

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



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June-July 2021

FFRF wins court case vs. Abbott

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has been granted relief in its six-year lawsuit challenging Gov. Greg Abbott's censorship of its Winter Solstice display in the Texas Capitol.

On May 6, U.S. District Court Judge Lee Yeakel ruled in favor of FFRF in its federal challenge of



Gov. Greg Abbott

censorship of its freethought display in the Capitol in 2015. Yeakel ordered declaratory and injunctive relief to ensure that Abbott and the State Preservation Board will not violate FFRF's free speech rights in the future.

"This is a great victory for free speech rights, especially of minority viewpoints, including nonreligious citizens whose voices must be equally respected," says FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert.

The court, after officially rendering its verdict in favor of FFRF's First Amendment freedom-of-speech claim, granted it protection from future viewpoint censorship and issued an injunction and this declaration: "It is further ordered and declared that defendants violate the Foundation's First Amendment rights and engage in viewpoint discrimination as a matter of law when they exclude the Foundation's exhibit based on the perceived offensiveness of its message."

FFRF, with help from members and with requisite sponsorship by a legislator, had placed a Winter Solstice display in the state Capitol in December 2015 as a response to a Christian nativity. FFRF's whimsical display depicted the Founders and the Statue of Liberty celebrating the "birth" of

See Abbott on page 2

Truth-telling in Tennessee



FFRF placed this message in June on a billboard outside Dickson, Tenn., thanks to local member Frank Stiver. Another billboard in the area also says: "The Good News is . . . THERE IS NO GOD." The slogans were suggested by Stiver, an octogenarian who generously paid to post them on behalf of FFRF. Both billboards are found on the I-40 outside of Dickson. One is a mile east of Highway 48 and the other a mile west of Highway 48.

FFRF wins lawsuit against praying Texas judge

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has won its court challenge to stop a Texas judge from conducting courtroom prayer.

U.S. District Judge Kenneth M. Hoyt ruled May 21 in favor of plaintiffs FFRF and local attorney "John Roe." They had sued Montgomery County Judge Wayne Mack over his divisive and unconstitutional practice of opening each court session with chaplain-led prayer. Mack, as a justice of the peace, has jurisdiction over minor misdemeanor offenses and lesser civil matters. Montgomery County is north of Houston, and its county seat is Conroe.

The decision reads: "The court is of the view that the defendant violates the Establishment Clause



Judge Wayne Mack

when, before a captured audience of litigants and their counsel, he presents himself as theopneustically inspired, enabling him to advance,

through the chaplaincy program, God's 'larger purpose.' Such a magnanimous goal flies in the face of historical tradition, and makes a mockery of both religion and law."

FFRF welcomes this judgment declaring at long last that Mack cannot continue abusing his authority to coerce attorneys, litigants and other citizens into participating in his courtroom prayers.

"A courtroom is not a church, and a judge's bench is not a pulpit," comments FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "Today's ruling is a victory for the constitutional rights of all Americans and for equal justice under the law."

See Mack on page 7

FFRF, others make history with White House meeting

In a first for secular organizations, the Freedom From Religion Foundation and five other groups met with the Biden White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships on May 14.

Representatives from FFRF, the American Humanist Association, American Atheists, Center for Inquiry, Ex-Muslims of North America and the Secular Coalition for America, which set up the meeting, met with Executive Director Melissa Rogers, Deputy Director Josh Dickson and Program Specialist Ben O'Dell.

"With more than a quarter of the population identifying as a 'None' (no religion), it's vital that our community, our voices be heard in favor of reason in social policy and upholding our secular government," FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor said, who was present

along FFRF Co-President Dan Barker and FFRF Director of Strategic Response Andrew Seidel.

The cordial meeting, which included discussions of secular priorities, marks a break from the previous administration, where Paula White ruled the roost and meetings began with prayer.

The current meetings have no prayer, no bragging about how religion is being inserted into the federal government. There has been no attempt to funnel government funds to these groups, and much of the emphasis has been messaging on the importance and availability of vaccines. FFRF representatives have been attending and monitoring all of the calls.

FFRF blew the lid off a series of secretive

See White House on page 14



FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker and FFRF's Director of Strategic Response Andrew L. Seidel participated in an online meeting with members of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships on May 14.

Abbott

Continued from Page 1

the Bill of Rights (which was adopted on Dec. 15, 1791).

Abbott, as chair of the Texas State Preservation Board, while permitting the Christian exhibit, ordered FFRF's display removed only three days after it was erected, lambasting it as indecent, mocking and contributing to public immorality.

FFRF initially won its lawsuit at the district court level, which ruled that Abbott and the State Preservation Board had violated FFRF's free speech rights. In April 2020, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that FFRF was entitled to more permanent, lasting relief than the district court initially awarded, and sent the case back to that court. On May 6, the district court granted FFRF prospective relief by enjoining Abbott and the board from censoring FFRF's speech in the future.

Gaylor notes that the fastest-growing segment of the population are the "Nones" — religiously unaffiliated Americans. FFRF has almost 1,500 members in Texas.

FFRF's relief was greatly delayed, thanks to a stunt pulled by the State Preservation Board.

Two weeks before the parties' briefs were due to the district court, the board made slight adjustments to its exhibit policies, including a dubious declaration that all future exhibits in the Capitol would be considered "government



FFRF's Winter Solstice display by Jacob Fortin depicts the Founders and the Statue of Liberty celebrating the "birth" of the Bill of Rights.

speech." In its subsequent briefing to the district court, FFRF successfully argued that these surface-level changes did not alter the true nature of the forum for citizen speech in the Texas Capitol. The court rejected the state's argument that FFRF's lawsuit no longer involved a live controversy and that the case was thus moot.

FFRF is represented by Associate Counsel Sam Grover and Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott, with attorney Rich Bolton of Boardman and Clark LLP serving as litigation counsel.

Life Member Marian Wiggins went from faith to reason

Name: Marian Wiggins
Where I live: Bremerton, Wash.
Where and when I was born: Tulsa, Okla., in 1949.

Family: Sister, age 68; younger brother died at 60, four years ago.

Education: Speech-language pathology at Oklahoma State University and postgraduate studies at University of California at Santa Barbara and University of Washington. Deaf studies and American Sign Language at Seattle Central Community College.

Occupation: Retired speech-language pathologist; former senior editor at Gospel Light Publications.

How I got where I am today: As a speech-language pathologist (SLP), I worked in clinics, hospitals, private practice and the public schools. Due to my professional background as an SLP and as an editor, I have skills that allow me to volunteer as an English tutor at Kitsap Immigrant Assistance Center, edit blog posts for the atheist-activist Valerie Tarico (valerietarico.com), and sit on the Kitsap County Developmental Disabilities Advisory Council Board of Directors.

Where I'm headed: I'm headed where we're all headed (and it isn't heaven or hell). In the meantime, I maintain a healthy diet and do some form of exercise daily in my home gym (which includes stretch bands, several pairs of hand weights and a BodyBlade, currently in a corner of my study).

I'm learning (and loving) t'ai chi and I'm in a book club and a dinner group. The plan is to stay healthy and helpful and connected for as long as possible, and then to die with a heart full of gratitude for all who helped me have a life well-lived.

Person in history I admire and why: This one's so difficult to answer; I can add new people to the list almost every day. Today I choose Darnella Frazier, the young teen who bravely filmed the police officers who knelt on George Floyd, even after being told by one of them to stop. I don't know that I would have been so brave at that tender age. Her footage marked a turning point in our understanding of the depth and breadth of the fears of Black Americans.

A quotation I like: "Nothing fails like prayer." — Anne Nicol Gaylor. (I doubt a week goes by that I'm not reminded of this quotation.)

Things I like: Sunshine, walks, books, coffee, friendships, classical music, books, good wine, dark chocolate, a gentle Pacific Northwest rain, and — need I say it again? — BOOKS!



Marian Wiggins

Things I smite: Meanness, racism, xenophobia, misogyny, bullying.

My doubts about religion started: The seed of doubt was planted in 1984 by Dan Barker (yes, that one) while I was at Gospel Light Publications, trying to locate him so that we could start our annual collaboration on the Vacation Bible School Mini-Musical. No longer in L.A., he'd moved to Madison, Wis., and had announced that he was an atheist, of all things! That revelation, coupled with my near-daily work with the bible while developing children's Sunday School and VBS curricula, enabled me to understand how someone could make that long and tangled journey. I had no idea I'd soon be making a similar journey, myself. Or did I? Denial is a mysterious force.

Before I die: I want to conduct a "Swedish death cleaning" of my closets, files, cupboards, garage (shudder!) — meaning that I want my heirs not to hate me for leaving loads of sorting to them.

Ways I promote freethought: Supporting Valerie Tarico's atheist-activism by editing her articles and by daily curating the news for her; sharing with others articles of hers and of those in Freethought Today; talking to others about my journey from faith to reason.

I wish you'd have asked me: Who has had the greatest impact on your life? My paternal grandfather was a self-taught man, having dropped out of school in eighth grade (1908) to help support his family. He was a voracious reader, an entrepreneur, a leader in his community (Tulsa, Okla.), and a kind and loving grandfather. Luckily for me, he lived next door. He taught me the value of study, the wisdom of both saving and sharing money, the undying necessity of truth, and the importance of a strong and a gentle character. I think of him — and am so grateful for him — every day.

Corrections

In the May issue on Page 12, Question 22 of Tom Shipka's critical thinker test should have been: "I strive to stay intellectually alive. I regularly read books, magazines and other publications."

In the April issue in the Overheard section on Page 3, the state which Rep. Al Green represents was incorrect. Green is from Texas.

ffrf

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Congress members join panel

Insurrection’s ties to Christian nationalism

FFRF’s Andrew L. Seidel moderated recent panel discussion of Jan. 6

Members of Congress attended a private panel discussion on March 23 about “Christian Nationalism and the January 6th Attack.” The panel was organized by the Congressional Freethought Caucus, which was founded by Rep. Jamie Raskin and Rep. Jared Huffman, who asked FFRF’s Director of Strategic Response Andrew L. Seidel to moderate the discussion. The panelists included Robert Jones, CEO and founder of PRRI, author of *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* and *The*



Photo by Chris Line
Andrew L. Seidel

End of White Christian America; Amanda Tyler, executive director of Baptist Joint Committee and organizer of Christians Against Christian Nationalism; and Juhem Navarro-Rivera, political research director and managing partner at Socio-analitica Research

and senior fellow at the Institute for Humanist Studies. At least 10 other members of Congress participated in the panel and many asked questions.

To “set the stage,” as he put it, Seidel recounted some of the imagery from that day. Here’s how Seidel kicked off the panel discussion:

Thank you, Rep. Huffman.

Christian nationalism ripped off its mask on Jan. 6 and the conversation that some of us had been having on the margins entered the mainstream in the wake of the attacks. Amanda Tyler and the Baptist Joint Committee had been warning about it for more than a year. Robert and Juhem have been studying it and other demographic changes that are driving the fear and possibly the rise of Christian nationalism. I wrote a book saying that Christian nationalism was un-American and called it “an existential threat to our republic.” Since Jan. 6, I’ve been scouring the photos, videos and court cases, and I am more convinced than ever about the



Tyler Merbler via Flickr

A gallows and noose were brought onto the grounds of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. The inscriptions included religious-based themes, including “In God We Trust,” “God Bless the USA,” and “Amen.”

role Christian nationalism played. But I want to set the stage a bit, to remind us all of just some of the Christian nationalism from that day, especially since some of you experienced it from a very different perspective.

Paula White began the day with a prayer; one that added “the United States of America” to the Lord’s Prayer written in Matthew 6. The rally ended with Trump calling on his mob to march to the Capitol. His last words were “God bless you and God bless America.” On their march to the Capitol, the Proud Boys were hailed as “God’s Warriors” and knelt for a prayer that was full of typical Christian nationalist rhetoric about restoring the nation.

One attacker carried a Christian flag on the floor of the Senate. The absurdly self-proclaimed “QAnon Shaman,” who led a prayer in the Senate about patriotism, Jesus, and restoring the nation — ended the prayer in Jesus’ name. One of the praying insurrectionists gave an interview later and said of the Senate prayer: We “just consecrated it to Jesus. . . . That to

me was the ultimate statement of where we are in this movement.” A third praying insurrectionist posted a video saying “I just wanted to get inside the building so I could plead the blood of Jesus over it. That was my goal.” He said he would start a prison ministry when he was sent away for his crimes. Another insurrectionist told her social media followers why she did it: “To me, God and country are tied — to me they’re one and the same. We were founded as a Christian country.”

The imagery is now infamous. The huge wooden cross, juxtaposed with the gallows from which they wanted to hang you. They signed the gallows as if it were a yearbook writing “Hang them high,” “In God We Trust,” “God Bless the USA,” “Hang for treason” and “Amen.”

The flags and signs were clear: Jesus is my savior, Trump is my president; one nation under God; in God we trust; Jesus saves; Jesus 2020; bible verses and crosses. One sign simply said, “I am on your side, signed, GOD.” A bible was seen raised above the crowd as it surged through one

Founding Myth soon to be in paperback!

Andrew L. Seidel’s book, *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism is Un-American*, is coming out in paperback in August and will include a new epilogue that expands on the themes mentioned in the article on this page. FFRF has a limited number of these books in hardback that may be ordered for only \$20 postpaid at ffrf.org/shop. You may also pre-order the paperback from ffrf.org/shop.

of the entrances. One of the people who entered the Capitol was a Catholic priest who admitted on camera to exorcising the demon named Baphomet. Another was a youth pastor from Florida.

They sang the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” (“Glory Glory Hallelujah, his truth is marching on . . .”) and prayed in the Rotunda. One group, the Jericho March, had been founded by two federal workers who were sent visions from their god to “let the church roar,” they named their rallies after a biblical genocide and re-enacted it by blowing shofars and declaring that the “this is one nation under God,” alongside the “Stop the Steal” charlatans. It wasn’t just imagery and rhetoric, it was a devout belief that this is a Christian nation that God chose Donald Trump — Trump himself said “I am the Chosen One” while looking up to the heavens — and that God was on their side. The attacker who kicked in Speaker Pelosi’s door, hoping to tear her “into little pieces,” was an attorney. His rantings were recounted at one of his hearings after being charged, “God is on Trump’s side. God is not on the Democrats’ side. And if patriots have to kill 60 million of these communists, it is God’s will.”

From there, Seidel, the panel and the congressional members had an engaging discussion about the role Christian nationalism played in the insurrection.



Screenshot via ProPublica Parler video archive

An insurrectionist held a sign saying, “I am with you — God” on the U.S. Capitol grounds on Jan. 6.

Freethought Today Cryptogram

UPK XGFK NKLFW LIGVU UPK VWEDKFQK, U
PK NKQQ BGWDEWBKT E LX UPLU UPKFK'Q
LWS QGFU GO IKWKDGNKWU OGFBK UPLU P
LQ LWSUPEWC UG TG MEUP EU, LU LNN.

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					20			21	22			
			23				24						
25	26	27		28		29			30		31	32	33
35			36		37			38		39			
40					41				42		43		
44				45		46				47			
48					49		50			51		52	
				53		54			55		56		
	57	58	59					60			61	62	
63						64	65			66			67
68						69				70			
71						72				73			

Answers on page 21

Across

1. Heart ____

6. Octopus' defense

9. Tropical tuberous root

13. a.k.a. Pleasant Island

14. Pigeon word

15. Cockatoo's cousin

16. Masonic Lodge doorkeeper

17. Spermatozoa counterparts

18. Fill with high spirits

19. *May 6, aka National Day of ____

21. *John de ____, actor and the first recipient of Clarence Darrow Award

23. *Barker of FFRF

24. "Lights out"

25. Third Sunday in June VIP

28. Irwin Shaw's "____ Man, Poor Man"

30. Onomatopoeic

35. Assist, often in wrongdoing

37. Alice Waters' "____ Panisse"

39. "The Onion" fort 

40. Rooster on the roof?

41. Bone-chilling

43. Pro ____, in proportion

44. More slippery

46. Direct one's way

47. Conjunction in comparatives

48. Woman in trouble?

50. Cross to bear

52. "Don't ____, don't tell"

53. With impaired hearing

55. Bull's mate

57. *FFRF National Convention 2021 location

60. *Nonbelief ____: "Freethinkers work to make this world heavenly"

63. Jonas Salk's conquest

64. Sticky stuff

66. Discombobulate

68. The lowest deck

69. Dec. 31st, e.g.

70. Moth-repelling wood

71. Like hard times

72. *"Enter the Dragon" star and freethinker

73. Related on mother's side

Down

1. Big bang cause abbreviation

2. "The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical"

3. Lay it down, and it's not to be broken

4. Mountain nymph of Greek mythology

5. College treasurer

6. Desktop picture

7. Presidential election mo.

8. Aussie bear

9. Baby powder ingredient

10. Popular smoothie berry

11. Distance over time

12. Be in the red

15. Good guy

20. Chilled (2 words)

22. *Human's cousin

24. From that circumstance

25. *Freethinker and Seinfeld's collaborator

26. Manila hemp

27. Levi's fabric

29. Precedes swallow

31. Inflict pain

32. Nebraska's largest city

33. I to Greeks, pl.

34. *Freethought Today's "____mail"

36. Golfers' props

38. *Freethinking author of "A People's History of the United States"

42. Draw out a conclusion

45. British tabloid, colloquially

49. *Oscar-winning actress Melissa ____, star of "The Most Hated Woman in America"

51. Consolation

54. Financial backer, not supernatural messenger

56. Make broader

57. A dull person

58. Paella pot

59. What division and confusion have in common

60. "The horse you ____ in on"

61. Poetic source of Norse mythology

62. Sharp alternative

63. Short for politician

65. It's the loneliest number?

67. Old English for before

India's government brought Covid-19 crisis on itself

This article was first sent out by the Progressive Media Project, an op-ed service, and has been published in several newspapers nationwide.

By Amitabh Pal

The Indian government is primarily responsible for the Covid-19 pandemic now ravaging the nation.

I am hearing daily accounts from my mother in India about relatives falling sick, getting hospitalized and worse. (My mother, thankfully, is among the tiny percentage of Indians who are fully vaccinated.)

Since mid-April, India has been leading the world in new cases and deaths, with around 400,000 infections and 4,000 fatalities reported on a daily basis. Both categories are undercounted.

The media reports are almost unbearable, with accounts of patients literally gasping to death due to lack of oxygen supply. A huge portion of the blame for all this suffering lies with right-wing populist Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the administration he has helmed for the past seven years.

The Modi government was so busy engaging in triumphalist self-congratulation for the relatively low toll the first wave took on India that it neglected to prepare for the second one. The prime minister actually boasted to the World Economic Forum in January that India was showing the world how to deal with the virus. Indian Health Minister Harsh Vardhan assured everyone in early March that the country was "in the endgame" of the pandemic. The government dismantled treatment facilities set up during the first wave.

