

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



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FFRF, others seek to dissolve State Dept. commission

Awaiting info on Unalienable Rights group

A new State Department body should be disbanded, the Freedom From Religion Foundation and close to 200 other organizations urged in a letter. Hundreds of former officials, academics and activists have also signed on to the July letter originating with Human Rights First.

FFRF and all these groups and individuals are calling on Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to dissolve the recently announced Commission on Unalienable Rights.

"We object to the commission's stated purpose, which we find harmful to the global effort to protect the rights of all people and a waste of resources; the commission's makeup, which lacks ideological diversity and appears to reflect a clear interest in limiting human rights, including the rights of women and LGBTQI individuals; and the process by which the commission came into being and is being administered, which has sidelined human rights experts in the State Department's own Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor," the letter states. "We urge you to immediately disband this body."



Mike Pompeo

The commission's shortcomings start with its title, the letter points out.

"We view with great misgiving a body established by the U.S. government aimed expressly at circumscribing rights through an artificial sorting of those that are 'unalienable' and those to be now deemed 'ad hoc,'" says the letter. "These terms simply have no place in human rights discourse. It is a fundamental tenet of human rights that all rights are universal and equal."

And the composition of the entity does little to inspire confidence.

"The commission clearly fails to achieve the legal requirement that a federal advisory committee 'be fairly balanced in its membership in terms of the points of view represented and the functions to be performed,'" asserts the letter. "The com-

See Commission on page 8



South Dakota law exclusionary

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is damning an exclusionary new South Dakota law that mandates displaying an "In God We Trust" logo in all public schools.

"A new state law that took effect this month requires all public schools in the state's 149 districts to paint, stencil or otherwise prominently display the national motto," the Associated Press reports. "The South Dakota lawmakers who proposed the law said the requirement was meant to inspire patriotism in the state's public schools."

The law — insultingly confusing patriotism with piety — is part of the nationwide legislative push by Project Blitz, which is a stealth campaign to inject religious bills into state legislatures across the country. The campaign, FFRF avers, is an unvarnished attack on Amer-

ican secularism and civil liberties, imposing the theocratic vision of a powerful few on "We the People."

These laws are about advancing the lie that the United States was "founded on God" or Christianity, thus dismantling the wall between religion and government. The motto "In God We Trust" is inaccurate, exclusionary, and aimed at brainwashing American schoolchildren into believing that our nation is a theocracy, FFRF asserts.

FFRF fought the law.

"The Freedom From Religion Foundation, based in Madison, Wis., which has legally challenged the motto's inclusion on U.S. currency, alerted its South Dakota members to

See Law on page 4

Appeals court: County seal ruled constitutional

Reverses FFRF victory in district court from 2017 in Pennsylvania

An appellate court on Aug. 8 disappointingly invoked a misguided U.S. Supreme Court decision to declare constitutional a cross-bearing Pennsylvania county seal.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation and four individual plaintiffs won resoundingly in district court in 2017 when a judge found unconstitutional the Lehigh County seal that features a prominent cross. "The undisputed facts demonstrate that the county's original

purpose for including a cross on the seal is not secular," Judge Edward G. Smith had ruled in 2017.

But the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia unfortunately relied on the Supreme Court's recent *Bladensburg* cross decision to rule the clearly Christian seal acceptable.

The opinion, written by Judge Thomas Hardiman, who was rumored to be on President Trump's short list for the U.S. Supreme Court, says that the 3rd Circuit was bound to uphold the seal and cross because of the *Bladensburg* precedent. Hardiman holds that, after *Bladensburg*, "longstanding symbols benefit from 'a

strong presumption of constitutionality,'" by which he means, "longstanding religious symbols." The seal dates back to 1944.

The alarming nature of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Bladensburg* judgment can be seen in this opinion. Instead of protecting the minority from the tyranny of the majority, Hardiman rules that the majority can trample the First Amendment in the name of its religion, concluding that the seal "has become part of the community."

FFRF's appellate brief, filed in April

See Seal on page 9





Join other nontheists for 2019 Secular Lobby Day

Make your voice heard in Washington, D.C., by joining the Secular Coalition for America at its Secular Lobby Day Sept. 26-27.

SCA, of which FFRF is a member organization, will begin its gathering on Thursday, Sept. 26, with an evening reception on Capitol Hill with members of the Congressional Freethought Caucus and other lawmakers and staff.

The next day will be spent on Capitol Hill with speakers, training and visits to congressional offices. Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne, Director of Strategic Response Andrew L. Seidel and Director of Governmental Affairs Mark Dann will be representing FFRF during the weekend.

You will learn how to effectively lobby your representatives, shape public policy to help make a real impact, meet with lawmakers and their staffs and network with like-minded secular leaders and advocates.

On Thursday, Sept. 26, from 7-9 p.m., you can attend an exclusive reception on Capitol Hill. While there, you will have the chance to mingle with your fellow citizen advocates as SCA honors the members of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, Hill staffers, and activists who have advocated on behalf of secular Americans.

Then, on Friday, Sept. 27, from 8 a.m.-5 p.m., you can join nontheists from across the country as they lobby members of Congress and their staff, in person, about issues impacting the separation of church and state. You will be trained on how best to present SCA's issues by lobbyists from SCA and our member organizations, and then team up with fellow attendees from your state or region for congressional meetings.

Tickets are needed for the reception and breakfast and space is limited. Go to lobbyday.us for more information or to register.

SECULAR INVOCATIONS

Karen Avizur Tavares (Fla.) City Hall March 20, 2019

I would like to thank you for this opportunity to address Tavares in this invocation, speaking not just as an atheist but as a resident of Mount Dora, to bring us together for this meeting.



Karen Avizur

I've lived here less than a year, and have already made many friends among my neighbors and others in my community. We're all appreciative to those officials who come together to better our society, who struggle with the laws, both moral and ethical. Who come to City Hall as representatives, and as citizens themselves, to do the best they can to encourage and preserve justice, equality, and the well-being of every person in our vastly

diverse society.

I'd like to recite a quote from Carl Sagan, one I'm particularly fond of, when he speaks of the photo Voyager 1 took of Earth, the "Pale Blue Dot."

"Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there — on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam."

I'm immensely grateful to those who work for our city and those who live in and support it, and hope that today's meeting, and all that come after, continue to unite us as one community.

Karen Avizur is a video editor living in Mount Dora, Fla., with her two dogs. In her free time, she likes to read sci-fi and write fantasy novels.

Lindsey Bridges Seminole County (Fla.) Commission Jan. 8, 2019

Madame chair, commissioners, staff, citizens, and guests, let me thank you for including me in today's proceedings.

The word "invocation" originates from the Latin *invocare*, meaning "to call upon" — an infinitive which generates a question. "To whom or to what do we call upon?"

Historically, and even today, we generally seek wisdom and guidance from god or muse, but today, at the helm of this new year, I invite you to call upon one another.

Let us invoke our fellow Homo sapiens, who have learned that working together as a whole enhances and benefits the individual immensely. What we lack or strive for in ourselves, let us offer and find in others who share our passion for service.

In the words of the poet John Donne, "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."

As a lifelong resident of Seminole County, a former volunteer at the Winter Springs Police Department and a member of the Central Florida Freethought Community, I champion this notion.

As one of our constitutional framers, Thomas Paine said, "Whatever is my right as a man is also the right of another; and it becomes my duty to guarantee as well to possess."

So, let us fulfill this duty, this obligation to represent and manifest the will of the governed; our fellow citizens.

Let our shared experience color us



Lindsey Bridges

and others' unique experimentation enlighten us all. Let us pursue truth and toil, each day, for a better way to serve our peers, by extension, ourselves, and to foster maximal well-being for all.

Again, the words of Thomas Paine: "Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom, must undergo the fatigue of

supporting it."

You have our sincere gratitude for setting the example of service we should all follow.

FFRF Member Lindsey Bridges, 21, is a member of the Central Florida Freethought Community, FFRF chapter, and a student at the University of Central Florida, studying biology and mathematics. "I'm passionate about the separation of church and state, religious liberty and equality for all."

See FFRF's Nothing Fails Like Prayer contest rules on page 12.

FFRF welcomes 17 new Lifers

FFRF thanks and welcomes our 17 new Lifetime Members and two Immortals. The new \$1,000 Lifetime Members are David Balint, Mary Balint, Carla Brady, William Burkhardt, Jimmy Dunne, Rebecca Greben, Laurel Huber, Walter C. Kennedy, Gordon L. Kramer, Barbara Lund, Jake Mahoney, N. Raymond Pearson, Linda Skory, William R. Slye, Jamie Smith, Matt Smith and Kathleen Steel.

States represented are California, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas and Washington.

Our new Immortals are Al Lunemann and Glenn E. McMunn. The Immortals category is a donation designation for those generous members who have contacted FFRF to report they have made provisions for FFRF in their estate planning.

The logo for Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), consisting of the letters "ffrf" in a stylized font inside a blue square.

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“Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom, must undergo the fatigue of supporting it.”
—Thomas Paine

IN MEMORIAM

Roger Chapman lived life on his own terms

Longtime FFRF Member Roger P. Chapman, 78, died July 5 in Fitchburg, Wis. He had been a member since 1979!



Roger Chapman

Roger was born in Eau Claire, Wis., on June 25, 1941, to Jean and Margaret (Sweeney) Chapman. He graduated from Evansville (Wis.) High School in 1959 and the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1964. Roger thought public schools were excellent and opposed public money going to religious or other private schools.

Roger worked at Evansville's Rex Theater, where he eventually became a projectionist. That led to jobs as a projectionist while he was an undergrad in college and a computer systems analyst in grad school.

When the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) became law in 1971, Roger designed and became a project leader of Wisconsin's OSHA system.

Based on his experience, Roger thought



Roger with Ingrid Andersson and her brother Karl Johnson in the early 1990s.

a broad liberal arts education, rather than one focused on computer science, was best for a computer systems designer.

After Roger was disabled by an accident, Dr. George Szasz gave him good advice regarding rehabilitation and living a full and active life. Roger followed this advice unrelentingly.

Roger spent six years in the Army Reserves, and became a political activist

in his later years. He was a member of the Democratic and Socialist parties and several public interest organizations. In 2003, he was honored as an extraordinary activist by the Coalition for Wisconsin Health.

Longtime friend Ingrid Andersson wrote this about Roger for Freethought Today:

"Roger was a family friend. We met at an FFRF function in the late 1980s. Roger grew up Catholic, but by the time I met him in the late 1980s, he was passionately opposed to religion and never tired of revealing holes of logic and mercy within it, especially Catholicism.

"Roger was also passionate about working toward an American single-payer health care system, and as an activist nurse and midwife, I shared those political local initiatives with him. Roger was a deeply compassionate individual who always got to the heart of the matter and rarely small-talked.

"Many people who knew Roger did not realize how much he loved folk dancing and singing. Though he could not dance — being confined to a wheelchair since

a motorcycle crash as a young man — he possessed intelligent, dancing eyes, and was a member of a secular monthly singing group. Many of us in Madison loved Roger for his truth-seeking qualities and passions, and we will miss him."



Photos provided by Ingrid Andersson
Roger and Ingrid Andersson at an FFRF convention.

Art collector James Smith Rudolph dies

James Smith Rudolph, 92, died in Sarasota, Fla., on April 15.

He was born June 9, 1926, to Samuel and Elizabeth Smith Rudolph. He enlisted in the Navy at age 17 and also attended Dartmouth.

Jim spent seven years in Paris, where he learned about literature, art and music. He once said that he



James Rudolph

wouldn't have traded them for any seven years of anyone else's life.

Jim is survived by his wife of 47 years, Adrienne. Together, they created Centicore Arts International in Ann Arbor, Mich., and traveled the

world. Jim collected Renaissance musical instruments, 18th century French furniture, contemporary art, vintage wines, kitchen gadgets, and more.

Active secularist Mike Steiner dies



Mike Steiner

FFRF Life Member Mike Steiner died in late June in Phoenix.

He was a constant presence in the Arizona secular community, serving on the boards of Secular AZ, FFRF – Valley of the Sun Chapter, and Americans Unit-

ed for Separation of Church and State – Greater Phoenix Chapter. He was also an

active member/volunteer in the Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix.

Secular AZ posted this about Steiner: "Mike was deeply committed to separation of church and state and worked tirelessly to make the world a better place. He was always willing to help by sharing his knowledge, ideas and time. We all knew that we could count on Mike to be there when we needed something done . . . and especially when we needed it done right. His attention to detail was legendary! Most of all, we will miss Mike's smile and quirky sense of humor. As one of our board members said, Mike was so often the spark that lit a smile."

Freethought Today caption contest!



This photo of the statue of the archbishop of Warsaw, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, was taken by FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. To enter the contest, please write a witty or humorous take on what this statue is thinking. Email your response to caption@ffrf.org by Sept. 18. The winner will receive an FFRF T-shirt!

Donate now to FFRF through CFC, AmazonSmile

There are a few ways you can donate to FFRF, including directly through our website, through the Combined Federal Campaign or AmazonSmile.

If you are a federal employee, you may make donations to FFRF through the CFC (Combined Federal Campaign) from Sept. 1 until Jan. 15, 2020. If you wish to help FFRF through this campaign, the CFC code to designate your contribution to FFRF is 32519.

It is recommended that all CFC donors check the box to include their name and mailing address (in addition to e-mail) with the donation. Donors will then receive an acknowledgment from FFRF when we receive pledge notification.

From the CFC website: "The CFC is the official workplace giving campaign of the federal government. The mission of the CFC is to promote and support philanthropy through a program that is employee focused, cost-efficient and effective in providing federal employees the opportunity to improve the quality of life for all. The CFC is the world's largest and most successful annual workplace charity campaign."

Another way to donate automatically is through AmazonSmile. It's a simple way for you to support FFRF (or other charitable organizations) every time you shop, at no cost to you. When you shop at smile.amazon.com, you'll find the exact same prices, selection and shopping experience as [Amazon.com](https://amazon.com), with the added bonus that Amazon will donate a portion of the purchase price to your favorite charitable organization. Hopefully, that's FFRF!

Visit the AmazonSmile donation designation page and select the Freedom From Religion Foundation to donate 0.5 percent of eligible purchases to FFRF.

The AmazonSmile Foundation is a 501(c)(3) private foundation created by Amazon to administer the AmazonSmile program. All donation amounts generated by the program are remitted to the AmazonSmile Foundation. In turn, the AmazonSmile Foundation donates those amounts to the charitable organizations selected by their customers. Amazon pays all expenses of the AmazonSmile Foundation; they are not deducted from the donation amounts.

HEADS UP

A Poetry Column By Philip Appleman

Fleas

I form the light, and create darkness:
I make peace, and create evil:
I the Lord do all these things.
— Isaiah 45:7

I think that I shall never see
a poem as ugly as a flea,
a flea whose hungry mouth is pressed
against a buttock or a breast,
a flea that spreads disease all day
and lifts its little claws to prey:
poems are made by you and me,
but only God can make a flea.

I think that no one ever made
a poem as powerful as AIDS,
or plagues that may in summer kill
half the bishops in Brazil
and share the good Lord’s Final Answer
with clots and cholera and cancer —
for God concocted pox to mock us,
staph and syph and streptococcus:
poems are made by bards or hacks,
but only God makes cardiacs.

I think that I shall never smell
a poem as pungent as a hell,
where grinning devils turn the screws
on saintly Sikhs and upright Jews,
giving them the holy scorcher,
timeless, transcendental torture:
poems can make you want to yell,
but only God can give you hell.

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

Photo by Brent Nicastro



© 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.

Other books by him, available at shop.ffrf.org, include *Karma*, *Dharma, Pudding & Pie* and *Darwin’s Ark: Poems by Philip Appleman*.

Law

Continued from page 1

their legislators to express opposition to the law,” AP reports.

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor told AP: “Our position is that it’s a terrible violation of freedom of conscience to inflict a godly message on a captive audience of schoolchildren.”

“In God We Trust” was belatedly adopted as a motto when President Eisenhower signed legislation at the behest of the Knights of Columbus and other religious entities, which undertook a national lobbying campaign during the height of 1950s zealotry.

The original inclusionary U.S. motto, chosen by a distinguished committee of Jefferson, Franklin and Adams, is the Latin *E Pluribus Unum* (From

Many, [Come] One).

As FFRF principal founder Anne Gaylor always pointed out, the religious motto isn’t even correct: “To be accurate it would have to read ‘In God Some of Us Trust,’ and wouldn’t that be silly?”

Anne Gaylor’s remark is more apt now than ever. The nonreligious segment of the U.S. population is currently the largest “denomination,” surpassing Roman Catholics at almost 24 percent of the populace. One-third of Millennials are “Nones,” and one-fifth of Gen Z explicitly identifies as atheist or agnostic.

A large portion of the schoolchildren in South Dakota belong to Gen Z — and with the required display of an explicitly religious motto, religion is being imposed on the freethinkers among them.

FFRF’s summer legal eagles



Photo by Chris Line

Gathering on the steps of the Wisconsin State Capitol are FFRF’s 2019 summer legal interns. From left, Joshua Engelkeimer, University of Wisconsin Law School; Ryan Shaner, Chicago-Kent College of Law; Mendel Jimenez, Vassar College; Eleanor Pressler, University of Wisconsin; Derek Hein, Marquette University Law School; and Alex Schmidt, UW-Madison Law School. During their stint at FFRF, the interns help write legal briefs and letters and do legal research.

OVERHEARD

Modern human rights are grounded on the dignity inherent in every human being. They are not God-given rights, or Trump-given rights, and they apply to people of all faiths and to those who have none.

Columnist Richard Cohen, “Trump’s ominous attempt to redefine human rights.”
The New York Times, 7-13-19

I just want to say to my atheist friends, some of my best friends are atheists. And some of them are also some of the best people I know. And it is ridiculous that people would think you are somehow less moral or less worthy of the full protection and enjoyment of all of our virtues as a society because of your religious beliefs.

Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang, in an interview.
Reddit.com, 7-8-19



JStone / Shutterstock.com

Whoopi Goldberg things that now we’re having to reiterate.

Whoopi Goldberg, in a profile Q&A.
The New York Times Magazine, 7-14-19

What are 26 bishops doing in our legislature, making us the only democracy with a theocratic element? True, the men in frocks don’t look out of place in the whole creaking edifice of the House of Lords. But the high number of religious members of both houses is wildly out of kilter with the wider population.

Polly Toynbee, in her column, “Faith in religion is dwindling, but when will British politics reflect that?”
The Guardian, 7-11-19

All four of these men have stood strong in defense of religious liberty,

despite unimaginable pressure, and the American people stand with them. The United States calls upon the governments of Eritrea, Mauritania, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to respect the freedom of conscience and let these men go.

Vice President Mike Pence, in asking to release blogger Raif Badawi, who is serving a 10-year/1,000-lash sentence for insulting Islam, and three others.
Reuters, 7-18-19

After all, this “character counts” and “personal integrity” and “political leadership” was central to what a lot of evangelicals argued when Bill Clinton was president. And now that it’s Donald Trump, they’ve decided to push that aside, which means that morality for them was a means to an end, not an end. It was something to be used as a political weapon. I think a lot of these white evangelical leaders are doing more to hurt Christianity than the so-called New Atheists ever could.

Peter Wehner, veteran of three Republican administrations, speaking on Michael Smerconish’s show on CNN.
CNN, 7-20-19

I have many fellow travelers, very few publicly. I think there’s still fear of this conventional wisdom that being an atheist or agnostic or a nonbeliever is somehow the worst possible thing in politics. My experience has been that that’s not the case, but how you do it matters.

U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman, on being the only “out” nonreligious member of Congress.
The Guardian, 8-3-19



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. 440 pages / PB

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

IN THE NEWS

Trump’s trade war could turn biblical

The price of bibles could soar because of the trade war President Donald Trump has waged against China. Trump has vowed to place tariffs on all of America’s imports from China, and book publishers are warning that those tariffs will cause the price of printing the bible to jump and possibly cause shortages. Most publishers of the bible in the United States print them in China because of the high cost and complexity involved in printing a text with roughly 800,000 words. HarperCollins Christian Publishing says about three-quarters of its bible manufacturing expenses are in China.

Hundreds plan to sue Boy Scouts for sex abuse

Nearly 700 men are coming forward with accusations that they were sexually abused during their time in the Boy Scouts. They plan to sue Boy Scouts of America, a century-old organization that has prohibited atheists from joining. The men are demanding that the Boy Scouts be held accountable for hiding abusers from the criminal justice system and enabling them to keep preying on young men. The Boy Scouts are facing financial trouble and may file for bankruptcy protection, which would freeze the ability of victims to file claims.

“This organization is so full of child molesters that if you weren’t sexually molested in scouting, you were just lucky,” said Tim Kosnoff, the attorney who gathered the claims. “The Boy Scouts should not exist anymore. . . . You couldn’t design a better place for pedophiles. You’re putting men you know virtually nothing about in close proximity with young boys away from their parents in the woods.”

Foster agency won’t accept Jews or LGBTQ

A federally funded Christian foster agency in South Carolina has decided to open its doors to prospective foster parents and employees who aren’t evangelical Protestants, but the organization’s ban on working with people who are LGBTQ, progressive Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or from other faiths remains intact. Greenville’s Miracle Hill Ministries, the state’s largest foster care organization for children who don’t have significant special needs, previously had strict rules about only hiring and working with foster parents and volunteers who subscribe to a set of conservative evangelical principles.

‘The Family’ exposes D.C. Christian organization



A five-part “docuseries” on Netflix takes a close look at “The Family,” the secretive Christian organization that has influence throughout Washington, D.C. It’s based on the book, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*, by investigative reporter Jeff Sharlet published more than a decade ago. The Family believes that the separation of church and state is unnecessary. The Family grooms and supports leaders, teaching them that the bible is a story about power, not mercy, and that leaders are chosen by God, not elected. Members of The Family have notably shunned publicity, preferring backroom deals and secrecy. Their mansion on C Street is the residency of a number of conservative members of Congress, and the only time they really come out in the open was the National Prayer Breakfast. The series became available on Aug. 9 on Netflix. Listen to Sharlet discuss his book and the Netflix series on FFRF’s Freethought Radio Aug. 8.

Jews, atheists are more knowledgeable on religion

Jews and atheists know more than every kind of Christian about what different religions teach, a recent survey by the Pew Research Center shows. The survey, which quizzed more than 11,000 U.S. adults, showed that most Americans are familiar with the basics of Christianity and the bible, but far fewer knew the answers to questions about Judaism, Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism. Also, most Americans do not know what the U.S. Constitution says about religion as it relates to elected officials.

Transubstantiation not believed by most Catholics

The Catholic idea of transubstantiation, that the bread and wine used for communion become the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ, is only believed by less than one-third of the religion’s adherents. A new Pew Research Center survey

finds that 69 percent of self-described Catholics say they believe the bread and wine used in communion are merely symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.” Just 31 percent say they believe that “during Catholic Mass, the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus.”

Wisconsin Dems want sex abuse loophole closed

Three lawmakers in Wisconsin want to close a loophole in state law that precludes clergy from reporting sexual abuse and they are also calling for changes to the state’s statute of limitations for civil cases involving childhood sexual assault. State Rep. Chris Taylor, state Sen. Lena Taylor and state Rep. Melissa Sargent, all Democrats, filed the two bills on Aug. 6. The first bill, known as the Child Victims Act, has been filed before and has failed to pass the legislature at least four times. The second bill, known as the Clergy Mandatory Reporter Act, is being filed for the first time.

Saudi Arabia loosens restrictions on women

Saudi Arabia published new laws that loosen restrictions on women by allowing all citizens, not just men, to apply for a passport and travel freely, ending a long-standing guardianship policy that had controlled women’s freedom of movement. The new laws were to go into effect by the end of August. The kingdom’s legal system has long been criticized because it treats adult women as minors, requiring they have a man’s consent to obtain a passport or travel abroad. Often a woman’s male guardian is her father or husband, and in some cases a woman’s son. Women are now also allowed to be legal guardians of their children, a right previously held only by men.

N.C. bans state funding for conversion therapy

North Carolina became the first Southern state to ban public funding of conversion therapy for minors, the practice often used by religious groups to “cure” individuals of their homosexual orientations and transgender identities. On Aug. 2, Gov. Roy Cooper instructed the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services to make sure state-licensed health care providers and organizations that use such techniques are not paid by government agencies. Eighteen states plus the District of Columbia have laws that ban conversion therapy of minors by licensed health care providers, but Southern states have been unable to muster the votes to pass legislation to ban the practice, even as polls show growing support for such legislation.

Atheism, nonreligion in England growing quickly

In England, the rise of atheism and non-religion among the younger generations is rising quickly. Just 1 percent of those under age 24 identify with the Church of England, which has a formal constitutional role in the country. More than half of British people now say that they have no religion, and about 40 percent are Christian, while 9 percent are Muslim. There is a steady rise in the number of “Nones,” people who do not identify with any religion. The Pew Global Forum suggests there will be 1.3 billion Nones worldwide by 2060. In the past 10 years, the number proclaiming no faith has risen from 43 percent to 52 percent. And in a strong shift toward atheism, 25 percent of the British now state “I do not believe in God,” compared with 10 percent 20 years ago.

40% of Americans still believe in creationism

Forty percent of adults in the United States believe in a strictly creationist view of human origins, claiming that God created the world in its present form within roughly the past 10,000 years. However, the 22 percent of Americans who do not believe God had any role in human evolution is a record high. This percentage coincides with an increasing number of Americans saying they have no religious identification.

