

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



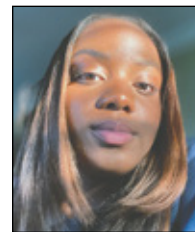
God has no place in Supreme Court decisions

PAGE 6



Winners of FFRF's college essay contest announced

PAGES 12-18



Forward Freethought award winners announced

PAGE 20-21

Vol. 38 No. 8

Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

October 2021



Billboards target 'megapreachers'

FFRF kicked off in Nashville a national billboard campaign in September targeting what FFRF calls "irresponsible megapreachers."

The 14-by-48-foot billboards, in a stained-glass-window motif, gave the advice to "Sleep in on Sunday" and "Enjoy life now — there is no afterlife."

The eye-catching billboards were on I-24 West, west of Briley Parkway, and on Lebanon Road, a

mile east of Andrew Jackson Parkway. They went up in early September and were up for a full month. The billboard messages were directed at megachurch pastors Kent Christmas of Regeneration Nashville, and Greg Locke of Global Vision Bible Church, and, of course, their flocks.

Locke is the incendiary preacher who has perpetuated QAnon conspiracy myths and has castigated the pope, Oprah Winfrey and Tom Hanks. He has called President Biden "demon-possessed," Vice President Kamala Harris a "jezebel demon" and claimed they oversee "child-

See Billboards on page 2

Texas abortion law

FFRF condemns Supreme Court's blow to Roe

In a shocking action, the U.S. Supreme Court issued an order officially declining to block Texas's draconian abortion ban.

In a 5-4 ruling, the high court rejected a request to bar enforcement of the law, contending that applicants failed to meet their burden to stay the law. The one-paragraph opinion was unsigned. Gratifyingly, Chief Justice John Roberts joined the court's liberal bloc — Justices Sonia Sotomayor, Stephen Breyer and Elena Kagan — in dissenting.

The Texas law that went into effect Sept. 1 is the most restrictive abortion law in the country, banning abortion procedures after six weeks of gestation — which is two weeks after a missed period and before most women even know that they are pregnant. Outrageously, the law deputizes private citizens to file civil suits against abortion providers or anyone who assists someone in obtaining an abortion, offering a "bounty" reward of \$10,000 and attorneys' fees for a successful lawsuit.

Roberts, joined in his dissent by Kagan and Breyer, noted that

See Roe on page 7

FFRF's new Reagan ad airs on Colbert, Maddow

A fresh version of an iconic Freedom From Religion ad featuring Ron Reagan premiered on Rachel Maddow's and Stephen Colbert's highly watched TV shows.



Ron Reagan

The updated ad, in which the "unabashed atheist" is still notably "not afraid of burning in hell," debuted on MSNBC's "Rachel Maddow Show." It ran six times be-

tween Sept. 7 and Sept. 16.

The new 30-second spot also appeared six times on "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert," on CBS nationally, from Sept. 20 through Sept. 30.

This year is the first year that the CBS national network has accepted the ad.

In the updated TV spot, Reagan, a former ballet dancer, is still seated on stage in an empty auditorium — but the new ad is more colorful, with added technical pizzazz and a few minor modifications. Reagan's memorable lines still sing:

"Hi, I'm Ron Reagan, an unabashed atheist, and I'm alarmed, as you may be, by the intrusion of religion into our secular government. That's why I'm asking you to join the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the nation's largest and most effective association of atheists and agnostics, working to keep state and church separate, just like our Founders intended. Please join the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Ron Reagan, lifelong atheist, not afraid of burning in hell."

Ron also recorded a more intimate 50-second digital spot reflecting on

what's changed since he first recorded the spot in 2014.

Reagan, who is the son of President Reagan and Nancy Reagan, has spoken on FFRF's "Freethought Matters" TV show about why he stopped attending church as a 12-year-old and what happened when he told his father. He has received FFRF's Emperor Has No Clothes Award for his outspoken, lifelong identification as an atheist and advocate of the separation between religion and government.

See Reagan on page 10

Goodbye, and thank you, Ed Asner

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

Meeting and interviewing Ed Asner, who died Aug. 29, has to be one of the most serendipitous and memorable moments from a lifetime spent working with the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Our meeting all began in late 2019, when Amit Pal, our director of communications who previously worked with The Progressive magazine, noted that Ed would be in town for a fundraising play for the publication. He asked me: "Would you like me to see if FFRF can interview him?" I re-



Annie Laurie Gaylor

Photo by Chris Line

interview with Ed Asner for FFRF's TV show, "Freethought Matters," in FFRF's Stephen Uhl Friendly Atheist Studio in our office in downtown Madison, Wis. His daughter Liza, who was

member replying, "Sure! But that seems like a long shot."

To my great delight, Amit and The Progressive came through, and we set up an appointment to record an

associated with the fundraising show and indicated she is an atheist, was extremely helpful and emailed about directions. Shortly before they were due to arrive, there was a knock on the back door by my first-floor office. It was Liza, unsure where to park. She asked if I could come out and direct them after I told her she was in the wrong driveway. I ran out in my high-heeled shoes and no coat into the icy December morning and got into the backseat of the car to direct her.

"Who're you?" asked Ed, who was sitting in the front seat.

See Asner on page 2



Ed Asner cradles FFRF's Clarence Darrow award given to him in 2020.

Asner

Continued from page 1

I told him my name. He immediately began serenading me with the old Scottish ballad I am named for. “Maxwellton’s braes are bonnie,” he belted out, “where early falls the dew.” He was still singing by the time we got around the block and into the proper driveway. As I got out, I asked him: “Would you be willing to sing that song during the interview?”

“Sure,” he replied.

And indeed he did. After Dan Barker and I introduced Ed as the legendary seven-time Emmy-winning actor and progressive activist, we interviewed him about his freethinking credentials. Before the first segment ended, I reminded him that he had said he would be willing to sing “Annie Laurie.” He said, “Say please.” I did — and the rest is history.

He was so gracious that I dared another request. After the show, when he was willing to pose with the crew, I told him our young staff of almost 30 were so excited to learn he was in the building. Would he be willing to meet them in our lobby?

“Sure.”

While waiting for the staff to assemble, I pointed out to him the framed photo of my mother in the Anne Nicol Gaylor Lobby, and mentioned that she was FFRF’s principal founder and had died in 2015. He glanced at me sympathetically and asked her age when she died. “Eighty-eight,” I told him. He nodded



Photo by Chris Line

Ed Asner sits in the Anne Nicol Gaylor Lobby of Freethought Hall in Madison, Wis., surrounded by most of the FFRF staff in this 2019 photo.

sympathetically, then asked about my dad. “He died in 2011 at 84,” I told him. He reminded me so much of my father — in particular his gruff, humorous demeanor. They were the same generation, a generation we are quickly losing.

I also showed him the Clarence Darrow statuette on display in our lobby — a miniature of the 7-foot-tall statue created

by sculptor Zenos Frudakis, which FFRF placed in Dayton, Tenn., on the lawn of the courthouse where the Scopes trial was conducted. I explained that the actor John De Lancie, who had portrayed Clarence Darrow in a play opposite Ed Asner as William Jennings Bryan, had helped dedicate the statue at the unveiling.

Ed raised his eyebrows when I told

him John had been given the first award. “What about me?” he asked. Soon after, we arranged to name Ed Asner our 2020 Clarence Darrow Award honoree, and, during the lockdown, he sent a video speech accepting the statuette, which he cradled in his arms. In that short acceptance speech, Ed said: “You are so essential to a democracy. It’s not easy to challenge religion in America, but it’s most necessary.”

I recently emailed him to ask if he would give us permission to use that endorsement publicly in our materials.

“Sure,” came the reply.

Before his death, I was watching the Netflix TV series “Grace and Frankie,” co-starring Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin. Lo and behold, there, at the end of the fourth episode, was Ed. He was in an electric scooter and his diction seemed a wee bit less firm, but he commanded the screen, as always. The pandemic slowed production, and the rest of the episodes are still being filmed. I hope Ed was able to complete his role in that filming. His work ethic, right to the very end, is so amazing, and his commitment, including going on the road in the ice and snow in late 2019 to do a fundraiser for The Progressive magazine, and stopping on the way to visit us here at FFRF.

Ed Asner touched so many lives as an actor and an activist, and I’m ever grateful he spared so much time for us at the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-president of FFRF.

Billboard

Continued from page 1

trafficking” tunnels underneath the White House. Locke termed Donald Trump the “legitimate” leader of the United States in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election. Most concerning, the pastor was in the mob outside the U.S. Capitol during the Jan. 6 insurrection, praying with a bullhorn — and hyped the riot ahead of time. After the riot, he was banned by social media. Unfortunately, Locke remains influential, with more than 2 million followers on Facebook.

Kent Christmas, who is founding pastor of Regeneration Nashville and heads Kent Christmas Ministries International, has likewise insisted that Trump won the presidential election, and that the presidential race was “a war between heaven and hell.” Christmas, who is stridently opposed to abortion and gay rights, and routinely spouts off about “demons” and “sin,” claims to be a prophet of doom.

In its billboard campaign, FFRF advised the good folks of Nashville to ignore these figures.

“It would be far better to sleep in on

Sunday — or commune with nature or volunteer to help someone — than to waste time getting infected with disinformation by either of these blowhards,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. “The only afterlife that ought to concern any of us is leaving our descendants and planet a secure and pleasant future.”

Locke recorded a video of himself burning a copy of the book, *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism Is Un-American*, written by Andrew L. Seidel, FFRF’s director of strategic response. “America would be kinder, healthier and happier if fewer people listened to Locke and more listened to their conscience. Don’t waste another minute swallowing the hate spewed by these peddlers of outrage,” says Seidel. “Take a nap instead.”

Gaylor notes that the “truly good news” is that church attendance in the United States is dropping off precipitously, with less than half of Americans claiming to belong to a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 70 percent church membership in 1999.

Similar billboard messages from FFRF will soon be aimed at Houston megapreacher Joel Osteen.

OVERHEARD

Nobody really chooses a religion. We’re born with it and then we try to justify it because we get emotionally attached.

Alaa Al Awwany, renowned Egyptian novelist.
Wall Street Journal, 8-6-21



Katherine Stewart

The end-of-the-world vision at the heart of the new Republican orthodoxy may help explain a further observation: The people who attend these kinds of religious nationalist gatherings — the activist backbone of the Republican Party — are in no mood to back down from the Jan. 6th attempt to subvert the presidential election through a brutal and disgraceful attack on our Capitol.

Columnist and author Katherine Stewart, in her article, “What’s missing from popular discussions of today’s Christian nationalism?”
Religion Dispatches, 8-9-21

False equivalence is the bread and butter of the post-truth approach, and the upshot, thanks to misguided media insistence on giving “both sides” of any “controversy” a hearing, has been the normalization of extremism and the enabling of America’s surging conspiratorial far Right — especially the Christian Right.

Chrissy Stroop, in her article, “Is being trans a religion? Why the Christian Right wants you to think so.”
Religion Dispatches, 8-6-21

Why are we systematically killing the scientific spirit by instilling in our citizens a body of irrational thought? Let us unite to denounce pseudoscience and promote the scientific spirit

and temper.

Partha P. Majumder, writing about the establishment of a Master’s program in astrology at Indira Gandhi National Open University.
The Indian Express, 8-25-21

Many rank-and-file conservative Christians have come to see their faith as a form of identity threatened by the forces of secularism and diversity.

E.J. Dionne Jr., in his column, “Can religion strengthen democracy?”
Washington Post, 8-25-21

Democrats must not take for granted the increasing number of atheists and agnostics in their coalition. . . . Data indicate that atheists are the most politically active religious group in the United States in recent years. In a 2018 survey, atheists were twice as likely to donate money or work for a political candidate as white evangelicals. Atheists want the Democratic Party to become more progressive and are unlikely to remain silent if they don’t see changes.

Ryan Burge, political science professor at Eastern Illinois University, in his column, “A more secular America is not just a problem for Republicans.”
The New York Times, 8-25-21

I am sure Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, who famously spends a good deal of his time composing press releases about religious liberty issues in other states, will be proud to see that Texas’s robust religious liberty laws, which he so vociferously champions, will prevent future abortion rituals from being interrupted by superfluous government restrictions meant only to shame and harass those seeking an abortion.

Lucien Greaves, spokesperson for The Satanic Temple, which is suing Texas for the abortion restrictions “which impede TST’s abortion ritual.”
TheSatanicTemple.com, 9-5-21

ffrf

FREETHOUGHT
TODAY

Published by Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

P.O. Box 750
info@FFRF.org
P 608.256.8900

EDITOR
EDITOR EMERITUS
EXECUTIVE PUBLISHER
GRAPHIC DESIGNER
COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR
CONTRIBUTORS

Madison WI 53701
FFRF.org
F 608.204.0422

PJ Slinger fttoday@FFRF.org
Bill Dunn
Annie Laurie Gaylor
Roger Daleiden
Amit Pal

Ryan Craygun, Linda Greenhouse, James A. Haught, Kristina M. Lee,
Chris Line, Andrew L. Seidel, Phil Zuckerman
The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Tax the churches!

How much do religious organizations not pay?

This article first ran on *TheConversation.com* on Aug. 12 and is reprinted with permission.

By Ryan Cragun

The hashtag #TaxTheChurches began trending on Twitter in mid-July. The spark was allegations about the wealth of celebrity pastor Joel Osteen. But it wasn't the first time that "tax the churches" has circulated. In fact, it is a slogan that long predates social media — Frank Zappa was singing it back in 1981, and Mark Twain expressed similar sentiments many decades before that.

As a sociologist of religion, I've long been interested in why religious institutions are exempt from certain taxes and what that means in potential lost revenue for the United States. In 2012, I examined this issue and estimated that in total, churches in the United States get out of paying around \$71 billion in taxes annually.



Ryan Cragun

Auditing churches

Most religious organizations are exempt from a variety of taxes that individuals and businesses are required to pay, like income and property taxes. These exemptions began formally in 1913 at the federal level, though there is a much longer history of exempting charitable, educational, scientific and religious institutions from taxation. It is important to note that faith organizations can be exempt from paying taxes solely based on their religious work, not for any other charitable endeavors. Churches and religious organizations — which the IRS loosely defines as entities organized for "religious purposes" or for "advancing religion" — are listed separately from other tax-exempt entities and charities and can be subject to different rules. Some religious congregations do engage in relief efforts for the poor and needy, but many do not. And of the ones that do, many give a very small amount of their revenue for such charitable purposes.



Photo image by Shutterstock

Unlike charities, churches and other places of worship are not required to report any financial information to the IRS.

Additionally, unlike charities, churches and other places of worship are not required to report any financial information to the IRS. The IRS encourages churches to do so, but they are not required to. And it can be an onerous process for the IRS to gain approval to audit places of worship, requiring prior evidence of abuse of tax exemptions reported by a high-level Treasury employee.

In many places in the United States, income is taxed at the local, state and federal levels. Religious institutions do not pay any income tax at any level of government. Additionally, individuals and corporations that donate to religions can deduct those expenses — once they are above a specific amount — from their taxable income.

Heavenly bank accounts

Religious organizations also pay no taxes on their investments, whether it be interest they earn on their investments or in capital gains — the increased value of stock from when the stock was purchased. As such, they are able to invest excess revenue in the stock market or other investment instruments, but pay no taxes on the corresponding earnings. One Fortune 500 company, Thrivent, originated as a financial-services organization for Missouri Synod Lutherans in 1902, and then for all Lutherans in the 1960s. It was called Thrivent Financial for Lutherans up to 2014, but it now manages the investments of members of many religious congregations.

Religious endowments and investment accounts total in the hundreds of billions of dollars in the United States. Just how much money religious organizations have is hard to tell, as churches

are not required to report such information. However, the net worth of some well-known pastors, like Kenneth Copeland and Pat Robertson, are estimated to run into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Religious organizations pay no sales tax. This means that when representatives of a religious entity make a purchase — office supplies, cars or travel, for example — they are exempted from whatever the local sales tax is in that area. They also pay no income taxes for businesses they own if they can show that the business furthers the objectives of the religion. For example, a bookstore that sells religious books would be exempt.

Religious organizations may pay employment taxes for their employees. However, there are exceptions built into the tax code here as well. Clergy and members of religious orders are the only citizens who can opt out of paying Self-Employed Contributions Act taxes, which are 15.3 percent taxes on income for self-employed individuals that pay for Social Security and other federal benefits.

If religious clergy opt out of the SECA tax, they cannot receive Social Security benefits. Clergy can also deduct the upkeep costs of their "parsonage" — their home or apartment — from their taxable income.

Finally, religious organizations pay no property taxes. Property taxes are primarily used in the United States to fund local services like firefighting, emergency medical services and police departments, as well as schools and other infrastructure, all of which religious organizations use.

Some municipalities make informa-

tion on property taxes publicly available, so it is relatively easy to work out the cost of this tax exemption to local communities. I looked at Manatee County in Florida as an example. Manatee County is a midsize county in Florida with just over 300,000 citizens living in a mixture of rural and urban areas. Recent data suggests that Manatee County is close to the national average when it comes to the religious makeup of its residents. Finally, Florida property values and the cost of living rank almost exactly in the middle of all U.S. states, making Manatee County a fairly representative illustration of the nation generally.

Manatee County's public portal indicates which properties are classified as churches and are therefore exempt from "ad valorem" taxes — those based on the assessed value of the property — and other property taxes. By downloading the "just market values" for the 360 properties classified as having a religious exemption, I was able to work out that their combined value was \$406.7 million. If they paid the standard property taxes required of both commercial and residential properties in Manatee County, they would add \$8.5 million to the tax revenue of the county annually. With the county's budget at \$740 million, an additional \$8.5 million works out to be about 1.1 percent of the total. This, according to the 2022 Manatee County budget proposal, would be enough to cover the building of all three newly proposed emergency medical services stations in the county, along with upgrades of EMS equipment and its 911 service.

Projecting those numbers out to the entire U.S. population is tricky. The number and proportion of religiously exempt properties vary by county, property values and tax rates vary across the country, and the value of religiously exempt properties varies as well.

But if one assumed that the exempt taxes are uniform across the country based on the information derived from Manatee County — which, to be clear, they're not — local and state governments forgo roughly \$6.9 billion in tax revenue annually by exempting religious from paying property taxes.

This is just an estimate — it is nearly impossible to know the actual amount, and it may be that the true figure is even higher. If churches and other places of worship were required to file annual financial reports, researchers could use that information to evaluate the financial health of religious entities in the United States.

It would also give a clearer understanding as to how much, in Twain's words, "the infidel and the atheist and the man without religion are taxed to make up the deficit in the public income" caused by the exemption for churches.

With such information more readily available, the public would find it much easier to discuss the merits of a hashtag campaign like #TaxTheChurches.

Ryan Cragun is professor of sociology at the University of Tampa.

Editor's note: This article is part of a partnership the Chronicle of Philanthropy has forged with the Associated Press and The Conversation to expand coverage of philanthropy and nonprofits. The three organizations receive support for this work from the Lilly Endowment.

MOVING?

Don't miss your next issue of **Freethought Today**

Please notify us of your address change promptly!
email: info@ffrf.org
or phone: 1-800-335-4021

FFRF cannot be responsible for replacing back issues if we have not been notified prior to your move.

The U.S. Post Office does not forward third-class mail.

FFRF's classic 'Freethinker' mug

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

\$25 each, 2 for \$40
Item# MU01

Order online ffrf.org/shop

Freethought Today Cryptogram

IR CSMR WCPB JVR KPDR WJ SUULRFPSWR
WCR YLSVQ QRBPYV JD WCR AVPMRLBR SVQ
DJL WCSW, P SH REWLRHRKT YLSWRDAK.
— BWRUCRV CSIZPVY

This puzzle is from *Freethinking Cryptograms* by FFRF member Brooks Rimes, available on Amazon.com for \$8.95. See bottom of page for description and hint for this puzzle. Answer is on page 23.

