwood, NJ, were removed from their Catholic parishes by the Archdiocese of Newark, which has reopened investigations into alleged sexual misconduct due to new information.

Ed Hanratty alleged he was molested by Sudol and that his misconduct was well-known among parishioners at St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Ridgefield Park, where Sudol served from 1986-94. Desmond Rossi, a priest in the Diocese of Albany, has accused Weiner of sexually assaulting him in 1988 in a Newark church when he was studying for the priesthood. *Source: northjersey.com, 8-29-18*

Eric Dudley, Tallahassee, FL, resigned as pastor at St. Peter’s Anglican Cathedral, said a letter to parishioners: “Father Dudley admitted to inappropriate treatment of others, abuse of alcohol, and anger issues.” The letter also said “complaints included patterns of undesired physical displays of affection which were deeply damaging to others and contrary to diocesan harassment policy.” *Source: WTXL, 8-29-18*

FFRF ON THE ROAD



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker, left, debated Catholic apologist Trent Horn, right, on the topic “Does the Christian God Exist?” at Minnesota State University-Mankato on Sept. 24. Also in the picture are, second from left, co-moderator Michael Mortenson of the St. Thomas More Catholic Newman Center on campus, Secular Student Alliance Mavericks manager Raghen Lucy and co-moderator Heidi Newbauer, an English professor at MSU-Mankato. A full house of more than 350 people attended the debate, and dozens more watched from an overflow room. The event was organized by The Catholic Mavs and the SSA Mavericks.



FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert introduced the panel of speakers following a screening of “Balancing the Scales: The Story of Women Lawyers in America” on Sept. 27 at the University of Wisconsin Law School. Members of the esteemed panel were, from left, former Dane County (Wis.) Circuit Judge and President of the State Bar of Wisconsin Susan Steingass, Milwaukee County Circuit Court Judge Kristy Yang, Wisconsin Court of Appeals Justice JoAnne Kloppenburg, and employment and civil rights attorney Tamara Packard.



FFRF Legal Fellow Colin McNamara gave a presentation to the Iowa Lakes Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Okoboji, Iowa, on Oct. 14. Pictured, left to right, are moderator Linda Weir, McNamara, Cheryl Squires and David Squires.

The title of the talk was “The Moral Case for Strict Church-State Separation — Madison’s Memorial and Remonstrance.” In the talk, McNamara made the case for why church-state separation is an indispensable safeguard of a free people and a free society. The talk was based on James Madison’s “Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments,” written in 1785, six years before the First Amendment was ratified. In “Remonstrance,” Madison lays out 15 reasons why the slightest incursion of government into religion — or vice versa — constitutes a “dangerous abuse of power.”

Advocate, activist Renie Lauer dies

FFRF Member Dorene “Renie” Lauer, 57, died at her home on Sept. 21, following a return of cancer of the esophagus.

She was born on Jan. 23, 1961, to Roger and Frances Mortenson in Slayton, Minn. Renie attended Minnehaha Academy, graduated from Priest River High School in Priest River, Idaho. She attended Itasca Community College in Grand Rapids, Minn., and Bemidji State University in Bemidji, Minn.

Renie held several jobs, including grade-school basketball and T-ball coach, teaching assistant at Northern Lights Charter School, caregiver at River View Villa, and helped out at Blueberry Meadows.

She was an advocate for women’s, children’s and animal rights. She enjoyed running, biking, camping, canoeing and motorcycling.

She was an active member of Grand Rapids Atheists and Freethinkers (GRAF), Woman’s GRAF and Indivisible.

“GRAF members were deeply affected by the loss of Renie and began an effort to quickly raise some money to donate in her name to FFRF,” GRAF President Ken Eck wrote. “At this point we have \$400, which is a



Dorene “Renie” Lauer

IN MEMORIAM

relatively large amount for a group as small as ours and with many members having limited financial resources. She was a good friend and we are missing her greatly.”

GRAF members suggested the donation should go to FFRF’s legal fund. Eck wrote that it was important for GRAF members, “knowing we contributed to a cause that was important to Renie.”

