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, cherished constitutional principles that keep religion out of government.

“We are only seeing the early stages of the Christian Nationalist takeover of the federal judiciary. 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.

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“We are only seeing the early stages of the Christian Nationalist takeover of the federal judiciary.
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, which 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/rgio by scrolling to that date), Bova said, “The Catholic Church teaches that faith is a gift from God, and it’s a gift I’ve 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, he 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 1960 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, fiction editor of Omni magazine. (1973 to 1977) and another in 1982 as editor of Analog, the popular science fiction at Harvard and film courses in the 1970s brought him the role for which he would be most acclaimed, fiction editor of Omni magazine.

His many building projects, including about Religion in Support of Civic Objectivity, Accuracy, and Balance In Public Education.

Ben Bova in 1974

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.”


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 Gutch and Bill Dunn. To see other entries in FFRF’s extensive list, go to ffrf.org/day.

The bright life of Paul Geisert

Many in the freethought world would be saddened to learn of the death of Paul Geisert, who succumbed Nov. 17 to COVID-19 due to an outbreak in the congested living community nearSacramento, 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 man- ner to education, with most positions being as a teacher and/or instructional developer.

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.

Ends his personal freethinking, Geisert was a nonconformist in sever- al ways, almost approaching iconoclast status. While on the faculty of the Uni- versity of Wyoming and being a highly innovative member of its Science and Mathematics Teaching Center (he won a national award for instructional develop- ment 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 iden- tity term (“a bright”) as a positive way of presenting one’s all-encompassing outlook without making reference to religion. Although a great many athe- ists and agnostics would qualify for the descriptor, not all would do so, because fitting the definition means going beyond deity-belief.

Brights have a naturalistic world- view, fully free of supernatural and mystical elements. No “woos-woos” 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. Unfor- tunately, the popular contributions were not always accurate, because the ne- ologism was not invented to be a syn- onym for atheist.

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

The need for civic neutrality between re- ligion and nonreligion.

Among other products, he co-pro- duced “Different Drummers: Non- conforming Thinkers in History,” an instructional unit that California approved for classroom use. He also lobbed 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 stud- ies 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, “Teach- ing 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), as do other nonprofits that he helped to get going, such as Sacramen- to’s Reason Center (reasoncenter.org) and, of course, The Brights’ Network (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 T, as two classic cars as in the bowls of an “old house renewal,” where he accom- plished 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 kitch- en and at the sewing machine, as well.

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

IN MEMORIAM

Ben Bova

was science fiction author

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

By Ruth Hurmence Green

A Missouri grandmother died of complications of COVID-19 this week. She was 87 and a grandmother to four children.

“Debunking the Bible as History”

Debunks the bible as history in a compelling way. A wonderful read for anyone interested in critical thinking.

The Born-Again Skeptic’s Guide to the Bible

By Ruth Hurmence Green

A Missouri grandmother debunks the Bible as history in a compelling way. A wonderful read for anyone interested in critical thinking.

—Published by FFRF. 440 pages / PB

Buy it from FFRF online

ffrf.org/shop

—PUBLISHED BY FFRF. 440 PAGES / PB

1

2
n 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 command- er Neil Armstrong, command module pilot Michael Collins and lunar mod- ule 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 Apollo 11 Mission. The text said: “FIRST SET FOOT UPON THE MOON: July 20, 1969. A.D. The Eagle has landed on the lunar surface. Two men from the Earth have visited the moon and returned to their spacecraft. In sending these words to the people of the Earth, weemphasize our firm belief in the potentiality of peace and progress in the cosmos. Godspeed to these peaceful explorers.”

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 shyly told a Japanese journalist staying at a Houston hotel who was looking for the transcript: “Open the drawer of the ta- ble 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 mis- sion, Scheer was awarded NASA’s highest award, the Distinguished Ser- vice Medal, and led the crew on tours around the world. He left NASA in 1971 to manage the campaign for for- mer North Carolina Gov. Terry San- ford for the presidency, but remained a consultant to the space program and was a trustee of the Smithsonian Insti- tution’s National Air and Space Muse- um. He worked for a Washington-based communications consulting firm until 1976, when he became a vice presi- dent 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 divorc- ing. After his death in 2001 at 75, he was survived by his wife, the former Suzann Huggan, with whom he had a daughter.

Freetought of the Day

This article is a reprinting of the Feb. 20 Freetought of the Day on ffrf.org. Freetought of the Day is a daily freethought calen- dar brought to you courtesy of the Freedom From Religion Founda- tion, highlighting birthdates, quotes and other historic tidbits. To view the Freetought of the Day, go to 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 Freetought Today.

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Hosted by Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor

Slightly irrelverent views, news, music & interviews

FREETHOUGHT PODCASTS

ffrf.org

MORE INFO AT:

ffrf.org/nothing-fails-like-prayer
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 Stew art and Phil Zuckerman, activists such as Hispanic American Freethinkers’ founder David Tamayo and honorees such as Black Skeptics Los Angeles founder Sikiw 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.

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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 Rosay 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 Kahlber and Vanitha Srinivasan Singh are FFRF’s newest After-Life Members, which is a membership category of $1,000, are: Mark Alper, Lorraine Bartlett, Walt Bibsoky, Michael Boilen, Katherine Bunderson, Jimmy Dunne, Ivan Gendzel, Glenn Greening, Laura Guaderrama, Dean Hanley, John Heider, Frank Heselton, K. David Heskett, Fred Holden, Paul Kohmull er, David Charles Lightwics, Julia Lo vin, Stephen McCauley, Lyn McCoy, Charles Miller, David Murdock, Desmond Murphy, Gretchen Niver, Marilyn Radke, Jeffery Robinson, Wendy Robinson, Nicola Savignanu, William Scale, Sarina Stogel, Sean Trabosh, Kevin Van Laeken, Kristine Walber bach, David Wemberg, Anne Wewrck and Thomas Zimbinski.