FFRF’s ‘Freethought Matters’ mug

A meaningful message and the logo of FFRF’s new TV show. Ivory imprint on tapered burgundy, 8 fl. oz. American-made mug.

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Lead Us Not Into Penn Station — Provocative Pieces

By Anne Gaylor

A must-have for any freethinker, this gracefully readable book contains Gaylor’s classic writings.

—Published by FFRF. 80 pages / PB

Buy it from FFRF online ffrf.org/shop

Rationality needed now more than ever

The following keynote speech was given at the North American Paleontology convention at the University of California-Riverside in June in front of paleontologists from 32 countries. In 2016, Rafida Bonya Ahmed was awarded FFRF's Forward Award, which recognizes individuals who have moved society forward.

By Rafida Bonya Ahmed

I am honored to be here today. I am not an academic or a paleontologist — not even an amateur one. But I know a thing or two about writing about science and the price you might pay for defending rational and scientific thinking. I thought it would be a good idea for me to share that with you, especially now, when rational thinking is under attack all around the globe.

My late husband Avijit Roy and I are — I guess were — writers devoted to scientific thinking, writing blogs and books after we came home from our day jobs in IT. Early on, when we met in 2002 through the blog that he founded for Bengali-speaking freethinkers, we decided to write in our first language, Bengali, because there was a lack of good books on emerging science



Photo by Ingrid Laas
Rafida Bonya Ahmed

and philosophy in our native tongue, though there was a big demand for it among the young population. We were both born in Bangladesh, though we spent most of our adult lives here in the United States. Writing was Avijit's passion. I don't know how, but he managed to write eight books and edited two others on such diverse subjects as how our universe works, how life began, homosexuality, the virus of faith or the philosophy of nonbelief.

I am lazy — I only managed to write one book on the evolution of life.

In 2015, we decided to visit our home country for a book-signing trip. Two of Avijit's books were due to be published during the month-long book fair in Dha-



Submitted photo

Rafida Bonya Ahmed and her husband, Avijit Roy. In 2015, they were brutally attacked by Islamist extremists. Roy died from the injuries and Bonya was critically wounded.

ka, Bangladesh.

And then it happened, on the 10th day of our visit. It was the evening of Feb. 26, 2015. In front of hundreds and hundreds of people, we were attacked by machete-wielding Islamic terrorists as we were leaving the book fair. We were targeted by one of the local Islamic militant groups, which later merged with al Qaida of the Indian Subcontinent.

Avijit bled to death on the street and I barely survived. I had four 6- to 7-inch machete gashes on my head, a sliced-off thumb and numerous cuts to the nerves and arteries on my hands.

I will not go into any more detail of that gruesome night. If you are morbidly curious, you can find the pictures of the attack scene on the internet, as a young photographer took a few pictures before he came forward to take us to the hospital when nobody else offered.

I don't have any memory of the attack itself. I remember the moment right before the attack and I have a few scattered memories of when I was taken to the hospital. It

must be an evolutionary mechanism which blocks this kind of traumatic experience from being registered in our long-term memory. My PTSD-specialist psychiatrist and I "prayed" together so that the memories of that night never come back.

Why we were targeted

Our "sin" was that Avijit and I wrote about science, philosophy and rational thinking. We criticized religion and religious fundamentalism. The militants later said in a press release that we deserved to be killed because of two of the books Avijit wrote — one on the scientific and social basis of homosexuality and the other one titled *The Virus of Faith*.

After the attack on us, the militants vowed to kill one atheist blogger a month and the impunity was so high that they continued to do so for next few months. They killed four other bloggers and attacked both of Avijit's publishers in their offices. One died and the other one barely survived.

Our so-called "secular" government stayed quiet because it did not want to upset the influential fundamentalist groups. The government was finally forced to act after the militants attacked a bakery in Dhaka, killing 20 foreigners and locals in a horrific night-long raid. The attackers sent gruesome pictures to ISIS as they slaughtered those innocent people.

This was not the Bangladesh we grew up in. But there is no denying that we have seen a dangerous shift toward religious fundamentalism or right-wing nationalism in many parts of the world.

Avijit's books are not sold in Bangladesh anymore and I have been told that the shopkeepers hide my book in the back of the store. You have to secretly ask them for it because they are afraid of the threats from the religious fundamentalists — and the government, too. They do not teach evolution in the Bangladeshi schools anymore, either.

You might think we are much better than that. But, think again. Are we really?

We might not get killed here in the United States for being atheist science writers, but what about being a victim of mindless gun violence? What about getting killed by the growing white nationalists in a Charlottesville-like protest?

What about our government's denial of the dangerous reality of global climate change and the predicament of our planet? Isn't that a death by thousand cuts for

future generations?

What about scrapping regulations that would have cracked down on coal-burning power plants, or stopping fetal tissue research that could help millions of people, including those afflicted with HIV, human development disorders or various cancers? I would be remiss to not mention the recent attacks on women's right to choose in many parts of this country, as well.

This administration has radically reduced the use of science in policymaking. It has deliberately weakened enforcement of science-based public health and environmental laws. And the list goes on. We are seeing the same trend in many other countries.

I know it is easy to list problems without talking about the solution. I have gone through enough in life to know there are things beyond our control. But, I still believe we can do many other things. They might be small, but they have the potential to make a profound impact on our society and environment.

The new storytellers

I have always viewed you guys, the paleontologists, as storytellers. You are those enchanting storytellers who make their readers travel through the deep history of our planet where none of us have ever been.

I know the word "storyteller" rings an alarm in your scientist ears. Storytellers are not necessarily scientific! And rightfully so. But bear with me.

What if we have storytellers who would rewrite the creation stories of our species with this new scientific knowledge we have gathered in the last few centuries? What if our stories could ignite the spark of critical thinking in kids from a very young age? Where did we come from? How did we get here? Did our species have any other siblings or cousins? We were not the only humans who roamed around this world. That plant and fungal kingdom are the basis of life on earth. Biodiversity is not just a thing to enjoy in a botanical garden, but an absolute necessity for our existence. What if we could teach our children early on that we are all dependent on each other in this biosphere, that we need to preserve our environment to preserve our own existence? That extinction is an inevitable part of life. Ninety-nine percent of all species have gone extinct. Our species is one of the newest actors on this planetary stage.

What if these new stories could teach



Photo by Andrew L. Seidel

Rafida Bonya Ahmed, U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman and FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor get together for a photo during the July 18 Congressional Freethought Caucus reception. (For more photos from the event, see next page.)

our next generations the desperately needed humility that we have lost along the way of our unbelievable evolutionary success? Our anthropocentric worldview is nothing but a representation of our arrogance and ignorance. Our existence in this universe is small and fleeting, but at the same time it is deeply consequential.

The dinosaurs had no way of predicting their extinction, but we do, and that's why we have a duty to protect our planet.

What if these stories could encourage people to question everything? If there is anything fixed in this world, it is that our universe, our planet, every life form, is continuously changing. Our culture, language, society, consciousness and values all change with time and space. So, we know when anyone tries to impose unchangeable rules and morals which have to be accepted without any question, they contradict the basic nature of our universe, our existence.

The reason I am obsessed with the rational and scientific storytelling is very personal. Storytelling is deeply embedded in the culture of our species. I know it works because it worked for me. One such storyteller influenced me profoundly when I was a teenager.

By age 13, I had read the children's versions of the scriptures of the main organized religions, along with many other books. Yeah, you can tell that I had nothing better to do. And, I declared to my parents: "None of these stories is cutting it for me. All of them sound like fairytales."

My liberal Muslim parents couldn't care less. They said, "OK, if that's what you want to believe." I don't know if this is possible in today's Bangladesh anymore.

Then I started searching for an answer that would make sense and my uncle came to the rescue. He bought me this book called *A Story Without an End*, written by Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, one of the well-known Bengali rational thinkers.

And this is where I got introduced to Darwin, evolution and paleontology. The book was about the story of the evolution of our planet and life on it. It was written before the days of genetics and genomics, so it was mainly based on what we

knew from geology, anthropology and, of course, paleontology.

This book shaped me in more ways than you can imagine. It told me that there were scientific and rational explanations to the questions I had about our history, our origin. It showed me our place in the universe. It made me aware of our evolutionary identity and the relationship between the past and the living life forms and it also made me understand the magnitude of changes happening through our history. Above all, it encouraged me to question, to think and to be curious.

The seed of scientific and rational thinking that this book planted in me in my early years not only helped form my worldview, it helped me immensely during the darkest moments of my life. They say rational thinking goes out of the window when you are in a foxhole. But it worked exactly the opposite way for me.

Randomness of existence

I was brought in from Dhaka to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota for further surgeries and treatment on the fourth day after the attack in 2015, leaving Avijit's body for medical research in Bangladesh.

Rather than wasting my energy on thinking, "Why have I been punished this way?," I thought about the randomness of our existence and the probability of this happening to me. We all like to create this little Garden of Eden around us and think nothing will happen to us and our loved ones, while many around us are constantly getting hurt or dying from war, extreme poverty, natural disaster, accidents, religious execution or sexual violence — you name it.

Lying in the hospital bed, I thought, "If it happens to millions of people all over the world, all through our history, it can happen to me as well, right?"

I remember thinking that although the universe is indifferent to my random existence and feelings, I do have a choice! I could be depressed and stay traumatized for the rest of my life or I could try to live again in a way that felt meaningful to me while I am here raising my footprint on our little planet. This is



Submitted photo

Rafida Bonya Ahmed, left, visited with Wisconsin Sen. Tammy Baldwin, second from left, along with FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor and FFRF Director of Governmental Affairs Mark Dann in Washington, D.C., recently.

what got me going and saved me from sinking into PTSD.

After I was done with my three-month-long initial treatment, I moved to Atlanta, where I had lived with Avijit for 16 years. I quit my job as an IT executive in the financial industry. I could no longer work just for a paycheck. I started writing again and lobbying against the persecution of free-thinkers, writers, bloggers, publishers and intellectuals in Bangladesh. I am lucky to have help from people from all around the world, including in Bangladesh.

I recently created a charity called "Think," with my scientist, educator and BBC documentary filmmaker friends. We are creating high-quality videos on science, history, philosophy and art in different languages — Bengali, Hindi, Arabic and English.

As you can expect, there is so much good content created in English in this new social media and YouTube era, but there is almost nothing in many other lan-

guages. We want to share the global knowledge and the scientific progress while celebrating the local history and knowledge base, treasures in critical thinking, history, art, philosophy. We are filming videos in each language separately — no more captions or dubbing from English! We are hoping to go live with our YouTube channels in October.

I would really like to thank the organizers of this convention for going beyond your academic research topics and focusing also on scientific thinking in broader society and public policy-making. We need this more than ever as we fight global climate change and the constant attacks on the rationally-informed view of evolution and the consequences of Earth's history, locally and globally. Paleontologists have played a very important role in our scientific revolution over centuries and I am confident that you will continue stepping up to the challenge at this critical moment of our planetary history.

July 18 reception for the Congressional Freethought Caucus, hosted by FFRF



Guest of honor and speaker Rafida Bonya Ahmed and FFRF Director of Strategic Response Andrew L. Seidel share a light-hearted moment.



Sarah Haider and Muhammad Syed, co-founders of Ex-Muslims of North America, mug for the camera.



Debbie Allen, acting executive director of Secular Coalition for America, speaks with U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman, who addressed the crowd.



Andrew L. Seidel and FFRF Director of Governmental Affairs Mark Dann.



A standing-room-only crowd showed up on Capitol Hill for the Freethought Caucus reception.

Photos by Mark Dann, Annie Laurie Gaylor & Andrew L. Seidel

FFRF opposes rule to legalize discrimination

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has submitted a formal comment condemning a proposed Department of Labor rule that would allow federal contractors to discriminate against employees based on “sincerely held religious tenets” of the corporation or business.

In an alarming new twist, the rule would protect a federal contractor engaging in discrimination based on conduct that the employer says violates their religion. Worse still, for-profit companies would be given a cover for labor discrimination so long as they invoke a religious purpose for such actions.

This proposed regulation would most obviously target LGBTQ individuals. Anti-gay employers have a long history of disingenuously arguing that they are not discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation, but rather on “lifestyle” choices or “conduct.”

But this rule could also be used to deny employment to atheists, members of a minority religion, single mothers or anyone else who isn’t practicing the “right” religion in the “proper” way, in the eyes of an employer receiving federal funds. In other words, Christian employers could discriminate against non-Christians, including atheists, or even against anyone they deem to

be a “bad Christian.”

Giving federal contractors a religious license to discriminate in employment places the federal government’s stamp of approval on all manner of bigotry. The Trump Administration’s proposed rule shamefully would let our taxpayer dollars aid discrimination by federal contractors. This harmful proposal would roll back decades of progress on labor law and the protection of the rights of LGBTQ and other vulnerable individuals.

FFRF is urging the Labor Department’s Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, which regulates anti-discrimination requirements, to reject the proposal.

“The Labor Department instead should adopt rules that will protect employees who have a history of suffering discrimination, rather than legalizing invidious discrimination,” says Dan Barker, FFRF co-president.

FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 30,000 members nationwide, including members in all 50 states. FFRF’s purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

Please take action against this rule!

Please join FFRF in denouncing this proposed rule. Go to ffrf.us/labor_rule. Click on the blue button in the upper right corner that reads “Comment Now!” and fill it out with the following wording (or adapt it as you see fit):

I strongly oppose the proposed changes to OFCCP policy that would allow federal contractors to discriminate against employees based on religious affiliation and also based on whether the employee’s conduct is consistent with the employer’s religious beliefs. This is unconscionable taxpayer-funded discrimination that will put civil rights for vulnerable populations at risk. The Labor Department instead should adopt rules that will protect employees who have a history of suffering discrimination, rather than legalizing such discrimination.

Commission

Continued from page 1

mission’s chair and members are overwhelmingly clergy or scholars known for extreme positions opposing LGBTQ and reproductive rights, and some have taken public stances in support of indefensible human rights violations.”

FFRF and the other groups strongly advise that “taxpayer resources should simply not be wasted on this commission,” since “its findings will have no weight or ability to redefine human rights.”

The joint letter, released July 23, has received coverage in major media outlets.

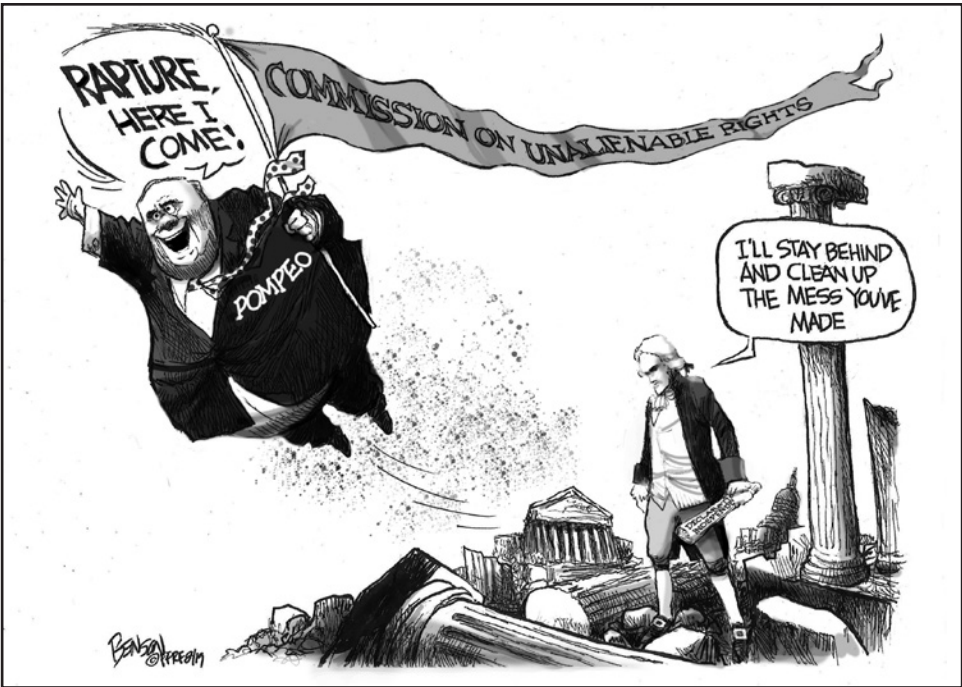
FFRF has been ahead of the curve when it comes to the “Commission on Unalienable Rights,” getting wind of it in June and immediately asking for records on the body, which FFRF awaits. FFRF has been concerned from the outset that the group will redefine human rights through the Christian nationalism that the secretary of state promotes.

“The distinctive mark of Western civilization is the belief in the inherent worth of human beings, with the attendant respect for God-authored rights and liberties,” Pompeo said in May. This conflation of “God-given rights” and “human rights” seems to be a hallmark of the commission.

In a speech to a Wichita congregation in 2015, Pompeo, the then-Kansas congressman, shared his worldview: “To worship our Lord and celebrate our nation at the same place is not only our right, it is our duty.”

He also exposed his Christian fundamentalism in stating, “America had worshipped other gods and called it multiculturalism.” Pompeo concluded by describing politics as “a never-ending struggle . . . until the rapture.”

FFRF’s Director of Strategic Response



Andrew L. Seidel has explained, “This language is worrisome. The Founders, Thomas Jefferson in particular, focused on human rights, not Pompeo’s ‘God-given rights.’”

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is more than happy to join in the call for the Commission on Unalienable Rights to be shut down.

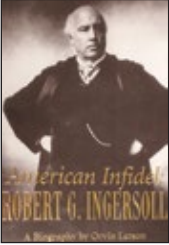
Donohue owes atheists an apology for slander

Bill Donohue, the Catholic League’s perennial gasbag, was bloviating wildly in the wake of the recent mass shootings, blaming lack of religion for the shooting rampages.

“It is not people of faith who are the most likely to go on a shooting rampage; it is those who have no religious convictions,” he said.

Donohue cites no study or data to back up this slander. Regardless, the claim is wrong on its face. It’s incontestable that “religious convictions” drive people to commit terrible atrocities. What makes Donohue’s latest attack on nonbelievers so ironic is that the El Paso shooter apparently self-identifies as a “proud God-loving Christian.”

The motivation for the horrific El Paso attack, clearly was white Christian nationalism. The shooter told us as much.



American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll
By Orvin Larson
Prof. Larson writes with affection and respect of this illustrious 19th century freethinker.

—Published by FFRF. 316 pages / PB

Buy it from FFRF online ffrf.org/shop

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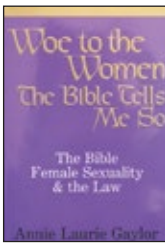
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NOT AFRAID OF BURNING IN HELL
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\$1,000 ‘Strong Backbone’ Student Activist Award

Student calls out state-church violations

This scholarship was generously established by an anonymous FFRF member.

By Janet Roberts

I am a recent graduate of Hamilton High School, which is just southwest of Grand Rapids, Mich. Throughout my high school career, I struggled to fit in with the conservative Christian culture. Religion was found in my classroom, cafeteria and integrated in the school board.

During my four years, I was a member of my school’s Women’s Chorale and Honors Choir. My classmates and I were required to attend multiple Christian Reformed Church services and perform various hymns. At the service, we sat as a captive audience and listened to the sermon. During the service, I felt uncomfortable as the beliefs expressed were very different from my own. On one occasion, the pastor was preaching derogatory messages regarding people in the LGBT community. I spoke with my teacher and was told if I was uncomfortable, I could leave and rejoin the choir when it performed the next song. Although I have strong beliefs, I did not want to be singled out among my peers or judged by my decision to leave. It was

‘Refused to stay quiet or back down’

Colin E. McNamara, FFRF’s Robert G. Ingersoll legal fellow, worked on this case with Janet (not her real name). Here’s what he had to say about her:

“Janet was one of the most intelligent, determined and downright tough young activists whom I had the pleasure of working with in my time at FFRF. Janet refused to stay quiet or back down — even when she faced backlash from staff, students and her community. Since she wrote this piece, I have communicated extensively with counsel for the school district to ameliorate these issues. In response, the administration has taken extensive steps to ensure that this

pattern of religious entanglement does not recur — and it’s all thanks to Janet and her courage. She did the right thing, and because of her tireless work documenting and reporting the myriad constitutional violations at her school, future generations of students won’t have to endure the creeping coercive pressure of religious indoctrination that she did.

“I’m so very proud of her, and I see great things in her future. She tells me that she wants to go to law school after undergrad and that she’s acquired an interest in state-church separation law, so I suspect we’ve not heard the last from this exceptional young woman.”

a lose-lose situation for me.

My parents and I wrote a letter to the superintendent in May 2016. He suggested we work through the high school principal first. We did that. The principal immediately forwarded the email to the teacher. She reiterated that the solution was to have me sit

out the sermon or do an alternative community singing event on my own. After meeting with the principal again, we were clear that this was not an acceptable solution for us. The proposed solution was only directed toward me and never formalized as a school policy.

My parents met with the superinten-

dent after this and he seemed to agree that the situation was unacceptable. However, nothing was ever done to address the issue.

It was at this point that I decided to contact FFRF.

After discussing the choir situation, I proceeded to mention other potential church/state violations. I had noticed that youth group leaders and members of the church seemed to roam freely around my school. In one instance, a youth group leader sat next to me at lunch and initiated conversation. I couldn’t help but wonder why this strange adult was hanging out at my lunch table. After some thought, I also recalled that the school board routinely prays before meetings. FFRF immediately notified the school of its church/state violations in an official letter and they are currently working toward a solution. (*Editor’s note:* This case has been resolved favorably.)

Although I often face backlash for my actions, speaking out about my school is something that I am proud of. I’m hopeful that permanent changes will be made and future students will be free from church/state entanglements.

FFRF’s Reagan TV ad to air during ‘The Daily Show’

FFRF’s TV ad featuring an endorsement by Ron Reagan will appear on Comedy Central’s “The Daily Show” with Trevor Noah from Sept. 9 through Sept. 12, and again the following week, Sept. 16 through 19. “The Daily Show” airs at 11 p.m. Eastern.

The 30-second spot originally debuted on “The Daily Show” and “The Colbert Report,” back in May 2014, airing once per show. This is the first time the ad has run multiple times on “The Daily Show” or since Noah Trevor became the host.

FFRF tried to get the same ad to run during the Democratic debates, but was rejected by ABC, which is hosting the two-day debates on Sept. 12 and 13.

The ad has also been refused by national CBS, NBC and Discovery. FFRF then sought to run a previous commercial during the ABC-hosted debates,



Ron Reagan

a 30-second spot featuring footage of candidate John F. Kennedy giving his famous speech to Houston ministers in 1960, in which he states, “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute.” This ad had run in the past on some national CBS programs.

“The public has no idea how often atheists and freethinkers and our views are censored in our nation,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. She noted that FFRF advertising has been routinely censored — not only by network TV, but by other media, recently including the Chicago Tribune and Sun-Times. FFRF sought for three decades to place billboards, before finally persuading a company to accept its advertising in 2006. “Yet many of our messages are still refused,” Gaylor added.

The endorsement ad by Reagan plugs FFRF:

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

Reagan is an FFRF honorary director who received the Emperor Has No Clothes Award from FFRF in 2004 and gave an acceptance speech at the 2009 national convention in Seattle.

Trump social media case implicates state rep

A recent judgment regarding President Trump’s use of social media has increased legal liability for a Florida state rep, who’s utilizing her social media account to promote Christianity, the Freedom From Religion Foundation is advising.

In July, the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in *Knight First Amendment Institute v. Trump* that the president’s Twitter feed is a government-run forum and that denying citizens equal access to read and post comments on his feed violated their First Amendment rights.

In light of this decision, FFRF has written to Florida state Rep. Kimberly Daniels, after a concerned constituent reported that he and several other residents were blocked from commenting on, or otherwise interacting with, the official “State Representative Kimberly Daniels” Facebook page.

Seal

Continued from page 1

of last year, highlighted the bedrock constitutional principles that the Christian seal violates as the symbol of Lehigh County government.

The federal lawsuit was filed in August 2016 in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. Co-plaintiffs with FFRF are four of its local members who’ve objected to encountering the religious symbol on county property.

The seal is on documents, many official county forms and reports, the county’s website, in a display in the Board of Commissioners meeting room and even on flags displayed prominently at the entrance of county buildings and the airport.

The board adopted the imagery that appears on the seal in 1944. (Allentown, the third-largest city in Pennsylvania, is located in Lehigh County, with a population of about 350,000.)

After FFRF complained, creating a minor firestorm, the Board of Commissioners sent a reply that proved

the state/church watchdog’s point: “The cross, one of more than a dozen elements, was included to honor the original settlers of Lehigh County, who were Christian.”

That’s why it’s incongruous that the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals has found the Lehigh County seal acceptable.

“The appeals court decision validates a Lehigh County seal that sends a wrong, exclusionary message,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “The county should be welcoming of all residents regardless of religion — and it’s appalling that the court didn’t prod county officials to move in that direction.”

The litigation is being handled by Marcus B. Schneider of Pittsburgh, with assistance from FFRF Attorneys Patrick Elliott and Elizabeth Cavell.

Elliott asserts that the appellate decision will damage the secular principles of the Constitution.

“This decision runs counter to decades of court decisions recognizing that the First Amendment prohibits governments from affiliating themselves with a religion,” says Elliott.

Freethought Matters

A weekly half-hour TV talk show produced by FFRF

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

Watch our show on YouTube!

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

“Freethought Matters” will return on Sunday, Sept. 1. First guest: U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman.