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8		9	10	11	12
13						14				15			
16						17				18			
	19					20			21	22			
			23				24						
25	26	27		28		29			30		31	32	33
35			36		37			38		39			
40					41				42		43		
44				45		46				47			
48					49		50			51		52	
				53		54			55		56		
57	58	59	60					61				62	63
64						65	66			67			68
69						70				71			
72						73				74			

Answers on page 21 Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Across

1. Aquarellist’s tool

6. *Freethinker Ben Gibbard’s band Death___ for Cutie

9. *Freethinker ___ Luxemburg

13. Cover turkey with juices, e.g.

14. Acronym, abbreviated

15. Naughty dog?

16. Cloudless

17. Get the picture

18. The kids in “Eight is Enough,” e.g.

19. * ___ Hemingway: “All thinking men are atheists”

21. *Freethinker Susan B. ___

23. Part of URL

24. Largest organ of human body

25. Like low relief

28. * ___thought Hall, Madison, WI

30. Embankments

35. Like some wines

37. Mimicked

39. Elizabeth II’s headdress

40. Head of family

41. *Bible quote: “Let the ___ learn in silence with all subjection,” 1Timothy 2:11

43. Related to ear

44. Relating to eye

46. Storage cylinder

47. Hitting the jackpot, e.g.

48. King of Pylos in Greek

50. Actress Campbell

52. ___ de deux

53. *Big one

55. Compass point between E and NE

57. *The Science Guy, 2 words

61. *Freethinking “M*A*S*H” movie director Robert ___

64. Bye to Edith Piaf

65. Corn unit

67. *Freethinking Norwegian playwright, “A Doll’s House” author

69. Upward

70. Food coloring, e.g.

71. Employer’s good news

72. Type of email box

73. Little Mermaid’s domain

74. Clear the blackboard, e.g.

12. Bohemian

15. Portmanteau of ‘robot’ and ‘network’

20. Scarecrow stuffing

22. Nada or nothing

24. Appearing

25. *Atheist actor who as Ren McCormick took on Rev. Shaw in “Footloose”

26. Wide open

27. Between Octs and Novs

29. Epic poem

31. Violin’s Renaissance predecessor

32. Consume, 2 words

33. “The Goldbergs” sibling

34. *Neurologist Oliver ___, author of “Awakenings” and self-proclaimed Jewish atheist

36. Nike slogan “Just ___”

38. River valley, especially in England

42. Writer’s opus

45. A.k.a. hazelnut

49. Dose of sunshine

51. Complete

54. Opposite of wants

56. Imprison

57. Barnyard sounds

58. Inactive

59. Regal mammal

60. Hit the road

61. Equals s squared

62. Largest continent

63. Loch with “monster”

66. Pirate’s assent, once

68. Clinton ___ Rodham

Down

1. England’s popular broadcasting acronym

2. Respiratory rattling

3. Drug addict

4. Custer’s last one was at Little Bighorn

5. Concerning this

6. Those in a play

7. Card with one pip

8. Spring vacation

9. “Lifestyles of the ___ and Famous”

10. A “Simpsons” palindrome

11. Witnessed

After three churches, Rimes found reason

Name: Brooks Rimes.
Where I live: Grand Island, N.Y.
Where and when I was born: Buffalo, N.Y., 1953.
Family: I live with my wife, Brenda. We celebrated our 40th anniversary in March. Sons, their spouses and grandchildren live nearby.
Education: I have an associate of applied sciences degree in data processing and professional certifications from Microsoft.

Occupation: I retired in 2015 from software work with a major regional bank headquartered in Buffalo. During my career, I spent many years at Moore Business Forms and Electronic Data Systems (during the Ross Perot years). I also have a sole proprietorship (“The Access Guy”) and continue to do a small amount of paid and pro-bono work.

How I got where I am today: I was raised Roman Catholic, attended a public school, but once a week was sent to “religious instructions” and made my first communion and confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church. Later, my mother took my brother and me to a Wesleyan Methodist church. Members jumping out of their pews to give personal testimonials in the middle of a sermon were quite a departure from the Catholic Church. Later, I joined a Presbyterian church due to the minister being such a nice fellow and became a deacon and quite involved in that church.

Where I’m headed: Doing snowbirding throughout the United States in a motorhome with my wife. Later, traveling to a long bucket list of international destinations when the Covid-19 situation improves.

Person in history I admire and why: Carl Sagan, both for his work in astronomy (creator of “Cosmos”) and his free-thinking writing.

A quotation I like: “I feel that we should stop wasting our time trying to please the supernatural and concentrate on improving the welfare of human beings.” — Ruth Hurmence Green, American author.

Things I like: Travel, hiking, biking, doing things with our sons and grandchildren, board games, puzzles, writing software, mysteries, science fiction, libraries and Mensa gatherings.



Brooks Rimes with his wife Brenda.

Things I smite: All those who try to force their religion onto others and/or remove the separation between church and state.

My doubts about religion started: The three churches I attended raised many unanswerable questions in my mind. My tipping point came shortly after a family member joined a born-again Christian church and I learned of their beliefs that they were the only

ones that would go to heaven. It became apparent that all the major religions have conflicting and ludicrous supernatural beliefs. It was time to stop thinking about which was “correct” and to come to the obvious conclusion that they are all false and based on fables.

Before I die: I would like to live for one or more months in one or more foreign countries and I would like to see the percent of “Nones” in the USA dramatically increase.

Ways I promote freethought: Belonging to and supporting FFRF, the Center For Inquiry and American Atheists. And writing the book *Freethinking Cryptograms* (available on Amazon).

[Editor’s note: His cryptogram puzzles are featured in each issue on Page 4.]

I wish you had asked me about: Volunteer work. I am a past member of the Lions Club International and Rotary International and currently work with the local chapter of SCORE, an arm of the Small Business Administration that mentors entrepreneurs.

Note to members

For those of you who get the PDF version of Freethought Today, there have been a few changes to the content you can see. Because of privacy concerns — the PDF can be easily forwarded to non-members — FFRF has stopped including in the PDF version the Black Collar Crime report, names of new Lifetime members, and the names of the Letterbox contributors. The online version at freethoughttoday.com also follows this protocol. Only the actual print newspaper contains all of these items. If you would like to continue reading

Black Collar Crime, see the names of FFRF’s newest Lifetime members, or see the names of those who contributed to our Letterbox, you will need to change your preferences in how you receive Freethought Today. In order to do that, follow these simple steps: Log into you FFRF.org account. Click on “Update your contact information.” Go down to “Deliver Freethought Today by” and click on either “Newspaper by mail” or “Both PDF and paper copy.” Click “Submit.”

Cryptogram hint

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

Atheists show higher morals than the pious

This article first appeared Aug. 21 on Salon.com and is reprinted with permission.

By Phil Zuckerman

Two recent events have shed an illuminating light on who is and who isn't moral in today's world.

First, Cardinal Raymond Burke, a leader in the U.S. Catholic Church and a staunch anti-masker/vaxxer, was put on a ventilator as a result of his suffering from Covid-19. Second, the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its latest data-rich report, warning that "unless there are rapid and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, limiting warming to close to 1.5 degrees Celsius or even 2 degrees Celsius will be beyond reach."

The global pandemic and the rapid warming of our planet — these dire phenomena are, above all, deeply moral matters in that they both entail care for the well-being of others and a desire to alleviate misery and suffering.

Now, while most people assume that such a morality is grounded in religious faith, and while it is certainly true that all religions contain plenty of moral ideals, in our nation today, it is actually the most secular among us who are exhibiting a greater moral orientation — in the face of deadly threats — than the most devout among us, who are exhibiting the least.

Before proceeding, let me make it clear: When I say the "most secular among us," I mean atheists, agnostics, people who never attend religious services, don't think the bible is the word of God, and don't pray. Such self-conscious and deliberately irreligious people are to be distinguished from the lackadaisically unaffiliated — often called "Nones" — who simply don't identify with a religion.

And by the "most devout among us," I mean religious fundamentalists who believe in God without any doubts, who attend church frequently, who consider the bible the infallible word of God, who pray a lot, and who insist that Jesus is the only way, the only truth, and the only life. These strongly religious folks are to be distinguished from moderately religious Americans, who are generally liberal and tolerant.

Think of it like two ends of a spectrum, with one end representing the staunchly secular and the other end representing the deeply devout. Most Americans fall some-



Phil Zuckerman



Photo by David McNew

A woman holds a sign proclaiming her belief that she doesn't need to be vaccinated or wear a mask because Jesus will protect her from coronavirus, as protesters pray near the Los Angeles City Hall on Aug. 14 after the City Council voted to create an ordinance requiring proof of vaccination to enter many indoor public spaces.

where in the middle — both the "Nones" and the moderately religious together comprise the majority of Americans. But as to those who occupy the end points of the spectrum, it is — as stated above — the affirmatively godless who are exhibiting greater moral proclivities in our nation today than the proudly pious.

We can start with the global pandemic. Covid-19 is a potentially deadly virus that has caused — and continues to cause — dire woe. Surely, to be moral in the face of such a dangerous disease is to do everything one can — within one's limited power — to thwart it. No moral person would want to willfully spread it, bolster it or prolong its existence. And yet, when it comes to the battle against Covid-19, it is the most secular of Americans who are doing what they can to wipe it out, while it is the most faithful among us, especially nationalistic white evangelicals, who are keeping it alive and well. Taking the vaccine saves lives and thwarts the spread of the virus. So, too, does sheltering in place as directed and wearing protective face masks. And yet, here in the United States, it is generally the most religious among us who refuse to adhere to such life-saving practices, while it is the most secular who most willingly comply. For example, a recent Pew Research study found that while only 10 percent of atheists said that they would definitely or probably not get vaccinated, 45 percent of white evangelicals took such a position.

Consider climate change. The best available data shows that — as a direct result of human activity — we are destroying our planet. The results are already manifesting with greater and

deadlier frequency: poisoned air and water, massive wildfires, stronger hurricanes, brutal mudslides, quickly melting glaciers, rising sea levels, the wanton disappearance of forests and coral reefs. Such developments do not bode well for the future; more suffering and death are on the rapidly approaching horizon.

And, yet again, what do we see? It is the most staunchly secular among us who understand the science behind climate change and want to do what needs to be done in order to prevent it, while it is the most pious among us who dismiss the science and don't want to address the dire threat. For example, a recent PRRI study found that over 80 percent of secular Americans accept the evidence that human activity is causing climate change — and they place addressing climate change at the top of the list of their political priorities — while only 33 percent of white evangelicals accept such evidence, and thus place it toward the bottom of their list of political priorities.

But it's not just the pandemic and climate change that illustrate this widening religious/secular moral divide. Take gun violence. Currently, more Americans die annually from firearms than automobile accidents. Since 2009, there have been 255 mass shootings in the United States; every few hours, a child or teen dies from a gun wound. When the founders of the country passed the Second Amendment, they couldn't have imagined the instantaneous devastation a semi-automatic rifle can do in the hands of one vicious person. And there is no question that Jesus — who taught an unmitigated message of nonviolence — would denounce the existence of such weapons. And yet, who is more pro-gun in today's America? Not the hardest of atheists. Rather, it is the most fervent of Christians. For but one example: While 77 percent of atheists are in favor of banning assault rifles, only 45 percent of white evangelicals are.

In terms of who supports helping refugees, affordable health care for all, accurate sex education, death with dignity, gay rights, transgender rights, animal rights; and as to who opposes militarism, the governmental use of torture, the death penalty, corporal punishment, and so on — the correlation remains: The most secular Americans exhibit the most care for the suffering of others, while the most religious exhibit the highest levels of indifference.

But wait — what about the rights of the unborn? While many people oppose abortion on decidedly moral grounds, it is also the case that many others support the right of women to maintain autonomy over their own reproductive capacities, on equally moral grounds. Hence, the deep intractability of the debate. And yet, most Americans — both religious and nonreligious — do not see the abortion of a nonviable fetus as being akin to the murder of a living human being. And let's be frank: It is impossible to square the assertion that the strongly religious are "pro-life" while they simultaneously refuse to get vaccinated, to wear a mask, to fight climate change, to support universal health care, or to support sane gun legislation. To characterize such an agenda as "pro-life" renders the label rather insincere, at best.

Admittedly, how morality plays out in the world is always complex, with numerous exceptions to the correlations above. For example, African Americans tend to be highly religious and yet are also extremely supportive of gun control. The Catholic Church, which has deftly overseen the most extensive pedophile ring in history, and continues to ban the life-saving use of condoms, also happens to morally oppose the death penalty. One study has found that evangelicals actually get vaccinated at higher rates than the religiously unaffiliated (though not at a higher rate than agnostics). And members of religious congregations tend to donate more money to charity, on average, than the unaffiliated. And, of course, the 20th century has witnessed the immoral, bloody brutality of numerous atheist dictatorships, such as those of the former USSR and Cambodia.

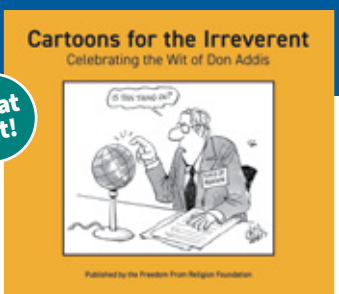
However, despite such complexities, the overall pattern remains clear: When it comes to the most pressing moral issues of the day, hard-core secularists exhibit much more empathy, compassion and care for the well-being of others than the most ardently God-worshipping. Such a reality is necessary to expose, not simply in order to debunk the long-standing canard that religion is necessary for ethical living, but because such exposure renders all the more pressing the need for a more consciously secular citizenry, one that lives in reality, embraces science and empiricism, and supports sound policies — not prayer — as a way to make life better, safer and more humane.

Phil Zuckerman is associate dean of Pitzer College and the author of *Society Without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment*. He will be a featured speaker at FFRF's convention in Boston in November.

Cartoons for the Irreverent:
Celebrating the wit of Don Addis



Great Gift!



This unique collection published by FFRF celebrates the wit and irreverence of Don Addis, a legendary editorial cartoonist and atheist. Don's toons will make you laugh, then make you think.

—153 pages / PB
\$15 ppd Item # FB109



NOT AFRAID OF
BURNING IN HELL

Logan Runde

UNABASHED SKEPTIC

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

God has no place in Supreme Court opinions

This column first appeared in *The New York Times* on Sept. 9 and is reprinted with permission.

By Linda Greenhouse

One hundred fifty years ago, a woman named Myra Bradwell brought a Supreme Court case claiming a constitutional right to be admitted to the Illinois bar. She had passed the state’s bar exam with high honors, but the Illinois Supreme Court refused her application, saying that when the state Legislature gave the court the power to grant law licenses, “it was with not the slightest expectation that this privilege would be extended to women.”

The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the state court, with Justice Joseph Bradley writing in a concurring opinion that “the paramount destiny and mission of woman are to fulfill the noble and benign offices of wife and mother.”

“This,” Justice Bradley explained, “is the law of the creator.”

The case of *Bradwell v. Illinois* is regarded today as a low point in Supreme Court history, at least by those of us who reject the notion of God as the ultimate personnel administrator. But it turns out that God has a role in the country’s civic life after all: that of supreme legislator.



Linda Greenhouse

Republican politicians used to offer secular rationales for their anti-abortion zealotry: They claimed that abortion hurt women or that abortion procedures demeaned the medical profession. In the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, some opportunistic states imposed temporary bans on abortion, making the demonstrably false assertion that abortion patients would take up scarce hospital beds.

But now, sensing the wind at their backs and the Supreme Court on their side, Republican officeholders are no longer coy about their religion-driven mission to stop abortion. In May, when Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas signed SB 8, the vigilante bill that bans abortion after six weeks of pregnancy, he claimed that “our creator endowed us with the right to life, and yet millions of children lose their right to life every year because of abortion. In Texas we work to save those lives.” (There are actually fewer than 1 million abortions a year in the United States, but let’s not get picky with the facts.)

Two years earlier, signing a bill that criminalized nearly all abortions in Alabama, Gov. Kay Ivey called the measure a “testament to Alabamians’ deeply held belief that every life is precious and that every life is a sacred gift from God.”

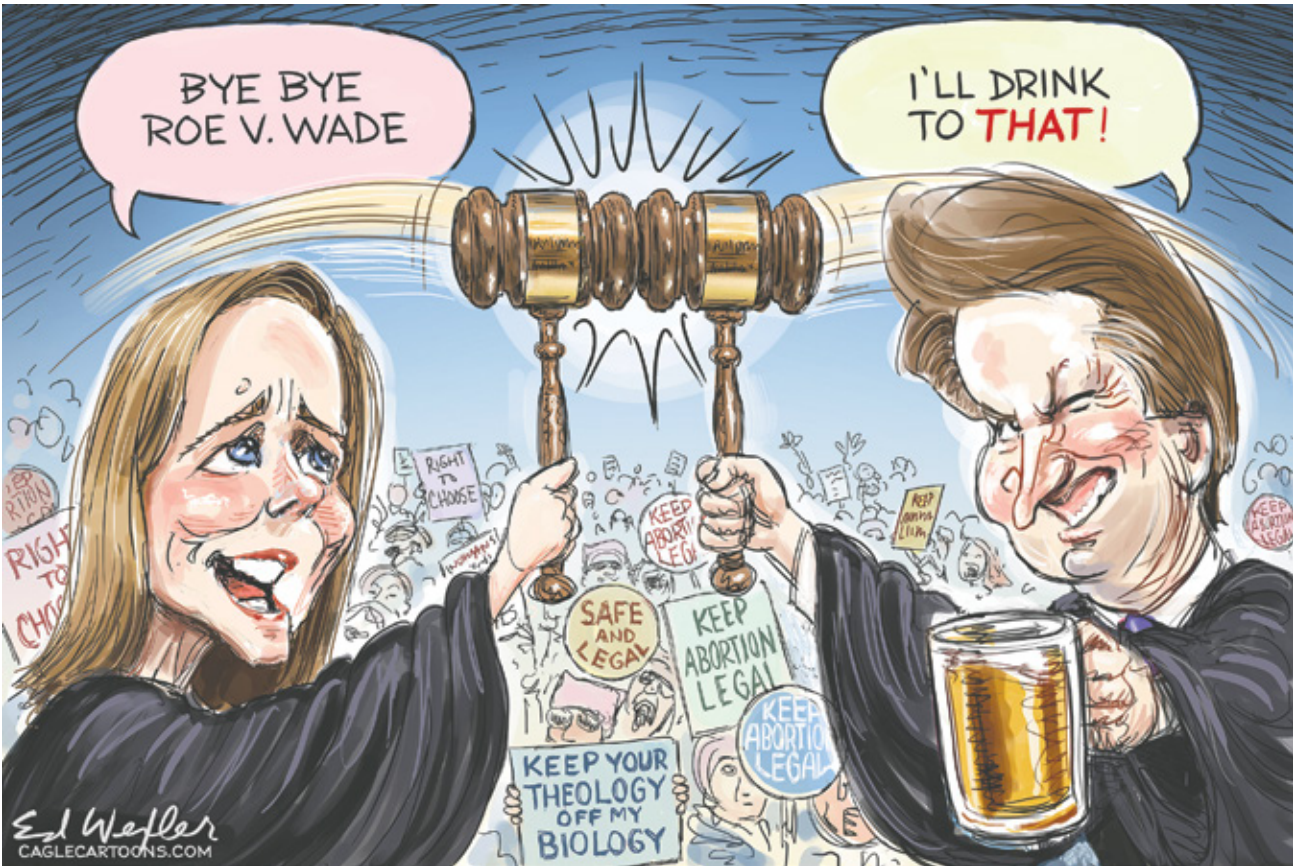
And this year, a Republican state senator in Arkansas, Jason Rapert, declared in explaining his sponsorship of a bill to ban nearly all abortions that “there’s six things God hates, and one of those is people who shed innocent blood,” as if it were self-evident that he was referring to abortion rather than to the “stand your ground” bill that he co-sponsored.

I could go on with this list, but these examples are sufficient to raise the question for those of us not on board with the theocratizing of America: Who let God into the legislative chamber?

The answer is that we did. Our silence has turned us into enablers of those who are now foisting their religious beliefs on a country founded on opposition to an established church.

The Supreme Court has come in for plenty of well-deserved criticism for September’s maneuver allowing Texas to enforce its new abortion law. The fact that the four of the court’s six Roman Catholic justices and a fifth who was raised Catholic but is now Episcopalian, all conservative, allowed a blatantly unconstitutional law to remain in place pending appeal has barely been noted publicly. (Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who are also Catholic, joined with two other justices in dissent.)

The five who voted for Texas (and the chief justice) were placed on the court by Republican presidents who ran on a party platform that called for the appointment of judges who would overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Those presidents may well have calculated that the religious background of their nominees would incline them to oppose abortion, sparing those pres-



idents from asking a direct question that their nominees would be bound not to answer.

When Amy Coney Barrett was a law professor at Notre Dame, the university’s Faculty for Life, of which she was a member, unanimously denounced the university’s decision to honor then-Vice President Joe Biden, a Catholic, with an award recognizing “outstanding service to church and society.” The faculty group’s specific objection was to his support for the right to abortion. “Saying that Mr. Biden rejects church teaching could make it sound like he is merely disobeying the rules of his religious group,” the Faculty for Life’s resolution stated. “But the church’s teaching about the sanctity of life is true.”

Barrett’s personal religious views are, of course, her personal business, but her support of this aggressive public intervention into a matter of public concern was fair game for questions, or should have been. It remained, however, far under the radar during the unseemly sprint to her Supreme Court confirmation.

Religion is American society’s last taboo. We can talk about sexual identity, gender nonconformity, all manner of topics once considered too intimate for open discussion. But we have yet to find deft and effective ways to question the role of religion in a public official’s political or judicial agenda without opening ourselves to accusations of being anti-religious.

The Mississippi abortion case the Supreme Court will hear this fall (the date has not been set) has attracted nearly 80 briefs in support of the state’s defense of its ban on abortion after 15 weeks of pregnancy and its request that the justices overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Well over half of the briefs are from organizations and individuals with overtly religious identities. Many of the remainder have more subtle affiliations with the religious right.

That shouldn’t be surprising. What reason other than religious doctrine is there, really, for turning back the clock on a decision that nearly a half-century ago freed women from the choice between the terror of the back alley and the tyranny of enforced motherhood? About one-third of Americans, according to a recent Gallup poll, want the court to overturn *Roe*. And yet, as we saw last week, the right to abortion is already functionally dead in Texas, and its fate may soon be left to the whims of Republican politicians everywhere else. It’s incumbent on the rest of us to call out those who invoke God as their legislative drafting partner.

The major step that Mexico’s Supreme Court took this week toward decriminalizing abortion in that country, which is predominantly Catholic, raises the head-snapping prospect of Texas women traveling across the border for legal abortions, as many did for illegal ones in the years before *Roe v. Wade*. The bishops denounced the court’s unanimous ruling, of course, but antipathy toward the church’s power over civic affairs is part of Mexico’s DNA.

