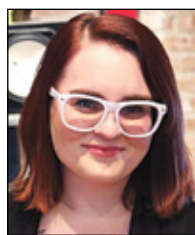


# FREETHOUGHT TODAY



**Why we need  
to reshape the  
federal judiciary**

PAGE 3



**Atheist couple  
renovates church  
into a home**

PAGE 12-13



**An unexpected  
visit to Scopes  
trial site in Dayton**

PAGE 24

Vol. 38 No. 3

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April 2021

## FFRF stops prayer by school boards in Indiana and Pa.

School boards in Pennsylvania and Indiana have discontinued injecting religion into their board meetings due to intervention by FFRF.

A concerned Montrose Area School District community member in Pennsylvania alerted the state/church watchdog that the school board had a practice of opening every meeting with a recitation of the Lord's Prayer following the Pledge of Allegiance. Additionally, all nine members of the board were reportedly participating in reciting this Christian prayer, during which students were sometimes present.

And in Indiana, the Griffith Public Schools Board of Trustees opened each of its meetings with a prayer led by a member of the board or a guest, including clergy.

In the Pennsylvania case, FFRF attorney Madeline Ziegler sent a letter to

Superintendent Christopher McComb, alerting the district to the unconstitutionality of beginning official district meetings with prayer, especially when students are present. McComb informed FFRF via email that "this practice has ceased and will no longer continue."

And in Indiana, in an email to FFRF Legal Fellow Joseph McDonald, the school board president acknowledged FFRF's role in the policy change.

"We have concluded that it would be in the best interest of the school district to offer up a moment

of silence in lieu of prayer," wrote School Board President Kathy Ruesken.

The local newspaper reported, "As a reaction to court opinions and a letter from that watchdog group, the board unanimously eliminated the prayer in favor of being neutral with a moment of silence so people can contemplate whatever they wish."

**For more victories by  
the FFRF legal team,  
see pages 8-9.**



This license plate was eventually allowed by the Alabama Motor Vehicle Division after FFRF intervened.

## All hail FFRF's victory!

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has obtained a victory for secularism and free speech in Alabama.

An Alabama resident contacted the state/church watchdog after being told that a request for a personalized "S8TAN" plate was "offensive to the peace and dignity of the state of Alabama" and would not be issued. The individual had been given a temporary plate for a couple of months, but then the Motor Vehicle Division in the Alabama Department of Revenue

sent a letter refusing the plate.

Alabama's regulations concerning the wording of personalized plates are unconstitutional, FFRF informed the Alabama Motor Vehicle Division. Just last year, FFRF and the ACLU of Kentucky won a three-year legal battle on behalf of a Kentucky resident who was denied a license plate saying, "IM GOD." The state of Kentucky was ordered to pay more than \$150,000 in

See S8TAN on page 4

## 'Getting better is taking me so long, Dad.'

### Avijit Roy was killed six years ago in a machete attack in Bangladesh

This article first appeared in the Baltimore Sun on March 1 and is reprinted with permission.

**By Trisha Ahmed**

My stepfather, Avijit Roy, was a Bangladeshi-American writer and engineer. While visiting Bangladesh, he was violently attacked with machetes and murdered on the street, as he left a book fair with my mother, Bonya Ahmed, who was also attacked and suffered life-threatening wounds. This happened six years ago. Ten days prior to this distressing anniversary, five of the attackers, members of a terrorist group inspired by al-Qaida, were sentenced to death in a Bangladeshi court.

This verdict does not bring me closure — so many questions about the forces underlying his murder remain unanswered. If I could talk with my dad today, this is what I would say.

Dear Dad,

People took pictures of you after the attack. One photo shows your glasses and a chunk of your brain, lying in a pool of



Avijit Roy, center, who was murdered six years ago by religious extremists, stands with his wife Bonya Ahmed, right, and step-daughter Trisha in Peru in 2014.

your blood on the pavement. I think of this image every few months.

But in the days leading up to the verdict in your murder (yes, it took almost six years for Bangladesh to hear your case in court), I couldn't stop thinking about

your glasses on the ground.

I'm no better at drawing now than I was when you were alive, but I sketched your glasses on a piece of paper. I drew all sorts of sights around D.C. into the lenses of those paper frames: monuments,

memorials and other places you'll never know. I pass by them every day now, as a D.C.-based graduate student at the University of Maryland focusing on investigative journalism.

America doesn't seem to care much for journalists now. Neither does Bangladesh. But if you were around, I hope you would say: "Journalist? That's even better than a scientist!"

Which means I didn't become the scientist you were so excited for me to be.

I couldn't commit to it after what happened to you. To deal with the trauma of losing you and nearly losing Maa, I became obsessed with other people's stories. I started collecting them in Baltimore as an undergrad at Johns Hopkins, and then all over America, finding that so many others are also dealing with fathers, brothers, cousins and friends being killed.

You should know that you changed the world, Dad. People marched in the streets for you. Millions of people learned your name. I'm sure you would ask me, excitedly: "Does that mean the world is more rational now?"

I don't think so.

After you died, the attacks continued. Your attackers were affiliated with a

See Dad on page 14



# FFRF’s McDonald relishes working on the front lines

**Name:** Joseph F. McDonald  
**Where and when I was born:** Madison, Wis., in 1991.  
**Education:** All from UW-Madison — B.A. in psychology, '14; B.A. in social welfare, '14; Global Health Certificate, '14; Master of Public Health, '20; Juris Doctor, '20.  
**Family:** I am the second youngest of six children.  
**How I came to work at FFRF:** I was, and still am, teaching public education and law at the University of Wisconsin-Madison when my mentor let me know that FFRF was hiring a legal fellow.  
**What I do here:** I am the Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow. I primarily have the great privilege

## MEET A STAFFER

of advocating on behalf of members and nonmembers by writing letters to individuals and organizations who have violated the Constitution. I also work on various legal projects in our litigation and legal education teams.  
**What I like best about it:** Not only do I get to advance the things that I believe in, but I also get to advocate for real people. Law school can be an exhaustingly hypothetical playhouse. FFRF's attorneys, leadership and members make the legal landscape real and I get to be on the frontlines as a legal advocate.  
**What gets old about it:** Working remotely! I know it's not an inherent part of the job, but it is real, nonetheless. I started with FFRF remotely and I've only met a handful of people in-person. I'm excited for the world to get vaccinated so that we can return to the office.  
**Working from home has been:** Exhausting! It's by far the toughest part of the job. I'm a very person-centered advocate, so

when I can't discuss grievances and gripes in-person with my fellow attorneys, it makes the work all the more difficult.  
**I spend a lot of time thinking about:** Whether I should exercise first or read. It is quite the morning dilemma. I then seem to default to wondering why I got a kitten as she attempts to bite my feet, which is normally how I start my day.  
**I spend little if any time thinking about:** It's counterintuitive to think about something to then say I don't think about it. But something I scarcely think about? Harry Belafonte. Yeah, that seems random enough.  
**My religious upbringing was:** I grew up attending a Christian African Methodist Episcopal Zion church. I attended Sunday school and sang in the choir.

**My doubts about religion started:** Pretty young. I'd say 8 years old. I started to see how people would treat certain folks in the church differently and even tell me not to associate with certain other children. But we were all members of the same church. And, over time, I understood that church was just a social club and religion was the arbitrary social rulebook. By the time I was 13, I realized it had little to do with goodness, but a lot to do with social order and money.  
**Things I like:** Napping in a canoe on the lake in the summer sun.  
**Things I smite:** People who assume their own rightness without ever challenging their own assumptions.  
**In my golden years:** Assuming we're talking about the crest of life and not the classic David Bowie song, I'd like to spend my time leading students on outdoor retreats.



Joseph McDonald



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Todd Peissig sells chances to win “clean money” (without “In God We Trust” on it) during the FFRF convention in Madison, Wis., in 2019.

# Executive Board member passionate on issue of state/church separation

**Name:** Todd Peissig  
**Where I live:** Medford, Wis.  
**Where and when I was born:** Milwaukee in 1966.  
**Family:** Mother, father and one sister — all atheists and all members of FFRF.  
**Education:** Bachelor of science degree in pharmacy from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.  
**Why I volunteer for FFRF:** I am passionate about state/church separation issues. Church violations do a tremendous amount of damage to many people. I was personally affected for many years, not being able to marry the person I love because same-sex marriage was NOT the law until 2015, all because it was opposed by the Religious Right.  
**What I do for FFRF:** I am an FFRF Executive Board member, and we meet several times per year making important decisions on the running of the organization and its employees, which is not only fascinating, but also very fulfilling.  
**What I like best about it:** A very enjoyable part of my volunteering is getting to run the “clean money” raffles, along with my partner Eric, at the annual FFRF conventions. However, I consider it a privilege to be just a small part of FFRF, helping it to fight the battles of the state/church violations.



Todd Peissig

## MEET A BOARD MEMBER

**My religious upbringing was:** My family was never deeply religious, however, my mother always thought attending church was important only because it was the “thing to do,” since most people where we lived attended church. She eventually realized the uselessness of church and now calls herself an atheist and, along with my father, is a proud Life Member of FFRF.  
**My doubts about religion started:** As I made my way through middle school, then high school I became fascinated with science and realized that the religious teachings made no sense and many were, in fact, factually impossible. By the time I was 18 years old, I asked my parents if I could stop going to church and they were liberal enough to let me make my own decision.  
So, I never stepped foot in a church again.

**Three words that sum me up:** Inquisitive, skeptical and passionate.  
**Person in history I admire and why:** Michelangelo was an Italian sculptor, painter, architect and poet. He seems like he was extremely intelligent and a truly enlightened man for his time. In his lifetime, he was often referred to as Ill Divino (the Divine One) and it seems to me that if you are going to be “divine,” instilling a sense of awe in the eyes of your fellow man is one of the best ways you can accomplish it.  
**A quotation I like:** “I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” — Voltaire  
**Things I like:** FFRF, traveling all over the world with my partner, eating foods from different ethnic regions, reading, collecting art and antiquing.  
**Things I smite:** State/church violations, right-wing politics, cold weather and desserts made with coconut.  
**Ways I promote freethought:** Besides being a Life Member of FFRF, I am a member of several other freethought groups, always trying to educate myself on the current trends and issues. I always communicate freely with friends, family and co-workers my feelings on freethought issues and educate them on the harm that religion has caused humanity. I like to think that I may somehow “enlighten” them.

## RECRUIT A MEMBER

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*The only freethought newspaper in the United States*



# Why we need to reshape the federal judiciary

This article first appeared in *The New York Times* on Feb. 11 and is reprinted with permission.

By Erwin Chemerinsky

In just one term, the Trump administration reshaped the federal judiciary. Working closely with a Republican Senate, the Trump White House appointed more than a quarter of all active judges, including three Supreme Court justices and more than four dozen appeals court judges — 245 judges in all, more than other recent presidents in their first terms.



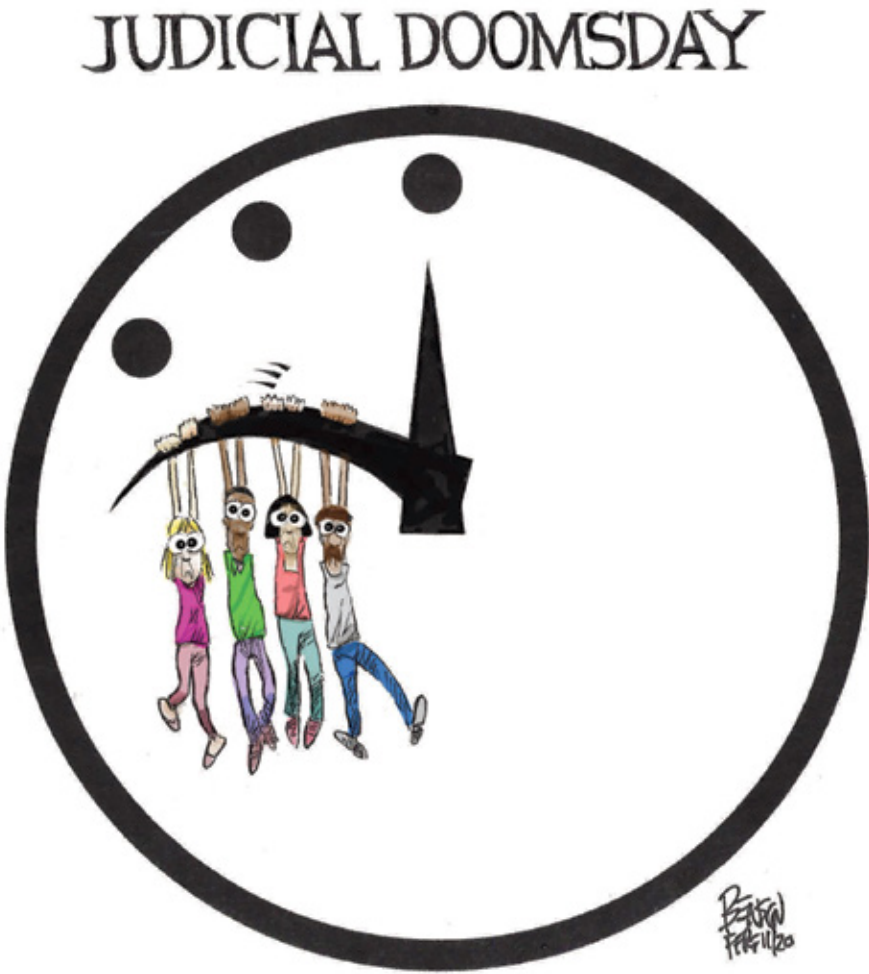
Erwin Chemerinsky

The judges have life tenure and are, by and large, relatively young. Seventy-six percent are men; 84 percent are white. And overwhelmingly, they are staunchly conservative. So, the impact on the federal courts will be significant and extend for decades.

Now that the Democrats have won back the White House and control of the Senate, the party must grab its opportunity and focus on nominating and confirming judges. It's especially urgent because they have control over the Senate by a single vote, and it's unclear if they will be able to maintain control after the midterm elections.

To that end, Justice Stephen Breyer should seriously consider stepping down from the Supreme Court in July 2021, at the end of the court's current term. Justice Breyer will be 83 in August and has been a justice since his 1994 appointment by President Clinton. He should give President Biden the chance to replace him while the Senate is in Democratic hands.

The Senate's majority leader, Chuck Schumer, must be at least as aggressive in the effort to reshape the judiciary as his Republican predecessor, Mitch McConnell, was. And McConnell was



very aggressive. As his former Chief of Staff Josh Holmes put it: "McConnell knows that from a legacy point of view, from a view of center-right America, this is the most important thing you can do."

The unfortunate fact is that Democrats have not always made filling judgeships a priority. Clinton took office in January 1993 with many unfilled judgeships. Two years later, when the Republicans took control of the Senate, many of those posts remained open. President Obama was also slow in appointing judges.

The Democrats should increase the number of District Court and Court of Appeals judgeships. Entirely apart from helping to restore ideological balance in the federal courts, this increase is desperately overdue. The last significant expansion in the federal judiciary was in 1990, when the Civil Justice Reform Act created 11 new



Justice Breyer

circuit judgeships, 61 new district judgeships, and 13 temporary district judgeships.

Court filings have significantly increased since the last time some new federal judgeship posts were created.

Our courts have been in crisis as a result. From 1990 through the end of 2018, case filings in appeals courts grew by 15 percent and in District Courts by 39 percent.

For example, in the Eastern District of California, which covers the Central Valley up through Sacramento, no new judicial posts have been created in more than 40 years, even as the population of that district grew by more than 5.5 million people. Even before

the effects of the pandemic, wait times for civil trials in the Eastern District of California were approaching five years and, for average people seeking relief, there seems to be little or no prospect of ever getting their cases resolved.

It can be nearly impossible for people to get their cases heard in many federal courts because of the colossal logjam of cases. District judges no longer have time to hear oral arguments in many cases. Litigants often are being told that they might want to consider other avenues, like arbitration. Those with deep pockets may be able to wait it out or pay for arbiters to resolve disputes privately, but for most Americans, the current situation is a huge barrier to ever getting justice.

Also, federal judges who are eligible for senior status should take it. Those judges can still handle cases, helping to increase the capacity of the federal judiciary. But by taking senior status, they would also open up their seats and give Democrats a chance to replace them. During the Obama presidency, a number of liberal appeals court judges declined to take senior status when they could have. When they eventually left the bench, it was too late for Democrats because Republicans had taken control of the Senate. President Trump appointed conservatives to take their place.

The importance of the federal courts cannot be overestimated. Criminal prosecutions, civil rights lawsuits, copyright and antitrust matters, claims of religious freedom and countless other matters flow through those chambers. Federal courts also address some of the most pressing problems of our times. They are the last protection against abuses by other branches of government.

The Democrats must make haste and follow the example of their Republican counterparts by making the federal judiciary their urgent priority.

*Erwin Chemerinsky is the dean of the law school at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author, most recently, with Howard Gillman, of **The Religion Clauses: The Case for Separating Church and State**.*

## OVERHEARD

No more hopes and prayers, thoughts and prayers. A vote is what we need, a vote, not thoughts and prayers.

**Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, vowing that the Senate would vote on the Bipartisan Background Checks Act of 2021, which passed the House March 17 in a 227-203 vote.**

*Fox News, 3-17-21*

I am being made a criminal for posting a f\*\*\*\*ing photograph on Instagram. . . . We are going backwards in time, more backward thinking. It is a violation of the most basic human laws. . . . I don't think the public know the details of the level of harassment I have been through. It is getting monstrous, and it is a growing tide of censorship and harassment.

**Polish heavy-metal singer Adam "Nergal" Graski, after appealing a sentence for blasphemy after stepping on a photo of the Virgin Mary in an Instagram post.**

*The Irish Times, 2-24-21*

It was not surprising that the majority of Pakistan chose to hail my father's killer as a hero, as they are brainwashed into believing that blasphemy laws are

essential to their existence.

**Mashal Naseem, daughter of Tahir Naseem, the U.S. citizen who was murdered in Pakistan over blasphemy allegations.**

*Vice.com, 2-23-21*

You used God to enslave my foreparents. You used God to segregate me in school. You used



Al Green

God to put me in the back of the bus. Have you no shame? . . . This is not about God. It's about men who choose to discriminate against other people because they have the power to do so.

**Rep. Al Green of New York, just prior to the U.S. House passing the Equality Act, in a speech targeted to Republicans who have claimed their religion led them to oppose civil rights protections for LGBTQ persons.**

*The Friendly Atheist, 2-27-21*

The truth is, many conservative Christians embraced Rush Limbaugh because

they had already embraced a faith that championed an us-vs.-them militancy, the denigration of liberals and feminists, the sexual objectification of women, an appreciation for coarse language and even violence when directed at the right targets, and a thinly veiled misogyny that kept women in their (God-given) place. . . . Crassness, callousness, righteous violence, and even sexual aggression are signs of God-given, testosterone-driven masculinity.

**Kristin Kobes du Mez, in her article "No, Rush Limbaugh did not hack your parents' Christianity."**

*Religion Dispatches, 2-22-21*

The case against "education savings accounts," as those attempting to make vouchers seem more appealing call them, is not complicated. There is the issue of separation of church and state when sending taxpayer money to religious institutions. Private and charter schools don't have to follow the same regulations that public schools do, leaving kids at risk.

**Amy Moore, in an op-ed, "Iowa should renew its public schools, not abandon them."**

*Des Moines Register, 2-20-21*

The Supreme Court has increasingly exempted religious believers from government regulations, and it is clear by their statements that individual justices on the right think religion is under siege in America.

**Joan Biskupic, in the article, "Right-wing justices think religion is under siege. Will the full Supreme Court follow?"**

*CNN, 2-17-21*

I'm actually not surprised that evangelicals are more likely to believe those kinds of things. Evangelicals are not socially isolated, but they are informationally isolated.

**Samuel Perry, a professor of sociology at the University of Oklahoma, about how the QAnon conspiracy theory takes hold among evangelicals more than others.**

*FiveThirtyEight.com, 3-4-21*

Atheists, in general, are understudied. And when they are studied, they are not studied well.

**David Speed, professor of psychology at the University of New Brunswick in St. John, Canada.**

*Religion News Service, 3-4-21*



Freethought Today Cryptogram

U A J H M W J U W U Q F M F W P F J M Z G M Q U H I H L E U C M Q G E G M Q  
U J M X “E H U, X L G I J W E J U L H G T! J B M F N X L G I J W E J U L H G T! J  
N J T T Z G I H S G J W Z! J Y H T J H I H J M D E Z H G L W W Z G W N Z G W  
X F H U C V, C V, C V D C U W A F D H Q F N M, Q F N M, Q F N M. G D H M!”  
— Q G M Y G L B H L

This puzzle is from *Freethinking Cryptograms* by FFRF Member Brooks Rimes. See bottom of page for description and hint for this puzzle. Answer is on Page 21.

