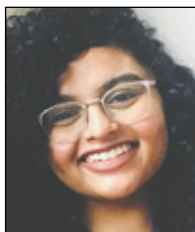


FREETHOUGHT TODAY



Escaping from my father's Westboro Baptist Church

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'Nothing Fails Like Prayer' contest winners announced

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Supreme Court now taken over by Christian Nationalists

President Trump's newly confirmed Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett is going to be a disaster for the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and will complete the Christian Nationalist takeover of the high court for more than a generation, the Freedom From Religion Foundation asserts.



Amy Coney Barrett

Barrett's biography and writings reveal a startling, life-long allegiance to religion over the law. The 48-year-old Roman Catholic attended a Catholic high school and a Presbyterian-affiliated college and then graduated from Notre Dame Law School, where she taught for 15 years. She clerked for archconservative Justice Antonin Scalia, and significantly, like the late justice, is considered an "originalist" or "textualist" who insists on applying what is claimed to be the "original intent" of the framers. She and her parents have belonged to a fringe conservative Christian group, People of Praise, which teaches that husbands are the heads of household. Barrett's nomination hearing for a judgeship on the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, where she has served for less than three years, documented her many controversial and disturbing positions on religion vis-à-vis the law.

Barrett is now the sixth Catholic on the nine-member court. (This

See Supreme Court on page 6

Tribute to Philip Appleman, freethought poet laureate

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

Philip Appleman — renowned poet, friend, avid nonbeliever and After-Life Member of the Freedom From Religion Foundation — died April 11, 2020. Before Richard Dawkins pleaded in *Unweaving the Rainbow* for more integration of science into the arts, Phil was doing it. His nine books of poetry, three novels (two with explicitly freethinking themes) and six volumes of nonfiction largely examined Darwin, natural selection or skewered religious belief, including the bible.

Although a distinguished professor of English at Indi-

See Appleman on page 4



Photo by Brent Nicastro
Philip and Marjorie Appleman at the 2002 FFRF Convention.



Photo by David Ryder

Despite his many public statements on atheism, Ron Reagan does not consider himself an activist.

Ron Reagan — A leading figure of nonbelievers

This article first appeared in Le Devoir (from Quebec, Canada) on Sept. 28 and is reprinted with permission. Special thanks to FFRF Board Member Steve Salemsen and Joan Wallace for translating the text from French.

In the United States, religion occupies such an important place in society that atheism has now become a real political movement, with its own lobbying effort, demands, and, recently, representatives in Congress. This article features a portrait of Ronald Reagan Jr., son of the former president and a major figure in this growing movement, which is becoming more mainstream among Americans.

By Isabelle Porter

Ronald Reagan Jr. is one of the best-known faces in the atheist movement in the United States. In a TV spot, the son of the former president declares with a sly smile that he is "not afraid of burning in hell."

"Hello, I'm Ron Reagan, an unabashed atheist, and I'm alarmed by the intrusions of religion into our secular government," he says in the understated ad. How could the son of one of the most conservative presidents in modern American history have ended up here? Partly by chance, he told *Le Devoir*.

"It started about 40 years ago, when my father was elected president. The New York Times asked me in an interview whether I was going to get into politics, too. You know, I had been asked this question all my life, and I used to answer that it wasn't

for me, that I didn't like politics . . . But there, I had an even better answer. I told them that I wasn't interested and that, in any case, I could never be elected because I'm not a believer."

As he had hoped, this reply put an end to the conversation, but it also caused a scandal. "The response was incredible," Reagan said. "It made many people angry. I received indignant letters from some friends who wanted to know why I had said that, what I was hoping to achieve . . . It was the first time I realized just how much people really care about what other people believe. I found that interesting."

Born in 1958, Ron Reagan was the youngest child of Ronald and Nancy Reagan, who also had a daughter together. The other two Reagan children are from a previous marriage.

Ron was 22 when his father was elected president, but only 8 when Ronald Reagan Sr. was first elected governor of California. In family photos from that time, the couple often posed only with their young son, as the other children were already grown.

It was at this time that he came to the conclusion that God did not exist. "By 10 years of age, I had already moved away from most Christian beliefs," he says. "Then, when I was 12, I told my parents that I wouldn't go to church with them anymore because it would be hypocritical. After all, if they were right about God, he himself would know that I was faking it!"

Where did these early convictions come from? Perhaps from his passion for prehistory. He re-

See Reagan on back page

THEY SAID WHAT?

He literally saved Christianity. There’s a full-out war on faith in this country by the other side. **Eric Trump, speaking about his father, President Trump, during a radio interview in North Dakota.**
The Huffington Post, 10-6-20

Many people have come to the Minnesota area that are not believers of the Book. They’re not Jewish or not Christian. . . . I would say probably the main thing is a loss of reverence for God and of the things of God, and a loss of reverence

Kyle Welty was geologist

FFRF Member Kyle Welty died at age 50. He was the youngest child born to Dr. Alan and Joy Welty. Kyle grew up in Corunna, Mich., on the Welty farm. He showed his first chicken in the Shiawassee County Fair at age 10 when he plucked the resident rooster from the hen house, entered him and won Grand Champion Cock. Kyle went on to show sheep, chicken and baked goods at the fair as both a member of 4-H and FFA. He also followed his siblings into the water, competing in swimming and holding records at Corunna High School. Kyle graduated from the University of Montana with a B.S. in education and minor in geology. There he followed another

for his word and the truth of his word. **Former U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann, speaking on pastor Todd Coconato’s “Bombshell” podcast, about how Minnesota is being ruined by people who “embrace false gods.” The Minneapolis/St. Paul area has become a hub for Muslim immigrants from Somalia.**
Right Wing Watch, 10-7-20

They’re miracles. People criticize me when I say that, but we have things happening that look like they’re miracles coming down from God.

IN MEMORIAM

er family tradition of playing rugby with both the University of Montana Jester and the Missoula Maggots. He earned a master’s degree in geology from the Montana State University. Kyle taught high school science in Wolf Point, Mont., Harrison, Mont., and Rifle, Colo., before pivoting to geologist, working as a mud logger for natural gas exploration. He created his own consulting company, Hollowtop Geological Services, with the motto of “If it can’t be grown, it must be mined.” Kyle’s loves were his dogs and his ’59 Edsel. He hunted, skied (until his knees gave out) and bicycled. He was an avid card player of cribbage and euchre. He enjoyed craft beers and had a standing Wednesday night euchre game at his favorite brew-house, Grimm Brothers, in Loveland. He is survived by his mother Joy, brothers Kurt and Kris and sister, Beth Dreyfuss.

FFRF thanks new Lifetime, After-Life, Beyond After-Life, Immortal members

FFRF thanks and welcomes our three new Beyond After-Life members, five After-Life members, 21 Lifetime members and three Immortals. Diane and Steve Uhl earn a special mention as they have become both After-Life Members and Beyond After-Life Members (on top of being Life Members)! Alan Huber is the other new Beyond After-Life member, which is a membership category of \$10,000. The three other newest After-Life members are Dr. Douglas Kinney, Ted Nunn and Ken Zaremba. After-Life membership is a donation category of \$5,000. Our 21 newest \$1,000 Lifetime Members are: Michael Adix, Scott Bender, Roni Berenson, Roland Bernier, Joseph Boetcher, Suzanne Collins, Howard Davis, Roger Fontes, David

Ford, Kris R. Geier (gift from Adam Rose), Maureen Hart (in memory of her husband Gene), Tom Hunden, Elton Hurst, Fay Kramer, Terry Lee (gift from Corinne Lee), Long Long, Julie Mahoney, Lawrence Merte, Dr. David Schneider, Jonathan Smith and Matt Weinhill. And our three new Immortals are Michael Bush, Mike Deal and William Wolmart. The Immortal category is for those who have made arrangements for FFRF in their estate planning. States represented are: Alabama, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Indiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, Virginia and Washington.

President Trump, speaking from Walter Reed Medical Center, about how the “therapeutics” he received at the hospital seem to be divinely ordained.
The Friendly Atheist, 10-4-20

God can survive without America, but America cannot survive without God. **Arkansas state Sen. Jason Rapert, in a tweet featuring a photo of a Ten Commandments monument.**
Twitter, 10-11-20

DEMS WANT TO SHUT YOUR

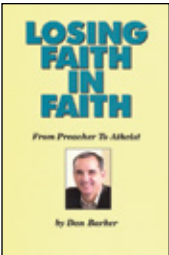
CHURCHES DOWN, PERMANENTLY. President Trump
Twitter, 10-7-20

Here in Borough Park, we don’t go by the laws of America. We have our own laws. **An unidentified person in a group of defiant protestors, shouting at reporters in the Hasidic enclave of Borough Park, Brooklyn, protesting COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in their “hot spot” community.**
New York Daily News, 10-7-20

FFRF’s caption contest



Here is the photo for this month’s caption contest. To enter, please write a witty or humorous caption for this photo. Email your response to caption@ffrf.org by Nov. 25. The winner, chosen by FFRF staff, will receive an FFRF T-shirt! We will announce the winner and runners-up in the December issue. If you’ve taken any photos that you think would be good for this contest, send them to caption@ffrf.org.

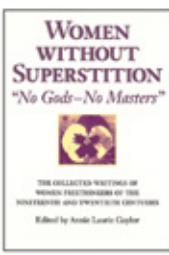


Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist
By Dan Barker

How Dan “threw out the bathwater and discovered there is no baby there.”

—Published by FFRF. 392 pages / HB

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop



Women Without Superstition
“No Gods—No Masters”
Edited: Annie Laurie Gaylor
Collected writings of 50 women freethinkers of the 19th & 20th centuries (51 photographs).

—Published by FFRF. 696 pages / HB

Buy it from FFRF online
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TODAY

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Freethought Matters

Fall 2020 season resumes

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Photo by Chris Line

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Los Angeles	KCOP-MY	(Ch. 13)	8:30 am
Madison, Wis.	WISC-TV	(Ch. 3)	11 pm
Minneapolis	KSTC-IND	(Ch. 45)	9:30 am
New York City	WPIX-IND	(Ch. 11)	8:30 am
Phoenix	KASW-CW	(Ch. 61)	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

Weaponization of the Free Exercise Clause

The Supreme Court is trying to stop civil rights advances

This article first appeared in *The Atlantic* on Sept. 18 and is republished with permission.

By Erwin Chemerinsky and Howard Gillman

There was a time when the Constitution’s protection of the “free exercise” of religion was a sort of shield, a protection for religious minorities from the prejudices of the powerful. No longer. The Supreme Court’s conservative majority is in the process of transforming this First Amendment clause into a sword that politically powerful Christian conservatives can use to strike down hard-fought advances in civil rights, especially for LGBTQ individuals and women.

At issue is whether religious believers who object to laws governing matters such as health care, labor protections and antidiscrimination in public accommodations should have a right to an “exemption” from having to obey those laws. In recent years, religious pharmacists have claimed that they should not be required to fill prescriptions for a legal and authorized medical procedure if that procedure is inconsistent with their beliefs. A court clerk whose religion defined marriage as a union of a man and woman has claimed a free-exercise right to refuse marriage licenses to same-sex couples who have a constitutional right to marry. Religious business owners, such as bakers and florists, who object to same-sex marriage have claimed a right to refuse service to same-sex couples. And employers have successfully asserted a right to deny their workers health-care benefits that they would otherwise be entitled to, such as contraception or abortion counseling.

Providing such religious exemptions has required a dramatic change in the law by the Supreme Court. In 1990, in *Employment Division v. Smith*, the Supreme Court held that the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment cannot be used as a basis for an exception to a general law, no matter how great the burden on religion, unless the government’s action can be shown to be based on animus to religion. The case involved a claim by Native Americans for a religious exception to an Oregon law prohibiting consumption of peyote.

Justice Antonin Scalia wrote the opinion for the court, ruling against the Native Americans and explained that it would be impossible to provide religious exemptions from civic obligations whenever a person disagreed with the law — there are just too many civic obligations and too many different religious views about those obligations. Also, if the gov-



Photo from Shutterstock

People rally for LGBTQ rights outside the Supreme Court on Oct. 8, 2019, as justices heard oral arguments in three cases dealing with discrimination in the workplace because of sexual orientation.

ernment were to begin down this path, it inevitably would face the impossible task of defining a “religious” belief. Such an approach would force the court to make intrinsically controversial and discriminatory decisions about which religious views were most deserving of special accommodation and which social values should be considered less important than the favored religious views.

This decision was in line with the approach taken by the Supreme Court, in almost all cases, through American history. Courts long held that the Constitution did not require an exception to general laws on account of religious beliefs — that parents could not deny medical aid to their children, that they could not have them work in violation of child-labor laws, even if the work involved dispensing religious literature, that religious schools could not violate laws against racial discrimination, and that a Jewish Air Force psychologist could not ignore the uniform requirement by wearing a yarmulke.

Unfortunately, the conservative justices on the current Supreme Court reject Scalia’s reasoning and may be about to overrule *Employment Division v. Smith*. If they do so, the Supreme Court’s conservative majority will in essence be saying that the views of Christian conservatives are more important than legal protections for workers and people who seek to engage in ordinary commercial activity without suffering discrimination.

The first sign of this shift came with the 2014 decision in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, when for the first time in American history, the court held that the religious beliefs of a business’s owner allowed it to refuse to provide employees with a bene-

fit required by law. Under the Affordable Care Act, employers are required to provide health-insurance coverage, including coverage for contraceptives for women. The Affordable Care Act had already carved out an exemption for religious not-for-profit organizations, so that, for example, a Catholic diocese would not have to provide contraceptive care to its employees. (Legislatures can choose to give religious exemptions, even though

the Constitution does not require them.) But at issue in *Hobby Lobby* were the rights of the owners of a purely secular business. The five conservative justices held that a family-owned corporation could deny contraceptive coverage to women employees based on the business owners’ religious beliefs.

The dissenters, led by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, pointed out that “the distinction between a community made up of believers in the same religion and one embracing persons of diverse beliefs, clear as it is, constantly escapes the court’s attention,” and wondered about religious employers who were offended by health coverage of vaccines, or equal pay for women, or medications derived from pigs, or the use of antidepressants. At the very least, there is a compelling interest in protecting access to contraceptives, which the Supreme Court has deemed a fundamental right.

In June 2020, the court ruled in *Our Lady of Guadalupe School v. Morrissey Berru* that teachers at a Catholic school could not sue for employment discrimination. The two cases before the court involved a teacher who had sued for disability discrimination after losing her job following a breast-cancer diagnosis and a teacher who had sued for age discrimination after being replaced by a younger instructor.

Previously, in *Hosanna-Tabor Lutheran Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. EEOC* (2012), the court said that a narrow exception protects religious organizations from being held liable for choices they make about their “ministers,” which traditionally have been considered “exclusively ecclesiastical questions” that the government should not second-guess. But now the court has expanded that exception to all religious-school teachers, meaning that the schools can discriminate based on race,

sex, religion, sexual orientation, age and disability with impunity.

This reflects a court that is likely to expand the ability of businesses to discriminate based on their owners’ religious beliefs. A few years ago, the court considered in *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* whether a baker could refuse, on account of his religious beliefs, to design and bake a cake for a same-sex couple. This should be an easy decision: People should not be allowed to violate anti-discrimination laws because of religious beliefs or any beliefs. For more than half a century, courts have consistently recognized that enforcing antidiscrimination laws is more important than protecting freedom to discriminate on account of religious beliefs. A person cannot invoke religious beliefs to refuse service or employment to Black people or women. Discrimination by sexual orientation is just as wrong. Although the justices in this case sidestepped the question of whether the Free Exercise Clause requires such an exemption, a number of other courts have ruled that compliance with general antidiscrimination laws might impose an impermissible burden on the free exercise of the owner’s religious beliefs, at least when the beliefs are Christian and the protected class includes gay and lesbian people. Moreover, the Religious Right has demanded that it is entitled to such exemptions.

In recent months, the court expanded civil-rights protection for gay, lesbian and transgender individuals, but there is reason to fear that the conservative justices are about to undercut this. In June 2020, the Supreme Court ruled that the federal law Title VII, which prohibits employment discrimination based on sex, forbids employment discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. But Justice Neil Gorsuch’s majority opinion left open the possibility of giving an exception to employers who discriminate because of their religious beliefs. The court should emphatically reject such claims. Selling goods and hiring people on the open market is not the exercise of religion, and stopping discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity is a compelling government interest that judges should not dismiss because members of a favored religion disagree with the policy.

Unfortunately, the court appears to be headed in exactly the opposite direction. Next term, which began in October, the court will consider, in *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*, whether free exercise was violated by a city’s barring a Catholic Social Services agency from participating in placing children in foster care, because the agency refused to certify same-sex couples as foster parents — in violation of the city’s general nondiscrimination policy. One of the questions before the Court is whether to “revisit” *Employment Division v. Smith*.

Five justices [perhaps six, pending Amy Coney Barrett’s confirmation status] may be about to do just that — paving the way for the court to allow religious organizations and persons to ignore nondiscrimination laws that protect the LGBTQ community, as well as ignore federal requirements to provide full health benefits to women.

Erwin Chemerinsky is the dean of the University of California, Berkeley School of Law. Howard Gillman is the chancellor of the University of California, Irvine. They co-authored *The Religion Clauses: The Case for Separating Church and State*.



NOT AFRAID OF
BURNING IN HELL

Olivia

UNABASHED ATHEIST

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FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

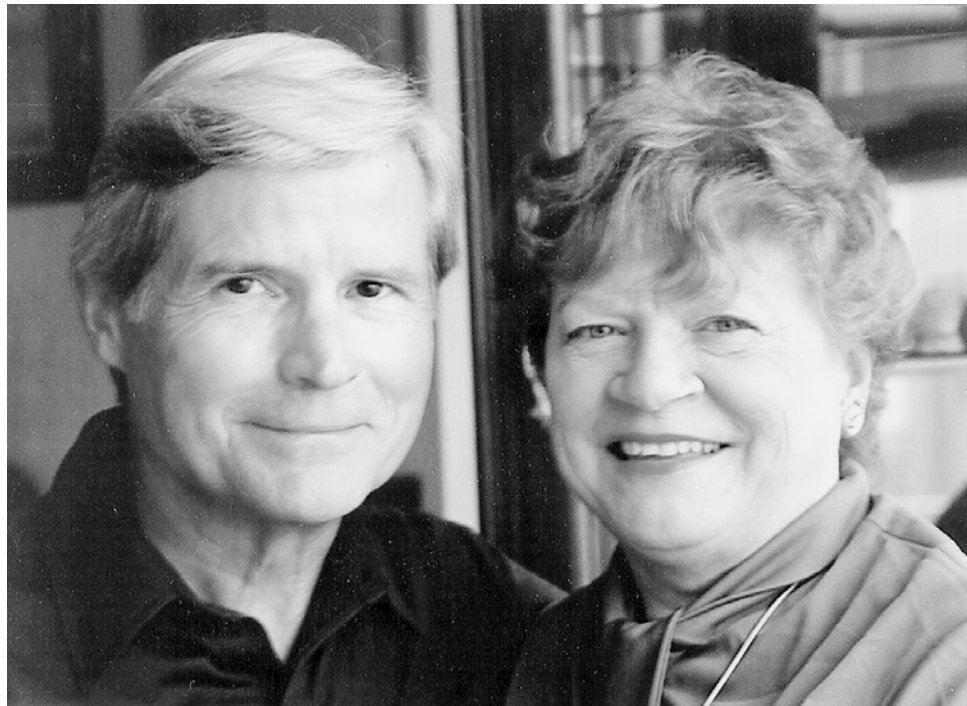
Make your own nontheistic cyber billboard at [FFRF.org/unabashed](https://www.ffrf.org/unabashed), and you might win an “Unabashed Atheist” cap, like Olivia.

Philip Appleman: ‘Let there be Enlightenment’

Continued from page 1

ana University, he was such a Darwin scholar that he was asked to edit the Norton Critical Edition, *Darwin*. Phil liked to point out that he was conceived the same month that John Scopes was arrested for the crime of teaching evolution in violation of Tennessee law. In his “12 years of education, including a high school course in biology, I never heard the name of Charles Robert Darwin,” he later wrote, which he called the educational equivalent of the Flat Earth Society abolishing gravitation. Phil’s life-altering experience came after serving in the

U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II, when he signed up as a Merchant Marine, and took along for reading material Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*.
“I am sure it is difficult for anyone reared in a more enlightened time and place to imagine the sense of exhilaration in a young person schooled in Midwestern fundamentalism, reading Darwin and understanding evolution for the very first time,” Phil recalled.
Born in Indiana on Feb. 8, 1926, he later earned degrees from Northwestern University, the University of Michigan and University of Lyon, did his dissertation on Darwin, edited an abridged version of *The Origin*, edited the Norton Critical Edition on Dar-



Phillip and Marjorie Appleman.

HEADS UP

Last-Minute Message for a Time Capsule

I have to tell you this, whoever you are:
that on one summer morning here, the ocean
pounded in on tumbledown breakers,
a south wind, bustling along the shore,
whipped the froth into little rainbows,
and a reckless gull swept down the beach
as if to fly were everything it needed.
I thought of your hovering saucers,
looking for clues, and I wanted to write this down,
so it wouldn’t be lost forever —
that once upon a time we had
meadows here, and astonishing things,
swans and frogs and luna moths
and blue skies that could stagger your heart.
We could have had them still,
and welcomed you to earth, but
we also had the righteous ones
who worshipped the True Faith, and Holy War.
When you go home to your shining galaxy,
say that what you learned
from this dead and barren place is
to beware the righteous ones.

