

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



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Vol. 37 No. 3

Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

April 2020

FFRF sues over forced prayers in Puerto Rico

The Freedom From Religion Foundation filed a federal lawsuit on Feb. 27 against Puerto Rico's education secretary and a principal on behalf of a family subjected to forced prayers and bullying in a public primary school.

Since September 2019, in direct contradiction of well-established constitutional law, officials at the Luis M. Santiago School, a public school in Toa Baja, have reportedly organized, led and coerced students to participate in 50-minute prayer sessions on school property every other

Monday during the school day.

FFRF is representing two of these children and their mother at the U.S. District Court for the District of Puerto Rico along with Humanistas Seculares De Puerto Rico, a leading Puerto Rican secular humanist organization that the mother belongs to.

The parties have entered into mediation to resolve the lawsuit, but due to the coronavirus pandemic, Puerto Rico schools are closed at least through March 30. Until the public schools reopen, FFRF

cannot ensure that the prayer practice has stopped and that teachers at the school have been properly trained on the separation of church and state. But based on the mediation thus far, FFRF is optimistic that the lawsuit will end quickly and favorably.

As far back as 1962, the U.S. Supreme Court has held that "the constitutional prohibition against laws respecting an establishment of religion must at least mean that in this country it is no part of the business of government to compose official prayers for any group of the American

people," FFRF points out.

The family brings this action under pseudonyms to protect the mother and her two minor children from social ostracism, retaliation and even physical harm. Eligio Hernandez Perez is being sued in his official capacity as the secretary of the Department of Education. Luz Ramos is the principal of the Luis M. Santiago School and is being sued in both her official and individual capacities, since

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Where do you 'Freethought'?



I like to treat myself to lunch and read my Freethought Today. I hold it proud where everyone can see the headlines and I even strategically pick the best seat in the house for viewing. Most of the time I get snarky looks, but I have been approached by some curious folks. We all need to advocate for freethought when and where we can!

Kami Pryor
Georgia

Major hit to state-church separation

The 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals issued a ruling on Feb. 19 upholding the constitutionality of a massive Latin cross on city property in Pensacola, Fla.

Circuit Judge Kevin Newsom, writing for the unanimous three-judge panel, wrote that the 40-foot-tall Christian cross in Bayview Park "has evolved into a neutral" symbol.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, the American Humanist Association and their plaintiffs won at the district level and before the 11th Circuit. However, the case was remanded back for reconsideration following the U.S. Supreme Court's June 2019 *American Legion v. American Humanist Association* cross decision. In the Bladensburg case, the Supreme Court ruled that the government-owned, government-maintained, Christian cross war memorial dominating

the landscape in Bladensburg, Md., did not violate the First Amendment.

Taking its cue from the Supreme Court, the 11th Circuit ignored the religious significance of the Bayview Park cross, holding that because it's been there a long time, and secular community events have been held in the park nearby, it is constitutional.

Newsom wrote: "American Legion itself demonstrates that an 'undoubtedly . . . Christian symbol' — in particular, a Latin cross — may nevertheless pose no Establishment Clause concerns."

The Pensacola cross stands in popular Bayview Park, serving solely as the centerpiece of annual Easter Sunrise Christian worship services. It was first challenged in a 2016 lawsuit filed by FFRF and AHA.

The district court sided with the national secular organiza-

tions in a June 2017 decision. In September 2018, the 11th Circuit upheld the decision, agreeing that the government-funded, freestanding

See Pensacola on page 3



The 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals has allowed to stand the Latin cross in Bayview Park in Pensacola, Fla.

FFRF is still at work on your behalf

Like all of you, we at the Freedom From Religion Foundation are adapting to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope this message will find you well and want to assure you that FFRF is committed to working on your behalf to keep religion out of government and promote freethought. After all, one of FFRF's purposes is fighting the virus of religion.

To keep employees safe while also maintaining services, FFRF staff are officially working remotely for the foreseeable future. Other measures we've taken:

Travel. We have canceled or postponed all travel and events through the spring.

Modified operations and services. Although staff are working remotely, you may still phone the FFRF office at 608-

256-8900. Please leave a clear message and call-back number. Your email to info@ffrf.org will continue to be routed to the appropriate staff person.

If you have a complaint about a state/church violation, use the online form at ffrf.org/legal/report. Please be patient about results: Many schools and public services are closed or operating at reduced capacity.

To donate or renew (thank you for helping to keep our nonprofit going!), please use the online forms at ffrf.org/renew or ffrf.org/donate if possible to reduce the need to process mail at FFRF.

Note: Our online store is closed for the time being.

Keeping our community in touch. In

these uncertain times, it's more important than ever to maintain a sense of normalcy and community. Production of the Freethought Today newspaper continues on schedule; it also remains an online publication (freethoughttoday.com). We plan to continue producing the weekly Freethought Radio (broadcast and podcast, ffrf.org/radio). "Freethought Matters" TV show will continue to broadcast on Sundays through the end of May and be posted on YouTube (google "Freethought Matters playlist"). Wednesday's Facebook Live! "Ask an Atheist" may be affected. FFRF's social media continues, along with press releases and action alerts (check out at ffrf.org/news) and Friday's Weekly Wrap email.

National events. We are "full steam ahead" on planning FFRF's 43rd National Convention (ffrf.org/convention2020) in San Antonio, Nov. 13–15. If conditions warrant cancellation, FFRF will refund registration fees in full. Guests may cancel hotel reservations without penalty at least 48 hours prior to arrival.

Office closed to visitors. For obvious reasons, FFRF's Freethought Hall office in downtown Madison, Wis., is not open until further notice.

We sincerely wish for you to take all precautions to keep yourself, your family and your community safe. Rest assured, that while the theocrats are not stopping their activities during this time, neither will we.



Greta Martens holds up a protest sign during a visit to the Wisconsin Capitol by Vice President Pence on Jan. 28 to promote religious vouchers.

Legal assistant helps make a difference

Name: Greta Martens
Where and when I was born: Wausau, Wis., in 1996.
Education: I have a B.A. from Hamline University in history and a minor in legal studies.
Family: One younger brother and two wonderful parents.
How I came to work at FFRF: My significant other was a legal intern at FFRF last summer and had an amazing experience. When I found out there was going to be an opening for a legal assistant, I knew I had to apply.
What I do here: Whatever the attorneys need done, such as filing with the court, organizing, doing research on anything and everything.
What I like best about it: I like knowing that I'm making a real difference. I get to come in every day and see the outcome of all of our hard work.
What gets old about it: Putting physical files away. I'm willing to take those papercuts for FFRF though.
I spend a lot of time thinking about: Politics and whatever comic I last read.
I spend little if any time thinking about: Being petty or mean. I like to stay positive as much as I can.
My religious upbringing was: Kind of intense. I went to a religious elementary school and was a regular churchgoer with my family.
My doubts about religion started: In



Greta Martens takes a break while hiking in Rocky Mountain National Park.

middle school, when I realized I had little worth as a woman to the church. It was hard not to question everything else after that.
Things I like: Reading DC comics, going for hikes, free samples and taking road trips to random states.
Things I smite: People who litter and bigots.
In my golden years: I'll be relaxing on the shores of Lake Superior and yelling at the youth to get off my beach.
What's your favorite podcast?: I religiously listen to the "NPR Politics Podcast," "Stuff You Missed in History Class," and "This American Life."

ffrf

FREETHOUGHT
TODAY

Published by Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

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OVERHEARD

The Declaration of Independence noted that the power of the government is not from God, but from the people. I think it's important to understand what the Founding Fathers believed when they had the clause that there must be a separation of church and state. This also protects religion from interference by government in their beliefs.
Indiana state Sen. Mark Stoops, in voting against having an "In God We Trust" sign in every public school classroom. The bill was amended without the requirement.
TheIndyChannel.com, 1-22-20

The abortion law is much more than the right to perform an abortion. It recognizes women as independent people who have the right to decide over our own bodies. The church is never going to be in favor of this.
Maria del Valle, speaking about Argentina's bill that would have legalized abortion in that country. The bill failed.
The New York Times, 2-23-20

As a science advocate, I take strong issue with the nonscience [Ken] Ham peddles to families and students. His parody of the scientific method does real harm, bleeding inexorably into education and public policy. The wholehearted embrace of "alternative facts" and the rejection of plain evidence are making our society more and more polarized. Yet Ham's treatment of Williamstown [Ky.] is a reminder that these sorts of cult-like organizations have impacts that go much farther than the foolish ideas they promote.
David MacMillan, a self-described "former creationist" and now paralegal and law student in Washington, D.C., in an op-ed about the Ark Encounter in Kentucky.
Cincinnati.com, 2-24-20

If this bill passes, it's only fair that the abuse of the church-state line go in both directions.
If public schools must carve out mandatory periods to facilitate prayer, then houses of prayer should carve out mandatory periods to facilitate academics.
Frank Cerabino in an op-ed, "Mandatory math in church is my pi-in-the-sky plan" which was in response to a Florida bill that would require public schools to have a mandatory period of silence each day to permit "the study of the bible and religion." The bill did not pass.
Palm Beach Post, 2-22-20

This is the real meaning of "religious liberty": the privilege enjoyed by certain favored groups to hold special status in

our society, to claim public money and resources for themselves, and to identify a despised other and organize around their contempt of that enemy. Through the unlikely person of President Trump, the Christian Nationalist movement has seized the levers of power at the heart of government. This is just the beginning.
Katherine Stewart, from an excerpt of her new book The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism. Stewart will be speaking at FFRF's convention in November in San Antonio.
The New York Review of Books, 2-28-20

My husband Avijit [Roy] once wrote: "We risk our lives the moment we start wielding our pens against religious bigotry and fundamentalism."
Today, I ask you to take up the cause of those armed only with pens. We all must have the right to examine, question, criticize, oppose, express ourselves, demonstrate, and write free from the culture of fear propagated by blasphemy accusations and other forms of religious persecution.
Rafida Bonya Ahmed, in testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives in a joint hearing on "Ending Global Religious Persecution" on Jan. 28.
The Humanist magazine, March/April 2020

No one should be made to feel wrong for who they are — especially not a child. Conversion therapy is not only based in discriminatory junk-science, it is dangerous and causes lasting harm to our youth.
Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam, after signing a bill that bans conversion therapy for minors. Virginia is the 20th state to enforce a ban on the practice, but the first Southern state.
The New York Times, 3-3-20

We respect people of the Christian faith and the importance of the bible to their beliefs. But the place for biblical instruction is in the Sunday school classroom, rather than the public school classroom. It's in the home and in church. Public school is the place to live out the values of one's faith, rather than the place to learn it.
Editorial speaking out against the bill to allow teaching the bible in school that is now waiting to be signed by the governor into law.
Charleston Gazette Mail, 3-5-20

Freethought Today caption contest

Please send us a humorous or witty comment about this photo. Email your response to caption@ffrf.org by April 22.
The winner, chosen by FFRF staff, will receive an FFRF T-shirt. We'll announce the winner and runners-up in the May issue.
If you've seen or taken any photos that you think would be good for this contest, please email them to caption@ffrf.org.

We’re less religious, but also better off

This op-ed first ran in the Washington Post on Feb. 19 and is reprinted with permission.

By Max Boot

It has become conventional wisdom on the right that religion is under assault from secular liberals — and that the waning of faith is bad for America.

Attorney General William P. Barr, a conservative Catholic, summed up this alarmist outlook last fall during an incendiary speech at Notre Dame. He bemoaned “the steady erosion of our traditional Judeo-Christian moral system” and the “growing ascendancy of secularism and the doctrine of moral relativism. By any honest assessment,” he thundered, “the consequences of this moral upheaval have been grim.” He went on to cite statistics on rising out-of-wedlock births (“illegitimacy”), along with “record levels of depression and mental illness, dispirited young people, soaring suicide rates, increasing numbers of angry and alienated young males, an increase in senseless violence, and a deadly drug epidemic.”

This tendentious reading of United States history ignores reality. By most metrics, the country is far better off than when Barr was a boy. He was born in 1950, when segregation was legal and homosexuality was not.

Consider some of the improvements since 1960. Real per capita gross domestic product has increased 216 percent, from \$18,268 in the first quarter of 1960 to \$57,719 in the first quarter of 2019, driven in part by a 230 percent increase in output per hour for non-farm workers as of 2015. The share of 25- to 34-year-olds who have graduated from college has tripled as of 2016. Infant mortality has fallen nearly 80 percent as of 2018. The homicide rate was unchanged as of 2018 — five murders per 100,000 people — but that disguises a vast improvement since the homicide rate peaked at 10.4 per 100,000 in 1980. While the number of out-of-wedlock births was more than seven times higher in 2018, the share of single mothers has declined since 1997 because more unmarried parents live together. The abortion rate soared after *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 but has fallen more



Max Boot

than 50 percent since 1980. How does Barr account for these improvements if the United States is on the road to ruin?

Barr’s simplistic idea that the country is better off if it is more religious is based on faith, not evidence. My research associate Sherry Cho compiled statistics on the 10 countries with the highest percentage of religious people and the 10 countries with the lowest percentage based on a 2017 WIN/Gallup International survey of 68 countries. The least religious countries are either Asian nations where monotheism never took hold (China, Japan) or Western nations such as Australia, Sweden and Belgium, where secularism is much more advanced than in the United States. The most religious countries represent various faiths: There are predominantly Christian countries (the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Armenia), Muslim Pakistan, Buddhist Thailand, Hindu India — and countries of mixed faiths (Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Fiji).

Indicators suggest that the less religious nations are much better off. Average GDP per capita in the least religious countries is more than five times higher, while the unemployment rate is more than twice as low and the poverty rate is one and a half times lower. The homicide rate is five times lower. Life expectancy is 22 percent higher, and infant mortality is 1,000 percent lower — in part because the least religious nations spend 50 percent more per capita on health care. The least religious countries are also better educated, with a

Less religious nations are better off

How the 10 top most religious nations compare with the 10 top least religious nations.

	Top 10 most religious countries	Top 10 least religious countries
Gross domestic product per capita	\$7,955	\$44,278
Unemployment rate	7.9%	4.4%
Poverty rate	29.2%	13.7%
Homicide rate per 100,000 people	5.1	1.01
Life expectancy (years)	66.4	80.9
Infant mortality per 1,000 births	36.3	3.25
Years at school (mean)	7.5	12.1
Income Inequality Higher numbers mean more unequal	38.6	31.1
Gender Inequality Higher numbers mean more unequal	0.49	0.2
Current health expenditure Percent of G.D.P.	4.24	9.06
Freedom Index Higher score is better	56.5	87.6

Sources: Top 10 most and least religious countries from WIN/Gallup International End of Year Survey 2017. These questions were asked in 68 countries. Other data from International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Development Program, Human Development Reports and U.S. Census Bureau’s 2017 estimates.

THE WASHINGTON POST

“[Attorney General William] Barr’s simplistic idea that the country is better off if it is more religious is based on faith, not evidence.

— Max Boot

mean 12 years of schooling per capita vs. 7.5 years in the most religious countries. Income inequality is 24 percent lower in the least religious countries, and gender inequality (as measured by the World Bank) is more than 400 percent lower. Finally, the least religious countries are freer, with an average score of 87.6 from Freedom House, compared to 56.5 for the most religious countries.

Gallup notes that “levels of religiosity diminish as income and education levels of the interviewees increase.” Put another way: Declining religiosity is not the result of a leftist plot. Capitalism has done more than the Supreme Court to break down traditional beliefs.

The United States is unusual not because religious observance has declined over the years but because it remains much higher than expected. A 2018 Pew Research Center survey found that 55 percent of American adults say they pray daily, compared with only 22 percent of Europeans. U.S. church attendance is down from its peak in 1960 but about

the same level as in 1940. Pew concluded that “the U.S. is the only country out of 102 examined in the study that has higher-than-average levels of both prayer and wealth.” But, perversely, the United States does worse in critical areas — such as the rate of homicides by firearms and the rate of children living in single-parent households — than Western nations that are less religious. How does Barr explain this if he thinks religion is a social elixir?

Fundamentalists may be unhappy that religious observance has declined over the decades, but the data shows that, by most measurements, life has gotten much better for most people. There is little evidence that a decline in religiosity leads to a decline in society — or that high levels of religiosity strengthen society. (Remember, Rome fell after it converted to Christianity.) If anything, the evidence suggests that too much religion is bad for a country.

Max Boot is a Washington Post columnist, the Jeane J. Kirkpatrick senior fellow for national security studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and a global affairs analyst for CNN.

Puerto Rico

Continued from page 1

the complaint alleges she developed the school prayer practice at issue.

According to the filed complaint, while dropping off her children at school on Sept. 3, 2019, the mother observed staff collecting all students in the school’s front yard in order to participate in a Christian prayer. The initial part of the prayer was conveyed by a schoolteacher with use of a microphone and speakers. Upon observing this prayer, the mother immediately confronted the first available school official, who was also taking part in the prayer, to protest and to request that her children be exempted from participating.

A school official informed the mother that participation in the school-led prayer was mandatory for all students. The mother subsequently requested an urgent meeting with the school principal, but this still hasn’t taken place. The mother next discussed the school prayer incident with her child’s homeroom teacher and the school social worker, who suggested that

the mother could request that her children be exempted from participation in future prayers. However, the teacher subsequently informed the mother that if her children, both excellent students, did not participate in the prayers, marks would be made in their student records indicating that they had cut class.

Since last September, staff-led prayers have taken place regularly at the school on alternating Mondays, starting at approximately 9 a.m. and lasting for approximately 50 minutes. Every prayer delivered during these school prayer sessions has been a Christian prayer. In an effort to avoid these prayers, the mother has brought her children in late on these days. Teachers for both the students have threatened to punish the children for unexcused absences or for being tardy as a result of the mother’s efforts to avoid the school-led prayers.

Moreover, Doe 2’s teacher publicly outed the family as non-Christian to the

father of one of Doe 2’s classmates, whose son told Doe 2 that, “If you believe in God, you go to Heaven, if you don’t believe in God, like your mother, you will go to Hell.”

The plaintiffs are seeking an injunction prohibiting the defendants from continuing to coerce student participation in school-led prayer, as well as a declaration that the defendants’ conduct violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and the free exercise rights of the individual plaintiffs.

“We look forward to ending these egregious practices and upholding the right of this American family to a public education free from religious indoctrination and divisiveness,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

FFRF Attorneys Samuel Grover and Madeline Ziegler are representing the Freedom From Religion Foundation, while local counsel Carlos A. Cintron Garcia is representing the Humanistas Seculares De Puerto Rico.

Pensacola

Continued from page 1

cross unconstitutionally entangled the government with the Christian faith. Both the district judge and the appeals court panel grudgingly ruled in FFRF’s favor. The city petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn the ruling. The Supreme Court waited until after ruling in *Bladensburg* to remand it to the 11th Circuit for reconsideration in light of that ruling.

This ruling said: “Removal of the Bayview Park cross at this point . . . could well, in the Supreme Court’s words, ‘strike many as aggressively hostile to religion.’”

“It is not ‘hostile to religion’ to uphold government neutrality over religion. Bayview Park is not a Christian park, Pensacola is not a Christian city and the United States is not a Christian nation,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Tax-exempt church property abounds where this cross belongs.”

HEADS UP

A Poetry Column By Philip Appleman

Creation

for the discoverer of the Grotte de Lascaux:
Marcel Ravidat, 1923–1995

On all the living walls
of this dim cave,
soot and ochre, acts of will,
come down to us to say:

This is who we were.
We foraged here in an age of ice,
and, warmed by the fur of wolves,
felt the pride of predators
going for game.
Here we painted the strength of bulls,
the grace of deer, turned life into art,
and left this testimony on our walls.
Explorers of the future, see how,
when our dreams reach forward,
your wonder reaches back, and we embrace.
When we are long since dust,
and false prophets come,
then don't forget that *we* were your creators.
So build your days
on what you know is real, and remember
that nothing will keep your lives alive
but art—the black and ochre visions
you draw inside your cave
will honor your lost tribe,
when explorers in some far future
marvel at the paintings on *your* walls

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*.

Chapter president ran Montessori school

Name: Aleta Ledendecker.

Where and when I was born: I was born in Baltimore in 1951 (but you shouldn't be asking a “lady”!) I now live just outside Knoxville, Tenn., where we polish the buckle of the Bible Belt without even trying.

Family: I've been married for over 50 years to my best friend, Carl. We have a wonderful freethinking daughter, plus three grandchildren. We bought a copy of *Women Without Superstition* as a college graduation gift for our daughter when we first met Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor in Cincinnati (a long time ago). Annie Laurie inscribed it: “To Meagan, the pagan.”

Education: I have a master's degree in education, plus training as a Montessori teacher for early childhood and elementary levels. Despite all that formal education, I discovered that I learned far more during my teaching years than I did when I was the student.

Occupation: Carl and I ran a small private Montessori school until we retired about five years ago. That necessitated our being “in the closet” about our atheism. Carl always joked that the door was open if anyone wanted to look. In addition to teaching children, I was a Montessori teacher trainer and the director of Montessori Educators International, Inc. I still continue to teach graduate classes in Montessori philosophy for William Howard Taft University.

How I got where I am today: One day at a time. More seriously, I found myself in the right place at the right time in so many ways. I consider myself very fortunate to have lived the kind of life I have had and to have been as successful as I have been.

Where I'm headed: Into the future.

Person in history I admire and why: Stephen Hawking. Despite overwhelming health issues, he lived his life on his terms and made a huge contribution to the world of science.

A quotation I like: “It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more



Aleta Ledendecker, shown wearing one of FFRF's “Ask an Atheist” T-shirts, is president of the FFRF East Tennessee chapter.

than our abilities.” J.K. Rowling, as spoken through the voice of Dumbledore.

Things I like: Traveling and the ocean (preferably fitting in both at the same time.)

Things I smite: Project Blitz, especially how it brings religion into public education.

My doubts about religion started: When I was in grade school. The idea of a god watching all the kids in the world do unimportant forbidden stuff was hard to comprehend.

Before I die: I want to make the world a better place in whatever ways I can.

Ways I promote freethought: I am active in numerous freethought groups in the Knoxville area and throughout Tennessee. I am also the head of our local chapter of FFRF. When separation of state and church issues arise in our area, I am willing to be the voice for those who cannot speak out for fear of reprisal.

What has been your most difficult challenge?: I contracted Lyme disease in 2012. It took several years of intense treatment to regain my quality of life and be able to function fully again. I must continue to be vigilant about my health to keep it from returning. But I praise modern medicine and antibiotics (not god), without which I might not be here today.



Aleta Ledendecker

MEET A MEMBER

FFRF thanks 23 new Life Members

FFRF welcomes and thanks its 23 new Lifetime Members, one new After-Life member, one new Beyond After-Life member and four Immortals.

The new Beyond After-Life member is Randy B. Bachman and the After-Life Member is Harold “Hal” Saferstein. Beyond After-Life is a tongue-in-cheek-named membership category of \$10,000 for those who want their donation to “live on” after them. After-Life is a \$5,000 membership category.

The newest \$1,000 Lifetime Members are Mark Benussi, William Blancato, Linda Blight, John Bouvier, David Burkhart, Jeanette Carter, Brian J. Freeman, Dr. Donald M. Hayes, Jose I. Hernandez, Thomas A. Kent, Valerie G. Lacey, Leo Luzcando, Cassidy Maxson-Jones (gifted by Gerald C. Cummings), Janet Nye, Alap Patel, Jack Sunday, Bert Van Gorder, Barbara Walden, Gary G. Welch, David Williamson, Jocelyn Williamson, George

Bradley Wolbert and one who wishes to remain anonymous.

The four Immortals are Astrid Falkenberg, Dan Fregin, Donato Lindi and Rick Stravinsky. Immortal is a category where a member has made arrangements in their estate planning to include FFRF.

States represented are: California, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas and Wisconsin.

RECRUIT A MEMBER

Sample copies for \$2

Send \$2 with the name and address of each person you wish to receive a sample copy of Freethought Today to:

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Please send us only names
of likely supporters

Freedom depends upon freethinkers

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A weekly half-hour TV talk show produced by FFRF

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

Watch our show
every Sunday!



Photo by Chris Line

Visit FFRF's YouTube Channel
to watch the shows.



