

# FREETHOUGHT TODAY



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join the grievance  
conservatives?**

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Vol. 38 No. 1

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## FFRF special report

# Christian Nationalist takeover of the federal judiciary

A new Freedom From Religion Foundation report issued on Dec. 15 exposes the Christian Nationalist takeover of the federal courts and the damage this is causing to the separation of state and church.

Over the past four years, President Trump has stacked the federal courts with ultraconservative judges, thanks to the blocking of President Obama's judicial appointments and the holding open of vacant seats by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. Trump has made three Supreme Court appointments, 53 appellate court appointments and 170 district court appointments, drastically outpacing his predecessors. In fact, the outgoing president vowed to continue nominating judges through the end of the lame-duck 116th congressional session.

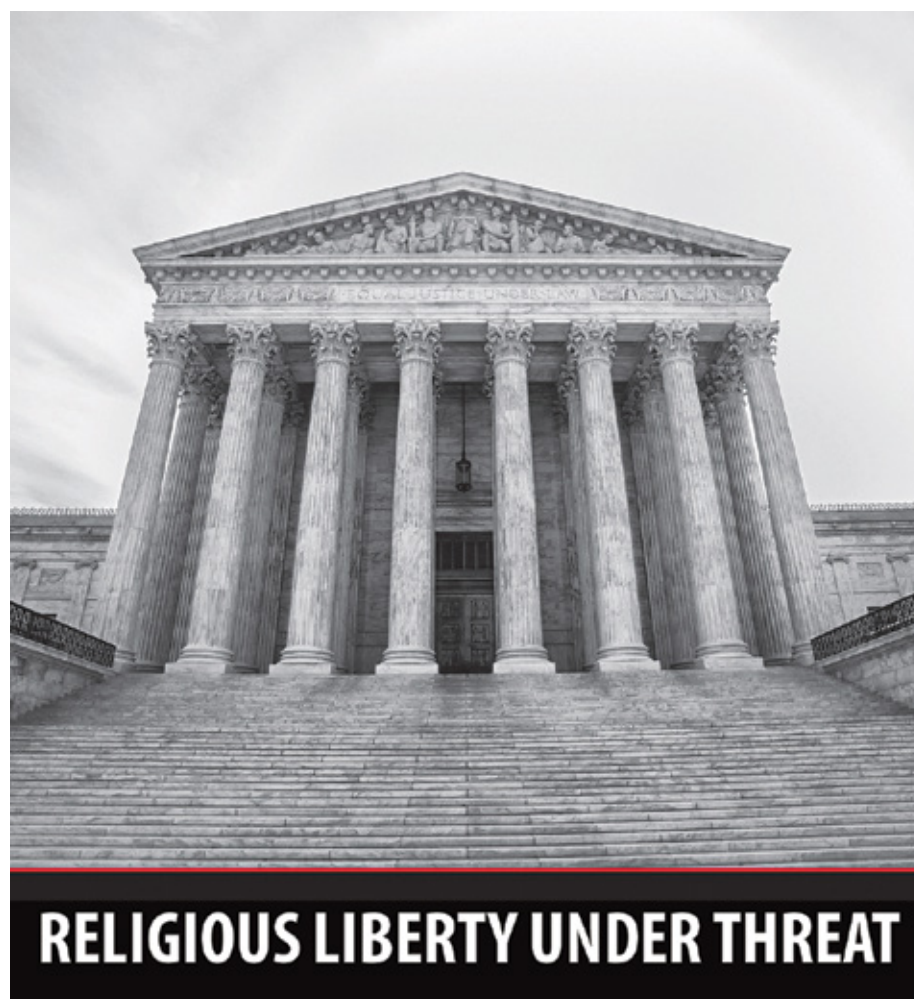
The capture of the courts is alarming, given the power the courts hold over the

interpretation of the Constitution and its impact on our rights, FFRF underscores in its report. The judges on the federal bench are appointed for life, which may be up to four or five decades. Their influence often lasts even longer.

To make matters worse, political calculations have dictated Trump's judicial appointees. In 2016, 81 percent of white evangelical Christians voted for him, and in return they've gotten a federal judiciary willing to codify religious privilege while stripping the rights of minorities. That's why the federal judges that have been appointed by Trump are religious ideologues who are dramatically redefining religious liberty and undermining core, cherished constitutional principles that keep religion out of government.

"We are only seeing the early stages of the

*See Judiciary on page 20*



## Unmasking the role of religion in the pandemic

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

**E**vangelist Franklin Graham has started off the New Year with a doozy of a warning.

In a pair of tweets on Jan. 1, he wrote: "Joe Biden has warned of a 'dark winter' for our nation. But the dark winter we're facing is not just due to Covid-19, it's due to the moral decline and political corruption we see throughout the U.S." and "We could face a dark period of history as God turns his back on our nation because of its sins and our politicians embracing, and even flaunting, sin."



Annie Laurie Gaylor

Biden, of course, predicted a "very dark winter" if pandemic mitigation measures dictated by science, such as mask-wearing and social distancing, continue to be politicized. But isn't it theocratic leaders who have led America astray, who should be "repenting" their science-denying,



Photo by Chris Line

**The mannequin of Charles Darwin in the Free-thought Hall library shows off FFRF's "In Science I Trust" face mask.**

religion-embracing ways?

Graham has also unctuously praised President Trump's sanctimonious remarks on Dec. 31 that "a society without religion cannot prosper."

Shouldn't the question instead be whether a

*See Religion on page 6*

## FFRF's legal team notches another great year in 2020

By Rebecca Markert

**F**FRF's Legal Department has been busy ensuring the wall of separation between state and church is high despite all the obstacles thrown our way in 2020. The pandemic changed *how* and *where* we work, but it hasn't changed *what* we do. Last year, as our homes became our offices, we still continued to advocate for your rights and work to keep our government free from religion through litigation, persuasive letters to government agencies asking them to resolve violations, and education on the



Rebecca Markert

importance of state/church separation.

### Staff changes

There were some staffing changes in 2020. Our legal team bid farewell to our legal fellow, Dante Harootunian, whose fellowship ended in August.

We welcomed a new legal fellow, Joseph McDonald, who recently graduated from the University of Wisconsin with a dual degree: a Juris Doctorate and a Master's in Public Health. Our team welcomed a new intake legal assistant, Stephanie Dyer, who is also a recent graduate from the University of Wisconsin. Both Joseph and Stephanie were onboarded remotely and have adapted to our "work from home" office environment well.

*See Legal team on page 20*



# IN MEMORIAM

## Ben Bova was science fiction author

Science fiction author and editor Ben Bova died of complications of COVID-19 and a stroke on Nov. 29 in Naples, Fla., at age 88.

He was the author of 140 books and edited some of science fiction’s best-known publications and served as the president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.

In an interview on FFRF’s Free-thought Radio (July 18, 2009, which can be heard at [ffrf.org/radio](http://ffrf.org/radio) by scrolling to that date), Bova said, “The Catholic Church teaches that faith is a gift from God, and it’s a gift I never received apparently. It always seemed kind of strange to me that we’re depending on this supernatural power and there’s no real evidence that it exists. . . . When I started understanding how science works, it occurred to me that there just is no evidence that there is a God.”

Attracted to science but fearing he lacked the math skills for it led him to study journalism at Temple University in Philadelphia, which landed him a job in 1954 as a newspaper editor. He then worked as a technical writer for an aircraft company and as a writer for educational films at MIT. He was working as a writer in 1969 for Avco Everett Research Laboratory, which built heat shields for the Apollo 11 module, when the first men landed on the moon.

He earned a master’s in communications from the State University of New York at Albany and a Ph.D. in education from California Coast University.

His increasing renown as a writer in the 1970s brought him the role for which he would be most acclaimed, editor of *Analog*, the popular science fiction magazine. As editor, Bova earned five consecutive Hugo Awards (1973 to 1977) and another in 1982 as fiction editor of *Omni* magazine.

After his first novel (*The Star Conquerors* in 1959), Bova wrote 140 futuristic and nonfiction books. The latest in his Grand Tour series was *Uranus* in July 2020.

He served as president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of



Ben Bova in 1974  
Wikimedia Commons

America and a science analyst on “CBS Morning News.” He taught science fiction at Harvard and film courses at other institutions. He received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Arthur C. Clarke Foundation (2005), was elected a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (2001) and in 2008 won the Robert A. Heinlein Award “for his outstanding body of work in the field of literature.”

Bova’s writings predicted solar power satellites, the discovery of organic chemicals in interstellar space, the space race of the 1960s, virtual reality, human cloning, stem cell therapy, the discovery of ice on the moon, electronic book publishing and the Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars). His novel *Mars Life* (2008) explored the clash between science, politics and religion. His 1980 article in *Discover* magazine, “The Creationists’ ‘Equal Time,’” became an inspirational classic among freethinkers.

He married Rosa Cucinotta in 1953 while attending Temple University. They had a son and a daughter before divorcing in 1974, when he married Barbara Berson Rose. She founded the Barbara Bova Literary Agency. She died in 2009 of cancer in Naples, Fla. Bova married Rashida Loya, an anesthesiologist, in 2013.

**Editor’s note:** Most of this obituary comes from FFRF’s *Freethought of the Day* entry, which was compiled by Bonnie Gutsch and Bill Dunn. To see other entries in FFRF’s extensive list, go to [ffrf.org/day](http://ffrf.org/day).

## The bright life of Paul Geisert

Many in the freethought world were saddened to learn of the death of Paul Geisert, who succumbed Nov. 17 to COVID-19 due to an outbreak in the congregate living community near Sacramento, Calif., where he had resided the past year.

An Ohio native, Geisert had a rather eclectic career, living and holding jobs in 11 states across his lifetime. Besides owning and running two businesses, all his creative work related in some manner to education, with most positions being as a teacher and/or instructional developer.

He pursued undergraduate studies in biology at the University of Toledo, did his master’s level graduate work at the University of Michigan, and then received his Ph.D. in instructional systems at Florida State University, co-authoring with his wife two college-level textbooks on instructional uses of computers.

He also authored numerous articles in science education and freethought publications, taking firm stances on behalf of authentic science in the face of creationist/religious intrusions into public education.

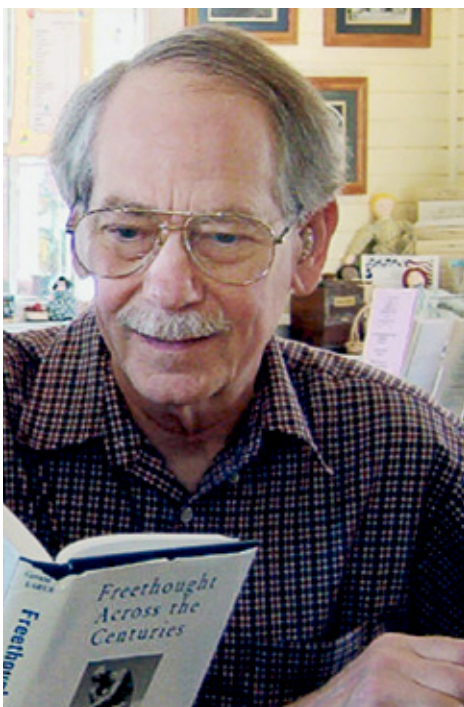
Besides his personal freethinking, Geisert was a nonconformist in several ways, almost approaching iconoclast status. While on the faculty of the University of Wyoming and being a highly innovative member of its Science and Mathematics Teaching Center (he won a national award for instructional development in college level biology there), he unpredictably departed academia after making local news by publicly turning down his academic promotion, choosing to pursue his own pathway as a freelancer instead.

Geisert is probably best known among organized freethinkers as the person who originated the noun identity term (“a bright”) as a positive way of presenting one’s all-encompassing outlook without making reference to religion. Although a great many atheists and agnostics would qualify for the descriptor, not all would do so, because fitting the definition means going beyond lacking deity-belief.

Brights have a naturalistic worldview, fully free of supernatural and mystical elements. No “woo-woo” for them. A bright would not credit as existing in reality any of the copious paranormal entities and agencies that inhabit human minds.

Geisert co-founded The Brights’ Network as an international online constituency of individuals holding a naturalistic outlook. Several notable freethinkers such as the magicians James Randi and Penn and Teller, and scientist Richard Dawkins, joined the network of registered Brights and drew attention to its existence. Unfortunately, the popular attributions were not always accurate, because the neologism was not invented to be a synonym for atheist.

Drawn to unconventional activities and unorthodox thinking, Geisert was a firm supporter of public education and



Paul Geisert

the need for civic neutrality between religion and nonreligion.

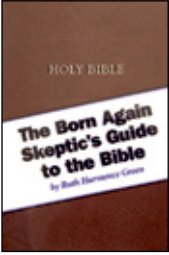
Among other products, he co-produced “Different Drummers: Nonconforming Thinkers in History,” an instructional unit that California approved for classroom use. He also lobbied its Department of Education to press for inclusivity of nonreligious persons and points of view, thereby inducing new wording for the state’s curricular standards for social studies teaching. Paul became active in Objectivity, Accuracy, and Balance In Teaching about Religion (OABITAR) and wrote material for several of its projects, such as the website, “Teaching about Religion in Support of Civic Pluralism.”

Atheists and Other Freethinkers, the local group that Geisert co-founded in 1993 and served as an early president, continues to be active today ([aofonline.org](http://aofonline.org)), as do other nonprofits that he helped to get going, such as Sacramento’s Reason Center ([reasoncenter.org](http://reasoncenter.org)) and, of course, The Brights’ Network ([the-brights.net](http://the-brights.net)).

Many who knew Geisert personally considered him a Renaissance Man, having proved himself just as handy under the hood of his Model A or two classic cars as in the bowels of an “old house renewal,” where he accomplished all the electrical, plumbing, carpentry, tiling, locksmith work, etc. by himself.

Among his many building projects, Geisert constructed two boats and even ground the lens for the telescope that he built. He was savvy in the kitchen and at the sewing machine, as well.

Despite having no deity-belief whatsoever and hence functionally an atheist, Geisert would not accept the label, despite friend Michael Newdow’s persuasiveness on the matter. “I see no reason to define myself by reference to religion; I am a bright.”



**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.

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**Buy it from FFRF online**  
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*The only freethought newspaper in the United States*



# The man who kept God off the moon

By Bill Dunn

On Feb. 20, 1926, Julian W. Scheer, who kept God off a plaque left on the moon in 1969, was born in Richmond, Va., to Hilda (Knopf) and George Scheer. He served in the U.S. Merchant Marine during World War II and after the war entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, graduating in 1950 with a degree in journalism and communications.

After working for a decade as a Charlotte News reporter, Scheer started working as a consultant for NASA at the end of the Mercury program in 1962 to create an organizational framework for NASA’s public relations efforts. In early 1963, he became NASA’s assistant administrator for public affairs. He strived to make the public more aware of the program while making flight technicians and astronauts more available for interviews. “The program was really a battle in the Cold War, and Julian Scheer was one of its generals,” astronaut Frank Borman later said.

In preparation for the historic Apollo 11 mission in July 1969 with commander Neil Armstrong, command module pilot Michael Collins and lunar module pilot Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin, Scheer helped craft the message on a plaque that would be attached to a leg of the lunar module’s descent stage, which would land and remain in an area of the moon called the Sea of Tranquility.

Scheer drafted the text for the plaque as a member of NASA’s Committee on Symbolic Activities for the First Lunar Landing. It said: “HERE MEN FROM THE PLANET EARTH FIRST SET FOOT UPON THE MOON. JULY 1969, A.D. WE CAME IN PEACE FOR ALL MANKIND. President Nixon’s and the astronauts’ names and signatures were under the statement.

According to several accounts, in-



Photo by Hugh Morton  
Former NASA consultant Julian Scheer was instrumental in keeping “God” off a plaque that would remain on the moon.



Photo courtesy of NASA

Julian Scheer outside NASA headquarters in Washington, D.C., in September 1965.

cluding Scheer’s, Nixon wanted God mentioned on the plaque. *Rocket Men: The Epic Story of the First Men on the Moon* by Craig Nelson recounts Scheer telling Nixon aide Peter Flanigan at the White House in early June that not everyone worships the same god, after Flanigan tried to insert “under God” after “We came in peace,” with Nixon initialing his approval of the change.

That flew in the face of Scheer’s wish that the plaque should make a universal statement: “Peter [Scheer said], there is no universal god.” Flanigan: “Dammit, Julian, the president wants that change. The president is big on God. . . . Billy Graham is here nearly every Sunday. The president wants God on the plaque!”

Scheer, in a 1989 column he wrote for the Orlando Sentinel, said NASA administrator Thomas O. Paine asked him on the way back from the White House what he was going to do. “The plaque has been put on the spacecraft and checked out,” Scheer replied. “I guess the answer is nothing.” Paine answered, “I didn’t hear that.”

William Safire, a speechwriter for Nixon and Vice President Spiro Agnew at the time, later wrote in a New York Times column (July 17, 1989) about

reviewing the inscription submitted by NASA: “We left ‘July 1969 A.D.’ intact because it was a shrewd way of sneaking God in [certainly not NASA’s intent]:

the use of the initials for Anno Domini, ‘in the year of our Lord,’ would tell space travelers hence that Earthlings in 1969 had a religious bent; piously, we made sure that a bible with both testaments was included in the spacecraft’s cargo.” Safire also suggested “came in peace” should

replace the original “come” and it was.

About six months earlier, on Dec. 24, 1968, the Apollo 8 crew (Bill Anders, Jim Lovell and Frank Borman) had read verses 1-10 from the Book of Genesis that were broadcast back to Earth while orbiting the moon. Scheer wasn’t involved with writing the text of what the astronauts said. Scheer slyly told a Japanese journalist staying at a Houston hotel who was looking for the transcript: “Open the drawer of the table next to your bed. In it you will find a book. Turn to the first page. The words you are looking for are there.” (*Chasing the Moon: The People, the Politics, and the Promise That Launched America Into the Space Age* by Alan Andres and Robert Stone, 2019) The mission’s religious intrusion was later upheld by the 5th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals.

After the successful Apollo 11 mission, Scheer was awarded NASA’s highest award, the Distinguished Service Medal, and led the crew on tours

around the world. He left NASA in 1971 to manage the campaign for former North Carolina Gov. Terry Sanford for the presidency, but remained a consultant to the space program and was a trustee of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum. He worked for a Washington-based communications consulting firm until 1976, when he became a vice president running the Washington offices of LTV Corp., whose holdings include steel mills. He retired from LTV in 1992 and returned to his consulting firm. He wrote several books, including *Light of the Captured Moon* for children.

He married Virginia Williams and they had three children before divorcing. After his death in 2001 at 75, he was survived by his wife, the former Suzann Huggan, with whom he had a daughter.

## Freethought of the Day

This article is a reprinting of the Feb. 20 Freethought of the Day on [ffrf.org](http://ffrf.org). Freethought of the Day is a daily freethought calendar brought to you courtesy of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, highlighting birthdates, quotes and other historic tidbits. To view the Freethought of the Day, go to [ffrf.org/news/day](http://ffrf.org/news/day).

Also, to see FFRF’s compilation of famous freethinkers by birth date, check out the calendar on the outer wrap of each issue of Freethought Today.

### NOTHING FAILS LIKE PRAYER CONTEST 2021

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

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

Deadline: August 1, 2021.

**MORE INFO AT:**  
[ffrf.org/nothing-fails-like-prayer](http://ffrf.org/nothing-fails-like-prayer)

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# Save the date!

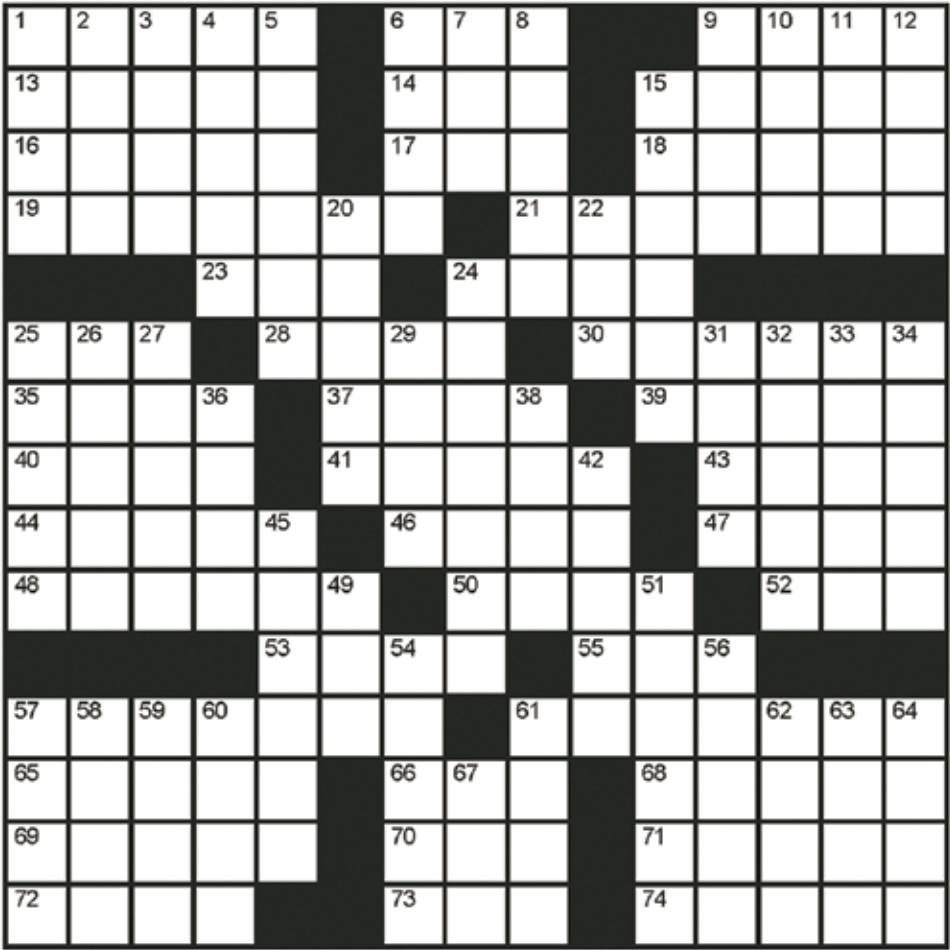
## Join us in Boston for FFRF’s annual convention

FFRF’s 2021 national convention is scheduled for the weekend of November 19-21, 2021, at the Boston Park Plaza Hotel in Boston.

Due to the pandemic, the 2020 convention was deferred to this year. The amazing roster still includes Margaret Atwood, Gloria Steinem and a host of secular authors such as Katherine Stewart and Phil Zuckerman, activists such as Hispanic American Freethinkers’ founder David Tamayo and honorees such as Black Skeptics Los Angeles founder Sikivu Hutchinson. New speakers and honorees will include New York Times court columnist Linda Greenhouse and more to be announced.

Given many uncertainties and logistics to work out, FFRF will be announcing details in future issues.

### Freethought Today Crossword



Answers on page 25 Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

- Across**
  - Itsy-bitsy bits
  - Spinning toy
  - Unnerve
  - Oil crisis, e.g.
  - Hole punching tool
  - Gourmet mushroom
  - Mythological princess of Colchis
  - Romanian money
  - Capital of Ghana
  - \*Habitual doubter, Brit. spelling
  - \*FFRF headquarters location
  - Skirt’s edge
  - Junk e-mail
  - Dojo pad
  - Two-masted vessel
  - Heavy lifting injury
  - Burden
  - No pain - no this!
  - “\_\_\_\_\_ in sight”
  - Field mouse
  - Of time long past
  - Crunchable info
  - Written corrections
  - Left to a Russian
  - Part of a wine glass
  - #19 Across without ‘c’
  - Bit attachment
  - 9 to 5, e.g.
  - Coin throw
  - Siren’s domain
  - \*Thomas Paine’s “The Age of Reason,”
- Down**
  - Schools of thought
  - Crude group?
  - Moon pull
  - Bet’s predecessor
  - Stone-gray
  - After-bath powder
  - O in IOU
  - Chubby
  - Plural of focus
  - Pendulum paths
  - \*Number of times word ‘god’ appears in U.S. Constitution
  - Distinctive flair
  - Jon Hamm’s TV show, 2007-2015
  - Insect in adult stage
  - Ooh and \_\_\_\_\_
  - Tiny burgers
  - \*Galileo Galilei: “And yet it \_\_\_\_\_”
- Opposite of cathode
  - Object of Tiny Tim’s affection
  - \*Thomas Jefferson’s phrase: “\_\_\_\_\_ of separation between church and state”
  - Singer Stewart and actor Steiger
  - Poet’s “below”
  - Lay to rest
  - \*U.S. President who was sworn in on a book of law, not bible
  - Cobblestone
  - Actress Campbell
  - Neil Diamond: “What a beautiful \_\_\_\_\_”
  - Form of civil disobedience, pl.
  - Trigonometry abbr.
  - Bee’s favorite drink
  - Turf, as opposed to surf
  - Distinctive atmosphere, pl.
  - Fungal spore sacs
  - It was, contraction
  - Shoshonean people
  - Cupid, in Greek mythology
  - PET or CAT
  - Ulrich of Metallica fame
  - Medicinal succulent
  - Goes with rave
  - Increase

## FFRF welcomes newest Lifers

FFRF thanks and welcomes our 35 newest Lifetime Members, six new After-Life Members, two Beyond After-Life members and four Immortals.

Richard Lee Hefner and Douglas Royer are our newest Beyond After-Life Members, which is a membership category of \$10,000.

Mike Fahle, Carol Fahle, Douglas Harris, Richard L. James, Beatrice Kabler and Vanitha Sitaram Singh are FFRF’s newest After-Life Members, which is a membership category of \$5,000.

Our 35 newest Lifetime Members, which is a membership category of \$1,000, are: Mark Alper, Lorraine Bartlett, Walt Bilofsky, Michael Boilen, Katherine Bunderson, Jimmy Dunne, Ivan Gendzel, Glenn Greening, Lauro Guaderrama, Dean Hanley, John Heider, Frank Heselton, K. David Heskett, Fred Holden, Paul Kohlmeier, David Charles Lightweis, Julia Lovin, Stephen McCauley, Lyn McCoy, Charles Miller, David Murdock, Desmond Murphy, Gretchen Niver, Marilyn Radke, Jeffrey Robinson, Wendy Robinson, Nicola Savignano, William Seale, Sarina Stogel, Sean Trabosh, Kevin Van Laeken, Kristine Walderbach, David Weinberg, Arne Werchick and Thomas Zibinski.

Finally, our four Immortals are Charles Byron Keeling, Christine Pellican, George E. Snow and Randall Sorenson. That category is a designation for those generous members who have contacted FFRF to report they have made provisions for FFRF in their estate planning.

States represented include: Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin.

## OVERHEARD

Through her attention-attracting assault on the public education system, Betsy DeVos has actually given the next secretary of education an opportunity — to recommit to public education as a public good, and a cornerstone of our democracy.

**Jack Schneider and Jennifer Berkshire, in the op-ed, “Trump’s Longest-Serving Cabinet Official May Start a Revolution.” The two are co-authors of *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door*.**

*Washington Post, 12-1-20*



**Jared Huffman**  
**the secretary of education said that staff should “be the resistance” to the Biden administration.**

*Twitter, 12-16-20*

I once took heat for calling Betsy DeVos “dumb as a bag of hammers.” But after her 4 years as our Education Secretary, I now realize an apology is owed. To hammers.

**U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman, after**  
**the secretary of education said that staff should “be the resistance” to the Biden administration.**

The last thing this country with a

rapidly increasing nonbeliever population needs, is for the Supreme Court to keep defining religious citizens as being in a class above all others, empowered with the ability to stomp out dissent or competing nonreligious views, even within government programs.

**Attorney Tyler Broker, in his column, “Arguments for religious ‘accommodation’ have become tyrannical.”**

*AboveTheLaw.com, 12/14/20*

If I get to the bottom of the Cracker Jack box and there’s a prize, I’m happy. But if there isn’t, I just enjoy the Cracker Jack. My happiness here doesn’t depend on something that’s awaiting me after it. I don’t have a complex orthodoxy; I have a vague spiritualism that tells me if I live a good life, good things will happen. But I don’t have any expected reward or expected afterlife or anything like that. I just want to make the most of this life and make as positive an impact as I can on the people around me and be grateful for their love and attention and try to do something worthwhile, and no count on getting a do-over.

