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JUDICIAL DOOMSDAY



Religious authoritarianism is here to stay, unfortunately

This column first ran on Nov. 16 in The New York Times and is reprinted with permission.

By Katherine Stewart

Will President-elect Joe Biden's victory force America's Christian Nationalists to rethink the unholy alliance that powered Donald Trump's four-year tour as one of the nation's most dangerous presidents? Don't count on it.

The 2020 election is proof that religious authoritarianism is here to stay, and

the early signs now indicate that the movement seems determined to reinterpret defeat at the top of the ticket as evidence of persecution and of its own righteousness. With or without Trump, they will remain committed to the illiberal politics that the president has so ably embodied.

As it did in 2016, the early analysis of the 2020 election results often circled around the racial, urban-rural, and income and education divides. But the religion divide tells an equally compelling

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Election heartening for FFRF's work

For the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the results of the U.S. presidential election mean the Christian Nationalist takeover of the federal government should end. The Joe Biden/Kamala Harris administration will mean a renewed chance to advocate for secularism and a return to rational debate.

"We the People" have spoken. Unfortunately, the Senate is unlikely to flip (barring two positive outcomes in Georgia

seats up for runoff elections), which will complicate recovery from a Christian Nationalist executive. However, the results overall look like a victory for science over faith, for reproductive and individual rights over theology, and for reason over ideology.

After years of playing defense, FFRF can now push forward. It appears there is a path cleared to achieving gains for FFRF's movement to keep religion out of government and public policy.

Donald Trump was carried into office on a crest of Christian Nationalism four years ago, a wave that was hostile to everything FFRF works for. We trust the relentless religious assault we've been beating back for four years will diminish — and we'll do everything in our power to ensure that.

FFRF is poised for the opportunities ahead. Our team of attorneys and 30-some staff, and our 33,000 members, are the watchers on the wall separating state and church. We're the largest U.S. association of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics) and the third-largest association of nonbelievers in the world. We've added a strategic response cam-

paign, a D.C. lobbyist, and our educational efforts have played a major role in the secular surge. We'll continue to fight and remain vigilant no matter which party is in the White House or controls Congress.

FFRF has been working with our allies to develop a common secular agenda that Congress and the new administration can quickly implement. We look forward to repairing damage inflicted on secularism and its values. This will entail repealing many Trumpian executive orders, regulations and extrajudicial bodies (such as the Religious Liberty Task Force), but must also include major judicial reform.

Unprecedented obstructionism in the Senate blocked President Obama not only from nominating Merrick Garland to replace Antonin Scalia on the Supreme Court, but also from filling more than 100 seats on the federal bench. The Trump administration has since packed the courts with more than 200 individuals handpicked by the Federalist Society, including unqualified zealots who do not reflect the American people, trampling Senate rules and norms along the way. An illegitimate process allowed Trump to make his third Supreme Court appointment in the midst of the national election — an appointment that clearly endangers abortion and LGBTQ rights, as well as decades of First Amendment precedent separating religion from government.

FFRF has a talented legal team, and

See Election on page 6

Military atheists want to be heard by DoD

FFRF's military and veteran members gave suggestions to Pentagon

By Ryan Jayne

Members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation associated with the military have a message for the Department of Defense: Acknowledge their existence and quit proselytizing.

Following national protests against

systemic racism, the DoD announced a multistep process to address diversity and inclusion concerns. This included an anonymous "crowdsourcing" brainstorm of the problem and possible solutions. FFRF invited its qualifying members to submit comments — and the response was overwhelming.

These true "atheists in foxholes" provided dozens of thoughtful examples of how the military could better accommodate and acknowledge non-religious service members. About 20 percent of FFRF's 33,000 members

around the country are either active service members or veterans, dispelling the tired myth that there are "no atheists in foxholes."

The Defense Department's presumption of religiosity begins with the required paperwork when individuals enter the armed forces: "There was no box to check under 'religious preference' for 'atheist,'" one nonreligious veteran wrote. "Instead, I checked the box 'None,' which was read by the clerk as 'None

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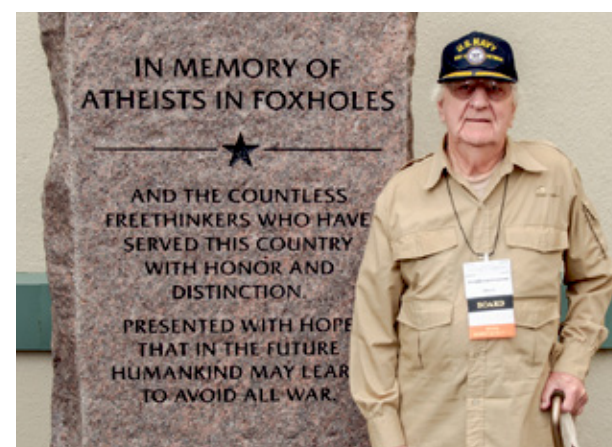


Photo by Ingrid Laas

FFRF Member Joseph Cunningham stands next to FFRF's "Atheists in Foxholes" monument outside its national office in Madison, Wis.

Nationalism

Continued from page 1

story. According to preliminary exit polls from Edison Research (the data is necessarily rough at this stage), 28 percent of voters identified as either white evangelical or white born-again Christian, and of these, 76 percent voted for Trump. If the numbers hold, these results indicate a continuation of support for Trump from this group.

The core of Trump’s voting bloc, to be clear, does not come from white evangelicals as such, but from an overlapping



Katherine Stewart

group of not necessarily evangelical, and not necessarily white, people who identify at least loosely with Christian Nationalism: the idea that the United States is and ought to be a Christian nation governed under a reactionary understanding of Christian values. Unfortunately, data on that cohort is harder to find except in deeply researched work by sociologists like Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry.

Most pollsters shoehorn complex religious identities into necessarily broad labels, so they fail to separate out the different strands of Trump’s support. There are indications that the president in fact expanded his appeal among nonwhite evangelical and born-again Christians of color, particularly among Latinos. Biden, on the other hand, who made faith outreach a key feature of his campaign, appears to have done well among moderate and progressive voters of all faiths.

Conservative voters of faith “came in massive numbers, seven and a half million more above the 2016 baseline, which was itself a record,” Ralph Reed, head of the Faith and Freedom Coalition and a longtime Religious Right activist, said at a postelection press briefing. “We believe they’re the reason why Republicans are going to hold the Senate.”

Toeing the Trump line

In their responses to the election outcome, some prominent Religious Right leaders have enabled or remained true to the false Trumpian line of election fraud. Michele Bachmann, the former Minnesota congresswoman and 2012 presidential candidate, said, “Smash the delusion, Father, of Joe Biden is our president. He is not.” In Crisis Magazine, a conservative Catholic publication, Richard C. Antall likened media reporting on the Biden-Kamala Harris ticket’s victory to a “coup



WhiteHouse.org

President Trump, surrounded by evangelical leaders, holds up an executive order that he signed during a National Day of Prayer event in the Rose Garden of the White House on May 3, 2018.

d’état.” Mat Staver, chairman and founder of Liberty Counsel, added, “What we are witnessing only happens in communist or repressive regimes. We must not allow this fraud to happen in America.”

Even as prominent Republican figures like George W. Bush and Mitt Romney slowly tried to nudge Trump toward the exit, leaders of the Religious Right continued to man the barricades. The conservative speaker and Falkirk Center fellow David Harris Jr. put it this way:

“If you’re a believer, and you believe God appointed Donald J. Trump to run this country, to lead this country, and you believe as I do that he will be re-elected the president of the United States, then friends, you’ve got to guard your heart, you’ve got to guard your peace. Right now we are at war.”

Others stopped short of endorsing Trump’s wilder allegations of election fraud, but backed his right to challenge the results. Reed told the Religion News Service, “This election will be over when those recounts are complete and those legal challenges are resolved.”

The Rev. Franklin Graham tweeted that the courts will “determine who wins the presidency.” The conservative pastor Robert Jeffress, who gave a sermon before Trump’s inaugural ceremony in 2017, noted that a Biden win was “the most likely outcome.”

After processing their disappointment, Christian Nationalists may come around to the reality of Biden’s victory. There is no indication, however, that this will temper their apocalyptic vision, according to which one side of the American political divide represents unmitigated evil. During a Nov. 11 virtual prayer gathering organized by the Family Research Council, one of the key speakers cast the elec-

tion as the consequence of “the whole godless ideology that’s wanted to swallow our homes, destroy our marriages, throw our children into rivers of confusion.” Jim Garlow, an evangelical pastor whose Well Versed Ministry has as its stated goal, “Bringing biblical principles of governance to governmental leaders,” asserted that Biden and Harris are at the helm of an “ideology” that is “anti-Christ, anti-biblical to its core.”

A political movement

The comments pouring in from these and other figures may be forgotten when Biden takes office. But they are worth paying attention to now for what they say about the character of the movement. While many outsiders continue to think of Christian Nationalism as a social movement that arises from the ground up, it is in fact a political movement that operates mostly from the top down. The rank-and-file of the movement is diverse and comes to its churches with an infinite variety of motivations and concerns, but the leaders are far more unified.

They collaborate in a densely interconnected network of think tanks, policy groups, activist organizations, legal advocacy groups and conservative pastoral networks. What holds them together is not any centralized command structure, but a radical political ideology that is profoundly hostile to democracy and pluralism, and a certain political style that seeks to provoke moral panic, rewards the paranoid and views every partisan conflict as a conflagration, the end of the world. Partisan politics is the lifeblood of their movement.

If one considers the movement from the perspective of its leaders, it is easier to see why it is unlikely to change in the new political circumstances we find ourselves in. The power of the leadership is the function of at least three underlying structural realities in America’s political and economic life and those realities are not going to change anytime soon.

The first is the growing economic inequality that has produced spectacular fortunes for the few, while too many ordinary families struggle to get by. Leaders of the movement get much of the support for their well-funded operations from a cadre of super-wealthy individuals and extended families who are as committed to free-market fundamentalism as they are to reactionary religion. The donors in turn need the so-called values voters in order to lock down their economic agenda of low taxation for the wealthy and minimal regulation. These donors include, among many others, the Prince DeVos family, the fracking billionaire Wilks brothers, and members of the Green family, whose Hobby Lob-

by fortune helped build the Museum of the Bible. The movement gets another big chunk of its funding from the large mass of people who are often in the middle rungs of the economic spectrum and whose arduously cultivated resentments toward those below them have been turned into a fundraising bonanza.

The second structural reality to consider is that Christian Nationalism is a creation of a uniquely isolated messaging sphere. Many members of the rank and file get their main political information not just from messaging platforms that keep their audiences in a world that is divorced from reality, but also from dedicated religious networks and reactionary faith leaders.

The fact that Trump was able to hold on to a high percentage of the vote in the face of such overwhelming evidence of malfeasance is proof enough that the religious-nationalist end of the right-wing information bubble has gotten more, not less, resistant over time.

The third critical factor is a political system that gives disproportionate power to an immensely organized, engaged and loyal minority. One of the most reliable strategies for producing that unshakable cohort has been to get them to agree that abortion is the easy answer to every difficult political policy question. Recently, Religious Right leaders have shifted their focus more to a specious understanding of what they call “religious freedom” or “religious liberty,” but the underlying strategy is the same: make individuals see their partisan vote as the primary way to protect their cultural and religious identity.

Republicans have long known that the judiciary is one of the most effective instruments of minority rule. Trump’s success in packing the federal judiciary — as of this writing, 220 federal judges, including three Supreme Court justices — will be one of his most devastating legacies. The prospect of further entrenching minority rule in the coming years will keep the alliance between Republicans and the Religious Right alive.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the Christian Nationalist response to the 2020 election is that we’ve seen this movie before. The “stolen election” meme won’t bring Trump back into the Oval Office. But then, the birther narrative never took President Obama out of office, either. The point of conspiratorial narratives and apocalyptic rhetoric is to lay the groundwork for a politics of total obstruction, in preparation for the return of a “legitimate” ruler. The best guess is that religious authoritarianism of the next four years will look a lot like it did in the last four years. We ignore the political implications for our democracy at our peril.

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

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Global ‘dark money’ report

\$280M spent by U.S. Christian Right groups

This article first appeared on *opendemocracy.net* on Oct. 27 and is reprinted with permission.

By Claire Provost and Nandini Archer

U.S. Christian Right groups, many with close links to the Trump administration, have spent at least \$280 million in “dark money,” fueling campaigns against the rights of women and LGBTQ people across five continents, *openDemocracy* revealed.

Organizations led by some of President Trump’s most vocal allies and supporters have spent increasing amounts of money globally to influence foreign



Jay Sekulow

laws, policies and public opinion in order “to stir a backlash” against sexual and reproductive rights. On Oct. 27, *openDemocracy* released the first dataset detailing the global scale of this spending. Human rights advocates and transparency campaigners from around the world have called it “alarming” and a “wake-up call” for democracies.

None of the Christian Right groups we studied reveals who its donors are or discloses details of how exactly it spends its money overseas.

“This is a form of interference in our political and judicial system which is as harmful to human rights as Russian meddling in democratic elections,” said Neil Datta, head of the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF).

Irene Donadio at the International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network (IPPF EN) said there has been a clear increase in campaigns against reproductive and sexual rights across the region, and described the scale of the funding revealed by *openDemocracy* as “staggering.”

“It is outrageous that groups that are playing with women’s lives and safety are allowed to operate in the darkness,” Donadio said. “They should be forced to comply with the basic principles of transparency and accountability.”

Trump-linked dark money

Each of the U.S. groups *openDemocracy* examined is registered as a tax-exempt nonprofit and as such is barred from participating in partisan political activity.

However, several of them, including the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) — which is run by Trump’s personal lawyer Jay Sekulow — have vocally supported Trump’s administration and his Supreme Court pick Amy Coney Barrett.

Last year, *openDemocracy* uncovered how a dozen U.S. Christian Right fundamentalist groups, many with links to the Trump administration and to Steve Bannon, had poured at least \$50 million of dark money into Europe over a decade.

The latest dataset from *openDemocracy* is the most comprehensive yet, following examination of thousands of pages of financial records since 2007 from 28 U.S. groups. According to this data, these organizations spent more money in Europe (almost \$90 million)



Shutterstock photo by Lukasz Pawel Szczepanski

A massive protest was held Oct. 30 in Warsaw, Poland, against the country’s anti-abortion law. Trump’s personal lawyer Jay Sekulow runs a group that submitted arguments in favor of the abortion restrictions.

Right-wing Christian organizations (dark money totals)	
Billy Graham Evangelistic Association	\$96,132,520
Fellowship Foundation	\$44,664,261
InterVarsity Christian Fellowship	\$28,876,998
Alliance Defending Freedom	\$21,338,551
Focus on the Family	\$17,921,428
American Center for Law and Justice	\$17,787,393
Human Life International	\$12,242,737
Federalist Society	\$5,425,566
Cato Institute	\$5,059,411
Bethany Christian Services	\$4,408,609

Source: *opendemocracy.net*

than anywhere else outside the U.S., followed by Africa and Asia.

This European spending has been led mainly by two groups that focus their fights on the courts. One of these is the ACLJ organization headed by Sekulow, who, along with Rudy Giuliani, has coordinated the legal challenges brought by Trump over the results of the U.S. election.

Another half-dozen ACLJ lawyers were also part of Trump’s defense team in impeachment proceedings earlier this year.

The ACLJ’s European branch (the ECLJ) has intervened in two cases to defend Italy’s position against gay marriage. It has also intervened in at least seven cases involving Poland, including at the European Court of Human Rights, to defend that country’s conservative policies including against divorce and abortion.

In October, Poland’s constitutional court voted to restrict access to abortion in cases of fatal fetal anomalies. Sekulow’s group submitted arguments in favor of the new restrictions.

A second U.S. conservative legal group involved in such cases is Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF). Based in a small town in Arizona, it is also closely linked to the Trump administration through former staffers and frequent meetings.

ADF went to the U.S. Supreme Court last year to defend nonprofit donor secrecy. The case is still ongoing. Its few known funders include the family foundations of Trump’s Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, which are also major Republican party donors.

Financial secrecy

The full extent of U.S. Religious Right funding for global activities is hidden, given that many Christian conservative groups are registered as church organizations that do not have to disclose any of this information.

For some groups in *openDemocracy*’s data — notably the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association — U.S. financial filings are only available for a small number of years. This group re-registered as an association of churches in 2015.

Sekulow has come under scrutiny over his financial practices since the 1980s, when he was a tax lawyer specialized in creating tax shelters for Atlanta’s elite.

Earlier this year, the Associated Press revealed that Sekulow’s groups, including the ACLJ, had paid more than \$65 million in charitable funds to Sekulow, his family members and corporations they own, fueling a well-documented opulent lifestyle including expensive cars and high-end real estate.

In 2018 alone, the ACLJ spent \$6 million on legal services provided by the CLA Group, a for-profit law firm in which Sekulow holds a 50 percent stake. This is the same firm that is understood to be contracted by Trump. It only has a mailbox address, however, and Sekulow is believed to do his work for Trump from the ACLJ’s offices.

American Institute of Philanthropy president Daniel Borochoff has said: “Regulators should investigate whether or not charitable resources, such as office, labor, equipment, etc., are being wrongly utilized to benefit Sekulow’s for-profit law firm.”

The U.S. website Charity Navigator, which rates nonprofits, has attached an orange “moderate concern” label to its entry for the ACLJ because of “atypical financial reporting issues.” These include millions of dollars that the ACLJ has paid over the years to Sekulow’s for-profit legal firm.

Global outcry

Several of these U.S. Christian Right groups have also been linked to COVID-19 misinformation. The anti-abortion Population Research Institute (PRI), for example, is led by an ultraconservative activist

who claims COVID-19 was man-made in a Chinese lab, and who also sits on an anti-China lobby group with Steve Bannon.

Another group, Family Watch International (FWI), has been training African politicians, religious and civil society leaders for years to oppose comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and LGBTQ rights across the African continent.

UNAIDS Executive Director Winnie Byanyima, from Uganda, told *openDemocracy* that “CSE is an integral part of the right to education and to health. It is not optional. It is not negotiable.”

South African gender rights group The Other Foundation also said that it has witnessed how U.S. Religious Right funding has been used to “stir a backlash to the pursuits for freedom, dignity and equality of LGBTIQ people.”

It said, “the government has a duty to frown upon and act against any agenda that undermines its country’s constitution,” which in South Africa forbids discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Alejandra Cárdenas, director of global legal strategies at the Center for Reproductive Rights, said *openDemocracy*’s findings “prove a manipulation we’ve been seeing for years by the U.S. Christian Right in Latin America and Africa, meant to break the social fabric and human rights protections that popular movements fought for.”

The EPF’s Neil Datta said: “As Europeans, we cannot sit back and watch what’s happening in the United States with distance, thinking that the erosion of democratic norms and human rights cannot happen here. The same U.S. Christian groups pushing for this in the United States are now spending millions in Europe trying to achieve the same over here.”

Croatian MP Bojan Glavasevic, a member of EPF’s executive committee, said *openDemocracy*’s revelations show “that action needs to be taken by member states to ensure full protection of EU citizens against predatory organizations. This isn’t a question of ideology. This is a question of security, the health of our citizens and transparency.”

“It’s time for the world to wake up. Do not stumble into our mistakes and do not think it could not happen where you live,” said Quinn McKew, director of Article 19 (an NGO focused on freedom of expression and information), about the rising influence of dark money in U.S. politics. She attributed this to “a long-standing process to erode accountability and transparency.”

“It was inevitable that these individuals, powering these organizations, would seek to internationalize their influence,” she added. Action is now needed to increase “financial transparency, shining light on these groups’ sources of funding.”

“It is the duty of governments to ensure that women’s rights are not eroded through misinformation and ideologically motivated campaigns,” said Melissa Upreti, member of the U.N. working group on tackling discrimination against women. “There are real-life and often dangerous consequences for women as a result.”

Neither the ACLJ, PRI or FWI responded to requests for comment.

ADF did not answer *openDemocracy*’s questions about its spending, but said that it is “among the largest and most effective legal advocacy organizations dedicated to protecting the religious freedom and free speech rights of all Americans.”

HEADS UP

Arise, Take Up Thy Bed, and Walk

Mark, 2:9
Motel boozy-woozy you
hardly hear the jangle or
the robot voice: time /
temperature / the brassy command,
Have a Nice Day—and the old routine
revs up again: the kegel-
squeezing rush to the john /
bleary wash / dry / comb /
pants / shirt / socks /
and then,
bag crammed, jammed, and zipped,
you tug and curse, and with a piggy grunt,
roll the mattress up
and squeeze it under your arm,
scrunch through the door,
down the hall, past
the frog-eyed desk clerk,
and out to the parking lot, where
you huff and puff and stuff it all
into the trunk.
Sweating behind the wheel
as the car burps into life,
you think:
but He made it sound so easy
in the book.



© Philip Appleman. From the book Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie.
Editor's note: After years of publishing Philip Appleman's poems in Freethought Today, this is the final installment of the Heads Up column. Sadly, Philip died earlier this year. (See the November issue for his memorial.) Philip's books of poetry are available from ffrf.org/shop.

Every day brings a new puzzle for Katya Maes

Name: Katya Maes.
Where and when I was born: Moscow, Russia, in 1969.
Family: Married with three kids and a dog.
Education: B.A. in history from University of California-Berkeley.
Occupation: Enigmatologist/cru-civerbalist or, in other words, I put together crossword puzzles.
How I got where am today: Mostly by flying by the seat of my pants. Maybe that wasn't always the best way, but it sure made the journey fun!
Where I'm headed: Into the complete unknown. I like to wake up not knowing what the day will bring. Schedules, though necessary for managing life in 2020, depress me.
Person in history I admire and why: I definitely don't have any heroes. Heroes are supposed to be perfect, and I don't think there are any perfect people out there. But I do admire people who are able to look at the world from different perspectives. Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky come to mind.



Katya Maes

A quotation I like: "Sometimes you have to forgo what's popular for what's important." Mo'Nique said this in her 2010 Oscar acceptance speech for her role in "Precious."
Things I like: Family traditions, our cabin, traveling, reading. I love old books.
Things I smite: When people rely on prayers rather than science, and when Christians claim that they, somehow, have a monopoly on morals.
My doubts about religion started:

Never had any doubts! I was born an atheist.
Before I die: I would like to see what my kids end up doing with their lives. I know it will be something super interesting and satisfying.
Ways I promote freethought: By being vocal about my views, by volunteering for FFRF. Oh, and I do own a number of T-shirts with applicable messages!

MEET A MEMBER

FFRF welcomes Life members

FFRF thanks and welcomes our new Beyond After-Life member, two After-Life members and 12 new Lifetime members.
Steve Overman is our newest Beyond After-Life member, which is a membership category of \$10,000.
Tom Westlake Buschman and Jay Jones are the two most recent After-Life members, which is a membership category of \$5,000.

The newest \$1,000 Lifetime members are: Leonard Bernstein, Ryan Detzel, Paul Efron, Claudia English, Russell Frum, Diane Jarman, Kathleen D. Lebeck, William Nagel, Peggy Plumb, Peter Sobel, Gloria Wilson and Sheila Wolfe.
States represented are: Arizona, California, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Washington and Wisconsin.

Caption contest winner!



Congratulations to Bill Rasmussen of Illinois for winning the November caption contest. Bill wins an FFRF T-shirt.
The winning entry is: **Looks like he's doing a real "bang-up" job.**
Runners-up are: **With this new TV antenna, I can watch "Freethought Matters" this Sunday!** — Stan Deutsch
Y'know, honey, when you promised me a cross-country trip . . . — Alfie Kohn
So, what are you giving up for Dent? — Greg Luciano
There were several entries for "Jesus saves on car insurance" or similar.

Freethought Matters

2020/2021 season resumes

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

Watch our show every Sunday!

Photo by Chris Line

Visit FFRF's YouTube Channel to watch the shows.

Freethought Matters TV talk show airs in:

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

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

IN THE NEWS

Church defiance to restrictions is growing

The number of people who want their church congregation to defy potential state orders to close due to the coronavirus has grown since March, according to surveys done by Paul A. Djupe of Denison University and Ryan P. Burge of Eastern Illinois University.

