

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



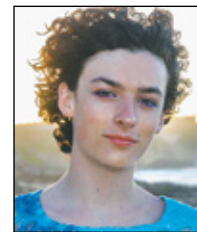
**Megan Phelps-Roper:
Leaving Westboro**

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**Courts have
smashed down
wall of separation**

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**'Don't Say Gay'
bill will hurt
teens like me**

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April 2022

FFRF sues school over Christian revival

**FFRF joins parents,
students in federal
lawsuit in W.Va.**

Nearly a dozen parents and students, with help from the Freedom From Religion Foundation, filed a high-profile federal lawsuit on Feb. 17 over a Christian revival in a West Virginia school that prompted a recent student walkout.

More than 100 students, led by Huntington High School senior Max Nibert, staged a dramatic walkout on Feb. 9 to protest some students being forced to attend an evangelical Christian revival at the school on Feb. 2. The walkout, with students chanting "Separate the church and state" and "My faith, my choice," was covered not only nationally by the Washington Post, NPR and CNN, but also internationally.

The legal complaint in the case, *Mays v. Cabell County Board of Education*, notes,



Photo by the Associated Press

Student and FFRF plaintiff Max Nibert holds up signs he and others would use during a walkout rally outside his school in Huntington, W.Va., on Feb. 9.

"For years, school system employees have violated the constitutional rights of students by promoting and advancing the Christian religion, as well as by coercing students into participating in Christian religious activity." The law-

suit charges that two Huntington High School teachers during homeroom on Feb. 2 escorted their entire classes to the revival. Students, including a Jewish student who asked to leave but was not permitted to do so, were instructed to bow their heads in prayer and raise up their hands and were warned they needed to make a decision to follow Jesus or face eternal torment. Adult volunteers from a local church went into the crowd to pray with students. Plaintiff students observed teachers and administrators praying with church volunteers. Huntington High Principal Daniel Gleason was present at the assembly along with assistant principals.

Evangelist Nik Walker, who runs Nik Walker Ministries and had been leading revivals in Huntington for weeks, even prayed to thank God for the fact "that you are not going to let these students

See Lawsuit on page 9

Judges appear skeptical of Abbott's censorship of FFRF

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has said its final piece in its case before an appeals court against the Texas governor's censorship of its Capitol display.

A district judge had granted FFRF permanent relief last May in its six-year lawsuit challenging Gov. Greg Abbott's censorship of its Bill of Rights exhibit in the Texas legislative building. U.S. District Court Judge Lee Yeakel ordered declaratory and injunctive relief to ensure that Abbott and the State Preservation Board would not violate FFRF's free speech rights.

Abbott and the director of the State Preservation Board puzzlingly appealed that decision, however, saying that since the board changed its rules, the case became moot. The rule changes declared that all exhibits placed in the Capitol are now "government speech." FFRF maintains that the label doesn't substantively change the fact that private groups and individuals are still permitted to replace displays in exhibit areas of the Capitol.

FFRF Associate Counsel Sam Grover in recent oral arguments before the 5th U.S. Circuit of Appeals noted that under the revised rule, groups have placed displays on such topics as pro-marijuana legalization and opposition to mass incarceration in Texas. This speech is incompatible with the government's contention that the state

is crafting the public forum message. The Capitol still has a forum as it did before, Grover contended, it's just that the governor and Preservation Board would like to continue to censor FFRF's speech.

Grover's arguments seemed to strike a chord, as the circuit court judges appeared skeptical of the state's argument that the case is now moot. Judge Patrick Higginbotham questioned whether the state was successful in converting the private exhibits into expression by the government. He commented, "The problem is whether they have succeeded in making all these publications actually the expression of the state of Texas, as opposed to private individuals." Judge Jennifer Walker Elrod asked about the displays that are currently allowed in the Capitol, remarking that the state is "still taking all comers" when it comes to requesting the placing of an exhibit.

Here's more background on the case. FFRF had placed a Bill of Rights "nativity" display in the Capitol building in December 2015 in response to a Christian nativity there. Abbott, as chair of the Preservation Board, while permitting the Christian exhibit, ordered FFRF's display removed. FFRF won its lawsuit at the district court level in 2018. In April 2020, the 5th Circuit ruled that FFRF was entitled to more permanent, lasting relief than the district court initially awarded, and sent the case back to award such relief.

Artwork: Jacob Fortin
FFRF's "nativity" display has been at the center of a lawsuit in Texas.

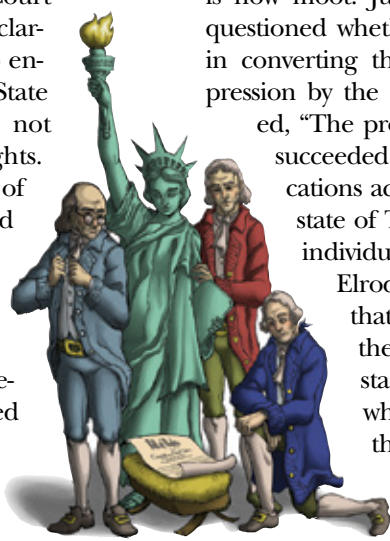


Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor shows off the new Wall of Immortals in Freethought Hall next to a painting of FFRF principal founder Anne Nicol Gaylor.

A love story for FFRF

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

The Freedom From Religion Foundation's secular "Wall of Immortals" went up fittingly around Valentine's Day to immortalize those who have shown their undying love for FFRF.

The display, comprising 168 generous donors over the past 45 years who have left bequests or made posthumous provisions for FFRF's continued support, is found in the first floor of Freethought Hall, FFRF's office building in downtown Madison, Wis.

It's appropriately surrounded by a portrait of FFRF's "immortal" principal founder **Anne Nicol Gaylor** and some memorabilia about her.

Going through our records and double-checking names and proofs was a moving experience for Dan Barker and me. We personally knew so many of these kind individuals who have played an outsized role in FFRF's stability and resulting successes.

An amazing number of these "bequesters" were activists and stalwart secularists in their own right.

See *Immortal* on page 2

Immortal

Continued from page 1

There's a plaque for **Phyllis Grams**, the feisty original plaintiff in FFRF's challenge of a Ten Commandments monument in La Crosse, Wis. When she received death threats over the phone, she would respond, "Tell me more!" She planned out her own memorial service, which Dan presided over. The room erupted with laughter when a recording of Frank Sinatra singing "I did it my way," was played, per Phyllis' instructions.

Darling **Catherine Fahringer**, who ran our San Antonio chapter and presided over a long-running show on cable TV there, adored student activists, was a state/church stalwart who spent the last two decades of her life trumpeting "freedom from religion" and doing everything she could to drum up "good trouble" in Texas. As she put it, "If we hang on with sweet determination, we will probably end up as a respectable segment of society. And wouldn't that be lovely?" And we hang on, with sweet determination, in Catherine's memory.

Then there's **Clarence Reinders**, owner of a motel in Marshfield, Wis., who sued, with FFRF, to challenge a roadside

church separation for posterity." Clarence made his mark for posterity.

One of our earliest bequests, in 1985, came from **A.H. Gordon**, whom we knew as "Mr. Gordon." He was a charming elderly English-born free-thinker who used to drop by FFRF's first rented space near the Wisconsin Capitol during his many long hikes. He loved walking and it was tragic when his health began to fail and he informed us there would be no more dropping by.

There's also Eric Kirschner of San Francisco, whose bequest was received in 1998. He suggested and paid for FFRF's first postal meter (what a "non-godsend" for our office!) and did so for several years before his death. A gay man in an era when it was pretty tough to be gay, he was so kind, an absolute pussycat. But you'd never know at first if you happened to phone him — he was ferocious until he made sure that you weren't a telemarketer!

We were incredibly touched that **Butterfly McQueen** (yes, the actress Butterfly McQueen) — who became one of FFRF's first Lifetime Members and certainly the first-time celebrity member —

named our group as a beneficiary on her bank account. After her tragic death in a fire in 1995, the account was rapidly depleted and thus FFRF received nothing, that is monetarily — but the international publicity for FFRF when it was reported Butterfly remembered our group, was priceless. How superlatively kind of Butterfly — who supported so many needy charities and public schools — to remember FFRF.

Among the other celebrity "Immortals" is **Philip Appleman**. He was a renowned poet, distinguished Darwin scholar and gave crowd-pleasing poetry readings, but was in person a one-man cheerleading team for us at FFRF. Every time we took an ad in his favorite New York Times, he would email superlatives. His poetry lives on, including his prescient warning, "Beware the righteous ones."

FFRF board members, including founding members **CJ and Margaret Richards** who died in the 1980s, and **Helen and Michael Hakeem**, who died in the 2000s, are now immortalized, too. They did so much careful oversight of the young FFRF,

also providing such personal enthusiasm and dedication. Both childless couples, they wanted FFRF to live on. The bequest Mike — a retired sociology professor who taught students critical thinking skills — left FFRF in 2006 has finally run out, but it paid for scholarships for hundreds of young college students through last year.

Blanche Fearn, another board member, was the single largest donor when we acquired our initial two-story Freethought Hall, which has since been expanded. The daughter of a Finnish upstairs maid and a French chauffeur, as a young hairdresser, she shrewdly bought a parcel of land in New Jersey in the 1920s that eventually yielded a windfall she generously shared with friends, relatives and FFRF. Her portrait still hangs — where else? — in the original Blanche Fearn Reception Room at Freethought Hall, now FFRF's cozy breakroom for staff. We hailed her as "FFRF's First Freethought Volunteer Extraordinaire" after her death in 1991.

Kay Elwers was a valiant elderly woman who, like the mail carriers of yore, refused to let rain, snow or dark of night keep her from her appointed rounds, holding up her "pro-choice" sign regardless of weather to ensure that Madison patients saw a friendly face as they navigated around anti-abortion pickets. We would try to coax her across the street to warm up in Freethought Hall but she would not be dissuaded. She died in 2008, never letting FFRF know she had made provisions for its future.

The Wall of Immortals includes many donors who were more private. One such fascinating member was **Elizabeth Elliott**, a former secretary to the Christian Scientists in Boston, who, in her retirement, found FFRF. After she went blind, her kind attorney would come and read Freethought Today to her in her nursing home. Her bequest was received in 1997. **Janet Brazill**, who died in 2020, was an ardent feminist freethinker from Colorado Springs who shared my mother's deep concern about keeping abortion safe and legal by getting "God out of government." **Harry Lonsdale**, a well-known environmentalist and gubernatorial candidate in Oregon, died in 2014, before he could see the lower level at Freethought Hall that bears his

name and photo. **Roger Chapman**, a vet who was paralyzed in a car crash, died in 2020, and surprised FFRF with a bequest. I remember picketing then-Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson in below zero weather with Roger in his wheelchair — a dyed-in-the-wool activist who never missed any local gatherings.

Some of the individuals who left larger bequests are living on in other ways, such as dear **Ken Proulx**, FFRF's single largest donor, who died in 2019. Ken was a WWII vet and self-educated man who

made his fortune investing in the stock market during his lunch hours while an assembly line worker at American Motors in Kenosha, Wis. Dan, Anne and I got to know him well through 30 years of visits to his humble home, where he lived a very frugal lifestyle.

Some of the individuals on the Wall of Immortals are particularly unforgettable because they actually notified us when they were dying, such as **Cliff Richards**, who called after receiving a diagnosis that he had, at most, a month to live. He specified that his endowment was to help student activists. He told me that he also left funds to a nonprofit to help Native American female students. What a kind man who has made such a difference in the lives of young people!

These are but a few stories about some of the many remarkable and generous individuals, not forgotten, who live on, not just in the Wall of Immortals, but in the work the Freedom From Religion Foundation is able to accomplish, thanks to their backing. And that's a true love story.

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

For information on becoming an FFRF "Immortal," write to bequest@ffrf.org or call Annie Laurie Gaylor at 608-256-8900.



Photo by Paul Gaylor

Phyllis Grams



Catherine Fahringer



Clarence Reinders

Photo by Brent Nicastro



Butterfly McQueen



Philip Appleman

Photo by Brent Nicastro

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Note to members

For those of you who get the PDF version of Freethought Today, there have been a few changes to the content you can see.

Because of privacy concerns — the PDF can be easily forwarded to non-members — FFRF has stopped including in the PDF version the Black Collar Crime report, names of new Lifetime members, and the names of the Letterbox contributors.

The online version at freethoughttoday.com also follows this protocol. Only the actual print newspaper contains all of these items.

If you would like to continue reading

Black Collar Crime, see the names of FFRF's newest Lifetime members, or see the names of those who contributed to our Letterbox, you will need to change your preferences in how you receive Freethought Today.

In order to do that, follow these simple steps:

Log into your FFRF.org account.
Click on "Update your contact information."
Go down to "Deliver Freethought Today by" and click on either "Newspaper by mail" or "Both PDF and paper copy."
Click "Submit."

Your weekly antidote to the Religious Right

FREETHOUGHT RADIO PODCASTS AND BROADCASTS



FIND OUT MORE: ffrf.org/radio

— Hosted by Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor —
Slightly irreverent views, news, music & interviews

FFRF.ORG FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill will hurt teens like me

This column was originally published in The New York Times on March 12 and is reprinted with permission.

By Will Larkins

Last October, I attended a high school Halloween party. A group of guys from my school surrounded me and shouted homophobic slurs. One even threatened me with physical violence. When I broke down crying in class the next day, my teacher comforted me. She told me that she had gone through something similar when she was my age.

On March 8, the Florida Senate approved the Parental Rights in Education bill, also known as the Don’t Say Gay bill. The bill, which Gov. Ron DeSantis has said he will sign, seeks to ban public schools in the state from teaching about sexual orientation or gender identity from kindergarten through the third grade, or through the 12th grade in a manner deemed “age-inappropriate” by parents. Had the proposed law been in effect last year, my teacher could have put herself in jeopardy by being there for me.

From an early age, I knew I was different. I wasn’t interested in the things other boys my age did, and I didn’t really feel comfortable in the clothes my parents bought me. The struggle for acceptance was not just internal, it also felt as if my classmates didn’t know what to make of me. By fourth grade, I was convinced that I was broken. I didn’t know how to defend myself when other kids made hateful comments or bullied me — I didn’t know why I was the way that I was. Without the vocabulary to articulate why I felt and acted like this, I assumed what they said about me was true. For most of the kids in my grade, I was the only kid like me they knew.

My life changed the summer before seventh grade. A girl at an arts summer camp turned to me on the first day and asked, “Are you LGBTQ?” She explained what each letter meant and showed me pictures on her phone of RuPaul. It felt as if a weight had been taken off my shoulders. The realization that I wasn’t the only one saved my life. I remember stepping away and calling my best friend at the time: “Max, I think I am gay.”

When I came home from camp, I became fascinated with learning more about queer culture. I read about Georgia Black, a Black trans woman who lived in the early 1900s close to where I do now, and I learned that in pre-Colonial times, more than 150 Indigenous tribes acknowledged



Submitted photo

Will Larkins shows off his “Say Gay” sign inside the Florida Capitol after speaking out to the Florida Senate against the proposed “Don’t Say Gay” bill.

third genders in their community and three to five gender roles: female, male, Two Spirit female, Two Spirit male and transgender. I realized how common the experience of falling outside of the gender binary was. As I learned about the history and culture of my community, I grew to understand and love myself. Education made me hate myself less.

I have come to realize that those who

have been so openly hateful toward me often knew little about the queer community — they thought being LGBTQ was a conscious choice. Education didn’t just give me a sense of self-worth, but also the knowledge of a community and lifeline there for countless young people.

LGBTQ teenagers are four times as likely to attempt suicide as their straight counterparts. According to the Trevor Project, a

“Education didn’t just give me a sense of self-worth, but also the knowledge of a community and lifeline there for countless young people.”

crisis intervention and suicide prevention organization for young gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer people, teenagers who learned about LGBTQ issues or people in school were 23 percent less likely to attempt suicide. We have a mental health crisis in the queer community, and Gov. DeSantis and the Republican Party want to outlaw the solution.

I am lucky to have supportive parents, but I am in the minority among my peers. Research has shown that LGBTQ teenagers have a higher risk of experiencing some form of homelessness, with family conflict being the primary cause. Many of my close friends have been thrown out of their homes after coming out to their parents or being outed by others. One of my best friends even stayed with my family for three weeks after he was kicked out of his home because his parents refused to accept that he was trans. Other friends have told me disturbing stories of being physically abused or worse because they strayed from traditional gender norms.

On Feb. 28, I spoke out against the bill on the Florida Senate floor, and on March 7, my friend Maddi Zornek and I led a walkout of more than 500 students at our high school. Republican lawmakers have been echoing the idea that parents know what is best for their kids, not the schools. In some cases that may be true. But parents aren’t trained professionals; unlike schools, they aren’t made to follow a set of standards. For many of my friends in dangerous situations because of their sexuality or gender identity, school has been a space where they could be themselves.

Now, under threat of lawsuits, districts, schools and teachers may be hesitant to talk at all with students about gender identity and sexuality, even if the conversation is “age-appropriate.” The bill also allows the state commissioner of education to establish a “special magistrate” so that prosecuting those in violation of the law would happen much faster than in a normal court.

When I look back to elementary school, I wonder how different my childhood would have been had my classmates and I known that I wasn’t some tragic anomaly, a strange fluke that needed to be fixed. People in support of the bill always ask, “Why do these subjects need to be taught in schools?” To them I would say that if we understand ourselves, and those around us understand us, so many lives will be saved.

Will Larkins is a junior at Winter Park High School, the president and a co-founder of the school’s Queer Student Union and one of the organizers of its Say Gay Anyway walkout.

Activist gets \$5,000 FFRF Catherine Fahringer award

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to be naming Florida teenager Will Larkins, 17, as recipient of its Catherine Fahringer Student Activist Award, which includes a \$5,000 cash scholarship.

Larkins, a junior at Winter Park High School, Fla., is president and co-founder of the school’s Queer Student Union and one of the organizers of an impressive Say Gay Anyway walkout of 500 students on March 7. Larkins even testified in person on Feb. 28 before the Florida Legislature against the punitive measure, which passed on March 8, but, as of press time, not yet been signed into law by Gov. Ron DeSantis.