Freethought Matters TV talk show airs in:

Chicago	WPWR-CW	(Ch. 50)	9 am
Denver	KWGN-CW	(Ch. 2)	7 am
Houston	KUBE-IND	(Ch. 57)	9 am
Los Angeles	KCOP-MY	(Ch. 13)	8:30 am
Madison, Wis.	WISC-TV	(Ch. 3)	11 pm
Minneapolis	KSTC-IND	(Ch. 45)	9 am
New York City	WPIX-IND	(Ch. 11)	8 am
Phoenix	KASW-CW	(Ch. 61)	8:30 am (Ch. 61 or 6 or 1006 for HD)
Portland, Ore.	KRCW-CW	(Ch. 32)	9 am (703 on Comcast for HD or Ch. 3)
Sacramento	KQCA-MY	(Ch. 58)	8:30 am
Seattle	KONG-IND	(Ch. 16)	8 am (Ch. 16 or Ch. 106 on Comcast)
Washington, D.C.	WDCW-CW	(Ch. 50)	8 am

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

Religion in the time of coronavirus

By PJ Slinger

While the coronavirus pandemic has affected everyone in some way, it's interesting to look at how religious institutions are dealing with it. While there have been some logical responses, there is certainly no shortage of irony to go around.

Perhaps the most ironic case is straight from Our Lady of Lourdes, the French shrine that features the "healing pools," in which sick pilgrims bathe and hope for healing. The shrine's pools have been closed temporarily because of coronavirus fears. It appears the shrine's higher-ups are flat-out admitting that the healing pools do not work as advertised.

And, Bethel Church, a prominent faith-healing megachurch in Northern California, has ceased its hospital visits in order to protect the faith-healers from the coronavirus.

"Though we believe in a God who actively heals today, students are not being encouraged to visit healthcare settings at this time," Aaron Tesauo, a church spokesman, said, according to Robyn Pennacchia of the Wonkette.

"So, with all of this, with the fact that they're basically now admitting that they can't magically heal coronavirus . . . will Bethel be ceasing its faith-healing practices?," Pennacchia writes. "Probably not, because that's where all the money is."

And then, of course, you have the preachers and ministers who make outlandish claims.

Pastor Brian Tamaki, New Zealand's popular Destiny Church leader, says the coronavirus pandemic is a sign the world has "strayed from God," but that those who continue to tithe will be protected.

"The prince of the power of the air, Satan, has control of atmospheres unless you're a blood-bought born-again, Jesus-loving, bible-believing, Holy Ghost-filled, tithe-paying believer," he said in a sermon. "You are the only one that can



walk through atmospheres and has a, literally a protection — the Psalm 91 protection policy around you."

Of course, a pandemic wouldn't be a pandemic without some religionists blaming it on the gays.

Pastor Steven Andrew of the USA Christian Church claims that the coronavirus is punishment for "LGBT sin."

"God's love shows it is urgent to repent, because the bible teaches homosexuals lose their souls and God destroys LGBT societies. Obeying God protects the USA from diseases, such as the coronavirus," Andrew wrote in a press release. "Our safety is at stake, since national disobedience of God's laws brings danger and diseases, such as coronavirus, but obeying God brings covenant protection."

Rabbi Meir Mazuz, an Orthodox Israeli rabbi, blames the coronavirus on the existence of gay pride parades. At a talk, Mazuz said a pride parade is "a parade against nature, and when someone goes against

nature, the one who created nature takes revenge on him."

Christian evangelical pastor Rick Wiles claims the coronavirus is God's "death angel" seeking justice for those "transgendering little children," according to an article in the New York Post.

"God is about to purge a lot of sin off of this planet," Wiles said. "Look at the United States, look at the spiritual rebellion in this country — the hatred of God, the hatred of the bible, the hatred of righteousness. There are vile, disgusting people in this country now."

And, of course, there are the preachers who say the pandemic takes political sides.

Televangelist Jonathan Shuttlesworth claims God will spare conservative red states from the coronavirus, but will use the pandemic to punish pro-choice blue states that favor abortion rights. He also claimed that "America will be minimally affected" by the global coronavirus outbreak because of President Trump's sup-

port for Israel, according to a report by Right Wing Watch.

Hemant Mehta writes on his "Friendly Atheist" blog about the Church of Cyprus, an independent Greek Orthodox church, and how it will continue to serve wafers and wine during communion. "They're not afraid because they insist God would never let the virus transmit that way," Mehta writes.

"Regarding the offering of the Holy Communion, the position of the Church is known," the Orthodox Times said in a statement. "The Holy Communion does not symbolize but it is the body and blood of Christ. It would be blasphemous to think that Christ's body and blood could transmit any disease or virus."

Monsignor Charles Pope, the pastor of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian Church in Washington, D.C., writing in the National Catholic Register, is not happy that churches have been canceling Mass because of the pandemic.

"Physical health has its place, but spiritual health does too — and its place is vastly more important. . . I am concerned that we have lost our courage and our faith and subordinated holy things to the state in this matter."

In New York, state Attorney General Letitia James demanded that televangelist Jim Bakker stop selling his "Silver Solution," which he claimed was a cure for coronavirus. Bakker said the product is "almost like a miracle" and that "God created it in Heaven."

The Vatican suspended a clerical sex abuse fact-finding mission to Mexico, saying it was due to the coronavirus. Abuse survivors said they doubted that the virus was the actual reason for the mission being called off, according to a report in the San Francisco Chronicle.

Mattia Ferraresi, writing in The New York Times, sums it up nicely in her column, "God vs. coronavirus."

"Holy water is not a hand sanitizer and prayer is not a vaccine," Ferraresi writes.

FFRF announces its essay contests for 2020

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has announced its four 2020 essay competitions for freethinking students — offering more than \$60,000 in total scholarships.

Each of the four contests has 10 prizes: First place — \$3,500; second place — \$3,000; third place — \$2,500; fourth place — \$2,000; fifth place — \$1,500; sixth place — \$1,000; seventh place — \$750; eighth place — \$500; ninth place — \$400; and 10th place — \$300. FFRF also offers optional honorable mentions of \$200. To encourage student activism, Florida FFRF members Dean and Dorea Schramm are providing a \$100 bonus to any winner who's a secular student club member.

The contests cater to students in different age/class ranges.

William J. Schulz Memorial Essay Contest for College-Bound High School Seniors: High school seniors graduating this spring and attending college in the fall are asked to write about: "Why I'm an unabashed atheist/agnostic/choose your favorite appellation." Write a persuasive, personal ("first person") essay about why you reject religion and think others would be better off doing so too. You may wish to include experiences or challenges you have faced as a young freethinker. Word limit: 300–350 words. Deadline: June 1.



Michael Hakeem Memorial Essay Contest for Freethinking College Students: Currently enrolled college students (up to age 24) may write on: "The Necessity of Freethought — Why I Am Not Religious." Although we are asking for a personal essay (written in "first person") about why you reject religion, you may also wish to approach this from a philosophical or social science point of view. You may additionally include personal experiences or challenges you have faced as a young freethinker (atheist, agnostic). Word limit: 450–650. Deadline: July 1.

The David Hudak Memorial Contest for College Students of Color: Students of color ages 17–21 (college-bound high school seniors to currently enrolled college students), may write on the topic of:

"Living and Thriving Without Religion." Write a personal essay (in the "first person") about why you are not religious and its benefits. Please be sure to explain why you reject religion. You may wish to include challenges you have faced in being nonreligious. You may also wish to include recommendations on how the secular community can better engage people of color. This contest is offered to provide support and acknowledgment for freethinking students of color, as a minority within a minority. The other FFRF student contests are open to all students. Students may only enter one FFRF contest annually. Word limit: 400–600. Deadline: July 15.

Brian Bolton Essay Contest for Graduate/"Older" Students: Graduate

students (through age 30) and "older" undergrads (ages 25–30) are asked to write on the topic: "Why God has no place in political debate; the growing dangers of Christian Nationalism." In the context of this year's presidential and congressional elections, make the case for keeping "God" and religion out of the political debates, and the dangers posed when public officials pander and mix religion with government. Word limit: 550–750. Deadline: Aug. 1.

FFRF thanks Phil Zuckerman, author and professor of sociology and secular studies at Pitzer College, for suggesting the topics for the college and grad school competitions.

Additional prompts on the topics and contest rule requirements can be found at: ffrf.org/studentessay. Students are required to submit their essay via the online application, and should carefully review all contest rules. All eligible entrants will receive a digital year-long student membership in FFRF.

FFRF is appreciative of FFRF members who make the effort to contact local high schools, colleges and universities to help publicize its competitions. (See "ads" on the back inside cover of the Freethought Today wrap that may be copied or cut out and sent to your local schools.) Or pass on the link: ffrf.org/studentessay.

Don't let Trump pay back evangelicals like this

This article first appeared in The New York Times on March 6 and is reprinted with permission.

By Katherine Stewart

Many Americans know by now that when Christian nationalists talk about “religious freedom” they are really asking for the privilege to impose their religion on other people. What Americans may not yet understand is that they are also demanding money from taxpayers to do so.

Long before Donald Trump hitched his political fortunes to the Christian Right, previous Republican administrations had primed the pumps that would send public money flowing toward religious organizations.

In 2002, the George W. Bush administration increased the flow of federal money to faith-based organizations providing services on behalf of the government. Bush himself insisted that these organizations would not be permitted to discriminate. But, in fact,



Katherine Stewart

the new method of faith-based funding invited the risk of discrimination and the erosion of church-state separation.

The Obama administration, responding to these concerns, put in place provisions to ensure that members of the public were not subject to discrimination on the basis of religious belief or unwanted proselytizing. The provisions also required that users of church-sponsored social programs be made aware of nonsectarian options.

The Trump administration is now proposing to eliminate these Obama-era safeguards. And true to form, they did so earlier this year, on the increasingly Orwellian-sounding annual Religious Freedom Day in January.

One purpose of the new proposed regulations is to make sure that organizations receiving taxpayer money are exempt from the kinds of anti-discrimination law by which nonreligious organizations must abide. If that sounds like a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, that's because it is — or at least it should be.

Under the proposed regulations, faith-based aid organizations that receive public money are free to hire and fire their workers and subcontractors on account of their religion, sexual orientation, or any other behavior or characteristic that the organization finds religiously appealing or objectionable. Organizations that receive their money through vouchers and other forms of indirect aid can now proselytize, require that recipients participate in religious activities or ask that recipients pledge their loyalty to Jesus. And the government itself is no longer required to offer a nonsectarian option for those whose beliefs or conscience make it impossible for them to accept aid on these terms.

Why is the Trump administration so determined to tear down the wall of separation between church and state? The long game is clear: because that's the way you “take back America” and make it a Christian nation.



Photo by Shutterstock

But the short game is more relevant now. There is a pile of public money on the other side of the wall that separates church and state, and Christian Nationalists are determined to grab it (and to hold on to what they have already grabbed).

These kinds of pro-discrimination rules are bound to cause harm. There may be a woman who loses her job at a faith-based service provider because she is “living in sin” with her partner. There may be people seeking counseling services who will forgo the help they need because it is offered only in conservative Christian health care settings and is staffed with Christian-only providers, all of whom claim to be living in conformity with a “bible lifestyle.”

There will be some minority-religion providers — a Jewish soup kitchen here, a Muslim job-training initiative there — that will defend the new rules and claim to benefit from them. But they will serve, in effect, as strategic cover, lending the appearance of diversity to a movement that ties the idea of America to specific conservative religious and cultural identities.

Legitimizing these forms of discrimination is itself a grotesque violation of whatever it is that we actually mean by religious freedom. But that's the point, as far as Trump and his Christian Nationalist allies are concerned. The religious rights of the larger American public are collateral damage in a war of conquest aimed squarely at the public coffers.

To grasp the motivation for the Trump administration in promulgating “religious freedom,” it helps to review a little Supreme Court history. In 2017, the Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia, Mo., brought a case in which the church claimed that it had an equal claim to government grants for purchasing materials to upgrade its playground.

Lawyers from conservative Christian legal organizations, including the Alliance Defending Freedom, argued that refusing to allocate public money to religious institutions amounted to discrimination against religion. This theory, if it takes hold in law, significantly weakens the Establishment Clause. If withholding taxpayer money from religious institutions amounts to discrimination, then the taxpayer

has no choice but to fund religion.

Some important things to know about today's Christian Nationalist movement: It doesn't believe in the First Amendment as we usually understand it and as our Founders intended it. It doesn't believe that the government should make no law respecting an establishment of religion. It also takes a dim view of government assistance — unless the money passes through churches first. Politically connected religious leaders like Ralph Drollinger of Capitol Ministries, whose White House bible study has been attended by at least 10 current and former members of Trump's cabinet, maintains that social welfare programs have no basis in scripture. “The responsibility to meet the needs of the poor lies first with the husband in a marriage, secondly with the family (if the husband is absent), and thirdly with the church,” Drollinger has written. “Again, nowhere does God command the institutions of government or commerce to fully support those with genuine needs.”

These ideas are shared by David Barton, a historical revisionist who sits on the boards of an array of Christian Nationalist legislative and data initiatives, pastoral networks and other influential groups. Barton has argued that the bible and God himself oppose progressive income taxes, capital gains taxes and minimum wage laws.

While these activists rail against direct government aid to the poor, they are eager to increase the flow of government handouts to churches and religious groups who may then provide the aid themselves, but without adherence to nondiscrimination law. As a further bonus, when the money gets funneled to religious organizations, some of it then can then be pumped back into the right-wing political machine through religious organizations and the policy groups they support, which act as de facto partisan political cells.

In order to understand the game that Christian Nationalists are playing, it's important to remember that the First Amendment has two clauses concerning religion: one that guarantees the freedom to exercise religion and one that prohibits the government from establishing any religion. What the framers understood is that

these two come as a pair; they are necessarily connected. We are free to exercise religion precisely because the government refrains from establishing religion.

At present, the Christian Nationalist movement has substantial sources of support in the form of access to wealthy donors and robust donor-advised charities. It also has a large base of supporters who make large numbers of small contributions. But leaders of the movement know that their bread will have a lot more butter if it comes from the government. They already receive significant funding indirectly from taxpayers in the form of deductions and exemptions. They are determined to secure these extra funds, and they are immensely fearful of losing them, especially if a pluralistic society decides to do something about the fact that its tax dollars are being used to fund groups that actively promote discrimination against many citizens and support radical political agendas.

In the future, if the Trump administration has its way, the current flow of taxpayer money to religious organizations may well look like the trickle before the flood. Religious nationalists dream of a time when most or all social welfare services pass through the hands of religious entities. They imagine a future in which a young woman seeking advice on reproductive health care will have nowhere to turn but a state-funded, church-operated network of “counseling” centers that will tell her she will go to hell if she doesn't have the baby.

The discrimination against individuals and the misuse of public money that the Trump administration's proposed regulations would allow is bad enough. But these are far from the worst consequences of this kind of assault on the separation of church and state. The most profound danger here is to the deep structure of American society and politics.

In 1786, when Thomas Jefferson and James Madison pushed through the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom that Religious Freedom Day commemorates, the issue that motivated them and that brought evangelical Christians at the time over to their side was a detested tax imposed on all Virginians to pay for the church services demanded by the established church. “To compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical,” Jefferson wrote. “No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever.”

It is ironic, then, that the Trump administration's religious freedom initiative seeks to fund religious organizations with taxpayer money. But what makes this particularly dangerous is that the same money in many cases goes to churches and religious organizations that are increasingly and aggressively asserting themselves in partisan politics, and that happen to support Trump. As Jefferson and Madison understood, the destruction of the wall that separates church and state corrupts politics just as surely as it corrupts religion.

*Katherine Stewart is the author of **The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism**.*

IN THE NEWS

‘In God We Trust’ to be in all OK state buildings?

The Oklahoma House has backed a bill that would require hundreds of public buildings in the state to display the national motto, “In God We Trust.”

The House voted 76–20 on March 2 in favor of the bill, sending it to the Senate. House Bill 3817 would require the Office of Management and Enterprise Services to display “In God We Trust” in a prominent place in all state buildings, except for those owned by school districts.

The size and placement of the phrase would match how the motto is displayed in the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center.

The bill could cost the state an estimated \$85,000 to place the signs in 342 state buildings.

Coach loses lawsuit over praying on field

The former high school assistant football coach in Washington who sued the school district after he was ordered in 2015 to stop praying on the field after games lost his lawsuit on March 5. FFRF had written an amicus brief in the case siding with the district.

U.S. District Court Judge Ronald Leighton ruled that Joe Kennedy’s religious rights were not violated when he was coaching at Bremerton High School.

Kennedy’s attorney said he would appeal.

In 2015, the district placed Kennedy on administrative leave after he repeatedly violated the district’s directive to stop praying on the field immediately after games

Appeals court upholds rules involving abortions

A U.S. appeals court on Feb. 24 upheld Trump administration changes that include additional hurdles for those seeking abortions through a federal program that helps low-income women.

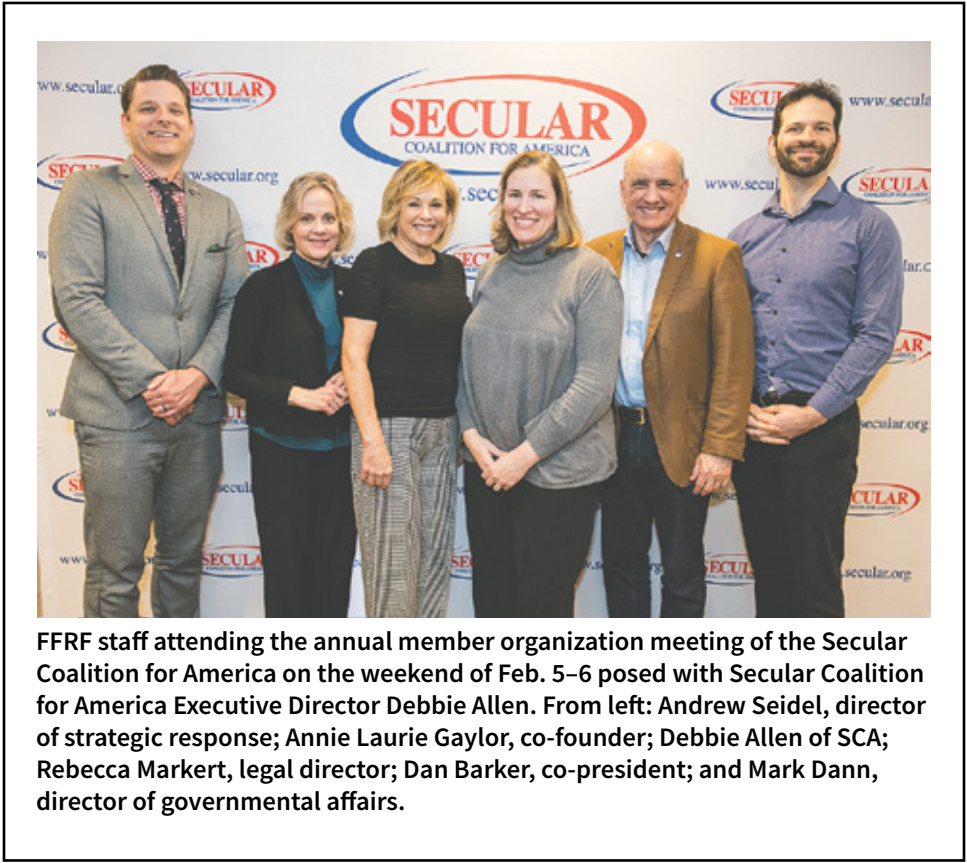
The 7–4 ruling by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals overturned decisions issued by judges in Washington, Oregon and California. The court had already allowed the administration’s changes to begin taking effect while the government appealed those rulings.

The rules ban taxpayer-funded clinics in the Title X program from making abortion referrals and prohibit clinics that receive federal money from sharing office space with abortion providers — a rule critics said would force many to find new locations, undergo expensive remodels or shut down.

More than 20 states and several civil rights and health organizations challenged the rules in cases filed in Oregon, Washington and California. Judges in all three states blocked the rules from taking effect.

Religious ‘extremists’ target pregnant women

A global network of “crisis pregnancy centers,” backed by anti-abortion groups linked to the Trump White House, has been condemned by lawmakers, doctors and rights advocates for targeting vulnerable women with “disinformation, emotional manipula-



FFRF staff attending the annual member organization meeting of the Secular Coalition for America on the weekend of Feb. 5–6 posed with Secular Coalition for America Executive Director Debbie Allen. From left: Andrew Seidel, director of strategic response; Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-founder; Debbie Allen of SCA; Rebecca Markert, legal director; Dan Barker, co-president; and Mark Dann, director of governmental affairs.

tion and outright deceit,” according to a report by openDemocracy.

There are thousands of these centers in the United States and many have been criticized for posing as neutral health facilities for women while hiding their anti-abortion and religious agendas.

In its investigation, openDemocracy sent undercover reporters posing as vulnerable women with unwanted pregnancies to centers affiliated with Heartbeat International in 18 countries. It found that women were falsely told abortion increases risks of cancer and mental illness; that a woman needs consent from a partner to access abortion; and that hospitals will refuse to treat medical complications from abortion.

Heartbeat International has close ties to the White House. Vice President Pence has spoken at its events and President Trump applauded a 2018 Supreme Court decision in favor of crisis pregnancy centers.

Blasphemy resolution passes House committee

A bipartisan resolution calling for the worldwide repeal of blasphemy laws unanimously passed the House Foreign Affairs Committee on March 4.

Res. 512 calls for the Department of State to work toward the global repeal of criminal laws against blasphemy, apostasy and heresy.

The bill was introduced on July 23, 2019, by Rep. Jamie Raskin, co-founder of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, along with Rep. Mark Meadows.

Poll: Dem candidates not seen as very religious

Americans don’t consider the Democratic candidates to be particularly religious, according to a Pew Research Center survey that asked about four candidates (prior to Pete Buttigieg dropping out of the race): Joe Biden, Buttigieg, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren.

Sanders is described as “not too” or “not at all” religious by 60 percent, while a third of respondents say Sanders is at least “somewhat” religious.

Biden is the only candidate who is considered at least “somewhat” reli-

gious by more than half of U.S. adults (55 percent), though only 9 percent describe him as “very” religious.

Opinions about all four candidates are divided along party lines: Respondents who identify as Democrats or say they lean toward the Democratic Party are much more likely than Republicans and GOP leaners to say that Biden, Buttigieg, Sanders or Warren are at least somewhat religious.

While some Democrats are highly religious — especially black and Hispanic Democrats — the party has become increasingly unaffiliated in recent years. The share of Democrats and Democratic leaners who identify as Christian declined by 17 percentage points between 2009 and 2019 (from 72 percent to 55 percent), while the share who are religiously unaffiliated jumped by 14 points, from 20 percent to 34 percent.

Bible bill heads to W.Va. governor’s desk

The West Virginia state Senate passed and sent to Gov. Jim Justice a bill clarifying that county school boards may offer elective courses on the bible.

HB 4780 passed March 4 30–3–1, but not before warnings about the constitutionality of the bill.

“I’ll bet you a Holy Rosary that this is going to be declared unconstitutional,” said Sen. Mike Woelfel, moments before he reluctantly voted for it, according to MetroNews.

Sen. Patricia Rucker defended the bill when asked if it had provisions for other sacred texts to be studied.

“No, it does not,” Rucker responded. “It says Hebrew Scriptures, Old Testament or New Testament.”

Rolls-Royce and \$112K? You can meet the pope

According to a Rolls Royce app, if you own a new Rolls Royce and have \$112,000 to donate to the Catholic Church, you can have a private audience and Mass with the pope, the Religion News Service reports.

The Whispers app, which was unveiled in February and is only available to owners of new Rolls-Royce cars, features “an offer that promises a one-hour private audience and Mass with the

pope, followed by an ‘exclusive’ tour of the Vatican and other sites around Rome,” according to screenshots from the app that a Religion News Service reporter viewed.

Applicants are also told that a minimum “fully deductible” donation to the Catholic Church of 100,000 euro (about \$112,000) is requested and will be “hand delivered to the pope himself.”

Study: Just 1 in 4 now a practicing Christian

Christianity in the United States has undergone dramatic change in the last few decades, with the number of practicing Christians now only about half as common as in 2000.

The Barna Group, which has survey data over several decades, found that currently, just one in four Americans is a practicing Christian. A practicing Christian is identified as a Christian who says that faith is very important in their lives and who has attended church within the past month.

In 2000, 45 percent of all those sampled qualified as practicing Christians. That share has consistently declined in the past 20 years, and now is at 25 percent.

