

# FREETHOUGHT TODAY



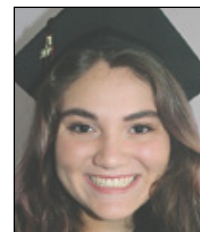
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Vol. 37 No. 7

Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

September 2020

## Helbachs? Hell no!



Photo by Dan Barker

**Bill Dunn, former editor of Freethought Today, protests outside Helbachs, an evangelical-run coffee shop in Middleton, Wis., that advertised itself as a “mask-free zone” in violation of a countywide public health order. The store was fined by the county after FFRF (and others) complained. (See story on Page 10.)**

## Religion helps push pandemic

Religion has a lot to answer for when it comes to the spread of COVID-19.

There are many political and sociological reasons why the United States is leading the world in coronavirus deaths and new cases, but the finger must also be pointed at religion and the role it is playing in making the pandemic even more deadly. Deference to religion by federal, state and local public officials is literally killing Americans. As professor Juan Cole has put it, “In the U.S. and abroad, leaders are putting faith before good science.”

That bad faith in religion is exemplified in two ways. One is the favoritism religion expects and often gets, such as the exemption of church gatherings from safety mandates. The other, more insidious, is religion's role in spreading another dangerous “virus”: science denial. As the Freedom From Religion Foun-

dation's bumper sticker puts it, religion is the original “alternative fact.” Religion sets the stage for denial of science by rewarding belief without evidence or even against the facts.

As countless studies and news articles have shown, church services are a hotbed for coronavirus infection, due to difficulty in social distancing, by the singing and chanting and extended indoor contact. Yet President Trump has used his authority to often deprecate scientific advice — and to pander to his religious base. In late May, he called churches “essential” operations — telling every governor to open up “essential places of faith . . . right now for this weekend” or he would override them. When he added, “In America, we need more prayer, not less,” he further signaled

See *Pandemic* on page 5

## FFRF special report

# Secret White House calls helped funnel taxpayer money to preachers, churches

The Freedom From Religion Foundation released evidence on July 15 of how the Trump administration secretly turned the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) into a bonanza of tax-paid handouts for churches and religious leaders.

FFRF has provided audio documentation, via a recording it made, of clandestine calls the White House set up with Trump-allied preachers and church leaders specifically to funnel taxpayer money to churches through the PPP. This giveaway to churches is the first time in U.S. history that tax funds have been directly used to pay the salaries of ministers and religious staff for religious purposes. Religious organizations received at least \$7.3 billion in forgivable loans, with megachurches and thousands of Catholic dioceses amassing millions.

President Trump's offering of public funds to religious ministers breaks with 250 years of constitutional precedent. As the Framers of the secular U.S. Constitution understood and discussed at length, religious liberty requires that citizens be free to decide which church to personally support, or to support none at all. Until very recently, even the fiercest opponents of the separation between state and church admitted that forcing taxpayers to pay the salaries of clergy was flagrantly unconstitutional.

The audio of two calls between re-

ligious leaders and the White House (which FFRF recorded) confirms that the White House secretly worked to give church leaders special access to PPP, ensuring they could receive top dollars from U.S. taxpayers.

The first such conference call took place on April 3, just as the PPP went into gear and a full two weeks before the Small Business Administration published its final rules on church eligibility — for the first time — for SBA funds. This secret announcement to clergy reveals that the SBA had no intention of listening to public comments on the proposed rule, and had already decided to extend these loans to churches, in spite of the Constitution and any public outcry. At the time of this call, SBA had only awarded about 10,000 of the 661,218 PPP loans.

Trump-allied faith leaders were assured by the federal government that even a discriminatory fly-by-night “church” that provides absolutely no secular social services, and of which the owner is the sole employee, could have its wages covered by taxpayers during the PPP time period.

The second call, 100 minutes on June 22, was even more explicit, with churches urged to apply for PPP funds before the June 30 deadline. Focus on

See *Secret* on page 5

## Billboard urges ‘social distancing between church and state’

A new Denver public message couldn't be more timely: “Practice social distancing between church and state.”

The dictum on a backlit 10-foot-by-23-foot billboard situated on Broadway south of 10th Avenue is brought to city residents by FFRF, thanks to a local donor and FFRF's Denver chapter.

“Practicing distancing is extremely important these days,” notes FFRF benefactor Monty C. Cleworth. “Not just distancing for COVID reasons, but also distancing between church and state. We wouldn't want to transmit anything that is unhealthy and dangerous.”

Adds Claudette StPierre, Denver chapter president, “We social distance to prevent the spread of infectious agents like COVID-19. Distancing between state and church is just as important to prevent the spread of religious dogma and doctrine into our government.”

Among local state/church issues is the taxpayer bailout money received by Denver-area churches.

The Catholic Church received up to \$3.4 billion of the pandemic relief Paycheck Protection Program, with reports that the Denver Archdiocese's share was at least \$1.9 million.



This FFRF billboard has been placed in Denver, thanks to FFRF Member Monty C. Cleworth and FFRF's Denver chapter.



# Legal interns help keep up the fight (from home)

FFRF’s legal interns for summer 2020 are the first to have never worked in Free-thought Hall in Madison, Wis. Because of the pandemic, they (and most of the FFRF staff) have been working from home. Here is a look at FFRF’s legal interns.

**Name:** Sammi Babcock.



Sammi Babcock

of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

**Where are you from?:** I’m originally from Janesville, Wis., but I’ve been living in the Madison area for three years now.

**Law school attending:** University of Wisconsin-Madison.

**Undergraduate school:** University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

**Religious upbringing:** Lutheran.

**Post-graduate plans/dreams:** After graduation, I hope to continue working in public interest, and I would love to come back and work for FFRF someday.

**What has it been like working for FFRF during the pandemic?** It’s been a wonderful time. Even though working remotely presents challenges, I have still enjoyed my time here immensely. It’s been an amazing experience being able to work with the attorneys and help FFRF in its mission to uphold the separation of state and church.

**My favorite part of the job:** The opportunity to research and write about a wide variety of issues, such as courtroom

prayer and COVID-19 outbreaks linked to churches.

**My legal interests are:** Constitutional law (more specifically First Amendment issues), intellectual property, and victim’s rights.

**These three words sum me up:** Determined, thoughtful, deadpan.

**Things I like:** Sushi, Shakespeare, hiking, Dungeons & Dragons, water-color painting, sketching and poetry.

**Things I smite:** Olives, Evangelicals, misogyny and humidity.

**A fun fact about yourself:** I love to visit Renaissance Festivals. I dress in costume, drink mead when possible, and watch historical re-enactments and lectures about Historical European Martial Arts.

**Name:** Kat Grant.



Kat Grant

**Where are you from?:** Washington, Ind., originally, now living in Bloomington, Ind.!

**Law school attending:** Indiana University Maurer School of Law

**Undergraduate school:** Indiana University (B.A. in political science).

**Religious upbringing:** Roman Catholic.

**Post-graduate plans/dreams:** I decided to pursue a career in law because

I’m incredibly passionate about advocating for the rights of marginalized and minority communities, and making the world a more equitable place. As long as the work I’m doing is related to that, I’ll be happy!

**What has it been like working for FFRF during the pandemic?** It’s definitely been a different experience than anyone was expecting for the summer, but the legal team has been great about making us feel welcome, helping us learn, and communicating with us about different projects!

**My favorite part of the job:** I’m a big nerd, so I’ve really enjoyed any time I’ve had to do any kind of deep dive looking for details and patterns! Also, just the satisfaction of knowing that I’m helping to uphold the principles of state-church separation.

**My legal interests are:** Constitutional law (specifically First Amendment issues), LGBTQ and disability rights, and the ways that changing cultural attitudes impact the law.

**These three words sum me up:** Enthusiastic, compassionate, stubborn.

**Things I like:** Jazz music, gluten-free baking and Dungeons and Dragons.

**Things I smite:** Math, Mike Pence, and the fact that the color chartreuse is not pink, but yellow.

**A fun fact about yourself:** As an undergrad, I was a member of the Indiana University Marching Hundred and Big Red Basketball Band! If you watched an IU football or basketball game between

fall 2015 and spring 2019, you just might have seen me playing clarinet!

**Name:** Ryan Sendelbach.

**Where are you from?:** Rochester, Minn.

**Law school attending:** University of Wisconsin Law School.

**Undergraduate school:** University of Wisconsin-Madison.

**Religious upbringing:** Pentecostal Christian.

**Post-graduate plans/dreams:** I want to serve in elected office at some point.

**What has it been like working for FFRF during the pandemic?** I strongly prefer in-person work over online, but FFRF has done everything possible to make the experience a success.

**My favorite part of the job:** The opportunity to work in such a unique area of law.

**My legal interests are:** Civil procedure, election law and taxation.

**These three words sum me up:** Bad at this.

**Things I like:** Efficiency, exploration and problem solving.

**Things I smite:** Pessimism, ignorance and closed-mindedness.

**A fun fact about yourself:** I triple majored in political science, economics and history as an undergrad.

Ryan Sendelbach

## THEY SAID WHAT?

He’s following the radical left agenda, take away your guns, destroy your 2nd Amendment, no religion, no anything, hurt the bible, hurt God. He’s against God.

**President Trump, in an attack on Joe Biden, a lifelong Catholic, in a tweet.**

*Washington Post, 8-6-20*

I’m going to call for three days of fasting and prayer for our state for July 20 through the 22. . . . This will be the spiritual diet and exercise that I, as a Catholic Christian, believe is very important anyway. So we’ll be doing lunch fasting for those three days and certainly praying as well, praying for the people of Louisiana, praying for those who are sick, praying for those who care for those who are sick, and certainly praying for the families of those who have passed on.

**Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards, in a press conference.**

*Newsweek, 7-16-20*

I’m not going to argue with you. Jesus is King. . . . Trump is the closest president we’ve had in years to allowing God to still be part of the conversation.

**Billionaire rap superstar Kanye West, in an interview conceding that he is running for president as a spoiler to siphon votes from the Democratic challenger and continues to have a relationship with the Trump White House.**

*Forbes, 8-6-20*

It’s fine that we minister to everyone. It’s not OK to have an abortion. It’s not OK to marry the same sex.

**Paula White, White House “spiritual adviser” and leader of the government’s**

**“Faith and Opportunity Initiative” program, in a sermon.**

*Right Wing Watch, 7-20-20*

As a country, I would hope that a part of what we’re learning right now is the destructive aspects of loveless, godless leadership. Do not elect people that don’t have God and love in their hearts.

**Actor Will Smith, during an interview with CNN’s Angela Rye.**

*The Friendly Atheist, 7-17-20*



Photo: Gage Skidmore  
Will Smith

The left is going to tell you there’s this separation of church and state, and that’s just nowhere in the Constitution, nowhere in American law. That’s nothing that our founding principles ever, uh, derived whatsoever.

**Jenna Ellis, President Trump’s senior campaign legal adviser, during a Zoom event hosted by Asian Pacific Americans for Trump.**

*The Daily Beast, 7-28-20*

Tyranny is built plank by plank. The

Jews didn’t one day get called to the edge of the railroad and told to get onto the boxcars.

**Pastor Matthew Trehwella of Mercy Seat Christian Church in West Allis, Wis., comparing a potential mask mandate in Brookfield, Wis., to the Holocaust.**

*Fox 6, 7-23-20*

I really do believe that those who are trying to undo this president, those who are trying to destroy me, trying to destroy Michael Flynn, who’s a very good man and great American patriot war hero, I do believe they’re satanic. . . . I don’t believe that any of these people involved in my prosecution are really believers in God.

**Roger Stone, political consultant and adviser to Donald Trump who was convicted of obstruction, witness tampering and lying to Congress, in an interview with CBN’s David Brody.**

*Christian Broadcasting Network, 7-15-20*

If aliens are real, salvation through Jesus Christ is the only way they enter heaven.

**Texas state Rep. Jonathan Stickland.**

*Twitter, 7-24-20*

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TODAY

Published by Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

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*The only freethought newspaper in the United States*

## FFRF welcomes 16 new Lifers

FFRF welcomes and warmly thanks its 16 new Lifetime Members.

The newest \$1,000 Lifetime members are: Nelson Allison, Nik Blach, Charles Briggs, Ben Graf, Tom Hinkle, Laura Kass, Larry D. King, Eniko (Enci) Lajos (gifted by Philip Lentz), David Lippes, Ed Livesay, J. Kent Mill-

er, Leighton E. Moss, Gloria Ratner, Richard W. Royer, Ian Saeger (gifted by Ron Saeger) and Kelvin Sun (gifted by Chenni Hsiung).

States represented are Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin.



# Roberts’ court shows its religious colors

This article first appeared in *The New York Times* on July 16 and is reprinted with permission.

By Linda Greenhouse

For once, the conventional wisdom was right: The Supreme Court term that ended in July was a triumph for Chief Justice John Roberts. But, as usual, the conventional wisdom skims the surface, focusing on the obvious: his steering of the court toward a center comfortably aligned with public opinion, and protecting it from an institutionally destructive alliance with a president who assumed



Linda Greenhouse

the court would do his bidding. I’m among those who celebrate these outcomes, and I don’t in any way mean to diminish them. Rather, I want to suggest that the 2019-20 Supreme Court term looks even more consequential, for the country and the chief justice, when his triumph is seen in full, in its multiple dimensions.

To do that requires looking closely at the three religion cases decided at the end of the term.

In *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*, the court held that a state that offers a subsidy to private schools can’t exclude religious schools from the benefit. In *Our Lady of Guadalupe School v. Morrissey-Berru*, the court ruled that the federal laws that protect workers from discrimination don’t apply to the lay employees of religious schools who have a role in “educating and forming students in the faith.” And in *Little Sisters of the Poor v. Pennsylvania*, the court excused employers, including corporations, with a “sincerely held” religious or “moral” objection to birth control from having to take even a modest arm’s-length step that results in an employee receiving coverage for contraception, to which the Affordable Care Act entitles her.

Roberts wrote the majority opinion in only the first of these cases; he assigned the opinion in the second to Justice Samuel Alito and the third to Justice Clarence Thomas. While the first two involve the First Amendment’s guarantee of the “free exercise” of religion, the third, concerning a rule put in place by the Trump administration, is not based on the Constitution but rather on administrative law and a federal statute.

But the decisions’ commonalities are more important than their differences. All three elevate religion to a position of privilege, short-circuiting the statutory rights of employees or, in Montana’s case, overriding an explicit state constitutional barrier against public financial aid to parochial schools. And all three go to the heart of John Roberts’s project.

By “project” I don’t mean something nefarious. To the contrary, it’s not surprising that the ambitious and accomplished people who make it to the Supreme Court have some goal or goals in mind, some way they would like to move the law or, in the case of liberal justices in recent decades, to prevent it from moving in an unwanted direction. For Chief Justice Warren Burger, the project was rolling back the criminal procedure revolution over which his predecessor, Earl Warren, had presided. For Chief Justice William



Photo courtesy of U.S. Supreme Court

Chief Justice John Roberts has overseen three court cases this past Supreme Court session that “elevate religion to a position of privilege,” writes Linda Greenhouse.

Rehnquist, an Arizonan who came to Washington in midlife, it was, among other things, elevating the role of the states in the federal system.

Federalism as such is not much of a motivator for his successor, Roberts, who has spent his entire career comfortably ensconced inside the Beltway. Nor does he, unlike Alito, appear driven to cut back on criminal defendants’ rights at every opportunity. After 15 years of watching John Roberts as chief justice, I’ve identified two main projects.

### Two main projects

One concerns race: getting the government out of the business of counting by race by rejecting both affirmative action that increases opportunity for racial minorities and federally policed guardrails to prevent the suppression of minority

votes. His early years on the job reflected this deep commitment, first with the *Parents Involved* case in 2006, overturning efforts by two school districts to maintain integration through race-conscious school assignment measures, and, six years later, with *Shelby County v. Holder*, which cut the heart out of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The other project is religion: giving religion a place at the public table long reserved for secular society; removing barriers to religious expression in the public square; insisting on organized religion’s entitlement to public benefits as a matter of equal treatment while at the same time according religion special treatment in the form of relief from the regulations that everyone else must live by. Benefits without burdens, equal treatment morphing into special treatment.

This term’s trio of religion decisions carried the project into new territory. The

chief justice’s opinion in the Montana case, *Espinoza*, was particularly eyebrow raising, because when the case reached the court, there was no longer a tax credit program in place for any nonpublic school. That the program no longer existed for anyone would seem to make a claim of anti-religious discrimination implausible at best.

Not so, the chief justice wrote for the 5-to-4 majority. He said the program’s cancellation “cannot be defended as a neutral policy decision” because it resulted from a decision of the Montana Supreme Court that the state Constitution’s “no aid” provision meant that religious

schools could not be included in the program. Because the state court said it couldn’t effectively rewrite the statute, it invalidated the entire program. But Roberts found this application of the “no aid” provision to be itself a violation of the federal Free Exercise Clause, amounting to “discrimination against religious schools and the families whose children attend them.”

Justice Sonia Sotomayor observed in dissent that “it appears that the court has declared that once Montana created a tax subsidy, it forfeited the right to eliminate it if doing so would harm religion.” She continued, “This is a remarkable result, all the more so because the court strains to reach it.”

It seems to me that the religion cases represent a triumph for Roberts on a different, deeper level than do the cases that left many liberals cheering at the end of the term. Consider three of the most prominent of those cases: the decisions that brought LGBTQ individuals into the category of employees protected against workplace discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; that

blocked President Trump from ending the DACA program that enables young undocumented immigrants, the Dreamers, to work legally and protects them from deportation; and that struck down a Louisiana law aimed at driving abortion clinics out of business. Roberts wrote the majority opinion in the Dreamers case, joined Justice Neil Gorsuch’s majority opinion in the LGBTQ case and wrote a concurring opinion in the abortion case.

### ‘Yes, but’ vs. ‘Yes, and’

While hailing each of those decisions, I think it’s still possible to take a clear-eyed look at them and to put each in a category that I call “yes, but.”

Yes, employers now can’t fire someone for being gay or transgender, but we have yet to see the carve-outs that the religious right will demand and to which the court may well accede in subsequent cases. Yes, the president can’t end the DACA program in such a clumsy way, but the decision offers a road map for how to do it better. Yes, the Louisiana law replicated a Texas statute that the court had already rejected, but Roberts court was careful to leave the door open to continued attacks on the right to abortion.

The religion decisions, by contrast, consist of cases that I would call “yes, and.” While the other decisions went no further than necessary to achieve their result, the religion cases went considerably further than they needed to, each one taking and running with one of the court’s recent applicable precedents.

For example, the Montana schools decision built on a three-year-old opinion by Roberts in *Trinity Lutheran Church v. Comer*, holding that Missouri could not exclude a church-run preschool from eligibility to apply for a state grant to resurface its playground. The church’s exclusion, under a provision of the Missouri Constitution, imposed “a penalty on the free exercise of religion,” the chief justice wrote then. In a footnote, he added that the court was addressing only “express discrimination based on religious identity with respect to playground resurfacing.” It didn’t take long for the no-discrimination doctrine of *Trinity Lutheran* to migrate to the heartland of church-state controversy in America: public financing of religious education.

The *Our Lady of Guadalupe School* case, which stripped anti-discrimination protection from elementary teachers at two Catholic schools, also built on an earlier opinion by Roberts in which the court first endorsed a judicial doctrine called the ministerial exception (as in exception from federal civil rights laws.) In the earlier case, *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. E.E.O.C.*, the teacher who claimed discrimination, while not an ordained minister, had received extensive religious training and served in what the Lutheran church deemed a “called” capacity.

By contrast, the two elementary schoolteachers in the new case were ordinary classroom teachers with minimal training who taught the required religion classes out of a workbook. The court extended the ministerial exception to them and, by implication, to all parochial school teachers and perhaps other school employees as well. (One of the teachers was fired after she requested time off to be treated for breast cancer; she died while her Americans With Disabilities Act case was pending.)

See Roberts on page 4



# HEADS UP

## BUTTERWORT

*Pinquicula vulgaris: flowers insectophilous, leaves insectivorous*

The bee:

“SEX is the word: feel  
Out your chances, make a deal,  
Procurement—then push the act  
Relentlessly to an accomplished fact:  
And if they tremble when you leave,  
Don’t let that flowery fuss make you believe  
You ought to linger. They’re coy, they’re sweet—  
But they always make ends meet.

“You youngsters wallow in remorse  
At dodging stigma, using tumid force  
To strip their nectar. What do you expect?  
For all their fluttering, they always collect;  
And they’ve got tricks that aren’t in books:  
Have you watched them hammer home their hooks  
And suck away all innards, to the skin?  
Look: isn’t that withered wreck some of your kin?”

The poet:

Don’t tell me about symbiosis; this  
Is war. The younger generation’s kiss  
Is death to faded parents; queens exhaust  
Their faithful lovers; derelict and lost,  
Infants are replaced with little balls  
Of filial rags. The boldest leader crawls  
Discreetly up inside himself and lets  
His left hand never know what the right hand gets.

Something is unbegotten, never yet  
Conceived of—needed: some flowering of regret  
For wastelands, something with a sense of pain  
For every loss, that suffers from the rain  
Falling on the unjust, knows how to rejoice  
At sun in hostile countries, has a voice  
That blossoms with compassion and with reason.  
Can such a thing be born in this dry season?

Photo by Brent Nicastro



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

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

Other books by him, available at [shop.ffrf.org](http://shop.ffrf.org), include *Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie* and *Darwin’s Ark: Poems by Philip Appleman*.

# Sign up for FFRF’s online membership meeting on Nov. 14!

The Freedom From Religion Foundation will be offering our first-ever online membership meeting, including legal and other highlights of the year, on Saturday, Nov. 14. The event will include some special greetings and surprises. While the meeting is only online, for the first time the gathering is available to all members, no matter where you live!