In March, 56 percent of those surveyed did not want their congregation to defy such an order, but that shrunk to 39 percent by October. Support for the government asking congregations to stop meeting in person slipped from 66 percent in March to 56 percent in October.

The data was clear across political party lines as the defiance is growing in all categories of political leanings. Even strong Democrats are urging a more defiant stance, though the growth among Republicans is much greater.

Poland delays abortion ban as protests continue

Poland's right-wing government has delayed implementation of a controversial court ruling that would outlaw almost all abortion after it prompted massive protests in more than 500 cities around the country.

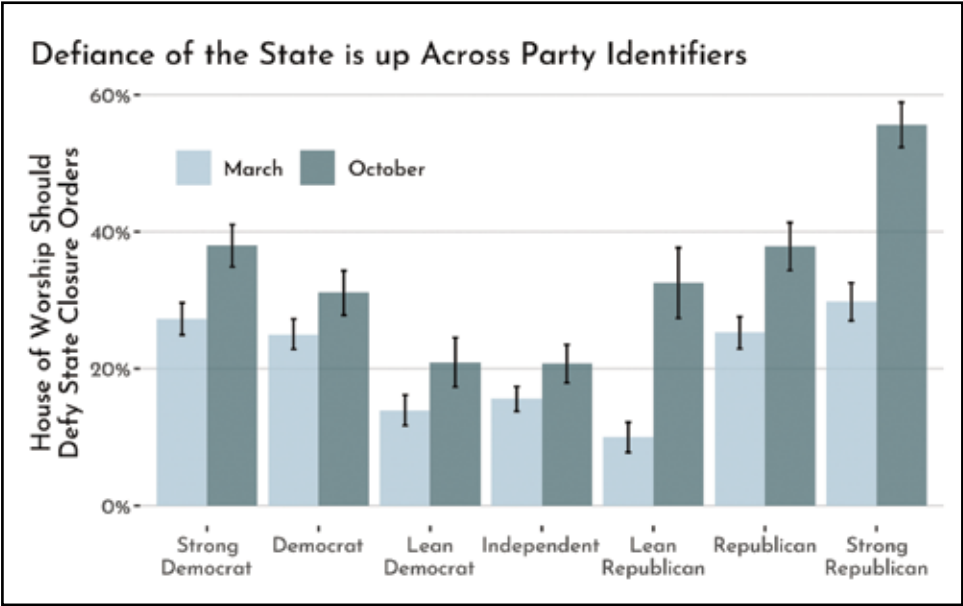
The decision by the country's constitutional tribunal promised to further tighten Poland's abortion laws, which were already some of the strictest in Europe. Abortion is allowed in Poland only if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, if the woman's life is in danger, or if the fetus is affected by severe congenital defects. The Oct. 22 court decision eliminated the last of these three conditions from the list.

The overwhelming majority of legal abortions — 1,074 of 1,100 performed last year — resulted from fetal abnormalities.

Trump sparks a rise of Patriot churches

Patriot churches are part of “an evolving network of nondenominational start-up congregations that say they want to take the country back for God,” according to an article in the Washington Post on Oct. 26.

Patriot churches belong to what reli-



Sources: March and October 2020 Surveys; @PaulDjupe

gion experts describe as a loosely organized Christian Nationalist movement that has flourished under President Trump.

Sociologist Samuel Perry, co-author of the new book *Taking America Back for God*, says “no other factor better predicts a vote for Trump than adherence to a Christian Nationalist ideology,” the Post reports.

In just four years, Trump has helped reshape the landscape of American Christianity by elevating Christians once considered fringe, which has, as the Post reports, “made for some strange bedfellows, but the common thread among them is a sense of being under siege and a belief that America has been and should remain a Christian nation.”

Beheaded French teacher to be awarded honor

France will posthumously honor Samuel Paty, a teacher who was beheaded on Oct. 16, with the Legion d’Honneur, the nation’s highest honor.

Paty, 47, was killed and beheaded in the Paris suburb of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine as he walked home from school.

His brutal murder took place after he was targeted by an attacker who prosecutors say sought to punish him for showing cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, considered blasphemous by the teachings of Islam, to pupils during a civics class teaching freedom of expression.

Americans supportive of LGBTQ rights

According to the Public Religion Research Institute, the vast majority of Americans (70 percent) favor allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry legally. Majorities of Democrats (80 percent) and independents (76 percent), as well as half of Republicans (50 percent), support same-sex marriage.

White evangelical Protestants stand out as the only major religious group in which a majority opposes allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry

(only 34 percent favor). Majorities in every other major religious group support marriage equality, including 90 percent of religiously unaffiliated Americans.

Americans overwhelmingly favor (83 percent) laws that would protect gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people against discrimination in jobs, public accommodations and housing.

John Paul II blamed for McCarrick elevation

Pope John Paul II disregarded warnings in elevating Theodore E. McCarrick to the position of cardinal, a Vatican inquiry found.

The Vatican report found that John Paul II had rejected explicit warnings about sexual abuse by McCarrick, now a disgraced former cardinal, “choosing to believe the American prelate’s denials and misleading accounts by bishops as he elevated him to the highest ranks of the church hierarchy,” the New York Times reports.

As Washington’s archbishop, McCarrick was one of the most powerful leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. But he became the highest-ranking American official to be removed for sexual abuse when the pope kicked him out of the priesthood in 2019.

Survey: Prejudice higher for religion in the UK

Religious prejudice is the “final frontier” for diversity, a place where individuals are willing to express negative attitudes, according to “How We Get Along,” a diversity study in England and Wales in 2020.

The report says, “We are a society largely comfortable with the idea of a close relative marrying someone from a different ethnic or national background. We are, however, less comfortable with a close relative marrying someone from a different religious background.

“This particularly applies to marrying a Muslim, the group most often targeted by negative attitudes from other faith groups, but also the group most likely to have negative attitudes towards other faith groups.”

Around three-quarters of those surveyed are comfortable with a close relative marrying an Asian or Black person (70 percent and 74 percent), but less than half (44 percent) are comfortable with the idea of a close relative marrying a Muslim.

W.Va. can’t use consumer law to sue church

The West Virginia Supreme Court said the state’s attorney general cannot use a consumer protection law to sue a Roman Catholic diocese over sexual abuse allegations.

The court, on Nov. 23, issued its opinion in response to a lawsuit the state filed last year accusing the Wheeling-Charleston diocese of failing to publicly disclose the employment of sexual abusers in its schools and camps.

The absence of such disclosure amounted to a violation of a consumer protection law, Attorney General Patrick Morrisey argued.

The narrow legal question concerned whether using the 2015 Consumer Credit and Protection Act to sue the diocese violates the separation of church and state. A lower court judge had stayed his order to dismiss Morrisey’s lawsuit pending the Supreme Court’s review.

In its majority opinion, the high court said the law does not apply to services provided by a religious institution.

Among the lawsuit’s allegations was that the diocese failed to conduct more than 20 background checks at a Catholic elementary school in Charleston in 2007 and 2008.

It also accused the diocese of covering up a 2006 report on sexual abuse allegations involving a teacher in Kanawha County.

Buffalo diocese sued over sex abuse cover-up

The state of New York on Nov. 23 sued the Roman Catholic Diocese of Buffalo and two former church leaders, alleging they “covered up allegations of sexual misconduct and misused charitable assets by supporting predatory priests who were allowed to retire or go on leave,” according to the Associated Press.

New York’s Attorney General Letitia James filed the suit against the diocese, former Bishop Richard Malone and former Auxiliary Bishop Edward Grosz.

It comes after a two-year investigation that found church leaders sheltered accused priests by letting them step away from ministry rather than follow mandated procedures that would subject them to possible removal from the priesthood.

Appeals court: Texas can kick PP out of Medicaid

A federal appeals court is allowing Texas to kick Planned Parenthood out of its Medicaid program.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on Nov. 23 sided with state officials who removed Planned Parenthood from the program for low-income people, according to a report in the Texas Tribune. The state cited a highly edited video created by anti-abortion advocates in 2015 that purported to show PP officials selling fetal tissue.

A lower court had blocked the state from removing Planned Parenthood in 2017. But the 5th Circuit judges ruled that legal precedent disqualifies Medicaid beneficiaries from taking issue with how states determine which providers are qualified to be in the program.

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Correction

On Page 17 of the November issue, on the chart of “Percentage of Americans willing to vote for a presidential candidate if they were . . .,” the line above the red bar should have said: “Over the age of 70.”

ELECTION NEWS

Five states elect first Muslim lawmakers

Five states (Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Oklahoma and Wisconsin) elected their first Muslim lawmakers to their state legislatures. All five candidates ran as Democrats.

More than 100 Muslim candidates ran for elected office this year, including U.S. Reps. Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib. The Democratic representatives, who are the first Muslim women to serve in Congress, were re-elected to their second terms.

The firsts for those five states are:

- Iman Jodeh to Colorado House of Representatives.
- Madinah Wilson-Anton to the Delaware House of Representatives.
- Christopher Benjamin to Florida’s House of Representatives.
- Mauree Turner to Oklahoma’s Legislature.
- Samba Baldeh to Wisconsin state Assembly.

Other Muslims elected include:

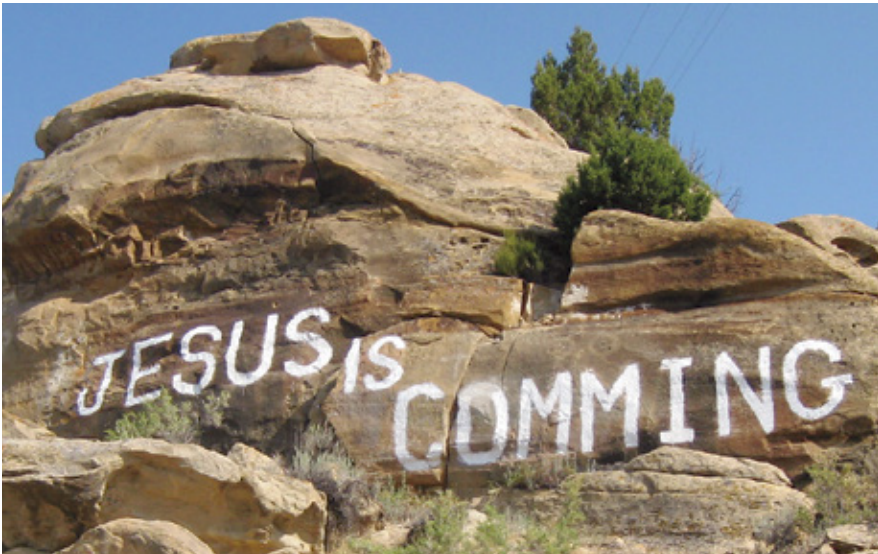
- Zohran Kwame Mamdani to the New York state Assembly.
- Charles Fall, who since 2019 served as the only Muslim member of the New York state Assembly, was re-elected.
- Abraham Aiyash to Michigan’s House of Representatives.
- Omar Fateh to Minnesota state Senate.

Sex ed referendum passes in Washington

Washington school districts will be required to teach sexual health education to most students under a referendum approved Nov. 3.

Nearly 60 percent favored Referendum

And he’s gonna teach spelling!



FFRF Lifetime Member Jeff Baysinger of Colorado sent us this photo of a sandstone bluff east of Rangely, Colo. as he returned to Denver following a trip to Dinosaur National Monument. “I thought FFRF may be amused at the misspelling,” Baysinger wrote.

90, a measure that marks the first time nationwide that a sex education mandate has appeared on a statewide ballot.

By approving the measure, voters signaled that a 2020 law should go into effect making lessons mandatory starting in kindergarten, though families could choose to opt out.

Mississippi approves new ‘IGWT’ flag design

Mississippi on Nov. 3 voted in a new design for its state flag, which now includes the phrase “In God We Trust” below a magnolia blossom.

Mississippi’s flag previously was the last one in the country to feature an image of the Confederate battle flag. The new de-

sign was selected by a state commission in September. The state Legislature will now have to enact into law the new design as Mississippi’s official state flag during its next regular session in 2021.

Nevada recognizes gay marriage in constitution

Nevada voters overturned a 2002 ban on same-sex marriage, making the state the first to recognize gay couples’ right to marry in its constitution.

Question 2 on Nevada ballots asked voters whether they support an amendment recognizing marriage “as between couples regardless of gender,” with 62 percent voting in favor of the question. It also included the

caveat that religious organizations and clergypersons would have the right to refuse to solemnize a marriage.

Louisiana amends state constitution on abortion

Louisiana voters decided to amend the state’s constitution by adding language that states the document offers no protections for a right to abortion or the funding of abortion.

The question before voters on Nov. 3 was whether to explicitly state that “a right to abortion and the funding of abortion shall not be found in the Louisiana Constitution.”

The vote will have no immediate effect, although if the Supreme Court were to overturn the *Roe v. Wade* decision on abortion rights, the amendment would ensure against any court ruling that language in the Louisiana Constitution grants abortion rights.

Pew: 28% of registered voters are secular

The share of voters who identify as religiously unaffiliated has nearly doubled since 2008, from 15 percent to 28 percent, according to the Pew Research Center.

Christians account for the majority of registered voters in the United States (64 percent), but that is down from 79 percent in 2008.

Around eight-in-ten Republican registered voters (79 percent) are Christians, compared with about half (52 percent) of Democratic voters.


Democratic voters are much more likely than GOP voters to identify as religiously unaffiliated (38 percent vs. 15 percent).

Taking a day off at FFRF to work at the polls

By Chris Line

My alarm clock was set to go off at 5 a.m., but I woke up at 4:30. I ate a big breakfast, put on my mask, and headed out into the darkness. My polling place was only a couple blocks away, but during my short walk I couldn’t help but think about the importance of what I was about to do.

I have to admit that, embarrassingly, in 2008, the first year I was eligible to vote in the presidential election, I neglected my civic duty and I didn’t vote. I was in my first year of college and like most 18-year-olds, I didn’t understand the importance of elections and participating in our democracy. Since then, I have never missed an oppor-



Chris Line

tunity to be part of this important democratic process, one which many people have fought very hard to secure.

This year, due to FFRF’s generosity, I was able to go one step further and not only cast my vote, but to serve as a poll worker. Because FFRF generously offered a paid day off to those who worked the polls, it was an opportunity for me to earn some extra income while helping to ensure that our democracy runs smoothly. [FFRF’s bookkeeper Eleanor McEntee also spent the day as a poll worker.]

As a constitutional attorney, I felt well qualified to help ensure that every eligible voter was able to cast a ballot. I spent my entire 8-hour shift working at the polling table for same-day registrants. My job was to help everyone who registered at the polls verify their identify and cast a ballot. Unfortunately, because of the draconian voter ID laws in Wisconsin, I had to turn away some otherwise eligible voters. Luckily, those situations were rare and I was able to ensure the majority of voters who registered at my polling station were able to vote. The ward I worked at generated the most voters of any ward in Madison.

As we all know, the election took place during a pandemic, and I knew that it wouldn’t be without risk. But I am young and healthy and if not me, then who? Al-

most 60 percent of poll workers are over the age of 60. And although COVID-19 can affect people of any age, older people are particularly vulnerable, with about 80 percent of COVID-19-related deaths in the United States occurring in adults 65 and older. It was important for those like myself to step up and provide some relief. I felt safe during my shift, but afterwards I received an email informing me I may have been exposed to the virus. I took a COVID test a few days later and I tested negative.

As much as I love my job defending the separation of church and state and advocating on behalf of freethinkers, I am glad that I chose to take a break for a day in order to support our democracy by working at the polls, and I am grateful to FFRF for providing me with that opportunity.

Election

Continued from page 1

it believes that any legal defense of the First Amendment — of the cherished American principle of the separation of state and church — must necessarily mean reforming our federal courts. We face a hostile federal judiciary, more dedicated to Christian Nationalism than the rule of law.

Regardless of the Supreme Court, we’re gaining in the court of public opinion — reflected in the increas-

ingly secular U.S. demographics. But we can’t let theocratic court-packing jeopardize civil rights, the Establishment Clause and our nation’s future. Even with the election results, it is clear that for reason, humanistic values and our secular Constitution to prevail, our nation will need to unpack, correct and rebalance the judiciary.

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How secular candidates fared in the 2020 election



Members of the Congressional Freethought Caucus			
D-CA (District 2)	Rep. Jared Huffman	2013 - Current	Humanist
D-CA (District 9)	Rep. Jerry McNerney	2007 - Current	Catholic
D-CA (District 19)	Rep. Zoe Lofgren	1995 - Current	Lutheran
D-GA (District 4)	Rep. Hank Johnson	2007 - Current	Buddhist
D-IL (District 6)	Rep. Sean Casten	2019 - Current	N/A
D-MD (District 8)	Rep. Jamie Raskin	2017 - Current	Jewish & “humanist”
D-MI (District 5)	Rep. Dan Kildee	2013 - Current	Catholic
D-MI (District 13)	Rep. Rashida Tlaib	2019 - Current	Muslim
D-PA (District 7)	Rep. Susan Wild	2019 - Current	Jewish
D-TN (District 9)	Rep. Steve Cohen	2007 - Current	Jewish
D-WA (District 7)	Rep. Pramila Jayapal	2017 - Current	N/A
D-WI (District 2)	Rep. Mark Pocan	2013 - Current	N/A
D-D.C.	Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton	1991 - Current	N/A
U.S House			
D-AZ (District 4)	Delina DiSanto	Challenger	“Recovering Catholic”
D-CO (District 5)	Jillian Freeland	Challenger	Humanist
D-NY (District 1)	Dr. Nancy Goroff	Challenger	Secular Jew
D-OH (District 16)	Aaron Godfrey	Challenger	Atheist
D-TX (District 26)	Carol Iannuzzi	Challenger	Humanist
D-WA (District 10)	State Rep. Beth Doglio	Challenger	Agnostic
D-WI (District 8)	State Rep. Amanda Stuck	Challenger	Unitarian Universalist
State Legislatures			
AR House District 68	Lisa Hassell	Challenger	Agnostic
AR House District 74	June Anteski	Challenger	Spiritual but not religious
AZ House District 8	Sharon Girard	Challenger	Agnostic
AZ House District 18	Rep. Jennifer Jermaine	2019 - Current	Religiously unaffiliated
AZ House District 23	Eric Kurland	Challenger	“Not religious”
AZ House District 26	Melody Hernandez	Challenger	Agnostic
AZ House District 26	Rep. Athena Salman	2017 - Current	Atheist
AZ Senate District 9	Sen. Victoria Steele	2019 - Current	Spiritual but not religious
AZ Senate District 20	Douglas Ervin	Challenger	Humanistic Judaism
AZ Senate District 26	Sen. Juan Mendez	2017 - Current	Atheist
CA House District 20	Rep. Bill Quirk	2012 - Current	“Scientist”
CO House District 11	Karen McCormick	Challenger	Spiritual but not religious
CO House District 13	Judy Amabile	Challenger	Atheist
CO House District 16	Stephanie Vigil	Challenger	Atheist
CO House District 23	Rep. Chris Kennedy	2017 - Current	Agnostic
CO House District 27	Rep. Brianna Titone	2019 - Current	Spiritual but not religious
CO House District 52	Rep. Cathy Kipp	2019 - Current	“Does not belong to any organized religion”
CO House District 56	Maria-Vittoria “Giugi” Carminati	Challenger	Secular Humanist
CO House District 57	Colin Wilhelm	Challenger	Spiritual but not religious
CT House District 88	Rep. Joshua Elliott	2017 - Current	“Agnostic atheist”
CT House District 96	Rep. Roland J. Lemar	2017 - Current	“Agnostic & humanist”
FL House District 47	Rep. Anna Eskamani	2018 - Current	Secular
FL House District 49	Rep. Carlos Guillermo Smith	2017 - Current	Agnostic
FL House District 69	Jennifer Webb	2018 - Current	Spiritual but not religious
FL House District 73	David Fairey	Challenger	Atheist
FL House District 113	Rep. Michael Grieco	2018 - Current	“Not religious”
GA House District 24	Natalie Bucsko	Challenger	Non-theist Pagan
GA House District 44	Connie Di Cicco	Challenger	“Not religious”
HI Senate District 9	Stanley Chang	2016 - Current	“No religion”
IA House District 22	Shawna Anderson	Challenger	Humanist
IL House District 90	Seth Wiggins	Challenger	“Does not practice religion”
IN House District 11	Keegan Damron	Challenger	“Not religious”
IN House District 20	Tim Gust	Challenger	Agnostic
IN House District 41	Greg Woods	Challenger	Atheist
IN House District 49	Amanda Qualls	Challenger	Agnostic
MD House District 20	Rep. David Moon	2015 - Current	Nonreligious
MA House Bristol 2	Rep. Jim Hawkins	2018 - Current	Religiously unaffiliated
MA House Essex 18	Rep. Tram Nguyen	2019 - Current	Spiritual but not religious
MA Senate Second Suffolk & Middlesex Dist.	Sen. William Brownsberger	2012 - Current	Nontheist

NE Senate District 8 (Unicameral)	Sen. Megan Hunt	2019 - Current	Atheist
NV House District 10	Rep. Rochelle Nguyen	2018 - Current	Not religious
NV House District 15	Rep. Howard Watts III	2018 - Current	Agnostic
NV Senate District 18	Liz Becker	Challenger	Secular Humanist
NH House Belknap 2	Natalie Taylor	Challenger	Atheist
NH House Belknap 6	Don House	Challenger	“Spiritual humanist”
NH House Cheshire 5	Rep. John Bordenet	2014 - Current	Unitarian Universalist
NH House Grafton 8	Rep. Suzanne Smith	2008 - Current	Religiously unaffiliated
NH House Grafton 8	Rep. Joyce Weston	2018 - Current	Atheist
NH House Grafton 9	Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban	Challenger	“No religious affiliation”
NH House Hillsborough 12	Rep. Amanda Bouldin	2014 - Current	Atheist
NH House Hillsborough 12	Rep. Andrew Bouldin	2018 - Current	Atheist
NH House Hillsborough 17	Rep. Tim Smith	2012 - Current	Atheist
NH House Hillsborough 20	Nikki Fordey	Challenger	Agnostic
NH House Hillsborough 21	Rep. Wendy Thomas	2018 - Current	Spiritual but not religious
NH House Hillsborough 27	Rep. Kat McGhee	2018 - Current	“Does not practice religion”
NH House Hillsborough 28	Rep. Jan Schmidt	2016 - Current	Nontheist
NH House Hillsborough 30	Rep. Sherry Dutzy	2018 - Current	Nonbeliever, atheist, & humanist
NH House Hillsborough 37	Brett Gagnon	Challenger	No religious affiliation
NH House Hillsborough 42	Rep. Jacqueline Chretien	2018 - Current	Humanist
NH House Rockingham 3	Michael DiTommaso	Challenger	Secular Humanist
NH House Rockingham 4	Ben Geiger	Challenger	Atheist
NH House Rockingham 4	Matthew Krohn	Challenger	agnostic Unitarian Universalist
NH House Strafford 16	Rep. Sherry Frost	2016 - Current	Atheist
NH House Strafford 25	Rep. Amanda Gourgue	2016 - Current	Religiously unaffiliated
NH House Sullivan 5	Liza Draper	Challenger	Nonreligious
NJ House District 16	Rep. Andrew Zwicker	2016 - Current	Atheist
NM Senate District 37	William Peter Soules	2013 - Current	Spiritual but not religious
NY House District 3	Steven Polgar	Challenger	Atheist
NY House District 74	Rep. Harvey Epstein	2018 - Current	Agnostic
NY House District 105	Laurette Giardino	Challenger	Humanist
NY House District 130	Christopher S. Comegys	Challenger	Spiritual but not religious
NC Senate District 49	Julie Mayfield	Challenger	Agnostic
NC Senate District 50	Victoria Fox	Challenger	Agnostic
ND House District 40	Kalyn Dewitt	Challenger	Humanist
OH House District 76	Garrett Westhoven	Challenger	Not religious
OR House District 5	Rep. Pam Marsh	2017 - Current	Religiously unaffiliated
OR House District 11	Rep. Marty Wilde	2019 - Current	Unitarian Universalist
OR House District 14	Rep. Julie Fahey	2017 - Current	Religiously unaffiliated
OR House District 47	Rep. Diego Hernandez	2016 - Current	Openly agnostic
PA House District 182	Rep. Brian Sims	2013 - Current	Openly nonreligious & very outspoken
TX House District 11	Alec Johnson	Challenger	Deist
TX House District 20	Jessica Tiedt	Challenger	“Omnistic”
TX House District 33	Andy Rose	Challenger	Agnostic
TX House District 135	Rep. Jon Rosenthal	2019 - Current	Agnostic
TX House District 150	Michael Walsh	Challenger	Atheist
UT House District 38	Ashlee Matthews	Challenger	Agnostic
VT House Addison-1	Rep. Robin Scheu	2017 - Current	Humanist
VT House Bennington-4	Kathleen James	2019 - Current	Spiritual but not religious
VT House Caledonia 3	Brice Simon	Challenger	Secular Humanist
VT House Chittenden 6-6	Barbara Rachelson	2013 - Current	Nonreligious Jew
VT House Windsor 4-2 Dist.	Rep. Rebecca White	2019 - Current	Atheist
VT House Washington-4 Dist.	Rep. Warren Kitzmiller	2001 - Current	Humanist
VT Senate Windsor Dist.	Sen. Dick McCormack	2007 - Current	“Governs with reason”
WA House District 21a	Rep. Strom Peterson	2015 - Current	Agnostic
WA House District 31b	Thomas Clark	Challenger	Agnostic
WA Senate District 9	Jenn Goulet	Challenger	Secular Humanist
WI House District 76	Francesca Hong	Challenger	Humanist
WI House District 89	Karl Jaeger	Challenger	Nonreligious
WI Senate District 16	Rep. Melissa Sargent	2013 - Current	Agnostic
WI Senate District 18	Aaron Wojciechowski	Challenger	Nonreligious
WI Senate District 26	Kelda Roys	Challenger	Atheist & Secular Humanist
Total on the ballots:	14 State Senators	85 State Reps	8 Congress
Total (results so far):	10 State Senators	41 State Rep	1 Congress

Special thanks to the Center for Freethought Equality and “The Friendly Atheist” Hemant Mehta

Alito’s speech shows need for court reform

Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito to consummated the unholy union between the federal judiciary and the Federalist Society in a one-sided speech on Nov. 12.