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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 Berkshires, 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.

Jared Huffman

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 apol ogy 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.

Tweets, 12-16-20

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 democracy and competing religious 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 Crack er 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 spiritu alism that tells me if I live a good life, good things will happen. But I don’t have any expected reward or expect ed 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 the love and attention and try to do something worthwhile, and not count on getting a do-over.


Freethought Today Crossword

Answers on page 25

Across

1. Itsy-bitsy bits
2. Fine group?
3. Stone-gray
4. Medieval succulent
5. Neutral in matters of affection
6. After-bath powder
7. Rap sheet acronym
8. Bevy
9. Unnerve
10. Pendulum paths
11. *Number of times
12. Distinctive flair
13. Oil crisis, e.g.
14. Hole punching tool

Down

1. fyfb
2. Nervous system
3. Antipathy
4. P guarding
5. Allergy
6. Insect in adult stage
7. French vegetable
8. A fterthought
9. Professor
10. Inflatable
11. Wind
12. *U.S. President who was sworn in on a book of laws, not bible
13. Current
14. *German money
15. *Number of times
16. Capital of Ghana
17. Romanian money
18. Capital of Ghana
19. *Habitual doubter, Brit. spelling
20. FFRF headquarters location
21. *FFRF headquarters location
22. Skirt’s edge
23. TIME’s court columnist Linda Green hep
24. Tiny burgers
25. Bubbly
26. A cat
27. Crude group?
28. Dwarf hammer
29. “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.

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Freethought Matters 2021

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

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IN THE NEWS
Court backs religious groups in two states

The Supreme Court on Dec. 15 sid- ed 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 con- cerned 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 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 wor- ship to 50 people.

53% of Ameri- cans 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 per- cent) say it is not necessary for a per- son to believe in God to be moral and have good values, which is a remark- able shift in recent years. A large part of this change is due to the rise of re- ligiously unaffiliated Americans, who now make up 26 percent of the adult population.

Forty-one percent of Americans ex- press 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 in- clined to believe in God but are some- what less than completely certain in their belief. Eleven percent of Amer-icans report being completely uncer- tain 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, Chill- icowich RCMP responded to reports of groups of people gathering at three separate churches contrary to the exist- ing 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, includ- ing 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 Associ- ation of Nigeria, was arrested by the state police after being accused of vo- lating anti-blasphemy laws for calling the Prophet Muhammad a terrorist.

The ruling, in which the judge de- clared Bala’s continuous incarceration as illegal and ordered his imme- diate 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 Inter- national. “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 eu- thanasia in what campaigners have called “a victory for compassion and kindness.”

Preliminary results showed 65 per- cent 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 Nether- lands 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 Ida- mist 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 de- cade after the magazine published car- toons mocking the Prophet Muhammad. A third attacker, Amedy Coulibaly, killed a police officer and then four Jewish hos- tages in a kosher supermarket in Paris suburb. Like the Kouachis, Coulibaly was killed in a shootout 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 de- fendants who received their verdicts Dec. 16 aided the primary assailants with money, vehicles and other logis- tical 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 in rejection of Gov. Henry McMaster’s plan to spend federal coronavi- rus 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, includ- ing historically black colleges and univer- sities, who were seeking an exception to the ruling so they could collect some $12 million in coronavirus relief.

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

“The Supreme Court’s opinion, af- firmed today, is an unequivocal affirma- tion of our state Constitution’s prohibi- tions on the use of public K-12 education dollars, allocated in any form, to private schools,” said Scott Price, executive direc- tor of the S.C. School Board Association.

Scupltor Zenos Frudakis featured on public TV show

Renowned sculptor and FFRF Mem- ber Zenos Frudakis is one of the art- ists featured in Season 3 of the Emmy Award-winning public television maga- zine series “Articulate with Jim Cotter.”

The episode featuring Frudakis, titled “The Monument Man,” 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 like- ness 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, underwrit- ten by FFRF, created the Clarence Darrow statue outside the courthouse in Dayton, Tenn., site of the 1925 Scopes Trial.
FFRF seeks summary judgment against Texas judge

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has filed a summary judgment in its federal case against a Texas judge who held prayer sessions in courtrooms. The case involves courtroom prayers in a lawsuit filed in March 2017, and due to various technical reasons, the case was heard by the United States Supreme Court. The plaintiffs argue that the judge’s courtroom prayer practice is unconstitutionally coercive.

The plaintiffs assert that the judge has abusively used the courtroom to illegally coerce attorneys, litigants and other citizens into participating in his courtroom prayers. The judge’s courtroom prayer practice is unconstitutionally coercive.

Wayne Mack

of those who appear in his courtroom,” Mack’s court order coerced court participants into a religious practice, he has violated one of the strongest, most fundamental commandments of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.”

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.”

Mack, a formerly licensed minister who attended Jackson College of Ministries, where he planned to major in theology, said he was not able to attend the proceedings, which were argued remotely. The judge’s courtroom prayer practice is unconstitutionally coercive.

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” and that its primary purpose and effect is to “cripple the nation’s coronavirus response in a misguided effort to achieve herd immunity.”

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, is wreaking a shocking Thanksgiving decision to eviscerate New York’s pandemic policy to limit church gatherings in high-density 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 now — and to the dismay and frustration of people of faith who believe in science — an uncertain future awaits as COVID-19 cases increase. A narrow COVID-19 case can be the worst of all possible worlds!” “Operation Warp Speed” is proof.

