

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



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In memory of Stephen Uhl



Photo by Chris Line

It is with heavy heart that FFRF announces the death of Stephen Uhl, 91. Stephen and Diane Uhl were major benefactors of FFRF and significant contributors to FFRF's Building Fund for its expansion in 2014-15. FFRF's TV and radio shows are recorded and produced in the Stephen Uhl Friendly Atheist Studio in Freethought Hall in Madison, Wis. To read Stephen Uhl's obituary and a letter from Diane to FFRF members, turn to Page 3.

FFRF lawsuit ends voter religious test

**Citizens can now opt out of
'so help me God' on Alabama's form**

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has attained a huge constitutional victory for secular voters in Alabama.

FFRF sued the Alabama secretary of state last October on behalf of four Alabama citizens who encountered and objected to a religious test to register to vote.

Now that the state of Alabama has amended all its voter registration forms to allow citizens to opt out of the religious oath, both online and in printed forms, FFRF has voluntarily dismissed its federal lawsuit challenging the uniquely Alabamian mandatory religious voter registration oath.

"The Alabama secretary of state excludes Alabama citizens from being able to vote if they are unable to swear a religious oath," stated the suit. "The secretary of state's official policy is to hinder the registration of voters who are unable to swear 'so help me God.' This policy violates the rights of the plaintiffs and others under the First and 14th Amendments to the United States Constitution."

As part of a settlement, Alabama Secretary of State John H. Merrill has amended all of the voter registration forms to allow voters to avoid swearing a religious oath. The new "mail in" form provides a check box that says, "Optional: Because of a sincerely held belief, I decline to include the final four words of the oath above."

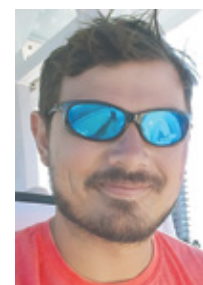
Shortly after the suit was filed, the secretary of state began implementing other changes. In November, the office adopted a new administrative rule that allows voters to strike out "so help me God" and provided guidance to county registrars (who add voters to the



Heather Coleman
and Chris Nelson



Randall Cragun



Robert Corker

See Alabama on page 8

Reps sponsor Day of Reason

Several members of Congress, led by U.S. Jamie Raskin, co-chair of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, are championing a resolution proclaiming May 7 as an annual National Day of Reason. Other sponsors include Reps. Jared Huffman, Mark Pocan, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Jerry McNerney and Pramila Jayapal, all CFC members.



Rep. Jayapal



Rep. Holmes
Norton

zens to "turn to God in prayer and meditation at churches, in groups, and as individuals." FFRF won a historic federal court ruling in 2010 declaring the law unconstitutional, which was later thrown out by an appeals court based on standing, not the merits.

Raskin's resolution reads: "Whereas the application of reason has been the essential pre-condition for humanity's extraordinary scientific, medical, technological, and social progress since the modern Enlightenment;

See Reason on page 19

\$300K secular studies endowment made by FFRF

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is delighted to announce the FFRF Secular Studies Endowment at Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif., the trailblazing home of the country's first Secular Studies program.

The \$300,000 gift, made possible thanks to a bequest by FFRF member and ardent atheist Kenneth L. Proulx, will help the Secular Studies program fulfill its mission to increase understanding of — and disseminate knowledge about — secularism, atheism, agnosticism, humanism, naturalism and freethought in societies and cultures, past and present.

Pitzer College, which is part of the Claremont Colleges, was the first college in the United States to inaugurate a Secular Studies program in 2011. Annually, more than 200 students take a secular studies course. Initiated by Phil Zuckerman, professor of sociology and secular studies, the program has six affiliated faculty members representing the fields of history, philosophy,



Kenneth Proulx



Phil Zuckerman

religion, science and sociology. Course offerings include "Sociology of Secularity," "God, Darwin and Design in America," "Fundamentalism and Rationalism" and "Anxiety in the Age of Reason."

Pitzer's Secular Studies program has an outsized reach, thanks to Zuckerman, founder of the program and an associate dean at Pitzer. Zuckerman has written a number of pop-

ular and academic books and papers on secularity, including *Society Without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment* (2008), *Atheism and Secularity* (2010), *Living the Secular Life* (2014), *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies* (2016), *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism* (with John Shook) (2017) and *What It Means to Be Moral* (2019). He's a frequent contributor to Salon, the Los Angeles Times, Free Inquiry and Freethought Today.

"This amazing grant aligns perfectly

See Endowment on page 8

IN MEMORIAM

Marjorie Appleman was playwright, FFRF donor

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is very saddened to announce the death of Marjorie Appleman. Marjie was believed to be in her early 90s.

Marjorie was a playwright and After-Life Member of FFRF, who was married to Philip Appleman, a renowned poet, ardent freethinker and Darwin scholar.



Marjorie and Philip Appleman speak at FFRF’s convention in 2002.

FFRF had been informed belatedly of Phil’s death, which occurred at age 94 on April 11, 2020, and was told that Marjorie had survived him.

We have since learned that Marjorie died just a few days before Phil, as is so often the case with longtime couples. They had been together for nearly 67 years. Phil had been Marjorie’s primary caretaker for many years after she was afflicted by cancer and other illnesses.

They were the quintessential devoted couple and their love story was immortalized in many of Phil’s poems. He read some of these on “Bill Moyers” in 2015, when he was 88. Google “Bill Moyers Philip Appleman” to watch that interview and bonus poetry readings. They were a beautiful, glamorous, witty couple who retired permanently to New York City, after giving up wintering in Florida, when climate change was battering their home.

Poets & Writers Directory lists that Marjorie wrote a book of poetry, *Against Time* (Birnam Wood, 1994) and her fiction was published in such journals as *Confrontation*, *Kentucky Poetry Review*, *Long Island Quarterly*, *Poetry Pilot*, *Poetry Review*, *Sojourner* and *Wind*. She was fluent in French.

She often accompanied Phil on his poetry readings, including to three national FFRF conventions. Marjorie read the female parts of Phil’s epic, humorous poem “Noah.” They gamely recorded this for FFRF in a New York studio, where it is included on FFRF’s DVD, “Beware of Dogma” and can be found on YouTube.

FFRF’s memorial tribute to Phil from the November 2020 Freethought Today may be viewed at bit.ly/32aooWd.



Photo by Brent Nicastro
Philip and Marjorie Appleman at the 2002 FFRF Convention.

FFRF was recently informed that the Applemans left a bequest of more than \$150,000 to FFRF.

“We treasure their memory and their words. Their photograph adorns the walls of the editorial wing of FFRF’s office, Freethought Hall, in Madison,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “And now we are indebted even more to them for their posthumous support of FFRF and our work. We honor their legacy.”

Former Board Member Ted Utchen dies at 91

Theodore M. (Ted) Utchen, a former director-at-large of FFRF’s Executive Board, died on March 4 at the age of 91.

He was born in St. Paul, Minn., on June 25, 1929, to Joseph and Lillian Utchen. Ted grew up in Hibbing, Minn., Petersburg, Va., and Oshkosh, Wis., where he graduated from high school in 1946, and Topeka, Kan. In 1950, he graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Kansas with a degree in political science. Ted served as 1st Lieutenant in the U.S. Army during the Korean Conflict and was discharged from service in 1955. He received his J.D. and his LLM in constitutional law from the University of Michigan School of Law where he was elected to the Order of the Coif Honor Society.

Ted engaged in trial practice in Wichita, Kan., before becoming a trust officer

with the National Bank of Tulsa. In 1964, he and his wife Esther moved to Chicago when Ted joined The Northern Trust Company as a trust and probate officer. Ted and his wife made their home in Wheaton, Ill., where Ted lived until his death. Ted and his wife had two children, Frank and Kathy.

In 1968, Ted left the Northern Trust Company to join the law department of Miami Corporation, where he worked until retiring from his position as vice president and general counsel in 1990. After retiring from Miami Corporation, Ted served as an arbitrator for the Cook County and DuPage County Circuit Courts. He was an active member a several Chicago Bar Association committees.

In 1991, because of his interest in constitutional law, Ted became a member of



Ted Utchen

ffrf

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Stephen Uhl was major FFRF benefactor



Stephen and Diane Uhl attended FFRF’s 2014 convention in Los Angeles.

Photo by Brent Nicastro

Stephen F. Uhl, 91, a Beyond After-Life Member and major donor to FFRF, died on Feb. 10 at his home in Oro Valley, Ariz.

“Steve and his wife Diane have been such boosters of freethought, humanism and FFRF,” said Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. “We feel so privileged to have known Steve and worked with him on many fronts. Steve was an important part of FFRF.”

He was born in rural southern Indiana in 1930, the sixth of nine children. At 14, he entered the boarding seminary at Saint Meinrad [Ind.] Archabbey, a Swiss order of Benedictine monks, where he stayed for six years. His major seminary studies (also for six years) were at Marmion Abbey in Aurora, Ill. He was ordained in 1956 as a priest, after which he was sent to Catholic University in Washington, D.C., where Steve earned an S.T.L. degree (Sacrae Theologiae Licentia).

“My serious doubts [about religion] started one morning in the monastery chapel in 1964 when I was 34 and was meditating on the intellectual proofs of God’s existence,” Steve wrote in a 2011 “Meet a Member” profile in Freethought Today. “I had a ‘lightning bolt’ insight in which I clearly saw how St. Thomas Aquinas’ supposedly strongest proof (his causality proof) fell far short, because it was based on an unwarranted assumption.”

After he left the priesthood in 1967, he earned a Ph.D. in psychology from Loyola University in Chicago. He married Diane on the Winter Solstice in 1968.

Steve taught high school religion and mathematics and counseled at the Benedictine Marmion Military Academy for 10 years.

Once freed from the priesthood, he taught public high school math and became a certified school psychologist. He opened a private practice as a psychologist in 1976, from which he eventually retired.

In 1999, Steve and Diane joined FFRF. Over the years, they became major benefactors and were among the most generous donors to FFRF’s building expansion in 2014, giving \$250,000 to the Building Fund. Since then, they have been honored in several places in FFRF’s Freethought Hall: The Stephen Uhl Friendly Atheist Studio, the Diane Uhl Steinway Grand Piano and the Diane and Stephen Uhl Legal Wing.

“Steve paid for one of our major ‘Out of the Closet’ personalized billboard campaigns in Phoenix and Tucson,” Gaylor says. “Not only is the legal wing of our office named for the Uhls, but they have given other major support for FFRF’s Legal Fund. It’s thanks to the Uhls that FFRF started our ‘Educate Congress’ campaign, culminating in the hiring of our D.C.-based director of governmental affairs.”

Steve told FFRF of his transition from believer to atheist.

“The superstitions learned in early childhood came into conflict with my adult learnings,” he wrote. “The common sense I had learned from my father (a farmer) drove me to follow my reasoning conscience and break the bonds of traditional superstition.”

In 2009, he wrote *Out of God’s Closet* (a few copies remain for purchase at ffrf.org/shop).

“This book started out to be an inti-

mate letter to my 31 nieces and nephews,” Steve writes in the preface of the book. “I had just recently learned that I had prostate cancer. My love would not let me die before trying to help my large family avoid some of the more serious errors of my earlier ways. So, I began to write to that large family to share some of the important lessons I had learned over seven decades.

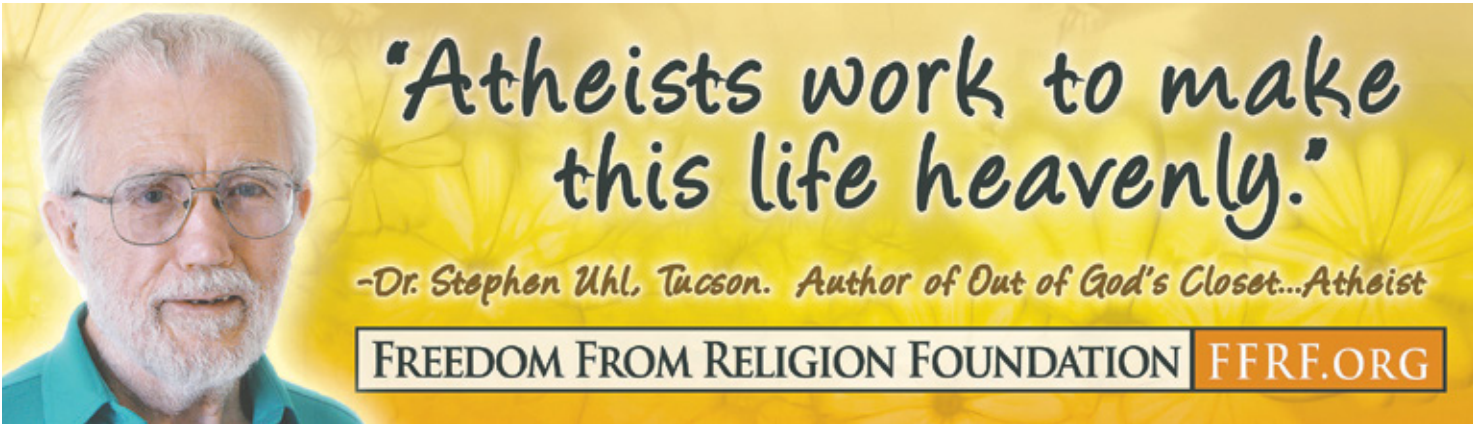
“It was not any sense of guilt that drove me to undo the fallacies and superstitions that I had taught so effectively as a naïve young priest. It was more a sense of responsibility for mopping up after my earlier mistakes. Then, as the book developed, it became a joyful sense of sharing that drove me to develop my message for all the planetary neighbors.”

“His influence will live on, but he will be very missed,” FFRF Co-President Dan Barker says. “We send our condolences to Diane, his life partner in all his endeavors.”



Photo by Ingrid Laas

The Uhls posed with FFRF legal staff members in the Diane Uhl Legal Wing of Freethought Hall prior to the 2015 convention in Madison, Wis.



A letter to FFRF members from Diane Uhl

Feb. 10, 2021
To my friends at FFRF,
Steve, my best friend in all the world, died here in our home in Tucson.

Steve was granted peace from the physical pain which had taken over his body. After 90 years, he had finally come to the time which we all must, and as Steve would say, when, “It is better not to be than to be.”

We thought he was going to have hip surgery, but while waiting for that surgery date, the prostate cancer went rampant and metastasized into the bones and other vital organs, causing excruciating pain.

Steve went to ER on Feb. 3 and on Feb. 5 he came home, with our decision being that we would do home hospice care, since our emphasis is on quality of life, not quantity. As per his (and our) personal philosophy, he gave up eating and drinking, with the goal being to bring about death in as peaceful and pain-free a manner as possible.

We worked to keep the pain under control with medication and tried to make him as comfortable as possible.

I was ever so fortunate to have the support of family and friends, near and far, to help me through this journey.

I had just sat at his bedside to read him Chapter One of the book that he authored, *Imagine No Superstition*, and two friends had stopped by. Fortunately, I was able to be there as Steve took his very last breath.

So, as I write this, I am looking at Steve’s final sunset, which I will toast with a glass of wine from our sunlit patio.

I am feeling very, very grateful for all the love, the adventures, the accomplishments and the fun that we have shared. Much of that was shared with many of you.

I shall never, ever regret having him here in our home, as opposed to a hospice facility, for these last hours of his life. Those hours were some of our most loving and most difficult hours of our 50-year marriage.

I want to thank each of you for your sharing and contributing to our lives.

I shall go forward with many of the projects that we had been working on, especially in regard to education. The very morning of the day that Steve went to the ER, he had spent several hours processing requests of teachers here in Arizona for financial support in their upcoming teaching endeavors.

So, Steve would close with a big smile and his wish to all of you to “Live long, die short.”

Freethought Today Cryptogram

IB ZPB ZRR ZDFBELDL ZAYGD NYLD YX DFB

VYWL DFZD FGNZCEDH FZL BOBP ABREBOBW

EC. LYNB YX GL QGLD VY YCB VYW XGPDFBP

— PEUFZPW WZIMECL

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

Freethought Today Crossword

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Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

- Across
1. Dust jacket promo

6. Matterhorn, e.g.

9. Ballet’s pas

13. Hindu queen

14. Princess’ cause of insomnia

15. Sandbar

16. Support person

17. Long, long time

18. Transport cargo

19. *Black ____ Crime

21. *On the Origin of Species author

23. Phone card acronym

24. One of the Earnhardts

25. Knot-tying vow

28. Member of National Socialist German Workers’ Party

30. “____ it ____,” or go full force

35. Makes a great puppet

37. Arnold Lobel’s Frog and ____

39. Headphones static, e.g.

40. Prefix for against

41. Gold bar

43. Lose coat

44. Beside, archaic

46. “Cogito ____ sum”

47. Editor’s mark

48. Sutures and strings material

50. Bald eagle’s nest

52. Hog haven

53. Bulls or Bears

55. Genteel affair

57. *Oscar winner and freethinker Jodie
60. *Former President’s son and unabashed atheist

63. Louisiana swamp

64. Barn sound

66. Capital of Bulgaria

68. “That is,” to an Ancient Roman

69. Progressive or Victorian one

70. Something that’s in

71. *Number of times word ‘god’ appears in presidential oath

72. Cubby hole

73. Swerved off course
- Down
1. Women’s undergarment

2. *Not of clergy

3. Press backward arrow

4. Olden-day movies

5. *This freethinker’s “God Bless America” was composed as a show tune

6. Copycat

7. *Novelist Tolstoy who was excommunicated by Russian Orthodox Church

8. Kind of bear, social media favorite

9. *George Bernard ____: “There’s nothing in religion but fiction”

10. *Singer-songwriter and freethinker Amos

11. Bring home the bacon

12. A layer in plywood

15. Smoke ____

20. Stradivari competitor

22. TV classic “____ in the Family”

24. Venn visualization technique

25. *Asimov of science fiction

26. Ritchie Valens’ hit

27. Octomom’s children, e.g.

29. Z in DMZ

31. Thomases, to friends

32. Civil unrest, pl.

33. Florida Key, e.g.

34. *His Playing Dumb album deals with Catholic Church sex abuse scandal

36. *Freethinking horror genre author

38. Venetian magistrate

42. Layered cake

45. Interjection for disapproval

49. Tiger’s prop

51. Adjective for bread

54. Packing heat

56. Ancient marketplace

57. Grow dim

58. Deed hearing

59. Comme ci, comme ça

60. Multicolored horse

61. “____ Good Men”

62. “____ to Five”

63. Line of work

65. Miner’s bounty

67. Hyperactivity disorder

FFRF still hopeful for convention in Boston

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is still waiting to make a determination about the safety and viability of hosting the 2021 convention in Boston, but FFRF is cautiously optimistic as more people become vaccinated from Covid-19. The convention is scheduled for the weekend of Nov. 19-21 at the Boston Park Hotel.

FFRF hopes to make a decision by mid or late summer to know whether a national conference will be practical and safe. FFRF encourages you to hold that weekend open, and will let you know as soon as we know whether we can hold a post-pandemic “bash” this year!

The roster includes the incredible lineup of authors Margaret Atwood, Gloria Steinem, John Irving, Katherine Stewart and Phil Zuckerman, His-

panic American Freethinkers’ founder David Tamayo, New York Times court columnist Linda Greenhouse and Black Skeptics Los Angeles founder Sikivu Hutchinson. Unfortunately, entertainer John Davidson has backed out due to another obligation that has come up.