A national Covid-19 task force did not meet a single time between mid-January and mid-April. And warnings from a scientific panel in early March that a second wave was imminent were ignored.

Incredibly, from April 2020 to January of this year, India doubled its exports of oxygen, leaving it ill-prepared for this second wave. And despite being a major global vaccine manufacturing hub, India under

Modi placed astonishingly low orders for the vaccine with domestic vaccine makers.

India's vaccination drive lost steam due to governmental mismanagement and complacency. And tens of millions of vaccines were given away or sold to other countries, in good part due to the government's desire to be seen as a major global player.

Then there were the officially blessed superspreader events. The top official from Modi's party in charge of a mountainous state allowed a massive Ganges bathing religious festival to proceed in the middle of the pandemic — one year ahead of schedule due to astrological reasons. Millions of Indians took a dip and disseminated the virus all over India.

A pliant Election Commission decided to hold polling in the politically crucial state of West Bengal in multiple stages, reportedly to provide Modi's party a fighting chance to oust a regional entity in power there. The result, again, was a surge of Covid-19 cases.

In keeping with its Hindu nationalist ideology, the Modi administration has a fondness for junk science that extoll the cow and the traditional Hindu medicinal system called Ayurveda. Two cabinet ministers were present at the launch of a medicine (named Coronil) that a godman known as Baba Ramdev, with a medicinal empire, is peddling as a Covid-19 cure.

Apologists for Modi's government offer several defenses: The Indian health infrastructure has always been woefully deficient; health is largely a state-level responsibility; and the cavalier attitude of the people explains the skyrocketing infections.

But Modi was elected seven years ago with the promise of transforming the country. While India is much less federal in practice than the United States, Modi's party or its allies in the governing National Democratic Alliance rule 18 of India's 28 states. And if Indians started taking things lightly in recent months, wrong messages from the government are at least partly to blame.

The Modi-led government's deeds of commission and omission have led to India's cataclysm. That fact should be recognized and remembered long after the current pandemic is gone.

Amitabh Pal is FFRF's director of communications.



Amitabh Pal

Religion, and Christianity in particular, has always been a thorn in my side. Now I know why; it is not true.
- Sophilia J Lark
Out of the Closet Freethinker

FFRF.ORG | FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

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

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: B => C.

IN THE NEWS

Atheists have lowest coronavirus death rate

Data on Covid-19 death rates in England has revealed that atheists, as a group, were the least affected, experiencing 336.6 deaths per 100,000 among men and 218.2 among women.

Muslims are by far the worst-affected religious group, with death rates twice as high as among Christians, and nearly three times higher than the atheists.

Data from the UK's Office of National Statistics showed that, up to the end of February, 4,191 Muslims had been killed by the virus.

Muslim men had a death rate of 966.9 per 100,000 people, while that of women was about 519.1 per 100,000.

Muslims were followed by Hindus — 605.2 among men and 346.5 for women; Sikhs — 573.6 and 345.7; Jews — 512.9 and 295.4; and Christians — 401.9 and 249.6.

However, after factoring in other risk indicators such as age, wealth and location, it said: "After adjustments, the Hindu population and Muslim men were disproportionately affected throughout the pandemic."

Experts have suggested that ethnic minorities are more likely to have low incomes and work in public-facing jobs that increase their exposure to the virus.

Bishops may push Biden to stop taking Communion

At the national meeting in June of U.S. Catholic bishops, they may decide to tell President Biden, a Catholic, to not take communion if he continues to advocate for abortion rights, according to a report by Religion News Service.

Such a stance by a public figure is "a grave moral evil," according to Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, who chairs the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Pro-Life Activities.

Wis. AG announces probe of clergy sex abuse

Attorney General Josh Kaul on April 20 announced an investigation into clergy sexual abuse across Wisconsin.

The state Department of Justice will lead the probe and focus on abuse allegations against Catholic clergy and other faith leaders — many of which date back decades and involve religious officials who are now dead. Prosecutors will request documents from the dioceses and religious orders as part of the investigation.


Wisconsin is home to five dioceses and religious orders such as the Norbertines.

45 dead in stampede at Israeli religious event

At least 45 people were killed and 150 more injured in a crush April 30 at a religious festival of ultra-Orthodox Jews in northern Israel, where tens of thousands of faithful had convened in one of the country's largest events since the pandemic began.

The event, at Mount Meron, is the festival of Lag BaOmer, which features bonfires and dancing around the Galilee tomb of a second century rabbi.

Of course it's in Texas



FFRF Multimedia Producer Bruce Johnson took this photo while in Fredericksburg, Texas. He writes: "Let's play 'One of these things is not like the others.'"

According to witnesses, in an area of the complex where the ultra-Orthodox Hasidic community of Toldos Aharon was holding its celebration, participants were pushing through a slippery staircase. Suddenly, a row of people fell to the floor, piling atop one another. People were asphyxiated or trampled in the tightly packed corridor.

Evangelicals are losing their climate skepticism

White evangelicals have become more willing to acknowledge anthropogenic climate change over the past decade, according to a Climate Nexus poll, as reported by Religion News Service.

In 2014, the Pew Research Center reported that just 28 percent of white evangelicals attributed global warming to human activity. In October 2020, though, 44 percent of them said climate change was due "mostly to human activities."

While they remain less concerned about the issue than other major American religious communities, the poll showed them to be closer to mainstream opinion than previously.

Abortion bills on huge upswing in U.S.

In the first four months of 2021, state lawmakers have introduced an incredible 536 abortion restrictions, including 146 bans, with 61 of those bills being signed into law.

The Guttmacher Institute, a reproductive health research organization that tracks abortion bills in the states, assessed the situation in a report.

Previously, 2011 was the most brutal year for abortion rights in recent history. In the 12 months after the 2010 mid-term elections, Republicans enacted 92 abortion restrictions across 24 states, kicking off a "war on women" that shut down dozens of abortion clinics across the country and dominated the national political conversation through 2014.

Florida expands private school voucher program

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis on May 11 signed into law a \$200 million school choice plan that will allow about 61,000 new students to become eligible for taxpayer-funded vouchers that will help families pay for private tuition and other education expenses.

The measure is a continuation of a decades-long push to expand school choice in Florida, a move Republicans support and most Democrats have fought as they advocate for more oversight and accountability for private schools that get state-funded vouchers.

The law, which takes effect July 1, will allow families of four with an income of nearly \$100,000 to qualify for awards, up from the current \$79,500 threshold. And students will no longer need to attend a public school before receiving a state voucher.

Christian school seeks 'ministerial exception'

A 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals panel on May 11 took up a case to test the limits of an exemption from anti-discrimination laws for religious schools.

Faith Christian Academy in Colorado claims the exemption should apply broadly to "teachers, chaplains and other leaders," according to a report by Reuters.

The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty will urge the panel to rule that the "ministerial exception" shields the school from a former faculty member's claims that he was fired for organizing a chapel service focused on combating racism.

A federal judge in Denver earlier had said a jury should decide whether the exception applied to Gregory Tucker, who was the director of student life at Faith Christian Academy, and denied the school's motion for summary judgment in his 2019 lawsuit.

German Catholics bless gay unions despite ban

Germany's Catholic progressives openly defied a recent Vatican ruling that priests cannot bless same-sex unions by offering such blessings at services in about 100 different churches all over the country in mid-May, according to a report by Religion News Service.

The blessings at open worship services are the latest pushback from German Catholics against a document released in March by the Vatican's orthodoxy office, which said Catholic clergy cannot bless same-sex unions because God "cannot bless sin."

Pope Francis, who has championed a more decentralized church structure, reminded the German hierarchy that it must remain in communion with Rome during its reform process."

Study: Young Jews are moving to opposite views

A new survey of U.S. Jews shows the group's youngest adults are increasingly dividing in polar-opposite directions: secularism and orthodoxy, according to a report by Religion News Service.

The study from Pew Research Center is a follow-up to its 2013 study, and many of the trends outlined have remained constant. U.S. Jews represent 2.4 percent of the U.S. population, a slight rise from 2.2 percent in 2013.

Nearly three-quarters of Jews identify as Jews by religion (73 percent), but a growing number do not consider themselves religiously Jewish (27 percent), instead identifying as Jewish ethnically, culturally or by ancestry.

This group is particularly large among Jews ages 18 to 29, where 40 percent consider themselves Jews of no religion. While Orthodox Jews represent 9 percent of the overall American Jewish population, the survey found, they represent 17 percent among the 18 to 29 age group.

Conviction overturned in 'holy spirit' case

A federal appeals court on May 5 overturned the conviction of former Florida Rep. Corrine Brown, ruling that a judge was wrong to remove a juror in her trial who said the "holy spirit" told him Brown was not guilty.

The 11th Circuit Court of Appeals, in a 7-4 decision, said that Brown, who was found guilty in 2017 on 18 felony counts connected to using a phony charity as a personal slush fund, deserved a new trial on the corruption charges.

Chief Judge William Pryor, writing for the majority, said the decision of a district judge to remove the juror after deliberations had already begun in the trial was wrong because there was no evidence that the juror had engaged in misconduct or would have ultimately held out against a conviction.

"Corrine Brown was entitled to the unanimous verdict of a jury of ordinary citizens," Pryor wrote. "The removal of Juror No. 13 — a juror who listened for God's guidance as he sat in judgment of Brown and deliberated over the evidence against her — deprived her of one."

Bad sign: Supreme Court to hear abortion case

“A chill wind blows,” as the late Justice Harry Blackmun once proclaimed to warn against the initial erosion of *Roe v. Wade* in the 1980s.

On May 17, that wind got far chillier, with the announcement that the Supreme Court agreed to hear an appeal of a Mississippi statute that bans most abortions after 15 weeks. The case, *Dobbs v. Jackson Health Organization*, will be the first significant abortion case heard by the high court since extremist Amy Coney Barrett replaced Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Barrett is one of the three anti-abortion justices appointed to the high court by former President Trump, whose stated goal was to overturn *Roe*. Barrett, an outspoken anti-abortion proponent who has received widespread praise from anti-abortion groups and organizations, makes the Supreme Court a securely anti-abortion majority. For example, when asked about the future of abortion access in 2016, Barrett replied, “I think the question of whether people can get very late-term abortions, how many restrictions can be put on clinics — I think that would change.”

And that’s just what is on the line in *Dobbs v. Jackson Health Organization*. In 2018, Mississippi legislators passed a bill that would ban abortion at 15 weeks of gestation, except in rare cases of severe fetal abnormality or medical emergency. The law was struck down by lower courts. As Mississippi only has one abortion clinic, women already face many obstacles in obtaining timely care. The women of Mississippi are not the only ones whose reproductive rights are in danger.

The Supreme Court has long established that it is unconstitutional to impose a pre-viability abortion ban. Viability is around 24-26 weeks of gestation, but even then the Court has acknowledged that each specific pregnancy necessitates its own medical determination. If the court rules that a state may ban abortion at 15 weeks, it will



be overturning much of the precedent of *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 decision that itself is based on the established constitutional right to privacy. With countless burdensome obstacles, like the religiously-rooted Hyde Amendment and TRAP laws that target clinics and care providers, women’s constitutional right to an abortion may be gradually erased.

As Nancy Northup of the Center for Reproductive Rights notes, “The consequences of a *Roe* reversal would be devastating. Over 20 states would prohibit abortion outright. Eleven states — including Mississippi — currently have trigger bans on the books which would instantaneously ban abortion if *Roe* is overturned.”

Abortion access and care is unnecessarily divisive due to the ideological motivations of the few. In fact, a new Pew study found that the majority of Americans believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Additionally, 82 percent of religiously unaffiliated people support legal abortions. Beyond public opinion, there is no science that supports abortion restrictions or bans. Evidence-based research has shown that abortions are safe and effective

and that serious complications are extremely rare — less than 1 percent. Rather, studies have shown that women are about 14 times more likely to die as a result of childbirth and pregnancy than from an abortion. There is simply no governmental interest or business in obstructing abortion care. The only organized opposition to abortion is religious in nature.

The Supreme Court is expected to hear the case in the beginning of October with a decision to likely come by June 2022.

As we anxiously await this verdict, we must take swift action to ensure that reproductive rights are protected by encouraging legislators to pass the EACH Act, which would reverse the draconian Hyde Amendment and guarantee abortion coverage in federal health insurance programs. This Christian nationalist campaign to dismantle abortion care in the United States also signals an urgent need for court reform.

The future of abortion rights in the United States hangs in the balance and our secular activism is needed more than ever.

FFRF decries new abortion law in Texas

FFRF castigates Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and the Texas Legislature for making it a law to ban abortion care as early as six weeks of gestation.

Abbott is a Christian nationalist whom FFRF recently successfully prevailed over his bigoted censorship of FFRF’s freethought view at the Texas Capitol (see page 1).

This follows alarming passage of sweeping anti-abortion legislation in April severely restricting abortion care and signed into law in Montana, Arizona, South Dakota, Wyoming, Oklahoma and Idaho.

Texas is following the actions of nearly a dozen other states that have passed the so-called “heartbeat” bill — a medically inaccurate misnomer. Dr. Ted Anderson, president of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, explains that this labeling is incongruent with the “anatomical and clinical realities of that stage of pregnancy” because the so-called heartbeat is simply “electrically induced flickering of a portion of the fetal tissue.”

It has been upheld by the Supreme Court that it is unconstitutional to impose a previability abortion ban. Pregnancies are considered viable around 24-26 weeks of gestation. Therefore this anti-abortion bill in Texas is completely unconstitutional.

Shockingly, the bill also allows anyone to sue a doctor for providing abortion care or anyone else who helped someone get an abortion. Perhaps the most startling aspect of this bill is that the person filing the lawsuit would not need any personal connection to the abortion, at odds with all legal precedent.

THEY SAID WHAT?

God came knocking on my door disguised as an angry mob.

Mark McCloskey, the lawyer facing felony charges for pointing a gun at Black Lives Matter protesters, during the announcement of his Senate run to replace retiring Missouri Sen. Roy Blunt.
Washington Post, 5-19-21

Joe Biden’s National Day of Prayer Proclamation has been released and it



doesn’t even mention God once! How do you release a proclamation about prayer and not mention God at all? Of course, it mentions climate change & racial justice. Truly, this is pathetic . . . and not surprising!
David Brody, Christian Broadcasting Network’s chief political correspondent.
Twitter, 5-5-21

When the restrictions were put on the church, it crossed the line from what we could do, which was buy groceries, and what we couldn’t do, which was worship as we want to worship. Praise God.
Texas state Sen. Donna Campbell, one of

many Texas lawmakers who are trying to ensure closures of houses of worship by government officials don’t happen again.
Texas Tribune, 4-28-21

Our creator endowed us with the right to life and yet millions of children lose their right to life every year because of abortion. In Texas, we work to save those lives.

Gov. Greg Abbott, signing a ban on abortion.
The New York Times, 5-20-21

Just Pretend: A Book For Young Freethinkers



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

Color Edition! Published by FFRF

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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.

A note to FFRF Members

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FFRF calls on Garland to probe Catholic abuse

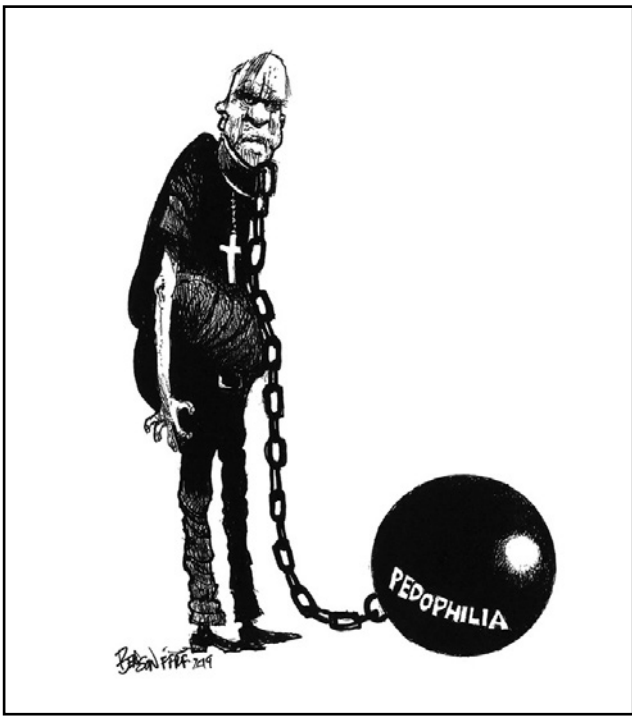
The Freedom From Religion Foundation is urging the U.S. Justice Department to initiate a nationwide investigation into the Roman Catholic clergy’s serial sexual abuse and cover-up.

“The Church’s claim of divine authority gives it coercive power over its congregants that allows it to get away with widespread crimes,” FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor write to Attorney General Merrick Garland. “Under Catholic Canon law, adherents are required to give a ‘religious submission of the intellect and will’ to their church. For millennia, the Church has used that power to suppress questions, doubts and dissent. This leads to frequent unprosecuted crimes against child victims who are forced to remain silent by their parents under pressure from, and fear of, the Church.”

Twenty-one states, as well as Washington, D.C., have investigated or are launching investigations of these crimes since 2002. Most recently, FFRF’s home state of Wisconsin announced its own investigation following a survivor’s suicide after the church reportedly stopped paying for his medication and therapy following years of abuse.

It is time, FFRF noted, for the U.S. government to follow the lead of states like Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts and Illinois — not to mention Ireland and Australia — and investigate this massive and coordinated abuse of minors throughout the country.

FFRF cites the widely covered 1,400-page Penn-



sylvania grand jury report detailing thousands of instances of sexual abuse by clergy in six of the state’s eight dioceses published in 2018 as evidence that the Catholic Church’s secretive and imposing structure allowed hundreds of offenders to escape prosecution for decades.


A federal investigation is in order because the Church’s “musical chairs” history of deliberate-

ly moving offenders to new locations — shielding them from local outrage and providing them with fresh victims — creates an interstate crisis that requires federal action. Even the Catholic Church itself has admitted that this is a global problem, with Pope Francis having referred to a “culture of abuse” inside the Church. However, the pope’s failure to provide any meaningful action to correct the problem confirms what FFRF and many victims’ rights groups have asserted for decades: The methodical, organized sexual abuse in the Catholic Church will not stop until secular authorities intervene.

To add to the problem, undue deference has not only been shown by the faithful, but all too often also by police, prosecutors and justices who have turned the other way when confronted with evidence of abuse. Compounding the cover-up is the Catholic Church hierarchy’s active lobbying to suppress reform of statutes of limitations in many states. In New York state alone, the Church has spent close to \$2 million to lobby over civil actions and to fight statute of limitations reforms.