“It’s shocking to hear a supposedly impartial Supreme Court justice speak in such a hyperpartisan, reckless and entitled manner,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, “Alito didn’t sound like a principled jurist, but a Christian Nationalist trading talking points with Sean Hannity on Fox News.”



Samuel Alito

It’s no secret that Donald Trump let the ultraconservative Federalist Society select nominees: “We’re going to have great judges, conservative, all picked by the Federalist Society.” Nearly all of President Trump’s 200-plus judicial nominees, including his three Supreme Court justices, have had ties to the conservative group.

Alito’s speech was the screed of an embittered, embattled minority fighting against the overwhelming majority. It highlights a central problem this country will face moving forward. Most Americans are not so conservative. Alito’s views are increasingly unpopular. He espouses the views of the conservative white, male, Christian Nationalist demographic. A shrinking demographic; a dwindling minority. But Alito is part of a 6–3 majority on the Supreme Court. He’s an unpopular minority but empowered for life on a packed court.

This speech was an admission, a confession. Alito admitted that we are a nation governed by minority rule and confessed that, although their grasp on legislative power is slipping, Alito and his five buddies will solidify that minority



ty rule with their judicial power.

Alito’s words have alarming implications for FFRF’s work. FFRF has been racing to fight against a radical attempt to redefine religious freedom, and Alito made it clear that this push is only going to get stronger. In Alito’s fantasy, religious liberty requires that laws exempt Christians who disagree with the law, that Christians be allowed to discriminate as they see fit, and that Christian views on same-sex marriage and reproductive rights must be forced on the entire legal system.

Shockingly, he did this while condemning public policy based on science and reason, even in the middle of a lethal pandemic: “Just as the COVID restrictions have highlighted the movement toward rule by experts, litigation

about those restrictions has pointed up emerging trends in the assessment of individual rights. This is especially evident with respect to religious liberty. It pains me to say this, but in certain quarters, religious liberty is fast becoming a disfavored right.”

Alito talked about a famous religious liberty case, a Supreme Court decision called *Employment Division v. Smith* authored by Justice Antonin Scalia, which Alito claimed “cut back sharply on the protection provided by the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment.” He added, “Congress was quick to respond. It passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), to ensure broad protection for religious liberty.” Just eight days before this speech, Alito participated in oral arguments in *Fulton v. Philadelphia*, a case in which a

Alito’s words have alarming implications for FFRF’s work.

Catholic organization is asking Alito and the other justices to overturn the very decision Alito just maligned.

Alito also opined on the *Masterpiece Cakeshop* case, which was heavily cited by the parties in *Fulton*, leaving no doubt which way he will vote. He could not have been more clear: “For many today, religious liberty is not a cherished freedom. It’s often just an excuse for bigotry, and it can’t be tolerated, even when there is no evidence that anybody has been harmed.”

“I’ll wager a year of my nonprofit salary that he finds for the Catholic organization and against the city,” says FFRF’s Director of Strategic Response Andrew Seidel.

Alito inappropriately discussed cases that have already been ruled on an interim basis, but that are continuing to work their way to the high court, such as pandemic “restrictions,” specifically discussing cases in Nevada and California, and snidely making his loathing for such orders clear: “Take a quick look at the Constitution. You will see the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment, which protects religious liberty, you will not find a craps clause or a blackjack clause or a slot machine clause.” He also spoke of a pharmacy case out of Washington, in which a business meant to provide care for people refused a prescription. In Alito’s biased retelling, this was about “so-called morning-after pills, which destroy an embryo after fertilization.”

FFRF has no faith that Alito will do the right thing in these instances precisely because his speech smacked of an entitled man above the law, not a man of the law.

Alito certainly did not mean for his speech to be a clarion call for court reform, something he condemned in his speech. But it is. If America fails to heed this call, we’ll pay a dear price. It’s time to expand the Supreme Court and the federal judiciary.

Biden administration must prioritize judiciary

The Freedom From Religion Foundation and dozens of other national organizations are advising the incoming administration on how to effectively prioritize judicial appointments, in the wake of court packing by the Trump administration.

Senate Republicans have confirmed over 200 extremist judges to lifetime seats on the federal courts at a breakneck pace that will damage our laws and civil liberties for decades to come, warns their joint statement, signed by the American Constitution Society, League of Conservation Voters, National Education Association and People For the American Way, to name just a few other signatories.

“At the time of their confirmations, Trump’s nominees already had records posing a severe threat to the rights of women, workers, people of color, LGBTQ communities, immigrants, consumers, and the environment,” states the letter. “Now on the bench, their rulings have more than justified our concerns. Trump-appointed justices have already rolled back hard-won rights and legal protections so critical to everyday Americans, while expanding the power of those at the top.”

That is why the Biden administration must immediately and explicitly prioritize judicial appointments, the statement urges, and advises on how to repair the damage.

• First, the statement counsels, the

Biden administration must nominate demographically and experientially diverse judges with a demonstrated commitment to equal justice. It should prioritize candidates who are demographically diverse, including from communities of color, women, LGBTQ communities, people with disabilities, and other underrepresented groups; and who come from a range of professional backgrounds, including public interest lawyers, civil rights lawyers, labor lawyers, plaintiffs’ lawyers and public defenders.

• Second, the Biden White House needs to prevent procedural roadblocks from delaying expeditious confirmation of outstanding jurists. The administration must be ready not only to nominate but to fight for nominees even in the face of opposition. So, rules put in place by Senate Republicans to fast-track the confirmation of Trump-appointed judges must remain in place for the Biden administration. This means no supermajority vote for Supreme Court nominees; two hours of post-cloture debate for district court nominees; hearings with multiple nominees; and no blue slip veto for appellate nominees, at a minimum.

• Third, the incoming executive team must support legislation to create new judgeships. Historically, Congress routinely expanded the number of district and circuit court judgeships to keep up with population and increased case-

loads. Since 1990, however, the number of judges has not significantly increased. The Judicial Conference, the policymaking body for the federal court headed by Chief Justice John Roberts, has recommended creating new judgeships to help address the significant increase in cases.

• Last, but far from the least, the statement recommends, the staff at the White House and Justice Department after Inauguration Day need to be committed to prioritizing judicial selections. The administration must consist of qualified and sufficient staff, committed to expeditiously vetting and marshaling nominees through Senate confirmation. Moreover, staff involved in judicial selection should have experience and deep connections within civil rights and public interest communities and be committed to, and representative of, a judiciary made up of judges from a wide range of legal, demographic and experiential backgrounds.

With the steps outlined in the statement, the Biden administration will, hopefully, be able to undo the judicial wrongs that the Trump administration has committed in the past four years.

FFRF debuts 2021 wall calendar celebrating freethought history.

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Vatican abuse report is too little, too late

By Ryan D. Jayne

It's becoming a story as old as the church itself: A young sexual assault survivor courageously reports his or her abuser, only to be shunned and abused again, while the abuser escapes punishment and rises in the ranks of the church. Decades later, we learn far too late that there were scores of victims. These stories are so common with the Catholic Church that they most often make up the lion's share of the Black Collar Crime section in Freethought Today. But it's still hard to keep track of them all.

The Vatican recently released a 445-page report detailing myriad allegations of sexual assault against former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, to date the highest-ranking Catholic priest to be defrocked for assaulting children

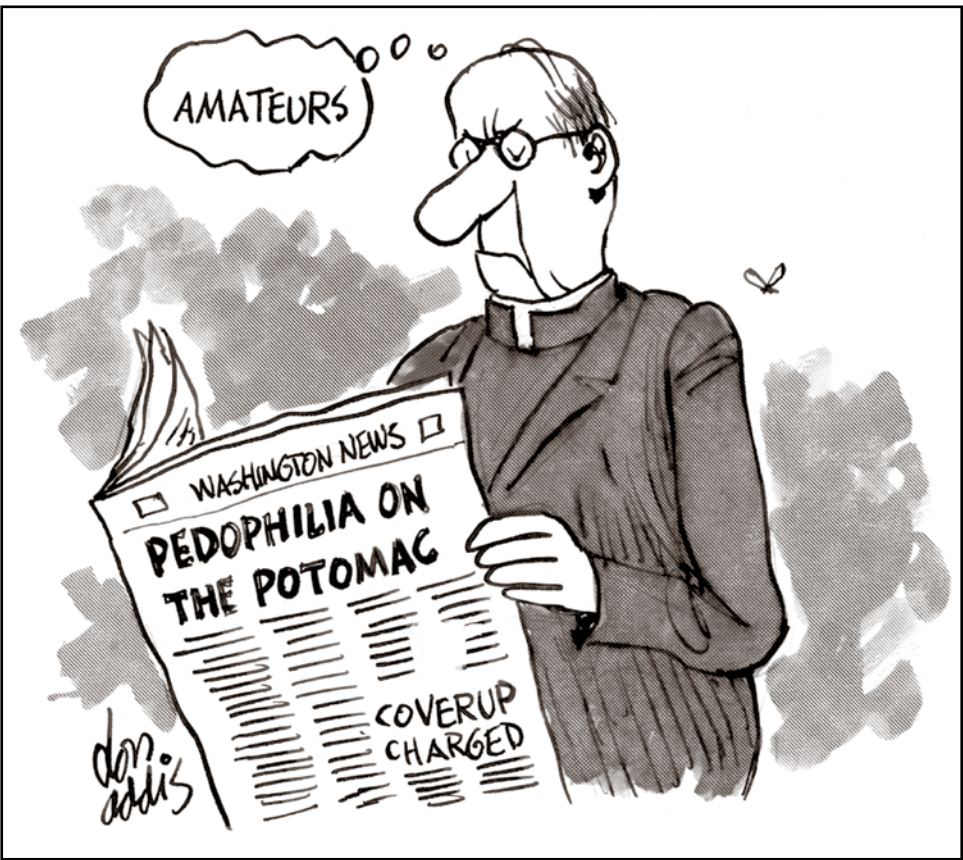


Photo by Chris Line
Ryan Jayne

and young adults. The report reveals a rampant pattern of abuse, dating back at least to the 1980s, during which church officials not only ignored allegations, but actively helped protect McCarrick and even joined in the abuse themselves.

The report comes more than two decades too late for the survivors. At this point, few could be surprised by yet another such report. Few were; the report has barely made a splash. We've been desensitized and are inured to the fact that the Catholic Church has regularly covered up sexual abuse. That alone should convince Roman Catholics around the world that it is finally time to quit the Catholic Church. Even with a popular and supposedly reformist pope, the church has not changed and will not change.

According to the report, Pope John Paul II knew of credible allegations against McCarrick at least by 1999. Rather than investigating or referring the case to local authorities, he decided to promote McCarrick, in large part because they were friends. After the McCarrick report came out, most news outlets rightly condemned the then-pope's actions (and Pope Benedict's inaction when he succeeded John Paul II), but then pivoted to the conclusion that Pope Francis, the current pontiff, was unaware of the allegations until 2017, at which point he took decisive



This cartoon is from *Cartoons for the Irreverent: Celebrating the Wit of Don Addis*, available through ffrf.org/shop. This unique collection, published by FFRF, celebrates the wit and irreverence of Don Addis, a legendary editorial cartoonist and atheist. (Paperback, 153 pages, \$15 post paid)

action to remove McCarrick.

Even if you believe that, the claim that the Vatican only heard allegations against McCarrick in 1999 is deeply misleading. The report actually details individuals who alerted the church to McCarrick's crimes far earlier. One survivor reported McCarrick to a church official as early as 1985, when a future priest informed Monsignor Anthony Gambino, a senior official at the Diocese of Metuchen (New Jersey), that McCarrick had assaulted him at an overnight beach house trip.

"McCarrick dictated the sleeping arrangements" such that there were insufficient beds, so McCarrick and the young man he was interested in would have to share, says the report. Then, "when McCarrick noticed that [the young man] was wearing pajamas over his underwear, he was displeased" and encouraged him to remove his pajamas. Next, McCarrick pressured the young man into exchanging back rubs and, when they were under the covers, "wrapped his body around [him]." The

young man "described himself as being 'ensnared' and could feel that McCarrick was sexually aroused," at which point he rebuked the advance, which "pissed off" McCarrick, and then ran out of the room.

Rape and sexual assault are crimes that should be reported to the police.

That apparently never happens in the Catholic hierarchy. At most, the crimes are reported to someone higher up in the chain. But even that didn't happen here. Instead,

Gambino admonished the young man for speaking up and arranged for a counseling session with another priest, Edward Zogby. After taking his confession, the report says Zogby "wanted to give [the survivor] a hug, and then tried to kiss him and grabbed his crotch." The next year, McCarrick was promoted to Archbishop of Newark.

And this horrifying story is just 10 pages of the 445-page report.

In 2019, the Vatican finally conducted an "administrative penal process" and concluded that McCarrick was culpable,

Even with a popular and supposedly reformist pope, the church has not changed and will not change.

although the pedophile priest's only punishment is house arrest. It appears McCarrick, now 90, will never serve a day in prison. If not for a whistleblower in 2017, McCarrick's crimes likely never would have become public, and he would have maintained his position as a senior cardinal, and his reputation as a "pastoral, intelligent and zealous bishop," despite his career of rampant abuse.

The Catholic Church silencing victims and covering up sexual abuse is nothing new. A 2018 grand jury report in Pennsylvania found that two bishops covered up "the sexual abuse of hundreds of children by more than 50 priests and other religious leaders over a 40-year period." An independent inquiry report, released on the same day as the McCarrick report found that "child sexual abuse was swept under the carpet" in the United Kingdom, as the church prioritized its reputation above all else. No one could rationally deny that the church, for decades, if not centuries, has facilitated and perpetuated sexual abuse at an almost unimaginable scale.

It would be naive in the extreme to think that the church's assembly line of abuse and cover-up will not continue. Outlets that praised Pope Francis for publishing the McCarrick report note that he did so despite fierce internal resistance in the upper echelons of the church. Even presuming that the current pope sincerely wants to fix the church's systemic promotion of abuse, the institution does not want to be fixed.

Powerful church officials will undoubtedly conceal reports of sexual misconduct from Pope Francis in the future — they almost certainly already have — to protect the reputations and bank accounts of the church, their friends, and themselves.

And there is little to no discussion on the one thing that would most work to fix the problem: justice. Even "Pope Fluffy" has not instructed the Church hierarchy and its adherents to report these crimes — and they are crimes — to the police or law enforcement. Defrocking a 90-year-old serial abuser, and sentencing him to house arrest, is far too little, far too late.

The church is not going to change anytime soon, and anyone deluding themselves into thinking otherwise is complicit in widespread, institutionally protected sexual abuse.

Ryan Jayne is a staff attorney for FFRF.

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THEY SAID WHAT?

For many today, religious liberty is not a cherished freedom. It's often just an excuse for bigotry, and it can't be tolerated. . . . You can't say that marriage is a union between one man and one woman. Until very recently that's what the vast majority of Americans thought. Now it's considered bigotry. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, in

a speech given to the Federalist Society, where he claimed that liberals pose a growing threat to religious liberty and free speech. *The New York Times*, 11-13-20

The Church cannot support the acceptance of objectively immoral relationships. Bishop Thomas Tobin of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence following Pope Francis' support of same-sex unions. *New York Post*, 10-23-20

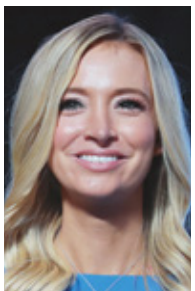
We have a vaccine. The name is Jesus Christ. John Hagee, the senior pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, in a sermon. *YouTube*, 11-15-20

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.

GOD IS IN CONTROL. Kayleigh McEnany, President Trump's press secretary, early in the evening on Election Day. *Twitter*, 11-4-20



Kayleigh McEnany

God has already sealed the results of this election. He has sealed it in Heaven. Former U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann, speaking during an election special airing on televangelist Kenneth Copeland's Victory Channel. *The Friendly Atheist*, 11-4-20

FFRF VICTORIES

By Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey

FFRF puts a stop to Missouri coach’s prayers

A Missouri school district has ended its football coaching staff’s practice of praying with the student-athletes after FFRF got involved.

Joey Ballard, head coach for Jasper High School’s boys football team, regularly led team prayer, a concerned parent of a player had informed FFRF. During these prayers, student players gathered around Ballard on bended knee, with additional coaching staff surrounding the students while Ballard delivered a Christian prayer and then led the students in reciting the Lord’s Prayer.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Jasper R-5 School District Superintendent Christina Hess, reminding the district that it is illegal for public school athletic coaches to lead their teams in prayer.

FFRF’s constitutional advice has been heeded.

“In response to your letter dated Oct. 6, 2020, we write to advise you about the actions the district,” the district’s legal counsel stated. “Employees of the district were reminded of the district’s board policy regarding religion at school and were also instructed not to lead students in, or promote, prayer. This matter has therefore been resolved.”

No more meeting prayers at Alabama school

Employees of Shelby County School District in Columbiana, Ala., will no longer be subjected to prayer at staff meetings.

A district employee informed FFRF that during a recent mandatory professional development meeting, one teacher began the meeting by delivering a prayer. The complainant reported that the teacher told staff he would make a motion when he began and ended his prayer so that anyone who was offended could mute him.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district to ensure that it no longer includes prayer as part of any employee meeting or events. The reported teacher has been counseled that this was not permitted and the district has initiated additional refresher training for its principals on this subject.

School board prayers ended in Pelham, Ala.

School board prayer in Pelham City Schools in Alabama has been stopped.

A district community member reported that the Pelham City Schools Board of Education opened each of its meetings with prayer. FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to School Board President Rick Rhoades, informing the district of the impermissibility of such prayer at school board meetings.

FFRF received a response from the school board’s attorney. “Please be advised that in a good faith effort to accommodate the various points of view, interests and legal considerations that are implicated by the practice of opening public meetings with invocation, the Board of Education has elected,



Joey Ballard, head coach for Jasper High School’s boys football team, had regularly led his team in prayer until FFRF intervened.

effective as of its meetings on Oct. 26, 2020, not to include an invocation on its meeting agendas or set aside time for that purpose as part of its official proceedings.”

School church question now more charitable

A homework question promoting religious donations has been removed from the curriculum in Paradise Valley Unified School District in Phoenix.

A concerned district parent alerted FFRF that their student’s personal finance class included an assignment that asked students to evaluate certain personal finance choices and rate them as being either good or bad. The assignment included the statement: “I give \$2 at church every week.” The assignment reportedly considered the only correct answer to this statement to be “good,” and that if a student were to rate it as “bad” they would not receive any points for the answer.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent of Schools Jesse Welsh, pointing out that the suggestion that giving money to a church every week, without any additional context, does not promote a “good money habit” but instead encourages students to partake in a common religious practice. Many students, FFRF reminded the district, do not attend church, and suggesting that it would be wise for them to give their money to a church is an advancement and endorsement of religion on the district’s behalf.

The district has changed the question in the assignment to state “charity” instead of “church.”

U.S. Rep. Eshoo stops prayer requests

U.S. Rep. Anna Eshoo has stopped including prayer requests in constituent emails in Palo Alto, Calif.

A constituent from California’s 18th congressional district reported that her office regularly sent out prayer requests. One communication said, “Let’s pray for each other, all the firefighters, and all those who have had to evacuate their families.” For a few weeks, her office was also sending a weekly newsletter that also ended with a prayer request.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Eshoo’s office noting that, while the California wildfire crisis is putting immense pressure on leaders to respond to and comfort constituents, as a U.S. representative she represents a diverse population including atheists, agnostics

and other nonbelievers. FFRF encouraged Eshoo to stand up for the precious constitutional principle of separation between state and church by refraining from sending prayer requests through official government channels.

FFRF was informed by the complainant that Rep. Eshoo’s more recent weekly newsletters did not include a call for prayer by constituents.

Georgia coach will no longer lead team prayer

Administration in the Fannin County School System in Blue Ridge, Ga., has committed to meeting with all district coaches to address First Amendment obligations.

FFRF was informed that the Fannin High School football coach was regularly leading his team in prayer. FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Michael Gwatney informing the district that it is illegal for public school athletic coaches to lead their teams in prayer as it constitutes a government endorsement of religion.

The district’s attorney sent FFRF a letter of response with assurances that Gwatney “has met with the high school principal and a plan is in progress to meet with all coaches to discuss issues related to the First Amendment, including the Establishment and Free Exercise Clause.”

FFRF ends constitutional violations in Kansas

Pratt USD 382 in Kansas has remedied multiple constitutional violations in its district following a letter of complaint from FFRF.

A concerned school staff member reported several concerning incidents of religious promotion at Liberty Middle School. The school’s vice principal had been using his position to promote and endorse his personal religious beliefs to students. The complainant reported that on “See You at the Pole Day,” the vice principal announced the event over the intercom, personally invited students to the event and then led students in prayer. He also apparently included religious messages and bible quotes in his official district communications. Recently during morning announcements, he said, “we need to remember to give all the glory to God, whether others agree with it or not, and I don’t care if I offend anyone by saying that.” The vice principal also reportedly played Christian music during class and made religious statements to students,

including telling a group of students that “God is sad when you don’t tuck in your shirts. You are disrespecting God.”

The complainant additionally reported that the school’s principal has directed staff members to arrange for the school to participate in “Operation Christmas Child,” which is a charity project sponsored by Samaritan’s Purse (led by Franklin Graham), which describes the program as a “shoebox ministry.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote a letter of complaint to Superintendent Tony Helfrich requesting that the district investigate these serious violations and take immediate action.

Helfrich informed FFRF in a letter of response that the district has investigated and addressed the issues and will see that “the actions in questions are discontinued.” The district has also discontinued its partnership with “Operation Christmas Child.”

