

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



**Secular grads,
the world
now needs you**

PAGE 12



**I'm a Black
Republican —
and now atheist**

PAGE 14



**A god created
in our
own image**

PAGE 18

Vol. 37 No. 6

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August 2020

Supreme Court voucher ruling blasted by FFRF

The U.S. Supreme Court handed down an alarming decision June 30 on school voucher programs that imperils true religious liberty, asserts the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

“The ruling eviscerates a founding principle of our secular republic — that citizens must not be taxed to support religion, including religious schools,” comments FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. She adds that the ruling would appear to severely undercut specific safeguards in state constitutions prohibiting the union of state and church.

In *Espinoza v. Montana Dept. of Revenue*, the Supreme Court overturned a ruling by the Montana Supreme Court, which held

that a neo-voucher school funding scheme violates the “No Aid” to religion clause of the state Constitution. The state court struck down the entire neo-voucher scheme as it applied to all private education, religious and secular. Nearly 90 percent of Montana’s private schools are affiliated with religion. Christian parents, represented by the pro-voucher Institute of Justice, appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, asking it to declare that No Aid clauses violate the federal Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

In *The New York Times*, reporter Adam Liptak wrote: “Montana’s Constitution, like those of many other states, restricts govern-

See Voucher on page 2

Sign of the times



Photo by Chris Line

A mask was put on this Bucky Badger statue on the University of Wisconsin campus, not far from the national office of the Freedom From Religion Foundation in Madison.

Abortion rights upheld by court

FFRF applauds the U.S. Supreme Court for striking down an unconstitutional Louisiana provision that would have effectively outlawed abortion in the state.

In a 5-4 decision in *June Medical Services v. Russo* issued June 29, Chief Justice John Roberts joined the court’s more liberal justices to overturn an onerous Louisiana law (Act 620) intended to shut down clinics. The law, part of a series of anti-abortion legal attacks known as

TRAP (targeted restrictions on abortion providers) laws, required physicians who provide abortions to unnecessarily hold “active admitting privileges” at a hospital located within 30 miles of the clinic. The law was virtually identical to a Texas provision quashed by the high court only four years ago in *Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt*, in which the court had decided the restriction constituted a medically “undue burden” on abortion access.

See Abortion on page 17

2020 convention canceled

FFRF sets sights on 2021 Boston gathering

Gloria Steinem, Margaret Atwood, others from 2020 have agreed to speak at next year’s event

Due to the coronavirus pandemic and related safety concerns, FFRF’s 2020 national convention scheduled for San Antonio in November has been canceled.

FFRF’s annual meetings of the membership and state representatives will take place online.

We plan to hold a fabulous post-pandemic celebration — including the lineup advertised for this year — at the Boston Plaza Hotel over the weekend of Nov. 19-21, 2021.

We are pleased to confirm that headliners Gloria Steinem and Margaret Atwood are expected to speak at the 2021 convention.

Also, others who had planned to speak in 2020 have let us know they will be joining the convention



Gloria Steinem



Margaret Atwood

in 2021, including author and journalist Katherine Stewart, secular studies professor Phil Zuckerman, and author and advocate Megan Phelps-Roper. We will be updating information on next year’s gathering, although it’s still too early to register.

If you reserved a room at the Hyatt Regency San

Antonio using the FFRF room bloc, your reservation has been automatically canceled. You should receive a notification from the hotel. (If you reserved a room through other means, on dates not included in the room block or at another area hotel, please be sure to double-check or cancel directly.)

All registration fees have been refunded by FFRF. Thanks to the many members who donated it as a gift!

We are now working on the challenges of conducting our first online annual membership meeting this fall, followed by an online state representatives meeting. The membership meeting will include some fun items, highlights of the year and legal accomplishments.

Private Line, our twice-a-year newsletter, will be mailed in the fall with full details on how to register for the online annual membership meeting. We look forward to “meeting” with you later this year.

We appreciate your patience. Stay tuned for details! Stay safe, and we’ll see you Nov. 19-21 next year at the Boston Park Plaza Hotel.

Take FFRF's membership survey!

It's been five years since the Freedom From Religion Foundation last surveyed its members.

FFRF, with over 32,000 members, is the largest freethought group in North America and the third-largest in the world. You are a vital part of an influential organization, and we want to hear from you. By taking this survey, you will also help FFRF lobby more effectively on your behalf on Capitol Hill and at your state level,

and convey your views to the media.

We emailed every member a comprehensive membership survey on July 15. If FFRF does not have an email address in our database for you, we have mailed you a hard copy. Please participate!

If you haven't seen the emailed survey invitation, please double-check your inbox or spam folder. If you can't find our emailed invitation, please contact the FFRF

office requesting the survey link. Please email survey@ffrf.org with your request and include your full name and full mailing address so we can check or update our records.

If you do not use email and have not received your mailed survey by early August, please phone our office at 608/256-8900. During the COVID-19 pandemic, our office phone calls are not directly answered. Please leave a clear voice

message slowly providing your full name (spell your last name), mailing address and phone number, and indicating that you need a membership survey mailed to you. We'll be glad to get that out to you.

To help us learn more about you, update our membership profile and find out how we can better serve or represent you, please take 10 minutes to fill out the FFRF membership survey at your earliest convenience.

Voucher

Continued from page 1

ment aid to religious groups. Those provisions, often called Blaine amendments, were initially adopted in the 19th century and often had the goal of restricting funding for Catholic schools. Of the 37 states with Blaine amendments, 14 have strict prohibitions on the participation of religious schools in state programs."

But, the Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision written by Chief Justice John Roberts, illogically ruled that religious schools were indeed being singled out.

"A state need not subsidize private education," the majority judgment states. "But once a state decides to do so, it cannot disqualify some private schools solely because they are religious."

The absurdity of the majority decision is laid bare in a dissenting opinion. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, joined by Justice Elena Kagan, points out that the Mon-

tana Supreme Court had made no distinction between religious and nonreligious schools in a previous ruling.

"Because Montana's Supreme Court did not make such a decision — its judg-

ment put all private school parents in the same boat — this court had no occasion to address the matter," the dissent states. It adds: "The state court struck the program in full. In doing so, the court never made religious schools ineligible for an otherwise available benefit, and it never decided that the Free Exercise Clause would allow that outcome."

Justice Sonia Sotomayor has a stinging dissent of her own.

"Today's ruling is perverse," she writes. "Without any need or power to do so, the court appears to require a state to rein-

state a tax-credit program that the Constitution did not demand in the first place. [The court] rejects the Religion Clauses' balanced values in favor of a new theory of free exercise, and it does so only by

“Without any need or power to do so, the court appears to require a state to reinstate a tax-credit program that the Constitution did not demand in the first place.

— Justice Sonia Sotomayor

setting aside well-established judicial constraints.”

FFRF had filed an 18-page friend-of-the-court brief in November cogently arguing that true religious liberty would be endangered if the court strikes down the provision

of Montana's Constitution that prohibits funding religious education.

"Religious liberty is imperiled in this case," its brief asserted. "This case is not about discrimination [against religion]; it is about government-compelled support of religion. Every Montana citizen has the right not to be taxed to fund religion. If this court abandons this basic principle, we will have reached a disastrous moment in American history: the era of government-compelled tithing."

Also in her dissent, Sotomayor added that the decision by the court "weakens this country's longstanding commitment to a separation of church and state beneficial to both."

FFRF agrees with Sotomayor, as this misguided decision deals a great blow to the separation of state and church, as well as the sovereignty of states to govern according to the will of their citizens. It virtually guarantees that citizens of the more than 30 states whose constitutions included No Aid to religion clauses may be taxed in order to support religious schools at some point in the near future, regardless of their own views on religion or which religious denomination they may belong to. The 26 percent of nonre-

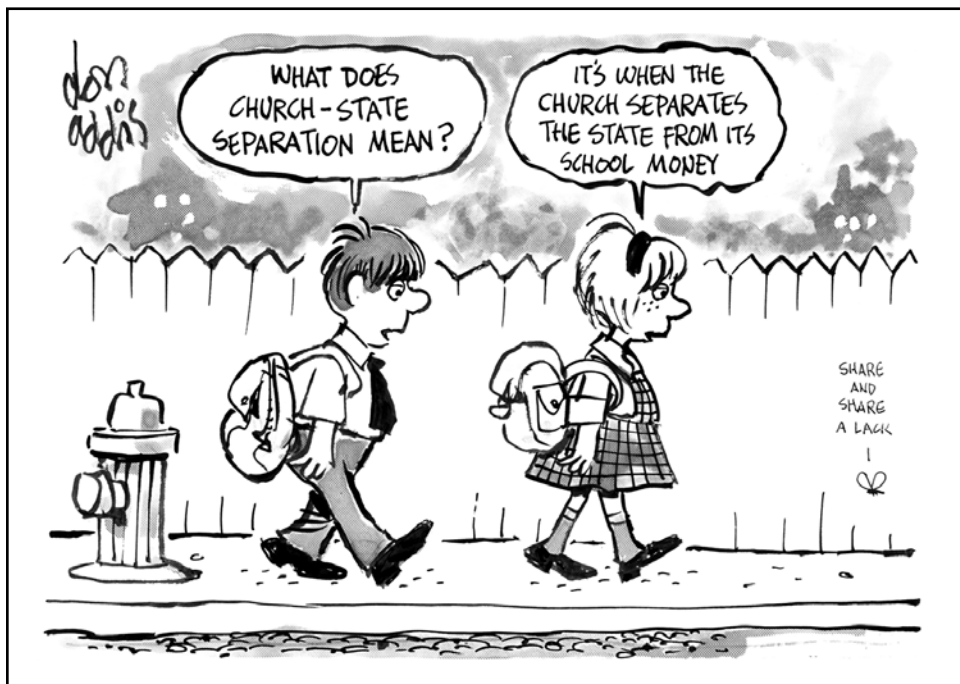
ligious taxpayers will be injured the most.

James Madison, later the architect of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, famously defeated a Virginia proposal in 1785 to pay the salary of Christian teachers, calling even a three-penny tax on citizens supremely immoral. The No Aid language in many state constitutions dates to the Virginia Statute for Religious Liberty of 1786, written by Thomas Jefferson, who deemed it "sinful and tyrannical" to tax citizens to support ministries or religious schools.

The Supreme Court's decision does not address whether some restrictions placed on funds going to religious schools would pass constitutional muster. States may still be able to restrict funding on the basis of "religious use." For example, a restriction on direct funding of religious education classes may be permissible.

An ironic additional consequence of such a ruling may be to bring down regulation on churches and religious schools due to the flow of public money into religious schools. In short, the judgment in favor of the plaintiffs will negatively and fundamentally alter the state-church relationship in place since the nation's founding.

FFRF decries the high court's blow to our secular public school system in order to fund religious institutions.




The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible
By Ruth Hurmence Green
A Missouri grandmother debunks the bible as no one has debunked it since Thomas Paine.

—Published by FFRF. 440 pages / PB

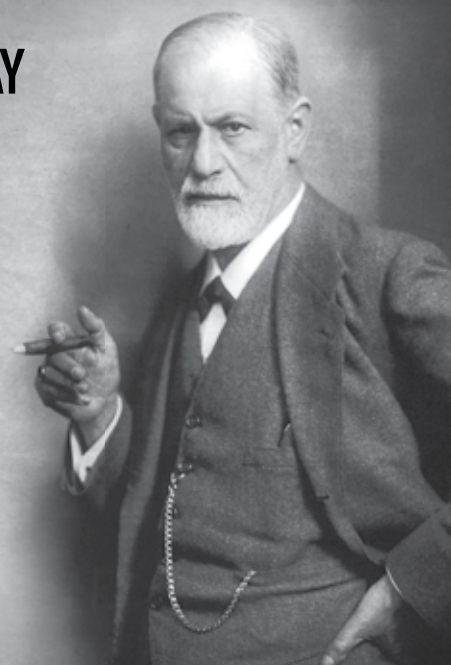
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ffrf.org/shop

View daily entries and quotes at ffrf.org/day

FREETHOUGHT OF THE DAY

"A religion, even if it calls itself the religion of love, must be hard and unloving to those who do not belong to it."

Sigmund Freud
"Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" (1921)



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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Shotgun wedding between state and church

By Kevin Welner

On June 30, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a decision that was once unthinkable. It required the state of Montana to set aside its own Constitution's ban on direct or indirect funding of religious private schools: "A state need not subsidize private education. But once a state decides to do so, it cannot disqualify some private schools solely because they are religious."

The principles underlying the U.S. Constitution's Establishment Clause, while not yet dead, are now in exceedingly poor health.



Kevin Welner

To be fair, the wall of separation between church and state never really existed. But for a while, there was a fairly high fence. It protected religious institutions from entanglements with the government, and vice versa. In

countries without such separation, state institutions can become instruments of the state's preferred religion — as the writers of the U.S. Constitution observed in England and other European countries.

In the United States, that high fence of separation between church and state transformed our essentially Protestant public schools into secular institutions attended by a cross-section of the population, including strongly religious families. That seeming contradiction of religious upbringing plus nonreligious schooling was, in fact, entirely consistent with Thomas Jefferson's reasons for embracing a "wall of separation" to avoid government involvement that could corrupt free religious practice, while also protecting the government against church influence.

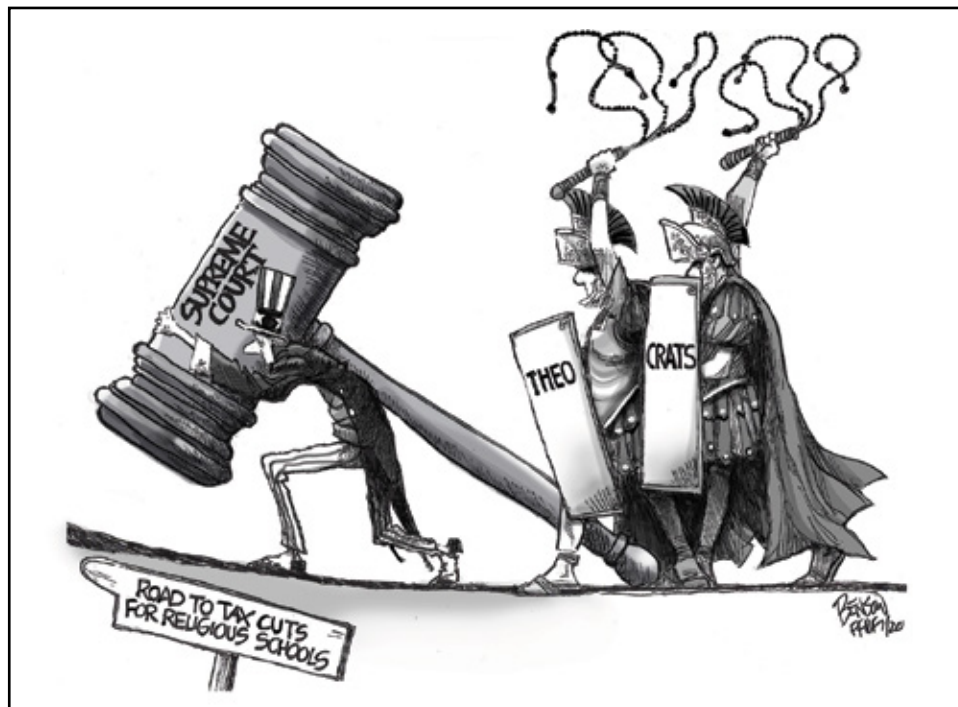
Churches and related religious institutions benefit from this arrangement in three key ways. First, the government stays away from the internal affairs of churches. While this can lead to fraud and abuse, it also protects religious liberty. Second, the government grants churches freedoms denied to other institutions, including the freedom to discriminate. Third, because "the power to tax involves the power to destroy," churches are given an extraordinary number of tax benefits.

As part of this exceedingly hands-off approach, church-affiliated institutions were not, in the past, eligible to participate in some government programs. For instance, while private religious colleges could receive aid to help students fund their education, the court prohibited state aid directly to religious K-12 schools.

Today's Supreme Court does not share Jefferson's vision. In fact, the court has been sawing away at the high fence for decades. In cases posing challenges to state funding of religious institutions, the court has steadily permitted greater and greater financial entanglements.

In fact, in a case three years ago called *Trinity Lutheran v. Comer*, the court pronounced that states can, under some circumstances, be constitutionally required to fund religious institutions, pursuant to the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment.

When providing a public benefit (in that case, state grants for playground resurfacing), the state cannot make religious status an impediment to receipt of that benefit — at least where the benefit is not directly supporting religious practice.



Even from this conservative court, the *Trinity Lutheran* decision was a bit of a surprise. Earlier, in 2004, in a case called *Locke v. Davey*, the court found no constitutional impediment to a state prohibiting a college scholarship from being used directly to support religious practice, by excluding students pursuing a "degree in devotional theology."

With those key precedents, the court decided a case involving a neo-voucher law that had been adopted in Montana. The law used tax credits to create a funding mechanism for small vouchers to help pay for private school tuition.

Because the Montana Constitution includes a "No Aid" clause that prohibits direct or indirect state support for church-controlled schools, the Montana Department of Revenue only allowed the law to go forward on the condition that religious schools be excluded.

A lawsuit called *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* challenged that ruling and made its way to that state's Supreme Court. That court struck down the entire neo-voucher law, thus avoiding the possibility of anti-religious discrimination raised in *Trinity Lutheran v. Comer*, while also avoiding a violation of the Montana Constitution.

That should have ended the matter, but the U.S. Supreme Court weighed in.

Before discussing the court's decision in the *Espinoza* case, it's important to step back and consider the unusual ideological extremity of the current Supreme Court.

The court is designed to be somewhat insulated from political pressures, with justices appointed for life. But the Supreme Court has now become almost as ideologically predictable as the Congress. The court has moved further and further to the right. There's now a reliable five-justice majority on issues ranging from school vouchers and affirmative action to border control and deregulation.

I would be remiss if I did not mention here the most momentous and egregious event in this process of building the current ultraconservative court: the unprecedented obstruction of President Barack Obama's nominee Merrick Garland.

Antonin Scalia died unexpectedly in February 2016, and Obama put forward Garland's nomination in March. But Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell refused to allow any confirmation hearings, citing the presidential election to take place eight months later. President Trump eventually appointed Justice Neil Gorsuch to the seat, maintaining the conservative five-justice majority (which was soon strengthened

with Justice Brett Kavanaugh replacing Justice Anthony Kennedy).

Let's return to that high fence mentioned earlier. Once the Supreme Court decided to hear the *Espinoza* case, we were left to hope that it would at least leave in place a speed bump of separation between church and state.

What we got instead is a shotgun marriage between church and state.

The court's decision held that application of the "no aid" provision in the Montana Constitution was barred by the U.S. Constitution's Free Exercise Clause. The

Montana provision prohibited any direct or indirect aid to a school controlled by a "church, sect, or denomination." But the court's *Espinoza* majority opinion also minimizes that distinction, which was

important in *Locke* and potentially crucial to the decision in *Trinity Lutheran*:

"None of this is meant to suggest that we agree with the Department [of Revenue] that some lesser degree of scrutiny applies to discrimination against religious uses of government aid. Some members of the court, moreover, have questioned whether there is a meaningful distinction between discrimination based on use or conduct and that based on status. We acknowledge the point but need not examine it here. It is enough in this case to conclude that strict scrutiny applies under *Trinity Lutheran* because Montana's No Aid provision discriminates based on religious status."

Here's more critical language:

"*Locke* differs from this case in two critical ways. First, *Locke* explained that Washington had 'merely chosen not to fund a distinct category of instruction': the 'essentially religious endeavor' of training a minister 'to lead a congregation.' Thus, Davey 'was denied a scholarship because of what he proposed to do — use the funds to prepare for the ministry.' Apart from that narrow

restriction, Washington's program allowed scholarships to be used at 'pervasively religious schools' that incorporated religious instruction throughout their classes.

"By contrast, Montana's Constitution does not zero in on any particular 'essentially religious' course of instruction at a religious school. Rather, as we have explained, the No-Aid provision bars all aid to a religious school 'simply because of what it is,' putting the school to a choice between being religious or receiving government benefits.

"At the same time, the provision puts families to a choice between sending their children to a religious school or receiving such benefits. Second, *Locke* invoked a 'historic and substantial' state interest in not funding the training of clergy, explaining that 'opposition to . . . funding 'to support church leaders' lay at the historic core of the Religion Clauses.' . . . But no comparable 'historic and substantial' tradition supports Montana's decision to disqualify religious schools from government aid."

The court concludes: "It is clear that there is no 'historic and substantial' tradition against aiding such schools comparable to the tradition against state-supported clergy invoked by *Locke*." But this historical focus was a side note in the court's earlier *Locke* decision. What Roberts did in this case was to limit *Locke* to its unique facts, marginalizing its usefulness as a precedent.

But note that sentence in bold from the passage above. A state's constitution is given meaning by the state's courts. Imagine if, upon remand, the Montana Supreme Court issues a new decision, saying something like: "In view of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision, we interpret the 'No Aid' provision in our state Constitution to prohibit any direct or indirect financial support to religious instruction in church-controlled schools."

This would allow a voucher law that provides support to religious schools but not to religious education. Implementing or enforcing that funding mechanism would entangle the state with the operations of the religious schools, but it would seem doable. Would the Roberts court find that approach to be constitutional, or would it further restrict the reach of *Locke*?

What's clear for now is that the long-standing "tuitioning" voucher systems in Maine and Vermont, which are limited to nonreligious private schools, cannot stand. There will have to be a shotgun wedding between church and state in those two states.

Other implications, which will reach beyond school vouchers, will emerge in the upcoming months and years.

Kevin Welner is the director of the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder and co-author of several books, including *NeoVouchers: The Emergence of Tuition Tax Credits for Private Schooling*. This article was excerpted from a Washington Post column and is reprinted with permission.

“The principles underlying the U.S. Constitution's Establishment Clause, while not yet dead, are now in exceedingly poor health.”



Make your own nontheistic cyber billboard at FFRF.org/out, and you might win an "Unabashed Atheist" tee, like Johnny Gillespie.

HEADS UP

A Poetry Column By Philip Appleman

SERPENT

The delicate backbone smashed,
it lived till sundown; then
its mate came for revenge.
The long muscle
glistened:
“Your eyes shall be opened,
you shall be
as gods, knowing good
and evil.”
“You are no snake,”
she told him. “You
are pure superstition—go
hypnotize a bird
or suck the milk from goats. Go,
or I’ll give you a backache, too.”
He slithered off, limp as liver,
swearing to find some weaker time
out there in the orchard,
and the storms he would conjure then
would wreck that greenery
and stand a guard there, blazing,
with a sword.

Photo by Brent Nicastro



© Philip Appleman, from *New and Selected Poems, 1956-1996*

Philip Appleman is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Indiana University. He is editor of the Norton Critical Edition of *Darwin*. 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*.

THEY SAID WHAT?

You cannot change the culture of a country until you change the character of mankind. And you can’t change that unless you change the heart, and for billions of us on the planet, we believe you can’t do that unless you accept Jesus Christ or unless you accept God. God has been left out of this equation through all of this and we need tremendous healing. You cannot love your fellow man if you don’t love God. And we have a country where we’ve been working really hard, particularly on the left, to kick God out. **Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, in an interview on Fox News.** *Huffington Post, 6-4-20*

All I really want to do is what God wants me to do with the talents he gave me. **5th U.S. Circuit Judge Stuart Kyle Duncan (in a 2014 article for the Ivy League Christian Observer).** **Duncan, an ultraconservative, upheld a Texas abortion ban.** *The Guardian, 6-14-20*

If you have a radical left group of judges, religions I think will be almost wiped out at America. If you look at it, pro-life will be absolutely wiped out. So, if you have that happening, pro-life is going to be out. It’s going to be gone. **President Trump, in an interview with Christian Broadcasting Network’s David Brody, on the need for more conservative justices.** *The Friendly Atheist, 6-22-20*

Montana and other states should be

very clear about this historic decision: Your bigoted Blaine amendments and other restrictions like them are unconstitutional, dead and buried. I’m calling on all states to now seize the extraordinary opportunity to expand all education options at all schools to every single student in America.”

