

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



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FFRF lawsuit gets Puerto Rico to stop school prayer

A lawsuit by the Freedom From Religion Foundation has persuaded Puerto Rico's education secretary and a proselytizing school principal there to halt unconstitutional school prayer.

FFRF had filed a federal court challenge in March against Secretary of Education Eligio Hernandez Perez and Principal Luz Ramos on behalf of a family subjected to forced prayers and bullying in a public primary school. Since September 2019, in direct contradiction of well-established constitutional law, officials at the Luis M. Santiago School,

a public school in Toa Baja, had organized, led and coerced students to participate in mandatory 50-minute Christian prayer sessions on school property every other Monday during the school day. The prayers were broadcast over a microphone and speakers.

FFRF represented two of these children and their mother before the U.S. District Court for the District of Puerto Rico, along with Humanistas Seculares De Puerto Rico, a leading Puerto Rican secular humanist organization that the mother belongs to. As a secular humanist, she "does not engage in prayer or believe in the power of prayer or . . . want to force any religious ideology" on her children, the legal complaint noted. When she objected to the religious practice, she was told if she removed her children from the prayer, they would be marked for cutting class, which could lower their grade point average. One child was told by a classmate, after a teacher outed

A public school in Toa Baja, had organized, led and coerced students to participate in mandatory 50-minute Christian prayer sessions on school property.

FFRF to challenge religious voter test

The Freedom From Religion Foundation plans to file a federal lawsuit by October to challenge a religious test to register to vote that is unique to the state of Alabama. Alabama is the only state in the country requiring voters to register on a form that mandates that they swear "so help me God."

In all other states, voters are provided a completely secular registration form or are not required to submit an oath or affirmation at all. FFRF expects to file on behalf of at least one Alabama resident and possibly others who have encountered this religious test when trying to register to vote. The defendant will be Alabama Secretary of State John H. Merrill.

The primary complainant, an atheist, has sought to register to vote in Alabama since November 2019, using a mail-in form downloaded from the secretary of state's website. The bottom of the voter declaration section warns, "Read and sign under penalty of

perjury," and adds: "If you falsely sign this statement, you can be convicted and imprisoned for up to five years." Voters submitting this registration form in Alabama must sign the voter declaration, beginning "I solemnly swear or affirm," and concluding with "so help me God."

The complainant contacted the secretary of state's office to ask about the process to register to vote without swearing an oath reading, "so help me God." The following day, the director of elections at that office informed the complainant that there was no legal mechanism for him to register to vote: "If you cross out a portion, the board of registrars in your county will reject the application and ask you to re-submit."

The secretary of state maintains that the registra-

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See Puerto Rico on page 9

Vote like your rights depend on it

. . . because they do!

More than 98 percent of FFRF members are registered voters (see Page 3), something FFRF is very proud of! Nevertheless, in this unprecedented election year in the midst of a pandemic, FFRF urges you to *make a voting plan*.

Three-quarters of the nation can vote by mail. (Exceptions: As of press-time, if you live in New York, Indiana, Tennessee, South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana or Texas, an excuse is required for absentee voting.)

Since there is great concern over delivery by the U.S. Postal Service, be sure to request your mail-in ballot *now*, if you have not done so. (If you live in Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, New Jersey, Vermont, Hawaii and D.C.,

registered voters should automatically receive a ballot by mail.)

Fill out and return your mail-in ballot at the earliest time permitted (and at least eight days before Nov. 3, to be sure your ballot is received in time). Or hand-deliver it to an early polling site if permitted in your area. If you can't vote by mail, or can't vote early in your location, please put on that mask and vote in person on Nov. 3.

P.S. Encourage healthy young colleagues or family members to consider being a poll worker as there is a shortage this year due to COVID-19 concerns. It's paid, may include bonus pay, takes an hour of training and will help ensure all votes count.

Check out rockthevote.org/how-to-vote/ for info on voting in your state and area.



Radiologist seeks to increase activism

Name: Steve Solomon.
Where I live: Wildwood, Mo.
Where and when I was born: Chicago, 1959.
Family: My wonderful wife Pam and three great kids, Mike (and wife Kelsy), Brad and Cindy.
Education: B.A. in biochemistry and molecular biology from the Integrated Science Program at Northwestern University. MD from University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine; Diagnostic Radiology Residency at Mallinckrodt Institute of Radiology, Washington University.

Occupation: Radiologist.
How I got to where I am today: I grew up in a conservative Jewish family (medium “strength” Judaism, between Reform and Orthodox) on the north side of Chicago. I received an excellent early education in an enlightened Chicago public school during the Apollo era with a strong emphasis on math and science. It was there that my sense of awe and wonder of the cosmos was born along with my driving curiosity to understand it. After repeatedly finding answers in science and reality, religion faded from my mind. I was fascinated with the rapidly developing technology of that time, happily trading in my slide rule for a hand-held calculator and punch cards for a personal computer. I relished a good mystery, in fiction and in

reality. I also loved the feeling I experienced when helping others. These factors led me to a career in medicine and, specifically, radiology, which combined cutting edge technology, image guided detective work, and helping patients. To date, I have had an enjoyable and rewarding 35-year career in radiology.

Where I’m headed: My medical career has occupied the lion’s share of my time, but it has been impossible to ignore disturbing changes in our country. The growing denial of science, experts and reality and the ever-increasing encroachment of religion on our secular government at all levels, especially in my Bible Belt surroundings. I became progressively alarmed by the lack of action on

global warming, the anti-vax movement, and the scarcity of science-based governmental policies, to name but a few. When I could, I marched for science, climate action and justice, reproductive rights, and other important issues. I wrote letters and emails to elected officials and called their offices. As I wind down my radiology career over the next several years, I plan to dedicate much more time to activism for all the humanistic, state/church separation, and science/reality-based issues that are important to me. This includes in-person lobbying, penning letters to editors, and running for office, such as the local school board.

MEET A MEMBER



Steve Solomon and his wife Pam pose during the Climate March in St. Louis.

Person in history I most admire and why: Carl Sagan. Not only was he an accomplished scientist in many disciplines, including astronomy, astrophysics, cosmology, and astrobiology, and a respected author, he was also the first, best science communicator I had encountered. He argued the now accepted hypothesis that the high surface temperature on Venus was due to the greenhouse effect and made known the implications for our fossil-fueled “Pale Blue Dot.” His book, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, was my primer for critical and skeptical thinking and holds up well to this day. He narrated and co-wrote the award-winning 1980s television series “Cosmos: A Personal Voyage,” the most widely watched series in the history of American public television, introducing the joy and wonder of science to hundreds of millions of people around the world. If it’s one thing that has become abundantly clear to me, our shared acceptance and understanding of science is necessary for our future survival.

A quotation I like: “There is no God, and that’s the simple truth. If every trace of any single religion were wiped out and nothing were passed on, it would never be created exactly that way again. There might be some other nonsense in its place, but not that exact nonsense. If all of science were wiped out, it would still be true and someone would find a way to figure it all out again.” — Penn Jillette

Things I like: Humanism, science, music, exercising, reading (especially science fact, science fiction and fantasy), electric cars, renewable energy, my solar panels, and a good bourbon or single malt scotch.

Things I smite: Anything that tears away at the wall between state and church, “religious freedom” (in the backward perverted sense that my religion is free to trump your rights), racism, gender discrimination, loss of body autonomy, science denial.

My doubts about religion started: My doubt began in Hebrew school. As was the norm in the time and place I grew up, all Jewish children attended Hebrew school to learn about Judaism and to prepare for an eventual Bar or Bat Mitzvah. In my case, that was a wonderful mistake. Four days a week after school during fifth through eighth grade, I spent two additional hours in a “wholly” untenable reality which started me on my path to becoming a first-generation freethinker.

Before I die: There are places I’ve wanted to travel to and haven’t yet, although I’m limiting their number to reduce my carbon footprint. New Zealand is high on my list, along with the Galápagos Islands. I’d love to see a glacier while they still exist. I aim to learn a new language and the culture of the people that speak it. I especially yearn to catch up on my ever-enlarging Kindle library!

Ways I promote freethought: I am an After-Life and Immortal member of FFRF as well as a Missouri State Representative and belong to and support many other organizations that promote science, rationality and state/church separation. When asked, I admit to being an atheist and am always willing to engage in conversation about my beliefs or lack thereof. In my conversations and social media posts, I promote science, critical thinking, secularism and the simple truth that you can be good without a god.



Steve and Pam Solomon hold signs at the March for Science.

ffrf

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TODAY

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

NOT AFRAID OF
BURNING IN HELL

Susan K Peterson

UNABASHED ATHEIST

FFRF.ORG

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

Make your own nontheistic cyber billboard at FFRF.org/unabashed, and you might win an “Unabashed Atheist” cap, like Susan.

2020 membership survey results

This is about you — Who are FFRF members?

We asked you, our 32,000 current members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, more about you, and you answered — more than 12,000 of you, which is an amazing response. (A standard response rate is 10-15 percent.)

Want to know more about yourselves? Here's the scoop: The typical FFRF member is a retired, married man and self-described atheist, with a four-year college degree who left Protestantism because "religion doesn't make sense," and is a first-generation freethinker. The typical member has spoken out about state/church entanglements and speaks out freely about his lack of religion.

The typical FFRF'er is most likely 50 or up, with an average age of 64.7. In fact, 83 percent of FFRF members are 60 or older, with those in the 70-79 age range the most popular age bracket at 28.36 percent (compared to 28.29 percent who are 60-69). In tandem with these age brackets, 61 percent are retired or semi-retired.

Seventy percent of you are male, 29 percent female and the rest non-binary or preferred not to say. Ninety-five percent of respondents identify as white, a reason why FFRF's board has embarked on a concerted diversity/inclusion plan. Only 10 percent have a child or children under the age of 18 in their household.

FFRF'ers are an educated bunch, with 80 percent having at least one four-year degree (compared to 34 percent of the general population), 25 percent a Master's degree or multiple Master's degrees (compared to 13 percent of the U.S. population), and 17 percent with a J.D., Ph.D., or M.D./VET/DDS/DMD.

Twenty-one percent are retired U.S.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Based on FFRF's survey, it seems most FFRF members are as excited to be members as Don Ardell was at the 2017 national convention in Madison, Wis. FFRF has a 98 percent satisfaction rate among its members!

military, compared to 8 percent of the general population. Eighteen percent are in the teaching profession or retired from it, compared to 2 percent of the general population currently teaching.

FFRF members, when asked "Which single term best describes your nonreligious views," chose "atheist," with 70 percent so identifying, followed by humanist at 9 percent, freethinker at 8.9 percent and agnostic at 7 percent (with a smattering of "other").

Three-quarters identify as a first-generation freethinker, 19 percent as second-generation, and only 4 percent third-generation.

Almost 12 percent consider yourselves to be part of the LGBTQ community, compared to 4.5 percent in the general population.

Slightly more than half indicate "My spouse/companion is also a nonbeliever," 24 percent agreed "Most of my immediate family members are also nonreligious," and 42 percent with "Most of my child(ren) are nonbelievers."

But your responses also told a story of the continuing lack of acceptance for nonbelievers in the United States, with more than a quarter "wary of letting others know I reject religion," 21 percent who "feel like the only 'infidel'

in my area," and 22 percent experiencing social stigma or other reprisal as a nonbeliever.

The upset question was: "Do you live with a cat or dog?" Those with dogs (35.6 percent) slightly outnumbered those with cats (32 percent) but the "no pet" category won overall (39 percent). (Forty-four percent of Americans in general have a dog and 29 percent have a cat.)

The number of vegetarians or vegans continues to climb in FFRF, to almost 13 percent compared to about 4 percent of the general population. More than 33 percent of you engage in regular volunteer work, higher than the average 25 percent generally.

We found that 43 percent of you have been members for at least 2-5 years; in fact, 75 percent have been members at least that long including 20 percent for 6-10 years.

And we were very pleased that 60 percent of you rate your overall satisfaction with FFRF as "very satisfied" and 38 percent as "satisfied" (that's a 98 percent satisfaction rate!).

We're still going through the optional comments left by more than 4,000 of you with great interest and analyzing your responses over in-house items.

"And something that makes FFRF very proud is that 98 percent of our members are registered voters, thus confirming our slogan: We're secular and we vote!" says Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president and co-founder.

Thank you, dear members, for telling us more about yourself and for completing the section on your views on the other timely matters of our day. (See story this page on secular voters.)

FFRF's poll: 'We are the real values voters'

What do nonreligious American voters want?

The Freedom From Religion Foundation just released a major new secular poll of nearly 12,000 registered voters who are atheists or agnostics (and members of FFRF), which provides a fascinating profile of American nonbelievers and their views on the major social issues of the day.

Major surveys consistently show that 26 percent of the adult population are either atheists, agnostics or identify as "Nones," having no religious identification, a demographic that now outnumbers Catholics (at 20 percent), once the single-largest religious denomination.

"We Nones — religiously unaffiliated adults in America — are now the largest 'denomination' by religious identification," says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "Yet most candidates and media outlets focus their time on traditional religious groups, and ignore this major demographic. We're releasing this voter poll so that our views will be heard, too."

Fully 98 percent of the respondents are registered voters, 70 percent identify as atheist, 9 percent as humanist or freethinker, and 7 percent as agnostic (with 4 percent preferring another term).

The data show with startling clarity that nonbelievers embrace a humanistic social policy in vastly higher numbers than the general U.S. population, e.g., are ahead of the curve when it comes to social progress.

Their support for women's rights, reproductive rights and LGBTQ rights is overwhelming, as well as death with digni-

ty rights:

- 99 percent support women's rights (compared to 79 percent of all adults).
- 98 percent or more support legal abortion and *Roe v. Wade* (compared to 75 percent of all Americans).
- 98 percent support marriage equality (compared to 61 percent of all Americans) as well as civil rights in general for the LGBTQ community (compared to nearly 70 percent of all Americans).
- 98 percent support the right to die with dignity (compared to 78 percent of Americans).

Nonreligious voters in far greater numbers support policies like gun control, police/prison reform, universal health care and free college:

- 95 percent support police/prison reform (compared to 69 percent of all Americans).
- 94 percent support universal health care coverage (compared to 66 percent of all Americans).
- 94 percent support "rational gun control" (compared to approximately 60 percent of all Americans).

Nontheists also show far more support than the general population for some hotly debated reform, such as:

- 84 percent support reduced or free public college tuition (with 11 percent undecided and only 6 percent opposing) compared to 58 percent of all Americans
- 70 percent support a guaranteed minimum income, while 54 percent of Americans as a whole oppose it.
- 84 percent of secular voters support

universal vote by mail, compared to 69 percent of all Americans.

- Over half oppose the death penalty (with 17 percent undecided, and 15 percent supporting it) compared to 39 percent of all Americans who oppose capital punishment.

The disparities continue on the hot button topic of racial justice:

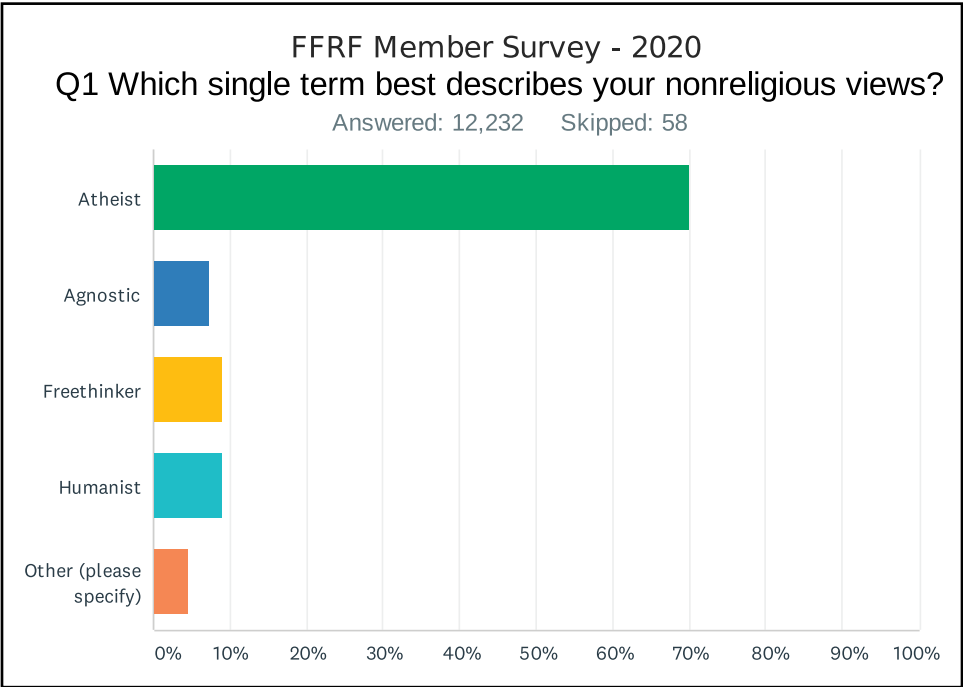
- 95 percent of secular voters believe racial and ethnic discrimination is a big problem in the United States (compared to approximately 76 percent of Americans).
- 45 percent support reparations for slavery (a plurality of seculars, with 31 per-

cent undecided) compared to only one in five Americans overall.

One of the greatest disparities between nonbelieving Americans and Americans in general is found in the response on statehood for the District of Columbia:

- 77 percent of those in the survey support statehood for the District of Columbia (with 17 percent undecided) compared to only 29 percent of all Americans.
- A higher percentage of atheist/agnostic voters also supports statehood for Puerto Rico: 75 percent, compared to 66

See Survey on page 10



HEADS UP

ARS POETICA

Think of it, nine thousand
breakfasts together, and now
coffee again for the first time: what
a virginal movement it is, this
silvering together, every day
the very first day, every night
the first night, not a film replayed, more
like pages in a long book, strata
in these limestone hills we live in,
two billion years old.
We're not yet as old as the limestone,
but we're catching up—or rather,
reducing the proportion, like a kid brother
gaining on his elders; we're gaining
on the limestone and
beginning to see
it's an art, like Cellini's, this
silvering—like poetry, reminding us
in its earnest, nagging way,
that every new minute we risk
immortality, surviving
for nine thousand days by luck or cunning;
but at the end we're sent to press
with all our typos intact, fossils, captive
in the ancient rock. Meanwhile,
we're all such fumlbers, gauche,
all thumbs: maybe
poems and marriages deal
mostly in failures—on the way to shape,
nine thousand blemishes hitching a ride. Maybe
only a poem or a silver bowl
will tell us as well as love: that
these are the only raw
materials we have—the painful
moments of wonder,
the small, well-meant betrayals, rain
in the limestone hills.
Well, we're not finished yet;
the revisions are still in process, a line here,
a day there, the whole thing
taking on a kind of polished
mutilation, a scarred silver florin,
a weathered hill,
an epic fragment.
There's time yet to get it—not right,
of course, but anyway revised,
emended, more mature
in its lumpy way. Think of it,
two billion years of shaping:
it's a beginning.



© 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*. Freethought Today has learned of Phil's recent death and will run a memorial in the next issue.
Other books by him, available at shop.ffrf.org, include *Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie* and *Darwin's Ark: Poems by Philip Appleman*.

Educator Otto Link dies at 91



Longtime FFRF Life Member Otto Paul Link died at his assisted living facility in Palo Alto, Calif., on May 9 at the age of 91.
Otto was born in St. Paul on June 12, 1928, to Otto Link and Julia (Pfeiffer) Link. Otto was the youngest of five children.
Otto played baseball and the trumpet and performed in small dance groups.
Otto worked several jobs as a youth, carrying ice at age 13, working in a refrigerator factory, and at Swift's packing-house with his father. He put himself through college at the University of Minnesota by working as a mail sorter in the Minneapolis Post Office, where he met his lifelong friend Elmer Zoff. Both were avid freethinkers.
Otto graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in education and later a master's degree in elementary reading. At the university, Otto met his future wife of 67 years, Jeanette (Weiss) Link. Otto taught fourth and fifth grade in the Minneapolis Public School system, and in summer school taught profoundly deaf children to read.
He later held positions as vice principal and principal in the Minneapolis public schools. As a vice principal in the 1970s, Otto was instrumental in the historic desegregation efforts integrating Hale and Field schools.
He retired from the Minneapolis Public School system after over 30 years of dedicated service, focusing on the importance of early literacy for

children.
Otto enjoyed boating, canoeing, motorcycle riding, reading, reading to his children, dinner parties with friends, working on his home in Brooklyn Center, family trips by car and coaching baseball.
Otto was a member of the ACLU, Freedom From Religion Foundation and the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis. He enjoyed repairing almost anything, camping, current events, and debating with others.
A lifelong learner and a history buff, Otto was intrigued by words and language and always had a dictionary nearby. After Jeanette broke her hip in 2017, she and Otto left their Brooklyn Center, Minn., home of 63 years and moved to an assisted living facility in Palo Alto to be near their son.
Otto was a freethinker, humanist, feminist, educator, civil rights advocate and lovingly dedicated to his family.
Otto is survived by his wife Jeanette Frances Link, son John Otto Link, daughter Barbrea Frances Link, daughter-in-law Sophia Green, son-in-law Patrick Selmi, grandson Benjamin Link Selmi and his sister Jewel Ecklund.

IN MEMORIAM

Caption contest winner!



Congratulations to Joe Barcroft of Missouri for winning the September caption contest. Joe wins an FFRF T-shirt.
The winning entry is: . . . **and they will know we are Christians by our love.**
Runners-up are: **Give Jesus your best shot.** — Joe Hardesty
Yes, we welcome adherents of America's two most powerful religions! — Michael Skolochenko
Relocate the "R" in "range" and you have "INDOOR ANGER." — Darrell Barker
Also, there were numerous entries for "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition."
Thanks to all who sent in captions. If you've taken any photos that you think would be good for this contest, please email them to caption@ffrf.org.

Regarding the caption contest photo, FFRF received this note from Terry Sunday of El Paso:
"A couple of years ago, when I applied for a Concealed Handgun Carry License, I had to take the practical shooting part of the state-mandated test on this very range. If you think the signs on the outside of the building are bad, the inside was worse. There were crosses, religious murals, bible verses, statues and other Christian paraphernalia on the walls, at the checkout counter, all around the store and everywhere I looked. Simply being in such a place gave me the willies. I had to buy an annual pass just so I could use the range one time for the test. I hated to give them a penny, but I had no choice if I wanted my license. Needless to say, I've never been back."

Your weekly antidote to the Religious Right

FREETHOUGHT RADIO
PODCASTS AND BROADCASTS



FIND OUT MORE: ffrf.org/radio

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

FFRF.ORG **FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION**

IN THE NEWS

Rep. Rashid Tlaib joins Freethought Caucus

Rep. Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, a first-term representative and Muslim, has joined the Congressional Free-thought Caucus.

The Freethought Caucus was formed in 2018 by Rep. Jared Huffman, who is the only openly non-religious member of Congress, and Rep. Jamie Raskin. It now has 13 members:

Rep. Sean Casten, D-Ill.
Rep. Steve Cohen., D-Tenn.
Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Calif.
Rep. Hank Johnson, D-Ga.
Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash.
Rep. Dan Kildee, D-Mich.
Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif.
Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Calif.
Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton, D-D.C.
Rep. Mark Pocan, D-Wis.
Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md.
Rep. Rashida Tlaib, D-Mich.
Rep. Susan Wild, D-Pa.

The Freethought Caucus “promotes public policy formed on the basis of reason, science, and moral values; protects the secular character of our government by adhering to the strict Constitutional principle of the separation of church and state; opposes discrimination against atheists, agnostics, humanists, seekers, religious and nonreligious persons, and to champion the value of freedom of thought and conscience worldwide; and provides a forum for members of Congress to discuss their moral frameworks, ethical values, and personal religious journeys.”

Nigerian atheist, arrested for blasphemy, is missing

Mubarak Bala, head of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, was seized by the police and has disappeared in custody.




On April 25, he logged on to Facebook and typed a post calling the Prophet Muhammad a terrorist.

Three days later, he was arrested by the state police after being accused of violating anti-blasphemy laws, which can carry a death sentence. He has not been seen since.






“We are concerned that he may be prosecuted under anti-blasphemy laws that provide for capital punishment in Nigeria,” wrote a group of U.N. experts who have called for his release.

Other nonbelievers are worried that

FREETHOUGHT CAUCUS



Jared Huffman Eleanor Holmes Norton Mark Pocan Hank Johnson Rashida Tlaib Sean Casten



Pramila Jayapal Jamie Raskin Zoe Lofgren Jerry McNerney Steve Cohen Susan Wild Dan Kildee

other Nigerian atheists will be prosecuted and that more arrests may be coming.

FFRF is urging the Nigerian authorities to release Bala and has contacted the Trump administration to do the utmost to ensure Bala’s well-being.

Nigerian teen gets 10 years for blasphemy

Omar Farouq, a 13-year-old boy, was convicted of blasphemy in a Sharia court in Nigeria and sentenced to 10 years in prison in September.

Farouq was accused of using “foul language” toward Allah in an argument with a friend. He was sentenced on Aug. 10 by the same court that recently sentenced Yahaya Sharif-Aminu to death for blaspheming Prophet Mohammed, according to lawyers.

Farouq’s punishment is in violation of the African Charter of the Rights and Welfare of a Child and the Nigerian constitution, said his counsel Kola Alapinni, who told CNN they filed an appeal on his behalf on Sept. 7.

NYC banquet halls host large Jewish weddings

Three banquet halls in Brooklyn’s Borough Park neighborhood hosted Hasidic Jewish wedding parties less than a week after Mayor Bill de Blasio warned that a similar gathering there led to an increase in coronavirus cases, the Washington Post reported. Celebrations were witnessed involving as many as 200

people at three different sites along a 10-block stretch.

At Torah Vyriah and Ateres Chaya, the windows were covered with paper to prevent anyone from looking in, but witnesses saw dozens of people getting out of cars and entering through side or rear doors.

Study: Nonbelievers more likely to sleep better

A new study shows that Americans who don’t believe in God are more likely to get the recommended amount of sleep each night than those who do believe in God.

