

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



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FFRF stops prayers at school boards in three states

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has successfully taught school boards around the country about the importance of adhering to the Constitution, recently halting the unconstitutional practice of prayer at three different school districts.

Multiple concerned parents reported to the state/church watchdog that the Yancey County Board of Education in North Carolina was beginning each of its meetings with a prayer, officially termed an “invocation,” led by a member of the board.

“It is beyond the scope of a public school board to schedule or conduct prayer as part of its meetings,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Yancey County Board of Education Chair Edwin Fortner. “This practice violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.”

In the most recent decision striking down a school board’s prayer practice, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals reaffirmed, in a case FFRF victoriously litigated (*Chino Valley*, 2018), that Establishment Clause concerns are heightened in the context of public schools “because children and adolescents are just beginning to develop their own belief systems, and because they absorb the lessons of adults as to what beliefs are appropriate or right.”

FFRF requested that the Yancey County Board of Education immediately refrain from scheduling prayers

at future school board meetings — and the board complied. The board’s counsel informed FFRF in an email that “the board is no longer having prayer during its meeting.”

Far north of North Carolina, FFRF provided a constitutionally remedial tutorial to another school district, this time in the Buckeye State. A concerned district resident and parent contacted the state/church watchdog to report that Orrville City School Board meetings opened with a Christian prayer, even though prayer wasn’t listed on the agenda.

“The Supreme Court has consistently struck down prayers offered at school-sponsored events,” FFRF Legal Fellow Karen Heineman wrote to Orrville Board of Education President Greg

Roadruck. Public school boards exist to set policies, procedures and standards for education within a community. The issues discussed and decisions made at board meetings are wholly school-related, affecting the daily lives of district students and parents, FFRF emphasized. And promoting religion at Orrville City School Board meetings also violates the district’s own policies, since religious neutrality is stressed throughout the policy manual.

The board has paid heed to FFRF’s reasoning and strong case precedent in

See *School Boards* on page 7

“It is beyond the scope of a public school board to schedule or conduct prayer as part of its meetings.”

— FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line



Renowned sculptor and FFRF Lifetime Member Zenos Frudakis works on his statue of Thomas Paine.

Paine statue gets boost

FFRF is grateful that Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., introduced a bill Feb. 11 to authorize the placement of a long overdue memorial to Thomas Paine in Washington, D.C.

“Tom Paine was a person so far ahead of his time that his work still challenges us in significant ways today to build a more democratic society,” says Raskin. “This luminary pa-

triot of the Enlightenment and the American Revolution inspired people in the colonies not only to overthrow the tyranny of faraway kings but to launch a nation founded on principles of democratic self-government, the rights of men and of women, and reason and science. Despite

See *Statue* on page 7

The Christian nationalist roots of the coup attempt

This article is part of the comprehensive report, “Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021, Insurrection,” published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation and the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. The full report is available here: [FFRF.us/Jan6Report](https://ffrf.us/Jan6Report).

By Katherine Stewart

By now, most Americans understand that Christian nationalism played a role in last year’s violent attack on the U.S. Capitol. But the movement’s contribution is much more complex and goes deeper than is widely appreciated. Understanding its part involves looking beyond the Christian nationalist activists

and signage at the specific event of Jan. 6, the day that former President Donald Trump’s attempt to overturn the 2020 election crossed into violence.

In order to grasp the role of Christian nationalism in this and other recent political developments, it is helpful to know something about the movement itself — its structure, its forms of operation, and its ultimate goals.

Because Christian nationalism is identi-

fied (or, more accurately, because it identifies itself) with a religion, the movement is often understood as a set of religious and/or theological positions that are then assumed to lead in a deductive way to a certain set of cultural and policy preferences, and from there to a certain kind of politics. But Christian nationalism is, first and foremost, a political movement. Its principal goal, and the goal of its most active leaders, is power. Its leadership looks forward to the day when they can rely on government for three things: power and influence for themselves and their political allies; a steady stream of taxpayer funding for their initiatives; and policies that favor “approved” religious and political

viewpoints.

The strength of the movement is in its dense organizational infrastructure: a closely interconnected network of right-wing policy groups, legal advocacy organizations, legislative initiatives, sophisticated data operations, networking groups, leadership training initiatives, and media and messaging platforms, all working together for common political aims. Its leadership cadre includes a number of personally associated activists and politicians, some of them working through multiple organizations. It derives much of its power and direction from an informal club of funders,

See *Stewart* on page 19



Katherine Stewart

IN MEMORIAM

Jan Froehlich was CPA for FFRF

Freethought Today sadly reports the death of Janice “Jan” Leigh Froehlich on Jan. 1 at age 58.



Jan Froehlich

Jan, for many years, was the dedicated lead certified public accountant from Johnson and Block, the company in Madison, Wis., that specializes in nonprofits and performs the annual audit for the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Her life was cut short by one of the most insidious cancers — glioblastoma.

Jan was born on March 10, 1963, got her accounting degree from the Universi-

ty of Wisconsin, became a CPA and was a devoted employee of Johnson & Block for 30 years, becoming a partner in 2005. Jan married Rob Novy Jr., in 2010. She served on the boards of multiple nonprofits, including one of her favorites — the Ice Age Trail. She volunteered for laborious prairie restoration and brush management projects (crown vetch was her “sworn enemy”), and loved hiking with her golden retrievers and at national parks and wilderness areas.

She mentored “her kids,” including the current and trusted CPAs who now work with FFRF.

Recalls FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor: “Jan was not just our CPA, but a wise adviser and friend to FFRF. Jan actually was the first person to suggest, when the FFRF’s office was hopelessly overcrowded and running out of space, that we were in a position to purchase the rundown apartment building next door. That turned into a heralded expansion, and she celebrated FFRF’s growth and successes with us.”

Jan did indeed have a “million-dollar smile” and “playful sense of humor,” as her obituary noted. She will be very missed.

Mireille Van Etten was an ‘educator to the end’

Member Richard Van Etten contributed \$1,000 to FFRF in memory of his mother, Mireille D. Van Etten, who died on May 7, 2021. This obituary was written by Richard.



Mireille Van Etten

Mireille D. Van Etten was born on Jan. 18th, 1927, in a small village near Compiègne, France. Her mother was Catholic and she was indoctrinated in that religion. As was the time in France, girls were not a priority to be educated, which was very frustrating to Mom, whose whole desire was to be a teacher. The war came and France was occupied by the Nazis for four years. My mother had numerous stories of the occupation, bombings, and seeing Jews marched out of Compiègne by German soldiers.

She met my father, who was a U.S. sol-

dier in France in 1945 and they were married there in 1946. After coming to the United States via ship, Mom then finally had her dream of an education realized. During this time (1951–1956), she gave birth to three boys, with me the oldest.

She earned a bachelor’s degree in languages from the University of Wisconsin and was offered a teaching position in 1964 in San Diego. Mom continued her education, obtaining a master’s degree from San Diego State. She taught French, Spanish and English to junior and high school students for decades. She was working on a doctorate when an opportunity arose to take several sabbaticals to France with her students, which she eagerly accepted. After retiring, she finally and reluctantly left San Diego in 2002 to move to Arizona, where her children had moved years before.

Mom was a kind and caring person who offered to help in any way. She donated countless time and money to help feed the hungry, animal welfare charities, and Habitat for Humanity, among others. She even tutored her handyman, who was from Guatemala, to learn English and helped him become a U.S. citizen.

There wasn’t a mean bone in her body. She rejected religion, saying it did more harm than good. An educator to the end, Mom donated her body to science. In a way, she is still teaching students. I could probably write a book about my mother’s accomplishments. The world is a better place because of her.

Evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson dies

Pulitzer Prize-winning author and biologist Edward O. Wilson died Dec. 26, 2021, at 92 in Burlington, Mass.

Wilson conducted pioneering work on biodiversity, insects and human nature.

On June 10, 1929, Edward Osborne Wilson was born in Birmingham, Ala. His father, Edward Osborne Wilson Sr., worked as an accountant. His mother, Inez Linnette Freeman, was a secretary. They divorced when he was 8.

Wilson earned his B.S. and M.S. in biology from the University of Alabama and a Ph.D. in 1955 from Harvard, the same year he married Irene Kelley. They had a daughter, Catherine. He joined the Harvard faculty in 1956, where he retired in 2002 at age 73, although he published more than a dozen books after that.

Blinded in one eye by a fishing accident as a child, his research focus was in the field of myrmecology, the study of ants. He discovered the chemical means by which ants communicate. His books include *The Insect Societies* (1971) and *The Ants* (1990), co-written with Bert Holldobler, which won the 1991 Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction. Wilson’s *On Human Nature* won a Pulitzer in 1979.

Wilson is perhaps best known for his intellectual syntheses, often connecting evolution and biology to other disciplines. His 1967 book, *The Theory of Island Biogeography*, which develops the mathematics of how species evolve in geographically small habitats, is influential in the fields of ecology and practical conserva-



E.O. Wilson

tion. He worked out the importance of habitat size and position within the landscape in sustaining animal populations.

Wilson’s parents were Southern Baptists, though he was also raised by conservative Methodists. He abandoned Christianity before college, later describing himself as a “provisional deist” and agnostic. In *On Human Nature*, he argued that belief in God and rituals of religion are products of evolution. He disdained the tribalism of religion: “And every tribe, no matter how generous, benign, loving, and charitable, nonetheless looks down on all other tribes. What’s dragging us down is religious faith.”

In *Esquire* magazine (Jan. 5, 2009), Wilson said: “If someone could actually prove scientifically that there is such a thing as a supernatural force, it would be one of the greatest discoveries in the history of science. So, the notion that somehow scientists are resisting it is ludicrous.”

He was honored by the American Humanist Association twice, in 1982 with the Distinguished Humanist prize and again in 1999 as the Humanist of the Year. In 1990, he was awarded the Royal Swedish Academy of Science’s Crafoord Prize in ecology, considered the field’s highest honor.

Fossil hunter Richard Leakey dies at 77

Richard Leakey, the renowned paleo-anthropologist and conservationist, died Jan. 2 at age 77.



Photo from Wikimedia
Richard Leakey

He was born Dec. 19, 1944, in Nairobi, Kenya, to the famous archaeologists Louis and Mary Leakey. As a child, Leakey accompanied his family on archaeological expeditions and discovered his first fossil when he was 5. After dropping out of high school when he was 16, Leakey entertained various careers such as leading safaris, but ultimately chose to follow in his parents’ footsteps, becoming an accomplished paleoanthropologist.

His achievements included finding the full skeleton of a 1.6 million-year-old *Homo erectus* known as “Turkana Boy” and co-discovering in 1972 the “Black Skull,” the earliest australopithecine fossil discovered to date. He also wrote

numerous books.

Caned in school as a child for missing chapel, he vowed to never become Christian. “I didn’t ever have religion,” Leakey said during an interview with the Academy of Achievement on June 21, 2017.

He made his first forays into paleo-anthropology and met archaeologist Margaret Cropper. In 1965 they married, but divorced in 1969 after having a daughter, Anna. He married zoologist Meave Epps in 1970 and they had two daughters: Louise, also a paleoanthropologist, and Samira.

In 1990, he was appointed the first chairman of the Kenya Wildlife Service and spearheaded efforts to stop elephant poaching. A plane he was piloting crashed in 1993 and both his legs had to be amputated. He told President Daniel Arap Moi, a religious man, not to pray for him.

Leakey left Kenya in 2002 to teach anthropology at Stony Brook University in New York and chair the Turkana Basin Institute. In 2007, he was appointed interim chairman of Transparency International’s Kenya branch and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. In 2013, he received the Isaac Asimov Science Award from the American Humanist Association. President Uhuru Kenyatta appointed Leakey chairman of the board of the Kenya Wildlife Service in 2015.

In his book, *One Life: An Autobiography* (1983), Leakey wrote: “I myself do not believe in a god who has or had a human form and to whom I owe my existence. I believe it is man who created God in his image and not the other way around.”

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Court takes up Christian nationalist cause

This article first appeared in Religion Dispatches on Jan. 15 and is reprinted with permission.

By Andrew L. Seidel

Can public school employees use their position of authority to impose religious rituals on other people’s children? “No” has been the resounding and obvious answer to this question for decades, but on Jan. 14, the Supreme Court agreed to hear a truly dangerous “religious freedom” case — *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*. This packed, political court is likely to say “Yes” and rewrite every American’s religious freedom rights.

An assistant football coach at the Bremerton School District in Washington used his access to students and the stage that is the football field to kneel at the center of the field in prayer with his students after games.



Andrew L. Seidel

The Supreme Court struck down school-sponsored prayers in 1962 and confirmed in 2000 that this applies to prayer at public school football games. Several federal courts have also specifically held that when

a coach prays with students *as a coach* it’s “an unconstitutional endorsement of religion” because the coach is a government actor wielding government power, not speaking or worshipping as an individual.

This isn’t controversial, nor does it rob the coach of his rights. In fact, this coach was free to pray. He could have bowed his head at any time and said a little prayer on the sideline to himself. But the coach doesn’t just want to pray, he wants to use the power of a public-school position to impose that ritual on an entire community. Halting this abuse of power does not violate the coach’s First Amendment rights. An analogy is useful here. Imagine, instead, that the coach was hurling curses or obscenities at students after the game. Does he really have a free speech right to do so, or can the school ask him to stop? Of course, he can be ordered to stop without it violating his First Amendment rights because he’s not acting in his personal capacity, but in his official capacity, so he’s bound by rules that restrict government actors, including the separation of state and church.

And if you’re still thinking about this



Submitted photo

Former Bremerton (Wash.) High School assistant football coach Joe Kennedy (wearing the blue jacket) prays with student-athletes on the field after a game.

coach, consider everyone else. Think instead of the young Jewish student left on the sideline while his public-school team gathers on the field without him (or worse, who joins the Christian prayer because he feels pressured to conform). The separation we require between government power and religious ritual protects everyone’s religious freedom.

On the basis of this clear rule, the school asked the coach to stop using his position of authority and access to pray with his students. The coach refused and was placed on administrative leave. His contract expired and he didn’t reapply.

Instead, he sued, demanding to be rehired and the right to abuse his power. And he’s been represented by the First Liberty Institute, a Christian nationalist legal outfit bent on redefining religious freedom under the First Amendment. The institute’s goal is to morph the hallowed protection for religious freedom, the shield, into a tool to impose that religion on others, a weapon.

The coach and the First Liberty Institute aren’t seeking religious *freedom*, but religious *privilege*. They don’t want equal treatment (nobody else is allowed on the field to pray), but special treatment for the ostentatiously pious Christian. (One wonders if the institute or coach have read Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount recently, specifically his condemnation of public prayer as hypocrisy.) They’re not seeking a right to exercise religion in a personal way free from government interference,

but to use government power to extend the reach of that religious exercise over the entire community.

When it asked the Supreme Court to take the case, the First Liberty Institute brazenly claimed the prayers were “a quiet prayer by himself,” a “personal prayer,” and “a silent or quiet prayer.” As the photos show, this is untrue.

A judge on the 9th Circuit called out the institute’s dishonesty, writing that its claim that the coach “was disciplined for holding silent, private prayers” was “a deceitful narrative . . . spun by counsel.”

As a lawyer who values professional responsibility, I’d be devastated to read that in a judicial opinion about my work and possibly take it as a signal of incoming ethics charges, but the institute took it as a sign to repeat the “deceitful narrative” to the Supreme Court.

If you’ve followed the last decade of the Supreme Court’s work to weaponize religious freedom, this is unsurprising. The justices themselves alter narratives, history, facts and reality to reverse engineer decisions that, for instance, allow a 40-foot-tall Christian cross to be rebuilt with government funds and remain on government property.

The First Liberty Institute itself has a long history of trafficking in dishonesty and Christian nationalism. It “promote[s] Judeo-Christian values” but wants Christian supremacy, which the institute wraps in “religious freedom” claims that average Americans understand as equality.

“The coach doesn’t just want to pray, he wants to use the power of a public-school position to impose that ritual on an entire community.”

It’s fought to keep evolution out of public schools; and put bible classes, Jesus portraits and school-imposed prayer in public schools.

That last effort is what *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* is all about. I first wrote about this case back in 2015, focusing on how the First Liberty Institute doesn’t mind taking losing cases because they’ll keep it alive for years and fundraise off their false narratives. And if the courts follow precedent and the Constitution, this is clearly a losing case. But I wrote that article more than a year before the 2016 presidential election, and since then, the Supreme Court has been packed with Christian nationalists who are, to mildly state the case, highly sympathetic to the institute’s crusade to weaponize religious freedom.

In fact, one of the institute’s own lawyers is now a federal judge — you may remember Matthew Kacsmaryk as the judge who abused his power to force the Biden administration to reinstate Trump’s “Remain in Mexico” policy. (Another First Liberty Institute lawyer, Jeff Mateer, was nominated to the federal bench but his virulently anti-LGBTQ remarks that surfaced were apparently even too much for Trump and McConnell, and his nomination was pulled. He’s back at the institute as executive vice president and chief legal officer working on this case.)

The change in the Supreme Court’s personnel should never change the law, but that’s precisely why the court was packed. So, what happens when the Supreme Court adopts the First Liberty Institute’s weaponized version of religious freedom? Just how bad could it be?