**Actor Michael J. Fox, in an interview on “Fresh Air.”**

*NPR, 12-21-20*

### Freethought Matters 2021 Season

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

Watch our show every Sunday!

Photo by Chris Line

Visit FFRF’s YouTube Channel to watch the shows.

Freethought Matters TV talk show airs in:

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

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



# IN THE NEWS

## Court backs religious groups in two states

The Supreme Court on Dec. 15 sided with religious groups in Colorado and New Jersey that argued that the states’ pandemic-related restrictions on worship services violated religious liberty rights.

In unsigned orders, the justices shot down lower court opinions in challenges that went in favor of the states.

The New Jersey challenge concerned restrictions related to limiting attendance at houses of worship as well as the state’s “mask mandate” that critics said violated the free exercise of religion because there are exemptions for secular reasons, including health, exercise and eating, but masks are only allowed to be removed momentarily in religious settings.

In the Colorado case, the court ruled in favor of High Plains Harvest Church, a small church in Ault.

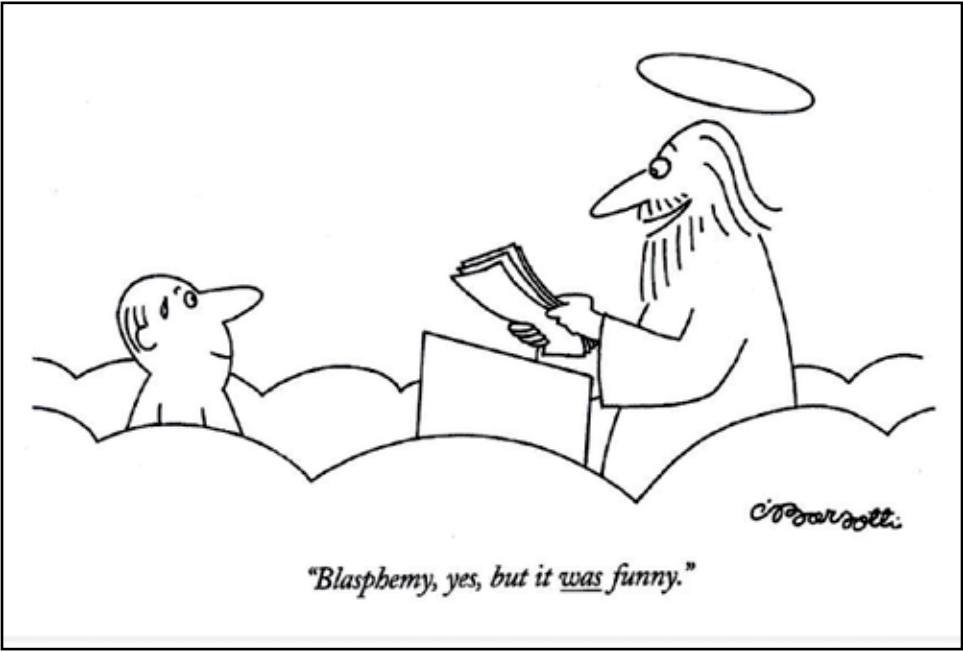
The dispute was brought against Jill Hunsaker Ryan, executive director of the Colorado Department of Health and Environment, who had issued an order capping attendance at houses of worship to 50 people.

## 53% of Americans believe in God with no doubts

According to findings from the American National Social Network Survey, 53 percent of Americans report they believe in God without any doubts at all. Conversely, 6 percent of Americans say they do not believe in God and express no uncertainty in their belief.

A majority of Americans (59 percent) say it is not necessary for a person to believe in God to be moral and have good values, which is a remarkable shift in recent years. A large part of this change is due to the rise of religiously unaffiliated Americans, who now make up 26 percent of the adult population.

Forty-one percent of Americans express at least some uncertainty about their belief in God. Eleven percent express some degree of disbelief in God, but remain at least somewhat unsure. Nineteen percent of Americans are inclined to believe in God but are somewhat less than completely certain in



their belief. Eleven percent of Americans report being completely uncertain in their views on God.

## Canadian churches fined \$18K for COVID violations

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police said it has distributed tickets totaling \$18,400 to representatives from three places of worship in British Columbia’s Fraser Valley for violating public health orders.

According to a press release, on the mornings of Dec. 6 and 13, 2020, Chilliwack RCMP responded to reports of groups of people gathering at three separate churches contrary to the existing public health order.

And on Dec. 17, 2020, police charged representatives of the congregations with eight counts of failure to comply with an order of a health officer, including fines amounting to \$18,400.

## Release humanist, says Nigerian court

A judge at the High Court in Abuja, Nigeria, ruled on Dec. 21 that Mubarak Bala should be immediately released from detention in Kano state, where he has been held since April 2020.

Bala, president of Humanist Association of Nigeria, was arrested by the state police after being accused of violating anti-blasphemy laws for calling the Prophet Muhammad a terrorist.

The ruling, in which the judge declared Bala’s continuous incarceration as illegal and ordered his immediate release, follows a “fundamental rights” petition detailing how Bala has been detained without charge for more than seven months, five months of which he was denied access to his legal representatives.

“Today’s ruling by the High Court in Abuja is a victory for the human rights

of all citizens in Nigeria,” said Andrew Copson, president of Humanists International. “It is time our colleague Mubarak Bala was released immediately and unconditionally and we call upon leaders in Nigeria to respect due process and the rule of law.”

## New Zealand votes to legalize euthanasia

New Zealand has voted to legalize euthanasia in what campaigners have called “a victory for compassion and kindness.”

Preliminary results showed 65 percent of voters supported the End of Life Choice Act. The law allows terminally ill people with less than six months to live the opportunity to choose assisted dying if approved by two doctors.

The law is expected to take effect in November. New Zealand will join a small group of countries, including the Netherlands and Canada, that allow euthanasia.

The legislation authorizes a doctor or nurse to administer or prescribe a lethal dose of medication to be taken under their supervision if all the conditions are met.

## 14 found guilty of aiding ‘Charlie Hebdo’ attacks

A French court on Dec. 16 convicted 14 people of crimes in relation to Islamist attacks in 2015 against the Charlie Hebdo satirical magazine and a Jewish supermarket.

Brothers Cherif and Said Kouachi stormed Charlie Hebdo’s offices in Paris on Jan. 7, 2015, killing 12, nearly a decade after the magazine published cartoons mocking the Prophet Muhammad. A third attacker, Amedy Coulibaly, killed a police officer and then four Jewish hostages in a kosher supermarket in a Paris suburb. Like the Kouachis, Coulibaly was killed in a shoot-out with police.

The ruling found the 14 defendants

guilty on a variety of charges, ranging from membership in a criminal network to complicity in the assault.

Prosecutors asserted that the 14 defendants who received their verdicts Dec. 16 aided the primary assailants with money, vehicles and other logistical support. Eleven of the accused have been behind bars awaiting trial, while the rest were tried in absentia.

## South Carolina court: No money for private schools

South Carolina’s Supreme Court on Dec. 9 affirmed its rejection of Gov. Henry McMaster’s plan to spend federal coronavirus money on private school tuition grants.

The court’s unanimous decision strikes another blow to the governor’s months-long effort to direct \$32 million in federal CARES Act aid toward a program that would pay for poor and working-class children to attend K-12 private schools in South Carolina this year.

The ruling also provides no help to 22 private colleges in South Carolina, including historically black colleges and universities, who were seeking an exception to the ruling so they could collect some \$12 million in coronavirus relief.

The ruling was a follow-up to the state Supreme Court’s Oct. 7 also unanimous decision in the same case, where the justices ruled for the first time that the state’s Constitution prohibited the spending of public money for private schools.

“The Supreme Court’s opinion, affirmed today, is an unequivocal affirmation of our state Constitution’s prohibition of the use of public K-12 education dollars, allocated in any form, to private schools,” said Scott Price, executive director of the S.C. School Board Association.

## Sculptor Zenos Frudakis featured on public TV show

Renowned sculptor and FFRF Member Zenos Frudakis is one of the artists featured in Season 6 of the Emmy Award-winning public television magazine series “Articulate with Jim Cotter.” The episode featuring Frudakis, titled “The Monument Man,” aired beginning Jan. 15. The series informs audiences with stories of how creative thinking shapes our world. “The Monument Man” episode explores the artistic drive behind the creative work of Frudakis, who, as “Articulate” describes him, “has spent the last 50 years sculpting life out of bronze, aiming to capture the likeness and spirit of his subjects and to shine a light on those who have helped foster change in the world.”

Frudakis is the sculptor who, underwritten by FFRF, created the Clarence Darrow statue outside the courthouse in Dayton, Tenn., site of the 1925 Scopes Trial.

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# FFRF seeks summary judgment against Texas judge

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has filed a motion for summary judgment in its federal case against a Texas justice of the peace who regularly foists prayer upon his courtroom attendees.

FFRF originally challenged the courtroom prayers in a lawsuit filed in March 2017, and due to various technical reasons refiled the case against Montgomery County Judge Wayne Mack in 2019 with an anonymous local attorney acting as co-plaintiff. The state/church watchdog and attorney “John Roe” are now asking for a swift decision to halt the unconstitutional practice.

The plaintiffs assert that Mack has abused his authority as a judge to illegally coerce attorneys, litigants and other citizens into participating in his courtroom prayers.

“Judge Mack’s courtroom-prayer practice is unconstitutionally coercive



Wayne Mack

of those who appear in his courtroom,” the motion says. “Because Judge Mack’s court sessions coerce court participants into a religious practice, he has violated one of the strongest, most fundamental commands of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.”

Mack, a formerly licensed minister who attended Jackson College of Ministries, where he planned to major in theology, made the unprecedented decision as a judge to solicit chaplains to open his court sessions with prayer, a practice not replicated by any other court in the country. By spring 2015, after receiving scrutiny from FFRF, which lodged a formal complaint to the State Commission on Judicial Conduct, Mack began revising his courtroom prayer practice.

Now, after attorneys have indicated their presence in the courtroom and after the docket has been called, but before Mack has entered, the bailiff gives a brief introductory statement describing the prayer protocol. This announcement is supposed to include a statement that those opposed to prayer may leave the courtroom without affecting the outcome of their cases, although it’s been incon-

sistently incorporated. Mack then enters the courtroom, mere moments after the bailiff’s announcement, and after his introduction, the chaplain leads a prayer. Anyone leaving the courtroom becomes conspicuous and the courtroom doors are often locked during the prayer.

FFRF’s motion makes several arguments, including that plaintiffs have standing to pursue their claims, that Mack’s prayer practice is unconstitutionally coercive and that its primary purpose and effect is religious.

FFRF seeks a judgment declaring that Mack’s prayer practice violates the Establishment Clause and awards to plaintiffs reasonable attorneys’ fees and costs.

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

## Religion

Continued from page 1

society with religion — at least the kind of theocratic influence on government and social policy besetting the United States — can prosper? The entanglement of religion and politics arguably is, if not the cause, then a major contributing factor of so much that has gone wrong with the pandemic response in the United States.

And the buck stops with the former president — and those who elected him.

Whether Trump believed what he was saying or was engaging in purely cynical political pandering, as was widely assumed, is not relevant. What is relevant is that Trump — in denying the pandemic, ridiculing masks, undercutting his administration’s own scientists, holding superspreader events, in short, golfing while America is burning up with Covid — was playing to his base. That base is white evangelicals and Christian fundamentalists, 81 percent of whom voted him into office (with Trump also winning the lion’s share of Protestant and Catholic votes in 2020). It can be argued that religion and its dumbing down of America got us into this political nightmare in the first place.

These evangelicals and fundamentalists — many of them Christian Nationalists inimical to the constitutional principle of separation between religion and government, as well as to individual liberties — themselves are the products of their anti-science, anti-intellectual faith.

They reject evolution, so is it any wonder they are “skeptical” of the science of infectious diseases? They’ve been taught to equate their beliefs and wishful thinking, e.g., “alternative facts,” with reality. They’ve been indoctrinated to bow down to a male authority figure. A chilling poll showed that 29 percent of white evangelicals believe that Trump was “anointed by God.”

And their unlikely messiah never stopped playing to his base, regardless of the consequences. One of the most symbolic moments of 2020 was when Trump triumphantly displayed a bible in front of a D.C. church after ordering military police to terrify and scatter peaceful citizens to clear a path for his pandering photo-op.

In the earliest days of the pandemic, while Trump was being briefed on its true nature, he promised, “One day — it’s like a miracle — it will disappear.” He has made so many statements asserting the pandemic will “just disappear” that CNN created an interactive “Covid disappearing Trump comment tracker”! In October, less than a week after contracting Covid-19, Trump was terming it “a blessing from God.”



Photo by Shutterstock

Franklin Graham, shown here greeting President Trump during a 2017 rally, praised Trump’s remarks on Dec. 31 that “a society without religion cannot prosper.”

Trump unrelentingly attacked science, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the front-line medical profession and the media for its objective coverage of the pandemic and his role in botching the administration’s response. Trump undercut testing, endlessly claiming “We have more cases because we have more testing!” Trump’s religious base, including QAnon supporters, was encouraged to embrace conspiracy theories against the vaccination.

The anti-science policy was set prior to the pandemic, not only by the Trump administration’s dismantlement in 2018 of the federal unit responsible for pandemic preparedness established by Obama, but by its disparagement of climate-change science. By November 2020, the administration, driven by fundamentalist “dominion” theory, had not only withdrawn from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, but had rolled back more than 100 environmental rules and regulations.

It was a small step, then, during the pandemic to attack science-based health and safety policies. Trump appointees in the Department of Health and Human Services began editing weekly reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about the coronavirus. U.S. Rep. James Clyburn, of South Carolina, said his investigators found a “political pressure campaign” to “cripple the nation’s coronavirus response in a misguided effort to achieve herd immunity.”

Extremist governors and legislators took their cue from Trump, greatly delaying social distancing and masking orders, including deferring to churches wanting to hold in-person worship services. The Freedom From Religion Foundation legal

team has been kept busy contacting public officials over pandemic prayer proclamations, including one by Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt. He largely failed to use his civil authority to enact pandemic mitigation measures, yet felt it his right to direct constituents to set aside a day of prayer and fasting to respond to the pandemic!

Trump’s thousands of irresponsible tweets and comments gave many evangelical ministers a green light to defy public health orders. Among countless megachurch leader deniers is Pastor John MacArthur, who maintains “There is no pandemic” as he openly defies public health rules at his Los Angeles church every Sunday, even though congregants have fallen ill and a visiting pastor died of Covid-19. County health inspectors seeking to monitor the church have been blocked by security guards claiming it’s “a Jesus Life Matters protest.”

Fortunately, many religious leaders, especially those in mainstream churches, synagogues and denominations, have done the right thing in the pandemic. Yet all too many ultraorthodox synagogues and churches, including several Catholic dioceses, continue to sue over state restrictions limiting gatherings. In December, four churchgoers refiled a previously settled lawsuit against Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam, challenging his generous executive order allowing church attendance so long as churches practice basic distancing and hygiene practices. They should be thanking Northam for protecting parishioners.

That lawsuit is one of many citing a grievance that “secular work is favored” while “religious activities are disfavored.”

## FFRF speaks out

In the wake of the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, a direct consequence of President Trump’s encouragement, the Freedom From Religion Foundation called on Congress to take immediate action against him.

In a Jan. 6 press release, FFRF said: “There must be consequences for any U.S. president who behaves like a strongman dictator and who continually voices his refusal to honor election results and our nation’s unbroken history of peaceful succession. Congress needs to take action now.”

FFRF also called on President Biden to eschew the bible during his swearing-in ceremony on Jan. 20 and to refrain from saying, “So help me God.”

FFRF has made several statements about the unparalleled threats to our democracy and secular Constitution, which may be found under news releases and blogs at [ffrf.org/news](http://ffrf.org/news).

At root, church officials appear to be smarting over the realization that they are not “essential.” The U.S. Supreme Court, remade by Trump’s three appointees, issued a shocking Thanksgiving decision to enjoin New York’s pandemic policy to limit church gatherings in high-cluster areas. Unfortunately, with Trump having appointed more than a quarter of the federal judiciary based on Religious-Right qualifications, there will be many more such rulings, long after Trump is gone.

For fundamentalists of whatever stripe, unfortunately, science remains an enemy. Since fundamentalists never admit they’re wrong, it does look as if our nation is indeed headed for “a very dark winter.”

On the bright side, we’ve seen widespread adoption by the general public of pro-science slogans, such as “Science works!” “Operation Warp Speed” is proof. Last year, the House passed the Scientific Integrity Act as part of the Heroes Act, which would require science-based federal agencies to adopt a scientific integrity policy. The Freedom From Religion Foundation will be working to help ensure it passes the 117th Congress.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.



# FFRF earns perfect charity rating score

The country’s premier nonprofit charity rating organization has yet again affirmed that the Freedom From Religion Foundation belongs to an extremely select club.

“We are proud to announce Freedom From Religion Foundation has earned our 11th consecutive four-star rating. This is our highest possible rating and indicates that your organization adheres to sector best practices and executes its mission in a financially efficient way,” Charity Navigator President and CEO Michael Thatcher has recently informed FFRF. “Attaining a four-star rating verifies that Freedom From Religion Foundation exceeds industry standards and outperforms most charities in your area of work. Only 2 percent of the charities we evaluate have received at least 11 consecutive four-star evaluations, indicating that Freedom From Religion Foundation outperforms most other charities in America. This exceptional designation from Charity Navigator sets Freedom From Religion Foundation apart from its peers and demon-



strates to the public its trustworthiness.”

FFRF is proud to win such a generous rating.

This isn’t all, however. Charity Navigator has placed FFRF in the tiny fraction of charities attaining a 100 percent accountability and transparency score. “Less

than 1 percent of the thousands of charities rated by Charity Navigator have earned perfect scores,” says the organization’s website. FFRF is, in fact, only one of two charities in the human and civil rights category with a 100 percent rating.

FFRF is delighted at the confidence placed in it by Charity Navigator.

“We consider ourselves responsible custodians of our members’ dues and donations, and we’re elated that Charity Navigator has, yet again, confirmed this,” remarks FFRF Co-President Dan Barker, to whom the Charity Navigator letter is addressed.

Charity Navigator has a stellar reputation in its field. As its letter to FFRF points out, Forbes, Business Week and Kiplinger’s Financial Magazine have favorably profiled the organization. “Our data shows that users of our site donated more than they planned to before viewing our findings, and in fact, it is estimated that last year Charity Navigator influenced approximately \$10 billion in charitable gifts,” the letter states.

## Rep. Raskin’s remarks ‘Thought crimes that have no actual victims’

The Freedom From Religion Foundation cheered the U.S. Senate’s and House’s approval in December of a resolution seeking the global repeal of blasphemy and related laws. Both resolutions specifically note that “secularists” are frequent victims of such laws.

Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., co-chair of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, spoke on the floor of the House in support of the anti-blasphemy resolution on Dec. 7, 2020. The following is a slightly edited version of that speech.

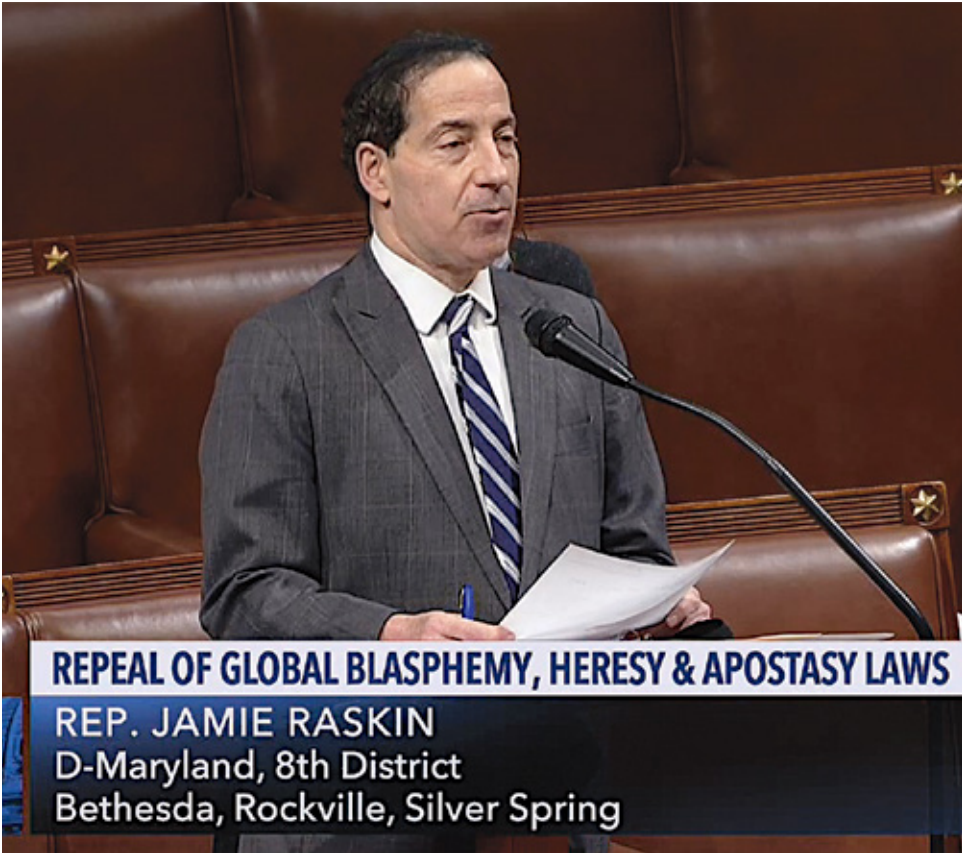
By U.S. Rep Jamie Raskin

Mr. Speaker, in this age of partisan division, one of the foundational American values still has the power to bring us together across the aisle — the defense of every human being’s freedom of religious conscience and freedom of thought against government persecution.

With House Resolution 512, we act today to stand up for religious and intellectual freedom in a world gone mad with religious discrimination, religious oppression and religious violence. H.R. 512 calls for global repeal of laws punishing blasphemy, heresy and apostasy — three religiously defined thought crimes that have no actual victims and thus no place in the criminal law of free nations.

And, yet, governments in 84 countries — from Saudi Arabia and Iran and Somalia to China and Russia and Bangladesh — still use laws like these to intimidate, arrest, prosecute and incarcerate members of minority religions, disfavored faiths and freethinkers. Putting them in jail or even condemning them to death for religiously subversive speech was not unknown in the American colonies. In Massachusetts, Puritan governors hanged Quakers for their heretical lectures in town squares. But our enlightenment Constitution, especially our First Amendment’s Free Exercise and antireligious Establishment clauses, put us squarely on the path of rejecting blasphemy laws and these other relics of the Inquisition, holy crusades and New England witchcraft trials.

Our law has gotten rid of obsolete offenses like blasphemy and apostasy because they have a purely religious character and do not refer to empirical social harms. Blasphemy is making impious or sacrilegious statements about established churches or doctrines. Heresy is



Screenshot from C-SPAN  
U.S. Rep. Jamie Raskin delivers a speech on the floor of the House on Dec. 7, 2020.



taking religious or intellectual positions at odds with an established religious orthodoxy. Apostasy is breaking away from a religious orthodoxy or church. As offensive as we might consider other people’s religious views and utterances, in America today, people’s thoughts and words about religion are absolutely protected by the First Amendment. But in many parts of the world where religion is still actively weaponized by theocratic and authoritarian governments, these imaginary offenses can still get you thrown into jail, harassed and executed, or simply stopped and torn from limb to limb by state-sanctioned lynch mobs.

Religious people of the wrong faith

are the most common victims of blasphemy and heresy laws.

You might be a practicing Christian or Hindu in an officially Muslim state like Libya or Afghanistan or a devout Muslim in a Hindu society like India. You might be a nonreligious person targeted by your enemies or state authorities.

You might be a 22-year-old Nigerian gospel musician like Yahoo Sharif Aminu, who is convicted of blasphemy in his state Sharia Court in Kano State on Aug 10, and has been sentenced to death by hanging for something that he said on a WhatsApp group on the Internet.

You might be a Sudanese Christian like Meriam Ibrahim, who was jailed for apostasy because, although she’d been a devout Christian for her entire life, government officials demanded that she follow her absent father’s Muslim faith. She was held in jail with her 20-month-old son and forced to give birth to her daughter in prison while her legs were shackled to the floor.

You might be a 13-year-old Muslim boy in Nigeria, like Omar Farouk, who was sentenced to 10 years at hard labor for blasphemy when he said something about Allah in an argument with friends — a

brutal miscarriage of justice condemned by UNICEF and child advocates all over the world.

You might even belong to the wrong sect of the official state religion. In the Islamic State of Pakistan, for example, people belonging to the Ahmadiyya Muslim faith are being persecuted as heretics and apostates as if this were the Middle Ages. At least five Ahmadi Muslims have been killed in Pakistan this year [2020] alone because of their faith.

Mr. Speaker, the global assault on religious and intellectual freedom today is taking place in many of the world’s largest countries. China confines millions of Muslims in miserable re-education camps and forces them into slave labor. Russia has decreed that Jehovah’s Witnesses are an extremist group and confiscated their property, jailed their members and even allegedly tortured some of them. India recently passed draconian laws burdening the rights of disfavored Muslim minorities.

With this resolution, Mr. Speaker, against the new wave of global religious oppression and persecution, America can once again take the lead in defending the basic human rights of religious and intellectual freedom all over the world.

Let us share this principle with the nations of the world with this resolution.

Raskin family creates fund

Following the death of U.S. Rep. Jamie Raskin’s 25-year-old son Tommy in late December, the Raskin family announced the launch of the Tommy Raskin Memorial Fund for People and Animals. The fund will distribute money to causes and charities championed by Tommy Raskin, including Oxfam, Give Directly, the Helen Keller Institute and Animal Outlook. The fund was launched with an initial contribution of \$50,000 and FFRF has made a donation.

Condolences or donations can be sent to [Jamie.Raskin@mail.house.gov](mailto:Jamie.Raskin@mail.house.gov) or by mail to his district office at 51 Monroe Street, Suite 503, Rockville, MD 20850.



# FFRF VICTORIES

By Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey

## Religious quote removed from Army signatures

Employees of Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri have been instructed not to include religious messages in email signatures from their official Army accounts. A technical support specialist for Fort Leonard Wood had been including the bible verse “‘With GOD all things are possible’ Matthew 19:26” in the signature block of his official U.S. Army email address.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Fort Leonard Wood Garrison Commander Colonel Jeffrey O. Paine and Command Inspector General Lt. Colonel Mary M. Smith asking that this email signature be changed so as not to create the impression of official military endorsement of Christianity over all other religions or religion over nonreligion.

Employees were instructed, per Army policy, to remove all religious references from their official email signatures.

## School staff won’t join in religious event

In Illinois, Roxana Community Unit School District #1 staff have been reminded they may not partake in religious observance during school events.

A local community member informed FFRF that district personnel, including staff and school board members, attended and participated in a “See You at the Pole” event last fall.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Debra Kreuztrager, reminding the district that staff must not plan, promote or participate in any future “See You at the Pole” events nor encourage students to put on such events.

Kreuztrager sent a letter of response with assurances that “expectations will be communicated to ensure that staff remember to serve only in a supervisory role as needed for this event in the future.”

## Daily school prayers stopped in La. school

Morning prayers have been stopped in the Washington Parish School System in Louisiana.

A local resident alerted FFRF that Franklinton High School’s student chaplain had been leading the school in prayer each morning before the Pledge of Allegiance.