Fortunately, many religious leaders, especially those in mainline church bodies, 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 state restrictions limiting gatherings. In December, a federal court ruled that synagogues should be included in the state’s shelter-in-place orders, containing a legal order that a person’s “right to worship is not absolute.”

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 launch an immediate action against him. In a Jan. 6 press release, FFRF said: “There must be consequences for any U.S. president who betrays the Constitution that is supposed to include a statement that those opposed to prayer may leave the courtroom without affecting the outcome of their case, although it’s been inconsistently 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 compelled to say the prayer for another fifteen seconds or they are locked during the prayer.

The office judge to solicit chaplains to open his courtroom without affecting the outcome of cases. By November 2020, the administration’s dismantlement in 2018 of the federal unit responsible for pandemic preparedness established by Obama, but by its disengagement of climate-change science. By November 2020, the administration, driven by fundamentalist “dowrnion” theory, had not only withdrawn from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, but had rolled back more than 100 environmental rules and regulations.

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

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

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Religion

Continued from page 1

society with religion — at least the kind of theocratic influence on government and social policy, some think — that 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 — who else?

Whether Trump believed what he was saying or was engaging in purely cynical political pandering, as was widely suspected, is a relevant question. What is certain is that Trump — in denying the pandemic, ridiculing masks, undercutting his admin- istration’s own scientists, holding sup- erspreaders 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). That is why he argued that religion and its damping down of America got us into this political nightmare in the first place.

These evangelicals and fundamental- ists — many of whom now say that they are imic to the constitutional principle of separation between religion and gov- ernment, as well as to individual liberties — themselves are the products of their anti-science, anti-intellectual faith.

They reject evolution, so is it any won- der 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 the claim that he never stopped playing to his base, regardless of the consequences. One of the most sy- mpathetic moments of 2020 was when Trump triumphantly displayed a bible in front of a D.C. church after ordering military police to terri- fify and scatter peaceful citizens to the ground, and then to lock the church doors.

In the earliest days of the pandemic, while Trump was being briefed on its true nature, he promised, “One day — it’s like a flu — one day, it’s all going to disappear.” While 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.”

Trump’s unlawful actions, 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 proclama- tions, 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 con- stituents to set aside a day of prayer and fasting to respond to the pandemic.

Trump’s thousands of irresponsible tweets and comments gave many evan- gelical ministers a green light to defy public health orders. Among countless megachurch leader deniers is Pastor John MacArthur, who maintains “There is no pandemic” and that its primary purpose and effect is 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 delay- ing social distancing and masking orders, including deferring to churches wanting to hold in-person worship services. The Freedom From Religion Foundation legal

FFRF speaks out

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, is wreaking a shocking Thanksgiving decision to eviscerate New York’s pandemic policy to limit church gatherings in high-density 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 now — and to the dismay and frustration of people of faith who believe in science — an uncertain future awaits as COVID-19 cases increase. A narrow COVID-19 case can be the worst of all possible worlds!” “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 fed- eral agencies to adopt a scientific integrity policy. The Freedom From Religion Foun- dation will be working to help ensure it passes the 117th Congress.

Anna Louise Gaynor is co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.
Dec. 7, 2020. The following is a slightly
the Congressional Freethought Caucus,
quent victims of such laws.
olution seeking the global repeal of blas-
'reth Crimes that have no actual victims'
'son to stand up for religious and intellec-
tial freedom in a world gone mad with
jamin Raskin's remarks
January / February 2021  |  Madison, Wisconsin  |  FFRF  |  FREETHOUGHT TODA Y
strates to the public its trustworthiness.
FFRF is proud to win such a generous rating.
This isn’t all, however. Charity Navigator has placed
in the tiny fraction of charities attaining a 100
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 des-
FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION
AS A 4-STAR RATED CHARITY
DECEMBER 23, 2020
By U.S. Rep Jamie Raskin
By U.S. Rep Jamie Raskin
M r. 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.
We have seen this at work in the past,
where religious persecution has led to
terrorism
In this new era of intellec-
tual and religious oppression, we must
be vigilant and we must stand up for
religious freedom today. A Resolution 512
calls for the global repeal of blasphemy
laws. It is time for a new beginning.

Blasphemy is a Crime Victim
REPEAL OF GLOBAL BLASPHEMY, HERESY & APOSTASY LAWS
REP. JAMIE RASKIN
D-Maryland, 8th District
Bethesda, Rockville, Silver
Spring

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, GiveDirectly, 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 the family at his capitol office or by mail to his district office at 51 Monroe Street, Suite 503, Rockville, MD 20850.
Religious quote removed from Army signatures

Employees of Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri have been instructed not to include religious messages in emails or 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 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 the Christian faith or 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 #91 staff have been reminded not to participate in religious observance during school events.

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

FFRF Legal Fellow Brendan Johnson sent a letter 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 partake 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 Brenda 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 asked 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 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 Marlee Tonge.

Abolishing the team chaplainship would not alter student athletes’ ability to pray, but it would prevent some students 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.

“I am not aware the Boise State did not travel with the football team to our recent game in Wyoming and the university will no longer include a chaplain in their travel party,” Thornton wrote in a response to the FFRF.

Written references to Mt. Thornton as the chaplain of the football team have been removed 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 prayer leader 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 district community member 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 Cligston 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 Harrodsburg 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.

The district continued in a letter of response the photo has been taken down. 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 is from Cartoons for the Irreverent: Celebrating the Wit of Don Addis, available through ffrf.org/shop. This unique collection, published by FFRF, celebrates the wit and irreverence of Don Addis, a legendary editorial cartoonist and atheist. This unique collection, published by FFRF, celebrates the wit and irreverence of Don Addis, a legendary editorial cartoonist and atheist. This unique collection, published by FFRF, celebrates the wit and irreverence of Don Addis, a legendary editorial cartoonist and atheist.
Megachurches abuse PPP funds

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 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 “inhumane and tyrannical.” The right to be free from that compulsion is religious liber- ty we have always understood in.