In this case, the impact could be devastating. Public education is a sacred trust. Parents of all religions and none can confidently send their children to public school knowing that the Constitution protects their freedom of conscience — knowing that the Constitution reserves the religious education of children for the family, not the state.

This case isn’t about protecting one man’s religious freedom, it’s about preventing overreaching government officials from imposing their religion on other people’s children. And I have no faith that this Supreme Court will get it right.

Andrew L. Seidel is a constitutional attorney and FFRF’s director of strategic response.

WHAT ARE YOU MISSING?

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Freethought Today Cryptogram

UZEY PBUZEYPRE BDGZXZPF, XPPQ IDPIGD LMF

VDYMAD UDGG MFQ VMQ IDPIGD LMF QP DAZG;

VRE KPB XPPQ IDPIGD EP QP DAZG — EYME EMODT

BDGZXZPF. — TEDADF UDZFDVBZ

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 25.

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4			5	6	7			8	9	10
11						12					13	14	
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55								56				57	
59								60				61	
62								63				64	

Answers on page 25

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Across

1. Shipping hazard

5. Military hospitals

8. Is is to she as ____ is to we

11. Phillip Phillips or Jordin Sparks, e.g.

12. Overwhelming defeat

13. Butcher's refuse

15. Crunchable info

16. Ireland in Irish

17. Use hydraulic fracturing

18. * ____ v. Board of Education, ban on religious instruction in public schools

20. Swing seat?

21. Letter-shaped girder

22. "Wow!"

23. *Thomas Alva ____: "Nature made us... not the gods of the religions"

26. Ballast sack

30. Between Mar. and May

31. Ideas of right and wrong

34. Lowest female voice

35. Iranian monarchs

37. Female reproductive cells

38. Ornamental hair net

39. Mambo king Puente

40. Becoming

42. "Wheel of Fortune" request

43. Sherlock Holmes and Miss Marple, e.g.

45. Sharp mountain ridges

47. Dreaded date for a student?

48. Pesto herb

50. Largest organ of human body

52. *Age of Enlightenment leader

55. *Irreverent spaghetti westerns director Sergio

56. Pomegranate seed

57. Prima donna

59. Goes up or down

60. Pac Man's blue ghost

61. Knight's breastplate

62. * ____ Brown, agnostic author of "The Da Vinci Code"

63. Tommy of Motley Crue

64. Polio vaccine developer

Across

1. Auction action

2. Dutch export

3. Campus drillers

4. Sloping bank

5. "There you are!"

6. Gold, to a chemist

7. Wine glass stalk

8. At a great distance

9. Track event

10. Caribou kin

12. Give in

13. More than occasional

14. *Betty ____, author of the "The Feminine Mystique"

19. Orchestra instrument, pl.

22. Found at the pump

23. Sunrise side, pl.

24. PhD in Great Britain

25. Angry

26. Phishing attack

27. Swell up

28. Make amends

29. *Christopher Hitchens' book " ____ Not Great"

32. Gardening tools

33. *Freethinker Frank Sinatra's song " ____ Got a World on a String"

36. *"Magician" Harry, ardent debunker of supernatural claims

38. Israel's neighbor

40. Ship pronoun

41. Finally

44. Radio receiver

46. Excludes

48. Past participle of bear

49. Description for twins

50. ____ good example

51. Riddle without solution

52. Colorado ski resort

53. Baltic capital

54. Austin Powers' antagonist

55. Psychedelic drug

58. Pose a question



George and Sally Erickson on their 50th wedding anniversary in 2006. Sally died Sept. 17, 2021, and George donated \$400,000 to charities and organizations in her honor.

Generous, loving wife was my constant support

By George Erickson

Last fall, when my beloved wife for 65 wonderful years entered hospice care, we decided that she should make a list of charities that she wanted to support when she died. That list grew to at least 20 local, regional and national charities (including FFRF) that would receive a total of \$400,000, an amount made possible by her being a consummate homemaker and devoted mother to our two fine sons plus her constant support of every project I undertook. Without that support, none of this would have been possible.

Sally was raised as a Presbyterian, so we were married in 1956 in her church. However, we left when its conservative board “fired” our liberal pastor.

For more than 30 years, I practiced dentistry in Worthington, Minn., while she conscientiously “kept our home fires burning.”

Always the homebody who loved cooking, sewing and reading a wide range of nonfiction books and promoting liberal issues, she supported my pursuit of a private pilot’s license and my 38 mid-summer flights in the far North that led to my first book, the bestseller *True North: Exploring the Great Wilderness by Bush Plane*, plus many articles on aviation and presentations in most of the major cities in the United States and Canada. “You should go,” she’d always say. “Have fun and be safe.”

True North led to four more books: *Time Traveling with Science and the Saints*, *Back to the Barrrens, Eyes Wide Open: Living, Laughing, Loving And Learning In A Religion-Troubled World* and *Unintended Consequences: The Lie the Killed Millions and Accelerated Climate Change*.

In honor of her constant support for the thousands of solitary hours I needed to write these books, I have made *True North* and my image-rich *Unintended Consequences* (which is my most important book), available free from the home page of my website (*tundracub.com*).

When I retired, we moved to New

Brighton, Minn., where I became president of the Minnesota Humanists, the VP of the American Humanist Association, a board member of the New Brighton Environmental Quality Commission and the VP of the Minnesota Seaplane Pilots Association, all of which took time away from home, again with her support.

In 2004, we moved to a lake home near Virginia, Minn., where I grew up, but where she knew no one. Although she was far from her roots, this generous, thoughtful person fully agreed with donating \$170,000 to Virginia’s indoor tennis project and \$150,000 to the Virginia school district, with lesser amounts to other deserving charities during her lifetime.

They say that “Behind every successful man stands a surprised wife,” which might be true for some, but for me it should say, “Behind this man stood a helpful, generous and loving homemaker whose support and encouragement made his achievements possible and his life worth living.”

Praise for Unintended Consequences

Dr. George Erickson, author of *Unintended Consequences: The Lie That Killed Millions and Accelerated Climate Change*, is a member of a group of about 80 independent physicists, engineers, energy experts and others who are deeply concerned about climate change, the environment and energy issues. You can contact Erickson at tundracub7@gmail.com. To read the book for free, go to tundracub.com.

Dr. James Hansen, former chief climate scientist at NASA, now climate scientist at Columbia: “Your writing is brilliant and so clear.”

Dr. Martin Goodman: “*Unintended Consequences* is excellent. I am impressed with your well documented writing.”

Dr. Rod Coenen: “*Unintended Consequences* is rational thought for those seeking a sustainable planet. Thank you for spelling it out in lay language.”

Cryptogram hint

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

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

We need to stand up, speak out about abortion

By Barbara Alvarez

It's been 49 years since the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that access to safe, legal abortions is a constitutional right in the landmark case, *Roe v. Wade*.

As the ultraconservative Supreme Court is slated to rule on the future of abortion rights this year, I fear that that this anniversary very well may be its last. In the 1973 ruling, the high court explained that abortion was protected by the privacy rights outlined in the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The Supreme Court ruled that "a person may choose to have an abortion until a fetus becomes viable, based on the right to privacy contained in the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. . . ." and that viability is generally determined to be between 24



Barbara Alvarez

and 28 weeks of gestation. Did you know that nearly one in four women will have an abortion by the age of 45? Abortion isn't uncommon — it is simply a medical procedure that many women will have. So, while legal abortion faces attacks, it is necessary that we speak about its benefits, as well as have conversations with friends and family about their experiences related to ending unwanted pregnancies.

When *Roe v. Wade* became law, the United States looked very much like a patchwork quilt of states with liberal and restrictive abortion laws. About 30 states had criminalized abortion, forcing women to travel lengthy distances to states where abortion was legal. For example, in 1972, 100,000 women left their home state to obtain a legal abortion in New York, which did not have residency requirements like Alaska, Hawaii and Washington, which also had more liberal laws, did. An analysis by the Guttmacher Institute looking at 1972 statistics estimated that 50,000 women traveled more than 500 miles for an abortion in New York City; roughly 7,000 women traveled more than 1,000 miles, and about 250 traveled more than 2,000 miles from places like Arizona, Idaho and Nevada. Of course, this was only an option for more affluent, overwhelmingly white women who had connections and the means to travel and take time off of work or school. Data from the New York City Department of Health showed that eight in 10 nonresidents obtaining abortion care in the city



between July 1971 and July 1972 were white, whereas seven in 10 city residents who underwent the procedure during that time were nonwhite.

Those who were unable to travel to obtain a legal abortion sought clandestine measures. In fact, before *Roe v. Wade*, more than 1 million women sought an illegal abortion, either self-induced or "back alley" abortions. These methods included ingesting toxins, throwing oneself down a flight of stairs, or inserting coat hangers, knitting needles and scissors to abort. This was common. Approximately 30 percent of all illegal abortions were self-induced. For back-alley abortions, women were often blindfolded, driven to remote areas, and passed off to people they did not know and could not even see during the process, who may or may not have had medical training. As a result, more than 200 women died each year from these underground procedures. Black and Hispanic women's mortality rates were 12 times higher than that of white women.

Before *Roe*, abortion was highly stigmatized. My mother, who graduated high school in 1972 in Wisconsin, recalled how she had overheard her mother talking with friends about someone who had collected money to "go on vacation to visit their aunt." As she explained to me, "Women talked about abortion in a secretive code — they never used the word, but everyone knew what they meant." This code was so secretive that my mother wasn't even supposed to know about it: "I heard it all by mistake."

The silence surrounding abortion came to a halt the following year when *Roe v. Wade* was handed down.

In the nearly five decades since abortion became legal in all 50 states, conversations about abortion have become more commonplace. "I know women who have had abortions," my older sister tells me in a matter-of-fact manner. I hear her pacing to her office, getting ready for her next conference call, while my niece and nephew clamor in the background. As she reflects on friendships throughout her young adulthood, she describes an atmosphere that was supportive of personal choice surrounding abortion. "Abortion was a health care tool and, for some of us, it was seen as a good option."

And she is not wrong. With the legalization of abortion came the dramatic reduction in abortion-related deaths. An editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* explains that not only are there fewer abortions per 1,000 reproductive-age women per year than immediately after *Roe v. Wade*, but deaths due to abortion procedures in the United States "have been essentially eliminated." Ninety percent of abortions are done within the first trimester of pregnancy "when the risk of maternal mortality is less than one-tenth of that associated with carrying a pregnancy to term."

Paradoxically, the World Health Organization estimates that there are 25 million unsafe abortions each year with 97 percent of them in developing countries where abortion is either illegal, heavily restricted or largely inaccessible.

It is safe to say that when physicians are able to practice reproductive medical procedures safely and legally, abortion (and contraception) saves lives. Medical science is truly incredible. The fact that

my sister and I could have a candid, on-the-fly discussion about abortion is a testament to this change.

But abortion is still highly stigmatized. In fact, President Biden, a pro-choice president, refused to talk about abortion or even say the word during the first 224 days of his presidency, despite relentless attacks on reproductive health care. People have been stigmatized when speaking about the benefits of abortion. Perhaps that's what made Anne Nicol Gaylor, co-founder of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and an early abortion rights activist, so radical when she wrote the book *Abortion is a Blessing* in April 1975.

In it, she explained, "I have become impatient not only with those religious zealots who tiresomely hiss 'murderers,' but with those apologists who, while granting the right to abortion, insist that somehow a woman must feel guilt and remorse. I have come to suspect that the persons who refer to abortion as 'a tragic option,' or 'a terrible alternative,' hold allegiance not to women's freedom but to a male-dominated world gone by."

As the future of *Roe v. Wade* hangs in the balance, we face a future where abortion soon may become illegal in many parts of the country. If it does, this would lead to a 21 percent increase in pregnancy-related deaths overall and a 33 percent increase among Black women, according to recent research at the University of Colorado Boulder.

Currently only 16 states and the District of Columbia protect legal abortion in their respective constitutions, which would leave millions of women without any abortion care should *Roe v. Wade* fall. We are already seeing this in Texas, where abortion has been effectively outlawed. While Texan women rush to surrounding states for abortion care at overworked and overcrowded clinics, religious legislators are eager to copy this draconian law and render abortion a criminal activity in their own state. And while the liberalization of mifepristone, the abortion pill, by the Food and Drug Administration is an important step, 19 states have already banned its distribution by mail.

Beyond supporting measures like the congressional Women's Health Protection Act, what can we do to stand up for abortion rights?

We can tell our stories and speak to our friends and family. I acknowledge that it is unfair that women so often feel compelled to publicly disclose their abortion stories in order to have legislative justice. But since we live in a country where Christian nationalism is overtaking abortion rights, it is vital that we do not revert back to the "hush-hush" environment of the generations that preceded us. Speaking out is what we must do to stand up for ourselves and for one another.

Barbara Alvarez is FFRF's inaugural Anne Nicol Gaylor Reproductive Rights Intern.

“It is vital that we do not revert back to the “hush-hush” environment of the generations that preceded us.

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FFRF NEWS

Jan. 6 Christian nationalism report released

On Feb. 9, FFRF and the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty released their hard-hitting exposé, “Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021, Insurrection.”

The entire report can be found here: [FFRF.us/Jan6Report](https://ffrf.us/Jan6Report).

The report includes contributions from prominent experts on Christian nationalism, including Professors Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, authors of *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*; Katherine Stewart, author of *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*; Dr. Jemar Tisby, historian of race and religion and author of *How to Fight Racism* and *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*; Amanda Tyler, executive director of BJC and organizer of the Christians Against Christian Nationalism initiative; and Andrew L. Seidel, a constitutional attorney at FFRF and author of *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism is UnAmerican*.

The extensive document begins with a sociological explanation of Christian nationalism in America



and the demographics that underlie this ideology. The report provides a brief history of white Christian nationalism in the United States, which is fol-

lowed by a thorough unmasking of the networks of power and money that prop up the ideology.

The bulk of the report exposes the role this ideology played in fomenting the insurrection, including a key section written by Seidel detailing the buildup and dry runs that occurred immediately following Election Day up until the attack itself. His chapter on the evidence of the role of white Christian nationalism is heavily documented and richly studded with photographs and links to videos of that day showing the prayers, signage and symbols of Christian nationalism.

The report concludes with examples of how Christian leaders responded to Christian nationalism and calling for a widespread recommitment to foundational values of religious freedom for all, including how separating the institutions of religion and government promotes everyone's freedom.

With its razor-sharp focus on an underreported aspect of the Jan. 6 assault, the report — combining the resources of two notable groups and with insights from prominent experts — deserves to be widely read.

Court needs defender of state/church separation

The Freedom From Religion Foundation welcomes Justice Stephen Breyer's retirement announcement and calls on President Biden to nominate a replacement who will be faithful to the constitutional separation between state and church.

Breyer has a mixed record on state/church separation. He has often taken a fact-specific approach to cases involving the separation of state and church, under both Chief Justices William Rehnquist and John Roberts. He was the swing vote in two high-profile Ten Commandments cases that were decided in 2005. Breyer struck down the recent placement of Ten Commandments plaques in Kentucky courthouses, but upheld a longstanding monument at the Texas Capitol. Breyer called for “legal judgment” in determining whether such displays violated the Establishment Clause based on their specific context.

More positively, Breyer dissented in *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, arguing that the town's prayer practice failed to include minority faiths and promoted a single religion. Likewise, Breyer dissented in *Espinoza v. Montana Dept. of Revenue*, which held that the application of Montana's “no aid” clause improperly restricted funding to religious schools. Breyer's dissent noted: “The Religion Clauses helped our nation avoid religiously based discord while



Stephen Breyer

securing liberty for those of all faiths.” In FFRF's challenge to faith-based funding under President George W. Bush, Breyer joined a strong dissent authored by Justice David Souter, which argued that FFRF had standing to challenge executive branch funding that flowed to religion. “I salute Justice Stephen Breyer for dissenting in favor of FFRF, Dan Barker and myself as the plaintiffs in the Supreme Court's *Hein* decision, for his passionate defense of *Roe v. Wade* precedent and voting rights — and for the thoughtful timing of his resignation announcement,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. Biden must nominate an individual with a demonstrated commitment to the separation of state and church who understands that there is no freedom of religion without a government that is free from religion, FFRF asserts. The president has previously committed to choosing a Black woman to sit on the court, a promise FFRF also requests him to keep. “Representation matters,” Gaylor simply says.

FFRF dismayed that Biden attended prayer breakfast

While the Freedom From Religion Foundation is pleased that progress is being made as more members of Congress abandon the National Prayer Breakfast, the state/church watchdog is disappointed that President Biden participated in the event on Feb. 3.

FFRF had called on the president and members of Congress to boycott the event, warning that the Christian nationalist organizers are exploiting their presence to further anti-democratic and anti-LGBTQ aims. Sen. Tim Kaine and several other past regulars did not attend this year's gathering.

“We are disturbed that President Biden nevertheless chose to address an event that has become a hotspot for Christian nationalists and theocrats, anti-LGBTQ bigotry and influence-peddling,” comments FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

The annual shindig, which is privately hosted but sounds as if it is an official governmental function, has been mired in scandal after scandal, including the FBI's arrest of a Russian agent with ties to Vladimir Putin. The National Prayer Breakfast zealously promotes right-wing ideas — far from the bipartisan event that it pretends to be.

