

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



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Appeals court expands FFRF victory against Gov. Abbott

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has won its case at the appeals court level against censorship of its display in the Texas Capitol by Gov. Greg Abbott.

The unanimous opinion by the three-judge court panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on April 3 granted FFRF additional relief. The judgment, written by Judge Stephen A. Higginson, sent the case back to the district court that previously ruled in FFRF's favor, to issue a more expansive remedy to protect FFRF's right to place displays in the future and to ensure a similar constitutional violation cannot happen to other organizations.

FFRF, with the help from members and the requisite sponsorship by a legislator, had placed a Winter Solstice display in the state Capitol in December 2015 as a response to a Christian nativity scene there. FFRF's whimsical display depicted the Founders and the Statue of Liberty celebrating the "birth" of the Bill of Rights (adopted Dec. 15, 1791). Abbott, as chair of the Texas State Preservation Board, ordered FFRF's display taken down



FFRF's Bill of Rights "nativity" display.

only three days after it was erected, lambasting it as indecent, mocking and contributing to public immorality.

In a judgment issued June 2018, U.S. District Judge Sam Sparks, for the Western District of Texas - Austin Division, declared that Abbott had violated FFRF's free speech rights and "engaged in viewpoint discrimination."

Abbott appealed that ruling on narrow technical grounds, arguing that the district court lacked the power to rule in FFRF's favor. The 5th Circuit disagreed — and ordered the district court to issue broader relief that will ensure FFRF's free speech rights are protected in the future.

See Abbott on page 9



Feeling helpless or angry? Here's how to fight back

Many of you have contacted FFRF, angry and worried that governors or other officials across the country are exempting churches and religious worship from the "safer at home" orders necessary to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

If you're stuck at home, perhaps feeling a little helpless, isolated and angry that these churches are risking your life and the lives of your loved ones, we want to help you fight back.

In response to the overwhelming and heartening volume of requests for advice on how best to hold our elected officials accountable during this

turbulent time, FFRF has created a set of resources for your use. FFRF's website now has a page specifically dedicated to secular activism in the time of coronavirus. You can access it here: ffrf.org/legal/covid-resources.

FFRF has already sent a letter to every governor explaining why church exemptions are unconstitutional and lethal. We've also asked each FFRF member to call and email your own governor. That action alert has basic talking points. We've sent other letters of complaint, too. We've written op-eds. We will continue to challenge these inappropriate religious

exemptions. And we know you want to fight them, too.

Please continue to report (ffrf.org/legal/report) any state/church violations happening in your community. While the Religious Right continues to exploit this global public health crisis as an opportunity to peddle their beliefs, we in the secular community must use all the resources at our disposal to ensure that reason-based solutions drive our public policy responses and solutions to this pandemic.

Thank you for your activism. We hope you are staying home and staying safe.

FFRF settles suit over HUD open records denial

The Freedom From Religion Foundation successfully settled a federal lawsuit April 23 over the denial of its Freedom of Information Act request by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

FFRF teamed up with Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW), a governmental watchdog, after HUD Secretary Ben Carson dodged records requests related to the White House bible study.

FFRF and CREW filed suit in January 2018 in the U.S. District Court for the

District of Columbia, alleging HUD's pattern and practice of denying fee waivers on FOIA requests where disclosure of the documents was "likely to cast the agency or HUD secretary in a negative light."

FFRF and CREW have subsequently received the desired documents. In the settlement, HUD has agreed to address the remaining issues by offering two sessions of in-person mandatory fee waiver training for the FOIA office, issuing updated fee waiver guidance for employees, and paying costs and attorneys' fees to the plaintiffs (\$14,400 to CREW and

\$3,400 to FFRF).

"One of the major benefits is that the updated training and guidance will ensure that citizens and groups will have access to agency records," explains FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott. It is FFRF's information and understanding that HUD had been illegally rejecting requests to waive fees. The lawsuit has remedied that situation by forcing the agency to give FFRF and CREW the records without charge and by promising to hold trainings to update staff.

In addition to seeking records that

were related to the White House bible study, FFRF had asked for records related to Carson's attendance at an event at the Museum of the Bible.

"Government needs to work in sunlight," comments FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. "Our lawsuit has ensured that should be happening in the future at HUD."

The case was before U.S. District Judge Carl J. Nichols. Anne Weismann, chief FOIA counsel for CREW, and Patrick Elliott, senior counsel for FFRF, represented the plaintiffs.

IN MEMORIAM

Bob Love was founding member of FFRFMCC

Tom Cara, FFRF Metropolitan Chicago Chapter's executive director, wrote the following about FFRF Member Bob Love:

With a deep heart, I am very sorry to announce the death of one of our dedicated chapter members. Bob Love died Feb. 24 at the age of 91 after battling pneumonia for many weeks.

As one of FFRF Metropolitan Chicago Chapter's founding members, he always looked forward to participating in our events. But, due to his recent need to take care of his ailing wife Lily, Bob could not join in with us as much as he would have liked. He had always been a tremendous financial supporter of the chapter since its inception, and was very much a champion of the mission of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. He had also been very hopeful of having the opportunity to visit Freethought Hall one day, which was something we had talked about doing together. I feel badly this was not something we were ever able to arrange.

Bob was an avid tennis player and was always ready to offer a good joke, particularly those which poked fun at religion.

He served in the military after World War II, and always recounted how servicemen had to provide a declaration of

religious faith. At that time, there was no choice for those who had no religious affiliation, so his only option was to indicate "Jewish," which was the religious identification of his birth family. But identifying as Jewish presented its own problems during his years in the military, as all were compelled to participate in Christian worship services. This was something that always troubled him for the 70 years after he finished his duty, as he had been a staunch atheist for most of his life.

Last spring, he and Lily needed to sell their condominium when it became clear she needed greater assistance in her daily living. They moved to an assisted living community, from where Bob had contacted me last fall with the news that a secular group had formed at their facility. This was something he was very excited about since, prior to that, it was primarily those of religious faith who were provided with activities and services catering to their beliefs. He had invited me to attend their first meeting, which took place in November, and I was pleased to join with the group to provide an FFRF perspective.

My wife Erin and I had the pleasure of having dinner with Bob and Lily on occasion. That became more difficult to do once Lily's health began to deteriorate. Sadly, Lily is now without him, but Bob left her in good hands when they moved to Sedgebrook Retirement Community, which provides wonderful care.

It is always a sad day when we lose a fellow freethinker. Bob's devotion to nontheism and state-religion separation will be missed. Let us carry on that work.



Roger Schempp, center, with parents Ed and Sidney, and siblings Barbara and Ellery.

Roger Schempp was part of landmark court case

Roger Wade Schempp, who testified in the *Abington v. Schempp* First Amendment case, died March 29 at age 77.

He was born Feb. 28, 1943, to Edward and Sidney Schempp. He was the husband of the late Mary Lou "Lucy" Zimmerman, to whom he was married for 40 years (until her death in 2009). He is survived by his elder brother Ellery, younger sister Donna, brother-in-law Tom Rute, and sister-in-law Ellen (Bitsy) Zimmerman.

Lucy and Roger first met in Nebraska at Hiram Scott College where Roger graduated. Roger went on to work at the Public Works Department of Pennsauken Township, N.J., as an inspector at the landfill.

His place in history is secured as he was part of a landmark U.S. Supreme Court First Amendment case — *Abing-*

ton v. Schempp (1963). At the age of 17, he testified to uphold the "separation of church and state" rights of children in U.S. public schools. Due to his family's and his efforts, the case terminated the exercise of mandated bible reading in public schools throughout the country.

Roger set up the family's scrapbook of newspaper articles and letters, thus establishing a historical archive.

Roger loved trains, not only the family's Lionel model trains, but also riding on them. Several times he would travel across the country coast to coast to visit his parents.

He volunteered for years at a Pennsauken food pantry and was energetic in his support of the Unitarian-Universalist Church in Cherry Hill, N.J. Roger loved animals, particularly cats, and volunteered at PetSmart.

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church

By Emily Dickinson

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church —
I keep it, staying at Home —
With a Bobolink for a Chorister —
And an Orchard, for a Dome —

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice —
I, just wear my Wings —
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton — sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman —
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last —
I'm going, all along.

From *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

Psychologist Leonard Coleman dies

FFRF Member Leonard Coleman of Bonita Springs, Fla., died Aug. 8, 2019, at age 84.

He was a clinical psychologist at the VA Hospital. He was preceded in death by his wife Lita Coleman in 2014 and daughter Pamela Coleman in 1979.

Coleman had many hobbies, including ham radio operator and advocacy for veterans in New York. He was raised in Malden, Mass.

Upon his death, he left a bequest to FFRF of more than \$40,000.

Barbara Smoker was atheist activist, leader

Humanist activist and freethought advocate Barbara Smoker, 96, died April 7.

She was president of the United Kingdom's National Secular Society from 1972–1996, chair of the British Voluntary Euthanasia Society (now known as Dignity in Dying) from 1981–1985 and an honorary vice president of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association in the United Kingdom.

Barbara is featured in the anthology, *Women Without Superstition*, edited by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

She was born in London on June 23, 1923. She served in the Women's Royal Naval Service from 1942–1945 in Southeast Asia.

The National Secular Society wrote the following in her obituary: "Barbara, who at one stage had herself considered becoming a nun, claimed she became an atheist at precisely midday on Nov. 5, 1949, when she concluded that the Catholic claim of papal infallibility was impossible. This was no sudden conversion, rather a tipping point for a young woman harboring increasing doubts."

She was managing director of the Rationalist Press Association and editor of *The Humanist*.

In 1950, Smoker joined the secular humanist movement when she became a member of the South Place Ethical Soci-



Barbara Smoker

ety, where she was critical of seeking redress on religious grounds. Eventually she became president of the National Secular Society for nearly 25 years. In that capacity, she represented the atheist viewpoint in print, on lecture platforms, speaking tours, on radio and television.

She was in demand to give addresses at secular funerals and eventually officiated at nonreligious funerals, wedding ceremonies, gay and lesbian commitments and baby namings. She was active in various social campaigns, such as the abolition of the death penalty, nuclear disarmament, legalization of abortion and for the Voluntary Euthanasia Society. She financed the manufacture of the first "Make Love, Not War" badges that were popular in Britain during the 1960s.

In 2019, she published her autobiography *My Godforsaken Life: Memoir of a Maverick*.

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Court nears moment of truth on religion

The majority’s view of the free-exercise clause poses a threat to society

This excerpted article first appeared in *The New York Times* on Feb. 27 and is reprinted with permission.

By Linda Greenhouse

A few years ago, two Michigan prison inmates, proclaiming themselves adherents of the “Christian Identity” religion, sought the prison’s official recognition to be allowed to conduct their own worship services, apart from other inmates. The prison already recognized 20 religions, including a number of Christian denominations, but the two men said they couldn’t pray with others because their religion demanded “white separatism.” While they observed several Jewish holidays, including Passover and Yom Kippur, they said they couldn’t join Jewish inmates in prayer because “the Jewish faith denies Jesus Christ.”

The official in charge of “religious programming” for inmates advised the prison administration to deny the men’s request. He noted in his memo that “the Christian Identity movement is known to have extreme racist and anti-Semitic views with a history of violence in the United States,” along with ties to the Ku Klux Klan and other white-supremacist groups. Giving Christian Identity a recognized place in prison life, he warned, “would pose a threat to the custody and security of our correctional facilities.”

The two prisoners sued under a federal law, the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act. They lost in federal district court. In February, the 6th U.S. Court of Appeals overturned that ruling. The court said the district judge, Phillip Green, had misapplied the law by weighing the prison’s interest in safety as part of his analysis of whether the prison was placing an improper burden on the men’s exercise of their chosen religion.

Say what? If you wondered whether the members of the three-judge appellate panel were recent Trump appointees who perhaps share his administration’s desire to elevate religious claims above all else, so did I. They were not.

And, in fact, I don’t really fault the judges — Richard Griffin, Jane Stranch and Bruce Donald — for a decision that strikes me as ridiculous. Christian Identity has been described by the Southern Poverty Law Center as “a unique anti-Semitic and racist theology” that has held a posi-



Photo by Shutterstock

tion of “commanding influence” on the extremist right. What sensible person, or judge, would want to allow it to flourish inside a prison?

The startling fact of the matter is that Griffin, Stranch and Donald were applying the law as they found it — as the Supreme Court has handed it to them in a series of decisions instructing judges to accept almost any religious claim, no matter how preposterous, at face value and to put the government to an extremely tough test to justify any infringement on a “sincere” religious belief. In the *Hobby Lobby* case six years ago, the court gave dispositive legal weight to the claim by owners of two for-profit businesses that the legal requirement to include contraception coverage in their employee health plans would make them complicit in the sin of birth control.

“It is not for us to say that their religious beliefs are mistaken or insubstantial,” Justice Samuel Alito wrote for the majority.

Frightening harbinger

Rather than looking at the 6th Circuit prison decision (*Fox v. Washington*) as an outlier, we need to see it as a harbinger, a frightening one. I don’t know whether this particular case will end up at the Supreme Court. But there are plenty of cases like it, making claims that would have been dismissed out of hand not too many years ago and that now have to be taken seriously by those of us worried about the growing threat that an increasingly weaponized free-exercise clause poses to civil society, along with the statutes meant to extend its reach.

The court is scheduled to hear two cases that are follow-ons to the *Hobby Lobby* decision. The cases challenge rules issued by the Trump administration to provide employers with not only an enhanced

religious opt-out from the Affordable Care Act’s contraception requirement, but also with a generalized “moral exemption” for employers who object to covering birth control but who can’t claim a basis in religious doctrine for not following the law.

On Feb. 24, the justices accepted a closely watched case that has been at the top of religious conservatives’ Supreme Court wish list. It challenges the city of Philadelphia’s termination of a contract

with Catholic Social Services, one of the private agencies certified to find families to take in foster children. Objecting to same-sex marriage, the agency, which is affiliated with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, won’t place children with same-sex married couples. It thus refuses to abide by the city’s Fair Practices Ordinance, which bars discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, among other characteristics.

When, for that reason, the city’s Department of Human Services stopped referring children to Catholic Social Services for placement, the agency, known as CSS, sued, claiming a violation of its religious liberty. It lost in both federal district court and in the 3rd U.S. Court of Appeals.

In one major respect, the claim in this case, *Fulton v. Philadelphia*, resembles the claim in a case from Montana that the court heard last month. In that case, *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*, parents who want to use state scholarship vouchers to send their children to religious schools are claiming a violation of their religious rights because the voucher program was terminated by the Montana Supreme Court. Montana’s Constitution prohibits spending public money for religious education, and rather than vet the nature of each school at which a voucher might be used, the state court shut the program down for religious and nonreligious schools alike. So, on the one hand, the parents want religious schools to be treated like any other schools. On the other hand, they seek special treatment in the face of the voucher program’s across-the-board termination.

Special treatment

In similar fashion, Catholic Social Services on the one hand seeks treatment as an equal among the several dozen agencies the city contracts with for foster placements. On the other hand, it claims the right to not follow a law that applies to everyone.

In two other respects, however, this new case is even more portentous — or promising, depending on one’s view — than the others. Five years after it ruled in favor of same-sex marriage, the Supreme Court has yet to fully address the objections of those who claim religious reasons for refusing to treat same-sex couples as equals. (The court failed to say anything meaningful two years ago in the case of the baker who wouldn’t bake a cake to celebrate a same-sex marriage.) Other such cases are pending, including one from a florist who doesn’t want to arrange flowers for a same-sex wedding. The court has not yet acted on that appeal, *Arlene’s Flowers v. Washington*, which was filed in September. Although the Catholic Church is not a direct party in the Philadelphia case, it is clearly the central actor in its agency’s dispute with the city, leaving no ambiguity about the doctrinal basis for the claimed right to an exemption. Whether a baker is a “cake artist” entitled to deploy his creative gifts as he chooses is not the kind of distraction that will emerge when the case is argued next fall.

Finally, the new case is especially important in offering the court a chance to do formally and in one sweep what the conservative justices have been trying to do more quietly case by case. Catholic Social Services is asking the court to overturn a 30-year-old decision, *Employment Division v. Smith*, which held that as a general matter, the Constitution’s free-exercise clause provides no exemption from a generally applicable law, so long as the law wasn’t enacted to target religion.

Congress’ response to that decision was swift. It passed both the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Person’s Act with the goal of blunting the force of the 1990 decision by forbidding government from interfering with religious practices unless it could show a compelling need to do so. (The court later ruled that Congress lacked the power to impose the Religious Freedom Restoration Act on the states, many of which have now passed their own versions.)

As religious conservatives have come to dominate the court in the intervening decades, the court itself has made the most of statutes that were actually intended as a rebuke to its authority. The Religious Freedom Restoration Act in particular, initially seen by a broad liberal coalition that supported it as protection for minority religious practices, has become a powerful tool in the hands of a politically energized Christian majority. Justice Antonin Scalia’s explanation for why the free-exercise clause can’t be read as a license to opt out from the general obligations of civic life now feels as if it comes to us from another era — as indeed it does.

“It may fairly be said,” Scalia wrote, “that leaving accommodation to the political process will place at a relative disadvantage those religious practices that are not widely engaged in; but that unavoidable consequence of democratic government must be preferred to a system in which each conscience is a law unto itself or in which judges weigh the social importance of all laws against the centrality of all religious beliefs.”

Now that the country’s justices and its religious politics are aligned, the question is how far the court will go. A moment of truth is approaching. If we don’t want hate groups to have a seat in the prison chapel, the time to start drawing lines is now.

Linda Greenhouse, the winner of the 1998 Pulitzer Prize, writes about the Supreme Court and the law.

Your weekly antidote to the Religious Right

FREETHOUGHT RADIO

PODCASTS AND BROADCASTS

FIND OUT MORE: ffrf.org/radio

— Hosted by Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor —

Slightly irreverent views, news, music & interviews

FFRF.ORG

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

HEADS UP

A Poetry Column By Philip Appleman

WILL

More or less sound
of mind and memory,
I venture this testament.

1
To the poets, in the perfect pitch
of your dangerous music,
I bequeath the fiber of quench and gravel,
slush and splinter, ratchet,
forage, and fizz.
And though you will face the welter
of blizzard, tussle, and brawl, the scud
of umbrage, rankle, and jeer,
I leave you the spell
of periwinkle, condor, daffodil, velvet,
trickle, rapture, and pine.
Even in the wasteland of writer's block
and the quicksand of murderous deadlines,
you will find them sprouting up
somewhere in the sunshine: impudent, racy,
passionate, irresistible.
Gather them in
with pleasure.

2
To the lovers, in the blooming
of each new moment, I hereby bequeath
a lifetime of honor and cherish.
I endow you with a glimpse of forsythia,
the shimmer of silk on a chair back,
the smell of bakeries at sunrise,
the secrets of sparrows.
And because there will be detours and chuckholes,
fields of nettles, and weeks of freezing rain,
I leave you my vested interest
in maple trees, jonquils, coral, and amber,
the flavor of raspberries, a taste of skin,
and yells of joy in troubled skies—
all of it for worse,
for better.
In witness whereof, this day
I set my hand—
and hope.

Photo by Brent Nicastro



© Philip Appleman

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

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

FFRF welcomes 13 new Lifers

FFRF welcomes and thanks its 13 new Lifetime Members and one new After-Life Member.

The newest After-Life Member is Virginia Massa. She was gifted the membership by Kenneth Fahrenholtz. (Thanks, Ken!) After-Life Membership is a tongue-in-cheek-named membership category of \$5,000 for those who want their membership to "live on" after them.

The newest \$1,000 Lifetime Members are Jehnana L. Balzer, Bill Chollett, Carolyn Crites, Daniel Fregin, Carole Iverson, Joe Leventhal, John Martinez, Matthew Neiger, Peter Norris, Diane Sollee, W. Andrew Stover, Nancy Ungar and Randall Scott

Walden.

States represented are Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas and Wisconsin.

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.

Atheism became professor's philosophy

Name: Tom Shipka.

Where I live: Youngstown, Ohio.

Family: Katie Kane Shipka, spouse; Anne Louise White, daughter; Andrew Shipka, son.

Education: A.B. in philosophy from John Carroll University; Ph.D. in philosophy from Boston College.

Occupation: Emeritus professor of philosophy and chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Youngstown State University.

How I got where I am today: I was raised in a Roman Catholic family and even spent two years in a seminary with the intent to become a priest. The change in plans was triggered during college largely by the exposure to philosophy courses, where the distinction between faith-based beliefs and reason-based beliefs took hold. This led to graduate work in philosophy, a doctoral dissertation which featured two atheists — Sartre and Dewey — and a 49-year career of teaching, researching, and publishing philosophy.

Where I'm headed: During my retirement, I continue reading a lot, serving as president of my condo association, backing political candidates who support a strong social safety net,



Tom Shipka

and, with FFRF, supporting the separation of government and religion and opposing Christian Nationalism.

Person in history I admire and why: Thomas Jefferson for his invaluable role in the founding of our nation.

A quotation I like: "Science is the answer to our prayers." — House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, in a television interview about the coronavirus pandemic, March 31, 2020.

Things I like: Teaching, motorcycling, reading, eating out, eating sweets, exercising, talking over coffee with friends, doing commentaries on the local NPR affiliate, attending YSU football and basketball games.

Things I smite: The role of wealth and religious extremism in undermining our government and the separation of government and religion.

My doubts about religion started: Thanks to philosophy courses in college.

Before I die: I hope to continue doing what I do now as long as my health permits. As my will and other legal documents provide, I will not acquiesce in an extended disability, especially a mental one.

Ways I promote freethought: During 10 years of commentaries on the local NPR affiliate, I often highlighted our Founders (especially James Madison and Jefferson), prominent atheists, and the roots of terrorism, violence, and intolerance in religious scriptures, including the "Good Book." Also, I am a member of all the major national organizations which promote secularism and the separation of government and religion.

What cultural changes worry you a lot today? The decline in reading books, newspapers, and magazines across all age groups in the United States due initially to the spread of television and more recently the global spread of cellphones and social media.

Caption contest winner!

Congratulations to Chris Watson of Idaho for winning the April caption contest. Chris wins an FFRF T-shirt.

The winning entry is: "Google Maps GPS: 'You have arrived at your destination.'"

Runners-up are: "We hold this truth to be self evident," by Mike Chupa of Pennsylvania.

"Don't say you weren't warned," by Dan Nerren of Oklahoma.

"And to think I dragged a cross all the way here," by Riku Kurki of Wisconsin.

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



A helpful guide to choosing the perfect god

By Gene Twaronite

It's not like going into a store and selecting a new sofa or mattress, though, come to think of it, you should look for something comfortable and durable. Most of us never get a chance to choose a god we can live with. We grow up with the religion we're assigned at childhood, and, by the time we reach adulthood, it's too late.