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends seven to nine hours of sleep a night.

In the journal Sleep, it says, “The psychology of religion literature indicates that religious engagement is beneficial to physical and mental health,” the study’s authors wrote. They anticipated that this might be reflected in better sleep.

The co-authors surveyed 1,501 participants in the Baylor Religion Survey on how many hours they slept each night and how easy they found it to go to sleep. Contrary to expectations, they found 73 percent of atheists and agnostics usually got the recommended sleep quotient. By contrast, only 65 percent of people who considered themselves religious got the same. The figure was just 55 percent for Baptists.

Medically assisted death can proceed, court rules

On Sept. 9, a Nova Scotia Court of Appeal judge denied a request to shelve a lower court decision that effectively allows a man to go ahead with a medically assisted death, in spite of his longtime wife’s efforts to stop him.

The 83-year-old man from Bridgewater, Nova Scotia, was approved for medical assistance in dying (MAID) earlier this year, but his wife of 48 years filed for an injunction with the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia, forcing him to cancel his plans.

The wife threatened to sue health-care providers who help her husband access a medically assisted death. She has also expressed a religious opposition to MAID.

The husband says he’s suffering and near the end of his life because of advanced chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), but his wife says his wish to die is not based on physical ill-

ness, but rather anxiety and mental delusions.

Sudan government agrees to state-church separation

Sudan’s transitional government agreed to separate religion from the state, ending 30 years of Islamic rule, according to a report on Bloomberg.com.

Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and Abdel-Aziz al-Hilu, a leader of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North, signed a declaration on Sept. 3 adopting the principle.

“For Sudan to become a democratic country where the rights of all citizens are enshrined, the constitution should be based on the principle of ‘separation of religion and state,’ in the absence of which the right to self-determination must be respected,” the document states.

Charlie Hebdo terror trial under way in Paris

Fourteen people have gone on trial in Paris over their alleged involvement in the deadly terrorist attack, which began in the offices of French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, and ended at a supermarket two days later.

The suspects are accused of having provided logistical support to the perpetrators — brothers Said and Chérif Kouachi, and their accomplice Amédy Coulibaly — and face charges of participating in a terrorist criminal association.

Charlie Hebdo was targeted over the magazine’s publication, in 2006, of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed. Depictions of Islam’s prophet are considered blasphemous by many Muslims. At the beginning of the trial in September, the magazine republished the same cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad.

Eleven of the suspects will appear in court — 10 of them from behind bullet-proof glass. Three others, who traveled to Syria in the days before the attacks began, will be tried in absentia.

A total of 17 people were killed in the attacks, which took place in the French capital over three days in January 2015. Twelve of those who died were shot in the Charlie Hebdo building.

N.C. county won’t say pledge at meetings

The Orange County (N.C.) Board of Commissioners voted on Sept. 1 against a resolution to open its meetings by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

The board voted 5-2 against a resolution proposed by Commissioner Earl McKee, according to Chapelboro.com. McKee brought forth the resolution as the result of a petition that pushed for the pledge to be recited, which circulated around Orange County earlier this year.

Several of the commissioners said the manner it was brought forth to the board, by a county resident who described himself as a “nationalist,” felt like a move to shame the county officials for not regularly reciting it.

Chair of the Board Penny Rich said she has not said the Pledge of Allegiance for years, citing the addition of “under God” in the 1950s as a lack of separation between church and state.

Freethought Matters

Fall 2020 season resumes

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

Watch our show every Sunday!



Photo by Chris Line

Visit FFRF's YouTube Channel to watch the shows.



Freethought Matters TV talk show airs in:

Chicago	WPWR-CW	(Ch. 50)	9 am
Denver	KWGN-CW	(Ch. 2)	7 am
Houston	KUBE-IND	(Ch. 57)	9 am
Los Angeles	KCOP-MY	(Ch. 13)	8:30 am
Madison, Wis.	WISC-TV	(Ch. 3)	11 pm
Minneapolis	KSTC-IND	(Ch. 45)	9:30 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

‘Freethought Matters’ is back on the air!

The pandemic is not stopping the Freedom From Religion Foundation from producing a lively fall season of its TV show, “Freethought Matters,” which resumed in 12 cities on Sept. 6. The season’s first show, with the distinguished journalist and pundit Eleanor Clift, is available to view via YouTube.

Tune in to find out what it was like for Eleanor Clift to fight for a word on “The McLaughlin Group,” on which she was a well-known panelist. Clift discusses her own “Cinderella story” as a professional writer (coming from an era when women journalists started as secretaries), then becoming Newsweek’s White House correspondent. The show focuses on Clift’s book, *Founding Sisters and the 19th Amendment*, recounting the exciting and controversial history of the suffrage movement, in honor of the recent centennial of the anniversary of the adoption of that amendment.

Clift has appeared as herself in several movies, including “Dave,” “Independence Day,” “Murder at 1600,” and the CBS show “Murphy Brown.” She has previously spoken at two FFRF conventions. Her late husband, Tom Brazaitis, also a well-known journalist, was an atheist and enthusiastic member of FFRF.

Upcoming guests and topics include



Photo by Brent Nicastro
Eleanor Clift, pictured at an FFRF function in Washington, D.C., in 2004.

the imperiled Constitution with Supreme Court expert Linda Greenhouse, who covered the court for 30 years for the New York Times, and the rise of Christian Nationalism, with Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, authors of *Taking America Back for God*. The second episode of the season featured professor Khyati Y. Joshi talking about her new book, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America*.

Freethought Matters has also interviewed the distinguished D.C. delegate

Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton, a member of the Congressional Freethought Caucus; and will interview singer John Davidson, a ’60s and ’70s pop star, movie and TV actor who is a nonbeliever.

For a change of pace, upcoming musical guests will include the talented and nonbelieving jazz couple: pianist Addison Frei and vocalist Tahira Clayton.

Irreverent troubadour/songwriter Roy Zimmerman and freethinking songwriter and singer Shelly Segal will also be interviewed.

“Freethought Matters” airs in:

- Chicago, WPWR-CW (Ch. 50), Sundays at 9 a.m.
- Denver, KWGN-CW (Ch. 2), Sundays at 7 a.m.
- Houston, KUBE-IND (Ch. 57), Sundays at 9 a.m.
- Los Angeles, KCOP-MY (Ch. 13), Sundays at 8:30 a.m.
- Madison, Wis., WISC-TV (Ch. 3), Sundays at 11 p.m.
- Minneapolis, KSTC-IND (Ch. 45), Sundays at 9:30 a.m.
- New York City, WPIX-IND (Ch. 11), Sundays at 8:30 a.m.
- Phoenix, KASW-CW (Ch. 61, or 6 or 1006 for HD), Sundays at 8:30 a.m.
- Portland, Ore., KRCW-CW (Ch. 32), Sundays at 9 a.m. Comcast channel

703 for High Def, or Channel 3.

- Sacramento, KQCA-MY (Ch. 58), Sundays at 8:30 a.m.
- Seattle, KONG-IND (Ch. 16 or Ch. 106 on Comcast). Sundays at 8 a.m.
- Washington, D.C., WDCW-CW (Ch. 50), Sundays at 8 a.m.

“You can turn on the TV and be preached at 24/7, especially on Sunday mornings. We want to provide sympathetic programming for the ‘unmassed masses,’ and offer an alternative, so that religious programming does not win by default,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president and co-host. The intent is to introduce communities to leading freethought or secular authors, thinkers and activists in a nonthreatening and positive way, adds FFRF co-president and co-host Dan Barker.

Please tune in to “Freethought Matters” . . . because freethought matters.

P.S. Please tune in or record according to the times given above regardless of what is listed in your TV guide (it may be listed simply as “paid programming” or even be misidentified). To set up an automatic weekly recording, try taping manually by time or channel. And spread the word to freethinking friends, family or colleagues about a TV show, finally, that is dedicated to providing programming for freethinkers!

HUD enabling religious bigotry, FFRF contends

A proposed Housing and Urban Development rule is blatantly pandering to religious prejudice, FFRF asserts in a recent public comment.

The HUD regulation would allow shelters to “establish a policy that places and accommodates individuals on the basis of their biological sex, without regard to their gender identity,” permitting explicit discrimination against transgender individuals, FFRF contends.

“The rule does nothing other than rubber-stamp religious bigotry and jeopardize the health and well-being of transgender homeless Americans — people who already face discrimination on multiple fronts and desperately need government support,” FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor write to HUD Secretary Ben Carson on behalf of FFRF’s 32,000-member association. “This rule disgracefully places the weight of the government in support of oppressors rather than the oppressed, allowing shelters receiving federal funds to turn away an individual simply because they are transgender, or because a shelter worker thinks they might be transgender based on their appearance.”

Religion plays a major part in anti-transgender discrimination, as it does in many such historical patterns, FFRF underscores. Indeed, the voices openly calling for the right to discriminate



against transgender individuals almost invariably cite “religious freedom” as a justification. Catering to these bigoted demands not only endorses such discrimination, but also endorses a particularly vile religious belief in violation of our entirely secular Constitution’s requirement that religion and government remain separate.

There’s another glaring problem with this rule, FFRF points out: Who deter-

mines an individual’s biological sex for the purpose of this rule, and how do they do so? This would require shelters to theoretically engage in the invasive and often complicated task of determining an individual’s biological sex — and then appropriately reconciling when the indicators do not all match. Because this is impossible, not to mention unethical, shelters would be left with a “know it when I see it” standard of discrimination

that is wholly unacceptable.

It becomes even more unacceptable because transgender people are at greater risk of homelessness, FFRF emphasizes. One in five transgender persons in the United States has experienced homelessness at some point in their lives due to societal bias, ignorance, family rejection, discrimination and violence. This cruel HUD rule would only further compound such bigotry.

And allowing a government-funded shelter to exclude gender identity from its sex discrimination policy seemingly conflicts with the U.S. Supreme Court’s recent decision, *Bostock v. Clayton County*. That opinion holds that the Civil Rights Act protects gay and transgender workers from workplace discrimination. If a private workplace cannot discriminate against LGBTQ individuals, clearly a federally funded shelter may not do so. A federal court just last week enjoined a Department of Health and Human Services effort to remove transgender protection from its anti-discrimination rules. This proposed rule seeks to do the same and must be rescinded.

“HUD’s true purpose in floating this bigoted proposal is to allow government-supported religious shelters to deny services to those in need based on sex and gender,” adds Gaylor. “That’s heartless and that’s shameful.”

WOMEN WITHOUT SUPERSTITION
“No Gods—No Masters”

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
ffrf.org/shop

LOSING FAITH IN FAITH

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

FFRF'S

Ask an Atheist

Send in your comments & questions via Facebook or AskAnAtheist@ffrf.org

Available on YouTube

Wednesdays at Noon (Central)

Looking to donate to FFRF? Here’s how!

There are many ways you can donate to FFRF, including directly through our website (ffrf.org/donate).

Ways to give include the Combined Federal Campaign for federal employees, matching gifts, AmazonSmile, estate planning, stock transfer and IRA charitable rollover gifts, which apply to seniors 70½ or older.

Combined Federal Campaign

If you are a federal employee, you may make donations to FFRF through the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC) until January 2021. Details can be found at opm.gov/combined-federal-campaign. If you wish to help FFRF through this campaign, the CFC code to designate your contribution is 32519.

It is recommended that all CFC donors check the box to include their name and mailing address (in addition to your e-mail) with the donation. Donors will receive an acknowledgment from FFRF when we receive pledge notification (throughout the year).

FFRF has been a CFC charity since 2007. Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc. appears in the listing of “National/International Independent Organizations” which is published in each local campaign charity list.

Matching grants

Matching grant donations have become a significant boost to FFRF in recent years. Many companies offer to match (fully or a percentage) their employees’ donations to charitable organizations. These matches multiply the impact of the initial donation to further the goals of the Foundation. Membership dues and donations are tax-deductible contributions and may be submitted to matching gift programs upon organization approval.

FFRF receives Charity Navigator’s highest four-star rating. Donations to FFRF are deductible for



income-tax purposes.

IRA charitable rollover

If you are age 70 1/2 or older, you may now donate up to \$100,000 to FFRF as a qualifying 501(c) (3) charitable organization directly from your Individual Retirement Account (IRA). The distribution will not be treated as taxable income, provided the distribution is made directly.

To qualify, contributions must come from a traditional IRA or Roth IRA, and they must be made directly to FFRF. Additionally, the donor may not receive goods or services in exchange for the donation, and they must retain a receipt from each charity to which a donation is made.

Because it is available to taxpayers whether or not they itemize their tax returns, the rollover helps older Americans, who are more likely not to file itemized returns.

FFRF will send a “non-tax” letter receipt that documents your lovely charitable rollover gift!

Stock

If you are interested in donating stock to FFRF, please email Director of Operations Lisa Strand (lstrand@ffrf.org) or FFRF Co-President Annie Lau-

rie Gaylor (algaylor@ffrf.org) or FFRF (info@ffrf.org) about your stock gift and we will gratefully reply with the information you need to make the transfer.

Estate planning

Leave a freethought legacy in your name that will significantly help carry forward the vital work of FFRF for generations to come.

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

For related information or to request a bequest brochure, please email Annie Laurie Gaylor or Lisa Strand or leave a message at 608-256-8900.

AmazonSmile

AmazonSmile is a simple and automatic way for you to support your favorite charitable organization every time you shop, at no cost to you. When you shop at smile.amazon.com, you’ll find the exact same prices, selection and shopping experience as Amazon.com, with the added bonus that Amazon will donate a portion of the purchase price to your favorite charitable organization. Visit the AmazonSmile donation designation page and select the Freedom From Religion Foundation to donate 0.5 percent of eligible purchases to FFRF.

The AmazonSmile Foundation is a 501(c)(3) private foundation created by Amazon to administer the AmazonSmile program. All donation amounts generated by the AmazonSmile program are remitted to the AmazonSmile Foundation.

In turn, the AmazonSmile Foundation donates those amounts to the charitable organizations selected by customers. Amazon pays all expenses of the AmazonSmile Foundation; they are not deducted from the donation amounts generated by purchases on AmazonSmile.

Camp Quest makes plans for the future

By Sarah Bingham Miller

At the beginning of 2020, all of us at Camp Quest were looking forward to our 25th summer of fun, friends and freethought.

In the summer of 1996, Edwin and Helen Kagin held the first Camp Quest in Kentucky. In the quarter-century since then, thousands of children have attended Camp Quest in locations from Virginia to California. Many young people have attended Camp Quest since they were 8 years old and continue to serve Camp Quest as counselors, board members and camp directors. In 2019, one session of Camp Quest Northwest had 11 former campers return as counselors!

And then in March, we all learned that we would not be able to hold residential camps safely this year because of the pandemic. Our network conducted an extensive national risk management assessment, carefully reviewing the evolving worldwide crisis and its impact on our programs.

Out of respect for the best scientific

To keep informed about Camp Quest, sign up for the newsletter at campquest.org/newsletter.

To learn more about the Camp Quest Virtual Leadership Summit, go to campquest.org/summit.

knowledge available, and placing the health and safety of our campers first, we decided to cancel residential camp sessions.

Our dedicated and inventive volunteers and staff worked hard to maintain the community so many find at Camp Quest. Camp Quest affiliates in Ohio, Minnesota and California held popular online camps. The Camp Quest National Support Center also provided online activities to campers impacted by school closures. All activities were free of charge, and we were able to serve over 300 campers online.

This year, our annual Leadership Summit will be held online for the first time. Our summits are a chance for staff and volunteers to gather, attend educational panels, share experiences and have meaningful connections. We are grateful to the Freedom From Religion Foundation for being one of our Session Sponsors in 2020, in addition to their generous support for camperships.

Camp Quest is also taking concrete steps to expand our programs. We are planning to launch new day camp and other year-round activities over the next few years.

In 2019, we conducted a feasibility study and created a new staff position to lead program expansion. In June of



Youth and leaders pose for a photo at the first Camp Quest in 1996.

this year, Camp Quest welcomed Mary Sullivan as our new program manager. Mary brings 20 years of camp experience to the team, including time as an accreditation visitor with the American Camp Association.

Camp Quest’s programs are held to the highest professional standards, and our network has an ongoing partnership with the American Camp Association.

In 2019, as part of our program expansion feasibility study, we also conducted a survey of local secular groups to gauge their community needs for secular youth and family programs.

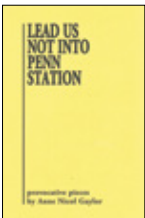
The desire for secular youth programs, especially day camps and afterschool programs, is widespread. Camp Quest’s vision is to support the growing secular community by mak-

ing it easy for local groups to conduct their own youth and family programs. Camp curriculum and activity resources, as well as assistance with operations, administrative systems, staff screening and training, are key services local camps will gain through Camp Quest.

Though the summer of 2020 presented the camp industry with many challenges, Camp Quest has thrived due to the perseverance of our volunteers and the strength of our community. We know that many more families and youth can benefit from Camp Quest. We look forward to our next quarter-century of service to the secular community!

Sarah Bingham Miller is the development director for Camp Quest.

Lead Us Not Into Penn Station: Provocative Pieces



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

Published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

Mourn Ginsburg’s death by calling your senators

To repeat and second the dying words of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, it is the most fervent wish of the Freedom From Religion Foundation that she will not be replaced until 2021.

The nation’s second female Supreme Court justice, the tenacious feminist, civil rights pioneer and cultural icon lionized by young admirers as “the Notorious R.B.G.” spent the final 27 of her 87 years as a justice defending the rights that FFRF and our membership cherish most. The way to mourn the loss of this champion and honor her life is to channel our collective grief and dismay into practical *activism*.

The election is happening now. Early voting and mail-in voting have already started in some states. Election Day itself is closing in fast. For this reason, for reasons of common sense, parity and fairness, it’s essential that “We the People” should decide who will nominate Ginsburg’s replacement. That’s why the Senate should not consider, much less confirm, a replacement for Justice Ginsburg until after the inauguration, as Ginsburg wisely counseled from her deathbed.

President Trump said he would name a nominee by Sept. 26 (which is after this issue went to press).

FFRF remembers Ruth Bader Ginsburg with admiration and gratitude for championing the clear separation of religion and government, particularly in our 2007 *Hein* case before the Supreme Court against the White House “faith-based” office. She became the court’s leading defender of state-church separation and of genuine religious freedom.



Photo: Supreme Court.gov

“Our Constitution was designed to separate church from the state,” she said in a recent interview. “Each should stay out of the other’s business.”

Ever the optimist, Ginsburg knew, “So often in life, things that you regard as an impediment turn out to be great, good fortune.” She endured condescension and sexist stereotyping when admitted as a woman to Harvard Law School, burning the midnight oil as a young mother and law student. The brainy standout was even refused a clerkship at the Supreme Court because of her gender. Yet a decade later, Ginsburg was pioneering, litigating and winning landmark gender discrimination cases before that court. She then went on to become only the second civil rights attorney (Thurgood Marshall was the first) to be seated on the Supreme Court, confirmed by a lopsided 96-3 Senate vote. The diminutive Ginsburg did not give up through three grueling bouts of cancer, even conducting oral arguments and overseeing her latest votes and decisions from her hospital bed.

In recent years, as the high court has turned increasingly reactionary, her brilliance in defense of our secular government and civil liberties shone through

in succinct dissents, often written with devastating clarity. Last term, she dissented when the five conservative justices upheld a 30-foot-tall Christian cross in a Maryland traffic circle, writing: “As I see it, when a cross is displayed on public property, the government may be presumed to endorse its religious content. . . . Using the cross as a war memorial does not transform it into a secular symbol.” Her dissent in the recent *Little Sisters* decision that further empowered religious employers to deny workers contraceptive health care choices condemned the court for privileging religion over individual liberty: “Today, for the first time, the court casts totally aside countervailing rights and interests in its zeal to secure religious rights to the nth degree.”

Ginsburg dedicated her entire career, on and off the court, to providing “equal protection of the laws,” including for women, LGBTQ individuals, advancing justice for people of color and preserving our democracy. She often advised, “Fight for the things that you care about. But do it in a way that will lead others to join you.” FFRF invites you to join us in fighting like your rights depend on it, like your country depends on it . . . because they do.

As Ginsburg noted: “Real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time.” Take that step. Call both your senators to insist that they ensure that the people get to decide who appoints Ginsburg’s replacement.

Call 202-224-3121 now, even if you think their votes are locked in. Then call them again the next day. Repeat.

FFRF announces Hansberry Scholarships

FFRF is delighted to announce, in association with the Women’s Leadership Project, the establishment of the Lorraine Hansberry Humanist Scholarship Awards.

FFRF has funded for the first time this year \$1,000 scholarships for five recently graduated high school seniors from Los Angeles. The honorees were chosen by the Women’s Leadership Project, which, with Young Male Scholars, conducts school and community-based peer education programming, outreach and professional development, offering invaluable life and job training skills.

Students meet weekly with program coordinators and interns and are trained in sexual harassment and sexual violence prevention, LGBTQ+ youth leadership outreach and homeless education. Students elect their own group officers and assume responsibility for campus outreach and other communications, writing blogs, articles, poems and crafting video. They initiated two youth-facilitated forums on Black homeless women, anti-racism and mental health, as well as LGBTQ+ Youth of Color and mental health sexual harassment and campus climate.

Five young women with a humanist orientation have been chosen for the \$1,000 awards. They are:

- Ashley Harris, a graduate of Drew Medical Magnet High School, will be attending El Camino College and plans to transfer to San Diego State, with a goal to study law. “My family is filled with either nurses or musicians and I wanted to be different, to create a change in the law system and free wrongly committed individuals,” she says.

The Women’s Leadership Project announces its
2020 Lorraine Hansberry Humanist Scholarship Winners
for Outstanding Feminist Leadership, Community Service and Achievement

Ashantee Polk
WLP 2020

Zorrie Petrus
WLP 2019

Brianna Parnell
WLP 2019

Ashley Harris
WLP 2020

Raina Lee
WLP 2020

“Though it be a thrilling and marvellous thing to be merely young and gifted in such times, it is doubly so— doubly dynamic—to be young, gifted and black.”
—Lorraine Hansberry, 1964

WLP
Women’s Leadership Project
www.womensleadershipproject.org IG: wlpproject
With generous support from the Freedom From Religion Foundation and the Harrington Family

- Raina Lee will be attending college this fall as a math major, also taking computer science courses, with a goal to “expose other young black girls to the world of coding and teach them the leadership skills Women’s Leadership Project has taught me,” including sharing the confidence to become their own boss.
- Brianna Parnell, who graduated from Gardena High School, is a first-generation student attending California State University pursuing a BFA in interior design/architecture. She aspires to attend Pratt Institute in New York for graduate studies and to be “an owner of multiple Black-owned businesses that will put wealth back into my community.”

- Zorrie Petrus graduated from Gardena High School, and is majoring in photography. “Photography is my passion and I am working toward making it my career in life. I don’t really see many photographers who look like me so one of my goals is to change that,” she remarks.

• Ashantee Polk was the Women’s Leadership Project president at King/Crew Magnet High School, and will attend Los Angeles City College planning a degree in psychology, hoping to transfer in three years to Cal-State Fullerton: “I want to continue to be the activist I am because we have a lot of work to do as a country and it starts with my generation and me. A big shoutout to WLP for making my senior year great even through the pandemic.”

The award memorializes Lorraine Hansberry, the playwright, who famously wrote in 1964: “Though it be a thrilling and marvelous thing to be merely young and gifted in such time, it is doubly so — doubly dynamic — to be young, gifted and Black.” Hansberry’s play, “A Raisin in the Sun” (1959), was the first drama by a Black woman produced on Broadway. Winner of the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award, it was loosely based on her own experiences when her parents bought a house in a white neighborhood and were greeted by a racist mob, sparking her parents’ civil rights case. The play’s heroine, Beneatha, notably, is a “self-avowed” atheist who gets slapped by her mother for admitting it. The title for the play came from a line in a poem by another freethinker, Langston Hughes.

“We express our appreciation for Sikivu Hutchinson, a founder of Black Skeptics Los Angeles, for her work with the Women’s Leadership Project and for making FFRF’s participation in this worthy cause possible,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. Hutchinson will be receiving FFRF’s Freethought Heroine Award at its annual convention in Boston in November 2021.

FFRF provides \$16K in scholarships

Humanists of Puerto Rico essay winners announced

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is delighted to announce that, in partnership with Humanistas Seculares De Puerto Rico (Humanists of Puerto Rico), it is awarding more than \$16,000 in cash scholarships to Puerto Rican students, including 10 major winners and four honorable mentions.

Students were asked to write about “The importance of separation of church and state in Puerto Rican society.”

The Humanists of Puerto Rico publicized the contest and judged the 150 essays received, and FFRF is providing the prize money. FFRF had contacted HPR seeking the partnership and suggesting the contest be in Spanish. Currently, FFRF sponsors five other essay competitions, which are open to Puerto Rican students, but are in English.

The winners and honorable mentions are:

1. Fátima Isabel Rosado Figueroa (\$3,500)
2. Roberto Orlando Rodríguez García (\$3,000)
3. Jahn Michael Alago Velázquez (\$2,500)
4. Ambar Marrero Pérez (\$2,000)
5. Génesis Vega Pérez (\$1,500)
6. Alejandra Gruber Acevedo (\$1,000)
7. Julissa Esther Santana García (\$750)
8. Zainely A. Sandoval Martínez (\$500)
9. Gustavo Daniel Hernández Luciano (\$400)
10. Lionel Reyes Ramírez (\$300)

Honorable mentions (\$200 each): Yanelie Díaz Román, Aviel Ramírez Fossé, Evan Flores Rosado and Karina Negrón Tudó.

“I personally had the chance to call each one of the 10 major prize winners,” said Gerardo M. Rivera Chaparro, secretary of the Humanists. “The happiness I heard from them and their families was overwhelming.”