We can already reveal that **legendary TV actor Ed Asner** will appear during the event in a video accepting FFRF’s 2020 Clarence Darrow Award. Asner, who just joined FFRF’s Honorary Board (see page 8), is an Emmy Award-winning actor. Asner toured the country portraying William Jennings Bryan in a play about the Scopes trial 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.

Our 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.

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, Nov. 2. See registration form below or register online at: [ffrf.org/2020-meeting](http://ffrf.org/2020-meeting).

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 info will be published in your fall Private Line, FFRF’s biannual newsletter.

State Reps, who will be voting on a bylaws change and Executive Board elections, will have their annual meeting online on Saturday, Nov. 21 at 1:30 p.m. CST.

Look for additional details in the upcoming fall Private Line, the October Freethought Today and email reminders. (Members who have not shared their email address with FFRF are encouraged to do so. Send your preferred email address to [info@ffrf.org](mailto:info@ffrf.org) and include your full name and mailing address.)

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 agenda and written reports along with 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.

As previously reported, FFRF’s 2020 convention slated for the weekend of Nov. 13-14, 2020, in San Antonio, had to be postponed due to the coronavirus. Almost all 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.

## FFRF’s First-Ever Online Annual Membership Meeting/Report

### Saturday, November 14, 2020 (1:30 PM)

The meeting is free and open only to current FFRF members.  
Registration Deadline: Monday, November 2, 2020.

Name

Phone \*Email

Street Address

City State / Zip  
Second Household Member (Below)

Name

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](http://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

## FFRF’s caption contest



To enter this month’s contest, please write a witty or humorous caption for this photo (taken outside a gun shop in El Paso, Texas). Email your response to [caption@ffrf.org](mailto:caption@ffrf.org) by Sept. 16. The winner, chosen by FFRF staff, will receive an FFRF T-shirt! We will announce the winner and runners-up in the October issue. If you’ve taken any photos that you think would be good for this contest, send them to [caption@ffrf.org](mailto:caption@ffrf.org).



## Secret

Continued from page 1

the Family founder James Dobson, a member of Trump’s Evangelical Advisory Council, explained that the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, which took between \$350,000–\$1 million, “has literally been kept solvent . . . by the Paycheck Protection Plan (sic).” Dobson explained that in 43 years of leading two faith-based ministries, he has “never asked for, nor received, one cent from the federal government,” expressing his surprise that taxpayer funds could now flow to his ministry.

At that meeting, evangelist Paula White, a White House employee, touted the Trump administration’s blending of state and church, such as inserting “faith directors” into every executive agency and securing grants for religious purposes. She praised Trump for “put[ting] ‘merry’ back in Christmas.”

The calls came in addition to regular White House conference calls specifically hosted for church leaders regarding the pandemic. Trump and Vice President Pence personally participated in at least one such call, which was described as “more like a time for Trump’s faith surrogates to praise Trump rather than to truly reach out to faith communities.”

Under the PPP, which is administered by the Small Business Association, companies with fewer than 500 employees can receive taxpayer-financed loans that don’t need to be repaid so long as they are primarily spent on employee wages. In May, FFRF sounded the alarm that the shocking change in SBA’s rules allowing churches and other faith-based organizations to receive funding meant taxpayers would be forced to pay the salaries of ministers — a flagrant violation of the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

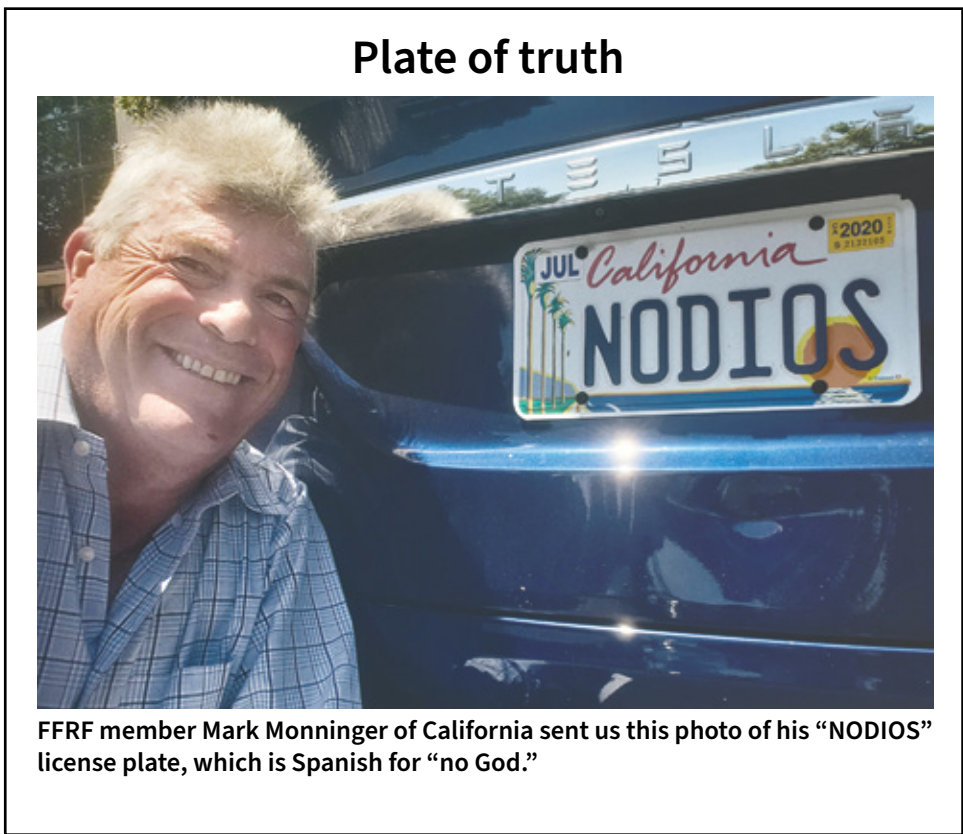
Trump and SBA, not the CARES Act passed by Congress, allocated these billions to churches. Although the CARES Act extended eligibility for loans from the SBA to nonprofits, which was new, the law does not give the SBA the power to extend this eligibility to houses of worship, nor could it. The Constitution prohibits government funding of religion.

Below are summaries and documentation of what took place during two of the White House’s conference calls with religious leaders:

### The first call

On April 3, two SBA representatives joined the surgeon general, White House officials and more than 500 church-related participants to explain that the SBA would release guidelines on PPP loans specific to churches. (The call was led by Jenny Korn, deputy assistant to the president in the Office of Public Liaison.)

Paula White was introduced with her official White House title (“adviser to



the White House Faith and Opportunities Initiative”) and began the call with a prayer asking people to “turn from their wicked ways” and convert to her brand of Christianity. The call also concluded with a sectarian Christian prayer, delivered by Supreme Knight Carl Anderson of the Knights of Columbus.

Before sharing reasonable information regarding the pandemic, Surgeon General Jerome Adams discussed his personal religious beliefs (“As was mentioned, I am a Christian”) and explained that prayers are part of the government’s response to the pandemic: “We’re

here trying to empower and equip health care professionals, hospitals, public health departments, and especially faith leaders, to do what works to keep our citizens safe from harm. . . . By working together and by supporting our neighbors and each other, and through prayer, we will get through this.”

Deputy Assistant to the President Jenny Lichter reassured the clergy that there would be virtually no limits for churches qualifying for PPP funds. She emphasized that taxpayer funds would be available even to churches that did nothing other than proselytize:

“Faith-based organizations are eligible regardless of whether they provide secular social services.”

Lichter then assured faith leaders that they would still be able to discriminate on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation or anything else: “A faith-based organization that receives a loan will retain its independence, its auton-

omy, its right of expression, its religious character, its authority over its internal governance, and no faith-based organization will be excluded from receiving funding because of any limitations it might place on leadership, membership, or employment based on shared religious faith or practice.”

### The June call

Paula White, this time introduced as Trump’s “spiritual adviser,” led a similar sectarian prayer to start the call. The prayer vilified non-Christians, contrasting “evil men”

with those who are “attentive to godly counsel.”

Following the prayer, White discussed the White House’s role in the PPP program, confirming that she was on the call as a government representative, not as a private citizen. Two panelists then spoke about receiving PPP funds: Evangelical

preacher Jentezen Franklin and Dobson, as reported above.

White appears to explicitly thank SBA Administrator Jovita Carranza for funneling PPP money to “so many houses of worship and faith,” something that was not envisioned in the CARES Act itself.

This boondoggle, this swamp filled with fetid holy water, this 10-figure transfer of wealth from the American taxpayer to churches, was thanks to the SBA, not Congress. Trump rewarded his most fervent supporters with billions of taxpayer dollars in clear violation of the Constitution.

## Pandemic

Continued from page 1

his devaluation of the role of science.

The Justice Department has thrown its support behind churches that have sought exemption from stay-at-home orders. Religion-based pressure was put on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, partly accounting for its less-than-stellar advice, delaying a guidebook on safety measures and tampering with CDC’s guidelines for churches.

Trump has muzzled the voice of reason that is Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who, by the way, is not a “man of faith” but a humanist. Notes Fauci: “One of the problems we face in the United States is that unfortunately, there is a combination of an anti-science bias that people are — for reasons that sometimes are, you know, inconceivable and not understandable — they just don’t believe science and they don’t believe authority. . . . Science is truth.”

A number of evangelical governors likewise refused to issue stay-at-home orders until it was too late, such as Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and Texas Gov. Greg Abbott. Even after seeing the light, both have given dispensations to religious gatherings from safety mandates. DeSantis, in a state with growing cases, still refuses to order mask-wearing in public. Church-going Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp even tried to sue Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms over her responsible actions, such as a city requirement to wear masks.

Many governmental officials either blinded by faith or seeking to propitiate the Religious Right, have perpetuated attacks on the scientific method and scientific knowledge. Polls are showing that, thanks to irrational anti-science views, only half to two-thirds of Americans say they would even get the vaccine once it is developed. This anti-science attitude has encouraged QAnon, the fringe conspiracy theorists who are spreading dangerous misinformation.

The base that many public officials are pandering to includes umpteen churches and worshippers who’ve filed lawsuits clogging the courts demanding to be considered above the law and to be exempted from stay-at-home and, now, masking orders. Behind many of these lawsuits are Christian Nationalist outfits, working to destroy the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

Church officials who ignore stay-at-home orders (and the biblical admonitions to “Love thy neighbor” and “do unto others”) and public officials who politicize or flout medical science are enabling the coronavirus curve to keep rising. The religion-inspired anti-science backlash is increasing infections and deaths, sowing ignorance about the potential of a future vaccine and jeopardizing the economic and educational recovery of our nation.

## Roberts

Continued from page 3

In her dissenting opinion, Sotomayor objected that in contrast to the detailed analysis in the *Hosanna-Tabor* case, the court this time “all but abandons judicial review” and “has just traded legal analysis for a rubber stamp.”

The *Little Sisters* decision represents a blatant bait-and-switch. Six years ago, when the 5-to-4 majority in the *Hobby Lobby* case held that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act required the Obama administration to offer an accommodation for religious employers that did not want to pay for insurance

coverage for contraceptives, Alito’s opinion for the court was reassuring about the consequences. The effect “would be precisely zero,” he said, adding that female employees of the objecting companies “would still be entitled to all F.D.A.-approved contraceptives without cost-sharing.”

Of course, that assurance became the basis for the religious employers’ resistance to the accommodation on the ground of complicity. In any event, no such reassurance was forthcoming this time. In her dissenting opinion, Jus-

tice Ruth Bader Ginsburg observed that 580,000 women work for employers eligible for the exemption.

“Of cardinal significance,” she wrote, “the exemption contains no alternative mechanism to ensure affected women’s continued access to contraceptive coverage.” The government, Ginsburg said, “may not benefit religious adherents at the expense of the rights of third parties.”

Put that in the past tense. Label it the Roberts project and call it a triumph.

In June 2006, as his first term was

nearing an end, I ran into Roberts at the court. There aren’t many questions a person can appropriately ask a Supreme Court justice, so I went with the obvious: “What are your summer plans?”

He had a pile of biographies of chief justices that he planned to read, he said. And then with a wry smile he added, “You know, most of them were failures.”

John Roberts doesn’t have to worry. *Linda Greenhouse, the winner of the 1998 Pulitzer Prize, writes about the Supreme Court and the law and is the author of several books.*



Commission on Unalienable Rights

Pompeo’s report is Christian Nationalism

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s Commission on Unalienable Rights produced a report on July 16 asserting that religious beliefs are more important than other peoples’ rights. The Freedom From Religion Foundation condemns this report and its flagrant attempt to elevate the rights of believers above the rights of others.

The report is Christian Nationalism in print and stamped with government authority, granting the State Department permission to conduct a Christian Nationalist foreign policy. That means not supporting the rights of the LGBTQ community, giving Christian Nationalists a blank check to proselytize, restricting access to HIV/AIDS medications and abortion, and permitting the direct funding of houses of worship abroad.

For instance, the report argues, “Protestant Christianity, widely practiced by the citizenry at the time, was infused with the beautiful biblical teachings that every human being is imbued with dignity and bears responsibilities toward fellow human beings, because each is made in the image of God.” Of course, the idea that all humans have worth and value cannot be claimed by one religion and is repudiated with disturbing regularity in the bible this commission seems to have failed to read. The bible condones and justifies slavery, subjugates women, and mandates death for LGBTQ people and anyone who exercises their right to religious freedom. Religion, Christianity and the bible are not bastions of human dignity. Rather, they favor adherents above all others — belief in the “correct” god is all that matters.

The report also claims that a belief in



God is a prerequisite for religious freedom, mistakenly attributing this belief to the Framers: “The Madisonian view of religious liberty — like the view to which Jefferson gave expression in his Virginia Bill for Religious Freedom — proceeds from a theistic premise about the sources of human dignity even as it denies the state the power to dictate final answers about ultimate matters.”

Pompeo once described politics as “a never-ending struggle . . . until the rapture.” This report is both political and highly religious. The report’s dangerous conclusion is based on the flawed premise that all human rights “came from our Lord,” as Pompeo told a group of conservative women last fall. This common Christian Nationalist talking point is based on a misreading of the Declaration of Independence,

which states that “all men” are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” Pompeo’s name for this commission tipped his hand from the outset, showing his intent to misuse this phrase to justify trampling others’ rights in the name of his religion.

In fact, the above phrase from the Declaration of Independence was nothing more than a rhetorical flourish. And it wasn’t even penned by Thomas Jefferson, the declaration’s primary author. The famous Deist wrote in his draft, later altered by others, that “all men are created equal & independent.”

More important, the Declaration of Independence is the wrong place to look for the source of our rights. America’s Founders made their views on fundamental rights perfectly clear in the document that provides those

rights: the U.S. Constitution. In the world’s first godless national charter, the U.S. Framers invented the formal separation of religion and government. The Constitution’s only references to religion in government are exclusionary, including bars on religious tests for public office (in Article VI) and on any law “respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; . . .” (in the First Amendment).

The first liberty guaranteed by the Bill of Rights — the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment — is the right to a secular government. This guarantee is an American original and directly undercuts the Christian Nationalist assertion that our rights rely on a deity. The idea of God-given rights is un-American and is dangerous, as the Freedom From Religion Foundation has championed repeatedly.

“God-given rights are fragile,” says FFRF’s Director of Strategic Response Andrew L. Seidel, one of the attorneys who has written about this fallacy. “God-given rights can be taken away by humans claiming to speak for that god, while human rights — rights that we possess by virtue of our shared humanity — are much stronger.”

Rights are not given by supernatural beings; they are asserted. Not only is our freedom not a gift from God, it is guaranteed by a godless document, the U.S. Constitution. The report from Pompeo’s commission is antithetical to this American principle, and is thus un-American in its quest to give government sanction to favored religious beliefs. Our country was founded in large part to reject exactly this notion, and this report must be given the same treatment.

Reps. Huffman, Raskin denounce commission’s report

U.S. Reps. Jared Huffman and Jamie Raskin, founders of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, issued the following statement on July 17 after the State Department’s Commission on Unalienable Rights unveiled its review of American human rights policy:

“We founded the Congressional Freethought Caucus to promote public policy based on reason, science and moral values, to protect the secular character of our government and to champion the value of freedom of thought and conscience worldwide. The State Department’s meandering new report only confuses these founding American principles and continues this administration’s retreat from clear and coherent world leadership for human rights.

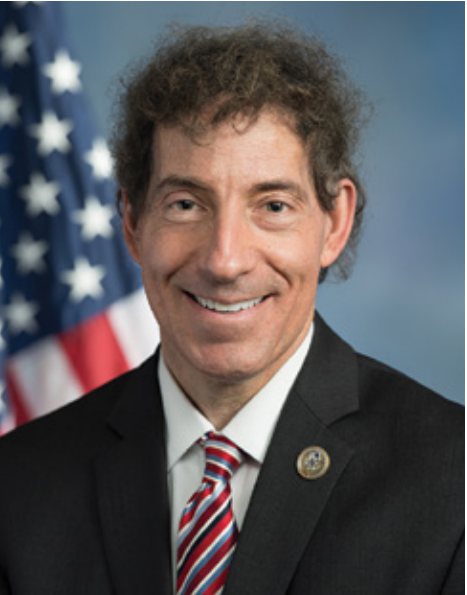
“As we feared, this report does not enshrine essential human rights, but rather confuses the whole field by downgrading political and civil rights and promoting a muddled and airily abstract interpretation of religious freedom. While invoking ‘Protestant Christianity’ first as a founding ethos for America, Secretary Mike Pompeo’s report cautions against ‘new claims of human rights,’ and warns that ‘the tendency to fight political battles with the vocabulary of human rights risks stifling the kind of robust discussion on which a vibrant democracy depends.’ We fear that such slippery, equivocating lan-



**Jared Huffman**

guage is intended to devalue LGBTQ+ rights and women’s reproductive rights and relegate them to mere ‘claims.’ While often pretending to some kind of abstract universal ambition for the rights of people, the authors cannot resist throwing rhetorical bones to the Religious Right and its war on personal freedom in America.

“Moreover, this report may lend credence to a foreign policy that disregards our international human rights framework in favor of a narrower interpretation of fundamental property and majority religious rights, one that allows



**Jamie Raskin**

for increased discrimination against political dissidents, women, and minority groups. The Congressional Freethought Caucus will continue to closely watch the impact of Secretary Pompeo’s curious commission and to hold this administration responsible for repeatedly walking away from mainstream American values.

“In short, at a moment when authoritarianism, racism and anti-scientific magical thinking are on the march, there is not much in here to make the dictators, despots, kleptocrats, racists, anti-Semites and strong-

men of the world quiver in any way. On the other hand, the authors do finally get around to criticizing human rights violations in Putin’s autocratic Russia, a detail buried deep in the report — perhaps with the hope that Donald Trump might not notice it. We are happy to bring it to his attention and to suggest that a first order of business should be to aggressively defend the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia and the Uighurs in China, two minority groups ruthlessly persecuted by these authoritarian governments that Donald Trump has worked hard to befriend.”

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# The holy war against liberal democracy

This article first appeared on TheDailyBeast.com website on July 13.

By Katherine Stewart

In Russia, where President Vladimir Putin wants to insert references to God and heterosexual marriage into the constitution, certain forms of violence against women have been decriminalized — so long as the violence takes place within a traditional marriage.

In Poland, where abortion access is already severely restricted, President Andrzej Duda has promised to sign draft legislation that would compel women to carry to term fetuses with severe congenital deformities, and a third of municipalities have declared themselves “LGBT-free zones” — all in order to “defend Christian values,” as one leader of the ruling party puts it.

In Turkey, reports of gender-based violence have risen sharply under the auspices of a president who has derided women’s equality and railed against birth control while claiming to champion traditional families.

In the United States, we should become increasingly familiar with this pernicious form of religious nationalism because, under the banner of “religious freedom,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo appears to offer his blessing to these kinds of initiatives. In 2019, Pompeo established the Commission on Unalienable Rights, a commission ostensibly intended to reformulate America’s commitment to advancing human rights abroad. But the secretary of state already seems to know which rights may take preference, and at whose expense.

“There are those who would have preferred I didn’t do it and are concerned about the answers that our foundational documents will provide,” Pompeo commented last fall at a gathering of the Concerned Women for America, a conservative women’s group, at the Trump International Hotel in Washington, D.C. “I know where those rights came from. They came from the Lord.”

To be clear, at that gathering, Pompeo expressed a concern for the rights of a



U.S. Department of State

## Secretary of State Mike Pompeo

variety of oppressed religious groups, from the Uighurs in China to the Yazidis in the Middle East to persecuted Christians in countries like Iraq. Religious persecution is real and devastating. But these expressions of support for the genuinely oppressed are far from the only agenda of the commission, which seems to have more to do with securing the freedom of some governments to impose religious orthodoxy on their own populations.

Around the world, the formulas of religious authoritarianism are remarkably consistent. The leaders convince their followers that their religion is under threat from a despicable or demonic force. The invisible enemy usually involves some combination of globalism, secularism, liberalism, feminism. The leaders promise to grant followers the “freedom” to direct their hate against these deviants. And then the regime goes on to strip everyone else of their rights, bolster hyper-conservative religious allies with public funds, and consolidate a kleptocracy where religion is too often reduced to organized hypocrisy.

Women and LGBT people are the canaries in the coal mine of human rights. Wherever their rights start to collapse, you can be sure, the freedom of the press, the freedom from corruption, and the freedom from fear will soon fall, too.

Mike Pompeo and his commission represent the stirrings of this kind of movement in the United States. Pompeo’s declared aim is to make “religious liberty” count as America’s “first freedom” and as the central pillar of its international human rights policy. Sounds inspiring, right? Too bad that “religious liberty,” in the mouths of so many cabinet leaders in the Trump administration, really means something like “religious privilege.”