Some of us ignore or eventually grow out of it. Others suffer a wrenching existential crisis when they discover that the religion that once sustained them no longer provides answers. And some decide to just go with the flow and settle into a comforting complacency of lukewarm faith.



Gene Twaronite

Too bad we're not provided at childhood with intensive training on all the many options available in choosing a religion or god. Instead of being brainwashed into the religion of their parents, kids would take comprehensive comparative religion courses, beginning with basic pre-school stuff about the actual meaning of the word "god" and what that entails. As they advance, they would learn what to look for in a god, and how to recognize a good deal when they see it.

To start with, just what is a god supposed to be? An all-powerful being, some would say. But that's hardly a sufficient answer, not even for a 3-year-old. How powerful? Can it do tricks? Can it make things, like the Earth and stars and planets? At the very least, you want a god that can create everything.

Durability is important. You want a god that goes the distance and won't crap out on you after five years or 100,000 miles, whichever comes first. Some gods do offer a lifetime warranty, though the price can be steep.

A factor not often discussed is portability. Say you decide to change your religion. Can you take your chosen god with you to your new religion? Sad to say, this is not the case. You're pretty much stuck with the religion's own brand of god. Suppose you really dig the Egyptian



The Shiva statue in Rishikesh, India.

god Hathor, otherwise known as the Cow Goddess, who is sometimes depicted as having a woman's body and a cow's head. You can't just take her with you if you suddenly convert to Islam or Christianity. It's a pity, since allowing followers to bring along as many gods as they please would certainly help to liven up religions and make worship more fun.

And how tough is this god? Can it beat the crap out of other gods in a fight? You don't want a wimpy god. Take the Hebrew god Yahweh of the Old Testament. He doesn't like what people are doing, so he makes a big flood and wipes out every creature on Earth except for those onboard an ark. Now there's a tough god!

But I wonder just how tough Yahweh would be if he had to go a round or two with the Hindu god Shiva the Destroyer. Supposedly, he goes around destroying not only all life, but the whole universe just so it can be re-created. He is said to have a third eye, the source of all his wild energy. He wears a cobra necklace and animal skins, and wields a mean-looking trident. Yahweh, on the other hand, appears as a burning bush.

This brings up another problem. Once you have chosen and accepted a god, you can't help trying to visualize this god. That might work for Greek gods, who are viewed as merely glorified versions of hu-

mans. But if yours is a Christian god, it is generally believed to be transcendent, totally incomprehensible, and incorporeal. So just how the hell are you supposed to visualize it?

Raised as a Catholic, I had to take the god I was given, the one true Catholic one, or so my catechism said. I was told that god (in fairness to other gods, I am not using capitals) was infinite, mysterious and beyond anything I could possibly imagine. That didn't stop me from trying.

“As a kid, I would look at a statue or picture of Jesus and imagine that he was actually a long-haired, bearded, white hippie in sandals, like some cool guy at Woodstock.”

Fortunately, there were plenty of visual aids. Catholics are big on icons, which can include crosses, statues, carvings, pictures and even little plastic figurines you mount on the dashboard to keep you safe.

As a kid, I would look at a statue or picture of Jesus and imagine that he was actually a long-haired, bearded, white hippie in sandals, like some cool guy at Woodstock. But he always seemed kind of wimpy to me. I couldn't imagine him chasing the money changers out of the temple. And he had always had a sorrowful face. Didn't he ever laugh? Paintings of god the father showed an old, gray-haired and fleshier version of a white guy, as if Jesus had just grown up. Who decided that god was white? And it was always a man, not a woman. As for the Holy Ghost, what's with that? Sounds like Halloween. At least put a sheet on him and show him as a ghost, not some silly white dove.

And while I was stuck with these limited male images of god, other religions had all kinds of cool deities. I especially loved Hinduism, where you have Ganesha, with an elephant's head and round human body. And it has female gods, too! There's that divine female known as Devi, and fair-skinned Sarasvati, all dressed in white. Better yet, there's full-bosomed Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, with her broad hips and warm smile. I can just hear her saying, "Why don't you come up some time and see me?" Gods don't have to be limited in their attributes.

You also want a god who doesn't require too much of you. It's all right for a god to expect a little acknowledgement and maybe an occasional thanks now and again, when things are going well. But I would definitely draw the line at those Mayan gods who require regular human sacrifice. Now, some people might find this has a certain cachet. Not me. If I

have to kill someone to worship you, well, that's unacceptable. Even a god who says such a thing, but doesn't really mean it, is not to be trusted.

Whenever I heard that story in the Old Testament about god telling Abraham to kill his only son, I thought, "What kind of god would even suggest such a thing?" It totally creeped me out. Supposedly this was symbolic foreshadowing of the promised son of god to come, who would be sacrificed for the good of humanity, but for me, the damage was done. Then god tells Abraham to just go kill a poor ram instead, and everything's fine. Well, it ain't. Killing animals shouldn't be a requisite, either. As for the son of god metaphor, you'd think an infinitely powerful god would find a better way to communicate with his subjects than staging such a sophomoric act. Downright sloppy.

So, what kind of requirements should you look for? At one end of the spectrum, you have gods who are content with a little chanting and dancing, general detachment, and just going with the flow, with maybe a little meditation thrown in. You can easily fit that in after work and still have the whole weekend free for less divine pursuits.

Watch out, though, for the Mormon god, who demands that you abstain from alcohol, tobacco, coffee and tea, and must marry for eternity (marrying for life is hard enough). The Rastafarian god may insist you wear dreadlocks. The Nation of Islam god requires you to pray five times a day. He also requires that you respect all laws, don't make war, and not bear arms, the last which some Second Amendment folks might find hard to obey. The Gnostic god requires strict celibacy and asceticism, since all matter is considered evil. This might explain the fact that this religion is pretty much extinct.

For minimal obligation, nothing beats the Deist god who, being totally uninterested in the world, doesn't require you to do a goddamn thing. He doesn't want to hear about your whiny needs, either, so don't bother praying to him.

One final thing to look for. You definitely want a god who is cool. I always had trouble thinking of Jesus as cool. Yeah, he was supposed to have performed all those miracles, like turning water into wine — a neat trick, I must admit. But his mother had to beg him to do it, to which he replied, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." Jesus Christ! You're talking to your mother, dude. I just couldn't relate to him.

So, here are a couple of imaging suggestions for a cool god. Imagine her as Lady God, in the form of Billie Holiday, at the top of her fame, singing her divine, jazzy songs "God Bless the Child" and "Strange Fruit." All she would require of us is that we sing to one another. A case could also be made for Frank Sinatra or Queen's Freddie Mercury, either of whom would be a lot more fun and inspirational than some wimpy, goody-goody hippie in robe and sandals or that fat old guy on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Personally, I can't think of a better image than that of Louis Armstrong, or Lord Satchmo, as his followers call him. Just imagine him creating the world with a blow of his sweet trumpet, then singing softly to himself, "What a Wonderful World."

This is an excerpt from FFRF Member Gene Twaronite's new collection of essays, My Life as a Sperm: Essays from the Absurd Side.

View daily entries and quotes at ffrf.org/day

FREETHOUGHT OF THE DAY

“The word miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is a monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson
Address at Harvard Divinity College (1838)

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IN THE NEWS

Atheist loses appeal over citizenship oath

On April 3, the 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a 2018 ruling that reciting the phrase “so help me God” in the Naturalization Oath of Allegiance was not unconstitutional.

Olga Paule Perrier-Bilbo had filed a federal lawsuit against the United States in 2017. The French citizen, who has lived in the United States since 2000, said she could not “in good conscience include those words in her oath.”

U.S. District Judge William Young said in his ruling that the phrase was a “well-established tradition” and was merely ceremonial.

Pastor dies from disease after keeping church open

A prominent Virginia pastor died April 11 from the coronavirus after telling his congregation in March, “I firmly believe that God is larger than this dreaded virus.”

Bishop Gerald Glenn founded New Deliverance Evangelistic Church in Chesterfield and spoke about the coronavirus on March 22, days after Virginians were urged to avoid large non-essential gatherings of more than 10 people.

“I am essential,” he said of remaining open, adding, “I’m a preacher — I talk to God,” according to the New York Post.

Atheists most politically active group in U.S.

Atheists are near the top or at the top in political participation, according to an analysis of the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey by Ryan P. Burge of Eastern Illinois University.

In all six scenarios offered by the survey, atheists were first or second in

likelihood to participate. A quarter of atheists attended a march or protest compared to just 4.4 percent of white evangelicals. Four in 10 atheists have contacted a public official or donated money to a candidate. That’s tied with Jews, but is much higher than most Christian groups in the sample.

At every level on the education spectrum, atheists and agnostics are more politically active than Protestants or Catholics. More education leads to higher levels of political activity among all religious groups, but the relationship is even stronger for atheists than other groups.

Cardinal Pell freed after conviction overturned

Australia’s highest court on April 7 overturned the sexual abuse conviction of Cardinal George Pell, the highest-ranking Roman Catholic leader ever found guilty in the church’s clergy pedophilia crisis.

Pell, 78, who was the Vatican’s chief financial officer and an adviser to Pope Francis, was sentenced to six years in prison last March for molesting two 13-year-old boys after Sunday Mass in 1996.



Cardinal Pell

He was freed after a panel of seven judges ruled that the jury ought to have entertained a doubt about his guilt. The judges cited “compounding improbabilities” to conclude that the verdicts on five counts reached in 2018 were “unreasonable or cannot be supported by the evidence.”

Pell had receded from the public

mind during his time in prison, and with the exception of his die-hard supporters, most Australians had come to accept his guilt as an established fact.

Michigan drops opposition to secular celebrants

The Center for Inquiry (CFI) withdrew its lawsuit against Michigan after the state attorney general reversed the government’s opposition to let secular celebrants officiate weddings.

The Center for Inquiry reports that in May 2018, it “challenged Michigan’s marriage laws for unconstitutionally granting exclusive authority to solemnize marriages to religious ministers, while denying that authority to Secular Celebrants trained and certified by CFI, which advances reason, science, and humanist values.”

But the new state administration that took office in 2019 interpreted the existing statutes as expressly permitting CFI’s Secular Celebrants to perform marriages, leading the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Michigan to dismiss the case as a settled matter.”

Poll: Majority has prayed for end of coronavirus

A majority of Americans have prayed for the end of the coronavirus pandemic, according to a poll from the Pew Research Center.

According to the survey, published April 6, 55 percent of U.S. adults say they have prayed for an end to the spread of coronavirus. Evangelicals are among the most likely to say that they have prayed for an end to the virus, with 82 percent saying they’ve done so. Among religious “Nones” — those who describe their religion as “nothing in particular” — 36 percent say they have prayed about the virus. And 15 percent

of those who generally seldom or never pray say they have prayed for an end to the crisis.

Muslims clash with police over lockdown

On April 3, Pakistani Muslims at a Karachi mosque clashed with baton-wielding police trying to enforce new curbs on gatherings to prevent Friday prayers and contain coronavirus infections, officials said.

According to Reuters, television footage showed dozens of people chasing two police vehicles and pelting them with stones as an officer fired in the air to disperse the crowd.

Health experts warned that the pandemic could easily overwhelm the weak public health systems in the region.

But Muslim-majority Pakistan and Bangladesh, and India, home to the world’s largest Muslim minority, have struggled to persuade conservative religious groups to maintain social distancing.

South Carolina school district owes AHA \$450K

In South Carolina, the Greenville County School District must pay more than \$450,000 to the American Humanist Association after losing a six-year legal battle over graduation prayers.

In August 2019, U.S. District Judge Bruce Hendricks stopped the district from including prayers at graduation ceremonies.

The school board claimed the ruling was unclear, caused “confusion,” and favored secular speech over religious speech.

The school district owes AHA \$446,466 in attorneys’ fees and \$9,776 for other expenses. The district said it would appeal the fees.

Pastors arrested for public health violations

The first known U.S. arrest of a pastor for holding church services amid the COVID-19 pandemic occurred March 30 in Tampa, Fla., when Rodney Howard-Browne, 58, was booked on misdemeanor charges of unlawful assembly and violation of a public health emergency order. He’s the pastor of the River at Tampa Bay megachurch and he and his congregation had been warned earlier by sheriff’s officials about the “dangerous environment they were creating for their members and the community,” reported the Tampa Bay Times.



Photo: Hernando County, Fla.
Howard-Browne

Instead, Howard-Browne held two large services March 29 and even offered to bus people to the church, where it live-streamed the three-hour “Main Event” service on its Facebook page, showing congregants shoulder-to-shoulder while the church band played.

He joined evangelical leaders who laid hands on President Trump during

a 2017 Oval Office meeting and has promulgated conspiracy theories about the pandemic, including that it was planned at a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation event. He’s being represented by the Liberty Counsel, a right-wing legal group.

Hillsborough County Sheriff Chad Chronister, a Republican, said at a press conference that he ordered the arrest “because of the reckless disregard of public safety and after repeated requests and warnings” were ignored.

Two days later, Howard-Browne said in a social media livestream that he would not open the church for Palm Sunday services April 5. “I’m doing this to protect the congregation,” he said, then added he was protecting them from a “tyrannical government,” not the coronavirus.

Louisiana pastor charged

A Pentecostal pastor in the Baton Rouge suburb of Central, La., was charged with six counts of violating Gov. John Bel Edwards’ emergency order barring gatherings of over 10 people, and later arrested for almost backing his church bus into a protester.

Mark A. “Tony” Spell, 42, pastor of Life Tabernacle Church, drew about 1,000 people to services March 22, in part by bussing people in from five par-

ishes. He also had been holding services on Tuesdays. Spell told CNN that response to the pandemic is “politically motivated.”

After being charged, Spell vowed to hold services again and said, “[I]f I am arrested, the second man in charge will step in. If he is arrested, the third man in charge will step in. If he is arrested, the thousands of people who are members of this congregation are gonna step in, but you can’t take us all.”

The next night, hundreds of parishioners, young and old, packed the church and were monitored from outside by law enforcement and media,



WAFB-TV reported. On Easter Sunday, reports from various sources say more than 1,300 people filled his church, despite the governor’s order.

On April 19, police say Spell was charged with aggravated assault in connection to the church bus incident that was caught on tape, according to NBC News.

A note to FFRF Members

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Bailout for religious entities unconstitutional

By Andrew L. Seidel

Lurking within the recently passed congressional stimulus package is a constitutional violation that virtually guarantees massive fraud and abuse.

Churches, houses of worship and nonprofits with religious missions are eligible for a sizable part of the \$2 trillion stimulus under the CARES Act, which allows businesses and nonprofits to take out forgivable loans from the federal government. That's



Andrew L. Seidel

a problem because it's unconstitutional for our government to tax citizens and then turn around and hand that money to churches to pay their preachers or mortgages. The federal government can't take our money and give it to Joel Osteen or Robert Jeffress or Paula White — even in the wake of a pandemic. It's also a nightmare because churches and religious nonprofits, unlike every other charity in the United States, don't disclose any financial information to the government or taxpayer.

As part of their public trust, 501(c)(3) nonprofits file an annual report with the IRS that details specific financial information — down to every penny. Unlike other 501(c)(3)s, churches are not required to file anything. They



are financial black holes. Public trust requires public transparency. Without it, the public cannot verify that nonprofits are honoring that trust and that it is not being abused or exploited.

For instance, how much of our money will flow to Trump's inner circle of preachers? Will we be covering the mortgage on Jeffress' \$130 million church? Will we be paying President Trump's "spiritual adviser" White's church and White House salaries? Will the Catholic Church, mired in scandal and with a bank all its own, be dipping into taxpayers' pockets? What about the virulently anti-gay Westboro Baptist Church? Because they entirely lack

financial transparency and accountability, churches are already rife with fraud and abuse. Churches qualify for CARES Act funds even if they have never registered as a church with the IRS. Receiving these taxpayer funds could be literally both the first and last time the government ever hears of them.

There are no safeguards built into the CARES Act. It is irresponsible to provide financial support to such organizations, and doubly so without requiring transparent accounting. Taxpayer funds should only be available to nonprofits that file financial information with the IRS, even if not required to do so by federal law. Oth-

erwise, Congress is handing out taxpayer money with no accountability whatsoever.

But Congress can't give taxpayer money to churches in the first place. That is the original safeguard and a unique principle that America bequeathed to humanity. This rule dates back to before the founding of our republic. The constitutional ban on taxing citizens for the benefit of religion guarantees religious liberty, for as Thomas Jefferson put it in the "Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom" (1786), "to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical."

Some will argue that this is just a question of equality and that churches should be treated like every other business and nonprofit. But that's the very problem: Churches are not. They are substantially favored under our system. State-church separation gives religion significant benefits, for instance, preventing the courts from adjudicating internal church disputes. Attached to these benefits are relatively few burdens, most importantly, that taxpayers cannot be forced to fund religion.

Funneling money to churches under the CARES Act augments the benefits churches receive under the separation of state and church, while eliminating the burdens. Churches get to have their cake — which the American taxpayers must buy — and eat it, too.

Andrew L. Seidel is the director of strategic response at the Freedom From Religion Foundation. He's the author of the recently published *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism Is Un-American*.

FFRF's first music video makes 'heavenly' splash

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is delighted to release its first animated music video, which takes a gentle jibe at unreasonable beliefs in an afterlife.

What better time than the here and now to enjoy the 2-D music video, featuring a clever poem, "Heaven," by Rupert Brooke, which pokes fun at that fishy story of the afterlife. The video exposes the irrationality of heavenly hopes by framing wishful thinking about an afterlife from the point of view of a fish. The poem is a favorite of *God Delusion* author Richard Dawkins, and his father was particularly fond of it, too. You can view it on FFRF's You-

Tube channel.

FFRF Co-President Dan Barker set the 1913 poem to music with calypso overtones several years ago. Recent art school grad Kati Treu brings the song and verses to life with her winning cartoon depiction of the religious longings of a fish.

The protagonist fish in Treu's depiction is cast down by the idea of there being nothing "beyond" and insists that "somehow, good shall come of water and of mud" and there must be "a purpose in liquidity." The fish imagines an afterlife filled with fat caterpillars, paradisaical grubs, "unfading moths, immortal flies, and the worm that never dies." (Watch the final few seconds, which reveal the fish's fondest dream about heaven.)

Brooke died tragically young during World War I. Barker, an accomplished piano player and songwriter, has recorded three musical CDs for FFRF. This song is not yet available on a CD.

Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president, briefly introduces the video and clarifies the freethought view on heaven. She comments: "Those who have taken the religious bait are all wet. Thinking people understand why hell is a disturbing idea. But the concept of heaven is also destructive, promising pie in the sky when you die, and discouraging humanity from making this world, our only life, heaven on Earth."



Artwork from the music video "Heaven" is by Kati Treu.

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FFRF NEWS

FFRF keeps pressure on during pandemic

The FFRF Legal Team has been as busy as ever these past two months as it ramps up its campaign to stop public officials from promoting religion during the coronavirus pandemic.

During normal times, a large percentage of FFRF’s legal work is focused on public schools around the country.

Now, FFRF has turned its attention to governors and other officials in charge of what happens during this troubling time.

The chart on this page shows what FFRF’s Legal Team and Strategic Response Team have been responding to lately. More letters have been sent since this issue went to press.

FFRF sent out mailings to all 50 governors about not exempting church gatherings from their shelter in place orders.

It also sent out specific letters to 17 governors, cautioning against the exemptions they’ve granted to religious gatherings from prohibitory orders that could have dire consequences.

“States all over the country, from Connecticut and Pennsylvania to New Mexico and Colorado, have exempted religious congregations of various sizes from coronavirus-related crowd regulations,” FFRF writes in a press release. “Religious gatherings are a severe community health hazard, FFRF emphasizes. The data doesn’t lie. One-third of all COVID cases in one large California county can be traced to church services.”

But it’s not just letters that FFRF has been sending out to state/church separation malefactors.

In response to near-daily accounts of government officials stepping over the state/church line, FFRF has sent out press releases and newspaper op-eds to inform the public. Here are snippets from a few of them:

• March 23: FFRF protests Vice President Pence’s appeal for church contributions.

“At a Coronavirus Task Force press briefing on March 21, the vice president told Americans that if they don’t attend a church service due to the global pandem-

List of officials FFRF has contacted			
Agency	State	Letter Sent	Description of Contact
Arizona Attorney General	AZ	3/13/2020	False advertising of corona virus protection at religious event
Bell County School District	KY	3/17/2020	Preaching about coronavirus in school
City of Sumter	SC	3/20/2020	Sumter Day of Prayer for Covid-19
Governor of South Carolina	SC	3/23/2020	Prayers at governor’s press conferences
Governor of Tennessee	TN	3/23/2020	Gov. Lee telling people to pray
Office of the Vice President	DC	3/23/2020	VP encouraging people to still donate to their churches if they are closed due to Covid-19
Governor of Utah	UT	3/23/2020	Utah governor religious proclamation
Fort Bend County, Texas	TX	3/25/2020	Fort Bend County Constable promoting prayer
Governor of West Virginia	WV	3/26/2020	West Virginia governor declared day of prayer
Governor of Oklahoma	OK	3/27/2020	Gov. has declared a day of prayer in response to Covid-19
Gilmer County Office of Emergency Management	WV	3/27/2020	Gilmer County Emergency Management dept promoting prayer on FB
Mount Airy	NC	3/30/2020	Mt. Airy mayor issuing call to prayer, urging church bells to ring
Governor of Louisiana	LA	3/31/2020	Governor calling for prayer, endorsing fasting and prayer as working
Senator Marsha Blackburn	TN	3/31/2020	Marsha Blackburn religious FB posts
Governor of Mississippi	MS	4/1/2020	Mississippi governor prayer service on FB (again)
CEO of MyPillow	MN	4/1/2020	CEO of MyPillow made religious remarks during Coronavirus taskforce meeting
Mayor of Jackson	MS	4/1/2020	Jackson mayor leading prayer service
Governor of Kentucky	KY	4/2/2020	Gov. Beshear religion in daily messaging
St. Bernard Parish	LA	4/3/2020	Violation of the Establishment Clause by St. Bernard Parish
Governor of Ohio	OH	4/6/2020	Gov. Dewine religion in corona update
Governor of Wisconsin	WI	4/6/2020	Thanking Tony Evers for the coronavirus response criticizing church exemption
Governor of Alabama	AL	4/6/2020	Gov. Ivey religion at press conference
Lt. Governor of Mississippi	MS	4/8/2020	Lt. Gov. directing churches to ring their bells
US Representative of Wyoming	WY	4/8/2020	Liz Cheney religious statement
Lt. Governor of Alabama	AL	4/8/2020	Lt. Governor “Ring for the Resurrection” campaign
Attorney General of Kansas	KS	4/9/2020	Kansas exemption for churches in gathering ban
Representatives who signed onto letter supporting act	LA/ SC	4/9/2020	Funding churches under the CARES Act
Raleigh County Sheriff’s Office	WV	4/9/2020	Raleigh County Sheriff’s Office religious FB post
Mayor of Pella	IA	4/10/2020	Day of Prayer Proclamation
Governor of Wyoming	WY	4/10/2020	Day of Prayer Proclamation
Mayor of New York	NY	4/10/2020	De Blasio support for discriminatory religious org running hospital
Governor of Ohio	OH	4/13/2020	Ohio stay at home order church exemption
Governor of Iowa	IA	4/13/2020	Iowa gov. declared day of prayer
Mayor of DC	DC	4/13/2020	DC mayor prayer proclamation
Governor of Arkansas	AR	4/14/2020	Gov. Hutchinson inviting preacher to coronavirus press conference
Governor of Missouri	MO	4/20/2020	Gov. Parson religion in coronavirus briefings, Good Friday text
Surgeon General	DC	4/20/2020	Promotion of religion from Office of Surgeon General

ic, they should still ‘go ahead and make that donation.’”

