



FREETHOUGHT TODAY



**Religious thought
habits are
hard to break**

PAGE 3



**Christian capture
of our federal
judiciary**

PAGE 11



**Black economic
justice from an
atheist's view**

PAGES 12-14

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Fun times in Boston



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Lifetime Member Ellery Schempp offers a hearty laugh while speaking with Barbara Alvarez, FFRF's reproductive rights intern, during the Saturday dinner at FFRF's national convention in Boston on Nov. 20. Schempp was the initiator of the landmark 1963 United States Supreme Court decision of *Abington School District v. Schempp*, which declared that required public school sanctioned Lord's Prayer and bible readings were unconstitutional.

For more photos from the 2021 convention, please see the special section included in this issue of Freethought Today. Convention videos may be viewed at ffrf.us/videos21.

Clarence Darrow Award Cheesecake, anyone?

Linda Greenhouse gave this speech (slightly edited) at FFRF's national convention on Nov. 19.

By Linda Greenhouse

My brief talk has a title: "Cheesecake, anyone?" I will explain that title soon. But first, I want to mention something that occurred to me as I heard other convention presentations today. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg received several shout-outs — well-deserved, because by the end of her time on the Supreme Court, she was the most committed separationist among the justices. But I want to remember another distinguished woman who served on the Supreme Court: Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who left the court in early 2006.



Photo by Ingrid Laas
Linda Greenhouse

She is still alive at 90, living with dementia.

In the summer of 2005, Justice O'Connor wrote an opinion concurring with the majority in a case called *McCreary County* that invalidated a Ten Commandments display on the wall of a Kentucky courthouse. Justice David Souter's majority opinion found the display to be a vi-

See Cheesecake on page 19

Introducing Linda Greenhouse

Journalist and author Linda Greenhouse was introduced on stage by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor during FFRF's convention on Nov. 19:

"Veteran Supreme Court observer and commentator Linda Greenhouse has earned this year's Clarence Darrow Award. You know her for her Pulitzer Prize-winning coverage of the Supreme Court for 30 years and for her continuing and important biweekly column on the court for The New York Times.

"A fierce defender of reproductive rights, her books include *Justice on the Brink: The Death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg*, *the Rise of Amy Coney Barrett*, and *Twelve Months That Transformed the Supreme Court*.

"Linda finds deft and effective ways to question the role of religion in the political or judicial agenda. Linda, you are FFRF's legal touchstone and we are so grateful to you for your acumen, your empathy, for sharing wise, frank expertise and warnings about the evolving state of the Supreme Court, especially your writings on the Establishment Clause."

Science and reason must prevail over religious exemptions

Failure to be fully vaccinated in the United States — where the vaccines have been long available for free and where most children are now eligible — is, to state the obvious, prolonging the pandemic.

There's no excuse — not even a religious one — in a secular nation predicated on science, not to do one's part to stop the spread of Covid-19 and its ever-growing variants. Atheists and nonbelievers can take pride that we are the most vaccinated sector in the United States. Unfortunately, white Christian evangelicals, the least vaccinated and most resistant group, wield disproportionate political power to disrupt rational public health policy.

The remedy is at hand, yet vaccine mandates and even "vaccine passports" at the state, public school or other local levels remain the exception. Lawsuits, mostly by religious politicians, individuals or entities, abound against existing mandates, including President Joe Biden's OSHA rule that companies with 100 or more employ-

ees must require vaccination. Litigation, backlash and resistance greet mandates, and the demand for religious exemptions from public health rules is growing.

Public health policy emphatically does require universal mandates, yet confusion reigns over the legality of religious exemptions.

Vaccine mandates are neutral. A vaccine mandate is a neutral rule that applies to everyone, religious or not. The mandate doesn't discriminate among religions, just as the novel coronavirus doesn't "discriminate" among who it infects.

Vaccine mandates are constitutional. The government's authority to protect the health and safety of citizens is well-established. The Supreme Court ruled vaccine mandates constitutional over 100 years ago in *Jacobson v. Massachusetts* (1905), and has affirmed that ruling multiple times over the past century. *Jacobson* involved the

See Exemption on page 24



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Legal Assistant Stephanie Dyer, Director of Operations Lisa Strand and Freethought Today Editor PJ Slinger installed the two displays in the Wisconsin Capitol on Dec. 1. To see other FFRF solstice and Bill of Rights displays, turn to Page 15.

FFRF's Capitol exhibit marks 25 years

FFRF's annual Winter Solstice exhibit is celebrating its (almost unbroken) silver jubilee at the Wisconsin Capitol.

The secular display is back in FFRF's hometown legislative building for a breathtaking 25th time after a pandemic-forced hiatus last year. A gilt sign in the Madison-located Statehouse features FFRF's traditional message from its princi-

pal founder Anne Nicol Gaylor.

A major addition to the exhibit in the rotunda for more than half a decade now is FFRF's whimsical Bill of Rights "nativity." The irreverent cutout by artist Jacob Fortin depicts Founders Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington gazing in adoration at a "baby" Bill of Rights while the Statue of Liberty looks on.



Bobbie Kirkhart

Bobbie Kirkhart was a longtime atheist leader

Atheist activist and FFRF Lifetime Member Bobbie Kirkhart, 78, died on Oct. 31 in her home in Los Angeles.

“Bobbie was a joyful, generous, courageous and fearless trailblazer for freethought and humanism,” said Dan Barker, FFRF co-president. “She was also a faithful faithful friend. She will be deeply missed.”

Bobbie was born April 16, 1943, in Enid, Oklahoma. She earned a degree in journalism from the University of Oklahoma in 1965 before moving to Los Angeles that same year.

Bobbie’s first job was as a social worker for the Department of Children and Family Services, where she participated in one of the first public employee strikes in the country. She completed some graduate-level coursework in linguistics before divorce sent her back into the workforce. She taught in private business colleges for a few years before becoming a teacher with Los Angeles Unified School District’s Adult Division, teaching Individualized Instruction Labs. She retired from LAUSD when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1999. After she recovered, she poured her energy into the freethought movement.

For nearly four decades, Bobbie was a fixture in the atheist movement. She served as president of both Atheist Alliance International and Atheists United, served on the board of Camp Quest and the advisory board for Humanist Asso-

ciation of Nepal, helped form the Secular Coalition for America, and was an informal advisor and mentor to dozens of freethought leaders. Bobbie had spoken to freethought groups throughout the United States, and had addressed atheists and humanists in Canada, Germany, France, India, Ireland, Nigeria and Cameroon. She also was a platform speaker at the first of its kind Godless Americans March in Washington, D.C., in 2002 and accepted the Freethought Backbone Award from the Secular Student Alliance in 2013.

In 2009, she purchased and opened up her century-old Victorian home (known as Heretic House) to speakers and local groups, giving atheists and progressive organizers a dependable and rent-free meeting space. Hundreds of fundraisers, parties, choir rehearsals, jam-sessions, board retreats, recovery meetings, and volunteer events have called Heretic House home over the last decade, while dozens of well-known speakers and activists have crashed for a few nights at a time.

Bobbie was first married in 1969 to William Mason, and then divorced in 1982. She remarried in 1997 to Harvey Tippit, whom she met through Atheists United. She became a widow in 2006. Bobbie continued to travel and took her daughter, son-in-law, and grandsons on an adventure to the Falkland Islands, South Georgia Island, and the Antarctic Peninsula in 2019, which would be her last major trip.

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TODAY

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Advice to Aaron Rodgers: Follow the (vet) science

By Karen Heineman

I am a veterinarian as well as an attorney. That’s why I was particularly disheartened to hear Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers’ dismissal of science and the benefits of vaccination and learn that he instead chose to use questionable remedies such as ivermectin to treat his Covid-19 infection.

I am familiar with ivermectin and vaccines. As everyone is now likely aware, ivermectin is a “horse dewormer.” That description is simplistic but not inaccurate. Ivermectin is primarily a veterinary product used to treat parasites. Even though it is used widely in the profession, it is not a drug without serious potential complications. Ivermectin toxicity is not pretty, since it can result in neurologic abnormalities, including coma and death.

I am familiar with death due to ivermectin. Horse dewormers containing ivermectin are readily available over the counter. One client of mine decided to treat her barn cats with ivermectin — with the disastrous result that the cats who pushed through the pack and ate the most died.

And although ivermectin has been available in veterinary medicine for a long time, it isn’t used to treat viral infections. Rodgers’ admission — late in the game — that he is not vaccinated and chose to treat his Covid-19 infection with medications, including ivermectin, which are not approved for this use, is frustrating. Rodgers’ reasons are particularly offensive, in part because he did not seem to fit the “dumb jock” mold. His deliberate verbal sleight of hand, choosing “immunized” to answer the question about his vaccination status, has slammed the door on his credibility.

Despite his declaration, Rodgers is not a critical thinker. A critical thinker does not base decisions on anecdotal evidence, untested theories and extrapolation of Petri dish observations. Rodgers professed to be concerned about what the Covid-19 vaccinations would do to his body, choosing homeopathic “immunization” instead, but when his preventative protocol was unsuccessful, he did not

Photo by Chris Line

Karen Heineman

hesitate to use unproven prescription medications with potentially significant side effects. The quarterback chose the Hail Mary option for treatment.

Rodgers continues to search for excuses to justify his selfish and ignorant behavior. The NFL provides an option for players who do not want to be vaccinated, but Rodgers wasn’t keen on following the protocols with that option. He chose instead to not believe the science behind the vaccines, put the Pack around him at risk and then invoke Martin Luther King Jr. to justify his right to go his own way.

Unfortunately, his athletic prowess provides a platform for Rodgers to misinform and influence how others will view vaccination and treatment.

To be clear, the fact that someone uses ivermectin and recovers from Covid-19 is not evidence, yet we can assume the use of ivermectin will increase because of Rodgers’ sponsorship of vigilante medicine. When the quarterback could be using his position to help the vaccine efforts, recently expanded to children, he has chosen instead to suggest that the vaccine can do more harm than good.

Be a responsible critical thinker. Follow the science, not the quarterback. Choose vaccination, not ivermectin.

Karen Heineman is an FFRF legal fellow and has been a practicing veterinarian in Wisconsin since 1992. She graduated from Marquette University Law School in 2020.

“A critical thinker does not base decisions on anecdotal evidence, untested theories and extrapolation of Petri dish observations.”

FFRF'S

Ask an
Atheist

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Wednesdays
at Noon (Central)*
Send in your comments & questions via Facebook or AskAnAtheist@ffrf.org

*Except the last Wednesday of the month

WHAT ARE YOU MISSING?

FFRF offers much more than just **Freethought Today** for news, information & lively banter about freethought & state/church separation.

Check out these other offerings!

Ask an Atheist online weekly show
ffrf.org/ask-an-atheist

Freethought Matters TV weekly show
ffrf.org/freethought-matters

Freethought Now blogs
freethoughtnow.org

Freethought Radio weekly show
ffrf.org/radio

FFRF press releases
ffrf.org/releases

FFRF action alerts
ffrf.org/action

Freethought of the Day
Daily online calendar of famous freethinkers
ffrf.org/day

Religious thought habits are hard to break

By Valerie Tarico

Perhaps it's been years or even decades since you left biblical Christianity behind. You may have noticed long ago that there are human handprints all over the "Good Book." It may have dawned on you that popular Christian versions of heaven would actually be hellish. You may have figured out that praying believers don't avoid illness or live longer than people who pray to other gods or none at all. You may have



Valerie Tarico

clued in that Christian morality isn't so hot and that other people have moral values too. (Shocking!) You may have decided that the God of the bible is a jerk — or worse. But some habits of thought are hard to break. It is a lot easier to shed the contents of Christian fundamentalism than its psychological structure.

Here are 10 mental patterns that trip up many ex-Christians, even when we think we've done the work of moving on. None of these is unique to former Christians, but all are reinforced by bible belief and Christian culture, which can make them particularly challenging for recovering believers.

1. All or nothing thinking. In traditional Christian teachings, no sin is too small to send you to hell forever. You're either saved or damned, headed for unthinkable bliss or unthinkable torment, with nothing in between. Jesus saves only because he was perfect. Moderate Christians are "lukewarm."

This kind of dichotomous black-and-white thinking seeps into us directly from bible-believing Christianity and indirectly from cultures that are steeped in Protestantism. Sports? Enjoying the activity isn't enough; you need to be all in. No pain, no gain. Work? You're a real worker only if you get back on the computer after dinner. Bragging rights start at 60 hours per week. Political? The more absolutist your proclamations, the more you'll gain a following.

2. Good guys and bad guys. One consequence of black-and-white thinking is that we put people into two mental boxes — good guys and bad guys. You are either with us or against us, a patriot or a socialist, an anti-racist or a racist, one of us or one of them. When we discover the personal failings of a public figure like Bill Gates, we may move them from



Image by Shutterstock

"A nagging sense of guilt can become baseline normal," writes Valerie Tarico.

one box to the other, good guy to bad guy. Christianity offers no mental model in which people are complicated and imperfect but basically decent — just fallen ("utterly depraved" in the words of Calvin) and either washed in the blood or tools of Satan.

3. Never feeling good enough. Since we are acutely aware of our own failings, it can be hard internally to stay out of the bad-guy box. Some of us toggle between "I'm awesome" and "I suck." Others have a nagging internal critic that tells us nothing we do is ever quite good enough. After all, it isn't perfect, and that's the biblical standard.

4. Hyperactive guilt detection. Biblical Christianity gives tremendous moral weight to all of this, and the practice of "confessing our sins one to another" turns believers into guilt-muscle body builders. We live in a world of shoulds and should-nots, and in the Protestant ethic, those daily failings are moral failings. A nagging sense of guilt can become baseline normal, with little bursts of extra guilt as we notice one thing or another that we have left undone or goals where we have fallen short.

5. Sexual hangups. For many former Christians, particularly for women or queer people, but also straight guys who like sex, it's impossible to talk about guilt without talking about sex, because sexual sins are the worst of the worst. When it comes to the bible, getting and giving sexual pleasure are more a matter of temptation than of intimacy and delight. Idolatry and murder share the top 10 list with coveting your neighbor's wife. Then there's virgin-madonna-whore trifecta. And don't forget God hates fags.

6. Living for the future. Sexual intimacy isn't the only kind of pleasure that biblical Christianity devalues. The consecrated life focuses broadly on the future rather than the moment. The small everyday wonders that comprise the center of joy in mindful living are mere distractions for a person who has their eye on the prize of heaven. As former believers grow convinced that each person gets one precious life, those individual moments can become treasures. But the habit of focusing on the future can make it really hard to breathe in, center in the moment, and bask in the ordinary beauties and delights around us.

7. Bracing for an apocalypse. Even worse than being drawn by the lure of heaven is being braced constantly for some impending apocalypse. We may no longer expect a rapture or the Mark of the Beast or Jesus riding in on a horse. But the idea of a cataclysmic disruption in history looms large, nonetheless. A sense of nuclear doom or pandemic doom or overpopulation doom or underpopulation doom may nudge us to action or be paralyzing. Either way, the experience is very different from being driven by a sense of curiosity and discovery as we face the unknown and unknowable.

8. Idealizing leaders. Living in a cloud of anxiety makes us more susceptible to demagogues and authoritarians, people who exude confidence we lack, who convey that they know what's right and true and how to solve problems. They prey on our fears and on our desire to do good and be good. They prey on our sense of ourselves as sinners and tell us how to atone. They prey on dichotomous thinking, reinforcing our sense that people

who don't share our worldview must be evil and so must be silenced or defeated.

9. Desperately seeking simplicity. Biblical Christianity tells a story about us as individuals and about human history that is clear and simple. Multi-dimensional causality? Moral ambiguity? Conflicts with no good side and bad side — just sides? Problems with no right answer? Blurry boundaries between human beings and other sentient species? No thanks!

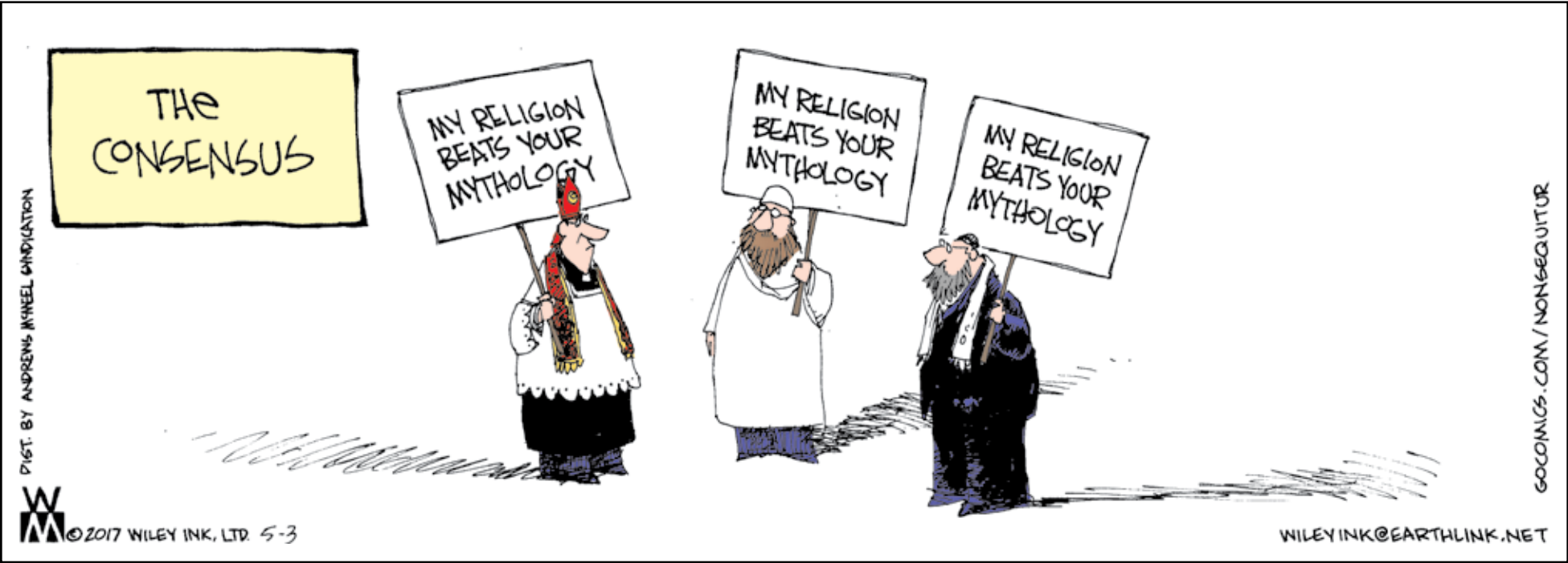
Fiction, in particular fiction from Christian-dominant cultures, often mirrors and reinforces older Christian templates and tropes. And it's all too easy to project these in turn onto the hard-to-parse and hard-to-solve challenges of the real world. We know deep down that things aren't that simple, but it's so much easier to act as if we live in a world of saints and sinners, orcs and elves.

10. Incessant what-ifs. And so we struggle. We tell ourselves it's OK; that we're OK. But often nagging doubts persist. What if I'm wrong? Many years ago, I told a therapist that I didn't believe in the Christian god anymore, but I didn't talk to anyone about it because I didn't want to take them to hell with me. He laughed and I laughed at myself, but it also felt very real. The journey out is — a journey. Along the way people second guess themselves, especially if bible-belief got inside when they were young. Years after quitting, a former smoker may crave a cigarette. That doesn't mean they were wrong to quit. It just means those synaptic connections got hardwired, soldered in place, and some of them are still there.

In the real world, growth is gnarly. It happens in fits and starts, with forward leaps and sideways turns and backward skids. Change is rarely linear. Flip-flopping often serves truth-seeking. Certitude is rarely a virtue. We seldom know where we are headed. Nonetheless, sometimes we can look back and say with confidence: Not that. I may not know exactly what is true and right and real, but there are some things I can rule out.

I often find myself quoting one former bible believer who made a comment but left no name: I would rather live with unanswered questions than unquestioned answers. Embracing uncertainty about the future and the big questions frees us to live more in the small delights of the present — a nest of blue jays, a hug, the smell of butter on toast. That may be as good as it gets.

*Valerie Tarico is a psychologist and author of **Trusting Doubt: A Former Evangelical Looks at Old Beliefs in a New Light and Deas . . . and Other Imaginings.***



Freethought Today Cryptogram

VD UDLM PDGLMKCF MJG LMCNS OCWKX CZ

JYTKFW YF YOO-HFCVKFW YOO-ECVGNZDO WCR

VJC XNGYMGL ZYDOMS JDUYFL, YFR MJGF

AOYUGL MJGU ZCN JKL CVF UKLMYHGL.

— WGFG NCRRGFAGNNS

This puzzle is from Freethinking Cryptograms by FFRF member Brooks Rimes, available on Amazon.com for \$8.95. 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			
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	50							51					
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59			60		61					62			63
64					65					66			
67					68						69		

Answers on page 18

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Across

1. “My bad!”

5. Things to lament

9. Gulf war missile

13. Stirs up

15. Lowest female singing voice

16. Type of cornbread

17. *Freethinking writer Charles Dickens’ “_____ House”

18. Czech or Serb

19. Vaulted recess of a building, not necessarily a church

20. *Ancient Roman December festival hijacked by Christianity

23. Corn unit

24. “_____ the Games Begin!”

25. Each and all

27. Small silvery fish

30. At the back

32. Cajole

33. Boisterous play

35. Indian cuisine yogurt staple

38. Belch

39. Theater to Socrates

41. Slang for heroin

42. Peeped through a hole

44. “_____ the Wild,” 2007 movie

45. Eurozone money

46. To-do list entry

48. Left-hand page

50. Group of eight

51. Hair-controlling goo

52. French vineyard

Down

53. *Irreverent poet, author of “Les Fleurs du Mal”

59. Wagner or Powers in a TV classic

61. Little cave

62. Treasure collection

64. “Sittin’ On The Dock Of The Bay” singer

65. Worth a million dollars?

66. Bats’ hangout

67. Voyeur’s glance

68. Kick out

69. Swallow’s house

27. Liquid food

28. *Irreverent two-time Nobel Prize winner who coined the term “radioactive” (2 words)

29. One who mastered a skill

30. Change the Constitution

31. Dick and Jane’s dog

32. “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert” network

34. *Santa’s pagan predecessor

36. Tropical tuber

37. “Four score and seven years _____”

40. Fictitious prose

43. Gloomy and dingy

47. Slow and graceful musical tempo

49. Fill with high spirits

50. *Speak like Cicero, who declared that “Reason is the mistress and queen of all things”

51. Gain access to (2 words)

52. Karate blow

54. Pakistani tongue

55. “Nobody _____ It Better”

56. Iraq neighbor

57. Wander about

58. Day before, pl.

60. Recipe amt.

63. “Is” in Paris

THEY SAID WHAT?

What we see happening in our schools today is no accident. This is a result of, literally, over a hundred years of planning, and activism and organization by ungodly people. And if I could just be frank, it’s by atheists, and communists, and secular humanists. OK? I’m just going to call a spade a spade here.

Truth and Liberty Coalition Executive Director Richard Harris, in the article, “The Christian Right revolution starts small and local.”

Religion Dispatches, 10-26-21

In the light of my seriously held God-following beliefs, my heart, soul and mind belong to the Almighty Creator Elohim, it is against my faith and conscience to have any of this injected into my body. I truly believe the God-given immune system has been proven to be the strongest against communicable disease.

Jamal Y. Speakes, a high school teacher in Los Angeles, who successfully applied for a religious exemption so he could continue teaching, despite Los Angeles Unified School District’s vaccine mandate for all employees.

Los Angeles Times, 10-29-21

While a free nation cannot and should not try to coerce atheists toward belief, people of faith, while we still have a voice, have an urgent duty to alert our fellow citizens that, although religious freedom protects atheists, atheism itself nonetheless has an inherent and — alas — well-established tendency to work not only against religious freedom, but against all freedoms.

Eric Metaxas, Christian author and radio host, in his column, “Is atheism the enemy of freedom?”

Fox News, 10-25-21

There’s no such thing as separation of church and state. . . .

In the classroom, kids would learn about good vs. evil, and that Judeo-Christian ethic separates itself from Islam and atheism and all these other belief sets on so many levels.

Josh Mandel, Ohio Senate candidate and former Ohio treasurer, during a GOP candidate debate, saying the authors of the Constitution envisioned a country where school children would be taught about God.

Newsweek, 10-25-21

Nearly everything that plagues our society can be attributed to a failure to follow God’s laws for morality and his rules for and definition of marriage and family.

Rep. Bob Good R-Va., during a House debate Oct. 26 on anti-domestic violence legislation called the Family Violence Prevention and Services Improvement Act.

Huffington Post, 10-26-21

The dilemma for the atheist is that he is compelled to oscillate unhappily between self-importance and no importance.

Donald DeMarco, senior fellow of Human Life International, in his column, “Atheism’s ‘eccentric’ nature.”

National Catholic Register, 11-8-21

Bob Good

Note to members

For those of you who get the PDF version of Freethought Today, there have been a few changes to the content you can see.

Because of privacy concerns — the PDF can be easily forwarded to non-members — FFRF has stopped including in the PDF version the Black Collar Crime report, names of new Lifetime members, and the names of the Letterbox contributors.

The online version at freethoughttoday.com also follows this protocol. Only the actual print newspaper contains all of these items.

If you would like to continue reading

Black Collar Crime, see the names of FFRF’s newest Lifetime members, or see the names of those who contributed to our Letterbox, you will need to change your preferences in how you receive Freethought Today.