© Philip Appleman, from *New and Selected Poems, 1956-1996*
Philip Appleman was a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Indiana University. He was editor of the Norton Critical Edition of *Darwin*.
Other books by him, available at shop.ffrf.org, include *Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie* and *Darwin’s Ark: Poems by Philip Appleman*.

win, and wrote a series of Darwin-inspired poems, including *Darwin’s Ark*. Mourning the fact that about half the American public still doubts that biological evolution occurred, Phil suggested “perhaps poetry and satire can be of some assistance.” Darwin, Phil wrote, finally released him from allegiance to the “incredible creation myths of Genesis,” so he also turned his wit and incisive pen to the bible.
I still remember the moment Dan (Barker) came into my office in the early 1990s, back when I was editor of Freethought Today, holding a small book called *Let There Be Light*, excitement catching in his voice as he started reading from Philip Appleman’s book of poems, subtitled, “The Bible Retold for Grownups.”
Phil’s spare, ironic voice captured Eve (“I didn’t ask to be cursed with curiosity, I only wanted the apple”), a confused, querulous Noah (“already six hundred years old, more than a little weary from all that virtuous living”), and Sarah, who, after retelling the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, trenchantly concludes about God, “. . . if there’s a Judgment Day, as some folks think, He’s going to have a lot to answer for.” Phil had reached out to Dan after seeing him on some talk show or another, sending a copy of his 1991 book of poetry on the bible. And then we thankfully reached out to Phil.
While *New and Selected Poems, 1956-1996*, is the most comprehensive overview of his poetry, Phil wrote prolifically and inspiredly into his mid-80s, including some lighter (yet deep) verse in *Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie* (2009) as well as *Perfidious Proverbs and Other Poems: A Satirical Look at the Bible* (2011). Freethought Today was honored to have been first to publish several of his later poems, and to have featured his regular poetry column, “Head’s Up” for many years.
Phil was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, the Castagnola Award from the Poetry Society of America, a Friend of Darwin Award from the National Center for Science Education and was published in *The New York Times*, *Harper’s Magazine*, *The Nation*, *New Republic*, *Paris Review*, *Poetry*, *Sewanee Review* and *Yale Review*. Sadly, *The New York Times*, of which he was an avid reader, has yet to publish an obituary.
What’s some consolation is that we can not only read Philip Appleman’s words and poetry, but see and hear him recite them. Bill Moyers, a fan, invited Phil on his show in 2015, when Phil was about 88, thus lending him a kind of immortality. To experience Phil reading and talking about his views and his poetry, you have only to Google “Bill Moyers Philip Appleman” to watch the interview and many bonus poetry readings. On that show, Phil read “Five Easy Prayers for Pagans,” including the stanza that concludes with this line, one of my favorites: “. . . and before our world goes over the brink, teach the believers how to think.”
On that show, Phil also read his short, devastating poem, “A Simple Explanation for Everything,” which briefly listed religious violence throughout history, concluding with the refrain: “Why did they kill? They killed for the Lord.”
Dan has set to music several of Philip’s poems, including “Fleas” (on FFRF’s CD, “Beware of Dogma”),

Phil’s clever riff on the saccharine poem “Trees” by Joyce Kilmer. Where Kilmer prayerfully declaims, “I think that I shall never see/A poem as lovely as a tree,” Phil rejoins: “I think that I shall never see/a poem as ugly as a flea...” Dan also set to music “In a Dark Time” (on FFRF’s CD, “Adrift on a Star”) written in 2006 at the height of the U.S. war against Afghanistan and Iraq — a poem I have often thought of in the past four years:

The warnings come in whispers and in shadows,
The messages are fire and black contagion
As prophets rise to chant their midnight terrors,
And empires all atremble charge their legions:
The winds are blowing cold above the cities
And lights are going out around the world.

Even as the preachers thunder Treason,
And holy horrors dance with petty scandals,
Even in this dusk, the dream of reason Beckons with its flickering bright candles.
But winds are blowing cold above the cities
And lights are going out around the world . . .

Dan likewise set to music Phil’s satiric poem, “God’s Grandeur” (on FFRF’s CD, “Friendly Neighborhood Atheist”), a delicious take-down of a deity who, when “they hunger and thirst . . . I send down a famine,” and whose motto is, “never apologize, never explain.” Dan set to music one of Phil’s musings on romance, “Summers of Love” (reprinted by Freethought Today, and on FFRF’s CD, “Beware of Dogma”).
Speaking of love, one cannot memorialize Phil without remembering his love for the women in his life: his mother, Gertrude; his mother-in-law, Martha; and his dear wife, Marjorie. He immortalized his mother in an eponymous, unforgettable poem about the right to die with dignity, beginning, “I wish that all the people who peddle God could watch my mother die . . .” He remembers her “young, lovely in gardens and beautiful in kitchens,” then racked by “thirty years of pain,” followed by stabbing cancer, and her plea, “Philip, I want to die.” He also described the needless suffering of mother-in-law, Martha Haberkorn, a loving individual tormented at the end of her life by religious fear of her “sins.”
And he cherished and celebrated his wife Marjorie, who survives him, “all sleep and love, there in the sun with sea birds calling,” as he put it in his 1968 book of poems, “Summer Love and Surf.” He promised in “S*x After S*xy”: “You kids in your fifties, listen, if you think it’s perfect now, just hang around: the best is yet to come.” He honored Marjorie’s beauty and youth in a poem FFRF ran in his poetry column about her endurance through health crises, including a mastectomy, sending us a photograph to run with it showing the two of them, a young, glamorous couple on a beach vacation in Spain, Marjorie impossibly lithe and lovely.
Phil and Marjorie, a devoted couple, attended and spoke at three national FFRF conventions, bringing



Marjorie and Philip Appleman speak at FFRF's convention in 2002.

down the house as they read his classic, humorous epic, “Noah” (I won’t give it away, but it has to do with “termites”). Marjorie, a playwright, read the female parts while gentle Phil, a closet ham, reached convincingly stentorian strains as the vengeful biblical deity. About 10 years ago, they gamely did an audio recording in a New York studio, to which Dan, on piano, and Abigail Cantor, on sax, added appropriate musical interludes.

Watch it on YouTube: bit.ly/3khiM3M

Phil’s intellectual curiosity had taken him from Darwin to Malthus, and he became so concerned with overpopulation that he wrote a book about it, called *The Silent Explosion*, then edited the Norton Critical Edition on Malthus. Phil believed the problem of overpopulation is “deplorably neglected,” as do I. Phil noted that “the continued proliferation of human bodies and human needs, with the

resulting competition for limited resources, destruction of natural habitats, growing pollution of the environment, endangering of other species, even the threat of extinction itself: all of these are ultimately Malthusian as well as Darwinian themes.” Phil, 94, died in the midst of a pandemic partly caused by human encroachment on other species’ habitats.

One of my favorite poems (reproduced on the previous page) is Phil’s “Last-Minute Message for a Time-Capsule,” which warns, so truly, “to beware the righteous ones.” (Despite its modern misuse as a new word for “cool” or “excellent,” the primary definition of “righteous” is “acting in accord with divine or moral law: free from guilt or sin.” Phil got that warning right.)

The couple retired to New York City, and were together for nearly 67 years at the time of his death, from unknown causes, which, sadly, was not reported for about six months.

In his last book, *The Labyrinth: God, Darwin, and the Meaning of Life*, really a monograph, published in 2014, Phil fearlessly wrestled with religion and reality: “People in general have never exhibited much passion for the disciplined pursuit of knowledge, but they are always tempted by easy answers. God is an easy answer.” He wrote that “God” may “soothe some minds temporarily, as an empty bottle may soothe a crying baby; the nourishment from each is the same.”

His writings are studued with secular epiphanies, compassion and yes, a slow-burning indignation over those “easy answers” that unfortunately have led the human race astray. As the FFRF bumper sticker he suggest-

ed says: “The truth shall set you free . . . from religion.” Philip Appleman, the person, the freethinker, the poet and the friend, has added immeasurable joy and understanding to our lives. He will be greatly missed. I look forward, when this pandemic is over, to once again walking daily past the framed photograph of Phil and Marjorie gracing FFRF’s editorial wing.

Here is my epitaph for him:
Philip Appleman decreed: Let there be Enlightenment. And it is good.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-founder and co-president, with Dan Barker, of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Most of Philip Appleman’s books of poetry may be found at ffrf.org/shop.



Philip Appleman with his wife Marjorie enjoying a day at the beach.

I didn’t need God to beat my addiction

This article first appeared in the Wall Street Journal on Aug. 13 and is reprinted with permission.

By Mary Beth O’Connor

I attended a Narcotics Anonymous meeting during my first day at rehab in 1993. The group discussed the program’s third step: “We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.” When the counselor asked us to identify a higher power, I said I was an atheist. “It’s higher power or relapse,” she replied. To me, this meant recovery would be impossible.

I began drinking at age 12, then abused pot, pills and acid before succumbing to a methamphetamine addiction at 16. I managed to graduate from college by exercising some control but afterward returned to daily use to cope with a violent relationship. Meantime, I worked my way down the corporate ladder: from law clerk to office manager to word processor. I didn’t believe I could survive without drugs.

By the time I arrived at rehab, I had been an addict for nearly 20 years and desperately wanted to quit. I asked the staff for proof that only one path to recovery existed and required God. They said I was fighting the program. When asked why the cure would be spiritual if addiction is a disease as Narcotics Anonymous proclaims, my sponsor said we wouldn’t debate the book. But I decided to apply only the concepts I found valuable.

We couldn’t consume any drug, including alcohol, to avoid a relapse. The staff provided useful guidance on han-



Recovery programs often include a step of “submitting to a higher power.” But there are resources for those who don’t believe.

dling triggers. The “one day at a time” mantra helped too, because I could accomplish that even if I wasn’t confident I could stay sober for long. When others shared their stories, they modeled methods for building a better future and gave me hope.

I reinterpreted step three as a lesson in limited control: I could work toward my goals but couldn’t determine the outcome. Although the damage from earlier trauma in my life was real, the people who broke me weren’t going to fix me. I had to repair myself. But I still felt apprehension when faced with the consensus that recovery is impossible absent a higher power.

After several months without drugs, I

discovered Women for Sobriety. The secular alternative taught that empowered women could build strong recoveries by releasing the past and taking control of their lives. Meetings focused on positive thinking. I felt optimistic using the organization’s introduction: I’m Mary Beth, and I’m a competent woman.

Another discovery was Secular Organization for Sobriety, which was succeeded by LifeRing Secular Recovery. This organization emphasized mutual support, rational decision-making and addicts’ responsibility for their own recoveries.

These programs validated my choice to create a plan that didn’t include the supernatural. I began thinking more

about Recovery than recovery — that is, being happy and stable without constantly addressing my addiction. The key was turning techniques into habits and reminding myself of what I could achieve before addiction ruined my life.

I started paying off debt, helped my family, and showed up for events. I quit smoking cigarettes. Anxiety sprang up as my biggest postrecovery struggle, but through therapy I began resolving the underlying trauma. I took new risks, and my confidence grew when they paid off. I took modest jobs and slowly climbed back up the corporate ladder. All this helped me move on.

Recovery wasn’t a perfectly smooth path. Sometimes foreboding would consume me. I worried about my achievements being taken from me whenever I made mistakes. I couldn’t shake these thoughts and overreacted to even a hint of criticism. Yet by my third year of sobriety, my brain had been rewired to stay clean. Not using was my new normal. Healthier patterns dominated, and the struggle was over. I went to law school, joined a Silicon Valley firm, and eventually became a federal administrative law judge.

Being forced to find my own path ultimately made me stronger. My pain never has been eradicated, but I can bear what remains. Despite jitters, I’m always looking to the next goal.

Traditional 12-step programs have helped countless people recover, and I applaud their success. But I’m glad I never accepted the premise that I couldn’t succeed without a higher power.

Mary Beth O’Connor is a board member of the She Recovers Foundation and LifeRing Secular Recovery.

Supreme Court

Continued from page 1

count does not include Justice Neil Gorsuch, who was raised Catholic but describes himself as Episcopalian.) Throughout her career and personal life, Barrett has made it clear that everything, including the law, is a means to promoting her personal religion and the “Kingdom of God.”

“Barrett will unquestionably eviscerate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment,” warn FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Many of our other hard-won freedoms will also likely be gutted.”

During her rushed confirmation hearings, Barrett refused to answer any questions regarding *Roe v. Wade*, the Affordable Care Act and climate change.

“I will not express a view on a matter of public policy, especially one that is politically controversial,” Barrett told Sen. Kamala Harris in response to a question on whether climate change is a fact.

However, Barrett lied when she testified that “I have never discriminated on the basis of sexual preference.” She recently served as trustee of Christian schools which barred gay teachers and children of same-sex parents.

Crucially, Barrett replaces Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg — a brilliant legal mind and defender of vital constitutional and secular values, including separation of state and church, women’s equality, reproductive justice, voting rights, LGBTQ equality and environmental justice. In 2015, Barrett publicly pledged to support Catholic teachings against death with dignity legislation, against contraception and abortion, against LGBTQ rights and marriage equality and even against divorce.

Alarming,ly, Barrett has been critical of the principle of stare decisis or precedent, writing that a justice’s duty is to “enforce her best understanding of the Constitution rather than a precedent she thinks clearly in conflict with it.” This signals she would have no compunctions overturning *Roe v. Wade* or the more than 70 years of clear Supreme Court precedent protecting the rights of conscience and keeping religious ritual out of our public schools.

During her confirmation hearings, Barrett said that *Roe V. Wade* is not a “super-precedent” that can’t be overturned.

Even more alarmingly, Barrett wants to use the law to make a “Kingdom of God.” For Barrett, her “legal career is but a means to an end . . . and that end is building the Kingdom of God,” according to her 2006 commencement address to Notre Dame Law School. She added: “Keep in mind that your fundamental purpose in life is not to be a lawyer, but to know, love and serve God, you truly will be a dif-



Amy Coney Barrett held up a blank notepad to show the Senate Judicial Committee that she had no notes, but FFRF helped fill it in for her.

ferent kind of lawyer.”

Nearly 200 faculty of Notre Dame signed letters opposing her confirmation.

And yet more alarming, Barrett has made statements indicating that her religion would trump her oath of office. Barrett co-authored an article in 1998 about the conflict of Catholic dogma and the law, which, she wrote, can put “Catholic judges in a bind.” The article was couched in terms of judges recusing themselves from death penalty cases, but she added: “The prohibitions against abortion and euthanasia (properly defined) are absolute; those against war and capital punishment are not.”

When such a conflict arises, Barrett has recommended that judges should “conform their own behavior to the [Catholic] Church’s standard,” rather than upholding their secular oath. When invited to repudiate this statement at her confirmation hearing in 2017, Barrett declined to do so.

A cause for concern is Barrett’s membership in a Charismatic Catholic group. Barrett is part of People of Praise, a “Charismatic Christian parachurch organization.” Former members call it “a cult.” The group was founded in South Bend, Ind., where Barrett was a professor. “Members are in spiritual bondage,” an ex-member has said. In 2005, People of Praise’s official magazine described Barrett’s own mother, Linda, as a “handmaid.” The group seems to require loyalty oaths of its members, which could conflict with her oath of office.

“There are serious and deep concerns about Judge Amy Coney Barrett’s affil-

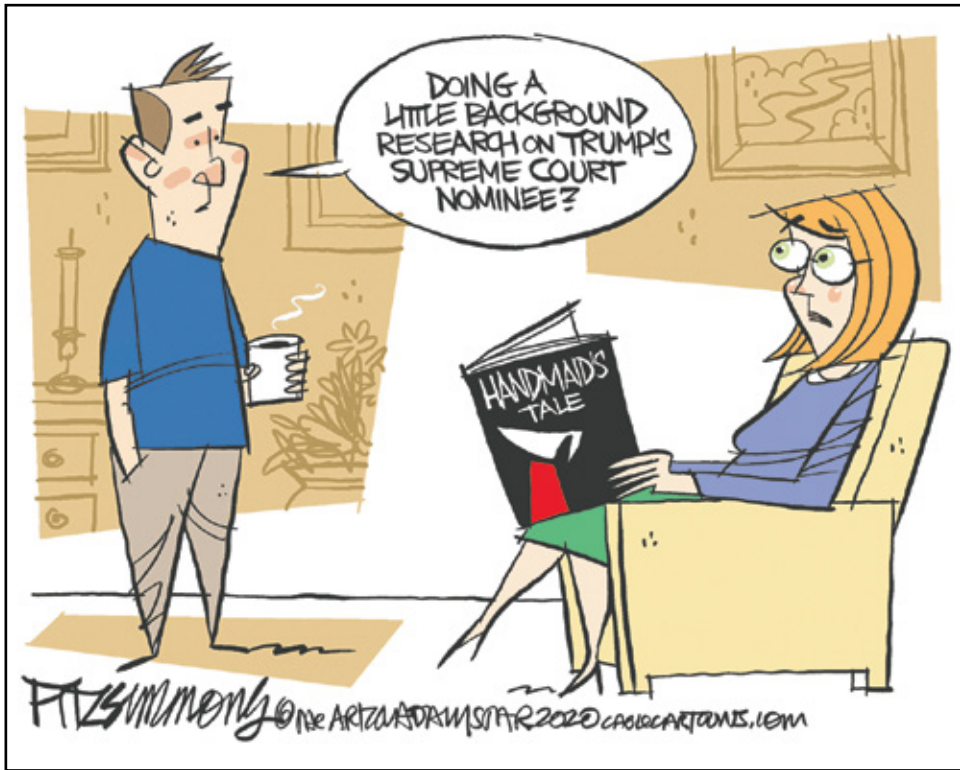
iation with People of Praise and her past comments about the conflict between faith and law,” as FFRF Director of Strategic Response Andrew L. Seidel told ABC News. “Not only is her connection to this community and her previous writings fair to ask about, but senators have a duty to the Constitution to ask those questions.”

Her short time on the bench has been marked by a series of objectionable votes that predict how calamitous her appointment to the high court would become: Barrett believes that women should not

be permitted to obtain an abortion even in cases of severe fetal abnormality. Even if a judge finds that a pregnant minor is mature enough to exercise her right to choose to terminate the pregnancy, Barrett believes that the minors’ parents must be told. Combine that with her view that health care should be stripped from Americans (a position she has not publicly repudiated even in the midst of a pandemic) and it reveals a supremely cruel vision of the law — a total betrayal of Ginsburg’s ethos. People will die and families will go financially and emotionally bankrupt under Barrett’s medieval jurisprudence.

During the pandemic, Barrett has ruled that religious services should be exempt from a general ban on large gatherings in Illinois, even though the ban applied to other large gatherings, such as political rallies, and even though the sweeping exemption undermines the entire point of the emergency health order. This dangerous decision put the 7th Circuit at odds with the vast majority of federal courts, which have correctly concluded that religion does not entitle a believer to flout public health laws.

Barrett’s writings, statements and affiliations attest to her conviction that Catholic lawyers are on a religious mission to serve their God and build that deity’s kingdom — clearly conflicting with the oath Supreme Court justices must take to uphold our secular Constitution. Barrett’s lifetime appointment on the Supreme Court will have far-reaching and ruinous effects on a woman’s right to choose, the right to die with dignity, the death penalty, and the collision of Catholic health care and our secular law.



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A note to FFRF Members

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Tennessee's volunteers



Members of FFRF's East Tennessee Chapter gather (socially distanced, of course!) in front of the FFRF billboard on Route 62 on Oak Ridge, Tenn. The billboard was up for the first half of October. From left to right: Real Van Breda (and dog Bailey), Carl Ledendecker, Alistair Elliott and Eliot Specht.

Empty the Pews editors seek writer submissions

In the essay anthology *Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church*, Chrissy Stroop and Lauren O'Neal sought to capture a generational portrait of people leaving North American conservative Christianity (evangelicalism, Mormonism and Catholicism). They are now seeking stories for a sequel that expands the ex-fundamentalist conversation to include former members of any high-control religious tradition or cult.

While contributions will obviously highlight the particularities of their authors' experiences, they are looking for essays that explore the issues so many ex-fundamentalists deal with regardless of their particular background, such as difficulty forming healthy relationships, coping with shame around sex, and the ramifications of an inadequate childhood education.

While some contributors will feature examples of abuse, they aren't looking only for shocking stories. In fact, many of the essays in *Empty the Pews* were successful because they examined the things the authors cherished or missed about the faith they ultimately decided to leave behind. Instead, they want compelling personal essays from a diverse group of au-

thors, each of which looks back at what it was like to believe before breaking from a religious community.

Because they hope to encompass a diverse array of lived experience (class, race, sexuality, and former religion), they encourage writers of all backgrounds to submit.

All contributors who are selected for the anthology will receive a small payment.

Submission guidelines

- Only personal essays. No fiction.
- Word count is 2,000 to 6,000 words, but exceptions can be made for exceptional writing.
- You may submit a full essay or a detailed pitch with links to writing samples.
- Send submissions to Empty-ThePews2@gmail.com. Attach the essay as a .docx or .pdf file.
- Include a short author bio with your pitch or submission.
- Submit your pitch or submission by Jan. 11, 2021.

Skeptic, magician 'Amazing Randi' dies

Magician, skeptic and escape artist James Randi, who went by the professional nickname "The Amazing Randi," died at age 92 at his home in Florida.

The New York Times wrote, in its obituary of him, that Randi "turned his formidable savvy to investigating claims of spoon bending, mind reading, fortunetelling, ghost whispering, water dowsing, faith healing, UFO spotting and sundry varieties of bamboozlement, bunco, chicanery, flimflam, flummery, humbuggery, mountebankery, pettifoggery and out-and-out quacksalvery, as he quite often saw fit to call them."

He spoke at FFRF's national convention in St. Louis in 1987, shortly after winning the MacArthur "Genius" Award.

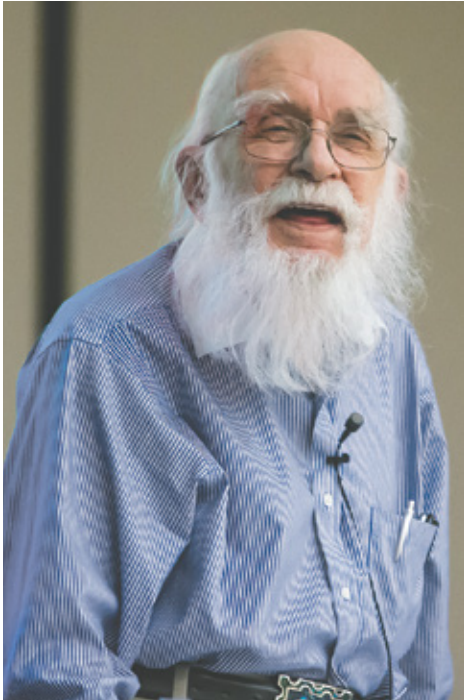


Photo by Chris Line

James "The Amazing Randi" was keynote speaker at the University of Wisconsin's Freethought Fest in 2016 in Madison, Wis.

He later spoke at Lake Hypatia Freethought Hall's Independence Day gathering in Munford, Ala., an event put on at that time annually by FFRF's chapter, the Alabama Freethought Association.

FFRF interviewed Randi on Freethought Radio in 2008. (To listen, visit ffrf.libsyn.com and find the May 17, 2008, episode.)

On the day of Randi's death, FFRF Co-President Dan Barker tweeted: "We will miss the Amazing James Randi. In 2010 he and I were having breakfast in Copenhagen. 'You are a magician,' I said. 'Can you make religion disappear?' Without missing a beat, he replied: 'Yes, I can — but you can't afford it.'"

Randi famously offered a \$1 million reward to anyone who could prove they had paranormal powers. No one ever did.

"Magicians are the most honest people in the world; they tell you they're gonna fool you, and then they do it," Randi had said.

Hemant Mehta, who writes "The Friendly Atheist" blog, interviewed Randi in 2010, "What made Randi such a legend was that, when confronted with an ex-

IN MEMORIAM

traordinary claim, he would suggest an ordinary explanation for it, and then work to confirm it. He took the other side seriously enough to investigate their claims. In a way, he showed the other side a kind of respect they didn't normally get from non-believers," Mehta writes.

An outpouring of love, support and memories flooded social media in honor of Randi.

On Twitter, Penn Jillette, the talkative half of the illusionist team "Penn & Teller," wrote of Randi: "You invented us. . . . We will never forget that without Randi, there would not be Penn & Teller. It's really that simple."

Bill Nye ("The Science Guy") wrote: "We've lost one of the greats. James Randi was an amazing man, a wonderful magician, and a thoughtful intellectual who brought the joy of scientific inquiry to millions. He left the world better than he found it."