Trump has stacked courts with arch-conservatives

The New York Times published an analysis of the more than 185 federal judgeships so far appointed during the Trump administration. These lifetime appointments include 51 to appeals courts, who now make up a quarter of the entire appellate bench. Trump has made these appointments in only three years, contrasting with the total of 50 appeals court judges confirmed under the Obama administration in eight years.

The stacking of the appeals court with arch-conservative appointments is very significant, because, in the words of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, “the court of appeals is where policy is made.”

“Perhaps most telling,” the Times reports, “all but eight of the new judges have had ties to the Federalist Society.” Senator Dianne Feinstein of California, the ranking Democrat on the Judiciary Committee, has called Trump’s appellate nominees “far outside the judicial mainstream.”

Christian poll didn’t get results it wanted

After getting results diametrically opposed to what it assumed it would get, the National Association of Christian Lawmakers blamed Satanists and atheists for the results.

The poll, sponsored by their own organization, showed 95.8 percent of the 16,000 respondents do not want to see Christians hold more elected offices.

“View the comments on this thread to see what religious persecution and anti-Christian bigotry looks like in America,” it said on the group’s Twitter page. “Satanists and atheists piled on this poll and have begun leaving vile messages as well.”

The organization was founded by Arkansas state Sen. Jason Rapert, who earlier claimed Christianity is in decline and warned of “the rise of the occult in our nation.”

FFRF’s Reagan ad gets plaudits on Twitter

FFRF’s “unabashed atheist” commercial with Ron Reagan that ran twice during the March 15 Democratic debate between Joe Biden and Sen. Bernie Sanders on CNN had Twitter all atwitter. Kathy Griffin, the actress with more than 2 million followers on Twitter, remarked, “Gets me every time. [Reagan]’s so smart and legit funny.” Reagan says in the ad: “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.” CBS, NBC, ABC and Discovery Science networks have refused the ad since 2014, but it has previously run periodically on CNN, Comedy Central and Rachel Maddow’s show on MSNBC. FFRF thanks members who have donated to FFRF’s Advertising Fund for making possible this major campaign. Below is a small sampling of other reactions on Twitter to FFRF’s ad.



Kathy Griffin @kathygriffin · 9h
Get me every time. He’s so smart and legit funny. I mean, I know Chris Matthews is retired but I always love watching Ron Reagan as a guest on Hardball. Ron always knew how to bob and weave in a quad split or kill it in a one on one.



Santiago Mayer @santiagomayer_ · 15h
My favorite part of watching the debates is watching the Ron Reagan ads.
“Lifelong atheist, not afraid of burning in hell” is going on my tombstone.



Robyn Pennacchia @RobynElyse · 15h
I will never get sick of this **Ron Reagan** commercial.

33 100 1.3K



Superior Seaman @SeamanSuperior · 16h
The ad with **Ron Reagan** kicked ass

6



Tyler Conway @jtylerconway
My favorite part of all these debates is a dude named **Ron Reagan** coming up on my screen and saying he’s not afraid of burning in hell
An absolute legend

2,209 8:33 PM - Mar 15, 2020



Trevor @trevdiggitydawg · 16h
Watching the **Ron Reagan** commercial during every debate is like watching It’s A Wonderful Life every christmas eve #DemDebate

1 3 15



Erik Otto @monolithicbmx · 16h
Ron Reagan Jr with the quote of the night. #NotAfraidofHell #DemocraticDebate

Your weekly antidote to the Religious Right

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FFRF.ORG

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

Media and Christian Nationalism



FFRF’s Director of Strategic Response Andrew Seidel discussed his debut book *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism is Un-American* on Feb. 26 in Los Angeles. Sponsored by the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, and co-sponsored by the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, Seidel’s presentation touched on how the media cover Christian Nationalism.

Project Blitz stands defeated on East Coast

As legislative sessions across the country came to a close, FFRF celebrates the defeat of several Christian Nationalist bills.

In Florida, H.B. 341 and its Senate counterpart, S.B. 746, both died, ensuring that public schools will not be forced to offer bible classes. H.B. 7103, a proposal that would have permitted prayer over the loudspeaker at state-sponsored athletic competitions, has also died.

Meanwhile, a similarly problematic bill has been defeated in New Hampshire. H.B. 1148 sought to place the theocratic motto “In God We Trust” in public schools. This is similar to other “In God We Trust” bills that have popped up in states across the country over the past year.

While politicians claim that these laws are intended to showcase the national motto or inspire patriotism, it is clear that their true purpose is to peddle religiosity to a captive audience. These laws are about advancing the Big Lie that the United States was “founded on God” or Christianity, dismantling the wall of separation between religion and government. It is a victory for state/church separation and our secular education system that New Hampshire students will not be subject to this religious pandering.

Florida’s bible class bill and New Hampshire’s “In God We Trust” bill



“These laws are about advancing the Big Lie that the United States was “founded on God” or Christianity, dismantling the wall of separation between religion and government.

were both the creation of the Christian Nationalist legislative push called Project Blitz. It seeks to inject state legislatures with a whole host of religious bills, imposing the theocratic version of a powerful few on We The People. Their proposals signal an unvarnished attack on American secularism and civil liberties — those things we cherish most about our democracy and now must tirelessly defend.

FFRF members and supporters in New Hampshire and Florida sent hundreds of messages to their lawmakers urging them to oppose these Project Blitz bills and defend the secular institutions in their state. FFRF will continue to call out these sinister legislative agendas for what they are — a calculated, discriminatory Christian Nationalist push fundamentally at odds with the principle of religious liberty for all Americans.

FFRF stops public prayers all over country

By Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey

From Virginia to Louisiana to Arizona and Utah and numerous points in between, FFRF has ended public prayers by school or city officials. Here’s a rundown of the most recent prayer cases FFRF has been successful in stopping.

Arizona

Yuma Union High School District has taken exemplary action to address a state/church violation in its school.

A Kofa High School student contacted FFRF to report that the 2019 Kofa High School graduation ceremony included an invocation. This invocation was scheduled in advance by the school and listed in the graduation program.

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian wrote to Superintendent Gina Thompson, asking that the district take action to ensure that religious rituals are not part of graduation ceremonies or any other school-sponsored events. Thompson sent a very positive letter of response to FFRF outlining the district’s commitment to remedying this violation.

“First, I will meet with individual employees who may have been responsible for the inclusion of an invocation in the Kofa High School graduation ceremony to educate them about the importance of separating church and state and preventing school sponsored prayer in school activities,” Thompson wrote. “Second, I will be distributing a statement of policy to all district employees, which will refer in part to the prohibition of the use of district resources for the promotion of religion in school activities. Third, we plan to add a component to our training for new employees reminding them of the importance of separating religious matters from state public school functions.”

Arkansas

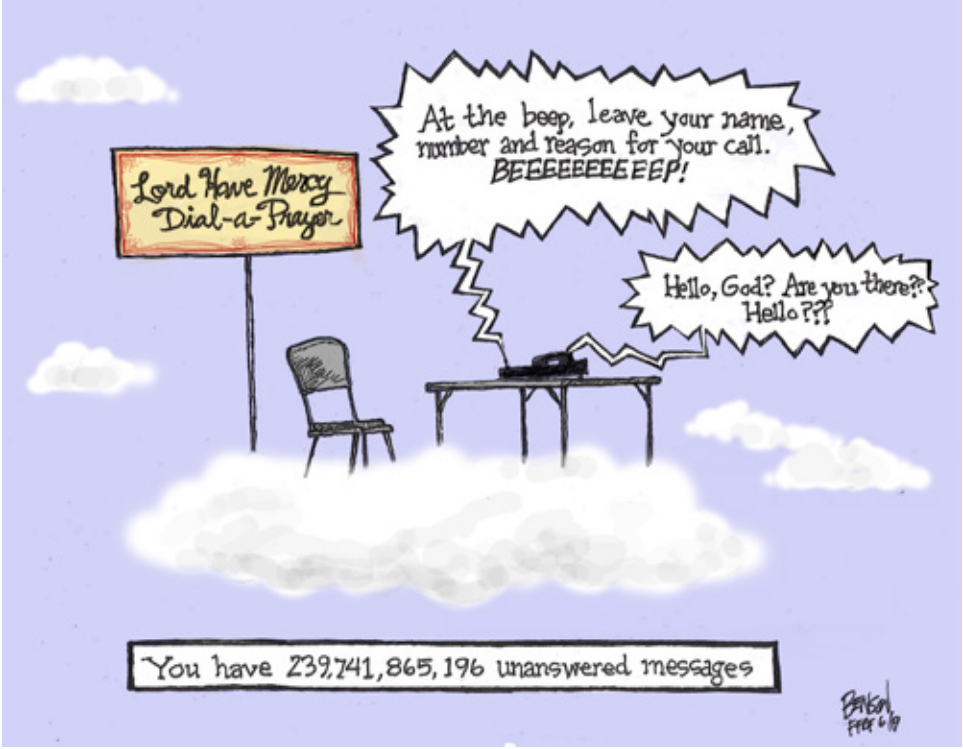
The Springdale School District has committed to working with local partners to ensure that community events are not promoting religion.

A district staff member informed FFRF that each year the district requires staff members to attend a back-to-school event sponsored by local businesses and held on school property. This event apparently begins annually with an invocation given in the name of Jesus and including proclamations exclusive to Christianity.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Jim Rollins, asking the district to ensure that future events do not unconstitutionally endorse religion. Rollins said in a letter of response that the district has discussed FFRF’s concerns with Chamber of Commerce staff and “will continue to work with them to ensure that Chamber of Commerce-sponsored district staff meetings are both inclusive and constitutional.”

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.



Illinois

Washington Park School District has taken steps to make sure that school-sponsored events no longer start with prayer.

A local resident alerted FFRF that multiple recent Washington Park District-sponsored events had begun with prayer. According to the complainant, the district promotes, schedules and staffs local monthly lunch events for seniors at Five Points, a facility operated jointly by several local government agencies, including the Washington Park District. FFRF was informed that the Park District partners with local senior living facilities and other similar organizations to provide food for the events. At least some of the organizations that the district have partnered with to provide food for these events have taken advantage of this partnership to pray over attendees. On at least one occasion an attendee who protested was told they would either sit down and be quiet during the prayer or leave the event.

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian wrote Washington Park District Executive Director Brian Tibbs, asking that the district refrain from partnering with organizations that will use their status as co-hosts of a government-sponsored event to require attendees to sit through their prayers.

Tibbs informed FFRF via email that the district has “taken the necessary steps to make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

Louisiana

Lafayette School District administrators have been reminded of district legal policies governing religion in schools after a student was scheduled to lead an invocation.

A district member reported to FFRF that Broussard Middle School scheduled a student to lead an invocation at its end-of-the-year ceremony. This student was apparently listed as the “master of ceremonies” on the event program and delivered a prayer that was Christian in nature, directed to “God” and ending with “Amen.”

FFRF Associate Counsel Sam Grover wrote to the Interim Superintendent Irma Trosclair, urging the district to discontinue scheduling religious invocations at any future school-sponsored events.

The district’s Chief Administrative Officer Jennifer W. Gardner sent a letter of response to FFRF with assurances that the district has taken action to address the complaints.

Texas

Prayers before the annual homecoming parade have been stopped in the Conroe School District.

A Conroe community member reported that last year’s homecoming parade began with a prayer being read over the loudspeaker in Moorhead Stadium. This prayer was reportedly overtly Christian as it involved multiple invocations of the Lord. Some students were apparently required to attend this event.

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to the district’s general counsel and reminded the district that prayer at school-sponsored events is against the law. In a letter of response, the school’s attorney assured FFRF that it will forgo prayer at future parades, which historically had been held off campus by the parent booster club.

“Next year there will be no prayer at the Homecoming Parade, regardless of whether it occurs on or off school property,” the letter says. “If the booster club wants to solemnize the event, they can begin the event with a moment of silence.”

...
The San Antonio International Airport has removed scheduled prayer from its volunteer event schedules.

A member of the airport’s Ambassador Program reported to FFRF that Christian prayer had continually preceded volunteer appreciation luncheons at the airport. The airport apparently regularly scheduled an invocation before these luncheons began. On at least one occasion, this was reportedly led by a Catholic priest who gave a prayer and requested a response from attendees.

FFRF Associate Counsel Sam Grover wrote to the program’s coordinator, pointing out that these prayers unfairly alienated non-Christian and nonreligious volunteers and urged the program to continue without such prayers in the future.

Chief Customer Experience Officer Karen W. Ellis responded to FFRF’s complaint with assurances that scheduled prayer had been canceled and would not occur in the future.

Utah

Prayers at public works employee meetings in the city of Provo have been stopped.

A city employee alerted FFRF that government meetings routinely featured a prayer before meals, always on city property and always at the request of management, who are all Mormons.

FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote to Provo City Attorney Robert West, urging the city to discontinue the practice of impermissibly subjecting employees to prayer at government meetings. West informed FFRF that these prayers will stop.

“Having had your complainant’s concerns called to his attention, the director does not want your complainant to feel unwelcome at department lunches and has decided not to make prayer at these lunches a routine practice,” West wrote in a letter of response.

Virginia

A high school in the Wythe County Public School District in Max Meadows has removed a large prayer display from its lunchroom.

A concerned community member reported that Fort Chiswell High School was displaying a religious prayer on a large placard in its cafeteria that read: “Our Father: We thank thee for this food. Bless it to the nourishment of our bodies and our lives to thy service. Amen.”

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Wythe County Public Schools Superintendent Scott Jeffries, urging him to remove this sign. The school’s general counsel informed FFRF the placard had been removed in response to the complaint.

West Virginia

Mineral County Schools in Ridgeley has committed to addressing complaints of coach-led prayer in the district.

A concerned district parent contacted FFRF to report that Frankfort High School Football coaches prayed with their players on the field after a game. FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Superintendent Troy Ravenscroft reminding him that this conduct is unconstitutional and that the district has an obligation to remain neutral on religion.

Ravenscroft sent a letter of response, thanking FFRF for informing him of this violation and alerting FFRF that the district views this “as an opportunity to work with staff and athletic coaches on observing and upholding the First Amendment, its boundaries and its requirements.”

...
Prayer before government-sponsored training sessions has been stopped in Martinsburg.

A local community member reported that the poll worker training class led by Berkeley County Council began with the Lord’s Prayer. FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson alerted Doug Copenhaver, the council’s president, of this unconstitutional government-endorsed prayer.

Copenhaver informed FFRF in a letter of response that the council was unaware this meeting began with prayer, but has since dealt with the issue.

FFRF VICTORIES

By Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey

Arkansas

Bible-distributing Gideons will no longer be allowed in Mountain View School District schools.

A concerned parent reported to FFRF that members of Gideons International were allowed into Mountain View Middle School to pass out bibles to students during class. FFRF’s complainant reported that their child’s teacher welcomed the Gideons into the class, thanked them for being there, and took a bible before letting them distribute bibles to students. The complainant’s child reportedly felt very uncomfortable and felt pressured to take a bible because everyone else in the class did.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Brent Howard informing him that it is unconstitutional for school districts to permit the Gideon Society to distribute bibles as part of the public school day. Howard responded to FFRF’s letter by email, informing FFRF that the district’s attorney was made aware of the issue and the matter has been handled.

California

An annual winter concert program in the Merced City School District will be moved to a non-church location in future years.

A district parent reported that last year, Burbank Elementary School held a Christmas concert at a nearby church. According to the parent, the church contained religious iconography including a large cross and a nativity scene, as well as a banner outside the building advertising worship services.

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian wrote to Superintendent RoseMary Parga Duran, pointing out that the use of a church for public school programming is inappropriate and unconstitutional because it sends the message of approval of the church to impressionable students.

In a response letter, the district’s attorney informed FFRF that in consideration of the complaint, the district will “seek out alternative, non-church venues to host such events in the future in order to avoid any misinterpretation that the district is endorsing or promoting any particular religion, or religion in general.”

Colorado

The Vanguard School, a charter school in the Cheyenne Mountain School District in Colorado Springs, will refrain from advertising for and affiliating itself with religious organizations in the future.

A district parent reported that each year, the school holds a “Thanksgiving Baskets” fundraiser for St. Joseph Catholic Church and a “Christmas Blessings Store” in partnership with the Calvary Baptist Church.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote a letter of complaint to the district pointing out that, while it is laudable for the district to encourage students to become active, charitable and involved in their community by volunteering and donating, the school cannot use that goal as an avenue to support churches or religious organizations.

Superintendent Walter C. Cooper sent FFRF a response letter which noted that “Vanguard understands the optics and perception that advertising the events in this manner could be con-

Speaking freely



FFRF Associate Council Sam Grover gave a talk in Las Vegas on Feb. 29 at an event called “Celebrate the First Amendment,” sponsored by the Center for Science and Wonder. The other speaker, who talked about free speech on college campuses, was Joe Cohn, the Legislative and Policy Director for FIRE, which is a group whose mission is to defend and sustain the individual rights of college students and faculty. Grover’s talk focused on current events within the freethought movement, with an emphasis on exploring why the current Christian Nationalist push to radically redefine “religious liberty” is endangering the rights of many Americans.

strued as a message of religious endorsement, and will refrain from doing so in the future.”

Florida

A religious sign has been removed from the Orange County Tax Collector’s office inside the West Oaks Mall, which was previously on display to the public.

This sign read, “Faith — it does not make things easy it makes them possible — Luke 1:37.” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line asked the county to remove this sign from county property in recognition that it represents an unconstitutional endorsement of religion over nonreligion.

Orange County Tax Collector Scott Randolph confirmed the sign was removed in response to FFRF’s complaint.

Illinois

Outside adults, including religious leaders, will no longer be allowed to attend student club meetings in Arcola School District #56.

A student contacted FFRF to report that the Arcola High School Students with a Testimony club’s Tuesday meetings were regularly attended by an outside pastor who came in to spread his religious beliefs to students, promising pizza and soda to attendees. These meetings apparently take place during the school day.

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian informed the district that public schools are not an appropriate place for outside adults to proselytize to children. FFRF asked that the district ensure this club is truly student-led, and not facilitated by religious leaders.

FFRF received a letter of response from the district, assuring that only school staff will be allowed to attend student meetings in the future, and that staff will “be present only in a non-participatory capacity.”

Indiana

A constitutionally inappropriate partnership within the Lakeland School Corporation in LaGrange will not continue.

A community member reported that Lakeland Middle School organized a field

trip to pack meals for Feed My Starving Children, an overtly Christian charitable organization. During the trip, the group’s staff asked students to pray over the meals they packed, and overtly Christian music was played over the loudspeakers for the duration of the trip.

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian alerted the district that this proselytizing partnership is not acceptable for a public school district. Lakeland Superintendent Eva G. Merkel informed FFRF via email that the district’s partnership with this Christian organization will “simply have to cease.”

Kansas

A “See You At The Pole” event will not recur in the Coffeyville Public Schools.

A concerned district staff member reported that other staff organized and endorsed a “See You at the Pole” event. The complainant reports that an email was sent from two district staff members to the rest of the staff promoting the event.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line reminded Superintendent Craig Correll that public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion. Furthermore, Line points out, it is unconstitutional for the district staff to plan, promote or participate in “See You At The Pole” events because doing so alienates non-Christian students, teachers and parents whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the school staff.

Craig informed FFRF that “this was an obvious oversight from the teacher and is against board policy.” He has notified the principal to instruct the employee that this cannot happen again in the future.

Kentucky

Religious posts have been removed from the Shelby County Sheriff’s Office official social media page.

A concerned area resident reported that a recent post on the office’s Facebook page concluded with the bible verse Galatians 6:9 — “So let’s not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time

we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don’t give up.”

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian asked the office to remove all social media posts promoting religion and refrain from uploading such posts in the future. Sheriff Mark Moore informed FFRF in a letter of response that this post has been removed.

...

Numerous religious displays have been removed from Letcher County Public Schools property after the school district received letters of complaint from FFRF.

A concerned Whitesburg resident reported to FFRF that Letcher Central High School had a bible verse on display in its locker room. The display said: “But the Lord is with me like a Mighty Warrior. Jeremiah 20:11.” FFRF wrote a letter of complaint to the district, pointing out that this display violated the constitutional principle of state/church separation.

FFRF had first contacted the district after an area resident reported multiple instances of the district promoting and endorsing religious messages. The complainant reported that Fleming Neon Middle School had a display in its hallway that said, “Jesus is my savior. You can’t scare me!” and that Martha Jane Potter Elementary School posted a prayer on its official Facebook page.

In both letters of complaint, FFRF asked the district to remove all religious messaging and iconography from public school property in recognition of its constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion.

Letcher County School District has removed each of these religious displays.

“The bulletin board has been replaced, the Facebook post has been removed, and the locker room has been repainted,” Superintendent Denise Yonts informed FFRF in a response letter.

...

Ludlow Independent Schools has deleted religious posts on its official district social media pages.

A district parent informed FFRF that a teacher at Mary A. Goetz Elementary School had been using her official position as a district employee to promote her Christian youth group to students. According to the complainant, the teacher invited students to her youth group on a daily basis, included information on the youth group in a newsletter to parents, and posted flyers promoting this group around the school. The teacher also reportedly organized a prayer walk on school property which the school promoted on its official Facebook page. The Christian youth group and the prayer walk appeared to be affiliated with a local church.

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian asked the district to make certain that none of its employees are unlawfully and inappropriately indoctrinating students in religious matters by encouraging them to pray, recruiting them for religious organizations or activities or otherwise using the district to promote religion.

In a response letter, the district’s attorney informed FFRF that the administration has addressed these matters with the teacher involved and deleted the social media posts corresponding to the event.

Maryland

Staff at Frederick County Public Schools have been reminded of district policy and their legal obligation to refrain from impermissibly endorsing religion.

A district community member informed FFRF of on-field prayer after an October football game between Walkersville High and Catoctin High and what appeared to be the coaches leading and participating in prayer.

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to the school’s attorney, informing the district that public school coaches must refrain not only from leading prayers themselves, but also from participating in students’ prayers. He urged the district to stop any and all school-sponsored prayers occurring at any district athletic programs.

The district’s attorney has directed principals and the supervisor of athletics and extracurricular activities to remind coaches that, as the board policy states, “school employees, when acting in their official capacities, are representatives of the state and are prohibited by the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment from soliciting or encouraging religious activity and from participating in such activity with students.”

Michigan

A Sparta Area Schools coach has been instructed to cease religious proselytizing to his team.

A district parent reported that a Sparta High School football coach used his position to promote a religious event to students and their families. According to the parent, this coach sent a mass Remind App message encouraging students and families to attend a worship event called “FAITH...FIGHT...FINISH!”

This event was listed as taking place at Sparta High School and organized by “The Big Idea — Sparta Elementary School.” The district’s website also had a section entitled “Sparta area churches” that lists the names, addresses, phone numbers, worship times and Sunday school times for several local Christian churches.

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian informed Superintendent Pete Bush that the district cannot allow its schools to be used as recruiting grounds for churches.

Bush informed FFRF in a phone call that the football coach has been instructed to refrain from promoting religion and that the church directory on the school’s website was removed.

Missouri

FFRF has prompted Hogan Preparatory Academy in Kansas City to address complaints of a teacher handing out rosaries as “prizes” to students.

A concerned Hogan Academy parent reported to FFRF that, after handing out rosaries, this teacher told students that, if they carry the rosary, nothing bad will ever happen to them. He also reportedly told students a story about two students who were shot while walking home from school. The student not wearing a rosary was killed, while the students who had a rosary survived. Our complainant also reports that he told students that he is followed by “spirits,” and that he has a device that will beep when spirits are near.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Jayson Strickland that he should no longer be allowed to distribute religious items or promote his personal religious beliefs to students.

Strickland sent a letter of response, assuring FFRF that the issue has been addressed.

...

FFRF scored a constitutional win against the Missouri attorney general after a school district ignored his advice



About 150 people showed up to hear FFRF Co-President Dan Barker speak about “The Battle of Church and State” for Houston Oasis on Jan. 26. Pictured, from left, are: Wil Jeudy, Veeral, Laura Whittenton and Dan Barker.

about football team prayers.

FFRF had sent a letter in October to Cameron R-1 School District Superintendent Matt Robinson about Cameron High School’s head football coach, Jeff Wallace, and assistant coach, David Stucky, holding religious “chapel” services for players before and after football games. The coaches prayed with players and read and discussed bible verses.