Kentucky football team ends religious promotion

Lewis County Schools in Vanceburg, Ky., has addressed concerns regarding promotion of a biblical message by a district coach.

FFRF was made aware that Lewis County High School had chosen an explicitly religious theme, directly from the bible, for its football theme this year. According to an official press release on the school’s Facebook page, “Our team motto this year comes from the story of Nehemiah and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its wall.” The story, which comes from the Old Testament, uses “the sword and the shovel” as metaphorical imagery. The school had adopted this imagery for the boys’ football team logo and promotional poster included a student wearing the football team’s jersey while holding a sword and shovel.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Jamie Weddington to ensure that the district no longer impermissibly promotes religion through its football program.

Weddington informed FFRF in an email response that “the post has been removed and your concerns have been addressed.”

Email signatures now standardized at college

A religious message has been removed from a staff email signature at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Mich.

FFRF was informed that one staff member had a bible verse in the signature block for their official university email address. The signature included: “Faith does not make things easy, it makes them possible.”

FFRF’s then-Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian wrote to Grand Valley State University President Philomena Mantella urging the university to see to the email signature being changed so as not to create the impression of university endorsement of Christianity over all other religions or religion over nonreligion.

FFRF was informed by the university that administration has standardized email signatures for all staff free from any mention of religion.

Black skeptics uplift through social justice

This article was first published in Religion News Service on Oct. 15 and is reprinted with permission.

By Alejandra Molina

Darrin Johnson would like nothing better than to rid the Black community of organized religion. The way Johnson sees it, Black people “don’t need outside beliefs or higher powers.”

“We have power,” Johnson said. “We are powerful entities. We just need to use that power.”

As an organizer with his local Black Lives Matter chapter, Johnson, an atheist, has sometimes felt a bit uneasy meeting in churches and working alongside pastors, who, like him, are calling for Black liberation.

For Johnson, Christianity has been the source of homophobia that shunned LGBTQ members in his family and has been used to “protect people that don’t deserve to be protected.”

But, he doesn’t let that deter him. “My atheism is not a thing of ‘I know better than you and so I’m better than you.’ I love my people be they religious or not,” said Johnson, of Moreno Valley in Riverside County. “I’d rather work with a Black religious person working for Black liberation, than a Black atheist who’s in it for social climbing.”

Black nonbelievers like Johnson have for years been working to redefine what it means to be atheist, a word too often linked to white spaces mostly concerned with creationism and the separation of church and state. Many Black nonbelievers identify as humanists and challenge Christianity for being linked to racism, capitalism and sexism.

That can make Johnson and other Black nonbelievers feel out of place. About 80 percent of Black Americans identify as Christian, according to the Pew Research Center, and the church has played a key role in Black life since the Civil War.

Johnson learned of a Black atheist community about eight years ago as a graduate journalism student at Cal State Northridge. He was a self-described “baby atheist” back then, and for a documentary project, sought to



Photo by Alejandra Molina
Darrin Johnson, a member of Black Skeptics Los Angeles, says his atheism is linked to social justice activism.

interview other Black secular people. That’s how he found Black Skeptics Los Angeles.

The first time he visited, Johnson recalls approaching the South Los Angeles home of a group member and hearing voices of people having a good time.

“You would think you were going to a church function,” he said.

“They were welcoming and willing to answer my questions. They gave me their time,” Johnson said. “It made me start to realize there are different kinds of atheism.”

Sikivu Hutchinson, an atheist activist and author, founded Black Skeptics Los Angeles in 2010.

The group started by simply offering space for Black and secular people of color to meet and later expanded to resources for nonbelievers. It now offers scholarships for graduating seniors and aid for secular people of color — especially during COVID-19 — as an alternative to religious and faith-based institutions. Funding has come from secular organizations like the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

“What’s been a constant is our focus on social and gender justice,” Hutchinson said.

Hutchinson said Black atheists have made strides over the last six or seven years in regard to the overall perspective of the secular movement. People of color appear in more humanist and secular publications and are present in conferences that are sponsored by white-dominated organizations.

And, she said, there’s now greater recognition of the specific struggles that Black, Latino and other secular people of color experience around accessing equitable housing and education and public spaces without being profiled by policies such as stop and frisk.

“There’s no longer the presumption

that the white atheist movement can just float by without considering their white supremacy, their white privilege and entitlement,” Hutchinson said.

“We’ve made it known.”

Hutchinson’s recently released book *Humanists in the Hood: Unapologetically Black, Feminist and Heretical* highlights the group’s mentorship of middle and high-school-age women of color, helping them think critically about feminism, rape culture and sexual harassment.

“You just do not see those kind of lived experiences being integrated into secular humanist discourse and representation,” Hutchinson said.

Hutchinson, who grew up in a secular household, recognizes she’s somewhat of an outlier in the Black Skeptics group. Her parents were freethinkers who protested during the Black Power and civil rights movement in the ’60s. Her atheism, she said, is a reflection of her upbringing.

That’s not true for many group members.

“Most folks are coming from a religious family upbringing,” she said. “There’s a lot more trauma with rejecting organized religions, those networks and the dogma and ideology.”

Liz Ross, a secular humanist who grew up Catholic, agrees.

Born and raised in the Caribbean, Ross attended a Catholic boarding school and was in the church choir.

“We had a sense of community,” she said.

Things changed after college when she moved to the Bay Area, where she met a UC-Berkeley professor and students who exposed her to issues surrounding social justice, white supremacy, patriarchy and LGBTQ issues.

“My movement into becoming a secular humanist was trying to reconcile the conflict between the claim that

there was an omnipotent, omniscient God while at the same time the reality showed there was senseless suffering,” said Ross, who is a member of Black Skeptics Los Angeles.

Ross is also bisexual, and with the church deeming homosexuality a sin, that was something she had to work through.

“I realized that the church itself was not a space that helped me empower myself, particularly as a Black woman and someone in the LGBTQ community,” she added.

To Ross, the mainstream image of atheism and whiteness can alienate people of color who need “people who look like them to feel a sense of community,” she said.

“This is why we try to be vocal through social justice work,” Ross added. “What resonates with the community is ‘How am I going to deal with police violence? How am I going to deal with racism on the job? How am I going to deal with sexual assault?’”

Johnson believes that creating a secular space can be a boon for Black nonbelievers, who often feel they don’t fit in among atheists.

A 2019 study from Pew Research found that among Americans who identify as atheist, 81 percent are white, while only 3 percent are Black.

“I’d like to uplift us and show that you can be Black and atheist because there’s still this idea that being atheist means that you are not Black or that you are trying to work your way into the good graces of white folks,” Johnson said. “My goal overall is just for us to realize how much power we have and how we do matter.”

Alejandra Molina is a national reporter covering Latinos and religion on the West Coast. She is based in Los Angeles.



Photo by Alejandra Molina
Sikivu Hutchinson, an atheist activist and author, founded Black Skeptics Los Angeles in 2010.

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2020 Students of Color essay contest winners

In the November issue, the Freedom From Religion Foundation published the essays of the top five winners (including ties) of the 2020 David Hudak Memorial Students of Color Essay Competition for College Students.

Because of space limitations, not all of the top 10 (and honorable mention) winners could be published at one time. As promised, the sixth- through 10th-place winners' essays are published in this issue. We also have published portions of the honorable mention essays. To read those full essays,



go to freethoughttoday.com. FFRF has paid out a record total of \$28,150 in award money for this contest this year.

College students of color were asked to write a personal persuasive essay about “Living and thriving without religion.” FFRF

received 342 entries for this contest.

FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994, grad students since 2010, one geared explicitly for students of color since 2016 and a fifth contest for law students since 2019. All contests are open to any students attending a school in North America meeting the age/grade level eligibility, except the students of color contest, which is reserved for students of color to offer special support for a minority within a minority.

SIXTH PLACE (tie)

How I became a freethinking, independent woman

FFRF awarded Mahum \$1,000.

By Mahum Haque

I have grown up in an extremely religious Muslim family. I believe that this is a core reason why I am not religious. I have all too many times seen religion being used as a way to make excuses for unjust behavior. Bombings, murders and wars have all been accepted and encouraged under the premise of religion and the idea that this is God’s plan. The “words of God” in holy books are so easily misconstrued into justification for these horrible acts.

This is why not being religious benefits me. I am able to step back from the cloud of religion that blinds everyone and look at the facts. And, most often, the facts are that one group of people has opposed the words of a supposed “book of God,” and for this reason they must be killed. Who is to say what is truly the word of God? Who is to say that there even is a God?

Religion is a pathway to justify and execute horrible tragedies.

As a girl living in a Muslim family, I am told that the Quran says that my job is to

serve my husband and my family. The sexism in our religion has become cultural. Even today, mothers-in-law and husbands want wives who can cook and clean. A woman’s education only serves as a way to make her family look better because education equates to money. However, after marriage, she is expected to only cook and clean — her one true Islamic purpose. After hearing this my entire life, I cannot imagine supporting a religion that does not support me.

Muslim countries say that this idea that I have — of women’s freedom and individual development — is an idea that has been imposed upon me by America’s “Western thinking.” I do not believe this is true. Western thinking is not why I believe in values that disagree with Islamic values. I hold these ideas because I am separated from the cloud of religion that captivates everyone’s mind. With the ability to think with a clear head, I have become my own woman with morals who values all lives, regardless of their religion.

The secular community must find ways to offer its support. Oftentimes, when a girl like me renounces her religion to her entire family and community, she is



Mahum Haque

marked as an outcast and even kicked out of her home. We have no support or freedom to share our beliefs. The Asian-American community, especially South Asian communities, are extremely protective of their image. If someone does something to tarnish their name, they can be killed or kicked out of the family. I have heard so many stories of young Muslims who are

gay but cannot come out to their family because they would be disowned. It is against Islamic beliefs to be homosexual. One of the great embarrassments of the family is having a gay son or daughter. How can we tell our families that we do not believe in our religion’s principles if they are willing to disown or even kill us over the supposed words of God?

For this reason, I think that organizations should help young South Asian teens like me, who have no way of leaving their religion. We need a community of like-minded people that will be able to support us. For many people who have been kicked out, getting a good education, food, and even a place to stay, can be a struggle. The secular community needs a better forum from which we can discuss all of these issues.

Mahum, 19, attends the University of Iowa, majoring in finance and on the pre-pharmacy track. “I am involved in the Women in STEM Ambassadors organization on campus and the Pakistani Student Alliance,” Mahum writes. “I will also work as a peer mentor to other business students on campus and join the executive board of the Business Student Ambassadors.”

SIXTH PLACE (tie)

Confessions of a former Christian

FFRF awarded Tina \$1,000.

By Tina Wen

I grew up in the small, unassuming suburbs of Pittsford, N.Y., with a population that was 95 percent Caucasian. My parents and I attended church on Sunday mornings in an attempt to fit in with our community.

As I got older, Sunday morning sermons evolved into month-long summer camps. I diligently listened to what my camp leaders said, bowing my head before each meal and thanking God for his blessings. The church’s teachings of compassion and acceptance made me feel as though I belonged to a community that allowed me to fit in with my peers and be seen as normal.

In eighth grade, I had a best friend who came out as gay. What I saw in the next few weeks horrified me. The love and acceptance that I had seen for years disappeared, with adults and children alike shunning my friend. I felt confusion, shock and betrayal. How could the church turn on something that my friend could not control, something given to him by the God they claimed to believe in?

When I chose to stand up for my best friend, the people I placed my trust in



Tina Wen

also ostracized me. I lost friends and my youth group refused to speak to me, forcing me to choose between standing up for my friend’s sexuality and obeying the word of God.

The blatant disregard for compassion and humanity I saw changed my perspective on religion. I could no longer have blind obedience and unquestionable faith in a God that would allow such awful treatment of another human. I could no longer follow a bible that taught kindness to one’s

neighbors on the same pages where it justified hate and bigotry.

Looking back on my time as a Christian, I realized I initially joined the church for its community. In my town, I felt alienated as a person of color and conformed to the beliefs of the people surrounding me.

I believe if there was a community for the nonreligious, I would have gladly joined such a group. If the secular community were to raise awareness for issues they believed in, providing help to the community, I would have found a community built around supporting causes I believed in. From summer camps to teach children about leadership, science, and technology, to helping the town alleviate poverty by providing aid for the homeless, the secular community can provide resources to better engage people of color.

Since the moment I turned 13, I have chosen to live my life without religion. I chose to reject religion because I believe all people deserve the right to be respected, regardless of what the bible says. I believe firmly that one’s morality should be decided by their experiences in life and

their own critical thinking, not the mandates of an ancient text that holds little relevance to our world today. Without religion, I am more compassionate toward those around me, instead of blindly rejecting their perspectives simply because they believe in different gods.

Today, I make choices based on how they benefit the people around me, instead of hoping to please a higher power. I am the person I am today because of how my friends and family have educated me, not because God created me to be who I am. I am free to donate to causes dear to my heart, such as organizations that support women’s bodily autonomy and the LGBTQ+ community. Rejecting religion freed me to make my own choices and take responsibility for them, instead of attributing the results to a higher power.

Tina, 18, is a freshman at Rice University, double majoring in computer science and economics. In high school, Tina was an intern at Microsoft, working on the Minecraft team. After college, Tina hopes to work on projects emphasizing the use of artificial intelligence and data visualization in solving everyday problems.

“The blatant disregard for compassion and humanity I saw changed my perspective on religion.”

SEVENTH PLACE

Taking control of my own chariot

FFRF awarded Praneel \$750.

By Praneel Bonthala

I grew up on a bronze chariot, watching Krishna and Arjuna rush into battle against the Kauravas. I gazed upon the ape warrior, Hanuman, as he pushed the Himalayas to Sri Lanka. I shuddered upon the mention of Bakasura, the insatiable demon that devoured the people of Ekachakra.

Even my name — in Sanskrit — means Lord Shiva.

The epics of Hinduism have been a cornerstone of my childhood. I consumed the legends of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, memorizing mantras and prayers. Spending parts of my youth living in Southern India, I was surrounded by devout Hindus, all expecting me to pour milk over Shiva’s linga (or light sandalwood) during Puja. And, so, it became difficult for me to detach myself from a religion my entire family was devoted to.

All my life, religion has been something told to me, but never explained. It has been something expected of me, but not something I was meant to understand. Religion nurtured me when I was a baby, alongside food and drink. It grew to loom over me every day of my life.



Praneel Bonthala

All I had, however, were stories of gods and warriors performing supernatural feats, accomplishments one would never believe. I had songs praising the raw power and beauty of these beings I would never lay eyes upon. I had texts like the Bhagavad Gita that told me how to live my life. I had a moral compass constructed out of scattered religious lessons and tales instead of my own humanity.

So, I made the decision to turn away from religion. It grew into a crutch for me,

preventing me from truly understanding what was happening around me. I grew tired of participating in rituals and pujas I didn’t understand. I couldn’t accept that the Goddess Saraswati was responsible for my success in school and that kneeling in front of Ganesha would bring me eternal prosperity. I felt that my existence didn’t belong to me — it belonged to supernatural beings that I would never even have the opportunity to meet.

Tearing myself away from something that had been an integral part of my life wasn’t easy. I was scared. I couldn’t muster the courage to tell my parents, so I continued to accompany them on their weekly temple excursions once we moved to California.

Nevertheless, I felt that I had more control over my own life. I grew to become more confident, finding myself more freely expressing my atheism. I finally began to dedicate myself to other pursuits: Science Olympiad, public speaking and tennis. Religion no longer governed what I chose to do. I didn’t spend hours reciting mantras or sitting in front of an idol. I began building my own understanding of

the world, not an idealistic one constructed by religion. I became more motivated in school — simply praying to a goddess every day wasn’t going to guarantee an “A” on the next exam. By detaching myself from religion, I grew closer to both myself and the world around me.

There is, however, an assumption that lies within the secular community. The assumption that every brown person must be Muslim or Hindu, or that every Latinx is a devout Catholic. To foster a

secular environment that welcomes people of color, it becomes necessary to crush these stereotypes and expectations — anyone can choose to express any religion, or lack of one, they wish.

Freedom of expression is something that should be encouraged and cherished by any community, not just the secular one. It’s a necessary tool to encourage people of color to become involved. Then maybe others like me can push their boundaries to discover even more about the world.

Praneel, 18, attends the University of California- Los Angeles, and hopes to pursue medical school and work in immunology or global health.

“By detaching myself from religion, I grew closer to both myself and the world around me.”

EIGHTH PLACE (tie)

Not the preacher’s daughter

FFRF awarded Aiden \$500.

By Aiden Gibbs

I never understood the implications of a preacher’s daughter until I became one. We were always a church family — well-dressed, hair curled and ready to praise on Sundays. I followed the rules — I didn’t show ankle, wore dresses and kept my hair long. I was, by church standards, good.

I only questioned God when I looked at girls. I wondered how everyone could be positive that God didn’t want me to love women. When my mother found out, she sat me down and explained that there was a reason God made Adam and Eve, not Eve and Eve. I cried in my room that night; I said my prayers. I prayed to be a boy, for God to make me right. I asked and asked, but never received a response.

The afflictions of a preacher’s daughter are to carry the hopes of the congregation.

In seventh grade, I dedicated a month to reading the bible, because I wanted to understand God and why we followed him. When I asked my mother about this, I was scorned for disbelieving. We got into fights about me not praying at the table. When she hit me, I’d ask her, “Is this what your God wants?” I was sent to my room. She always asked me what people would say if they found out that her daughter was gay and questioned God and how bad that would look for her.

In eighth grade, I gave up on Christianity. I couldn’t get myself to believe that God would allow me to hurt the way I did. If he had helped all those people in the bible, why wouldn’t he come to save me? I cut my hair and cut ties with the church. It became a falling out with my mother on Sundays. She would drag me by the collar to the car and make me sit in the front pews of the church. When I cried, the congregation didn’t help, and that’s when I knew God wasn’t in their hearts. He was



Aiden Gibbs

just at the tips of their tongues when they needed something to believe in.

When selecting high schools, I chose the most liberal ones I could find. I ended up at one dedicated to the creative and performing arts. Religious people were the minority and everyone seemed free in their own regards. My mother had taken a step

“If religion has taught me anything, it’s that I can thrive without it.”

back. I think she gave up when she came to the school and found out everyone was calling me Aiden, and not the name she had given me. I was writing about being gay and wearing pants and all the simple sins that I had to rethink into simple pleasures. I never knew what it meant to thrive until I looked at a girl without weight in my heart. I started going to parties and accepting worldly desires as my own free will. I was free to be me without God on the backburner, pressuring me to be a saint.

If religion has taught me anything, it’s that I can thrive without it. Thinking back on who I was at 12, I was so afraid of everything. I didn’t want to be seen for who I was, so I treated Christianity as my exclusive personality. The freethinking world is one where I don’t have to adopt a set of rules and guidelines outside of my own moral compass, and that is why I love it. I don’t have to be “the preacher’s daughter,” I get to have a name — it’s Aiden.

Aiden, 18, is a nonbinary student at Temple University with plans to major in psychology. Aiden works as a youth advocate for government programs involving opioids and mental health.

EIGHTH PLACE (tie)

Why must I suffer to be blessed?

FFRF awarded Aaliyah \$500.

By Aaliyah Philippe-Auguste

When you are a child, your parents are your heroes. You do not question most of what they say, because, why would you? They are your world. Their beliefs become yours. You love them. They love you. Until you start to think on your own. Once you get a little taste of what the world has to offer

and that it does not just revolve around you, you begin to question every little bit of information that was fed to you since you were born. Almost everyone experiences some version of this, ending with some not “taking the leap” of thinking for themselves.

I grew up in a Black, Haitian-American Baptist household where it is required to “pray away” every trial and tribulation that my family encounters. My father only uses religion to justify his discomfort toward anyone who is not

a straight cisgender man. My mother genuinely feels that she has a personal relationship with God, and she thanks him every day for a life that she hates. We went to church on most Sundays. I attended bible study because I was told it will help me become closer to God, and I was just too scared to find out what would happen if I simply just said “I don’t want to go.”

I never felt connected with Christian-



Aaliyah Philippe-Auguste

See Philippe-Auguste on page 14

Philippe-Auguste

Continued from page 13

ity or the idea of religion. When I was told that I must fear God — even though he is supposed to expel all the fear in my life — I knew at that moment there is something darker to this. Taking an AP world history course was my tipping point. I learned how Christianity was used to corrupt and destroy so many lives, including my ancestors’ lives. As I grew a stronger passion for science and medicine, the idea of having a sense of respect, awe and submission to a deity did not make sense to me. It never felt right to me. I never needed a god to be

good. Why must I repent for simply living and being human?

Coming to terms with who I am, as I accepted the fact that I am an atheist, has allowed me to be more comfortable with expressing who I am today, a bisexual black woman. Living with constant reminders that what I am is “wrong” and a sin took a toll on my mental health, especially when they are from the ones I love. My heroes. My mother refuses to recognize the decline in her mental health because she

“The idea of having a sense of respect, awe and submission to a deity did not make sense to me. It never felt right to me. I never needed a god to be good.”

believes God will fix it. To be constantly silenced in my own home has encouraged me to be a part of society that encourages our freedom to choose our own beliefs and identities. I reject religion because, at the end of the day, we are all human. But we must not forget that our society has been built on patriarchy, corruption, misogyny and racism. Many are too afraid to accept that God will not fix our world. Only we, humankind, can do it, and we must dig deeper into the internalized

phobias that we have against anything different from the “norm.”

As the Black Lives Matter movement continues to spread awareness and educate others, I have had the honor to speak and participate in protests and rallies. To provide a platform for those silenced is essential for change. No more praying. Those who do must ask themselves “Why must I suffer to be blessed?”

Aaliyah, 18, attends Towson University with plans to major in health education and promotion, with a minor in psychology on a pre-physician assistant track. “Being more confident with telling my story, I was a speaker at a Black LGBT Lives Matter rally, and I was asked to participate in more upcoming rallies,” Aaliyah writes.

NINTH PLACE

In us we trust

FFRF awarded Idalina \$400.

By Idalina Du

The ability to indoctrinate is the greatest superpower to capture a young child’s mind. It twists their thoughts, from one day playing in the sandbox to another where they ask the vast blue sky to grant them wishes that their parents couldn’t fulfill. It evolves from praying for a doll to asking what the meaning of life is. It evolves from praying for good grades to asking why people suffer. It evolves from praying for everyone to be safe to asking why they were condemned to live a life where they were sinners simply for existing.

I didn’t mean to be religious. When I was 7, my greatest wish was to fit into my predominately white and Christian suburb. When my peers flaunted their commitment to God and their Sunday routines, I couldn’t help but feel as though I didn’t belong. My skin was already painted a different color, a faint yellow in comparison to the cool-toned porcelains surrounding me, so I did everything in my power to blend into the background. Somehow, I found myself reading the bible and frequenting vaca-



Idalina Du

tion bible school where I sang jubilant melodies and promoted religion in the guise of arts and crafts. God was great. He saved us.

The message of the church has always been to “love thy neighbor as thyself,” the Gospel of Matthew regurgitated as a firm reminder that God loved everyone. Yet, that phrase was uttered in the same breath that they would ridicule those who didn’t live the lifestyle that they deemed

“Christian.” Children are not born to discriminate, and I wasn’t an exception to that. My curious hands stumbled upon one documentary after another, engulfed in information about the LGBTQ+ community, reproductive rights, and the division of race in the United States. No, to be gay was a crime in the eyes of the church, to have an abortion was synonymous with murder, and slavery was only a “necessary evil.” The cherry-picked fallacies of Leviticus, Exodus and Genesis were the justifications, but I never saw their targets as the “sinners” that they were perceived as.

“Freedom from religion brought me to a position where I found solace in the community around me.”

The love and acceptance within those communities were ignored by my church, including members who sat outside in the sun with their posters attached on yardsticks, screaming profanities at others in anticipation that this act would be righteous in the eyes of God. They said, “God forgives you for all of your sins,” and utilized the universal cure of prayer to coerce people to conform to some nonsensical standard.

My faith began to fade in middle school.