Thanks to extensive reporting from Jonathan Larsen of TYT Investigates, we are seeing more information about how destructive the National Prayer Breakfast and its supporting organization, the Fellowship Foundation, are.

The National Prayer Breakfast is a pay-to-play event with a troubling history:

- Mike Lindell of My Pillow infamy credits his rise and relationship with Don-

ald Trump to being “picked out of 12 people to pray with Ben Carson in a room [at] the National Prayer Breakfast.”

- The FBI caught Maria Butina, an unregistered foreign agent with ties to Vladimir Putin, using the event to illegally “back channel” with American officials who attended. Butina pleaded guilty and was convicted in 2018.

- New records reveal that Rev. Franklin Graham is the primary financial backer of the event, which he admitted is meant to buy access: “They're wanting to be able to rub elbows with somebody that they normally couldn't rub elbows with.” Graham justified this by pointing to “the gays, they do everything they can to get their politicians into office.”

- Anti-LGBTQ rhetoric is baked into the event and its organizers. Recent stories have documented how the foreign officials who join the event are often less-than-official and virulently anti-LGBTQ. European LGBTQ groups like Forbidden Colours are objecting to this international influence.

- President Trump used the event in 2019 to promote discriminatory adoption practices, “My administration is working to insure that faith-based adoption agencies are able to help vulnerable children find their forever families while following their deeply held beliefs.” His comments were met with tremendous enthusiasm.



The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible
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Supreme Court hears Christian flag case

FFRF warns that the Christian flag case heard by the U.S. Supreme Court will have an unclear impact for future cases.

The high court recently heard the case of *Shurtleff v. City of Boston*, involving a demand by a Christian group to hoist a Christian flag on the flagpole at Boston’s City Hall. The flag features a blue rectangle in the corner with a blood-red Latin cross and is the same flag that was paraded during the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, along with symbols of white supremacy.

A majority of the justices seem poised to rule that Boston should have approved the Christian flag. “The real question is the scope of the court’s decision later this year and what signal it might send to other governmental bodies,” says FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert.

Most of the arguments focused on the free speech claims of Camp Constitution, a Christian group that asked the city to fly the Christian flag, apparently partly in response to the city flying the rainbow LGBTQ flag for the officially recognized Boston Pride Month.

But during oral arguments, Justice Brett Kavanaugh chillingly remarked that a “mistaken” understanding of the Establishment Clause was the



Image by Shutterstock

The Supreme Court heard a case about whether the Christian flag can be one of the three flags on the Boston City Hall grounds.

“root cause” of the denial here, citing a friend of the court brief by the Becket Fund, a religious group. That brief had called for overturning the Supreme Court’s longstanding “Lemon test” to determine conflicts between state and church.

Justice Neil Gorsuch asked that if the court agrees that the city’s de-

nial was based on a mistaken understanding of the Establishment Clause: “What’s left for us to decide?”

Boston has maintained that flags on its flagpoles are attributable to the city and not private speakers so it can decide not to affiliate itself with religion.

FFRF submitted a friend of the court brief maintaining that Boston’s

flagpole is a nonpublic forum subject to reasonable restrictions, and that the city’s restriction on religious flags is appropriate to avoid the appearance of religious endorsement. FFRF pointed out this is not a case of viewpoint discrimination, because the city of Boston has not flown flags representing other religions or sects.

The flagpole in question is one of three 83-foot-tall flagpoles standing prominently in front of the City Hall entrance. On one the U.S. flag always flies, on the second a Massachusetts flag and on the third, the city flag usually flies. The city flag is occasionally replaced by an approved temporary flag, usually representing another country or an officially recognized event, for limited periods of time. Over 90 percent of such flag raisings are of national flags. City employees are present for each flag-raising.

That the high court agreed to take the case, even though the 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals had ruled in Boston’s favor, signals that at least four justices seek to overturn the appeals court findings.

Camp Constitution is being represented by Liberty Counsel, an extremist Christian nationalist legal outfit.

School boards

Continued from page 1

the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals governing Ohio, hence replacing the prayer with a moment of silence. “While the longstanding practice of including an invocation at the beginning of board meetings has not previously been challenged, the board recognizes that the 6th Circuit’s decision in *Coles v. Cleveland Board of Education* is controlling, and will, under advice of legal counsel, cease opening prayers,” the board’s legal counsel wrote back in a formal letter.

Deep down south, FFRF continued its lessons to winning effect.

A concerned parent from Lake Hamilton School District in Arkansas contacted FFRF regarding prayer at school board meetings; a subsequent review of board meeting minutes confirmed that board meetings were consistently opened with prayer.

Board members are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way, Heineman wrote to

the legal counsel for the school board a few weeks ago. However, by praying at official meetings, the school board lends its power and prestige to religion, amounting to a governmental endorsement. And, FFRF pointed out, prayer also alienates nonreligious Americans who make up the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification — 35 percent of Americans are non-Christians, including more than one in four Americans who identify as religiously unaffiliated.

The board has quickly responded to FFRF’s missive. Counsel for the board replied that “prayer has been removed from the standard agenda.”

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is beyond delighted that it was able to provide a cross-country constitutional corrective.

“We salute any school district for taking steps to stay secular and inclusive, but when this happens on several occasions within a short period of time, it is reason for a special celebration,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

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.”

Statue

Continued from page 1

his catalytic role in founding America and our constitutional republic, Paine remains too often on the dark outskirts of history. It is way past time for Congress to give Paine the central place of respect and awe he deserves in our nation’s capital. This memorial to Paine — amazingly, already pre-funded with a flood of voluntary contributions and pledges from private citizens — will be a powerful and dramatic addition to the symbolic life of Washington, D.C.”

Co-sponsors of the bill include Reps. Jared Huffman, D-Calif., Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., Mark Pocan, D-Wis., Sean Casten, D-Ill., Madeleine Dean, D-Pa., James McGovern, D-Mass., Mark DeSaulnier, D-Calif., and Thomas Suozzi, D-N.Y.

The legislation will authorize the Thomas Paine Memorial Association to establish the commemorative work in the District of Columbia. The association is working with renowned sculptor Zenos Frudakis, and the statue will be paid for through private funds. The Thomas Paine Memorial Association is the recipient of a very generous matching gift from Todd Stiefel and the Stiefel Freethought Foundation.

“We can think of no one better suited to champion the resolution to dedicate a memorial to our ‘For-

gotten Founder’ Thomas Paine than Rep. Jamie Raskin,” comments Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president and co-founder who serves as the secretary of the Thomas Paine Memorial Association. “Raskin embodies Paine’s dedication to reason, democracy, liberty and humanistic values. We are honored to be working with him to help restore Thomas Paine to his rightful place in our country’s history.”

Margaret Downey, Thomas Paine Memorial Association president and founder of the Freethought Society, says, “Long neglected, Paine stands as the embodiment of the Declaration of Independence, and his Crisis papers were the spark that won the American Revolution. A statue of Thomas Paine will bring attention to the fundamental principles of the country, and serve as a source of unity of our founding principles.”

Robyn Blumner, who is vice president of the association and CEO of Center For Inquiry, sends her “thank you to members of Congress who seek to correct this historical oversight.”

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is asking its 35,000-plus-membership to enlist sponsorship and support of the bill from their senators and members of Congress.

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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 or 6 or 1006 for HD)	8:30 am
Portland, Ore.	KRCW-CW	(Ch. 32)	9 am (703 on Comcast for HD or Ch. 3)
Sacramento	KQCA-MY	(Ch. 58)	8:30 am
San Francisco	KICU-IND	(Ch. 36)	10 am
Seattle	KONG-IND	(Ch. 16)	8 am (Ch. 16 or Ch. 106 on Comcast)
Washington, D.C.	WDCW-CW	(Ch. 50, 23, 3)	8 am

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

IN THE NEWS

OnlySky media site caters to nonreligious

A new website for secular and nonreligious people has launched at OnlySky.media.

As secular studies Professor Phil Zuckerman writes, its “goal is to be a media hub (news, culture, politics, entertainment, science, etc.) for the 85 million nonreligious Americans out there.”

The site was founded by Shawn Hardin, who quickly added Zuckerman, Hemant Mehta, Sarah Levin, Dale McGowan and others to get the site up and running.

“OnlySky is a participatory media platform delivering world-class journalism, storytelling, and commentary — exploring the whole human experience from a secular perspective,” Zuckerman writes. “OnlySky provides a media platform for the nonreligious to express the positive perspective and values they actually hold. We want to change the cultural narrative regarding the nonreligious, encouraging a nationwide movement that secures an influential place for secular values in our culture and makes a naturalistic, freethinking world-view accessible and desirable through storytelling. Nonreligious Americans are projected to become the largest belief group in the United States within the next 5-10 years; it’s time that our voices are widely heard.”

40% of countries had blasphemy laws in 2019

A new Pew Research Center analysis finds that 79 countries and territories out of the 198 studied around the world (40 percent) had laws or policies in 2019 banning blasphemy, which is defined as speech or actions considered to be contemptuous of God or of people or objects considered sacred.

Twenty-two countries (11 percent) had laws against apostasy, the act of abandoning one’s faith.

These laws were most common in the Middle East and North Africa, where 18 of the 20 countries (90 percent) in the region have laws criminalizing blasphemy and 13 of them (65 percent) outlaw apostasy.

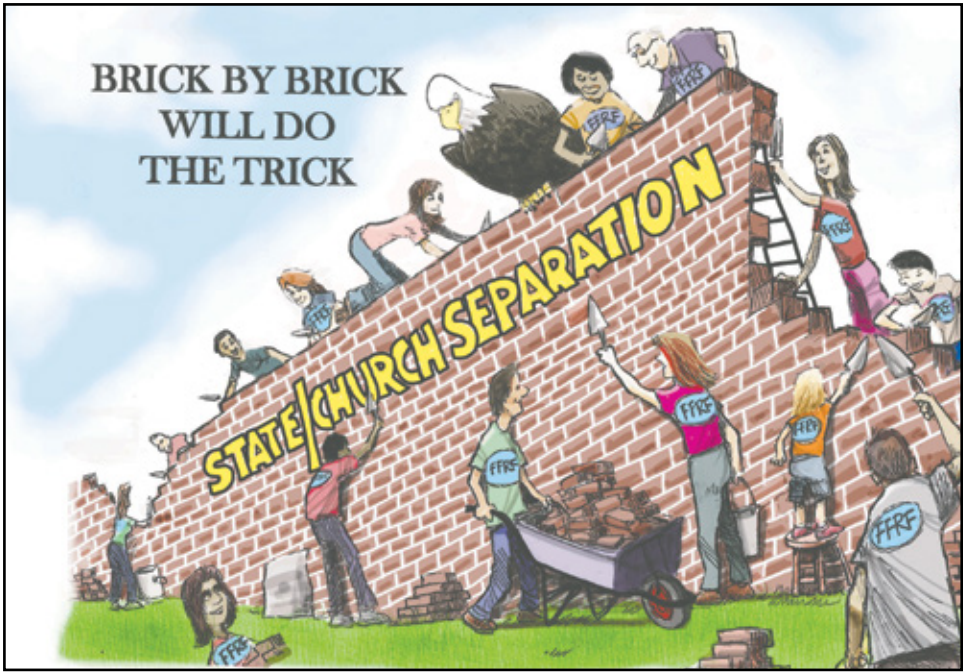
Blasphemy laws were on the books in 2019 in all five global regions covered by the analysis, including 18 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, 17 in the Asia-Pacific region, 14 in Europe and 12 in the Americas.

Among the 79 countries that criminalized blasphemy, penalties varied widely, from fines to prison sentences and, in some cases, lashings and execution.

S.D. school ‘prayer’ bill rejected by committee

A Republican-dominated South Dakota House committee on Jan. 21 rejected Gov. Kristi Noem’s proposal to require public schools to have a moment of silence to start the day.

The Republican governor first billed the proposal at a conservative Christian conference in Iowa last year as “putting prayer back in schools,” but a House committee rejected the idea after education groups argued that voluntary prayer is already allowed in schools and the proposed law would have saddled teachers with an unclear mandate. The Republican-dominated House Education Committee rejected the bill on a 9–6 vote, but



Cartoon by Steve Benson

it could still be revived with support from one-third of House members.

“Maybe it’s me, but I view prayer as something that is personal and not performative,” said Republican Rep. Will Mortenson, who criticized the bill as vaguely written.

Ex-pope accused for how he handled abuse cases

A church-commissioned German investigation on Jan. 20 accused former Pope Benedict of “wrongdoing” in his handling of sexual abuse cases during his time running the archdiocese of Munich between 1977 and 1982.

The law firm that carried out the investigation said Benedict’s claims to have no direct knowledge of the cases were not credible.

At a news conference to unveil its nearly 1,900-page report, the firm said Benedict, known as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at the time of the cases, could be accused of wrongdoing in four of them, including one in which he knowingly accepted a priest into his archdiocese even after the cleric had been convicted of sexual abuse in a criminal court.

The report provides rare insight into how someone who went on to become a pope acted behind the scenes in one of the defining crises of modern church.

Pakistani sentenced to death for blasphemy

A court in Pakistan has sentenced a woman to death over allegedly blasphemous messages sent over WhatsApp and Facebook.

Aneeqa Ateeq, 26, was found guilty and given a death sentence by a court in Rawalpindi on Jan. 19 after a complaint was registered against her under Pakistan’s draconian cybercrime and blasphemy laws, The Guardian reports.

Ateeq allegedly met her accuser, a fellow Pakistani, online in 2019 through a mobile gaming app and the pair began corresponding over WhatsApp.

He accused her of sending blasphemous caricatures of holy prophets, making remarks about “holy personages” on WhatsApp and using her Facebook account to transmit blasphemous material to other accounts.

Ateeq, who has stated that she is a practicing Muslim, denied all the charges. During the trial, Ateeq told the court that she believed the complainant intentionally dragged her into a religious discussion so he could collect evidence and take “revenge” after

she refused to be “friendly” with him.

The court found her guilty, gave her a 20-year sentence and ordered her to be hanged.

Michigan faith agencies can deny LGBT adoptions

Faith-based adoption agencies that contract with the state of Michigan can refuse to place children with same-sex couples under a proposed settlement filed in federal court Jan. 25, months after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled for a Catholic charity in a similar case, the Associated Press reported.

The state Department of Health and Human Services said the high court’s ruling against Philadelphia is binding on the state and limits its ability to enforce a nondiscrimination policy.

In 2019, Lansing-based St. Vincent Catholic Charities sued the state, challenging a deal Attorney General Dana Nessel announced to resolve an earlier lawsuit brought against the state by lesbian couples who said they were turned away by faith-based agencies.

OK lawmaker wants bible as official state book

An Oklahoma lawmaker has filed a bill that would make the bible the official state book of Oklahoma.

“We are people of great faith,” state Rep. Tammy Townley said in a statement. “The Holy Bible is an integral part of numerous faiths and is deeply important to many Oklahomans. Even when we don’t always agree with each other, we always know that we have a foundation higher than politics that we can rely on to remain unshakeable when times are tough.”

Townley, the author of House Bill 3890, used to own a Christian bookstore.

The bill will be available for consideration during Oklahoma’s upcoming legislative session, which begins Feb. 7.

California sues ‘sharing ministry’ health plan

California on Jan. 12 sued what the state’s attorney general called “a sham health insurance company operating as a health care sharing ministry.”

The lawsuit names The Alieria Companies and the Moses family, which founded Sharity Ministries Inc. Sharity, formerly known as Trinity Healthshare Inc., is a nonprofit corporation.

But the state says Alieria is a for-profit corporation that collected hundreds of

millions of dollars in premiums from thousands of Californians and others around the United States through unauthorized health plans and insurance sold through Sharity/Trinity.

Instead of paying members’ health care costs, the state alleges the company routinely denied claims and spent just 16 cents of every dollar in premiums on health care expenses.

Survey: Most Germans find religion unimportant

A new poll shows a significant majority of Germans say religion plays no role in their life. Fewer than one in eight German adults believe that faith makes the world a better place, although younger people were more positive.

Just 33 percent of those polled said that religion was important to them. Only 12 percent said they thought religion could make the world a better place, and just 25 percent saying it had any political significance.

Eastern Germans were even less devout than Germans as a whole. Some 30 percent of respondents described themselves as “devout” or “very devout,” while 35 percent said they were “not devout at all.”

Jewish couple sues over agency discrimination

A Tennessee Jewish couple had planned to adopt a child in Florida, but when they were set to begin a family-training course required in their state, the agency that had been scheduled to provide the training backed out, saying the couple did not share its Christian beliefs, a lawsuit says. The adoption ultimately fell through.

The lawsuit, filed in Tennessee on Jan. 19, comes two years after Gov. Bill Lee signed a law that allows state-funded child-placement agencies to decline to assist in cases that “would violate the agency’s written religious or moral convictions or policies.” Civil rights groups and Democratic lawmakers had opposed the measure, saying it could be used to discriminate against families of various faiths or identities.

The couple’s lawsuit names the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services and its commissioner, Jennifer Nichols, as defendants. The complaint alleges that state funding of child-placement agencies, such as Holston United Methodist Home for Children, that discriminate “against prospective or current foster parents based on the religious beliefs of the parents” violates the Tennessee Constitution.