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4			5	6	7			8	9	10
11						12					13	14	
15						16					17		
	18				19						20		
				21						22			
23	24	25						26				27	28
30					31		32	33			34		
35				36			37				38		
39						40				41		42	
43					44					45		46	
				47				48	49				
		50	51				52					53	54
55							56				57		58
59							60				61		
62							63				64		

Answers on page 21 Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

- Across

1. \*”No \_\_\_\_, No Masters,” Margaret Sanger’s slogan and part of A. L. Gaylor’s book title

5. Kickable game prop

8. “Survivor” network

11. One-armed bandit

12. Spanish for male wolf

13. “J” \_\_\_\_, or “I love you” in Paris

15. Friend in war

16. Paleozoic and Mesozoic, e.g.

17. China grass

18. \*SSA, a.k.a. Secular Student \_\_\_\_

20. Goody bag stuff

21. Boredom

22. Chinese cuisine cookware

23. Turkey’s highest peak

26. Plant of bruise-treating renown, pl.

30. Roll of bills

31. In a curious manner

34. North American Grappling Association, acr.

35. “Bad news travels fast,” e.g.

37. Bass or Redhook

38. Seize a throne

39. Ice on a window

40. Radiant

42. Tolstoy

43. Get undressed

45. \*Dan \_\_\_\_, FFRF

co-president

47. Street in Italy

48. Movie trailer, e.g.

50. Chinese monetary unit

52. \*”E \_\_\_\_ Unum,” supplanted by “In God We Trust”

55. Dyed fabric

56. Litter member

57. Moldy appetizer

59. Hoard

60. Singer-songwriter Tori

61. Trend-setting

62. Campfire residue

63. \*Nietzsche: “Is \_\_\_\_ one of God’s blunders? Or is God one of \_\_\_\_’s blunders?”

64. Viking writing symbol

Down

1. General Services Administration, acr.

2. Paella pot

3. Cabbage Patch Kid, e.g.

4. Hairdresser

5. \_\_\_\_copia

6. Old-time calculators

7. Pinocchio’s lie detector

8. Robin Cook’s 1977 novel

9. Prison on a ship

10. “\_\_\_\_ Spot run”

12. Shanty

13. Match play?

14. \*Richard \_\_\_\_, author of “The God Delusion”

19. Silly

22. Kind of humor

23. \*”The Emperor Has No Clothes,” e.g.

24. Forearm bones

25. West and Sandler

26. Sheltered, nautically

27. Crack sealer

28. What “12 Angry Men” tried to do

29. Power of affecting taste buds

32. Wise man

33. Under the weather

36. \*Ricky \_\_\_\_, English comedian, actor, writer, director and atheist

38. Savory taste sensation

40. Arabic garment

41. Terminates

44. Sty sounds

46. \*Agnostic Margaret Atwood’s “The \_\_\_\_ Bride”

48. D’Artagnan’s hat accessory

49. Kind of sentence

50. Thanksgiving tubers

51. The Beehive State

52. Baby carriage

53. Pakistani language


54. Endorse a check

55. “Sheep be true! \_\_\_\_-ram-ewe!”


58. Potato bud
- # FFRF’s convention in Boston still TBD
- ## But save the dates! Weekend of Nov. 19-21 at Boston Park Hotel
- The Freedom From Religion Foundation is cautiously optimistic that its 2021 national convention — scheduled for the weekend of Nov. 19-21 at the Boston Park Hotel, Boston — may take place. But, as Dr. Anthony Fauci wisely advises, we must “Let the science speak.” FFRF, like the rest of the nation, awaits pandemic mitigation developments and advice, and hopes by mid or late summer to know whether a national conference will be practical and safe. FFRF encourages you to hold that weekend open, and will let you know as soon as we know whether we can hold a post-pandemic “bash” this year! The amazing roster still includes
- authors Margaret Atwood, Gloria Steinem, John Irving, Katherine Stewart and Phil Zuckerman, entertainer John Davidson, Hispanic American Free-thinkers’ founder David Tamayo, New York Times court columnist Linda Greenhouse and Black Skeptics Los Angeles founder Sikivu Hutchinson. Look for updates and announcements in future issues of Freethought Today and on our website, [ffrf.org/convo-2021](http://ffrf.org/convo-2021). We look forward to holding a post-pandemic celebratory bash with these powerhouse speakers and seeing you there, when it’s safe. Please keep in mind future convention sites and dates: Hyatt Regency San Antonio Riverwalk, Oct. 28-30, 2022, and Monona Terrace Convention Center/Hilton Madison Monona Terrace, Oct. 13-15, 2023.
- ## S8TAN
- Continued from page 1
- attorneys fees as a result of defending its unconstitutional conduct. “The Motor Vehicle Division’s restriction of the message because of the viewpoint being expressed violates the free speech clause of the First Amendment,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Alabama Motor Vehicle Division Director Jay Starling. “The Supreme Court has continually struck down viewpoint discrimination by the government.” FFRF recently learned from its complainant that its communication with the state of Alabama had an effect and that a triumph for free speech was indeed achieved. “My husband and I are members of The Satanic Temple; its fundamental tenets fit with what we believe,” the person emailed FFRF. “The state of Alabama has no business judging us for our or anyone else’s beliefs.”
- The Satanic Temple functions as a secular group that works in part to promote the separation of state and church. “Some of the reasons we choose ‘S8TAN’ are that it represents to us free-thinking, standing for rights, opposing injustice, common sense, belief in science, protecting other’s rights, compassion towards others, treating people with dignity and respect,” says FFRF’s complainant. FFRF is pleased at ensuring equal protection of viewpoints on license plates in Alabama, where religious messages are permitted. “Our complainant learned that folks at the Alabama Motor Vehicle Division laughed and said that ‘S8TAN’ would never be on a tag in the state of Alabama,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Now look who is having the last laugh.”
- Freethought Matters 2021 Season

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

Watch our show every Sunday!

Photo by Chris Line

Visit FFRF’s YouTube Channel to watch the shows.



Freethought Matters TV talk show airs in:

Chicago	WPWR-CW	(Ch. 50)	9 am
Denver	KWGN-CW	(Ch. 2)	7 am
Houston	KUBE-IND	(Ch. 57)	9 am
Los Angeles	KCOP-MY	(Ch. 13)	8:30 am
Madison, Wis.	WISC-TV	(Ch. 3)	11 pm
Minneapolis	KSTC-IND	(Ch. 45)	9:30 am
New York City	WPIX-IND	(Ch. 11)	8:30 am
Phoenix	KASW-CW	(Ch. 61)	8:30 am (Ch. 61 or 6 or 1006 for HD)
Portland, Ore.	KRCW-CW	(Ch. 32)	9 am (703 on Comcast for HD or Ch. 3)
Sacramento	KQCA-MY	(Ch. 58)	8:30 am
San Francisco	KICU-IND	(Ch. 36)	10 am
Seattle	KONG-IND	(Ch. 16)	8 am (Ch. 16 or Ch. 106 on Comcast)
Washington, D.C.	WDCW-CW	(Ch. 50, 23, 3)	8 am

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

A cryptogram is a substitution puzzle in which one letter stands for another. If U equals T, it will equal T throughout the puzzle. Example:  
UOG RLQTM HYVBF DVP SLACN VWGY UOG KJEZ XVI.  
THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPS OVER THE LAZY DOG.  
This month’s hint: V = P.



# Biden should abolish ‘faith-based office’

The Biden Administration should abolish, not resurrect, the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, as it did with the Feb. 15 executive order.

FFRF was the most vociferous critic of President George W. Bush’s egregious action to establish a “faith-based initiative,” which has created so much bad precedent to entangle religion and government.

As FFRF noted at the time, 9/11 was “a faith-based initiative” — and so was the Capitol riot on Jan. 6.

Our lawsuit over the creation of a faith-based office in the White House and at the cabinet level went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In *Hein v. FFRF*, issued in 2007, the high court in a 5-4 decision (following the resignation of Justice Sandra Day O’Connor), ruled that FFRF, Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, President Emeritus Anne Gaylor, had no right to sue the executive branch for entangling state and church.

In fact, the ruling made clear that no citizen would have the right to sue the president for setting up a faith-based office in the White House.

The Supreme Court did not find the office constitutional, never ruling on the merits of the case.

That office is indeed unconstitutional, and it has been abused to reward churches that support political candidates, among other things. Christian organizations have been given high preference under previous administrations.



Photo from WhiteHouse.gov

**President Biden signs an executive order on Feb. 15 that resurrects the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.**

Said one Bush official, “When I saw one of those non-Christian groups in the set [of grants] I was reviewing, I just stopped looking at them and gave them a zero. . . . A lot of us did.” Bush used the office to compensate his supporters — evangelical Christians. Former President Trump notoriously appointed televangelist Paula White to run the office.

When President Obama was elected, he watered down the office by renaming it the Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. The Biden iteration is better than previous versions because the executive order technically recognizes secular aid organizations, the separation between state and church, and the existence of nonreligious Americans. The order says it is establishing the office “while preserving our fundamental constitutional commitments guaranteeing the equal protection of the laws and the free exercise of religion and forbidding the establishment of religion.”

The order states that the purpose of the office is “to assist in organizing more

effective efforts to serve people in need across the country and around the world, in partnership with civil society, including faith-based and secular organizations.” But the order doesn’t create an Office of Neighborhood Partnerships to Serve People in Need, as it should. Instead, it wrongly singles out faith-based aid for special treatment, buying into the myth that most social services in our nation are religious in nature. But in this case as in so many others, churches get the credit . . . and taxpayers get the bill.

Biden has tapped Melissa Rogers, who ran the office during Obama’s second term, as its newest executive director. She is the former general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, which is generally pro-state/church separation and has supported FFRF in some cases. Josh Dickson, named deputy director of the faith-based office, helped with “Humanists for Biden” and co-authored a Brookings Institute report with E.J. Dionne entitled, “A Time to Heal, A Time to Build.”

Apparently taking its title from Ecclesiastes 3:3, the report recognizes nonbelievers, stating that “the proportion of Americans who do not identify with any religious tradition has skyrocketed, especially among the young, and these nonbelievers are an important” political constituency. Rogers and Dickson may appreciate the separation of state and church, but the office itself violates that principle. And the degree of the violation should not depend on who’s in the office.

## \$3,700 donated to food bank by FFRF’s Denver Metro chapter

Claudette St.Pierre, president of the Denver Metro Chapter of FFRF and an FFRF State Representative, described how the Denver chapter again helped the Food Bank of the Rockies.

She writes: “Our chapter engages in some sort of community charity support every year. In the past, we have donated to Atheists Helping the Homeless, Denver Pride Fest, as well as the Food Bank of the Rockies.

“We had success with a spring Food Bank fundraiser last year when the pandemic was at its peak, so we thought with the winter surge and seeing that more and more folks were suffering from food insecurity, we decided to do another fundraiser. We want to show the community that nonbelievers are just as generous as the religious folks.

“It also helps our members participate in community support without having to ‘volunteer’ or go out of their bubble during the pandemic (we do have many members who are 65 and older). Our chapter matched funds dollar for dollar up to \$2,000. We donated over \$3,700! Our local members are very generous!”

The Food Bank of the Rockies said the monetary gift would be enough to provide nearly 15,000 meals.

### 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.

### Spread the word, not the virus

**Doug and Deborah Hilpiper of Illinois stand near FFRF’s “In Science We Trust” billboard in Chicago at the intersection of Lincoln and Foster avenues in the Lincoln Square neighborhood. The Hilpiperes were instrumental in getting the sign displayed.**

**Tom Cara, president of the Metropolitan Chicago Chapter of FFRF, says the billboard sign was scheduled only to be up through the end of February, but was still greeting pedestrians and drivers in early March.**

## Join the Thomas Paine Day event

Please join the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the Freethought Society, the Thomas Paine National Historical Association, the Center for Inquiry and the American Humanist Association as we celebrate the 2021 Thomas Paine Day via Zoom on June 8.

Register at this site: [bit.ly/Join4Humanity](https://bit.ly/Join4Humanity).

The program begins at 6:45 p.m. Eastern time with a 15-minute Thomas Paine-themed concert by songwriter and recording artist James Klueh.

Melissa Myers (representing Center for Inquiry) and Margaret Downey (representing Freethought Society) are the event co-hosts.

After an introductory statement from U.S. Rep. Jamie Raskin, a welcome message will be given by co-sponsors’ representatives Annie Laurie Gaylor, Robyn Blumner, Mandisa Thomas, Gary Berton and Downey.

A summary of the life and work of Thomas Paine will be presented in sections by Mandisa Thomas of AHA, Tom Flynn of CFI, Andrew Seidel of FFRF, Downey of FS and Berton of TPNHA.

Sculptor Zenos Frudakis will show the progress of the Thomas Paine statue project and Dan Barker, co-president of FFRF, will perform his original song “The World is My Country.”

After a short break, there will be a question-and-answer session to conclude the festivities.



# FFRF NEWS

## National Day of Reason

# Join FFRF, others in ‘Mayday For Humanity’

The Freedom From Religion Foundation and other secular and freethinking groups are asking you to celebrate National Day of Reason on May 6 by joining the Zoom entertainment extravaganza — “Mayday For Humanity.”



Julia Sweeney

FFRF, along with members of the Secular Student Alliance, the Secular Coalition for America, the Freethought Society, and Recovering From Religion are sponsoring the event.

The three-hour program will begin at 7 p.m. EST, with comedians Leighann Lord and Ian Harris co-hosting. They will usher in an array of comedians, poets and performers, including Penn & Teller, Julia Sweeney, John de Lancie, John Davidson and Ann Druyan. (See below for full list.)

The National Day of Reason falls on the same date as the National Day of Prayer. But, as the religious community prays, the nontheist community will be taking action!

During the National Day of Reason’s “Mayday For



Humanity” event, online donations will be collected to benefit homeless shelters and food banks selected by the event co-sponsors. All beneficiary organi-

zations operate in a non-discriminatory and secular manner. The program will be interspersed with messages from co-sponsors, celebrity supporters and



John de Lancie

people who are conducting grassroots community service projects during the 2021 Secular Week of Action (April 30 – May 9).

An online auction will also take place with items donated by Zenos Frudakis, Ann Druyan, Curt Anderson, the Humanists Society of Santa Barbara and many others.

Register for the Zoom event at: [bit.ly/Join4Humanity](https://bit.ly/Join4Humanity). Pre-event

donations can be made at: [bit.ly/MAYDAY4HUMANITY](https://bit.ly/MAYDAY4HUMANITY). You can also donate via text! Just text the code: “MAYDAY4HUMANITY” to 44-321.

Here is the list of performers and guest appearances:

Ty Barnett, Sandra Booker, Baba Brinkman, John Davidson, Ann Druyan, John Fugelsang, Victor Harris, Jon Huertas, Keith Lowell Jensen, John de Lancie, Hemant Mehta, Shelley Segal, Gary Stockdale, Penn & Teller, Jill Sobule, Julia Sweeney, Voices of Reason.



This tweet from The Hill shows U.S. Sen Tommy Tuberville speaking to the Senate on March 1.

## Newly elected senator wrong on school prayer

U.S. Sen. Tommy Tuberville, who built a reputation for pushing religion onto public school football players, repeated his Christian Nationalist talking points on the floor of the U.S. Senate on March 1.

As a coach, Tuberville was instrumental in spreading the harmful practice of scheduling Christian college football chaplains to push religion onto public school athletes. Tuberville played a prominent role in the Freedom From Religion Foundation’s comprehensive report, “Pray to Play,” exposing such abuses at the collegiate level. As the report pointed out, Tuberville is personally responsible for instituting unconstitutional chaplaincies at Ole Miss, Auburn, Texas Tech and Cincinnati.

Tuberville today declared from the floor, “We’ve got to start teaching our young people moral values again. That starts with putting God and prayer back in our schools.”

Tuberville then lamented that U.S. students are underperforming in reading, science and math compared to their counterparts abroad.

Tuberville is wrong twice over. First, private prayer was never taken out of U.S. public schools, except when illegally imposed

on students as an official part of the school day. “So long as there are pop math quizzes, there will be prayer in public schools,” quips FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. In fact, at least half of public schools in the United States were not scheduling classroom or other school-imposed prayer at the time of the 1962 and 1963 Supreme Court decisions protecting student rights of conscience. Tuberville wants to inflict his brand of religious rituals on all public school students, as he demonstrated when he was a football coach.

Second, Tuberville is laughably wrong to say that more religion is the solution to low science scores. Religion has historically inhibited scientific progress, insisting that gaps in our scientific knowledge must be filled with dogma rather than by reason-based evidence. From the heliocentric model of the solar system to evolution, religion has always been there to condemn the quest for scientific truth and progress.

Religion is the typical justification of politicians like Tuberville who reject the science on vaccines, climate change and more. Tuberville should reflect on the fact that the countries that have outpaced the United States in terms of academics are, on a whole, much less religious.

## FFRF welcomes Life members

FFRF welcomes and thanks its 21 newest Lifetime, three After-Life and one Beyond After-Life members, and those who have become Immortals.

Michael E. Meek is the newest Beyond After-Life member. Beyond After-Life is a the very generous membership category of \$10,000.

Frank Bastian, Phil Carskaddan and Kenneth Krug are FFRF’s newest After-Life members. After-Life is a the highly generous membership category of \$5,000.

The new \$1,000 Lifetime members are Brad Baker, Al Crafts, Lewis M. Cutler, Timothy Douros, John Edelson, Larry Gerlach, Dante Cade Harootunian (a former FFRF legal fellow), Brian Kuehn, Caryla J. Larsen, Mark Mabie, Cassidy Maxson-Jones (gifted by Gerald “Jerry” Cummings), John Randolph Mecredy, Bo Savage,

Amanda Schackart (gifted by Alap Patel), Marci Shaver, Larry Shelzi, Steve Sklar, William Stees, Lisa Tillingham, Eugene Zabokritski and Marc Zylberberg.

The new Immortals are Charles Burton, David H. Carroll, Amy Murphy-DeMeo, Martin Stern and Jim Zerwick (an FFRF Executive Board Member). The Immortals category is for those who have made provisions in their estate for FFRF.

States represented are Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, Washington, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible

By Ruth Hurmence Green

A Missouri grandmother debunks the bible as no one has debunked it since Thomas Paine.

—Published by FFRF. 440 pages / PB

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

\$5 Off!

NEW!

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 [ffrf.org/shop](https://ffrf.org/shop)

‘IN SCIENCE WE TRUST’ Self inking stamp

Carefully crafted to stamp out ‘god’ on U.S. currency. Good for up to 2000 impressions.

\$20 postpaid — Item #ST02

Buy It Online [ffrf.org/shop](https://ffrf.org/shop)

NEW!

IN SCIENCE WE TRUST



# FFRF rebukes FBI for promotion of religion

FFRF is admonishing the FBI for conducting Christian devotions and otherwise unconstitutionally promoting religion.

An FBI employee has informed FFRF about serious concerns regarding increased religious promotion within the bureau. The FBI reportedly has a chaplain offer a Christian invocation at FBI graduation ceremonies and allows religious figures into the VIP section during FBI Academy events. The complainant has also reported that last summer, an FBI supervisor (Assistant Director Renae McDermott) forwarded an email from the Academy chaplain to all employees reminding them “that there is a divine power in charge of all things. You are all very much appreciated and I have been praying for you and your loved ones each week. . . . I have restocked the chapel with bibles, MP3 sticks and tracts for all.”

Scheduling prayers at FBI events such as Academy graduation ceremonies is unconstitutional and a violation of rights of conscience, FFRF informs the FBI.

“It is a fundamental constitutional principle that publicly funded institutions

cannot support, promote or otherwise endorse religion or engage in religious exercises,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line writes to McDermott. “Therefore, it is inappropriate for a public institution such as the FBI Academy to schedule an invocation as part of a secular graduation ceremony.”

Furthermore, FFRF adds, a call to FBI agents, their families and friends, and officers — who may be of varying faiths or no faith — for collective prayer is coercive, embarrassing and beyond the scope of a government training academy.

Prayers at FBI Academy events are especially coercive. Although the prayer may technically have been voluntary, agents would likely interpret a commanding officer’s suggestion to participate in the prayer as a command and would likely be unwilling to publicly dissent because of potential negative consequences on their new career.

FFRF has requested the FBI to abide by the Constitution and has put in a Freedom of Information Act request to ensure that the nation’s law-enforcement agency indeed does that.

“I have restocked the chapel with bibles, MP3 sticks and tracts for all.”  
— FBI Academy chaplain

# FFRF rips abortion ban law in Arkansas

FFRF condemns Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson for signing into law a near-total abortion ban.