For years now, leaders of America’s Religious Right have been making the spurious claim that the Constitution is written in the language of “natural law,” and that it entitles them not only to discriminate against gay people and others of whom they do not approve, but also to a steady stream of public money in the form of unique subsidies, exemptions, vouchers, grants and other means. They have also aggressively cultivated the conviction that they themselves are the victims of persecution.

A glance at the roster of commissioners is sufficient to make clear the purpose of Pompeo’s effort. Seven of the 12 commissioners, according to analysis by GLAAD, were already on record expressing hostility to LGBT rights. The chair of the commission, Mary Ann Glendon, is a former ambassador to the Vatican and has opposed women’s reproductive rights just as vigorously as she has defended the Catholic Church against scrutiny. She once suggested that honoring Boston Globe reporters for their work in exposing an epidemic of child abuse by Catholic priests would be like awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Osama bin Laden.

Almost immediately after the commission was formed, hundreds of human rights organizations, foreign policy experts, scholars, faith leaders and former government officials recommended the body be disbanded. In May 2020, in anticipation of the commission’s report, 20 senators challenged the commission for featuring “a group of largely ideologically uniform scholars, some of whom have expressed views openly hostile to internationally-recognized human rights.”

As Rob Berschinski and Andrea Worden note on the website Just Security, “Pompeo continues to serve as the commission’s cheerleader-in-chief, generally referencing the body’s motivating theme in unabashedly religious terms.”

One group that is happy with Pompeo’s program, on the other hand, is the leadership of America’s Christian Nationalist movement. In a conversation about the commission with Pompeo in January 2020, Family Research Council President Tony Perkins said, “When you talk about this, you’re essentially saying allow countries to make their own decisions based upon their religious conviction and cultural heritage and not force them through a form of cultural imperialism with our global policies to adhere to something that is an anathema to them.” Which is pretty much what the Polish right-wingers say when they set up their “LGBT-free” zones. So much for “religious freedom.”

True religious persecution is a terrible scourge and assisting those who suffer from it will require a broadly coordinated effort. But that is precisely why an issue as important as this should not be put in the hands of people who largely represent one skewed perspective. Pompeo has also worked hard to staff the agencies that disperse U.S. funds with ideologues who share his views. He recently appointed Merritt Corrigan as USAID’s new deputy White House liaison, who wrote, “Liberal democracy is little more than a front for the war being waged against us by those who fundamentally despise not only our way of life, but life itself.” Bethany Kozma, deputy chief of staff for USAID, has declared that the “U.S. is a pro-life nation.”

Although the American public often has trouble accepting what is going on at the highest levels of the American government, religious authoritarians abroad have no such trouble. They see it — and they like what they see. Over the past several years, alliances between America’s Christian Nationalists and like-minded religious nationalists in other countries have grown in strength, with links forged through groups, such as the International Organization for the Family, that couch their advocacy for regressive social positions as a defense of the “natural family.”

It is hard to imagine anything worse for the American national interest than making the United States a leader of such a regressive agenda. Pompeo’s commission and other efforts to promote “religious freedom” will not only undermine the rights of many people around the world, it will also promote some authoritarian regimes at the expense of democratic movements and diminish still further America’s credibility as a champion of democracy at home and abroad.

So why on Earth would any secretary of state pursue such a course of action? The answers are the same in the United States as they are in the regimes that Pompeo’s policy will end up assisting. President Trump knows that his hopes for political survival depend almost entirely on his base of white Christian Nationalist supporters, and Pompeo has demonstrated that he will stop at nothing to please his boss — especially if it might enhance his reputation and career prospects.

If blessing some more LGBT-free zones and spouse abuse-friendly regimes is a way to consolidate authoritarianism at home, he seems happy to make the trade.

Katherine Stewart is the author of *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* and will speak at FFRF’s national convention in Boston in 2021.

### Freethought Matters

Fall 2020 season resumes Sunday, Sept. 6, 2020

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

Go to: [ffrf.org/freethought-matters](https://ffrf.org/freethought-matters) for more information



FFRF NEWS

Asner, Camara, Stone join FFRF Honorary Board

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is delighted to announce three additional members to its Honorary Board of distinguished achievers who have made known their state-church support or their dissent from religion. The newest members are Ed Asner, Jeremiah Camara and Geoffrey R. Stone.

Ed Asner, movie and stage actor, TV (“Lou Grant,” “Mary Tyler Moore Show”) legend, winner of seven acting Emmy Awards, comedian and dramatist, has been a trade union and political activist, and two-term president of the Screen Actors Guild. He has appeared in dozens of movies and television shows, including as the voice of Ralph in the beloved film, “Up,” and as Santa in “Elf.” Jeremiah Camara is filmmaker of



Ed Asner



Jeremiah Camara



Geoffrey R. Stone

“Holy Hierarchy: The Religious Roots of Racism in America” (2018), “Contradiction: A Question of Faith” (2013), and other films, and author of the books *Holy Lockdown: Does the Church*

*Limit Black Progress?* and *The New Doubting Thomas: The Bible, Black Folks & Blind Belief*. He’s also creator the widely watched YouTube video series “Slave Sermons.”

Geoffrey R. Stone, Edward H. Levi Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago, joined the faculty in 1973 after clerking for Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan. He later served as dean of the law school and provost of the University of Chicago. Stone is the author of many books on constitutional law, including *Sex and the Constitution: Sex, Religion and Law from America’s Origins to the Twenty-First Century* (2017).

The FFRF Honorary Board also includes Sean B. Carroll, Jerry Coyne, Richard Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett, Ernie Harburg, Jennifer Michael Hecht, Susan Jacoby, Robin Morgan, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, Mike Newdow, Katha Pollitt, Steven Pinker, Ron Reagan, Robert Sapolsky, Edward Sorel and Julia Sweeney.

FFRF legal team stays busy

Apart from dealing with pandemic-related issues, FFRF has also been recently busy fielding a variety of dismaying non-COVID First Amendment violations.

A lot of these (not surprising in an era of physical distancing) involve inappropriate promotion of religion on government social media. And a number of infringements still involve in-person promotion of prayer and religion.

Below is a representative roundup of violations that FFRF has sent complaint letters about in June and July:

Governmental promotion of prayer, religion

- Post Office, Louisville, Miss.: Conducting a daily morning prayer at the mandatory safety meeting.
- Caddo Parish Public Schools, Shreveport, La.: Opening each meeting with prayer, invariably Christian, led by school board members who often mention “Jesus Christ.”
- City of Franklin, Va.: “Blessing” food and beginning a May 22 lunch in honor of public works employees with an invocation “in the name of Jesus Christ.”
- City of Findlay, Ohio: Organizing and participating in a prayer event outside the county courthouse with Christian-only churches. Said Mayor Christina Muryn: “I think that religion, and faith and Christ are an important part of every issue that we face, as individuals and as a community.”
- Gregg County Courthouse, Longview, Texas: Judge Bill Stoudt organizing a June 27 prayer rally, stating his intention was for “everyone to get together and let’s just do some praying.” The lectern featured the official Gregg County seal.
- Christian County Sheriff’s Office, Ozark, Mo.: Sponsoring and promoting a “Day of Prayer” event on Ozark Square, including a post on the official Facebook page containing a Latin cross and New Testament bible verse inviting everyone to pray.
- City of Frankfort, Ky.: Gov. Andy Beshear relentlessly promoting Christianity during official press briefings, such as inviting Rev. C.B. Akins to lead the state in Christian prayer on May 28 at the daily coronavirus update.

- Morganfield Police Department, Morganfield, Ky.: The chief of police leading a group of citizens in prayer while on duty.
  - City of Prattville, Ala.: Organizing and hosting a June community prayer event, advertising it on the city’s website and social media pages, holding it in city hall, and streaming it online.
  - Abilene ID, Abilene, Texas: Craig Middle School using its text-reminder system for parents to promote attendance at religious events, granting a Fellowship of Christian Athletes coordinator access to the confidential list of phone numbers, reminding parents to send children to FCA meetings, including one at a church.
  - Department of Natural Resources, Madison, Wis.: Requiring employees to attend an awards ceremony at a resort wherein DNR chaplains led prayer and invoked Jesus Christ and a presentation was given with overtly religious themes about grieving.
- Promoting religion over social media**
- FFRF has been contacted by citizens around the nation alerting us to many instances in which governmental social media sites are promoting religion. These include:
- Nicholas County Health Department, Summersville, W.Va.: Regularly endorsing and promoting Christianity in social media posts, encouraging citizens to pray, such as in a May 19 post saying “There is power in prayer!”
  - Jefferson County Sheriff, Mount Vernon, Ill.: Posting a video on the official Facebook page where the sheriff said he believed truth is found “In God’s word alone,” and that the U.S. and state constitutions are secondary legal authorities below “the word of God.”
  - Baker County Sheriff’s Office, Macclenny, Fla.: Promoting religion on its official Facebook page.
  - City of Central Fall, R.I.: The mayor announcing an official day of mourning and lament before inviting a Christian pastor to deliver a short sermon, concluding “in the name of Jesus,” all posted on the city’s official Facebook page.
  - City of Longview, Texas: Posting a graphic quoting Psalm 37:4 as part of its updated posting on coronavirus cases.
  - Hinton Public Schools, Hinton,



FFRF’s legal team includes the intake and letter-writing crew (clockwise from top left): Intake Attorney Madeline Ziegler, Staff Attorney Chris Line, Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson, Legal Assistant Greta Martens and Legal Fellow Dante Hartootunian.

- Okla.: Posting a religious message by a coach on the team’s Facebook page referencing living by the bible. The religious post was removed after FFRF objected, and we were assured it wouldn’t happen again.
  - Greenfield Police Department, Greenfield, Wis.: On multiple occasions promoting Christianity on its Facebook page such as images and videos with biblical quotes.
  - City of Madera, Calif.: Posting a video address from the mayor on its official Facebook page urging citizens to “continue to rely on your faith . . . We all know we cannot get through this without our lord and savior Jesus Christ,” asking residents to pray.
  - Polk County Commissioners, Bartow, Fla.: Deleting comments, then access by members of a local atheist group from the official Facebook page, simply for expressing viewpoints different from the county board’s chair.
- Promotions of religion by members of Congress and statehouses**
- State Rep. Ric Metzgar, R-Md., who on July 4 posted on his official government Facebook page the bible verse 1 Peter 2:16, urging his constituents to begin “living as servants of God” and seeking the “gift of Jesus’ salvation.”
  - U.S. Rep. Bill Johnson, R-Ohio, who regularly posts religious messages every Sunday, and on other occasions as well.

- U.S. Rep. Roger Williams, R-Texas, who sent an email to constituents urging them to adopt faith as a central fact of their lives and stressing that the United States was founded “on Judeo-Christian values.”
  - State Rep. Scott Plakon, R-Fla.: His Memorial Day post on his official Facebook page was a religious message and New Testament verse that began, “We all should thank God every day.”
- FFRF salutes its intake and letter-writing legal team, overseen by Legal Director Rebecca Markert, headed by Intake Attorney Madeline Ziegler, with Staff Attorney Chris Line, Legal Fellows Brendan Johnson and Dante Hartootunian, and Legal Assistant Greta Martens. (We will miss Dante, who has departed recently for his federal clerkship in American Samoa.)

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

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# Two big developments for FFRF in D.C.

By Mark Dann

To paraphrase Taylor Swift: Legislators are gonna legislate. And the Freedom From Religion Foundation is making your secular voice heard in that process.

Congress is resuming normal order and looking to pass appropriations bills to fund the government. FFRF has been using this part of the legislative process to fight for your secular rights. FFRF has also continued to build bridges and cultivate allies in Washington during the COVID crisis by joining the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.

## Appropriations

FFRF has been urging the House to use the appropriations process to tell the Trump administration that religious

exemptions are not acceptable and that the separation of state and church must be preserved. This year, we've worked with our allies in the Congressional Freethought Caucus to focus on inserting strong nondiscrimination language and defunding harmful regulations that promote religious exemptions. The House has delivered.

The appropriations bill includes strong language (Section 248) denying funds to any organization that discriminates on the basis of age, disability, sex, race, color, national origin, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation. In fact, the bill goes further and bars funding for the implementation of several anti-religious-liberty Trump administration regulations and administrative actions that greatly expand religious exemptions in health care (Section 245), the awarding of federal contracts (Section 114) and in abortion and reproductive care (Section 244). (The bill currently retains the Hyde Amendment barring federal funds from being used for abortion care for low-income recipients on Medicaid and Medicare, which FFRF opposes.)

These types of issues — securing rights and denying funding for regulations that harm the separation of state and church — aren't usually brought up during appropriations. However, these are not traditional times and, with FFRF's help, the House is recognizing the uniqueness of this moment.

## Leadership Conference

Unlike legal victories, policy requires building strong relationships with like-minded organizations. We have achieved a major milestone in this area: FFRF has officially become a member of the Leadership Conference for Civil and Human Rights. The Leadership Conference was born out of the civil rights movement. It was founded by A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (and a freethinker who declared, "Prayer is not one of our remedies,"); Roy Wilkins of the NAACP; and Arnold Aronson, a leader of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council. The Leadership Conference networks FFRF with other like-minded organizations fighting on a whole host of issues that touch on state-

church, from making our courts fairer to removing religious exemptions in health care. We've been able to share intelligence and coordinate grassroots lobbying, communications efforts and polling data.

The Leadership Conference will make our advocacy more effective and help to increase the impact of your donations and grassroots efforts. Our participation in this group is also raising FFRF's profile and helping showcase the importance of secular government across a whole host of other issues, including education, science-based policy, global climate change, religious freedom, health care, LGBTQ rights, women's rights, reproductive justice — and so much more.

The news has been brutal over the past four months. But FFRF has never stopped fighting for your rights and taking that fight into new arenas. These two highlights are victories, and we should savor them.

With your help, we can expect more victories and a strong finish in 2020.

Mark Dann is FFRF's director of governmental affairs and lives in Washington, D.C.



## FFRF condemns Catholic lobbying for billions

The Roman Catholic Church, including many of its dioceses involved in clergy sexual abuse cover-ups, has appeared to rake in the biggest haul of taxpayer COVID-19 relief money going to religious institutions — possibly exceeding \$3.5 billion, according to a shocking analysis by the Associated Press.

"By aggressively promoting the payroll program and marshaling resources to help affiliates navigate its shifting rules, Catholic dioceses, parishes, schools and other ministries have so far received approval for at least 3,500 forgivable loans," AP reported on July 10.

The Catholic Church successfully lobbied to be exempted from a Small Business Administration rule disqualifying Paycheck Protection Program applicants with more than 500 workers.

Nearly 500 loans approved to Catholic entities exceeded \$1 million, and at least eight were between \$5 million and \$10 million. Loan recipients of about \$200 million included some 40 dioceses that have spent hundreds of millions of dollars in the past few years paying victims through compensation funds

or bankruptcy proceedings, AP reports. The Diocesan Fiscal Management Conference has reported that about 9,000 Catholic entities received loans, nearly three times the number of Catholic beneficiaries that AP could identify, making AP's estimate that \$1.4 billion to \$3.5 billion in public funds have gone to Catholic entities an undercount.

AP reports that in late April several hundred Catholic leaders urged President Trump during a conference call to give even more funds after thousands of Catholic institutions had already secured loans. During the call, Trump engaged in electioneering and boasted that he was the "best [president] the Catholic Church has even seen."

This grotesque governmental favoritism toward religion — the complicity with religious demands that the rules do not apply to them — is as egregious as the raid of taxpayer funds. The "deadly sin" is that our nation's wall of separation between religion and government has been breached, to pad the coffers of one of the world's wealthiest and most corrupt religions.

## Christian 'mask-free' coffeeshop gets fined

FFRF commends its home county for taking action against an evangelical-run coffeehouse that advertised itself as a "mask-free zone" in violation of a county-wide public health order.

FFRF had emailed a complaint letter on July 20 to Public Health Madison and Dane County, asking it to enforce its order requiring indoor masking in shops and stores to defiant establishments such as Helbachs Coffee in Middleton, Wis. On July 21, health authorities fined Helbachs \$263.50 for violating the masking requirement. WKOW-TV quotes an official as saying that since the mask mandate went into effect on July 13, the office has received 390 compliance complaints — with 180 of those against Helbachs.

FFRF noted in its letter that employees of the coffeehouse, run by a couple who started divisive "Jesus Lunches" at Middleton High School, had belittled customers, including small children, who entered while wearing masks and reportedly had refused to space out seating to comply with social distancing regulations.

The shop also briefly posted a "mask-free zone" announcement warning that it would not admit anyone wearing a mask.

Individuals have picketed the shop, including FFRF staff. FFRF asked officials to suspend Helbachs' food and drink license if it refused to comply with the mask order.

"Businesses that refuse to abide by the Public Health Madison and Dane County's regulations risk the health of everyone in their communities," stated FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian. Failing to enforce the order puts responsible coffeeshops and comparable businesses at a competitive disadvantage for obeying the law and protecting their customers, he noted. The mask enforcement, FFRF pointed out, had to include businesses whose owners claim that the mask mandate violates their deeply held personal religious beliefs.

Dane County apparently agrees with FFRF. On Aug. 6, it informed Helbachs that it could lose its drink and food licenses if it doesn't comply with the mask order.

A note to FFRF Members

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## FFRF VICTORIES

# City revokes tax exemption after FFRF protests

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is celebrating a victory for taxpayers near its home.

The city of Monona (adjacent to FFRF’s headquarters in Madison, Wis.) had incorrectly classified a nearly 10-acre property on Lake Monona as being exempt from property taxes. Even though the property is generally referred to as the “San Damiano Friary,” it reportedly hadn’t been used for tax-exempt purposes since at least 2015. FFRF had protested this misclassification in December.

“Property that is exempt under Wis. Stat. § 70.11(4) must actually be used by the entity seeking an exemption,” FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott had written to Monona City Administrator Bryan Gadow and the official appraisers. “It is not enough for a religious organization to own the property, it must be ‘used exclusively’ by the



The owners of the “San Damiano Friary” in Monona, Wis., are now required to pay taxes on the expensive waterfront property.

organization.” Wisconsin case law backed FFRF’s argument. In *Dominican Nuns v. City of La Crosse*, the Wisconsin Court of

Appeals ruled that a church property that was being maintained but had been vacated by a religious order was taxable. Any claim to an exemption by the owner here was even worse than in the *Dominican Nuns* case, since the property was reportedly being rented to tenants, FFRF had added.

The city of Monona seems to have come around to FFRF’s perspective. The latest documents from the city’s assessing agency show that it is being appraised at just under \$4 million, and the property owners could end up paying more than \$80,000 in taxes annually.

“We’re glad we were able to help end yet another case of religious privilege,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Monona residents will no longer have to compensate for this entity not paying its taxes.”

By Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey

### Alabama

Gideons International — the infamous evangelical association — will no longer be distributing bibles in Autauga County Schools in Prattville.

A concerned district parent reported that a teacher at Daniel Pratt Elementary School used the school’s official communication channels to send a message to all parents: “The Gideons come every year to distribute bibles to any fifth-grade student who wants to have one.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district, urging it to take immediate action to ensure that it no longer facilitates the distribution of bibles to students.

The district’s attorney informed FFRF in a letter of response that the superintendent was made aware of the issue and will “address the inappropriate use of Autauga County Board of Education’s communication’s channels for non-school-related matters, including but not limited to, the distribution of Gideon bibles with all board personnel.”

### California

A Long Beach Unified School District teacher will no longer be promoting the religious “Good News Club.”

A teacher at Colin Powell Elementary School reportedly founded and was running a Good News Club for first- and second-grade students that met in her classroom. Other adults, at least some of whom are district employees, reportedly also helped to organize the club and “bring the gospel message” to students.

Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian wrote to Superintendent Chris Steinhauser asking that he inform staff that school-spon-

sored religious activity, like this club, violates the Constitution as well as the rights of conscience of students.

The district’s attorney has informed FFRF that the teacher leading the Good New Club has been told to stop while in her role as a public school teacher.

### Georgia

Thomas County Schools events will no longer contain school-sponsored prayer.

A Thomas County Central High School student alerted FFRF that the school’s 2020 graduation ceremony opened with a scheduled invocation. Everyone in attendance was instructed to rise for the prayer and it was delivered “in Jesus’ name.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district reminding it that the Supreme Court has continually struck down prayers at school-sponsored events and that, in order to protect the rights of all its students, the district must no longer allow invocations at official events.

The district’s attorney informed FFRF in a letter of response that the district has reviewed the relevant legal requirements and will adhere to them in the future. “The district takes very seriously its responsibility to protect the rights of all students,” the letter reads.

### Iowa

School officials in the Logan-Magnolia Community School District will no longer send out religious messages to district families.

In April, the district sent a mass email to parents that endorsed Easter and religion. The email read, in part: “Easter is normally a time of rebirth and bringing together of family. Unfortunately,

the coronavirus has thrown our entire world upside down.” The email concluded: “And, in the end, take time to thank God for all your blessings. Your children are a blessing, and now more than ever, you need them to give you hope for the future.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Tom Ridder to ensure that future communications do not include religious messages or endorse religious holidays. Ridder confirmed in a reply email that the district will comply.

### Illinois

A religious event has been removed from a Community Unit School District #200 summer activity handout in Wheaton.

A district parent informed FFRF that the district sent out a “Summer Choice Board” handout to parents via email which provided various summer activities for students to participate in. One of these activities, “Summerfest Goes Wild,” was a Christian worship event presented by Highpoint Church. The event began with a woman explaining, “We are here for one reason, and that’s to get to know who God is and his great love for each of us.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Jeff Schuler reminding him that the district may not encourage students to attend a Christian worship event. Schuler informed FFRF in a letter of response that the event has been removed from the handout.

### Louisiana

Rapides Parish Schools in Alexandria has addressed several church/state issues raised by FFRF.

A concerned community member reported that Brame Middle School has begun each school year by inviting a local church to its faculty meetings to pray with and preach to teachers and staff. Teachers have reportedly been told they cannot leave during this portion of the meetings. Additionally, teachers and staff at the school had been regularly participating in student Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) meetings, often by signing praise songs with students. Finally, many classrooms throughout the school featured religious displays, including crosses and bible verses.