In order to do that, follow these simple steps:

Log into your FFRF.org account.

Click on “Update your contact information.”

Go down to “Deliver Freethought Today by” and click on either “Newspaper by mail” or “Both PDF and paper copy.”

Click “Submit.”

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 clue: H => K .

FFRF’s classic ‘Freethinker’ mug

Our classic ‘Freethinker’ mug has been re-created. White imprint on classic blue, matte finish. 9.5 oz. American-made mug. Price includes over \$10 in shipping cost.

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Item# MU01

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The many reasons for the holiday season

By John Compere

Our American winter holiday season begins and ends with secular holidays (Thanksgiving and New Year’s Day). In between are various secular, sectarian, ethnic, cultural and regional celebrations. They are merging, yet different, American holiday traditions.

Our winter holidays become the season of peace and goodwill when they are inclusive of all traditions and not exclusive for any one tradition.



John Compere

Peace and goodwill are also the principles proclaimed by one of the popular songs of the holiday season. There will be “peace on Earth and goodwill to men,” women and children when we respect other tra-

ditions and reject the badwill of those who arrogantly claim their tradition is the exclusive reason for the season.

The inclusive secular celebration for all choosing to participate can involve Santa Claus, elves, Rudolph and other flying reindeer, sleighs with bells, gift giving, snowmen/women, fireplace stockings, decorative trees, poinsettias, mistletoe, holly, eggnog, candy canes, caroling, the Grinch, holiday cheer and much more.

The exclusive sectarian celebrations are for those practicing a particular religion. Christianity, for example, commemorates the fictitious birth date of a Jewish figure from the ancient Middle East. Christian biblical scripture also blesses and encourages peacemaking (Matthew 5:9;



Painting by Jacques Le Fresno

Romans 14:19; James 3:18). It is important to note that less than 50 percent of Americans belong to a church, synagogue or mosque (Gallup poll).

“Season’s greetings” and “Happy holidays” refer to the entire festive period and all traditions. “Merry Christmas” refers to one day (Dec. 25) and one tradition. The word “Christmas” comes from Greek, Latin and Hebrew translations of “Christ’s mass,” which is an exclusive ritual of one religious denomination.

American colonists (Puritans, Congregationalists, Quakers, Methodists, Baptists, et. al.) opposed celebrating Christmas because it was a sectarian ceremony of the Roman Catholic Church. Southern states were the first to begin celebrating Dec. 25 with feasting, drinking, dancing, gambling, hunting, fishing and socializing. It later became an American public holiday at the initiation of banks

and businesses and is our biggest commercial holiday.

Yuletide celebrations and decorated trees originated with pagan winter festivals of Germanic people in early Europe. Neither are mentioned in religious scripture.

Saint Nicholas was a gift giver to children and a fourth-century Eastern Orthodox bishop in Asia. His Dec. 6 festival day was a European holiday dedicated to children. He was recreated in America as our secular Santa Claus and the date changed to Dec. 25, becoming the genesis for our secular gift-giving tradition.

The day, month or year of Jesus’ birth is not known. It was celebrated at different times for 300 years until a fourth-century Catholic pope arbitrarily set it on Dec. 25 to compete with the popular pagan winter solstice festival celebrated throughout Europe. There is not just one birth story,

but three contradictory birth versions (Matthew 1-2; Luke 1-2; Revelation 12). All were compiled from oral stories (hearsay) and written in ancient Greek by different anonymous and non-eyewitness authors long after Jesus reportedly lived. They cannot be reconciled when compared.

The term “Xmas” is not sacrilegious, does not replace Christ with an English “X” and does not remove Christ from Christmas. Those who claim otherwise display ignorance of Christian history. “Xmas” originated in the early Christian church as an acceptable abbreviation for Christmas because the New Testament was written in ancient Greek and its letter for Christ was “X.” The Greek letter “X” is deeply rooted in Christianity and has been used as a sacred Christ symbol for centuries.

The historic facts about our winter holiday season provide an important perspective. “Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored,” as English philosopher and writer Aldous Huxley perceptively penned.

Respect for all Americans and their traditions fosters peace and goodwill. Peacemakers and Goodwillers care about others, welcome different holiday traditions, keep personal beliefs in perspective and accept human diversity. Peacebreakers and Badwillers do not. More respectful inclusiveness and less disrespectful exclusiveness will ensure peace and goodwill for all during this winter holiday season.

“So many gods, so many creeds,
So many paths that wind and wind,
While just the art of being kind
Is all this sad world needs.”
— Ella Wheeler Wilson

FFRF Member John Compere is a retired lawyer, retired judge and Texas rancher.

Theologian admits religion does more harm than good

By James A. Haught

Surprisingly, an important theologian and Catholic scholar has admitted that all religions do more harm than good.

Writing in the Harvard Divinity Bulletin a couple of years ago, Northwestern University Professor Robert Orsi delivered a blistering indictment titled: “The Study of Religion on the Other Side of Disgust.” He startlingly stated, “On balance, in the long perspective of human history, religions have done more harm than good.”

Orsi described how he grew up in a devout Italian-American Catholic family, went to Mass several times weekly, and how he has devoted his life to faith as chairman of Catholic Studies in the Religion Department at Northwestern. He has written sev-



James A. Haught

eral religious books.

Orsi focused most of his disgust on the never-ending Catholic pedophile scandal and on bishops who have tried to hide the sordid abuse of innumerable children. He quoted psychologist Richard Sipe, a former Benedictine priest who estimates that half of Catholic clergy violate their vow of celibacy.

Orsi emphasized: “Please make no mistake about this: It is impossible to separate ‘religion’ here from the rape of children, young people, women, seminarians and novices. . . . Disgust teaches

me that the history of religion is always also a history of perversions. . . . Disgust reminds me of the sexual abuse of indigenous people at the hands of Catholic missionaries . . . and of the sexual abuse of orphans, of children with disabilities, of drug-addicted teenagers.

Orsi also lashed Protestants, however. “I say on this day that I am disgusted with Catholicism and, by extension, with all religion,” he wrote. Addressing fellow religion scholars, he declaimed: “Perhaps some of you are disgusted, for instance, by how cravenly evangelicals have embraced political corruption in the United States today in order to advance the allegedly Christian agenda of ostracizing and harassing young LGBTQ people, curtailing women’s reproductive rights and basic health care,

and reviving a toxic white Christian nationalism.

“Disgust is the final step in the explication of the idea of lived religion. On the other side of disgust is a clearer vision of how religion is actually lived in everyday life, with its intimate cruelties, its petty as well as profound humiliations, its sadism and its masochism, its abuses of power and its impulses to destroy and dominate.”

America has many university religion departments, scholarly religious foundations and other religion research centers. I wonder how many of the experts at these places quietly share Professor Orsi’s view.

FFRF Member James A. Haught was the longtime editor at the Charleston Gazette and has been the editor emeritus since 2015. This column is adapted from a piece originally published on Nov. 25, 2019, at Daylight Atheism.


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What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

Founded in 1978 as a national organization of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics), the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc., works to keep state and church separate and to educate the public about the views of nontheists. FFRF has more than 35,000 members. FFRF is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and donations are tax deductible for income tax purposes.

FFRF’s email address is info@ffrf.org. Please include your name and physical mailing address with all email correspondence.

FFRF members wishing to receive online news releases, “action alerts” and “Freethought of the Day” should contact info@ffrf.org.

FFRF NEWS

‘Casting Light’ report
FFRF calls out Florida’s multiple violations

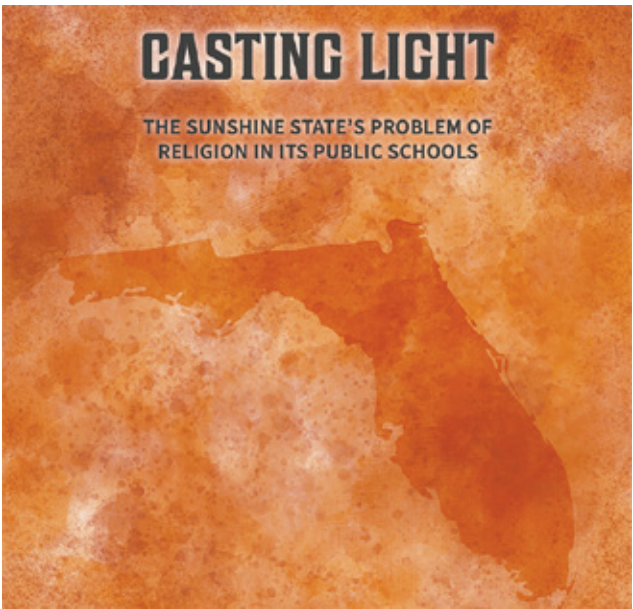
A new report by the Freedom From Religion Foundation is calling attention to the myriad unconstitutional activities taking place in public schools all over Florida — and proposing an easy fix.

“Casting Light: the Sunshine State’s Problems of Religion in its Public Schools” (ffrf.us/sunshine) documents serious, systemic Establishment Clause violations in Florida public schools, ranging from teachers imposing their personal religion on students to administrators establishing chaplaincies. The report has been sent to every Florida school district.

“These abuses of power fly in the face of well-established law, but school district employees and officials are taking cues from state officials,” states FFRF. “Florida state government seems intent on putting Christianity into Florida’s public schools.”

“Casting Light” points to a number of such instances. For example, the Florida Board of Education attempted to amend social studies standards, insisting that “Judeo-Christian values influenced America’s founding ideals and documents.” After a public outcry, the standards were removed, but in last-minute, opaque political maneuverings at a July meeting, the board added “the Judeo-Christian tradition” back into one standard. And after the 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, even as the Florida Legislature ignored the pleas of students for meaningful reforms, it passed a law requiring every public school to display the Christian Nationalist motto, “In God We Trust.” With state level leaders like this, it’s no wonder teachers and staff feel comfortable flagrantly violating court precedent protecting students’ rights of conscience.

FFRF’s report examines typical Florida public school violations reported to FFRF and focuses attention on some of the worst-offending districts. There are 67 public school districts in Florida, and FFRF has received complaints about religious promotion occurring in nearly all of them. Among the worst offenders are Orange County Public Schools (against which FFRF actually filed a lawsuit over censorship of literature), Polk



County Schools and Marion County Schools. FFRF also gives an example of one district, Hillsborough County Public Schools, that took proper corrective action.

When FFRF receives complaints directly from affected parents, students and others, FFRF reaches out to district administrators to bring these problems to their attention and engage their cooperation. FFRF asks school districts to investigate the complaints, stop unlawful practices, and educate staff in their district to prevent problems from recurring. “Many districts respond to FFRF complaints by doing exactly that,” notes FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert. “But it is rare to receive such cooperation from most Florida public school districts.”

The law is clear, FFRF’s report emphasizes: Public schools must be neutral toward religion. Public school teachers, for instance, may not participate in student-initiated prayer, lead their students in prayer, encourage students to pray or otherwise endorse reli-

gion to students. The Supreme Court has also continually struck down prayers at school-sponsored events, including public school graduations and school athletic events. The Establishment Clause prohibits public school boards from scheduling or conducting prayer as part of their meetings. Public schools may not provide religious instruction. The distribution of bibles to students at public schools during the instructional day is prohibited. And public school districts must not allow outside religious groups or individuals school resources or unique access and opportunities to befriend and proselytize students during school events and on school property.

Religious imposition in public schools is unconstitutional and exclusionary, FFRF contends. Currently, 24 percent of Americans are religiously unaffiliated and another 7 percent belong to religious minorities, making nearly one-third of our population non-Christian. Nationally, 21 percent of younger Americans — those born after 1999, i.e., all current public school students — identify as either atheist or agnostic. By ignoring complaints of systemic, unconstitutional religious promotion in schools, Florida school districts are signaling to a significant, growing segment of the community that they are second-class citizens. Even more important, such school districts, by flouting established law and legal precedent, are communicating the wrong lesson to all students, staff and parents, regardless of religious belief or lack of religious belief.

In short, FFRF’s report concludes, public schools exist to educate, not indoctrinate. Florida school districts must educate staff and adopt sound policies ensuring all school-sponsored programming, including athletics, are free from religious activity and pressure.

FFRF and its active local chapter, the Central Florida Freethought Community, are eager to assist school districts in adopting policies and practices that respect the rights of conscience of all students and members of the district community. All officials have to do is ask.

Prop 3 a big mistake for
Texans, FFRF contends

Voters in Texas unwisely approved Proposition 3, a ballot measure amending the state Constitution to prohibit the state from limiting worship services even for public health considerations, such as in the event of another pandemic. FFRF is disappointed with this result, which may lead to easily preventable deaths in the future.

“One harsh lesson the United States learned over the past year is that deadly viruses don’t care about religious liberty,” says FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. “Texas can’t ever claim to be a ‘pro-life’ state with this on the books.”

Time and again, worship services have turned out to be super-spreader events during Covid outbreaks. The most dangerous events have been those where many people are gathered indoors, in close proximity, especially where they are talking or singing. Many lives were unquestionably saved by states that closed bars and halted concerts, and by multiple governors who correctly recognized that worship services are similarly risky events.

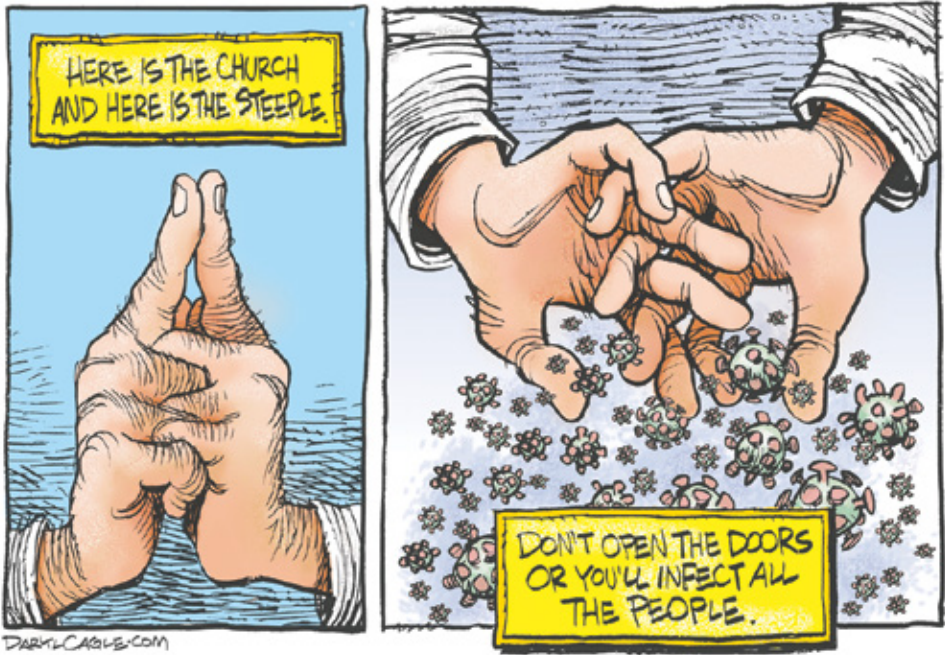
Unfortunately, the ultraconservative religious bloc of the U.S. Supreme Court, as well as religious public officials and preachers, demanded that public health restrictions not apply to in-person worship services. The high court’s majority disingenuously compared worship services to patronizing

grocery or liquor stores, even though nobody spends hours singing or sitting in close proximity to other customers at such locations. Justice Elena Kagan correctly noted at the time that “this foray into armchair epidemiology cannot end well.”

Now, even if Texas state actors realize their mistake, they have tied their own hands and will be unable to protect constituents. In the event of a wave of a new Covid variant, or another pandemic altogether, Texans will continue to gather in-person to pray for the health of their fellow citizens. Those prayers will not only go unanswered, but the very act of gathering to pray will galvanize the spread of a virus that would otherwise be mitigated by effective quarantine measures that apply equally to all.

“This is worse than anyone realizes,” says Director of Strategic Response Andrew L. Seidel. “The text is not limited to a pandemic. If there were an active shooter, a hurricane or tornado or flood, chemical spill, terrorist attack, or if the church is structurally unsound, overcrowded, and full of fire hazards, the government is now powerless to save the lives of religious worshippers.”

This problem is not limited to Texas, FFRF notes. Eight other states have passed bills with a similar effect, and



such bills were introduced in another 15 states this year.

Preachers and religious Texans will not be the only victims of this massive lapse of judgment. Neighbors, health care workers, and citizens in need of hospital beds will also be needlessly harmed in the event of another pandemic. It was reckless for Texan lawmakers to place this measure on the ballot, and foolishly dangerous for voters to support it.

“This sounds an awful lot like human sacrifice,” quips Barker.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is committed to working to ensure that reason — not religion — prevails in America’s medical policies.

The Not So Good Book: What Does the ‘Holy Bible’ Really Teach?

By Brian Bolton
Foreword by Dan Barker
Illustrated by Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Steve Benson

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NEW!

THE NOT SO GOOD BOOK

WHAT DOES THE HOLY BIBLE REALLY TEACH?

Brian Bolton



Judge Bruce Schroeder speaks during the Kyle Rittenhouse trial.

FFRF questions judge’s bible story instructions

FFRF is critical of a highly questionable biblical reference made Nov. 4 during the nationally watched homicide trial of Kyle Rittenhouse in Wisconsin.

Judge Bruce Schroeder raised eyebrows when explaining the concept of “hearsay” to the jurors by citing the trial of Paul in the New Testament.

“Saint Paul, when he was put on trial . . . he happened to have been a Roman citizen. So, he had rights that we share now as Americans,” Schroeder clumsily explained. “He said, ‘Where are the witnesses against me? I am a Roman, and I have a right to confront my accusers. They should be here.’ And so that led to, actually, his voyage to Rome to have his case heard before the Emperor. Um, so it’s an ancient rule; it’s strictly, strictly enforced.”

FFRF points out that the judge’s fumbling explanation from Acts 25 was both confusing and unnecessary, since the legal concept of hearsay — a witness reporting unsubstantiated information received from other people — is easy to explain without reference to scripture. Worse still, Schroeder’s explanation gives the false impression that America’s secular laws are somehow based on the bible, which they are not.

“This shows how little believers know their own bible,” says FFRF Co-President Dan Barker, a former evangelical preacher

and author of books about the bible. “We are told the bible is divine and infallible, yet it is basically ‘hearsay.’”

The judge would have done better to quote Thomas Paine on the bible, rather than quoting the bible, contends Barker. In *The Age of Reason*, Paine wrote that the miracles of the bible are hearsay, specifically noting of the virgin birth, “It is only reported by others It is hearsay upon hearsay, and I do not choose to rest my belief upon such evidence.” Paine went on to condemn all divine revelation as hearsay: “It is revelation to the first person only, and hearsay to every other”

This isn’t the first controversy over religion in the Rittenhouse case. In September, FFRF Director of Strategic Response Andrew Seidel helped break the story about the Christian fundraising website raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for Rittenhouse’s defense. Wrote Seidel, “Christians fundraising for an accused racist and murderer was a surprise only to those who conflate ‘Christian’ with ‘good.’ They were surprised that Christians could support racism and murder because of flawed assumptions.”

A secular judge in a secular court of law representing “We the People,” and whose duty is to administer justice, has no business quoting the bible, FFRF concludes.

Freethought Caucus requests religious health care probe

FFRF is commending Congressional Freethought Caucus members for asking regulatory authorities to investigate a dubious, religious form of health care.

Congressional Freethought Caucus Co-Chairs Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Calif., and Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., plus Mark Pocan, D-Wis., and Del. Eleanor Holmes-Norton, D-Washington, D.C., have called on the Federal Trade Commission to investigate health care sharing ministries “and take immediate action to protect consumers.”



Rep. Jared Huffman

Such entities are a form of health coverage in which members — who typically share a religious belief — make monthly payments to cover expenses of other members. According to the Commonwealth Fund, health care sharing ministries (HCSMs) “do not have to comply with the consumer protections of the Affordable Care Act,” which means that “although HCSMs are not insurance and do not guarantee payment of claims, their features closely mimic traditional insurance products, possibly confusing consumers.”

Health care sharing ministries have recently been under scrutiny due to damaging reports in the New York Times and an exposé on John Oliver’s “Last Week Tonight.” As one observer cogently puts it, “Christian health sharing is a scam.”

In the carefully composed congressional letter, the Freethought Caucus members make it clear that health care sharing ministries “are jeopardizing the health and well-being of a reported 1.5 million Americans through deceptive marketing practices and their systemic failure to provide necessary products and services for the consumers to whom they offer ‘coverage.’”

The impact of these “health care” organizations has been devastating, according to the letter. The members of Congress have several questions

for the Trade Commission, including: “What actions can FTC take to protect consumers from enrolling in health coverage that does not cover medically necessary tests and services?”

FFRF expresses its appreciation of these members of Congress for shining a spotlight on a little-known and questionable model of health care.

“We are grateful that Rep. Huffman and his colleagues are asking for clear answers about health care sharing ministries and how to best regulate them to prevent harm to consumers,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Such outfits are yet another example of how religiously affiliated organizations hide their harmful and profitable practices from the public under the guise of religious exemptions.”

“We applaud Rep. Huffman’s actions today,” adds FFRF Director of Governmental Affairs Mark Dann. “It shows that he is a true leader in Congress. We hope that today’s letter to the Federal Trade Commission is just the beginning of more actions that will rein in these harmful entities.”

Don’t attend the annual religious breakfast, FFRF urges Biden

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has written President Biden asking him to stop attending or endorsing the National Prayer Breakfast. Biden attended and spoke virtually at the event in February.

FFRF earlier sent similar letters to members of Congress who have recently sponsored or attended the event.

“The breakfast is a pay-to-play political event with a troubling history,” write FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor in their letter to Biden. They note that the shadowy Fellowship Foundation, known as “The Family,” was originally founded to oppose the New Deal, and operates as the sole, public networking event

for the secretive group. Its unsavory connection to world dictators and its agenda, often anti-democratic, have been exposed in a bestselling book and Netflix documentary.

Far from being a benign, ecumenical, non-partisan, non-denominational event, the annual breakfast is being used by individuals such as the anti-gay Rev. Franklin Graham, currently the primary financial backer, to buy influence. Notoriously, the FBI caught Maria Butina, an unregistered foreign agent with ties to Russian leader Vladimir Putin, using the event to illegally “backchannel” with American officials who attended. Butina pleaded guilty and was convicted in 2018. My Pillow

CEO Mike Lindell credits his rise and relationship with former President Trump to being “picked out of 12 people to pray with Ben Carson in a room [at] the National Prayer Breakfast.”

Salon.com reports that “Two European advocacy organizations warned this year that right-wing foes of LGBTQ and reproductive rights are using prayer breakfasts to advance their legislative and political agendas.”

The Salon story also reported: “Revelations by journalist Jeff Sharlet and others show a growing pattern of the National Prayer Breakfast functioning as a de facto convention for religious conservatives.”

“Russian spies, Christian national-

ists and theocrats, anti-LGBTQ bigotry, influence-peddling, and a shadowy religious group known as ‘The Family,’” adds FFRF Director of Strategic Response Andrew Seidel.

FFRF notes that for many years, the National Prayer Breakfast has been used like a “gotcha event,” in which presidents and members of Congress have felt constrained to attend for fear of appearing unfaithful. Now, FFRF warns, the real danger is that public officials will be tainted by their association with the prayer breakfast. “Given the sectarian religious nature, the National Prayer Breakfast is no place for our President and Commander in Chief,” FFRF concludes.

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A digital billboard featuring a woman (Christine Roy) wearing a face mask and a red cat-eared hood. To her right is a red flame graphic with the text "NOT AFRAID OF BURNING IN HELL". Below this, her name "Christine Roy" and the phrase "UNABASHED ATHEIST" are displayed in white.

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

IN THE NEWS

Poll: Strong support for upholding *Roe v. Wade*

Americans, by a 2-to-1 margin, believe the Supreme Court should uphold *Roe v. Wade*, according to a recent Washington Post-ABC News poll.

The public also strongly opposes the Texas law banning most abortions after six weeks of pregnancy.

The poll shows 27 percent of Americans say the court should overturn *Roe*, while 60 percent say it should be upheld, attitudes that are consistent in polls dating to 2005, the Washington Post reports.

Asked about a Texas law that authorizes private citizens anywhere in the country to sue anyone who performs or aids someone in obtaining an abortion in Texas after about six weeks of pregnancy, the poll finds 65 percent say the court should reject the law, while 29 percent say it should be upheld. The Supreme Court is considering the role federal courts can play in evaluating the Texas law, which was intended to avoid federal court review.

A separate question finds 36 percent support state laws that make it more difficult for abortion clinics to operate, while 58 percent oppose such restrictions, including 45 percent who oppose them “strongly.”

“The poll results show why some on the court might be reluctant to take such a bold step,” writes Scott Clement of the Washington Post. “*Roe* has become synonymous with a woman’s right to choose abortion, even as some restrictions on the process can be politically popular.”

Evangelicals want to live in Christian country

A majority (57 percent) of white evangelical Christians said they’d prefer that the United States be a nation primarily made up of people who follow Christianity, according to a new study from Public Religion Research Institute. Only 13 percent of white evangelicals said they prefer the country to be made up of people belonging to a wide variety of religions.

“On this question, there is really more going on than politics,” said Robert P. Jones, PRRI’s CEO.

Also, 75 percent of white evangelicals say the values of Islam are at odds with American values and ways of life — significantly more than any other U.S. religious group.