“Felicitaciones!” says Dan Barker, FFRF co-president. Adds Annie Laurie Gaylor: “We’re delighted to be partnering with the Humanists of Puerto Rico, particularly at a time when so many public schools on the island were shuttered after Hurricane Maria, and when students are in need of educational support. We hope this will become an annual scholarship.”

FFRF recently went to court with the humanist group and a local family, successfully halting the unconstitutional imposition of mandatory 50-minute bi-weekly prayers upon students at a primary school in Toa Baja as part of the school day. (See story on Page 1.)



Justin Fajar Kitty Anne Dubuisson India Quick Jalyn Williams

FFRF, Black Skeptics award \$20K in tuition scholarships

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is announcing \$20,000 in scholarships given to four students, making this its second annual distribution of the Forward Freethought Tuition Relief Scholarships, funded by generous FFRF benefactor Lance Bredvold. This year, the students were selected by Black Skeptics Los Angeles (BSLA), an African-American humanist-atheist community-based organization.

FFRF has previously partnered with BSLA in its annual “first in the family” humanist scholarships for outstanding secular students of color. This year, the tuition relief was doubled to \$5,000 per student, thanks to the fund Bredvold has endowed for FFRF.

This year’s winners: Justin Fajar, 17, Dartmouth College (pre-med); Kitty Anne Dubuisson, 18, MCPHS University in Boston (pre-medical and health sciences); India Quick, 17, Fayetteville State University (business major); and Jalyn Williams, 19, Albright College (environmental studies).

“Secular African American youth disproportionately come from religious backgrounds and communities,” says BSLA founder Sikivu Hutchinson. “These youth are often marginalized in K-12 and higher education due to their nonconformity.”

BSLA is the first secular humanist atheist organization to specifically address college pipelining for youth of color through its ongoing scholarship, college and K-12 youth leadership partnerships. FFRF has proudly partnered

with BSLA for seven years to provide tuition grants, gradually increasing the funding and number of scholarships.

In the video by Justin Fajar, an aspiring pediatrician, he notes: “Mixing religious beliefs and medicine leads to discrimination and unnecessary deaths” and that “health care [should be] based on facts, not beliefs.”

Kitty Anne Dubuisson’s video notes: “It’s so important to question. Every great discovery started with wonder, someone unwilling to accept the norm. I came to realize that the qualities that would make me a good scientist also made me a terrible believer.”

In Jalyn Williams’ video, she notes that she prefers to work, not pray, for change and wants to offer more “secular opportunities for communities of color” to show that religion is not the only path for improvement for their communities. “I hope freethinking will become a more widely accepted world view in communities of color,” she said.

Both Fajar and Williams took part in a BSLA-hosted Zoom panel discussion on Sept. 26, with Black secular Gen Z youth recipients from the 2016 and 2020 classes of its First in the Family Humanist Scholarship/Freedom From Religion Foundation award.

You may donate to the Forward Freethought Tuition Scholarships (choose “Tuition Scholarships” in the dropdown designation). Donations will help future students and are deductible for income-tax purposes.

“I came to realize that the qualities that would make me a good scientist also made me a terrible believer.”

— Kitty Anne Dubuisson

Winners of Debut Puerto Rican Essay Contest



FFRF & Secular Humanists of Puerto Rico

Pansy Freethinker Mug

Glazed brilliant blue ceramic handcrafted mug with pansy medallion (symbol of freethought). American-made. 12 fl. oz.

\$35 each Item #MU04
\$60 for two

Prices include over \$10 shipping per mug.



NEW!

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

Puerto Rico

Continued from page 1

the family as nonreligious, that “If you don’t believe in God, like your mother, you will go to hell.”

The plaintiffs sought an injunction prohibiting the defendants from continuing to schedule and host school prayer, as well as a declaration that the defendants’ conduct violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and the free exercise rights of the individual plaintiffs.

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

At a mediation session held on March 9, the defendants said they would immediately and permanently prohibit school-

led prayers at Luis M. Santiago School and would undertake all reasonable efforts to ensure an academic school environment free from harassment of the students and their parents. They also consented to remove negative academic marks related to the plaintiff students’ nonparticipation in the prayer sessions.

And importantly, they indicated they would circulate a memorandum on the policy of nondiscrimination and non-sectarian education in public schools to Department of Education employees and conduct a training for all employees of the school regarding their constitutional obligations.

The plaintiffs and FFRF agreed that these actions would resolve the issues raised in their complaint and that upon completion of these actions by the defendants, the lawsuit would be dismissed. On Aug. 7, the court-appointed mediator declared that the mediation process had

been completed to the satisfaction of all the parties involved.

This was FFRF’s first court challenge in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. FFRF thanks the brave family for coming forward to fight for freedom of conscience, Secular Humanists of Puerto Rico for its invaluable assistance and Attorney Cintron Garcia for representing the plaintiffs throughout the litigation and mediation process. Toa Baja is a suburb of San Juan with about 89,000 people.

The family brought this action under pseudonyms to protect the mother and her two minor children from social ostracism, retaliation and even physical harm. FFRF Attorneys Samuel Grover and Madeline Ziegler represented the Freedom From Religion Foundation, while local counsel Carlos A. Cintron Garcia represented Humanistas Seculares De Puerto Rico and the plaintiff family.

FFRF gives \$5K to exiled Bangladeshi freethinker

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is pleased to offer financial assistance to a Bangladeshi freethinker forced out of his country due to his defense of secularism and LGBTQ rights. FFRF is granting \$5,000 to blogger Asad Noor, who is currently in exile in India.

The information minister of Bangladesh recently tried to seize a Buddhist monastery. When the monk who founded the institution tried to speak up, false charges of blasphemy were slapped against him. This is where Noor showed his courage by speaking out on behalf of a religion that a tiny percentage of the population follows in his home nation. The consequences were severe.

“Soon afterwards, police came to Noor’s home and tried to locate him,” states a Foreign Policy magazine op-ed. “When they could not find him, they decided to torture and threaten his family instead. Today, Asad Noor is a fugitive on the run for the crime of defending a Buddhist monk on social media and speaking up for the LGBT community in Bangladesh.”

Noor has been charged under the Digital Security Act, 2018, for defaming Islam — an offense punishable with a jail term of up to 10 years, the Indian news site News18 reports. Noor has already been imprisoned several times in Bangladesh for his outspokenness, spend-

ing many months in jail. He has also been detained in India for six months, allegedly for lacking proper papers.

A number of reputed international organizations, such as Amnesty International, Humanists International, Reporters Without Borders and the International Federation of Journalists have expressed concern over the Bangladeshi government’s maltreatment of Noor and his family members.

“The harassment of Asad’s family is not an isolated incident,” Sultan Mohammed Zakaria, South Asia researcher at Amnesty International, said in a press statement. “It is part of a worrying pattern targeting families of human rights defenders in exile.”

FFRF applauds the immense courage Noor has displayed in defending freethought and secular principles.

“Noor has shown tremendous daring,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “All the persecution he and his family have been subjected to seems to have left him unfazed.”

The Bangladeshi activist is expressing his appreciation for FFRF’s support.

“If you are with us, I am confident that one day we will be able to establish a freethinking-based society in Bangladesh — and assure the rights of atheists and other minority people. It was the dream of our iconoclast and beloved Dr. Avijit Roy,” says Noor, referencing the assassinated Bangladeshi-American



Photo from Noor’s Facebook page

Bangladeshi freethinker Asad Noor has been living in exile in India after being charged with blasphemy for defending a Buddhist monk.

freethinker in the memory of whom FFRF has instituted an award. “Freedom will certainly come through the light of reason if we continue our activism. And I feel it is our duty to fulfill his dream so that his sacrifice will not go in vain.”

FFRF has also recently given a \$5,000 stipend to an endangered Egyptian atheist who has fled to another Muslim

nation that must remain undisclosed for his safety, where he and his family are stranded as they await resettlement via an international agency.

“It is a measure of the terror spread by Islamic anti-apostasy laws that we cannot even reveal where he currently resides,” adds Gaylor. “Thoughts should be free — and being an atheist or freethinker should not be a crime anywhere.”

Alabama

Continued from page 1

tion forms are “prescribed by statute” and “that any changes would require legislative action.” FFRF’s lawsuit will point out that the secretary of state has the authority to create and amend voter registration forms.

Government officials routinely allow attorneys, jurors, witnesses and many others who must take an oath to make a secular affirmation instead when they are unable to swear “so help me God” as a matter of conscience.

FFRF Attorney Chris Line previously sent a letter to the secretary of state, noting that any requirement for religious oaths violates the First Amendment of the Constitution, which bars religious tests. In *Torcaso v. Watkins*, the Supreme Court held that neither a state nor the federal government may force a person to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion. “The prohibition on mandatory religious oaths is a well-settled issue,” Line added.



The late Roy Torcaso, an FFRF honorary director, won a unanimous Supreme Court decision in 1961 affirming the government may not impose a religious test.

“The secretary of state has willfully excluded nontheist citizens from registering to vote,” says FFRF Senior Litigation Counsel Patrick Elliott, “and is coercing a statement of belief in a monotheistic god by requiring nontheists to swear a religious oath.”

FFRF welcomes its newest Lifetime, After-Life members

FFRF thanks and welcomes its two new Beyond After-Life members, one After-Life Member and 13 new Lifetime Members.

Robert Bliemeister and Daniel Kozloff are the two newest Beyond After-Life Members, which is a tongue-in-cheek-named donation category of \$10,000 for those who want their contribution to extend beyond their lives.

Raymond Stefanski is FFRF’s newest After-Life Member, which is a generous donation category of \$5,000.

FFRF’s newest \$1,000 Lifetime Members are: Peter Brush, Dennis Coyier, Tom Fitch, Gerry Fritsch, Robert Fritsch, Daniel T. Gilmartin, Susan Gilmore, Daniel McCartney, Fred Muzzin, Eric Thomas, Paul L. Wellmer, Glenn Wismer and Helen Wolfson.

States represented are: California, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Wisconsin. Countries represented are: Japan and Germany.

Survey

Continued from page 3

percent of all Americans.

Some other results are not surprising, coming from a minority sector that is particularly supportive of the separation between state and church:

- 98 percent support public education and 94.5 percent oppose tax vouchers to public schools.
- 98 percent of secular voters believe “churches should play by the same rules as secular organization.”
- 97 percent believe humans are causing climate change (compared to 50 percent to 71 percent of all Americans, depending on polls) and 90 percent of secular voters believe religious denial is harming response to fight climate change.
- 93 percent believe asylum seekers and immigrants should not be banned based on religion (up-to-date comparison data was not available).
- 93 percent oppose churches receiving COVID-19 bailout money. (Maybe it’s surprising it wasn’t 100 percent!)
- 68 percent believe “Congress should take action, such as by enlarging the U.S. Supreme Court, to correct the blocking of Judge Merrick Garland’s Supreme Court nomination in 2016 (with 23 percent undecided). (No comparison data available.)

These secular voters put their money where their mouths are, with 49 percent financially supporting civil rights and/or racial justice-equality organizations, 48 percent financially supporting reproductive rights, 52 percent supporting environmental issues and 50 percent charities to help the needy. About a third financially support women’s rights organizations, animal rights, education and the arts.

Overwhelming numbers support legislative initiatives such as the proposed Scientific Integrity Act (99 percent) and

repealing or amending the Religious Freedom Restoration Act or other bills making Christians and religious Americans a favored class (96 percent). Secular voters also overwhelmingly support requiring religious organizations to follow the same financial disclosure requirements as secular organizations (99 percent), to pass the No Ban Act barring religious discrimination in immigration (93 percent), and to create secular parity in addiction recovery programs (95 percent).

More than half identify their political voting pattern as Democratic, 17 percent as progressive and 16 percent as independent (with 1 percent Libertarian, 1 percent Republican and 3 percent Socialist).

They also overwhelmingly have written and emailed their elected officials (77 percent) and more than a third have protested at a rally or picketed.

“Overall, nonbelievers are obviously caring, compassionate, involved and engaged individuals,” notes Dan Barker, FFRF co-president, “who clearly recognize that this world is what matters. Not believing in a god doesn’t mean you don’t believe in values. We are the real values voters.”

From June through August 2020, FFRF surveyed its 32,000 current members, with 12,290 total respondents participating across the nation. The social policy questions were answered by 11,904 of the overall respondents. Since the last membership survey in 2015 (with 8,000 responses), FFRF found that the numbers of registered voters in its ranks grew from 96 to 98 percent (which compares to 79 percent of all Americans).

FFRF is a nonpartisan educational nonprofit that does not endorse candidates for office. (For documentation on general population polls, see FFRF’s online news releases and analyses about the secular voter poll at ffrf.org/news.)

Freethought Hall is now powered by solar energy

FFRF is pleased to announce that its headquarters — the historic Freethought Hall in downtown Madison, Wis. — is getting greener.

Adding to energy improvements, such as universal LED lighting made during a 2015 renovation and expansion, FFRF is taking a bigger step toward sustainability: partnering with Madison Gas and Electric (MGE) to power Freethought Hall with solar energy from a new five-megawatt solar array at the Middleton Municipal Airport (Morey Field).

FFRF's 152 shares of local solar will provide enough clean energy to power approximately 50 percent of our operations at Freethought Hall and will offset about 80,800 pounds of carbon dioxide annually. That's like planting 50 acres of forest every year.

"FFRF has long considered that the climate crisis is a state/church issue," says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, adding: "The only afterlife that ought to concern any of us is leaving our descendants and our planet a secure

and pleasant future."

The Morey Field Solar project is the second array in MGE's popular Shared Solar program. The expansion gives residential and business customers throughout MGE's electric service territory the option of powering their homes or businesses with locally generated solar energy. The new array began delivering energy to the community grid on Aug. 1.

FFRF's Director of Strategic Response Andrew L. Seidel, who leads the in-house effort to make FFRF more environmentally conscious and our actions more sustainable, adds: "This is about living out our secular values. We have a duty to our children and grandchildren, to the other species we share our planet with and to ensure our world is habitable for the future." Seidel, who worked in the Tulane Environmental Law Clinic during law school and won the Haber J. McCarthy Award for excellence in environmental law, is well suited to run the "FFRF Green Team."

Day of the Dead celebrates life

FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor will be speaking during the 2020 Secular Day of the Dead on Sunday, Nov. 1.

Nontheist Hispanics view the Day of the Dead as a perfect way to remember the legacy of dead loved ones in a way that does not require prayer, church, or any religious dogma.

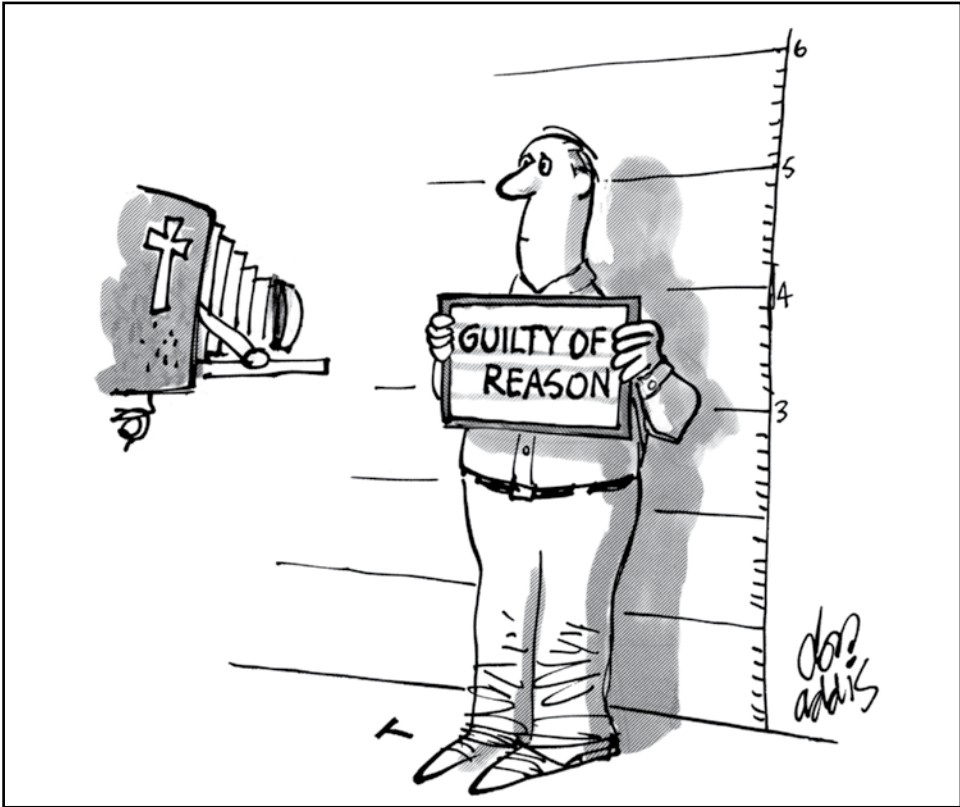
The 2020 Secular Day of the Dead will be presented as a Zoom event, with special attention to Spanish-speaking participants. It is co-sponsored by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the Freethought Society, Hispanic American Freethinkers, American Atheists and the Center for Inquiry.

The event will begin at 3 p.m. (EST) with a bilingual welcome by organizers and co-sponsors Annie Laurie Gaylor,



Robyn Blumner, Victoria de la Torre, Margaret Downey, Nick Fish and David Tamayo. Co-sponsors and organizers will each light a candle to honor a "Secular Saint" of historic significance. At 3:30 p.m. (EST), Dan Barker will speak on the topic of "Adios a dios."

To join the event (or for more information), go to [meetup.com/freethought-society-meetup](https://www.meetup.com/freethought-society-meetup).



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)



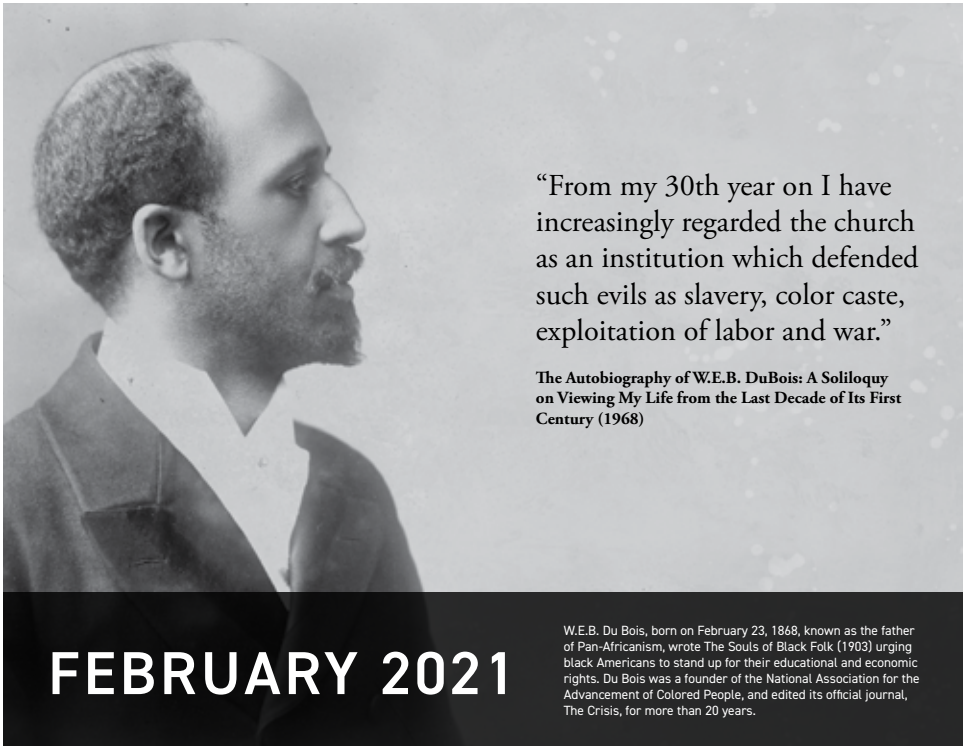
FFRF debuts 2021 wall calendar celebrating freethought history

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is pleased to offer, for the first time in more than 10 years, a wall calendar, "Famous Freethinkers 2021," where you can learn about the diversity of famous or influential freethinkers while marking off dates.

The elegant but functional 8 x 11 calendar is filled with the names and birthdays of hundreds of diverse freethinkers: early freethought philosophers, actors and musicians past and present, groundbreaking scientists throughout history and a number of social activists including Black civil rights advocates, feminists and iconoclasts.

While you'll find well-known 19th century "infidels" such as Robert G. Ingersoll and Elizabeth Cady Stanton featured, the calendar also pays homage to NAACP founder W.E.B. Du Bois and India's rationalist first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

Order your calendar online at ffrf.org/shop (under the Books & Lit dropdown) or watch for FFRF's fall-winter catalog, en route soon. The calendar sells for \$12 including postage and handling, and makes a marvelous end-of-year or New Year's gift for the discerning freethinker on your list!



This is the February graphic in FFRF's 2021 wall calendar.

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

Who really won the vote for women?

The lost history of freethought, race and a woman’s right to vote

By Susan Jacoby

Back when people were still underestimating the severity and potential duration of the coronavirus pandemic, I expected to speak in August about the role of both black women and freethinkers in the 19th and early 20th century women’s suffrage movement. This event, to have been sponsored jointly by FFRF and the Center for Inquiry, was to be held in the nation’s capital and timed to mark the 100th anniversary of passage of the 19th Amendment.

Like nearly all group meetings last summer (except for those sponsored by science deniers who still consider the pandemic a hoax), the event to commemorate the suffragist movement was



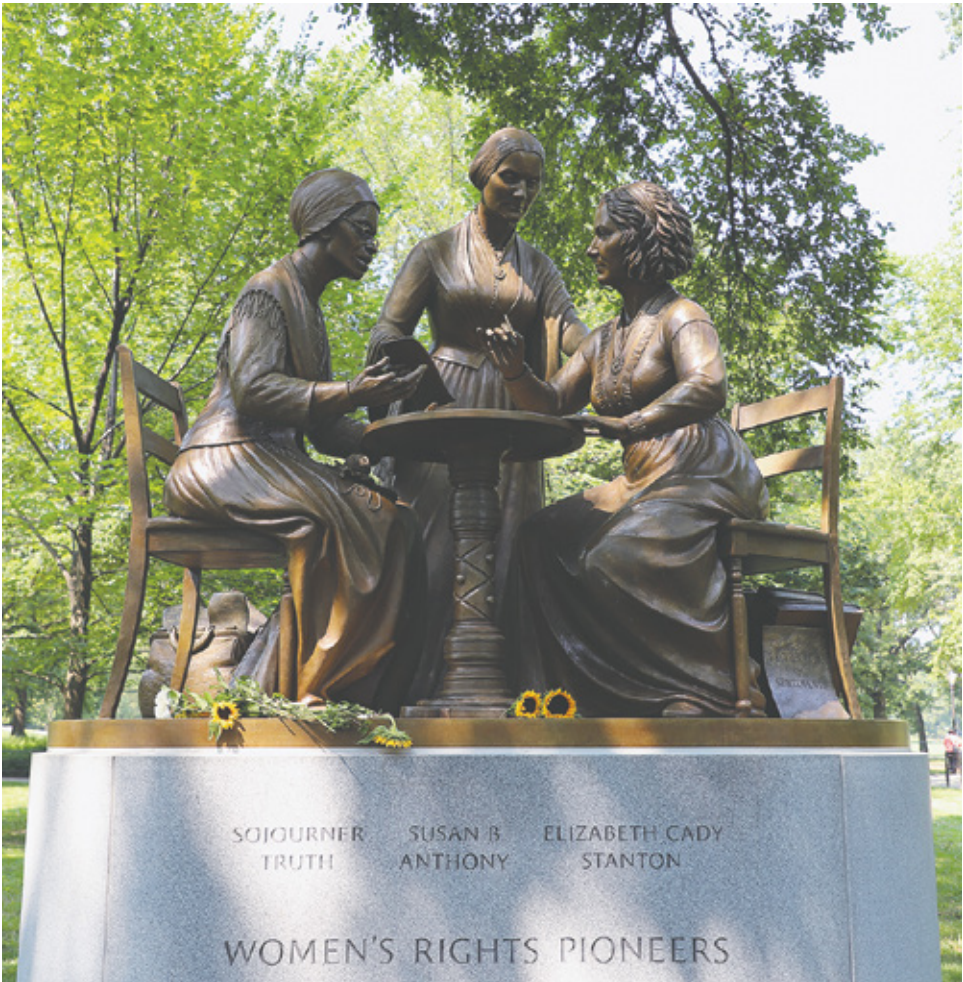
Photo by Ingrid Laas
Susan Jacoby

canceled. I am happy to have the opportunity here to deliver a portion of the speech I would have made in person. My views about relations among black women, freethinkers and white suffragists have changed as a result of the plethora of books and articles by scholars and journalists (many of them black) published during the centennial summer.

As Election Day approaches rapidly, one thing we know is that women of many colors and races will play a decisive role. A century ago, nearly everyone believed that women would vote how their husbands would vote. They were wrong. There is now a significant gender gap in which women since 1980 have been more likely to vote Democratic than men. Black women, it has turned out, are the most loyal Democratic voters. We shall see if this truism of recent history continues to hold this year.

The lost history of black woman suffragists in the 19th and early 20th centuries is particularly relevant at this time. For the most part, new publications examining the subject do an excellent job of recapturing that racial and racist history. But they are just as unenlightening as many old books by white scholars about the deep fissures over religion within the feminist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. In fact, the intersection of race, religion and misogyny in the suffragist movement — which could be ripped from today’s headlines — offers a stellar example of the culture wars of the 19th century and demonstrates the persistence of issues that, we see again, are capable of ripping this country apart long after they have been incorrectly considered “settled.”

To my friends in freethought, I cannot emphasize enough that some things are never settled. The rewriting of neglected history is a tricky business. As Saul Bellow once observed, “Everybody knows there is no firmness or accuracy of suppression; if you hold down one thing, you hold down the adjoining.” This is particularly true of the history of



A monument to Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Sojourner Truth was unveiled on Aug. 26 (Women’s Equality Day) in New York’s Central Park. It’s the first monument dedicated to historical women in the park’s 167-year-history.

reform movements, whose chroniclers never like to acknowledge that some of their heroes had feet of clay.