The law, scheduled to go into effect in late summer, would permit abortions only in rare cases to save the lives of pregnant women, with no exceptions for rape or incest.

Hutchinson claims that he is motivated by his “sincere and pro-life convictions.” These so-called “pro-life convictions” are undermining the lives and constitutional rights of women throughout Arkansas — and potentially the country.

State Sen. Jason Rapert, the bill’s sponsor, has equated abortion to slavery and described the abortion ban as though it were a religious tenet. In a tweet on Feb. 22, Rapert described abortion as a “crime against humanity” while sharing the Republican Party of Arkansas’ 2020 platform.

Notably, two principles on the platform are “the power of faith in God Almighty” and “the sanctity of life.” Make no mistake: This anti-abortion law is about imposing religion on a secular nation at the expense of women’s health. And it clearly violates the rights spelled out in *Roe v. Wade*.

That long-established decision ruled that it is unconstitutional to impose a pre-viability abortion ban, which is around 24-26 weeks of gestation. Hutchinson has openly stated that the goal is to bring it to the Supreme Court in the hopes of overturning *Roe v. Wade*. Other states, including South Carolina, have recently passed anti-abortion bills that they, too, hope will lead to the repeal of *Roe*. The ultraconservative Supreme Court, whose balance has been tipped by the replacement of Justice Ruth



Photo by Shutterstock

Bader Ginsburg by Christian Nationalist Amy Coney Barrett, makes the future of *Roe v. Wade* uncertain as these religion-backed bills wend their way to the high court.

This egregious ban endangers the health of millions of women. Studies have shown that denying abortion care can lead to long-term health consequences and contributes to poor maternal health outcomes. In contrast, abortion is an extremely safe procedure and complications are rare, with no long-term consequences on a woman’s physical or mental health after an abortion.

The Arkansas abortion ban has dangerous consequences for the women of this country. As a secular nation, we must stand up for science, bodily autonomy and the human right to health care — including abortion.



Photo by Adam Gray from Twitter

Eric Barber of Parkersburg, W.Va., is alleged to have participated in the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6.

# FFRF foe charged in Capitol attack

Christian Nationalist Eric Barber, a former member of the City Council in Parkersburg, W.Va., has been charged in connection with the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection. FFRF, which is suing the Parkersburg City Council, had called in early January for an investigation of his role in the assault.

Barber was charged March 3 with entering a restricted building, disorderly conduct and theft, and was released on a \$10,000 unsecured bond.

“If you were to be convicted of any of these charges, you would be exposed to years in prison,” U.S. Magistrate Judge Dwane Tinsley told him during an initial hearing out of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

Until recently, Barber was a member of the council that FFRF and local plaintiffs are suing over its practice of beginning governmental meetings with an unconstitutional recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, which derives from the New Testament.

Due to his aggressive conduct, FFRF had singled Barber out in reporting on developments in our litigation: “At least one member of the City Council has been openly hostile to nonparticipants,” the lawsuit charges.

“Councilman Eric Barber glared at attendees who sat during the prayer at a meeting. At the end of that prayer, Barber positioned himself near his

microphone, pressed the button, and shouted, ‘Amen.’” FFRF had highlighted video of his behavior at one of the council meetings.

Barber’s behavior at the City Council meetings seems to have been true to type. Disturbing video footage shows Barber in a military-style helmet during the attacks.


Another Christian Nationalist in West Virginia who seems to be involved in the insurrection is state Sen. Mike Azinger, who has been open about his attendance and wish that Trump will call protesters back to D.C. FFRF had condemned a school bible bill that Azinger sponsored in the state Senate.

“We know from personal experience that Christian Nationalists at all levels of our government pose a grave threat to individual liberties and our secular form of government,” comments Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. “Now we see just how dangerous some of these Christian Nationalists really are.”

The FBI had received several tips identifying Barber’s presence at the Capitol. CCTV footage from U.S. Capitol Police shows Barber moving through the Capitol, taking selfie photographs in the rotunda and searching through C-SPAN equipment at a media station in Statuary Hall, where he allegedly unplugged a portable power station and stole it.

Yip Harburg,  
from his book:

Rhymes for the Irreverent



A Nose Is A Nose Is A Nose

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

Illustrated by Seymore Chwast, published by FFRF

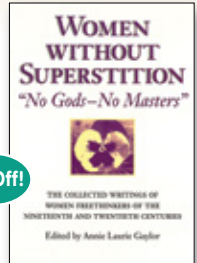
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Women Without Superstition  
“No Gods—No Masters”

Edited by, Annie Laurie Gaylor

Collected writings of 50 women freethinkers of the 19th & 20th centuries (51 photographs).

—Published by FFRF. 696 pages / HB



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



# FFRF VICTORIES

By Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey

## Religious signatures no longer part of emails

An issue of religious promotion by a teacher and coach has been corrected in the Brighton 27J School District in Colorado.

A district community member alerted FFRF that a biology teacher and coach at Brighton High School was sending emails from his official district account with a religious signature line. One email included the message: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not stray from it.” Proverbs 22:6.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Chris Fiedler, asking him to ensure that religious email signatures are removed so as not to create the impression of school endorsement of religion.

FFRF was assured by the Board of Education that the school principal would address the issue with the teacher.

**Football coach won’t proselytize in Montana**

In Montana, reports of ongoing proselytizing in the Great Falls Public Schools football program have been addressed by district leadership.

FFRF was informed that the head coach of the Charles M. Russell High School football team had been promoting religion to his players and the public at large through official district communication channels. The coach had been praying with his players and the team’s official Instagram account was regularly posting religious content. One post, which selected “Mary, Mother of God” as the “Beast of the Day” read:

“Mary, mother of Jesus, was a willing servant who trusted God and obeyed His call. While her life held great honor, her calling also required great suffering. Though there was joy in motherhood, there was great pain in the privilege of being the mother of the Messiah. Despite these things, she responded to God with great obedience and submission to his plan.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Thomas Moore, alerting him to this impermissible behavior and urging the district to take corrective action.

Moore informed FFRF in an email response that the issues were addressed with the coach and the religious posts have been permanently removed from the team’s social media page.

**Michigan coach won’t pray with students**

A public school basketball coach in Michigan has been asked to stop praying with his team after FFRF contacted his school district.

A district parent informed FFRF that a Wyandot Middle School basketball coach had been leading his students in prayer before basketball games. According to the parent, the coach would have the players gather in a circle, make them hold hands and then say a prayer. When he finished saying his prayer, he would ask any of the players if they wanted to say a prayer.

FFRF Legal Fellow Dante CH Harootunian sent a letter to Chippewa Valley Schools Superintendent Ronald



Roberts urging the district to stop any and all prayers occurring within any school athletic programs.

“Public school coaches must refrain not only from leading prayers themselves, but also from participating in students’ prayers,” Harootunian wrote. “It is unconstitutional for public school employees to participate in the religious activities of their students.”

Assistant Superintendent Adam Blanchard sent a letter of response indicating that the district took this issue seriously and that it has taken steps to ensure coaches are not endorsing or joining in on prayer.

The coach, the district wrote, “has been informed that his involvement in this type of religious activity cannot occur during school or a school event.”

**Chicago police won’t join in religious event**

The Chicago Police Department has acknowledged its obligation to remain neutral on religious matters.

A local resident informed FFRF that three uniformed police officers on horseback attended the annual Feast of St. Francis Assisi pet blessing service. During the public outdoor service, Pastor Amity Carrubba of Grace Place Episcopal Church recited a Christian prayer and blessed more than 60 pets, including three police horses.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent David Brown, urging the department and its officers to refrain from participating in religious events and avoiding endorsing religion when acting in their official government capacity.

Brown wrote in a response letter to FFRF that the department will “review [its] policies and procedures in an effort to maintain government neutrality and protect the constitutional principles of separation between church and state.”

**Religious tweet removed from school’s account**

In Missouri, a religious social media post has been removed from the Weaubleau High School Softball Team’s official page.

The team’s official Twitter account posted Christian scripture that read, “With God there is no limit to what YOU can do. There is no obstacle you can’t overcome, through him ALL things are possible! . . . We give God glory for another day to play! #TIGERSTRONG.”

FFRF Legal Fellow Joseph McDonald wrote to Superintendent Eric Wilkenm, urging the district to refrain from posting religious messages to official district social media pages as it constitutes an impermissible government endorsement of religion.

Wilken informed FFRF via email that the post has been removed.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line submitted a public records request to the city and asked for assurances that any deal between the city and Haywood Street Congregation/Haywood Street Community Development would include provisions ensuring that this project would not enrich the church at the expense of Asheville and that the property would not be used for religious purposes.

According to local reporting, the city has pulled the proposal to sell the land to the church.

**Sheriff’s religious post on Facebook removed**

The Elk County Sheriff’s Office has removed a problematic social media post promoting religion in Ridgway, Pa.

A local resident alerted FFRF that Sheriff Todd Caltagarone posted what amounted to a sermon on Facebook, decrying measures aimed at curbing the pandemic, such as limits on in-person gatherings, as an assault on freedom to worship, and advancing his personal religious belief that the bible says his constituents should sing and praise God in church.

FFRF Staff Attorney Maddy Ziegler wrote to Caltagarone to alert the sheriff to the impermissibility of promoting religion on the department’s official social media page. FFRF asked the sheriff’s office to remove the post, refrain from promoting or posting religious messages on social media, and enforce the laws officers swore to uphold, including laws that will reduce the spread of Covid-19.

FFRF was informed that the Facebook post has been taken down.

**Tenn. school district to reassess prayers**

A Tennessee district has addressed multiple incidents of school-endorsed prayer in Lexington.

FFRF was informed that a student, with several staff members standing behind him with bowed head, led the audience in a Christian prayer at last year’s Henderson County School District graduation ceremony, which concluded with “and we thank You for

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

### Pansy Freethinker Mug

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

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

Prices include over \$10 shipping per mug.



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



sending Your son down to this Earth to die on the cross for our sins. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.” Additionally, FFRF was made aware that a district band instructor led students in prayer at a recent football game.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Director of Schools Steve Wilkinson to inform the district that both these instances of school prayer were constitutionally impermissible as they amounted to government endorsement of religion.

The district’s attorney informed FFRF in a letter of response that the superintendent agreed to “address issues with faculty concerning prayer in school and the violation of the Establishment Clause of the Constitution” at the next staff meeting.

## Religious sign removed from Texas polling place

A religious sign has been taken down from a polling place in Wichita Falls, Texas. FFRF was informed that during early voting for the 2020 election, a County Commissioner building being used as a polling site displayed a sign that read “PRAY FOR PEACE 1 Thess. 3:16.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote to County Clerk Lori Bohannon, asking the county to take action to prevent its facilities, particularly polling places, from displaying religious messages or iconography.

Bohannon notified FFRF via email that the office would be removing the sign.

## FFRF humbles Texas school district

Humble Independent School District in Texas has conducted extensive First Amendment training with staff after complaints of a state/church violation from FFRF.

An area resident alerted FFRF that a local religious group called Covenant on Campus Team was granted access to the classrooms in Park Lakes Elementary School to leave messages



Gemma Dehnbostel of Florida sent us this photo from a chiropractic office. “Then why in the world would I spend money on a chiropractor?,” Gemma wondered.

on the students’ desks. The group was also reportedly allowed to pray over every student’s desk, regardless of the students’ religious affiliation or lack thereof.

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to the district’s attorney, asking the district to refrain from allowing religious groups privileged access to public schools and spaces occupied by students.

The district’s legal representation informed FFRF in a letter of response that she has reviewed the standards for community groups at school with district leadership. Additionally, Humble ISD has conducted a detailed First Amendment training over the summer with all campus principals and assistant principals, as well as representatives from central office leadership and Human Resources.

## Poll site will no longer have religious images

The city of Roanoke, Va., has taken action to address the placement of religious iconography at a polling location during the November 2020 election.

FFRF was informed that during the election, a Roanoke polling place, Christ Lutheran Church, displayed a large portrait of Jesus above the ballot bin. FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote to City Clerk Cecelia McCoy alerting the city to this problematic infringement on free and fair voting.

Director of Elections and General Registrar J. Andrew Cochran assured FFRF in a letter of response that the city will take action to rectify this.

“While there was no ulterior motive in the placement of the ballot bin, it is the impact to the voter that we are focused on in this case,” Cochran writes. “I can assure you all Officers of Election will be trained on the learnings from this concern.”

## Church ad taken down in Georgia school district

A church advertisement has been removed from Cobb County School District property in Mariette, Ga.

FFRF was informed that Kennesaw Elementary School, which rents out space on Sundays to HighPoint Church, was permanently displaying two canvas advertisements for the church on the school’s fence.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district’s attorney requesting that the religious display be removed from school grounds any time the property is not being rented by the church.

The district’s attorney sent a letter of reply alerting FFRF that the district “has confirmed that the referenced signage is no longer on display.”

## Sheriff’s office removes religious Facebook post

The Pacific County Sheriff’s Department in South Bend, Wash., has taken action to correct religious promotion on its social media page.

Last fall, the sheriff’s office posted a Thanksgiving message on its official Facebook page, which included a photo of a Latin cross with the message, “Blessings” across it.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Sheriff Robin Souvenir illustrating the constitutional and ethical issues which arise when the sheriff department endorses Christianity on an official website.

Souvenir assured FFRF that the post has been removed and has committed to the department being more diligent in the future to ensure it does not promote religion.

# CRANKMAIL

Here’s your April version of emails, letters and social media comments FFRF receives from its, shall we say, critics. Published as received.

**This months JOKE tv show!!:** SECULAR JEWS!!! OK, YOU WANT FREEDOM FROM RELIGION. WHAT A GROSS BUNCH OF SCUMBAG LYING SCOUNDRELS!!!!!! YOUR MAIN ALLIANCE IS WITH “SECULAR”?!?!?!?!? WHAT A JOKE. CHANGE WILL COME AND YOU SCUM LIARS CAN GO WITH YOUR “SECULAR” BED MATES. WHAT SCUM!!!!!!!!!!!! — Elliot Raj

**Stop Praying:** If you do not want people praying at Osceola County School Board meetings then

you are what is wrong with this country! — Jackson Treadle

**Evidence:** like there is no God isnt evidence based at all and cant ever be disproved. There is no God and everything created itself please that defies the Laws of science the laws of thermodynamics evolution atheism a pipe dream a fantasy for grown is who dont want the truth because they want wickedness. Theres people smarter than these clowns who have literally tried to disprove scriptures and ended up receiving Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour. Jesus died for our sins was buried and rose again the

third day FACT. The leaders hated him yet they never found even a nail of his but an empty tomb. — Christopher Rathmann

**Our rights:** You have the freedom to be in our Wonderful Country. We Do To. We Don’t tell you what to believe in and you have no right to tell us what we can do here in our country. If you don’t want God to be in your life that’s fine He doesn’t make you do that either. You Don’t have any Right to change our rights. You do your thing and we’ll do ours. If you don’t want to pray during a game or what ever your at that prays that’s find but Don’t push your stuff on us. I am so sick of you people coming in and pushing your ways on us. You Choose to Not Believe. Satan Believes in God and he trembles. Your choice. Don’t bow your head. — Linda Rentmeester

**Abortion:** You should not mislead people about what god says about abortion. Exodus 21 clearly says life for life. A baby can survive if born as early

as 21 weeks. You better do a few more bible studies. — Dennis Harder


**Godless:** there is no good in a godless society. in a godless world there is no moral laws. you are only proving how dumb you god rejecting people are. you godless people have no moral foundation. ffrf is lying in their book. they promote the religion and cult of atheism. godless world view there is no such thing as good. there is no morality in a godless world view. humanist is purely a satanic religious cult just like atheism is. — Dean Festiger

**FFRF:** 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 Dontang

**Biting my tongue:** I am a Christian...that said I have some decidedly un-Christian things to say to you regarding your recent threats of a lawsuit. I do hope that you see the irony in bullying people for what they believe, as that seems to be the sole purpose for your organizations existence, yet, you can’t just sit idly by and tolerate (another keyword you hobgoblins like so much but don’t understand fully) that you are not the majority. I’m not going to shout or even espouse hellfire & damnation as that would only fuel your hatred for every human being other than the infinitesimally small minority.. — Quinn Perkolast

**Go away!:** You are a bunch of atheist who get offended by religious people is absolutely hysterical. It sounds like you are all nothing but a bunch of lawyers trying to find ways to sue people and make money. As the saying goes..., the only good lawyer is a dead lawyer! Now stop bothering people you fucking assholes! When the time does come you will get what is coming to you! — John Ably

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# IN THE NEWS

## U.S. Rep. Don Beyer joins Freethought Caucus

U.S. Rep. Don Beyer of Virginia is the newest member of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, which was started by Reps. Jared Huffman and Jamie Raskin.

Speaking at the Secular Coalition for America members' meeting on Feb. 6, Beyer said:

"I was honored to be invited to join the Congressional Freethought Caucus in Congress. Congressman Jared Huffman and Congressman Jamie Raskin are two men I admire immensely. Together, we will do our best to minimize the impact and influence of religious rules and dogmas and intolerances on our laws and our budgets. If we are a nation founded on freedom, then it is essential that every person be free to think, believe, even worship in their own way — to the extent, of course, that it is lawful and does not impinge on the freedom of others.

"I have four children, none of whom have even the slightest inclination toward God, religion or church. Religion means 19 Muslims killing 3,000 people and themselves on 9/11, to earn virgins in heaven. It means Jerry Falwell and Jerry Falwell Jr., and the Moral Majority, which was neither. It means Shiites vs. Sunnis, Catholics vs. Protestants, burning at the stake because you don't believe in baptism. Religion is equivalent to intolerance — of skin color, sexual orientation, class, and on and on. Religion means imposing your rules and practices and beliefs on everyone else — especially, especially when it comes to sexuality."

### Alabama can't execute inmate without pastor

The Supreme Court on Feb. 12 said Alabama could not execute a death row inmate without the man's pastor by his side, the Washington Post reported.

The court also indicated that other states must find a way to honor final requests for a spiritual adviser in the death chamber.

The court's order came an hour before Alabama's self-imposed deadline of executing Willie B. Smith III, convicted of a 1991 robbery and murder. A lower court had put the execution on hold, and Alabama asked the Supreme Court to step in.

Justice Amy Coney Barrett sided with liberal colleagues, saying federal law requires states to make accommodations for prisoners like Smith.

### Tennessee bill would let man stop abortion

Tennessee lawmakers proposed a bill on Feb. 15 that would let a biological impregnator stop a woman from getting an abortion, according to a report by The Hill.

An injunction would only be granted to an individual if there is evidence the woman is considering an abortion and if there is evidence the man is the impregnator.

However, DNA evidence is not required for the injunction.

Once the injunction is issued, the court must hold a hearing with both parties within 14 days. If a woman vio-

A Superior event



Barbara Stark and Charles Gessert of the Lake Superior Freethinkers (LSF) volunteer at Second Harvest food bank in Duluth, Minn.

Members of the Lake Superior Freethinkers, a local chapter of FFRF, donated their time and \$2,063 to the food bank. FFRF donated \$1,000 and LSF added \$1,063 in matching funds.

Helping at the event were LSF members Linda Crumpton, Don Fraser, Charles Gessert, Allen Loken, Tom Patten, Julius Salinas and Barbara Stark.

## Young Black adults becoming less religious

Young Black adults are less religious and less engaged in Black churches than older generations, a Pew Research Center survey shows.

Black Millennials and members of Generation Z are less likely to rely on prayer, less likely to have grown up in Black churches and less likely to say religion is an important part of their lives, the Pew report states. Fewer attend religious services, and those who do attend are less likely to go to a predominantly Black congregation.

About one-in-five Black Americans are not affiliated with any religion and instead identify as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular," and this phenomenon is increasing by generation: Roughly three-in-ten Black Gen Zers (28 percent) and Millennials (33 percent) in the survey are religiously unaffiliated, compared with just 11 percent of Baby Boomers and 5 percent of those in the Silent Generation.

But Black Americans are still more religious than the American public. They are more likely to say they believe in God or a higher power, and to report that they attend religious services regularly. They also are more likely to say religion is "very important" in their lives and to be affiliated with a religion, and to believe prayers to ancestors have protective power and that evil spirits can cause problems in a person's life, the Pew report states.

### God belief not needed to tell right from wrong

One doesn't have to believe in God to believe in goodness, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center, analyzing various values driving the morals of atheists and religious believers.

The poll revealed more than half (51 percent) of people polled in 34 countries do not think believing in God is fundamental to being moral and having good values.

Overall, respondents in nations with lower gross domestic product are more likely to say that belief in God is necessary to be moral and have good values.