The survey also finds white evangelicals to be outliers on a host of other issues.

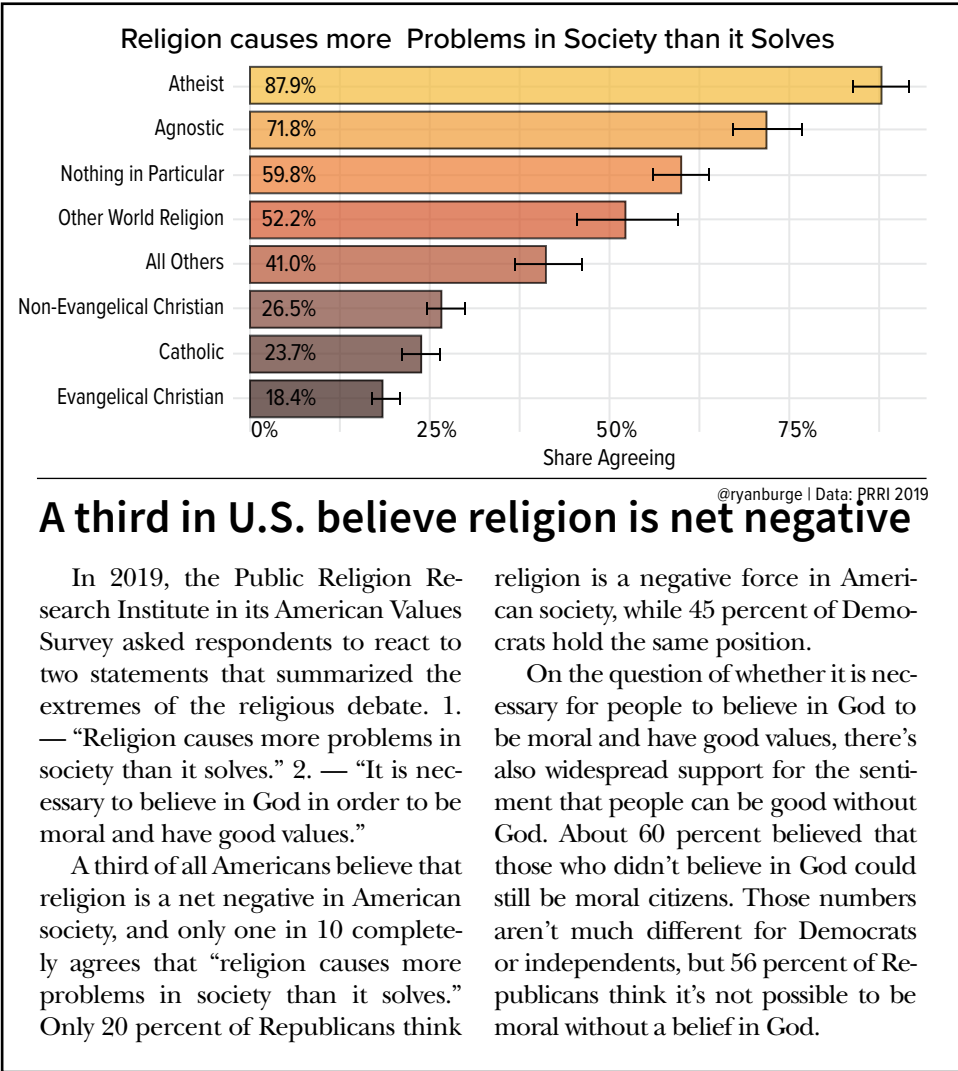
Almost a quarter of white evangelicals (23 percent) believe in the QAnon conspiracy theory — more than any other religious group. White evangelicals are also the religious group most likely to say American patriots might have to resort to violence to save the country.

New low for number of religious Canadians

A new report from Statistics Canada has found that Canadians are becoming less religious.

New StatCan data show that in 2019, only 68 percent of Canadians reported having a religious affiliation. It’s the first time that fewer than 70 percent of Canadians reported being religiously affiliated since StatCan began tracking the data in 1985. Between 2000 and 2017, the percentage of religiously affiliated Canadians hovered around 77 to 82 percent, before declining to 75 percent in 2018.

Only 23 percent of Canadians in 2019 reported attending group religious activities, such as church service, at least once



a month. Between 2000 and 2009, that figure was around 30 percent.

Individual religious activities, such as prayer or meditation, are also on the decline. Only 30 percent of Canadians reported engaging in such activities at least once a week, compared to 46 percent in 2006, when the data was first collected.

‘Procession’ documentary reveals clergy sex abuse

In the new Netflix documentary “Procession,” six men who survived clergy sexual abuse as children make short films to try to process their trauma. The film debuted in theaters and on Netflix in November and shows the group from Kansas City working as a collective in scenes based on their memories and dreams.

In Ed Gavagan’s vignette, a priest sits with his trousers off in an all-white bedroom, beckons to Gavagan and asks, “What do you do when you think of girls? If you can’t tell me, then you can show me. Show me what you do when you have impure thoughts.”

Later in the scene, Gavagan vents his frustration by smashing up the set with a sledgehammer after learning criminal charges against his alleged abuser have been dropped. Although four of the men received settlements from civil suits, none of the accused priests was charged with a crime.

“Procession” is director Robert Greene’s seventh feature documentary and is influ-

enced by drama therapy. The abuse survivors saw the potential to confront long-buried parts of themselves. They took on roles in each other’s stories and used the same young actor, Terrick Trobough, to play themselves in every segment.

“I admit I was a bit skeptical about the drama therapy part, but the way it’s presented is quite powerful,” said Tilt magazine critic Stephen Silver.

“There’s no fixing” what happened decades ago, said Greene. “There’s no giving back to these guys what was taken from them. All we could hope to do is move forward.”

Religious exemptions for contractors rolled back

The Department of Labor has rolled back a rule made during the Trump administration that clarified religious exemptions for federal contractors organized around faith-based activities that would allow them to discriminate against certain groups in hiring decisions.

The department had already signaled its intent to rescind the rule after facing lawsuits opposing the rule, which went into effect on Jan. 8.

Since its proposal, civil rights groups had opposed the rule, saying that it

stoked confusion about nondiscrimination laws and encouraged those wanting to discriminate to seek federal contracts. They also warned that it could usher in discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in particular.

The Biden administration said the rule had been a departure from “long-standing policy and practice” of how the department had interpreted an existing religious exemption for contractors.

French bishops agree to compensate abuse victims

France’s Catholic Church announced on Nov. 8 that it would compensate sex abuse victims by selling property assets or taking out a loan, if needed.

French bishops said in a written statement they will set up an “independent, national body” tasked with addressing compensation issues.

Eric de Moulins-Beaufort, President of the Bishops’ Conference, stressed that the Church has recognized its “institutional responsibility” and decided to go “on a path of recognition and reparation that paves the way for victims to get the possibility of a mediation and a compensation.”

The Bishops Conference held its annual meeting a month after a report revealed large-scale child sex abuse within the French Catholic Church. The study released by an independent commission estimated that some 330,000 children were sexually abused over 70 years by priests or other church-related figures.

Judge: Texas ban on mask mandates violates ADA

A federal judge ruled Nov. 10 that the ban by Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas on mask mandates in his state’s schools violates the Americans with Disabilities Act.

U.S. District Court Judge Lee Yeakel’s decision bars state Attorney General Ken Paxton from enforcing the governor’s executive order. The decision comes after parents of young children with disabilities and a disability rights group sued Texas officials this summer, alleging that Abbott’s executive order put students with disabilities at risk.

“The spread of COVID-19 poses an even greater risk for children with special health needs,” wrote Yeakel, an appointee of former President George W. Bush, in Wednesday’s decision. “Children with certain underlying conditions who contract COVID-19 are more likely to experience severe acute biological effects and to require admission to a hospital and the hospital’s intensive-care unit.”

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll

By Orvin Larson

Prof. Larson writes with affection and respect of this illustrious 19th century freethinker.

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FFRF VICTORIES

By Casandra Zimmerman

Religious language removed from website

A teacher is no longer spreading religious messaging after a concerned citizen reported to FFRF that a Kansas City School District employee had posted her biography, which included a “Spirit Walk” section and “Wants God to receive the glory for every success and triumph,” on the district website.

In a letter written by Legal Fellow Joseph McDonald, FFRF asked that these specific posts be taken down, as they could create the impression of endorsement of religion.

McDonald went on to say “We understand, of course, that the district cannot monitor every statement made by employees. But we do ask that it take the appropriate steps to ensure that employees are made aware of their constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion while acting in their official capacity.”

The response came from Kelly Wachel, chief marketing and communications officer of Kansas City Public Schools, who informed FFRF that the religious language was taken down and steps had been taken to avoid it in the future.

‘God bless America’ display removed from park

A “God bless America” digital sign was removed from a Florida city park after a concerned Pompano, Fla., resident reported that it had been on display for several weeks in August on the entrance sign to Pompano Community Park.

FFRF explained that when this phrase is proclaimed by the government, it “amounts to a declaration of orthodoxy in religion that falsely equates patriotism with piety,” and urged the city to recognize its obligation to provide all residents with an environment free from city-sponsored religious messages.

The city assistant manager responded to report that the digital sign was removed from the park.

No more bible verses on social media posts

The superintendent of Glen Rose ISD in Texas has stopped using bible verses in social media posts after receiving a letter from FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line. A concerned resident reported that on Sept. 1, the superintendent posted a bible verse on the district’s official Facebook page. The post informed parents and students about the junior high campus closing but also included “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and a sound mind. 2 Timothy 1:7.”

Line informed the superintendent that district employees and administrators can worship, pray or quote any religious text they wish when acting in their capacities. But they are not permitted to use their position as public school employees to promote and endorse their personal religious views.

A response from the superintendent indicated that he will not do it again.

City won’t use religious pamphlet in bills

A Minnesota city has stopped including religious promotions in their bills to residents after FFRF intervened.

A concerned Saint Clair resident reported that in July 2021, the city included an insert with a sign-up for a summer bible school in its June/July 2021 monthly newsletter and utility bill. The insert promoted “Divine Nature Camp,” a vacation bible school program.

After hearing from FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line, the city agreed that it will only include inserts appropriate for a government entity.

No more prayer meetings for players in Oklahoma

A high school in Tecumseh, Okla., is no longer proselytizing football players and students after FFRF intervened.

A concerned community member reported that on Aug. 29, Tecumseh High School football players were required to attend a team prayer meeting on the football field while district coaches organized and led prayer at the school-sponsored event. A post on the Tecumseh Savage Football Face-

book page confirmed that there was an official team prayer event held to “say a prayer over our players, cheerleaders, band members, students, coaches, and fans.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote a letter to Tecumseh Public Schools asking that it investigate and take action to make sure coaches and employees no longer lead students in prayer, participate in prayer with students or organize team prayer events.

Tecumseh Superintendent Robert Kinsey instructed the removal of the religious message on the school’s Facebook page, and spoke with coaches to ensure that prayers are student-led, voluntary and held off district property.

School district dress code won’t discriminate

An Alabama school district revised its discriminatory dress code after receiving a letter from FFRF. A parent reported that the latest edition of Shelby County Schools’ Student Code of Conduct prohibited students from wearing “any sign, symbol, logo or garment, which has become synonymous with any gang, cult, Satanism, or unauthorized club or activity.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote that “A school policy that targets a particular form of religious belief, in this case, ‘Satanism,’ violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. The prohibition on any sign, symbol, logo, or garment that has become synonymous with Satanism must be removed immediately.”

The school district responded to the letter saying that they are revising the Code of Conduct to address FFRF’s concerns and expect the revisions to be approved at the district’s next board meeting.

Virginia school board ends prayer at meetings

A Virginia school is no longer scheduling prayers during meetings after hearing from FFRF.

A letter was sent to Russell County Public Schools to inform the chairman that it is unconstitutional for the board to institute prayers at its meetings. FFRF requested that the board immediately refrain from scheduling prayers as part of future school board meetings to uphold the rights of Russell County residents under the First Amendment.

The school board later let FFRF know that it no longer includes prayer on its meeting agenda and no longer leads or orchestrates a public prayer as part of its meeting.

Bible verse removed from university locker room

A Tennessee university removed a bible verse from a football locker room after FFRF’s intervention.

It was reported that the Tennessee Tech University football locker room displayed the bible verse, “Let us not be weary in doing good, for in due season we shall reap a great reward. Galatians 6:9.”

In a letter sent to the president of Tennessee Tech University, Philip Old-

ham, FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line made it clear that it was “inappropriate for the university to display this religious message because it conveyed government support for religion.”

General counsel for Oldham responded by saying that the bible verse had been removed from the locker room.

Scheduled graduation prayer ended in W.Va.

An annual student-led prayer has ended in Roane County, W.Va., after the school received a letter from FFRF.

Roane County High School used to have student-led prayers each year at the graduation. The prayers were a planned part of graduation ceremonies and were included in the official graduation program.

Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district to let them know that by “scheduling prayers at graduation, the district abridges that duty and alienates the 38 percent of younger Americans who are not religious.”

The director of the school, LaDonna McFall, received the letter, had a conference with the principal and assured FFRF that the prayers would no longer be included in the graduation ceremonies.

District stops “See You at the Pole” events

Conroe Independent School District in Texas has stopped proselytizing students after FFRF wrote a letter to the school district. Teachers and staff members were participating in a “See You at the Pole” event at Birnham Woods Elementary School on Sept 22.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line reminded the district that “it cannot organize, promote, or endorse religious events like See You at the Pole.”

In a response from the general counsel for the district, it was reported to FFRF that training has been provided to all new administrators regarding “See you at the Pole” and other similar situations in which they could encounter religious activities in the school setting.

School-sponsored prayer ended in Louisiana

Athletic and staff meetings at Lafourche Parish School District in Louisiana will no longer include prayer after a parent reported that the district regularly opened school-sponsored events with Christian prayer, including athletic events and staff meetings.

On Aug. 4, the district invited a Catholic priest to pray over a staff meeting at Central Lafourche High School. The school then posted about this prayer on its official Facebook page.

In a letter to the district, FFRF explained that a prayer taking place at a “regularly scheduled school-sponsored function conducted on school property” would lead an objective observer to perceive it as state endorsement of religion.

Superintendent Jarod W. Martin responded and assured FFRF that the issue had been addressed and resolved.

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Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health

Court case shows abortion rights in peril

The U.S. Supreme Court’s pro-choice justices, who distressingly seem to be in a minority, made some very convincing points in a crucial abortion rights case on Dec. 1.

The court heard oral arguments for *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, a case that would prohibit abortions in Mississippi after the 15th week of gestation. Should the court rule in favor of the abortion restriction, the very fabric of *Roe v. Wade* would be dismantled and abortion rights throughout the country would be in great peril.

Of consequence in the oral arguments was the issue of *stare decisis*, which refers to precedent: to stand by rulings and reasonings previously decided by the court, in other words. Justice Stephen Breyer explained the importance of *stare decisis* in this case, stating that to re-examine *Roe* would “subvert the court’s legitimacy.” Justice Elena Kagan expounded upon this by explaining that a major goal of *stare decisis* is to “prevent people from thinking that this court is a political institution that will go back and forth” as its membership changes.

Indeed, the makeup of the Supreme Court has significantly changed since it ruled just a year and a half ago that hospital-admission requirements on abortion clinic doctors were unconstitutional. Since then, anti-abortion Justice Amy Coney Barrett replaced pro-abortion rights Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg after her death in September 2020. As the composition of the Supreme Court has become



Photo by Shutterstock

On Dec. 1, protesters rally outside the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., as the court hears oral arguments in a case that would prohibit abortions in Mississippi after the 15th week of gestation, or possibly overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

ultraconservative, religious legislators are scrambling to overturn *Roe v. Wade* despite decades of precedent upholding it as constitutional. Justice Sonia Sotomayor asked as much: “Will this institution survive the stench that this creates in the public perception — that the Constitution and its reading are just political acts? I don’t see how it is possible.”

Perhaps one of the most impressive exchanges took place between Sotomayor and Mississippi Solicitor General Scott Stewart. In questioning Stewart about the

motivation for state abortion restrictions, Sotomayor pointedly asked: “How is your interest anything but a religious view?” She continued, “The issue of when life begins has been hotly debated by philosophers since the beginning of time. It’s still debated in religions. So when you say this is the only right that takes away from the state the ability to protect a life, that’s a religious view, isn’t it?” Sotomayor also questioned: “When does the life of the woman, and putting her at risk, enter the calculus?”

Sotomayor’s poignant statements un-

derscore the foundation of abortion restrictions and bans. They also complement the amicus brief that the Freedom From Religion Foundation and its secular allies, Center For Inquiry and American Atheists, filed before the high court in this case. The brief, drafted by FFRF Associate Counsel Elizabeth Cavell with help from FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert, Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott and FFRF Reproductive Rights Intern Barbara Alvarez, states: “Doing away with the viability framework and asking courts to review and weigh state interests before viability will require courts to address the underlying purpose of such abortion bans — to enshrine into civil law a religious belief about when personhood begins.”

The Supreme Court is expected to rule on this case in 2022. Given the ultraconservative leanings of the majority of justices on the bench, abortion rights look endangered. In the meantime, it is imperative that we take secular action and stand up for abortion rights. Let’s call on our U.S. senators and demand that they pass the Women’s Health Protection Act. FFRF submitted formal testimony in support of this act, which would codify abortion rights in the statutes. Thanks to the work of many activist citizens, including FFRF members, it has passed the U.S. House. However, it faces a lot of resistance in the Senate.

Call your senators to tell them to work to pass this vital piece of abortion legislation that will protect abortion rights regardless of the court’s ruling. There’s never been a more critical time.

Abortion ban would spike pregnancy-related deaths

By Barbara Alvarez

A recent study shows how detrimental it would be to women’s health if there was a nationwide ban on abortion — a possible reality in light of recent events.

Outlawing abortion would have severe consequences on the health and lives of women throughout the country, according to a study published in *Demography*, a Duke University Press research journal. The study’s author, University of Colorado Professor Amanda Jean Stevenson, used an analysis of recently published statistics and found that a national abortion ban could result in a 21 percent increase in pregnancy-related deaths. This figure would rise to 33 percent among Blacks, even now facing stark inequalities in the health care system.

Increasing Black women’s exposure to the risk of pregnancy-related mortality because their wanted abortions are denied would exacerbate an existing public health crisis. Stevenson acknowledges that self-managed abortions, or ending one’s own pregnancy with abortion medication without a doctor or health care provider, has become a safer option for legal abortions than the clandestine abortions of the past. Indeed, medication abortion is safer than medications like Tylenol and Viagra. Despite its safety and efficacy, it is restricted to distribution by “certified” providers.

Nevertheless, women have been able to



Photo by Chris Line
Barbara Alvarez

find alternative sources for obtaining this medication. Stevenson notes, however, that not everyone will know about or be able to successfully access or pay for the pills. She concludes that “denying all wanted abortions in the United States would increase pregnancy-related deaths. Yet any state-level total or nearly total ban on abortion could also cause more pregnancy-related deaths. . . . Similarly, other abortion bans (e.g., banning abortions sought for specific reasons or at specific gestations) will also cause more deaths if they lead to more pregnancies being continued.”

Frighteningly, this future doesn’t seem too far away. In fact, 2021 has been a record-setting year — with more than 106 restrictions on abortions that have become law. The Supreme Court recently heard oral arguments by abortion providers and the U.S. Department of Justice challenging SB 8, the draconian abortion restriction that effectively bans almost all abortions in Texas and deputizes private citizens to uphold the law through abortion bounty hunting. Eight other states have passed bans at six weeks in the hopes of overturning *Roe v. Wade* and making abortion illegal throughout the country.

Tragic and unnecessary deaths underscore the dangers of anti-abortion legislation of any kind. In fact, Dr. Tlaleng Mofokeng, a health expert with the United Nations, filed a brief ahead of the Dec. 1 oral arguments for *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, a case that could overturn *Roe v. Wade*, arguing that this would be antithetical to human rights. She writes: “This would cause irreparable harm to women and girls in violation of the United States’ obligations under the human rights treaties it has signed and ratified.” The brief further explains the cruelty of abortion restrictions:

“The denial of safe abortions and subjecting women and girls to humiliating and judgmental attitudes in such contexts of extreme vulnerability and where timely health care is essential amount to torture or ill treatment.”

Mofokeng explains that rescinding abortion rights in the United States will have significant ramifications throughout the world.

That’s why there has never been a more pressing time to make our secular voices heard and call upon our senators to pass the Women’s Health Protection Act, which guarantees the right of patients to receive abortion care and for health care professionals to provide abortions. The act protects against medically unnecessary restrictions, such as mandatory ultrasounds, waiting periods, admitting privilege re-

quirements and limits on medication abortion or any restrictions creating burdensome barriers to abortion access.

FFRF submitted formal testimony in support of the Women’s Health Protection Act, and thanks to the work of many activist citizens, including FFRF members, the act passed the House.

It is now in the Senate — where it will face major resistance. It’s vital that we ensure that our secular voices are heard. Call your senators to tell them to work to pass this important piece of abortion legislation. The lives of women and pregnant people around the world depend on our actions.

Barbara Alvarez is FFRF’s inaugural Anne Nicol Gaylor Reproductive Rights Intern.

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

Religious liberty under threat

Christian capture of our federal judiciary

This column was first published on FFRF's *FreethoughtNow.com* blog site on Oct. 27.

By Rebecca Markert

A little more than a year ago, Justice Amy Coney Barrett was confirmed to the U.S. Supreme Court. It was President Trump's third and final appointee to the high court. Her confirmation completed the Christian nationalist takeover of the court and tipped the scales in favor of a privileged status for religion in our country.

The Trump administration, with the help of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, rammed through judges at



Photo by Chris Line
Rebecca Markert

an alarming rate in 2020. Despite a raging pandemic and economic uncertainty, the only priority appeared to be packing the federal bench. Trump judges are young, ultraconservative and fill 30 percent of the seats on the federal bench, positions they'll hold for life. They're also overwhelmingly Christian nationalists, which the Freedom From Religion Foundation warned about in a report issued last year.

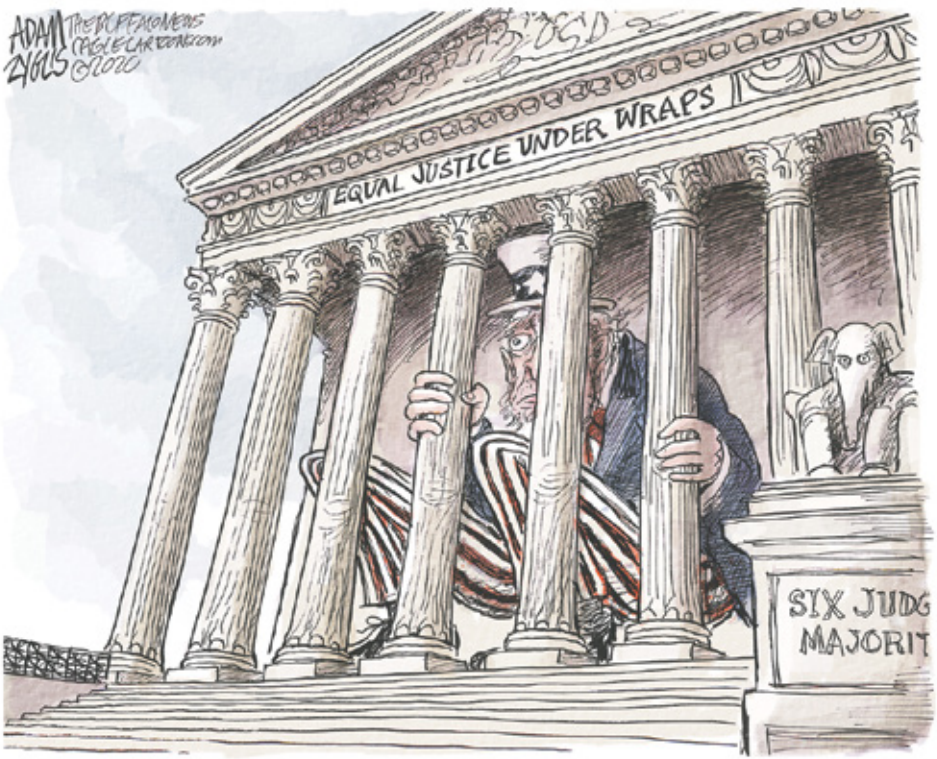
Among those 230 or so judges are three Trump-appointed Supreme Court justices.

2020 court rulings

Since those appointments, we've seen the Supreme Court, through the shadow docket, block Covid restrictions in California and New York, and upend 50 years of precedent by greenlighting Texas' abortion ban after six weeks of pregnancy. The high court also continues to expand religious privilege, particularly to Christians, through increased exemptions.

As pointed out in FFRF's "Religious Liberty Under Threat" report, Amy Coney Barrett's appointment to the bench already flipped it on an issue of life or death — public health restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. In July 2020, the court let public health restrictions on church services stand in Nevada and California. Only four months later, after Barrett's confirmation, the court flipped on the issue. In *Roman Catholic Diocese of New York v. Cuomo*, the court would not allow New York to enforce limits on church gatherings because of claimed religious discrimination. In April 2021, the high court would rule again on the issue of Covid restrictions in California — this time approving religious gatherings in homes in the *Tandon v. Newsom* case. In neither case did the Constitution change; the only difference was who was on the court.