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 PPP 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 ripe with fraud and abuse. Yet, according to the SBA’s guidance, churches qualify for CARES Act funds even if they’re never registered as a church with the IRS. Receiving these taxpayer funds could be literal- ly 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 adminis- tration treated churches — even hosting secretive White House calls for Trump’s closest faith leaders and church support- ers 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 are never forgiven. So maybe, just maybe, years from now we’ll know if the People were defrauded.

We’ll know sooner if journalists start digging. Matthew W. Guerrero, a reporter for 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 mon- ey. 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 be- tween $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 cook- ie 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 tax- payers. 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.

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 poses big trouble ahead for our secular laws and policies.

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

Earlier in 2020, the court 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 voted with the majority in the earlier ruling 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, who lead the 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 of the virus, Cuomo had slightly 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 now before 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 ultraliberals on the court (which nobody speculatively has 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 similar activities, Sotomayor wrote, and Gorsuch had 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 Episcopal 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 dissenting 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 retroactively on a renewed application if the shutdowns began 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 the atypical 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 worst 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 coronavirus medical experts tell us facilitate the spread of COVID-19: large groups of people gathering together, speaking and singing in close proximity indoors for extended periods of time.” She added: “The Constitution does not forbid states from responding to the 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?

By Linda Greenhouse

Linda Greenhouse

The Supreme Court has become a prize in war over how far the country will go to privilege religious rights over other rights, including the right not to be discriminated against.

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

The endorsement of grievance conservation 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 constitutional right to same-sex marriage. 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 grate at Alito’s mind. Alito added, “I 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 unilaterally, 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 conservation, 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 Philadelph, 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 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.

The 6th Circuit panel’s unanimous ruling that the school was somehow unusual because it was issued by one Democratic-appointed judge, Karen Nelson, to Danville Christian Academy, said that “it is called by God to provide in-person instruction to its students,” the school has gone to Vankaana, who has supervisory jurisprudence 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 have been 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?”

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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 Javey and Mark Dann. Also attached to SRT are AnnieLaughlin, Communications team members Amit Pal and Bailey Bachrach-Mackesy and FFRF’s legal team. SRT maintains 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:
- Effective using the appropriations process to deny funding for regressive and doctrines 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, the author of “Killing in God’s Name,” and contacting Christian Nationalist leaders in Congress.
- Supporting key pieces of legislation.
- FFRF has been recognized by the caucus as one of the main thought leaders in the secular movement.

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 280-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 vote today.
- The Equality Act, which prohibits discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation and gender identity, passed 256-173.
- The Religious Freedom Restoration Act’s most common state/church adjoint bills were threats to LGBTQ rights. The next most common bills were those 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.
- 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 our 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 the during the fight on Christian Nationalist Judge Justin Walker.

Stopping violations

Often, FFRF will hear about a violation happening in the immediate future. SRT works to stop these violations before they occur. SRT also works 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 drafted 89 op-eds, articles, blogs and letters to the editor.

By the numbers

In 2020, SRT completed:
- 42 state campaigns 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 2,000 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, which eliminates the Trump administration’s 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.
- 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.

Outlets that published FFRF pieces include Religion Dispatches, Friendly Atheist, the Wisconsin State Journal, National Affairs, Madison.com, Salt Lake Tribune, the Miami Herald and Rewire News. Shaping public opinion is not just about writing letters; it also means 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. Often when it becomes clear that our congressional allies had no appetite to oppose the measure, we began to focus on transparency and accountability. The media responded and we also often go to organizations for comment and information. We even broke the PPP story of FFRF and 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 ops 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 Barrett, 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.
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 agenda 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 may make for a relatively cautious chamber that could carefully assess which legislative opportunities available. Yet the Biden administration opens up lots of opportunities to undo damage and to begin the separation of state and church, especially in regulations, executive orders, and guidance.

Here’s the plan:

Engaging the new administration and undoing harm from the outgoing one

The Trump administration engages in over three dozen rules, regulations, guidelines, and commissions designed to take away your civil and secular rights. We will be working to undo and remove harmful regulations and shut down some of Trump’s extrajudicial commissions: the 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 the court packing from the Trump administration will stop after the presidential inauguration. We will be working to make sure that this new administration will undo and remove the judicial nominees who have been placed over the past four years, undoing harm from the Trump administration, and ensuring that all of these appointments will be made up 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 advanced to work on 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. The Senate passed 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 Oct. 1. The Blapheomy 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 will be hard to manage as Trump is not leaving the country. The Equality Act will be very hard to get to the president’s desk. We’ll be working diligently to encourage more members of Congress to join the caucus. Look for more opportunities to help our 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’re 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 of bills, and it will also consider their social media engagement, press releases, and more 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 undoing the Trump administration and enacting 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 victories for Congress and the administration, and more holding legislators accountable. The best thing you can do today is to renew your membership. If you do not already buy FFRF, or better yet, sign up for a gift membership.

Let’s need your help, but more than that, we need members. We need numbers. Membership equals power. Political power is the only thing that 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 in our legislative session, and get moving.

Mark Dann is FFRF’s director of government affairs.

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 appointment of judges and other government officials who adhere to and actively promote 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,” said Johnnie Y. Yellock, 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 Government 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 based on the separation of religion, science, and moral values, while opposing discrimination against atheists, agnostics, humanists, seekers, religious and nonreligious people.