In reaction to FFRF’s complaint, Attorney General Eric Schmitt dispatched a missive to the district urging it to disregard FFRF’s concerns and mischaracterizing FFRF’s arguments, even advising the district that the coach’s actions are lawful.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line urged Cameron R-1 School District to take immediate action to stop school-sponsored prayers or religious worship occurring within the district’s athletic programs. The school district recently sent FFRF a note indicating that it is heeding FFRF’s counsel.

“Employees of the district were reminded of the district’s board policy regarding prayer at school or at school-sponsored events and were also instructed not to lead students in prayer, initiate a prayer with students or cause a student to initiate prayer,” stated Robinson. “This matter has therefore been resolved.”

Montana

The Libby School District’s Veteran’s Day assembly will no longer include religious language as part of a flag folding ceremony.

A district community member reported that during last year’s ceremony, student participants were provided with a script that claimed to explain the meaning of each of the 13 folds in the flag. According to the complainant, the script attributed religious meaning to the majority of the folds. This includes assertions that Americans rely on God and his guidance, “glorify the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit” and that one fold “in the eyes of a Hebrew citizen represents the lower portion of the seal of King David and King Solomon.”

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian wrote to Superintendent Craig Barringer, asking the district to end promotion of religion at official school events. Barringer responded to FFRF’s complaint with

assurances that the script would not be used again in the future.

New Jersey

Multiple signs for church parking have been removed from Matawan city property.

FFRF Staff Attorney Maddy Ziegler wrote to Mayor Joseph Altomonte, after FFRF received a local complaint that three signs, reading “Second Baptist Church Parking Only, 9 a.m.–2 p.m. Sun. & Religious Holidays,” were placed along a public road. FFRF requested that the city remove the signs and ensure that parking enforcement is in compliance with constitutional requirements going forward.

Matawan’s attorney responded to FFRF’s letter with assurances that the signs have been removed and that they had been “posted by entities other than the municipality.”

New York

Holland Patent Central School District has remedied a serious state-church violation.

A concerned district parent recently reported to FFRF that a Holland Patent High School biology teacher began a lesson on evolution by undermining the theory of evolution, denigrating those who understand and accept the fact of evolution.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line sent a letter to Holland Patent Central School District Superintendent Jason Evangelist, pointing out that this teacher’s anti-scientific rant was both unconstitutional and pedagogically deplorable.

The district has taken swift action to address FFRF’s concerns and ensure that Holland Patent students are no longer subject to religious proselytization in its schools.

Ohio

A free concealed-carry permit program has been extended to include all nonprofits rather than just churches in Butler County.

A Hamilton citizen reported to FFRF that the Butler County Sheriff’s Office was offering free concealed-carry weapons training to churches. The classes were reportedly only intended to be open to church security teams in Butler County.

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian wrote to Butler County Sheriff Richard K. Jones, pointing out that extending a free government benefit only to churches, or even solely to houses of worship, is unconstitutional.

The department, along with local media reports, confirmed these classes will now be offered free to all nonprofit organizations.

Texas

The Mesquite Independent School District has conscientiously redressed a serious state/church violation.

A community member reported that Frasier Middle School football players were required to attend a religious meeting in the gym after practice. The meeting was led by an outside group, Men of Honor. Speakers encouraged students to read the bible, pray and join their overtly Christian organization. The meeting then ended with an outside pastor who came in to lead the students in prayer.

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson asked the district to refrain from sponsoring inappropriate and unconstitutional religious meetings in the future, and ensure no future assemblies from outside groups contain a proselytizing message or agenda.

Assistant Superintendent Karyn Cummings responded to FFRF with assurances that the district “fully investigated” this matter and that “the employees in question have accepted full responsibility and completely understand that their actions were not acceptable.”

...

Staff in the Goldthwaite Independent School District have been reminded of their obligation not to use school resources to promote religion.

A community member reported that the Goldthwaite Lady Eagle Basketball Facebook page was used to promote two religious events — See You at the Pole and Field of Faith. Additionally, the Fields of Faith promotional material listed a school coach as the event contact, suggesting that she was involved in coordination of the event.

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Superintendent Ronny Wright, informing the district that district staff may not plan, promote or participate in events like See You at the Pole or Fields of Faith.

Wright informed FFRF that he has “spoken with the employee referenced in [FFRF’s] letter and both district athletic directors, in order to remind them that school resources cannot be used to advertise such events and the appropriate role for school employees in such events.”

Virginia

Religious reading materials have been removed from Arlington National Cemetery’s Administrative Building.

A local resident reported that Arlington National Cemetery had a kiosk displaying Christian material in its administration building where families meet prior to burial. According to the complainant, the administration building only displayed books from the American Bible Society, and did not contain secular grief guides.

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian asked Arlington National Cemetery Chairman Lt. Gen. James Peake to respect and honor the wishes of our nation’s minority religious and nonreligious military personnel and veterans by removing the Christian literature from displaying in the ANC administrative building.

Officials informed FFRF that the team at Arlington National Cemetery has removed the display case.

Convention speech

The challenge of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses

This is an edited version of the speech Amber Scolah gave at FFRF's national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 19, 2019. She was introduced by FFRF Programs Manager Kristina Daleiden:

Amber Scolah is the author of the moving memoir *Leaving the Witness*, which details her experience growing up as Jehovah's Witness, moving to China to become a missionary and coming to question the beliefs that she had been taught and eventually leaving that religion. After suffering the tragic loss of her 4-month-old son, Amber became a parental leave advocate, bringing this issue to the forefront of the 2016 presidential campaign. She also penned an op-ed in *The New York Times* titled "Surviving the death of my son after the death of my faith." "Oprah" magazine said that *Leaving the Witness* was one of the best books of summer and *The New York Times* called it one of 12 new books to watch. Amber is a Canadian writer living in Brooklyn.

Please join me in welcoming Amber Scolah.

By Amber Scolah

First of all, it's amazing to be here. I was raised a Jehovah's Witness and women were never allowed to give talks. It's my guess that everyone in this room either has known a Jehovah's Witness or has had one approach them to preach to them.

But so many people feel like they don't really understand what the Jehovah's Witnesses are about and why there isn't more information from ex-members out there.

Jehovah's Witnesses fly under the greater cultural radar, in many ways, because of the way its own culture is set up. As a Jehovah's Witness, you are raised to believe that you must keep separate from the world.

This is why Jehovah's Witnesses don't vote, don't get involved in charity work, are told not to go to college or pursue any kind of career, don't get too close to people or have relationships with anyone who is a nonbeliever. Any person who is not a Witness is considered "worldly" and a bad association. The outside is Satan's world.

Growing up as a Jehovah's Witness, I was taught I was different. And this was reinforced by many of the arbitrary things the Witnesses pull out of the bible and pronounce as necessary for salvation. No blood, which obviously meant that if you were dying and needed a blood transfusion, you'd have to accept death. No Christmas, no singing carols. We'd have to sit outside. When someone had a birthday in the classroom, we weren't allowed to eat the cake. We couldn't date or marry a non-Jehovah's Witness. Our time was to be used for preaching, to save as many as we could before Armageddon.

No dirty laundry

You don't see many books by people like me, who leave the religion, because the leaders of the group strongly forbid anyone from airing any of the organization's dirty laundry.

This applies to very minor issues. For example, we were told constantly that even if a brother cheats us, we shouldn't take him to court. And it extends to very serious issues, where parents are told not



At FFRF's convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 19, 2019, Amber Scolah tells the story of why she left the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Photo by Ingrid Laas

to go to the police when their child has been sexually abused by someone within the congregation. The idea behind this is that the most important thing is that God's chosen ones be protected. They don't want God to look bad.

Of course, you might think, if you leave, then you're no longer bound by this rule, right?

But what happens when you leave the Jehovah's Witnesses, like I did, is that you are shunned. This is quite a severe punishment for people who have been taught to build their entire lives around an organization, and who, as a result, have very few ties anywhere else.

This shunning is bad enough, but if a person takes it one step further and speaks out about the organization, or their doubts, or anything that they feel is wrong within the organization, in any kind of a public way, that person is labeled an apostate.

This is a very scary brand to receive. Apostasy, according to Jehovah's Witnesses literature, is the one sin God will never forgive. "Apostates" like me would be described in very terrifying terms. They were "mentally diseased," "criminals," "lower than a snake" with "characteristics like the devil."

Even after I wrote my book and didn't believe in the religion anymore, you feel the power of that community lasts even after you've left. The last thing I wanted to be was that horrible apostate character we've been warned about. I didn't want to be seen that way, even by people who no longer spoke to me. I didn't want to be "mentally diseased"!

Yet here I am, out here in Satan's world!

dom, which should have told me something, since most people who go to China don't feel more free.

Because my preaching work was done underground in China, the structure of meetings and community I had had my whole life at home as a Witness was gone. Our religion was illegal there, so there was no structure.

Of course, my aim was to preach, and I took that mission seriously. But that, too, looked different. Back at home, rarely would a Witness ever have a friend who was not a Witness. The only interaction was for the sake of conversion. Non-Witnesses were to be always kept at bay, as they were a worldly influence.

Yet here in China, we were told by the leaders of the organization that the way to go about our preaching work was to spend a lot of time getting to know people before we preached to them. This would allow us to vet them, to make sure they weren't Communist Party members, or people who would turn us in to the authorities. Often that vetting process took a long time, because you were trying to "be casual" and get information from people naturally, before bringing in the bible or our literature and possibly endangering ourselves.

A byproduct of this, of course, was that I began to make "worldly friends" for the first time. I got to know people who weren't Jehovah's Witnesses on a pretty intimate level before I ever even tried bringing up the bible.

Preaching in a language like Mandarin, too, was so different, it felt like my mind was being excavated. As I sat teaching my Chinese bible students "the truth," telling them to throw away their thousands of years of cultural history for my 100-year-old religion in this new language, it was almost as if I could hear what I was saying for the first time. I started to realize my beliefs sounded a bit crazy.

Cracks in my faith

Eventually, the mild disorientation of being in this new culture and speaking this language so different than my own opened up cracks in my faith, and the physical distance from my community gave me a mental break from the constant meetings and indoctrination. Slowly, a "worldly" friendship I began to engage in with a client at my workplace ended up with me questioning every-

Path to freedom

The path to finding my freedom happened in one of the most restrictive countries in the world: China.

When I was in my 20s, after spending years knocking on doors in my home city of Vancouver, Canada, to not much in the way of results — you all know what you do when a Jehovah's Witness calls! — I decided to learn Mandarin Chinese and travel to China to preach. China was the one place that had not received a Witness, and I wanted to give them a chance to convert before Armageddon came and God killed them for being nonbelievers.

Ironically, it was in China that, for the first time in my life, I had some free-



Photo by Chris Line

Amber Scolah signs copies of her book, *Leaving the Witness*, for FFRF members after her speech.

thing I had been raised to believe. A lot of people who have never been religious wonder why in the world anyone would stay in a group like this that is so obviously, to those on the outside, wrong and “culty.”

Here’s the thing: No one who is in a cult ever thinks they are in a cult. You think you are living the best life, and in some ways it IS a great life. You have no angst, you don’t worry about climate change, you don’t have to have a retirement fund because Armageddon and God are going to solve all those problems. Plus, you have many wonderful friends and family who believe in it with you. You have a warm community.

You are constantly told about how awful people’s lives are on the outside, and because you are only allowed to be close with other Witnesses, you have no way of verifying. Of course, the world can be a scary place, so it’s an easy message to sell. Sure, you see people who seem happy and fulfilled, you meet nice people at work and such, but you know that they are going to die at Armageddon, so really, how great can that be?

Yes, it isn’t until you try to leave a cult that you start to realize it’s a cult. When the people in your organization and family immediately shun you for questioning even one of the beliefs handed down from the leaders, you know you are in some form of cult.

When I voiced a doubt or two and that got back to the elders, well, that was about when I started to get the inkling that the Jehovah’s Witness organization bore the traits of a cult.

Later, after I left, I found stronger proof: The first boyfriend I had after leaving the religion found on YouTube nearly every documentary ever made about cult members and we watched them together. I was surprised as I watched. Every cult it seemed, from the most extreme (Jim Jones in Jamestown) to the less extreme ones (that didn’t mandate death), well, they were exactly my story.

They are entirely different belief systems, but have the same systems in place to keep people in. My lines of reasoning, my thought patterns, my thought-blocking, the us vs. them mentality, all the things we had been trained to do to stay in the religion were the same things people in all these cults had been trained to do.

And while the Witnesses are not as extreme as some cults, they do mandate that people die rather than take life-saving blood transfusions. So, while they aren’t drinking Kool-Aid, they are mandating death for no reason, which isn’t that different.

It takes a lot of deprogramming to realize the religion you were raised with as “truth” is simply a mythology that has been passed down from generation to generation.

No regrets

Even given all I lost — family, friends, faith, support systems, purpose — I have never once regretted waking up and leaving. And I’ve never heard any other ex-Witnesses saying any different. People have lost their own children to the religion after waking up, have lost their livelihood, everything.

But now that I shed a belief system, it’s a lot easier for me to see culti-ness everywhere, not only in religion. We



Photo by Chris Line

Amber Scorah relates the difficulty of handling the death of her 4-month-old son after leaving the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

are, all of us, subject to indoctrination of some form, whether we realize it or not. Obviously, some belief systems are more extreme than others, but we all have blind spots. We are born into a family that teaches us values and ideals from birth. All of us have embedded ideas about how things must be and how we must live (marry, have children, elect a straight white man, whatever it is). This is most obvious in the religious realm, but it’s also the case in the political, social, internet, scientific and any other realm in which people identify with a way of thinking.

This is why cults exist! They are just a manifestation of the extreme end of something that is in us all. We all need to check our thinking, to ensure we aren’t succumbing to our own cult-like tendencies.

How do we do this? Make friends with people who don’t think like us. That may sound trite, but in my story, the only reason I was able to see my blind spots was because I developed a close relationship with someone “on the outside.” The differences between us were what made it possible for me to see that not everything I had been taught to believe by my culture was absolute truth. Allowing myself to get close enough to someone so different than me was what made me see that. It wasn’t always pleasant, but I’m so grateful I didn’t back away or dismiss him.

I’ve also learned this: When we feel very sure we are right, that’s always a sign to look again, look deeper, question our strongest assumptions, never be dogmatic about anything. Always be willing to listen and readjust. Never let your identity be too stuck to a group, a belief. Step outside our comfort zone and be willing to put ourselves in positions that make us feel off kilter, because that is when we get opened up, that is when we learn.

Great tragedy

There is one postscript to my story. And that is that seven years after I left my religion, I experienced a great tragedy.

My first child, my 4-month-old son, Karl, died. I raise this because many people who know my religious background have asked me if this terrible loss made me want to go back to religion. I think it’s an interesting question.

I don’t think anyone really can be prepared for the loss of a child, but it

blindsided me. I was now faced with an entirely foreign landscape: death without hope of an afterlife. Grief without religion.

My father had died when I was a Witness, when I was 18, and I was sad, but I wasn’t that sad, because I was certain that one day I would see him again in paradise. Religion was born for times like this. My faith, I realize now, had acted as a buffer to many of these more devastating aspects of being human.

And now, when I lost my son, without that faith, I experienced this death as nothingness. My child, so full of promise and health and energy, vanished. It was beyond my ability to accept losing him. But it was even farther beyond my abilities to return to any kind of belief in life after death. This was the ultimate test for someone who had once had belief.

But let me tell you what I discovered about grief without religion. It has some surprising byproducts.

I now had no choice but to live with the reality of the loss, and it made me deal with what was in front of me. What was in front of me was utter devastation on every level. But once you have been that close to death, something else happens when you can’t escape it. In the midst of this kind of grief, where you have no escape, you are forced to experience a deeper pain, but you also become more clear-eyed about life. You find you see what is beautiful in life in the midst of all this suffering. And one of those things I experienced was the great care and compassion that we as human beings possess.

When I was in such great pain, so many people, strangers and friends alike, got me through by showing love in so many ways. It was the strangest thing, to experience such an awful thing, yet at the same time, to be touched by such beauty and love.

Now, time has gone by, and without the escape of belief, I have learned a lot. I have learned how to live with ev-

eryone’s worst nightmare, I’m still alive, which honestly feels like a feat sometimes. I have learned patience and endurance and how to tolerate devastating feelings, because that is what living without your child requires.

But since I do not believe that my son is “out there” somewhere or will come back to me, it has also meant that I have kept him alive in the ways in the here and now. By talking about him to his sister, and by holding close the memories I have of him every day.

I also became an activist for a national parental-leave policy in his name. Through this work, I found that death without hope didn’t have to be death without faith.

How so? Activism is an act of faith. A faith that when there are problems, we as human beings can find ways to solve them. A faith that my son’s life and death would show others the value of every child’s life. A faith that others would join me in a fight for what was right, and they did.

In my old religion, we were taught not to put our faith in man.

But if humankind is all we have, perhaps this faith, this active belief that we can change the world, is not misplaced. That’s what I learned. I’m not willing to give up hope yet.

And the fact is, once we accept reality and truly live in it, with its full range of emotion, good and terrible, that’s where life lies. Not in some fictional paradise.

The one thing that no one can take away from us is the beauty and love we can find in this world if we look for it. When I am in great pain, I remember that the depth of grief we experience is a reflection of the depth of the love we are capable of.

I don’t have all the answers now, but I can appreciate the deep mystery of it all. I feel the magic of life all around me, the great power of shared humanity. I feel gratitude.

And it’s been so lovely to be here with you today. Thank you.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Amber Scorah

To watch Amber Scorah’s convention speech, go to ffrf.us/scorah

Convention speech

Evangelicals’ ‘religious freedom’ is neither

This is an edited version of the speech made by Andrew Bradley at FFRF’s national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 18, 2019. He, along with Deven Green, created the comedy act of Mrs. Betty Bowers, America’s Best Christian, which is an award-winning satirical web series. The duo performed an act for the convention crowd, but then Bradley took the stage solo to give this speech.

By Andrew Bradley

America is lucky it was founded during the Enlightenment. Or, rather, it was lucky that it was the Enlightenment that pushed it to be founded. The Enlightenment meant that the United States was formed during a time of healthy skepticism for religions.

If you read the correspondence of most of the Founding Fathers, it would be almost impossible for any of them to be elected now, even as a Democrat.

They would be destroyed in the primaries by the super PACs: “Why does Ben Franklin hate Jesus so much? Why did Thomas Jefferson desecrate the Lord’s word by calling it a steaming pile of feces?” The Establishment Clause reflects this lull between fits of religious radicalism in this country.

Can you imagine the Bill of Rights written by the Puritans? It would probably look a lot like one that would be written by today’s evangelicals. And would probably have come to be known as the Bill of Wrongs. And only apply to other people.

Evangelicals don’t like — because of our pesky Constitution — that the United States isn’t the Official Sponsor of Christianity. And they’re tirelessly showing their resentment right now.

American theocracy has a new gimmick it’s using to try to work around the Constitution, and to shoehorn a right-wing brand of Christianity into the secular square. It’s called “religious freedom.” Forgive yourself right now if you think religious freedom is about being either religious or free. It is not.

As is the case with most political branding, the words were chosen for their ability to disarm rather than inform. “Religious freedom” is code. It’s anti-constitutional theocracy in constitutional drag. Who could possibly object to freedom? But a peek beneath its benign surface reveals “religious freedom” is really about one thing: Evangelicals using our government to promote their faith. But just an unapologetically selfish and vindictive version of their purported faith.

This very objective was regarded as so inimical to our secular republic that both the Founders and citizens thwarted it twice in the Constitution.

Once, in the body of the Constitution, Article 6, Section 3, banning religious tests for holding office. And then once again, for good measure, in the First Amendment, barring government from promoting any religion. The Founders haven’t been alone at recoiling from theocracy.

“Religious freedom” is not about indulging, much less protecting, non-Christians. It’s not even about protecting Christians who are not right-wing evangelicals. That’s because “religious freedom” is rooted in a lie. Its blandly inclusive title, pretending to protect people of all faiths, is descriptive only of its marketing, not implementation.

If you doubt this, listen to one of “religious freedom’s” highest profile proponents, the anti-LGBTQ president of Family Research Council, the odious Tony Perkins, a man who has selflessly devoted his life to thinking about men licking each other.

[Video of Perkins plays:] “The key to the Muslim community remains Jesus Christ. And that means that we, as Americans, understand the unique nature of this country, its heritage and its government is founded upon Christian truth. And that’s how it works. And the ideas of democracy and individual liberty and self-government



Andrew Bradley speaks at FFRF’s national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 18, 2019.

Photo by Ingrid Laas

are incompatible with what we see in the Muslim world.”

Now, that doesn’t sound like a guy who’s serious about protecting everyone else’s freedom to practice their religion.

In fact, Perkins has also said the Constitution does not protect Islam. And, according to him, “religious freedom” is even more stingy, as it only protects “orthodox” versions of Christianity. You know, the type that, quite coincidentally, hates the gays just as much as Perkins does.

It’s an ungrateful line in the sand. One of the Family Research Council’s favorite tropes to support its made-up version of “religious freedom” is to cite the statutory version called the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

The RFRA, which was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1997 as unconstitutional when applied to states, was enacted in large measure to protect the religious freedom of Native Americans. The very people — pagans — the new “religious freedom” excludes.

Even beyond its objective, to have secular courts promote one faith, there are other, fundamental problems with how “religious freedom” attempts to nullify laws that apply to all Americans.

If evangelicals can void a law, ad hoc, by claiming it violates their “deeply held faith,” how do courts define that faith, much less determine whether it is deeply held?

And courts can’t just take someone’s word for it. That would be tantamount to the anarchy of giving everyone a wallet full of “Get Out of Laws Free” cards. Hardly in keeping with evangelicals’ oft-spoken fondness for “law and order.”

Let’s address the first question: What is the “faith” being used to avoid the law of the land?

It may not be the one you think. The Christianity that evangelicals practice is as abrupt a departure from Christianity as Christianity was from Judaism. It is so far removed from the teachings of Jesus, it begs for a new name. Jerry Falwell Jr. makes me think of a few . . . But Christianity 2.0™ is the most polite.

Jesus was beta-tested for centuries and, clearly, found buggy. Too many empathy commands, too few tax cuts for Herod. Too much rendering unto Caesar. And give what to the poor? Er, no. That’s not happening.

If imitation is the highest form of flattery, conservatives have made their lifework not letting it go to Jesus’s head. Because, to conservatives, Jesus’s “help the poor” and “turn the other cheek” elective suggestions sound alarmingly liberal, even suspiciously un-American.

Worse, Jesus neglected to mention evangelicals’ two biggest obsessions: homosexuality and abortion. Something had to go. (Spoiler: It was Jesus.)

This has made “religious freedom” all about making up for Jesus’s carelessness. His inconveniently liberal agenda has been swapped out for evangelicals’ less-Jesussy approach.

If Jesus never had a problem with homosexuals, but you do, saying your voluntary animus is actually compulsory faith is a shrewd way to curry legal deference that would otherwise be curtly withheld. Because it’s not prejudice if you call it religion.

It’s God ignoring civil rights, not you. It’s God being an asshole for no reason, not you. “It’s nothing personal: God told me to hate you.”

Now, let’s address the second problem with this wildly improvised faith: How can it be claimed, much less proven, to be “deeply held”?

If there is one thing that the ascension of Donald Trump has taught us, it is this: The tea party never really cared about deficits. And evangelicals never really cared about “values.”

When it comes to determining what people really believe, actual actions speak louder than pious proclamations. Hardly any evangelical “deeply holds” the faith of

traditional Christianity when it comes to what they do. So how can they be allowed to only hold it deeply when it comes time to use it against someone else?

Using “deeply held” religious beliefs as carte blanche to step on the constitutional toes of others is a dangerous precedent.

Do we provide exemptions from hate crime laws to Nazis, the KKK or other toxic flavors of white supremacy? Their “deeply held beliefs” about minorities, slavery and mixed marriages have, after all, been supported, with much success, in the past by the bible.

Whenever Franklin Graham tweets that the bible is a “book of timeless moral truths,” I always turn to Exodus 21:20 for tips on beating humans I own. The helpful Lord tells me I can beat them within an inch of their lives and I can’t be punished if they survive since they are my “property.” Ah, what a timeless moral truth. Glory!

I raise the Lord’s fondness for beating slaves to underscore how dangerous it is to allow rules in the bible to override secular laws about how we treat each other. Our secular laws change as humans become more knowledgeable, more caring. The bible is frozen in a time long before either science or the Enlightenment.