The idea that any time the government grants an exemption to the law, it is obligated to grant an exemption for religion was expanded in *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*. There, Catholic Social Services, one of 30



agencies that Philadelphia contracted with to vet foster families for abused and neglected children in new homes, claimed the city violated its free exercise rights by denying them a contract for foster care services. Philadelphia stopped contracting with Catholic Social Services because it refused to work with same-sex couples for foster care screening services, in violation of the city's anti-discrimination policy. In a 9-0 ruling, the Supreme Court ruled that the city infringed on the Catholic agency's "free exercise" rights.

In reviewing the contract, the court focused on a provision that gave the commissioner "sole discretion" to grant exceptions. Though the commissioner had never given an exemption for the nondiscrimination policies, the court found that because individual exceptions existed elsewhere, the law was not of general applicability.

Though the ruling was limited to the facts of this specific case, it continues the alarming trend among justices of expanding privileges to Christians. And the effect of the ruling is this: Catholic Social Services is still eligible to participate in the foster care program certifications, and still allowed to discriminate against same-sex couples.

The Supreme Court recently heard oral arguments in the cases *United States v. Texas* and *Whole Woman's Health v. Jackson*, which both challenge the state law banning abortion before most people even know they're pregnant. The law not only denies pregnant people their constitutional right to an abortion, but also favors religious ideology over evidence-based medicine. SB 8, the harshest abortion restriction in the country, was crafted with help from Texas Right to Life, a Christian anti-abortion group which describes itself as a group that "legally, peacefully and prayerfully protects the God-given right to life of innocent human beings from fertilization to natural death." When Gov. Greg Abbott signed the anti-abortion law, he commented, "Our creator endowed us with the right to life and yet millions of children lose their right to life every year because of abortion."

Religious ideology

There is no science behind the abortion ban, only religious ideology, an attempt to legislate biblical law into our secular law. FFRF has always viewed reproductive justice as a state/church issue and an overwhelming majority of FFRF members support the right to choose.

The court also is poised to move the

needle even further in favor of Christian privilege during this upcoming term. At present, the court has or is set to hear three cases involving religious freedom claims and another case on abortion.

On Nov. 9, the court heard oral arguments in *Ramirez v. Collier*, a death penalty case out of Texas. There, a condemned person is claiming a free-exercise right to have a member of the clergy not only present at his execution, but also in the room praying over him and laying his hands on him at the moment of death, in violation of prison protocols. This case follows a number of death penalty cases from Alabama and Texas considering whether those on death row are entitled to religious clergy in the execution chamber.

FFRF submitted an amicus brief in this case arguing that the death penalty is first and foremost unconstitutional, and pointing out the absurdity of quibbling over a condemned man's free exercise rights moments before he's put to death and stripped of those rights forever. FFRF also argued that the court should allow any person facing capital punishment a source of comfort at their execution regardless of religious belief.

On Dec. 8, the Supreme Court considered *Carson v. Makin*, a case involving a state-backed tuition program in Maine. The program allows rural families with no local public school to get tuition assistance from the state to send their children to private schools. Two families sued because they wanted assistance to be used at private Christian schools that indisputably teach religion. Coming on the heels of *Espinoza v. Montana*, this case could result in the court mandating the use of public funds to teach a "Christian and biblical worldview" ultimately obliterating the separation of state and church.

The court is also scheduled to consider *Shurtleff v. Boston*, a case from Boston, which will determine whether the city violated the free speech clause by refusing to fly a Christian group's blatantly sectarian flag. The organization, called Camp Constitution, had demanded that the city display the Christian flag, which features a blue rectangle in the corner with a blood-red Latin cross. This is the same flag that was paraded by Christian nationalists, intermingled with symbols of white supremacy, during the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection. It's another move by this highly activist court in taking cases that advance Christian privilege.

The Supreme Court also heard arguments on another major abortion case

on Dec. 1. *Dobbs v. Jackson Health Organization* involves Mississippi's 15-week abortion ban. FFRF submitted an amicus brief with the court, arguing that religion has always been at the heart of abortion bans. This is evidenced in Mississippi by various highly sectarian religious statements that Mississippi legislators made in support of the legislation, such as: "I believe that life is precious and children are a gift from God" and "I am not God, but I serve a God who says life is in the blood. And this bill will protect those lives."

This case directly challenges the constitutionality of previability abortions long protected by the high court. Barrett is an outspoken anti-abortion proponent who has received widespread praise from anti-abortion groups and organizations, giving the Supreme Court a securely anti-abortion majority. The court has long established that the right to abortion exists up to viability. If the court allows this ban to stand, it will upend decades of precedent and end fundamental constitutional rights for pregnant people all over the country.

What to expect

Christian right legal organizations are suing government entities all over the country regarding Covid-19 vaccine mandates and seeking religious exemptions to those mandates. It's almost inevitable that one of those cases will go before the court.

A case involving prayer by a public high school football coach in Washington is also pending request for review at the Supreme Court. The theocratic Liberty Institute is representing Joe Kennedy, former Bremerton High School football coach, who was ordered to stop praying with students. He refused, was placed on administrative leave, and eventually was not re-hired. The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled unanimously in favor of the school district, but Kennedy filed for certiorari, basically claiming that the circuit court ruled incorrectly. It would not be surprising to see the Supreme Court take up that case as well.

As pointed out in FFRF's report last year, we're only seeing the beginning of radical changes to how religious liberty is defined in America. What's shocking is the lightning speed at which they're changing law. As the Supreme Court hands down cases, lower Trump appointees will be empowered to "bless" other governmental favoritism of religion.

The federal courts have been hijacked — and must be restored. Expanding the number of federal judges is decades overdue, with many federal cases taking many years to complete because there are too few judges.

Congress has the ability to fix this problem by expanding the federal judiciary at every level. Every other avenue of progress will be blocked until our broken court system is addressed. Americans should bombard their members of Congress with calls to fix this miscarriage of justice immediately.

FFRF will continue to monitor and report on Christian nationalist judges who are intent on turning our hallowed principles on their head.

Check FFRF's Christian nationalist page (ffrf.org/legal/christian-nationalist-courts) to get updates on the captured courts. FFRF remains committed to fighting for the cherished constitutional principle of separation between state and church, our secular government and true religious freedom for all.

Rebecca Markert is FFRF's legal department director.

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.

The secular case for reparations

Black economic justice from an atheist's view

Cynthia McDonald gave this speech at the Women of Color Beyond Belief conference in Chicago on Sept. 25.

By Cynthia McDonald

I want to first say that I am honored and humbled to have been invited by the great Mandisa Thomas to address you. I never thought I'd be asked to come before such an accomplished group of people to speak about something that I am so extremely passionate about. Finding the Black Nonbelievers was integral because it helped me find a community of other Black atheists, skeptics, agnostics and humanists and let me know I am not alone.

James Baldwin (author, poet, activist and sharp critic of the church) once said, "I love America more than any other country in this world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually." He also said, "To accept one's past — one's history — is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought."

Activism in this space happens because, although one may love the land they are from, it does not mean the land has always loved them. It also means that if I do love this land, I must speak up when it is wrong and has wrought harm to its first citizens. I use the term "first citizens" not as an insult to those who have come before or who have immigrated after America was established. I use that term because what we know and how we determine citizenship was as a result of the ending of slavery and the adoption of the 14th Amendment.

The opening sentence of Section One of the 14th Amendment defines U.S. citizenship as: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside." There are certain rights that come with citizenship such as:

- Freedom of speech.
- Freedom of the press.
- Freedom of religion.
- Freedom of assembly.
- Right to petition the government.
- Freedom of liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Citizenship also comes with responsibilities such as:

- Supporting and defending the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic.
- Staying informed of the issues affecting your community.
- Participating in the democratic process (example: voting).
- Respecting and obeying federal, state and local laws.
- Respecting the rights, beliefs and opinions of others.

African Americans who were either enslaved or the descendants of the enslaved have kept the responsibilities of what is expected of a citizen, yet the rights and privileges that come with such a title have not always been extended to us. African Americans have supported and defended the Constitu-



A view of over 200,000 marchers along the Capitol mall on Aug. 28, 1963, where Martin Luther King Jr. would speak about, among other things, the need for financial equality for Blacks.



Cynthia McDonald

tion against all enemies, foreign and domestic, because we have fought in every war. I, myself, am a daughter of a Korean War veteran and a great granddaughter of a World War I veteran.

African Americans stay informed of the issues that affect our community because we are still living under the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow. African Americans have participated in every election since we were given the right to vote, yet we still face voting suppression in numerous states and municipalities. African Americans obey the laws of the land, yet we are incarcerated more than five times the rate of whites, and at least 10 times the rate in five states. According to a study, Black drivers are about 20 percent more likely to be stopped than white drivers relative to their share of the residential population. The study also found that once stopped, Black drivers were searched about one-and-a-half to two times as often as white drivers, while they were less likely to be carrying drugs, guns or other illegal contraband compared to their white peers. Also, according to a different study, Black Americans are 3.23 times more likely than white Americans to be killed by police.

Generational wealth

Another indicator of the privileges that come with citizenship is the opportunity to create and pass on generational wealth. Right before the March on Washington in 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. addressed a group of activists and organizers. He reminded them of the purpose of the march in the nation's capital. Often, most people think Dr. King was there so he could speak about his dream. Components of that speech are often misused, misquoted or misrepresented. King reminded his folks that this march is about gaining full citizenship status, which includes a proper share of wealth and economic inclusion.

He said: "At the same time when America refused to give the Negro any land, through an act of Congress, our government was giving away millions of acres of land in the west and the Midwest. It meant that it was willing to undergird its white peasants from Europe with an economic floor. But not only did they give the land, they built land-grant colleges with government money to teach them how to farm. Not only that, they provided county agents to further their expertise in farming. Not only that, they provided low interest rates in order for them to mechanize their farms. Not only that, today many of these people are receiving millions of dollars in subsidies not to farm and they are the very people telling the Black man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps. Now this is what we are faced with and this is the reality. Now, when we come to Washington in this campaign, we're coming to get our check."

King was referring to a policy called the Homestead Act of 1862. This particular policy lasted for over 114 years. The government granted more than 270 million acres of land while the law was in effect. (The passage of the Fed-

eral Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 repealed the Homestead Act in the 48 contiguous states, but it did grant a 10-year extension on claims in Alaska.) By 1934, well over 1.5 million white families — both American-born and immigrant — eventually profited from it. And, although the process was rife with fraud, as many homesteaders sold their plots to corporations, the original claimants pocketed the income from land sales, establishing a basis of wealth and capital.

About 6,000 Black families were able to take advantage of the policy, but most of them lost their land through land theft, lynchings and the like. Enforcement of previous policies such as The Oregon Land Donation Act of 1850 barred Blacks from owning land and real estate. In 1866, shortly after the end of the Civil War, the Southern Homestead Act (SHA) was supposed to function much like the original act. During the first year of this act, unoccupied southern land was offered exclusively to African Americans and loyal whites, but after 1867, even landless former Confederates applied. You can guess what happened afterward.

This one act of Congress has approximately 48 million white Americans living today off the wealth from that one policy. Companies such as Cargill and Perdue exist because of the Homestead Act. Colleges such as USC exist because of the Homestead Act.

The United States has used policy countless times to create wealth in predominantly white communities. Policies such as the New Deal largely went to whites and excluded Blacks. The GI Bill was enacted toward the end of World War II. This policy was to give economic assistance to veterans, such as getting a house, investing in a business, or paying for college. Unfortunately, the management of this policy was given to the states, so Black soldiers coming home from war were often denied this benefit and never told why. An example is the state of Mississippi only granted two Black veterans the GI Bill when it first was enacted. Some 1.2 million Black men served in the U.S. military during the war. There were 237,000 soldiers from Mississippi and a large contingency of

FFRF ad on '60 Minutes'

CBS has finally agreed, seven years after it was first recorded, to air during "60 Minutes," FFRF's 30-second TV spot by the obliging Ron ("Unabashed atheist . . . Not afraid of burning in hell") Reagan.

The ad will run on four consecutive Sundays, beginning Jan. 9 and running through Jan. 30.

those soldiers were Black.

Why does this matter? Oftentimes, the question is raised, “What is wrong with Black people?” What about Black-on-Black crime? What about Black gangs? What about the marriage rate being low? What about Chicago? What about this and what about that? The “what-aboutisms” are what I like to call the symptoms of the disease. I also like to call them “work avoidance.”

Since I hit you with a little history of economic injustice, let’s delve into the wonderful world of statistics. Currently, Black Americans own less than 2 percent of the wealth in the United States. The median income of an African American household is roughly \$30K - \$43K vs. the median income of a white household being nearly \$66K per year. The estimated median wealth of Black households is \$36,000 (not liquid), while white households estimated their parents’ median wealth at \$150,000. A Black household median wealth for the head of the house with a bachelor’s degree is roughly \$15,000 less than the head of a household that is white without a high school diploma.

According to the Economic Policy Institute, African Americans’ median household income and wealth is lower than ALL racial and ethnic groups. Even this myth that African Americans have this spending power of \$1.3 trillion is a fallacy. That number was based on self-reporting surveys and the combined incomes of African Americans for approximately a year. If you did not know by now, income does not equate to wealth and it damn sure does not mean buying power.

Reparations needed now

So, what now? How is this going to be solved? The only way this is going to be solved is by how the government always solved the issue of groups of people coming into wealth: policy. Massive economic policy — and that policy specifically for the injured group is reparations. This can only be achieved through what leading reparations scholar and Duke University Professor William Darity Jr. calls ARC — Acknowledge, Redress and Closure.

So, before we go into ARC, I think it is important to define reparations. Merriam-Webster defines reparations as a repairing or keeping in repair — the act of making amends, offering expiation, or giving satisfaction for a wrong or injury. . . or B: something done or given as amends or satisfaction. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines reparations as a levy on a defeated country forcing it to pay some of the war costs



Photo by Shutterstock

During the pandemic in 2020, 41 percent of closed businesses were Black-owned. Black Americans own less than 2 percent of the wealth in the United States.

of the winning countries.

Reparations were levied on the Central Powers after World War I to compensate the Allies for some of their war costs. Another example of the later definition is when Germany was forced to pay reparations to Jewish Holocaust victims and their descendants if the victim did not survive. Other countries such as France and Croatia, who were also complicit in this behavior, also paid reparations.

When the civil war ended, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman met with former slaves who were pastors and other leaders in their community and asked them what they wanted. They told him land that they could work and farm on their own. On Jan. 16, 1865, during the American Civil War, he issued Special Field Orders No. 15, a wartime order to allot land to some freed families in plots of land no larger than 40 acres. That wartime order was rescinded by the government and the land was redistributed back to the former slave owners after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln when Andrew Johnson became president. According to an article in Yes! magazine, those land grants alone would have been worth at least \$6.4 trillion dollars

today. Another econ Ph.D. candidate told me recently the land grants would have been worth over \$19 trillion today.

America has actually acknowledged its malfeasance. On July 29, 2008, the U.S. House of Representatives issued an apology to Black Americans for the institution of slavery, and the subsequent Jim Crow laws that for years discriminated against Blacks as second-class citizens in American society. Rep. Steve Cohen, a Democrat from Tennessee, issued the resolution and it had 120 co-sponsors. Along with the acknowledgement, President Biden recently signed into law Juneteenth as a national holiday, acknowledging the last of the enslaved to be told in Galveston, Texas, that the war was over and they were free.

So, the United States is already very aware of its complacency, and despite the recent laws in various states banning the teaching of critical race theory (or what I call teaching actual history), it would not negate the fact that America has done a deep injustice and harm to Black Americans.

America is liable

America is also liable for other policies that caused great harm to our community, such as convict leasing, land theft, domestic terrorism, lynching, redlining, the war on drugs, mass incarceration, multiple Black towns where residents were massacred and whole townships under water, to environmental racism such as Flint, Mich., water or Cancer Alley in Louisiana. All of this blood is on America’s hands, yet we have yet to see any attempt for redress and repair.

What does redress and repair look like? Darity, the professor from Duke, stated in an article from BU Today, “Redress is the actual form that restitution might take — and I’ve argued that in any program of reparations, it’s important that restitution must include in some significant way direct payments to eligible recipients.”

So, who is eligible? Darity’s criteria (which I agree with) is a person who identifies as Black or African American for at least 12 years before a reparations program is enacted and can trace their

lineage to the institution of chattel slavery through at least one ancestor. Some have argued that this is an arduous task. I am here to tell you it is not.

According to the Smithsonian, before 1965, Black people of foreign birth residing in the United States were nearly invisible. According to the 1960 census, their percentage of the population was to the right of the decimal point. But after 1965, men and women of African descent entered the United States in ever-increasing numbers. During the 1990s, some 900,000 Black immigrants came from the Caribbean; another 400,000 came from Africa; still others came from Europe and the Pacific rim.

Also, as an anecdote, not only am I a descendant from chattel slavery, I am also a descendant of Black immigrants. First, second and so on generations of Black immigrants know from where we hail.

The United States census from 1870 is the first census to name all former slaves. Using census records constitutes indirect evidence to the institution of chattel slavery. Also, it is noteworthy that there are still other documents, such as bills of sale and other slave records, that survived. Darity proposes in his book he co-wrote with A. Kirsten Mullen, *From Here to Equality — Reparations for Black Americans in the 21st Century*, that part of a reparations program would be for the federal government to set up an office to help those who have claim to find substantiating documents to confirm their lineage to chattel slavery.

At the heart of any reparations program should be to address and close the racial wealth gap. As mentioned earlier, I shared historical examples of multiple infractions that caused this chasm that exists today. Only direct payments, economic building programs, and implementing protections can address this macro crisis that Black Freedmen descendants face. As stated, Black Americans own less than 2 percent of the wealth in the United States. During the pandemic in 2020, 41 percent of closed businesses were Black-owned. This is a direct result of not having capital to



Photo by Shutterstock

In this Sept. 12, 2019, file photo from outside a Democratic primary debate venue near Texas Southern University campus, a group of ADOS (American Descendants of Slavery) activists demand reparations for slavery.

Continued from page 13

Discriminatory system

- “Black workers often face labor market discrimination, including being steered toward occupations that are less secure, lower paying, and have fewer benefits and career advancement opportunities. These systematic obstacles to gaining access to good jobs are especially prevalent in the private sector.
- “Opportunities to contribute to and benefit from innovation and advances

• “The financial system strips Black households of their wealth by denying them access to the same investment opportunities and affordable credit that white households have. This systematic bias makes it more difficult for Black households to participate in the stock market, to start and grow their own business, and to put away a rainy-day fund, while they carry costlier debt such as car loans, credit card balances, and payday loans at the same time.

- “Black households continue to face housing market discrimination, which makes it harder for them to own a home in the first place, and their houses appreciate less in value than those of white households.

- “Additional factors such as systematically worse treatment in education, health care, and in the criminal justice system also feed into the persistent Black-white wealth gap.

- “Amid the fallout from the pandemic, state and local governments have made deep cuts to public sector jobs. Black workers have seen economic gains thanks to their hard work in the public sector. These income and wealth gains are now at risk again. In September 2020, 211,000 fewer Black workers had a job in the public sector than was the case in September 2019.”

A reparations program should encompass all of these factors to create a pathway of making a group of people whole. Support for education, support for entrepreneurial activity, and some resources that go to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) is absolutely necessary. But the preponderance of the funds must go to individual recipients. And they must go in such a way that we, in fact, eliminate the racial wealth gap. That should be the primary objective of the reparations project.

So now let's discuss closure. Malcolm



Photo by Shutterstock

X said, “If you stick a knife in my back 9 inches and pull it out 6 inches, that’s not progress. If you pull it all the way out, that’s not progress. . . . They haven’t pulled the knife out; they won’t even admit that it’s there.”

According to Darity: “Closure is an agreement on the part of both parties — the culpable party and the victimized party — that the debt has been paid. But I want to be clear that closure in that sense does not mean forgetting. An important dimension of reparations programs must address issues concerning the memory of the events that led to the reparations commitment.”

Unfortunately, a proper conversation about closure cannot be had until the metaphoric knife is acknowledged in the body politic that matters. We have seen “piecemeal policies” proposed, signed into law, benign neglect and the like. Affirmative action, which was a policy to help “minorities” be added more to work and education spaces, has mostly assisted white women. The 13th Amendment still allows for the enslavement of convicted felons and one is already aware of the disproportionate rate of Black men in U.S. prisons. Black men are roughly 6 percent of the population but they make up roughly 41 percent of the prison population. How?

Even with the landmark civil rights act of 1964, King said “Until we commit ourselves to ensuring that the underclass is given justice and opportunity, we will continue to perpetuate the anger and violence that tears the soul of this nation. I fear I am integrating my people into a burning house.”

Faith hasn't helped

Continuing in the spirit of King, oftentimes faith leaders are credited with leading in the space of social justice. But what good has it done us? Even though one cannot deny the organizing efforts of churches along with organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Black wealth is still at the bottom. Despite the ills we as a group have experienced, God is awfully silent concerning our plight, even though, according to recent Pew

the alleviation of sickness and poverty, which are viewed as curses to be broken by faith. This is believed to be achieved through donations of money, visualization, and positive confession.

These are all forms of apologetics to continue to believe and serve a silent and apathetic God that has done nothing to change the position of Black Americans. I'd conjecture he is also quite absent at the southern border as well.

Solutions needed

It's time for a new approach. I had a discourse with a Black conservative who told me the reason for all these abysmal statistics is because of how we think. I cannot completely dismiss that. Hoping, wishing and praying for a deity to save our community is a bad approach.

I want to believe as many true things as possible and not believe in the things that are not true.

Any civil rights leader who was effective in their advocacy has taught us that none of the things we desire on the macro level can be achieved without a political solution. Voting is important, but it is not the full stop of political engagement. Who writes their congressperson today? What about calling their office? How about going to town halls where you can engage them directly? And the engagement is not just on the federal level. There are state and municipal representatives that need engagement, as well, because all politics are local.

Speaking on the need for proper economic justice is a herculean task, especially since the issues that Black people face are long and deep. Although it may seem insurmountable, it is still a task that should not be ignored or forgotten. We as a people will not survive without commitment from the powers over us to intervene. They won't do it, though, without our voices. It can't just be African Americans saying this, either. It has to be a critical mass of all peoples recognizing and putting hands to plow to make this a reality.

I, as a Black woman, can only do so much. It takes a village to make this happen. And please recognize that the upliftment of the Black community is an uplift for America. Every transformative legislation that affects the social and economic make-up for America is because Black people said, “enough is enough.”

Time for reciprocity.

Thank you.

Cynthia McDonald writes a blog (“ADOS Health and Wellness”) which speaks on the social determinants of health of Black Americans who descend from chattel slavery. She also hosts a socio-political podcast (“The 13 Percent”), a pop culture podcast (“Chronicles of a Revolutionary Nerd”) and is a regular host on the “Non-Prophets” show, produced by the Atheist Community of Austin. Cynthia also serves as the general secretary of ADOS Chicago.

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Religious vaccine exemptions are harmful

This article first ran on Religious Dispatches on Oct. 8 and is reprinted with permission.

By Andrew L. Seidel

The Spirit of 1776 was as much about science as it was about freedom. George Washington required the entire Continental Army to get inoculated against smallpox — the first army-wide vaccination in history. Mortality dropped from 30 percent to 1 percent. Mandatory vaccinations just might have won America its freedom. From that auspicious beginning, Americans have let vaccine science protect our soldiers in the military, our students in school, our healthcare workers on the front lines — everyone.

Vaccine mandates are undoubtedly constitutional. The Supreme Court explained back in 1905 that freedom can be limited, especially when wielded to harm others’ rights: “The liberty secured by the Constitution of the United States does not import an absolute right in each person to be at all times, and in all circumstances, wholly freed from restraint.”

During WWII, the court specifically said that religious freedom is no excuse to shun vaccines: “The right to practice religion freely does not include liberty to expose the community or the child to communicable disease or the latter to ill health or death.” Even the late, uber-conservative Justice Antonin Scalia singled out religious exemption from “compulsory vaccination laws” as not required by the First Amendment. Most state courts

have independently reached the same conclusion.

In hundreds of cases across more than a century, the law is clear: vaccine mandates are constitutional and religious exemptions are not constitutionally required.

People are fond of saying that freedom isn’t free, but nor is it absolute. And thinking in constitutional absolutes is killing Americans. Literally. The claim that the Second Amendment protects a sacred and unlimited right is a legal narrative recently invented, deliberately advanced, and grossly manipulated by the NRA — and it’s killing Americans. The Supreme Court’s political manipulation of the constitutional right has allowed guns to become as much of a public health crisis as Covid and has thwarted sensible gun regulation. This Supreme Court is considering another Second Amendment case this term that will likely entrench the absolutist misunderstanding of the right further.

There is currently a crusade, much like the NRA’s, to weaponize the religious freedom right guaranteed by the First Amendment. To make the right to act on a religious belief as absolute as the right to believe. This has never been true under our Constitution.

Drawing these lines is not difficult, though in this case it’s a matter of life and death. You are free to believe whatever you want. But your right to believe does not include the right to risk the lives, health and safety of anyone else. You might believe you can safely operate a car while drunk; but if you get behind the wheel, we punish that reckless behavior. Vaccine refusal is reckless in the same way drunk driving is. Whether the

belief is religious or not doesn’t change the calculus.

If you need an easier example, just think of ritual human sacrifice. Is murder permitted if the murderer believes his god commands it? If religion were a license to violate another’s rights, that would not be religious freedom, but religious privilege — your right to believe would trump my rights. This version of religious freedom is inherently unequal.