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to the district, pointing out the constitutional concerns with each of these reported violations and urging it to immediately cease prayer at faculty meetings, staff participation in student religious practices and display of religious symbols and messages in the classrooms.

The district’s attorney responded to FFRF’s letter with assurances that these complaints were addressed by the school principal.

### Michigan

Coaches in Muskegon Public Schools will no longer be leading their athletic teams in prayer.

A district community member report-

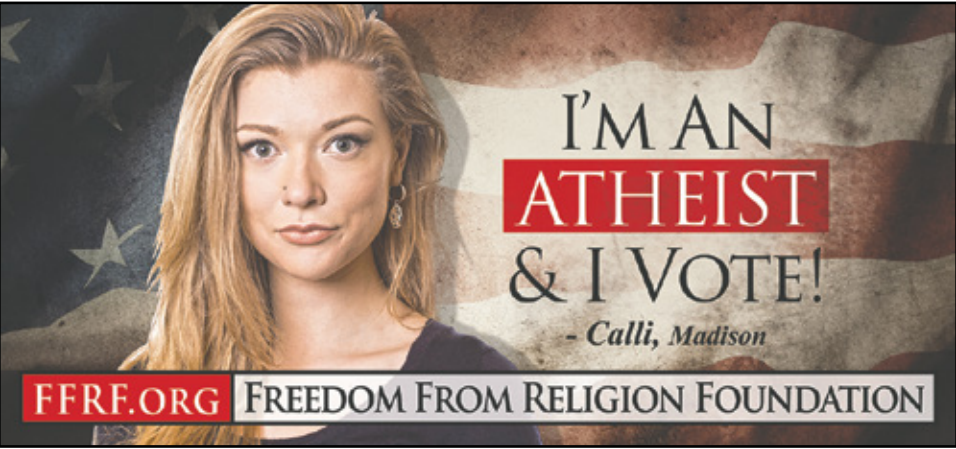
## NOTHING FAILS LIKE PRAYER CONTEST 2021

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](https://ffrf.org/nothing-fails-like-prayer)









# IN THE NEWS

## S.C. to allocate \$32M to pay for private tuition

South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster announced July 19 he is allocating \$32 million for grants to pay for private school tuition.

The grants, called Safe Access to Flexible Education (SAFE), will come out of the \$48 million McMaster’s office received in discretionary funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act.

McMaster said the money will go to private schools to distribute, and it is intended for current private school students or those who wish to transfer to a private school.

The announcement received immediate backlash from state teacher organizations, two state senators and FFRF.

Opponents of the plan filed a lawsuit, which was heard by an Orangeburg circuit judge, who temporarily enjoined the funding.

The plaintiffs then filed a petition to take the case directly to the South Carolina Supreme Court.

It’s something attorneys on both sides support, saying that reaching a resolution to the case is critical as the start of school approaches.

## Survey: Do you need to believe in God to be good?

A new Pew Research Center survey showed that people’s thoughts on whether belief in God is necessary to be moral vary by economic development, education and age.

Across the 34 countries in which residents were surveyed, 45 percent said it is necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values. But there are large regional variations in the answers.

Less than half of those surveyed in both Canada and the United States say belief in God is necessary to be moral (26 percent and 44 percent, respectively).

There is an inverse relationship between GDP per capita and the percentage of the public that draws this connection between belief in God and morality.

In most European and North American countries surveyed, individuals with more education are less likely to say that belief in God is necessary to be moral.

## Transgender man sues Catholic hospital

Jesse Hammons, a 33-year-old transgender man, had his hysterectomy canceled by the University of Maryland St. Joseph Medical Center because it conflicted with the medical center’s Catholic beliefs, according to a story in the Washington Post.

So, on July 17, Hammons filed a lawsuit against the medical center, claiming the hospital’s denial violated the 14th Amendment’s equal-protection clause and discrimination protections in the Affordable Care Act.

The Post reported that a staff attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union, which is representing Hammons, stated that “The case follows a pattern of Catholic hospitals across the country denying care to transgender patients as Catholic medical systems have continued to expand nationwide and as the Trump administration has removed nondiscrimination protections for transgender people in health care.”



## Photo forces Falwell to take leave at Liberty

Jerry Falwell has taken a leave of absence as president of Liberty University, an evangelical Christian college, after posting a photo of himself and a woman, both with their pants unzipped.

The university said in a statement on Aug. 7: “The Executive Committee of Liberty University’s Board of Trustees, acting on behalf of the full Board, met and requested that Jerry Falwell Jr. take an indefinite leave of absence from his roles as president and chancellor of Liberty University, to which he has agreed, effective immediately.”

The college has a strict code of conduct for student behavior at the university, including barring premarital sex and the consumption of media either on or off campus “that is offensive to Liberty’s standards and traditions.”

## Christian Nationalists less likely to wear masks

A new study shows that those who embrace Christian Nationalist ideology are more likely to flout measures intended to slow the spread of COVID-19, such as wearing a mask or social distancing.

According to the study, published in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, “Christian Nationalism is the leading predictor that one engaged in more frequent incautious behavior related to COVID-19” and the “second strongest predictor that Americans took fewer precautions like wearing a mask or sanitizing/washing one’s hands.”

The authors of the study, Samuel Perry, Andrew L. Whitehead and Joshua B. Grubbs, concluded that “Christian Nationalism ideology is positively associated with Americans’ frequency of engaging in incautious behaviors.”

## Chicken-killing ritual faces legal challenge

In New York, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish chicken-killing ritual is a major health risk during the coronavirus pandemic, animal advocates write in new legal papers.

The Alliance To End Chickens as Kaporos has waged a five-year battle against the Kaporos ritual, which takes place on public streets in Brooklyn and elsewhere prior to Yom Kippur. Up to 100,000 live chickens are brought in packed crates and sacrificed to “cleanse the practitioner of sins.” In new papers filed in Manhattan Supreme Court on July 6, the group seeks to revive a lawsuit against the city Health Department in light of the pandemic.

“A pandemic-causing virus, such as COVID-19, can be caused by a live animal wet market, which involves uncontrolled and poorly understood interactions between humans and intensely confined filthy, sick and diseased animals, which is what Kaporos is and does,” attorney Nora Constance Marino writes in the suit.

FFRF has written the city of New York several times over this animal cruelty issue in the name of religion.

## Murder prompts criticism of blasphemy laws

On July 29, Tahir Naseem, 57, of Illinois, was on trial for blasphemy in the Pakistani city of Peshawar. A man walked into the busy courtroom and shot Naseem multiple times at close range, killing him.

Video showed the murderer saying that the Prophet Muhammad told him to kill Naseem in a dream.

“He is the enemy of Islam ... the enemy of Pakistan,” the gunman said.

The murder of an American standing trial for blasphemy in Pakistan has sparked renewed pressure on Islamabad

to reform laws that human rights groups say target minorities.

The State Department said Naseem was a U.S. citizen and called in a tweet for “immediate action” in response to his killing.

Pakistan’s blasphemy laws have long been the target of fierce criticism from international human rights groups.

## Satanic Temple suit moves forward against city

A lawsuit filed by the Satanic Temple over its efforts to erect a monument in a Minnesota park is moving forward, despite a federal court’s dismissal of most of the counts outlined in the complaint.

U.S. District Judge Wilhelmina Wright dismissed nine of the 10 counts in the suit against the city of Belle Plaine, several of which alleged violations of free speech and the free exercise of religion.

The suit alleged the city broke what amounted to a promise by rescinding the permit to let the temple place a monument in Veterans Memorial Park. The temple had already paid to have the monument built, at a cost of \$40,000, its lawyer said.

The group has been fighting with the city for more than three years after city leaders accepted a steel silhouette of a soldier kneeling at a cross in the park.

## Arizona ‘Nones’ advance to November election

Three Arizona “Nones” advanced to their respective November general elections.

Arizona state Rep. Athena Salman won her primary on Aug. 4. She had the most votes in the three-way race, where the top two advance to the November ballot. Salman is a two-term representative and serves as Minority Whip.

Arizona state Sen. Juan Mendez easily won his primary against a more moderate Democrat. Mendez, one of only a few openly atheist state senators, is in his second term as state senator following two terms as a state representative.

Delina DiSanto won the Democratic primary in Arizona’s Fourth Congressional District. DiSanto, who is a registered nurse running in her first race, is a self-described “recovering Catholic,” according to the Freethought Equality Fund PAC.

### 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.

Your weekly antidote to the Religious Right

## FREETHOUGHT RADIO

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FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION



# FFRF awards \$26,100!

## Winners of FFRF’s 2020 high school essay contest

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the winners of the 2020 William Schulz High School Essay Contest. FFRF is awarding an unprecedented \$26,100 in scholarship money for this year’s contest!

College-bound high school seniors were asked to write a personal persuasive essay based on this prompt: “Write a persuasive, personal essay about why you reject religion and think others would be better off doing so, too. You may wish to include experiences or challenges you have faced as a young freethinker.”

After reviewing 491 essays (a record!), FFRF awarded 15 top prizes and 16 honorable mentions.

Winners are listed below and include the college or university they will be attending and the award amount.



- First Place**  
Arianna Kassatly, 18, Florida State University, \$3,500
- Second Place (tie)**  
Liliana Austin, 18, Brampton University of Ottawa, \$3,000  
Jonah Mathisson, 18, University of Michigan, \$3,000
- Third Place (tie)**  
Kara Curtis, 18, University of Texas at Dallas, \$2,500  
Jana Kelly, 18, Brown University, \$2,500
- Fourth Place**  
Katherine Gerhardt, 17, University of California-Berkley, \$2,000
- Fifth Place**  
James Tripp Conway, 18, University of Kentucky, \$1,500
- Sixth Place**  
Paris Huckaby, 18, University of Colorado-Boulder, \$1,000
- Seventh Place (tie)**  
Kaitlin Eblen, 18, University of California-Los Angeles, \$750  
Arielle Fentress, 18, Cleveland Institute of Music, \$750
- Eighth Place**  
Anderson Lynch, 18, Oglethorpe University, \$500.
- Ninth Place (tie)**  
Ahndiya Kiburi, 18, University of California-Davis, \$400  
Isaiah Welch-Novels, 18, University of New Haven, \$400
- Tenth Place (tie)**  
Asia Felton, 18, Loyola Marymount University, \$300  
Samantha Schwarz, University of California-Los Angeles, \$300
- Honorable mentions (\$200 each)**  
Yiping An, 18, Carnegie Mellon University  
Soji Bedsole, 18, Auburn University  
Hailey Cheng, 18, Columbia University  
Julia Dimov, 18, Appalachian State  
Alan Dupre, 18, Arizona State University  
Brina Howell, 18, Kutztown University  
Adam Johnson, 18, Duke University  
Sofia Jorgensen, 18, University of Washington  
Sierra Kolodjski, 18, University of Wisconsin-River Falls  
Daisy Martinez, 18, Blinn College  
Harikeshav Narayan, 18, Indiana University-Bloomington  
Alvaro Ortiz, 18, University of California-Berkley
- California-Berkley**  
Allen Papp, 18, University of Texas at Austin  
Ashleigh Price, 18, Eastern Illinois University  
Anastazia Rudolph, 18, University of Alaska-Fairbanks  
Melinda Zou, 18, University of California-Berkley

bonus to students who are members of a secular student club or the Secular Student Alliance. The total of \$26,100 reflects these bonuses.

FFRF also warmly thanks FFRF “Director of First Impressions” Lisa Treu for managing the infinite details of this and FFRF’s four other annual student competitions, and the challenges of doing it remotely. And we couldn’t judge these contests without our “faithful faithless” readers and judges, including: Linda Aten, Dan Barker, Darrell Barker, Kristina Daleiden, Bill Dunn, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Judi Jacobs, Linda Josheff, Dan Kettner, Kathy Kunz, Gloria Marquardt, Katya Maes, Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey, Amit Pal, Sue Schuetz, Lauryn Seering, PJ Slinger, Katrina Treu, Lisa Treu and Karen Lee Weidig.

FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994, grad students since 2010 and one dedicated to students of color since 2016. A fifth contest, open to law students, began in 2019.

The college student essay winners will be announced in the October issue.

### FIRST PLACE

# I don’t need to be fixed, thank you



Arianna Kassatly

*FFRF awarded Arianna \$3,500 for her essay.*

By Arianna Kassatly

“Yeah, I’ve just never really considered myself religious. I prefer to think freely, you know, instead of following the rules of a 3,500-year-old book that has been rewritten over and over again by power hungry white men.”

Every time one of my privileged peers pressures me into explaining my lack of spirituality, that is the monologue I recite. Their jaws usually drop, followed by a mumbling apology, and a brisk exit from the conversation, but I’ve never quite understood why. Is anything that I said untrue? If Jesus/God is real, why would he let a raging pandemic end the lives of thousands? If he were real, why would he let racism and bullying swallow

my childhood years? If he were real, why would he let me, or anyone else, grow up without a father?

Religion is simply a trap in our modern society, convincing kids to stop having sex, only so that parents can rest at night knowing that their little girl is “pure and clean.” Christians claim that “loving thy neighbor” is the only way to secure a place in heaven, and then continue to fight for the restricted rights of the LGBTQ+ community. Why can’t these people see that they are being controlled, brainwashed even? Their narcissistic ways are limiting the opportunities of growth that they so obviously desire.

So why not just live? Without a book telling you what you can and cannot do. Without a judgmental group of “friends

that will abandon you the moment you get into real trouble. Without the constant pressure to be a “perfect Christian.”

I do. I live freely, and I love my life. I guide my own path, and I think I’ve done a pretty good job. I have a perfect 4.0 GPA, big dreams, and strong relationships that support me. So, no, I don’t need to go to church with you. I don’t need to start a relationship with God. I don’t need to be fixed. I am free, and I am happy.

*Arianna, 18, is from Sugar Hill, Ga., and will be attending Florida State University. She enjoys performing in theatre shows and also volunteers as a student theater director for elementary school students. She was raised by a single mother who each year takes her and her brother to a previously unvisited country. When she isn’t traveling, she works as a waitress.*

“No, I don’t need to go to church with you. I don’t need to start a relationship with God. I don’t need to be fixed. I am free, and I am happy.”



SECOND PLACE (tie)

Growing up Catholic in a prison of guilt

FFRF awarded Liliana \$3,000 for her essay.

By Liliana Austin

In Catholicism, you're born a sinner, live a sinner and die a sinner. You spend your whole life attempting to redeem yourself for sins committed centuries before your birth, to be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

The guilt that comes with Catholicism is crushing. You second-guess every action, every thought, asking, "What would Jesus do?" You live in a perpetual state of shame, knowing you are not and will never be good enough. There's a voice in the back of your head whispering threats of eternal damnation, fire and brimstone. Life is hell and, it seems, it's only the prequel.

I was born to a single mother and raised Catholic, a contradiction in itself. I went to Catholic school, where I learned that my very existence is a sin, that my family

is wrong. I am wrong, double-damned, extra-unworthy of Christ's sacrifice. Hitting puberty and discovering I like girls was the cherry on top.

Becoming agnostic didn't happen overnight. It was a slow process, small things plucking at threads until the whole tapestry was shredded. The first thing was money — our church couldn't seem to get enough of it. They passed around the collection plate twice per mass, guilt-tripping even those who had nothing to give. Not a cent went to the poor.

Next was the sexual abuse. Then it was the Church's views on just about everything: homosexuality, birth control, divorce. I started noticing how much shame the Church pushed onto people, and then I noticed how much shame the

“Becoming agnostic didn't happen overnight. It was a slow process, small things plucking at threads until the whole tapestry was shredded.”

Church pushed onto me. I had this feeling of being suffocated by guilt I did nothing to deserve. I realized that I didn't believe in God; I simply feared the punishment I would receive if I didn't.

I don't know if God exists. I do know that I'm alive and that counts for something.

Agnosticism has freed me from the prison of guilt the Catholic Church trapped me in. I don't know if it's the right answer, but it's one that doesn't tell me I'm an abomination every day of my life.

Liliana, 18, is from Brampton, Ontario, Canada, and will be attending the University of Ottawa, with plans to major in biomedical science. She is a boxer, published poet and science enthusiast. She dreams of becoming a doctor and working with Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders).



Liliana Austin

SECOND PLACE (tie)

Where is God in the back of the ambulance?



Jonah Mathisson

FFRF awarded Jonah \$3,000 for his essay.

By Jonah Mathisson

There is a certain type of atheist who can pinpoint an exact moment in time when God died for them. I know these people exist because I am one of them.

I volunteer as an EMT on my local ambulance. When we get a critical patient in the back of the ambulance and are racing the clock, it can be tempting to pray. And believe me, I know how.

When I was young, Saturday meant an early wake-up for Hebrew school and services. I went to a Jewish summer camp for years where we would pray before and after each meal and before bed. I recited Torah at my bar mitzvah, and have visited Israel twice for religious

reasons. I did all of this happily, eager to please my parents, family and rabbi.

God died for me in the best possible way. On March 20, 2019, I crewed a cardiac arrest. After intubation, several shocks and numerous rounds of chest compressions, the patient regained a pulse. I was later informed that he left the hospital on his own two feet. Later, I caught myself reflexively praising God for this man's continued life. Yet, where was God in the ambulance? I had watched and assisted a well-trained crew of health-care professionals perform life-saving interventions. I now realize it is impossible to reconcile the concept of an omnipotent God with the work we do in EMS. Even considering such an idea would alienate the critical nature of our call to action and imply that our patient lacking in perfusion didn't truly need our help.

Now that I have expelled God from the back of the ambulance, it is a much safer place. Patients need not wait for divine intervention when medical intervention is at hand. I am an unabashed atheist because if I ever end up in the back of the ambulance, I want the paramedic to be one too. To all the religious EMTs, commercial pilots, doctors, and firefighters, heed my entirely non-prophetic words: Civilians' lives are in your hands, not God's.

Jonah, 18, is from Rye, N.Y., and plans to attend the University of Michigan, where he plans to study biology and eventually become a doctor. He is a volunteer EMT. In high school, he was president of the Science Olympiad team, founder of the chess club, an editor for the school newspaper and captain of the cross country team. He won the St. Vincent's Youth Award at his high school for his commitment to volunteerism.

THIRD PLACE (tie)

Attempting to pave the way for tolerance

FFRF awarded Kara \$2,500.

By Kara Curtis

I was raised atheist in rural Texas. In middle school, I passed 15 crosses in my eight-period day — on bookshelves, teachers' desks, or by the door as students walked into class. Half of all the school gossip started with "last night at church." We closed our school choir concerts with "The Lord Bless You and Keep You." People forget, especially in places as insular as my little town, that anyone could not believe what they do. I do my best to be vocal about my atheism because I truly believe that I can make a difference. When people are used to everyone sharing their religious views, sometimes all it takes is a reminder that people believe other things to open the way for sensitivity

and understanding.

As the valedictorian of my graduating class, I like to think I serve as a pretty big reminder. One of my friends, a confirmed Christian and regular church-goer, refused to open our graduation with a prayer. She told me she didn't want to make people who didn't share her religious views uncomfortable. As the only non-Christian she knows, I feel pretty confident taking credit for that. (I admittedly have the privilege to change people's attitudes and perspectives as a white born-and-bred country girl that the Muslim girl two grades below me who moved into my town last year does not.)

I am an unabashed atheist in an attempt to pave the way for religious tolerance in a town that is used to tolerating only one religion. I am an unabashed atheist not because I hate my community, but because I love it so

much. I want them to see that there can be people among them who don't believe what they do, and they are still people worthy of respect and kindness. I'm an atheist because I just find no evidence pointing to a higher power. I'm an unabashed atheist because I hope that every day I am unabashed, I make things just a little bit easier for the person who comes after me.

Kara, 18, is from Gunter, Texas and will be attending the University of Texas at Dallas, where she plans to study international political economy. She was her school's valedictorian and a National Merit Commended Student. She volunteered in Panama, worked with dog rescue organizations and started a nonprofit centered around opera called Opera Teens. In high school, she was in the all-state choir, captain of the golf team, founded and led several academic teams and worked with Spanish-speaking English Second Language students.



Kara Curtis



THIRD PLACE (tie)

Each of us is an almighty force of nature

Jana was awarded \$2,500 for her essay.

By Jana Kelly

I was raised by a father who was a by-product of mental illness and child neglect. He was born to a 72-year-old man who'd already had a first batch of children, and all he would tell me about the grandfather I'd never met was this: "The only time he paid me attention was to make sure I went to church." Naturally, this led my father to raise me as an agnostic. I grew up without the influence of any holy book, and while I respect the right of those who worship, I don't think I'd be the person I am today if I were leaning on a deity.

Because my childhood was devoid of a mystical guiding figure, I learned to

guide myself. I learned the capabilities of my own mind, and I learned self-reliance. You see, as beautiful as it is to believe in something, religion can distract you from true celebration. I see people saying they got into Harvard because of God, or they got this great new job because of him. While faith is security, it is also a disavowal of self-reward. You got into Harvard because you worked hard for that 4.0. You got that job because you are smart and qualified. Without the obligation of having to chalk my successes up to Someone or Something, I've learned to worship myself above all. I've learned to see myself as the purest, most powerful force of nature.

I am unabashedly agnostic because the world is full of inevitability. We are but specks in this infinite universe — who are we to assign meaning to how

we came to be? It's incredibly freeing to live without requirements or covenants. Life is so short, and in a vacuum of potentially unlimited knowledge, I'd suggest we spend it wisely. Not everything has to be a sign from the heavens. You get what you pay for and you earn what you work for. We don't need to justify our existences with the creation of some almighty power. We, on our own, are almighty.