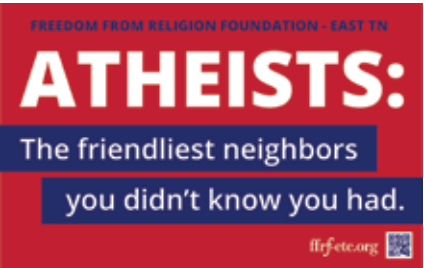
FFRF asks that the Justice Department not sit by while a hyperwealthy tax-exempt organization facilitates the sexual abuse of thousands of children, cites divine authority to silence victims, and works vigorously to protect both the abusers and the Church’s coffers. For the sake of national safety and justice for our nation’s children, FFRF is urging Garland to immediately commence an inquiry into the Catholic Church’s crimes.

Good to see in Tennessee!




FFRF’s East Tennessee Chapter hosted a rally to celebrate the National Day of Reason on May 6 in downtown Knoxville, Tenn., at the Krutch Park Extension. Members of the chapter were joined by other local freethinkers, including members of the Rationalists of East Tennessee and the Atheist Society of Knoxville, according to Aleta Ledendecker, president of FFRF’s East Tennessee Chapter.

Ledendecker writes: “By far the most popular sign among participants and passers-by stated: ‘Atheists — The friendliest neighbors you didn’t know you had.’ Several people among the public expressed gratitude for finding the local chapter of FFRF as they were either new to the area and looking for fellow freethinkers or planning on moving to the area and happy to discover there was a vibrant secular community. Of course, there were some religious folks who offered to pray for rally participants. But that was nothing to worry about since reason ruled the day.”



Yip Harburg, from his book: **Rhymes for the Irreverent**



Illustrated by Seymore Chwast, published by FFRF

Letter To My Guru

If this planet is a sample,
Or a preview if you will,
Or a model demonstration
Of the great designer’s skill,
I say without hesitation,
“Thank you, no reincarnation.”

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Mack

Continued from page 1

FFRF and Roe, who originally challenged the courtroom prayers in March 2017, due to various technical reasons, refiled the case against Mack in 2019.

Mack, a formerly ordained minister who attended Jackson College of Ministries, made the unprecedented decision to solicit chaplains to open his court sessions with prayer, a practice not replicated by any other court in the country. Despite numerous complaints regarding the practice, Mack insisted on opening his court session with chaplain-led prayer. Attendees have reported Mack surveying the courtroom during prayers, causing concern that their cases would be affected if they did not participate. Mack’s bailiff announced the prayers, stating that anyone could leave during the prayer, but then locked the courtroom doors. Mack entered, talked about his chaplaincy program, introduced a chaplain, and gave the name and location of the chaplain’s church. While everyone in the courtroom remained standing, the chaplain, who was almost always Christian, delivered a prayer, with no guidelines regarding permissible content.

Since entering the lawsuit, Roe has regularly declined business in order to avoid appearing in Mack’s courtroom. On some matters, where a district court has concurrent jurisdiction with Mack’s court, Roe elected to bring claims in the

district court instead of Mack’s court, despite the higher filing fees, higher service fees and the generally slower docket, in order to avoid Mack’s prayer practice. These decisions, motivated by a desire to avoid government-prescribed prayer, are not choices that any attorney or private litigant should have to make, FFRF argued in its briefings.

FFRF’s suit asserted that Mack’s prayer practice is unconstitutionally coercive, with a primary purpose and effect of promoting religion. FFRF noted that Mack’s practices cannot be compared to legislative prayer. Unlike legislative prayer, Mack’s courtroom chaplains directed their prayers to the audience, not the judge. And in the courtroom setting many of the audience members are compelled, under threat of a warrant issuing for their arrest or other ordered penalties, to appear in the courtroom. Judge Hoyt agreed that the prayers were coercive.

While this latest decision resolves the case, the court issued a ruling on March 25 granting FFRF and its plaintiff Roe default judgment against Mack in his official capacity as a judicial officer. Because the state of Texas elected not to defend the lawsuit, plaintiffs Roe and FFRF moved for, and were granted, a default judgment declaring: “Judge Mack’s courtroom prayer practice violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.” Plaintiffs plan to seek recovery of their attorneys’ fees and costs against the state.

“In a time where the wall of separation between state and church is continually chipped away, this decision is welcomed for its straightforward and accurate interpretation of the Establishment Clause, noting the prayer practice ‘flies in the face’ of our traditions,” comments FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert.

FFRF and Roe are being represented by FFRF Associate Counsel Sam Grover, with FFRF Associate Counsel Elizabeth Cavell and Attorney Ayesha Khan of Washington, D.C., serving as co-counsel.



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

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

—Published by FFRF. 392 pages / HB
\$20.00 Item # FB26

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ffrf.org/shop

FFRF VICTORIES

By Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey

State-church violations remedied in Georgia

FFRF has remedied two state/church violations in Camden County Schools in Kingsland, Ga.

A local community member reported that, earlier this year, students at David L. Rainer Elementary School were required to line up and walk through the lobby of the school where a member of the infamous Gideons International offered them a bible. Students were reportedly told that taking the bible was optional, but that all students were required to stand in line and be offered a bible. This apparently had been occurring annually.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent John Tucker, alerting the district to the Gideons’ insidious operating structure to successfully usurp parental power and constitutional limitations on religious promotion in public schools to target young, impressionable students. The district may not, FFRF emphasized, allow the Gideons or any other religious groups to enter school property and distribute religious material.

Additionally, FFRF was recently made aware that teachers at Matilda Harris Elementary School were leading students in daily lunchtime prayers. These prayers were reportedly made “In Jesus’ name.”

Line sent Tucker a second letter of complaint, urging the district to also make certain that none of its employees are unlawfully and inappropriately indoctrinating students in religious matters by leading prayer, encouraging them to pray, or setting aside time for prayer.

Tucker sent a letter of response to each of FFRF’s complaints, with assurances that the staff members involved have been spoken to about their constitutional obligations surrounding students’ rights of conscience.

“I am confident that staff and volunteers will honor both the letter and the intent of the Constitution, its principles, and applicable statutes,” Tucker wrote.

No more bacculaureate event in N.C. district

A public school district in North Carolina has distanced itself from a religious bacculaureate event after impermissibly entangling with it.

A concerned parent in Lenoir, N.C., reported that the Caldwell County Schools district was organizing and sponsoring a bacculaureate in May 2021. The complainant reported that tickets for the event were being managed by South Caldwell High School and that the event was scheduled to take place in the school’s gym. While the event was apparently not mandatory, the school reportedly told parents and teachers that attendance was “highly encouraged.” The event was also apparently organized by school staff and promoted on the school’s official website.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Donald Phipps alerting the district that this type of religious promotion by a public school is impermissible. FFRF asked that the district end all involvement with the bacculaureate service to avoid the perception of school sponsorship of religious activities.

FFRF was informed that the district has moved this event to the local church that is sponsoring the bacculaureate and has stopped promoting it on behalf of the district.

Still too expensive



Member Julie Tooth sent us this photo from a store in Lexington, Ky.

“I just had to send this along after perusing a Habitat for Humanity ReStore that we do-nated a couch to,” she writes. “Further reductions needed! I hope you all get a chuckle from this. Thanks for all you do!”

School won’t resurrect religious promotion

Administration in Big Sandy Independent School District in Dallardsville, Texas, has taken action to remedy a serious state/church violation occurring in its school.

A district parent reported multiple instances of religious promotion and endorsement occurring at Big Sandy Elementary School. The parent reported that for Easter, a kindergarten teacher at the school gave students “resurrection eggs,” which were Easter eggs with something related to Jesus inside, and had students color “Jesus is love” pictures that included a large Latin cross. The teacher also reportedly was regularly teaching students about Christianity and their “Lord and Savior.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district asking that it take immediate action to ensure that none of its employees are unlawfully and inappropriately indoctrinating students in religious matters by giving them religious assignments, teaching about religion, or promoting their personal religious beliefs.

Superintendent Eric Carpenter informed FFRF in a letter of response that it is taking the reports seriously. “To the extent that any employee of BSISD is violating the law, the district will address it with that employee to ensure that no violations occur in the future,” Carpenter wrote.

FFRF stops politicking at church voting site

Polling places in the parish of East Baton Rouge, La., will be reminded of their obligation to refrain from partisan politicking prior to and on election day.

FFRF was informed that during the November 2020 election, Woodlawn

Baptist Church was illegally promoting a ballot item while the church was being used as a polling place. While voting was happening, the church displayed a sign on its lawn that read, “Vote Yes on #1,” a constitutional amendment which was on the ballot.

FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote to county officials urging the county to seriously reconsider allowing area churches to be used as polling plac-

es, and at the very least to ensure that churches that are used as polling places are following the law and not promoting any particular political stance.

FFRF received a letter of response from Registrar of Voters Steve Raborn that provided assurances that the leader of the church has apologized for not removing the sign before election day, calling it “an oversight.” More significantly, however, the Clerk of Court’s office in the parish of East Baton Rouge has “agreed to add language to their pre-election letters to all polling places reminding them of state law pertaining to campaign signs at and near polling places.”

Silence is golden at N.C. school meetings

Brunswick County Schools in Bolivia, N.C., has replaced scheduled prayer before meetings with a moment of silence.

A local resident alerted FFRF that the Brunswick County School Board had been opening its meetings with prayer, including references to “our heavenly father.” Meeting attendees, including students, have reportedly been asked to stand for the invocations, which were then led by Board Chair Ellen G. Milligan.

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Superintendent Jerry Oates urging the board to refrain from engaging in prayer at its meetings. When a government entity like the school board engages in prayer at its meetings, FFRF’s letter emphasized, it violates the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution by showing preference for religious belief.

In a letter of response from the board’s attorney, FFRF was informed that the board has decided to instead open its meetings with a one-minute period of silence.

Mayday event raises \$25K

Five national nontheist organizations, including the Freedom From Religion Foundation, hosted an event of action to counter the National Day of Prayer on May 6 — raising \$25,000 earmarked for five homeless shelters or food banks.

As those in prayer beseeched the heavens, thousands of atheists, agnostics and free-thinkers participated in a three-hour fundraising event: the National Day of Reason Mayday for Humanity. The extravaganza (available to watch) included celebrities, comedians, musicians and poets.

“We believe in the Robert Ingersoll maxim, ‘The hands that help are better far than lips that pray,’” comments FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. “Think of the good that would come if our nation stopped hyping prayer and focused on improving this world.”

The nonprofit secular groups are directing the proceeds to re-

gional “helping hands.” FFRF will be donating its share of the donations to Second Harvest in Wisconsin. Recovering from

Religion will be donating \$5,000 to eStart in Missouri, and the Secular Coalition for America will direct \$5,000 to Capitol Food Bank in Washington, D.C. Each benefiting organization operates in a nondiscriminatory, secular manner.

Margaret Downey, the Mayday for Humanity event coordinator and president of the Freethought Society, which is delivering \$5,000 to Safe Harbor of Chester County, says, “Thanks to the nonbelievers who generously donated during the event, humans, not prayers, answered the Mayday for Humanity emergency call to help end homelessness and hunger.”

It’s all part of the secular notion of doing and acting — instead of praying and hoping in vain.



Bible supports several execution methods

By Brian Bolton

Bloodthirsty Bill Barr and deranged Donald Trump presided over 10 federal executions in 2020, ending a 16-year moratorium and greatly accelerating the rate at which federal death sentences were carried out, from just three in the half century before last year.

The former attorney general, who is a practicing Catholic, justified the government-sponsored killing spree by explaining that some people commit crimes so terrible that we are obligated to kill them. The ex-president, who now calls himself a nondenominational Christian, obviously agreed with the former AG.



Brian Bolton

Anticipating a potential shortage of drugs used for lethal injection, the ghoulish duo announced a new rule that allows the federal government to electrocute, shoot, gas or hang convicted criminals who are sentenced to death in federal courts.

What was the inspiration for this grotesque expansion of acceptable execution methods? A possible source is a 2019 Supreme Court decision written by Trump’s first appointee, Justice Neil Gorsuch, who opined that any method of execution is permissible if it does not “cruelly super-add pain.”

Gorsuch, who has been described as a death-obsessed death penalty fanatic, incorporated into his judicial opinion a thorough discussion of the pain caused by various execution procedures, including firing squads, gas chambers and hanging.

As horrific as the Barr-Trump-Gorsuch federal rule is, some Christians may take comfort in knowing that the bible fully supports the application of numerous alternatives to lethal injection.

In the following sections I summarize a number of Yahweh’s approved killing methods and conclude with an appraisal of the current status of judicial killing.

Stoning

This method of execution serves a cathartic function for the community, with all members participating in the meting out of justice. Also, it is readily adapted to collective punishment, which is strongly endorsed and widely practiced by Yahweh.

Yahweh decreed stoning to death by community members for the following: disobeying an order not to keep booty from the destruction of Jericho (Joshua 7:10–26), blaspheming the Lord (Leviticus 24:10–16,23), gathering firewood on the Sabbath (Numbers 15:32–36), and unpopular preaching (2 Chronicles 24:21).

Other violations that specify stoning as punishment include: worshipping other gods (Deuteronomy 17:1–7), encouraging the worship of other gods (Deuteronomy 13:1–11), sacrificing children to Molek (Leviticus 20:1–2), and communicating with the dead (Leviticus 20:27).

Burning alive

It could be reasonably argued that the electric chair constitutes a modern version of burning alive, which is possibly more humane. However, the procedure is not necessarily recommended. After all, wrongdoers deserve to suffer maximally for their crimes against Yahweh. Yahweh burned sinners alive for sexual immorality



in the massacre of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18–19), for specified sexual misbehaviors (Leviticus 20:14, 21:9), and for offering incense without proper authorization (Leviticus 10:1–2, Numbers 16:35). Jephthah sacrificed his only daughter as a burnt offering to Yahweh (Judges 11:29–40). King Abimelech burned alive one thousand residents who had taken refuge in the tower of Shechem (Judges 9:49).

King Manasseh sacrificed his son as a burnt offering on a heathen altar (2 Kings 21:6). King Ahaz (2 Kings 16:3) sacrificed his son as well, and countless Israelites sacrificed both their sons and daughters (2 Kings 17:17).

Stabbing and impaling

Some of the earliest instruments of attack and defense were sharp implements, including knives, daggers, swords and spears. These weapons were designed to cause lethal damage by penetrating the body and therefore may be viewed as the precursors of guns. This suggests a possible biblical justification for execution by firing squad. Hence, the relevance of this mode of killing.

At Yahweh’s behest, the Levites used their swords to kill three thousand fellow Israelites for worshipping the golden calf (Exodus 32:27–29). Phinehas murdered a fornicating Israelite man and his consort by driving a spear through both of them (Numbers 25:1–18).

Acting as Yahweh’s messenger, Ehud killed King Eglon of Moab by plunging a sword into the king’s belly, causing his entrails to ooze out (Judges 3:12–25). Four similar killings by stabbing in the abdomen are reported in 2 Samuel 2:23, 3:27, 4:5–6, and 20:8–10. Three additional gruesome killings by bodily penetration are reported in Judges 8:19–21, 2 Samuel 18:14–17, and 2 Kings 9:24.

General Sisera was killed by Jael, who hammered a tent peg through his skull and into the ground while he was asleep, as prophesied by Deborah (Judges 4:17–22).

Finally, two of King Xerxes’s officers were impaled alive on poles because they had conspired to assassinate him (Esther 2:21–23, NIV). The villain Haman was also impaled (Esther 7:5–10, NIV), as were his 10 sons (Esther 9:13–14, NIV).

Drowning and suffocation

There is no doubt that drowning and suffocation are methods close to Yahweh’s heart, so it is entirely appropriate to honor the Lord’s predilection by recognizing that the gas chamber also involves asphyxiation.

Yahweh drowned all living people ex-

cept eight adults for incorrigible wickedness (Genesis 6–8). He also drowned Pharaoh’s charioteers, their horses and the Egyptian cavalry to bring glory to himself (Exodus 14:21–31). Yahweh buried alive three disobedient Israelites, as well as their wives and children (Numbers 16:31–35), and Hazael suffocated King Ben-Hadad (2 Kings 8:15).

Wild animals

This is another mode of execution favored by Yahweh. However, it strikes most civilized people as too barbaric to even seriously consider. But with the expansion of zoos, wildlife parks and exotic animal exhibits, the means are readily available and rather inexpensive. In fact, lions, alligators, sharks and other large predators have to eat, and they are not vegans. So, this may be a truly cost-effective deterrent for potential evildoers.

Yahweh killed disobedient Israelites — including children — using venomous snakes (Numbers 21:6), lions (1 Kings 13:23–26, 2 Kings 17:24–25), and bears (2 Kings 2:23–24). Daniel’s false accusers, along with their wives and children, were also permitted by Yahweh to be ripped to shreds by lions (Daniel 6:24).

Beheading

Although beheading or decapitation is an age-old mode of killing, it does not appear to rank among Yahweh’s preferred methods. In fact, he never specifically ordered beheading as punishment for any violation. Maybe if the guillotine had been invented 3,000 years earlier, Yahweh would have been more favorably disposed to beheading.

Of the seven episodes of cutting off heads described in holy scripture, only two are unequivocal beheadings, while the others involve hacking off heads after killing. In all cases, the severed head is regarded as a trophy to be displayed disrespectfully or (in one situation) treated with reverence.

David slew Goliath, cut off his head, and delivered it to Saul (1 Samuel 17:50–57). The Philistines cut off Saul’s head after he killed himself, and they hung up his head in the temple of Dagon (1 Samuel 31:9–10; 1 Chronicles 10:9–10). Other postmortem beheadings are described in Judges 7:25 and 2 Samuel 4:5–12.

It is not entirely clear whether Ahab’s 70 sons were slaughtered before their heads were removed, but the description of the event suggests that they were killed first (2 Kings 10:6–8). On the other hand, the account of Sheba’s death indicates that he was most probably beheaded (2 Samuel 20:20–22). Finally, John

the Baptist was almost certainly executed by beheading (Matthew 14:6–12; Mark 6:22–29).

Throwing from heights

Another method that may be applicable today is that of throwing condemned people from great heights to their deaths. This gruesome spectacle permeates urban mythology surrounding violent drug gangs and infuses prison lore about inmate punishment. The fear of falling from dizzying heights ranks up there with snakebites and public speaking as causes of irrational anxiety and panic attacks.

Of course, some thrill-seeking convicts might actually opt for this mode of execution, for the same reason that sky-diving enthusiasts like to jump. The two examples in the bible are the 10,000 Edomite men who were thrown from the top of a cliff (2 Chronicles 25:11–12) and the wicked woman Jezebel, who was thrown out of a window (2 Kings 9:30–37).

Note on hanging

Because Barr, Trump and Gorsuch included hanging as an acceptable alternative method of execution, its omission from the list requires explanation. The consensus opinion of scholars is that hanging was not a biblical mode of execution, but the bodies of victims were often hung up for display after they were killed (e.g., Joshua 10:26; 2 Samuel 4:12).