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, following the Supreme Court’s ruling in the *Espinoza* case, allowing for the expansion of voucher-like programs. *The New York Times, 7-1-20*

This week Dr. Anthony Fauci made the statement that “science is truth.” Really? I would beg to differ. Science may be a quest for truth, but it is certainly fallible. . . . And, man did not evolve from apes or tadpoles, as many scientists say. That’s just not true — God created man and woman, as the bible says. **Evangelist Franklin Graham, on his Facebook page, linking to a CNN article about Fauci.** *Facebook, 6-21-20*

Mask-wearing has become a totem, a secular religious symbol. Christians wear crosses, Muslims wear a hijab, and members of the Church of Secular Science bow to the Gods of Data by wearing a mask as their symbol, demonstrating that they are the elite; smarter, more rational, and morally superior to everyone else. **Alex Castellanos, a veteran Republican strategist.** *Washington Post, 6-30-20*

Hoping to counteract anti-science agenda

Name: Larry W. Allen.

Where I live: Altadena, Calif.

Family: I lost my wife, FFRF Life Member Marilyn Morgan, to pancreatic cancer two years ago.

Education: Graduate with double major in philosophy and economics from California State College (now University) in Los Angeles. Graduate studies in both fields, but no graduate degree.

Occupation: Retired real estate investor. I never held employment in any paying job long enough to call it a career.

How I got where I am today: I was raised in the Presbyterian Church, but I’m not sure I ever believed in its teachings, although I could mouth the appropriate words. I’ve always been interested in science. The tipping point for me came when one of my junior high school classmates announced he didn’t believe in God because the creation ac-

count was inconsistent with Darwinian evolution. I’ve pretty much been an atheist since then.

Where I’m headed: I’ve not been an activist since my college years, but the ascendancy of the Religious Right in recent Republican administrations has impelled me to rethink what I can do to counteract their anti-science and anti-human freedom agenda. A priority now is the upcoming election cycle and I think I may commence by donating to Senate races across the country.

Person in history I most admire and why: There are actually two who are celebrated for their roles in the formation of our country, but whose religious skepticism was excoriated at the time and has been suppressed in the mythology of our country’s founding: Ethan Allen and Thomas Paine.

A quotation I like: I’ll paraphrase here: “You must not fool yourself, and you are the easiest person to fool.” — Richard Feynman,

renowned physicist and Nobel Laureate (1974 Caltech commencement address).

Things I like: Early music (Bach and before), the visual arts, birdwatching, science, nature and travel.

Things I smite: Religions, superstitions, hypocrisy and authoritarianism.

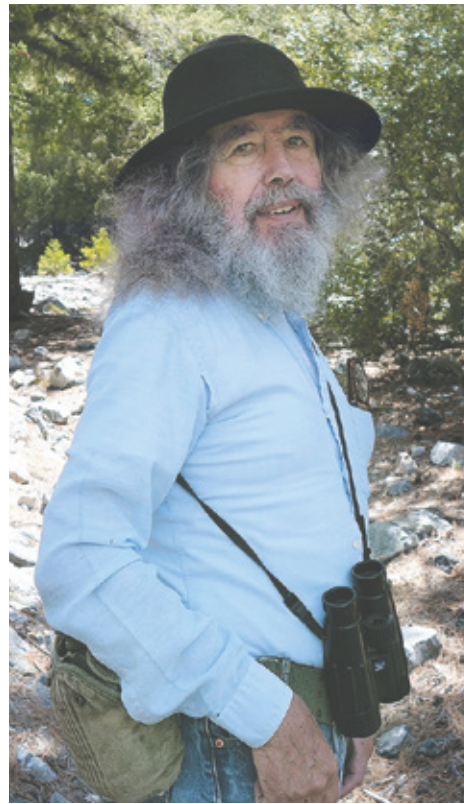
My doubts about religion started: In junior high school, subsequently reinforced by my studies in philosophy, science and history.

What cultural changes worry you?: The increasing close-mindedness of the populace in the United States when it involves science, the value of the scientific method, and the implications of the findings of science to the future of our planet. Concomitant with this worry is the subordination of human freedom to the dictates of the Christian religion.

Before I die: I’ve accomplished pretty much what I wished, experiencing only one disaster: the death of my wife. The best I can do at this point is to ensure that the bulk of my estate goes to nonprofit organizations that instantiate my ideals and values.

Ways I promote freethought: I discovered FFRF only a few years ago when it ran a full-page ad in the Los Angeles Times, but since then I have become a Lifetime Member, have gifted two Lifetime Memberships to people close to me, and given memberships in FFRF to acquaintances when I have learned that they are atheists.

MEET A MEMBER



Larry W. Allen

Caption contest winner

Congratulations to Derek Mathias of California for winning the June/July caption contest. Derek wins an FFRF T-shirt.

The winning entry is: **Pugnacious Pastor Pelc, the plastic pistol-packing priest, painlessly pelts pandemic-panicked parishioners with pure papal-pleasing precipitation, proving positively that pumped potable projectiles in public places is as preposterously pointless as pious prayer in pews.**

Runners-up are: **Well, so much for “. . . putting away childish things” (1 Cor.13:11).** — Thomas Drolsum of Wisconsin

Let us spray. — A.F. Ortiz Jr. of Florida

The sacramental wine is now available to all communicants who caught



Photo by Shutterstock

the consecrated host delivered via slingshot. — Dana Diedrich of Idaho

If you’ve taken any photos that you think would be good for this contest, please email them to caption@ffrf.org.

IN THE NEWS

'Nones' more accepting of homosexuality

Nones, the group of nonreligious, have a much higher tolerance for acceptance of homosexuality than religious believers. In the United States, 72 percent of people now say being gay should be accepted, but that number is even higher for the Nones, at 86 percent, according to a Pew Research survey.

However, among those in the United States who said religion was "very important" to them, only 57 percent said homosexuality should be accepted by society.

In the Pew analysis, it said, "Those who are religiously unaffiliated, sometimes called religious Nones, (that is, those who identify as atheist, agnostic or 'nothing in particular') tend to be more accepting of homosexuality. Though the opinions of religiously unaffiliated people can vary widely, in virtually every country surveyed with a sufficient number of unaffiliated respondents, Nones are more accepting of homosexuality than the affiliated."

Humanist weddings in Scotland more popular

Humanist weddings, which have been legal in Scotland for 15 years, are more popular than Christian ones, according to data from the National Records of Scotland.

In 2019, there were 5,879 Humanist weddings compared to 5,812 Christian weddings. In 2018, there were 6,117 Humanist weddings, but 6,258 Christian ones.

A 2017 survey found that more than 70 percent of Scottish people said they were not religious.

Southern Baptists see big drop in membership

Total membership in the nation's largest Protestant denomination fell at a historic rate between 2018 and 2019, according to an annual report.

The Southern Baptist Convention said it had 14.5 million members in 2019, down about 287,655 from the previous year. Membership dropped 2 percent, the largest single-year drop in more than 100 years, according to a survey from LifeWay Christian Resources, the denomination's publishing and research arm.

The decline reflects a larger trend of Americans leaving Christianity at a rapid pace. According to the Pew Research Center, 65 percent of Americans describe themselves as Christians, down 12 percentage points during the past decade.

Southern Baptist baptisms, a key metric in measuring new members of the faith, fell by more than 4 percent.



FFRF Member Hal Webre sent us this photo of a yard sign. He writes: "Laurie and I split time between sheltering-in-place at our home in northwest Florida and shelter-in-place at our second home in northeast Alabama. While in Alabama, we noticed these signs going up sporadically in residential neighborhoods. I really can't say whether this means that God's going to cure everyone who contracts COVID-19, or whether it means that God, himself, tested positive."

1 in 4 Americans see Trump as a man of faith

Only 27 percent of registered voters in a Politico/Morning Consult poll said they somewhat or strongly agree that President Trump is religious, while 55 percent somewhat or strongly disagree. Just over a third of all Christians view the president as religious (50 percent do not), while 23 percent of Catholics and 18 percent of independents see him that way.

Evangelicals were more likely to view Trump as religious: 40 percent said they agreed that he is, while 33 percent disagreed.

Ideological conservatives and Republicans were the only demographics in which a majority of respondents characterized the president as religious — 55 percent and 60 percent, respectively.

South Korean church sued for \$66M over virus

The city at the epicenter of South Korea's coronavirus outbreak has filed a \$83 million suit against the religious group that has been linked to nearly 62 percent of the 6,900 cases in the city.

Officials of the Daegu city government are demanding compensation for losses suffered by the local authority as a result of the leaders of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus refusing to cooperate with initial efforts to halt the spread of the virus.

The church's refusal to cooperate with regional health authorities hampered the initial response to the crisis and worsened the outbreak in the city, an official said.

Investigators also reported that the church went ahead with services and events in defiance of an order from the local government banning mass gatherings.

Survey: Most not yet OK going back to church

A study in May examining Americans' response to COVID-19 shows that with the exception of white evangelicals, a majority of Americans are not comfortable returning to in-person religious services.

The results of the survey suggest that despite political pressure to reopen houses of worship — from President Donald Trump as well as leading conservative Christians and religious liberty advocates — Americans aren't quite ready to take a seat in a sanctuary.

The survey from the American Enterprise Institute showed that 64 percent of Americans said they were "somewhat uncomfortable" or "very uncomfortable" attending in-person worship.

Even among those who reported their congregations offered in-person worship, 56 percent of respondents said they chose not to go.

"We're seeing among lay people a significant amount of discomfort in going back to formal in-person religious practices," said Daniel Cox, a research fellow at AEI who led the study. "People are equivocating and uncertain about whether they feel comfortable attending."

20% in Northern Ireland identify as nonreligious

The proportion of people in Northern Ireland who identify as "nonreligious" has reached 20 percent, according to the latest Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey.

It was an increase of 3 percent over the previous year. The proportion of nonreligious people in Northern Ireland now exceeds that of every other religion or belief group except Catholics — 36 percent, with Presbyterians accounting for 18 percent and those who identify as Church of Ireland/Anglican/Episcopal at 14 percent.

Greek church: Yoga not for Christians

Yoga has no place "in the life of Christians," the governing body of the Greek Orthodox Church has ruled.

The Church intervened after Greek media recommended yoga as a way to combat stress during the pandemic.

"[Yoga] is a fundamental chapter in Hindu religion. It is not a 'kind of physical exercise,'" the Holy Synod said in its

statement.

The church's opposition is based on the "experience of those who practiced yoga," Father Michael Konstantinidis said, explaining that "if yoga offered what man wanted, we would be happy."

Evangelicals still strongly support Trump

President Trump's approval rating has dropped among a wide range of religious groups, including white evangelical Protestants — though they remain strongly supportive.

About seven-in-10 white evangelical Protestants say they approve of the way Trump is handling his job, according to a Pew Research Center survey, but that's a 6 percentage point drop from 78 percent recorded in April.

The same survey found that if the 2020 presidential election were held today, 82 percent of white evangelical Protestant registered voters would vote for Trump or lean toward voting for him. By comparison, a Pew survey that was conducted just after the 2016 presidential election among those who were identified as having voted found that 77 percent of white evangelical Protestant voters backed Trump.

Catholic clergy sex abuse complaints jump

The Washington Post reported that the number of allegations of Catholic clergy sex abuse of minors more than quadrupled in 2019 compared to the average in the previous five years.

The yearly audit report by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said the 2019 report counted 4,434 allegations of clergy sex abuse against minors. That number was 1,451 in 2018, 693 in 2017, 1,318 in 2016 and 903 in 2015.

About half of the 2019 allegations were deemed credible by the church.

There are about 37,000 diocesan and religious order priests in the country.

In the 2019 audit, the Catholic Church paid out a total of \$282 million related to those allegations, including child abuse settlements, other payments to victims, "support for offenders," attorneys' fees, and other miscellaneous costs related to those lawsuits.

Delaware city sued for not allowing crèche

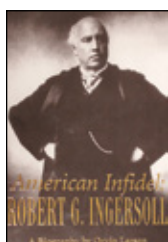
The Knights of Columbus, backed by the First Liberty Institute, filed a federal lawsuit against the city of Rehoboth Beach, Del., claiming religious discrimination for the town's blanket ban of a Knights of Columbus nativity scene from city property.

For decades, a free-standing crèche has been part of the Christmas holiday tradition in Rehoboth Beach. The primary location for Christmas displays is the circle at the city bandstand and adjacent boardwalk.

In 2018, after a local church placed a nativity scene on the public site, the city forced the church to take it down.

"I don't understand why Christians would be deeply offended," Mayor Paul Kuhns said. "We are basically saying that on public property, with public resources comes public responsibility and this [separation] of church and state is the city's decision."

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll



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The quiet demise of state-church separation

This article appeared in *The New York Times* on June 8 and is reprinted with permission.

**By Nelson Tebbe,
Micah Schwartzman
and Richard Schragger**

The First Amendment’s Establishment Clause prohibits the government from making any law “respecting an establishment of religion.” This has long been thought to prohibit direct government support for religion. The contours of that idea have been contested, and they have contracted over time. But the commitment to some form of separation of church and state has endured.

Yet in response to the coronavirus pandemic, Congress has approved a huge payout to small businesses and nonprofits that allows funding for clergy salaries — a direct payment of tax dollars for a core religious use that would have been unthinkable in previous eras.

Thousands of churches applied for help under the Paycheck Protection Program, and many have had their funding approved. We are witnessing an important moment in the nation’s constitutional history: the quiet demise of the already ailing separation of church and state.

In 1785, James Madison, the chief architect of the Establishment Clause, argued against a Virginia bill that would have paid for clergy salaries with tax dollars, even though it would have supported a relatively wide range of denominations. Madison’s essay making that case was once widely thought to provide the best historical evidence for the meaning of the clause. He believed it was a violation of religious freedom to “force a citizen to contribute three pence only of his property” to pay for the salaries of clergy, a mandate he saw as an “establishment” of religion by the government. Thomas Jefferson made much the same point in his religious freedom bill, which became the law in Virginia.

One hundred and sixty-two years later, in 1947, the Supreme Court evoked Madison’s essay in a seminal Establishment Clause decision, asserting that the clause “means at least this:” That “no tax in any amount, large or small, can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions, whatever they may be called, or whatever form they may adopt to teach or practice religion.”

In that decision, the court in fact upheld a New Jersey program that supported the transportation of students to all schools, including religious schools. But it emphasized that transportation services, like ordinary police and fire



protection, were “so separate and so indisputably marked off from the religious function.”

And that was the point: The New Jersey program, unlike the Paycheck Protection Program that helps congregations pay their clergy members, did not directly support a religious mission. It merely provided students attending public and religious schools equal access to affordable transportation.

The Supreme Court reiterated in 2000 that the Establishment Clause prohibits direct funding of religious activities. “Actual diversion” of public support to religious uses “is constitutionally impermissible,” Justice Sandra Day O’Connor wrote. And concerns are heightened when government aid takes the form of cash payments made directly to religious organizations, she emphasized.

Congress’s Paycheck Protection Program flouts this rule. As applied, the program explicitly extends to nonprofits, including churches — with no restrictions on payment of clergy salaries. Although the aid initially takes the form of a loan, it is largely forgivable if the recipient maintains its payroll size for a sufficient period.

The Small Business Administration waived its normal rules prohibiting aid for religious activities. Remarkably, it relied implicitly but unmistakably on a reading of the First Amendment that not only permits cash aid to houses of worship for core religious activities, but requires the government to pay for those activities.

The Paycheck Protection Program

violates the constitutional rule requiring the separation of church and state, and it does so on an enormous scale. Nine thousand Catholic parishes have received loans so far. The Archdiocese of Louisville, for example, was awarded more than \$20 million across 84 entities, for an average of \$238,000 each. One church, St. James parish and school in Elizabethtown, Ky., received loans totaling \$439,800.

Moreover, a national survey found that 40 percent of all Protestant churches had applied for government funds and that 59 percent of those applications were approved. The Jewish Federations of North America reported in late April that 575 organizations had received loans, with a median of \$250,000

each and a total of \$312 million. Recipients included more than 200 synagogues. With 445 entities awaiting word on their applications, the J.F.N.A. estimated that Jewish nonprofits could receive \$500 million from the program.

Of course, the rule laid down by Justice O’Connor 20 years ago is vulnerable to revision by the current court, with its conservative majority. At least five justices have signed opinions indicating a willingness to allow public aid that is administered neutrally with respect to religion and that is secular in content. The court is soon expected to decide a funding case in which it has an opportunity to go further and require religious schools to be included in a school choice program. Almost certainly, the court led by Chief Justice John Roberts will continue its campaign to revolutionize First Amendment law so

that it favors religious actors.

What is remarkable is not that the federal government is spending tax dollars for religious uses in a way not seen before, or even that it is doing so on a vast scale. It’s how little pushback this program has elicited. With respect to public funding of religion, the separation of church and state has all but disappeared — without a bang or even a whimper.

More than likely, this tacit acceptance reflects compassion for the small businesses and nonprofits struggling during the pandemic. That concern is entirely understandable, especially given that houses of worship, like many other organizations, have been burdened by state public health restrictions. But as Justice David Souter once observed, “constitutional lines have to be drawn, and on one side of every one of them is an otherwise sympathetic case that provokes impatience with the Constitution and with the line.”

Constitutional interpretations forged during times of crisis tend to persist after the danger has eased. That is especially true in this context, where the separation of church and state had already been under sustained attack, making the foundational doctrine all the more vulnerable.

In 2002, the Supreme Court ruled that states could indirectly fund religious schools through a voucher program. More recently, the court held that a state cannot exclude religious schools from a grant program for school playgrounds, even when the schools are owned and operated by churches.

Now the core constitutional rule against using taxpayer dollars to pay clergy is slipping away in face of the coronavirus crisis. That should give us pause. The obliteration by Congress and President Trump of a basic principle of separation is a significant development in American constitutional culture.

We should take a moment to reflect on what has happened and to reckon with a new constitutional structure in which the government supports the central missions of religious organizations on a large scale. The entanglement of church and state will bring predictable conflicts: efforts by religious groups to control government and by the government to control religious groups. The risk of government favoritism for some religions over others, and for religion over nonreligion, will be heightened.

In other words, the new church-state paradigm will raise the very dangers that Madison and Jefferson warned of when they articulated principles of religious freedom for our country.

Nelson Tebbe is a professor at Cornell Law School. Micah Schwartzman and Richard Schragger are professors at the University of Virginia School of Law.

“The risk of government favoritism for some religions over others, and for religion over nonreligion, will be heightened.”

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Churches took in billions from taxpayers during pandemic

Recipient	Church	Amount received
Jack Graham	Prestonwood Christian Academy	\$2–\$5 million
Robert Jeffress	First Baptist Church of Dallas	\$2–\$5 million
David Jeremiah	Shadow Mountain Community Church, Inc.	\$2–\$5 million
Greg Laurie	Harvest Christian Fellowship	\$2–\$5 million
Tom Mullins	Christ Fellowship Church, Inc.	\$2–\$5 million
Diocese of Pittsburgh	Diocese of Pittsburgh	\$2–\$5 million

Source: Small Business Administration and the Freedom From Religion Foundation

FFRF.ORG FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

Churches took in \$6B of taxpayer money

The Freedom From Religion Foundation condemns the unconstitutional, possibly corrupt handout of taxpayer funds to churches, including churches run by some of President Trump’s closest allies, under the Paycheck Protection Program. New data released by the Small Business Administration on the program’s forgivable loans shows that more than 12,400 American churches took in billions of taxpayer dollars (while some were helping to spread the pandemic).

Trump’s Evangelical Advisory Board reaped substantial benefits. The First Baptist Church, run by Robert Jeffress, a vocal supporter of Trump’s Christian Nationalist policies, took in between \$2 million and \$5 million. Other members of the board fed at the government trough, many also receiving \$2 million–\$5 million, including: Jack Graham (Prestonwood Christian Academy); David Jeremiah (Shadow Mountain Community Church); Greg Laurie (Harvest Christian Fellowship), and Tom Mullins (Christ Fellowship Church). Still others connected to the board obtained smaller amounts, such as Paula White (City of Destiny), whose church received at least \$150,000.

And yet other churches closely aligned with Trump also got forgivable loans of \$2 million or more, including King Jesus International Ministry in Miami, led by Trump ally Guillermo Maldonado. It

is difficult to determine with specificity how much taxpayers were forced to give to church leaders personally connected to Trump, but the figure is at least close to \$50 million.

FFRF analysis, made possible by an initial search through the data for houses of worship (conducted by Professor Ryan Burge and posted publicly) reveals that U.S. churches took in at least \$6 billion of taxpayer funds, possibly much more, in the Paycheck Protection Program. FFRF sounded the alarm in May about precisely this problem with the program’s funding, and has been vigorously investigating it ever since.

“These numbers are staggering,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “It’s everything the framers of our godless Constitution dreaded: the government wielding its taxing power to force citizens to support churches and pay preachers’ salaries. Where public money goes, public accountability should follow, but that is not the case with church finances.”

“One of the real dangers with constitutionally sending taxpayer funds to churches is that they become beholden to politicians,” adds FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. “This was one of the harms our Founders worried about.”

Roman Catholic churches and dioceses also dominated the list of recipients. For instance, the Diocese of Pittsburgh took in between \$2 million and \$5 million. That diocese was famously featured in the Pennsylvania grand jury report on abuse and rape of minors involving 90-plus priests, some of whom marked victims with gold cross necklaces so other priests could more easily spot them. The church received its taxpayer infusion 20 months (to the day) after the grand jury report was finalized.

The Small Business Administration loan numbers were not specific, but were released in five sets of ranges: \$150,000–\$300,000; \$350,000–\$1 million; \$1 million–\$2 million; \$2 million–\$5 million; \$5 million–\$10 million.

The many reports and news stories about churches and worshippers acting as superspreaders of the coronavirus, with a number of them suing the government for preferential treatment from stay-at-home orders, make this gross violation of the principle of separation between state and church all the more appalling. As FFRF has documented, scientific data shows that churches have often been responsible for spreading the virus.

FFRF intends to continue its investigation into this constitutional violation and the appearance of political cronyism. This is just the tip of an unconstitutional iceberg.

Dozens of religious groups got highest tier of funds

Under the government’s Paycheck Protection Program, at least two dozen religious organizations received the highest tier of funds (between \$5 million and \$10 million), according to Religion News Service.

Of those dozens, two megachurches — Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago and Life.Church in Edmond, Okla. — were included.

“The notion of separation of church and state is dead, and the PPP loan program is the evidence of that,” Micah Schwartzman, a professor at the University of Virginia School of Law, told Reuters. “The money is going to fund core activities of many organizations, including religious organizations. That’s something we’ve not seen before.”

Religion News Service reported that several Protestant denominations, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Presbyterian Church, also received between \$5 million and \$10 million, as did a dozen Roman Catholic entities and at least two Jewish organizations — the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago and the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations. Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy in New Jersey, which is named after President Trump’s son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner’s grandfather, got a loan in the range of \$1 million to \$2 million.