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 Religious 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 flaunted international law to attack religious liberty and promote religion over the law for American Atheists. We look forward to working with the new administration to reverse these 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.”

January / February 2021 | Madison, Wisconsin | FFRF | FREETHOUGHT TODAY
FFRF awards $17,750 in Brian Bolton competition

Grad/older student essay contest winners

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 12 winners and nine honorable mentions of the Brian Bolton Essay Contest for Graduates/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 panders 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 Akron. Bolton is also underwriting FFRF’s Bible Accountability Project to call attention to the continuing dominance of biblical beliefs.

FFRF thanks Dean and Garea 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 Dan Ardel, Dan Barker, Darrell Barker, Bill Dunn, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Stephen Hirtle, Judy Jacobs, Linda Josheff, Dan who报价es 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 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 has attempted to enact policies that are favorable among white evangelicals, a key voting bloc of Trump’s political success 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 of color would 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 funnelled 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 wellbeing. 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.”

FFRF awarded Miriam $3,500.

By Miriam Barnicle

FFRF awarded Miriam $3,500.

Freedom from religion is granted by the U.S. Constitution and has been a right guaranteed to Americans since 1802, when the Department of Health and Human Services rolled back regulations that barred humanists from using federal funds to provide services to Americans. As religions gained power, they started to court our nation’s leaders. In 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

Sudhi Ham Myres, 29, Virginia Commonwealth, $2,500.

Fourth place

Nicole Dirksen (Ranni), 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

Isha 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)

Emelia 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.
Kaviar Kaman, 25, New Jersey Institute of Technology.
Brionna McCumber, 23, Colorado State University.
Yarrow Mead, 25, Hamline University.
Yamarie Trujillo, 28, University of Central Florida.
Andrew Young, 22, University of Denver.
Natural is my religion. Growing up, while my classmates spent the weekends in Sunday school, I slipped off into the forest for my own spiritual and moral instruction. Gentle deer reminded me of how others, chattering squirrels taught me the importance of advocating for basic rights, a mother bear helping her cub taught me 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 battles. 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” between religion and public policy, ever since when President Trump was elected, he assembled an administration that took a sledgehammer to that wall (which had buffer every different wall along the border). The president handed the reins of the federal government directly to the Christian dominonists, who used 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 his 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 the destruction of EPA policies meant to bring the president’s powerful industry backers back into the fold of wealth and power.

According to Pruitt, “The biblical worldview with respect to these issues is that we have a responsibility to manage and cultivate 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 proselytization.”

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?

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 California University.

As a leader of a nation that was founded on the Jeffersonian principles of the separation of church and state, Pence uses religion to further his political agenda.

As a member of a community that faces unapproachable atrocities at the hands of a radical blameworthy terrorism, I invoke the words of another Christian who followed a similar path to address this issue.

“When you have a choice between a protective and a blameworthy practice, it is your duty to choose the blameworthy practice.”

—Martin Luther King Jr., 1967

As a leader of a nation that was founded on the Jeffersonian principles of the separation of church and state, Pence uses religion to further his political agenda.
Religion is antiquated and irrelevant

By Nicole 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 religions intermingle with politics. When the two become enmeshed, policy changes are made to accommodate religious beliefs which 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 on Christian values. LGBTQ+ rights, provided the country were heavily based on scientific evidence, this would indicate that science would matter. Yet, many state legislatures have passed laws violating the rights of 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 on Christian values. LGBTQ+ rights, provided the country were heavily based on Christian values.

By Rebecca Barrett

The presence of religion in government has long been contentious. While some, seeing religion as a guide 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, in an explicitly Christian prayer. Monumental 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 being twisted beyond recognition, as people like Trump use free speech as a tool to promote their own religious viewpoints, I believe we would not see the cases of Santa Claus as a God, the primary of Christianity in public spaces, in politics and in public discourse is causing the United States to slide towards theocratic democracy. No individual politician has a seat in the political conversation, they are left out, morality 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.

Nicole, 29, attends South Dakota State University, studying biochemistry and government 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 my 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.”
Politics and religion — the oldest con in the book

FFFR awarded Ipsa $750.

Ipsa Banerjee

"G
door blesses the United States of America" as the norm to conform religion. People practice no one balks twice at. Though the separation of church and state has been advocated for since the time of the Founding Fathers, religion remains intertwined with government as a tacit ‘‘act of passage.’’ Trump used his ‘‘bully pulpit’’ to indulge

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time. Without fearing the consequences of a supernatur- al God that there is no evidence for, religion 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 pardonable politicians. Because candidates are mold- ed 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 emotion 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 put them in a box, limiting progress. Now, these leaders must pandefer to religious beliefs and values to avoid being outcast by voters and ostracized by other policymakers. Public officials must make decisions in accord with their religious beliefs and campaign platforms, especially if they hope for reelection and acceptance among others of the same party. Finally, viewing politicians through a political lens for their beliefs rather than 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 ‘‘forget and for- get’’ 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 e- vidence that guides its followers. This inher- ent mystery surrounding its existence al- lows for strategic employment in order to influence, gain power or even conceal cor- ruption. If religion is replaced with ethics and reality, voters and leaders alike would experience unity, change and growth. Pol- itics needs to banish God and faith-based reasoning because in the end, religion is simply powerful marketing that dupes en- tire masses with the promise of virtue.

Ipsa, 22, attends Arizona State University after graduating from nearby Hamilton High School in Tempe, Ariz. In May 2020, with a degree in integrative biology and psychology, ‘‘I volunteer virtually for Red Cross’’ Biological Services de- partment. She learned the importance of drivers and delivery and voluntee for the Phoe- nix 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.”