When you peel back the pleasant appearance of the words “religious freedom,” you see that something as fraudulent as it is unworkable is afoot. It was something the Founders tried to protect us from — an American theocracy.

Family Research Council and its ilk, after decades of butting heads against the separation of church and state mandated by the Constitution, have come up with a Trojan horse. They call it “religious freedom.”

They know that if you can’t stop inconvenient civil rights laws, creating an excuse to ignore them is the next best thing.

Cases are popping up around the country where businesses otherwise open to the public exercise their “religious freedom” to demean and refuse service to LGBTQ and other minorities.

But “religious freedom” is never about wedding desserts. It’s about just deserts: retribution against secularism.

It’s about promoting one brand of religion by making life difficult for those who do not promote it. It’s about people preening in the piety of making others comply with a “religion” they don’t even follow. It’s about upending America’s hierarchical relationship between settled law and ad hoc belief. It’s about providing right-wing evangelicals with a pretty costume to cover for their grimy bigotry.

Because “religious freedom” treats something that is just a choice (religion) as more important than immutable characteristics that are not choices (race and sexuality).

When you really look at it, you realize that “religious freedom” is neither.

Convention speech

White biblical imagery is still with us

This is an edited version of the speech given by Jeremiah Camara at FFRF's convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 19, 2019. He was introduced by FFRF's Director of Operations Lisa Strand:

It is my pleasure to introduce filmmaker Jeremiah Camara. He directed and produced the documentary, "Holy Hierarchy: The Religious Roots of Racism in America." Those who were here at our convention a few years ago had the pleasure of seeing his other movie, "Contradiction," also about religion, and it's on Amazon Prime. Jeremiah is also an author, whose books are *Holy Lockdown: Does the Church Limit Black Progress?* and *The New Doubting Thomas: The Bible, Black Folks and Blind Belief*. He is the creator of the widely watched YouTube series, "Slave Sermons," a mini-movie series addressing the harmful effects of religion. Please welcome Jeremiah Camara.

By Jeremiah Camara

I'm honored to be here. Thanks to [FFRF Co-Presidents] Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker for inviting me to this event, to an organization that's so important, and not only to this country, but to the world. We definitely need the Freedom From Religion Foundation. They say that America's going to hell and going wayward because of the rise of secularism. That is the dumbest thing I've ever heard. It is really crazy. Do you realize that once upon a time there was something in this country called slavery — and religious belief was the driving justification behind slavery? And now they're saying that we're going to hell because of secularism.

My film, "Holy Hierarchy: The Religious Roots of Racism in America," attempts to explain how the beliefs in a biased supreme being during Colonial America led to beliefs in supreme human beings. If you believe in a supreme being, it's a seamless transition to believe in supreme human beings.

There is a legal component behind racism that we tend to forget, and it ultimately turned racism into an institution. When you believe in a god, you bring your baggage into that belief, you bring your beliefs, your bigotry, your bias, your superstitions, your stereotypes and your ignorance into that belief. And one of the most fundamental beliefs in America since Colonial times and even today, even if it's on a subconscious level, is the belief that there is a god who created whites to be superior and blacks to be inferior. This was the prevailing precept.

We moved from Virginia, but many of us still have a Virginia state of mind. Virginia is the boss of this country. You can call it the District of Columbia, if you want. That's Virginia. And I tell people, if you don't understand early Virginia, it'll be a challenge understanding racism in this country, because Virginia is the place where the party started. They perfected racism.

You can't talk about racism without talking about white supremacy. You can't talk about white supremacy without talking about Christianity. They're tied. They're interwoven. And it's the root of racism. You don't enslave. You don't create systems of apartheid. You don't create systems of Jim Crow. You don't implement systems of redlining. The prison-industrial complex is for people who you believe are equal to you.

I think one of the least appreciated but most powerful elements that keeps the wheels of Christianity spinning is white biblical imagery and iconography throughout this

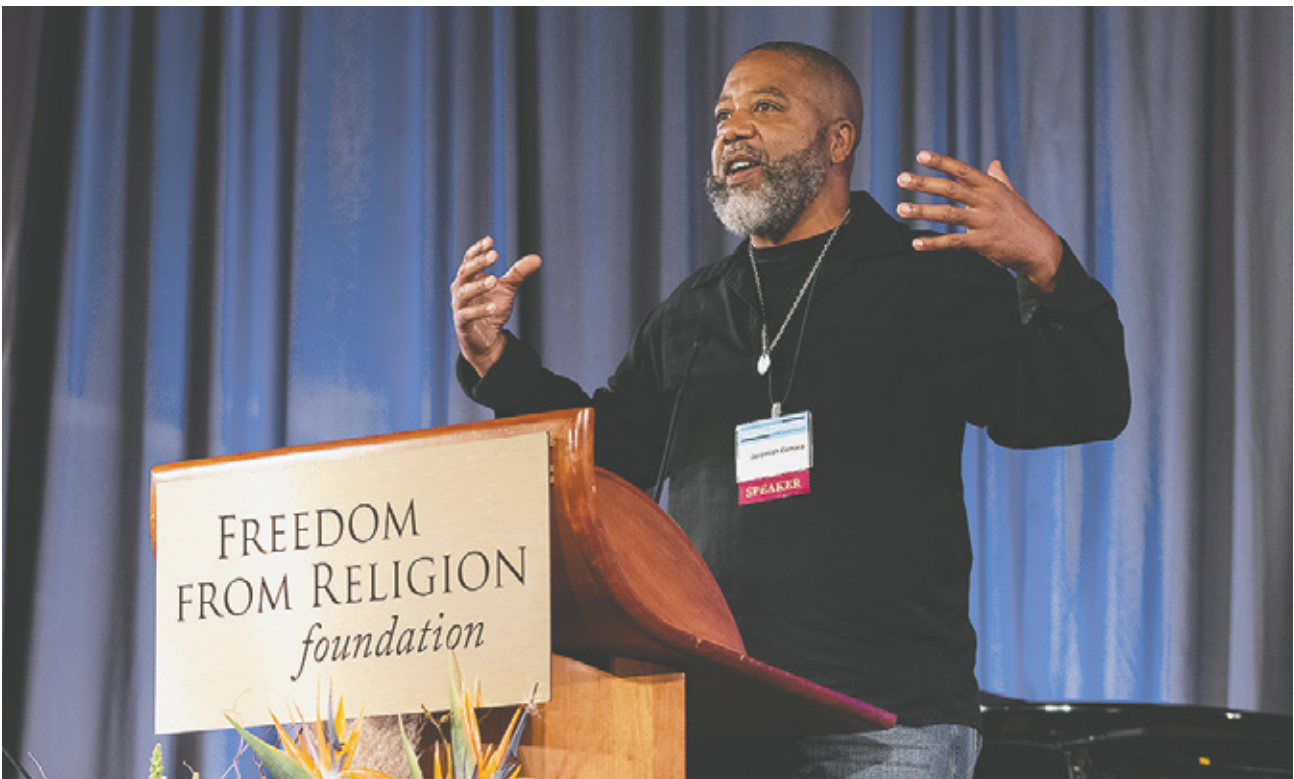


Photo by Ingrid Laas

Filmmaker Jeremiah Camara speaks about his latest film, "Holy Heirarchy: The Religious Roots of Racism in America" at FFRF's national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 19, 2019. Watch the film on Amazon Prime.

country and the world. It does three things: It promotes Christianity, it promotes white supremacy, and it ensures and preserves racism. There's a lot of talk about the separation of church and state, but there's also the separation of church and the state of one's mind.

Imagery is more or just as powerful than any speech that any attorney general or any president or vice president can give in promoting Christianity. Iconography is one of the most powerful weapons in support of Christianity. It's the unnoticed elephant in the room.

Before there was television, there was imagery. Before there were magazines, there was white biblical iconography. I remember when I was about 6, my mother had a picture of a white Jesus in the kitchen and it was sitting on the table and I noticed that everywhere I went, the eyes followed me. So, I knew that there was really something to this religion because I never saw a picture do that, where the eyes actually followed you.

To people of color, especially blacks being the antithesis of white, seeing white biblical imagery causes immeasurable psychological damage, which has helped to lead to severe cases of lack of self-worth. And deep illness of Stockholm syndrome, as we witnessed in the Botham Jean-Amber Guyger case. And the humongous statue of a white Jesus in the country of Nigeria.

Since Colonial America, the imagery throughout the land continues to support the notion of white supremacy. We see mythological white biblical imagery every day in the magazine and book sections of Walmart, Kroger, Walgreens, CVS and all throughout Hobby Lobby. We see the iconic biblical imagery in doctor's offices. We see it in hospitals, airports, billboards. We've seen it in schools and, of course, in churches and movies.

You look at some of the big blockbuster movies that we've had, like "The Passion of the Christ," that took in close to \$400 million. Blacks go to these movies, too.

I always tell people that Jesus is white, even though he never existed. Jesus is white and they ask, "Why do you think that he's white?" Because he's white in Walmart and Walmart is the largest retailer in the world. My phone is packed with imagery that I just collect everywhere I go. It's all around. And that's something that's really not talked about a lot.

I was born and raised in Cin-

cinnati, and I used to work at a place called Half Price Books. I was a buyer there. People would bring their old books in and I would assess them. I was really the best assessor that they had and I was the only black. A lady came up with her books and she needed them assessed, and said, "I don't want a black person touching my books," even though she was giving them up anyway. I was like, "OK, no problem."

Honestly, I wasn't offended. I was cool with it, but what really pissed me off was my white co-worker who assessed her books. That's the problem. If I can't do them, you, as my co-worker, should say, "Look, take your books somewhere else." So, if we're not all offended and all appalled when we go to Walmart, when we go to these places, I don't care. I was at the Miami airport and there's white biblical iconography all around. It's all over, it's everywhere. It's ubiquitous. We all should be upset about that.

Let's not ignore imagery. Imagery is deeper many times than the spoken word. If there's no legal justification to end the onslaught of white biblical imagery based on the Constitution's protection of free speech, then the Constitution is flawed. You should not be able to walk into a store and see white images of Moses and Abraham. To a person of color, it does immeasurable psychological damage. There's no way we can put a measure on the damage psychologically.

Black people don't even embrace their own culture. We have Stockholm syndrome to the highest degree in Africa. I don't know how many have been to Africa, but it is amazing the reverence. They have a saying in Africa that if you're on your way to church and you see a white man, turn around, because you've already laid eyes on God.

This is all about imagery. But what is racism? There's a lot of talk about it. We hear that word all the time, but racism is the legal backing of a group's prejudices, stereotypes, bigotry, bias and ignorance. It's when all that is backed legally it becomes racism. We've been mentally conditioned to perceive an all-knowing and all-powerful creator as a white male. And no matter what our current beliefs are, our memory, an association of a white Jesus, are permanently locked in our minds. I've been this way since I was 22 years old, since I've been out of religion. Done with it. But that image when I was 6 years old is still there. It will always be there.

I've got a little part in the film that addresses that imagery. Racism actually stems from one group believing to be of more value and more worth than another group. And it's time to end all of that and I'm glad that I'm here. I wish there were more blacks here. I wish there were more Hispanics here. It's a long process, but I think we're headed in the right direction.

Thanks for having me. I appreciate you guys.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Jeremiah Camara, center, poses with Greg Kramer and Granada Higgins outside the main hall at FFRF's convention.

Clarence Darrow Award

Democracy requires state-church separation

This is an edited version of the video speech made by U.S. Rep. Jamie Raskin that was shown at FFRF's national convention on Oct. 18, 2019.

By U.S. Rep. Jamie Raskin

Hello to all my friends out at the Freedom From Religion Foundation. I'm thrilled to be here with you, even in absentia.

Freedom from religion means freedom of religion, and freedom of religion means freedom from religion because people aren't going to be able to exercise the religion of their choice or the philosophy of their choice if you have theocrats imposing a particular religious creed on all of society.

Obviously, we've got some important things going on in Washington, D.C., and I'm delighted and honored and gratified to receive the Clarence Darrow award.

I've got this right by my desk, so Clarence Darrow can keep a close watch over me. I want to thank you for this award, which means a whole lot to me. It's important to me for a few reasons.

One is that Clarence Darrow was a great lawyer who thought systematically and logically, and I think that that is the mindset we have to try to bring to public things. The second reason is because he was a very passionate crusader against capital punishment.

I remember when I was in law school reading his famous closing argument in the Leopold and Loeb case, and being so moved by what it was that he had to say. I was honored to have a chance in my life to campaign against the death penalty in my home state of Maryland as a state senator. I led the floor fight to abolish the death penalty, which we did in 2013. I invoked Clarence Darrow and tried to carry on in his spirit.

We had a guy who was convicted of the most brutal, grisly, gruesome, rape-murder you ever could have imagined: Kirk Bloodworth. But he swore that he didn't do it and he was on death row and we very easily could have executed an innocent man. He read about the advent of DNA evidence and wrote to his lawyer, begged his lawyer, who is now the chief judge of the District of Columbia Superior Court, Judge Richard Morin. He begged him to let him get a DNA test.

They found that evidence, which actually was supposed to have been disposed of, but the judge in the case had an assistant who never believed that Bloodworth was guilty, and she'd saved the physical evidence in her desk. They found the evidence.

They performed the DNA test and it came back with more than 99.9 percent certainty that it could not have been Bloodworth. And they actually found a positive DNA match with someone who was already in prison with Bloodworth a floor beneath him in Maryland. That guy confessed to the crime.

I said on the floor to our friends across the aisle who were defending capital punishment, that the death penalty is a great system for people who think that the government is perfect and the



In this screenshot from a video, U.S. Rep. Jamie Raskin accepts the Clarence Darrow Award from FFRF. Raskin was unable to be at FFRF's 2019 national convention in person, so he sent a video to be played to the convention audience. To watch the video, go to ffrf.us/raskin.

justice system is infallible.

Usually that's not what we hear from Republicans about the government. Usually they say government can't do anything right. And here they are saying government couldn't do anything wrong. But, obviously, in this most extreme of scenarios, the government could very easily do something wrong and we know has convicted hundreds of innocent people. And that's one principal reason that the death penalty doesn't function for us.

So, I was proud to be involved in that work of abolishing capital punishment in the state of Maryland. I'm also proud to

receive this award because Clarence Darrow was such a magnificent and eloquent champion for the separation of church and state. And here he drew upon the deepest wellsprings of American constitutional and political thought.

Our Founders were enlightenment liberals who rebelled against centuries of religious conflict and religious war. The wars of religion between the Catholics and Protestants in Europe were every bit as brutal and vicious as the wars between Sunni and Shia today in the Muslim world.

Our forefathers and foremothers wanted to go in a different direction. They said, "We want a break from the religious wars, from the Inquisition, from the holy crusades. We want a break from the witchcraft trials and the blasphemy laws, the apostasy laws and the heresy laws. We want to put government on a secular and rational basis." And that's why we got our First Amendment. Thank you, James Madison.

We got a First Amendment, which gave everybody a right to freely exercise religion as they see fit — right of freedom of speech and also no establishment of religion.

I think that is what resonates with the name of your strong and growing organization. No establishment of religion, free exercise of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom

to petition government for redress of grievances, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press. All of these freedoms of the human mind go together. That was a great breakthrough victory in our Constitution for progress of human society and human understanding. It allowed us to say that government would be concerned with reason and we would try to govern based on reason and based on a passionate commitment to the rights of everyone.

And that's basically what our whole history has told us. We have a trajectory of freedom in our Constitution and that's going to be a central commitment of what it means for us to defend American constitutionalism against attack. This is important to me.

I thought Clarence Darrow obviously had a brilliant and stunning performance at the *Scopes* trial in 1925, although I think it may have been unnecessary to humiliate William Jennings Bryan in the way that he did. We can say that there should be imposition of no religious creeds or orthodoxies, whether or not those religious creeds or orthodoxies are true. By the way, Clarence Darrow voted for Bryan and supported him in the 1896 election.

But when Bryan died five days after the *Scopes* monkey trial was over, it led to a kind of breach between the enlightened secular separation of church and state forces that tended to be in

the big cities, as Clarence Darrow was in Chicago, and the rural populist forces that were fighting against big business exploitation. I don't think that we needed that split.

And I think that split has been a tough thing for us politically. That divide has lasted up until this day. We need to defend and uphold the separation of church and state and all the Enlightenment values that Darrow was fighting for.

We should be respectful of other people's practices of their philosophies and their creeds in their religions, and we should try to join everybody together in working to defend our constitutional democracy. A critical part of our constitutional democracy is the separation of church and state and no imposition of religion through the schools.

The Supreme Court's ultimate decision in *Engel vs. Vitale* in 1962 was a great landmark precedent. Some of my colleagues today still walk around Congress saying this was the moral downfall of America, when the Supreme Court banned prayer in the public schools. But, as I like to say, the Supreme Court did not ban prayer in the public schools. As long as there are pop math quizzes, there will be prayer in the public schools.

All the Supreme Court found is that the government cannot impose religious prayer on anyone.

Thank you for this great award. Thank you for giving me a moment to share some of my thoughts with you. And please send me your thoughts and ideas as we move forward in trying to rescue American constitutional democracy today.



U.S. Rep. Jamie Raskin

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

Strong Backbone Award

Taking on school’s violations paid off, eventually

Dustin received a \$1,000 “Strong Backbone Award,” which is generously contributed by an octogenarian member of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (who prefers anonymity) to celebrate his birthday. He likes to bestow the scholarship, via FFRF, upon a high school student or recent high school grad who has demonstrated a “strong backbone” in defending the separation of state and church and/or freethought.

By Dustin Daniels

All of this started when I was a 16-year-old sophomore who opposed a Ten Commandments plaque hanging inside my Tennessee high school.

After I lodged a complaint, controversy ensued, with hundreds of people inflamed about the complaint, which caused the Cumberland County School Board to ultimately vote to allow the decalogue to remain on the walls.

Despite this loss, there was little time to be upset because I knew more needed to be done, since the basketball team had a “character coach” who was leading weekly devotionals, religious messages were displayed everywhere and Christian music was blasted during classes. All of it had to be resolved.

I decided to continue fighting and give activism one more chance . . . or multiple chances.

FFRF stepped in and had to write nu-

merous letters of complaint, sometimes over the same violation. Some people told me I was being too difficult, but I felt the students’ rights were of top priority. It didn’t matter how annoying the school officials thought the complaints were. Following the Constitution is not annoying nor is it too difficult.

Every day, I walked into a school that I felt lacked any respect for me or my rights. Each complaint took months to resolve, and, frustratingly, it seemed each time one violation was resolved, another would come up.

Finally, after nearly two years, there was success. The school district’s attorney agreed to conduct county-wide training on religion in schools. Additionally, teachers who had repeat violations were warned of possible reprimand, and one principal agreed to watch over a sixth-grade history teacher accused of promoting Jesus in the world religions curriculum. Multiple religious displays have been removed and the basketball team was required to be inclusive.



Dustin Daniels



We are still dealing with serious issues, such as the Ten Commandments plaques and school events in churches. However, as the old saying goes, “The wheels of justice turn slowly,” but they turn, nonetheless.

True religious freedom cannot exist when the government decides to be a church or a preacher. Seeing what happens when religion and govern-

ment become too close made me realize the wall between church and state must remain tall and impenetrable. It is up to everyone to protect that wall and to never settle for less than what we deserve.

Dustin graduated high school early and will attend Roane State Community College. He hopes to go to law school after college graduation.

Embrace honesty for a purpose-driven life

By James A. Haught

Millionaire evangelist and author Rick Warren is correct: Having a purpose-driven life gives people meaning and goals. But he’s absurd in claiming that purpose comes from gods and devils, heavens and hells, miracles and messiahs.

I think the purpose that drives science-minded freethinkers can be summed up in a single word: honesty. It’s dishonest to claim to know supernatural things that nobody can know. Honest people want evidence and don’t embrace magical assertions without it. Simply to be honest about beliefs — that’s a powerful motive imparting purpose to skeptics.

Sixty years ago, when I was a gawky young news reporter, my mentor was a tough city editor who was a clone of H.L. Mencken. He sneered at hillbilly preachers in our Appalachian Bible Belt. As a naive wisdom-seeker, I asked him: “You’re right that all this bible-thumping is silly — but what’s the truth? Why is the universe here? Why does life exist? Why are we all



James A. Haught

doomed to die? What’s the meaning of everything? What truthful answer can an honest person give?”

He eyed me squarely and replied: “You can say: I don’t know.”

Bingo. That rang a clear bell in my mind, and it never left me. It showed me how to be honest in the face of bewilderment. An honest person admits inability to comprehend ultimate reality.

Later, as I studied, I learned that this same conclusion was reached by Ancient Greece’s great Epicurus — and by Omar Khayyam in his profound *Rubaiyat* — and by Jean-Paul Sartre and fellow modern existentialists — and by Zorba the Greek,

whose questions exposed “the perplexity of mankind” — and by multitudes of other earnest seekers trying to discern what underlies our existence.

The honesty worldview can give you a sense that you are supporting factual reality. It makes you advocate science, democracy and human rights as the best tools to improve humanity. It gives you a personal identity — something worth fighting for.

Honesty makes us realize there’s no trustworthy proof that our minds will continue living after our bodies die. As far as we can tell, each person’s psyche is created by an individual brain — and dies when the brain does. Accepting the coming oblivion requires courage, but it’s the only honest stance. Wishing for immortality is self-deception.

When I foresee the abyss, the blackness of death ahead, it breeds existential gloom — a sense that everything ultimately is meaningless — a bleak awareness that our struggles soon will be forgotten and ignored, like those of past generations. I’m haunted by Macbeth’s rant: “All our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Pointless floundering, soon to vanish into the forgotten past. That’s a dismal summation, and it rings true. Yet we nonetheless can develop purpose-driven lives that hold the gloom in abeyance, while we move onward.

We gain purpose by raising children, working at a satisfying job, sharing our life with a fond spouse or lover, relishing the serene joys of nature, etc. But those

pursuits don’t address the ultimate questions that cannot be answered and never go away.

Historian Gleb Tsipursky of Ohio State University says trusting one’s own sense of integrity and belief in the scientific method imparts value.

“We as secular people can use science to fill that emptiness deep in the pit of our stomach that comes from a lack of a personal sense of meaning and purpose,” he wrote. “We can use science to answer the question: What is the meaning of life for you?”

He cited studies showing that people with strong convictions have better health and more happiness. “Discover your own sense of life purpose and meaning from a science-based, humanist-informed perspective,” he urged.

A wag replied: “My purpose in life is to feed my cat.” Well, simply ignoring the profound questions is a legitimate way to cope — but some of us can’t stop wondering. We know we will never find answers, yet we crave firm beliefs to keep us struggling onward.

The only approach that works for me is to repudiate imaginary spirits and support humanistic reality as the basis of life and society.

Ever since ancient Greece, the world’s greatest minds have searched for the purpose of it all — to no avail. But each secular humanist can acquire a personal purpose by embracing honesty and the scientific method. We can have purpose-driven lives by opposing self-proclaimed holy men who write books like *The Purpose-Driven Life*.

James A. Haught is editor emeritus of West Virginia’s largest newspaper, *The Charleston Gazette-Mail*.

Yip Harburg,
from his book:

Rhymes for the Irreverent

Satan To The Rescue

This small bit of mud, revolving in space,
Would be an abysmal and dismal old place,
But thanks to the genius who first thought of sin,
This here is a dear little sphere to be in.

Written by “Over the Rainbow” lyricist Yip Harburg.
Illustrated by Seymour Chwast, published by FFRF.

LETTERBOX

Granddaughter immersed in ‘Freethought Radio’

There’s no publication I anticipate seeing in my mailbox as much as Freethought Today, which is a true pleasure to read. It’s hard not to devour the entire issue in one sitting.

I have a story that I thought you might be interested in.

During the daytime on Thursdays and Fridays from early August through mid-November of 2019, my wife and I were watching our youngest granddaughter, from the time she was four months old to seven months old.

On virtually every one of those Thursdays and Fridays, I would take her for a stroller walk for nearly an hour, which just happened to be the perfect amount of time for listening to the previous week’s “Freethought Radio” podcast!

So, I’d put my phone in the back of the stroller, turn the volume up as high as I could to drown out any traffic noise, and happily listen to the podcast as I pushed the stroller along the sidewalks in our neighborhood.