One difficulty in reaching an unequivocal conclusion about this subject is the substantial differences in scriptural translations, as illustrated by two renderings of Esther 2:23: “both were hanged on a gallows” (NKJV) and “the two men were impaled on a sharpened pole” (NLT). Another problem is presented by the ambiguous expressions used in describing Jesus’s crucifixion: “killed by hanging on a tree” and “by hanging him on a cross” (Acts 10:39).

However, there is a conclusion on which all translations agree: Judas hanged himself (Matthew 27:5). Of course, this was a suicide, not an execution, and Judas may have died as a result of a fall (Acts 1:18).

Status of judicial killing

1. While secular opponents of the death penalty can have reasonable confidence that Yahweh’s preferred modes of execution will probably not be implemented on a large scale in the United States, because most would still be considered unnecessarily cruel, there is no doubt that capital punishment will continue to be the law in Texas, Florida, Georgia, Missouri and a few other states.

2. Although the U.S. Supreme Court is overwhelmingly Christian and predominantly Catholic, and the Vatican strongly opposes the death penalty, the ultraconservative majority is unlikely to apply the criterion of “evolving standards of decency” and will continue to support the legality of capital punishment, especially given the disproportionate fundamentalist Christian influence in favor of executing evildoers.

3. With President Biden, also a practicing Catholic, believing that state-sponsored killings are immoral, arbitrary and often racist (as do many Americans), and with Pope Francis’s renewed condemnation of the death penalty, it is increasingly probable that nonbelievers will have to rely on the moral authority of mainline religionists in their continuing fight to abolish judicial killing.

FFRF Lifetime Member Brian Bolton is a retired professor/psychologist living in Texas.

Religion haunts a women’s health clinic

In 2003, Steven Neubauer began to escort patients, video camera in hand, during every procedure day at the Planned Parenthood clinic in York, Pa. He did that for five years until 2008, when he became security coordinator for the clinic. He later became security officer after the coordinator position was eliminated. By the time he retired in 2019, Neubauer had logged over 600 volunteer hours as a Planned Parenthood escort and more than 12,000 volunteer hours as security coordinator or security officer.

By Steven Neubauer

Religious leaders often sing the praises of the “sidewalk counselors” who “minister” to the young women entering reproductive health clinics. Here’s how that “counseling” has worked on one sidewalk.

The protesters I encountered during my five years of escorting and 11 years of working security at Planned Parenthood in York, Pa., were a case study in everything that is wrong with religion. The local Catholic churches would post notices asking people to volunteer to help “save the babies” on Wednesday mornings, the day procedures were scheduled. Sign-up sheets were also posted so parishioners could volunteer for a specific time slot.

These Catholic protesters ranged from those who gathered to pray quietly across the street to very aggressive and provocative people who did everything “legal” to interfere with patients, staff and volunteers. Some groups stood on the public sidewalk in front of our building and prayed the rosary aloud. Other groups would loudly sing hymns, at times with music from a boombox or even live musicians. One retired couple of Catholic protesters rented an apartment directly across the street from the clinic. No one ever lived there; it was used exclusively for many years as a break area for protesters who wished to stay all day. The renting couple often set up lawn chairs on the sidewalk and sat all day watching the front door of the clinic, taking notes and photos.

For several years, one group walked a procession every Wednesday morning from a Catholic church a few blocks away carrying a life-sized statue of the Virgin Mary. Upon arrival at the clinic, the statue would be stood up on a pedestal or truck bed and elaborately dressed in robes and a golden crown. At the end of the day, the Mary statue would be undressed and removed, a process I always thought was a little creepy.

These Catholic protesters had obviously been trained in how to intimidate and make threats without crossing the line into actual criminal behavior. For example, following news reports of violence at other abortion clinics, one of these protesters, usually a female, would walk up behind me and say quietly: “Did you see where that abortion doctor got shot and killed the other day? You know, Steve, we know who you are, and we know where you live.”

In quieter moments, these very same protesters, aware that I had attended Catholic schools as a child, would then approach me and, speaking softly and kindly, express their love for me and their concern for my immortal soul. They begged me to “return to Jesus” (I am, in fact, a lifelong atheist).

Disregard for the privacy or safety of our patients was common. One female protester, who worked as a substitute teacher at a local Catholic high school, patrolled our clinics daily, informing par-



Steven Neubauer stands outside the Planned Parenthood clinic where he worked and volunteered for 16 years.



“This woman would ‘hex’ us with her crucifix,” Steven Neubauer writes. “When I approached her car to take the photo, she immediately began yelling for help, claiming that I was molesting her.”

ents of the patients entering who she recognized as students at her school. A male protester, billing himself as a minister and co-founder of Cops for Christ, took photos of young-looking females entering our clinic. He then presented these photos to police, health and government agencies as “evidence” that our clinic was illegally treating minors.

The really serious security issues usually came not from the protesters, but from those religious extremists who wouldn’t show their faces out front, and also from the very people who arrived and entered along with the patients. Boyfriends, husbands, fathers, uncles, sometimes even mothers and grandparents would enter the building with the patient to provide “support,” then have a change of mind and start an argument with the patient over the procedure or try to drag the patient out. That never worked, but it only added to the fear and terror felt by the waiting young women. We frequently had angry and abusive boyfriends or husbands waiting outside or trying to gain entrance, often with the active support of the protesters, and we had to arrange for patients to be removed secretly and taken to a shelter.

In addition, during my time there, I had to, along with my ex-cop partner, try

to hold the front door shut to keep out a violent group demanding to be let in, while at the same time admitting real patients safely. Also, I once found myself in the middle of a gunfight in front of our building while escorting an employee to her car, and on another occasion was only inches from a pipe bomb deposited near the front door of our clinic.

I can’t count the number of times I had to step between two people to stop a violent encounter. Patient companions had only to deal with this for one day. But several escorts quit when they could no longer tolerate the constant harassment, intimidation and offensive comments.

The dedicated ones

I was privileged to know and work with many dedicated, outstanding people: medical staff, doctors, administrators, volunteers, the several terrific partners I had over the years, and several police officers. Our doctors endured constant threats and intimidation and even picketing at their homes.

Also heroic were the women on the clinic staff. Nearly all younger with families or single mothers, these brave women, never overpaid, endured intimidation and abuse outside the center and stressful and at times tragic situations inside doing their jobs. I recall one young woman whose husband dropped her off for work in front of our building on procedure day. The woman spoke to her two young children in the back seat as she left the car, telling them to behave or they wouldn’t go to Hershey Park on Saturday. As she turned to walk inside, a female protester, rosary in hand, ran up beside her and said: “If you go in there today, we are going to find your kids at Hershey Park on Saturday and tell them how their mother comes here every week and rips the arms and legs off little babies.”

Then, for several years, we had a priest as a regular protester. This guy arrived every week wearing sacramental vestments so everyone would know for sure he was a Catholic priest. He was loud and seemingly never shut up, condemning us all to hell. He tried to interfere with every patient, but took particular pleasure in singling out employees.

‘Father Porno’

A few months after first arriving, I overheard the priest giving his name to a departing patient companion as a contact for post-procedure “counseling.” I ran the name, Virgil Tetherow, through a few databases and discovered the priest had been arrested several years prior on

23 felony counts involving downloading child pornography on the church rectory computer where he was living. He was allowed to plea down to one felony count of indecent use of a communication device and he was also suspended by the Catholic Church from performing the sacraments, but that suspension was because of his refusal to say the mass in English, not because of the porn issue.

At times, “Father Porno” would have children, some of them too short to be seen above their “aborted fetus” signs, line up to block cars from entering our driveway. As approaching cars would stop in the street waiting for the children to very slowly move, the adult protesters would swarm around the car, knocking on windows and accusing the occupants of being “baby killers.”

One of the escorts and I met with a reporter from the local newspaper. The following Sunday, the newspaper ran a front page, above-the-fold story about the priest with a felony child porno criminal record who was harassing women every week at Planned Parenthood. That was the beginning of the end for Father Porno at our clinic. His church in York publicly stood by him, insisting that he was a very moral and ethical Christian. His church also, completely straight-faced, stood by his absurd story that he had been framed on the porn charge by the female church secretary.

Some months later, according to news reports, the York church changed its tune after Father Porno allegedly absconded with the school fund and the church computer to start his own church elsewhere in York county. I never saw him again at our clinic. A few years later, there was a notice in the Harrisburg diocese newsletter that Tetherow had finally been defrocked by the Catholic Church. Again, not because of the child porn conviction of many years earlier, but because of his stubborn refusal to obey the pope’s direct order to say the Mass in English rather than Latin.

This type of offensive behavior continued during my entire 16-year tenure at the clinic. And yet, during all those years of demeaning, abusing and terrorizing patients and staff, the protesters, as well as the Catholic and Protestant churches that supported them, continued to publicly maintain that the protesters were gentle and loving Christians being victimized by brutal Planned Parenthood staff and supporters.

But that’s what religion all too frequently does: It turns decent and thoughtful people into cruel and delusional creatures who haunt the rest of us.

FFRF Member Steven Neubauer is president of the Central PA Rationalists, a chapter of FFRF.

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Richard & Beverly Hermesen Student Activist Awards

Child litigants in Puerto Rico each earn \$5k

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has bestowed the \$5,000 Richard & Beverly Hermesen Student Activist Awards to each of the two child litigants in its successful lawsuit ending prayer in a Puerto Rican grade school last year.

The children in the case, who were in the second and eighth grades at the time of the 2020 lawsuit, were bullied and harassed after their mother complained about the illegal 40-minute-long, mandatory biweekly prayer sessions.

When the mother's complaints did not end the violation, she arranged for her children to avoid the prayers by coming to school after the pray sessions. Teachers then threatened the children, who had exemplary grades, with tardy marks, which would have lowered their grade-point average.


The suit was filed by FFRF and Humanistas Seculares de Puerto Rico in February 2020, with the mother and her two children as pseudonymous plaintiffs. After a March 2020 mediation session, Puerto Rico's Education Secretary and the principal at Luis M. Santiago School agreed to immediately take action to stop the school-led prayer, take steps to ensure a harassment-free environment and remove any negative marks related to the students' records. A memorandum was circulated on the policy of nondiscrimination and nonsectarian education in public schools to Department of Education employees, and a training was scheduled for Luis M. Santiago school staff. The case was settled last August.

FFRF has been told the children are doing much better since the case has been resolved, and one child has moved to a different school.

"Our dedicated plaintiffs were the whistleblowers on this case, and we were only able to stop this egregious violation thanks to their dedication and courage. We also thank Humanistas Seculares de Puerto Rico, and warmly acknowledge our generous FFRF members Rich and Beverly Hermesen, for making possible these special awards," says Dan Barker, FFRF co-president.

The scholarship will help the students with educational expenses, such as computers, and future higher education.

Generous benefactors

A photograph of an elderly couple, Richard and Beverly Hermesen, smiling. Richard is on the left, wearing glasses and a brown and white argyle sweater. Beverly is on the right, wearing a blue top. Both are wearing name tags that say "Beverly Hermesen".

FFRF Lifetime Members Richard and Beverly Hermesen have generously endowed a \$5,000 student activist award since 2013. It is the largest monetary student activist award FFRF offers. FFRF is very thankful to and appreciative of the couple.

\$1,000 ‘Strong Backbone’ award

12-year-old wins FFRF activist scholarship

Kylie has been awarded FFRF’s “Strong Backbone Scholarship” of \$1,000 endowed annually by an octogenarian member of the Freedom From Religion Foundation in honor of his birthday. FFRF is grateful for his support of youthful activism.

By Kylie Morgan

I used to go to Milton Middle School in Milton, W.Va. I’ve lived in that school district my entire life, but we recently had to move due to my complaint about religion in my school.

We had eight class periods throughout the day, including a health class with Mrs. Ashworth for my sixth-period class. Everyone in that class seemed to be religious, including the teacher. Little did I know that on March 10, things were about to take an unexpected and unpleasant turn.

We were talking about “starting a family” when the topic turned to God. She said



Kylie Morgan

that we should wait until we are married to get physically involved with somebody. The day before, she had mentioned going

to church. I decided to start recording.

To paraphrase, she said it’s crazy how some people don’t believe in God, and that people can’t be moral unless they’re Christian. She said that if you were raised with morals and values, God will be there to guide and help you, which, to me, implied that people who don’t believe in God don’t have morals or values. She spent four minutes talking about Jesus, violating our constitutional rights, as she is an employee of the state. According to her, some of the people in her first- and second-period classes mentioned how often she brings God into many of her lessons, and that she “tries to squeeze it in without getting in too much trouble.”

In mid-March, the Freedom From Religion Foundation sent a cease-and-desist letter to the school district, and that’s when things took a turn. My dad picked me up from school, and the next day, there were adults protesting at my bus stop. I started getting messages to my phone from peo-

ple I didn’t know. One person wrote, “Hey, is this Kylie? . . . I’m a nice person. I’m not here to say [anything bad] to you . . . Mrs. Ashworth does not deserve to be fired, but I’m so sorry about all the eighth graders, my grade, posting about you. There’s no reason for them to do that.” And that was one of the nice messages.

Somebody doxed my real phone number to their Snapchat story. I had to change my phone number. I couldn’t even leave my house to take out the trash. Finally, I went to visit my grandma. I was there in hiding for a few weeks while my dad moved us to New York City. I’m joining a new school district in Manhattan. I’m excited to be in an area that doesn’t know who I am and doesn’t want me dead.

Kylie, 12, likes Minecraft, has a few close friends and writes, “I’m an atheist, but grew up around Christians (except my mom and dad). I like to watch TikTok, YouTube and Twitch. My dad is a YouTuber, and I’ve been on his channel a few times.”

CRANKMAIL

It’s time to rev up this month’s engine of literary nonsense, hyperbole and general outlandishness that FFRF finds in its inbox. Printed as received.

\$\$\$: What a piece of shit organization. It’s all about money...isn’t it? — Russell Mandor

Sickening: You goal in life is to kill religion in pubic. What a disgusting bunch of people you are. Take on a project to PROTECT our religion for our people, not take it away. ISIS will kill you because you don’t believe in Islam. Get your priorities straight. — Bud Everson

Scum!: You are the scum of the earth...nothing your organization does means a damn thing to intelligent people...you are disgusting but I’m sure you already know that...get a life or a job for CHRIST sakes!! — Bobby Jacoby

Help not hate: Keep your nose out of other people business. That is the problem with our society. Just because you do not like it you think it should be taken down the non profit organization you belong to will spend thousands of dollars. When there are people out of work and children need medical help you are wasting money on a sign. Tell me where any of that makes since. — Sallie Mathison

Losers: Christians can sue your organization for discriminating against the Christians. Christians has the same amount of freedom of speech like everyone else does. This means you lost this round. You media wanna-be atheist attention can’t win all the time. Makes it unfair! Enough is enough! Also I’m telling the media not to broadcast your protest on radio, tv and news paper worldwide. Make sure you tell your attorneys what I said. — Mike Templeton

Stop it: Why do go out of your way and everyone’s time with this silly crap you try to do?? If don’t like a billboard signdon’t fucking read it - ya shit bag - — John Billows

You’re a joke: Your entire organization is a joke and a waste of time. You attack Christian people like my old coach. The constitution says freedom of religion, meaning you can choose whatever you want or don’t want. It doesn’t say “from”. So preventing a coach or player from practicing his or her religion on or off school campus is UNCONSTITUTIONAL, as well is attacking the people that do. You might want to read the constitution a few

more times because your entire organization just got torn apart by a 19 year old that knows more than you do about the rights of citizens and the U.S. constitution. — Nolan Asuncion

Prayer: Why are you worried about prayer if you don’t believe in it. — Mark Pavarek

Bye bye: You guys are ignorant idiots. There is a hell and Satan has a spot reserved for everyone in FFRF. :) — Geoff Reynolds

FFR: Never thought of looking at your website. Glad to see your pictures. Now I know what pieces of shit look like! — Dan Johnson

Jesus is King!: I thought I’d inform you that just about when you get every cross removed and every nativity taken down and every 10 Commandments taken down ... Jesus will return and rule from Jerusalem and there not be a single thing that any of you can do to stop Him. And, that’s a promise ... from the holy Bible scriptures!

All the other prophecies have come true so it stands to logical thought that all the prophecies that have not come true yet will. Not believing in God does not make God not exist. I’ve been in His

presence. — Jean Babcock

Prove it: Considering that none of you can PROVE there is no “God” and that it is nearly universal that ALL human groups tend to adopt the concept of a “higher” being, you folks have NOT SCIENTIFIC BASIS for your position — in fact your argument is more of a religion than any intellectual process! But you guys are just a bunch of FAKES who have not true logical basis for what you claim to be “TRUTH” and “FACT”. In face, your speech is no more fact based than that of the religions you attack. — David Bachmann

Google search: Looking for information this morning I came across your site. What a disgrace! You take absolutely everything out of context to make your points. I was literally shocked. Then I looked at the author and it made more sense. If you actually want freedom from religion you could at least be honest about what you’re trying to free yourself from. As far as I can see you’re simply trying to be free of your own lies. Take a look at the truth, actually read the book, then free yourself from that. — Karen Eastman

All of our gods come from within ourselves

By Ann L. Lorac

Those who belong to a church, synagogue, mosque or any of other temple of worship all have a faith that is explicitly woven into the ideological fabric of that religion.

But faith and religion are separate entities. One can have faith without belonging to a collective religious body. On the other hand, a particular religion has no faith without its parishioners believing in



Ann L. Lorac

its ideological credo. In other words, religions' houses of worship are empty and meaningless buildings that only have spiritual significance in the minds of the beholders who occupy them. Their personal faith resides not in heaven or with an exterior god or goddess, but in their minds only. In fact, there wasn't a Sumerian beer god until beer was invented. Then the Sumerians invented him.

As I look back on my detachment from the religion of my youth, I realize that it was a process that is still unfolding. There are a lot of layers to shed. It's similar to desensitizing one's self from a cult.

My initial reaction to disbelief in an exterior male god was guilt. I felt that I was abandoning a close friend who was always there for me, looking after my well-being — the benevolent all-powerful creator of the universe. I then felt trepidation for ignoring such a powerful deity, but no retribution ensued, only the horrified reaction from a fundamental Christian sibling and his wife. But I, too, was horrified by my admission of doubt.

My sibling asked, "If there wasn't God, what would be the purpose of living?" That is the classic philosophical question every human must answer for themselves — the meaning of life. I grappled with that and the hole left by turning my back on a familiar, comforting spiritual path.

Absorbing myself in Buddhism, I



Image by Shutterstock

learned to meditate for spiritual solace and self-healing. The enormity of the many Buddhist practices with their physical and mental disciplines were not for me. I am not a follower; I must discover for myself.

After a bit of research, I incorporated my own technique for relaxation and mind focus, in which I freed myself from the guilt imposed upon me by others through hostile interactions. And I nurtured myself by allowing strength, wisdom, compassion and love to flow inside me. The empty hole was filled.

I came to the realization that one's belief in God was indoctrinated at a young age by one's family. But no matter how seemingly real that God, that Jesus or that Holy Spirit is, it is only a belief, not a fact. I realized that God is not an absolute and my god was equal to all the gods that exist in the minds of everyone on Earth.