Reuters reported that the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Bernardino, Calif., received between \$5 million and \$10 million, despite publicly acknowledging its role in decades of sexual abuse.

And Ken Ham’s infamous Ark Encounter in Kentucky, the \$100 million boondoggle meant to prove that the bible is literally true, has taken in between \$1 million and \$2 million through the PPP.

Most of the churches (70 percent) listed in the data received between \$150,000 and \$300,000, according to Ryan Burge, an assistant professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University who examined the data.

But highly controversial figures have also received aid, including televangelists Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker and Peter Popoff.

Swaggart, who leads the Family Worship Center in Louisiana, was defrocked by the Pentecostal Assemblies of God in the early 1990s after being implicated in sex scandals. His church got between \$2 million and \$5 million.

Bakker, of Morningside Church Productions in Missouri, was also defrocked by the Assemblies of God after a highly publicized sexual encounter with a church secretary and was imprisoned in the 1990s on dozens of fraud and conspiracy charges surrounding his church fundraising. Morningside received between \$350,000 and \$1 million.

Popoff, of People United for Christ in California, was exposed for using an earpiece to receive radio messages from his wife so he could pretend to know personal details about his audience members during religious services. His church received between \$350,000 and \$1 million.

Between 12,000 and 13,000 of the 17,000 Catholic churches in the United States also

applied for PPP loans, CBS News reports. The larger the church, the more likely it was to have applied for federal aid. Half of the pastors at churches that average 200 or more attendees said their church applied for a loan, compared to only a third of churches that average fewer than 50 attendees.

Pete Evans, an investigator of religious fraud for the Trinity Foundation, said he had expected controversial churches would receive the aid.

“You’re getting free money, and that’s what these guys are good at,” Evans told The Guardian.

Note: As a qualifying secular 501(c)(3) nonprofit, FFRF was eligible for and received a forgivable loan under the PPP of less than half a million dollars. Unlike churches, FFRF discloses its finances to the government and the public.

“The notion of separation of church and state is dead, and the PPP loan program is the evidence of that. The money is going to fund core activities of many organizations, including religious organizations. That’s something we’ve not seen before.”

— Micah Schwartzman, a professor at the University of Virginia School of Law

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Another demand by God



When FFRF Member Jeff Albright saw this church marquee in Clarkston, Wash., he thought: “But what if I don’t want to?”

FFRF NEWS

Church pandemic orders aren't discriminatory, FFRF asserts

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has submitted a brief in solidarity with the state of California in response to churches challenging pandemic social prohibitory measures.

"The suit, *Gish v. Newsom*, says that religious services may not lawfully be restricted," reports a California TV station. "The lawsuit says that the state and some counties have given exemptions to many businesses so that they may remain open, but has forced churches to halt in-person worship services."

Churches suing first claimed they were discriminated against because certain essential services such as grocery stores are open, a fallacious contention, as FFRF points out in its amicus brief filed before the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

"None of California's public health orders targets any activity or organization for unfavorable treatment for having a religious character," the brief states. "Initial restrictions on gatherings applied not only to churches, but to movie theaters, concert halls and other secular locations."

Stay-at-home orders regulate conduct, rather than religious status, FFRF emphasizes: "If anything, the current order actually favors churches because it allows churches to gather now, but similarly situated secular gatherings (such as concerts and sporting events) are not permitted until later phases of the re-opening."

The new argument raised by church litigants — that the rule limiting worship service attendance to the lesser of 25 percent capacity or 100 people targets religion — is not true. The rule also applies to similarly situated secular gatherings.

And the central argument of the case is misbegotten, the brief underscores.

"California's public health orders do not target religious activity for unfavorable treatment," says FFRF's brief. "Parity is not persecution and equality is not discrimination. Whatever religious freedom argument the plaintiffs are attempting to make, it must fail because they are treated equally."

Churches asking for religious exemptions to public health orders are not simply asking for a right to gather, they are also asking for a right to risk the health and lives of every other member of the community and country, FFRF asserts. California doesn't need to look beyond her borders to understand the unique danger posed by in-person worship gatherings during a pandemic: Sacramento County, Mendocino County and Butte County have traced infection clusters back to religious gatherings, including church services that violated the state's original public health order. For this reason, Chief Justice John Roberts recently observed that California's orders "should not be subject to second-guessing by an unelected federal judiciary, which lacks the background, competence, and expertise to assess public health."

The plaintiffs' claims are without merit, FFRF's brief concludes.

"All 40 million Californians are shouldering the same burden," the brief ends. "The religious nature of worship gatherings does not entitle plaintiffs to special treatment."

FFRF Attorney Andrew L. Seidel was counsel of record, with FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian and FFRF Attorney Patrick C. Elliott writing the brief.

Court's *Guadalupe* decision allows discrimination

FFRF is decrying the unwarranted expansion of a religious exemption by the U.S. Supreme Court as a blow to the rights of employees everywhere.

"The Supreme Court is allowing religious employers a broad opportunity to discriminate against employees. Their workers now will have less protection under civil rights laws," says Dan Barker, FFRF co-president.

The consolidated cases of *Our Lady of Guadalupe School v. Morrissey-Berru* and *St. James School v. Biel* dealt with the "ministerial exception" to civil rights laws, which allow religious organizations to fire their "ministerial" employees for any reason — even because of race, sex, religion, age, national origin, etc. The July 8 ruling, which dealt with the firing of two teachers at different Catholic schools, harmfully expands this exception under the guise of the religion clauses of the First Amendment.

"When a school with a religious mission entrusts a teacher with the responsibility of educating and forming students in the faith, judicial intervention into disputes between the school and the teacher threatens the school's independence in a way that the First Amendment does not allow," Justice Samuel Alito writes for the

7-2 majority opinion.

In a strong dissent, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, joined by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, points out the potentially dire societal consequences of the ruling.

"The court is not only wrong on the facts, but its error also risks upending antidiscrimination protections for many employees of religious entities," she states. "Recently, this court has lamented a perceived 'discrimination against religion.' (*Espinoza v. Montana Dept. of Revenue*) Yet here it swings the pendulum in the extreme opposite direction, permitting religious entities to discriminate widely and with impunity for reasons wholly divorced from religious beliefs. The inherent injustice in the court's conclusion will be impossible to ignore for long, particularly in a pluralistic society like ours."

In an amicus brief filed before the court in March, FFRF had asked the high court to reject such overbroad firing practices.

FFRF's brief was unique in warning the court that adopting the test preferred by the defendants would have an immediate, devastating impact on the rights of more than 1 million health-care employees — a point that is even more pertinent now than when the brief was filed.



Mississippi lawmakers finally voted to remove the Confederate flag from within the design of the state flag. Unfortunately, a new design will include the phrase "In God We Trust."

Mississippi's new flag to swap one divisive symbol for another

FFRF commends Mississippi lawmakers for finally taking action to remove the racist Confederate Battle Flag from the state flag. Mississippi's flag was indefensible when it was created in 1894 — and remains an unconscionable affront and threat to Black Americans.

Voters will eventually choose the new flag design. Unfortunately, state lawmakers have decided that every possible design must include the divisive religious phrase, "In God We Trust." This decision was rammed through the state Legislature on a Sunday afternoon, allowing virtually no opportunity for public input.

In case there was any doubt which god lawmakers intend the phrase to refer to, Mississippi House Speaker Philip Gunn reportedly celebrated the unusual Sunday passage as occurring "on the Lord's day." In addition to excluding all nonbelievers in Mississippi, Gunn has made it clear that only those who share his personal version of Christian belief will be represented by the state flag.

"In God We Trust" is a phrase

that is intimately entwined with slavery and segregation, making it a particularly ironic choice to replace the Confederate Battle Flag. The phrase was first added to one coin toward the end of the Civil War at the urging of a preacher raging at the "ignominy of heathens," and was belatedly adopted as the national motto and added to paper currency in the 1950s — the height of segregation and the Red Scare.

Mississippi typically ranks as one of the most religious states, but even so, about 17 percent of Mississippians are not Christians, according to a 2014 Pew study. In other words, Mississippi is once again choosing to exclude citizens from its flag.

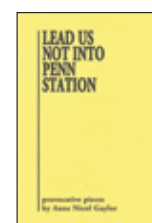
Instead of this divisive religious phrase, Mississippians might consider the original national motto for the overwhelming part of U.S. history, *E Pluribus Unum* ("From many [come] one"). *E Pluribus Unum* would send the message that Mississippi has truly learned from its past mistakes, replacing exclusion with inclusion and seeking to heal and grow as a state.

What Is a Freethinker?

freethinker *n.*

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

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FFRF VICTORIES

By Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey

FFRF has Gideons barred from Ga. school district

A Georgia school district has stopped the Gideons from distributing bibles in a number of schools after FFRF raised several objections.

Many parents reported to FFRF that Ebenezer Elementary School and Marlow Elementary School in the Effingham County Schools system allowed Gideons to enter classrooms, preach to students about the significance of the bible, and distribute bibles to young students, including our complainants' children. Every child was reportedly given a bible (although they were told that they could return it to the teacher if they didn't want it).

Gideons International is an association of Christian business and professional men who are members of Protestant/evangelical churches "dedicated to telling people about Jesus . . . by providing Bibles and New Testaments." Their website openly refers to "students in the fifth grade and above" as prime targets.

It is unconstitutional for public school districts to permit the Gideon Society to distribute bibles as part of the public school day, FFRF Attorney Chris Line emphasized to Effingham County Schools officials.

FFRF's admonitions had their effect.

"The Board of Education has authorized me to assure that outside adults, including the Gideons, will not be allowed into the classrooms of any of the schools in the school district to proselytize or distribute religious materials," the school system's legal counsel recently responded.

National Day of Prayer ended in Florida town

The town of Callahan, Fla. will no longer sponsor a National Day of Prayer.

The town reportedly had been sponsoring and organizing a National Day of Prayer event annually. This year's event was held virtually and posted on the city of Callahan's official website. The video was also recorded in the Town Council meeting room.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Callahan Mayor Marty Fontes informing him to refrain from further organization and promotion of religious events, stop having government employees organize the event and stop advertising the event on the official Callahan website.

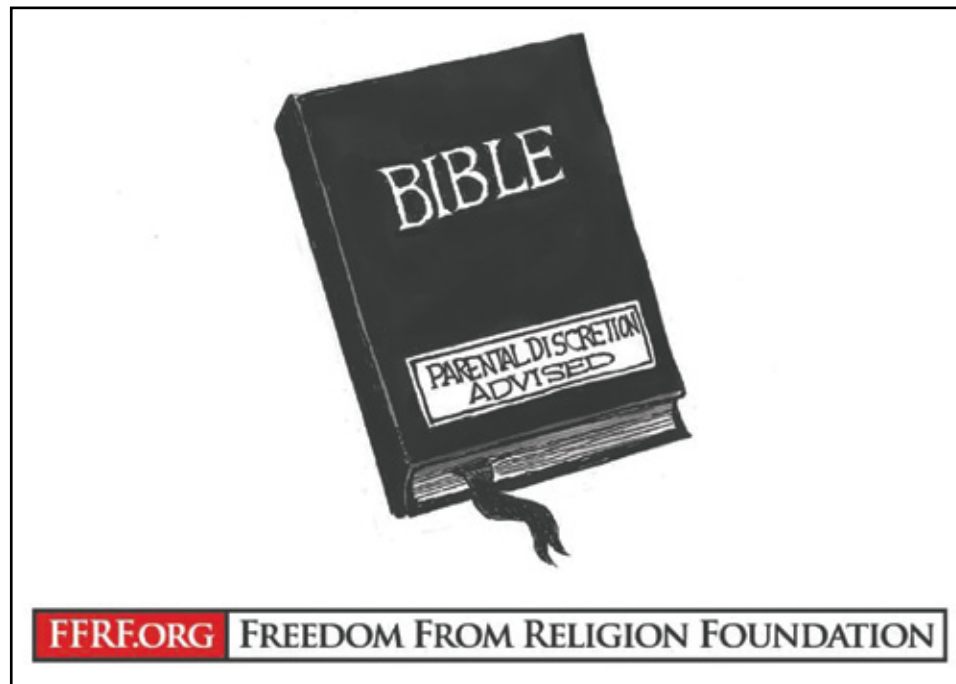
The town of Callahan's attorney sent a letter of response informing FFRF that it does not plan to sponsor the National Day of Prayer going forward.

Religious reference removed from email

A staff member at the Protected Species Division of NOAA Fisheries, a federal wildlife conservation organization, has removed a religious reference from its email signature.

FFRF was informed that a government employee in the division was including two bible verses in her email signature on emails sent through her official government email address to members of the public.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Acting Division Director David Bernhart urging him to direct employees to remove religious references from official emails,



Cartoon by Steve Benson

so as not to create the impression of official endorsement of Christianity.

Bernhart informed FFRF in an email response that the division has established a standardized template for employees to use for their email signatures, free of religious references.

Bible verse taken off Michigan police website

A bible verse was removed from the DeWitt Township Police Department website.

The department had been displaying a verse from the bible, John 15:13, on a page memorializing a fallen officer. The verse read, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."

Former FFRF Legal Fellow Colin McNamara wrote to the department requesting that the verse be removed, which the sheriff's office has since done.

Teacher to stop reading religious stories to class

A teacher in Fairview Area Schools has been instructed to cease reading religious stories to her class.

A district parent informed FFRF that an elementary school music teacher read her class a story in which a man causes a blind girl to see again by praying and which ends with a moral that "all God's children should love one another."

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian wrote to the district superintendent, asking that Fairview remove this story from its curriculum and remind staff of their obligations under the Establishment Clause to remain neutral on matters of religion.

Superintendent Bill Lake assured FFRF in a letter of response that he met with the teacher involved and that this story is not a part of district curriculum. This story or any with similarly religious messages will no longer be given to students in the future.

Minnesota district ends baccalaureate service

Independent School District 728 will make certain that staff are no longer involved in planning, organizing, supervising or carrying out a baccalaureate service in their capacity as district employees.

A district student reported that Rogers High School sponsored and promoted a baccalaureate ceremony that took place online last month. The ceremony was promoted on the school's official Facebook

page and an assistant principal and three teachers participated. The program for the ceremony clearly indicated that these staff members participated in their official capacity as representatives of the school.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Daniel Bittman, informing him that the Establishment Clause prohibits public schools from sponsoring any type of religious practices, including baccalaureate services.

Bittman informed FFRF in a response email that the school district does not permit staff to have any involvement in programs like this one and that "no public resources may be used in planning, organizing, supervising or carrying out such a service." Bittman added that this information will be part of the district's back-to-school orientation with school administrators.

Good News Club gets bad news in North Carolina

District officials in Henderson County Public Schools will address a religious club run by teachers at Hendersonville Elementary School.

A community member alerted FFRF that elementary school teachers were hosting a Good New Club, a self-proclaimed child evangelism fellowship whose mission is to "evangelize boys and girls with the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and establish (disciple) them in the Word of God and in a local church for Christian living."

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Superintendent Bo Caldwell, requesting that the district cease allowing any Good News Clubs in its elementary schools, as such clubs violate the First Amendment.

The district's attorney responded to FFRF with assurances that he will address the legal issues involved with this club with the district.

Oklahoma school takes down religious post

A religious post has been removed from Hinton Public Schools' official social media page.

FFRF was informed that a Hinton High School coach recently posted a religious message on the football team's official Facebook page. In this post, he explained that "in the Hinton Football Program, we want to live by a simple biblical principle 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" He continued, "We don't all

have the same life experiences but the bible doesn't call us to love only those like us. It calls us to love everyone."

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Marcy Derryberry pointing out that, while FFRF agrees with the sentiments of unity and togetherness that the coach promoted in his post, it is in violation of the Establishment Clause for teachers and coaches to endorse a religious message to students.

Derryberry sent a letter of response informing FFRF that the post has been deleted and that employees will be provided training to ensure that such behavior is not repeated. "Our coaching staff and employees have been directed not to utilize school resources or property to engage in religious lessons with students during athletics or at any time they are performing services for Hinton Public School District."

Religious content to be removed from website

Religious content will be removed from a video on the Hutto (Texas) Independent School District website.

A local resident informed FFRF that the school posted a video of its Teacher of the Year award on its official Facebook account, which featured a district principal speaking to the awardee: "Scripture tells us that we all have different gifts according to the grace given to each of us," the principal said. "Your gifts are the gifts of service and the gifts of teaching."

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to the district, informing it that in order to avoid Establishment Clause concerns, district personnel must not post religious messages to public social media pages on which they represent themselves using their job titles.

The district informed FFRF it is in the process of editing the video to remove the religious content.

Council prayer replaced with moment of silence

Prayer at Norfolk City Council meetings will be replaced with a moment of silence. A local religious leader representing Satanic Norfolk reportedly had their offer to give an invocation at a Norfolk City Council meeting rescinded after the city clerk learned the leader's religious beliefs did not include belief in the bible. Every invocation at Norfolk's city council meetings since at least 2017 has been a Christian one.

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Norfolk Mayor Kenneth Cooper, pointing out that singling out a religious denomination by denying them a chance to give an invocation, despite allowing similarly situated Christian leaders to offer invocations, amounts to a clear violation of the First Amendment. If a government entity like the City of Norfolk chooses to engage in prayer before its legislative meetings, FFRF pointed out, it may not constitutionally restrict opportunities to give invocations at faith traditions of which the city approves.

City Deputy Attorney Jack Cloud sent a letter of response, informing FFRF:

"After much thought and careful consideration, the city has suspended its practice of inviting community members to give legislative prayers or to engage in the practice of legislative prayer at all. The city now holds a moment of silence instead."

FFRF praises LGBTQ decision by SCOTUS

The U.S. Supreme Court issued a historic ruling upholding civil rights protections for LGBTQ Americans.

In a 6-3 decision issued June 15 in *Bostock v. Clayton Co.* (with Justice Neil Gorsuch authoring the majority decision), the court declared that the existing federal ban on sex discrimination forbids employment discrimination against LGBTQ workers. The decision reads:

“An employer who fired an individual for being homosexual or transgender fires that person for traits or actions it would not have questioned in members of a different sex. Sex plays a necessary and undisguisable role in the decision, exactly what Title VII forbids.”

Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Samuel Alito (Justice Clarence Thomas joining) each issued a dissenting opinion.

Prior to this ruling, more than half of the United States had no laws protecting against employment discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Very often, the religious beliefs of employers have been used as justification for discrimination against LGBTQ employees. Aimee Stephens, a trans woman fired from her job at a funeral home and one of the plaintiffs at the center of today’s decision, was terminated because, her boss argued, it would vio-



late “God’s commands” if he allowed Stephens “to deny her sex while acting as a representative of the organization.”

This decision encompasses three cases: *Altitude Express Inc. v. Zarda*, *Bostock v. Clayton County* and *R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral Homes v. EEOC*. The court noted that each of the plaintiffs was a longtime employee fired shortly after revealing their transgender status — and for no other reason than that.

It’s hard to overstate the magnitude of this victory, given the clarity of the decision: “An individual’s homosexuality or transgender status is not relevant to employment decisions. That’s because it is impossible to discriminate against a person for being homosexual or transgender without discriminating against that individual based on sex.”

The court’s reasoning stands in stark contrast to the Trump administration’s sustained attack across policy areas to deny civil rights protections to trans people, often citing the preservation of so-called “religious liberty” as its justification. On June 12, in the midst of a global pandemic, the Department of Health and Human Services finalized a rule erasing federal protections for trans patients against discrimination in health care.

Although the decision is a monumental victory for LGBTQ equality, the court failed to address a critical question: Can Christian employers claim a religious right to fire LGBTQ employees? The court didn’t answer that question. This makes the fight for state/church separation all the more vital. We at the Freedom From Religion Foundation recognize the struggle is far from over to ensure that religious dogma is no longer permitted to undermine the rights to full citizenship for LGBTQ Americans or individual liberty for any American.

OVERHEARD

The phrase “But Gorsuch” is shorthand for how conservatives justify all the moral compromises they’ve made in supporting Trump; controlling the Supreme Court makes it all worth it. So there’s a special sweetness in Gorsuch spearheading the most important LGBT rights decision since the 2015 ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which established a constitutional right to same-sex marriage.

Columnist Michelle Goldberg, in her column, “Surprise! Justice on LGBT rights from a Trump judge.”

The New York Times, 6-15-20

The new culture war is not abortion or same-sex marriage, the new culture war is about preserving a white, Christian America.

Robert Jones, founder of Public Religion Research Institute.

The New York Times, 6-18-20

A former member of the administration (one of the few who did decide to resign) told me that both [Vice President] Pence and [Secretary of State] Pompeo “have convinced themselves that they are

in a biblical moment.” All of the things they care about — outlawing abortion and same-sex marriage, and (though this is never said out loud) maintaining a white majority in America — are under threat. Time is growing short. They believe that “we are approaching the Rapture, and this is a moment of deep religious significance.” . . . If you are convinced we are living in the End Times, then anything the president does can be forgiven.

Anne Applebaum, in her article “History will judge the complicit.”

The Atlantic, July/August 2020 issue

The problem is here she [Education Secretary Betsy DeVos] is again standing up for private schools, and public school folks feel like she’s never protected or cared about them. As far as I can tell, she’s pretty much played to type.

Michael J. Petrilli, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative education think tank.

Washington Post, 6-15-20

It’s only a moment, for sure, but the Roberts court, against all expectations, has made this battered country a better, safer place. For now.

Columnist Linda Greenhouse, writing about the Supreme Court’s recent decisions on abortion, DACA and LGBTQ rights.

The New York Times, 7-2-20

FFRF welcomes newest Lifers, After-Lifers, Beyond After-Lifers

FFRF thanks and welcomes its three new Beyond After-Life Members, one After-Life Member and 16 Lifetime members.

FFRF’s three new Beyond After-Life Members are Brenda Wood Frei, Mark G. Frei and Jerry Walker. Beyond After-Life is a membership category of \$10,000.

New After-Life Member is Daniel Kozloff. This membership designation is for donations of \$5,000.

Our 16 newest \$1,000 Lifetime Members are: James Balko, Lisa C. D’Andrea, Sue Goldwomon, Bill Hall, Thomas J. Hannie Jr., Chris Lampe, Marissa Langseth, Joan E. Lavier, Ronald Mallory, Larry Wayne McHam, Beverly Price, Mark Robinow, Howard Saltzman, Edward Sorel, Nancy Travis and Douglas Young.

States represented are: Arizona, California, Florida, Louisiana, Nebraska, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin.

FFRF blasts court’s contraceptive ruling

The U.S. Supreme Court in its decision July 8 lamentably has blessed the Trump administration’s expansion of exceptions to contraceptive coverage for religious reasons.

In *Trump v. Pennsylvania*, and its companion case “*Little Sisters*,” a five-judge majority of the court ruled that the Trump administration may have a free hand in permitting employers and private universities to opt out, without notice, of the Affordable Care Act’s contraceptive mandate, which requires employers to offer preventive care, including prescription contraception for women. A district court judge ruled against the Trump administration’s move and issued a preliminary injunction against the rule coming into effect. That decision was upheld by a three-member panel of the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. A Catholic order of nuns, the Little Sisters of the Poor Saint Peter and Paul Home, was permitted to intervene in the case and argue that the mere act of signing an ACA waiver violates their religious freedom and the Catholic view that birth control is a sin.

The Supreme Court decided that the Trump administration had the authority to massively enlarge the contraceptive care exceptions and that its process for doing so was not procedurally improper.