Consider what Elizabeth Cady Stanton had to say in 1869 at the first meeting of the National Woman Suffrage Association. This speech took place at the height of the battle over ratification of the 15th Amendment, which extended the franchise to black men and former slaves (for only a time, as it turned out) but ignored women of all races and colors. Stanton enjoined the delegates. “Think of Patrick and Sambo . . . and Yung Tung, who do not know the difference between a monarchy and a republic, who cannot read the Declaration of Independence or Webster’s spelling book, making laws for Lucretia Mott, Ernestine L. Rose and Anna E. Dickinson.”

Mott, a devout and liberal Quaker, organized the 1848 Seneca Falls convention, generally considered the kickoff of the 19th-century feminist movement, with Stanton. Rose was born into a Jewish family in Poland, emigrated and rejected religious Judaism, and became one of the few feminists in the United States to advocate for atheism. Dickinson was the first woman to deliver a speech before Congress. My guess is that unless you are a scholar with a special interest in women’s history, Stanton is the only one of these names you recognize.

Stanton’s remarks, which were both racist and anti-immigrant — although suffragists and abolitionists had long been allied — are a permanent blot on her moral record (a generalization that also applied to male abolitionists who were willing to sacrifice women in order to obtain passage of the 15th Amendment).

Wording of amendments

First, let us consider the precise wording of both the 15th and 19th amendments. The latter states that “the right of citizens of the United States to

vote shall not be abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex.” Power “to enforce this article by appropriate legislation” is reserved for Congress. Nearly identical language was used in 1870 in the 15th amendment, which specified that the right to vote for males could not be abridged due to race, color or previous condition of servitude. That injunction too was to be enforced by Congress. We know the story of everything Congress failed to do in the former Confederate states after Reconstruction ended. Everything — from the terror imposed by the Ku Klux Klan to literacy tests and poll taxes — was used to deny recently enfranchised slaves the right to vote.

Many of the new histories of suffrage take earlier accounts to task for their implication — or outright claim — that the 19th Amendment “guaranteed women the right to vote.”

But the nearly identical language of both amendments underlines the impossibility of guaranteeing any right that Congress is unwilling to enforce. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, which finally took on the night riders and the South’s systematic legal attempts to limit

it the black franchise, could not possibly have been “guaranteed” by either the 15th or 19th amendments. Black women (and men) could vote in Chicago when I was growing up in the 1950s and early 1960s, but they had little chance of doing so in Georgia or Mississippi. You might as well blame Frederick Douglass for supporting the 15th Amendment because it did not anticipate the end of Reconstruction. Indeed, you might as well blame legislators who enacted the Voting Rights Act in 1965 for failing to anticipate the ingenious voter suppression techniques being used today.

What Stanton can and should be blamed for is her turn to nativism and racism at the time of the 15th Amendment debate. And the next generation of suffragists — the ones who won the battle over the 19th amendment — can and should be blamed for marginalizing black suffragists and demanding (though not successfully) that they march in the back of parades in a separate section.

The historian Martha S. Jones, in her recently published *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All*, takes special note of women, like the crusading journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who disregarded white organizers’ demands that she march at the back of the Illinois delegation during the first national woman suffrage parade in Washington in 1913. Wells-Barnett was one of my heroes long before I knew she had anything to do with the suffragist movement, because her landmark 1892 book *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* was taught in a journalism class at Michigan State University in 1964. (This was long before feminist history was taught in either high school or college. Had Wells-Barnett been “only” a suffragist, I never would have heard of her.)

In August, many newspapers were inspired by the selection of Sen. Kamala Harris as the Democratic vice-presidential candidate to mention the role of black sororities, such as Delta Sigma Theta and Alpha Kappa Alpha (Harris’s sorority at Howard University) in defying

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Illustrated by Kati Treu

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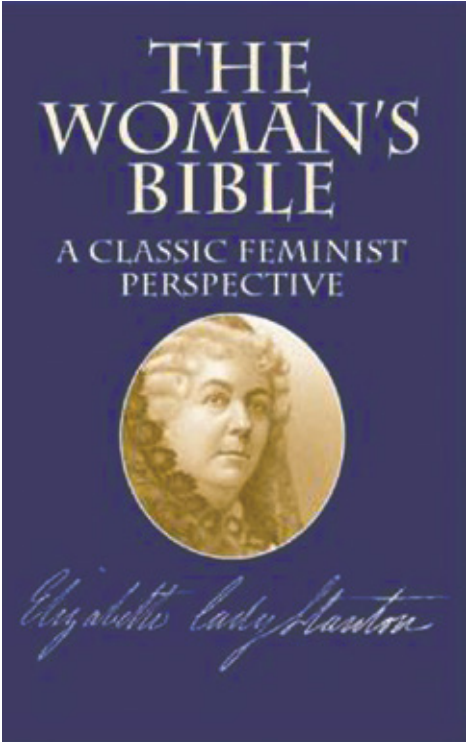
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ing white organizers who were fearful that a visible, integrated presence in marches by black women would wreck their chances of getting the amendment ratified in any southern state.

Three phases

There are essentially three phases to the suffragist movement in the United States. The first extends, roughly, from the 1840s to the Civil War, when women’s suffrage (and women’s rights in general) took a decided back seat to abolitionism as the major cause of all reformers. The second phase, from the end of the Civil War to the early 20th century, involved struggles between women over how best to gain general public support — meaning male and conservative female support — for their cause. The presence of many female freethinkers, who included both Anthony and Stanton, in the feminist movement was downgraded. Anthony’s view was that an alliance with Christian suffragists — such as the members of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union — was essential to the suffragist cause. She also urged Stanton not to publish her book, *The Woman’s Bible*, which included long essays by Stanton herself and other female biblical scholars. These essays mocked the Christian bible’s denigration of women, and Stanton rejected Anthony’s advice that it was unwise to arouse religious opposition.

The Woman’s Bible was a huge best-seller, but it also got Stanton written out of the women’s movement for at least 80 years. The suffrage amendment, which Stanton had been the first to propose,



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Susan Jacoby speaks to the audience at FFRF’s national convention in Pittsburgh in 2016.

was named after Anthony. As recently as 1977, when runners carried a torch from Seneca Falls to Houston to celebrate International Women’s Year, Stanton was an unperson. A grandniece of Anthony (who never married) was sitting on the dais, but no descendant of Stanton (who had a great many, since she was a mother of seven) was invited. That’s what you get for challenging religious orthodoxy.

Religious differences, as well as racial prejudice, may have played a significant role in the obliteration of so many black women from histories of the suffragist movement. Many black female orators and reformers got their start in black churches, which were a foreign country to most whites. Jones, for example, begins her general history of black woman suffrage not with the Seneca Falls convention but in 1819, when Jarena Lee was the first woman authorized to preach by the African Methodist Episcopal Church. But Lee lived in Philadelphia. How were women of her generation to know what enslaved women or men in the South (or, for that matter, in New York, which did not abolish slavery until 1827) had to say about human rights? In fact, they could say nothing — regardless of what they might think — beyond a whisper to another enslaved friend.

The religious origins of black Americans’ strong commitment to human rights would have put off a great many of the women at Seneca Falls, who were secret, Enlightenment-influenced free-thinkers, even though they refused to admit to their heresy by the end of the 19th century. There were black women

in the North who were also influenced by the Enlightenment (and, yes, Stanton, who could read the Declaration of Independence), but it is safe to assume that few of them were on social terms with the upper class white women who formed the core of the nascent feminist movement.

Another problem is the lack of written records about pre-Civil War feminist discourse in general. Frederick Douglass, an outspoken supporter of women’s rights as well as abolitionism, is the only African-American of either sex whose presence was reported at the Seneca Falls convention. But that doesn’t mean he was the only black American there. It means only that Douglass’ place as one of the greatest Americans in history was ensured partly by his own talent for self-promotion. That is not a criticism but a truth about nearly everyone considered great by history.

Oratory of Truth

The vital role of written records is underlined by the life and oratory of Sojourner Truth, who would certainly have been known to her contemporaries in both the suffragist and the abolitionist movements. Her presence is not recorded at Seneca Falls, but she certainly should have been invited. She was born into slavery to a Dutch-American owner in New York and ran away when her master refused to free her after the state prohibited slavery in 1827. She became a traveling preacher affiliated with no single church and became involved in both the abolitionist and feminist movements. Her most famous speech is

known as her “Ain’t I a Woman?” address, as Martin Luther King’s most famous piece of oratory is known as his “I Have a Dream” speech.

The address was made in 1851 in Akron, Ohio, at a women’s rights convention. “Well, children,” she began, “where there is so much racket, there must be something out of kilter. I think that ‘twixt the Negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon . . .

“Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could hear me! An ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man — when I could get it — and bear the lash, as well! And ain’t I a woman?”

She went on to single out a man who was apparently a member of the clergy. “Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ’cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with him.”

The phrase “Ain’t I a Woman?” does not appear in a version published soon afterward in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* by the Rev. Marius Robinson. But the speech reached a wider audience in 1863 when it was edited and published by Frances Gage — a feminist reformer who later became particularly outspoken in her support for voting rights for all women, including blacks. The “Ain’t I a woman?” phrase is included in Gage’s version. Various historical sources invite readers to compare the versions and makeup their own minds. My mind tells me that the repetition of certain key phrases is very much a part of traditional black American oratory, inspired by speech proceeding from the Black church.

Sojourner Truth, and the black women who came after her and fought for suffrage, was a proponent of human rights as we understand them today. It’s too bad that she and Anthony never (as far as we know) met. They would have had plenty to learn from each other. Who knows? Anthony might have been moved to erase the blot from her freethought record. Might have. That is always the problem with long-suppressed history. We can never truly *know*.

We can only try to understand in a way that makes it possible, if not easy, to move forward in a way that enshrines reason and rejects prejudice and superstition. Very recently, I spoke with a white man who said that he no longer has a chance if he is competing for anything with a woman of any color or with a black man. “Boo-hoo,” I said to him. And ain’t I a woman?

Susan Jacoby, an FFRF honorary director, is author of *Freethinkers: a History of American Secularism*.

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Recent books of interest

American Women — Gail Collins

Fighting Chance: The Struggle Over Woman Suffrage and Black Suffrage in Reconstruction America — Faye E. Dudden

Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All — Martha S. Jones

African-American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920 — Rosalyn Terborg-Penn

FFRF VICTORIES

By Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey

Religious displays removed in California

Religious displays were removed from Eastside Union School District property in Lancaster, Calif., after a resident contacted FFRF. A community member alerted FFRF that there were religious displays in several locations throughout the district, including in classrooms, staff lounges and the district office. FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian wrote to Superintendent Joshua Lightle, pointing out the impermissibility of such religious displays on public school property. Lightle responded to FFRF’s letter with assurances that the district has addressed these concerns.

FFRF stops religious signature on email

A Seminole County Public Schools employee in Oviedo, Fla., will no longer be using a religious email signature. A district community member reported that an administrative secretary at Paul J. Hagerty High School was sending emails from her official district account with a religious message included in the signature line. One email she sent included the message, “Believe. When a believing person Prays, Great things happen. James 5:16.” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the school’s attorney, requesting that the email signature be removed so as not to create the impression of school endorsement of religion. The district’s attorney informed FFRF the religious signature has been removed from the staff member’s email.

No more prayer at back-to-school meeting

No proselytizing took place at Allen Parish Schools’ (Kinder, La.) back-to-school meeting after last year’s mandatory meeting subjected attendees to prayer. FFRF was informed that at last year’s mandatory teachers’ meeting at Kinder Middle School, a Catholic priest was allowed to speak to the group and recite a prayer before the meeting. The result was that the school created a public platform for a religious leader to spread his religious views to a captive audience of school employees.



FFRF Associate Counsel Sam Grover wrote to Superintendent Kent Reed to ensure that no prayers were scheduled for this year’s meeting, out of respect for the religious and nonreligious diversity of the district’s staff. Reed informed FFRF in an email response that no prayers took place at the meeting this year.

School’s religious post removed from Facebook

In Tennessee, a religious post has been removed from Alamo City School District’s social media page. FFRF was alerted that the district had posted a graphic on its official Facebook page encouraging students and parents to “Park & Pray Everyday.” The graphic read: “Driving past a school? Pull in, park and pray for our children, teachers and staff! Driving past an administration building? Pull in, park and pray for our leaders! Driving past a bus lot? Pull in, park and pray for our bus drivers!” FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Director of Schools Ree-

cha Black, requesting that the district cease posting religious content on its official social media pages and that this and any related posts be taken down. Black informed FFRF that the post has been removed.

FFRF stops prayers at DNR employee meetings

Future Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) employee meetings will not include an opening prayer. FFRF was informed that, earlier this year, several Wisconsin DNR employees were required to attend an awards ceremony sponsored by the department. During the event, official DNR chaplains led prayers and invoked Jesus Christ. FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian wrote to DNR Secretary Preston Cole, informing the department that, as a government entity, it has a legal obligation to remain neutral toward religion. Federal courts have held that mandatory meetings for government

employees cannot promote religion. The department’s legal counsel informed FFRF in a thorough response that the DNR agrees such prayer was inappropriate. “In the future, if a member of our Chaplain Program asks to give an opening prayer at a mandatory training meeting, we will deny the request,” the response read.

Prayers discontinued in Tennessee county

Morgan County Schools has discontinued prayers at its school board meetings. A concerned local resident reported to FFRF that the Morgan County School Board had been opening its meetings with Christian prayer. FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Board Chairman Wade Summers, requesting that the board refrain from engaging in prayer at its meetings, as it violates the First Amendment of the Constitution. Summer responded to FFRF via email with assurances that the request would be met and the board will no longer include prayer at its meetings.

Prayer locker removed from Texas school

A “prayer locker” has been removed from Prairiland Junior High School property. A local resident alerted FFRF that the school had designated a locker to be used as a “prayer locker” for its students, marked with a Latin cross and a sign that reads: “Drop Prayer Here. Prayer Locker.” The purpose of this locker was apparently to encourage students to submit prayer requests to an outside religious group — Youth for Christ. FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Superintendent Jeff Ballard, informing the district that the First Amendment prohibits government entities like Prairiland Independent School District from promoting religion. Johnson encouraged the district to remove all prayer boxes from district property. Ballard informed FFRF via email that the prayer locker has been removed.

Religious message taken off school sign in W.V.

A religious message has been removed from a Wayne County Schools (W.Va.) sign. A local resident reported that the electronic notice board outside of Buffalo Middle School had featured the message “God will carry us” for much of the summer. This message was accompanied by several footprints on the digital notice board, presumably in reference to the popular Christian poem “Footprints in the Sand.” FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Superintendent Todd Alexander, pointing out the constitutional impermissibility of projecting this overtly religious message on public school grounds. Alexander assured FFRF in an email response that the message has been removed from the sign.



DeVos plots to enrich private schools

This article first appeared on The New Republic site on Aug. 13 and is reprinted with permission.

By Katherine Stewart

How much more does the Trump administration value the children of elite private and religious schools than the children who attend public schools? We can answer the question with some hard numbers. Public school students merit something like \$266 apiece in extra pandemic-related funding. Kids attending the right private schools are worth \$5,000 each or possibly much more.

That \$266, by the way, is an overestimate. It's what you get when you take the \$13.5 billion allocated for K-12 education in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act of this past March and divide it up among the nation's 50.8 million public school students. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos made sure to siphon some of that money for private and religious schools, which she has long favored, although she did receive pushback: On July 22, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), joined by school districts in California, Connecticut, and Colorado, sued DeVos and her department over the policy, calling it "as immoral as it is illegal."



Katherine Stewart

Daniel A. Domenech, executive director of the School Superintendents Association, described her efforts as "an opportunistic money grab, using the pandemic environment to advance the privatization agenda." And yet, if we take a closer look, the manipulation of the school-funding portion of the CARES Act was just one piece of the great private-school bailout of 2020.

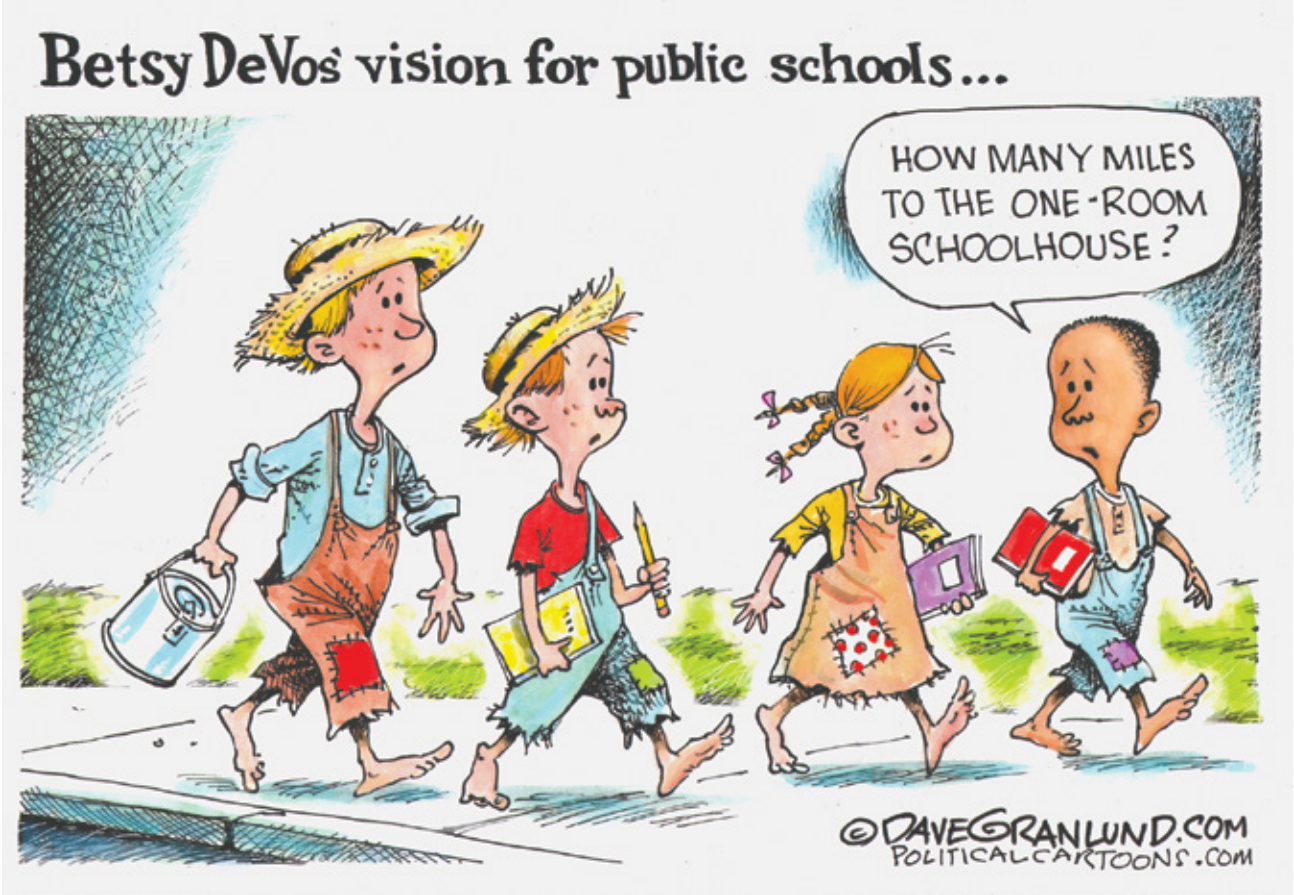
The \$5,000 per student figure for some private schools cited above comes out of the Paycheck Protection Program, which was established by the CARES Act and implemented by the Small Business Administration. Public schools aren't eligible for PPP money, which is technically a loan but will be forgiven if the funds are used for expenses that meet certain criteria. Although the SBA does not disclose exact loan amounts, it does make public the recipients receiving more than \$150,000 and identifies amounts within broad ranges.

With this information, we know that Buckingham Browne & Nichols School, a private pre-K-12 school in Cambridge, Mass., with a \$75 million endowment and a student body of around 1,013, where annual tuition runs up to \$52,300, collected a loan of between \$5 and \$10 million — or roughly \$5,000 to \$10,000 per student. (The school did not respond to multiple requests to confirm the exact amount.)

Saint Ann's School in Brooklyn, N.Y., a private pre-K-12 school of around 1,090 pupils that does not grade its students but has nevertheless been wildly successful in placing graduates at highly selective colleges, received a loan within the same range, picking up a minimum of \$4,587 and up to \$9,174 per student. (The school also did not respond to requests to confirm the exact amount.)

Georgetown Preparatory School, which serves about 500 students on 93 acres in North Bethesda, Md., and whose notable alumni include Supreme Court Justices Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh, collected a \$2.7 million PPP loan, which works out to \$5,440 per student. According to an analysis by Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the total amount of large PPP loans given to private and religious schools was at least \$2.67 billion and as much as \$6.47 billion — or about half as much as the total for all schools under the CARES Act, even though private and religious schools educate only 10 percent of the nation's schoolchildren.

And these schools could potentially receive even



more. DeVos stuffed a provision in the CARES Act for "equitable services" that may send another \$1.35 billion, which might otherwise have gone to public schools, to private schools. She's also giving them a cut of the \$3 billion Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund.

Many of the private schools getting PPP money are already receiving substantial amounts of taxpayer funds through voucher programs. The flow is poised to dramatically increase, thanks to the Supreme Court decision in *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*, which barred Montana from excluding religious schools from a program that directs taxpayer funds to private schools through tuition grants to parents. In a certain sense, some private schools are starting to be treated like public schools: taxpayer-funded, only with much more money, fewer restrictions on who and how they must serve, and much less public oversight.

The religious school beneficiaries remain free, as they always have been, of the anti-discrimination

laws that apply to public schools. For example, Cathedral High School in Indiana took in a PPP loan of between \$2 and \$5 million (\$1,700 to \$4,200 per student), but it fired a teacher for having a same-sex spouse. The Foundation Academy in Winter Garden, Fla., whose 2016-17 handbook informs school families that the husband "has the God-given responsibility

to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family" while "a wife is to submit herself graciously" and which groups "homosexuality, lesbianism bisexuality" along with "bestiality" as grounds for expulsion, took in between \$1 million and \$2 million in PPP money. Americans United estimates that at least 4,006 religious schools, or about 70 percent of private school recipients, received large PPP loans.

There is no indication, however, that the private schools receiving PPP money are under anything like the pressure the Trump administration is applying to public schools to fully reopen. When Fairfax County public schools offered parents a choice between in-person and remote learning, DeVos denounced the move in vehement terms. (The district has since announced that the 2020-21 school year will be fully remote.) But the Fairmont Preparatory Academy of Anaheim, Calif., which took in a minimum of \$5 million, or \$7,700 per student in PPP money, is offering families the same choice, so far with no criticism from the Department of Education.

Republican proposals for emergency school funding reflect a fundamental prioritization of private over public education. The private regime has much more flexibility and many more resources; the public regime has far less money and fewer choices. Under the Republicans' proposed bill, public schools would potentially receive billions of dollars in aid — about \$1,200 per student. But the money comes with strings attached: Only public schools offering in-person classes, which pose a greater risk, would qualify for the funding. Meanwhile, private schools have their money as well as the freedom to decide how they may best deliver an education.

The administration's grotesque efforts to take money out of the schools that educate the overwhelming majority of American children in order to subsidize the disproportionately wealthy percentage of children who attend private schools should make the blood boil. And yet, this is much more than just another story about waste and corruption.



Betsy DeVos

Betsy DeVos did not take over the Department of Education in order to improve public education as we know it but to degrade it. She came to office with an ideology as simple as it is destructive: Government should get out of the business of education, she has consistently maintained. DeVos brought with her two powerful interest groups. On the one hand are the privatizers, on the other are the proselytizers, and both paws are reaching for the same pot of taxpayer money.

In a May radio interview, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Catholic archbishop of New York, asked DeVos whether she was trying to "utilize this particular crisis to ensure that justice is finally done." "Yes, absolutely," she replied. Alluding to her longstanding efforts to divert taxpayer money to sectarian schools, DeVos said, "For more than three decades that has been something that I'm passionate about."

The public has consistently underestimated the extremity of the agenda against public schooling. Listen more carefully to what DeVos and her backers are actually saying. For decades, Christian Nationalist leaders have denounced public schools as hotbeds of secularism. For just as long, reactionary economic ideologues have condemned them as breeding grounds for socialism. DeVos' boss simply repeats the message at a louder volume: During his Fourth of July speech at Mount Rushmore, President Trump said public schools are teaching kids to "hate our country" with a "far-left fascism that demands absolute allegiance." They all understand at some level that a robust public school system is one of the pillars of a modern, progressive, pluralistic, and democratic society. That's why they want to destroy it.

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

FFRF awards \$23,650

Winners of FFRF’s college essay contest

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 13 winners and 16 honorable mentions of the 2020 Michael Hakeem Memorial Essay Contest for Ongoing College Students (out of more than 200 entrants). FFRF has paid out a total of \$23,650 in award money to this year’s college contest winners.

Ongoing college students up to the age of 24 were asked to write a personal persuasive essay on the topic of “The Necessity of Freethought — Why I am Not Religious.”

This contest is named for the late Michael Hakeem, a sociology professor who was an FFRF board chair and active atheist known by generations of University of Wisconsin-Madison students for fine-tuning their reasoning skills. His bequest has been used to fund college essays since his death in 2006.

Winners, their ages, the colleges or universities they are attending and the award amounts are listed below, and winning essays are reprinted or excerpted in this issue.

First place

Asja Misner, 20, Indian River State College (Florida), \$3,500.

Second place (tie)

Katherine Lance, 20, Tarleton State University (Texas), \$3,000.
Reese Borlin, 19, Southern Illinois University, \$3,000.

Third place

Marquez Collins, 19, Savannah State University (Georgia), \$2,500.

Fourth Place

Anna Miller, 19, Bryn Mawr College (Pennsylvania), \$2,000.