In the darkness of my bedroom, I questioned the validity of my church’s statements. The hypocrisy of their words only drew me further from scripture and, gradually, my conscience guided me. I saw a source of power within me, and I used that power to join with others in spreading awareness and education on rising social issues. Freedom from religion brought me to a position where I found solace in the community around me. My skin color, gender and sexual identity didn’t matter, and for the first time in my life, I saw the light beyond a predestined path.

I didn’t mean to be religious, but leaving religion has allowed me to pursue my character. There need not be a guide to which I must abide by to be content with my life. While I joined the church as a way to mask my insecurities in a place where I didn’t belong, I have left as someone unashamed of being me.

Idalina, 18, attends Rice University with plans to study biochemistry and statistics. Idalina is from San Antonio and is active in her community, including with Interact Club and the South Texas Veterans Health Care System.

TENTH PLACE

Parting from religion as Latinx woman

FFRF awarded Manuela \$300.

By Manuela Cano

As a Hispanic woman of color, my personal relationship with religion has been synonymous with sexism and shame. Like many others within the Latinx community, I was raised Catholic and was expected to adhere to the Catholic doctrine. It is no secret that this doctrine treats women differently than it treats men. Positions of authority within the church, notably members of the clergy, are exclusively male, women being barred from such roles. However, the disempowerment of women is not the extent of the church’s gender bias. A substantial amount of sexual shaming occurs on behalf of the Catholic Church, and it falls disproportionately on women.

At 11 years old, I recall an adult male family member warning me that sex before marriage would be a sin that I would regret for the rest of my life. Unprompted. I was 11. At that point in my life, I had hardly a concept of sexuality or intimacy of any kind. Yet, due to religion, I was forced to contemplate what it meant to be a sexual being from a young age.

These sorts of comments were never directed toward my older brother or male peers. Young girls within the Catholic Church are expected to live with the implication that the sin of lust falls on their shoulders alone.

As I hit puberty, I began to feel the natural emotions that the church deemed to be immoral. I felt a staggering level of guilt that I could never truly be free from, as I could never escape the perceived scrutiny of the vague, omnipotent god I was taught existed.

Additionally, although I am not personally a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I had many close friends confide in and come out to me. I cherished these friends of mine. Even from a relatively young age, I never felt as though there was anything “wrong” with them. Bigotry is taught, and my church certainly tried to teach it. Even catechism directed toward children dedicated a significant amount of time toward the “evils” of being gay. I could not stand to accept the teachings of a religion that antagonized communities simply because of their sexuality or gender identity.

As a practicing Catholic, I felt that my silent acquiescence to the church’s



Manuela Cano

treatment of queer individuals made me complicit in its discrimination. For these reasons, I lost all respect for the Catholic Church. I turned away from it entirely, and I reject religion to this day.

Despite my negative relationship with the Catholic Church, there is one element that is rarely present within secular spaces that I connected to within the walls of my family’s place of wor-

ship. Mass was one of the relatively few times in my life where I could sit among a crowd that looked like me and spoke Spanish like me. For Hispanic-Americans, and I would assume for many other communities of color, religious gatherings can act as one of few tangible connections to our culture that exist within the United States. For me, the loss of that cultural connection has been hard to reconcile.

I feel as though the secular community can better engage people of color by helping to foster cultural connections outside of the sphere of religion. It can be that much more challenging to leave a faith if it is closely tied to one’s community, as some may see their church as less of a religious entity and more a net of support. As secular individuals, we must be prepared to offer that support.

Manuela, 19, attends the University of South Carolina, majoring in integrated information technology. “I was born in Greenville, S.C., but am the proud daughter of two Colombian immigrants,” Manuela writes. “My mother and father raised my brother and me in a bilingual household, sparking a lifelong interest in international languages and literature.”

Students of color essay honorable mentions

FFRF awarded honorable mentions to nine students of color, with each receiving \$200 (and an additional \$100 for those who are members of a secular student club).

Here are excerpts of those essays and the students' bios. To read their essays in full, go to freethoughttoday.com.

By Jonathan Le

I have the freedom to decide whether what's been decided as sinful actually belongs under the label. The world changes and evolves and so do my values. Instead of being handed an absolute manual, I have the opportunity to examine everything I wish and decide on my own whether it is correct. I'd hate to live based on an autobiography already authored by someone else.

It is extremely important that we build and strengthen the nonreligious community to feel welcoming and interconnected so that people of color see absence of religion not as abandoning home but as an avenue to look further.

Jonathan, 18, attends the University of California, Irvine and is pursuing a degree in biochemistry and molecular biology. "My greatest passion has always been science, and biology in particular, so I even started my own science club," Jonathan writes.

By Grace Okafor

Although I don't discourage folks from using religion as a coping mechanism, it goes far beyond comfort and can greatly limit an individual's ability to understand the world beyond their preferred dogma.

Being without religion and looking at various spaces and cultures for spiritual guidance reaffirms my belief that I don't need God to motivate my behaviors; I need myself. This attitude helps me see the world more objectively and unbiased. Additionally, it allows me to incorporate my understanding of the world and other people's realities without condescension.

Grace, 21, attends the University of Maryland, College Park, and will be graduating in the spring with a degree in behavior and community health. "In the fall, I will be completing an independent student-led research study on how racial and gender roles impact help-seeking behaviors in female African-American college students," Grace writes.

By Aline Pham

I am a child of Vietnamese refugees. Like many immigrants, my parents sought the American Dream and were warmly greeted by the church upon arriving in the United States. Perhaps that explains why religious Asian-American populations converted to Christianity or retained their homeland traditions. So, even in public, supposedly secular, schools, I felt the dominating presence of Christianity.

Now, I recognize that intolerance evolves into hatred, forming a vicious cycle. Religion often becomes an obligation for children in religious households. But I refuse to worship a god out of obligation.

Sooner or later, I will come across yet another person who asks me, "You don't believe in God?" And to that, I will reply, "I believe in people."

Aline, 19, attends the University of California, Irvine, and is majoring in education sciences. "I aspire to become a teacher who engages her students in divergent thinking and problem-solving," Aline writes. "Last year, I attended FFRF's annual convention in Madison, where, for the first time, I truly felt heard and understood by fellow freethinkers."

By Anousha Peters

Somehow, religion has managed to monopolize the feelings of solidarity and fulfillment. Religion has convinced society that these feelings can only be achieved under the decrees of religion: that it is impossible to feel the same collective solidarity with a mass of people outside of a place of worship and that it is impossible to feel fulfilled in oneself without faith in some set of religious principles.

I rejected religion when I realized this was not at all true.

I find it far more inspiring to see hundreds of thousands of people rally with one another for material change, to better the world for one another, than to see hundreds of thousands of people prostrating themselves before the altar of a religious institution.

Anousha, 20, attends Columbia University, majoring in sociology. "I am a volunteer with Learn To Be tutoring and a volunteer with LEAH (Legal Empowerment & Advocacy Hub) for justice in my hometown, Gainesville, Fla.," Anousha writes.

By Je-Woo Im

Three years ago, my sister was diagnosed with lupus, an autoimmune disease where her immune system attacks her own organs. While her future was compromised and my parents were staying up all night for weeks researching what she could do to improve her situation, all that our relatives and friends could say was, "I'll pray for her."

I was half-forced to become the caretaker of my family. As I barely kept my nearly-falling-apart family together with little sleep and dwindling morale, my grandma continued to advise me to pray each night. This time, my frustration and anger over the impracticality of this advice was much more extreme, for God, if he existed, was surely not helping.

Je-Woo Im, 18, attends Northwestern University as part of the honors program in medical education. In high school, Je-Woo was on the crew team that won the national championship in 2019. Je-Woo also took part in multiple medical-related internships.

By Bruno Rios De La Fuente

With every question, the reply was always the same. "Read your bible." It was never lost on me that the people saying it wouldn't actually ever read it. So, I decided to actually try it. What I found was atrocious. Long story short: The bible didn't provide me with any actual answers, or even coherent arguments.

In my time within the religious community, I discovered a disease of hypocrisy. It was as widespread as the common cold. People would always claim they believe in this or that, but when it truly matters, when they have something to lose, they tend to lean more so toward their own benefit. I found that repulsive.

I can firmly say, that the only thing the bible gave me was a thorough lesson in what not to do, and, in that regard, it went above and beyond.

Bruno, 21, attends California State University Channel Islands. "My life has always somehow managed to buck its trajectory. Some call its perseverance, others tenacity, I think of it more as stubbornness. I have overcome a lot, but I prefer not to dwell on that. I'm focused on becoming a professor one day, to share my love of history and write in a way that can connect with people."

By Tamanna Sheikh

Growing up as a Muslim in America lends to a lot of conflict from many opposing sides. Americans don't always understand Islam, and the media has a tendency of bastardizing it while promoting the ideology of terrorism alongside it. My family and culture, however, glorify the value of Islam and expect me to continue upholding the faith my entire life. Simply said, the general consensus around my American environment told me that Islam is bad, while my parents believed it was the best. The conflicting lines of thought were pretty jarring, especially for child-me who desired to find my own path. I wanted to embrace American culture, but I also wanted to please my parents and believe Islamic dogma despite slowly feeling disconnected from it.

Tamanna, 20, attends Virginia Commonwealth University, majoring in psychology. "I have a passion for volunteering and I regularly go to United2Heal meetings, where I help sort and organize medical supplies," Tamanna writes.

By Nicole Kye

Now, when I'm faced with a decision, the voice that asks me "Why not?" is my own. This mantra has given me the courage to leave the Church, become the president of multiple clubs, and help organize a countywide festival. I have used these simple words to beat back that iron hold religion held me in and to become the fearless fighting female my younger self envisioned.

I can confidently say that rather than getting engulfed with angst, I now boldly charge into a world of unknowns, with a chorus of "Why not?" spurring me onward.

Nicole, 19, is a first-year student at Cornell University and hopes to become a cardiac surgeon. Nicole volunteered at the public library and local hospital during high school and also was president of the Civics Youth Corps.

By Claire Hill

My hometown has 45 churches in only 11.5 square miles and is 90 percent white, so being a black, nonreligious female, I had to face many different challenges.

There are a few upsides to being nonreligious, even in an area so heavily occupied by churches. I have not been bound to a social code, wherein people judge you for inconsequential decisions you have made, such as clothing worn or your family's structure. Another benefit I have is not having existential crises when I learn about conflicting topics in my classes as a science major.

Claire, 19, is a sophomore at Drake University, majoring in health sciences. She earned the Emerging Leader Award from her sorority and holds the Equity & Inclusion position there. Claire hopes to become a doctor.

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FFRF’s chapters stay engaged, build support

By Kristina Daleiden

FFRF’s network of 21 (soon to be 22 with the recent addition of the Metro Cincinnati Chapter) officially recognized grassroots chapters have continued to build support and increase the visibility of local freethinkers. Despite the challenges we have all faced due to the pandemic, these dedicated activists have embraced new strategies to keep their communities engaged, and helped those who find themselves in even greater need through the \$1,000 annual charitable grant provided by FFRF.

Below are recent highlights from many of FFRF’s chapters.

Central Florida Freethought Community (CFFC)

Continuing its remarkable history of building community, CFFC increased its outreach to include thousands of followers and local members. CFFC members volunteered nearly 200 hours cleaning up parks in central Florida, tabled at local events including Central Florida Earth Day, Central Florida Veg Fest, Valencia College’s Peace and Justice Institute, the Women’s March, FREEFLO (the biennial Freethought Florida Conference) and marched in the Come Out With Pride Orlando and the Orlando Veteran’s Day Parade.

CFFC hosted countless events of its own and in partnership with other organizations, including the Central Florida Summit on Religious Freedom. The Seventh Annual Freethought Cruise featured renowned atheist Matt Dillahunty. CFFC also shook up the Florida Film Festival with the premiere of the movie “Hail Satan?”, featuring Satanic Temple co-founder Lucien Greaves.

CFFC’s campaign for secular, inclusive invocation practices before governmental meetings continued apace, with more than a dozen secular invocations given around the region, topped off by a lauded victory in its 11th Circuit Court lawsuit against the Brevard County Commission. CFFC, along with FFRF and other organizations, joined to ensure the commission’s discriminatory selection practices for invocators at commission meetings would come to an end.

CFFC and FFRF contributed \$2,000 to purchase PPE supplies for local teachers at the start of the 2020 school year, while in 2019 they collected nearly 100 STEM toys in conjunction with BE Orlando Humanist Fellowship for the Coalition for the Homeless of Central Florida.

Central Indiana Chapter of FFRF (CICFFRF)

The Central Indiana Chapter of FFRF (CICFFRF), which was just established in September 2019, worked to build its membership and engage with the community through meetings and informal gatherings. CICFFRF elected its governing board, attained official 501(c)(3) status and capped off 2019 with a celebratory winter holiday party.

Unfortunately, plans to increase local visibility by tabling at annual events such as the 2020 Indianapolis Pride Parade were stalled by the pandemic, but CICFFRF remains undaunted in its commitment to standing up for freethinkers.



Judy Saint (right), president of Greater Sacramento Chapter of FFRF, stands with chapter board member Janet Thew (middle) and the director of the Mustard Seed School for homeless children. The chapter has given hundreds of \$5 gas cards to parents who often sleep in their cars and must drive their kids to school.

Colorado Springs Chapter-FFRF

FFRF’s oldest chapter continued its long tradition of showing its notoriously Christian community how to be good without God. Beyond sponsoring the local PrideFest, members in Colorado Springs expressed their appreciation for teachers with gifts of Penzey’s Spices and supported their students with donations to food pantries serving schools.

The Colorado Springs chapter keeps busy at gatherings by creating “comfort scarves” for students in need of extra warmth or a cozy reminder that they have caring, rational allies who support them. According to long-time chapter leader Gary King, these gifts were inspired to be like constant hugs for children facing insecurity and difficult times.

With the closing of local schools, and the resulting lack of contact with students in families already stressed before the pandemic, members are exploring more ways to share their comfort scarves, and FFRF is ready to support their efforts with its annual charitable grant program.

FFRF–East Tennessee Chapter (FFRF–ETC)

FFRF-ETC is active on social media and has a robust Facebook presence that acts as a lightning rod for people to report violations of the Establishment Clause. The outstanding leadership and members of FFRF-ETC are responsible for alerting FFRF’s legal team to countless instances of religious encroachment into our secular public sphere.

In collaboration with the Rationalists of East Tennessee, these activists continue their effort to challenge the distribution of Gideon bibles in Blount County schools. In 2018, the group successfully eliminated bible distribution at the elementary school level. Although Blount County has been dragging its feet and creating roadblocks, FFRF-ETC and the Rationalists of East Tennessee intend to keep fighting until the Gideons are no longer given access to proselytize to students in junior and senior high.

Thanks to FFRF’s annual chapter charitable grant, FFRF-ETC members were able to distribute 48 well-stocked backpacks to the homeless population

in Knox County, where individuals experiencing homelessness are required to have a backpack or luggage for their personal effects before they can be admitted into a shelter.

FFRF-ETC worked with our national office to post a “Proud Atheist” billboard in Maryville, garnering attention from the local TV news. Tennesseans were further reminded through ads on the local NPR station that not everyone shares the Christian beliefs. These PR initiatives were made possible through a grant from FFRF.

FFRF Metro Chicago Chapter (FFRFMCC)

The members of the FFRF Metro Chicago Chapter kept a rigorous schedule of activities, presentations, legislative efforts and highly visible secular displays around Chicagoland in 2019 and early 2020. FFRFMCC also streamlined its membership process to ensure that chapter membership aligned with FFRF membership requirements, beefing up the membership numbers of both organizations.

In keeping with ongoing efforts across the secular movement to build diversity, ensure equity and create inclusive, non-religious spaces for people from marginalized communities, FFRFMCC and FFRF were delighted to co-sponsor the First Annual Women of Color Beyond Belief National Conference in Chicago, which came on the heels of hosting Black Nonbelievers President Mandisa Thomas, who delivered her presentation, “Fear of a Black Atheist: How Religion Crippled the Black Community.”

Critically, FFRFMCC reported to FFRF that the state of Illinois was con-

sidering giving grants to various religious organizations, using funds from its “Rebuild Illinois” program. This action prompted an investigation, which resulted in a letter to the department requesting the grants not be approved by the state, citing the Illinois Constitution, which prohibits taxpayer funds from being used to support religious organizations. FFRFMCC members and leadership are also working to encourage legislation regarding compassionate “end-of-life” options in Illinois.

It wasn’t all business, of course. Everyone’s favorite satirical secular songwriter Roy Zimmerman performed for local freethinkers, sponsored in cooperation with the Ethical Humanist Society of Chicago. FFRFMCC also continued its long-running tradition of placing secular “equal time” displays to counter religious holiday imagery around the Chicago area, including a large light-up Dawkins “A” and two banners at the Daley Center Plaza, and three of FFRF’s Bill of Rights nativity displays in public locations.

FFRF Metro Denver Chapter

FFRF Metro Denver Chapter continues to make the most of the vibrant secular community in its region. It was delighted to partner with a number of other groups to host the Colorado Secular Conference, which drew nearly 200 attendees from throughout Colorado and featured FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor as a headliner.

The Metro Denver Chapter hosts regular Coffee & Community Pancake Breakfasts each year, as well as celebrations for the Summer and Winter Solstice. Utilizing its connections in the community, the Denver chapter hosts speakers, recently welcoming Secular Student Alliance Executive Director Kevin Bolling, and FFRF’s own Andrew L. Seidel. 2019 was its sixth year attending Denver’s PrideFest, and was able to raise over \$800 in donations in exchange for secular bumper stickers.

FFRF Kentucky

FFRF Kentucky kept up the pressure in the Bible Belt, continuing its dedication to serving as a critical state/church watchdog. FFRF Kentucky members executed multiple open records requests to reveal the troubling entanglement between creationist Ken Ham of Answers in Genesis and the Ark Encounter with the city of Williamstown.

Working closely with the FFRF legal department, FFRF Kentucky raised the alarm over multiple violations of the Establishment Clause, including field trips to Ark Encounter and Creation Museum by high schools and colleges, sale of Christian CDs and books by the author

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and teacher’s aide in public schools, prayers at school events, violations by the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, numerous violations by the previous Gov. Matt Bevin, and a shocking episode of a Daviess County public school teacher playing religious videos during biology class, which earned the student involved an FFRF Student Activist Award.

FFRF Kentucky has worked tirelessly to foster relationships with other secular organizations, tabling at the 2019 American Atheist Conference and partnering with the Secular Student Alliance to support SSA chapters at numerous universities in the region. The outreach efforts of FFRF Kentucky are remarkable, hosting booths at the Kentucky State Fair, NanoCon, KY Freethought Convention, and publishing the informative and entertaining “Blasphemy in the Bluegrass” podcasts, on top of coordinating regular chapter meetings, group excursions, and speaker events. FFRF Kentucky also partners with a low-income senior living facility to provide essentials to many people without the resources to purchase new items for themselves.

Grand Rapids Area Freethinkers (GRAF)

In Minnesota, the Grand Rapids Area Freethinkers continued its regular meeting and social gathering schedule throughout 2019, shifting its focus from educational programs to highlight community organizations providing services to disadvantaged groups in order to determine what GRAF can do to support them.

GRAF members serve their community in a number of ways, from the “Adopt-a-Highway” program to a holiday food program at the Second Harvest Food Bank and toy packing program. With the support of the chapter charitable grant program, GRAF has continued to make an annual donation to the local Boys and Girls Club, who operate two programs in school buildings located in Grand Rapids and Coleraine. GRAF’s donation has served to fund memberships for children whose families are unable to pay the annual fee. Due to the increased need related to COVID-19, GRAF’s contribution to the Boys and Girls Club will also help supply the community food shelf in 2020.

In response to a weekly column in



FFRF Portland’s president Cheryl Kolbe (second from left) holds a package of sheets to be donated to Portland Homeless Family Solutions.

the local newspaper featuring area ministers called “Faith,” GRAF asked to participate in this use of the paper’s space and was invited to submit a column once per month in rotation with the church columns. GRAF’s column is called “The Humanist Voice,” which explains and defends the secular humanist perspective and the columns are published on the third Wednesday of the month.

Greater Sacramento Chapter of FFRF

In 2019, the notoriously non-sacramental Sacramento chapter continued to take on projects large and small with the zeal it’s become known for. Sacramento chapter members took advantage of their location in the California capital city to “Come Out to a Candidate” by handing out cards with secular population statistics to lawmakers and candidates. Chapter President Judy Saint hosted a lively event with Dan Barker, and the chapter board voted to help the local Gay and Lesbian Center. This support provided 20 HIV tests along with counseling, and five events of “cultural competency and diversity training for any agency, workplace or school seeking to create an affirming and compliant environment.”

Inland Northwest Freethought Society (INFS)

The Inland Northwest Freethought Society fills a surprising niche in western Washington and eastern Idaho, where self-determination and freethinking aren’t necessarily associated with non-belief. However, this group has created a vibrant and active secular community. FFRF Co-President Dan Barker’s visit in March 2019 to the “Heathen Mexican Fiesta Potluck” was a fantastic success, with 108 people in attendance! While the pandemic has greatly impacted INFS’s traditional gatherings, it looks forward to returning to safe and fun social activities.

INFS also supports the work of its member, author and lecturer Jim Downard. His book, *Evolution Slam Dunk: Why the Reptile-Mammal Transition Proves Macroevolution & How Antievolutionists Ignore It*, is a great takedown of creationism. He is also a co-author of *The Rocks Were There*, an in-depth, well-researched book dealing with creationist claims. In keeping with its tradition of valuing and supporting members, INFS recognized three members with an In-

land Northwest Freethought Achievement Award in 2019 for longtime contributions to the community and to the INFS organization.

Kenosha-Racine Area Freethinkers–Southeast Wisconsin (KRAft)

In 2019, KRAft held biweekly meetings over dinner and drinks at the Charcoal Grille for fun and engaging trivia nights.

The Adopt-a-Highway program continued with three occurrences over the course of the season from April 1 through Oct. 31, providing great exposure in front of a very popular tourist attraction.

In July 2019, KRAft took a field trip to Freethought Hall, where Dan Barker and Andrew L. Seidel helped with content for a new YouTube channel and podcast. KRAft members who had not yet seen the silicone Charles Darwin statue in FFRF’s library were charmed with his patience while they took pictures.

An alert KRAft member in Racine exposed the county’s funding of a Christian youth group and we were able to stop the violation with help from FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne, whose swift letter explaining the constitutional violation was able to nip the program in the bud.

Lake Superior Freethinkers (LSF)

The LSF has distanced itself from any events that could be perceived as partisan political activities in order to avoid any inappropriate entanglements for a nonprofit organization. To that end, the LSF has established a subgroup, the People of Conscience Committee (POCC), which provides interested members with opportunities to engage in community activities (such as demonstrations of support for addressing climate change), without the endorsement of the LSF as a whole.

The LSF also engages in activities in support of local organizations and movements in order to enhance the visibility of secularism in general and the LSF in particular. Such activities include participation in Gay Pride events and fundraisers for the local women’s health center, the WE Health Clinic. With the support of FFRF’s charitable grant program and additional contributions from LSF members, LSF presented a direct grant to the WE Health Clinic in early 2020.

FFRF Portland Area

Sadly, in 2020 we are saying goodbye to this chapter, which had eight years of laudable advocacy! As a final hoorah, the chapter ran Independence Day ads in three local newspapers to counter the traditional Hobby Lobby misinformation ads.

Among the most notable achievements of any group was FFRF Portland’s successful effort to add “nonbelief” as a protected class in the city of Portland, which was approved in February 2019. Portland is now only the second municipality in the nation that recognizes nonbelief as a protected class. (Madison, Wis., FFRF’s home base, is the other.)

FFRF Portland participated in street fairs, hosted regular meetings, and speaker events over the years, and members provided hours of volunteer time at the Oregon Food Bank. Recently, FFRF Portland has directed support to Portland Homeless Family Solutions to purchase sundries for families experiencing homelessness to take with them to their new homes, and materials to create a calm and healthy environment while at the shelter.