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W.E.B. Du Bois

The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Self-Portrait in Seven Years (1968)

W.E.B. Du Bois, born on Feb. 23, 1868, known as the father of Pan-Africanism, wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) urging Black Americans to stand up for their educational and economic rights. Du Bois was a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and edited its official journal, *The Crisis*, for more than 20 years.

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VICTORIES

North Carolina school district drops FCA

In Kenansville, N.C., Duplin County Schools teachers and staff will be reminded of their obligation not to proselytize students.

FFRF received reports that Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) Area Director Ken Lovell had been repeatedly granted access to the district’s student-athletes, particularly the football team, during school-sponsored events.

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to the district’s attorney, reminding the district that coaches may not grant outside adults access to school-sponsored activities to preach religious messages to students.

The district’s attorney informed FFRF in an email response that he has discussed the issue with the Duplin County Schools superintendent. “He has, and will again, emphasize to principals and athletic directors that outside groups like FCA may not proselytize to students,” the attorney writes.

District removes video with religious message

A video containing religious messages has been removed by the Marion (Ark.) School District.

A district parent reported that the district recently produced and distributed a video titled “Welcome Back, MSD Faculty and Staff” that included several prayers and a bible reading. The video begins with messages from the mayor and a state representative and then features two preachers who deliver prayers.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Glen Fenter with a reminder that it is unlawful for the district to promote religion by including prayer in an official school-sponsored video that was shared with staff, students and parents.

The district’s attorney informed FFRF in a letter of response that the video has been removed.

FFRF gets county to take down Jesus sign

In California, the San Bernardino County Clerk’s Office has addressed a complaint about an impermissible religious display on county property.

A San Bernardino County citizen alerted FFRF that there is a sign stating “Jesus Christ is Lord of All” displayed in the customer service window on the first floor of the county clerk’s office.

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian wrote to County Clerk Bob Dutton asking that the sign be removed and that employees be reminded of their obligation to remain neutral toward religion while serving in their official capacity as public employees.

Dutton sent a letter of response informing FFRF “[these] concerns had been addressed.”

No more ‘God Bless America’ at school

A Capistrano Unified School District school in California has ceased playing a religious song after the Pledge of Allegiance.

A district parent alerted FFRF that during distance learning at Reilly Elementary Schools, teachers were playing



an audio recording of “God Bless America.” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Kirsten Vital, asking the district to immediately stop this divisive practice.

The district’s attorney informed FFRF in a letter of response that the district will no longer play “God Bless America” at events.

Graduation prayers end in Kentucky district

A Kentucky school district will no longer subject graduation attendees to prayer.

FFRF was informed that the July 2020 Pikeville High School graduation program included three student-led prayers. These prayers were explicitly Christian in nature, including language such as “Oh Heavenly Father,” “In your son’s name, we pray,” and thanks to the “Lord and savior, Jesus Christ,” as well as warnings of the “war on the Christian faith.”

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Superintendent David Trimble, informing him that this inclusion of prayer at a public school graduation ceremony is impermissible and encouraged the district to ensure that future ceremonies remain secular.

The school district’s attorney informed FFRF in an email response that he has advised the school’s principal to “refrain from religious prayer at future graduations.”

Missouri coach won’t lead team in prayer

In Missouri, a coach in the Jasper R-5 School District has been advised to cease proselytizing students.

FFRF was informed that Jasper High School’s head football coach was regularly leading his team in prayer. During these prayers, student athletes knelt around the coach, with additional coaching staff surrounding the students as he gave a Christian prayer and then led the students in

Texas district removes graduation prayer

The Orangefield Independent School District in Texas has removed scheduled prayer from its graduation ceremony.

A community member informed FFRF that the Orangefield High School graduation program included an invocation and benediction, during which students lead the audience in a prayer through the microphone on the graduation stage. This practice occurred at the May 2019 graduation ceremony and remained in place, traditionally enforced by the superintendent.

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Superintendent Kevin Weldon, informing the district of the unconstitutionality of prayer, invocation and benediction at school-sponsored events.

The district’s attorney informed FFRF in a letter of response that the district “changed all references to invocation and/or benediction to opening and closing remarks, respectively, in its 2020 graduation programs. Additionally, the Orangefield High School Yearbook for the 2019-2020 year did not refer to invocation or benediction.”

Texas schools to follow the First Amendment

Pasadena Independent School District in Texas will be considering its legal obligations with regard to student speeches at graduation ceremonies.

A concerned citizen informed FFRF that the Pasadena Independent School District high schools have been including prayers at their graduation ceremonies. Video shows that multiple district graduation ceremonies began and ended with prayer. This had apparently been an established practice at several schools for years.

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to the district’s attorney, urging the district to refrain from endorsing, promoting or otherwise encouraging prayer at their graduation ceremonies.

FFRF was informed in a letter of response that the attorney is “advising the district on its legal obligations” and that the district “is committed to following the requirements of the First Amendment when it comes to student speech, both at graduation ceremonies and elsewhere.”

Police won’t participate in prayer events in W.V.

In West Virginia, Morgantown police officers will no longer participate in prayer events in uniform.

A local Morgantown resident reported that a local police officer and pastor at New Life Ministries appeared in uniform and delivered a prayer at a National Day of Prayer event. Several other uniformed officers reportedly also participated in this prayer event, including joining in a prayer circle with citizens while in uniform.

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Interim Police Chief Ed Preston to ensure that no department members participate in religious events in their official capacities as public servants.

Powell sent FFRF an email response with assurances that he has addressed the matter with the officer and “advised him to not participate in any further activities while in uniform.”

IN THE NEWS

Supreme Court won't hear Kim Davis case

The Supreme Court on Oct. 5 said it won't hear a case from Kim Davis, the Kentucky clerk who refused to issue marriage licenses for same-sex couples, the Washington Post reported.

The court rebuffed the case from Davis, the former county clerk who was sued after she said her religious convictions kept her from recognizing same-sex marriages. She was briefly jailed over the issue.

While Supreme Court Justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel A. Alito Jr. said they agreed with the court's decision not to accept Davis' appeal, they renewed their objections over the case.

"Davis may have been one of the first victims of this court's cavalier treatment of religion in its *Obergefell* decision, but she will not be the last," Thomas wrote. "Due to *Obergefell*, those with sincerely held religious beliefs concerning marriage will find it increasingly difficult to participate in society without running afoul of *Obergefell* and its effect on other anti-discrimination laws."

Some baptisms may be invalid, archdiocese says

The Archdiocese of Detroit is trying to contact those who may have received invalid sacraments after a priest in the archdiocese learned his own baptism as an infant 30 years ago was invalid, according to a report on DetroitCatholic.com.

On Aug. 6, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a note clarifying that baptisms using an improper formula — using the phrase "We baptize you . . ." instead of the Church's "I baptize you . . ." — are not valid.

Matthew Hood, an associate pastor, contacted the Archdiocese of Detroit after finding out that his baptism used the wrong wording.

"It was devastating for me to find that out," Hood told Detroit Catholic. "There was definitely shock and sadness at finding out 30 years later that I was never baptized. It was an alienating sense that even though I was following

In control, but needs help



Member Marc Mary of Louisiana sent us this photo of a convenience store marquee. "Should I ask for an application?" he writes.

the Lord, I wasn't a Christian, and I wasn't a priest, and I wasn't a deacon."

Court shows interest in abortion medication case

The Supreme Court issued a decision on Oct. 8 saying that it was holding onto a case involving access to abortion medication. While not yet deciding the matter, the court said in *FDA v. American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists* that it would benefit from a "more comprehensive record." It directed a lower court to consider a request from the government to lift a court order that provides for non-contact access to abortion medication.

Because of the pandemic, a Maryland district court issued an injunction against the enforcement of an FDA rule that requires women to pick up

in person a pill that induces abortion. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, doctors and patients sued over the rule, given concerns about unnecessary face-to-face contact. The FDA asked the Supreme Court to reinstate the rule.

This decision by the Supreme Court is significant because it shows substantial interest by the justices on this issue. The decision is also informative because of a dissent filed by Justice Samuel Alito, who would have taken the case outright and ruled in favor of the FDA. He wrote that the pandemic has caused "unprecedented restrictions on personal liberty," and said that "free exercise of religion also has suffered previously unimaginable restraints." Alito added, "While COVID-19 has provided the ground for restrictions on First Amendment rights, the District Court saw the pandemic as a ground for expanding the abortion right recognized in *Roe v. Wade*."

Pakistani court acquits man for blasphemy

A Pakistani appeals court has acquitted a Christian man who spent about seven years in jail on the accusation of blasphemy.

Sawan Masih, 40, was arrested in 2013 on blasphemy charge following an argument with a Muslim.

A two-member bench of the Lahore High Court on Oct. 6 acquitted Masih of all charges, with a full verdict detailing the reasons for the acquittal to be issued at a later date.

Masih was convicted and sentenced to death under Pakistan's strict blasphemy laws by a lower court in 2014. The court had convicted him of insulting Prophet Muhammad, a charge that carries a mandatory death penalty under Pakistani law.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews hit hard by coronavirus

Defiance to public health measures and lack of education are the driving forces behind the high levels of COVID-19 infections among ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel (and New York City), according to an article in Foreign Policy.

Israelis, in general, have followed the lockdown protocols, the ultra-Orthodox Jews known as Haredim have accounted for as much as 40 percent of new daily confirmed cases in Israel.

And in New York City, another region with a large population of ultra-Orthodox Jews, communities have also been hit hard by the coronavirus. In one area, the average rate of positive test results was 28 percent, compared with 1 percent statewide.

Foreign Policy writes: "In Israel — and increasingly in the United States — the ultra-Orthodox community is impoverished and uneducated in the skills that prepare them for life in the modern world. Over the last decades, the Haredi ideal has been to be a 'society of learners,' where men pursue a life of religious study to the exclusion of everything else well into adulthood."

Christian Nationalists flout safety guidelines

A group of academics say Christian Nationalism is either the single best predictor or a top predictor of whether a person will flout social distancing recommendations, among other science-negative beliefs and actions, according to a report from Religion News.

Samuel Perry, associate professor of sociology at the University of Oklahoma, Andrew Whitehead of Indiana University and Joshua Grubbs of Bowling Green State University "argue in a series of new papers that Christian Nationalism is a top predictor of whether a person will flout social distancing recommendations, be skeptical of science, find nothing racist about calling COVID-19 the 'China virus' or argue that lockdown orders threaten the economy and liberty — all while deprioritizing the threat to the vulnerable," according to Religion News.

"Christian Nationalism is knocking out all of the competition in terms of factors that influence these things," said Perry, who co-authored with Whitehead the book *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*.

Pope sides with science on climate change

Pope Francis, during a prerecorded TED talk that streamed Oct. 10, urged lawmakers to follow science and to deal with climate change as a "moral imperative," according to a report by Religion News Service.

"Science tells us each day with greater precision that urgent action is needed — I am not exaggerating; this is what the science tells us! — if we want to have the hope of avoiding radical and catastrophic climate change," the pope said in the message.

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Freedom depends on freethinkers

‘Everything I had been taught was a lie’

Son of Fred Phelps tells of his escape from his father and Westboro Baptist Church

Nate Phelps is the 2020 recipient of FFRF’s Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award for his years of speaking out publicly for freethought and humanism as the son of Fred Phelps. Nate has received \$10,000, thanks to FFRF Member Henry Zumach, who has so generously set up this annual award to reward individuals who are making a difference in fighting religious fundamentalism. Since the 2020 national convention had to be canceled this year due to COVID-19, instead of delivering this speech in person, Nate has submitted this moving article about leaving the Westboro Baptist Church, founded by his father Fred Phelps, known for its inflammatory hate speech.

By Nate Phelps


I am the sixth of 13 children born to Fred and Margie Phelps. I was raised in the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan. Our childhood was defined by my father’s interpretation and application of the fundamentalist ideology of John Calvin.

Twice every Sunday, we sat in his small church learning the doctrines of his faith. Absolute Predestination, the cornerstone of Calvinism, turns a key aspect of Christianity on its ear. The notion that one can ask God into their heart and be saved is rejected. Instead, Calvinism argues that humankind is dead in his trespasses and sins and has no capacity to receive salvation unless God first acts on the heart. Human-kind has no say about its salvation. God decides. This key doctrine, coupled with the biblical notion that only a “remnant” of humans will be saved, led my father to the conclusion that only those within his church would go to heaven.

Other ideas gleaned from Calvin’s bible (the subservient position of women, corporeal discipline, and lifetime dominion over his children), coupled with Fred’s predisposition to extreme black and white thinking, created an environment of physical and emotional violence in our home.

Because Eve had been fooled by the snake in the Garden of Eden, women were second-class citizens in the Church. They were to be silent. Men were to have dominion over them. They were to wear head coverings in the sanctuary to cover their shame. Paul’s instruction in Corinthians that a woman have long hair became a rigid biblical standard that no woman in our church could ever put scissors to her hair.

Returning from school one day, I found



Nate Phelps survived living with his abusive father, Fred Phelps, before escaping from the family at age 18.



Members of Westboro Baptist Church appeared with their signs in front of Ground Zero on the anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks on Sept. 11, 2014.

my mother weeping in the vestibule of the church building where we lived. A scarf covered her head. My older brother Mark rubbed her back, trying to console. Suddenly, she tore the scarf from her head exposing the butchered remains of her hair. Her white scalp showed through in several places. “He cut my hair off!” she cried. I recall the feeling of horror, not just for her distress, but because I knew this meant she would go to hell. My father was all-powerful, consigning the disobedient to their eternal destinations.

Physical abuse

When the barber strap that he used to beat his children began to fray at one end, he went in search for a new tool of discipline. Calling a meeting of all the children, he held up the handle of a mattock. Quoting from Proverbs, he reminded us that “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.” This would be his new rod of correction. He called my brother Mark up for an example blow. Swinging the mattock in a high arc like a baseball bat, he struck him on the backside. Mark went white and the lesson was learned.

Several years later, in the early 1970s, my younger brother Jon and I brought home less than perfect report cards from middle school. Forty blows later, the skin on the back of our legs was broken and bleeding. Suspecting abuse, the principal of our school notified the police. An investigation led to charges of child abuse, but my father’s combative and litigious predisposition succeeded in getting the charges dropped. The long-term fallout was more violence for subjecting the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ to ridicule and shame.

Another passage claiming that our physical bodies were God’s temple became the impetus for several extreme experiences in our youth. It began with a health scare when Fred collapsed in his bedroom. Rushed to the hospital, his excess weight and abuse of drugs was determined to be the cause.

Back home from the hospital, Fred read the back of a box of Wheaties where exercise guru Jack LaLanne had outlined an exercise program where one could earn “benefit points.” Within a few days,

we were all at the local high school track running laps. Soon, Fred decided he needed to find a way to drop the weight quicker. So, he went on a fast. No calories . . . zero. Days passed and he soon retired to his bed from the weakness. Weeks passed. He dove deep into the bible for inspiration and motivation. At one point late in his fast, his body and mind muted, he spoke of seeing an angel at his bedside. Too weak to move, he used a bell on his nightstand to summon his wife or a child for his every need.

Forty-seven days and nearly 100 pounds lighter, he rose from his bed and rejoined the world. To avoid regaining the lost weight, he returned to the track with renewed vigor and motivation. Like in so many other areas in his life, he went to extremes. A regular running routine quickly morphed into a rigid training regime to run a marathon. Charts were displayed in the back of the church showing the activity and benefit points each child had earned. If a child fell behind, the mattock came out of the corner.

Nutrition experiments

Reading everything he could find on fitness and health, he began imposing a variety of unusual nutrition experiments on his family. One book extolled the virtues of raw eggs, so each child was required to slide two or three eggs, “Rocky” style, down their throat. A variety of nutritional supplements soon became standard fare in our diets. It was not unusual to sit down to a dinner plate of 25 brewer’s yeast tablets, 10 bone meal tablets, rose hips and a half head of steamed cabbage.

Eventually his focus on health turned dark. Our mother, having gone through 16 pregnancies, had lost her youthful shape and that was unacceptable. Entering puberty, several of the children were also putting on a bit too much weight for his liking. Again, citing God’s instruction to treat the body as a temple, he demanded that the weight be dropped. A daily routine of weighing outside his bedroom door led to violent beatings if a child had not lost weight that day.

Several years after Fred began practicing law in Kansas, he was suspended for two years for ethical violations. Without an income, he hit upon the idea to send

“Any attempt to defy [Fred Phelps’] authority, to forge our own paths in life, meant banishment from the Church and family and eternal damnation.”

his children out to sell candy. The official line was that we were raising money for a new piano for our church. Early successes prompted a more expansive effort where the children were spending three or four hours every evening after school, covering the entire city over and over.

When people questioned whether we had raised enough for a piano, it became new carpet and a new organ. After several years, sales in town began to dry up so we started working other communities nearby. On Saturdays, we would travel greater distances to Kansas City and other larger cities. On weekend nights, young children would canvas the bars where drunken patrons were more apt to buy candy and offer generous tips. If a bit of violence occurred, it was a small price to pay to insure the solvency of the Church. And like everything else, corporeal discipline was instilled to motivate the children to maintain proper sales volumes.

Religious ideology

Our lives were soaked in his religious ideology. Verses were posted and required memorization. At a young age, the children were required to memorize the names and order of all the books in the bible to minimize the time it took to look up passages while he preached. As the children grew, Fred’s sermons became interactive experiences. A child would be called upon to look up a verse and be prepared to read it aloud when directed. Sometimes commentary on the passages read were demanded. Any misstep in this process would lead to a command from my father, “Someone smack that kid!” He was building his army for God and had no patience for ignorance, incompetence or delay.

While all of this was going on, we returned every Sunday to the pews to be trained up in the way we should go. Much like Fred in those years, his God was an angry God. His brand of Christianity beat us over the head constantly about our sinful, evil nature and the righteousness of God’s wrath if he were to condemn us to an eternity of flames where the worm that eats on you never dies. Throughout our childhood, we were constantly reminded of our duty to church and family. It was made clear early on that Fred would have absolute authority over us for our lifetime. An obscure passage in the bible about a man leaving his father and mother to cleave to his wife secured his authority, as our father, until marriage.

From that point on, his authority was derived from his role as our pastor. Any attempt to defy that authority, to forge our own paths in life, meant banishment from the Church and family and eternal damnation.

Approaching the age of maturity, several of the older children attempted to assert control over their own lives. Our father was not having any of that. When my oldest sister left several months before turning 18, he mounted a posse of minions and kidnapped her back home. For several months, she was locked in a room upstairs at the church. My father was determined to beat the rebellion out of her by regularly abusing her and forcing her to fast. When the two oldest boys left as adults, he employed a variety of means to coerce them back. When the second oldest boy, Mark, succeeded in leaving, Fred exploded with anger. Behind the pulpit he made sure the entire congregation knew they were subject to excommunication and other discipline if they had anything to do with him.



Shutterstock photo

The Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan.

Observing Mark’s success, a guttering flame of hope ignited within me. You see, I had taken Fred’s message to heart. I knew that Christ was going to return around the year 2000 and I knew when he did, I would be cast into Gehenna, the final hell of punishment. But perhaps I could live life just a little outside the violence and control of my father. So, at the age of 16, I began to plan. Over the next year, I worked out my strategy. Each violent encounter with my father reinforced my determination. Late in my 17th year, I purchased an old Rambler Classic from the security officer at my high school. I kept it hidden from my family. As my 18th birthday approached, I quietly packed my meager belongings, a box at a time, and hid them in the cluttered garage.

Walking away

On the night before my 18th birthday, I waited until the household was quiet. I walked down the street to my car and backed it into the driveway. Checking to ensure no one had awoken, I returned to the garage and packed my belongings into the trunk. Returning to the house, I stood in the dining room and watched the clock move slowly toward midnight. I was both excited for a future away from this place and terrified that God would strike me down. When the clock reached midnight, I turned and walked away from a childhood of extreme religious indoctrination and violence.

For years, I lived in fear, certain that God was waiting for the best time to exact his revenge. Walking down the sidewalk in downtown Kansas City, I recall looking up to see if a piece of the building was falling toward me. As much as possible, I avoided thinking about it. I moved to southern California and got married. When my wife announced that she was pregnant, I was elated and terrified. I had never told her that I was certain God would never give me children. My father was clear on the message that children were a gift from God. He surely would not bestow that blessing upon me. The birth of my son changed everything. As I considered my responsibilities for that tiny life, I was forced to confront the past that haunted me. How would I raise this child? What would I teach him about this God I lived in fear of?

I entered counseling for several years. At the same time, we joined an Evangelical Free congregation, where I began my search for the kinder, gentler God of mainstream Christianity. Meanwhile, we had two more children, twins. My most fervent desire was to raise them in a healthy, happy environment where they could grow into self-realized adults.

Angry God of Calvin

As I studied the bible with a new focus, I could not reconcile its words with the messages from our pastor. Where they preached an all-loving, all-caring creator, I saw passage after passage that pointed squarely to the angry God of Calvin and Jonathan Edwards. As I began to ask questions of religious leaders both locally and nationally, I was shocked to discover that their answers were shallow and unresponsive.

When I confided in a few close friends that I had doubts, their response was unsatisfying. One day, my oldest son asked me about Jesus. I tried to describe him in the loving terms I hoped for, but he interrupted me with a question. “What about the people who don’t believe?” Bless his little atheist heart. I had no better answer than to tell him they went to hell. He began to weep and my heart burst. What was I doing? How could I expose my little children to such an idea? So, I began to pull away from Christianity.

When the Gulf War came along, roughly the same time my family began their campaign of hate against the gay community, I was terrified that Armageddon was starting. The undefinable fear returned. Weeping at the dinner table one night, I told my wife I did not want to go to hell. But the year 2000 was rapidly approaching, and with it my eternal destruction. The new century arrived without any sign of Jesus. As the months passed, a tiny spark of hope came with it. While I continued to try and reconcile my own experiences and my doubts with the message of the bible, I was quietly entertaining doubts about the whole thing. Then 9/11 happened.

A young lady in our community who had attended school with my stepdaughter had just graduated from Boston College. She was returning home on the second plane that flew into the World Trade Center. The impact was devastating locally and nationally. Then, I noticed something that struck me as odd, even dangerous. The entire country was responding to a violent act of faith by turning to their own blind faith. For the first time I considered, in a personal way, the harm that religion was causing the world. I considered the world my children would inherit, and I was afraid all over again.

In 2005, following a painful separation, I moved to Canada. By this time, my birth family had gained international notoriety as they focused their “God Hates Fags” campaign on the funerals of soldiers who had died in the war on terrorism. For the most part, I avoided requests for interviews about my family. Then, in 2008, a young journalism student climbed into the back

of my cab. As we drove to the airport, he mentioned a documentary he had recently seen on a small church in Kansas. I told him I knew about it, that it was my family. After the shock wore off, he requested an interview. The ensuing article garnered several hundred thousand views online. He called me one day and said he had contact information requests from several people who had read the article. I gave him permission to provide it.