FFRF thanks GRAF and appreciates the gesture in her name.

“The chapter is so generous to have raised money for FFRF as a memorial to Renie,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “It is very meaningful to us.”

CRANKMAIL

Here is this month’s installment of Crankmail, where the voices of reason have taken a break. Printed as received.

Disgusting!: I find it DISGUSTING that the Freedom From Religion Foundation would ATTACK a Lake City MI school for posting a video of a Family Circle prayer or whatever...yet NOT a PEEP when our Public Schools provide Pray Rooms and Time Out for MUSLIMS to engage in their Religion on and in Public Schools!!! Damn Hypocrites is what you are...not to mention Nasty Anti-American Democrats on top of that!!! — *Randy Stepp*

Go away: STAY OUT OF THE SOUTH. People here are Bible believing people, you are going to end up pulling the wrong tail. — *Barbara Best*

Religion: Tour the world and notice the great monuments left behind from ancient civilizations and even not so ancient civilizations, and notice that they have something to do with religion. Religion is in our DNA. To deny it is similar to denying that we need food and air. Don’t take offense but what is the median IQ of your members? Something is lacking in your organization. — *Joe Pino*

Go to hell!: Your support of Satan is without shame. I hope you enjoy your welcome when you arrive in Hell in the arms of your hero. — *Vincent Sanzone Jr.*

FFRF: I hope your kids all die and rot in whatever weird perverted hell you believe in — *Tony Snow*

Fuck off!: You can go all fuck yourselves and stick your tyrannical leftist pro Islamic threat up your ass. You have no problem with your Islamic freinds imposing their filthy customs in our schools but we can’t pray to Jesus. We have had with your tyranny. FUCK YOU AND FUCK THE PEDOHILE PROPHET YOU WORSHIP. WE WILL CONTINUE TO PRAY TO JESUS AND IF YOU TRY TO STOP US WE WILL ERADICATE YOU. — *Charles Martel*

No life: Get a life. WAIT. God is the author of life and you don’t like him so I guess you have NO life to get. — *Leo Bacigalupo*

You’re wrong: We always said the Lord’s prayer in school while I was growing up (a public school). Stop fighting God and stop fighting religion. God may forgive you. — *Joanne Boyle*

Power of prayer: I would kindly ask that you stay out of our counties buisness. I get you may not believe in the mighty God I serve but you see i have seen the power of prayer up close and personally. He has saved my life twice from leukemia and no matter what. GOD WILL be a part of our community no matter what!!! And I will pray for you! — *Laura Thigpen*

FFRF cowards: It is a sad day when it is ok for athletes to kneel during the playing of our National Anthem but a coach at a public school cannot take a knee in support of his/her athletes during prayer.

Them praying at a school football game does not effect you or anyone else in your Godless organization so why threaten them. That is just being a coward and a bully. — *Doug Reynolds*

You’re stupid: Perhaps we should strike April Fool’s Day from the calendar. That way, atheists won’t be able to celebrate their desperate life decisions. You people really need to read some history and science books and wake up. It’s called “live-and-let-live” and “tolerance.” The idea is apparently well beyond your ability to comprehend. — *Erasmus Golden*

Fools: Oh my, do any of you realize how foolish you all look by protesting the National Motto, “In God We Trust” and advocating it be abolished from public schools? Might as well also protest against having the American flag displayed, too. Or any mention of the Ten Commandments or Biblical verses on public buildings in Washington, D.C. and other locations. Don’t you have something better to do with your time? — *Suzanne Renaud*

Praying for FFRF: I can’t believe what an ignorant group of. People you are, I am sure you will be played back in the next life. Organizations like yours are ruining this country. I will pray for you, God knows you need it — *Ronald Schafer*

Jesus is real!: You all need freedom in Christ this is a country that was based on Christ and prayer. So funny you can be intimidated by something that happened over 2 thousands years ago. Think about that one. — *Wendy Pittman*