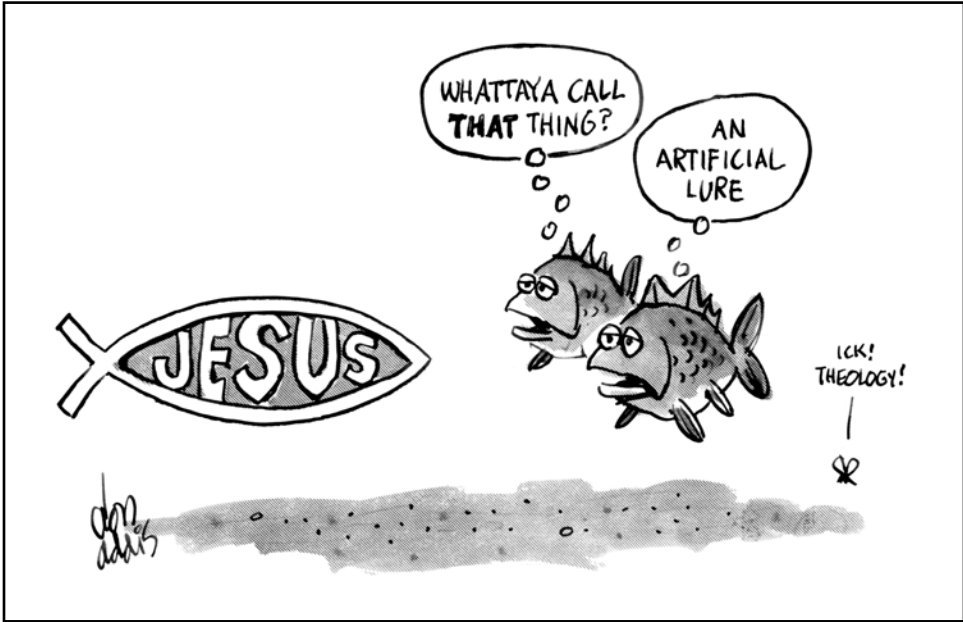
FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson sent a letter to Superintendent Frances Varnado asking that the district immediately cease scheduling this prayer as it constitutes illegal religious endorsement on the part of the school.

The complainant has informed FFRF that the daily prayers have stopped.

## Boise State downgrades chaplaincy program

One of Idaho’s most prominent educational institutions has listened to the Freedom From Religion Foundation regarding its unconstitutional football chaplaincy.

The national state/church watchdog had written to Boise State University about the football program’s official chaplain, Mark Thornton. Thornton has arranged for post-game prayers on



This cartoon is from *Cartoons for the Irreverent: Celebrating the Wit of Don Addis*, available through [ffrf.org/shop](http://ffrf.org/shop). This unique collection, published by FFRF, celebrates the wit and irreverence of Don Addis, a legendary editorial cartoonist and atheist. (Paperback, 153 pages, \$15 post paid)

the field with players, led them in chapel the night before games and prayed with players individually before games.

Public schools may not advance or promote religion, FFRF emphasized.

“Government chaplains may only exist as an accommodation of a public employee’s religious beliefs when the government makes it difficult or impossible to seek out private ministries,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Boise State University President Marlene Tromp.

Abolishing the team chaplaincy would not alter student athletes’ ability to pray, but it would prevent some student athletes from feeling coerced into participating in prayers to a deity they may not believe in, FFRF added.

FFRF’s reasoning seems to have scored many points with Boise State, which has pledged to significantly downgrade its chaplaincy program.

“We have been in communication with the Athletic Department to provide some education about this issue and to ensure measures are taken now and in the future to resolve the issue and establish appropriate constitutional boundaries,” the university’s legal counsel recently responded via email. “Mr. Thornton did not travel with the football team to our recent game in Wyoming and the university will no longer include a chaplain in its travel party. Written references to Mr. Thornton as the chaplain of the football team have been or are in the process of being removed and no future references will be made in writing or otherwise.”

## Prayer no longer part of fire academy graduation

Kansas City Fire Department staff in Missouri will no longer schedule prayer as part of fire academy cadet graduation ceremonies.

FFRF was made aware that the department scheduled invocations as part of its cadet graduation ceremonies and posted videos of these ceremonies on its official Facebook page. The 2020 winter ceremony prayer, led by one of the department’s firefighters, called on attendees to “bow [their] heads and come together now in prayer.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Fire Chief Donna Lake, pointing out that in addition to violating the Establishment Clause, calling on attendees to pray at fire department

events is coercive, embarrassing and beyond the scope of a fire department. FFRF’s letter encouraged the department to respect its pluralistic class of firefighters and cease from including prayer at future official ceremonies and events.

Lake informed FFRF via email that department staff have been directed to “discontinue sponsoring or scheduling an invocation or any other prayer at Fire Academy cadet graduation ceremonies.”

## Mo. district nixes prayer from future graduations

A staff prayer issue was resolved in Kirksville R-III School District.

A district community member reported that during a Kirksville High School graduation ceremony, Superintendent Richard Webb included a prayer in his remarks to students.

He said: “And today, which is the Sabbath Day, I pray also that you won’t let memes or social media define the truth for you, but that you’ll instead see you as God sees you. That you will listen to Him when He whispers the truth of a variety of things to you.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Webb requesting that he refrain from abusing his position as superintendent to proselytize. Line pointed out that it is particularly concerning that, as superintendent, Webb is charged with ensuring constitutional compliance in the district, but instead used his position to promote his personal religious beliefs to students.

The district’s attorney informed FFRF in a letter of response that “employees of the district were reminded of the district’s board policy regarding religion at school and were also instructed not to lead students in, or promote, prayer or religion.”

## Religious displays taken down at public workplace

Religious displays have been removed from government property in Macon County, N.C.

A concerned employee in the Macon County Solid Waste Department reported that religious materials were on display in the workplace at Otto Center. These displays included the Ten Commandments, as well as various other religious postings.

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Recycling Coordinator Shaun Cribbs requesting that these materials be removed.

Cribbs responded via email to inform FFRF that the religious materials have been taken down and that a memo was sent to all staff to ensure this does not happen again in the future.

## Texas school district gets social media lesson

Pine Tree Independent School District in Texas will train teachers on appropriate usage of the district’s social media pages following its impermissible promotion of a religious event.

A local resident reported that Pine Tree Elementary School used its official Facebook page to promote a “See You at the Pole” event. The post described the event as a “national day of student prayer” and indicated that the event was being hosted by the school.

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Superintendent Steve Clugston to request that the district refrain from endorsing religious events.

The district sent a letter of response indicating that it recognizes this as an “opportunity to educate [its] staff while continuing to support the rights of [its] students and will develop a training for district staff who have control over district social media pages addressing this issue.”

## Jesus picture taken down at W.Va. school

An impermissible religious display has been removed from Harrison County Schools property in West Virginia.

A community member informed FFRF that a picture of Jesus was on display at Robert C. Byrd High School.

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson wrote to Superintendent Dora Stutler reminding the district that it may not advance, prefer or promote religion and therefore must remove this religious photo.

Stutler confirmed in a letter of response the photo has been taken down.



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



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Charles Darwin, Born Feb. 12, 1809



Photo Illustration by Chris Line

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# Megachurches abuse PPP funds

This article first ran on Religion Dispatches on Dec. 15 and is reprinted with permission.

By Andrew L. Seidel

“The federal government can’t take our money and give it to Joel Osteen or Robert Jeffress or Paula White — even in the wake of a pandemic,” I wrote back in May 2020. But that’s exactly what Trump’s Small Business Administration has done by giving Paycheck Protection Program funds to churches. Paula White’s church took in between \$150,000 and \$350,000, Jeffress’s church grabbed between \$2 million and \$5 million and, now we know that Osteen’s megachurch pocketed \$4.4 million. Other megachurches snagged millions of taxpayer dollars. As time passes, the inevitable abuses are coming to light. One megachurch televangelist even bought a private jet two weeks after receiving \$4 million in PPP funds.

None of this should ever have happened. The CARES Act extended eligibility for loans from the Small Business Administration to nonprofits, something new. But the law did not give the SBA the power to extend this eligibility to churches, nor could it — the Constitution prohibits government funding of religion. In fact, the CARES Act only mentions religion once, to prevent universities from using taxpayer funds for “capital outlays associated with facilities related to athletics, sectarian instruction or religious worship.” However, the SBA ignored that language, along with the centuries-old bar on taxpayer-funded religious worship, and instead issued rules and guidance declaring that the forgivable loans distributed under the CARES Act’s Paycheck Protection Program “can be used to pay the salaries of ministers and other staff engaged in the religious mission of institutions.” To do this, SBA had to suspend numerous rules that, correctly, prevented taxpayer funds from flowing to churches.

These discarded rules embody the separation of state and church, one of America’s founding principles. Taxation without representation sparked the American Revolution and the revolutionaries later set up a system that barred the government’s coercive taxing power from being wielded to force citizens to support a religion. One of this country’s first religious freedom laws warned that taxing citizens and giving the money to churches is “sinful and tyrannical.” The right to be free

Andrew L. Seidel


Wikimedia Commons

Joel Osteen’s megachurch took \$4.4 million of the government’s Paycheck Protection Program funds.

from that compulsion is religious liberty as we have always understood it. SBA’s constitutional violation — if such violations are to be measured in economic terms — is massive. American churches took in as much as \$10 billion in taxpayer funds through PPP loans. More than 400 evangelical churches received loans of at least \$1 million. The Catholic Church might have taken in as much as \$3.5 billion. Osteen’s Lakewood Church is probably the biggest church in the United States, with 50,000 or so members. One estimate puts its annual budget at \$90 million, with more than \$25 million going to the television ministry. Osteen’s net worth is hard to pin down, but it’s probably around \$50 million or \$60 million. This isn’t a church that’s hard-up for cash. And with sensible Americans worshipping at home, its massive televangelism empire probably only grew. Osteen received millions of dollars meant for small businesses. Osteen’s church claimed that it used \$4.4 million in taxpayer funds “to provide full salaries and benefits, including health insurance coverage to all of its employees and their families.” But we’ll likely never know. Many of the safeguards that apply to SBA loans and that applied to other nonchurch entities through the PPP didn’t apply to churches. It’s not just special treatment under PPP that’s problematic, but other laws too. Combined, this was a recipe for fraud and abuse. For instance, unlike every other 501(c)(3) and charity, churches file no annual financial disclosures with the IRS. They are financial black holes. As part of their public trust, all other 501(c)(3) nonprofits are required to file an annual report, the Form 990, with the IRS that details specific financial information, tracking every penny donated and spent. Because they entirely lack financial transparency and accountability, churches are already

rife with fraud and abuse. Yet, according to the SBA’s guidance, churches qualify for CARES Act funds *even if they’ve never registered as a church with the IRS*. Receiving these taxpayer funds could be literally both the first and last time the government ever hears of such churches. None of this is new. The Freedom From Religion Foundation made all these points in a formal comment to the SBA rule proposing the Paycheck Protection Program — the SBA knew of these dangerous loopholes and forged ahead anyway. The potential for government audits was supposed to curb some abuse, but given how favorably the Trump administration treated churches — even hosting secretive White House calls for Trump’s closest faith leaders and church supporters to encourage them to apply for the forgivable loans — churches were unlikely to worry about enforcement or audits. In any event, later rule changes mean the government forgives loans of less than \$2 million after a one-page form is filled out. Loans over \$2 million face an audit. So maybe, just maybe, years from now we’ll know if We the People were defrauded. We’ll know sooner if journalists start digging. Chris Mathews, a reporter from the Houston Business Journal, broke the Osteen story. Lisa Guerrero of Inside Edition has been digging too, and she discovered a private jet likely financed with PPP money. Marcus Lamb runs Daystar Television, which may have as many as 2 billion viewers and is valued at a quarter of a billion dollars. Two weeks after it took \$4 million in taxpayer PPP funds, it bought a private jet, a Gulfstream V, valued at between \$9 million and \$10 million. Lamb denied using taxpayer funds to get the private jet two weeks after it got the loan: “We had our own money.” If so, why didn’t it use that money for their employees? But you know why. Like any kid caught with their hand in the cookie jar, they denied it and then paid the money back. But only because Guerrero caught them. There are no safeguards in place to prevent churches from defrauding taxpayers. That’s not a bug, but a feature. Trump’s SBA designed the PPP program that way. The Fourth Estate needs to hold the churches accountable, because the government won’t. Andrew L. Seidel is FFRF’s director of strategic response and attorney. His first book is *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism Is Un-American*.

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# Justices ‘play a deadly game’ in church ruling

*A statement from FFRF:*  
A 5–4 Supreme Court decision enjoining New York state’s pandemic policy that limited some church gatherings is wrong, unnecessary and portends big trouble ahead for our secular laws and policies.

As dissenting Justice Sonia Sotomayor warns: “Justices of this court play a deadly game in second guessing the expert judgment of health officials about the environments in which a contagious virus, now infecting a million Americans each week, spreads most easily.”

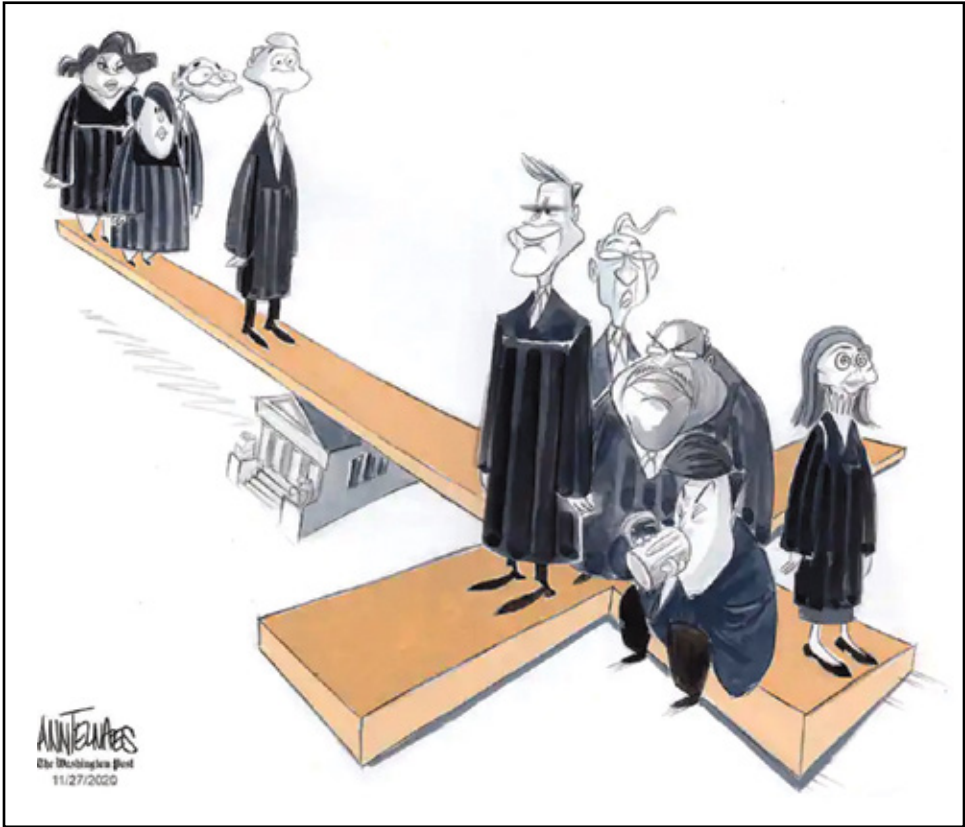
Earlier in 2020, the court had upheld health restrictions on church services in Nevada and California, but the vote in *Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn v. Andrew M. Cuomo, Governor of New York* flipped. The opinion was a rebuke for Chief Justice John G. Roberts, who’d voted with the majority in the earlier rulings, but dissented in this case. The addition of archconservative Amy Coney Barrett on the court last month, replacing Ruth Bader Ginsburg, has “dealt the chief justice a body blow,” as the New York Times put it. (Not that we should give Roberts, who indicated in his dissent that he thought the New York rules had gone too far, too much credit.)

The Archdiocese of Brooklyn and Agudath Israel of America, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish congregation, were situated within the red and orange zones in Brooklyn and Queens with high COVID infections, and had been restricted to 10- and 25-person capacity limits by Gov. Andrew Cuomo. But in response to a lessening spread, Cuomo had already lifted the restrictions by the time the request to enjoin the governor reached the high court. With the litigants now in a “yellow zone,” they can hold services at up to 50 percent of capacity. As Roberts pointed out in his dissent, this is more relief than their suits sought. The case is due to be heard by a court of appeals, and hasn’t been fully argued or considered, making the action by the high court especially irregular.

## Decision was wrong

The majority of ultraconservatives on the court — Justices Barrett (widely speculated to have written the unsigned decision), Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito — was clearly eager to act on its newfound power to squelch what it misguidedly saw as a case of “religious discrimination.” But stay-at-home orders treated religious worship more favorably than movie houses, lectures, plays or indoor sporting events, which were entirely banned. The five justices absurdly treated the temporary limitations like a national emergency — dramatically issuing a ruling minutes before midnight on Nov. 25, the eve of Thanksgiving. “Even in a pandemic, the Constitution cannot be put away and forgotten,” the majority chided. President Trump almost immediately tweeted the decision, adding “HAPPY THANKSGIVING.”

The heavy lifting was done by Gorsuch, whose sarcastic concurring opinion lit into the dissenters. He claimed the governor deems that “it may be unsafe to go to church, but it is always fine to pick up another bottle or wine, shop for a new bike, or spend the afternoon exploring your distal points and meridians [acupuncture].” Gorsuch decried the “burden on the faithful who have lived for months under New York’s unconstitutional regime unable to attend re-



Ann Telnaes editorial cartoon used with permission of Ann Telnaes and the Cartoonist Group. All rights reserved.

ligious services.” [emphasis added]  
The majority’s true grievance — umbrage that governments are not labeling church services as “essential” — is revealed in Gorsuch’s concurrence: “The only explanation for treating religious places differently, seems to be a judgment that what happens there just isn’t as ‘essential’ as what happens in secular places.” Church officials and theocratic public officials have deeply resented that church gatherings have not been deemed “essential” by executives trying to stop the spread of the coronavirus. The majority opinion, voted on by a bloc of practicing Catholics with the exception of Gorsuch (who was raised Catholic, but now attends an Episcopalian church), goes so far as to claim that those who can’t attend Mass are at “risk of suffering further irreparable harm in the event of another reclassification.” Most of us would consider, when comparing the harm of missing in-person Mass to risking death from COVID-19, the latter to be the “irreparable harm,” but not the high court’s coterie of true believers.

## Dissenters urge caution

In his temperate dissent, Roberts (also a practicing Catholic) responded to the majority and Gorsuch’s charges: “To be clear, I do not regard my dissent-

ing colleagues as ‘cutting the Constitution loose during a pandemic,’ yielding to ‘a particular judicial impulse to stay out of the way in times of crisis,’ or ‘shelter[ing] in place when the Constitution is under attack.’” The chief justice said that no injunctive relief is needed given the changing facts, pointed out the court could act quickly on a renewed application if the shutdowns begin again, and noted that the Constitution entrusts “the safety and health of the people” to politically accountable officials.

In his dissent, Justice Stephen Breyer underlined that New York’s regulations treat church services more favorably than gatherings with comparable risks, such as public lectures, concerts or theatrical performances.

As usual, the strongest dissent was by Sotomayor, who wrote, “Amidst a pandemic that has already claimed over a quarter million American lives, the court today enjoins one of New York’s public health measures aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19 in areas facing the most severe outbreaks.” Citing the earlier majority opinions upholding church service restrictions, she noted they provide a “clear and workable rule”: “They may restrict attendance at houses of worship so long as comparable secular institutions face restrictions that are at least equally as strict.”

Cuomo’s policies are more lenient to houses of worship than similar activities, Sotomayor wrote, and Gorsuch “does not even try to square his examples with the conditions medical experts tell us facilitate the spread of COVID-19: large groups of people gathering, speaking and singing in close proximity indoors for extended periods of time.” She added: “The Constitution does not forbid states from responding to public health crises through regulations that treat religious institutions equally or more favorably than comparable secular institutions, particularly when those regulations save lives.”

## Trouble ahead

As New York Times Supreme Court reporter Adam Liptak points out, the ruling is “almost certainly a taste of things to come.” When Ginsburg was alive, Liptak writes, “Roberts voted with the court’s four-member liberal wing” in a number of major cases. This ruling clearly signals that the new SCOTUS majority is ready to move full steam ahead to weaponize and redefine religious liberty at the expense of the protections of the Establishment Clause separating religion from government. And the consequences, in this case, may be deadly.

The ACLU’s Daniel Mach puts it aptly, “The freedom to worship is one of our most cherished fundamental rights, but it does not include a license to harm others or endanger public health.” As FFRF has been emphasizing since the pandemic began, Americans have the right to free exercise, but not to risk other peoples’ lives.

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# Will Barrett join the grievance conservatives?

This article first appeared in *The New York Times* on Dec. 3 and is reprinted with permission.

By Linda Greenhouse

Justice Amy Coney Barrett had a choice. She could provide the fifth vote on the Supreme Court that Justices Samuel Alito, Clarence Thomas, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh needed — and would not have received from the Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg — to place a temporary block, in the name of religious freedom, on New York’s pandemic-driven limitations on church and synagogue attendance.



Linda Greenhouse

Or she could give that precious fifth vote to Chief Justice John Roberts in the name not only of public health but also of judicial modesty, since the most severe restrictions the Catholic and Jewish organizations were complaining about were no longer in effect and the whole case might well disappear into thin air if the Supreme Court simply stayed its hand.

History will record the choice Barrett made in the court’s Nov. 25 decision as the first moment of fruition for the hopes and fears engendered by her abrupt election-eve ascension to the Supreme Court following Ginsburg’s death in September. Until then, Roberts had held the line in favor of public health in similar cases from California and Nevada, each by 5–4 votes. Now he was left in dissent, joined by the remaining members of his former majority, Justices Stephen Breyer, Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan. Barrett, who did not express her opinion in writing, was a silent member of the new majority.

I’d like to think this was a tough choice for her, but in the end, this case may simply disappear. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, along with an Orthodox Jewish organization, was appealing the decision of a federal district court judge not to enjoin the state from enforcing attendance limits at worship services. That’s when the Supreme Court stepped in, at the request of the diocese, and issued the



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Amy Coney Barrett takes the oath prior to the Supreme Court confirmation hearings.

injunction itself, pending the appeal to a federal appeals court in New York. Maybe then the case will end up back at the Supreme Court on the merits, but, most likely, it won’t, because the governor eased the restrictions while the case was pending in the court.

The real significance of the decision lay in the which-side-are-you-on test it posed for the newest justice. I don’t mean the conservative side versus the liberal side. Obviously, she’s a conservative. What matters is that a month into her tenure, she chose to align herself with what I call grievance conservatism: conservatism with a chip on its shoulder, fueled by a belief that even when it’s winning, it’s losing, and losing unfairly.

The embodiment of grievance conservatism is Alito, who, in a November 2020 speech to his fellow members of the Federalist Society, said that “it pains me to say this, but in certain quarters, religious liberty is fast becoming a disfavored right.”

Alito is a member of a Supreme Court majority that during his nearly 15-year tenure has been more deferential to the demands of religious believers than any Supreme Court in modern history. Just this past summer, the court ruled that a state that offers a subsidy for private-school tuition must include parochial schools in the program; that religious organizations may exclude a substantial category of employees from the protections of federal

civil rights laws under a “ministerial exception” that goes well beyond members of the ministry; and that employers with religious or even vague “moral” objections to contraception can opt out of the federal requirement to include birth control in their employee health plans.

Alito was in the majority in these decisions and so, notably, was Roberts. And both were in dissent five years ago when

the court declared a constitutional right to same-sex marriage in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. But while the chief justice seems to have made his peace with that decision (he was in the majority in the decision in June that interpreted federal

civil rights protections as applying to gay and transgender individuals, while Alito called the ruling a “brazen abuse” in a 54-page dissent accompanied by a 52-page appendix), the implications of *Obergefell* for people with religious objections to same-sex marriage still gnaw at Alito.

Along with Thomas, he wrote sympathetically in early October about Kim Davis, the Kentucky county clerk who refused for religious reasons to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. While agreeing with the other members of the court that the clerk’s appeal wasn’t suitable for Supreme Court review, the two justices wrote that “nevertheless, this petition provides a stark reminder of the consequences of *Obergefell*.” They continued, “By choosing to privilege a novel constitutional right over the religious liberty interests explicitly protected in the First Amendment, and by doing so undemocratically, the court has created a problem that only it can fix.”

Since the two justices were neither voting to grant the appeal nor dissenting from its denial, their opinion was entirely gratuitous. They simply used the case as a platform to reiterate warnings about the threat to religion from official recognition of same-sex marriage.

Barrett was not yet confirmed when Thomas and Alito issued this statement. I wonder whether she would have signed it. It was pure grievance conservatism, with no effect other than to invite new cases seeking to overturn *Obergefell*, and to strike fear in some parts of the LGBTQ community that it could happen. It won’t. But I’m certain that the pressure on the court will only grow.

There’s no neutral ground: The Supreme Court has become a prize in a war over how far the country will go

to privilege religious rights over other rights, including the right not to be discriminated against. A case the court heard in November, *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*, raises the question whether a Catholic social services agency under contract with the city to place children in foster homes can refuse to consider same-sex couples as foster parents despite the city’s nondiscrimination law.

For religious adherents pressing such claims, equal treatment is no longer sufficient. Special treatment is the demand. That’s clear in another COVID-related case that reached the Supreme Court this week. In mid-November, Gov. Andrew Beshear of Kentucky issued a temporary order barring in-person instruction in all public and private schools. A religious school, Danville Christian Academy, promptly won an injunction from a federal district judge.

A three-judge panel of the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals stayed the injunction this past weekend. The court observed that because the order applied to religious and secular schools alike, it was “neutral and of general applicability,” key words that under a 1990 Supreme Court decision, *Employment Division v. Smith*, foreclose a claim under the First Amendment’s Free Exercise Clause for a special religious exemption.

Claiming that “it is called by God to provide in-person instruction to its students,” the school has gone to Kavanaugh, who has supervisory jurisdiction over the 6th Circuit, asking him to vacate the stay of the injunction. The 35-page brief skips almost entirely over the fact that public schools are under the same strictures, asking instead, “Why can a 12-year-old go to the movies along with two dozen other people, but she can’t watch ‘The Greatest Story Ever Told’ with a smaller group in bible class?”

The 6th Circuit panel’s unanimous ruling against the school was somewhat unusual because it was issued by one Democratic-appointed judge, Karen Nelson Moore, and two judges appointed by President George W. Bush, John Rogers and Helene White. Statistics compiled recently by Zalman Rothschild, a fellow at the Stanford Constitutional Law Center, show a startling partisan divide in how federal judges have approached cases involving religious objections to government-imposed limitations related to COVID-19.

In a group of 89 such cases, Democratic-appointed judges voted to uphold all the government orders, while Republican-appointed judges did so only 36 percent of the time. The difference is even more stark with judges appointed by President Trump. They voted to uphold the orders in only 6 percent of cases, voting 94 percent of the time in support of the religious plaintiffs.

Numbers like this pose an obvious question: Are Trump-appointed judges supporting religious claims as a matter of personal faith, or has voting to uphold religious claims become a kind of judicial MAGA cap, a mark of political identity?

At this moment’s legal and political inflection point, the answer may not matter. If Barrett wants company, she clearly has plenty. And the rest of us have plenty to worry about.

Linda Greenhouse, the winner of the 1998 Pulitzer Prize, reported on the Supreme Court for *The New York Times* from 1978 to 2008. You can hear her discuss this column on *Freethought Radio*. Go to [ffrf.org/radio](https://ffrf.org/radio) and browse to the Dec. 10 program.

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# FFRF’s Strategic Response Team making waves

By Andrew L. Seidel

FFRF’s Strategic Response Team’s third full year was a success, despite going fully virtual.

The SRT handles FFRF’s rapid response, legislation and lobbying work. Specifically, the team is tasked with:

- Federal lobbying; tracking, analyzing, and educating about pending legislation around the country; and mobilizing FFRF’s membership with action alerts.
- Responding to current events with statements, letters, and articles.
- Shaping public opinion with articles, editorials and letters to the editor.
- Working to stop imminent violations with legal letters.

The team has three full-time members: Andrew L. Seidel, Ryan Jayne and Mark Dann. Also attached to SRT are Annie Laurie Gaylor, communications team members Amit Pal and Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey and FFRF’s legal team. SRT has leveraged new resources (including powerful software) and alliances, to work more effectively on FFRF’s dual missions.

Here’s a look at what SRT accomplished in 2020.