The Parental Rights in Education bill is also known as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill because it seeks to inhibit or outright prohibit public schools from

teaching about sexual orientation and gender identify. From kindergarten to third grade, such mentions would be illegal, and would only be permitted through the 12th grade if not deemed “age-inappropriate” by any complaining parent. Additionally, the bill would encourage parents to sue districts for alleged violations, and teachers to effectively “out” students to parents.

In a moving guest essay (reprinted on this page), “Florida’s ‘Don’t say gay bill will hurt teens like me,” that ran in The New York Times in March, Larkin recounts being surrounded by classmates at a high school party last year who shouted homophobic slurs, with one student threatening violence.

“When I broke down crying in class the next day, my teacher comforted

me,” Larkins wrote. “She told me that she had gone through something similar when she was my age . . . Had the proposed law been in effect last year, my teacher could have put herself in jeopardy by being there for me.”

Larkins cites statistics from the Trevor Project, which show that LGBTQ teenagers — who are four times more likely to attempt suicide as straight counterparts — are far less likely to attempt suicide if they learn about LGBTQ issues in school.

“We are so impressed with Will Larkins’ courage and activism, for so bravely sharing personal experiences and for speaking out at school and in his state Capitol against this pernicious legislation,” comments Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president.

FFRF has called the bill a theocratic assault.



Will Larkins waves a flag outside his school during a March protest against Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill.

Freethought Today Cryptogram

DMQNWNB Y NG GASZ H LMONMIHQ NOMH. N

ZHIM KZBAWZK HJBAK MIMDX UHSMK BU

DMQNWNB Y HYO N SHY'K JAX HYX BU NK.

— RZXQQNG ONQQMD

This puzzle is from *Freethinking Cryptograms* by FFRF member Brooks Rimes, available on Amazon.com for \$8.95. See bottom of page for description and hint for this puzzle. Answer is on page 21.

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8		9	10	11	12
13						14				15			
16						17				18			
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48					49		50			51		52	
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57	58	59	60					61				62	63
64						65	66			67			68
69						70				71			
72						73				74			

Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Across

1. Improvise

6. Type of sail

9. What exhaust pipes do

13. Utah city

14. Lyric poem

15. S in NASA

16. Best not mentioned

17. New York time

18. Kind of cap

19. *Studs ____, self-described agnostic or a “cowardly atheist”

21. *Zora Neale ____: “Prayer seems to me a cry for weakness”

23. Yang’s opposite

24. One of Man

25. Philosophical system

28. *Atheist Jack London’s novel “Martin ____”

30. Toyota pickup

35. Feline line

37. Bovines

39. Fix a program

40. “Frozen” sister

41. Very pale

43. Living room seat

44. Elephant trainer’s tools

46. Foal’s mother

47. Looking for aliens org.

48. Trying experience

Down

50. Bottle plug

52. Cos’ partner

53. Heater outlet

55. Roman road

57. *War in the name of religion

61. *Freethinking singer-songwriter John ____ of “All of Me” fame

64. Safe place

65. Beer acronym

67. Fits of shivering

69. ____ provocateur

70. Engagement rock

71. City in northern France

72. Bog deposit

73. 60 mins, pl.

74. Small island

12. Seaside bird

15. Peanut butter to a cracker

20. Furnish with a fund

22. Final, abbr.

24. Imprecise

25. Insect in adult stage

26. Mister in Madrid

27. Single-celled microorganism

29. Final

31. ____pit

32. Double-reed instruments

33. Civilian clothes

34. *Born ____, like Jimmy Carter

36. *Roe’s opponent

38. “I, Claudius” role

42. Bundle of axons

45. Learned one

49. ____ Zeppelin

51. Capital of Rwanda

54. Talk like Secretariat

56. Knight’s breastplate

57. Crack in a lip

58. Angry display

59. Eye layer

60. Email box

61. Flees

62. Void’s partner

63. Expunge

66. P in m.p.g.

68. Between “ready” and “go”

OVERHEARD

Trump is merely the embodiment of many of the raw wounds that already existed in parts of the white evangelical world: misogyny, racism, racial obliviousness, celebrity worship, resentment and the willingness to sacrifice principle for power. **David Brooks, in his column, “The dissenters trying to save evangelicalism from itself.”** *New York Times*, 2-4-22

Enlightened lay Catholics increasingly understand that looking to a priest, or a bishop, or even a pope for guidance and moral example has been a dangerous mistake. Generations of those men have brought the church to its greatest crisis in some 500 years — and they cannot solve the problem of credibility and accountability for one simple reason. They are the problem. **David von Drehle, in his column “A pope complicit in covering up sex crimes can bid moral authority goodbye.”** *Washington Post*, 1-25-22

Opponents of the idea of church-and-state separation have often said that eliminating religion from public schools is not neutral — it’s imposing a religion of secularism. In previous eras, though, the court was quite clear that, no, that’s not the case — it’s just enforcing a separation between church and state. . . . The reality is that Americans face a future in which the court, much like the rest of the country’s political infrastructure, will be imposing an array of conservative, minority views, some of them religiously based. **Margaret Talbot, in her article, “Amy Coney Barrett’s long game.”** *The New Yorker*, 2-7-22

When you look at our politics, there is always assertion that God is with us. We even have the aspect that the president is chosen by God. We are asking leaders of political parties to affirm to Kenyans that they will not go to campaigns talking about God. . . . The political leadership has to change and we think atheists in Kenya will drive that transformation. The transformation will lead to a more equal society, where nobody is discriminated against on the basis of religion or lack of religion. **Harrison Mumia, president of Atheists in Kenya Society, being quoted in the article, “After moving out of their comfort zone, atheists in Kenya gain visibility,” by Fredrick Nzwili.** *Religion News Service*, 2-7-22

I need you to understand something and I say it without any hyperbole: White evangelicals need to be stopped, now. If the 2022 midterms elections allow Republicans to gain control of Congress, conservative Christians will decimate this nation, and LGBTQ people, Muslims, women, people of color, and non-Christians will never have equality under the law again. **Unitarian Pastor John Pavlovitz, in his column, “I’m a Christian pastor. Evangelicals have to be defeated in 2022.”** *JohnPavlovitz.com*, 6-5-21

I read the bible. And then I kept reading. If I was going to look for God, I was going to look everywhere. I devoted myself to studying Judaism, Hinduism, Islam. I connected pretty intensely with Buddhism for a few years in there, even seeking out temples in Los Angeles as I tried to further explore it, but ultimately the book that impacted me the most was *God Is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens. That led to *Letter to a Christian Nation* by Sam Harris. But I found more spiritual resonance reading *Pale Blue Dot* by Carl Sagan than I found in two decades of bible study. **Mike Flanagan, director of the Netflix horror series “Midnight Mass.”** *TheGospelCoalition.org*, 10-16-21

Secular legal and cultural activism should focus on the lawlessness and inequality that arise when LGBTQ persons, nonbelievers, religious minorities and religious moderates are forced to live under one particular religious conception of God. **Jacques Berlinerblau, in his column “Separation of church and state? Let’s get real — that’s over. So what do we do now?”** *Salon.com*, 2-12-22

Actually, I don’t like the word “atheist.” It sort of means an absence of belief in God, and I don’t think it’s an absence of anything: I think it’s a powerful belief in humanity. It’s up to us. I don’t think there’s a higher power we can appeal to that will make things better. I think it’s in the hands, hearts and minds of human beings. **Actor Juliet Stevenson.** *TheAge.com*, 2-11-22

Americans do not have a robust idea of where morals come from, if not from God. . . . Morality is a feature of being human, much like the feature of love . . . Thinking that morality needs a special origin is just a cultural hangover from religion. **Jennifer Michael Hecht, in her column, “Do you taboo? On the silence of nonreligion.”** *OnlySky.com*, 2-16-22

Make no mistake: Christian nationalism is the opposite of religious freedom. What these right-wing actors advocate for is not religious freedom, but rather the ability of some Christians to be exempted from laws that don’t conform to their theology. **Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons and Maggie Siddiqi in their op-ed, “A Tennessee couple’s struggle to adopt shows religious freedom is under siege in America.”** *CNN*, 2-15-22

Cryptogram hint

A cryptogram is a substitution puzzle in which one letter stands for another. If U equals T, it will equal T throughout the puzzle.

Example:
UOG RLQTM HYVBF DVP SLACN VWGY UOG KJEZ XVI.
THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPS OVER THE LAZY DOG.
This month’s clue: G => S.

‘Do Mess with Texas’

Sign up now for FFRF’s San Antonio convention

Join us in San Antonio as the Freedom From Religion Foundation is hosting its 45th national convention at the Hyatt Regency San Antonio Riverwalk, 123 Losoya St., on Friday, Oct. 28 through Sat., Oct. 30, followed by Sunday morning membership and state director meetings.

The convention theme, apropos of Gov. Greg Abbott’s direct admonition of FFRF “not to mess with Texas,” is: “DO Mess with Texas.”

Please plan to arrive early to tour San Antonio’s famed Riverwalk and nearby historic sites and museums. A reception for “early birds” will be held Thursday, Oct. 27. The conference will take place all day Friday and Saturday.

Convention registration is online at ffrf.org/convo-2022, along with links to make hotel reservations. Or you can send in the form on the back page of this issue.

Invitations to some speakers and honorees are still in the works, but confirmed speakers to date include:

• **Jim Hightower.** In keeping with the convention theme, “Do Mess with Texas,” iconic Texan commentator and writer Jim Hightower will speak



Jim Hightower

on Friday at 11 a.m., then sign books. Hightower, dubbed “America’s most popular populist,” has spent four decades battling the Powers That Be on behalf of the Powers That Ought To Be — consumers, working families, environmentalists, small business and just-plain folks. The two-time Texas Agriculture Commissioner is a national radio commentator heard on more than 150 commercial and public stations. He writes a rousing newsletter, “The Hightower Lowdown” and has been dubbed a “populist road warrior.” A New York Times bestselling author, he’s written seven books, most recently, *Swim Against the Current: Even a Dead Fish Can Go with the Flow*.

• **John Irving.** The novelist of 14 books, including *The World According to Garp* and *The Cider House Rules*, will be receiving FFRF’s Emperor Has No Clothes Award. Irving has won the National Book Award, the O. Henry Award, an Oscar for best adapted screenplay and a Lambda Literary Award for his novel *In One Person*. His all-time bestselling novel is *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. FFRF offered Irving the award after his column, “The long, cruel history of the anti-abortion crusade,” appeared in *The New York Times* on June 23, 2019. In it, he noted, “We are free to practice the religion of our choice, and we are protected from having someone else’s religion practiced on us. Freedom of religion in the United States also means freedom from religion.”

• **Amy Hagstrom Miller.** FFRF’s 2022 “Forward Award” honoree will be Amy Hagstrom Miller, who founded Whole Woman’s Health in 2003, which are a series of clinics that provide abortion and gynecological care services, including four clinics in Texas. She brought *Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt*, in which the Supreme Court in 2016 ruled 5-3



Amy Hagstrom Miller

that Texas can’t restrict delivery of abortion care through TRAP laws that place an undue burden on the woman. She has been chief plaintiff in the lawsuit challenging SB 8, the extreme Texas law banning abortions by six weeks and deputizing antiabortion strangers to sue anyone who “aids or abets” a pregnant person in having an abortion past that time period. Hagstrom Miller also founded the nonprofit Whole Woman’s Health Alliance in 2014, which works to remove the stigma around providing quality abortion care. The award is reserved for individuals who are moving society forward. The 2021 recipients were Margaret Atwood and Gloria Steinem.

• **Daniel Mach.** Director of the ACLU Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief, Mach will accept on behalf of the ACLU FFRF’s Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award, which has grown to \$35,000. The award is personally endowed by FFRF Lifetime Member Henry Zumach. Mach leads a wide range of religious liberty litigation, advocacy and public education efforts nationwide, and often writes, teaches and speaks publicly on religious freedom issues. Mach currently serves as an adjunct professor of law at the George Washington University Law School, focusing on constitutional law and religious liberty.

• **Alice Greczyn.** She will be named FFRF Freethought Heroine 2022. She is an actress, author of *Wayward: A Memoir of Spiritual Warfare and Sexual Purity*, and the founder of Dare to Doubt. Midwest-raised and LA-based, Alice’s nomadic childhood moved her around the United States until her modeling career as a teenager led to an acting career in Hollywood. Her own story includes a painful but rewarding transition from evangelical Christianity to atheism, a journey that inspired her to found *DaretoDoubt.org*.



Photo by Chris Line

Appearing at FFRF’s convention will be the “Godless Gospel,” which includes, from left, Rogiërs Fibby, DeAngela Morant, Mandisa Thomas, Candace Gorham, Cynthia McDonald and director Andre Forbes.

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Alice Greczyn

• **Hector A. Garcia.** He is the author of *Alpha God* and *Sex, Power and Partnership: How Evolutionary Science Makes*



Hector A. Garcia

Center in San Antonio.

• **Candace R. M. Gorham.** She will be running a workshop “On Death, Dying and Disbelief.” She will also be performing as part of “Godless Gospel” as well as participating on a panel of African American nonbelievers. She is a licensed professional mental health counselor, and is a former ordained minister. Gorham is also the author of *The Ebony Exodus Project: Why Some Black Women Are Walking Out on Religion — and Others Should Too* and *On Death, Dying, and Disbelief*.

• **Barbara Alvarez.** She will be conducting a workshop on what you can do to help stop the religious war against reproductive rights. She has a master’s degree in Library and Information Science from the University of Illinois-Urbana/Champaign. Barbara is the author of the forthcoming book *Library Services for Sexual and Reproductive Health Information*. She was the first reproductive rights intern at FFRF.

• **Elle Harris.** FFRF will be awarding its debut “Out of God’s Closet” \$5,000 student scholarship, given by Diane Uhl in memory of her late husband Stephen

Sense at Our Political Divide. He has given a TED Talk. Garcia is a clinical psychologist and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Texas Health Science

Uhl, to 11-year-old Elle Harris, author of *Elle the Humanist*. Becoming aware that most of her classmates were religious and “had a hard time imagining someone who didn’t go to church or pray,” she wrote a book to clearly and warmly introduce humanism to young readers.

• **Max Nibert.** He is the 18-year-old Huntington (W.Va.) High School student who helped organize a walkout protest after the school held Christian-themed assemblies in the public school. He will be receiving the Richard & Beverly Hermesen \$5,000 Student Activist Award.

• **Godless Gospel.** An “atheist choir” will debut with “godless gospel” songs, a collaboration of music producer/songwriter **Andre Forbes**, and FFRF Co-President (and songwriter/piano player) **Dan Barker**. Songs are by Andre and Dan. The first rehearsal and demo tape was recorded in February. The artists, major free-thought activists in their own right, will also join a panel discussion on “Why I left religion.” Vocalists include: **Tahira Clayton**, jazz vocalist; **Rogiërs Fibby**, president of Black Nonbelievers of DC; **Candace Gorham**, author of *The Ebony Exodus Project*; **Cynthia McDonald**, an activist with Freedmen of Chicago; **DeAngela Morant** of Florida; and **Mandisa Thomas**, president of Black Nonbelievers.

Also included will be the usual reports on FFRF’s achievements over the year, including the report by FFRF’s team of attorneys and a reprise of last year’s popular “Ask an Attorney” workshop.

For information about the hotels and menus, please turn to the back page.

FFRF'S

Ask an Atheist

Wednesdays at Noon (Central)*

On Facebook Live

Send in your comments & questions via Facebook or AskAnAtheist@ffrf.org

*Except the last Wednesday of the month

IN THE NEWS

Some atheists more likely to hide beliefs

Atheists in the United States are more likely to conceal their beliefs if they're women, Republicans, Southerners or if they've previously been religious, according to new research from Rice University and West Virginia University. (The study appears in a recent edition of Social Forces.)

Jacqui Frost, the study's lead author from Rice University, said that findings about atheists hiding their religious beliefs aren't surprising. Previous research shows atheists are among the least liked and most distrusted minority groups in the United States. Earlier research has also shown that atheists are more likely to report discrimination on the basis of their atheism in social settings, at school and at work, Frost said.

Colombia court decriminalizes abortion

Colombia's constitutional court voted Feb. 21 to decriminalize abortion in the first 24 weeks of pregnancy.

The ruling makes Colombia the third large country in the region to decriminalize the procedure in slightly more than a year, after Mexico and Argentina. Abortion rights activists said it could fuel further gains for abortion rights in the region.

Since 2006, the procedure has been permitted in Colombia in cases of rape, nonviable pregnancy and when the life or health of the woman was in danger. At the time, those rules positioned the country as a regional leader in abortion rights.

More than 90 groups filed a lawsuit in September 2020, arguing that the criminalization of abortion exacerbates the stigma around the procedure and creates barriers to access, even for patients who qualify under the exemptions.

Court to hear designer's case against LGBTQ

The Supreme Court will hear a new case involving religion and the rights of LGBTQ people in the case of a Colorado web designer who claims her religious beliefs prevent her from offering wedding website designs to gay couples.

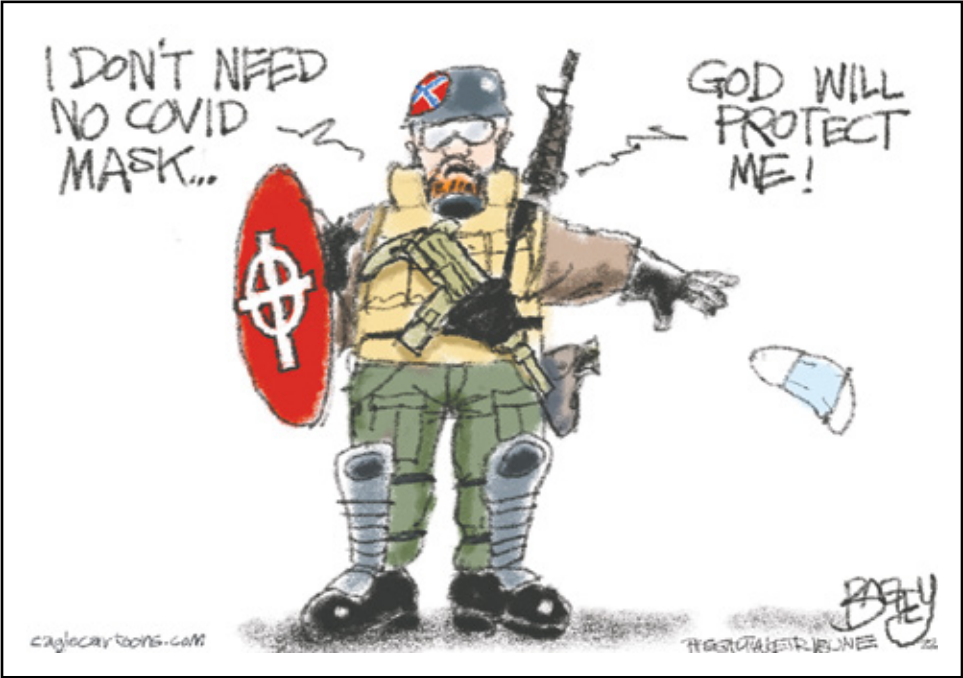
Lorie Smith, a Denver-area designer, offers graphic and website design services and wants to expand to wedding website services, but she says her Christian beliefs would lead her to decline any request from a same-sex couple to design a wedding website. She also wants to post a statement on her website about her beliefs. Doing those things, however, would run afoul of a Colorado anti-discrimination law. Smith had argued the law violates her free speech and religious rights.