Look for updates and announcements in future issues of Freethought Today and on our website, ffrf.org/convo-2021.

We look forward to holding a post-pandemic celebratory bash with these powerhouse speakers and seeing you there, when it’s safe.

Please keep in mind future convention sites and dates: Hyatt Regency San Antonio Riverwalk, Oct. 28-30, 2022, and Monona Terrace Convention Center/Hilton Madison Monona Terrace, Oct. 13-15, 2023.



Gloria Steinem



John Irving



Margaret Atwood



Sikivu Hutchinson

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Freethought Matters 2021 Season

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

Watch our show every Sunday!

Photo by Chris Line

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YouTube

Freethought Matters TV talk show airs in:

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

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

The final spring episode of “Freethought Matters” airs Sunday, May 30. After a summer hiatus, shows resume in September.

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: C => N.

Supreme Court’s extraordinary religious streak

This article was first published on April 5 in The New York Times and is reprinted with permission.

By Adam Liptak

“For many today, religious liberty is not a cherished freedom,” Justice Samuel A. Alito Jr. told the Federalist Society, the conservative legal group, in November. “It pains me to say this, but, in certain quarters, religious liberty is fast becoming a disfavored right.”



Adam Liptak

Those quarters do not include the Supreme Court, which has become far more likely to rule in favor of religious rights in recent years, according to a new study that considered 70 years of data.

The study, to be published in The Supreme Court Review, documented a 35-percentage-point increase in the rate of rulings in favor of religion in orally argued cases, culminating in an 81 percent success rate in the court led by Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr.

“Plainly, the Roberts court has ruled in favor of religious organizations, including mainstream Christian organizations, more frequently than its predecessors,” wrote the study’s authors, Lee Epstein of Washington University in St. Louis and Eric A. Posner of the University of Chicago. “With the replacement of Ruth Bader Ginsburg with Amy Coney Barrett, this trend will not end soon and may accelerate.”

(The court led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, from 1953 to 1969, supported religion just 46 percent of the time. That grew to 51 percent under Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, from 1969 to 1986; then to 58 percent under Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist, from 1986 to 2005; and finally jumped to just over 81 percent under Roberts, who joined the court in 2005.)

The kinds of cases the court is hearing have changed, too. In the Warren court, all of the rulings in favor of religion benefited minority or dissenting practitioners. In the Roberts court, most of the religious claims were brought by mainstream Christians.



Photo by Shutterstock

The Supreme Court has become far more likely to rule in favor of religion in recent years, according to a new study that considered 70 years of data.

The five most pro-religion justices all sit on the current court, the study found.

“The justices who are largely responsible for this shift are Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch, John Roberts and Brett Kavanaugh,” the study’s authors wrote. “While there are some differences among these justices, and Kavanaugh has been involved in only a handful cases, they are clearly the most pro-religion justices on the Supreme Court going back at least until World War II.” All are Republican appointees.

In the last term alone, the court sided with Christian religious groups in three argued cases. The court ruled that state programs supporting private schools must include religious ones, that the Trump administration could allow employers with religious objections to deny contraception coverage to female workers and that employment discrimination laws do not apply to many teachers at religious schools.

And the court will soon decide whether Philadelphia may bar a Catholic agency that refused to work with same-sex couples from screening potential foster parents.

After Barrett joined the court, it

changed positions on the one question on which religious groups had been losing: whether governors could restrict attendance in houses of worship to address the coronavirus pandemic.

There has been a similar shift in the entire federal judiciary in cases on the constitutional protection of the free exercise of religion. Protecting that right, as Alito pointed out in his speech, used to be a bipartisan commitment. In 1990, when the Supreme Court cut back on protections for free exercise, with Justice Antonin Scalia

writing the majority opinion, Congress responded with the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

“The law had almost universal support,” Alito said. “In the House, the vote was unanimous. In the Senate, it was merely 97 to 3, and the bill was enthusiastically signed by President Clinton.”

Earlier studies, covering 1996 to 2005 and 2006 to 2015, found that judges’ partisan affiliations, as reflected by political parties of the presidents who appointed them, were not significantly tied to their votes in free exercise cases.

Zalman Rothschild, a fellow at the Stanford Constitutional Law Center, updated that data in a second study, to be

published in The Cornell Law Review. He found that things had changed.

“The politicization of religious freedom has infiltrated every level of the federal judiciary,” Rothschild wrote.

In the five years through the end of 2020, he wrote, federal judges’ partisan affiliations had become powerfully correlated to their votes. “And when the pandemic struck, resulting in widespread lockdowns of religious houses of worship,” he wrote, “the unprecedented number of constitutional free exercise cases brought in such a condensed span of time forced that partisanship into sharp relief.”

Even putting aside cases concerning the pandemic, a big partisan gap has opened in free exercise cases. Judges appointed by Democrats sided with religion 10 percent of the time in such cases in the last five years, compared with 49 percent for ones appointed by Republicans and 72 percent for ones named by President Trump.

The numbers were even starker, Rothschild wrote, in cases concerning restrictions meant to combat Covid-19. Through the end of last year, not a single judge appointed by Democrats sided with religion in those cases, while 66 percent of judges appointed by Republicans and 82 percent of judges appointed by Trump did.

What changed in just the last five years? It is probably no coincidence that the court established a constitutional right to same-sex marriage in 2015.

More generally, claims of religious freedom, brought mostly by Christian groups, have increasingly been used to try to limit progressive measures like the protection of transgender rights and access to contraception. On top of that, a culture war erupted about how best to address the coronavirus.

In 2018, Justice Elena Kagan accused the court’s conservative majority of “weaponizing the First Amendment,” of using its protection of free expression “to intervene in economic and regulatory policy.”

Epstein said something similar was afoot in the court’s religion decisions. “Just as the majority has weaponized free speech in service of business and conservative interests,” she said, “it’s using the religion clauses to privilege mostly mainstream religious organizations.”

Adam Liptak covers the Supreme Court and writes *Sidebar*, a column on legal developments.

“With the replacement of Ruth Bader Ginsburg with Amy Coney Barrett, this trend will not end soon and may accelerate.”
— Lee Epstein and Eric A. Posner

FFRF: SCOTUS church ruling signals trouble ahead

The Supreme Court’s series of rulings in favor of science-denying religious litigants signals serious trouble ahead for the principle of separation between state and church, warns the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Near midnight on April 2, the U.S. Supreme Court issued yet another emergency decision striking down Covid-19

restrictions as applied to religious gatherings by the state of California, in this case affecting those in private homes. As the majority itself noted, “This is the fifth time the court has summarily rejected the 9th Circuit’s analysis of California’s Covid restrictions on religious exercise.” That’s five times too many.

Here’s what the case was about. Rev. Jeremy Wong and Karen Busch, who are holding religious services in their Santa Clara County homes, sued the state of California for restricting any gatherings in private homes to three households. A federal judge ruled against them, noting that the law applies equally to all private gatherings, not singling out those for religious purposes. When the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals refused to block the ruling, the plaintiffs asked the Supreme Court to intervene — and the damage was done.

The unsigned Supreme Court majority in its ruling renewed its theme of alleged ill-treatment of religion, charging: “California treats some comparable secular

activities more favorably than at-home religious exercise, permitting hair salons, retail stores, personal care services, movie theaters, private suites at sporting events and concerts and indoor restaurants.”

This, of course, is comparing apples to oranges — or “apples and watermelons,” as dissenting Justice Elena Kagan put it. The majority — Justices Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, Brett Kavanaugh, Neil Gorsuch and Amy Coney Barrett — is continuing to indulge in what veteran court observer Linda Greenhouse has labeled “grievance politics.” Joining Kagan’s dissenting opinion were Justices Stephen G. Breyer and Sonia Sotomayer. Although he did not sign Kagan’s opinion, once again Chief Justice John Roberts dissented on this issue.

“California . . . has adopted a blanket restriction on at-home gatherings of all kinds, religious and secular alike,” Kagan noted, ably pointed out the logical fallacy of the majority opinion: “The First Amendment requires that a state treat re-

ligious conduct as well as the state treats comparable secular conduct.”

FFRF has to ask: Why the drama? Where’s the emergency requiring a late-night ruling at the start of the weekend? The restrictions were due to be modified the week of April 12 to allow as many as 25 persons. Once again, SCOTUS has gone out of its way to undercut secular Covid-19 mitigation policy, in order to privilege religious litigants.

A Reuters news analysis about the increasing number of shadow docket rulings warns: “Decisions can come in the middle of the night, with no public discussion and no guidance to lower-court judges on how to analyze similar cases.”

A legal study released in April troublingly reveals that “the Roberts court has ruled in favor of religious organizations more frequently than its predecessors” — in fact 81 percent of the time.

The latest ruling is yet another sign of big trouble to come for the Establishment Clause.

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

By Dan Barker

\$5 Off!

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

—Published by FFRF, 392 pages / HB

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FFRF NEWS

FFRF cheers decline of church membership

FFRF hails a report from Gallup that shows formal church membership among Americans has dropped below 50 percent for the first time in Gallup’s 80-year history of asking the question.

“Americans are waking up,” says FFRF Co-President Dan Barker, a former evangelical preacher and author of several books on “losing faith in faith” and leaving religion behind.

Gallup noted that this is likely not an anomaly caused by the pandemic and quarantine, but part of a long-term trend. “U.S. church membership was 73 percent when Gallup first measured it in 1937 and remained near 70 percent for the next six decades, before beginning a steady decline around the turn of the 21st century.”

The “decline in church membership is primarily a function of the increasing number of Americans who express no religious preference,” explains Gallup. In 1999, 70 percent of Americans belonged to a church, so the drop to 47 percent in 2020 is a massive loss of one-third.

Perhaps the most important finding was that church membership declined in every single demographic Gallup measured: age, gender, marital status,



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Church membership declined in every single demographic group that Gallup measured.

education level, geographical region and race. For instance, the number of non-Hispanic white adults who belong to a church dropped 16 points (from 68 to 52) in the last two decades, while non-Hispanic Black adults dropped 19 points (from 78-59) over that time.

FFRF notes two factors that make the findings

even more exciting. First, this is self-reported church membership. Demographers and sociologists have long known that survey respondents overreport their church attendance. Actual church attendance is about one-quarter to one-half what is self-reported.

The Gallup datapoint is slightly different, seeking to determine formal membership with specific houses of worship, but is still likely overreported for similar reasons.

Second, America appears to be returning to its irreligious roots. At the time of our nation’s founding, most Americans — the vast majority — were unchurched. This fact cuts against the popular and misguided Christian nationalist narrative that our Christian nation was founded for and by Christians. According to U.S. historians and religion scholars, Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore, “The highest estimates for the late eighteenth century make only about 10-15 percent of the population church members.”

FFRF has long sought to educate the public about freethought (using reason to judge religious claims) and to provide a community and soft landing for people leaving religion. “It’s working,” notes FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.



FFRF celebrates demise of Pompeo’s Commission on Unalienable Rights

FFRF is toasting the demise of a Christian nationalist commission imposed on the nation by Mike Pompeo, President Trump’s secretary of state.

FFRF was among the first groups to criticize and oppose Pompeo’s pet project, the so-called Commission on Unalienable Rights. FFRF was sure that the true goal of the commission was to turn the concept of religious freedom into a “God-given” super-right that trumps other rights — a fear that was confirmed by the commission’s egregious report. We had early information on the commission and immediately launched an investigation, using the Freedom of Information Act to seek records. In a joint letter, FFRF charged that Pompeo’s attempt to create a hierarchy of rights was an attack on human rights as they’ve been understood for decades and urged him “to immediately disband the body.”

We’re delighted that our advice was followed by President Biden’s secretary of state, Anthony Blinken. He has announced, in a statement accompanying

the annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, that the commission has been disbanded. Blinken also reiterated a vision of human rights that FFRF defended in the face of Pompeo’s attacks:

One of the core principles of human rights is that they are universal. All people are entitled to these rights, no matter where they’re born, what they believe, whom they love, or any other characteristic. Human rights are also co-equal; there is no hierarchy that makes some rights more important than others. Past unbalanced statements that suggest such a hierarchy, including those offered by a recently disbanded State Department advisory committee, do not represent a guiding document for this administration.

FFRF is keeping track of all the various executive orders, commissions and other Trump-created bodies that were open attacks on our secular government or an effort to privilege conservative Christians over other Americans. The national state/church watchdog will keep pushing until all of them join Pompeo’s pet project on the ash heap of history.

FFRF condemns evangelical role in voter suppression

The Religious Right and its political allies are busy depriving citizens perceived to be Democratic — especially Black Americans — of their voting rights.

Tony Perkins, a leading evangelical and president of the Family Research Council, brags: “We’ve got 106 election-related bills that are in 28 states now. So here’s good news: There is action taking place to go back and correct what was uncovered in this last election.” This is perpetuating the Big Lie that Donald Trump won the presidential election.

Michael P. Farris, president of the Christian nationalist Alliance Defending Freedom, responded to Perkins’ remarks with a hearty “Amen.”



Tony Perkins

These groups mean business — and have the resources to inflict real damage. ADF, a frequent nemesis of FFRF, brought in \$51.5 million in 2015-16.

The New York Times reports that another big player on the Christian nationalist scene, the Heritage Foundation, has pledged to spend millions of dollars to restrict voter access, including laws requiring identification for voters and limiting absentee ballots.

The hugely wealthy Susan B. Anthony List and the American Principles Project are other ultraright groups expanding their activities to include voter suppression.

“The Susan B. Anthony List and the American Principles Project recently announced a joint ‘election transparency’ campaign and set a fund-raising goal of \$5 million,” reports the Times. “They hired a top conservative activist who is a former Trump administration official to lead it. They have organized conference calls for activists with other social conservative groups across the country, and say they have found

participants to be enthusiastic about getting involved even if election law is entirely new to them.”

FFRF has called for passage of the For the People Act, H.R. 1, already noting that its enemies include many enemies of secularism. The Times’ exposé on these machinations by deep-pocketed theocratic groups makes crystal clear why H.R. 1 is indeed a secular issue.

Adding to the threats to absentee voting (also a secular issue), is the grim announcement by the United States postmaster of a proposed huge roll-back on consumer mail services. Louis DeJoy, one of the “foxes in chicken coops” appointed by President Trump still remaining in D.C., brings no joy with his 10-year plan to slow down and cripple mail delivery and, thereby, also cripple the right to vote by mail.

It should be possible for the Biden administration to end DeJoy’s reign of terror at the U.S. Postal Service. But the threats to voter rights are even more daunting — and with many more players on the attack.



Louis DeJoy

Just Pretend: A Book For Young Freethinkers

By Dan Barker
Illustrated by Kati Treu

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FFRF applauds Supreme Court expansion bill

FFRF welcomes a significant congressional proposal to add four seats to the U.S. Supreme Court, a necessary court correction.

Rep. Mondaire Jones, D-N.Y., on April 15 introduced a bill, the Judiciary Act of 2021, to increase the number of justices. Joining Jones as sponsors are Rep. Jerry Nadler, chair of the House Judiciary Committee, and Rep. Hank Johnson, a member of the Congressional Freethought Caucus. Jones, an attorney who worked at the Department of Justice under President Obama and who was seated this year, ran in part on a platform of court reform: “We have to restore balance and preserve our democracy,” he said.

“We applaud Rep. Jones for his vision and initiative in introducing a proposal to rebalance and expand a court that has been politicized, homogenized and captured by special interests,” says Dan Barker, co-president of FFRF.

The case for high court expansion includes the fact that the number of justices on the high court was historically tied to the number of circuit courts of appeals — and there are now 13 such circuits. “Jones’ proposal simply brings the court seats back to where they should be,” Barker adds.

Court expansion and reform are in

order, FFRF notes, for many compelling reasons. The nation’s highest court should better represent the U.S. population, not only by sex and race, but by diversity of legal background and other life experiences. The current nine-member court is dominated by seven white justices, six Roman Catholics and six men.

Additionally, FFRF points out the otherwise irreversible harm inflicted by the unprecedented manipulation of the filling of recent high court vacancies. That includes the blocking of Obama’s nomination of Merrick Garland to replace Justin Antonin Scalia in 2016 and the confirmation of archconservative Amy Coney Barrett in the midst of a presidential election only days after the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Civil and individual liberties have been endangered because of these maneuverings. Rich and powerful interests helped confirm justices opposed to equal rights under the law, state/church separation, women’s rights, access to health care — and more.

“Our courts have already been packed and all the amazing policy solutions in the world are meaningless if they cannot survive a challenge in a rigged federal judiciary.”

— Andrew L. Seidel, FFRF director of strategic response

“Justices Neil Gorsuch and Barrett essentially occupy stolen seats,” observes Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. “These two appointments to the high court will tilt its balance to extremist positions opposed by most Americans for generations.”

That’s why Rep. Jones’ bill provides a much-needed rectification.

“If anything, Congress could go further, because this court has a legitimacy problem,” says FFRF Director of Strategic Response Andrew Seidel, an attorney. “Our courts have already been packed and all the amazing policy solutions in the world are meaningless if they cannot survive a challenge in a rigged federal judiciary.”

FFRF’s report shows how the courts have indeed already been “packed” by extremist jurists handpicked by the Federalist Society and documents the poisonous influence of extremism and Christian nationalism resulting from those ap-

pointments, threatening reproductive rights, Establishment Clause law and voting and civil rights. The report warns: “The Trump administration had the rare opportunity to fill three Supreme Court seats in one term, and Trump’s choices were all religious extremists pushed by Christian nationalist lobbying outfits because of their reactionary views. Their pre-Supreme Court records on the Establishment Clause were alarming, and now that they are sitting on the court, we are already seeing the disastrous results.”

The number of Supreme Court justices is set by Congress, not the Constitution, and has changed in size seven times, from a low of five to a high of 10.

President Trump, who lost the 2016 popular vote by almost 3 million votes, appointed one-third of the Supreme Court and about a third of the lower federal judiciary. FFRF looks forward to supporting bills expanding the lower courts, beset by huge delays, swamped judges and ballooning federal criminal law.

“Rep. Jones’ bill is a great step toward better representation and equal justice on the Supreme Court,” says FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert. “But FFRF is working to make sure it’s just the first step.”

FFRF’s NY Times ad examines religious roots of insurrection

The Freedom From Religion Foundation ran a full-page ad in the national news section of the April 6 New York Times, calling the storming of the Capitol a “faith-based initiative.”

The ad features a large photograph of Jan. 6 insurgents in prayer before a wooden cross at the U.S. Capitol. FFRF warns that the assault is what “One Nation, Under God” looks like and urges a

return to “E Pluribus Unum” and “One Nation, Indivisible.”

The ad documents the Christian nationalist nature of the mob attack. “This political identity movement, embraced by a number of public officials who insist ‘America is a Christian nation,’ poses a continuing threat to civil liberties and our secular republic,” warns FFRF.

The ad concludes, “Freedom depends on freethinkers. Join FFRF in our essential work so that reason and our secular Constitution will prevail.”

“I truly believe that ‘E Pluribus Unum’ is the answer to Jan. 6,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. “‘From many, [come] one’ encapsulates the ideal that diverse citizens and states can embrace our differences while coming together as ‘We the People’: one people and one nation under a secular Constitution.”