“We hold that the Departments had the authority to provide exemptions from the regulatory contraceptive requirements for employers with religious and conscientious objections. We accordingly reverse the 3rd Circuit’s judgment and remand with instructions to dissolve the nationwide preliminary injunction,” writes Justice Clarence Thomas in his majority opinion that was joined by four other justices.

The majority found that the Affordable Care Act granted broad authority to the Health Resources and Services Administration “to define preventative care and screenings and to create the religious and moral exemptions.”

Justice Elena Kagan, joined by Justice Stephen Breyer, filed a concurring opinion that leaves some hope that the expanded contraceptive exemptions

may not survive further review. The case was remanded for further proceedings, which will allow the states of Pennsylvania and New Jersey to show that the new exemptions were “arbitrary and capricious.” As noted by Kagan, “That issue is now ready for resolution, unaffected by today’s decision.” One concern raised by the parties is that the Trump administration rules provide exemptions to contraceptive coverage to publicly traded companies, which will be difficult to justify.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, joined by Justice Sonia Sotomayor, dissented out of a concern about women’s rights and the intent of the Affordable Care Act to guarantee comprehensive care.

“The original administrative regulation accommodating religious objections to contraception appropriately implemented the Affordable Care Act and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act consistent with Congress’ staunch determination to afford women employees equal access to preventive services, thereby advancing public health and welfare and women’s well-being.”

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is strongly disturbed by the majority judgment.

“This is a disheartening decision that will enable an attack on reproductive rights,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Employers should not have free rein to deny women workers much-needed contraceptive care. This is discriminatory and unacceptable.”

FFRF had signed on to a brief before the court, as part of a diverse assortment of groups, contending that the Trump administration was breaching the First Amendment in allowing certain religion-based exemptions from required birth control coverage.

FFRF has also long advocated for the repeal of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which is what provides the underlying basis for the Supreme Court’s ruling today, and its ruling in the Hobby Lobby case. These decisions demonstrate the need for Congress to take action and to finally repeal this act.

Reality, not religion, is truly amazing

By James A. Haught

If you follow science, you perhaps have gotten an eerie sense that daily reality — people, houses, cars, trees, air, earth and all the rest — is just a shred amid a hugely greater array of existence.

The European Southern Observatory — a 15-nation consortium that operates telescopes in Chile — released a photo of two galaxies colliding. Here's the stunner: It happened 7 billion years ago. It took that much time for fast-traveling light to reach Planet Earth just now. To look at the image today is looking backward in time through incredible eons.

Philosopher-engineer R. Buckminster Fuller has put it this way: "Up to the 20th century, 'reality' was everything humans could touch, smell, see and hear. Since the initial publication of the chart of the electromagnetic spectrum, humans have learned that what they can touch, smell, see and hear is less than one-millionth of reality."

Here are some random examples:

Each cell of your body (except red blood cells) has about 6 feet of DNA tightly coiled into 46 chromosomes in its nucleus. Since the human body has an estimated 37 trillion cells, each person contains perhaps 30 billion miles of DNA.

When you sit perfectly "still," you're traveling vastly faster than a bullet — 1,000 miles per hour with Earth's rotation (at the equator), 67,000 mph with the planet's or-



James A. Haught

bit around the sun, 486,000 mph with the solar system's whirl around the Milky Way galaxy, and an estimated 1.3 million mph with the galaxy's travel through the universe. (A bullet goes about 3,000 mph.)

Einstein's theory of relativity is fully accepted today. But ask yourself: Can time really slow down and dimensions shorten as speed increases? Einstein's famed $E=MC^2$ equation showed that matter and energy are interchangeable. Less matter than a dime turned into energy at Hiroshima in 1945.

And nobody really knows what subatomic particles are. Sometimes they're objects; sometimes they're waves. They seemingly exist in several places at once. They're "the dreams that stuff is made of," one physicist said. Some "virtual particles" appear and vanish in pure vacuum.

Here's a grabber: Nearly all the weight, or mass, of matter comes from protons and neutrons, which are composed of three quarks each. Yet the masses of three quarks add up to just 1 percent of the mass of a



Illustration by Shutterstock / Sergey Nivens

proton or neutron. New Scientist magazine says theorists think that actions of the strong nuclear force, which binds quarks together, creates 99 percent of the mass.

Atoms are as empty as the night sky. Yet these voids form solid-seeming matter, because their negative outer electrons repel each other. When emptiness is squeezed from atoms — when intense gravity compresses a collapsing star into a pulsar, a solid mass of neutrons — the substance weighs 10 million tons per thimbleful. Astounding.

To demonstrate the mysteries of existence, California Unitarian minister Ted Webb has cited statistics like these: "Your

body and mine make 300 million new cells every minute." And "the information in the DNA molecule in every cell would fill a thousand 600-page books."

What conclusion can be drawn from all this? Here's mine: Science shows that reality is amazing, baffling, incredible, bizarre, seemingly miraculous. I can't imagine why anyone would need supernatural gods, devils, heavens and hells of religion — purely fictitious, as far as any honest observer can tell — when science reveals greater enigmas.

FFRF Member James A. Haught was the longtime editor at the *Charleston Gazette* and has been the editor emeritus since 2015.

Religion is the world's greatest scam

By Barbara G. Walker

Religion is the world's oldest, richest, most elaborate, and by far the most successful scam ever perpetrated. It is the work of very wealthy organizations dedicated to continuing their acquisition of tax-free assets, to support millions of dependent employees, and to maintain a show of impeccable respectability. For these purposes, theologians are forever trying to fine-tune their basically ridiculous doctrines to force them into seeming to make some kind of sense.



Barbara G. Walker

For just one example: The words "above" and "below" used to be the normal synonyms for heaven and hell. Everybody knew automatically that heaven was located in the sky, and hell was underground. But, in modern times, we now know the limits of the Earth's atmosphere, and that there is nothing beyond it but empty space. We also know what lies below the Earth's crust.

So, the theologians can no longer speak of a god or angels or deceased loved ones "looking down," nor can they picture bad people writhing around in

molten lava. So, they are taking pains to deny and redefine these physical locations, and finding it difficult to do.

Although no one can say anymore exactly where the ghosts go, religious shills still try to maintain the basic concept, to perpetuate the scam.

They know that this scam is best instilled in its victims from early childhood, to present them with a make-believe parental authority figure that will override and outlive real parents. They seek to impose a system of daily and seasonal reminders and habitual connections to every important occasion in life: birth, maturity, marriage, death. They know that when such habits are fully installed, the victims will be hesitant to criticize them, and will go to great lengths to continue believing that, after death, they will be able to see without eyes, hear without ears, feel without nerves, think without a brain, and that if they behave they will be able to subject this ongoing consciousness to a transcendent happiness.

But the downside is the most sadistic threat ever conceived, eternal torture that can somehow be felt by those non-existent nerves — a threat so severe as to terrify the gullible into compliance with all the money-making demands imposed on them. They are targets of the world's most successful scam, which charges high prices for its promised non-product, which never has to be delivered because it consists of nothing but hot air.

Making promises that you never have to fulfill, brainwashing the marks so they never rebel, earning huge sums on false pretenses that you never have to justify, and keeping this scam operational for many centuries in many nations — how could it be any more

successful?

We are still being exposed to religion as part of our daily language and seasonal calendar. It is a shamelessly overt kind of scam that those of us who can perceive its falseness are still expected to tolerate. So, we are still being taught mythology in the guise of history, avarice masquerading as benevolence, and lies masquerading as truth.

The real downside, of course, is that over the centuries, religion has developed truly evil and destructive ways of maintaining itself against rivals, unbelievers or scientific facts. It has instituted wars, inquisitions, holocausts and hideous oppressions. It has denied observable truths and set itself against scientific knowledge of our world. Its only answer to the doubters is still "you must have faith" because it is evil to ask questions.

The real evil is that questions that can't be reasonably answered must never be spoken or heard. Secular leaders and politicians have always gone along, either because they are suitably brainwashed themselves, or because they dare not oppose that much money and influence.

Perhaps we can hope that in a more scientifically enlightened future the world will finally turn against this scam, and give humanity a more rational and peaceful world, without any threatening All-Father to terrify them or any absurdly questionable hopes to close their minds. But that is still far off. Let us do what we can in our own lifetimes to bring it a little bit closer.

FFRF Lifetime Member Barbara G. Walker is a researcher, lecturer and author of 24 books.

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Freedom depends upon freethinkers

Secular grads, the world now needs you

By John de Lancie

Greetings — wherever you may be. I'm John de Lancie. Some of you may recognize me from my roles on "Star Trek" or "Breaking Bad" or any number of other shows. Today, I'm speaking to you not as an actor, but rather as a secular humanist — as a person who has far more love and respect for the real world than for the imaginary one.

Congratulations to those of you who have just finished high school. And congratulations to those of you who have just finished college. Bravo to all of you who worked hard and got the grades. And to those of you who barely read the assignments, slept through your classes, pushed the boundaries of goofing off to new levels — like I once did — bravo to you, too. Whether you are graduating summa cum laude or by the skin of your teeth, you've made it!

Make no bones about it — graduation is a milestone. It's a day reserved just for seniors. You might have thought, as freshmen, this day would never come, but it did. It's a special day. A special week. Getting your diploma in front of family and friends is important. The parties and proms are all part of the celebration. Whether you're graduating from high school or from college, you are on the launch pad. Fueled and ready to go. Next stop — The Future. Except, hold on... there's a glitch? A problem? A what?

A worldwide pandemic! Just like in the movies. And all of a sudden, the best part of your senior year is cut short and the springtime ramp up to graduation has been replaced with anxiety, hurried goodbyes, quarantine and Zoom?!

It sucks. No question about it.

Remain optimistic

And yet, in the midst of all this disappointment and tragedy, you need to remain optimistic — as difficult as that may sound. Your future depends on it. Because as dark and scary as things may be today, there are opportunities opening up that only come around once in a generation. A new world is going to get shaped out of this mess, and as a secularist, you are particularly well-suited to do the shaping.

This is not the first crisis to befall humankind nor will it be the last. Each generation has had a particular challenge.

I think about my parents and how they must have felt, at 18 years old, when their lives were suddenly turned upside down. Saturday night, Dec. 6, 1941. They were at the movies, looking forward to Christmas and New Year's. Their future was all worked out — or so they thought. The next morning, in the blink of an eye, the party was over as a whole new reality came screaming into their lives.

How frightened and scared they must have been those first months as the world exploded around them, and yet it didn't take long before they understood the challenge they faced, rose to the occasion and, ultimately, created a whole new world out of the old one. Just like you will do.

My parents' generation achieved extraordinary things. They built a world in which democracy triumphed over fascism and dictatorship. A world where cooperation and internation-



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Actor and FFRF "After-Life" Member John de Lancie holds the Clarence Darrow Award which he received at FFRF's national convention in San Francisco in 2018. This speech was delivered on May 30 at the Secular Student Alliance's online graduation event.

al institutions replaced "might makes right." Out of the ashes of WWII came an unprecedented period of prosperity both for the victors and the vanquished, where billions of people worldwide were lifted out of poverty. Where parents no longer had to fear losing their children to measles or polio. If that weren't enough, in a supreme feat of optimism and creativity, they landed on the moon. Pretty impressive.

But along with all those successes was a dark side. There was a world of inequality. A world where people were limited by race, gender and sexual orientation. A world of consumption and extraction without regard for sustainability. A world where one political misjudgment and the push of a button could annihilate the human race.

That's the world my generation inherited when we graduated. A war in Vietnam, race riots at home and political assassinations. So, what did we do?

Well, like most every generation we started out with the best of intentions. We helped to end the Vietnam War. We fought for the civil rights of minorities, women, gays and people of color. We started the sexual revolution. We innovated and turned the richness of

American music, art, comedy, film and television into the world's most attractive brand. We invented the personal computer, the Internet, and an entire digital economy in which a majority of you will probably make your careers. We traveled the world like it was our backyard.

But, as my own children remind me, that's not all we did. We happily reaped the benefit from the investment our parents made in education, infrastructure and institutions, then pulled the ladder up behind us. We allowed, and even celebrated, the obscene accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few with no regard for what it does to the many.

We borrowed and borrowed — never wanting to pay the piper. We choked the Earth with pollution and then convinced ourselves that your generation should take care of it. We incarcerated more of our fellow citizens than any other country on Earth. We shrugged and turned away when our own children were gunned down in their classrooms. We corrupted the political system with vast sums of hidden money. We turned news into entertainment and lying into a political norm. Because we didn't go to the moon our-

“The future belongs to you. And the forging of that future will require what you possess in abundance: reason, truthfulness, critical thinking and courage.”

elves, out of envy we concocted conspiracy theories about how it never happened at all. And as the years wore on some of us became small and petty. There's a reason we're called "The Me Generation."

You are the future

Crises have a way of exposing both the best and worst. And this pandemic is no different. As secularists, these last few months have shown with brutal clarity that the future does not and cannot belong to the liars, the magical thinkers, the bloviators, the science deniers — to those who are too lazy to actually "know" anything except for what their "gut" tells them — as ample as that may be.

The future belongs to you. And the forging of that future will require what you possess in abundance: reason, truthfulness, critical thinking and courage. And also "belief."

Now I know that's a strange thing to say about people like us. We are used to being defined by what we don't believe. "Oh, you don't believe in God?" "You don't believe in the bible?" "You don't believe in the Blood of the Lamb?" You got it! I don't!

I believe that truth is more powerful than fiction. That ideology, dogma and groupthink is dangerous and should always be challenged. I believe in fairness, tolerance and equality. I'm happy to say that these last few months, as tragic as they have been, have provided us with shining examples of what matters most: Facts, truth and caring — as health professionals and scientists all around the world battle to save us all.

People love to say, "there are no atheists in foxholes," but my experience is that when the shit hits the fan there are no anti-vaxxers or magical thinkers in a pandemic. Well, unfortunately there are, but we all know Darwinism will eventually take care of that.

What's important for you to know is that my generation's influence is coming to an end. And that this crisis, positioned a few months before an election, provides you with the unique opportunity not to just clean up, but to clean out.

Today, your graduation day, is an invitation to imagine your future and to achieve it. You don't like \$72,000-a-year colleges? I don't blame you. You want to breathe clean air and drink pure water? You should. You want to be paid a living wage? I agree. You want health care? Absolutely! Social justice? It's all within your reach.

As this crisis wanes, there is already a push to get things back to "the way they were." Here's your first challenge. If the way they were is not good enough, then you need to do something about it. How you tackle these next six months will impact your lives for years to come.

Remember, good intentions are not enough. "Being" secular is not a lapel pin — it's a mission. Today, more than ever, we need leaders. We need visionaries. We need a whole new conversation. That's why you must remain optimistic and active. Your time is now. In the coming months, the forces of bigotry, ignorance and fear are counting on you to remain on the sidelines. Surprise them. Be smart. Be strategic. Be secular. The world needs you.

See you out there!

How to effectively argue with Christians

By Miklos Jako

I am a big fan of FFRF. I've been a member since I saw Anne Nicol Gaylor on Phil Donahue's show some 40 years ago. Though I remain a theist philosophically (I believe in the probability of a general, almost deistic God not tied to any particular religion), I strongly oppose Christianity in the same way FFRF does. I regard atheists as my compadres, not Christians.

Similar to Dan Barker, I came out of Christianity, slowly, carefully, over time. During that journey, I've argued with hundreds of Christians, including top apologists like Hank Hanegraaff ("The



Miklos Jako

Bible Answer Man"), Hugh Ross (a legitimate astrophysicist), Peter Kreeft (sometimes referred to as the C. S. Lewis of our day), and William Lane Craig (the best Christian apologist out there, in my opinion).

I think my observations on how to argue with Christians are valuable. The following are some of the basic methods I've found to effectively communicate and debate.

Pick the right issues: Too often atheists like to talk about the existence of God or about evolution. As important as these topics are, you usually end up just going around in circles, talking past each other.

Instead, I find the Dennis McKinsey approach (Dennis is the author of *The*



William Lane Craig



Miklos Jako

This is a screenshot from the video produced of the debate between Christian apologist William Lane Craig and FFRF Member Miklos Jako.

Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy) to be much more productive: Focus on biblical contradictions and immoralities. The bible is replete with serious problems. Use their own book against them.

Productive engagement: Engage with patience, not hostility. You'd be surprised how willing Christians are willing to talk, IF you have the right attitude. Don't say, "So, you really believe this imaginary man in the sky answers your prayers?" Instead, say, "I overheard you talking about the bible. Can I ask you a few questions?"

There is a place for hard-core criticism and/or mockery, but in individual discussions, it's best to keep it civil. Try to understand their viewpoint. Choose your language carefully. Even though you might be thinking, "Oh, that's absolute

BS!" make yourself say, "Well, I strongly disagree with you about that!" My favorite parting line is a cordial "Well, we agree to disagree." That way I haven't insulted them and the chances are better that they'll be willing to actually think over some of the arguments I made.

Conservative vs. liberal Christian: They are different species! They interpret the bible very differently. They view social issues very differently. The liberal Christian normally does not believe in hell, does not condemn homosexuals, does not oppose church/state separation, does not oppose evolution. Liberal Christians are cafeteria Christians, accepting what they like and simply ignoring what they don't like. In my opinion, combating the conservative Christian is far more important, because they are the ones who cause harm.

Appreciate their circumstances: Keep in mind that Christians are Christians not because they are inherently dim, but because they have been culturally indoctrinated into their religion, usually from childhood. They've been taught to focus only on the good aspects of their religion. They've been raised with the idea that Jesus is the personification of all that is good. And they have a profound emotional incentive to remain Christians because so many of their friends and family members are fellow Christians.

Realistic expectations: Here are words probably never spoken in human history: "You know, that's a good point. I think I'll give up my religion." You cannot give a Christian your best arguments in 30 minutes and expect him to give up beliefs he's held for 30 years. Change is glacial. You're just laying seeds. (I once had a Jehovah's Witness write to me 25 years after our conversation, to tell me he left his religion.)

Being too literal: Try not to interpret the bible too literally (as atheists are wont to do), but allow for figurative and metaphorical interpretation, if at all reasonable. Otherwise, the Christian will dismiss you as a typical, myopic atheist, who understands nothing about spiritual matters. If you insist that Jesus was scientifically wrong to refer to the mustard seed as the smallest of all seeds, they will regard you as a foolish "wooden literalist."

The "taking it out of context" ploy: Frequently you'll hear them say, "Oh, you're taking the passage out of context." They often try to peremptorily dismiss a criticism with this general assertion without actually dealing with the issue. Insist they explain to you exactly how the con-

text radically changes a normal reading of that passage. Make them back up their claim.

The talking in paragraphs ploy: Christians, especially ministers, will often talk in whole paragraphs, in set-piece sermonettes, and not allow you to interrupt with a timely objection to their line of reasoning. They do this deliberately to ground the discussion in the Christian worldview, and to end up presenting a *fait accompli* in favor of Christianity. If you try to interrupt, you come across as being rude, not allowing them to finish a thought. My answer to this ploy is to let them finish, and at the end say, "I was not able to follow your reasoning and would you please repeat your presentation, but this time very slowly, step by step." Then, I can point out the flaws in his reasoning or in the biased assumptions he is making along the way, without being perceived as "rude."

They will frequently bombard you with related but irrelevant points at length. Christians are experts at deflection. If they don't address the relevant aspect of your question, ask it again.

Strategy and research: Whatever topic you want to bring up, make sure you know their positions ahead of time. Don't underestimate them. Christianity has had 2,000 years of developing and fine-tuning its apologetics! There are innumerable books on apologetics. It's hard to find any topic they have not already defended, often quite cleverly (and convincingly for the Christian, though, not so for the objective inquisitor). Before I talked to William Lane Craig, I spent nine months studying his website, reading half a dozen of his books, watching scores of his debates on YouTube, taking and organizing copious notes.

I recommend Geisler and Howe's *When Critics Ask* as the best Christian apologetics reference book. It covers virtually every issue from the Christian perspective, and succinctly so. Note that the website *Biblegateway.com* is extremely helpful in looking up info. I used to own 14 different versions of the bible and often labored through them, but now everything is quick and easy on that website. I also strongly recommend Dan Barker's *Losing Faith in Faith* for getting a good feel for the Christian mindset and the issues involved in leaving Christianity.

It certainly helps to know the bible well, but you don't need to. Just pick a couple of arguments you like, and keep using those.

Miklos Jako, who lives in Massachusetts, is the author of *The Truth About Religion and Confronting Believers*.

Getting what you pray for

The following are two examples of a specific debate conversation.

I reject Jesus because he promised to answer our prayers and we all know prayers do not always get answered.

Christian debater: Sometimes the answer is no. Jesus did not promise your prayers will always be granted.

Yes, he did! In Mark 11:24 — "Whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them."

Christian debater: Uh, but it's qualified. If it's according to God's will.

Yeah, but that makes the promise completely meaningless. It makes Jesus' promise essentially: God will grant your prayers when He does, but He won't when He doesn't. That is not what Jesus meant, or what a normal person would understand by Jesus's words in that passage. I mean, that's just typical Christian double-talk. If you say to someone you will do anything he asks, and then qualify it by "according to my will," that is to essentially say you will do anything YOU wish, not what the other person wishes.

Stoning your loved ones to death

I could never be a Christian. I could never kill a loved one just because they decided to follow a different religion.

Christian debater: Where do you get that!? Christianity teaches us to love one another!

In the Old Testament, it tells you to stone to death, without mercy, any loved one who decides to follow a different religion. It's in Deuteronomy 13:6-10.

Christian debater: You're taking things out of context. That was probably a very particular situation, where the survival of the Hebrew nation was at stake. Obviously, Christians do not hold to that kind of severity today.

I think such a command is profoundly immoral no matter what the period of history, no matter what the context. This command was NOT specifically retracted at any later point. In fact, in the previous chapter of Deuteronomy, 12:32, it says, "Everything that I command you. . . you shall not add to it or take from it." Psalm 33:11 says, "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, The plans of His heart to all generations."

Christian debater: Well, that is disturbing. But that does not refute Jesus and who he was.

I think it does. The Old Testament God was the God Jesus believed in, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jesus knew Old Testament scriptures, and he did not repudiate the bad stuff, as he must, if he's supposed to be the ultimate beacon of morality.

I'm a Black Republican — and now atheist

Cincinnati council member comes out as nonbeliever

This is an edited version of an article published May 21 on [Medium.com](#) and is reprinted with permission. You can read the full article at: bit.ly/2YIUJ4b.

By Jeffrey Pastor

I am an atheist.

Writing these words is my liberation from a life that had become too unbearable and inauthentic. My old seminary professor reminded me to be “true, authentic and courageous.”

Growing up in America and by biological accident, I came to society as a Black kid in urban Cincinnati. All of my family was raised in a predominantly Catholic and Pentecostal household. As a child, I have fond memories of my mother worshipping at Zion Temple First Pentecostal Church. My mother would go on to “give her life to Christ” around the time I was 11.

I would go on to give my life to Christ at the tender age of 12. Fully convinced that it was necessary to avoid hell and fight the demons that lurked around every corner, I not only “got saved” but was “on fire for the Lord.” Most of our elders encouraged this promising behavior, often remarking, “God has a calling on you, young man.” Those words of affirmation only strengthened my resolve.

While attending high school, I would carry my bible and briefcase. I was a virgin who did not use curse words or experiment with drugs and alcohol and who feverishly battled against sexually lustful and hateful thoughts. I was on my way to “get my reward!”

At 17, I graduated from high school and began to chart my own path. I thought I had the whole world figured out.