FFRF will miss the tireless advocacy of FFRF Portland’s longtime leader Cheryl Kolbe, but we wish her the very best in the future and are deeply grateful for her work and on-going leadership as a current member of FFRF’s Executive Board of Directors.

Unfettered Freethinkers of South Sound

In December 2019, the stalwart members of the Unfettered Freethinkers of South Sound, led by Darrell Barker, persevered in their efforts to provide a counterpoint to a nativity display on the grounds of the Washington state Capitol, causing such consternation that the display was vandalized, as it was in 2017. Fortunately, the display was quickly “re-erected” with the support of FFRF members and UFSS volunteers. Local chapter members were rewarded with donuts and coffee from the grateful team in Madison.

Valley of the Sun (FFRF–VS)

The FFRF-Valley of the Sun was originally formed in 2011 by a Phoenix group, led by a determined activist who served as the nucleus for an informal secular group. With the death of that activist, a number of group members took up the banner and formalized the FFRF-VS chapter in late 2019. Even while they busied themselves with details of formally establishing their group, FFRF-VS members worked to build its core membership and engage with the community through meetings and informal gatherings. FFRF-VS elected its governing board and attained official 501(c)(3) status.

In the short time before COVID-19 prevented in-person activities from happening, FFRF-VS chapter hosted numerous events, including talks with FFRF’s Director of Strategic Response Andrew L. Seidel and FFRF Co-President Dan Barker, and tabled at the 2020 Women’s March before the pandemic sent all of their activities online. FFRF-VS has taken its virtual meetings and presentations to a much broader audience and has added virtual social meetings, which have become popular.

Kristina Daleiden is FFRF’s programs manager.



The Unfettered Freethinkers of South Sound had its “Let Reason Prevail” banner vandalized on the Washington Capitol lawn last year.

Winners of Cliff Richards Student Scholarships

FFRF is proud to announce it has awarded three \$1,000 scholarships to students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The scholarships are part of FFRF’s Cliff Richards Student Activist Awards program and in partnership with the Secular Student Alliance.

Below are bios of the three awardees. (Two of the three did not want their last names used.)

Kourtney

Attending Spelman College was a life-long dream for Kourtney, a health sciences major. Her desire to learn more about herself through education led her to pursue a career as a medical examiner. In high school, she naturally gravitated to and excelled in STEM-related courses.

Kourtney and her mother, who is a Christian, have had many talks about her spiritual journey outside of Christianity and religion. Kourtney has explored her own morals with a larger worldview and respects those with different beliefs.

During her sophomore year, Kourtney chose to further her education in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, which lacks representation of Black students. She also joined the Student Organization for Anti-Racism to advocate increased representation of African-American students in international classes. During this election year, Kourtney has been focused on increasing the turnout of young voters. Kourtney feels that the Secular Student Alliance provides a safe space for nonreligious and religious students to connect with each other and discuss differing viewpoints with civility and respect.



Kourtney

Timothy

Majoring in aerospace engineering, Timothy is a first-year student at Tuskegee University. Raised in an Independent Fundamental Baptist home, he went to a private Christian school from first to eighth grade, but then attended public school due to issues with bullying.

As the first in his family to go to college, Timothy is a role model for his younger brothers. Timothy’s secular identity is relatively new, as his interest in science began to challenge his religious beliefs. At age 17, he left the church, which disappointed his parents, who then disabled his phone, tried to take his car, and threatened to kick him out of the house.

Timothy is involved with the Black Lives Matter movement and encouraged voting on campus. He also works with local organizations to combat institutionalized racism.



Timothy

ism. As someone who had his thoughts and ideals hijacked from an early age, Timothy says: “It is very important to me that I do my best to encourage freethought among my peers. For when we have the ability to truly express our thoughts, then we may know who we really are and what we want.”

Marie Chantal

Marie Chantal is a junior at Howard University, majoring in chemical engineering with a concentration in biotechnology and biomedicine. She plans to attend medical school to become a doctor specializing in contagious diseases. She hopes to provide aid in the refugee crises and build Africa’s medical infrastructure.

Marie was born in a Rwandese refugee camp, so she and her family know the impact of war. “I do not have a name for my secular identity. I just know that I have seen Catholicism im-



Marie Chantal

ported by colonizers stop my people from seeking justice for themselves because they believed in a savior falling from the sky. I have seen religion hurt my people.” While respecting her Rwandese and Black family, Marie says she cannot follow religious practices that have been used for centuries and that continue to oppress her people.

Marie is a member of the Youth United Nations Association, Black Action Movement and Planned Parenthood. She organized fundraisers and panel discussions for Freedom House Detroit, which helps asylum seekers. She presented at conferences on cultural competency and preventative methods against sexual harassment in higher education. She also produced a documentary promoting Black mental health, in an attempt to disrupt the stigma surrounding mental health in the black community.

Winners of Yip Harburg Youth Activist Award

FFRF is proud to announce the three students with art-related majors who are winners of this year’s Yip Harburg Youth Activist Award. They will receive \$1,000.

The generously endowed scholarship is from the Yip Harburg Foundation and FFRF Members Ernie and Margie Harburg, the children of the famous lyricist of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.”

Here are the bios of the three winners, who did not want their last names used.

Daniel

The first in his family to go to college, Daniel is majoring in photography at the Rhode Island School of Design and enjoys using his photos to tell stories and evoke feelings about race, sexuality and femininity.

Daniel grew up with a religious Dominican mother, who credited God for everything they had. Daniel felt his mother was “discrediting all the hard work she’s done for our family and all the sacrifices she’s made.” When Daniel realized he was gay, he re-examined his religious beliefs, concluding there was no god and people were using God as a coping mechanism for the things going on in the world.

Daniel organized a photography fundraiser with other local photographers for the Black Lives Matter movement. While Daniel’s photography centers around empowering women and showing the diversity of what it means to be a woman, he hopes to discuss humanistic and racial themes through his photography and art.

An atheist, gay, pro-Black-Lives-Matter feminist, Daniel feels we should be able to accept each other’s differences and exist amicably. Everyone should be free to express their beliefs without fear



Daniel

of backlash and without invalidating other people’s beliefs.

Catherine

Catherine is a theatre and music lighting designer major at Rutgers University. At the age of 15, she was interested in the technical side of theatre and hopes to work on Broadway and eventually become a teacher. Catherine believes theatre and other storytelling art helps mold young minds into being more compassionate people.

Catherine’s grandfather was a deacon and multiple great aunts and uncles are nuns and monks. Despite this, her religious parents raised her in a home devoid of religion, so, when she was old enough, she chose on her own. “I am an atheist and proud of it,” she says.

Catherine is a very outspoken activist, believing the church should not hold control in the government. Catherine feels the



Catherine

impact of Christianity is negatively impacting women’s reproductive rights and marriage equality. She has participated in multiple woman’s rights marches, Gay Pride week, March for Science and Black Lives Matter protests. In high school, she was captain of the debate team, writing mock bills focused on race and gender.

Braxton

As a Navajo native from Idaho, Braxton grew up in an LDS-Mormon family. Braxton felt the church and most members shunned his family because of their non-traditional background, family member’s addictions, and their overall lifestyle. Eight years ago, Braxton officially left the church because he disagreed with the church’s vocal stance against same-sex marriage, among other things. “I now identify as an atheist and strive to show people good comes from good people, not God,” Braxton says.



Braxton

Braxton saved enough money to attend Utah Valley University as an audio digital media major, but during his second semester, he was struck by a car while biking to work, fracturing his skull and rendering him unconscious for three days. After three weeks in the hospital, he re-learned how to balance, walk and speak. While his doctors suggested he drop out of school, Braxton decided nothing was going to stop him from being the first of his family to get a bachelor’s degree. When he came back to UVU, he started the Chess, Audio and Card Games Club on campus. He also started a volunteer and internship program between UVU and Primary Children’s Hospital for fellow audio and video production students, all while being a full-time student and maintaining a 3.7 GPA. This year, he opened a concert/recording space for musicians and songwriters to combat Utah’s “censorship for the sake of censorship.”

Recovered Catholic now happy atheist

By Brian Fitzpatrick

In 1945, the birth lottery dropped me in Brooklyn, N.Y., and there, frocked freaks pounced and shoved Catholicism down my throat. Thirty-five years later, I wretched it up. But, oh, the wasted energy escaping from that malicious



Brian Fitzpatrick

myth: branded with original sin and predestined for eternal flames. I had lost life's game before I suited up. For many painful years, I stumbled through the minefield of ubiquitous sins. I struggled to distinguish mortal from venial. I suffered from the guilt of being a boy and being attracted to girls. I finally realized that if nature hadn't designed me that way, humanity would perish.

After eight years of nuns at Our Lady of Incredible Guilt and eight years of Jesuits, I was perfectly prepared for the

Spanish Inquisition. Unfortunately, it was the '60s and protesters were burning bras and draft cards. I never could reconcile Cardinal Francis Spellman's endorsement of napalming Vietnamese children with "Thou shalt not kill."

The blatant hypocrisy of "God and country" slapped me in the face. My cloistered walls were cracking. Thank Grog I met some jovial Jews who liberated me. The Jewish atheists had traded Yahweh for Marilyn Monroe. It looked like a good deal to me. I told God to go to hell — I'm going to heaven . . . with Marilyn.

Walking life's trail for 75 years, I've had time to think. If divinity exists, it blooms within the communion of human hearts. The confluence of individuals fostering beneficence is our *raison d'être*. It points to our evolutionary path. We were born to protect creation and leave Mother Earth healthier than we found her.

Our noblesse oblige is to nurture the common good. Herein lies the rub. Organized religion is a parasite. It refuses to pay taxes to support the common good. We citizens pay taxes on proper-

ty, income and consumption. But not churches; they get a free ride. One wonders why? Perhaps churches perform a function for the state. What could that function be?

Historically, shamans and holy men played the masses for chumps. The shamans invented gods to enhance their powers. Nothing has changed. Christianity invented a guy in the sky who metes out eternal flames if you disobey "his" rules. That's the yardstick. If people believe the god myth, they will swallow the lies of puppeticians (politicians on oligarch strings).

Religion is a gullibility test. If people are naive enough to swallow the swill emanating from churches, they will also swallow government lies (e.g., the weapons of mass destruction ruse that killed a million Iraqis and had untold other consequences).

Witness the current milieu: Evangelicals rabidly support a blatant sybarite, swindler and schmuck.

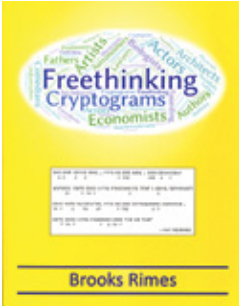
Thank Grog I'm a happy atheist.
FFRF Member Brian Fitzpatrick is a retired public high school teacher in Jefferson County, Colo.

FREETHOUGHT BOOKS

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

Freethinking Cryptograms

By Brooks Rimes
\$8.95 (paperback)
Solving cryptograms is fun and these quotes will inspire! Respected and admired men and women have their quotes hidden here, including Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin Franklin, Billy Joel, Ernest Hemingway, Frank Lloyd Wright – a total of 191 different people. So sharpen your pencil, put on your thinking cap and start solving the 250+ puzzles!



Upon Further Review: The Search for Truth and Reality in the Abrahamic Faiths

By Emory Lynn
Paperback \$23
Woods Lane Press LLC, 2020
Does the god of the Abrahamic faiths exist? What are the historical truths about Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad? How did our universe come to exist? How did human beings and other biological species come to exist? What is the source of purpose and meaning in our lives? This book is a journey of discovery based on 21 years of rigorous, comprehensive research into the truths proclaimed by the Abrahamic religions, with an emphasis on the world's most popular religion — Christianity.



Time Is Irreverent 3: Gone for 16 Seconds

By Marty Essen
\$14.95 (paperback)
\$4.99 (Kindle)
Encante Press, LLC, 2020
Marty Mann and Nellie Dixon are back for another irreverent, liberal, twisty, time-travel comedy. This time they have Noah's Ark and Ronald Reagan in their sights. *Time Is Irreverent 3: Gone for 16 Seconds* is a thought-provoking satire that answers the questions, "If Noah boasted about the size of his ark, what else did he boast about?" and "What if you could kidnap Ronald Reagan and show him the Ghosts of Earth Yet to Come?" And yes, Jesus plays a mean electric guitar!



Military

Continued from page 1

of the above,' rather than my preference being no religion." This vet described representatives of Gideons International being invited onto federal property to distribute bibles, and being forced to sit through a Christian church sermon just before beginning basic combat training. "I vividly remember the pressure to attend religious services," wrote another.

Enlistment oaths typically include the religious phrase, "So help me God." "I find it almost humorous," a service member wrote, "that the oath taken to defend the Constitution, which expressly prohibits a religious test, includes religious wording." The proposed fix was to remove religious language from all Defense Department regulations and to return to the nation's original motto, "E Pluribus Unum."

Some went for church services only because the alternative was a work detail for those who didn't attend. Recalled one nonreligious vet: "I chose to do the work detail instead of repeating the church nonsense. . . . Peeling potatoes allowed me to sit alone and avoid the circus at the church. It was much better." Others noted that bibles were placed in drawers at military temporary housing.

Another FFRF veteran made the alarming disclosure that he did not re-up because "there was so much Christian Nationalist evangelism [in my branch of the U.S. military] that I was often scared for my own safety. There was always pressure to toe the line to keep the military nonsecular. It was for this reason that I could not continue serving in the U.S. Armed Forces."

In addition to cataloguing myriad examples of the military's mistreatment of nonreligious service members, respondents offered many concrete, constructive suggestions on steps the military could take to address this widespread problem. The most common ones were regarding religious chaplains in the military.

"Begin commissioning humanist chaplains," recommended one respondent. This was echoed by another individual who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and had "nobody to talk to" other than religious chaplains. "Consider something else besides preachers!" they urged the department.

Yet another FFRF member who is a veteran exhorted more bluntly: "Do away with the chaplains." A nonreligious vet asked rhetorically, "If we are going to spend the kind of money required on salaries for military chaplains who are officers, why not just spend it on better, formally trained counselors?" He

suggested that lay members for various faiths within the military community could attend to most religious functions during off-duty hours.

Many urged that atheism be destigmatized in the military. "Commanders should establish command policy letters that not only prohibit discrimination against other protected categories, but also expressly prohibit harassment or criticism of agnostics, atheists and free-thinkers," they opined.

Other suggestions included ensuring that officers avoid religious speech when addressing subordinates, promoting "the importance of science as a resource to understand our challenges," "supporting inclusion and diversity whenever you can," and "elevating minorities, as they have a significant contribution to make to our society and tend to be marginalized, which reduces their impact."

FFRF has erected two monuments to atheists in the military, one in front of its national office in Madison, Wis., and the original at Lake Hypatia, Ala., both of which read:

"In memory of ATHEISTS IN FOX-HOLES and the countless FREETHINKERS who have served this country with honor and distinction. Presented by the national Freedom From Religion Foundation with hope that in the future humankind may learn to avoid all war."

A note to FFRF Members

Don't miss a single issue of Freethought Today & Private Line!

If the expiration date of your FFRF membership on your address label says December 2020 or earlier . . .

Please renew now!

FFRF Memberships:
\$40 single; \$50 household;
\$100 gung-ho; \$250 sustaining

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Freethought Today is published 10 times a year.

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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

LETTERBOX

Thanks for celebrating ‘Day of the Dead’

Kudos to FFRF for celebrating a “Secular Day of the Dead!”

Yes, for centuries already my fellow Mexicans have celebrated “El Dia de los Muertos.”

On that day, families gather to honor their dead by enjoying life — they eat, they drink, and they make merry.

Aren’t we humans blessed to be so creative in our efforts to prevent the grim reaper from pouring vinegar into the tasty punch of life?

Mexicans have a popular proverb, which I’ll make an effort to translate: “El muerto a la sepultura, y el vivo a la travesura!” (“The dead we must bury, but while we live, let’s be merry!”)

David Quintero
California

FFRF’s online convention exceeded expectations

Congratulations on the excellent online convention and membership meeting. Kudos to the folks who made the technology work — an amazing accomplishment.

I very much enjoyed seeing and hearing from so many different staff members. Highlighting the behind-the-scenes staff showed the strength of this organization and added a personal feeling to the meeting. It is all too easy to forget that all that behind-the-scenes work is absolutely essential and a key to the success of an organization.

FFRF is so professional in everything it does, so it is no surprise that you were able to put together such an excellent online event. I’ve always particularly valued the legal summary at conventions. It is a very powerful statement on the importance and success of FFRF.

I expected a professional and engaging event, and, as is typical, you exceeded my expectations.

Thank you to all who were involved in the event!


Cheryl Kolbe
Oregon

Check for signs of religion before buying

I recently purchased a jar of exceptionally good pickles from a small company in the Midwest. As I emptied my shopping bag at home, I decided to read the ingredients label, and just to the side of the list was a reference to a bible verse from Psalms. I wondered just how much I am paying for and consuming that supports causes that I reject. I decided to be vigilant, and, interestingly enough, not more than two weeks later, I happened to read the inside lid of my organic egg carton. And there it was . . . a bible verse from Matthew. I have since taken it up a notch, now walking behind every contractor’s truck as they arrive at my property, wanting to verify that there are no bumper stickers or decals that support causes or a point of view that I find offensive. It’s amazing what I have encountered since initiating this practice. Bottom line: Two contractor bids rejected, no more fabulous pickles and a different egg brand.

Robert Laub
Missouri

Where do you ‘Freethought’?



Patrick Hart of Washington says: “I read Freethought Today while receiving chemo for my CLL (chronic lymphocytic leukemia). Medicine for mind and body!”

Use these funds to help the FFRF legal team

I didn’t do an IRA direct contribution this year, but figured your legal department could use some help. Please accept my donation check as an incentive to hit the ground running as soon as the election dust settles. I’m seeing a long struggle ahead.

Name withheld
California

Ben Hart was highlight of FFRF’s online convention

Thank you, thank you, thank you for a most wonderful Covid Convention!

From Dan Barker’s delightful and irreverent entertainment through the incredible accomplishments of FFRF’s legal team in 2020 (and a cameo by Ed Asner, as well!), it was a most informative afternoon. Worth far more than the price of admission, the virtual convention was indeed a true pandemic-era prize.

With all due respect to the FFRF staff, the clear superstar of the convention was Ben Hart. As a native Ohioan, I was pleased that Ben led a life of bliss while living in that state. But once he had the audacity to toddle across the border into Kentucky . . . yeesh!

Anyone who thinks (as I once did) that his story is that of a dude trying to get a (super-duper!) vanity plate is completely missing the point. His eloquent, succinct and witty presentation of his years-long battle had me cheering. (And did I hear him correctly that he has been married to his lovely wife for 64 years? He hardly appears to be that old!) Ben Hart is a most engaging orator and is my new hero. He is FFRF-ing amazing!

Finally, a big shout-out to FFRF’s IT Director James Phetteplace for masterminding a flawless virtual presentation. Let’s face it, many of us have attended Zoom meetings crippled by technical snafus, but none of that occurred during the online convention. He made it all look like a piece of cake.

On a dreary and raw afternoon in Wisconsin during a surging pandemic, the convention truly inspired me and gave me hope for a better 2021. Best wishes for a restorative Winter Solstice, and above all, stay safe out there.

Charles T. Bingham
Wisconsin

Secular teenagers need our attention

Please let everyone know how proud I am to be part of an organization like FFRF, and how well conducted I thought the annual meeting was — very professional.

I’m especially pleased at the increased attention you are giving to our teenagers. The kids too often get left out of secular activities and they are our future. At Camp Quest, I got a chance to talk one-on-one with a lot of secular kids, and I hadn’t fully appreciated the discrimination they often must endure — and just at the stage in life when they are trying to figure out who they are. That discrimination includes everything from dating issues to being an outcast at the lunch table at school to not being allowed to go to certain classmates’ homes. And here I thought being a secular adult in the workplace was tough!

Donald Lewellyn
Texas

Paper would be better without two sections

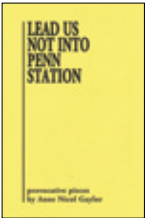
I read with great interest the entire newspaper, with two exceptions: The “Crankmail” and “Black Collar Crime” sections. I’m not interested in what these looney-tunes think and I’m even less interested in what those creeps do to children and vulnerable adults.

I believe it’s a waste of print and wish you could condense those sections.

Other than that, I love reading about those victories in giving those so-called religious fanatics a lesson in what it means to be a secular democracy versus a theocracy. Keep up the good work!

Joseph DiBlanca
New York

Lead Us Not Into Penn Station: Provocative Pieces



By Anne Gaylor

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

Published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online ffrf.org/shop

Your values are what’s meaningful to you

Human psychology (predisposed to personification), alongside ignorance and fear, invented God. The human mind naturally wants the whole shebang to be about something, for it to be of great consequence, pregnant with meaning. The human mind wants its life to be lived within grand meaning. We want everything — the universe, our world, our lives — to be purposeful, to be sanctioned with an external seal of approval.

We believe that while we may not know what God’s divine purpose is, surely we’re integral to it. Your birth ushers you into the meaning, purpose and significance of a divine order. You matter more than you know, but matter, you do. Our natural craving for external meaning has created God and kept God going. (Taught to most people by their beloved parents, the very idea of God becomes loved. The trappings of religion fashion solidity onto airy ideas, while fellow worshippers bestow safety in numbers to farfetched beliefs.)

Lamentably, religion fosters and promotes the wrong expectation — that all of it, including our lives — has external meaning. No. The opposite is true.

We are just another animal in the animal kingdom. We are classified among the great apes. The meaning of life is to live well your animal existence. Don’t be too hot or too cold. Don’t be too hungry or too thirsty. Stay safe. Work for good health. If you love and are loved, that’s icing on the cake. Meaning comes from within — internally, not externally — from your values. Your values come from your DNA and experiences. If you value animals, then caring for animals will be meaningful to you. If you value a knowledge of history, then the study of history will be meaningful to you. Live in accordance with your values and your life will be meaningful to you. If your values are honorable and kind, your life will be meaningful to others, as well.

The body’s decline and death are inevitable and natural. At the moment of your death, all that you are vanish — no more thoughts, no more feelings, no more experiences. That fate awaits you, as it does all animals. For that is what you solely are — an animal. Don’t deny the facts. Don’t hide in illusion. Work to live well.

Brent London
California

MOVING?



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Seeing faces of FFRF staff was wonderful

What a feat presenting the online convention this year.

Great job by all in pulling it all together and giving us a thorough and informative virtual convention.

It was wonderful seeing all the familiar faces, even consoling. It surely made me miss coming up to the office and seeing people in person.

I look forward to the day when we can safely be together.

Thank you and to all of the staff.