The ad language plays on the Pledge of Allegiance, which originally ended, “one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all,” until a McCarthy-era Congress tampered with it by inserting the words “under God.”

A similar full-page ad appeared in the Wisconsin State Journal.

The educational ad was made possible thanks to the generosity of FFRF members donating to FFRF’s Advertising Fund.



Iowa gov raised private school funds

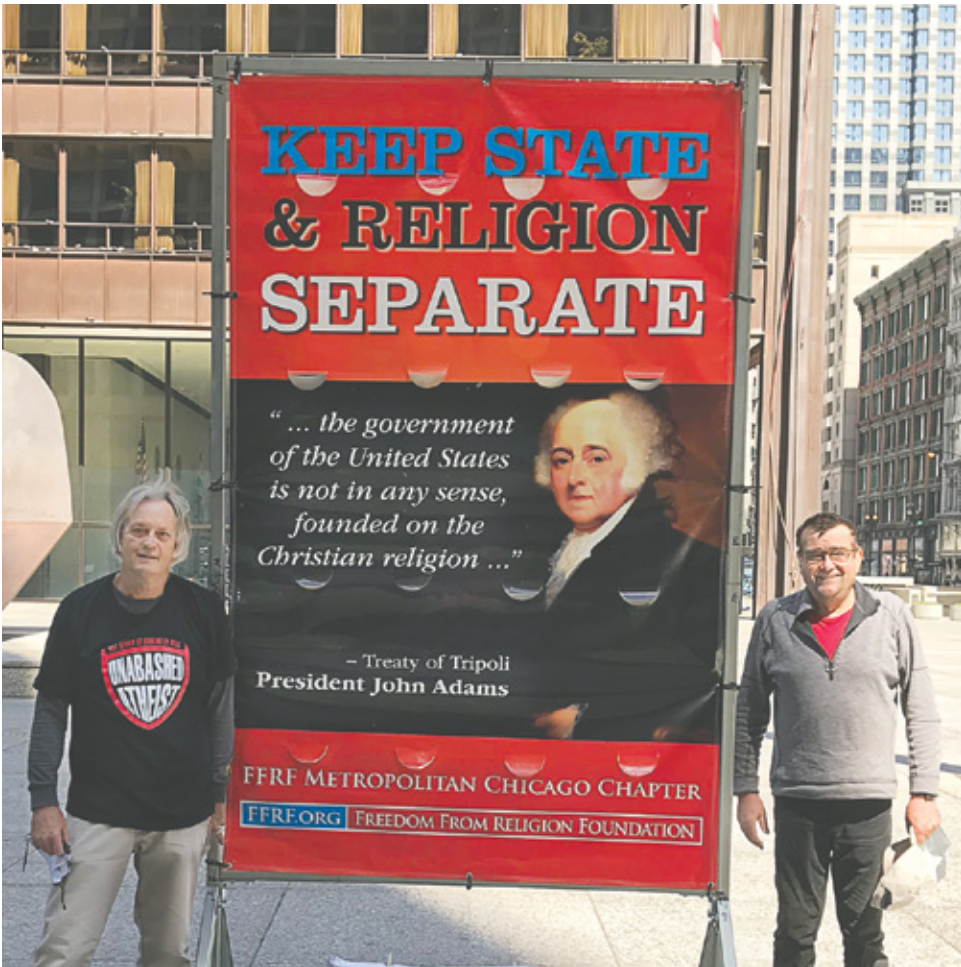
The Iowa governor has transgressed the Constitution by recently raising funds for a Christian school, charges FFRF.

On April 10, Gov. Kim Reynolds helped a faith-based school raise money by allowing it to auction off a dinner with her at the governor’s mansion. The winning bid was an astounding \$30,100, reports an Iowa-based community news portal. Des Moines Christian School’s self-described mission is to nurture graduates who are “servant-hearted leaders” and “passionate apprentices of Christ,” and donors to the gala were told their contributions represent an investment in

the school’s effort to “impact the world for Christ!”

FFRF says Reynolds misused her public position and publicly funded residence in order to raise funds for a Christian school.

“Our Constitution’s Establishment Clause dictates that the government cannot in any way endorse religion,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the governor. “As the Supreme Court has put it, ‘the First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.’”



Shane Stapley and Steve Foulkes of FFRF’s Metropolitan Chicago Chapter helped put up this display in Daley Plaza on April 3.

Secular display returns to Chicago

FFRF’s local chapter again put up a secular display in downtown Chicago on Easter weekend to counter a Catholic shrine there.

On April 3, FFRF’s Metropolitan Chicago Chapter (FFRFMCC) placed in Daley Plaza two colorful 8-foot banners on a 12-foot structure promoting the secular views of the Founding Fathers. The display was on public view until April 10.

One banner reads, “In Reason We Trust,” and pictures Thomas Jefferson, highlighting his famous advice to a nephew: “Question with boldness even the existence of a god.” The other side proclaims, “Keep State & Religion Separate,” and pictures President John Adams, who signed the Treaty of Tripoli, which assured that “the government of the United States is not in any sense,

founded on the Christian religion.”

The FFRF display is designed to balance a period of prayer and evangelism that occurs annually in Daley Plaza by a Catholic group, the Thomas More Society, that has preached in the plaza every Easter since 2011. The group’s aim, through its “Divine Mercy Project,” is to seek the “conversion of Chicago, America and the whole world.”

The Thomas More Society’s Catholic shrine, including a large wooden Latin cross, a 9-foot banner of Jesus, and “kneelers” for people to pray, also returned.

FFRF warmly thanks FFRFMCC Executive Director Tom Cara for securing a permit for the display and two board members of the active local chapter, Shane Stapley and Steve Foulkes, for their assistance in putting it up.

FFRF: N.D. law unconstitutional

A new North Dakota law that seeks to impose the Ten Commandments on the state’s public schoolchildren is unconstitutional, declares FFRF.

The bill originally permitted Ten Commandments stand-alone displays “in the school and in a classroom.” The final version that Gov. Doug Burgum signed was changed to only allow schools to place the biblical displays “with a display of other historical documents in the school and in a classroom.” The Supreme Court has explicitly barred any Ten Commandments display in a public school.

Knowing that such Ten Commandments displays violate the law, legislators are including a provision that

purports to remove all legal damages from school districts, administrators and board members for erecting such displays. This provision is misleading, since schools could still be subject to injunctions that would lead to the school paying for legal fees, and schools and school officials would still be subject to legal liability under federal law.

This law would open districts up to expensive and unnecessary legal liability.

FFRF will challenge any displays that go up in schools. Any families in schools where these Ten Commandments displays go up should reach out to FFRF at ffrf.org/legal/report.

Alabama

Continued from page 1

rolls) saying that voters could cross out the language.

The lead plaintiff, Randall Cragun, an atheist, had sought to register to vote in Alabama since November 2019. However, voters submitting this registration form in Alabama had to sign the voter declaration, beginning “I solemnly swear or affirm” and concluding with “so help me God.” The director of elections informed Cragun: “There is no legal mechanism to register to vote in Alabama without signing the oath as it is stated.”

The state of Alabama has dramatically changed its posture, thanks to FFRF’s lawsuit.

FFRF’s plaintiffs Chris Nelson and Heather Coleman (who are married) were able to register using the new form in March. Both of their registrations were accepted by the Shelby County registrars. “We are glad that the state has — at least, begrudgingly — made some concessions to support state-church separation, and that freethinkers in Alabama will continue to push for these reforms,” they say.

The other plaintiffs have expressed their appreciation for no longer being forced to pose as religious in order to exercise such a basic right.

“Because of this suit, I will finally be able to register to vote in Alabama,” says Cragun. “It is disappointing that the state prevented me from voting in the 2020 elections, but I am looking forward to participating in the future, and I now have a better appreciation of the value my voice and other individual voices contribute to shaping the state.”

Adds co-plaintiff Robert Corker, “I am proud to have been a part of this effort to secularize voting in the state of Alabama. I relish more opportunities to foster inclusiveness for nonbelievers in this state.”

Cragun thanked FFRF for stepping in where others wouldn’t.

“I am so grateful to FFRF for pursuing this case,” he said. “Before FFRF took on the case, I spent a few months contacting attorneys and made no progress. I became discouraged by the idea that the state could infringe on my rights without me having any hope of doing something about it. I have heard people accuse FFRF of coming in from out of state to interfere with local matters, and I think anyone who has taken that rhetoric seriously should know that FFRF is helping protect the rights of its members like me. I never thought that I had much power to protect my rights until FFRF helped give me a voice.”

FFRF is honored to play its part of

Secretary of state defendant admits to 3-year affair

John Merrill, the Alabama secretary of state who was the defendant in the FFRF lawsuit over a required religious test on voter registration forms, has acknowledged an “inappropriate relationship” with a woman for three years.

Merrill said he would not seek elected office in 2022 after he was confronted with a 17-minute audio conversation between Merrill, who is married, and the woman. Merrill had denied the affair prior to being informed off the audio recording.

In the call, Merrill told the woman he hoped to draw strength from God to resist continuing their affair, which lasted from November 2017 to November 2020.

“I am not able to stay away from you, so that’s the reason why I have to have help in order to do that . . . the help is coming from the Lord,” Merrill said.

Prior to the revelations, Merrill was expected to run for the U.S. Senate.

“I will obviously not be a candidate for the United States Senate nor will I be seeking any other elected position in 2022,” Merrill said.

securing voting access for all Alabama residents.

“The secretary of state was consciously discriminating against nonbelieving voters,” says FFRF Senior Litigation Counsel Patrick Elliott. “We obtained our goal of ensuring equal voting rights.”

The lawsuit had been filed in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Alabama, Southern Division. Steven P. Gregory of the Birmingham-based Gregory Law Firm was serving as co-counsel. FFRF Senior Litigation Counsel Patrick Elliott and FFRF Associate Counsel Liz Cavell were also attorneys in the case. The defendant was Alabama Secretary of State John Merrill.

FFRF litigation to correct state/church entanglements is made possible thanks to kind donations designated to FFRF’s legal fund.



Famed sculptor Zenos Frudakis, second from right, shows off the Thomas Paine statuette he created. Standing with Zenos are FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF Director of Strategic Response Andrew L. Seidel and Freethought Society’s Margaret Downey.

Join the 2021 Thomas Paine Day event

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

Register at this site: bit.ly/20LPG2a.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Endowment

Continued from page 1

with the goals of both FFRF and the Secular Studies program: to support education around secularism, atheism, and humanism,” comments Zuckerman. “It will help generate more course offerings, student and faculty research and campus programming. I am both thrilled and honored.”

The purpose of the endowment is to broaden, develop and innovate the study of nonreligious people, groups, movements, thought and cultural expressions and increase the canon of scholarship and scope of visibility of secularity.

A wide range of activities and initiatives supported by FFRF’s endowment are envisioned over the years, including course development, research stipends, student travel, distinguished speakers and panelists, symposia or conferences. The college envisions FFRF’s endowment as a lead gift in a goal to someday establish a Center of Secular Studies at Pitzer College.

“FFRF is so pleased to support the critical work of Pitzer’s Secular Studies

program,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president, “because it values the study of the impact of freethought and skepticism here and worldwide. We consider Phil Zuckerman to be a national freethought treasure.”

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FFRF VICTORIES

By Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey

Indiana school district ends meeting prayers

FFRF has persuaded an Indiana school district to cease opening school board meetings with prayer.

A concerned district community member contacted FFRF to report that the Griffith Public Schools Board of Trustees opened each of its meetings with a prayer led by a member of the board or a guest, including clergy. For example, Pastor Freda Scales with Griffith Lutheran was invited to lead the opening prayer during the January 2021 regular board meeting and John Dudlicek, second vice president of the board, led the opening prayer during the November 2020 special board meeting. These prayers were invariably Christian in nature.

The school board is an essential part of the public school system, FFRF pointed out.

“Students, parents, and district employees have the right — and often have reason — to participate in school board meetings,” FFRF Legal Fellow Joseph McDonald wrote to School Board President Kathy Ruesken. “While those in the religious majority may view opening prayers as striking an appropriately solemn tone to mark the start of a meeting, the prayers have the opposite effect for those who do not hold the same religious beliefs as the prayer giver.”

The board was engaging in a governmental endorsement of Christianity that excludes the 30 percent of Americans who are non-Christian and are largely nonreligious, FFRF added. Nationally, among millennials and younger Americans — who make up the entirety of the nation’s student population and most students’ parents — about 46 percent are non-Christian, either practicing no religion at all or a minority religion. Including prayer at meetings unnecessarily ostracized this significant, growing portion of the district’s community.

FFRF’s well-reasoned missive had an impact.

“As a reaction to court opinions and a letter from that watchdog group, the board unanimously eliminated the prayer in favor of being neutral with a moment of silence so people can contemplate whatever they wish,” reports the local newspaper. “The letter was written by FFRF representative Joseph McDonald.”

In an email to McDonald, the school board president acknowledged FFRF’s role in the policy change.

“Regarding the letter that I received



Photo by Shutterstock

from Mr. Joseph McDonald, I would like to state that the trustees of the Griffith School Board have reviewed the contents,” Ruesken stated. “We have concluded that it would be in the best interest of the school district to offer up a moment of silence in lieu of prayer.”

FFRF stops school board prayer in Pa. district

A Pennsylvania public school district has discontinued injecting religion into each school board meeting due to intervention by FFRF.

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

FFRF sent a letter to Superintendent Christopher McComb, alerting the district to the unconstitutionality of beginning official district meetings with prayer, especially when students are present.

“Students and parents have the right — and often have reason — to participate in school board meetings,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote. “It is coercive, embarrassing and intimidating for nonreligious citizens to be required to make a public showing of their nonbelief or else to display deference toward a religious sentiment in which they do not believe, but which their school board members clearly do.”

FFRF requested the district respect the First Amendment by refraining from scheduling prayers at official board meetings — and its plea had the desired effect. McComb informed FFRF via email that “this practice has ceased and will no longer continue.”

Religious signs removed from school hallways

A state/church entanglement was rectified in Alabama at Blount County Schools

after FFRF intervened.

FFRF was informed that staff members at Appalachian Elementary School in Oneonta, Ala., had hung up religious displays in the halls of the school. The messages included: “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew within me a right spirit,” from Psalm 51, “Love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself. Mark 12:28-31.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district’s attorney, pointing out that the district violated the Constitution when it allows its schools to display religious symbols and messages. FFRF urged the district to remove the displays immediately.

FFRF was informed that the matter has been resolved.

FFRF stops school from constitutional violations

Religious displays have been removed from Willard County Schools in Missouri following intervention from FFRF.

A Willard Public Schools parent reported multiple constitutional violations. The teacher was displaying a sign that read “Mrs. B’s Mission Statement” outside of her classroom where the first mission statement was to “Follow Jesus.” Additionally, FFRF was informed that the “God’s Not Dead” club, led by a district employee, had placed posters of Christian bible quotes around the school.

FFRF Legal Fellow Joseph McDonald wrote to Superintendent Matthew Teeter urging the district to remove these religious displays and posters from school property. The religious messaging alienated those nonreligious students, families, teachers and members of the public whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the school, McDonald’s letter emphasized.

The district’s attorney informed FFRF: “The posters with religious messages have been removed. Teachers have been reminded of their responsibility to comply with Board of Education policies. Finally, principals have been directed to monitor their buildings to ensure that similar postings are not made in their buildings.”

Staff told not to join in student-led prayers

Staff in Bison School District in South Dakota have been reminded that they may not participate in student-led prayer.

FFRF was made aware that the Bison High School boys basketball team was concluding every game with a prayer circle. It appeared that, at times, the coaching staff joined the prayer circle, either standing or on bended knee. The team’s

coach stated that “the team’s priorities are, in order, faith, then family, then school, and then basketball.”

FFRF Legal Fellow Joseph McDonald wrote to Superintendent Marilyn Azevedo, pointing out that these comments, actions and approach to coaching showed a clear preference for religion and are unconstitutional. FFRF asked that the district commence an investigation into the complaint and take immediate action to stop any and all school-sponsored prayers occurring within any district athletic programs.

The district’s attorney responded to FFRF with assurances that, in response to these revelations, the district will provide specific training for all district coaches regarding students’ right to pray and to remind all personnel that they may not encourage, initiate, lead or participate in student prayer.

Coaches won’t join in post-game prayers

An issue of religious promotion by the Cumberland County School District in Crossville, Tenn., has been resolved.

FFRF was made aware that the Stone Memorial football coaching staff joined a public prayer with students after a school football game against Christian Academy of Knoxville last fall. Several coaches bowed their heads and held the shoulders of the players.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district’s attorney, informing the district that it is illegal for public school coaches to organize or participate in prayer with their teams.

Cumberland County School Board Attorney G. Earl Patton informed FFRF in a letter of response that the issue has been resolved. “Stone Memorial High School Principal Kelly Smith met with the head coach of the football team and reiterated that public school coaches must refrain, not only from leading prayers themselves, but also from participating in prayers led by students,” Patton wrote.

Additionally, Patton informed FFRF that he gave a presentation to district administration concerning increasing religious diversity and the importance of adhering to religious neutrality.

Religious groups won’t be allowed student access

Humble Independent School District in Texas has reviewed expectations and guidelines around remaining neutral on religious issues with administration following a letter of complaint from FFRF.

A local resident reported that a local religious group called the Covenant on Campus Team was granted access to the classrooms in Park Lakes Elementary School to leave messages on the students’ desk, regardless of the students’ religious affiliation or lack thereof.

Former FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to the district’s attorney to request that the district refrain from allowing religious groups privileged access to public schools.

Humble ISD General Counsel Stephanie Maher informed FFRF in a letter that she has reviewed the standards for community groups at school with the principal and the assistant superintendent.



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

IN THE NEWS

Religious makeup of Congress skewed

While more than a quarter (26 percent) of U.S. adults are religiously unaffiliated — describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular,” also known as “Nones” — just one member of the new Congress (Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz.) identifies as religiously unaffiliated, according to a Pew Research Center analysis, although Rep. Jared Huffman identifies as a Humanist.

Nearly nine in 10 members of Congress identify as Christian (88 percent), compared with two-thirds of the general public (65 percent). Congress is both more heavily Protestant (55 percent vs. 43 percent) and more heavily Catholic (30 percent vs. 20 percent) than the U.S. adult population overall.

Congress is more heavily Christian than U.S. adults ages 50 to 64, by a margin of 14 percentage points.

Younger Blacks are less religious than their elders

Black adults attend church and participate in bible studies more than other U.S. adults, but younger Black Americans are less likely to identify with the Christian faith than older generations, a new Barna Group report shows. The research firm on April 16 released its “Trends in the Black Church” report.

It shows Black Gen Zers, those who were born between the 1990s and early 2010s (67 percent), and Millennials (65 percent) have similar connections to Christianity. That makes them less Christian than older Black adults but more linked to that faith than their peers of other races.

While 74 percent of all Black adults say they are Christian, that percentage has declined sharply from 89 percent in 2011. Fifteen percent of African Americans say they are agnostic, atheist or of no faith.