The Supreme Court said in taking the case that it would look only at the free speech issue. It said it would decide whether a law that requires an artist to speak or stay silent violates the free speech clause of the First Amendment.

Vermont House OKs 'reproductive liberty'

The Vermont House of Representatives approved a proposal Feb. 8 to amend the state Constitution to protect reproductive rights, including abortion.

Lawmakers approved the proposal 107-41. It will now go before state voters in November for a binding referendum that will decide whether to amend the Constitution.



State Rep. Ann Pugh said the amendment will not change the right to an abortion that Vermont women have enjoyed for 50 years, but, if approved in November, it would enshrine those values in the state Constitution.

If approved by voters in November, it will take effect immediately.

Court rejects teachers' bid to block mandate

The Supreme Court on Feb. 11 rejected an emergency request that it consider an appeal by a group of New York City teachers seeking to block a vaccine mandate over what they said was a discriminatory religious exemption policy.

The decision, issued by Justice Sonia Sotomayor, was the latest in a series of legal defeats by opponents of New York's vaccine requirement for municipal workers and it came the same day as the deadline for such workers to get vaccinated or face dismissal.

The plaintiffs in the case had argued that the city's vaccination requirement amounted to religious discrimination because it unfairly denied applications and did not offer exemptions for employees with unorthodox religious beliefs.

Sotomayor, who oversees cases in the Second Circuit, which includes New York, Connecticut and Vermont, had rejected a challenge to the city's vaccine mandate in October, when the mandate went into effect for public schoolteachers.

Judge dismisses VA hospital bible lawsuit

A judge agreed to dismiss a nearly 3-year-old lawsuit on Feb. 23 over a bible displayed on a table at a New Hampshire veterans hospital after the plaintiffs' lawyer proposed a separate display and sought to work with the hospital.

Two U.S. Air Force veterans filed the lawsuit in federal court in 2019 against the Manchester VA Medical Center director, saying the bible's inclusion on a "missing man" table near the entrance honoring fallen or missing veterans and prisoners of war is a violation of the First Amendment. The case went to mediation.

The medical center initially removed the bible in January 2019 after the Military Religious Freedom Foundation objected, saying it got complaints from 14 patients who felt it violated the First Amendment. But the bible later reappeared on the table. It was put in a clear case and secured to the table. A VA spokesperson said the medical center received an outpouring of complaints from veterans and others.

Priest resigns after 'incorrect' baptisms

A Catholic priest in Arizona has resigned after he was found to have performed baptisms incorrectly throughout his career, allegedly rendering the rite invalid for thousands of people.

The Catholic Diocese of Phoenix announced on its website that it determined after careful study that the Rev. Andres Arango had used the wrong wording in baptisms performed up until June 17, 2021.

During baptisms, Arango used the phrase "we baptize you in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." He should have said "I baptize," the diocese explained.

Diocese spokesperson Katie Burke told NPR that Arango is believed to have used the incorrect word since the beginning of his priesthood in 1995, which includes thousands of baptisms.

Bill would ban teaching opposing view to religion

Oklahoma state Sen. Rob Standridge has introduced a bill that would allow people to sue teachers if they offer an opposing view of religious beliefs held by students.

In the Students' Religious Belief Protection Act, teachers can be fined a minimum of \$10,000 "per incident, per individual," and the fines have to be paid from personal resources. If the teacher can't pay the fine, they would be fired under this act, according to The Independent.

It will also allow parents to demand the removal of any books perceived as anti-religious. This includes topics like evolution, the big bang theory and even birth control.

Currently, the bill has no co-sponsors and has been referred to the Senate Education Committee. If passed, this act, which has been referred to as "necessary for the preservation of the public peace," will take effect immediately.

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Ex-pope apologizes for abuse, admits no responsibility

Pope Emeritus Benedict on Feb. 8 expressed his "profound shame" to the victims of clerical abuse, and he said he was pained by "errors" that occurred in various places across his career in the church. However, he stopped short of acknowledging any specific personal responsibility after a church-commissioned German report accused him of mishandling four cases during his time running the archdiocese of Munich between 1977 and 1982.

Benedict, who stepped down as pope in 2013, has been under renewed scrutiny because of the Munich report, which detailed decades of abuse in the archdiocese. Although popes dating back to John Paul II have been ensnared by the global abuse crisis, never had a future pope been accused in such detail of mishandling specific cases.

3 in 10 adults now religiously unaffiliated

The latest Pew Research Center survey of the religious composition of the United States finds the religiously unaffiliated share of the public is 6 percentage points higher than it was five years ago and 10 points higher than a decade ago.

Currently, about 3 in 10 U.S. adults (29 percent) are religious "Nones" — people who describe themselves as atheists, agnostics or "nothing in particular" when asked about their religious identity. Self-identified Christians of all varieties make up 63 percent of the adult population. Christians now outnumber religious Nones by a ratio of a little more than two-to-one. In 2007, when the Pew Research Center began asking the question about religious identity, Christians outnumbered Nones by almost 5-to-1 (78 percent vs. 16 percent).

In addition, the share of U.S. adults who say they pray on a daily basis has been trending downward, as has the share who say religion is "very important" in their lives.

Religious freedom bill dies in Virginia Senate

A Virginia Senate committee on Feb. 23 failed to advance a bill that would excuse certain religious and religious-affiliated groups from adhering to state nondiscrimination laws.

Under the bill, Virginia law would have been amended to exempt "any place of accommodation owned by or operated on behalf of a religious corporation, association, or society from the nondiscrimination of accommodation provisions of the Virginia Human Rights Act."

Introduced in January by Rep. Les Adams, the bill had also argued that nothing in the Virginia Human Rights Act prohibits a religious or religiously affiliated organization "from taking any action to promote the religious principles for which it is established or maintained." It was passed by Virginia's House of Delegates.

Atheists make up 0.1% of fed prison population

Only 143 out of the 139,002 people in the U.S. federal prison system in 2021 were self-described atheists, according to data from the Federal Bureau of Prisons. That's just one-tenth of 1 percent, meaning for every 1,000 people in federal prison, just one of them is an atheist.

"Friendly Atheist" Hemant Mehta, who made the FOIA data request, also did so in 2013 and 2015, and found that the numbers have been roughly the same each time, "suggesting this proportion isn't changing even as the percentage of atheists in the general population steadily, yet slowly, inches upward," Mehta writes. "More significantly, it means our presence in U.S. federal prisons is significantly lower than what we find in the general population."

FFRF NEWS

FFRF rebukes prison for religious favoritism

FFRF is spotlighting an appalling instance of religious favoritism that the Indiana Department of Corrections has shown toward a mass murderer.

Alyssa Shepherd, who was convicted of killing three children and badly injuring a fourth at their Fulton County bus stop in 2018, was reportedly released six months ahead of schedule because she took a bible study course called “Plus Faith 2.0: Criminal Lifestyle, Attitudes & Behavior.” “After completing a bible course, Shepherd was granted release six months early,” says a local television news story.

It is a fundamental principle of First Amendment

jurisprudence that the government cannot in any way promote, advance or otherwise endorse religion, FFRF points out.

Reducing an inmate’s sentence for participating in a bible study course is unconstitutional, FFRF emphasizes because it ties a substantial and desirable benefit — the opportunity to leave jail sooner — to an exclusively religious act: engaging in religious study and worship. The amount of time that someone is required to stay in jail should not be dependent on their willingness to participate in religious activities or their religious affiliation.

FFRF is asking the Department of Correction to stop decreasing sentences for those who participate in bible study and seek religiously neutral ways to advance its rehabilitation efforts. FFRF has also filed an open records request to learn more about the department’s policies and how this occurred.

“This is a shocking instance of religious favoritism bestowed upon a person who killed three children,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “The fact that she took a bible course should in no way, shape or form result in the truncating of a prison sentence for her.”

FFRF on the road



Iowa Atheists and Freethinkers hosted a rally on March 3 at the Capitol rotunda in Des Moines. FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne (front row, wearing tie) discussed some Iowa bills that are bad for state/church separation, how those bills are part of larger national trends, and why the right to a secular government is so important.

Boycott Idaho potatoes if ban-and-bounty law signed

FFRF is warning Idaho’s governor that it will call for a boycott of Idaho potatoes if a six-week-ban-and-bounty law is signed there.

On March 14, Idaho became the first state to adopt a copycat measure that echoes the infamous Texas abortion law prohibiting the procedure at six weeks and providing for bounty hunting by private citizens. The Idaho bill says mothers, grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles of the “preborn child,” as well as the prospective father, may sue anyone who aids or abets in an abortion, including physicians or Uber drivers. In Idaho’s case, the bounty is up to \$20,000. The bill is before Idaho’s governor, Brad Little, who previously signed a restrictive abortion law.

This action follows the March 11 ruling



by the Texas Supreme Court to uphold the draconian six-week abortion ban that has been in place in the state since Sept. 1. This ban includes the infamous abortion bounty hunting provision, whereby everyday citizens can sue individuals for up to \$10,000 for “aiding and abetting” someone in procuring an abortion.

FFRF will be calling for a boycott of Idaho potatoes if Little signs the new ban. The New York Times reports that Idaho’s attorney general, who is a Republican like Little, has issued a warning opinion that the measure will “likely be found to violate recognized constitutional rights.”

Unbelievably, a bill has also been recently introduced in the Missouri House of Representatives to make it a crime to help a woman get an abortion outside the state at any point in her pregnancy unless her life is endangered by continuing it. The bill would allow private citizens to enforce the ban via lawsuits “regardless of where the abortion is or will be performed.” Individuals could be sued if they provide information, transportation or funds to someone seeking an in-state or out-of-state abortion.



The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible
By Ruth Hurmence Green
A Missouri grandmother debunks the bible as no one has debunked it since Thomas Paine.

—Published by FFRF. 440 pages / PB

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

FFRF cheers Saudi blogger’s freedom

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is cheering the release of Saudi blogger Raif Badawi, whose 10-year sentence and barbaric 2015 whipping for “insulting Islam online” caused global outrage.

Badawi, now 38, was originally sentenced to 600 lashes and seven years in prison, a sentence which an appeals court soon increased to an unthinkable 1,000 lashes and 10 years in prison, also imposing a fine of \$267,000. After he was subjected to the first 50 lashes in 2015, the Saudi government, responding to the worldwide outcry, did not carry out the rest, and recently ended flogging as a form of punishment.

Badawi was able to call his family in Canada on March 11 upon his release, but is subject to a 10-year travel ban, which the press freedom watchdog group Reporters Without Borders has pledged to fight.



Ensaf Haidar holds up a photo of her husband, Raif Badawi.

Badawi was first arrested in 2012, charged with “insulting Islam through electronic channels” and “going beyond the realm of obedience.” He had criticized Saudi Arabia’s religious police and called for an end to the role of religion in politics. According to the BBC, a judge later recommended he also be tried for apostasy, which carries the death penalty, because Badawi refused to “repent to God.”

Badawi’s writings have been collected in a book, *1000 Lashes: Because I Say What I Think*. He has won the prestigious Sakharov Prize for Freedom of

Thought awarded by the European Union. His wife Ensaf Haidar, who has worked tirelessly to free him, received FFRF’s Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award of \$10,000 in 2018, speaking at FFRF’s national convention that year. She and their three children are now Canadian citizens, and the Canadian House of Commons voted unanimously last year to grant Badawi citizenship.

FFRF will be reaching out to Badawi to offer him the Avijit Roy Courage Award.

‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill is theocratic assault

FFRF is dismayed that the Florida Senate failed to stop a notorious anti-gay bill Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Catholic extremist, is expected to gleefully sign into law.

Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill will inhibit or outright prohibit public classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity. The bill states that “sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards.” It will encourage parents to sue districts for alleged violations and teachers to effectively “out” students to parents. It’s a cruel bill that would demonize and add more suffering to an already marginalized group of people,

particularly LGBTQ students, whose suicide attempt rate is four times greater than that of other young people.

DeSantis confirmed that his support for this bill is based on his anti-LGBTQ bigotry, rather than a concern about parental rights, saying recently that the bill will protect children from “grooming” — as though all LGBTQ people were pedophiles.

FFRF was delighted to see students walk out against the bill at several Florida high schools. FFRF will continue to support the rights of LGBTQ youths against the religious extremists seeking to discriminate against them. Lawmakers should focus on secular solutions to real problems, rather than creating more problems for already marginalized children and students.

FFRF VICTORIES

By **Cassandra Zimmerman**

City’s mission statement changed to nonreligious

A concerned Hudsonville, Mich., resident reported to FFRF that the city had endorsed religion through its official mission statement.

“While the city of Hudsonville should work to strengthen family



Chris Line

and community life, and should be committed to excellence in providing quality municipal services, it is inappropriate and unconstitutional for the City Commission and administration of the city of Hudsonville to officially ‘strive to serve God,’ and to proclaim this misuse of public office on the city’s official website,” wrote FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line in a letter to Mayor Mark Northrup. “This mission statement should be changed immediately.”

FFRF then received a response from Northrup in which he assured the state/church watchdog that the city would adopt a new mission statement.

Prayer poster removed from Florida post office

FFRF intervened after a report from a Palm Beach County, Fla., resident showed that the local post office contained a lengthy Christian prayer posted for public view. The resident also reported that when the issue was brought up to management, the response allegedly was, “No Jews have ever complained, so it’s OK.”

In a letter to West Palm Beach Tax Collector Anne Gannon, FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote, “We write to ask that the county remove this religious sign from county property in recognition that it represents an unconstitutional endorsement of religion over nonreligion.”

FFRF also noted that the Palm

Well wishes from California



One of FFRF’s longest-tenured members and longtime State Representative, Lifetime Member Dick Hewetson of California sent this photo of himself wearing one of FFRF’s masks. He updated us on his life.

“I am now 92. It was my good fortune to meet Dana Treadwell at the last convention in Madison. She is my wonderful neighbor here in California. She drove me to Campbell, where the picture was taken, to hear Katherine Stewart speak to the Atheists of San Jose.

“Until recently, I have only missed two conventions in the history of FFRF. The conventions I attended were the highlights of each year. Between my physical disability and Covid, I have been fairly isolated of late. But with my wonderful life partner, John, and friends like Dana, I am lucky.

“Best to everyone at Freethought Hall.”

putting on an event at Downingtown Area School District.

A letter from FFRF Staff Attorney Maddy Ziegler reminded the school district that it is well settled that schools may not advance or promote religion. “Please note that the fact that this event takes place after school and participation is voluntary is not a valid safeguard,” Ziegler wrote. “Courts have summarily rejected arguments that voluntariness excuses a constitutional violation.”

The solicitor for the Pennsylvania school district has reassured FFRF that its intention is and will not be to endorse any religion.

Board prayer replaced with moment of silence

FFRF was alerted that the Lebanon Community School Corporation Board in Indiana was beginning its meetings with a prayer. The agenda, found on the corporation’s website, showed that the Oct. 19, 2021, meeting listed the Pledge of Allegiance as the first item of business with no mention of prayer.

A video of the Oct. 19, 2021, meeting confirmed (even though any



Karen Heineman

mention was missing from the agenda) that “as is our custom, we begin our time with a word of prayer.”

In a letter from FFRF Legal Fellow Karen Heineman to the school board president, it was emphasized that

prayer alienates nonreligious Americans, who make up the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification. Thirty-five percent of Americans are non-Christians, including more than one in four Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.

“After consultation with its counsel, the board has decided to open the meeting with a moment of silence instead of a prayer,” the school district’s law firm wrote back. “That practice has been followed since receipt of your letter.”

Pa. school district won’t use religious speakers

A Pennsylvania resident reported to FFRF that a speaker with a history of talking about his faith would be

Beach County Tax Collector serves all citizens regardless of belief or nonbelief, and such a posted prayer turns non-Christians into outsiders.

The general counsel for Gannon let FFRF know that the posted prayer had been removed.

WHAT ARE YOU MISSING?

FFRF offers much more than just **Freethought Today** for news, information & lively banter about freethought & state/church separation.

Check out these other offerings!

Ask an Atheist online weekly show
ffrf.org/ask-an-atheist

Freethought Matters TV weekly show
ffrf.org/freethought-matters

Freethought Now blogs
freethoughtnow.org

Freethought Radio weekly show
ffrf.org/radio

FFRF press releases
ffrf.org/releases

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ffrf.org/action

Freethought of the Day
Daily online calendar of famous freethinkers
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A note to FFRF Members

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If the expiration date of your FFRF membership on your address label says April 2022 or earlier . . .

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Photo by Chris Line

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Chicago	WPWR-CW	(Ch. 50)	9 am
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Houston	KIAH-CW	(Ch. 39)	11 am
Los Angeles	KCOP-MY	(Ch. 13)	8:30 am
Madison, Wis.	WISC-TV	(Ch. 3)	11 pm
Minneapolis	KSTC-IND	(Ch. 45, Dig. Ch. 5.5)	9:30 am
New York City	WPIX-IND	(Ch. 11)	10 am
Phoenix	KASW-CW	(Ch. 61)	8:30 am
	(Ch. 61 or 6 or 1006 for HD)		
Portland, Ore.	KRCW-CW	(Ch. 32)	9 am
	(703 on Comcast for HD or Ch. 3)		
Sacramento	KQCA-MY	(Ch. 58)	8:30 am
San Francisco	KICU-IND	(Ch. 36)	10 am
Seattle	KONG-IND	(Ch. 16)	8 am
	(Ch. 16 or Ch. 106 on Comcast)		
Washington, D.C.	WDCW-CW	(Ch. 50, 23, 3)	8 am

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

FFRF’s 2022 student essay contests begin

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has announced its 2022 essay competitions for freethinking students — offering \$70,000 (or more) in total scholarships.