FFRF VICTORIES

By Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey

Illinois township calls off Ark Encounter trip

Scheduled trips to the Ark Encounter and other religious venues have been called off by an Illinois township following a letter of complaint from FFRF.

A local resident reported that Frankfort Township recently sponsored a religiously themed trip that included visits to the Ark Encounter Creation Museum in Kentucky. A flier for the event is titled “The Frankfort Township Board Presents Ark Encounter & Creation Museum.”

Another flier advertised a similar religious trip in June, with the Township Board sponsoring a trip to Lancaster County, Pa., to see a performance of “Jesus” at the Millennium Theatre, which describes itself as “Where the bible comes to life on stage.” The Christian theatre group’s stated purpose is “to present the gospel of Jesus Christ and sow the word of God into the lives of customers.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne wrote to Township Supervisor Jim Moustis, pointing out that “sponsoring regular Christian-themed trips shows an endorsement of Christianity on behalf of the township.” This endorsement, of course, “is unconstitutional and excludes the township’s residents, who are being told that they are not part of the township’s favored religious groups,” Jayne adds.

The township’s attorney contacted FFRF and confirmed over the phone that these events were cancelled.

Indiana school district ends graduation prayers

An Indiana school district has discontinued scheduling prayer at graduation ceremonies after a letter from FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne.

A district community member reported that the South Vermillion High School graduation ceremony on May 25 featured a pre-scheduled Christian prayer. The ceremony’s written program included a “class prayer.”

Including religious rituals, such as prayer, in school-sponsored events is a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, FFRF reminded the district. The Supreme Court has routinely struck down prayers at such district-backed events, including graduations.

The district’s attorney responded to FFRF with assurances that prayer would not be a part of the official graduation program in the future.

Maryland county grants open to all nonprofits

Any future Montgomery County, Md., grants will be open to all nonprofit organizations regardless of religious affiliation, after FFRF raised concerns with a recent initiative providing grant funds to faith-based facilities.

A concerned taxpayer reported that, earlier this year, the county awarded \$200,000 to a variety of faith-based facilities for “security operations.” The county’s solicitation for applications for these grants left no doubt that these taxpayer funds were only available to “houses of worship” and that secular nonprofits would understand that they need not apply, even if they faced plausible threat of hate crimes.

My old Kentucky village



The FFRF Kentucky chapter used its \$1,000 chapter grant to “once again buy items for poor senior citizens living in Section 8 housing at American Village in Louisville, Ky., in July,” according to chapter president Edwin Hensley.

“The event was successful and our best ever! Four senior citizens are now sleeping on beds rather than the floor. Many others received household items like sheets, blankets and towels that they could not purchase otherwise. The management and residents of American Village were very pleased with this event.”

In the photo are, from left, an unidentified resident assistant at American Village; Carol Craig, manager of the facility; Shelly Henry, AU Louisville Chapter president and FFRF attorney in Kentucky; an unidentified American Village employee; and Jim Potash, FFRF member and president of the Kentucky Secular Society.

FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne wrote to Montgomery Chief Executive Marc Elrich, noting that while it is laudable for the county to work with at-risk organizations in the community to improve security and safety, offering funds only to houses of worship attaches an unconstitutional religious criterion to the grant program. Jayne requested assurances that future county grant programs will not be offered only to houses of worship.

Montgomery County responded and informed FFRF that any future funding, should it exist, would be made open to all nonprofits with a demonstrated need, “irrespective of any religious affiliation.”

Michigan school districts end ‘Conquerors’ visits

Three Michigan districts will discontinue invitations to the infamous “Conquerors” after complaints that their assemblies amount to an unconstitutional endorsement of religion in public schools.

FFRF Robert G. Ingersoll Legal Fellow Colin McNamara wrote letters to Constantine Public Schools, Schoolcraft Community Schools and Sturgis Public Schools seeking open records pertaining to their hosting of school assemblies featuring The Conquerors Strength Team.

The Conquerors held a “week of ministry” through the Riverside Church in Three Rivers. Throughout its trip, the group performed assemblies at 11 schools in the greater Three Rivers area. In the final performance at Riverside Church on April 13, Mike Benson said that “The Conquerors International Strength Team exists for one purpose and one purpose only, and that is to transform communities worldwide with the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

“We request that you refrain from sponsoring inappropriate and unconsti-

tutional assemblies moving forward, and that the district ensures that assemblies from outside groups or speakers do not contain an underlying proselytizing message or agenda,” McNamara wrote to the districts.

All three districts committed to refraining from inviting the Conquerors to any future events and to ensuring that outside groups are not invited to proselytize to students.

Religious signs taken down from Miss. school

In Mississippi, several religious signs have been removed from George County Schools property following FFRF’s intervention.

A district community member reported to FFRF that signs displaying a Christian cross had appeared on several district properties. The signs feature a large cross next to the words “passion, purpose, pride” with “#gcstrong” and “George County Rebels” underneath. At the time of the complaint, these signs were reportedly on display at five district schools and at the district’s Transportation Maintenance & Child Nutrition building.

FFRF Associate Counsel Sam Grover wrote to the district to ensure that it cease impermissibly endorsing Christianity through religious displays on school property.

“These religious displays alienate non-Christian and nonreligious students, parents, teachers, and members of the public whose beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the district,” Grover noted. “This consideration should hold substantial weight for the district, given that fully 47 percent of young Americans are non-Christian, with 21 percent of those born after 1999 — i.e., all of your current students — identifying as either atheist or agnostic.”

The religious signs have been removed from district property.

Invocation, benediction removed from ceremony

An annual benediction did not occur at a North Carolina public school graduation ceremony this year, due to a complaint from FFRF.

An Elkin High School student reported that every year Elkin High School directs students to deliver an invocation and benediction as part of its graduation ceremony. The complainant reported that school officials assign students to deliver the invocation and benediction and that the students’ prayers are then reviewed by the school’s guidance counselor for approval. During the 2018 Elkin High graduation ceremony, the invocation was explicitly Christian and ended with a recitation of the Lord’s Prayer.

FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Myra Cox, insisting that the district cancel the religious programs at the 2019 ceremony. The district’s legal counsel responded to FFRF’s complaint with assurances that the 2019 ceremony did not include any prayer and that the issues raised by FFRF’s letter were addressed with administrative personnel.

Prayers at Texas school graduation won’t continue

The Seguin Independent School District in Texas has altered its graduation ceremonies, to avoid its tradition of opening and closing with prayers led by students.

A district parent informed FFRF that Seguin High School has a practice of scheduling opening and closing prayers at each of its graduation ceremonies. These prayers are invariably Christian in nature. Last year, for instance, the senior class secretary began the invocation with “Dear heavenly father” and ended with “We ask this in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.” The ceremony ended with the senior class president giving the benediction, which also opened with “Dear heavenly father” and ended with “In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

FFRF Associate Counsel Sam Grover wrote to Superintendent Matthew Gutierrez requesting assurances that the district will no longer schedule prayer at school-sponsored events.

The district’s attorney conferred with district leadership and assured FFRF the titles have been changed from “invocation” and “benediction” to “student prelude” and “student adjournment.”

Religious photo removed from teacher’s desk

A religious photo has been removed from an Illinois public school classroom following FFRF intervention.

A Freeburg Community High School District 77 community member reported that a teacher at Freeburg High displayed a photo in her classroom that urged students to “Seek the Lord,” along with a biblical reference to Isaiah 55:6. The picture was located in a prominent spot on the teacher’s desk in full view of students.

FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne sent a letter to the district, pointing out that it is wholly inappropriate for a public school to display a message that most students would understand to be a suggestion to convert to Christianity.

The photo has been taken down, the district’s legal representation informed FFRF in a response letter.

FFRF awards \$10,000 in partnership with Black Skeptics Los Angeles

Four earn Catherine Fahringer scholarships

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

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

Fahringer was a San Antonio (site of FFRF's 2020 convention!) feminist and freethinking activist who ran a long-lived FFRF chapter and served on FFRF's Executive Board for many years. She was especially interested in nurturing the next generation of freethinkers. She died in 2008.

Here are excerpts from the winners' essays.

By Chinaza Onwubuemeli

Being a Catholic from Nigeria, where religion is taken strictly and seriously, I was taught to believe what the church said — and that only. I grew up in Nigeria, where love was preached to me all the time by family members, priests and church administrators. I was taught to not judge anyone. It's even written in the bible. In Matthew 7:1-2, it says "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. In the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." Believing that, I tried to incorporate that doctrine into my daily life so that I could make it to heaven after death. Heaven was my ultimate goal in life, and I had to do everything in my power to make it there.

What I was taught wasn't what I experienced. Priests constantly judged people based on their social class. Apparently, the more money you give to the church, the more guaranteed you are to make it to heaven. And if you don't have money to give, well, give what you have, even if it's the food meant for your family. Girls were judged based on their clothing. Girls wearing pants are sinners and have a special place in hell. I was a victim of that doctrine. I was made fun of for wearing trousers.

Sexual orientation is not a thing, according to doctrine. Either you are a female or a male — nothing in between. Even if you have an interest in communicating your sexual orientation, you will be shut down and be advised to pray the demon away.

Coming to America and living here for the last eight years has really changed my life. I have learned to respect people for who they are, regardless of anything. We are all human, and all desire and deserve the love that is preached every day. We are in this race together, in this human race, to love and accept people.

Though I currently live in America, I'm more passionate about bringing changes to my country, Nigeria, since we already have many advocates in America. In Nigeria, we have been really critical about ourselves in the name of religion, hurting and condemning each other, while still preaching love and judging no one. To be able to make a difference, I would want to go back after college and help in creating a nonprofit organization that will help the condemned people, be it the homosexual, the lower class and so on, to help nurture their interests and their lives.

By Claire Shamiya

When I was 6, my mother would sit on my bed and hold a prayer book, I mean bible, to my face, begging me to memorize the Hail Mary.

When I was 9, my dad told me to pray for his business to go well. After all, inshallah in Arabic means "if God willing, it'll happen."

When I was 12, I went to a psychological chiropractor. He cracked my bones in every which way, and by the sound they made, he was able to tell me about my



Claire Shamiya

When I was 15, I prayed for God to help me fall in love with a man. But tell me, why are women so beautiful to look at?

When you ask me why I'm not religious, these memories come to mind. They are painful, maybe even amusing — What is a psychological chiropractor anyway? — but they are vulnerably sincere.

However, the main reason I've stayed secular is because, at age 18, I refuse to assimilate into a religious culture that is against what I am for. I refuse to remain stagnant in times of moral crisis and I refuse to accept prayers when the state of our world can be controlled by our very own actions. Humanism is the most influential but the most difficult aspect of life to accept as it demands accountability.

When we are held accountable, social change is empowered, but when we hand the work over to a spiritual figure, how can we expect change? We can't.

As I'm typing this essay, I'm ditching school. Not because of a lack of scholarly motivation, but because teachers found a hit list in the boy's bathroom. What happens if I'm on it? What happens if my sisters or my friends are on it? Politicians are too focused on the numbers; I'm focused on the lives.

In AP Environmental, I learned that the place we call home is on fire. What does it matter if the stock market is gonna crash, or if we're going to get free college education, or if your favorite football team is going to win?

They say LGBTQ don't deserve the right to marriage. But when I ask, "Who told you that?" and they raise their bibles, animosity grows not for their god, but for the translators who associate God with hate.

And, no, prayers won't solve any of these problems, but proper legislation, voting, education, accountability, an open-minded attitude and the will to help can.

By Kaitlyn Farnan

Kansas is a state known for such things as the "Wizard of Oz," farming and altruism. Although these all are generally thought of as positive references, even Kansas has that weird uncle. Topeka, Kan., is home to our lovely state Capitol, along with the nationally known religious group (or as I like to call them, a cult) the Westboro Baptist Church. I do not consider myself religious, but I understand religions that have a background that promotes love and equality for everyone.

Although the Westboro Baptists quote the bible by tongue, their actions directly target the innocent with cruel and evil intent. This group tormented people at my cousin's college graduation, my high school graduation, and, even worse, funerals. The Westboro Baptists show up at deceased soldiers' funerals and not only mock them, but they blame their deaths on the LGBTQ community. I do not understand how this group claiming to be "righteous" can scapegoat a community based on love, and go so far as to blame them for murder.

Although the previous example is quite extreme, the judgment upon people different than the norm is evi-

dent in most religions. Although I was raised Catholic, I am no longer practicing it for multiple reasons. I realized I would never fit in, no matter how hard they tried to promote diversity and inclusion. Being an Asian woman in a predominantly white man's place, it is difficult to not feel excluded. The looks that old couples give me, like I came straight out of a petting zoo, and the all-white statues are a continuous reminder that I do not belong.

Also, I discovered my sexuality during my early teens. Guess how else I am different? While I found out that I was bisexual, the church that I had been going to since I was a child preached that the only proper marriage was between a male and a female, and that was God's intended way. This moment proved my point that I was not welcome here.

Out of all of my internal battles with the Catholic Church, my biggest issue is not its lack of diversity, or its anti-LGBTQ beliefs, but rather the moral decay that lies within. The fact that sexual abuse has been going on for hundreds of years ignites anger in me. The church taught me to respect my body, yet it corrupts innocent ones every day. It taught me that virginity is sacred, but it continues to commit sexual crimes against children. It taught me to respect life, but it cares more about its image than about exposing its explicit faults. I am not Catholic because I believe in human rights for all — human rights for every gender, race, sexuality and economic status. The exposure of the corruptness and hypocrisy behind religion is shameful, and I hope this world can focus on something greater than a label. Religion teaches rules and stereotypes, but love is universal and empowers all.

By Cia Russell

When asked, I refer to myself as agnostic. By no means do I come from a heavily religious family. My mother only occasionally goes to church on Sunday mornings and I am never invited — mostly because I never stay awake in the pews. However, my lifelong neighbors, who I do love, are incredibly devoted to the word of the bible. I had awkwardly attended several of their bible study sessions with my best friends (their twin daughters) and was taught about Christianity. But a strong religious belief such as theirs bewilders me. They can easily cite several scriptures — an impressive feat, undoubtedly. But, for avid believers of Christ, they choose to skim over and

feign innocence to what they don't agree with in the bible. I don't believe you should follow the bible word-for-word, but I'd rather they acknowledge the flaws of what they worship and say that it is OK to live beyond certain rules. However, they don't do that, leaving me feeling hollow, and even a bit betrayed by their blatant denial.

I cannot comprehend how daily prayers alone could suddenly alleviate me of all woes found today. Were that the case, I wouldn't have to deal with the financial struggles I endure now. I'd be able to afford my education easily and achieve total happiness without ending up with an abundance of loans to my name. To rely so much on God to solve all your problems in life is dangerously quixotic. One must actually make an effort.

Beyond the debacle of the many religions, there are problems arising all over the world due to many other factors. I am a supporter of those who are oppressed. While the world is somewhat more balanced than it was in the past, there is still toxic hate brewing in the streets and households.

I am asexual, which was the catalyst that dragged me away from my neighbors' church. There, they told me, that, as a woman, my goal in life was to reproduce with a man and help repopulate the Lord's glorious Earth. Of course, this left a sour taste in my mouth. There's more to life than creating more life, believe it or not. The idea of childbirth or sexual intercourse in general revolts me greatly, and I know that God would value my happiness and comfort over the global population.



Cia Russell

FFRF awards \$17,550

2019 college students essay contest winners

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 16 winners of the 2019 Michael Hakeem Memorial Essay Contest for Ongoing College Students. FFRF has paid out a total of \$17,550 in award money to this year's college contest winners.

Ongoing college students up to the age of 24 were asked to write a personal persuasive essay on the topic of why we'd be better off concentrating on the here and now rather than worrying about an unknown afterlife, and why they agree with John Lennon that there is "no hell below us, above us only sky." FFRF thanks Professor Phil Zuckerman of Pitzer College for the essay prompt.

This contest is named for the late Michael Hakeem, a sociology professor who was an FFRF board chair and active atheist known by generations of University of Wisconsin-Madison students for fine-tuning their reasoning skills. His bequest has been used to fund college essays since his death in 2006.

FFRF thanks Dean and Dorea Schramm of Florida for providing a \$100 bonus to students who are members of a secular group, student club or the Secular Student Alliance. The total of \$17,550 reflects those bonuses.

FFRF also thanks "Director of First Impressions" Lisa Treu for managing the de-



tails of this and the four other student essays competitions. And we couldn't judge these contests without our "faithful faithless" volunteer and staff readers and judges, including: Don Ardell, Linda Aten, Dan Barker, Jeff Brinckman, Bill Dunn, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Judi Jacobs, Linda Josheff, Dan Kettner, Kathy Kunz, Katya Maes, Gloria Marquadt, Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey, Dave Petrashek, Sue Schuetz, Lauryn Seering and PJ Slinger.

FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994, grad students since 2010 and one geared explicitly for students

of color since 2016. A fifth contest for law students debuts this year.

Winners, their ages, the colleges or universities they are attending and the award amounts are listed below, and winning essays are reprinted or excerpted in this issue.

First place
Jack Buchanan, 20, University of Iowa, \$3,600.

Second place
Blake Miller, 23, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, \$3,100.

Third place
Alexis Gabbart, 22, Southeastern

Oklahoma State University, \$2,500.

Fourth place
Kaitlyn Hunt, 24, Coastal Carolina, \$2,100.

Fifth place
Danielle Kyle, 21, Western Illinois University, \$1,600.

Sixth place
Isaac Jay Marcoux, 20, University of Tennessee, \$1,100.

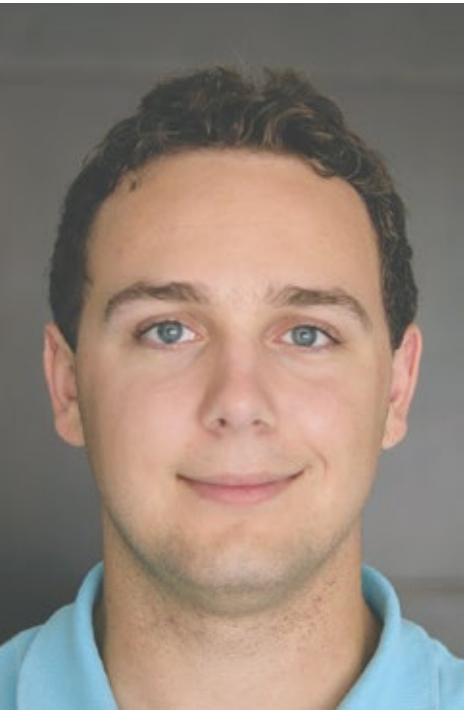
Seventh place
Dylan Mitchell, 20, Guilford College, \$750.

Eighth place
Cora Womble-Miesner, 23, New York University, \$500.

Ninth place
Hazel Peterson, 19, University of Wisconsin-Stout, \$400.

Tenth place
Paige Nielsen, 19, Florida State University, \$300.

Honorable mentions (\$200 each)
Max Bisaha, 20, College of Charleston.
Alice Blesi, 22, University of Minnesota.
Devon Gable, 20, Front Range Community College.
Yaffa Gani, 19, University of Florida.
Youssef Maklad, 20, Southeastern Connecticut State University.
Kyle Morse, 22, University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.



Jack Buchanan

FFRF awarded Jack \$3,500 for his winning essay.

By Jack Buchanan

“Imagine there's no heaven.” I was 8 when I first heard those lyrics. I didn't really understand the meaning, I just liked the song. However, as I grew up, I kept coming back to that song.

When I was 14, I was listening to it when the “Imagine there's no heaven” verse sparked something inside me. And I imagined it. I began to question my religious beliefs more and more, constantly seeking justification for what I had so long believed. I continued to grapple with those big questions until my senior year of high school, when I finally gave up my faith and opened up an entirely new chapter in my life, with no hell below me, above me only sky.

Since that moment, my life has become infinitely more meaningful. I no longer stay awake at night thinking

Michael Hakeem Memorial Essay Contest Winner

‘Imagine there’s no heaven’

about eternal torment. I no longer worry if my actions or beliefs align with a divine being's will.

Instead I focus on the here and now, being the best person I can be to those I love and to myself. I do this not for some external promise of paradise, but because I want to make that same paradise a reality here on Earth. No afterlife is guaranteed, so why spend the only life we know we will have in preparation for it? After all, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Especially when you aren't even sure the bush exists. We should strive to make every day better, to leave the world a better place than before.

“There is no heaven to fix this world, and the only hell is one we create ourselves.”
— Jack Buchanan

With this realization there also comes a great deal of responsibility. There is no heaven to fix this world, and the only hell is one we create ourselves. Knowing this, it falls on all of us to be the change we wish to see. No supernatural force will pick up the slack when we fall short. Any improvements I want to make to either my community or myself must come by my own hands. Unfortunately, many people, including members of my family, do not understand this. They pray for peace, they pray for the poor, they pray for a better life, but they rarely if ever initiate the change themselves. My father once asked me how I found meaning in life without believing there's some being watching over me. I simply responded that I have someone in this world who's watching over me, who's responsible for my

actions and truly has my best interests at heart. And that person is me.

As the current vice president of my university's Secular Student Alliance chapter, I have seen firsthand the benefits of living in the here and now. We have coordinated multiple charity events and the friendships I have made will last a lifetime. People need our help now, and it's our responsibility to ensure they get it. And, knowing that my actions make a difference in their lives gives my own life more meaning than I ever thought possible.

Focusing on the here and now is a truly transformative mindset. It allows people to take responsibility both for themselves and others. With no afterlife

guaranteed, it becomes imperative to make our current life the best it can be. And as we hurl through space on this pale blue dot, with so much of the cosmos still unknown, it's important we remember to look down every now and then and remember that, regardless of who we are, where we come from or what we believe, we are all human. We are all capable of change and we are equally capable of spreading that change. So, let's all strive to make this reality the best it can be, by focusing on the here and now.

Jack, 20, from Palatine, Ill., is a mechanical engineering major at the University of Iowa. He is vice president of the school's Secular Student Alliance chapter and is the head of the prosthetics division for his school's 3D printing club, which prints affordable prosthetics for those in need. He plays trumpet in the Hawkeye Marching Band and enjoys hiking.

NOTHING FAILS LIKE PRAYER
CONTEST 2020

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 individual who gives the best secular invocation will be invited to open FFRF's annual convention in 2020, receiving an expenses-paid trip to San Antonio, Nov. 13-15, 2020, along with a plaque and an honorarium of \$500. Deadline: August 1, 2020.

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

A fleeting chance to do things right

Second place

FFRF awarded Blake \$3,000 for this essay.

By Blake Miller

In 1609, one of Galileo’s most famous inventions was creating optical tools of ever-increasing power. However, his most wondrous accomplishment was more profound: discovering Jupiter has moons. And that those moons, the planets and even the stars follow the same natural rules as our planetary home. That the sky itself is subject to the same forces as the ground, going against thousands of years of dogmatic traditionalist-derived “knowledge.” There are no special exceptions to the functions of the universe outside of Earth. Humanity discovered that we are not special.

There is no eternal and unchangeable celestial sphere. This is not a universe designed for our benefit.

Our species is not the nodal point upon which the cosmos revolves. There never was a grand purpose encoded and entrusted to our irresponsible species. There is no parent creator who obsesses with our every action or forgives us for the harm we cause.

But the inverse is true, as well. There is no almighty being to whom we can entrust



Blake Miller

justice or punishment for those causing us harm. Only we are masters of our fate. Only humans can make a better life for humans. For all religions’ claims of secret knowledge regarding a post-mortem superior sentient existence, the transition to that next mystical plane seems awfully preoccupied with how we live in this one.

We are better off concentrating on the here and now rather than an unknowable afterlife for the simple reason that we are alive in this place and in this moment. The concept of life after death is an illusion. It can only be discovered by losing the ability to discover. Only by coming together as a species to fix the problems and challenges we face, during our short individual lifespans, can we leave the world a better place than how we found it.

John Lennon once said that there is “no hell below us, [and] above us only sky.” Galileo would have been proud. We belong within that sky. The sky above us is the same sky below us. The only hell is what we allow to happen in the middle.

Why be thankful that someone’s suffering will be relieved in some magical second life? We should be solving their suffering now, while it actually affects them. If you try to tackle tough problems with the foundational belief that there is a much better existence following this one — one where all our problems don’t even exist — then you would be inclined to say that the answer to each problem is simple: it does not matter. Solving any problem in this life does not matter.

Now, assume an afterlife does not exist. Assume that this is it — every passing mo-

ment is gone forever, and you are one step closer to the end of your consciousness. Assume that humans are no more eternal than dinosaurs and that we are not promised a happy ending.

From this perspective, questions have a very different tone. Why should we care that we are making the planet uninhabitable for our species and many others? Why should we help the downtrodden and disabled members of our society without receiving any individual benefit? Because it is the only home we have ever known. It is the only place in the entire cosmos we know, for a fact, that harbors life. Because our descendants deserve the same finite moment of existence that we have. Because there is no justice or morality without direct human intervention. Because, when you only have one life, there are no second chances. I can lead and create a better life for myself and others because I care about the here and now.

Blake, 23, from Avon, Ind., is majoring in history of science and innovation at IUPUI (Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis). Blake works as a librarian at the Avon Washington Township Public Library and plays a number of string instruments. He would like to become a history professor after attending grad school.

Third place

Finding purpose without religion

FFRF awarded Alexis \$2,500.