Jana, 18, is from Davie, Fla., and will be attending Brown University, with plans to major in English. She hopes to become an English professor (and win a Pulitzer!). She lives with her brother and mother, who was born in Thailand, where they visit every summer. During high school, she was a speech and debate competitor, classical guitar student and the president of her school's Dead Poets Society.



Jana Kelly

FOURTH PLACE

Nonreligious perspective has been freeing



Katherine Gerhardt

FFRF awarded Katherine \$2,000 for her essay.

By Katherine Gerhardt

Growing up Christian, I was always bothered by a kernel of doubt about religion. As I matured, that kernel grew until it exploded and I became an atheist. Now, I view the world from a completely different perspective. My sense of morality comes from my ability to empathize with other people, contemplating life in general and observing the world around me. I live my life as if it's the only one.

I first began doubting my Christianity when the bible was read to me. Numerous questions flew through my mind. Why were dinosaurs not mentioned in the bible? If Santa is not real, how did I know God was? As elementary as these questions were, the answers never satisfied me. I was told that the bible was metaphorical. How-

ever, it all seemed to be a sloppy cover-up story to me.

As the years progressed, I developed an interest in science. It was then that I discovered that there was no objective evidence at all that the supernatural realm even exists. After all, in our experience as a species, we have found the natural explanation for almost anything we previously thought was supernatural. And if we haven't — it's only a matter of time.

When I entered middle school, my parents divorced, and this threw my mother in an unstable financial state. I placed my religious doubts aside and prayed every night, searching for answers and relief, but support was never granted. It got me thinking: Why would God let his innocent children suffer? If it were merely a test, why were immoral people rewarded? It

all seemed counterintuitive. When I asked myself, "Do you really believe God exists?", the answer was no. From that point on, I knew I was an atheist.

Now, when people ask me, "Why are you an atheist?", I answer with "Why aren't you?" Think about it. Why should you believe in something without any objective proof? A belief that relies on

blind faith? Personally, since becoming an atheist, my life has become clearer, simpler and more enjoyable. I finally feel free.

Katherine, 17, is from Fairfield, Calif., and plans to attend the University of California-Berkeley with hopes of becoming a bioengineering major. She would like to become an anesthesiologist. Katherine is a competitive figure skater and has won multiple awards on the state and semi-national level. She was valedictorian at her school and was a member of the Key Club, Photography Club and the National Honor Society.

“Now, when people ask me, ‘Why are you an atheist?’, I answer with ‘Why aren’t you?’”

FIFTH PLACE

Credit humans, not God, for achievements

FFRF awarded James \$1,500 for his essay.

By James Tripp Conway

God was an axiom during my entire childhood because of the religious dogma that socialized my young malleable mind. Society instills faith onto the masses, and young impressionable minds are most susceptible to the fairy tales of authority. Rejecting the existence of a creator has been a liberating and enlightening change to my personal philosophy.

Expunging the bias instilled into my brain left an inquisitive teen who yearned for answers. A passion for science, the paradigm for ideological freedom, formed. Emancipation from intellectual slavery gave purpose and control. Discrepancies between reality and the imposed fiction of God were too apparent. I rejected God because evil is abundant, despite a benevolent being supposedly protecting us. This

oxymoronic delusion became personal when I began to suffer from innate hearing loss.

Science, from evolution to space, reaffirms the notion that the universe has no place for mysticism. Through extrapolation, it is fact that all phenomena are driven by nature. A reductionist perspective shows that nothing is intelligently designed. The universe is too complex, natural and imperfect for God and the simpleton mantra of religion. Omnipotence and omniscience are both impossible qualities to attain, yet both are necessary for God.

The drive toward progress and discovery has been the highlight of humankind. If one aspires for the betterment of society, putting effort into science and rationalism is the only path toward human prosperity. The stringent dichotomy between scientific truth and mass delusion is self-evident. Science brought theoretical methods for explanations of our universe; science cre-

ated vaccines against infectious disease; science manifested modern technology. Religion caused death, partisanship and hysteria that plagued civilizations and their people throughout all of history.

Because of the acceptance of the scientific method, we enjoy the fruits of our progress that have transcended us from animals merely surviving to explorers who have reached a collective self-actualization. Instead of relying on an imaginary external force to intervene, give yourself and others the rightful credit. The pinnacle of human achievement is not attributed to a nonexistent being; it is attributed to us: pioneers, inventors and visionaries. God gave us nothing. We earned ourselves everything.

James, 18, is from Crestwood, Ky., and will be attending the University of Kentucky, with the goal of earning a degree in physics. He plans to re-establish the prominence of the Secular Student Alliance at the University of Kentucky. His hobbies include writing, reading, programming and video games.



James Tripp Conway



SIXTH PLACE

The divine proportion is purely natural



Paris Huckaby

FFRF awarded Paris \$1,000 for her essay.

By Paris Huckaby

The Fibonacci sequence is a series of numbers that continues on forever, following the rule that each number is equal to the sum of the preceding two numbers. In nature, it's what makes up the world around us: the spirals of shells, the structures of pine cones and seeds. Even spiral galaxies ascribe to the golden ratio, which is also called the divine proportion because of its ubiquity in nature — and ironically — because it's one of the things to which I attribute my lack of religion. This kind of certainty and meaning that can only be found in the natural world is more beautiful than any of faith's torn tapestries and gauzy platitudes. My entrance into adolescence was defined by a desperate search for any kind of meaning. Unable to justify letting my childhood's religious foundations scare me

into hiding my true self any longer, I came out of the closet when I was 13. Most of my friends were religious, but I expected them to overlook the prejudices they'd been raised with because they knew me — I wasn't any different than I'd always been. Unfortunately, this wasn't the case. Shunned by my peers and questioning how a religion claiming goodwill had only brought me pain, I found an unexpected comfort in science and math, grounded by their tangibility and their measurable impact for good in the world. That's something that religion lacks — it doesn't cure sickness, it doesn't turn the sun's rays and wind's force into renewable energy, it doesn't make up the very fabric of the world that encloses us. Science does. I'm proud to identify as agnostic because I believe not only in what I can see

and feel, but in what is measurable. If we were to measure the role that religion plays in the world, I think we would find an unbalanced ratio of pain, fear and control compared to any promotion of peace or goodwill. Without religion telling us where to find meaning, we are able instead to find it for ourselves wherever we may choose, finding peace in knowing that we will rejoin the world's natural harmony ourselves one day. Paris, 18, is from Loveland, Colo., and will be attending the University of Colorado-Boulder, where she plans to study English, journalism and political science. She was a member of the National Honor Society and Future Business Leaders of America. She serves as a commissioner on her city's Youth Advisory Commission. Paris won the local chapter of Daughters of the Revolution's Good Citizen award.

“Without religion telling us where to find meaning, we are able instead to find it for ourselves wherever we may choose.”

SEVENTH PLACE (tie)

Irony of Christian club held in science lab

FFRF awarded Kaitlin \$750 for her essay.

By Kaitlin Eblen

It was during my freshman year, at the request of many of my religious friends, that I attended my first Christian club meeting. A local church sponsored this on-campus club at my high school, which met every Wednesday at lunch. Not lost on me was the obvious irony of the location of this club in one of the science labs. In the very classroom where students had, only minutes earlier, been observing scientific phenomenon and empirical evidence, a guest speaker was now reading from passages of the bible. Unlike the principles of kinematics and osmolarity that had underlaid the physics and biology experiments performed here, the foundations of these “truths”

rested on faith and written word alone. I couldn't help but think that the club's presence was entirely counterproductive to the goals of a public education. Why do we adhere strictly to the rules of nature in one area of study only to blindly follow faith in another? And how can such divergent modes of thought be taught nearly simultaneously, in a classroom, only minutes apart? I believe strongly that their coexistence is impossible, their differences, irreconcilable. When I raise my hand in math class to express an objection to the series of derived equations on the board, I am expected to substantiate my argument, to provide evidence. Religious beliefs, however, can never withstand the same examinations and scrutiny. Objections to its validity can be dismissed simply on the basis of a few verses of scripture or on the ultimately in-

comprehensible power of a divine being. And when so much of faith is centered on individual interpretation and personal experiences, how can it really be questioned at all? Even in regard to more subjective areas of study, such as English, literary commentary and analysis are still based upon a firm understanding of both the book and its author. It is therefore that I implore you to consider the baselessness of religious claims. With nothing more than holy scripture and personal conviction to its favor, religion cannot be defended. Kaitlin, 18, is from Temcula, Calif., and will be attending UCLA, with plans to major in international relations. She is a member of the National Honor Society and was an active member of Political Youth Club, Vegan Club, California Scholarship Federation and co-president of the Global Awareness Campaign.



Kaitlin Eblen

SEVENTH PLACE (tie)

True enlightenment comes from atheism



Arielle Fentress

FFRF awarded Arielle \$750 for her essay.

By Arielle Fentress

The most beneficial action one can take is to think and research freely, without any bias or judgment. Religion, a system of beliefs based on archaic ideas and stories, continues to claim billions of followers worldwide — many of whom certainly do not think freely. Religion perpetuates ignorance, breeds immoral behavior and limits many minds from true self-discovery. Religion is the easy way to face the world. God and Lucifer — good and evil, with no in between. The prophets Muhammad and Jesus brought the alleged word of God thousands of years ago, and followers put their faith in every word they said, not once doubting the legitimacy of their tales or questioning their

supposed existence. It is much easier to believe what you are told than to branch out for yourself and discover that we may not know all of the answers to life. But that's why it's so important to have space for this questioning to exist, to nurture freethinking. It shapes our identity for the better and expands our mind, so we are not trapped in a self-made shield from the hard-to-swallow truth. Self-discovery and self-acceptance are often stunted by religion. Within religion itself, there is a lot of nit-picking that simply does not hail from any form of logic and serves only to antagonize certain groups of people, typically minorities. The LGBTQ+ community has been targeted by religion through modern times. In some areas of the Middle East, where Islam is practiced, LGBTQ+ members who are found out can be punished severely, even executed. Additionally, religion can

lead to internalized homophobia/transphobia and this, in turn, leads to higher suicide rates. Even those brave enough to accept themselves aren't always guaranteed a better fate. Many are thrown onto the streets by horrified parents who want nothing to do with their child anymore. In the fight to stanch the blinding ignorance of religion, atheism has bloomed over the past century and continues to make advancements. I have been happier and freer than ever before since I embraced atheism, and I finally truly feel enlightened. Arielle, 18 is from Oviedo, Fla., and will be attending the Cleveland Institute of Music, majoring in viola performance. Her goal is to become a member of a major professional orchestra. “I would say that music is my religion,” Arielle writes. She toured Europe and America and also immersed herself in music at Boston University Tanglewood Institute for two months.



EIGHTH PLACE

# Rejecting that which oppresses me

FFRF awarded Anderson \$500 for his essay.

By Anderson Lynch

“Y’know, you’re, like, actually a nice person. It’s a shame you’re going to hell.”

I nearly choked on my food as the girl across from me continued to eat her lunch, the sounds of the school cafeteria apparently rendering her oblivious to the implications of her statement. I glanced around the table, seeing if anyone would say anything, even more surprised when nobody did. According to her, I was going to hell, to be tortured for all of eternity. Not a hundred years, not a thousand. She expected me to experience unimaginable pain for the rest of time.

Why? What had I done to deserve that, a fate I’d be hesitant to wish on my worst enemy? Was it because I’m transgender? Bisexual? Atheist? Did I wear too many mixed fabrics or eat shellfish one too

many times? If any of these things made me worthy of eternal damnation, then I didn’t want any part of it.

As a young man in the Southern United States, however, I didn’t have a choice over whether or not to be a part of it. The discriminatory effects of religion, especially Christianity, weaseled their way into every part of my life. I couldn’t go two feet without hearing hate in the name of “the Lord,” justifications for racist and homophobic beliefs coming from places like Genesis 9:18-27 and Leviticus 18:22.

A religion that I wasn’t even a part of made me ashamed of who I am.

It didn’t end with me, though. I’ve seen the oppressive impact Christianity had on my family and friends, from the consequences of people saying my

“Nobody should be made to feel inferior or inherently flawed for something they can’t control, be it skin color, gender, sexuality or country of origin.”

sister was a Satanist for not believing in God, to my parents having to lie about their religion in order to secure jobs, to friends hiding their true identities for fear of their radical families rejecting them.

That is why I reject religion. Nobody should be made to feel inferior or inherently flawed for something they can’t control, be it skin color, gender, sexuality or country of origin. I can’t support an infrastructure that does exactly that.

Anderson, 18, is from Loganville, Ga., and will be attending Oglethorpe University. He is an aspiring doctor, author, poet and artist who volunteers at a local food bank. He attended Georgia’s Governor’s Honor Program for Communicative Arts. Someday he would like to join Doctors Without Borders or something similar.



Anderson Lynch

NINTH PLACE (tie)

# Choosing humanity over God



Ahndiya Kiburi

FFRF awarded Ahndiya \$400 for her essay.

By Ahndiya Kiburi

Why don’t I believe in God? It is a question I hear surprisingly often. Emotionally, I have had some negative experiences with organized religion in the past. In third grade, my best friend told me I was going to hell because I did not have a church. That was terrifying to me. I also did not understand why some religions did not accept the LGBTQ+ community. It made no sense to preach love in faith and not embrace all of humanity.

Intellectually, I do not feel as though human beings on this Earth have the ability to understand or know definitively that there is a higher power. I believe that good and evil stops and

starts within our own minds. I consider myself an agnostic: I claim neither disbelief nor belief in a higher power.

Religion holds us back from seeing that there is more than one way of thinking and seeing the world. I find that Christianity, for example, often belittles others who do not believe in their faith. My ancestors were stripped of their animistic religions when they were brought to the Americas as slaves. Slaveholders used the bible to justify slavery and many enslaved Africans came to believe that if they “served” on Earth, God would give them eternal joy after death. When we use religion to oppress and we think that our beliefs are the only truth, we lose sight of embracing the diversity of human existence.

I have seen religion among my high school peers hold them back from achieving their full potential.

For example, due to specific Christian beliefs, one of my peers cannot attend college and become a nurse, which is her dream career. Instead, her parents are forcing her to live in their home until she is married. Religion is limiting. It limits knowledge, emotion, morality, and thought. I could never limit myself to the joys of life. I choose love, kindness, and the faith I have in others to live my life with honesty and accountability.

Ahndiya, 18, is from Sacramento, Calif., and will be attending the University of California-Davis, where she plans to major in design and international relations and would like to be a diplomat. She is passionate about the visual arts and fascinated with other cultures, languages and histories. She has done volunteer work, served as chair for a civil rights student-led club and served as creative director for an international ecology project.

NINTH PLACE (tie)

# Why I believe in agnosticism

FFRF awarded Isaiah \$400 for his essay.

By Isaiah Welch-Novels

I respect all religions and the people who practice them. From Christianity to Buddhism, I believe that every human has the right to practice what they believe in as long as they do it peacefully and are respectful of others. However, I prefer to remain agnostic.

Growing up in an African-American household, I was raised having to practice Christianity and having to go to church every Sunday. However, as I grew older, I began to question the principles of Christianity. Who were all these people? Why can’t we do things that other people can? Is there really a

heaven and a hell? All these questions flooded my mind, and I began to question my faith. I soon stopped going to church and began thinking for myself.

Being bound to a religion from a young age teaches you a narrow-minded way of living that is based solely on tradition. I believe that in order to live life to the fullest, you must do things that may not be in line with what is taught in religion and adapt to a more liberal worldview. Allowing oneself to see the world for what it is rather than as what we’re told is crucial for the development of the mind. Before accepting myself to be agnostic, I saw things like romantic/sexual relationships and drugs as bad for people, especially teens. However, as a freethinker, I have discovered that these things are crucial

for the development of humankind. Homosexuality, gender dysphoria and mental illness are examples of what tradition teaches you to criticize. Still, these are normal occurrences, and we need to be more accepting of them, considering they cannot be controlled.

In a society where there is no religion or tradition, there would be less hate. People would be more accepting of one another and open to ideas. This is the ideal world, and I think that can be achieved if we digress from religion.

Isaiah, 18, is from Rochester, N.Y., and will be attending the University of New Haven, where he plans to major in music and sound engineering. He works at the Rochester Regional Healthcare System. His hobbies include music performance and production, gaming and hiking.



Isaiah Welch-Novels



TENTH PLACE (tie)

# Religion offers justification for oppression



Asia Felton

FFRF awarded Asia \$300 for her essay.

By Asia Felton

Have you ever wondered how American slaveholders justified their wrongdoings toward enslaved African-Americans? How did they justify slavery as righteous when it was clearly the opposite? They used the bible. Slaveholders quoted scripture to keep the enslaved under control.

As an African-American woman, it's hard for me to ignore this.

Growing up, I was primarily raised in a Christian household, living with my mom. But on the weekends, I spent time with my dad, who raised me to be a Hebrew Israelite. Christianity and Hebrew Israelite are very different. One is strict in a way that is very political, while the other is strict in a way where it denounces its own people.

I was always caught at a crossroads with my parents because of this strictness. One day I'd have my dad telling me women shouldn't teach religion, while my mom is a proclaimed minister at church. Both religions addressed everything in the book, from what foods its followers should eat, to sex. But they never addressed the bible being used to oppress us as a people. And that never sat right with me.

I reject religion for this very reason. It has been used for years to oppress. It's one of the reasons why my people suffered and continue to suffer in this country. It's the reason why people turn a blind eye to this suffering, as well, because "God wants it to be this way." Religion creates boundaries that are used to abuse freedom, not only in regard to African-Americans, but in general as well.

When it comes to my advice for other people, I would tell them to avoid being

bound by labels. Always know that whatever religion they decide to conform to, it may have history stacked against them. Religion is supposed to give you hope, a reason to keep going, but from my experience, it suppresses the freedom to think for oneself. So, none should need the label of religion to help them feel motivated about their futures and their lives. That comes from within.

Asia, 18, is from Chicago and will attend Loyola Marymount University, where she plans to pursue a degree in computer science and economics. She would like to own a private equity company someday, as well as become a performer in the music industry. In high school, she was the leader of student relations, a peer counselor, a track and field athlete and the captain of the Lane Tech Majorette Team. She also volunteered for the homeless, serving at food pantries in Chicago.

TENTH PLACE (tie)

# I choose determination and self-reliance

FFRF awarded Samantha \$300 for her essay.

By Samantha Schwarz

After dealing with much adversity, it's easy for me to recognize that life is not fair. Acknowledging a higher power or being doesn't always ensure good fortune or the prevention of bad fortune. When I was diagnosed with cancer, it felt like my world collapsed. It forced me to grow up fast. I was hit with the cold reality of isolation and separation from family and friends. The constant battle of anxiously waiting for test results and fearing additional treatments necessary to live has always kept me on edge.

Prayer was commonly brought up as I lived as an in-hospital patient. Family members and friends would reach out, telling me they pray for me. Much emphasis was placed on rituals like attending

church, reciting prayers and preaching about holy powers and unquestionable love of an nonexistent being.

Religion for me is too restrictive. As a free-spirited and independent-thinking survivor, I'm against any establishments that forcibly regulate my moral and ethical values; that tell me some of my actions and thoughts are more valid than others; that preach about only being able to obtain paradise and being accepted if certain practices or worship routines are performed.

I will forever be grateful for my family and friends' endless love and support, but no amount of spiritual messages or calling upon a god, spirit or angel prevented the cancer from coming back again — and again and again.

I am a survivor. I have never stopped fighting when chemotherapy took my last strands of hair, when surgery and radiation brought back what was hoped to be

the last whirlwind of pain, or even when isolation brought the fear of deteriorating friendships.

I lived the first 15 years of my life waiting for something "amazing" to happen, but nothing ever did. My religious faith was exhausted, so I chose to step outside my learned religious beliefs. I have no reason to believe that my now-improving health is a result of anything except my skilled doctors, my own drive and willpower and having faith in myself.

Samantha, 17, from Rocklin, Calif., will be attending the University of California-Los Angeles. She would like to become a doctor, specializing in oncology or radiology. "Cancer may have infringed on my being every year in high school, but I never allowed it to infringe on who I am as a leader, survivor and dreamer," Samantha writes. In high school, she was junior class president, founder of the Asian Pop Culture Club and danced with the Multicultural Youth Group.



Samantha Schwarz

# High school essay honorable mentions

FFRF awarded honorable mentions to 16 high school 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 16 students. To read their entire essays, go to [freethoughttoday.com](http://freethoughttoday.com).

By Yiping An

The concept of religion and being constantly judged, evaluated or even forgiven by some higher entity makes me feel trapped. I am not willing to live under a set of rules predetermined by the above when I can be free. Taking a step back, one can see how humanity is simply a microcosm in the grand scheme of the universe whereas religion pompously forces it to be viewed as the core.

Often, people associate being nonreligious with lacking morality; however, that is not the case. Humans naturally have a moral sense that dictates their version of ethical behaviors. I am a part of a community. I have personal values.



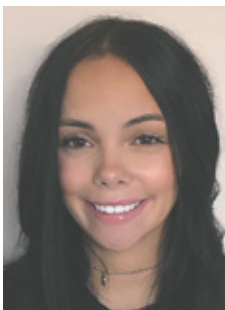
Yiping An

I think deeply about morality.

Yiping, 18, is from Katy, Texas, and will attend Carnegie Mellon University, where she will pursue a major in business administration. In high school, she was a member of National Honor Society and Spartans Outservicing, and the co-founder and marketing coordinator of Talks on Innovation, Leadership and Entrepreneurship (TILE), vice president of Interact club, and vice president of the National Chinese Honor Society.

By Soji Bedsole

Soon after my birth, my parents split. My father's priorities quickly became alcohol and drugs. He was a miserable, angry man who had no outlet for his hate, except one, me. I was repeatedly physically and mentally abused at my



Soji Bedsole

father's house. I had remembered hearing admonitions to "pray to God and he will answer" and that "God has a reason for everything."

I relied on a God to save me. It never happened.