Each of these four contests has 10 top prizes: First place — \$3,500; second place — \$3,000; third place — \$2,500; fourth place — \$2,000; fifth place — \$1,500; sixth place — \$1,000; seventh place — \$750; eighth place — \$500; ninth place — \$400; and 10th place — \$300. FFRF also offers optional honorable mentions of \$200.

The contests cater to students in different age/class ranges. Students may only enter one FFRF contest annually and may not enter a contest if they have previously won an award in that particular contest.

William J. Schulz Memorial Essay Contest for College-Bound High School Seniors

High school seniors graduating this spring and attending college in the fall are asked to write on the topic of “Good without God.”

Nonbelievers are routinely told we can’t be moral if we don’t believe in a god. Please write a letter to a religious friend, classmate, teacher, family member, etc., who buys this myth, to explain why you can be “good without God.” Debunk what’s wrong with this mindless prejudice against atheists and explain why religiosity is not synonymous with morality. You may wish to use examples. Be sure to define or include what being moral or ethical entails.

Word limit: 300–450. Deadline: 11:59 p.m. June 1.
ffrf.us/senioressay

Kenneth L. Proulx Memorial Contest for Freethinking College Students

Currently enrolled college students (up to age 24) may write on: “In God I Trust — NOT!”

Please write a personal statement about why you, as a nonbeliever/atheist/humanist, have faith not in a supernatural deity but in yourself. How does trusting in a deity instead of oneself prevent individuals or society from advancing or solving problems? Why would the world be a better place if humankind put faith in itself, instead of a supernatural deity? Give examples.

The \$1,000 prize in the ongoing college competition is now being generously endowed by actor and FFRF Lifetime Member Mr. Madison Arnold. Madison, who is

90, has given a \$30,000 endowment as a living bequest, what he calls a “pre-quest.”

Word limit: 450–650. Deadline: 11:59 p.m. June 1.
ffrf.us/collegeessay

David Hudak Memorial Essay Contest for Freethinking Black, Indigenous and Students of Color

Black, Indigenous and Students of Color ages 17–21 (college-bound high school seniors to currently enrolled college students), may write on the topic of “How atheism/humanism makes me a better person.”

Psalm 53:1 preaches: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity; there is none who does good.” How would you answer this defamation of nontheists? Please write a personal essay that explains why being nonreligious (whether you identify as atheist, agnostic or humanist) makes you a better, not a worse, person. You may wish to explain why your moral values are improved by your naturalistic views, or cite how nonbelief and nonbelievers have improved the world.

This contest is offered to provide support and acknowledgment for freethinking Students of Color, as a minority within a minority. The other FFRF student contests are open to all students.

Word limit: 400–600. Deadline: 11:59 p.m. June 1.
ffrf.us/BIPOCessay

Cornelius Vander Broeck Memorial FFRF ‘Graduate/Older’ Students Essay Contest

Graduate students (through age 30) and “older” undergrads (ages 25–30) are asked to write on the topic: “Why religion is not the answer.”

Please analyze and document at least one major national or worldwide problem in which religion is the problem — not the answer. How does faith or religious dogma get in the way of solving earthly problems? If religion is not the answer, what is? Indicate instead how we should approach the challenge you are analyzing in particular and problem-solving in general.

Word limit: 550–750. Deadline: 11:59 p.m. July 1.
ffrf.us/gradessay

Note: In none of the essay competitions are we looking for an opinion or theory about the origin of religion or why religion exists.

Additional prompts on the topics and contest rule requirements can be found at: ffrf.org/studentessay. Students are required to submit their essay via the online application, and should carefully review all contest rules. All eligible entrants will receive

a digital year-long student membership in FFRF.

FFRF is appreciative of its members who make the effort to contact local high schools, colleges and universities to help publicize its competitions. (See “ads” on the back cover of the Freethought Today wrap that may be copied or cut out and sent to your local schools or universities.) Or pass on the link: ffrf.org/studentessay.

FFRF seeks volunteers to judge student essays

FFRF proudly hosts five essay competitions a year — four of which are judged by volunteer FFRF members and staff. Due to the pandemic, we have migrated to an online platform to share essays and grade them. So, we can now seek qualified volunteer readers and judges from our membership around the country, not just the local members who can come into our office in Madison, Wis.

Do you have a special background and interest in encouraging freethought students? Do you enjoy reading the winning essays in issues of Freethought Today? We are looking for judges who have backgrounds and experience that make them particularly suited to reading and judging student essays. This background can include degrees in English or writing, being a teacher (or retired teacher), writing instructor or tutor, etc. — or other life experiences and freethought activism. With our contest dedicated to Black, Indigenous or Students of Color, we would like to be sure to include some BIPOC judges. With the graduate competition, it can be helpful, although not a prerequisite, to have judges who have advanced degrees or have taught at the college level. The essay prompts vary from year

to year so generally being aware of and interested in freethought topics is adequate. Otherwise, the requirements are:

- Having the time to judge a quantity of essays on a deadline.
- Being comfortable reading and grading essays online and accessing them via Google Sheets, where the essays will be found. (We simply share a link with you by email, which takes you to a spreadsheet.)

The initial judging is computed by metrics, with Google Sheets automatically adding up points. We judge essays (0-2) with zero being a “no,” 1 a “maybe” (such as an honorable mention) and 2 “a winner.” You are given the opportunity to add a comment about any essay. The final judges will see the finalists and review any comments, as well.

Judges will be identified and thanked by name publicly in Freethought Today and in FFRF’s Year in Review.

Once you have applied, FFRF will let you know in May whether you have been chosen to be a judge, and give you an opportunity to confirm your availability. We will then share brief tips on judging essays with you and confirm the deadlines, and share a portion of the student essays with you.

Fill out an application at ffrf.us/judge.

Lawsuit

Continued from page 1

leave without . . . knowing you.”

FFRF has written several legal complaint letters over adult proselytizing, prayer and religious practices aimed at students within Cabell County Schools, which have been ignored.

Huntington East Middle School held separate Nik Walker Ministries assemblies on Feb. 1. It is FFRF’s understanding that a staff member requested the events and that some students attending those assemblies did not do so voluntarily. It seems parents were not informed in advance.

The lawsuit contends, “At the behest of adult evangelists, Huntington High School held an assembly for students that sought to convert students to evangelical Christianity. Some students were forced to attend. Regardless of whether attendance is mandatory or voluntary, the defendants violate the First Amendment by permitting, coordinating and encouraging students to attend an adult-led worship service and revival at their school during the school day. Parents and students bring this suit to stop these practices.”



Submitted photo

Students at Huntington High School in West Virginia staged a walkout on Feb. 9 to protest some students being forced to attend an evangelical Christian revival at the school on Feb. 2.

Bethany Felinton, mother of the Jewish student, is one of the plaintiffs, along with three of her children. Most student plaintiffs are identified only by initials, with the exception of Max Nibert. They are suing the Cabell County Board of Education, its superintendent and Huntington High School Principal Daniel Gleason. Plaintiffs are seeking a permanent injunction enjoining the district from sponsoring any religious

worship services, adult-led religious activities during the school day or participating in such events with students during the school day. Plaintiffs are seeking nominal damages in the amount of \$1 per plaintiffs, plus costs and attorney’s fees.

Nibert, who is a named plaintiff, passed around a petition during the rally, getting about 75 signatures. During the protest, he said: “I have never been

prouder of a group of my peers than I am right now. When ordinary citizens find their circumstances to be unfair, they change them. And that’s exactly what we’re doing today.”

Attorneys representing the plaintiffs include outside counsel Marc Schneider, FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott, FFRF Attorney Chris Line and West Virginia-based attorney Kristina Thomas Whiteaker.

IN MEMORIAM

Ben (IM GOD) Hart was freethought activist

FFRF Member Bennie L. Hart, 82, of Independence, Ky., died Feb. 16.

Ben was known to FFRF members for his legal battle with the state of Kentucky over his tongue-in-cheek freethinking license plate, “IM GOD.”

The Kentucky Department of Transportation said that his submitted wording was “obscene and vulgar,” even though it allowed numerous religious plates. After FFRF and the ACLU of Kentucky filed a federal suit in November 2016, on Ben’s behalf, the BBC picked up the story and, as Ben noted: “It went around the world.” Fox News and the Washington Post interviewed him. In January 2020, Ben was finally informed that his “IM GOD” plate was on the way. When it arrived, it didn’t contain the slogan “In God We Trust,” ruining Ben’s joke. He complained — and the state reissued it correctly. (His “IM GOD” license plate from Ohio is on display in the legal wing of Freethought Hall.)

Ben was born in Corbin, Ky., on Aug. 8, 1939, to Charles and Joy Mae Goodin Hart Conrad. Bennie loved his family, nature and researching his family genealogy. He was president of the Freedom From



Ben Hart shows off the “IM GOD” plates he received as a resident of Ohio and later Kentucky.

Religion Foundation-Northern Kentucky Chapter and awarded FFRF’s Freethinker of the Year Award in 2020.

Ben recorded a video acceptance speech for that award, which was bestowed remotely at FFRF’s online national membership meeting in November 2020. He noted, “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.” He observed that 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.”

Ben explained his license plate’s “IM GOD” wording: “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.” He added, “I’m the god of the dictionary. The American Heritage Dictionary has six definitions for ‘god.’ Number five is ‘a very handsome man.’ And my wife says I’m a very handsome man. And nobody argues with my wife.”

Ben became an ordained minister so that he could marry individuals who did not follow a particular religious faith. In the 1970s, Bennie enjoyed racing cars at Lawrenceburg Speedway and Florence Speedway, where he holds the “Altitude Record.” He belonged to the local Old Racers Club and Winnebago Club. He was very social and could not go out without seeing someone who he knew. You could often find him with a \$2 bill that he was famous for giving to children. Bennie’s final gift to society was that he donated his body to the University of Cincinnati for research.

“I and other staff members were in touch with Ben as recently as a week before his death,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. “He was the sweetest, funniest guy. We send our heartfelt condolences to his family and to his friends at the Cincinnati Metro Chapter.”



Isabelle Regan (right) shares a moment with Anne Nicol Gaylor during an FFRF convention in 2004.

Isabelle Regan was longtime friend of Anne Nicol Gaylor

Longtime FFRF Member Isabelle C. Regan died on Jan. 1.

She was born June 21, 1926, in Mather, Wis. She had a successful career with the VA Hospital and lived a long, eventful life.

Isabelle was a near-lifelong friend of Anne Nicol Gaylor, FFRF’s principal founder. They met as young first-year students at Tomah (Wis.) High School. “I am sure that we were considered nerdy types,” Isabelle said during a tribute she delivered on Oct. 29, 2004, during a retirement event honoring Anne at FFRF’s 27th annual national convention in Madison, Wis.

She added: “When we met, we became instant friends — a friendship that has lasted through the years. By the time we were seniors in high school, Anne’s dissatisfaction with unreasonable customs and rules was evident. One rule she took exception to was that girls could not wear slacks to school. We wore dresses or skirts with ankle or knee socks. One winter day, we became the first girls to wear pants at Tomah High School, not to rebel against the rules but because it was reasonable on that bitter cold Wisconsin winter day. Anne has never been a rebel without a cause.

“One of the books we read aloud to each other during the summer following our freshman year of high school was *Pollyanna*. The realities of the world cancelled out most of that happy philosophy, but Anne

has not lost her faith in the potential goodness of people. Otherwise, why would she work so hard to improve the human condition? . . . Although I reached my rejection of religion separately and early in my life and have mostly been indifferent to it, I have always believed strongly in the work of the Foundation,” Isabelle said.

Although they did not live in the same town or area after high school, they corresponded regularly, reunited in person when they could and were speaking weekly on the phone at the time of Anne’s death in 2015. Isabelle was supportive of Anne’s many radical ventures, and attended several events to honor Anne.

“My mother took great comfort in Isabelle’s gentle and supportive friendship — someone who essentially came from Anne’s roots in rural Wisconsin,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Although their lives took very different turns, both of them were extremely hard workers and high achievers, career women and ‘bread winners’ in an era when that was most unusual.”

Isabelle is preceded in death by her first husband, Dale R. Purdy, and her second husband, Edward J. Regan. She’s also preceded in death by her oldest daughter, Diane. She leaves behind her two other children, Nancy and Casey, six grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

Dian Gabriel was an accomplished artist

Dian M. Gabriel, 81, died on Dec. 20, 2021. She was born in Milwaukee on Oct. 29, 1940, to Joseph and Virginia Lukitsch.

Dian was an accomplished artist and was well-known throughout the area.

Her husband, FFRF Lifetime Member Jack Simpson, sent FFRF this light-hearted tale:

“I can’t say enough nice things about the hospice people who looked after Dian in her final days. Their focus on ‘death with dignity’ impressed me.

“I got a call from the hospice pastor on the day she died. After exchanging hellos, I asked him if he was an Old Testament pastor or a New Testament pastor.

He said, ‘What?’

“I said, ‘If you’re an Old Testament pastor, you are for hellfire, brimstone and damnation, and if you’re a New Testament pastor, you likely are for compassion and understanding.’ He chuckled and said, ‘I’ve never been asked that before.’

“I said, ‘You probably haven’t talked to many atheists, either. Both Dian and I were lifelong atheists.’

“I told him I appreciated his call and we hung up. He never called me back.”



Dian Gabriel

Athletic Nancy Ungar enjoyed travel, ocean

FFRF Lifetime Member Nancy Elizabeth (Kordig) Ungar died on Sept. 5, 2020, in Portland, Ore., with her loyal kitens by her side.

“FFRF is so grateful and touched that Nancy made provisions to give a major bequest to our organization,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “That bequest was received in February 2022 and will go to work in Nancy’s memory to make America a more secular and freethinking country.”

Nancy was a longtime resident of Humboldt County, Calif., until she moved to Portland.

Nancy was born on June 13, 1957, in Evanston, Ill. and moved to Salt Lake City when she was 4. She subsequently moved to Burbank, Calif., to live with her sister. Nancy graduated from John Burroughs High School in Burbank. She attended UCLA



Nancy Ungar

for a year before transferring to Humboldt State University in Arcata, Calif.

Smart, hardworking and adventurous, Nancy attended and worked at HSU, earning a degree in biology. She also worked nights and weekends at Merryman’s Restaurant.

Nancy was an athlete, swimmer (diving, tank/no tank, abalone diver, runner (triathlete), biker (numerous solo cross-country camping/biking trips). She loved the ocean, travel, food, and companionship. Two of her favorite trips were to India and Egypt.

Nancy moved away from Humboldt in 1988, living for a short time in Santa Anna, and then to Sonoma County, where she managed the Sonoma State University Bacteriology Lab.

After unsuccessful attempts at marriage, Nancy returned to Humboldt and purchased her dream home in Trinidad, Calif.

Honoring Nancy’s prearranged request for the disposition of her cremains, they were scattered by her sister and niece on a cliff overlooking her beloved Pacific Ocean in Cannon Beach, Ore.

IN MEMORIAM

Robert Siegel worked in Md. public health field



Robert Siegel

Robert Siegel, 87, of Lexington, Mass., and long-time resident of Maryland, died of pancreatic cancer on Jan. 28.

While not a member himself, his obituary noted that donations should be made to FFRF in his memory. Robert's son, David, is an FFRF member.

Bob was born on July 7, 1934, in New York City. He grew up in the Bronx and attended pharmacy school at Fordham University. He served two years in the U.S. Army at Fort Meade, Md., was

discharged as a captain, and opened a dental practice in Beltsville, Md. After leaving his practice, he earned a master's degree in public health from Johns Hopkins University. He then worked for Maryland's Department of Public Health as a supervisor in the Medicaid programs for dentistry, optometry and podiatry.

He was happiest on the water in any vessel. He was a kind, considerate, and generous raconteur with a dry and irreverent sense of humor. He enjoyed cooking, designing and building furniture, listening to classical music, studying astronomy, and spending time with his walking group, the Walkie Talkies, until his knees began to fail.

Generous FFRF donor David Fuhrman was movie buff

FFRF Lifetime Member David Fuhrman of Boca Raton, Fla., died Sept. 14, 2021.

David was born in 1932 and was married for 49 years to his late wife, Joan. They had three sons — Michael, Peter and Steven — and two grandchildren. He was a lifelong dedicated New York Yan-

kees fan who attended many World Series games, as early as 1947. David was an active tennis player, golfer and swimmer. He was a lover of chocolate, a master of the Sunday crossword puzzle and a man who managed to watch nearly 1,000 movies.

FFRF is very grateful to report that David gave a bequest of \$20,000 to FFRF.

Life Member Jim Swanson was longtime educator

Lifetime Member James L. Swanson, 86, died in St. Cloud, Minn., on Dec. 27, 2021, with his beloved husband, John Mazzitello, at his side.

He was born Dec. 25, 1935, to Leslie and Lydia (Stenstrom) Swanson. Jim grew up in the small town of Sycamore, Ill., graduating from Petersburg High School in 1954. The first in his family to attend college, Jim graduated from Wheaton College in 1958. After earning a master's degree in education from University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana, Jim began a long career with Racine Unified Public Schools in Racine, Wis., where he taught special education students for many years, eventually supervising and innovating creative system changes. Jim's kind, gentle, thoughtful approach to his students supported lifelong relationships with "Mr. Swanson" and forged friendships with many of their parents. Jim was a loving

and attentive father to his children from his first marriage.

Moving to Minnesota to share his life with John in 1995, Jim began a second life filled with appreciation for the woods, lakes, (their lake cabin in northern Minnesota) and birds (with many feeders on their deck), the cultural offerings of the Twin Cities and St. Cloud, and a devotion to British comedy TV series and "The Big Bang Theory." Jim loved crossword puzzles and devoured books of puzzles on a weekly basis.

He was a Lifetime Member of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and supported the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, the Nature Conservancy, the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Humane Society, the ACLU and several pro-democracy political candidates.