Also, individuals with more education are less likely to say that belief in God is necessary to be moral. This pattern closely tracks the connection between income levels and the way people answer this question, because there is a significant correlation between educational attainment and earnings.

### Religious institutions not trustworthy for Gen Z

Trust in institutions among Americans in general has dwindled over the years and Gen Z — those born between 1995 and 2010 — are among the most distrustful, according to a story on the Religion In Public blog on Feb. 19. Gen Z members are also the generation most likely to self-identify as "atheist" or "agnostic" according to surveys.

The State of Religion and Young People 2020 confirmed that trust in organized religion was not very high — around two-thirds of young people rated their trust of religious institutions at 5 or below out of maximum of 10, with an overall mean score of 4.5 out of 10. This compares with an average score of 5.3 for banks.

lates the injunction and gets an abortion, "the court may hold the respondent in civil or criminal contempt and punish the respondent in accordance with the law."

If the bills are passed and approved by the governor, they would take effect starting July 1.

### Religion's relevance down in Iran, Middle East

Several recent surveys in the Middle East show an increase in secularization and growing calls for reforms in religious political institutions, according to a report by Deutsche Welle.

"Personal piety has declined some 43 percent over the past decade, indicating less than a quarter of the population now define themselves as religious," it said in the Middle East survey report.

In Iran, the survey showed 47 percent reported "having transitioned from being religious to nonreligious."

Pooyan Tamimi Arab, assistant professor of religious studies at Utrecht University and co-author of the survey, sees this transition as a logical consequence of Iran's secularization.

"Iranian society has undergone huge transformations, such as the literacy rate has gone up spectacularly," Tamimi Arab said.

### Evangelicals more likely to believe QAnon theory

A survey shows that more than a quarter of white evangelical Protestants believe the QAnon conspiracy theory that purports former President Donald Trump was secretly battling a cabal of pedophile Democrats, the Religion News Service reports.

It also showed that about half of the evangelicals expressed support for the debunked claim that antifa was responsible for the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

Experts say the data point to a widening ideological divide not only between white evangelicals and other religious groups in the country, but also between white evangelical Republicans and other members of their own party, RNS reports.

There was also significant support among white evangelicals for the claim that members of antifa, or anti-fascist activists, were "mostly responsible" for the attack on the U.S. Capitol — a discredited claim repeated by former Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani and conservative religious leaders such as the Rev. Franklin Graham. FBI officials have said there is "no indication" antifa played a role in the insurrection.









This former Lutheran church in southern Wisconsin was purchased by Audrey Martinovich and her husband and is being renovated into their home.

Altared states

# Atheist couple renovates church into home

By Audrey Martinovich

My husband and I live in a church. Some people might think it’s weird for outspoken atheists to have bought and renovated a former worship site, but it isn’t that weird for us. We are more intrigued by the architecture and novelty of having our own bell to ring than we are put off by the small amounts of religious imagery that linger.



Audrey Martinovich

Luckily for us, only three of the 12 stained-glass windows include religious symbols. The window in our son’s room features an image of the bible in the center. My husband and I joke that this window will put the fear of God in our son because we won’t. Eventually, we will probably change the bible to another book. Some contenders are *Lord of the Rings* and, of course, Dan Barker’s *Life-Driven Purpose*. The other two windows have a cross and a goblet of wine, neither being visible from the main living areas. The church we bought was formerly Lutheran and is located in a small town in southern Wisconsin. I can’t say that we would have bought the church had it been Catholic or other denominations, with their long track records of homophobia, since I’m bisexual. But then again, maybe we would have bought it out of spite and

painting it rainbow colored instead of just putting up Pride flags.

### Church for sale

The congregation from this church had a new building constructed and was operating out of that location, leaving the old church empty for nearly a year before we looked at it. We saw right away that the building was more structurally sound than anything else we had looked at. And it was super cheap, so we knew we would be able to afford a big renovation project to turn it into a house. When we closed on the church in June 2020, our real estate agent congratulated us with bread and red wine. We went through everything the church left behind and decided what to keep, what to sell, what to burn and what to throw away. We kept anything with a name engraved on it — mostly little name plates on cubbies where bibles were stored — with the intention of either returning it to the person or their family, or making it into a display piece reflecting the history of the building. On our first night of church ownership, we invited some friends over, projected movies onto the wall behind where the preacher would have stood, and took turns reading some of the names to the group, attaching a backstory and accent to each name. We removed the 26 pews, keeping three and selling some off to a campground for outdoor seating, the rest to a county courthouse, and started framing some bedrooms in the sanctuary. Other than electrical and plumbing, my husband has been do-

ing most of the construction himself. During the early stages of construction, we lived in an apartment in another town. We couldn’t call the church “home” quite yet and, while cheeky at first, it got old saying we were going to church when we meant our future house. We decided to nickname the church Castle Grayskull, a nod to He-Man, one of our favorite cartoons. We even have a sign that will go on the front of the building where a cross used to hang. The church left us an organ, piano, three microphones (which was perfect for me, since I own a recording studio), a box of bibles, an altar, and some other odd bits of furniture



A stained-glass window.



This is how the main chapel area looked before renovation.





The church has been named Castle Grayskull, a reference to the Masters of the Universe comic/animation series.

and kitchenware.

We donated most of the dishes to a neighbor who'd lost everything in a fire, but kept some goblets and a pair of elaborate chairs, which can now be spotted in the background of the indie horror movie, "The Headmistress." Written and produced by clients and friends of mine, "The Headmistress" is set in an abandoned nunnery and was in the early stages of filming when we bought the church. My friends asked if we had any items they could use to dress the set and we happily obliged.

Unfortunately, the organ was in disrepair and turned out to be of no value, so we are either going to turn it into a bar or will pass it along to an artist friend to create something new. However, we are keeping the pipes and have relocated them from what is now a bathroom to the living room as a focal point. Once renovation is complete, we will be setting up a Hammond organ, though the pipes won't be functional.

When our apartment's lease was up, we turned the church basement, which had a working kitchen and bathroom, into a studio apartment for us to occupy while renovations took place upstairs. The basement housed the piano the congregation left behind. Over the holidays, we adorned the piano with Christmas decorations that originally spelled "Santa," but rearranged them to spell "Satan," one of my favorite subtleties of our decor. It reminds me of when I was in high school and, although my whole family is life-long atheists, we lived in a different church that had been renovated into apartments. My mom bought a neon light in the shape of a martini glass and kept it in the window, visible from the street, as a funny way to juxtapose "sin" with a church.

### Mixed reception

The reception of our family into the town has been mixed. Three weeks after our move, the town had

a high school homecoming parade that featured a float depicting men dressed in sombreros trying to climb over a wall, while men wearing the town's high school football jerseys beat them off the wall and sprayed them with silly string. I posted photos online which went viral and landed on several news stations. Everyone in the town knew I took the pictures and, because of the oddity of our house, also knew exactly where we lived. We received a couple anonymous letters after that.

Before the parade float incident, the congregation that had formerly occupied Castle Grayskull invited us to participate in a ceremony marking the end of the church as a site of worship and to welcome us to the

town. While we aren't religious, we recognized that this was significant for them, so we agreed to participate. It was strange to go from the one extreme of literally receiving hate mail to the other extreme of being given a quilt to symbolize the warmth of the community.

In the year since, we're almost ready to move from the basement upstairs. The stained-glass windows have protective plexiglass over them and we've added security cameras. The painting is finished and now we have a list of odds and ends to do. Plus, we've doubled down on the anti-racism message.

*Audrey Martinovich is an audio engineer and helps produce FFRF's Free-thought Radio program.*



An old piano was left behind, as were letters that originally spelled "Santa."



Conversion of the church into a home continues, with the stained glass windows remaining part of the design.



The intial framing of the bedrooms.



The kitchen is being built on the altar area of the former church.



An old bell was left behind that the owners will keep.



# ‘Verdict will not bring peace to my family’

## Five sentenced to death in murder of Avijit Roy

A court in Bangladesh has sentenced five men to death and one to life in jail for hacking secular blogger Avijit Roy to death six years ago in the capital city of Dhaka.

Roy, a U.S. citizen from Bangladesh, was attacked by machete-wielding assailants in February 2015 while returning home with his wife, Bonya Ahmed, from a Dhaka book fair.

The assault that killed Roy and critically wounded Ahmed was carried out by the group Ansar Ullah Bangla, which is allegedly linked with al-Qaeda. All six men convicted were members of Ansar Ullah Bangla.

Two of the group were tried in absentia, including former army Major Syed Ziaul Haque, who is accused of leading the attackers. He was sentenced to be hanged, as were four others: Abu Siddique Sohel, Mozammel Hossain, Arafat Rahman and Akram Hossain. Hossain and Haque are still on the run.

“Charges against them were proved beyond any doubt. The court gave them the highest punishment,” said public prosecutor Golam Sarwar Khan.

*This following is a statement given by FFRF Lifetime Member Bonya Ahmed on her Facebook page on Feb 16.*

By Bonya Ahmed

In 2015, my late husband Avijit Roy — Avi — and I visited Bangladesh, our home country, for the annual book fair where two of Avi’s books were being published. We were attacked by Islamist terrorists. Avi died and I barely survived and the killing spree continued for another year.

Today, the courts released their verdict. They judged whether the attackers murdered Avijit for writing books and blogs



Avijit Roy

about science, philosophy and religion. This verdict is not a closure for me or our family, I never expected it to be.

In six years, not one person investigating the case in Bangladesh reached out to me — though I am a direct witness and victim of the attack. In January, the state lawyer in the case publicly lied, saying that I did not agree to be a witness in the trial. The truth is, no one from Bangladesh’s government or the prosecution has ever contacted me.

Here are my thoughts about this verdict:

The main two culprits — Sayed Ziaul Haque, the top commander, and Akram Hossain, the top operative of the militant group that attacked us — have never been caught. Last week (in the verdict following the murder of Avi’s publisher, Faisal Arefin Dipan, in 2015), we learned that Haque continued to mastermind the serial killings of other secular writers and publishers for eight months(!) after Avi and I were attacked. And, yet, Bangladeshi authorities failed to put him behind bars.

Today, civilized countries cannot get away with extrajudicial killings. But in 2016, Bangladeshi police carried out the extrajudicial killing (via “crossfire,” as it’s commonly called in Bangladesh) of Mukul Rana Sharif. He was reportedly a top operative of the militant group that attacked us. Sharif was in police custody for months before the authorities killed him. Why was Sharif killed?

Dipan’s verdict from last week includes



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Bonya Ahmed speaks at FFRF’s convention in Pittsburgh in 2016, just 18 months after she and her husband were brutally attacked in Bangladesh. Her husband, secular blogger Avijit Roy, was killed.

this confessional statement from one of the convicted killers: “In 2015, money used to flow in to kill bloggers, publishers and homosexuals in the country.” I want to know: Who has investigated this flow of money? Has anyone? What will these verdicts accomplish, if we don’t get to the source of the money — or rather, to the source of the killings?

On Feb. 26, 2015, Avi and I were invited to meet a group of science writers. The people who organized that event kept us waiting for hours. Finally, we met the group in the evening. After the event, we were attacked and Avi was killed. Were the organizers of that event ever investigated? What was the outcome?

Bangladesh’s government has become more autocratic since we were attacked: Freedom of speech has been

restricted further; secular writers, bloggers, activists were forced to leave the country during and after 2015; a harsher Digital Security Act has been enacted; and bloggers, writers and publishers have been persecuted for their writings on a regular basis. Bangladesh’s prime minister is increasingly friendly with Hefazat-e-Islam, the Islamist group of madrasah teachers and students that demanded “the heads” of secular writers and bloggers in 2014.

Simply prosecuting a few foot-soldiers — and ignoring the rise and roots of extremism — does not mean justice for Avi’s death, nor for the deaths of the “bloggers, publishers and homosexuals” before and after him as part of the serial killing. That’s why this verdict will not bring peace to my family or theirs.

## Dad

Continued from page 1

group known as “al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent.” They didn’t like what you wrote about science and secularism.

In the months after your death, extremists killed your friends. And your publisher. And a bunch of other people you didn’t know. The attacks were graphic, with machetes and ISIS videos and witnesses who might never forget seeing their partners die.

I’m realizing now, after six years, that the news of each murder gashed fresh wounds into scars that were not done healing for you. Getting better is taking me so long, Dad. I’m still mourning you, but also them.

On Feb. 16, some of your attackers were sentenced to death. Knowing they’re going to die doesn’t make me feel better about losing you. Their loved ones will mourn them too.

Though these five were charged with carrying out your attack, so many more were involved in the planning, execution and silencing of Bangladeshi bloggers. Some orchestrators have never been caught, or even identified. After the verdict, Maa asked questions I wish could answer: Where

are the masterminds of the attack? Why was one leader killed in police custody, years before the trial?

“Money used to flow in to kill bloggers, publishers and [gay people]” in Bangladesh, one of your publisher’s attackers confessed. So, who funded your murder?

I thought, if the Bangladeshi investigators don’t have answers, then maybe journalists will. Unfortunately, Bangladesh — like many countries now — is imprisoning journalists for speaking out.

Just last year, Bangladeshi journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol mysteriously disappeared for 53 days after criticizing a government official’s alleged sex-trafficking involvement. When he resurfaced, Kajol was then sentenced to seven years in prison, under Bangladesh’s controversial 2018 Digital Security Act, which restricts free speech. Two other journalists were jailed in May under the same law.

Thankfully, Kajol had a kid, who fought for his father’s release and gained international attention. Kajol was released from jail after seven

months, instead of seven years.

Cases like his and yours, which are only the tip of the iceberg, keep me up at night. When I finally sleep, you tend to die. I still wake from violent dreams and feel tired all day, desperate for rest. I might have actually forgotten how to rest. But maybe, like you, I’ve never known how.

I remember your late nights writing, your determination to change minds — but most vividly, I remember your songs. When you couldn’t get topics you were writing about, like “intelligent design,” out of your head, you’d turn those words into loud, belted-out tunes. I remember us dancing to them. I wonder, if you were here now, would you still be singing and dancing with me?

There’s little point pondering hypotheticals. But one hypothesis comforts me: As long as there are people like Kajol’s son and your daughter, the world will be forced to provide answers — as we bend societies toward your vision of rationality, of equity, of peace.

Trisha Ahmed is a graduate student at the University of Maryland and reporter at the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism.

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Actor and singer John Davidson appeared on “Freethought Matters” in December.

# ‘Freethought Matters’ Quality TV for freethinkers

If you haven’t seen FFRF’s “Freethought Matters” TV show, you’re missing out on interesting discussions and intellectual repartee by and for freethinkers.

Hosts Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker talk with dozens of freethinkers, politicians, actors, writers and more about current events as they relate to state/church separation, nontheism and other topics.

Just take a look at the lineup of great guests from the most recent season:

- **Nate Phelps**, the freethinking son of the notorious founder of the Westboro Baptist Church Fred Phelps.
- Congressional Freethought Caucus member **Rep. Jerry McNerney**.
- Indian actor/activist **Sushant Singh**.
- Pundit **Eleanor Clift**.
- Actor and FFRF After-Life Member **John de Lancie** of “Star Trek” “Q” fame.
- Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter **Linda Greenhouse**, the country’s leading analyst of the U.S. Supreme Court.
- Legislative stalwart and feminist and civil rights pioneer **U.S. Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton**.
- Eminent public intellectual Professor **Steven Pinker**.
- Legendary TV host, actor and singer **John Davidson**.

- **Ann Druyan**, the co-creator of “Cosmos,” possibly the most acclaimed TV series of all time.
  - Prominent British philosopher and the author **A.C. Grayling**.
  - **Robert P. Jones**, the CEO and founder of Public Religion Research Institute who is an expert on the intersection of religious and racial extremism.
- Previous seasons included episodes with **Ron Reagan**, **Julia Sweeney** and **Ed Asner**, as well as **U.S. Reps. Jared Huffman** and **Jamie Raskin**, co-chairs of the Congressional Freethought Caucus.
- More than a quarter of the nation has access to view “Freethought Matters” every Sunday. But even if you don’t live in one of those areas, you can catch current and past shows on FFRF’s YouTube channel ([YouTube.com/user/FFRFForg](https://www.youtube.com/user/FFRFForg)).
- “Freethought Matters” airs in:
- Chicago, WPWR-CW (Ch. 50), Sundays at 9 a.m.
  - Denver, KWGN-CW (Ch. 2), Sundays at 7 a.m.
  - Houston, KUBE-IND (Ch. 57), Sundays at 9 a.m.
  - Los Angeles, KCOP-MY (Ch. 13), Sundays at 8:30 a.m.
  - Madison, Wis., WISC-TV (Ch. 3), Sundays at 11 p.m.
  - Minneapolis, KSTC-IND (Ch. 45),

- Sundays at 9:30 a.m.
  - New York City, WPIX-IND (Ch. 11), Sundays at 8:30 a.m.
  - Phoenix, KASW-CW (Ch. 61, or 6 or 1006 for HD), Sundays at 8:30 a.m.
  - Portland, Ore., KRCW-CW (Ch. 32), Sundays at 9 a.m. Comcast channel 703 for High Def, or Channel 3.
  - Sacramento, KQCA-MY (Ch. 58), Sundays at 8:30 a.m.
  - San Francisco, KICU-IND (Ch. 36), Sundays at 10 a.m.
  - Seattle, KONG-IND (Ch. 16 or Ch. 106 on Comcast), Sundays at 8 a.m.
  - Washington, D.C., WDCW-CW (Ch. 50 or Ch. 23 or Ch. 3), Sundays at 8 a.m.
- You can also receive notifications when we post new episodes of “Freethought Matters” by subscribing to FFRF’s YouTube channel.
- Editor’s note:** Tune in or record according to the times given above, regardless of what is listed in your TV guide (it may be listed simply as “paid programming” or even be misidentified). To set up an automatic weekly recording, try recording manually by time or channel.
- And spread the word to freethinking friends, family or colleagues about this TV show, finally, that is dedicated to providing programming for freethinkers!

## Churches favored over science again

The U.S. Supreme Court has engaged again in religiously preferential conduct toward churches resisting Covid-19 health orders, much to the FFRF’s chagrin.

In an unsigned order issued on Feb. 27, the high court blocked local health regulations seeking to slow the spread of Covid-19 via indoor worship services. A group of churches suing Santa Clara County, Calif., appealed to the Supreme Court after the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals left in place limits on indoor worship. The court’s brief order simply refers to one of its prior decisions: “This outcome is clearly dictated by this court’s decision in *South Bay United Pentecostal Church v. Newsom*.” Justices Elena Kagan, Stephen Breyer and Sonia Sotomayor dissented.

The county had argued that its regulations, which temporarily limited “all indoor gatherings of all kinds,” are neu-

tral and did not single out churches. The county also filed a letter with the court indicating that decreasing rates of Covid-19 would lead to allowing indoor worship gatherings as early as Wednesday, March 3. Nevertheless, the Supreme Court went ahead with its order.

Covid-19 cases have topped 114 million globally, with more than 2.53 million deaths.

“Given the fact that the United States is the worst-hit country with the highest number of cases and deaths, it’s appalling that the Supreme Court has gone out of its way to favor churches,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Churches and religious gatherings have figured highly as super-spreaders. This decision is not based on the science, but on privileging churches.”

Other California churches that chal-

lenged health orders have flaunted their disregard for public health — and have been coddled by the highest court in the land. Harvest Rock Church was granted an injunction by the Supreme Court on Feb. 5. Its most recent Sunday service featured 30 straight seconds of shouting as part of a 40-minute sing-along.

“This reckless behavior is exactly why churches should have to follow the same rules as other gatherings,” adds Gaylor.

Epidemiologists have warned about extended worship gatherings that involve singing. Kagan had previously cited the state of California’s expert witness, who reported that there is an increased risk of community spread where churches have lengthy gatherings that involve singing or chanting.

Unfortunately, the Supreme Court continues to favor churches over science.

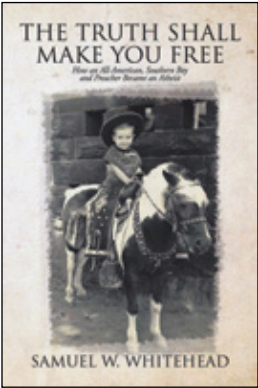
### FREETHOUGHT BOOKS

The following books are by FFRF members on the topics of religion or freethinking. FFRF does not do book reviews. These books are **not** offered through [ffrf.org/shop](https://ffrf.org/shop).