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FFRF VICTORIES

FFRF ends Illinois church parking subsidy

The city of Morris, Ill., has agreed to stop a discriminatory parking policy favoring churchgoers after the Freedom From Religion Foundation stepped in.

The presence of four “church parking only” signs prohibiting area residents from parking on a public street near a church created a discriminatory privilege for churchgoers, FFRF told Morris Mayor Chris Brown.

“This not only confers endorsement and advancement of religion but also fosters excessive entanglement between the city and a church,” FFRF Legal Fellow Karen Heineman wrote. “The Supreme Court has struck down such entanglements between government and religious actors.”

The subsidy for church parking is significant because the church, unlike



A before and after shot of the street parking space in Morris, Ill.

a secular counterpart, does not pay taxes to contribute to public streets and public parking options. By providing church parking, the entire city is subsidi-

dizing free parking for churchgoers. If parking is limited immediately in front of a church, it is not for the city to resolve by granting special treatment.

These signs allowed a religious organization to control the enforcement of parking on a public street in Morris. The city’s treatment of parking was preferential toward churchgoers and exclusionary toward residents and neighbors who do not attend the church. The city’s bestowal of special parking benefits to a select church couldn’t be reconciled with the Constitution, FFRF insisted.

FFRF’s constitutional parking lessons fell on receptive ears.

In an email from the city of Morris’ counsel Garrett Wheeler, FFRF was reassured: “The city looked at the issue once it was brought to the city’s attention and determined the signs were erected without city council approval, so they were removed by the church.”

By Casandra Zimmerman

No more teacher-led prayers in S.C. district

A South Carolina school district has stopped teachers from leading prayers during school hours.

After a concerned parent reported to FFRF that multiple teachers within the Cherokee County School District had been leading their classes in prayer during lunch, including teachers at Northwest Elementary School, FFRF Attorney Chris Line wrote a letter to the district.

“Public school teachers may not promote religion by leading students in prayer, encouraging students to pray, participating in student-initiated prayer, or otherwise endorsing religion to students,” he wrote. “The district must make certain that none of its employees are unlawfully and inappropriately indoctrinating students in religious matters by leading prayer, encouraging them to pray, or setting aside time for prayer or religious instruction.”

The Cherokee County School District responded by stopping the offensive practice and reminded all of its administrators of the need to maintain a distance between state and church.

Pro-Christian film won’t be shown in school

After a student contacted FFRF to report that an Oklahoma science teacher was showing students a Christian propaganda film during class, FFRF Attorney Chris Line sent a letter to Superintendent Brian Beagles of Sperry Public Schools.

Beagles was informed that playing Christian music in class and requiring students to watch a Christian film entangled the district with a religious message.

FFRF also informed Beagles that “Facing the Giants” is a Christian propaganda film about a struggling high school football coach who inspires his team to believe in the Christian god and to use religious faith to succeed.

Counsel for the school responded to FFRF and reassured it that the issue had been addressed and will not happen again.

District to no longer teach religious song

Children at a Texas elementary school are no longer being proselytized by their music teacher after FFRF intervened.

A parent had reported that a music teacher at Frostwood Elementary in Spring Branch ISD taught a religious prayer song in sign language to first-grade students. The parent’s child signed and sung a prayer before dinner after which our complainant learned that she was taught the prayer at school by the school’s music teacher.

FFRF let Superintendent Jennifer Blaine know that “Thank You For The World So Sweet” is an incontrovertible prayer.

FFRF Attorney Chris Line wrote in a letter to the school district that “No public school employee may urge religious points of view on students.”

General counsel for the school district responded to Line by saying “Though the song is in a state-approved textbook, the textbook is outdated (from 2006), so the teacher agreed to discontinue the use of the outdated textbook.”

Ga. district won’t allow promotion of religion

A school district in Georgia has stopped basketball coaches at Northwest

Whitfield High School from letting outside adults proselytize students.

After a community member raised concerns with FFRF about this promotion of religion in the high school’s girls’ basketball program, FFRF Attorney Chris Line wrote a letter to Superintendent Mike Ewton, informing him that “This conduct raises serious concerns that Northwest Whitfield High School coaches are proselytizing and promoting their religion to students, both through outside religious leaders and directly to students.”

Newton was asked to investigate the complaint and take immediate action to ensure that its athletic programs are not being used to proselytize and promote religion in violation of students’ constitutional rights

Ewton responded to FFRF’s request and said the school has addressed the situation with the employees involved. The principal also met with all other coaches at the school as well as the FCA coordinator and reminded them of appropriate procedures.

Ohio school stops performances in church

An Ohio School district has ceased sending its high school students to a church to perform after FFRF got involved.

When a concerned community member reported that the Logan High School Chamber Singers performed during a religious worship service at First Presbyterian Church in Lancaster, FFRF Attorney Chris Line sent a letter to Superintendent Monte Bainter insisting that the school no longer hold school-sponsored events in churches and instead select public facilities for all future events.

“The use of churches for public school programming is inappropriate and unconstitutional. It is a fundamen-

tal principle of Establishment Clause jurisprudence that a public school may not advance, or appear to endorse religion,” Line explained. “Even if attendance and participation in this event were voluntary, church performances are still impermissible.”

Legal counsel responded by assuring FFRF that the district has no scheduled performances at any church venue and all future venue selections will be approved by the superintendent.

FFRF members help cinch Michigan victory

FFRF and its members in Michigan have persuaded a county board to reverse its prayer policy and halt governmental prayer.

After multiple concerned area residents reported the Leelanau County Board was starting to implement prayers to open its meetings, FFRF contacted the board in September, urging it to honor the constitutional principle of separation between religion and government.

“Prayer at government meetings is unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote Leelanau County Board of Commission Chair William J. Bunek.

Although FFRF received an initially discouraging response from the county, local activists attended meetings to voice their objection and changed the board’s mind. On Jan 18, the county board voted 5 to 2 to change the prayer to a moment of silence.


City stops prayers at mandatory holiday party

The city of Port, Ark., has stopped having prayers during holiday parties.

FFRF was told that the city was holding mandatory holiday parties that all city employees were required to attend. At the events, David Parsons, the city manager, was leading employees in sectarian Christian prayers.

“Prayer and proselytizing as part of government-sponsored events is unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive,” wrote FFRF Attorney Chris Line in a letter to the Mayor Charles Bujan. The mayor was then asked to stop the prayer.

FFRF has since been informed that the prayers have ended.



I began asking myself hard questions and daring to give honest answers. I realized no deities had any evidence behind them. I'm a happy atheist now!

- Steve DeHaven

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Anti-science govs go all in on anti-vaxxing

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

While the Supreme Court axed the best hope for defeating the spread of Covid — the Biden administration’s OSHA rules — it is at least a secular blessing that it has permitted the self-evident need for a vaccination mandate for federal health care workers. (If someone wants to be in healthcare, the least they can do is not give a patient Covid if they can help it.)

What a sad commentary on the state of acceptance of medical science in the United States that less than half of the country — 21 states and the District of Columbia — had previous to this ruling mandated Covid-19 inoculations for health care workers. Even worse, consider that at least 27 states are involved in one or more lawsuits against the federal vaccine mandates.

Most of this resistance comes down to partisan politicking. The divide has brought out the latter-day “Know-Nothings,” including public officials who’ve positively swilled the anti-vax Kool-Aid. These state public officials and legislators have seemingly made it their mission in the name of religious freedom to do their damndest to spread the virus in the midst of our nation’s greatest Covid-19 spike yet.

Special awards for anti-science denial belong to several governors with the worst records on Covid — who all fall into the Christian nationalist camp — and who have been actively sabotaging efforts to stop the spread:

Florida Gov. DeSantis

Amid a Covid surge shattering old records in his state, Gov. Ron DeSantis maintained a steady silence about Florida’s spike in infections. But he has found time to taunt Dr. Anthony Fauci, use “Don’t Fauci Me” T-shirts to raise funds for his campaign and recently called to imprison this humanist bastion of science and reason. (Fauci’s critics are legion among ultraextremists at the state or federal level. Fauci called out U.S. Sen. Rand Paul on the Senate floor for stirring up “the crazies” who are making threats on his life.)

During the worst of the spike, DeSantis appeared at a New Year’s Eve celebration at a Miami Christian concert, where he claimed, “I’m glad we’re going to be able to celebrate the new year in the freest state of the United States.”

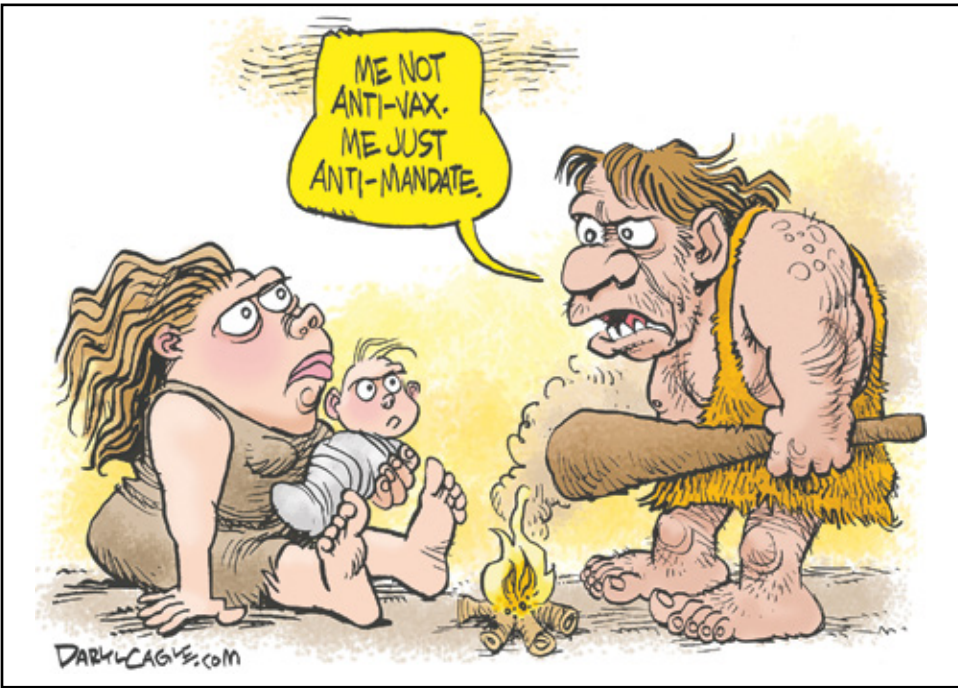
Following the January ruling by the Supreme Court upholding Biden’s healthcare requirement, DeSantis even castigated Supreme Court Justice John Roberts and Justice Brett Kavanaugh for having “no backbone,” and announced he won’t enforce the requirement, saying it had created an “insane situation.”

What DeSantis calls the “freest state in the union” has some of the most draconian prohibitions against vaccinations and masking. Florida now:

- Prohibits private employer Covid-19 vaccine mandates, adopting a law that fines small employers who violate this “health protection” law by up to \$10,000 per employee violation, and medium to larger-sized business up to \$50,000 per employee. (Who’s pro-business?)
- Prohibits government entities from requiring Covid-19 vaccinations.



Annie Laurie Gaylor



- Prohibits educational institutions from requiring students to be vaccinated.
- Prohibits school districts from having policies on face masks, and encourages students and parents to sue districts that adopt masking policies.
- Has sued President Biden over his vaccination mandates.

Even Donald Trump has pointed out that DeSantis has refused to answer questions about whether he’s been boosted.

Arizona Gov. Ducey

Gov. Doug Ducey’s state of Arizona jumped to the unenviable record of being No. 3 in the nation for Covid deaths. This is no surprise, given Ducey’s outrageous anti-Covid-mitigation policies. Ducey is known to the secular community for posting on the official gubernatorial Facebook page a bible verse and greeting that “He is Risen.” His misuse of Covid funds — to penalize public schools that mask students by giving the funds to private (religious) schools that won’t mask — is so extreme that the Biden administration is threatening to revoke the funds altogether. In an opportunistic raid on public funds to promote religious schools, he’s promising \$10 million in relief funds to give parents up to \$7,000 a year to pay tuition and education costs at private schools if their public schools close or move to remote learning.

While he has promoted voluntary vaccination in the past, Ducey’s reckless pro-Covid overreach has gone so far as to prohibit state universities from requiring masks or testing of unvaccinated students.

Texas Gov. Abbott

Like DeSantis, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott — whom FFRF is successfully suing over his discrimination against nonbelievers and who has told FFRF “not to mess with Texas” — claims to be pro-business, yet has barred business owners from requiring vaccinations. He’d previously prohibited any governments or school districts from mandating vaccinations. He has sued the Biden administration for requiring vaccinations for members of the Army National Guard, and joined the other lawsuits against Biden’s healthcare and OSHA requirements. It’s no surprise that omicron is surging across Texas.

Abbott and Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, both religious fanatics, even got a constitutional amendment passed by voters last fall that exempts churches from emergency measures, claiming it violates the Establishment Clause.

Georgia Gov. Kemp

Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp once (with inadvertent humor) told a Christian reporter, “I knew that God had a plan for

me, but I just didn’t know exactly what it was until after the election.” He vociferously fought Covid-19 mitigation efforts by the mayor of Atlanta throughout the pandemic, and issued an executive order in August to ensure businesses don’t have to comply with local Covid-19 measures such as masks and vaccination mandates. He panderingly unveiled the “Faith Protection Act” to ensure that emergency powers cannot be used to “specifically limit the practice of any religion.”

In early 2021, he sued to challenge the Biden administration’s Head Start vaccine and masking mandate, as well as being party to the newest lawsuits over health care mandates and OSHA requirements.

“I will absolutely not be implementing any measures that shutter businesses or divide the vaccinated from the unvaccinated or the masked from the unmasked,” Kemp has announced amid the omicron spike in his state.

Tennessee Gov. Lee

Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee wears religion on his sleeve, has mandated a day of prayer, promoted and signed an early abortion ban now under appeal and endorses “faith-based initiatives.” A former state health department employee (who had been fired for doing her job in promoting vaccinations) accused Lee of putting his personal religious views over the rollout of the J&J Covid 19 vaccines.

After OSHA issued its November rule requiring large employers to adopt vaccine mandates (now blocked by the Supreme Court), Lee signed into law a legislative package severely limiting schools, health agencies and businesses from requiring proof of vaccination and restricting school masking to extreme surges. It also allows workers to collect unemployment benefits if they refuse a vaccine. Tennessee is suing Biden over vaccine mandates for employers.

Lee went so far as to invite unvacci-

nated out-of-state cops to join Tennessee’s highway patrol (you can’t make this stuff up).

Montana Gov. Gianforte

Gov. Greg Gianforte was the first governor in the nation to sign a law prohibiting private businesses from requiring vaccinations in the workplace, and some other measures limiting the power of local health departments. He’d previously discouraged local school boards from implementing masking mandates. All of this even after he contracted Covid last April. In claiming Biden’s OSHA mandate was illegal in Montana, he wrote, “Vaccine passports, or any documentation related to an individual’s vaccination status, are unwarranted infringements on our liberties and illegal in Montana.” (This is more than ironic given that Gianforte has signed seven pieces of anti-abortion legislation with unwarranted infringements on pregnant women’s liberties.)

The wealthy governor is a fundamentalist whose Gianforte Family Foundation gives to theopolitical and Christian nationalist groups, including Focus on the Family, the Alliance Defending Freedom, the Family Research Council and others of similar ilk. He has donated more than \$4 million to the Grace Bible Church in Bozeman, his family’s church, and the pastor spoke at his inauguration.

Freedom to get Covid

As California pediatrician and state Sen. Richard Pan has explained: “In politics, if someone wins with 60 or 70 percent of the vote, they’ve crushed their opponent. But in vaccination, that’s not nearly enough. You have to get to the upper 80s and 90s in percentages to keep people safe, and there just aren’t many ways to get 90-plus percent of people to do anything voluntarily. That’s where mandates come in, and generally, they’ve been effective.”

This partial list of public executives who’ve put their anti-science religious convictions above science and the public welfare could go on and on, but you get the picture.

So here sits the United States in the midst of the latest Covid-19 surge, suffering record numbers of infections and hospitalizations, and with barely 63 percent fully vaccinated and only 24 percent boosted. Here we are with a majority of state legislatures rejecting the obvious utility, need and efficacy of vaccination mandates.

Worse, a supermajority on the Supreme Court has ignored more than a century of high court precedent related to vaccinations during epidemics and rejected the patently clear right of the federal government to enact broad inoculation mandates.

Whose views are insane? It does appear that the inmates are running the asylum.

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

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Kindergarten pledge leads to early God talk

This column first appeared on FFRF's [FreethoughtNow.org](https://freethoughtnow.org) blog site.

By Ryan Jayne

I've never liked the Pledge of Allegiance, but a recent parenting experience really brought home the coercive nature of this ceremony and the divisive impact it has on nonreligious citizens. My family learned a hard lesson.

As an atheist father of young kids, with my wife a recovering Lutheran, our initial plan was to forego any discussion of religion, gods or the afterlife until our kids started asking questions on those topics, at which point — as those familiar with my prior writings might imagine — I will have plenty to say.