No major religion has a theological objection to vaccines. In one NPR story, a pastor admits that there’s no religious objection to vaccines, but also confesses that he’ll sign off on religious exemptions, not because of theology, but because a vaccine mandate “just seems a little harsh right now.” He may be well-meaning, but rarely do we get such a clear example of the rampant abuse of religious freedom.

He admits religion isn’t the issue, but is using religious privilege to recklessly risk other people’s lives. As Chrissy Stroop recently pointed out in her column, “sometimes religion is the problem.”

This Supreme Court hasn’t yet ruled on religious exemptions to mandatory vaccinations in the Covid-era, but it’s almost certain that the five Covid justices will side with Christian privilege. They’ve already weaponized religious freedom against public health orders, among other things. I’d bet on a decision in favor of mandatory religious exemptions from vaccine mandates whenever the shadow docket presents an opportunity for the court to decide such a case.

The difference between the decades- and even century-old Supreme Court cases mandating vaccines and today’s, isn’t just the recently weaponized reli-

gious freedom, but also because “in most instances, communities had achieved the luxury of herd immunity,” as FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor put it recently. Once the hard work of getting to herd immunity is done, a religious exemption might not seem like a big deal. But we have to get there first.

“We don’t have that luxury when it comes to Covid-19,” Gaylor told me, “and even before this pandemic, we’ve seen the health and fiscal cost of vaccine exemptions, especially religious exemptions, for decades in this country.” Gaylor is right: in 2015 alone, unvaccinated people cost the country \$7 billion. The only exception to this mandate should be medical — those people who are, for instance, immuno-compromised. Herd immunity protects these vulnerable people.

Herd immunity for Covid-19 is far away because a lethal virus was politicized by Christian nationalists. Professors Andrew Whitehead and Sam Perry, leading scholars on Christian nationalism, have so many receipts. They’re not alone.

Today’s anti-vaxxers, be they religious or political, are accustomed (and inured) to the benefits of modern medicine. They want life to get back to normal but fail to realize that that normal was achieved with mandatory vaccination and no religious exemptions. If we’re to be free of the pandemic that’s killed 710,000 of our friends, brothers, sisters, and parents — more Americans than all our wars combined — we need to recover that spirit of 1776. Mandatory vaccination now. Religious exemptions be damned.

Andrew L. Seidel is FFRF’s director of strategic response and author of *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism is Un-American*.

FFRF members install secular holiday displays



For the fourth successive year, FFRF members have put up a display honoring the Bill of Rights and our secular government in Concord City Plaza in New Hampshire. FFRF extends thanks to member Jack Shields and other local members for their activism in organizing the annual display, which will be available to the public for viewing until New Year’s Day.



A Bill of Rights “nativity” display has again been installed by vigilant FFRF Member Will Meyer next to a Christian nativity scene at the Grundy County Courthouse, not far from Chicago. It will be available for public viewing until Jan. 2

CRANKMAIL

Here is this issue’s installment of correspondence sent to FFRF from the less savory side. Printed as received.

My freedom matters to: I should be able to watch a show without a bunch of idiotic atheists on my screen telling us all how they want to be free. Whoever Ron Reagan Jr is who is mocking my religion by saying he’s not afraid of hell is completely, uncalled for! It’s not my problem if you aren’t intelligent enough to respect others like myself. I haven’t seen any commercials pushing toward my Christianity so I expect to be respected the same way. If you’ve never had the pleasure of having your prayers answered that’s very sad but again not mine or any other Christians problem. I pay for my internet so you need to do your disgusting bidding somewhere else. Stay off of my screen!! — Melissa Burton

FFR: There is already something in this country called separation of church and state. Nobody is forcing religion on you through the government you fucking liars. You and your atheist organization can suck dicks in hell. Have a nice day. — Dana Carrington

Billboard in Houston: I am a very strong Christian and I saw your billboard along the freeway here in Houston sleep in on Sunday there is no afterlife I sure would like to know where you have proof that there is no afterlife other than you saying there is no afterlife the Bible says absent from the body present with the Lord the Bible is thorough proof that there is afterlife God wrote the book God is incapable of lying God does not make up fairy tales as you people do and a place of billboard on the freeway telling people there is no afterlife that is totally wrong you have no right to do so let people choose what they want to choose if they so choose not to follow God then let that be their choice don’t instigate it we Christians do not instigate people into following Christ we give them a choice we just tell them what the consequences are for not accepting Christ as you people have all I can say is that I hope all of you will come to your senses someday and realize that God exists — Kalin Rossmeier

God’s love: As all men are touched by God’s love, so all are also touched by the desire for His intimacy. No one escapes this longing; we are all kings in exile, miserable without the Infinite. Those who reject the grace of God have a desire to avoid God, as those who

accept it have a desire for God. The modern atheist does not disbelieve because of his intellect, but because of his will; it is not knowledge that makes him an atheist...The denial of God springs from a man’s desire not to have a God—from his wish that there were no Justice behind the universe, so that his injustices would fear not retribution; from his desire that there be no Law, so that he may not be judged by it; from his wish that there were no Absolute Goodness, that he might go on sinning with impunity. That is why the modern atheist is always angered when he hears anything said about God and religion—he would be incapable of such a resentment if God were only a myth. His feeling toward God is the same as that which a wicked man has for one whom he has wronged: he wishes he were dead so that he could do nothing to avenge the wrong. The betrayer of friendship knows his friend exists, but he wished he did not; the post-Christian atheist knows God exists, but he desires He should not. — Jacqueline Larsen

Atheist: What you may want to consider is your absolute belief in nothingness is really religion itself as you are exhibiting the very behaviors you claim to hate by promoting your belief system upon the masses. You see you really are not atheists, because you do believe in something... it just happens to be nothing. — Alayna Jones

Dangerous: Our forefathers came here, not to get away from religion, but to have the right to practice whatever RELIGION they believed in. Atheism is NOT a religion. You do have the right not to believe in God but you do NOT have the right to try to change the foundation of this country. If you don’t like that religion is practiced here then GET THE FUCK OUT. I find it amusing that the only program that will air your ridiculous diatribe is that disgustingly liberal CBS Sunday Morning, which I was forced to watch by a dear, but ignorant, friend (ignorant to how unbelievably stupid the liberal left is & how they, like you, are a danger to our country). — Stan Prochaska

Covid: I need to know your official views on the death shot Covid Vaccine which is not a vaccine. Also, anyone who has studied it knows astrology works. It is mathematics and physics and frequency and resonance. — Al Fischer

\$1,000 Al Luneman Student Activist Award

We must build a better world ourselves

By Sami

It was dim inside the mosque. I watched as the men, followed by the women, faced Mecca. Sacred Arabic syllables filled the room. Though they were just sounds, they moved the adherents around like a powerful magnet. I imitated these movements, but I did not understand their significance. As I fell onto my knees and stretched my hands out in front of me, I did not realize I was submitting myself to Allah. Islam means submission. I learned



this not from my Muslim childhood but from atheist philosopher Daniel C. Dennett. In his book *Breaking the Spell*, he posits that religions spread through memes. I had begun to realize that those afternoons in the stuffy mosque, singing Quranic scripture, were a form of indoctrination. Like a virus infecting a host, religion attempted to cloud my thinking. A set of strict morals, attitudes and principles were bestowed upon me against my will. For much of my childhood, I had mistakenly identified as Muslim, when, in fact, I was a child of Muslim parents.

In 1995, after my grandfather and uncle had been brutally killed for voicing criticism of Saddam Hussein’s authoritarian regime, my father fled Iraq and immigrated to the United States, where free speech is enshrined in the Constitution. My mother, also a refugee, narrowly escaped genocide in the Bosnian War, where ethnic

minorities were slaughtered and devoid of their religious freedoms.

As a multicultural first-generation American, I hold dear the freedoms afforded by the U.S. Constitution. I advocate for secularism because my lineage testifies to the atrocities of religious violence. My parents lost a national identity as a direct consequence of sectarianism. Otherwise beautiful countries, with vibrant cultures and profound histories, were reduced to rubble. If it weren’t for the religiously motivated genocide against Muslims in Bosnia and the Shia-Sunni schism in Iraq, perhaps my parents would not have immigrated to the United States as refugees.

As a gay person, my entire being is demonized not only through claims made in archaic religious text, but also through religious demagoguery that champions the so-called sanctity of marriage between husband and wife. By being openly gay and atheist in Bosnian and Iraqi-American communities, I am often met with adversity.

For instance, I had finally mustered the courage to post about Pride Month on my Instagram, adding a rainbow flag to my bio. One of my father’s real estate clients happened to see this, and he fired my dad for raising a gay son. Discriminatory acts in the same vein are quite common.

As a teenager, I felt conflicted trying to connect the disparate pieces of my identity: gay, atheist, Bosnian, Iraqi, American. Now, as a young adult, I celebrate my complexity. To address the fundamental issues of our generation, we must first understand ourselves. We are all complex.

The issues I am most passionate about—climate change, economic justice, LGBTQ+ equality—cannot be addressed without the separation of church and state. The rise of

Student activists earn FFRF cash awards

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, with the financial backing of the individual donors, has collaborated with the Secular Student Alliance to select, announce and distribute these student awards. (As per SSA policy to help protect the students’ identities, only the students’ first names are used.)

This year’s winners are:

- Sami — Al Luneman Student Activist Award (\$1,000)
- Amuri — Yip Harburg Lyrics Foundation Student Scholarship (\$1,000)
- Angelina — Phoenix Fund (\$1,500)
- Jordan — Phoenix Fund (\$2,000)
- Egan — Cliff Richards Memorial Student Activist Award (\$1,000)
- Mirona — Cliff Richards Memorial Student Activist Award (\$1,000)

FFRF has a variety of scholarships available to give directly for exceptional student activism, as well. If you know of any student who is actively helping to uphold state/church separation or fighting for the rights of nonbelievers, please contact Freethought Today Editor PJ Slinger at editor@ffrf.org.

religious fundamentalism, coupled with the extraordinary lobbying power of religious interest groups, calls for secular action.

My involvement in activism did not start until I learned what is at stake. When I learned that religious arguments were being used to attack individual rights, I joined Arizona State University’s Secular Student Alliance (SSA) in January 2021 and immediately got involved. The chapter president granted me membership, even though I was then a high school senior.

We started by lobbying Arizona State House and Senate members to vote against bills that impinge on Americans’ religious freedoms. Notably, I fought against HB 2140, a near-total abortion ban.

This past summer, I interned for Rep. Ruben Gallego, who represents Arizona’s 7th Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives. I assisted with federal casework and coordinated with federal agencies on the behalf of constituents.

My atheist activist initiatives are not limited to legislation.

- Cognizant of theist resistance to mental health education, I started a mental health campaign at my high school. I began by placing an op-ed in my school newspaper, which addressed cultural prejudices regarding mental health, many of which are rooted in religious beliefs. I also launched a virtual emotional support group with the aim of addressing the emotional needs of students through science-based, secular approaches rather than ones rooted in religious dogma.
- I joined MoveOn, a leading progressive public advocacy group. On March 31, 2020, as part of the Recovery Recess, I hosted an event for the Thrive and For the Peo-

ple Act. I spoke about how the passage of a transformational infrastructure package can put 15 million Americans in family-sustaining climate jobs, deliver real climate solutions and advance racial, Indigenous, gender and economic justice.

- I was the co-founder and president of the Freedom Liberation Caucus of Ironwood, a nonpartisan political discussion club. As president, I hosted seminar discussions and encouraged a diverse cohort of students to find common ground on controversial issues in an effort to combat censorship.
- I entered the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education’s (FIRE) 2020-2021 Free Speech Essay Competition. Out of 3,000 essays nationally, mine placed second.
- I protested at the Stop the Filibuster rally, where over 200 activists organized to condemn Sen. Kyrsten Sinema for her vehement defense of the Jim Crow relic.
- My op-ed, “Let’s talk about Christian nationalism,” has been published by Secular AZ’s newsletter. Legal Director Dianne Post has even invited me to become a board member of Secular Communities For Arizona.

We cannot just imagine a better world — we must build it ourselves. In accordance with the SSA’s mission, I will do everything in my power to promote secular values and bring a world governed by reason, logic and freethought into fruition.

Sami is a first-generation college student who is a political science major at Arizona State University.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation thanks FFRF Member Al Luneman for making possible this scholarship.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

After earning the Al Luneman Student Activist Award, Sami spoke at FFRF’s national convention in Boston on Nov. 20.

\$1,000 FFRF Cliff Richards Memorial Scholarship

Mirona

Winston-Salem State University

Mirona is a music education major at Winston-Salem State University. Music is her passion and she plans to tutor kids in music after college and become a music teacher and college band director.

Mirona was forced to go to church when she was young and she realized religion was being used as a mechanism to control her and other African-American people. But Mirona was rebellious. Be-

cause of the negative religious views of her bisexuality and being called a “devil,” Mirona quickly realized “religion wasn’t for me.” Even though she has openly identified as an atheist for four years, her family still says she is going through a “phase.”

Mirona is the recipient of the FFRF Cliff Richards Memorial Scholarship dedicated to a student attending a historically Black college or university (HBCU).



Mirona

\$1,000 FFRF Yip Harburg Lyrics Foundation Scholarship

Amuri

Virginia Commonwealth University

As a child, Amuri experienced periods of adversity, and art was a form of escapism. At Virginia Commonwealth University, she is passionate about art and wants to be a studio artist and art teacher. As the deprioritization of creativity in the classroom in favor of rehashed lesson plans stunts the development of a visionary lens, Amuri wants to ensure future generations

are presented with artistic nurturing to maximize their potential.

Amuri wants to promote community engagement in the arts. She volunteers as an art studio assistant at the Children’s Museum of Richmond, helping children create art and greatly further their social-emotional development. She has also created several murals in the city of Richmond.

As an African-American, Amuri felt



Amuri

her racial identity led her to secularism, because religion was historically used as a tool of oppression for black communities within America. By promoting freethought within the black community, Amuri hopes this will help shape future leaders that are free from previous biases and unjust religious grounds for governing our society. Amuri is a continuous participant in activism that points out that there is no justification for prejudice against nonbelievers as well as activism against the use of people forcing their beliefs

on others. A studio artist, Amuri’s work focuses on the manifestation of identity — particularly Black identity — and consistently features the powerful presence of the Black figure as a way to rewrite the narratives Western visual media historically assign Black figures. *This scholarship is made possible by the generous Yip Harburg Lyric Foundation and FFRF Member Ernie Harburg, the son of the famous lyricist of “Over the Rainbow.”*

\$2,000 FFRF Phoenix Fund

Jordan

Fordham University

Jordan is a senior at Fordham University in Bronx, N.Y., aspiring to go to law school with the goal of becoming a criminal prosecutor of sex crimes. Raised in a secular family, Jordan was informed by a Christian friend that she “would be going to hell,” since she was never baptized. By high school, Jordan’s secular identity was not just shaped by a secular upbringing and lack of belief in God, but by a passion for human rights and separation of church and state. As a queer woman, Jordan has seen firsthand how religion encourages sexism and homophobia. She is on the Fordham Secular Student Alliance Executive Board and

member of the Student Government’s Committee on Sexual Misconduct. Even though Fordham is a Catholic institution, Jordan says the secular population is bigger than it might seem — but it is hiding. The SSA at Fordham challenged the school’s health center policies, which do not offer any contraception. They created a petition to change the policies, allowing the school could keep its Catholic identity and plenty of loopholes to allow more access to sex-related health care for students. *Jordan’s scholarship is sponsored by the FFRF Phoenix Fund.*



Jordan

\$1,500 FFRF Phoenix Fund

Angelina

South Texas College of Law

Finding it increasingly more difficult to be a teacher, Angelina is pursuing a degree in paralegal studies at Lone Star College to be able to help children in a different way and give a voice to the injustices of harassment. Growing up in a Mexican-American family, Angelina was raised Catholic but had doubts about the credibility of God, Jesus and the bible. She has “seen and experienced the wrath, hatred, bigotry, and racism that came with people who were devout

Christians.” Now agnostic, her secularism is the basis of her fight for women’s rights, LGBT+ civil rights, racial justice, immigration reform, and Native American rights. Angelina is the vice president of the Criminal Law Society and will use the position to enhance her classmates’ knowledge and understanding of criminal justice reform. *The Phoenix Fund is an FFRF member-endowed scholarship fund.*



Angelina

\$1,000 FFRF Cliff Richards Memorial Scholarship

Egan

University of Texas at Tyler

Egan is pursuing a Master of Science in health care administration at Texas Tech University and an MBA in cyber security at The University of Texas at Tyler. She was raised in a highly conservative Christian household and community. Egan’s progression to secularism started during adolescence with conflicting values of the Jehovah’s Witnesses doctrine and the medical and mental health community. Egan was removed from fellowship and the congregation was mandated to shun her. “The Jehovah’s Witnesses religion was my entire identity apart from being an

African American woman,” said Egan, who now identifies as an atheist and humanist. She is involved with the Freedom from Religion Foundation, Recovering from Religion, The Dallas-Plano Atheists, Metroplex Atheists, Freethinkers of Fort Worth, and Black Nonbelievers. Egan says the Secular Student Alliance is essential to helping nonreligious youth gain the comprehension and willpower to question the foundations of their upbringing and develop a humanist future.



Egan

OVERHEARD

A court that gets off the path of liberty expansion by reversing *Roe* will lose its most precious means of establishing legitimacy. **Noah Feldman, in his column, “If the court reverses *Roe*, its very legitimacy may be at risk.”** *Bloomberg, 10-24-21*

It used to be that when many people thought about evangelicalism, they conjured up an image of a fiery preacher imploring them to accept Jesus. Now, the data indicate that more and more Americans are conflating evangelicalism with Republicanism — and melding two forces to create a movement that is not entirely about politics or religion but power. **Ryan Burge, a political science teacher at Eastern Illinois University and author of *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are and Where They Are Going*, in his op-ed “Why ‘evangelical’ is becoming another word for ‘Republican.’”** *The New York Times, 10-26-21*

The decision in *Does* suggests that there is, at least, some limit to the court’s willingness to carve out legal exemptions for religious conservatives. **Ian Millhiser, in his article, “The Supreme Court finally decides the religious right asked for too much,” regarding Maine’s vaccine mandate for health care workers.** *Vox.com, 10-29-21*

A ruling requiring religious exemptions will upend public health law. . . . A decision by the Supreme Court that rejects its own precedent on vaccine mandates and ignores the distinctions between medical exemptions and religious exemptions will reverberate far beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. Whether or not the court intended to unsettle the constitutionality of vaccine mandates, it has done so. **Wendy Parmet, law professor at Northeastern University School of Law, in her op-ed column, “A dangerous Supreme Court fight over vaccine mandates looms.”** *The New York Times, 10-31-21*

The cases before the Supreme Court this fall are cause for alarm. Let’s make them a rallying cry for demanding reproductive freedom as a fundamental human right — and not just a privilege dependent on your race, where you live, whom you sleep with or how you define your identity. **Kathryn Kolbert and Julie F. Kay, in their op-ed column, “*Roe* is as good as gone. It’s time for a new strategy.” Kolbert, the co-founder of the Center for Reproductive Rights, argued *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* before the Supreme Court in 1992. Kay is a human rights lawyer who argued against Ireland’s ban on abortion before the European Court of Human Rights.** *The New York Times, 11-1-21*

By exploiting the provisional nature of scientific knowledge, its inevitable updating and the realities of the scientific funding structures, conspiracists eroded the trust of some susceptible individuals in the recommendations of public health authorities about lifesaving behaviors, including mask wearing and vaccination. Their success in doing so made community immunity, and with it an end to the pandemic, more elusive. **Kathleen Hall Jamieson, in her article, “How conspiracists exploited Covid-19 science.”** *Nature.com, 11-1-21*

First, personal choice is fine — as long as your personal choices don’t hurt other people. I may deplore the quality of your housekeeping, but it’s your own business; on the other hand, freedom doesn’t include the right to dump garbage in the street. . . . Vaccination, then, should be considered a public duty, not a personal choice. **Paul Krugman, in his column, “No, vaccine mandates aren’t an attack on freedom.”** *The New York Times, 11-1-21*

Church figures have browbeaten elected officials over Covid restrictions, built powerful institutions in parallel to secular government, harassed perceived opponents, and accumulated land and businesses in pursuit of a long-term goal of transforming America into a nation ruled according to its own, ultraconservative moral precepts. **Jason Wilson, in his article, “Make it a Christian town’: the ultraconservative church on the rise in Idaho.” The article shows how the influential Christ Church leader in Moscow, Idaho, aims to establish a Christian theocracy in the town.** *The Guardian, 11-2-21*

When you see how hard it’s been for governments to get their citizens to just put on a mask in stores, or to get vaccinated, to protect themselves, their neighbors and their grandparents from being harmed or killed by Covid-19, how in the world are we going to get big majorities to work together globally and make the lifestyle sacrifices needed to dampen the increasingly destructive effects of global warming — for which there are treatments but no vaccine? That’s magical thinking, and it demands a realistic response. **Thomas L. Friedman, in his column “The climate summit has me very energized, and very afraid.”** *The New York Times, 11-10-21*

It takes astonishing conceit to believe you — and the minority of people who think like you — know God’s will better than all others. Radical Christians show key narcissistic traits, including overconfidence in their beliefs and lack of interest in the views of others. **Psychologist Thomas Smurthwaite, in his article, “The perils of American fundamentalism.”** *Medium.com, 10-28-21*

The fixation on race and Christian nationalism has serious ramifications for American political life. White evangelical Christians are fighting an impossible crusade against demographic inevitability. . . . Because they can never win (at least in a democracy with free and accurate elections), their political venom will not abate. . . . There is nothing Democrats can “give” them (e.g., jobs, cheaper health care) to satisfy their need for white Christian ascendancy. **Jennifer Rubin, in her column, “America cannot give evangelicals what they want.”** *Washington Post, 11-9-21*



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Thomas L. Friedman

Yes, state/church separation is a thing

“There’s no such thing as separation of church and state.” This was a lie told by a candidate during a GOP senatorial debate in Ohio in October during a long-winded answer to the question, “What’s the greatest crisis facing kids?”

Because the Freedom From Religion Foundation is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) nonprofit, we can’t discuss the politics of this answer or the pontificator. But we can point out the copious flaws.

Here are some parts of that candidate’s statement, in order, and why they are wrong.



...tian ethic separates itself from Islam and atheism and all these other belief sets on so many levels, but one of the main levels is our acknowledgement of good vs. evil and teaching our kids to fight for good over evil.

To the extent that the framers thought about public education, which is not mentioned in the Constitution, this assertion is wrong. Jefferson famously designed the University of Virginia as a secular institution where the religion of the students was irrelevant (be they “Judeo-Christian” or “Islam” or “Atheist”). “In conformity with the principles of our Constitution, which places all sects of religion on an equal footing . . . [and] in favor of freedom of religion manifested on former occasions, we have proposed no professor of divinity” for the new school, he stated. Religious education should be left to the sects to instill on their own, not the state: “Leave every sect to provide as they think fittest, the means of further instruction in their own peculiar tenets.”

Moreover, religion does not teach kids about good and evil or right and wrong. Religion conflates obedience to God with morality in a truly dangerous manner.

So, virtually the entire statement is factually wrong.

“The United States of America was founded on a godless Constitution that draws power from the people, not a deity,” retorts FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “We’d love to see people speak the truth about this history with pride.”

They’re trying to take God out of all aspects of society and they’re trying to water down on the Judeo-Christian bedrock of America.

First, nobody is seeking to remove anyone’s deity from all aspects of anything. Secular groups such as FFRF are fighting to ensure that government power is not abused to promote any version of god, a “holy book” or religion. Our Constitution demands no less. People will still be free to pray even if there’s no National Day of Prayer.

Second, there is no “Judeo-Christian” tradition, let alone a “Judeo-Christian bedrock” on which America was founded. FFRF’s own Andrew L. Seidel wrote an entire book debunking this fallacy.

A lot of these Soros-funded organizations, they advance the argument that the separation of church and state exists, and, for that reason, you can’t teach kids about religion.

As with the “take God out of all aspects of society” phony argument, this is a straw man. As FFRF frequently points out, public schools may teach about religion, so long as they don’t preach religious “truth.” Schools may educate, but not indoctrinate. Teach, but not preach. These are simple lines, but are often overstepped by overzealous school staff. That’s why FFRF exists, to protect the rights of conscience, including protecting students from that overreach. And we’ve yet to receive a check from George Soros, though we’d welcome any donations.

My personal feeling is, there’s no such thing as separation of church and state.

Yes, there certainly is, and that’s a fact, not a feeling. The Founders said so when they adopted history’s first secular Constitution. The Supreme Court has said so — many times. So have numerous lower courts. The phrase itself dates to a letter that President Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1802 in which he “contemplated with solemn reverence” the First Amendment of the Constitution, “thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.” He knew this letter would go down in legal history, even clearing it with his attorney general.

The framers of the Constitution envisioned a country where in the classroom, kids would learn about God. That in the classroom, kids would learn about good vs. evil, and that Judeo-Christian

Poll shows majority support for state/church separation

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is delighted by the results of a new Pew Research Center poll showing that Americans overwhelmingly support the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

The poll is the first of its kind and confirms what FFRF has been saying for decades: Americans want their elected representatives to leave private religious beliefs out of official government actions. A majority of Americans (54 percent) think the United States should enforce state/church separation, and a strong majority (69 percent) believe the federal government should never adopt an official state religion.