## In Congress

In 2019, SRT began crafting a legislative agenda for FFRF, and in 2020 it was implemented. A key part of the agenda was to make FFRF a vital partner in advancing the Congressional Freethought Caucus’ agenda. The caucus had numerous victories with FFRF’s urging and assistance such as:

- Effectively using the appropriations process to deny funding for regulations and entities that seek to discriminate using the guise of religious liberty.
- Opposing Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s Commission on Unalienable Rights’ and its Christian Nationalist report.
- Hosting speakers such as Bonya Ahmed and Katherine Stewart.
- Supporting key pieces of legislation. FFRF has been recognized by the caucus as one of the main thought leaders in the secular movement. Caucus members, including Reps. Jared Huffman, Jamie Raskin, Mark Pocan and Eleanor Holmes Norton have appeared on “Freethought Matters” and Freethought Radio.

## Legislative wins

FFRF worked closely with the Congressional Freethought Caucus to endorse key pieces of legislation. The Do No Harm Act, our highest priority piece of legislation, which ensures that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act can’t be used to discriminate, continues to move forward. The bill had a hearing in the House, and FFRF was a leading organization to obtain its 200-plus co-sponsors. The Do No Harm Act is primed to move in the next Congress.

Most of FFRF’s key bills have all passed out of the House or House committee and have been endorsed by the Caucus. We have seen progress on:

- The STOP FGM Act of 2020, which prohibits Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) on a minor, was unanimously passed by the House and the Senate in a voice vote.
- The Equality Act, which prohibits discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation and gender identity, passed 236–173.



Photo by Shutterstock

## By the numbers

- In 2020, SRT completed:
- 42 statements for FFRF on a variety of issues.
  - 39 articles, op-eds, blogs and letters to the editor.
  - 58 press releases for FFRF on legal and legislative issues.
  - 52 rapid response letters written to prevent impending violations.
  - Comments on 20 formal rule changes the Trump administration proposed.
  - 72 meetings with legislators on Capitol Hill.
  - 121 action alerts that connected FFRF supporters and legislators 175,745 times and nearly 1,200 calls.
  - 493 bills analyzed and tracked.
  - Nearly 800 separate SRT projects, a 60 percent increase over 2019.

- The Scientific Integrity Act prevents political appointees from meddling in publicly funded scientific research. It passed, as part of the Heroes Act (COVID Relief Bill), 208–199.
- The No BAN Act eliminates the Muslim Ban (which could be turned against atheists abroad seeking a safe haven), limits presidential authority to suspend or restrict immigration and prohibits religious discrimination in immigration-related decisions. It passed 233–133.
- The Blasphemy Resolution, which calls on the president and the State Department to prioritize the global repeal of blasphemy laws, passed out of the House and the Senate.

## Expanded our allies

Lobbying progress is impossible without allies. We need allies in Congress and in the broader progressive movement. We held 72 meetings with congressional offices, many dedicated to deepening our work with the Congressional Freethought Caucus.

We also strengthened our relationships with our secular partners and built new strategic relationships with civil rights and LGBTQ organizations. We joined the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, which is the primary coordinating body of civil and justice minded organizations.

We teamed up with a huge coalition to fight Amy Coney Barrett and other Christian Nationalists. A highlight of our work on judicial nominations was during the fight on Christian Nationalist Judge Justin Walker.

## Tracked legislation

In 2019, SRT launched Quorum, powerful legislative software that helped us

track legislation. We tracked 493 separate bills in 2020.

Of those bills, the most common state/church-adjacent bills were threats to LGBTQ rights. The next most common were bills that threatened reproductive rights, such as so-called “heartbeat” abortion bans that are unconstitutional, often deliberately so, and are passed with the hope that they will be challenged to give Christian Nationalist judges the chance to change overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

At both the federal and state level, we used 116 action alerts to mobilize FFRF members. More than 15,000 FFRF members have made more than 175,745 connections with legislators, including spending more than 27 hours on the phone on 1,181 calls with those offices. The total number is actually much higher because this only includes calls and emails to legislators made through our system, not those which people made on their own.

That overwhelming response helped us defeat many of these bad bills. In California and Wisconsin, we helped to stop bills that would have treated churches more favorably than secular nonprofits. And in Oklahoma and elsewhere, Project Blitz bills to plaster In God We Trust on government buildings, including classrooms, were soundly defeated.

At the state level, SRT focused on fighting Christian Nationalism, specifically Project Blitz, a nationwide campaign to insert Christian Nationalism into state law. Since its inception, we’ve tracked and opposed 123 Project Blitz bills and only 16 have been enacted.

## Stopped violations

Often, FFRF will hear about a violation happening in the immediate future. SRT works to stop these violations before they occur. SRT also wades in when fast action can change the typical media narrative. SRT’s ordinary response time on these letters, from notification to mailing, is less than an hour.

## Shaped public opinion

SRT published 39 op-eds, articles, blogs and letters to the editor.

Outlets that published FFRF pieces include Religion Dispatches, Friendly Atheist, the Wisconsin State Journal, Kentucky State Journal, The Cap Times (in Madison), the Salt Lake Tribune, the Miami Herald and Rewire News. Shaping public opinion is not just about writing op-eds and articles. SRT is also building relationships with reporters.

## Responded to news

Since the last convention in 2019, we sent 58 statements for FFRF on a variety of issues from Paula White calling for all Satanic pregnancies to miscarry to the coronavirus and churches violating health regulations. Other statements include denouncing Trump’s Twitter assault on nonbelievers, protesting a worship service at White House that Pence attended, attacking nine new rules implemented by executive agencies, condemning Washington Rep. Matt Shea and his Christian Nationalist terrorism rhetoric, exposing Trump’s school prayer guidance, decrying Trump’s voucher plan, and condemning Trump’s State of the Union religious allusions.

SRT took the lead in opposing taxpayer money flowing to churches under the Paycheck Protection Program and when it became clear that even our congressional allies had no appetite to oppose the measure, we began to focus on transparency and accountability. The media responded and we were often the go-to organization for comment and information. We even broke a big PPP story, publishing a report and audio for two secretive phone calls the Trump administration held with evangelical supporters before the PPP process was public, helping to funnel money in their direction.

One of our op-eds for Religion Dispatches about churches, especially megachurches, abusing the taxpayer-funded Paycheck Protection Program went viral. The article, “Inevitable megachurch abuse of PPP funds is coming to light—private jet included,” had people seeing red as these megapreachers were pulling in the green.

Perhaps one of our biggest jobs was also one of our most fruitless and thankless: opposing Trump’s judicial nominees. From Barrett down to Walker, we put countless hours into this fight. We shifted public opinion and, we hope, have shown the need for judicial reform.

Increasingly, as with our work on PPP, we are looked at as an authority on issues of religion and the law, putting us on a level with the ACLU.

*Andrew L. Seidel is director of strategic response for FFRF.*

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# FFRF’s 2021 legislative plan needs your backing

By Mark Dann

It is clear that following the 2020 elections, we’re in a far better place than we were before. The Christian Nationalist in the White House was not re-elected, while all members of the Congressional Freethought Caucus were. With Democrats winning the Georgia Senate races in January, the balance of power in the Senate changes. The House results



Mark Dann

may make for a relatively cautious chamber that could diminish the legislative opportunities available to us. Yet the Biden administration opens up lots of opportunities to undo damage and to strengthen the separation of state and church, especially in regulations, executive orders and guidances.

Here’s the plan:  
**Engaging the new administration and undoing harm from the outgoing one**

The Trump administration enacted over three dozen rules, regulations, guidances and commissions designed to take away your civil and secular rights. We will be working to encourage the new administration to reverse and remove harmful regulations and shut down some of Trump’s extrajudicial commissions: the so-called Religious Liberty Task Force at the Department of Justice, the Conscience and Religious Freedom Division at the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Commission on Unalienable Rights at the Department of State.

**Judicial nominations**  
The good news is that the pain of court packing from the Trump administration will stop after the presidential inauguration. We don’t know how long it will take to rebalance and correct the courts that have been packed with Christian Nationalist judges.



We’re working with our friends in the Leadership Conference for Civil and Human Rights to help advocate for and nominate high-quality judges who support the separation of state and church.

**Key pieces of legislation**  
In the 116th Congress, FFRF worked hard to add co-sponsors to the Do No Harm Act. We also worked to advance the Equality Act, which adds LGBTQ as a protected class to the Civil Rights Acts and prohibits discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation and gender identity, and the No BAN Act, which eliminates the Muslim ban, limits presidential authority to suspend or restrict immigration and prohibits religious discrimination in immigration-related decisions. The Equality Act and the No Ban Act did pass out of the House in the 116th Congress.

In addition, the Scientific Integrity Act, which prevents political appointees from meddling in publicly funded scientific research, passed the House as part of the HEROES act (COVID Relief Bill). The STOP FGM Act of 2020, which prohibits female genital mutilation (FGM) on minors, was just signed into law on Jan. 11. The Blasphemy Resolution, which calls on the president and the State Department to prioritize the global repeal of blasphemy laws,

just passed Congress.  
We’re looking forward to making gains with these pieces of legislation. However, the entire legislative process starts again. We will have to work with our allies to build co-sponsor lists and get all of these bills moving in their committees, in the legislative chambers and onto the president’s desk.

**Expanding the Congressional Freethought Caucus**  
The Congressional Freethought Caucus, first established with three members in October 2018, has now expanded to 14 with the recent addition of Rep. Don Beyer, D-Va. We’ll be working diligently to encourage more members of Congress to join the caucus. Look for more opportunities to engage your

member of Congress and encourage them to join the caucus.  
**Building the movement as Christian Nationalism regroups**  
In 2021, we’re going to be offering some new advocacy tools to make your civic engagement more impactful. We are planning to better connect you to lawmakers to make your secular voices heard. We’ll be providing you with the tools to evaluate legislators with a new dynamic legislative scorecard that rates members of Congress on votes and sponsorship or co-sponsorship of bills, and it will also consider their

social media messaging, press releases and media mentions on FFRF issues, as well as whether they’ve joined the Congressional Freethought Caucus. You’ll be able to identify who are the true champions of the First Amendment and who we need to better engage.

Plus, FFRF has been working with our secular allies to develop a common agenda for Congress and the new administration to implement. We’re dedicated to undoing much of the harm inflicted on this nation in the last four years and to working to safeguard the secular future. The legislative agenda focuses on judicial nominations, engaging the new administration and undoing harm from the Trump administration, and advancing key pieces of legislation.

**Final thoughts**  
We are going to need a lot of help to make sure our collective voice is heard during this legislative session, and to keep Christian Nationalism on the back foot. While the Freedom From Religion Foundation is the nation’s largest membership organization of nonbelievers, with about 33,000 members, a larger base would mean more power, more engagement and visibility with Congress and the administration, and more holding legislators accountable. The best thing you can do today is to renew your FFRF membership and tell friends about FFRF, or better yet, sign them up for a gift membership.

Yes, we need your dues, but more than that, we need members. We need numbers.  
Membership equals power. Politicians listen to their constituents. They might not do exactly what you want, but when citizens speak up, politicians prioritize. Members in the upcoming Congress and in statehouses across the country are trying to figure out what must be prioritized and what can wait. Let’s make some “good trouble” together and get moving.  
*Mark Dann is FFRF’s director of governmental affairs.*

“Let’s make some ‘good trouble’ together and get moving.”

## Secular groups offer agenda for new administration

The Secular Coalition for America, in partnership with its 19 member organizations (including the Freedom From Religion Foundation), has issued a blueprint for the new administration and Congress.

The “Secular Agenda for the 117th Congress and Biden Administration” includes strengthening and supporting the Congressional Freethought Caucus, repealing harmful executive orders, supporting the nomination and appointments of judges and other government officials who adhere to and actively promote and prioritize the separation of religion and government, and a slew of legislative priorities. These include the Do No Harm Act, the Scientific Integrity Act and the CORE Act.

“We are excited to put forth this ambitious plan for the new administration and Congress,” states Casey Brinck, director of policy and government affairs for the Secular Coalition for America. “As we move forward into the first session of the 117th Congress, we can expect a flurry of legislative actions to be undertaken, and want not only our community to understand what we are working for on their behalf, but also for Congress and the new administration to have a better understanding of what our very large and quickly growing

constituency expects of them.”  
FFRF fully concurs.

“Our partnership with the Congressional Freethought Caucus has allowed us to advance the secular agenda in ways once unimaginable,” says FFRF Director of Governmental Affairs Mark Dann. “By coordinating with members of the caucus and their staff, we have been able to fight back against the erosion of the wall that separates religion and government and elevate the discussion of our common secular values in Congress. The entire coalition is thankful for the work the Congressional Freethought Caucus does, and we are excited to continue to work with it in the 117th Congress.”

Other secular groups agree.  
“We have made significant progress during the past few Congresses on many of our legislative priorities, and we look forward to seeing them pass the finish line in the 117th,” Rachel Deitch, director of policy and social justice for

the American Humanist Association, remarks. “While there still will be a difficult fight in Congress, bills like the Do No Harm Act have consistently gained support over the past few years, and we believe now is the time to see them on President-elect Biden’s desk.”

The coalition will also be working to strengthen and aid the Congressional Freethought Caucus in its mission to promote public policy formed on the basis of reason, science, and moral values, while opposing discrimination against atheists, agnostics, humanists, seekers, religious and nonreligious persons.

The 19 member organizations that make up the Secular Coalition for America will, in addition, be working to repeal the numerous harmful executive orders issued over the past four years. Listed in the agenda, too, are Trump administration commissions that have been utilized to blur the lines between religion and government and advance the Christian Nationalist agenda. These include the Re-

ligious Liberty Task Force, which is dedicated to allowing religious institutions and individuals to continue to receive special treatment under the law, and the Commission on Unalienable Rights, led by well-known Christian Nationalist ally and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

“The Trump Administration has used constitutionally suspect regulations and flagrant misinterpretations of U.S. Supreme Court decisions to promote religion, attack civil rights, and undermine the separation of religion and government,” says Alison Gill, vice president for legal and policy at American Atheists. “We look forward to working with the new administration to reverse these dangerous policies and to restore religious freedom for every American.”

The Center for Inquiry emphasizes the importance of the joint secular agenda.  
“The assault on secular values reached an unprecedented level during the Trump administration,” says Jason Lemieux, director of government affairs at the organization. “Trump and his religious extremist allies used every trick in the book to impose Christian Nationalism upon every aspect of public life. The secular agenda is a step toward true separation of church and state.”

“The assault on secular values reached an unprecedented level during the Trump administration.”  
— Jason Lemieux, Center for Inquiry



# FFRF awards \$17,750 in Brian Bolton competition

## Grad/‘older’ student essay contest winners

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 10 winners and nine honorable mentions of the Brian Bolton Essay Contest for Graduate/“Older” Students. FFRF has paid out a total of \$17,750 in award money to this year’s contest winners.

Graduate students up to age 30 or undergrad students ages 25–30 were asked to write a persuasive essay on “Why God has no place in political debate.” Students were asked to make the case for keeping “God” and religion out of the political debates, and the dangers posed when public officials pander and mix religion with government.

This contest is generously and single-handedly endowed by Lifetime Member Brian Bolton, a retired psychologist, humanist minister and professor emeritus at the University of Arkansas. Bolton is also underwriting FFRF’s Bible Accountability Project to call attention to the continuing harm of the bible to society.

FFRF thanks Dean and Dorea Schramm of Florida for providing a \$100 bonus to students who are members of a secular group, student club or Secular Student Alliance. The total of \$17,750 reflects those bonuses.

FFRF also thanks “Director of First Impressions” Lisa Treu for managing the details of the essay contests. And we couldn’t judge these competitions without help from our “faithful faithless”



volunteers and staff members, including Don Ardell, Dan Barker, Darrell Barker, Bill Dunn, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Stephen Hirtle, Judy Jacobs, Linda Josheff, Dan Kettner, Katya Maes, Bailey Nachreiner-Mackesey, Amit Pal, Dave Petrashek, Sue Schuetz, Lauryn Seering, PJ Slinger and Karen Lee Weidig.

FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994, grad and older students since 2010, one geared specifically for students of color since 2016 and one for law school students since 2019.

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

sue. The honorable mention essays will not be reprinted here but can be seen at [freethoughttoday.com](http://freethoughttoday.com).

Note: The essays were written prior to the November elections and have been edited, when possible, to reflect the discrepancy.

**First place**  
Miriam Barnicle, 23, Alverno College, \$3,500.

**Second place**  
Kelsey Kane-Ritsch, 26, Columbia University, \$3,000.

**Third place**  
Sydni Ham Myers, 29, Virginia Commonwealth, \$2,500.

**Fourth place**  
Nicolle Dirksen (Rann), South Dakota

State University, \$2,000.

**Fifth place**  
Rebecca Barrett, 25, Emory University, \$1,500.

**Sixth place**  
T. Parker Schwartz, 27, Capital University, \$1,000.

**Seventh place**  
Ipsha Banerjee, 22, Arizona State University, \$750.

**Eighth place**  
Sonia Bajaj, 28, Benedictine University, \$500.

**Ninth place**  
Paula Canales, University of Texas-San Antonio, \$400.

**Tenth place**  
Michelle Krauser, 30, Coastal Carolina University, \$300.

**Honorable mentions (\$200 each)**  
Emella Canlas, 25, California State University, East Bay.  
John Carroll, 25, SUNY Fredonia.  
Selina Chan, 29, University of Pennsylvania.  
Ruth Dickey-Chasins, 26, George Washington University.  
Kavitha Kannanunny, 25, New Jersey Institute of Technology.  
Brionna McCumber, 23, Colorado State University.  
Yarrow Mead, 25, Hamline University.  
Yamiset Trujillo, 28, University of Central Florida.  
Andrew Young, 22, University of Denver.

### FIRST PLACE

## Threat of religious pandering in a COVID election

FFRF awarded Miriam \$3,500.

By Miriam Barnicle

Freedom from religion is granted by the U.S. Constitution and has been a right guaranteed to Americans since our nation’s founding. In the political debates of 2020, there was no time or place for discussing the religious convictions of candidates. The American people deserved to hear how candidates would work in service of their constituents, not their God. When considering reopening the economy in May, President Trump stated: “I’m going to have to make a decision, and I only hope to God that it’s the right decision.”

As economies reopened and coronavirus cases soared last summer, it is clear that he would have benefited from consulting other sources. In 2020, the mixing of God with political decisions presented dire consequences for the health, safety and economic prosperity of the American people.

Religious pandering poses an immediate threat to Americans’ access to healthcare. Trump’s administration was incentivized to enact policies that are favorable among white evangelical voters, a key voting block of Trump’s political success, even if such policies present health risks. Most recently, the Department of Health and Human Services rolled back regulations that barred health-care professionals from denying care to individuals based on their gender identity or expression. This policy may be welcome to evangelical voters, and advantageous for some politicians. But in the face of a deadly pandemic, the U.S. government cannot allow healthcare professionals to deny care based on their own religious convictions. Americans who profess no faith or hold beliefs different than those of their elected officials should not have to wonder

“Americans deserve not only transparency from political officials about where tax dollars are going, but also confidence that public money will not be funneled into the pockets of religious groups in hopes of political gains.

whether politicians will deem them worthy of care. Every American deserves health care that is competent, compassionate and based on the facts available, rather than religious doctrine.

In addition to limiting access to health care, religious pandering poses a threat to the general safety of the entire country. As COVID-19 cases continue to rise, the debate over masks has grown increasingly heated. Elected officials have expressed religious objections to face coverings, such as an Ohio lawmaker who refuses to wear a mask because he believes it dishonors God. Additionally, as many states have implemented mask mandates in public spaces to try to contain the spread of coronavirus, some governors have issued exemptions to places of worship despite a complete lack of scientific justification. Of course, discourse about the factors impacting the spread of coronavirus and the government’s role in mandating such measures should be welcome in America. However, these discussions must be guided by data rather than the religious beliefs of individual lawmakers.

Finally, the entanglement of religious beliefs with policy creates economic consequences. At the time of writing, roughly 30 million Americans are receiving unemployment benefits, Congress is working to roll out another trillion-dollar stimulus package, and economists warn that the impacts of COVID-19 will continue for months, if not years to come. The U.S. government will continue to need to pump money into the economy, presenting an opportunity for costly religious pandering. The \$2.2 trillion CARES Act has already poured millions of dollars into the coffers of religious groups, such as religious schools, megachurches, and Trump’s own private preachers. Americans deserve not only transparency from political officials about where tax dollars are going, but also confidence that public money will not be funneled



Miriam Barnicle

into the pockets of religious groups in hopes of political gains.

The entanglement of religious beliefs with public policy decisions poses clear threats to Americans’ health, safety and economic well-being. Trump warned that the current situation would probably “get worse before it gets better,” and it is clear that the crises facing America today will remain at the forefront of political debates. As our nation grapples with whether and how to open safely, we find ourselves in desperate need of leadership unclouded by religious beliefs. Now, more than ever, public officials must rely on data, science and the voice of the people, not the voice of God. Failure to do so threatens the founding principles of the United States and the lives and livelihoods of the American people.

Miriam, 23, of Milwaukee, attends Alverno College. “I am working toward a master’s degree in urban education. I also work as a special education teacher at a Milwaukee high school and enjoy supporting my students as they embark on their own educational and career goals.”



SECOND PLACE

# Remove religion bias to fight climate change

FFRF awarded Kelsey \$3,000.

By Kelsey Kane-Ritsch

Nature is my religion. Growing up, while my classmates spent their weekends in Sunday school, I slipped off into the forest for my own spiritual and moral instruction. Gentle deer reminded me to listen to others, chattering squirrels taught me the importance of advocating for basic rights, a mother bear protecting her cubs displayed the importance of love, and unapologetic peacocks prompted me to never be ashamed to show my true colors.

My beliefs left me feeling like the pariah of the playground ruled by Catholic Girl Scouts. I didn't realize until later just how fortunate I was to be defended by a public school system that was legally bound to accept students of all beliefs and not take sides in our spiritual schoolyard squabbles. This separation of church and state allowed me to develop my own understanding of the world that has shaped nearly every personal, educational and professional decision I have made.

I have joined the ranks of Americans who commit their careers and their votes to maintaining this thin "wall of separation." However, when President Trump was elected, he assembled an administration that took a sledgehammer to that wall (while building a very different wall along the border). The president handed the reins of the federal government directly to the Christian dominionists, who used



Kelsey Kane-Ritsch

the bible as an excuse for environmental exploitation.

While a series of political horrors have resulted from this shift (i.e., anti-abortion policies, immigration bans and much more), none is more devastating than the assault on the health of our planet. Thanks to the skills and values gained from my forest friends, I now spend my days working for the Natural Resources Defense Council advocating for the lives of my fellow inhabitants of Earth and against the destructive climate policies based on religious rationales.

Climate policies should be based in sound science. This is not news to world leaders, except perhaps former President Trump, who skipped the key climate crisis talks at the United Nations in 2019 to chair his own conflicting event on "religious freedom."

Promoting science is also unfamiliar to

this staunchly Christian former Vice President, Mike Pence, who has argued on the floor of Congress that evolution is only a theory and that creationism should be taught in public schools.

Therefore, it is no surprise that Trump "blessed" Scott Pruitt with the opportunity to run the Environmental Protection Agency, where Pruitt used interpretations of religious texts to conveniently justify destructive EPA policies meant to bring the president's powerful industry backers immediate wealth and power.

According to Pruitt, "The biblical worldview with respect to these issues is that we have a responsibility to manage and cultivate, harvest the natural resources that we've been blessed with to truly bless our fellow mankind." He has also argued that "God has blessed us with natural resources," but "the environmental left tells us that, though we have natural resources like natural gas and oil and coal, and though we can feed the world, we should keep those things in the ground, put up fences and be about prohibition."

Even the pope strongly disagreed with these statements. Yet, our federal government invoked this religious interpretation while forcibly suppressing the sound science calling for the end of extractive practices fueling climate change. The suppression of science illuminates just how

damaging the blind application of any "religious justification" can be to fair political decision-making. If God's word is considered the final word in politics, whose interpretation of God's word is correct and who gets to decide?

While I'd love to turn to my old forest friends and let them decide, my own spirituality must remain removed from politics, as well. Our democracy thrives off of healthy political debate fueled by a mix of economic, scientific, and moral arguments.

This discourse must continue unencumbered by religious bias in order to craft fair policy. It just so happens that science, economics and morality are all on the same side of the climate change debate, so removing the Trump administration's rules based

on dominionist religious theory will clear the path to our own futures.

In keeping with what I learned from the squirrels,

the people must bury this collection of nuts in order to grow a more sustainable future.

*Kelsey, 26, is from the Los Angeles area and attends Columbia University.*

*"During my undergraduate years at Princeton, I focused on anthropology and environmental studies. Today, I work as a program coordinator for the Science Center and Oceans team at the Natural Resources Defense Council while pursuing my M.S. in sustainability management."*

“If God’s word is considered the final word in politics, whose interpretation of God’s word is correct and who gets to decide?”

THIRD PLACE

# The political ideology of God

FFRF awarded Sydni \$2,500.

By Sydni Ham Myers

On June 23, 2017, Mike Pence delivered keynote remarks to an energetic crowd in Colorado Springs at the 40th anniversary celebration of Focus On The Family, an organization that openly invests in public education campaigns against LGBTQ individuals: "In a very real sense, you're the hands and feet, and the voice in so many ways of the truths found in the scriptures," said Pence. "You've strengthened marriages. . . . You've advocated for the timeless values our society needs to hear now more than ever."

Meanwhile around the living room of my parents' home in Hampton, Va., heads shook in confusion and disgust at CNN's live coverage of the mystifying words of our nation's vice president.

Yet one family member remained fixed on the zealous speaker. In the middle of the room, my uncle watched on, eyes wide with awe, nodding his head fervently to every word.

Then Pence doubled down with the promise: "Protecting and promoting religious freedom is a foreign policy priority of the Trump administration. . . . Many believers around the world are under assault, and nowhere is this more evident than the

Middle East, in the very land where our faith was given life, that's why under President Trump, America stands with Israel."

In response, my uncle slowly stood up from his seat, clapping his hands together and said, "Amen."

The room fell silent and the tension that followed was palpable. I remember my father and grandfather scoffing loudly in reaction to the daring act of praise. For it was certainly a bold act, especially

for a Black man, to openly praise a conservative leader in a room of unwavering Democrats. Yet, to my uncle, the deeply religious references that enveloped Pence's speech were the only thing that mattered.

With a nod to God, my evangelical uncle could look past even the most divisive of messages.

When religion is referenced throughout political debate, it helps politicians gain automatic support from a large demographic of the American populace: devout Christians. This blind devotion is antithetical to the legal framework intended by our country's Founding Fathers.

In the 18th century, when Christianity was the de facto religion of the country, Thomas Jefferson introduced the Bill Concerning Religious Freedom to the Virginia Legislature. In it, he urged an amendment to end state support of religion out of fear that combining faith and



Sydni Ham Myers

politics would encourage citizens to conform to a common denomination. He believed conflating religion and politics would also have more severe rippling effects — it would lead to the persecution of individuals outside of the common faith.

For years, Israel and Palestine have been in conflict over border rights and control of Jerusalem (as well as Israeli settlements, Palestinian freedom of movement, water rights and many more matters). Furthermore, according to its 1997 Status of Jerusalem plan, the United Nations aims to one day recognize Jerusalem as a capital of both states, Israel and Palestine.

Yet, in his Focus On The Family address, Mike Pence likened Palestinians struggling on the border to radical terrorists: "Nearly 2,000 years ago the disciples

of Jesus Christ fanned out from Israel in every direction, but today, these Christian communities face unspeakable atrocities at the hands of radical Islamic terrorism."

As a leader of a nation that was founded on the Jeffersonian principles of the separation of church and state, Pence used religion to cushion his extremist point of view. In doing this, he invoked a foreign policy that isolated an entire group of people based on faith.

When Pence or any other politician claims that God is on their side, they not only confuse Christians and encourage blind piety, they also use religion to justify enacting policies that are ethically corrupt.

During the 2016 vice presidential debate, Sen. Tim Kaine recounted a moment, during his time as governor of Virginia, when he struggled between upholding the state's death penalty laws and his Catholic faith. Yet, despite his personal religious views, he upheld the law.