I had recently read Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* and for the first time in my life I was willing to consider that I might be an atheist. That was such a horrible, terrifying word that I would not say it out loud. But this was much bigger than that. This would be, for the first time, me embracing my own ideas about God publicly. At the same time, I would be openly defiant toward my family and their campaign of hate. You see, even in all that had passed, I still hoped for a reconciliation. If I did this very public speech, if I was finally truthful to myself and the world, that hope was lost. I also knew that the hard-wired message of my rebellious, sinful, damned nature would be forced back out into the open. The words . . . the emotions that were so psychologically destructive would be laid bare.

No answers or evidence

And what was that truth? The story of a god that I grew up with was wholly predicated on the words written in the bible. But no one could provide answers that satisfied the lifelong question I struggled with, the question, by my estimation, that is at the heart of faith: What evidence proves that the bible is the inspired, inerrant, immutable word of a divine creator? Absent adequate evidence supporting that claim, everything I had been taught was a lie.

Every effort to discover the truth of this matter was met with more and more strident, defensive challenges to my lack of faith. Challenging this claim, I came to understand that faithful ideas, by definition, are unaccountable to reality. Injecting an all-powerful, divisive, punitive entity into a belief system robs the adherents of any hope of analysis and reason. Really, what choice does a person have if they believe not believing will cause separation from all they love AND an eternity of unspeakable pain? Surely, you can argue that those who embrace it wholly are happier for that choice, but at what cost?

At a social level, a system that judges and condemns those who act outside their moral parameters must be harmful.

Any attempt at social change is stymied and corrupted by the truculence of immutable faith. We see a rich history of that with Christianity. From using scripture to justify slavery for generations, to the long-standing assault of our LGBTQ brethren, Christianity — this unsustainable assertion that an all-knowing, all-powerful lawmaker hates them — has been the spear tip of condemnation and injustice for broad swathes of our fellow humans.

Since my family began their picketing campaign in 1991, Christian America has, with one voice, condemned their message. But I would argue that Westboro Baptist Church is just giving voice to the same destructive ideology at the foundation of even the most moderate iteration of that faith. How do we sit idly by considering that reality? So, I gave my first public talk before a gathering of nonbelievers. Then, I gave more talks. I talked about the ugly truth behind the ugly, God-ordained placards of my family’s protests.

Today, I embrace the humanistic ideas that this life, this brief moment in time we share, is all we have. I see concern and love toward our fellow humans as paramount. I reject any idea that marginalizes one group over another. Today in America, as we once again face separation and division inspired by religious ideology, the words of British philosopher, Bertrand Russell come to mind.

When asked what message he would want people to take from his example, he said: “I should like to say two things, one intellectual and one moral. The intellectual thing I should want to say to them is this: When you are studying any matter, or considering any philosophy, ask yourself only what are the facts and what is the truth those facts bear out? Never let yourself be diverted by what you wish to believe, or by what you think would have beneficent social effect if it were believed. But look only and solely at what are the facts. That is the intellectual thing that I should wish to say. The moral thing I should wish to say to them is very simple: I should say love is wise, and hatred is foolish. In this world, which is getting more and more closely interconnected, we have to learn to tolerate each other, we have to learn to put up with the fact that some people say things that we don’t like.

We can only live together in that way — and if we are to live together and not die together, we must learn a kind of charity and a kind of tolerance, which is absolutely vital to the continuation of human life on this planet.”



Nate Phelps (lower left) was one of 13 children of Fred Phelps.

FFRF awards \$28,150!

2020 Students of Color essay contest winners

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 16 top winners and nine honorable mentions of the 2020 David Hudak Memorial Students of Color Essay Competition for College Students.

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

College students of color were asked to write a personal persuasive essay about “Living and thriving without religion.” FFRF received 342 entries for this contest.

Winners, their ages, the colleges or universities they are attending and the award amounts are listed below. Due to space limitations, only the essays of the top five winners (including ties) will be reprinted in this issue. The remainder, including excerpts from the honorable mentions, will be published in the December issue.

FIRST PLACE
Nidhi Nair, 19, University of Connecticut, \$3,500.

SECOND PLACE (tie)
Gianna White, 20, New York University, \$3,000.
Taylor Fang, 17, Harvard University, \$3,000.

THIRD PLACE (tie)
Justine Vega, 19, New York University, \$2,500.
Stephanie Black, 19, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, \$2,500.



FOURTH PLACE (tie)
Nickaela Steele, 18, Howard University, \$2,000.
Leila Okorie, 19, University of Washington, \$2,000.

FIFTH PLACE (tie)
Rojina Timsina, 18, Kalamazoo College, \$1,500.
Shreyas Kallingal, 18, University of California-Berkeley, \$1,500.

SIXTH PLACE (tie)
Mahum Haque, 19, University of Iowa, \$1,000.
Tina Wen, Rice University, \$1,000.

SEVENTH PLACE
Praneel Bonthala, 18, University of California-Los Angeles, \$750.

EIGHTH PLACE (tie)
Akeima Gibbs, 18, Temple University, \$500.
Aaliyah Philippe-Auguste, 18, Towson University, \$500.

NINTH PLACE
Idalina Du, 18, Rice University, \$400.

TENTH PLACE
Manuela Cano, 19, University of South Carolina, \$300.

HONORABLE MENTIONS (\$200 each)
Claire Hill, 19, Drake University.
Je-Woo Im, 18, Northwestern University.
Nicole Kye, 19, Cornell University.
Jonathan Le, 18, University of California, Irvine.
Grace Okafor, 21, University of Maryland College Park.

Anousha Peters, 20 Columbia University.
Aline Pham, 19, University of California, Irvine.
Bruno Rios De La Fuente, 21, CSU Channel Islands.
Tamanna Sheikh, 20, Virginia Commonwealth University.

FFRF thanks Dean and Dorea Schramm of Florida for providing a \$100 bonus to students who are members of a secular group, student club or the Secular Student Alliance. The total of \$28,150 reflects those bonuses.

FFRF also thanks “Director of First Impressions” Lisa Treu for managing the details of this and FFRF’s other student essays competitions, with Kati Treu assisting. And we also would like to thank out “faithful faithless” volunteer and staff readers and judges, including: Don Ardell, Dan Barker, Darrell Barker, Bill Dunn, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Judi Jacobs, Linda Josheff, Dan Kettner, Katya Maes, Gloria Marquardt, Amit Pal, Dave Petrashek, Sue Schuetz, Lauryn Seering, PJ Slinger, Mandisa Thomas, David Tomayo and Karen Lee Weidig.

FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994, grad students since 2010, one geared explicitly for students of color since 2016 and a fifth contest for law students since 2019.

FIRST PLACE

Freedom from Hinduism: A personal journey

FFRF awarded Nidhi \$3,500.

By Nidhi J. Nair

My great-grandmother used to tell me stories from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana every night before bed. I would curl up at her feet and swat away the mosquitos that would plague us in the sweltering Indian heat. She would drink her tea and raise a wrinkled, trembling finger before enthralling me with stories of brave heroes, epic wars, beautiful heroines and wily gods.

Her stories made me feel proud to be a Hindu and an Indian. Even at a young age, I sensed the rich tapestry of culture and history that thrived in these tales, narrated through centuries by people who understood the enduring humanity of anger, passion, betrayal, lust and pride. I carried this appreciation for my religion throughout my childhood.

However, I experienced a paradigm shift in my thinking when my parents decided to move from Mumbai to a small town in South India called Kochi. They enrolled me in an orthodox Hindu school (Chinmaya Vidyalaya School), where I faced forced indoctrination of Hindu values. After enduring weekly Bhagavad Gita classes, where we spent many exhausting hours analyzing the ancient poem and long prayer sessions that consisted of angry mass chanting, I started feeling stifled and constrained at school.

Hinduism became more than the glorious and imaginative epic stories



Nidhi J. Nair

I heard from my grandmother. In my mind, Hinduism became the malignant force that restricted me from going to the temple when I was menstruating, and the justification for the sexist beliefs that gave my male classmates wonderful academic opportunities when I was equally talented. It became the religion that reinforced Indian patriarchy, which viewed me as the property of men, and the impetus for the pervasive caste system and mass communal violence. As I watched poor people get lynched by fanatical Hindus for selling cows and young Hindu-Muslim couples get brutally murdered for falling in love, it became clear to me that my religion was unscientific, monolithic and cruel.

In response to my views, my father always told me that Hinduism was not a static religion, and that each gener-

ation had to reinterpret its core values to suit their era. He told me stories of how Hinduism “liberated” women and how the “divine” female body was venerated. However, in my teenage years, stories of Hindu greatness no longer made a positive impact on me. I grew more and more intellectually curious and increasingly skeptical of traditional Hindu values, and whenever I thought of the religion I was born into, I could only see the hate crimes, violence and nationalism it spawned.

Slowly, I began to disaffiliate from Hinduism. My personal identity morphed to include my atheism, and I stopped labeling myself as a Hindu. I started falling in love with data science, and I inculcated a passion for reason and logic. I started seeing the value of having a scientific temper, and, as my worldview expanded, I felt released from the shackles of tribalistic religious emotion. When I moved to the United States to study economics and statistics

at the University of Connecticut, I felt like a new person, unbound by any religious or ideological constraints. For the first time in my life, I felt truly free.

Today, I am grateful for my divorce from Hinduism, because it forced me to undergo a journey of self-discovery that helped me become the woman I am today — independent and strong, fearless and free.

Nidhi, 19, is an international student from India studying economics and statistics at the University of Connecticut. Nidhi conducts a weekly radio show, “Content is King,” at WHUS Radio and contributes to the Daily Campus.

“I started seeing the value of having a scientific temper, and, as my worldview expanded, I felt released from the shackles of tribalistic religious emotion.”

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.

Just Pretend: A Book For Young Freethinkers



By Dan Barker
Illustrated by Kati Treu
Revised and adorably illustrated classic. This fun book explores myths and religion from a freethought point of view, and promotes critical thinking.

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SECOND PLACE (tie)

Painting a future of freedom, compassion

FFRF awarded Taylor \$3,000.

By Taylor Fang

Sty blue fabric, washi tape and popsicle sticks. In first grade, when I was invited by friends to attend a “craft club,” I wasn’t aware that these innocent craft supplies were actually tools for indoctrination. Growing up in a small town in Utah, which is dominated by the Mormon church, I was the constant target for conversion. Before every craft club, I sat awkwardly as the group said a prayer. After a few meetings, I was given the Book of Mormon. Slowly, I began to feel ashamed for being an “aberration” in my town: as an atheist, feminist and daughter of Chinese immigrants.

Yet, although I did not have access to many resources about independent thought, I began spending afternoons at the library. Reading gave me companionship. More importantly, literature taught me to evaluate objective evidence, to think for myself, and to think critically. I began recognizing the hypocrisy of a church which claimed to welcome all,

“I realized that following one’s own moral conscience and beliefs, rather than dogma and tradition, is the path to ultimate freedom of conscience.

yet which denied women status outside of the family and portrayed homosexuality as sinful. I realized that following one’s own moral conscience and beliefs, rather than dogma and tradition, is the path to ultimate freedom of conscience.

I can especially recall a moment of enlightenment while reading Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Atwood depicts a theocratic society where priests use religion for social control. Faith is weaponized to justify the subjugation of certain groups. “Nothing changes instantaneously: In a gradually heating bathtub you’d be boiled to death before you knew it,” writes Atwood. In Atwood’s words, I recognized the danger of a society based on religious fanaticism. I had been slowly proselytized into believing the only way I could fit in was through conversion. When I refused, I was excluded from friend groups, discussions, social events and gatherings. Yet, *The Handmaid’s Tale* illuminated to me that struggling against the grain is necessary to escape this religious-based manipulation.

I’ve begun realizing that I can employ science and logic to answer questions about the world, rather than using reli-



Taylor Fang

gion as a veil to cloud reality and truth. I can apply my time and energy to raising awareness of important social issues, rather than looking toward a church leader’s dogma on LGBTQ+ rights and abortion. And I can strive to support marginalized groups through service.

Throughout the past three years, I’ve especially worked to help educate females in my community. Education is the path to greater understanding. After learning that Utah is last in the entire nation for women in STEM, I started

teaching my own seven-week afterschool coding program for middle-school girls. Since 2017, I’ve directly impacted 150 Utah girls and dedicated over 200 hours to this project. My goal is to teach my students to think critically and independently, and to encourage them to step outside the Mormon gender role where “a woman’s place is in the family.”

A world where church and state are separate is a more equal world — one where ignorance has no place and empathy can build true community. Rather than seeing faith weaponized to justify conservative values, I hope to continue speaking up and advocating for free thought. I’m grateful to have strong role models in this journey. My parents were not fluent in English when they came to United States, and they felt further isolated for being non-Mormon. Yet still, they persevered. Their story inspires me to continue pursuing my ambitions as a woman of color. I envision a more compassionate world where minorities are respected for their identities, and where all individuals, no matter their background, have the freedom to think for themselves.

Taylor, 17, is a freshman at Harvard University. She is a nationally recognized poet and has been published in the New York Times and the Pulitzer Center. Taylor is also the founder of Girls Explore Tech (GET), a seven-week series of coding workshops for local Utah middle-school girls.

SECOND PLACE (tie)

The choice of worship not limited to religion

FFRF awarded Gianna \$3,000.

By Gianna White

In his speech, “This is Water,” David Foster Wallace claims “there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.” I think about this quote frequently because it has since left me with the question of what I worship.

The African slave trade was the beginning of what would turn into a long history of dispossession and displacement for my people. In a twist of fate, my ancestors were forced to worship the Christian God by the very people they needed saving from. Like many colonized groups around the world, my ancestors were robbed of their gods and to this day the majority of Black Americans subscribe to the Abrahamic religions forced on them across generations.

My ancestors were continuously

robbed of autonomy. They were never given a choice of what to worship. It is because of this I am extremely grateful for the freedom of choice, and in part why I am not religious. I do not reject religion simply because it was forced on my ancestors. It is because it was forced on them that I have taken the time to analyze my own thoughts toward spirituality and reach my own conclusions. This process has made me analyze and critique established systems and power structures in my life. It has enabled me to search for what I worship.

I have tried to be a Christian and I have looked to other religions to try to discover spiritual worship. I could not rationalize any religion I came across. I found contradictions everywhere.

“I do not reject religion simply because it was forced on my ancestors. It is because it was forced on them that I have taken the time to analyze my own thoughts toward spirituality and reach my own conclusions.

Religion is not immune from hatred, it is not immune from sexism, it is not immune from power imbalances — in fact, it thrives on them. And this is not because religion is inherently hierarchical, it is because religion is a reflection humanity has made of itself and humanity is deeply flawed. I once read the reason why the Catholic Church has yet to stomp out its pedophilia problem is that the church provides the perfect cover for abusers. The Catholic Church is a space where maleness + authority = untouchable. I have yet to find a religion where this equation is not true — a religion where women are not seen as subservient either in holy text or by its practitioners.

Where then am I left as a Black woman? Where do I belong? Is there a space that will accept me, treat me as an equal? Where I am free to ask questions?

In my family, being nonreligious is generally met with disapproval and subtle attempts to convert me — the casual text message inviting me to a bible service or reminder that God loves me even if I am astray. I love my family, and I am not upset with them or their actions because I know they are acting out of love. However, I think that they and secular communities at large could learn to respect and acknowledge our differences. Do not ignore my culture, my gender, my individual identities because they do not matter to a



Gianna White

God or higher power. They matter to me and they affect how the world sees me and in turn how I see the world. Acknowledge differences, but do not let them cause alienation.

Know that I, too, worship. I do not worship in a spiritual sense, instead, I worship freedom. I worship love, togetherness, perseverance, empathy. I worship the best aspects of humanity, the same principles that govern most religions. All I ask is that others respect my choice of worship.

Gianna, 20, is a junior at New York University, majoring in sustainable urban environments. Gianna is an organizer for March for Science NYC and volunteers with environmental and social justice groups, including Sunrise Movement, Earth Day Initiative, Black Lives Matter, March for Our Lives.

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FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

THIRD PLACE (tie)

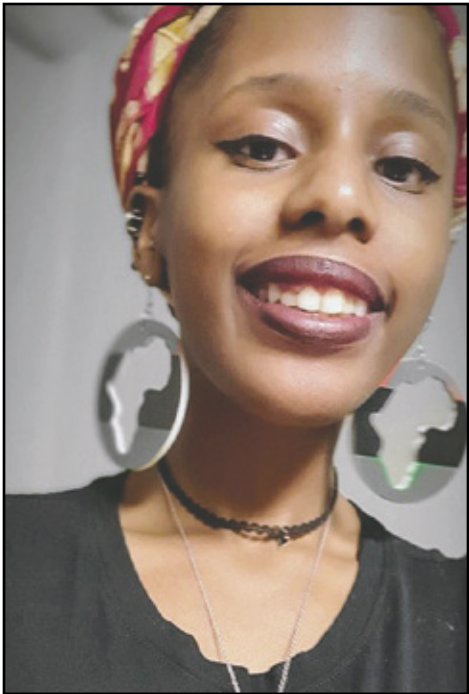
Deep trenches: Finding the path to humanity

FFRF awarded Stephanie \$2,500.

By Stephanie Black

Fear. The word is very familiar to me as I have lived most of my life growing up living in fear. The familiar feeling of my heartbeat speeding up, of the sweat coating my forehead and my hands, the anxiety creeping up my spine. I felt like I did not have a voice, I did not have a mind, and I did not have freedom. I felt fear that I was constantly being disobedient, that I was not being the perfect child of God. I feared judgment, I feared ridicule, I feared not getting into heaven by making even the slightest mistake. “God looks high and looks low.” People would tell me that every chance they got and the fear would build up in me.

Caged. Growing up in a Christian family, I had to attend bible study on Wednesdays, Sunday school on Sunday, church service on Sunday, and church school during the summer. That, however, was not exactly the worst part. I was caged within the cycle of physical, emotional and verbal abuse. I felt that the abuse I endured was a punishment for disobeying God whenever I did something that went against the 10 Commandments or went against the word of God preached



Stephanie Black

during the church sermons. I felt that my imperfections were condemned. I blamed myself for not being able to follow after God’s example. But, there were times when I had not done anything wrong and was still a victim of the cycle of abuse. And, so, I wonder why God did not protect me since he protected all of his children. I was a caged prisoner, and, as I reached out past the bars, all that

was there for me was the back that God turned on me.

Starvation. I began to question my beliefs as, continuously, people would tell me to pray about the abuse I was experiencing, even when praying did not do anything for me. I began to experience emotional starvation as my challenge of religious beliefs broke bonds that I held dear to me. Romantic relationships crumbled, friendships collapsed and family bonds decayed. One of my closest friends withdrew from our friendship because I questioned the persecution and discrimination of groups of people by the hands of God. My friend believed that if God said so and if it is within the will of God, it is OK for people to be discriminated against. It broke me that I could not keep the friendship because of the fact that I refused to abide by hatred. I was frustrated with the fact that I was starving and was not able to consume the emotional connections I desperately desired because I rejected religion.

Freedom. Mahatma Gandhi once asserted, “Freedom is not worth having if

it does not include the freedom to make mistakes.” Breaking away from religion has granted me the understanding of what it means to be human. I am no longer standing yards away from freedom, forever reaching for it but barely catching it. I am no longer suffocating from the pressure of being the perfect individual. I am no longer succumbing to the exclusion of groups of people. I am no longer making excuses for receiving harsh treatment. I am no longer living in fear, I am no longer caged and I am no longer starving. I know now that it is more than OK to have a mind of my own, to speak up about dark situations, and to make mistakes as I am thinking through my steps in life. I regained pieces of my humanity.

Stephanie, 19, attends Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, majoring in physics and math. Stephanie’s goal is to earn a Ph.D. in plasma astrophysics. “I am a social media Black activist in which I use my Instagram account to promote Black-owned businesses, Black art, Black authors/poets and Black musicians,” Stephanie writes. “I also use my social media platform to educate my follows on Black history and Black modern-day issues.”

“I was a caged prisoner, and, as I reached out past the bars, all that was there for me was the back that God turned on me.”

THIRD PLACE (tie)

Against la cultura: Why I am not religious

FFRF awarded Justine \$2,500.

By Justine Vega

My relationship with religion began at an early age, as Latin culture is deeply intertwined with Christianity and my upbringing reflected that. My mother enrolled me into a Christian school, where I spent my days reading the bible and attending church. However, I never became religious due to my father, an adamant nonbeliever, who took the time to educate me on the history of Latin America. He would tell me folktales, teaching me about the Spanish conquistadors who came and forcibly converted indigenous peoples, slaughtering those who refused. The most memorable story passed down to me was of the last Inca emperor, Atahualpa.

The story goes that a Spanish priest had shown Atahualpa a bible, proclaiming the book to be God. Confused, he smacked the book to the ground and, because of this, lost his life to the Spanish, the entire empire falling with him. This history of violence and genocide contributed to my uneasy relationship with religion, which seemed to be a political tool rather than a spiritual outlet.

Understanding the role religion played, specifically Christianity, in the oppression of nonbelievers in Latin America and around the world creat-

ed a deep skepticism inside of me. I could never fully immerse myself in religious practices, such as going to church or praying. This created tension in my life since I was raised in the Hispanic community. Latin culture is heavily influenced by Christian ideas, especially in regard to gender roles. Although the path toward gender equality continues, there still exists a clear distinction between the expectations for men and those for women. Since I never fully believed in the Christian ideals of womanhood, I often felt trapped in a world that did not fit me.

I did not adhere to traditional femininity — I was not quiet or interested in taking care of children or the home. I was a tomboy who liked to play sports and help my dad work in construction, loud and opinionated.

As I matured, this discomfort only grew and, as I furthered my education by reading different philosophies of religion, I realized it was OK for me not to aspire to Christian expectations of women. Separating myself from religion allowed me to sharpen my critical mind, made me curious to find answers to my questions outside of a religious framework. This curiosity for knowledge propelled my interest in studying, and I eventually graduated high school early because of it.

Although I was fortunate enough to be exposed to different teachings, many of the kids I grew up with never received those opportunities. The best

way to combat ignorance is through education, and as someone who went to public school, I experienced firsthand the lack of resources and funding, especially in working-class areas. Children of color often reside in these poorer neighborhoods, attending schools that lack funding for new books and better class offerings. If we want minority communities to be exposed to different viewpoints, funding public education and programs for at-risk communities is the first step.

As our nation faces a turning point, those in the secular community who wish to see change can help by championing both primary and secondary education for people of color. Access to a high-quality education that challenges its students to think critically will allow them the choice to consider a more secular perspective. An educated mind is a free one and by funding education we can pave the way to a progressive future.

Justine, 19, is a first-generation American attending New York University, majoring in political science. As a first-year



Justine Vega

student, Justine studied in Paris and wrote a research paper on French secularism and its relationship to minority communities in France.

“Since I never fully believed in the Christian ideals of womanhood, I often felt trapped in a world that did not fit me.”

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FOURTH PLACE (tie)

My life is at peace because of atheism

FFRF awarded Leila \$2,000.