Politics and religion — the oldest con in the book

Politics and religion have been inter- twined throughout the United State’s history. For example, although it is not required, the Christian religion is conventionally sworn in using the bible. Additionally, the mention of ‘‘God’’ or our ‘‘Creator’’ can be seen across national documents and symbols of national Independ- ence 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, un- der God.’’ Even all coins and paper money
Religion and science are like oil and water

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 informed by rational decision-making. Thus, science is relevant to the issue of politics as a methodological, 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 among most researchers the same: to discover the truth of this universe as they are. Similarly, the political process is inherently an active one. As society evolves, so do their concerns, technology, access to information and understanding of the world. As new information is added, the collective database, growth occurs accordingly. Politics is an active process that requires a growing knowledge base, not a stagnant one. The active, 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 low-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 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 this debate. Ancient texts should not be doctrines for use in any rational discourse. Government is a space which affects each and every individual, without exception. 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 distortions of the past.

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.”

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TFNF awarded Michelle $500.

By Michelle Krauser

“God” not part of secular Constitution

A secular society in which the government is prohibited from establishing a state 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. The Founding Fathers 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 non-religious 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 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 public discourse is pervasive, as evidenced by anti-abortion and anti-lgbtq, 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. Neopagan? 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 religious beliefs or lack thereof, which has led to horrific violence, injustice and oppression across the globe. It is not coincidental 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 religious beliefs be propounded as a perversion political tool. The Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause were incorporated into the Constitution because history has shown repeating 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 and was graduated from Oakland University in 2017. “I am researchinghogback sharks at Coastal Carolina University. I interned with the Student Conservation Association at Elizabeth Morton National Wildlife Refuge in New York and Wisconsin 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, each included a $100 award for each. Below are their names, along with the headlines of their essays and their personal bio. To read their essays, go to freethoughttoday.com.

**Michelle Krauser**

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 been 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.

Carroll

John Carroll — The foundational chokers

John Carroll is an educational choker won 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 am working on a degree in music composition and pursuing my masters in musical performance. I have performed with NYU. I was music director and composed scores for two shows this year, and I was awarded first place in ICarrHollListen. I am currently working with a local theater on my setting on autism and the concert environment.”

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 Filipinos-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.”

Emella Canlas

Yarrow Mead — Let the first-born die: Christian Nationalists and the hypocrisy of allowing religious liberty to dictate policy

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

I am working on my masters of religion degree at the New York Institute of Technology. I am a self-employed metalsmith, and my capstone project is focused on merging the worlds of art and education by creating curricula that encourages young students’ confidence and technical skills while also teaching them high-level academic writing.

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 chemical engineering and then worked as a technical roles at ExxonMobil. I served three years in the oil and gas industry, as well as two years in 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.”

Rut Dickey-Cha- sin — 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.”

Rut Dickey-Cha- sin

Yarrow Mead

Yarrow Mead

Rut Dickey-Cha- sin

Emella Canlas

Michelle Krauser

John Carroll

Emella Canlas

Selina Chan

Rut Dickey-Cha- sin

Yarrow Mead

Rut Dickey-Cha- sin

Selina Chan

Emella Canlas
Legal Team (Continued from page 1)

Court victories

• In 2020, FFRF secured two court victories that finalized a victory in another case. FFRF persuaded a Kansas school district to discontinue mandating that students avoid 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 nondiscrimination.

• FFRF favorably settled a case it filed with Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) against Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. HUD had a pattern and practice of denying fee waivers for freedom of information requests. CREW filed suit on behalf of FFRF and FFRF's attorneys were entitled to attorneys' fees. The Superior Court of the District of Columbia ordered a total of $217,949.15 to FFRF's attorneys, including $124,687.50 to outside counsel. The court agreed that the constitutional law is relevant to the case. FFRF was reimbursed the remainder of the fee and attorneys' fees to both groups—$93,251.65 to FFRF.

• In April, FFRF won its case at the Court of Appeals granting 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 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 court reversed the previous judgment and remanded the case back to the district court for further proceedings.

Judiciary

Continued from page 1

coming radical changes to how religious liberty is defined in America," the report was released by the American Civil Liberties Union. "As we 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 in a new way."

For instance, in a 5-4 decision in July, the Supreme Court allowed public health state-level pandemic restrictions on church services that are commensurate with restrictions on places of worship. Just four months later, thanks to newly appointed Justice Amy Coney Barrett, the court flipped and held that 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 on places of worship. This decision will likely signal to other states and federal courts across the country that FFRF submits its briefs to help guide the court in decision-making and are invaluable in contributing the voice of free thinkers 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 in cases involving religious exemptions and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Two were filed in our home state at Wisconsin's Supreme Court and involving religious freedom in light of the restrictions involving the pandemic. Others involved other exemptions to stay-at-home orders, prayer at school, a right to a public hearing in a public property and the Muslim travel ban.

Nonadvocacy litigation

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: Trump Appointments and the Future of the Federal Judiciary." (See summary on Page 1.) This report exposes the Christian Nationalist takeover of the federal courts across the country. This is causing to the separation of state and church. The report describes in alarming detail how 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 Marsh et al. are FFRF's Legal Department directors.

Our "godless Constitution separates church from state, and federal courts have not been fulfilling American principle," the report concludes. "Our nation has always understood religious freedom is a protection, not a tool to advance Christian Nationalism who've captured the courts have turned these and other hallowed principles on their head."

Read the full report, principally authored by FFRF Attorney Elizabeth Webber. The report is available at ffrf.us/judicial.

CRANKMAIL

Well, FFRF’s celebratory certainly had a field day af- ter FFRF persuaded a Kansas school district to discontinue fundraising for Franklin Graham’s proselytizing Christian Charities. Once you’ve had a gander at the mail we got. (Printed as received — including an abundance of foul language.)