Jim was a devoted husband, having cared for his husband John through many serious medical challenges.

Jim grew up in "Abe Lincoln" country and became a self-taught expert on all things Lincoln-related, having visited every site connected to Abe more than once with his children. He was a member of the New Salem Lincoln League in Petersburg, Ill., and felt a strong affinity with Lincoln, especially regarding Lincoln's known depression.

Throughout his life, Jim expressed his fine taste and creativity in many artistic pursuits and handicrafts, including painting, ceramics, needlepoint, and wood carving. He was an expert cook and championship cookie baker, producing innumerable varieties at Christmas time, which he carefully mailed to lucky recipients.

Jim loved dogs, and will also be sadly missed by his little Sheltie, Bonnie Two Shoes.



Jim Swanson

FFRF chapters in action!



The Lake Superior Freethinkers (LSF) offered a check of more than \$2,000 to support Safe Haven, which provides shelter and support for people leaving abusive domestic situations. LSF members matched FFRF's \$1,000 partnership grant to reach that goal. Pictured are members of the LSF (and Safe Haven), from left to right, Allen Loken, Tom Patten, Linda Crumpton, Charles Gessert, Carin Skoog (of Safe Haven) and Barbara Stark.



Members of the Central Florida Freethought Community (CFFC), an Orlando-area chapter of FFRF, stand near a billboard it placed during the first weeks of the 2022 Florida legislative session to remind citizens and elected officials that there cannot be freedom of religion without a government that is free from religion.



Philip Lentz, right, president of the FFRF Valley of the Sun Chapter in Arizona, presents a check for \$500 to Alex Zygmunt, president of the Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix as members of both groups look on. The Valley of the Sun Chapter also has donated \$1,000 to Atheists Helping the Homeless (AHH).

'IN SCIENCE WE TRUST' Self inking stamp



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

\$20 postpaid — Item #ST02

Buy It Online ffrf.org/shop

Convention Honoree

Megan Phelps-Roper: Leaving Westboro

This is the speech given by Megan Phelps-Roper on Nov. 20, 2021, at FFRF's national convention in Boston. She was introduced by FFRF Board Treasurer Steve Salemson.

Steve Salemson: It's my privilege to introduce the Henry Zumak Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award. Hank Zumak, who has with incredible generosity endowed this award, unfortunately was not able to be with us at the convention this year. The award is intended to encourage and support individuals or groups working to free society or our laws from religious fundamentalism.

This year's recipient, Megan Phelps-Roper, is highly deserving of this acclamation. She is the granddaughter of Fred Phelps, pastor of the Westboro Baptist Church, best known for daily protests of LGBTQ individuals, Jews, other Christians, a few atheists, and even members of the military. Megan will recount for you her journey from being a child, a teenage and then a young adult acolyte and how she became deradicalized and left the church and her entire way of life in November 2012.

Megan, please come up to receive the plaque recognizing your courage and conviction and to receive your \$10,000 Henry Zumach Award.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Megan Phelps-Roper received an award and spoke at FFRF's national convention on Nov. 20, 2021, in Boston about how she left the Westboro Baptist Church, which was founded by her grandfather, Fred Phelps.

By Megan Phelps-Roper

It is such an honor to be here and to receive this award. It's been nine years since I left Westboro Baptist Church and lost my family. If you had told me then that less than a decade later, I would be standing here, an unabashed unbeliever, celebrating and being inspired by the work of the godless, I probably would have been very afraid of you. The distance between there and here feels incredibly vast in some ways, so I'm just going to take a few minutes to talk about where I come from and to explain why sometimes these days it actually doesn't feel very far away at all.

When I was 18, I found myself in Las Vegas for the first time. I was less than two weeks from my high school graduation, and I was spending the week before finals making appearances on Howard Stern's "Live in Las Vegas," alongside my mom, two cousins, my 11-year-old sister and my 8-year-old brother.

My little brother was absolutely adorable. He had these platinum blonde curls and enormous blue eyes and

sweet little dimples, so you can imagine how jarring it was for the audience then to see the T-shirt my little brother was wearing with these bold white letters on a Navy blue shirt that said, "GodHatesFags.com." We'd had the shirts made especially for the occasion, and all of us matched.

The show was broadcast live on closed circuit TV and so all over Las Vegas, my sister and I were recognized and pointed out, "Hey, look, it's the 'God Hates Fags' girls." This was life as I'd always known it. Before I could read, I was learning why God despised gays and Jews and everyone who wasn't part of our church.

Before I started kindergarten, I was standing on public sidewalks holding signs with messages like "Gays are worthy of death." My earliest memories began at about age 3 when I was sitting in the living room with my family, memorizing bible verses and the church's interpretation of them, basically that God hated most of mankind, and that I was so terribly lucky to have been born at Westboro Baptist Church, the only known place on Earth where God meets with his people. With only 70 or so congregants, our church was tiny, but what we lacked in size we made up for in the force of our beliefs.

Defender of Westboro

I grew up with the understanding that I was in grave danger at all times, that the world and its inhabitants were full of evil and that they would seduce me away from the truth unless I maintained constant vigilance. This was the story I was told and that I believed for the first 26 years of my life. Because my grandfather was the church's founder and my mother was its most influential member and organizer, it's no surprise that I found a special place in the church, too. My mom used to call me her right hand, and at her side I became a skilled

defender of Westboro and its many controversial doctrines.

It didn't hurt that both of my parents and many of the adults in the church were attorneys. Their arguments were well-crafted and tightly woven, and I learned them well. Whether it was for "The Tyra Banks Show" or local television news or the many documentary crews that were coming and going all the time, I was frequently called upon to give interviews. I traveled with my mother to represent the church's positions in classrooms all over the United States, from high schools and universities to the FBI National Academy at Quantico.

Along came Twitter

I felt so thankful to God for giving me the ability to speak for him, and then, like a gift from God Almighty himself, I thought, along came Twitter. I discovered the social media platform and became Westboro's voice there when I was 23. I had no way of knowing that it would be Twitter, of all things, that would be the beginning of the end of my unshakable faith in the God and worldview of Westboro Baptist Church.

Twitter seemed perfect — a tool that was easy to use and so effective at getting attention. It rewarded clarity and simplicity and directness, which our message had in spades. It only took one-tenth of a tweet's 140-character limit to announce that "God hates Jews." It required so little effort to find and attack Westboro targets, and I was ready and willing to defend our beliefs against them all.

What I was not prepared for was kindness. David Abitbol was one of the first people I targeted after joining Twitter. He is the creator of a blog called "Jewlicious," and I found him listed at number two on a list of the 100 most influential Jews on Twitter.

I researched David and his blog and immediately got to tweeting. I accused

the Jews of killing Jesus and warned David that Jewish customs were dead, rote rituals that would take them all to hell. David's response was swift, cutting and angry, which was exactly what I expected. But, almost immediately, something changed. I kept peppering David's feed with these condemnatory messages, but his responses morphed from angry insults to friendly barbs. He started asking questions about our picket signs, and I started asking him questions about Jewish theology. Both of us were genuinely curious how the other had come to such different conclusions about the bible.

We were still clearly adversaries, but there was something new, too — this human element that was impossible to ignore. David's friendliness made me wary. I knew he was evil, but here he was, trying to help teach me Hebrew so that I could read the Old Testament the right way, and challenging Westboro's doctrines with a gentle ribbing of a friend. In spite of my wariness, I discovered that I liked David, so, naturally, I thought it was time to picket him.

I first met David when my church protested the Jewlicious festival in Long Beach, Calif., and then again nine months later at the Jewish General Assembly in New Orleans.

Both times, David came out to the picket line to chat with me. In New Orleans, he brought me a Middle Eastern dessert from a market in Jerusalem where he lives, and I brought him some of my favorite peppermint chocolate. He flipped the candy bar over and started teaching me about the kosher symbols on the packaging, while I listened earnestly and held my "God Hates Jews" sign. We had reached this strange sort of truce, even though neither of us was backing off from our positions.

Internal inconsistency

But shortly after New Orleans, I suddenly stopped talking to David. In a conversation about one of our protest signs, David managed to find an internal inconsistency in Westboro's doc-

The book cover for "Unfollow" features a photograph of a person wearing a white headscarf, looking down. The title "UNFOLLOW" is in large, bold, yellow letters. Below it, the subtitle "A Memoir of Loving and Leaving Extremism" is in smaller yellow letters. The author's name "MEGAN PHELPS-ROPER" is at the bottom in white.

You can buy Megan Phelps-Roper's book, *Unfollow: A Memoir of Loving and Leaving Extremism* at ffrf.org/shop for \$18

Women Without Superstition
"No Gods—No Masters"

Edited by, Annie Laurie Gaylor

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

—Published by FFRF.
696 pages / HB

ffrf.org/shop

The book cover for "Women Without Superstition" has a white background with a purple and yellow design at the bottom. The title is in bold black letters, and the subtitle is in italics. The editor's name is also listed.

The book cover for "The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible" has a brown background with a white and yellow design at the bottom. The title is in bold white letters, and the author's name is in smaller white letters.

The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible
By Ruth Hurmence Green

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

—Published by FFRF. 440 pages / PB

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

trines, this loose thread of contradiction in those tightly woven arguments.

Never in my life had I come upon a question that the church didn't have a satisfactory explanation for with some bible verse somewhere. But when I went to the elders with this contradiction, they absolutely could not hear it. My questions were immediately shut down, and although I tried to suppress it for a while, this was the beginning of the unraveling for me, the realization that Westboro did not have a monopoly on truth — the undeniable understanding that we were human, infallible and not divine.

I cut off my communication with David after that exchange, but I continued my conversations with other users on Twitter, not realizing that they were changing me, too. What I failed to see was that the dynamics on Twitter were fundamentally different from anything that I'd encountered before. At protests, it was mostly loud and raucous, but on Twitter it could be calm. It was questions and jokes and quiet in a way that the pickets rarely were. And because pickets only ever lasted for a few hours at most, there was never any way to develop any sort of rapport with outsiders.

On Twitter, the conversation was ongoing. It lasted for months and then years. I continued to argue the bible with other people on the platform, but we also celebrated one another's birthdays and anniversaries. I listened to the music they recommended. I watched as their children grew older, in the photos they posted. I saw their grief when loved ones died, and, in time, I began to grieve with them. For me, this was a terrifying turn of events. This was not the truth that I had been taught. They were Satanic arguments and feelings that would lead me to hell.

But the dialogue on Twitter worked in the other direction, as well. It helped my opponents see me as a human being, and their behavior also changed in spite of the terrible things I was saying. They stretched across that divide to listen to me. In spite of their abhorrence of my beliefs, they befriended me. And as they developed a more nuanced understanding of Westboro's doctrines, they were able to find more effective ways to kindly and respectfully challenge me.

When those seeds of doubt planted by David and others eventually bloomed, I left Westboro knowing that my family would cut me out of their lives forever. They believed that God required them to deliver me to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.

Into a void

The church had been my entire identity, so when I walked away, I walked into a void. I didn't know who I was or what I believed. I was terrified of my own mind — this mind that had been passionately convinced that my primary duty in life was to warn the world that they were doomed. I knew I had hurt so many people in the process, and I had no idea how to make any of it right.

I had no idea where to go from there. I didn't know it at the time, but my saviors would turn out to be people and reason. There were people like David Abitbol, former enemies who offered me incredible grace and friendship when they could have instead demanded punishment and retribution. There was my old high school English teacher who recommended books from thinkers like Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, people who first gave voice to my skepticism, people who gave me the vocabulary to articulate why I was leaving not just Westboro, but religion per se, and there were a lot of religious people, too: Evangelical Christians in Iowa, Orthodox Jews in Los Angeles and Jehovah's Witnesses in Deadwood, S.D.

I didn't share their beliefs, and I was never tempted to join their ranks, but I wanted to understand why they believed as they did. And I learned so much about my own beliefs by being in conversation with people who saw things differently.

It's hard to overstate the overwhelming joy I felt in being able to have these friendships with gays and Jews and all these other people I demonized because it's something that had never been allowed at Westboro.

My mom often quoted a passage from the bible that said, "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" It was a rhetorical question, and the clear answer was no, true friends always agree on everything that matters. What amazed me most about those friendships was the open-mindedness of the people in those groups compared to my family at Westboro, because they weren't fundamentalists. The Christians I met with spoke openly of their disagreements with bible passages. My Orthodox Jewish friends didn't disdain Jews who were less observant. I could tell these people why I believed their ideas were wrong, and they didn't kick me out of their lives for it.

Striking contrast

It was such a striking contrast to my life at Westboro, where any deviation from the approved doctrine would result in someone's excommunication, removing them from their home and their family and the whole community. I found the open-mindedness of my new friends potent and heady, the freedom to consider ideas from multiple perspectives, the freedom to disagree with someone without demonizing and ostracizing them, the freedom to question received wisdom without risking everything. I couldn't believe I'd gone through my whole life not knowing that kind of intellectual freedom was possible.

It seemed like the whole world had been living in this utopia of open-

mindfulness, and I felt so privileged to have finally joined the party. But slowly my rose-colored view of the world started to slip a bit. I became obsessed with trying to understand how my family — my intelligent, analytical, kind, well-intentioned family — had gotten to such a terrible place. From the outside, it was much easier to see the patterns that I had been living when I was blind to it. There are patterns we see in places where true dialogue is impossible because the cost of dissent is so high that few are willing to pay it, and orthodoxy develops a stranglehold, as a result.

Those patterns are the hallmarks of my upbringing — groupthink and confirmation bias and dichotomous black-and-white thinking. This entrenched tribalistic mindset and the inherent fear that accompanies it — the fear of being cast out of the group — those forces led my family and me to the kind of blinding certainty that makes it incredibly difficult to honestly entertain opposing views. Motivated reasoning is a common human foible, but it can seem nearly insurmountable when we allow ourselves to arrive at the conclusion that our views could not possibly be wrong, that we have nothing to learn from those who believe differently, that there is nothing outside of our perspective that can or should change our positions.

Looking back at that sad trajectory of my family was illuminating. But even as I resolved to avoid the pitfalls that had derailed us at Westboro, I was surprised and then dismayed to watch as those same destructive ideas have come to characterize public discourse in America and beyond, that division of the world into us and them, the casting out of apostates for the slightest deviations from the party line, the self-righteousness of a punishing call-out culture, and the self-censorship that results from it. Over the past six years or so, I've listened as more and more people across the political spectrum have declared their refusal to be in relationship with people, even their own families, who they see as having the wrong beliefs.

And when I hear that, I can't help but think of that passage that my mom always quoted, "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" I truly shudder to think where I would be today if my friends on Twitter had taken that position. I also can't help but think about so many of the people I met early in my post-Westboro days, those religious people who, over the course of our friend-



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Megan Phelps-Roper

ship, many of whom have also chosen to leave religion and to embrace a secular life. I'm so grateful for those people on Twitter for showing me in an unforgettable way that listening is not agreeing, that empathy is not a betrayal of one's cause, that these are, in fact, the tools of effective persuasion.

I mentioned that it's now been nine years since I left Westboro and my family, and while the trauma and regret of that part of my life will always be with me, they are accompanied by this deep and abiding sense of hope. My life was forever changed by people who took the time and had the patience to listen to my story and to share theirs with me. They forsook judgment, and they came to me with kindness and empathy, and the impact of that decision was huge.

I'm not trying to argue that every single bigoted person can be converted to the side of acceptance and equality and tolerance, but what I am saying is that there is a lot of hope for a lot of people who seem hopelessly lost — even people like me, who was raised from birth to fear and condemn others.

One point I hope you'll take away from all this is that when people are in the thrall of poisonous ideology, it's not all about deliberate ill will or inherent hatred or lack of intelligence. It's about the unbelievable destructiveness and staying power of bad ideas and about finding ways of equipping people with the tools they need to fight them.


I am so grateful to the Freedom From Religion Foundation for being such an important part of that effort. And, again, I'm so honored to receive this award today. I have every intention of working every day to try to be worthy of it. Thank you so much.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Megan Phelps-Roper speaks with a convention attendee during her book-signing event after her speech on Nov. 20, 2021, in Boston.

Yip Harburg,
from his book:



Rhymes for the Irreverent

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

Illustrated by Seymour Chwast, published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online - ffrf.org/shop

Convention speech

Courts have smashed down wall of separation

This is an edited version of the speech that Jay Wexler gave at FFRF's convention on Nov. 19, 2021, in Boston. He was introduced by FFRF Attorney Sam Grover.

Sam Grover: I'm very excited to be introducing our next speaker, Professor Jay Wexler, who has been teaching at Boston University School of Law since 2001, after he clerked for Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and after working for the Department of Justice. In addition to teaching law, Wexler is the author of the Twitter handle "SCOTUS Humor," which tracks the number of laughs each Supreme Court justice receives during oral arguments, with a running tally for each term. Jay is also an accomplished author with six books. You can find out more about his books and his other works at his website jaywex.com. His newest book is called *Our Non-Christian Nation: How Atheists, Satanists, Pagans and Others Are Demanding Their Rightful Place in Public Life*.

Please welcome Professor Jay Wexler.

By Jay Wexler

Good morning, everybody. This is spectacular. There are so many people here! It's always a pleasure and a privilege to speak at an FFRF event.

And it's particularly thrilling to talk about my 2019 book, *Non-Christian Nation*, because the Freedom From Religion Foundation and its members are really one of the major heroes of the book. Indeed, the book is dedicated to the courageous plaintiffs who have fought for separation of church and state, and many of those plaintiffs and, of course, their lawyers, are here today. It's like a who's who of extremely important plaintiffs in big cases. I see Linda Stephens there, who was the plaintiff in *Town of Greece v. Galloway*. David Williamson is a plaintiff in the *Williamson v. Brevard County* case. Dan Barker, of course, is a plaintiff in a case challenging the House of Representatives' policy about chaplains. So, it's really a thrill.

It's just not often that one gets to talk about a book to those who inspired the book. What I'm going to do is talk briefly about the book and then mention a few recent developments that have post-dated the book.

Our Non-Christian Nation

Our Non-Christian Nation grew out of two straightforward facts about the United States, neither of which I think will surprise anybody here.

The first fact is that in the past 25 years, the Supreme Court has really smashed down the wall of separation between church and state, basically rendering the Establishment Clause practically a dead letter, and vastly increasing religion's access to government property, government money, government institutions. The last time the Supreme Court struck something down under the Establishment Clause, the First Amendment, was 2005.