In this country, the clash between church and state

over abortion is an old story. Thirty-seven years ago, one of the country’s most prominent Catholic public officials, Gov. Mario Cuomo of New York, was caught up in a debate with the church over his support for using public money to pay for abortions for poor women. The Supreme Court had recently upheld the Hyde Amendment, which cut off federal Medicaid funding for that purpose. But states remained free to spend their own money, and New York had chosen to do so. On Sept. 13, 1984, Cuomo addressed the controversy, defending the state’s policy in a speech at Notre Dame that he titled “Religious belief and public morality: A Catholic governor’s perspective.”

While he accepted the church’s teaching on abortion as a matter of personal belief, he said, “there is no church teaching that mandates the best political course for making our belief everyone’s rule.”

He went on: “The hard truth is that abortion isn’t a failure of government. No agency or department of government forces women to have abortions, but abortion goes on. Catholics, the statistics show, support the right to abortion in equal proportion to the rest of the population. Despite the teaching in our homes and schools and pulpits, despite the sermons and pleadings of parents and priests and prelates, despite all the effort at defining our opposition to the sin of abortion, collectively we Catholics apparently believe — and perhaps act — little differently from those who don’t share our commitment. Are we asking government to make criminal what we believe to be sinful because we ourselves can’t stop committing the sin?”

(What was true in 1984 remains true; Catholic women obtain nearly one-quarter of U.S. abortions, roughly proportional to their representation in the population.)

“Persuading, not coercing” had to be the goal “in our unique pluralistic democracy,” the governor said. “And we can do it even as politicians.”

It was a remarkable performance, reminiscent of John F. Kennedy’s speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association during the 1960 presidential campaign, in which he sought to reassure skeptical Protestant clergy members about his candidacy. “I am not the Catholic candidate for president,” he told the ministers. “I am the Democratic Party’s candidate for president who happens also to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my church on public matters — and the church does not speak for me.”

A generation separated the Kennedy and Cuomo speeches, and a generation or more has passed since Cuomo’s declaration of independence at the University of Notre Dame. As the country lurches toward theocracy, we need voices like those more than ever.

Linda Greenhouse is the author of the forthcoming book, *Justice on the Brink: The Death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the Rise of Amy Coney Barrett, and Twelve Months That Transformed the Supreme Court*. She is one of FFRF’s featured speakers at this year’s national convention in Boston.

“Sensing the wind at their backs and the Supreme Court on their side, Republican officeholders are no longer coy about their religion-driven mission to stop abortion.”

FFRF files amicus brief with Supreme Court

Mississippi anti-abortion case to be heard Dec. 1 by high court

The Freedom From Religion Foundation and its secular allies are pushing back in the U.S. Supreme Court against Mississippi’s religion-infused attempt to severely curtail abortion rights.

FFRF has drafted and filed a friend-of-the-court brief before the highest court in the land in *Dobbs v. Jackson Health Organization*. In the brief, FFRF puts forth a well-reasoned argument as to why Mississippi’s lawsuit to effectively overturn *Roe v. Wade* will require courts to confront the religious purposes underlying abortion bans: “Religion has always been at the heart of anti-abortion legislation, and Mississippi House Bill 1510 is likewise motivated by religious ideology.”

This is revealed by various highly sectarian religious statements that Mississippi legislators made in support of the legislation, such as: “I believe that life is precious and children are a gift from God” and “I am not God, but I serve a God who says life is in the blood. And this bill will protect those lives.”

The brief elaborates on its secularly informed assertion. “The state is asking the court to toss out the decades-long safeguard of choice before viability, and require courts to engage in fact-finding and searching analysis of state interests in order to judge them compelling enough to justify abortion bans,” it states. “But doing away with the viability framework and asking courts to



review and weigh state interests before viability will require courts to address the underlying purpose of such abortion bans — to enshrine into civil law a religious belief about when personhood begins.”

Due to the religious impetus of Mississippi’s anti-abortion onslaught, FFRF felt a compelling need to make itself heard in this Supreme Court case.

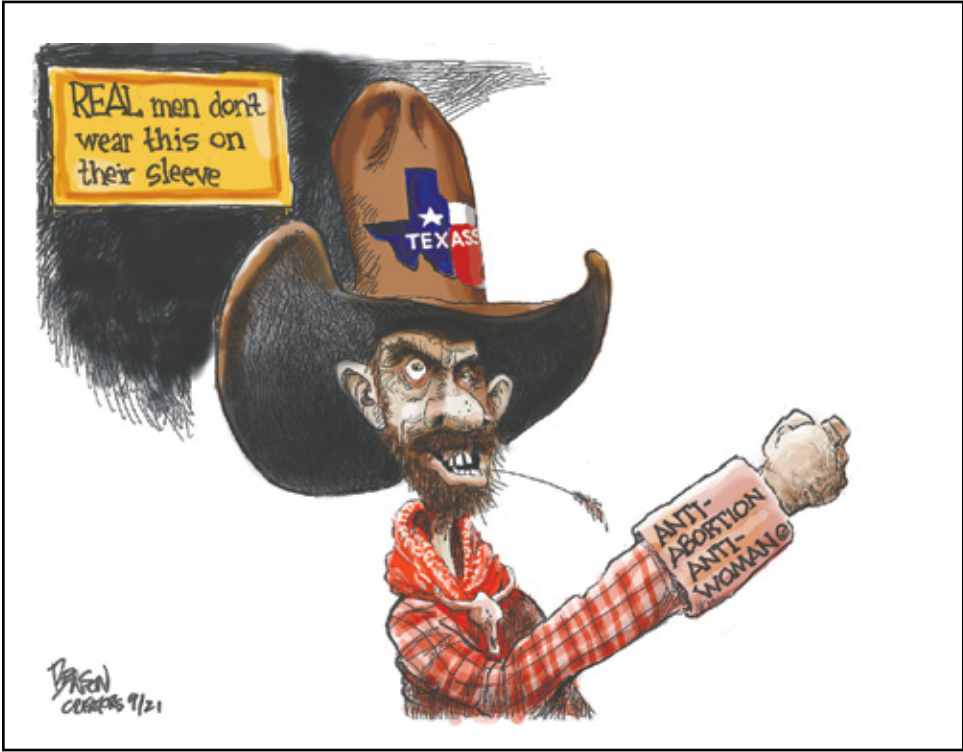
As FFRF stated in May when the Supreme Court decided to hear the lawsuit, abortion access and care

are unnecessarily divisive due to the ideological motivations of the few. A recent Pew study found that the majority of Americans believes that abortion should be legal in all or most cases, and 82 percent of religiously unaffiliated people support legal abortions. Not surprisingly, today almost all of FFRF’s members consider reproductive rights a vital secular policy issue. A recent membership survey showed that 98.8 percent of FFRF members support the constitutional right to legal abortion embodied in *Roe v. Wade*. Among FFRF members and the general population, abortion rights have high approval, but a religious minority is driving the agenda of states such as Mississippi.

This brief states in its closing portion: “The government has no business requiring citizens to comply with the religious beliefs of those who are in power. The framers of the Constitution adopted a godless and entirely secular Constitution, in which the only references to religion are exclusionary.”

It is simply unconstitutional for a state to force a religious belief about personhood onto anyone else, FFRF contends and urges the Supreme Court to uphold the judgment of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that struck down the Mississippi anti-abortion law.

FFRF Associate Counsel Elizabeth Cavell drafted the amicus brief for the organization, with help from FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert, Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott and FFRF Reproductive Rights Intern Barbara Alvarez. The Center for Inquiry and American Atheists are the other groups that have joined in FFRF’s brief.



Roe

Continued from page 1

the Texas law is “not only unusual, but unprecedented” and “appears to insulate the state from responsibility.” Given the novelty of the law and the questions still before the court, he stated he would have blocked implementation of the law “to preserve the status quo.”

Sotomayor, who has become the new voice of dissent on the high court, wrote her own passionate dissent, also joined by Breyer and Kagan, appropriately calling the order “stunning.” She termed the law “a breathtaking act of defiance — of the Constitution, of this court’s precedents, and of the rights of women seeking abortions throughout Texas.” She castigated the majority for “bury[ing] their heads in the sand.” Her footnote noted the immediate and devastating impact of the court’s failure upon pregnant people in Texas.

Kagan issued her own dissent, also joined by Sotomayor and Breyer, highlighting concerns that the shadow docket ruling departed “from the usual principles of appellate process.” She added, “the majority’s decision is emblematic of too much of this Court’s shadow-docket

decision-making — which every day becomes more unreasoned, inconsistent, and impossible to defend.”

The unsigned majority opinion acknowledged that the fight is not over, contending “this order is not based on any conclusion about the constitutionality of Texas’s law, and in no way limits other procedurally proper challenges to the Texas law, including in Texas state courts.”

The case will continue in the lower courts. Later this year, the Supreme Court is expected to hear arguments in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, involving the constitutionality of a Mississippi law banning abortions after the 15th week of pregnancy.

“The court’s action has stripped millions of Texans of their fundamental rights under our Constitution and has effectively overruled *Roe v. Wade* and *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*,” says FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert. “This decision makes clear that we cannot rely on the current Supreme Court — packed with ultraconservative Christian nationalist justices during President Trump’s term in office — from abiding by the rule of law.

The only path forward is to fix our broken federal judiciary through legislation.”

FFRF commends DOJ move against Texas abortion ban

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is cheering the news that the U.S. Department of Justice is suing the state of Texas over its draconian, dystopian abortion prohibition that deputizes everyone as bounty hunters.

“May we say ‘Hallelujah,’” remarks FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

Attorney General Merrick Garland announced the Texas lawsuit at a press conference.

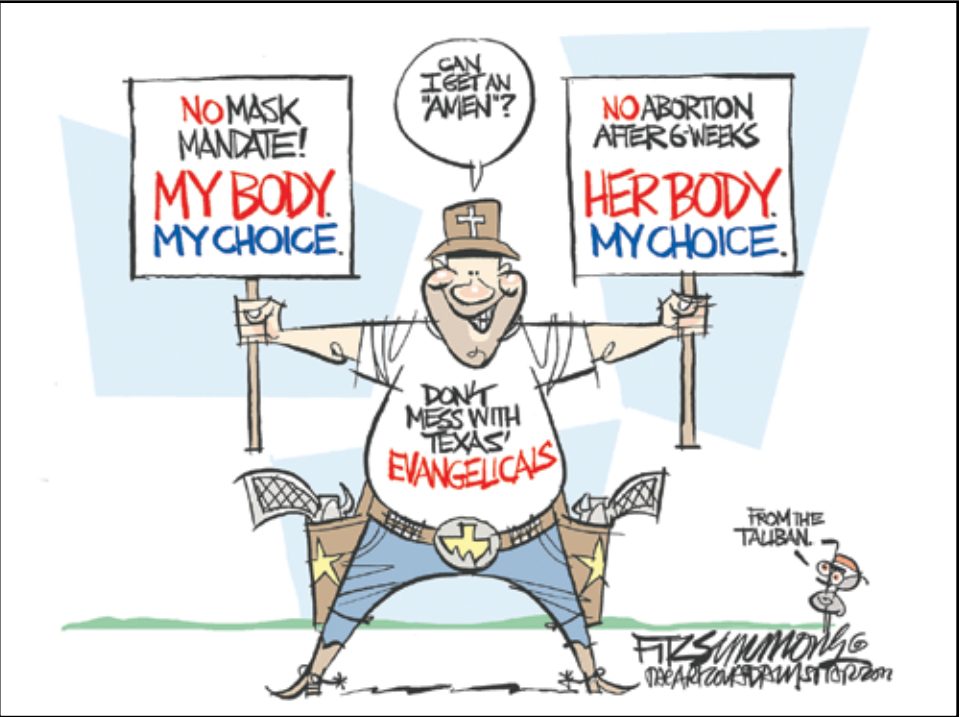
“The United States therefore seeks a declaratory judgment that SB 8 [the Texas law] is invalid under the Supremacy Clause and the 14th Amendment, is pre-empted by federal law, and violates the doctrine of intergovernmental immunity,” states the DOJ complaint. “The United States also seeks an order preliminarily and permanently enjoining the state of Texas, including its officers, employees, and agents, including private parties who would bring suit under the law, from implementing or enforcing SB 8.”

FFRF has been at the forefront of raising the alarm about this awful measure. FFRF statements came down against the law going into effect and the Supreme

Court’s eventual decision. We’ve also mobilized members to call on Congress to pass the Women’s Health Protection Act and to expand the courts — the only real solution. FFRF’s legal team has been working to educate the public on the bill and court expansion with a number of highly placed op-eds, blogs, and a fascinating episode of “Ask An Atheist” with a leading scholar.

“Nintey-nine percent of FFRF members support the right to choose,” says FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert, “precisely because this is a state/church issue. The end of reproductive justice is an attempt to legislate biblical law into our secular law. Of course, FFRF is going to do all it can to stop that.”

Markert notes that some arguments in the lawsuit are novel and interesting: “The lawsuit appears to use Texas’ refusal to exempt rape and incest in the original law as a way to argue that it impedes federal agencies from doing their job and makes them liable for the \$10,000 bounty, leading to the novel intergovernmental immunity argument that the DOJ has asserted in its complaint.”



FFRF VICTORIES

By Casandra Zimmerman

N.D. basketball coach stops praying with team

In North Dakota, a Mott/Regent School District basketball coach will no longer participate in his team’s prayers after games.

A district resident informed FFRF that the Mott/Regent basketball team concluded every game with a prayer, and that the coach had been a participant.

FFRF’s Patrick O’Reilly Legal Fellow Joseph McDonald sent a letter to Superintendent Willie Thibault, informing him that a coach participating in prayer in their official capacity can equate to the school’s endorsement of religion.

Rachel A. Bruner, representing the Mott/ Regent School District, wrote to FFRF assuring that no coach would engage in prayer with students at a public event and that all coaches will be reminded of the implications of the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause.

Texas school board ends prayers at meetings

The school board in Duncanville, Texas, has stopped opening its board meetings with prayer after FFRF got involved.

A concerned Village Tech Schools parent contacted FFRF stating that the board had been opening each meeting with a prayer, which was included on the meeting agenda. FFRF Staff Attorney Christopher Line wrote a letter to Chairman Daniel Price, requesting that, instead of a prayer, a moment of silence “would allow the board’s meetings to come to order without ostracizing portion of those in attendance.”

Joseph Hoffer, attorney for Village Tech Schools, responded to FFRF’s letter, stating that the school took immediate action in getting rid of the prayer and replacing it with “moment of inspiration.”

FFRF gets grad ceremony changes made in S.D.

Unconstitutional prayer at a South Dakota graduation and school sponsorship of baccalaureate ceremony will not happen again, the superintendent of Menno Public School District insists.

A letter from FFRF Legal Fellow Joseph McDonald was sent to Superintendent Tom Rice after a district parent contacted FFRF. The letter stated that “the school’s role in hosting the baccalaureate on school property, scheduling it immediately before graduation, and live-streaming the two events together

Spreading something positive in Florida



Thirty-five members (and one cute doggie!) of the Central Florida Freethought Community (CFFC), FFRF’s chapter in Florida, celebrated on Aug. 14 the placement of two billboards in the Orlando area. The billboards were up until at least mid-September. An FFRF operations grant helped cover some of the cost.

would cause any reasonable graduating senior or parent to conclude that the district endorses the religious messages espoused at these services.”

A response from Rice included how the school would conduct graduation ceremonies in the future to not violate the Constitution and plans to move the baccalaureate ceremony somewhere other than school property.

Invocation, benediction removed from ceremony

Invocations and benedictions are no longer included in Orville (Ohio) City School District’s graduation ceremonies.

A student’s parents notified FFRF that their daughter’s graduation ceremony contained multiple state/church violations, such as an invocation, a benediction, and a commencement address given by a local pastor, who said, among other things, “You are either heading toward God or away from God. Please remember today that prayer and faith will always point you in God’s direction. Do your best not to go in the wrong direction.”

FFRF Legal Fellow Joseph McDonald wrote in a letter to Superintendent Jon Ritchie that “The court stated that in this context, ‘Regardless of the listener’s support for, or objection to, the message, an objective . . . student will unquestionably perceive the inevitable . . . stamped with her school’s seal of approval.’”

Ritchie responded by quoting the Board of Education’s policy manual and affirming that the ceremony will include neither benediction nor invocation. Stu-

dent remarks will also be reviewed beforehand to ensure they follow the policy and the law.

Ky. school will not use ‘prayer lockers’ anymore

A Carter County middle school in Kentucky is no longer implementing a program that involved “prayer lockers,” in which students were informed of four lockers that a prayer team would check and would be “honored to take your concerns to Our Heavenly Father on your behalf!”

FFRF Staff Attorney Christopher Line sent a letter to the Superintendent Ronnie Dotson asking the district to remove all prayer lockers from district property. “The district serves a diverse student body that consists of not only Christians, but also minority religious and nonreligious students.”

Ryan Tomolonis, director of personnel, responded and said that after talking with both Dotson and the East Carter Middle School principal Aaron Baldwin, the program would no longer be implemented.

School to train faculty on state/church issue

School-sanctioned invocation and prayer at Loftis Middle School in Hamilton, Tenn., are not going to happen again after FFRF sent a complaint letter to Scott Bennett, counsel for the school.

Principal Mary Gaitlin had instruct-

ed students and parents to “bow their heads and pray,” and later a student recited a prayer that ended “in Jesus’ name.” FFRF Legal Fellow Joseph McDonald reminded Bennett in the letter that “The Supreme Court has settled this matter — graduations must be secular to protect the freedom of conscience of all students.”

Bennett responded, letting FFRF know that the school will hold training for all the faculty on the separation of state and church.

Texas school won’t post bible studies on Facebook

Amarillo Independent School District in Texas has stopped promoting bible studies and other religious activities on its Facebook page.

A concerned parent contacted FFRF to report that South Georgia Elementary School had been promoting different bible study groups on its Facebook page. FFRF Staff Attorney Christopher Line sent a letter to Superintendent Doug Loomis, informing him that posting bible clubs on the school’s page can amount to the promotion of religion.

FFRF received a response from attorney Andrea Slater Gulley, who informed Line that after reviewing standards for appropriate use of district-operated social media, it was decided that the accounts would only be used “for promoting campus announcements.”

you do about the rights of citizens and the U.S. constitution. — Nolan Ploth

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

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

Stay away from us: you need to mind your own business. Your not even from our town. Stick your nose in hell...a warrior for God — Sally Pantages

CRANKMAIL

Welcome to this issue’s Crankmail, where we post correspondence received (via snail mail, email or social media) from those who seem to take issue with FFRF’s cause. Printed as received.

Ridiculous: Just read in the local newspaper in Canton Ohio that thanks to you a prayer will no longer be said before the local board meetings. Don’t give me state-religion separation, the Constitution doesn’t and never has mandated that. The person who summoned you from our area won’t even give her name, that takes a lot of courage to stand up for some cock-amaney belief. I would hope when your judgement day comes, the Man upstairs remembers this and you are held accountable. — Robert Feller

The Bible is true: There are no contradictions in the bible, these fools are like many in a church who read the bible and think there are contradictions as well. 1st retarded argument about 8 or 18, in Hebrew the difference is a tick mark, and he is

talking about a translated document to English from 2 different books. I went to court a few years ago and there were mistakes in the police report that would never have been fixed if someone didn’t go to court- and that was 5 years ago not 5000. I laugh when she say Liberals are more Rational, roglmao. — Stella Murtaugh

Go away!: Once again you’re are butting your nose into places it does not belong. Stay out of Texas, we do not want you here. You need to stay up there where you are and tend to your own business. So shut the hell up, we do not care about your Freedom from Religion Foundation. You people are freaks. If you don’t believe in God, then why does a cross bother you so much??? Don’t mess w/Texas, we DO NOT WANT YOU HERE and we don’t care about your cause. — Sue Overbeek

Silly: I find it hard to believe that you can’t find something else to do rather than stir up trouble about a cross in the city park. Just because

your foundation doesn’t believe in Christianity doesn’t mean you can impose your disbelief on us. It just makes your foundation look very silly. — Kay Horvath

COWARDS: Thank you so much for posting pictures of your board. I’m going to use them to teach my kids what a coward looks like. — Peter Wolcott

Learn the constitution: Your entire organization is a joke and a waste of time. You attack Christian people like my old coach. The constitution says freedom of religion, meaning you can choose whatever you want or don’t want. It doesn’t say “from”. So preventing a coach or player from practicing his or her religion on or off school campus is UNCONSTITUTIONAL, as well is attacking the people that do. No one has the right to take away my rights or the rights of the teachers and coaches. You might want to read the constitution a few more times because your entire organization just got torn apart by a 19 year old that knows more than

FFRF NEWS



Secular Day of the Dead celebration set for Nov. 2

You are invited to join FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor during the 2021 Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos secular celebration beginning at 6:45 p.m. (EDT) Tuesday, Nov. 2, via Zoom.



Jon Huertas

Barker and Gaylor will join leading secular voices to welcome participants during this bilingual event to be followed by the Honoring Ceremony, featuring dedications from distinguished guests and participants. Participants are encouraged to share a photograph or portraits of a deceased loved one during the Honoring Ceremony. Prizes will be awarded and mailed to participants whom the cosponsors determine to have the best Secular Day of the Dead-themed clothing, Zoom setting, face painting, face mask, and hair adornment.