• March 26: Governors must prohibit church gatherings, FFRF urges.

“The rights the First Amendment guarantees, such as free assembly and the free exercise of religion, are limited. In fact, the government already regularly limits worship gatherings if they jeopardize public health. Preventing large gatherings due to a pandemic is crucial.”

• April 2: It’s unconstitutional to bail out churches, FFRF and others remind Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley.

“A group of eight civil rights and re-

ligious freedom organizations sent a letter to SBA urging the agency to respect existing regulations and the Constitution. ‘Taxpayers cannot be forced to fund churches, even in a pandemic,’ comments FFRF Director of Strategic Response Andrew L. Seidel.”

• April 2: FFRF welcomes police action against religious scofflaws.

“Zealous ministers nationwide are denying the science of preventive measures and the authority of the state to enforce them, with some even promising that they possess supernatural powers to ward off the coronavirus. . . . We need to see

more such arrests — and subsequent convictions. Religion is not a license to risk the lives of Americans, any more than it is a license to discriminate.”

• April 13: FFRF tutors members of Congress on the Constitution.

“FFRF is objecting on constitutional grounds to members of Congress urging federal agencies to include houses of worship in the stimulus package.

“For members of Congress to blithely cast aside long-standing principles of separation of state and church is to sacrifice religious freedom in a moment of panic, FFRF asserts.”

Judge moots FFRF lawsuit over W.Va. bible class

A federal judge dismissed the claims of a mother who, with the support of FFRF, has been challenging religious indoctrination in a West Virginia school system. Because those classes were suspended as a result of FFRF’s litigation, the court ruled the lawsuit is moot.

Senior U.S. District Court Judge David Faber ruled on March 31 that Elizabeth Deal could not pursue an injunction against bible classes. The judge requested additional briefing on Deal’s claim for nominal damages.

Deal and the FFRF filed suit in 2017 over Bible in the Schools (“BITS”) classes taught for nearly 80 years in Mercer County. That school district suspended the classes, but did not provide formal assurances that classes would not resume. Deal, who had to remove her third-grader from the school in order to avoid the bible classes, won an earlier appeal before the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which found that she had standing to challenge the classes. Shortly after that decision, the Mercer County Board of Education adopted a resolution saying that the classes would not return to elementary schools. The U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear



an appeal by the school district last October.

With the case returning to the district court, Faber has now ruled that claims for an injunction are moot because “defendants have met their burden to show that the classes could not return.”

In the brief filed with the district court, FFRF and Deal had argued that the school board’s actions were merely an “attempt to thwart judicial review of its constitutionality.” The board’s resolution was adopted just two weeks after it lost on appeal. The plaintiffs’ brief pointed out that there is no meaningful bar to the classes resuming and that the school superintendent has in fact expressed a desire to do so.

The original legal complaint has examples of the blatantly religious curriculum imparted to Mercer County public school elementary students. One lesson promoted creationism by claiming humans and dinosaurs co-existed. Students were asked to “picture Adam being able to crawl up on the back of a dinosaur! He and Eve could have their own personal water slide! Wouldn’t that be so wild!”

The plaintiffs submitted an additional briefing on April 8 to explain that Deal can pursue nominal damages. When the case is finally resolved, FFRF and Deal may appeal the judge’s decision that claims for an injunction are moot. An appeal would be heard again by the 4th Circuit.

Where was God?



Photo by Jenn Powell

The steeple of the Shoal Creek Baptist Church in Priceville, Ala., was hit by lightning and started a fire on Easter Sunday. The fire destroyed the steeple, but firefighters were able to salvage the rest of the building.

Many churches were damaged or destroyed by “acts of God” in March and April, including Easter Sunday. In New Kensington, Pa., the steeple on St. Mary of Czestochowa was damaged by a tornado on April 8. In Nashville, the Hopewell Missionary Baptist Church was left in complete ruins by a tornado on March 3. Also in Nashville, the East End United Methodist Church bell tower was toppled during the storm. In Bradley County, Tenn., the Church of Jesus Christ was left badly damaged. The Grants Hill CMW Church in Carbon Hill, Ala., was destroyed by a tornado on April 12 (Easter Sunday), the second time in less than 20 years it has been hit by a tornado. And the Cornerstone Apostolic Church in Chattanooga, Tenn., was damaged during a tornado that same day. And, finally, Lawler Missionary Baptist Church in Dora, Ala., was hit by tornado on Easter, including three crosses outside the church, although the middle one was left standing. Believers were quick to say that it was a sign from God because the “Jesus” center cross was not destroyed.

OVERHEARD

I had done a tour in Gitmo, in Guantanamo Bay, and that really kind of sealed the deal for me. I decided, yeah, I don’t believe in [religion] anymore. **Arlene Rios, a former military service member, who started a LatinX atheist support group in El Monte, Calif.** *Spectrum News 1, 3-3-20*

I have been hearing the argument that we do not have a right to close or restrict places of worship. I disagree with that legal analysis in all respects. **Sunrise, Fla., Mayor Mike Ryan, in April 3 email to Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis’ Chief of Staff Shane Strum, after getting mixed messages from DeSantis on whether local authorities have the right to restrict gatherings.** *Politico, 4-7-20*

Downplaying the threat and refusing to comply with social distancing measures require an indifference toward the common good, a certainty that the ends will justify the means and a brash confidence that God will be on one’s own side. **Kristin Kobes Du Mez, in her op-ed “Some evangelicals deny the coronavirus threat. It’s because they love tough guys.”** *Washington Post, 4-2-20*

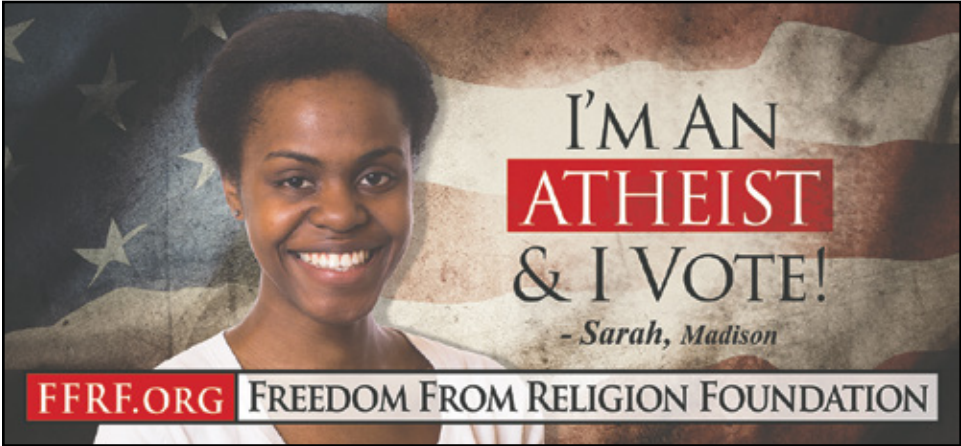
If Texas is any indicator, the rise to power of Christian Americanists may not mean an immediate shift to conservative Christian theocracy. Instead, church-state separation and religious freedom may die a death of a thousand cuts. **David R. Brockman, in his column, “New study of Christian Nationalism in Texas should be a warning for the whole country.”** *Religion Dispatches, 4-2-20*



CC BY-SA 2.0 Michael McKean

Belief in the Rapture should disqualify anyone from holding public office. **Actor Michael McKean.** *Twitter, 4-8-20*

Our behavior has stopped the spread of the virus. God did not stop the spread of the virus. And what we do, how we act, will dictate how that virus spreads. **New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo in a press conference.** *CNN, 4-14-20*



Universal vote by mail is a secular issue

The injustice of forcing citizens to endanger their lives to vote in the midst of a pandemic was recently brought home to FFRF during the debacle that was Wisconsin’s in-person primary election. Several FFRF staff members were forced to risk their lives — and the lives of their families — on April 7 in order to vote, after requesting absentee ballots that never arrived. Both the Wisconsin and U.S. Supreme Courts compelled the state’s voters to violate stay-at-home orders and risk health and plague to exercise their constitutional right to vote. (Note that both courts safely issued these undemocratic decisions via remote work.) Dissenting Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg warned that the decision would result “in massive disenfranchisement” and wrote that the reasoning of her conservative colleagues “boggles” the mind. All evidence so far backs up Ginsburg’s prediction. Only five polling places were even open in Milwaukee, a county of nearly 1 million people (down from more than 180 polling sites in normal elections). Lines were long at many polling stations, making social distancing a joke. Poll workers had to sit close to each other, and handle countless IDs, thanks to Wisconsin’s unnecessary voter ID requirement. Even worse, the deci-

sion to override Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers’ accommodation, which would have allowed a longer time frame to mail in ballots, was purely ugly partisan politicking, a preview of coming attractions in November. The pandemic has brought renewed attention to the advantages of universal vote by mail. American secular voters are becoming a force. Secular voters sharply increased their share of the U.S. electorate to 17 percent by 2018: a massive 55 percent increase. FFRF wants to see those numbers continue to climb. After all, the nonreligious are 26 percent of the U.S. population, so we have secular muscle to flex. Currently, five states conduct all elections entirely by mail (Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington and Utah) and 21 allow voting by mail in lesser elections. Conveniences include privacy, fewer barriers for those with disabilities, more time to vote (ballots are sent out in advance), and to consider one’s vote. Even better, voting by mail costs less — in one study up to 40 percent less. Best of all, the convenience tends to increase turnout and enhance democracy at work. Universal vote by mail will not just help secular voters, but will assist all Americans to exercise their supreme right of citizenship. FFRF supports it. We hope you will, too.

Abbott

Continued from page 1

“It’s highly gratifying to win our court battle in *FFRF v. Abbott*,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Free speech — even for the atheists Abbott reviles — is alive and well in Texas, despite the governor’s attempts to malign, censor and exclude nonbelievers.” The district court is now tasked with deciding whether Texas’ rules governing displays in the Capitol leave so much room for discriminatory censorship that they must be scrapped altogether.

Citing prior decisions, the 5th Circuit warned that any government regulations on speech must “provide adequate safeguards to protect against the improper exclusion of viewpoints.” Higginson’s opinion was joined by Judges James E. Graves Jr. and W. Eugene Davis. The case was argued before the 5th Circuit by FFRF Attorney Sam Grover. Outside counsel Richard L. Bolton and FFRF Attorney Patrick Elliott also represent FFRF in the case.

Freethought Matters

A weekly half-hour TV talk show produced by FFRF

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

Watch our show every Sunday!

Photo by Chris Line

Visit FFRF's YouTube Channel to watch the shows.

Freethought Matters TV talk show airs in:

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

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

FFRF VICTORIES

Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey

Arizona

A menorah has been removed from Chandler Unified School District property.

An area resident reported that Perry High School had been displaying a 7-foot-tall menorah in its front office. This menorah was apparently built by a local club for Jewish teenagers who received permission from the district to display it at Perry High School. The club was also reportedly encouraging more schools in the district to erect religious displays during the next holiday season.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Camille Casteel, informing the district that it is unlawful for public schools to host religious holiday displays, thus endorsing the religious message behind the displays.

Casteel informed FFRF via email that the menorah was removed.

California

Delano Joint Union High School District will no longer recruit teachers as bell ringers for The Salvation Army after FFRF got involved.

A concerned community member informed FFRF that the district sent out a mass email seeking volunteers for The Salvation Army, an overtly Christian ministry. The stated mission of the Salvation Army is “to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in his name without discrimination.”

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor wrote to Superintendent Jason Garcia, pointing out that the Salvation Army’s religious mission makes it a poor choice for a public school charity drive. Garcia informed FFRF that the district will no longer be disseminating volunteer opportunities to staff in the future.

Georgia

FFRF has seen to it that Franklin County Schools will no longer advertise religious events on its social media page.

Franklin County Schools had been advertising a community-wide prayer event that takes place each Friday morning on Facebook. The event had been shared on the district’s official Facebook page, featuring the district superintendent.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Chris Forrer, urging him to discontinue this practice immediately. Using his position as superintendent to promote his personal religious beliefs to students and the community is an egregious violation of the Establishment Clause, Line pointed out.

Forrer clarified in a response post that this weekly program was not an official district event and the district will no longer be promoting the event.

Kentucky

The Daviess County Sheriff’s Office told FFRF it will ensure that it no longer holds fundraisers entangled with religion.

A county resident alerted FFRF to a fundraiser hosted by the sheriff’s office, which raised money for the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church. According to local news, Major Barry Smith said the donations were a “thank you” to the church for hosting a sheriff’s office banquet. The sheriff’s office had also been promoting

Standing for equality



Eric Paul Shaffer sent us this photo of himself after winning an FFRF T-shirt. He writes: “Aloha. As long as I wasn’t doing anything this Easter Sunday morning, I rose before Jesus to send you this photo of me and my totally cool T-shirt. I’m in my social-distancing mask, standing up for equality and searching the horizon for justice. Thanks to FFRF for this most excellent T-shirt. Stay healthy and vote (safely) on Nov. 3.”

Christianity on its official Facebook page, including posts that quote the bible and instruct readers to “remember the greatest gift ever given to mankind, the birth of the Christ child.”

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian wrote to Sheriff Keith Cain, asking the office to redirect its fundraising efforts to a secular charity, avoid organizing official events in houses of worship and remove all religious posts from its official Facebook page.

Daviess County Attorney Claud Porter informed FFRF in a letter of response that these concerns were addressed and that the office will “ensure all its future fundraising activities, advertisements and acknowledgments meet all constitutional requirements.”

Ohio

Several violations have been remedied in the Ottoville Local School District, thanks to FFRF.

An Ottoville community member reported that the district was holding Catholic religious classes for students each morning. According to the complainant, these religious classes were taught by public school teachers in public school classrooms during the school day. A letter was reportedly sent out to district parents at the beginning of the year encouraging all students to sign up for these Catholic classes so that they do not feel left out by not being with their peers. Additionally, the complainant reported that, on Wednesdays, students were bused to the local church for Mass and that religious packets were distributed to students on school grounds in relation to these events. Finally, the local priest apparently was invited to offer a prayer every year at the graduation ceremony.

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian wrote to Superintendent Scott Mangas, pointing out that this promotion of Christian dogma is patently unconstitutional and cannot continue in

any capacity.

Mangas informed FFRF in a letter of response that the district has investigated the reported violations and “taken corrective measures.” He wrote: “Please be advised that currently, the district does not hold any Catholic religious classes, distribute religious packets, encourage students to sign up for Catholic classes, or bus students to Mass. It is the district’s intention that none of these activities will occur in the future.”

Oklahoma

The Fort Gibson Police Department has removed several religious posts, including a bible verse on a department recruitment poster, following a response by FFRF.

The Fort Gibson Police Department Facebook page was promoting Christianity, namely, the cover photo on the page quoted from the book of Isaiah: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom Shall I send? And who will go for us?’ and I said, ‘Here am I. Send me.’” As a result, the department displayed the bible quote on a post advertising a job opening at the Fort Gibson Police Department.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the chief of police pointing out that a recruitment post endorsing Christianity is not only unconstitutional, but could also potentially discourage members of non-Christian faith, or no faith at all, from applying to work at the department. Line urged the department to remove any religious promotion from its social media pages or other promotional materials.

In a letter of response, Fort Gibson Town Attorney Larry D. Moore informed FFRF that religious references have been removed from the department’s pages and the new chief of police assures us it will not happen again in the future.

A religious social media post has been removed from the Valliant (Okla.) Public Schools social media page after FFRF contacted it.

An area resident reported that Valliant High School’s baseball coach posted a message on the team’s Facebook page informing the team that this year’s season would be cancelled because of the coronavirus. In the post, he explained that he teaches his players that sports should not be in their top three priorities but that their priorities should be “1. God and Faith. 2. Family. 3. Education. 4. Activities and Hobbies.” He went on to instruct all his students to spend this time “praying and educating yourself about God.” He also said that he hopes the community will grow to be more “God like.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Craig Wall, urging the district to ensure that religion is no longer being promoted in any district athletic programs.

The school’s attorney informed FFRF in a letter of response that the superintendent reviewed the post and spoke with the coach concerning the problems with this post and revised the post to remove all references to God.

Pennsylvania

After hearing from FFRF, administrators in the Lackawanna Trail School District have taken several affirmative steps to ensure that students are no longer subject to religious promotion during athletic events.

FFRF was informed that before each Lackawanna Trail High School football game, the team gathered in a prayer circle in which team coaches participated.

FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote to Superintendent Matthew Rakauskas, reminding the district that it is illegal for public school coaches to sponsor prayers, as doing so constitutes a government endorsement of religion.

The district’s attorney sent a letter of response assuring FFRF that the football coach was directed to cease leading the team in prayers. Rakauskas also issued a directive to all coaches that school-led prayer is not permitted at any school event and held a district-wide training earlier this year, where he specifically instructed staff not to lead or take part in prayer with students.

West Virginia

The Gilmer County Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management has deleted a religious social media post after receiving a letter from FFRF.

A local citizen reported that the department, in a Facebook post on March 24, stated that “tomorrow is national day of prayer . . . we need to pray really hard for our state and our nation!”

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Director Eric Squires, requesting that the department refrain from issuing such statements in the future. By appearing to be neutral on matters of religion, FFRF pointed out, the department ensures the citizens from which the government derives its power that the department will be evenhanded regardless of their faith tradition or lack thereof.

Squires informed FFRF via email that the post has been removed and that similar messages will not be posted in the future.

Tide turns toward Constitution in Alabama

FFRF’s legal team was successful in getting four Alabama school districts to end state/church violations recently.

In the Jefferson County School District, a concerned parent reported that Gideons were allowed inside McAdory Elementary School to hand out bibles to students. The complainant’s child was given a bible as the children left P.E. class by men who had set up a table in the hallway. Another parent reported that Grantswood Community School had put up a religious display in one of its classrooms. The display read, “He is the reason,” an obvious reference to Jesus given the context of a holiday display. This religious message was also posted on the school’s Facebook page.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district’s attorney, asking the district to cease allowing outside adults into its schools to distribute bibles to students and to remove the religious display from its property and social media page. The Jefferson County Schools’ attorney informed FFRF in a letter of response that both of these requests have been met by the district.

...

Coaches in the Hartselle City School District are no longer leading prayers with students after FFRF got involved.

A district parent alerted FFRF that Hartselle High School’s football coach had been leading his team in prayer. At the end of each team workout, the coach reportedly directed the team to get on their knees and then led them in a Christian prayer. After the prayer, players were allowed to leave.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Danna Jones, asking the district to investigate this routine and take immediate action to stop any and all school-led prayer at district athletic events.

In a letter of response, the district’s attorney informed FFRF that he has discussed the coach-led prayers with the superintendent and school officials and that staff has been “advised to discontinue any such practice.”

...

The Morgan County School District has indicated it is not moving forward with a planned bible class partnership, thanks to FFRF’s intervention.

FFRF was alerted to a potential partnership between Morgan County Schools and Piedmont International University, which would establish a bible class for the district.

FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne wrote to the district’s attorney, pointing out several constitutional concerns with this pending arrangement. First, Jayne wrote, Piedmont University professors are experts in training Christian ministers, not teaching secular history. Additionally, Piedmont discriminates in its hiring based on religion and is flagrantly anti-LGBTQ. The university’s handbook states that homosexuality is a “sinful perversion” and that “God disapproves of and forbids any attempt to alter one’s gender by surgery or appearance.”

FFRF was informed that the district has no plans to move forward with this dual enrollment program.

...

In Prattville, concerns regarding staff involvement in an Autauga County School District religious event have been addressed by administration.

A local resident reported that Daniel Pratt Elementary School organized and promoted a “See You at the Pole” event last fall. The school’s principal reportedly led students in prayer.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line alerted the school’s attorney to this violation and urged the district to ensure that no staff member plans, promotes or participates in any future “See You at the Pole” events.

The principal involved “acknowledges she was caught off guard” when asked to pray by the students and “should not have been a participant in the event.” The school’s attorney further informs FFRF the principal “has been counseled on her role as principal and board employee at ‘See You at the Pole’ and similar events.”

FFRF awards \$20k in minority scholarships

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is delighted to provide, in partnership with Black Skeptics Los Angeles, student scholarships totaling \$20,000, double the amount awarded last year.

FFRF is granting Black Skeptics Los Angeles, an African-American humanist-atheist community-based organization, \$20,000 for four awards to outstanding secular students of color who will be first in their family to attend college. Each recipient will receive \$5,000 to support college education and expenses through FFRF’s Forward Freethought Scholarship fund, generously endowed by FFRF member Lance Bredvold. The application deadline is June 26.

In 2013, Black Skeptics Los Angeles spearheaded its First in the Family Humanist Scholarship initiative, which focuses on undocumented, foster care, homeless, LGBTQI, system-involved and secular youth who are underrepresented in the college population. FFRF previously has been underwriting annual \$2,500 scholarships for four students in partnership with BSLA. Special consideration this year will be given to students on whom the pandemic has had an economic impact.

“The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to continue supporting free-thinking students of color — a minority within a minority,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “They need all the encouragement they can get, even more so in the trying times we’re experiencing.”

Black Skeptics Los Angeles founder Sikivu Hutchinson, who will be speaking at FFRF’s convention later this year, explains the purpose of the scholarship program.

“Secular African-American youth disproportionately come from religious backgrounds and communities,” she says. “These youth are often marginalized in K-12 and higher education due to their nonconformity. This scholarship program provides a platform for their voices and experiences.”



FFRF signs on to Supreme Court brief over contraception exemption

FFRF signed on to a brief before the U.S. Supreme Court contending that the Trump administration is breaching the First Amendment in allowing certain religion-based exemptions from required birth-control coverage.

A diverse assortment of groups, including Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the Anti-Defamation League, are explaining to the U.S. Supreme Court why Trump administration rules violate fundamental First Amendment protections for religious freedom. The case is centered around the Affordable Care Act, which requires that employer-provided health plans cover preventive care for women — including all FDA-approved methods of contraception — without cost-sharing. Since 2013, the implementing regulations have exempted houses of worship. And religiously affiliated entities have similarly been entitled to an accommodation — once they give notice that they want one. The Trump administration has since sought to dramatically increase exemptions to the contraceptive mandate.