Fifth place

Aaron Hill, 19, University of California-Berkeley, \$1,500.



Sixth place (tie)

Eli Faymonville, 19, Northern Michigan University, \$1,000.
Hannah Hawkins, 20, Shawnee State University (Ohio), \$1,000.

Seventh place

Anne Marie Nester, 19, Georgia Institute of Technology, \$750.

Eighth place

Brenna Bigenwald, 20, University of Pittsburgh, \$500.

Ninth place (tie)

Kirsten Cohns, 19, Brookhaven College (Texas), \$400.
Parker Randall, 20, University of Texas-San Antonio, \$400.

Tenth place

Karsten Barr-Rollins, 23, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (Florida), \$300.

Honorable mentions (\$200 each)

Hosanna Barrett, 20, West Virginia University
Sonja Bimberg, 18, University of Minnesota-Duluth
Indigo Bistrup-Peterson, 19, Carleton College (Minnesota)
Danika Brousseau, 20, University of New Mexico
Allison Burks, 24, University of Central Florida
Sam Christenson, 18, University of Maryland-Baltimore County
Maya Givens, 20, University of South Florida
Jenna Kornicki, 21, Columbia University (New York)
Gabriel Lebon, 20, Arizona State University
Winston McCurley, 20, University of Alabama-Huntsville
Justin Mitchell, 21, Ursinus College (Pennsylvania)
Fatima Montero, 18, Moore College of Art and Design (Pennsylvania)
Rachel Panettiere, 19, University of Georgia
Skylar Pinto, 18, Fairleigh Dickinson University (New Jersey)

Danielle Puccio, 19, University of North Carolina
Sharay Ropozo, 21, University of Washington

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 \$23,650 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. And we couldn’t judge these contests without our “faithful faithless” volunteer and staff readers and judges, including: Dan Barker, Darrell Barker, Kristina Daleiden, Bill Dunn, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Judi Jacobs, Linda Josheff, Dan Kettner, Katya Maes, Gloria Marquardt, Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey, Sue Schuetz, Lauryn Seering, PJ Slinger 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. All contests are open to any students attending a school in North America meeting the age/grade level eligibility, except the students of color contest, which is reserved for students of color to offer special support for a minority within a minority.

FFRF will be announcing the winners of the students of color contest and grad contest in upcoming issues of Freethought Today.

FIRST PLACE

Dear Religion, your time is fading fast

FFRF awarded Asja \$3,500 for this winning essay.

By Asja Misner

Dear Religion,

It has always astonished me that some people honestly believe your magnificent fables are non-fiction. They take your words at face value, and never question that maybe your purpose is dual-sided: to offer hope and conviction in a difficult world, and to control and subjugate. They are too fascinated and starstruck by your promises of answers, salvation, divinely defined purpose, and an escape from the harsh reality of death to realize that you’re harmful, as well. Sure, you’ve done a lot of good, and help countless people through tremendous atrocities. I’m not denying that. The capacity to do good and survive our struggles is already within us. You’re just slapping your name on a project you didn’t create. Despite the amount of good attributed to you, the amount of suffering and horrid acts you’ve been used as justification for heavily outweigh it, and that just doesn’t sit right with me.

It has always surprised me that you can cause so much needless harm, guilt, self-loathing and hatred in your followers, yet they continue to love



Asai Misner

you like gaslighted and brainwashed victims love an abusive partner. When we try to help these people you hurt so much, they say that we need to wake up and open our eyes. They say that we are the ones who are being harmed and need saving. They dig their nails in and fight for fear of being wrong and having to admit that not knowing is OK sometimes.

It amazes me that your followers can quote you and use you as “evidence”

to back their claims when they are on opposite sides of debates. It astounds me that they can look at your countless clear contradictions and don’t see the ridiculous mental gymnastics it takes for them to twist their views to compensate. They hold steadfast to what they want so badly to be true, like a toddler clutching their security blanket even after it’s been covered in mud.

It terrifies me that to survive, you depend on impeding free thought and inquiry. It’s sad that when asked a difficult question, your only real response is to have faith and believe in something despite the lack of any logic or real evidence in your favor. You stand so proudly in the way of science, education and the overall advancement of humanity because you know that the more people learn to use their critical thinking skills, the less you matter. The more we learn about the world around us, the smaller the gap you can fill. The more we learn to love ourselves and others and to show kindness and compassion for one another, the better life gets for everyone, and the more your ability to control and restrict freedom is diminished.

It fills me with hope that as the

“Like a virus, you need us to survive, but we are better off without you.”

world becomes more socially progressive as a whole, the more your followers are forced to backtrack, rationalize and question you, and the more equality and freedom there will be. If we sit back and do nothing because we think we deserve pain and suffering for making understandable human mistakes, the less yearning we have to fix the injustices we see and improve the human condition, which is the opposite of the love you claim to offer.

Freedom dies in theocracy. That’s why the happiest and healthiest countries are secular democracies. You had your time and place in history, but it’s coming to an end. Like a virus, you need us to survive, but we are better off without you.

Sincerely,
Your lifelong questioner
Asja, 20, is from Port St. Lucie, Fla., and attends Indian River State College, where Asja is majoring in organizational management. “I am an avid social and civil justice warrior, putting my full support behind the LGBT+ rights and BLM movements and am a vocal advocate for preserving/building separation of church and state.” Asja hopes for a career in higher education or nonprofit work.

SECOND PLACE (tie)

I am reverent, not religious

FFRF awarded Reese \$3,000.

By Reese Borlin

“A scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.” — The Boy Scout law

Reverent. Supposedly one must be religious to be reverent. But I was reverent. I showed “deep and solemn respect” when it came to the beliefs of others. I attended mandatory Sunday service on campouts. I respected the choice of scouts to pray before meals. I went through the motions. I drank the wine; I chewed the wafer.

And, yet, I had to lie to earn my Eagle Scout rank. Do you see the contradiction? The Boy Scouts of America preferred that I choose its definition of reverence over that of trustworthiness. I was supposed to place respect for a god over respect for myself. I could have believed in any number or type of gods, as long as I believed in “something beyond myself.”

I am deeply, profoundly reverent of my own human capacity for freethought. I cherish this ability over all else. I can make my own decisions, choose my be-

liefs. I control my own destiny. This isn’t a new feeling for me. In the third grade, I vividly remember a Catholic priest trying to convince me that this tiny bread — reminiscent of a stale, flat Cheerio — was, literally, the flesh of Jesus Christ. First: That’s gross. Second: Even my 9-year-old brain realized that there was something off about this whole thing. Fast forward a couple of years to when I was attending my friend’s youth group (mostly because some girl I liked was there). I enjoyed the games, but the small group sessions made me incredibly uncomfortable. I asked but one question for the three years I went: “Why do bad things still happen?” The leader rambled in circles for 20-plus minutes, but never gave a direct answer.

In fact, I have never heard a direct answer. Religion prevents us from seeing past our own privilege, becoming nearly blind to real suffering. Belief in a higher power placates our conscience, creating no moral imperative to help others. It acts as filler, providing meaning for those lacking it in their own human lives, or rather those who refuse to embrace their life as singular and their own: those who need the promise of something more to feel comfortable.

“Belief in a higher power placates our conscience, creating no moral imperative to help others.”



Reese Borlin

As human beings, we have the capacity for abstract thought. We can partake in seemingly joyless activities and obtain massive fulfillment from it. I gain happiness from running. My high school track coach was a pastor, and, to my surprise, he rarely brought religion into the mix. Yet, one day, he asked each of us to choose something we are running for “beyond ourselves.” I am rarely confrontational, but I blatantly disagreed. I run for myself. My answer made him glaringly uncomfortable and insulted. He “ran for God.” That statement made him feel as though he had done

right by his faith. There is no need to actively seek opportunities to better the lives of others when one can simply go jogging for God, therefore being the peak of morality. These thoughts perpetuate the ethical complacency created by religion. There is a chasm between what religion says is good and necessary versus what the world needs. With the climate crisis, current pandemic and volatile political situation, Earth needs more freethinkers: those who can see problems — real problems, not those invented by religious beliefs — for what they are and fix them.

As a freethinker, I am reverent in the purest definition of the word. I am “deeply and solemnly respectful” to my fellow people, to all species of Earthlings who coexist on this planet, and, most importantly, to what makes me human. Because of freethought, and without any threat of eternal damnation, I have realized my moral obligation to better the world, and I intend to live my life in a way that fixes real problems, rather than creating imaginary ones.

Reese, 19, is from Washington, Ill., and attends Southern Illinois University and is majoring in forestry with minors in Spanish and GIS studies. “I love nature. I identify with the outdoor recreation I pursue, and I want a career helping others do the same. I am an avid runner, having qualified for and ran the 2019 Boston Marathon in addition to various ultramarathons.”

SECOND PLACE (tie)

I cede to no one, not even God

FFRF awarded Katherine \$3,000.

By Katherine Lance

Since before I could even articulate the thought, I have philosophically opposed the idea of an omnipotent, omnipresent and omnibenevolent God. Most children do not wrestle with the problem of evil. However, being the victim of maternal abuse, I pondered evil daily and prayed to God nightly.

I read Mark Twain’s *The Mysterious Stranger* when I was 10 — and everything fell into place. Armed with this philosophical knowledge, I came to rely only on myself, unable to place my fate in the hands of such a callous handler as God. No God ever came to save me.

When I was 16, I told my mother she was forcing me to parent her, so she kicked me out. God never came for my older siblings. They simply left. God never came for my younger sister. At 14, I was 95 pounds

of pure desperation fighting an enraged grown woman. When it was time to write a testimony for court, I did not pray for God to give me strength. I relived all my worst memories alone in my head. And I got it done.

My grandmother’s death was the catalyst for my official break in faith. An impoverished Mexican immigrant, pregnant when she crossed the border and abused for much of her life, she was a victim of every obscene punishment life can offer. Despite this, she was deeply religious. My devout Catholic grandmother died enfeebled and in agony, wracked by cancer, despite her faith that God would save her. My mother called me stupid for not believing in God. I explained the problem of evil to her in this context and she never questioned my beliefs again.

“Belief in a higher power placates our conscience, creating no moral imperative to help others.”

Others are not satisfied, citing intelligent design. Religions first existed partly as a way for humans to explain the unexplainable. As we make further advances in scientific research, we have no need to assign deities to what we now know to be natural phenomena with rational explanations. Intelligent design as a concept is similarly invalid. As a student of biology, I can show you the meandering path of evolution in many organisms — pointless vestigial structures, deer antlers being made of cancer cells, legs serving as makeshift antennae in proturan insects. Koalas eat what is basically poison, have an almost completely smooth brain, and cannot recognize eucalyptus leaves as food unless the leaves are still on the branch. Pandas are terrible at reproduction and parental care, leading to their near functional extinction. Sloths sometimes confuse their own limbs for branches and fall to their deaths. Even the human skeleton is architecturally unsound. These are only a few examples of how evolution has taken place.

I will admit the natural rebuttal to that argument, which is that God only set the universe into motion and did not otherwise interfere — that there is no such thing as an act of God. I will allow this as a possibility, but I will never be religious. As someone who grew up with an abusive mother who so ardently believed in God, I have a natural place in my psyche where faith should lie. It is filled instead with statements to the contrary.



Katherine Lance

Cormac McCarthy writes in *The Crossing*, “There is no order in this world save that which death has put there.” This is the truth the religious wish to deny. By seeking comfort in God, we can turn a blind eye on the senselessness of suffering. I choose to overcome obstacles rather than pretend they do not exist. I take an active role in my life rather pray for happiness. All of myself is my own. I cede to no one, not even God.

Katherine, 20, is from Cedar Park, Texas, and attends Tarleton State University, majoring in wildlife sciences, with minors in natural resource ecology and entomology. “I spend much of my time hiking and working on my insect collection, and I am also a visual artist and creative writer. I use these skills to run a blog advocating for the conservation of insects, which are often wrongly vilified in popular media.”

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THIRD PLACE

I’m a minority within a minority

FFRF awarded Marquez \$2,500.

By Marquez Collins

I was 13 years old when I first rejected religion. I stopped attending church, stopped praying, and started thinking for myself. As a young Black teenager in America, I had automatically put a target on my back. I was a Black boy who did not believe in God — a minority within a minority. But what pushed me to alienate myself at such a young age? The simple answer is curiosity. However, the real reason is much more difficult to grasp.

Ever since I was old enough to understand the bible, I disagreed with it. I sat in church on Sundays and listened as the pastor would read scriptures that almost seemed to completely contradict his lifestyle and that of his followers.

One particular story that stuck with me was The Book of Exodus. In it, God told each Israelite household to find a lamb, kill it, then rub its blood on the top of the door. If the Israelites did not follow his instructions, all first-borns

“I decided that I would live by my own morals, thank myself for my accomplishments, and treat others with true love and fairness.

would be killed by the next morning. This was nothing short of mass murder done to prove a point. As a young boy, I questioned how so many people could believe this story was even possible, let alone agree that it was morally correct.

However, there were many more stories just like that one. Some were even more gruesome. So, one day when I had finally had enough, I asked my grandmother about it, believing she would be the most understanding toward my curiosity. I could not have been more wrong. My grandmother began to treat me as if I had a sickness. She would call priests to visit me, repeatedly remind me I would go to hell, and even take me to doctors to diagnose me with depression. However, I never lost sight of my original goal. I was determined to uncover more information on the widely accepted absurd and egregious acts described in the bible.

At that point in my life, I became almost obsessed with learning about the origin of the bible. I wanted to know why a “loving and forgiving” god would murder his own people. What I



Marquez Collins

uncovered left me even more conflicted. According to the bible, the Christian God created “angels” to carry out his will as messengers. One of his angels, Lucifer, disobeyed God and was cast out of heaven into a fiery world called hell. So, from then on, he is mentioned as the cause of all things evil. My problem was not with the extremity of the story. The entire bible was filled with unbelievable stories. My problem was with the obvious in-

congruity of this story. In the bible, it describes how everything God creates must be good. However, in this case, something God created became evil and powerful enough to affect everyday life. There were too many things wrong with this story for me. Why did “God’s creation” turn evil? Also, if God is all powerful, why did he not simply kill Lucifer in the same way he killed innocent people? I was only 13, but, from that point on, I knew I could never believe in Christianity.

Christianity was not the fit for me, but I knew there were many more religions to explore. And one by one, they all failed me just as much. Islam had clear misogynistic messages, and other religions seemed pointless to me. So, I decided that I would live by my own morals, thank myself for my accomplishments, and treat others with true love and fairness. Many people feel that religion acts as a guide for their success. Personally, I do not need an imaginary deity to determine how prosperous I would be. I am a proud minority within a minority, and I will succeed in life.

Marquez, 19, is from Stockbridge, Ga., and attends Savannah State University, majoring in biology. “My goal after college is to become a medical doctor or surgeon. I am also a self-taught barber and have been using that to help support myself through school.”

FOURTH PLACE

The easy answer

FFRF awarded Anna \$2,000.

By Anna Miller

“Why are you not religious?” I’ve spent much of my life answering this question, as if the default of our existence is believing a bearded man in the sky cares about our sexual practices and a malevolent being waits behind corners to tempt us into wrongdoing. Depending on the circumstance, I answer with varying degrees of honesty.

To the confused children I babysit, I am not religious because I wasn’t raised that way. I explain that I read about the Kingdom of Narnia before anyone ever told me about heaven, that in my world, Harry Potter had magic powers before Jesus did, and that thanks to Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*, Death was my first experience with an omnipotent being, not God. It is the easy answer, but not the whole truth.

To my fellow nonreligious friends, I am not religious because the concept of God has never made sense to me. I tell them that I can’t believe in the benevolent God promised by so many denominations while witnessing the common sufferings experienced by both believers and atheists alike. I say that it’s never seemed logical that the creator of the universe might care about the thoughts and experiences of lowly humans, and I am often not alone in expressing doubt about the effectiveness of prayers when so many go unanswered. Many of my



Anna Miller

fellow atheists agree that we’ve experienced the most profound periods of growth in our own personal development while searching for meaning without religion, experiences that we likely never would have enjoyed if our search for purpose began and ended with serving a God.

But it is with my religious friends that I am perhaps the most honest. I explain that I wasn’t raised in a religious household and that the idea of a God has never seemed logical, and with a defensiveness born of discomfortability, they nearly always tell me that their beliefs are built on something stronger than any uncertainty: faith. They are surprised when I agree.

If logic is the path to the center of a corn maze, faith is the bulldozer that razes the field. If critical thinking is careful tap dancing, then faith is a child stomping its foot.

When asked why I am not religious, I tell my religious friends that I don’t stand with any idea or organization or group of people that asks for unwavering, unconditional faith no matter the circumstances. I tell them that I cannot willingly operate within a system that insists there are fundamental truths that one should never question.

I express my concern that this method of relying on faith doesn’t leave room for honest reflection and reevaluation of individuals or an often patriarchal, xenophobic system. I confide in them that I worry too much about being manipulated to ever subscribe to an organized religion.

At this point, those religious friends who were trying to save my soul from eternal damnation realize that I’m a lost cause. We part ways amicably enough, both of us pitying the other in their ignorance. But of those who don’t depart immediately, I ask for more. I ask why they are religious, what prompted them to believe this particular story as the universal truth over all the other tales told around the world. I often find myself on the receiving end of an awkward shrug, an uncomfortable laugh, a confused

“If critical thinking is careful tap dancing, then faith is a child stomping its foot.

expression.

“I was raised that way,” they say. And I find myself hoping that they are only giving me the easy answer.

Anna, 19, is from Bellingham, Wash., and attends Bryn Mawr College. “I am an avid reader and writer and I love exploring the beautiful outdoors in the Pacific Northwest. I play soccer for Bryn Mawr College and volunteer with Holisticare Hospice in Philadelphia.”

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FIFTH PLACE

My own shelter in the storm

FFRF awarded Aaron \$1,500.

By Aaron Hill

The Ten Commandments, the Upanishads, the Muslim schools of Fiqh, the Gospels and countless other religious scriptures and traditions offer widely varying moral codes. I feel that no moral code can be held as absolute when so many exist, and in which none is evidently superior to another. Moreover, choosing a religion relies on one’s own conscience, and is not evidently superior to following that conscience to begin with. For these reasons, I am agnostic.

For the purposes of a philosophical thought experiment, let us assume the Christian faith and bible hold true, though this test works across countless traditions. Upon one’s death, most Christians agree that a final judgment is rendered that determines one’s eternal salvation or damnation. Herein dilemmas arise: Of the countless denominations that claim to be Christian and hold the bible as ultimate truth, each sect has varying and often conflicting codes that determine one’s everlasting fate. As an example, many denominations still condemn the use of contraceptives as a sin, but Presbyterians no longer do. Unless decisive revelatory evidence has been hidden from me, there is no way to distinguish Presbyterianism from Catholicism as closer to a divine truth, especially to some-



Aaron Hill

one raised outside of either tradition. Therefore, if after reading the bible or attending a particularly compelling sermon I ascribed absolute moral authority to Christian doctrine, how could I choose a denomination? This example ignores the even greater difficulties of choosing Christianity over, say, Sikhism. Choosing a religion or denomination to follow would therefore come down to my own moral compass determining which tradition best suited me, defeating the very purpose of choosing a religion to guide moral decisions in the first place.

This is not to say that I do not abide by any moral philosophy; I do. The ideas I live my life by are flexible over time, though strictly followed at any given point. While I have lived my life and bettered my understanding of humanity and the world, even my most closely held ideals have shifted and will undoubtedly continue to change.

This is the other critical reason I do not live my life by any religious doctrine: When I find my own views on any subject to be flawed, I can adjust them, but if I found my views to be out of sync with my adopted faith, to shift them would be heretical. For a concrete example, many faiths find homosexuality to be immoral, largely because of their pre-modern and cultural roots. As my understanding of human sexuality has shifted in my adolescence, so have my opinions on this subject.

I prefer this to mentally clashing with religious doctrines each time my ideas evolve. Simply put, no religion is likely to perfectly match my ideology and no religion will be able to be flexible enough to change with my own shifting beliefs. In the end, I’d rather light my own path with the blazing wisdom of countless philosophers and prophets than by the flick-

“I’d rather light my own path with the blazing wisdom of countless philosophers and prophets than by the flickering light of a single faith.

ering light of a single faith.

A Muslim parable from antiquity reasons that any religion is like a room with a leaky roof in a thunderstorm. Each has its own problems, yet offers great benefits. To switch to another would mean suffering through the rain and mud of faithlessness before settling in again to the equally leaky room of a new religion.

While that analogy concludes that one should be loyal to their faith, I see it applying to my life in a different manner. I have not settled for the inevitably leaky shelter of any religion, nor am I caught unprotected outside without guiding principles. I stand in the flawed chamber of my own morality and can slowly patch the holes in my own roof.

I need not accept my moral flaws as immutable truths of a religion. I can amend them.

Aaron, 19, is from Forest Falls, Calif., and attends the University of California-Berkeley, majoring in history with a minor in public policy. Aaron has been a writer and editor for the Berkeley Political Review, an activist in the campus chapter of the ACLU, and a campus coordinator for the Pete Buttigieg campaign and currently for Joe Biden’s campaign. Aaron hopes to attend law school and become a civil rights attorney.

SIXTH PLACE (tie)

Unabashed atheist, strong-willed scientist

FFRF awarded Eli \$1,000.

By Eli Faymonville

As a student looking to shift our agriculture system to more sustainable practices, I must rely on the concreteness of the natural world. In sustainable agriculture, there are many pieces of the puzzle to unlock biodiversity maintenance and high crop-yield support. Whether it be how fungi interact with surrounding plants, or understanding the scope of the soil microbiome, conservation botany is driven by change and progressed through natural means. For these reasons, I find believing

“I find comfort in knowing my life is not determined by anyone but me, which allows my faith and fear to be placed in what I know — the natural world.

in a higher power retrogressive.

Although raised Methodist, I am an unabashed atheist. While watching nature documentaries, I noticed the complexity and specificity of adaptations to an environment that each animal and organism exhibits. From a single-celled organism to a human brain, evolution carves our biological necessities to our environment. For evolution we have proof, for evolution we see continuity today, and evolution can be explained with the natural world.

Methodism, however, simply ignores this clear-cut evidence to explain how we, as an ecosystem, have arrived at our present state.



Eli Faymonville

As a scientist, this is an ideology carried with Christianity that I cannot avoid; my progress as an intellectual would be inverted, my mind would be closed, and I would be placing my faith outside of the natural world. Extrapolating my hope takes my reliance off of what I know through my studies, and places it in a gullible, vulnerable position of blind faith. Justifying major weather events as from the hand of God blinds populations to how our world functions. Likewise, justifying human-inflicting events like an assassination or polling results with religion

allows the individual to excuse the actions done by humankind and place the blame above the clouds. This is simply unacceptable. If we as a population don’t recognize our faults and predations on the natural world, we will not only teach our youth these habits, continuing the preposterous lies, but we will also fall at the hands of our own wrongdoing.

It is our duty, as citizens operating in an environmentally conscious atmosphere, to recognize the effect humanity has on nature, take the blame, and start

the change with concrete beliefs. With a belief placed beyond explanation, we are not able to move our communities toward a more aware and accepting atmosphere. We strive for such a society because, here, natural science is encouraged and accepted by all, allowing for bountiful opportunities of medical advancements, more self-awareness, a deeper connection with the environment, and children who would learn to never follow blindly.

I understand that religion provides hope, happiness, and in some cases, shelter and food. However, we must not forget the hate that is innately placed in the religious human heart because of religious differences. I am truly thankful for the awareness I’ve gained and the man I’ve become. Through arduous academics and copious community outreach, I find my success. I find comfort in knowing my life is not determined by anyone but me, which allows my faith and fear to be placed in what I know — the natural world. It is for these reasons that I am not only confident in my choice as an atheist, but proud to be aware as one.

Eli, 19, is from Iron Mountain, Mich., and attends Northern Michigan University, where he is majoring in botany and ecology. “I firmly believe in change through volunteerism. I believe change comes through positive relationships and trusted bonds within a community, and I see opportunities to create such an atmosphere through volunteerism,” he writes.



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SIXTH PLACE (tie)

My journey from Christianity to atheism

FFRF awarded Hannah \$1,000.

By Hannah Hawkins

I was 14, an eighth grader anxiously awaiting my first year of high school, when famous science educator Bill Nye debated Creation Museum founder Ken Ham on the scientific legitimacy of biblical creationism. Having watched “Bill Nye the Science Guy” in many of my science classes in school, I was curious to see Nye outside of the whimsical setting of his show. Having also been raised devoutly evangelical, however, I had decided before I had even watched the debate that I would not listen to anything Nye had to say. I distinctly remember giving myself a pep talk before listening to the debate, telling myself, “even though you like Bill Nye, he’s going to try to tell you things that aren’t true, so don’t listen to him.” As I watched the debate, I disregarded all of Nye’s seemingly logical arguments, and instead rallied behind Ham’s warped scientific understanding and staunch presupposition that the bible is infallible. By the end of the video, I was more confident than ever that the biblical creation story was true and was

“My mind was plagued with doubts that became harder and harder to ignore.

supported by scientific evidence. When my mental health deteriorated in my early teens and my suicidal ideations reached their boiling point, I turned to God and the bible to help me stay afloat. After watching the debate between Bill Nye and Ken Ham, I delved deep into the world of Christian apologetics and anti-evolutionary rhetoric. I would spend my free time reading books like Lee Strobel’s *The Case for a Creator* and looking up answers to tough questions posed by atheists. I engaged in several heated debates with atheist classmates about the legitimacy of intelligent design. In my mind, I was a defender of truth in a world that sought to destroy my faith. Even if I hated everything else about myself, at least I was right about this one thing. This passionate conviction kindled the flame in my heart just enough to keep my depression from overtaking me, and kept it aflame long enough for me to eventually realize how wrong I was. During my sophomore year of high school, it slowly dawned on me how fiercely I was twisting the bible’s words to narrowly align with modern science. I grew tired of reading parts of the bible



Hannah Hawkins

and trying desperately to understand them from a scientific perspective. I had lost my energy trying to explain why evolution was false and never having a solid enough answer. My mind was plagued with doubts that became harder and harder to ignore. Eventually, it stopped being atheists who questioned the validity of my faith, but myself. Instead of researching why creationism was right, I started researching why it was wrong. Instead of looking to the bible or Lee Strobel for the answer to my questions, I started looking to

credible scientists. Instead of blindly believing Ken Ham’s words on how the bible is backed by science, I rewatched the debate and saw the logical fallacies and confirmation bias behind his arguments. That same confirmation bias had blinded me to the truth for my whole life until that point. I am now 20 years old in my junior year of college and an atheist passionately against pseudoscience and the indoctrination of children. Religion shaped my life and worldview in a way that stifled my intellectual growth, left me reliant on an ancient text for my personal well-being, and gave me a false sense of superiority over nonbelievers and skeptics. As an atheist and freethinker, I am no longer bound by the words of the bible or the opinions of the church. I see the value in myself and others, untouched by religious prejudice. When I hear dissenting opinions, I incorporate them into my own viewpoint instead of ignoring their words altogether. Best of all, my journey as a freethinker did not end when I denounced God. A freethinker’s journey never ends. *Hannah, 20, is from Shelby, Ohio, and attends Shawnee State University, majoring in simulation and gaming engineering technology and minoring in information systems. “I am passionate about separation of church and state, women’s rights and gender equality in the technology field.”*

SEVENTH PLACE

Death is not to be feared

FFRF awarded Anne Marie \$750.