By Alexis Gabbart

For as long as humans have walked the Earth, fear of the unknown has dominated our reality. In the earliest of times, this fear was purely based on survival. Staying alive was the top priority and eating the wrong berry or provoking the wrong animal were fatal mistakes. Searching for answers has always been important to us as a species. It is not surprising, then, that humanity’s strong fear of the unknown has caused so many conflicting opinions about what happens after death. However, I am of the opinion that it does not matter what happens after we die, but rather how we spend our short time on Earth.

Sometimes I wonder where we would be as a civilization if religion did not exist. Think of all the knowledge we lost when the Library of Alexandria was burned, all the brilliant women who could have made scholarly contributions had they been allowed to sooner, all the wars fought, and lives lost in the name of one god or another. It is impossible to know everything religion has robbed us of, but one thing is certain: our lives would be infinitely better if our ancestors had not looked for divine meaning in this secular world.

As someone born and raised in the Bible Belt, I have seen my family dismiss the rights of LGBTQ to marry, I have friends who believe that their husbands are superior to them, I’ve watched strangers pick fights with attendees of a pride festival, and more — all in the name of God.

Evangelicals preach about love yet show hatred toward anyone who is different from themselves. They talk about helping the needy yet turn a blind eye to refugees. They claim that all lives matter yet cage immigrant children and attack religious and racial minorities.

These same evangelicals claim that my life has no meaning or purpose without their religion, but I disagree. I don’t look to an invisible puppet master in the sky to find meaning. I find meaning through other mediums: literature, music, relationships and my future career. It is also a common misconception that freethinkers do not have morals because they do not believe there will be eternal consequences. If one needs the fear of eternal damnation to enforce their morality, then they are not a good person.

“It does not matter what happens after we die, but rather how we spend our short time on Earth.

— Alexis Gabbart

By using my own moral compass, as opposed to the church’s, I am able to make the best of my life. I believe that we each get to choose what our purpose is, and I have chosen to spend my time on Earth helping people live the best possible life. Not only will I do this in my future career as an occupational therapist, but I try to do it every day simply by being kind and accepting to everyone I come across. I do not care for others because I fear eternal

punishment, but because we are all alike in our humanity. No one is more or less deserving of love and respect based on religion, race, nationality or sexual orientation.

I truly believe that religion was born from imperfect humans who were searching for answers to questions that confused them. It is known that our ancestors blamed magic for phenomena that they did not understand. It is also known that the earliest chapters of the New Testament were not written until approximately 100 years after the death of Jesus.

Nowadays, the bible should not be considered a credible source. These are just



Alexis Gabbart

a couple reasons why I agree with John Lennon that there is “no hell below us, above us only sky.” The claims of men who lived thousands of years ago are not good enough. Perhaps one day the world will be how Lennon wished it, but, until then, I will work to make it a better place, one interaction at a time.

Alexis, 22, is from Caddo, Okla., and recently graduated from Southeastern Oklahoma State University with a bachelor’s degree in psychology. She is beginning work on a master’s degree in occupational therapy at Howard University. “I am the only freethinker in my entire family, and none of them know, so this essay allowed me to express some of my daily thoughts that I usually have to suppress,” Alexis writes.

Fourth place

What would I lose? My morality, focus, peace

FFRF awarded Kaitlyn \$2,000.

By Kaitlyn Hunt

When I told my conservative, Christian mother that I was an atheist, she asked me, “Why can’t you just choose to believe? What have you got to lose?”

I would lose my sense of morality if I chose to model my behavior after what

is written in the bible. I would lose my focus on creating a healthier and more sustainable Earth for those who live after me, because by believing I would concede that everything that is happening to our planet is God’s will. I would lose my craving to find answers to questions about the universe because they all could be found in the bible. I would lose my peace and acceptance about death because I would believe that as

a lesbian, I would go to hell and be tortured for eternity. I would lose my drive to better humanity because I would focus on securing our afterlives and not this existence.

As a sheltered, home-schooled, indoctrinated Christian child, I used to believe that my purpose on Earth was to bring other people to Jesus to save them from being sent to hell. I was told every single day that people of different

religions, different sexual orientations and other unrepentant sinners were going to spend eternity in hell. My siblings and I were forced to read books and listen to sermons that detailed the torture and unrelenting pain that was inflicted on those who did not follow Christ and his laws that are laid out in the bible. Because of my upbringing,

See Hunt on next page

Hunt

Continued from page 13

my parents were shocked and horrified when I came out as gay. My mother cried for me because she believed that when she and I both die we will end up in different places. Instead of caring that I was living a happy, fulfilling, purposeful life with my wife, my family only focuses on what they presume to be my torturous eternity after I die.

In my life, there are many things that I want to accomplish, but all my ambitions have one goal: to make a difference in the well-being of the people who will be on Earth after I die. We all only have a short number of years in comparison to the billions of years of the universe. Our lives are a mere speck on the timeline of existence. The human lifespan is so mathematically insignificant compared to the age of the universe that it can be written off logically as zero.

Those who believe in an afterlife are comparing the human lifespan to eternity. To them, this life feels in-



Kaitlyn Hunt

significant, whereas their afterlife would be an infinite existence in a perfect world. Even though both atheists and theists believe that their lives are short, they have different motives for living. Theists, including my family, have their eyes on the afterlife, using their earthly lives simply to set up spending eternity with their god in Heaven.

However, we non-theists think that because there is only nonexistence before and after our lives, we should treat each day as a gift and make the most of every day.

I care about my short life. I care about the fleeting

lives of the people around me. I care about the brief lives of my children, grandchildren and others who will be alive after me. Because it is my firm belief that we only have roughly 100 years to come into the world and make a difference, I look forward to the next 75 years of my life. I know that I will spend every day enjoying it with the woman I love and striving to contribute at least one small part to preserve the future of those who will live after me. When my mother asked me what I would lose if I believed in Christianity, even solely for the purpose of securing a place in heaven, I answered, "I would lose my purpose in life."

Kaitlyn, 24, is from Myrtle Beach, S.C., and attends Coastal Carolina University where she is studying chemistry and mathematics. She and her wife Kaylyn live in South Carolina. Kaitlyn was home-schooled from kindergarten through high school by a conservative Southern Baptist Christian family. After getting an associate's degree at community college, she attended Liberty University for one year. "It is during that time when I became an atheist," she writes.

Fifth place

Morality without fear of eternal damnation

FFRF awarded Danielle \$1,500.

By Danielle Kyle

Despite being a vegetarian, an environmentalist and strong advocate for marginalized groups (LGBTQ+, women, the poor, disabled), I still run into theists who question my morality. Because I do not believe in an afterlife, I do not have the pressing fear of eternal damnation as motivation to behave like a decent human being.

Needing that sort of fearful motivation to behave like a decent human being is rather concerning. I question the idea that we should only be "good" and "moral" because there is punishment if we do not.

As an atheist, the threat of hell is not something that motivates me to treat others with respect and kindness, rather, it is my identification as a humanist. I believe in



Danielle Kyle

the inherent worth of every person and being around me. They are all deserving of respect and dignity, no matter where they come from, how they identify, who they choose to love or their ability.

It's better to live without the belief in heaven or hell. While others have offered their thoughts and prayers to the sick, scientists have delivered treatments. Where religious folk sit at home, praying to their deity that the Westboro Baptist Church, which protested at my university, will have a change of heart, I organized a rally to show those who felt threatened that they were loved. I lobbied in Washington, D.C., on a scholarship, to promote how essential the humanities are to the United States, because there is no god that will do it for me.

Because there is no hell, I believe it is the responsibility of people here to take action against hatred and bigotry. Likewise, it is the responsibility of people like me to promote charity and uplift the disadvantaged around me.

I live with the knowledge that this is my only chance. There is not another life where I can improve on what I did before, so I must do my best now, every step of the way.

If others did the same, there would be less "thoughts and prayers" every time the United States experiences a

“I lobbied in Washington, D.C., to promote how essential the humanities are to the United States, because there is no god that will do it for me.”

— Danielle Kyle

mass shooting — and more motions put in order to prevent the next one. Without the fear of hell, I believe my fellow humans would spend less time criticizing the "sins" that led to someone living in poverty, or with addiction, and instead offer them support.

Americans would not be taking "mission trips" to other countries and imposing their views on people who need the opposite of Western saviors. The best way to help communities in need is not sending other people to "fix" the problem (people often ignorant of the culture they will be encountering), but providing the individuals concerned with the tools to do it themselves.

Living with "no hell below us" and "above us only sky" provides me intrinsic motivation to help others. It means I will not be blaming some deity when something goes wrong, but rather taking action in order to improve the situation.

Dannie, 21, is from Elgin, Ill., and is a senior at Western Illinois University. She has spent her time at WIU doing advocacy work for the humanities in Washington, D.C., organizing the Rally for Love and Macomb Pridefest, and participating in various ensembles. Dannie previously spent a semester in Mannheim, Germany, where she improved her German and conducted research on topics such as foreign aid's effectiveness in civil conflict.

Sixth place

My morality not motivated by cosmic carrot

FFRF awarded Isaac \$1,000.

By Isaac Jay Marcoux

I didn't grow up in a religious household. My parents were born into religious families, but figured out that they didn't have to live in fear of God or hell. They raised me with no indoctrination whatsoever in faith or dogma, only introducing me to the world as they saw and understood it.

They let me read books and watch documentaries about science, and I grew up learning that the world is to be understood through reason and methodical study. When I was in kindergarten, I was introduced for the first time to Christianity and religion. My reaction then, as it is now, was a feeling that I don't think can quite be captured by words, so I will choose the three that best encompass my thoughts on the matter: "What the hell?"

As a kid, every time I would talk about religion with someone, I felt like I was dipping into some alien world with goofy customs and beliefs. Why did people believe this? Why was religion a thing if we so clearly understood that its doctrines were factually wrong? Having grown up and learned more about people, I now understand why religion exists and continues to exist, but with these answers have come more troubling lessons. I've borne witness to and learned of some truly awful acts carried out because people believe in heaven and hell as real, tangible



Isaac Jay Marcoux

places one can be sent or sentenced to.

I attended a private school from the sixth to eighth grades, and the small community was mostly quite welcoming of virtually anyone. However, one particular student in my third year didn't exactly embrace this mentality. Each chance she'd get, she'd spread lies about me, or pester me, or belittle me in any way she could. This came to a head when the school staff got involved, and I finally learned her reasoning behind this behavior: I didn't believe in anything that scientific study could not prove.

How many people actually believe in religion's superstition and rules to the letter? Many seem to, which is how they justified the kind of behavior I experienced. Looking back, I have learned an important though harrowing lesson from this ordeal: Anything is justifiable with religion. I was an atheist, so it was OK to make my life a living hell — at least, that's how the bully saw it.

Without heaven to aspire to or a hell to fear and blame things on, there'd be no way for her to justify treating me in a way nobody should ever be treated.

Around the same time I was getting bullied, I was taking piano lessons in middle school. While I was learning to play John Lennon's "Imagine," other kids were cooped up in church, learning to live by fear and a need for validation. Their families and communities taught them that morality came from God, and he would reward those who obey him and torture those who don't. Meanwhile, I take care of animals, open doors for others, and try to add some goodness to the world because, as I see it, that has its own intrinsic value. And I feel better for it. I don't live in fear and I'm not desperately clinging to a nonexistent reward; I'm doing good by my own choice.

Manipulation by dogma is nothing new. Evidence suggests that these traditions were even shared by Neanderthals and, thus, were shared by our common ancestor. Clearly, humans are just that easy to manipulate, and we always have been. As such, there is more merit to moral behavior when it's motivated not by a cosmic carrot and stick, but by genuine empathy and goodwill. A life lived not in fear, but hope for a kind, tolerant future is a better life to lead and offers a better world to live in.

Isaac, 20, is from Oak Ridge, Tenn., and attends the University of Tennessee. As a youth, he was interested in science and then expanded into the creative realm, where he is now seeking a career as a writer. Isaac volunteers at his local animal shelter.

Seventh place

Enjoying the bliss of that which we know

FFRF awarded Dylan \$750.

By Dylan Mitchell

“No Hell below us, above us only sky.” These words, exquisitely written and performed by the late John Lennon nearly 50 years ago, remain controversial even today. But why is that? Why are atheist sentiments still considered ethically lacking by the religious majority?

We in the secular community constantly hear the question: “Where do you get your morals from?” followed by, “And what stops you from performing [fill in random and obviously egregious act]?” We’re also subject to the well-intentioned but often rude question of “Where do you find meaning



Dylan Mitchell

in life without God?” What I find most interesting is the proverbial mirror these apologists are staring into without realizing. I would reply: “Tell me, is the only thing stopping you from performing such an act the consequence you fear from the invisible Big Brother you worship? What is the point of corporeal life here on Earth when you believe an eternity in serenity is awaiting you in heaven?” The irony in these questions posed by the religious is that they answer themselves, and often times such answers are more profound from the atheist’s viewpoint.

What stops the hypothetical secularist from shamelessly committing vile deeds? I would say it’s innate human compassion and empathy, combined with a genuine concern for the state of the planet and its inhabitants. The point of life without God? I argue it’s the pursuit of happiness through maximizing positivity, pleasure and activism. With no second chances at life, no divine deus ex machina to be comforted by, I think atheists harbor the unique mentality of making the best of what we have. What logically follows is a mindset of humanism. For us, a life spent curating kindness and overall well-being for ourselves and those around us is a life well-spent. There

“Secular humanism will always be more genuine, and as a result more effective, from its lack of any ulterior motives.

— Dylan Mitchell

do exist, of course, many religious organizations that have the same creed, and have helped many a person throughout the world. However, while mostly appreciated, these groups have an inherent design flaw: They’re built on a foundation of coercion with the not-so-subtle goal of conversion. Secular humanism will always be more genuine, and as a result more effective, from its lack of any ulterior motives.

To truly live for the here and now, is to choose the bird in the hand. To spend our precious waking hours wishing for the afterlife is to lose time. Even if heaven existed, it would be an inevitability undeserving our mortal attention. Since evidence hasn’t yet manifested in the favor of such a place, I think we’re all better off making the lives we have now as enjoyable as possible for as many as possible. Humanism’s goal is to make the world that exists as close to heaven as possible, from the ground below us to the sky above. Imagine that.

Dylan, 20, is from Kernersville, N.C., and attends Guilford College and is majoring in creative writing. He is an aspiring author. “Though I write fiction exclusively, I read almost entirely nonfiction philosophy, and mostly on the topic of religion,” Dylan writes.

Eighth place

Finding tranquility in godlessness

FFRF awarded Cora \$500.

By Cora Womble-Miesner

My parents chose not to inflict a strict faith onto my brother and me, but hints of God remained from their own religious upbringings. So, for the early years of my life, I held the idea of a greater power in my head, one that was all-knowing and ever-present. It took me a while to realize that God was a source of anxiety for me: At the slightest glimmer of a sinful thought, I would become certain that I had put myself in jeopardy. God would undoubtedly know that I had conjured up indecent thoughts, and therefore I would be punished — not for actual actions, but rather for amorphous things that took place solely within my mind. The harder one tries not to think of anything evil, the more salacious thoughts crowd together, bouncing off one another and multiplying. I was certain that I was destined for hell, due to my inability to control the wandering of my thoughts.

Something struck me one day and diverted my unhindered anxiety: I real-



Cora Womble-Miesner

ized that belief in a higher power was a choice, and if I did not believe in God, then I would not have to live in fear of his punishment. I can’t recall what catalyst prompted this abrupt loss of God, but it was a moment of elation. I was 10 years old and I felt this thought operating like a switch inside me. In an instant my thoughts were calmed, and I was so pleased with the remarkable inner change that I returned to the idea again

and again. If God didn’t exist, then my thoughts could be wholly my own, impenetrable from the outside, a place for me to explore freely without fear of being spied on by an all-knowing entity who could decide my fate during life and after death. With the loss of a god, I also lost the concept of an afterlife. Death has a calming finality to it, devoid of the possibilities of punishment or reward.

In that same year, my best friend confided in me in the hallway at school: “Hell isn’t real,” she expressed excitedly. “It was invented to make people go to church.” The confidence with which she delivered this information struck me. It was then that I started to realize that religions operate largely based in fear and shame. To believe in God is to fear God, and so you construct your actions in a way that you will avoid his wrath. Religion is often falsely equated with morality, but if one’s good deeds are not for the benefit of others but rather to ensure a pleasurable afterlife for oneself, the integrity of these morals can be called into question. Without belief in heaven or hell, kindly acts can be truly

selfless instead of self-serving.

Freed from the fear of a fiery inferno awaiting me post-mortem, I found that my quality of life improved. The mind of a middle-schooler is already replete with enough worries, trepidations and anxieties without the added concern of eternal punishment. Once I realized my thoughts were not being supervised, I no longer found my brain crowded with hurtful ones. I found instead that my mind was a safe haven for me to be alone, to imagine in solitude, and then return to the world unscathed and soothed. I conduct myself in a way I consider moral, not because of God’s watching eye, but because I care about humankind. My parents raised me to be empathetic and kind and I do not need the threat of hell to monitor my behavior.

Cora, 23, is from San Diego and attends New York University, where she is majoring in English. She attended community college for four years before transferring to NYU. Cora enjoys literature and amateur boxing, and volunteers at her local library and teaches boxing lessons to children at a gym. She would like to teach creative writing to incarcerated people.

Ninth place

Procrastination for salvation

FFRF awarded Hazel \$400.

By Hazel Peterson

I have the most severe procrastination habit of anyone I know, and it makes even the smallest task an unending nightmare. As a person who has clocked countless hours banking on the odds of a good outcome despite waiting until the last possible moment to accomplish something, I can tell you that heaven is no more than the ultimate reward for procrastination.

For ages, people have muddled through life unsatisfied and unfulfilled. They take jobs they hate and keep them. They do just enough to get by, and trust

that their current plight will somehow give way to a paradise that erases every worry, every need, every regret. If they simply keep their heads down, they will be rewarded with a snap of God’s fingers. Karl Marx believed that religion was used as a tool by the bourgeoisie to keep laborers humble (and, more importantly, subordinate). The workers put off self-actualization and potential by relying instead on the promise of heaven. After all, if a person

“If a person can slip through the pearly gates with just a nod to God and an empty can of elbow grease, why should they search for anything else?

— Hazel Peterson

can slip through the pearly gates with just a nod to God and an empty can of elbow grease, why should they search for anything else?

Religion not only impedes the ability to take personal action, but also the capacity to take action for others.

How often do people send “thoughts and prayers” to victims of tragedy, yet never act concretely to prevent it from happen-



Hazel Peterson

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Peterson

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ing again? How often does religion value God’s arbitrary (and sometimes bigoted) notions of morality instead of the people that these notions are directly harming? It is cowardly and misguided to think that anything matters more than others’ suffering right here, right now, and what we can do to ease it. If heaven is not guaranteed for me, then it is also not guaranteed to the victim, much less the survivor of a school shooting, who therefore can’t count on the sweet release of heaven for peace. Survivors need all of the support that this life can give, and only those who

realize this can help them. Apparently, though, it doesn’t really matter at all what a person does, since as long as they accept Jesus, they are welcomed into heaven. Therefore, it seems you could live an objectively horrendous life and still be rewarded as long as you have a change of heart on your deathbed. Or, you could live an objectively altruistic life and yet be eternally punished in hell for having a little healthy doubt about an afterlife! Beyond the concerning implications of this hypocrisy, I find that these points render religious criteria for a “good” life basically moot. To me, the whole concept of heaven and hell is a lot like a looming essay assignment. There is a small chance that I could

avoid writing it until a few hours before the due date, and still perform well. But I’d spend many painful weeks beforehand paralyzed by the unknown. What if I attempted to write and just got frustrated instead? Or worse, what if I tried my best and failed? It’s an exhausting way to live. I’d be much better off confronting doubt and putting my best effort into writing at least a little bit each day. Even if my fears came true, and I still didn’t achieve the outcome I wanted, I’d feel secure and proud, knowing that I’d taken every opportunity possible to succeed. I don’t want to procrastinate my life away in fear and hope for the slim chance that I can scramble into heaven at the last minute. I’d much rather

make my own rules and devote myself to reaching my potential while helping others do the same. If I fall asleep for the final time knowing that it doesn’t matter what happens next because I’ve seized every moment and embraced it, then hell will have no power over me. I will have already occupied a heaven of my own creation. Hazel, 19, is from Ladysmith, Wis., where she was co-valedictorian of her high school, and attends the University of Wisconsin-Stout, planning to major in art. She aims to use her art and writing skills to tell stories that encourage open-mindedness, acceptance and compassion. She has volunteered at nursing homes and community events and enjoys working with children.

Tenth place

No worries of the past and future

FFRF awarded Paige \$300.

By Paige Nielsen

The saying “there is no time like the present” holds significant meaning when considering the worth of worrying about an afterlife. The here and the now is certain, and I think that a life spent revolving around a heaven and hell that may not even exist is a life wasted. During our time here on Earth, we can see tangible, important problems that do not concern the existence of an afterlife — such as poverty, social injustice, the pointless suffering of innocent humans, and, more recently, a global environmental crisis. As such an intelligent species, how can we disregard these problems and focus on something so abstract and impossible to study, let alone know? I agree with John Lennon’s quote because rather than fearing hell, humans should fear those problems that directly affect them while alive on this planet. When one stops believing in a hell, one focuses on the positives of living. In contrast, rather than appreciate the beauty of a heaven that no one has ever observed, the astounding beauty of the world we are so fortunate to have found ourselves living in should be celebrated, such as



Paige Nielsen

the simple view of a sunset or an interesting cloud formation. Both are enough to bring tears to my eyes as they remind me how lucky I am to be able to experience my existence and the beauty of Earth. In addition to the importance of focusing on the problems of the present, focusing on the joys of the present is also an effective way to live a fulfilling life. A better and more enjoyable life can be led when it is focused on the family, friends and simple things that affect one’s well-being directly, rather than anguishing over an undetermined future. Hobbies that make you smile, friends that make you laugh, family who you love — all these things are in the present and have

nothing to do with an afterlife. The laugh of a baby should be more important than whether or not that baby will go to heaven or hell when it reaches the end of its life. The smile of a loved one cannot be compared to the supposed beauty of the hypothetical pearly gates of heaven. The pain of heartbreak should not be shoved aside and diminished in comparison to the possibility of burning in an unpleasant afterlife. These material things are real and certain, and the afterlife simply is not. Doing what makes you happy and helping support others who are struggling in the present world does wonders for the human psyche, and I feel that such actions will lead to a very fulfilling life. Life can be incredibly short in this unpredictable world. Although unlikely, life can end at any moment of any day, so each moment we live in should be perceived as a gift and utilized to enjoy the time which we are certain that we have. At the end of our lives, if we find out there is nothing beyond, it would be

quite tragic to have wasted all of those precious, finite moments worrying about an unknowable afterlife. When people get old, they often have regrets about not doing everything they wanted to accomplish in life. Living in the present is a way to avoid that sinking feeling that time is passing us by, and the constant contemplation of an afterlife magnifies those regrets we may face. The present moment is the only moment we have control over as humans, the passage of time is beyond our limits. While our actions in the present do affect the future, the only thing we truly have control over is the present. Worrying about an afterlife will only rob us of the riches within our actual grasp. Paige, 19, is from Merritt Island, Fla., and attends Florida State University, where she plans to get a degree in chemical and biomedical engineering. After graduation, she would like to work in stem cell research and tissue engineering. She is active in the LGBT community and works as an ocean rescue lifeguard at Cocoa Beach.

“How can we disregard these problems and focus on something so abstract and impossible to study, let alone know?”

— Paige Nielsen

FFRF student essay honorable mentions

FFRF selected six essays from the college essay contest it deemed worthy of honorable mention status. Each of the following students received \$200 from FFRF. To read each of the honorable mention essay in full, go to freethoughttoday.com. Here are edited excerpts from each one.

By Yaffa Gani

I am 12 and waiting in line at the grocery store with a fish head, pomegranate, apples and a jar of honey on the conveyor belt. The cashier begins to ring up the items, and as I see the price increase, my heart starts to flutter. “Please be under \$15,” I think to myself. The cashier mumbles “\$13.40” under his breath and I breathe a sigh of relief. There is enough money left over to buy myself the poster board I need for my class project. My father is a man of faith — and a man with a limited wallet. When I told him of my class project, he knew that affording both the ceremonial foods for Rosh Hashanah and my project would be unlikely. Instead of apologizing, he



Yaffa Gani

stroked his chin as if to say he was communicating with a power above, and said, “The reward God gives you in heaven will be much greater than any A.” Contrary to my father and millions like him, I prefer to spend my life in the now. That means personally taking care of problems instead of delegating them to some imaginary giant in the sky. Living in the moment makes me the protagonist in my story instead of a supporting character. It ensures that I am aware of all actions and holds me responsible for what I do and what I wish to do. Walking into a grocery store now is a

very different experience than when I was 12. During holiday season, I no longer wander through the aisles looking for mandatory foods that will bring me eventual reward. Instead, I take stock of what I need in the moment, and relish in the fact that it is guaranteed that those items will be coming home with me. Yaffa, 19, is from Hollywood, Fla., and attends the University of Florida, where she is studying computer science. She is the oldest of six kids and has a passion for social justice. Yaffa is also involved in leading youth groups and acting as a mentor to children.