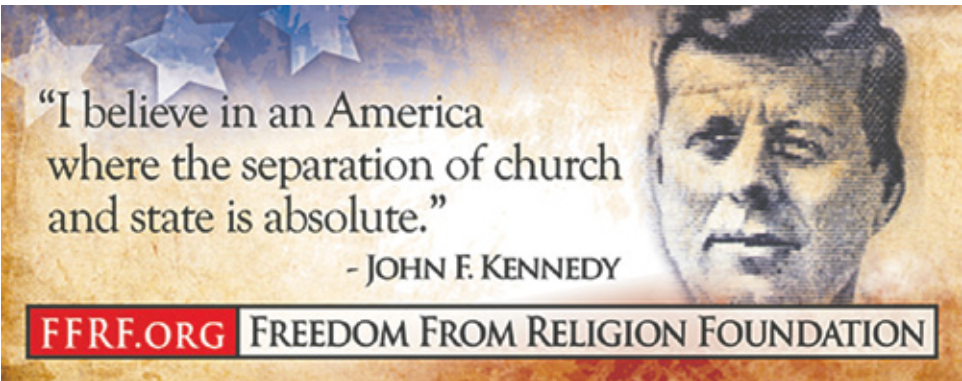
Additionally, 63 percent believe the federal government should advocate “moral values shared by people of many faiths” rather than Christian values. Likewise, 69 percent indicate that the U.S. Constitution was written by humans and reflects their vision, “not necessarily God’s vision,” compared to only 18 percent who believe it was “inspired by God [and] reflects God’s vision for America.” Pew points out that “even among white

evangelical Protestants and highly religious Christians, fewer than half say the U.S. should abandon its adherence to the separation of church and state or declare the country a Christian nation.”

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor applauds the findings.

“The Founders adopted the first godless Constitution in history, barring religious tests from government and establishing no official religion,” she points out. “They understood that true freedom of religion requires a government free from religion. It’s wonderful that most Americans agree with this fundamental concept.”

Despite the generally favorable attitudes, the survey reveals a need for greater education on specific topics. A plurality (39 percent) thinks local governments should be allowed to place religious symbols on public property (35 percent oppose and 26 percent have no opinion). As many as 30 percent of respondents think public school teachers should be allowed to lead students in sectarian prayers (although nearly half, 46 percent, oppose this clear violation of



freedom of conscience).

Pew notes that while there is above-average support for an overtly Christian government among Republicans and white evangelical Protestants, nearly four in 10 Black Americans support public teachers leading school prayer, and one in five Hispanics oppose enforcement of state/church separation. A partisan divide was confirmed by the survey, with most Democrats and those leaning Democratic (72 percent) supporting state/church separation, compared with 38 percent of Republicans. Support for the constitutional principle is higher among college graduates and lower in the South, but nevertheless, fewer than one in five Southerners consistently expresses a desire for the integration of church and state, Pew notes.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of

the new survey is the extent to which Christian nationalism is overrepresented in modern politics. Listening to the rhetoric of senior government officials in recent years, one might conclude that half the nation believes that the United States is a “Christian nation.” The poll shows in fact that Christian nationalist officials are speaking for only a tiny minority of Americans.

Unfortunately, the outsized influence of Christian nationalists in positions of power — including recently appointed federal judges — means that FFRF’s work as a state/church watchdog has never been more needed. This survey will be an important tool to educate public officials, as well as affirm that state/church advocates are not alone. FFRF hopes the survey will reinvigorate secularists to fight against theocratic threats.

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FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

Cheesecake

Continued from page 1

olation of the Establishment Clause. Justice O'Connor agreed. This is what she wrote: "At a time when we see around the world the violent consequences of the assumption of religious authority by government, Americans may count themselves fortunate. Those who would renegotiate the boundaries between church and state must therefore answer a difficult question: Why would we trade a system that has served us so well for one that has served others so poorly?" FFRF asks people to ask this question. It could be an FFRF motto. And now to my talk.

Even were I not receiving this wonderful award, it would be an honor and a pleasure simply to be here, among people who are not shy about challenging the surge in religiosity that is sweeping across our supposedly secular country. In my new book and in my opinion columns, I look at this growing problem with a focus on the Supreme Court's role. But of course, the court is a reflection, not a source of the problem. Supreme Court justices don't fall from the sky, and the makeup of the current court is a reflection of our domestic politics.

I don't mean to let the court off the hook for its series of decisions that have placed religion in a position of privilege that would have astounded our Constitution's Framers, to whom conservative judges and justices purport to pay so much homage. I'm only suggesting that "We the People" paved the way to the Supreme Court we have today, either by active participation in or by passive acquiescence to the wave of religiosity that deposited the most recent justices onto the court's bench.

What distinguishes FFRF is its refusal to stand silently by. To stand silent, as most people do, even those who are troubled by what they see, is to enable. Religion, as I've written, is the last taboo in American society. Unlike when most of us grew up, we can now talk unabashedly about sexual identity, gender nonconformity, money, race, social class — anything but religion. To comment on the fact that the last three Republican presidents have placed a total of five conservative Catholics on the court — and I mean doctrinally conservative, not simply politically conservative — and you risk being considered rude or even bigoted. But to remain silent in the face of this astonishing fact is to become an enabler. What I admire about FFRF is that you refuse to be enablers.

Now, what could I possibly mean by the title for my talk? Last month, one of our great federal appeals courts declared that Jewish prison inmates had a legal right to be served cheesecake on the Jewish holiday of Shavous. Yes, you heard that right. It's the 6th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, which covers Ohio, Kentucky and Michigan, which is where the case of *Ackerman v. Washington* arose. I'm guessing that some in this audience have some acquaintance with Jewish tradition and practice, as I do. For those from Christian backgrounds,



Photo by Ingrid Laas
New York Times columnist and author Linda Greenhouse gives her speech, "Cheesecake, Anyone?" on Nov. 19 at the Boston Park Plaza.

Clarence Darrow award

The Freedom From Religion Foundation's Clarence Darrow Award is not just a statuette, but it's a miniature bronze replica of the 7-foot statue by sculptor Zenos Frudakis that FFRF erected in Dayton, Tenn., in 2017, home of the Scopes trial where there had only been a statue recognizing evangelist William Jennings Bryan. The award is an all-purpose award to recognize civil libertarians, those who promote science and evolution, and/or freethought, as Darrow advocated. Actors John de Lancie and the late Ed Asner have received the award — both are atheists who were involved in plays about Darrow. U.S. Rep. Jamie Raskin — co-founder of the Congressional Freethought Caucus — also received the statuette and it's in his congressional office.

Shavous is Revelation, the handing down of the Ten Commandments. What on heaven or Earth does this have to do with cheesecake? This is the story.

The Michigan Department of Corrections makes vegan kosher meals available to any prisoner with a religious objection to the standard prison diet. This is a universal meal for prisoners with any religious objection, whether based on Jewish, Muslim or other religious dietary requirements. Two Jewish inmates challenged the prison's practice, claiming that, based on their religious beliefs, they were entitled to kosher meat on the Sabbath and to a dairy meal on Shavous — not just a generic dairy meal but, according to one of the inmates, cheesecake.

Testifying at trial, one of the inmates, who claimed familiarity with Jewish law, first said that "Shavous is generally associated with cheesecake in the Jewish community," but later amplified that remark to say that eating cheesecake was, in fact, required. The district court ordered the prison system to provide kosher meat to prisoners requesting it on the Jewish Sabbath and to provide cheesecake on Shavous.

The prison system appealed, challenging the sincerity of the prisoner's claims. The 6th Circuit affirmed, crediting the inmates' sincerity and noting that both had grown up eating kosher food at home. Two of the three judges on the appellate panel were appointed by Donald Trump, but, in fact, that's largely irrelevant, as I will explain. Writing for the panel, one of those two judges, John Nalbandian, said that while the kosher meat claim for the Sabbath was an easy question, the cheesecake claim was "trickier." The judge observed that "religious texts don't say that cheesecake is mandatory." He cited a note in the Code of Jewish Law that

"some have a custom to just eat some dairy" on the holiday of Shavous.

Why didn't that end the judges' inquiry? Why didn't a finding of "no religious requirement" equate to a finding of "no entitlement"? Aha, and I quote: "But there's also evidence suggesting that these prisoners do, in fact, sincerely believe that cheesecake is required on Shavout" [a more modern spelling of the name of the holiday]. Noting that the District Court judge had accepted the prisoners' sincerity on this point, Judge Nalbandian said: "That's all that is required. Even if we may have come out differently on this issue if we were sitting as district judges, we affirm under the applicable standard of review."

Theoretically, Michigan might have rebutted this finding by showing that the state had a compelling interest in not yielding to the inmates' request. The state offered a financial interest: meeting the dietary demand would cost \$10,000 a year. The 6th Circuit rejected that effort, noting that the prison system's annual food budget was \$39 million, and that an addition \$10,000 represented "just a tiny 0.02 percent in that multi-million-dollar-food-budget bucket."

Now, I'm no expert on Jewish law. But I was married in an Orthodox synagogue, and I'm here to tell you that Jews no more require cheesecake on Shavous than Christians require colored eggs on Easter. Fun to have, in both cases, but how did we come to a point where a federal appeals court issues a 23-page opinion addressing a matter that to a person without a stake in the outcome would appear frivolous, even ridiculous?

The fact of the matter is that when it comes to religious claims, nothing is frivolous or ridiculous. And given where the Supreme Court has driven the law, the chain of reasoning that produced the out-

come in this case was completely plausible and even predictable. The case was litigated under a 20-year-old federal law, the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, or RLUIPA. The law provides that the government must show a "compelling interest" to justify imposing "a substantial burden on the religious exercise of a person residing in or confined to an institution." "Religious exercise" is defined as "any exercise of religion, whether or not compelled by, or central to, a system of religious belief." Given that statutory language, it's hardly surprising that the Supreme Court has interpreted the law as triggered by any "sincere" belief, no matter how unfounded. And if all that matters is "sincerity," who, after all, is to judge?

The law essentially enables judges, if so inclined, to take themselves out of the role of judging. To this effect, it mirrors a companion federal law, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which was the law at issue in the Hobby Lobby case that the Supreme Court decided in 2014. This was the case about whether a corporation with a religious owner could exempt itself from the Affordable Care Act's mandate to provide birth control as part of the employee health insurance plan. The owner of Hobby Lobby claimed that he couldn't possibly abide by this mandate because certain forms of birth control cause abortion. This does not happen to be true. But it was, ostensibly, the man's belief. So, the court credited it and ruled in Hobby Lobby's favor, to the detriment of thousands of women all over the country who work for such employers and as a result have been deprived of an employment benefit contemplated by Congress and enjoyed by women who are lucky enough to work for companies that obey the law.

My point in telling you the cheesecake story, then, is really about a lot more than cheesecake. In context, the 6th Circuit opinion was not crazy. It was, as I said, completely predictable. It's the law itself that has gone off the rails in full view of anyone who cared to watch. Prisoners can be denied decent medical care, can be abused by guards, of course forfeit their right to vote — but, by God, let them eat cheesecake.

Something is seriously out of balance, and by the end of the current Supreme Court term it is highly likely to become even more so. The situation urgently requires our attention. I'm comforted by the knowledge that FFRF will keep doing its part.

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LETTERBOX

We need more freethinkers like Ava Bertolotti

Great essay “The prophets of doom have data” by Ava Bertolotti, which won FFRF’s high school essay contest this year. We need more freethinkers like her and I’m sure she’ll do great at whatever she decides to do!

Pennsylvania

Can we sue for church’s scam promises?

I recently received an email from an organization asking if I had ever been scammed. I responded: “If a church guaranteed me eternal paradise in Heaven for being a ‘good’ church member, do such eternal afterlife promises constitute a scam? And, if so, what can legally be done about it?”

I recall a similar situation from many decades ago, when a son sued the Catholic Church because his father left his millions to the Catholic Church, which, according to the son, promised his father a glorious heavenly hereafter if he left his money to the church.

The son claimed that unless the Catholic Church could prove the existence of a hereafter, they shouldn’t get his father’s money because such promises were a scam. I thought he should have won, but he didn’t.

I am willing to be a plaintiff in this case if FFRF would like to sue the Catholic Church for its scams.

Oklahoma

Every Vatican ambassador has been Roman Catholic

What is truly outrageous is the fact that ever since Ronald Reagan established formal diplomatic relations with the “Holy See,” every U.S. ambassador to that so-called sovereign entity has been a Roman Catholic.

This policy has only one purpose: to appease the Vatican and American Catholics, particularly the conservative ones. These appointments, of course, are in direct violation of Article VI, Clause III, of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits any religious tests for public office. Yet the media, academia and both political parties are mute on this issue, just as they are mute on the fact that six of the last seven Supreme Court justices appointed by Republican presidents have been conservative Catholics, while the seventh, Neil Gorsuch, is a former Catholic who is now a Protestant. No Jews, Muslims, Hindus, liberal Protestants, Buddhists, Unitarians, atheists, humanists, pagans, etc. are considered by the GOP for the federal judiciary, the Constitution be damned.

New York

Government can’t decide whose beliefs are sincere

Unfortunately, it has become all too common for otherwise generally applicable federal and state laws to be written allowing exceptions for “sincerely held religious beliefs.” Can there be any greater entanglement between church and state than that created when the government, in an attempt to ascertain whether the re-



FFRF Member Jeff Livingston returned home to these yard signs after a four-month stay at the hospital where he got an artificial heart before getting a transplanted heart and kidney.

Doctors at the University of Wisconsin Hospital had to quickly replace his highly infected heart with a total artificial heart to keep him alive until a live transplant organ would become available.

However, during the operation, his kidneys stopped functioning and never fully recovered. So, he then needed both a live heart and kidney (from the same donor).

He was placed near the top of the national transplant list and the donor gifts arrived about a week later. Surgery for both organs went

well, and two weeks later, on Nov. 9, Jeff went home.

Prior to the transplant surgeries, Jeff remarked that he wasn’t worried about not surviving. “They’ll put me under, and either I’ll wake up from the surgery, or I won’t, and if that’s the case, I won’t know it. So, there’s nothing to be worried about.”

Jeff is a close friend of Freethought Today Editor PJ Slinger. In 2016, the two of them drove the van with FFRF’s gear and merchandise from Madison, Wis., to Pittsburgh for FFRF’s convention. Jeff also helped sell clothing and books during the convention.

FFRF is pleased to hear of Jeff’s recovery and also wishes him to “live long and prosper,” words immortalized by Leonard Nimoy as Mr. Spock from “Star Trek.”

End diplomatic relations between U.S., Vatican

This letter was printed in the Corvallis Gazette-Times and Albany Democrat-Herald.

The unconstitutional, inappropriate ambassadorship to the Vatican should be discontinued. The Roman Catholic Church is not a country.

Even though the U.S. Constitution explicitly precludes any religious test for public office, if confirmed, Joe Donnelly would become the 12th Roman Catholic to serve as Vatican ambassador. (Perhaps, if an ambassador is to be named, a pro-choice secular humanist should be selected!)

Official diplomatic relations between our country and the Holy See

ligious exception applies in a given case, seeks to determine whether a person’s belief constitutes a religious belief and whether that belief is “sincere”? Surely this is the polar opposite of what the authors of the Constitution intended.

North Carolina

Westboro Church helped legalize gay marriage

I just want to tell you what a fantastic job you did organizing this year’s convention. It was wonderful and I’m so glad I attended. I’m just sorry I didn’t get to speak with Megan Phelps-Roper. As a gay man, I would have told her how grateful I was to her gay-bashing family and the Westboro Baptist Church for going so over the top with their public messages of hate. I truly believe it was helpful in turning the tide in favor of legalizing gay marriage in the astonishingly short time it took. Their outrageous and abhorrent “thank god for dead soldiers” protests further exposed how deranged they are, and, by inference, how questionable, no, discardable all of their beliefs are. I considered it an additional gift to the cause.

Thank you for a great convention.

New Jersey

prefers and favors Roman Catholicism over other religions and religion over nonreligion.

This unprecedented link between the United States and a head of a world religion seriously politicizes their relationship. One former U.S. ambassador to the Holy See said when opposing the possibility of nominating a pro-choice Catholic to the ambassadorship, “It’s imperative, it’s essential that the person who represents us to the Holy See be a person who has pro-life values.”

The Vatican issues absolutist doctrinal decrees, which include official opposition to many human, civil and constitutional rights, such as gay marriage, birth control, abortion, embryonic stem cell research and euthanasia. The Church’s role in the rape of children is notorious. The Church demands that Roman Catholic citizens and legislators vote en masse, in strict accord with these decrees and in direct contravention of the Constitution.

End our federal government’s unholy alliance with the Roman Catholic Church.

Oregon

Authoritarian followers are like the religious

According to John Dean’s *Authoritarian Nightmare — Trump and his Followers*, there are authoritarian leaders, like preachers, who may very well know what they are doing, and there are authoritarian followers who usually have no idea what they are supporting. Nor do they care, as long as they have someone telling them what to believe, what to do, and how to behave, just like religious movements. They are immune to facts and logic, no matter what. Coherent arguments or scientific studies have no impact, and will actually reinforce their stand. Even if their leader is headed for a cliff, they’ll follow blindly. And upon their leader’s instruction, they are ready to swallow the most ridiculous lies, like Noah’s ark, the story of Adam and Eve, or Trump’s Big Lie, all good examples of authoritarianism.

As Dean summarizes numerous psychological studies, authoritarian followers are highly compartmentalized in their thinking, using double standards, believing many contradictory and conflicting things, having trouble deciding what is sound evidence and what is not. Their thinking is highly ethnocentric,



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Freedom depends on freethinkers

The next issue of Freethought Today will be the January/February issue and will be delivered in late January or early February.

Write to us

To send a letter to the editor for Freethought Today, please email it to editor@ffrf.org.

dogmatic and prejudiced in what they think about others.

We have seen what authoritarianism did to Germany in the 1930s, and eventually to the rest of the world. Catholics (including the pope) and Protestants supported Hitler, while U.S. evangelicals strongly supported Trump, and still do, as unbelievable as that sounds! Have we learned from it? I have my doubts.

California

Let’s focus on being happy and quit killing

We humans, as we developed consciousness and intelligence, have long wondered how we got here. Since Darwin wasn’t yet here to figure things out, our ancestors kept inventing gods, and certainly some of them and their rituals were quite bizarre.

To quote Albert Einstein (from *Ideas and Opinions*): “This intoxicated joy and amazement at the beauty and grandeur of this world is the feeling from which true scientific research draws its spiritual sustenance, but which also seems to find expression in the songs of birds.”

Thus, we all should be happy that we are here and quit killing each other over who’s god is best.

Thank you for your great work.

Pennsylvania

Fools still object to responsible leaders

Let’s imagine a scenario where thousands of years ago, a leader of a small tribe ordered everyone to keep a fire burning all night at the entrance of their caves, as a defense against dangerous animals. I’m sure no one defied him.

But if some fool told him to mind his own business and not interfere with his “right” to ignore the edict, it’s likely that soon a wild beast entered the fool’s cave and ate him and his family.

And now here we are: An advanced nation in the 21st century, where many fools still object to the efforts of responsible leaders who are trying to save them and everyone in the tribe from deadly harm.

At times like these, Puck’s words in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* echo in my ears: “What fools these mortals be.” Well, if we had Puck with us today, I’m sure he’d bluntly say, “These mortals are dying of terminal stupidity.”

California

Crossword answers														
O	O	P	S			W	O	E	S		S	C	U	D
R	I	L	E	S		A	L	T	O		P	O	N	E
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	O	C	T	A	D			G	E	L				
C	R	U		B	A	U	D	E	L	A	I	R	E	
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P	E	E	P			O	U	S	T			N	E	S

Passover, not Easter, reason for spring holiday

Although I would be pleased if the Day of Reason became a New York City holiday, I’d like to point out that the spring holiday is not about Easter.

Easter is always a Sunday, so it doesn’t require a day off, and is a “moveable feast” that wanders around from March 22 to April 25. If you look more closely, you’ll discover that the week off doesn’t always coincide with Easter or the Christian observances leading up to it, such as Lent, but it always falls exactly during Passover. In Orthodox Jewish communities, Passover is observed for eight days, kicking off with two seder nights and continuing with restrictions against consuming bread and other foods, which makes it challenging for observant individuals to grab lunch in the school cafeteria or local deli.

There was a time when the NYC public school system was so heavily dominated by Jewish teachers, administrators and staff that if school were held during Passover, an army of non-Jewish substitutes would be required. That would create huge expenses and pandemonium. So, not to honor the religion, but just to be pragmatic, it just made sense to schedule the spring break to coincide with Passover. Although the demographics of the NYC educators may have shifted over the years, the traditional timing of the holiday persists.

I would not want to equate a Day of Reason observance with religion, but rather with secular observances. I’d like to clear out unnecessary holidays, religious or simply obsolete, before adding any more days off. NYC has been increasingly calling off school days for various faiths. If that policy were continued in a city with so many different religions, eventually there would indeed be very few school days left. I’d vote for scaling back all religious or otherwise inappropriate public holidays in favor of secular ones, or ones that just make sense based on the calendar or other practical considerations. But I don’t expect to live long enough to see it. In the meantime, let’s all strive to make every day a day of reason.

New York

What does the bible say about abortion? Nothing!

On Dec. 1, while listening to the oral arguments at the Supreme Court over Mississippi’s law banning abortion after 15 weeks of pregnancy, I called Freedom From Religion Foundation and ordered 200 of its nontracts: “What Does The Bible Say About Abortion?” Well, it says absolutely nothing! However, it says much about children who were routinely massacred and makes clear that an embryo or fetus is

Cryptogram answer

We must question the story logic of having an all-knowing all-powerful god who creates faulty humans, and then blames them for his own mistakes.

— Gene Roddenberry



Photo by PJ Slinger

Richard Halasz prepares to take a photo of the massive “Norm” burger at Cheers in Boston.

Boston convention was the best one yet

By chance, I saw Freethought Today Editor PJ Slinger on the streets of Boston during the FFRF convention and we decided on the spot to go to lunch together. We went to Cheers (site of the inspiration for the 1980s TV show), where my eyes were bigger than my stomach and I ordered the giant “Norm” burger. My eyes might as well have been the size of atoms and the burger might as well have been as large as Jupiter.

The next day, while waiting in line to get Christopher Cameron’s book *Black Freethinkers* signed, I looked around the room and standing behind me was Sasha Sagan! I’m not ashamed to say that I gushed like an

unabashed fanboy over her and her book *For Small Creatures Such As We*. “The primary reason why the universe is expanding is to make room for your talent and more copies of your book!,” I said.

The next day, as she signed her book to me and my brainy, beautiful, blasphemous bride Jana, Sasha said: “Oh, you’re my new friend.” Be still, my heart.

Then, by design, very intelligent design, I might add, I was able to hug FFRFers Lisa Strand, Annie Laurie Gaylor and Kristina Daleiden.

This was the best convention yet!

Texas

not a human being. The bible is not pro-child. Read Numbers 31:17, I Samuel 15:3 and Isaiah 13:18.

I also read Gloria Steinem’s essay, “If Men Could Menstruate,” from her book *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*. Some examples of what would happen: Men would brag about how long and how much, sanitary supplies would be federally funded and free, and commercial brands would include John Wayne Maxie Pads and Joe Namath Jock Shields.

Happy New Year!

Ohio

Convention was enriching, inspiring, entertaining

Having Just returned from my first FFRF national convention, I want to express my gratitude for an all-around enriching and inspiring experience. The convention was so well planned and impressively organized, especially

when it came to Gloria Steinem’s injury and 11th-hour cancellation, whereupon FFRF staff were — amazingly — able to nevertheless begin her remote interview with Annie Laurie Gaylor precisely at the scheduled time.

The speakers, many of them authors of books available for purchase, were entertaining, diverse and thought-provoking (who knew that Margaret Atwood had such a droll wit?), and the addition of visuals and videos provided a stimulating dimension to their presentations. It was truly gratifying to be part of an audience of hundreds of kindred spirits.

And then there was the extraordinary musical talent of Dan Barker to keep us all upbeat. Thanks you, Dan!

Finally, a thank you to PJ Slinger (it was a pleasure meeting you) and his talented and hard-working staff, for a consistently high-quality publication.

California

BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

Gregory F. Loughney, 42, Cresco, PA: Attempted statutory sexual assault, corruption of minors, indecent assault and criminal use of a cellphone. Loughney is pastor of Most Holy Trinity Catholic Parish. It's alleged he thought he was texting online with a 15-year-old named Cyrus before meeting at a convenience store, where he was arrested.

Cyrus was actually an adult member of a citizen group called 507 Predator Catchers, who called police after Loughney allegedly showed up thinking he was meeting Cyrus and his friend Billy, age 16. An affidavit said Loughney "was going to have a three-way" with the boys, according to an arresting officer.

It's also alleged he told police he wanted to bring Cyrus and Billy back to his home for dinner and cookies because Cyrus "was having a rough time in life" and he wanted to help him. *Source: Pocomo Record, 10-25-21*

Joshua O. Shonubi, 50, Bowie, MD: Conspiracy to commit marriage fraud and visa fraud and presenting false documents to a federal agency. Shonubi, pastor at NewLife City Church in Hyattsville, allegedly arranged 60 fraudulent marriages between impoverished foreign nationals and U.S. citizens between January 2014 and January 2021.

The indictment says he created and signed at least 38 reference letters under NewLife's letterhead "falsely stating his relation to the parties; the nature of the marriage; his role in providing spiritual guidance or counseling; and his belief as to the romantic nature of the marriage."