This plan seemed reasonable, since the metaphysical claims of religion are all false. If you teach young kids about the moon, you probably wouldn't mention the moon-landing denial conspiracy theory. Since it's not based in reality, it's not something small children need to know until they confront it and start asking questions, at which time you can teach them how to be good skeptics.



Ryan Jayne

One of our major objections to raising kids with religion is not just that heaven, hell and gods are all myths, but that indoctrination relies on the fact that young kids are tremendously gullible. When parents tell their kids that every word of the King James Bible is true, their children will likely believe them without a second thought.

Since we want to raise kids who are true freethinkers, my wife and I were reluctant to tell them that we're atheists, and that gods don't exist. This would be accepted without question, and it feels too close to telling a 4-year-old, "We're Catholic, God exists and the pope can talk to him." So, we put this discussion off as long as possible.

Initially, our plan worked well. After my wife's father died, my daughter became very interested in the concept of death, but she understood the simple,



true explanation that nothing lasts forever. And she seems to have taken to heart our reminders that the temporary nature of life makes all of our relationships precious, and we should cherish every day that we have with those we love. No one suggested that her grandpa was somehow living forever and is waiting for her in a magical realm above the sky, and so she never asked. The truth is, after all, much simpler.

But then came kindergarten. Although my daughter loves school — recently she lamented that she didn't have school on the weekend, (which I'll have to get in writing for the future) — this new chapter in her life brought new changes to her daily life. For one, on car rides, she would see an American flag and robotically drone, "I pledge allegiance to the flag . . .," all the way to her conclusion, ". . . with liberty and justice for all. Have a great day!"

The pledge has always seemed weird to me, and it's especially weird to hear a 5-year-old mindlessly repeat every word just as it's read over the loudspeaker each day. She memorized each word long before she thought about what any of them meant. That's creepy.

But she soon started thinking about what the words meant, which led to the question at dinner one day: "What does 'one nation under God' mean?" Initially, my wife deftly parried the question, saying the phrase is a funny way of saying, "We hope the country stays safe."

When our daughter asked again a couple weeks later, I gave her an

honest historical crash course about why humans imagine gods, beginning with something like: "When humans couldn't explain lightning, they imagined a great monster in the sky throwing down bolts when it was angry. They called them gods, but now we know that's not how it works." My wife, as a former Christian and more sensitive to language that might offend my daughter's classmates, was not thrilled with my choice to characterize God as a "monster."

She changed her mind on this point, and we both changed our mind on our entire plan to hold off on the "God talk," when Christmas approached. Like many atheists, we celebrate the holiday with family, lights, decorations and presents. We put up a tree in our living room and reindeer on our lawn. We never pretended that Santa was real, while letting our daughter know that she shouldn't spoil it for other kids. Then, one day, my daughter came home from school to say that an All-Knowing First Grader told her all about the "true meaning" of Christmas, which was that Jesus died on Christmas and came back three days later to go to heaven.

This first grader's remark, although humorously a bit fuzzy on her own theology, was a major wake-up call. On further discussion, my daughter said that multiple other classmates had mentioned Jesus, heaven and church to her, and that she trusts them and was curious, but hadn't asked us yet because, well, she was busy asking about how crayons are made, what she should do if a wild animal gets into our house, and dozens of other random topics each day.

Clearly, we had to rethink our approach. The sad reality is that being a kid in America means that you're going to get proselytized, and it happens earlier than parents might think. Young

kids are, after all, tremendously gullible, and churches know that they need to plant their seeds before kids are too mature to question them. (Churches even train children to do this with something called "peer to peer" evangelizing. Look it up.)

So, we did a complete 180 on our approach. The same evening we learned about our daughter's interaction with the first-grader, we introduced her to FFRF Co-President Dan Barker's fantastic book, *Just Pretend*, which illustrates the importance of remembering what is real and what is just a story, even when it's fun to pretend that fictional stories are true.

Our philosophy with the Santa story — telling the truth but explaining that it might make other kids sad if you tell them — provided an easy analogy to explain God belief. Of course, there was the uncomfortable fact that, unlike with Santa, many adults in her life really believe in an all-knowing, all-seeing creator god who reigns over a magical land where all their dead relatives live.

But at the end of the day, although I've counseled my daughter not to bring it up, a part of me wants to be a fly on the wall when a 5-year-old lays waste to the obvious absurdity of religious belief in the brutally honest way that only a young child can. Some poor true-believing grandma is not going to know what hit her.

The lesson we learned is this: Teach your kids to be skeptical thinkers, but don't be afraid to talk to them about religion, gods and the afterlife myth. In this country, if you're not talking to your 5- or 6-year-old about the metaphysical claims of religion, someone else probably is.

At the Freedom From Religion Foundation, we've long fought against "under God" in the pledge. We've written hundreds of letters for parents to school districts, lobbied Congress, litigated cases, written articles and even books to explain that Congress' tampering with the Pledge of Allegiance in the 1950s by inserting religion is harmful.

But while I've defended kindergartners who were being forced to say the pledge, this experience underscores how the pledge forces young kids into religious conversations at a tender age, even when schools are not violating the law, and often without parents' knowledge. That's too bad. I wish we could ditch this weird nationalistic practice altogether — or at least make it secular again, so that it's not at odds with our Constitution. Until then, it's more proof that everything you need to know you learned in kindergarten — even how to respond when someone tries to sell you immortality.

Ryan Jayne is an FFRF attorney and a member of the strategic response team.

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Convention speech

Steven Pinker: Rationality and why it matters

Steven Pinker gave this speech (edited for length) on Nov. 19, 2021, at the Boston Park Plaza during FFRF's national convention. To watch the full speech, go to ffrf.us/speeches-2021. He was introduced by FFRF Board Chair Stephen Hirtle.

Stephen Hirtle: I am pleased to introduce our next speaker, Steven Pinker, who is a cognitive scientist, experimental psychologist, linguist and bestselling popular science author. Steve also serves as FFRF honorary president and has kindly recorded a 30-second commercial for FFRF that has run on "CBS Sunday Morning" and "Late Night with Stephen Colbert," among other outlets. Steve Pinker is the Johnstown Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University and is known for his advocacy of evolutionary psychology and the computational theory of mind.

His newest book, which also directly relates to FFRF's mission, is called *Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters*. Please welcome the distinguished Steven Pinker.

By Steven Pinker

Thank you. It's an honor to return to the Freedom from Religion Foundation's annual meeting.

Rationality presents us with a puzzle. On the one hand, our species has walked on the moon, taken photographs of our planet, plumbed the secrets of the cosmos, of life, of mind. At the same time, a majority of Americans aged 18 to 24 think that astrology is "very" or "sort of" scientific. Large proportions believe in conspiracy theories, such as that Covid vaccines are a plot to implant microchips into our bodies by Bill Gates, or that the American "deep state" houses a cabal of Satan-worshipping cannibalistic pedophiles.

Many of us believe in paranormal woo-woo, such as possession by the devil, extrasensory perception, ghosts and spirits, witches and spiritual energy in mountains, trees and crystals. This is the puzzle I tried to deal with in my book *Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why it Matters*.

What is rationality?

Well, let's begin at the beginning. What is rationality? I think a good characterization of rationality raises the question: "How can knowledge be used to attain goals?" And the answer comes from normative models, a set of tools that specify how one ought to reason if one wants to attain goals rationally.

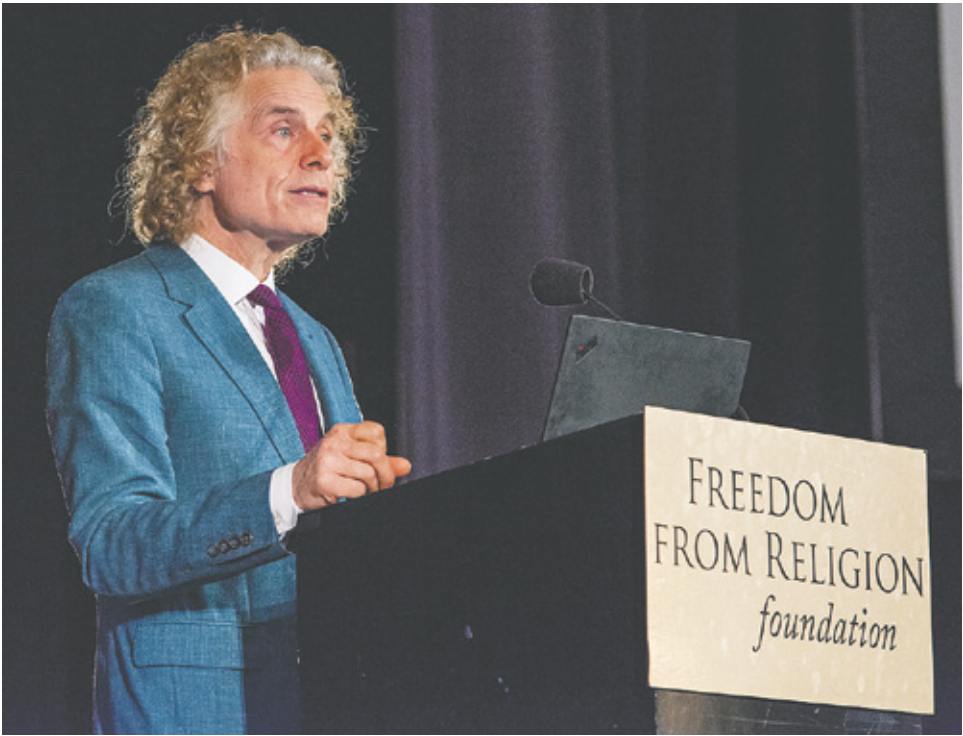


Photo by Ingrid Laas

Steven Pinker says that rational people "have fewer accidents and mishaps, better financial health and employment outcomes, and are less likely to be swindled by medical or psychic or, for that matter, religious charlatans."

Different models for different goals.

Logic: It's the set of tools for deducing new true propositions from existing ones. An awareness of logic can help us avoid fallacies, such as affirming the consequent. "Every creative genius was laughed at in his time. People laugh at my ideas. Therefore, I'm a creative genius."

Probability: The likelihood of an event depends on the number of occurrences as a proportion of the number of opportunities. An awareness of how to calculate probability helps us avoid fallacies like the availability bias, in which the subjective likelihood of an event depends on how easily you can recall anecdotes and images.

Bayes rule: We should give credence to a hypothesis to the extent that it's credible a priori. It's consistent with the evidence, and the evidence is uncommon across the board. That allows us to avoid fallacies such as base-rate neglect, as in, a woman I know whose 2-year-old daughter suffered from twitches. A family doctor said, "Oh, perhaps she has Tourette's syndrome" because Tourette's patients tend to have twitches, ignoring the fact that Tourette's syndrome is rare in the population, whereas twitches are common. This friend of mine rediscovered Bayesian reasoning just working it through for herself.

The theory of rational choice: A rational

actor chooses the option with the greatest expected utility. It helps us avoid our buying extended warranties, which a large percentage of American consumers do. Does it really make sense to take out a health insurance policy on your toaster?

Signal detection theory: A fallible observer cannot know whether an observation is real, a signal or bogus noise and must set a decision cutoff that trades off misses and false alarms according to their costs. This allows us to avoid fallacies such as, "We should deal with misconduct by making it easier to convict the accused in the absence of heightening the sensitivity of forensic methods." This is exactly equivalent to saying we should punish more innocent people.

Game theory: Or, how to make rational choices when the payoffs depend on someone else's rational choices. Well, an awareness of game theory can help us avoid fallacies, such as we can avoid climate change just by convincing everyone that it's in their interest to conserve. The problem is that it is not in the interests of any individual to conserve unless everyone else is making the same decision at the same time and is guaranteed to stick with it. Otherwise, a person who conserves suffers the misery of waiting for a bus in the rain, shivering in the winter, sweltering in the summer, while his compatriots enjoy the comfort of cars and air conditioners and heaters. Or, he could be a free rider and enjoy all the benefits of consuming fossil fuels. And his decision will not by itself harm the planet. It is, to be sure, in everyone's interests if everyone conserves, but it's in no one's interest to conserve individually.

Finally, causal inference to distinguish causation from correlation: One must manipulate the putative cause holding all else constant. And this allows us to avoid fallacies like failing to rule out confounds. My favorite illustration comes from an old joke in which an Orthodox Jewish couple beseech their rabbi for advice. The wife is sexually unsatisfied, and it is written in the Talmud that a man is responsible for his wife's sexual pleasure. Well, the rabbi strokes his beard, and he says, "Well, here's an idea. Why don't you hire a young, strapping, handsome young man? And the next time you make love, have him wave a towel over you, and the fantasies will help the missus achieve satisfaction." Well, they try it. And, sure enough, nothing happens. They go back to the rabbi, who strokes his beard

again, and says, "Well, this time, let's try a slight variation. This time, have the young man make love to your wife and you, the husband, will wave the towel while they do it." And sure enough, she achieves an Earth-shaking, screaming orgasm. And the husband says to the young man, "Schmuck! Now that's the way you wave a towel!"

Explaining irrationality

Well, now the question that everyone is waiting for. I know this because as soon as I told people I was teaching a course on rationality and then writing a book on rationality, the frequently asked question was, "If people can be rational, why does humanity seem to be losing its mind? How do you explain, professor, the conspiracy theories and fake news and post-truth rhetoric and paranormal woo-woo?"

Not an easy question to answer, and I think the explanation has at least four parts.

The most obvious is motivated reasoning. I mentioned that rationality is always in service of a goal. That goal is not necessarily objective truth. It can also be to win an argument in which the stakes matter to you. It's not surprising that tobacco companies deploy considerable ingenuity to try to persuade us that smoking is harmless. And as Upton Sinclair said, "It is hard to get a man to understand something when his livelihood depends on not understanding it."

To show how wise and moral your group is, your religion, your tribe, your political sect and how stupid and evil the opposing one is called the "My Side Bias," which is the subject of an important new book, *The Bias That Divides Us*, by the psychologist Keith Stanovich. He argues that this is the most robust and pervasive of the cognitive biases documented by psychology.

Let me give you an example. Is this syllogism valid? "If college admissions are fair, then affirmative action laws are no longer necessary. College admissions are not fair. Therefore, affirmative action laws are necessary." Well, think about it for a second. In fact, this is not a valid syllogism. He commits the fallacy of denying the antecedent. He implies Q, not P, therefore not Q. That is illogical. And a majority of liberals commit the fallacy, and most conservatives do not. If you ask a conservative for the explanation, they say, "Well, we told you all along, liberals are illogical." But not so fast.

Here's another syllogism: "If less severe punishments deter people from committing crime, then capital punishment should not be used. Less severe punishments do not deter people from committing crime. Therefore, capital punishment should be used." Another example of the fallacy of denying the antecedents. But this time, it's conservatives that commit the fallacy, and liberals don't.

What the two problems have in common is that, in both cases, people ratify the conclusion that is congenial to their political ideology in the first place, and they're not so good at tracking logic that seems to be inconsistent with it. In other words, politics makes you illogical. Quite literally.

A second part of the explanation is that we're all vulnerable to primitive intuitions. For example, people are liable to the intuition of dualism. A person has a body and a mind, and there is a short step to imagine that there can be minds without bodies. So, you get spirits and souls and ghosts and afterlife, reincarnation, ESP. We imagine that there is something immaterial, ineffable, invisible going on that happens to be linked to their body. And from there, it's a short step to imagine it unlinked from their body.

It's natural to think that living things



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Steven Pinker signs a copy of his book, *Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters*, for Douglas Kinney of Belgium.

contain some kind of invisible essence or stuff that gives them their form and powers from which it's a short step to think that disease is caused by an adulteration of one's essence, by some formal contaminant that makes people resistant to vaccines. And vaccine resistance is as old as vaccines. Because, when you think about it, the last thing that you'd want to do to prevent disease is actually inject a version of the disease pathogen into the tissues of your body. That is deeply unintuitive, but that's what we're asked to do when we get vaccinated. Likewise, genetically modified organisms, known to be completely innocuous, give many people the willies. It makes people susceptible to homeopathy and herbal remedies.

We are vulnerable to intuitions of teleology. We know that our plans and artifacts are designed with a purpose, our purpose. From there, it's a short step to imagine that the world is designed with a purpose, leading to beliefs in creationism, astrology, synchronicity and the vague sense that everything happens for a reason. There are no coincidences.

Now, these primitive intuitions are unlearned and objective truths are acquired only by trusting legitimate expertise such as scientists, historians, journalists, government record-keeping agencies. Few of us can really justify our beliefs, including our true beliefs.

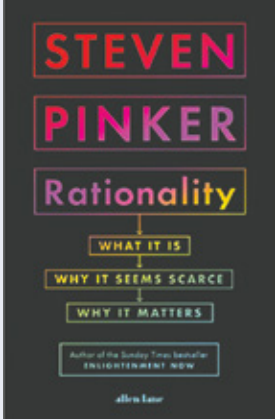
Finally, I think there's a key distinction between what I call realist and mythological beliefs. Why do people believe outlandish fake news and conspiracy theories? Well, part of the answer is it depends what you mean by belief. Bertrand Russell said it is undesirable to believe a proposition when there is no ground whatsoever for supposing it is true. I suspect that most people in this room think that this is an obvious, trite, banal, commonsense observation. In fact, it is a radical, unnatural manifesto that for most people, through most of history, grounds for believing something are just one of the reasons to hold a proposition.