By Leila Okorie

My questioning of religion started at a fairly young age. Being half Nigerian and having grandparents who slipped God into every other sentence, I grew up pretty Christian. I rarely went to church as a kid, and the few memories I have of going consist of me falling asleep, being bored out of my mind, and wondering why they were calling grape juice Jesus’ blood and a cracker his flesh.

I just never quite felt like I belonged in churches, or like there were any real spiritual forces at play within them, and my experience has yet to change.

I slowly went from praying on my knees every night before bed, to praying in bed every other night, to simply praying in my mind every once in a while. As this went on, I began to notice that I only prayed when I was afraid or I wanted something. What’s more, I never received what I asked for, and I never got any replies back. Not only did this make me realize I was being selfish with my prayers, but it made me feel silly for spending time talking to something that has never once responded to me.



Leila Okorie

In fourth grade, I was at recess and I asked my friend, “If God created Jesus, then who created God?” I will never forget the distress and shock in her face before she said she didn’t want to talk about that. Not too long after, she no longer wanted to be friends with me.

The older I got, the more I began to distance myself from religion. I learned

about how many wars and massacres had happened in history, and still continue to happen, over religion. I learned about how people used, and still use, religion to justify discrimination against different races, sexual orientations and genders. Middle school was also when I learned that I was not straight, and, a few years later, one of my best friends came out to me as transgender. I had people I knew and loved that were in the LGBTQ+ community, including myself, who I knew were good people, and yet they supposedly deserved to burn in hell.

Discovering myself and my identity only raised more questions. If there is a God, why does he create people that automatically deserve to go to hell? Why do people who question a being that provides no scientific proof of its existence deserve to go to hell? I also hated seeing people using religion as an excuse to turn a blind eye to real life concerns, such as not vaccinating their children, or saying they’re “sending prayers” during times of crisis or saying that “everything happens for a reason.”

By ninth grade, I decided that being

an atheist was best for me and my mental health. I was tired of feeling like I was being watched and judged for every decision I made, and tired of apologizing for my identity.

I hold no disdain for religious people, and I believe everyone should choose the lifestyle that makes them happiest. But, being an atheist allows me to live my life with the mindset that every day matters because this is the only life we have. Death no longer holds the same weight because I’m not afraid of going to hell for being a “bad” person. It has also helped me feel more in control of my life and keeps me more accountable, because I know a prayer of forgiveness won’t erase the consequences of my actions. For me, atheism is to live peacefully.

Leila, 19, is a senior at the University of Washington, and is on track to earn a bachelor’s degree in art. “Being an African-American woman who is also a part of the LGBTQ+ community, I strive to be an example that you can excel in your passions,” Leila writes. “I want to become a concept artist for video games and film so I can help bring more diverse characters to media.”

“I was tired of feeling like I was being watched and judged for every decision I made, and tired of apologizing for my identity.”

FOURTH PLACE (tie)

I am my own refuge

FFRF awarded Nickaela \$2,000.

By Nickaela Steele

A stained-glass door opens and I am hastily ushered down the altar. All the church ladies stare back as if to say, “You’re late! How dare you!” The silence of their stares is more deafening than crashing drums. Amid what my 5-year-old mind perceived as chaos was a tall man in a long robe overpoweringly repeating the phrase, “Lord, you are

my refuge.” Over and over he repeated the phrase, as if it were glazed in honey as it fell from his lips and he wanted to savor every letter.

I often replay this memory in my mind and also remember the faces of the people next to me as their minds, with relief, accepted this idea as truth. But I never truly knew what he meant by this, until, one day, I thought about the people behind the phrase. I thought about the pastor who is from a small village in Jamaica and the many people standing in the congregation who come from similar places, where their religion was all they had. This was the only way they knew how to cope with the everyday lows.

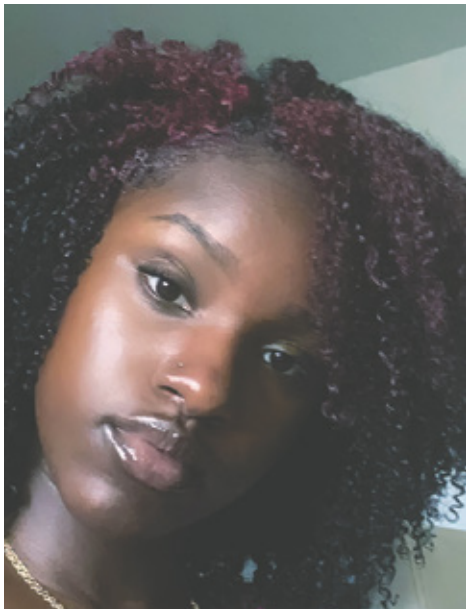
I often thought, “If only these people knew they were their own refuge.” It was an “aha” moment for me when I realized that this is true for many Black people across the world. When

it feels the world is against them, Black people rely upon their God to release the hurt and grant them back their humanity, which has been battered so frequently.

For Black people, religion is woven into our identities and we are made to believe that everything we need is outside of ourselves. Looking for forgiveness? Get it from God. Looking for love? Ask God.

But what happens when our desires are not delivered to us by God? Must we simply give up on ourselves? I could not help but wonder: What if we were just to simply ask for these things from ourselves? To love ourselves and humankind unconditionally and to forgive others while we learn to forgive ourselves?

So, I put it to the test. I put down the bible and gave myself all the love and support I was taught to give to God. Instead of looking outward for refuge when I felt emotionally low or mentally weak, I looked inside myself and worked actively to find these answers. And, to no surprise, I have seen a positive shift in my emotional and mental health due to actually working through these feelings and understanding them instead of suppressing them and looking to God to make them stop. This has created a blissful awareness of myself and others: Now I can fix my own problems, I can take my own responsibility for my own emotions, I can be my own refuge.



Nickaela Steele

Even regarding the recent tragic outcry caused by deaths in the Black community, my first thought is, “What can I do to help my people?” and I work actively to be the change I want to see.

In order for the secular community to become more inclusive to people of color, it is imperative that the impact religion has had on us be understood through a historic and humane lens. It must also be understood that because of our background our perspective of how we maneuver our secular identity may differ from our white counterparts, and, most importantly, we should affirm together we can thrive without religion: We are our own refuge.

Nickaela, 18, attends Howard University and is interested in screenwriting and acting.

“I put down the bible and gave myself all the love and support I was taught to give to God.”

Yip Harburg, from his book:
Rhymes for the Irreverent

Written by “Over the Rainbow” lyricist Yip Harburg.

Back to the Drawing Board

God made the world in six days flat,
On the seventh, He said, “I’ll rest,”
So He let the thing into orbit swing,
To give it a dry-run test.

A billion years went by, then He
Took a look at the whirling blob;
His spirits fell, as He shrugged, “Ah well,
It was only a six-day job.”

Illustrated by Seymour Chwast, published by FFRF.

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FIFTH PLACE (tie)

Infinite thread of human ingenuity, morality

FFRF awarded Krunal \$1,500.

By Krunal Sampath

A quick glance confirmed my parents had left. I swiftly removed my poonal — a supposedly sacred loop of thread across my body — and ripped it apart into frayed ends. Pressed into my sore palms were two red imprints, marks of my dissatisfaction.

It was therapeutic — perhaps a bit rebellious. However, years ago, I would have been repulsed by such an act. After all, I was a Brahmin, bound to protect our ancient religious customs. As my grandfather had instilled in me, we were the best of all the castes.

So, why did I reject this mindset? Partially, because of the irksome rituals, I suppose. But beyond my impatience, the true horrors of Hinduism that pushed me away were hidden from my view in America.

My skepticism started with a simple question: “Why are we innately better?” I crept above muddled walls, overlooking a societal structure that upheld my inherited ivory tower. The entanglement of Hinduism and India — a so-called “secular nation” — had caused

massive rifts among the population.

Casteism was pervasive, even tarnishing art forms. Indian classical music, which I sang and adored for its melodic complexity, had been sealed off from certain groups who were deemed unworthy from a religious perspective. I placed hope in progressive movements that have attempted to raise awareness for women’s issues and LGBTQ+ rights. Unfortunately, the de facto stigma against them continues to sting like a gaping wound.

The acknowledgment of injustice morphed into guilt. I was shaken by a sense of religious dissonance: Music is a universal language, medicine is a means for compassion, and education is a path to opportunity — but only if the gods approved of you.

My personal beliefs no longer align with the religious ideas I was carefully brought up with, manifesting in my severance from Hinduism. Antithetically, this originally theistic quest brought me closer to logical and scientific reasoning. Although I was no longer restricted by religion, its problems were

“My journey to secularism has fundamentally changed my life.”

still deeply ingrained in society. I had to act.

Instead of abandoning my culture, I fought for inclusive, secular reform. I supported efforts to incorporate marginalized voices in art, like the collaboration between the Jogappas — a group of transgender artists — and T.M. Krishna, a musician focused on disrupting the status quo.

I also saw a disparity in global health, driven by centuries of persistent hierarchies that tightly controlled education. Galvanized by my research, I launched an initiative to help support this basic right through building awareness of waterborne disease.

Yet there is more work to be done. Behind nearly every religious establishment’s peaceful facade, I uncovered sheer intolerance to new ideas and nonbelievers. Scientific disinformation — a manipulative aversion to objective truth — has fueled efforts to contain followers despite clear evidence. Particularly during this pandemic, I have been working to understand the mechanisms that lead to dangerous over-

trust in religious figures.

I found that their insatiable thirst for power feeds on a fear of the unknown. Sadly, many minority groups worldwide lack the informational resources and support structure necessary to break free. I, too, felt alienated at times from the conversation. Contrary to the predatory nature of religious indoctrination, the secular community has an ability to bolster equality and equity that will spark individualistic discovery. We can highlight our stories as beacons of hope for others.

My journey to secularism has fundamentally changed my life. I appreciate cultures for their symbolic beauty rather than exclusionary undertones. I adhere to a belief in rigorous scientific proof rather than empty mandates. I now accept the infinite thread of human ingenuity and morality that can connect us all.

Krunal, 18, attends the University of California at Berkeley, studying bioengineering and anthropology. “In high school, I led several research projects, including a low-cost system to detect waterborne parasites,” Krunal writes. “My work has inspired me to start awareness initiatives to educate others about critical global health and environmental issues.”

FIFTH PLACE (tie)

Religion is merely the illusion of reassurance

FFRF awarded Rojina \$1,500.

By Rojina Timsina

Every morning before sunrise, bells would ring in the temple near my house in Nepal. One gloomy morning, I was accompanied by my parents to go witness the rituals. Rubbing my tired eyes, I marched behind them. In the large crowd, there was pushing and shoving, crying children and screaming moms. My mother yanked my wrist and pulled me toward the front, where all the action was.

I never understood the importance of events like these, why people would try to commune with something they could not see or hear. But, this time, I wasn’t in the position to question.

As a 6-year-old, I constantly had night terrors. It was scary and I didn’t know why it happened. I made the bold choice of telling my overly religious parents, which meant the temple visit was inevitable. For the next three years, I devoted myself to a religious life so God would be happy with me and stop sending demons to scare me at night.

In 2010, we came to America as refugees, seeking a better life. There were many challenges I had to face in getting used to the new culture at an age where I still hadn’t completely figured out my old culture in Nepal. Religion was a big part of our life in refugee camps.

My parents had lived their whole life in uncertainty. Growing up in the brutal environment of Bhutan, they fled to Nepal and then to America. Religion was all they had, the only certainty they had. However, I was fortunate enough to receive an education. My views on religion changed as I experienced life in a diverse school.

The void that religion filled in my parent’s life, education filled in mine. Reli-



Rojina Timsina

gion creates barriers among people and makes us inhumane toward those who are different. Education makes us compassionate toward those different from us. Religion gives us the illusion that everything around us is God’s creation and should not be questioned. Education lets

us know that we can make a change for ourselves and others. Religion makes us narrow-minded, while education makes us open-minded.

My parents get a sense of assurance from believing they’ll reunite with God after death. I get that sense of assurance from believing this life is all we get and then we’re done. The peace my parents get from listening to prayers and reading religious texts, I get by reading poetry highlighting the beauty of nature and life, books that remind me to appreciate my life. The sense of pride my parents get from donating to temples, I get from donating to those who are in need.

While religion makes us compete with each other to reach God, education reminds us that each other is all we have in life.

Life is uncertain and scary. My parents latched on to religion to help them through this crazy journey. At the moment, that was the only choice they had. I don’t need the reassurance of someone from above watching over me. I like to

“The void that religion filled in my parent’s life, education filled in mine.”

be in control of my own life, and though that’s not always possible, I’ve realized being nonreligious gives me that control, to some degree. I have control over what I choose to do in my life, how I choose to make my life fulfilling and purposeful.

Now, when night terrors happen, I choose to reassure myself by understanding why it happens instead of praying to God so he would make it stop.

Rojina, 18, is a first-year student at Kalamazoo College and enjoys studying history, philosophy and psychology. “I enjoy social work in refugee centers and hearing inspiring stories of people who had led very different lives than me,” Rojina writes.

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Why don't atheists get elected to Congress?

This article first appeared on TheConversation.com on Oct. 5 and is reprinted with permission.

By Phil Zuckerman

This year, the selection of Kamala Harris as Joe Biden's running mate presented the United States with its first politician of Indian heritage — and the first Black woman — to be on a major party ticket. It followed Hillary Clinton's becoming the first woman to win the popular vote for president in a 2016 election to replace America's first Black president, Barack Obama.



Phil Zuckerman

Meanwhile, Pete Buttigieg became the first openly gay candidate to win a presidential primary and Ted Cruz became the first Latino to do so. In recent years Americans saw the first Jewish American win a primary, Bernie Sanders, and Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar became the first Muslim women elected to Congress. But in this era of increasing diversity and the breaking of long-rigid political-demographic barriers, there is no self-identifying atheist in national politics. Indeed, throughout history, only one self-identified atheist in the U.S. Congress comes to mind, the late California Democrat Peter Stark.

'In atheists, they don't trust'

This puts the country at odds with democracies the world over that have elected openly godless — or at least openly skeptical — leaders who went on to become revered national figures, such as Jawaharlal Nehru in India, Sweden's Olof Palme, Jose Mujica in Uruguay and Israel's Golda Meir. New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern, the global leader who has arguably navigated the coronavirus crisis with the most credit, says she is agnostic.

But in the United States, self-identified nonbelievers are at a distinct disadvantage. A 2019 poll asking Americans who they were willing to vote for in a hypothetical presidential election found that 96 percent would vote for a candidate who is Black, 94 percent for a woman, 95 percent for a Hispanic candidate, 93 percent for a Jew, 76 percent for a gay or lesbian candidate and 66 percent for a Muslim — but atheists fall below all of these, down at 60 percent. That is a sizable chunk who would not vote for a candidate simply on the basis of their nonreligion.

In fact, a 2014 survey found Americans would be more willing to vote for a presidential candidate who had never held office before, or who had extramarital affairs, than for an atheist.

In a country that changed its original national motto in 1956 from the secular "E pluribus unum" — "out of many, one" — to the faithful "In God We Trust," it seems people don't trust someone who doesn't believe in God.

As a scholar who studies atheism in the United States,

Percentage of Americans willing to vote for a presidential candidate if they were ...
A 2019 Gallup survey found that less than two-thirds of voters would be willing to back an otherwise qualified atheist for high office.

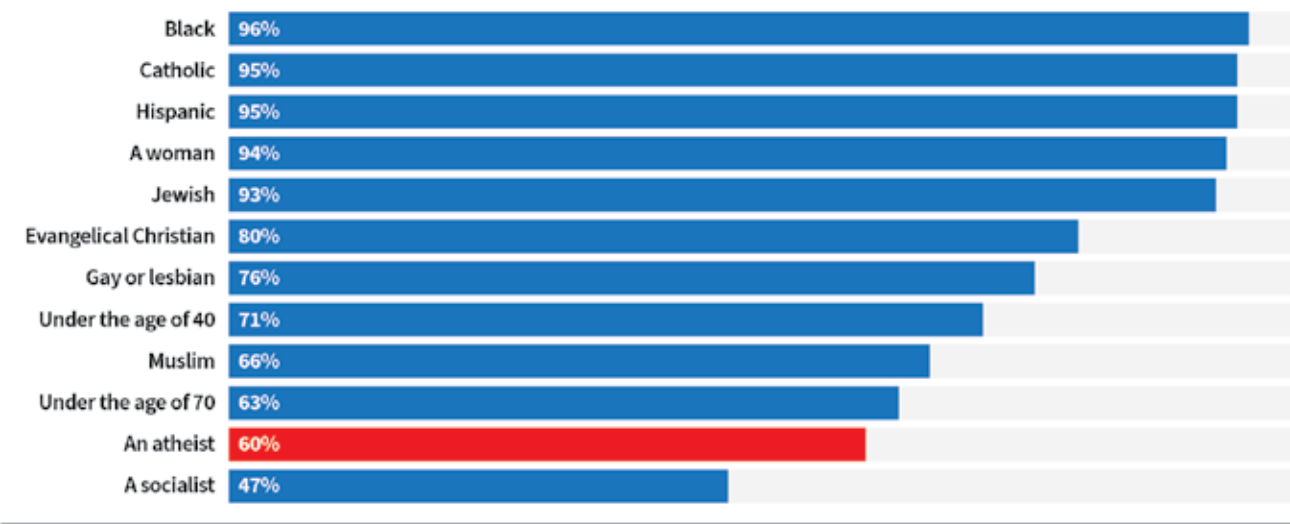


Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: Gallup • Get the data

I have long sought to understand what is behind the antipathy toward nonbelievers seeking office.

Branding issue?

There appear to be two primary reasons atheism remains the kiss of death for aspiring politicians in the U.S. — one is rooted in a reaction to historical and political events, while the other is rooted in baseless bigotry.

Let's start with the first: atheism's prominence within communist regimes. Some of the most murderous dictatorships of the 20th century — including Stalin's Soviet Union and Pol Pot's Cambodia — were explicitly atheistic. Bulldozing human rights and persecuting religious believers were fundamental to their oppressive agendas. Talk about a branding problem for atheists.

For those who considered themselves lovers of liberty, democracy and the First Amendment guarantee of the free exercise of religion, it made sense to develop fearful distrust of atheism, given its association with such brutal dictatorships. And even though such regimes have long since met their demise, the association of atheism with a lack of freedom lingered long after.

The second reason atheists find it hard to get elected in America, however, is the result of an irrational linkage in many people's minds between atheism and immorality. Some assume that because atheists don't believe in a deity watching and judging their every move, they must be more likely to murder, steal, lie and cheat. One recent study, for example, found that Americans even intuitively link atheism with necrobustiality and cannibalism.

Such bigoted associations between atheism and immorality do not align with reality. There is simply no empirical evidence that most people who lack a belief in God are immoral. If anything, the evidence points in the other direction. Research has shown that atheists tend to be less racist, less homophobic and less misogynistic

than those professing a belief in God.

Most atheists subscribe to humanistic ethics based on compassion and a desire to alleviate suffering. This may help explain why atheists have been found to be more supportive of efforts to fight climate change, as well as more supportive of refugees and of the right to die.

This may also explain why, according to my research, those states within the United States with the least religious populations — as well as democratic nations with the most secular citizens — tend to be the most humane, safe, peaceful and prosperous.

Freethought caucus

Although the rivers of anti-atheism run deep throughout the American political landscape, they are starting to thin. More and more nonbelievers are openly expressing their godlessness, and swelling numbers of Americans are becoming secular: In the past 15 years, the percentage of Americans claiming no religious affiliation has risen from 16 percent to 26 percent. Meanwhile, some find the image of a bible-wielding Trump troubling, opening up the possibility that suddenly Christianity may be contending with a branding problem of its own, especially in the skeptical eyes of younger Americans.

In 2018, a new group emerged in Washington, D.C.: the Congressional Freethought Caucus. Although it only has 13 members, it portends a significant shift in which some elected members of Congress are no longer afraid of being identified as, at the very least, agnostic. Given this new development, as well as the growing number of nonreligious Americans, it shouldn't be a surprise if one day a self-identified atheist makes it to the White House.

Will that day come sooner rather than later? God only knows. Or rather, only time will tell.

FFRF member Phil Zuckerman is professor of sociology and secular studies at Pitzer College.

OVERHEARD

Secularism is the cement of a united France. Our challenge is to fight against those who go off the rails in the name of religion, while protecting those who believe in Islam and are full citizens of the Republic.

French President Emmanuel Macron, in a speech.

Bloomberg, 10-2-20

Our insistence on religion as a unifying American principle feels just as outdated and illusory as the notion of civility in the White House. And when politicians wield their faith as a means to convince voters that they're "good," it strikes me as downright condescending.

Rosa Heyman, deputy editor of Cosmopolitan magazine, in her column, "Will we ever have an atheist president?"

Cosmopolitan, 10-8-20

I assume that to most of the young people who choose, as you had, to get their

legal education at the University of Notre Dame, the kingdom of God means the same thing. But I'm sure I'm not the first to point out that it doesn't mean the same thing to everyone in our great and diverse country. Your God's kingdom may not be the kingdom of someone else's God, if that person even has a God.

Linda Greenhouse, in her column, "Questions for Amy Coney Barrett."

The New York Times, 10-8-20

Saying atheism is a belief system is like saying not going skiing is a hobby.

Actor and comedian Ricky Gervais, in an interview for the U.K. Sunday Times in 2016.

The Week, 10-4-20

A judicial ruling — or a statute passed through the democratic process — in favor of same-sex marriage rights in no way violates the religious freedom of a single human being. To claim otherwise is not

to seek religious freedom, but to back theocracy, the rule of civil society by religious dogma.

If a law or ruling only makes sense to the religious, or to followers of a certain faith, it is something a constitutional democracy cannot tolerate. It has to be a policy that could be supported by members of any religion, or of none.

In short, it has to pass the atheist test.
George Pyle, editorial page editor of The Salt Lake Tribune, in an op-ed: "American laws must pass the atheist test."

Salt Lake Tribune, 10-8-20

Trump's war on scientific expertise during this once-in-a-century pandemic is a reflection of the right's decades of effort to elevate faith in God as an overriding value, leaving no room for scientific inquiry or medical leadership.

Matthew Dallek, professor at George Washington University's graduate school of political management, in his op-ed:

"The GOP has a long history of ignoring science. Trump turned it into policy."

The Washington Post, 10-9-20

It's clear that most atheists won't fall back on the religion in which they were likely raised. They instead make their decision on what religious group is closest to their perspective when taking the survey, which is clearly agnostics or nothing-in-particulars. In short, the vast majority of atheists have severed ties with all established religions, which means it's highly unlikely that they would return to the fold.

Ryan P. Burge, data researcher and political science professor at Eastern Illinois University, regarding a survey in 2010 that left off the option of "atheists," meaning atheists had to pick some other category, among them "agnostic," "nothing in particular" and "other," as well as all of the major religions.