Then, between 2001–2005, I became human. I lost my virginity. I attended my first campus party in 2003, but still did not drink or smoke “the devil’s grass.” Yet, I would be haunted with guilt and shame for attending college parties and lusting. Anything bad that came my way — sickness, financial calamity, ruin — was all a result of my behavior. I had to fight by “rededicating my life to the Lord.” I missed out on so much in college living up to expectations I could never meet.

In 2001, I was a “chaste” 17-year-old Pentecostal from Cincinnati. Four years later, I was still a Pentecostal kid, but with a precious 4-month-old girl. I graduated Central State University in 2005.

But life has a funny way of hitting working-class graduates hard, especially racial minorities. I got a job in the Wal-Mart Assistant Manager Trainee program in Moraine, Ohio, over one hour away from Cincinnati. How did I get there? My working-class mother, a Metro employee at that time, drove me or allowed me to take the car. (If I ever believed in a god, it would have to be my mom.) But I could not maintain the commute.

What did I do? I prayed. Then I got a “sign from God” that told me to attend the seminary. I asked my ex-girlfriend to move to Ohio so we could raise our 6-month-old daughter together. Besides, “you need to mar-



Jeffrey Pastor, a member of the Cincinnati City Council, recently came out as an atheist.

ry that young lady” was a common refrain among the religious faithful. She obliged. We got married Dec. 3, 2005, one day before my 22nd birthday, and had our next beautiful girl in May 2006. But in less than a year, we’d divorced. My life was shattered. How could the kid who was “on fire” and in seminary fall from grace? I thought I did everything right.

The next six years were marked by depression as I navigated life as a divorcee with two precious daughters and the guilt of my “infidelities” and “failed marriage.”

Questioning faith

My first questions about my “faith” began in 2005, what believers would call my “Job season.” Thankfully, unlike that biblical archetype of suffering, I had my younger siblings, grandmother and mother as support during this dark period when I did what any faithful Pentecostal does: Pray harder. Fast. Repent. Repeat. I felt that my situation was a result of disobeying God. But the questions became more pronounced: Why do I believe in the Pentecostal version? Why do we use three letters — G-O-D — to describe a being that is supposedly omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent? Are billions of people really doomed to hell because they do not follow our version of Christianity? Is this imminent demise for all nonbelievers even real?

I begin to unravel. First it started with thinking that Jesus is not God, which is a huge leap from the Jesus-only Pentecostal faith. That led to my lack of belief in eternal punishment, which led to visiting and joining a Baptist church. I remarried in 2009, and after sharing with my wife my doubts, we begin visiting as many denominations as possible.

At that point, I received an honorable discharge from the Navy. I tried Catholicism — yes, only 45-minute church services during football season! This must be it! Except it wasn’t. Then we tried the Episcopal, Methodist, Southern Baptist and A.M.E. churches. But nothing seemed to fit.

How about Islam? We visited a mosque, began to take Shahadah. But issues with the seemingly second-class treatment of women proved implacable and unreconcilable. We were raising little girls whom we wanted to be strong Black women and a son whom we wanted to respect women.

Most importantly, it felt like I never left orthodox Christianity. Finally, we tried every kind of Judaism. Orthodox Judaism. Conservative Judaism. A brief stint with Reformed Judaism. Alas, it was too orthodox, too xenophobic. Finally, we converted to Conservative Judaism, where we remain. My conversion name is Yaakov (Jacob).

Words that liberate me

I am an atheist. These words liberate me. These words that had been echoing inside my head finally left my lips in December 2013 when I informed one of my best friends, Nic. My heart palpitated fast, my anxiety seemed uncontrollable.

“I am an atheist, Nic.”

“I already knew that,” he said. “What took you so long to admit that to yourself?”

Tears. Joy. Next, I told my wife.

“Well, you’ve always joked I was an atheist, and now your ass is an atheist,” she said. “Live in your truth. I am here either way. Can we still attend shul?”

Tears. Joy. “Are you going to tell your mother?” she asked.

When my wife and I converted to

Judaism, my mother was skeptical. She has always supported anything that I had done in life, but this may be one step too far. Yet, by 2019, I couldn’t stay silent any longer.

“Mommy, I am an atheist.” Finally, saying those words in the face of God liberated me. For real. For good.

Obviously, my Pentecostal mother does not agree, and from my perspective, our relationship has changed ever so slightly. She is concerned about my being punished for my lack of belief. Her fear is that God will demonstrate that he is real through some personal destructive act that will force “my knee to bow and tongue to confess that Jesus is Lord.” My mother holds dear to that which nearly all zealous theists believe. In some countries, there is a huge price to pay for not having faith in an anthropomorphic divine figure.

An atheist. These words liberate me.

Seeking freedom

The truth is that none of us really achieves the mythical freedom we seek. The god you choose is highly dependent on family and country.

If you live in America and you are Black, you are most likely a Christian. Take that same human and put it in brown color in Saudi Arabia, they’re probably Muslim.

I have always been a questioning person. Why was I so lucky? Why am I right and they are wrong? Quite frankly, I was tired of avoiding the answers. I was tired of living in the shadows.

I am an atheist. Words that liberate me.

My freedom is worth my death. I will not use this space to bash or shame theists because, quite frankly, there are millions of great theists out there in the world.

Yes, I still participate in the Jewish liturgy. Yes, I am still a classical liberal (original Republican). Yes, I still sing every Christmas. And, yes, I will continue to fight for private businesses’ right to discriminate based on their religious teachings. Limited government is, as we say, maximum freedom.

Personally, I need to live up to what I “preach” to my family and friends. How can I keep hiding who I am? “If a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn’t fit to live.” — Dr. Martin Luther King. I am willing to die for my freedom and liberty and the freedom and liberty of others. I am now, finally, alive at 36.

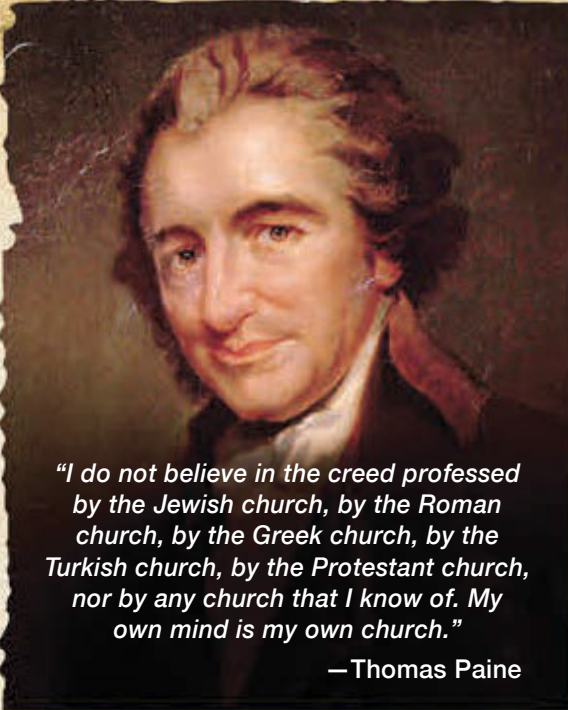
Liberty is worth death. I will surely lose donors, voters, family, friends’ social capital. I’ll be disinvited to key events. Shunned, ostracized, pilloried. If so, it was/is still all worth it.

This is my “coming out,” my liberation, my freedom. A Black guy who is obsessed with both Malcom X’s and Ayn Rand’s economic teachings. A Black guy who has suppressed his desire for polyamory and who believes that children represent eternal life. An atheist Jew who finds truth in agnosticism, humanism, African/Chinese/Native American spirituality. In Democrats and Republicans. In humans.

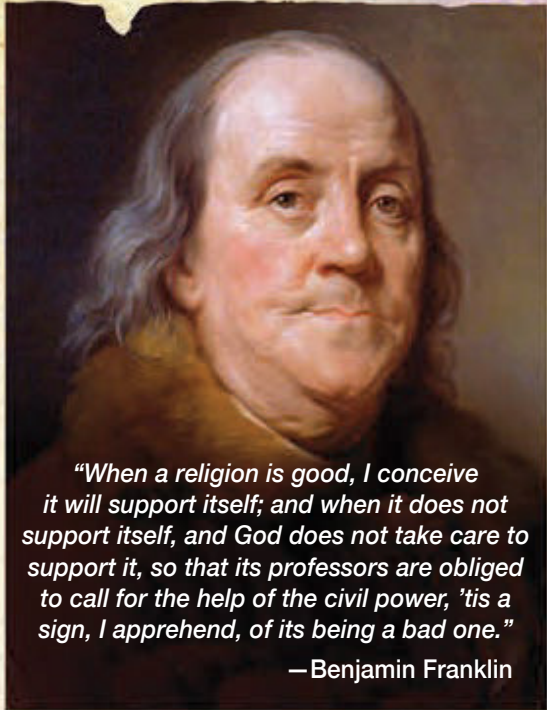
I am all these things and more, but I begin with . . . I am an atheist. I am free. These words liberate me.

Jeffrey Pastor is a member of the Cincinnati City Council. He served in both the Ohio Army National Guard and the United States Navy Reserve. He lives in Cincinnati with his wife and four kids.

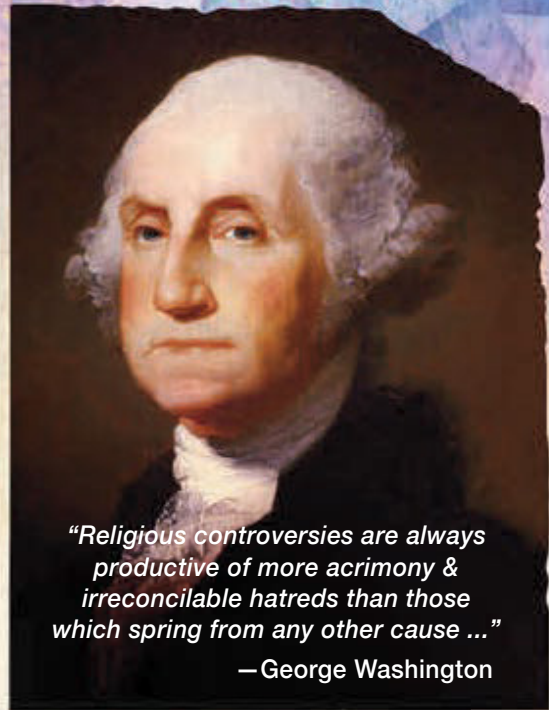
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"I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church."
 —Thomas Paine

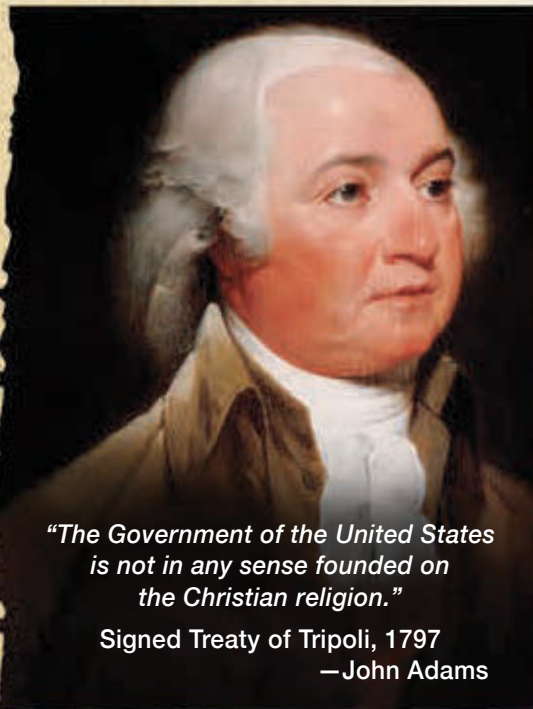


"When a religion is good, I conceive it will support itself; and when it does not support itself, and God does not take care to support it, so that its professors are obliged to call for the help of the civil power, 'tis a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one."
 —Benjamin Franklin

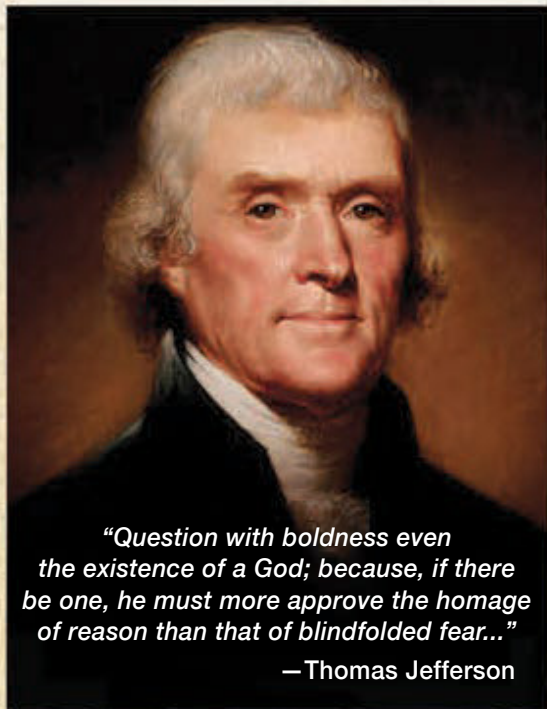


"Religious controversies are always productive of more acrimony & irreconcilable hatreds than those which spring from any other cause ..."
 —George Washington

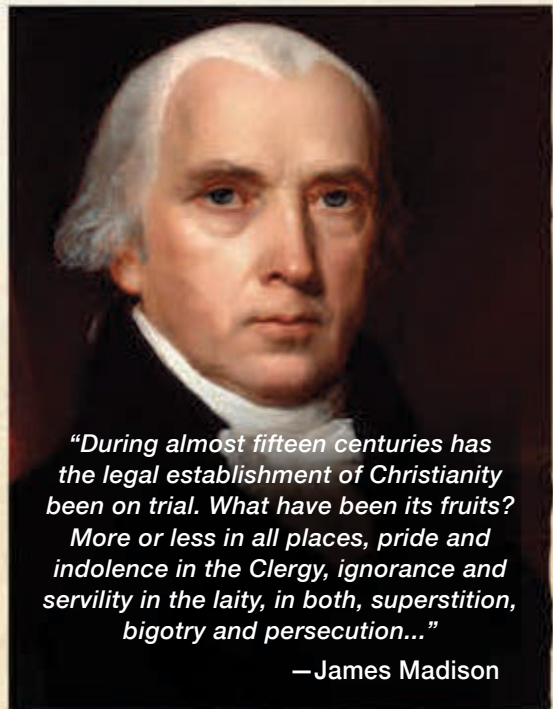
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GODLESS ★ ★ ★ ★
CONSTITUTION
 this Fourth of July weekend



"The Government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion."
 Signed Treaty of Tripoli, 1797
 —John Adams



"Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear..."
 —Thomas Jefferson



"During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution..."
 —James Madison

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FFRF is the nation's largest association of atheists & agnostics, working to keep religion out of government.



This FFRF full-page ad ran in The Oregonian, the Eugene Register-Guard and the Salem Statesman Journal newspapers on the Fourth of July this year. Warmest thanks to FFRF's Portland chapter for underwriting this campaign.

Catching up with former FFRF legal interns

FFRF has been hiring law school students to work as paid interns to help its legal department since 2008. FFRF contacted several of these former interns to see what they have been up to since they left.

Jarvis Idowu

When were you an intern at FFRF?
2012-15.

Where did you attend law school?
University of Wisconsin-Madison.

What is your current occupation?

Director of programming for Prosecutor Impact in Philadelphia.

What did you learn or do at FFRF that helped you in your future studies and/or career?



Jarvis Idowu

Drafting portions of briefs and letters really improved my writing. The culture at FFRF also raised the bar. I try to model the approach to support and feedback I received from attorneys Andrew L. Seidel, Rebecca Markert, Patrick Elliott and Liz Cavell in my current work.

What is your fondest memory of working at FFRF?

Going to “Christian movie night” at Andrew’s house and watching a Fox News anchor read a portion of the letter I helped draft to Clemson University.

What advice do you have for current or future legal interns?

Grind. There’s plenty of work to be done on this front, and the folks on the other side of the table seem to be more brazen than ever.

Kristen Fox

When were you an intern at FFRF?
Summer and fall of 2011

Where did you attend law school?
University of Wisconsin-Madison.

What is your current occupation?

I am a sales and product trainer with



Kristen Fox

Volkswagen. Prior to that, I was a college professor (with an emphasis on constitutional law).

What did you learn or do at FFRF that helped you in your future studies and/or career?

You’re given a lot of autonomy as you work, but you also always have support, so it was a great preview of when you’re working in the legal profession. Additionally, I learned about the resources available for legal research that extend far beyond the typical LexisNexis/WestLaw offerings. I also love that you’re encouraged to write in a relatable way, which is not always possible in standard legal writing. Creativity and clarity are encouraged.

What is your fondest memory of working at FFRF?

Honestly, as cheesy as it may sound, my favorite part was discovering a community

of like-minded colleagues and sharing our experiences, particularly when it came to the irreligious aspects. Some people grew up without religion, and others (like me) grew up in extremely repressive areas hostile to freethinkers and equality. The friendships I made in my year with FFRF endure today, and I will always be grateful for the opportunity to meet such amazing people — from Dan Barker, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Rebecca Markert and the rest of the Madison crew to other interns scattered from California to New England. (Being interviewed by national media outlets as a law student was pretty cool, too, but the people are even better.)

What advice do you have for current or future legal interns?

There’s such a wealth of knowledge and experience at FFRF, and so many opportunities to get involved in the organization and cause. Be sure to take advantage of all of those resources available to you! Also, if you’re not from the Madison area, take the time to explore the beautiful city. There is always something to do, whether you’re into exploring the outdoors, checking out local art and culture, or just relaxing with some of the country’s best beer!

Stephanie (Schmitt) Thompson

When were you an intern at FFRF?

I was the first legal intern for FFRF. It was the summer of 2008.

Where did you attend law school?

Southern Illinois School of Law.

What is your current occupation?

Owner and attorney of Krueger, Hernandez & Thompson.

What did you learn or do at FFRF that helped you in your future studies and/or career?

Written communication is truly the most important skill for every attorney. Whether it’s in the form of email, letters or briefs, one must learn how to communicate effectively in all settings. FFRF gave me experiences with all of these and it was this stepping stone that allowed me to advance my career in other areas of law.

What is your fondest memory of working at FFRF?

I have made lifelong friends while working for FFRF and am truly grateful for those relationships.

My fondest memory that is actually work-related was assisting Rebecca Markert with the first amicus brief written by FFRF’s own staff attorneys. The topic was fascinating and the timeline was incredibly short, but we successfully completed the task and it felt incredible to know the U.S. Supreme Court would be reading the words I compiled, even though I’m sure only a few small portions were actually my contribution to the final product.

What advice do you have for current or future legal interns?

Do it and enjoy it. There are very few opportunities out there that will provide this type of experience.



Stephanie (Schmitt) Thompson

Olivia Mote

When were you an intern at FFRF?

In 2014, during the spring semester of my first year of law school.

Where did you attend law school?

The University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School.

What is your current occupation?

I am a private-practice attorney with the law firm of Eustice, Laffey, Sebranek & Auby, S.C. My home base is our firm’s Capitol Square office in Madison, Wis., but we also have an office in nearby Sun Prairie, Wis.



Olivia Mote

I clerked for the firm during law school and joined them as an attorney upon graduation.

What did you learn or do at FFRF that helped you in your future studies and/or career?

I benefited a great deal, professionally and personally, from my time at FFRF. Prior to attending law school, I completed a master’s degree in comparative religion and taught religious studies courses at Miami University in Ohio. The academic study of religion remains one of my passions. The internship at FFRF allowed me to draw on my religious studies education and also apply the new skills I was learning in law school. At FFRF, I learned about First Amendment jurisprudence and was trained by skilled FFRF attorneys to advocate for policies and practices that respect the separation between religion and government.

What is your fondest memory of working at FFRF?

I really enjoyed the whole experience of interning. But perhaps what I now treasure most about my time at FFRF is the inspiration provided by FFRF’s legal department. The staff attorneys are smart, passionate lawyers working diligently to honor and protect First Amendment freedoms. FFRF serves a critical role on behalf of all of us who believe our government should be secular.

What advice do you have for current or future legal interns?

Take every opportunity to learn and practice new skills. Internships are an important supplement to classroom education. As an intern, you get to try on a little bit of the life you may lead after graduation, and each insight you gain can not only make you a better advocate once you’re licensed, but can also help you understand what types of work suit you. Beyond that, the best advice I have is to dig in and relish your time at FFRF, because what you’re doing there is fun, meaningful and truly makes a difference.

JJ Rolling

When were you an intern at FFRF?

The summer of 2012. I continued working with the organization through the fall semester of that year.

Where did you attend law school?

University of Wisconsin Law School.

What is your current occupation?

I am an attorney in private practice with a law firm of approximately 175 at-

torneys. Generally, I represent private parties involved in real estate litigation matters. More specifically, these matters typically involve eminent domain, property tax assessments, easements, and disputes related to water, highways and power lines.

Because the use of eminent domain is limited by the Fifth Amendment (as well as state constitutions), I actually still deal with constitutional issues.

What did you learn or do at FFRF that helped you in your future studies and/or career?

Law students start out with the notion that legal writing comes in two forms: the memo or the brief. What FFRF taught us was that skilled advocates can make effective, concise legal arguments in everything they write.

As for a nuts-and-bolts topic, another thing I draw on today is what I learned about the structure of various governmental bodies. FFRF’s members contacted us about issues with a number of different types of governmental units. There were boards, cities with administrators, villages with executives, officers, and managers, to name a few. By virtue of writing to these different groups and determining who was in charge of each, I came away with a practical sense of how various public bodies operate. I draw on that structural knowledge today when representing landowners in matters involving a diverse set of governmental units.

What is your fondest memory of working at FFRF?

I really liked how the interns were included in legal team meetings. We sat around a large boardroom table and the legal team went over developments in the matters they were overseeing. During one meeting, there was a lot of excitement because Andrew L. Seidel had just finished preparing a white paper regarding the Founders, and FFRF’s Legal Director Rebecca Markert had just been working hard to get affidavits for a federal matter, and the other attorneys were talking about a number of national cases on which they were working. A lot was happening, and there was a real sense of positive energy. It was exciting to be a part of.

What advice do you have for current or future legal interns?

While the Establishment Clause is only a few words long, its interpretation fills casebooks. But recognize that an internship with FFRF provides you with the unique opportunity work alongside a team of attorneys who share subject-matter expertise in that extremely focused area. And, the positive energy and sense of common purpose make the team pretty nurturing for the soon-to-be-attorney. With that in mind, trust yourself and your ability to learn and begin to understand this area of the law. You are learning alongside experts, so it would be a waste to keep your head down.



JJ Rolling

June Medical Services case was never about health and safety

By Barbara Alvarez

The Supreme Court has commendably struck down in a 5-4 decision a Louisiana law that would have required abortion physicians to obtain admitting privileges for nearby hospitals.

Should this law have gone into effect, it would have left Louisiana with only one doctor at a single clinic in the entire state. The court's decision in *June Medical Services LLC v. Russo* not only upholds scientific evidence of the safety of abortion, but also protects women's human right to reproductive health care. And it is imperative to underscore that this case was never about the health and safety of women seeking abortions — it was about pushing a religious agenda in a secular nation.

To begin with, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal signed into law in June 2014 "Louisiana Unsafe Abortion Protection Act" requiring physicians who perform abortions to have active admitting privileges at a hospital within 30 miles of the facility where the doctor performed abortions or face revocation of licenses, fines and civil liability. The admitting privileges law is an arm of TRAP (targeted regulation of abortion providers) laws, which claim to be in the best interest of women's health, but instead impose unnecessary burdens on their legal right to an abortion.