UK ‘Nones’ have lowest Covid-19 related deaths

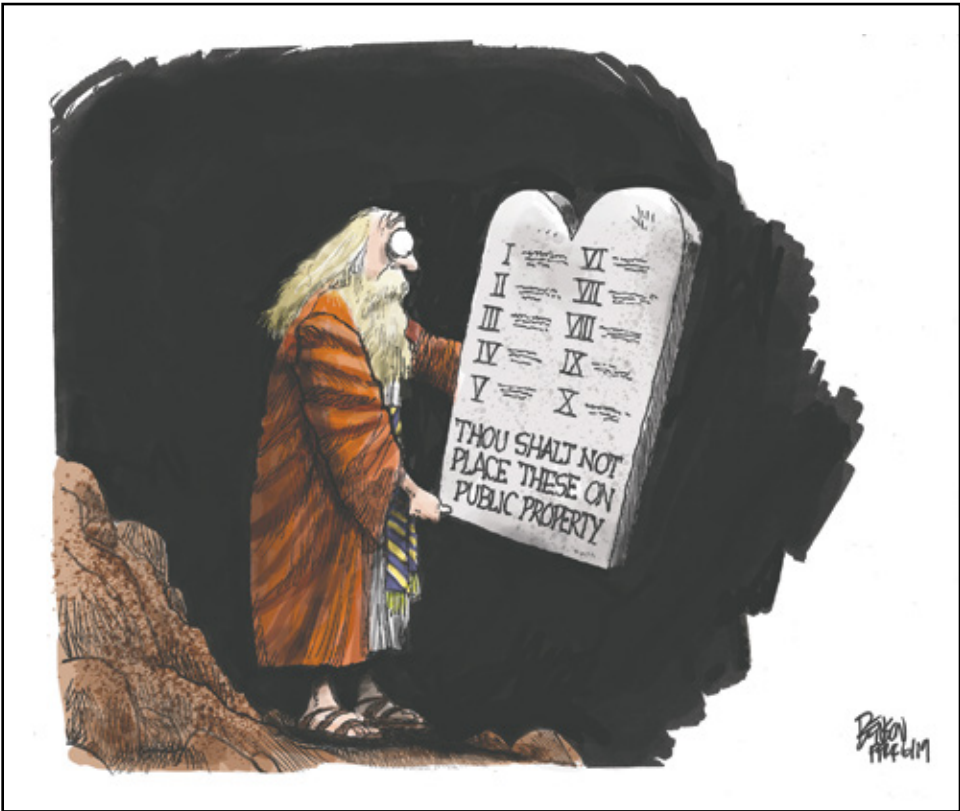
In the United Kingdom, those who reported having “no religion” (also known as “Nones”) had the lowest rate of death involving the coronavirus with 80.7 deaths per 100,000 males and 47.9 deaths per 100,000 females, according to a study done in the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic (from March through May 2020).

The highest age-standardized mortality rates of deaths involving Covid-19 were Muslims, with 198.9 deaths per 100,000 males and 98.2 deaths per 100,000 females. People who identified as Jewish, Hindu or Sikh also showed higher mortality rates than other groups.

“For the most part, the elevated risk of certain religious groups is explained by geographical, socioeconomic and demographic factors and increased risks associated with ethnicity,” said Nick Stripe from the Office for National Statistics in the UK.

S.C. Blaine Amendment targeted in fed lawsuit

A federal civil rights lawsuit filed by a group of religious schools and independent colleges in South Carolina takes aim at the state constitution’s Blaine Amendment.



South Carolina’s Blaine Amendment says no public money can be used for the direct benefit of any religious or private school. Thirty-seven states have similar provisions in their constitutions.

South Carolina amended its Blaine Amendment in 1973 to eliminate the ban on “indirect” funding of private schools.

The lawsuit, which was filed April 14, argues the amendment discriminates against Black residents and Catholics by withholding education funding from nonpublic schools in South Carolina and has been used to keep COVID-19 relief from private, independent and religious schools, including historically black colleges and universities.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Charleston and the South Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities are the plaintiffs in the lawsuit, which names South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster, Department of Administration Executive Director Marcia Adams and Department of Administration Budget Director Brian Gaines as defendants.

Evangelicals linked to searches for ‘bigger penis’

According to a recent paper in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, researcher founds a a “strong association” between the number of evangelical Christians in a state and the number of Google searches in those states looking for “bigger penis.”

Samuel L. Perry and Andrew L. Whitehead published the paper, titled, “Linking Evangelical Subculture and Phallically Insecure Masculinity Using Google Searches for Male Enhancement.”

Using Google Trends, an analysis tool, the researchers focused on terms like “male enhancement,” “ExtenZe,” and “penis pump” and connecting them to the “preponderance of evangelicals in a state.”

U.N. report shows Islamophobia on the rise

A March 11 report from the United Nations shows growing Islamophobia and excessive surveillance of Muslims in countries around the world, including the United States, according to an article by the Religion News Service.

The United Nations Human Rights Council report says that governments around the world should do more to combat Islamophobia.

The report notes that almost four in 10 Europeans held unfavorable views of Muslims in surveys conducted between 2018 and 2019. A survey of Americans conducted in 2017 found 30 percent held Muslims “in a negative light.”

Ky. bill would let medics refuse to provide care

The Kentucky Senate will get a “rights of conscience” bill that would let medical professionals in Kentucky refuse to perform procedures that violate their religious or moral beliefs.

The Senate Judiciary Committee on Feb. 11 approved Senate Bill 83 despite testimony from health care advocates and civil rights groups that warned the measure could permit discrimination. Medical ethics require doctors to treat everyone equally, regardless of their own personal beliefs, testified Dr. Keisa Fallin-Bennett, a family medical specialist.

“This bill protects discrimination based on personal identity and threatens the core of the Hippocratic Oath and the health of our citizens,” Fallin-Bennett said.

Court: Removing cross didn’t violate rights

In *Kelly v. Montana Department of Transportation* on March 23, a Montana federal district court adopted a magistrate’s recommendations dismissing First Amendment objections to the removal of a “spiritual cross” that the plaintiff had erected alongside of a highway in memory of his stepson.

The magistrate held that “a spiritual cross erected on public land adjacent to a highway constitutes government speech.” Rejecting free exercise claims, the magistrate said in part:

“*Kelly* does not allege that the defendants prohibited him from freely exercising his religious beliefs though private speech.”

School can be liable for barring Christian group

University of Iowa administrators can be held liable for monetary damages for improperly barring a Christian student group that rejects homosexual relationships, a federal appeals court ruled in March, according to a report by the As-

sociated Press.

The administrators do not enjoy qualified immunity from the lawsuit brought by Business Leaders in Christ because they violated the group’s clearly established constitutional rights to freedom of speech and association, the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled.

The case dates to 2017, when the organization barred a student from serving in its leadership after disclosing that he was gay and did not agree with its teachings on sexuality.

Study: Religion a driver of gender pay gap

Research published in the Academy of Management Journal indicates that religion perpetuates the gender wage gap, according to an article on PsyPost.com.

The findings provide evidence that men tend to earn significantly more than women in societies with heightened religiosity.

The researchers examined the situation in the United States using data from Gallup and the Status of Women in the States report. They found that the gender wage gap tended to be greater in more religious countries and in more religious states within the United States. The collective mentality toward sexuality, the ability of women to attain power, and the differentiation of social roles for men and women helped to explain the relationship.

“The effect held true for all major world religions,” said Traci Sitzmann, an associate professor of management at the University of Colorado Denver and the corresponding author of the new study. “It didn’t matter if most believers in a country were Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or adherents to a folk religion. The wage gap was still greater in countries where religion played a major role in daily life.”

“The gender gap is projected to vanish in 28 years in the most secular states, compared with a stunning 109 years in the most religious states in the United States,” Sitzmann added.

Bill ending religious vaccine exemption passes 1st step

A bill that would end Connecticut’s long-standing religious exemption from immunization requirements for schools, beginning with the 2022-23 school year,



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Freedom depends on freethinkers

now awaits action in the state Senate, according to the Associated Press.

The legislation passed on a 90-53 vote in the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives on April 20. No date has been set yet for when the Senate, which is also controlled by Democrats, will vote on the same bill.

The House vote marked the furthest the legislation has progressed in Connecticut. Some Republican opponents argued the bill was unnecessary and an attempt to impede the religious liberties of children. Yet mostly Democratic supporters said it was a necessary step to prevent future outbreaks of disease.

Panera sued over religious discrimination

A Pennsylvania woman filed a lawsuit March 24 against Panera Bread Company, alleging that she was discriminated against and fired due to her pagan beliefs, according to a Religion News Service report.

Tammy McCoy worked as a baker at a Panera in a Pittsburgh suburb in October 2019. According to the filing, she “never discussed her religion or religious beliefs at work.”

According to the lawsuit, the McCoy’s religion came up last May, when McCoy was on break with the store’s assistant manager, Lori Dubs, and the manager, Kerri Ann Show. Show asked McCoy what her religion was, and Tammy responded, “I am pagan.”

The lawsuit describes a series of discriminatory actions, including complaints that McCoy’s hours were cut, and when she asked why, she was told that she “needed to find God” before returning to her “previous schedule.” She was reportedly docked pay for breaks that she did not take.

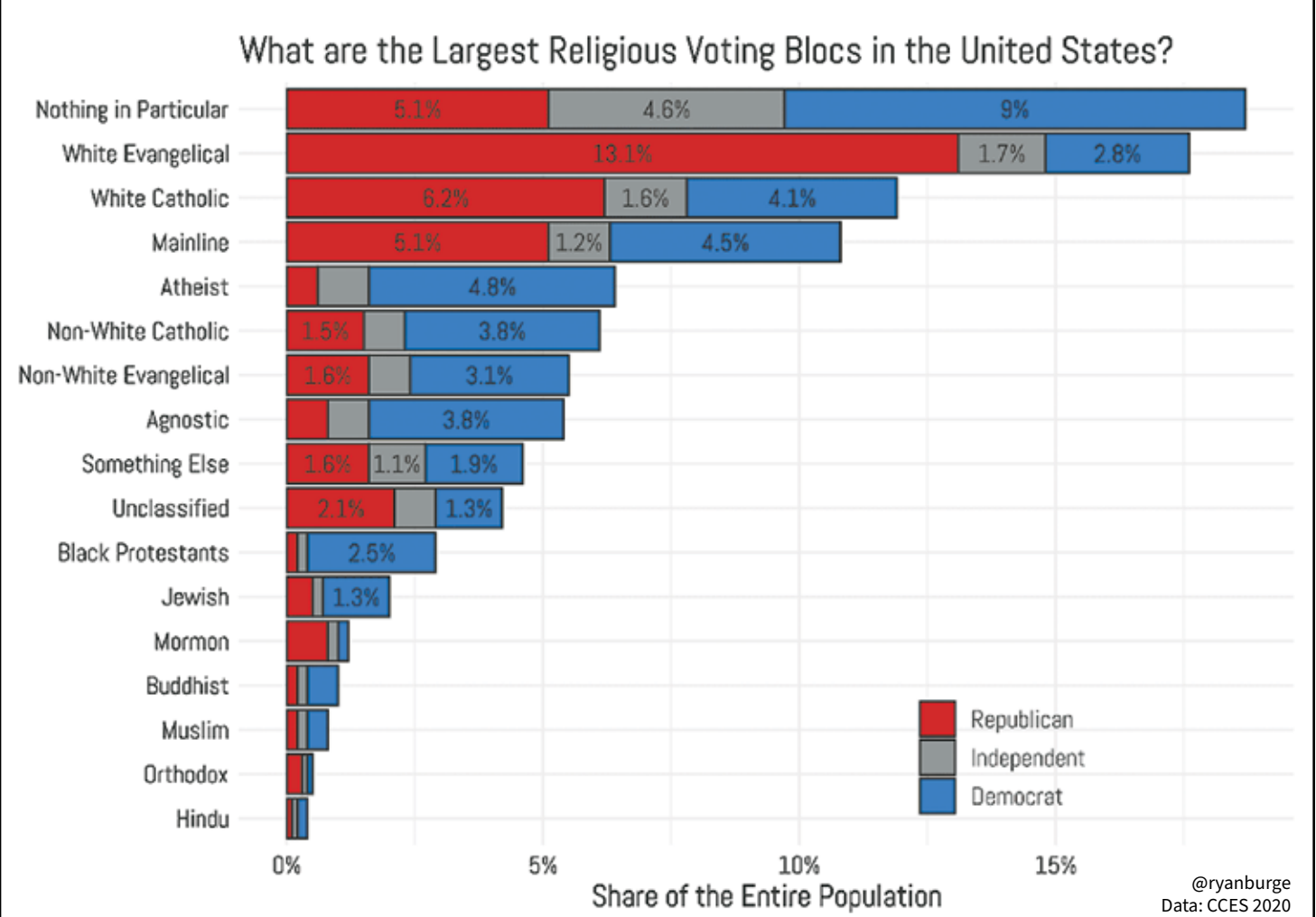
On July 27, 2020, McCoy said she was told to give notice that she was leaving her job. Both she and her husband, who also worked at Panera and was not otherwise mentioned in the case, were fired, according to the suit.

The lawsuit, which was filed in a Pennsylvania federal court, states that McCoy’s civil rights were violated under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prevents discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex and national origin.

LGBTQ students sue Department of Education

On March 29, 33 LGBTQ students sued the Department of Education in a class-action lawsuit, according to NBC News. The students allege that they faced discrimination at 25 federally funded Christian colleges and universities in 18 states.

The Religious Exemption Accountability Project, or REAP, an organization that advocates for LGBTQ students at



Secular voters outnumber other religious groups

Secular Democrats have a strong voting bloc that outshines all other political/religious/racial groupings, according to an analysis of voting patterns.

Researcher and professor Ryan P. Burge used data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study to come up with a chart to show how different religious groups voted in the 2020 November elections. The chart above shows various faith-based and nonreligious voting blocs as a share of the entire population.

Overall, the “nothing in particular” group, including Republicans, Democrats and independents, outweighs all white evangelicals by 18.7 percent to 17.6 percent.

The largest individual political voting bloc by a religious group is the 13.1 percent by white evangelical Republicans.

However, combining the Democratic Nones (the “Nothing in particulars”), atheists and agnostics adds up to 17.6 percent of the population.

Hemant Mehta, who writes the Friendly Atheist blog, said it would behoove Democratic candidates to try to gain the secular vote.

“It’s all the more reason Democratic candidates in large parts of the country should openly work for the secular vote by talking about the importance of church/state separation, LGBTQ rights, abortion access, quality science and sex education in school, and any number of other issues that unite most secular Democrats while also being opposed by so many conservative Republicans,” Mehta writes.

taxpayer-funded religious colleges and universities, filed the lawsuit in the U.S. District Court in Oregon on behalf of former and current students.

Many Christian colleges and universities receive federal funding and are still allowed to enforce policies that, for example, prohibit same-sex relationships on campus. Title IX, the federal civil rights law that bars sex-based discrimination, contains an exemption for religious entities. The ultimate goal of the lawsuit by the students is to strike down Title IX’s religious exemption.

White evangelicals skeptical of Covid vaccine

Vaccine skepticism is more widespread among white evangelicals than almost any other major bloc of Americans, according to a report by the Associated Press.

In a March poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 40 percent of white evangelical Protestants said they likely won’t get vaccinated, compared with 25 percent of all Americans, 28 percent of white mainline Protestants and 27 percent of nonwhite Protestants.

The findings have aroused concern within evangelical circles, the AP writes. The National Association of Evangelicals, which represents more than 45,000 local churches, is part of a new coalition that will host events, work with media outlets and distribute various public messages to build trust among wary evangelicals.

“The pathway to ending the pandemic runs through the evangelical church,” said Curtis Chang, a former pastor and missionary who founded ChristiansAndTheVaccine.com, the cornerstone of the new initiative.

Chang contends that with white evangelicals comprising an estimated 20 percent of the U.S. population, resistance to vaccination by half of them would seriously hamper efforts to achieve herd immunity.

Alabama House votes to end yoga ban in schools

The Alabama House of Representatives voted 73-25 in March to approve a bill that will authorize school systems to decide if they want yoga to be allowed in K-12 schools, according to a report from the Associated Press.

Yoga done in school would be lim-

ited to poses and stretches. The bill says the use of chanting, mantras and teaching the greeting “namaste” would be forbidden.

The Alabama Board of Education voted in 1993 to prohibit yoga, hypnosis and meditation in public school classrooms. The ban was pushed by conservative groups.

Under the bill, the moves and exercises taught to students must have exclusively English names. Students would also have the option to not participate and instead do an alternative activity. The bill moves to the Alabama Senate.

Survey: Most know Biden’s religion, but not Harris’

About 6 in 10 U.S. adults (58 percent) know that President Biden is Catholic, including 63 percent of those who are Democrats or lean Democratic and 55 percent of Republicans or Republican leaners, according to Pew Research Center survey results.

The report, released March 30, looked at Americans’ views about the faiths of Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris.

The survey of more than 12,000 U.S. adults revealed a political divide in agreement on just how religious the two top officeholders are.

Two-thirds of American adults (65 percent) said they are not sure of Harris’ religion. The vice president identifies as a Baptist.

About half of Americans say Harris is “somewhat religious” or “very religious” (46 percent).

FFRF'S

Ask an Atheist

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Are you a critical thinker? Take this test

By Tom Shipka

Thinking is like playing tennis, driving a car, giving a talk, dieting, or speaking a foreign language. It can be done well or badly. In modern education jargon, good thinkers are called critical thinkers. Critical thinkers have a mix of attitudes, skills and habits that set them apart from sloppy thinkers. Are you a critical thinker? Test yourself by answering these questions. Award yourself a score on each item as high as five (5) or as low as one (1).



Tom Shipka

- ___ 1. I am a successful problem-solver.
- ___ 2. When I face a problem or mystery, I follow Occam's Razor, i.e., I seek the simplest adequate solution or explanation instead of a needlessly complex one.
- ___ 3. Before I make a decision, I first gather as many relevant facts as time permits and I anticipate the likely consequences of each course of action.
- ___ 4. I strive for informed beliefs, that is, beliefs based on solid evidence and sound arguments. I do not embrace beliefs simply because they are popular or consoling.
- ___ 5. I appreciate the indispensable role of skepticism in an intelligent and responsible life. I refuse to embrace a claim or adopt a practice, however satisfying or intriguing, until I find reasonable grounds for it.
- ___ 6. I can explain and defend my beliefs and practices capably.
- ___ 7. My beliefs are coherent, that is, some of them don't contradict others.
- ___ 8. My practices are coherent, that is, some of them don't contradict others.
- ___ 9. My beliefs and practices are coherent, that is, some of the former don't contradict some of the latter.



Photo by Shutterstock

- ___ 10. I use language with precision and clarity.
- ___ 11. I am a good listener.
- ___ 12. I strive to be objective and even-handed in my assessments. I do not exaggerate the benefits or harms of a belief, a practice, an argument, a person, an organization, a lifestyle, a movement, a product or a service.
- ___ 13. I know that my perceptions can be distorted by my beliefs, expectations, biases and state of mind.
- ___ 14. I know that my memory is selective and constructive and seldom provides a literal report of the past.
- ___ 15. I am open-minded and flexible. I am willing to hear or read an elaboration or defense of a position that strikes me initially as weird, foolish, far-fetched or immoral.
- ___ 16. I am sensitive to human fallibility, that is, the fact that humans make mistakes. Accordingly, I have the courage to reevaluate a long-cherished belief or practice and to acknowledge that it may be mistaken.