“At issue is a push in 2017 to expand exemptions to the ACA’s ‘birth control mandate’ with new regulations that would allow all but publicly traded companies, including private colleges and universities that issue student health plans, to opt out on moral grounds,” the Philadelphia Inquirer reports. “The attorneys general of Pennsylvania and New Jersey challenged the proposal, saying the rule change could saddle their states with the cost of dealing with thousands of unplanned pregnancies and as many as 127,000 women losing access to no-cost contraception.”

A district court judge and a three-member panel of the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals both have ruled against the Trump administration’s proposed expansion. A Catholic order of nuns, the Little Sisters of the Poor Saint Peter and Paul Home, was permitted to intervene in the case and argue that the expansion was lawful.

By establishing religious and moral exemptions that effectively nullify the contraceptive-coverage requirement’s protections for countless women, the brief contends, the Trump administration has upended a previously satisfactory balance. Its religious exemption directive permits employers to exempt themselves in a way that affirmatively bars the government from providing the coverage by other means. Under Trump’s new directive, entities that object to providing contraceptive coverage would no longer even be required to give notice to the government, meaning employees would not have access to other coverage.

Neither exemption should stand, the brief asserts. The Supreme Court has made clear that religious exemptions are permissible, if at all, only when they alleviate substantial government-imposed burdens on religious exercise, and only when they do not detrimentally affect non-beneficiaries. Otherwise, the exemptions are unconstitutional preferences for religion.

The Trump administration’s religious exemption runs haywire, the brief maintains. It authorizes broad exemptions without regard to whether an entity demonstrates (or even asserts) that the pre-existing accommodation substantially burdens religious exercise.

The challenged rules fail miserably: They broadly exempt objectors on the bare possibility that some religious exercise somewhere might be burdened, and are in total dereliction of the court’s directive and the government’s statutory duty to ensure that women receive the mandated contraceptive coverage without cost-sharing.

The religious and moral exemptions that the Trump administration is trying to implement are constitutionally defective.

“Under Trump’s new directive, entities that object to providing contraceptive coverage would no longer even be required to give notice to the government, meaning employees would not have access to other coverage.”

Catching up with FFRF's honorary presidents

FFRF contacted its distinguished honorary board presidents during these strange and stressful times to catch up with them, to find out how they're doing and to see if they have any thoughts of how we can best weather the coronavirus crisis.

Edward Sorel

Satiric cartoonist and irreverent illustrator

What are you up to these days?

I've been working on my book *Profusely Illustrated*, which Knopf plans to publish in 2021. Although the jacket calls it a memoir, it is also a political expose. As I tell the story of my life, I interrupt my narrative to describe the criminal and unconstitutional acts that my president was doing at that time. Since



Edward Sorel

I am now 91, that includes all the presidents from Harry Truman on down to the present autocrat.

The book will also serve as a show case for the cartoons, caricatures, and magazine illustrations I've done for The New Yorker, Vanity Fair, The Nation, The Atlantic Monthly, Ramparts, Freethought Today and The New York Times Book Review.

How are you holding up?

I've been freelancing ever since I was 25, so working alone is nothing new. I've been a widower for five years and have grown accustomed to living alone. Living in solitary confinement hasn't disrupted my life as much as it has others.

Advice for others?

To those who can't help praying for divine assistance in times like these, make sure you're praying to a God who has a good record at ending worldwide catastrophes quickly, not one of those geezers who have been around forever, and still can't seem to do anything right. What helps me at times like this is a hot bath after I've shut off the phone.

Susan Jacoby

Bestselling author of *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, and program director of the Center for Inquiry

What are you up to these days?

I'm working at home on a new book, *Up From Sanctity: Why Religion Holds Women Back*, to be published by Pantheon at some point in 2021. The title is, I think, self-explanatory. Publishing schedules have been totally disrupted by the pandemic, and the New York Public Library, where I work in a special room for authors, has been closed for several weeks. I am separated from my books, among other things.

How are you holding up?

Life in New York right now is so difficult in terms of everyday tasks (panic buying of Tylenol, which I need for a bum knee, is the newest problem) that it is impossible to worry about quotidian matters and actually getting the virus at the same



Edward Sorel's cartoon of dog's Ten Commandments.

time. This is probably a valuable evolutionary trait. Basically, New York City has turned into a hunter-gatherer society.

Advice for others?

I have no advice for others. I am disgusted by all of the moralizing op-eds about how much we are going to "learn" from this experience. There isn't a lot of evidence for the educational value of disasters. See: How we got to World War II after World War I. If I weren't personally involved, I suppose I would find it interesting to watch what unfolds when you elect people who are ignorant and contemptuous of science, which has indeed progressed since both World War I and the Neolithic era. As it is, I am just another person trying to work, worrying about my older friends, and generally astonished at how much everything around me resembles my grandmother's accounts of the influenza epidemic of 1918.



Susan Jacoby

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

Research associate in Harvard's psychology department and a 1996 MacArthur Fellow

What are you up to these days?

I've been working on two book proposals. One is for a book called *Longing to Matter: The Story of What Makes Us Human*. The other is for a book requested from me by the philosophy editor at Oxford University Press that will be an easy-breezy introduction to philosophy's major 10 problems. Don't you worry — there'll be a chapter on "Is God Real?"

How are you holding up?

The consuming rage I've been feeling for the last few years as we all watch in horror as major institutions of democracy are dismantled has been overcome by . . . well, I guess the word is just sadness. The level of suffering and death is overwhelming. But here's something I've discovered about myself during this pandemic. I can't work when I'm enraged. I know that for many people anger can be creatively energizing but for me anger is just draining. It's just impotent rage. But sadness? Sadness, especially of this kind, just makes me stop concentrating on the villains and feel love for all the rest of humanity in all its frailty, and that's a creative state for me. Hello darkness, my old friend.



Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

Advice for others?

You know, some evolutionary psychologists have theorized over what the adaptive value of psychological depression could possibly be and have come up with the view that it forces you to step out of your life, just put it all on hold, and re-evaluate why your life choices have brought you to this place. I'm not endorsing this explanation of depression, and of course I'm not saying that it's our own personal life choices that have brought on a world pandemic. But what I would say is that having to put our lives on hold for a while opens up a huge space for serious reflection on what matters. And the sense of shared vulnerability also opens up a place for greater compassion and forgiveness for any grievances we might have been harboring, sometimes for years. I've gotten in touch with a few people with whom I'd severed ties just to find out how they were doing, as if nothing had ever happened between us, and the results have been mutually beneficial. There's nothing like a worldwide pandemic to give one a little perspective.

Daniel C. Dennett

Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University

What are you up to these days?

I've been working on a debate book with philosopher Gregg Caruso, on free will and 'just deserts.' It's almost finished and will be published soon.



Daniel C. Dennett

How are you holding up?

My wife and I are very fortunate. We're safe and sound in our own home in relatively low-covid Maine, and we have found a grocery store that will take email shopping lists and do curbside delivery.

Advice for others?

Read a book a day!

Jerry Coyne

Professor of ecology and evolution at the University of Chicago



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Jerry Coyne

What are you up to these days?

I'm finishing up a book that, curiously, has nothing to do with science. It's a children's book about an Indian man I met in Bangalore, and about it I will say no more. Oh, except that writing a children's book is extremely challenging. It's a genre with its own rules and conventions and requires a lot of work. Everybody thinks they can write one, but it's not that easy!

How are you holding up?

Like everyone else, I am frustrated at my plans that will not be fulfilled. Everybody has their own gripes. Mine is that I planned to travel this summer and fall and that no longer seems realistic. But compared to those who have lost friends and loved ones, or have become unemployed, this is a minor quibble. I consider myself lucky to have escaped the virus (so far), and am catching up on a lot of reading.

Advice for others?

I'm not an expert. Everyone has their own way of coping. My own take (which can be construed as advice) is that we should be prepared for this to last a lot longer than many people think, and certainly longer than Donald Trump implies. I am starting to wonder if universities might even cancel their fall semesters.

Michael Newdow

Doctor and lawyer



Michael Newdow

What are you up to these days?

I'm afraid I don't have much to report at the moment. I just lost a case in the 1st Circuit (challenging the "so help me God" phrase in the immigration oath). I may file a Petition for Rehearing, although that will undoubtedly be futile. I still plan to try another challenge or two to "In God We Trust" on our money. I have a ton of other ideas, but far too many "to do" items to get to them right now.

How are you holding up?

I'm holding up fine in the pandemic. I'm an ER doc, so I don't know how long that will be true, but, for now, things are OK.

Julia Sweeney

Comedian, actress

What are you up to these days?

This last year has been one of acting in TV shows. I was on three shows this last year, and two of them have been picked up for additional seasons, so that means a lot of this coming year will be spent on doing those acting jobs. I'm on "Shrill" on Hulu, "Work in Progress" on Showtime, and "American Gods" on Starz. Each job has been a complete joy and that seems like it must be untrue, but it's not. Truly each show is like a child to me and I cannot choose which one I love best.

I was also scheduled to film my one-person show "Julia Sweeney: Older & Wider" as a comedy special, but it was cancelled because of the quarantine. I will be working to film that show when it's possible. Other than that, I'm working on a podcast idea I have about Catholicism, and I have a TV idea, too.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Julia Sweeney

How are you holding up?

If I wasn't so upset about how much suffering is out there, how much suffering that is going to take place, and rage over the ineptness of our federal response to this crisis (all those things are a big emotional hit on my psyche) I would be in a constant state of bliss. I love being home. I love being told I have to stay at home. I love not thinking anyone else is doing anything, so I don't even have to be burdened with feeling I want to be somewhere. I love it top to bottom. I could go on this way for years. Hell, maybe I will!

I am reading so much (Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Mary Beard's *History of Rome* at the moment) and I'm watching great film and television. I'm cooking like crazy, organizing all the time and not too rushed either. I love that I don't know what day of the week it is. I love being with my husband and daughter all the time. I love making our house our entire world. I love what this quarantine is doing to me psychologically — it's altering my plans for the future. I want to do and write and participate in different things. I want to do more thoughtful things, fewer things, deeper things. It's transformed my relationships and made me realize who I truly care about and who I can let go of. It's actually been quite profound.

Advice for others?

Hmmm . . . read and watch. Do nothing. Stare at stars at night. Eat what you want when you feel like it. Just looking at what I wrote, I am overcome by my privilege. I am so glad not to have a gaggle of kids at home, or be preoccupied with money worries, or not like my husband and daughter, or be forced to work when I don't feel safe working — all of these are things that are happening.

So I guess I alter my advice and say this: This Too Shall Pass. We will get beyond this.

Ron Reagan

Media commentator

What are you up to these days?

I have recently remarried. My new bride is Italian and we spend half our year in Tuscany. I still show up on TV, though not as regularly. I'm working on a novel (but don't hold your breath!).

How are you holding up?

Since I've always been rather solitary (albeit with a significant other), social distancing has been less disruptive for me than many others. We, like so many people, have explored baking at home — my wife, Federica, does the hard part; I arrive for the sampling.



Ronald Reagan

Advice for others?

Think about what you miss. Also, what you don't miss — dirtier air and water, noise, cruise ships, etc. Ask yourself how we fashion a better world on the other side of this calamity.

Steven Pinker

Johnstone Professor of Psychology at Harvard, bestselling author

What are you up to these days?

I'm teaching a new general education course at Harvard called "Rationality," divided evenly between the basic tools of rationality (logic, probability, Bayesian reasoning, statistical decision theory, game theory, etc.), the psychology of rationality (cognitive heuristics and biases and how they can be overcome), and applications of rationality (sports, crime, war, medicine, journalism, philanthropy, climate change). I added a lecture on "Rationality in a Time of Coronavirus," applying the concepts learned in the course to understanding the pandemic.



Steven Pinker

How are you holding up?

I am among the lucky ones, not just healthy and having healthy loved ones, but securely employed (Harvard gets its tuition whether students are in class or using Zoom), introverted enough not to miss the face-to-face contact, and in good company (with 2011 Freethought Heroine Rebecca Newberger Goldstein).

Advice for others?

Recall that disease is not divine retribution or any other symbolic message-bearer, but an inherent part of life on Earth as it evolved. Organisms are opportunistic, and our bodies and cellular machinery are irresistible targets of tiny organisms in their struggle to replicate. All species have evolved defenses against pathogens — sexual reproduction, an immune system — yet our species has evolved a unique one, namely reason. We can know our enemy and figure out new ways to defeat it. It is human ingenuity and sympathy that empowers us to believe that we will prevail, and more quickly than our ancestors did when faced with their own plagues and pestilences in the past.



Bonya Ahmed, speaking at FFRF's convention in Madison, Wis., talked about her husband's brutal murder and her nearly fatal attack by Islamic militants in 2015.

Photo by Ingrid Laas

Progress demands struggle, sacrifice

By Bonya Ahmed

I'm honored to announce this year's annual Avijit Roy Courage Award. This is the second annual Avijit Courage Award and this year's award goes to Avinash Patil.

He is the current executive president of Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (MANS), which means "Blind Faith Eradication Committee." I am happy to mention that this award comes with \$5,000. Thank you very much for coming all the way from India to accept this award.

I have been asked to introduce two of our fallen comrades.

I actually knew one of them very well — Avijit Roy. I lived with him for 13 years. I worked with him. I enjoyed life with him until it ended very abruptly. Thanks to FFRF for starting this award last year in his name.

The other person is Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, who founded MANS in 1989, the organization Avinash runs now. I did not know him personally, but I have immense respect for his work and the sacrifices he made for all of us. But both he and Avijit were killed for their work, for their writings and for their belief or, maybe we should say, for their nonbelief.

Avijit loved to write. That was his passion. He was a prolific writer. He wrote eight books and hundreds and hundreds of articles and blogs in such a short period of time. He was just 43 when he died. His books ranged from philosophy to science to literature.

The Islamic militants, who later marched with al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, mentioned that they targeted us — Avijit and me — for our writing, specifically for two of Avijit's books: *Virus of Faith* and *Homosexuality: A Scientific and Socio-Psychological Investigation*.

Many of you already know that we were attacked by machete-wielding Islamic militants at a book fair when we were visiting our homeland for a book-signing trip in 2015. Avijit died in the hospital and I survived, with four machete stabs on my head and a sliced-off thumb and numerous wounds all over my body.

After the attack on us, Islamic militants vowed to kill one atheist blogger every month in Bangladesh and they managed to do so. The impunity was so high. The government stayed quiet. So, the Islamists murdered three other bloggers and managed to kill the two publishers of those two books. They actually managed

to hack the two publishers in their offices. One died and the other one barely survived.

Let me tell the story of Dr. Dabholkar before I get carried away. We are giving the prize to Avinash and the MANS organization because of the sacrifices that the organization has made. And Dr. Dabholkar has given his life for it.

Dr. Dabholkar decided to become a social worker after working as a medical doctor for 12 years in Maharashtra in India. He founded MANS and campaigned against religious superstitions prevalent in India. He was the editor of a renowned Marathi weekly, and he fought against godmen. You know they are very big all over India and claim to perform medical miracles. He also relentlessly fought for the equality of Dalit — the Untouchables, and against violence rooted in the Hindu caste system. He received numerous threats, but as far as I know, he refused to take any police protection from the government. And he was gunned down and murdered Aug. 20, 2013.

Let me read one of his quotes. "Sowing seeds of reason in the mind is not an easy job. However, reason uttered repeatedly does take you a step ahead. The utterance converts into a movement. If people involved in the movement practice what they propagate, the movement culminates into a union, which is a good thing to happen. If, in addition, the union jumps into a struggle for change, nothing like it but climbing up these steps exhausts you considerably. I am treading this path with whatever ability I possess, knowing full well that it is endless."

And endless it is. It does seem ever so endless today more than ever, doesn't it?

There is nowhere to hide: Charlottesville to Istanbul, Bangladesh to Saudi Arabia, India to Nigeria. There is nowhere else to go. Or, maybe, it is too soon to despair. I also think that we should not give up hope, even if the battle feels increasingly difficult. I haven't given up hope, yet. Human progress is never linear.

It demands immense sacrifice, struggle and dedication. Sometimes you have to take two steps backward just to make one step forward. Let's not lose hope. I haven't. May there be a day when we will not need any award such as the Avijit Roy Courage Award. I think that should be our goal. That is the best goal. That is the best way to honor the Avijits and the Narendras of the world. Thanks to FFRF and thank you all for being here.

Avijit Roy Courage Award

Let's work together to eradicate superstition

Here is an edited version of the speech given by Avinash Patil during FFRF's national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 19. He was introduced by FFRF's Director of Communications Amit Pal:

Dr. Narendra Dabholkar was the founder of the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (MANS) and was killed on Aug. 20, 2013. His sacrifice was not in vain. He was awarded one of India's highest civilian honors. Because of the pressure built due to his death, there was an anti-superstition bill passed at the state level. A medical doctor by training, he was also an international-level sports player.

It's amazing work that MANS is doing in a state that's larger than most countries in the world. And it's doing it in the face of a Hindu nationalist government, led by Narendra Modi, that's very hostile to the sort of work the organization is doing. In fact, after Dr. Dabholkar's assassination, there have been three more murders of rationalists in the same region of India by the same group that carried out Dabholkar's assassination.

The current head of MANS is here to receive the Avijit Roy Courage Award. We were initially considering giving it to the organization, but now we are giving it to Avinash Patil himself because he actually is a volunteer. He doesn't receive any salary at all. He still has no security. He has refused it even after the way his predecessor was heinously assassinated. Avinash has been doing incredible work, so it's with real pleasure that we ask him to come up to receive the Avijit Roy Courage Award.

By Avinash Patil

I am Avinash Patil, executive president of Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti in India. I am here to receive the prestigious Avijit Roy Courage Award on the behalf of my organization, MANS. I dedicate this award to our luminary leader, the late Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, and the strenuous efforts of our thousands of activists who are struggling for the same cause: rationality. Today, I remember hundreds of thousands of well-wishers and supporters from India and abroad who have been assisting



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Avinash Patil holds the Courage Award.

us for the last 30 years.

I express my deep sense of gratitude to the Freedom from Religion Foundation for conferring this award to MANS. We believe this recognition of our dedication and work at such an international forum will ignite our aspirations and will help us increase the credibility and reliance of our work among people.

Two years before Avijit Roy was hacked in Dhaka, Dr. Narendra Dabholkar was shot in Pune. Many freethinkers have been assassinated in the name of religion, traditions and culture. This tendency has become prevalent around the world, especially in developing countries. Further painful is the attitude of the authorities, who, in most cases, are unsuccessful in arresting the assassins. The prevalent silence of the authorities and lack of political will to address these matters has driven the rise in intolerance and insecurity.

The eradication of superstitions in a society where it is used for socio-political and economical gains of the few has become a hazardous task. The field demands a lot of patience and rationality, it also needs deep-rooted courage to face the challenges of work that can literally take your life. An award titled with the word "courage" becomes complementa-



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Avinash Patil speaks at FFRF's national convention on Oct. 19, 2019.

ry to our work.

In the course of civilization, we have lost several freethinkers whose sole aim was to promote secularism, humanity, science, equality, justice, scientific temperament, and enlighten our fellow people. I have mixed emotions of pleasure and misery while receiving the award for the philosophy and ethics of courage in the 21st century world that is, on one hand, based on science and technology, while on the other lacks rational thought and is full of superstition.

Fundamentalists and extremists have not been able to digest the dialogue, sympathy and acceptance that was created by MANS and fellow rationalists. Dr. Narendra Dabholkar has sacrificed his life for the cause of our work.

Not only Dabholkar, but other rational activists and social reformers like Govind Pansare, Professor M.M. Kalburgi and journalist Gauri Lankesh have sacrificed their lives for the courage they embodied in the thoughts, ideas and principles of their works. Officials and agencies have claimed these assassinations to be linked to religious extremists. I dedicate this award to their memories and contributions.

All of us gathered here dream of a society full of Mukto-Mona or freethinkers. Let me talk about the work, ideals and perceptions of MANS. MANS has been working on such ideals for the past 30 years. The “eradication of superstition” is a phrase coined in today’s sociocultural context in the state of Maharashtra due to the contributions of the MANS and the creative leadership of Dr. Dabholkar. He established this organization on Aug. 9, 1989.

On Aug. 9, 2019, to celebrate the 30 years of our work, we organized an international conference in Mumbai. MANS’s campaigns, imaginations, works and organizational skill have spread the work, with our group currently having 350 branches. The base of this work is the ideas of reformers in Maharashtra who criticized the caste system, superstitions and rituals. MANS continued this legacy of works with creative activism and organization.

MANS started its works with exposing so-called godmen and people claiming themselves as the incarnation of gods on Earth. Later, the work developed the basis of scientific temperament, criticism of religion, and the principles of secularism, rationality and humanity. The key role of MANS in passing a bill that outlaws black magic is a prime example of its journey.

30 years of MANS

The organization’s 30 years of work is based on the following principles and may be divided into three decades.

In the first decade, MANS existed with five to 10 branches and a handful of volunteers. The achievement of the first decade was to convey the

importance of our work. Society accepted that there are superstitions and they must be eradicated. We exposed many godmen, black magic incidents, etc., and people were attracted toward this work, especially the youth.

In the second decade, society certified MANS as a chief whistle-blower of the work and recognized its expertise in the field. MANS worked on a variety of different issues.

In the third decade, the journey from constructive criticism of religion to rationality became our catchphrase, since it reflects the fundamentals of MANS.

MANS has its commitment to two major aspects: first its commitment to reformists of Maharashtra and India, who had a message of morality, ethics, brotherhood, rationality, humanity, justice and nonviolence through their works.

Second, the Constitution of India that supports all these things through its preamble and constitutional provisions. It does not make difference between man and woman and permits both the genders to function at all places. It does not support any inhuman and atrocious rituals that decrease the person’s dignity and freedom. The constitutional behavior of Indian society will lead it to a society that MANS aspires to as an “ethical and rational society.”

Our experience of 30 years shows that superstition is one of the main hurdles in

forming a humanitarian society. Unscientific temperaments don’t give ample space for the development of women, downtrodden and deprived, and at the same time exposes these classes to rampant exploitation. Superstitions aid godmen in creating ritualistic businesses. Unscientific thoughts, lack of criticism and evaluation of customs, fake pride of traditions and blind followership in religion lead to all sorts of exploitation.

MANS has worked on inclusive and innovative programs, such as constitutional festivals, rational selection of life partners, awareness about pseudoscience, annihilation of caste councils, etc. Time and again, MANS has organized innovative activities. Our encounters with communities have always kept our work dynamic.

We have two major assets to work effectively and creatively: First, our activists work in this organization without any personal desires. Their tireless efforts have taken this organization to this stage after 30 years. And the second asset is the acceptance and recognition by society and media of this work.