To this day, I cannot come up with a reason why any omnibenevolent God that is constantly preached about would subject a helpless child to that.

Soji, 18, from Madison Ala., will be attending Auburn University, with plans to major in chemical engineering and pre-medicine. Her ultimate goal is to become a surgical oncologist.

By Hailey Cheng

Establishing what is right and wrong purely from religious beliefs often proves itself very problematic. There is no way



Hailey Cheng

to know whose God is "right," so it is baseless to form our standards of morality purely upon religious grounds.

Being agnostic means being tolerant, open-minded, and willing to consider conflicting perspectives. As the world's philosophical diversity expands, agnosticism is the way for us to coexist in peace.

Hailey, 18, from Arcadia, Calif., will be attending Columbia University, with plans to earn a degree in political science. She is a passionate advocate for Asian-American issues, climate change and equality. Hailey created a climate change petition that was published on the White House website and has spoken on NPR about climate change solutions. She also enjoys theater and acting, and has won multiple regional first-place awards for acting.



By Julia Dimov

People criticize each other’s religion and are so steadfast in their beliefs that they deem anything else offensive. This fear and division results in war, discrimination, and death over who the best made-up character is. Everything is credited to religion, as a blessing or a lesson. Car accident? God intended it. You lived? God saved you, but who put you there? Religion is excused for the terrible things that happen while getting credit for the good.

Julia, 18, is from Mooresville, N.C., and will attend Appalachian State University. “I am a Russian student and come from a poorer background,” she writes. “My goal is to create a successful future for myself that gets me out of the adversity I have had to face throughout my life. I am driven by my independence and the goals I have set for myself. I am motivated to show that my adversity was just a chapter towards a happy ending for my success story.”

By Alan Dupre

There is little doubt in my mind that humankind would be better guided by rational and evidence-based approach to beliefs than by belief in the supernatural. If there is anything that the past few centuries of progress has shown me, it is that we advance as a society not when we stay on our knees and look to the sky to show us the way, but when we stand up and take action, using reason and humanism as our guiding values.

Alan, 18, is from Phoenix and will attend Arizona State University, with plans to get a degree in mechanical engineering. In high school, he participated in his school’s tutoring center and environmental club. He also co-founded the organization “Intergenerational Buddies,” which had its members volunteer at a senior living center.

By Brina Howell

Religion is simply a way to hide the unpleasant truths behind the circle of life. Life flows, and has a cycle of incubation, growth, deterioration, and death; a natural and graceful way of living. Religious doctrines undermine this cycle, trying to promise an everlasting life full of loved ones who have died, with us joining them as an inevitability.

Our philosophy shouldn’t be looking forward to the afterlife, but instead savoring our ephemeral one. Brina, 18, is from Kresgeville, Pa., and will attend Kutztown University, with plans to major in art education. She enjoys working outdoors and has a passion for the arts, especially painting. She won more than 20 local awards from art shows held at fairs/festivals, including a “Best of Show” award.

By Adam Johnson

It is my hope that, politically, at least, humanity will shift toward secularism, as the voice of a religious majority in power can create significant cultural setbacks. The world’s religious traditions, by their very nature as conflicting sets of “absolute” ideals, have no place in government or in manipulating the course of societies built on principles of freedom.

Adam, 18, is from West Palm Beach, Fla., and will be attending Duke University, with plans to major in environmental engineering and political science. He has been playing the trumpet and piano for 11 years, and has competed as a finalist in the International Trumpet Guild’s Youth Solo Competition. He received the Sunshine State Scholar award as one of the top state high school students in STEM. He volunteers with a sea turtle rehabilitation center and with the St. Baldrick’s Foundation, which seeks to raise money for childhood cancer research.

By Sofia Jorgensen

When I went home and asked my mother what we believe in, she turned to me and said, “We believe in ourselves and we believe in science.” I remember this moment in particular, because it is this way of thinking that has shaped me into the person I am today.

All people should have the freedom to be free-thinking, cleared of guilt, fear, and obligation set by nonexistent higher powers.

I put my faith in myself, I do not need a high power to dictate my values and suppress my rights. Sofia, 18, is from Bellingham, Wash., and will attend University of Washington, where she plans to pursue a degree in molecular biology and then apply to medical school.

By Sierra Kolodjski

Abstractly, it is not reasonable to assume there is a god. There is no reason that an all-powerful god would give us the ability to reason and expect us not to use it, instead having faith, rather than providing proof.

Sierra, 18, is from Oak Grove, Minn., and will be attending University of Wisconsin-River Falls with plans to major in chemistry. She earned her Associates of Art degree while still in high school. She volunteers at a local senior care home and has worked as a bank teller for three years.

By Daisy Martinez

Religion enables a “with me or against me” attitude that isn’t healthy for humankind. We need to be helpful and loving to each other despite of who we pray to before going to bed — or if we even pray at all. It isn’t healthy for people to base how they feel about someone because of their religious beliefs. Humanity would be complete-



Daisy Martinez  
Daisy, 18, is from Rosenburg, Texas, and will be attending Blinn College, with plans to pursue a business major. She is the youngest of five siblings and will be a first-generation college student.

By Harikeshav Narayan

The same religion that advocated for equality ostracized the women in my family during the period of menstruation, because they were “impure.”

It’s rather ironic that the religion which manipulates denizens into labeling “purity” conveniently ignores the fact that 23 percent of female students in India drop out of school by the 7th standard, due to the insufficient availability of sanitary pads. This blatant prioritization of purity over the vocational development of the female half of the human population by religion is reprehensible.

Harikeshav, 18, is from Bangalore, India, and will be attending Indiana University-Bloomington with plans to major in finance. He was age 2 when his parents moved from the United States to India. He was a member of Model United Nations and was on the debate team. He interned with the Smile Foundation of India.

By Alvaro Ortiz

I would rather be held accountable for my mistakes and wrongdoings and learn how to grow as an individual than use religion to escape guilt.

My life has taken more meaning after having abandoned religious ideologies. I feel more empowered to fight through adversities, strive towards success and be a better person because it is my decision, not because it is forced upon me.

Alvaro, 18, is from Oakley, Calif., and will be attending UC-Berkeley as a first-generation college student. He intends to study computer science. Alvaro has been an avid volunteer in his community by participating in service events with philanthropic clubs and local organizations such as Key Club, Interact Club, Rotary Club, and Clean Pittsburg.

By Allen Papp

Why do I feel such an emotional attachment to the beliefs that I currently hold? How do the objective merits of other worldviews stack up against my own? On what basis should I assess my beliefs?

It was in trying to answer these three simple questions that I realized that my firm adherence to my faith had been based

in emotion rather than reason, that I had known that my beliefs were empirically false, and that what is in accordance with reality should be the basis of knowledge.

Allen, 18, is from Newton, Pa., and will be attending the University of Texas at Austin, with plans to major in physics. He hopes to become a researcher after getting a master’s and doctorate in physics.

By Ashleigh Price

Faith has held no sway over me my entire life. I’ve been so far removed for it to feel downright alien.

I know who I am. I was never indoctrinated into fear. I’ll always be thankful for that. I don’t believe, because I don’t know that I could forgive myself for following someone so needlessly cruel.

Ashleigh, 18, is from Algonquin, Ill., and will attend Eastern Illinois University, where she plans to major in digital media technology. She is an accomplished artist and violinist, having won her high school’s Art (Drawing) Award, as well as performing on a state level with the Chamber Orchestra, while graduating Summa Cum Laude.

By Anastazia Rudolph

Throughout my career in emergency services, I intend that my actions will serve as an example showing that a lack of faith does

not coincide with a lack of compassion or service-mindedness. It is my goal to protect my community from disaster — whether it be from a hurricane or a terror attack — and to comfort others in a way that is not centered upon any particular religion. I hope to become a shining example of patriotism and secularism throughout the course of my life.

Anastazia, 18, is from Dayton, Nev., and will be attending the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, with plans to major in emergency management and homeland security. She would like to work for FEMA upon graduation. In high school, she joined the Civil Air Patrol and is now the cadet commander of her squadron. Anastazia is multilingual, able to communicate proficiently in English, German and Spanish, while also studying Russian and Dutch.

By Melinda Zou

I do not understand why God commands love but also fear. Or why only believers are allowed into the pearly gates of paradise, or why forgiveness is more important than a girl’s trauma.

I am agnostic because I am curious, and a freethinker. I have so much to learn. The beauty of being agnostic is that I have no other moral compass but my own, liberated of the constraints that a religion forces me to don.

Melinda, 19, is from Artesia, Calif., and will be attending UC-Berkeley with plans to major in political science. In high school, she was a member of Junior State of America, a political activism club that dedicates itself to getting youth engaged in politics, and she also headed the school’s Gay-Straight Alliance.



# LETTERBOX

## In my father’s footsteps as FFRF Life Member

It is the one-year anniversary of the death of my father, Dr. Ludwig Koukal. He was a Lifetime Member and I would like to follow in his footsteps and become a Lifetime Member.

While I was growing up, my father was a quiet atheist. Back then, it was not so easy to come out of the closet, so to speak, and admit or talk about being an atheist. After he retired and moved to Arizona, he became much more engaged and open about his atheism and his passion for the separation of state and church.

It took me a long time to be able to call myself an atheist without the fear or the disapproving or judgmental looks it could generate.

Keep up the good and important work that you do!

**Lisa C. D’Andrea**  
New York

## Loved the pet pictures in June/July issue

I appreciated seeing all the photos of your pets in the June/July issue. I turned straight to the back page to look at them. Thank you.

**Theresa Kyte**  
Colorado

## I’ll let Mormons give me after-death baptism

This is regarding the two columns in the June/July issue: “I’m in the last scene of the last act” by James A. Haught and “I have no problem contemplating life’s end” by Barbara G. Walker.

If I were a “kid” in my 60s or mid-70s, those titles alone would have turned me off. But now, like many others my age, I just wish I could turn the sand clock of my life upside down when the last grain hits bottom.

Yet, as a most welcome alternative to mortality, those two articles are like a balm to my soul — oops, to my mind.

As a gesture of goodwill, and even though I’m an atheist, I’m leaving something to the Mormons in my last will. Because their church is obsessed with performing after-death baptisms, I’m allowing them to baptize not just me when I am dead, but also the worms feasting on my corpse.

After all, the gentle St. Francis called those lowly creatures “brothers and sisters.” So, shouldn’t they too enjoy the bliss of Paradise?

**David Quintero**  
California

## FFRF should not have printed offensive letter

As a long-standing FFRF Member and member of the Lake Superior Freethinkers, I was very disappointed to see William Dusenberry’s letter (“Which state has most religiously trained teachers?”) printed in the Letterbox in the June/July issue.

I would think that such obvious discrimination would have been recognized by FFRF for what it is. The letter suggests that anyone who graduates from a “religious institution of indoctrination” should not be certified to teach in public schools.

Where do you ‘Freethought’?



At the Louvre in Paris. We went and returned just prior to the shutdown. I brought my Freethought Today with my husband and we had our picture taken at the museum.

**Tobin Wirt and Robert King**  
Massachusetts

I firmly believe in separation of church and state. But to assume that anyone who attended a religion-affiliated college must believe in such crap, much less would indoctrinate their students, is extremely offensive.

I graduated in 1970 from Augustana College, a Lutheran-affiliated private college. I’ve served the public for decades working for various nonprofits, and I met my wife at Augustana College. She became an incredibly talented and dedicated elementary public school teacher. I have always been an outspoken atheist, as was my now-deceased wife.

To suggest that one should be prejudged based upon the school they attended is nothing short of blatant discrimination and should not be promoted by FFRF.

**Kent Nusbaum**  
Wisconsin

**Editor’s note:** FFRF allows the viewpoints of its members to be addressed in the Letterbox section, but FFRF does not necessarily endorse those viewpoints.

## I share much in common with James A. Haught

I have much in common with James Haught. He is 88, I am 87. We are both contemplating the end of a good life. I recently was diagnosed with metastatic cancer. I spent 30 years in his beloved West Virginia. We are both outspoken atheists and, despite limits on our ability to enjoy nature and physical activity, we still enjoy a good concert. I share with James a definite lack of fear about the inevitable, except that the lovely music will end.

**Harold L. Saferstein**  
Arizona

## Maybe God tests our willingness to find truth

Christians who don’t believe in evolution sometimes claim that the evidence for evolution in the Grand Canyon was planted by God to test our faith. Why don’t they use the same argument for explaining the errors in the bible?

It seems to me that the “evidence” God planted was not to test faith, which is a horrible concept, but more likely a test of our willingness to pursue and believe the truth, which is a great concept.

In other words, God will respect those who judge the geologists’ findings as real evidence that evolution is true. Those who blindly follow the cult and refuse to listen to reason will be frowned upon by God. Maybe — just maybe — atheists will go to heaven and believers will go to hell! But then, heaven and hell are just more false evidence for God. Darn it!

**Alan Wagner**  
Illinois

## ‘Cousin Charlie’ says ‘hi’ from California

I am delighted to announce that I have become a member of FFRF!

I find it interesting that you are headquartered in Madison, Wis., which is home to many of my relatives, all devout Catholics. Perhaps you can hand deliver copies of Freethought Today to them and just tell them they’re from “Cousin Charlie.”

**Charles Oakey**  
California

**Editor’s note:** Sorry, Charlie, you’ll have to do that yourself.

## Page of pet photos was fun diversion from world

Between COVID-19 and a moron mismanaging the country, these are tough, tough times. But someone with insight made a good call regarding the pet page in the June/July issue. Incarcerated at home with a White Power president, we badly need some fun and diversion.

I realize you all do serious and important tasks all day, but I was intrigued by [FFRF staffer Lauryn Seering’s pet gecko] Darwin! What does he eat? Is he nocturnal? How about personality? Lauryn has to be a great person to have such a great pet.


Thanks for your good work.

**Helaine Flan**  
North Carolina

## Find out the category of pro-lifer’s stance

The article in the August issue by Miklos Jako on “How to argue with Christians” is very good.

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](http://ffrf.org/shop)

**Just Pretend: A Book For Young Freethinkers**



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

**Color Edition!** Published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online [shop.ffrf.org](http://shop.ffrf.org)



I ask the following question when talking with pro-life people: Is your opinion political, religious or philosophical? If political, shame on you.

If religious, St. Thomas Aquinas, the great Catholic theologian, said that the soul is not rational until “the body is ready to accept it.” And the bible says absolutely nothing about abortion.

If the argument is philosophical, then we can talk. The human brain does not start developing until the sixth week and it is not fully developed until the 33rd week after conception. If the brain fails, the individual is considered dead.

Dr. George Domingo  
California

## This poem on death is artful and comforting

Perhaps many of you admirable freethinkers know this poem. I find it not only confirmation of my lifelong freethinking beliefs, but artful and, yes, comforting. Thank you for all you do to lead humans out of the confines of certainty.

“Antidotes to Fear of Death” by Rebecca Elson.

*Sometimes as an antidote  
To fear of death,  
I eat the stars.  
Those nights, lying on my back,  
I suck them from the quenching dark  
Til they are all, all inside me,  
Pepper hot and sharp.  
Sometimes, instead, I stir myself  
Into a universe still young,  
Still warm as blood:  
No outer space, just space,  
The light of all the not yet stars  
Drifting like a bright mist,  
And all of us, and everything  
Already there  
But unconstrained by form.  
And sometime it’s enough  
To lie down here on earth  
Beside our long ancestral bones:  
To walk across the cobble fields  
Of our discarded skulls,  
Each like a treasure, like a chrysalis,  
Thinking: whatever left these husks  
Flew off on bright wings.*

Alexandra Moffat  
New Hampshire

## What if Jesus was killed by guillotine?

What if the Romans had invented the guillotine? (They most certainly possessed the means.) What if they had adopted that eminently effective device for their routine disposal of undesirables?

Imagine Jesus having to drag one of those things through the narrow streets of Jerusalem. Would they have even bothered with the flogging and crown of thorns?

At Golgotha, would other guillotines have been waiting, in order that a brace of criminals be simultaneously decapitated to either side of him, or would all three have had to queue up for a single machine? Might authorities have then been tempted to impale Jesus’ head on the city wall as a trophy — miles perhaps, from the tomb —thereby seriously complicating a resurrection?

Or, interred disconnected, would the risen Christ have reappeared, noggin tucked gloriously under one arm, exhorting his mesmerized followers to “go and do likewise?”

And how would all that be enshrined today? Would church steeples everywhere feature spot-lit guillotines? Would some have a full-scale replica bolted to a wall behind the altar? Would the faithful wear tiny, gilded guillotines suspended from delicate necklaces? Would impressive rows of whitewashed guillotines stretch across the perfect green lawns of martial cemeteries?

The inventiveness of the Romans is legendary, *exempli gratia*, roads, bridges, aqueducts, concrete and indoor plumbing. Nonetheless, for public execution they settled on a technology that was cheap, easy to use and had no moving parts.

What if Pontius Pilate were to observe how in our time his go-to implement of torture, humiliation and death has become venerated, yea worshipped, as a symbol of everlasting life? Would he find it curious, laughable, dangerous or merely pathetic?

Michael Brandt  
Wisconsin

## FFRF worthy of donation from my stimulus check

I received my check from the government and was stimulated to donate the funds to individuals in need and organizations doing worthy service. FFRF is the most important and effective organization protecting and defending our constitutional democracy.

I was particularly interested in the May issue article that presented the Jeff Sharlet convention speech about “The Family.” Margaret Atwood’s vision of Gilead is disturbingly possible. It was also stunning to recently learn that President Trump’s attorney Jay Sekulow came out of the Pat Robertson organization.

Please accept this donation and continue your good works defending our secular way of life.

James R. Baxter  
Ohio

## Ban the Orthodox ritual of slaughtering chickens

In all probability, the disgusting and hazardous Bronze Age ritual known as Kaporos, in which thousands of chickens are slaughtered by Orthodox Jewish men, will most likely be allowed to proceed this year on the streets of Brooklyn as usual, the coronavirus pandemic notwithstanding. [See page 12 for news brief.]

The men twirl the doomed fowls around their heads three times before sacrificing them to Jehovah in the belief that their sins will be transferred to the birds.

Many New Yorkers, including some members of the Orthodox community, are calling on the authorities to prohibit this annual massacre, which poses a clear hazard to public health. However, the financially powerful, bloc-voting Orthodox community always gets its way with our pandering political leaders and judges, and has viewed itself as above secular laws for years, with good reason.

The defenders of this annual religious event point out that millions of chickens are slaughtered each year, but neglect to note that the industrial killing occurs indoors, subject to stringent regulations, and not on public streets, with thousands of men armed with knives crowded together, with the gory results

splattered all over the ground, left to be cleaned up by the sanitation department at taxpayer expense.

The fact that the Orthodox Jewish community has been especially hard hit by Covid-19 due to its resistance to social distancing and large families makes it even more imperative that this event be canceled, if not abolished for good. This mass ritual slaughter has no place on New York streets or anywhere in the United States in the 21st century.

Dennis Middlebrooks  
New York

## People are rational for all but Super Santa

I enjoy all the issues of Freethought Today, but I was especially captured by Ted Ottinger’s “Pondering death from different perspectives” column in the June/July issue. Like Ted, I’m a special educator by training. I have a brother who is a fundamentalist Mennonite, a sister who is a fundamentalist Mormon and I grew up in a very religious Mennonite home.

One thing that amused me for years is the ready dismissal by my fundamentalist relatives and others of things like fairies and elves, and especially Santa Claus, as myths because they are obviously inconsistent with rational analyses. They easily see the ridiculousness of belief in Santa, but not Super Santa!

So, I came up with a seasonal song about how this might go along with their beliefs:

*You’d better watch out  
You’d better comply  
You’d better not doubt  
I’m tellin’ you why  
Super Santa’s comin’ to town!  
He’s makin’ a list  
Checkin’ it twice  
Gonna reveal whose Santalogy’s right  
Super Santa’s comin’ to town!*

Funny, perhaps, but stranger to me than many things in this world is the application of science and reason to many things, perhaps most things, but adamant refusal to apply the same rationality and healthy skepticism to beliefs considered religious.

James M. Kauffman  
Virginia

# CRANKMAIL

Here is this month’s collection of contemptible correspondence collated for your consumption. Printed as received.