#### The Truth Shall Make You Free: How an All-American, Southern Boy and Preacher Became an Atheist

By Samuel W. Whitehead  
\$7.20 (Kindle)  
\$7.96 (Paperback)

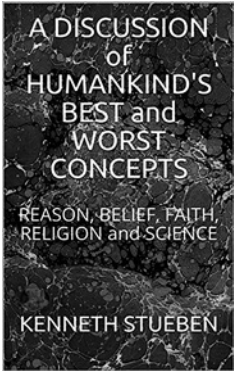
Sam Whitehead was raised in a strict religious family and was a teenage preacher. At age 22, he began a 40-year quest of research and reflection to prove that his faith was the one “true” religion and that God was real. He reluctantly came to the conclusion that there is no God and that no religion is true. Staunch believers in God and readers who are trying to find their own truth will find Sam’s journey compelling. This serious work challenges believers to live up to their creed and reflects the humor in many situations along the way.



#### A Discussion of Humankind’s Best and Worst Concept: Reason, Belief, Faith, Religion and Science

By Kenneth Stueben  
Paperback \$14.99  
Kindle \$2.99

How do each of us come to believe what makes up our store of knowledge? What’s real or true and what’s not and why the difference is critically important to humankind. It progresses from mythological creation myths and superstitions to “New Age” beliefs to a summary of the countless gods of the past and then examines some of the religions that are common today. The author also discusses the bible, prayer and miracles, marriage, abortion, contraception and homosexuality. The benefits and downsides of religion are discussed and that leads to another question — Would the world be better without religion?



#### Crazy Little Thing Called Love

By Graham Sale  
Paperback \$19.99



A collection of cartoons on God and religion by Pulitzer Prize-nominated cartoonist Graham Sale. His cartoons and illustrations have appeared in newspapers (including Freethought Today), magazines, advertising, books, clothing and other products around the world.



# Christian Nationalism is un-American

By Andrew L. Seidel

“I think that Christian Nationalism is the biggest threat to America today. It’s an existential threat to a government of the people, for the people, and by the people.”

I said that at the Religion News Association conference in September of 2019 to a roomful of 250 religion reporters and alongside journalists and authors Katherine Stewart (*The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*) and Jack Jenkins (*American Prophets: The Religious Roots of Progressive Politics and the Ongoing Fight for the Soul of the Country*).

I said something similar at the FFRF convention a month later: “Do we have a government of the people, for the people and by the people? Or is ours a government of the Christians, for the Christians and by the Christians? That is our battle right now. America is in a desperate fight against Christian Nationalism, a political theology that is an existential threat to our republic.”

Two weeks later, a Christian Nationalist preacher, Greg Locke, who prayed for the founder of the Proud Boys at a D.C. rally on Jan. 5, burned my book with a blow torch. By that point, I’d been warning about this danger for five months, ever since my book, *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism Is Un-American*, came out in May 2019.

And, 20 months after *The Founding Myth* was published, Christian Nationalists would attack the U.S. Capitol and try to overturn a free and fair election, proving the subtitle of the book.

Warning about the threat Christian Nationalism poses was part of *The Founding Myth*, but not the point. My intent was not simply to refute the idea that we were founded as a Christian nation. I make the argument that America will never be a Christian nation because the moment it becomes a Christian nation, it will cease to be America.

Christian Nationalists rewrite our history and claim to be the true heirs of the American experiment to justify a hateful, exclusionary movement that is, right now, seeking to privilege conservative Christians over every other American. This is about claiming America had a Christian founding so that, today, Christians can receive special treatment under the law while others are lowered to second class status.

The two excerpts from *The Founding Myth* below, edited for space, are examples of sounding the alarm. I chose the first, a portion of Chapter 18, because it showcases the brilliance of one of the co-founders of the organization I hold near and dear: Anne Nicol Gaylor, who co-founded FFRF back in 1976. I quote her observations on the authoritarian nature of the Ten Commandments, which were incisive and prescient. This edited excerpt is from Part III of the book, in which I



A large wooden cross is carried by insurrectionists outside the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. Shutterstock photo

compare the Ten Commandments to the principles on which America is built. All of the Ten Commandments conflict in some way with America’s founding principles. (Yes, even the ones that you’re thinking about right now, though you’ll have to read the book to find out why.)

The second edited excerpt is from the final chapter of the book in which I am literally exhorting Americans to “take alarm,” as James Madison once did.

I did not predict that Christian Nationalists would attack our Capitol to overturn a free and fair election, but I am not at all surprised. They believe this is their country, given to them by their god, that they are acting on his orders, and

that Donald Trump is “God’s chosen one.” When reality collides with a belief system like that, violence is almost inevitable.

So, before we turn to the excerpts, one final warning: Christian Nationalism is not gone simply because Trump is out of the White House. It may be more dangerous now than it ever was. We need the tools and arguments in *The Founding Myth* to relegate white Christian Nationalism back to the fringe from whence it came.

## Chapter 18 On Family Honor: The Fifth Commandment

“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” — Exodus 20:12

Few assert with any real conviction that parental reverence influenced the American founding. Culture, yes.

Interestingly, this is the “only commandment that comes with an inducement instead of an implied threat,” as Christopher Hitchens observed. The reward is not only long life, but long life on the land you were given — the Promised Land.

The fifth commandment requires respect simply because of a family connection. But intellectual honesty requires that only those worthy of respect receive it. The “biological fact of fatherhood or motherhood does not

in and of itself warrant honor,” observed Anne Gaylor.

Certainly not all parents are worthy of honor or respect, so this commandment is, to use a legal term, overinclusive: It’s a law that protects people it should not. But curiously, it is also underinclusive, failing to protect people it should. Since the code already mandates blind respect, it could easily be improved by extending the requirement to honor to all one’s family, or better yet, one’s fellow human beings. However, if blind respect is to be mandatory, perhaps the best formulation would require that every human deserves the chance to earn respect. One might justifiably end a moral code there and have done better than the Judeo-Christian god.

If the true purpose of this commandment is not to spread familial bliss, as seems evident by its shortcomings, what might it be? There are three possibilities: (1) ensuring obedience, (2) supporting priests, and (3) supporting the clan. All three purposes work to perpetuate the religion that issued the mandate. This commandment is not about honor and respect; it is about obedience and power.

The idea is simple: Honor your God-fearing parents if you want a reward. And since parents will worship the biblical god with no other gods before him, this commandment helps ensure the worship of the “correct” deity. This commandment teaches obedience at an early age and comingles household obedience with obedience to god.

Gaylor was correct to describe the fifth commandment as the authoritarian culmination of the previous orders. That authoritarianism — the veneration of authority — may have helped elect Donald Trump.

With his immodesty, lack of liturgical and scriptural knowledge, and “un-Christian behavior,” Trump seemed like an improbable choice for American evangelicals. Yet 81 percent of white evangelicals supported him in 2016, more than supported Mitt Romney, John McCain or George W. Bush.

Trump’s dictatorial tendencies and mendacity, negative attributes for many voters, poised him perfectly to manipulate the evangelical mind. Like the biblical god evangelicals worship, Trump is a thin-skinned authoritarian with totalitarian tendencies. He craves love and punishes any disloyalty or slight. Evangelicals have been taught to worship and adore that type

of being above all others. This strain of religion cultivates a veneration for extreme authority. Studies bear this out: Religious fundamentalism and a tendency to submit to authoritarianism are highly correlated. Trump acted like the character evangelicals worship and benefited from their ingrained adulation. Evangelicals were simply seeing in Trump a character they’d been taught to revere.

With the evangelicals’ ready heart comes an overly receptive mind, a blind faith in the righteousness of the strongman authority. If he says something, it is true. It becomes an article of faith, not an issue of fact or evidence or reality.

Evangelicals believe in virgins giving birth, talking snakes, and all manner of obvious falsehoods. The religious mind is primed to accept lies. Presented with an extraordinary claim, it does not demand extraordinary evidence, but instead engages faith to overcome skepticism. Their religion has taught evangelicals to accept, rather than to question. Trump’s constant waterfall of outright lies landed on amenable minds. His support was greater among regular churchgoers than among lukewarm believers. The greater the faith, the more subordinate healthy skepticism becomes. So, the biblical fetish for totalitarians may have helped America elect its first.

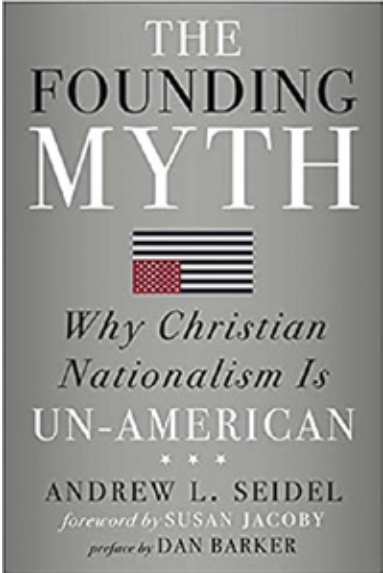
The U.S. Constitution honors individual rights over naked authority. The fifth commandment is about perpetuating religion, ensuring obedience and venerating authority. It had no influence on America’s founding.

## Conclusion

“It is proper to take alarm at the first experiment on our liberties.

“We hold this prudent jealousy to be the first duty of Citizens, and one of the noblest characteristics of the late Revolution. The free men of America did not wait till usurped power had strengthened itself by exercise, and entangled the question in precedents. They saw all the consequences in the principle, and they avoided the consequences by denying the principle. We revere this lesson too much soon to forget it.” — James Madison, “Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments” (1785)

The last mass I witnessed was during a full Catholic wedding. The priest mentioned the happy couple about 60



The Founding Myth can be purchased for \$20 at [ffrf.org/shop](http://ffrf.org/shop).

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times — a respectable number, given that we had gathered together to celebrate them. But the priest was also able to mention his church and God more than 235 times. The Catholic Church is co-opting the prestige of more illustrious events, people and moments for itself. Two people dedicate their lives to each other, and religion injects itself in the middle.

Christian Nationalism excels at this type of piracy and imposition. It attempts, like the Catholic priest at those weddings, to bask in unwarranted glory. It seeks to co-opt undeserved greatness, accolades and credit. It claims a nation dedicated to the freedom of and from religion, for one particular religion. It insists that a nation with a godless Constitution is dedicated to one particular god.

A religion that demands fearful, unwavering obedience takes credit for a rebellion and revolution in self-government. It declares that that revolution was the brainchild of a few Christians rather than of a group of unorthodox thinkers testing Enlightenment principles. It even claims universal human morality as its own invention.

Christian Nationalism also contends that the United States of America is exceptional because the nation was chosen by God, not because the Founders’ enlightened experiment was successful.

The sad irony of the myths of the Christian nation, biblical America, and Judeo-Christian principles is that they are born out of a misplaced zeal to revive or extend American exceptionalism. Trump and his Christian Nationalist brethren want a return to a Christian nation; they want to “make America great again.” But religion did not make the United States, let alone



Photo by Chris Line

Andrew L. Seidel, FFRF’s director of strategic response, speaks at FFRF’s 2019 national convention in Madison, Wis., about his book, *The Founding Myth*.

make it great. “We the People” make America exceptional.

Religion is the millstone around the neck of American exceptionalism because religious faith denies experience and observation to preserve a belief. It is for this reason that it is unlikely to

contribute to progress, though it will take credit for what science, rationality, experience and observation have accomplished. America succeeded as an experiment because it was based on reason. If we abandon reason in favor of faith — or if our elected leaders

commit this sin — we are asking to regress. Not to some golden age, but to a time “when religion ruled the world . . . called the Dark Ages,” to borrow from Ruth Green.

The foundational claim of the Christian Nationalist identity — that Judeo-Christian principles influenced American principles — must be discarded. Christian principles conflict with American principles.

Ben Franklin cautioned, “When a religion is good, I conceive that it will support itself; and when it cannot support itself, and God does not take care to support it, so that its professors are obliged to call for the help of the civil power, it is a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one.”

By seeking to graft their religion on to the structure of the American government, the Christian Nationalists are simply showing their religion to be “a bad one.” Not only bad, but also, according to Thomas Jefferson, erroneous, for “it is error alone which needs the support of government. Truth can stand by itself.”

Christian Nationalism, by its very existence, admits the weakness of Christianity’s truth claims, the frailty of a morality based on supernatural authority, and the shortcomings of an antiquated book. As with the Catholic wedding, Christian Nationalists’ attempt to co-opt the power and prestige of the American Enlightenment for their own ends says far more about their insecurity and the genuine blindness of their faith than it does about America’s founding.

Andrew L. Seidel is FFRF’s director of strategic response and a constitutional attorney.

## THEY SAID WHAT?

Becoming too closely aligned with militias — is that a bad thing?

**Ryan Kelley, lead organizer of an armed protest at the Michigan Statehouse in April, quoted upon announcing his bid for governor.**

*The New York Times*, 2-9-21

Not every issue is equal. This [abortion] is not climate change or immigration of taxes. The sanctity of human life, from conception to natural death, is a non-negotiable part of Catholic self-understanding.

**Jose Gomez, archbishop of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference, unilaterally condemning**

**President Biden’s support for abortion rights in a statement issued on Inauguration Day (that contrasted its Inauguration Day welcome in 2017 to Donald Trump).**

*Los Angeles Times*, 2-8-21

If they start canceling these American presidents, they’re gonna come after bible characters next. Mark my words.

**Fox News host Bill Hemmer**

*Fox News*, 2-19-21

It is a fiction that has been created by some people. There is no establishment of religion. That is very different than the prevention of religion.

**Florida state Rep. Randy Fine, sponsor of a bill mandating moments of silence at the beginning of the school day.**

*Florida Politics*, 2-16-21

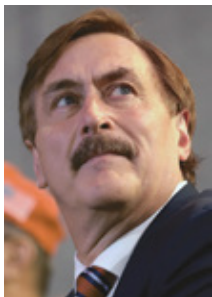
Notes on the events of Jan. 6. The illusion of a participatory democracy has been burst. You already live in a cult/theocracy — I offer you Christian liberty in a Christian nation.

**Fritz Berggren, a mid-ranking Foreign Service officer in the State Department, in a blog post shortly after the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Berggren for several years has been publicly calling for the establishment of Christian nation-states.**

*MSN*, 2-27-21

Well, I’m telling you when you get that, what do you care what someone else does, if that person wants to come to a mall and they don’t want to get a vaccine. This is our bodies, this is ‘mark of the beast’ stuff.”

**Mike Lindell, the “MyPillow” CEO, on how vaccines are allegedly, according to a quasi-religious conspiracy theory, “the work of the devil and . . . that a person is unwittingly pledging allegiance to Satan.”**



Gage Skidmore, CC BY SA 2.0  
Mike Lindell

*The Independent*, 3-2-21

When men or women claim to be able to choose their own sexual identity, they’re making a statement that God did not know what he was doing when he created them. . . . When a nation’s laws no longer reflect the standards of God, that nation is in rebellion against him and will inevitably bear the consequences.

**Rep. Greg Steube, R-Fla., during a House debate ahead of a vote on the passage of the Equality Act, which would ban discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Rep. Jerry Nadler responded perfectly: “Mr. Steube, what any religious tradition describes as God’s will is no concern of this Congress.”**

*RawStory.com*, 2-25-21


[If America] loses its white demographic core and if it loses its faith in Jesus Christ, then this is not America anymore. **Nicholas Fuentes, organizer and host of the “America First Political Action Conference,” which was held concurrently in Orlando, Fla., with the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC).**

*Forbes*, 2-27-21

I have done some research and would like to share it with you on the physical and emotional and even the mental injury to our bodies — and possibly even our souls — as healthy individuals are required to wear face masks.

**Idaho Republican state Rep. Karey Hanks, speaking in favor of a bill that would prohibit any mask mandates issued by local government officials.**

*The Friendly Atheist*, 3-4-21

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# FFRF’s 2021 student essay contests begin

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has announced its 2021 essay competitions for freethinking students — offering \$70,000 (or more) in total scholarships.

Each of these four contests has 10 top prizes: First place — \$3,500; second place — \$3,000; third place — \$2,500; fourth place — \$2,000; fifth place — \$1,500; sixth place — \$1,000; seventh place — \$750; eighth place — \$500; ninth place — \$400; and 10th place — \$300. FFRF also offers optional honorable mentions of \$200.

The contests cater to students in different age/class ranges. Students may only enter one FFRF contest annually and may not enter a contest if they have previously won an award in that particular contest.

See separate article below on FFRF’s Cornelius Vanderbroek Memorial Essay Competition for Law School Students, which offers a different set of scholarship prizes for law students. Information on that contest can also be found at [ffrf.org/studentessay](http://ffrf.org/studentessay).

### William J. Schulz Memorial Essay Contest for College-Bound High School Seniors

High school seniors graduating this spring and attending college in the fall are asked to write on the topic of “In science I trust.”

Write a personal statement about why you trust science over faith, and why you think society should do the same. Please include an example of how religious faith has obstructed science or analyze a historic or current issue related to religion vs. science, such as with the pandemic, stem-cell research, climate change, medical (and psychiatric) science, etc.

Word limit: 300–450. Deadline: 11:59 p.m. May 31.

### Michael Hakeem Memorial Essay Contest for Freethinking College Students



Currently enrolled college students (up to age 24) may write on: “How religion divides us, and secularism unites us.”

Write an essay about the divisiveness of religion personally, historically and/or politically, and why secularism is unifying. You may wish to incorporate analysis of current events and controversies to make your case. Tell us why you reject religion.



Mr. Madison Arnold

The \$1,000 prize in the ongoing college competition is now being generously endowed starting in 2021 by actor and FFRF Lifetime Member Mr. Madison Arnold.

Madison, who is 89, has given a \$30,000 endowment as a living bequest, what he calls a “pre-quest.”

Word limit: 450–650. Deadline: 11:59 p.m. June 30.

### The David Hudak Memorial Contest for Black, Indigenous Students of Color

Color ages 17–21 (college-bound high school seniors to currently enrolled college students), may write on the topic of: “What I would like to tell my family (or friends) about my atheism or nonbelief.”

In an essay written in the form of a letter to a religious family member, friend or teacher, etc., please tell them what you think is most important to know about why you are an atheist or otherwise reject religion. (You may prefer to describe yourself as an agnostic, freethinker, humanist, etc.) You may wish to address common misconceptions or stereotypes about atheism, reassure them about your morality or explain why rejecting religion has improved your life. If you choose to discuss harm caused by religion, please include at least one reason why you also consider religion to be untrue.

This contest is offered to provide support and acknowledgment for freethinking Students of Color, as a minority within a minority. The other FFRF student contests are open to all students.

Word limit: 400–600. Deadline: 11:59 p.m. July 15.

### Brian Bolton Essay Contest for Graduate and “Older” Students

Graduate students (through age 30) and “older” undergrads (ages 25–30) are asked to write on the topic: “The dangers of religious extremism in 21st century America.”

Please write about the dangers of religious extremism today in the United States, whether by individuals, churches, public officials or the judiciary. You may wish to address Christian nationalist threats to civil rights or American principles. Provide some examples and analysis, and make a case for secularism.

Word limit: 550–750. Deadline: 11:59 p.m. July 31.

**Note:** In none of the essay competitions are we looking for an opinion or theory about the origin of religion or why religion exists.

Additional prompts on the topics and contest rule requirements can be found at: [ffrf.org/studentessay](http://ffrf.org/studentessay). Students are required to submit their essay via the online application, and should carefully review all contest rules. All eligible entrants will receive a digital year-long student membership in FFRF.

FFRF thanks Phil Zuckerman, author and professor of sociology and secular studies at Pitzer College, for suggesting several of the topics for the competitions.

FFRF is appreciative of its members who make the effort to contact local high schools, colleges and universities to help publicize its competitions. (See “ads” on the back cover of the Freethought Today wrap that may be copied or cut out and sent to your local schools or universities.) Or pass on the link: [ffrf.org/studentessay](http://ffrf.org/studentessay).

# FFRF announces 2021 law student essay contest

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is announcing its third annual Cornelius Vanderbroek Memorial Essay Competition for Law School Students.

This year’s topic: “Why ‘history’ shouldn’t justify violations of the separation between state and church.”

The contest will award \$10,000 in prize money, with \$4,000 for first place, \$3,000 for second and \$2,000 for third place, plus \$500 discretionary awards for honorable mentions.

The topic explores a change in Supreme Court interpretation that has become central to state/church litigation in recent years.

In *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, the Supreme Court wrote that “the Establishment Clause must be interpreted ‘by reference to historical practices and understandings.’” In the wake of that decision, courts have struggled to define the exact contours of the historical considerations at play, with some courts treating *Galloway* as announcing a broadly applicable “history test,” while others have continued to apply more traditional Establishment Clause tests.

In no more than 1,500 words, identify the dangers in interpreting *Galloway* as establishing a broadly ap-



plicable “history test” and, with citation to at least two post-*Galloway* cases, from any courts, define the outer boundaries where a history test should be applied.

The contest is open to ongoing law school students attending a North American law school, except those starting law school for the first time in the fall of 2021. Students remain eligible to enter this contest if they will graduate from law school by spring or summer of 2021.