In fact, abortion is an extremely safe and effective procedure. Major complications occur in less than 1 percent of abortion procedures. A 2018 study found that in the few instances where patients did seek emergency services, they went to their closest emergency department and not the hospital at which the provider had admitting privileges.

By issuing unnecessary provisions on abortion providers and clinics, states are

able to limit — or eliminate — abortion access. Currently, 27 states are abortion deserts, where women must travel at least 100 miles to the nearest abortion clinic, leaving millions of women without abortion care. Abortion is an essential medical service and delaying care directly places women's lives at risk.

In 2016, the Supreme Court struck down (5-3) a nearly identical law in Texas in *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt*. However, the makeup of the Supreme Court has significantly changed, favoring the Religious Right. Since President Trump appointed two new conservative justices (Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh), a Pew Research study found that white evangelicals, who overwhelmingly want *Roe v. Wade* completely overturned, view the court more favorably than they did under President Obama.

By negating the ruling on *Whole Woman's Health*, *June Medical Services* would have been a step toward propitiating Christian Nationalists. Nevertheless, Chief Justice John Roberts sided with Justices Stephen Breyer, Elena Kagan, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomayor to uphold the Supreme Court ruling precedent on *Whole Woman's Health*.

It is gratifying to see abortion rights being protected — for now — in America. Yet the fight is hardly over. As history has shown, religiously motivated anti-abortionists will not relent on their crusade to insert dogma into women's health care. We who believe in the liberty of individuals to decide if and when to continue a pregnancy must remain vigilant.

Barbara Alvarez is FFRF's Anne Nicol Gaylor reproductive rights intern. She attends the University of Wisconsin-Madison, working on a Ph.D. in library and information sciences with a minor in gender and women's studies.

Abortion

Continued from page 1

After continuing to enforce this law in defiance of the Supreme Court's ruling in *Whole Woman's Health*, the state was counting on a change in the composition of the court yielding an overturning of settled law.

"Thankfully, the court today did not bend to the political whims of the Religious Right and honored its own precedent to preserve reproductive freedom," says Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Justice Stephen Breyer's opinion, joined by Justices Elena Kagan, Sonia Sotomayor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, reads:

"Given the facts found, we must also uphold the district court's related factual and legal determinations. These include its determination that Louisiana's law poses a 'substantial obstacle' to women seeking an abortion; its determination that the law offers no significant health-related benefits; and its determination that the law consequently imposes an 'undue burden' on a woman's constitutional right to choose to have an abortion. We also agree with its ultimate legal conclusion that, in light of these findings and our precedents, Act 620 violates the Constitution."

While Roberts' concurrence officially made him the deciding swing vote striking down this unconstitutional law, his reasoning signals a troubling future for the land-

scape of abortion rights in states across the country. He writes: "I joined the dissent in *Whole Woman's Health* and continue to believe that the case was wrongly decided. The question today, however, is not whether *Whole Woman's Health* was right or wrong, but whether to adhere to it in deciding the present case."

This opinion, along with the dissents of Justices Kavanaugh, Samuel Alito (with Neil Gorsuch joining) and Clarence Thomas, acts as a chilling reminder that while today's victory is cause for celebration, there remains a conservative majority on the Supreme Court that wants to restrict access to legal abortion.

FFRF joined 71 other groups in filing a friend-of-the-court brief in the case, which argued that the court must take into account the economic and social circumstances of the women who will suffer the negative consequences of denial of abortion access.

While U.S. women's reproductive rights dodged a bullet with this ruling, there is no question that the religiously motivated "antis" will continue their legal war to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, as demonstrated by the fact that eight states passed laws to ban the procedure in 2019 alone.

The legal battles over abortion are far from over.



Barbara Alvarez, during a visit to Luxembourg.

FFRF hires intern for reproductive rights

Barbara Alvarez has been hired as FFRF's first Anne Nicol Gaylor Reproductive Rights Intern.

The internship is paid for with the scholarship funds received in memory of Anne, FFRF's principal founder who died in 2015.

MEET AN INTERN

Anne was an early abortion rights activist who wrote the book *Abortion Is a Blessing* about the battle to legalize abortion in Wisconsin.

Barbara is helping to track reproductive rights threats at the state and federal level, with editorial response on abortion/religion intersection issues and working on analyses of bills and language for action alerts.

On this page is one of her columns for FFRF. You can find them all at patheos.com/blogs/freethoughtnow.

Name: Barbara Alvarez

Where and when I was born: April 3, 1989, in Illinois.

Family: My husband, Nick, and our 13-year-old pooch, Amos.

Education: B.A. in history and Spanish from the University of Illinois-Urbana/Champaign, Master of Science in library and information science from the University of Illinois-Urbana/Champaign, and current Ph.D. student at The Information School at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

My religious upbringing was: Roman Catholic. I went to Catholic school for 10 years and even wanted to be the first female priest. (I was promptly told that women could never be priests). In my 20s, I had periods of returning to the Catholic Church and dabbling

in Lutheranism before becoming a freethinker.

How I came to work as an FFRF intern: In fall 2019, I entered and won second place in FFRF's Brian Bolton essay contest for older

adults for my essay on the bible and

abortion legislation. Sadly, reproductive rights are under constant attack because of religious imposition. So, when an opportunity arose to intern with FFRF, I jumped at it! It is an absolute honor to continue the work that Anne Nicol Gaylor fought so hard for.

What I do here: I monitor reproductive health policy and track religious impositions from legislators. I also draft testimony letters to state governments, create fact sheets and brochures related to abortion and the bible, and write blog pieces about religious attacks on reproductive health.

What I like best about it: It is fascinating to see how policy is created and it is empowering to take action. I especially appreciate working alongside a team of smart and passionate individuals who unapologetically uphold secular values.

My interests are: Public libraries, information access, Latinx feminism, community activism and reproductive justice.

My heroes are: Alice Paul, Dolores Huerta, Sophie Scholl and Audre Lorde.

These three words sum me up: On the move.

Things I like: Audiobooks, meaningful conversations, new experiences and genuine people.

Things I smite: Willful ignorance, white saviorism, multilevel marketing schemes and bad writing.

A god created in our own image

By Erin Louis

There are many religious believers in my life, most of whom are good people, kind, compassionate and empathetic in their everyday actions. It can be hard to square their beliefs with the god I was taught to believe in growing up as a Catholic.

As I started to question the god I learned about, I came to reject the narcissistic, sadistic and hypocritically judgmental deity of the bible. However, in my social circle, I was an anomaly. Somehow, the people around me were able to parse the good parts of the belief system from the objectively awful parts. I was taught that man was created in God's image, but all the good people I know are nothing at all like the god of the bible.



Erin Louis

One afternoon, my husband and I heard a lawnmower on our property and we looked outside to see our Christian neighbor with his lawnmower. When I asked him why he had mowed our lawn, he said that he had noticed that my husband's work truck had stayed in the same place for several weekdays in a row. Aware that my husband was not one to let our lawn get to an unsightly length, he thought he may have been sick, and decided to mow it for us. It turned out that was exactly why our lawn had gone uncut, and we were grateful to our neighbor. The only reason that we knew our neighbor was a Christian was because he had politely invited us to a church service when we first moved in. We respectfully declined. That was the one and only time he mentioned it. For the entire time we lived next to him, we traded friendly words and kind favors.

However, other believers I know seem to emulate the dark side of the god of the bible. They are polite with their first invitation, expressing disingenuous understanding when the offer is declined. But they then continue with the questions and offers of salvation, moving from passive-aggressive comments to outward hostility

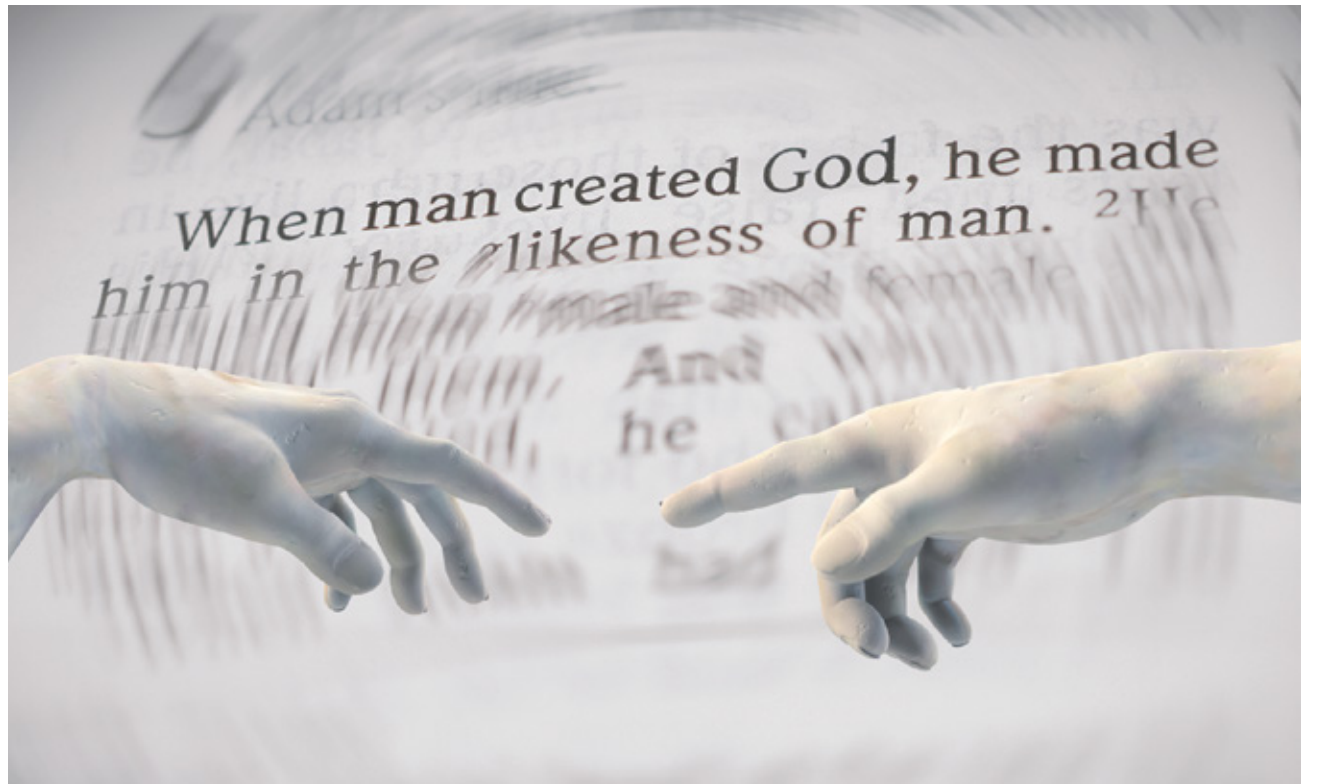


Photo Illustration

when their invitations are repeatedly declined. They finally digress into open disdain and threats of eternal damnation, reminiscent of the god of my childhood nightmares — the one who would sentence otherwise good people to an afterlife of hellfire for the simple transgression of unbelief.

When I came to the conclusion that there was no god, there was a certain period of grief at the loss of the good parts of the god I was taught. He was the one who looked out for me, loved me and would invite me to hang out with my grandma when my life on Earth was over. So, I do understand the reluctance for some people to let go of that belief. It seems that sometimes, rather than give up the idea of God, people may reinvent him in an image that is moral, just and kind.

Ultimately, it is hard for me to understand how anyone can live their life believing they were created in the

image of such a malevolent deity as the one depicted in the bible and not reject it outright. I think they actually have rejected that horrible deity, however. Maybe realizing that the one who found it necessary to drown the whole world except for one family and two of each animal was not worthy of worship. They simply recreated a god in their own images: A god that goes out of their way to help people and asks nothing in return. A god that really does love unconditionally. A god that created heaven for everyone — believers and nonbelievers alike. A god that couldn't care less whether you believe or worship it.

While I do not believe in any gods, I do believe in the goodness of my fellow humans. They are the ones worthy of my praise and admiration.

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

CRANKMAIL

Here is your August assortment of sometimes vile, sometimes mean, but always interesting hate mail sent to FFRF. Printed as received.

God: I feel so sorry for all of you. God is REAL but it will be too late for you and your soul when you die. The Bible says it is appointed for man once to die and then judgement. You will stand before God- Jesus as your judge. If you did not accept Jesus as your Savior while on earth you will spend forever and ever and ever in HELL a HORRIBLE place. Why don't you believe Jesus is God. Get the book by Lee Strobel The Case for Christ. He was an atheist but found OVERWHELMING evidence that Jesus is who He says He is and the Bible is TRUE. — Ben Boderinger

Change now! I will say this and only say it as a favor to you pieces of shit from one human being to another. normal americans grow very weary of people like your organization stands for. You might want to check yourselves with your incessant need to trample on over half the countries ideals just because you have an evil judicial system at your back that mostly ignores the founders true intentions and our constitution true spirit. a day grows near when my countrymen may just decide enough is enough and that you and your ilk are a clear and present danger to the constitution and spirit of America We are watching you and your leftist agenda and constantly evaluating you and your filth to determine if you have finally over-

stepped your yourselves to a degree which we cannot let pass. I wish to impress upon you are very close to that edge of a cliff from which the sleeping giant may be awoken and you will rue the day. — Ryan Renshaw

Satan (Islam) comes to Kill: Satan comes to steal, kill, and destroy. Islam comes to steal, kill, and destroy. Obama comes to steal, kill, and destroy. Freedom from Religious foundation comes to steal, kill, and destroy. You might want to look over Islamic Laws because Islam is now demanding Sharia Law in America and by July America will not have any more freedoms. August 21, plan between then and September 23 to have a nuclear attack in every major city in the USA. All white, black, Jews and Christians must die in the USA by September 23rd. My Church complaint is to shut down every Islamic Mosque in America because America died from within because Islam is taking over from within. — Vic Ashcraft

Payback is coming: I'm not a religious person at all! But for you fuckers to file lawsuits against people who want to express their religious beliefs is beyond childish. Because you are a bunch of atheist who get offended by religious people is absolutely hysterical. It sounds like you are all nothing but a bunch of lawyers trying to find ways to sue people and make money. As the saying goes... the only good lawyer is a dead lawyer! Now stop bothering people you fucking assholes! When the time does come you will get what

is coming to you! — John Zukowski

Cowardice: You people suck. You are weak minded fools. We are going to take our country back and you are not a part of it. You are just haters that think you can separate religion from government. No where does the constitution call for that. Now crawl back into your hole. I will do every thing I can to defy everything you do and YOU CANT DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT. I will take a Christian flag into every government building and you can not stop me as you are not able COWARDS. It's time we shut you hate mongers down. — David Kollars

Horrible people: You can all go fuck yourself's. You are horrible people for making towns and cities remove crosses. I hope you all burn in hell! This is a nation founded on Christianity if you don't like it get the fuck out! We don't want you anyway! I hope God make the rest of your lives miserable! — Michael Rossman

Freedom from religion: It appears that much of the general public is either uneducated or just don't

care and I am sure it is some of the both. I include YOUR Organization within this bunch as well. YOU need to learn just what Separation from Church (Religion?) and State really means as well as the Freedom of Speech. You folks trying to add to the Constitution to read what you want it to read even though Some Prejudiced Courts allow you to get by will eventually back fire and fail. The Gay movement, Your Religious Fight, Black Lives matter and the list goes on will one day all Fall. I urge you all to learn the Truth and the Truth will SET you FREE Indeed; The Truth is that their is ONLY One God, One World, and one People and in that Order. Secondly, you all should invest just a few ounces of your energies in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Just as Important is the FACT of what is really going on here in America is found in II Timothy the Third Chapter of the Holy Bible and Not one of your L aw Books. The real deal is those who do not Repent, Accept Christ, and become a part of the Bride of Christ will be Rewarded ONLY with Eternal Hell Fire. — John Andrews

NOTHING FAILS LIKE PRAYER CONTEST 2021

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 2021, receiving an expenses-paid trip to Boston Nov. 19-21, 2021, along with a plaque and an honorarium of \$500. Deadline: August 1, 2021.

MORE INFO AT:

ffrf.org/nothing-fails-like-prayer



The god of death & the death of God

FREETHOUGHT BOOKS

By Steve Mendelsohn

From my earliest childhood memories, I remember being terrified of death. I remember crying out to my dad from the dark of my bedroom as a 7-year-old, unable to sleep from my fear of death. “Daddy,” I’d wail, “what happens when you die?” “Your soul goes into a new baby,” he’d reassure me.

But that wasn’t reassuring. That wasn’t reassuring at all. What good is it to me if



Steve Mendelsohn

my “soul” goes into a new baby? If my soul is going to go into some next person, then presumably that means that my soul came to me from some previous person. But I don’t remember being that previous person. So, in the same way,

when my soul goes into some next person, that next person won’t remember being me. What good was my dad’s version of reincarnation if my current consciousness doesn’t continue to my next incarnation?

I was terrified of death then and I stayed terrified of death for another 35 to 40 years.

I mean really terrified of death. I mean shooting-up-in-bed-in-the-middle-of-the-night-in-a-cold-sweat-screaming-“No!”-and-turning-on-the-light-hoping-upon-all-hope-that-the-reality-of-my-inevitable-and-ultimate-oblivion-was-just-not-true terrified of death. This was true in my teens, in my 20s, 30s and well into my 40s.

And then something happened. I realized one day that I wasn’t terrified of death anymore. I don’t know exactly when or how or why it happened, but it did. My sister noted that it seemed to happen right about the time that our dad died in 2001. My wife pointed out that it also happened right about the time that our children were born. I don’t know if either had anything to do with it or not, but it’s certainly a possibility, although I don’t for the life of me know why either would.

Perhaps my current lack of terror of death comes from realizing that my consciousness did not exist for the billions and billions of years before I was born. When I wake up in the morning and do not recall being aware during my previous night of sleep, I am not terrorized by the possibility that my consciousness did not exist for the last few hours.

I used to envision my existence after death as constituting my consciousness peering into the black abyss of oblivion. That was truly terrifying. Now, I realize that, after I die, I won’t be conscious and therefore I won’t exist. In addition to



Shutterstock Illustration

believing that “I think therefore I am” is true, I also believe that “I will not be when I am no longer thinking” is also true. After my body dies and my consciousness ceases to exist, there will be no “I” to peer into anything, which is a whole lot less scary than me peering into nothing.

I used to believe that God exists. I didn’t know that God exists, which is probably why I was terrified of death even when I believed that God exists.

But, at some point in time, probably when I was in my 20s or 30s, I stopped believing that God exists. I desperately wanted God to exist, I hoped that God does exist, I thought that it would be better if God did exist and that I would be happier if I believed that God exists, but somehow I came to believe that God does not exist. Even so, I thought it would be prudent to behave as if there were a God, hedging my bets just in case.

So, I continued to do the things that I thought (my Jewish) God wanted me to do and not do the things that I thought (my Jewish) God didn’t want me to do. I went to synagogue. I kept kosher. I observed the Sabbath. I rarely, if ever, bore false witness against my neighbor. And I made damn sure that my ox never gored my neighbor’s bull.

Not only did I think that it would be better if I believed that God exists, I thought that it was a good thing that most of the world did believe that God exists. When Marx said, “Religion is the opiate of the masses,” I replied, “Thank God, who wants a bunch of un-opiated masses running around loose?”

I used to envy people who believe that God exists. I thought that it was good for

them to believe that God exists. I did not want to disabuse them of that belief. Except, of course, for those bible thumpers who always came around campus to preach the Word to us. They really annoyed me with their circular reasoning (“proving” the existence of God by citing the bible) and their absolute certainty (failing to admit even the remotest possibility of God’s nonexistence).

Since Oklahoma City and Sept. 11, I’ve started to believe that believing that God exists is not such a good thing. Thanks to Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris and others, I no longer believe that we need to believe that God exists in order to be good. And now I am slowly being convinced that, in the overall scheme of things, it would be better if none of us believed that God exists. It’s not the belief that God exists itself that is the problem. The problem is all the bad things done by people who believe that God exists because they believe that God exists.

Oh, sure, there are plenty of good people who believe that God exists, and they may even be good (or at least better than they would otherwise be) because they believe that God exists. But, when you look at the history of our world, and if you look around the world today, it’s hard to conclude that the world was and is better off because of all the people who believe that God exists. You don’t have to take my word for it. Go read Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris and others. They’ve done a better job than I ever could to make the case against God.

So, I used to believe that God exists, then I didn’t believe that God exists, but I wished that I did and was glad that others did, then I stopped wishing that I did believe that God exists, and now I’m getting to the point where I wish no one did.

And here I am today, a devout atheist, with no belief in a World to Come, with no expectation of a continued consciousness after this life ends, who nevertheless is not terrified of death. Don’t get me wrong; I’m still not happy about it, but at least it’s not keeping me up at night anymore.

FFRF Member Steve Mendelsohn is a patent attorney, amateur philosopher, and author (see “Freethought Books” on this page) and lives near Philadelphia with his wife Lynn, kids Lauren and Jack, dog Lilly, and cat Leo.

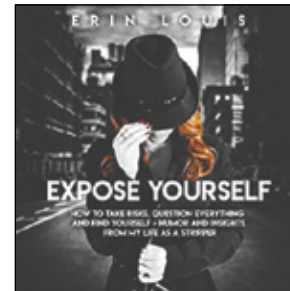
The following books are by FFRF members on the topics of religion or free-thinking. FFRF does not do book reviews.

Expose Yourself

By Erin Louis

Paperback \$14.99

After her first two books about the stripper world and her memoirs, Erin Louis offers us her new self-help book promoting critical thinking and self-confidence through humor, challenging insights, and her own true stories. A cross between *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The God Delusion*, Louis titillates as she enlightens readers. You will learn how to find the freedom to be yourself, find confidence to take risks, and change your life. This book will show you how. As she says, you don’t even have to get naked to do it, she’s done that for you.

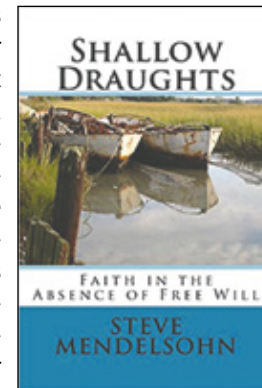


Shallow Draughts

By Steve Mendelsohn

\$6 (paperback)

Faith is the psychological process by which our brains generate our beliefs. That psychological process — Automatic Involuntary Subjective Evidence Weighing (AISEW) — is the same process that generates all of our beliefs whether they are “religious” beliefs like “God exists” or “God does not exist” or “secular” beliefs like “E=mc²” or “Shakespeare wrote Hamlet.” Since the AISEW process is automatic and involuntary, our brains automatically and involuntarily generate all of our beliefs. In other words, we don’t exercise conscious control over our beliefs. In other words, we don’t have free will.



Holy Smoke: How Christianity Smothered the American Dream

By Rick Snedecker

\$13.95 (paperback)

Station Square Media

Since the first Christian fundamentalists arrived in the 1600s on the shores of what would become the United States, Christianity has become increasingly embedded in the nation’s social and cultural fabric. This is completely contrary to the Founding Fathers’ original vision of America. Through their efforts, God is now in evidence everywhere in the country — on our money, in our schools, even in high-level-government officials’ speeches. But freedom of — and from — religion is the American promise to all its people whatever their belief — or disbelief.



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



History Lesson

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

Illustrated by Seymour Chwast, published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online — ffrf.org/shop

LETTERBOX

Here's to remarkable job you do at FFRF!