Commies: I think you should relocate your organization and all your fervent members to a communist country where your ungodly efforts will be welcomed - you are not welcome in this country - until you examine your collective conscience and respect the rights of others as provided by our constitution. You are all WRONG - may God help you. — *Linda Norman*

LEAVE US ALONE: LEAVE THE NEW LEXINGTON HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL PLAYERS ALONE YOU AHVE YOUR RIGHTS AND THEY AHVE THIRES I AM GETTING TO GETHER A GROUP OF PEOPLE TO GO TO THE HIGH SCHOOL AND JOIN THESE PLAYERS ON THE FIELD SO THE NEST VIDEO YOU SEE WILL BE JUST THIS GOD BLESS AMERICA I AM ALL SO STARTING A GROUP CALL DOWN WITH THE FFRF IT TIME CHRISTIANS STAND UP FOR WHAT WE BELIVE IN AND THAT THIS COUNTRY WAS FOUNDED ON GOD IM SORRY YOU DO NOT BELIVE THE WAY WE DO AND THATS IS YOUR YOU BELIVE IN SO PLEASE STOP HATING US BECASUE I DO NOT AHTE YOU — *John Dunn*

Pigs!!!: You people are Socialist pigs. Your group of sick queers is founded on hate and lies. Those are the same things that will destroy you perverts. — *Gregory Galminas*

Eliminate the unreasonable act of faith

By Michael J. Rice

“Faith” is the word we use for the specific action of accepting something as fact without proof.

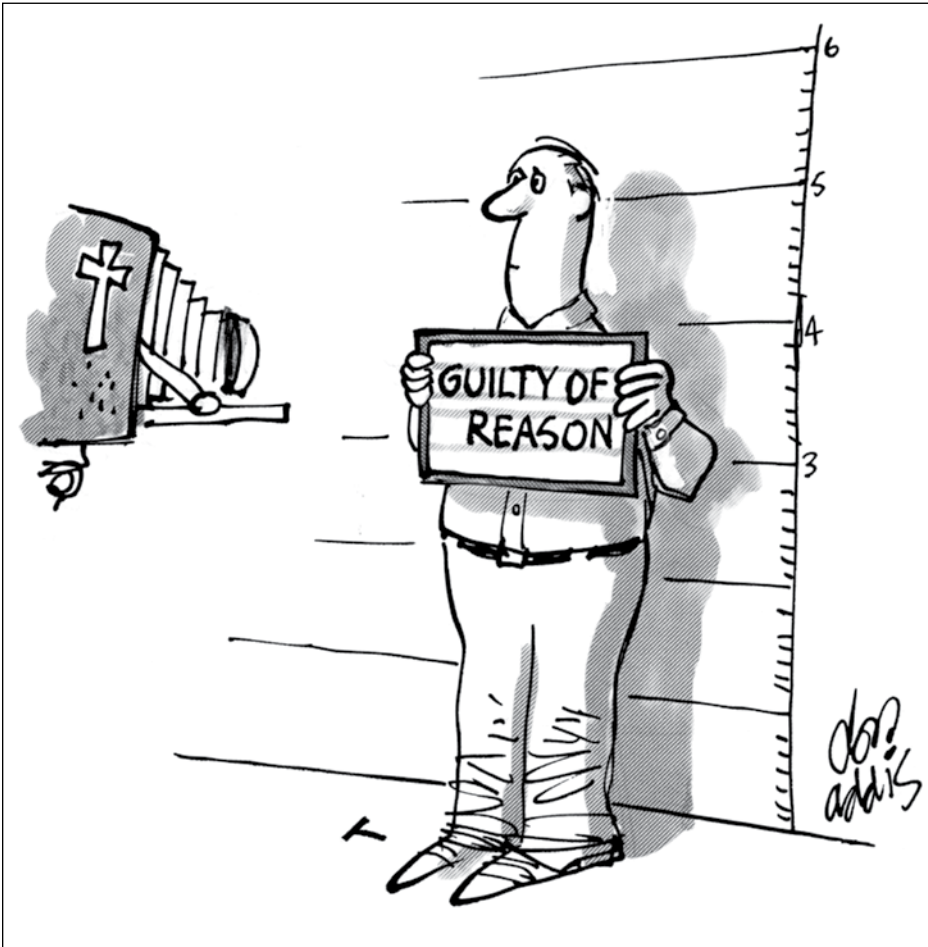
Most people never consider what that definition of “faith” is, or what acting on it means, because those who are taught to have faith are also taught that you shouldn’t question it.