10-13-20

FFRF’s 2020 secular invocation winners

By Sarah Ray

A citizen of Lake Wales, Fla., asked me to look into giving an invocation, the first-known secular invocation in the city. I was scheduled to do so by the city clerk. Then two commissioners, Al Goldstein and Curtis Gibson, went to the local press, outraged. Those two commissioners walked out as I approached the podium to give my invocation, one of them leaving a bible on the dais in protest. After my invocation, at a later meeting, the commission passed a resolution stating: “The prayer shall be voluntarily delivered by the City’s Chaplain or by an eligible member of the clergy/religious leader in the local community of Lake Wales.” The city clerk then advised me that someone from the Atheist Community of Polk County could be included, but that they would have to be a resident of Lake Wales (I am not). But even that is inconsistent with their resolution. I’m advocating for open, inclusive invocations, a moment of silence, or better — no invocations at all.

This is the invocation I gave at the Aug. 4, 2020, meeting:

Thank you mayor, commissioners and city staff for your service to the community, and for the opportunity to provide reflection and an inspirational start to your meeting. I stand before you tonight by request of citizens of Lake Wales who are also members of the Atheist Community of Polk



Photo by Keith McCullough

Sarah Ray gave a secular invocation at the Lake Wales (Fla.) City Commission meeting on Aug. 4.

County. I am honored to represent them and all your atheist, agnostic, humanist and other nonreligious constituents.

We find ourselves once again in a period of uncertainty and discord, and it is during these times especially that we look to our leaders for guidance, for reassurance, for hope. Consider the vast collective knowledge and leadership that comes together in this all-important task of self-governance: of, by and for the people.

The brilliance in the design of self-gov-

ernance to me is profound yet simple. We, the people, far more alike than different, bring our many unique talents and skills together for the good of all.

Tonight, I call for peace and understanding. Yes, I’m an atheist. I’m white. I’m a parent. I’m originally from Illinois. I’m a transgender woman. We are all different in many ways. If we have prejudged each other already upon these differences, I fear we have lost before we ever began. Instead, may we seek out that which we have

Nothing Fails Like Prayer awards

FFRF annually awards its “Nothing Fails Like Prayer” award to a person who delivers a secular invocation at a public meeting. This year, FFRF is honoring two such people — Ann Landman and Sarah Ray. Read their statements and invocations on this page. Winners receive \$500. In a normal year, the winners would also get an expenses-paid trip to FFRF’s convention, where they would deliver their invocations.

in common, and recognize that much of what makes us different separately makes us stronger together. This is the foundation upon which we can build a better tomorrow — together.

So, let us all meet there tonight, together, at that foundation of our shared humanness and approach these important responsibilities with reason and compassion as we work to build that better future for all the citizens of Lake Wales.

In service, I thank you.

Sarah Ray is an openly atheist, openly transgender woman and co-founder/director of the Atheist Community of Polk County in Florida. She and her wife of 10 years, Becca, have two children.

By Ann Landman

I founded Western Colorado Atheists and Freethinkers in February 2007 and it became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in 2011. Our group lobbied the Grand Junction City Council to get rid of the invocation in 2008, but we settled for the council making it more inclusive. When we asked the council to prohibit people who say the invocation from saying the name of a deity, the council members refused to “censor” what people could say. I submitted my name to say the invocation back in 2009, after our group convinced the city it needed to give everyone the chance to say the invocation, not just restrict it to people from organized religions.

Here is the invocation I finally gave on June 17, 2020:

I’m here representing Western Colorado Atheists and Freethinkers. Our group was founded in 2007, and since none of you was on City Council back in 2008, you may not know our group was responsible for the council adopting the invocation policy that’s currently in place that brought me here tonight. Instead of limiting who can say the invocation to members of certain religions, the current policy invites everyone the right to say the invocation, regardless of their religious affiliation or lack thereof, and it also gives that right to individuals as well as groups. Back in 2009, after the city adopted its current policy, I put my name in the hat to say the invocation, and lo and behold, 11 years later, here I am.

It’s not lost on me that in other communities when atheists have asked to say the invocation, they’ve had to go to court and fight for the right to do it. We should be proud that in Grand Junction this isn’t the case. Maybe one day we’ll see an end to discrimination against people based on their belief systems, or lack thereof.

I want to give you an idea of who atheists in our community are. I did a quick survey of our group’s supporters and



Ann Landman gave a secular invocation at the June 17, 2020, meeting of the Grand Junction (Colo.) City Council.

found that atheists in our community include: grocery workers, truck drivers, registered nurses, security guards and other “essential” workers who have been putting their lives on the line for the rest of us amid the coronavirus pandemic. Grand Junction atheists are teachers, translators, artists, software developers, mental health and addictions counselors. They manufacture parts for vehicles that enable vehicles to move. Many atheists own tax-generating enterprises.

Atheists sit on the boards of local businesses and community benefit nonprofits and serve in local elected offices. Atheists organize some of the biggest long-time traditional parades in Grand Junction; they clean up roads, help organize the Special Olympics; serve food to the hungry, volunteer to teach inmates at the jail, help clean and support the Homeward Bound homeless shelter, donate generously to the Mesa County Public Library, the Community Food Bank, the Roice Hurst Animal Shelter, a cancer survivor program at St. Mary’s, the botanical gardens and more. Atheists in our community volunteer time to cook

and distribute food to hungry people; help immigrants get out of detention centers legally, and shop preferentially at locally owned businesses over big box stores. Many of us have given away all or part of our CARES ACT funds to benefit the less

fortunate in our community, and much more. In short, atheists are a helpful, selfless, loving, highly moral and community-oriented bunch of people who contribute substantially to the greater good of our city and make it the truly wonderful place to live that it is.

Thank you to all of you city councilors for giving so generously of your time to benefit our city. We know you don’t get paid much for all the time and effort you put in to considering so many unsexy topics like road repairs, traffic management, water, drainage and sewage systems, so the rest of us can enjoy without a thought the high quality of life these systems bring us all.

Since 2008, our group has been pushing the City Council to honor, in both letter and spirit, the separation of church and state in the First Amendment to the Constitution, AND make more efficient use of taxpayer-funded meeting time by eliminating the invocation entirely. In keeping with that spirit, I won’t waste any more time. I’ll just let you get down to work so you can get out of here as early as possible tonight, because you deserve it. Thank you.

NOTHING FAILS LIKE PRAYER CONTEST 2021

Our goal is to see secular citizens flood government meetings with secular invocations that demonstrate why government prayers are unnecessary, ineffective, embarrassing, exclusionary, divisive or just plain silly.

The individual who gives the best secular invocation will be invited to open FFRF’s annual convention in 2021, receiving an expenses-paid trip to Boston Nov. 19-21, 2021, along with a plaque and an honorarium of \$500.

Deadline: August 1, 2021.

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

The dubiousness of miraculous revelations

This column first appeared on FFRF's blog page at patheos.com/blogs/freethoughtnow.

By James A. Haught

In the mid-1800s, a prisoner in Persia (as Iran was then known) allegedly saw a vision of a “heavenly maiden” who informed him of his holy status. Later he declared that he was Baha’u’llah, the Promised One of All Religions. In effect, he said he was Jesus returning for Christians, the Messiah coming for Jews, Lord Krishna coming for Hindus, a long-awaited divine imam coming for Muslims, and so on. He drew thousands of followers, called Baha’i. Surrounding Shi’ite Muslims massacred them, but they persisted. The Persian’s brother tried to poison him and declared himself, instead, the Promised One of All Religions. But the brother’s attempt fizzled. Baha’is slowly grew to 7 million around the world today, although they remain cruelly persecuted in Iran.

Also in the mid-1800s, a Chinese man read Christian missionary tracts and said he experienced a vision in which God told him he was a divine younger brother of Jesus. God commanded him to “destroy demons.” The vision-receiver drew followers, launched the Taiping religion and a Taiping army that conquered much of China, causing an estimated 20 million deaths.

Around the same time period (a fertile era for revelations apparently), a much-arrested mystic named Joseph Smith said he was visited by an angel named Moroni who showed him golden tablets buried on a New York state hill. The angel allegedly gave him magic stones that enabled him to translate ancient writing on the tablets. It became the Book of Mormon, describing a North American civilization that was visited by Jesus. But nobody could see the golden tablets and magic stones as proof, be-

cause the angel supposedly took them back to heaven. Today, the Mormon faith numbers 15 million worldwide.

Mary Baker Eddy said she heard supernatural voices as a child, and she later became devoted to a hypnotist healer. Then she claimed that divine inspiration led her to write a faith-healing book and launch the Church of Christ Scientist in the 1870s. But critics claimed that she lifted most of her spiritual healing ideas from the hypnotist and from Eastern religions.

In 1935, according to the Unification Church, Jesus appeared to Sun Myung Moon in Korea and commanded him to finish the “incomplete” work that Christ started 2,000 years earlier. Moon began evangelizing and slowly created the “Moonie” faith that spread worldwide.

In the 1970s, a French racecar driver called Rael said he was visited by ancient extraterrestrials called the Elohim, who originally created all life on Earth. Rael wrote books and launched a religion that consists mostly of naked assemblies, casual sex, and efforts to bring the Elohim back to the planet. Estimates of the number of Raelians range from 50,000 to 90,000.

And, as everyone knows, the Prophet Muhammad claimed in the seventh century that the Angel Gabriel visited him repeatedly for 23 years, dictating the Quran. Muhammad was illiterate, but supposedly relayed the angel’s words to others and scribes, who put them on paper. This launched the Muslim faith, which now has 1.5 billion adherents.

You get the picture. Time after time throughout history, various people have claimed miraculous visits. The visionaries began preaching and spawned religions. They drew great numbers of followers — showing a remarkable human craving for miracle tales.

Alleged communication from gods and godlings goes back to the earliest known writings. Greek King Agamem-



James A. Haught



In 1995, a statue of the Virgin Mary appears to cry blood tears in Civitavecchia, Italy. About 60 people testified to witnessing the alleged phenomenon. However, the blood on the statue was later found to be male, and the owner of the statue refused to take a blood test.

non supposedly offended the goddess Artemis, who calmed winds when the king’s army tried to sail for Troy. The goddess supposedly told the prophet Calchas that she would relent only if Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia, and it was done.

The bible reports many angel visitations. Genesis 6 implies that fallen angels came to Earth, impregnated women and bred giants.

The all-time champion of holy appearances is the Virgin Mary, who often makes herself visible to believers — in 1531 at Guadalupe, Mexico; in 1858 at Lourdes, France; in 1917 at Fatima, Portugal; in 1981 at Medjugorje, Bosnia; in 1983 at a farm in Georgia, to name a few. Vast multitudes of worshipers flock to these sites. It’s odd that Mary doesn’t appear to Jews, Buddhists, Protestants or atheists. As a wag said, “Some things must be believed to be seen.”

Troy Taylor, a collector of ghost tales, wrote that the Virgin made numerous appearances in Illinois. A retired railroader, praying by a crucifix at Queen of Heaven Cemetery at Hillsdale in 1990, was visited by Mary, St. Michael and three angels, he said. Swarms of believers rushed to the spot and made miracle reports of their own. At Belleville in 1993, a man said a voice told him to visit the Lady of the Snows shrine, where Mary appeared from a bright light and gave him messages. Meanwhile, various Orthodox churches around Illinois reported weeping or bleeding statues or paintings of the Virgin. And a family at Hanover Park said Mary appeared in 1997 in shadows on an apartment wall, drawing crowds of the faithful.

Taylor wrote that all these happenings may be “the fevered imaginings of a religious mind” or they may be genuine miracles — “We leave that up to you to decide.”

How many divine revelations and visitations have been claimed through the centuries? Tens of thousands? Millions? The total is uncountable. Clearly, it’s part of human experience. It’s somewhat akin to people who say they were abducted by space aliens, taken aboard UFOs and subjected to sexual experiments.

Are these vision-seers psychotics or “fantasy-prone” neurotics who really believe their tales? Or are they charlatans who invent lies, then spend the rest of their lives repeating them?

One exception to the lie-repeating premise is an American named Alex Malarkey. In 2004, when he was 6, a car crash sent him into a coma. After he woke up, he said he had gone to heaven and visited Jesus and Satan. His father helped him write a best-selling book, *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven*, which sold a million copies and was made into a television movie. But at age 16, the paralyzed boy said his tale was a hoax to get attention. The publisher halted sales of his book. His name should have been a giveaway.

The widespread phenomenon of miraculous encounters should be a field of study for psychiatrists. What facet of the mind causes some people to claim that divine visitors came to them — and causes other people to believe them?

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



To see this cartoon and hundreds more, please purchase a copy of *Cartoons for the Irreverent: Celebrating the Wit of Don Addis*, available through ffrf.org/shop. This unique collection published by FFRF celebrates the wit and irreverence of Don Addis, a legendary editorial cartoonist and atheist. Enjoy Don’s jokes that poke fun at religion, creationism and pious politicians. Addis’s toons will make you smile, then make you think. (Paperback, 153 pages, \$15 post paid)

LETTERBOX

Justice Ginsburg had sense of humor

We are all mourning the passing of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Several years ago, she came to Chicago to talk at the monthly meeting of the Chicago Bar Association (CBA). Ten people sat on the stage with her, including the president of the CBA and the chief judge of the Cook County Circuit Court. She gave a great talk, and when we adjourned, many of us walked up to the front of the stage to talk with whom-ever we wanted. I waved at Ginsburg, and she came over to where I was. I complimented her on her talk, and I told her it was great to have her with us, but it was contrary to the biblical teaching of Paul to Timothy, which I ironically quoted to her. She smiled back and said, “That was somewhat before my time.”

Her death is a tremendous loss to our country.

Ted Utchen
Illinois

Human life, not life in general, is the issue

Dr. George Domingo was absolutely right in his letter in the September issue (“Find out the category of pro-lifer’s stance”), but he does not go far enough. The problem is the anti-abortion crowd uses the “pro-life” mantra in ways that persuade many unthinking people. But the issue is not “life” — it is human life. Yes, a fetus is life. So is a daisy or a mosquito, but no one thinks twice about plucking a daisy out of the ground or swatting a mosquito. And a fetus does not become a human life until it experiences existence outside the womb.

Those of us who respect a woman’s right to her own body and who believe that religionists and political groups want to inflict their own values on everyone need to emphasize that human life, not “life” propaganda, is the real issue here.

Michael Spielman
New York

Evangelicals are now just political prostitutes

Christianity was once a bedrock of moral and ethical values, held steadfast for generations. The Ten Commandments were etched in stone. White evangelicals have changed all that in their lust to support the most immoral and unethical president in American history. They have rationalized President Trump’s violation of every commandment, including “Thou shall not kill,” which Trump ignored by cozying up to Russian and Saudi Arabian dictators who murdered political opponents. Evangelicals overlook Trump’s daily lies, racism and adultery, while playing to his massive ego by telling him he was chosen by God to lead America.

While other religious denominations haven’t been as vocal, they have enabled Trump and the evangelicals with their silence. All have contributed to changing the bedrock of Christian values into a malleable mass of amorphous mud that can be remolded to suit whatever is the political purpose of the day. They have ceased to be Christians and are now, instead, a convenient cadre of political prostitutes.

Dave Wester
Wisconsin



Time to join the ranks of Lifetime Membership

I’m not sure how long I have been a member of FFRF, but I do remember when Skeets and I first became members. We gave at the “household” level and in 2011 we bumped up to the “gung-ho” level. I’m ready to move into a new category! I am enclosing a check for \$1,000 to become a Lifetime Member! I can’t think of a better way to spend a grand than to give it to the Freedom From religion Foundation.

On an unrelated note, I just finished reading *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire* and it made quite an impression on me. One of the things that hit hard is the role that religion played over the last 400 years in creating our current situation, where reality, science and facts simply don’t matter. And the Religious Right seems to be stronger than ever and pushing its dogma and views on the rest of us.

Thanks for all you do!

Julie Mahoney
Arizona

Government knows that churches are businesses

Thank you for Freethought Today! I read it faithfully (forgive the expression!).

In the August edition, you comment about the support of churches through the Paycheck Protection Program. I agree with your comments,

but look at the positive aspect: The program is run by the Small Business Administration, which shows that the government also realizes that religion is a business.

Keep up the good work!

Mark Gaston
New York

FFRF, Freethought Today have opened up my mind

Thank you for sending me Freethought Today. I’m new to this. I’m a member, but just wanted to thank you for opening up my mind. I was raised

Catholic and I have been an enthusiastic non-Catholic for years. I enjoy every one of your articles, from cover to cover. Thanks for all you do.

Teresa Miller
Wisconsin

No need to pretend if you live in real world

With all the news about RBG’s death, I remembered my thinking a couple decades ago. I accept that there is consolation in religion. I sat by my mother’s bedside where she was in an irreversible coma. Dad had consulted with us kids and had her disconnected from life support. We took turns sitting with Dad by her bedside as she slowly died. I found myself thinking how consoling it would be if I could just believe I would see her again — to see her as her younger, fully healthy self and laugh and talk with her.

But that consolation is only available if one lives in a fantasy world where religion is true. I chose to live in the real world and could not make myself believe something that was clearly illogical. So, I grieved as she slipped quietly into oblivion. She had already left herself and now she left the rest of us.

The problem is that, if you can accept fantasy and illogic about death, then you can accept fantasy and illogic about the real world. That can lead to real disaster and unhappiness. No, it is better to live in the real world and do appropriate grieving over real losses than to pretend there is a rosy future where no grief is necessary.

Karla Martin
Washington

Essay scholarship will help further my education

I am very thankful to have received the 2020 Michael Hakeem Memorial Essay Honorable Mention Scholarship. Your generosity will help me to continue my education at Carleton College.

Though I have not officially chosen a field of study yet, I am planning on pursuing an English major. I hope to use the skills I have acquired in a position at a publishing company or teaching English abroad. Thank you again for the scholarship.

Indigo Bistrup-Peterson
Minnesota



Catholics have outsized influence on high court

Article VI of the U.S. Constitution prohibits religious tests for any public office, including the federal courts. Yet Amy Coney Barrett, who has been confirmed by the Senate, is the fifth conservative Roman Catholic on the current Supreme Court, all appointed by Republican presidents.

Conservative Catholics probably represent no more than 10 percent of the nation’s population, yet will now comprise a solid majority on the court, with another conservative Trump appointee, Neil Gorsuch, who now calls himself a Protestant, having been raised Catholic. Antonin Scalia, whom Brett Kavanaugh replaced, was another conservative Catholic appointed by a Republican.

It is clear that these justices were nominated and confirmed in the knowledge that they most likely will never defy the teachings of their church and will vote to overturn *Roe. v. Wade* and same-sex marriage, and oppose separation of church and state, approving taxpayer support for religious schools in the form of vouchers and tax credits, along with taxpayer support for repairs and renovations to church properties, while defending the right of religious institutions receiving public funds to discriminate in hiring based on “religious freedom.”

Any critics of these right-wing Catholics have been, and will continue to be, accused of anti-Catholicism.

In addition to the Supreme Court, Trump has been appointing large numbers of conservative Christians (Catholic and Protestant, including Amy Coney Barrett earlier) to the lower federal courts ever since he took office. Jews, Muslims, atheists, Unitarians, Hindus, Buddhists, etc., need not apply.

Dennis Middlebrooks
New York

Happy to see FFRF show up our in community

Lo and behold, what a wonderful surprise! There, in the middle of the third page of the Sept. 9 edition of our local weekly (the State Port Pilot), I saw the headline, “Group seeks to end prayer at meetings.” This call-out was long overdue. Since we have lived here, the Brunswick County Commissioners have put “In God We Trust” in bold letters on the county building and stick-on strips of the same on all county vehicles. This was justified by one member as “the

Go tell it on the mountain



Joel Brown of Colorado recently took a trip to Utah, where he visited the Arches, Canyonlands and the La Sal Mountains with his new personalized license plate. “It has given us some good laughs and so far only positive interactions,” Joel writes. “I was inspired to give this a try when I learned of the man in Kentucky [Ben Hart] who got the same plate after a legal battle. I had that ruling from the federal court ready to share with my local DMV, but it was not needed. On the DMV form where it asks what the personalization means, I wrote, ‘This reflects my belief that religion is subject to individual interpretation.’” This photo was taken at the Garden of Eden trailhead in Arches National Park.

moral thing to do.”

What was so great for me is to know that I’m not the only FFRF member here. Keep it up!

Joe Hardesty
North Carolina

Is QAnon a smokescreen for the Catholic Church?

You’ve heard about the lunatic cult QAnon. It’s rabidly obsessed about the sexual abuse of children transnationally by an imaginary satanic cabal of popular right-wing whipping boys: show biz, the media, liberal politicians.

Meanwhile, children are sexually abused by something real — the Catholic Church — and QAnon has nothing to say about that.

Could whoever assembled this online gaggle of loonybirds be operating with the covert aim of providing a smoke-screen for the Church, a distraction? Or could the secret leader of QAnon merely be a dupe of some Catholic-fomented alternative reality?

Basically, is there a purpose to all this, a method to the obvious madness? Or is it simply misguided to try to find sense where none actually exists?

Stephen Van Eck
Pennsylvania

A few questions for the Supreme Court nominee

I sent this letter to Sen. Dianne Feinstein of the Senate Judiciary Committee prior to the confirmation hearings of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court.

Some questions for Barrett:

1. Can religion be used as an excuse to harm or discriminate against other citizens of the United States? Yes or no?
2. Can one citizen of the United States be forced by taxation to support the religion of another citizen? Yes or no?
3. Does the government of the United States take a position as to which religion a citizen of the United States must adhere? Yes or no?
4. Is there a religion to which a citizen of the United States must adhere in order to have constitutional rights and equal protection of the law? Yes or no?
5. Is there a percentage of the United States population that a group of citizens must achieve before members of the said group have constitutional rights and equal protection of the laws? Yes or no?

Paul Keller
Wisconsin

I really enjoy FFRF’s NYT ads, Freethought Today

I love your monthly newspaper and the FFRF ads in The New York Times. I am an atheist because I see no evidence of a god, heaven or hell. They are imaginary.

Jimmy Dunne
Texas

FFRF’s survey results are surprising, dismaying

I am somewhat surprised, and not a little dismayed, at FFRF’s survey results. “Universal health care access” [which 94 percent of respondents support] means some sort of government control — a singularly bad idea. And a “guaranteed minimum income” [70 percent support] is simply an excuse to indulge the terminally lazy. “Reduced college tuition” [83 percent support] imposes the costs on people who do not benefit from them. These ideas are an excellent way to completely destroy an economy. People who are smart enough to realize that there can exist no reason to believe that any god exists ought to be smart enough to understand this.

Robert Saunders
California

CRANKMAIL

Here is your monthly installment of correspondence to FFRF that may be a bit light on reason and heavy on religion (or bad grammar or bad spelling or profanity. Printed as received.