Reality or mythology zone

I suspect people hold two kinds of beliefs. Their beliefs in the reality zone. This is the physical objects around them, the other people that they deal with face to face, the memory of their interactions. Even people who believe in chem trails or who are 911 truthers or lizard people, a lot of them hold jobs and keep food in the fridge and gas in the car and get the kids clothed and fed and off to school on time. It's not that they are irrational throughout their lives, there are just certain zones in which they seem to depart from ordinary, verifiable cause-and-effect reasoning.

In the second zone, the mythology zone, which covers the distant past, the unknowable future, far away peoples and places, remote corridors of power, CEO boardrooms, presidential palaces, the microscopic, the cosmic, the counterfactual, the metaphysical. Here, people hold beliefs because they're entertaining, they're uplifting, they're empowering, they're morally edifying. Whether they are true or false is unknowable and irrelevant. And indeed, for most of our history, they were unknowable before we had science and government record-keeping and responsible journalism and historians and so on.

One example that hardly needs to be mentioned in this room is religion. A remarkable phenomenon that accompanied the publication of the quartet of books a dozen years ago by the "new atheists" — Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins — is that the furious counter-reaction was not so much that they were wrong and that there is plenty of evidence to believe in the existence of God, but rather it's somehow just, you know, inappropriate or uncouth to consider the existence of God to be a matter of truth and falsity



You can buy a hardcover copy of Steven Pinker's latest book, *Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters* at ffrf.org/shop for \$35 postpaid.

in the first place. You hold it because it is a good thing to believe, not because it is factually accurate.

As an example, consider Pizzagate, the predecessor of QAnon, according to which Hillary Clinton ran a child sex ring in the basement of Comet Ping Pong, a Washington, D.C., pizzeria. A typical response among holders of this theory was to leave a one-star Google review of the restaurant saying, and I quote, "The pizza was incredibly under-baked and suspicious-looking men gave funny looks to my 5-year-old son." Now, this isn't the kind of reaction you would have if you literally thought that children were being raped in the basement. Instead, you might call the police. So, what is it? What do people mean when they say, "I believe that Hillary Clinton ran a child sex ring"? What they really are saying is, "I believe Hillary Clinton is so depraved that she's capable of running a child sex ring," or, perhaps even more accurately, "Boo, Hillary." That is, beliefs can be expressions of moral convictions.

How to be more rational

All this raises the question: How can we become more rational again? There's not a simple answer. I think part of the solution is that the tools of formal rationality should become second nature. Rationality should be the fourth "R" taught in school, along with reading, writing and 'rithmetic.

We should have a greater awareness of the fallacies that the unaided human mind

is prone to. We should promote the norm, that beliefs should be based on evidence and that changing your mind when the evidence changes should be taken as a sign of strength, not of flip-flopping or weakness.

Perhaps, most importantly, institutions with rationality-promoting rules must be safeguarded. The great achievements of human rationality were not the product of some single genius granting his brainchild to the world, but rather from institutions, societies and professions in which people voice hypotheses and other people can criticize them. In that way, one person can notice and make up for another's biases. Though each of us is rather poor at spotting our own biases. Sometimes called the "bias bias," that is, all of us think everyone else is biased, but not us. On the other hand, we're pretty good at spotting other people's biases, and in a community of people where you're allowed to do that, the collective can become more rational than anyone is individually.

What do I mean by rationality-promoting institutions?

- We have science with its rules for empirical testing and peer review.
- We've got democratic government with its checks and balances.
- Journalism with its mechanisms of editing and fact checking and cultivating a reputation for accuracy.
- The judicial system with its adversarial proceedings instead of just entrusting verdicts to a hanging judge.
- Academia, at least in theory, with freedom of inquiry and open debate.
- And another example is Wikipedia, with the system of corrections based on a commitment to neutrality and objectivity among electronic media.

What it means is that the credibility and objectivity of these rationality-promoting institutions must be safeguarded. They are a precious resource that people are disabused of weird beliefs to the extent that they trust institutions and that trust has to be earned.

Experts should show their work. We should not have public health authorities just giving pronouncements like edicts or new cases or dogmas, but rather explain the rationale behind their recommendations. Fallibility should be acknowledged. No one's perfect. It is inevitable that people will make mistakes. That brings down the credibility of the whole institution if they were just presented as the pronouncements of an oracle or a priesthood and gratuitous politicization should be avoided.

Unfortunately, that's something that's far from getting better; it's getting worse as more and more of our institutions brand themselves as branches of the political left. When you have public health authorities say, "To reduce the spread of Covid, people should stay away from Make America Great Again rallies, but it's OK to attend Black Lives Matter rallies because the cause of social justice is so important that it's worth coming down with Covid," which is what they said. And which is, to put it mildly, a strategic blunder in terms of securing the credibility and objectivity of public health institutions.

Why rationality matters

Finally, why rationality matters. Rationality certainly matters to our lives. Again, this is a conclusion that I hardly need to make to this audience. People who do follow the normative models and avoid cognitive fallacies, on average, have fewer accidents and mishaps, better financial health and employment outcomes, and are less likely to be swindled by medical or psychic or, for that matter, religious charlatans. Rationality drives material progress. In my book *Enlightenment Now*, I presented a large number of graphs that show that over the decades and centuries, longevity, peace, prosperity, safety and quality of life have all increased.

But the universe contains no force that carries us ever upward. Quite the contrary. A number of forces that are at best indifferent to our well-being and, at worst, appear to be trying to grind us down — pandemics being the most obvious example.

Progress comes from deploying reason to improve human flourishing. That is, when people apply their brainpower to the goal of making people better off every once in a while, they will succeed if we retain these solutions that make people better off. And try not to repeat our mistakes. Things can get better. That's all there is to progress.

The power of rationality to guide moral progress is of a piece with its power to guide material progress and wise choices in our lives. Our ability to eke increments of well-being out of a pitiless world and to be good to others despite our flawed nature depends on grasping impartial principles that transcend our parochial experience. We are a species that has been endowed with an elementary faculty of reason and that is discovered formulas and institutions that magnify its scope. They awaken us to ideas and expose us to realities that confound our intuitions, but are true for all that. Thank you.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

The FFRF convention audience listens intently to Steven Pinker's speech.

Convention speech

Check your white privilege, freethinkers

This is an edited (for length) version of the speech given by Sikivu Hutchinson at FFRF's national convention on Nov. 20, 2021, in Boston.

To watch the full speech online, go to ffrf.us/speeches-2021. She was introduced by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

Annie Laurie Gaylor: Sikivu Hutchinson is a feminist, novelist, playwright, director and atheist. She is the author of many books, including *White Night*, *Black Paradise*, which is about the 1978 Jonestown Massacre, *Moral Combat* and two new books: *The Rock and Roll Heretic: The Life and Times of Rory Tharpe* and *Humanists in the Hood: Unapologetically Black, Feminist and Heretical*.

Sikivu was named Secular Woman of the Year in 2013 and was a recipient of the Harvard Humanist of the Year award. She founded Black Skeptics Los Angeles in 2010. She's also the founder of the Women's Leadership Project in L.A. to mentor youth.

We're very pleased to bestow FFRF's Freethought Heroine Award on someone who definitely is what renowned Black feminist and atheist Florynce Kennedy would call "a real kick ass." Please greet our 2021 Freethought Heroine.

By Sikivu Hutchinson

Thank you for the award and the recognition.

I passionately believe that it's the task of a freethinker, whether or not one is considered to be a hero or heroine, to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted. And toward that end, when I first started writing about racism and atheism and the white supremacist legacies of humanism — and what I call the Black secular social justice imperative — there were some elite white males in the movement who got royally pissed off. Surprise, surprise.

I was informed back in 2012 that evidently there was a "secret memo" that had been circulated demanding that I be checked for my heresy. And in response to that, I wrote a piece called "The Uppity Negroes and the OGs" or the "Original Gangstas," because that's what that cabal was acting like.

I'm going to underscore what I have emphasized, again unapologetically, throughout my checkered tenure as an atheist: If you are a white person and you are not willing to interrogate your white privilege, your white entitlement and your investment in legacies of white apartheid and white supremacy, you cannot rightfully claim to be a freethinker.

Let's be clear: You have forged your freethought liberties in stolen indigenous lands, in a nation that was built on chattel slavery and racial capitalism on the backs of the extinguished and the dispossessed. This is the baseline ideology of Black, secular, social justice that is based in the principle that social, racial and educational justice are forms of reparations.

Scholarship initiative

In 2014, I approached FFRF to support our then-nascent First-in-the-Family Black Humanist Scholarship Initiative. We award between four to six youth scholarships annually. And the impetus for the initiative — in addition to much of the programing that Black Skeptics supports year-round by the Women's Leadership Project program and the Standing 4



Photo by Chris Line

Sikivu Hutchinson holds up the Freethought Heroine Award that was presented to her by Annie Laurie Gaylor at FFRF's national convention on Nov. 20, 2021, in Boston.

Black Girls Coalition and other programs in South L.A. — were the misogynistic inequities and the anti-Black misogyny that Black girls were experiencing in K-12, as well as the massive prison pipelining of youth of color, primarily African-American, Indigenous and Latinx.

African-American girls, for example, are six times more likely to be suspended, expelled and pushed out of school than are non-Black girls. Black girls are 10 times more likely than white girls to receive discipline referrals. And this entrenches not just the school-to-prison pipeline, but the sexual abuse to prison pipeline.

With this scholarship initiative, we focused on undocumented, LGBTQ, foster care and unhoused youth, and later on, secular youth, because that prior group of youth are more likely to be pushed out of school or more likely to be pipelined into prisons and are less likely to have the full bore social, emotional and academic support that they need to succeed in college, to go to college and graduate from college.

For example, a majority of people of color who are in prison in California institutions are coming from the foster care system. If we look at the juvenile incarcerated population in the United States, the majority of those young peo-



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Sikivu Hutchinson

ple are African-American, whereas African-American youth only comprise about 13 percent of the youth population in the United States.

This atrocity in an exceptionalist nation informs the lives of African-American youth across the spectrum. It doesn't matter whether they are straight up Pentecostals or unapologetic atheists; they have lack of access to college prep resources, and mental health support, as well as culturally responsive education. Instead, many African American youth are subjected to endless policing, surveillance and disruption at their schools. All of these factors inform the apartheid regime of K-12 in this nation, a regime that certainly has been exacerbated by the hierarchies of the pandemic.

Outstanding winners

In 2016, I wrote a piece for The Humanist magazine where I profiled some of our outstanding winners from that year. Most of these youth were coming from South L.A. high schools. Dr. Miani Giron, a former foster youth who just received her medical degree, is one of the students I focus on in the piece. She was my mentee from ninth grade and identifies as an agnostic. She graduated from UCLA Medical School and is now a resident at the VA Hospital in West L.A. in psychiatry.

In the piece, I underscore the fact that Black youth who reject organized religion don't have the social and economic benefits of white privilege to blunt their apostasy. When they graduate high school, they must navigate institutional racism and historically white-dominated colleges and universities where they may never have a professor or dean who looks like them.

One of our 2021 winners, Belen Padilla, is a young woman who is now attending Scripps College. She had these insights about the award:

[Shows video] "Hello. I am Belen Padilla. As a queer Latina atheist, the scholarship has provided me empowerment by building my voice. And with that financial support granted by the scholarship, I will continue to expand

my nonprofit work, which is awareness of health disparities through science and statistics rather than faith, especially coming from the Latinx community in Las Vegas, where 90 percent of my school is Hispanic and Black, and Hispanic communities tend to be highly religious.

"I have always been open about my lack of faith, and I have always been shamed and belittled by my own community, family and, occasionally, my own friends. But Black Skeptics has made me feel that my choice is valid and has empowered me with this scholarship. It will ease some of the financial stress to further my education at Scripps College, where I will pursue medical school to become a neurologist, to join the 6 percent of active Latinx-identifying physicians and the 2 percent of Latinos with STEM degrees and even lower percentage of low-income first-generation queer Latinas in STEM." [End of video]

I want to make a note that Belen is a recipient of the First-in-the-Family Humanist scholarship, in partnership with FFRF, and it's designated as the Forward Freethought Scholarship. Kaylin Nelson is one of this year's recipients. She attends the University of Central Florida, and she has some really telling insights about mental health.

[Shows video] "Hi, my name is Kaylin Nelson, and I'm one of the winners of the First-in-the-Family Humanist scholarships. Firstly, I'd like to thank Black Skeptics for awarding me this scholarship. I will be attending the University of Central Florida, where I will be majoring in social work. Although I'm not completely sure where this path will take me, my dream career is that of a counselor or a therapist.

"As someone who was raised in a religious family but does not necessarily subscribe to the same beliefs as my family, I understand how important mental health services can be for people like me. Often, our families do not understand this divergence in thoughts or beliefs. We are seen as rebels or deviants simply for not believing. From my personal experience, I know that this can be extremely alienating. When I have struggled with mental health issues in the past or been caught in difficult situations, the only answer that I've ever been given was prayer. I respect all religions, of course, but prayer sometimes felt impossible or useless when I was in those situations. At times like those, I would have benefited greatly from having someone who was unbiased or non-religious to listen to me and to provide me with guidance." [End of video]

Kaylin also participated in a panel that we convened [in November 2021] in collaboration with the American Humanist Association, the Black Humanist Alliance and Black Skeptics. The subject of that panel was whether secular humanism is relevant to Black Gen Z youth, particularly given the escalation of anti-Blackness in K-12 and higher education, as well as the racist backlash against critical race theory and social justice education.

Atheists need to step up

The consensus was decidedly ambivalent to negative because, quite frankly, when we break it down, white-dominated secular organizations have not stepped up for the racial, social and educational jus-



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Sikivu Hutchinson speaks about ways in which Blacks are continually fighting an uphill battle because of systemic racism.

tice issues that are burning in communities of color. And this is to their peril, given the fact that we are on the precipice of a major transition in demographics in the United States to majority minority in 2045, and that greater numbers of African-American, Latinx, Indigenous and other BIPOC youth are identifying as queer, as gender nonconforming and nonbinary and gender fluid.

And yet, there are those in the secular movement who continue to spit out reactionary white-splaining articles like, “Atheists don’t owe your social justice agenda a damn thing.” This piece was written in direct response to my 2014 Washington Post article titled “Atheism has a big race problem that no one is talking about,” wherein I take on and challenge the exclusive church-state separation focus of organizations like FFRF and American Humanists and American Atheists, SSA and CFI.

Since then, there have been gains. There have been improvements. There have been allyship initiatives. And we certainly do appreciate the support of FFRF and other organizations for the Women of Color Beyond Belief conference that we’ve convened for the past couple of years.

In that Washington Post piece and in other critiques that I’ve made, I’ve also criticized the problematic dynamic of white-dominated secular boards, white-dominated secular conferences, white-dominated secular decision-making processes and white-dominated secular leadership.

In the aftermath of the lynching of George Floyd, there was all of this corporate posturing about supporting BLM and rushing to institute diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives to supposedly redress racial disparities in the workplace. But, when the dust settled, Black women are still on the bottom of the wage scale next to Latinx women. Black women essential workers have been displaced in disproportionate numbers from the workplace. And Black women are least likely to have unionized job protections and earn living wages and have the benefit of defined benefit plans.

This is also situated within the context of what has been dubbed a pandemic within a pandemic of domestic violence and sexual violence. African-American women are disproportionately impacted by sexual violence and domestic violence, such that nearly 60 percent of Black girls will experience sexual abuse by the age of 18 and only one in 15 African-American women feel empowered to report rape or sexual abuse.

Hijacking of #MeToo

This question of the #MeToo movement intersecting with the #SayHerName movement, which is designed to amplify the erasure of Black women within narratives of state violence and mobilization around state violence, is particularly acute for Black girls. Despite the fact that the #MeToo movement was spearheaded by a powerful, visionary Black feminist named Tarana Burke, it effectively has been hijacked within popular culture by white women who have made it into a platform

for their grievances. It therefore erases the institutional and community disparities that African-American women and girls confront, especially when they are considered to be “adultified.” This term was coined by a Georgetown University researcher to highlight how Black girls are criminalized, viewed as more mature, more adult, and hence less worthy of protection.

This insidiousness was really driven home to me several years ago when I was in conversation with one of my mentees. She related that she had been handcuffed and led away by school police when she was watching a fight. She wasn’t even involved in the fight; she was just on the outskirts watching, yet got handcuffed. She commented that had she been a white girl, she would have gotten Starbucks and some Uggs. I remember thinking that this analysis was brilliant and bittersweet, because her statement, again, is indicative of the nexus of criminalization, misogyny and the adultification that Black girls experience.

And, in many ways, it captures the rage that we experience when, for example, we see on national TV yet another missing white girl who the media fetishizes as the life that we need to pay attention to and to amplify and validate at all costs.

Raise your hand if you know who Gabby Petito is and you don’t know who Mitrice Richardson is. She’s a Black woman who went missing after foul play at an L.A. County Sheriff’s substation in 2009. And the not-so-fun fact is that African-American young women comprise a good majority of those who are missing and abducted in the United States, but you wouldn’t know it if you turned on CNN or Fox or MSNBC.