My next thought process was to find my god. Faith is an indelible human trait, even if that faith is in an idea buried deep in one's subconscious, waiting to be discovered. Then I discovered that my god was not only a belief in my mind, but my conscious mind itself, the place where all beliefs in god reside. My god was my conscience.

Since my god didn't need to be worshipped, I now saw all religions that do

have gods that need to be worshipped as pagan. Bending the knee or bowing the head, reciting a litany of praises to placate a belief of an all-powerful deity was to me the essence of paganism, which had its roots in the gods and goddesses of antiquity. I viewed contemporary god worshippers as a continuum of the pantheism of antiquity gods of the Egyptian pharaohs, the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Persians, the Jews, the Greeks and the Romans. All those religious devotees — prostrating themselves to their gods, lighting candles and burning incense — were still with us.

This past Dec. 24, when a friend gave me a link to her splendid church with its stained glass, vaulted ceiling, her recall of wonderful wood and incense smells, angelic voices and flickering lights, I thought of the labor that made all of that possible. I thought of the cathedrals of Europe, the great temples from antiquity — of Egypt, Israel, Greece and Rome, and even of the Egyptian pyramids themselves.

All required an exhaustive supply of labor, which was grueling, crippling, deforming, toxic and lethal. How many men and women died creating houses for the gods? And how many who didn't wished that they could have died instead of dying slowly by unrelenting physical

pain and mental persecution? I realized I was a humanist. The god that resides in the consciousness of each of us gives us dignity and the right to be here simply because we were born. It is religion that dehumanizes other human beings and denies them the right to their own life by demeaning it, constraining it or simply eliminating it completely.

Gazing at the twinkling lights on my front porch, the sense of heavenly awe that they used to invoke was replaced by a painful aching of empathy for humanity of the past, for long departed souls that walked this earth before me. I envisioned each light as the god-consciousness of a departed soul and the lights seemed brighter and more intense. They suffered and died for an ignorant human being's devotion to a god that lived only in his mind and who told him he was superior to another. That false superiority has been the most egregious crime against humanity ever committed — the assumption of a God-given belief that another human being is not worthy of his life on this earth and is tortured and killed because he or she was born.

My humanism and respect deepened for all the souls who lived before me, from the Paleolithic period to the present. I finally realized that until humans shed their gods and stop bending their knees to worship them, humanity will never be free of suffering, oppression, persecution and death.

I have learned that so much work needs to be done in this world to rid the human dependency on organized, bureaucratic for-profit and for-power religions that reach their tentacles in government and every aspect of one's personal life.

One's god and one's faith should be personal and private and kept in one's mind, where it belongs. When religious proselytizing is no more and for-profit religious bureaucracy has died, the world will finally become wiser, more compassionate, more tolerant, more understanding and more peaceful.

FFRF Member Ann L. Lorac is an amateur author who lives in Tennessee.

OVERHEARD

I've never seen anything begin to approach . . . the divisiveness that we're



Anthony Fauci

seeing, but also the distortion of reality. There's so much distortion of reality and complete misinformation out there that, you know, if it wasn't so serious and have such a negative impact, it would almost be funny. But it's not funny.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, on the level of misinformation that has arisen from the pandemic.

Poynter.org, 5-11-21

The Freedom From Religion Foundation in Madison announced it would file a lawsuit if any North Dakota school district displays the Ten Commandments. If opponents of the law, Senate Bill 2308, are correct, the state will lose the case. The state likely would incur legal costs regardless of the outcome. It's an effort by legislators to impose their beliefs on everyone. . . . There are many ways schools can instill values in students without selective use of religion. . . . Legislators are

trying to score points with voters while playing what they know is a losing game. The public deserves better.

Newspaper editorial: "Bills inviting legal action usually bad."

Bismarck (N.D.) Tribune, 4-29-21

I want to make it clear, this law does not take away the choice of parents to make medical decisions for their children. But, if they do choose not to have their children vaccinated, this bill best ensures that other children and their families will not be exposed to these deadly diseases for hours each day in our schools.

Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont, after signing legislation that would end the state's religious exemption for mandatory school vaccinations beginning in the 2022 school year.

Hartford Courant, 4-28-21

At this time, it appears more of the [conspiracy] theories are traveling in politically conservative circles, which corresponds to the higher percentages in the churches led by white Protestant pastors.

Scott McConnell of Lifeway Research.

Sojourners, June 2021

Imagine if the prime minister was a hardline atheist giving speeches about po-

litical matters at an atheist convention that he or she wanted to keep from the wider public. . . . We have a right to know what ideas guide the actions and decision-making of those who stand for public office.

Meredith Doig of the Rationalist Society of Australia, explaining why her group released video of Prime Minister Scott Morrison's speech to Australian Christian Churches conference, where he talked about "the evil one" and "laying-on of hands" and talking to God.

IndependentAustralia.com, 5-11-21

Christian nationalists take the view that because America is a "Christian nation," any party or leader who isn't Christian in the "right" way, or who fails to conform to their agenda, is illegitimate. Legitimacy derives not from elections or any democratic process but from representing an alleged fidelity to their version of the American past and what they believe is the will of God.

Katherine Stewart, author of *The Power Worshippers*, as quoted in the article, "A



Katherine Stewart

Pennsylvania lawmaker and the resurgence of Christian nationalism."

The Atlantic, 5-9-21

The best available weapon we have is to counter the information with facts, is to keep pressing for more information, because it's in the area of facts that moral panics tend to collapse. They just get ridiculous, except for maybe a very small number of true believers who can tolerate an enormous amount of dissonance.

Sociologist Mary de Young, author of *The Day Care Ritual Abuse Moral Panic*, and how the "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s, when false accusations of the abuse of children in satanic rituals spread across the United States, is not that different from what QAnon members believe. Adherents of QAnon think that a shadowy cabal kidnaps children, tortures them and uses their blood in satanic rituals.

NPR, 5-18-21

I am optimistic that this shared experience [of the pandemic] will increase trust in vaccines and in the man-made, not God-sent, miracles of medical science.

Columnist Nina Burleigh, author of *Virus: Vaccinations, the C.D.C. and the Hijacking of America's Response to the Pandemic*.

The New York Times, 5-19-21

It's time to consider religion a disease

By Larry Roszkowiak

With all of our recent concern about contracting Covid-19, we've lost awareness that we regularly encounter people who suffer from something equally deadly — something that most likely first infected the earliest of humans ages ago. Even though it's responsible for millions of deaths, century after century, our species has yet to fully confront it. Now is the time.

It's time to begin considering religion as a disease. The model fits. It's contagious. It can be benign or malignant, dormant or virulent. The very old and very young are the most vulnerable.

The most common symptom of religion is vacuoles of intellectual atrophy. When belief supersedes knowledge, the ability to acquire information, and then synthesize it into knowledge, falters from lack of use. In many cases, this ability suffers damage, yet continues to attempt to function, thus producing "knowledge" that is hopelessly flawed.

External symptoms of religion can include the spontaneous and unexplained suspension of knowledge that had been both legitimately acquired and confirmed. This causes sufferers to make decisions based on faith and belief instead of facts and observations.

A high-level symptom often observed is the situational rearranging or suspension of ethical codes. This can apply to the ethical code of the individual, and that of the larger group, up to, and including, the entire society.

My parents showed neither knowledge nor commitment to any religious specifics, yet they hauled us to church every Sunday, and packed us off to fake schools every September. By doing so, they acted as carriers.

My siblings and I were infected. As kids, we were told, and actually believed, that somewhere there was a powerful old guy who watched everything we did and judged us. We also were told that this grand being's almighty judgments could be swayed and influenced. This influence was most commonly achieved through incantations, potions, charms and cash. As a child, I started to see this "god" as something akin to a crooked sports official who takes bribes, even while the match is in play.



Image from Shutterstock

Is religion a disease that needs to be treated?

With time, the siblings and I recovered. We developed antibodies which we passed to our children. The disease, however, mutates, leaving all of us still vulnerable to infection.

Our opinions come from the same perspective as our fantasies. My own opinions are from the perspective of someone making public policy, because that's my fantasy.

Religion sufferers can often hold a perspective that's rooted in an afterlife. This causes their interactions with their surroundings to be skewed by the professed belief that the events of life are of little consequence.

Unfortunately, religion sufferers are easy targets for liars. People who've contracted religion don't have to be pried off of reality, because they're already in a state of freefloat. Once you believe water can be walked upon, you'll believe anything.

Religion, and our vulnerability to it, are consequences of evolution. As humans grew more intelligent, we developed the ability to conceive of the future. Nature abhors a vacuum and rushes to fill it. Whereas absolutely nothing of the future can be truly known, our evolved brains hungered to fill that vacuum.

An accelerated version of this happened to dogs. Dogs' natural evolution was hijacked by humans. We domesticated dogs and then bred them for various qualities. By breeding dogs for their ability to relate to humans, we also jump-started the development of their intelligence. As in

humans, this intellectual development gave dogs the ability to sense the existence of the future. ("Oh no! They're taking me to the vet!") After a few thousand years, dogs' slavish dependency on humans became too egregious to ignore. Losing even their hygienic skills, dogs had become vulnerable to religion. Humans stepped in to fill the void. The parallels of a human praying to a god, and a dog performing inane tricks for a snack, should not be lost on any observer.

Predatory behavior is an instinct. The human species is even known for intramural predation. Predators are naturally opportunistic. Humans, overwhelmed by their newly acquired cognizance of a future, were vulnerable, and a new type of predator evolved. Today, they're known as "clergy."

Predators seek the vulnerable, and religion cultivates extraordinarily vulnerable people. The aforementioned intellectual atrophies allow many religious sufferers to be easily turned into thoughtless followers. What they hold to be faith is often little more than a cultivated, intellectual laziness.

The specifics of the spirits and societies that populate any particular afterlife vary from culture to culture, and even from century to century. The wise rulers, and scurrilous villains, of the various afterlives were possibly lifted from the juicier social scandals and political events of the culture at hand.

Through some social process similar to molecular cohesion, the sufferers of religion tend to congregate and, in the worst cases, organize. In this way, the disease protects itself. The dynamics that develop in religious organizations in many ways mimic those of insect colonies and crime syndicates. All wealth is channeled upward to central individuals who are protected by a hierarchy of attendants. Those at the lowest levels are expendable pawns.

The pawns sedate themselves into accepting their role by having "faith" that those at the top will someday recognize their silent subservience, pluck them from the crowd, and joyously welcome them into the ring of the elite. In religions this is often called "paradise" or "heaven." In the present economic system, it shows up as "Undercover Boss."

It's possible that both art and science could be seen as companion maladies to religion. Art and science, however, have a built-in integrity that religion lacks. Art is fantasy presented as fantasy. Science is fact presented as fact. Religion is fantasy presented as fact.

Religion is not innocuous. It is not to be protected. It needs to be treated.

FFRF Member Larry Roszkowiak was born in New Jersey.



A prescient president?

“If we are to have another contest . . . of our national existence, I predict that the dividing line will not be Mason and Dixon's, but between patriotism and intelligence on the one side, and superstition, ambition and ignorance on the other.”

— Ulysses S. Grant

According to *Snopes.com*, President Grant said those words at the Annual Reunion of the Army of the Tennessee in Des Moines, Iowa, on Sept. 29, 1875. Grant was commanding general of the U.S. Army during the American Civil War and 18th president of the United States from 1869 to 1877. “As Grant approached his last full year in the White

House, and the coming of the nation's centennial celebration, he spoke of the importance of ensuring an educated citizenry and maintaining the separation of church and state in order to protect the rights enshrined in the U.S. Constitution,” *Snopes* reported. Nearly 146 years later, on Jan. 6, 2021, the U.S. Capitol was attacked by a throng of people seeking

to prevent certification of Joe Biden's victory over President Trump in the 2020 presidential election. News reports that followed noted the existence of “far-right talk of a coming civil war” among the Capitol rioters, who had been motivated by false claims propagated by Trump that the election had been “stolen” and “rigged.”

NOTHING FAILS LIKE PRAYER CONTEST 2021

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

The individual who gives the best secular invocation will be invited to open FFRF's annual convention in 2021, receiving an expenses-paid trip to Boston Nov. 19-21, 2021, along with a plaque and an honorarium of \$500. **Deadline: August 1, 2021.**

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

Freethought Matters to return this September



Photo by Chris Line

Visit FFRF's YouTube Channel to watch our past shows.



After a summer hiatus, Freethought Matters resumes production in Sept.

Donohue finally agrees with FFRF!

The irony is delicious. FFRF vigorously protested the White House faith-based offices when first created by President George W. Bush. FFRF never thought Catholic League President Bill Donohue would join its protest. But, on May 17, Donohue wrote a piece saying that President Biden should “do us all a favor and simply trash this office.”

What caused this startling pronouncement? It was the fact that the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships had the graciousness to meet with FFRF and five other secular organizations. That meeting was set up by the Secular Coalition for America. Donohue apparently learned of it thanks to after-the-fact coverage by the Religious News Service.

“None of them are religion-friendly and some are positively militant in their agenda,” fumed Donohue. “If the Biden administration is going to manipulate the founding purpose of faith-based initiatives by welcoming the advice of militant secularists, it would do us all a favor and simply trash this office. It is obviously a bust.”

In short, according to Donohue, governmental offices that are not bigoted toward nonbelievers must be abolished. FFRF didn’t just protest Bush’s creation of the faith-based offices. It filed suit. After a district court ruled that FFRF had no “standing” or right to sue over this executive action, FFRF appealed that dismissal to the U.S. 7th Circuit Court of Appeals, which ruled in its favor. FFRF’s case was remanded to the district level to be heard on its merits, but the Bush administration appealed FFRF’s win to the Supreme Court.

In a 5-4 decision issued in 2007, *Hein v. FFRF*, FFRF lost the case on standing — not on the merits, which were not addressed. All we can say about Donohue’s pronouncement is that religion, not just politics, certainly makes strange bedfellows.



Bill Donohue

White House

Continued from page 1

calls the Trump White House held to reassure churches that they could and should request forgivable loans under various SBA programs, including the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). In one call, Trump-allied faith leaders were assured by the federal government that even a discriminatory fly-by-night “church” that provides absolutely no secular social services, and of which the owner is the sole employee, could have its wages covered by taxpayers during the PPP time period. These assurances were made a full two weeks before the SBA released its final rule on eligibility, showing that it had no interest in considering public comments.

Another call was even more explicit, with churches urged to apply for PPP funds before the deadline. Focus on the Family founder James Dobson, a member of Trump’s Evangelical Ad-

visory Council, reported that the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, which took in \$350,000–\$1 million, “has literally been kept solvent . . . by the Paycheck Protection Plan (sic).” Dobson noted with obvious glee that in 43 years of leading two faith-based ministries, he had “never asked for, nor received, one cent from the federal government,” expressing his surprise that taxpayer funds could now flow to his ministry.

While FFRF maintains that it is inappropriate for any government action to turn religious Americans into an “in” crowd while secular Americans are “outsiders,” the current White House faith-based office has turned a blatantly Christian nationalist outfit into an office that explicitly acknowledges the separation between religion and government. That’s a step in the right direction.

What a relief!



Photo by Dan Barker

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor shows off the new bas-relief sculpture, created by world-renowned sculptor Zenos Frudakis, of birth control pioneer and freethinker Margaret Sanger. The sculpture hangs in Freethought Hall.

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor thanks world-renowned sculptor Zenos Frudakis for the exquisite and meaningful gift of a bas-relief sculpture of birth control pioneer and freethinker Margaret Sanger. The bas-relief sculpture embodies Sanger’s determination to free women.

In the first issue of her 1914 periodical, *The Woman Rebel*, whose motto was “No Gods — No Masters,” Sanger counseled women: “To look the whole world in the face with a go-to-hell look in the eyes; to have an ideal; to speak and to act in defiance of convention.” This sculpture, says Gaylor, beautifully captures that sentiment, as well as the commitment to reproductive rights by FFRF principal founder Anne Nicol Gaylor.

The artwork bears a quote by Sanger: “No woman can call herself free who does not control her own body.”

The sculpture newly graces a prominent wall in the administrative wing of Freethought Hall, FFRF’s office building in downtown Madison, Wis.

Frudakis, a member of FFRF,



created the FFRF sculpture of Clarence Darrow now found in front of the courthouse where the Scopes trial took place in Dayton, Tenn. His best-known piece, “Freedom,” has been listed in “The Top Ten: Public Art” by *The Independent*.

(For more on Sanger’s freethought views, check out Gaylor’s anthology of women freethinkers, *Women Without Superstition*, at ffrf.org/shop.)

FFRF'S

Ask an Atheist

A production of the Freedom From Religion Foundation

Join us on FFRF’s Ask An Atheist

Each week on Facebook, FFRF hosts a live show where FFRF staff members and guests talk about timely topics ranging from atheism to the separation of state and church. You can join us each Wednesday at noon Central time on Facebook Live.

To watch previous episodes, you can go to FFRF’s YouTube channel: bit.ly/3ajgbUd.

So far, FFRF has produced more than 150 episodes, with such topics as:

- Why doesn’t FFRF go after Islam?
- Is religion a license to discriminate?
- Are science and religion incompatible?
- What is secular parenting?
- Do atheists have morals?
- Do Americans have a shared reality anymore?

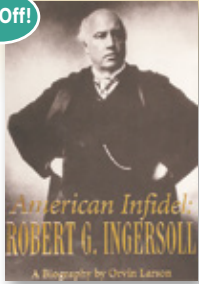
If you’d like to ask a question to be discussed on the show, you may post on FFRF’s Facebook page or by email at AskAnAtheist@ffrf.org.

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll

By Orvin Larson \$5 Off!

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

—Published by FFRF. 316 pages / PB



Buy it from FFRF online @ ffrf.org/shop

Lead Us Not Into Penn Station Provocative Pieces

By Anne Gaylor \$5 Off!

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

—Published by FFRF. 80 pages / PB



Buy it from FFRF online @ ffrf.org/shop

Donate to FFRF while you shop!



AmazonSmile allows you to support FFRF every time you make a purchase — at no cost to you!

When you visit smile.amazon.com

select the **Freedom From Religion Foundation** to donate 0.5% of your eligible purchases to FFRF.

FFRF offers ‘A’ badge for Boy Scout members

The Freedom From Religion Foundation offers a badge to reward freethinking youths and to challenge the Boy Scouts of America’s discriminatory policy against the nonreligious.

The badge, based on the Dawkins’ “A,” is issued in collaboration with the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science.

The Boy Scouts of America formally discriminates against nonreligious boys and their families, officially excluding atheists, agnostics and non-believers. BSA maintains “that no member can grow into the best kind of citizen without recognizing his obligation to God.”

FFRF maintains that no one can grow into the best kind of citizen who discriminates against the non-religious, and that it’s what you do —

not what you believe — that makes you a good person.