God will save you: Turn back to God and turn from your wicked ways. Because eternal lives matter You’ve been deceived by wolves in sheep’s clothing. You either serve God or you serve the pits of hell there’s no middle ground and he is coming soon. 31 prophecies fulfilled in the last nine months. we Are here from Adam & Eve that is a scientific fact. It’s a scientific fact as is the flood! God didn’t write the 10 suggestions.Sin is sin — Mark Plaveroll

Freedom From Religion: I think your ‘group’ have overlooked something very important. This country was founded on freedom from religion, fleeing religious persecution in Europe. Our framers understood the importance of religion in daily life. So you want relain erased from the face of America? If you think people are unruly now just keep pushing for a no accountability to God. Every nation in history feel when they took God out of the equation. Check it out. It’s not rocket science. You will stand up before God an account for your indifference and even hostility to Godly principles. “Every knee will bow and every younger confess that he is God....” that means

“every” no exception. But at that time it will be too late to undue the damage to both your own soul and those you influenced that you will be accountable for. — Judy Mende

FFRF: Fuck you Fuck you Fuck you Fuck you Fuck you@Fuckyou.com — Jeffrey Balzek

Hate Speech: A “freethought” show this morning was hateful. CW channel aired hate speech at Christians. I request you give equal hateful shows to other religions, in all fairness. I pray Jesus (who died to save your soul, person reading this) forgive your sins and bring you into his loving embrace, now and forever. — Karen Hoiland

Ron Reagan: You Godless fool-hell is hotter than you can imagine. Grow up dude.You are more of a disgrace than your father. I served 4 yrs.in the US Army from 1983-1987. Your dad was a pussy with no brain-like you. — Kevin Lowry

Can a man kick a stone and not injure himself? The Lord God sees all you are doing in standing against Him. You have made an alliance with Lucifer, his fallen angels and demons to stand against the will of God, but you will not succeed. But the Lord God is merciful. So repent, believe in Jesus Christ and be saved! The Lord does not see as the enemy, the real enemies are those spirits, and fall-

en angels that are deceiving you think that you can actually win the fight you have picked. I rebukes all such demons and fallen angels in the name of the Lord Jesus! I rebuke satan there father that has deceived you and many in the name of Jesus Christ! I pray your eyes and ears will open so you can see and hear what the Spirit of God is doing and is saying respectively! — Robert Joseph

Eternity: Mr.Atheist, you have or had Christian loved ones in your family, and very close friends that you really love or loved in life, and they loved you back. So the fact is, every soul on this earth has an appointment in eternity, and there is absolutely no way out of it, and here’s what I’m asking you to do. When your time comes to step into eternity with your science, philosophy, and your opinions, I’m asking you to call those loved ones and friends out by name, to see if they answer you back because in life you both loved one another, “they know your voice”. If they don’t answer you, then you should know that you made a mistake in life, that will never get fixed. You allowed the door of eternity to close shut between you and your loved ones and friends. — Tyrone Barry

Repent Now: Sick of athiests who are so afraid of my God, they have to attack people with faith. I am

sorry you are threatened by the truth. The Bible. — Amyann Jannelle

Your idiocy: Y’all are misguided. No where in The Constitution does it call for separation of church and state. The spirit of the first amendment is not violated by a politician posting Bible verses. We know this because of the obviously Christian prayers offered up by the first congress (same guys who wrote the first amendment). Given that your “foundation” is built on lies (freedom OF religion, not FROM) it’s no surprise you have no problem propagating them. Remember - the FOOL says in their heart there is no God. Not the wise person, not the scholar, the fool. You want to practice your secular religion - that’s fine. But you have no right to limit or inhibit anyone from practicing theirs. — Marcus Ashford

True Freedom: You say you support freedom by insisting religious associations be removed from the public. That’s your freedom. Mine would be to include religious (Christian) associations with all things public. By strong arming your worldviews on ALL, you infringe upon my freedoms! What makes your worldview more valid than mine? I am willing to wager that you haven’t a valid answer. You hypocrites! You make me sick; however, I forgive your short shortsightedness and hypocrisy. — Philip Berry

BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

Gary Berthiaume, 78, Warrendale, IL: 2nd-degree criminal sexual conduct alleged to have occurred involving a 14-year-old parishioner in August 1977 at Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church in Farmington, MI, where Berthiaume was pastor. He was previously arrested for sexual assault of 2 other minors in Michigan and served jail time in 1978 for molesting 2 brothers who were altar boys. Their mother, Betty Kedzierski, filed a civil suit in which she alleged she was thrilled at first that her sons would have a father figure in Berthiaume since she was a single mom. The church settled the suit for \$350,000. After serving his jail sentence, Berthiaume was transferred to the Diocese of Cleveland in Ohio and was moved again in 1987 to the Diocese of Joliet, IL. He was defrocked in 2007. *Source: WNEM, 9-28-20*

Lloyd E. Lasker Jr., 49, Mayflower, AR: Possession of a controlled substance, possession of drug paraphernalia and possession of firearms by certain persons. Lasker, pastor at the House of Refuge and Deliverance, was arrested after police reportedly found 4 grams of meth and a glass pipe in a vehicle registered to the church. He is also under investigation for a domestic abuse allegation involving a 1-year-old boy, on whom Lasker allegedly admitted performing exorcisms after his mother claimed he was “possessed by a demon.” A responding police officer reported the boy had “multiple bruises from head to toe and was life threateningly emaciated.” According to a search warrant affidavit, Lasker said “he has used meth in the church several times,” including with the child’s mother and “many other members in the church.” *Source: Log Cabin Democrat, 9-28-20*

Bryan S. Carrejo, 33, Orange City, FL: 5 counts of possession of sexual performance by a child. Carrejo, pastor at Victory Chapel, is accused of offering to share child pornography online that depicted children as young as 8. Duncan Corn, a neighbor, commented: “It’s amazing that he’s doing that and he’s got five kids, four or five kids, living in his house.” Authorities discovered the activity by using a tool created by the nonprofit Child Rescue Coalition, which tracks people using the “dark web” to share child porn. *Source: WESH, 9-24-20*

Three people attending a “psalm sing” sponsored by Christ Church in a city hall parking lot in Moscow, ID, were arrested for resisting/obstructing police and violating public health orders aimed at reducing coronavirus transmission. **Two others** received public health citations but weren’t taken into custody. About 200 people attended. Christ Church pastor **Ben Zornes** said the event was held to protest the city council’s “largely groundless” mask and distancing order. **Gabriel Rench**, a church deacon running as a Republican for county commission, retweeted a video of his arrest that showed police handcuffing him while the crowd continued to sing. *Source: Newsweek/AP, 9-24-20*

David Reiter, 51, South Park, PA: Federal tax fraud charges related to alleged embezzlement, failure to pay \$805,000 in employment taxes from 2016–18 and filing false income tax returns for 2014–18 while he was business administrator at Westminster Presbyterian Church. Reiter pleaded guilty in 2019 in state court to receiving stolen property, theft, forgery, access device fraud, tampering with records and unlawful use of a computer. He pleaded no contest to conspiring with his wife, Connie Reiter, in the crimes. After the church board of directors discovered missing funds in 2018, the board treasurer tried to speak with the man he thought had conducted the audit. But according to investigators, Reiter gave the treasurer the number of his own prepaid cellphone and then pretended to be the auditor. *Source: Post-Gazette, 9-23-20*

Zvi Feiner, 50, and **Erez Baver**, 50, Chicago: 10 counts of wire fraud and a single count of wire fraud, respectively, for allegedly bilking an estimated \$22 million from investors. Feiner is the founder and spiritual adviser of Bais Medrash Binyan Olam, an Orthodox congregation. Baver was his business partner in the Rosewood Care Centers chain of nursing homes. The chain was part of a network they bought after raising money from investors in the Orthodox Jewish communities around Chicago and New York. Prosecutors allege they misled investors about Rosewood’s financial health and operated a Ponzi scheme. Feiner paid a \$1 million penalty to HUD last year for failing to file several years of audited financial reports required by a federal mortgage insurance program. *Source: Skokie Patch/NY Times, 9-15-20*

Jacob Steagall, 28, Morehead, KY: Misdemeanor indecent exposure alleged to have occurred Dec. 15, 2019, when he

was youth pastor at Better Life Church. A statement on social media from the church said he resigned Aug. 25 due to “a personal problem that had become a pattern of behavior.” According to the mother of a minor who was allegedly flashed, there may be at least 3 more alleged victims: “It is my prayer that this will make him understand that this behavior will not be tolerated by our community.” *Source: The Trail Blazer, 9-11-20*

Joseph Comperchio, 66, Ft. Myers, FL: 6 counts of criminal sexual conduct stemming from alleged incidents in the 1970s when he was a drama and music teacher at St. John Catholic School in Jackson, MI. Two alleged victims reported they were assaulted by Comperchio between the ages of 9 and 11 between 1974 and 1977, according to state Attorney General Dana Nessel. *Source: State Journal, 9-14-20*

Mulugeta Legesse, 64, Oklahoma City: 2 counts of indecent or lewd acts with a child under 16. Legesse, a former elder at St. George Ethiopian Orthodox Church, is accused of preying on girls as young as 7 at Sunday school by luring them with candy into his car in the parking lot. “If you tell your parents, they will beat you,” he allegedly told the girls. *Source: KFOR, 9-10-20*

Sylvester Ofori, 35, Orlando, FL: 1st-degree murder with a firearm. Ofori, pastor at Floodgates of Heaven International Ministries who calls himself a prophet and motivational speaker, is accused of shooting his wife in the head several times with a handgun outside the Navy Federal Credit Union where she worked. He and Barbara Tommey, 27, were estranged and going through a divorce. Ofori, a native of Ghana, was arrested on a domestic violence complaint in February 2016 by a deputy who saw him and Tommey arguing in a gas station parking lot. He was charged with resisting arrest but the case was later dismissed. *Source: Orlando Sentinel, 9-9-20*

Gary and Cindy Smith, Milton, PA: Theft by deception, theft by unlawful taking, receiving stolen property and theft by failure to make required disposition for funds received. Gary Smith, pastor at Calvary Tabernacle Church on Packer Island, and his wife are charged with stealing \$8,390 from the church from January–May 2020. A 2010 contract between the Smiths and the church showed they were to be paid \$800 a week for their services, but they allegedly misappropriated \$8,390 above that amount. *Source: Daily Item, 9-8-20*

Michael A. Mayer, Casper, WY: 2 counts of sexual abuse of a minor. Mayer, a Jehovah’s Witnesses ministerial servant, allegedly had sexual intercourse with a 16-year-old girl. Ministerial servants assist church elders and often take leadership roles. It’s alleged she and Mayer had sex several times at his office at the Bureau of Reclamation in Mills. The girl told investigators she viewed Mayer as a father figure and mentor, court documents state. *Source: K2 Radio, 9-8-20*

Netanel Shriki, a “mystic” rabbi in Netivot, Israel, was arrested on suspicion of sexual assault of a woman who came to him for counseling. His assistant, **Ariel Moshe**, was arrested for witness tampering. “Dr. N.” alleged she sought Shriki’s advice on her husband’s recommendation because they were having trouble conceiving a second child. Shriki “put his hand on my stomach, moved it upward, stopped at the lower bust, came closer to me with his face to my neck, breathed heavily, like a dog pants,” she told a reporter. “And then he asked me: ‘What does that do for you?’ And then he looked at me and said

to me: ‘Ah, but nothing ever happened here. Tell your husband and I’ll deny it, he’ll believe me.’” Two other women later came forward. One alleged Shriki told her if she didn’t lift her bra above her breasts, he wouldn’t be able to render a medical finding. Shriki told the court that according to Jewish mysticism, metal hinders spiritual clairvoyance, which is why he asked her to bare her breasts. *Source: Haaretz, 9-1-20*

Jacqueline M. Bowser, 31, Millville, NJ: 3rd-degree theft, forgery and uttering a forged instrument. Bowser, a volunteer at First United Methodist Church, allegedly wrote 9 checks to herself for \$6,503 on a church account between Sept. 19 and Dec. 6, 2019. Court records show she was indicted in 2008 for shoplifting and completed a pretrial diversion program in April 2010. *Source: Daily Journal, 9-1-20*

Mona McGrady, 62, Sonora, CA: Guilty by jury of sexual penetration with a foreign object and 2 counts of lewd or lascivious acts with a child aged 14 or 15. McGrady, former coach and sports coordinator at Mother Lode Christian School, was acquitted on 8 similar counts. “Not guilty sometimes means not proven to the level that it needs to be proven,” said Judge Kevin Seibert. In lengthy testimony, McGrady denied molesting 2 “Jane Doe” students between 1995–97 and said she has never been gay. Defense witness Mary Beth Sponsler, McGrady’s friend who is married to the school’s former athletic director, testified McGrady was always “very modest” and acted as a well-intentioned mentor. Prosecutor Eric Hovatter asked about her knowledge of the accusations and conditions surrounding them such as McGrady’s locked office door, signed contracts limiting her exposure to students, and coaches sleeping in the same bed with athletes. “Wouldn’t that creep you out?” Hovatter asked Sponsler repeatedly. Sponsler responded she would not be uncomfortable with students and teachers sharing sleeping arrangements. *Source: Union Democrat, 9-17-20*

Richard Mick, 59, Castalia, OH: Life in prison plus 3 years after a jury found him guilty of rape and 8 counts of gross sexual imposition involving 2 minors while he was pastor at Lighthouse Baptist Church in Sandusky in the 1990s and 2000s. An appeals court overturned his 2016 conviction on similar charges. The judge in Mick’s retrial in 2019 declared a mistrial after it was determined the prosecution didn’t share a key piece of evidence — a police report — during pretrial discovery. *Source: Sandusky Register, 10-3-20*

Hanny Lantara, 50, Surabaya, E. Java, Indonesia: 10 years in prison after being found guilty of sexual abuse. Lantara, pastor of Happy Family Center Church, was accused of repeatedly raping a young congregant from 2005, when she was only 12, until 2011. *Source: Jakarta Post, 9-22-20*

Gregory Lisby, 41, Worcester, MA: 6 years in prison after pleading guilty to possession of child pornography in February after investigators found hundreds of images in his online storage. The images depicted “extreme abuse” of children as young as preschoolers. Lisby was removed as rector at All Saints Episcopal Church in 2018 after what the church referred to as an “inappropriate relationship

with an adult that did not involve sexual contact.” It was also disclosed in court that he had sexual contact with a 16-year-old boy but wasn’t charged because 16 is the age of consent. U.S. District Judge Timothy Hillman ruled Lisby deserved an enhanced sentence for encouraging the boy to send him sexually explicit material online. When arrested, he was working as a kindergarten teacher in Holyoke and living with his husband, rector of a different church in Worcester, in that church’s rectory with their 2 children. Bishop Douglas Fisher said Lisby’s husband has filed for divorce and “is in no way implicated in any of these charges.” *Source: Telegram & Gazette, 9-18-20*

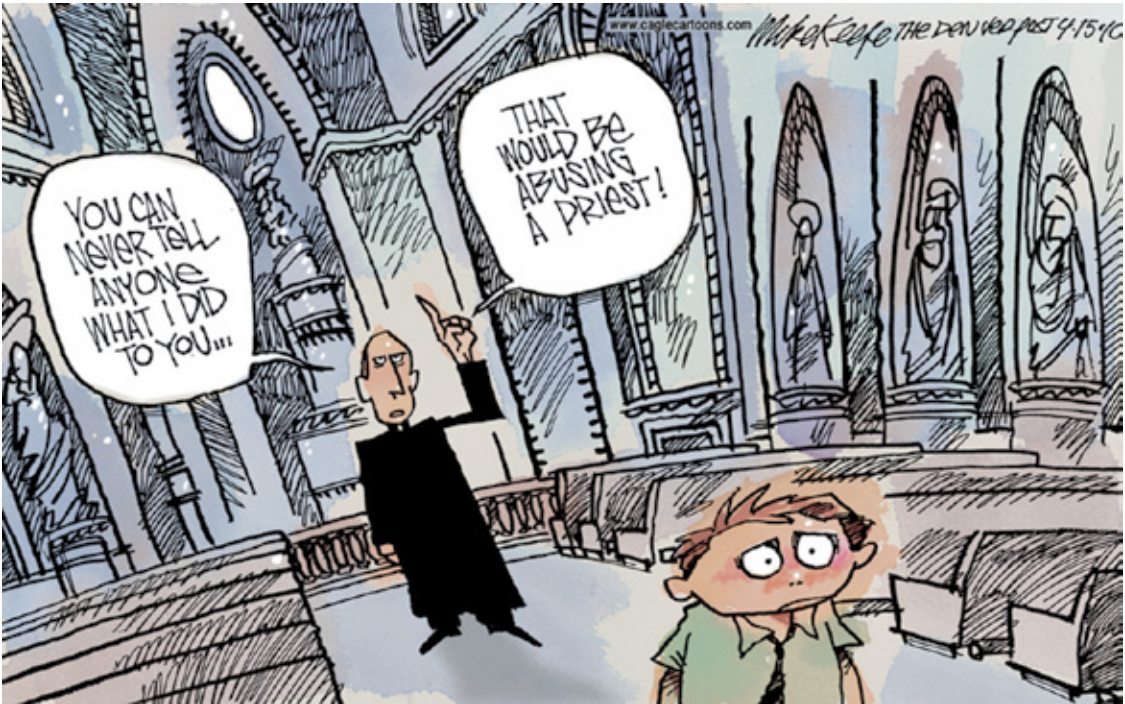
Jerry Zweitzig, 72, Hatboro, PA: 200 years in prison after pleading guilty to manufacturing and possessing child pornography involving 2 victims. Zweitzig, who retired in 2016 as pastor of Horsham Bible Church, said during a presentence interview that “I taught [the child] that in the house, there was nothing wrong with nudity. ... I really felt that I was trying to help.” When first confronted in 2014, he insisted he had only spoken to the girl about puberty. No charges were filed. After a more detailed 2018 complaint, police found thousands of sexually explicit photos and videos of children in his home. A 13-minute video showed Zweitzig masturbating in front of the girl, then age 9, who ran to lock herself in a bathroom. Other images showed her in various states of undress or being forced to perform sex acts on him. She alleged the abuse occurred from 2009–14. When confronted by a family member after his arrest, Zweitzig maintained he didn’t think the images were illegal because he took them only for his personal use, prosecutors said. After he pleaded guilty in 2019, police found a video shot in 2010 of him molesting the girl’s infant sibling, in which the six-month-old boy is coaxing into a sex act. Zweitzig’s voice can be heard repeatedly saying “That’s a good boy” in the video, prosecutors said. U.S. Attorney William McSwain: “I will simply say this. Today’s sentence ensures that Zweitzig will die in prison, which is probably a better fate than what he deserves.” *Source: Hatboro-Horsham Patch, 9-17-20*

Aaron C.M. Schwartz, 22, and **Petie C.M. Schwartz**, 18, Seymour, MO: 15 years in prison, suspended, after pleading guilty to 2 counts of 3rd-degree child molestation with a child under age 14. The Amish brothers and 2 of their underage siblings were accused of having sex with their sister, who was 12 and 13 at the time in 2019–20. The sentence includes 5 years’ probation, sex offender treatment, 100 hours’ community service and apology letters to Seymour’s Amish community. Prosecutor Ben Berkstresser said he was aware that the plea bargain’s sentence would be criticized: “These two young men would’ve been eaten alive in the state prison system.” The brothers were initially charged with incest and 6 counts of statutory rape. Berkstresser said the victim, now 13, had a baby 2 weeks ago: “One of the brothers is the father of this child. ... The only reason we knew of this was because the sister got pregnant and a doctor found out and hot-lined it.” *Source: Webster County Citizen, 9-16-20*

Robert W. Rector, 31, Vancouver, WA: 5 years in prison after pleading guilty to 4 counts of child molestation involving 4 victims aged 15 or younger. Rector was involved with multiple church youth groups and other groups in Clark County and traveled out of state with them. Court documents described a 15-year-old boy’s sleepover at Rector’s home with other church group members. The boy alleged Rector touched his crotch 4 times when he thought he was sleeping and massaged his back and thighs. *Source: The Columbian, 9-11-20*

Courtney M. Bingham, 36, Loudon, TN: 12 years in prison after pleading guilty to solicitation of a minor to commit statutory rape by an authority figure and 4 counts of aggravated statutory rape. Bingham, the family activities coordinator at Bethany Baptist Church, admitted soliciting a 16-year-old boy for sex while he was a member of her youth group in November–December 2018. “You just don’t think about this kind of thing going on in your Christian church family, and certainly we loved her and considered her a special part of what we did here,” said Bethany pastor Rick Harrell. “She was faithful to the church, always had a bubbly attitude. The young people loved her, were drawn to her.” She will have to serve at least 4 years before she is eligible for parole. *Source: WBIR, 9-11-20*

James Gaudreau, 77, former pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church in Lynn, MA, was sentenced to “a life of prayer and penance” after being found guilty by a church judicial court of child abuse. He cannot function in any manner as a priest, according to the Archdiocese of Boston. Gaudreau was placed on leave in 2012 for allegations dating from 2006 by a



minor. There has been no criminal prosecution. The church is “obligated to provide food, shelter and healthcare” to Gaudreau until he dies or is defrocked, a spokesman said. *Source: Boston Herald, 9-10-20*

Benjamin A. Harter, 81, Cumming, GA: 5 years in prison and 15 years’ probation after pleading guilty to 3 counts of child molestation. Harter, pastor at Ebenezer Primitive Baptist Church in Sandy Springs since 2014, began traveling with his wife to the Philippines to work with churches there in the mid-1990s and opened an orphanage before returning to the U.S. in 2008. The couple adopted 19 children over the years. *Source: Journal-Constitution, 9-3-20*

Isai Beltran, 30, Long Beach, CA: 3 years in prison after pleading guilty to lewd or lascivious act on a minor younger than 14. A plea deal dismissed misdemeanor counts of child annoyance and touching an intimate part of another person.

Beltran admitted molesting a 12-year-old boy on Thanksgiving Day in 2014. He was also accused of molesting a 15-year-old boy he met as a volunteer at an unidentified Orange County church. Beltran worked as a volunteer at a several churches in Los Alamitos and Cypress in 2013-14. *Source: mynews1a.com, 8-28-20*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

James Grear — a Catholic priest living in Philadelphia — the **Diocese of Lafayette**, IN, the **Diocese of Phoenix** and 2 “Doe” defendants are being sued by an anonymous Navajo plaintiff who alleges Grear molested him when he attended high school in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Chinle, AZ.

Grear was transferred to Arizona after a series of Indiana abuse allegations were made.

After working at Chinle High School, Grear had assignments in other parts of Arizona, South Dakota, Guam, Maryland, the U.S. Virgin Islands and Bronx, NY. He was finally removed from the ministry in 2001. *Source: Arizona Republic, 10-2-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Worcester**, MA, and retired priest **Thomas Mahoney** have been named in a suit for alleged abuse of a minor in the 1970s. Bishop Robert McManus removed Mahoney from the ministry after the suit was filed.

Mahoney, who was ordained at age 30 in 1968, retired as co-pastor of St. Gabriel the Archangel Parish in Upton in 2012. *Source: Worcester Telegram, 10-1-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Savannah**, GA, and current Bishop **Stephen Parkes** are defendants in a suit alleging conspiracy and fraud in mishandling alleged abuse by defrocked priest **Wayland Brown** in the 1980s. Brown died in 2019 while serving a 20-year prison sentence.