Black women again are invisible when it comes to mainstream nar-

You can buy Sikivu Hutchinson’s new book, *Humanists in the Hood: Unapologetically Black, Feminist and Heretical* at ffrf.org/shop for \$15.

tives about who is impacted by state violence. And the uprising and protests following the police murder of Breonna Taylor in Louisville really marked the first time that a Black woman victim received global attention. Her young life was savagely cut short because of the terroristic reign of police in Black neighborhoods. Certainly, white Christians will never have to know this horror. And white secularists will never have to know this horror because your freethought liberties are forged on this erasure of the enormity and the toxicity of white supremacy.

In the final analysis, radical progressive Black folks know that we’re still bound by these legacies of apartheid in this nation and that our humanist, freethought agenda is the same as an anti-racist, anti-imperialist social justice agenda. To quote the great free-thinker Frederick Douglass, “Power concedes nothing without a demand.” Thank you.

Hutchinson joins Pitzer’s Secular Studies program

Sikivu Hutchinson has joined Pitzer College’s Secular Studies program as an adjunct professor, with help from an endowment by FFRF.

“It is a landmark moment because she will be the first Black woman to teach a course on African American Humanism in this one-of-a-kind program,” writes Olusiji Oluloto in The Humanist Magazine.

“Drawing from my book *Humanists in the Hood: Unapologetically Black, Feminist, and Heretical*, the impetus for this course is the virtual absence of Black feminist humanist ‘praxis-based’ scholarship in the small, white-dominated field of secular studies,” Hutchinson stated in The Humanist article. “Unfortunately, the majority of courses on secularism are situated in religious studies departments that do not necessarily reflect the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity of secular humanist culture and social history. Moreover, Black women comprise only 2 percent of tenured professors in American colleges and universities — further underscoring how racist-sexist faculty hires translate into negligible representation for Black students in academe.

“With this course, I hope to not only expand student perspectives on the trajectory of American humanism, but inspire new generations of scholars to explore how contemporary Black humanism also disrupts narratives about American exceptionalism and the American dream — especially as anti-Blackness escalates in K-12 and higher education.”

Phil Zuckerman, chair of the Secular Studies program at Pitzer, is excited to have Hutchinson on board. It is really thrilling to have Professor Hutchinson offering “African American Humanism,” he told The Humanist Magazine. “I’ve been a fan of Sikivu for a long time; I’ve assigned her writings to my students and have had her give guest lectures here on campus. She is one of the sharpest, most insightful minds out there. And she pushes and challenges those of us within the secular humanist community to be more inclusive, more intersectional, and more attentive to matters of racism, sexism, and other issues of inequity and injustice in ways that are sorely needed.”

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Debating heaven with my devil’s advocate

By PJ Slinger

Nearly every day, I spend about 45 minutes walking through my neighborhood, going about three miles on average. With bad knees, I can no longer run for exercise, so now I take it slower. It gives me time to think, reflect, contemplate and just enjoy being outside (cold as it is).

During these outings, I often hold debates with myself on a variety of topics, including religion. I always try to play devil’s advocate when I attempt to debate the opposite side of my truly held position.

But it’s funny how my truly held positions almost always win out. And that’s not by luck, of course. It’s because I have debated these same topics in the past, either within my own head or with other people, and if I have changed positions on anything, it’s because my previous thoughts were either ill-informed, under-informed or new information had been introduced.



PJ Slinger

But still, no matter how many times I have the internal debate about so many topics regarding religion, my conclusions have not wavered. This is because they have always been bound in logic and reason. And it’s not like religions are coming up with fresh ideas that would overtake my previously held positions.

Take for example, my debate recently with myself on heaven. I, of course, say there’s no heaven, no God to create heaven, no chance for this perfect utopia to exist. But my inner devil’s advocate says, “Hey, let’s look at this one item at a time.”

Eternity of bliss

The selling point of heaven is that you get to live an eternal life full of joy and to bask in the glory of God forever. But forever is a long time. Humans can’t appreciate the timescale of eternity. We can barely understand where the last 10 years have gone.

Yet, the entry fee for heaven is allegedly based upon what you do with your maybe 100 years as a human being. You’re being judged on what you did during a nearly nonexistent fraction of time compared to eternity. In fact, the history of our universe (at 16.4 billion years) is also a nearly nonexistent fraction of time when compared to eternity.

Only the good get in

Of course, everyone thinks they are part of the “good people” crowd. No one who truly believes in God, heaven and hell believes they are going to hell or they would certainly do something to alter that horrifying eternal fate.

But what constitutes “good”? That kid who threw a snowball at me in grade school and gave me a black eye, is he good? Where is the line drawn?

Anyway, why should you be punished (by not getting into heaven) by God for what you did during your time as a human? If God is omnipotent and omniscient (as God is claimed to be), then God knew long before you were even born that that’s how your life would play out, with you being a bad person. You had no chance. God had the opportunity to alter your human life into one where you were good, but didn’t. Seems



like the game is rigged.

Or can you be granted permission to heaven simply by believing in God and/or Jesus? That’s what some people think, which then means that a God-believing serial killer gets a free pass to heaven while an atheist who led a fruitful, positive life gets shunned. And what kind of heaven is that, filled with God-believing murderers, thieves and charlatans?

Grandma is watching

Apparently, being in heaven means you get to peer down through the universe to that little speck of a planet in the Milky Way galaxy and see, with precision, what your loved ones are up to. “Oh, dear, Johnny is getting drunk again,” Grandma sighs from heaven.

This leads to a couple of perfunctory realizations.

First, if those in heaven can see what is happening on Earth (or anywhere, I imagine), does this mean they have eyes or a physical form with which they can see?

Also, is the speed of light a factor in this? When Grandma looks down and sees Johnny, is she seeing him in real time, or is it a remnant of what she saw based on the time it takes for light to travel from Earth to heaven (wherever that is)? If it is outside of space and time, as many believers say, then how does it work that heavenly souls can see into space?

If those in heaven can see what humans on Earth are doing, and see something they are not happy with, doesn’t that go against the basis of heaven, where everything is perfect? If Grandma is up there worrying about Johnny’s drinking problem, is that what can be considered a perfect existence?

All will be revealed

There are so many things that are unknown to humanity. “Only God knows everything,” they say about the deity’s

omniscience, which includes everything that has happened or will happen, down to the most imperceptible things. But if heaven is a place of eternal bliss, can there be souls who don’t know everything? If you don’t know everything, can your existence be perfect?

If everyone in heaven knows all, and can see what is happening on Earth — the hatred, the killings, the horrific natural disasters — how can they be immune to the pain of humans on Earth? “There’s Johnny getting shot on the street corner. Oh, well, who cares?! This is heaven!”

It’s a sign!

Believers sometimes say that some loved one in heaven reached out to them on Earth by giving them a sign. “The light in the room flickered when I was thinking about Dad! He used to flick the lights on and off when he wanted our attention. It’s a sign from Dad in heaven!”

This concept is puzzling. Basically, they are saying that these souls in heaven have the ability to alter matter and/or energy on Earth. How is that done? Can they just think it into existence? And if they have those powers, why wouldn’t they put them to a more productive use, rather than merely making a light blink? Do all souls in heaven have these god-like powers? Does God have powers that are better than these powers the rest of heaven’s inhabitants have? Or does everyone have powers equal to God’s? If everyone is equal, then there isn’t one god, there are billions.

Body and soul

Which then brings us to the idea of heavenly bodies. Is it only your soul that is up there, living in some sort of dream-state without a physical manifestation? Or does your dream state include realistic thoughts of having a body that you use as you would on Earth? And is that body the same as it was on Earth (obviously without

the aches, pains and maladies you would get as a simple human)? And from what age on Earth is that physical body? Are you represented by your 18-year-old self, or your 40-year-old self? Or would you look completely different?

What about babies who die in the crib? Once in heaven, are they perpetually babies? Or are they fully grown adults who just never aged on Earth?

What about reuniting with your loved one when you die? Is that a good thing? What if your loved one secretly despised you on Earth? Is that person going to have to spend forever as your partner?

Seems like relationships in heaven could be full of fraught. Unless, of course, heaven is full of souls that cannot hold negative thoughts. But then where’s the free will? If there’s no free will, then all the souls are just automata, going through the motions? What kind of heaven is that?

Or, if heaven is just a mental state, where (and how) is the soul housed? Does it float freely in heaven? But float freely in what? Is the soul made of physical particles, or some unknown matter? What is the engine that drives it, since it supposedly requires no sustenance?

Spending your time

Once in heaven, now what? You’re gonna be there for eternity. No, not just until the end of time, but for eternity. Eternity has no end. So, what are you doing with that time? You don’t need to sleep. You don’t need to eat. That leaves your entire existence free to do as you please. Will you get bored? You don’t need to learn anything, as you already know everything. What are you going to do to fill up an eternity’s worth of time? And what if what you like to do is at odds with what someone else likes to do?

That possibility came up during a discussion I had with a friend (several years ago) when I asked his thoughts about heaven. He was a motorcycle enthusiast and said he was looking forward to being able to race his motorcycle all the time in heaven.

I had a lot of questions. “Do you race others, or are you just out joyriding?” He said he would race others because it’s more fun.

“OK, so do you win every time?” He said because it’s heaven, you get to win every race.

“But what about the losers of your races? Aren’t they in heaven, too? How can that be fun (or perfect) for them if they always lose to you?”

He paused and said, “Well, maybe we tie every time.”

“You tie? How is that fun for anyone, much less perfect? You’re going to spend eternity never winning (or losing) a race?”

“I guess I never thought of that,” he dejectedly responded.

Unfortunately, I lost some intellectual respect for my friend (who is a professional in the mental health field!), who clearly never gave heaven a real thought. When I called him on it, I could see he realized there might be some contradictions in what constitutes an all-perfect heaven for everyone.

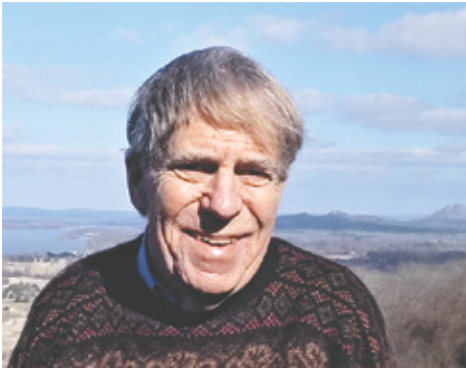
Hopefully it opened his eyes (and mind) to deeper questions about heaven, questions that really lead to only one answer: It doesn’t exist.

And just like that, three miles have passed underfoot and I’m back home, with a bit of physical and mental exercise, to boot.

PJ Slinger is editor of Freethought Today.

Ken Gould’s passion is foreign bicycle travel

Name: Ken Gould.
Where I live: Little Rock, Ark.
Where and when I was born: Chicago in 1943, but we moved to Nebraska at age 3.
Family: Deceased (2021) wife, Judy Lansky; son, Ken L. Gould of Portage, Mich.; daughter, Jackie Gould of Atlanta.
Education: Public schools of Lyons, Neb. (population 1,020). No college-graduated teacher until sixth grade; no worry about selecting a foreign language since none was offered). Juris Doctor degree from Creighton University School of Law in 1970.
Occupation: Emeritus professor of law at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock School of Law.
How I got where I am today: Mostly dumb luck. With absolutely no effort on my part, I was born in a not perfect but economically prosperous country that for me had few barriers to societal and economic advancement. And, not to be disregarded is the advantage that came from being born to well-educated parents whose routine use of proper English was naturally instilled in me, relieving me of the burden of learning the intricate rules for speaking and writing that somewhat difficult language and giving me an initial edge over those not so lucky.
I was also possessed of the unearned ability to run around in circles fast enough to earn a track scholarship that completely paid all undergraduate ed-



Ken Gould stands on his back deck, which has a spectacular view of the Arkansas River Valley with mountains in the distance.

ucational expenses. That was followed by graduation from law school at a time when the student population of American legal education was expanding with the concomitant need for law schools to significantly increase the employment of additional faculty for one of life’s wonderful occupations.
All of that, plus the good fortune of marrying one of the planet’s most wonderful, engaging women who helped remedy some of my less than positive characteristics, making me a better human being. (See page 10, November 2021 Freethought Today, “Judy Lansky was ‘unique in all the world.’”)
Where I’m headed: Hoping to contin-

ue having a sense that my life is relevant, even at age 78, to positive causes in whatever time remains. I don’t need to be relevant by some objective standard, just to feel that my life is relevant.
Person in history I admire: Abraham Lincoln. Having learned over the years that high intelligence and good judgment often don’t coincide, Lincoln was one person who possessed both in great measure. He often foresaw developments and took measures of which others, even his closest advisors and compatriots, were doubtful but later came to realize were wise. Lincoln can also be characterized as a freethinker — the only president not a member of any church and with an ever-inquiring mind guided by principles of rationality, as reflected by the following response in an 1862 open letter to newspaper editor Horace Greeley: “I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors; and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.”
A quotation I like: “Keep the company of those who seek the truth — run from those who have found it.” — Vaclav Havel
Things I like: Bicycling, theater, symphonic music, art, though by no means an expert in any of those, possibly save bicycling.
Things I smite: Lack of rationality asso-

ciated with public processes, though laying no claim to avoiding personal irrationality.
My doubts about religion started: They evolved over time from early in high school, but were significantly accelerated when a Presbyterian youth minister visiting my house nearly bolted for the door when I expressed doubt about the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, in obvious unstated expression of his own doubts regarding the subject.
Before I die: I want to continue a lifelong passion of foreign bicycle travel to view the most wonderful geographic and constructed sights of the world, and engaging peoples of different cultures without filters, that is, not as part of an organized tour but with the enriching experiences that come from meeting people directly and on their own terms.

Ways I promote freethought: By not being reticent to speak openly regarding my lack of religious belief and of my “belief in not believing” by using reason as the mode of analysis of difficult issues. I am also working with the president and members of the Arkansas Society of Freethinkers to establish a chapter of the FFRF in Arkansas.

Correction

In the December 2021 issue, Ken Gould’s state was misidentified in the convention special section photo of FFRF’s state reps. Gould is from Arkansas.

OVERHEARD

The results are almost unequivocal that those who support the Insurrectionists are highly Christian nationalist.
Paul A. Djupe and Ryan P. Burge in their article “Support for the insurrection is largely limited to Christian nationalists.”
ReligionInPublic.blog, 1-12-22

The most serious attempt to overthrow the American constitutional system since the Civil War would not have been feasible without the influence of America’s Christian nationalist movement. One year later, the movement seems to have learned a lesson: If it tries harder next time, it may well succeed in making the promise of American democracy a relic of the past.
Katherine Stewart, in her column, “Christian nationalism is one of Trump’s most powerful weapons.”
The New York Times, 1-6-22

Wacky ideas are infused with new life when met with silence or assent. Arm yourself with good, science-based infor-

mation about some of these nutty beliefs and contest, contest, contest!
Jim Underdown, in his column “The biggest lie.”
Center For Inquiry, 1-12-22



Samuel L. Perry
We are forgetting that Jan. 6 was very much a religious event — white Christian nationalism on display. We must remember that fact. Because evidence is mounting that white Christian nationalism could provide the theological cover for more events like it.
Samuel L. Perry, sociology and religious studies professor at the University of Oklahoma, in his column “Jan. 6 may have been only the first wave of Christian nationalist violence.”
Time, 1-4-22

Where journalists and commentators are failing us . . . is in their refusal to push past their Christian supremacist biases enough to take these political actions seriously as Christianity. Not as a perversion of Christianity, but as one very real and powerful broad expression of the faith with deep historical roots that’s been present in one form

or another at least since the fourth century, when Christianity became deeply entangled with Roman imperial power. . . This Christianity is not a less authentic form of the faith than turn-the-other-cheek Christianity just because we may find it less congenial.
Chrissy Stroop, in her column, “One year after Jan. 6, media still refuse to recognize authoritarian Christianity.”
Religion Dispatches, 1-4-22

I think it’s statistically accurate to say that agnostics are in many ways just a toned-down version of atheist. And . . . many agnostics do become atheists over time.
Ryan Burge, political science teacher at Eastern Illinois University, in his article “Are agnostics just atheists light?”
ReligionInPublic.blog, 1-7-22

It’s often said that the joiners of cults and subscribers to delusions are driven by their hatred of elites. But in the present situation, the snake oil salesmen are not just Alex Jones, QAnon’s master manipulators and evangelical hucksters. They are senators, powerful white Christian men, prominent media figures, billionaires and their foundations, even a former president.
Historian Rebecca Solnit, in her article, “An assault on the truth.”
The New York Times, 1-9-22

It seems obvious that belief in prophetic religion, which is widespread in American religion, bestows a level of certainty and righteousness that can propel projects forward with no guardrails. It just so happens that prophetic Christian nationalists are common and are likely to rally behind extreme groups on their side.
Paul A. Djupe of Denison University, in his article, “The accelerator of American extreme politics: prophecy belief.”
ReligionInPublic.blog, 1-20-22

If religions don’t make these ideals [compassionate, kind, just, honest] the most important ends of human action, then their value rightfully should be di-

minished. If secularization is advancing these ideals, then it should grow and be embraced. And vice versa.
Lou Matz, in his column, “The rise of the religiously unaffiliated: Is increasing secularization of U.S. a good trend?”
The Stockton Record, 1-22-22

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.
Columnist David Von Drehle, in his column, “A pope complicit in covering up sex crimes can bid moral authority goodbye.”
Washington Post, 1-26-22

There’s this gradual move toward a more revolutionary, burn-it-all-down posture, and I think Christian Identity for a lot of these people has become a way for them to organize their thoughts.
Alex Bradley Newhouse, deputy director of Middlebury College’s Center on Terrorism, Extremism and Counterterrorism, on the Christian Identity ideology that claims, among other things, that Jesus was a white Aryan and that the end times will come about through a racial holy war.
Religion News, 1-26-22

It is also clear that a Biden pick is needed to defend fundamental constitutional rights, as the court’s six-member majority has a different agenda: imposition of an ideological (if not theological) agenda from the bench. And that the right-wing majority is impervious to reason and appeals to precedent. Instead, it has pre-decided every case of political import and will reach a conclusion pleasing to their political patrons.
Columnist Jennifer Rubin, in her column, “This is not how the Supreme Court is supposed to work.”
Washington Post, 1-26-22

FFRF’S

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

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The three stages of mantis belief

FFRF was recently gifted a piece of artwork from Member David Ball of Ohio. It is a triptych created by Carla Fontecchio, which includes the “praying mantis,” the “agnostic mantis” and the “atheist mantis.” It now hangs on the wall in Freethought Hall’s editorial department.