Both an English and a Spanish speaker's Zoom breakout room will be available after the keynote speech by Jon Huertas. See full details at ftsociety.org. Advance registration is requested. To reserve a 3- to 5-minute time slot to celebrate a deceased loved one, email seculardayofthedead@ftsociety.org.

FFRF runs ad in NY Times

FFRF ran a full-page ad in the Sunday, Sept. 12, New York Times asking people to counter the religiously inspired war on women's rights.

The advertisement featured a sketch of a "handmaid" in a reference to Margaret Atwood's classic. "*Roe v. Wade* is in grave peril," it warns.

The ad spotlights the recent egregious Texas abortion prohibition — and the U.S. Supreme Court's nod to the anti-women measure.

"The Supreme Court majority ominously signaled its stunning hostility to reproductive rights by cruelly refusing to block the draconian ban on abortion in Texas," it states. "It has also agreed to review an unconstitutional Mississippi ban."

And the ad puts the national anti-abortion campaign in the full context.

"Emboldened Christian nationalists in state governments have ramped up their relentless, religiously motivated war on abortion," it cautions. "Our federal judiciary has been stacked with Trump-appointed extremists."

The ad calls on New York Times readers to mobilize in defense of secular values.

"Join FFRF in defending the treasured constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and in our call for court reform," it concludes. "Support FFRF in our vital work for emancipation from religious dogma."

FFRF is placing the advertisement in the country's most prominent paper be-



cause it is deeply concerned about the state of women's rights in the country.

"The threats to liberty are dire," says Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. "Freethinkers need to come together to uphold the Constitution."

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

FFRF lawsuit moves forward

Arkansas state Sen. Jason Rapert so far has avoided contempt of court after initially refusing to allow plaintiffs, including FFRF, to have access to a list of donors who helped pay for a Ten Commandments monument on state Capitol grounds.

Rapert sponsored legislation to have the monument installed, and when it was first erected in 2017, it was rammed purposely by a vehicle and was destroyed. A replacement monument, surrounded by 3-foot-tall concrete posts, was then installed in 2018 in the same spot.

Shortly thereafter, FFRF joined a coalition of freethinking groups (including the American Humanist Association, the Arkansas Society of Freethinkers and several individuals) in suing Arkansas Secretary of State Mark Martin, who allowed the installation to occur. (The defendant is now John Thurston, the current secretary of state.) The ACLU of Arkansas also filed its own lawsuit.

Rapert then took part in a videotaped deposition regarding the case, but didn't want it going public (allegedly for fear of his words being taken out of context). He also refused to offer any financial documents regarding who funded the monument or how much was raised. So, on Sept. 8, Rapert had to explain to the judge why he shouldn't be held in contempt for refusing to cooperate.



Arkansas state Sen. Jason Rapert stands next to the Ten Commandments monument on the state Capitol grounds.

At that hearing, the attorney for the American History and Heritage Foundation (AHHF, which Rapert formed to fund the monument) agreed to provide most of the materials FFRF and the other groups requested. AHHF was required to provide documents to the plaintiff's attorney Gerry Schulze within 10 days and Schulze was to report back to the court if the documents produced were unsatisfactory.

The judge said a status hearing would be held sometime before the end of October.



Reagan

Continued from page 1

After FFRF aired the ad during several Democratic presidential debates carried by CNN in 2019, Reagan was credited with "winning" and becoming the top trending search on Google.

"We are so grateful to Ron for continuing to lend his celebrity to the Freedom From Religion Foundation," says Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. "Everywhere we go, including in Congress, the public now recognizes FFRF, thanks to Ron, and realizes there are many atheists and freethinkers in America, including the son of a conservative president."

Your weekly antidote to the Religious Right

FREETHOUGHT RADIO

PODCASTS AND BROADCASTS



FIND OUT MORE: ffrf.org/radio

— Hosted by Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor —

Slightly irreverent views, news, music & interviews

FFRF.ORG **FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION**

Walter Plywaski’s story is worth remembering

This article first appeared on *TheConversation.com* on Aug. 2 and is reprinted with permission.

By Kristina M. Lee

Walter Plywaski’s death earlier this year from complications related to Covid-19 went largely unnoticed by national media. Only an invitation by his family to donate to the civil liberties group ACLU in Plywaski’s memory gave hint to his legacy in the fight for religious freedom. Almost 70 years ago, Plywaski fought for the right of atheists to become U.S. citizens — and won.



Kristina M. Lee

As a scholar of religious and political rhetoric, I believe that Plywaski’s fight is worth remembering. Stories like Plywaski’s give an insight into the discrimination atheists in the U.S. face even today and the role that those professing no faith have had in holding society accountable to the goals of religious tolerance and freedom. Polish native Walter Plywaski, born Wladyslaw Plywacki, spent five years in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. After being liberated from Dachau, the Bavarian camp in which 41,500 prisoners died, he worked as an interpreter before immigrating to the United States and serving four years in the U.S. Air Force.

In August 1952, Plywaski petitioned for U.S. citizenship while in Hawaii. All he had left to do was say his oath of allegiance. Plywaski, however, was an atheist. He informed the judge that he could not sincerely end the oath with the words “so help me God” and requested an alternative. Judge J. Frank McLaughlin reportedly asked Plywaski to consider what it says on the back of U.S. coins: “In God We Trust.” McLaughlin then denied Plywaski citizenship, justifying his decision by proclaiming, “Our government is founded on a belief in God,” and accused Plywaski of “seeking admission on your own terms.” With the help of the ACLU, Plywaski appealed McLaughlin’s decision, argu-

ing it was a violation of religious freedom while noting that natural-born citizens had the option to say affirmations rather than oaths, which allowed them to affirm their allegiance based on their own honor rather than a belief in a higher power. McLaughlin, however, stood his ground. He argued that the case was not about religious freedom, but about whether Plywaski “believes in all the principles which support free government,” which, according to McLaughlin, included a belief in God. Plywaski moved to Oregon and successfully petitioned to have his case moved there to be looked at by a different judge. In January 1955, Plywaski won his case and became a citizen.

Plywaski’s case confirmed that those applying for citizenship must have the option to not recite “so help me God” when taking their oath, a policy that is now explicit in the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services policy manual. But despite the precedent he set, Plywaski was not the last atheist who would be denied U.S. citizenship. More than 60 years later, nonreligious people still had to fight for immigration rights. In 2013 and 2014, two women were initially denied citizenship after being told they had to be religious in order to be conscientious objectors when refraining from stating in their oaths that they will “bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by law.”

This was despite 1965 and 1970 court cases that affirmed that atheists could be conscientious objectors. And even atheists with citizenship have been denied certain rights because of requirements that a religious oath be uttered. Roy Torcaso won a 1961 U.S. Supreme Court case after he was denied a position as a public notary when he refused to recite an oath acknowledging the existence of God. Torcaso’s case made clauses in state constitutions banning atheists from holding public office unconstitutional and unenforceable. Yet such bans have still occasionally been used to challenge open atheists who have won public office, though such challenges have failed. And in 2014, an atheist in the Air



Screenshot from video by Boulder Daily Camera
Walter Plywaski was denied U.S. citizenship 70 years ago because he refused to say “so help me God” during the oath of allegiance. With the help of the ACLU, he sued, and three years later won his court case and became a citizen.

Force was denied re-enlistment after refusing to say “so help me God” in his oath. The Air Force later reversed the decision and updated its policy after atheist groups threatened to sue. Such instances fit a pattern of discrimination against atheists. A 2012 study found that that nearly 50 percent of atheists have felt forced to swear a religious oath. While they legally should have options to say alternatives, the pressure to take the religious oaths remains. Because “so help me God” is the a default in many oaths, atheists often have to decide between passing as theistic or outing themselves as atheists — which, in a country where good citizenship is often unfairly tied to a belief in God, could potentially bring stigma onto themselves or mean risking being denied certain rights. Atheists tend to win cases in which they challenge the denial of their citizenship and other rights based on their refusal to acknowledge God. Yet, the fact that atheists risk facing additional obsta-

cles and legal fights to have their citizenship recognized speaks, I believe, to their continued marginalization. The atheist fight for equal rights is rarely acknowledged outside of active atheist communities. My research shows how the discrimination against atheists fits with what I describe as a deeply ingrained and coercive theistnormative mindset that frames democratic societies and good citizenship as being tied to belief in a higher power. Historians such as Leigh Eric Schmidt, David Sehat, Isaac Kramnick and Robert Laurence Moore have all written about religious oppression in the United States and its impact on atheists. These histories highlight how stigma surrounding both atheism and openly critiquing religion and religious oppression often pressured atheists to hide their identity. Yet, there were — and still are — atheists, like Walter Plywaski, willing to openly challenge discrimination. Their stories are part of the larger fight for religious tolerance within the United States. Kristina M. Lee is a Ph.D. candidate in rhetoric at Colorado State University. In 2019, she earned an honorable mention award in FFRF’s graduate student essay contest.

“ Stigma surrounding atheism and openly critiquing religion and religious oppression often pressured atheists to hide their identity.

Religious war remains a huge problem around the world

By James A. Haught

The Taliban seizure of Afghanistan underscores an ugly 21st century fact: Religion-based warfare remains the world’s worst type of armed conflict. After the CIA under President Reagan helped brutal Muslim tribal warlords drive the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan, these chieftains started fighting each other. That’s when the Taliban, a movement of armed Islamic students,

swept through the mountain nation. Puritanical Taliban officials were notorious for their hatred of sex. They ordered all women to wear shroud-like burqas outdoors because “the face of a woman is a source of corruption” for men. Females, essentially, couldn’t be educated. Those who secretly attended underground schools were executed, along with their teachers. Girls’ schools were burned. Women weren’t allowed to work or go outdoors without a family male escort. They couldn’t wear high heels under their burkas because clicking heels might excite lustful men. Apartment windows were painted over. Wearing form-fitting clothes was a capital offense. Public stonings or other executions of women oc-



James A. Haught

curred. A huge number of brides were forced into marriage. The Taliban allowed the al-Qaeda terror network to operate from Afghanistan. After the Sept. 11 attacks, the United States invaded and drove out the fanatics. But two decades of costly American effort to create an Afghan democracy failed, and now the Taliban rule again. Much of the world is holding its breath, waiting to see if sexual savagery returns. Actually, the Taliban is merely one of many armed Islamist militias. There’s Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabab in Somalia, ISIS in Syria and al-Qaeda hidden somewhere. Back in 2017, when the Taliban seemed rather dormant, a scholarly book stated: “Boko Haram is now the deadliest

terrorist organization operation in the world.” The fundamentalist Sunni group is notorious for raiding villages and cities, massacring civilians (including Shiite and Sufi Muslims), raping and abducting girls, and seizing boys to become soldiers. I wonder if Boko Haram someday may seize Nigeria, as the Taliban did Afghanistan. Around the globe, warfare — especially between countries — has faded enormously in the 21st century. It’s fascinating to think that the world might have become war-free if not for religion. FFRF Member James A. Haught was the longtime editor at the *Charleston Gazette* and has been the editor emeritus since 2015. He has won two dozen national newswriting awards and is author of 12 books and 150 magazine essays.

“ It’s fascinating to think that the world might have become war-free if not for religion.

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.

FFRF awards \$17,050

Winners of FFRF’s college essay contest

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 10 winners and eight honorable mentions of the 2020 Michael Hakeem Memorial Essay Contest for Ongoing College Students. FFRF has paid out a total of \$17,050 in award money to this year’s college contest winners.

Ongoing college students up to the age of 24 were asked to write a personal persuasive essay on the topic of “How Religion Divides Us and Secularism Unites Us.”

This contest is named for the late Michael Hakeem, a sociology professor who was an FFRF board chair and active atheist known by generations of University of Wisconsin-Madison students for fine-tuning their reasoning skills. His bequest has been used to fund college essays since his death in 2006.

Winners, their ages, the colleges or universities they are attending and the award amounts are listed below, and winning essays are reprinted or excerpted in this issue.

First place
Ryan Rindels, 18, University of New Mexico, \$3,500.

Second place
Meredith Corda, 21, University of California Berkeley, \$3,000.

Third place
Belinda Becker-Jacob, 19, University of Denver, \$2,500.

Fourth Place
Lindsey Bridges, 23, University of Central Florida, \$2,000.



Fifth place
Madeline Kumagai, 23, Clovis Community College (California), \$1,500.

Sixth place (Mr. Madison Arnold Award)
Nikola Velimirovic, 21, University of Nevada-Las Vegas, \$1,000.

Seventh place
Sarah Nicell, 19, Franklin & Marshall College (Pennsylvania), \$750.

Eighth place
Keara Hayes, 19, Michigan State University, \$500.

Ninth place
Angelique Robinson, 18, Florida State University, \$400.

Tenth place
Samantha Gregory, 19, Florida State University, \$300.

Honorable mentions (\$200 each)
Stephanie Clavijo, 23, University of California-Davis
Kennedy Coates, 21, Agnes Scott College (Georgia)
Michale Fite, 19, University of San Francisco
Ellie McDonald, 18, University of Colorado-Boulder
Eveliina Niva, 20, University of California

University (California)
Lauren Rickard, 19, University of Texas-Arlington
Olivia Sato, 19, Northeastern University

FFRF also thanks “Director of First Impressions” Lisa Treu for managing the details of this and FFRF’s other student essays competitions. And we couldn’t judge these contests without our “faithful faithless” volunteer and staff readers and judges, including:
Don Ardell, Dan Barker, Darrell Barker, Bill Dunn, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Linda Josheff, Dan Kettner, Sammi Lawrence, Katya Maes, Gloria Marquardt, Amit Pal, Dave Petrashek, Sue Schuetz, Lauryn Seering, PJ Slinger, Karen Lee Weidig and Jenny Siklos Wilson.

FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994, grad students since 2010, one for students of color since 2016 and a fifth contest for law students since 2019. All contests are open to any students attending a school in North America who meet the age/grade level eligibility, except the students of color contest, which is reserved for students of color to offer special support for a minority within a minority.

FFRF will be announcing the winners of the students of color contest and grad contest in upcoming issues of Free-thought Today.

MICHAEL HAKEEM MEMORIAL CONTEST WINNER

Is anyone listening?

FFRF awarded Ryan \$3,500.

By Ryan Rindels

The divisiveness of religion was only revealed to me as I began to depart from it. Sixteen years I had spent marinating in the evangelical Christian faith — in its community, in its doctrines, and in its unfailing support.

I spent my nights in prayer, external from family dinners and church services, in order to capture alone time with God. I could feel the tangible threads of a relationship already developing in the short time I had been alive. I longed for the day I would reach eternal salvation, forever alive with the ones that I love, free of fear or worry. I questioned the justice of eternal damnation, and never truly believed that homosexuality was a sin, but these were quiet doubts, overshadowed by a far more powerful feeling inside of me.

One night, I continued my nightly prayer ritual, but instead of feeling satisfied, I gazed up at my bedroom ceiling and felt the most unbearable silence I had ever experienced. I was incredibly unsettled, and failed to fall asleep for several hours. This was NOT the reason for my deconversion, but rather, it was the catalyst that asked the question in my mind for the first time: “Is anyone listening?”

The questions I had suppressed steadily crept to the forefront of my brain as time went on. Most of my questions regarded Hell, but others challenged the biblical narrative, the philosophical aspects of a God, and the personal experiences my friends and family held dear. Following two years of further doubt and



Ryan Rindels

discovery, it was finally time to entirely reject the ideas I had been forced to believe.

My perspective shift to an outsider revealed a countless number of cracks I had been unable to see under the Christian veil. The religion that I was a part of for so long was NOT a religion of hope, joy, inclusion, freethought, or even love, as it is often described. Historically, this is hardly controversial. Christianity has been used to justify numerous atrocities, such as the Crusades or the Atlantic slave trade. Even today, Christianity is the enemy of unity, constantly battling any ideas contrary to the biblical narrative, even those that push for equality.

Personally, I have experienced the extreme shame that my religion gave me, for thoughts and actions that were entirely healthy as an adolescent. I believed that my community was unrivaled, and yet it pushed back against inclusion at every

step of the way. I believed my beliefs were truly my own, instead of being compelled to believe falsehoods. Especially during the year of my deconversion, I witnessed a level of demonization toward others by Christians that was devoid of any sort of love. And finally, I found my religion to be one of the most hopeless propositions ever offered, except to a select few.

For the majority of humankind, only futility can be seen.

Secularism is quite the opposite. An openness to new ideas, inclusion of everybody, and a caring for humankind can only lead to unity. Though I can only honestly speak to the religion that I was a part of, it is truly an obstacle to progress. So much pain has been caused even within my own family by my different belief system. I can’t imagine how others have been forced to cope with a similar struggle. My

words seem to evaporate in the face of my church community. I have yet to feel like anyone has been listening, let alone a divine being.

I truly believe that the only way to unify the world is to embrace openness. Secularism is beneficial, but even the religious can attempt to understand those different from them and approach new ideas free of bias. It is my hope that the world will embrace openness and break away from the rigid exclusion that religion has always provided.

Ryan, 18, is from Los Lunas, N.M., and attends the University of New Mexico, with plans to graduate with a degree in film and digital arts. “I recently left the evangelical Christian faith I was indoctrinated into,” Ryan writes. “While a Christian, I participated in feeding the homeless, and plan to do so apart from religion.”

“My perspective shift to an outsider revealed a countless number of cracks I had been unable to see under the Christian veil.”



FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

P.O. Box 750 • Madison, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • FFRF.org

What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

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

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

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

SECOND PLACE

Out of the shadows

FFRF awarded Meredith \$3,000.

By Meredith Corda

“*Ave Verum Corpus natum de Maria Virgine Vere passum, immolatum In cruce pro homine*”

As I sang those words, surrounded by my peers, feeling the swells of the music, I couldn’t help but let tears well up in my eyes and eventually spill down my cheeks. Overcome with raw emotion, I continued to sing, my heart aching, but my voice somehow still intact.

In the six years I sang in choirs, I fell in love with the processes behind an excellent choir: what it took to perfect the blend of voices, the hours spent on tiny details in order to improve and better convey meaning to an audience.

Creating synergy within a choir depends on an emotional connection to the music, or so I was taught. We held long conversations about each song, because syncing up every consonant, breath and pitch was not enough. We had to sing with one mind.

We all knew what this song was about, more or less: Jesus dying on the cross and his mother Mary’s suffering. I knew the story all too well. Having grown up going to Catholic Church for 10 years, I



Meredith Corda

was familiar yet uncomfortable with the subject. Several of my closest friends were devoutly Christian and LDS, and would often talk about church or their youth groups at school.

When I was a freshman in high school, I finally accepted that I did not believe in a god, but I kept that to myself for years, opting to hide in the background of conversations about religion, which was difficult for an outgoing person like myself. It felt like I was keeping a dark secret. In many ways, I envied my

religious friends; the way they could talk about their beliefs with what seemed like no fear, but also no consideration for those without the same beliefs.

In class that day, as we read the translation from Latin, the room was tense. Our director asked if anyone was comfortable enough to share their personal connection with the music. Of course, several students stood and described their personal, religious connection to the song. I distinctly remember looking around the room and feeling like a “closeted”

atheist — shameful, uncomfortable, and sad. Sad that I would not be able to feel the same way about the song, sad that we were even talking about religion this much in a public high school classroom, and sad for the other students in the class I knew felt the same way. Not just other atheists, but students of other faiths who probably felt equally as alienated. I knew that there was more to the song than a love for a god, and even though at the time I didn’t feel very comfortable opening up about my lack of faith, I knew that if we all truly were going to buy into something meaningful, it was not going to be a religious sentiment. So, I stood, and as

gracefully as I could, offered a more secular interpretation: that we should simply sing with the theme of parental love in our minds, something I was sure we all could find a way to relate to.

Even though this was over four years ago, I can still remember the relief I felt in that moment. I was not met with any judgment and my interpretation sparked several other talking points and nudged other nonreligious students to stand up and share what they thought. I can truly say that this experience helped me realize the unifying power of secular thought, even if it is not explicitly anti-religious. When we finally performed the song, I was blown away by just how connected we all really were. Going forward, I became more outspoken about my secular views and gained confidence in myself, which is why I wholeheartedly encourage all secularists to be brave and do the same.

Meredith, 21, attends the University of California Berkeley with a double major of rhetoric and German. “I am a member of Cal’s cross country and track and field teams,” Meredith writes. “I hope to attend law school after I graduate and am interested in international and environmental law.”

“I knew that if we all truly were going to buy into something meaningful, it was not going to be a religious sentiment.”

THIRD PLACE

Masquerading as morals, religion divides

FFRF awarded Belinda \$2,500.

By Belinda Becker-Jacob

“Our creator endowed us with the right to life and yet millions of children lose their right to life every year because of abortion. [The Texas Legislature] worked together on a bipartisan basis to pass a bill that I’m about to sign that ensures that the life of every unborn child who has a heartbeat will be saved from the ravages of abortion.” These words were proudly spoken on May 19 by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott at the signing ceremony for the Texas Heartbeat Act. He had just banned abortions past six weeks of gestation.

This major law robbing countless

women of reproductive rights bears no scientific or medical basis; it is grounded merely in religious reasoning. Following the bill’s passage, religious groups such as the Texas Right to Life and the Human Coalition rejoiced, hailing the law as a restoration of lost morals and a terribly belated protection of human life. Over the years, countless such events and legal actions have demonstrated the divisive nature of religion in the public sphere — and the power of secular institutions to strengthen the ties between those of different backgrounds.