- ___ 17. I am sensitive to human fallibility, that is, the fact that humans make mistakes. Accordingly, I welcome constructive criticism.
- ___ 18. I am sensitive to human fallibility, that is, the fact that humans make mistakes. Accordingly, I recognize that well-educated and well-trained persons, even experts, can be mistaken.
- ___ 19. I successfully detect bias, special pleading, code words, propaganda and exaggeration in what I hear or read.
- ___ 20. I strive to be honest, fair and objective. I scrupulously avoid lying and exaggerating, and treating speculation, gossip or rumor as fact, in order to influence or persuade others.
- ___ 21. I am aware that many TV programs, films and publications deviate from the historical record and contradict well-established scientific laws and theories.
- ___ 22. I strive to stay intellectually alive. I balance my reading, radio listening
- ___ 23. I strive to stay intellectually alive. I balance my reading, radio listening

and TV viewing so that I expose myself to a variety of views and perspectives.

- ___ 24. I strive to stay intellectually alive. I participate regularly in serious, civil conversations about significant issues facing the human community locally, nationally and globally.
- ___ 25. I detect common fallacies in reasoning such as:
 - *Stereotyping (assuming that all members of a group share the same strengths or weaknesses of one or a few members of the group that I observe).
 - *Hasty generalization (jumping to a conclusion based on insufficient evidence).
 - *Ad hominem (disqualifying a claim or argument based solely on its advocate or supporter).
 - *The slippery slope (assuming that a modest change will necessarily trigger dire consequences).
 - *The time fallacy, also called post hoc ergo propter hoc (assuming that because one event preceded another, the former caused the latter; confusing correlation with causation).
 - *The appeal to ignorance, or shifting the burden of proof (assuming the correctness of a claim or belief simply because it has not been disproven).
- ___ 26. I strive to avoid the use of such fallacies in my own reasoning.

The highest score possible is 130 points. How did you do? If you are especially bold and brave, you might invite another person who knows you well to evaluate you on this same test, compare the two scores, and discuss any discrepancies.

FFRF Member Tom Shipka is emeritus professor of philosophy at Youngstown State University.

Versions of this essay appeared previously in The Vindicator, David Stewart and H. Gene Blocker's book, Fundamentals of Philosophy, Shipka and Arthur J. Minton's book, Philosophy: Paradox and Discovery, and Shipka's Commentaries: 162 Essays on WYSU.

CRANKMAIL

It's time for this month's installment of Crank Mail, where we shed a little light on those non-members who have contacted FFRF with their own words of "wisdom." Printed as received.

Islam: Why is it that all I see here is freedom from christianity? Why aren't you trying to reign in Muslims as well? They want Sharia law in the US. But your real mission is to slam Christianity not religion isn't it? Stop putting stickers on the Gideon's Bibles you lowlifes. — Shawn Davis

your site: keep your fucking pie hole shut, who the fuck are you snowflakes to tell me how to practice my religion — William Schieber

Heartache: I was looking for a Sunday morning on-line sermon and Ronald Reagan's son came on instead. No love or joy will be found there! What a heartbreak. What a hideous organization~ or you do not understand anything from our beloved Founding Fathers, many of whom are my relatives, my forefathers. They prayed that we would take their faith forward. And for this I just shake my head and will continue to at every

remembrance of this man for certain he is an abomination. We ARE a Christian nation. May the great Ronald Reagan's son discover what TRUE discipleship means. He clearly doesn't understand who Christ is nor what a relationship with God can mean and we are not meant to govern separate from it I assure you of that. You do not come across as happy at all. — Sabra Bruning

Prayer in schools: Just a response to your pathetic organisation that is trying to ban prayer in school . Yes you barred me off your miserable little Facebook page because you couldn't take the truth well here I am your organisation will never destroy Christianity because you are to weak to even try , yes you are getting spiritual help from Satan himself , but the Lord Jesus as already bruised satans filthy head with His heel — Stephen McCarroll

Thoughts: I thought I'd inform you that just about when you get every 10 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.

People always cause war, stavation, and misery for one another and ... not until Jesus returns and separates the wheat from the chaff will we ever ever ever have world peace and a good life for all. 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 Hampleman

You should be ashamed: I have learned a great deal more about what it means to be a christian after going into depth with a global community bible study, and when i see this type of advertising against christianity I get a much better understanding of why our country and world is in the failing condition it's in. I will pray for your ignorance and may God have mercy on you. If you could actually take the time and effort to study the bible your eyes would be opened. SHAME ON YOU — Mike Belghey

Y'all should just mind your own business: Please leave people that want ti pray alone y'all just give it a

rest yjur poking your nose inti things thats best left alone if people want ti pray let them it dont matter where they are or when just let them do it im a nonpracticing jew and if i should chosse ti pray i will and dint care where i am at. — Ed Silverman

Your self-righteous BS: 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 Gillis

FFR: Your group is just as disgusting, hateful, loathsome and repulsive as the liberals who have ruined the Democrat Party. You are also as low as they are and that is so low they can't even pipe sunlight to you. — Wally Moses

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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.**

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I’m masking for a friend (and others)

Name: Shirley McClellan.
Where I live: Morgantown, N.C.
Where and when I was born: Morgantown, 1957.
Family: My husband Mike, daughters Jennifer and Leslie, dog Maddie, and cats Lenney, Huck Finn and Hank Jr.
Education: I have an associate’s degree in recreational therapy. I’ve educated myself since childhood about history and religion.
Occupation: Disabled due to two previous back surgeries that left me with chronic back pain and weak/painful legs.



Shirley McClellan

How I got where I am today: Curiosity. I was raised with liberal political views and conservative Baptist religious views. I kept the political views but rejected the religious ones. Curiosity caused me to look at other religions. Life experiences change people, too. In 1979, my daughter was born with a type of limb deficiency called phocomelia. I was heart-broken and afraid for her future. But she has done well. She has a bachelor’s degree, has been married to her husband for 18 years and works at a

battered women’s shelter.
Where I’m headed: I hope I’m always learning and growing and helping others. I am now a caregiver for my husband of 45 years who had two strokes in 2019. His ability to remember was affected and has worsened.
Person in history I admire and why: I admire Robert Ingersoll for his character, compassion for others, his loving demeanor, his open heart, the way other people’s suffering pained him so much, the beautiful way he saw the world, and his unbelievable writing and speaking skills.
A quotation I like: This quote was in Oprah magazine: “Come, come, my conservative friend, wipe the dew off your spectacles and see that the world is moving.” — Elizabeth Cady Stanton.
Things I like: Time with family, reading, dogs and cats, sunsets, nature, the Beatles, John Lennon, chocolate, Italian food, kind and friendly people.
Things I smite: Mean people, bullying, violence, cruelty and suffering.
My doubts about religion started: As a child, I always questioned what I was taught in Sunday school and bible school. I knew these characters weren’t nice people and I couldn’t be nicer than God (the “good Lord”)! Around age 16, I began reading about religion on my own. The more I read the bible, the



Shirley McClellan shows off a few of the hundreds of masks she has made during the pandemic.

more I saw it as unreasonable.
Before I die: I want to continue to learn, grow and try to be open-minded. I want to practice being tolerant and kind. And to enjoy the simple things: family, good food, good music, good weather and the love of our pets.
Ways I promote freethought: By speaking of it and sharing my opinions. I think sharing the concept with others, when appropriate, is the most important.

ant. But it’s also important to show compassion and understanding of people’s beliefs. Also, by being a proud member of FFRF since May 1990!
I wish you’d asked me about: My masks. I have made 445 masks since February 2020. I’ve been trying to keep my family, friends and community safer. I’ve also mailed them to family and friends in other states. My daughters and I love to give them away!

MEET A MEMBER

Concept of immortality defies logic, proof

By Barbara G. Walker

The concept of immortality is one of the most grandiose expressions of human egotism: the pretense that we are so radically different from every other form of life on Earth that we will not cease to exist as individuals.



Barbara G. Walker

Despite the undeniable proof we see all around us, that every living thing sooner or later comes to its end, we invent mental images of our own perpetuity. We greatly fear the intrusion of reality upon this imagery, so we create religious brainwashing that begins in childhood and usually remains unquestioned throughout life. We also fear to witness what really happens to the dead. In most cultures, corpses are either completely destroyed, or securely enclosed and hidden away. Some have invented mummification, and its highly profitable modern descendant, embalming, to pretend for a while that the body won’t decay after all. But it will, in spite of all such complex procedures, and we don’t want to watch. According to the Catholic Church, there are numbers of alleged saints whose bodies remained fresh for centuries, but such nonsense is not much heeded nowadays. Nevertheless, we have to realize that the dead rot away inevitably, so we create nonearthly places for them to exist in: heavens in the sky, hells underground. We surely know that the sky really has nothing but air, and beyond it lie billions of light-years of dark, empty space. We also know what lies beneath the Earth’s surface, and it’s not a realm of tormenting demons or hellfires decreed by the cruelty of a punishing God. How could



Photo image by Shutterstock

we endure eternal torture when we are without any nerves to feel? We know that the pearly gates and legions of harp-strumming angels, which have been literally believed for centuries, are simply not possible. Yet we can envision them as clearly as we see Santa Claus. People speak of the dead “looking down” on them, as if the dead somehow exist in the empty sky. On the other hand, sometimes they “walk the Earth,” and are seen as benevolent or malevolent spirits still among us, seen or unseen. Deep down, we know perfectly well that the only real persistence of our individual image is in the memories of other humans, usually family for a generation or two, or because of our works. Much flowery language develops around our overwhelming desire to be “remembered.” We are enjoined to “remember” deceased heroes of all sorts, so they can still exist at least in the imaginations of the living. Today’s fancy, expensive funerals developed from the centuries-old, primitive belief that ghosts are out there somewhere, watching and listening, and they want praise and kowtowing, or they might take

offense. Ghosts were feared, even those of formerly beloved relatives. A tastier synonym for “ghost” is “soul,” a typically religious concept that exists only as a word. It is roughly envisioned as our basic consciousness, actually a product of the gray matter within our skulls, which is just as perishable as the rest of the body. Patriarchal societies insisted that soul is the really important part of a person, and it is simply a “seed” implanted in a woman by a man. Official church doctrine always declared that a baby’s soul comes only from the father’s semen. This led to male claims on family names, property and innumerable rights not allowed to women. Of course, it was not until 1928 that the human ovum was discovered and seen to be much larger and more complex than a spermatozoon. Religious notions of the male “seed” bearing the soul are obvious nonsense, but they persist nevertheless among the ignorant who still worship Allah or Yahweh. Centuries before the advent of patriarchy, worldwide beliefs usually attributed the soul to the mother. The primitive but

logical assumption was that babies were formed from the mother’s blood, which remained in the womb for that purpose instead of emerging with each menstrual phase of the moon. Thus, family relationships were always “blood” relationships. We still use the same term. According to the early Egyptians, a mother gave her “heart’s blood” to create her child’s soul. Mothers were given more respect than fathers, but all male “blood” relatives such as brothers, maternal uncles, nephews and cousins in the maternal line were all part of the lineage. When Darwin demonstrated that humans are simply life forms like all other animals, having outsized brains to make up for their usually inferior senses and physical strength, religious fundamentalists were horrified by the possible diminution of father souls and father gods, and frantically denied the facts of evolution. Some still do, even though against incontrovertible truths. They claim that only humans possess souls, and all other creatures are soulless. Those who are keenly aware of the genuine love and intelligence demonstrated by their pets tend to contradict this view. Some people bury their deceased pets with as much ceremonial grieving as they lavish on relatives. So, what can we conclude about our fabled immortality? First, that it is a monumentally successful money-making scam. Second, that it is perpetuated by our monumentally egotistical view of ourselves. Third, that it can exist only in our imagination, but nowhere in the real world. The fact that it still exists, and continues to be perpetuated by a majority of human beings, attests to the determination of believers, no matter how contrary the evidence. We need to be grownup enough to control our egotism, accept the brevity of each individual human life, and use our time as wisely as possible. FFRF Lifetime Member Barbara G. Walker is a researcher, lecturer and author of 24 books.

Memorial is monumentally unconstitutional

This column first appeared in LA Progressive on March 11 and has been updated and is reprinted with permission.

By Barry Fagin

Can non-Christians serve in the military? Should they be allowed to? If they die in combat, should their sacrifice be honored? Does America’s military fight for Jesus? Allah? Moses? Joseph Smith, perhaps? Are America’s soldiers sworn to defend the bible? The Koran? The Book of Mormon?



Barry Fagin

Last October, the town of Monument, Colo., dedicated a memorial to veterans in the town cemetery. Given how many veterans are buried there, this makes sense. What doesn’t make sense is the inscription, well-known in fundamentalist circles: “Only two defining forces have ever offered to die for you: Jesus Christ and the American Soldier; one died for your soul, the other died for your freedom.” The cemetery memorial is, I believe, deeply and profoundly offensive to all non-Christians buried there. I’m confident it offends some Christians, as well. But even if everyone buried in that cemetery is Christian, what does the memorial say to non-Christians who have lost loved ones in uniform? No need to ask. Jewish War Veterans of the USA has already called for the memorial’s removal. Also, the memorial features the copyrighted logos of America’s armed

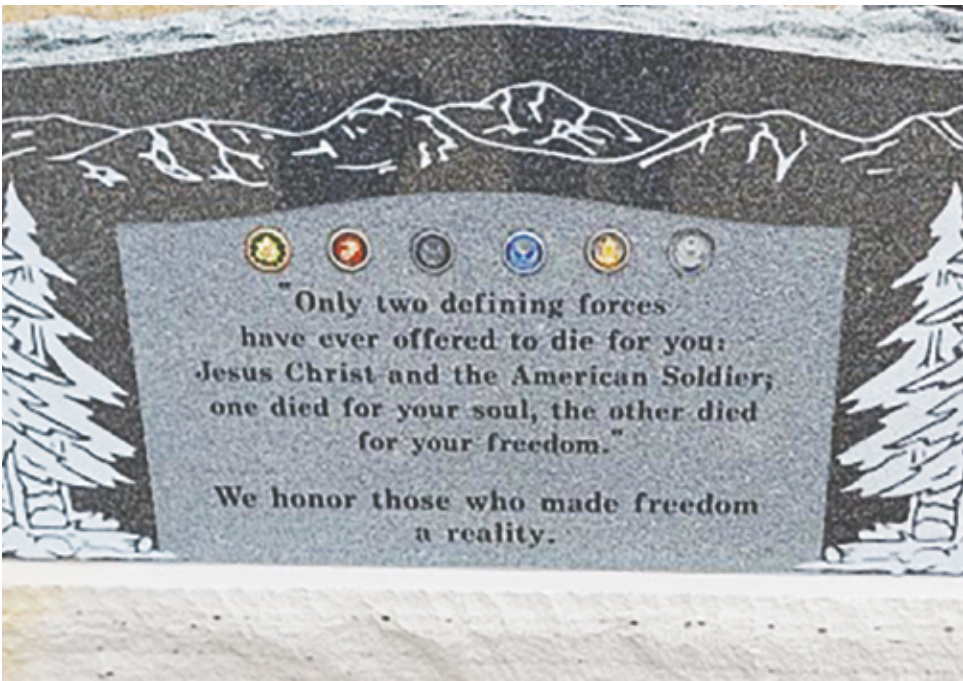


Photo courtesy of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation

This memorial in the Monument, Colo., town cemetery is unconstitutional because of its promotion of Christianity.

services. These are specifically forbidden by Department of Defense Instruction 5535.12 to be used “for any purpose intended to promote religious beliefs (including non-belief).” The memorial is simply unconstitutional. It is a blatant government endorsement of a specific sect of a specific religion on government land. You cannot enter the cemetery without passing by it. This memorial was an Eagle Scout project. I know many Eagle Scouts and their parents, all of them awesome. I’m sure this young man is awesome, too. Unfortunately, every single adult involved in the approval and execution of this project failed him badly. When the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF) claimed it would file suit against the town of

Monument because of the memorial, the town claims to have sold the land on which the memorial was built to the family of the Eagle Scout, making it a matter that, supposedly, no longer concerns the town. Even if this were true, the problem of illegal use of trademarked Department of Defense logos remains completely unaffected. Additionally, such a transfer would require that the land be completely maintained by the family in perpetuity, and a sign prominently displayed indicated that the memorial is private and is in no way endorsed by the town. And, of course, it would need to have been sold to the family at fair market value. We do not yet have any evidence any of this has happened or will happen. In fact, there is good reason to be-

lieve what the town has done is something different and equally problematic. For the land to truly have been sold, it needs to be conveyed to the family “in fee simple,” a fact which would be recorded on the deed. Since the town has not publicized the documents pertaining to the alleged sale, as yet we have no way of knowing if this is in fact what the town has done. What is far more likely is that the town has cooked up some scheme involving the sale of burial plots, either of equivalent size to the land around the memorial, or possibly but less likely, located on the grounds of the memorial itself. Even if we grant the tenuous assumption that family members will eventually be buried on the memorial site (if you would see it, you’d see how unlikely that is), all the town has sold to the family is the right to be buried there. The land would still be owned by the town. We will not know the truth until the town of Monument is compelled to provide all documents pertaining to the alleged transaction, either through the Colorado Open Records Act or through legal action. Sadly, I suspect doing right by the law was not the town’s primary purpose. What this ruse has accomplished is the widespread conviction among consumers of evangelical Christian media that those of us who are opposed to this chicanery are vilifying an Eagle Scout who honored the service of his family and other veterans with a completely legal memorial on private land. That is patently untrue. But in our modern culture wars, truth takes a back seat to faith. Barry Fagin is an ACLU National Civil Liberties Award winner and a recipient of the Thomas Jefferson Award from the Military Religious Freedom Foundation.

FFRF legal assistant enjoys law, politics

Name: Stephanie Dyer.
Where and when I was born: Madison, Wis., 1997.
Education: B.A. in political science and legal studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
Family: Two amazing parents and one younger sister.
How I came to work at FFRF: I was looking for a job after graduation and saw this great opportunity to work with a nonprofit organization that protects the constitutional principle of state/church separation.
What I do here: I am a legal assistant. I work in the Legal Department with the Intake team. I assist the attorneys with a variety of tasks, such as organizing files and managing a lot of the attorney’s correspondences with government entities.
What I like best about it: I really enjoy the people I work with. This organization has been so friendly and welcoming. I also really like the issues we deal with; I get to be part of some very important work.
What gets old about it: Doing the mail. Folding letters and stuffing envelopes can be tedious.
Working from home has been: An

interesting experience. I like being able to work in my pajamas, but I miss interacting with people.
I spend a lot of time thinking about: Law and politics. I majored in political science in college and plan to attend law school in the future.
I spend little if any time thinking about: Traveling. I love to travel, but since Covid, I don’t spend much time thinking about all the places I would like to visit.
My religious upbringing was: Lutheran. I was heavily involved in our church community, from volunteering at church events to assisting with worship services.
My doubts about religion started: I don’t remember an exact time when my doubts started, but I have always had a lot of questions about religion.
Things I like: My favorite thing to do is spend time outside. I really like to go hiking and kayaking. Traveling is one of my favorite things to do.
Things I smite: People who don’t believe in scientific facts.
In my golden years: I will live in a nice house, relaxing, surrounded by friends and family.

MEET A STAFFER



Stephanie Dyer

Banning transgender athletes is wrong

This article appears on FFRF's blog site patheos.com/blogs/freethoughtnow.