That's a long time now. How has it done this and in what areas has the Supreme Court acted in this way? Four main areas that I talk about in the book are of extreme importance.

First of all, it's funding of religion as a result of the 2002 case called *Zelman*, which involved the Cleveland voucher program, and the 2000 case *Mitchell v.*



Photo by Chris Line

Boston University School of Law Professor Jay Wexler gives a talk at FFRF's national convention in Boston on Nov. 19, 2021.

Helms. And the most recent *Espinoza* case that came out two years ago.

Basically, the government can funnel tons of money — billions of dollars — to religion, so long as it does so in kind of formally the right way, which is actually pretty easy to do. And, moreover, the government can't choose to exclude religious recipients from general funding programs as a result of the new reinvigoration of the Free Exercise Clause, which is one of the biggest developments in separation of church and state law that we see today.

The second is legislative prayer. In 2014, the Supreme Court, in the *Town of Greece* case, held that town boards, as well as state and local legislatures, can start off their sessions with prayers. And not just nonsectarian prayers, which, of course, don't exist, but the Supreme Court likes to talk about nonsectarian prayers. Not only can they start off with a nonsectarian prayer, they can start off with a completely sectarian prayer to the Lord Jesus Christ and anything else like that before a legislative session.

Third, contacts in the public schools. Previously, the courts did pretty well in policing the line in public schools between keeping religion out, such as in school prayer cases. But in a line of cases culminating in the case about the Good News Club, the court said that public schools, if they open up their classrooms to organizations after the school day, can't exclude religious groups from using those classrooms and those facilities, even if those groups are proselytizing to 6-year-olds and giving them candy and money for remembering bible verses.

And, finally, there's the context of religious displays and symbols on public property where the court has, over the past 20 years, basically approved many

of these kinds of government-supported monuments, such as the Ten Commandments in Texas, and, most recently, the 40-foot cross in Maryland. I went to that argument at the Supreme Court because I was just a masochist and just wanted to see the Establishment Clause fall right in front of my face. And I just sat there open-mouthed as the justices debated for 70 minutes about whether a 40-foot-cross is, in fact, a religious symbol. I looked it up. That's two and a half giraffes. I looked that up just because I wanted to see how big the cross was with the units of giraffes, which are apparently 15 feet tall.

So that's the first development, where the wall has really come down on the separation of church and state.

More nonbelievers

The second development is a social-cultural development. The Supreme Court is doing all this demolishing, even though the United States has become much more religiously diverse. You see anywhere from 15 percent to 30 percent as the number of how many people believe in no religion at all. We have growth in religious diversity and nonbelief at the same time that the Supreme Court is smashing down the wall of separation of church and state. The natural question that follows is, "What should religious minorities and atheists do in a post-separation of church and state nation?"

There are lots of different possibilities. One possibility is to continue to fight in the courts to promote separation of church and state, and, of course, we have to do that. FFRF does that better than anybody, and especially just hearing the cases that FFRF is litigating now, I mean, yes, if there are some bap-

tisms in the public school, there needs to be action taken.

So, we got to keep fighting, keep litigating in the courts. But at the same time, there's only so far that can go these days with our current Supreme Court, which has gone very far to the right. When I think of Justice Amy Coney Barrett replacing my former boss and hero on the Supreme Court, the only good thing about that is when I'm doing community theater and I need to weep on demand, I'll think about that.

I really fear cases getting to the Supreme Court. Truly, I don't want the next school prayer case to show up on Justice Barrett's desk. I don't know what will happen if it does.

So, what else can atheists do? One thing we could do is just give up. We could cede the public square to Christianity. The Supreme Court has said the government can support Christianity in all these ways I described. Maybe we just give up and go home. I doubt anybody in this audience would want that, for good reason.

So, what else might we do? Well, we could do what FFRF does, which is writing letters, lobbying, public education, etc., to make sure that people understand some of the dangers of religion and some of the goals of secularism.

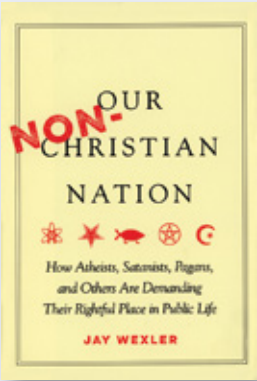
Equal participation

But there's one other thing that we can do. And that is to demand equal participation in the public square alongside Christians. The Supreme Court has opened up the public square in terms of money, institutions, property, religion. But it has also, at the same time, said that the government can't discriminate on the basis of what religion or nonreligion people believe in.

That means that not only can Christians put up displays, but, of course, so can atheists. We can have secular organizations in the public schools proselytizing with candy, I suppose, if necessary.

The idea that we, as religious minorities or atheists, should be participating in public life, that's not what we wanted to do. We wanted to keep religion and the government and the public square separate. It's kind of strange in a way. We've got to get over the hump that we're stuck with religion participating in the public square.

One of the main things we can do to counter it is to participate alongside



You can buy Jay Wexler's book, *Our Non-Christian Nation* at ffrf.org/shop for \$25 for hardcover and \$18 for paperback, postpaid.



Photo by Chris Line

Jay Wexler said he fears religious cases being heard by the Supreme Court: “Truly, I don’t want the next school prayer case to show up on Justice Barrett’s desk. I don’t know what will happen if it does.”

Christians. And, indeed, religious minorities and atheists have started doing exactly that. And that’s what much of the book is. It’s about telling the stories.

Many of the stories in the book involve religious minorities. There’s a story about a Muslim school in North Carolina, for example, that participates in that state’s voucher program. That was a school which saw three of its graduates shot to death in a hate crime.

There’s a story of a wife of a Wiccan war hero who, with the help of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, sued to get the Wiccan pentacle approved by the Veterans Administration for placement on the National Cemetery gravestones. And now, if you go to the National Cemetery in Washington, D.C., there are at least eight headstones with the Wiccan pentacle.

There’s the story in the book of how I went to Belle Plaine, Minn. Belle Plaine is this tiny town, the town where the very first Satanic monument on public property was going to be erected. I went there to go see if that was going to happen. But what happened is that the town actually closed down its free-speech zone rather than allow a Satanic veteran’s monument to be next to a bunch of crosses in their Veterans Memorial Park.

There are all of the secular invocations that have been given before town boards by the fantastic CFFC in central Florida. Linda Stephvns did a fabulous secular invocation in front of the same town that she took to the Supreme Court, which I thought was one of the bravest things I’ve ever seen.

Of course, there’s the FFRF holiday displays. We’ve seen the nativity displays with Benjamin Franklin and the Statue of Liberty.

Sometimes, these events go really smoothly. At Linda’s invocation, I went to town of Greece, and I secretly hoped that there would be some kind of hula-laloo that I could report on. But really, luckily, looking back on it, there was not, and it was very peaceful.

The only thing was that I was sitting next to a guy, and when Linda was introduced, the town board guy said, “There’ll now be a prayer.” And then the guy sitting next to me took off his baseball hat. And then when it was clear that it wasn’t going to be an actual prayer, he put the hat back on. That was the extent of the controversy

there. So, sometimes these things go very smoothly.

Not always smooth

But, of course, as you can imagine and know from all FFRF’s work, often-times they don’t go smoothly. And I tell some stories in the book about that. There are stories, for example, of invocations being shouted down, counter-invocations being given, displays being torn down. There’s the story of legislators in Louisiana who supported a voucher program until they learned that there were such things as Muslim schools, at which point they decided, “Well, we better get rid of that voucher program.”

Sometimes the stories are actually quite unfortunate, which I don’t think will surprise anybody. Although most of the book is descriptive, it also puts forth a normative argument, that this kind of participation in public life, while in a sense kind of a second best to the ideal secular public square, nevertheless, has some real positives that minorities might not get from that kind of secular public square.

For example, having a religious cacophony. That’s how I envisioned it in the public square, where you have Christians talking about what they want and Jews talking about what they believe and atheists saying what they believe and the Satanists and the Wiccans, and everybody talking about what they believe the good life looks like. I find that’s kind of exciting in a way to me. I’m sure some of you will disagree, but the idea of this pluralism in public life is very attractive.

And I also think that it’s educative. I think it was David Williamson who told me in a conversation that doing an invocation before a meeting as a secularist gives you sort of a two-minute lecture opportunity to both model how atheists are not scary and to teach people who might be afraid of atheists what we believe in.

There’s an educative benefit to participating in the public square. And maybe, also, over time, we might see more mutual understanding and toler-

ance and respect. The other possibility, of course, is that you have something like what happened in Phoenix when the Satanic Temple decided it was going to give an invocation and the town decided after a three-hour, really, really hard-to-watch meeting, where the entire city of Phoenix came out to denounce the Satanic Temple, even though they didn’t know what the Satanic Temple was, they closed down the invocation program altogether, kind of like the Belle Plaine park, rather than let a Satanist talk for two minutes once a year. So, you get the secular public square anyway.

New developments

So that’s the argument of the book and the description contained in the book. And now let me just talk about three developments that have occurred since I wrote the book.

The first development is a really troubling one, and that is the exclusion in some jurisdictions of atheists from invocation programs. It’s true that the Supreme Court and *Town of Greece* said that the government can’t discriminate on the basis of religion when it lets people give opening prayers. But some jurisdictions, including the United States House of Representatives, have said, “Well, OK, other religions can pray, but atheists can’t pray because atheists can’t pray.” And this has happened in a few jurisdictions. It happened in the 11th Circuit, happened in the 3rd Circuit, and the D.C. Circuit, and FFRF was involved in the litigation of maybe all of those cases, but certainly the D.C. Circuit case in which a judge that I had clerked for before I worked for RBG, David Tatel, actually came out in favor of the government. This was so disturbing

to me, the idea that the government could exclude atheists from this pluralistic public square just because atheists don’t believe in a higher power. It’s deeply troubling and really under-

mines the religious pluralism possibility that is the only silver lining in my view of the Supreme Court’s new Establishment Clause jurisprudence.

The second development is a case called *Shurtleff v. Boston*. This is the Boston flag case, which is at the Supreme Court now, and it’s going to be a really interesting case. The city of Boston has these three flag poles right in front of the City Hall.

One has the U.S. flag, one has the state flag, and the other has the city flag. And sometimes the city flies a private group or civic organization’s flag in conjunction with an event that that group does. And a Christian group said, “Can we put up our flag?” The city said, “No, it’s not consistent with our guidelines.” And then the lawsuit occurred. From a free speech First Amendment perspective, it’s a really interesting and difficult case because it turns on whether those flags are the government speaking, in which case the government can say we’re not putting up a cross, or whether it’s the government facilitating a forum for private speech, in which case, then the government maybe has to put up the Christian flag. But if it does, and if that’s what the Supreme Court rules, I’m really hoping that the Freedom From Religion Foundation has a flag, because that’s what we need to do on day two, is to put that up.

And finally, I just want to say a word about the Supreme Court’s reinvigoration of the Free Exercise clause. In the last couple of years, we’ve seen this right-turning court really push the Free Exercise clause, finding that religious believers have rights to exemptions from various general laws and other things like that. Recent cases involving things called the “ministerial exception” and the *Fulton* case from last year, and there was all those Covid cases which the court is deciding on a shadow docket with no oral argument. All those cases represent a new reinvigorated Free Exercise clause. And we can debate about what the proper interpretation of the Free Exercise clause may be. But the point I want to make here is that whatever you think about that, it’s certainly the case that reinvigorating the Free Exercise Clause at the same time that the court is demolishing the Establishment Clause puts the religion clauses out of balance. If we’re going to allow religion to be exempt from some general laws — and maybe we should, maybe we shouldn’t — but if we are, then religion should then also bear the burden of needing to be excluded from government programs on the other end to balance the two rights.

We often talk about the two clauses in isolation from each other, but I think we ought to be talking about them together. And if the court is going to demolish the Establishment Clause, it doesn’t make any sense for it to reinvigorate the Free Exercise clause at the same time. And I think we need to keep making that point.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Jay Wexler spoke about his book, *Non-Christian Nation*, as well as some recent developments regarding state/church separation.

Tales from an agnostic Catholic school student

By Thomas Drolsum

In religion class during my freshman year at a Catholic high school in the 1960s, the teacher, Father Luke, selected some students to form a panel that would answer questions from the rest of the class about the bible.

When it came my turn to pose a question, I asked if it was possible that Jesus was actually a fictional character (i.e., that Mark made up the Christ narrative and that Matthew, Luke and John repeated it, adding their own embellishments). My question was met with full-throated derision from the panel. Posing such a question, they warned, was blasphemous. They went on to vociferously claim that the biblical story of Jesus had to be true because it was in the bible. I was still unfamiliar with the logical fallacy of circular reasoning, but I intuitively felt that using the bible to prove the veracity of something in the bible made no sense. I looked at the teacher for help, but he remained silent, seeming, thereby, to side with the panel. I left the class that day born again . . . as an incipient infidel.

...

Moving on to my junior year, one day in religion class, Father Hiller stood next to the lectern and showed us how to masturbate by vigorously stroking his "air penis." (Religion classes at this school were not co-ed.) In retrospect, this was problematic given the subsequent revelations of the widespread priestly penchant for pederasty. Even back then, he was forced to apologize to the class the next day. It seems that reports of his lesson in onanism had made its way to some of the parents who took umbrage at his perverse attempt at sex education.

My own problems at the time were twofold. First of all, no one needs to teach a teen boy how to masturbate. Teens already had the technique well in hand. Secondly, and more to the point, the Catholic Church considered masturbation a mortal sin punishable by eternal torment in hell. After all, "every sperm is sacred" as Monty Python laughingly reminded us in the movie, "The Meaning of Life." And here was a priest ignoring that dictum and lending a hand in our own damnation.

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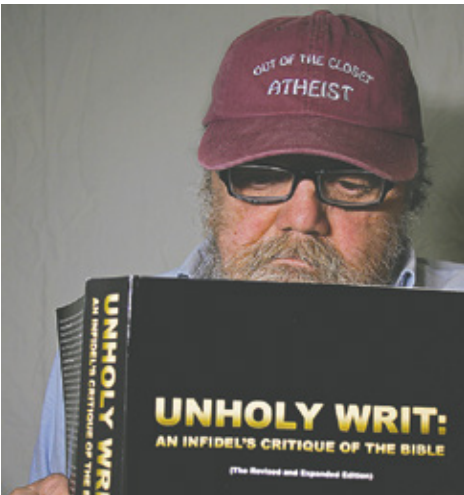
Proceeding to my senior year, I had a confrontation with Father Falcone in yet another religion class. While he was lecturing on the proofs for the existence of God, I was staring out the window, enjoying the sights of a beautiful spring day. He called me out, insisting that the contents of his lecture were far more important to my immortal soul than anything I would find out the window. After all, he was proving that God existed.

Then he asked me the question that got me into trouble: Did I think God's existence could be proven? (I had yet to read the Antinomies section of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which debunked all of Father Falcone's so-called proofs.) I said no. Suddenly, his face turned red, and when he tried to speak, only saliva spewed forth from his mouth. At that instant, the bell rang. I used that as an excuse to flee the scene.

However, my escape from his wrath was only temporary. At the beginning of the next day's class, he called me out into the hallway. He said that, given my scores on the entrance exams and IQ tests, I should be near the top of the class. But, alas, to my apparent shame (at least in his eyes), I was mired right in



Image from Shutterstock



Thomas Drolsum

the middle. This apparently meant that I was someone whose intellectual accomplishments were so meager that my opinions on matters theological could be discounted. He returned to the classroom with a hop in his step after having vanquished an infidel. I was left standing there in confusion about how a purported intercessor for Christ could be so mean-spirited.

...

As a hall monitor, I had another interesting clerical encounter, this time with a young priest named Father McHugh, or, rather, with what caught my attention in his office. A secretary from the school's main office gave me a note to be delivered to him in his office.

When I entered his outer office, I encountered four cheerleaders doing filing — mostly their nails. I told them about the note I was supposed to deliver and they directed me to the inner office, where I found Father McHugh with two more cheerleaders. There I was, a teenage boy with raging hormones surrounded by six beautiful girls. I somehow managed to maintain my composure and left this scaled-down version of Islamic paradise. As I made my way back to my guard station, I was thinking that a small office was a strange place to hold cheerleading

practice. Or, maybe, there was more going on at that school than met the eye.

...

This incident reminded me of another occasion years earlier when I was surprised by priestly behavior. When I was in parochial school, I was still a true believer, and, as such, became an altar boy. One day, when we were preparing for Mass in the sacristy, the priest noticed that he had forgotten the sacramental wine. Off to the rectory he sent me to fetch it (so he could turn it into the actual blood of Jesus with the transubstantiation miracle he was going to pull off during Mass). When I opened the rectory's refrigerator door, I was astounded to see cases of beer filling almost the entire fridge. Three priests lived in that rectory and they obviously made sure that they had an ample supply of liquor. This made quite an impression on me at the time, but I shouldn't have been surprised. After all, they were Christ's representatives on Earth and his first miracle was to make booze [John 2:1-11].

...

Speaking of transubstantiation, on the first Friday of each month there was a Mass held in the school gymnasium that was attended by the entire student body. The highlight of each Mass was Holy Communion, when each of the students was afforded the opportunity to eat God. Although a vast majority of the students took part in this theophagy, I was never one of them.

After almost four years of non-participation in this ritual, people started to notice. (You couldn't get anything past those eagle-eyed nuns.) After one of those Masses, I was confronted by my homeroom teacher, Sister Christopher. She took me out in the hall to inform me that the other nuns had remarked that none of them had ever seen me receive Communion. She deftly explained to them that I received the Host at an early morning Mass that I attended before coming to school. I just shrugged my

shoulders and tried hard not to laugh out loud. Anyone who had any awareness of my lifestyle knew that I was not a morning person. I wouldn't get up early to see the "Second Coming," let alone eat bits of corpse, which I, along with James Joyce, thought was a rum idea.

...

Alas, home life was no refuge from this superstitious mumbo jumbo.

One day, my older brother screamed at me that I was going to hell because I had not fulfilled my Easter duty. (I was obliged to dissolve God in my gastric juices between Ash Wednesday and Pentecost Sunday). Failure to meet this obligation was a mortal sin, again, punishable by the eternal torment of hell.