Although at such a young age, it’s highly unlikely my granddaughter was able to grasp what was being said, I like to think that the enlightening freethought messages somehow found a way to enter her neural pathways anyway, perhaps predisposing her to a life as a freethinker.

Randy Hilfman
Washington

Senate chaplain said Lord would guide them

I was interested to hear the Senate chaplain (a position which should not exist) infer in one of his impeachment invocations (a ritual that should not exist) that the Lord, in its infinite wisdom, would guide the senators to make the right decision. Shows how much the Lord knows.

With President Trump declaring in the State of the Union address that he is going to put prayer back in the schools, looks like you folks at FFRF will have a busy year.

Finally, thanks for giving me a chuckle by publishing in the January/February issue the photo of the Alabama high school football team baptizing folks in a livestock watering tank.

Phyllis Murphey
California

Religion and morality are not synonymous

Many people believe that morality and their religion are the same — and that the more pious they display themselves, the more they will appear as paragons of virtue.

But we nonbelievers know better. How often, after all, has religion served as a charlatan’s mightiest fortress? And how many believers have sunk to the lowest depths of immorality, camouflaged by religion’s respectability?

When most Americans finally learn that religion and morality are not synonymous — and that religion itself often hinders morality, they’ll run like hell when they come across a politician who flaunts his or her faith like a shameless exhibitionist.

David Quintero
California

Help get more freethought into libraries

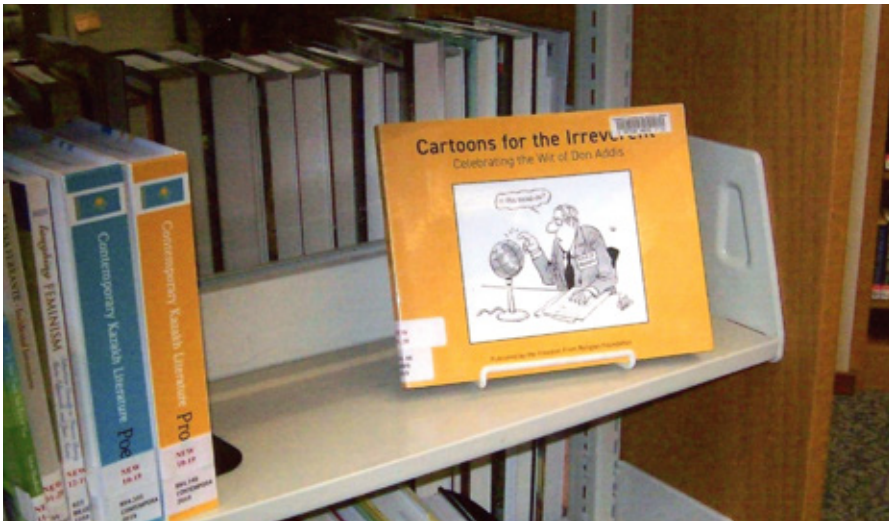


Photo by Dan Hilbert

A copy of *Cartoons for the Irreverent* is available at the McMinnville Public Library in Oregon.

In November, I ordered the book of Don Addis cartoons (*Cartoons for the Irreverent*) from FFRF, with the express purpose of gifting it to the McMinnville Public Library. After several months, it finally appeared on the “new books” rack. Maybe FFRF members could follow suit and get more freethought material into their local libraries. Throughout the years, I figure I have gotten at least 13 freethought books added to my local library system.

I am a longtime member of FFRF and have also succeeded in getting Freethought Today into four libraries.

Dan Hilbert
Oregon

Hooray for FFRF’s TV ad during Dem debate

Bravo and thank you for running an ad during the Democratic debate on Feb. 5! Good job! I support you all the way!

Alan Iberg
Oregon

The Bladensburg cross case conundrum

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that an old and large concrete cross maintained with government funds on government property in Bladensburg, Md., did not violate the First Amendment requiring the separation of church and state because passage of time somehow diminished its Christian religion symbolism and rendered it historically secular. This specious solution ignored not only legal precedent but also several historic facts.

- The Second Commandment (Exodus 20:4, 34:17; Deuteronomy 5:8, 27:15) prohibits making or worshiping graven images or idols in the form of anything.
- Roman cross idolatry, violating the commandment, was created by early foreign priests to exploit vicarious guilt among fearful foreign followers. The Roman Catholic Church combined, construed and confused commandments to cover its blasphemous worship of Roman or Latin crosses. Copycat American Protestants inexplicably ignore the prohibition by also idolizing foreign crosses.
- Foreign execution crosses are negative and nefarious instruments of torture and death from an ancient barbaric empire. They are not American symbols, but foreign imports from the ancient Middle East by way of pagan Rome. American revolutionary, founder and second President John Adams opined, “the most fatal example of the abuses of grief which the history of mankind has

preserved — the cross.”

Unthinking Americans disrespect and disregard the biblical commandment by idolizing foreign crosses. Those who believe biblical scripture is the hallowed word of God, but pick what they prefer and reject the rest need to think again. Glorifying sadistic symbols of maiming and murder is sordid and sacrilegious.

The American flag, American eagle, Liberty Bell, Statue of Liberty, Liberty torch, Christian fish, dove with olive branch or divine assurance rainbow are more sacred symbols for American Christians.

John Compere
Texas

Camara’s ‘Holy Hierarchy’ is powerful, enlightening

I watched Jeremiah Camara’s movie, “Holy Hierarchy.” I did not realize how images of God, Jesus and even Mary as white people had such an effect. As a heathen (my term for myself), I had kept some religions images in my home. They are all as white as am I. I will now remove such images from display in my home. I will not give them away as that would continue the stereotyping. This is a very powerful and enlightening movie. I recommend that everyone should watch it.

Joe Gillis
Tennessee

Editor’s note: See page 15 to read Camara’s FFRF convention speech. Watch the film on Amazon Prime.

Church-state separation may not exist for long

In Lapeer, Mich., the police vehicles have “In God We Trust” on their license plates. In Marysville, Mich., the City Council is pressing for compulsory prayer back in the schools. At a national level, President Trump is giving free

reign to the evangelicals to institute their agenda, which strongly supports prayer in school and forced recital of the Pledge of Allegiance.

If Trump wins a second term, no religions will exist in the United States except the evangelical church. The country will dissolve into a dictatorship.

These are pressing matters that are taking my time and which have me greatly concerned. These are truly desperate times for the United States. With the Trump administration, the separation of church and state has been and will be eroded to the point that “separation” will no longer exist. Trump has taken the power from Congress and has packed the courts. Without a revolution, I fear the separation of church and state will not be withheld.

Mark J. Taylor
Michigan

Freethought Today helps in these dark times

Thanks for all your great work. Reading Freethought Today puts me in a good mood, especially in these dark times. I’ve enclosed a check to become a Lifetime Member.

Janet Nye
Minnesota

Senators use religious ideology when voting

Our creepy creeping theocracy has now shifted into second gear. Have you noticed? The corruption and chaos of the Dark Ages have been brought to the United States of America by the Republican Party and Dictator Trump. They are debating who has the right prayers, who has real faith and who is a cult, and who is going to save this Christian nation from Democrats, socialists, liberals and secularists? Ultimately, from the devil! The myth and superstition is everywhere, just like in ancient times, and we must call it out for what it is: a tool of corrupt politicians.

Trump said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi can’t possibly be praying for him, because she is a “horrible person” and one of those Democrats who are “vicious as hell” and “stone-cold crazy.” He openly questioned her faith and whether “she prays at all.” He accused Democrats of conducting a “deranged

A note to FFRF Members

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crusade” against him. In fact, he and his oligarch conspirators are carrying out a Christian crusade to overturn the Constitution in favor of the Old Testament. After all, some of Trump’s supporters and he himself claim he was “chosen by God” or “heaven sent.”

Trump said Sen. Mitt Romney only used “religion as a crutch” when he decided to vote to convict him on the impeachment charge. And, of course, Romney is a Mormon, rather than a Christian evangelical. How is it that the Republican senators all voted as a solid block to acquit Trump (with the exception of Romney)? Religious ideology, that’s why.

Trump and the other oligarchs are using code words like “liberty” and “freedom” that to them mean individuals of privilege should not have to sacrifice anything for “social justice,” or to end discrimination or ensure civil rights or even clean air and water and social services. Their religion is so selfish that, if Jesus was real and returned to Earth, he would be horrified.

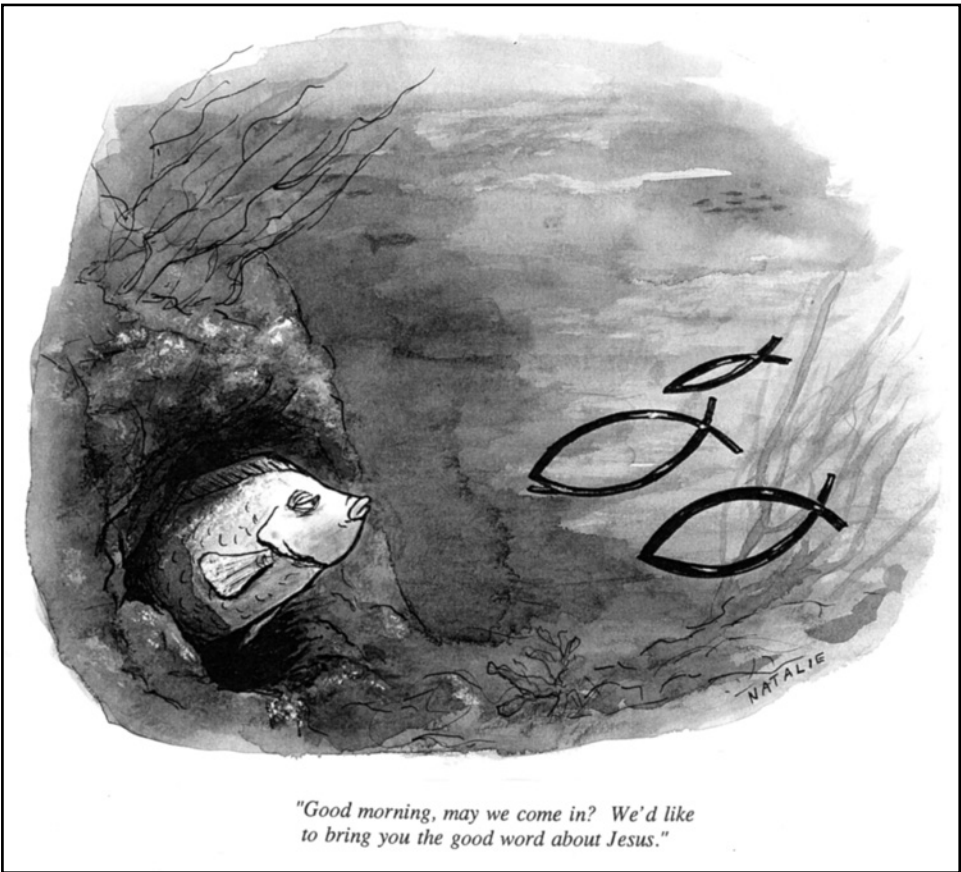
Ron Herman
New Mexico

Buy *Founding Myth* to donate to your library

In the December issue, there was the article “Pastor burns copy of *The Founding Myth*.”

This inspired me to purchase five copies of Andrew L. Seidel’s book, *The Founding Myth*, and donate them to my local public library. I recommend that every FFRF member purchase at least one copy of *The Founding Myth* and donate it to their public library. It’s a great way to promote freethought and provide some financial support to FFRF.

John Dunn
California



Creeds throughout time are devoid of reason

Throughout my upbringing, I was, as a matter of routine, obliged to recite a “creed,” i.e., a definitive statement of Christian faith. To learn that more than one of these devices was in common use among the various congregations in our town was something I found at the time to be only mildly perplexing. Little did I know that over the centuries, Christians have felt the need to develop well over 100 different creeds, each one as devoid of reason as the others.

Only recently did it occur to me that any one of us might put forth an equally valid, personal statement of faith. For example, the following creed says all anyone would ever need to know about the

belief system I have come to embrace. And while others of you might find it interesting or even helpful, no one will be required to memorize or recite it.

An Atheist Creed

I believe everyone should have a chance to fly.
I believe in chivalry and sportsmanship and that the Golden Rule is the best idea anyone ever had.
I believe undivided attention is the greatest compliment one can bestow or receive.
I believe dog is humans’ best friend, that elephants have a mind and that even a moth can sense kindness.
I believe intelligence or stupidity may be inherited but that ignorance is a choice.

I believe that everything which begins will have an end,
that there exist profound truths beyond our comprehension
and that humor affords our only sane retort.

I believe that love cannot save us,
yet is the one sure thing worth dying for.
I believe heaven is a moment,
that only the living can suffer hell
and that death is no more mysterious than the flipping of a light switch to Off.

Michael Brandt
Wisconsin

Does law still apply if roles are reversed?

What happens when the gay baker refuses to serve evil-gelicals?

Tim Scott
South Carolina

Donation to ad campaign will help your vital work

The transcriptions of the speeches given at FFRF’s annual conventions continue to be a favorite section of Freethought Today for this supporter.

I especially want to applaud you for having invited Rachel Laser of Americans United. She’s doing great work!

I have enclosed a check to be applied to your advertising campaign. It appears that, along with the prevailing sense of anomie running amok, it’s generating significant numbers of new members.

As always, I can depend on the superior sense of ethics which prevail at FFRF to continue your vital and wonderful work.

Alan Maximuk
Iowa

CRANKMAIL

Here is this issue’s installment of Crankmail, where we republish, unedited, some of the mail we get at FFRF that doesn’t deserve Letterbox status. Not for the faint of heart.

Abortion: You should not mislead people about what god says about abortion. Exodus 21 clearly says life for life. A baby can survive if born as early as 21 weeks. You better do a few more bible studies. — Dennis Zacharias

Bow to Christ: I just want to say that you guys can keep your liberal “freedom from religion” garbage in Wisconsin. That junk isn’t welcome in WV. There are many in this state that still hold to godly principles and the truth of Scripture. It amazes me how organizations like this exist and take offense at these things and try to put a stop to it, and in turn disrespect and offend the Christians. Don’t give me

that “separation of church and state” spill either. We both know that means that the state can’t govern how the church operates and does not mean that Christian values can’t be expressed publicly. If someone is offended then guess what? WHO CARES! One day you guys will bow before Christ, either as your Savior or your Judge. Rom 10:9 — Jayce Mersten

Hell: There are no atheists in hell, when they die and their souls see HELL, they believe but it’s too late — Roland Bouchard

u want a fight: Who in the hell are you to be telling people what is right or wrong. I find that when a person or group of people say that what I think, say, do, live is wrong then it’s time that I find that person or group and knock it on its fucking ass, then keep knocking down till they learn to leave me alone. So if it’s a fight u want it’s a fight u get you hitler loving

sob’s — Robert Tess

Go pack sand: I have been reading numerous articles where the FFRF has threatened numerous sheriff’s around the country in regards to the “In God We Trust” stickers on the sheriff department vehicles and wearing their uniform while addressing church congregations they have been invited to speak at. From what I can gather, all of them have basically told your attorneys to pack sand and fuck off. I also find it refreshing to see the courts-of-law throwing your lawsuits out with “No Merit” rulings. I interpret that to also mean the FFRF can pack sand and get fucked as well. I highly recommend the FFRF continue to file the frivolous lawsuits and am encouraging the governments affected to file for all court costs, time and a half for employees salaries wasted to respond to your games, fuel to travel to and from court, printer ink, paper, copier toner and any and all other taxpayer expenses for the waste of time you have created for nothing. Eventually, your supporters will begin to question the wisdom of wasting their money on lawsuits that continue to be without merit. Sincerely, — Andy Pastorini

Concord: Why do you force atheist ideas on a Concord School district when most of the community is Christian? Shall we start a “Freedom from atheists” group in order to protect my and my children’s

rights. One student in a school should not be allowed to choose what I watch!!! You are forcing what you believe on me. STOP — Linda Junck

You bastards! You demon possessed bastards want to attack Christians and Veterans like me huh? Well you sons-of-bitches, when The Rapture happens and you get Left Behind, I can’t wait for World War 3...you’re going to get your asses kicked by God Almighty Him-self when He pours out the 21 Judgments! Jesus Christ is going to make you all bow... whether it is on His right side for worship, or on His left for damnation! Fell free to get the hell out of my country that I served and buried over 25 of my friends & comrades! Maybe you bastards can get traded: send you to Syria, Iraq, Iran, etc., and bring the women, children, and persecuted Christians here to the USA! God damn you, God damn your false teachings, and God bless the United States of America!!! — William Pasternak

God the creator: You do know it is scientifically impossible for space time and matter to arise from nothing, by nothing. (what the atheistic world view suggests) Check out the first law of thermodynamics, “Energy can neither be created nor destroyed in nature” You atheists have a problem...if there is no God how did all this stuff get created??? — Michael Hartinger

View daily entries and quotes at ffrf.org/day



Photo by Tinseltown / Shutterstock.com

FREETHOUGHT OF THE DAY

“I don’t believe at all in God and I’m very relieved that I don’t.”

Cloris Leachman

Interview, Huffington Post (2012)

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BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

Larry E. Deutsch, 54, O'Fallon, MO: Possession of child pornography. Deutsch met his alleged teen victim through their Mormon Church ties. (A church statement said Deutsch hasn't led a congregation since 2014.) After the girl moved with her family to Arizona in 2017, he stayed in touch with her even though her parents got a restraining order against him.

It's alleged Deutsch coerced the girl into sending him nude images of herself in October 2019 and then sending her nude images of himself. Court documents say he flew to Arizona in February, bought her a 2020 Nissan Rogue SUV and drove with her to Missouri. She told police they had plans to get married in May 2021.

"Police have a compelling reason to believe there may be other victims," a statement said. "Deutsch was known to have unsupervised contact with children as part of his leadership and service duties at various churches and youth organizations based in St. Charles County and Troy." *Source: KMOV, 2-21-20*

Josue Romero, 46, Wendover, UT: 3 counts of aggravated sexual abuse of a child. Romero, pastor at New Life Ministries Baptist Church, is charged with inappropriate touching of a girl "about 20 times" from 2016–18 when she was in 5th–7th grades.

The girl, now 16, told police Romero touched her while they were "seated at a large table reading from the Bible with other children around, but no one could see because of the table," during a sleepover at the church and while they were outside the church playing hide-and-seek. *Source: Salt Lake Tribune, 2-21-20*

Former Polish Catholic priest **Jacek Miedlar**, 31, was indicted on charges of hate speech and Holocaust denial. Miedlar's religious order, the Congregation of the Mission, had banned him from public speaking, leading him to quit the priesthood in late 2016.

According to the prosecutor, Miedlar said this at a nationalist march in November 2017: "Dear ladies and gentlemen, that synagogues can stand here on our Polish soil in Wroclaw, and that [mayor] Dutkiewicz and Jews can get drunk at them with Talmudic hatred, this is only the result of our tolerance."

Miedlar publicly set fire in 2018 to a portrait of deceased Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, calling him a "communist scab" who "never concealed his Jewish-communist Bolshevik inclinations." Although Mazowiecki was Catholic with no Jewish roots, his political opponents often accused him of Jewish descent to discourage people from voting for him. *Source: Jerusalem Post, 2-20-20*

Frederick J. Lutz, 76, Springfield, MO: Forcible sodomy, felony sex abuse and 2 counts of 2nd-degree statutory sodomy while he was pastor at St. Joseph Catholic Parish in Advance in January and February 2000.

Lutz allegedly called the 17-year-old boy, who had been doing yard work, into the rectory where Lutz was drinking alcohol and watching porn. The boy told police Lutz "blocked the door and would not let him out" until he performed and received oral sex and promised to come back the next day with marijuana.

Another boy filed a complaint with the diocese in 2006 that Lutz molested him in 1972 when he was 17 after a night of drinking. He alleged he woke up to Lutz masturbating him and that the next day at Mass, Lutz handed him a bible and wished him "good luck" in college. The diocese ignored the complaint. *Source: Riverfront Times, 2-19-20*

Christopher "Checkerz" Williams, 47, Baton Rouge, LA: Aggravated assault with a firearm, aggravated criminal damage to property, illegal carrying and discharge of weapons and reckless operation. Williams, lead pastor at Renew Church, was charged with firing a handgun at the driver of an 18-wheeler on I-10 after Williams' vehicle struck the truck. He then fled the scene. *Source: WBRZ, 2-18-20*

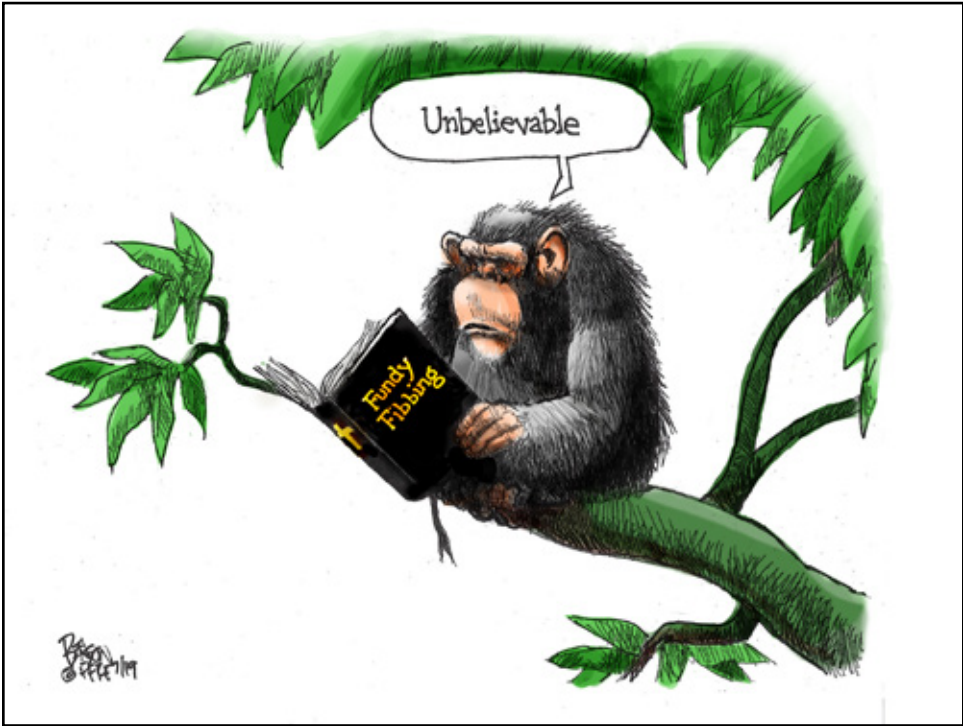
Guia Cabactulan, 59, **Marissa Duenas**, 41, and **Aminda Estopare**, 48, Los Angeles leaders of the Philippines-based Kingdom of Jesus Christ Church, have been charged as part of an alleged scheme to trick followers into becoming fundraisers and arrange sham marriages to keep them in the U.S.

Former followers told the FBI they worked long hours soliciting donations for the church and were beaten and psychologically abused if they didn't make daily quotas. Some described having to live in cars at truck stops.

Between 2014–19, \$20 million was sent to the Philippines. Investigators documented 82 sham marriages over a 20-year period. *Source: AP, 2-14-20*

Stricjavvar F. Strickland, 37, Kalamazoo, MI: Misdemeanor assault and battery. Strickland, senior pastor at Second Baptist Church, is charged with striking a deacon at the church Dec. 15. Strickland claimed it was self-defense. *Source: mlive.com, 2-12-20*

Paul E. Lubienecki, 62, Hamburg, NY: 2 counts of cyberstalking. Lubienecki, an adjunct professor at



Christ the King Seminary in East Aurora, is accused of making voicemail threats starting last August to TV news reporter Charlie Specht for his stories on abuse scandals in the Diocese of Buffalo and at the seminary.

"You're still a bad Catholic and a horrible reporter," a message on Specht's phone said. "I hope to God I don't see you walking around."

Hours after the diocese announced on Feb. 4 the closure of the seminary, Specht gave a live report and received a call: "You must be so happy the seminary's closing. You're a bad person. I know where you live ... I'm gonna find you. I'm gonna kill you."

Lubienecki also allegedly left menacing messages for former diocesan employee Siobhan O'Connor and Fr. Ryszard Biernat. *Source: WKBW, 2-12-20*

Todd T. Hogue, 59, Curwensville, PA: 2 counts of 3rd-degree criminal sexual conduct. Hogue, pastor at Community Baptist Church since 2003, allegedly assaulted a 17-year-old girl at Lake Region Christian School in Baxter, MN, in 1987–88 when he was 27 and was a youth pastor at First Baptist Church and girls basketball coach.