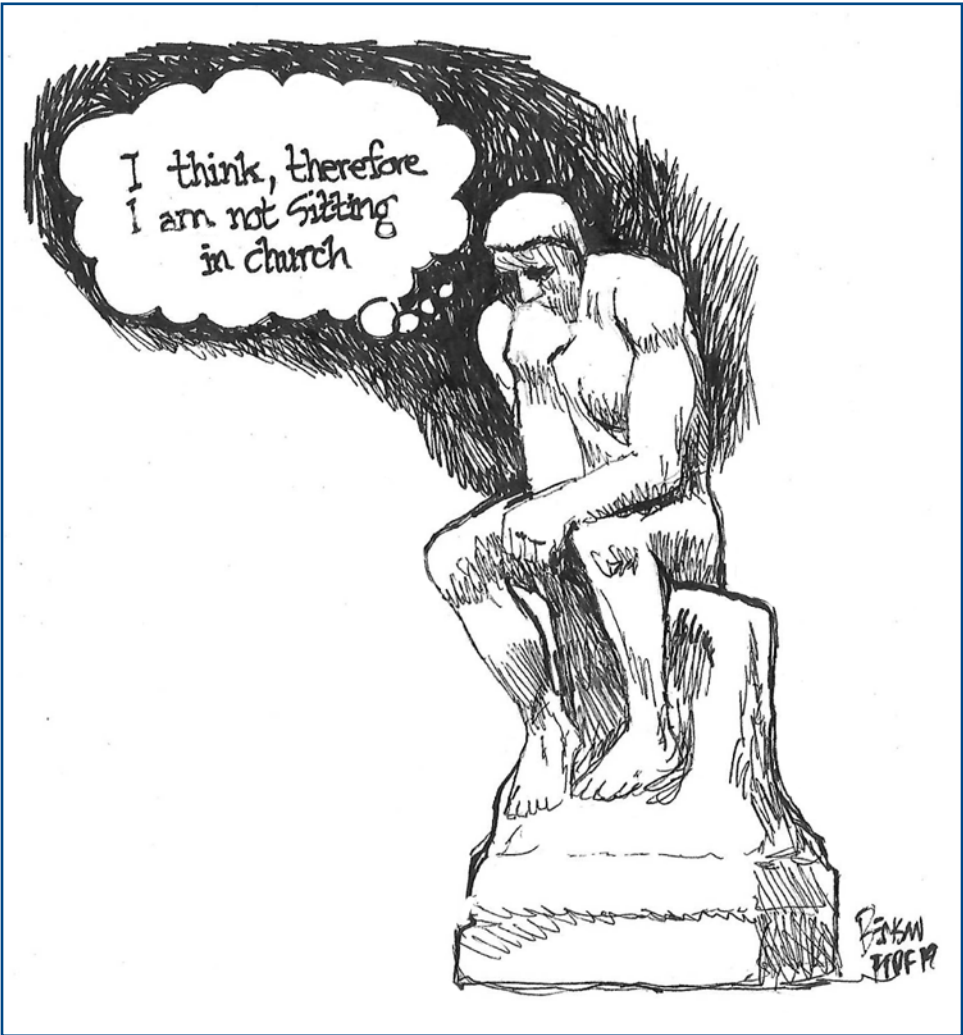
Linda Josheff
Wisconsin

Alabama case pushed me to become Life Member

I have been an atheist since I was 12. That's when my parents gave me the choice to continue to go to church or not. I immediately opted out. Although we never discussed it, I am pretty sure my mom was a nonbeliever, as she is the one who pushed to not have me baptized, much to the astonishment and lifetime ire of my paternal Southern Baptist grandmother.

I have always enjoyed reading Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins. And back in 2014, I came across Dan Barker's book *Godless*. I thoroughly enjoyed reading about his transformation from a preacher to a regular reasonable person. By the way, I loved the quote: "I was the guy you didn't want to sit next to on the bus."

It was at that time that I first found



out about FFRF and I joined immediately, as I wanted to be part of a group that was standing up for the basic ideals of this country, which, for me, includes the ability to have all the religion/mythology you want, but keep it away from me and my government.

After reading Freethought Today and the story about the voter registration requirement in Alabama to sign

off on "so help me God," even though there is already case law in *Torcaso v. Watkins* on the books, it got my ire! As a result of that story, I have decided to become a Lifetime Member to help in your continued pursuit of reason and sanity. Keep up the necessary work!

David Ford
New Mexico

Congrats to secular invocation winners

Congratulations to Sarah Ray and Ann Landman for their perseverance and courage in achieving the acceptance of their local city councils in Lake Wales, Fla., and Grand Junction, Colo., to allow them to give secular invocations. I hope that, in the not-too-distant future, all local and municipal governments in this country will adhere to what our founders intended to establish when they wrote the Constitution and the Bill of Rights — a permanent wall between religion and government.

Steve Taulbee
Maryland

Baha'i faith no different than other religions

In James Haught's piece in the November Freethought Today, James mentioned Baha'u'llah and the Baha'i faith. Years ago, a businessman in my hometown actually started a Baha'i Fellowship and attracted some members. I looked into Baha'i and briefly considered joining this fellowship as Baha'i sounded more interesting to me than the Christian sects I'd known. But, ultimately, it turned out to be just as conservative, just as pray-pay-and-obey as all the other churches in the area. (The business has long since closed, and the businessman has evidently left the area, taking his Baha'i Fellowship with him.)

Andrew C. Jones
Michigan

OVERHEARD

To suggest that somehow this federal government is hostile to faith and we must vote for Donald Trump to protect Christendom is one of the stupidest arguments I have ever heard in my life. . . . Look what the Supreme Court has done on religious liberty, specifically protecting religious liberty of conservative Christians! . . . I've got a lot of the same beliefs that you have. But those similarities stop when I think that the protection of my faith, of my evangelical faith, should only be applied to me and not applied to Catholics, not applied to Jews, not applied to Muslims, not applied to the others.

Joe Scarborough, MSNBC host of "Morning Joe."
Mediaite.com, 11-5-20

The issue with the Nones isn't that religion is bad; it's that it needs to be kept out of secular government policymaking. And science needs to be in.

Danny Westneat, in his column, "Power of the 'Nones' in a growing religious

gap, or why sex ed passed so easily." In Washington, a referendum on whether to mandate sex education in the schools passed with 60 percent of the vote.
Seattle Times, 11-6-20



CC By 2.0
Emmanuel Macron
French President Emmanuel Macron, defending cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad following the beheading of a teacher, who showed his class caricatures of Muhammad as part of a lesson on free speech.
Washington Post, 10-31-20

I understand that one can be shocked by cartoons, but I will never accept that one can justify violence. Our freedoms, our rights, I consider it our vocation to protect them.

I think what happened was, over time, white evangelical orthodoxy on politics sort of just melded into Republican orthodoxy, and there's no difference anymore. We used to always believe that religion was the first cause and then politics was downstream of religion," but newer studies suggest that "those two lenses have switched places now and that partisanship is the first cause and now religion is downstream of partisanship.

Ryan Burge, a professor at Eastern Illinois University, quoted in a column by Elizabeth Breunig, "Why evangelicals aren't what they used to be."
Washington Post, 11-6-20

[America's massive failure of character] is the culmination of Trump's influence among Republicans, and among white evangelical Christians in particular. Their main justification for supporting Trump — that the president's character should be ignored in favor of his policies — has become a serious danger to the republic. . . .

Under the president's influence, white evangelicals went from the group most likely to believe personal morality matters in a politician to the group that is least likely.

Michael Gerson, in his column "This is a massive failure of character among Republicans — with evangelicals out in front."
Washington Post, 11-12-20

[White evangelicals] are, as a group, dying out (median age in the late 50s), and their views are hardly recognizable to many other Americans. . . .White evangelicals have become, in essence, an offshore island, one whose inhabitants are slowly but steadily distancing themselves from the American mainland. The fading Island of White Evangelica will, eventually, lose its influence over America.

Dana Milbank, in his column, "Trump's racist appeals powered a white evangelical tsunami."
Washington Post, 11-13-20

CRANKMAIL

Please enjoy the following thoughts from non-FFRF members, printed as received.

You are deliberately recrucifying Jesus Christ: You need to turn that question internal, because it is INSANE ANTICHRIST FILTH as you that are destroying humanity and I hope and pray every single day that God makes you suffer horribly for it! — Beth Ann Morse

Get out of Dothan: Your article regarding a prayer request at a Dothan City School is absolute Bull\$hit. First of all, it is none of your business. We, the citizens and parents of the Students didn't ask for your opinion nor do we need it. We have urged our School board to ignore you asinine "requests" and if you choose to litigate, we will financially support our system and will raise

funds as needed for whatever litigation might be necessary. You only exist to create havoc and chaos. You attempt to "FORCE" your views on others yet you try to thwart our views. Your organization is the epitome of hypocrisy. We don't need you in Dothan and will continue to operate OUR school system as we see fit for OUR Children. — Roger Kirkland

Valdosta city schools: Tell who ever you need to including your attorney to stay out of Valdosta Ga. We will do what we want to and we are not gonna have a bunch of stupid ignorant Wisconsin Yankees tell us what we will do or not do. You are threatening us and we will not have it. We don't take too kindly to threats in South Georgia so go away. — Brendon Hannon

You Are Going To Be Judged: I just wanted to warn you, that by deliberately misquoting the Bible and by misleading people you are in serious danger of God's judgement. It is okay to have differing opinions but to blatantly and grotesquely misrepresent the intentions of the Bible is very dangerous to you living a life of eternal torment in a place of darkness and where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. — Gene Staley

Your ridiculousness: Dissolve your group and Pray you all can be forgiven. Each of your members have made a choice in order to remove God from schools. Because it's so awful to have kids praying right? It's so awful to have a symbolism of good faith and goodwill towards men right? You people are the right hand of the Devil and shame

on you all for what you do every day it disgusts me and there should be a constitutional amendment that disbands your org. Or at least maybe you could rename your organization to something a little more honest, I don't know like the devil seed or maybe replace God withhate.com, or maybe we hate anything good. We are all going to hell. Luckily for you there are people like that Jasper head coach out there because maybe they can pray for you to save your souls. — Shawn Kirby

Twisting Scripture: You guys are twisting scripture to promote abortion. The truth isn't subjective. The truth is the truth and whether you believe it or not, you will stand before God one day. — Elizabeth Luyendyk

BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

Daniel Chalmers, Raleigh, NC: Misdemeanor or assault. Chalmers, co-founder with his wife of Love Wins Ministry, is charged with urinating on a sleeping woman in the rear seat of a Delta Airlines flight from Las Vegas to Detroit. Chalmers is also on staff at Catch the Fire, a church in Durham.

Alicia Beverly said she awoke to a warm feeling: “By that time I actually looked at him and I see him shake himself off and I’m like this man just peed on me. I looked and there was a puddle of pee in the seats.”

Chalmers allegedly told flight attendants he thought he was going to the bathroom. Sources told Fox 2 he had an apparent reaction to the sleep aid Ambien. According to a police report, his blood-alcohol level was 0.17 after the flight, twice the legal limit, and he said he had 2 drinks before boarding.

Beverly is suing Chalmers and his church for over \$2 million. He was suspended, then resigned from Catch the Fire. *Source: Charlotte Observer/Detroit News, 10-30-20*

Jeremy Thompson, 33, Memphis, TN: Soliciting sexual exploitation of a minor and attempted statutory rape by an authority figure. It’s alleged that Thompson, a youth pastor at New Life of Memphis, used electronic communication to engage a child between 13 and 18 years old in sexual activity and used his position of trust to attempt to have sex with the child. *Source: Commercial Appeal, 10-23-20*

Michael Zacharias, 53, Cleveland: Sex trafficking of a minor and sex trafficking of an adult and minor by force, fraud or coercion. Zacharias, pastor at St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Parish, allegedly engaged in criminal acts from 1999 when he was a seminarian to July 2020.

The alleged offenses involve 2 former Catholic school students in Toledo, OH. Zacharias is alleged to have preyed upon them as minors and as adults, trading sex for money so that they could continue their drug addictions. *Source: Findlay Courier, 10-23-20*

Patrick Wattigny, 53, Slidell, LA: 4 counts of child molestation. Wattigny, pastor of St. Luke the Evangelist Catholic Church, had resigned earlier this year as chaplain at Pope John Paul II High School after church officials were shown a series of text messages from him to a student.

The charges stem from allegations he sexually abused the student in 2013, who was 15 at the time, on at least 4 different occasions, sometimes in the church rectory. *Source: WDSU, 10-23-20*

Abner A. Rolon, 46, Davenport, FL: Scheming to defraud in the amount of more than \$20,000 and presenting himself as a contractor without a license. Rolon, senior pastor at Calvary First Assembly, allegedly attempted to bilk an 85-year-old woman with visual, hearing and mobility impairments out of \$36,440, according to a Haines City Police Department press release.

Rolon allegedly gave the woman “A Servant’s Hand” business card in June and presented himself as a licensed contractor capable of multiple services. Building inspectors later found a water heater, ceiling fans, windows, electrical work and light fixtures incorrectly installed. He allegedly also billed her for roof and porch repairs that were not done.

“To take advantage of an elderly woman trying to sell her home and to this extent, is simply unconscionable,” said Police Chief Jim Elensky. “We should be able to rely on our local pastors to serve as community leaders — not lying, stealing and taking advantage of people.” *Source: The Ledger, 10-21-20*

Brandon Tovar, 35, Decatur, IL: Grooming. Tovar, a volunteer youth leader at Heartland Community Church who lives alone but has visitation rights with his 12-year-old daughter every other weekend, allegedly engaged in inappropriate conduct with his daughter’s 12-year-old girlfriend.

The daughter told police Tovar was sleeping with the 12-year-old in his bed and that they were cuddling on the couch Sept. 19. She gave police a photo she took of them on the couch and copies of Snapchat messages between them.

Tovar allegedly told police he was lonely and weak and knew it was wrong to send sexually explicit messages to the girl. *Source: WICS, 10-21-20*

Robert L. Gilmore Sr., Casper, WY: 6 counts of 2nd-degree sexual assault and 7 counts of indecent liberties with a minor. Gilmore, pastor at New Life Tabernacle Church, is accused of assaults on several victims, including a girl who alleged to police that in 2003, when she was 5, Gilmore told her that having sex was part of preparing to be baptized.

Another alleged victim described an incident in the spring of 2004 or 2005 when she was taken into the church basement after Sunday school to change into a baptismal gown. Gilmore allegedly took off all her clothes and molested her, telling her it was God’s will. *Source: KTVQ, 10-15-20*

John S. Hackmann Jr., 45, Marion, IL: Child

pornography and felony intimidation. Hackmann has been relieved as pastor at Marion First United Methodist Church, according to a statement from Bishop Frank Beard.

He’s accused of soliciting a teen to get lewd photos of female friends who are her age and of threatening to show her mother a private video of her and her boyfriend. *Source: KFVS, 10-14-20*

Kenneth R. Sullivan Jr., 36, Lexington, NC: 3 counts of obtaining property by false pretenses, obtaining property by false pretenses of over \$100,000, 3 counts of securities fraud and exploiting a disabled or elderly person while in a position of trust. Sullivan was clerk of sessions at Grace Presbyterian Church, a position which gave him control of its financial accounts.

He was initially charged in 2019 with 3 other counts alleging he stole \$340,384 from the church and church members through fraud, including his own parents and other relatives. It’s also alleged he tried to obtain another \$429,000 by applying for credit cards and personal loans using other people’s names. *Source: Winston-Salem Journal, 10-13-20*

Richard A. Kelton, 37, Holly Springs, NC: 3 counts of indecent liberties with a child. Kelton, who volunteered at Hope Community Church while working as a realtor, is charged with assaults on 2 girls. Two of the charges stem from alleged incidents in April 2012. The third allegedly took place from May 2019 until October 2020.

Kelton, a married father of 3, formerly worked for the YMCA but left in 2012. *Source: WRAL, 10-12-20*

Jeff Taylor, 46, Strafford, MO: 7 felony counts of statutory sodomy and statutory rape. Taylor, a now-fired student pastor at First Baptist Church, is accused of assaults on a girl starting when she was 11.

The probable cause statement said law enforcement was made aware of the case when a woman told them that her employee, now 19, told her about her alleged sexual relationship with Taylor and that she had decided to go public after hearing he was involved with an adult woman at the church.

The statement said Taylor admitted to the relationship: “To me, it was the way that I could love her. ... Whatever picture of love she has now, I put it there. It’s my fault.” *Source: KY3, 10-11-20*

Travis Clark, 37, Pearl River, LA: Obscenity. Clark, pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church and chaplain at Pope John Paul II High School in Slidell, was arrested after police were called to the church and viewed a video recorded by a passerby. Police allege the person “observed and had video of Ms. Cheng and Ms. Dixon” using plastic sex toys while engaging in intercourse on the altar with Clark, who was still partially wearing his priestly attire. A mobile phone mounted on a tripod was recording the scene under stage lighting.

Mindy Dixon, 41, Kent, WA, and **Melissa Cheng**, 23, Alpharetta, GA, were also arrested for violating a law prohibiting people from having sex within public view. Dixon works in the adult film industry, often as a dominatrix.

Archbishop Gregory Aymond of New Orleans later told parishioners that the desecrated altar had been removed and burned. “The church is a very holy place,” Aymond said.

Clark had succeeded **Patrick Wattigny** [see 10-23 item above] as chaplain at Pope John Paul II High School. *Source: Times-Picayune, 10-8-20*

Frank A. Noe Jr., 56, Speedwell, TN: Incest and 5 counts of child rape. Noe is pastor at Bennett’s Fork Baptist Church in Middlesboro, KY. It’s alleged Noe assaulted a male victim between 30 and 40 times when he was between the ages of 4 and 8.

The affidavit says the alleged victim’s mother corroborated his statements. There are also allegations of abuse involving a younger female family member. *Source: WRIL, 10-6-20*

Roger C. McLaney II, 47, DeFuniak Springs, FL: Organized fraud over \$50,000. McLaney, a communications officer at the Walton County Sheriff’s Office, is charged with embezzling over \$100,000 from Friendship Baptist Church while serving as its treasurer since 2016. *Source: WEAR, 10-6-20*

Salvatore DiStefano, 61, New Providence, NJ: 5 counts of use of a juvenile to commit a crime and 6 counts of endangering the welfare of a child. DiStefano, chaplain since at least 2012 at Oratory Prep, an all-boys school in Summit, is accused of threatening the welfare of 6 students while leading a school club named the “Knights of Malta.”

According to the prosecutor, he “would frequently attempt to speak with the students about sex and instructed a student to masturbate in order to relieve stress. He also allegedly made repeated attempts to entice a student to accompany him away from the school alone and took steps to conceal that activity, for instance telling the student to leave his cell phone at school so that his true location would be hidden from his parents when he met with him off-campus.”

It’s also alleged that he routinely texted and called club members and at various times in late 2019 let them consume cannabis edibles in his office and allegedly bought THC cartridges for them as well as providing them money to do so. *Source: Catholic News Agency, 10-5-20*

Levi S. Esh Sr., 63, Pequea, PA: Pled guilty to 2 counts of failure to report child sexual abuse while he was an Amish bishop in Lancaster County. A plea bargain calls for him to serve 2 years’ probation and 25 hours of community service aimed at informing others in the Amish community of the legal requirements of mandated reporting.

Church member **John G. Beiler** allegedly confessed to Esh that he sexually abused 3 girls in 2012 or 2013. Beiler faces 9 pending charges. Court documents state that 2 other people in the church allegedly raised abuse concerns in 2019 with Esh and other church leaders but were told it was “none of your business.” *Source: Post-Gazette 10-26-20*

Lorenzo R. Washington, 49, Lexington, SC: Pled guilty to 2 counts of 1st-degree assault and battery. Washington, senior pastor at Mt. Hill Missionary Baptist Church in Aiken, was arrested after a Dorman High School student reported she was assaulted in January 2019 in a school concession stand during an after-hours event.

Washington, a member of the school booster club, allegedly touched the girl over her clothes and kissed her on the neck and mouth. He was initially charged with sexual conduct with a minor and attempted criminal sexual conduct with a minor under 16. *Source: WSPA, 10-21-20*

James Russell, 50, Las Vegas, NV: 20 to 95 years in prison on Michigan convictions for creation, possession, transportation and distribution of child pornography. He was accused of taking nude photos of a boy at his home in Norton Shores between 2009–12. The person in the photos, his now-adult son, alleged Russell took thousands of photos of him naked.

Russell worked for 22 years as a teacher and elementary school principal and at various times has been a camp counselor and youth ministry

volunteer at several churches. Another teacher found Russell’s interest in students unusual and filed a complaint in 2018. He was suspended and then resigned.

In 2019 he moved to Las Vegas, NV, where he caught the attention of the FBI after dozens of child porn images were uploaded online. Russell confessed to uploading those photos. *Source: WOOD/KTNV, 10-22-20*

Bryan Broughton, 39, Eau Claire, WI: 48 years in prison on convictions for repeated sexual assault of a child and causing mental harm to a child. Broughton, a resident adviser at Hope Gospel Mission who also worked with children’s ministries at 2 Eau Claire churches and had been a church camp counselor, admitted assaulting a girl repeatedly when she was between the ages of 6 and 13.

He also admitted assaulting another 6-year-old girl about a dozen times and allegedly told detectives that part of the thrill was to not get caught. One girl told investigators Broughton touched her sexually at her home and at Chaos Waterpark and that she couldn’t think of a time when he came over that he didn’t touch her. *Source: WQOW, 10-20-20*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

Archbishop **John Michael Miller** of the Catholic **Archdiocese of Vancouver**, BC, **Catholic Independent Schools** of Vancouver, **John Kilty** and **Raymond Clavin** are defendants in a suit filed by “John Doe,” who alleges sexual abuse by Kilty and Clavin in the mid-1970s. Kilty, now deceased, was a priest and Clavin was a teacher and former student of the Christian Brothers. It’s not clear from the suit if he’s alive. The archdiocese is also a defendant in a separate class-action suit.

“I cannot find the right words to explain how the sexual abuse I endured at age six has impacted my life,” the plaintiff said in a statement. “When the most intimate moment of one’s young life is simultaneously the most horrifying and disgusting, there is a suffocation of every authentic experience from that moment onward.” *Source: Vancouver Sun, 10-24-20*

Skyway Community Chapel and its pastor **Jason B. Lane** are being sued by a former high school student in Palmetto, FL, who alleges fake pornographic photos created in Lane’s home caused her “unbearable shame and embarrassment.” According to the suit, detectives were unable to determine what user at Lane’s IP address posted the photos and thus haven’t charged anyone criminally.

It’s alleged that a Snapchat user named “Eli” sent images taken from clothed photos of the plaintiff that she posted on Instagram and altered them by adding realistic, bare female breasts. “Eli” tried to blackmail the girl into sending actual nude photos by threatening to send the doctored images to the entire student body at the school if she didn’t comply, which she didn’t, the complaint says.

Detectives determined Lane’s son’s name was identical to the one used on the first threatening texts and photos sent to the girl, the complaint says, and further alleges that investigators did not seek a search warrant for the son’s cellphone. He was brought in for questioning but denied guilt. His parents demanded that the questioning stop and the interview ended. *Source: Herald-Tribune, 10-23-20*

The **Order of St. Benedict New Jersey** — the Catholic order that runs **Delbarton School** in Morristown, NJ — now faces 16 sexual abuse suits in state court after 4 more were filed naming **Timothy Brennan**, a priest and former teacher, who has been the focus of at least 20 complaints since the 1980s. Brennan died in December 2019 in Missouri, where he was living in a treatment center for clergy.

The order and **St. Mary’s Abbey** have settled at least 10 suits involving Brennan over the years. At least 9 order clerics and a Delbarton lay teacher have been accused of abuse in 30 suits over the past 20 years. *Source: northjersey.com, 10-22-20*

The **New Jersey Catholic Conference**, **Newark Archdiocese** and **Paramus Catholic High School** are defendants in a suit alleging they did nothing to stop the abuse of 2 male students that now-deceased hockey coach **Bernard Garris** is accused of molesting between 1985–88.

Garris was fired in 1986 or 1987 for physically abusing students, the suit asserts. *Source: nj.com, 10-11-20*

Kelli A. Black, **John B. Black Sr.**, **St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church** in Sacramento, CA, and former pastor **Ephraim Williams** are defendants in a suit filed by Giana Lee, who alleges John Black, her stepfather, started molesting her when she was 11 in 1994 when he was a pastor at St. Paul. Kelli Black is her mother.

The night after it first happened, “Giana shut her door and lined up all of her stuffed animals against it,” court papers say. “That way, in the morning, she could tell if someone had entered her room. ... When she woke up the next morning, her animals had been thrown about the room,



but she could not figure out what happened. Subsequently, Giana would wake up and notice her shorts or underwear gone or rolled up in her blanket.”

The suit alleges that when Lee was taken to Williams for counseling at the church, he responded, “We don’t lie on good pastors!”

Lee, now 37, alleges John Black put her on birth control when she was 12 or 13 and that instead of taking her virginity, he arranged for a boy she was friends with to do it.

Black also took her with him to adult stores, where he bought her “sex books, crotch-less underwear and small vibrators,” Lee alleges, adding that after her grandmother took her to talk to police, her mother pressured her to recant. *Source: Sacramento Bee, 10-7-20*

Finances

Colorado’s **3 Catholic dioceses** have paid \$6.68 million to 73 survivors of sexual abuse by clergy. The Independent Reconciliation and Reparations Program fielded claims from alleged abuse survivors to determine their credibility and eligibility for compensation. Eight claims were rejected.