By Ryan Jayne

There's a disturbing new phenomenon we've recently observed at the state level.

Last year, Idaho was the first state to ban transgender females from playing in high school women's sports. Even though the Idaho law is likely unconstitutional, this year 31 states are considering following suit, and four state legislatures have already passed such measures: Alabama, Idaho, Mississippi, South Dakota, Tennessee and Arkansas.



Photo by Chris Line
Ryan Jayne

The Freedom From Religion Foundation tracks bills like these that seek to codify a benighted religious belief into the law, and this is a major trend we've spotted among the 900+ bills FFRF is currently tracking. These bills and laws achieve nothing except using the legislative process to stoke anti-trans fears. This is nothing new — lawmakers similarly tried to convince parents that trans women would assault girls in public bathrooms. After intense backlash, they are moving to a new *bête noire*, insisting that trans women will steal high school sports awards. This anti-trans rhetoric is rooted in religious absolutism based on biblical references that supposedly declare that gender and sex are identical, binary and immutable. The argument depends on creation myths for support, since data, science and the real world offer none.

Are we to believe that 2021 was the great awakening in which anti-LGBTQ lawmakers suddenly discovered a deep love of and desire to protect women's sports and equality? How many of them have supported the Equal Rights Amendment? Just like their "bathroom bills" were never about bathrooms, their trans athlete bans are not about supporting women's sports. They're about outing and excluding transgender kids.

The Christian nationalist contingency in Congress is a driving force behind this anti-trans movement. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., an unapologetic conspiracy theorist and Christian nationalist, made a public show of dehumanizing transgender individuals by placing a sign that read, "There are two genders, male & female, 'Trust the Science!'" across from the office of a colleague who has a transgender child. This statement is not only factually incorrect, but also shows the need for a law like the Equality Act, which has passed the House of Representatives and will prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender identity. (See Page 19.) Greene's anti-trans behavior and rhetoric shows how bigots bring their religiously motivated hate into the workplace to dehumanize and divide others.

Religious motivation

The motivating factor behind this anti-trans rhetoric is overwhelmingly religious in nature. The argument is often cast as "God only made two genders." Or as a West Virginia legislator put it recently in defense of a trans athlete ban, the existence of trans people means "that my God made a mistake. . . . [and] my God

does not make a mistake." In these lawmakers' minds, discriminating against transgender individuals is fulfilling the Christian god's will. To do anything less is "defying God's will." Seeking to legislate religious doctrine is the real motivation behind these bills.

But, of course, they try to spin their discrimination as being based in fact and reason. Those proposing "trans athlete bans" insist that the laws are needed to prevent the end of women's sports as we know it, and are essential to protect cisgender female athletes. QAnon-endorsing, gun-and-God-obsessed Rep. Lauren Boebert, R-Colo., went on Fox News to say that the Equality Act is a threat to female athletes, and that those who favor the act "hate women" and want to "end women's sports." Like most of her fellow anti-trans lawmakers, Boebert cannot cite a single instance of this "problem" in her district.

Boebert's fear-mongering about women's sports was also the leading argument by opponents of the Equality Act at the bill's recent hearing in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee. The first thing Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, did was to enter into the record a letter from a parent of a female Connecticut athlete who was concerned about her daughter competing with "biological males" (an outdated description that shows Grassley is not up to speed on the relevant science). Other senators opposing the bill repeated the same argument. An "expert" witness — a reporter, not a scientist — told senators over and over again that banning discrimination on the basis of gender identity means instant doom for women's sports.

Data, science and reason tell a different story. Even considering their best possible arguments, the conclusion is clear: These bans are nothing more than targeted discrimination, inflicting harm for no reason. No science supports these bills.

The history of sports has shown that while all elite athletes reach biological limits to their performance, those barriers come sooner for elite athletes who have competed in women's events than for those who have competed in men's events. As one stark example, the male deadlift record is now over 1,100 pounds, with many elite male powerlifters topping 900 pounds, while the women's record, set in 2005, is 694 pounds.



Photo by Shutterstock

A protester holds up a sign at the National Trans Visibility March in 2019 in Washington, D.C.

Studies have documented biological differences between post-pubescent men and women that likely explain this gap, which is present at the elite level in every athletic test of strength, endurance or speed. This persistent gap cannot be written off as a difference in technique, hard work, psychology or the ratio of female to male athletes. The difference, science suggests, is physiological.

Proponents of trans athlete bans point to this elite-level gap and conclude that it would be unfair for cisgender girls or women to compete, at any level, against anyone who has undergone male puberty, arguing that, therefore, cisgender female high school athletes should not be forced to compete against transgender female athletes. That's the strongest version of their argument, and it is riddled with problems.

An imagined problem

We know that this is an almost entirely imagined problem.

In many states that have protected against transgender discrimination for decades — e.g., Minnesota since 2001 — we have not seen the "sky is falling" predictions for women's sports come to pass. After decades of transgender athletes participating at every level, the anti-trans crowd all cling to one instance of an award-winning runner in Connecticut. It puts perspective on the issue to point that only 0.6 percent of American adults identify as transgender. The transgender takeover of women's sports is a fantasy.

We can thus say with confidence that trans athlete bans have virtually zero practical benefit, since they address a nonexistent problem. Meanwhile, the bills openly discriminate against and exclude transgender athletes, harming these young athletes in a clear and unambiguous way. High school trans athletes don't have a significant athletic edge, but excluding them deprives them of the myriad benefits associated with sports, from scholarships to the psychological benefits of being part of a team. And it gets worse.

These laws restrict young athletes, most of whom care more about participation than performance, rather than elite athletes.

The gap described above is most pronounced at the very elite levels of competition, when athletes are approaching

the very limits of their physical capabilities — a world where runners and swimmers work to trim hundredths of a second off of their times. Things are very different at the high school level, where these trans athlete bans apply. At that level, most student athletes simply want to play. Their performance varies wildly depending on their natural abilities, how well refined their technique is, and how hard they train.

Elite athletic leagues already have their own science-driven policies, which have not obliterated women's sports.

If there is a high school transgender girl who is really good at a sport, that's just fine. Any concerns about a possible physiological advantage are easily outweighed by the benefits of inclusion for all high school athletes. Beyond the high school level, governing bodies like the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) have allowed transgender women to compete, subject to policies that attempt to ensure an even playing field (those, too, are hotly contested and subject to ongoing studies).

Detached from research

A state legislature imposing a sweeping ban on transgender participation in women's high school sports is detached from the research we do have and amounts to lawmakers inserting themselves into an area where they are not experts. It's the wrong decision-makers making the wrong decision for the wrong reasons.

The bigotry that motivates these rules is laid bare when one considers that restricting sports participation to "sex assigned at birth" leads to the very problem proponents say they are trying to avoid.

Under a trans athlete ban, a transgender male, identified female at birth, could go through male puberty and would still be forced to compete in women's sports. This is not merely hypothetical. In Texas, a transgender boy was forced by state rules to compete against girls, drawing boos when he won the state championship. That a 17-year-old was booed shows both the harm and the absurdity of the anti-trans lawmakers' supposed concerns for women. The fact that anti-trans lawmakers fixate on their constituents' fear of transgender women, without even realizing they are trying to force transgender men to compete in women's sports, shows how phony their concern is. If their concerns were genuine, they would seek a more nuanced, research-based approach.

Finally, many groups that are dedicated to advancing and protecting women's sports — including the Women's Sports Foundation and the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education — have emphasized that, as a practical matter, trans athlete bans would do far more harm than good. There are very real threats to women's sports, and transgender athletes are not among them. If you care about women's sports, you should want more women to participate, not fewer.

To summarize: Yes, there is a physiological performance gap between elite athletes who have gone through male puberty and those who have not. But don't be fooled into thinking that fact in any way supports a ban on transgender high school athletes. It does not. Just let the girls play.

Ryan Jayne is an FFRF attorney.

‘Religious liberty’ a truly deceitful term

This column was first published on *AboveTheLaw.com* on March 22 and is reprinted with permission.

By Tyler Broker

It is understandable, if not logical, for citizens today to believe religious faith is under attack. When held up to scrutiny, however, the claim falls apart.

For one thing, religious liberty is currently on a decade-long winning streak at the Supreme Court. Indeed, thanks entirely to an ever-increasing conservative majority, the Supreme Court has, without textual basis and in complete defiance of precedent, reimagined the meaning of the First Amendment’s Free Exercise Clause in a way that favors religious exemption from general applicable laws.



Tyler Broker

You would think that, as a consequence of such an impressive and resounding winning streak, religious citizens would feel more protected. Instead, the exact opposite has occurred.

In such a religiously diverse country as ours, there are a lot of explanations for current religious angst. I submit the reason mainstream Christians feel under attack is because both Protestantism and Catholicism are experiencing a rapidly declining membership. As a consequence of more Americans openly rejecting attendance in Christian churches, nonreligion itself has become more of a boogeyman to Christians — something not only to fear, but to demonize and hate.

Under the previous president’s administration, demonization of the nonreligious population was commonplace and done openly without remorse to citizens whose only perceived failing was they did not believe in religious faiths. The prior administration’s first attorney general, Jeff Sessions, had described the nonreligious as a threat to government. At his confirmation hearing just four years ago, he wondered whether nonreligious citizens could discern “truth,” calling into question the morality of every nonreligious citizen working at the Department of Justice.

William Barr, the man who would eventually replace that attorney general two years ago, took bigotry against the nonreligious a step further and proclaimed that nonbelievers as a collective group were directly responsible for claimed rises in “depression and mental illness,” “suicide,” “senseless violence,” and furthering “a deadly drug epidemic.” This demonization of citizens for their lack of religious belief is not without effect. The nonreligious are one of the most disliked religious minorities in the United States.

Not only is this demonization by cabinet members sickening, it is demonstrably false. (Imagine if an attorney general nominee said at their confirmation hearing that they couldn’t say if Catholics or Protestants could discern “truth” because their faith was wrong.)

As the decline of religion has occurred, over this same period, violence and crime have dropped dramatically, and, even on a topic many Christians claim is of their upmost concern, abortion rates are now at record lows. Yet, there is a disturbing insistence by powerful government officials who claim that nonreligion is a national



Photo from court documents

Former Bremerton, Wash., assistant football coach Joe Kennedy (lower center in blue) praying with students after a 2015 football game, just lost his appeal.

security threat and a threat to the religious way of life.

Nonbelievers, however, are not just facing rhetorical demonization but actual legal oppression. A federal court has upheld disenfranchising nonbelievers from giving secular invocations to state legislatures. The court’s reasoning for banning nonbelievers from addressing their own state legislatures with patriotic messages of universal tolerance and unity was that “only theistic prayer can satisfy all the traditional purposes of legislative prayer.” Again, imagine if a federal judge said that neither Catholics nor Protestants could give invocations because only non-religious messages could “satisfy all the traditional purposes” of a secular or civil government?

Regardless of whether you agree that only religious faiths that have given invocations in the past are capable of giving invocations to state legislatures now or in the future or that it is just nonbelievers who can be excluded from offering invocations, this is not a neutral position but a direct (and vile) system of government-enforced exclusion and discrimination against an ever-growing population of American citizens.

And if we’re talking tradition, traditionally American legislatures represent all citizens, regardless of their religious faith.

In another federal court, nonreligious citizens were banned from performing private wedding ceremonies for nonreligious couples. A federal court upheld a law that bans one-fifth of the population in Texas from performing private wedding ceremonies, solely because the citizens lacked a government-required religious belief to perform a private task. If a nonreligious couple wants a nonreligious celebrant in Texas, the government will only allow them to use the services of a government official, whereas a religious citizen in the same state can have someone from their own community, who reflects their values, and at their exclusive choosing, perform the same (legal) ceremony without any interference from the government.

“Nonbelievers are not just facing rhetorical demonization but actual legal oppression.”

I will say this until I am blue in the face: There is no form of legal or cultural attack on believers that even remotely compares to the legal disenfranchisement faced by nonbelievers in just these two cases. And I could go on about how the Supreme Court upheld forcible taxation on nonbelievers to subsidize a giant Christian monument.

With such gross imbalance toward favoring religion in the law, you would be right to ask how a claim of persecution by government against religion persists? The blunt answer is that people are being deliberately misled.

For example, take *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, a case from Washington that has been making the religious outrage rounds on platforms like Fox News. To hear the plaintiff tell it, assistant high school football coach Joe Kennedy was fired because he was simply expressing his faith. But the facts of the case tell a much different story.

Here are those facts: Kennedy prayed in the middle of the field immediately after the football games ended. At first, he prayed alone. When several students asked to join the coach in prayer, the coach responded with “This is a free country” and “You can do what you want.” Over time, a majority of the team’s players would join the prayer. Sometimes, members of the opposing team also joined.

Then, the parent of an atheist student told the principal that his son “felt compelled to participate” in the coach-led prayer because “he felt he wouldn’t get to play as much if he didn’t participate.”

The school, fearing a lawsuit on Establishment Clause grounds, made an attempt to work with the coach to provide a “location within the school building, athletic facility or press box” that could be made available to the coach to practice the religious exercise he and others were participating in. The school even said the coach or any player could pray on the field, although not immediately after the game or before the students had been released.

Instead of discussing the matter with the school as requested, the coach chose to go on a media blitz, where he repeatedly portrayed himself as the victim of religious persecution by the school and vowed to continue the prayer despite any school order.

The media attention turned the issue into a spectacle — and a potentially dangerous one. Several school officials testified they suffered repercussions (and fear for their own safety) due to the increased attention and anger being expressed at the way the coach “chose to address the situation.” On at least one occasion, the school was unable to properly supervise the students and keep the crowd under control at the game.

After the season ended, the school chose not to rehire the coach because he had “failed to follow district policy,” and because “his actions demonstrated a lack of cooperation with administration,” and had “contributed to negative relations between parents, students, community members, coaches and the school district,” while he “failed to supervise student-athletes after games due to his interactions with media and community.”

More than a few things stand out about these facts that conflict with the narrative used by the coach that he was fired because of his faith. The school showed no animus to the coach’s faith, for one thing. The school was only objecting to the time and place of the exercise, not the religious practice itself.

The school even offered to open up all of its facilities to accommodate the religious expression, at virtually any time other than right after the game before the students had been released to the care of their parents. Moreover, I submit it is completely understandable why the school would be worried about the time and manner of the exercise that has nothing to do with religious animus but to better encourage personal choice and free exercise.

Thankfully, the Supreme Court denied to take up Kennedy’s appeal.

Religious exercise is a personal choice that is better reserved to the decision-making between the parent and child than by government officials who students are mandated to follow while under their supervision.

The spectacle of stigma is what prevents equitable results in religious liberty cases. Knowing that, it is still amazing to watch it work despite the obvious.

How can it be legally justified that the coach in *Bremerton* is a victim of hostile government animus, yet states can ban nonreligious wedding celebrants at private ceremonies? It’s beyond me.

Calling such a system “religious liberty” is not only mistaken, but pernicious and intentionally deceiving.

Tyler Broker’s work has been published in the Gonzaga Law Review, the Albany Law Review and the University of Memphis Law Review.

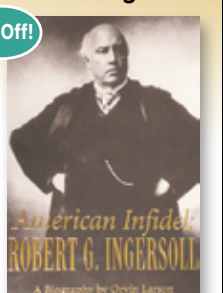
American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll

By Orvin Larson

\$5 Off!

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OVERHEARD

Why when Jesus talks about feeding the poor, it's Christianity. But when a politician talks about feeding the poor, it's socialism?

Mohamad Safa, executive director of Patriotic Vision, a non-governmental organization in Lebanon, who also, in 2020, said, "Our world is not divided by race, color, gender or religion. Our world is divided into wise people and fools. And fools divide themselves by race, color, gender or religion."
Twitter, 3-9-21

If secularists hoped that declining religiosity would make for more rational politics, drained of faith's inflaming passions, they are likely disappointed. As Christianity's hold, in particular, has weakened, ideological intensity and fragmentation have risen. American faith, it turns out, is as fervent as ever; it's just that what was once religious belief has now been channeled into political belief. Political debates over what America is supposed to mean have taken on the character of theological disputations.
Author and Brookings Institution senior fellow Shadi Hamid, in his column, "America without God."
The Atlantic, 3-10-21

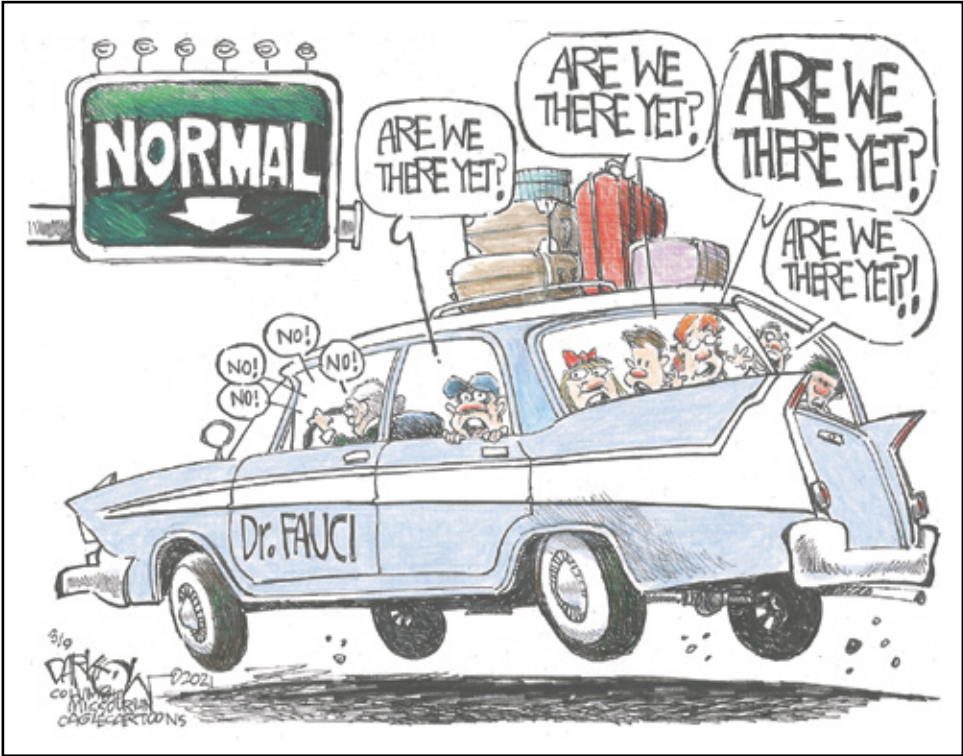
There were bibles, there were crosses, there were bible verses on signs. . . .