My brother was not the only person to predict my eternal damnation. I once had a paramour who, after five years of an intimate relationship, told me that I was destined to burn forever in the fires of hell. Although she admitted that I was a good person (in fact, one of the best people she had ever met), I was irretrievably doomed because I would not accept Jesus as my lord and savior. So, in her eyes, one could be good and still be damned. That suffocating stench of Calvinism helped confirm my decision to continue my sojourn on this so-called road to perdition, sans her company.

...

Finally, when I was in college, I was called for jury duty in a malpractice case. While the court clerk was swearing in the jury, I stood with them but did not repeat her words. After the swearing in, the rest of the jury sat down, but I remained standing. I told the judge that I could not in good conscience take the oath because I was an atheist, and, consequently, I could not make an affirmation that ended with the words "so help me God."

Surprisingly, he wasn't the least bit fazed by my announcement. He simply told the clerk to give me the secular oath. Unlike the judge, she was so non-plused by the situation that she started swearing me in as if I was a witness in the case. After she had started by saying "Do you swear to tell the truth . . .," the judge intervened and told her to give me the same oath that she had administered to the other jurors, but to leave off the last word. Later, apparently not recognizing me, a woman approached me in the jury room seething with rage about that abhorrent man who refused to swear to God. Looking into her eyes, I could see a female Torquemada, a modern-day witch burner, a blood-thirsty crusader against the godless. Sad to say, I fear that she is far from alone.

FFRF Member Thomas Drolsum is an author, amateur chemist, photographer, avid septuagenarian cyclist and ardent dog lover.

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The Not So Good Book: What Does the 'Holy Bible' Really Teach?



NEW!

THE NOT SO GOOD BOOK
WHAT DOES THE HOLY BIBLE REALLY TEACH?

Brian Bolton

By Brian Bolton
Foreword by Dan Barker
Illustrated by Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Steve Benson

A sourcebook for all Americans who consider fundamentalist Christian zealots to be a threat to religious freedom.

—Published by FFRF. 368 pages / PB

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Live your best life in a meaningless universe

This article (lightly edited) took second place in the 2021 Nonfiction Writing Contest held by TCK Publishing.

By Donald B. Ardell

Humans can trace our ancestors back about 200,000 years. Unlike the vast majority of species that ever existed, we are still here. This is not as impressive as it might sound. Compared with some life forms, being around for 200,000 years does not make us special. Dinosaurs ruled the Earth for about 165 million years until their extinction about 65 million years ago.

Living conditions for most humans, until quite recently, were rather grim. Life expectancy as late as the Middle Ages was 25 at birth, and 50 percent of children died before turning 5! Furthermore, chances for a relatively good life, at least in terms of creature comforts (e.g., safety, clean water, sanitation, ample food) were ghastly, relative to contemporary circumstances in developed nations. Until quite recently, personal extinction was an ever-present danger. It's safe to assume that people who lived during all but a fraction of human time did not devote a lot of time to pondering the meaning of life.

As for extinction, consider this somewhat disquieting reality: We're all doomed. And not just as individuals, but as a species, along with all other life forms and Earth itself.

So, how long do we have? That depends. Countless natural or human-induced calamities could drop the cosmic curtain at any time, such as asteroid strikes, thermonuclear wars, a supernova or volcanic eruptions combined with earthquakes. Less sudden but no less epic terminal misfortunes, such as loss of the biosphere via global warming, widespread pandemics that would make Covid-19 and its variants seem no more consequential than zits, or other science fiction-like events could end things quickly. Oh, and don't overlook the possibility of a blitzkrieg by extraterrestrials with serious attitude problems.

Even if our descendant homo sapiens hang on for many centuries to come, or thousands or even millions of years, in time, Ecclesiastes' lament will come to pass — all will be futile, utterly futile.

Sadly, the absolute certainty is that our sun is mortal, just like us. While its life-span is more impressive, in time it will go the way of all flesh, even though it is decidedly not of flesh. Presently 4.6 billion years old, it has already burned through roughly half the hydrogen in its core. Barely enough remains to keep the lights on for about another five billion years.

Once the fuel is gone, the sun will expand into a red giant, where it will eventually engulf Earth. Our planet will become a lifeless rock. But you will have been dead for a very long time before that will come to pass.



Image from Shutterstock



Don Ardell

There is good news

Though the ultimate meaninglessness of all life is not yet recognized by billions around the globe, the good news is that eventual recognition of such might bring dramatic advances for humanity, such as in the way we treat each other. If nearly everyone comes to realize and adapt to the reality that there is no true purpose for our existence, no grand scheme, no divine plan, no overarching design, no after-life, then compassion, kindness, empathy and other decencies might be more attractive than at present. Why be a jerk when we're here for such a brief time?

In a universal sense, your presence as a human is totally meaningless — you have no preordained role. You are inconsequential, like everyone and everything. You and I and everyone are alone, with no loving or angry deity or savior looking out for us, no sky god to reward or punish. There is no invisible, unknowable superpower doing favors for prayers or inflicting harm if we don't adhere to what priests and preachers, ayatollahs and rabbis, witch doctors and shamans insist it demands we do, or not do.

Consider the overwhelming likelihood that there is no hell below or heaven above. Your momentary presence on this planet as a somewhat advanced life form is a cosmic accident. It's highly improbable — and a true wonder.

This life is it and doesn't last long, so try to experience and share as much joy, art, music, drama, happiness, exuber-

ance, love and so on before you die. The end is near, so get on with it.

Make no mistake: This is good news, even if somewhat disguised. It can be an incredibly liberating perspective. It's a sound reason to set a course to live well and die happy. Celebrate! Shape your ultimately meaningless existence in ways that mean something to you here and now.

It's enough to focus upon things to do and ways to be that can be beneficial for you and invaluable for those you love.

In no way does meaninglessness mean you should or are more likely to ignore the well-being of others. On the contrary, a view of life as meaningless, save for what purposes we invent, makes us as likely to care for others as much as we do for ourselves.

Don't read meaning into random, seemingly unlikely if not impossible coincidences or other forms of amazing events of a fortuitous nature —such occurrences do not happen for a reason, they just happen. Avoid the temptation to infer causation, pattern or purpose to mind-boggling injustices — they are not curses from below, blessings from above or answered prayers. Eschew all such self-reverential conclusions. Recognizing realities is emotionally liberating.

Finding meaning

We know from Viktor Frankl, Irving Yalom and many existential philosophers whose work focused upon finding meaning in this life that service to others is the surest path to happiness.

Many who could afford to engage in lavish self-indulgence choose instead to devote themselves to causes and service to their fellow humans, and derive meaning and enduring satisfactions from doing so.

The list of such notables is long. Familiar examples include former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, and titans of business Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, and artists such as Sonny Bono and Angelina Jolie.

Here's what Apple CEO Tim Cook told a graduating class at my alma mater George Washington University on May 17, 2015:

"There are problems that need to be

solved, injustices that need to be ended, people who are still being persecuted, diseases still in need of cures. No matter what you do next, the world needs your energy, your passion, your impatience with progress. History rarely yields to one person, but think and never forget what happens when it does.

"That can be you. That should be you — all of us, making a mark, and a positive difference, however modest, during the brief moments of our time. No, none of it will matter to us when we're gone, but it does give meaning for a while, while we and those we affect still exist."

That's why we should all learn about, adopt and maintain a lifestyle that promotes well-being, reason, exuberance and personal freedoms. Do that and you will surely make the most of your possibilities.

Despite the absence of wishful thinking about an ultimate, cosmic and pre-ordained purpose which you may have long suspected was make-believe, you will have filled your time with consequence, meaning and purposes of your own design.

Our lives matter to us during our time, and especially to others who benefit from our love and caring. Familiarize yourself with the nature and benefits of reason and science, exuberant living, healthful nutrition, vigorous exercise and opportunities to boost your personal freedoms to think and act freely. Books, lectures, podcasts and all manner of ways to learn more about the skills associated with the four REAL wellness dimensions (Reason, Exuberance, Athleticism, Liberty) are readily available in this amazing age of ready information on almost everything.

The improved person, after all, "will observe, investigate, experiment and demonstrate," as Robert Ingersoll wrote in 1890. Knowledge has to be followed by practice, practice, practice — with adjustments and fine-tuning all the time. This is the likeliest path, not just to the stage at Carnegie Hall, but, more importantly, to overcoming the damages occasioned by dysfunctional ideas absorbed by initial circumstances.

May your life be epic and triumphant. FFRF Lifetime Member Don Ardell is a triathlete, author and wellness advocate from Madison, Wis. His blog posts can be found at donardell.com.

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll

By Orvin Larson

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

—Published by FFRF. 316 pages / PB

Buy it from FFRF online @ ffrf.org/shop

A quick summary of a current belief system

By Gary Larson

Several thousand years ago, a young man and young woman met and married. Even though they were married, the marriage had not yet been consummated. Thus, she was still a virgin. She turns up pregnant, and she convinces her young husband that God did it, and that she is going to have a baby God. Being the somewhat gullible young man that he was, he accepted that explanation of her condition.



Gary Larson

Word got around that she was to deliver a baby God, and they set off on a journey. But, at the end of the journey, they could find no overnight accommodations where they could rest and bear the baby God. They ended up staying in a barn, where the baby God was born.

Word had gotten around so much about the birth of the baby God that even the heavens realigned themselves, causing the stars to shine on and point to the barn where baby God



Image from Shutterstock

was born. This realignment of the stars enabled several important men of the time to find baby God’s birthplace, so they could bring appropriate gifts.

When baby God grew up, it is said that he became a carpenter, but there is little note of anything he ever built. Mostly, he traveled around the countryside with a group of his buddies, who truly believed that he was a baby God. He spent most of his time traveling around trying to convince those who would listen about his de-

ity, and the deity of his God father, and his father’s sidekick – an invisible ghost or spirit.

He performed all sorts of miracles — making the blind see, making the deaf hear, turning water into wine, and such — finally convincing many followers of his and his father’s and the ghost’s deity.

He finally got the attention of the rulers of the land at that time, who were none too happy with the message he was spreading. One ruler final-

ly had him executed, but after three days of being dead, he came back to life and left his tomb (body and all) and went to be with his father and the ghost somewhere in outer space.

Now he, his father, and the ghost watch over all the world to see what kind of good deeds and bad deeds each person on Earth does in their lifetime. At the end of each person’s life, if they have done enough good deeds, and not too many bad deeds — and this is the important part — if they believe in him, his father, and the ghost, they will join the trio in an eternally happy and joyous place. Even if they have done too many bad deeds, if they confess their transgressions and profess a belief in the trio, they can still go to the happy place. On the other hand, if they have done too many bad deeds, or if they do not believe in the trio, they will spend eternity in a really bad, unpleasant, hot place.

Many rational, scientific people cannot understand how otherwise rational people can follow the sorts of beliefs that are promoted by groups like QAnon, but fall hook, line and sinker for the above-described belief system. Go figure!

FFRF Member Gary Larson is retired and lives with his wife in rural northern California.

MEET A MEMBER



Photo from Smithsonian Magazine

Robert Saunders, shown in this 2021 image from Smithsonian Magazine, kneels in front of a Digital Equipment Corp. display from 1961. He, along with several other MIT students, “concocted a simple but enthralling program called ‘Spacewar!’ that debuted in 1962 on the Digital Equipment Corporation’s PDP-1 machine,” as reported in the magazine.

Retired programmer imparts *Knowledge*

Name: Robert A. Saunders
Where I live: California.
Where and when I was born: Chicago, 1938.
Education: B.S. in physics from MIT. Lots of study since.
Occupation: Retired from my primary career as a programmer of operating systems.
How I got where I am today: Lots of work and study.
Person in history I admire and why: Richard Dawkins.
He knows where the fossils are buried — or not.
A quotation I like: Anything by Carl Sagan.
Things I like: Chocolate.
Things I smite: Religion, of any sort.
My doubts about religion started: When I was 6. Biblical accounts of extreme old age were not credible.
Before I die: I want to see my book *Knowledge: What Can We Know And How Can We Know That We Know It?* widespread. It explains in detail why religion is silly, and also includes essays on a number of other subjects. People should find the chapter on personal finance useful.
Ways I promote freethought: Pushing my book.



FFRF shop manager is a confirmed heathen

Name: Katina Gehn
Where and when I was born: Red Wing, Minn., in 2000.
Education: I graduated from Winona State University in August 2021 with a B.A. in sociology and a minor in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies.
Family: Two parents, an older sister, and an older brother.
How I came to work at FFRF: I wasn’t sure what I was going to do after graduation and started looking up nonprofits related to my interest areas. I did a double-take when I saw that FFRF was located right where I was living and was hiring, so I knew I needed to apply.

What I do here: I’m FFRF’s shop manager/program assistant. I fulfill orders, manage inventory, keep track of our sales stats, order items for our online shop and annual convention, enter new products into our shop website, address any questions or concerns from customers, answer the phones, manage the marquee quotes displayed on our building, and more. There are many small tasks that make up my job.

What I like best about it: Seeing our “Crankmail” (letters that tell us we’re going to burn in hell and such) and other crazy things that get sent to us.
What gets old about it: Not everyone who calls us likes what we do — enough said.

I spend a lot of time thinking about: What my future will look like.
I spend little if any time thinking about: Wifi. I still can’t explain what it is or how it works. I’m OK with this.
My religious upbringing was: Lutheran (LCMS — Lutheran Church Missouri Synod). I regularly attended church and confirmation classes. It was a pretty strict denomination.

My doubts about religion started: I’m not



Katina Gehn

sure if I ever believed, but at least all those long sermons fostered some creative storytelling in my mind. I wasn’t any more serious in my confirmation classes and

I once responded to my pastor’s “Merry Christmas!” greeting with “Happy Hanukkah!” I thought it was funny, but it was not well-received.

Things I like: Watching musicals, going to the movies, walking through the farmers’ market, seeing all the plants in conservatories, swimming at Devil’s Lake State Park, bakeries, Halloween, seagulls, squirrels, and rollercoasters.

Things I smite: Superhero and horror movies, spiders and sermons.

My best birthday memory: I once had a homemade jellyfish piñata that was somehow stronger than sugar-motivated little kids. Never underestimate the strength of a plastic cake container with packing tape and some streamers hanging off of it, I guess. It finally gave way when my brother took a swing at it with the bat, but it was a tough jellyfish to crack!

MEET A STAFFER

Former churches with better missions



FFRF Member Kate Retzlaff of Wisconsin pointed us toward this former church in Milwaukee. The Dresden Castle on Underwood offers amenities for cocktail receptions, business meetings, or wedding receptions and ceremonies. Above the door, the solid tympanum includes the name of the former church in raised lettering, “Holy Family R.C. Church.”



FFRF Member Larry J. Kueneman sent us photos of the Salt Springs Brewery in Saline, Mich. The building was built in 1899 as a Methodist Episcopal church. The congregation moved in 1990, so the city of Saline purchased the old church with plans to use it as a court facility. But the voters turned down a bond issue, and the city had to sell the building. From there, it became the Calico Cat Book and Gift Shoppe until 2010. Then it was sold again and became the Stone Arch Arts and Events Center before being converted into the craft brewery in 2015.



Longtime FFRF Member Jason Balmuth (with his dog Mia) outside Beans in the Belfry near Washington, D.C. “I came across yet another church put to a higher purpose — coffee! Although they also have good breakfast food, sandwiches, etc.,” Jason writes. “Not on the menu: useless superstition.”

The building was constructed as the Brunswick Reformed Church in 1910, and served as a church until December 1968. Today, the red brick structure has retained most of its original appearance and the original stained glass windows.



FFRF Member Peter Werbe of Michigan sent us this photo of a 100-year-old church in Detroit that has housed several congregations, the last being the New St. James AME Church. Abandoned several years ago, it has been refurbished as The Congregation, a coffeehouse and bar. It sits a block from the intersection where the 1967 massive Detroit riot began.



Ken McMurray sent us this photo of the former River of Life Assembly of God church in Green, Ohio, a suburb of Akron. “It was rebranded as the Church of Odd, home of Oddmall, an ‘emporium of weirdness’ for crafters and artists featuring games, toys, jewelry, crafts, art, geeky things, oddities and all things imaginative and inspired,” Ken writes. “Oddmall Outpost, as it’s also called, took over the building in 2018.”



FFRF Member Josh Meiss sent us this photo of a former temple which is now a single-family home near downtown Bloomington, Ill.

...

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

LETTERBOX

Accept Jesus and never be held accountable

In Christian thinking, you will go to hell just for being alive, However, if you accept Jesus as your savior, you will never be held accountable for anything. A sweet deal, if you can get it. No wonder the religion is so popular.

South Carolina

Hoping the Reagan ad attracts more members

It's excellent that you're able to run this great Ron Reagan ad on national television! Congrats. I hope it attracts thousands of new members!

I always tell people "strength in numbers" when I repost news from FFRF on Facebook.

Wisconsin

'Incorrect' baptisms show Catholicism is a joke

I was watching the news when I saw a priest had baptized hundreds of people, but the baptisms were not "official" because the priest used the words "we baptize you" instead of "I baptize you."

Apparently, those people should get baptized again so that it could be corrected, but what if those people are already dead? Will they be in hell now because they weren't baptized? It really shows what stupidity there is in the Catholic religion!

I was born and raised as a Catholic and attended Catholic school from K-5, then was transferred to the public school because my parents couldn't afford the Catholic school costs. While in Catholic school, I was miserable, but when I started the public school, those were the best years of my life.

I am an FFRF member and have been for 20-plus years. Long ago, someone (and I still don't know who, but I thank them every day) mailed me a copy of Freethought Today. When I saw what it was, I dropped it on the floor because I was so afraid it would put me in hell.

Well, I am now a full nonbeliever

Which way gets me out of hell?



I was going through some old photos and came upon this one from St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Mobridge, S.D., taken in 2011. My caption would be: "Mayday! Mayday! Do I retreat or advance?"

I have enclosed a donation to help you continue the good work you do to encourage the use of reason over dogma.

South Dakota

As a result, our health care system is being stretched, and in some places overwhelmed, by patients who could have easily avoided their illness. And the urgency of the Covid cases reaching our hospitals and clinics often vaults those patients to the front of the line, postponing treatments for others. Doubtless, the enormous expense of all this will translate into higher insurance and Medicare premiums for all of us.