At least 166 children were abused by at least 43 priests in Colorado dating back to 1950.

The investigation found that on average it took nearly 20 years for the church to stop an abusive priest after receiving an allegation. More than half of child victims were abused after the diocese was made aware that priests were abusers.

The most-recent cases uncovered by the review were in 1990 and 1998 and 2 instances since 2000 of priests “grooming” a child.

Before the 1990s, the Colorado dioceses “often intentionally did not document child sex abuse allegations or referred to them in such euphemistic terms that they were completely obscured,” investigators wrote. An anal rape of a 12-year-old boy was documented as a “boundary violation.” Nearly 10 assaults by a priest just out of the seminary were documented as “boy troubles.” *Source: Colorado Sun, 10-16-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Richmond**, VA, has paid a total of \$6.3 million to victims who were sexually abused as minors by clergy. The diocese announced 51 claims were approved for payments through the Independent Reconciliation Program administered by a Richmond law firm.

The diocese released the results of the program: total claims, 68; total ineligible, withdrawn or never completed, 8; denied by administrator, 9. *Source: WWBT, 10-16-20*

Legal Developments

Aaron C.M. Schwartz, 22, and **Petie C.M. Schwartz**, 18, Seymour, MO, were ordered to prison after a judge determined they failed to abide by the terms of their 15-year suspended sentence. The Amish brothers were sentenced in September for molesting their 13-year-old sister, who is pregnant.

Under a plea agreement, the brothers had been ordered to complete 5 years’ probation with no prison time, have no contact with the victim and write letters of apology to the Amish community.

Prosecutor Ben Berkstresser cited a probation officer’s report that the men had contact with the girl within 3 days of signing the agreement. Berkstresser had previously defended the agreement by saying the men “would’ve been eaten alive in the state prison system.”

Demonstrators confronted several people accompanying the brothers as they entered and left the courthouse for resentencing, chanting “The Amish are not above our laws.” *Source: News-Leader, 10-22-20*

Stricjavvar “Strick” Strickland, 37, a Kalamazoo, MI, Baptist pastor charged with sexually assaulting 4 teen boys, turned down a plea deal, details of which were not available. A probable cause conference was rescheduled for December. Strickland is charged with 11 felonies.

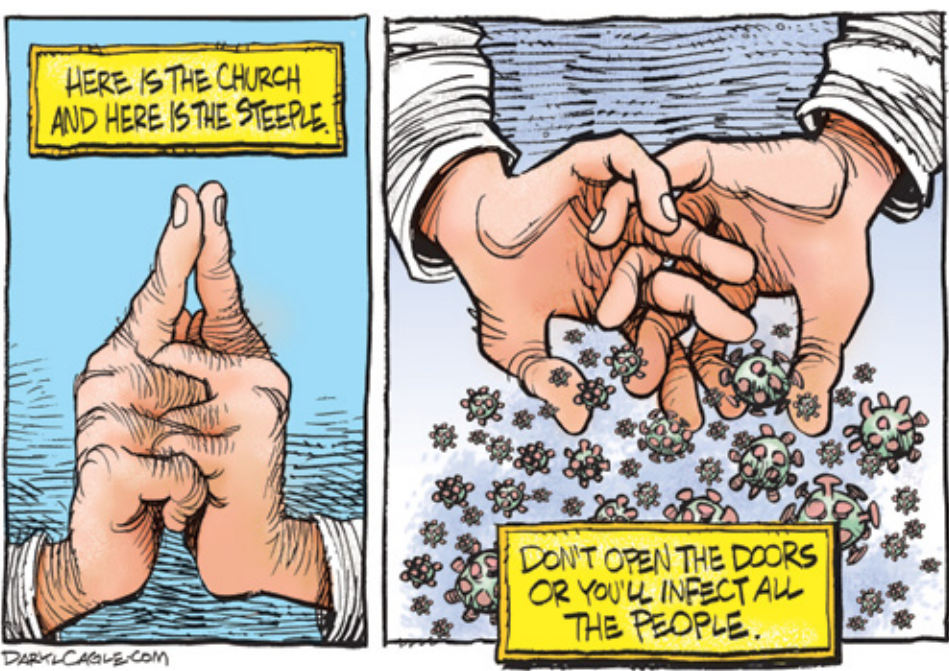
It’s alleged he and his wife Jazmonique used their positions in the church and the Kalamazoo Public Schools to coerce the boys into having sex. Strickland, a father of 8, has been working at a horse farm in his native Mississippi while out on bond. Jazmonique, 28, who is pregnant with their sixth child together, has not been charged. *Source: WWMT, 10-22-20*

The rape case against actor **Danny Masterson**, 44, can go forward, a Los Angeles judge ruled in rejecting a defense argument that the allegations are too old to be prosecuted. Masterson, best known for playing sarcastic teen Steven Hyde on “That ’70s Show,” is accused of raping 3 women at his home between 2001–03.

Four women also sued Masterson, the **Church of Scientology** and its leader **David Miscavige** in August 2019, alleging they were stalked and intimidated after going to the police. Masterson, a Scientology church member, is identified in the suit as the ex-boyfriend of all the plaintiffs, 3 of whom were church members. *Source: Variety, 10-16-20*

William Wasmus, 64, a Grove City, OH, evangelical pastor who conducted services on public access television and was sentenced to 220 years in prison for child rape in 1994, is petitioning the Ohio Parole Board to be released.

Former church member Dave Wexler is opposing release. He and his ex-wife, who married Was-



mus, discovered pornographic images and videos of children Wasmus had allegedly been molesting and turned them over to police.

“Five years ago, this four-member parole board was split 50/50 on whether or not to release [him],” Wexler said. “It was close and I think he is likely to be released if we don’t overwhelmingly protest this.” *Source: WCMH, 10-12-20*

Five Orthodox Jewish institutions in New York City were fined \$15,000 for health code violations amid the coronavirus pandemic for having more than 10 people inside their facilities. Six coronavirus clusters have cropped up in Brooklyn and Queens and in Broome, Orange and Rockland counties.

U.S. District Judge Nicholas Garaufis denied a motion by the Catholic **Diocese of Brooklyn** seeking a preliminary injunction to reopen dozens of churches across Queens and Brooklyn. The Diocese of Brooklyn has 26 churches in the state’s “red” and “orange” zones. *Source: CNN, 10-12-20*

Catholic priests **Gabriele Martinelli** and **Enrico Radice** went on trial before the Vatican’s criminal tribunal. It’s the first known time the Vatican has prosecuted sexual abuse that allegedly occurred within its walls, in this case inside the St. Pius X youth seminary, which houses about a dozen boys aged 12 to 18 who serve as altar boys at papal Masses.

Martinelli is accused of repeatedly molesting a younger seminarian when he himself was a senior altar boy at St. Pius X. Radice was the rector of the seminary at the time and is accused of aiding and abetting the crime. *Source: AP, 10-12-20*

Jun Kwang-hoon, whose Sarang Jeil Presbyterian Church in S. Korea has been at the center of a renewed COVID-19 outbreak, had a \$3.9 million claim filed against him by the Seoul Metropolitan Government. Sarang Jeil means “love comes first.”

Jun is accused of impeding epidemiological investigations by providing false information on the church’s gatherings and giving inaccurate membership lists to officials. Health officials also allege congregants hampered virus-tracing efforts by lying and evading investigators. *Source: UPI, 9-18-20*

Allegations

Jonathan Freirich, Temple Beth Zion rabbi in Buffalo, NY, was censured by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, part of the Reform movement, for 5 ethics code violations over the past 4 years. The synagogue also announced it’s ending his contract 6 months early, on Dec. 31.

Cantor Penny Myers filed a complaint in December 2019 about Freirich allegedly referring to her as “Fifty Shades of Cantor” after she returned from an overnight anniversary celebration with her husband at a winery. He also allegedly referred during the first dinner out with the synagogue’s new executive director to “popping his cherry” in front of Myers and the temple’s sound engineer.

A separate June 2019 complaint filed by a family alleged Freirich sought cellphone numbers of teen bat mitzvah students, tried to arrange study sessions with girls away from the synagogue and asked their 12-year-old daughter out for coffee to talk about her upcoming ceremony.

Temple board president David Goldberg wrote in a September email sent to 16 people and obtained by a newspaper: “We have done an admirable job, up to now, of trying to run the temple, protect the Rabbi, shield our congregants, pacify our Cantor, put on our happy faces, and hide our dirty little secrets.” *Source: Buffalo News, 10-29-20*

Jeffrey Maher, a monitor appointed to oversee the handling of sexual abuse claims at **St. Paul’s School** in Concord, NY, has resigned, accusing

campus officials of thwarting his efforts. St. Paul’s is a college-prep school affiliated with the Episcopal Church.

An investigation found credible evidence of abuse involving 20 former faculty members over several decades and 31 allegations during the last 6 months of 2019. Maher, a former college safety director and police captain, cited “an intolerable working environment,” including limiting access to information and a “seemingly orchestrated threat” of a civil suit by an administrator. *Source: The Republic, 10-22-20*

A state attorney general’s probe into sexual abuse in **7 of Michigan’s Catholic dioceses** has identified 454 accused clergy and 811 victims, which led to charges against 11 persons. Of the 11, only 2 have been convicted so far. Their sentences were for 60 and 45 days in jail. Allegations in the **Diocese of Saginaw** and the **Archdiocese of Detroit** have yet to be reviewed.

Investigators had reviewed 64% of the digital documents as of late September. Document review will continue into 2021. With court operations slowed amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the last case resolved was in November 2019. *Source: mlive.com, 10-21-20*

Theodore L. Richling Jr., a priest who served Catholic parishes in northeast Nebraska before dying in 2019, was added to the list of those credibly accused of sexual misconduct with multiple minors by the Archdiocese of Omaha. He was ordained in

1971. *Source: World-Herald, 10-16-20*

At least **a dozen priests** belonging to the **Basilian Fathers of Toronto**, a Catholic teaching order in Canada, have been accused of sexually abusing children, according to an investigation by CityNews of Toronto, which has compiled a list from mostly public sources.

Brenda Brunelle, a Canadian leader of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, called for the Basilians to release their own list of credibly accused priests.

“He taught me how to give him a blow job,” Peter Luci alleged about **Leo Campbell**, a priest he met when he was 15 in the early 1980s and Campbell was teaching at St. Mary’s College, a high school run by the Basilians.

“He’s a monster. He’s a predator. He really, really is. And he’s wearing the cloth of God,” Luci said. “I didn’t know anything about this, I was a child. When I think about it, you know, smells come back to me, and textures.”

Campbell, who spent 3 months at a treatment center for priests with addictions, would remain at St. Mary’s until 1988, when he was named principal at St. Michael’s College School in Toronto. He was in that job until he was suspended in 1992, when another historic abuse allegation came to light. *Source: CityNews, 10-13-20*

Since the **Boy Scouts of America** filed for bankruptcy in February, about 35,000 alleged victims have filed claims, with “thousands” more emerging ahead of the Nov. 16 deadline. “People are just coming forward in droves,” said plaintiffs’ lawyer Andrew Van Arsdale, who expects the number to top 50,000.

“It’s three to four times the claims filed in all the Catholic bankruptcies combined,” said Jason Amala, who is also representing plaintiffs. All BSA units are owned and operated by chartered organizations. Of the 3.62 million BSA members in 2010, 65% were in units chartered to faith-based groups.

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints units, which all withdrew from scouting in 2019, had 37,933 units and 437,160 members in 2010. The United Methodist Church sponsored 10,703 units with 349,614 members. The Catholic Church sponsored 8,131 units with 259,297 members.

The Boy Scouts model is “doomed to fail” in terms of protecting children but has become the “go-to model for organizations with large numbers

of victims” like the Catholic Church, said Child USA founder Marci Hamilton.

“It’s a potent message to the victims,” said Hamilton. “They had better come forward immediately because they might be shut out. So they come forward whether they’re ready or not.” *Source: NY Post/USA Today, 10-10-20*

Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, based in Alpharetta, GA, has opened an investigation into allegations that its late founder and namesake sexually harassed multiple massage therapists who worked at 2 day spas he co-owned.

Three women who worked at the businesses in a strip mall in Johns Creek, an Atlanta suburb, told Christianity Today that Zacharias touched them inappropriately, exposed himself and masturbated during regular treatments over a period of about 5 years.

During his ministry career, Zacharias, a renowned apologist who died last May at age 74 from cancer in his sacrum, often spoke of managing pain with massage and physiotherapy.

Zacharias masturbated in front of one woman over 50 times, she alleged, telling her he was burdened by the demands of his ministry and needed this “therapy.” Another said he showed her his erection at least 15 times in a few months. *Source: Christianity Today, 9-29-20*

Terry Kelly, a former health teacher and athletic director at **Canterbury School** in Ft. Myers, FL, a co-ed prep school founded “to promote Christian education” in 1964, is accused of sexual abuse by 3 women who attended the school. Kelly worked there from 1991–2000 and later at **Holy Innocents Episcopal School** in Sandy Springs, GA, where he was fired in 2016 for sending inappropriate messages to students, according to police records and news reports.

One woman, now 37, alleged Kelly started grooming her as an 8th grader: “I gave him oral sex when I was 16” in his red SUV but didn’t have intercourse with him until after she graduated.

Alumna Christina Anderson chastised the staff who never reported Kelly’s behavior. “Terry Kelly’s interaction with female students was an open secret. It was the worst-kept open secret at Canterbury,” she said. *Source: Ft. Myers News-Press, 9-25-20*

Removed / Resigned

William H. Love, 63, agreed to leave his position as bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Albany, NY, on Feb. 1 after a disciplinary panel found he violated church rules by ordering clergy in the diocese not to perform same-sex marriages. A Texas native, he has been bishop since 2007.

New York’s Marriage Equality Act was signed into law in 2011. Love is the only Episcopal bishop in New York to issue such an order to clergy. *Source: AP/WWNY, 10-26-20*

Ananias Buccicone, 58, pastor of Queen of Peace Parish in Patton, PA, was placed on leave in response to what the Catholic Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown described as an accusation of recent inappropriate conduct involving minors. A Benedictine priest, he has served the parish since 2002.

Thirteen other priests have been put on leave by the diocese pending investigations of allegations of sexual abuse of minors, according to its website. *Source: Tribune-Democrat, 10-22-20*

Edward Janiak resigned as bishop of the Polish Diocese of Kalisz in the wake of allegations he shielded at least 2 priests known to have sexually abused children. At 68 he is well below the normal retirement age of 75.

Pope Francis in June ordered Janiak to leave Kalisz and forbade him from having any influence on diocesan affairs, pending an investigation. Two documentary films — “Playing Hide and Seek” and “Tell No One” — by brothers Tomasz and Marek Sekielski played key roles in exposing the cover-ups. *Source: AP, 10-17-20*

William E. Dean, 70, was removed from ministry by the Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia due to a credible allegation of sexual abuse of a minor in the late 1970s. Dean had been serving for 8 years as chaplain at Camilla Hall, a home for retired and ill nuns belonging to the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Malvern.

He is legally blind. His case will be forwarded to the Vatican to determine if he should be defrocked. *Source: Catholic Philly, 10-9-20*

Other

William Faucher, 75, a retired Boise Catholic priest sentenced to 25 years in prison in 2018 for child sexual abuse, died of apparent natural causes in the medical unit of the Idaho State Correctional Institution. When arrested he had over 2,500 computer files that were sexually exploitative or pornographic. A search also found marijuana, LSD and Ecstasy/MDMA in his home. He had online conversations about wanting to rape and murder children, but in his defense claimed he never acted on those desires.

Prosecutors said the material included “many, many infant children.” Some of the images and videos also included torture of adults and torture and killing of animals. *Source: Idaho Statesman 10-30-20*

Saying goodbye to God — ¡Adios a Dios!

This speech was given on Nov. 1 during the Secular Day of the Dead celebration.

By Dan Barker

On this Secular Day of the Dead, we honor those who are no longer with us. They have not “passed on.” They are not “resting in peace.” They have not “gone to their reward.” They are dead.

I was dead once. Really. And I came back to life.

Well, not physically. I was baptized. After accepting Jesus as my savior, I was dunked under the water and lifted back out. Baptism signifies — as you are lowered beneath the surface — that you



Dan Barker

have died, just like Christ was dead and buried. When you are brought back up, you are raised from the dead to a new life, just like Jesus was resurrected from the grave. You are literally “born again.” And by “literally,” I mean not

“literally physically,” but “literally spiritually.” If you believe in the spirit world, then baptism is not just a metaphorical ritual drama — it is an actual occurrence in the supernatural world.

Of course, that was only possible because of a bloody human sacrifice: Jesus suffered an agonizing death on the cross so that you and I could be redeemed.

So I believed.

Of course, it's not just the Christian religion that is obsessed with death. Long before the gospels — many thousands of years before the ancient Israelites, and the Mesopotamians before them who first started writing things down — long before that, humans had to face the reality of death. Since they could still dream about dead ancestors, many imagined a spirit world where their loved ones live on.

Prehistoric burial sites contain food, clothing, jewelry and tools buried with the person to accompany them on their journey to the afterworld.

Ritualistic burial happened all over the planet, in various forms. The Aztecs, in what is now Mexico, inherited an ancient tradition — going back at least 3,000 years — that a dead person's soul would go up — either to the sun, or to a garden paradise — or down to the underworld, governed by the goddess Mictecacihuatl. But first, they had to endure a long journey through Chicunamictlán, the Land of the Dead. This was not a hell of torment — it was the final resting place of the soul. That journey could take several years of arduous travel and difficult obstacles. Similar to the rituals in the Fertile Crescent and Europe, Nahua rituals in the Americas, traditionally held in August, involved family members providing food, water and tools to help their loved ones in their challenging odyssey beyond the grave.

It's a celebration

This tradition continues in the contemporary Day of the Dead festival, in which people leave offerings on the graves or on homemade altars (called *ofrendas*) in their homes. These acts are positive and optimistic. The Day of the Dead is a not a mourning, but a celebration. It is not a funeral, but a kind of cheerleading.



Margaret Downey, director of the Freethought Society, coordinated, with Victoria de la Torre, the first online, international Secular Day of the Dead on Nov. 1. Margaret, who is a FFRF State Representative and Lifetime Member, co-hosted the event and is pictured with Secular Day of the Dead memorabilia. Participants included FFRF and other secular groups. Celebrities including actor John Huertas, Hollywood legend John Davidson (who sang Mexican folk songs) and author Sasha Sagan, daughter of Carl Sagan.

Since the Aztec rituals long preceded Christianity, the Day of the Dead is not a Mexican version of Halloween. Halloween came later, in Europe, where there was generally a darker attitude toward death.

Halloween is the evening of the Catholic Feast of All Saints. After the Spanish Christians invaded the Americas, the religious customs were merged and the Day of the Dead shifted to Nov. 1.

In 1755, Nov. 1 literally became a day of the dead in Europe.

That morning, the city of Lisbon, Portugal, was brimming with Catholics who packed dozens of churches for the Feast of All Saints.

Around 9:45 a.m., while worshippers were praying, the city was rocked by a massive earthquake, 10 times stronger than the one that destroyed San Francisco in 1906. Most of the stone churches were demolished, immediately killing thousands of believers who were trapped inside.

Some tried to escape by rushing to the sea. Around 10:20, the first tsunami arrived, drowning many. More earthquakes and tsunamis followed, battering the wounded city, causing great human tragedy.

But that wasn't the worst. The fires that broke out grew into a roaring inferno that blazed for days through the rubble, incinerating trapped survivors, impeding rescue efforts and destroying structures that were still standing.

Convents and hospitals were ruined. So were prisons. Many of the criminals who were suddenly free began rampaging through the ruins, looting and raping. Some of them broke into homes that had survived the quakes, killing the inhabitants. In the days that followed, vermin and disease plagued the homeless and destitute survivors.

This “day of the dead” incited a huge debate across Europe about the problem of suffering. Voltaire wrote his famous “Poem on the Lisbon Disaster,” savagely attacking trite religious theodicies. Is death the “wages of sin,” he asked, or is it the result of natural forces? Some thinkers began to question the existence

of a good god.

Mexico has also had its share of earthquakes, one of the largest of which hit Mexico City in 1985. That shows us that there is one thing that unites all people on the planet, all cultures throughout history.

Death is for all

Death belongs to all of us. How we deal with it varies, but the fact of death is inescapable.

Of course, as an evangelical Christian, I did not believe that. After I was baptized and called to the ministry, I preached that there is indeed a way to escape death. I spent many years as a pastor, evangelist and missionary, including two years in Mexico, preaching that “For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

I was a true believer. I warned that the world was going to end at any moment, “like a thief in the night.” I spent 19 years in ministry, waiting and hoping for the day Jesus would return to take us away from this depraved planet, away from death.

There was only one time in Mexico that I remember getting any pushback to my ministry. Around 1970, I was passing out Christian literature on a sidewalk in Mexico City when a well-dressed man came walking by. I approached him and started telling him that there are more important things in life than money, that Jesus offers true meaning and the hope of salvation. He seemed to be in a hurry, so I quoted Matthew 6:34, where Jesus said “Take no thought for tomorrow. Tomorrow will take care of itself.” He looked me straight in the eye and said, “If I believed that, my company would go bankrupt.”

He quickly walked away, leaving me with nothing to say.

Decades later, when I returned to Mexico for the first time as a nonbeliever, I spoke to a group of atheists in Mexico City and confessed my sin of arrogance and condescension when I was a preacher. I asked them to forgive me

— to absolve me of the sin of missionizing — and they did! I can hold my head high in Mexico now.

It's a journey

The Day of the Dead is not about the end of anything. It is about a journey. A journey from one state of existence to another. I also made a journey — from preacher to atheist — and much of it happened in Mexico. I always felt at home in Mexico, maybe partly because one of my great-great-grandmothers was born in Chiapas, and the next three generations, including my mom, were born in Tucson, Ariz., in the middle of Mexican-American culture.

It was in Mexico, in fact, where I first admitted to myself that I was an atheist. I had just gone through a period of about four or five years of thinking and reading, gradually moving across the theological spectrum from fundamentalist at one end, through the moderate middle for a couple of years, to the more liberal thinking that does not hold the bible to be literally true. If the story of the Prodigal Son is a parable not intended to be taken historically, and if the tale of Adam and Eve is a metaphor, then what else in the bible might be symbolic rather than actually true? Perhaps Yahweh, God himself, is just a literary invention, a huge figure of speech. When I realized there is no way to know where to draw that line, God moved from concrete to abstract. I learned that there is no coherent definition of God, no agreement among believers as to the nature or moral principles of such a God, no good philosophical argument for the existence of such a creature, no good reply to the Problem of Suffering, no evidence for an afterlife, and no need for a god — because you can live a happy and moral life without such a belief. Combine that with the fact that Jesus stubbornly refused to return like he promised, and it looks very much like it is all myth and that the natural world is all there is.

I was lying on a cot one night in the Sunday School room of a Baptist church in a little ejido south of Mexicali where I was spending the night in the summer of 1983. I was looking out the open window at the night sky. Those stars are gathering material and burning it up, shining brightly for a while in the darkness before they burn out and cough their atoms and energy back into the void. For the first time in my life, it dawned on me that I was completely alone in that room.

There was no watchful eye judging my thoughts and actions. There were no spiritual beings competing for my soul. I realized that I, like those stars, am a part of the natural universe. I am a little low-wattage sun, ingesting material, burning it up at about 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit, and will one day sputter out and disperse my atoms and energy back into the universe. I finally met my true self — I am an animal, and that is all, and that is good enough. At that moment, I truly became a “born again” creature of which the scriptures so ignorantly speak. I completed my journey from supernatural to natural, from “life after death” to “life before death.” A life that will end.

My arduous odyssey complete, I looked out that window and said, “Adios a Dios.”

Dan Barker is co-president of FFRF and author of the books *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists*, *Losing Faith in Faith* and *GOD: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction*.