But questioning, investigating and defining everything perceived is what our species specializes in — reasoning. Questions are the first step in seeking facts, increasing knowledge and improving ourselves.

Humanity would be much better off without faith, if only for the fact that forbidding questions about anything circumvents reasoning and, by extension, being reasonable.



Michael J. Rice



whose foundation is, and very existence depends on, an unreasonable act?

We cannot define what we cannot sense, and it is our sense, in concert with our ability to reason, that allow us to define what we perceive. For example, if a living human brain were placed in a box unable to hear, touch, see, smell or taste, would it observe anything? No, obviously not, therefore our ability to know anything is dependent on our ability to first sense physical data and then define the data in terms that are consistent with those observations. We cannot know anything which we cannot first observe, which means that anything relying on faith is not knowledge-based.

The use of faith is an admission that what is being espoused cannot be accepted on its own merits. People cannot simultaneously have both faith and knowledge of anything because where knowledge exists, faith is unnecessary. Because it can be proved, no one uses faith to know that “one plus one equals two.” No reasonable person disputes this equation. And if anyone could prove gods existed, faith in those gods would not be needed.

So, faith is, by definition, an unreasonable act.

Why do otherwise reasonable, rational adults accept, practice and teach an unreasonable act? Like most animals belonging to the kingdom Animalia, it is in our nature to be credulous. It is more expedient for everyone involved if offspring believe what they are told: Don’t touch that snake, eat that berry or play with that gun. Yes, it saves time, but, unfortunately, it also conditions people to accept unverified assertions as fact.

We need to learn to honestly and comfortably say, “I don’t know,” when that is the truthful answer. To quote Carl Sagan: “Better the hard truth, I say, than the comforting fantasy.”

There are many things to our nature besides being credulous. Killing, stealing and raping are acts committed by many animal species. However, it is generally unacceptable for the human animal to do these things, which means that just because something is natural does not necessarily make it practical, reasonable or acceptable.

I asked a friend, “If proof were provided that there were no gods, would you accept it?” The answer was no. The same question was asked of a sibling. Not only did my sibling flatly refuse to answer that hypothetical question, but the reply was, “What kind of person would ask a question like that?”

Neither of those reactions qualifies as reasoned. This is what the act of faith does — it allows people to be shamelessly arrogant and often times fanatical in not only their thoughts and words, but, unfortunately, their actions.

Reason is humanity’s greatest asset, its greatest ability. Reason has allowed us to extend our senses beyond our natural limitations and create a wealth of knowledge that allows us to do many unnatural things. We’ve seen more

“For our species to survive, we need to exploit reason to its fullest.”
— Michael J. Rice

than 13 billion light-years into the past, recorded life on the microscopic level and traveled the land, water and air in unnatural ways at unnatural speeds, all because of our ability to reason.

Is there anything reasonable people cannot accomplish or amicably agree upon? For our species to survive, we need to exploit reason to its fullest. We cannot accomplish that without first recognizing and acknowledging those things that prevent us from becoming completely reasonable.

People must reject the notion that faith cannot be questioned — not questioning what is believed, but questioning the act itself. The fault does not lie in what is believed, the fault lies in the act itself. What greater good can come of anything, religious or otherwise,

There are many atrocities done in the name of faith that no reasonable person would ever consider, much less do. And there are no good deeds done in the name of faith that could not or would not be accomplished by reasonable people. I can think of no instance or circumstance where choosing to be unreasonable is ever acceptable.

For a civilized society to exist, the act of faith needs to be shunned. Unreasonable acts, faith or otherwise, should never be practiced, taught or condoned. How positive would the repercussions be if, instead of teaching children faith, we taught them to always be reasonable in thought and action?