He also allegedly created false rental leases and listed a corporation he formed in 2015 as the landlord to show a couple was living together when they were actually living separately. *Source: WJLA, 10-21-21*

Michael M. Baldwin, 52, Alexandria, VA: Securities fraud and wire fraud. Baldwin, assistant pastor at Crossroads Baptist Church in Bailey's Crossroads, VA, is accused of bilking investors out of more than \$740,000.

Alleged victims include Harbor Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC, which contributed over \$370,000 in 2016 to help Baldwin build Miracle Mansion, a family entertainment venue with a "Biblical worldview" near Washington, DC. He started marketing the venue in 2009.

The indictment alleges that instead of using investors' money to further Miracle Mansion's purpose, Baldwin spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on his personal lifestyle and made "Ponzi style" payments to other investors.

Baldwin's father founded Crossroads Baptist, where his brother is now senior pastor. *Source: Charlotte Observer, 10-20-21*

Brian R. Tamaki, 63, Auckland, NZ: Breach of bail conditions. Tamaki, founding pastor of Destiny Church, had been charged Oct. 5 with failing to comply with an order under the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act for helping organize an anti-lockdown protest.

Bail conditions banned him from attending similar protests and from using the internet to encourage noncompliance, but on Oct. 16 he allegedly attended another rally in Auckland.

Destiny is a fundamentalist Pentecostal church that condemns LGBTQ+ persons. Tamaki has said the pandemic is a sign the world has "strayed from God." Critics note his lavish lifestyle and Destiny's 13 separate charitable organizations they suspect are tax havens. *Source: Radio New Zealand, 10-20-21*

Mack D. Knight, 45, Kingsland, GA: faces a 5-count federal indictment alleging he lied to the Small Business Administration on applications for Economic Injury Disaster Loans. His Facebook page says "Pastor Mack De'Von Knight is deemed the 'People Pastor' because of his compassion and his heart for people. Regardless of race, creed or religion, Pastor Knight is a voice for the voiceless. He is a senior pastor, activist, entrepreneur and a father."

It's alleged that he lied on loan applications in February and March 2021 for Knight's Tax Services and Daddy Earl's Kitchen by falsely claiming the businesses each had hundreds of thousands of dollars of gross revenue before the COVID-19 pandemic. The indictment says that after receiving \$149,900 from the SBA by using false documentation, he used part of the money to buy a Mercedes-Benz S-Class sedan. *Source: justice.gov, 10-19-21*

Joseph M. Krol, 36, Dawson, IL: Grooming, a Class 4 felony. Krol, pastor at First Baptist Church in Rochester, is accused of sending sexually inappropriate Snapchat messages to a 15-year-old girl whose family belonged to his previous congregation. He was pastor at Galilee Baptist Church in rural Decatur until last June.

It's alleged that in a game of "true confessions," Krol described his sexual past and asked if she could sneak out when everyone in her home was asleep. The conversations went on for 3 to 4

months, said sheriff's Sgt. Sergeant Scott Flannery.

An affidavit said that when a deputy used the girl's Snapchat account, Krol sent a video of the outline of his penis and asked about her sexual preferences in older men and her sexual fantasies. When deputies went to serve a search warrant, they saw him grab his cellphone in the kitchen and start pushing buttons in an attempt to restore the factory settings.

Grooming is defined as an act by which a person uses a computer or mobile device to attempt to seduce, solicit, lure or entice a child under 17 to commit a sex offense. *Source: Journal-Register, 10-18-21*

Samuel Phillips Jr., 44, Riverview, FL: Soliciting another to commit prostitution. Phillips, pastor at Be Limitless Church, "responded to a false ad placed on an escort website," said Chad Chronister, Hillsborough County sheriff in Tampa.

The 20-day "Operation Round-up" sting resulted in 125 arrests and freed 4 women and a teen from human trafficking in conditions "too vile to fathom," Chronister said.

"Be Limitless Church is a life-giving church that will raise up a multitude of people who will pray that God's will be done in Tampa, FL and abroad," its website says. *Source: Fox 13, 10-17-21*

Michael F. Gutsell, 72, Omaha, NE: Theft of \$5,000 or more and abuse of a vulnerable adult. Gutsell, who resigned in July as pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Parish in Springfield, NE, is accused of stealing \$154,732 from an incapacitated retired priest who willed his estate to the Archdiocese of Omaha and died in 2019.

Thefts are alleged between October 2018 and January 2020. Gutsell is the former chancellor of the archdiocese. He obtained power of attorney on the retired priest's accounts in January 2017. *Source: WOWT, 10-15-21*

Peter Wren Sr., 72, Birmingham, AL: 2 counts of 1st-degree sex abuse. Wren, pastor of E. Birmingham Church of God in Christ, is accused of assaults on a minor between the ages of 12 and 16.

"We are waiting for his day in court when the real reasons these allegations were made will come out," said his attorney Emory Anthony in a statement. "People who know Bishop Wren know he wouldn't commit an offense of this nature." *Source: WBRC, 10-14-21*

Damion O. Archat, 39, Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Domestic battery by strangulation, battery and resisting an officer. Archat, executive director and founder of Jesus Experience Ministries, allegedly pulled a woman out of her car by the hair, threw her down and choked her. Her name is redacted in the police report. He is married to N. Lauderdale city commissioner Regina Martin.

Archat allegedly tried to escape from deputies attempting to detain him. He has preached at several other churches but has no official affiliation with them. *Source: NBC Miami, 10-13-21*

David Jones, 57, Ferndale, MI: 10 charges, including driving while intoxicated and attempted murder. Jones, pastor at Hilton Oaks Baptist Church, has been arrested 9 times for drinking and driving.

Deputies called to a convenience store allegedly found him sitting in his car before he drove off, hit a building across the road and then purposely slammed into the patrol car. "If you turn your vehicle around and intentionally collide with a police vehicle, you are going to be charged with attempted murder," said Arena County Under-sheriff Don McIntyre.

The report said Jones refused to get out of the vehicle after the crash and deputies had to break the windows to arrest him. *Source: WXYZ, 10-11-21*

David Huneck, 31, Columbia City, IN: Felony child seduction and sexual battery and misdemeanor counts of furnishing alcohol and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Huneck, pastor at St. Paul of the Cross Catholic Church and chaplain at Bishop Dwenger High School, is accused of assaults on females ages 17 and 19 in July and September.

It's alleged he became very drunk and repeatedly groped them while celebrating his birthday at his residence in July. They were the only guests, according to a probable cause affidavit, and Huneck apologized the next day.

His accusers decided in September to accept an invitation to Huneck's residence since he had exhibited "normal" behavior for several weeks, the affidavit said, but he allegedly became intoxicated again, exposed his genitals and groped the 19-year-old.

In text messages sent the next day, "Huneck apologizes for his behavior and states that he may be relegated to the 'bad priest list,'" the affidavit said.

Huneck, a 2008 Bishop Dwenger graduate, was ordained in 2018 and was removed from public ministry in August. *Source: Journal Gazette, 10-9-21*

Anthony L. Strickland, 55, Bono, AR: Rape and 2nd-degree sexual assault. Strickland, pastor at the Freedom Center, which he started in 2003, is charged with assaults on a 11- to 13-year-old girl and her 11-year-old sister. According to a probable cause affidavit, the older girl, now 18, told her parents that when she stayed overnight with Strickland, who was a friend of her parents for 20 years and pastor of their church, he touched her genitals while watching a movie.

When the mother later questioned her other children, the younger girl cried and said, "Momma, he did that to me, too," the affidavit states.

A female acquaintance in 2019 accused him of hitting her in the face and raping her while he was intoxicated. A rape charge was eventually dismissed after he pleaded guilty to 2nd-degree domestic battery and was sentenced to 60 months' probation. *Source: Jonesboro Sun, 10-9-21*

Cody Butler, St. John, New Brunswick: Failure to comply with provisions of a mandatory emergency order. Butler, associate pastor of His Tabernacle Family Church, is charged with holding Sunday services attended by over 100 people in violation of COVID-19 orders.

Philip Hutchings, church founder and lead pastor, later signed an agreement to "make all reasonable efforts to ensure compliance" with rules on faith-based gatherings. Churches may choose between requiring proof of vaccination or holding services at 50% capacity with distancing, contact tracing lists and no singing. Masks are mandatory with either option. *Source: CBC, 10-8-21*

Jerome Milton, 65, Tyler, TX: Property theft between \$2,500 and \$30,000 and 2 counts of credit or debit card abuse against the elderly. Milton is pastor of Open Door Bible Church. An investigation started after an elderly couple's son heard church members say Milton was misusing his parents' bank cards and getting them to sign blank checks.

An affidavit alleges he used the couple's bank cards to withdraw cash between March and July totaling about \$3,800. Still under investigation is a claim he fraudulently deposited checks drawn on the account of Greater New Pleasant Hill Baptist Church, where he was ousted as pastor in 2018 due to "his handling of finances and other suspicious behavior." *Source: Morning Telegraph, 10-8-21*

“ ‘Momma, he did that to me, too.’ — accuser of Pastor Anthony Strickland



Amanda G. Jeffery, 36, Aiken, SC: 3 felony counts of unlawful neglect of a child or helpless person. Jeffery, who worked at Town Creek Christian Academy Preschool, is accused of physical abuse of several 1-year-olds at the day care operated by Town Creek Baptist Church.

She "forcefully grab[bed] the facial area of a 1-year-old victim" and "forcefully grabbed" all 3 victims' wrists, carrying them across the room by their wrists, according to arrest warrants. *Source: Aiken Standard, 10-5-21*

Wendi W. McLamb, 52, Supply, NC: Felony conspiracy and embezzlement of funds by public officer/trustee greater than \$100,000. McLamb, treasurer/secretary at Sabbath Home Baptist Church is accused of misappropriating \$136,000 from the church between 2014–20. Her estranged husband, **Ransom W. McLamb Jr., 54,** is church pastor and is being sought on similar charges. They allegedly used debit and credit cards and other banking transactions to facilitate the thefts. *Source: WECT, 9-29-21*

Douglas Johnson, Reston, VA: Johnson, youth minister at St. John Neumann Catholic Church from 2005–18, faces 6 charges related to unlawful videotaping of a female minor in Chesapeake. He volunteered at both St. John Neumann and St. Thomas à Becket Parish before being hired as youth minister, according to the Diocese of Arlington. *Source: Reston Now, 9-27-21*

Michael E. Coghill, 33, Oklahoma City: Lewd/ indecent acts to a child. Coghill, discipleship minister at Lakehoma Church of Christ in Mustang, is accused of inappropriate touching of a 9-year-old boy at a school bus stop. Coghill previously worked at Choctaw Church of Christ. Both churches oppose civil rights for LGBTQ+ persons.

The boy had allegedly told his father earlier about Coghill's behavior, so the father was parked near the bus stop to watch. After the alleged touching he confronted Coghill, who tried to run away. During the altercation, Coghill's eye socket was broken. *Source: KWTW, 9-23-21*

Anthony R. Gualtieri, 48, Jeffersonville, IN: Child seduction and 4 counts of sexual misconduct with a minor where the defendant has a professional relationship with a child. He's accused of starting a sexual relationship with a 14-year-old girl in 2015 when he was her youth pastor at Faith Baptist Church in Ft. Wayne.

They allegedly had about 100 sexual encounters in hotels, at his home and at the church until early 2019. He allegedly told Faith Baptist pastor Joseph Marden that the relationship was "not about the sex, it was an emotional connection," and that he was going to turn himself in to police.

Gualtieri never showed up for his police interview, court documents said. In July his accuser gave police 5 pairs of panties she said he had given her. *Source: Journal Gazette, 9-22-21*

Carlos R. Valdez, 57, Riverside, CA: 5 counts of lewd or lascivious acts with a minor younger than 14 and 3 counts of oral copulation or sexual penetration of a child 10 or younger. Valdez, pastor of International Mission Church USA in Santa Ana, is accused of assaulting 3 girls from 2014–20. Two were 8 years old. *Source: OC Register, 9-22-21*

Christopher M. Coddington, 42, Kingston, GA: 2 counts of aggravated child molestation, which allege he assaulted preteen boys. Coddington has been a youth pastor at a church in Bartow County for 15 years, operated a youth ministry for boys called Rock On and previously had been a foster parent.

Police said his accusers were both under age 13 at the time of the alleged abuse and came forward recently as adults. *Source: 11 Alive, 9-21-21*

Pleaded / Convicted

Jason Greathouse, 40, Henderson, TN: Pleaded guilty to misdemeanor contributing to the delinquency of a minor after a 2nd-degree rape charge was dropped. He was accused of starting a consensual sexual relationship in 2008 when the girl was 14 while he was her youth pastor in Enterprise, AL.

A plea agreement calls for him to serve 2 years' unsupervised probation. The age of consent in Alabama is 16. The girl became pregnant at age 15 and they married but divorced in 2009. Ashley Pereira (her current name), now an actress based in Tennessee, didn't accuse him of rape until 2020, an allegation Greathouse's attorney called "absurd" and retaliatory because Greathouse was given custody of their daughter.

"This case had extenuating circumstances and we felt like this is in the best interest of all parties," said Coffee County District Attorney Tom Anderson, adding that the case presented serious challenges to prosecutors. *Source: al.com/WTVY, 10-15-21*

Fernando Cristancho, 65, Bel Air, MD: Pleaded guilty to coercion and enticement of a minor and producing child pornography. Ordained in 1985 in Colombia, he worked as a Catholic priest in the U.S. from 1994–2002, when the Archdiocese of Baltimore removed him from ministry without saying why.

Charges stemmed from assaults in 2002 on a boy from St. Ignatius Parish starting when the boy was 11. The crimes came to light during an

investigation after a store employee helping Cristancho print photos in 2017 noticed what appeared to be photos of naked children on his phone. One showed bite marks on a child's buttock.

Authorities became aware last July of a woman, now 33, who accused Cristancho of assaults starting when she was 7 in 1995. After the final instance of abuse in 2002, the girl told her mother, who confronted Cristancho.

He allegedly said he would turn himself in but "her mother said this would be bad timing for the Church," court documents state, in the wake of the Boston Globe's investigation into child sex abuse by priests. *Source: Baltimore Sun, 10-5-21*

Sentenced

Gregory Marshall, 59, San Jose, CA: 80 months in prison after pleading no contest to 26 counts of sexual penetration and oral copulation with a person under age 18.

Allison Brown alleged to police in 2019 that Marshall, her basketball coach at Valley Christian High School, had a sexual relationship with her starting in 2004 when she was 17. Her teammate Tracey Walker reported in 2006 that she also had a sexual relationship with Marshall when she was underage. No charges were filed then in Walker's case, with prosecutors citing insufficient evidence.

The school has since settled civil suits with both women for undisclosed terms. The suits alleged the school prioritized preserving its reputation and athletic pedigree over protecting students. *Source: Mercury News, 10-11-21*

Rick D. Iglesias, 66: 9 years in prison after pleading guilty in **Winona, MN**, to 2nd-degree criminal sexual conduct with a person under age 16 with multiple acts and a significant relationship. When arrested, he was working at a church in Pennsylvania.

His accuser alleged to police in 2019 that Iglesias assaulted him weekly between his freshman and sophomore years, mostly at Iglesias' home, when he was pastor at Pleasant Valley Church.

Defense attorney Kurt Knuesel argued for a shorter sentence: "We have someone who did a lot of good in his life and made an extraordinarily terrible choice over a period of time and is now doing his level best to make up for that." The judge denied a request for a 1-year sentence split into 30-day stints over 12 years. *Source: KSTP, 10-13-21*

Artur Pawlowski, 48, Calgary, Alberta: Fines and legal costs totaling over \$43,000 for violating 2 court orders to follow COVID-19 public health measures. Alberta Health Services sought a 21-day jail sentence but Justice Adam Germain declined to jail him, saying it would only make Pawlowski more of a martyr.

The nondenominational preacher and political activist was found guilty of contempt for holding services outside the Whistle Stop restaurant, where between 300 and 400 people gathered. His brother **Dawid** was also convicted and fined \$10,000. Restaurant owner **Christopher Scott** was fined \$20,000.

They are also subject to probationary orders that say any public speeches they make must mention that the majority of scientific opinion contradicts theirs. *Source: Calgary Herald, 10-13-21*

Larry A. Holley, 64, Grand Blanc, MI, and Patricia E. Gray, 60, Flint, MI: 100 months and 42 months, respectively, in prison with 2 years' supervised probation and restitution to investors. Holley, an Abundant Life Ministries pastor, and Gray operated Treasure Enterprise LLC, which offered financial planning and asset management services.

Both pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit mail fraud and wire fraud. In 2014 they started soliciting investors, including retirees and laid-off auto workers, at "Blessed Life" seminars held at churches in Michigan and other states. It was alleged their multi-year Ponzi scheme defrauded over 140 investors out of almost \$9.3 million.

"Investors were drawn to, and put their trust in, Holley and Gray because of their seemingly shared spirituality," the complaint said. "Holley told prospective investors that, as a person who 'prayed for your children,' he was more trustworthy than a banker." *Source: justice.gov, 10-8-21*

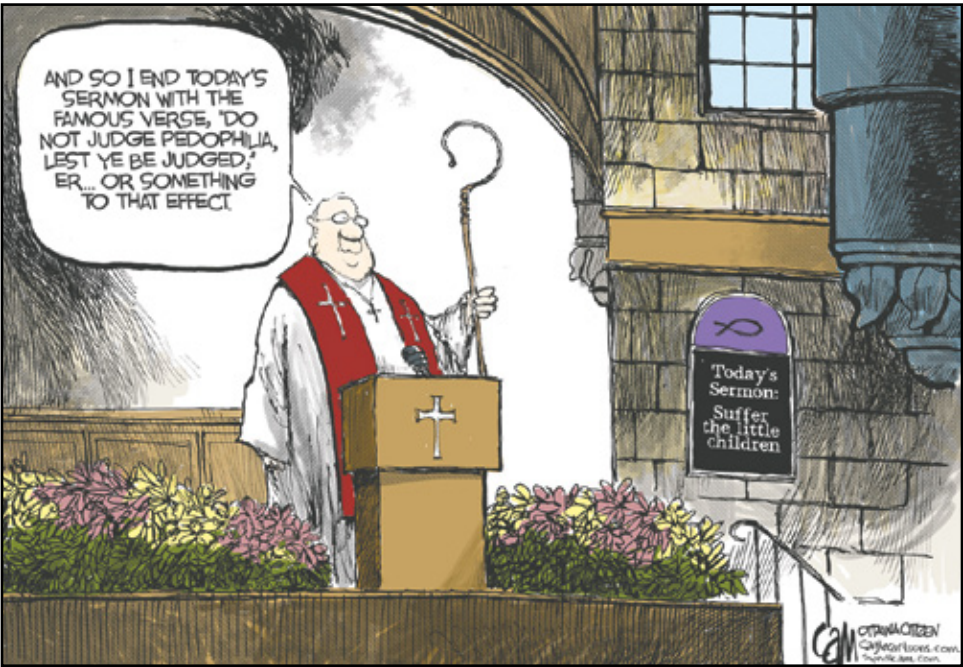
Joseph McLoone, 58, Downingtown, PA: 5 years' probation, including 9 months under house arrest, and community service after pleading guilty to misdemeanor theft for stealing an estimated \$30,000 from St. Joseph Parish. He was initially accused of stealing nearly \$100,000 but a plea deal reduced the amount.

Prosecutors said McLoone diverted funds into secret accounts and misappropriated fees charged to parishioners while doubling the amount he collected as a stipend for each Mass, wedding and funeral. They said he used the money to pad his \$26,000 annual salary, for a beach house in Ocean City, NJ, and spent it on men he was dating.

McLoone was assigned to the parish in 2011 to replace Msgr. **William Lynn**, who weathered his own scandal as the archdiocesan secretary accused of hiding reports of clergy sexual abuse. *Source: AP, 10-2-21*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

The **Rockland Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses** in **Rockport, ME**, and the **Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York** are being sued by a woman alleging she was sexually as-



saulted as a child by a church elder, unidentified in a news story.

The woman alleges multiple molestations between 1993–96 starting when she was 11 and that she was disfellowshipped, with church elders threatening her family with a lawsuit if they went public. Plaintiff's attorney Michael Bigos said the alleged perpetrator remains an elder and is the registered agent for the congregation. *Source: Courier-Gazette, 10-9-21*

Dino Rizzo, associate pastor at Church of the Highlands in **Birmingham, AL**, is a defendant in a suit alleging he didn't protect a church intern from sexual harassment by lead pastor **Jason Delgado** at Vibrant Church in **Columbus, MS**, where Rizzo is an overseer. Rizzo is also executive director of the Association of Related Churches, an evangelical church planting organization.

Co-defendants are Delgado and his parents and Vibrant Church. Plaintiff Laura Eagan claims that while she was a Vibrant intern, Delgado sent her unwanted and sexually explicit private messages starting in early 2021, which escalated into sexual propositions. Delgado resigned as lead pastor of Vibrant in April 2021 after apologizing for undetailed "inappropriate behavior." *Source: al.com, 10-6-21*

Cedar Crest Independent Baptist Church in **Mt. Union, PA**, is being sued for \$75,000 by a woman alleging sexual abuse by **Jeffrey Winstead**, former church pastor, when she was a teen. The suit says she was 15 when Winstead started molesting her and was 16 when the abuse ended in 2012 and that church officials had reason to suspect Winstead was acting inappropriately with her and other girls but took "no meaningful action" to stop it.

Winstead, now 65, was sentenced to 8 to 16 years after pleading guilty in 2014 to involuntary deviate sexual intercourse with a person under 16. *Source: pennlive.com, 8-12-21*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

Geelong College in **Newtown, Australia**, was ordered to pay a former student over \$2.7 million for enduring sexual abuse at the school. Geelong is a Uniting Church day and boarding school. Uniting Church was founded in 1977 and is the nation's 3rd-largest Christian denomination after the Catholic and the Anglican churches.

A judge found that the plaintiff, now 46, was molested on and off campus starting in the late 1980s by **Bert Palframan**, who died in 1999. At the time, the school let members of the public use its wood-working facilities for their own purposes.

Michael Magazanik, plaintiff's attorney, said Palframan "showed up for years on end, never working on his own projects, was only there to groom and abuse children, and the college never did anything, no checks, no preventative measures, nothing at all to protect the kids."

Magazanik added, "That failure, as the judge made clear, was despite the school knowing that he'd had a history of child sexual abuse on those premises." *Source: abc.net/au, 10-3-21*

Legal Developments

A new **Maine law** that took effect Oct. 18 lifted the statute of limitations on sexual abuse claims, allowing all survivors to pursue civil cases no matter how long it's been. Previously, those abused before 1987 generally couldn't sue. Maine eliminated the statute in 2000 for those claims but the policy was not retroactive, so victims whose claims had expired still couldn't bring them forward.

A lobbyist for the Catholic Diocese of Portland opposed lifting the statute at a March hearing before the legislature's Judiciary Committee.

Robert Dupuis, now 72 and living in East Lyme, CT, is considering a suit. In 1961 when he was 12, he was part of a group of 5 boys who

did chores around St. Joseph Catholic Church in Old Town, working under the supervision of its pastor, **John J. Curran**.

The abuse happened over a 6-month period, Dupuis said, and it was a secret he kept until 2008. "I kept it to myself like most abused people did at that time, fearing a number of different things," said Dupuis, who struggled for decades with depression and alcoholism while working as a nuclear engineer.

Curran died in 1976 at age 76. The diocese acknowledged his abusive past after Dupuis went public. *Source: WGME/Bangor Daily News, 10-22-21*

Kenneth Moales Jr., 49, Bridgeport, CT, failed to appear in court on a felony charge of issuing an insufficient funds check over \$2,000. Moales, pastor of Prayer Tabernacle Church of God and Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, later turned himself in. He is accused of writing a bad check to Testo's Restaurant for \$2,821 for catering services but has now allegedly made good on the check and claims the charge is politically motivated.

Moales is embroiled in a federal foreclosure case. A judge has ordered him evicted from his churches. It's alleged he owes over \$15 million to his largest creditor, Foundation Capital Resources. Properties include the churches, Kingdom's Little Ones day care, Love Christian Academy and a summer camp.

He also owns a construction and management company and formerly chaired the city's Board of Education. *Source: News 12/CT Post, 10-15-21*

William Casey, former pastor at St. Dominic's Catholic Church in **Kingsport, TN**, was denied retrial on an appeal of his 35-year sentence in 2011 for aggravated rape. Casey claimed he "received ineffective assistance of counsel" at trial and during the appeal which followed.

The victim, a former altar boy, alleged Casey molested him over 50 times over the course of 5 years. The appeal also claimed evidence that should have been excluded at trial was allowed to be presented. *Source: WJHL, 10-13-21*

Critics of the bankrupt Catholic **Diocese of Camden, NJ**, call its offer of \$26 million to settle clergy abuse claims "paltry" and "inappropriate" and plan to fight it in court. The proposed settlement with at least 320 survivors would make average payments of \$81,250.

The plan could increase to \$40 million "if survivors choose to accept tax-free payments over seven years," the diocese said in a statement. "This is just an insult," said Greg Gianforaro, who represents 70 survivors, adding it's "just an extension of what we've seen with regard to hypocrisy of the Catholic Church."

John Baldante, who also represents about 70 survivors, described it as a "terrible plan." *Source: inquirer.com, 10-12-21*

Trent B. Holbert, 41, Black Mountain, NC, charged in May with indecent liberties with a child and 2 counts of statutory sex offense with a child under 15, gave a false report of child abuse to a social service agency, according to newly revealed court documents.