Robert Jones
The insurrectionists are telling us who they are. They very deliberately chose those symbols. They wore them on their clothes. These were white supremacists. These were Christians. Those two groups were not fighting each other. They were marching side by side.
Robert Jones, Public Religion Research Institute founder and CEO, in an interview for the article, "The Capitol attack: White supremacist terrorism meets evangelical Christianity."
Salon.com, 3-10-21

While religious exemption conversations are still dominated by debates over sex, marriage and reproduction, we confine it to a "culture war" issue at our peril. The ability of religious exemptions to undercut a wide swath of regulations and protections in the areas of economic and workers' rights, public health, environmental justice and even democratic reforms should not be underestimated.
Elizabeth Reiner Platt, in her column, "Religious liberty' is coming for voting rights."
The Hill, 3-10-21

This is a stunning change in the American social landscape. To put it in context, prior to 1990, virtually no Americans identified in public opinion surveys as nonreligious. It was as low as 5 percent, which is close to the margin of error. And by the time we get to the year 2000, at that point you're talking about 14 percent to 15 percent of the population. And now, 23 percent, 24 percent. That is a huge change. We do not typically see change of anything on that scale in a relatively short period of time.
Political scientist David E. Campbell, author, along with Geoffrey C. Layman and John C. Green, of Secular Surge: A New Fault Line in American Politics.
Religion News Service, 3-12-21



I began asking, how much is too much? Is it OK to get rich off of preaching about Jesus? Is it OK to be making twice as much as the median income of your congregation?
Ben Kirby, whose Instagram account @PreachersNSneakers has screenshots of pastors next to price tags and the street value of shoes and clothes they were wearing.
Washington Post, 3-22-21

We are denied housing, employment, health care and recognition of our equal value. We are considered a threat — a threat to what, I will never understand. Don't tell me it's about individual beliefs. When I worked as a health care provider, I never denied Christians care, even though their religion has been weaponized against me. How does a doctor refusing me care when I am sick square with Christian values? What ideology was protected during the nights I spent on the street, knowing that I would be denied shelter? . . . Some people believe that in respecting my rights, they will lose some of their own. But equality is an endless cake. The more who eat from it, the more there is to share.
Cecelia Gentili, from her op-ed "Equality is an endless cake."
The New York Times, 3-22-21

Most Nones are "somes." Church attendance is the first thing that goes, then belonging and finally belief — in that order. Belief goes last.
Political scientist and professor Ryan Burge, author of the new book, The Nones: Where They Came from, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going.
Religion News Service, 3-24-21

Antiscience has emerged as a dominant and highly lethal force, and one that threatens global security, as much as do terrorism and nuclear proliferation.
Dr. Peter Hotez, professor of pediatrics and molecular virology at Baylor College of Medicine, where he co-heads the Texas Children's Center for Vaccine Development, in the article, "The anti-science movement is escalating, going global and killing thousands."
Scientific American, 3-29-21

The coming decade of U.S. politics may be defined, in part, by the struggle to prevent conservative Christianity from taking democracy down with it.
Eric Levitz, in his article, "The GOP (rightly) fears America's churchless majority."
The Intelligence, 4-1-21

It is white evangelicals who were and remain the most ardent MAGA followers. Conversely, the most progressive voters, least amenable to the GOP's brand of white supremacy and cultural memes, are those without religious affiliation. . . . Even more ominous for faith leaders is that a large percentage (58 percent) of the unaffiliated are openly hostile to religion, saying "religion is not personally important in their lives and believe religion as a whole does more harm than good in society."
Jennifer Rubin, in her op-ed column, "The latest threat to the GOP: Americans are becoming less religious."
Washington Post, 3-30-21

It wasn't that she was a Catholic, but that there's supposed to be this thing called separation of church and state, which is becoming blurred. Her religion, I didn't care. What I care about is the use of religion as basically trumping every other right. I was presiding over the Senate, and Sen. [Tommy] Tuberville says something like, "We should bring morality back, and God and prayer should come back into our schools." I'm sitting there going, "What?" But that is the view of too many Republicans.
U.S. Sen. Mazie Hirono, on her questioning of Amy Coney Barrett's religion during her Supreme Court confirmation hearing.
New York Times Magazine, 3-28-21

Young people are especially allergic to the perception that many — but by no means all — American religions are hostile to LGBTQ rights.
David Campbell, professor and chair of the University of Notre Dame's political science department, in the article, "Allergic reaction to U.S. Religious Right' fueling decline of religion, experts say."
The Guardian, 4-5-21

There is a tendency today to frame the debate over the separation of church and state in terms that are far too narrow. In these instances, a focus on the symbolic issues, such as crosses on public land and prayers in public meetings, can obscure the fact that the entire legal system may be turned into the arm of a political movement that has no actual interest

in advancing the law. In America today, these assaults on the separation of church and state are in fact part of a larger attack on democracy and the rule of law itself. Religious nationalism is the kind of thing that takes democracies down.
Author and columnist Katherine Stewart, in her column, "The Supreme Court's religious persecution complex."
The New Republic, 4-9-21

As they dwindle, the faithful will work more furiously toward imposing their fading religion on the growing body of unwilling unbelievers. It's like the Republican model of government: Yell loud enough and some will believe you are still in charge.
Neil Steinberg, in his column, "See you in church . . . oops, no I won't," about the decline in church attendance.
Chicago Sun-Times, 4-6-21

The people who battle against science are the same ones who, for instance, wield and embrace their pocket-sized smartphones, which merge state-of-the-art engineering, mathematics, information technology and space physics. It's an educator's conundrum indeed. So perhaps what I really learned during the pandemic year is that science needs better marketing — refined and persistent — so that no one will ever again take its discoveries for granted.
Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, in a column.
Wall Street Journal, 3-18-21

Blasphemy? Fucking Blasphemy? It's 2021 for fuck's sake. What next? People being punished for insulting unicorns?
Comedian and atheist Ricky Gervais.
Facebook, 3-26-21

The [Supreme] Court is serious about giving religious conservatives broad immunity from the law — so serious, in fact, that it is literally willing to endanger people's lives in order to achieve this goal.
Ian Millhiser, in the article, "The Christian right is racking up huge victories in the Supreme Court, thanks to Amy Coney Barrett," regarding the court's decision on April 9 allowing people of faith who want to gather in relatively large groups in someone's home despite the state of California's limits all in-home gatherings.
Vox, 4-12-21

Evangelicals' own story of engaging politically out of serious concerns about morality and 'sincerely held religious beliefs' has lost influence with the public because of the transparent hypocrisy they displayed through the Trump years.
Chrissy Stroop, in her column, "Have white evangelicals finally lost control of the narrative?"
Religion Dispatches, 4-6-21

They've offered plenty of thoughts and prayers, members of Congress. But they've passed not a single new federal law to reduce gun violence. Enough prayers. Time for some action."
President Biden, as he unveiled new planned executive actions to address gun violence in the United States.
The Week, 4-8-21

It's time to end the Hyde Amendment

By Barbara Alvarez

It is high time that we end the destructive Hyde Amendment, a religiously rooted piece of legislation that denies abortion coverage for otherwise eligible federal health care recipients. Simply put, the Hyde Amendment is based on religious intent — not science. And the impact is ruinous.

The Hyde Amendment was introduced by staunchly Catholic Rep. Henry J. Hyde



Barbara Alvarez

and first enacted in Congress in 1976. Hyde's intent with this amendment was to make abortion as inaccessible as possible. On the heels of the Supreme Court's landmark case *Roe v. Wade*, which made abortion a constitutional right, Hyde sought an opportunity to restrict abortion on a broad scale. He found that by targeting low-income women and women on federal health plans, he could do just that. And since 1976, the Hyde Amendment has been included in every Congressional appropriation act.

Due to the Hyde Amendment, low-income women on Medicaid, federal employees, women in federal prisons, Peace Corps volunteers, those in the Children's Health Insurance Program and Native American women on the Indian Health Service program are ineligible to receive subsidized abortion care. When abortion care can range anywhere from \$500 to \$2,000, these out-of-pocket expenses



Photo by Shutterstock

can cost families up to one-third of their monthly income.

Thankfully, the Equal Access to Abortion Coverage in Health Insurance Act of 2021, or the EACH Act, was reintroduced recently. This bill, which currently has 127 co-sponsors in the House and 22 in the Senate, would end the draconian Hyde Amendment and make abortion accessible and affordable to millions of women throughout the country. FFRF has joined All* Above All, a women of color coalition, and 150 other groups, including Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, and SisterSong: Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, to champion this bill.

As a result of the Hyde Amendment, millions of women are delayed or denied

abortion care. For example, in 2018, 20 percent, or roughly 13 million women of reproductive age, were on Medicaid.

While some states elect to use their own funds to subsidize this legal medical procedure, 34 states and the District of Columbia do not. As such, low-income women and racial minorities, like Black and Hispanic women (31 percent and 27 percent, respectively), are disproportionately denied their constitutional right. This leads to poor maternal health outcomes, since states with more abortion restrictions have higher maternal and infant mortality rates.

Hyde explained his religious reasoning for this patronizing and damaging legislation:

"When the time comes, as it surely will, when we face that awesome moment, the final judgment, I've often thought, as Ful-

ton Sheen wrote, that it is a terrible moment of loneliness. You have no advocates, you are there alone standing before God — and a terror will rip your soul like nothing you can imagine. But I really think that those in the pro-life movement will not be alone. I think there'll be a chorus of voices that have never been heard in this world but are heard beautifully and clearly in the next world — and they will plead for everyone who has been in this movement. They will say to God, 'Spare him, because he loved us!'"

The Catholic Church praised Hyde for his efforts to strip women of their bodily autonomy. As a nation founded on the separation of state and church, there is no room for this religious fusion in our health care legislation.

That's why it is imperative that we pass the EACH Act. Not only would it reverse the Hyde Amendment, but it would also prohibit the federal interference related to decisions by state and private insurance companies related to abortion coverage. Additionally, the EACH Act would end unnecessary restrictions on state health plans. Furthermore, 62 percent of Americans support abortion coverage on Medicaid.

Christian nationalist efforts to restrict abortion care are not backed by science or by the majority of people. A 2020 survey of FFRF's membership found that a whopping 98.8 percent support abortion rights. Clearly, FFRF'ers are well aware of the role religion is playing in denial of basic reproductive and human rights. Let's make our secular voices heard and call on our legislators to support the EACH Act immediately.

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

FFRF applauds policy changes on abortion

FFRF applauds the Biden administration's decision to lift a Trump-era policy requiring abortion pills to be dispensed in person during the pandemic. FFRF is also cheering the tandem announcement that the administration is beginning to undo another Trump-era directive that directly forced Planned Parenthood out of the federal family planning program.

Planned Parenthood's exit was compelled by a Trump rule barring eligibility to clinics that offered abortion referral and education or that were not physically and financially separated from abortion clinics. Planned Parenthood formerly served about 40 percent of low-income patients covered by Title X, the federal family planning program that also provides basic health care screenings. The Trump change is estimated by Health and Human Services to have led to up to 180,000 unintended pregnancies.

HHS' proposed rule to restore the program, unfortunately, is expected to take months.

Meanwhile, FDA Commissioner Janet Woodcock announced late Monday that the agency could "exercise enforcement discretion" on use of mifepristone to terminate pregnancies. This means that women in some states will now be able to receive their medication for an abortion via telehealth or mail. During a pandemic that has cost over 563,000 lives, this new policy provides a much-needed safety measure to patients and providers alike.

FFRF has long called for the abolition of in-person requirements for abortion

medication. These FDA regulations are not based in science but upon religious ideology. Mifepristone, a prescription medication used to safely terminate pregnancies, has been used by more than 3 million women in the United States for over 20 years. When combined with misoprostol, this method is 99.6 percent effective. Moreover, adverse reactions are extremely rare and far below the rates of commonly prescribed medications like Lipitor and Ritalin.

However, since the George W. Bush administration added mifepristone to the FDA's Risk Evaluation and Mitigation Strategy program in 2007, it has been extremely difficult to obtain mifepristone. Only 33 states allow physicians to provide abortion pills, and under the Trump policy, women typically had to make at least two in-person appointments to receive the medication before 10 weeks' gestation. This created onerous barriers, adding extra loss of work, travel expenses, child care arrangements and expense, particularly punitive and risky during a pandemic. Above all, this is a burden that has hampered women's constitutional right to abortion.

Simply put, abortion is health care. And the Biden administration's reversal of this in-person requirement for mifepristone is an important step in the right direction. Yet, it should be noted that this change is currently only set for the duration for the pandemic. That means we must continue to champion accessible medication abortion in the future.

THEY SAID WHAT?

Now is the time to flee the public schools. A new river of cash is headed to you and your kids. Find a school, do a deal, and enroll your children. . . . Start this very day by Googling the name of your city and "Catholic schools." Make a list, start calling, asking for the admissions office. Tell them you want in and you have the new benefit coming.

Conservative columnist Hugh Hewitt, shortly after the \$1,400 stimulus payments started hitting people's bank accounts.

Washington Post, 3-17-21



Pope Francis

psychological and spiritual suffering.

Reuters, 3-28-21

Our kids are being told that this kind of product is, not only okay, it's "exclusive." But do you know what's more exclusive? Their God-given eternal soul. We are in a fight for the soul of our nation. We need to fight hard. And we need to fight smart. We have to win.

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, in response to the "Satan Shoes" that allegedly contain one drop of blood and are being promoted by rapper Lil Nas X. The shoes are a PR stunt by the product design company MSCHE.

Twitter, 3-28-21

They are actually talking about people's ability to buy and sell linked to the vaccine passport. They might as well call it Biden's Mark of the Beast.

U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, on Twitter.

The UK Independent, 3-30-21

We are going to go through times of trials and all kinds of awful things, but we still know where we are going at the end. And heaven is so much better than here on Earth. Why would we fight leaving here?

Evangelical Ron Holloway of Missouri, on why he won't get the Covid-19 vaccination.

Associated Press, 4-5-21

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The Equality Act debate hinges on religion

By Mark Dann

Recently, the Equality Act — one of FFRF’s top priorities for legislation — passed the House (224–206). It provides consistent and explicit anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQ people across key areas of life, and it is starting to move in the Senate.

The debate on the Equality Act is instructive on where Congress is on issues relating to the separation of state and church.

The Equality Act was debated on the House floor in 2019 during the previous Congress when religious liberty issues were not front and center. There were exceptions in the form of usual Christian Right hardliners, such as Reps. Virginia Foxx, R-N.C., and Louie Gohmert, R-Texas.



Gohmert mockingly said, “I realize they believe that their [supporters of the bill] way of approaching things includes much more wisdom than that of Moses.”

Most of the attacks were disgusting and full of baseless claims about the transgender community, with fearmongering tangents about transgender athletes ending women’s sports. The opposition presence in the chamber was sparse compared to the large physical presence of members on the “pro” equality side. The opposition even ran out of speakers and didn’t use up its allotted speaking time. Not surprisingly, the “pro” side commanded the floor.

This year, the opposition to the Equality Act has intensified, and more opposition members of Congress see electoral gains in vocally opposing it. A leader of the opposition has been Trump stalwart Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio. The lies about



Image by Shutterstock

transgender Americans were still on full display. But an addition to the opposition attacks were claims that the bill would violate religious freedom.

Jordan expressed the thoughts of many of his colleagues: “They [supporters of the bill] are taking away American citizens’ most fundamental liberty [freedom of religion].” Others, like Rep. Greg Steube, R-Fla., combined contempt for the LGBTQ community and religious freedom. In his floor speech, Steube stated, “It’s not clothing or personal style that offends God, but rather the use of one’s appearance to act out or take on a sexual identity different from the one biologically assigned by God at birth. . . . The gender confusion that exists in our culture today is a clear objection of God’s good design. Whenever a nation’s law no longer reflects the standards of God, that nation is in rebellion against him and will inevitably bear the consequences. . . . And I think we are seeing the consequences of rejecting God here in our country today, and this bill speaks directly against what is laid out in scripture.”

One reason why so many opposition

members are angry about the Equality Act is because of the strong provision in the Equality Act stating that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act can’t be used to discriminate against others. Opposition members of Congress want that provision removed. Their thinking goes: If someone voices a religious objection to the equal treatment of others, that’s the individual’s constitutional right. Deny housing or employment? Fine, if there’s a religious objection. Obviously, FFRF strongly opposes this claim that privileges religion and exempts religionists from honoring civil rights laws.

The anti-equality side of the debate, surprisingly, has added two new members from swing districts: Reps. Victoria Spartz, R-Ind., and Yvette Herrell, R-N.M. Given that 70 percent of all Americans support the Equality Act, it’s odd to see such members of Congress spend their political capital on publicly opposing the Equality Act, especially with a floor speech. In normal times, somewhat vulnerable members would not want to be so vocal in their opposi-

tion to an extremely popular bill.

But these are not normal times.

Opposition members are seeing benefits in vocally opposing pieces of legislation such as the Equality Act. The new calculus is to keep the Christian nationalist base engaged and enraged. Compared to the 2019 debate, the right-wing media ecosystem has intensified and hardened, thanks to Fox News and One America News. The debate is turbocharged with thousands of right-wing social media pages that many of us won’t even know about, due to how algorithms suggest pages to like-minded viewers.

Given the siloing of the media, swing voters who might be turned off by staunch opposition to the Equality Act may not see the tactics that the opposition is using. And, even if these voters do see what is happening, they might deprioritize the Equality Act in favor of other political gains and priorities.

We are seeing that when an issue becomes religious in nature, it can take on a tribal aspect that becomes a live wire in the culture wars. FFRF’s role in Washington, D.C., has not changed. We will continue to work with like-minded organizations to pass our legislative agenda, work with the Biden administration to roll back harmful Trump actions, mobilize and grow the number of FFRF supporters, and build and strengthen the Congressional Freethought Caucus.

Rep. Jamie Raskin, Md., co-chair of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, said it best during his floor speech on the Equality Act: “Every scoundrel in American history has tried to dress up his opposition to other people’s civil rights in religious garb.” We’ve seen this show before. We’ve defeated religious cosplay time and time again — and we’ll keep doing it in the 117th Congress and beyond.

Mark Dann is FFRF’s director of governmental affairs in Washington, D.C.

FFRF applauds Chauvin verdict

The Freedom From Religion Foundation applauds the “guilty on all counts” verdict in the George Floyd murder trial against Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin.

We all watched the horrifying video documenting a helpless African-American’s life being snuffed out by a pitiless and indifferent white police officer. African-American bystanders desperately tried to point out that Floyd was not resisting arrest and then didn’t appear to be breathing during the horrifying nine and a half minutes officer Chauvin remorselessly kept his knees on Floyd’s neck. The prosecutors brought out the details of Chauvin’s cruel restraints — how his body weight was bearing down on Floyd’s lungs, shoulders and windpipe, how Chauvin was pulling at Floyd’s fingers, restraining his legs and ignoring Floyd’s pleas: “Please, please, please, I can’t breathe.”

Since the Floyd killing, our nation

has far greater awareness of police killings of African-Americans. Thankfully, we no longer have a malicious, uncaring president blowing racist dog whistles. But convictions of white police officers for killing Black, Indigenous and People of Color are almost unheard of. “Even as tens of thousands of Americans protest police brutality and demand overhauls of law enforcement, a yawning gulf remains between public perception of police violence and how it is treated in court,” notes The New York Times.

Police shootings of Black Americans by cops continue unabated, including in Minneapolis. Barely a week before the verdict, Daunte Wright, 20, was senselessly shot and killed in a Minneapolis suburb after a minor traffic stop by a police officer who claimed she meant to fire her taser, not her pistol. In late March, a 13-year-old Latino, Adam Toledo, was caught on video being shot to death after being chased by police and obediently tossing a handgun before raising his hands. That is why the Chauvin conviction is so significant.

Americans — white or black, religious or freethinking — must speak up and demand not only justice for Floyd, but a national reckoning with racial profiling, police brutality, vigilantism and institutional indifference and racism. The jury verdict was a step toward this national reckoning.