As a liberal, pro-choice female, I find the heartbeat law heinous, its restrictions preposterous and unjust. But most disturbing is the justification — or lack thereof — behind it. The primary proponents of the bill are religious anti-choice individuals such as Abbott and organizations who claim their views are simply the “word of God” or cite biblical verses. For ethical reasons, no atheist groups have publicly supported it. Although I was raised as a humanist with a strong belief in the separation of church and state, realizing the risk of religion hindering reproductive rights has reinforced to me the need for a secular government. Appalled by recent events, my rejection of religion has only deepened.

Unfortunately, the Texas Heartbeat Act has not been the only legal action in which religion has prevailed. Religious institutions have won numerous recent Supreme Court cases, including some limiting reproductive rights.

The 2014 case of *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores* established that for-profit reli-



Belinda Becker-Jacob

gious institutions are exempt from the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act requirement that employers provide FDA-approved contraceptive methods. This set a precedent for *Little Sisters of the Poor Saints Peter and John Home v. Pennsylvania* (2020) in which the SCOTUS majority upheld that the federal government “had the authority to provide exemptions from the [ACA] regulatory contraceptive requirements for employers with religious and conscientious objections” (*Little Sisters v. Pennsylvania*, 2020).

Both cases were rightfully controversial, drawing supporters and their adversaries to Washington. This conflict has incited violence, including menacing protests outside abortion clinics and the murder of prominent abortion physician George Tiller by anti-choice activists.

Secularism, however, has served as a unifying force in the sea of hatred and

division. In 1962, the New York State Board of Regents authorized a voluntary recitation of a “nondenominational” prayer every morning at elementary schools. Although the school board argued the prayer did not establish an official religion and thus did not violate the Establishment Clause, seven justices referenced the vastly important separation of church and state, ultimately ruling that the practice was unconstitutional and must be ceased. This landmark decision of *Engel v. Vitale* ensured public educational institutions remain nondenominational, creating a more inclusive environment for students of various backgrounds and undoubtedly impacting my own schooling experience positively.

The right of freedom from religion is vital and often ignored. My humanist, liberal upbringing taught me that religion is not equivalent to morality or fairness, and recent events have demonstrated the truth of these ideas, furthering my belief in them. But equally importance to an ethical society is the law. The sheer danger religion poses to the legal rights of millions has led me to advocate for the separation of church and state, which protects and unites us all.

Belinda, 19, is from New York City, and attends the University of Denver, where she is a member of the Delta Alpha Pi Honor society. She writes that “in addition to being passionate about the separation of church and state issues, I am committed to disability rights and supporting the needs of the neurodiverse population, serving as the student representative of DU’s Neurodiversity Resources Group.” She hopes to use her political science degree to work in advocacy or a similar field and change people’s perceptions of those who are labeled “different.”

“Realizing the risk of religion hindering reproductive rights has reinforced to me the need for a secular government.”

Just Pretend: A Book For Young Freethinkers

By Dan Barker
Illustrated by Kati Treu

Revised and adorably illustrated classic. This fun book explores myths and religion from a freethought point of view, and promotes critical thinking.

Color Edition! Published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

FOURTH PLACE

Tribal tribulations

FFRF awarded Lindsey \$2,000.

By Lindsey Bridges

On Jan. 6, religious syndicates stormed the U.S. Capitol, imbued with apocalyptic admonitions of ecclesiastical authorities who posited Donald Trump as God’s chosen sovereign. On May 11, Israel leveled civilian homes in its latest act in the centuries-old play of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a gruesome game of divinely inspired land grab. In April, as Covid-19 engulfed India, the Dalits, formerly the “Untouchables,” were ejected from hospitals and denied care as a result of the country’s inveterate, sacred caste system. There are countless examples of religion’s divisiveness, and yet it persists. How is it that something so often equated to goodwill and camaraderie, to fellowship and community, to alms and philanthropy, can be responsible for such cruel discrimination? To examine this question requires insight into the human mind and the rise of the thinking ape.

In *The Meaning of Human Existence*, Edward O. Wilson claims “It is tribalism,

“Secularism offers a neutral, humanistic sanctuary and the means to take us further, united.

not the moral tenets and humanitarian thought of pure religion, that makes good people do bad things.” The need to belong trumps the desire to hold to lofty ideals and moral platitudes. Such steadfast commitment to the tribe was once crucial for survival — a relic of intense ecological competition among neighbors, a byproduct which unequivocally offers little utility in our modern construction of global society. What religion calls “altruism,” scholars of evolutionary theory call “a set of complex behaviors whose potential benefits outweigh potential costs.” Simply put, a unified group of optimal size would boast increased predator safety, elevated foraging ability, and a reproductive advantage. Historically, religion acted as a vital ingredient in this “glue,” providing a common origin and purpose among communities.

If this is true, why, then, do we not unite under our shared origin with all of life? If religion is no more than the early unscientific reasonings and fantasies of our forebears, why has the advent of secularism not supplanted it? Arguably, it is because religion offers the concept of predestination — the idea that everything, especially the bad things, are



Lindsey Bridges

meant to happen. We derive comfort from believing in a higher power, that an unseen actor guides us all, and that in times of unthinkable suffering, there is always recourse and redemption. “These sacred places, where God dwells immanent on Earth, become ultimate refuges against the iniquities and tragedies of secular life,” as Wilson suggests. There is no dopamine rush, or sense of tranquility, in acknowledging that all events occur without purpose, by chance, constrained by a universal physics.

It is time to change the narrative. If

secularism is to unite us, it must embrace us all. It must ground its faith in humanity; it must furnish hope for peace, for a future; it must transform spirituality mired in supernatural fictions into communion with one another, with every being on Earth. Secularism has the propensity to transcend the tenuous lines in the sand we toil to preserve in the name of religion. Humanity must say to itself that there is a better, real hope — open to all — if it could only learn to trust in its power; if it could only banish its tribalism. For, as long as factions fight for gods, globalism is obstructed — our progress stunted. Secularism offers a neutral, humanistic sanctuary and the means to take us further, united. Through it a true paradise exists, if we are prepared to reconcile our differences — without hoary myths and untoward prejudice. Then, we may yet coexist.

Lindsey, 23, attends the University of Central Florida, with plans to major in biology and mathematical biology.

“As a formerly Baptist Christian, I am a proud member of the Central Florida Freethought Community and FFRF,” Lindsey writes. “During the pandemic, I organized a fundraiser supplying PPE and sanitation supplies to Central Florida Public School teachers with the aid of grants awarded by FFRF, Central Florida Freethought Community and the FHA.”

FIFTH PLACE

From faithful to freethinking

FFRF awarded Madeline \$1,500.

By Madeline Kumagai

When I became Christian in middle school, I learned the ways that religion elevates believers at the expense of nonbelievers. In bible study, I learned of the phrase “unequally yoked.” It refers to the idea that Christians should not be in relationships with non-Christians. After all, would we want to be with someone who wouldn’t be going to Heaven? “Unequally yoked” implies that one person is superior to the other. There is a superior “us” and an inferior “them” in interfaith relationships. I would later learn that this “us vs. them” mentality is prevalent in Christianity and other faiths.

One of my junior high friends told someone that if they did not believe in Jesus, they would be going to Hell. Even though I identified as Christian, I was appalled at her message. I never felt comfortable with evangelism. Was it really “spreading the good word” if the alternative was banishment to Hell? The idea that believers are saved while nonbelievers are damned broke my heart. It felt wrong to me that kind, non-Christian people were deserving of eternal punishment. Letting go of the idea of an afterlife brought me peace. I do not have to worry if people I care about will be saved or punished. We can all be equals, united in death, if there is no Heaven or Hell.

My middle school struggles with evangelism sowed the seeds of doubt

in my faith. As I aged, I questioned more of the inequalities perpetuated by religion.

In high school and college, I learned more about struggles faced by the LGBTQ community. A lot of the pushback against this community and legalized gay marriage comes from people of faith. While some denominations claim to be tolerant of people who identify as LGBTQ, it is written in the bible itself that homosexuality is a sin. My cognitive dissonance returned regarding the LGBTQ community. I wondered how a loving, consensual, queer relationship could be sinful. The idea that heterosexual relationships are “superior” to others is what turned me away (and keeps me away) from Christianity. I refuse to be a part of any religion whose doctrine debases

“Letting go of the idea of an afterlife brought me peace. . . We can all be equals, united in death, if there is no Heaven or Hell.

queer love.

Renouncing my faith in college has dissolved the “us vs. them” mindset, ingrained in me by Christianity. I no longer see people as saved vs. un-saved, but just people. This “us vs. them” mentality is not exclusive to Christianity. Someone I met in college said that she is not allowed to be with someone outside her faith and culture because outsiders are not “pure.” Even in other religions, people are taught that nonbelievers are “less than” believers. At times, it has been difficult in my young adult life to feel a sense of community with others. However, I have resolved to seek community outside of a religion. Embracing secularism has allowed me to see every person as an equal, every person deserving to live on Earth as they are.

Madeline, 23, attends Clovis Commu-



Madeline Kumagai

nity College and plans to become a nurse. “I love going for walks (especially with my poodle), playing video games, and cooking,” Madeline writes. “I also have a polished rock collection and know how to make balloon animals.”

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll

By Orvin Larson

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

—Published by FFRF. 316 pages / PB

Buy it from FFRF online @ ffrf.org/shop

‘IN SCIENCE WE TRUST’ Self inking stamp

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

\$20 postpaid — Item #ST02

Buy It Online ffrf.org/shop

SIXTH PLACE

A family divided

FFRF awarded Nikola \$1,000.

By Nikola Velimirovic

Often presented to people all around the world as a unifying force, religion tends to lead to quite the opposite. By fostering an “us versus them” mentality, many religious institutions support a kind of rank tribalism, which is based on one’s membership in a group. Perhaps more damaging to the people living in accordance with religious dogma in such communities, however, is the way religion can shape one’s view of the “outsider.” By castigating those who do not follow the same religious teachings as strangers, much of religious dogma creates a split between people who, in both a cultural and historical sense, tend to be quite similar. This is perhaps most true of the Abrahamic faiths, which have caused religious strife among themselves throughout the centuries, though their teachings tend to be quite similar. From the ongoing conflict in Israel, based on a religious claim to land, to the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s in my native country of Bosnia, the ability of religion

“ Though the application of secularism may not rid the world of all problems, it certainly will prevent many religious claims from governing public policy.

and religious institutions to separate people based on arbitrary lines is unparalleled, and has caused a lot of pain and suffering for many in the process. Though the application of secularism (especially in regard to government) may not rid the world of all problems, it certainly will prevent many religious claims from governing public policy, and hopefully, save lives from being ruined by the unfounded claims of religious mystics, in the process. Perhaps somewhat anecdotal, but equally as powerful, the reason I reject religion is because of the stories which my mother and grandfather have told me about their experiences during the Yugoslav Wars. One story which cemented my rejection of religion was told to me by my grandfather, in which he explained how he was approached by the Yugoslav People’s Army during the beginning of the war in Bosnia, and was told that he either had to join the Serb Orthodox military forces — and fight against his brother (who was a Muslim) — or leave his home as a deserter and never come back. My grandfather decided to leave, along with his brother, and went to Germany, although he was unable



Nikola Velimirovic

to take the rest of his family with him. On his way out, however, his car was blown up by the Mujahedeen (who were fighting against Serb forces). Though he survived, he was left mostly blind in one eye, and lives with painful memories of that time. As a result of his denial to fight for religious extremism on any side, and because he believed in a secular government, the rest of my family was kicked out of their hometown in Bosnia, and had to rely on the kindness of strangers, and often sheer luck, to survive a bloody and brutal conflict, which was supported by many religious

extremists at the time. Though my family story is just one example, it is perhaps indicative of what can happen once a nation rejects secular government in favor of religious doctrine and religious claims to land. On the opposite end of the spectrum stands a nation like the United States, which is indeed a secular nation (though some may beg to differ). For me, this secularism represents a freedom from the fear of religious extremism running the government, and dictating policy. Although the United States is not perfect, it does allow hopeful immigrants like my family to live in peace with people of all faiths, without the possibility of being targeted for having different religious beliefs in one family. The main strength of secularism is that it does not propose any ideology, aside from a lack of involvement in religious matters, a doctrine which seems like a dream for many people living in nations that often face religious strife. In order for the world to prosper in a greater peace, religion must have no say in government matters. Nikola, 21, attends the University of Nevada-Las Vegas and is in the English and German Studies programs and hopes to go to law school after graduation. “What I am passionate about is learning from other cultures, and I am currently working on a translation of a memoir from the pre-World War II era, from German to English, for the Undergraduate Research Department at UNLV,” Nikola writes.

SEVENTH PLACE

Queer people and churchy cherry-picking

FFRF awarded Sarah \$750.

By Sarah Nicell

For as long as I can remember, God has hated me. Not in a chuckle-inducing I-forgot-my-homework-ugh-God-hates-me kind of way, nor in the infamously traitorous I-committed-adultery method of religious betrayal. I was extricated from the womb at 4 pounds, 6 ounces, and nothing — not my mother’s blood, nor my first bath, nor the doctors, nor my baptismal introduction into the church — could rinse me of all of the inevitably horrific shame, guilt and sin this infant would collect and propel at the world like the plague. I was informed that God would hate that baby because she wasn’t just any regular baby. She was a gay baby. A lesbian baby. That baby would grow up to dream about girls in the way that boys were supposed to, and she would question her gender in the process. In being baptized into Catholicism, receiving the



Sarah Nicell

Eucharist, getting confirmed, and being bestowed with the name of Mary Magdalene herself, these sacraments simultaneously welcomed me into the church and informed me that my type of person was not acceptable.

To me, religion has always been a juxtaposition of “love thy neighbor” and “burn in Hell,” all wrapped up in forcibly well-intentioned comments and gossip that spread like wildfire. My church hand-selected its true sins from the bible just as customers might their meals at a diner, perusing the pages to find which acts to condemn and which to gloss over. Unfortunately, homosexuality was popular on the menu. I was told from a young age that lesbians were apparently not all the rage up in Heaven, and neither was abortion or premarital sex, two rules which simultaneously perceived women as objects and villains with no bodily autonomy. On the other hand, disillusionment ran rampant, for hatred, pedophilia, adultery, lust, lying, theft, masturbation and greed were “sins” that were discussed far less than the ever-so-scandalous nature of two men creating a life of love together. This churchy cherry-picking is incredibly problematic, but its influence would be far less harmful in a secular world. Today, the hateful views of bigoted religious figures disguised as holy men impact my everyday life beyond pious institutions. Despite no longer attending church, I am forever plagued by news of equal rights failures carried on the backs of conservative Christians. The Westboro Baptist Church throws slurs around like they’re empty words, proudly protests military funerals, and features frequent cultish behavior that

“ A secular world is an inclusive world, one in which belief and identity can co-exist, where neither are boosted above others, and neither are excluded from opportunity.

is inexplicably protected by the law. The *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* apparently left businesses with the ability to turn away LGBTQ+ consumers on the basis of religious expression and freedom. At the same time, Christians began to label transgender individuals who simply wanted to use the restroom assigned with their gender identity as predators, despite some of the most frightening predators being active pedophiles within the church. A secular world combats the hypocrisy of religion — a reality that allows for the double-dealing of love to the queer — while promoting the freedom of choice. A secular world is an inclusive world, one in which belief and identity can co-exist, where neither are boosted above others, and neither are excluded from opportunity. A secular world accepts me, a gender-nonconforming lesbian, when God and his people don’t. A secular world gives me the chance to be queer without the unwashable guilt, and that sounds pretty good to me. Sarah, 19, attends Franklin & Marshall College. “I have volunteered for local political campaigns, advocated for LGBTQ+ rights, engaged as a journalist for *The College Reporter*, and participated in my college’s student governments,” Sarah writes. “I am a Class of 2020 Diabetes Scholar, a winner of NextGenAmerica’s ‘Pride is Political’ contest, and an alumnus of the Hugh O’Brian Youth Leadership seminar.”

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



Illustrated by Seymore Chwast,
published by FFRF

Beware Of The Dogma
The soma faces life with dread,
The psyche fears each minute,
We suffer less from a cold in the head
Than a new idea in it.

Buy it from FFRF online - ffrf.org/shop

EIGHTH PLACE

An aversion to questions

FFRF awarded Keara \$500.

By Keara Hayes

I remember the first time I was told I was going to hell. I was in fifth grade, sitting with my friends, when out of nowhere, a friend piped up about how she believed everyone should worship God. Even as a kid, the idea of dedicating so much energy to someone you can't see, hear or touch struck me as strange. So, being a kid, tactless as they are, I said that out loud.

And my friend told me I was going to go to hell. A single, ineloquent, off-handed remark was all it took to provoke her and the wrath of God, and that astounded me. What shocked me even more was finding out as I grew up that adults behave that way, too, throwing around threats of eternal damnation like rice at a wedding, and at the heart of these threats is morality. Religion divides because of the way it defines morality.

I've seen philosophical discussions of religion that go roughly like this: "God gives us morals and I believe in

“Because secularism requires humanity to define morals, it doesn't divide people the way religion does. We can discuss and compromise with real people, which we can't do with some absent deity

God, therefore I am moral." If a person thinks like this, where they connect the degree of morality to the degree of faith, problems immediately arise. By questioning a person's faith, you are, in effect, questioning whether they are a good person.

Secularism doesn't have this effect. Because secularism requires humanity to define morals, it doesn't divide people the way religion does. We can discuss and compromise with real people, which we can't do with some absent deity. It's a person's actions that make them good, not something arbitrary like faith. Secularism allows for understanding and discussion in ways that religion can't.

Abortion is a good example of this idea. If a person wants to discuss abortion with someone who is pro-life because of their faith, the conversation is over before it begins. The blast doors are sealed, because entertaining another viewpoint, or, "God forbid," changing their minds, means they aren't completely faithful, which puts their immortal soul on the line.

Rigidity and stubbornness are built in, because anything else means in-



Keara Hayes

complete belief in God, which, by that syllogism, makes them a bad person. Religion reduces complex issues to a binary "yes" or "no" choice, and if you pick the wrong one, you go to hell. It's no wonder Americans are so divided on things like abortion, birth control and LGBTQ+ rights. If a theist questions, they burn.

It's that aversion to questions that causes me to reject religion, because without asking questions, we stop learning. We stagnate. I'm a scientist, so I know what it's like to believe something, to test it, to find that belief was false, and have to let go of that belief.

Asking and answering questions is my job, and in my relatively short life, I've found that there is little that is as satisfying as learning something new, even if that means admitting I was wrong. I'm a humanist and a secularist because those schools of thought lend themselves to learning. Prejudice, stagnation, and close-mindedness are all possible for nonreligious people, but it's much more difficult to be that way when you don't have a mystical, unquestionable text backing up your feelings, or a god breathing down your neck with threats of damnation.

I don't belong to any faith or believe in any god. I believe in humanity. I believe in the good and the beauty of people. Secularism unites because it forces us to see that beauty, to see the good in different ideas, because we aren't bound by books or scrolls that supposedly tell us how to be good people.

What is right becomes humanity's responsibility. Secularism unites because it makes us responsible to each other.

Keara Hayes, 19, attends Michigan State University and is majoring in astrophysics. "I love all things science fiction, with soft spots for "Star Trek" and "Doctor Who," Keara writes. "I hope to pursue cosmology research and science communication, and science literacy is a passion of mine."

NINTH PLACE

Religion, government separate, not equal

FFRF awarded Angelique \$400.

By Angelique Robinson

Religion forces people to shape their beliefs to a system created long before their birth. Religions seldom change as their holy texts are seen as sacred. Secularism is more adaptive; beliefs change over time as human thought evolves. Many religions reject individuals, even those of the same faith, for holding differing beliefs, while secularism is meant to accept people's beliefs as they are.

I did not reject religion until I read Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*. The satirical piece shows that religion does not help reveal the truths about the world because it takes on so many forms, none of which can be proved correct. Reading the novel made me realize that I only said I was religious, when deep down I knew I didn't believe in Christianity, I never had. I went to church often as a child, but never because I believed in religion.

Religions have a lot of hypocrisy and inconsistencies, and the benefits do not outweigh these problems, so I rejected religion. Once this occurred, I was able to see the world in a much different light.

Religion divided me and my best friend Adrien. I realized that I was living the way Christianity wanted me to live and not according to my own beliefs. During our sophomore year of high school, Adrien told me they are pansexual and non-binary. Because of my years of bible study, my brain would not let me accept that something other than man and woman existed. I rejected one of my closest friend's identity for two years because of the religion



Angelique Robinson

I had been raised with. I had never been given the opportunity to create my own beliefs about the idea of being LGBTQ+ until I let go of religion because it had already been painted wrong for me.

Nations with strong religious ties are trying to create laws that limit how LGBTQ+ members get to live their lives. In early April, the Florida Senate tried passing a bill that would prevent trans girls from playing in women's sports. The only reason the bill died was because the NCAA released a statement stating that it would pull events from any state that barred athletes from playing sports aligned with their gender identity. Even in a "secular" government system, religion was only outweighed by economics. In addition to several states passing anti LGBTQ+ legislation, many religious beliefs are bleeding

into legislation, pitting citizens against each other.

In countries like the United States and France, whose constitutions both claim to be secular and to protect their people, religion is bleeding into government actions and reactions and creating division. France's Senate recently just passed a ban on minors wearing hijabs in public, which is a direct attack on Muslim young women. This sparked protest around the world as it is violation of the freedom of religion guaranteed to French citizens in their constitution.