FFRF, at the urging of its late member Richard Kirschman, has produced a badge similar to BSA’s merit badges, which are typically sewn on uniforms or sashes.

Scouts who wish to earn this badge are asked to help disprove BSA’s misguided claim that nonbelievers cannot be good citizens.

At Dawkins’ suggestion, the scout is also required to send FFRF a short essay that addresses BSA’s claim that nonbelievers can’t be good citizens. Unlike BSA badge providers, FFRF



will not charge scouts money for the badge.

FFRF intends the badge to reward Boy Scouts who have persevered in an organization that basically has instituted a ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy about atheist and agnostic participants, but has regularly expelled open nonbelievers. While BSA officials dictate the discriminatory policy, scouting troops vary widely in their enforcement of the ban, so it’s believed many scouts are nonreligious.

But if any young boy — or girl — fulfills the requirements, FFRF will be delighted to reward them with this badge. Many nonreligious students who might otherwise wish to join BSA never join, knowing of its bigoted policy. This is also their chance to be rewarded for critical thinking and to earn a keepsake at the same time.

FFRF hopes someday soon that BSA itself will change its policy and adopt its own official merit badge rewarding critical thinking. It urges those who care about equality for nonbelieving children to contact BSA to protest this invidious discrimination.

To apply online, go to ffrf.org and click on the Outreach and Events menu, and click on “Freethought Badge.” To apply via mail, send a short essay on how nonbelievers can be good citizens to FFRF, Attn: Freethought Badge, P.O. Box 750, Madison, WI 53701.

‘No magic. No superstition’

By Dave Glenn

It’s always fascinating to read about Boy Scout history and how free-thinking Scouts are moral despite the archaic rules of the organization.

I started Scouting in 1967. Our only local troop was affiliated with the Methodist church, so that is where we went, all three boys. Unfortunately for the troop, we were not Methodist, but Jewish, and generally quite secular. But our dad wanted to give us the Scouting experience, and we agreed to join. Dad also became an adult leader and that helped insulate us a bit. The troop did welcome us because they (wrongfully) assumed we were God-fearing Judeo-Christians. Close enough.

While the troop held meetings in the church basement, I did not witness any religious goings-on there. On the other hand, I recall several times on camping trips (when my dad was not in attendance) when one of the supervisory dads would announce a mandatory Sunday morning ad hoc Christian service. It was unclear if he was concerned about parents being upset their boys might miss Sunday services, or if his god would object.

Our family had long given up going to temple, and I had never attended a Christian service. My 11-year-old brain was in catch-22 mode. I was concerned the Scout leaders would reprimand me if I didn’t attend. And I was concerned my parents would reprimand me if I did. The leaders were definitely not in the mood for my excuses. Thus, my novel solution was to hide in my tent until the service was over. Fortunately, the leaders did not come looking for me and my fellow Scouts did not “rat me out.”

Sometime later, it was time for us to make our Scout vests. For those of you who don’t know, Scouts cut and sew a vest to hold all their hiking and camping awards and badges. We followed a basic template and then each Scout was to customize the vest to their own personality and tastes. Most of the boys made plain-looking vests (with help from their parents). I opted to make a soft blue velour garment with matching blue fringe balls, mini wood button epaulets, and trimmed in fur. Yup, fur. My cousin’s father was a furrier in town and he gladly gave me some extras.

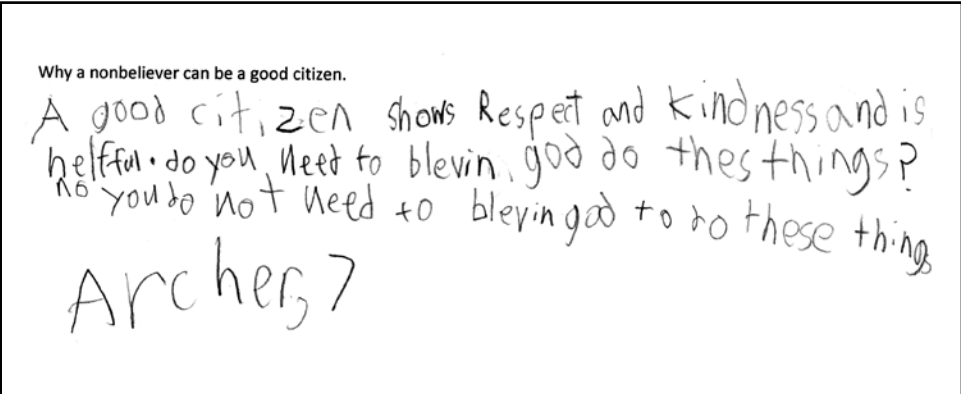


Dave Glenn shows off the “A” atheist badge he received from FFRF.

Years later, I laugh at the irony of a totally outrageous vest made by a gay adolescent (who didn’t yet know he was gay). Fortunately for me, I completed my Scouting experience (Eagle and Order of the Arrow) before my hormones kicked in and I realized who I am. It is highly likely I would have been given the boot had I stayed past age 13 and announced my orientation.

Jump ahead 54 years, and I am now a philanthropist, activist, volunteer and family advocate in southeastern Wisconsin. I have financially supported dozens of organizations and offered hands-on volunteer support to almost 50. Currently, I am a volunteer for a couple dozen organizations, including local nonprofits, museums, theaters and a local farm. With the pandemic still upon us, much of this work is on hold. Yet, as an emergency preparedness volunteer for the health department, I am now busy helping at our community Covid-19 vaccination clinic.

Perhaps not being bogged down by religion freed me to be able to help my community. Or maybe that extra time I got was just a bonus. Despite the fact that my story is just a single data point, it is clear that many nonreligious people do indeed make a difference. I like to think my self-determined purpose in life is to help people. No magic. No superstition.



This cute essay came to FFRF from 7-year-old Archer N. from Iowa.

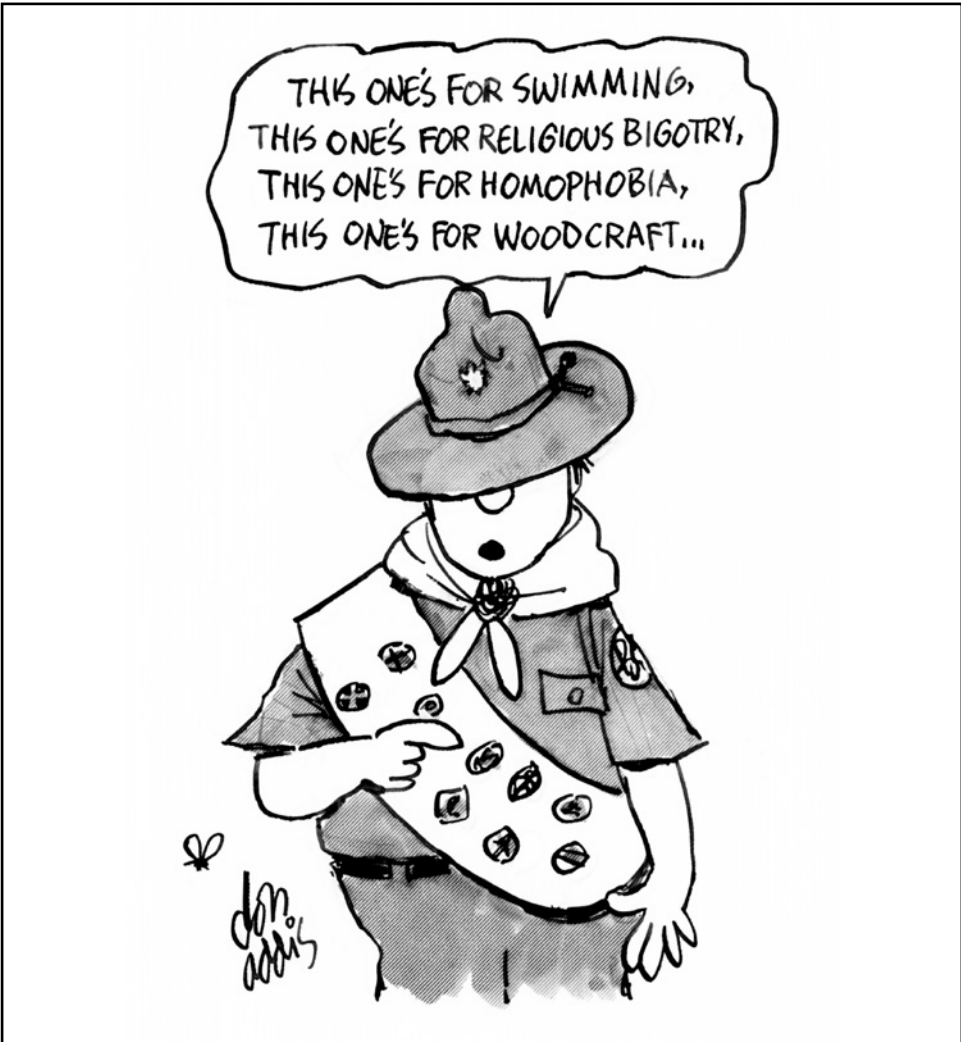
Others who have earned an FFRF Freethought badge

You can be a good citizen without God. I don’t know why that is so hard for BSA to comprehend. You do not need some imaginary god in the sky to tell you what is right or wrong. Humans have a brain that can process what is right or wrong. There are a lot of atheists who donate and help the Earth and people. It is not right that they can kick someone out of Boy Scouts for being an atheist. That certainly doesn’t sound like being a good citizen.

Genevieve Parkinson, 11, Wisconsin

As a nonbeliever, I am a good citizen. I vote and I stay informed on the issues that directly affect society. Religious belief does not have anything to do with being civic minded. I am a critical thinker. I am also a humanist. My concern is for the good of society and myself. My actions reflect these beliefs. I get directly involved with issues that concern both.

Eileen M. Miller, 48



IN MEMORIAM

Beloved volunteer, Phyllis Rose, dies at 89

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is very sad to report the death of FFRF Lifetime member, Board member and longtime volunteer Phyllis Rose, 89, in a hospice in Miami, on April 17, two weeks after sustaining a head injury. Phyllis had been very frail for several years.

Née Phyllis Woloshin, she was born on Feb. 8, 1932, in Chicago, to a family of Jewish-Russian immigrants. Her older sister, Connie Sutton, had predeceased her, as had her husband Robert Kimbrough (see accompanying obituary). They were married for more than 40 years. Her two sons are Nathan Rose, Florida, and Danny Rose, Indiana. She earned a B.A. in sociology, then a Master's in library science from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She reminisced that when she first attended the UW, she was barred from a coveted women's dormitory because she was Jewish. A feminist, she formally shed her birth and married names and changed her last name to Rose in the early 1980s.

"Phyllis loved the progressive atmosphere of Madison," her two sons recalled in her formal obituary. "She was a mentor to young women, encouraging them to be fearless in the pursuit of their life goals. She loved lunching with friends, sitting with a book on her back porch, and attending plays at American Players Theater in Spring Green, Wis., with her husband."

"Phyllis was an unpaid staff member and confidante," recalls her friend Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. "Phyllis enveloped us and our office and staff with warmth and support, and added so much to our lives intellectually and socially."

She was also a workhorse. Beginning around 2001, after she retired as a library administrator at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, she began volunteering one afternoon a week at Freethought Hall, FFRF's office in Madison. Soon she started coming in three afternoons a week.

Phyllis proofread Freethought Today and did endless "posting," updating FFRF membership cards before FFRF took that online. She also helped judge countless student essay competitions. She served on the board of the Freedom From Religion Foundation as secretary for many years. She also served on the board and was a longtime volunteer and donor to the Women's Medical Fund, a volunteer abortion fund administered by Anne Gaylor, FFRF's principal founder.

Phyllis would be known to FFRF members who regularly attended FFRF's national conventions from 2001 until about 2013. She helped register convention-goers and staffed sales tables. In the run-up to conventions, when FFRF had a much smaller staff, Phyllis often volunteered



Photo by Brent Nicastro

Phyllis Rose shows off one of FFRF's T-shirts for sale.

full days assembling and proofing registration materials.

In a "Meet a Volunteer" column featuring Phyllis in the March 2010 Freethought Today, she wrote that she volunteered at FFRF because "I can't think of a better organization that works to protect fundamental human and societal values in a nation in which far too many people don't care about separation of church and state. I believe that religion plays a devastating role in governmental affairs."

She praised the work atmosphere "with dedicated staff who work hard and harmoniously and have a lot of fun doing it. And we are fueled by a constant supply of 'sweets' and tea." Asked about "things I smite," she responded: "Hypocrisy and theocracy and idiocracy."

Politically engaged, Phyllis was an aficionado of journalist Amy Goodman, and stalwart supporter of The Progressive magazine, where she also volunteered. Thanks to her encouragement, FFRF began tabling at Bobfest, a regional fall event named for Wisconsin's "Fighting

Bob LaFollette," a founder of the Progressive Party (and nonbeliever).

Amit Pal, FFRF's communications director, had worked with Phyllis at The Progressive. "We were always amazed as to how seamlessly she managed to integrate her strong political opinions with her warm and charming personality," he said.

Annie Laurie noted that Phyllis was "an Audrey Hepburn type, who looked effortlessly chic, her silver bob perfectly coiffed, beaming her big, welcoming smile." Phyllis will be missed and remembered for her wit, intelligence, indefatigable spirit, and defense of underdogs everywhere. Former staff member Katie Daniel, one of the young women befriended by Phyllis, remembers her as a "one-of-a-kind awesome woman."

Her family encouraged contributions to the organizations she supported: FFRF, The Progressive and Planned Parenthood.

Robert Kimbrough fought 'the good fight'

Freethought Today learned belatedly that FFRF friend, Life Member and octogenarian Robert Kimbrough died on June 3, 2019, at a care facility in Madison, Wis. Robert was born on June 26, 1929.

A professor of Shakespeare at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he wrote the book, *Shakespeare and the Art of Humankindness* (1990). He had joined the Marine Corps to "prove myself a man by fighting for my country and for the United Nations," he told the Wisconsin State Journal in 2008. In Korea, he was hit three times and felled by a concussion grenade, but kept going back to his unit. "In the end, the experience soured him on war as a vehicle for change," noted reporter William Wineke. Robert received four Purple Heart awards and a Silver Star for combat valor, retiring from the reserves as a full colonel.

Robert told the Journal, "Our war was a phony thing, but people got killed and wounded. War is not the way to settle anything internationally. It's a crude way of getting your own way." He later became active



Photo by Brent Nicastro

Robert Kimbrough and his wife Phyllis Rose.

with Vets for Peace.

An earlier write-up by John Aehl in the Wisconsin State Journal (Sept. 1, 1996), had this to say: "No doubt

about it, Robert Kimbrough has been a bit of a troublemaker in his time. The visual impression of Kimbrough is of a placid, ingenuous, mild-man-

nered academic. . . . The reality is that Kimbrough has fought, and continues to fight, the good fight for what would generally be termed minority causes, things and issues that he, when pressed, probably would term thinking man's causes."

These causes included the Freedom From Religion Foundation and the Women's Medical Fund.

Robert acted and directed at the Madison Theater Guild, American Players Theater and his own Honest Puck Productions. He directed and narrated a play about the Rosenbergs.

"I was lucky to have him as my Shakespeare professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison," notes FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, "because he was a bit of a ham who brought the plays to life." After his beloved daughter Lisa Kimbrough died at 54 in 2011 from brain cancer in her home in Kathmandu, Nepal, Robert's health declined. He is survived by other children Bob and John Kimbrough, and Lisa's children Rajan and Asha. He married Phyllis Rose in 1977. (See accompanying obituary).

Hector Avalos 1958-2021

From preacher to atheist to professor

Cultural anthropologist, religious studies professor, author and FFRF Member Hector Avalos died on April 12 after a battle with cancer.

He was born in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, on Oct. 8, 1958. His early education began in an elementary school in Mexico and continued in Glendale, Ariz.

At the age of 7, he began preaching in Pentecostal churches in Texas. At age 9, he gave a keynote address before hundreds of people at the Territorial Convention of the Church of God in Glendale, Ariz., in 1968. And, as a teen, he became a Christian evangelist traveling in Mexico and Texas.

He also became interested in science as a result of the Apollo missions, read many college textbooks on science in junior high school, and became known as “the boy chemist,” operating a small, well-equipped laboratory in his home.

By his first year in college, he was agnostic, and then characterized himself as an atheist.

While a student at the University of Arizona, he contracted granulomatosis with polyangiitis, requiring him to drop out of his degree program in anthropology in 1978. He battled with this disease and/or complications from it until the end of his life. More than once, his med-



Photo by Chris Line

Hector Avalos was a guest on FFRF’s “Freethought Matters” on Oct. 16, 2019 with co-hosts Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker. You can watch it on FFRF’s YouTube channel.

ical doctors advised him to put his affairs in order, but scientific discoveries and new treatments allowed him to continue. Dr. Anthony Fauci developed a medical regimen that improved his life and going forward, he was joyous every time he saw Dr. Fauci.

He returned to the University of Arizona in 1980 and made up lost time. He completed his sophomore, junior and senior years in three semesters.

He stayed another year to pursue a master’s degree in anthropology (although he never did finish it).

He was awarded a Master of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School. In 1991, he received a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Philology from Harvard’s Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations.

After graduating from Harvard, he

moved to the University of North Carolina, where he had appointments in anthropology and religious studies.

Avalos joined the Religious Studies faculty at Iowa State University in 1993 and founded the U.S. Latino/a Studies Program. He was named Professor of the Year in 1996, and he won the Outstanding Professor Award in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in the same year. He was the first recipient (1996) of the Early Excellence in Research and Creative Activity Award, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Other awards included a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Iowa Atheists and Freethinkers in 2016, and the first Hispanic American Freethinkers Lifetime Achievement Award in Washington D.C. in 2018, and was inducted to the Iowa Latino Hall of Fame in 2019.

He was proud to be one of the few openly atheist biblical scholars in academia.

“Most biblical scholars in academia, after all, are no longer obedient servants of a denomination,” Avalos wrote. “Most see themselves primarily as historians, linguists, and students of an ancient literature. Just as one need not be a believer in Greek myths in order to study them, one need not believe in all, or in any, of the idea and claims of biblical authors in order to study them.”

Adios, amigo

By Dan Barker

I met Hector in Boston in 1990 when he was finishing his studies at Harvard. We went to lunch and immediately hit it off. We had both been evangelical preachers in our youth, and spoke the same kind of Mexican Spanish.

When I told him my story, we discovered that I had preached on the very hillside where he was born in Nogales, Mexico. I was a teenager at the time, and it is not impossible that Hector was one of the many Mexican children who came to hear us gringo missionaries sing and share the

“good news” of the gospel. Hector remembers singing some of the songs from the albums by Manuel Bonilla that I had arranged and produced in the 1970s.