"It was a real struggle for me," Kaine said, "but I think that it's important that those of us who have deep faith lives don't feel like we can just substitute in our own views."

When politicians take the oath of office, ideally, they should sacrifice their personal beliefs to do what is legally and ethically just for the sake of their constituents. Unfortunately, the politicians of today still remain to weave Jesus into their ideologies at any opportune chance.

*Sydni, 29, attends Virginia Commonwealth University.*

*"I'm a young woman passionate about advertising and writing and a proud Hampton, Va., native."*

“When Pence or any other politician claims that God is on their side, they not only confuse Christians and encourage blind piety, they also use religion to justify enacting policies that are ethically corrupt.”



FOURTH PLACE

Religion is antiquated and irrelevant

FFRF awarded Nicolle \$2,000.

By Nicolle Dirksen

In the current political climate of extreme polarization, religion seeks to further divide us. While many proponents of religiosity view it as a catalyst of togetherness, the opposite is true, particularly when religion becomes intertwined with politics. When the two become enmeshed, policy changes are made based on religious values that do not represent all of a politician’s constituents. Additionally, religion within the context of politics creates a narrative in which one set of ideas is viewed as the only path to morality and, most devastatingly, it forces scientific understanding and critical thinking to the backseat in policy making.

Lawmakers have incredible responsibility to their constituents and to the country as a whole. Heading into the 2020 elections, the issues that most divided the country were heavily based on Christian values. LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights and police reform were voted on, by many Americans, through the lens of biblical principles. Politicians pander to these Christian ideals, regardless of their own convictions. While this may seem like a strategic plan to politicians, it only serves to further divide the country into Christians and non-Christians. Nonbelievers and holders of alternate religious views are left out of the equation, pointing to a need for our politi-



Nicolle Dirksen

cal system to do away with any religious consideration or conversation. When politicians involve religion in their platforms, it will always be the religion of the majority, because nothing else makes strategic sense. This is not conducive to creating a government for the people, but rather a government for the “right” people, thereby creating an “us-versus-them” society. As demonstrated by the current political climate, no one wins when extreme polarization runs rampant. This polarization is further highlighted when the question of morality inevitably enters the conversation. When religion is part of political conversation on virtually every media plat-

form and viewed by the masses, unequal representation of belief systems emerges. This reinforces the false narrative that one’s moral compass must be guided by a religion and/or higher power. When more people in America say they would vote for a Muslim presidential candidate than an atheist candidate in a post-9/11 country rife with anti-Muslim rhetoric, it becomes clear that a religious focus reinforces that morality equals God, any god. A Muslim politician is more palatable than a lawmaker viewed as amoral, even when that politician’s deity is one whose religious text(s) and belief system are in complete contradiction with the voters’.

A lack of a god belief becomes synonymous with a lack of morality, further polarizing the country and calling any scientific discovery that does not align with religion into question.

Science is the only method through which progress can be made. With religion at the center of political debate, science inevitably becomes an afterthought. When a country’s population is incapable of critically thinking about their own beliefs, the beliefs of others, and scientific literature, it is a detriment to that country’s ability to advance. In the social media age, this lack of critical thinking ability is clear. Confirmation bias and creating an echo chamber are easier than ever, and if one searches for something hoping for an answer that aligns with his/her/their biases, he/she/they are almost

certainly going to find it, regardless of any objective, scientific truths that may directly oppose it. This seems to be especially true when something as closely held as religion is at the center of those biases. If the political system continues to incorporate religion in any part of the conversation, this problem will only continue to grow.

Religion is the most divisive and problematic player in the American political system. No individual political figure could do as much damage as religion has. During this tumultuous time in American history, it is more important than ever for our leaders to create policy and make change based on scientific understanding, not divisive religious values. When religion has a seat in the political conversation, people are left out, morality becomes blurred, and critical thinking becomes obsolete. If America wants to move past the polarization and pave a path forward, we must view religion for what it is: antiquated and irrelevant.

Nicolle, 29, attends South Dakota State University, studying human development and family studies with a minor in psychology.

“Living as an atheist in middle America has not always been easy, but it has been motivating. I have applied to graduate schools and hope to use my skepticism and critical-thinking skills to further the pool of research in psychology. Science has become increasingly important to me, particularly in the age of social media ‘truth,’ and I cannot wait to devote my life to scientific progress.”

FIFTH PLACE

Dangers of mixing religion and government

FFRF awarded Rebecca \$1,500.

By Rebecca Barrett

The presence of religion in government has long been contentious. Despite the First Amendment to the Constitution, which states, in part, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” religion has long been creeping into public life. Many politicians are sworn into office on a bible. Many state legislatures, city councils and other political bodies begin their meetings with an “invocation,” usually given by a priest, pastor or minister with an explicitly Christian prayer. Monuments of the Ten Commandments are put up in public buildings. Advocates of religion in public life say that religion has a positive influence on politicians and on the public. They contend religion in government encourages government officials to behave more morally, more honestly and with more compassion. But the whole idea of “religious freedom” and “religion in government” is a misnomer. We are really talking about a specific form of Christianity in government. The evangelical fundamentalists and pundits bemoaning the “War on Christmas” on Fox News do not want just any religion in government, they want their religion in government. The consistent effort to insinuate Christianity into every aspect of public life is not just an annoyance for non-Christians, it undermines religious

freedom and chips away at the foundations of our pluralistic democracy. Proponents of religion in public spaces argue that it is not about promoting Christianity, because these public spaces are open to all religions who want to enter them. But is this actually the case? The Satanic Temple has been a marvelous case study that proves that claims that public spaces are open to all religions equally are false. Founded in 2013, the Satanic Temple has been formally recognized by the IRS as a church and has 23 official chapters in the United States, Canada and Europe. It has applied to have after-school clubs, give invocations at city council meetings, and is suing Arizona to be allowed to put a 9-foot-tall statue of Baphomet next to the Ten Commandment’s monument on the statehouse lawn. Unlike some Christians, it is not trying to be the only voice in the public square. Rather, it only asks to enjoy the same rights Christians do to have its religion acknowledged in government meetings and in public spaces. The ensuing debate is very revealing. Christianity in government proponents who find themselves saying, “Why do these Satanists need to have their religion in public spaces?” must also ask themselves the same question. It is clear why freethinkers and people with minority religious viewpoints should be concerned by the incursions of Christianity into public life, but even other Christians should be concerned. This dominance of a particular type of



Rebecca Barrett

conservative, fundamentalist Christian viewpoint is antithetical to the pluralism that our democracy is dependent on. Christian theocrats claim to be advocating for “freedom” for all religious people, but really it is about power. When public officials give primacy to Christianity in public life, they are knowingly or unknowingly promoting the superiority of Christians above other religions. This has a chilling effect on free speech, as people with other religious viewpoints, or Christians who interpret scripture differently, do not feel welcome in these spaces. Our democracy depends on the ability of all members of our society to voice their opinions, no matter how upsetting to

some those opinions may be. When religion and politics mix, a difference of opinion becomes heresy. If these public spaces could truly be an open forum to all religious and non-religious viewpoints, I believe we would not have a problem. Unfortunately, the primacy of Christianity in public spaces, in politics and in public discourse is causing the United States to slide toward theocracy.

When Donald Trump stood in front of St. John’s Church holding the bible after having violated the constitutional rights of protesters to free speech and free assembly, he was not just pandering to his conservative Christian base. Trump was telling Americans, and the world, that the unquestionable and unquestioning morality of the Christian faith was on his side. While Trump’s piety is most likely a performance, real politicians are making public policy decisions every day not based on science but based upon religious belief. This debate is not merely academic. It impacts the health and welfare of every American.

Rebecca, 25, attends Emory University. “I have been an atheist and lover of science and reason since age 10. After getting my bachelor’s degree in biomedical engineering, I decided to get my master’s degree specializing in public health policy. I have a particular interest in criminal justice and prison reform. I am interested in how policy reforms can radically change the justice system, so it can maximize social welfare while still addressing harm.”



SIXTH PLACE

‘God’ as an ideological precedent

FFRF awarded Parker \$1,000.

By T. Parker Schwartz

The repercussions of America’s expansive political campaign rhetoric attached to “God” and organized religion will, as always, have measurable impacts on local, state and federal government policies. While pandering to religion certainly creates a litany of policy-related consequences, the implications of such overridingly religious rhetoric also stoke a widespread and dangerous ideological precedent for the selection, evaluation and cultivation of our country’s future political leadership.

The lack of a historically accepted secular orientation for the evaluation of our elected political leaders contributes to an entrenched set of sectarian norms that encourages the disenfranchisement of secularists from our political system. Throughout American history, virtually every president has furthered these Judeo-Christian values in his inaugural address. In fact, President Trump’s 2017 inauguration remarks, opined The Washington Post, “was infused with religious language . . . [including a] a bible reference to Psalm 133” and several explicit mentions of “Jesus Christ.” It was one of the most starkly religious inaugural addresses in collective American memory.

As leaders across party lines elevate religion in their personal and political platforms, both leading U.S. presidential candidates pandered to faith-based constituencies as a tacit “rite of passage.” Trump used his “bully pulpit” to indulge

far-right Christian factions of his electorate, both as an act of party solidification and for the sake of self-promotion. The president’s June 2020 bible-thumping photo-op in front of St. James Church, amid the George Floyd protests, revealed his brazen attempts to gain favor with Christian elements of the GOP. Moreover, the formation of the president’s Evangelical Advisory Board, led by prosperity theologian Paula White, raises serious questions about whether our federal government respects the separation of church and state.

Trump’s Democratic opponent, former Vice President Joe Biden, also fomented appeals to religiosity for undoubted political purposes. Biden initiated a campaign intent on “stealing votes” away from Trump’s solidly evangelical Christian voting base, reported Gabby Orr of Politico. In implementing such a strategy, Biden crafted campaign messaging with “religious undertones, and [he] reportedly hosts a weekly call with faith leaders to crowdsource policy and personnel suggestions.” In a December 2019 op-ed, Biden reveled in scripture and quotes from the pope as examples of foundations for his political philosophy.

This ideological precedent, bent on promoting religion as a political weapon, must shift as the American citizenry becomes increasingly more secular in nature. A fall 2019 poll by Pew Research Center revealed that nearly four of every 10 Millennials are unaffiliated with any religion. Moreover, Millennials (23- to 38-year-olds) are more likely to identify as having no religion. For an even younger



T. Parker Schwartz

Gen Z (13- to-18-year-olds), a recent Barna study revealed that they are twice as likely as their adult counterparts to identify as atheist (13 percent to 6 percent).

This sizable shift toward an increasingly secular American demography is hardly reflected in the rhetoric and makeup of our publicly elected officials today. As David Smith of The Guardian wrote in 2019, “nonbelievers [still] remain few and far between in U.S. politics.” Only one member of Congress (U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman of California) identifies as a nonbeliever. Secular candidates have not made widespread waves in state elections either. The Center for Freethought Equality noted before the fall election that just over 70 total state elected officials consider themselves to be atheists or humanists.

By pandering to America’s historic Judeo-Christian values, the American political establishment risks engendering young, future political leaders toward public promotion of religious values as a threshold for seeking elected office. Our current set of elected political leaders’ religious values do not reflect the growing ranks of nonbelievers in America’s evolving voter base.

As President Obama made the first step of doing in his 2009 inaugural address, our public officials must acknowledge our growing population of nonbelievers. Furthermore, our local and state representatives must take the steps to denounce the influence of religion in the structure of selecting and evaluating the criteria for viable political candidates. In doing so, our American political system will become a more conducive environment for the inclusion of intelligent, young and secular leaders who will help move our nation toward a set of policies more consistent with the separation of church and state.

As a current law school student, and hopeful future public official, I have little doubt that I speak for thousands of young Americans by saying that we yearn for the day when religion is no longer a barrier, or litmus test, to seek elected office.

*Parker, 27, is a law school student at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio. “I previously worked as a public and media relations professional with Wilks Communications Group. A 2015 graduate of DePaul University, I majored in political science and communication and also have a master’s degree in professional communication from East Tennessee State University.”*

SEVENTH PLACE

Politics and religion — the oldest con in the book

FFRF awarded Ipsha \$750.

By Ipsha Banerjee

“God bless the United States of America” as the norm to conclude presidential speeches is a practice no one blinks twice at. Though the separation of church and state has been advocated for since the time of the Founding Fathers, politics remains tangled with religion as citizens are constantly reminded of Christian beliefs through nationalist symbols and public officials’ rhetoric. Politicians’ propagation of their supposed religious beliefs spurs danger in the form of controversy surrounding important issues, bias in voters that distracts from platforms, and division of the nation. Continued involvement of religion in politics is not only absurd — as religion is based on dogma and arcane consequences whereas politics depends on current events and present existence — but also harmful as it impedes growth and advancement.

Politics and religion have been intertwined throughout the United States’ history. For example, although it is not required, presidents are conventionally sworn in using the bible. Additionally, the mention of “God” or our “Creator” can be seen across national documents and symbols. The Declaration of Independence states: “they [all men] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” The Pledge of Allegiance, which some public schoolchildren are required to recite daily, mentions “one nation, under God.” Even all coins and paper money



Ipsha Banerjee

include the nation’s motto “In God We Trust.” Religion and God are subconsciously reinforced through repeated exposure in the name of nationalism and therefore is implicit in politics.

The primary problem of religion mixed with government comes down to misuse and obscurity. Instead of being a private choice each person has the right to make, religion has become a tool of political influence by deliberately priming public response and adding unnecessary points of contention to current issues. Religion should not be incorporated with politics because it is based on belief not evidence. Why should something that is a figment of humankind’s imagination impact politics, which is tangible and includes our country’s foreign policies, social institutions, economic development and civil rights?

Policies should not be based on a future possibility but rather current happenings. If we framed issues and public officials’ platforms in terms of what is beneficial for us right now, in this moment, without fearing the consequences of a supernatural being that there is no evidence for, we would make progress with controversial topics such as abortion, stem cell research, LGBTQ+ rights, and even wearing masks to curb the ongoing pandemic. In the end, religious rhetoric and ideology are only impeding the political system, both for voters and public officials, as well as increasing civil conflict.

The intermixing of religion and politics implements bias, influences voter perception, limits public officials and pardons politicians. Because candidates are molded to fit religious views of political parties with their public image, marital status, church attendance and campaigns, voters often form an opinion based on the beliefs politicians’ claim to espouse rather than their stances and plans. Voters feel an emotional connection to candidates through a supposedly shared identity, creating bias, and thus are more likely to support the candidate without considering ability or platform. Religion provides the opportunity for voters to remain ignorant and make assumptions based on limited knowledge that then determine our country’s leadership. When these candidates are elected as public officials, the religious undertone of their platform and campaign puts them in a box, limiting progress. Now, these leaders must pander to religious beliefs and values to avoid being outcast by voters and

ostracized by other policymakers. Public officials must make decisions in accordance with their appeal to religious voters, especially if they hope for reelection and acceptance among others of the same party. Finally, viewing politicians through a religious lens often obscures what they are saying and what they stand for. Even if the politicians speak or act immorally, those who identify with the politicians’ claimed religious values will often “forgive and forget” due to their initial presumption of character based on those values.

Religion is ingrained in politics and used as a means to an end. Based on faith and spirituality, religion has no logic or evidence that guides its followers. This inherent mystery surrounding its existence allows for strategic employment in order to influence, gain power or even conceal corruption. If religion is replaced with ethics and reality, voters and leaders alike would experience unity, change and growth. Politics needs to banish God and faith-based reasoning because in the end, religion is simply powerful marketing that dupes entire masses with the promise of virtue.

*Ipsha, 22, attends Arizona State University after graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, in May 2020 with a degree in integrative biology and psychology. “I volunteer virtually for Red Cross’ Biomedical Services department to support local and national blood drives and delivery and volunteer for the Phoenix Children’s Hospital and as a private piano and vocal teacher for underprivileged students. I also advocate and fundraise for organizations I’m passionate about, including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Arizona.”*



EIGHTH PLACE

Religion and science are like oil and water

FFRF awarded Sonia \$500.

By Sonia Bajaj

Religion is not bound by the same constraints as science. There can be no conversation tethered completely in reality that is guided solely by religious doctrine. By contrast, scientific debate is typically guided by a motivation for the distillation of truth. Politics is also a fluid process that is, in an ideal world, informed by rational decision-making. Thus, science is relevant to the issue of politics as a methodical, self-reflective approach to discerning fact.

Experiments aim to minimize external variables in order to test specific hypotheses and determine causality. Even non-experimental designs take measures to reduce the influence of bias. Errors are certainly made in this process, but the aim among most researchers is the same: to discover the truths of this universe as they are. Similarly, the political process is inherently an active one. As societies evolve, so do their concerns, technology, access to information and understanding of the world. As new information is added to the collective database, growth occurs accordingly. Politics is an active



Sonia Bajaj

process that requires a growing knowledge base, not a stagnant one.

Religion, by contrast, is a passive process. Centuries-old books written by humans are taken to be the word of God. Critical review of these doctrines is frequently condemned, and, in some communities, dissent is punished. Like oil and water, religion and politics are quite separate entities. Where the two intersect, there is turbulence. Abortion, an issue that has

been debated heatedly for decades, is one such example. Religious views on the subject tend to impose a version of the “correct” response to unplanned pregnancy that is at once restrictive and subjugating to women. It denies a female’s essential right to choice in favor of some “godly” version of virtue. It denies the fact that children born without access to proper financial, emotional, and environmental resources are less likely to reach developmental milestones for their ages. It fails to acknowledge the role that circumstance and experience play in human life.

It simplifies a nuanced issue.

Religion, when used to inform political decisions, has devastating consequences. Planned Parenthood has faced a decades-long battle against conservative religious groups. In the past several years, it has experienced defunding and restriction of its lower-income patients insured by Title X. In certain states, entire clinics have been closed. Missouri’s last abortion clinic in St. Louis was threatened with closure, but after a year-long battle, fought for its continued existence.

The consequences of closure would have impacted not only individual lives, but society at large. With social

services experiencing greater cuts, it seems unlikely that every fetus, if given the chance at life, would receive the care and protection it would need to thrive. This is but one consideration of many in the efforts to secure reproductive rights in this country. The lack of respect and empathy afforded to those individuals who choose abortion and the continuous, underlying threat to their autonomy is yet further evidence that religion has no place in political debate.

Ancient texts should not be doctrines for use in any rational discourse. Government is a space which affects each of us, regardless of our political stances. For a free and fair political system to be functioning optimally, it must use every resource at its disposal to dispel myth, bias and fiction from its internal process. Only then will fact reign and truth be preserved from distortion.

*Sonia, 28, attends Benedictine University, studying clinical psychology. “I appreciate expressive approaches to therapy, including art and dance. My professional goals include supporting individuals who have experienced childhood trauma and advancing our understanding of trauma recovery through research and clinical practice.”*

NINTH PLACE

One nation going under

FFRF awarded Paula \$400.

By Paula Canales

Religion — specifically the Abrahamic belief systems — has played a large and multifaceted role in the development of humanity for the past several thousand years. Historical trends reveal a general decline in human rights and societal progress during times of increased religiosity and in theocratic societies, such as during the European Dark Ages and in countries under strict observance of Sharia law. Basing political systems on theology can often create a slippery slope into religious extremism and compulsory conversion. Despite being the land of the free in theory, the history of the United States is scarred with the effects of religious extremism, as evidenced by Christian support of slavery, Manifest Destiny and the forced removal/conversion of Native Americans, and evangelical marginalization of women and homosexuals, to name just a few.

The modern political stage has also seen a rise in Christian Nationalism and its negative effects due to [former] President Trump’s problematic rhetoric, such as the empowerment of Christian domestic terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and faith-based ignorance of COVID-19 precautions under the guise of individual rights. Aside from the obvious and overdone (and often ignored) argument that the Founding Fathers stipulated a separation of religion and government, Christian Nationalism is a detriment to American society and should be kept out of election debates because it further divides the nation’s people and creates a hindrance to social and

scientific progress.

There have been few instances in our nation’s history plagued with more division among its people than the present. Domestic terrorist groups have become increasingly empowered, racial and foreign tensions are at an all-time high, and the very recognition of a worldwide pandemic has been reduced to a political opinion. Despite living in the age of free and accessible information, we continue to see the classic religious denial of fact for the sake of faith, and near-cult following Donald Trump has gained among right-wing Christians. His public displays of piety and religious rhetoric have not only gained him forgiveness for inexcusable displays of character (citing his former racist business decisions and misogynistic actions and remarks) but have caused nearly half of the nation’s population to turn a blind eye to the aforementioned atrocities. Additionally, Trump’s rhetoric has caused a belief among many Christians that our nation’s problems stem from a rise in rational secularism and thus, reinstitution of mainstream Christian dogma is necessary, despite being unconstitutional. We have seen from the Trump presidency how easily a cult of personality can be formed based on religious rhetoric, and how this in turn leads to social division and permittance of the blatantly unconstitutional. Regardless of one’s political affiliation or opinion of Trump, leaders should be elected based on the merit of their ideas and applicable experience, rather than feigned divine ordination.

The ancient standards of the bible are purely anachronistic when applied to modern society. Not only do they contradict well-established scientific



Paula Canales

facts such as the evolution of life forms (further evidence of the ignorance of the book’s human writers), but they hinder social progress because of their rigid nature. Of even more concern is the damage done by bible-based political policies, such as the call to defund Planned Parenthood, which would result in greatly limited access to healthcare for underprivileged women. Additionally, some fundamentalist Christian sects have pushed for the biblical myth of creation to be taught in public schools as an equivalent and opposing theory to that of evolution. The freedom of religion granted as the most basic of rights in the United States has become confused for biblical supremacy over the personal lives of citizens largely due to the willingness of politicians to include such demands in their platforms.

Contrary to the myth that Christianity is under attack by modern ide-

als, secularism takes a neutral stance on social issues; religious beliefs of almost any kind are tolerated, without favoring one over others. Rather, political decisions should be made based on reason and with the peoples’ best interest in mind, without unequitable regard to any specific theology’s laws. Because of the requirement of faith in the absence of evidence that is the foundation of Christianity — rendering it little more than a long-held and inherited personal opinion — it is no more relevant to political debate than other arbitrary traits, such as a candidate’s favorite color. Allowing religion to interfere in politics is a threat to progress and to the unity of the people.

*Paula, 25, attends University of Texas at San Antonio. “I am a mental health tech in a children’s psychiatric center in San Antonio. Teaching English as a second language and advocating for speakers of other languages has been a goal of mine since high school. After earning my degree, I hope to teach abroad to gain experience working with multiple language groups. Upon returning to the United States, I hope to teach and advocate for multilingual learners.”*



**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  
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TENTH PLACE

# ‘God’ not part of secular Constitution

FFRF awarded Michelle \$300.

By Michelle Krauser

A secular society in which the government is prohibited from establishing a state-sponsored religion or giving priority to a religion is a right acknowledged in the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Free Exercise Clause, which is also found in the First Amendment, grants every citizen the freedom to exercise any religion freely. The people who founded this country recognized that politics mixed with religion is a deadly combination — a recipe for conflict, bloodshed and marginalization. In conjunction with radical politicians, Christian Nationalists have demonstrably misinterpreted the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause as a right to impose Christian moral ideology on others through political discourse and legislation.

Christian Nationalism, ignited by the “Make America Great Again” conservative political agenda espoused by President Trump, uses the bible to categorize non-Christian and nonreligious Americans as immoral and unpatriotic, an organized force hell-bent on destroying the sanctity of the United States and establishing a state of debauchery. But what exactly



Michelle Krauser

does “Make America Great Again” mean? To many, this slogan is symbolic of a desperate struggle to save the United States from an onslaught of secular “non-Christian” ideals and restore the Christian fundamentals, as interpreted by Christian Nationalists, upon which this country was supposedly founded. However, the underlying message is more sinister. This propaganda is an attempt by radical politicians to harness the unparalleled power of religion to create a society in which the

white male reigns supreme, women are subservient to their husbands and those who rebuke extremist Christian values are condemned to eternal damnation.

The inclusion of religious ideology in political discourse is pervasive, as evidenced by anti-abortion and anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer legislation. Pro-choice? “Life begins at conception!” Pro-LGBTQ? “It is against God’s will!” Such claims, often touted by Christian Nationalists and radical politicians, are an unabashed breach of the Establishment Clause. In the United States, Christian Nationalism is a threat to secular democracy. Conservative politicians have constructed a false war — the war on Christianity — to incite fear and mobilize the religious voter base. Controversial topics, such as same-sex marriage and abortion, are used to manipulate individuals into voting against their own best interests. Tax cuts for the wealthy? No problem, as long as access to abortion is restricted. Nepotism? Corruption? Crickets.

Christian Nationalists ignore blatant abuses of power in favor of their personal religious beliefs.

Politicians use Christianity as a tool to influence prospective voters and control the masses. This is not a new phenomenon, as the Roman Catholic Empire, Ancient

Egypt and countless other theocracies have shown. Governments have capitalized on religion and used it to maintain absolute power throughout history. Equally disturbing, governments have used religion to manipulate the masses into detesting others on the basis of their individual beliefs or lack thereof, which has led to horrific violence, injustice and oppression across the globe. It is not a coincidence that the theocratic governments that exist today tend to be the most authoritarian and violent, a fate that the United States is not excluded from should religion continue to be exploited as a perverse political tool. The Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause were incorporated into the Constitution because history has shown that the inclusion of religion in politics results in an anti-democratic state. The Constitution itself is secular. There are, in fact, two words that are intentionally absent in the Constitution: “God” and “Christianity.”

*Michelle, 30, attends Coastal Carolina University after graduated from Oakland University in 2017. “I am researching loggerhead shrikes at Coastal Carolina University. I interned with the Student Conservation Association at Elizabeth Morton National Wildlife Refuge in New York and Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge in South Carolina. I spend most of my free time hiking with my dog and hope to pursue a career with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.”*

## Grad/‘older’ student essay honorable mentions

FFRF awarded nine students with honorable mentions, which included a \$200 award for each. Below are their names, along with the headlines of their essays and their personal bios. To read their essays, go to [freethoughttoday.com](http://freethoughttoday.com).



Young

**Andrew Young — Abortion: A gateway to religion**

Andrew, 22, is from Bolingbrook, Ill., and attends the University of Denver. “I am passionate about accounting and have had a few internships that have only confirmed this belief. My career goal is to pass the CPA exam in Colorado, practice for a few years and then to begin teaching accounting in a university in Colorado. I want to give back to education and influence young people to think freely about all ideas in life.”



Trujillo

**Yamiset Trujillo — Conservative Christianity is at direct odds with LGBTQ+ basic human rights**

Yamiset, 28, is from Miami and attends the University of Central Florida. “I’m a first-generation Cuban-American student. When I was six months old, my parents put me in a little box and smuggled me aboard a rickety little boat to cross the sea between Cuba and the United States. I’ve taken my lifelong passion for art and storytelling into just about any artistic medium. My art has been displayed in galleries, painted on shoes of professional athletes, and in a 3D-animated student film about the dangers of light pollution on a sea turtle’s life cycle that’s been shown at over 50 film festivals worldwide.”



McCumber

**Brionna McCumber — The foundation of America is religious freedom**

Brionna, 23, is from Pleasant Grove, Utah, and attends Colorado State University. “I am an entry-level graduate student excited to start a program working with zoos and aquariums in the fields of education and conservation. I have worked in education for the past four years and have a deep love for natural science. I love working with animals and students. My wife and I recently got married during the COVID-19 pandemic.”



Canlas

**Emella Canlas — Trump’s America and religious false pretense**

Emella, 25, is from Alameda, Calif., and attends California State University, East Bay. “I am Filipino, and like many other Filipino-Americans, I was raised in a very strict Catholic household. By the time I was in high school, I identified as agnostic, in part due to my bisexuality, and in part due to how hypocritically religion played out in the real world.

“I attended a community college and then transferred to UC-Davis, where I participated in the Filipino association called Mga Kapatid, which seeks to educate and dismantle colonial mentality.

“I have been working as a registered behavior technician for the last three years, providing therapy to children with special needs and various learning disabilities. I am working on my master’s degree in special education.”