Eradication of superstitions means eradication of hate, anger, greed, fear, unfair competitions, and negative emotions through inculcating love, cooperation, brotherhood, tolerance, peaceful

coexistence, sympathy, reliance for each other, rationality and reason. This is not a momentary journey — it may take hundreds of years together. One generation is not enough for it. Generations together must contribute for this.

Join together

I, on behalf of MANS, appeal to you on this occasion to be our comrades, supporters and companions. We strongly feel that like-minded organizations that struggle for the same cause here in the United States as we do in India must collaborate in addressing the issues. We can share our scholarships and expertise with each other, since we are co-travelers on the same road — the road that leads the world toward humanity, rationality and equality.

We believe that rationality should be adopted on a wide scale. MANS has this humble standpoint while organizing Aug. 20 as National Scientific Temper Day.

Human life has traveled to scientific thoughts through logic, assessment and an inclusive thought process. The next developed stage of this is rationality. We must nurture and renew a rationality, primarily, based on carving the values and ethics of life toward a comprehensive perspective.

A determination to change human personality based on only thoughts is not enough, because human personality is the combination of thoughts and emotions. So, we must nurture human personality based on rational thoughts and ethical emotions, too.

Increasing violence and bigotry are creating a frenzy, along with a self-centered society due to the influence of globalization. These have already created several challenges. But we are firm in our attempts to form a unity of our work.

We, on this occasion, declare that MANS is bound to shoulder any responsibility, either minor or major, toward this gigantic task to form a union of all like-minded organizations toward the creation of a rational world. We want an alliance of the humanists and rationalists from all over the planet. They should come together and travel hand in hand toward the purpose of creating a beautiful and flourishing world. Thank you.



Photo by Ingrid Laas
Avinash Patil is the head of MANS, an Indian organization that seeks to eradicate superstitious belief.

THEY SAID WHAT?

Men are far likelier to obey rules that come from God than to abide by the abstract outcome of an ad hoc utilitarian calculus.

Attorney General William Barr, during a speech at the 2020 National Religious Broadcasters Convention.
The Friendly Atheist, 2-27-20

I literally went to the Throne Room of God. There was a mist that was coming off the water, and I went to the throne of God, and I didn’t see God’s face clearly, but I saw the face of God . . . I

knew it was the face of God.
Paula White, the White House spiritual advisor, during a sermon at Apostle Guillermo Maldonado’s church in Miami.
Right Wing Watch, 2-20-20

God gave us grace on Nov. 8, 2016, to change the course we were on. God had been taken out of our schools and lives. A nation had turned its back on God. And I encourage you to use this time at home to get back in the “Word,” read our bibles and spend time with our families.

MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell, after President Trump allowed him to speak during a coronavirus press conference outside the White House.
Huffington Post, 3-31-20

The governor should reconsider her “dangerous and godless” advice.
Steve Smothermon, pastor of Legacy Church in Albuquerque, N.M., speaking about New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham’s statement telling people to avoid going to church (or other community events).
KRQE.com, 3-11-20

God is Brazilian. The cure is right there.
Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, a major denier of the severity of the coronavirus, insisted that an anti-malaria pill of unproved efficacy would cure COVID-19.
The New York Times, 4-1-20

No, I’m covered in Jesus’ blood. I’m covered in Jesus’ blood!
A woman in Ohio, when asked by CNN’s Gary Tuchman as she was leav-


ing church in her vehicle, if she was worried she could impact other people if she got the coronavirus being so close to others in church.
CNN, 4-5-20



Hulk Hogan

Maybe we don’t need a vaccine, Maybe we need to take this time of isolation from the distractions of the world and have a personal revival where we focus on the ONLY thing in the world

that really matters. Jesus.
Former professional wrestler Hulk Hogan, posting on Instagram that the pandemic is a sign from God and therefore a vaccine is unnecessary.
The Friendly Atheist, 4-7-20



Those who think they are christ like, rarely act christ like

- Dawn Allsman

Out of the Closet Freethinker

FFRF.ORG FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

Make your own nontheistic cyber billboard at [FFRF.org/out](https://www.frf.org/out), and you might win an “Out of the Closet Atheist” cap, like Dawn.

Convention speech

My worldview is based on evidence, not the bible

This is an edited version of the speech Aline Pham gave at FFRF's national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 19, 2019. She was introduced by FFRF Executive Board Treasurer Steve Salemsen:

We brought the winner of FFRF's William J. Schulz Essay Contest for College-Bound High School Students to speak today. The students were asked to write an essay based on this prompt: "Why we must rely on ourselves, not God, to solve the world's problems." Their insights give us nonbelievers faith in the future.

Our first-place essay winner is 18-year-old Aline Pham, an exceptional young woman from La Mirada, Calif., who is attending the University of California-Irvine. Aline was valedictorian of her high school class, and it says a lot about her that her senior class voted her "most likely to vote for a cause." She told us that separation of church and state is one of those causes. She would like to become a teacher, then a principal and her ultimate goal is one day to become a superintendent.

Welcome, Aline.

By Aline Pham

This past summer break, while my friends were taking trips to San Diego and making the most of their last summer before adulthood, I sat in my room and applied for scholarships. But my mom is the real champion. She spent her days searching for scholarships and nagging me to apply. That's how we found out about the Freedom From Religion Foundation and this scholarship. But unlike other essay applications, this prompt didn't take me hours to answer. It came easily to me. So, I sat there and I thought.

I thought about myself in fifth grade, a 10-year-old girl fed up with the substitute teacher who went on a 30-minute spiel about God after introducing herself. She called attendance and praised every child whose name originated from the bible. But that's not all. She rambled about how we, as children of God, must be grateful for the blessing of education and thank him every Sunday in church. Impulsively, but not regretfully, I raised my hand and said, "What if I don't go to church?" I swear I could hear 30 students shifting in their seats awaiting a response. She replied something along the lines of, "Oh dear, well that's OK, too." But I could tell by looking in her astonished eyes that she thought this 10-year-old was going to hell.

I thought about 13-year-old me sitting criss-cross applesauce in the public library when a security guard approached me and firmly demanded that I take my feet off the chair. With his bulging eyes, he asked me, "Do you sit like that in church, miss?" At the time, I was too taken aback to call him out on his rude assumption. But now, I realize how wrong he was in imposing his beliefs on me, even though I shouldn't have had my feet on the furniture.

I thought about ninth grade, when my friend (whom I get along with very well) asked me, "Wait, you're Christian, right?" "Why would you assume that?" I asked him. I thought to myself, "Maybe it's because I once helped him correct grammatical errors in his letter for a mission trip to Mexico." But to my utter disbelief, he replied, "Well, I mean, I just



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Aline Pham was the winner of FFRF's 2019 William J. Schulz Essay Contest for College-Bound High School Students.

figured because you're nice and a good person." I wouldn't have hesitated to call him out on this obviously flawed logic, but the funny thing is that he seemed to recognize his mistake before I could point it out. This dangerous association of Christianity with good and anything else with bad is what spews ignorance and hatred throughout our nation.

So, I took all these thoughts (and many more) that had been roaming around in my head for years and put them onto paper. The result was this:

"God makes no mistakes." Personally, I think he set the oven temperature too high when he cooked up Agent Orange in the Vietnam War, when he stirred Jewish bodies in Nazi Germany, when he sprinkled some cockroaches in the Rwandan genocide. A god did not do that. Humans did. Instead of singing "hallelujah" and talking to the sky, we should hold ourselves accountable for such terrible atrocities and prevent history from repeating itself.

Vietnamese Buddhist funerals are very peculiar. For hours on end, monks recite prayers repeatedly, slurring their words so much that no one — not even the most fluent Vietnamese grandparents — can comprehend. My mother tells me the murmuring chants will allow my grandfather's soul to leave his body and move on. I nod my head just to humor her. He's dead. His body has been cremated. His body is gone, but his memory lives on. We don't need monks or altars or burning incense to recognize that. I refused to cope with my grandpa's death by reciting meaningless prayers in front of Buddha statues, and instead vowed to carry on his memory by working hard in school and being kind to others. Three years after his passing, I have healed and still continue to fulfill my promises — without the help of a god.

After the Parkland shootings, the smell of social activism lingered in the air as my school led its own student sit-out for common-sense gun control. While I protested in honor of the 17 vic-

tims, some of my peers refused to participate, convinced that their "thoughts and prayers" would suffice to heal all wounds. As comforting as they may be, prayers cannot heal bullet wounds — or social wounds caused by mental health issues, faulty legislation and deep-rooted prejudice.

These prayers are merely temporary solutions that encourage individuals to unproductively wait around for the "man upstairs" to solve their problems and vanquish their worries. Rather than throwing baseless words at victims, we should address problems such as gun violence by introducing new laws and voting for new politicians. The same students who offered "thoughts and prayers" use the bible as their sole "evidence" for discriminating against my LGBTQ+ classmates. I often wonder if they realize that such baseless claims contradict the "Love thy neighbor" principle. Religion gets in the way of so many things and is a root cause of many social wars we fight today.

I draw conclusions about our world using evidence provided by Bill Nye the Science Guy, not the bible. I have always been fascinated by science, biology in particular. In freshman year of high school, my passion and drive paid off when I was recognized as my teacher's top biology student at my high school's award ceremony. Intending to compli-

ment me, my friend exclaimed, "Aline, you're so lucky and blessed!" To my surprise, my teacher corrected him. He said matter-of-factly, "No, she's not. She worked hard to earn it. No luck or blessings needed." Looking back, I realize he was right. In biology, I participated in class discussions, led group projects, and conducted unique experiments. It was my work that earned me awards, not prayers. It was my drive, not dogma.

The truth is, I have never written a piece like this — not one that expresses my raw feelings toward religion and faith, or lack thereof. I will be the first to admit that I was not always this confident about my secular stance. I always thought I was insecure growing up because all my friends were Christian while my family was Buddhist. But now I realize I was insecure because school was Christian, home was Buddhist, and I was neither.

A lot has happened since I wrote this essay. I started my first year at college and often find myself overwhelmed by the new people, environment and expectations. A few days ago, I even thought to myself, "How nice would it be to sit here, hold my hands and pray? All my worries would be washed away." But is that really the mentality we want to teach our kids? To deflect our problems toward God? To slap a Band-Aid on a gushing wound? No. I have to take responsibility for my mistakes: procrastinating on an assignment, not keeping in touch enough with friends and family, and so forth. I must have drive, not dogma.

So, I would like to sincerely thank FFRF for giving me the opportunity to do so, and for making this convention possible for me to attend. Thank you to my mom, who has always encouraged me to speak up and exercise my First Amendment rights, whether she agrees with me or not. And lastly, thank you all for listening to my story.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Aline Pham

Yip Harburg, from his book: Rhymes for the Irreverent



A Nose Is A Nose Is A Nose

Mother, Mother,
Tell me please,
Did God who gave us flowers and trees,
Also provide the allergies?

Illustrated by Seymore Chwast, published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online - ffrf.org/shop

Convention speech

Trump is The Family’s ‘vessel of God’

Here is an edited version of the convention speech given by Jeff Sharlet at FFRF’s national convention on Oct. 19, 2019, in Madison, Wis. He was introduced by FFRF Associate Counsel Sam Grover:

Jeff is an award-winning literary journalist author of The New York Times best-seller *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power* and *C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy*. He is also executive producer of the new Netflix documentary series based on those books. Please give a warm welcome to Jeff Sharlet.

By Jeff Sharlet

Thank you for having me here. In the so-called “cease-fire deal” that Mike Pence negotiated recently with Turkey, Pence declared that he not only wanted to thank President Trump, he wanted to thank the millions of Americans who were holding that moment in prayer.

The press passed over that nod to the evangelical base. But I believe it was key because, for a fraction of a second, Christian Nationalist support for Trump had wavered. You probably heard Pat Robertson’s warning that Trump was in danger of losing the mandate of heaven.

But the mandate of heaven is in Mike Pence’s portfolio, and Mike Pence wanted Christian Nationalists to remember that he is their man, their agent, and that he represents the covenant between Trumpism and the faithful that he, on behalf of Trump, heard their prayers. And, lo, he said, their prayers were answered. Peace in our time, said Pence. Don’t fret the details. Consider not the fate of the Kurds, not even their fellow Christians among them.

I don’t make many political predictions, but in 2010, I ended my book *C Street*, in which I’d written about a number of Christian Nationalist politicians fallen to scandal, with a little speculation about who might represent Christian Nationalism in 2016? Maybe, I wrote, it’ll be Rep. Mike Pence, a little-known Indiana congressman, a former right-wing radio host with White House eyes. I was so close. I could not imagine that Donald Trump would become the chosen one. How did that happen?

That question is at the heart of my recent documentary series on Netflix, “The Family,” directed by the brilliant Jesse Moss. The Family, also called The



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Jeff Sharlet speaks at FFRF’s national convention on Oct. 19, 2019, in Madison, Wis.

Fellowship, is the oldest and most influential Christian political organization in Washington. It’s also the most secretive. The longtime leader, Doug Coe, liked to preach that the more invisible you can make your organization, the more influence it will have. This so-called invisibility served The Family’s purposes because it’s not a mass organization. It’s not interested in your soul. It’s not interested in your salvation. This is one Christian Right group that is not going to try and convert you. It’s worse.

The Family began long before what we think of as the inception of the modern Christian Right. It was the midst of the Great Depression, 1935, when the founder Abraham Vereide was convinced that economic suffering was a punishment from God for socialism, for the New Deal, for Franklin Roosevelt.

God told Vereide — and I mean told him, spoke to him, he could hear the voice of God — that Christianity has been getting it wrong for centuries. It was focusing on the poor, the weak, the down-and-out. God told Vereide that he actually cared most for the strong, the wealthy, for those whom Vereide called the up-and-out men in power, given that power was better to build God’s kingdom.

A deal with God

How this can work, this deal with God? The Family moved to Washington, D.C., where it began organizing congressmen

and business and military leaders in 1953. It created the National Prayer Breakfast to sanctify the nation to Jesus, and in its documents it’s explicit about this — to create a space to cut deals between Christ’s followers and government and business.

By the 1960s, it was firmly established around the world through its embrace of foreign dictators, whom it said had been chosen by God to aid America in the Cold War.

Here’s just one example among many. The Somali dictator Mohamed Siad Barre called himself a Koranic Marxist. But his Soviet backers had abandoned him. He needed some help and he agreed to pray to Jesus with Sen. Chuck Grassley, Republican of Iowa, who’s still serving us today.

Sen. Grassley, who is representing The Family in Somalia, was remarkably candid in his correspondence about what Barre wanted in return for his prayers to Jesus: military aid and a White House meeting — quid pro quo. Done and done, wrote The Family.

And, so it was. And, in return for that, The Family said in a now declassified CIA memo, Barre would give the U.S. full land and naval bases and complete access to his territory. So, for the dictator, this was a good deal. To The Family, to Sen. Grassley and his friends, it was faith. Everybody wins, except Somalia, to which Barre laid near biblical waste with the backing of the American Christ.

Such is the art of the deal. Let me give you another example.

American preacher and former Congressman Zach Wamp, a leader of The Family, told us as we made this documentary, that Trump is the vessel of God, albeit an imperfect vessel.

He says The Family is not blind to the vanity of man, especially to the man to whom it gives its backing. They know who they’re dealing with. One Family leader calls its clients its specialty dictators, murderers and thieves. Their words — “dictators, murderers and thieves.” The miracle, they say, is that such men — and it is almost always men — are chosen by God. The Family calls this quid pro quo a covenant. I’m going to quote Doug Coe, the longtime leader, what he means by that term covenant.

“Jesus says: ‘You have to put me before other people.’ Hitler, that was the demand of the Nazi Party. Quite a leap there. I’ve seen pictures of young men in the Red Guard of China. A table laid out like a butcher table. They would bring in this

young man’s mother and father, lay her on the table with a basket on the end. He would take an ax and cut her head off. To have to put the purposes of the Red Guard ahead of the mother, father, brother, sister, their own life. That was a covenant, a pledge. That was what Jesus said. If you’re going to have any kind of movement, you have to have that kind of commitment.”

Which is why it does not matter to The Family, to Christian Nationalism, what Trump believes. Or whether he is, as some Christian Nationalists claim, a baby Christian, a man brought to grace by power. Each of his actions in the White House — the appointment of judges, a rollback of reproductive rights, spiritual war with Islam, the fortification of America as a chosen nation — symbolized by the wall to be built on its border. Each action is like a baby step toward the Lord. It does not matter whether he is a baby Christian or perhaps not truly a believer at all, but rather a tool in the hands of the Lord.

Trump as King Cyrus

This is the notion popularized in the 2016 campaign among evangelicals. The biblical story of King Cyrus the Great recast for the man who would make America great again. Both of them anointed by God. Even though neither necessarily had faith in God. It is King Cyrus, the king of Persia, a pagan, who the story goes, freed the Jews from Babylon and, what’s more, built a wall around Jerusalem. A wall. There’s real subtlety in this movement. And he didn’t actually build a wall either.

Now, some critics see these such beliefs as dangerous superstition, as naivete at its worst. Others say it’s cynicism.

And what I want to propose to you today is that it is both the art of the deal, of which Trump’s ghostwriters boast, and their best approximation of Trump. The real art of the deal is making everyone believe they got a good deal. It’s not the hard compromise of democracy where we’re aware of what we gave up.

The art of this deal is faith. The product of the deal is power, strength, total commitment. This is what The Family has dreamed of since its founder first wrote admiringly of Hitler’s effectiveness. It’s what Doug Coe spoke of whenever he cited Hitler, Lenin and Mao as the models of strength of the covenant, the deal with power that followers of Christ must seek. Trump instinctively understood early on that he was something like that model of strength — the unique figure who could bind reactionary forces together or according to Christian Nationalist mythology.

I want to emphasize this may not be true. It was allegedly Melania who figured it out, according to a 2016 best-selling campaign book called *God’s Chaos Candidate: Donald J. Trump and the American Unraveling*, by Lance Wallnau, an evangelical Trump adviser. Wallnau writes, “While [Trump is] watching the evening news with his wife Melania, they witnessed the escalating violence and riots happening in Baltimore. In that moment, Melania turned to Trump and said, ‘If you run now, you will be president.’”

“‘What,’ said Trump? He was legitimately shocked by this sudden declaration. ‘I thought you said I was too bright and brash to get elected.’ Melania turned back to the plasma screen and said, ‘Something has changed. They are ready for you now.’”



Photo by Chris Line

Jeff Sharlet signs copies of his book for convention attendees following his speech.

Convention speech

Constitution belongs to ‘We the People’

This is an edited version of the speech given by Andrew L. Seidel at FFRF's national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 18, 2019. He was introduced by FFRF Co-President Dan Barker:

Andrew is the director of strategic response at the Freedom From Religion Foundation. He graduated from Tulane University with a B.S. in neuroscience and environmental science and he graduated magna cum laude from Tulane University Law School in 2009, where he was awarded the Haber J. McCarthy Award for excellence in environmental law. Andrew studied human rights international law at the University of Amsterdam, completing his Master of Laws at Denver University Sturm College of Law in 2011.

He was also one of FFRF's student essay contest winners that year, which is how we met him. Andrew joined FFRF as a constitutional attorney on Halloween 2011 and ever since then he's been scaring the hell out of the Religious Right.

He also writes for many other publications including Think Progress, Religion News Service, Rewire News and others. Andrew's new book is called *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism is Un-American*. Please welcome Andrew.



Andrew L. Seidel, FFRF's director of strategic response, speaks at the national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 18, 2019.

Photo by Ingrid Laas

By Andrew L. Seidel

Do we have a government of the people for the people and by the people? Or is ours a government of the Christians for the Christians and by the Christians? That is our battle right now. America is in a desperate fight against Christian Nationalism, a political theology that is an existential threat to our republic.

That is why I wrote *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism is Un-American*. Christian Nationalism is not a scholarly debate. It is a sinister exclusionary idea. The goal is to redefine America according to the Christian Nationalist identity and then reshape our law accordingly. Christian Nationalism is the idea that America was founded as a Christian nation that is based on Judeo-Christian principles and, most importantly, that we've strayed from that foundation. Now we've got to get back to our godly roots. They use that language of return to justify all manner of evil public policy.

Christian Nationalists seized power in 2016. The best predictor of a Trump voter in 2016 was thinking that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. So, Trump tapped into this fearful undercurrent of Christian Nationalism and he rode it into the most powerful

office in the land. And since then he and his administration chockablock full of Christian Nationalists have been implementing this exclusionary public policy. You've seen it. They love to talk about it.

The Muslim ban is a really great example of this. Not only did it ban immigration from Muslim-majority countries, it also favored immigration for Christians, and the child separation policy at the border. The administration justified it. Jeff Sessions, the attorney general at the time, got up there and justified it using the bible. Romans 13 opposition to LGBTQ equality and opposition to reproductive rights is almost exclusively Christian Nationalist and it's not just at the federal level. We are seeing it all across the states as well. There is a coordinated push.

Religion becoming law

They call it Project Blitz and it is unabashedly Christian Nationalist. Their religion is becoming the law. But there's good news because the very identity of the Christian Nationalists depends on myths and lies. You've heard them before. Trump loves to spout them all. "One nation under God." "In God we trust." "The Declaration of Independence references the Christian God four different times." "Our Founding Fathers were all the equivalent of evangelical Christians." "They prayed at the Constitutional Convention." "George Washington got down on his knees at Valley Forge in the snow and said a prayer."

And my personal least favorite: that our law is based on the Ten Commandments. Without the historical cover that these myths and lies give, their policy justifications begin to crumble. Their identity begins to wither and fade, so their entire identity and political ideology is actually incredibly weak and vulnerable because it is based on these historical distortions and lies.

But we need more than facts to fight back. We need better arguments. So, that is the purpose of *The Founding Myth* — to bury Christian Nationalism. It's a lofty goal, I admit. I want to utterly destroy this un-American ideology. The book is not simply a refutation of the idea that we are founded as a Christian nation. Instead, I wanted to go deeper.

So, I asked, did Judeo-Christian principles positively influence the founding of the United States of America? And the answer to that question is no, they did not. In fact, it's a good thing they didn't because Judeo-Christian principles, and especially those principles that are central to Christian Nationalism, are fundamentally opposed to the principles on which this nation was built. There is such disagreement and conflict that it is fair to say, albeit bluntly, Christianity is un-American.

That is the argument I make. There are these two conflicting systems. They have irreconcilable differences so much so that the Founders had to divorce the two.

To make the argument in the book, I broke it up into four basic parts. Part one goes over the Founding

Fathers and their personal beliefs. It also talks about the Declaration of Independence. I walk you through every one of those four references to God or the Christian God, supposedly in the Declaration, and I talk about our colonial history. And, again, what I'm trying to do in the book is give you better arguments.