As I was reading in horror a New York Times article (see page 5) on the crumbling of the wall between church and state, I was reminded that I keep meaning to drop you a note on the remarkable job you continue to do at FFRF. The regular emails I receive from you, as well as articles in Freethought Today, all reinforce your amazing, endless efforts and the terrific results you continue to achieve. Congratulations! I am so very proud to be a member of this magnificent organization.

I hope you and the whole FFRF organization are staying safe and healthy — thriving, actually — in this miserable pandemic.

Sheridan Chapin
New York

Check from 'Trump' will actually get good use

I got a check from the government with the name "Trump" on it. My first impulse was to send it back. On second thought, I decided to get some positive use out of it by dividing the money among three groups I support. (If you're interested, the other two were Planned Parenthood and a local food bank.)

David M. Shea
Maryland

...

Donald Trump's purpose for having his name printed on the stimulus checks backfired in my case. I'm turning the entire \$1,200 over to FFRF to help in its fight against this blatant First Amendment abuses.

Steven Higman
South Carolina

Do we need Congress to step in over justices?

It was appalling to read about the Supreme Court's decisions that the Bladensburg and Bayview Park crosses were allowed to remain on government property.

If the Supreme Court continues to diminish the protections of the Establishment Clause, we the people might eventually need an act of Congress to enforce the separation of state and church. Maybe a Government Neutrality Restoration Act is asking too much, but how else can we prevent government entanglement with religion when the Supreme Court itself is entangled with religiously biased judges?

Christopher Santiago
South Carolina

'Blacklist' character got it right on religion

We are currently watching the TV show "Blacklist." On one of the shows, there was an argument regarding homosexuals, with the lead character stating something to the effect of "you'd rather cut off his penis than allow him to be gay?" Then he went into this verbatim quote: "Is it just me, or is it the human race armed with religion, poisoned by prejudice, and absolutely frantic with hatred and fear galloping pell-mell back into the Dark Ages?"

Roberta Mistretta
Minnesota

Stimulus donation is to help keep our freedom



Fred Spoerl of California was featured in the Desert Sun newspaper ("Pied Piper of Palm Desert donates stimulus check, encourages others to do the same") for his donation to FFRF and a local homeless shelter.

It being an honor to have been a Lifetime Member of FFRF for many years, I decided to donate half of my \$1,200 recovery money to your causes and the other half to the local homeless in the Coachella Valley. Keeping religion/state separate is one of the most important things to ensure a lasting freedom for a country that was started as secular state to remain so. It's sad that most religious people don't understand the importance of this separation. Keep up the good work.

Fred H. Spoerl
California

Three things I love about Freethought Today

The only contact I had with FFRF is through Freethought Today. I read every issue and find them very interesting. There are three features I particularly like:

1. "Former churches with better missions." I am an amateur student of architectural history and I appreciate that many of these structures have historical importance, regardless of the original purpose for which they were built. I am glad to see they are being preserved and used for more secular purposes, especially beer halls, restaurants and brew pubs.

2. "Black Collar Crime." It's a much-needed collection of news items that have been sadly neglected by mainstream media. It brings together the crimes and other outrages that those frauds and mountebanks parading in clerical garb have done and are continuing to do to their customers.

3. "Crankmail." I find this section, on the surface, hilariously funny. On the next level down, though, I have a feeling of sadness that such sentiments are actually written down and sent to you. I know you don't make any of it up. You don't have to.

There are enough idiots out there to supply your needs. It can be argued that our public school system has failed in its mission to give the students at least a minimal education. But I think it is more likely that these letter writers have failed the school system.

In closing, I just want to say thank you for your great work and keep it up.

Ed Stepp
Maryland

Churchgoers should use Jesus, not medicine

All those people who flock to churches with the belief that nothing bad can happen to them in The House of God should be issued wristbands that read: "Do not treat me medically. Jesus will heal me." That way there will be more hospital beds available for the rest of us.

Art Naebig
Wisconsin

May issue of Freethought Today is best one ever

I have been a member of FFRF for several years. I regularly read Freethought Today. The May issue was so good — in fact, it's the best issue I can remember since I've been a member.

I've enclosed a \$100 honorarium to buy lunch for the team that produced it. Or maybe buy a gross of face masks. Thanks!

Fred Thorlin
Texas

Editor's note: Thanks so much, Fred!

Greenhouse column was terrific in May issue

Let me express my compliments on the May issue, which I truly enjoyed. There was interesting content and the format was clean and easy to read. It's terrific that you were able to reprint New York Times columnist Linda Greenhouse's essay. She is an amazing legal scholar (and a modest person with a commitment to causes that we value).

You all are obviously busy with serious work during these difficult times. Let me lighten things up by including a small piece below that I recently wrote.

Friend: What is the difference between atheists and agnostics?

Me: That's easy. Atheists wear their atheist pin on their lapel whereas agnostics carry their atheist pin in their pocket.

Friend: Oh. And which are you, atheist or agnostic?

Me: How would I know? I've lost my pin.

Paul Newman
Indiana

New Mexico governor got it right on closings

Kudos to New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham for allowing the medicinal cannabis dispensaries to remain open as essential businesses, but ordered all churches closed, as they are not essential. I totally agree!

Philip Dahl
New Mexico

Church leaders must not have faith in prayer

If the pope and leaders of the Catholic church truly had faith in prayer, they would have allowed the public into the Vatican for Easter services. A telling decision.

Ken Fahrenholtz
New Jersey

Public's ignorance must be discouraging to FFRF

I read FFRF's posts on Facebook, and they fill me with wonder that you don't get discouraged. So many politicians, being elected by an unthinking public, feel it's their gawd-given right to punch holes in the wall between church and state. Well, thankfully, you don't. I could just scream at the ignorance of the general public. Or maybe it's their inertia. It is much easier to have another beer, switch channels on the TV and hope that you have merited some magic protection from a Sky Daddy.

Well, enough of my ruminations. Keep up the good work.

Dr. Peter G. Roode
Florida

Your weekly antidote to the Religious Right

FREETHOUGHT RADIO
PODCASTS AND BROADCASTS



FIND OUT MORE: ffrf.org/radio

— Hosted by Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor —
Slightly irreverent views, news, music & interviews

FFRF.ORG FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

Christian God doesn't keep his promises

It appears to me that Dan Barker's syllogism in his column in the May issue ends in a non-sequitur. The major premise that the Christian God promises to answer prayers coupled with the minor premise that prayers go unanswered does not lead to the conclusion that the Christian God does not exist. The most that can be concluded is that the Christian God does not keep his promises. The question about his existence is not addressed in the syllogism as it is structured. He simply is not as advertised.

However, the presence of evil in the world (e.g., COVID-19) means that the Christian God cannot be both pure love (1 John 4:8) and omnipotent (Mt. 19:26; Lk 1:37).

This was pointed out by Epicurus in his famous series of interrogatives: "Is god willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then from whence comes evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?"

In short, the presence of evil contradicts the qualities of character usually ascribed to him and goes a long way to undermining the claim that he exists.

Tom Drolsum
Wisconsin

I wish I could have chosen my own god

Gene Twaronite's column on "Choosing the perfect god" was insightful and fun. I wish I could have chosen my god when I was a child. My choice would have been far different from my Catholic upbringing, and I would not have entered the seminary at the too-young age of 16. Thank you, FFRF, for showing me the way. I have allowed my children to choose their religion or lack of religion and they are quite content with their freedom from religion.

Raymond Hellkamp
New York

Maybe we do need prayers at dentist's office

It was a little disturbing to find out that dentists have their own prayer. I had kind of hoped that dentistry was a practice based on science, experience and technology. But it does make sense.

It has been said "there are no atheists foxholes," which is demonstrably untrue. However, in the dentist's chair, I pray. Maybe it's not "real" praying since I'm not praying to anyone. I'm just wishing real hard, but it's certainly as close to prayer as I will ever get.

During what is probably the most



Where do you Freethought?

Lifetime Members George and Julie Iddon catch up on their Freethought Today reading out in the Arizona desert while doing social distancing and a 14-day self-quarantine. "A couple we met out in the desert were very interested in FFRF and its work, so we gifted them a copy of Freethought Today and an annual membership," the Iddons write. "Their permanent home is in Milwaukee and they were unaware FFRF was located in Madison. While in Arizona, we drove down to Oro Valley and met up with Diane and Steve Uhl, author of *Out of God's Closet*, and had an enjoyable lunch."

extreme exercise of self-will, I give someone a substantial amount of money to crawl inside my mouth with sharp instruments and power tools for a purpose supposedly in my long-term best interests. During that I pray — I pray to be able to leave my body or to time travel to when I'm walking out of the office. I pray that I don't gag. I pray to slip into unconsciousness, or at least for my body to relieve itself of the need to breath or swallow for the next 30 minutes. Of course, none of these wishes or prayers is ever answered.

Steve Trunk
California

Crankmail Christians are all brainwashed

I'd like to write a letter to all the so-called Christians in the Crankmail section. You people are really and truly brainwashed if you believe all that crap that's in the bible. When it comes to BS, your bible is loaded with it. There isn't one word of truth in your so-called holy book. Since you believe all that religious garbage, I have two words for you — prove it!

Eugene T. Bernascone
New Jersey

Phrase puts burden of proof where it belongs

In the June/July Letterbox, Carl Sheiman said that he was looking for "a slogan or catchphrase that'll spread

like a meme and change social perceptions of what people mean by 'god,' and what that entails, while dismissing any deity being given credit for existing."

Years ago, a friend suggested that conversations with believers should always refer to YAG, or 'your alleged god.' This simple phrase puts the burden of proof where it belongs.

Steven Morris
California

Tradition not privileged in U.S. Constitution

A report in the May issue showed that the 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a 2018 ruling that it is not unconstitutional to make new citizens recite "so help me God" at the end of the Naturalization Oath. The excuse by U.S. District Judge William Young was that the phrase was a "well-established tradition" and was merely ceremonial.

This is a direct result of the Supreme Court's conservative majority conjuring up excuses about history and tradition as ways to allow the Establishment Clause violations to continue. Nowhere does the Constitution privilege tradition, history, culture of ceremony over principles.

Violations became "historical" only because non-Christians, until recently, lacked the resources and organization to challenge them. Prohibition of same-sex marriage was traditional, but that tradition fell to principle. The same needs to happen to the Bladensburg cross, Pensacola cross, "so help

me God," etc.

Jurists who use history/tradition excuses to permit ongoing Establishment Clause violation are derelict in their duty to apply constitutional principles to the issues brought before them. They need to be impeached and removed before they cost the Supreme Court and more of its credibility.

Lee Helms
Michigan

Poem is my way of saying thanks to FFRF

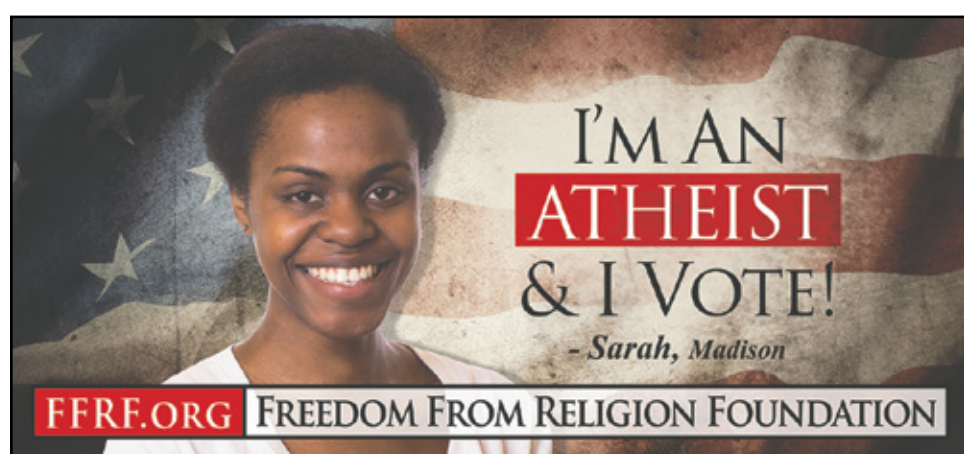
Last July, I completed my 80th year and was inspired to write this poem for posterity. I've been an atheist for about 70 years. I can't emphasize how much I appreciate Freethought Today and what FFRF is doing. Sharing this little piece of my life is my way of saying thank you for doing what you do.

Thoughts

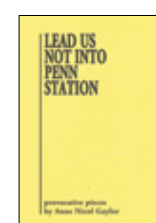
Eighty years old and I'm slowing down
Getting closer to the time when I
won't be around
Being alive is still really good, don't
get me wrong
"Viviendo me vida," and singing my
song
There is something to be appreciated
in every day
Some more than others, depending
on what comes my way
I think more now than I ever have
Thinking to me is like a healing salve
Had a rough beginning as I look back
Growing up in a factory town called
Pontiac
Didn't like living in a real religious
home
Hit the streets early and started to
roam
Getting into trouble that seemed to
be everywhere
By the time I was 15, I had more than
my share
Got through it all, though it wasn't a
sure thing
Living the fast life, you never know
what tomorrow might bring
But I had the strength and the will to
survive
Though there were times I thought I
might not make it out alive
Then I got turned onto books and set
my mind free
Each day I set aside some time to
think, because I can
And to appreciate my existence, and
the person I am
I don't need no religion, no beliefs
and such
I am comfortable with evolution and
don't need a crutch
I like to think about this planet, re-
volving around the big ball in the
sky
And ask myself questions like How?
And Why?
I've come to the conclusion that no
one knows
It is what it is, and for now that's how
it goes
Sometimes it seems like it's all a
fantasy

This awareness of life and its reality
Simply living my life for this short
little while
Gives me a lot of satisfaction, and
always brings a smile
I feel so fortunate for this gift of life
Lucky to have met the woman who is
now my wife
Lucky to have a daughter and son
I guess you could say I'm a lucky son
of a gun.

Danny Margosian
California



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BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

Five members of the Catholic teaching order Clercs de Saint-Viateur du Canada were arrested for alleged sexual abuse of boys in their care between 1961-89. The men are between the ages of 78 and 88 and live in the Clercs de Saint-Viateur home in Joliette, Quebec

They face over 30 charges, including gross indecency, sexual assault and indecent assault. Fifteen alleged victims have recently come forward. A 2017 class action suit against the order includes at least 270 alleged victims involving incidents at 20 locations as far back as the 1930s. *Source: CBC, 6-23-20*

Charles Richmond, 30, Viroqua, WI: Sexual assault. Richmond, parochial administrator of Church of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is accused of assaulting the same child on at least 3 different occasions. He was ordained in 2015.

During his time in Chippewa Falls, Richmond was chaplain at McDonell High School and Notre Dame Middle School. The criminal complaint said a police officer interviewed a 19-year-old woman in March who alleged Richmond touched her sexually multiple times in her sophomore year before she turned 16. *Source: Chippewa Herald, 6-17-20*

Steven M. Glover, 42, Coventry, RI: Obtaining money over \$1,500, larceny over \$1,500 and fraudulent use of a credit card. Glover, who resigned as pastor of Sts. Rose and Clement Catholic Church in Warwick in August 2019, is accused of making personal purchases amounting to about \$40,000 with a church credit card. *Source: Providence Journal, 6-16-20*

Esteban Ruiz, 21, Kearny, NJ: Sexual assault of a minor and endangering the welfare of a child. Ruiz allegedly assaulted a 16-year-old girl in April 2018 while he was a youth leader at Good Shepherd Church. When arrested he listed Centro de Adoracion in Hackensack as his current employer. *Source: The Observer, 6-16-20*

Marc V. Spera, 57, St. Petersburg, FL: Statutory sexual assault, unlawful contact with a minor, involuntary deviate sexual intercourse and related charges. Spera is accused of crimes as a teacher at Church Farm School in Exton, PA, where he worked from 1995 to 2010.

The school was founded in 1918 by an Episcopal clergyman as a boarding school for boys, mostly from single-parent homes. Edmund "Ned" Sherrill II, another Episcopal pastor, now heads the school.

The investigation started after a man told authorities last year he was molested by Spera when he was in the 7th and 8th grades in 2008-10. Spera also volunteered with the Boy Scouts of America from 1980 to the present. *Source: Daily Local News, 6-12-20*

Ray J. Wigdal, 61, La Crosse, WI: Possession of child pornography. Wigdal is CEO of the Mordecai and Esther Foundation. Its website says it provides medical care for children "born with bodily deformities" and other services to meet orphans' needs in Sierra Leone and Pakistan. (Mordecai adopted his cousin Esther and raised her as his daughter in the Old Testament Book of Esther.)

Wigdal was at the center of a controversy in China in 2014 while caring for 11 orphans, including a girl named Phoebe. He claimed her fatal injuries were from a bicycling accident but media reports said the girl told hospital staff Wigdal had been hitting her. *Source: La Crosse Tribune, 5-30-20*

Christopher Keys, 56, Macon, GA: Solicitation of sodomy. Keys was fired as a youth pastor by Wesleyan Drive Baptist Church after a May 19 incident. Deputies had responded to a call about an armed robbery at a motel, where Keys claimed he was robbed by 2 black men.

Keys, who is married, allegedly told deputies he had answered a Craigslist ad to meet a man at the motel. It was determined there was no truth to his claim to have been carjacked from a CVS store. He told deputies "he did not want this to get out and that he did not want deputies to talk with his relatives," a sheriff's press release said. *Source: Baptist Press, 5-27-20*

An **unidentified rabbi** from the Shuba Israel congregation in Buenos Aires and **7 wedding party participants**, including the bride and groom, were cited by police for violating the coronavirus lockdown banning public and religious events.

It was the third Jewish wedding in less than a week in the Balvanera area of the city, which is home to a large Orthodox population. Police took no enforcement action at the previous weddings. The Shuba Israel congregation has lost at least 2 members to COVID-19. *Source: JTA, 5-26-20*

Gustavo Gonzalez Zamora, 68, Lodi, CA: Multiple counts of child molestation alleged to have occurred between 1994-2000 when Zamora was a pastor at the Apostolic Assembly Church in Lindsay.

Zamora "abruptly left the church in 2000," a sheriff's statement said. He is now pastor at a

Holy Smoke



Stockton church. *Source: Times-Delta, 5-22-20*

Roy N. Shoop, 55, Inola, OK: 6 counts, including lewd or indecent proposals or acts to a child under 16 and rape by instrumentation. Shoop, pastor at Cowboy Gatherin' Church, is accused of crimes against 3 girls, ages 15, 13 and 12, who were either working on his farm or taking equestrian lessons from him between April 2018 and Jan. 3, 2020.

Sheriff Scott Walton said there may be other victims and that Shoop was cocky and arrogant toward deputies on the way to jail. *Source: Fox 23/Tulsa World, 5-20-20*

Chicago pastors **Joe Wyrostek** of Metro Praise International Church and **Cristian Ionescu** of Elim Romanian Pentecostal Church were cited for disorderly conduct for violating the Illinois "stay at home" order by holding services with over 10 people attending.

"If that's what it takes to continue our mandate to serve our people, then it's a price we are willing to pay," said Ionescu, who is suing Gov. J.B. Pritzker over the restrictions. *Source: NBC Chicago, 5-20-20*

Gary J. Eaches, 41, Dickson City, PA: Indecent assault. Eaches, the father of 2 teens, allegedly admitted to police that he gave a 16-year-old girl alcohol and marijuana and improperly touched her. He had recently lost his job as pastor at United Baptist Church in Scranton.

Eaches describes himself on his Twitter page as "Aspiring Comedian, enjoy singing country music, #typeonediabtic, #chronicillness and struggles with #addiction." On another post he's singing the Hank Williams Jr. song "Whiskey Bent and Hell Bound." *Source: WNEP/Twitter, 5-18-20*

Tony A. Shaw, 55, Sheridan, MT: Felony sexual assault. Shaw, pastor at Ruby Valley Baptist Church, is accused of inappropriate contact with a 14-year-old girl in the church basement, where another person allegedly witnessed the contact.

Sheriff's officials said they had received an earlier assault complaint involving Shaw. *Source: Montana Standard, 5-14-20*

Yisrael Knopfler, 45, Lakewood, NJ: Obstruction, resisting arrest and violating the governor's executive order by having a gathering of 10 or more. Police had responded to a report of a large gathering at the Orthodox rabbi's home, where about 30 people were standing around a barrel fire in the backyard.

It's alleged Knopfler threatened officers with a garden hose and tent pole, chest-bumped an of-

ficer before dropping to the ground and refused to walk to a police vehicle. *Source: NJ 101.5 FM, 5-14-20*

Nine Serbian Orthodox Church priests in Montenegro, including Bishop **Joanikije Mićović** of the eparchy of Budimlja and Nikšić, were detained by police for holding a procession attended by thousands in Nikšić despite a ban on gatherings due to the coronavirus.

Riots broke out after the arrests. The men were released after 72 hours. Montenegro, with 620,000 people, split from much larger Serbia in a 2006 referendum. The church is headquartered in Belgrade. *Source: Reuters, 5-13-20*

Pleaded / Convicted

Gregory Dow, 61, Lancaster, PA: Pleaded guilty to 4 counts of engaging in illicit sexual conduct with a minor in a foreign place between 2013 and 2017 while running the Dow Family Children's Home in Boito, Kenya. Prosecutors said that when the abuse started, the victims were between the ages of 11 and 13.

He founded the home in 2008 after moving to Kenya with his wife and 6 children. "[Dow] purported to be a Christian missionary who would care for these orphans," said U.S. Attorney William McSwain. Dow started the home independent of a mission organization but with financial support of churches and church members.

A plea agreement calls for him to serve 15 years and 8 months in prison. He pleaded guilty in 1996 to assault to commit sexual abuse in Iowa and received 2 years' probation. *Source: Des Moines Register, 6-15-20*

Cesar A. Guerrero Jr., 42, Sharonville, OH: Pleaded guilty to coercion and enticement for engaging in sexual acts with a 17-year-old girl on 2 occasions in 2019 in his office at Mision Cristiana el Calvario.

According to the plea agreement, Guerrero told the girl, who'd been sexually molested in Guatemala, that he dreamed of her "dressed in white" while "walking in a dark place" with the only way to get out of the dark place was to have sex with him as a "cleansing process." *Source: WXIX, 6-11-20*

Jerry Zweitzig, 71, Hatboro, PA: Pleaded guilty to manufacturing and attempted manufacturing of child pornography. Zweitzig, pastor at Horsham Bible Church until his 2016 retirement, admitted videotaping his abuse of an infant in 2010.

The video was discovered during a presentence investigation of a separate exploitation case in which he pleaded guilty in 2019. In that case he admitted molesting a girl from the ages of 5 to 11 and taping it. He also had a porn collection depicting over a thousand other children. *Source: The Inquirer, 5-20-20*

Sentenced

Jo Ann White, 60, Bristol, VA: 10 years' probation and restitution of at least \$300 a month after pleading guilty to theft of \$60,000 or more for stealing over \$65,000 from East Bristol Freewill Baptist Church, where she was treasurer and her husband was pastor until he retired at the end of 2019.

Church elders sought financial records from the Whites after checks started bouncing but they stalled in providing them, said current church secretary Beth Lester. *Source: Herald Courier, 6-18-20*

David M. Weltman, 29, Skokie, IL: Indeterminate prison term not to exceed 25 years after a jury found him guilty of sexual abuse. Weltman, the former director of Hillel House in Iowa City, IA, will have to serve at least 17½ years.

He was accused of sexually abusing a 9-year-old boy in a storage area at the Jewish student center during a Hebrew lesson in 2019. Judge Chad Kepros said although the sex act was short in duration, "the seriousness of the offense is not defined by length."