By Anne Marie Nester

When I was a junior in high school, a previously close friend of mine killed herself. She was a gender-nonconforming lesbian in an unaccepting religious household, and the years of abuse finally took its toll. To me, this was an unforgivable act of cruelty. Her parents killed their own child in the name of religion — and it was appalling. To have to attend a funeral that she would have hated in a church she didn’t conform to was incredibly painful. It was at this time that my superficial questioning of religion became serious reflection and eventually complete atheism. As harsh as it may come across, there was nothing more I hoped than for my friend to cease to be after her death. While she deserved respect and acceptance while she was alive, I thought the least that could be done is allow her to have peace. I can think of no fate worse for her than to be forced to continue on after being tortured to her breaking point. How cruel a twist of fate it would be if the people who caused her to take her own life were correct in their view of the world. This was too much for me to believe, and there began my staunch atheism. It was a very difficult road to take, however. Not only do you risk the ostracization of those who can’t accept differing points of views, but you are also forced to confront your deepest-rooted biological fear — the fear of death. For a healthy teenager, the idea of death is either too abstract to properly grasp, or



Anne Marie Nester

too horrifying to contemplate seriously for too long. And, indeed, the thought of losing my loved ones — and eventually myself — permanently with no chance of reunion or restoration was nightmarish for a long time. Time marched on as it does, and with time and new experiences, my worldview was expanded into a newfound sense of relief at death. This marked change was due to the steep physical and cognitive decline of my father beginning in my freshman year, which would end with his death in that first year of college. Having to watch something as painful as a loved one crying in pain as they lie on their deathbed would have most sane and empathetic people begging for a quicker death for them. This prompted the realization that death is not scary at

all. Rather life, and especially the decline of life, is the true terror. The only thing that every human being on the planet has in common is that we were born and that we will die. There is no fear in doing something that everyone else has done. It is far scarier to live a life of pain and regret than an ending to that pain and regret. This is ultimately why I never became a devout believer in religion. Believers often spend more time trying to better their next life than their current one, and that is no way to live. The most steadfast in their beliefs will also unrepentantly hurt those that they are supposed to love in the name of that belief. While there are many truly amazing and kind religious people out there, I find that they are generally that way in spite of their beliefs rather than because of them. Because, ultimately, religion is an ignorant concept at its best, and malicious and exploitative at its worst. While being an atheist can be very painful

“While there are many truly amazing and kind religious people out there, I find that they are generally that way in spite of their beliefs rather than because of them.

ful and difficult, it opens the door to being a more dynamic, thinking and feeling person. And that should be what we strive to achieve. Rather than abide by some arbitrary rules for the chance of a better afterlife, we should be maximizing our time here and now with each other. *Anne Marie, 19, is from Jesup, Ga., and attends the Georgia Institute of Technology, majoring in physics. “Ever since I was a little kid, I was nearly obsessed with space. Every book fair, I would buy books about space. My whole life, I wanted to grow up to study the stars, and now I finally have the opportunity to.”*

What Is a Freethinker?

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

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EIGHTH PLACE

The non-necessity of religion

FFRF awarded Brenna \$500 for her essay.

By Brenna Bigenwald

My religion — or rather my lack thereof — has been a topic I have defended for as long as I can remember. As a young atheist surrounded by individuals with differing opinions, I’ve gotten used to answering questions about why I choose to live without religion. The simple answer? I do not believe there is a higher power in any way, shape or form. Though this is ultimately what drives my life as an atheist, this answer does not do justice to the myriad other reasons I reject any theologies.

I was raised in an atheist household — a result of two parents who turned their backs on their Catholic upbringings to raise their children as freethinkers. My parents stressed the ideals of knowledge, reason and forming one’s own opinions, so I was educated on religion, not shielded from it.

Ultimately, it was my decision as to whether or not I would continue living as an atheist, but the choice was exceedingly easy after being raised to think for myself. I did not want to sacrifice my own viewpoints for those blindly endorsed by organized religion.

Even in elementary school, I was introduced to the constant propaganda



Brenna Bigenwald

of faith in America. I questioned why I was forced, at age 6, to stand before the American flag in the name of a god I did not believe in. My teachers claimed it was about respect for our country, but it made no sense to me why my beliefs were being thrown to the wayside in favor of a religion that not all citizens practice. America claims to follow the principle of separating church and state.

However, it is abundantly clear that monotheism — Christianity in particular — is exceedingly favored. Little dis-

plays of religion, like our currency or the use of the bible in court settings, all undermine the pretense that Americans are free to practice whatever religion they wish. Though I face no legal repercussions for being unreligious, this preference for particular beliefs makes freethinkers and those of less favorable religions feel like second-class citizens.

I also find religion to be wholly unnecessary in this day and age. Humans have an incredible amount of research and technology at our fingertips, research that has pointed time and time again to the lack of credibility of religious teachings. In ancient times, believers looked to scripture to explain the world around them, but that blind faith is pointless when we have science to guide us. Rather than following an ancient word that has been used to justify sexist and discriminatory actions, I prefer to look to reason and logic to guide my convictions.

People often mistake being holy for being moral when that is simply not the case. I do not need religion to be a good person; I was raised to be kind and generous without the threat of an afterlife looming over my head. It is not the fear of being rejected from heaven

that inspires my sense of morality, but rather empathy for my fellow human beings. As a young atheist, I am able to use reason and faithless goodwill to live a fulfilling life.

Simply put, I am an atheist because I find religion to be restrictive and unnecessary. My life without religion has not been a life without kindness or selflessness. Instead, it has been a life rooted in logic and filled with empathy. Even though my country undeniably favors religion, I hope there comes a day when there is not only a clear separation of church and state, but also a separation of religion from politics. I hope that more atheists are unafraid to speak out against religious institutions. I hope that all nations move toward becoming more secular, more educated and more peaceful.

Brenna, 20, is from Rochester, N.Y., and attends the University of Pittsburgh, and is majoring in rehabilitation science and minoring in education. Brenna plans to earn a doctorate in occupational therapy. “I am hoping to work with children, either in schools or a hospital setting, so that I can help children with developmental delays and disabilities live a happy and healthy childhood!”

“I did not want to sacrifice my own viewpoints for those blindly endorsed by organized religion.”

NINTH PLACE (tie)

Going against Black code

FFRF awarded Kirsten \$400.

By Kirsten Cohns

Growing up, I would wake up every Sunday and roll my eyes, like almost every young Black child. It was Sunday . . . we had to go to church. Which, for me, a young Black girl, meant I had to get the hot comb put on my head, which meant I had to hold my ear unless I wanted to get burned. I had to put on the poofy dress with flowers, topped with a colored cardigan, the white ruffle socks and squeaky white flats to match. I had to sit through a service and not fall asleep. I couldn’t laugh, I had to keep my legs closed. I had to clap when it was time to clap, I had to stand when it was time to stand. It was a routine, a boring one.

At the age of 18, I realized I was agnostic. I’ve realized how much church, God and the bible are a joke. I com-

pletely went against Black code. By Black code, I mean things that go unsaid in the Black community, but that we all do. The code I broke was believing in God. The majority of the Black community identify as Baptist or a believer of God in general. However, for me, God is questionable, to say the least.

I’ve always questioned God. My mother never communicated properly and used abuse. If God was real, why was my mother hurting me? When I was 15, I came out to my parents. God loves everyone, right? Why is the LGBTQ+ community an exception? Having sex before marriage, wearing mixed fabrics and getting tattoos are all sins — but everyone in my community draws the line at homosexuality. I don’t want to believe in something that’s supposed to love everyone

except me. That’s conditional love and I already get enough of that from my parents. I could never put myself in a position where I don’t feel loved.

Black church was pure comedy. Today, you can even find clips from Black churches being used as memes. I stopped going to church the same year I came out. The women “shouting” and making a scene by falling in church was embarrassing. At one point, my mom even did it and I just had to put my head down because I was so embarrassed. The only truly interesting thing about Black church was the sermon being wrapped around church drama. By the end of the sermon, we all would know who was cheating on who. The preacher never really taught me anything related to the bible — half the time it wasn’t even

opened.

The bible is the most questionable thing of all. Passages in the bible contradict themselves, so how do we really know the truth? For example, in the same verse (Galatians 6:2) it says, “For every man shall bear his own burden,” and then, “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” So, what am I supposed to do? The bible was written by humans who say they were prophets.

That’s why today I’m agnostic. I believe in the universe and its power, not a big man in the sky. I meditate, manifest positivity, love and light — something I never felt God could give.

Kirsten, 19, is from Pflugerville, Texas, and attends Brookhaven College with plans to major in business management. “I love dancing even though I’m not great at it. I love baking, taking photos, traveling and exercise. My love for baking has grown over the year because I’ve gone vegan and it’s fun to recreate the desserts I loved as a child.”

“I don’t want to believe in something that’s supposed to love everyone except me.”

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NINTH PLACE (tie)

How religion tore my family apart

FFRF awarded Parker \$400 for the essay.

By Parker Randall

I have had a long, twisted journey with religion ever since I was a baby. I grew up in a conservative, Southern Baptist home with a preacher for a grandfather. I learned the books of the bible before I learned the full alphabet. I spent all my free time at the church cleaning, volunteering, being in plays and going to youth group. The church was all I ever knew.

But nobody prepared me for what it meant to go against the church’s teachings. I identified as a lesbian at age 13 when I realized I liked girls the way I was meant to like boys. Of course, I knew this behavior was unacceptable in the Lord’s eyes and that I was a dirty sinner. I kept quiet about it and no one in my school or my family knew about my orientation. I would sneak lesbian-centric books on my Kindle, watch LGBT content creators on YouTube, and quietly watch lesbian movies when my parents were asleep. I was determined to hide until I was 18 and could leave.

“I am against organized religion because people who uphold a religion hold that deity above all else.

However, life had other plans for me. I went to a boarding school my junior year to get some college credit. The school was a college-level preparatory institution that only accepted the top 10 percent of the state’s students. Being the home of highly intelligent individuals, there was a lot of diversity among the student body and it was very inclusive. I was able to come out about my sexuality, meet other LGBT people, and have a place to express who I was. It was here when I realized I was actually a transgender man and became comfortable in my own skin.

I would have visits home where I would go back into the closet for a brief period of time. I would answer to my birth name instead of my preferred one, attend church with my family, lie about my beliefs and stay hidden. Every time I went home, I couldn’t wait to go back to school. But right before my high school graduation, I came out to my mom as a transgender man. I wanted to tell her before graduation because she was not as conservative as my father. I hoped we could stay in contact.

Turns out, she had no intentions of keeping my secret and told my father.



Parker Randall

He degraded me, insulted me, told me that I was an abomination before God and that he would never support me. I cried almost every night over his words. I was torn between making him happy or making myself happy.

I am an atheist because religion is the reason I lost my family. My parents told me the entire reason they won’t support my transition is because it is against their beliefs. Christianity has

torn a hole in my heart and left a gap where my family should be. I reject religion because I know I am not the only one hurt by it. I know there are other people in the world torn from their loved ones over religious beliefs. Religion leaves people emotionally and psychologically scarred for life. I am against organized religion because people who uphold a religion hold that deity above all else.

Religion is a terrifying form of power and authority over others. You can use religion to intimidate people into believing the same way because, if you don’t, you’ll burn in hell for eternity. The leaders of religious organizations have embedded their own beliefs and agendas into the fabric of churches. I choose to be a freethinker because I refuse to be bullied any longer. I refuse to stay silent as religious leaders poison people’s minds in the name of spirituality. I choose atheism because I have the free will to believe what I want without someone making the decision for me.

Parker, 20, is from San Antonio, and attends the University of Texas-San Antonio, majoring in politics and law. “I want to use my education to revamp the American political system and government to better serve the people over the politicians. One day, I hope to be the first openly transgender male senator and president,” Parker writes.

TENTH PLACE

Journey to rationality

FFRF awarded Karsten \$300.

By Karsten Barr-Rollins

I am fortunate to have grown up with many of my grandparents still alive. They all have different religious views and I was exposed to each of them. Always the question hit me: How can they all be so certain? I spent my high school years trying to find out if there was a possibility that they might all have a basis in truth. After all, so many people couldn’t be so wrong, right?

In college, I started to explore religious ideas, and why people believe what they believe.

I would hear the same arguments from believers. The watchmaker analogy, the Kalam cosmological argument, “creation implies a creator,” yet many of their arguments were flawed and relied upon at least one logical fallacy, and ultimately, faith.

Faith has had many different usages in history. However, today it seems to be used as a shield to questions. “You’ve just got to have faith” or “I believe it on faith” seems to be the foundation of a lot of individual perspectives. But, faith is not a good way to discover what is most probably true. If it were, then people who had faith in things would agree on what they have faith in and that is not the case. Rather, even within a religion, there exists division and conflict. Instead, we should focus on rational conversation and logical processes based on evidence to achieve a better understanding of the world around us.

Faith has been one of the greatest dividers for humanity. It has been the cause of some of the bloodiest wars. When religion dominates, diplomacy fails, and toleration becomes treason and blasphemy. Perhaps a religion is true, but we will never discover that without the freedom of discourse provided by living in a secular society, a society that I can promote.

I have always held to the idea that we should search for the truth and accept it, even if it’s uncomfortable. I am passionate about science and the pursuit of knowledge, and that has led to my current, tentative beliefs.

I left college to enlist in the Air Force. Before I left, I was asking an NCO I knew from college about some tips for basic military training (BMT). Her recommendation: “Sundays are important. Go to a church. If you’re not religious before BMT, you will be when you’re done.”

However, thanks to the college culture of mixing worldviews, I had already rejected Christianity, but I was curious what other beliefs could be out there. On our first Sunday off of BMT, I was able to go to the “Atheists and Secular Humanists” meeting. At the first meeting, we learned about humanism and it was a “eureka” moment for me. Everything just clicked. It described me and my outlook. It wasn’t a framework I needed to mold myself to, it was more like putting on

“[Humanism] wasn’t a framework I needed to mold myself to, it was more like putting on a jacket that had been tailored to me.

a jacket that had been tailored to me.

I am an active duty airman in the United States Air Force. I am a secular humanist. I am a father, a husband and a student. I serve my community,

my country, my family and myself. I am able to do so without the permission of, or declaration from, a supernatural force. I do my best in the positions I am in to be the best I can be and to help others realize

their full potential. I don’t do it for a reward in some far-away paradise. I do it because I believe it is the right thing to do. This is the only life we get, and I believe that we should do our best to improve the lives of others.

Karsten, 23, is from Wichita, Kan., and attends Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, majoring in aeronautics.



Karsten Barr-Rollins

Yip Harburg, from his book: Rhymes for the Irreverent



Shall I write a letter to my Congressman?

Each Congressman has got two ends,
A sitting and a thinking end,
And since his whole success depends
Upon his seat — why bother, friend?

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

Buy it from FFRF online — ffrf.org/shop

College essay honorable mentions

FFRF awarded honorable mentions to 16 college students, with each receiving \$200 (and an additional \$100 for those who were a member of a secular student club).

Here are excerpts and bios from those students. To read their entire essays, go to freethoughttoday.com.

By Sam Christenson

When I saw that the rules supposedly created by God are picked through and selectively followed, religion seemed increasingly like an illogical human imposition on the world. As a scientist, this lack of logic makes it impossible for me to believe in the teachings of most major religions, as I am unable to commit to such a far-fetched hypothesis without proof.

Sam, 18, is from Rockville, Md., and attends the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, majoring in biochemistry and molecular biology with minors in sexuality studies and early medieval and modern studies.

By Danika Brousseau

I believe that no one should be blamed for another person's sin. I believe that striving to bring kindness into a cruel world is often the best we can do. I may not be the Christian girl that my parents wanted me to be, but I still want to make the world a better place to live. Why isn't that enough for others?

Danika, 20, is from Albuquerque, N.M., and attends the University of New Mexico, majoring in history, anthropology and archaeology.

By Maya Givens

Being able to develop a perspective unbound by the rules of Christianity was like a rebirth. I felt I was finally discovering who I actually was. The more I experienced life, the more I found better ways to live without religious confinement. I found people to love and people who also returned love.

Maya, 20, is from Tampa, Fla., and attends the University of South Florida, where she is majoring in biomedical sciences. "I'm a military dependent, so I've spent most of my life traveling the world and gaining valuable cultural experiences."

By Hosanna Barrett

I knew from an early age that I was not going to be made ashamed of my sex. I do not intend to accept a lesser place in life. Like my foremothers, I am going to seek the truth, revel in my achievements and make my voice heard. Now, instead of obeying the arbitrary commands of my father, I am free to revel in the accomplishments of the great women and men whose



Hosanna Barrett

shoulders I stand on.

Hosanna, 20, is from Keyser, W.Va., and attends West Virginia University, majoring in biology. She plans to go to grad school to pursue research or teaching.

By Sonja Bimberg

I was 15. Desperate, confused, and lonely, I turned to online forums for other people who had left or been kicked out of my specific church, and there, I found somewhere to belong. These forums were populated with all sorts of different people. We all had one thing in common. We had, in various ways, been rejected by the very people who claimed that God's love was unconditional. This was where my break from religion truly began.

Sonja, 18, is from Watertown, Minn., attends the University of Minnesota-Duluth and is majoring in history and German.

By Winston McCurley

My closest friends are straight, bisexual, gay, liberal, conservative, Christian, agnostic, atheist and Wiccan, and I love and identify with all of them, not due to their religions or preferences, but because of their inherent qualities — their characters and their personalities.

Winston, 20, is from Hartselle, Ala., and attends the University of Alabama-Huntsville, majoring in nursing.

By Skylar Pinto

While practicing for his Bar Mitzvah, my friend discovered he had to recite this verse during his Torah portion: "Thou shalt not lie with mankind; as with womankind; it is detestable." My friend is gay, so reciting this line goes against part of his identity. He asked our rabbi if this verse could be removed from his Torah portion, and the rabbi declined. I was disgusted by this response.

Skylar, 18, is from Pipersville, Pa., and attends Fairleigh Dickinson University, where she is a film major.

By Sharay Rapozo



Sharay Rapozo

When I was younger, I nearly resented the fact that I was not religious. I questioned why I did not have the same experiences as my friends — I was left out of conversations,

I was left behind. As I have matured, I have come to realize that my mother's decision to not bring me up religious was, ironically, a blessing in disguise.

Sharay, 21, is from Makaweli, Hawaii, and attends the University of Washington, majoring in political science.

By Danielle Puccio

The rejection of religion is the grandest act of faith; it declares a confidence in each other that builds community, resists selfishness, and directs us toward a world guided by mutual care rather than fatally useless offerings of "thoughts and prayers."

Danielle, 19, is from Cary, N.C., and attends the University of North Carolina, double majoring in communication studies and women's and gender studies.

By Fatima Montero

Liberation lies not under the dominating suppression of God, but under the knowledge of our power and control over ourselves and our lives. I strongly believe that in order to secure basic human rights such as housing, food, water and health care, we must reject organized religion and reckon with the violence it has imposed on marginalized peoples.

Fatima, 18, is from Bethlehem, Pa., and attends Moore College of Art and Design. "I am a lesbian Mexican who loves heavy metal, anarchy and creating occultist art."

By Jenna Kornicki

If each and every human being learned to think freely, rather than blindly follow religious dictates, we could make judgments that are entirely our own, based on independent research and experience, and the world would become a much more tolerant, progressive, and collaborative entity.

Jenna, 21, is from Sicklerville, N.J., and attends Columbia University, majoring in chemical engineering.

By Rachel Panettiere

I will admit it is easier to accept what you are told as true than to form your own opinions. I strongly maintain, however, that a moral code is instinctual, and that understanding what it means to be a good person does not require a religious establishment.

Rachel, 19, is from Acworth, Ga., and attends the University of Georgia, majoring in economics and minoring in Arabic.

By Gabriel Lebon

Converting to Islam, or any other religion, would have required me to deny basic facts I know about the universe and to accept, as dogma, principles that I have always believed to be a matter of debate. None of the major Abrahamic religions of the world appealed to me, since their holy books fundamentally contradict a mountain of scientific data concerning the age of the planet and the origin of our species.

Gabriel, 20, is from Grovetown, Ga., and attends Arizona State University, majoring in computer engineering.

By Justin Mitchell

I had spent the first years of my life following a religion that would sooner hide the truth than acknowledge it, all in an effort to maintain the illusion that creationism is the only model that works. The religious dogma I was willingly following was responsible for the proliferation of misinformation and a woefully oblivious populous.

Justin, 21, is from Doylestown, Pa., and attends Ursinus College, majoring in history and would like to be a museum curator.

By Indigo Bistrup-Peterson

People turn to religion in order to quell their fears of the unknown. Realizing this helped me cement my own belief in myself, and I began to act on it. I started by omitting the word "God" in the pledge. Then I stood up but didn't say the pledge at all. One day I didn't even stand for the pledge and was immediately chastised by my teacher for disrespecting our country. Even so, I was finally starting to feel like my true self.

Indigo, 19, is from Foreston, Minn., and attends Carleton College, majoring in English.

By Allison Burks

Religion only has power, revelation, brainwashing and dogma as its methods and no way of proving its claims false, which is why there are thousands of religions all making opposing declarations about the universe. Religion is too confusing, contradictory and scientifically ambiguous for me to reconcile.

Allison, 24, is from Orlando, Fla., and attends the University of Central Florida, majoring in clinical psychology.

LETTERBOX

James A. Haught is a pillar of freethought

Thank you for publishing another fantastic short piece by James A. Haught. He's a pillar of freethought in the vein of Voltaire, Thomas Paine, Christopher Hitchens, Dan Barker and countless others.

I look forward to each of these concise, insightful articles by James Haught. I wish he could keep on writing forever.

Bruce Kopetz
Michigan

FFRF sticker should be made available to more

My FFRF bumper sticker ("Religion, the original fake news") continues to draw attention and gives personal satisfaction. Now, when I am stuck in traffic, I am less annoyed knowing that the drivers behind me are receiving a thought-provoking message, piquing both their religious and political views.

I would like to encourage greater participation in displaying this message. If an anonymous member donated \$500 and offered free bumper stickers to FFRF members requesting one, how many stickers would that be?

Anonymous
Texas

September issue was beautifully well-written

The September issue was beautifully well-written. Thank you, everyone, for your hard work on this!

Patrick Lindley
California

God born when we took madmen at their word

This little rant was inspired by two posts in rapid succession. (One preacher claiming that masks are satanic because God can't hear you pray through a mask, and another saying that vegetarian burgers will alter your DNA so you are no longer human, and then Christ can't save you.)

Only he heard the voices, no one else could, demanding he murder his child.

Some say God talked freely with people in biblical times, and now is silent because, you know, abortion and gay marriage.

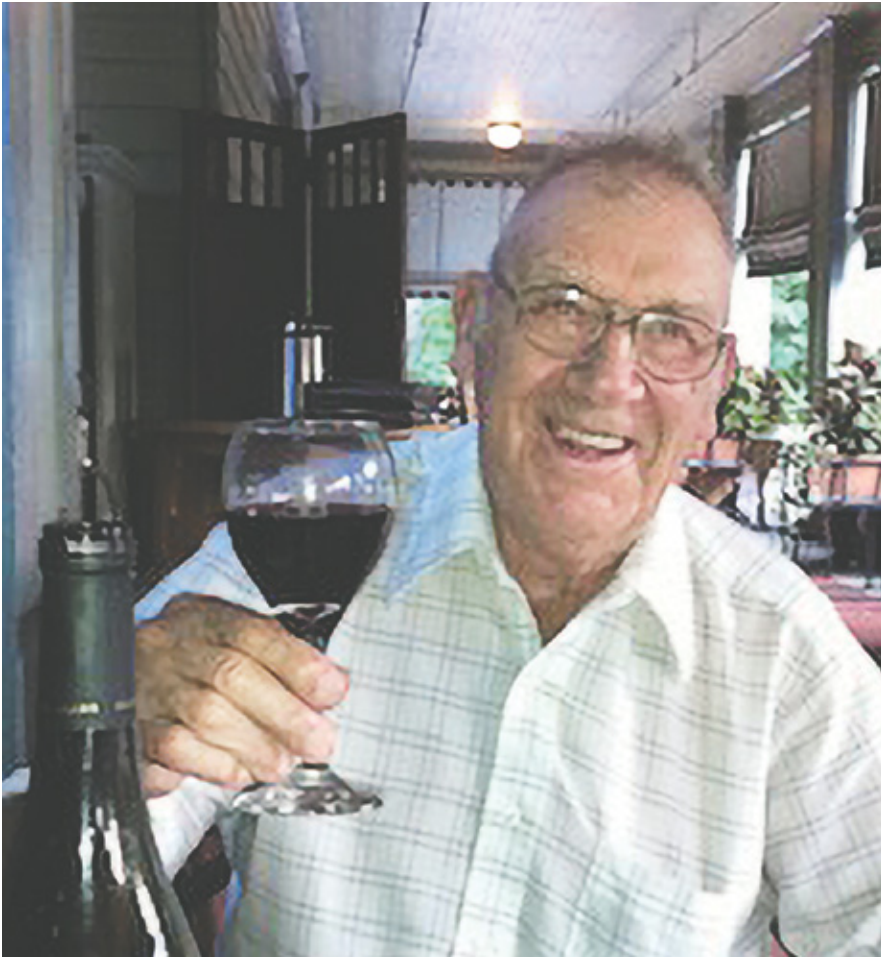
Some say God was our first attempt to explain a world where sometimes the crops thrived and sometimes they failed.