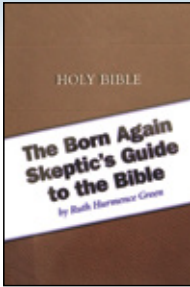
Secular policies would not be causing these divides within nations. If the policies had benefits beyond religion, then the protests would not be as strong. Both these nations have strayed from the secu-

lar systems their constitutions created.

Secularism is not a judgment-based system like religion, so it is better for unifying people. Throughout history, people have used religion to divide and pass judgment on others, while secularism has been geared toward letting diverse groups of people live together in harmony. While secularism will not guarantee that people will agree, it does mean that one religion's beliefs will not dictate the lifestyles of everyone.

Angelique, 18, attends Florida State University. "I have had a passion for writing since I was 12," writes Angelique. "I was a member of my high school newspaper staff for three years. I won two Florida Scholastic Press Association awards during that time. I also volunteered with Hillsborough County's Family and Parent Association during high school."

“Throughout history, people have used religion to divide and pass judgment on others, while secularism has been geared toward letting diverse groups of people live together in harmony.



The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible

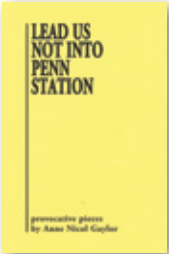
By Ruth Hurmence Green

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

—Published by FFRF. 440 pages / PB

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

Lead Us Not Into Penn Station
Provocative Pieces



By Anne Gaylor

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

—Published by FFRF. 80 pages / PB

Buy it from FFRF online
@ ffrf.org/shop

TENTH PLACE

Funniest, smartest and friendliest

FFRF awarded Samantha \$300.

By Samantha Gregory

We are all born screaming, crying and completely unaware of the world that exists outside of our mothers. As we grow, we get our knees scraped up, learn how to ride bikes, start to get crushes on classmates, and undergo so many universal experiences.

If these life events and how we learned from them were the only things that shaped us into the people we are today, we would know to accept, love and make efforts to understand all others. Instead, religion tries to teach us why a person is considered good or bad.

Over time, we no longer see Aliya as the funniest person in class, but instead as the girl who does not believe Jesus is the son of God. We no longer see Caleb as the smart boy who brings that cool spinning toy for everyone to play with during winter, but as a boy who is wrong because he doesn't celebrate Christmas. We no



Samantha Gregory

longer see Ben as the friendliest kid in school, but as the boy who sometimes holds his best friend's hand, which makes him a sinner.

We start out to only knowing people as being the smartest or the nicest or the funniest, but gradually we discount all of the traits and features

that make people unique and put them in a box with their difference, like "Jew," "Muslim" or "gay" as the only label that matters. Over time, people associate more and more with people who follow their religion and reject anyone that strays from that.

A divide is created between children and potential loving parents because adoption agencies use their religion to justify refusing same-sex couples. Middle Eastern and Muslim-appearing men and women also tend to be stopped more often at U.S. airports for random searches than all other races. This shows the biases put on Muslim Americans because of their religion. Additionally, states that implement laws that limit abortions and abortion access, using religion as their justification, harm women who hope for a better life.

With true secularism, not only would the government not be influ-

“ Gradually we discount all of the traits and features that make people unique and put them in a box with their differenc

enced by religion when implementing laws or judging cases, but people wouldn't use religion in their considerations of people at all. People would no longer see others as the labels that made them different from their personal religion, but instead just as people. We would go back to seeing others not as Muslim, Jewish or gay, but as the funniest, smartest and friendliest. We would stop pointing out the ways people are different and we would start remembering how they scraped their knees up and how they fell off their bike a few times, too.

Samantha, 19, attends Florida State University, studying insurance. "I work as a part-time cashier and my interests are making Tik Toks, learning about current events/activism, and playing with my dog," Samantha writes. "I hope to be a financial adviser or risk manager one day."

College essay contest honorable mentions

FFRF awarded honorable mentions to eight college students, with each receiving \$200.

Here are excerpts from their essays and bios. To read their entire essays, go to freethoughttoday.com.

Religion led to bloodshed in Argentina

By Stephanie Clavijo

In 1976, there was a bloody coup in Argentina, the country where my parents and I are from. The slogan of the coup was "In defense of our Western and Christian way of life." "Christian way of life" meant Roman Catholic and Apostolic. The coup plotters managed to divide society between "We, the Catholics, and them, the others."



Stephanie Clavijo

The dictatorship lasted seven years and took the lives of more than 30,000 people. General Jorge Rafael Videla was seen receiving communion from the hands of the highest authorities of the Catholic Church.

Even now, an important portion of Argentine society justifies the actions of the armed forces in the elimination of the unpatriotic and atheist enemy.

A democratic government was established in December 1983.

Although the new administration did not break with the Catholic Church, it was not influenced or intimidated by the church. A few years later, divorce law was enacted and a period of secularism began in the country. Limiting the influence of religion in government has allowed great progress in the rights of the LGBTQ+ community and

the rights of women.

Last year, Congress approved a law that gives women the right to abortion. Argentina is one of the first countries in Latin America to decriminalize abortion at the federal level. Despite the control the Catholic Church once had over Argentina, we were able to grow without it and show more empathy. I hope we can continue on this path.

Stephanie, 23, attends the University of California-Davis. "When my family and I lived in Argentina we didn't have enough food to eat or a place to call home, one of my first memories as a child is stealing mashed potatoes because I was starving," Stephanie writes. "Life seemed bleak, but then we were able to migrate from Argentina to the United States, where my family was able to get many lucky opportunities."

Key to discontinuing the religious divide

By Kennedy Coates

Having parents with two differing views on religion created a divide. My mother wanted me and my sibling to attend church with her every Sunday, whereas my father believed that we should have the opportunity to make our own decisions on whether to go. These opposing ideas between my parents caused conflict when I was younger, and as a child, I did not understand why. It wasn't until I became older and confessed to my mother my doubt in religion that I truly got to experience first hand how religion has the power to divide people.

Religion does not just separate peo-



Kennedy Coates

ple who have different beliefs, but it also causes a division between people who may be a part of the same religious community. Take, for instance, the Sunni and Shiite groups in the Middle East. Although these two groups agree on the fundamentals of Islam and the teachings of their holy text, they are in conflict about which group should lead the Muslim community.

People who may be against secular humanism may not realize that people who practice this have faith. However, unlike religion, our faith is not in a higher power. It is faith in humanity's ability to be humane, cooperative, sensible and peaceful toward others. Our actions do not have to be justified or inspired because of a higher power. Our actions should reflect our morals and who we are as a people.

Kennedy Coates, 21, attends Agnes Scott College and is majoring on neuroscience, with plans to eventually earn a Ph.D. and become a teacher. "Although I spend a lot of time focusing on my academics and research, I still take time to give back to my community," Kennedy writes.

Secularism: Unity through diversification

By Michael Fite

Religion. It is the blind faith in scriptures of unknown origin, a reliance on the interpretation of the teachings of an undiscovered author. Its hallmark is the church's elucidation of the Holy Scriptures, yet the wide variety of definitions of "correct belief" has only led to conflict.

President Biden has asserted multiple times that he is a devout Catholic who is adamant about pro-choice laws regarding abortion. This has sparked a controversial debate within the walls of Catholic churches, as the Catholic Church mandates that those under Catholicism must be against pro-choice



Michael Fite

laws. This has led to the proposal to publish an assertion on "eucharistic coherence," an explanation as to why those who receive communion should have similar beliefs to the Catholic Church.

This "eucharistic coherence" debate illustrates a fundamental flaw in religion: the manipulation of beliefs. If this document is published, the church is actively admitting to controlling the ideologies of Catholics by punishing those who go against Church beliefs through the denial of communion. This controlling of beliefs halts the advancement of progress by actively limiting free thinking. The Catholic Church is creating a singular-minded organism, a mass of individuals who fail in diversifying their beliefs.

However, secularism has one stark difference between it and religion, and that is faith. In secular societies, religious scriptures are omitted from humanity's critical decisions, relying only on the laws of the natural world to guide them.

The laws of the natural world need not be interpreted: only discovered. And this objectivity allows secular societies to be unified in their beliefs, as they simply rely on what they collectively witness with their own eyes: not what a body of people dictates to be correct. And this objectivity is why I, despite growing up in a religious household, deny all religious practices.

Michael, 19, attends the University of San Francisco, with plans to major in psychology. Michael was active in his home community, volunteering at "Walk to Be-

Essay Contest

Continued from page 17

lieve” in New Jersey and participating in multiple school clubs to tutor children and create art.

Religion as a manipulated institution

By Ellie McDonald

Religion breeds an “us vs. them” mentality, not only among members of different religious groups, but even among members of the same religion, especially among religious extremist branches like Wahhabism. Wahhabi Muslims, famous members of which include Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, attack not only those outside their religion, as evident in the infamous attacks on 9/11, but they also reject other Muslims because they do not follow the “correct” Islam.

Historically, wars were fought in the name of a certain god not because of genuine civil rights issues, but rather out of greed and power-based aspirations, most often territorial expansion or simply an ego boost initiated by a power-hungry narcissistic ruler. When a war was over, the bodies buried and blood washed from the streets, the victorious empire would further feed into its religious delusions by claiming that its triumph was simply an affirmation that its god was the “correct” god.

I reject religion because it is inherently greedy and self-centered. Every religion emphasizes performing certain habitual actions so as to attain a personal goal, whether it be gaining entry into heaven, becoming one with Brahman, etc. When the backbone of every moral decision is rooted in a desire to attain a certain end goal, the decision is no longer moral, it’s strategic. I reject religion because I want my moral decisions to be made from a desire to act in accordance with my own moral code, not the moral code given to me by a religious institution that I follow so as to attain a desirable afterlife.

Religion is an arbitrary system, where in good and evil have no real significance, as what makes an action “good” is religiously ambiguous.

Religion is, in every sense of the term, a manipulatable system in which participants either consciously or subconsciously feign moral responsibility to strategically act in accordance with selfish values and aspirations. Religion is very convenient for those who look to separate and divide us, and secularism tears down the ties that religion binds us to, essentially dissolving the “us vs. them” worldview that religious institutions enforce so as to manipulate and exploit their followers.

Ellie McDonald, 18, attends the University of Colorado-Boulder, with plans to major in philosophy, minor in Italian, and possibly double majoring in either neuroscience or political science.

In God I don’t trust

By Eveliina Niva

One cold Finnish winter day, at about 6 or 7 years old, I asked my mother why my uncle wasn’t getting married in a church.

Kneeling down, she grabbed my hands and told me that his future wife was different from us. I didn’t understand back then, but now I do. Finland, where I was born and lived until the age of 8, is a Lutheran country. There is a tradition that grants you entry into the church.

The summer of the year children turn 15, they attend a week-long camp where they and their friends learn about Jesus and the bible. If this camp is not attended, that child is not a member of the church, and therefore cannot get married in one. My uncle is a member, but his wife is not, and so they were married in an old building with the help of a non-religious officiant.

In the summer of 2013, I moved to the Bay Area in California. Finally, I was in a place that did not constantly shove religion down my throat, or tell me that I am useless because of my beliefs. Yet, all throughout high school, I saw the claws of religion grip into the government.

As Donald Trump became president my sophomore year, all I could think about was the fact that my rights as a woman were about to be dismissed. The rights of nonbinary, transgender, homosexual people were about to be dismissed, and not because of a president, but because of a 2,000-year-old book.

A separation of church and state is supposed to be in order, yet in some places it is deemed un-Christian-like to use contraception or get an abortion when you cannot afford to have a child. What happened to the freedom of choice? What happened to liberty?

Eveliina Niva, 20, attends the University of California, Santa Barbara. “I was born in Finland, moved to Brazil at the age of 8, and then to California at the age of 12,” Eveliina writes. “I love to travel and have visited over 15 countries with my family.”



Eveliina Niva

Despite this, many people of the church ignored these practices and turned rather to prayers and physically repenting, which led to further spread of the illness with close-quarters gatherings within churches and the opening of routes of infection and the spreading of bacteria, preceding disinfectants. What would medicine be today if religion hadn’t pulled so much attention away?

Lauren Rickard, 19, attends the University of Texas-Arlington, with a goal of become a medical technologist.

Secular ethics: A path of convergence

By Olivia Sato

Differences in outdated religious notions, undergirded by the fervent belief in the immutable perfection of religion, impedes progress and foments animosity.

Secularism removes these barriers by engaging moral agents in active, culturally sensitive dialogue.

For something so personal, religious identity’s implications on status and opportunity mark it as the longest-running case of identity politics in the United States. “American Exceptionalism” has always been inextricably linked to white Protestantism.

Christian social capital has been leveraged politically and legally to ensure conformity to a narrow definition of rightness.

The final evolution of a society’s moral development occurs when diversity exists without painful division, as agents democratically defend their political and social assertions along universal secular lines. For example, a Christian, Muslim, Buddhist and person of indigenous faith may find it impossible to reach a common policy decision if attempting to consolidate inconsistent teachings. Instead, concepts grounded in the dignity of human life, i.e., justice, peace and truth, are called upon to rationalize judgments. Such unifying principles are inherently secular, referenced across faiths but also intrinsically understood in the absence of religious pretext.

I trust these secular, universal ethics because they are self-evident. The complicated, ritualistic teachings of many organized religions, on the other hand, seem overtly contrived to conveniently align with social convention. Admittedly, some religions can be counter-cultural, but a through line of power and spiritual control remains. People commit body and soul to diverse faiths, resolute our universe. Instead of one perspective miraculously representing ultimate truth, it is much likelier that no religious invention of humankind accurately captures the beauty of our extraordinary existence. I am not a cynic. I believe in empiricism and extrapolation. And until I personally observe evidence that opposes my Occam’s razor approach, I firmly root myself in the wonderful pragmatism of secular humanist wisdom.

Olivia Sato, 19, attends Northeastern University, majoring in physics and philosophy. “I am a member of the STEM education outreach organization FirstByte, in which I design accessible STEM curricula to distribute to Boston Public Schools educators,” Olivia writes.

Medicine vs. religion

By Lauren Rickard

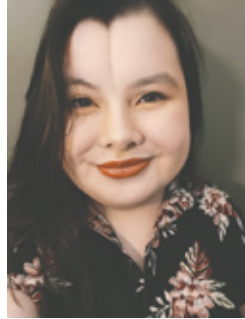
Early civilizations used religion to explain away the phenomena of nature, which evolved to systems and cycles from

reincarnation to elaborate afterlives. Religion comes in varying degrees, as belief changes with every translation of the text. With every belief, there are absolute no’s, and typical within that are the actions against

nature. Medicine, at the most simplistic level, is an action to circumvent or avoid natural processes, from antibiotics to pain killers to vaccines to dementia treatment. For as long as there was a theory of naturopathic medicine, there was opposition from various religious crowds that led to deep rifts between the processes of God and those “playing God.”

Pandemics are very trying times for anyone, let alone those who take it as an act of God. With the flourishing of the Black Death across Eurasia, there were many divisions that made themselves apparent. An early urinalysis abandoned for astrology. Self-flagellation in order to repent. The beginnings of the “Great Pestilence” in Europe were marked with the mass infection of the known world from large sores called buboes and slight discomfort to death within an hour.

Beyond that was the beginnings of medicine or natural healings. Uroscopy was a practice of association with nearly every known disease, with its various different urinary characteristics. Urinalysis, on the surface level, is still done today with a fruity smell being present with diabetes, or color differentiation with the presence of some bodily materials. Although this devolved into a simple look at the bole of the specimen with the astral alignments in mind, it still served its purpose, along with the accidentally correct theory of miasma, in which the route of all illness was bad air, that led people away from infections with their avoidance of horrible smells that emanated from the rotting corpses of the plague.



Lauren Rickard



Olivia Sato

Looking to donate to FFRF? Here’s how!

There are many ways you can donate to FFRF, including directly through our website (ffrf.org/donate).

Ways to give include the Combined Federal Campaign for federal employees, AmazonSmile, matching gifts, estate planning, stock transfer and IRA charitable rollover gifts, which apply to seniors 70½ or older.

Combined Federal Campaign

If you are a federal employee, you may make donations to FFRF through the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC) until January 2022. Details can be found at opm.gov/combined-federal-campaign. If you wish to help FFRF through this campaign, the CFC code to designate your contribution is 32519.

It is recommended that all CFC donors check the box to include their name and mailing address (in addition to your e-mail) with the donation. Donors will receive an acknowledgment from FFRF when we receive pledge notification.

FFRF has been a CFC charity since 2007. Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc. appears in the listing of “National/International Independent Organizations” which is published in each local campaign charity list.

Matching grants

Matching grant donations have become a significant boost to FFRF in recent years. Many companies offer to match (fully or a percentage) their employees’ donations to charitable organizations. These matches multiply the impact of the initial donation to further the goals of the Foundation. Membership dues and donations are tax-deductible contributions and may be submitted to matching gift programs upon organization approval.

FFRF receives Charity Navigator’s highest 4-star rating. Donations to FFRF are deductible for income-tax purposes.



IRA charitable rollover

If you are age 70 1/2 or older, you may now donate up to \$100,000 to FFRF as a qualifying 501(c)(3) charitable organization directly from your Individual Retirement Account (IRA). The distribution will not be treated as taxable income, provided the distribution is made directly.

To qualify, contributions must come from a traditional IRA or Roth IRA, and they must be made directly to FFRF. Additionally, the donor may not receive goods or services in exchange for the donation, and they must retain a receipt from each charity to which a donation is made.

Because it is available to taxpayers whether or not they itemize their tax returns, the rollover helps older Americans, who are more likely not to file itemized returns.

FFRF will send a “non-tax” letter receipt that documents your lovely charitable rollover gift!

Stock

If you are interested in donating stock to FFRF, please call Director of Operations Lisa Strand or FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor at 1-800-335-4021. Or email FFRF (info@ffrf.org) about your stock gift and

we will gratefully reply with the information you need to make the transfer.

AmazonSmile

AmazonSmile is a simple and automatic way for you to support your favorite charitable organization every time you shop, at no cost to you. When you shop at smile.amazon.com, you’ll find the exact same prices, selection and shopping experience as *Amazon.com*, with the added bonus that Amazon will donate a portion of the purchase price to your favorite charitable organization. Visit the AmazonSmile donation designation page and select the Freedom From Religion Foundation to donate 0.5 percent of eligible purchases to FFRF.

The AmazonSmile Foundation is a 501(c)(3) private foundation created by Amazon to administer the AmazonSmile program. All donation amounts generated by the AmazonSmile program are remitted to the AmazonSmile Foundation. In turn, the AmazonSmile Foundation donates those amounts to the charitable organizations selected by customers. Amazon pays all expenses of the AmazonSmile Foundation; they are not deducted from the donation amounts generated by purchases on AmazonSmile.

Estate planning

Leave a freethought legacy in your name that will significantly help carry forward the vital work of FFRF for generations to come.

Arrange a bequest in your will or trust, or make the Freedom From Religion Foundation the beneficiary of an insurance policy, bank account or your IRA. It’s easy to do.

For related information or to request a bequest brochure, please phone Annie Laurie Gaylor or Lisa Strand at 608-256-8900.

THEY SAID WHAT?

God does not want us wearing masks. . . . A mask is a symbol of fear. If you have a mask on, it means you actually don’t trust God. You don’t have faith.

DeAnna Lorraine, GOP activist who lost a California primary bid to unseat Rep. Nancy Pelosi in 2020, during a livestream broadcast.

Patheos.com, 7-17-21

The God hypothesis is constantly vindicated by the comprehensibility of the universe, and the capacity of our reason to unlock its many secrets.

Columnist Ross Douthat, in his piece, “A guide to finding faith.”

The New York Times, 8-22-21

Now is the time for prayer! Mississippi’s official seal bears the words “In God We Trust.” This is the moment for us to put into practice what we say we believe, trusting in God to get us through these difficult days. As a fellow Mississippian, I’m asking you to join me in praying for one another and asking God to bring healing here in Mississippi and across America.

Andy Gipson, Mississippi’s agriculture and commerce commissioner.

Facebook, 8-25-21



Tate Reeves Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves, on why that people in his state were “less scared” of Covid-19.

Yahoo News, 8-29-21

A Christian has no responsibility to obey any government outside of the scope that has been designated by God.

Sam Jones, a pastor at Faith Baptist Church in Hudson, Iowa, in a letter to parishioners stating that he would offer “religious exemption” letters to those seeking to not be vaccinated.

The New York Times, 9-11-21

We need better parenting . . . We need to restore God in our communities. If we do that, we will be able to reduce crime in this region.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, after signing into law a bill that makes it harder to get out of jail on bail.

AlterNet.com, 9-13-21

When you believe in eternal life — when you believe that living on this Earth is but a blip on the screen, then you don’t have to be so scared of things.

Longtime member admires Ingersoll

Name: Borden Applegate.
Where/when I was born: Lakewood, N.J., in 1940.
Where I live: Jackson, N.J.
Family: Son of late Borden Sr. and Lorraine Applegate and younger brother of Ronnie Applegate. I have three daughters: Debra, Tracy, Beth.
Education: Master’s degree from Rutgers University.
Persons I most admire: My mother and father.
Occupation: Retired as a major in the Jackson Police Department.
Religious upbringing: Methodist.
Person in history I most admire: Robert Ingersoll.
My doubts about religion started: When I stopped believing in the Sandman, I stopped believing in God.
How I promote atheism: Through



Borden Applegate

education, reason, tolerance and a sense of humor. I have written over 50 letters to the editor that have been published, and, with few exceptions, all have dealt with state/church separation issues or matters of concern to atheists. I have been a member of FFRF since the 1980s and have greatly admired and appreciated the work you have done on behalf of atheists for so many years.