You may not re-enter if FFRF has already awarded you for a law student essay.

Eligible entrants will receive a one-year complimentary student membership in FFRF, including a digital version of 10 issues of Freethought Today, FFRF’s newspaper, which publishes winning student essays.

Contest entrants must fill out an application form online ([surveymonkey.com/r/ZP6CDVX](http://surveymonkey.com/r/ZP6CDVX)), which also details other requirements, and attach their essay.

**Deadline:** 11:59 p.m. June 14.

**Word limit and formatting:** Essay must be no longer than 1,500 words (not including footnotes), double spaced, standard margins, and font size 11 to 14 point. Include your name and title of your essay on each page. Choose your own title. Pages must be numbered. Indicate word length at end of essay.

**Agreement:** By entering, students agree to permit winning essays to be printed in full or in part in Freethought Today, FFRF’s newspaper, and posted online at FFRF’s website. Winners agree to promptly provide a photograph suitable for reproduction with their essay. Verification of student enrollment may also be requested.

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# Poetry and theodicy

By Ben Sevard

Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” was not, I believe, written to be read in a book (much less off a screen) but told as a warning by a stark raving mad lunatic who accosts you on the street, his voice alternating between a conspiratorial whisper and a bellowing denunciation. Nonetheless, I will quote a bit, and make you supply the voices:

*What sphinx of cement and aluminum  
bashed open their skulls and ate up their  
brains and imagination?*

*Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ash-  
cans and unobtainable dollars! Children  
screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing  
in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!*

*Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch!  
Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch  
the heavy judger of men!*

*Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Mo-  
loch the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Con-  
gress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are  
judgment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Mo-  
loch the stunned governments!*

*Moloch whose mind is pure machinery!  
Moloch whose blood is running money! Mo-  
loch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch  
whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch  
whose ear is a smoking tomb!*

*Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind  
windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in  
the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch  
whose factories dream and croak in the fog!  
Moloch whose smoke-stacks and antennae  
crown the cities!*

Ginsberg is speaking of what evil ruined his friends, the people he saw “destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging them through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix.” The culprit is Moloch, obviously — not the god of the Canaanites per se, but his ideal: his manifestation as war, as murder, as avarice and ignorance and arrogance.

Surely a more thorough exegesis could and has been done, delving into the poet’s life to find the actual people and events who served as inspiration. Or one could provide a detailed political account, situating the poem and its author in the early rumblings of the gay liberation movement and a protracted controversy over obscenity and free expression.

Yet, this is not how I have come to understand this piece. When I read it, I feel more than anything a scream, a ris-



Ben Sevard

ing shriek — a howl. Yes, more so than a 70-year-old political context or a dead eccentric’s dead friends, I hear and feel a frenzied epiphanic shout. I realize it is not Moloch who stands in judgment above us, demanding sacrifice, but we who look down into the abyss on Moloch, imagin- ing red eyes in the empty darkness.

Reading the laundry list of his crimes, I realize he is, in fact, innocent, for everything of which he is accused is done by us. He is an ancient fiction, powerless. He does not demand a sacrifice lest the crops fail; neither does he raise the edifices of torture or sit on war councils in the world’s great capitals. The laws of matter and energy make wheat grow, whereas the properties of concrete and gunpowder enable us to exploit them. No demon is involved, and nothing except the structure of society demands we act the way we do. This structure is itself our history, deter- mined through conflicts long-ago settled and those that rage still today.

In this way, we are both innocent and guilty — innocent of the crimes of our ancestors, but thoroughly and egregiously guilty of those of today and tomorrow. We are guilty for the crimes of Moloch, even as he is a stand-in for our society’s prevailing ideology. But to expect that the world’s evils could be ended today through the massive spontaneous adop- tion of the “correct” religion, ideology or principle is delusion. However, it is equal- ly unwise to expect a meaningfully better world of tomorrow unless things change, that is, unless we change them.

This is how I understand evil in the world. How do you explain it?

*Ben Sevard, from Whitefish Bay, Wis., is a junior studying mathematics and religious studies. “I grew up in an atheist household, so religion was not a part of my life as a child, yet I have found a secular appreciation for it through my studies here at UW-Madison and by working at a local synagogue,” Ben writes. “My academic interests lie primarily in the religious traditions of India. As a fellow with the CRGC, I hope to explore the ways that religious commu- nities and leaders in Madison and beyond have responded to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has led many state and local governments to force the cancellation of in-person religious services. Through this issue, I want to explore deeper questions about religious freedom and the role of the state.”*

## FFRF underwrites 2 UW fellowships

FFRF is underwriting two \$1,000 fellowships at the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Center for Religion and Global Citizenry.

This year’s two student fellows from the Interfaith Fellows Program (part of the Center for Religion and Global Citizenry) are Kally Leidig and Ben Sevard. Their essays are re- printed on this page.

The Interfaith Fellows Program trains undergraduate students to become more knowledgeable about different religious traditions and more skilled at communicating with people from other religious backgrounds.

“We look for students with an eagerness to learn from and be in relationship with those who are re-

ligiously different than them, who demonstrate maturity in their own religiosity, worldview, and/or spir- ituality, and who show capacity to be interfaith leaders on campus and in life after graduation,” writes David Schulz, who works closely with the center’s director, Ulrich Rosenhagen.

For the 2020-21 school year, the center has 25 fellows from a variety of backgrounds.

“We aim to have several religious (and no religious) traditions repre- sented, as well as a diverse repre- sentation within traditions,” writes Schulz. “This year we have Chris- tians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, a Hin- du, and a couple of nonreligious fellows.”

# Are we all nonbelievers?

By Kally Leidig

“Nonbeliever.” Until very re- cently, I thought this was just a semi-patronizing yet endearing term my best friends used to describe me or other atheists.

So, I decided to inquire about it. It turns out that when they say nonbeliev- er, it means everyone who doesn’t be- lieve in the Christian God. In hindsight, this makes a lot of sense, but in my athe- ist mind, everyone who follows faith was inherently a believer.

This sparked a series of conversations with my friends, whom I would describe as both very Christian and pretty liberal. I asked about something I really struggle to comprehend about Christianity — the coexistence of humbleness and thinking there is only one true religion, that oth- ers result from false prophecy or works of sin. In my mind, there was a pretty large disconnect between being humble and thinking that only your interpretation of the world is right.

I should point out that everyone I talk- ed to expressed great levels of respect and tolerance for people, no matter their reli- gion. There also was a reverence for the concept of faith, no matter the belief. Also, what I have just said is an extremely brief summary of very long conversations and is void of some necessary nuances.

Nonetheless, these conversations led me to wonder: When fellows are inform- ing you on what they believe, of course you value and respect it, but do you think it is correct? Are other religions speaking the truth? What is at stake for you to say another religion is true? Or, furthermore, is your religion true?

As I type this, I am surrounded by Ha- nukkah decorations, Christmas decor, and one very extensive Pitbull (i.e., Mr. Worldwide) shrine, all of which make



Kally Leidig

me extremely aware that such questions may be divisive or accomplish nothing. Perhaps being respectful and curious is all that is needed. Despite that, I can’t help but be troubled by the idea of “I am right and you are wrong.”

The purpose of this essay isn’t to high- light conversations that may or may not be representative of a group, but rather to wonder aloud at what the implica- tions could be of learning about others and respecting them, but also disbeliev- ing what they say.

I often find questions like these are much better posed in person — where you can alter them depending on the per- son, their responses or the situation. But, I hope that everyone can take solace in the fact that we are all united in the idea that others would consider you a nonbeliever.

*Kally, who grew up in the suburbs of Minne- apolis, is a senior studying political science, eco- nomics and environmental studies. “I became rather disenchanted with my church and started exploring alternatives,” she writes. “My interest in religion and belief systems has continued to grow despite me now considering myself an athe- ist. I am excited to learn more about new per- spectives both foreign and familiar to me. It espe- cially fascinates me how people relate or reconcile political preferences with morals and values.”*

**Losing Faith in Faith:  
From Preacher to Atheist**

By Dan Barker

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

Published by FFRF

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*Jai*

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# LETTERBOX

## ‘Unity’ Super Bowl ad was too focused on religion

The Super Bowl ad by Jeep, featuring Bruce Springsteen and showing a church in the “center” of the country and promoting unity in the “Re-United States of America” left me flat.

The current religious make-up in America is about 25 percent nonreligious. So even though that church is “open to everyone,” as an avowed atheist, I have never set foot in it despite standing at that very spot. Do you think any other non-Christian is likely to enter that chapel?

A little history. In 1829, the Delawares were the first Indians to sign a treaty giving them land in what was to become Kansas. After 1830, the Cherokee, Chippewa, Delaware, Iowa, Iroquois, Kaskaskia, Kickapoo, Munsee, Ottawa, Peoria, Piankashaw, Potawatomi, Quapaw, Sac and Fox, Shawnee, Stockbridge, Wea and Wyandot lived there. Although these emigrant tribes were assured by the federal government that they would not be moved again, Kansas Territory opened for settlement in 1854 and once again forced the removal of Native peoples. Many more settlers moved into Kansas Territory after the Civil War, accelerating the movement of Indians off the land. This was displacement by white Christians citing a “manifest destiny” – Christian Nationalism. Placing a Christian chapel there has no purpose other than staking a territorial claim to a religious (white) supremacy.

There can be no unity until there has been accountability. As of now, half of us don’t believe the other half. How does wishing for unity without recognizing a common reality work? Ignoring facts and history will only get us further from each other.

**Jack Shields**  
New Hampshire

**Editor’s note:** This (edited) letter was originally published in the Concord (N.H.) Monitor on Feb. 14.

### Christian Nationalism is a threat to all of us

The horrible events at the Capitol in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 6 were a grim and frightening illustration of the violent potential inherent in the Christian Nationalist movement. The angry mob was seemingly intent on murder and one police officer was indeed killed during the tumultuous riot. Vice President Mike Pence narrowly escaped.

During the ransacking of the Capitol building, some members of the mob paused to pray to their Christian god. They truly believed that their violence was divinely sanctioned. This was the epitome of insane delusional thinking. Using religion to justify this horrendous violence calls to mind dark chapters of American history, where groups such as the Ku Klux Klan felt that the god of Christianity sanctioned a racist social system and the violence that was used to maintain it.

I once thought that American society had progressed beyond the violent Christian Nationalism of the past. I am no longer so optimistic. A new version of Christian Nationalism and its accompanying violence has arrived, and what we witnessed on Jan. 6 was as ter-

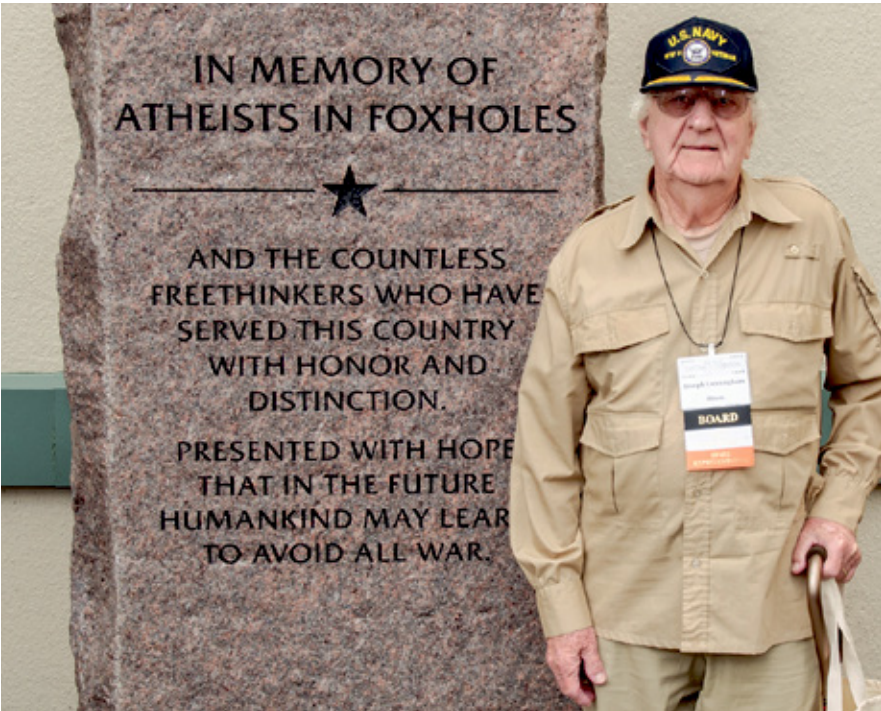


Photo by Andrew L. Seidel  
**Joe Cunningham stands next to FFRF’s “Atheists in Foxholes” monument outside of Freethought Hall in Madison, Wis.**

## Joe, 94, gets his Covid-19 vaccine

I just received my first Covid-19 shot, but oh, what a runaround I got because I didn’t have a certain bar code. I felt as though I was asking for a million dollars when I went for my vaccination and had to beg as my papers were not in order.

I said, “Have a heart. My hand shakes so much that I can hardly write my name. I do not have a printer on my computer, so I could not print out the bar code.” Apparently, our county has a short supply of vaccine and has to guard it as if it is their money in the bank. Ha! I had zero reaction from the shot; just frustrated that there was so much red tape to get into the place.

When I was 17 and entered the Navy, we were given many shots on the same day. We walked down a single line, and doctors on both sides of the line were sticking needles in our arms without even looking at faces. One poor guy staggered backwards, and the pharmacists giving the shots, who looked at nothing except arms, shot him again in both arms. The poor guy then fainted and had to be carried away.

Our arms were so sore from these shots that we were forced to do pushups to work the fluids on through our bodies. The next day I could hardly move my arms. Nothing like that occurs today as we all sit in our cars, roll down our windows, stick our arms out, and that is that. We didn’t even shut off our motors.

Instead of hoarding the formulas, the vaccine formulas should readily be given to more manufacturers, and the government could reimburse the original developers for their work.

**Joe Cunningham**  
Illinois

**Editor’s note:** Joe, who turns 95 in April, is a longtime FFRF member who served on the FFRF Board of Directors for nearly 30 years.

rible as any similar events from history.

What can we do? I’m not sure what the solution is. I would hope that all FFRF members will read Andrew L. Seidel’s brilliant book *The Founding Myth* and educate themselves concerning the illiberal ideology called Christian Nationalism. It’s violent and it’s a threat to us all.

**Robert Hunter**  
Illinois

### Column on end-of-life options was appreciated

As a member of Compassion & Choices, I appreciated the article on end-of-life options. My father was very ill, and yet he managed to end his life with dignity, but alone. It would have been better if he could have had compassionate help.

On a lighter note: I love reading the very thoughtful student essays. Congratulations to all the entrants. And I enjoyed doing the crossword puzzle.

**Kate Retzlaff**  
Wisconsin

## Asner portraying Bryan seems counterintuitive

I found it interesting and beyond curious that Ed Asner played the real-life character of William Jennings Bryan, impassioned defender of the bible’s veracity, in the play, “Inherit the Wind,” a drama about the 1925 Scopes “monkey” trial.

The play’s protagonist, Clarence Darrow, in character and real life, defended the teacher who was being prosecuted for teaching evolution. Playwrights Robert E. Lee and Jerome Lawrence laced the Darrow character with brilliant arguments revealing the scientific nonsense of Bryan’s unfailing allegiance to scripture.

With Asner’s well-known political and theological positions, I would love to know how he prepared for a role that is so perfectly opposite of his personal beliefs.

**Donald Marine**  
Arizona

**Editor’s note:** For the answer, watch the “Freethought Matters” interview with Asner (on YouTube).

## Blog post calls out Biden’s religious moves

I want to thank Annie Laurie Gaylor for her blog post, “Drop the state religion blither-blather — We need ‘a new day.’” I had inwardly (OK, outwardly, too) recoiled when a Christian prayer was spoken at the civic observance at the Lincoln Memorial that millions of us were sharing, only to be confronted the very next day with that dreadful hymn, “Amazing Grace.”

I doubt those will be isolated instances in the Biden presidency. He has been steeped in the Catholic tea for 78 years. And, although we can be grateful that Biden won’t be grabbing women by their nether regions or inciting an insurrection, he will continue to step on that line separating state from church.

Your article brilliantly detailed the problems these religious actions present to a nation not united by Christianity. I’ve read it twice, shared it with others and saved it to read again someday when I need inspiration.

**Marian Wiggins**  
Washington

### Can we stop Florida’s voucher bill from passing?

Congratulations on the perfect rating from Charity Navigator. I’m not surprised, as I see the evidence of how my donations are used every time I read my Freethought Today (cover to cover). By the way, I love the addition of the crossword puzzle.

I’m impressed by and grateful for FFRF’s accomplishments, transparency and accountability.

However, I am concerned about Florida Senate Bill 48. It expands Florida’s school voucher programs to the detriment of public schools and the benefit of charter and private schools. The bill would reduce the frequency of audits, increase the yearly growth rate of the voucher programs, and expand the use of public funds for parents to “shop” for private schools or homeschool services. I believe this bill violates the separation of church and state by using public dollars to pay religious or church-affiliated school tuition.

Yes, I’m already calling legislators to oppose the bill. I thought this might be worth a look for FFRF, or possible legal challenge if (when) it passes.

Thanks for all you do.

**Heidi Juhl**  
Florida

### Right-to-die issue has some important caveats

Thank you for the critical article by Lamar Hankins on the right-to-die issue in the January/February Freethought Today.

My late partner took advantage of our state’s Death with Dignity (DwD) program when she was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. I am a promoter of both the DwD program and the Final Exit Network.

Some information in the article was new and welcome. However, a couple of comments are warranted. Outside of Holland and Switzerland, there are no countries that sanction euthanasia. Medical Assistance in Dying is not a euthanasia program in that one must be terminally ill to be eligible. Hopefully, over time, that will change.

Also, the term “state-sponsored suicide” is not applicable to the DwD pro-



grams. When my partner was diagnosed, we found there were two doctors, living here on our island in Washington, associated with the program. One helped write the state law.

He told us they went to great extremes to remove any suggestion of suicide from the bill and that the cause of death was listed as that which would have killed the person had they not enrolled in the program. This is critical for such things as insurance policies and other benefits that are usually withheld in the case of suicide. Terminology is important. That’s one reason I use the term “god-free” instead of “godless.”

Jack Pedigo  
Washington

## Ben Bova was inspiration as author and editor

I was saddened to hear of the death of Ben Bova. I was the one who brought him to FFRF’s attention as a possible guest on the Freethought Radio show in 2007. I had met Ben at the 1993 Isaac Asimov seminar in New York. Ben was one of the panelists (who made clear his atheism) at the seminar, which dealt with how space exploration could be used to benefit humanity.

He was a very congenial person. He told me that he was a frequent visitor to New York City and that his favorite restaurant was a place near Union Square called Paulie & Jimmy’s. I subsequently dined there a few times and it became one of my favorites.

As a science fiction buff, I have read a number of Bova’s novels and enjoyed them all. He was truly a major figure in the field of science fiction, both as an author and as an editor.

Dennis Middlebrooks  
New York

## There is help for those with religious trauma

I came across the Feb. 3 YouTube video from “The Hang Up” with Dr. Darrel Ray, with special guest Andrew L. Seidel. I had no idea about the Freedom From Religion Foundation organization before that.

Anyway, I’m an atheist and I’ve been in 12-step recovery for 36 years. I began an Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACA) meeting for atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, humanists and those struggling with the concept of a power greater than themselves. ACA is also a critical support need for people with religious trauma (as it often relates directly back to childhood dysfunction).

I’m also working to start ACA Agnostica. The need is real. We started small (two people) but are now up to three meetings a week with many more participants. If you don’t know about

Crossword answers																
G	O	D	S			C	A	N				C	B	S		
S	L	O	T			L	O	B	O			A	D	O	R	E
A	L	L	Y			E	R	A	S			R	A	M	I	E
	A	L	L	I	A	N	C	E				S	W	A	G	
				E	N	N	U	I				W	O	K		
A	R	A	R	A	T					A	R	N	I	C	A	S
W	A	D			N	O	S	I	L	Y		N	A	G	A	
A	D	A	G	E			A	L	E		U	S	U	R	P	
R	I	M	E			A	G	L	E	A	M		L	E	O	
D	I	S	R	O	B	E					B	A	R	K	E	R
				V	I	A			P	R	O	M	O			
	Y	U	A	N				P	L	U	R	I	B	U	S	
B	A	T	I	K				R	U	N	T		B	R	I	E
A	M	A	S	S				A	M	O	S		E	D	G	Y
A	S	H						M	E	N			R	U	N	E

### He who lifts our balloons

**He is everywhere,  
in the heavens and Earth.**

**He makes the stars shine  
yet He cannot be seen.**

**He is noble, abundant,  
and fills the universe.**

**He can lift you into the sky  
and bring you gently down.**

**He can take many forms.**

**He can help heal,  
He can help kill.**

**He can help create,  
and He can help destroy.**

**Praise be unto He.  
Helium.**

FFRF Board Member and Treasurer Steve Salemsen sent us this image. He writes: “This is for all the science nerds! :-)”

ACA, take the time to learn. Childhood trauma, coupled with religious trauma, is tough to recover from and we are here to help.