Reason

Continued from page 1

“Whereas reason provides the vital catalyst for confronting the crises of our day, including the civilizational emergency of climate change, and for cultivating the rule of law, democratic institutions, justice, and peace among nations;

“Where irrationality, magical and conspiratorial thinking, and disbelief in science have undermined the national effort to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, contributing to the death of more than 555,000 people in the United States;

Whereas reason and science are fundamental to implementing an effective coordinated response to beat the Covid-19 virus, which includes improved social confidence in the safety and efficacy of vaccinations and evidence-based solutions to the inequities exacerbated by the pandemic, and involves the federal government, the states, and the scientific and medical communities;

“Whereas America’s Founders in-

sisted upon the primacy of reason and knowledge in public life, and drafted the Constitution to prevent the official establishment of religion and to protect freedom of thought, speech, and inquiry in civil society;

“Whereas James Madison, author of the First Amendment and fourth president of the United States, stated that ‘The advancement and diffusion of knowledge is the only guardian of true liberty,’ and ‘Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives’ and

“Whereas May 7, 2021, would be an appropriate date to designate as a ‘National Day of Reason’: Now, therefore, be it Resolved, that the House of Representatives supports the designation of a ‘National Day of Reason,’ and encourages all citizens, residents, and visitors to join in observing this day and focusing on the central importance of reason, critical thought, the scientific method, and free inquiry to resolving social problems and promoting the welfare of humankind.”

“We are grateful to Rep. Raskin and other co-sponsors for working so that reason and our secular Constitution will prevail,” FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor said.

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.



Rep. Raskin



Rep. Pocan

LETTERBOX

Rowan Humanists cherish Freethoughts of the Day

My job at Rowan Humanists is secretary and Words of Wisdom Presenter. At the end of each Zoom meeting, I display a PowerPoint slide with a photo of a prominent individual who has spoken memorable words that we humanists might use in our daily lives. Freethought of the Day is my main source of these words of wisdom. I have 64 of them, more than we will ever need, but you keep supplying such great quotes, so my inventory keeps expanding. Thank you for these important snippets. They are being repurposed for Rowan Humanists!

P. P.
North Carolina

Editor’s note: To read FFRF’s Freethought of the Day, go to ffrf.org/day.

Donation can be used to bring new Enlightenment

I am enclosing a check for your legal projects.

I’m a regular viewer of your weekly TV program “Freethought Matters” on our local station and find it enjoyable.

I know it’s been a challenging period for your legal staff, but I’m hoping for a new “Enlightenment.” Give my regards to the staff.

W. V.
Minnesota

Editor’s note: “Freethought Matters” will be taking a summer break and will be back on the first Sunday in September.

Despite attempts, I couldn’t be brainwashed

I enjoy reading your paper and cutting out stories to share with friends and relatives. I tried to believe in God as a child, yelling in my bedroom as a 12-year-old in 1956, “God, if you are REAL, let me FEEL you like the people in church and the kids in my Christian School do.” Also, during my early grade school years, the words “under God” were not a part of the Pledge of Allegiance. After they were added, I could never say those two words. I still can’t. I consider the traditional Presbyterian Church music of my childhood spiritual and do enjoy it, though I don’t believe God is anything but something people are brainwashed to believe exists high in the sky. My friends and I say, “We couldn’t be brainwashed.”

C. L.
California

How about calling it a ‘helpful mantis’?

Regarding the cartoon in the March issue, it is entirely ironic that humans named this particular mantis “praying.” Front legs which appear to be in a praying position actually contain sharp tibial spines that are used to skewer and hold the unfortunate victim while the mantis eats it alive. Yum.

I should add that mantises are considered beneficial insects because they keep garden and crop pests under control. Perhaps we just need a better moniker for the helpful fellow.

D. G.
Wisconsin



Prisoners share much with what’s in bible

In one of their videos, YouTubers Lardo and Burley, known as the “Moron Brothers,” ponder the following question: “Why is it that the bible cannot be read in school, but can be read in prison?”

Maybe it’s because many of those in prison have already been involved with murder, rape, incest, etc., that are so prominent in the bible, while our school children need not be subjected to such atrocities.

J. D.
Oklahoma

Kudos to FFRF for stopping ‘That Song’

During a recent re-reading of the March issue, I noticed the “FFRF Victories” item about FFRF making a California school stop publicly singing “God Bless the U.S.A.,” hereinafter called “That Song.” This victory has a special meaning for me.

In 1984-85, I was depressed, unmoored and contemplating suicide because of bad personal breaks, and my disgust with the way my coun-

try was going, which was seemingly determined to re-elect Reagan and follow him into the pit of meanness. And constantly hearing “That Song” on the radio, even on non-country stations, only made my bad feelings worse. Otherwise, I actually liked Lee Greenwood’s music, but when I heard “That Song,” I thought “God (something else) the U.S.A.” And “God (something else) that song!” Even today, when I hear “That Song” start to play, I either change the station, turn off the sound or leave the room.

So that’s why FFRF Attorney Chris Line’s stopping the school from playing “That Song” gave me a special satisfaction. Kudos to him, and to whoever made the original complaint.

A. C. J.
Michigan

No need for a new word or phrase for ‘death’

I must disagree with a March issue letterwriter suggesting a different euphemism than “passed away” for death. We don’t need a new name for it.

Nonbelievers — well, everyone, but especially nonbelievers — should acknowledge death as “death” when it

occurs and not try to soften the blow. After all, death is a fact of life. Precision in speech equals precision in thought, and that’s the best way to communicate.

I have long said that the only people who pass away are errant quarterbacks.

M. S.
New York

Capitol attacks were done by CASHEWS!

Thank you for properly identifying the types of people who were behind the Capitol attacks in January. I propose a new shorthand to identify these lunkheads:

- Christian
- Anti-immigrant
- Sexist
- Homophobic
- Evangelical
- White
- Supremacists

And indeed, many of them are genuinely nuts!

L. C.
Illinois

FFRF’s dollar-bill stamp helps stamp out crime

FFRF seems to have an interest in banknotes.

It gives out “godless” currency at its conventions and it has that most perfect stamp — “In Reason We Trust” — to put on dollar bills. I got two new bands of one-dollar bills and stamped them all.


Then, one Sunday morning, Seattle police trapped a burglar in my house. When he surrendered, he had about 140 dollar bills in his possession. Every single one of them bore that most perfect phrase! Good going, FFRF! Life just keeps getting more fun the older I get.

P. B.
Washington

Editor’s note: You can buy the “In Reason We Trust” stamp here: ffrf.org/shop.

Yip Harburg,
from his book:

Rhymes for the Irreverent



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

Illustrated by Seymore Chwast, published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online - ffrf.org/shop

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Religion is at heart of negative sex attitudes

In the context of an increase in anti-Asian bigotry in America because of the coronavirus, the media and some politicians have been characterizing the murder of eight people (six of

them Asian) in Atlanta as simply more of the same. But there’s something else going on here. The killer apparently had a very strong sex drive, combined with very negative views about sex. It’s something seen in most sex-linked serial killers. The inner conflict caused him to project his self-hatred onto those

women who aroused his “shameful” lust. And to relieve the stress, he killed them, along with anyone else who happened to be on the scene. His perception of these women as “less than” made it easier for him to give vent to his despised sexual urges, and to ultimately kill them.

The core problem here is a negative attitude toward sex. This could only have come from religion. And it turns out that the killer was a member of the Crabapple First Baptist Church (a name I do wish to disseminate). Despite the sexual revolution of the 1960s, we are still a Puritan society. We have an unhealthy attitude toward sex instead of a healthy acceptance of it as natural.

This unhealthy attitude screws a lot of people up. If we had a healthier attitude, there would be a lot less violence against women.

And once again, religion does a poor job improving people’s moral character.
S. V. E.
Pennsylvania

Do religionists even read their own sacred texts?

This is in regard to the news item from the March issue: “Survey: Covid-19 in U.S. has strengthened faith.”

By his own acknowledgment, God not only takes responsibility for evil incapacities and calamities, but also brags about it.

Some examples:
“I form the light, and create darkness. I make peace, and create evil. I, the Lord, do all these things.” (Isaiah 45:7)

“Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and evil come?” (Lamentations 3:38)

“If there is calamity in a city, will not the Lord have done it?” (Amos 3:6)

“Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” (Exodus 4:11)

Isn’t it obvious, then, that religious Americans don’t read their own sacred texts? If they did, the dreadful Covid-19, which God himself brought into the world, would surely weaken his devotees’ faith, rather than strengthen it.

Or perhaps their twisted logic is that God brings evil and calamities into the world so that his worshipers will beg him to save them.

D. Q.
California

‘Freethought Matters’ deserves all accolades

Fortunately, I’m situated about 50 miles from WPIX in New York City, where “Freethought Matters is shown every Sunday at 8:30 a.m.

I’m an ex-Catholic, ex-Methodist, and ex-Presbyterian. Please pass on all thumbs-up for the wonderful program you put on. You folks certainly deserve accolades for this show.
G. G.
New Jersey

QAnon conspiracists are same mold as religionists

Hardly a surprise that the QAnon conspiracy aficionados are also of the very religious variety. It all fits together. What’s the difference between

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

made-up, impossible bible stories and impossible, made-up twists on more recent events, despite solid proof of the opposite, not to mention the insanity exposed? If anything, the latter exposes the unbelievable cruelty of calling school massacres a hoax, face-to-face with parents who lost their children and children who lost their teachers.

There should be no doubt that those who willingly swallow the most impossible, made-up bible stories are far more likely to be fooled by the insane QAnon conspiracy nonsense than more rational, educated people.

J. A.
California

FFRF helping me to become free of dogmas

I recently became a member of FFRF. Thank you so much for sending me a bunch of gifts. I enjoy everything that has been sent: Dan Barker’s CD, a badge, a magnet, notes with signatures. I appreciate everything.

I was born and raised in South Korea and I wondered why society had so much dogma against women. I’m gradually learning to be free from dogmas.

Thank you again for being a fighter.
B. S.
California

New York Times ad by FFRF was not ignorable

On getting to page 5 in my April 6 New York Times, FFRF’s ad really caught my eye. I am well trained, over many years, at totally ignoring ads when I read newspapers, but this one was not ignorable!

Congrats!
L. L.
California

• • •

The full-page ad in The New York Times was fabulous!

You correctly identified the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol as a “faith-based initiative.” And just as I began writing this, the Ron Reagan FFRF ad played on MSNBC during the Rachel Maddow show. Together, these two events provided an FFRF double whammy for recruitment. Wow!

I very much look forward to the post-pandemic day when FFRF can once again resume full operations and meetings. In the meantime, stay well and stay safe.

F. C.
New York

Gaylor’s book offers both solace and ammunition

I want you to know how much I appreciate Annie Laurie Gaylor’s book, *Women Without Superstition — No Gods, No Masters*. I have two copies — one for the shelf, one for the study. It’s given me both solace and ammunition for the fundamentalists with which my town is full.

C. F.
Oklahoma



Photo from Belleville News-Democrat

Joseph Cunningham has planted thousands of daffodils over the years along a highway near his home in Mascoutah.

Flowery prose

Some townspeople are asking about the big “JC” formed by daffodils on a high road bank leading into Mascoutah.

I didn’t do that. Around five years ago, a member of the St. Louis Garden Club called and asked to come over to see my millions of daffodils. She wanted to see me work. I had about five big buckets of daffodil bulbs to plant that day. She asked if she could have one of the buckets of bulbs to plant. How could I refuse?

I gave her one bucket; she went to one section of the highway banks, I to another. After a few hours of working, we met up again. Then she went back to St. Louis and I to Mascoutah.

Mascoutah residents are now asking me if I planted those initials in flowers along Route 4. I went out to check; sure enough, there is a big “JC” made from daffodils.

Now, after I am dead and long forgotten, new residents of Mascoutah will see these initials and think: “JC? Oh, Jesus Christ must have done that — another of his miracles!”

I wish she had made an “NC” for my late wife, Norma Cunningham.

Oh, well, I have not the strength to change them now, but I am going out to Highway 4 on my 95th birthday and plant a few (very few) daffodils so I can say that I planted on my birthday.

Joseph Cunningham

Editor’s note: Joe and the late Norma Cunningham served on FFRF’s Executive Board for many years. To read the story about Joe and the daffodils from the April 12, 2015, Belleville News-Democrat, go to bit.ly/3rEd2UF.

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

Cryptogram answer
We are all atheists about most of the gods that humanity has ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further.
— Richard Dawkins

Religious governors a danger to our health

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

We “Nones,” atheists and agnostics can properly take pride in the freethought movement’s pro-science and pro-public health actions during this pandemic. Religious-minded public officials, however, occupy the other end of the spectrum.



Photo by Chris Line
Annie Laurie Gaylor

Atheists are the most likely to say we will get a vaccine, while white evangelical Protestants are the least likely to, according to Pew Research Center. Nine in 10 atheists say they would definitely or probably get a vaccine or already have had one, compared to 77 percent of Catholics, 65 percent of Black Protestants and 54 percent of white evangelical Protestants. Similarly, only about 56 percent of Republicans and GOP-leaning independents say they’ll get a vaccine, compared to eight in 10 Democrats or Democratic-leaning independents.

As has been well-documented, Christian nationalism may determine whether you wear a mask or, if you are a public official, mandate masking. A survey last fall showed that subscribing to Christian nationalist views is the second leading predictor of whether someone would engage in precautionary measures, such as social distancing, wearing masks and washing hands.

And therein lies a huge problem: Many public officials, including governors, are disproportionately white Protestants or Catholics — some of them indeed strong Christian nationalists. These public officials with reli-



Photo by Shutterstock

Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott proclaimed churches “essential services” a year ago, making an exception for church services in his stay-at-home order.

giously impaired judgment are calling the public health shots for the rest of us in irresponsible ways that are costing Americans’ health and lives, and crippling our nation’s recovery from the pandemic. Yes, the nation dodged a bullet when it unseated the last president, a Christian nationalist panderer, most of whose Covid-19 policies were harmful and full of “alternative facts.” But almost half of our states are led by similar panderers or true believers who have or are shunning science and common sense.

About 64 percent of Americans live in counties where there is a very high

or extremely high risk of exposure to Covid-19. With 65,000 new cases a day, the most common variant of the coronavirus is the highly infectious version originating in the United Kingdom. B.1.1.7 is 60 percent more contagious and 67 percent more deadly than the original form of the virus.

This is no time for governors and public officials to relax vigilance.

Yet 21 states have no statewide face covering mandates. Ten states recently lifted statewide mask mandates, eight via gubernatorial order (Arkansas, Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, Montana, North

Dakota, Texas and Wyoming), one by court order (Wisconsin) and one by legislation action (Kansas). Alabama’s mask mandate has also just ended.

What is happening in the FFRF’s home state of Wisconsin is a travesty, just to take one example. The Wisconsin Legislature, along partisan lines, overrode Gov. Tony Evers’ Covid-19 emergency order and mask mandate, even knowing this action would cost a catastrophic loss in federal supplemental benefits tied to state mandates. In early April, the ultraconservative Wisconsin Supreme Court struck down the mask mandate — despite knowing that beginning in May hungry state citizens will lose out on a total of more than \$50 million per month in supplemental food aid. Had the court been willing to wait only one more day before issuing the ruling, the state still would have received the \$50 million payment for May. The court’s and the Legislature’s callous, cavalier cruelty makes Scrooge look like a philanthropist.

Most of the governors who have refused to issue or are rescinding masking orders are religious Republicans (see list below), many of whom preferred to proclaim unconstitutional days of prayer over Covid-19 rather than show responsible leadership.

Are these public officials just too religious to care? Are they truly so blinded to facts, evidence, science and compassion? It seems so.

FFRF and its membership have our work cut out for us in combating so many public officials whose true allegiance lies with religious lobbies, churches and their own particular dogmas, instead of their oath of office. That oath includes upholding the preamble of the U.S. Constitution, which calls for promoting the public welfare of We the People.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-president of FFRF.

“Are these public officials just too religious to care? Are they truly so blinded to facts, evidence, science and compassion? It seems so.”

How governors used their power to promote religion

- **Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey** held a prayer (which FFRF protested) while announcing a statewide stay-at-home order last spring. She declared May 7 last year as a day of prayer in light of Covid-19 and quoted the New Testament in a statement urging citizens to stay at home if possible.
- **Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy** refused mandates, instead calling for an “Alaska Day of Prayer and Hope.”
- **Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey** has signed a law to protect many entities, including religious institutions, from being sued over Covid-19. Last April, he issued an Easter/Passover proclamation imploring a turn toward prayer “in times of trials and uncertainty.”
- **Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis** belatedly encouraged social distancing a year ago but has still urged Floridians to “Please keep God close.” He has exempted churches from social distancing rules. He has also steadfastly refused to enact statewide mask mandates and is working to strike down local face-covering ordinances.
- **Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp** in February announced the “Faith Protection Act” to ensure the gover-

- nor’s emergency powers could not be used to “specifically limit the practice of any religion.” He held a prayer service and day of prayer at the Georgia Capitol last April, which streamed live on Facebook.
- **Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds** (who recently got publicly vaccinated), issued a “Day of Prayer” for Covid-19 in Iowa a year ago instead of a masking mandate.
- **Idaho Gov. Brad Little** refused to issue a mask mandate and asked “Idaho to unite in prayer” over Covid. He did indicate that he would be attending church remotely at that time.
- **Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves** said on Nov. 30, in opposing church limitations, that “God is bigger than government,” promising “The right to freely practice your faith must never be infringed.” He also held a “Statewide Day of Prayer, Humility and Fasting.”
- **Missouri Gov. Michael Parson** on multiple occasions has appealed to prayers and citizens to pray and last spring exempted houses of worship from social distancing rules.
- **Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte**, who tested positive for Covid-19, along

- with his wife, reversed some public health restrictions implemented by previous Gov. Steve Bullock. They attend Grace Bible Church, a non-denominational church.
- **Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts** proclaimed Dec. 30 as a “Day of Prayer” for “relief from the pandemic.” (Ricketts notoriously signed a proclamation this year declaring *Roe v. Wade* as an “Annual Statewide Day of Prayer to End Abortion.”)
- **North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum** started a press conference last spring with prayer, although he did thank churches for being “North Dakota Smart” by not holding in-person services at that time.
- **Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt** declared Dec. 3 — as virus cases surged — a statewide day of prayer and fasting for Oklahomans affected by Covid-19.
- **South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster** not only proclaimed a day of prayer over the pandemic last May, but championed a bill to treat churches and other religious organizations as “essential services” during a state of emergency (which has passed the House). FFRF complained many times about his use of

- prayer at official press briefings including about his March 19 conference. McMaster tried to misallocate \$32 million in coronavirus aid to students attending private schools but was successfully sued.
- **South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem** proclaimed a day of prayer over the virus and recently defended her hands-off approach to Covid-19.
- **Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee** told mayors last year to pray about the virus, rather than pass mandates. Last May, he issued an executive order blocking local governments from regulating places of worship to stop the spread of the virus. He announced he would send out prayers in January three times a week for the next four weeks about Covid-19. Although he had sharp words for churches a year ago last March that were still meeting in person, he exempted churches from in-person limitations imposed late last December.
- **Texas Gov. Greg Abbott** proclaimed churches “essential services” a year ago, making an exception for church services in his stay-at-home order. Abbott urged “Texans of faith to lift each other up in prayer.”