By Kyle Morse

The promises of religion are all based in the principles of comfort. Comfort against the unperceivable terror of nothingness, the threatening specter of futility, and the unthinkable possibility that humans do not reside atop a natural hierarchy of spiritual selection. The allure is undeniable, but the ramifications are inexorable. When we look past the sky in search of the heavens, we miss the sublime display of natural harmony and the



Kyle Morse

infinite span of the universe. When we look at the ground in fear of an evil-producing underworld lurking below, we overlook the cruelty that is afflicted on innocents every day in the name of salvation. Living in the here and now — the true here and now, free of the seduction of the afterlife and existential certainty — requires sacrificing of the comforts that religion offers. However, accepting temporality is as liberating as it is terrifying. Confronting the certainty of uncertainty changes us down to the deepest reaches of our being. The way I see it, why we’re alive at this point in time and space is an unanswerable enigma. Life’s currents are fierce,

make no mistake about that. Storms come without warning and the tide is ever-changing, but we are not merely helpless drifters in the sea of life. We are the captains of our own ship and makers of our own fate. The “big picture” is no longer denoted to a conclusion, but rather is the singular moment that envelops all life. Lennon’s world and ideas may only exist in the minds of anomalous freethinkers, but that does not dilute from the transcendent power of free will and furthered capacity for appreciation granted to the individual that serves the singular moment. The glimmer in Lennon’s eye reflected a world of transient purity, and he’s not the only one.

Kyle, 22, is from Parker, Colo., and attends the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. His passions are literature and baseball and he hopes to be a writer after graduation.

By Alice Blesi



Alice Blesi

I have always found value in the idea that I can choose what I want to do with my life. It is, after all, the only life I have. I have one shot to make my life everything I want it to be. This includes what I study, where and who I work for, which people I keep in my life and what I devote my time to. My time is especially important. Since I have a limited amount, I must be careful about what I decide to do with it. Will I spend it volunteering? Advancing my career? With my family? All the above and much more are time-consuming, so I must pick and choose which options I value more so that I can spend my time doing what I love. That, however, is not always possible with religion.

Living for some unknowable future, something that isn’t guaranteed, is so limiting. The bible, among other religious texts, tells you what to value. In an age where newer generations are moving away from traditional life plans such as marriage and nuclear families, it is important that we have other options, without fearing judgment. We also much understand that over time our values will change. If we stick to a strict religion and hope it will bring us happiness someday, then we will be disappointed. A secular lifestyle, where we look at our values, allows everyone to assess their own, and do what they believe is best, especially when it comes to the events of the here and now.

We can throw ourselves into move-

ments that we value, instead of participating in movements we have no passion for. We can find what lifestyles best suit us. Our passions, beliefs and desires are not threatened with hell or controlled with promises of heaven. Living in the here and now we are free, and we can be ourselves, with “no hell below us, above us only sky.”

Alice, 22, is from Minneapolis and attended the University of Minnesota, where she earned a degree in English and creative writing, graduating in May. She was an officer in the University of Minnesota’s secular group, Campus Atheists, Skeptics and Humanists.

By Youssef Maklad



Youssef Maklad

As a child, I could easily accept the idea of an afterlife, but as my prepubescence cascaded into adolescence, I could no longer be as confident in my faith. It’s almost funny how I let death suck all the joy and meaning out of life. I cursed my curiosity for not letting me delude myself. But now that I reflect back, it was only through my retreat from a heaven and a hell that my scared and confused adolescence flourished into confident adulthood. My fear of death led me to question the meaning of it all. Was life worth it, and if so, what are the dynamics of living well? For that purpose, I pursued philosophy both in my academics and in my free time. It was from that discipline that I found my answer. It is only in having the courage to let go of the tradition associated with an afterlife that one can focus on individual flourishing and leading a meaningful life in the here and now.

In practice, religion breeds uniformity and restricts individual flourishing. Yet, living life according to your own will is a must when it comes to living with meaning. Not only is the belief in a hell problematic toward living a good life, but so is the belief in a heaven.

A hope for a heaven can halt one from living in the here and now. To lead meaningful lives, to really begin living, you have to accept life at its worst as well as its best, to live in and for the moment, and to pursue what makes you individually blossom. Those are the dynamics of living well. Which brings me to those lyrics by John Lennon: “No hell below us, above us only sky.” To give up on a hell below is to be uncaged. To look up

at the sky above us is to fly. For what imagery better instills a sense of freedom other than a blue sky? And, oh, what a vivid sky it is! Imagine it. It’s easy if you try.

Youssef, 20, is from Orange, Conn., and attends Southern Connecticut State University, where he is studying economics and philosophy. He plans to pursue a master’s degree after graduation.

By Max Bisaha



Max Bisaha

Accounts say approximately 10,000 Tutsis, a minority ethnic group of Rwanda, were crammed in and around the Nyamata church on April 10, 1994. They were hiding from the Interahamwe, a Hutu militia, roaming the area. These Tutsis certainly thought such a sacrosanct place was safe, and that the statue of a serene Mother Mary that looked overhead wouldn’t permit any harm.

Yet, God watched in seeming indifference as almost all the men, women and children in the Rwandan church that day, and for 100 days all over the country, were brutally killed, raped or beaten. He works in mysterious ways, I suppose. Perhaps the people of Rwanda were being particularly sinful, and a more capricious version of God felt they deserved it, as if thinking, “That’ll teach ’em.” But maybe it is not as horrifying as we think. After all, as Mother Teresa posited in her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in 1979, “Death is nothing, but going home to God.” That’s surely comforting, but then again, the God described above doesn’t strike me as a tender host for all eternity.

Often, people submit that heaven and hell may not exist, but that it is beside the point to argue their truth because what matters is that these ideas give people solace and moral direction — “purpose,” one might say. So, what if religion acts like a crutch, as long as it alleviates people’s existential crises? But is that what people want — to be coddled by a lie? Humanity deserves more credit than that.

A belief in the afterlife is not only a false belief, but a belief that affects the way you make everyday decisions. Too often, humans go through life trying to rack up brownie points with the invisible white guy in the cosmos in an attempt to get into heaven. By living in the here and now, as opposed to your postmor-

tem future, you are bound to live a more appreciative, engaged and fulfilling life.

Max, 21, is from Rehoboth Beach, Del., and attends the College of Charleston, where he is majoring in political science. He plays rugby and is vice-president of the Outdoors Club. After college, Max is pondering a stint with the Peace Corps.

By Devon Gable



Devon Gable

A man is starving on the side of the road when two men approach him. One man is wearing blue, the other wearing green. The man in blue offers the starving man all the food he could ever eat in the afterlife if he lives a certain way, but warns that if he strays from the set path, he’ll starve for eternity. The man in green offers the starving man a meal and one day’s pay if the starving man will plant a tree in the park. Who’s offer does the starving man take?

When a person is more concerned with how their hypothetical afterlife will be rather than how their actual current life is, they will unconsciously undervalue everything that can be experienced or gained in it, only committing good acts for the promise of reward, their every action solely self-serving.

If the starving man chooses the man-in-blue’s offer, then he gambles on getting his reward of food to cease his starvation. Likely, the man starves to death living by the prescribed tenets and in his best-case scenario, he gets food after he dies, although the food is now worthless and he followed someone else’s arbitrary rules for no reason. If the starving man chooses the man-in-green’s offer, then he gets his food and is no longer starving. The man also receives pay, which he may use to continue living, and the man helped the world by planting a tree. The man has benefited not just himself, but the world, granted in a small way.

If we could achieve paradise in the now, what possible reason is there to wait until after one’s life is done?

Devon, 20, is from Thornton, Colo., and attends Front Range Community College. His goal is to become a college professor teaching either English, history or a subset of the humanities. Devon is an aspiring writer currently working on his first novel, and works as a supplemental instruction leader at his college.

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



History Lesson
This we learn from Watergate
That almost any creep’ll
Be glad to help the government
Overthrow the people.

Illustrated by Seymour Chwast, published by FFRF

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250th birth anniversary of Alexander von Humboldt

The greatest scientist you don't know about

During his lifetime, Alexander von Humboldt was one of the most famous men in Europe. At the time of his death in 1859, he was the most famous scientist in the world.

Critics accused him of atheism, yet his funeral in Berlin was the largest ever given to a private German individual. Tens of thousands of mourners followed behind his hearse, pulled by the king's horses. Newspapers eulogized him as the "most remarkable man ever born" and lamented the end of the "age of Humboldt." More species are named after Humboldt than after any other human being.

The centennial anniversary of Humboldt's birth was widely celebrated in 1869. Parades, concerts, and fireworks shows were held in Moscow, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Melbourne and dozens of American cities. President Ulysses Grant joined a huge celebration in Pittsburgh, and 25,000 people assembled in Central Park to celebrate. The New York Times devoted its entire front page to the worldwide festivities.

Yet 250 years later, on the anniversary of his birth in September 1769, the mention of his name does not elicit immediate recognition. So, who better than the Great Agnostic, Robert G. Ingersoll, to describe Humboldt and his achievements. Ingersoll gave this lecture (edited for length) in 1869 as part of the festivities on the 100th anniversary of Humboldt's birth.

By Robert G. Ingersoll

Great men seem to be a part of the infinite — brothers of the mountains and the seas.

Alexander von Humboldt was one of these. He was one of the few who were great enough to rise above the superstition and prejudice of his time, and to know that experience, observation and reason are the only basis of knowledge.

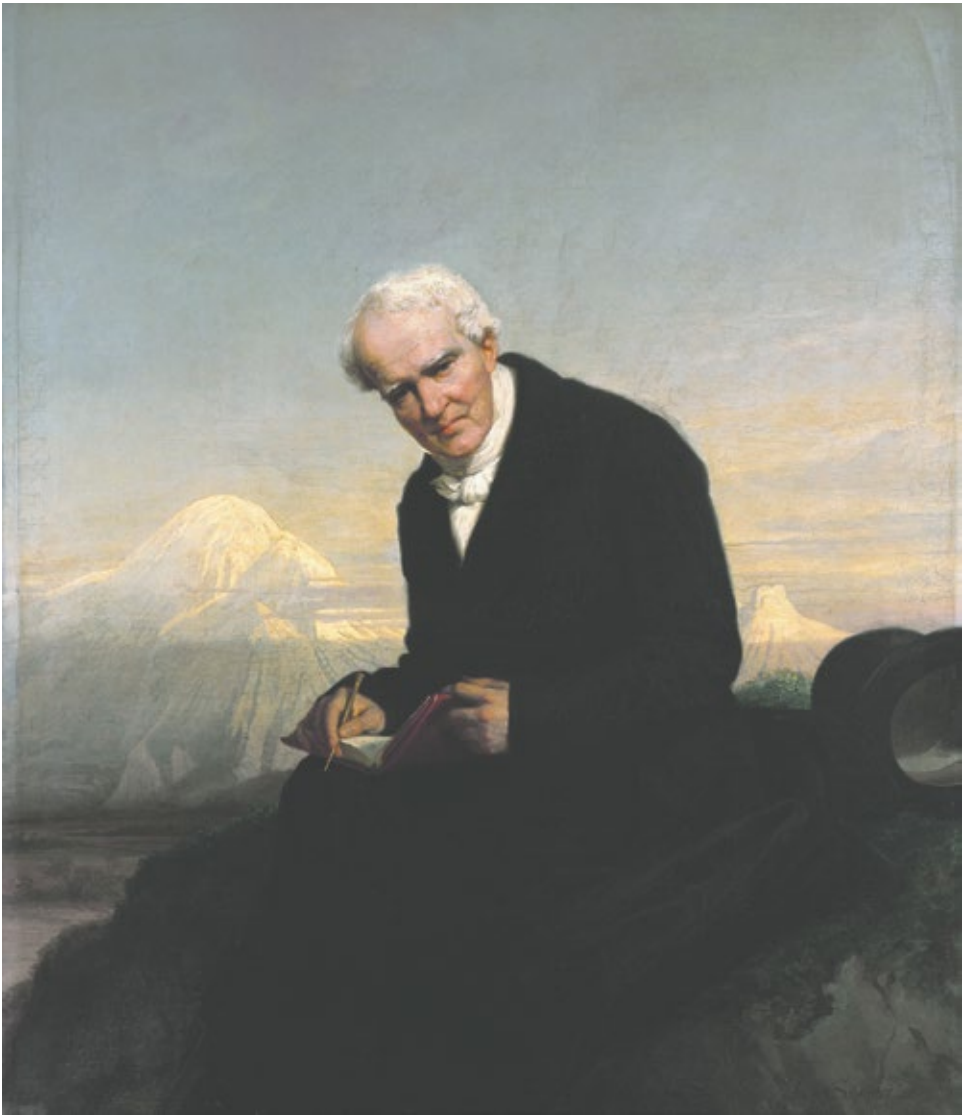


Robert G. Ingersoll

He became one of the greatest of men in spite of having been born rich and noble — in spite of position. I say in spite of these things because wealth and position are generally the enemies of genius, and the destroyers of talent.

It is often said of this or that man, that he is a self-made man — that he was born of the poorest and humblest parents, and that with every obstacle to overcome he became great. This is a mistake. Poverty is generally an advantage. Most of the intellectual giants of the world have been nursed at the sad and loving breast of poverty. Most of those who have climbed highest on the shining ladder of fame commenced at the lowest rung. They were reared in the straw-thatched cottages of Europe; in the log-houses of America; in the factories of the great cities; in the midst of toil; in the smoke and din of labor, and on the verge of want. It is hard for the rich to resist the thousand allurements of pleasure, and so I say, that Humboldt, in spite of having been born to wealth and high social position, became truly and grandly great.

In the antiquated and romantic castle of Tegel, by the side of the pine forest, on the shore of the charming lake, near the beautiful city of Berlin,



A portrait of Alexander von Humboldt by Julius Schrader (1859).

the great Humboldt, 100 years ago today, was born, and there he was educated. There he received the impressions that determined his career; there the great idea that the universe is governed by law, took possession of his mind, and there he dedicated his life to the demonstration of this sublime truth.

He came to the conclusion that the source of man's unhappiness was his ignorance of nature.

After having received the most thorough education at that time possible, and having determined to what end he would devote the labors of his life, he turned his attention to the sciences of geology, mining, mineralogy, botany, the distribution of plants, the distribution of animals, and the effect of climate upon man. All grand physical phenomena were investigated and explained.

From his youth he had felt a great desire for travel. He felt, as he says, a violent passion for the sea, and longed to look upon nature in her wildest and most rugged forms. He longed to give a physical description of the universe — a grand picture of nature; to account for all phenomena; to discover the laws governing the world; to do away with that splendid delusion called special providence, and to establish the fact that the universe is governed by law.

To establish this truth was, and is, of infinite importance to humankind. That fact is the death-knell of superstition; it gives liberty to every soul, annihilates fear and ushers in the Age of Reason.

Comprehending the world

The object of this illustrious man was to comprehend the phenomena of physical

objects in their general connection, and to represent nature as one great whole, moved and animated by internal forces.

For this purpose, he turned his attention to descriptive botany, traversing distant lands and mountain ranges to ascertain with certainty the geographical distribution of plants. He investigated the laws regulating the differences of temperature and climate,

and the changes of the atmosphere. He studied the formation of the Earth's crust, explored the deepest mines, ascended the highest mountains, and wandered through the craters of extinct volcanoes.

He became thoroughly acquainted with chemistry, with astronomy, with terrestrial magnetism; and as the investigation of one subject leads to all others, for the reason that there is a mutual dependence and a necessary connection between all facts, so Humboldt became acquainted with all the known sciences.

His fame does not depend so much upon his discoveries (although he discovered enough to make hundreds of reputations) as upon his vast and splendid

generalizations.

Humboldt was to science what Shakespeare was to drama.

He found, so to speak, the world full of unconnected facts — all portions of a vast system — parts of a great machine; he discovered the connection that each bears to all; put them together, and demonstrated beyond all contradiction that the Earth is governed by law.

He knew that to discover the connection of phenomena is the primary aim of all natural investigation. He was infinitely practical.

Origin and destiny were questions with which he had nothing to do.

Great men do not live alone; they are surrounded by the great; they are the instruments used to accomplish the tendencies of their generation; they fulfill the prophecies of their age.

Nearly all of the scientific men of the 18th century had the same idea entertained by Humboldt, but most of them in a dim and confused way. There was, however, a general belief among the intelligent that the world is governed by law, and that there really exists a connection between all facts, or that all facts are simply the different aspects of a general fact, and that the task of science is to discover this connection; to comprehend this general fact or to announce the laws of things.

The German mind had been grandly roused from the long lethargy of the dark ages of ignorance, fear, and faith. Guided by the light of reason, every department of knowledge was investigated, enriched and illustrated.

Humboldt breathed the atmosphere of investigation; old ideas were abandoned; old creeds, hallowed by centuries, were thrown aside; thought became courageous; the athlete, reason, challenged to mortal combat the monsters of superstition.

No wonder that, under these influences, Humboldt formed the great purpose of presenting to the world a picture of Nature, in order that men might, for the first time, behold the face of their Mother.

Traveled the globe

Europe becoming too small for his genius, he visited the tropics in the new world, where in the most circumscribed limits he could find the greatest number of plants, of animals, and the greatest diversity of climate, that he might ascertain the laws governing the production and distribution of plants, animals and men, and the effects of climate upon them all. He sailed along the gigantic Amazon — the mysterious Orinoco — traversed the Pampas, climbed the Andes until he stood upon the crags of Chimborazo, more than 18,000 feet above the level of the sea, and climbed on until blood flowed from his eyes and lips. For nearly five years,



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he pursued his investigations in the new world, accompanied by the intrepid Bonpland. Nothing escaped his attention. He was the best intellectual organ of these new revelations of science. He was calm, reflective and eloquent, filled with a sense of the beautiful, and the love of truth. His collections were immense, and valuable beyond calculation to every science. He endured innumerable hardships, braved countless dangers in unknown and savage lands, and exhausted his fortune for the advancement of true learning.

Upon his return to Europe he was hailed as the second Columbus; as the scientific discoverer of America; as the revealer of a new world; as the great demonstrator of the sublime truth, that the universe is governed by law.

In order that the people at large might have the benefit of his numerous discoveries, and his vast knowledge, he delivered at Berlin a course of lectures, consisting of 61 free addresses.

These lectures are what is known as the Cosmos, and present a scientific picture of the world, of infinite diversity in unity, of ceaseless motion in the eternal grasp of law.

These lectures contain the result of his investigation, observation, and experience; they furnish the connection between phenomena; they disclose some of the changes through which the Earth has passed in the countless ages; the history of vegetation, animals and men, the effects of climate upon individuals and nations, the relation we sustain to other worlds, and demonstrate that all phenomena, whether insignificant or grand, exist in accordance with inexorable law.

There are some truths, however, that we never should forget: Superstition has always been the relentless enemy of science; faith has been a hater of demonstration; hypocrisy has been sincere only in its dread of truth, and all religions are inconsistent with mental freedom.

Since the murder of Hypatia in the fifth century — when the polished blade of Greek philosophy was broken by the club of ignorant Catholicism — until today, superstition has detested every effort of reason.

Slowly, beautifully, like the coming of the dawn, came the grand truth, that the universe is governed by law; that disease fastens itself upon the good and upon the bad; that the tornado cannot be stopped by counting beads; that the rushing lava pauses not for bended knees, the lightning for clasped and uplifted hands, nor the cruel waves of the sea for prayer; that paying tithes causes, rather than prevents famine; that pleasure is not sin; that happiness is the only good; that demons and gods exist only in the imagination; that



Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland at the foot of the Chimborazo volcano in Ecuador.

faith is a lullaby sung to put the soul to sleep; that devotion is a bribe that fear offers to supposed power; that offering rewards in another world for obedience in this, is simply buying a soul on credit; that knowledge consists in ascertaining the laws of nature, and that wisdom is the science of happiness. Slowly, grandly, beautifully, these truths are dawning upon humankind.

The moment the fact was established that other worlds are governed by law, it was only natural to conclude that our little world was also under its dominion. The old theological method of accounting for physical phenomena by the pleasure and displeasure of the deity was, by the intellectual, abandoned. They found that disease, death, life, thought, heat, cold, the seasons, the winds, the dreams of man, the instinct of animals, in short, that all physical and mental phenomena are governed by law, absolute, eternal and inexorable.

Law is a fact, not a cause

Let it be understood that by the term “law” is meant the same invariable relations of succession and resemblance predicated of all facts springing from like conditions. Law is a fact — not a cause. It is a fact, that like conditions produce like results: this fact is law. When we say that the universe is governed by law, we mean that this fact, called law, is incapable of change; that it is, has been, and forever will be, the same inexorable, immutable fact, inseparable from all phenomena. Law, in this sense, was not enacted or made. It could not have been otherwise than as it is. That which necessarily exists has no creator.

The glory of science is, that it is freeing the soul — breaking the mental manacles, getting the brain out of bondage, giving courage to thought, filling the world with mercy, justice, and joy.

Science found agriculture plowing with a stick, reaping with a sickle — commerce at the mercy of the treacherous waves and the inconstant winds — man denying the authority of reason, employing his ingenuity in the manufacture of instruments of torture, in building inquisitions and cathedrals. It found the land filled with malicious monks — with persecuting Protestants, and the burners of men. It found a world full of fear; ignorance upon its knees; credulity the greatest virtue; women treated like beasts of burden; cruelty the only means of reformation.

The world is beginning to change because the people are beginning to think. To think is to advance. Everywhere the

great minds are investigating the creeds and the superstitions of men — the phenomena of nature, and the laws of things. At the head of this great army of investigators stood Humboldt — the serene leader of an intellectual host — a king by the suffrage of Science, and the divine right of Genius.

And today we are not honoring some butcher called a soldier, some wily politician called a statesman, some robber called a king, nor some malicious metaphysician called a saint. We are honoring the grand Humboldt, whose victories were all achieved in the arena of thought; who destroyed prejudice, ignorance and error, not men; who shed light, not blood, and who contributed to the knowledge, the wealth, and the happiness of all humankind.

His life was pure, his aims lofty, his learning varied and profound, and his achievements vast.

We honor him because he has ennobled our race, because he has contributed as much as any man living or dead to the real prosperity of the world. We honor him because he honored us, because he labored for others, because he was the most learned man of the most learned nation, because he left a legacy of glory to every human being.

For these reasons he is honored throughout the world. Millions are doing homage to his genius at this moment, and millions are pronouncing his name with reverence and recounting what he accomplished.

We associate the name of Humboldt with oceans, continents, mountains, and volcanoes, with the great palms, the wide deserts, the snow-lipped craters of the

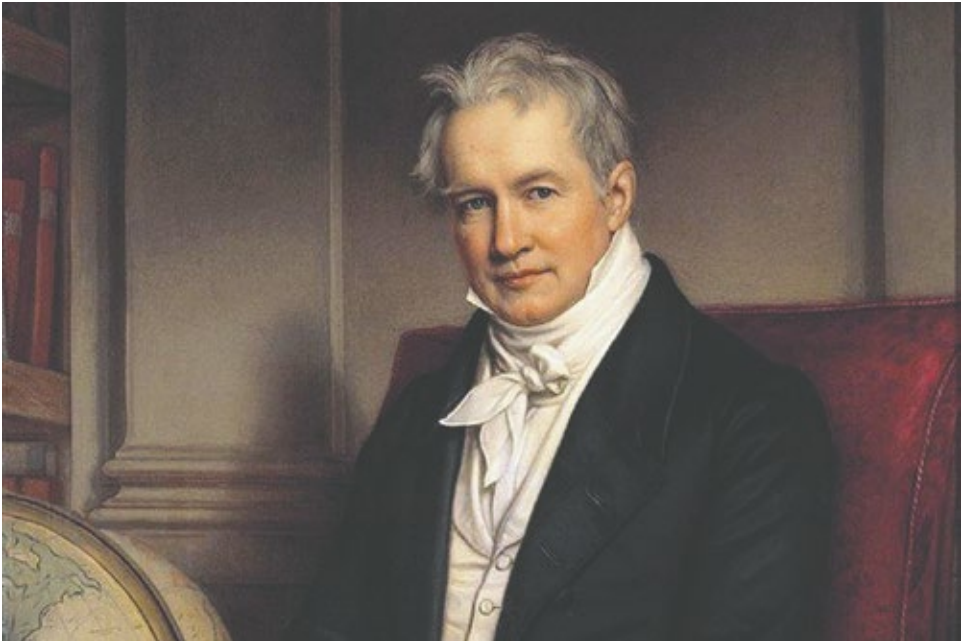
Andes, with primeval forests and European capitals, with wildernesses and universities, with savages and savants, with the lonely rivers of unpeopled wastes, with peaks and pampas, and steppes, and cliffs and crags, with the progress of the world, with every science known to man, and with every star glittering in the immensity of space.

Humboldt adopted none of the soul-shrinking creeds of his day; wasted none of his time in the stupidities, inanities and contradictions of theological metaphysics.

He did not endeavor to harmonize the astronomy and geology of a barbarous people with the science of the 19th century. Never, for one moment, did he abandon the sublime standard of truth; he investigated, he studied, he thought, he separated the gold from the dross in the crucible of his grand brain. He was never found on his knees before the altar of superstition. He stood erect by the grand tranquil column of Reason. He was an admirer, a lover, an adorer of Nature, and at the age of 90, bowed by the weight of nearly a century, covered with the insignia of honor, loved by a nation, respected by a world, with kings for his servants, he laid his weary head upon her bosom — upon the bosom of the universal Mother — and with her loving arms around him, sank into that slumber called Death.

History added another name to the starry scroll of the immortals.

The world is his monument; upon the eternal granite of her hills he inscribed his name, and there upon everlasting stone his genius wrote this, the sublimest of truths: The universe is governed by law.