So, it is really fun to talk about the religion or lack thereof of the Founding Fathers. But if we do that, we are actually ceding a central point, and that is that it doesn't matter what they personally believed about God or Jesus or any of that. What matters was their views on the separation of state and church. That's why we need to be focusing on the Declaration of Independence. We can go over all of the references in there we can talk about it, but, at its heart, it is an anti-biblical document. The central points in it are that power comes from the people and the people have a right to overthrow and rebel against their government when it becomes tyrannical. Both of those central principles are refuted in

the bible in Romans 13, the same chapter that supposedly justifies the child-separation policy at our border.

Part 2 of the book is called the "United States v. the Bible." And here I really dig into those Christian principles that you can find in the bible. Things like hell, vicarious redemption through human sacrifice, biblical obedience and any notions of justice, and I compare those to America's founding principles. Again, you see this fundamental disconnect.

Part 3 is where the book began. This book actually started out as a law review article that just got really, really out of hand. In this section, I compare the Ten Commandments to our founding principles and I walk you through every single one of the Ten Commandments and show that they really are fundamentally opposed to the principles on which our nation was built. All of them — yes, even the ones that you're thinking of right now.

Part 4 is called "American Verbiage." This is argument by idiom. These are the things that you all know and loathe: "In God We Trust." "One nation under God." "So help me God." "God bless America." Almost all of you know that none of those is from the founding generation. They're all much later additions to the American vernacular. But our better argument is that these phrases were deliberately foisted on America during times of national fear and crisis by Christian Nationalists who were often seeking to wipe out earlier unifying phrases. "E Pluribus Unum" ("From Many One") replaced by "In God we trust," "one nation, indivisible" literally dividing the indivisible with God, historically the most divisive force known to humankind.

So, you have not read a book like *The Founding Myth*. It is different. Previous books have offered this gentle correction to the Christian Nationalists. Here's what our Founding Fathers meant. Here's what they actually said. This is the real history and they've kind of left it at that, but correction is not enough.

Facts are not enough

Facts are not enough. Pointing out errors is no longer sufficient. So, this book does that, but then it takes the next step. This book goes on the offensive because patriotism has no religion. This book is an assault on the Christian Nationalist identity. Not only are Christian Nationalists wrong, their beliefs and identity run counter to the ideals on which this nation was founded. They are un-American.

Christian Nationalists are not just un-American, they're also thieves. Christian Nationalism seeks to steal America's greatness, its accolades and credit. It insists that a nation with a godless Constitution is dedicated to one particular god. This is a religion that demands fearful unwavering obedience and it's trying to claim credit for a rebellion against a godly king and a revolution in self-government. It declares that that revolution was the brainchild of a few pious Christians rather than a group of unorthodox think-



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Andrew L. Seidel says his goal is to "utterly destroy this un-American ideology" of Christian Nationalism.

ers testing Enlightenment principles.

Christian Nationalism also bears false witness. It claims that a nation dedicated to the freedom of and from religion was built for one particular religion. It seeks to bury a fundamental truth on which our republic rests. That there is no freedom of religion without a government that is free from religion.

Christian Nationalism claims that the United States is exceptional because it was chosen, but a religion did not make America great, let alone make America at all. “We the People” make America great. America did not succeed because of Jesus or the bible. America succeeded as an experiment because it was based on reason. And if we abandon reason in favor of faith, or if we ask our elected leaders

“ Not only are Christian Nationalists wrong, their beliefs and identity run counter to the ideals on which this nation was founded. They are un-American.

to commit this sin, we are asking to regress and not to some golden age but to a time when religion ruled the world, which was called the Dark Ages, as Ruth Green had said.

The Christian Nationalists will not go gently into the obsolescence for which they are bound. They have grown accustomed to religious privilege. They are used to imposing their beliefs on unsuspecting schoolchildren. They expect politicians to pay lip service to their duty and they demand acknowledgments of their god on government property.

But that time is ending. The end of Christian privilege is near. But you have to fight. As progress marches on, the lies exposed in this book will be professed more often, more loudly and with more desperation. You must be prepared to

refute them factually and vocally. *The Founding Myth* gives you the facts and it gives you better arguments. You are responsible for the rest. Outspoken resistance is, to quote James Madison, the first duty of citizens.

Christian Nationalists have persuaded too many Americans to abandon our heritage, to spurn our secular foundations in favor of their myth. But America invented the separation of state and church. It is an American original. The idea was born in the Enlightenment, but was first implemented in the American experiment and it is time for us to reclaim that heritage and bury their lies.

This is not a Christian nation.

Our Constitution does not belong to the Christian Nationalists. It belongs to “We the People” — all of the people — and it’s about damn time that we take it back.

Purchase Andrew L. Seidel’s book, The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism is Un-American, from ffrf.org/shop and Andrew will donate his royalty to FFRF.

Q&A with Andrew L. Seidel

Here is a selection of Q&A from convention attendees to Andrew L. Seidel following his presentation.

Can you speak to the intersection of White Nationalism and Christian Nationalism?

Yes. So, if you’re looking at a Venn diagram, it’s a circle.

I know that FFRF frequently sends friend-of-the-court briefs to the Supreme Court. Do the judges read those?

The clerks certainly read those. The judges are supposed to read all that. Sometimes, I think they just get briefed by clerks on what is in them. But they can be effective, especially if you can make them stand out among the pack, which is something that we really work on doing.

I have a question about the intersection of the bible as the myth of the Christian Nationalists, but the Constitution as sort of the myth of the American people. Can you talk about how you dealt with that in your book?

Yeah, absolutely. I do get into that in the book, a lot. There are many of the principles that are in the Declaration and the Constitution that were aspirational at the time they were written and successive generations left it to their children to do the hard work of realizing a lot of those principles.

I have devoted quite a few chapters in the book to this because it’s taken us a long time to get to the idea that all of us are equal, but I don’t think we’re there yet. There are a few places where I actually had to concede some influence to Christian Nationalists. It’s just not a positive influence.

I mean, seriously, slavery is a really good example. All



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Andrew L. Seidel speaks in October about his book, *The Founding Myth*, with Isaac Kramnick, right, who died in December.

of the justifications for slavery on the “we need to have slaves” side were religious. And it’s in the bible, it’s in the Ten Commandments twice. Jesus tells you how hard you have to beat your slaves in a parable. I mean, if you have a holy book that you can point to that says, “Yes, slavery is totally fine,” you’re gonna hang a hat on that. And they did.

And there were few other areas where I had to concede that influence. The subjugation of women is another area where Judeo-Christianity had a massive impact. And the fight for LGBTQ rights is another area where we have to concede some influence, but it’s not good influence. It’s a poisonous influence that we are trying

to shake off and have been for centuries.

Could you address Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the taking over of the State Department’s website to promote his Christian leadership?

For people who did not see this, Mike Pompeo, the secretary of state, spoke in Nashville at this conference of Christian counselors. He basically said the bible should be a guidebook for leadership. He told everybody to read it, then used the secretary of state website to promote his talk. The Department of State’s website had this huge image of him with a link to his talk, including the full remarks. So, he’s using the resources of the state to promote his personal religion, which is Christian. That is Christian Nationalism.

That’s exactly what we are working to fight. FFRF wrote a letter within a couple of hours of that happening. That did come down from the website shortly thereafter, but not just because of our letter. There was a huge outcry. This is what we are fighting.

And it’s not just Pompeo. That same day, Attorney General Bill Barr gave his really hateful speech at Notre Dame, where he weaponized religious liberty. He vilified nonreligious Americans, he bastardized American history and the law, and just spouted pure Christian Nationalism as the U.S. attorney general, which was nothing new.

We warned everybody that he had these views. He gave speeches that were very similar to that back in 1992. We warned Congress not to confirm him in this position for that very reason. So, nothing new there. But this is the kind of stuff that we are regularly fighting.

CRANKMAIL

Here is this month’s installment of Crankmail, letters from those who seem to be missing a marble or two from their collection. Printed as received (including strong language).

HAPPINESS!: Your organization is a joke! You are athiests in every respect! Your world is coming to an end in about 7 to 9 years! Repent & accept the GOD you can’t see! Believe on his son Jesus or perish in flames! The beast stirs! His reign is coming! All of you need GOD in your lives! If not for his righteousness & his glory & forgiveness, you would suffer greatly! I am only the messenger,— Emmanuel Torouge

Pensacola cross: You are the most hateful motherfuckers on the planet. God is disappointed in my language to you but i will ask his forgiveness, later. For now I find peace believing you will not ask his forgiveness and you will burn in Hell forever. — Anthony Tommins

Fool: You want people to donate to an atheistic foundation, but you want to stop a restaurant from giving a discount to those who go to church (i.e., donating to theistic people). What a hypocrite!!! No wonder the Bible says, “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God”. According to the Bible, everyone who says there is no God (i.e., atheists) is a fool. Your complaint sure proves the Bible right -- and also shows how there must be a God!!! — Ed Charles

Lies: Ffrf is spreading lies in the name of freedom, when in truth they want to silence anyone who has the strength of mind to speak publicly about their First Amendment protected right to speak and to believe according to their own conscience. Stop trying to bully the free populous, and return to the rock that you crawled out from under. Your billboards are plastered all over my hometown like an atheistic propaganda campaign. I’m submitting this for informational purposes only, no reply necessary. — Brian Lee

Prayer kids get to do: We Don’t tell you what to believe in and you have no right to tell us what we can do here in our country. If you don’t bwant God to be in your life that’s fine He doesn’t make you do that either. You Don’t have any Right to change our rights. If you don’t want to pray during a game or what ever your at that prays that’s find but Don’t push your stuff on us. Satan Believes in God and he trembles. Your choice. Don’t bow your head. — Linda Kroon

FFRF: Fuck your ass motherfucker im not a christian but this website is a fucking pot of steam-ing shit — Jesse Paul

Alabama schools: You people better leave our schools in Alabama alone. We in Alabama are not going to be forced to give up our religion for 4% of

the population in Alabama. I am sick of you people and if you keep pushing too hard, you are going to end up with a war on your hands that was started by you intolerant idiots. There will be enough red blooded true patriotic Americans that will become sick of your bullying and intolerant acts that are going to stand up and say enough is enough. Keep on with your crap, one day you will regret it. Oh, and I’m sure you are going to try to get your legal team on this because you think that I am threatening you, but don’t waste your time. You can’t do anything because guess what, I didn’t tell you that I am going to do anything to you, it will be every Patriot that stands up that will. — Carl Grier

Planets: Why are all the planets we know of, round? So uf you follow the big bang theory, the wouldn’t all planets be oddly shaped hunks or space rock? Who polished all the pieces and made them round? — Marcy Huntington

JESUS CHRIST: QUESTION when its time for u to get sick and things are not looking to good for you WHO DO U PRAY TO ? JUST CURIOUS — Joe Schenk

Barker fail on Carlson: I demand Dan Barker’s immediate termination. He presents himself as glibly knowledgeable, but spouts slander discredited for centuries, thus exposing his ignorance or cor-

ruption. Mark my words: he will end up destroying any remaining credibility FFRF has left. This is the best you can do?! Fire him today! — M.D. Waterloo

I met God in person: I can prove it to anybody. Everybody I talk to be lives me I have all types of proof. Just wanted you to know that. Stop living a lie. God is the most serious person that ever exist. — Greg Stribling

Prophecies: Forget everything about what the Bible says except all the prophecies. You can’t deny prophecy because by its very definition is “history told before it happens.” The Bible has literally hundreds of prophecies both in the OT and NT. To date, the accuracy of these prophecies is 100%. This cannot be denied or overlooked. The prophecies alone about Jesus and his birth, Life, death and resurrection total approximately 300 prophecies. Do you know what the odds are of even a few of these coming to pass are? The prophecies alone land to be incredible way in which this amazing book was written over the centuries. If you can dispute these then I will become an atheist! Give it your best shot! — Norma Saib

religion: I was just asking how do you know there ain’t no god? He’s done a lot for me he kept my babies alive when doctors said they were in critical shape . Prayers were answered. — Brian Ward

LETTERBOX

Stay strong on the front lines, FFRF!

As a longtime FFRF member, I just want to thank you so much for the outstanding work of your entire staff. You guys are my heroes! I used to do radio and TV debates with religious leaders, but I lost so many fans and clients that I was forced to stop. I'm glad you guys are still on the front lines fighting religious insanity. Please keep doing this critically important work.

Steve Siebold
Georgia

Despite ruling, public crosses are coercive

Relying on the *Bladensburg* cross Supreme Court decision, the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals reversed itself and decided that a Christian cross located on a government-owned park in Pensacola, Fla., does not violate the Constitution.

The court opined that a cross somehow loses its religious significance to make it neutral based on the lapse of time. That is, a miracle of transmutation occurs.

These judicial decisions remind me of a rally for the Combined Federal Campaign that I was mandated to attend when working as a federal civil service employee. The executive who led the fund-raising event told us that while we were not obligated to contribute, "I don't understand how anyone would not want to support this worthy cause. And think how a supervisor might evaluate a promotion package when considering a candidate who was not a team player." Any way it might be rationalized, his talk was coercive. I was all for contributing to a worthy cause through a payroll deduction. However, I was not comfortable with the threat because it violated governmental standards of ethical behavior.

Similarly, I am all for religious folks celebrating their faith with public displays of a cross — just not on government property and with public funds utilized for upkeep. I believe government support for religious symbols violates my First Amendment rights to practice religion (or no religion) without government intrusion. Like the donation for promotion pitch, the crosses are coercive.

Plus, I dislike legal sophistry by a court to reach a predetermined conclusion.

Marv Friedlander
Virginia

A new secular 'Dentist's Prayer' is needed

Here is my letter that was printed in the March issue of the American Dental Association News:

I commend the ADA's decision to take a neutral policy stance with respect to religion; rescinding "The Dentist's Prayer" and permitting a moment of silence at the start of meetings to accommodate prayer or personal reflection. Unfortunately, judging from his letter to the editor, Dr. Joseph Kalil, author of "The Dentist's Prayer," remains unconvinced that religion should not be endorsed by a secular, science-based organization like the ADA.

In hopes of combatting this and with

Where do you 'Freethought'?



On a recent cruise up the Amazon, I read several Freethought Today papers and then shared them with fellow cruisers. (This was prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus.) In addition, our last stop in Key West, Fla., was where I finished reading Andrew Seidel's *The Founding Myth*. What a marvelous book! To top off our cruise, I spoke with a fellow cruiser who was reading Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now*. It was an FFRF extravaganza cruise!

Steve Pinski
Colorado

the hope of convincing my colleagues who hold strong convictions of faith to remain ADA members, I offer my version of "The Dentist's Prayer."

Thank you, O ADA's Diversity and Inclusion Committee, for the privilege of being a member of a professional organization that remains neutral with the respect to the religious beliefs or lack thereof of its members. May I always be treated with no more and no less reverence than every other dues-paying human life that upholds the ethical principles of the ADA. Help me and each member understand that what unites us as an organization must be stronger than what divides us, or surely we shall perish. I am proud to be a member of a professional health care organization that does not accommodate any member at the expense of another. We can certainly remain respectful of the religious beliefs of each member while barring any religious endorsement or favoritism. As H.L. Mencken put it: "We must respect the other fellow's religion, but only in the sense and to the extent that we respect his theory that his wife is beautiful and his children smart."

Frank A. Cornella, D.D.S.
Missouri

Catholic Church needs to be safe, ethical

Sunday morning I witnessed my neighbors coming back from an early morning car trip. They were dressed up and when they exited their car they were holding palm leaves. Obviously, they went to a Palm Sunday service. Unfortunately, the governor of Pennsylvania exempted religious gatherings from stay-at-home orders and social distancing mandates. Gov. Tom Wolf "suggested" that religious gatherings limit themselves to 10 people. It was a suggestion, not a mandate. Gatherings of even 10 people are unhealthy, risky and unethical, for attendees and for all with whom

they come in contact. To make matters worse, the woman went into the house to retrieve her shopping bags for her trip to the store!

I shudder to think of how many COVID-19 infections will result because the Catholic Church was allowed to remain open. Catholic leaders nationwide should have figured out a way to convey their religious doctrine safely and ethically.

Margaret Downey
Pennsylvania

Donation honors wife, who broke free from religion

This \$500 donation to FFRF is in honor of my wife, Heather, who grew up in an extremely evangelical Christian home. Her mother was a worship leader and her father was highly involved in church politics. She shed her religious shackles and hasn't looked back. We are raising our children in a secular household and plan on making a donation to your foundation yearly as a way of teaching our children how important the separation of church and state is. I am so proud of my wife for being strong enough to break the chains of religion and to live her life fighting for those less fortunate and those chastised by the Christian community.

Jacob Smith
Washington



Trump doesn't care about prayer, vouchers, etc.

Andrew Seidel's column (March issue) on the State of the Union Address was excellent. I appreciate all that he pointed out. However, the way it was written, one might think that President Trump actually cares about Christianity and believes in what he says. I do not believe he is a Christian nor a religious person at all. I do not believe he cares at all about school prayer, vouchers, reproductive rights, banning abortion (how many abortions might he have paid for?), public religious displays or even Christian Nationalism. He only cares about himself! Courting evangelicals and Christian Nationals benefits his political success and therefore he does it. My wish is that future articles about Trump and/or his administration will be more clear about his intentions. I don't mean to be a critic of the good work Seidel and everyone else at FFRF is doing. I am most grateful. I only want us to be clear about this man's beliefs.

Jay Jaffee
Minnesota

Is it time to create 'atheist' schools?

I mentioned in a discussion with a family member that I was really unhappy with the Florida Legislature making public schools put "In God We Trust" in a prominent place. I was shocked when she turned and literally screamed at me that "It's only words! If you don't like it, go build atheist schools!" I told her I believed in the separation of church and state.

Now, with all the voucher programs, I'm wondering if there isn't something in this suggestion and want to pass it along to smarter people than me.

What if we did start building state-of-the-art schools teaching top scientific fields and devoid of religion? Require religious/atheist studies and separation of church and state classes. Get donor and government school funding and figure out some way to make it free.

Maybe they would begin to draw in more youth wanting to be the best and the brightest. Maybe corporations and organizations would begin to rank the schools the best in the country.

We should mull on this some more. Thank you for all you do.

Cherie Ohlsson
Florida

MOVING?

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Ancient Greeks had it right on separation

In the third chapter of *The Greek Commonwealth* by Alfred Zimmern, the author traces the court system from family to tribe to church. This was a system fraught with injustice. The 5th century BCE Greeks decided on a different path. Quoting Zimmern: “It was at this point the city state and its magistrates first intervened decisively in criminal affairs.” The early Greeks saw the wisdom in a law judge and not a priest or tribal leader, and the importance of written law.

So, we have the Greeks of 2,500 years ago setting up a great example to allow the law of the land to be applied rationally by a public servant-layman, pursuant to a code, and not the whims of an ignorant, superstitious and often deranged religious zealot.

And, in America, we have been trying to keep the wall between church and state intact with dubious success (e.g., the changes of our national motto to “In God We Trust” in the 1950s). The founders would have been appalled.

The current Christian politicians will not cease in trying to tear down the wall. Trump’s federal judicial appointments may make the job complete. I am certain from my reading about our founders that the ancient Greeks were an inspiration and a model, and they would not be pleased with the current Christian politicians today who either don’t know the first 10 words of the Bill of Rights, or they just don’t care.

On that note, I have gladly enclosed a check for my FFRF membership renewal.

Jim Martin
Florida

Christians should heed gospels on prayer

If more Christians (particularly those in places of high power) read the gospels, perhaps they’d stop clamoring for compulsory prayers in public schools, during graduations, high school athletic events and other government-sponsored activities.

In Matthew 6:1–6, this is how Jesus instructed his followers to pray: “When you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites: They love to say their prayers standing up for people to see them. But when you pray, go to your own private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.”



What could be easier to understand? The gospels encouraged frequent prayer and prayer meetings, but never to coerce any one to join the faithful in their prayers — or to intimidate those who don’t pray.

David Quintero
California

Being member of FFRF is the best antidote

I found out that my parents’ church received a \$2.4 million small business loan as part of the COVID-19 bailout and I wanted to throw up. I decided the best course of action was not to throw up or argue with my parents, but to stop procrastinating and become a member of FFRF. I have been a fan for years and I am in a great place financially, all things considered

I hope my small \$250 contribution helps you continue your great work. Thank you, thank you and thank you for representing my rights!

Eli Steiger
Colorado

Religious gatherings repugnant to rest of us

While many of us already recoil at the Trump administration’s unrepentant (pun intended) efforts to devolve this country into a theocracy, even the faithful should be outraged by the blatant “business as usual” attitudes of self-righteous church leaders who hosted large Easter gatherings in spite of the “Pearl Harbor moment” that the COVID-19 crisis now represents.

All people have a right to their beliefs (or lack thereof), but not to the extent of needlessly sickening thousands of people outside their houses of worship. This is especially repugnant to the 25 percent of us who are either atheist, agnostic or unaffiliated, not to mention adherents of

other faiths. To coin an old legal adage, “your right to wave your fist stops at my nose.”

Intrusion of bronze-age folklore into secular governance is nothing new, but deliberate exposure of innocent people to life-threatening illness is quite another matter entirely, and this particular variety of flagrantly ignorant behavior rises well beyond the pale.

These credulous zealots are thankfully still a minority (at least for now), but their behavior threatens to undermine the positive results of stay-at-home orders that have been dutifully abided for weeks by the rest of us. If you want true respect for your religious beliefs, do not sit quietly while a few ignorant people worsen an actual crisis by creating an imaginary one.

As the movie character Forrest Gump so eloquently stated: “Stupid is as stupid does.”

Justin Pripusich
Illinois

Science is our best chance against pandemic

Looking to religion as the answer to a pandemic is simply Dark Ages misguided thinking.

In his classic book from over 100 years ago, *A History of the Warfare of Science With Theology in Christendom*, historian Andrew Dickson White has several chapters contrasting the failures of religion and the successes of science in dealing with plagues and other medical issues over the centuries.

Regarding the Western world’s transition from reliance on Greek science to Dark Ages religion and then to Enlightenment science, White summarizes: “Just in proportion as the world progressed from the sway of Hippocrates to that of the ages of faith, so it progressed in the frequency and severity of great pestilences; and . . . just in proportion as the world has receded from that period when theology was all-pervading and all-controlling, plague after plague has disappeared, and those remaining have become less and less frequent and virulent.”

History shows that humanity is infinitely better off relying on science instead of ancient religious texts that are the product of a pre-scientific, ignorant and superstitious past. As the physicist and philosopher Victor Stenger said in our own time: “Science flies you to the moon. Religion flies you into buildings.”

Joe Sommer
Ohio

Joining as Life Member since the need is great

I have been wanting to do this for some time and finally I feel financially able to get a Lifetime Membership. Right now, above all times, we absolutely need the work that you do. Please keep up your good work and thank you for doing it.