How I got where I am today: Through the support of my wife, public school teachers and luck.

Things I like: May and October in New Jersey, the fragrances of lilac and honeysuckle, loyalty, small towns, my old dog Mr. Higgins, people with a sense of humor, Dixieland jazz, and movies with Gene Kelly or Fred Astaire dancing.

Things I smite: Christian doctrines of “original sin” and “eternal punishment.”

Favorite quote: “Happiness is the only good. The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy to so make others so.” — Robert Ingersoll.

MEET A MEMBER

Donate to FFRF while you shop!

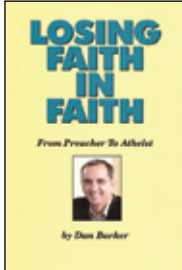


amazon smile
You shop. Amazon gives.

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

When you visit smile.amazon.com

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



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

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

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

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

Forward Freethought scholarship winners

FFRF has awarded \$20,000 in scholarships to five students, making this its third annual distribution of the Forward Freethought Tuition Relief Scholarships.

This year, the students were selected by Black Skeptics Los Angeles (BSLA), an African-American humanist-atheist community-based organization. Rather than the usual four student winners, BSLA chose five winners this year, with three of them earning \$5,000 and two of them getting \$2,500 each.

FFRF has previously partnered with BSLA in its annual “First in the Family” humanist scholarships for outstanding secular students of color.

BSLA is the first secular humanist atheist organization to specifically address college pipelining for youth of color through its ongoing scholarship, college and K-12 youth leadership partnerships. FFRF has proudly partnered with BSLA for eight years to provide tuition grants, gradually increasing the funding and number of scholarships.

The 2021 honorees

Here are the 2021 Forward Freethought Tuition Relief Scholarship winners, underwritten by FFRF, thanks to the generosity of FFRF benefactor Lance Bredvold, conducted in partnership with Black Skeptics Los Angeles, which chooses the recipients.

Natasha Herrera, UC-Irvine (\$2,500)

Harini Pootheri, Cal Poly Pomona (\$5,000)

Stephanie Avitia, UC-Berkeley (\$2,500)

Bellen Padilla, Scripps College (\$5,000)

Kaylin Nelson, University of Central Florida (\$5,000)

Giving power to the people

By Natasha Herrera

Religion was something I believed in as a child. My mom didn’t talk about God much, but I just assumed she believed because of the teachings I learned every Sunday at church with my grandfather.

My grandpa was a born-again Christian, who relied on his family’s ignorance — they forgive too easily and have an excuse for everything. He was never an amazing person who provided for his family, but, anytime he fell off, he claimed to be lifted by God again and was forgiven.

My father disappeared for six years. When he returned, he was welcomed back into the family with no questions asked. It never made sense to me how easily their trust was earned back, but according to them, God had willed him back and willed them to forgive.

When I would ask my family questions about the bible, I was always accused of distrusting God, even though for me it wasn’t that I didn’t believe the bible, I

just had questions. I’ve always been a curious person and it didn’t make sense to me to not ask questions about something so important. Questioning authority shouldn’t be a sign of defiance.

In my experience, people have tried to use religion as an excuse for the world and their actions. Instead of trying to hold people accountable, often God is used as an excuse. I struggled to see how, if an almighty god existed, it would allow so much bad and evil to exist and why it would punish those who didn’t believe in or agree with it.

Learning about the injustices and struggles in the world just made me more angry at God. So much conflict and harm have been a product of religion and yet God had done nothing about it. It proved itself another way to divide people in a world where there is already so much division, and that didn’t make sense. I was tired of people waiting for God to make a change when they were really the only ones capable of doing anything. As an atheist, I believe humanism is the only way to make significant positive change.



Natasha Herrera

My community struggles with diversity and provides a haven for racists and I work to change that. When I attended a peaceful BLM protest in my town, we were met with violence from law enforcement. I am multiracial and

have the privilege of white-passing, and I make an effort to use that privilege to speak out and talk to those with harmful views. Religion is a large reason humans still live in disharmony. This fact is living proof that we need to change the way the majority thinks and open people’s eyes. Though religious tolerance wasn’t taught by my grandparents, my mother always taught me how important civil rights and speaking out for what you believe in is. I carry that with me.

Humanism is important because it places the responsibility on the only people that can really make change and takes away excuses, allowing people to see what’s really happening and positively change the world. It brings to the surface the reality that human beings are capable of changing the world and we are more powerful together than any outside source or entity. Giving the power to the people and not a man in the sky is the only way to create social change.

Natasha, 17, attends University of California-Irvine.

Suns do not surround the Earth

By Harini Pootheri

“To lose a mother is like losing the sun above you.” — *Life of Pi*, by Yann Martel.

Sometimes, I wonder why I am the only life form that does not have a mother. Every being that is alive, even a cell, has a mother. After all, it is plausible that life begets life. However, in my case, it appears that death begets life.

On March 15, 2012, the sun above my head disappeared, and dismal clouds began to pour. My mother, Vijaya Lakshmi Natarajan, died one year before Peter Higgs won the Nobel Prize in physics for discovering the Higgs boson, also called the “God particle.” When my mother came to the United States in 1991 with my father to pursue a better life, they could not even afford a plane ticket. Hailing from distant Tamil Nadu, India, my mother’s auspicious last name was the only possession that she could hold onto in a foreign country. Her last name, Natarajan, was a symbolic representation of the nature of God — but not in the traditional sense of an all-knowing creator living in the skies.

However, Natarajan represents the most fundamental aspects of quantum physics, a ubiquitous God residing within every form of life. In front of CERN — the particle physics lab where Higgs discovered the “God particle,” stands a statue of Natarajan. The Higgs boson



Harini Pootheri

is depicted as the form of Natarajan because it contains no physical matter. Higgs’ discovery proved that although 99 percent of this world is composed of non-physical matter (known as Shiva or that which is not) — the remaining 1 percent is made up of physical matter (known as Shakti or inner strength).

The theory of Natarajan differs from the traditional heliocentric religious concept of God, as instead, it postulates that God is not the external sun, but rather within us. All humans can learn to harness their inner strength, but one must first

lose their external sun and conquer the impenetrable shadow of an eclipse. My mother’s core philosophy of Natarajan, the sun within, allowed her to fight until her last day, when she tragically committed suicide in front of my eyes. The moment she swallowed the last of the pills in the line-up of bottles, she gave me the same look the sun gives the moon before it sets. It was a look of silent defeat — my mother knew she had lost her battle and had accepted the inevitable darkness to envelop us both. I lost the sun that shielded me from my father’s beatings all of those years, the sun that absorbed the black and blues, the sun that warmed my cheeks after a tear ran down it, but most notably, the sun that welded my broken spirit when the weight of the world crushed it.

Furthermore, by losing my external sun, I found the sun that is inside of me. Subsequently, I came to understand that the fundamental truth my mother taught me was that “suns do not surround the Earth.” In another sense, we do not need much to survive at the end of the day, only our inner strength. By embracing the oppressive darkness caused by the sun disappearing above my head, I found the light within. As a result, growing the sun within allowed me to unify my identity as each move to another foster placement shattered it.

Like the nonphysical nature of the Higgs boson, although my mother would no longer be with me physically, she will

forever reside in my inner sun.

If I could say one last solace to her soul, I would tell my mother that her belief in Natarajan was proven true by the discovery of the “God particle.” Thus, I would like to honor her steadfast faith in the power of the sun by developing my personal philosophy and obtaining my undergraduate degree in philosophy with an emphasis on law and society at Cal Poly Pomona. My goal in the future is to become a judge and help at-risk youth in the foster care system build their inner strength and develop their philosophy as I did. Due to growing my inner sun, I could focus my efforts on developing my future and pursuing higher education.

Harini, 18, attends Cal Poly Pomona.

Women Without Superstition
“No Gods—No Masters”

Edited by, Annie Laurie Gaylor

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

—Published by FFRF. 696 pages / HB

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

Humanism could help end racism, discrimination

By Stephanie Avitia

In a Latino household, religion is shoved down your throat. It starts at such a young age when you are the most impressionable. They baptize you and make you go to Sunday school so you can receive communion. I was always skeptical because it never really made sense to me, especially since I was exposed to two religions simultaneously. I remember being in science class and learning facts about life itself. I was fascinated and I started to question everything I was told. However, I would keep it to myself because I did not want to be reprimanded by my family for being “sinful” for questioning “God.” Now, when I tell my family I’m an atheist, they look at me like I’m crazy, but at least they support me. I am a STEM girl; I have always believed in science, math and technology. I’m going to UC-Berkeley to major in bio-engineering and minor in environmental

studies because I am passionate about science. I was introduced to atheism by a friend when I was in seventh grade. It’s nice to see that my generation is becoming more aware, especially how in Ethnic Studies classes we’re taught about the origins of religion and how it was used to enslave our people. I come from East Oakland, a low-income community of color. East Oakland is facing so many important issues that need to be addressed and changed — from gun violence to gentrification, food apartheid to poor air quality, or the lack of investment in infrastructures to underfunded schools. The list goes on. Two issues that I am passionate about addressing are two that I have experienced first-hand: food apartheid and underfunded schools in East Oakland. I have participated in many organizations addressing these specific issues. Two organizations stayed with me. One was called Youth Together and the other one called Oakland Leaf.



Stephanie Avitia

Youth Together is a social justice organization that uses grassroots organizing to fight for educational equity. I was a lead student organizer. A big thing I did was help organize students during the

Oakland teacher strike of 2019. In Oakland Leaf, we would fight for social and ecological justice through education and food cultivation. We would provide the community with healthy fresh fruits and vegetables. We even partnered with The Black Cultural Zone in helping open up the Akoma market. It’s one of the only farmers markets in East Oakland. This is a farmers market that highlights local black and brown farmers, restaurateurs, artists and small business owners, giving them the space to branch out to reach local consumers. Humanism might make a positive difference in creating social change by eliminating the root causes of why we need a social change in the first place — racism and discrimination. Currently, the system is set up so that heterosexual, able-bodied, white people succeed. It is set up to make anyone who doesn’t fit in that criteria fail. Stephanie, 18, attends University of California-Berkeley.

Humanism allows for equality for mariginalized groups

By Belen Padilla

My parents immigrated from Mexico with visas they overstayed. They struggled to provide for my siblings and me because they did not speak English, have legal documentation or even high school educations. When I was a child, school counselors pressured my father to take me to see a psychologist to treat my anxiety and depression. It was through therapy that I made sense of my father’s treatment of me. In therapy, I realized that his immigration and inheritance of patriarchal culture were disruptive to his emotional health. Over time, he developed stress-induced migraines and became intensely angry. He did not receive treatment for these health problems while undocumented and uninsured. My father then began to take his anger out on my mother, sister and myself by forcing us to endure abuse. I identify as an atheist as I ponder that if there is a God, why does he make innocent children that he claims to “love” survive traumatic situations such as my do-



Bellen Padilla

mestic violence? Also, if a God controls our world, why has he forced injustice of racism, gender, LGBTQ+, and allowed overall inequality to roam our world? As the queer daughter of formerly undocumented immigrants, I am passionate about providing leadership now and in

the future to address the issue of health disparities in my community because I have witnessed the outcomes of not having access to culturally sensitive healthcare through my father’s experiences. The national HERlead Fellowship, University of Michigan Health Sciences Academy, the University of Nevada-Las Vegas’ Students Interacting with STEM program, Bank of America Student Leaders, and UCLA’s Medical Advocacy program equipped me with the necessary leadership skills and institutional knowledge to help other low-income youth think creatively about problem-solving and self-advocacy. As a queer Latinx medical professional, I will mentor low-income and/or queer youth of color so they, too, become empowered to envision new lives for themselves and advocate for their communities. Through my work at a local women’s domestic abuse shelter, I have been spreading humanism’s ideals of equality for all. I also pitched a project to the Children’s Services Division at the Shade Tree to mentor and read socially progres-

sive books to children displaced by domestic violence. After the readings, I use my network of professionals I met through summer opportunities, such as black Eastern Michigan University Professor Tamara Tucker, and plan to contact other professionals to further educate the children about important social issues. My hope is that these mutually respectful conversations will encourage children to become active allies to disadvantaged communities and feel empowered enough to speak up for equality. I believe that when young people support each other, they can drive meaningful change. My mentorship not only inspires youth to become allies to progressive ideals and become familiar with STEM career paths, but it also allows us the opportunity to sharpen our self-advocacy tools together. Through instilling the next generation with the ideals of humanism’s equality, I am driving social change to my community to have society be one step closer to equality. Belen, 18, is from Claremont, Calif., and attends Scripps College.

Free from the shackles of religion

By Kaylin Nelson

I was raised in a Christian household, with a minister father and a devoutly religious mother. I am not sure if I ever believed in God, or if I simply followed the beliefs of my parents because I was too young to form my own opinions. At 6 years old, I was sexually assaulted on the grounds of my church. My abuser was a family friend — a 20-year-old man, whose mother and father held positions similar to my own parents in the church. The assault occurred as I waited outside of the church building where youth choir practice took place, with adults standing just inside the doors. After my assault, I remained an active member of the church. I returned to the location of my assault a week later for choir practice, and con-

tinued to return for the next 11 years. I was baptized at 9 years old. My mother cried as the pastor pressed his hands to my chest and held me beneath the water, washing me of my sins. Being washed of my sins, according to my mother, was also supposed to wash me of any hatred, or ill will that I felt towards others. Even if she never said it, I knew she spoke of my abuser. It was my duty to move on — to forgive and forget. Time was supposed to have healed all wounds. My wounds refused to heal. They were picked at each time I saw my abuser at church, where he had been welcomed back with open arms. The idea of stepping foot on the grounds of my church made me ill, and still does. The behavior of my church, and the ease with which they accepted my abuser back into the fold pushed me

away from religion. I could not, and would not, subscribe to a doctrine that ignored my pain, and called for forgiveness, even before healing could take place. I didn’t see a therapist until I was 15. For nine years, the only solution I was presented with was prayer. I was told to run back into the arms of the God, who had already allowed me to be broken. My sexual assault drove me away from church and opened my eyes to the flaws of religion. God has been used to spread hatred, to protect abusers and to shame victims. I no longer see church as a place of worship, but rather as a breeding ground for future abusers and abuse apologists. As someone of intersecting identities — a queer, Black woman — I have witnessed religion being used against people who share identities



Kaylin Nelson

with me, to both actively oppress them or to excuse their mistreatment. This, along with greed and rampant sexual assault, are just some of the issues that I have encountered at my church. Kaylin, 17, attends University of Central Florida.

LETTERBOX

Helping to stop a prayer at 50th reunion

A few days before attending a 50th reunion for my public high school class in Menomonee Falls, Wis., a member of the reunion committee sent an email to everyone asking if we should invite a pastor to say a prayer for the departed.

The reunion chair responded: “I’m sure we can request a short moment of silence for our deceased classmates. I’ll also try to find someone to say a grace. Can anyone think of a classmate that I should consider?”

As I read all this, I wasn’t sure what to do. I had attended a public school, yet I did not want to say anything for fear of being ostracized by old friends and acquaintances.

Fortunately, after that, a classmate wrote: “If we do that, we should keep it real non-denominational, because we had someone in the Optimist’s Club offended by the wording of our prayers at the beginning of our meetings, because she is Jewish.”

Although I retired from the law practice years ago, that email gave me the courage to put my gloves back on and to fight once more for what is right. I wrote: “Hello, everyone: I agree regarding the need for a public high school-sponsored event to be nondenominational. A moment of silence for the deceased is acceptable, as it is neutral as to religion. I suggest we use the moment of silence for both remembering the deceased and for each individual’s silent thoughts or prayers.”

Although I lost a few “friends,” they heeded my advice, and the reunion conducted just a moment of silence, without a pastor, a prayer or anyone giving any grace at dinner.

Wisconsin

The younger generations are truly less religious

Freethought Today’s articles about increasingly secular attitudes among younger Americans are spot on, and here is an example: I recently handed two \$20 bills to a Panera bakery employee to pay for bagels and bread.

“Did you do this?” the young woman asked, pointing to the bold block lettering: “In Reason We Trust.”

“Yup! I’m an atheist,” I said.

“Cool,” she replied.

“No one asked me if I want religious dogma printed on our money and it is not true or right,” I explained.

“That is true,” she cheerfully agreed, handing me a 25-cent coin celebrating the “flying fox” bats of American Samoa. That quarter’s motto? E pluribus unum!

Arizona

For religious believers, Trumpism an easy leap

People have asked why so many Trump supporters are members of Christian religious sects. I figure if somebody believes in virgin birth, the holy trinity and the resurrection, you can probably get them to believe almost anything.

Wisconsin

Just do as God says



Joel Kersting of Minnesota writes: “Just be sure you wear your life jacket.”

Thank you so much for essay contest award

Thank you so much for giving me an honorable mention through your essay contest scholarship program. I appreciate the opportunity to not only fund my college, but also to share my experience with how religion is obstructing my daily life by encouraging the distrust of science. Your work to educate society has and will impact many others besides me, and I look forward to seeing the great advancements this organization cultivates.

Minnesota

Jefferson tried to avoid Declaration controversy

In their attempts to assert that the U.S. is a religious, even Christian nation, proponents point to the Declaration of Independence. The words “all men are created equal . . . endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights,” are used to support the theocratic view.

What I find missing in most debates over the meaning of these words is the context. In the 18th century, much of Europe was ruled by monarchs who claimed “divine right” to occupy their thrones. A religious skeptic, Thomas Jefferson likely believed that human liberty was a natural state of affairs — no need for a deity to grant rights. But in the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson chose not to muddy the waters by asserting that there wasn’t any deity to grant rights to anyone. Instead, his document essentially said to King George III: Whatever rights you claim, we as free men have equal rights. You have not been given the right to rule over us.

With this interpretation, emphasizing equal rights regardless of whether they come from nature or a creator, Jefferson avoided adding a religious controversy over the primary issue of independence. Mention of a “creator” shielded Jefferson from being branded a godless radical. He simply asserted that “all men are created equal.”

California

Church tax breaks are one form of socialism

Since the year 2000, I’ve lived in four red states (Georgia, South Carolina, Oklahoma, Arizona). In each of these states (as well as all the other red states), there’s a conspicuous loathing and hostility toward anything considered either communistic and/or socialistic.

But how and why should this be?

After all, as most of us freethinkers already probably know, anyone who considers themselves a practicing Christian has been taught to believe that Jesus can transport them after they die to a Christian heaven. And, in return for such benefits, practicing Christians can deduct whatever they donate to their church from what they are otherwise obligated to pay in income tax. However, such tax breaks are akin to socialism.

And anything socialistic, according to actual believing Christians, is not only unpatriotic, un-American, and outright subversive, but also unconstitutional and opposed to everything our founding fathers stood for.

So, if Christians so despise socialism, why do they look forward so enthusiastically to spending their eternity in what is expected to be an authoritarian commu-

nist/socialist paradise, where every basic human need is provided by the Christian God, who’s a dictator.

And why don’t GOP Christians consider the tax exemptions the federal government gives to their churches socialistic?

Oklahoma

It’s clear that God wants us to be naked

A tweet: “‘If God had wanted us to cover our nose and mouth, he would have made us that way,’ said a woman with glasses on.”

Me: We weren’t made with a covering over our bodies either, so obviously we’re not to wear anything. Take off your clothes! Now!

Washington

Religion has always been an inherited belief

Here is an excerpt from my book, *Finite Human Infinite Humanity*:

Billions of people believe they have a soul that will be resurrected into heaven, while millions of other people believe they have a soul that will be reincarnated into a newborn.

These somewhat similar beliefs are incompatible. They can’t both be true, otherwise we humans must admit the gods are playing us for fools!

To resolve this dilemma, sociologists point out that neither is true. These two beliefs are simply cultural norms, useful as a psychological reward to motivate people to act morally and cooperate harmoniously with other members of their in-group.

When what you believe depends on where you were born, religion loses all credibility and becomes just another game of chance, and who wants to bet their life on that?

The 5th century BCE Greek historian Herodotus described this cultural relativism: “Everyone believes . . . the religion he was brought up in is the best.” In other words, religion is an inherited belief — inherited from their parents’ generation, who inherited it from their parents’ generation, going all the way back to hunter-gatherers 11,600 years ago at Gobekli Tepe of southern Turkey.

Florida

Freethought Matters 2021 Season

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

Watch our show every Sunday!

Photo by Chris Line

Visit FFRF's YouTube Channel to watch the shows.



Freethought Matters TV talk show airs in:

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

IN MEMORIAM

Jim and Julie Ede helped educate Alaskans

FFRF Lifetime Member James Colin Ede died of natural causes at his home- stead property, the Ede Den, on Dec. 9, 2020, one day past his 88th birthday. Just six months later, Julia Alice Ede died of natural causes at her daughter Ella’s home on June 15.

Julie was born Aug. 1, 1931, in Frank- furt, Ind., to Carter Wallace and Verna Wallace. Jim was born on Dec. 8, 1932, in Knox, Ind., to Colin Ede and Ethel Ede.