What the anti-vaxxers may like to think of as a bold statement of faith is really not so bold when there's someone else to sweep up your mess — when there are medical professionals willing to sacrifice time with their families, if not their own mental health, to make sure help is there when you need it. When other workers and employers across the country are contributing to insurance pools while the much-maligned government guarantees Medicare, Medicaid and unemployment benefits.

Those who choose to trust that their faith in God amounts to Covid immunization most certainly have the right to do so. The rest of us have the right to demand that they pay in cash and go to the back of the line. What a demonstration of true faith that would be.

Wisconsin

Walker is right about evolution of religion

I was very pleased to read Barbara G. Walker's cogent article about the evolution of religion. I have read Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade*, which also explains the change from a nurturing mother goddess to a punishing male god. Like Freud, Walker is correct in describing the religious impulse as a juvenile need for dependence. The "appalling" invention of an eternity of torture is another attempt at control by the clergy. So happy to be an unbeliever who is responsible for my own here and now.

Florida

Religious freedom claims are nothing of the sort

Andrew Seidel's illuminating article "Court takes up Christian nationalist cause" (March issue) shows

and cannot see how I used to believe and how people still do believe in that crap! All I try to do is be the best person I can be, treating everyone with respect.

I didn't mean to go on and on, but if you saw that news story, you would understand what a joke it was.

Keep up the good work.

Nebraska

Pres. Hayes believed in state/church separation

Rutherford B. Hayes, our 19th president, had this to say about religion and government: "We all agree that neither the government nor political parties ought to interfere with religious sects. It is equally true that religious sects ought not to interfere with the government or with political parties. We believe that the cause of good government and the cause

of religion both suffer by all such interference."

Hayes was a Republican who would be appalled to learn that his party now claims the separation of church and state is a myth.

New York

Anti-vaxxers should put their faith to the test

Since the beginning of the Covid pandemic, a vast majority of those hospitalized and dying from the coronavirus have been unvaccinated. At first this was understandable, as there existed no proven means of immunization. What's occurring today, though, is harder for most of us to understand. In the face of a deadly, highly transmittable virus, an alarming number are asserting their right to reject a proven safeguard and, instead, trust in divine intervention.

CRANKMAIL

Apparently FFRF's Ron Reagan "Not afraid of burning in hell" ad really struck a nerve with the pi-ous. Printed as received.

At the name of Jesus: I saw the 60 minutes ad. So sorry for your belief. You may be prepared to burn in hell, but one day everyone will stand before God and give an account. He is the only truth and constant in this lost world. — Valerie O'Neal

Your ad: You and Reagan are speaking EVIL!!! You will believe in HELL when you get there!! His father may have been a decent man, but he is a FOOL!!! GOD will NOT protect you when Iran, Russia, N. Korea and Evil China blow you out the Water/Earth!! You and others will take the Mark of the Beast because you are EVIL. Same way ALL the FOOLS took the EVIL SHOT created by Gates "OF HELL", Lying Fauci and Obamma helped to Create!! Enjoy your monies now because you will NOT enjoy it in HELL!!!!!!! — Rich Long

FFR: Eat Balls And Feed Them To Your Sister. Stupidness! Get a grip — Jake Langer

You are insane: Fuck off and stop destroying our country You punk ass bitch — Melissa Dereyna

Morons!: Lawless pos like you is what's wrong with this country to begin with. We don't need God-less morons like yourselves dictating what happens in the country. Regan doesn't believe in hell not that he isn't scared to burn there. A sissy wimp like him is scared of a lot. — Greg Baden

The Foundation's Ignorance: You can't. But you can educate yourselves by read the Constitution which protects the Church from the State. Your backwards and a threat to our democracy. — Phillip Fagan

Sad Reagan sign off: It's sad enough that you don't believe, but for "Ron" to sign off "not afraid to burn in hell" is back-handed & disrespectful. Problem many have with THE TRUTH (Scripture) is that it doesn't fit their truth. Sorry, but there is only One Truth, & It Is Written.. — Jay Evers

Hell: Ron Reagan you WILL burn in Hell and you should be afraid Unless you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior — CarolLynn Ellison

Really?: It takes a LOT MORE FAITH to not believe in God than to believe in Him. There ARE NO ATHEISTS in hell — Darren Timberlake

Hi: You guys suck. — Jeremy Tibbs

Freedom from religion: Just wanted to tell you what low lives you were. ... you are shameful!!! — Vince Kolstad

Freedom: You poor things, nobody ever taught you how to correctly divide the word of God. How will you give thanks for water, heat and food among everything else? Or did you think people made these things? — Carlos Hernandez

Please listen: I WANT YOU PEOPLE SAVED AND NOT GO TO HELL FOR ETERNITY. SO PLEASE LISTEN TO ME BEFORE ITS TO LATE FOR YOU. YOUR ETERNAL DESTINY DEPENDS ON IT. — Gary Klawfta



"To let off a bit of steam, I have included my (shamefully) vicious response to the Crankmail letter writers," writes Member George Hoskin of this cartoon he drew.

once again how most of the so-called claims of religious freedom are nothing of the sort. They truly are invasions on our constitutional freedoms. It is clear to me that private prayer is religion; public prayer is politics. New York

Kudos to Richard Ross, Joseph Cunningham

The Christian religions believe that they have the ultimate and absolute power to do good deeds. Of course, this is just one of the many religious myths.

Recently, for example, Richard Ross from California gifted Zachary Van Stanley with a Lifetime Membership to FFRF. Zachary was awarded the Freethought Badge for his essay challenging the discriminating policy of the Boy Scouts of America against the nonreligious.

The power of our living in a secular nation depends on our younger generations. Our freedom from religion depends on the separation of state and church. I am filled with hope thanks to the younger people like Zachary and all of the authors of the courageous and intelligent student essays received by FFRF.

Another example of kindness comes from Joseph Cunningham of Illinois, a longtime member of FFRF who, for many years, planted hundreds of daffodil bulbs alongside the highway leading into his town. This back-breaking labor of love has been rewarded by the cheer and joy it brings to travelers as thy witness this blaze of yellow flowers in the springtime.

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Sunfire red, glazed ceramic handcrafted mug with Unabashed Atheist medallion. American-made, 14 fl. oz.

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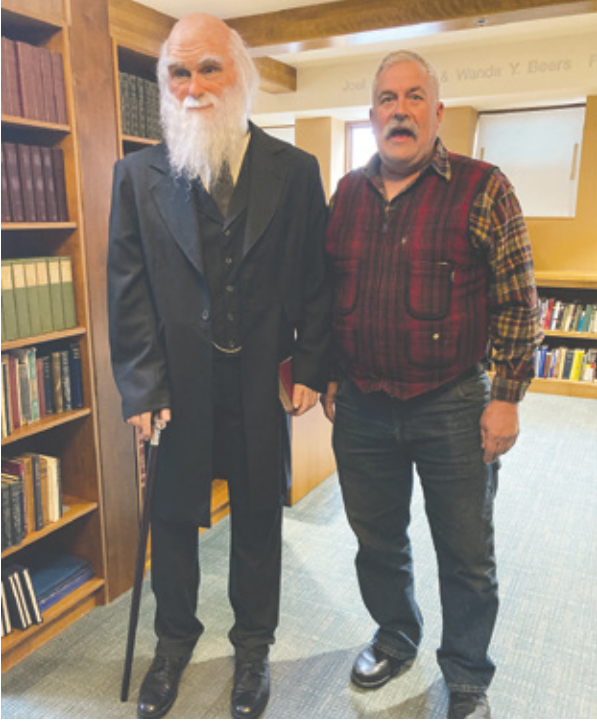
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Crossword answers																			
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It's all relative



Scot McCollum, the grandson of Supreme Court victor and heroine Vashti McCollum, stands with “Mr. Darwin,” FFRF’s life-like silicone mannequin who lives in the Joel B. Landon and Wanda Y. Beers Freethought Library at Freethought Hall in Madison, Wis.

Vashti McCollum brought and won the landmark *McCollum v. Board of Education* case, the first Supreme Court decision against religious instruction in our public schools. The 1948 decision is the basis of all the subsequent high court rulings against bible reading and devotions in public schools, including classroom, commencement and sporting event prayer. She wrote the book, *One Woman’s Fight*, about the challenge, and it was the basis for Jay Rosenstein’s 2011 Peabody-Award winning documentary, “The Lord Is Not On Trial Here Today.”

The *McCollum* decision is now imperiled by changes to the Supreme Court, and Vashti’s book is more timely than ever. FFRF is offering the classic account in digital form. Purchase online at ffrf.org/shop.

Thank you, Richard and Joseph, for your kindness and generosity! Washington

FFRF has been good to my brother Hal and me

My brother Hal (Harold) died on Feb. 21. He was 94. He was a Lifetime Member of FFRF and receiving Freethought Today was very important to him and brought him much enjoyment. We talked by phone about our early lives, but almost always some of our conversation was about some of the articles in Freethought Today.

He was pleased that he got to meet [FFRF Co-Presidents] Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker when he came to Madison for the Blanche Fearn memorial. Hal and I had a great time in Madison.

I also remember a nice walk Dan and I had on the beach in Ormond-By-The Sea, Fla. We had supper in a Chinese restaurant and I remember that Annie Laurie liked fresh fruit. So many good times at Blanche’s house and all of the FFRF conventions.

I have shared with many friends Dan’s music on CD and my copy of

Annie Laurie’s *Woe to the Women*. I am glad that I was part of your fantastic success.

I am now 91 years old and feeling good, waiting for the next issue of Freethought Today (which my brother paid for). Florida

Write to us

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

THEY SAID WHAT?



Jesus, guns, babies.

The campaign slogan on the side of a bus for Kandiss Taylor, a Republican candidate for governor of Georgia. *The New York Times*, 2-19-22

What Is a Freethinker?

freethinker *n.*

1 A person who forms opinions about religion on the basis of reason, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief.

RECRUIT A MEMBER

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Cryptogram answer

Religion is such a medieval idea. I have thought about every facet of religion and I can't buy any of it.

Phyllis Diller

I don't know what it was, there was just this vision God revealed to me that we were going to come back, we were going to be part of a Super Bowl, we were going to win it. And, somehow, I was going to walk off the field as the MVP of the game.

Cooper Kupp, Los Angeles Rams wide receiver, in a post-game interview after he was named MVP of the Super Bowl, in which the Rams defeated the Cincinnati Bengals.

The Western Journal, 2-13-22

Michigan county caves to secularist pressure over holding prayers before legislative meetings.

Headline on the Fox News website regarding FFRF's victory in getting the Leelanau County Board of Commissioners to vote to remove the prayer portion of its meetings.

FoxNews.com, 2-17-22

I must begin these very brief remarks by thanking God for delivering me to this point in my professional journey. My life has been blessed beyond measure, and I do know that one can only come this far by faith.

Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, in a speech after being nominated to the Supreme Court by President Biden.

WhiteHouse.gov, 2-25-22

FFRF convention, Oct. 28-30

On to San Antonio!

Join the Freedom From Religion Foundation in San Antonio for its 45th annual convention from Oct. 28-30 at the Hyatt Regency San Antonio. (For information on the guest speakers, see page 6.)

General schedule

The official starting time of the convention at the Hyatt Regency is 9 a.m. on Friday, Oct. 28, continuing through Saturday night. Registration will open by 8 a.m. on Friday, Oct. 28. FFRF's membership and State Representatives meetings will take place Sunday morning, ending by noon.

The conference will offer an optional Thursday 4-6 p.m. appetizer/cash bar reception and early registration.

Plan to come early and/or stay late if you want to sightsee in this exotic locale. The hotel is less than five minutes from the Alamo and many other attractions.

Return the handy registration form on the right or sign up at ffrf.us/2022convention.

Registration

Registration for the convention is only \$75 per FFRF member, \$80 for a companion accompanying a member, \$130 for nonmembers (or you can save money by becoming a member for \$40). High school students or younger are free and the college student rate is \$25.

Make your room reservations directly (see info box on this page). We encourage you to register early and book your hotel rooms as soon as possible. Sorry, only partial refunds after the Oct. 10 registration deadline. After Oct. 23, no refunds will be issued.

Optional Group Meals

We've provided meals with the most commonly requested dietary preferences. Please specify other requirements on the registration form under ADA/food allergy accommodations.

Friday Grab & Go Box Lunch (\$60) Grilled Vegetable Wrap (Vegan)

Wrap of baby greens stuffed with a duo of grilled zucchini and roasted butternut squash with sweet, roasted pecans and wrapped in a spinach tortilla spread with roasted red pepper hummus

Garden Salad with Grilled Chicken (gluten free)

Grilled chicken garden salad with baby lettuce, grape tomatoes, artichoke hearts, cucumbers, candied pecans, dried cranberries with grilled chicken breast, served with a creamy balsamic vinaigrette

Turkey Sandwich

Oven roasted breast of turkey with early harvest lettuces, provolone and slices of cucumber on a potato bun and maple-pumpkin butter cream cheese

Friday Dinner Reception (\$65)

Hearty reception with beef steamship for carving with horseradish cream, au jus and mini rolls; pulled BBQ pork slider with pickled onions on sesame roll; ranch spiced chicken satay with tomato BBQ dip; vegan jackfruit al pastor quesadillas with roasted corn, black beans, Monterrey Jack cheese served with mango salsa; crudité's with poblano hummus and spinach dip; Southwest Caesar salad (charred corn, black beans and croutons with Ancho Caesar dressing); self-serve mac & cheese station (white cheddar mac & cheese tossed with green chiles, mushroom and caramelized onions). Cash bar provided.

Saturday Nonprayer Breakfast (\$55)

Eggs, potato, bacon, and fruit cup service. Vegetarians will receive "melted" tomato in place of bacon. Vegan meal is vegan scrambled eggs with melted tomatoes and vegan cranberry orange scone. Beverages are orange juice, coffee and tea.

Saturday Dinner (\$95)

Caesar salad (heart of romaine, aged Parmesan, smoked garlic ciabatta croutons with creamy Caesar dressing); seared chicken breast with jalapeno-apricot glaze, melted leek and bacon jam; mascarpone risotto, and mixed cauliflower. The vegetarian option is



The Hyatt Regency San Antonio is home to the 2022 FFRF convention.

roasted acorn squash stuffed with vegetables and herb quinoa, coriander spiced carrot puree and aged saba. The vegan/gluten-free option is vegetable ravioli, wilted spinach, asparagus tips, charred cauliflower, tomato-caper sauce. Dessert is chocolate cappuccino cake with vanilla whipped cream or vegan/gluten free chocolate-banana mousse with fresh berries. Beverages are coffee and tea. Cash bar provided.

Please note that meal costs reflect the cost to FFRF; we do not mark up these prices.

Room Reservations

If you need an accessible room, please state your needs when you make the reservation.

Hyatt Regency San Antonio
123 Losoya
San Antonio, TX 78205
210-451-6200, ffrf.us/hotel
Indicate you're with the "Freedom From Religion Foundation" block.
\$205 (single/double occupancy)
\$215 (triple/quad occupancy)
State and local taxes (currently 16.75%) and fees will apply. Group rate includes standard internet.

Overflow options Hilton Garden Inn Downtown San Antonio

408 E Houston St.
San Antonio, TX 78205
210-222-8811
Rates are \$149 for single or double occupancy. Cutoff date is Oct. 1, 2022.
In addition, state & local occupancy taxes of 16.75% and a city tourism fee of 1.25% apply.
Valet parking, subject to availability, is \$33 plus tax of 8.25% per night per vehicle.

Menger Hotel
204 Alamo Plaza
San Antonio, TX 78205
Phone: 210-223-4361
Toll-free 24-hour reservations: 800-345-9285
Rates are \$139 for single through quad occupancy. Cutoff date is Oct. 8.
In addition, state & local occupancy taxes of 16.75% and a city tourism fee of 1.25% apply.

If guest leaves earlier than the scheduled departure date when guest is in-house at the hotel, there will be a charge of \$75, plus 16.75% tax. Cancellations less than 48 hours prior to arrival will be assessed one night's room and tax.

Overnight parking, subject to availability, is \$18 plus 8.25% tax.

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

NATIONAL CONVENTION

SAN ANTONIO | OCTOBER 28-30, 2022

45TH CONVENTION REGISTRATION FORM

Or register online: ffrf.us/2022convention

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

OPTIONAL MEALS / EVENTS

We've provided meals with the most commonly requested dietary preferences. Please specify other requirements below under ADA or food allergy accommodations.

Friday, October 28

Grab & Go Box Lunch			___\$60	\$___
Registrant 1	<input type="checkbox"/> Chicken Salad (Gluten Free)	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetable Wrap (Vegan)	<input type="checkbox"/> Turkey Sandwich	
Registrant 2	<input type="checkbox"/> Chicken Salad (Gluten Free)	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetable Wrap (Vegan)	<input type="checkbox"/> Turkey Sandwich	

Friday Dinner Reception					___\$65	\$___
Registrant 1	<input type="checkbox"/> Regular	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegan	<input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		
Registrant 2	<input type="checkbox"/> Regular	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegan	<input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		

Saturday, October 29

Non-Prayer Breakfast					___\$55	\$___
Registrant 1	<input type="checkbox"/> Regular	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegan	<input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		
Registrant 2	<input type="checkbox"/> Regular	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegan	<input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free		

Saturday Dinner			___\$95	\$___
Registrant 1	<input type="checkbox"/> Chicken	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian Stuffed Squash	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegan/Gluten Free Ravioli	
Registrant 2	<input type="checkbox"/> Chicken	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian Stuffed Squash	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegan/Gluten Free Ravioli	

► Total \$___

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

Please tell us about any ADA or food allergy accommodations needed in order to fully participate.

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

- ☐ I attest that I and my guests will be fully vaccinated for Covid-19 as of 10/14/22.
☐ I attest that I have a physician's order against my vaccination.

Name of Registrant 1

Name of Registrant 2
☐ I am including additional registrants (enclose your additional list, with meals, if any).

Address

City State / ZIP

Phone* Email*

Credit Card Number Expiration Date / Security Code

Billing Name / Signature *Contact information for in-house use only
Registration deadline October 10, 2022 (Unless event is sold out)
Registration cancellations received Oct. 11 through Oct. 23 may be refunded, less a \$25 cancellation fee. After Oct. 23, no refunds will be provided.