Allegations include assault on several occasions before and after the girl's 18th birthday, including sexual intercourse. The investigation revealed other instances of alleged behavior by Hogue, including snapping students' bra straps and other inappropriate touching. *Source: Brainerd Dispatch, 2-11-20*

Jefferson Kwamina-Crystal, 65, Spartanburg, SC: 1st-degree sexual battery and sexual misconduct. Kwamina-Crystal, a chaplain at Leath Correctional Institution in Greenwood, allegedly coerced an inmate to perform oral sex on him in his office between August and December 2019. *Source: WSPA, 2-11-20*

Taisha D. Smith-DeJoseph, 43, Willingboro, NJ: 13 counts of computer criminal activity, tax fraud, theft by deception and theft. It's alleged she stole \$561,777 from 2015–19 while overseeing finances at St. Paul's Baptist Church, filed a fraudulent income tax return in 2017 and did not file at all in 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2018. *Source: Philly Inquirer, 2-11-20*

Ryan S. Walsh, 27, Gulf Breeze, FL: Transmitting obscene material to a minor, lewd and lascivious behavior involving a minor and use of a computer to solicit/seduce a child. Walsh, youth director at United Methodist Church, is accused of inappropriate touching, messaging and sending photos to a 13-year-old girl. *Source: WALA, 2-10-20*

Antonio Carlisle, 45, Jacksonville, FL: Sexual battery and sexual misconduct. Carlisle, senior pastor at Greater Truevine Missionary Baptist Church in Lake City and education supervisor at the Florida State Prison in Raiford, allegedly penetrated the victim anally with his penis without consent on Aug. 6. *Source: Miami Herald, 2-7-20*

David R. Darby, 41, Paris, TX: Aggravated sexual assault of a child. Darby, youth pastor at Freedom Church, is accused of an assault on Jan. 1, 2013. *Source: KXII, 2-7-20*

Jason Thomas, 40, Coppell, TX: Aggravated sexual assault of a child. Thomas, associate minister of worship at Valley Ranch Baptist Church, allegedly had sexual contact with a girl under 14 years old. *Source: CBS Dallas, 2-7-20*

Logan Wesley III, 56, Texarkana, AR: 18 felony counts related to alleged sexual abuse of 3 underage girls. Wesley, pastor of Trinity Temple Church of God in Christ, allegedly started molesting one of the girls when she was 12 and continued for several years on a regular basis. *Source: Texarkana Gazette, 2-6-20*

Elmer R. Perez, 45, New Bedford, MA: Witness intimidation, rape, aggravated rape and 2 counts of indecent assault and battery on a person 14 or older. Perez, pastor of Iglesia de Jesucristo, allegedly met the married parishioner at a market last October and convinced her to go to the storefront church, where the assaults took place. Prosecutor Zac Mercer said 5 women have come forward with assault allegations. One is pregnant. *Source: Standard-Times, 2-3-20*

David Desmond, Sioux Falls, SD: Grand theft embezzlement. Desmond resigned last July as pastor at St. Mary Catholic Church after being confronted about financial irregularities and frequent absences. An audit revealed over \$95,000 worth of questionable disbursements over a 5-year period. Desmond's whereabouts are unknown. *Source: KELO, 2-3-20*

Rolando Fuentes, 53, Anaheim, CA: Lewd acts with a minor, rape, sexual battery, domestic battery and child annoyance. Fuentes, pastor at Centro Familia Cristiano Peniel, has 3 alleged victims, including 2 juveniles. The church, founded by Fuentes and his wife in 2008, mainly serves Guatemalan immigrants. *Source: KABC, 1-31-20*

Frederick G. Smith, 50, Memphis, TN: Identity theft and 2 counts of theft of property over \$10,000. It's alleged that Smith, pastor of New Life Holiness Church, went in March 2015 to the home of church member Cleve Williams and asked her to be on a church board before obtaining personal information such as her Social Security and driver's license numbers.

Williams said she soon began receiving credit card statements in her name showing charges of between \$10,000 and \$60,000. Carolyn Bussell, Williams's daughter-in-law, said the money was used for all kinds of things. "They got dental work done to their teeth ... hair extensions, \$6,500 worth of shoes."

Smith's wife was initially charged with misdemeanors but she was not indicted due to insufficient evidence. *Source: Fox Memphis, 1-31-20*

Richard T. Brown, 78, Dittmer, MO: Aggravated sexual assault of a child. Brown, a Catholic priest living at a church treatment center for sex addicts, is charged with molesting a girl between the ages of 6 and 14 in 1989–96 in Texas.

Brown told a detective the girl was "fascinated" by him, "sat in my lap" and "was aggressively all over me," an arrest warrant said.

Brown was forced out as pastor of Our Lady of the Lake in 1994 in Rockwall, TX, a year after another alleged victim told church leaders he abused her in 1981. He underwent therapy and continued to serve in adult-only ministries.

Brown allegedly admitted to Dallas detective David Clark in 2019 that he sexually abused as many as 50 children during his time at the Dallas diocese. "It should be noted," Clark wrote in the affidavit, "Brown has not been investigated or prosecuted for any of his acts of sexual abuse against children." *Source: Dallas Morning News, 1-30-20*

Robert D. Adkins, 75, Ona, W.VA: Pleaded guilty to mail fraud. In a plea bargain, Adkins, volunteer treasurer at Antioch Baptist Church, admitted writing over \$487,000 worth of checks to personal creditors without the knowledge of church leaders from 2012–18. The fraud charge stems from mailing a church check in December 2018 to a Texas creditor to pay his monthly payment on a 2016 Ford Escape. *Source: WV MetroNews, 2-19-20*

Brian D. Batke, 73, Surrey, BC: Pleaded guilty

to sexual assault. Batke was associated with Cloverdale Christian Fellowship Church at the time of the 2007 assault of a minor. He was a church elder until 2005 and then served as a church director until 2007.

Samuel Emerson, a pastor at the church, was found guilty of sexual assault in November. *Source: CBC, 2-18-20*

Andrea Knecht (née Lightfoot), 34, Omaha, NE: Pleaded no contest to 1st-degree sexual assault. Knecht, a part-time coach at Marian Catholic High School in 2013, was charged with assaults on a freshman basketball player when Knecht was 27 and the girl was 14 and 15.

Knecht later married and had a child. "Phone records were gathered which showed hundreds of calls between the victim and the defendant during that time period," prosecutor Molly Keane told the court.

The girl's parents discovered the phone calls and the school told Knecht to stop contacting her. "The defendant then, according to reports, bought the victim a burner phone to continue their contact," Keane said. She was eventually fired but the school never alerted police. The girl didn't file a complaint to police until 2019.

According to its website, "Marian teaches the beliefs of the Roman Catholic faith in a caring and loving community atmosphere" to girls preparing for college. *Source: World-Herald, 2-1-20*

Sentenced

Kevin Lonergan, 31, Pottsville, PA: 1 to 2 years in prison and sex offender registration for 15 years after pleading guilty to indecent assault. Lonergan, pastor at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Allentown, admitted rubbing his body against the 17-year-old victim's body in 2018 and sending her 20 sexually explicit photos and a video.

Lonergan had been transferred in 2016 from another parish after a 15-year-old girl alleged he assaulted her. He was temporarily removed from ministry but later reinstated before his transfer.

"We are still transferring priests that molest children?" asked Judge Maria Dantos at sentencing. "If he had been sanctioned and fired, this victim would not be a victim."

Lonergan apologized. "I am guilty of violating your trust and stealing your dignity as a person," he told the girl. "My actions were disgusting and selfish."

Dantos berated the priest's many supporters who came to court. "There is no churchgoing person who should be supporting your actions. Period." *Source: Morning Call, 2-24-20*

Orlando Martinez-Chavez, 48, Jersey City, NJ: 8 years in prison. Martinez-Chavez, a father of 3 and pastor at Iglesia Pentecostal Lirio de los Valles, was found guilty at trial of sexual assaults on a 10-year-old girl from the church. He later pleaded guilty to assaults on 2 other underage victims. *Source: Daily Voice, 2-22-20*

Olivet University, a San Francisco-based evangelical college, and **4 of its top executives** with ties to media companies pleaded guilty in New York to falsifying business records and money laundering and were fined \$1.25 million. The entities and leaders also have ties to controversial Korean-American pastor David Jang, whose expansive global network founded Olivet, the Christian Post, Christian Today and the International Business Times.

The media companies and Olivet inflated their financial standing to secure \$35 million in loans to purchase high-end computer servers. They instead obtained cheaper servers (or none at all) and used the loans for their own operations as well as transferring funds to each other, according to the Manhattan DA's office.

Olivet offers 21 degree programs to a student body of a few hundred mostly international students on visas from Korea and China. It's accredited through the Association for Biblical Higher Education. *Source: Christianity Today, 2-20-20*

Robert D. Barkman, 66, Atlanta, TX: 30 years in prison after pleading guilty to possession of child pornography and 2 counts of promotion of child pornography. An investigation started in June 2019 when images were discovered on his computer at an unidentified church where he served as youth leader and secretary. He's also a retired middle school teacher.

"According to investigators, it appeared that Barkman has been creating and holding child pornography since the early 2000s," said a prosecution press release. *Source: Texarkana Gazette, 2-10-20*

Hugh Lang, 89, a retired Diocese of Pittsburgh Catholic priest, was sentenced to 9 to 24 months in jail on sexual assault convictions involving a boy who was 11 at the time and is now 30.

He accused Lang of taking him to an isolated basement room in Munhall, then forcing him to undress and masturbate him as punishment for making a joke to other altar boys about Lang drinking the communion wine. *Source: Post-Gazette, 2-6-20*

Thomas W. Steele, 63, Concord, NC: 73 to 100 months in prison and \$123,367 restitution for embezzlement over \$100,000 and 4 counts of exploitation of an elder adult. Steele, pastor of New Life Baptist Church, was convicted of stealing from an

85-year-old widow after the death of her husband in 2015. She had given Steele power of attorney. *Source: WBTV, 2-3-20*

Lincoln Warrington, 49, Teaneck, NJ: A year and a day in prison for his part as treasurer in a scheme to steal more than \$5.3 million from the Is-raelite Church of God in Jesus Christ from 2007–15. Co-conspirator and pastor **Jermaine Grant**, 44, was sentenced to 18 months. Both pleaded guilty.

The Southern Poverty Law Center calls the Har-lem-based church a black nationalist hate group. Grant has claimed that a black Jesus will return to Earth to kill and enslave whites. *Source: Daily Voice, 1-30-20*

Michael Sperou, 69, Portland, OR: 160 months in prison and \$70,000 in victim damages after being convicted of sexually assaulting a child under age 12 on separate occasions between 1991–96. Sperou, senior pastor of N. Clackamas Bible Community Church, was found guilty of abusing girls who lived within the community, which some have called a cult. At the time it was called the Southeast Bible Church. *Source: KATU, 1-31-20*

Brian Stanley, 57, Coloma, MI: 60 days in jail, 5 years' probation and 15 years' sex offender reg-istration after pleading guilty to attempted unlawful imprisonment of a 17-year-old boy in 2013 when he was pastor at St. Margaret's Catholic Church.

Stanley immobilized the boy in plastic bubble wrap and covered his mouth and eyes with masking tape for over an hour before letting him go. Three other alleged victims have come forward, said pros-ecutor Alison Furtaw, including a boy who was 13, but those cases are past the statute of limitations.

"Although [Stanley] reports there was no sexual reason for doing this to the victims, they thought he was masturbating, but it was hard for them to tell because their eyes were taped shut," Furtaw told the court. *Source: mlive.com, 1-30-20*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

St. Michael's Catholic Church and **St. Fran-ces Xavier Cabrini Parish** in Rochester, NY, are being sued for alleged 1969 sexual assaults of a Florida plaintiff. The man alleges he was molested by Fr. **Benedict Ehman** and **another priest** when he was 8 years old, sometimes singly and some-times by both priests at the same time. *Source: WROC, 2-19-20*

The Catholic **Archdiocese of Denver** and Den-ver priest **Andrew Kemberling** are defendants in a suit alleging St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Parish and School at Kemberling's direction used \$2.2 million in restricted funds to cover things the money was not appropriated for over a 5-year period.

The total includes \$250,000 from a fund to help a teacher at the school pay for the education of her 4 children after their father died of cancer. *Source: CBS Denver, 2-18-20*

The **First Baptist Church** of Hammond, IN, and **David Hyles** are being sued by Joy Rider, who al-leges Hyles raped her repeatedly as a teen in the late 1970s when he was a youth pastor.

She alleges officials of the church and **Hyles-Anderson College** were complicit. David Hyles is the son of the church's charismatic lead-er, the late Jack Hyles.

The suit asserts that after Rider's father con-fronted church officials, he was given a lucrative job at Hyles-Anderson "in exchange for his silence and agreement not to take the allegations to law en-forcement" and that David Hyles was moved to a Texas church. *Source: nwtimes, 2-18-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Paterson**, NJ, is be-ing sued over alleged abuse at the now-closed Don Bosco Technical High School in Paterson by a for-mer student, who asserts he was molested by **Sean Rooney**, a priest and chemistry teacher, over 100 times in the early 1970s. Rooney's last known ad-dress was in Tempe, AZ.

The website bishop-accountability.org noted Rooney was also accused in a 2013 suit of abuse of a 14-year-old seminary student at a retreat house in Massachusetts and at a seminary in New York. *Source: nj.com 2-17-20*

The Catholic **Archdiocese of Los Ange-les**, former Archbishop **Roger Mahony** and for-mer priest **Michael Baker** are being sued by a 32-year-old man who alleges Baker was returned to parish duties even after admitting to molesting him and other children.

Baker has been accused of molesting at least 23 men as young boys during his decades as a priest. He was convicted in 2007 and sentenced to 10 years. *Source: KTLA, 2-12-20*

Jerome Yeiser, a deacon at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, NY, is being sued for alleged-ly absconding with over \$200,000 from at least 5 church families during the last 6 years. He alleged-ly used the money to pay for a personal trip, his daughter's law school tuition and an IRS tax lien.

Yeiser and **his wife Avis** have faced many past charges of financial malfeasance, including \$170,000 in civil judgments, \$90,000 in unpaid tax liens, a home foreclosure, 3 bankruptcy filings and prosecution on more than a dozen federal criminal charges. *Source: amny.com, 2-12-20*

At least 20 former **Jehovah's Witnesses** members in the UK are suing the church over historical sexual abuse. The Witnesses have a policy of not punishing child sex abuse unless another person besides the accuser has wit-nessed it or an abuser confesses.

Former elder John Viney, who alleges he was abused between the ages 9 and 13 by a distant family member who was an active Witness, said the church is "inadvertently" protecting abusers. "The way that Jehovah's Witnesses handle matters with-in the congregation, it's a closed shop," Viney said. *Source: BBC, 2-4-20*

Kevin Vann, bishop of the (Latin Rite) Catho-lic Diocese of Orange and **Edward Poettgen** are being sued by a 28-year-old man who alleges Po-ettgen fondled and penetrated him twice at St. Poly-carp School in Stanton, CA, when he was 6.

The plaintiff said that after he reported the al-leged abuse in January 2019, Vann treated him like "an enemy of the church" instead of offering com-passion. Poettgen is now assigned to St. Boniface Parish in Anaheim.

"They served subpoenas on my mother, my girlfriend and my employers, hoping to intimidate me but I will not be intimid-ated," the plaintiff said. "I find strength in know-ing that my actions will protect other children." *Source: KABC, 2-4-20*

The **Diocese of Buf-falo**, NY, and **St. Timo-thy's Catholic Church** are defendants in a suit filed by a plaintiff who alleged oral and anal rape by St. Timothy's pastor **John L. Ducette** starting in 1986 when he was 13. Ducette, who was also police chaplain for the town of Tonawanda, died in 2016 at age 79.

"Plaintiff estimates that Monsignor Ducette sex-ually assaulted and abused him over one hundred (100) times over the course of an eighteen (18) month period," the suit alleges. "Monsignor Ducette wore his religious garb while sexually assaulting and abusing Plaintiff." *Source: Buffalo News, 2-1-20*

Richard T. Brown, a recently arrested for-mer Texas Catholic priest (see Arrested/Charged above), repeatedly raped an 8-year-old girl in the early 1980s after Sunday school at Holy Family of Nazareth Parish in Irving, according to a suit filed against the Diocese of Dallas.

The suit was filed on behalf of the alleged victim by her aunt. When they were alone, Brown allegedly told the girl "God said it was OK." Now 45, "Jane Doe" struggles with drug addiction and living an in-dependent life and doesn't have a driver's license, her aunt said. *Source: WFAA, 1-30-20*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

Ohio televangelist **Ernest Angley** and his Grace Cathedral megachurch in Cuyahoga Falls reached a confidential settlement in a suit filed by Brock Mill-er of Myrtle Beach, SC. Miller, a former church em-ployee, alleged Angley abused and harassed him for a decade starting in 2004, forced him to get a vasectomy, inspected his genitals and asked him sexual questions.

Had the case gone to trial, attorneys had agreed the 98-year-old Angley wouldn't be required to testi-fy due to age-related maladies. *Source: AP, 2-17-20*

The Catholic **Archdiocese of Los Angeles**, **Lawrence Lovell** and the **Claretian Missionaries** agreed to settle for \$1.9 million a suit filed by Rich-ard Barrios, 47, who alleged Lovell molested him at San Gabriel Mission Parish from 1982–84 when he was 9 to 11 years old.

Lovell was convicted in 1986 in Los Angeles of abusing a 14-year-old boy and placed on 3 years' probation. He later pleaded guilty after being trans-ferred to Arizona to child molestation and sexual conduct with a minor and received a 14-year sen-tence. He's scheduled to be released March 7, 2021. *Source: L.A. Times, 1-30-20*

Finances

The Catholic **Diocese of Buffalo**, NY, facing 260 lawsuits involving clergy sexual abuse, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Filings estimate between \$50 million and \$100 million in liability. The diocese already paid \$17.5 million to 106 victims in 2018.

Source: WKBW, 2-28-20

The Catholic **Diocese of Harrisburg**, PA, filed for bankruptcy, 6 months after disclosing it paid over \$12 million to over 100 people sexually abused as children by its clerics. Twenty-three U.S. dioceses and religious orders, including one in Guam, have filed for bankruptcy.

The diocese told the court it has more than 200 creditors and estimated liabilities between \$50 million and \$100 million, with assets of less than \$10 million. The diocese estimates it faces about 200 additional child sexual abuse claims. *Source: AP, 2-19-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Richmond**, VA, an-nounced creation of a compensation fund for vic-tims after identifying nearly 50 priests credibly ac-cused of sexual abuse of minors.

Survivors of clergy sex abuse had until April 3 to submit a claim. The program will be administered by BrownGreer, a Richmond-based settlement firm. *Source: WWBT, 2-17-20*

Disgraced Cardinal **Theodore McCarrick** secretly gave nearly \$1 million to a controversial group of Catholic mis-sionaries and supported leniency for its founder **Carlos Buela** after the Vatican sanctioned Buela in 2010 for sexual wrong-doing with minors. From 2004–17, McCarrick sent the Institute of the Incarnate Word in Argentina dozens of checks from a charitable account he con-trolled at the Archdiocese of Washington, according to church ledgers.

Buela was ultimately ordered to live in a monas-tery in Spain in 2016. McCarrick, defrocked in 2019 for sexual abuse, recently moved from a Kansas fri-ary to an undisclosed location. *Source: Washington Post, 2-17-20*

Legal Developments

Thomas Ericksen, 72, a Catholic priest sen-tenced in 2019 to 30 years for sexual assaults on at least 11 boys, could be released on parole less than a year after being sentenced. According to a letter from the state Department of Corrections to victims, the Wisconsin Parole Commission will consider Er-icksen's request for parole in April.

"I couldn't believe it," said victim Steve Weix. "A lot of people just spent 10 years trying to get him convicted, and it finally happened in September. Now they're already looking at paroling him in April?"

The sentence was described in the letter as "indeterminate," meaning the judge has no control over how long Ericksen will actually serve. Because Ericksen committed the crimes before the state ad-opted "truth in sentencing" in 1999, his prison term is up to the Parole Commission.

Generally, inmates with an indeterminate sen-tence must serve at 25% of it, which is 7½ years for Ericksen. *Source: Wausau Daily Herald, 2-20-20*

John B. Feit, 87, died in a Texas prison only 2 years into his life sentence for the 1960 murder of 25-year-old Irene Garza, a school teacher and former Miss South Texas. Feit was living in Arizo-na when he was finally arrested in 2016. He left the Catholic priesthood in the early 1970s, married and had 3 children.

Trial testimony showed Garza was killed on Easter weekend after Feit heard her confession at Sacred Heart Parish in McAllen when he was 27. An autopsy revealed she had been raped while uncon-scious and was asphyxiated.

Prosecutor Michael Garza alleged Feit was sex-ually excited by the sound of women walking in high heels and by the sight of them kneeling for prayer. Evidence was also presented that the Catholic Church conspired with law enforcement to prevent a scandal and to shield Feit from being charged. The investigation died and the church transferred him. *Source: McAllen Monitor, 2-13-20*

The Pennsylvania attorney general's office is in-vestigating whether **Jehovah's Witnesses** repeat-edly failed to report child sexual abuse allegations. Mark O'Donnell, a former Witness, was interviewed

last year at his home in Baltimore and testified be-fore a statewide grand jury in Harrisburg, PA.

The Witnesses branch in Wallkill, NY, in a state-ment to USA Today, said it "cares deeply about chil-dren" and always tries to follow the law.

In 2018, a Montana jury awarded \$35 million to Alexis Nunez, who said she was sexually abused for years by a member of the Thompson Falls con-gregation. Two others told elders in 2004 they were abused by the same man, but the elders never re-ported it to authorities.

The church appealed the verdict and the Mon-tana Supreme Court ruled in its favor, finding that the lower court erred when it said Witnesses had a duty to report. *Source: USA Today, 2-8-20*

Peter Green, 56, a leader of a New Mexico paramilitary religious sect with anti-Semitic leanings who is facing multiple counts of child sex abuse charges, was released on house arrest despite pro-tests from law enforcement. Green is a lieutenant colonel in the Aggressive Christianity Missions Training Corps near Grants.

His mother-in-law, sect leader **Deborah Green**, 71, was sentenced in 2018 to 72 years in prison for kidnapping, criminal sexual penetration of a minor and child abuse. Eleven children were rescued from the compound.

Cibola County Undersheriff Michael Munk said former members described leaders treating follow-ers like slaves and physically beating children. Two other leaders are serving prison sentences. *Source: AP, 2-4-20*

Allegations

Abuse allegations by 2 women against **Wes-ley Feltner**, former lead pastor at Berean Baptist Church in Burnsville, MN, were deemed credible after a church investigation. Feltner behaved in a shameful way not "free from sinful habits" and de-served "rebuke or censure" in the eyes of church elders, according to a recent statement from the church to congregants.

JoAnna Hendrickson and Megan Frey, now in their mid-30s, said Feltner, now 41, dated each of them at the same time in 2002 when he was a youth pastor and they were 18.

Their accusations came to light last fall after Feltner applied for a position at a church in Clarks-ville, TN. Hendrickson and Frey created a website about their experiences and the church's failure to take action. "We love Christ, we love the church, and the whole reason this is coming about is be-cause the church needs to be saved from people like this," Frey said.

The investigation also determined Feltner inten-tionally misused his church credit card, which offi-cials said will be offset by reducing the amount they agreed to pay him when he resigned. *Source: Star Tribune, 2-5-20*

Rabbi **Avraham Mordechai Alter**, son of the leader of the ultra-Orthodox Ger Hasidic sect in Is-rael, is accused of sexual assaults by male yeshiva students in Jerusalem dating back 2 decades. His father, Yaakov Aryeh Alter, 80, learned years later about the accusations and removed him from the yeshiva, but authorities weren't contacted and com-plainants have received no financial or emotional support.

It's also alleged the Hasidic community paid about \$86,000 to hush up the scandal, after which the younger Alter was moved to another Hasid-ic institution and the yeshiva was closed. *Source: Haaretz, 12-22-19*

Removed / Resigned

The Southern Baptist Convention expelled **Ranchland Heights Baptist Church** in Midland, TX, for knowingly hiring registered sex offender **Phillip Rutledge** as pastor in 2016. It's the first church to be disfellowshipped by the denomination amid a heightened push to combat sexual abuse.