Jim was an only child and attended Purdue University for a year following high school. From 1952-1955, he served in the U.S. Army and was stationed at Fort Wainwright in Fairbanks, Alaska, during the Korean War. He returned to Indiana to complete college on the GI bill and met his wife Julie at Indiana Uni- versity. They married on Aug. 23, 1958.

In 1959, Jim and Julie set out for an adventure driving up the Alcan in a VW bus with their 9-year-old son, Stephen, to become educators in the new state of Alaska. They arrived at the Anchorage Park Strip on July 4 to see the Alaska state flag raised for the first time. From there, they settled into their first teach- ing job in Koyukuk. They taught school in five rural Alaska villages, as well as in Wasilla and Anchorage, for many years.



Jim and Julie Ede relax inside and outside their Wasilla, Alaska, home called the “Ede Den.”

Jim was very involved in promoting rural education and was president of the National Education Association-Alaska. Julie went on to teach many more years at Chugiak Elementary School until she retired in 1993.

In 1961, Jim and Julie bought their 50-acre homestead property, later called “The Ede Den” in Wasilla. Originally a two-room homesteader cabin, Jim add- ed on over the years to build their dream home furnished in Alaskan-inspired art, raised their three children (Stephen, Diana and Ella), ran a bed-and-breakfast and an antique business.

In their younger years, they often travelled internationally to Canada, Eu-

rope and Asia.

Jim and Julie were both very active in state-wide and community organizations, including arts, education, historical, and political groups. They enjoyed their col- lectible cars and were involved with the Antique Auto Musers and the British Car Club. They were active members of the Alaska Democratic Party, Palmer Elks Club, Alaska Pioneer Fruitgrowers Association, the Alaska Hemlock Society, Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbi- ans and Gays (PLAG), and the Freedom from Religion Foundation.

Jim shared a passion for reading, antiques, woodworking, beekeeping, gardening, wine making, Dixieland jazz and vintage cars. He was a master tink- er and could fix almost anything.

Julie was on the board of the Wasilla Library until 2010. As a longtime teach- er, she was passionate about teaching kids to read and promoting literacy. Julie was instrumental in the successful campaign to build a new public library in Wasilla, which she was thrilled to see opened in 2016. Julie visited the library every week to check out books and it was one of her proudest accomplishments to have been part of the campaign for the new library.

If you were family or friends with Julie, she never forgot a birthday and called or visited often. She was known for her generosity and kindness. She once came home from the grocery store with an entire family who needed a place to stay. She was an amazing host- ess and threw the best parties and never showed up empty-handed to someone’s home. The Ede Den annual Halloween party was legendary and continues to be an Ede family tradition.

Over the years, Jim and Julie made many friends all over the state. They never knew a stranger and went by the old Alaska practice of paying it forward and always helping a friend or neighbor in need.

Tom Flynn was Free Inquiry editor, secular humanist leader

Tom Flynn, editor of Free Inquiry magazine and former executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism, died unexpectedly Aug. 23 at age 66.

Tom was born Aug. 18, 1955, in Erie, Pa. He earned his bachelor’s de- gree at Xavier University.

Wikipedia details when Tom “con- verted” to atheism and how he began a lifetime of secular humanism activ- ism: “Acknowledging that he had be- come an atheist in 1980 while residing in Milwaukee, he visited Milwaukee’s downtown library, looked up ‘athe- ism’ in the card catalogue, and found the so-called Dresden Edition of *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll* on the open stacks. Reading Ingersoll’s florid Gild- ed Age speeches in defense of agnos- ticism and atheism confirmed him in his identity as an atheist and kindled his desire to become a public activist for unbelief.”

A statement on Tom’s death from the Center for Inquiry said: “A stark rationalist and staunch atheist if ever there was one, Tom was nonetheless brimming with enthusiasm, curios- ity, bold ideas, and perhaps most of all, humor. He had a deep love and encyclopedic knowledge of free- thought history and devoted himself to the preservation and rediscovery of American freethought’s great untold stories.”

Flynn also directed the Robert G. Ingersoll Birthplace Museum, which commemorates the 19th-century ora- tor and speaker known as “The Great Agnostic.”

Flynn was also known for his es-



Photo by Monica Harmsen/Creative Commons
Tom Flynn gives a presentation on the Freethought Trail at the Center For Inquiry, in Amherst, N.Y., in 2014.

says on atheism, religion and secular ideals, as well as his satirical science fiction novels, known as the Mess- iah Trilogy. He wrote *The Trouble With Christmas*, featuring the Anti-Claus.

“Tom didn’t believe in magic, but he was magical,” Robyn E. Blumner, president and CEO of the Center for Inquiry, said in a statement. “How else to describe this unlikely combination of brilliance, charm, vision, and roll- up-your-sleeves accomplishment?”

Adds Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president, “As well as being a lead- ing expert on Ingersoll, Tom was just plain funny and fun to be around. He and his work will be greatly missed.”

Janet Simmons had intelligence, humor, adventuresome spirit

Family and friends gathered at a neigh- borhood watering hole on Aug. 29 to raise a glass to Janet Meseroll Simmons, 90, an FFRF member who died in Lakewood, Colo., on Aug. 15 from cardiac arrest.

Janet was born in Metuchen, N.J., on Sept. 2, 1930. She graduated from Metuchen High School, completed a two- year course in secretarial studies at the Katharine Gibbs School in New York City, and then moved to Washington, D.C.

In 1952, she crisscrossed the United States in style while working as the as- sistant press secretary on the Dwight D. Ei- senhower presidential campaign. At the conclusion of the campaign, she moved to Colorado.

Before marrying David L. Simmons, Janet worked various jobs in what were then the small, seasonal mountain towns of Black Hawk and Central City. After marriage, Janet was a stay-at-home moth- er for 11 years, but was quite active in lo- cal Democratic politics, volunteered as a “room mother” when her children were in elementary school, read voraciously, and enjoyed opera, jazz and theater.

When Janet returned to the workforce as the assistant to a C-suite executive in a development firm, her desk was some- times in a construction trailer and some- times in a well-appointed office suite. Eventually, the job took her to Los An- geles, where she continued to work until retirement.

After retirement, she settled in as a dedicated volunteer in the Western His- tory Department of the Denver Public Library. Janet’s gift for organization, making order out of chaos, and careful record keeping were put to good use by the library. Concerned she could no longer move file boxes of documents and not wanting to be a nuisance, she ended her volunteer work when she was 88.

Janet then decided she wanted to live



Janet Simmons

around people her own age, so she sold her condominium and moved into an independent living facility just before Covid-19 hit. The facility locked down and Janet reveled in long days of reading, listening to opera, and frequent phone conversation with family.

It was during this time she discovered FFRF. Always a freethinker, Janet delight- ed in the arrival of Freethought Today, the content of which became a staple in her conversations with daughter Tracy.

Janet is survived by three children and five grandchildren. Her intelli- gence, humor and adventuresome spir- it are missed by those who knew her. Here’s a toast to a freethinker and a woman ahead of her time!

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.



Margaret Atwood



Randa Black



Christopher Cameron



Randall Cragun



Ann Druyan



Linda Greenhouse



Sikivu Hutchinson



Megan Phelps-Roper



Steven Pinker



Sasha Sagan



Sushant Singh



Gloria Steinem



Katherine Stewart



David Tamayo



Jay Wexler



David Williamson



Phil Zuckerman

See you in Boston, Nov. 19-21

Don't miss out on FFRF's convention!

We are closing in quickly on FFRF's 44th annual convention in Boston that begins Friday, Nov. 19! Sign up now if you haven't already, as seats are filling up fast! You won't want to miss out on all the great speakers and entertainment lined up for that weekend.

(Reminder: The event is limited to those who are fully vaccinated for Covid-19. See page 28.)

The conference will open informally on Thursday night, Nov. 18, with early registration and a two-hour appetizer reception at the Boston Park Plaza Hotel. Registration resumes at 7 a.m. Friday, Nov. 19, with early morning coffee, tea and breakfast pastries. The full, two-day program formally opens at 9 a.m. Friday and continues through Saturday night. The membership meeting will take place at 9 a.m. Sunday, followed by a short meeting of the State Representatives, concluding by noon.

The convention will include a report on FFRF accomplishments by Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, an hour-long legal report by FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert and FFRF's attorneys, a little music at the piano by Barker, FFRF book and product tables, the traditional drawing for "clean," pre-"In God We Trust" currency, and some complimentary food receptions.

FFRF Director of Strategic Response Andrew Seidel, author of *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism is Un-American*, will lead a workshop on Christian nationalism and its ties to Jan. 6.

Receptions

There will also be two optional author receptions. After "An evening with Margaret Atwood" Friday night, a short private reception for Ms. Atwood will take place, limited to 100 individuals. Tickets to the reception are \$500 and will include a copy of *The Testaments*, her sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Friday evening will end with a complimentary dessert reception and hot beverages for all participants.

Gloria Steinem will be interviewed by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor on Saturday afternoon, taking some audience questions, followed by a half-hour reception.

Mail in the handy registration on Page 28 or register online at ffrf.org/convention-2021.

Speakers

Below are shortened bios of this year's convention speakers. To read more about each speaker, please go to ffrf.org/convention-2021 and click on "Speakers 2021."

Margaret Atwood is the author of *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Edible Woman*, *The Robber Bride*, *The Blind Assassin*, *Oryx and Crake*.

Atwood will receive FFRF's "Forward" Award, which is reserved for those who are moving society forward.

Randa Black of Florida has won FFRF's Nothing Fails Like Prayer contest and will recite at the convention her secular invocation. Black is a professional actor, appearing in hundreds of television com-

mercials and episodic TV shows.

Christopher Cameron, associate professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, is author of the new book, *Black Freethinkers: A History of African American Secularism*.

Randall Cragun was a plaintiff in FFRF's lawsuit successfully challenging the disenfranchisement of atheists in Alabama.

Ann Druyan is a Peabody and Emmy Award-winning writer, producer and director of "Cosmos," specializing in the communication of science.

Linda Greenhouse is a clinical lecturer at Yale Law School and writes a biweekly column on law for The New York Times.

Sikivu Hutchinson, Ph.D. is an educator, author, playwright and director. Hutchinson will receive FFRF's "Freethought Heroine" Award.

Megan Phelps-Roper, author of *Unfollow: On Loving and Leaving the Westboro Baptist Church*, was raised in the Topeka, Kan.-based church known for its protests. Phelps-Roper will receive the \$10,000 "Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism" award.

Steven Pinker is a cognitive scientist, experimental psychologist, linguist and popular science author. He is a Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University. His latest book is *Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters*.

Sasha Sagan is author of the new book, *For Small Creatures Such as We: Rituals for Finding Meaning in Our Unlikely World*. She is a graduate of NYU, and has worked as

a television producer, filmmaker, writer and speaker.

Sushant Singh is an Indian actor and presenter known for his work predominantly in Hindi cinema. He has appeared in almost 50 movies since 1998. Singh will be receiving the Avijit Roy Courage Award, which includes a crystal plaque and \$5,000.

Gloria Steinem is a writer, lecturer, political activist, and feminist organizer. Steinem, who's been billed as "the world's most famous feminist," is a journalist who co-founded Ms. Magazine in 1972. Steinem will receive FFRF's "Forward" Award.

Katherine Stewart is the author of *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*. She writes about religion, politics, policy and conflicts over the separation of church and state.

David Tamayo is co-founder and president of Hispanic American Freethinkers in 2010. He was vice president of the Reason Rally 2016, former host of the TV show "Road to Reason — A Skeptic's Guide to the 21st Century."

David Williamson is co-founder of the Central Florida Freethought Community (CFFC). Williamson and other winning plaintiffs in the Brevard Co. lawsuit will accept FFRF's Freethinker of the Year Award.

Phil Zuckerman is the associate dean and professor of sociology at Pitzer College, and the founding chair of the nation's first Secular Studies Program. He has authored several books, including *What It Means to be Moral*.

Thursday, November 18

7-9 PM REGISTRATION OPENS

Book & sales tables open
Reception with appetizers, drinks

Friday, November 19

7-9 AM REGISTRATION RE-OPENS

Complimentary pastries, hot beverages, fruit juices (Registration remains open throughout convention)

9 AM Welcome

Lisa Strand, Director of Operations

Year in Review

FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker & Annie Laurie Gaylor

Nothing Fails Like Prayer Award/Secular "Invocation"

Randa Black

9:30 Legal Report by FFRF Attorneys

Legal Director Rebecca Markert & Attorneys TBA

10:30 "Our Non-Christian Nation"

Law Professor Jay Wexler

11:00 BREAK

11:15 "Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters"

Steven Pinker

FFRF's 44th annual convention schedule

(Tentative schedule subject to minor change)

NOON

Pinker/Wexler Book signings

NOON - 1:30 PM LUNCH BREAK

Optional Box Lunches

12:30 Workshop on Christian Nationalism

FFRF Director of Strategic Response Andrew Seidel

1:15 BREAK

1:30 Freethinkers of Year

Randall Cragun, David Williamson and other plaintiffs

2:30 TBA

3:00 "The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism"

Katherine Stewart

3:30

Stewart book signing

3:30 - 4:00 BREAK

Snacks, beverages

4:00 Clarence Darrow Award

Linda Greenhouse

Greenhouse book signing

5-7 PM Buffet Dinner

(Ticketed event)

7:00 An Evening with Margaret Atwood

(in conversation with Katherine Stewart)

8-8:45

Atwood book signing

Concurrent with Cupcake/Hot Beverages Reception

9:00 Atwood Reception

(Ticketed event)

Saturday, November 20

8:00 AM Non-Prayer Breakfast

(Ticketed event)

MUSIC

Dan Barker

9:30 Avijit Roy Courage Award

Sushant Singh (with Bonya Ahmed)

10:00 "Living the Secular Life"

Phil Zuckerman

10:30 "Black Freethinkers"

Chris Cameron

11:00 Freethought Heroine Award

Sikivu Hutchinson

11:30 Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award

Megan Phelps-Roper

NOON

Zuckerman/Cameron/Hutchinson/Phelps-Roper book signings

NOON - 2 PM LUNCH BREAK

Chapter Lunch

2:00 PM Student Honorees

2:30 Hispanic American Freethinkers

David Tamayo, Founder

3:00 Forward Award

Gloria Steinem (In conversation with Annie Laurie Gaylor)

4:00 BREAK

4 - 4:30 Ticketed Steinem Reception

4:15 "Ask an Attorney" Workshop

6:00 PM SATURDAY NIGHT DINNER

(Ticketed event)

8:00 "Clean Money" drawing

8:30 An Evening with Ann Druyan and Sasha Sagan

"For Small Creatures Such As We"

Sasha Sagan

Emperor Has No Clothes Award

Ann Druyan

Druyan/Sagan book signings

Sunday, November 21

8:30 AM Pastries, coffee served

9 Annual Membership meeting

Open to all current FFRF members

11ish Annual State Representatives Meeting

ADJOURN BY NOON



The Boston Park Plaza is site of FFRF’s 2021 national convention, Nov. 19-21.

Convention information

Hotel reservations

The convention hotel is the Boston Park Plaza, 50 Park Plaza at Arlington St., Boston. The convention rate is \$189 single, double, triple or quad. Suites are \$389 and up. Attendees should call the Central Reservations Office (617-379-7129). Please ask for “Freedom From Religion Annual Convention.” The hotel will discount self-parking to \$30 per day at Motor Mart Garage.

The cut-off date for reserving rooms is 5 p.m. Eastern on Oct. 18, 2021. *FFRF urges you to plan ahead and reserve early to avoid disappointment.*

Meals

In addition to offering several complimentary food or dessert receptions, the convention will include four optional group meals. FFRF does not mark up meal prices, which include 17 percent gratuity, 10 percent taxable administrative fee and 7 percent sales tax.

A **robust and tasty box lunch**, \$60, will be offered at Friday noon for participant convenience, concurrent with Andrew Seidel’s Christian nationalism workshop.

Choices include:

- Grilled Chicken Caesar Wrap
- Turkey BLT Wrap
- Grilled Vegetable Wrap

Wraps will be served with roasted vegetable penne salad, Cape Cod potato chips, a piece of whole fruit, a freshly baked cookie and choice of assorted soft drinks or bottled water.

A **Southern barbecue buffet**, \$65, with vegetable chili and cornbread muffin, rotisserie chicken with BBQ sauce and greens, carved brisket with mac and cheese and fruit kabobs will take place from 5–7 p.m. Friday.

FFRF’s Non-Prayer Breakfast, \$45, includes scrambled eggs, bacon and breakfast potatoes, assorted pastries, juice, coffee and tea, with vegetarian/vegan options.

The Saturday banquet dinner of \$95 will include Maple Glazed Statler Breast of Chicken with buttermilk mashed potatoes, seasonable autumn baby green salad with roasted beets, quinoa, goat cheese, apple cider vinaigrette, and Boston Cream Pie. The vegetarian option is Butternut Squash Ravioli.

A **two-hour lunch on your own** is scheduled for Saturday to permit some fresh air, sightseeing or relaxation between events.

The Boston Park Plaza itself offers a variety of dining options: Kozy Korner for drinks, lunch or dinner in Off the Common, the uber-modern steakhouse Strega Italiano just off the lobby, and classic Irish pub J.J. O’Connor’s, just outside the entrance. The Back Bay Boston neighborhood offers a variety of restaurants.

Plan time to sightsee

The Boston Park Plaza is in the officially recognized neighborhood of Back Bay Boston, built on reclaimed land in the Charles River basin. It’s home to a number of restaurants, glitzy stores, skyscrapers, the commercial strips of Newbury Street and Boylston Street, the residential brownstones of Marlborough Street and Copley Square, a grassy plaza within walking distance. The hotel is about a mile from the Charles River Esplanade, a waterfront haven for runners.

You may wish to take a self-guided Freedom Trail tour of historic Boston sites, or sign up on your own for a guided tour on Thursday or Sunday at thefreedomtrail.org or choose any number of other tour options.

Covid-19 rules — vaccinations required

The event is limited to FFRF members and their guests who are fully vaccinated* for Covid-19. Please be sure to indicate on the registration form whether you have been vaccinated. FFRF reserves the right to request proof of vaccination. **Only exception: If you are under a physician’s explicit instructions not to be vaccinated for Covid-19 due to health/immunity issues.*

The great news is that atheists as a group in the United States are the most likely and willing to be vaccinated.

We fully expect the event to reach “herd immunity.” FFRF staff members are fully vaccinated.

Please note that the Boston Plaza Hotel is adhering to all federal, state and local guidelines and does

not at this time require its staff to be vaccinated.

The hotel has indicated it will follow whatever protocol, as yet unknown, is required by the government at the time of FFRF’s convention.

We expect masking will be required and will follow any CDC, Massachusetts or Boston rules. FFRF will be offering its popular masks, with the slogans “FFRF,” “Science is Golden” and “In Science I Trust,” at no cost during the convention while they last.

The conference room will be set up in the usual theater format, which does not allow for social distancing.

FFRF will inform participants of any requirements requested by authors during book signings, such as masking or social distancing.

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

NATIONAL CONVENTION

BOSTON | NOVEMBER 19-21, 2021

44TH CONVENTION REGISTRATION FORM

Or register online: ffrf.org/convention-2021

REGISTRATION FEES	Number Registering	Cost
Member	___	\$75 \$___
Spouse or Companion (Non-member accompanying member)	___	\$80 \$___
Child (High school or under accompanying registrant)	___	Free \$___
College Student with ID	___	\$25 \$___
☐ I am interested in hotel, meal or travel scholarship		
Non-member	___	\$130 \$___
☐ Or, I will join FFRF for \$40 (and save \$15)	___	\$115 \$___

OPTIONAL AUTHOR RECEPTIONS

VIP Dessert Reception / Fundraiser with Margaret Atwood	___	\$500 \$___
Friday night Includes author book (Limited to 100)		
VIP Book Signing / Fundraiser with Gloria Steinem	___	\$500 \$___
Saturday afternoon Includes author book (Limited to 50)		

SOLD OUT

OPTIONAL MEALS / EVENTS

Friday, November 19

Box Lunch Wraps	___	\$60 \$___
Registrant 1 ☐ Grilled Chicken ☐ Turkey BLT ☐ Grilled Vegetable (vegan)		
Registrant 1 ☐ Grilled Chicken ☐ Turkey BLT ☐ Grilled Vegetable (vegan)		
Friday Dinner Buffet	___	\$65 \$___
Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free		
Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free		

Saturday, November 20

Non-Prayer Breakfast	___	\$45 \$___
Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free		
Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free		
Saturday Dinner	___	\$95 \$___
Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free		
Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free		
► Total \$	___	

☐ I am adding a donation to sponsor student convention scholarships. \$___

Please enclose separate note indicating any ADA or food allergy accommodations needed in order to fully participate.

(Make checks payable to FFRF) Return with payment to:
FFRF, Attn: Convention | P.O. Box 750 | Madison, WI 53701

☐ I attest that I and my guests will be fully vaccinated for Covid-19 as of 11/18/21.
☐ I attest that I have a physician's order against vaccination.

Name of Registrant 1

Name of Registrant 2

☐ I am including additional registrants (enclose your additional list, with meals, if any).

Address

CityState / ZIP

Phone*Email*

Credit Card NumberExpiration Date / Security Code

Billing Name / Signature*Contact information for in-house use only

Pre-registration deadline Oct. 31, 2021 (Unless event is sold out)
No refund after pre-registration deadline.