**Cross on mural:** Unless you live in my town, we will put crosses where we want. Do not ever tell our community what to place in a public place. Freedom from religion is your choice but your rights end where mine begin. — Barb Seversen

**I have a question:** why did you X some of the Ten Commandments is it because you broke some of the rules or is it because your life is so bad that you had to do that because I know the one thing I had asked God Jesus and the Holy Spirit for forgiveness and when I did I started to believe even more that I’m not

selfish I don’t love money I don’t let money control me so my heart turn to kindness love caring so now that we love God Jesus and the Holy Spirit even more now they would never let any harm come to me and my husband because for one thing we really truly love God not out of fake oh an what we are saying is not a lie it’s the truth because nobody should never ever BLAME/HATE!! God Jesus and and the Holy Spirit. Or somebody doing something that they did on their own — Petra Vespersion

**Freedom:** Why must the intolerant left continuously push their agenda on the rest of us. We are a country based on Judeo Christian values and beliefs, there is much evidence of it thruout

our history and it should be respected. Shame on you for imposing your views on what the majority of Americans believe, cherish and respect! — Rick Robinson

**Thank you:** This organization needs to close! Our foundation as a country is based on Christ and the recognition that we are all under GOD! I pray that you change your ways and he forgives you all from the terror that you breed. God have mercy for your souls. You’re the problem not the solution ! — Scot Nesom

**APPALLED APPALLED APPALLED:** North America was founded on Godliness. Check American coins “In God We Trust”. Ron Reagan is DISGUSTINGLY BOLD. My heart aches for blinded people like him. PLEASE don’t engage me in conflicting conversation. If Ron is ‘happy to burn in hell’, I won’t stand in his way. Very disappointed that your deplorable organization would would tie up airwaves that could be used for good. — Dick Janzen

**You are what is wrong with America:** We are praying for your salvation. But even as Atheists, how can you spread such hate across America. Have courage to be decent and don’t hide behind your weak arguments. You should be shut down as a domestic terrorist organization. I pray for peace in your empty souls. How sad and weak you must feel every day. Your ignorance and hate is well hidden by your arrogance. — Daniel McNeill

**us constitution:** Separation of Church and State is NOT in the US Constitution, you should actually take a moment to read it for once!. Americans are sick and tired of your organization destroying America. Which of the Ten Commandments is of-

fensive? Nothing in them is destructive. We are not afraid of you and we will NOT give in to your organization, at all costs! Any court agreeing with you is declared incompetent and we will NOT comply with their rulings. The Bible is FACT, not an opinion. Evolution is fiction, get over it. Do what is right and disband your organization, you are NOT welcome in the USA, your organization is a cancer on humanity and should be removed. — Michael Henton

**Constitution:** Your organization is a shame and is disrespectful to the constitution - except for your beliefs. Never have i been so disgusted with people attacking religions for no reason. Atheism religion should be attacked also, and you are destroying hope in majority of people. You are a greedy, unjust organization and should be defended. Your organization is a manipulation of words to use to your advantage to encourage hate, and hopelessness in anything. You should be ashamed of yourselves but I am sure that you have no feelings. You are on the same level as a serial killer. You have made a mockery of the seperation of church and state and turned us into a hopeless country. , Horrible — Kathleen Hoffman

**Ignorance:** It’s okay, your limited minds will one day come to grasp the reality around you. You simply haven’t discovered that aspect of our existence yet. In the meantime, you might want to curtail your Nazi-like marches on the truth others have discovered, that you yourself have not. You might not look as foolish when you realize said Truth. Ironically, God will forgive your ignorance even though you refuse to forgive the “ignorance” of those who know the truth. — Juan de Santos

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# BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

## Arrested / Charged

**Jerry Jones**, 71, Olympia Fields, IL: 3 counts of aggravated criminal sexual abuse. Jones is pastor of Apostolic Assembly Church of Lord Jesus Christ and former assistant commissioner of the Chicago Fire Department. The alleged victims are now 21, 30 and 34. The older women are his nieces.

The 21-year-old told police she was 11 to 17 when molested. The nieces allege they were 5 to 15 years old. According to prosecutors, the 21-year-old said “he could not wait to have sex with her when she turned 18. Defendant often grabbed his genital area in front of [the youngest victim] and made remarks about how big his penis is, how rough he is in bed, and how [she] would not be able to handle it.”

She alleged that after she told church members about the abuse in 2016, the church came up with a “restoration plan” to punish both her and Jones and to handle the matter internally. *Source: Sun-Times, 7-26-20*

**Glen A. Uselmann**, 61, Columbus, WI: 2nd-degree sexual assault of a child and sexual assault of a child under 13. Uselmann is accused of assaults between 1988-92, starting when the alleged victim was 12. Rebecca Martin Byrd recently went public with her allegations as did several other women.

Byrd wrote, referring to Uselmann: “In the eyes of Calvary Gospel Church, my predator was a great young man, a burgeoning minister. ... I was 12 the first time he sexually assaulted me. He never even noticed or acknowledged that I never responded when he’d kiss me. I clearly wasn’t enjoying what he was doing and I resisted when he’d make me touch him. He would take my hand and force it onto his pants. This went on for years until we had full intercourse when I was 14. He was 31. I took my first pregnancy test at his job after hours when I was 15. I went on birth control shortly after.”

They married when she was 18 and had 2 children before divorcing in 2006. Byrd was among 4 women alleging they were manipulated and assaulted as children by **several men** while attending the Pentecostal church. Nine others — including parents, siblings of survivors, members who witnessed sexual misconduct and a pastor in leadership at the time — corroborated the abuse.

There is no statute of limitations for prosecution for sexual contact with a minor if the child was under 13. For a sexual assault against a minor under 16, a crime can be prosecuted until the victim reaches the age of 45. Byrd is 44. *Source: Capital Times/Spiritualabuse.org, 7-21-20*

**Varghese Alengadan**, 67, Alameda, CA: Misdemeanor sexual battery, allegedly involving an adult female on July 24, 2019. Alengadan was removed as pastor at Christ the King Catholic Parish in Pleasant Hill after police opened an investigation.

Oakland Diocese Chancellor Stephen Wilcox said in a letter to parishioners that allegations were “of a sexual nature with current and former female employees.”

Judge Colin Bowen issued an arrest warrant after Alengadan failed to appear for his arraignment and set bail at just 1¢ due to the coronavirus pandemic. Only those accused of violent felonies are being held. *Source: Mercury News, 7-17-20*

**Lenin Vargas**, 48, Starkville, MS: 10 counts of wire fraud. During the investigation and before the indictment, Vargas, a Mexican national serving as pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church, fled to Mexico.

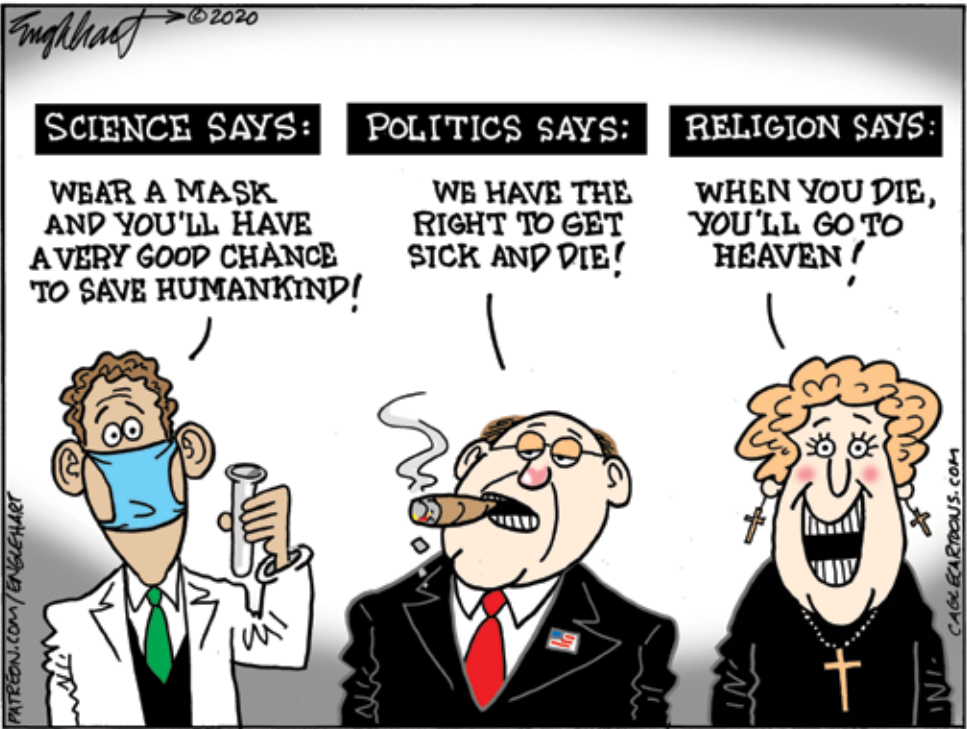
It’s alleged he told parishioners he had been diagnosed with cancer and was collecting money to build an orphanage and chapel in Mexico. Donations totaled \$18,258 through checks to him or through a GoFundMe account opened in 2015. Vargas did not have cancer but was diagnosed with HIV in 2014.

According to documents, the Diocese of Jackson was aware of the fraud and helped spread the false story about a cancer diagnosis while funding his treatment for HIV in Canada. The indictment said the fraud took place between 2015-18. It may have involved as much as \$200,000. *Source: WLBT, 7-15-20*

**Richard J. Doyle**, 84, Mandurah, Australia: 6 counts of indecent treatment of a child under 14. It’s alleged Doyle molested a girl starting when she was 6 and he was serving as a Catholic priest in Western Australia in 1979-82. *Source: Mandurah Mail, 7-13-20*

**Mark Grenon**, 62, **Jonathan Grenon**, 34, **Joseph Grenon**, 32, and **Jordan Grenon**, 26, Bradenton, FL: Conspiracy to defraud the U.S., conspiracy to violate the federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act and criminal contempt.

Mark Grenon and his sons are charged with marketing Miracle Mineral Solution through Grenon’s Genesis II Church of Health and Healing, claiming it cures COVID-19, cancer, autism, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer’s and AIDS. A federal judge’s April order to stop selling the substance was ignored. *Source: Spectrum News, 7-9-20*



**Olaf Latzel**, 53, Bremen, Germany: Sedition for inciting hatred. Latzel, pastor of Sankt Martini, an evangelical church, is accused of making October 2019 comments on YouTube that homosexuality “destroys civilization and culture.” Prosecutors described his words as “an attack on human dignity.”

“Everywhere these criminals run around [on] Christopher Street Day,” Latzel said [the Stonewall Inn was at 53 Christopher St. in Lower Manhattan, NY]. *Source: Der Spiegel, 7-3-20*

**Robert McWilliams**, 40, Cleveland: Transportation of child pornography, receiving and distributing depictions of minors engaged in sexually explicit conduct, possession of child pornography, 2 counts of sex trafficking of a minor and 3 counts of sexual exploitation of children.

McWilliams, pastor at St. Joseph Catholic Church, is accused of posing online as a female on a gay dating site from 2017-19 to persuade boys to send him sexually explicit images of themselves and threatening to tell their parents if they didn’t keep sending them, a threat he carried out several times by sending sexual images to boys’ mothers. *Source: AP, 7-2-20*

**Sharon Bradley**, 62, Lakeland, FL: Grand theft, fraud, criminal use of personal ID, fraudulent use of credit cards, forgery, uttering false instrument and money laundering. Bradley, finance secretary at Calvary Baptist Church in Winter Haven since 2008, is charged with stealing over \$600,000 from the 350-member congregation before resigning this year during an audit. *Source: WFLA, 7-2-20*

**Steven P. Tibbetts**, 61, Godfrey, IL: Knowingly distributing child pornography. Tibbetts, lead pastor at Resurrection Lutheran Church, began being investigated in August 2019 when the photo-sharing website Tumblr sent a tip to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Twitter also sent a tip to the center in February.

After a warranted search at his home in June, Tibbetts allegedly admitted trading child porn since the 1990s and to having a sexual interest in underage males. *Source: News-Democrat, 7-1-20*

**Andrew Cote**, 36, Las Vegas, NV: 2 counts of murder. Cote, pastor of Iglesia Bautista de Fe y Amor, an independent Baptist church, is charged with killing his 71-year-old neighbor and her friend with a shotgun in a dispute that started over nude hot-tubbing activities. Cote’s daughter was present when he shot Mildred Olivo and Timothy Hanson, in his 50s, over a brick divider between their backyards, KLAS reported. Cote told police he “noticed Hanson was still moving and shot him in the head a second time.”

Olivo had reportedly sprayed Cote and his daughter with water from a hose earlier in the day. Cote said he had called police then but nothing happened. Family members said Olivo had asked Hanson to come over to protect her.

Neighbors said the dispute started years earlier when Cote complained about Olivo using her hot tub nude. He eventually built a wall for more privacy, the Las Vegas Sun reported. *Source: Yahoo News, 6-26-20*

**Nathan D. Qualley**, 46, Mounds View, MN: Criminal sexual conduct with a child under age 13. He’s accused of assaulting a 10-year-old girl at Chisago Lakes Baptist School, where he taught in 2001. The girl had been sent to him for speech therapy.

Complainant Melissa Stewart, now 29, went public with her allegations after she heard Qual-

ley was appointed as a deacon and church council member in 2019 at GracePoint Church in New Brighton. She said she didn’t recognize what happened to her as sexual abuse until she was in her 20s. Now she’s a Duke University law student.

The complaint alleges Qualley once unzipped his pants and had her touch his genitals and touched her another time under her dress. *Source: Star Tribune, 6-25-20*

**Robert Shiflet**, 50, Denton, TX: Coercing a minor to cross a state line to engage in sexual activity and 3 counts of transporting a minor across state lines to engage in illegal sexual activity. Shiflet is charged with incidents in 1997, 2001 and 2002 involving 3 minors when he worked as a youth pastor in Denton and Little Rock, AR.

Shiflet’s alleged offenses overlap with his time working at Denton Bible Church, where he worked in youth ministry programs from 1995 to 2001. *Source: Record-Chronicle, 6-24-20*

### Pleaded / Convicted

**David B. DeHaven**, 50, Fincastle, VA: A judge found DeHaven guilty of 3 misdemeanor counts of unlawful video of a person in a state of undress and 4 counts of contributing to the delinquency of a minor. DeHaven, an adjunct professor at Liberty University, a Christian school in Lynchburg, used a camera to record 6 people using the bathroom in his home.

His son’s girlfriend testified she found the camera near the toilet during a party in March 2019. She removed the memory card and gave it to her parents, who gave it to police. The videos showed 3 people under age 18 and 3 older than 18.

DeHaven testified he initially started recording to see if his ex-wife was taking anything from the home and later to determine if a maid was cleaning the room properly, including removing cobwebs.

The delinquency charges involved DeHaven’s alleged knowledge that minors were drinking alcohol in his home. *Source: Richmond Times, 7-16-20*

**Timothy J. Hallow**, 62, Kaysville, UT: Plead guilty to possessing material containing child pornography involving a minor under age 12. Hallow, a Mormon bishop in the Kaysville Stake, admitted to possessing depictions on his phone of prepubescent children being sexually assaulted by adults, sending them to a woman in the Philippines and using images for sexual gratification. *Source: KUTV, 7-14-20*

**Yisroel Goldstein**, 58, Poway, CA: Plead guilty to wire fraud and tax fraud. Goldstein, rabbi at Chabad of Poway until resigning last November — citing exhaustion — admitted his role in several long-running schemes involving tax, real estate, insurance and grant frauds dating as far back as the 1980s. **Five co-defendants** also pleaded guilty.

An investigation uncovered \$18 million in “complex financial schemes” with the rabbi “at the center of illegal activity,” an FBI statement said. One called the “90-10” fraud had donors make large contributions to Chabad of Poway but then secretly getting most of the money back.

Typically, Goldstein would keep 10 percent, according to the charging document, and pocketed about \$620,000. Donors then claimed large charitable deductions on their taxes, resulting in losses to the IRS of at least \$1.5 million.

Chabad of Poway was attacked by an anti-Se-

mitic gunman in April 2019, killing a woman and injuring several others including Goldstein, who lost his right index finger. *Source: Union-Tribune, 7-14-20*

**Jeanine A. Poe**, 51, and **William Poe**, 57, Carthage, MO: Plead guilty respectively to wire fraud and misprision of a felony. William Poe is pastor at Wildwood Baptist Church in Joplin.

Jeanine Poe managed 2 Doc Stop convenience stores in Joplin and used at least 7 credit cards issued to the business to conduct personal transactions from 2015-19, the government alleged. William Poe admitted he was aware of his wife’s embezzlement and concealed the thefts by convincing the owner that she was not stealing from him. *Source: justice.gov, 7-1-20*

### Sentenced

**Keith L. Robinson**, 35, Memphis, TN: Probation for 11 months and 29 days, after which charges will be dropped. Robinson, pastor at Greater Mount Moriah Church, pleaded guilty to assaulting 68-year-old congregation member Linda Holland by throwing her into a wall in February at the church. He is Holland’s cousin’s son.

The incident in which Holland suffered a chipped collarbone and bruises was captured on video. Robinson’s attorney told the court the video didn’t show the woman’s behavior and hostility toward his client’s family in the years before the assault.

A police affidavit says Robinson’s wife, Melody, was also involved. The video shows Holland being kicked. According to the affidavit, Holland thinks Robinson was angry because she filed a complaint against his funeral home for not putting a headstone on her brother’s grave. *Source: WMC, 7-22-20*

**Christopher Rossman**, 47, Baldwin, City, KS: 37 months in prison and a \$5,000 fine after pleading guilty to possessing child pornography on a church computer while he was pastor in 2016 at Annunciation Catholic Parish.

Monitoring software detected Rossman had visited adult and child porn websites. His sister tried to destroy the tablet device by driving over it but a forensics exam found files on it depicting prepubescent females engaged in sexual activities. *Source: KSNW, 7-15-20*

**Manuel Cociña**, 72, a Spanish Catholic priest and member of the conservative Opus Dei order, was sentenced by a Vatican court to 5 years of suspended ministry after being found guilty of sexual abuse of a man starting when he was 18.

The abuse survivor was also an Opus Dei member. Cociña worked in high schools, seminaries and as rector of the Basilica of San Miguel in Madrid. “What enrages me is that this man has been abusing young men for 30 years throughout Spain, and [Opus Dei] moved him from one place to the other,” the abuse survivor said. *Source: Crux, 7-13-20*

**Francis Trauger**, 74, Brooklyn, NY: 18 to 36 months in prison and 7 years’ probation after pleading guilty to 2 counts of indecent assault of a minor. Two men, now in their 30s, alleged Trauger molested them as altar boys at St. Michael the Archangel Parish in Tullytown, PA, his final assignment as a priest before being defrocked in 2005.

One of the men called Trauger “a sick and vile deviant” in a written statement: “For 30 years, this man has systemically cornered boys who no one will believe and rapes them.” *Source: Philly Inquirer, 7-8-20*

**Anthony Oelrich**, 54, St. Cloud, MN: 41 months in prison after pleading guilty to criminal sexual conduct. Oelrich, Catholic pastor at Christ Church Newman Center, was accused of having sex with a woman who went to him for spiritual guidance. She had disclosed to him that she had been sexually abused previously.

Because of the potential for exploitation, state law bars clergy from engaging in sexual relationships with anyone they are counseling. Consent is not a defense. *Source: St. Cloud Times, 7-8-20*

**Logan Wesley III**, 56, Texarkana, AR: 5 life sentences served consecutively plus 220 years in prison and a \$30,000 fine after a jury found him guilty of sexual assaults on 3 women when they were children. The victims, now 38, 34 and 32, testified Wesley used his position as pastor of Trinity Temple Church of God in Christ to convince them God approved of them having sex.

One is a close relative who came to live with him when she was 13 and testified she was molested until about age 20. Wesley was described as “the night crawler” by another relative, now 43, who alleged he started touching her sexually when she was 4 and he was a teen.

Two women testified Wesley once told the congregation that a victim’s black eye happened when she attacked him, with parishioners responding “Amen” before Wesley said “No kid is going to run my house.” *Source: Texarkana Gazette, 7-2-20*

**Michael Smith**, 55, Boulder, CO: 20 years in prison after pleading guilty to 1st-degree assault and attempted sexual assault of a child. The victim and her family were heavily involved in the Shambhala Buddhist community and rented out rooms to other members, including Smith.

The girl first told a family friend about the abuse



in 1998 and then told her parents, according to a police report. She alleged Smith molested her numerous times after meeting her when she was 9 or 10, performing oral sex on her, forcing her to touch his genitals and kissing her breasts. The report said a community leader convinced the family not to pursue charges if Smith entered a treatment program and paid for the girl's therapy.

Judge Bruce Langer pointed out that Smith told investigators there was “no stopping [the victim]” and that she never used their “safe word.”

“I just don't know what to say about that,” Langer said. “It's hard to imagine anyone saying that about sexual contact with a child.” *Source: Daily Camera, 6-25-20*

**John E. Harris**, 42, Prattville, AL: 13 months in prison after pleading guilty to assault. He was originally indicted in 2017 for sexual abuse, facilitation of travel of a child for a sex act and enticing a child for immoral purposes. Harris was student minister at Glynwood Baptist Church for 8 years, resigning a month before his arrest. The teen boy was a member of the youth group.

The plea agreement was offered because it “would have been difficult” proving the elements of the sex charges, said Mandy Johnson, assistant district attorney. *Source: Montgomery Advertiser, 6-23-20*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

Convicted priest **Gerold Langsch**, 76, and the **Secular Institute of Schoenstatt Fathers**, which operates St. Paul's Catholic Church in Austin, TX, where Langsch worked, are being sued by 2 women who allege sexual abuse while they were parishioners.

Langsch pleaded no contest in 2019 to misdemeanor assault by contact of a woman who sued earlier after he received 300 days' probation and a \$1,000 fine for assaulting her. The Schoenstatt Fathers order is based in Waukesha, WI.

Langsch had been called to give last rites to a diabetic woman in renal failure, who recovered and is a plaintiff. The arrest affidavit alleged he anointed her chest with holy water, massaged her breasts with lotion and pinched her nipple while asking, “Does that feel good?”

She told police he also unsuccessfully tried to slip his hand inside her diaper. *Source: American-Statesman, 7-24-20*

Lloyd's of London accuses the Catholic **Archdiocese of Indianapolis** in a suit of failing to disclose allegations of sexual abuse by priest **David Marcotte** when applying for renewal of liability insurance coverage last year.

Marcotte, 33, was charged in 2019 with child solicitation, vicarious sexual gratification with a victim or victims under 16 but older than 13 and dissemination of matter harmful to minors. His phone records showed he had an inappropriate relationship with a 15-year-old boy he met when he was an administrator and coach at St. Malachy Catholic School in Brownsburg. The boy's father filed suit against the school and archdiocese in February.

The policy renewal application had a question asking if the archdiocese was aware of any “facts, circumstances, or allegations that may result in claims being made against you.” The archdiocese replied no. *Source: Insurance Coverage Law Center, 7-24-20*

Defrocked Catholic cardinal **Theodore McCarrick** is accused in a suit of taking his pick of boys to molest and assigning others to clergy in 1982 at a beach home in Sea Girt, NJ. Jeff Anderson, the plaintiff's attorney, referred to gatherings at the house as a “sex ring.” The **Newark Archdiocese** and the **Metuchen Diocese** are co-defendants.

McCarrick faces 2 other suits alleging he abused boys. Along with McCarrick, 4 of the 5 adults named in the suit have been previously accused of abuse.