If we choose to act on and condone unreasonable acts, our species will not survive. With humanity’s ability to potentially exterminate itself, the only way our species will survive is to eschew faith and fully embrace reason.

FFRF Member Michael J. Rice, a former estimator for a mechanical contracting firm, was born, raised and retired in Tucson, Ariz.

Bible presents God as monster of vanity, cruelty

By Barbara G. Walker

Nonbelievers are often asked, “Why not accept the idea of God as a harmless one, a force for good, an inspiration to bring out the best in people?” But when I read the bible as a teenager, I found a lot of reasons why not. The biblical God is hardly harmless. He is incredibly cruel, irrational, vain, sadistic and untrustworthy.

In spite of saying “Thou shalt not kill” at one point, he orders endless massacres — whole cities to be wiped out, including men, women, children, animals, all. He demands that raped women must be killed, a brutality still carried out in certain Muslim coun-

tries. He orders you to murder any members of your own family who don’t sufficiently respect him (Deuteronomy 13:6-9). He sends wild animals to kill children (2 Kings 2:23-24). He is a jealous God, full of vengeance and wrath (Nahum 1:2). He brags that he has destroyed many nations (Zephaniah 3:6). He even admits: “I create evil” (Isaiah 45:7).

In Genesis, he kills almost every living creature on Earth because a few people failed to praise him enough. He is the ultimate embodiment of male egotism; his appetite for praise is insatiable. He demands it every minute, from everybody, for all eternity. We have been told that one of the components of heavenly “bliss” is that we will join the choirs of angels in singing God’s praises forever and ever. Well, that might be entertaining for half an hour, but for all eternity? More like hell. The pagans had a better idea, that heaven-



Barbara Walker

ly “bliss” would be like an eternal orgasm; but, of course, the prudish God would not allow that.

As a child, I was told about one of God’s worst crimes. He arranged to have his own son murdered, to induce himself to save some of the people from the hell of eternal torture that he created to punish the sins he knew they would commit, because he made them that way.

What kind of a father is it who kills his own allegedly beloved son? And why should it be so pleasing to him? But even this death would not eliminate God’s hell altogether, because the blessed ones in heaven needed to enjoy the sadistic pleasure of a perfect view of the tortures of the damned, according to St. Thomas Aquinas and other godly folks.

As a child, I wondered, “What was the point of killing Jesus?” If the all-powerful God wanted to save people, couldn’t he just do it, without all the folderol and pain of sacrifice? But no, hell must never be eliminated. Apparently, God really wanted to intimidate his poor subjects with that vision of endless agony that only real-

ly sick minds could create, and that same imaginary fear made enormous profits over the millennia for God’s ever-greedy minions on earth.

I find it incredible that people can read what the bible says about this God’s character and still think him harmless, benevolent or anything close to lovable.

The bible presents him as a monster of vanity and cruelty, the “jealous God” that people were commanded to fear. The men who created and developed his character were like schoolyard bullies, relishing their ability to make others tremble.

They made a god that I found hugely unworthy. I wanted neither his heaven nor his hell, and felt much more comfortable after dismissing them. My future may be limited, like that of every other life form on Earth, but that’s better than either of God’s alternatives.

Barbara G. Walker is the author of the award-winning Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets, Man Made God, Belief and Unbelief, The Crone, The Skeptical Feminist, and 20 other books, and is a Lifetime Member of FFRF.

What Is a Freethinker?

freethinker *n.*

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

Politics the new religion for progressives

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By Emma Green

The voters who are most amped for the 2018 elections look elite in nearly every way. They are Democrats, college-educated and largely secular. They are likely to be women, but they're not necessarily white or particularly young. These are the people who might post rants about Donald Trump on Facebook or harass their friends to donate to Planned Parenthood. They may sign petitions on *Change.org* or follow the Facebook page of the U.S. Senate candidate Beto O'Rourke, even though they don't live in Texas. Maybe they attended the Women's March two years ago, or the March for Our Lives this spring.