Some say it's been a protection racket all along. Pay up, people, or go to hell.

I say God was born when we took the madmen at their word, and every schizophrenic was a prophet. Even today, the Jim Bakkers and Joel Osteens and Pat Robertsons have their mansions and yachts and private jets, all because they imagine some private hotline to God. Think how much more so the ancients may have revered the madmen, chosen by God to hear his voice.

The founding patriarch of the revealed religions only spared his son's life when the voice in his head said he could.

Linda Palter
Michigan



Nancy Kopp writes: "This is a photo of my dad, Rudy Kopp, from about nine years ago. He was the best person I have ever known and was a wonderful example of how a nonbeliever can be an honest human being who was always trying to make the world a better place."

My father loved the FFRF Reagan ad

On the one-year anniversary of my father's death, I am enclosing a check to FFRF in his memory. I would appreciate it if you would put this money toward your advertising budget. My dad loved the Ron Reagan commercial and if he knew in advance it was going to be aired, he would make a point to watch whatever program carried it.

My dad lived a long, happy and productive life and had his wits about him until the end. Although some expected him to make a deathbed conversion, Dad was a lifelong atheist, not afraid of burning in hell. I shared my issues of Freethought Today with him and he always enjoyed them.

Nancy A. Kopp
Wisconsin

Chief Justice Roberts lied regarding Espinoza

In the case of *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*, Chief Justice John Roberts said, "A state need not subsidize private education, but once it decides to do so it cannot disqualify some private schools because they are religious." That would be good law if those were the facts of this case, but the state of Montana disqualified taxpayer aid to all private education, religious or not. Chief Justice Roberts lied!

Douglas Norberg
Nevada

There's only one way to argue with Christians

Miklos Jako's column on how to argue with Christians could not be more wrong. While exchanging biblical jabs between a nonbeliever and a Christian might be entertaining, good theater at colleges, and fun between friends and even for writing books, it is pointless for a genuine refutation of Christianity.

For the latter, this is how it should go:

Nonbeliever: "Show me proof your god exists."

Christian: "The bible says . . ."

Nonbeliever: "Stop! The bible is only

relevant if it is the written word of your god. Until you prove your god exists, it is evidence of nothing. So again, show me proof your god exists."

Sadly, for entertainment purposes, this is a very short exchange. But to "effectively" argue with Christians using their own scriptures makes no sense.

John Steiner
California

Thanks for getting rid of awful religious event

I just want to say thank you for working to get rid of the spring tea event in Muskogee County, Okla. I went to this in 2011 and it was really awful. I always wanted to make sure that nobody else would have to go, and I never had the resources or the power to make that happen.

Please keep fighting programs like this. Just because Muskogee isn't doing this anymore doesn't mean that other school districts aren't. The speaker who spoke to us was Carol Sallee, and her website still markets her as a school speaker. I hope that someday Oklahoma is free from character-based abstinence programs that make girls feel like trash or, in the words of Carol Sallee, "a paper plate."

Emily Dean
Oklahoma

People are religious for comfort, the afterlife

I found it interesting that two articles on the same page in the August issue of Freethought Today seemed to me to be making unwarranted assumptions about the religious.

James Haught couldn't imagine why anyone needs the supernatural when reality is so amazing, and Barbara Walker accuses religion of being a scam, as theologians try to adapt their doctrines to reality. However, I don't think the average religious American is being scammed into believing or needs to believe in something amazing. I think the religious are religious simply because they find it comforting to believe. They don't need an amazing God — just one that assures them of an afterlife where they will be reunited with their dead loved ones and one they can pray to when times are bad (as an adult replacement for the parents children turn to for comfort). Even if the theologians didn't come up with reasons why prayers are not answered, people would still pray because they need the hope that prayers give them (just as gamblers keep gambling even if they rarely win).

I think these reasons are why human-kind invented and maintains its religions, although I admit that, once religions become organized, scamming is inevitable. It is evolutionarily helpful to be able to enforce norms that benefit the group, including soliciting donations that are used to benefit the needy. However, absolute power (when you speak for God) corrupts absolutely, and the threat of hell can also be used to enforce things like requiring donations that are used mostly to benefit the church and those who run it, sending people to war to defend the beliefs that empower those who run the churches, or even just telling people they must believe without asking any pesky questions. If those behaviors were all that people got from religion, though, humans would not be the religious people we are. My belief is that it is the comfort people derive from prayer and belief in an afterlife that maintains religion throughout diverse human societies.

Wendy V. Koch
Colorado

Sacrificing of chickens is pure animal abuse

While I am disturbed at a number of the news items I see in Freethought Today (especially religious institutions stealing money from taxpaying Americans such as myself), as a strong opponent of animal abuse, I find the story about the "chicken sacrifices" in New York doubly disturbing — mostly for the fact that anyone is going after these cultists as a matter of health instead of for the sake of the poor animals!

Steven Evans
Oklahoma

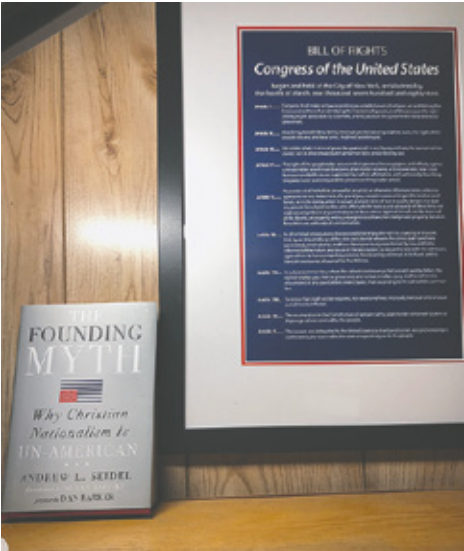
Cafeteria Christians are easier to convince

I always find articles, such as by Miklos Jako (August issue), on how to talk to the religious informative. But I disagree with the statement that "combating the conservative Christian is far more important." It is very difficult to convince true believers to question their beliefs. I target cafeteria Christians because they've already

taken a step away from core tenets. I think getting these people to stop calling themselves Christians and to stop donating to churches is a way to marginalize the conservative ones. But it is useful to pursue multiple strategies and I'm glad Jako tackles the harder problem.

Charles H. Jones
Oregon

Seidel’s book earns place in living room



Andrew Seidel’s unapologetic and crushing critique of Christian Nationalism earned him a special spot in my living room. I went out and bought a plaque of the Bill of Rights and another copy of his book, *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism Is Un-American*. I’m hoping I get the chance to offer the book to someone, who, after visiting my house and seeing the plaque, is curious as to its purpose in my living room beside this book.

Of course, I bought these items using my Amazon Smile FFRF page, which gives a portion back to one of my favorite charities. Keep up the good fight, FFRF!

Richard Gibble
Pennsylvania

Editor’s note: Thank you, Richard. You may purchase an autographed copy from ffrf.org/shop.

A kinder, gentler Crankmail section?

While reading the Crankmail feature in the September edition of Freethought Today, I couldn’t help but notice a total lack of the usual profanity. So, I’d like to take this opportunity to compliment that particular group of individuals who wrote to FFRF to express their delusional, fantasy-riddled and irrational perspectives on religion and the separation of church and state, yet managed to do so without resorting to vulgar, crass and vile expressions of disagreement.

Marcia Goodman
California

FFRF let me identify as ‘chaplain,’ unlike others

I sent an email supporting Do No Harm and noticed that FFRF is the only entity soliciting my actions or funds that lets me identify myself as “chaplain.” I worked as hard in web-based and classroom study for The Humanist Society to certify me as a humanist chaplain as I did for my B.A. from Syracuse, my M.A. from The American University, and my commission in the U.S. Navy. I’m 83, and done with all that buryin’ and marryin’ stuff, but I’m still active in the VA’s InHome Visits Program. COVID-19 has cut us back to phone visits, but we still do what we can for disabled/homebound vets. Thanks for recognizing my validity!

Roy Bates
New York

Why does FFRF capitalize the word ‘God’?

I question why we capitalize the word “god” in Freethought Today.

God is no one’s proper name, it is just one of many possible deities. Would it not be better to simply name the deity in question, or use “deity” in place of “God”? If deities do not exist, why do we capitalize that which does not exist? Very illogical.

Alexander Wallace
California

Editor’s note: FFRF capitalizes “God” when it is used as the name of a particular god. Also, things that do not exist have names that are capitalized (i.e. Mickey Mouse).

When is enough biblical nonsense enough?

When is proof enough proof? The worldwide scientific community has sent satellite probes billions of miles into an unfathomable universe. They have thousands of photos of many of the billions of suns, moons, galaxies, etc., right down to active volcanoes, ice caps, giant geysers, etc. But the bible sums it all up in Gen. 1:16 — “God also made the stars.” Bingo! Creation completed in six days!

But one thing these probes haven’t seen is any sign of heaven — you know, that place where angels, gods, souls and Jesus traverse. I see how people can buy into the delusion of heaven because it can make them feel kind of OK with dying, since they’ll be there with only people who also believe and think as they do.

Just when is enough of this total nonsense enough?

Tony Spahn
Florida

CRANKMAIL

Here is this month’s installment of Crankmail, letters and messages received by FFRF from some of its, shall we say, lesser fans. Printed as received.

Just a comment: What a sad organization!!!!!!

— Sharon Kleis

No More: Look..... it’s time you ridiculous troublemakers stop. You are bullying people by forcing them to take down things that in no way, shape, or form hurt you in the slightest. We dont harrass YOU because of your beliefs. Even though we know.... you’re wrong we shake our heads and leave you in peace. What you are doing is unconstitutional. And it’s time for it to come to an end. Or else we.... as the majority can stand and fight back. It’s time to stop... the bullying. — Lloyd Reed Jr.

Abortion and Gods Word: Your article on WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT ABORTION? is an atrocity, a mocking of God. The person or people who wrote this article are as lost as a goose in a

hail storm. They do not know holy scripture and its contexts according to the love of God, why & how he destroys all evil even the women and children, to wipe evil off the earth, the generations of evil. God forbids abortion. It is murder. Whoever sheds innocent blood, will be judged by God on judgement day. I certainly do not support any shedding of innocent blood by any means or abortion even if it pertains to a womans life. That is one of the consequences of getting pregnant, unfortunately, but if you get pregnant that chance of dying is there, that’s the chance you take bringing in a life into the world. You have sex, you better be ready to get pregnant even if you take precautions and know that you could die giving birth or have life complications. — Terry Hurd

Noah’s ark: The Noah’s ark display is not hurting anyone and it is always some atheist fool who gets their panties in a twist if they see something like this. Would you have the same response if it was a Muslim

Where do you Freethought?



At 9,500 feet above mid-Michigan in my little single engine airplane. Probably the safest place to think during the pandemic! (Yes, the autopilot is flying.)

David Osher
Michigan

FFRF helps give mother closure

I was reading my weekly emailed FFRF newsletter and was excited to read of your involvement with the Salem-Keizer (Ore.) School District. Your actions help me put closure to a situation I had with the district nearly 50 years ago.

I was the parent of two young boys who were enrolled in a Salem-Keizer elementary school. I’ll always remember the day my 8- and 6-year-old sons arrived home from school. They were the most excited I’d seen them. They flew into the house, each carrying a flyer inviting them to join a club — The Good News Club! The flyer promised them cookies, cupcakes, Kool-Aid, party games and bible stories. The best part: It was during school hours so they could miss their class to attend. All they needed was for me to sign the permission paper and they could both be club members.

One problem: Their father was Muslim and I was one of those cursed nonbelievers. I was a mother being faced with telling my two little boys that I wasn’t going to give my permission to them to be club members and party with their friends. (I had an epiphany when I was 7 years old. I was sitting in one of those little chairs at Sunday school listening to bible stories. Suddenly, it occurred to me that I was in a room full of people who were taking those crazy stories seriously. I was shocked and got out of the room as fast as I could. I never went back.)

What happened next was too lengthy to describe in detail. I met with

their teachers, school officials, legislators, etc. The end result: My sons were the only students in their class who weren’t allowed to join the club. They were required to sit at their desks doing class work while all their friends partied. Further exacerbating the situation, my sons’ teachers were required to remain in the classroom to monitor my sons instead of taking a break in the teachers’ lounge. Thus, my sons were furious with me and their teachers were, likewise. Every week for the remainder of the school year we suffered because we weren’t “good Christians.”

Reading about Salem-Keizer in my FFRF newsletter reminded me of how angry I felt years ago when I was unjustifiably faced with either disappointing my children and remaining true to myself or conforming to the pressure of other peoples’ religious beliefs. I’ve never questioned that I made the right decision, but I still feel anger about being placed in the situation of having to explain to my sons why my beliefs ostracized them from their friends.

I’m an old grandmother now. My two grandsons attend Salem-Keizer schools. I’d like to make a donation to FFRF so you can continue the fight against religion in our public schools. I wish FFRF would have been around for me so many years ago. Maybe you can use my donation to help in the continuing effort to remove religion from our schools.

Judith Hassoun
Oregon

display, I gather not, since FFRF would be too terrified to be labeled as Islamophobic in hear of having their heads cut off I bet. Anyway, just a reminder that God says that He will not be mocked, and what you sow you shall also reap in return. I pray that God will turn back on your own heads what you are doing to others. It would be a terrible thing if a freak tornado or earthquake were to destroy the FFRF headquarters there. By the way, don’t insurance companies refer to that as an “act of God.” — Rev. Robert Fritch

TORTURE BLASPHEMY: THEY POKED HOLES INTO MY THIRD EYE FORHEAD. DID OCCULT BLACK MAGIC. ASTERIAL PROJECTION CAUSING INJURY. CONTACTED ME SEXUAL MISCONDUCT. RECORDED MADE PORN. OR SEXUALLY GRAFFIC FILMS. HUMAN TRAFFICKED BY BUSH OBAMA AND TRUMP. KILLED MY FETUS. TORTURED PREGNANT. TORTURED BABIES. TORTURED CHILDREN. TORTURED PARENTS FOR NOT BEING ROMAN CATHOLIC. — Shelly Drouil-

lard

For God So Loved the World: (You have an open offer from God to receive his free gift of salvation. Won’t you consider accepting it instead of fighting Him? He does love you. I know you’ve wondered about it. While there’s still time. His offer isn’t open forever. That He Gave His Only Begotten Son — Arman Medosh

FFR: I wish EVERY person was FREE from ORGANIZED RELIGION . Yeshua Jesus is NOT a religion. He is THE WAY , THE TRUTH and THE LIFE and no man gets to the Father EXCEPT through HIM. Organized religion is man made AND NOT the truth in total. 99% truth and 1% lie is STILL a lie. Satan is trying to curb ANYTHING GODLY , TRUE GODLY , in this world and him and anyone that does not turn to the Creator of EVERYTHING , well, their destiny is the Lake of Fire FOREVER. — Elaine Gray

BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

Jose A. Lopez, 67, Mission Viejo, CA: Suspicion of committing lewd acts. Lopez volunteered as a pastor at Pacific Hills Calvary Chapel in Aliso Viejo from 2003–05 and at Compass Bible Church in Aliso Viejo from 2012–20, according to the Orange County Sheriff's Department.

He was arrested after the alleged victim reported Lopez started molesting her in 2010 when she was under 10 years old. She did not meet him through the church, authorities said.

Compass spokesman Brandon Mellor denied that Lopez had a pastoral role: "He never volunteered as a pastor at our church and he never volunteered in a role with kids in the children's ministry at our church," Mellor said in an email. "He served as a volunteer on a team of men that kept order in the parking lot." *Source: Pacifica Tribune, 8-28-20*

John C. Sapp Jr., 34, Hartly, DE: 89 counts, including continuous sexual abuse of a child, sexual abuse of a child by a person of trust, 4th-degree rape with a victim under the age of 18 and unlawful sexual contact. Sapp, a married youth leader at Maranatha Fellowship near Dover, is accused of sexual involvement with 2 girls in the group he led for 3 years.

One girl told investigators she and Sapp began a "secret relationship" in 2017 when she was 15 and that they had sex 2 or 3 times a month until June 2019. The other girl told officers her "secret sexual relationship" started when she was 16 and went from January 2019 to January 2020. *Source: News Journal, 8-26-20*

Andrew Kawecki, 65, Scottsdale, PA: Involuntary deviate sexual intercourse and 2 counts of indecent assault for alleged incidents when he was pastor at St. Cyril and Methodius Catholic Church in Fairchance. He's accused of assaulting an 11-year-old altar boy multiple times from 2004–07.

Allegations include forced masturbation and oral sex. Kaweck has served at 15 parishes in the Diocese of Greensburg since 1980, most recently as a trust adviser to Conn-Area Catholic School in Connellsville and pastor of parishes in Scottsdale and Everson. *Source: Tribune-Review, 8-26-20*

Shawn N. Waddell, 29, Warner Robins, GA: 3 counts of sexual exploitation of children and 4 counts of eavesdropping, surveillance or intercepting communication. Waddell, a part-time youth pastor at an unidentified church, is accused of alleged incidents involving 3 females in 2019–20, some tied to church-related functions. *Source: WGXA, 8-26-20*

Stricjavvar Strickland, 38, Kalamazoo, MI: 4 counts of 3rd-degree criminal sexual conduct, 4 counts of human trafficking of a minor for commercial sexual activity and 3 counts of child sexually abusive activity. Strickland, pastor at Second Baptist Church, is accused of crimes between 2015–18 involving teens between the ages of 15–17.

He allegedly paid teen boys \$100 to \$200 to have sex with his wife or to send him nude photos. Two of the 5 alleged victims were students at the public high school where Jazmonique Strickland worked as a secretary. She had not been charged as of this writing.

One boy told investigators he was given a car in exchange for letting the pastor perform oral sex on him. It's also alleged that Strickland engaged in similar behavior years ago with his ex-wife when they lived in Mississippi.

He also faces a misdemeanor assault and battery charge stemming from an incident with a church deacon. The Stricklands have 8 children. *Source: mlive.com/WOOD, 8-25-20*

Michael Zacharias, 53, Findlay, OH: Coercion and enticement, sex trafficking of a minor and sex trafficking of an adult by force, fraud or coercion. Zacharias, pastor at St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Parish, is accused of engaging in sexual conduct with minors since the late 1990s.

According to court documents, Zacharias manipulated and coerced drug-addicted boys and men into having sex. At his own request, he had a "confession video" recorded in 2015 showing him fondling a male.

In the video he's wearing clerical garb and at one point turns to the camera and says: "I first met [Victim #1] when he was in 6th grade at St. Catherine's and I was a seminarian. I knew from the first time I saw him that I wanted to suck his ----. ... I remember seeing him in the hospital, he had meningitis. I remember it was the two of us alone in the room. And I remember the back of his hospital gown opened up and I saw his a--. I wanted that sweet little a-- right then."

Victim #1 was found in possession of fentanyl in July, FBI investigators said. *Source: News-Messenger/Findlay Courier, 8-18-20*

Willie Forest, Goldwater, MS: 3 counts of child molestation. Forest, pastor of Springhill Missionary Baptist Church in Pope, may have had other victims, said District Attorney John Champion.

Source: Fox 13 Memphis, 8-17-20

Donato Cabardo, 56, Jersey City, NJ: Harassment and 2 counts of criminal sexual contact. Cabardo, pastor at St. Paul of the Cross Catholic Church, is charged with touching a parishioner's breast and buttocks and kissing her cheek between January and July in the church rectory. She first reported the allegations to the Archdiocese of Newark, which notified law enforcement. *Source: Daily Voice, 8-17-20*

Ian Reid, 32, Treadlight, Jamaica: Sexual intercourse with a person under 16. Reid, who is married and has a Christian music ministry in which he performs as "the Gospel Kid," is accused of having sex with a 15-year-old girl in July in an abandoned building.

In a 2019 interview about being hit by a care-less driver in 2010, Reid talked about deciding during a long recuperation to start going to church and joining Holiness Born Again Church of Jesus Christ: "One week, I was sitting at the back and the evangelist called me to sing a song. I closed my eyes so tight and took the microphone and started singing. When I finished singing the song, I saw everyone screaming and raising their hands. However, I thought they were laughing at me because I didn't know how the Holy Ghost worked at that time." *Source: Jamaica Gleaner, 8-12-20*

Kenneth C. Glasgow, 53, Dothan, AL: Unlawful possession of a controlled substance. Glasgow allegedly possessed crack cocaine when he was stopped for a traffic violation. He is co-founder of the Ordinary People Society, a ministry focused on addiction, poverty and life after incarceration.

Glasgow, a half-brother of the Rev. Al Sharpton, was arrested in January on a similar drug charge and for scuffling with and biting a police officer. *Source: al.com, 8-11-20*

Keisha Christley, Roanoke, VA: Embezzlement. Christley, director of the preschool at St. Mark's Lutheran Church, allegedly stole an undisclosed amount of money from the school between January 2016 and March 2020. The school is now closed for good due to lack of finances, Pastor James Armentrout announced. *Source: WDBJ, 8-11-20*

David Pettigrew, 48, Denison, TX: Transporting child pornography. Pettigrew, pastor of the Denison Church of the Nazarene since 2006, came to the attention of law enforcement officials through referrals from electronic surveillance providers and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

He is married to a teacher and they have 3 children, said the church's website. *Source: CBS Dallas, 8-7-20*

José A. Mena, 60, Houston: Continuous sexual abuse of a child. Mena, pastor of Pueblo de Dios, is accused of sexually assaulting a 9-year-old boy as recently as April. Allegations date back to Jan. 1. Mena turned himself in on July 27. *Source: KPRC, 8-7-20*

Jonathan Tsai, 40, Los Angeles: Oral copulation of a person under 16, sexual penetration of a person under 16 and 4 counts of lewd acts on a child under 14. The complainant alleges Tsai molested her for 6 years starting at age 12 when he was youth pastor at Home of Christians Eastern Los Angeles. He's now head pastor at the church, which has been renamed Abundant Life Ministries.

Two more women have reported assaults by Tsai when they were minors. Police in West Covina are investigating other allegations. *Source: KABC, 8-6-20*

Archie Emerson, 75, Smithfield, RI: 2nd-degree child molestation. Emerson, retired pastor at Ocean State Baptist Church, is accused of assaults on a girl between the ages of 6 and 11. Emerson "is shocked that someone would levy such horrific allegations against him," his attorney said. *Source: AP, 8-3-20*

The **unidentified chief priest** of Singapore's oldest Hindu temple was arrested on charges of criminal breach of trust as a servant. The Sri Mariamman Temple had lodged a complaint after finding that gold ornaments in the priest's custody were missing.

The priest, age 36, was questioned and later returned the missing items, the temple said in a statement. *Source: The Tribune, 8-2-20*

Francis Hughes, 65, Queens, NY: Receipt and distribution of child pornography. Hughes, pastor of St. Pancras Catholic Church, allegedly shared nude images with a 15-year-old boy he met on the hook-up app Grindr in February.

The teen asked if he could send an explicit image to Hughes, according to the indictment. "I'd never get mad about that," Hughes allegedly responded. "How would you like to be spoiled by your grandpa? ... We can try to make it a regular thing." *Source: NBC New York, 7-29-20*

Desmond Hicks, 34, George, Iowa: 2 counts of criminal sexual conduct. Hicks, former associate

pastor of youth and worship at Cornerstone Free Church in Pipestone, MN, is charged with repeated sexual touching of a boy, now an adult, starting in 7th grade.

At the time, the boy was in foster care with Hicks' now-wife, and would come to Pipestone to visit Hicks, who allegedly told police he thought the sexual contact was consensual.

"Desmond is the type of person that everybody falls in love with," Cornerstone pastor Steve Stahl said when Hicks was hired in 2013. "He has musical talents beyond belief." *Source: Worthington Globe, 7-29-20*

Denise A. Decker, 62, Duryea, PA: Felony theft and forgery and misdemeanor tampering with records. Decker, a 20-year employee of Nativity of Our Lord Parish, is accused of stealing \$98,206 while she was church secretary.

She allegedly admitted stealing for about 5 years. Police began collecting the trash from the curb at her home and recovered 65 donation envelopes, the complaint said. *Source: Citizens' Voice, 7-23-20*

Isac Calderon-Sierra, 22, Ville Platte, LA: 305 counts of possession of pornography involving juveniles under the age of 13 and 5 counts of sexual abuse of animals. Calderon-Sierra was a volunteer for a Catholic youth group that met at Our Lady Queen of All Saints Church.

When a reporter asked Blue Rolfes, Diocese of Lafayette communications director, when Calderon-Sierra volunteered or what his responsibilities were, she wouldn't say. *Source: Daily Advertiser, 7-23-20*

Pleaded / Convicted

Wayne W. Allen, 69, Ft. Wayne, IN: Guilty by jury on 2 counts of child molestation. Allen, who has a doctorate from Concordia Theological Seminary and worked for 13 years as an overseas missionary with World Partners, was charged with assaults on a girl who stayed overnight twice at his home between April 2017 and May 2018. The girl alleged that he crawled into bed with her and used his hand to manipulate her genitals.