Holbert, who resigned as Ridge Church pastor after being charged, also tried to assume parental rights for his alleged victim, asking her parents to sign a waiver giving him those rights if they died. The parents refused. *Source: WLOS, 10-9-21*

R. Joseph Hemmerle, 79, a Kentucky Catholic priest, was set to be released from prison Oct. 1 over the objections of abuse survivor Michael Norris. "I'm concerned this guy is getting out," Norris told a reporter. "He can show up next door and you won't have a clue who this man is. Your children can get around him. I can tell you from my own experience they don't want to go through that."

Hemmerle is not required to register as a sex offender. Norris told a jury that when he was 10 in 1973, Hemmerle stood him naked on a stool and

assaulted him with his hands and mouth in Hemmerle's cabin, where he'd gone to him for poison ivy treatment. The camp was run by the Archdiocese of Louisville until 2002.

Hemmerle, who is still a priest, testified at his 2016 trial that he would sometimes apply calamine lotion to children's genitals if they didn't object. He was found guilty of indecent or immoral practices with a child under 15. *Source: AP, 9-22-21*

Allegations

Kansas Catholic clergy are the subject of 122 investigations by the state attorney general's Catholic Clergy Taskforce, which has received 215 tips. The task force has reviewed about 40,000 records since 2019.

Investigators are interested in the allegation itself and what, if any, follow-up occurred when it was made, said Attorney General Derek Schmidt, a Republican. *Source: AP, 10-15-21*

French Catholic clergy victimized an estimated 216,000 children sexually between 1950–2020, said a 2,500-page report by an independent commission. Between 2,900 and 3,200 clergy were involved, said commission head Jean-Marc Sauvé.

When lay members of the church such as teachers and catechism supervisors were included, the number of survivors rose to at least 330,000.

While 80% were boys ages 10 to 13, girls were also victimized, even by nuns using crucifixes to penetrate them or forcing boys to have sex with them. "Marie" remembered a nun coming into her class every day when she was 11 to choose a student to help her with preparing for Mass.

"She would take me to her office, lock the door, and then draw the curtains. After which she would put me on her knees to make me read the gospel according to Saint Paul or another saint, while she squeezed me with one hand to her chest and pulled down my panties with the other hand. We were of course in pleated skirts and not in pants. It terrified me and paralyzed me." *Source: The Guardian, 10-3-21*

An **unidentified priest** in **Sacramento, CA**, preyed on her when she was a Catholic school 1st-grader, alleged Clare Crawley, the first Latina Bachelorette, who led the ABC-TV reality show's 16th season in 2020. She is the youngest of 6 sisters, whose mother is of Mexican descent.

Her parents, who had limited resources and put priests on a pedestal, sent her to one for counseling because she was so "painfully shy" that she would "pee her pants" rather than raise her hand to go to the bathroom.

But, said Crowley, 40, "I don't think there was any counseling that was done. It was a one-on-one time to be a predator." She said she didn't tell her parents for 3 years and that when they threatened to sue, the church talked them out of it by transferring the priest. *Source: E! Online, 9-29-21*

Removed / Resigned

Michael King, 44, Gort, Ireland, was placed on "indefinite leave" as assistant pastor at St. Colman Catholic Parish for appearing in TikTok videos in which he is topless while alluding to sex and alcohol. In one post he declares it's "thirsty Thursday" and "half past pub time" before saying "Glug, glug, glug, glug ... beer. Nice."

On a post by another user, he tells her "Pineapple does not go on pizza, bitch, and carrots do not go into cakes, OK?"

In a video captioned "Me in charge of a funeral playlist," King lip-synchs to AC/DC's "Highway to Hell," Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust," the BeeGees' "Stayin' Alive" and the dance hit "You'll Never See Me Again."

King worked as a bartender and amateur actor before being ordained in 2016. *Source: Irish Examiner, 10-22-21*

Leakey Nyaberi, Brooklyn Park, MN, resigned as pastor of United Central Seventh-day Adventist Church after an audio clip purportedly of him asking for sexual favors from a female church member leaked on social media. The clip was described as "lurid and graphic."

Nyaberi reportedly admitted to the church's governing board that the voice on the clip was his, saying he fell into temptation. He tendered his resignation Oct. 11 for "personal reasons" but in an interview later claimed his accuser is blackmailing him and wants to destroy his career. *Source: KSN News, 10-17-21*

Other

A memorial service in **Baltimore** for **Michael Salerno**, a Catholic priest removed from ministry in 2007 for molesting a teen boy in the late 1970s, was canceled at St. Leo the Great Parish. The service honoring Salerno, who died recently at age 80, included a reception but was scrapped after the Archdiocese of Baltimore reached out to parish leaders.

Salerno was a member of the Pallottine Fathers, the order that runs St. Leo's. Parishioners were told following the 2007 investigation that Salerno had admitted to the abuse. No criminal charges were filed but the Pallottines suspended his priestly functions. *Source: Baltimore Sun, 10-14-21*

Email: blackcollar@ffrf.org

Exemption

Continued from page 1

constitutionality of a regulation by the board of health in Cambridge, Mass., to require vaccinations in response to a smallpox epidemic. The Supreme Court held that the mandate represented a valid exercise of the state’s police power and affirmed that “a community has the right to protect itself against an epidemic of disease which threatens the safety of its members.”

The Supreme Court again found, in *Zucht v. King* (1922), that the school district of San Antonio, Texas, could constitutionally exclude unvaccinated students from attending district schools. In *Prince v. Massachusetts* (1944), the Supreme Court concluded that “[t]he right to practice religion freely does not include liberty to expose the community or the child to communicable disease or the latter to ill health or death.” In *Employment Division v. Smith*, (1990), the court reaffirmed that the free exercise clause does not “require religious exemptions from . . . health and safety regulation such as . . . compulsory vaccination laws.”

Mandatory vaccinations are longstanding. Mandatory vaccinations date to a decision by George Washington, as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, to order an 18th century version against smallpox, which he termed the “most dangerous enemy.” It was a good thing he did, as historian Thomas Schactman notes: “Nothing that Washington did had a greater impact on the outcome of the war than his actions to protect his troops from death by smallpox.” The infection rate among the American soldiers dropped from 17 percent to 1 percent in a year.

All 50 states and the District of Columbia have long required school-aged children to receive vaccines for measles, rubella and polio. The state of Mississippi does not provide for *any* exemptions from school vaccinations.

Religious entities do not oppose vaccination policies. No major U.S. religious denomination opposes vaccination outright, with only a few tiny Christian denominations as outliers.

Legal and practical problems in “accommodating” religious exemptions. As Chicago Tribune columnist Steve Chapman warns, “Employers who choose to accommodate religious exemptions . . . have to investigate subjective matters on which they have no expertise,” noting the exception invites “every phony and crank to escape a basic measure needed to protect those around them.”

Curtis Chang, who is affiliated with Duke Divinity School and is cofounder of Christians and the Vaccine, points out in a New York Times guest essay that any institution considering religious exemptions should require applicants to demonstrate they’ve consistently refused other immunizations for religious reasons. Most evangelicals have historically chosen to be immunized against polio, measles, tetanus and other diseases.

The burden should be on the individual seeking the exemption anyway. Government officials rolling out vaccination mandates have misguidedly assumed they have a legal duty to offer an exemption.

Who’s behind anti-vaccine backlash? Arch-conservative



governors, uniformly Christian and rightwing, are outracing each other to ban Covid mandates, such as Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who’s banned private entities from mandating vaccination. Other Christian nationalist governors include Ron DeSantis, of Florida, who banned vaccine passports, and Arizona’s Doug Ducey, who’s using Covid funds to reward private schools for banning masking. Multiple states with Christian right-dominated legislatures are suing Biden over the OSHA rule. Litigating private entities include Christian Employers Alliance, defended by Alliance Defending Freedom. Among petitioners against the OSHA rules are Ken Ham’s Answers in Genesis. Liberty Counsel is spearheading anti-mandate challenges.

It’s no coincidence that zealous evangelical Gov. Abbott, who signed SB 8 — the notorious law careening Texas into the land of *The Handmaid’s Tale* — has been among the most aggressive public officials in banning Covid mandates, hypocritically condemning them as federal “overreach.” Mandatory motherhood is not government “overreach,” but a jab in the arm to protect health and defeat a pandemic is? The religious motivation to ban both abortion and Covid mandates is irrefutable.

Two closely-watched lawsuits involve Christian, anti-abortion healthcare workers in Maine and New York State. The Maine religious healthcare workers, so far losing their lawsuit, have asked the U.S. Supreme Court to intervene. Sooner or later this or a similar case will be sched-

uled for the Trump court’s “shadow” or regular docket. Then, watch out. We can expect to see the Religious Freedom Restoration Act invoked to assert that those with “sincerely held religious beliefs” are above the law. Clearly, individuals who deny science and/or who place their idiosyncratic religious beliefs above the health of patients don’t belong in the health care or nursing home care professions.

“Religiously-motivated anti-vaxxers challenging mandates act like not being vaccinated is somehow a courageous act of personal integrity,” comments FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “It is in fact the height of selfishness. These latter-day Know-Nothings fail to grasp or honor the fact that vaccinations work not only by providing protection to the individual, but to the community through herd immunity.” Unfortunately, the current estimate is that we will only reach Covid-19 herd immunity when 90 percent or more of the population is vaccinated.

As the centuries-old battle of science versus faith continues unabated, the Freedom From Religion Foundation will continue our vital work to ensure that reason and science — not religious obstructionism — end up prevailing in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. The United States and the world have a long way to go, and irrationality is still “the most dangerous enemy.”

Thanks to FFRF Attorney Chris Line for his research and drafting of much of this statement.

Special Winter Solstice / New Year's Gift Membership Offer!

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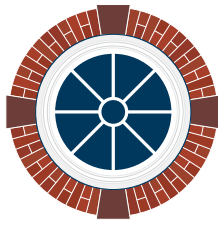
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FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION
NATIONAL CONVENTION

BOSTON | NOVEMBER 19-21, 2021



Photo by Chris Line

Ann Druyan gestures toward her Emperor Has No Clothes Award as her daughter, Sasha Sagan looks on to close out the 2021 FFRF national convention in Boston on Nov. 20.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Todd Peissig (Wis.) and Eric Lawrence (Ill.) have been selling tickets to the “clean money” drawing for many years at FFRF’s conventions.



Photo by Chris Line

Twins Christine and Maddie Hettinger, both of Wisconsin, are all smiles during the convention.



Photo by Chris Line

Presenter Rafida Bonya Ahmed holds the attention of the others at her table during one of the convention meals.



Photo by Chris Line

Granada Higgins and Jeremiah Camara, both of Georgia, are FFRF’s newest Executive Board members.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Lee Parks (D.C.) asks a question of author and columnist Katherine Stewart after her convention speech.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Members, including Dan Kozloff (Calif.), watch FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor give the opening presentation on Friday, Nov. 19.



Photo by Chris Line

Honorees Chris Nelson and Heather Coleman Nelson of Alabama watch the convention from the back of the Boston Park Plaza ballroom.



Photo by Chris Line

Hoa Anh Hoang (D.C.) shares a laugh with other convention attendees following the evening meal on Saturday, Nov. 20.



Photo by Chris Line

Katherine Stewart prepares to sign another copy of her book *The Power Worshippers* following her speech at the convention on Nov. 19.

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

NATIONAL CONVENTION

AWARDS



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Steve Salemsen, FFRF's treasurer, hands off the Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award and \$10,000 to Megan Phelps-Roper. She earned the award for breaking away from the bigoted Westboro Baptist Church and writing about it in *Unfollow: Leaving the Westboro Baptist Church*.



Feminist icon Gloria Steinem, who couldn't be in attendance due to an injury sustained earlier in the week, chatted with FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor via a Zoom interview. Steinem received the Forward Award, which is given to a person who helps move society forward.

Photo by Chris Line



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Ann Druyan, "Cosmos" author, producer and director, was awarded FFRF's Emperor Has No Clothes Award by Dan Barker, given to a public figure who takes on the fabled role of the little child in the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale and "tells it like it is" about religion.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Chris Nelson and Heather Coleman Nelson, Robert Corker and Randall Cragun each earned FFRF's 2021 Freethinker of the Year awards as plaintiffs in FFRF's lawsuit ending Alabama's requirement that voters register to vote on a form mandating they swear "so help me God."



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Famed author Margaret Atwood, center, received the Forward Award, which was created by renowned sculptor Zenos Frudakis, who holds the statuette. Standing with them is Katherine Stewart, who held a lively conversation with Atwood during the Friday evening portion of the convention.



Photo by Chris Line

Sikivu Hutchinson holds up her Freethought Heroine Award, which was awarded to her by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. The award recognizes the special contributions of women to freethought and the battle to keep state and church separate.



Sushant Singh speaks to the audience via a pre-recorded message from India. Singh earned the Avijit Roy Courage Award, which also carries a \$5,000 prize. He was introduced by FFRF Director of Communications Amit Pal. The award, introduced by Bonya Ahmed, is given to an individual working toward the spread of rational and logical discourse, and recognize creative and heroic individuals who have persisted, despite hurdles, in their work to promote science, logic and humane ideas.

Photo by Ingrid Laas



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Randa Black (Fla.) earned FFRF's Nothing Fails Like Prayer Award. She was introduced by Freethought Today Editor PJ Slinger. The award is given to an individual who gives the "best" secular invocation at a public meeting.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Author and columnist Linda Greenhouse was presented with the Clarence Darrow Award by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor and sculptor Zenos Frudakis, who created the statuette. The award recognizes civil libertarians, those who promote science and evolution, and/or freethought, as Darrow advocated.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Jeffery Koeberl, David Williamson and Keith Becher show off their 2021 Freethinker of the Year plaques. They earned the awards as plaintiffs in FFRF's victorious case against Brevard County Board of Commissioners, Fla., which had disallowed invocations from atheists at its meetings.

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

NATIONAL CONVENTION

SPEAKERS



Sasha Sagan, author of *For Creatures Such as We: Rituals for Finding Meaning in Our Unlikely World*, discusses the topic of her book.

Photo by Chris Line



Student honorees Tylinn Wilson, Fadima Tall, Sami Al-Asady, Everett Viego and Galilea Black, most of whom won FFRF essay contests, had an opportunity to read their speeches to the audience. See Page 16 of Freethought Today for Sami's activist essay.

Photo by Ingrid Laas



FFRF's honorary director and Harvard professor Steven Pinker speaks on the topic of his just-released book, *Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters*.

Photo by Chris Line



David Tamayo, an FFRF Board member who is co-founder and president of Hispanic American Freethinkers, talks about the pros and cons of artificial intelligence.

Photo by Ingrid Laas



Author and journalist Katherine Stewart speaks about the "Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism" based on her book, *The Power Worshipers*.

Photo by Chris Line



Secular studies pioneer and Pitzer College Professor Phil Zuckerman speaks about "How Secular Morality Will Save the World."

Photo by Chris Line



Boston University School of Law Professor Jay Wexler gives his speech on "Our Non-Christian Nation."

Photo by Chris Line



FFRF Director of Strategic Response Andrew L. Seidel conducted a workshop called "Christian Nationalism on Jan. 6".

Photo by Ingrid Laas



Chris Cameron, associate professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, speaks on the topic of "Black Freethinkers."

Photo by Chris Line



Four members of FFRF's Legal Team — Sam Grover, Rebecca Markert, Andrew L. Seidel and Chris Line — moderated an "Ask an Attorney" workshop that garnered many questions from the inquisitive audience.

Photo by Ingrid Laas

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

NATIONAL CONVENTION

OPENING RECEPTION



Photo by Chris Line

Brian Engler (Va.) and Debbie Allen (D.C.), executive director of the Secular Coalition of America, share a moment during the opening reception at FFRF’s national convention at the Boston Park Plaza.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Gerardo Rivera (Puerto Rico) and Sohan Dsouza (Mass.) pose with the FFRF banner at the reception on Nov. 18.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Trish Dayan and Raymond Dayan, both of Connecticut, hold up the complimentary “In Science I Trust” face masks offered by FFRF at the convention.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Jeanne Casteen(Ariz.), Sheila Hoover (Pa.) and Rachel Hoover (Pa.) enjoy the Thursday opening reception.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Eric Nelson (Minn.) and Jamie Mason (N.C.) are deep in discussion.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Jeffery Koeberl and Keith Becher enjoy the reception a day before receiving Freethinker of the Year awards due to their court victory in Florida.



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF members make their way down the food line during the Thursday night opening reception.



Photo by Chris Line

Convention attendees sit on the steps to chat and eat and drink in the Boston Park Plaza main ballroom.



Photo by Chris Line

The opening reception included sliders, meat and veggie.



Photo by Chris Line

Carrots, baby tomatoes, broccoli and other vegetables made for a beautiful edible display.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

FFRF members take a moment during the convention reception to pose for a photo.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Margaret Downey (Pa.), Supreme Court victor Ellery Schempp (Mass.) and Arlene Germain (Mass.) make the rounds at the reception.

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

NATIONAL CONVENTION

STAFF

Photo by Ingrid Laas



Members of FFRF’s audio-visual and multimedia team — from left, Camera Operator Stephanie Benicek, Audio Engineer Buzz Kemper, Floor Manager Mallory Johnson, Communications Manager Lauryn Seering, Camera Operator Erin Johnson, IT Director James Phetteplace and Multimedia Producer Bruce Johnson — were a busy group. They recorded and filmed the convention, posted to social media, and kept the convention running smoothly.



Freethought Today Editor PJ Slinger and Reproductive Rights Intern Barbara Alvarez worked the sales tables during the convention.

Photo by Ingrid Laas



Legal Assistants Greta Martens and Stephanie Dyer and IT Director James Phetteplace show off FFRF’s banner outside the main hall of the Boston Park Plaza Hotel.

Photo by Ingrid Laas



FFRF’s Director of Operations Lisa Strand opened the convention with a welcome and call-out to all the states represented.

Photo by Chris Line



Communications Manager Lauryn Seering, Legal Assistant Stephanie Dyer and Bookkeeper Eleanor McEntee kept busy at the sales tables throughout the convention.

Photo by Ingrid Laas



Chris Line pulled double duty at the convention. As one of FFRF’s attorneys, he was a panelist during the legal report and the “Ask an Atheist” sessions, and also worked as a photographer.

Photo by Ingrid Laas



Membership and Office Manager Jackie Douglas kept things flowing and on track from the Help Desk.

Photo by Ingrid Laas



Programs Manager Kristina Daleiden shares a nice moment with Legal Director Rebecca Markert.

Photo by Ingrid Laas



FFRF’s Director of Communications Amit Pal and FFRF Attorney Sam Grover take a break from sales.

Photo by Ingrid Laas

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

NATIONAL CONVENTION

CLEAN MONEY



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Every year at its convention, FFRF hosts a “clean money” drawing, referring to money printed before 1957, which did not contain the words “In God We Trust.”

This year’s clean money winners are, from left: Heather Coleman, Marc Goldenberg, Michael Barrows, Rob Boston, Neil Polzin, Clotilde Tamers, John Corbett, Dawn Keser, Stephen Hirtle, Guy T. Craig, Bruce Rockwell and Judith Stuss (standing in for Edwin Foster).



Photo by Ingrid Laas

FFRF Board Member Todd Peissig works on drawing up interest in the “clean money” drawing.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Buzz Kemper, emcee of the Clean Money drawing, displays the \$10 bill that Alvin W. Miller of Tennessee donated.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Students Brady Fiona and Tylinn Wilson read off a winning ticket number for one of the clean money bills.

Denom	Year/Series	Donor	Winner
\$1	1922	Gary & Marcy Garb, Pa.	John Corbett, Ind.
\$1	1934	Todd Peissig, Wis.	Edwin Foster, N.J.
\$1	1935 series D	Bob Ricketts & Donna Schultz, Colo.	Rob Boston, D.C.
\$1	1935 series E	Joseph Cunningham, Ill.	Clotilde Tamers, Fla.
\$1	1935 series G	Dennis K. McDaniel, D.C.	Dawn Keser, Pa.
\$2	1928 series G	Ron Frederickson, Wis.	Neil Polzin, Calif.
\$2	1953 series A	D.A. Rickards, Ohio	Guy T. Craig, Calif.
\$5	1934 series D	Lamar & June Hankins, Texas	Bruce Rockwell, N.Y.
\$10	1934 series A	Alvin W. Miller, Tenn.	Marc Goldenberg, Md.
\$20	1934	Nancy Colgan, Colo.	Stephen Hirtle, Pa.
\$50	1950 series B	Phyllis Murphey, Calif.	Michael Barrows, N.Y.
\$100	1934	Erin Louis, Calif.	Heather Coleman, Ala.

Thanks to FFRF Bookkeeper Eleanor McEntee for organizing the prize money.

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

NATIONAL CONVENTION

STATE REPRESENTATIVES



Photo by Ingrid Laas

FFRF held its annual State Representatives meeting on Nov. 21 at the Park Plaza Hotel in Boston.

Here is the 2021 list of the State Reps, although not all were in attendance at the meeting.

Daniel Barker (Wis.), Darrell Barker (Wash.), Charles and Sheri Bender (Ind.), Lance Bredvold (Mont.), Robin Buckallew (Neb.), Chris Calvey (Ill.), Jeremiah Camara (Ga.), Tom Cara (Ill.), John Cavin (Kan.), Dianne Centa (Ohio), Michael Cermak (Pa.), Sheridan Chapin (N.Y.), Dianne Cooper (Iowa), Margaret Downey (Pa.), Mike Dubik (Va.), Zenos Frudakis (Pa.), Annie Laurie Gaylor (Wis.), Kevin Gough (Conn.), Ken Gould (Ariz.), Ed and Mikel Hensley (Ky.), Granada Higgins (Ga.), Stephen Hirtle (Pa.), Cheryl and Ken Hofbauer (Ill.), Linda Hollar (Texas), George and Julie Iddon (Wash.), Linda Josheff (Wis.), Sue Kocher (N.C.), Cheryl Kolbe (Ore.), Marc-Andre Lachance (Ontario), Aleta Ledendecker (Tenn.), Philip Lentz (Ariz.), Steven Lowe (D.C.), Douglas Marshall (Mich.), Rob Moore (Wis.), Stefanie Moritz (Wis.), Paul Novak (Iowa), Todd Peissig (Wis.), Randy Pelton (Ohio), Judy Saint (Calif.), Betsy Salemsen (N.H.), Steve Salemsen (Wis.), Tom Schottmiller (Pa.), Sue Schuetz (Wis.), Nick Sheridan (Md.), Steve Solomon (Mo.), Claudette St.Pierre (Colo.), Bonnie and Gary Stormo (S.D.), David Tamayo (Va.), Wayne Thurston (N.Y.), Steve Trunk (Calif.), Tom Waddell (Maine), David Williamson and Jocelyn Williamson (Fla.), James Zerwick (Wis.) and Rob Zweibach (Calif.).

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

NATIONAL CONVENTION

MOMENTS



Photo by Chris Line

Steven Lowe (D.C.) asks a question of the FFRF Legal Team during the “Ask an Attorney” session of the convention.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor were emcees of the 2021 convention.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Megan Phelps-Roper signs a copy of her book *Unfollow* for a convention attendee.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

More than 550 FFRF members and speakers from 43 states and Belgium, Canada, Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands attended the 2021 convention at the Boston Park Plaza.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Convention attendees sit on the balcony above the ballroom to listen to the speakers.



Photo by Chris Line

Convention attendees get served ribs and mac and cheese from one of the several food stations during the Friday dinner.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

FFRF members join in the “moment of bedlam” during the Non-Prayer Breakfast on Saturday, Nov. 20.



Photo by Chris Line

Ingrid Laas was the official photographer of the convention.

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

NATIONAL CONVENTION

EXECUTIVE BOARD



Photo by Chris Line

Erin Johnson operates a camera to record the convention speakers.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

The FFRF Executive Board members are, from left, David Tamayo, Stephen Hirtle, Sue Kocher, Todd Peissig, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Cheryl Kolbe, Dan Barker, Mike Cermak, Jr., Lisa Strand (not a Board member, but FFRF’s director of operations), Steve Salemsen, new members Granada Higgins and Jeremiah Camara and outgoing longtime Board Member Jim Zerwick.

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

NATIONAL CONVENTION

MOMENTS



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Honoree Margaret Atwood enjoys a moment during her evening discussion with Katherine Stewart on Nov. 19 at the Boston Park Plaza Hotel.



The convention audience watches a replay of a video that Ed Asner recorded for FFRF after he received the 2020 Clarence Darrow Award. Asner died Aug. 29.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

An attendee goes through her “clean money” tickets, hoping to win some pre-1957 bills without the words “in God We Trust” on them.



Photo by Chris Line

Sculptor Zenos Frudakis, left, chats with a couple of convention guests following dinner.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

During short breaks, FFRF Co-President Dan Barker entertained the audience with some piano playing and singing.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Steve Solomon (Mo.) takes photos during the opening remarks of the convention on Nov. 19.



Photo by Chris Line

Siblings Cary Kocher (Mich.) and Sue Kocher (N.C) enjoy watching the convention speakers from one of the balconies at the Boston Park Plaza ballroom.



Photo by Chris Line

Erin Louis (Calif.), right, holds the attention of Kathy Johnson (Calif.), left, and Judy Saint (Calif.) during the Friday dinner.



Photo by Chris Line