Andrew Stover
Pennsylvania

Why is death rejected by the religious?

Most discussions about religion focus on the existence and nature of God, rarely on death.

Sometimes I will ask a believer, “What were you thinking 10 years before you were born?” They always answer, “Nothing.” Then I go in for the kill and say, “That’s what you’ll be thinking 10 years after you’re dead.”

Here is one of my favorite (stolen) lines: “Life is a tiny existence of life between two vast eternities of nothingness.” I like the symmetry.

I will never understand how the reality of human death is rejected by the human majority. When you’re dead, you’re dead.

Thomas Hug
New Jersey

Faith in prayer doesn’t beat evidence

As an atheist since age 12, I am a bit perplexed about reactions to the coronavirus pandemic. For instance, why did the pope cancel services? Doesn’t he trust God to protect Catholics against infection, or at least protect him?

For that matter, why do religious people everywhere not think that prayer may be enough protection? Why do religious people think that God, whom they believe decides everything, would, on a whim, unleash this deadly virus and at the same time saddle America with a doofus president who is clueless on how to deal with it?

I think a lot of religious people are good, kind, generous, altruistic true believers. I think even more are selfish hypocrites. But I think they are all a bit unrealistic putting all their faith in something so far removed from reality and lacking even an iota of evidence.

Allan Provost
Florida

Too bad we don’t have Loring Miner leading us

To help you weather the pandemic, I am renewing my membership and becoming a Lifetime Member.

In John Barry’s book, *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History*, is a description of the Kansas country doctor who first detected that flu among his farm patients and tried to warn the world:

“Loring Miner was a big man who didn’t suffer fools, especially when he drank, which was often. A certain rebelliousness was part of his bigness, as well. He hadn’t seen the inside of a church in years. Periodically, he reread the classics in Greek.”

I wish he was in charge of the United States’ COVID-19 task force instead of that wax museum theocrat Mike Pence.

Jehnana Balzer
Arizona



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BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

African authorities have arrested **several Christian pastors** and even **some congregants** for defying bans on large gatherings to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Typically, they were released after being warned. In Uganda, arrests were made at God Is Able Church, Kampala Catholic Archdiocese, Christian Witness Church and Blessed Feelings Church International.

In Ghana, arrests were made at Open Arms Ministry, Kingdom of God Church and at a prayer camp in the village of Pokrom. Nigerian police arrested 3 pastors. The Christian Association of Nigeria reportedly had called on churches to hold Sunday services as planned to help raise awareness of the pandemic. *Source: Christian Post, 3-26-20*

An **unidentified Orthodox rabbi** and **3 members** of Ajdut Israel synagogue in Buenos Aires were arrested for operating a mikvah (ritual bath) after Argentina ordered all synagogues closed to combat the spread of the coronavirus. *Source: JTA, 3-25-20*

Metropolitan Seraphim, Kythira, Greece, was arrested for contravening a ban on large gatherings by calling on Greek Orthodox congregants on the island to come to church. Metropolitans are the equivalent of bishops.

Mayor Stratos Charchalakakis said such a service “completely violates the government’s mandates regarding church and religious gatherings” to prevent the spread of COVID-19. *Source: Orthodox Christianity, 3-23-20*

Fabiano N. Dakai, 58, Fiji: Disobedience of lawful order. Dakai, a Catholic priest, was arrested for offering Mass on the island of Ovalau, which resulted in over 20 people gathering despite efforts to contain the coronavirus. *Source: Fiji Sun, 3-23-20*

Isidor P. Archibeque, 44, Salt Lake City: Rape, forcible sodomy, object rape and 2 counts each of aggravated sexual assault and forcible sexual abuse. It’s alleged Archibeque, pastor at an unidentified church, “systematically raped” a girl in his congregation from late 2014 to July 2017, starting when she was 14.

The girl’s family “confirmed that there were many incidents where Archibeque had access to [her] by picking her up at school and through church activities,” the arrest warrant said. *Source: Deseret News, 3-18-20*

Tumelo Mukheti, 29, Soweto, South Africa: Fraud. “It is alleged that [Pastor Mukheti] lured his church members in Kiptown to invest a non-refundable R1500 each into his investment scheme, which is known as Yahwe, between the year 2017 and 2018. He has an agreement with them that they would be receiving a 14% profit,” police said in a statement. The total is estimated at 2 million rand, equal to about \$117,000. *Source: Eyewitness News, 3-18-20*

Scott Asalone, 63, Asbury Park, NJ: Carnal knowledge of a minor. At the time of the alleged abuse in 1985, Asalone was pastor at St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church in Purcellville, VA.

He engaged in sexual relations “without the use of force” with a minor aged 13 or 14, the indictment said. He was removed from public ministry in 1993 and was dismissed from the Capuchin Friars in 2007.

After Asalone’s arrest was announced, David Grosso, a councilman in Washington, D.C., announced in a statement, “The minor he assaulted was me. ... This occurred during a very difficult time of my life. Since then, I have been working through the negative impact of this abuse on my life. With the loving support of my wife Serra and my family, I am proud of the progress I have made,” Grosso wrote. *Source: WTOP, 3-16-20*

Jonathan A. Weaver, 56, Pennsylvania: 2 counts of 1st-degree assault and battery. Charges in South Carolina involve an alleged 2001 incident when Weaver was pastor at Hyde Park Baptist Church in New York and took students to Bob Jones University in Greenville. He is a 1986 Bob Jones graduate.

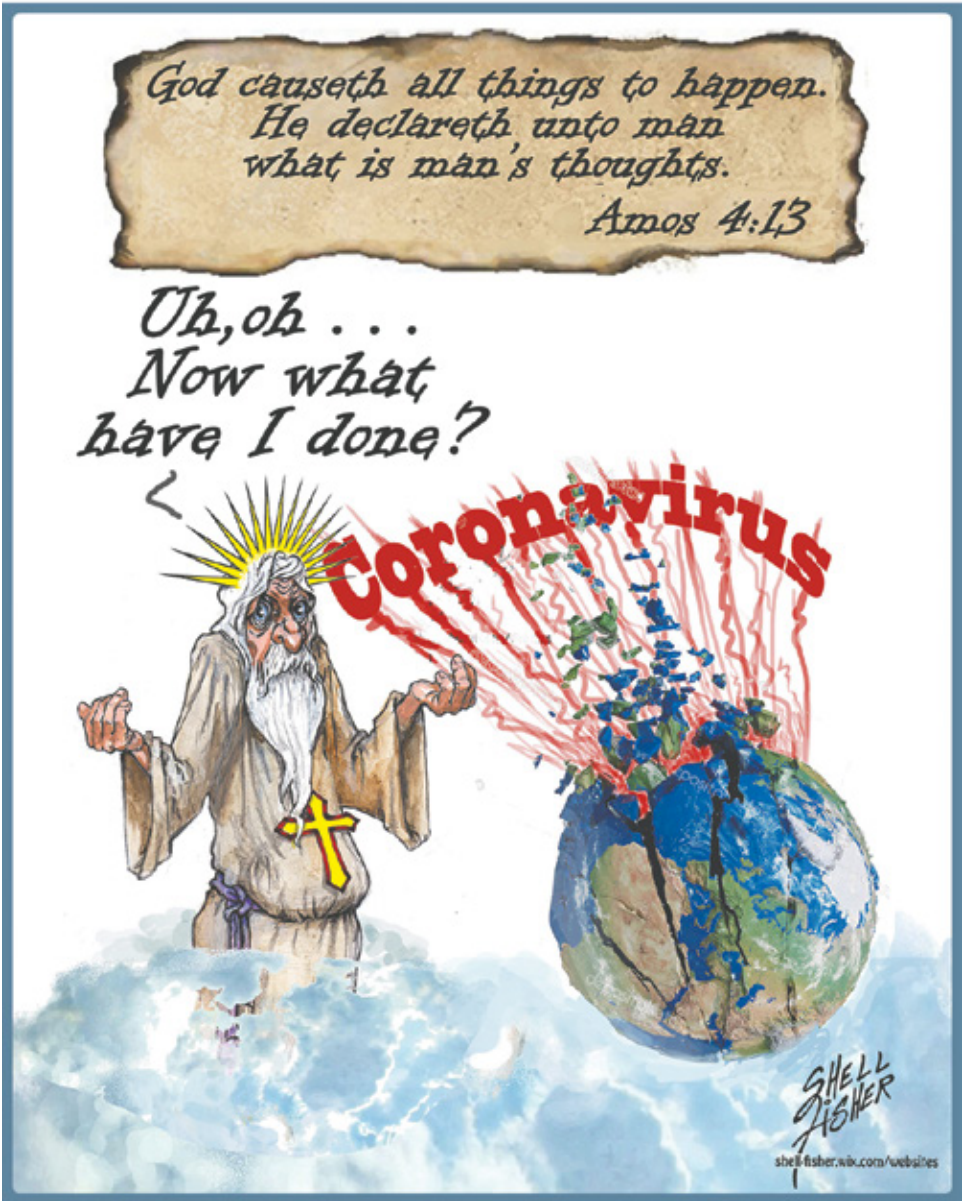
Shielagh Clark filed reports with Hyde Park police and university officials in 2005 that the abuse started when she was 15 and she became pregnant. She alleges she was instead asked to withdraw from Bob Jones for lying about where she was when she used overnight passes.

The arrest warrant states Clark was afraid to report the allegations in 2001 because Weaver was her pastor. *Source: Greenville News, 3-14-20*

James Burrus, 63, Staten Island, NY: Murder. Burrus, bishop of By Divine Purpose Christian Center, is charged with the 1980 strangling death of Lorraine Snell, a 19-year-old legal secretary. The former husband of Snell’s cousin, Burrus was seen leaving a party with her and was initially a suspect but wasn’t arrested until improved DNA technology recently linked fingerprint scrapings from Snell to him.

Burrus told a reporter in 2014 he “got into Christ in the prison and now it’s my life.” He was serving time for robbing a taxi stand the same night Snell was murdered and was released in 1985. Pearl Snell-Holder, the victim’s mother, asked NYPD detectives in 2015 to take a fresh look at the case.

Holy Smoke



Source: NY Daily News, 3-12-20

Ronnie Nelson Jr., 33, Toledo, OH: Aggravated murder. Nelson, executive pastor at Greater New Psalmist Church, is accused in the March death of his 6-month-old niece Ava Pope. It’s alleged he shook the infant, who died of “abusive head trauma,” while he was babysitting her. *Source: Toledo Blade, 3-12-20*

Scott E. Nedberg, 68, Warren, IN: Felony theft. Nedberg, pastor at Warren United Church of Christ, allegedly swindled a woman, telling her “he could have charges for her son dismissed or receive a reduced sentence for a sum of \$8,000.”

Police had the woman drop off \$2,000 to Nedberg at his church while she was wearing a recording device and listened as they talked about the remaining \$6,000. Nedberg told police he devised the scheme because he was in “so much debt that he is about to lose everything,” an affidavit said. *Source: WANE, 3-10-20*

Clayton Turner, 40, San Antonio: Aggravated sexual assault of a child and indecency with a child. Deputies believe he had access to children at several places of worship through his work as a youth pastor. Turner listed The Message and Guadalupe Seminary as places where he served.

The 12-year-old girl alleged the assaults occurred over the past couple of years. *Source: KSAT, 3-8-20*

Toddrick D. Johnson, 36, Alvin, TX: Theft and using deception to secure an executive document. Johnson, pastor at Paradise Missionary Baptist Church in Houston, allegedly stole just over \$200,000 from his congregation.

Johnson filed for bankruptcy in February. He also allegedly “obtained loans and filed false insurance claims” as part of the scheme. *Source: Houston Chronicle, 3-8-20*

Brad Isakson, 38, Clearfield, UT: Enticing a minor by internet or text, dealing in materials harmful to a minor, 4 counts of forcible sodomy and 2 counts of forcible sexual abuse.

Assistant Police Chief Devin Rogers said Isakson had a leadership position over the boy, now 14, about 2 years ago in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Rogers said Isakson no longer held that position during the time of the alleged offenses over a 5-week period starting in November 2019.

Isakson’s wife filed for divorce in February. *Source: Standard-Examiner, 3-6-20*

Jeffrey D. Lang, 46, and **Kimberley E. Lang**, 48, Glendale, OH: Theft of over \$50,000. Lang, who resigned abruptly in 2018 as pastor at West Sunbury Presbyterian in Pennsylvania, allegedly received over \$33,000 in unauthorized salary compensation and nearly \$20,000 from other misappropriated funds.

The couple are accused of using the church bank account in 2017–18 “for their family’s own personal benefit and not the benefit of the church,” investigators said. They and their children, Paisley, Pelham and Phoebe, moved to Ohio in 2018. *Source: Butler Eagle, 3-5-20*

Matthew D. Johnson, 30, Loma Linda, CA: Possession of child pornography. Johnson, a counselor at La Sierra Academy, a Seventh-day Adventist school in Riverside, is charged with secretly recording boys in a school bathroom and with possessing over 600 pornographic images and videos, many depicting prepubescent boys. *Source: San Bernardino Sun, 3-5-20*

Hayden Hunter, 19, Pleasant Grove, UT: Suspicion of possessing and distributing child pornography. Hunter was arrested in Fremont, CA, where he was working as a Mormon missionary. Police said he used an alias and asked people to come forward if they had interacted with the email address katieteal15@gmail.com. *Source: Desert News, 3-5-20*

Melanie L. Kummerer, 54, Leesport, PA: Theft by deception, theft by failure to make required disposition of funds received and security execution of documents by deception. Kummerer, treasurer at Calvary Lutheran Church from 2009–19, is charged with stealing over \$390,000 from the church. *Source: Reading Eagle, 3-4-20*

Eliezer Berland, 82, Jerusalem: Exploitation and aggravated fraudulent receipt. Berland, a rabbi and convicted sex offender, was indicted for fleecing millions of shekels from people by promising miracle medical cures, freeing the imprisoned and finding missing persons. The indictment cites 16 alleged incidents.

Berland commands a cult-like following among the thousands of members of his group, an offshoot of the Bratslav Hasidic sect. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison in November 2016 on 3 counts of indecent acts and assault, as part of a plea deal that included 7 months of time served. He was freed 5 months later, in part due to ill health. *Source: Times of Israel, 3-1-20*

Victor S. Couzens, 43, West Chester, OH: Mis-

demeanor telecommunication harassment. Couzens, who leads Inspirational Baptist Church, a Cincinnati megachurch, allegedly engaged in “revenge porn” involving his failed relationship with New York model Andrea Garrison, 31.

It’s alleged he threatened her over the phone, tried to extort her and recorded a sex tape without her knowledge and distributed it. Couzens’ church building was foreclosed on in February, owing \$4.6 million. *Source: Fox Cincinnati, 2-28-20*

Jacob M. Malone, 37, a youth pastor imprisoned in 2017 for sexual assault of a teen girl in Reading, PA, is charged with attempted murder, criminal solicitation, attempted aggravated assault and making terroristic threats.

Malone allegedly offered his former cellmate \$5,000 to kill Calvary Fellowship Church Pastor Harold Wiggins, who reported him to police, and Judge Jacqueline Carroll Cody, who sentenced him. *Source: Reading Eagle, 2-26-20*

Thomas Stacy Jr., 46, and **Jennifer Stacy**, 43, Martin, KY: Thomas Stacy, pastor of Goble Roberts Community Free Will Baptist Church, is charged with criminal and sexual abuse of a child under the age of 12, sodomy and sexual abuse of a child by being a person in a position of authority or special trust. His wife is charged with misdemeanor assault and 4 counts of criminal abuse.

It’s alleged the couple abused or permitted the abuse of 5 children in their care from 2008 until January 2020. The criminal abuse charges allegedly occurred to children adopted by the Stacys. *Source: WKYT, 2-26-20*

Dionne Van Zyl, Atlanta: Van Zyl, an unregistered investment adviser, is accused by the Securities and Exchange Commission of using his position as an ordained elder to swindle congregants at a suburban church out of over \$23 million from 2013–19. A native South African, he also heads a nonprofit to equip leaders and pastors for the work of the ministry.

While clients lost most of their investments as a result of his trading activities, Van Zyl collected nearly \$3 million in undisclosed fees, commissions and other compensation, it’s alleged. *Source: sec.gov, 2-26-20*

Randolph Brown, 64, Maple Heights, OH: 2 counts of compelling prostitution of a minor. Brown, pastor at Inner-City Missionary Baptist Church in Cleveland, is charged with having sex with 2 minor girls who were being trafficked by another person.

The indictment accuses of him of paying for sex from the girls, who were runaways ages 16 and 13 in 2018. *Source: cleveland.com, 2-25-20*

Pleaded / Convicted

Curtis R. Brown, 55, Albuquerque, NM: Pleaded guilty to criminal sexual penetration of a child under 13. He resigned as pastor at Grace Baptist Church when allegations came to light that he molested his 5-year-old grandson in August 2019. He had been a pastor there for 18 years. *Source: KRQE, 3-12-20*

Kirbyjon Caldwell, 66, Houston: Pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud in connection with his alleged role in a multimillion-dollar investment scheme. His co-defendant, **Gregory A. Smith**, pleaded guilty in July 2019.

Caldwell, senior pastor at Windsor Village United Methodist Church, is accused of conspiring to persuade multiple victims to invest \$3.5 million in bonds issued by the former Republic of China before losing power to the Communist government in 1949.

Caldwell has already made partial restitution to victims and agreed to pay the remaining balance, \$1.95 million, before sentencing. Caldwell served as a faith-based adviser to presidents Obama and George W. Bush. *Source: KHOU, 3-11-20*

Marcin Garbacz, 41, formerly of Rapid City, SD: Convicted by jury of transporting stolen money, 50 counts of wire fraud, 9 counts of money laundering and 5 counts of filing false tax returns for stealing \$260,000 from Catholic parishes and schools where he was a pastor and teacher from 2012–18.

Garbacz, a Polish immigrant, was arrested in May 2019 at a Seattle airport waiting for a one-way flight to Poland. Videos showed him taking money, and after being confronted by church officials in 2018 he moved to Washington state and started working for FedEx. *Source: Rapid City Journal, 3-11-20*

Troy A. Piccaluga, 48, Redwood, MS: Guilty by jury of statutory rape and sexual battery involving two 14-year-old girls while he was pastor of 2 United Methodist churches between January and March 2018.

While the clerk was reading the guilty verdict, deputies saw Piccaluga “pull a handful of what appeared to be pills out of his pocket and take them,” said Warren County Sheriff Martin Pace. He was treated and released and jailed under suicide watch. *Source: Vicksburg Post, 3-6-20*

Gregory Lisby, 40, Worcester, MA: Pleaded guilty to possession of child pornography. Libby, an Episcopal priest and former kindergarten teacher, was arrested in 2019 in possession of nearly 200 images and videos, some of which showed boys as young as 8 in sexual scenarios.

The evidence was discovered in a search of Lisby’s home, which he shared with his husband, the

“The investigation uncovered over 2,500 text messages between Cline and the girl.”

pastor of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, and their 2 daughters. His husband has not been implicated and has filed for divorce. *Source: Christian Post, 2-25-20*

Sentenced

John A. McLean, 59, Little Rock, AR: 21 months in prison and \$203,966 restitution to 10 victims after pleading guilty to wire fraud. He served as a Presbyterian minister in 2016–17 while engaged in a scheme with a sports memorabilia dealer to fraudulently sell ordinary items represented as valuable collectibles.

McLean, who told the judge he was “incredibly ashamed,” falsely told prospective buyers that his father obtained some of the items from his connection with famous football coaches. *Source: Democrat-Gazette, 3-18-20*

Bernard Preynat, 75, Lyon, France: 5 years in prison. Preynat, a defrocked Catholic priest and scout leader, confessed in January to molesting boys aged 7–14 between 1970–90. He testified he abused up to 2 boys “almost every weekend” and as many as 5 a week when he led 1-week scout camps.

His superior, **Philippe Barbarin**, 69, a conservative named Lyon archbishop in 2002, was given a 6-month suspended sentence in March 2019 for not reporting Preynat’s crimes. An appeals court overturned the conviction in January and Pope Francis accepted his resignation in March. The appeals court ruled Barbarin should have reported Preynat but could not be held criminally liable. Barbarin claimed he dealt with the case as per instructions from the Vatican. *Source: AP, 3-16-20*

Everett Mitchell, 41, Steubenville, OH: 30 days in jail and 2 years in prison after pleading guilty to 4 counts of sexual battery, 2 counts of unlawful sexual conduct with a minor and misdemeanor sexual imposition when he was pastor of Tower of Power Church.

The victim, Raelin Scurry, who went public to encourage others to come forward, was 12 when the abuse started in 2006 and continued through 2010 in Mitchell’s home, where she also lived.

Mitchell allegedly made her stand before a mirror outside his bedroom, take off her clothes and touch herself while he watched with his sleeping wife beside him. Another time he bent her over a desk after a church service “and tried to penetrate her.” *Source: Herald-Star, 3-10-20*

Kevin W. Myers, 74, Colac, Australia: 15 years in prison after pleading guilty to 12 counts of sexual abuse involving 9 boys in the 1980s to 1990s when he taught science at Trinity College. Trinity is a Catholic co-educational school for 7th to 12th graders.

Myers would invite students to learn water safety on weekend trips to the coast and ply them with alcohol. They often awoke to find him groping or sucking their penises. *Source: abc.net.au, 3-10-20*

Michael Oluronbi, 60, Walsall, UK: 34 years in prison. Oluronbi, an evangelical pastor and self-styled prophet originally from Nigeria, was found guilty of sex offenses against a man and 6 young women dating back to the 1980s. Five of them attended his church and took part in “spiritual bathing” to be cleansed of evil spirits.

Those he impregnated were taken to abortion clinics. **His wife Juliana** was sentenced to 11 years for aiding and abetting rape and arranging some of the terminations. *Source: Express & Star, 3-6-20*

Ray Underwood, 46, Syracuse, NE: Up to 85 years in prison, with parole eligibility after 37½ years, after pleading guilty to sexual assault of a child. Underwood, a correctional officer and former Methodist pastor at churches in Exeter and McCool Junction, was arrested after a 7-year-old girl was examined at a medical clinic.

Underwood admitted he sexually penetrated the child several times, most recently in May 2019. He blamed his behavior on addiction to pornography, for which he was afraid to seek help for fear of losing his pastoral jobs. *Source: KOLN, 2-24-20*

Paul D. Burdick, 48, Hillsboro, OR: 6 months in jail and 5 years’ probation with sex offender treatment after release. Burdick, a driver’s education instructor at Portland Community College and bishop of the Hillsboro Ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, pleaded guilty to 6 counts of 3rd-degree sex abuse occurring from 2012–18. Prosecutors dismissed 15 more counts.