Carroll

**John Carroll — The evangelical chokehold on American elections**

John, 25, is from Ballston Lake, N.Y., and attends SUNY Fredonia. “I graduated from SUNY Schenectady with a degree in music performance and I’m working on a degree in music composition and pursuing my masters in musical theatre writing at NYU. I was music director and composed scores for two shows this year, and I was awarded first place in ICareIfYouListen.com’s 2019 New Voices essay contest for my writing on autism and the concert environment.”



Dickey-Chasins

**Ruth Dickey-Chasins — Preserving democracy: The dangers of religion**

Ruth, 26, attends George Washington University. “I work at the Society for Science & the Public as part of the Outreach & Equity team. I am working on my Masters of Public Health, where I plan to focus on the mental health impacts of climate change. Previously, I have worked with the anti-poverty nonprofit YouthBuild and as an intern at the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center. Outside of school and work, I am part of the Food Recovery Network, a local feminist percussion group, and I am (trying to) learn Arabic.”

**Selina Chan — First Amendment under siege: Trump and the rise of Christian Nationalism**

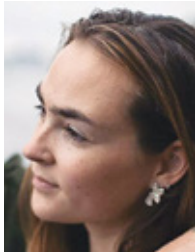
Selina, 29, is from Alpharetta, Ga., and is in the veterinary program at the University of Pennsylvania.

“I graduated in 2014 from Georgia Tech with a bachelor’s degree in chem-



Chan

ical engineering and then worked several roles at ExxonMobil. I spent three years in the oil and gas industry before pursuing a career in animal care and public health. For the past two years, I have worked with animals and communities in the United States and throughout Latin America.”



Mead

**Yarrow Mead — Let the first-born die: Christian Nationalists and the inevitable hypocrisy of allowing religion to dictate policy**

Yarrow, 25, is from Finley, Minn., and attends Hamline University.

“I am working on my Masters of the Art of Teaching. I’m a self-employed metalsmith, and my capstone project is focused on merging the worlds of art and education by creating curriculum that encourages young students’ confidence and technical skills while also teaching them high-level academic writing.”



Kannanunni

**Kavitha Kannanunni — Paradise in a steel dome**

Kavitha, 25, is from Jersey City, N.J., and attends the New Jersey Institute of Technology.

“My decision to pursue a master’s degree in computer science was motivated by a desire to immerse myself in a competitive and challenging environment. With a data science specialization, I wish to work in an organization where I can analyze and generate valuable insights from business data.”



## Legal Team

Continued from page 1

### Court victories

- In 2020, FFRF secured two court victories and finalized a victory in another case. FFRF, together with Humanistas Seculares de Puerto Rico (HUSE) filed a lawsuit against Puerto Rico’s education secretary and the principal at Luis M. Santiago School challenging an hour-long Christian prayer practice led by teachers at the school every other Monday that students were required to attend. Because of her secular humanist beliefs, our plaintiff mother had been keeping her children home during the school-led prayers. The children were threatened with tardy marks for arriving late to class in order to avoid the prayers. At a mediation session in March, the defendants agreed to permanently prohibit teacher-led prayers at the school and to remove any tardy marks from the students who avoided school during the prayers. And importantly, the secretary of education agreed to circulate a memo on nondiscrimination to Department of Education employees and to conduct a training for all employees at the school on avoiding religious endorsement.
- FFRF favorably settled a case it filed with Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) against Secretary Ben Carson’s Department of Housing and Urban Development. HUD had a pattern and practice of denying fee waivers on Freedom of Information Act requests “where disclosure of the requested documents is likely to cast the agency or HUD Secretary Ben Carson in a negative light.” The agency had denied waivers in FFRF’s requests over records relating to the White House bible study. In April 2020, we settled the case after it agreed to issue guidance to employees on fee waivers, provide mandatory training, and to pay the attorneys’ fees to both groups — which totaled nearly \$18,000.
- In April, FFRF won its case at the appeals court level against censorship of

### FFRF’s legal team stats for 2020

<b>Top states for complaints</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Florida</li><li>2. Texas</li><li>3. California</li><li>4. Washington, DC (tie)</li><li>4. Tennessee (tie)</li><li>6. Ohio (tie)</li><li>5. Georgia (tie)</li><li>8. Kentucky (tie)</li><li>9. Alabama (tie)</li><li>10. Wisconsin</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>3. Social media</li><li>4. Elections</li><li>5. Faith-based organizations</li><li>6. Religious displays</li><li>7. Prayer proclamations</li><li>8. Government funding to religion</li><li>9. Legislative prayer</li></ol>
<b>Top issue areas</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Schools</li><li>2. Government prayer</li></ol>	<b>Top school complaints</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Religious clubs</li><li>2. School board prayer</li><li>3. Coach prayer</li><li>4. Preachers in school</li><li>5. School rentals</li><li>6. Religious displays</li><li>7. Assemblies</li></ol>
<b>Total letters sent:</b> 600 <b>Total victories:</b> 200 (includes 115 additional victories from 2019 and before; more to come in 2021)	

its Bill of Rights “nativity” display in the Texas Capitol by Gov. Greg Abbott. The unanimous opinion by the three-judge court panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals granted FFRF additional relief. The judgment sent the case back to the district court that previously ruled in FFRF’s favor, to issue a more expansive remedy to protect FFRF’s right to place displays in the future and to ensure a similar constitutional violation cannot happen to other organizations.

- In May, a year after FFRF won a resounding victory halting millions in tax dollars flowing unconstitutionally to repair churches in Morris County, N.J., a judge ruled that FFRF and its attorneys are entitled to attorneys’ fees. The Superior Court of New Jersey ordered a total of \$217,949.15 to FFRF’s attorneys, including \$124,687.50 to outside counsel Paul Grosswald and \$28,875 to constitutional scholar Erwin Chemerinsky, who defended FFRF at the Supreme Court level. FFRF was reimbursed the remainder for the work of its staff attorneys Andrew L. Seidel and Ryan Jayne.
- FFRF, along with the ACLU and AU, finalized the victory in a case against the Brevard County Board of County Commissioners. The board agreed not to resume its past practice

of discriminating against people who do not belong to mainstream, monotheistic religions when selecting invocation speakers to open board meetings.

- Right before the election, FFRF filed a lawsuit on behalf of four Alabama citizens, challenging a mandatory voter registration oath that concludes, “so help me God.” Alabama is the only state to require voters to sign a religious oath in order to register to vote. In all other states, voters are provided a completely secular registration form or are not required to submit an oath or affirmation at all. Our suit seeks a declaratory judgment that mandating the oath, without a secular option, is unconstitutional and a permanent injunction prohibiting the secretary of state from requiring voters to swear “so help me God.” It also asks for an order to the secretary of state to provide forms that permit voters to register without swearing a religious oath.

### Amicus briefs

One of the most impressive accomplishments in 2020 was the number of amicus briefs (or “friend of the court” briefs) FFRF was able to submit in state and federal courts across the country. FFRF submits these briefs to help guide

the court in decision-making and are invaluable in contributing the voice of freethinkers and the nonreligious in cases involving religious liberty. Our attorneys submitted a record number of 10 amicus briefs in 2020! Four of these were filed at the U.S. Supreme Court for cases involving religious exemptions and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Two were filed in our home state at Wisconsin’s Supreme Court and involved religious exemptions to the restrictions involving the pandemic. Others involved other exemptions to stay-at-home orders, prayer at school, a nativity scene on public property and the Muslim travel ban.

### Nonlitigation advocacy

In 2020, our intake team processed over 2,000 contacts from members of the public over state/church concerns. Our staff attorneys and legal fellows sent nearly 600 letters of complaint to government agencies over state/church violations. FFRF also sent over 350 letters in “mass mailings” educating government officials on state/church violations, including letters to governors regarding the constitutionality of prohibiting in-person worship services during a pandemic.

### Judges report

Our final achievement for 2020 was publishing a report on Trump judges entitled, “Religious Liberty Under Threat: The Christian Nationalist Capture of the Federal Judiciary.” (See summary on Page 1.) This report exposes the Christian Nationalist takeover of the federal courts and the damage this is causing to the separation of state and church. The report describes in alarming detail how over the past four years, President Trump stacked the federal courts with ultraconservative judges who will now hold their positions for life.

As you can see, the pandemic has not slowed our legal team. As we enter 2021, we will continue to fight for you and for our right to have a secular government.

*Rebecca Markert is FFRF’s Legal Department director.*

## Judiciary

Continued from page 1

coming radical changes to how religious liberty is defined in America,” the report warns. “As Trump appointees continue to decide cases in the decades to come, we will continue to see ‘religious liberty’ used to undermine the laws that keep us all safe and protect us from discrimination. We will continue to see courts give their ‘blessings’ to government favoritism of religion.”

For instance, in a 5-4 decision in

July, the Supreme Court allowed public health state-level pandemic restrictions on church services to stand. Just four months later, thanks to newly appointed Justice Amy Coney Barrett, the court flipped on this issue. The Constitution did not change — just personnel. The court ignored the legitimate public health reasons for state and local governments to place restrictions on church services that are commensurate with restrictions placed on events posing similar risks. For the Christian

To read the full report, go to [ffrf.us/judicial](https://ffrf.us/judicial)

Nationalist justices, religion must occupy a place of privilege. This ruling clearly signals that the new Christian Nationalist majority is ready to move full steam ahead to weaponize and redefine religious liberty, with dangerous consequences.

The report places a spotlight on some prominent Trump appointees, such as Justices Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Barrett and Judges Kevin Newsom, David Stras and James Ho — and their misbegotten judicial philosophies.

# CRANKMAIL

*Well, FFRF’s detractors certainly had a field day after FFRF persuaded a Kansas school district to discontinue fundraising for Franklin Graham’s proselytizing Christian organization. Here is a very small sampling of the mail we got. (Printed as received. . . including an abundance of foul verbiage.)*

**FFrf:** By keeping your mother fucking mouths shut about kids getting toys fromBGEA.does it make you feel good to take toys from children.you all are a bunch of bitches for doing that to that school.ill bet secretly you do pray to god. — *Gordon L. Chambers*

**Kids toys:** What sort of sick fucks are you your hatred of religion has prompted you to send letters and take kids toys away? you seriously have to be some sick cock sucking mother fuckers. go fucking yourselves you fucking cunt whore pieces of shit. fucking dirty pieces of human shit — *Robert Bailey*

**Kansas Christian:** I will be donating \$1000’s of

dollars to to Liberty Middle School because of your harassment. Christians the world over do the most good for the poor and disenfranchised. Everyone knows it. — *Cathy Goracke*

**assholes:** go fuck yourselves ffrf,is it true all atheist women are sluts,if they would keep thier legs closed they wouldnt need to kill babies but then you dont believe in god so killing babies is ok.hopefully all athiest,liberals,progressives get covid and vanish from this planet,you people are a plague.liberal,atheist,progressives and dems are the biggest terrorist threats this country and constitution faces over all terrorist groups out there infact you fucking pigs are terrorist.so you think because damentia biden stole the election we are going to bow to fucking pig athiest,liberals and progressives go fuck your selves you pigs — *Andy Konocki*

**xmas:** you nasty cunts for stopping those kids

from getting gilfs.....i hope all you fuckers get shot .....you cunts — *Wayne Beard*

**Kansas middle school:** stick a crucifix up your ass until it comes out of the top of your skull — *Mark Hittle*

**Evil Website:** You are a evil place and should be removed from society. You will burn in hell for what you do to this great country. I hope and pray you lose every battle you try and do. My children will be taught there is a God which by the way there is a God so when you are on your death bed you will call out to God for sure. — *Michael Wilson*

**Hey!:** You really are a disgusting, piece of shit organization. You’re actions and fucking threats in Pratt, KS are reprehensible. Of course, we should all expect this from a fucked up state like Wisconsin and fucked up, Godless people like you are. ROT IN HELL — *John Hoehn*

**Toys are bad:** Did you karen motherfuckers really

threaten a fucking school for collecting toys for less fortunate kids? Like are you fucking shitting me? what kind of absolute trashy fucking human shit are you? Hope y’all get run the fuck over & your families get covid. Scummy motherfuckers. — *Janet Belfour*

**Fuck Off!:** You can mind your own goddamn business is how you can assist me. Keep your nose and your bullshit out of Fannin county GA. If you don’t like it you can go fuck yourself. You goddamn liberal cunts!! — *Geoff Parsons*

**Disgusting:** Close your doors. After reading your page a bit and reading your website this is disgusting. You ARE the reason we have lost all morality in this world. You have a war on Christmas? Gtfo something that brings joy and happiness to so many you want to dismantle it? Im glad my parents hugged me enough to not hate someone with a different of opinion. — *Patrick J. Henry*



# Our final freedom

## The right to decide how, when, where we die

By Lamar Hankins

FFRF's new secular poll results reported in the October Freethought Today included one result that got my attention — 98 percent of nonbelievers support the right to die with dignity. That figure corresponds with my impressions working in the right-to-die movement for almost 30 years.

In the early 1990s, I joined about a half dozen others in the Austin, Texas, area to form a local chapter of the Hemlock Society, created in 1980 by Derek Humphry. Our purpose was to learn how to take charge of the end of our lives to avoid suffering, should we be unfortunate enough to be stricken with a debilitating illness from which we would not recover.

We were not a morbid group in the least. In fact, we were jovial, yet thoughtful and determined to make the best of whatever time we had left. The group — the Austin Hemlock Society — met regularly until 2004, when the national Hemlock Society changed its name to End-of-Life Choices, and then was merged into Compassion in Dying, finally changing its name to Compassion & Choices.



Lamar Hankins

Humphry's 1991 book *Final Exit*, in a later edition, explains how to use inert gas to have a peaceful, effective and reliable hastened death. The most readily available inert gas at the time was helium, but nitrogen is now most often used. In 1999, at the urging of psychologist Faye Girsh, then the president of Hemlock, the group started a program called "Caring Friends," which provided trained volunteers to meet with an applicant and teach the person how to hasten their death using inert gas so that they could avoid suffering from a terminal illness or avoid a deteriorating quality of life. The volunteer also was available to be at the person's side when they died to provide emotional support — a caring friend.

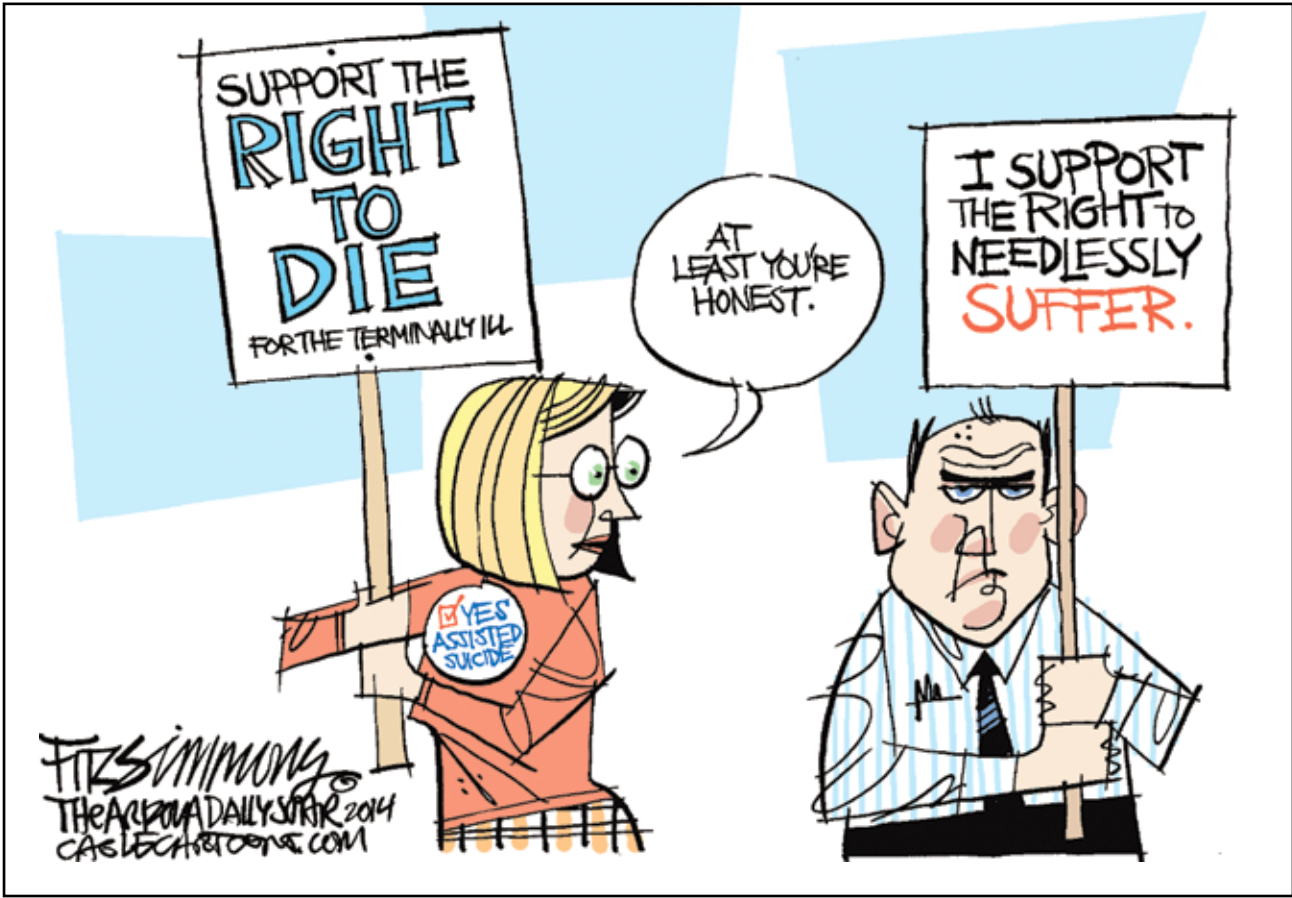
After the mergers, the new organization discontinued the Caring Friends program to focus on promoting legislative solutions to aid in dying for terminal patients (defined as six months or less to live). When that happened, several longtime Hemlock leaders formed Final Exit Network (FEN) to continue the work of Caring Friends under the name Exit Guide Program. Volunteer medical doctors, psychologists, social workers and others from all walks of life joined together to establish the program, develop procedures, start a volunteer-training regimen and build a new organization dedicated to instructing and educating those who wanted to hasten their death because their quality of life had become, or soon would become, unacceptable to them as a result of deteriorating health.

### My death, my choice

For the last 40 years, the idea of a right to die has been widely debated in the United States. Most people claim this right by refusing ultimately futile medical treatment or procedures, sometimes through advance directives. Often, they are aided by hospice, which focuses on palliative care of a terminally ill or dying patient's symptoms, whether physical, emotional or social. For some people, however, palliative care is ineffective or does not meet their other needs, and they seek to end their lives rather than continue suffering. Many people are surprised to learn that ending one's own life is not against the law. What is prohibited in most, but not all states, is actively assisting someone to end their own life.

Perhaps the most important aspect of ending one's life is that it is the individual's decision to proceed in such a fashion. And that focus on each individual's decision is made clear by Final Exit Network's early billboard campaign "My Life, My Death, My Choice," which was intended to promote autonomy in such decisions and encourage thoughtful discussion about the end of life.

The "Guiding Principle" of the nonprofit, volunteer-directed Final Exit Network explains its philosophy: "Mentally competent adults have a basic human right to end their lives when they suffer from a fatal or irre-



versible illness or intractable pain, when their quality of life is personally unacceptable, and the future holds only hopelessness and misery. Such a right shall be an individual choice, including the timing and companion, free of any restrictions by the law, clergy, medical profession, even friends and relatives no matter how well-intentioned. We do not encourage anyone to end their life, do not provide the means to do so, and do not actively assist in a person's death. We do, however, support any [individual] who requests it when medical circumstances warrant their decision."

Volunteers help implement the FEN Exit Guide Program in several ways:

- Producing its newsletter.
- Serving as senior and associate Exit Guides.
- Conducting interviews with program applicants.
- Serving as coordinators to answer questions from applicants and those seeking information about the program.
- Participating on FEN's Medical Evaluation Committee (MEC), which consists of volunteer doctors who determine whether the applicant satisfies FEN's requirements for exit guide educational and training services.
- Providing training to those interested in becoming guides.
- Serving on FEN's board and providing other organizational services.

In 2017, FEN began an edited blog about end-of-life and right-to-die issues. The Good Death Society Blog is searchable and discusses a wide range of issues relevant to FEN's mission.

### Eligibility criteria

Although FEN does not require a client to have a terminal illness to be eligible for its educational services, it does require mental competency at the time of application and at the time the person chooses to exit, as well as the physical ability to do so. In addition to the mental competency criterion, FEN requires that applicants

- Have "existing or reasonably anticipated unbearable suffering or an unacceptable or intolerable quality of life with no reasonable hope of improvement."
- Demonstrate that they have informed or expressed "a willingness to inform close family members and intimate associates of the applicant's intent."
- Submit a personal statement describing how their "medical condition meaningfully reduces or will reduce the applicant's quality of life, including examples of current physical or mental decline, the applicant's values as they pertain to end-of-life choices, and a statement of what the applicant wants from Final Exit Network."

In addition to meeting all the general criteria, an applicant must have serious physical disease; chronic, severe, somatic pain as demonstrated in medical records;

dementia (prior to mental incompetency); or a constellation of irreversible medical conditions.

FEN educates about one other method of hastening death — voluntarily stopping eating and drinking (VSED). It is another way to have a good death that is often assisted by hospice. VSED frequently occurs naturally near the end of a disease, or it can be intentionally pursued to avoid lingering, sometimes for years. With VSED, dehydration causes the body to shut down. Death usually occurs within seven to 10 days or so after VSED begins.

FEN has developed a special supplemental directive using VSED and designed for those who have dementia, but who want to live only as long as the disease leaves them with some enjoyment in living or recognition of who they are. More information about VSED can be found at [finalexitnetwork.org](http://finalexitnetwork.org).

Obviously, not everyone will need or want to end their own life before it comes to a natural end. We won't all need medical assistance in dying or inert gas to have a good death. But many of us who have had a family member or friend with dementia or Parkinson's or ALS or cancer or some other condition which makes a good death difficult or impossible, often remark that we don't want our own lives to end that way. Most of us will die quickly of a heart attack, or in our sleep, or by misadventure. Still others will find the help of hospice essential to having a good death. But many of us may want to take matters into our own hands, with the help of a clinician or the advice and counsel of FEN.

Unlike medical assistance in dying (MAID), which is available in 10 U.S. jurisdictions (Montana by judicial decree, and by law in California, Colorado, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Maine, New Jersey, Oregon, Vermont and Washington), FEN operates throughout the country, responding to the suffering of people who have a debilitating illness from which they will eventually die. FEN's application process is comprehensive, and yet available to far more people than MAID, and is requested often even in those jurisdictions that have MAID laws.

The work that FEN does demonstrates that, with appropriate safeguards, it is possible to take control of one's life to avoid additional suffering when facing a debilitating or irreversible illness. Helping people in distress at the end of their lives is often challenging for both FEN's volunteers and their clients, but it has been among the most rewarding work I have ever done, and the people who are helped are invariably grateful. Their gratitude seems tied to their desire to exercise that final freedom — the freedom to control the quality of their lives, avoid suffering, and determine the manner and timing of their deaths.

FFRF member Lamar Hankins lives in Texas with his wife, June.



THIS AD IS SOLELY THE OPINION OF THE ADVERTISER, THE FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION.

To honor Bill of Rights Day, the 229th anniversary of the adoption of the Bill of Rights . . .

HELP ROLL BACK THE CLOCK

ON JUDICIAL DOOMSDAY

**A**lthough our nation and the Bill of Rights have dodged a bullet with this fall's election, the Trump administration's shameless packing of the courts with extremists threatens civil liberties and the First Amendment for generations. Imperiled are abortion and LGBTQ rights, and our secular Constitution.

**J**udges hand-selected by the Federalist Society for their Christian Nationalist or reactionary credentials now comprise a quarter-plus of our federal judiciary. A majority of ultraconservatives on the Supreme Court, in a perversion of "religious liberty," just quashed a New York pandemic health policy limiting church gatherings during the COVID-19 spike. Dissenting Justice Sonia Sotomayor properly warned: "Justices in this court play a deadly game in second guessing the expert judgment of health officials." Political and judicial deference to religion over science is sabotaging rational response to the pandemic—and many other policies.

**H**elp FFRF, a state/church watchdog and the nation's largest association of freethinkers (atheists and seculars), protect the First Amendment and its precious principle of separation between religion and government.

Help FFRF ensure that reason and our secular Constitution will prevail. Join us today.

ffrf.us/nyt

1.800.335.4021

Or request a complimentary issue of our newspaper, Freethought Today, ffrf.us/free

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★★★★ RATING

—Charity Navigator

FFRF is a 501(c)3 educational nonprofit founded in 1978 with over 33,000 members and a team of attorneys.

Read our new analysis, "Religious Liberty Under Threat," at ffrf.us/judicial. Watch FFRF's TV show, "Freethought Matters," on WPIX-IN (Ch. 11), Sundays at 8:30 a.m. in New York City or via YouTube. Broadcast info for other cities: ffrf.org/freethought-matters

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This ad appeared in the Dec. 15, 2020, issue of the New York Times — thanks to kind donors to FFRF's advertising fund at [ffrf.org/donate](https://ffrf.org/donate).



# Celebrating the Winter Solstice Season 2020



In the Iowa Capitol, FFRF's Bill of Rights nativity display marks its fourth consecutive year in the legislative heart of the Hawkeye state, thanks to the efforts of FFRF State Representative Paul Novak.

A sign beside the tongue-in-cheek Nativity reads: At this season of the Winter Solstice, Join us in honoring the Bill of Rights, adopted on Dec. 15, 1791, which reminds us that there can be no religious freedom without the freedom to dissent.

Keep religion and government separate!



FFRF's Bill of Rights nativity display went up in Ricalton Square in Maplewood, N.J., thanks to the efforts of Member Steve Merhson.



FFRF Member Jerry Bloom, left, of Shelton, Conn., and John Levin erected the "Let Reason Prevail" banner on the Huntington Green in Shelton.



FFRF's Bill of Rights nativity display was set up Dec. 1 at North Park School in Arlington Heights, Ill., for the ninth year. Tom Cara, president of the FFRF Metropolitan Chicago Chapter, writes, "We've had three different displays over the course of that time — the Winter Solstice 'Let Reason Prevail' banner (which was vandalized), our 5-foot lighted Dawkins scarlet 'A' sign and the Bill of Rights nativity cutout."



A "Celebrate the Solstice" banner waves across 8th Ave. in downtown Eugene, Ore., thanks to the work of FFRF Member Charles H. Jones.



A Bill of Rights nativity display was set up by FFRF Member Will Meyer next to a Christian nativity scene on the grounds of the Grundy County Courthouse in Illinois.



This FFRF banner in Warren, Mich., was stolen days after being erected near the intersection of Mound and Chicago roads. A complaint about the theft of the "Keep Saturn in Saturnalia" banner has been filed with local police.

FFRF thanks local FFRF Members Doug Marshall and Scott Elliott for making these displays possible

FFRF has a special fund (donors may choose Resurrection Fund in the designation dropdown at [ffrf.org/donate](http://ffrf.org/donate)), to replace "equal time" displays on public forums when vandalized or removed.



The Bill of Rights nativity display was up outside the Glenview, Ill., Village Hall. It is situated in the middle between a lighted, rolled-steel creche decoration with a "Keep Christ in Christmas" banner erected by a Knights of Columbus group, and a menorah put up by a Chabad group," Tom Cara said. Cara added that another Bill of Rights nativity display was up for the third year at Cook Memorial Park in Libertyville, Ill. It was put up by Steve Foulkes.



In Concord, N.H., (from left to right) Elaine Clow, Gary York, Jo Shields, Jack Shields (and Friday the dog, master of all he surveys) show off the Bill of Rights nativity display.

## Let Reason Prevail!



# LETTERBOX

## Congrats to secular invocation winners

Congratulations to Sarah Ray and Ann Landman for their perseverance and courage in achieving the acceptance of their local city councils in Lake Wales, Fla., and Grand Junction, Colo., to allow them to give secular invocations. I hope that, in the not-too-distant future, all local and municipal governments in this country will adhere to what our founders intended to establish when they wrote the Constitution and the Bill of Rights — a permanent wall between religion and government.