Emma Green

This is the sketch that emerges from a new poll by The Atlantic and the Public Religion Research Institute, which looks at Americans' civic engagement in the lead-up to November's midterms.

"Whoever is in the losing party tends to be more energized," said Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, the director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University. "They have something to win back."

It's the segment that's surprising: Religiously unaffiliated voters, who may or may not be associated with other civic institutions, seem most excited about supporting or donating to causes, going to rallies, and expressing opinions online, among other activities. Political engagement may be providing these Americans with a new form of identity. And in turn, they may be helping to solidify the new identity of the Democratic Party.

Democrats have traditionally had a strong base of religious voters. A decade ago, more than 80 percent of self-identified Democrats were affiliated with some sort of religion, according to the Pew Research Center. The party was nearly one-quarter Catholic and nearly one-half Protestant, including mainline, evangelical, and historically black denominations. By 2014, those numbers had shifted significantly: Pew found that



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Associate Counsel Sam Grover speaks his mind during the Women's March in Madison, Wis., in January 2017.

28 percent of Democrats identified as religiously unaffiliated.

More enthusiasm

This year, the God gap also seems to be an enthusiasm gap between religious and nonreligious voters. In the new PRRI survey of 1,811 respondents, conducted this year in August and September, religiously unaffiliated Democrats were more than twice as likely to have attended a rally within the past 12 months compared with their religious peers. During that time, they were significantly more likely to have contacted an elected official or to have donated to a candidate or cause. And nearly half of religiously unaffiliated Democrats said they had bought or boycotted a product for political reasons or posted political opinions online, compared with roughly one-quarter of their religious peers.

"Culturally, this is the subgroup of the Democratic Party that feels most at odds with the direction of the country and what the Trump administration is doing," said Dan Cox, the research director at PRRI. "These secular Democrats also tend to be the most liberal."

The data on religiously unaffiliated Democrats combines with other statistics to form a rough picture of the voters who have been getting the most civically involved over the past year. Across the board, college graduates were significantly more likely than their nongraduate peers to have signed petitions, volunteered for or donated to a cause, attend-

ed rallies, liked a campaign online, called their representative, or changed what they bought for political reasons. Women were also more likely to have done many of these things than men, and they were five percentage points more likely to say they had become more civically engaged over the past two years.

In general, Democrats beat out Republicans on a number of measures of civic engagement, especially when it comes to online activism: They were twice as likely to have signed an online petition, encouraged friends or family to get political online, or posted about issues they care about.

So what does all of this mean for the 2018 elections? While many Democrats seem to be more politically fired up than Republicans, it's not clear that this will translate into big wins at the ballot box: Eighty-one percent of Democrats said they'll absolutely or probably vote in November, compared with 82 percent of Republicans. But this wave of political energy may say something about the identity of Democratic voters — particularly those who don't have strong religious or institutional ties.

"There's a sociological story you can tell about this community," said Eitan Hersh, a political scientist at Tufts who is writing a book on what he calls "political hobbyism." "This online world of political identity . . . is basically acting as a replacement for people who maybe a generation or two before would identify as Catholic or as Jewish or as Irish or Italian."

New identity

This new identity of voter is largely elite, politically plugged-in, constantly discussing the Republicans' latest political shenanigans at dinner parties, and more focused on national problems than local affairs.

"You see Democrats who will say on surveys that their most important issues are the environment or racial equality, and they take absolutely no interest in voting in local primaries or local municipal elections, where a lot of those issues are worked out," Hersh said. "It's a lot more gratifying to be talking about the Kavanaugh hearing."

This sketch doesn't necessarily capture what's happening on the ground in Democratic and progressive organizing circles, said Lara Putnam, a professor of history at the University of Pittsburgh.

"I have met more churchgoing progressive women in the world of . . . political organizing than I had ever met in my previous 15 years of living in basically the same communities," she said.

It may be challenging to understand these people through a national poll: While it's easy for Democrats to talk about their angry Facebook posts, it's more difficult to capture the kind of political transformation that Putnam is seeing among local groups in Pennsylvania. "The spark may have been about Trump," she said. "But that story . . . stopped being about Trump a long time ago."