Julianne Vered  
Indiana

## Carl Sagan story was reminder of ‘Planet’ poem

Hearing that Carl Sagan held his daughter above his head shortly after her birth and told her, “Welcome to the planet Earth” was a delight. I just heard this anecdote in your conversation with Sasha Sagan on the Freethought Radio podcast (Jan. 28), which I listen to every weekend as I prepare submissions of my poetry to various publishers.

I cannot resist sharing my poem “Welcome to the Planet,” written in 1990 and published in 2000 in my third book *Portable Planet*.

Thank you for all of your excellent work, and I hope you enjoy the poem.

**Welcome to the Planet**  
*a greeting to newborn humans*

This day, we welcome you.  
We teach our ways to greet you.  
We are one kind among many the world encircles.  
Touch all gently.  
Our people are near us always.  
Find yourself among the best.  
Cities display our inventions and designs.  
Watch, wonder, and wander away.  
Highways are dark and long, concrete and crowded.  
Make your own way.  
Birds and beasts bring news of the planet.  
Good news for your ears only.  
The sea foretells the past and future.  
Live now.  
Soil is the source of the great and the humble.

### Cryptogram answer

Scientists do not join hands every Sunday and sing “Yes, gravity is real! I know gravity is real! I will have faith! I believe in my heart that what goes up, up, up must come down, down, down. Amen!”

— Dan Barker

These are the cautionary lessons each Crankmail column teaches us. Reason and logic are ineffectual protections against religion. We need stringent laws to fortify the wall between state and church.

Jehnana Balzer  
Arizona

## Atheists need to be seen as caring and moral

For those frustrated trying to reason with fundamentalist friends and relatives, don’t bother. After years of trying to reason with believers, I got nowhere. When one is taught that non-believers are enemies of God, it follows that they must be immoral, and if not hated, at least ignored. So, it occurred to me to try something different and nonthreatening.

Those of us who contribute to secular charities get “thank you” responses. I started a pile of these. Of course, they include the testaments from these organizations (Doctors without Borders, Human Rights Watch, Global Fund for Women, etc.) as to where the money goes and why (i.e., to relieve suffering, empower women, etc.).

I took that pile, put it in a large envelope and sent it to them with “Positive news” written on the envelope so they wouldn’t throw it away. I left out any commentary. My goal was to make it difficult to dismiss atheists as non-caring and/or immoral. We need to be seen as compassionate and moral.

Carl Scheiman  
Maine

## Media failed to tie riot to Christian Nationalism

As member and secular citizen, why is it that the legacy media fails to mention that the insurrection was led by Christian Nationalist zealots? All we hear about are the ties to white supremacy, but not the intersection of these two toxic ideologies. Thank you for the work you do and continue to do in defending the Jeffersonian wall of separation.

Christopher Kendel  
Ohio

## FFRF convention in Texas may not be safest place

Since FFRF announced the cancellation of last year’s convention in San Antonio, Texas, I am hoping that the virus conditions will allow for the 2021 conference [in Boston].

However, in the interim, Texas politics have become a national issue. Considering the profile of their gun culture and the ugly rise of Christian Nationalism, it might be a good time to reconsider the venue that might be an attractive target for the radicals in that state. Keep in mind the safety of those who want to participate in these events.

This is just my vote for a safer location, as I am looking forward to the return of in-person events that build consensus opinions and community.

Bette Hammerle Inman  
North Carolina

**Editor’s note:** FFRF is always cognizant of safety issues when hosting its conventions and takes substantial precautions for the safety of its members. The 2021 convention is planned for Boston and then San Antonio in 2022.



# BLACKCOLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

## Arrested / Charged

**Isaias “Carlos” Vasquez**, 44, Oxnard, CA: Oral copulation of a minor, penetration by a foreign object, 3 counts of lewd acts upon a child and 2 counts of unlawful sexual intercourse. Vasquez, a volunteer at Iglesia Pentecostes Un Nuevo Florecer, is accused of assaults on 3 girls he met at the church. Law enforcement began investigating after a 14-year-old alleged Vasquez lured her to a motel in January under the pretense of a cleaning job and then assaulted her. After investigators were made aware of an alleged victim age 17, another 14-year-old contacted the Ventura County Sheriff’s Office, accusing Vasquez of assault on Jan. 31 in a car near Ojai. *Source: Fox 11, 2-26-21*

**Alex T. John**, 32, Lake Charles, LA: Indecent behavior with juveniles. John, youth pastor at Waters Edge Gathering Church and an adjunct instructor in digital arts at Sowela Technical Community College, allegedly had inappropriate communications with a juvenile under age 17 about 6 years ago. *Source: KPLC, 2-26-21*

**Brandon Dasilva**, 26, Terre Hill, PA: Criminal use of a communication facility, 4 counts of sexual abuse of children for disseminating child pornography and 26 counts of sexual abuse of children for possession of child pornography. Dasilva, pastor of student ministries at Weaverland Anabaptist Faith Community Church in East Earl, was arrested after a Homeland Security agent discovered an account on the social media app Kik had distributed 4 images of suspected child pornography. He allegedly admitted he had been viewing child pornography for about 18 months and said he was ashamed and “hated himself” for his behavior, according to the complaint. *Source: Fox 43, 2-25-21*

**Robert M. Blumenthal**, 85, Randwick, Australia: 2 counts of sexual intercourse with a person under the age of 10 and 3 counts of sexual intercourse with a person under 16 who was under authority. Blumenthal, a defrocked Catholic priest, is charged with assaults on a 9-year-old boy at a school in Bathurst in the mid-1980s. Blumenthal is the 14th priest or former priest to be accused by a task force established in 2008 to investigate indecent assaults of students at Bathurst schools between 1960–93. *Source: Daily Mail, 2-18-21*

**James Johnson**, 70, Jacksonville, FL: Lewd molestation and offenses against a student by an authority figure. He oversees the high school home-room at New Beginnings Christian Academy and teaches history, science, bible and other electives. The alleged victim was between the ages of 12 and 16. William Holland, senior pastor, said the school principal learned from a parent that a staff member may have been sending inappropriate messages to a student. Holland met with the parent the next day and filed a report with the sheriff’s office. According to media, Johnson has posted several videos on the Lord’s Lighthouse Ministry’s Facebook page of him preaching. *Source: WFOX, 2-18-21*

**John W. Gill**, 63, Middleburg, FL: 2nd-degree murder in the shooting death of his brother Thomas M. Gill after an apparent domestic dispute. John Gill had non-life-threatening injuries believed to be self-inflicted. His wife told police he had become emotionally or mentally disturbed and had led the Middleburg Open Bible Church out of their home. Nephew Matthew Gill said social media comments have been very difficult for the family: “It’s being shared back and forth and people that don’t want to see it, it’s popping up on their [Facebook] timelines. People saying that ‘It’s Jesus and it’s Middleburg. What do you expect?’” *Source: News4Jax, 2-18-21*

**James Coates**, Edmonton, Alberta: 2 counts of contravening the Public Health Act and a charge of failing to comply with a condition of an undertaking. Coates was arrested after police and health officials observed services at GraceLife Church, where he is pastor, and determined the church was again ignoring restrictions calling for attendance to be capped at 15% of capacity and requiring masks and physical distancing. Coates was jailed after refusing to agree to bail conditions attached to his release. He was first issued a \$1,200 ticket in December for contravening the health orders. *Source: CBC, 2-17-21*

**Kandasamy Senapathi**, 37: 5 counts of criminal breach of trust as an employee and 5 counts of breaching the Corruption, Drug Trafficking and Other Serious Crimes Act. He is chief priest of Singapore’s oldest Hindu temple, the Sri Mariamman Temple. Kandasamy is accused of taking gold ceremonial ornaments from the temple and pawning them to shops between 2016–20. Pawn value of the jewelry was over \$1.5 million, a prosecutor told the court. Kandasamy, an Indian national, allegedly transferred about \$106,000 in proceeds out of the country. His purported modus operandi was to pawn the ornaments, redeem them when he had the mon-



ey and return them to the temple. But when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, he was unable to raise funds to redeem the items in time for ceremonies, his lawyer said. *Source: The Hindu, 2-16-21*

**Dominic Muscante**, 46, Glassport, PA: Indecent assault, endangering the welfare of children, unlawful contact with minors and selling/furnishing liquor to minors. It’s alleged he committed crimes at the Assembly of God Church (now River City Church), where he volunteered, and the Glassport Community Outreach food bank. One girl told police she was between ages 13 and 15 when Muscante gave her alcohol and touched her sexually on several occasions, including during a Christmas party at the church and in his van during travel for the food bank. The other girl alleged she was 6 when the abuse started and 19 when it ended. *Source: Post-Gazette, 2-11-21*

**Christopher D. Lawton**, 43, Greenfield, NH: 20 counts of aggravated felonious sexual assault with special enhancement. He is accused of assaults on a girl when she was 16 and 17 and he was her pastor in 2015-16 at Lamplight Christian Church, which he founded. He was originally indicted on 10 counts in October 2020. *Source: Manchester Ink Link, 2-5-21*

**David Hornbuckle**, 51, Fayetteville, GA: Sexual battery and 3 counts of child molestation. He is lead pastor at Whitewater Church, affiliated with the Assemblies of God. He and his wife, who have 5 children, started the church in 2008. He was arrested after the sheriff was notified of an incident allegedly occurring in early January involving “inappropriate conduct” with “a juvenile known to him,” said Sheriff Barry Babb. *Source: Fayetteville Citizen, 2-3-21*

**Drue J. Mordecai**, 55, Santa Rosa, CA: 27 felony charges and 2 enhancements, including 9 counts of assaulting a minor with the intent to commit a felony and 5 of committing a lewd act with a child. The alleged victim and Mordecai attended New Vintage Church, where Mordecai was a volunteer group leader working with students for several years. The alleged victim was 12 when the abuse started, the complaint said. *Source: Press Democrat, 2-3-21*

**Christian Bileth**, 55, Grand Rapids, MI: Embezzlement over \$100,000. He is accused of stealing \$812,000 from St. John’s United Church of Christ between 2014–19 when he was president of the church council. He was also president of Core Audit Consultants, a company which is where it’s alleged he funneled the missing money. *Source: WXMI, 2-3-21*

**Ira J. Summerlin**, 74, York, SC: 3 counts of criminal sexual conduct with a minor. Summerlin, a youth group volunteer and longtime member at Central Baptist Church, is charged with improperly touching a 6-year-old girl who was sitting on his lap in January at a church function, behavior purportedly captured on video. Further investigation showed other inappropriate behavior in 2020, resulting in 2 more criminal counts. *Source: WBTV, 2-2-21*

**Keith and Carolyn Collins**, 60 and 72, respectively, Ridley Park, PA: 12 counts each of theft by unlawful taking, theft by deception and receiving stolen property — all 3rd-degree felonies — 6 misdemeanor theft counts and 3 felony conspiracy counts. The couple, who are co-pastors of the Church of the Overcomer in Trainer, allegedly embezzled \$109,206 from 18 court-appointed guardianships through Pinnacle Guardian Services, a company they owned. Co-defendant **Gloria F. Byars**, Carolyn Collins’ sister, is facing 763 counts for facilitating about \$3

million of fraud through various means. Attorneys for the Collinses contend they are guilty only of “bad bookkeeping” with no intent to defraud. *Source: delcotimes.com, 1-28-21*

## Pleaded / Convicted

**Roger VanRaden**, 49, Rantoul, IL: Pleaded guilty to 2 counts of criminal sexual assault. The state dismissed 2 other counts in a plea bargain. The charges were filed in December 2019 for sexual activity occurring while he was an assistant pastor and youth pastor at Faith Baptist Church. The victim was 18 when she revealed that she had been having sex with VanRaden for about 5 years, beginning in 2015 when she was 14, often at the church. *Source: News-Gazette, 2-22-21*

**Trinity Bible Chapel**, Waterloo, Ontario, was found in contempt of court after opening for in-person services and exceeding pandemic crowd limits on Dec. 27 and Jan. 3. “Six elders, including the pastor [Jacob Reaume] and the Trinity Bible Chapel corporation” had been charged for hosting a gathering exceeding the number permitted, said a statement from regional officials. *Source: CBC, 1-26-21*

## Sentenced

**John Allen**, 77, W. Manchester Township, PA: 5 years’ probation after pleading guilty to 5 misdemeanor counts of indecent assault on 2 boys while he was a Catholic priest in Harrisburg. Defrocked in 2006, Allen was also deemed a sexually violent predator and will have to register with state police for life. One accuser told detectives Allen grabbed his buttocks on multiple occasions in 1999–2002 when he was 10 to 13 years old. Another boy accused Allen of touching him on the buttocks and in the genital area multiple times in 1997–99. A former altar boy filed a lawsuit in 2018 against the Harrisburg Diocese, claiming Allen “lasciviously leered at, groped and sexually molested [him] approximately a dozen times in different rooms at the church” between 1999–2002. The suit is still pending. *Source: pennlive.com, 2-16-21*

**Hugh Graham**, 60, London: 4 years in prison after pleading guilty to attempting to arrange the commission of a child sex offense, attempting to incite a child to engage in sexual activity, possessing an extreme pornographic image, possession of prohibited images of children and 3 counts each of making indecent photos of children and attempted sexual communication with a child. The offenses took place between May 2018 and December 2019 when he was pastor at St. Andrew’s United Reformed Church in Hampstead. He posed to an undercover officer on the Grindr dating app as a 13-year-old boy. In a message from Graham to a victim he called himself “an open-minded perv” who was “not really interested in toddlers.” In another he wrote, “I’m hoping you aren’t a gang of blokes trying to trap me. I could get into trouble for chatting to you lol.” Over 35,000 illegal images of children as young as about 3 and some wearing handcuffs were found in his possession. One laptop showed its user had been viewing such material since 2012. *Source: Camden New Journal, 2-11-21*

**John R. McFarland**, 68, Fullerton, CA: 15 years to life in prison after pleading guilty to 13 counts of lewd and lascivious acts with minors while serving as a United Methodist pastor at several churches. He was first arrested in December 2018 for molesting a girl under age 14. The counts stem from

acts committed on 7 minor girls between 2002-18. *Source: L.A. Times, 2-9-21*

**Gregory Dow**, 61, Lancaster, PA: 15½ years in federal prison and \$16,000 in restitution after pleading guilty to 4 counts of sexual abuse. Dow and his family started the Dow Family Children’s Home near Boito, Kenya, in 2008 and operated it for about a decade with funding from U.S. churches and faith-based groups, including Dow’s parish, LifeGate in Elizabethtown. Prosecutors said he returned home in 2017 when Kenyan authorities began investigating abuse allegations. The FBI said he abused 4 girls, including 2 who were age 11 when it started. Prosecutors said Dow abused girls knowing that his wife, who helped run the orphanage, had taken them to have birth control devices implanted in their arms. “Gregory Dow was the proverbial wolf in sheep’s clothing,” said Michael Driscoll of the FBI’s Philadelphia office. *Source: CBS/AP, 2-4-21*

**Michael Mulenga**, 49, Mandeville, LA: 5 months in jail after a judge found him guilty of simple misdemeanor battery. It’s alleged Mulenga, a visiting Catholic priest from Zambia, reached under a 75-year-old woman’s blouse several times in January 2020 while trying to seduce her at an Archdiocese of New Orleans independent living facility where he was chaplain. Mulenga had administered the “last rites” to the woman’s late husband about 2 months earlier. She is suing him, the facility and its owner — the archdiocese’s Christopher Homes. *Source: WWL, 2-4-21*

**William A. Metzger**, 76, Baraboo, WI: 10 years in prison and 10 years’ extended supervision after pleading guilty to 1st-degree child sexual assault. Metzger, pastor at Open Door Baptist Church, was accused of assaulting a girl multiple times between August 2016 and December 2018, starting when she was 6. According to the complaint, Metzger told authorities he had discovered the girl “fondling herself” and then showed her how, touching her inappropriately more than once, though he claimed he didn’t remember assaulting her about 10 times over a period of 2 years as she told her father in 2019. Onlee Bowden, a Michigan woman, watched the hearing from a video feed in the Sauk County Victim Witness Office. She alleges Metzger assaulted her in the mid-1960s when she was 6 by telling her that he was teaching her how to masturbate. *Source: News Republic, 2-3-21*

**James Glawson**, 76, Exeter, RI: 40 years in prison after pleading no contest to 11 counts of 1st-degree sexual assault, including counts of oral sexual penetration with a “mentally disabled” person and 5 other males in the early 1980s. He volunteered for the Boy Scouts from 1980 to 2018 and served as an assistant Catholic chaplain at a scouting camp in Hopkinton. Glawson apologized in court for his “evil ways” and said “It makes me sick to think of what I have done.” *Source: Providence Journal, 1-28-21*

## Civil Lawsuits Filed

**Nicholas DiMarzio** — bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, NY — **Holy Rosary Parish** in Jersey City, NJ, and the **Newark Archdiocese** are defendants in a suit filed by a Florida man alleging DiMarzio, 76, molested him in 1979–80, starting when he was 6. Plaintiff Samier Tadros is represented by Boston attorney Mitchell Garabedian, who is also the attorney for another man who alleges DiMarzio abused him at St. Nicholas Parish in Jersey City in the 1970s. Garabedian said that suit is pending. Since December 2019, when New Jersey suspended the statute of limitations for civil sexual abuse lawsuits for 2 years, 300 suits against Catholic dioceses have been filed. *Source: northjersey.com, 2-22-21*

**Mitchell T. Rozanski**, St. Louis Catholic archbishop, was part of “abhorrent attempts” to protect the reputation of the late **Christopher J. Weldon**, the former bishop of Springfield, MA, alleges a Massachusetts suit. Other defendants are current and former officials of the Springfield Diocese, including longtime diocesan attorney **John J. Egan**. The plaintiff alleges Weldon molested him in the 1960s when he was an altar boy. Rozanski, who served as bishop in Springfield from 2014–20, is accused of approving an official statement denying the Diocesan Review Board found a credible abuse allegation against Weldon when that statement was “patently false.” *Source: Berkshire Eagle, 2-9-21*

The **Christian Brothers** order is accused in a class-action suit of moving child abusers from the notorious Mount Cashel Orphanage in Newfoundland to Vancouver College and St. Thomas More School in Vancouver, BC, and to other schools. Lead plaintiff Darren Liptrot alleges he was molested by his teacher, **Edward English**, convicted in the 1990s of multiple counts of gross indecency and assault against boys at Mount Cashel and sentenced to 13 years in prison. *Source: Vancouver Sun, 2-9-21*

**Ben Lippen School** (now called Columbia International University), a Christian school founded



in 1940 in W. Asheville, NC, and former teacher and coach **Pamela Kaye Herrington** are being sued by Rachel Howald, 50, New York City, who alleges Herrington sexually assaulted her repeatedly in 1986–88 when she was 16 and 17.

Herrington was in her late 30s and unmarried when hired in 1982, claims the suit, alleging “Rachel was sexually abused by Defendant Herrington over and over again. ... This abuse included but was not limited to, fondling Rachel’s breasts, squeezing Rachel’s nipples, and grinding her vaginal area aggressively into Rachel’s upper thigh or on top of Rachel’s vaginal area.”

Columbia International is a “Christ-centered” pre-K-12 school now located in Columbia. *Source: Citizen Times, 1-29-21*

**John Asare-Dankwah**, New Orleans, is accused in a suit by “A.A. Doe” of raping him at age 10 while Asare-Dankwah served as a priest in 2008 at Blessed Trinity Catholic Church in Broadmoor, AL. A Ghana native, he is now pastor of St. Peter Claver Catholic Church.

The suit alleges Asare-Dankwah anally raped Doe while hearing his confession in the anteroom of a chapel during a 7-day retreat in Montgomery and that he didn’t report it because he was too humiliated. At his grandmother’s funeral in September, he saw Asare-Dankwah officiating and had a flashback, it’s alleged. *Source: Times-Picayune, 1-29-21*

**Hillsong Church**, based in Australia, is being sued in Norwalk, CT, and in Australia. The Wall Street Theater Co., which Hillsong’s Connecticut branch rented for \$6,000 a week, is suing for just over \$100,000, alleging unpaid rent, theft of venue property and “immoral, oppressive and unscrupulous” actions.