Portrait of Alexander von Humboldt.

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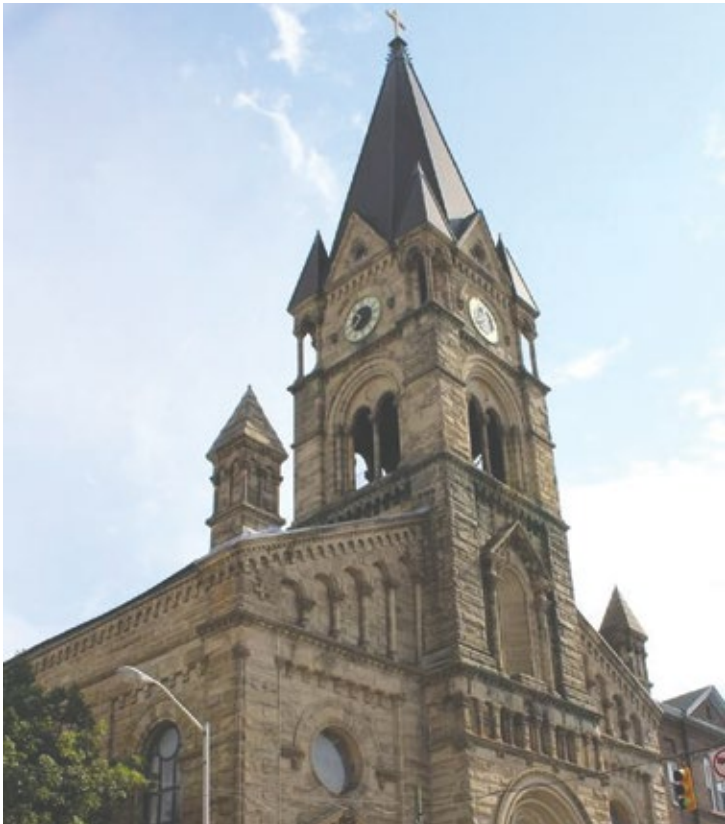
Former churches with better missions



Richard Packham sent us the information on the former Blackfoot LDS Tabernacle in Blackfoot, Idaho. It served as a tabernacle for large gatherings of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977. In 1980, the church sold the building and it now functions as the Hawker Funeral Home.



Al Read sent us this image of the Church Cafe, Bar and Restaurant in Dublin, Ireland. It is housed in the former St. Mary's Church that was constructed in the early 1700s. Arthur Guinness, the founder of the Guinness brewery, was married here in 1761, an event celebrated by his bust resting prominently on the bar (above center, detail at left).



David Shea alerted us to the former St. Michael's Roman Catholic Church in Baltimore, which closed in 2011 and was sold in 2018 to local developers for \$1.7 million. It is undergoing renovations to become a brewery called the Ministry of Brewing. The building is a 130-year-old, 70,000-square-foot granite church complex that is on the National Register of Historic Places. The Ministry of Brewing will be incorporating elements of the church in its design. The project includes 37 apartments that are being built within former school space on the property.



Dr. Roga Hudson of Colorado informed us of this former church in Rocky Ford, Colo., that now houses a gourmet restaurant, Christine's. The building was built in 1910 as St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, where all services were held in German until 1960. It closed in 1972. After that, it had been an antique store, funeral home and private "getaway" until 2004, when Mike and Christine Laurent turned it into the restaurant.



Marc Gold and Rich Pope each sent us a photo of the former Water's Edge United Methodist Church, which has been converted into the Beer Church Brewing Company in New Buffalo, Mich.



Dr. Roga Hudson let us know about this former Christian Science church in Rocky Ford, Colo., that was dedicated in 1916. For the past decade, it has been a private home, where reconstruction and renovations have continued for more than eight years. A pair of trees block a better view of the home.

If you see or know of any former churches that now serve a secular purpose, please send us a photo (preferably with you in it!) and a brief description of the property. Send it to editor@FFRF.org.

Lack of faith doesn't increase gun violence

This op-ed first appeared in the Los Angeles Times on Aug. 11 and is reprinted with permission of the author.

By Phil Zuckerman

In the wake of yet another and another and another mass shooting in America — with at least 34 dead in Gilroy, El Paso and Dayton — Mike Huckabee, the former governor turned pundit, repeated his go-to response: Gun violence in



Phil Zuckerman

our country is all about waning belief in God. As he piously proclaimed in a recent televised interview: “The common denominator in all of this is . . . disconnecting from God. A lot of our country [is] utterly disconnected from any sense of identity with their creator.” Huckabee was even more explicit after the Sandy Hook mass shooting in 2012 that killed 26, including many young children. Such violence occurs, he said, because “we have systematically removed God from our schools.”

Huckabee, the former governor of Arkansas, is far from alone in holding this view. After the latest mass shootings, Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick said on “Fox and Friends” that if Americans don’t adequately praise God, the result will be

continued carnage. So, there you have it: Mass shootings in America are the direct result of people not having enough active faith in God.

The interesting thing about this hypothesis is that it is easy to test. You’ve got an independent variable (faith in God) and a dependent variable (gun violence). The hypothesis put forth by Huckabee and other Christian moralizers comes down to this: When a given society has a higher amount of faith in God, the rate of gun violence should be correspondingly lower. Conversely, the lower the amount of faith in God, the higher the rate of gun violence.

But social science finds the exact opposite correlation. The facts show that strong faith in God does not diminish gun violence, nor does a lack of such faith increase gun violence.

Here’s one crystal-clear example: Faith in God is extremely high in the Philippines. One study found that the country “leads the world” in terms of its strength of faith in God, with 94 percent of people there saying they have always believed in God. Comparatively, the Czech Republic is one of the most atheistic nations in the world, with only about 20 percent of Czechs believing in God. According to Huckabee’s hypothesis, violence and murder rates should be much worse in the Czech Republic and much better in the Philippines.

But the reality is different: The murder rate in the Philippines is nearly 10 times higher than it is in the Czech Republic, ac-

cording to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

This same correlation holds true for nearly every country in the world: Those with the strongest rates of belief in God — such as El Salvador, Colombia, Honduras, Jamaica, and Yemen — tend to experience the most violence, while those with the lowest rates — such as Japan, Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland, New Zealand and Australia — tend to experience the lowest levels of violence.

Are there exceptions? Yes. For example, New Zealand experienced a horrific mass shooting in March. Norway did as well, in 2011. But when looking at averages and correlations over time, the statistical relationship they reveal is unambiguous: Huckabee’s hypothesis doesn’t hold water.

By any standard measure, the safest countries in the world are highly secularized nations like Iceland, Denmark, Canada, Slovenia and South Korea — where faith in God is very low. And the most dangerous countries include fervently faithful places such as the Central African Republic, Syria, Sudan, Venezuela and Belize — places steeped in faith in God.

But the analysis can also be applied closer to home, to the 50 states. According to the Pew Religious Landscape survey, the states with the strongest levels of faith in God include Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee and Oklahoma. Those with the lowest levels of belief in God are Maine, Vermont, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode

Island, Massachusetts, New York, Alaska, Oregon and California. And, as expected, when it comes to homicide rates and violent crime rates in general, the least faithful states in America tend to experience far less than the most faithful.

Of course, there are many different reasons that some nations — or states — have higher rates of violence. For instance, higher rates of gun ownership have been tied to higher rates of domestic homicides. Factors like economics, politics, culture and a host of other aspects of social life also play their part.

But that’s the point. People’s relationship with the divine doesn’t have much, if anything, to do with it. Huckabee’s hypothesis needs to be rejected not only because it is statistically incorrect, but because it’s also inhumane: By blaming mass shootings on a lack of God worship, he is implicitly asserting that the many victims of gun violence, well, deserved it.

On average, about 13,000 Americans are killed by guns every year. And every day, approximately seven children are killed by guns. Such endless carnage and horror will only stop with sane laws and ethical policies.

Faith in God will do nothing to end the epidemic of mass shootings in America, save perhaps to serve as a balm for the souls of the many Americans forced to weep at funerals for victims of gun violence.

*FFRF Member Phil Zuckerman is a professor of sociology and secular studies at Pitzer College and author of the forthcoming book, **What it Means to be Moral**.*

THEY SAID WHAT?

There are only God-given rights protected by the Constitution. If you don’t believe in the one true God, there is nothing to protect. **Craig Northcott, the district attorney general of Coffee County, Tenn., asserting that Muslims have “no constitutional rights.”** *The Washington Post, 6-5-19*

Let every demonic network that has aligned itself against the purpose, against the calling of President Trump, let it be broken, let it be torn down in the name of Jesus. **Paula White, President Trump’s spiritual adviser, in the opening prayer before his campaign kickoff rally in Orlando, Fla.** *The Hill, 6-18-19*

We live in a society where homosexuals lecture us on morals, transvestites lecture us on human biology, baby killers lecture us on human rights and socialists lecture us on economics. . . . By giving the minority more rights than the majority. I hate to think of the country my grandkids will live in unless somehow we change and I think that will take a revolution. . . . The only way to change it would be to kill the problem out. I know it’s bad to say but without killing them out there’s no way to fix it. **Mark Chambers, mayor of Carbon Hill, Ala., in a Facebook post. He later apologized in another Facebook post.** *WBRC, 6-4-19*

Mark Chambers

[It’s] an affront to almighty God. **Alfonso Cirulli, Barnegat, N.J., mayor, in a campaign to end a law that brings an LGBT curriculum into schools.** *Asbury Park Press, 8-7-19*

It is true that George County is a community that is predominantly Christian faith-based. While this is the case, the accusations that are being directed at our county by an organization that has not invested into the heart of our community should first take the time to inquire about the meaning and purpose attached to our 19/20 theme. We do not argue that the cross historically represents Chris-

This is what happens when you have someone who doesn’t fear the Lord, who doesn’t fear God. **“Fox & Friends” host Ainsley Earhardt, blaming the mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio, on atheism, in effect.** *Fox News, 8-6-19*

We’ve got to put Jesus and God before everything else. And if we don’t do that, we’re going to be brought down to our knees again. **Tommy Tuberville, the former head football coach at Auburn University and a candidate running for Senate from Alabama, at a campaign stop in Montgomery. In 2015, FFRF highlighted Tuberville in its “Pray to Play” exposé on chaplain programs that foisted Christianity on public university athletes.** *AL.com, 7-23-19*

The rate of marriage between U.S. Jews and non-Jews means the Jewish people have “lost 6 million people” and is like a “second Holocaust.” **Rafi Peretz, Israel’s minister of education, in a July 1 cabinet meeting that was attended by Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.** *New York Post, 7-9-19*

tian faith, likewise, it represents: life and protection. **Pam Touchard, superintendent of George County Public Schools, in an op-ed posted on the George County Times’ Facebook page in response to FFRF’s request to remove religious displays from school property.** *Facebook, 8-2-19*

He is, without a doubt, the most biblical president I have ever seen. I’m going to repeat that: He is the most biblical president I have ever seen in what he does. His actions are remarkable and I would ask the audience to please pray for him continually. **Former U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann, talking about President Trump on the American Pastors Network’s “Stand In The Gap” radio program.** *Right Wing Watch, 7-29-19*

Prayer has been fundamental to our country from the very get-go. Our country is founded on prayer. The Declaration of Independence says we hold these truths self-evident that we are endowed by our creator, which is referencing God. **Raymond Grim, a member of the Surprise, Ariz., Parks and Recreation Commission, after the City Council voted to allow religious invocations before meetings.** *Your Valley News, 7-8-19*

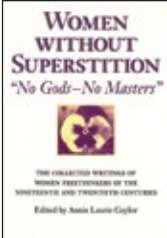
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What Is a Freethinker?

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

LETTERBOX

Hobby Lobby tries to hoodwink the public

I opened up my e-edition of the Pantagraph newspaper (from Bloomington-Normal, Ill.) on July 4 and was aghast to see Hobby Lobby’s full-page ad spewing its nonsense about Christianity and our nation. Hobby Lobby can spend its money any way it wants, but I hate to see the public hoodwinked. I had received FFRF’s “Is America a Christian Nation?” pamphlet, so I thought of FFRF when I saw the ad.

Bill Rasmussen
Illinois

History, tradition no excuse for court rulings

I read FFRF’s article “Bladensburg cross decision a shameful legacy for Supreme Court.” This decision, relying on “history” to excuse an obvious Establishment Clause violation, seems to be part of a pattern. The *Greece v. Galloway* decision also relied on history and tradition, as have several others.

If history and tradition had been significant considerations in decisions by past courts, we would still have racially segregated public schools, poll taxes and literacy tests as barriers to voting, and cops beating “confessions” out of subjects. Those past decisions instead relied on reason, logic and the golden rule, as applied to principles stated in the Constitution. This current court is using history and tradition as excuses to allow blatant violations to continue, which creates a “might makes right” attitude.

Justice Samuel Alito’s claim that “the passage of time gives rise to a strong presumption of constitutionality” is flat-out dishonest. The Constitution says nothing about accepting violations after some time limit. These “histories” and “traditions” were established at a time when the unconstitutional Christian dominance of society and government was unquestioned. That dominance is now being questioned and we need to call out the Supreme Court’s Christian mullahs: Stop making excuses that allow the violations to go on. Continued excuse-making will cost the court even more of its credibility.

Lee Helms
Michigan

Was Jesus gay? He was still bachelor at 33

I enjoyed Brian Bolton’s informative article on the blatant hypocrisy of evangelical Christians regarding their opposition to legal rights for the LGBTQ community on “biblical grounds.” Among other items, Bolton noted the reluctance of these religious bigots to address the ambiguous nature of Jesus’ sexuality based on what can be gleaned from the gospels. In addition to what Bolton noted, there is another aspect of Jesus’ life that should alarm fundamentalists and support the notion that he may have been gay. At a time when most Jews were expected to marry and have children soon after they reached puberty, Jesus was still a bachelor at age 33, along with most, if not all, of his disciples. Mary must have been one very disappointed Jewish mother!

Dennis Middlebrooks
New York

Badge of honor



“I always felt there was something missing from my badge sash,” wrote Life Member Mary Jo Sirling of California, prior to earning FFRF’s Freethought Badge. “My sash has the 39 Girl Scout badges that I earned, but it was time for me to receive the 40th. I have been working on this badge for 79 years and I have always been a good citizen in ‘thought, word, and deed’ as my 1950 Girl Scout Handbook states. And here I am wearing my Freethought Badge. My Girl Scout Handbook had no directions about where to place it, so I put it at the top of my badge sash. Obviously, that is where it belongs.”

Cross is definitely a Christian symbol

The Supreme Court’s decision in *American Legion v. American Humanist Association* ruled that a huge cross can stand as a WWI memorial on public land in Maryland. I was upset after reading Samuel Alito’s opinion that such an old cross was not a religious symbol. I have heard such opinions my whole life about crosses, Christmas, and all manner of obvious Christian symbols and practices. Even as a child, I recognized these absurd statements as expressions of privilege — Christians get to make the rules. The consequences were always just as clear — non-Christians are not full Americans. It is disheartening to get this from the Supreme Court. Allowing symbols from other religions as condolence attempts at inclusivity always struck me as patronizing. They only reinforce the primacy of Christianity in the United States.

I recognize the Constitution as an aspirational document, and that we must continuously fight for freedom from religion. My grade school civics tells me the way to fight Supreme Court decisions is for Congress to pass laws against them. There was talk in 2016 of electing candidates to contravene *Citizens United* in this way. Sadly, those elections did not turn out so well. What can individuals and FFRF do against this latest development?

Mitchell Dushay
California

Canada, too, has issues of state-church separation

I am a Canadian member of FFRF and I am very supportive of your work. It’s very reassuring to know you’re out there, especially for ex-fundies like me.

I watch “Ask an Atheist” and “Freethought Matters” videos a couple of times a week and I realize the American problem is different from the Canadian one. You have a constitution that provides a legal basis for the separation of

church and state and, therefore, you can bring legal action directly to the issue. In contrast, Canada has developed a culture that allows for greater diversity and is less reactionary to the multitude of opinions but, on the other hand, it’s not like the old mythologies have disappeared. Beliefs, faith, doctrines and traditions are more in the closet, yet they still affect political, civic, public and group behavior and decision-making.

The situation in Quebec is one I would recommend that FFRF highlight because of the recent legislation to deny anyone from wearing religious symbols if one works in a government office or in an agency funded by the government. The exception is the wearing of small Christian crosses on necklaces. That’s OK, but a hijab is not? Most of us know that this effort is a thinly disguised ploy to restrict Islam by stopping Muslim women from wearing burkas and hijabs and other facial or head coverings in public.

All the while this debate is going on, there is a giant cross on the wall of the provincial legislature. It is jaw-dropping to see this huge, blatant Christian symbol in the background during news items on TV as they defend legislation to eliminate religious symbols! The official response to questions about it is, “Oh, that’s not religious — it’s traditional and historic.”

Canada is a long way away from putting nativity scenes on public property and the Ten Commandments in courthouses and schools, but we aren’t out of the woods yet. Your encouragement, support and action will always be appreciated.

Jay Moore
Waterloo, Ontario

‘The bible’ should not be used in the singular

There is no such thing as “the bible,” so it is wrong to use it. Give me your definition of the “bible” and then I can show you. Generically, the bible is the word of a god or gods. Considering there are about 10 major versions of the bible and about 100 different translated versions in English alone, there cannot be “the bible.” When someone says to me, the “bible,” I ask what version. I don’t let someone believe that there is only one Christianity based on their bible version because they are stealing the narrative.

David Detterich
California

View daily quotes at ffrf.org/day

FREETHOUGHT OF THE DAY

“No Gods — No Masters”

Margaret Sanger

Motto of Sanger’s newspaper
The Woman Rebel

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Display adds religion where it shouldn’t be

During Memorial Day this year, the U.S. Department of State’s Charleston Regional Center’s display honoring our nation’s fallen soldiers moves the heartache from the personal to the political.

The display is a table with a place setting for someone who will not return, whose absence is grieved: a glass waiting to be filled, a folded flag memorializing their sacrifice, and . . . a bible?

For those who made the ultimate sacrifice, was their sacrifice any less if they did not share Christian beliefs?

For those who suffer from the loss of a loved one in the military, is their suffering any less if their loved one did not share Christian beliefs?

For those who died defending our country, is the debt of gratitude we owe them any less if they died not sharing Christian beliefs?

Please, remember all who made that sacrifice, not just those who shared a particular religious belief.

Richard Cook
Arkansas

It’s never too late to become a Life Member

I’ll make this short and sweet. Having just turned 91, it seems I need to show more my gratitude for the work you do. I’m giving this check to become a Lifetime Member to help in some small way. I have already included FFRF (along with other worthwhile organizations) in my will.

Martin Stern
Texas

Excited about return of ‘Freethought Matters’

I am delighted to know that there will be a second season of the “Freethought Matters” TV show. There is hope for Sunday mornings!

Keep up the good work!

Martin Snelus
California

Prayer didn’t get us to the moon, science did

I just published my memoir of my years at NASA in Houston working on Apollo missions. It’s titled, *When We Landed on the Moon*.

Along with many other engineers, I

spent long hours, sometimes literally 24-hour days, working on Apollo 8. The mission was a triumph of human ingenuity, genius and intense hard work. So, when the astronauts read bible verses while orbiting the moon, I was outraged and betrayed. Prayer didn’t get us to the moon — science and technology did. That magnificent and very human achievement was denigrated in favor of the childish creation myth of a primitive people.

At least I got the chance to blow off some steam about it in my book!

David Dvorkin
Colorado

Abortion T-shirt has a very moving message

The National Network of Abortion Funds sent me a T-shirt that has one of the most moving statements ever: “Everyone loves someone who had an abortion.”

I wear this shirt to the mall in Torrance, Calif., and the response from women and young girls has been overwhelming. I’m a 71-year-old male.

Damian Walters
California

POW/MIA displays are for remembrance

At remembrance displays in a VA medical center, fundamentalist Christians put religious scripture in the middle of those memorials to publicly proselytize religious beliefs. The hospital refused to remove it when veterans, including Christians, complained. A lawsuit was then filed to prevent this unconstitutional government endorsement and promotion of religion.

Originated in 1967 by a group of our Vietnam War combats pilots, the POW/MIA display purpose was (and is) to leave a place at the dinner table for those military comrades. It has always been about remembrance, not religion.

In response to the lawsuit, the VA wrote a new policy, presumably permitting this religious intrusion on the secular remembrance display, which is nothing more than unconstitutional malfeasance because it:

- Disobeys the First Amendment, prohibiting our government from endorsing or promoting a religion and requiring government neutrality regarding religion.
- Distracts from memorial remembrance by promoting religion not shared by all POWs, MIAs or military veterans.
- Disrespects millions of Americans who are not fundamentalist Christians.

Brig. Gen. John Compere, (Retired)
Texas



I ‘Freethought’ at the gym. Where do you?

I just got home from a long vacation to a pile of mail. I dug through everything, hoping there would be a copy of Freethought Today waiting for me. Happy to find it, I took it to the gym with me, looking forward to reading it on the stationary bike. Whenever I get a new issue, I take with me so I can read it during the down times of my day when not much is going on.

I had two thoughts that came to me as I read: First, I am out and proud, and always take off the outer cover sheet from the paper, so the title is clearly visible to anyone that sees me reading. I look forward to the day when Freethought Today can be delivered like any other magazine, with the cover exposed, and that there are no more FFRF members that have to be discreet about their membership!

Second, I would like to see a small section of the paper that is titled, “Where do you Freethought?” Members could send in a photo of where they read their paper. I’ll start it with the attached photo: I “Freethought” at the gym.

Keep up the great work!

John Fisher
Washington

Editor’s note: The “wrap” around the paper is not because FFRF is ashamed or is hiding its content, but because it is required by the Postal Service as a third-class mailing. Secondly, FFRF would be happy to publish photos of our members reading their Freethought Today outside of their home environment!

CRANKMAIL

Here are some of the latest hits and missives from nonmembers who perhaps didn’t get a proper education. Printed as received.

Ohio school: What is wrong with all of you. Moaning about a 10 commandment display in a ohio school. Just because some looser does not like. I won’t it down. 92 years on the wall. Boo Hoo Moron’s. I will try to find a lawyer to sue to put it back up. Go get a real job. Quit whinning about everything. This is why the U.SA is going down the drain. Because looser’s like your group and similar ones. Socialist-Atheist etc Go Get a real Job. It discriminates to those who like it. Also put the bibles back in hospital’s and hotel’s. If you don’t wan’t to read it, don’t open it. I would say have a good one but in this case have a bunch of bad ones. — Carl Pielmeier

Losers: Your horrible work at New Philadelphia Ohio school: You should get a real job instead of infringing on the rights of others. Your position is a joke to humanity. Have you ever had a job where you have accountability or just prey on others? — Nick Cullen

Abortions: SHAME ON YOU PEOPLE!! YOU DON’T TWIST GOD’S WORD FOR YOUR OWN AGENDA!!! YOU PEOPLE TWISTING GODS WORDS TO APPROVE OF ABORTIONS, WILL ANSWER TO

GOD COME JUDGMENT DAY!!!! STOP TELLING PEOPLE THAT GOD IS FOR ABORTION!!!! ONE OF HIS COMMANDMENTS IS “THOU SHALT NOT KILL” & ABORTION IS MURDER!!! — Candi Byrum

FUSD Resilience in Education Program: I don’t understand why you are involving yourselves in something not even in your state let alone that doesn’t affect you. Personally I see no problem with religion in schools but since so many people nowadays have such a problem with it and the pledge of allegiance, they are not allowed in schools. I do have a problem with you complaining and threatening possible lawsuit for chaplains to be reading to students. How freaking ridiculous is that? Just because a chaplain is reading to our children doesn’t mean religion is being inserted into school. Other people read at the schools also. — Jennifer Gage-Reyes

Our money: Well,if you guys hate the phrase ‘In God We Trust’ on our money,I would suggest that you don’t use it. There,solves your problem. Go to Canada. — Michael Putignano

Hell awaits: FFRF is evil. There is a God. His name is Jesus and if you don’t acknowledge him as the Almighty son of God and Lord of your life you will burn in hell for eternity. — Bill Wright

Learn our history: Our country was founded on the Bible. Freedom of religion is about Not being jailed due to one believing a different church from the church of the day.... NOT BADGERING PEOPLE for believing in our FATHER GOD in Heaven. In fact what YOU ALL are doing is EXACTLY why “separation of church and state is in our constitution. It is put there to Protect citizens who believe in GOD!.... so they are not forced to believe in one Christian religion over another. You all need to do some in depth studies of American History. — Juliana Linzey

Leave us alone: Curious why your group feels the need to take down things that have been around for ages, i.e 10 commandments plaque etc... why can’t you just ignore? I think your group is vile but I don’t rant and rave that you talk about atheism. If you are so sure of your beliefs why can’t you just let things be? — Meg Walsh

Freedom OF religion: You people have it all wrong, the constitution gives you the freedom to practice any religion, or none at all as you do. If we were free from religion there would be no churches, no celebrating atheism or devil worship. All of those things are given to us from the constitution, freedom to practice any religion, NOT freedom from religion.