But, mainly, we talked about the bible. I realized that Hector had become a first-class scholar. I asked him some questions about the Old Testament. The very first letter I received from Hector, in November that year, is mostly about the interpretation of the Hebrew word *ra* (“evil”) in Isaiah 45:7. He started his letter with this paragraph:

“Dear Dan, if I were a theist, I might say that meeting you was a product of divine providence. How-

ever, like-minded individuals usually seek each other, and that was the case with me. I had seen you before on various television programs, and I knew you would be a good person to contact. You were delightful company.”

For more than 30 years, Hector was a constant friend, a reliable and generous help in research. Not only did we write promotional blurbs for each other’s work, but he carefully reviewed many of my paragraphs dealing with biblical translation and interpretation. I often changed my writing at his suggestion. He saved me much embarrassment. If I ever had a question about the meaning of an



Hector Avalos

Old Testament passage, Hector was the “go-to guy.”

Hector was a guest on Freethought Radio more than once, where he talked about his books *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (June 2, 2007) and *The Bad Jesus* (May 18, 2015). He was also a guest on FFRF’s “Freethought Matters” TV show in 2019, not long before he experienced his final illness.

When I visited Iowa State University for a “First Amendment Week” event, Hector was the adviser and facilitator for my talk. I heard from some of the students that Hector’s classes on the bible were so popular that even devout Christians, knowing he was an atheist, were eager to his sign up for his lectures.

Both Hector and I eventually said, “adios a Dios.” Now, with deep sadness, I have to say “adios, amigo.”

Dan Barker, FFRF co-president, is a former evangelical preacher.



Brigit Clark-Smith

Longtime FFRF Member Clark-Smith dies at 90

FFRF is saddened to report the death of Brigit Clark-Smith, 90, a member of FFRF for decades.

Brigit took her own life on Sept. 2, 2021, informing friends and family well in advance of her plans. “I am leaving Earth in a dignified way,” she wrote FFRF last summer. “I am ready. Living in this way, in pain and breaking down, is not for me.”

“I have been an FFRF member for years. I have been an atheist since second grade. My parents were Christian and I had to go to Sunday school and

church every Sunday (Presbyterian). Thank you, FFRF, for being here,” she wrote.

In her 80s, Brigit had formed an Atheists Anonymous organization in her La Costa Glen retirement community in Carlsbad, Calif. She named the group after a woman in her retirement center told her, “Oh, we’re atheists, but we want to remain anonymous.”

“They couldn’t be free in the United States of America to say they are atheist, and I thought that’s just terrible,” Brigit told KPBS-TV, a local station in

San Diego, which did a segment about Brigit and her atheist activism on Dec. 5, 2012. You can watch the segment at: bit.ly/3aRThDH.

Brigit’s group started out in 2010 with 16 members and some meetings had attracted more than 90 people. However, reactions included being called “Anti-Christ,” “a Jew lover” and being told she’s “a sinner,” who will go to hell and will “burn forever.”

A virtual memorial was held via Zoom on Nov. 7, 2020.

IN MEMORIAM

Meg Bowman, 91: Her ‘sparkling light is gone’

Freethought Today is very saddened to report the death on Nov. 23, 2020, of longtime FFRF Member Meg Bowman. Meg, a charming, sparkling force of nature, is featured in FFRF’s anthology of women freethinkers, *Women Without Superstition: No Gods — No Masters*, edited by Annie Laurie Gaylor. Meg often signed her name, “Meg Bowoman.”

Friends remember the statuesque blonde for her “maverick streak,” her infectious laugh and booming delivery style, and seemingly endless energy to cheerfully call out wrongs and organize to right them. She specialized in writing and creating dramatic readings to bring to life forgotten women and history. Her books include *Courageous Women*, *Lilith: Adam’s First Wife and Other Dramatic Readings*, and *Readings for Women’s Programs*, many published under her own Hot Flash Press.

Born in Rugby, N.D., on July 28, 1929, to Hazel Whiting and Albert Gunnerud, she graduated from high school in Illinois, moved to Arizona, married Richard Turner and raised three boys: Richard Jeffrey (deceased), Larry (deceased) and Carter. She has four grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. She was particularly close to her granddaughter, Christine.

She earned a pilot’s license, then got a teaching certificate at Tempe Normal School (Arizona State University), and taught at Phoenix Union High School District as a “secret” card-carrying union member. Meg studied at University of Colorado-Boulder, where she earned a Master’s in psychology and a doctorate in sociology. She taught at San Jose State University for many years.



Meg Bowman, left, with Annie Laurie Gaylor at FFRF’s national convention in Seattle in 2009.

Photo by Greg Gilbert

In the late 1950s, she was secretary of the NAACP in Phoenix, and advocated for civil liberties her entire life. She led tours to the UN Decade for Women Conferences and was a fearless proponent for gender justice and global feminism. She chaired the Feminist Caucus of the American Humanist Association for many years, inviting Annie Laurie Gaylor, now FFRF co-president, to share in those duties. She was among the founders of Women & Religion, a Unitarian Universalist division, with the late Rosemary Matson. She was the editor of the book, *Telling Our Stories, Celebrating Ourselves* (1998), which includes the history of that task force.

Meg performed a reading at FFRF’s 1984 national convention, titled “Why We Burn,” which was later a chapter in *Dramatic Readings on Feminist Issues* (1988) and is excerpted in *Women Without Superstition*. “It’s time to exorcise the sexism out of religion!” she urged. Volunteer readers were given sexist adages from diverse religions to read, which were then set aflame.

Meg sent her friends and colleagues across the nation fascinating annual Winter Solstice letters full of astute recommendations for the best books and movies of the year, as well as jaunty updates on her life (“am still popping rat poison — warfarin blood thinner,” she quipped in

her 2015 letter). Sadly, but fittingly, the last thing she did was sign and prepare for mailing to friends her 2020 Winter Solstice letter. She lived long enough to see Joe Biden and Kamala Harris win the presidential election, a great satisfaction.

As a humanist counselor, she performed weddings and other rites of passage. When planning a memorial service for a friend, Meg realized there was practically nothing in print for feminists, nonbelievers “and others whose beliefs do not fit into such neatly structured categories as ‘Christian.’” *Memorial Services for Women* was the result. Included in it is Meg’s own poem, which perfectly captures her:

Atoms in the Air

Her smile was brighter than morning sunlight
Her laughter healed better than any medicine
Her memory charms us still.

Her sparkling light dimmed and is gone
Yet we cannot grieve more than a moment
For she is all around us
With her smile
Her laughter
Her memory.

“To know Meg was to love her, if I may paraphrase Robert Burns,” says her friend Annie Laurie. “Meg enriched our world and lives, and while ceaselessly advocating for equality made it fun.”

Among the groups listed in her obituary to donate to in her memory is the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

A tribute to atheist Carol Popet

Mark Benussi, a Lifetime Member of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, wrote this in memory of his wife Carol Popet, who died on April 5, 2016. Mark, who sent a \$1,000 gift in Carol’s memory, explains that he and Carol had not known about FFRF at the time of her death, but she was a committed atheist who would have joined. He became aware of FFRF after seeing Ron Reagan’s commercial on behalf of FFRF on MSNBC’s “Rachel Maddow Show.” He says, “every time I see that ad, I chuckle.”

By Mark Benussi

We met in the 1990s. I was in a collapsing marriage of 26 years and she had never been married. We struck up a friendship first, and later it bloomed. She was looking for plants and stuff for her garden. I had two nurseries, one in El Cajon and one in Escobido. (I have been in the landscape and nursery industry for over 40 years.) It amazed me to see her making a garden.

We got together and she was the love of my life. We married in 2006. I had always thought of myself as being an agnostic, while she was an atheist. After her death, I re-examined my beliefs (or lack of any) and was able to determine that I am really an atheist.

We would visit various nurseries and would buy as we saw fit. Our garden has been in five national tours and a number of women’s clubs. The last tour was the “holy grail” of garden tours, “The Grand



Mark Benussi and Carol Popet

Conservancy.” It publishes a book every year of the gardens and states to which they belong. It occasioned a great honor to be included.

Below is a description from the book of our garden in Fallbrook:

“We made our downward sloping one-acre wild garden look much larger than it really is by the clever planting of more than 200 trees and bamboos beneath which a huge variety of shrubs, vines and ground covers grow. We enjoy walking along nearly 1,000 feet of meandering vines, which are dotted with eye-catching metal animal sculptures and blooming perennials year-round. Along the way we have added garden structures, dry creeks, wine bottle walkways, a redwood-and-glass greenhouse, and a rustic waterlily pond with a waterfall, together with many scattered seating areas where we relax in a secluded and serene setting and watch our three Airedale terriers play.”

Charles Preston was longtime WSJ cartoonist

FFRF Gung-Ho Member Charles Preston, a longtime cartoonist for the Wall Street Journal, died at his home at age 98. Charles generously bequeathed \$100,000 to FFRF.

For 70 years, Preston was a cartoonist for WSJ, beginning with his first cartoon on June 6, 1950. The cartoon was called “Pepper . . . and Salt.”

To fill the Journal’s daily slots, he sorted through hundreds of submissions a month from dozens of cartoonists. He was looking for those, he said, that help us “laugh with others in order to laugh at ourselves.” The humor in the cartoons he chose was always gentle and good-natured, never sarcastic or snarky.

Preston once observed that “I’ve looked at more cartoons than anyone in the history of mankind.”

According to the obituary in the Wall Street Journal, Preston also contributed articles on skiing and sailing, and edited crossword puzzles and quote acrostics, which appeared in hundreds of newspapers, including USA Today, where he was the puzzle editor for 15 years.

“His taste for outdoor adventure extended to sailing across the Atlantic and the annual spring ski down Mount Washington’s steep Tuckerman Ravine, which he accomplished into his 70s,” the WSJ obituary states.

Charles and his wife Linda Preston were the editors of the crossword puzzles published in the Coast Star and an estimated 100 other newspapers.



Charles Preston

“Linda does the work,” he said. “I get the glory. I receive comments only when a solver becomes frustrated.”

Charles is a former race-car driver and member of the original staff of Sports Illustrated, where he was the cartoon editor. An assignment from The National Observer to edit crossword puzzles resulted in a new career, but he didn’t give up cartoons.

“Pepper . . . and Salt” cartoons have been collected in 14 books, including *Portfolio of Business Cartoons*, a 50th anniversary compilation published by the Wall Street Journal. Preston’s personal cartoon collection found a home at Harvard Business School’s Baker Library.

Questions to guide a wellness lifestyle

By Don Ardell

Philosophers, poets and many others, whether erudite and celebrated or ordinary in the sense of blending in with the general population, long have pondered life’s persistent questions. This is how humans guide our way through life. Doing so, of course, is something of a luxury, a privilege primarily for those fortunate enough to have secured basic needs, such as ample food, shelter, education, safety and a good measure of leisure. Even under favorable circumstances, however, sorting out the mysteries and possibilities and reaching satisfactory and effective decisions about existential questions is among the hardest of challenges humans struggle to master.

In our time, an awareness of and commitment to REAL wellness lifestyles (Reason, Exuberance, Athleticism and Liberty) is likely to bring such matters to the forefront of priorities. In the course of thinking and acting upon ways to boost mental and physical well-being, it’s only natural to contemplate destiny-shaping questions.

- Here are a few examples:
- What qualities do I most value, and find attractive in others?
 - What exercise and diet patterns should I adopt, master and integrate into daily practice for lifetime fitness?
 - Who and what do I love most, and how can I experience more of it?
 - Why am I here?
 - What shall I choose for my passions and purposes?

So much of what we believe was shaped by our cultures during childhood and the early years, mostly through observations, lessons, rules and other well-intended indoctrinations. But, as adults living in a society different in important ways from our early years, it’s possible, even likely, that a few unconscious biases, prejudices, customs and/or traditions don’t quite align as well as earlier in life.

Exploring REAL wellness dimensions can be an efficient and well-organized way to put long held views through a valuable review process.

A good start, one that affects reason, exuberance and liberty — and that probably looms as a most fertile ground for reassessments — is religion.

Religion

Religions provide answers to existential questions, usually long before those born into religions are old enough to have existential questions, let alone answers for such. Later in life, when doubts arise and questions are posed, common



Photo image by Shutterstock

replies too often take the form of non-answers in extremis, such as, “God works in mysterious ways” or “We must believe, have faith and pray for guidance.”

Anyone who takes the reason dimension of REAL wellness seriously will find this kind of explanation unsatisfactory, basically because it’s no explanation whatsoever. In the deep past and especially modern times, many, if not most, religious officials, as well as cult leaders, charlatans and con artists of manifold stripes, seek to protect the faith, the dogma and the rituals that control followers. Too often, what is represented as the way, the truth and the light, as revealed in ancient holy books, is but blither, blather and babble.

Of course, there are exceptions: Martin Luther King, William Sloan Coffin, Barry W. Lynn and, in the latter half of the 19th century, Henry Ward Beecher and Caroline Bartlett Crane. The last, less known today than the others, was the 38-year-old pastor of the People’s Church of Kalamazoo when Robert Ingersoll visited and declared that, if such a church existed in my community, he would have become a member if they would have him.

An ultimate question

James Haught, emeritus editor at the Charleston Gazette and a senior editor of Free Inquiry magazine, recently wrote a piece titled, “The Ultimate Question for Us.” Haught’s essay posits that there is one question that everyone should ask, one that overrides all others in consequence.

Do you believe that your answer could dictate your entire approach to life if an-

swered in the affirmative, as Haught suggests? Here’s the question:

“Is there a supernatural god who may burn you forever in fire after you die? If the answer is yes, it’s the most crucial fact of human life. But if no such god exists, religions have committed millennia of fraud and deception.”

Haught is not the first to make this observation. British historian Paul Johnson and the multi-talented American entertainer Steve Allen also weighed in with the same point of view.

“The existence or nonexistence of God is the most important question we humans are ever asked to answer. If God does exist, and if in consequence we are called to another life when this one ends, a momentous set of consequences follows, which should affect every day, every moment almost, of our earthly existence. Our life then becomes a mere preparation for eternity and must be conducted throughout with our future in view.” — Paul Johnson, *A History Of Christianity*

“I do not understand those who take little or no interest in the subject of religion. If religion embodies a truth, it is certainly the most important truth of human existence. If it is largely error, then it is one of monumentally tragic proportions — and should be vigorously opposed.” — Steve Allen, *Dumbith*

If you believe in a supernatural, all-powerful deity who knows everything, who, if you fail to please him sufficiently before you die, will hold you over a flaming pit of fire like a marshmallow and toast you forever and ever, with no bloody end to

the torture, then it seems clear what your purpose should be. Your purpose must be to praise him, convince yourself you love him, and prostrate yourself to him, even if he’s invisible and seems rather vindictive, brutal, implacable and unrelenting if you incur his wrath by not measuring up. After all, he loves you, you’re told, so it would be wise to love him back every available waking moment of your entire life, the better to avoid a gruesome situation in the afterlife. Your best bet will be to devote your existence to praise thoughts and bowing behaviors.

An alternate approach

To guide reassessments, you might want to develop, or just fine-tune, a few REAL wellness skills, such as skepticism, doubt and critical thinking as part of using reason, while safeguarding personal liberties. Be alert to the hazards of alternative facts, superstitions and conspiracy theories. Do an inventory of childhood indoctrinations and cull the crapola.

Recognize this indisputable fact: Nobody on this good Earth has any knowledge whatsoever about any form of life after death. There may be a hell, a heaven or something else, but nobody has a scintilla of evidence of that, or an inkling of what a promised land might look like.

I’d like to think there is such a place. It would be a place where all my needs would be met, but, even more important, where all my fantasies would come to pass. But, in sober moments, I know that after a few hours there my jejune and shifting earthly fantasies would soon be boring, then annoying and, after a few days, let alone weeks, years, centuries and millennia of engaging in these fantasies, I’d be begging and pleading to be toasted like a marshmallow over a pit of fire.

As Haught observed: “Beliefs are baffling. Nobody knows what causes some people to want to believe supernatural claims — or causes heathens . . . to doubt them. Our personalities are formed by subtle factors still not fully understood. But this much is clear: If the answer to the God question — the deepest human question — is no, then religions have been lying since before written history began.”

In case there’s any doubt what I think, be advised that I’m with Ingersoll: “Happiness is the only good. The time to be happy is now, the place to be happy is here and the way to be happy is to make others so.”

Lifetime Member FFRF Member Don Ardell is a triathlete, author and wellness advocate from Madison, Wis. This article and other blog posts can be found at donardell.com.



Don Ardell



LETTERBOX

Comforting to know FFRF is always on the case

I have enclosed a contribution to become an After-Life member.

Thank you for all you do legally and legislatively in the noble effort to protect our secular government from religious intrusion.

I enjoy your various print and online productions. I always find something informative and entertaining while reading or listening.

When I find myself getting incensed about something in the news, I just have to remember that FFRF is on it. Thank goodness!

I've learned so much from FFRF over the years and am glad to know I'm in good company with other atheists.

California

FFRF members should watch 'One of Us'

You should see the Netflix documentary "One of Us." It tells the story of three people in a New York Hasidic community who tried and were successful in leaving this oppressive lifestyle.

This cult is disgustingly patriarchal, and I so admire the woman who was able to break free, at great cost to herself. I also learned how the Hasidim came to be — a good history lesson.

Wisconsin

God still hasn't made itself known to me

As a 12-year-old in 1956, I tried and tried to feel God the way people and kids in church and Sunday school seemed to, but I couldn't feel whatever it was they felt. So, one time, when no one was home, I screamed in my bedroom, "God, if you're real, let me feel you." It didn't work and I never could feel God, though I did feel "spiritual" during the times I listened to the church pipe organ or the Mormon Tabernacle Choir on Sunday mornings.

California

Author never made the intellectual leap in book

I found a book, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, in a thrift shop. What was striking about it was the obvious desperation about bringing the church (in a general sense) back to the prominence it once enjoyed, rather than acknowledging the end of it as a viable institution, and moving on to more enlightened forms of community.