Weltman told the court he hoped they see the "gross injustice of this egregiously long sentence." *Source: Press-Citizen, 6-12-20*

Kevin P. Healy, 81, Napier, New Zealand: 9 months' home detention after pleading guilty to 5 counts of indecency in the 1970s involving a girl aged 8 or 9 and her brother and another boy who were 12 and 13. Healy, a Catholic brother who taught school, took students on outings and to camps and was a regular visitor to families' homes.

A male victim in court called the sentence as "a bit light." The judge said he took Healy's age and infirmity into account even though he had a previous conviction. *Source: NZ Herald, 6-5-20*

Brett J. Monroe, 39, Arlington, TX: 24 years, 3 months in prison after pleading guilty to sexual exploitation of a child. Monroe, associate pastor for 11 years at Heritage Baptist Church, admitted using his cellphone to secretly record underage females showering in his home and converting the videos into still images to trade online.

He was also a registered volunteer at Corey Academy of Fine Arts and Dual Language, formerly Corey Elementary School. *Source: KTVT, 6-2-20*

Phillip C. Loftis, 53, Silver Point, TN: 18 months' probation after pleading guilty to solicitation of sexual exploitation of a minor and attempted statutory rape. Loftis, pastor at Herrens Chapel Church of Christ, engaged in an online conversation with an undercover agent posing as a 13-year-old girl and exposed himself in photos sent to the agent. *Source: Herald-Citizen, 6-1-20*

Ryan D. Crawford, 33, Austin, AR: 25 years in prison without parole followed by 20 years' supervised probation and \$2,500 in victim restitution after pleading guilty to producing child pornography. Crawford, assistant pastor at First Baptist Church in Pineville, MO, admitted touching a 9-year-old girl inappropriately and taking sexually explicit photos of her while she was sleeping. *Source: Joplin Globe, 5-27-20*

Alisa Haynes, 45, and **Alexis Fortune**, 25, Toledo, OH: 2 years and 4 years in prison respectively, after pleading guilty to tampering with a witness or victim. They are the wife and stepdaughter of convicted pastor Anthony Haynes, sentenced earlier to life for a sex-trafficking scheme involving a teen girl and several others.

"Ms. Fortune gave one of the victims a phone in order to leave not just one, but two voicemail messages recanting what the victim said to law enforcement officers about what happened in the underlying sex-trafficking case," U.S. Assistant Attorney Ashley Futrell said. *Source: Toledo Blade, 5-20-20*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

The Catholic **Diocese of Albany**, NY, is being sued for failure to stop child sexual abuse by 2 now-deceased priests: **J. Gregory Mulhall**, who served as pastor of Annunciation Church in Ilion from 1961 until retiring in 1985, and **Charles A. Gaffigan**, who retired from Holy Mother and Child Parish in Lake Luzerne. Mulhall died in 2001 and Gaffigan died in 2015.

The law firms of Jeff Anderson & Associates and LaFave Wein & Frament have filed 74 such complaints. *Source: Observer-Dispatch, 6-15-20*

St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church, Jamaica, NY, the **Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America** and former scoutmaster and teacher **Lawrence Svrcek** are defendants in a suit in which Svrcek is accused of molesting the plaintiff and other children in the 1970s and 1980s.

Plaintiff "C.R." decided to come forward after



Father Sergei (see Other)

learning about an earlier complaint against Svrcek. That 2019 suit also named the **Boy Scouts of America** and asserted Svrcek molested plaintiff "N.R." from 1977–82 when Svrcek was a scoutmaster and a science and gym teacher at the church's school. *Source: Daily Eagle, 6-11-20*

A **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints** ward in San Jose, CA, is at the center of a suit alleging 2 underage sisters were molested between 2009–16 by **Joseph Neipp**, now 72. "In his actual or apparent authoritative capacity as the bishop of the Branham Ward, Neipp repeatedly engaged in inappropriate grooming behavior with children during Primary classes and on or around ward events including allowing small children to sit on his lap, and transporting plaintiffs and other young children alone in his vehicle to ward activities," it's alleged.

Even though Neipp was excommunicated due to an earlier complaint, church members weren't told, so that "he was still regarded as bishop or 'Father of the Ward' and parents were under the impression that it was safe for children to be around him," the suit alleges. *Source: KUTV, 6-5-20*

Douglas D. Thore, 72, former pastor of **St. Nicodemus Lutheran Church** in Marilla, NY, the parish and the **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America** are being sued by 2 men now in their 30s who allege sexual abuse by Thore when they were teens. He resigned as pastor in 2004 after admitting to church officials he had sexual contact with 2 boys in the congregation years earlier.

Thore, who lives in Davenport, FL, told the court in a letter he can't afford a lawyer. "I live in a mobile home built in 1984 which currently has little equity. I drive a 2010 Toyota Yaris with 135,000 miles on it. I budget every dollar to pay my bills and live on what is left over, trying to save for major repairs, such as replacing a hot water tank," he said. "This is my life." *Source: Buffalo News, 6-4-20*

The **Allentown Catholic Diocese** and **Holy Guardian Angels Parish** in Reading, PA, have been sued by Democratic state Rep. Mark Rozzi, who alleges he was molested at age 13 by **Edward R. Graff** in 1984-85. The suit asserts that Graff was put on "sick leave" in 1979-80 and was sent to New Mexico in 1986 for "treatment of undefined but 'serious' conduct."

He was eventually arrested in 2002 on child sex charges in Texas and died a month later in jail before facing trial. Rozzi learned about Graff's history only after reading a statewide grand jury report. *Source: Reading Eagle, 5-28-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Rockville Centre**, NY, is accused of invasion of privacy related to a suit that alleges Long Island priest **Gregory Cappuccino** repeatedly molested plaintiff Greg Hein, 52, at St. Anthony of Padua Parish in 1984.

Hein said he was contacted several months after filing his suit by an ex-roommate who had attended a drug abuse program with him in 2017 and had recently gotten a call from a church investigator. "I felt like I was being violated again," said Hein. "How they got [his] information is just beyond me."

"To possess this information is grossly improper and a violation of both Mr. Hein's and [the roommate's] right to privacy," court papers state. Hein's suit is among at least 44 filed against the diocese after the passage of the Child Victims Act. *Source: NY Post, 5-24-20*

CrossPoint Community Church (formerly First Baptist Church), Modesto, CA, and former youth pastor **Robert Chapman** are defendants in a suit filed by Carl Epperson and Larry Spencer, who allege Chapman, now in his 80s, molested them as teens.

The church has already settled a separate suit with survivor Jennifer Roach for \$267,500 for abuse by youth pastor **Brad Tebbutt** in the late 1980s. A suit filed last October by Tracy Epler alleges she was assaulted by youth pastor **Les Hughey** in the 1970s.

Epperson said Chapman led a "Disciples

Group ... which was supposedly to help young teen boys with issues related to reaching puberty." One night he awoke in Chapman's camper on church grounds before an event to find Chapman masturbating him, the suit asserts.

Epperson alleges after he reported the abuse that detectives told him he "would be serving three to five years in California Youth Authority if I was lying. They asked, 'Did you like it? Did you enjoy it? Did you ever think you might be homosexual?' I remember telling myself, 'You know what happened, don't let these guys falsify what you know is true.'"

The case was closed without charges, Chapman kept his job and later assaulted another teen boy. He pleaded guilty to child molestation in 1987 and served 300 days in jail. *Source: Modesto Bee, 5-23-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Syracuse**, NY, **St. John the Evangelist School** in Binghamton and school employee **James Purtell** are being sued by a 57-year-old man alleging deceased priest **Thomas Keating** molested him for 3 years starting in 1973 when he was 11.

Purtell is accused of making sexual comments to the plaintiff in 1973. He and Keating both used fear and intimidation to ensure the plaintiff's silence, it's alleged. *Source: Press and Sun-Bulletin, 5-21-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Allentown**, PA, and **St. Catharine of Siena Parish** in Reading are defendants in a suit filed by Timothy McGettigan, a Texas man who alleges he was sexually abused and tortured by **several priests** in a church basement in the 1970s.

McGettigan alleges he was assaulted by **Joseph Grembocki**, **David A. Soderlund** and **other priests** he can't identify. Grembocki died in July 2016. He is not named in the statewide grand jury report and no other accusation has surfaced. Soderlund was defrocked in 2005 and moved to Wyoming, where he was sent to prison for exploiting children and possessing child pornography.

The suit alleges Soderlund started a "single moms with kids" club to identify and groom vulnerable children. Over 50 Allentown Diocese priests have been accused of child abuse. *Source: Morning Call, 5-20-20*

Finances

The Catholic **Diocese of Syracuse**, NY, facing upwards of 100 lawsuits under the Child Victims Act, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Bishop Douglas Lucia said in a statement that the diocese will implement a victims fund charged with pooling money from the diocese and insurance carriers to assess the extent of coverage.

Syracuse is the third of New York's 8 dioceses after Buffalo and Rochester to file for bankruptcy. *Source: NY Post, 6-19-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of St. Cloud**, MN, agreed to a framework for resolving clergy sexual abuse claims against the diocese and its parishes. It has received 74 claims of sexual abuse of minors involving 41 clergy.

The agreement includes a \$22.5 million trust fund to compensate abuse survivors, a commitment to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection "in the near future" and to make public a list of all credibly accused clergy. *Source: KSTP, 5-26-20*

Legal Developments

Retired Catholic Bishop **Joseph Hart** is still under investigation for alleged sexual abuse of over a dozen boys despite earlier claims to the contrary by a Wyoming prosecutor. Natrona County District Attorney Dan Itzen told Cheyenne police he is still pursuing charges and the case is still open. A prosecutor who later recused herself misread or misunderstood details in a probable cause affidavit, Itzen said.

Hart, 88, was a priest in Kansas City, MO, for 21

years before moving to Wyoming, where he served as auxiliary and then full bishop from 1976 until retiring in 2001. The first known allegations against him date to the early 1960s and were made in the late 1980s.

The Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph has settled suits with at least 10 victims. At least 6 men have come forward in the past 2 years to say he molested them in Wyoming. *Source: AP, 6-23-20*

Televangelist **Jim Bakker** filed a civil action in U.S. District Court for the Western District of Missouri on behalf of his Morningside Church and Morningside Church Productions based in Blue Eye. Bakker hopes to thwart attempts by the Arkansas Attorney General's Office to obtain personal information of congregation members as part of an investigation into Bakker's promotion of Silver Solution, which he claims cures COVID-19.

Bakker is also under investigation in Missouri for his Silver Solution claims. In their complaint, Bakker's attorneys claim he feels "divinely inspired" to offer Silver Solution to the world and that products like it "have been made available to this generation by God."

It was announced in May that Bakker, 80, had suffered a stroke and would be taking a break from "The Jim Bakker Show" to recover. *Source: Democrat-Gazette, 6-10-20*

Donald C. Biggs, 41, a youth pastor at Mountain Church in Medford, OR, sentenced in 2018 to 15 years for secretly recording juvenile girls showering, was granted a public defender to help him apply for "compassionate release" from a Minnesota federal prison due to coronavirus concerns.

"I fear for my life based on the fact that I cannot 'social distance' in prison," Biggs wrote in a May 14 letter asking for release "to go home to be with my loved ones to support them through this pandemic."

Biggs made national headlines when the victim's father and church member jumped the railing and punched him during sentencing. Charges against him were later dismissed. *Source: Mail Tribune, 5-21-20*

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo extended the deadline for filing childhood sexual abuse claims due to the coronavirus pandemic from Aug. 14 to Jan. 14, 2021. Cuomo said a reduction in court services has limited the ability of survivors' attorneys to file and prepare cases.

It took more than a decade for the Child Victims Act to become law, as Catholic churches and other organizations opposed it year after year for liability reasons. "The decision to extend it through executive order is not terribly surprising to us," said Dennis Poust of the New York State Catholic Conference. *Source: Queens Courier/Crux, 5-11-20*

Allegations

Nicholas DiMarzio, bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, NY, has been accused by a second man of abuse in the 1970s, when DiMarzio was a parish priest in Jersey City, NJ.

DiMarzio "repeatedly sexually abused" Samier Tadros starting when he was about 6 years old, according to a letter Tadros' lawyer sent to the attorney representing the Archdiocese of Newark. The letter alleges the abuse happened in Holy Rosary Church.

"There is absolutely no truth to this allegation," DiMarzio told The Associated Press. "We have uncovered conclusive evidence of Bishop DiMarzio's innocence," said Joseph Hayden, his attorney. Hayden declined to share the evidence with the AP.

Mitchell Garabedian, best known for focusing attention in 2002 on clergy abuse scandals in the Archdiocese of Boston, represents both accusers, who are ages 46 and 57 and live in different states. *Source: Alton Telegraph, 6-4-20*

Removed / Resigned

Jack Herron, Fargo, ND, a retired Catholic priest, was removed from public ministry by the Diocese of Fargo after a woman accused him of groping her in the church rectory when she was 15 or 16 in the 1970s.

"The canonical investigation and review by the diocesan review board is complete," a statement said. "It was determined that Father Herron would not have faculties to engage in public ministry." The diocese released a list in January of 31 priests, deacons and non-ordained individuals whom it believes have been credibly accused. *Source: inforum.com, 6-18-20*

Carlos Osorio of St. Louis Catholic Parish in Clarksville, MD, was removed from priestly faculties after alleged "sexual activity involving adults" was reported to the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Osorio, 36, is not expected to return to active ministry, said Mary Ellen Russell, director of community affairs for the archdiocese. *Source: Baltimore Sun, 6-8-20*

James Curtin, Lockport, IL, resigned as pastor of St. Dennis Catholic Parish after an inappropriate video was posted to social media. In a letter to parents, St. Dennis School said a student opened a Snapchat video which included Curtin and went viral.

Lockport police are investigating the video. The diocese said the video was not created with malicious intent but was done due to lack of knowledge of modern technology. *Source: WGN, 5-14-20*

Timothy Seavey, 31, Mesa, AZ, was removed as pastor at Queen of Peace Catholic Church and chaplain of Seton Catholic Preparatory High School amid allegations he sent "inappropriate images of a sexual nature" to a 17-year-old boy.

Allegations were reported to the high school and police after the boy recognized Seavey, said Detective Nik Rasheta. A complication is that the boy identified himself as 18 in his online dating profile. Mesa police said the investigation is active but no charges have been filed. *Source: Mesa Tribune, 5-12-20*

Other

Father Sergei (né Nikolai Romanov), a prominent Russian Orthodox priest barred from public ministry in April for preaching about his anti-coronavirus views, took over the Sredneuralsk convent outside the city of Yekaterinburg and set up a perimeter of Cossack militia to guard the site. "Father Sergei literally removed the mother superior from management," the Yekaterinburg Diocese told reporters.

The ultraconservative priest and former policeman previously spent 13 years in prison for murder. He faces an ecclesiastical court for defying bans on public ministry as well as a secular court on suspicion of inciting hatred. *Source: Moscow Times, 6-17-20*

Thomas J. Weston, 68, Laketown, UT, was found dead of an apparent suicide while awaiting trial on counts of sodomy on a child and aggravated sexual abuse of a child. The Rich County Sheriff's Office received a report in January that Weston had assaulted a minor female relative "numerous times" dating back to 2018.

According to his obituary, "He served an honorable LDS mission in The Australia West Mission from 1971–1973. ... Tom was a mountain of a man with a laugh to match. He served in various positions in his church and his community." He and his wife were married in 1973 in the Ogden Temple and raised 4 children.

Sheriff Dale Stacey set up a monitored phone call Jan. 24 between the victim and Weston, during which Weston allegedly admitted to her he had one thing that would "probably put me in prison the rest of my life." *Source: Uinta County Herald, 6-15-20*

David A. Gross, 86, died of COVID-19 complications while incarcerated at Colorado's Sterling Correctional Facility. Gross was a retired Air Force chaplain described as a "serial child molester" by the judge who sentenced him at age 79 to 10 years to life in prison.

Gross was arrested on suspicion of sexually touching 4 granddaughters as part of their "special relationship" with him. He pleaded guilty to sexual assault on a child by one in a position of trust. *Source: Colorado Springs Gazette, 5-20-20*

Darrin Patrick, 49, St. Louis, died of an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound. Patrick founded the Southern Baptist megachurch The Journey with his wife in 2002 and later served as a teaching pastor at the multi-site Seacoast Church based in South Carolina. He was a former chaplain for the baseball St. Louis Cardinals.

Patrick was fired in 2016 as pastor of The Journey for "deep historical patterns of sin" involving 2 women. After 26 months of "restoration," he started working at Seacoast Church.

His friend Bob Oesch said Patrick would often ask people who "lived without God in their lives," "How's that working for you?" "And that was a great way of getting people to see the value of putting God in their lives," Oesch said. "I still call it the Darrin question." *Source: Post & Courier/Religion News Service, 5-9-20*



‘Weight off my shoulders’

FFRF attorney tips scales back in his favor

By Chris Line

I was morbidly obese.

Weighing in at 438 pounds, I knew something had to be done to save my life. This “revelation” came to me just as I was hired full-time as a legal fellow for the Freedom From Religion Foundation in June 2017.

So, as my legal career began to take off, I decided to take off the pounds, too. I was tired of making excuses for my weight.

Being over 400 pounds doesn’t happen overnight. I grew up on fast food, soda and, really, any high-calorie food that I could get my hands on. Any fitness effort was always eclipsed by the massive amount of food I ate. By the time I graduated from high school, I was well over 300 pounds and growing.

The weight gain continued during my first couple years of college before I was finally able to stem the tide, temporarily, at least, for the first time in my life.

It was during this period that I discovered a love of playing ultimate frisbee. I also realized I enjoyed long walks while listening to audiobooks. It was during these walks that I first listened to *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins and *God is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens. I had been an atheist since high school, but it was books like these that really solidified my beliefs and made me feel like I wasn’t alone.

Within the secular community, I finally found a place where I felt like I belonged. I became heavily involved (no pun intended!) in the Secular Student Alliance group at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. I considered attempting to get an internship at FFRF, but, ultimately, I took one closer to home.

During this time, the weight seemed to melt off. I lost more than 80 pounds, going from around 350 pounds to 270.

Unfortunately, the weight loss didn’t last long. I graduated college in 2012 with a political science degree and no clear career path. I found a job in my hometown, working on cars for minimum wage.

Gone were the days of discussing philosophy, politics and the meaning of life. I lived with my parents and saved what I could, which wasn’t much. My weight skyrocketed. I was over 400 pounds during this time.

I knew I had to do something, anything, because the path I was on was leading toward total self-destruction. I quit that job and started studying full-



FFRF Attorney Chris Line’s dramatic weight loss can be seen in the two photos. The first is when he had just graduated from the University of Wisconsin Law School in 2017 and the other was taken in 2020.

time for the LSAT. During college, I had taken that test to get into law school, but I really didn’t do that much studying.

This time, however, I put in the effort. I studied for months, worked through multiple LSAT programs, took every practice test available and achieved a score that allowed me to attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison on nearly a full-tuition scholarship.

Things were looking up and, before starting law school, I was able to lose a little bit of weight. But the stress of law school led me back to my old ways and I quickly started to gain weight again.

Law school was especially hard for me because I wasn’t passionate about being a lawyer. My real interest was in atheism and secularism, but there is no such thing as a professional atheist. This time, I applied for and was accepted for a legal internship at FFRF during the summer after my first year of law school.

Within my first few weeks at FFRF, I knew that I had found my home. I spent the summer working with an incredible group of attorneys, protecting the separation of church and state and generally advancing the idea of a more secular society.

I interned at FFRF for more than a full year, which made my law school career advisor worry about me. She believed I was making a big mistake by only interning at one organization. But I had

faith, so to speak.

Toward the end of law school, I applied to be a full-time legal fellow at FFRF. I was a bit worried, but optimistic, given my years of experience. Happily, I was offered the fellowship and, on June 1, 2017, started working at FFRF full-time.

With this new job now locked in, I knew it was time to make a change, a real change, in my health. I started with small adjustments to my diet — like removing fast food — and just kept eating less and less as my weight dropped. I went from drinking soda to low-calorie lemonade to flavored water. A typical day included a breakfast sandwich or wrap, a protein shake for lunch, and then chicken and vegetables for dinner. I didn’t count calories, but ate things that were lower in calories and low in carbs.

It wasn’t easy, sometimes I was hungry but my body was able to adapt to my new lifestyle pretty quickly. I made sure to allow myself to indulge when necessary, especially when my coworkers would bring in eclairs, candy, or various baked goods. I also had to give in whenever our amazing supporters would send pizzas, or other treats to the office for our staff

to enjoy. It’s all about balance.

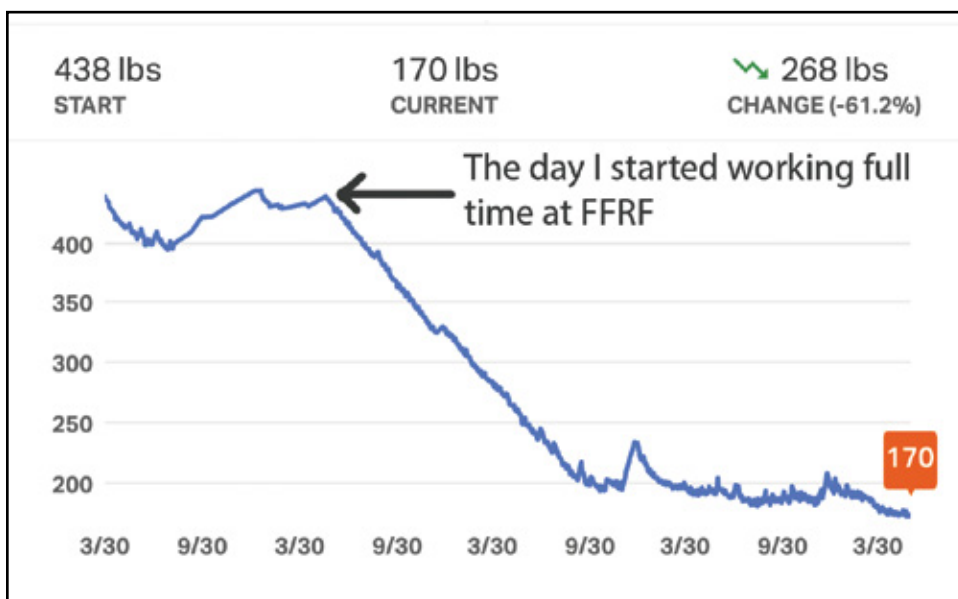
Within a year, I lost 180 pounds, going from 430 to 250 pounds.

When I first started my weight-loss program, I would walk a lot — two to three hours on workdays and five to eight hours a day on the weekends. At some point, I transitioned from just walking to running. My FFRF co-workers signed me up for a half-marathon as a “reward” for my hard work and progress. I only had six weeks or so to prepare. I started trying to run as far as I could without stopping. I ran my first half-marathon on Nov. 11, 2019.

Since then, I have been running every day. I’m now down to 170 pounds, meaning I’ve lost more than 250 pounds from my highest weight. With my new lifestyle that I am enjoying so much, I don’t expect that I will have to worry about becoming obese ever again.

And when my two-year legal fellowship ended, FFRF kept me aboard and hired me as a full-time attorney — a dream come true.

I have so much more left to achieve in my life and career, and I can now do so with a tremendous weight off of my shoulders.



Chris kept a chart of his weight, showing the steep decline from 2017 to 2019.



Chris ran a half-marathon in November 2019 after FFRF co-workers signed him up.