I’d love to know what you think of my view as I believe it is constitutionally correct. While you may not believe in the bible or the Curran I’d like to know what you think of the law. Anxiously awaiting your response, — David Haugh

Comment: What a bunch of MINDLESS ROBOTS you people are. — Mary Thomas

Your Sick: Your very sick people — Bob Smit

God: WHY DONT YOU BELIEVE GOD EXISTS — Joshua Pryce

You are an evil organization: You want to silence and oppress Christians! In the name of God you will be damned! You will go straight to Hell!! the USA was founded on Christian values...the freedom of speech and religion comes from the values Jesus Christ taught us NOT your BS lack of values! Long live Jesus Christ...you can go to HELL! — Horacio Rodriguez

Haters: Why are you discriminating Christianity: Why is it that you hate Jesus Christ so much? — Alex Velez

Evil incarnate: Dan, you’re a true servant for the Prince of Darkness. I can hear your “Go Satan!” chants from here. — Eric Wood

BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

Raymond M. Vliet Jr., Flint, MI: Embezzlement from a vulnerable adult \$20,000 or more but less than \$50,000 and stealing or removing a financial transaction device. Vliet, pastor at Old Beth-el General Baptist Church, is accused of using a power of attorney he obtained from a 91-year-old church member with dementia to take out loans for a pontoon boat and Jeep and cashing in a \$4,000 life insurance policy.

"The pastor couldn't get the loan in his [own] name because he had such a poor credit rating," said Genesee County Sheriff Robert Pickell. *Source: mlive.com, 7-16-19.*

Jacek Ploch, 38, Coventry, RI: Driving under the influence. Ploch, a native of Poland and pastor at Our Lady of Czestochowa and St. Vincent de Paul Catholic parishes, was arrested about 9:30 p.m. after he struck a pedestrian with a 2018 Jeep Wrangler. His blood-alcohol content was higher than 0.15%, an affidavit said. The pedestrian was hospitalized in stable condition. *Source: Providence Journal, 7-16-19*

Gregory Dow, 60, Manheim, PA: 4 federal counts of engaging in an explicit sex act with a minor in a foreign country. Dow is accused of assaulting girls between 2013-17 at an orphanage he founded in 2008 in Boito, Kenya, where he had moved with his wife and 6 children. "[Dow] purported to be a Christian missionary who would care for these orphans," said U.S. Attorney William McSwain.

Dow started the home independent of a mission organization but with financial support of churches and church members. Doug Lamb, pastor of Life Gate Church in Elizabethtown, the first church to support Dow, previously said he thought Dow was innocent.

Dow fled to the U.S. after Kenyan authorities issued an arrest warrant in September 2017. Investigators noted in court filings that he pleaded guilty in 1996 to sexually assaulting a girl in Iowa and was a registered sex offender for 10 years. *Source: lancasteronline.com, 7-13-19*

Jason W. Keller, 42, Pfafftown, NC: 10 counts of sexual activity with a student. Keller is accused of having sex with a female student 10 times between August 2008 and May 2009 when he was an assistant principal at Union Grove Christian School in Lexington and a worship leader at his unidentified church. The case, originally brought in 2009, was dismissed but new information from the alleged victim caused it to be reopened recently.

Also arrested by Davidson County authorities in an unrelated case was **Matthew R. Hendrix**, 36, Mocksville. Hendrix, a youth leader and Sunday school teacher at an unidentified church, is charged with statutory sex offense with a child by an adult, statutory rape of a child by an adult and 2 counts of indecent liberties with a child. Hendrix allegedly violated a 12-year-old girl who attended the church between June 15-25. *Source: Lexington Dispatch, 7-12-19*

Dean Kaplan, 35, Kensington, Australia: Counts of using a carriage service to access and make available child pornographic material and 2 counts of possessing child pornographic material. Kaplan has worked as a fitness instructor at the 800-student Emanuel School in the Sydney suburb of Randwick since 2016. It's affiliated with the New South Wales Jewish Communal Appeal.

Kaplan also runs his own business, Get a Grip Personal Training, and gained some local renown after appearing on the TV program "Dating In the Dark." *Source: Morning Herald, 7-10-19*

Joseph "Jack" Baker, 57, Waterford, MI: Criminal sexual conduct first degree/sexual penetration with a person under 13. Baker, pastor at St. Perpetual Catholic Parish, is the 6th priest charged as part of a state probe of abuse within the Catholic Church.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg," said Dana Nessel, state attorney general. "Our clergy abuse investigative team is working day and night to review the hundreds of thousands of pages of documents and files seized from all seven of Michigan's dioceses last fall." *Source: mlive.com, 7-8-19*

Stephen A. Morris, 61, Four Oaks, NC: 5 counts each of statutory rape/sex offense and indecent liberties with a child. Morris, pastor of Oliver's Grove Baptist Church, allegedly engaged in sex acts with a 13-year-old girl, now 19, in 2013-14. She didn't come forward until June. *Source: Daily Record, 7-8-19*

Jerry Thareparambil, aka Father George, 40, Perumbadam, India, was taken into custody after parents of 7 children filed sexual abuse complaints. Thareparambil, a Catholic priest, is director of a facility that provides shelter and education to boys from poor families. It's run by the Order of Discalced Carmelites. *Source: Onmanorama, 7-7-19*

Karey M. Heyward, 34, N. Charleston, SC: Criminal sexual conduct with a minor. Heyward, lead pastor at Eternity Church, is accused of lewd acts in a home from 2012-15. He also served with the Coastal Crisis Chaplaincy. The alleged victim's mother spoke at the bond hearing: "I was heartbro-

ken for my daughter. You have trust as a pastor, trust as a protector." *Source: WCSC, 7-6-19*

Timothy M. Crowley, 70, Tempe, AZ: 8 counts of criminal sexual conduct alleged between 1986-90 at St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church in Ann Arbor, MI, where Crowley was pastor. He was defrocked in 2015 and lives in a retirement home.

It's alleged he repeatedly gave an altar boy cigarettes and alcohol and forced him to watch pornography while Crowley masturbated. The Diocese of Lansing settled a suit for \$200,000 in 1993. The diocese shared information about Crowley with the Washtenaw County Prosecutor's Office that same year but the case was dropped at the request of the boy's family. *Source: mlive.com, 7-5-19*

Shannon Griffin, 49, Burbank, IL: Grooming, sexual assault, solicitation of child pornography and distribution of harmful materials. Griffin, a kindergarten teacher at Jordan Baptist School, allegedly sent nude images of her showering to 2 students, boys ages 15 and 16, with text saying "Come on in."

She's accused of having sex with the younger boy at least 5 times starting with the initial encounter in 2013 and giving him a bottle of Maker's Mark bourbon, said prosecutor Kyle Gruca. The alleged conduct continued until 2018. Griffin is married to the pastor who runs the school and has 3 adult daughters. *Source: Chicago Tribune, 7-4-19*

William C. Claveria, 32, Toronto: 22 counts related to abuse of at least 3 prepubescent children at 2 Filipino churches, where he allegedly recorded sexual assaults and shared them online. Detective Constable Don Bai said Claveria met the children in 2018 while attending Pentecostal services at Word & Life Christian Assembly and Jesus Reigns Forever International Ministry. *Source: CTV, 7-4-19*

Gabe R. Gilbert, 19, S. Jordan, UT: 5 counts of aggravated sexual extortion of a child and 4 counts of sexual exploitation of a minor. Gilbert allegedly coerced dozens of teen girls with threats into sending him nude images of themselves. When police went to interview him in March, they discovered he'd left in October 2018 to serve a mission with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Mexico.

One girl reported using using Snapchat to talk to "Ethan Parker" after he friended her and commented, "Tbh I'm horny asf would you be willing to help me out?" The girl told him no and "Ethan" responded, "I will Photoshop your face onto nudes and send them out."

Investigators discovered about 50 potential victims. After a 14-year-old refused to send photos, "Ethan" said, "I hope your house has good security ... I'm sending out your location and username ... to as many creeps on the web as I can find." *Source: KTVX, 7-2-19*

John T. Martin, 41, Florence, AL: 4 counts of 1st-degree sexual abuse. Martin, pastor at Light-house Baptist Church, told the congregation in June that he had "disgraced his family name because he had sex with two boys," a church representative told authorities.

One boy, "in either 6th or 7th grade," was assaulted several times, said a case summary from the Lauderdale County sheriff. The boy alleged Martin showed him nude photos of himself while on a public school bus Martin drove and frequently texted to ask if he had touched himself that day.

The church condemns LGBTQ people, as it explains in an online FAQ: "We believe that God

has commanded that no intimate sexual activity be engaged in outside of a marriage between a man and a woman. We believe that any form of homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, bestiality, incest, fornication, adultery, and pornography are sinful perversions of God's gift of sex. We believe that God disapproves of and forbids any attempt to alter one's gender by surgery or appearance." *Source: al.com, 7-1-19*

Carlos S. Duran, 37, Las Vegas, NM: 2 counts of child abuse. Duran, pastor at Mountain View Fellowship, is accused of striking 2 boys and throwing one of them to the ground in June at the Baptist church because they were misbehaving. Arriving at the scene, police Officer Estevan Varela called an ambulance and the boy was taken to the hospital.

Duran was charged in 2004 with aggravated assault and battery with a deadly weapon and criminal damage to property. *Source: New Mexican, 6-28-19*

Arthur Ivey, 59, Quincy, FL: 2 counts of lewd and lascivious behavior on a minor. Ivey, pastor at Friendship Primitive Baptist Church, is accused of inappropriately touching 3 children at a child welfare facility. One said the alleged abuse had gone on for nearly 2 years. *Source: Tallahassee Democrat, 6-25-19*

Mark S. Witt, 69, and **Jason Witt**, 37, Somerset, PA: Failing to report child abuse. The Witts, father and son, are ordained ministers who operate Teen Quest Ranch, a Christian youth camp. It's alleged that a 16-year-old boy assaulted an 11-year-old girl in a cabin in March while 2 male teens watched.

State Trooper Sondra Haberl said in an affidavit that the Witts "are mandated reporters that were informed of the abuse in May and did not make a report on the child's behalf." A relative of a participant notified police about the incident June 3.

Haberl said she questioned Jason Witt on June 12, when he allegedly said he only learned of the incident in early May "when Mark Witt told him." *Source: Tribune-Review, 6-25-19*

Francisco J. Bautista Avalos, Mexico City: Suspicion of murder. Bautista, pastor at Christ the Savior Catholic Church, was arrested after parish deacon Leonardo Avendaño's body was found June 13 in his pickup truck. Bautista offered the funeral Mass for Avendaño, 29.

After interviewing him, police noted inconsistencies in his statement and discovered he'd met the victim late the night before he went missing. They were seen together on surveillance footage outside the church. Avendaño's family believes he was murdered to stop him from going public with certain accusations.

Avendaño had recently graduated from Intercontinental University with a master's in psychoanalysis and had earlier completed a bachelor's in theology, hoping to become a priest. *Source: National Catholic Reporter/Mexico News Daily, 6-20-19*

Afshin Yaghtin, 47, Spokane, WA: Obstructing an officer. Yaghtin, pastor at New Covenant Baptist Church, was arrested while protesting Drag Queen Story Hour at the Spokane Public Library, the only person arrested at the organized protest.

Police Sgt. Terry Preuninger said Yaghtin was given numerous opportunities to stay in the designated protest area but refused. He and others yelled slurs like "sodomites" while about 50 children headed into the library.

Andrea Tate, event co-coordinator, said she's never received so much pushback during the year

and a half she's been reading. "I'm sure a lot of children are going home and asking what a sodomite is," she said. *Source: Spokesman-Review, 6-19-19*

Kwabena Asiamah, 50, Nyamebekyere, Ghana: Rape. Asiamah, an elder at Christ Apostolic Church International, is a fugitive after being accused of impregnating his 15-year-old stepdaughter. He's also alleged to have bribed the girl with 10 cedi (about \$2) to not say anything or he would stop paying her school fees. *Source: Ghana Web, 6-19-19*

Mitchell H. Conte, 35, Lincoln City, OR: 2 counts each of 2nd-degree sexual abuse, luring a minor, online sexual corruption of a child, 3rd-degree sodomy and contributing to the sexual delinquency of a minor. Conte, pastor at Oceanlake Christian Church until last November, is accused of having sex with a 15-year-old girl who babysat his daughters, ages 4 and 6.

The girl's brother saw some explicit text messages and told their father. Conte was also affiliated with Life Change Church and helped run the Spooky Spectacular at Taft Elementary School last Halloween. *Source: Lincoln City Homepage, 6-13-19*

Sentenced

Chuck Kormanski, 57, Bellefonte, PA: 11½ to 23½ months in the county jail, 5 years' probation, 350 hours of community service and \$167,000 in restitution after pleading guilty to 10 counts of theft by unlawful taking. Kormanski admitted stealing the money over a 7-year-period from St. John's Lutheran Church, where he was treasurer and wrote 379 checks to himself.

He also owned Pappy Chuck's Candy Shoppe until it closed last December. He has filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy. *Source: WTAJ, 7-9-19*

Jordan Baird, 28, Manassas, VA: 3 years in prison and 3 years' probation after pleading guilty to 2 counts of indecent acts with a child by a custodian. The victim was 16 in 2014 when Baird, youth pastor at The Life Church, put her hand on his genitals and asked for oral sex.

He's married and has a 5-year-old daughter. At sentencing his wife told the court that he's a changed man. Baird's brother and father have both been head pastors at the church.

Baird was convicted in 2018 of electronic solicitation of a minor and 5 counts of indecent liberties with a minor involving another 16-year-old girl and was sentenced to 10 years, but all but 8 months were suspended. Testimony from other girls allegedly molested was barred by the judge as prejudicial.

The mother of the victim in that case told a reporter that Baird should have admitted guilt when he was arrested several years ago. She and others allege that church leaders portrayed victims as liars. The case prompted a new law that makes clergy mandatory reporters of child abuse. It went into effect July 1. *Source: Fox5 DC, 7-8-19*

Mark Aderholt, 47, Columbia, SC: 30 days in jail, 24 months' probation and a \$4,000 fine after pleading guilty to misdemeanor assault causing bodily injury. He was initially charged with 4 counts of sexual assault of a child under 17 that allegedly occurred in 1996 against a 16-year-old girl.

The victim told the court she met him online while seeking help to organize a See You at the Pole event at her high school. He was then a 25-year-old Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary student. He served as a missionary with the International Mission Board from 2000-08 and on the staffs of 2 Arkansas churches. When arrested in 2018 he served on staff of the South Carolina Baptist Convention. *Source: Baptist Standard, 7-2-19*

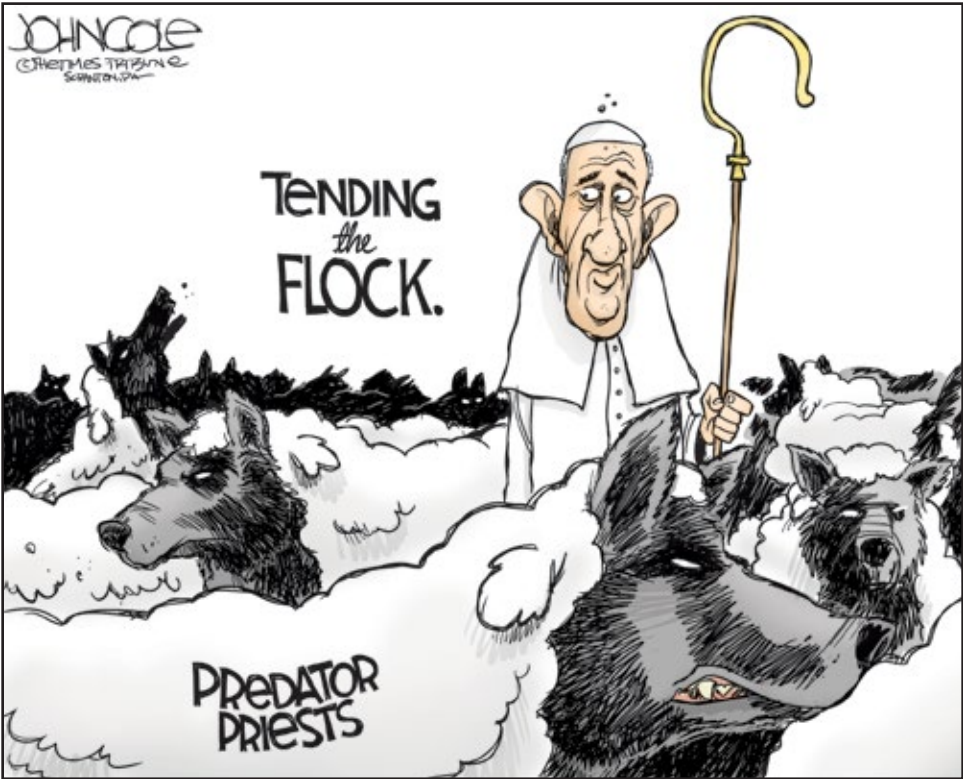
Anthony Haynes, 40, Toledo, OH: Life in prison after a jury found him guilty of sex trafficking of a minor, sexual exploitation of a minor and obstructing a sex-trafficking investigation. The victim, now 19, testified that Haynes, pastor of Greater Life Christian Center, had sex with her starting when she was 14.

"When she had sex with him, she got money. When she didn't have sex with him, she got nothing," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Alissa Sterling. She had moved in the Haynes family, which includes 5 other children, after her mother could no longer care for her.

Prosecutors said the grooming started shortly after she moved in when Haynes took her to a woman's apartment, where he and the woman performed oral sex on each other in front of the girl. About a week later the woman performed oral sex on the girl at Haynes' church, the victim testified. Haynes also coerced her into having sex with 2 other pastors who were sentenced earlier to life and 17½ years respectively. *Source: Toledo Blade, 6-28-19*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

Michael Wight, Fargo, ND, the Catholic Diocese of Fargo and the Texas-based Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity are being sued for at least \$50,000 by Kateri Marion, 33, who alleges Wight sexually assaulted her while he was pastor at St. Ann's Catholic Church in Belcourt on the Ft. Berthold Indian Reservation. Marion is a



member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa.

Wight, 52, was assigned to St. Ann's in 2016 from the Society of Our Lady in Corpus Christi. The suit alleges he tried to touch Marion sexually during confession in July 2016: "Kateri tried to pull away. [Wight] would not let her, and instead [he] held Kateri close and shortly thereafter [he] ejaculated."

Marion has a history of being neglected and abused and went to church almost daily, she said at a press conference. She said she reported the alleged abuse to Belcourt police "immediately" but was told several days later that she should let the church handle it. Belcourt police referred questions to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Aberdeen, SD. *Source: Grand Forks Herald, 7-11-19*

Renee Bach and her religious nonprofit **Serving His Children** (SHC), which has ignored a 2015 order to stop operating, are accused in a suit filed in Uganda of operating a medical facility without a license. Plaintiffs are the Women's Probono Initiative (WPI), which promotes human rights, and Gimbo Zubeda and Kakai Annet, who allege the defendants' actions led to the deaths of 2 of their children.

The suit alleges that Bach, 30, Bedford, VA, and SHC "unlawfully practiced medicine and offered medical services to unsuspecting vulnerable children." According to WPI, Zubeda and Annet were led to believe that Bach was a physician and that she was often seen "wearing a white coat, a stethoscope and often administered medications to children in her care."

SHC was registered with the government in 2010 as a rehabilitation center with a focus on addressing malnutrition. Its website now makes no mention of Bach, who isn't listed as part of "Our Team" despite founding the organization. Two former SHC employees also thought Bach was a doctor, according to affidavits supporting the suit, saying they had observed Bach in a "clinical coat" and assumed she was a medical professional.

A group called No White Saviors has been campaigning for SHC to be shut down. In a 2018 anonymous article on medium.com, a member self-described as a white American volunteer wrote, "Initially, I admired Renee for her sacrifice and tireless commitment to children battling malnutrition. It was not until January 2014 that my perspective really started to change." She went on to describe how Bach allegedly got a boy "fat and healthy and then sent him home without so much as any consideration for the root cause of his malnutrition."

Bach denies all the allegations and said she's always had only good intentions. She and SHC are represented by attorney David Gibbs III, founder of the National Center for Life and Liberty ("Standing with Churches Across America") in Largo, FL. *Source: CNN/Daily Mail, 7-4-19*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

The Catholic **Diocese of Little Rock** confirmed that it paid \$790,000 to 5 men who accused Arkansas priest John J. McDaniel of sexually abusing them in the early 1970s when they were between 12 and 15 years old. Plaintiffs' attorney Josh Gillispie said the settlement didn't include nondisclosure agreements, which allows the men to speak freely about their experiences.

"The reason we are doing this is because my clients want other victims to know that they are not alone," Gillispie said. "These five guys lived into their 50s and early 60s thinking they were alone, which added on and compounded the suffering over the years."

All Souls Parish's insurance covered \$250,000 of the settlement and diocesan insurance paid for the rest. *Source: Democrat-Gazette, 6-28-19*

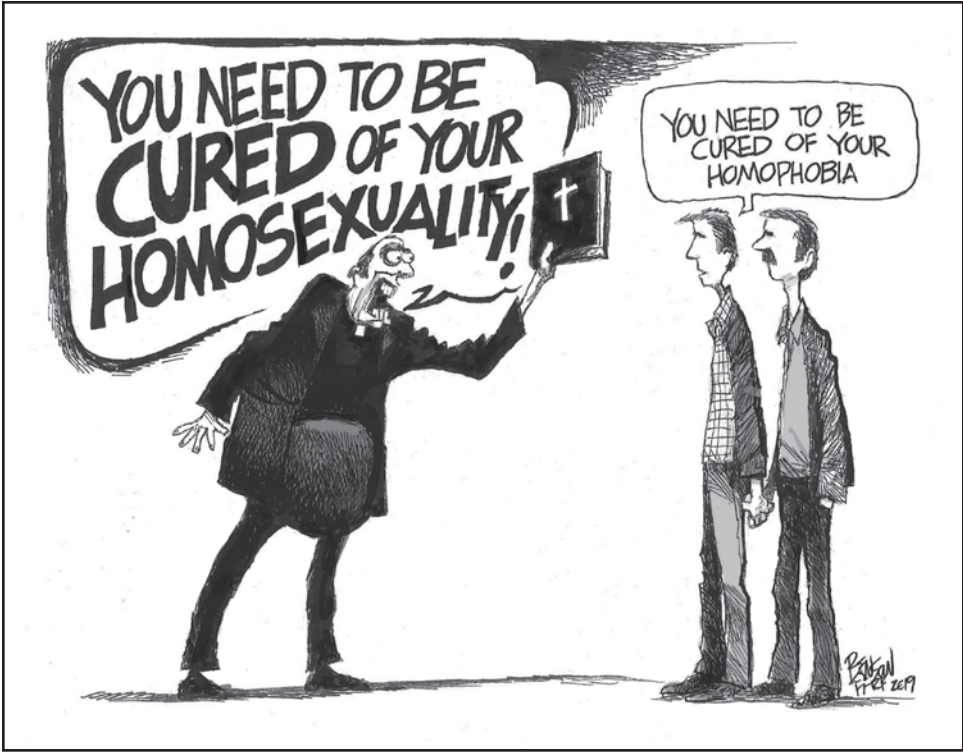
The Catholic **Diocese of New Ulm** in Minnesota has reached a \$34 million settlement in its bankruptcy case with 93 people who say they were sexually abused by priests and others, the diocese and an attorney representing survivors said. Attorney Jeff Anderson, who represents many of the survivors, said the settlement includes contribution of \$8 million from the diocese and its parishes with the rest coming from insurance carriers. If the bankruptcy court approves the plan, the survivors will vote, and then their claims will be evaluated to determine award amounts for the individuals.

Four other Minnesota dioceses have already filed for bankruptcy or announced the intention to file. *Source: AP, 6-26-19*

Legal Developments

A new Tennessee law to protect children from **sexual predators and human traffickers** took effect July 1, including removing the statute of limitations for felony sex crimes in certain circumstances. The law applies if the victim is under 13 or ages 13-17 when the crime occurred and is reported before their 23rd birthday.

If victims were 13-17 years old and didn't report before turning 23, the statute of limitations is 25 years from their 18th birthday. After those 25 years, the case can proceed if there is corroborating evidence of allegations or similar acts by the defendant. The law also increases the time for civil claims involving child sexual abuse to be filed from 7 to 15 years after the victim turns 18. Commenting on the law, Joanna Yoder said



she was raised "in a very strict Mennonite community over in Pulaski and was sexually abused from the time I was 3 until I was 21 by five members of my community." She now lives in Pennsylvania but came to Nashville to watch Gov. Bill Lee sign the bill. "It felt very monumental to be there," Yoder said. *Source: WZTV, 7-1-19*

"[M]ore than one child was a victim of sexual abuse by the alleged maltreater" at a preschool operated by **Washington Hebrew Congregation**, according to a cease-and-desist letter sent by the District of Columbia superintendent of education to the synagogue in June.

The Reform congregation, founded in 1852, is one of the city's most prominent Jewish institutions. Eight families allege preschool teacher **Jordan Silverman** molested children ages 2-4 from March 2016 to August 2018 and have sued.

The letter instructs the school to comply with a plan to correct the violations. The school "knowingly" violated a requirement that at least 2 teachers should supervise students at all times, it said. *Source: The Legal Herald, 7-1-19*

The **Church of Scientology International**, its **Religious Technology Center**, "ecclesiastical leader" **David Miscavige** and **25 unnamed co-respondents** are being sued by "Jane Doe," who alleges retaliation, child abuse, human trafficking, libel, invasion of privacy and intentional infliction of emotional distress involving her and other former members.