**Steve Taulbee**  
Maryland

## Subtleties of Christian Nationalism at work

I received an email invitation from the Wall Street Journal. It's a subtle but disturbing approach to establishing "trust" via covenant thinking, heavily influenced by David W. Miller, director of Faith and Work Initiative at Princeton. There is also a white paper link in the invitation. It seems to be an attempt to get corporate leadership to move in an ethical direction based on the "religious concepts" of ethics and trust. Unbelievably subtle.

And, the irony is that it's sponsored by Philip Morris, the same company that spent millions during the 1950s and '60s attempting to create distrust in the scientific research about the link between smoking and lung cancer. Kind of a dark history, indeed!

**Michael Pettus**  
California

## Black Collar Crime section is a must-read

I read in your December issue a letter from a reader suggesting that the paper should discontinue the Black Collar Crime section because he has no interest in the topic.

I completely disagree with his suggestion. Frankly, Black Collar Crime is the main reason I read Freethought Today. It is the way I learned of the crimes of four local clergy I went to school with or otherwise worked with in the past.

Please keep up the great work in this important section of your publication.

**David Nason**  
Michigan

...

In the recent issue of Freethought Today, you printed a letter in which the writer stated that Freethought Today would be a better publication without the inclusion of Crankmail and Black Collar Crime. He stated he was "not interested in what these looney-tunes think and . . . less interested in what those creeps do to children and vulnerable adults."

I disagree with him. In fact, my favorite part of Freethought Today is Crankmail and Black Collar Crime. I admit that my enjoyment does stem from schadenfreude at the knowledge that some people have paid for their crimes committed under the cover of their religious positions.

But, I also think these two sections are valuable because they instruct us as to the heinousness of these crimes

## State-church separation fight is no small feat



On a cold Sunday morning in the Twin Cities of Minnesota, our feet are toasty warm with our FFRF stockings and our minds are being stimulated with a new episode of "Freethought Matters."

The opening of this episode is from President John Kennedy, the first Catholic elected president. In that campaign, he needed to assure Protestants and secularists he accepted the constitutional concept of separation of government and religion.

"I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference; and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the president who might appoint him or the people who might elect him."

FFRF is the premier organization today fighting every day for absolute separation of government and religion. "Freethought Matters" is central to the communication of that principal to everyday Americans. Thank you and keep up the good work.

**Shirley Moll and Steve Petersen**  
Minnesota

and their perpetrators' justification for their behavior on religious grounds. When I pass my Freethought Today on to friends, they always comment on the Crankmail and Black Collar Crime sections as being the most enlightening about the cause of separation of church and state. I would venture to say these sections open more eyes than more erudite and philosophical articles.

**Georgellen Burnett**  
New Mexico

## Scary flight was true test of the nonbeliever

About 10 years ago, I was flying out to Denver, and before boarding, I stopped in Hudson Books to grab something to read on the flight. I was very familiar with Christopher Hitchens' work, but at the time I hadn't gotten around to reading *God Is Not Great*. (It's now so ragged and worn that it barely holds together.) I was pleasantly surprised to see it on the shelf, so I bought it.

The final approach to Denver International involved the worst thunderstorm I'd ever flown in, by far. I was thinking to myself, "How many of these passengers are praying their asses off for a safe landing, and here I am holding

a book by one of the most prominent atheists of our generation?"

In several instances, I was all but certain the plane was going down, based on how turbulent it was. (Even the flight attendants were visibly terrified, which is never a good sign). That was my ultimate, "Well, I guess I'm all in" moment as a nonbeliever, and I can still remember it as vividly as if it happened yesterday. Obviously, the flight did land safely, but that was the closest thing to a "near-death experience" that I had ever encountered, and I decidedly was not praying to any deity to get me on the ground, but it happened anyway. Miracle? Hell no. Just amazing airmanship and modern technology.

**Justin Pripusich**  
Illinois

### MOVING?

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

Please notify us of your address change promptly!  
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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 does magnificent job with its fundraising

We have recently survived Black Friday, Cyber Monday and Giving Tuesday. On that Tuesday, my inbox had at least 50 requests for donations. In addition to this, my snail mailbox has as many as a dozen requests on a daily basis thought the year.

I am grateful to the Freedom From Religion Foundation for not using those methods. Twice a year you make a general request for funds allowing us to choose how we want our money to be used. It appears to me that FFRF does a magnificent job raising money without wasting envelopes, stationery and postage. Thank you.

**Dick Hewetson**  
California

## FFRF is an invaluable ally, amazing nonprofit

FFRF has been an invaluable ally and asset to our local freethought community here in southeastern Wisconsin. On two separate occasions, FFRF lawyers have written letters in response to violations in our towns of the Establishment Clause. Both times were efficient and effective, with a very short response time.

In 2017, a teacher in the public school district festooned her classroom with bible quotes and other Christian propaganda. After many complaints and lengthy meetings with the principal failed to convince the school to remove the material, FFRF lawyers drafted a letter challenging the constitutionality of the displays and demanding their removal. The resulting investigation by the school district resulted in a sweep of all schools and the eventual removal of the offending material.

More recently, the Racine, Wis., county government was discovered to have been awarding \$50,000 annually to an evangelical Christian nonprofit called Youth For Christ in the form of a community and cultural grant. Similarly, the obvious nature of this violation prompted a letter from the lawyers at FFRF. Although the facts of the letter were denied by the county, the grant subsequently disappeared from the next budget, due to fiscal shortfalls.

FFRF is well-run on a rarely seen level. Beside its legal support, it is extremely

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

Written by "Over the Rainbow" lyricist Yip Harburg.

**Strike Three**

A broken clock can tell the time  
Correctly twice a day,  
Astrologers, like broken clocks,  
Are clairvoyant that way.

Illustrated by Seymour Chwast, published by FFRF.

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**Women Without Superstition**  
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available to aid local chapters and members, including making appearances, welcoming visits to Madison, and lending support of any kind to chapter efforts. Both administration and staff are unfailingly pleasant, kind, patient and responsive. Every year, FFRF hosts an extravagant convention in a different city around country for the benefit of all members, everywhere.

With podcasts, TV shows, newspapers, original entertainment, a world-class headquarters, it's hard to catalog all the ways in which this nonprofit serves its constituency and the nation. Its spokespeople routinely appear before Congress or on national news outlets to fight for the rights of all Americans, while simultaneously creating community and solidarity on a grassroots level for its members.

Keep up the amazing work!"  
**Rob Moore**  
Wisconsin

Unfortunately, ignorance still reigns supreme

While Oregon has among the highest percentage of “Nones” in the country, churches and religious salespeople still dominate this state.

Here in Eugene, there are well over 100 Christian churches and two Christian colleges. Most nonprofits are Christian-oriented. Yet, there's hundreds of homeless folks living on the streets of Eugene in tents. The hypocrisy is mind-boggling.

Wouldn't you think these Christian priests/ministers would feel obligated to house homeless people in their churches? These parasites don't even pay property taxes! If they did, homeless shelters and other needed community projects could be funded.

Christian preschools, bible camps and Sunday schools are still screwing up the minds of children with fairy tales of sky gods and divinely inspired books of hate and warmongering. But we allow this brainwashing to continue because it's supported by our government and ignorant parents/guardians unwilling or unable to think for themselves.

The major problem we're facing today is that there are far too many gullible, submissive people accepting the lies of religious salespeople, billionaire psychopaths and corporate-funded politicians.  
**Robert Simms**  
Oregon

Thanks to those who support bodily autonomy

As a woman in my late 30s, and a longtime FFRF member, it was discouraging to read in the FFRF membership survey that 80 percent of respondents are 60 or older and 70 percent male.

However, it was heartening to read that 98.8 percent of the respondents support legal abortion and *Roe v. Wade*. As a woman who has attended many protests for the right of bodily autonomy, I've often been dismayed at how few men are in attendance. A large thank you to the old(ish) men (and all other members) of FFRF for being much needed allies.

I terminated an unattended pregnancy only a few years ago in my mid-30s. At the clinic, I was provided with a couple of ibuprofen. Only people with a driver would be permitted to get the strong meds for the procedure. I was perfectly comfortable with my personal health decision, but I was too embarrassed to call a friend to pick me up. Years later, I mentioned my abortion to a friend. “Oh, yeah, I had one in my 20s,” she said.

Given that one out of four women terminate a pregnancy by age 45, her response should not have surprised me. A year later, my friends, when telling me about their clinic visits, hopefully were not surprised when I said, “Oh, yeah, me too.”

And, so, my fellow atheists, agnostics, humanists and freethinkers, thank you for helping normalize the normal and not letting the detriment of Christian supremacy affect your commitment to a person's own bodily autonomy. I'm hoping for a day when none of us is uncomfortable calling our friend to pick us up, so we can have the good meds.

Name, state withheld

Circumcision should be added to mutilation bill

Contrary to FFRF's recommendation, Donald Trump (or Joe Biden) should NOT sign HR 6100, the Stop Female Genital Mutilation Act of 2020. The president should send it back to Congress and demand that boys also be included in the ban. And, FFRF should immediately amend its position on infant genital mutilation to include all children, regardless of gender. How can it be not OK to mutilate little girls, yet be OK to mutilate little boys?

**Jay Clem**  
California

I'm grateful to watch 'Freethought Matters'

I was lucky enough to tune in to recent episodes of “Freethought Matters.” I knew nothing of Ann Druyan until that show, to say nothing of her work and marriage to Carl Sagan. Wow. What a delightful conversation you had with her. I loved it.

Then, I just happened to tune into

your show with John Davidson. Wow again. I never knew he was a freethinker and was delighted to hear him sing and play guitar. What an interesting interview.

Anyway, I am so grateful for your show.  
**Marilyn Fisher**  
Wisconsin

Thanks to FFRF 'atheists' for county seal change

Michael Powers, county executive officer of California's Ventura County, sent me a letter with the recently launched new logo, which doesn't have images of the Ventura Mission, cross or of missionary Junipero Serra. An earlier story in the Ventura County Star newspaper noted that “atheists” had objected to the county seal. The new logo is nice, and it seems to count as a step forward — away from Christian imagery in civic life.

**Mitchell Dushay**  
California

'Theo-plagiarism' worthy of adding to lexicon

The quote from President Trump in the November “They Said What?” section, thanking the Christian God for the treatment Trump got at Walter Reed Medical Center, is a perfect example of “theo-plagiarism,” the act of giving credit to one's own hypothetical deity for work done by humans.

We've long needed a word to describe believers' nasty habit of thanking their god(s) for firefighters putting out fires, doctors saving lives, search parties finding lost hikers, and so on. “Theo-plagiarism” seems to fit.

**Lee Helms**  
Michigan

'Freethought Matters' showed me I'm not alone

I want to let you know how much I appreciate FFRF TV show “Freethought Matters.” I love the people you interview (including Ann Druyan), the music and the testimonials before and after. It has been my gateway to people who share my recently formed thoughts on religion and God, so I now feel comfortable identifying as an atheist.

**Cheryl Thompson**  
Wisconsin

Editor's note: FFRF's TV show “Freethought Matters,” goes up on FFRF's YouTube channel every Thursday and now airs in 13 major cities on Sundays. To find out if your city broadcasts it, check out [ffrf.org/freethought-matters](http://ffrf.org/freethought-matters).

Devilishly good cake was as good as its name

I decided to try Paul Gaylor's “Devilishly Good Chocolate Cake” recipe from the “World Famous Atheist

Cookbook.” It was my first time making a cake from scratch, and indeed, it turned out devilishly good (especially with the marshmallow buttercream frosting I also made)!  
**Andrew C. Jones**  
Michigan

Arthur C. Clarke had it right about religion

On Dec. 16, mention was made of Arthur C. Clarke in FFRF's Freethought of the Day. So, I thought it was a good time to write the following for those FFRF members who are also science fiction fans.

Clarke, in *The Songs of Distant Earth*, made a clear statement about religion that I wholly agree with. The “task” referred to is the winnowing of all human thought into compact information to be sent electronically with colonists to a new planet. What should be included for a fresh human start and what deleted? No developed human brains were being sent (only genetic material, in a form unspecified, to be turned into humans by robots for the first generation), so this would truly be a clean start.

“The task was, of course, impossible as well as heartbreaking. With tears in their eyes the selection panels had thrown away the Veda, the bible, the Tripitaka, the Quran and all the immense body of literature — fiction and nonfiction — that was based upon them. Despite all the wealth of beauty and wisdom these words contained, they could not be allowed to reinfect virgin planets with the ancient poisons of religious hatred, belief in the supernatural, and the pious gibberish with which countless billions of men and women had once comforted themselves at the cost of addling their minds.”

So, throw religion out; it does more harm than good. What should be indisputably true is that religion is not genetic and that anyone has to be taught to be religious. It is not part of the human genome. It is a human meme that we choose to propagate. As Clarke says, don't let that meme infect the universe.

**Karla Martin**  
Washington

Will bigots ever accept same-sex marriages?

Some bigots are shrewd enough to argue that it is they who are the victims of bigotry. For example, Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito complained that those who oppose same-sex marriage on the basis of their faith are unfairly called bigots by those who accept it.


If Alito had lived 100 years ago, I'm sure he'd have condemned anyone who accused faith-based opponents of interracial marriage as bigots. “Those against interracial marriages are not bigots,” he'd say. “No! They are defending a doctrine of their faith.”

Well, such marriages are legal now, and only the bigoted long for a return to the “good old days” when religiosity reigned supreme and imposed its will on all matters, including people's most intimate behavior. It is they who continue to insist that for a marriage to be legal, it must be between a man and a woman.

My only wish is that someday they'll at least tolerate, if not accept, same-sex marriage, as they now (I hope) tolerate interracial ones.

**David Quintero**  
California

Cartoons for the Irreverent:  
Celebrating the wit of Don Addis



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# BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

## Arrested / Charged

**Nathaniel S. Myers**, 38, Clovis, CA: 6 counts of lewd and lascivious acts with a child. It's alleged Myers molested multiple children under age 14 during the last 18 years "while actively working" at an unnamed church and as a landscaper, said a press release from the Fresno County Sheriff's Office.

Online sources list Steve and Peggy Myers as teaching pastors at SouthPoint Church in Fresno. A Facebook page lists Nate Stephen Myers as a Worship Team Member at SouthPoint from 1995 to the present.

It's believed there's "a strong possibility" he may have victimized other children, the release said. *Source: Fresno Bee, 11-26-20*

**Robert McKenzie**, 49, Brooklyn Park, MN: 2 counts of 3rd-degree criminal sexual conduct. It's alleged that McKenzie, co-founder of Word of Faith Ministries, molested a 17-year-old girl inside a residence in November. The church holds services at a St. Louis Park hotel.

Court papers stated he admitted touching the girl inappropriately, saying he "had a perverted thought." *Source: WCCO, 11-25-20*

**Michael M. Penkava**, 71, Crystal Lake, IL: Misdemeanor violating reporting provisions. Penkava, a Jehovah's Witness church elder, is accused of failing to notify police about an allegation that a male congregant was sexually abusing a family member. *Source: Northwest Herald, 11-25-20*

**Mark A. Korando Sr.**, 69, Costa Mesa, CA: 2 counts of aggravated sexual assault of a child with a foreign object, 3 counts of oral copulation or sexual penetration with a child 10 or younger, 2 counts of forcible lewd act on a child and 7 counts of lewd or lascivious acts with a child younger than 14.

Police said Korando volunteered for years as a chaperone for children at a church identified as located in the 1700 block of Baker Street. The only church in that vicinity is Mesa Verde United Methodist Church at 1701 Baker St.

His arrest for alleged assaults on 2 sisters, ages 12 and 14, about 2 years ago came after their mother contacted police in September. As a chaperone, Korando helped take church youth groups out of state on trips to provide services to needy people. *Source: CBS-LA, 11-25-20*

**Timothy L. Waters**, 39, Elizabethtown, KY: 1 count each of 1st-degree sexual abuse, 3rd-degree sodomy and 3rd-degree rape. Elder Ben Ashlock of The Driven Church said Waters had volunteered with the church's youth about "one year, more or less."

An arrest affidavit said Waters was "in a position of authority" when he allegedly had sexual contact with a 16-year-old girl on multiple occasions. Vine Grove Police Chief Kenny Mattingly said his department became aware of the situation when an officer encountered Waters and the girl at a city park. *Source: News-Enterprise, 11-25-20*

**Moises Norberto-Guerrero**, 43, Greenville, SC: Criminal sexual conduct with a minor and 2nd-degree assault and battery involving alleged incidents between 2008–19 with several victims. It's alleged that Norberto-Guerrero, pastor at Iglesia Pentecostal Jehovah Jireh, inappropriately touched a 7-year-old who attended church services, said a report filed Oct. 19. Another alleged victim came forward Nov. 16 and told police that Norberto-Guerrero touched him sexually on multiple occasions. *Source: WYFF, 11-25-20*

**Venkataramanappa**, 68, Chickballapur, India: Sexual assault. The Hindu priest is accused of raping a 10-year-old girl after luring her into his house next to the temple with promises of snacks. "The girl was taken to a hospital for a medical examination where doctors confirmed that she was raped," a senior police officer said. *Source: The Hindu, 11-25-20*

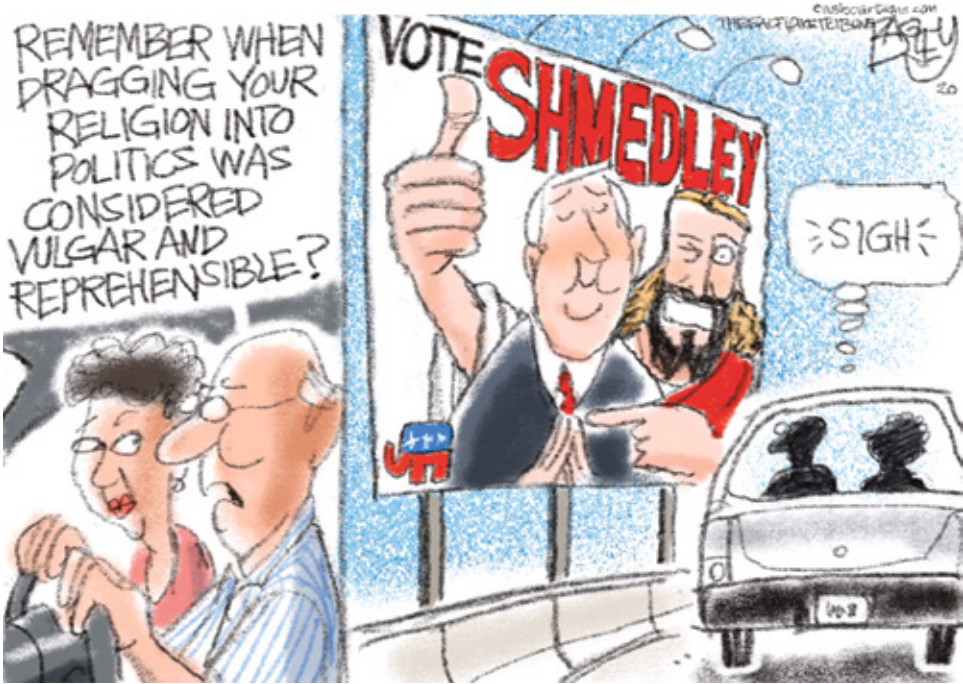
**Jason Carpintero**, 51, Salisbury, NC: 5 counts of sexual exploitation of a minor and indecent liberties with children. Carpintero, a high school teacher's aide with ties to several churches, is suspected of crimes against at least 2 children not from the school.

Carpintero's résumé says he received a divinity degree from Asbury Theological Seminary in 2008 and that he was a pastor at 5 Methodist parishes from 2000–08. The United Methodist Church's online directory confirms several of those pastoral appointments as well as several more at other churches. *Source: Daily Independent, 11-24-20*

**Ronnie Upshaw**, Gainesville, FL: Obstruction without violence, breach of the peace and breaching a county noise ordinance. Upshaw, pastor at Church of God the Bibleway, was arrested after police received noise complaints from apartment residents about loud music and preaching.

After refusing to stop, Upshaw is heard in a video saying, "Come on take me to jail, I'm ready to go. Jesus is the savior, Jesus is lord, Jesus is Christ, Jesus is a hero." *Source: WCJB, 11-23-20*

**Jacob Ouellette**, 24, N. Myrtle Beach, SC: 2 counts of criminal solicitation of a minor. "I regret to have to inform you that Jacob Ouellette, director of youth ministry at Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Church and former employee at



Holy Trinity Catholic School, has been arrested in connection with a multi-jurisdictional investigation targeting sexual exploitation of minors via the internet," said a church statement.

He also volunteered at St. Andrew Catholic School for several months in 2019. *Source: WBTW, 11-23-20*

**Andrey Kovalenko**, 52, Bedford, OH: 10 counts of mail fraud. Kovalenko served as a priest at the Shrine of Mariapoch in Burton, St. John Byzantine Catholic Church in Solon and St. Eugene Byzantine Catholic Church in Bedford. The parishes are part of the Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Parma. He is a native Russian who emigrated to the U.S. in 1996.

He is accused of looting the churches' accounts of nearly \$399,000 from May 2014 through July 2018. *Source: Plain Dealer, 11-21-20*

**Isaiah J. Thompson**, 37, Ft. Smith, AR: 2 counts of rape of a minor under 14 years old. Thompson is accused of assaulting 2 male minors when he was a youth ministry volunteer.

One man alleged he was sexually involved with Thompson from the time he was 7 and Thompson was about 17 and that the abuse occurred for over 15 years. Another man who attended the church as a child alleged Thompson started molesting him when he was 12.

Thompson was affiliated pastorally with Christ for the World Pentecostal Church and Bobby Hogan Ministries until he was fired in 2018. *Source: KARK, 11-20-20*

**Angela J. Wagner**, 50, Elm Mott, TX: Theft of more than \$150,000 but less than \$300,000. Wagner, secretary/treasurer since 2013 at First Baptist Church, allegedly stole over \$173,000 by using the church debit card for personal expenses.

Her attorney, Rod Goble, said Wagner is "very sorry for her actions" that started in February 2017, adding that she has cooperated with authorities from the start. *Source: Tribune-Herald, 11-19-20*

**Shepard Bushiri**, Pretoria, S. Africa: Money laundering, theft and fraud. Bushiri, founder of a church called the Enlightened Christian Gathering, was arrested in his native Malawi along with **his wife and 2 others** on charges involving alleged fraud totaling \$6.6 million.

He claims to be able to cure HIV and blindness with "miracle oil" and promises to deliver his thousands of followers from poverty. Authorities in Botswana shut down his church. *Source: BBC, 11-16-20*

A **prominent rabbi** from central Israel was arrested for allegedly molesting several of his students. Two complaints have been filed against the rabbi, whose identity remains under embargo. Police are investigating if there are others wary of coming forward.

The rabbi denies the allegations. Followers claim it is the work of a rival Haredi rabbi. *Source: Israel Hayom, 11-15-20*

**George Swain**, 71, Boston: Rape of a child and indecent assault and battery of a child under the age of 14. Swain is pastor at Greater Victory Temple, a Pentecostal church.

"During the timeframe of 1997 to 2004, the defendant is charged with sexually assaulting these three children at the time repeatedly and over years," said prosecutor Audrey Mark. "He also provided them money." *Source: WCBV, 11-14-20*

**Anthony Laterza**, 70, Lakehurst, NJ: 3 counts of possession of child pornography. Laterza served as a deacon at St. John's Catholic Church in 2019. A forensic review of electronic devices seized from his home revealed apparent images of child pornography, said prosecutor Bradley Billhimer. *Source: Manchester Patch, 11-12-20*

**Codie Malesker**, Hastings, NE: 5 counts of mail and wire fraud. The indictment alleges Male-

“A state grand jury in 2018 identified Allen as one of 301 ‘predator priests.’”

sker used his employment as an insurance agent, construction company partner and as a pastor and board member at Faith Community Tabernacle to file fraudulent claims of over \$107,000 from 2013–17 and collect the proceeds.

The church website lists him as administrator, sound manager, Praise Team member and bass guitar player: "Bro. Malesker assists the church in all business aspects of the church. He also preaches." *Source: Journal-Star, 11-10-20*

**Johnny Monderen**, 49, Colorado Springs, CO: Sexual assault on a child by one in a position of trust, sexual exploitation of a child, misdemeanor menacing and unlawful display of sexually explicit matter.

Monderen, pastor at Church of the Son, is accused of assaults over a period of 3 years starting in 2017. It's alleged assaults occurred after he would enter the child's room when everyone was asleep and force the child to drink wine and beer. *Source: KRDO, 11-2-20*

**Todd A. Foster**, 52, McComb, MS: Carnal knowledge of a juvenile while he was a teacher and basketball coach in 2007 at Christian Life Academy in Baton Rouge, LA. Foster and his wife were pastors at The Well church in McComb before announcing in October they would be taking a sabbatical to "allow them a time of rest."

Sara Gray-Foreman, Foster's accuser, is a former Christian Life student who alleges he assaulted her at his home when she was 16. She told deputies she decided to report the incident because she learned he was leading The Well and feared what might happen to other children. *Source: The Advocate, 11-2-20*

**Kevin F. Hite**, 54, Radford, VA: Taking indecent liberties with a minor and 10 counts of unlawful carnal knowledge of a child aged 13 or 14. Hite, a church deacon and office administrator at HeartCry Missionary Society, allegedly had a sexual relationship with a girl, who is now a young adult, "over an extended period of time, beginning when the child was 13 years old."

A search warrant alleges Hite admitted when interviewed by police that he and the girl exchanged nude photos, that he reserved a motel room for them and bought her a cellphone and paid for its service. *Source: Roanoke Times, 11-1-20*

**Sean Higgins**, 30, Palmyra, NJ: 28 criminal counts, including aggravated sexual assault and manufacturing child pornography. Higgins, youth pastor and music leader at Harbor Baptist Church and a teacher at Harbor Baptist Academy, is accused of posing as a teen girl named "Julie Miller" to trick unsuspecting boys on Snapchat and Instagram.

"When a boy would send a nude photo of himself, Higgins would instantly transform and warn the child, 'I've got you,' and threaten to circulate that photo if the child did not engage in additional sexual acts on camera for Higgins's sick gratification," prosecutor Scott Coffina said. *Source: nj105.com, 10-30-20*

**Jarod Mills**, 33, New Castle, OH: Importuning [requesting sexual services] and unlawful sexual conduct with a minor. Mills, pastor at Clifton Flats Alliance Church and an instructor at Butler County Community College, was among dozens of men arrested in a statewide anti-human trafficking operation.

The operation led to 109 victims being rescued and referred to social surfaces. *Source: WKBN, 10-26-20*

**Edward Lilly**, 70, Boothwyn, PA: 10 counts each of child pornography possession and depicting a minor child engaging in or simulating a prohibited sexual act and misdemeanor corruption of a minor.

Lilly is pastor at the Christian Church of Chester, formerly White Rock Christian Church.

The alleged victim told police that in 2017 when she was 16, Lilly started to flirt with her at the market where she worked and that they began having sex after she turned 17. Lilly recorded the encounters on his cellphone. *Source: Haverford Patch, 10-26-20*

## Pleaded / Convicted

**Robert Shiflet**, 50, Denton, TX: Pleaded guilty in federal court in Little Rock, AR, to 2 counts of transporting minors across state lines for unlawful sexual activity. Shiflet worked in Denton Bible Church youth ministry programs from 1995 to 2001.

According to the prosecutor, Shiflet assaulted a 15-year-old girl in 1997 on a church camping trip to the Buffalo National River in Arkansas. He also pleaded guilty to multiple assaults on a different girl in 2002–03 while working as a youth pastor in Little Rock. *Source: Arkansas Times, 11-30-20*

**Manuel LaRosa-Lopez**, 62, Richmond, TX: Pleaded guilty to 2 counts of indecency with a child. A plea bargain calls for him to serve 10 years in prison. La Rosa-Lopez admitted molesting a girl and a boy while he was a priest at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Conroe from the late 1990s to early 2000s.