Perhaps the takeaway from this data, then, is that the Democratic Party is going through a transformative moment of both sentiment and identity. Many liberals are feeling anger, and finding ways to express that. The elite part of the party, especially those who are well educated, is most engaged. And for these people, progressive politics may offer a form of meaning making, especially if they are disconnected from other forms of ethnic or religious identity.

"The Democratic Party is undergoing a fundamental transformation. It's not going to occur over one election cycle," Cox said. "So much of this is wrapped up in people's ideas of who they are and where they belong. And that reflects on what kind of country they want, what kind of leaders they want, and, perhaps even more importantly, what kind of leaders they don't want."

Emma Green is a staff writer at The Atlantic, where she covers politics, policy and religion.

Survey

Continued from page 1

secretly serving in government but too afraid to come out of the closet.

Respondents reacted positively to learning about the 10-member Congressional Freethought Caucus launched earlier this year. On a scale of 0 to 100, respondents averaged a 90 when asked how likely they would be to support candidates who openly identify as nonreligious.

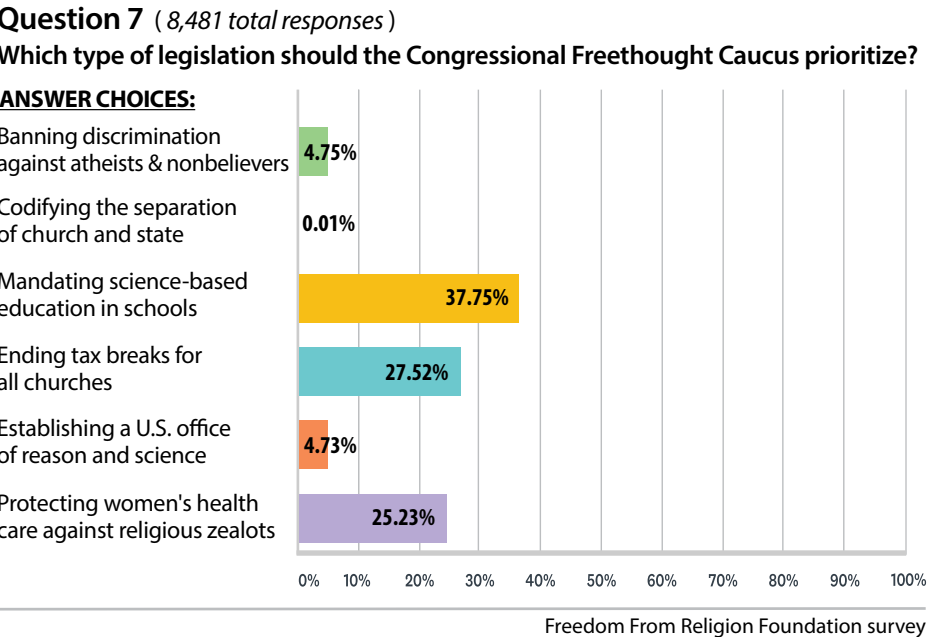
Respondents said the Freethought Caucus should prioritize mandating science-based education in schools, ending tax breaks for all churches, and protecting women's health care against religious zealots.

When asked what is the most dangerous threat to the separation of church and state in America, the top response was President Trump's Supreme Court nominees, followed

by "Religious Freedom" bills advancing in state legislatures across the country.

FFRF's Secular Voter Survey also found:

- Nearly three-quarters of secular voters identify as atheists, with 13 percent identifying as humanists and 6 percent as agnostic.
- More than one-quarter are Democratic Socialists, 45 percent are Democrats, 22 percent are independents and less than 2 percent are Republicans.
- Nearly two-thirds hold a college degree or multiple degrees, with just 6 percent having not attended any college.
- The largest group of secular voters are middle-aged-whites, a coveted swing demographic cited by many national political pundits and campaigns.



• The vast majority are supervoters, stating they vote in every presi-

dential, midterm and local election, including most primaries.