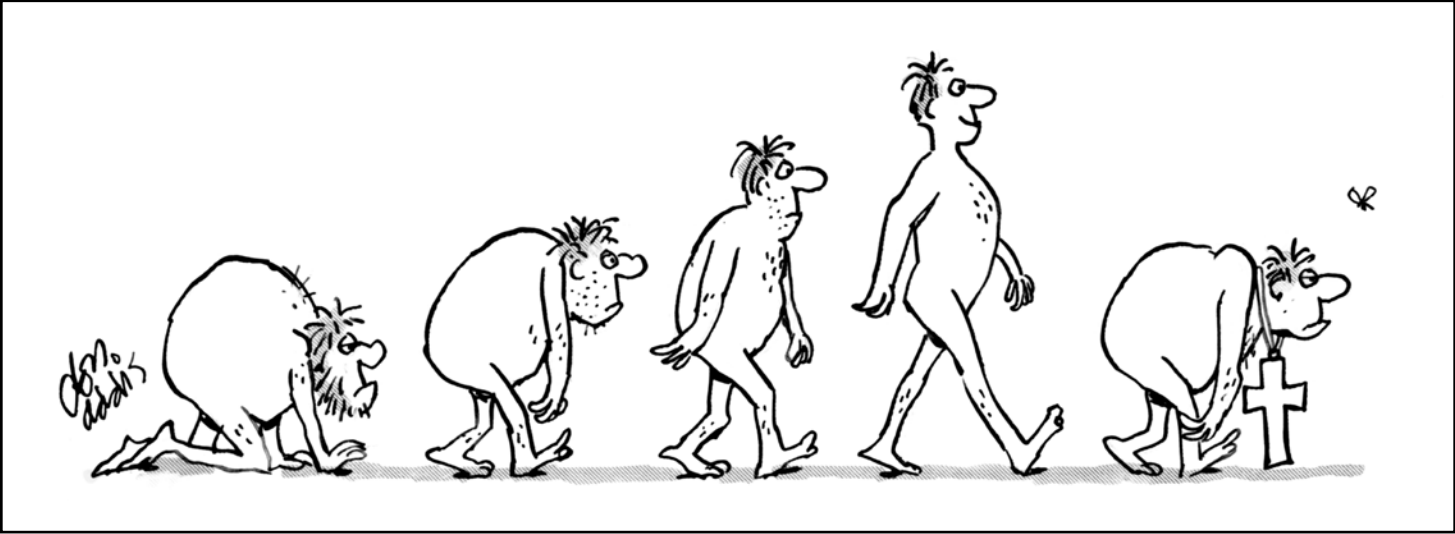
As the author, a former pastor, states: Fully 90 percent of U.S. churches today are moribund — at various stages of decay and eventual demise.

He sees the problem, but doesn't make the leap beyond.

Also, I have FFRF's music CD, "Adrift on a Star," and absolutely love it! My favorite song is "Merry Frickin' Christmas"! I think Christmas is the tackiest day of the year, both spiritually and commercially. It's such a relief to me that someone else "gets it"!

I also loved the article in the April issue by the atheists who bought the church to renovate and live in.

New Mexico



Don Addis' book, *Cartoons for the Irreverent*, is full of his iconic cartoons about state-church separation, religion and politics. Buy it now (\$15 postpaid) at ffrf.org/shop. All profits benefit FFRF.

Deuteronomy lays bare fifth commandment

I have been a member of FFRF for 10 years. Thanks for your good work.

In Andrew Seidel's article on *The Founding Myth* in the April issue, when writing about the fifth commandment ("Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long."), he didn't reference Deuteronomy, where the basis for obedience to parents is laid.

Deuteronomy 21:18-21 says you'd better obey your parents, otherwise they will have you killed. Specifically, they will drag you to a public place and ask that the men in the neighborhood stone you to death.

Here's the whole gruesome thing, which ends by striking fear not only in individuals, but the whole society, so that they will obey any authority figure:

[Deut 21:18-21 KJV] "If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and [that], when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them: Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place; And they shall say unto the elders of his city, This our son [is] stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; [he is] a glutton, and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die: so shalt thou put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear."

Indiana

Einstein's god was provable, unlike 'God'

In The New York Times column "Can the meritocracy find God?" on April 10, columnist Ross Douthat noted: "You can see people who might have been new atheists 15 years ago taking a somewhat more sympathetic look at the older religions, out of fear of the vacuum their decline has left."

However, Douthat failed to consider

that some found a provable god, which simply replaced Douthat's unprovable god.

Albert Einstein claimed to have a god, which was the god of Spinoza, which is synonymous with nature. So, I converted from atheism to the Spinoza/Einstein god.

Finding God depends on what one looks for in a god; therefore, Mr. Douthat, if you'd have studied Spinoza, you might be a secular humanist pantheist (as I am) and we'd both have a provable god.

Meritocracy should have nothing to do with such a quest.

Oklahoma

Douglass/Ingersoll article was interesting

I was especially interested in the article (in the March issue) about the meeting of the two great liberators, Frederick Douglass and Robert Ingersoll; the one arguing for the freedom from slavery and the body, the other for freedom of slavery of the mind. I also laughed out loud at Ingersoll's quip that I had never heard before: "With soap, baptism is a good thing."

It was also remarkable that a hotel in Peoria, Ill., bravely took in Douglass in 1870. I read a book about baseball player Ty Cobb, a flagrant racist even by the standard of his time, who once delivered a foul-mouthed racist rant at a Black maid at a hotel. The maid told the manager (who was white) and he called Cobb's room and told him to pack his things. He was no longer welcome there. You find courage in all sorts of unexpected places.

Finally, when I read student essays now, I notice a different attitude about religion. Most of us older folks left religion because it didn't make any sense, or we never found any credible evidence for it. But these younger people seem to feel personal grievance against religion. They see it as a real and immediate threat to themselves and society. Us old-

er folks arrived at that by long evolution of thought. But freethinking youth have cut straight to the bottom line.

Maryland

No need for euphemisms when people die

Like other letter writers, I, too, am annoyed every time I hear the phrase "passed away." To where did they pass? Man created God and his "afterlife" primarily due to a fear of and attempt to deny death. Actually, what the person did was die. Why do we have to resort to euphemisms, such as "committed to memory"? Why can't we just say "died"? It is factual, descriptive and succinct. Or are we still trying to deny death?

Also, thank you for putting Christian nationalism on full display in the March issue, something the mainstream media cannot or will not do.

I'm still hopeful for the Boston convention. I've had my shots and am ready to go!

California

Atheism has helped me live a rewarding life

I am in the last stage of living in this temporal world. It has been a great adventure. Dying itself has been an adventure and has been made so much easier with the help of hospice.

At 90, I have concluded that the better part of my life has been an atheistic and rewarding one, where no

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one could shake my belief in science and experimentation. Atheists are humanists because they believe that the human experience and rational thinking provides the only source of both knowledge and a moral code to live by and they can live ethical and fulfilling lives without religious beliefs.

Washington

Packing Supreme Court is an extreme measure

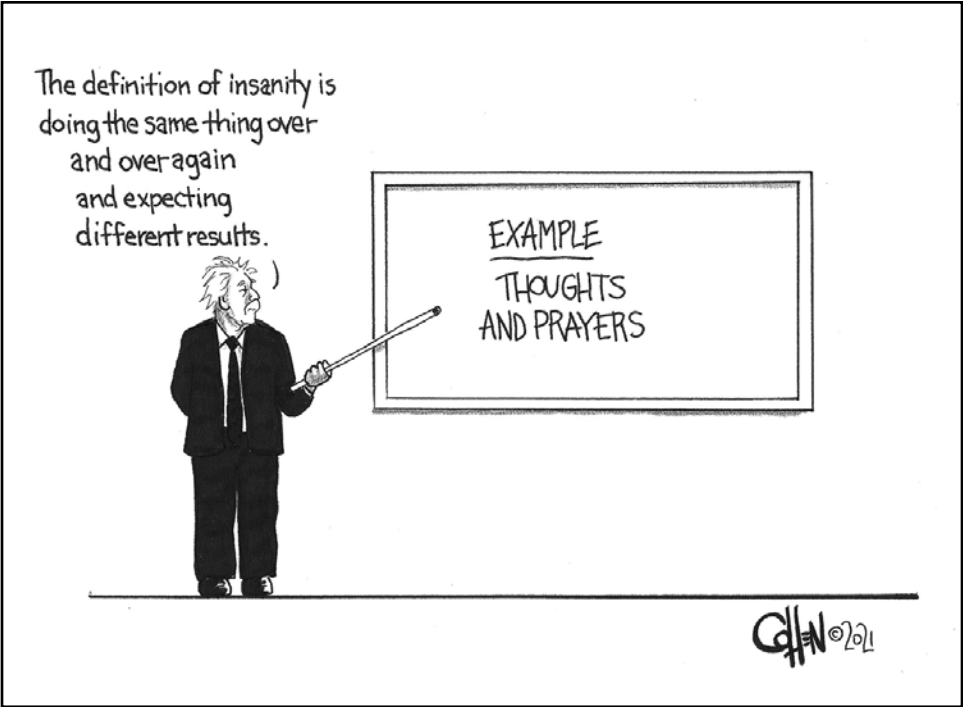
As a member of FFRF, I was deeply concerned to receive the call to action concerning packing the Supreme Court. While I fully agree that dangerous games of politics were played concerning the appointment of the last three justices, packing the court is an extreme measure that threatens the very fabric of our constitutional system. I am, however, in favor of expanding the overworked and overwhelmed lower courts. This is rational and can be divorced from what appears to be petty partisan games (from both sides of the political aisle). I have higher expectations of FFRF than appeals to pack the court that will not be politically feasible, and will serve to further divide a fractured society. Your work on church/state violations has been remarkable and commendable. Please don't taint your accomplishments and your reputation by supporting such an extreme measure, especially when 68 percent of Americans oppose it. Thanks for all you do, and I hope this finds you all in good health!

Washington

We need to push hope, support without theology

In the March issue, Phil Zuckerman reported Gallup polls which show that religion and spirituality are declining in the United States. In 1945, 75 percent were members of a church, synagogue or mosque compared to today's 47 percent. The number of people "confidently believing in God's existence without a doubt" in 1990 was 63 percent vs. today's 53 percent. FFRF members could build on this momentum, not by trying to convince believers that there is no God, but instead by showing believers how to get the two things they want from religion without resorting or appealing to spiritual entities: First, inspiration and hope; and second, emotional support for specific problems.

Joel Osteen, pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, gives entertaining sermons full of inspirational stories to motivate his audience to endure life's injustices, failures and disappointments. Osteen provides hope using the powerful spiritual concepts of God, the soul,



heaven, and miracles often referring to the biblical heroes Jesus, David and Moses. We nontheists have to be inspirational without these grandiose beliefs — relating stories of human struggle and courage against the odds.

Second, the function of religion today is the same as it always has been, and that is to support and maintain the emotional well-being of the believer. There are several specific ways religion helps believers cope with the hardships of a difficult life:

- 1) As a defense mechanism against despair from loss of a child ("She is in a better place with God," or "You will be reunited with her in heaven someday."
- 2) Belief in miracle generates hope.
- 3) "God loves me" overcomes loneliness.
- 4) Prayer relieves stress.
- 5) Judgment day remedies inequities.
- 6) Heaven conquers fear of death.
- 7) Confession alleviates guilt.

These beliefs in a false reality serve a useful human purpose. Atheists can address these universal emotional needs without oversampled spiritual and religious concepts: Only a caring mode can conquer faith's unreasonable emotion.

Now it's time for us to get busy.

Florida

Thanks to Alvarez and link to UNFPA study

I want to thank you for the wonderful article by Barbara Alvarez: "Religion as impediment to gender equality" [on FFRF's blog site: [patheos.com/blogs/freethoughtnow](#)]. I also appreciated the link in that story to the United Nations Population Fund's (UNFPA) latest "State of World Population 2021." It took quite a while for UNFPA to talk frankly about bodily autonomy for women. I'm co-founder of 34 Million Friends of UNFPA. This grassroots movement raised \$8 million for UNFPA since 2002, partly due

to three presidential administrations (Reagan and both Bushes) withholding funding from the UNFPA.

California

National Day of Reason is not well-reasoned

My initial response to the National Day of Reason proposal was negative, and the reasons why the project is ill-advised continue to pile up. Here is the short list.

- Reason is a faculty that should be exercised in all our affairs. The Founders deemed it essential to the conduct of government. To set aside one day a year to celebrate reason is in effect to trivialize it.
- Conversely, to suggest that reason and prayer make equally serious claims on us might be taken as an admission that prayer is important to the nation.
- It might also be taken as a tacit admission that secularists have abandoned the cause of eliminating the National Day of Prayer.
- The very idea of offsetting a day of prayer with a day of reason is nonsensical. There is no need to neutralize the alleged power of prayer in this way because prayer cannot be shown to have any power. To oppose a day of prayer with a day of reason is to give prayer a boost by putting it back in the headlines.
- Furthermore, the designation of a day of reason will surely add fuel to the eternal flame of conspiracy theory and provoke a backlash from Christian nationalists who will link it to the latest secularist plot. It will be perceived, and promoted on the right, as Atheist Anti-Prayer Day. The resolution will serve as a recruiting tool for the Christian right.

California

No one can know what happens after death

FFRF's effort has enabled many of us to reach beyond a limited perspective. The great error in organized religion is to disallow one to consider what may or may not happen at death. I reject a singular figure outlined in a book of fiction that embraced a very small group of people while excoriating all others.

What may or may not exist beyond the grave is unknown and outside human experience. Organized religion fills that space by assuring us that there will be justice, love and peace in that place, but they don't know.

We cannot say there is nothing at death no more than they who claim they do know. Both sides are claiming

Write to us

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

something that cannot be known.

Your organization allows the opportunity to express spirituality outside the rigid halls of orthodoxy. You credit the agnostic in your literature, which allows room for conjecture. The atheist is not reconciled with established religious orthodoxy without closing the door to considerations of what may or may not exist after death. I think that is worthy of clarification.

I love what you do at FFRF.

California

Barker, others have opened my eyes to truth

I have just finished listening to Dan Barker's *Godless* and *God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction* on Audible and I am overwhelmed with how wonderful and enlightening the books were. I, as a former devout Jehovah's Witness, cannot believe how embarrassingly ignorant I was of how horrible and evil the character of Jehovah is. Thanks to you and many others (such as Seth Andrews, Christopher Hitchens, Aron Ra, Black Nonbelievers, etc.), I have completely opened my eyes and mind. I personally know, as Thomas Paine once said, "The mind once enlightened can never again be darkened."

Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

Georgia

'Dare to Doubt' would be a great movie

I recently watched your Sunday morning program "Freethought Matters." I thoroughly enjoyed guest Alice Greczyn's story, "Dare to Doubt." It struck me that it would make a wonderful movie. It would be great for the freethought movement. Maybe FFRF could help produce the project! I dare to dream.

California

We will go to Georgia to hand out water to voters

In regard to the new Jim Crow laws passed by the Georgia Legislature, my wife and I have "elected" to take some action. Of all the heinous regulations and penalties imposed on people simply wanting to exercise their right to vote, making it illegal to pass out water or food to a person standing in line to vote is the most horrific to us.

We have decided that for the next general election we will fly from our residence in Nevada to Georgia and graciously pass out water to folks standing in line for terminally long periods of time to exercise their right as citizens to vote. If the state of Georgia wants to throw my 79-year-old atheist butt in jail and that of my 69-year-old wife, they can have at it. I'm confident they will be portrayed by the news media throughout the world as the evil vote suppressors they are. Anybody care to join us?

Nevada

Crossword answers														
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Cryptogram answer

The more I learn about the universe, the less convinced I am that there's any sort of benevolent force that has anything to do with it, at all.

— Neil deGrasse Tyson

Boston, here we come!

Steinem, Atwood to headline FFRF convention

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is excited to announce that its 2021 national convention in Boston is on! Based on the science and expected vaccination rates, FFRF is delighted to move forward with its “post-pandemic” convention bash.

Join us on the weekend of Nov. 19-21 at the Boston Park Plaza Hotel, with special guest **Gloria Steinem**, among many others.

FFRF will hold a longer than usual full two-day convention beginning on the morning of Friday, Nov. 19, running through Saturday night, Nov. 20. The Sunday, Nov. 21 membership and State Representatives meetings conclude by noon. FFRF is still working out the details (dining, lineup, schedule) and will carry full information including hotel specifics and the registration form, in the upcoming “Private Line” newsletter and in the August issue of Freethought Today. Or check out



Gloria SteinemMargaret Atwood

ffrf.org/convention-2021 to keep up to date.

Steinem will speak at the conclusion of the Saturday afternoon session, with an optional reception. Friday evening will feature “An Evening With **Margaret Atwood**,” also concluding with an optional reception. Atwood will be interviewed by journalist and author **Katherine Stewart**, who will talk separately about her timely book, *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous*

Rise of Religious Nationalism.

Other speakers include:

- **Linda Greenhouse**, author and veteran Supreme Court observer, who covered the high court for the New York Times for more than 30 years.
- Black Skeptics Los Angeles founder, novelist and activist **Sikivu Hutchinson**, who will be receiving FFRF’s Freethought Heroine Award.
- **Megan Phelps-Roper**, who wrote the book, *Unfollow: A Memoir of Loving and Leaving the Westboro Baptist Church* about leaving her family’s Westboro Baptist Church in 2012. She will receive the Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award.
- **Shusant Singh**, an Indian actor and presenter known for his work predominantly in Hindi cinema, who has appeared in almost 50 movies since 1998, will receive

the Avijit Roy Courage Award for his role in protesting Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalism.

- **David Tamayo** is cofounder and president of Hispanic American Freethinkers.
- **Phil Zuckerman**, associate dean and professor of sociology at Pitzer College, who is author of many books on secularism and is the founding chair of the nation’s first Secular Studies Program at Pitzer College.

Other speakers will be confirmed shortly and will include Freethinkers of the Year and student honorees.

The 2020 convention set for San Antonio had to be canceled, but FFRF will hold its annual gathering there in 2022 and in Madison, Wis., in 2023. Author John Irving, who was slated to speak last year, is now scheduled to speak at the 2022 convention in San Antonio.

Former churches with better missions



Dan and Donna Barski of New York sent us these photos of the former Ascension Church, built in the 1800s in Tonawanda, N.Y. It is now The Old Chapel Antique and Artisan Market.

“It was the first time either of us entered a church in decades, and we found it to be a very enjoyable experience indeed, knowing that it has now been put to much better use as an antique shop and cafe!”

If you see or know of any former churches that now serve a secular purpose, please send us a photo (preferably with you in it!) and a brief description of the property. Send it to editor@ffrf.org.



Chuck Collazzi of Arizona sent us this photo of this former church that is now the Prescott Center for the Arts Theater. It was initially the Sacred Heart Church, built beginning in 1891. In 1970, it was added to the National Registry of Historic Buildings. The stained glass interior circles above the audience area are part of the original church architecture, as are the metal walls and ceiling.

“Prescott is the heart of ‘God’s country,’ and it’s encouraging to see so many temples of ignorance bite the dust,” Chuck writes.



Kate Retzlaff of Milwaukee sent us this photo of the former First Church of Christ, Scientist (shown at left), which was built in 1907. In 1989, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places. The building is now Renaissance Place, an elegant venue on Milwaukee’s east side for weddings, parties, etc. When church attendance fell off, the church moved to the smaller building next door.



Dennis Middlebrooks of New York sent us this photo of the former South Congregational Church in Brooklyn, N.Y. “The church opened in 1857, when the neighborhood was overwhelmingly Protestant,” Dennis writes. “In later years, the area become mostly Irish, and then for most of the 20th century it was an Italian-American enclave. It is now an upscale gentrified community called Carroll Gardens. The church was converted to a residential condominium building back in the 1990s.”

The complex, consisting of a church, original chapel, ladies parlour and rectory, was landmarked by the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1983 and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.