FFRF: By keeping your mother fucking mouths shut about kids getting toys from GenesisAdores, it makes you look like a prattlehead. — Garden-L Chambers

Kids toys: What sort of sick fucks are you who hate our heat of religious freedom has prompted you to send letters and take kids toys away? you seriously have to be some sick cock sucking motherfuckers. fuck off your selves you fucking cunt who keeps pieces of shit, fucking dirty pieces of human shit — Robert Bailey

Kansas Cititan: I will be donating 51000’s of dollars to to Liberty Middle School because of your ha- rassment. Christiains the world over do the most good for the poor and disenfranchised. Everyone knows it. — Cathy C. of Iowa

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To read the full report, go to ffrf.us/judicial

Evil Website

You are a evil place and should be removed from society. You will be in hell for what you do to this great country. I hope and pray you lose every battle you try and. My children will be taught there is a God who by the way there is a God and on your death bed you will call out to God for sure before Wilson Hey! You really are a disgusting, piece of shit or- ganization. You’re actions and fucking threats in Pratt, KS are reprehensible. Of course, we should all expect this from a fuckd up state like Wisconsin and fuccked up. Godless people like you are. RRT IN HEEL — John Holm

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The right to decide how, when, where we die

By Lamar Hankins

FRF’s new secular poll results reported in the Oct./Nov. 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, founded in 1988 by Dr. 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 a motley 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.

Humphry’s 1991 book Final Exit, in its late 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 philosopher Fay Ginsh, 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 terminally ill 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, train a volunteer training team 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 that said, “Our final freedom — Our final freedom.”

The “Guiding Principle” of the nonprofit, volunteer-directed Final Exit Network explains in philosopher: “Mentally competent adults have a basic human right to end their lives when they suffer from a fatal or irreversible 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 companionship, 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.
• Working 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 findadeathnetwork.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 in even 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.

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

Judges 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.

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

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

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.”

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 FFRF’s Bill of Rights nativity display.

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 Foukles.

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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), to replace “equal time” displays on public forums when vandalized or removed.

Let Reason Prevail!
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 Lakeland, 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 Taubbee
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, or lack thereof, of an organization and its leaders. 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 sections because he has no interest in the topic.

I disagree with him. In fact, my favorite part of Freethought Today is the inclusion of Crankmail and Black Collar Crime sections because they are my favorite sections, and “near-death experience” that I had ever experienced. Obviously, the flight did land safely, but that was the closest thing to a “near-death experience” that I had ever encountered, and I definitely 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.

Georgiann 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.

Shirley Moll and Steve Petersen
Minnesota

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 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

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, my email inbox 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 biblical quotes and other Christian propaganda. After many complaints and lengthy meetings with the principal, she 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 $30,000 annually to an evangelical Christian nonprofit called Youth For Christ in the form of a community and cultural grant. Similarly, the observed 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
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 extravaganza convention in a different city around the 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 have testified 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? There is some talk even of property taxes! If they did, homeless shelters and other needed community services would be a lot more common.

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.

I’m hoping for a day when none of us is uncomfortable calling our friends to drive 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 ‘atheistics’ 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 Jesus, tian imagery in civic life.

An earlier story in the Ventura County Star newspaper noted that “atheistic” had objected to the county seal. The new logo is nice, and it seems to count as a step forward — away from Christ in every 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. It’s still a long needed word to describe believers’ natty 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 15 major cities on Sundays. To find out if your city broadcasts it, check outxfff.org/freethought-matters.

Devilishly good cake was as good as its name

I decided to try Paul Gaylord’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 invented)!}

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 Free-thought of the Day. So, I thought it was a good time to write the following for FFRF members who are also science fiction fans.

Clarke, in The Songs of Distant Earth, states a statement about religion which 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 genetic expression), so this would truly be a clean start.

“The task was, of course, impossible as well as heartbreaking. With tears in my eyes, I watched the ships being launched new away the Veda, the bible, the Tripitaka, the Quran and all the immense body of literature — fiction and nonfiction — that was based upon it. Despite all the wealth of beauty and wisdom these words contained, they could not be allowed to reinfect fresh minds with the poisons of religious hatred, belief in the supernatural, and the pious gibberish which caused so many men and women had once thought to seize themselves at the cost of adding 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 by religion. The sons of religious hatred, belief in the supernatural, and nonfiction — that was based upon it. Despite all the wealth of beauty and wisdom these words contained, they could not be allowed to reinfect fresh minds with the poisons of religious hatred, belief in the supernatural, and the pious gibberish which caused so many men and women had once thought to seize themselves at the cost of adding their minds.

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Arrested / Charged

Nathaniel S. Myers, 38, Clives, CA: 6 counts of lewd acts on a child under age 14. It’s alleged that Myers molested multiple young children under age 14 during a 2-year period. He is known locally as a "predator priest." The case is bound over to superior court and is scheduled for a preliminary hearing on March 8th.

Michael M. Penkava, 53, Palmyra, NJ: 28 criminal counts of sexual exploitation of a minor. He’s accused of assaulting 2 male minors when he was a Jehovah’s Witness church elder, is accused of failing to report the sexual abuse.

Timothy L. Waters, 43, Greenville, SC: Criminal sexual conduct with a minor and 2nd-degree criminal sexual conduct with child. It’s alleged that Smith sexually abused a 7-year-old who attended church services, said a report stated. The case was filed on November 16. It is alleged that Norberto-Guerrero, pastor at Iglesia de Cristo de la Fe, brought a 13-year-old Malesker assists the church in all services. He was 12 when the abuse occurred for over 3 years starting in 2007. Another man who attended the church as a child alleged Thompson molested him when he was 12.