Doe alleges she was raised in the church from birth and at age 15 became Miscavige's personal steward before being removed in 2015 and placed in an isolation program called "the Hole" because she knew too much about Miscavige's marital problems. She escaped in 2016 in the trunk of a car driven by a non-Scientologist actor with whom she was assigned to produce promotional videos, the complaint says. *Source: NBC, 6-19-19*

William Weaver, 69, Lakewood, NJ, minister of Linden Presbyterian Church for 39 years, is accused of sexual assault, sexual battery, false imprisonment, intentional infliction of emotional distress, misrepresentation and gross negligence in a suit filed by 3 men and a woman. He was scheduled to face his accusers at an internal church trial in January for "multiple acts of idolatry and sexual misconduct" but renounced the jurisdiction of the presbytery the day before the trial was to start.

The male plaintiffs allege Weaver performed oral sex on them to remove evil spirits. The suit alleges the woman, "H.C.," was about 35 during incidents in 2005-06 and that Weaver once "raised Plaintiff's shirt and pulled down her pants so that he could place his hand on her navel, which he began to suck" for about a minute before spitting out a small metal ball, showing it to her and claiming it was a "hit." *Source: nj.com, 6-18-19*

The **Catholic Archdiocese of Newark**, NJ, is being sued by about 135 former employees of the now-closed St. James Hospital in Newark who allege they lost their pensions because the archdiocese intentionally underfunded and removed assets from the plan, resulting in it going broke.

Retirees stopped receiving pension checks in November 2017 and those who hadn't started taking payments never got any money. The archdiocese claims that after the hospital was sold in 2008 it did not have responsibility for the plan.

The suit alleges that the archdiocese failed to transfer the pension liability to the new owner despite telling retirees their benefits wouldn't be affected. The suit cites a letter in which the archdiocese said "The Pension Plan was fully funded and you will receive, when due, the full amount of your vested retirement benefit." *Source: nj.com 6-13-19*

Allegations

The **Christian Academy** in Japan, a suburban Tokyo school founded in 1950 as a boarding school for the children of Christian missionaries, is investigating 66 cases of alleged physical and sexual abuse of students by faculty, mostly in the 1960s and '70s. An alumni group representative said she's aware of cases as early as the late 1950s and as recent as the 1990s.

A statement on the school's website from top administrator Anda Foxwell said the school "did not provide the nurturing and caring environment for children that we should have provided." And although some of the stories she's heard are secondhand, she said "I didn't doubt the experiences." The academy no longer has a boarding program. *Source: Religion News Service, 7-12-19*

The **Catholic Diocese of Yakima**, WA, released a list of 21 priests and deacons with substantiated allegations of sexual abuse of a minor. Most of the men are dead and none of the others remain in any official position that puts them in contact with children or other members of the public, church officials claim. *Source: Tri-City Herald, 7-10-19*

The **Catholic Diocese of Providence**, RI, released the names of 50 priests and deacons credibly accused of sexually abusing minors since 1950. The list includes the names of 31 deceased clergy and 19 who are still alive but removed from the ministry and was compiled by retired State Police Maj. Kevin O'Brien, who directs the diocese's Office of Compliance.

The Attorney General's Office plans to cross-reference the list with previous allegations and disclosures, said spokeswoman Kristy dosReis. "While release of this list is a step forward, we do not view it as the end of the process," she said in a statement. *Source: NY Post, 7-1-19*

The names of **11 Wyoming Catholic priests** are on a list released by the Diocese of Cheyenne for substantiated sexual abuse allegations. First on the list is **Gerald F. Chleborad**, 84, who now lives in Colorado and was accused of molesting 3 teen boys in 1984-85, 1995 and 2003. The most recent allegation was made to the church in 2016, according to the diocese. Chleborad's alleged abuse of 3 different adolescent boys took place over a period of 20 years.

While Chleborad was a priest in Jackson in 1995, he was charged with public lewdness in Sandy, UT. Security video in a store recorded him touching a coat sleeve on a rack with his penis. A spokesperson at the time said Chleborad was placed on leave and "has met with Bishop Joseph Hart and will be receiving counseling." *Source: News & Guide, 6-25-19*

Removed / Resigned

Joseph H. Metzger III, Norfolk, VA, was suspended from his duties as pastor of Blessed Sacrament Catholic Parish by the Diocese of Richmond due to a violation of the code of conduct involving minors, which reportedly doesn't involve sexual abuse. The complaint was reported to law enforcement. Metzger was also placed on temporary leave last December because of similar conduct violations and had just been reassigned July 1. *Source: WAVY, 7-15-19*

Catholic priest **William McFarlane**, who serves Nativity of Our Lord Parish and St. Gabriel Parish in Chicago, was "asked to step aside from ministry" after the Archdiocese of Chicago was notified of an allegation of sexual abuse. It's not known if the accuser was a minor in 1997 at the time of the alleged abuse, which was before

McFarlane entered the seminary, the archdiocese said. *Source: Sun-Times, 7-13-19*

The Catholic Diocese of Lansing, MI, suspended **William Auth** from the ministry due to "serious concerns" about the financial management of a nonprofit he runs. Auth is affiliated with the Oblates of Saint Francis de Sales. Bishop Earl Boyea also banned Auth from asking people in the diocese to help fund Maya Indian Missions, an Ann Arbor-based nonprofit he runs that was founded in 1998. *Source: State Journal, 7-11-19*

John C. Miller, Ross, PA, was placed on leave as an ordained Catholic deacon at St. Teresa of Avila Parish due to allegations he tried to kiss an underage girl in 2016. The Diocese of Pittsburgh received the allegation in 2018 and has forwarded the case to the Vatican. *Source: Post-Gazette, 7-10-19*

Joe Townsend, Broken Arrow, OK, was placed on leave as pastor of St. Benedict Catholic Church during a probe of alleged sexual misconduct involving a minor. He was ordained in 1988 and has served at St. Benedict since 2007. When Bishop David Konderla announced new priest appointments in April 2018, Townsend was listed as beginning a "sabbatical experience for one year." *Source: Tulsa World, 7-6-19*

John Duffell, 75, retired as a Catholic priest after he was removed as pastor of Blessed Sacrament Catholic Parish in New York City. A source close Duffell said the allegation involved misconduct over a period of years. At a 2011 conference at Fordham University, Duffell allegedly told a participant to lie to church authorities about his same-sex attraction in order to be accepted in the seminary. *Source: Catholic News Agency, 7-5-19*

Bernard Preynat, a retired Catholic priest in his 70s, committed "criminal acts of sexual character against minors under 16," a French church tribunal ruled in stripping him of his clerical status. Preynat has confessed to abusing Boy Scouts during the 1970s and 1980s and his criminal trial is pending.

Cardinal **Philippe Barbarin**, 68, Lyon, was convicted earlier this year of failing to report Preynat to police and was sentenced to 6 months' incarceration, suspended, and was fined €45,000 (\$50,600). *Source: AP, 7-4-19*

Biodun Fatoyinbo, Abuja, Nigeria, leader of the Commonwealth of Zion Assembly, announced he was taking a leave of absence from the pulpit to "submit to the concerns of [his] spiritual mentors." The Pentecostal leader is known as "the Gucci pastor" for his expensive taste in clothes and cars.

Busola Dakolo, a mother of 2 married to musician Timi Dakolo, recently accused Fatoyinbo of raping her when she was 16 after grooming her when she attended his fellowship group called the Divine Delight Club. A week after the initial rape in her home, she alleged, he raped her on the hood of his Mercedes, then said, "You'll be fine. This thing is not a new thing. Men of God do this."

Several days after Dakolo's allegation, a woman who worked as an au pair for the pastor and his wife alleged he raped her in 2017. Fatoyinbo denies the allegations. The Coalition of Public Interest Lawyers and Advocates has written Mohammed Adamu, inspector general of police, asking him to ensure justice is served. *Source: The Guardian/Premium Times, 7-1-19*

Joseph V. Arevalo, 81, Babylon, NY, who has been living at St. Joseph Catholic Church, "has voluntarily stepped away from ministry and will not present himself as a priest" while an allegation of sexual abuse of a minor in the 1990s is investigated, a Diocese of Rockville Centre statement said. Arevalo, who was ordained in the Philippines, has served in the diocese since the 1970s. *Source: Newsday, 6-30-19*

Jack Herron, pastor at St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church in Fargo, ND, was suspended after a woman alleged he touched her inappropriately while she was a teen in the 1970s. She reported it to the Diocese of Fargo in early 2018. Herron is retired and has been serving as a hospital chaplain outside the diocese. *Source: Redwood Falls Gazette, 6-28-19*

Jeff Gatlin, 51, Louisville, KY, resigned as pastor at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Parish after being accused of "inappropriate field taking" of students during a May 13 school field day. The school serves K-8 students.

While Archdiocese of Louisville spokeswoman Cecelia Price said photos "showed nothing inappropriate," other complaints surfaced during the investigation. In a May 31 email to parishioners, interim pastor Joe Graffis and parish administrator Scott U'Sellis wrote that Gatlin was "getting the help he needs dealing with chemical dependency and depression." *Source: Courier Journal, 6-25-19*

Abdullah Patel, Gloucester, UK, was suspended as imam at Masjid Umar mosque and deputy head teacher at Al-Ashraf primary school for alleged comments he made about Zionists and about women, who he said needed "to be smarter" to avoid being sexually assaulted. His advice to women: "Don't be alone with a man!"

A mosque statement said it had chosen to give Patel "some time away" while it investigated. *Source: The Guardian, 6-19-19*

ON THE ROAD

Dan Barker’s trip across the pond



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker performed a concert and spoke on the topic of “Mind The Dogma,” in London at the historic Conway Hall on July 25. Event funds went to The Humanist International “Protect Humanists at Risk” campaign.



Barker sits with David Milne, president of Liverpool Humanists at the same table in Chetham’s Library where Marx and Engels sat when they wrote the notes that became the Communist Manifesto. Chetham’s Library is the oldest public library in the English-speaking world, founded in 1653.



Barker spoke about “Losing Faith in Faith” (also the name of his first book) to the Greater Manchester Humanists on July 23 in Manchester, U.K. The host and organizer, Guy Otten, is on the left.



Barker, center in blue shirt, spoke about “Freedom From Religion” and performed a concert for members of the Liverpool Humanists on July 24.



Barker, pictured with other speakers, gave a talk on “The Harm of Faith Healing” at the Rationalist International Conference at Cambridge University in Cambridge, U.K., on July 27.



Pictured at the 2019 Colorado Secular Conference in Aurora on July 27, are (from left): FFRF Denver Chapter President Claudette StPierre, college students William Trevillyan and Matt Phillips, Denver chapter volunteer Pat Brodbent, grad student Kristina Lee and FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. Both Claudette and Annie Laurie spoke at the one-day event, attracting over 180 individuals from Denver-area secular societies. Annie Laurie also spoke before the Jefferson (Co.) Humanists on July 28. Annie Laurie warmly thanks Claudette and Pat for their exceptional hospitality in hosting her at their home, a patch of “atheist paradise.”



A packed house of about 180 people showed up in Orlando, Fla., to listen to FFRF Director of Strategic Response Andrew L. Seidel talk about his new book, *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism Is Un-American*. FFRF’s chapter, the Central Florida Freethought Community, hosted Seidel’s talk.

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Mandisa Thomas



Avinash Patil



Anthony B. Pinn



Frederick Clarkson



Andrew L. Seidel



Steve Benson



Aline Pham



Jacob McGee



Shiv Shah

Convention lineup nearly finalized

FFRF is happy to announce that author **Amber Scorah** and **U.S. Rep Mark Pocan** of Wisconsin will be speaking at FFRF’s 42nd annual convention. Also appearing via video will be **U.S. Rep Jamie Raskin** of Maryland.

Don’t forget to sign up now to join us in Madison, Wis., from Oct. 18-20 for the annual gathering of FFRF members. *See details next page.*



Amber Scorah

However, once there, she came to question the beliefs she had been taught and ended up leaving the religion. Amber then moved to New York City, where tragedy struck. Her 3-month-old son died on his first day in childcare. After suffering this loss, Amber became a parental leave advocate. Combining forces with a Republican mother, their bipartisan efforts brought the cause of parental leave to the forefront of the 2016 presidential campaign.

Rep. Pocan, who represents the district which includes Madison, serves as co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus and Congressional LGBT Equality Caucus. He is also a member of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, of which Rep. Raskin is a co-founder.

Raskin will provide a short speech via video in accepting FFRF’s Clarence Darrow Award for his advocacy and career as a constitutional law professor.

You’ll also get to listen to **FFRF’s Legal Team** report on the year’s legal highlights and victories.

FFRF will be honoring an assassinated Indian rationalist and his organization. **Avinash Patil** will be given the Avijit Roy Courage Award, which includes a crystal plaque and \$5,000, on behalf of the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan

Samiti (MANS), or the Committee to Eradicate Superstition in Maharashtra. It was founded in 1989 by **Dr. Narendra Dabholkar**, who was assassinated in 2013 at the age of 67. Patil has been the executive president of MANS since 2010.

Also speaking will be the impressive top three prize-winners of our college-bound high school senior essay contest: **Aline Pham, Jacob McGee and Shiv Shah.**

Other convention speakers include: **Nancy Northup**, president and CEO of the Center for Reproductive Rights, who will be receiving FFRF’s Forward Award.

Sarah Vowell, best-selling author of seven nonfiction books on American history and culture.

Steve Benson, Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist and ex-Mormon, who will be on hand doing clever caricatures of convention guests as a fundraiser for FFRF.

Mandisa Thomas, founder and president of Black Nonbelievers, who will be named FFRF’s 2019 Freethought Heroine.

Isaac Kramnick & R. Laurence Moore, emeritus professors at Cornell University, who will discuss their book, *Godless Citizens in a Godly Republic: Atheists in American Public Life.*

Rachel Laser, president and CEO at American United for the Separation of Church and State, who will receive the Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award on behalf of AU.

Hemant Mehta, editor of the Friendly-Atheist.com blog website.

Trae Crowder, who will perform his “Liberal Redneck” comedy act.

Deven Green and Andrew Bradley, the comedy duo of Mrs. Betty Bowers, America’s Best Christian, who will entertain with their act, “God Gets His Annual Performance Review.”

Frederick Clarkson, author of *Eternal Hostility: The Struggle Between Theocracy and Democracy and Dispatches from the Religious Left: The Future of Faith and Politics in America.*

Anthony B. Pinn, who will be receiving FFRF’s Emperor Has No Clothes Award, is professor of religion at Rice University.

Andrew L. Seidel, the director of strategic response at FFRF, who recently released his book, *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism Is Un-American.*

FFRF will be showing **Jeremiah Camara’s** movie, “Holy Hierarchy: The Religious Roots of Racism in America,” to mark the 400th anniversary of the introduction of slavery in North America.

FFRF’s 42nd annual convention schedule

Subject to minor changes

Friday, October 18

MORNING OPEN HOUSE

Pre-convention event

9:30 -11:30 AM OPEN HOUSE

Freethought Hall in Downtown Madison (Free, but reservations required!)

EARLY REGISTRATION OPENS

Complimentary pastries, juice, hot beverages, Champagne, OJ, Mimosas

AFTERNOON FORMAL OPENING

Monona Terrace Community & Convention Center
Monona Terrace, 1 John Nolen Dr.
Madison Ballroom

Noon REGISTRATION RE-OPENS

(continues throughout convention)
Sales tables open in the Madison Ballroom

1:00 PM SHORT WELCOME

“The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism Is Un-American”

Andrew Seidel
Book signing during break

1:30 PM Henry H. Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award

Rachel Laser accepts on behalf of Americans United

2:00 PM A Conversation with Sarah Vowell

with Dan Barker, followed by Q&A

3:00 PM BREAK — Refreshments (lobby)

Book signing for Sarah Vowell in ballroom concurrent

3:30 PM “Godless Citizens in a Godly Republic: Atheists in American Public Life”

Authors R. Laurence Moore & Isaac Kramnick
Book signing at 5 p.m.

4:15 PM Forward Award, Nancy Northup, Center for Reproductive Rights

5:00 PM DINNER BREAK Buffet in Grand Terrace/Rooftop gardens (ticketed event)

Book signing for Moore & Kramnick concurrent

Friday Evening Program

Madison Ballroom

7:00 PM EVENING WELCOME, MUSIC

FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker & Annie Laurie Gaylor: Year in Review

Video speech: **U.S. Rep. Jamie Raskin**

7:30 PM “Nothing Fails Like Prayer Award”

Hemant Mehta
“Is Atheism Still Taboo in Politics?” Hemant Mehta

8:00 PM God Gets His Annual Job Performance Review

Mrs. Betty Bowers (America’s Best Christian™) and Andrew Bradley

Complimentary gourmet cupcakes and hot beverages — Grand Terrace

10:15 PM Film: “Holy Hierarchy: The Religious Roots of Racism in America”

To be repeated at 12:15 p.m. Saturday

Saturday, October 19

All Saturday events held in Madison Ballroom, unless otherwise noted.

8:00 AM Nonprayer Breakfast (ticketed event) — Exhibit Hall A

9:00 AM Madison Ballroom Sales tables open

9:30 AM WELCOME Lisa Strand,

MUSIC Dan Barker

9:40 AM Film Preview, Jeremiah Camara, Director, “Holy Hierarchy: The Religious Roots of Racism in America”

10:00 AM Trio of student essay winners

10:30 AM “Eternal Hostility: The Struggle Between Theocracy and Democracy”

11:00 AM Battle of Church & State: Legal Accomplishments

FFRF Legal Staff & Mark Dann, FFRF lobbyist

Noon - 2:00 PM LUNCH BREAK Optional Grab & Go Lunch

12:15 - 12:45 PM FILM SCREENING “Holy Hierarchy: The Religious Roots of Racism in America”

2:00 PM Freethought Heroine Award

Mandisa Thomas

2:30 PM Avijit Roy Courage Award

Avinash Patil, on behalf of Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti

3:00 PM Emperor Has No Clothes Award

Anthony B. Pinn

3:30 PM BREAK

Book signing for Anthony Pinn

4:00 PM Leaving the Witness

Amber Scorah

4:30 PM U.S. Rep. Mark Pocan

6:30 PM SATURDAY NIGHT DINNER (Ticketed event) — Exhibit Hall A

Evening program in Madison Ballroom

8:00 PM “Clean Money Drawing”

8:30 PM An Evening with Trae Crowder, “Liberal Redneck”

Sunday, October 20

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING Hall of Ideas FG

8:30 AM Complimentary pastries & hot beverages

9:00 AM Annual Membership meeting Open to current FFRF members

Annual State Representatives meeting

ADJOURN BY NOON

Register now for Oct. 18-20 event

Visit Madison for FFRF’s irreverent conference!

Join the Freedom From Religion Foundation in Madison, Wis., for its 42nd annual convention from Oct. 18-20 at the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center. For speakers and tentative schedule, see previous page.

General schedule

The pre-convention open house is Friday morning, Oct. 18 at Freethought Hall, FFRF’s national office.

The starting time of the convention, at the convention center (1 John Nolen Drive) is 1 p.m., Friday, Oct. 18, continuing through Saturday night. FFRF’s membership and state representative meetings take place Sunday morning, ending by noon.

The schedule includes irreverent music, FFRF book and merch sales tables and book signings, complimentary ice cream and beverages on Friday afternoon and complimentary Friday night dessert reception. Plus, there is the always-popular drawing for “clean” (pre-“In God We Trust”) currency on Saturday night.

Return the registration form on this page. It must be received no later than Oct. 7 if you plan to order meals. Or sign up at ffrf.org/convention2019.

Hotel reservations

FFRF is using three Madison hotels. The Hilton Madison, attached to the convention center, site of the convention, is the main hotel venue. The other two hotels offer overflow rooms, and require either a 3-block walk or driving or taking a free shuttle to the convention site. All hotels have blocks Thursday through Saturday nights, with a few more limited rooms Wednesday and Sunday nights.

Hilton Madison Monona Terrace, 9 E. Wilson St., Madison, WI 53703. Call 1-877-510-7465 or 414-935-5941, or visit bit.ly/2SPTPlz and mention “Freedom From Religion Foundation.” Rates are \$185 (1-4 people), plus tax. **Deadline is Monday, Sept. 16**, for this rate. A self-parking garage is \$17/day. Valet parking: \$20/day.

Sheraton Madison Hotel, 706 John Nolen Drive, Madison, WI 53713. Call 866-716-8134 or 608-251-2300 or visit: reservations.com/hotel/sheraton-madison-hotel, mentioning “Freedom From Religion Foundation.” Rates are \$156 (1-4 people), plus taxes and fees. **Deadline is Wednesday, Sept. 18**, for this rate. Parking is free and so is the shuttle to Monona Terrace, a 3-mile walk or 8-minute drive.

Park Hotel Madison, 22 S. Carroll St., Madison, WI 53703 (3 blocks from Monona Terrace). Call 800-279-8811 or 608-285-8000 or visit parkhotelmadison.com, mentioning “Freedom From Religion Foundation.” Rates are \$194 (1-2 people, one bed); \$214 (1-4 people, 2 beds); \$254 (suite). **Deadline is Tuesday, Sept. 17**, for this rate. Two-night minimum length of stay. Guaranteed parking for one vehicle for overnight guests (\$15 per night, valet only).

Food!

Complimentary receptions include light brunch fare at the Friday morning Freethought Hall Open House, complimentary ice cream and hot beverages Friday afternoon after the start of the convention and complimentary dessert reception with cupcakes and hot beverages at the conclusion of Friday night.

Optional meals include:
Friday Dinner Buffet, \$35: Bucky’s Tailgate Buffet includes Wisconsin Waldorf salad, home-style potato salad, beer-boiled Johnsonville Bratwurst with sauerkraut and chopped fresh onion, grilled boneless chicken breast and black bean burgers.

Saturday Nonprayer Breakfast, \$20: Cheese & chive scrambled eggs, apple smoked bacon, rosemary wedge potatoes, petite muffin assortment, chilled juice, coffee, tea and milk. Veggie/vegan/gluten-free substitutes available.

Saturday ‘Grab and Go’ Box Lunch, \$25. For your convenience, we offer a box lunch containing deli-sliced turkey on fresh Kaiser roll, piece of whole fruit, cookie and chips. Vegetarian option is marinated grilled tempeh sandwich.

Saturday Dinner, \$50: Roasted chicken breast with truffle glaze, potatoes, vegetable blend, dessert.

Pre-registration closes on Monday, Oct. 7, at midnight. Mailed registration forms must received by this date. No convention meals may be ordered after Oct. 7, but there will be registration at the door. Phone 1-800-335-4021 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Central weekdays. Or sign up at ffrf.org/convention2019.



This night view of downtown Madison, Wis., is taken from Lake Monona and shows, in the foreground, the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center, site of this year’s convention, and, in the background, the Wisconsin State Capitol building.

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MADISON | OCTOBER 18-20, 2019

2019 CONVENTION REGISTRATION FORM

Or register online: ffrf.org/convention2019

REGISTRATION FEES	Number Registering	Cost
Member		___\$60 \$___
Spouse or Companion (Non-member accompanying member)		___\$65 \$___
Child (Under 18 Accompanying Registrant)		___Free \$___
Student with ID (Over 18)		___\$10 \$___
<input type="checkbox"/> I am interested in hotel, meal or travel scholarship		
Non-member		___\$115 \$___
Or join for \$40 and save \$15		___\$100 \$___

OPTIONAL MEALS / EVENTS	Number Registering	Cost
Friday, October 18		
Freethought Hall Open House 9:30-11 AM / Must register to attend		___Free
Friday Welcome Party (Dinner Buffet) 5-6:30 PM		___\$35 \$___
Registrant 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Regular <input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian <input type="checkbox"/> Vegan <input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		
Registrant 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Regular <input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian <input type="checkbox"/> Vegan <input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		
Registrant 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Regular <input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian <input type="checkbox"/> Vegan <input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		
Saturday, October 19		
Non-Prayer Breakfast		___\$20 \$___
Registrant 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Regular <input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian <input type="checkbox"/> Vegan <input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		
Registrant 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Regular <input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian <input type="checkbox"/> Vegan <input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		
Registrant 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Regular <input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian <input type="checkbox"/> Vegan <input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		
“Grab and Go” Box Lunch		___\$25 \$___
Registrant 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Regular <input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian <input type="checkbox"/> Vegan <input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		
Registrant 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Regular <input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian <input type="checkbox"/> Vegan <input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		
Registrant 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Regular <input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian <input type="checkbox"/> Vegan <input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		
Saturday Dinner		___\$50 \$___
Registrant 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Regular <input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian <input type="checkbox"/> Vegan <input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		
Registrant 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Regular <input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian <input type="checkbox"/> Vegan <input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		
Registrant 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Regular <input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian <input type="checkbox"/> Vegan <input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		
		► Total \$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> I am adding a donation to sponsor student convention scholarships \$ _____		
Please tell us about any ADA accommodations you need in order to fully participate in this convention:		
<hr/>		
(Make checks payable to FFRF) Return with payment to:		
FFRF, Attn: Convention P.O. Box 750 Madison, WI 53701		
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Name of Registrant 1		
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Name of Registrant 2		
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Name of Registrant 3		
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Address		
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City		
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State / ZIP		
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Phone*		
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Email*		
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Credit Card Number		
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Expiration Date / Security Code		
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Billing Name / Signature		
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*Contact information for in-house use only		

Pre-registration and meal order deadline: Monday, Oct. 7.



Cartoonist Steve Benson will be drawing caricatures of attendees at FFRF’s convention in October as a fundraiser for FFRF.