Rutledge was convicted of sexually assaulting two preteen girls in 2003. A deacon at the church told the local CBS affiliate in 2016 that "the vast majority" of members knew about Rutledge's sex offender status. *Source: New York Times, 2-19-20*

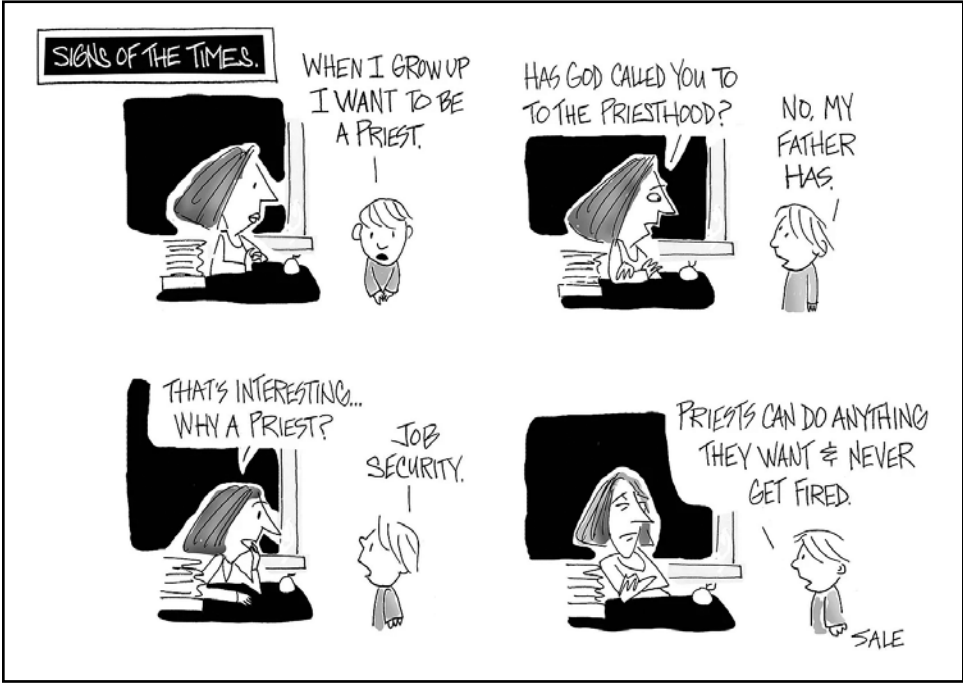
Other

Ulysses Woodard, 44, co-pastor with his wife of True Word of Deliverance Church of God in Prich-ard, AL, killed himself with a handgun after shooting Alisha Woodard in the chest in the parking lot of Cornerstone Church in Mobile, where she had just finished preaching. They were recently estranged.

As police arrived, Woodard fled the scene in his vehicle but soon returned. As officers approached, he shot himself. His wife's injuries were serious but not life-threatening. *Source: Christian Post, 2-28-20*

Richard Logan, 53, Sugar Land, TX, a former pastor and founder of the faith-based nonprofit At-tack Poverty, fatally shot himself after killing his wife and son in the family home, then tried to strangle his daughter. Logan served as missions pastor at River Pointe Church for several years. Diana Logan, 48, was a small-group leader. Their son Aaron was 11.

Logan then drove to San Marcos, where his daughter Ambrielle is a senior at Texas State Uni-versity and tried to strangle her before taking his own life, police said. *Source: Christian Post, 2-14-20*



IN MEMORIAM

Early FFRF volunteer Liz Uhr ‘felt strongly about the mission’

FFRF Lifetime Member Elizabeth (Liz) Uhr died Jan. 9 in Minneapolis at the age of 90 after suffering a stroke on Jan. 3.

Elizabeth Stern was born on Dec. 23, 1929, in Washington, D.C., to Malcka (Razavsky) and Boris Stern. She and her sister, Naomi Rovner, grew up in D.C. She attended Swarthmore College, earning a B.A. in English literature in 1952. She married Leonard Uhr on July 1, 1949, and they moved to Ann Arbor, Mich. They had two boys, Frank and Steve.



Liz Uhr is shown here with her son Frank and her three granddaughters.

They moved to Madison, Wis., where both Liz and Len worked at the University of Wisconsin. Liz was an editor at the Institute for Research on Poverty and active with FFRF, Women’s Medical Fund and Planned Parenthood. Liz wrote fiction, including the novel *Partly Cloudy and Cooler*, published by Harcourt, Brace and World.

After Len’s death in 2000, Liz moved to Hawaii to be near her son, Frank. Liz enjoyed Hawaii and was active with

the Hawaii Dog Park, enjoyed hiking, flowers and had many friends. In May of 2019, she moved to Masonic Care Home in Bloomington, Minn., close to her son Steve.

“Liz was very dear to me,” wrote Tamara Uhr, Liz’s daughter-in-law. “I have been married to Frank for nearly 30 years and Liz has been so wonderful to me. We spent many summers in Madison in the early 1990s and I remembered she loved volunteering at the Women’s Medical Fund and the Freedom From Religion Foundation. She took it very seriously and didn’t want to skip a shift. She felt strongly about the mission and the people she worked with.

“She donated her body to University of Wisconsin Medical School, but when she moved to Hawaii, she did it for the medical school here,” Tamara continued. “Her instructions were no ceremony, no funeral, no obituary, and if cremation remains get returned, she wanted them scattered in the Pacific Ocean.”

Liz’s friend Jan Blakeslee of Madison said: “She was a woman of principle, a writer, mother, devoted friend and dog-walking companion of many years. She is missed.”

Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president, said she, too, will miss her, but happily will be reminded of her every spring.



This photo from about 1966 shows Liz Uhr with her sons, Frank and Steve.

“Liz was an avid gardener, and I and other area friends still have popping up in in early spring some of the miniature irises she shared around, a fascinating mix of brown, blue, yellow and orange,” Gaylor said. “She was an absolutely lovely, gentle, supportive individual — but fierce in her support for reproductive rights and freedom from religion.”

Diane Post was ‘my beautiful flower’

FFRF Lifetime Member Stephen Post wrote the following (edited for length) about his wife, FFRF Lifetime Member Diane Lynn Helder Post, who died Nov. 20, 2019. (She was born March 11, 1948.)

Diane didn’t like to talk much about philosophy or religion, but she had a world-stance that was the foundation of how she viewed the world and approached her life. Diane rejected all supernatural claims, including gods, pseudoscience and superstition. She identified as a Secular Humanist, and we went to a number of their meetings and events.

Let me turn to Diane’s run under the sun:

Love of nature

- She totally loved this intricate and interrelated web of life that over eons has evolved “endless forms most beautiful” (Darwin).
- Our five acres of woods and garden is full of nature and was an immense joy to her. If she had time and the weather was good, she would be out there with a smile.
- She spent countless hours digging, planting and nurturing her garden and native plants, feeding the birds. (In really cold weather, she also fed the foxes and possums).

Love of science

- The first night we met at a dance she brought up topics such as the social structure of Bonobo chimpanzees, or black holes in space. She has told me that when she saw that I was familiar with and enjoyed those topics she realized we might be something special.
- The first time I was over at Diane’s house, I saw that she had stacks of Scientific American and Discover magazines in her bathroom. Once married, we got up to six science magazines per month. Diane read them all.
- I always have a nonfiction book going and Diane always enjoyed hearing



Diane Post

me summarize the more interesting points. She got pretty familiar with relativity, quantum mechanics, materials science, molecular biology, evolution, computer science and so forth.

Notable traits

- Diane was very intelligent. She had a Master’s degree in statistics and another in data communications. She attained a high technical position at AT&T. She mastered my network modeling tool like a fish in water. As we extended the tool for our business, she and I always talked through the design of the complex algorithms and data structures.
- Diane also had a certain kind of whimsy and creativity that I found fun, but that also helped find out-of-the-box solutions, such as design issues in our product.
- Toughness and resilience. Diane worked through marital problems, single parenthood, breast cancer and developmental issues with her children.
- Diane was living the life she wanted with me. If she had wanted something different, she would have done it. She was happy.

Bill Kocol was federal judge

Meaning of life

Diane realized that she was not simply an observer of life, but was an integral part of numerous vast and complex networks, such as the ecosystem, our nation, the economy, her family. There was also accumulated scientific knowledge, art and literature. These existed before her and were much greater than her. They were critical to sustain and enrich her life. Plus, she had compassion and altruism in her heart. She cared about people. She felt a sacred obligation to pitch in and work to leave the world better than she found it. The older she grew, the more she felt an obligation to posterity. She always researched political issues and voted, signed petitions, contacted lawmakers, volunteered at the polls and in the schools, and contributed to causes.

Our marriage

We found each other in our 40s and fell in love. We were together all the time, but I wish I had been wise enough to commit sooner than I did. She was my companion, my best friend, my lover and my true love. I’ll love her until I die.



Bill Kocol

Suppose you have a beautiful flower. You enjoy its beauty, perhaps especially because you know flowers don’t last long. Sure enough, the flower dies. You don’t think, “Damn, I miss that flower.” You think, “Wow, wasn’t that a beautiful flower!” Diane was my beautiful flower. The fact is that I do miss her, more deeply than I ever realized I could miss anyone. We’ve got to appreciate each other while we’re here and enjoy their remembered beauty when they’re gone.

On reflection, I now see my loss and grief are good things. The more you love, the more you will grieve. It is just logic that they have to go together. If I embrace the love, I must also embrace the grief. Her love was worth it. I am happy that so much of my time under the sun could be spent with Diane. The world is still wonderful and life goes on.

The Honorable Judge William G. Kocol, an FFRF member, died Feb. 20 at age 71 with his husband Timothy Gajewski by his side at their home in Los Angeles.

Bill was born Nov. 5, 1948. With a law degree from University of Wisconsin, Bill was appointed a federal administrative law judge in 1992. Within the National Relations Labor Board, he defended the legal rights of union labor and the protection of workers. With over 40 years of distinguished service to the federal government, he retired in 2013. Bill and Tim were legally married in California in 2008.

His obituary in the Los Angeles Times requested that donations in lieu of flowers should be directed to FFRF.

Tamayo, Phelps-Roper, Singh join convention

The Freedom from Religion Foundation has added more speakers — **Megan Phelps-Roper**, **Shusant Singh** and **David Tamayo** — to the illustrious lineup for the 2020 national convention in San Antonio from Nov. 13-15, along with a presentation from FFRF’s Freethinkers of the Year.

They will join legendary activist **Gloria Steinem** and literary titans **Margaret Atwood** and **John Irving**, along with many others, at the Hyatt Regency San Antonio on the famed Riverwalk. The convention venue is limited to about 900 attendees, so please plan ahead. For more details and to register for the convention, turn to the back page or go to ffrf.org/convention2020.

Phelps-Roper was raised in the Westboro Baptist Church, the Topeka, Kan., church known internationally for its daily public protests against members of the LGBTQ community, Jews, other Christians, the military, and countless others.

As a child, teenager and early 20-something, she participated in the picketing almost daily and spearheaded the use of social media in the church. However, dialogue with “enemies” online proved instrumental in her deradicalization, and she left the church and her entire way of life in November 2012. Since then, she has become an advocate for people and ideas she was taught to despise — especially the value of empathy

in dialogue with people across ideological lines. In 2019, she wrote the book *Unfollow: A Memoir of Loving and Leaving the Westboro Baptist Church*.

She will be receiving the \$10,000 Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award.

Sushant Singh is an Indian actor and presenter known for his work predominantly in Hindi cinema. He made his film debut in 1998 with Ram Gopal Varma’s “Satya,” but rose to stardom with the 2000 film “Jungle,” and received rave reviews for portraying slain bandit Durga Narayan Chaudhary. He then went on to star in period dramas such as “Ambedkar” and “The Legend of Bhagat Singh,” and established himself in Bollywood. He has appeared in a few television shows also, and hosted the immensely popular crime show “Savdhaan India” from 2012 to 2019. He has also served as the Honorary General Secretary of CINTAA (Cine & Television Artistes Association), Mumbai. He has appeared in almost 50 movies since 1998.

Singh will be receiving the Avijit Roy Courage Award, which includes a crystal plaque and \$5,000. The award honors the life and work of the Bangladeshi-American atheist and author assassinated in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2015 by Islamist terrorists. It goes to an individual working toward the spread of rational and logical discourse, and recognizes creative and heroic individuals who have persisted, despite hurdles, in their work to promote science, logic and humane ideas.

Tamayo is cofounder and president of Hispanic American Freethinkers, which is the first and only national Latino nonprofit educational organization of its kind. He was vice president of the Reason Rally 2016, former host of the TV Show “Road to Reason – A Skeptic’s Guide to the 21st Century,” founding board director of Camp Quest – Chesapeake, and host of Contrapuntos podcast (featuring de-

Making worry-free convention arrangements

If you are concerned about how uncertainty over the coronavirus may affect plans for FFRF’s late November convention, worry no more! It’s full-speed ahead at FFRF with convention planning at present.

However, if it were to become incumbent upon FFRF to cancel the convention due to the coronavirus, your registration with FFRF would be fully refunded. Hotel reservations at the convention hotel site can be cancelled up to 72 hours before your first night’s reservation.

If you are traveling by air and like to book ahead, FFRF recommends booking a refundable ticket and/or purchasing flight insurance. Most carriers offer a refundable/rebookable ticket at a level beyond basic. Ask if you are not sure.

bates with preachers, science deniers, and other interesting personalities in Spanish). David is the chief information officer for DCS Corporation, a large aerospace engineering company in Washington, D.C. He holds a bachelor’s degree in computer science from George Washington University, and a master’s in management in information technology from University of Virginia.

Steinem and Atwood both will receive FFRF’s “Forward” Award, which is reserved for those who are moving society forward. The award includes a statuette designed by world-renowned sculptor Zenos Frudakis.

Steinem will take part in a conversation with FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor on Friday, Nov. 13, at 3 p.m., breaking for audience questions. A private reception with Steinem afterwards is sold out.

Steinem, who’s been billed as “the world’s most famous feminist,” is a journalist who co-founded Ms. Magazine in 1972, helped found the Women’s Action Alliance, the National Women’s Political Caucus, the Women’s Media Center, and was president of Voters for Choice, a political action committee, for 25 years. She is founding president of the Ms. Foundation for Women, Take our Daughters to Work Day, and many other initiatives. Her books include the bestsellers *Revolution and Within: A Book of Self-Esteem*, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, *Moving Beyond Words*, *Marilyn: Norma Jean* and *My Life on the Road*.

A life-long reproductive rights activist, Steinem has said: “Do not hang out any place where they won’t let you laugh, including churches and temples.”

“An Evening with Margaret Atwood” will take place Friday night, to include a conversation with journalist Katherine Stewart, who will be speaking herself on Saturday. Atwood has agreed to sign books after her talk. The book signing will be followed by a private reception, which is also sold out.

Atwood is the author of more than 50 volumes of fiction, poetry, children’s literature and nonfiction. Her best-known novels include *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *The Edible Woman*, *The Robber Bride*, *The Blind Assassin*, *Oryx and Crake*, which is being adapted into an HBO TV series by filmmaker Darren Aronofsky. A serialized adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* has received 13 Emmy nominations and eight awards including for Best Drama.

Irving, who will receive FFRF’s Emperor Has No Clothes Award, has been nominated for a National Book Club Award three times, winning it in 1980 for *The World According to Garp*. In 2018, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize hon-

ored Irving with the Richard C. Holbrooke Distinguished Achievement Award. He won the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay for “The Cider House Rules” in 2000. He achieved international acclaim after the success of *Garp*. Many of Irving’s books, including *The Cider House Rules* (1985), *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989) and *A Widow for One Year* (1998) have been bestsellers.

Others confirmed to speak at the convention include:

- Journalist and author **Katherine Stewart**. In addition to conducting the on-stage interview with Margaret Atwood, Stewart will talk about her new book, *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*. She is also the author of *The Good News Club: The Christian Right’s Stealth Assault on America’s Children*. In 2014, she was named Person of the Year by Americans United for her coverage of religion, politics, policy and state/church conflicts.

- Phil Zuckerman** is the associate dean and professor of sociology at Pitzer College, and the founding chair of the nation’s first Secular Studies Program at Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif. He is the author of several books, including *What It Means to be Moral* (2019), *Living the Secular Life* (2014), *Society Without God* (2008) and *Faith No More* (2012), among others. Zuckerman is also the editor of several volumes, including *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism* (2016) and *The Social Theory of W.E.B. Du Bois* (2004).

- Black Skeptics Los Angeles founder, novelist and activist **Sikivu Hutchinson**, Ph.D., will be receiving FFRF’s Freethought Heroine Award. Hutchinson is an educator, author, playwright and director. Her books include *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars* (2011), *Godless Americana: Race and Religious Rebels* (2013) and the novel *White Nights, Black Paradise* (2015) on the Peoples Temple and the 1978 Jonestown massacre. She also wrote, directed and produced a short film of “White Nights, Black Paradise.”

- Brian Bolton**, an FFRF Lifetime Member, has recently endowed a professorship at the University of Texas at Austin that will focus on the growing segment of the population that adheres to a secular worldview. The executive wing of FFRF’s office, Freethought Hall, is named for Bolton, due to his support of FFRF’s headquarters expansion. FFRF will be publishing Bolton’s new work, tentatively titled *Why the Bible Is Not a Good Book*, this year. Bolton is a retired academic psychologist with a background in mathematics, statistics and psychometrics. He has edited and authored 10 books.

For more, go to ffrf.org/convention2020.

Important flight info

Air travelers will need REAL ID-compliant licenses or other acceptable forms of ID, such as a valid passport, in order to fly beginning on Oct. 1.

Visit your state’s driver’s licensing agency website to find out exactly what documentation is required to obtain a REAL ID.

Note: FFRF always encourages members making flight arrangements to attend FFRF conventions to either purchase refundable tickets, or purchase major flight insurance, for maximum protection.

Include FFRF In Your Estate Planning

Arrange a bequest in your will or trust, or make the Freedom From Religion Foundation the beneficiary of an insurance policy, bank account or IRA.

IT’S EASY TO DO!

For related information (or to receive a bequest brochure), please contact:

Annie Laurie Gaylor
at (608) 256-8900
info@ffrf.org

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The Hyatt Regency atrium in San Antonio.

San Antonio, Nov. 13-15

Conventional wisdom

Here’s what you need to know about lodging, schedule, meals, etc.

Join the Freedom From Religion Foundation in San Antonio for its 43rd annual convention from Nov. 13–15 at the Hyatt Regency San Antonio. (For information on the guest speakers, see page 23.)

General schedule

The official starting time of the convention, at the Hyatt Regency (123 Losoya), is 1 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 13, continuing through Saturday night. FFRF’s membership and State Representatives meetings will take place Sunday morning, ending by noon. Registration will open by 10:30 a.m.

An early-bird workshop by Andrew L. Seidel, director of strategic response, will take place at 11 a.m. and noon.

Plan to come early and/or stay late if you want to sightsee in this exotic locale. The hotel is less than five minutes from the Alamo and many other attractions. The convention schedule, as always, includes irreverent music, FFRF merchandise sales, complimentary snacks and beverages on Friday and Saturday afternoons and a Friday night dessert reception.

Return the handy registration form on the right or sign up at ffrf.org/convention2020.

Registration

Registration for the convention is only \$60 per FFRF member, \$65 for a companion accompanying a member, \$115 for nonmembers (or you can save money by becoming a member for \$40). High school students or younger are free and the college student rate is \$10.

Make your room reservations directly (see info box on this page). This convention is limited to 900 guests, so we encourage you to register early and book your hotel rooms as soon as possible. Sorry, no refunds after the Oct. 31 pre-registration deadline.

Private receptions

On Friday afternoon from 4–4:45 p.m., there is a private VIP Book Signing /FFRF Fundraiser with Gloria Steinem.

Those who signed up for Steinem’s private reception will receive her most recent book, *The Truth Will Set You Free, But First It Will Piss You Off! Thoughts on Life, Love, and Rebellion*, signed by the author during the reception.

To cap off the Friday schedule, sign up for the VIP Dessert Reception/ FFRF Fundraiser with Margaret Atwood, which takes place after her public conversation with Katherine Stewart Friday night. (\$500)

Room reservations

Hyatt Regency San Antonio
123 Losoya
San Antonio, TX 78205
210-451-6200

Indicate you’re with the “Freedom From Religion Foundation” bloc or reserve online at ffrf.us/hotel.

\$205 (single/double occupancy)
\$215 (triple/quad occupancy)
State and local taxes (currently 16.75 percent) and fees will apply.
Group rate includes standard internet.

This reception is also for a limited number of attendees, so don’t wait to sign up! Attendees will receive Atwood’s most recent book, *The Testaments*, signed by the author during the reception. A major portion of the reception cost is a tax-deductible, charitable contribution to FFRF.

Meals

Friday Dinner Reception (\$60)

Hearty reception with beef steamship with horseradish cream, au jus and mini rolls; pulled BBQ pork slider with pickled onions on sesame roll; ranch spiced chicken satay with tomato BBQ dip; crudité including carrots, cucumbers, jicama and cauliflower with poblano hummus and spinach dip; Southwest Caesar salad (charred corn, black beans and croutons with Ancho Caesar dressing); self-serve mac & cheese station (white cheddar mac & cheese tossed with green chiles, mushroom and caramelized onions). Cash bar. Veggie/vegan options.

Saturday Nonprayer Breakfast (\$50)

Eggs, potato, bacon, and fruit cup service, with orange juice, coffee and tea. Vegetarian/vegan option available.

Saturday Dinner (\$90)

Caesar salad (Heart of Romaine, aged Parmesan, smoked garlic ciabatta croutons with creamy Caesar dressing); seared chicken breast with jalapeno-spricot glaze, melted leek and bacon jam; mascarpone risotto, and mixed cauliflower; chocolate cappuccino cake with vanilla whipped cream; coffee and tea. (Vegetarian/vegan option: Roasted acorn squash stuffed with vegetable and herb quinoa, coriander spiced carrot puree, aged saba.) Cash bar.

Immediately following the Saturday dinner in the Regency Ballroom, the evening program will be presented. As space allows, limited seating for non-diners will be provided.

Please note that meal costs reflect the cost to FFRF; we do not mark up these prices..

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

NATIONAL CONVENTION

SAN ANTONIO | NOVEMBER 13-15, 2020

43rd CONVENTION REGISTRATION FORM

Or register online: ffrf.org/convention2020

REGISTRATION FEES

	Number Registering	Cost
Member	___\$60	\$___
Spouse or Companion (Non-member accompanying member)	___\$65	\$___
Child (High school or under accompanying registrant)	___Free	\$___
College Student with ID	___\$10	\$___
<input type="checkbox"/> I am interested in hotel, meal or travel scholarship		
Non-member	___\$115	\$___
<input type="checkbox"/> Or, I will join FFRF for \$40 (and save \$15)	___\$100	\$___

AUTHOR RECEPTIONS

Friday, November 13

VIP Book Signing / Fundraiser with Gloria Steinem ___\$500 \$___
4:00–4:30 PM | Includes author book
You have my permission to list me as a reception sponsor. ☐ Yes ☐ No

VIP Dessert Reception / Fundraiser with Margaret Atwood ___\$500 \$___
9:15 PM | Includes author book
You have my permission to list me as a reception sponsor. ☐ Yes ☐ No

OPTIONAL MEALS / EVENTS

Friday, November 13

Friday Dinner Buffet ___\$60 \$___
Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free
Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free
Registrant 3 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Saturday, November 14

Non-Prayer Breakfast ___\$50 \$___
Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free
Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free
Registrant 3 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Saturday Dinner ___\$90 \$___
Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free
Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free
Registrant 3 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free
► Total \$_____

☐ 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:

(Make checks payable to FFRF) Return with payment to:
FFRF, Attn: Convention | P.O. Box 750 | Madison, WI 53701

Name of Registrant 1 _____

Name of Registrant 2 _____

Name of Registrant 3 _____

Address _____

City _____ State / ZIP _____

Phone* _____ Email* _____

Credit Card Number _____ Expiration Date / Security Code _____

Billing Name / Signature _____ *Contact information for in-house use only

Pre-registration deadline Saturday, October 31, 2020 (Unless event is sold out)
No refund after pre-registration deadline.