Prosecutors said victims reported the abuse to church officials at the time but the allegations were never relayed to law enforcement. *Source: KHOU, 11-17-20*

**Randolph Brown**, 65, Cleveland: Pleaded guilty to 2 counts of compelling prostitution and was labeled a Tier II sex offender. Brown, pastor at Inner-City Missionary Baptist Church, was arrested in February 2020 in a sting targeting trafficking of underage girls who had run away from home. *Source: WOIO, 11-12-20*

**Kent R.E. Whitney**, 38, Newport Beach, CA: Pleaded guilty to mail fraud and filing a false federal income tax return. He used his Church of the Healthy Self in Westminster in a scam that took in \$33 million and sent bogus reports to investors, prosecutors said.

He admitted to reporting his income in 2018 as \$17,539 when it was actually at least \$452,872. About \$435,000 of that income came from the scam. *Source: OC Register, 11-6-20*

**John Allen**, 76, W. Manchester Township, PA: Pleaded guilty to indecent assault and corruption of minors for assaulting 2 altar boys between 1997 and 2002 when he was pastor at St. Margaret Mary Alacoque Church in Penbrook.

A plea bargain calls for him to serve 5 years' probation. A state grand jury in 2018 identified Allen as one of 301 "predator priests." The Diocese of Harrisburg expressed concern about his "sexual behavior" as far back as 1970. *Source: York Daily Record, 11-5-20*

**Thomas Humphrey**, 79, N. Amityville, NY: Guilty by jury of forcible touching. Humphrey, pastor at Hollywood Full Gospel Baptist Cathedral, was accused of sexual touching by a woman who worked with him producing a radio show on multiple occasions between April and September 2018. *Source: Amityville Record, 10-29-20*

## Sentenced

**Marcin Garbacz**, 42, Rapid City, SD: 7 years and 9 months in federal prison for convictions on 50 counts of wire fraud, 9 counts of money laundering, transportation of stolen money and 5 counts of filing a false tax return.

Garbacz was ordered to pay \$258,696 in restitution to the IRS and 3 Catholic parishes he served as pastor. He was accused of stealing from parish collections for several years and was arrested in May 2019 at the Seattle airport with a one-way ticket to his native Poland and more than \$10,000 in cash.

At sentencing, he apologized to parishioners and said he was angry with Catholic doctrine that considers homosexuality to be "intrinsically disordered." He identifies as gay.

He still faces federal charges of engaging in illicit sexual conduct in a foreign place and receipt of child pornography. The indictment alleges he traveled abroad in 2011 to engage in sexual conduct with someone under age 18. *Source: KEVN, 11-23-20*

**Tobias Tissen**, Sarto, Manitoba: Fines of \$1,296 on each of 2 convictions for violating COVID-19 restrictions. Tissen, pastor at the Church of God, said he felt "honored" to be fined "for doing something that God wants me to do."

The church itself was fined \$5,000 and **5 others** were given individual tickets of \$1,296 after the church tried to hold a large drive-in service. They were blocked by Mounties, which led to over 100 cars lined up trying to get into the parking lot.

Fines totaling \$180,000 were issued to people and businesses throughout the province for breaking public health orders. The area in the vicinity of the Church of God has a COVID test positivity rate of 40%, among the highest in North America. *Source: CBC, 11-23-20*

**Timothy J. Hallows**, 62, Kaysville, UT: 46 months in prison with credit for 13 months already served in jail after pleading guilty to possession of child pornography. He admitted having images on his phone of prepubescent children being sexually



assaulted by adults and sending them to a woman in the Philippines in November 2019.

Hallows, a father of 5, was bishop of the Wellington Ward in the Kaysville Stake of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when arrested. A probable cause statement said Skype filed a complaint about a user who shared child sexual exploitation materials. The user's screen name was "timhallows."

Investigators found files containing videos and photos showing nude or partially clothed prepubescent girls, some of whom posed with nude adult males. *Source: KSL, 11-18-20*

**Mona McGrady**, 62, Sonora, CA: 4 years and 4 months in prison after being found guilty by jury of sexual penetration with a foreign object and 2 counts of lewd or lascivious acts with a child aged 14 or 15. McGrady, former volleyball coach and sports coordinator at Mother Lode Christian School, was acquitted on 8 similar counts.

In lengthy testimony, she denied molesting 2 students between 1995–97 and said she has never been gay. Tom McGrady, her husband of 36 years who also taught at Mother Lode, testified for the defense. "Jane Doe 2" testified but her allegations fell outside the statute of limitations. *Source: Union Democrat, 11-17-20*

**Bret Welty**, 49, Boise, ID: 15 years in prison after pleading guilty to sexual abuse of a child younger than 16. Welty, pastor at Hard Rock Revival Church, was accused of assaulting a 15-year-old girl in August 2019.

The girl was staying with Welty's family for the weekend, as the "family believed that spending time at the pastor's home would be helpful" because of anxiety and family problems she was having, prosecutors said. Welty had her undress and touched her sexually for between 30 and 60 minutes, only stopping when his wife knocked on the bedroom door. They're now divorced.

Welty admitted having "struggled with such behaviors before" but never with someone as young as the victim, court documents said. *Source: Lewiston Morning Tribune, 10-28-20*

**Edward S. Thompson**, 40, Eugene, OR: 125 years in prison for convictions on 4 counts of rape, 5 counts of sex abuse and 1 count of sodomy. When arrested in 2018, he was a music ministry leader at Christ Fellowship Church and former member of the Eugene Faith Center.

The female victim, under age 12, told a counselor that Thompson molested her while babysitting for "as long as [she] could remember." The affidavit stated the abuse occurred between 2012–18. *Source: Register-Guard, 10-17-20*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

The **Catholic Archdiocese of Newark**, NJ, is being sued by a woman who alleges she was sexually assaulted by 2 nuns when she was 8 in 1969 and in 1971 by a priest at Immaculate Conception Parish and School in Montclair. **William Dowd**, the priest, lives now in Brick and was removed from ministry nearly 2 decades ago before being reinstated in 2007 after a church trial. The archdiocese settled a suit last October filed by a man alleging Dowd molested him as a child. Dowd is chaplain for the New York Giants NFL franchise.

John Baldante, attorney for plaintiff Mary Joy Morgan, said she told a therapist about the abuse years ago and in 2018 reported it to a priest at the Montclair parish, now called St. Teresa of Calcutta.

The suit accuses **Sr. Maria Michael Garner**, a teacher and administrator at Immaculate Conception Elementary School, of abusing Morgan several times a week starting in 1969 and **Sr. Alice Bernadette**, of helping restrain her for Dowd in 1971. Both nuns are dead.

Dowd's abuse continued until 1975, when Morgan transferred to another school, it's alleged. *Source: northjersey.com, 11-30-20*

The **Catholic Diocese of Buffalo**, NY, and 3 bishops have been sued by the state Attorney General's Office for cover-up of sexual abuse by priests. The state will try to use civil laws governing religious charities and their fiduciaries to prove the diocese failed to follow policies enacted in 2002 by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The suit seeks restitution and institutional changes and a ban on former bishops **Richard Malone** and **Edward Grosz** from management roles in any charitable organization.

Attorney General Letitia James alleges the men used bureaucratic maneuvers to shelter more than 2 dozen priests accused of harming children. **Edward Scharfenberger** is named as a defendant in his capacity as current interim administrator of the diocese. *Source: NY Times, 11-22-20*

The Vatican's **Holy See** is being sued by 4 plaintiffs, "JA Doe 50-53," men who allege sexual abuse by defrocked Cardinal **Theodore McCarrick**. One plaintiff is a priest. Plaintiffs' attorney Jeff Anderson said it's the first time an active clergy member has sued the Holy See regarding abuse.

Three of the plaintiffs were parishioners who allege McCarrick, 90, abused them as youths in the 1980s. The priest alleges McCarrick assaulted him at a beach house in New Jersey in the 1990s and that a fellow priest told him to forget what happened "for the good of the church." *Source: WNBC, 11-20-20*

**Concordia Preparatory School** (formerly Baltimore Lutheran School) in Towson, MD, and the **Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod** are being sued by a former student who alleges her reports of male

student-athletes sexually assaulting and harassing her on campus in 2017–18 were ignored. Three similar suits were filed recently.

The plaintiff alleges as a freshman she was "cat-called" in hallways by males expressing a desire to have sex and that once she was lifted up with her legs pinned while she was grabbed and struck on her backside and thighs.

The girl later reported the assault to the headmaster, the dean of students and a guidance counselor, but no action was taken, according to the suit. The girl's boyfriend, a Concordia alumnus, also wrote several emails to school officials calling for action on her behalf.

At least half a dozen female students met with administrators to report harassment, the suit alleges. The plaintiff later transferred to another school. *Source: Baltimore Sun, 11-13-20*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

**Miracle Meadows School** in Salem, W.VA, settled claims with 29 former students for \$51.9 million. The claimants alleged to have suffered mental, sexual, and physical abuse by adults who ran the Christian boarding school founded in 1987 for at-risk and learning-disabled youth. It was shut down by the state in 2014.

School founder **Susan Gayle Clark** and the **Seventh-day Adventist Church-North American Division** were among the 14 defendants in the original suits filed in 2017. Clark pleaded guilty to child neglect, failure to report and obstruction of justice and received 6 months in jail and 5 years' probation.

"The abuse suffered by these children would shock the conscience of any West Virginian," said plaintiffs' attorney Jesse Forbes. "They were stripped naked, handcuffed, sexually abused and kept in a 5-by-8-foot room with a coffee can for a toilet. This is the stuff straight from a horror movie."

Although authorities mounted investigations as far back as 1999, it was hard to bring them to a conclusion since alleged perpetrators often came to the school on work visas and would be sent back to their home countries before they could be questioned. A state Supreme Court ruling in 2000 also limited officials' access to medical records and their ability to interview students. *Source: WV News, 11-12-20*

**Joseph Stone**, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Starkville, MS, and head deacon **Terry Miller** were found liable by a civil trial jury for over \$500,000 in damages in connection with a failed construction project that started in 2015.

The jury found that Stone and Miller conspired with the contractor and that Stone likely took kickbacks from the contractor, Donald Crowther, who has pleaded guilty to fraud. *Source: WCBI, 11-4-20*

Finances

The **Catholic Diocese of Scranton**, PA, paid \$24.46 million to 213 survivors of sexual abuse through its Independent Survivors Compensation Program, now closed. Eleven offers were rejected by claimants, 25 offers remain outstanding and 46 were determined ineligible.

Accepting an offer means forfeiting the right to sue. The program was primarily funded by the sale of the diocese's 3 long-term care facilities, which sold for about \$26 million. *Source: Diocese of Scranton, 10-29-20*

Legal Developments

The Utah Supreme Court heard arguments in a case alleging 4 **male elders** of a Jehovah's Witnesses congregation in Roy forced a 15-year-old girl to listen to a recording of a man raping her in 2008. Lower courts found the church was not liable

under 1st Amendment protections.

The woman sued the elders, the church and its national organization, the **Watchtower Bible and Tract Society**, in 2016, alleging she cried, shook visibly and pleaded for them to stop as they played the recording intermittently for at least 4 hours in 2008.

She alleges she was 14 when the perpetrator, a fellow Jehovah's Witness, 18, bullied her increasingly and began sexually assaulting her in 2007. She gave the congregation's leaders a recording of one instance. The church tribunal's goal was to extract a confession that she had voluntarily engaged in sex outside marriage, her attorneys contend.

"The allegation here is a mental and emotional equivalent of waterboarding," Justice Deno Himonas said. "I've been a judge for a long time and a lawyer for a long time. I've never seen, in court, anything like this that's alleged."

Church lawyer Kara Porter argued that the tribunal was trying to determine if the girl had sinned, a process the government isn't permitted to meddle in. Church attorneys previously said the teen could have walked out of the meeting with her parents. *Source: Deseret News, 11-9-20*

**Roy N. Shoop**, 55, Inola, OK, has now been accused of molestation by 5 girls in 3 states, all under age 16 and as young as 12, who make similar claims that they were working at Shoop's farm or taking riding lessons from him when molested. Shoop is pastor at Cowboy Gatherin' Church.

Sgt. Bo Williams of the Rogers County Sheriff's Office said he believes all 5 were groomed. "Kidding and joking, subtle touches. Stuff like that. There were statements made that 'Oh, that's just Roy being handsy.'" *Source: News on 6, 11-9-20*

Allegations

The New Zealand Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse is hearing from 23 people abused while in the care of the **Catholic and Anglican churches** and the **Salvation Army**. Frances Tagaloa, 52, testified she was sexually abused between ages 5 and 7 by Brother Bede Fitton, a Marist Brothers teacher.

"Brother Bede would be fondling me or would want me to take my pants off and stand me up on a table and get me to read books. I was not sure what else he was doing because I was reading a book."

Tagaloa said she started processing what happened to her as a child when she was 17. "It just seemed strange to me that I had to go back to the Marist Brothers, to the very organization that allowed the abuse to happen. I had to go back to them to try and see if they would fix it or do anything about it, and it made me quite fearful." *Source: Radio New Zealand, 11-30-20*

**George W. Rutler**, 75, a prominent New York City Catholic priest, author and host on the Eternal Word Television Network, is accused of forcible touching by a Bronx woman, Ashley Gonzalez, 22, who worked as an overnight security guard at his parish, St. Michael the Archangel in Manhattan.

She was on her second day of the job Nov. 4 when she alleges she saw him watching gay pornography on an office computer. Rutler's weekly newsletter is carried by Church Militant, a right-wing Catholic website that rails against homosexuality. Gonzalez has shared an 18-second video with media of him watching the porn.

"He looked at me with a smile, looked away, and he put his hand inside his pants, and he was playing with himself," Gonzalez alleged. When she tried to leave, she said, "He aggressively threw himself on me and grabbed me sexually, aggressively, and I was fighting him off of me."

The Archdiocese of New York said in a statement that Rutler denies acting inappropriately but "has voluntarily stepped aside from the parish and

is not currently serving as a priest."

"[T]he NYPD takes sexual assault and rape cases extremely seriously," said a police statement about its investigation of the allegation. *Source: Daily Beast, 11-28-20*

A Vatican investigation revealed how defrocked Cardinal **Theodore McCarrick**, 90, rose through the Catholic hierarchy to become one of America's most powerful prelates despite longstanding allegations of sexual misconduct that ultimately led to his downfall.

"**Pope John Paul II** personally made the decision to appoint McCarrick," the report said, despite receiving a letter from John O'Connor, the archbishop of New York, that summed up allegations that McCarrick engaged in sexual conduct with another priest in 1987, that he had committed pedophilia with his "nephews" and that he shared a bed with young adult men and seminarians.

"What is now known, through investigation undertaken for the preparation of the Report, is that three of the four American bishops provided inaccurate and incomplete information to the Holy See regarding McCarrick's sexual conduct with young adults," a summary said. *Source: NY Times, 11-10-20*

State investigators have named **97 priests** credibly accused of sexually abusing children within Florida's Catholic churches. Prosecutors set up a hotline for clergy sexual abuse in 2018 and received 260 tips.

Investigators concluded none of the 97 can be prosecuted because they are either dead or the statute of limitations has expired. The report also revealed 81 priests who were relocated to Florida after being credibly accused of sexual abuse in other parts of the country.

"I feel bad for the Florida victims of past church assaults," said Eugene Rosenquest of the Florida chapter of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. "Are they now left to twist in the wind?"

The report underscores the need for statute of limitation reform, he said, and for a "look back window" law like New York's. *Source: News 4 Jax, 11-9-20*

Removed / Resigned

**Francis "Frank" Lawlor**, administrator of Sacred Heart Catholic Parish in Pittsfield, MA, was placed on administrative leave by the Diocese of Springfield. The leave is effective immediately "pending the outcome of a private legal matter," said a post on the diocese's website.

According to a police report, Lawlor was charged with open and gross lewdness after urinating outside a sandwich shop on May 10. He had been asked to leave the shop because he was not wearing a mask and following COVID-19 restrictions.

An employee told police that Lawlor was "spraying pee all over." Lawlor admitted urinating on some bushes because he "couldn't hold it any longer." The case is still pending. *Source: Berkshire Eagle, 11-16-20*

**Carl Lentz**, 41, was terminated as lead pastor of Hillsong East Coast, a megachurch in Manhattan, NY. An email from Hillsong founding pastor Brian Houston cited "leadership issues and breaches of trust, plus a recent revelation of moral failures."

The church also cut ties with his wife, Laura Lentz, 40, Hillsong co-pastor. Houston and his wife founded the original Hillsong in 1983 in Australia. It now has locations in 28 countries and, pre-pandemic, had an average 150,000 weekly attendees.

Carl Lentz famously baptized singer Justin Bieber in a bathtub at the Manhattan home of Knicks player Tyson Chandler in 2015.

Lentz's former lover Ranin Karim, 34, a fashion designer and native of Palestine, detailed her alleged affair with him in a news interview: "We were obsessed with each other. He was like a drug to me. I was a drug to him." *Source: Religion News Service/NY Post, 11-10-20*

Other

**Joel Kolko**, 74, a New York rabbi accused of molesting students at the yeshiva where he taught for years, died of COVID-19 while on a visit to Israel. Yeshiva Torah Temimah in Brooklyn paid \$2.1 million in 2016 to 2 former students who accused Kolko of sexual assault.

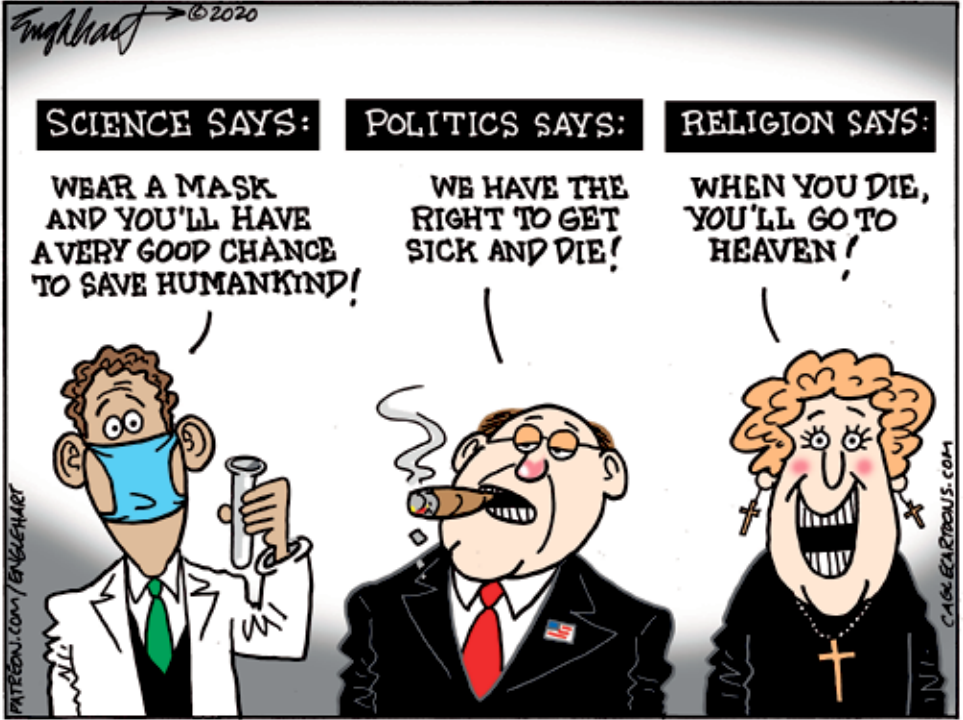
The boys were 6 at the time of the alleged abuse. The school is facing several more suits accusing Kolko of abuse. *Source: JTA, 11-10-20*

**Paul Shanley**, 89, a former Massachusetts Catholic priest who served 12 years in prison for raping a boy at a Newton church in the 1980s, died Oct. 28. A cause of death was not provided.

Shanley was a popular street priest who ministered to gay and troubled youths. Decades later, dozens of men came forward with abuse accusations. He was defrocked and moved to an apartment in Ware in 2017 after being released.

Shanley's outing and conviction were partly attributable to the Boston Globe's landmark 2002 investigation that raised questions about widespread abuse among clergy and whether Archdiocese of Boston officials had looked the other way. The reporting led to a Pulitzer Prize and the 2015 Oscar-winning film "Spotlight." *Source: NBC Boston, 11-6-20*

Email: blackcollar@ffrf.org





# Freethinker of the Year Award

## I’m God and I have the license to prove it!

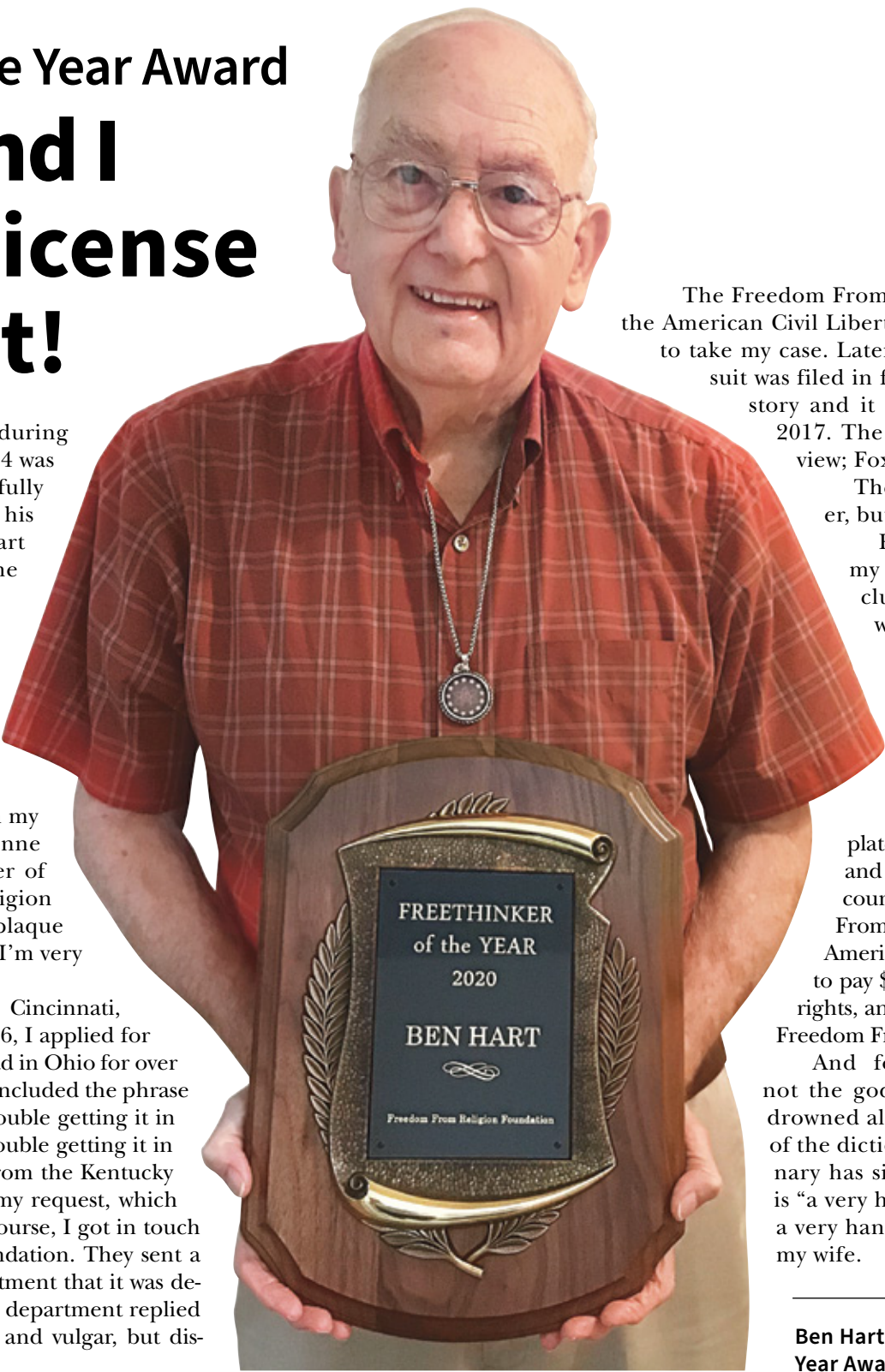
Appearing in a pre-recorded video during FFRF’s “Covid Convention” on Nov. 14 was FFRF Member Ben Hart, who successfully sued Kentucky to get “IM GOD” on his license plates. Because of that, Hart earned FFRF’s 2020 Freethinker of the Year Award.

Here is an edited transcript of his acceptance speech:

By Ben Hart

My name is Ben Hart and I live in Independence, Ky., with my wonderful wife of 64 years, Yvonne Hart. I have been named Freethinker of the Year by the Freedom From Religion Foundation. And this is the nice plaque that they have given me. It’s a beauty. I’m very proud to have gotten it.

We moved to Independence from Cincinnati, just across the river. In February of 2016, I applied for the same personalized license plate I had in Ohio for over 12 years — “IM GOD.” The plates also included the phrase “One Nation Under God.” I had no trouble getting it in Ohio, so I didn’t expect to have any trouble getting it in Kentucky. A week later, I got a letter from the Kentucky Transportation Department rejecting my request, which said it was obscene and vulgar. So, of course, I got in touch with the Freedom From Religion Foundation. They sent a letter telling the Transportation Department that it was denying my First Amendment rights. The department replied that the plate wasn’t actually obscene and vulgar, but distracting. It still denied my request.



The Freedom From Religion Foundation then contacted the American Civil Liberties Union in Kentucky, and it agreed to take my case. Later that year, in November of 2016, the suit was filed in federal court. The BBC picked up the story and it went around the world in March of 2017. The Washington Post called for an interview; Fox News called for an interview.

The state filed for dismissal a full year later, but the judge denied the motion.

Finally, in January [2020], I was told my plate was on its way. I asked if it included the phrase “In God We Trust.” I was assured it did.

Then I went to pick up the plate, but it didn’t have the phrase on it. I refused it and they ordered another one. I finally got it — “IM GOD” with the phrase “In God We Trust” on it — no extra charge.

I now have the most famous license plate in the world on the front of my Jeep and the most expensive license plate in the country on the rear, thanks to the Freedom From Religion Foundation and the Kentucky American Civil Liberties Union. The state had to pay \$150,000 in attorney fees to deny me my rights, and that, my friends, shows the power our Freedom From Religion Foundation has.

And for those who are wondering, I’m not the god of the bible — that’s the guy who drowned all the babies in the world. I’m the god of the dictionary. The American Heritage Dictionary has six definitions for “god.” Number five is “a very handsome man.” And my wife says I’m a very handsome man. And nobody argues with my wife.

Ben Hart displays his 2020 Freethinker of the Year Award plaque.



# Clarence Darrow Award

## Ed Asner: It’s not easy to challenge religion

By Ed Asner

Prolific and award-winning actor Ed Asner appeared via pre-recorded video at FFRF’s “Covid Convention” on Nov. 14.

Asner, who recently became part of FFRF’s Honorary Board, accepted FFRF’s 2020 Clarence Darrow Award.

Asner toured the country portraying William Jennings Bryan in a play about the Scopes Trial opposite John de Lancie (portraying Darrow), and has been an outspoken progressive activist. The award includes a bronze statuette, a miniature of the 7-foot statue by renowned sculptor Zenos Frudakis that FFRF erected on the lawn of the “Scopes Trial” courthouse in Dayton, Tenn.

Here is an edited transcript of his remarks:

Actor Ed Asner shows off the Clarence Darrow Award he received from FFRF in 2020.

This is a beautiful award. My God, it is beautiful. He is so embodied here. And being a junkman’s son, I can tell you, this is good metal. This is fine metal. You can’t get better metal than this. Unless you go to gold and silver and titanium, but we won’t go there. This comes from the heart, this is Clarence Darrow.

I was with your group in Wisconsin, and I felt the same way there that I feel with you now. You are brave, wonderful people, so essential to a democracy such as America, which needs you badly. It’s not easy to challenge religion in America, but it’s most necessary, very necessary.

And I want to say that Darrow put it so bluntly when he said the most humane thing we can do is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Keep doing it. You’re setting a great example for all freedom lovers. Thank you.