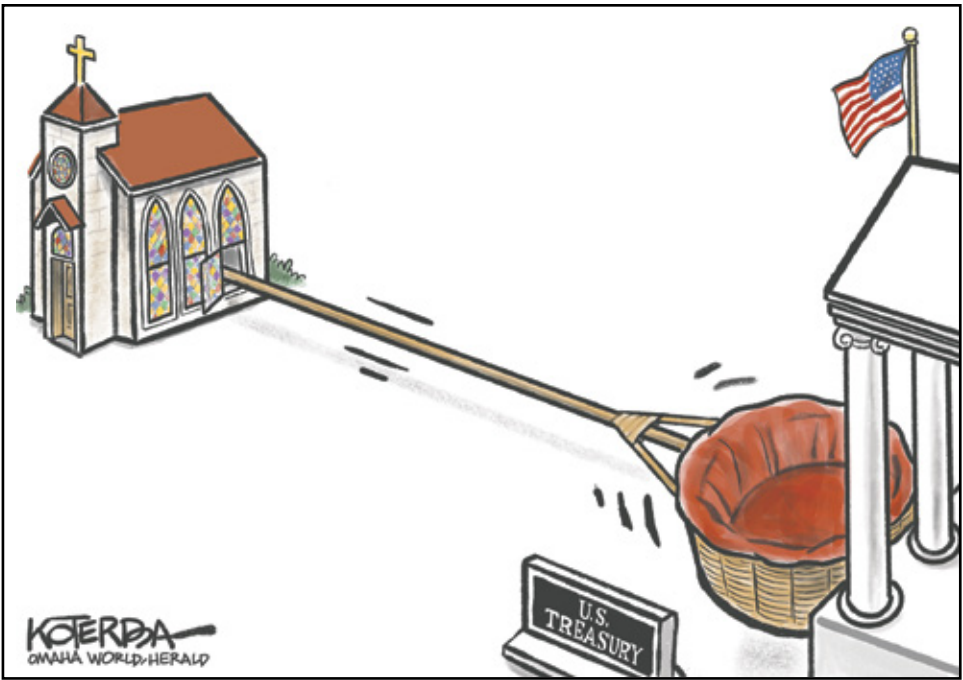
“McCarrick assigned sleeping arrangements, choosing his victims from the boys, seminarians and clerics present at the beach house,” the suit alleges. “Minor boys were assigned to different rooms and paired with adult clerics.” *Source: USA Today, 7-23-20*

**Three priests** and a **lay teacher** who taught at **McQuaid Jesuit High School** in Rochester, NY, in the 1970s and '80s are accused of sexually abusing students in new lawsuits. The accused priests are **William O'Malley**, 88, known for his role in the movie “The Exorcist,” **Harry Untereiner** and **James Curry**. The lay teacher is **John Tobin**, now deceased, as is Curry. *Source: Democrat & Chronicle, 7-22-20*

**Abraham Reichman**, a former principal at **United Talmudical Academy** in Brooklyn, NY, Satmar Orthodox leader **David Niederman** and the **United Jewish Organizations of Williamsburg** are being sued for “fraudulent inducement” by Joel Engelman over Niederman's alleged 1993 sexual abuse when Engelman was 8.

Engelman asserts he was “tricked and pressured” into delaying his 2008 suit until it was too late and the statute of limitations had expired. But due to the recent Child Victims Act, Engelman, 35, can sue again. Satmar was founded in 1905 in Hungary by Joel Teitelbaum. After World War II it was reestablished in New York and is one of the world's largest Hasidic movements. *Source: The Forward, 7-22-20*

The Catholic **Diocese of Shreveport, LA**, has been sued by “Paul Doe,” alleging he was molested



in the early 1970s by 2 men, the first being a man named “**Henry**” (no last name provided), a student at Northeast Louisiana University who lived with Fr. Sam Polizzi in the rectory on the NLU campus. Doe alleges Henry sodomized him in the rectory.

The other man accused is **William G. Allison**, pastor at Our Lady of Fatima in Monroe, who died in 1986. Allison was named as credibly accused of abuse by the Diocese of Gallup, NM, and the Diocese of Monterey, CA, as far back as 1964. *Source: Shreveport Times, 7-19-20*

**Bellevue Baptist Church**, Memphis, TN, a megachurch with over 30,000 members, provided the opportunity for plaintiff “Janet Doe” to be molested by volunteer coordinator **James A. Hook** starting when she was 15, says a suit filed by Doe's parents.

Hook, 44, pleaded guilty to sexual battery by an authority figure after police found him and the girl in a car in May 2019. Hook admitted to sexual contact but denied having intercourse. The suit asserts the girl's mother had an extramarital affair with Hook in 2011. They also had a child together — Doe's sibling — according to Bellevue's response to the complaint.

According to the complaint, when the girl's parents separated in 2018, Hook began communicating with her and her mother, encouraged Doe to volunteer in the Sunday school program and sent her explicit photos of her mother taken during the affair 7 years earlier. *Source: Commercial Appeal, 7-10-20*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

The Catholic **Diocese of Nashville, TN**, settled a suit for \$65,000 filed by an anonymous plaintiff alleging **Kevin McGoldrick** got her drunk on bourbon and sexually assaulted her in 2017 in the campus rectory of Aquinas College in Nashville, where she was a student and he was a priest. The Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia operate the school.

According to the plaintiff's statement published by the UK Catholic Herald, “Susanna” (not her real name) and McGoldrick were watching a movie after having had several drinks when he told her he had “a thing for feet.” Touching feet became touching legs. Then he was on top of her.

“[He was] touching me in very inappropriate ways and kissing my neck,” Susanna told the Herald, saying the touching was above and beneath her clothing. She alleged she passed in and out of consciousness: “Every time I woke up I hoped I was in a nightmare and the chaplain of my college wasn't on top of me. I was wrong each time.”

Susanna first complained to the Diocese of Nashville, which never opened a formal investigation. Concerned that McGoldrick might be grooming other young women, she took her allegation to the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, his “home” diocese, in July 2019. The archdiocese found the allegation credible in January 2020 and suspended his priestly faculties. McGoldrick has asked the Vatican to laicize him. *Source: Catholic Herald, 7-18-20*

**Young Life**, a nationwide Christian youth ministry, and **Christ Memorial Church** in Holland, MI, settled for undisclosed terms a suit filed by 5 men who alleged they were molested by **Jonathan King Meyer**, a church youth group leader and Young Life volunteer. Meyer, now 40, was convicted of criminal sexual conduct in 2012 and served a prison term.

Plaintiffs alleged abuse on multiple occasions such as a “lock-in” on church property and during a youth group field trip that included stopping at a Hooters restaurant in Grand Rapids. *Source: Holland Sentinel, 7-15-20*

Legal Developments

**Timothy Evans**, 57, Ft. Collins, CO — sentenced to 14 years to life in prison in 2007 for sexually assaulting a teen boy in 1999 at St. Elizabeth Ann

Seton Church, where Evans was pastor — has been granted parole. He was also accused of assaulting a boy in Arvada, where he served in 1996, but was not criminally charged.

At the parole hearing, Evans asked to be released to Grand Junction, where he could live with his stepmother and be near his father, who is in a memory care facility. *Source: Coloradoan, 7-15-20*

**James C. Clark**, 68, Lubbock, TX, former pastor at Mt. Vernon United Methodist Church, had his appeal denied to get out of prison due to the coronavirus pandemic. He was sentenced in 2008 to 19 years for fraud and money laundering and importing an alien for immoral purposes.

Clark had arranged in 2005 to have a Kenyan woman enroll at South Plains College in Levelland, then threatened to have her deported if she did not have sex with him. In a handwritten letter to the judge, he detailed his medical conditions: diabetes, toe and foot amputations, hypertension, chronic kidney problems, prior strokes, prostate problems and myocardial infarction. *Source: KLBK, 7-16-20*

**James W. Treadwell**, 62, was bound over for trial on criminal sexual conduct charges in Grand Rapids, MI. Treadwell, a member of a Christian brotherhood known as the Servants of the Word, called himself an “urban monk” and made it a point of his ministry to interact with families and children. He was the artist in residence for The Potter's House, a school offering “Christ-centered education.”

The father of an 8-year-old girl testified at the hearing how in 2016 he saw Treadwell touching his daughter's thighs, buttocks and private area while she sat on his lap: “I don't know what happened beyond that. I was so flabbergasted. I couldn't believe I had seen it.”

The father of an 8-year-old girl testified at the hearing how in 2016 he saw Treadwell touching his daughter's thighs, buttocks and private area while she sat on his lap: “I don't know what happened beyond that. I was so flabbergasted. I couldn't believe I had seen it.”

After meeting the family in 2015, Treadwell started going to the same church — Sherman Street Christian Reformed Church — and often sat in the same pew. He faces similar charges in Wyoming when the alleged victim was in 4th or 5th grade. *Source: WOOD, 7-9-20*

Allegations

Multiple former students at **Christian Youth Theater** in El Cajon, CA, have come forward with stories of sexual assault, abuse and misconduct. CYT President Janie Russell Cox wouldn't confirm the number of alleged victims but said a close family member publicly posted on social media his own account of abuse from many years ago.

CYT is a nationwide after-school theater arts education program for children ages 4–18. San Diego attorney Jessica Pride said she's representing a former student who claims she was abused starting in 2006. “The first time she was 13 and it continued until she was 15 years old.” Dozens of former students are contacting the firm, Pride said. *Source: KGTV, 7-23-20*

**Presentation High School**, a Catholic girls school in San Jose, CA, released results of an investigation into sexual abuse allegations against staff members. “The stark truth is that our school did not live up to its commitment to protect you,” said a letter from Presentation's president and the board of directors chair. “We added further harm when we responded defensively when reports of past abuse began to surface in 2017.”

The letter says investigators have “good faith belief” that staff members engaged in inappropriate behavior with students from the 1980s to 2013. In 2017, Kathryn Leehane, a 1991 graduate, disclosed alleged abuse by her now-deceased Spanish teacher **John Fernandez**, which led to others coming forward.

The report found credible sexual misconduct by Fernandez and 5 others and said former principals **Mary Miller** and **Marian Stuckey** received misconduct complaints but took ineffective or no action. The

school has shared the report with the San Jose Police Department, the San Jose Diocese and the Archdiocese of San Francisco. *Source: Mercury News, 7-10-20*

The number of allegations of **Catholic clergy sex abuse of minors** in over 200 U.S. dioceses more than quadrupled in 2019 compared to the average in the previous 5 years, in part due to new compensation programs and laws extending statutes of limitations. The report by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops counted 4,434 allegations, about half of which were deemed credible by the church.

Francesco Cesareo, chairman of the church's National Review Board, called for a more in-depth and truly independent audit. The latest audit was done by StoneBridge Business Partners, using information given to it by the dioceses, which also determined the questions and which allegations were credible. *Source: Washington Post, 6-27-20*

**Sixteen Marianist Catholic clergy** with Cincinnati-area ties have been accused of sexually abusing minors. Oscar Vasquez, provincial of the Marianists in the U.S., disclosed the names of the accused priests and brothers. One is alive and the rest are dead.

“To those who have survived sexual abuse at the hands of a member of the Society of Mary, we profoundly regret and apologize for the serious harm you have suffered,” Vasquez said. *Source: WLWT, 6-24-20*

Removed / Resigned

**Will Dismukes**, Prattville, AL, resigned as pastor of Pleasant Hill Baptist Church amid controversy for his invocation at the 199th birthday celebration for Ku Klux Klan founder Nathan Bedford Forrest in Selma. Dismukes, 30, who is also a Republican state legislator, then posted a photo of himself standing in front of a portrait of Forrest, who was a Confederate general

Rick Lance, executive director of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, said, “We are saddened and grieved to learn of the recent Facebook post by state Rep. Will Dismukes. ... In the wake of tremendous controversy we reaffirm our opposition to any kind of racism.”

Dismukes blamed the negative response on “anti-Southern sentiment” and “cancel culture.” *Source: Alabama Baptist, 7-30-20*

The appointment of **Jerry Hoss** to lead United Methodist congregations in Anderson and Atlanta was rescinded by Indiana United Methodist Church Bishop Julius Trimble, who called it “a mistake we cannot afford to make.” The appointment of Hoss, a lay pastor convicted in 2015 of misconduct with students while he was a public school principal, brought an outcry from church members.

The investigation found that Hoss asked a 16-year-old student for nude photos and sent her 2 photos of himself, naked from the waist down in one. Detectives also said that in 2010, Hoss texted a 17-year-old student, asking her to come to his home to drink alcohol with him. *Source: Herald Bulletin, 7-20-20*

**James Kirby** was put on leave as pastor of St. Elizabeth Seton Catholic Parish in Carlisle, IA, by the Diocese of Des Moines due to an allegation of inappropriate conduct. Kirby was ordained in 1996 and was campus minister at Dowling Catholic High School from 1998-2009, where he also coached cross country.

Simpson College, a Methodist-affiliated school, cut ties with Kirby as a track coach after the school became aware of the allegation tied to a series of tweets from Kirby to the mother of a 19-year-old woman named Ashley, who first met him as a Dowling student and track athlete.

The messages allegedly from Kirby read in part: “it think the little Ashley is adorable. I KNOW I AM older, but i am still a good person. i am not a creepy old man. I trust you to tell me the truth. I just wanted to share this. I am taking a risk here and i am counting on your discretion. Trying not to be creepy by i think the little ashley is very pretty. Likely too young but i just thought id put it out there. I am a gentleman and rely on your discretion.” *Source: Des Moines Register, 7-10-20*

Wheaton College chaplain **Timothy Blackmon** was fired for “inappropriate comments and actions of a racial and sexual nature” toward staff members. Wheaton is an Evangelical Protestant school in Wheaton, IL. Blackmon, 50, grew up in the Netherlands with an African-American father and a Dutch mother.

A school statement alleged Blackmon used an ethnic slur against an Asian-American employee, made graphic sexual comments to a married female employee, circulated a lewd meme and arranged to have an illustrated manual of sexual positions placed on a female staff member's desk. *Source: Chicago Tribune/Daily Herald, 7-8-20*

**Henry C. Foxhoven**, 46, a Catholic priest who admitted impregnating a 17-year-old altar girl in Glouster, OH, has been defrocked by the Vatican. Foxhoven is serving 12 years in prison after pleading guilty to 3 counts of sexual battery.

A warranted search of his home found several used condoms and a pregnancy test with a positive indication, according to the Athens County sheriff. *Source: News-Register, 6-29-20*

Email: blackcollar@ffrf.org



# State-church separation is breaking down

## Religious groups getting special treatment from pandemic-relief efforts

*This article first appeared in The Atlantic on June 29 and is reprinted with permission.*

By Micah Schwartzman,  
Richard Schragger, Nelson Tebbe

The separation of church and state is supposed to prevent government favoritism of religion in the United States. For most of the past century, the Supreme Court interpreted the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to mean that government cannot “pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another.” Under this principle of disestablishment, at the very least, the government cannot give special privileges to religious organizations beyond what is available to similarly situated nonreligious groups.

But the past few months have seen a near-complete collapse of this principle at the national level, at least with respect to government funding of religion. Under the Payment Protection Program, which has allocated \$669 billion in subsidies to support small businesses during the coronavirus pandemic, the government has extended funding to churches and other houses of worship. This program is unprecedented in terms of the sheer amount of money involved and the religious nature of the activities, including payment of clergy salaries, that the government is subsidizing.

As we recently wrote in The New York Times [reprinted in the August issue of Freethought Today], this funding of faith-based organizations has received little attention, in part because of the sense that churches, like other groups, have been harmed by government-ordered shutdowns. If churches have to comply with public-health restrictions like other businesses and nonprofits, then they should also be compensated, the thinking goes. In short, they should receive equal treatment when it comes to PPP funding.

But religious and nonreligious groups are not being treated equally under the program. Far from it. The Small Business Administration has granted a special exemption from its eligibility rules. Those rules are designed to guarantee that PPP loans support only small business and nonprofits, defined as those with fewer than 500 employees. To that end, one of the rules denies aid to organizations that are affiliated with larger entities. For religious nonprofits, however, the SBA has waived that rule.

As a result, many religious organizations, including thousands of local congregations, received hundreds of millions, and likely billions, of dollars in PPP loans — even though they are affiliated with large organizations that altogether have more than 500 employees.

Yet secular nonprofits — such as the Boys and Girls Club, the YMCA, and Goodwill — that may have similar affiliation structures are not eligible for this exemption. In fact, they may be entirely excluded from receiving PPP loans. Now these large nonprofits are facing legal risks that religious entities are not. The SBA’s implementation of the program thus privileges nationally affiliated religious organizations over their nonreligious counterparts. The extent of this disparity should become clearer when the SBA discloses more detailed data about PPP loans and their recipients, which it has now promised to do, reversing its earlier refusal to release such information.

For now, the SBA’s discrimination in favor of religious organizations is most visible in the case of Planned Parenthood. When PPP funding became available, 38 local Planned Parenthood centers requested and received federal loans totaling about \$80 million. But the SBA is now demanding that those Planned Parenthood affiliates return the money they received. It claims that these local centers are ineligible because they are controlled by a national umbrella organization, Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

A group of 27 Republican senators, led by Tom Cotton and Mitch McConnell, latched on to this argument. In a May 21 letter, they called on Attorney General William Barr to open an investigation into Planned Parent-

“By privileging religious organizations over secular nonprofits, the SBA and GOP senators are advancing a position that contravenes the Establishment Clause, which forbids the government from giving special subsidies to religious organizations.”



Photo by Shutterstock

Planned Parenthood centers are being asked to return their Payment Protection Program funds because of a rule that religious organizations don’t have to follow.

hood and suggested that the affiliates should be subjected to civil and criminal penalties for filing fraudulent loan applications. Sen. Marco Rubio, who chairs the Senate committee that oversees the SBA, also demanded that the agency cancel PPP loans to Planned Parenthood affiliates and investigate them for wrongdoing. In response, Senate Democrats charged the SBA with attacking Planned Parenthood for partisan, ideological purposes. For its part, Planned Parenthood released a statement saying that its local centers satisfy the SBA’s existing eligibility requirements.

This back-and-forth between Republican and Democratic senators is only the latest iteration of political conflicts over abortion. Conservative politicians have long sought to defund Planned Parenthood because of its support for women’s reproductive rights, including abortion services; liberals and progressives have in turn defended the organization. So, the Republicans’ motivation for targeting Planned Parenthood is no mystery.

There is, however, a more fundamental problem with these recent attacks on Planned Parenthood. By privileging religious organizations over secular nonprofits, the SBA and GOP senators are advancing a position that contravenes the Establishment Clause, which forbids the government from giving special subsidies to religious organizations. One might have thought that the separation of church and state would bar churches from receiving PPP loans to fund clergy salaries. But even as the Supreme Court has moved away from a principle of separation, initially by allowing public funding of religious organizations and now more and more toward requiring equal treatment, a policy of favoring religious groups would turn the Establishment Clause completely on its head. And indeed, one important and longstanding objection to a regime of equal funding is that it leads precisely to this result, namely, preferential treatment for religion.

The SBA’s implementation of PPP funding shows how equal treatment can devolve into such favoritism. The Trump Administration has claimed that churches must receive federal funding on equal terms with secular nonprofits. But the SBA’s religious waiver of its affiliation rules means that religious groups are not, in fact, being treated equally — they are being favored, and on a massive scale. Religious groups that would otherwise be excluded from funding under neutral affiliation rules can receive billions of dollars in federal aid, while organizations like Planned Parenthood receive nothing.

Why should secular nonprofits be treated one way and religious groups another? The SBA waived its affiliation rules for faith-based organizations because it believed

that those rules would “substantially burden” groups that are religiously committed to hierarchical forms of organization. According to the SBA, its religious exemption is authorized under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), and perhaps under the First Amendment, which has been interpreted to limit government interference with the internal decisions of religious organizations.

There is reason to be skeptical about these arguments. Neutral affiliation rules, which limit the size of loan recipients, do not trigger protection under the RFRA or interfere with the decision making of religious organizations. But if those dangers exist, they can be addressed by exempting all nonprofits from the affiliation rules — by treating all such employers equally. What cannot be justified is granting religious groups an accommodation that enables federal funding while disadvantaging secular organizations that are similarly structured.

The SBA’s unequal application of its rules conflicts with existing legal doctrine under the Establishment Clause. The Supreme Court held in a crucial 1989 case, *Texas Monthly v. Bullock*, that Texas could not exempt religious periodicals from its sales tax while taxing secular ones like Texas Monthly. But here the SBA has done much the same thing.

The Supreme Court recently emphasized the importance of treating religious organizations like nonreligious groups in granting public benefits. Last month, in the first Supreme Court decision involving churches during the COVID-19 outbreak, Justice Brett Kavanaugh wrote in a dissenting opinion that “the Church and its congregants simply want to be treated equally to comparable secular businesses.” But when it comes to PPP funding, some churches don’t want equality. They want to be treated more favorably than their secular counterparts.

Planned Parenthood affiliates have constitutional grounds for resisting demands to return their PPP loans. If small religious nonprofits are eligible to receive PPP funds, even though they are affiliates of large national organizations, then the same eligibility rules must apply to secular nonprofits such as Planned Parenthood.

There cannot be two sets of funding rules — one that sends billions of dollars to local religious congregations and one that denies the same support to secular nonprofits. If those rules are constitutional, even as they allow more direct financial support for churches than at any other point in American history, then the Establishment Clause has lost its meaning. At the very least, it must stand for the proposition that the government cannot pick out religious organizations for special privileges. If that principle collapses, the country will be witnessing not only the end of the separation of church and state with respect to public funding but also a subversion of the commitment to equal treatment that is said to be replacing it. Instead, what will exist is a regime that favors religious organizations above others.

*This article is part of the project “The Battle for the Constitution,” in partnership with the National Constitution Center.*