Andrey Kovalenko, 30, Palmyra, NJ: 4 counts of mail fraud. Kovalenko served as a priest at the Holy Trinity Catholic Church. He was arrested in connection with a multi-jurisdictional investigation into the operations of the Church of God. The investigation was inspired by a statewide sting targeting trafficking of unaccompanied minors for assault.

Lilly is pastor at the Christian Church of Chester, for former White Rock Christian Church. The allegations occurred in 2018, when she was a part-time resident of the church. The investigation was prompted by a national trend of child pornography being exchanged online. Lilly admitted to possessing images of children engaged in prohibited conduct. She was charged with 15 criminal counts of sexual exploitation of a minor. She pleaded guilty to multiple assaults on a different girl in 2003–2005 while working as a youth pastor in Little Rock, AR. She was sentenced to 8 years in prison.

John Allen, 76, A Madison, Wisconsin: Pleaded to guilty assault and conviction of molesting a 2-year-old boy between 2007 and 2012 when he was pastor at St. Margaret Mary Catholic Church. 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, 11-22-20

George John, 70, A Naples, FL: Guilty by jury of forcible rape. Humphrey, pastor at Hollywood Full Gospel Baptist Cathedral, was accused of raping a boy, 10, in 2007. He was convicted and sentenced to prison. La Rosa-Lopez admitted molesting a 15-year-old girl in 1997 on a church camping trip to Montana. He was also pleaded guilty to multiple assaults on a different girl in 2002–2003 while working as a youth pastor in Little Rock, AR. He was convicted and sentenced to 8 years in prison. Source: KEVN, 11-23-20

Andrey Kovalenko

A forensic review of electronic devices seized from his home revealed apparent images of child pornography. He was charged with 15 criminal counts of sexual exploitation of a minor. He pleaded guilty to multiple assaults on a different girl in 2003–2005 while working as a youth pastor in Little Rock, AR. He was convicted and sentenced to 8 years in prison. Source: nj105.com, 11-23-20

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

The city of Madison, Wisconsin is home to the Catholic Diocese of the West-

ing Wendt in the Kayakole State of the Church of Latter-day Saints. The diocese is

able. A probable cause statement said Stepe filed a complaint about a user who shared sexual explicit photos showing nude or partially clothed prepubes-

cultural organization.

Bret Welty, 49, Boise, ID: 15 years in pris-

by 2018, the Family History Library in Salt Lake City had

90s. The priest alleges McCarrick assaulted him at

nally being sued by 4 plain-

of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when arrest

ons showing nude or partially clothed prepubes-

The girl was staying with Welty's family for the

wrongful manner.

Close consultations by the Archdiocese of Cam-

by claimants, 25 offers remain outstanding and 46

nversation led to a Pulitzer Prize and the 2015 Os-

The pope himself called this "a sad time" for the

The church also cut ties with his wife, Laura

“Why is now known, through investigation un-

The girl's parents, who said they

in their respective dioceses as far back as 1999, it was hard to bring them to
to the Pope. McCarrick was defrocked by the papal

in. Church attorneys previously said the teen could

said plaintiffs' attorney Jesse Forbes. "They were

The boy was younger than 16. Welty, pastor at Hard Rock Re-

is a Catholic priest and former bishop of the West-

and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod are being sued by a
colleague of him watching the porn. The church also cut ties with his wife, Laura

The plaintiff alleges as a freshman she was "cat-

His family moved to Annapolis, Maryland in

a complaint about a user who shared sexual explicit photos showing nude or partially

manner. He was like a drug to me. I

rural community. He was an obsessive collector of books and

Lara Gayle Clark, 89, a former Massachusetts

in Salem, WVA, set up a hotline for clergy sexual abuse in 2018

of them to avoiding clergy sexual abuse in Florida's Catholic churches. Prosecutors

States are now calling for Sunshine Act legislation that would allow

munity, diocese, and the

of him watching the porn. The church also cut ties with his wife, Laura

of them to avoiding clergy sexual abuse in Florida's Catholic churches. Prosecutors

states was ‘spraying pee all over.’

The society seeks restitution and institutional change and a ban on former

Civil Lawsuits Filed

The Catholic Archdiocese of Newark, NJ, is being sued by 4 plain-

The girl's parents, who said they

in. Church attorneys previously said the teen could

are being sued by 4 adult

by defrocked Cardinal Theodore McCarrick. This report, the

by Priests. “Are they now left to twist in the wind?”

The report underscores the need for stat-

The school was closed in 2000 also limited officials' access to medi-

were among 44 defendants

Mary Jo Morgan, said she testified that Fr. Lawlor

was 'spraying pee all over. '

Shoop is pastor at Cow-

The boys were 6 at the time of the alleged

hesitated to help her with the abuse because she was 14 and

The archdiocese issued a statement that said it was

The school was 'spraying pee all over. '

The case is still pending. Sources: Beresford Eagle, 11-

Church attorneys previously said the
teen could walk out of the meeting with her

In 2007 after a church trial. The archdiocese

New York York.

marriage and in 1971 by a priest at Immaculate

Kierra Williams is hearing from 23 people abused

By defrocked Cardinal Theodore McCarrick. This report, the

The Management of Sexual Abuse is hearing from 23 people abused

the 14 defendants in the

and the

Church-North American Se-

san Gayle Clark, 62, Sonora, CA: 4 years and

The girl was 'spraying pee all over. '

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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.

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. Finally, I 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.

By Ben Hart

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

Clarence Darrow Award
Ed Asner: It’s not easy to challenge religion

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 Zeenos 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.

By Ed Asner

This is a beautiful award. My God, I’m 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 mundane 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.