In Australia, owners of nearly 300 expensive apartments are suing the megachurch and its development and property arm for \$20 million, alleging structural defects that will lower future sale prices.

Dale Smith, whose company ran Hillsong Connecticut’s venue security, said he found the church to be more of a corporation than a religious institution. “It just seemed like a business, real robotic. Even the ones on the payroll seemed to be fighting, positioning in order to climb that ladder which, in my opinion, is not what a church is supposed to be.” *Source: NY Post, 1-28-21*

The Catholic **Diocese of Trenton**, NJ, is named in 2 complaints alleging sexual abuse by former priests **Thomas A. Rittenhouse** and **Michael J. Teta**. Rittenhouse is accused of abusing a minor while serving at Holy Cross Parish in Rumson in 1981–82. He died in 2006 and was later added to the diocese’s credibly accused list.

Teta is accused of abusing a minor while assigned to St. Joseph’s Parish in Bound Brook from 1974–77. *Source: Rumson-Fair Haven Patch, 1-19-21*

The Catholic **Archdiocese of New York** and **St. Mary’s School** in the Bronx are defendants in a suit alleging deceased priest and chess grandmaster **William J. Lombardy** molested Anthony Mazzucca and Joseph Telesca while they were altar boys and St. Mary’s students in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Lombardy’s mentorship in 1972 of chess icon Bobby Fischer when he defeated Boris Spassky was detailed in the 2014 movie “Pawn Sacrifice.” The plaintiffs also allege sexual abuse by another priest at the school, **Raymond Foster**. Lombardy, who was ordained in 1967 and left the priesthood in the late 1970s, died in 2017 at age 79. *Source: NY Post, 1-11-21*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

The Catholic **Diocese of Winona-Rochester**, MN, announced settlement of clergy sex abuse claims from 145 survivors for \$21.5 million. The settlement moves forward the diocese’s organization plan in U.S. Bankruptcy Court as part of its Chapter 11 filing in November 2018.

The diocese released the names in 2013 of **14 priests** credibly accused of sexual misconduct with children from the 1960s through the 1980s. *Source: Winona Daily News, 2-10-21*

Legal Developments

**Jack Schaap**, 63, Hammond, IN, a Baptist pastor serving a 12-year federal sentence since 2013 for taking a 16-year-old girl he was counseling across state lines to have sex, had his petition for early release denied. Schaap told the court he needed to care for his parents, ages 86 and 84, whose health is failing.

U.S. District Court Judge James Moody rejected release, noting Schaap has expressed little remorse and would continue to pose a danger to others. He has “repeatedly couched his apologies and admissions in excuses, suggesting a deep-rooted failure to accept full responsibility for his actions,” Moody wrote.

In the past, Schaap blamed other factors, including the girl’s “sexual aggressiveness” and “experience.” He is housed at the Federal Correctional Institute in Ashland, KY, where he and over 300 others contracted COVID-19 last fall. His scheduled release date to a halfway house is Feb. 2, 2023.

Schaap claims to be a “model prisoner” but his record is not spotless, Moody wrote, noting he lost 27 days of good time credit with no visitors for 9 months after he was caught putting his hand in the “crotch area of a female visitor.” *Source: Chicago Tribune, 2-16-21*

**North Dakota lawmakers** rejected 3 bills ex-

panding the statute of limitations for civil and criminal actions in childhood sexual abuse cases. “These bills were all about giving victims of child abuse hope. Hope after a life of hell,” said main sponsor Rep. Austen Schauer, R-West Fargo.

Shane Goettle, lobbyist for the State Association of Nonpublic Schools, testified the bills focused unfairly on private organizations. The Catholic Church does not testify on every bill it supports or opposes, said Christopher Dodson, general counsel for the state Catholic Conference, adding that the church agreed with Goettle’s testimony. *Source: Fargo Forum, 2-15-21*

**Eliezer Berland**, 83, leader of the Israeli Shuvu Bonim sect, is banned from communicating with his followers, ruled a Jerusalem court in setting terms of his release to house arrest. He must also post bail of \$369,315 and pay for 24-hour private security to watch him.

Berland is accused of sex offenses and defrauding sick and elderly followers out of millions of shekels and has spent over a year in detention. *Source: Times of Israel, 2-15-21*

**Marcelo D. Krawiec**, 44, former rabbi of a Buenos Aires synagogue who is accused of sexually abusing at least 2 young men between 2010–18, is being sought by Interpol. He had been living in Israel since 2019 and re-entered Argentina on Nov. 17, 2020, staying for about a week before disappearing. *Source: JTA, 2-13-21*

**Robert DeLand**, 73, a Michigan Catholic priest convicted of sex crimes against a male teen in 2019, was granted parole. He was sentenced to 2 to 15 years in prison in April 2019. He will remain on probation for at least 3 years and will have to register as a sex offender. His status as a priest will be determined by the Vatican. *Source: WJRT, 2-12-21*

**Master’s Ranch West**, a Christian facility for troubled boys near Prescott, WA, is subject to a permanent injunction barring it from continuing to operate. Pastor **David Bosley** and his wife **Tresa Bosley** opened the unlicensed home in early 2020. They already were operating the Master’s Ranch Christian Academy in Missouri for about 7 years.

Missouri lawmakers are now trying to change the law to require more oversight of faith-based schools. Three Washington sisters have sued churches in Prosser and Tenino, claiming David Bosley abused them as children.

Academy employee **Maxwell Shelter**, 20, pleaded guilty to communication with a minor for immoral purposes for molesting the daughter of another staff member and was sentenced to 3 months in jail. *Source: Tri-City Herald, 2-10-21*

An attempt by the bankrupt **Archdiocese of Santa Fe** to block lawsuits accusing it of transferring millions of dollars in property to 93 parishes in order to shield assets from settlements in sexual abuse cases was blocked by a New Mexico judge.

The ruling lets suits by hundreds of victims proceed. The archdiocese filed for bankruptcy in 2018. The real estate assets could be worth over \$150 million, according to Judge David Thuma.

Plaintiffs’ attorneys said the number of survivors is close to 2,000. The archdiocese said in 2019 that least 78 clergy members had been credibly accused of child abuse. *Source: Santa Fe New Mexican, 2-7-21*

A trial for **Paul A. West**, 60, a Franciscan Catholic friar accused of molesting students in the 1990s in Mississippi, was moved to April so he could undergo a mental evaluation. A grand jury indicted West on 2 counts each of sexual battery and gratification of lust. He also faces a charge in Wisconsin of sexual assault of a child.

The Franciscan order settled sex abuse cases by secretly paying cousins Joshua Love and La

Jarvis Love, both 37, \$15,000 each and requiring them to keep silent about their claims. The payments were far less than what other Catholic sex abuse survivors have typically received. “They felt they could treat us that way because we’re poor and we’re Black,” said Joshua Love. *Source: ABC News/AP, 2-7-21*

**Anthony Haynes**, 41, former leader of the Greater Life Christian Center in Toledo, OH, was denied compassionate release. At the time of the ruling, Haynes had only served 18 months of a life sentence for facilitating a child sex trafficking ring with 2 other pastors.

Judge Bernard Friedman denied the request because Haynes provided little evidence of health conditions putting him at greater risk of having coronavirus complications, while mentioning the severity of the crimes.

“Based on the facts of this case, defendant could not be released without seriously endangering the community,” Friedman wrote. “This alone disqualifies defendant from consideration for compassionate release.” *Source: Toledo Blade, 2-3-21*

**California Catholic bishops** are asking a judge to throw out a law allowing accusers of clergy sexual abuse to sue even if they were molested decades ago. The state in 2019 provided a 3-year period starting Jan. 1, 2020 to file suits.

It also extended the age of people who could sue for childhood abuse from 26 to 40 after the extension expires and allowed triple damages in cases involving a “cover-up” of previous assaults by an employee or volunteer.

Plaintiffs’ attorney John Manly called the bishops’ motions “morally reprehensible and hypocritical,” adding, “They systematically violated reporting laws ... lied to the families, lied to the media, lied to the faithful. Now what they are saying is, ‘Don’t allow our victims to hold us accountable.’” *Source: KSBY, 1-28-21*

**Malka Leifer**, 54, accused of 74 counts of rape and sexual abuse between 2004–08 when she was principal of an ultra-Orthodox Jewish school for girls in Melbourne, was extradited from Israel, where she fled in 2008 to avoid prosecution.

Australia has tried to extradite her since 2014. The case centers on the allegations of 3 sisters now in their early 30s — Dassi Erlich, Elly Sapper and Nicole Meyer — who say they were abused by Leifer.

Her trial is likely to be delayed until 2022 due to the coronavirus pandemic, said Nick Kaufman, her attorney. Kaufman also said that publication of photos of Leifer taken during her extradition undermined her dignity. [Ed.: He did not mention the dignity of her alleged victims.] *Source: NY Times, 1-25-21*

**Numerous priests and other Catholic officials** in North Dakota won’t be criminally charged for historical child sex abuse due to the statute of limitations, said Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem. Investigators spent 18 months reviewing files from the Fargo and Bismarck dioceses to determine if charges could be brought. The dioceses released lists in January 2020 with the names of 53 priests and others facing substantiated allegations.

Probable cause was found to bring charges against only 2 priests: **Norman Dukart** of Dickinson and **Odo Muggli**, a Benedictine at Assumption Abbey in Richardton.

Minnesotan Ted Becker, who alleges he was molested in the 1940s, expressed disgust at the news. “They knew that if they kept putting things off, eventually the statute of limitations would expire. That’s not what a responsible person, much less a responsible religious person, should do.” *Source: Fargo Forum, 1-4-21*

Allegations

**Joseph Jablonski**, a Catholic priest barred in 2014 from serving further in the Diocese of San Bernardino, CA, was allowed to return to priestly duties in Illinois despite allegations of sexual abuse by a California boy. The San Bernardino Diocese immediately notified Jablonski’s religious order, the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, whose Chicago-area headquarters is in Aurora.

Records and interviews show that the order didn’t inform dioceses in Rockford and Joliet and the Archdiocese of Chicago about the allegations. “The provincial at the time didn’t feel any obligation to contact any other diocese,” said Richard Kennedy, who has led the order’s U.S. province since 2018.

Jablonski, now in his 70s, is leaving the order, Kennedy said. “If a complaint were filed today, it’d be handled in a much different way.” *Source: Sun-Times, 2-19-21*

The Catholic **Archdiocese of Cologne** “severely damaged” the process of owning up to decades of sexual violence against children, said a report by an independent German secular panel established in 2016. It decried the diocese’s internal review.

The Berlin-based panel referred to the “Cologne Archbishops’ panel” but not to Archbishop **Rainer Maria Woelki** by name, and said that the public saw a “cover-up.”

Cologne cabaret artist and author Jürgen Becker, delivering a satirical online sermon from St. Agnes Church, alleged the archdiocese “systematically covered up the mass clergy sexual abuse for decades.” *Source: Deutsche Welle, 2-16-21*

**Ravi Zacharias**, who died in 2020 of cancer at age 74, engaged in “sexting, unwanted touching, spiritual abuse and rape” spanning many years and multiple continents, said a report released by Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, the global organization he founded.

Several months after his death, the magazine Christianity Today reported allegations Zacharias had groped and masturbated in front of several women who worked at a pair of day spas he co-owned near his ministry’s U.S. headquarters in Alpharetta, GA. He was married for 45 years.

“We believe not only the women who made their allegations public but also additional women who had not previously made public allegations against Ravi but whose identities and stories were uncovered during the investigation,” the ministry’s board of directors said in a statement.

Former Vice President Mike Pence spoke at his memorial service in Atlanta, calling him “a man of faith who could rightly handle the word of truth like few others in our time” and comparing him to Billy Graham and C.S. Lewis. *Source: NY Times, 2-11-21*

An **unidentified Romanian Orthodox priest** in Suceava is under investigation after the death of a 6-week-old hours after the baby’s baptism. An autopsy found water in the child’s lungs. The incident has sparked calls for the Orthodox Church to change baptism rituals that require 3 full submersions.

Church spokesperson Vasile Bănescu encouraged churches to instead sprinkle holy water over recipients. “It’s hard for us to understand why God let this happen,” Teodosie Petrescu, archbishop of Tomis and leader of the church’s conservative wing, disagreed: “These canons of faith will be available for another thousand years. That is why we will not change. We’re not intimidated.” *Source: vice.com, 2-5-21*

Removed / Resigned

**Lee Reddyhoff**, senior minister at Faringdon Baptist Church in Swindon, England, resigned after it was revealed he engaged in a secret relationship with a woman from the congregation. In a letter to church trustees, Reddyhoff acknowledged his conduct had fallen “below that expected” of him.

He also resigned as an accredited minister from the Baptist Union due to his “gross misconduct” and is considering his future outside of the ministry. *Source: Swindon Advertiser, 2-19-21*

**Michael Green**, Westborough, MA, was fired as rabbi at Chabad of Westborough, a Hasidic community center, for social media posts railing against pandemic-related lockdowns, mask mandates and vaccinations.

“It’s NOT immunization. It’s pathogenic priming & mass sterilization,” Green wrote in January. In 2019 he had argued against getting the measles vaccine.

“It became clear that dismissal was our only choice,” said Mendel Fogelman, director of the Central Massachusetts Chabad. *Source: Times of Israel, 2-3-21*

Other

**Paul Burak**, 74, Palos Heights, IL, a Catholic priest accused of striking and killing a teacher and injuring another in a hit-and-run accident as they were leaving a parish Christmas party in 2019, died in his sleep Jan. 10.

A witness snapped a picture of Burak’s license plate, followed him and told him to go back to the restaurant. Burak returned and remained at the scene for a short time but didn’t tell police he had hit the women.

The DUI charge was dropped but the more serious felony of leaving the scene of a deadly accident remained. Civil suits were filed against him and he was on electronic monitoring at his condo for the criminal charge. *Source: Orland Park Patch, 1-12-21*





# An unexpected visit to Scopes trial site

By Barbara Alvarez

I love a good road trip. And it doesn't necessarily have to be anywhere exotic for it to be a worthwhile journey.

While the pandemic put a damper on travel, I still itched to get in the car and go somewhere. After considering how and where we could road trip safely, thoughtfully and responsibly, my husband and I found a cabin in remote Alabama. We mapped it out so that we could do the Civil Rights Trail along the way.

The Civil Rights Trail is incredible — and I highly recommend it. Stopping in front of the home of the slain civil rights champion Medger Evers, seeing the Greyhound bus station where so many heroically challenged interstate segregation laws, and walking across the bridge in Selma is both awe-inspiring and quieting.

At the cabin, we spent several days on the lake, reading, relaxing and eating s'mores. The night before we were set to return, we mapped our journey back north through Tennessee.

Scanning our route on the mobile map, I noticed the town of Dayton pop up. Where had I heard of that town before? A cursory Google search revealed that Dayton, Tenn., was the site of the famous Scopes trial.

The *State of Tennessee v John Thomas Scopes*, colloquially referred to as the “Scopes monkey trial,” continues to be one of the most well-known court cases in U.S. history. The Butler Act, a Tennessee law passed in March 1925, forbade the teaching of evolution in all “universities, normals, and all other public schools of Tennessee, which are supported in whole or in part by the public school funds of the state.” The law claimed that evolution denied “the story of the Divine Creator of man as taught in the bible.” Teachers were to be penalized for imparting the concept to their students. What ensued was a battle over teaching evolution in the classroom — and an epic showdown between state and church.

Excitedly, I added the town to our “must-stop” list. I found a guide to the people and places of historic Dayton and spent the final night in the cabin watching “Inherit the Wind,” with Spencer Tracy, Fredric March and Gene Kelly.



About 40 miles northeast of bustling Chattanooga rests Dayton, a quiet town of approximately 7,000 people seated in Rhea County. When we arrived, it was an early Saturday morning. The main street, which dots the historic center with shops, offices and a bank, hadn't woken up yet. Nary a car



The Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton, Tenn., site of the 1925 Scopes “Monkey” trial.



Photos by Barbara Alvarez

This statue of Clarence Darrow was commissioned by FFRF and designed and crafted by Zenos Frudakis.

drove by and only a few residents could be seen sipping coffee on their front porch.

Much of this solitude is undoubtedly reminiscent of the town in 1925. After the Butler Act was passed, the American Civil Liberties Union sought to challenge this religious law by sending out press releases that offered to legally defend any teacher who defied it. Meanwhile, businessman George Rappleyea of Dayton was looking for a way to bring much-needed publicity and money to the quiet town. He consulted with Frank E. Robinson, known as “The Hustling Druggist,” then the president of the school board and owner of a local drug store. His house rests at the corner across from the courthouse.

After meeting with the school's superintendent, Rappleyea found a candidate in John T. Scopes, a meek science teacher at Rhea County High School. On May 7, 1925, Scopes was arrested. After a grand jury meeting, the trial proceeded on July 10. It was a media sensation and business boon as thousands flocked to “Monkey Town.”

W.C. Bailey's Boarding House was the place that Scopes stayed during his first year of teaching in Dayton. Joe Mendi, a performing chimpanzee brought to Dayton as a traveling attraction, also stayed at the house, which, according to my travel guide, is now a law office.

Among the hundreds of journalists who flocked to Dayton to cover the trial was H.L. Mencken, a pundit who coined the term “Bible Belt” and described himself as “absolutely devoid of what is called religious feeling.” Staying a few blocks from the trial, Mencken was largely cynical of the town and its people, believing that the guilty verdict was predetermined. Departing the town before the trial even concluded, Mencken lamented, “Let no one mistake [the trial] for comedy, farcical thought it may be in all its details. It serves notice on the country that Neanderthal man is organizing in these forlorn backwaters of the land, led by a fanatic, rid of sense and devoid of conscience.”

The home that the famed journalist stayed in is still standing. It exists today as an office.

Amid the quaint and unimposing scenery stands a proud courthouse where the contentious battle between religion and secularism took place. Two statues appear as you approach the Rhea County Courthouse: one of William Jennings Bryan and the other of Clarence Darrow, the two lawyers in the trial.

For the prosecution was William Jennings Bryan, a

former U.S. secretary of state and an ex-Congressman from Lincoln, Neb., who had three presidential nominations under his belt. A progressive who had championed women's suffrage, Bryan's devotion to religion caused him to become a fierce advocate against the teaching of evolution by 1921. Bryan asserted that “evolution is the merciless law by which the strong crowd out and kill off the weak” and that the bible reflected “the law of love.” (Bryan's comparison of evolution and the bible is curious as the god of the bible routinely ordered mass killings, including 24,000 Israelites.)

Clarence Darrow led the defense team. An attorney and prominent member of the ACLU, Darrow was also a labor organizer and a freethinker. Although Darrow and Bryan had many commonalities in terms of civil rights policies (Darrow had even supported Bryan in his first presidential campaign), they had fundamental differences over religion, especially over state and church.

Looking at the statues, one can tell that they weren't crafted by the same sculptor, since the likeness of Bryan is crudely fashioned, picturing him as a young man. The other is an amazingly lifelike rendition of Darrow during the trial, complete with his signature forelock askew. On a side of the base is a bas-relief rendering of the “frenemies” together. I later learned that the statue of Bryan was donated by Bryan College in 2005. Notably, Bryan stood alone until the Freedom From Religion Foundation fundraised and erected a statue sculpted by Zenos Frudakis of the famed attorney three years ago. As a new intern for FFRF, this made the spontaneous visit even more worthwhile.

The Scopes trial endured over eight days and was a media sensation. On the seventh day of the trial, on the front lawn of the courthouse, Darrow questioned Bryan on the literal interpretation of the bible. The following day, the jury, after eight minutes of deliberation, handed down a guilty verdict to Scopes, who was forced to pay a \$100 fine. Two years later, the Tennessee Supreme Court overturned this verdict on a technicality.

The media circus is long-gone, but a museum in the basement of the courthouse continues to memorialize the famous trial.

On our trip back home, I couldn't help but think of the continued relevance of the trial and of the countless examples of Christian Nationalism permeating the classroom. For example, in February, a Florida Senate panel backed the “Parents' Bill of Rights” to allow parents to keep their children out of class on days when topics like evolution, climate change and sex education are taught. Meanwhile, in West Virginia, state senators passed a bill that would require local county boards of education to offer an elective on instruction of the bible in public high schools.

The battle for science and secularism promises to be a long-drawn one. As we collectively work for the separation of state and church, Clarence Darrow's words, spoken at the trial on July 15, 1925, remain as salient as ever: “I do not consider it an insult, but rather a compliment to be called an agnostic. I do not pretend to know where many ignorant men are sure — that is all that agnosticism means.”

Barbara Alvarez, from Sheboygan, Wis., is FFRF's first Anne Nicol Gaylor Reproductive Rights Intern.



The statue of William Jennings Bryan outside the Rhea County Courthouse.