Two teen girls told their parents in 2016 that Burdick touched them sexually during driver’s ed classes. Police investigated but determined the evidence was not strong enough to charge him. Eventually, 21 female students came forward, several alleging he made them perform jumping jacks while he recorded them.

After his arrest in September, 3 students filed a lawsuit seeking \$2 million each. *Source: The Oregonian, 2-24-20*

Scott B. Cline, 33, Kaukauna, WI: 11½ to 23 months in the county jail, 100 hours’ community service, \$1,050 restitution and 4 years’ probation after pleading guilty to institutional sexual assault involving incidents with a 16-year-old female student between February and August 2018. Cline resigned as a teacher in October 2018 at Coventry Christian School in Pottstown, PA, and moved to Wisconsin.

The investigation uncovered over 2,500 text messages between Cline and the girl, many between midnight and 5 a.m. during the school year. *Source: The Mercury, 2-19-20*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

The Catholic **Diocese of Kamloops**, BC, Canada, and its priest **Erlindo Molon**, 88, are being sued for \$2.45 million for alleged sexual assaults by Molon in 1977. Plaintiff Rosemary Anderson, now 70, alleges she was 26 when Molon started molesting her when she taught at a church school and after she had gone to him for solace after her father’s death.

He instead began groping her and initiated a sexual relationship that she prayed to God to end, the suit alleges. *Source: Kamloops Matters, 3-11-20*

Joseph Grasso “sexually assaulted and committed battery” against a male student in 2002–03 at Siena Catholic Academy and/or St. Thomas More Church in Brighton, NY, according to the unidentified plaintiff’s suit. Grasso, an ordained member of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, was academy principal at the time and the plaintiff was 12 or 13.

Grasso became chaplain in 2008 at Stratton VA Medical Center in Albany and remains a priest in good standing in his order. *Source: Catholic Courier, 3-3-20*

Jonathan Meyer, 40, Zeeland, MI, **Holland Public Schools**, **Christ Memorial Reformed Church** and **Young Life** are defendants in a suit filed on behalf of 5 plaintiffs, now adult men, who allege Meyer sexually assaulted them as adolescents and he was a church youth group leader and middle school lunchroom worker.

It’s alleged Meyer continued to abuse boys for years after a student complained and before his 2012 arrest. He pleaded guilty and was sentenced to six to 20 years but is now released.

The suit says he plied students with alcohol and cigarettes and taught them it was normal to masturbate together and have sex with each other and him: “Meyer told the plaintiffs that ‘what happens in the cabin, stays in the cabin.’”

Much of the abuse is alleged during youth group and church events such as a Young Life overnight camp. Young Life is a Christian youth ministry based in Colorado. One field trip included a stop at a Hooters restaurant in Grand Rapids.

He’s also suspected of abuse while working at Holland Christian Schools, but that’s not part of the suit. *Source: Holland Sentinel, 3-1-20*

“Jane Doe” is suing **Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church**, Oak Lawn, IL, over claims its youth pastor **Adam Cook** molested her underage daughter in 2018. He has not been charged criminally.

The girl had signed up for a youth service project created by Cook, which he allegedly used to coerce her into an inappropriate relationship, it’s alleged. *Source: Oak Lawn Patch, 2-27-20*

Joseph E. Larrabee is being sued by 2 men in their 50s who allege he sexually abused them as teens at least 19 times between 1982–84 as pastor at St. Agnes Catholic Church in Avon, NY. Larrabee was identified as an abuser as far back as 2002 and in August 2019 was named in 3 previous suits for having “unpermitted sexual contact” with minors. Co-defendants are **4 parishes and officials of the Diocese of Rochester**. *Source: Livingston County News, 2-26-20*

The **Diocese of Brooklyn** and **St. Michael’s Catholic Academy** in Flushing, NY, are being sued by Charles Pellegrino, 66, who alleges he was abused in 2nd grade by his teacher. “He was really savagely beaten by this **Sister Mary Jeremy** — kicked in his groin and otherwise really injured,” Pellegrino’s attorney Diane Paolicelli alleged to a reporter. “This poor child went through hell.” *Source: NY Daily News, 2-20-20*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

A bankruptcy judge approved a \$34 million settlement between the Minnesota **Diocese of New Ulm** and 93 claimants alleging sexual abuse by clergy. Abuse survivors will start receiving payments in May.

“This is a massive cleanup of a massive cover-up,” said plaintiffs’ attorney Jeff Anderson. Bishop John LeVoir apologized to survivors during the hearing.

Of the \$34 million, \$26 million comes from diocesan and parish insurance coverage; \$7 million in cash contributions from the diocese and \$1 million contributed by all parishes in the diocese. *Source: AP, 3-10-20*

Ballarat Christian College in southeast Australia will pay an undisclosed amount and give a positive employment reference to former teacher Rachel Colvin, who was fired in 2017 after refusing to support the school’s statement opposing same-sex marriage.

However, the settlement also said Ballarat doesn’t have to change its “statement of faith” or make concessions on its teaching. *Source: The Australian, 3-8-20*

Legal Developments

Charles Hanel, 61, Pewaukee, WI, charged with sexual assault of a 13-year-old girl, had a mistrial declared by the judge after nearly a week of testimony. Hanel, pastor at Queen of the Apostles Catholic Church, is accused of groping the girl inside the con-

fessional in 2017.

Judge Michael Maxwell ended the trial in light of efforts by the girl’s mother to gain legal immigration status. Hanel’s attorneys argued that the girl likely fabricated the accusation to help her mother gain legal status.

The victim’s mother has a history of illegal entry into the U.S., attorney Jerome Buting said, citing discovery material. As a result, all the usual paths to entry for her were barred.

“Except for one way,” Buting said. “If she was the parent of a child who was the victim of a sexual assault.”

The prosecution argued that disclosure of her undocumented status gave more weight to her testimony because she was risking deportation by revealing that fact. Prosecutor Sue Oppen said she was uncertain if the state would seek to retry Hanel. *Source: Journal Sentinel, 3-13-20*

Gary A. Jacobs, 74, Albuquerque, NM: Jacobs was charged in January with 7 counts of criminal sexual conduct alleged to have been committed in 1981–84, including with a child under age 13, when he was a Catholic priest in Michigan. Two more Michigan alleged victims have since come forward, adding 3 more counts of criminal sexual conduct involving a child between the ages of 13 and 15. *Source: mlive.com, 3-11-20*

Jason J. Hicks, 46, Ponca City, OK, was bound over for trial after a preliminary hearing. Hicks, a deacon at Agape Church of Christ, was arrested in October 2019 and is charged with lewd or indecent proposals or acts with a child under 16 years old.

Charges date to August 2019 when the alleged victim was visiting Hicks’ daughter for a sleepover and was groped on her breasts and groin. The 15-year-old then called her mother and asked to be picked up.

“If we didn’t believe the story, we certainly wouldn’t pursue it,” Osage County Sheriff Eddie Virden said. *Source: KFOR, 3-6-20*

A federal appeals court upheld a \$21.7 million civil

verdict against Connecticut rabbi **Daniel Greer**, 79, sentenced in December to 12 years in prison for repeatedly molesting a teen boy in the early 2000s when he attended the Yeshiva of New Haven school, which Greer founded.

Greer appealed, claiming the civil trial judge erred in instructing the jury on how to consider his invoking his 5th Amendment right against self-incrimination when declining to answer questions during the trial. *Source: NBC New York, 3-4-20*

Allegations

Peter J. Karalus, Buffalo, NY, a close aide to Diocese of Buffalo Bishop Edward Scharfenberger, was placed on administrative leave while an independent investigator looks into an abuse allegation involving a teen in 2011 when Karalus was pastor at St. John Paul II Parish in Lakeview. He is now vicar general and moderator of the curia for the diocese.

Karusus said in a statement, “I emphatically deny and confidently declare as false the allegation that I offered words of inappropriate content to a penitent during the Sacrament of Reconciliation nine years ago.”

“The complaint that we received refers only to some words that were allegedly stated by Father Karalus during a confession,” Rodney Personius, his attorney, said. “Father Karalus cannot disclose anything that was said during a confession, but says his words must have been either misunderstood or misremembered by the person who made the complaint.”

Karusus said he doesn’t remember the complainant. *Source: Buffalo News, 3-21-20*

World Vision International, among Australia’s biggest charities, has been implicated in a \$1.6 million corruption scandal involving alleged nepotism and kickbacks in return for lucrative printing contracts for mass mailings.

The charity was founded in 1950 and states on its website: “Going to the ends. Where no one else goes. Because Jesus is alive in the hardest places to be a child. That’s because we’re a global Christian humanitarian organization.”

World Vision Australia chief executive officer Claire Rogers announced her resignation for family and personal reasons in March, and officials deny it had anything to do with the scandal.

Chief financial officer Gordon Allison said the charity was “deeply concerned” by the allegations and has asked Victoria Police and the auditing firm KPMG “to undertake a formal, independent investigation of this matter.” *Source: Morning Herald, 3-8-20*

Lists published by **52 U.S. Catholic dioceses** of credibly accused clergy showed 51 clergy accused in the U.S. were able to work as priests or religious brothers in a host of countries, from Ireland to Nigeria to the Philippines. ProPublica and the Houston Chronicle analyzed the lists.

At least 40 had worked in U.S. states along the southern border, including 11 in Texas. No country was a more common destination than Mexico, where at least 21 found refuge.

The 178 lists made public as of January and compiled into a searchable database by ProPublica revealed a web of incomplete and often inconsistent

information. No diocese in Mexico, home to about 90 million Catholics, has published a list. *Source: ProPublica/Houston Chronicle, 3-6-20*

Removed / Resigned

Michael Ryan, pastor of Our Lady of Good Counsel & St. Peter in March, England, stepped down during an investigation of allegations of sexual abuse of children at his former assignment in Peru.

The parish belongs to the Catholic Latin Rite Diocese of East Anglia. *Source: Cambs Times, 3-25-20*

Robert “Bud” Grant, a Catholic priest on the faculty at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, IA, was put on leave due to an allegation of sexual misconduct from the early 1990s. He was ordained in 1984.

The allegation dates to when Grant taught and coached boys soccer at St. Albert High School in Council Bluffs. A prosecutor said the complaint involved a person who was a minor at the time and is too old to be criminally investigated. *Source: AP, 3-18-20*

George Alengadan, 67, was placed on leave by the Diocese of Oakland, CA, for a second time due to allegations of groping and sexual impropriety with female employees. Since last July, Alengadan has been removed as pastor of St. Joseph Basilica in Alameda and Christ the King Catholic Parish in Pleasant Hill.

Five women have alleged sexual harassment and Alameda police have opened a criminal probe.

The parents of the original alleged victim complained to the diocese about 2002 incidents but said they decided against going to police because they trusted the church to handle it internally.

The mother alerted the diocese again in 2016, sending an email to Bishop Michael Barber without results, she said. The diocese finally investigated and closed a probe in 2018, then more women came forward. *Source: San Francisco Chronicle, 2-26-20*

Other

Cesar Pastrana, 33, an inmate at Hancock State Prison in Sparta, GA, died after a fight with another inmate. He was sentenced to life in prison in 2012 after pleading guilty to multiple counts of aggravated child molestation and aggravated sodomy involving 9 boys, including 2 relatives.

His arrest in February 2012 came days after a weekend lock-in for middle school and high school students sponsored by NorthStar Church in Kenesaw, where he volunteered. An arrest warrant alleged Pastrana had sexual contact at a similar event in 2011 held at his home.

He had previously been dismissed as a teaching assistant at a public school for inappropriate conduct but passed a background check before starting work at NorthStar. *Source: Journal-Constitution, 3-20-20*

Darrell L. Gilyard, 58, who admitted molesting 2 girls and was sentenced to 3 years in prison in 2009, was installed as the new pastor of Mount Ararat Baptist Church in Jacksonville, FL. Many in the congregation are concerned that a registered sex offender is their pastor.

“Our phones were ringing off the hook,” said Lynn Jones, an editor for the Jacksonville Free Press. “Members of Mount Ararat — they were totally upset, and a lot of them are our subscribers.”

Gilyard started preaching at Christ Missionary Tabernacle Baptist Church in 2012 after he was released.

Tiffany Thigpen Kilgannon said on Facebook that she was a victim and wrote that “God doesn’t need predators in the pulpit, no matter how great a speaker or the truth of God’s word being spoken.”

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement said Gilyard is not on probation and can work wherever he wants. The church is across from Stanton College Preparatory School. *Source: WJXT, 3-10-20*

Gerald R. Hechenberger, 56, Mascoutah, IL, was pronounced dead March 6 while serving a 9-year sentence at Pinckneyville Correctional Center. The cause of death was not released but Hechenberger was morbidly obese and leaning on a cane when sentenced in January after pleading guilty to possession and dissemination of child pornography and possessing methamphetamine.

He was associate pastor of Holy Childhood Catholic Church and School when arrested in 2018. At sentencing, he told the court his behavior was a result of a “perfect storm” of mental health issues, drug use, hypersexual thoughts and grief after the 2014 death of his father.

Judge Zina Cruse said he “exhibited a desire to see others abuse prepubescent children.” *Source: News-Democrat, 3-7-20*

The Diocese of Phoenix announced the death of **John D. Spaulding**, 74, who was indicted in January on 6 counts of sexual misconduct with a minor and 1 count of molestation of a child. The alleged abuse involving 2 boys younger than 14 happened between 2003–07 when Spaulding was pastor at St. Gabriel’s Catholic Church in Phoenix and St. Tim’s Catholic Church in Mesa.

Spaulding was laicized in 2014 but appealed the decision. His appeal was still pending with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith when he died, according to the diocese. *Source: KPHO, 2-26-20*

Coronavirus proves that God does not exist

This column is excerpted from Dan Barker's blog at patheos.com/blogs/freethought-now on April 23.

By Dan Barker

It's simple logic. The Christian god promises to answer prayer. Prayers to this god are not answered. Therefore, the Christian god does not exist. Right now, millions of Christians are asking their god to defeat the coronavirus and to heal the sick. Those prayers are having no effect.



Dan Barker

It is not just the coronavirus, of course. We could take the example of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake that Voltaire called a "repellant dance of death" and which 19th-century orator Robert Ingersoll claimed had "denied the existence of God." Or the 1918 "Spanish flu," which killed my great-grandfather. Or the 2001 terrorist attacks that prompted Richard Dawkins to say: "My respect for the Abrahamic religions went up in the smoke and choking dust of Sept. 11th."

History is pockmarked with examples, but we only need one. SARS-CoV-2 is virulent enough to single-handedly kill the Christian god.

What does the Christian god promise?

The Christian god makes a crystal-clear pledge: "I will answer your prayers."

Jesus stated boldly: "All things, whatever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive." (Matthew 21:22) There is no ambiguity here. "All things" means "all things." He even clarified: "Even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done."

Jesus, who said "I and the father are one," confirmed this in many other passages:

"So, I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." — Mark 11:24

"If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven." — Matthew 18:19

"Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you." — Mark 11:22-23

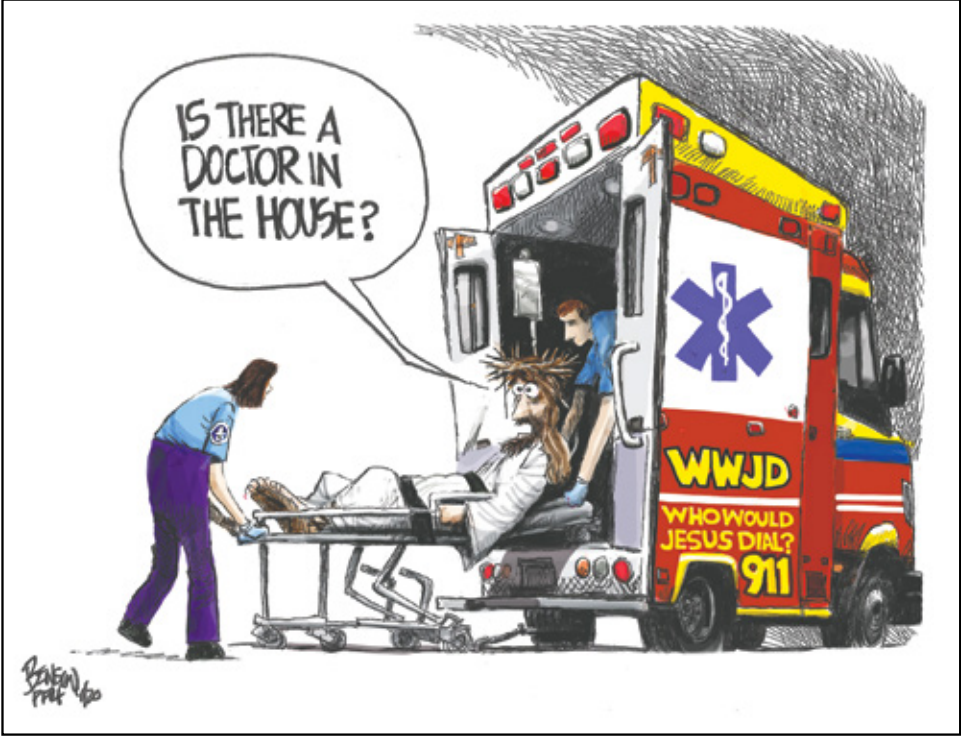
Other New Testament writers agreed: "And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight." — 1 John 3:22

The same promise appears in the Old Testament: "Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." (Psalm 37:4)

The claim is indisputable. The Christian god promises to answer "everyone who asks," "all things," "whatever you ask for in prayer." If a believing Christian prays, then "it will be done for you," "you shall receive," "it will be yours," "I will do it."

There is no more solid promise in scripture.

The Christian god vows to answer prayer not with "Yes, No, or Wait," as some apologists claim. He promises an unequivocal "Yes."



Does God answer prayer?

Multitudes of Christians have been fervently praying. The Jesuits have asked Jesus to "Heal those who are sick with the virus."

The Christian relief organization World Vision is asking Almighty God to "keep this new coronavirus from continuing to spread." The Southern Baptists are praying "Lord, you are the Great Physician, so we pray for healing for the victims of COVID-19." President Trump's spiritual adviser Paula White said, "I believe in the same way if we call on God almighty to divinely intervene just as He does so many times, that the plague can be stopped."

So why are thousands continuing to succumb indiscriminately to the coronavirus? The tragic deaths include devout believers, as well as ministers, bishops and priests. They are asking their Lord for protection, but the virus, no respecter of person, is recklessly storming around the planet oblivious to their beliefs.

By the middle of March, President Trump finally realized that the pandemic was going to be a problem. The number of COVID-19 deaths in the United States was inching toward 100. So he announced (by tweet) a National Day of Prayer, "looking to God for protection."

Trump's proclamation prayed "for God's healing hand to be placed on the people of our Nation. . . . For with God nothing shall be impossible."

Then what happened?

The death rate from COVID-19 shot up dramatically after that. A month later, on April 15, there were more than 20,000 known deaths. A week later, it surpassed 40,000 and will certainly be higher by the time you read this. Christian families are not being spared. Prayer is making no difference. In fact, the reluctance of some pastors to close their sanctuaries — trusting that Jesus meant what he promised — most certainly has increased the risk of infection among churchgoers.

Mountains are not being cast into the sea.

Is governmental prayer effective?

Since the 1950s, the U.S. president has issued an annual "National Day of Prayer" proclamation. Many governors and mayors have echoed it, asking for God's protection for our nation. President Trump's 2019 Proclamation said:

"Today, on this National Day of Prayer, we once again come together to give

thanks to Almighty God for the bountiful blessings He has bestowed on our great Nation . . . We also acknowledge our dependence on God's love to guide our families, communities, and our country away from harm and toward abundance and peace."

Look around. Did that have any effect?

The theme for this year's National Day of Prayer on May 7 will be "God's Glory Across The Earth." That unintentionally tragic-comic phrase was selected many months ago, before the glory of the virus was parading across the earth, before the prickly irony would have been apparent. And yet, people will continue to pray, hoping that maybe this time God will keep his promise.

When Florida Gov. Rick Scott publicly prayed for Hurricane Irma to bypass his state in 2017, the destructive storm paid no attention. That merciless tempest was nicknamed "Irmageddon."

Is it our fault?

Rev. Ralph Drollinger, the evangelical pastor who conducts bible study at the White House for President Trump's cabinet, blames the coronavirus on sin: "Whenever an individual or corporate group of individuals violate the inviolate precepts of God's Word, he, she, they or the institution will suffer the respective consequences," he wrote. "Most assuredly America is facing this form of God's judgment."

Some Christians preach that prayer is conditional. Natural disasters are actually punishments from God, they proclaim. He doesn't answer prayer at the moment because America has turned its back on him. They cite verses that condition God's favor on our obedience.

"If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." — 2 Chronicles 7:14

So, the pestilence is our fault. Actually, it isn't. Notice that that verse is only the second half of a sentence. The first half says:

"If I shut up heaven that there be no rain, or if I command the locusts to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among my people;" — 2 Chronicles 7:13

Put those verses in the right order, and we see what it is that God promises to "heal the land" from: himself!

In my book, *GOD: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction*, I cite more than 50 passages showing that the jealous biblical God uses pestilence, plagues and illness-

es to punish his people for worshipping someone other than himself. Here are a few:

"I will heap calamities on them . . . I will send wasting famine against them, consuming pestilence and deadly plague." — Deuteronomy 32:23

"So the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel . . . and there died of the people . . . 70,000 men." — 2 Samuel 24:15

"Behold, with a great plague will the Lord smite thy people." — 1 Chronicles 21:14

'God did not stop the virus'

On April 14, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo was expressing guarded optimism that the curve was beginning to flatten in his state. "Our behavior has stopped the spread of the virus," he said. "God did not stop the spread of the virus. And what we do, how we act, will dictate how that virus spreads."

Exactly. What we do. It should be obvious, even to those who believe in prayer (including Cuomo, who is Catholic), that effective remedies do not come from begging God.

Prayer might offer hope and comfort to some, but the heavy lifting of problem solving is done by science through human effort. Brave health-care workers (including believers and nonbelievers) and enforced governmental policies like sheltering at home are what make the difference.

Isn't it a relief to know that the Christian god does not exist? Instead of being distracted and disappointed by supplicating an ancient god full of empty threats and emptier promises, let's open our eyes, get off our knees, roll up our sleeves and work with science and medicine to battle this pandemic.

Robert Ingersoll said it best: "The hands that help are better far than lips that pray."

Dan Barker is co-president of the Freedom-From Religion Foundation and co-founder of The Clergy Project.

Convention 2020 update



Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the status of FFRF's 2020 national convention in San Antonio the weekend of Nov. 13-15 is to be determined. FFRF is still accepting convention registrations online (and will fully refund members if the convention is cancelled). Speakers include Gloria Steinem, Margaret Atwood and John Irving. For more information on this evolving situation, please check future issues of Freethought Today. To register, for hotel information and info on other speakers, go to ffrf.org/convention2020.