The judge declared a mistrial last November due to possible juror taint after it was reported that the juror was seen riding with her father to court and that the father had been in the courtroom during the trial. *Source: NBC Ft. Wayne, 8-14-20*

Todd Spain Jr., 27, Pelham, NH: Pleaded guilty to assaulting his wife at the time on a hike in July 2019. Spain was employed as a youth minister at Crossroads Church until 2 days after his arrest. His father is lead pastor at Crossroads.

Molly Spain alleged she and her husband got into an argument after he admitted to having an affair. "When she turned to leave the mountain, she was struck in the back of the head with a rock," said an affidavit by Detective Brian King. She was taken to the hospital after calling 911 but wasn't seriously injured.

The plea agreement calls for him to serve 30 days in jail on weekends, 40 hours' community service, maintain good behavior for a year or serve another 23 months in custody and undergo anger management training. *Source: Eagle-Tribune, 8-11-20*

Sentenced

Jack Trieber, Santa Clara, CA, was fined \$10,000 for twice violating a health order by holding indoor services with vocal music at North Valley Baptist Church. Trieber justified the services by claiming the area was not a COVID-19 "hot spot."

"He's using the somewhat low numbers in Santa Clara County, which are the sign of success of their policies, to violate the policies and that's not very good," said Dr. Steven Goodman, Stanford University professor of epidemiology and associate dean of the school of medicine. *Source: KPIX, 8-27-20*

Rob McCoy, 56, Newbury Park, CA, who led services at Godspcak Calvary Chapel in violation of a health order, was held in contempt of court and his church was fined \$3,000.

"They're allowed to disagree with the court's order but there are consequences for acting in violation of a court order," said prosecutor Jaclyn Smith.

McCoy has been very vocal in urging other churches to resist public health orders. He ran as a Republican for state Assembly in 2014 and came within 5 percentage points of winning. *Source: KABC, 8-21-20*

David Astin, 38, Hermosa, SD: 3 years in prison, 3 years' supervised release and restitution of \$433,877 after pleading guilty to 3 counts of wire fraud involving a Rapid City anesthesiologist who was bilked. Judge Jeffrey Viken said he reviewed 23 pages of support letters written on Astin's behalf

that showed he had a strong religious background and was active in his church.

His attorney Paul Andrews said Astin's religious convictions kept him from using his Social Security number because he belongs to an anti-government "sovereign citizens" movement. He fled during the investigation that started in 2008 to Guatemala, where he met his wife, with whom he has 8 children.

His father, Ward Astin, pastor of Christ's Tabernacle Church for 19 years and also a sovereign citizen, was arrested for failure to obtain a state sales tax license for a business he had and pleaded no contest to a felony count in 2009. *Source: Rapid City Journal, 8-8-20*

David Lah, 43, Toronto, Canada, was sentenced in Myanmar to 3 months in jail for holding Christian church services in Yangon in defiance of a health order. Lah is a native Burmese. About 6% of Buddhist-majority Myanmar identify as Christian.

"If people hold the bible and Jesus in their hearts, the disease will not come in," he proclaimed in a video to a roomful of faithful. "The only person who can cure and give peace in this pandemic is Jesus."

About 20 people who took part in his gatherings in April, including Lah himself, eventually tested positive for COVID-19. That led to a cluster of 67 cases. *Source: Al Jazeera, 8-7-20*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church, Jamaica, NY, the **Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America** and former scoutmaster and teacher **Lawrence Svrcek** are defendants in 12 lawsuits in which Svrcek is accused of molesting the plaintiff and other children in the 1970s and 1980s.

The latest suit was filed in Queens and alleges Svrcek molested "S.G." starting in 1984 when the student attended Jamaica Day School, which was run by St. Demetrios Church. *Source: NY Post, 8-22-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Alexandria**, LA, is the sole named defendant in a suit filed by "Lou Doe," who alleges he was molested by **Leo Van Hoorn** in 1962–63 when he was in 1st or 2nd grade at Sacred Heart of Jesus School in Pineville.

Van Hoorn was suspended from active ministry in 1979, retired as a priest in 1983 and died at age 74 in 2006. The suit calls him a "diseased pedophile." *Source: Town Talk, 8-22-20*

John J. Jenik, the Catholic **Archdiocese of New York** and **Paul Gruber** are being sued by Shawn Ganley, who alleges Gruber molested him at age 14 in the 1980s at Our Lady of Refuge School in the Bronx. It's alleged Jenik was abusing minors himself when he "trafficked" Ganley to Gruber.

Gruber was convicted in the mid-1980s after another boy's parents complained. He's now a tutor in Arlington, VA. Jenik, 76, who oversaw the after-school program where Gruber volunteered, resigned as auxiliary bishop in 2019 due to a "credible and substantiated" abuse allegation. *Source: NY Post, 8-15-20*

Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, is being sued for negligence by "John Doe," who alleges former SU grad student and Olympic athlete **Conrad Mainwaring**, 68, sexually abused him. The school, founded in 1931 by the Methodist Episcopal Church, since 1920 has been affiliated with the United Methodist Church. Mainwaring ran the 110-meter hurdles in the 1976 Olympics for his native nation of Antigua and Barbuda.

According to a 2019 ESPN investigation, at least 41 men as young as 12 across 2 continents and 4 U.S. states have accused him of abuse, often while employed at prestigious institutions. Statutes of limitations have hindered criminal prosecution.

While working in student housing and counseling in 1987 at Caltech in Pasadena, he gave "Brian" a massage after a workout that ended in masturbating him, according to ESPN. Mainwaring was also certified in physiotherapy. "He was very clever, very diabolically clever because he was couching it as nonsexual," as a way of achieving mental toughness, Brian alleged.

"I looked at him like a Christian disciple because he would intersperse his weird, wacked-out teaching with Bible aphorisms here and there," said Brian, who is very religious. "Like cults use the Bible, he used it in a way that he knew had pull with me." *Source: Daily Orange, 8-14-20; ESPN, 8-1-19*

The Catholic **Diocese of Pittsburgh**, **Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church**, Cardinal **Donald Wuerl** and Bishop **David Zubik** are defendants in a suit brought by William Schneider, 65, who alleges he was 8 when he was molested in the 1960s by **James Somma**, a priest who died in 2004.

Schneider's sister reported similar abuse to the diocese in the late 1990s but church leaders dismissed her claim and she died before filing a lawsuit. Another woman who reported abuse was allegedly told Somma shouldn't be removed because of his "strong denial, sterling military career,

the passage of time and [the alleged victim's] admitted psychiatric treatment." *Source: Ellwood City Ledger, 8-12-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Albany**, NY, former Bishop **Howard J. Hubbard** and **St. Francis of Assisi Parish** are defendants in a suit filed by a South Carolina man who alleges he was 10 when Hubbard sexually abused him in 1975 during a church-sponsored bus trip to West Point Military Academy and on other occasions.

It's the 5th suit alleging abuse by Hubbard. Abuse by another priest, **Cabell B. Marbury**, is also alleged. Marbury taught at Cardinal McCloskey Memorial High School in Albany. "This priest forced [the plaintiff] to touch him, and the priest touched him. He was also forced to have anal sex with this priest," the suit asserts.

Hubbard retired in 2014, the same year Marbury died. *Source: Times-Union, 8-12-20*

St. Stephen's Catholic Parish and School, Grand Island, NY, is accused by plaintiff "PB-22 DOE" of enabling now-deceased priest **Lynn Shumway** to molest him in 6th grade in 2009. It's alleged Shumway "lured Plaintiff to the church bathroom" and "engaged in unpermitted, forcible and harmful sexual contact" during a school assembly.

Shumway, who wasn't ordained until age 55, died in 2019 at age 71. He also taught Latin at Bishop Duffy High School. *Source: WKBW, 8-11-20*

Bridge Bible Church, Bakersfield, CA, and **Eric Simpson**, former pastor of transformation, are named in a suit filed by an anonymous plaintiff alleging Simpson abused his position as a Mennonite Brethren marriage counselor to make sexual advances.

The plaintiff and her husband were counseled by Simpson for 9 months starting in 2016. She alleges he started one-on-one therapy sessions with her in 2018, using "his position of authority and trust to initiate repeated physical contact of a sexual nature on Plaintiff. He also bombarded her with sexually explicit and graphic comments."

Pastor Jeff Gowling later announced to the congregation that Simpson would no longer be working at the church because of "an inappropriate relationship with a female member." He received a severance package and outside financial support and returned to counseling, now at Hume Lake Christian Camps. *Source: Mennonite World Review, 8-10-20*

Immaculate Conception Catholic Parish, Bloomfield, PA, Cardinal **Donald Wuerl** and Diocese of Pittsburgh Bishop **David Zubik** are being sued by Gennaro Greco, who alleges he was raped twice in 1967 as an altar boy by Leo Burchianti, parish pastor. Greco immigrated to the U.S. from Italy when he was 13.

A state grand jury report alleges Burchianti abused at least 8 boys between 1967-93 while being moved around to different parishes. He withdrew from the ministry in 2003 and died in 2013. The report said he received treatment on 3 occasions at church facilities for "inappropriate relationships with male minors" and that monetary settlements were made with 2 people in 1994 and 2008. *Source: Tribune-Review, 8-7-20*

New Mexico Catholic priests **Roderick Nichols** and **Damian Gamboa**, the **Las Cruces** and **El Paso dioceses**, **2 parishes** where they served and the **Order of Friars Minor** are being sued by "John Doe" and "Jane Doe" for alleged child sexual abuse.

John Doe alleges Nichols molested him in the early 1990s when he was about 13 and Nichols was pastor at St. Vincent De Paul Parish in Silver City. Jane Doe alleges Gamboa abused her in the early 1980s when she was 13 or 14 and Gamboa was pastor of St. Francis de Paula Church in Tularosa. *Source: Sun News, 8-4-20*

Mark Rhodes, Wynantskill, NY, **Victorious Life Christian Church** of Troy and elder **Dominick Brignola** are defendants in a suit alleging plaintiff Abigail Barker was 5 in 1998 when she was molested by Rhodes while he was babysitting her and her younger brother. Barker is Gov. Andrew Cuomo's deputy press secretary.

According to the suit, Rhodes removed "Plaintiff's pajama bottoms and underwear, bringing his face up to her vagina and anus and touching her vagina with his face. ... When Plaintiff disclosed the abuse, Defendant VLCC, its Pastor and Presiding Elder Defendant Dominick Brignola and Defendant Rhodes revictimized Plaintiff emotionally in an effort to silence Plaintiff and cover up the abuse."

Rhodes worked at Victorious Life until 2011, and his wife remains a deacon there. *Source: WAMC Public Radio/Noaker Law Firm, 8-4-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph**, MO, covered up abuse by priests known to be sexual predators allege suits filed by 2 plaintiffs. It's alleged **Darvin Salazar** assaulted the plaintiff in the rectory at Holy Cross Catholic Church in July 2018. He is in the process of removing himself from the priesthood.

The other suit alleges **John R. Tulipana** assaulted the plaintiff several times when he was 13 in

Mine eyes have seen the gory of the bloody Christian Lord



1977 while serving as pastor at Coronation of Our Lady Parish in Grandview. Tulipana was barred from the ministry in 1994 and died in 2012.

The diocese paid \$10 million in abuse settlements in 2008 and another \$10 million in 2014 in cases involving 79 plaintiffs. *Source: Insurance Journal, 8-2-20*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

The **Order of St. Augustine** agreed to pay nearly \$1.4 million to 11 abuse survivors (10 female, 1 male) who alleged Catholic priest **John J. Gallagher** molested them in the 1970s at St. Mary's School in Lawrence, MA.

The order settled a previous suit by 3 women for \$1 million in 2018. Gallagher, who died in 2006, also coached basketball and swimming. *Source: Boston Herald, 8-28-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Columbus**, OH, will pay \$1 million to Kevin Heidtman, now in his 30s, for abuse by Msgr. **Thomas Bennett**, a St. Charles Preparatory School teacher from 1964 until shortly before his death in 2008.

Heidtman's attorney Konrad Kircher said the \$1 million settlement amount is fair for Ohio, which caps civil damages at \$250,000. If the case had gone to trial, that would have been the maximum amount of any award. *Source: Columbus Dispatch, 8-26-20*

Finances

A total of 503 people filed clergy abuse claims against the Catholic **Diocese of Rochester** under New York's Child Victims Act that extends the time allowed to bring claims, which is double the projected amount.

That total is in addition to more than 30 people who already settled claims in 2019 through a mediator. The diocese earlier paid \$1.6 million to other survivors before the new law took effect. *Source: WHAM, 8-19-20*

Legal Developments

In cases involving **2 Utah men** charged in 2018, the state Supreme Court ruled unanimously that children who report sexual assaults don't need to testify and confront their alleged abuser multiple times in court. One man is charged with abusing his 5-year-old daughter. The other, age 27, is accused of having sex with a 12-year-old girl.

The decision means that young people won't have to testify at preliminary hearings except in rare circumstances. Recorded interviews can be used instead. The court ruled that a child victim could still be required to testify at a pretrial hearing if a defense attorney can show it's needed to present evidence on a specific point material to the judge's decision. *Source: Salt Lake Tribune, 8-19-20*

Islamic cleric **Abdullah al-Faisal**, aka Shaikh Faisal, 56, will stand trial on 5 counts of conspiracy as a crime of terrorism and soliciting or providing support for an act of terrorism after being extradited from Jamaica to New York City.

Born Trevor William Forrest and raised in an evangelical Christian family, Faisal was introduced to Islam in his mid-teens. He eventually moved to London, where he became a firebrand preacher in the late 1990s. He was convicted in 2003 of inciting violence, served 4 years in prison and was de-

ported in 2007 from Britain and from Kenya in 2010.

In 2016, an NYPD undercover officer made contact with Faisal and they established encrypted communications, the indictment said. At Faisal's urging, the officer traveled to the Middle East, where Faisal had promised to assist her in joining the Islamic State. *Source: Washington Post, 8-14-20*

Jeffrey McGehee, 32, Portage, MI, had his plea bargain rejected by Superior Court Judge Roger Bradford. McGehee, a leader at the Church of Jesus Christ in South Haven, pleaded guilty to dissemination of matter harmful of minors for sending nude photos and a video of himself masturbating to a 15-year-old boy in 2017.

McGehee had pleaded guilty to a single felony count of dissemination of matter harmful to minors, with the special prosecutor recommending only a year's probation and no incarceration or sex offender registry. Four charges were dismissed.

The boy alleged to investigators that he was told to keep quiet by the church pastor and others, charging documents said. The pastor, who is McGehee's father-in-law, was charged with 2 misdemeanor counts of failure to report for at-

tempting to cover up the incidents. Those charges were dismissed in December. *Source: nwtimes.com, 8-10-20*

N.Y. Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed legislation extending the 1-year window for Child Victims Act lawsuits to Aug. 14, 2021. Cuomo had extended the deadline in May to January 2021 due to coronavirus-related delays in the court system.

"The Child Victims Act has allowed more than 3,000 brave survivors to come forward to seek justice," said Democratic state Sen. Brad Hoylman. "Yet it's clear many New Yorkers who survived child sexual abuse haven't come forward, especially during the COVID-19 crisis which has upended our courts and economy." *Source: Catholic News Agency, 8-3-20*

The Catholic **Episcopal Corporation of St. John's** is financially liable for sexual abuse at the Mount Cashel orphanage in the 1950s, ruled Newfoundland and Labrador's highest court. The archdiocese must now pay about \$2 million to 4 lead plaintiffs. Mount Cashel, operated by the Christian Brothers, was closed in 1990 and torn down in 1992. *Source: Canadian Press, 7-29-20*

Allegations

Emil S. Payer, 75, Unity, IN, had his name added by the Catholic Diocese of Greensburg to its list of clergy with "credible and substantiated" claims of sexual abuse. Payer was convicted in 2014 of stealing \$98,033 from the Church of the Seven Dolors in Yukon and was sentenced to 10 years' probation and restitution.

He was removed from active ministry in 2011 when the theft was discovered. The diocese plans to reconsider Payer's living situation on church property, said spokesman Jerry Zufelt. *Source: Tribune-Review, 8-26-20*

Robson de Oliveira Pereira, 46, a Catholic Redemptorist priest who is rector at the Basílica do Divino Pai Eterno in Trindade, Brazil, is under investigation for allegedly embezzling more than \$21 million donated to the shrine.

Pereira, a media celebrity, manages a set of associations connected to the shrine, which is a popular pilgrimage site. It's suspected Pereira used

deception and shell corporations to mislead officials and create obstacles to the funds' transparency while enriching himself and his associates. *Source: Crux, 8-26-20*

Four Catholic dioceses in Kansas — Wichita, Salina, Dodge City and Kansas City — plus the conservative **Society of St. Pius X**, a break-away sect, have had 205 allegations of clergy abuse lodged, according to a probe by the state Bureau of Investigation.

The agency convened a 6-agent task force in early 2019 at the request of Republican Attorney General Derek Schmidt, who has opened 120 cases stemming from the allegations. The neighboring state of Missouri has a similar task force. *Source: Wichita Eagle, 8-13-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Covington**, KY, announced that 59 priests and 31 others associated with the church — deacons, teachers, brothers, nuns and laypersons — sexually abused children since the 1950s. The report was compiled by a pair of former FBI agents. Of the accused priests, all but 14 are dead.

"I sincerely hope that this report will bring at least some sense of closure to those whose lives have been forever changed by the egregious behavior of those who were pledged to care for God's little ones," said Bishop Roger Foy. *Source: WLWT, 8-1-20*

Removed / Resigned

Virgil M. "Maxey" Wheeler III, 63, Old Metairie, LA, was removed as an ordained deacon at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Parish due to an allegation of abuse from 20 years ago. Wheeler's attorney Eddie Castaing denounced the "scurrilous and false allegations."

Wheeler is a prominent attorney who has served on the boards of directors for Archdiocese of New Orleans charities, including the Catholic Community Foundation. He won't serve on any boards during the investigation, according to the archdiocese. He was among the 2007 alumni of the year at Loyola University. *Source: WWL/Times Picayune, 8-4-20*

John Ortberg, 63, Menlo Park, CA, resigned from Menlo Church, a megachurch he pastored for 17 years. He was placed on leave in late 2019 after elders learned he let a volunteer who had admitted an attraction to children work with them at the church. It later came out that Daniel Lavery, Ortberg's son, had emailed the elders about the situation.

Ortberg returned to the pulpit last spring after an inquiry, but the issue flared up again after Lavery revealed that the accused volunteer was his younger brother, a fact Ortberg withheld from the congregation. *Source: Washington Post, 7-29-20*

Ibraheem Lunat resigned as imam at Masjid Al-Jumu'ah, a Muslim mosque in Bolingbrook, IL, after Instagram videos and photos posted by Lunat came to light.

"Hijabi season is now gone and hoe-jabi season is finally upon us," Lunat said in a video that included a "checklist" of tips for women, such as using perfume "to let all the boys in town know you're back and ready for business — huzzah, open sesame," and wearing a "skintight" abaya, or overcoat, "to make that booty pop" and attract attention from "n-----."

Other posts included captions about "bagging your first cougar," "smash a single mom" and an explicit joke about pedophile priests. *Source: Religion News Service, 7-28-20*

Rich Perry, former pastor at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Missoula, MT, has been permanently removed from ministry due to credible claims he sexually abused a minor girl in the late 1970s or early 1980s in Seattle. Perry will live under a safety plan at Sacred Heart Jesuit Center in Los Gatos, CA.

Perry was sent to the center in October 2019 for a separate matter, after a woman came forward with a claim of "inappropriate contact," which Perry admitted to at the time. *Source: The Missoulian, 7-27-20*

Other

Francisco José Cox, 86, a Chilean archbishop removed from the priesthood in 2018, died without facing trial on allegations of sexually abusing minors. His death was due to "respiratory failure and multisystemic failure," said a statement by the Schoenstatt Fathers, his original religious order, which was founded in Germany in 1914.

He was buried the same day he died, with only his 4 brothers present. Pope Francis removed Cox from the priesthood after an investigation conducted by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Source: Crux, 8-14-20*

OVERHEARD

Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. Voting and participating in the democratic process are key. The vote is the most powerful non-violent change agent you have in a democratic society. You must use it because it is not guaranteed. You can lose it.

John Lewis, former U.S. representative and civil rights leader, in an op-ed he wrote to be published on the day of his funeral.

The New York Times, 7-30-20

Because the dominant framing of face coverings is that they are foreign, a sign of submission, and an assault to American values, our country is now unable to cover when it is literally an issue of life and death. Islamophobia

has long been a danger to Muslim Americans’ health, but COVID-19 has made it clear that misperceptions about Muslim practices affect the health of non-Muslims as well.

Liz Bucar, in the article “Islamophobia and American’s problems with face masks.” Bucar is a professor of religion at Northeastern University.

TheRevealer.com, 9-3-20

I say this lovingly — not as an ideologue, but as someone who prides himself on being open to argument, interested in evidence — but I quite literally have no patience for climate change deniers. It’s completely inconsistent, that point of view, with the reality on the ground, the facts as we are experiencing.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom, discussing how the

state will continue to pursue policies that combat climate change as California battles another round of deadly wildfires.

Politico.com, 9-8-20

QAnon community construction, from the start, has emphasized a traditionalist American morality that is closely aligned with popular Christianity. “Q” himself posts in a style that both invokes evangelical talking points and encourages deep scriptural research.

Brian Friedberg, a senior researcher at the Harvard Shorenstein Center’s Technology and Social Change project, in the article “Evangelicals are looking for answers online. They’re finding QAnon instead.”

TechnologyReview.com, 8-26-20

‘Covid Convention’

Join FFRF’s online membership meeting Nov. 14!

Despite no national convention this year due to the pandemic, the Freedom From Religion Foundation will be hosting an online membership meeting, including legal and other highlights of the year, on Saturday, Nov. 14.

Please join other FFRF members and staff at this event, which will include special greetings and surprises. While the meeting by necessity is only online, for the first time the gathering is otherwise available to all members, at no cost, no matter where you live!

Legendary TV actor Ed Asner will appear during the event in a video accepting FFRF’s 2020 Clarence Darrow Award. Asner, who recently became part of FFRF’s Honorary Board, is known for portraying “Lou Grant,” and to younger audiences for voicing “Ralph” in the movie “Up” and portraying Santa in the movie “Elf.” Asner toured the country portraying William Jennings Bryan in a play about the Scopes Trial opposite John de Lancie (portraying Darrow), and has been an outspoken progressive activist. The award includes a bronze statuette, a miniature of the 7-foot statue by renowned sculptor Zenos Frudakis that FFRF erected on the lawn of the “Scopes Trial” courthouse in Dayton, Tenn. De Lancie, who helped dedicate the statue, received the debut award two years ago,



Legendary actor Ed Asner will accept FFRF’s 2020 Clarence Darrow Award during the online meeting.

mail with details on their annual meeting, which will take place the following week, on Saturday, Nov. 21, at 1:30 p.m. (CST). The agenda has been published in the fall Private Line newsletter, mailed to all members unless they specify receiving a digital copy.

Any FFRF member in good standing (meaning your dues are up to date) is invited to attend the annual membership meeting. Participants will be emailed the final agenda and written reports along with easy instructions to access the meeting and to vote. All registrants of the membership meeting will receive an email with a link to the online ballot to elect the state representatives. You must attend the meeting for your vote to count.

Please be sure to register online no later than Monday, Nov. 2, or to mail your free registration so it is received by our office (FFRF, PO Box 750, Madison WI 53701) no later than Monday, November 2. See registration form this page or simply register online at: ffrf.org/2020-meeting.

FFRF’s 2020 convention slated for the weekend of Nov. 13-14, 2020, in San Antonio, was postponed due to the pandemic. Most of the scheduled speakers, including Gloria Steinem and Margaret Atwood, have agreed to appear at FFRF’s 2021 convention at the Boston Park Plaza Hotel on the weekend of Nov. 19-21, 2021. (So save the dates!) Additional honorees and speakers joining them for the two-day event will be announced in 2021, and FFRF is looking forward to an exciting post-pandemic celebration.

(Members who have not shared their email address with FFRF are encouraged to do so. Send your preferred email address to info@ffrf.org and include you full name and mailing address.)



Ben Hart, who got “IM GOD” onto his license plate after a lengthy court battle, will accept FFRF’s 2020 Freethinker of the Year Award during the meeting.

and U.S. Rep. Jamie Raskin, a co-founder of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, received the award by video at last year’s convention.

FFRF’s team of “watchdog” attorneys will present legal highlights at the online meeting, and FFRF’s many other actions and achievements over the year will be featured in the hour-long report preceding the short membership meeting.

Also appearing via a taped video will be Ben Hart, who is earning FFRF’s 2020 Freethinker of the Year Award. Hart seeking to counteract license plates saying “In God We Trust,” challenged in a lawsuit his inability to get a license plate with the words “IM GOD” on it. Kentucky DMV

officials denied the plate because it was deemed “obscene or vulgar” and then later “not in good taste.” The U.S. District Court for the Eastern Court of Kentucky ruled in Hart’s favor that the denial of the plate violated the First Amendment.

The “FFRF Highlights of the Year” will begin online at 1:30 p.m. (CST) on Nov. 14, followed by a short membership meeting, which includes the annual treasurer’s report and an election for the State Representatives. The agenda and other information is published in your fall Private Line, FFRF’s biannual newsletter.

State Reps, who will be voting on a by-laws change and some Executive Board elections, will be contacted by email and

ffrf

.. ONLINE ..

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2020 [1:30 PM CST]

The meeting is free and open only to current FFRF members.

Registration Deadline: Monday, November 2, 2020

Name

Phone*

Email*

Address

CityState / ZIP

Name (Second Household Member)

Phone*

Email*

*For in-house use only. Email address required.

You will be emailed instructions and agenda information in November.

Register online by Monday, Nov. 2, 2020: ffrf.org/2020-meeting

Mail-in form to be received no later than Monday, Nov. 2, 2020:

FFRF Annual Meeting | PO Box 750 | Madison, WI 53701