The plaintiff joined several other claimants in previous suits alleging abuse by Brown. He was 13 at the time and was attending St. James Catholic School in Savannah. The diocese paid \$4.5 million in 2016 to settle a similar suit. *Source: AP, 9-29-20*

Robert Gandara, **De La Salle High School** in New Orleans, **Catholic Charities**, the **Christian Brothers** and the estate of **Richard Langenstein** have been sued by a plaintiff alleging sexual abuse in the early 1980s by Langenstein, the school principal who died in 2003. He and Gandara were Christian Brothers at the time.

Both of the men previously pleaded no contest to child molestation for conduct in St. Tammany Parish unrelated to the school. The plaintiff alleges he was about 15 the first time Langenstein groped his genitals after making him undress in his office, where he’d gone to get a tardy slip.

The alleged abuse by Langenstein and Gandara occurred for about 2 years. The suit says the boy’s mother caught Langenstein touching him sexually during a pool party at her home, leading her to kick the principal out of the house. *Source: WWL, 9-25-20*

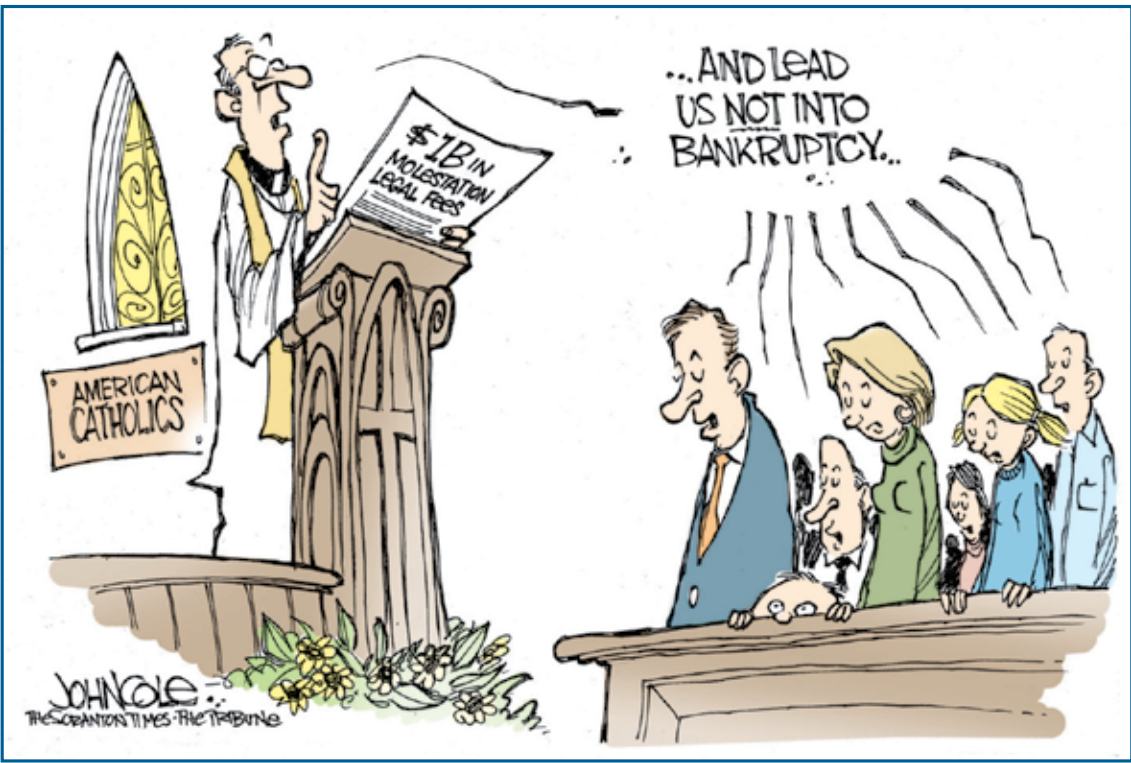
Harumi Suzuki is suing the Catholic **Diocese of Sendai** and Bishop **Martin Testuo Hiraga** in Japan, alleging that a priest raped her in 1977. The suit seeks 56.1 million yen (\$534,000) in damages. The priest is identified in the suit, but Suzuki’s lawyers don’t want his name reported for fear of a possible defamation claim.

Suzuki alleges she was raped during a counseling session she had gone to because she was a domestic abuse survivor. A 2016 church investigation determined that sex occurred but recommended no action due to the passage of time and the priest’s possible belief it was consensual. *Source: AP, 9-25-20*

All Saints Catholic School in Jupiter, FL, its principal **Jill Broz** and the **Diocese of Palm Beach** are being sued for alleged failure to protect an 11-year-old girl from sexual abuse by a male classmate who reached under her skirt in an unsupervised classroom on 2 occasions between January and March.

According to a heavily redacted police report, the boy said, “I put my finger in a girl’s private spot but it wasn’t on purpose, but it wasn’t an accident.” He has been charged as a juvenile offender with lewd and lascivious conduct.

The complaint alleges that after police and school officials were notified, Broz took no action to protect the girl from the other student and required her “to write an essay confessing to her maladapt-



tive social behaviors, which included her own recognition that her actions were induced by the abuses she had suffered.”

It also claims the school and Broz “were motivated out of a desire to extend undue favor” to the boy “because his parents are long-time and repeated substantial financial donors to the school itself and several charities connected to the Diocese of Palm Beach.” *Source: Palm Beach Post/WPTV, 9-22-20*

James A. Sinnerud, a Jesuit priest who taught and coached football at **Brophy College Preparatory** in Phoenix in the 1980s, sexually assaulted him, a Brophy alumnus now living in California alleges. The suit alleges negligence by the school, the **western U.S. Jesuits province** and the **Phoenix Catholic Diocese**.

Sinnerud was one of 38 clergy members named in 2018 by the Archdiocese of Omaha, NE, as credibly accused of sexual abuse after a state attorney general’s investigation. After the church removed him from Brophy in 1987, Sinnerud went on to teach at Creighton Prep, a Jesuit school in Omaha, until retiring in 2008. He later worked part-time there until being removed in 2018. *Source: New Times, 9-22-20*

Charles Atkins Jr., the **Presbytery of New York City** and the **French Evangelical Church of New York** are defendants in a suit filed by Grace Nzameyo Maa, who alleges Atkins repeatedly pursued her sexually after helping her get a part-time pastoral job at his Manhattan church in 2018.

Nzameyo, a native of Cameroon, alleges that Atkins told her he wanted her to be his mistress because his wife wouldn’t have sex with him: “I’d like to get a blow job from a cute pastor like you. I know you Africans don’t like to give blowjobs.”

“Don’t wear your robe. I was hoping I could see your butt and curves and legs today,” Atkins allegedly said another time. Twice in late 2018, Atkins sent Nzameyo “three different photos of his genitals,” the suit alleges.

Nzameyo filed a formal complaint in February 2019 with the presbytery. She says he was fired 3 months later; the presbytery responded that Atkins “resigned before the investigation began.” She contends she was then barred from her church duties in retaliation, which the presbytery denies, saying “her employment as a minister had not been not been undertaken properly.” *Source: NY Post, 9-22-20*

The Nova Scotia Supreme Court certified a class action on behalf of survivors of sexual abuse from 1960 to the present by priests of the Catholic **Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth**. The class action was filed by Douglas Champagne on behalf of other survivors. Champagne alleges he was assaulted by **George Epoch**, pastor at Canadian Martyrs Church in Halifax. It’s alleged the archdiocese sent priests to Southdown Institute, a treatment facility in Ontario, before placing them back into churches without any warning to parishioners. *Source: newswire.ca/Koskie Minsky LLP, 9-14-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Metuchen**, NJ, and 2 **clergy** are being sued over alleged sexual assaults of minors. **Patrick Barrett** is accused of molesting a child aged 9 to 10 who attended St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church in Port Reading in 1983–1984 when Barrett was pastor.

Regis Moccia is accused of molesting a 13- to 14-year-old student at St. Joseph High School in Metuchen from 1994–95. Moccia was a member of the Catholic Brothers of the Sacred Heart, which staffs the all-boys school in Metuchen. *Source: Woodbridge Patch, 9-11-20*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

The Catholic **Diocese of Kamloops**, BC, settled for undisclosed terms 2 suits filed by brothers who alleged the now-deceased priest **Herbert Bourne** molested them at St. James Parish in Vernon in the

late 1970s. Plaintiffs’ attorney Bill Dick said his clients are satisfied with the resolution, which included an in-person apology from Kamloops Bishop Joseph Nguyen. *Source: Castanet, 9-16-20*

The Catholic **Archdiocese of Boston** settled suits alleging molestation by 3 priests — **Sylvio Ruest**, **John Salvucci** and **T. Raymond Sullivan** — according to plaintiffs’ attorney Mitchell Garabedian. Ruest, who died in 1969, was accused of molesting a 13- or 14-year-old boy while assigned to Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Bellingham in 1957 and 1958.

Salvucci allegedly molested a teen between 1977–79 while assigned to St. Mary’s Parish in Billerica, and Sullivan was accused of molesting a 14-year-old in 1977 while assigned to St. Therese’s in Dracut.

Garabedian said the victims of Ruest and Salvucci received claims in the high five figures, while Sullivan’s victim received a claim in the low five figures. *Source: Worcester Telegram, 9-15-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of St. Catharines** in Ontario settled a suit filed by a woman whose sister was molested by **Joseph Bonomi**, a priest who died in 2012, and allegedly assaulted her older sister for 3 years in the 1970s at the rectory of St. Kevin’s Parish in Welland and in his car.

The plaintiff alleged Bonomi brought her along in the back seat, her dolls beside her, and made her stand outside as a lookout while he raped her sister or forced her sister to masturbate him and at least once made her watch.

After her sister became pregnant at 14 and had an abortion in 1974, Bonomi was abruptly transferred to another parish. A civil suit filed by the older sister was settled in 2008. *Source: Globe & Mail, 9-14-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Kamloops**, BC, and **Erlindo Molon** will pay former schoolteacher Rosemary Anderson \$844,140 for sexual assaults at Our Lady of Perpetual Help School in N. Kamloops in 1976. Molon, 88, is a retired priest with dementia.

Anderson, 70, testified she sought counseling from Molon while grieving the death of her father and was coerced into a sexual relationship that went on for months. Anderson, who was 26 at the time, testified they had intercourse 70 to 100 times.

Molon was eventually suspended and forced to leave the diocese, but Anderson said then-Bishop **Adam Exner** told her that she also needed to leave Kamloops. *Source: Terrace Standard, 8-27-20*

Finances

The Catholic **Diocese of Rockville Centre** on Long Island, NY, facing 223 lawsuits alleging sexual abuse, filed for bankruptcy, the largest U.S. Catholic diocese to do so. Those lawsuits will now likely be frozen and swept under the supervision of bankruptcy court.

Rather than having their individual cases litigated in court, current plaintiffs and any future claimants would become creditors and would be eligible for a portion of a settlement fund negotiated by a committee of abuse survivors.

Marie Reilly, a law professor at Pennsylvania State University, said the end result would likely open a new chapter in the diocese’s financial life, free of Child Victims Act claims.

Plaintiffs’ attorney Jeff Anderson said the move would deny a jury trial to victims and limit their ability to unearth documents through discovery. The diocese has already paid about \$62 million to settle about 350 cases under its Independent Reconciliation and Compensation program. *Source: NY Times, 10-1-20*

The German Catholic Church is setting up a system to compensate survivors of sexual abuse by clergy to provide for payments of up to 50,000 euros

(\$58,400) per survivor, who will be able to apply for payments starting Jan. 1, said Limburg Bishop Georg Baetzing, head of the German Bishops’ Conference.

A 2018 church-commissioned report said at least 3,677 people were abused between 1946–2014. Over half were 13 or younger and nearly a third were altar boys. Payments since 2011 under the old system have averaged about \$5,840.

The new guidelines fall short of a recommendation by an independent working group for payments of up to \$467,000 per person. *Source: AP, 9-24-20*

Legal Developments

The Jerusalem District Court ruled **Malka Leifer** can be extradited to Australia. She has 30 days in which to appeal the decision to Israel’s Supreme Court. The Israeli justice minister must also approve extradition.

Leifer, 53, fled to Israel from Australia in 2008 amid allegations she sexually abused students when she was the principal at the Jewish Adass Yisroel school in Melbourne. Australia filed an extradition request in 2014 after her indictment on 74 counts of rape and sexual assault.

She was arrested that year and then released after being deemed mentally unfit for the legal proceedings. She was rearrested in 2018 after an undercover investigation found she lived a normal life and was mentally fit to face extradition proceedings. *Source: JTA, 9-21-20*

Paul A. West, 60, a former Franciscan friar and 4th-grade teacher, has been extradited from his home state of Wisconsin to Mississippi to face sexual battery charges involving 2 impoverished Black boys who say they were pressured as men into accepting paltry payouts to settle their claims.

West did not contest his extradition at a hearing in Appleton, WI, on Aug. 17. The men making the allegations, La Jarvis Love and Joshua Love, both 37, are cousins who met West in the 1990s when he was a teacher at St. Francis of Assisi School in Greenwood, MS. About 2 years ago, each agreed to settle their claims for \$15,000 — far less than most clergy abuse victims receive.

Joshua Love’s younger brother, Raphael, also alleged West molested him and reported it to church authorities in 1998, after which West returned to Wisconsin. Raphael Love rejected a settlement similar to those signed by his brother and cousin.

La Jarvis and Joshua Love sued in federal court in New York in 2019, claiming the Franciscans pressured them into signing low-ball settlements requiring their silence about their allegations. At the time they were not represented by an attorney.

In 2006 the Diocese of Jackson, which includes Greenwood, settled suits covering 19 victims, 17 of whom were white, for \$5 million. That average payout of \$263,000 for each survivor is 17 times that offered to the Loves. *Source: AP, 9-2-20*

Allegations

Twin Cities musician **David R. Haas**, 63, among the best-known contemporary composers in the Catholic Church, has been accused of sexual misconduct involving multiple young women who studied with him over the years. Haas taught at Benilde-St. Margaret’s school in St. Louis Park, MN, was composer-in-residence at the St. Paul Seminary and ran a Music Ministry Alive program for years at St. Catherine University, which drew more than 2,200 students from 1999 to 2017.

Susan Bruhl, 54, is among the 41 women alleging misconduct. She sang with Haas’ musical group Emmaus in the early 1980s. She alleges Haas invited her to lunch to celebrate her 18th birthday, ordered several “jumbo margaritas” for her and after the meal started walking her to her hotel next door. “He said something like, ‘You’re a woman now. Let’s continue the party.’”

Bruhl, who now lives in Hawaii, said from talking with others, she has learned Haas would “seek women who came from single-parent families or didn’t have a strong male presence.”

Haas initially denied the allegations as “false, reckless and offensive” before issuing a tepid apology in July: “I have come to realize that I have caused great harm to a variety of people. I make no excuses for any harm that I may have caused. I take responsibility for my behavior and I am truly sorry.”

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis and several other denominations have halted the use of his music. *Source: Star Tribune, 9-8-20*

Other

Sabine Griego, 82, a former Catholic priest awaiting trial on a count of criminal sexual penetration, died in Albuquerque, NM. Court records allege he sexually assaulted 38 children in New Mexico from the mid-1960s through the early 1990s.

The trial charge stemmed from an accusation by a female that Griego raped her while she was a student at Queen of Heaven Catholic School. On one occasion, she alleged, he raped her while pushing her face into a table, breaking her nose. *Source: KOB, 10-5-20*

In U.S., atheist groups battle nationalism

This article appeared in Le Devoir (from Quebec, Canada) on Sept. 26 and is reprinted with permission. Special thanks to FFRF Board Member Steve Salemsen and Member Joan Wallace for translating the text from French.

By Isabelle Porter

In the United States, atheism is the subject of passionate activism, which the current president has only fired up. This portrait is of a phenomenon unique to the United States, the complete opposite of the situation in Quebec.



Annie Laurie Gaylor



Andrew L. Seidel



Rep. Jared Huffman

two out of five Americans say they would not trust a nonreligious presidential candidate. One indication that atheism is the ultimate taboo is that fewer respondents would refuse to vote for an openly

homosexual or Muslim candidate than for an atheist.

As the United States election approaches, defenders of secularism in the United States are on the alert. “We have reached a critical point,” explains Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the FFRF. “We’re on the verge of losing *Roe v. Wade*. With Trump, we are currently witnessing a takeover of the Supreme Court.”

Founded in 1976, FFRF has more than 33,000 members. Gaylor initially espoused atheism as a way to defend the rights of women. “We realized that the only organized opposition to the right to abortion came from religious groups and that, in order to protect women’s rights, we could not accept having religion involved in government,” she recalls.

A few months ago, FFRF ran an advertisement in the New York Times denouncing “theocracy,” which they believe is at risk of inundating the country like a tidal wave.

Gaylor develops the ideas for the newspaper ads herself, and not without humor. In recent months, one of them praised the merits of “the social distancing of state and church.” While we in Quebec have seen the nationalists become ardent de-

fenders of secularism, among Americans, the defenders of secularism are in an open struggle against the nationalists.

“We are fighting Christian nationalism, this idea that the United States was founded as a Christian nation, built on Christian principles, and that we’ve strayed from that foundation,” explains Andrew Seidel, constitutional attorney and FFRF’s Director of Strategic Response. “Christian Nationalism conflicts with the secular principles of our Constitution.”

“Donald Trump,” he continues, “heavily exploits this Christian Nationalism. According to some researchers, Christian Nationalism was the best predictor of those who voted for him in 2016.”

What role do atheist lobbies play in the electoral campaign? A limited one, since the law prohibits nonprofit organizations from openly supporting a candidate, financially or otherwise. However, the rule also applies to religious groups. Subsequently, FFRF sometimes intervenes indirectly in the campaign by filing complaints against religious groups that break the law. It happened in July, when it filed a complaint with the Internal Revenue Service against Texas pastor Robert Jef-

fress, who had invited Vice President Mike Pence to deliver a speech to hundreds of worshippers in Dallas.

While some atheist groups file complaints, others write letters. The Secular Coalition for America encourages its members to write to their elected officials in Congress to let them know that they are atheist voters. “With your help, our elected officials are going to take note of the size of our community and consider it in their policies,” the organization argues.

Atheist groups are also an important presence on college campuses. On Sept. 8, the Secular Student Alliance organized a web conference titled, “How to go about supporting atheist candidates.” Essentially, students were advised to set up booths at universities to encourage as many young people as possible to vote. In any case, it is practically impossible to support openly atheist candidates because there are so few.

But that is starting to change. Two years ago, members of the House of Representatives in Congress created the Congressional Freethought Caucus to “promote science and rational solutions, and to defend the secular nature of government.” California Rep. Jared Huffman is one of its founders. “We have a problem in the United States. We’re moving slowly toward a theocratic regime, and our group thinks that the separation between church and state is threatened,” he summarized.

The term “theocracy” refers to regimes in which the government is seen as the representative of God, and where priests play an important political role, which is the case, for example, in Iran.

Isn’t the formula a bit exaggerated when it comes to the United States?

“No,” Huffman retorted, “Have you listened to Attorney General Bill Barr lately? He gives speeches that seem straight out of a Margaret Atwood novel. . . . He regularly describes us as a Christian nation founded on Christian values and principles that we need to strengthen. It’s very worrisome, because we are a pluralistic country with a diversity of ideas and people.”

Today, the Congressional Freethought Caucus has 13 members, including representatives of religious minorities (Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, etc.). All are Democrats.



Reagan

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members that his mother was not sure what to say to him when he wanted to know whether Adam and Eve were “cave-men.” Santa Claus didn’t help, either. “When you’re little, your parents tell you that there is a Santa Claus at the North Pole, that he has a big white beard, and that he knows whether you’ve been naughty or nice. That sounds a lot like God, but then you find out that Santa doesn’t exist.”

Ron can’t recall much about his father’s reaction to his rejection of the Church. But one thing is certain: Ronald Reagan Sr. was not the type to meddle in the faith of others. “He was a religious man, but he never made the mistake that many politicians do who use their faith for political gain,” Ron said at his father’s funeral in 2004. “It’s true that after being the target of an attempted assassination, he came to think that God had spared him to do good. But he accepted it as a responsibility, not a mandate.”

Despite being a well-known Democrat, Ron Reagan insists his father would have

disapproved of what the Republican Party has become, even before Trump’s accession to power. “My father signed a law legalizing abortion, he raised taxes after having reduced them, and gave amnesty to 3 million immigrants,” he recounted on Bill Maher’s show in 2015. “And when a hole formed in the ozone layer over the South Pole [. . .] he didn’t decide it was a leftist plot to deprive us of cold beer, and he acted!” He concedes, however, that it was also during his father’s time that Republicans began approaching the Evangelical lobby. “The party wanted to woo the Evangelical vote, and it was pretty simple to do: My father was a Christian; he could claim he was on their side.”

Then it got out of hand. “Now we end up with a Donald Trump who is clearly not a believer, but who has sought the vote of the Evangelicals. Why? Because he hates or claims to hate the same people that they do: all those progressives who want to allow homosexuals to marry, have black friends, want to deprive them of their white privilege, threaten their way of life, and so forth,” he said.

Reagan is never at a loss for words and wields sarcasm with relish. He is also occasionally invited on television as a political

commentator, especially on MSNBC. He even had his own show, “The Ron Reagan Show,” before Air America Media went bankrupt. He splits his life between Seattle and Italy with his second wife.

Despite his numerous public statements on atheism, he does not consider himself an activist. After his interview in The New York Times, he became “the atheist who had a famous father,” he recounts, amused. “After that, I could allude to it, they would ask me the question again and I would confirm it. Eventually, the Freedom From Religion Foundation heard about it and asked me to make the TV spot.”

That was in 2014, and the ad is still running and continues to generate strong reactions. During one of the televised Democratic debates, commentators even said that it stole the show from the debate itself by sparking a surge of positive comments on Twitter. Conversely, some major national TV networks still censor the message, because of the passage where Reagan says that he is “not afraid of burning in Hell.”

From FFRF’s perspective, his contribution is invaluable, especially since celebrities who dare to publicly call themselves atheists are very rare in the United States.

“Having the son of a very conservative president do a promotion for a controversial group like ours, by presenting himself openly as an atheist, has had a huge educational impact. It’s helped show the nation that people of this sort exist, and that they are normal,” said FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

“This sort of publicity was a huge coup for us,” she added. “He took a short 30-second clip and made it much more effective by force of his personality. He was the one who added the expression, ‘lifelong atheist, not afraid of burning in Hell.’”

Whom does he think he is addressing with this message? “I would like this to be heard by atheists who are still ‘in the closet.’ That would probably be the most useful thing, so that people are less afraid of coming out. I’m not trying to convert anyone to atheism or to lead believers away from their faith. That’s something they have to do on their own.”

But beyond that, it’s a way for him to defend science. “What bothers me the most is the negative effect religion has on stem cell research, for example. People can believe whatever they want, but when it gets into the public sphere and affects everyone’s life, then we have a problem.”