Here, in Ball’s words, is how the artwork came to be and ended up at FFRF.

By David Ball

A few decades ago, I ran across a simple cartoon in a science magazine that portrayed a praying mantis shrugging its shoulders instead of clasping its “hands,” with the caption “Agnostic Mantis.” I snipped it out, and it eventually made its way onto the bulletin board of my office when I became a professor in northeast Ohio.

About 15 years ago, a friend, also an atheist, saw it and remarked something along the lines of “Well, if you take that to its logical end, you’d get an atheist mantis, right?” We laughed together at the joke, but then he turned a bit serious and said — again, not an exact quote — “You should consider getting a triptych made. You know — praying mantis, agnostic mantis, atheist mantis.” My friend’s mother was a devout Catholic and three-panel triptych works are a well-known style in Christian art.

Well, Cleveland has a very well-regarded art school — the Cleveland Institute of Art — so we advertised for a student who would be willing to take the idea and make it happen. Carla Fontecchio, a senior drawing student, agreed to do the job for \$300. She and I met a few times to talk about how to proceed, including how each one would be posed. We agreed that the atheist mantis should have its arms crossed in a sort of “no-ideologies-wel-



The “praying mantis,” the “agnostic mantis” and “atheist mantis” with a light bulb over its head, by Carla Fontecchio.

come” stance. It was her idea to draw the three mantises in those poses and label them with their Latin binomial name and common name in an Audubon-esque style.

My wife, Gail, who took Latin in high school, made up fake Latin names for the agnostic and atheist mantises. Carla took a few months to do them. In addition to the original, she made five copies of each panel onto thick parchment using the specialized duplicating equipment at the Cleveland Institute of Art.

I framed the original, and it is hanging in our home. I framed one copy and hung it in my office, where it alternatively tickled and antagonized my colleagues and students. One copy went to my friend who suggested it, one

port scholarship or legal expenses?

I reached out to FFRF’s Programs Manager Kristina Daleiden, whom I met earlier when my son and I visited, and proposed it. She came back to me with the idea that FFRF can use it as their contribution to the auction for the MayDay for Humanity event.

Well, that wasn’t exactly my intention as I wanted the FFRF community to enjoy it in some way. But then I recalled that I had two sets remaining, and sug-

gested to Kristina that FFRF take both, one to donate to the MayDay auction and the other to use as FFRF sees fit.

So, I shipped both sets to FFRF for ultimate disposition (along with some maple candies from a small but proud northeast Ohio maple industry!).

If I recall, the MayDay for Humanity auction got several hundred dollars for their set, and FFRF has a set on display at Freethought Hall. Eventually I’ll visit again and see it in person!



David Ball

Heathen humor

Why do mantises pray?
Because they are in sects.

— PJ Slinger



Photos by Chris Line

Former FFRF Programs Manager Kristina Daleiden shows off the artwork commissioned by David Ball of Ohio that now hangs in Freethought Hall.

THEY SAID WHAT

Ohio must be a pro-God, pro-family, pro-bitcoin state.

Josh Mandel, candidate for the U.S. Senate from Ohio, who says there’s no such thing as church/state separation.

Twitter, 12-27-21

I’ve seen people and I know some people that, through that energetical transformation, through the power of prayer, through the power of gratitude, they manage to turn the most toxic food or most polluted water, into the most healing water.

Tennis great and anti-vaxxer Novak Djokovic, who was deported back to Serbia from Australia for refusing to comply with the country’s vaccination mandate before the Australian Open.

New York Post, 1-6-22

Day 1 when Republicans take back the House, we must declare the Covid pandemic OVER. No more mask and vaccine mandates. I will not comply with tyrants.

Anti-vaxxer Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene.

Twitter, 1-20-22

Why do we assume that the body’s natural immune system isn’t the marvel that it is? . . . Why do we think that we can create something better than God in terms of combatting disease?

Ron Johnson

U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, an anti-vaxxer, speaking on a conservative radio show.

Huffington Post, 1-5-22



I can tell you right now, there’s no such thing as an ideal godless America. . . There have been times in America when majority vote has been dead wrong. So our system has to be based on a deeper set of principles, and I submit

to you that that’s God the creator.”

Oklahoma Attorney General John O’Connor, speaking at the Rotary Club of Sand Springs luncheon. FFRF sent O’Connor a letter taking him to task over his statement.

Tulsa World, 1-8-22

And we all know what happened and it’s all going to get corrected. And it’s all been on God’s timing, not our timing.

Mike Lindell, the MyPillow founder, speaking at an Arizona rally for former President Trump, about how the 2020 election results will still be turned in Trump’s favor.

Newsweek, 1-16-22

America today has too many of these negative projects, whether they’re aiming to destroy religion, destroy patriotism, destroy local attachments, destroy family devotion, destroy traditions, destroy old institutions or destroy astrology.

Bradford Tuckfield, in his column, “Astrology and the search for meaning.”

The American Conservative, 1-19-22

They don’t know that little baby inside them may be the next president, may be the next person who changes humanity . . . God put them in this moment.

Garrett Soldano, a Michigan Republican candidate for governor, speaking out against abortion, including cases where victims of rape become pregnant.

Washington Post, 2-1-22

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.

Stewart

Continued from page 1

a number of them belonging to extended, hyperwealthy families.

It took me some time to navigate the sea of acronyms, funding schemes, denominations, and policy and kinship networks, and I lay out much of this ecosystem in my book, *The Power Worshipers*. Yet the important thing to understand about the collective effort is not its evident variety but the profound source of its unity.

Commitment to vision

The top-level leadership of the movement is unified by its members’ consistent, and often performative, repetition of their commitment to a shared ideological vision and a certain set of messages. Many of the movement’s conferences, summits and strategy gatherings have a “religious” character — not necessarily in the sense that they are promoting specific religious or theological doctrines, but that those meetings center on the constant repetition and back-and-forth of the core messages.

At the conferences and presentations I have reported on over the past year, audiences were told, heatedly and repeatedly, that America is and always has been a Christian nation, that the bible is on the verge of being outlawed, and that the 2020 election was corrupt. This is part of the reason why the hold of Trump on this wing of the Republican Party has been so hard to break: because Christian nationalist gatherings generally don’t involve open debates about facts or policy, but rather displays of fidelity to a message and loyalty to the leaders who have managed to identify themselves with that message.

When Trump launched the effort to overturn the election by promoting the lie that it was stolen, consider where some of the most militant and coordinated support came from. The Conservative Action Project, a group associated with the Council for National Policy, which serves as a key networking organization for America’s religious and economic right-wing elite, made its position clear in a statement issued a week before the insurrection.

It called for members of the Senate to “contest the electoral votes” from Georgia, Pennsylvania, Michigan and other states that were the focus of Republicans’ baseless allegations. Co-signatories included nearly two dozen powerful movement figures including Bob McEwen, a leader of the Council for National Policy; Morton C. Blackwell of the Leadership Institute; Alfred S. Regnery, a former publisher; Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council; conservative lawyer and activist Cleta Mitchell, who was on the phone with Trump when he urged Georgia’s secretary of state to “find” extra votes; and Thomas Fitton of Judicial Watch.

Even as Republican figures like former President George W. Bush and Sen. Mitt Romney attempted to nudge Trump toward a graceful concession, many religious right leaders doubled down on conspiracy or denial or provided indirect support for election lies by articulating “concerns” about supposed “constitutional irregularities” in battleground states. Today, many of the movement’s most influential organizations have embraced the cause of “election integrity” as a fairly transparent means of undercutting faith in elections as a cornerstone of our democracy.

Delivering votes

A key to the movement’s durability is its influence on elected political leaders (and their appointees). Its influence on these leaders depends in large part on its ability to deliver large numbers of votes in

a consistent way. And its ability to deliver these votes rests on at least three important mechanisms:

- The first is that Christian nationalism serves as an effective tool for controlling information flows to a significant part of the population. It is a way of creating a population that will be receptive to certain forms of disinformation and immune to other types of information, which the present leadership often denigrates as “fake news” or “the lying media.” This gives the leadership cadre, and political allies, a tremendous degree of power.
- A second mechanism for mobilizing mass political power involves manufacturing and focusing a sense of persecution and resentment among the rank and file. To be clear, the movement draws on a wide range of pre-existing anxieties and concerns. But its real contribution consists in identifying and promoting grievance and then aiming it at political opponents.

• And finally, the movement offers its supporters a means of reconciling two seemingly contradictory notions: that our nation is the greatest nation on Earth precisely because it is a Christian nation; and at the same time that our nation is overrun with alien and evil forces.

On the one hand, Christian nationalists are America, at least in their own minds. On the other hand, movement supporters are persuaded that America is in the grip of malevolent forces, which they variously identify as “secularists,” “the homosexual agenda,” “the communist threat,” and even “demonic organizations,” and they insist they need to “take America back.” The ability to keep a population in this state of tension — engaged in an apocalyptic struggle between absolute good and its opposite — is critical to the movement’s power.

All three mechanisms were on display during the attempted coup, which erupted in violence on Jan. 6. On the matter of information flows, there was no shortage of publicly available evidence on the question of the integrity of the 2020 election. There was no factual support for the fraudulent claims that were repeatedly promoted by Trump and used as the pretext for his attempted coup. There are, of course, many sources of disinformation, and a number have become the focus of commentators: social media in general, Fox News, Breitbart News Network and too many others to count.

All played significant roles, no doubt. But it is clear that disinformation about the 2020 election was promoted by many Christian nationalist leaders and organizations, and it had a lasting impact among the rank and file. Within the Republican base, survey data shows that white evangelicals are the most likely cohort to believe in Trump’s election lies.

To be clear, however, not all white evangelicals do. Many evangelical Christians either do not support or actively oppose Christian nationalism, and a substantial number of America’s religious nationalists are not evangelical. The movement includes representatives of both Protestant and non-Protestant religion, and it receives support from some people and groups that do not identify as Christian at all.

Top down leadership

An important point is that the movement is led from the top down, rather than the ground up. Understanding its appeal to a broad mass of American voters is necessary in explaining its strength,

but is not sufficient in explaining the movement’s direction. It is a means through which a small number of people — quite a few of them residing in the Washington, D.C., area — harness the passions, concerns and resentments of a large and diverse population in their own quest for power. Movement leaders have quite consciously reframed religion itself to suit their political objectives and then promoted this new reactionary religion as widely as possible, thus turning citizens into congregants and congregants into useful foot soldiers.

The rank and file come to the movement with a wide variety of backgrounds, ideas and interests, and a very substantial number do not explicitly support anything like a “theocracy.” Many would be unhappy to learn all of the details about what their leaders are proposing. Much of this group votes identity, not policy. When they vote for the candidates who promise to end abortion or defend the

traditional family or reunite church and state, they aren’t explicitly aiming for major fundamental changes in the way American government is organized; they are

making a statement about who they are, what they value in themselves, and perhaps what they fear in other people.

They may also be drawn to the movement’s promise of certainty in an uncertain world. Against a backdrop of escalating economic inequality, deindustrialization, rapid technological change and climate instability, many people, on all points of the economic spectrum, feel that the world has entered a state of disorder. The movement gives them confidence, an identity, and the feeling that their position in the world is safe.

Yet the price of certainty is often the surrendering of one’s political will to those who claim to offer refuge from the tempest of modern life. The leaders of the movement have demonstrated real savvy in satisfying some of the emotional concerns of their followers, but they have little intention of giving them a voice in where the movement is going.

I can still hear the words of one activist I met along the way. When I asked her if the anti-democratic aspects of the movement ever bothered her, she replied, “The bible tells us that we don’t need to worry about anything.”

Conveying messages

The leadership of the Christian nationalist movement conveys messaging to their followers through a wide range of means. Among the most important is the targeting and exploitation of the nation’s conservative houses of worship. The faith communities may be fragmented in a variety of denominations and theologies, but movement leaders have had considerable success in uniting them around their political vision and mobilizing them to get out the vote for their chosen candidates.

Leaders of the movement know that members of the clergy can drive votes. They also understand that if you can get congregants to vote on a small handful of issues, you can control their vote. And, so, they draw pastors into conservative networks focused on political engagement and offer them sophisticated tools that they can use to deliver the “correct” messages about the issues that they wish to emphasize in election cycles.

It is fair to say that the coup attempt started with the actions of Trump, who very few people identify directly with the “family values” that Christian nationalists frequently claim to support. But this misses the point about the way this kind of movement operates. Once the movement laid the basic groundwork for an anti-democratic politics, others in Trump’s position could have done what he did. The movement threw its support behind Trump at a critical moment, delivering to him the Republican Party’s most reliable slice of electoral votes. He in turn gave the movement everything he had promised them: power and political access, access to public money, policies favorable to their agenda, and above all the appointment of hard-right judges. At the 2021 Road to Majority conference, a gathering of religious right activists, strategists, and political leaders, Sen. Lindsey Graham said, “Bottom line is President Trump delivered, don’t you think?”

No doubt things might have played out differently had a different Republican politician come to power in 2016.

But as we look to the future, it would be false comfort to imagine that the entire episode can be written off to the actions of a single bad leader. With or without Trump, the movement will remain committed to the illiberal, antidemocratic politics that the former president so ably embodied.

Columnist Katherine Stewart is author of *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Katherine Stewart signed copies of her book, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*, at FFRF’s national convention in Boston on Nov. 19.

LETTERBOX

Christian nationalism can't co-exist with democracy

The insurrection in Washington a year ago shows that Christian nationalists want to overthrow American democracy and establish a theocracy. This conflicts with the founding constitutional principle of the separation of government and religion, and with the notion that all citizens are equal in the eyes of the law.

Most Christians don't regard hatred and violence as Christian values. Christian nationalists do. Their ideology is fundamentally anti-democratic because its goal is not government of, by, and for the people, but power. The greatest threat Christian nationalism poses to democracy is that it seeks to undermine the very foundation of democracy: voting.

American democracy and Christian nationalism cannot co-exist.

Oregon

Hope to see more of FFRF's Ron Reagan ad

I wanted you to know that I just renewed my membership at the \$500 level because I just saw Ron Reagan's commercial on WHNT-19 here in Huntsville, Ala. Every day, and especially on Sunday, I have to deal with the overt religious messages that are everywhere. It was a breath of fresh air to see Ron say: "Not afraid of burning in hell." I hope to see his commercial more. Thank you!!!!

Alabama

Treat us as citizens, not a congregation

Let's dream of an America where national political ceremonies don't actively exclude 50 million citizens who don't believe in God, grace, souls or miracles. The only way to get things done is not by prayer (Anne Nicol Gaylor: "Nothing fails like prayer.") or faith ("Faith is believing what you know ain't so."), but through work, negotiating, reason, cooperation, resilience, perseverance and persistence, where athletes stop pointing to the sky as if God and not their own effort caused their success.


I know, the United/Divided States is three-quarters full of believers who expect God-talk at events, however, it would really be wonderful to be mindful of the clearly secular nature of the U.S. Constitution and omit the preaching to the pulpits, and treat all Americans as citizens, not a congregation!

Ohio

Anti-vax Christians threaten our lives

I work for American Red Cross Blood Services as a blood drive phlebotomist. We are considered essential personnel, and have been working all through the pandemic. Many staff have had exposure events, and caught Covid. As a national organization, and a medical organization, we are subject to the vaccine mandate. But there are among us several staff who are part of the Christian anti-science anti-vaccine movement. They are all now getting "religious exemptions" from the vac-

License to Photoshop



Ben Hart had a little fun combining the photo of him by his "IM GOD" Ohio license plate with Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" fresco painting.

A year ago, Hart received FFRF's Freethinker of the Year Award after successfully suing, with the help of FFRF and the ACLU in Kentucky, the Kentucky Transportation Department over its rejection of his requested license plate phrase.

Hart finally received his Kentucky "IM GOD" plates in January of 2020.

cine requirement, despite not even being members of religions that forbid any vaccinations as part of their ideology. So, they are being allowed to threaten our (and our families) lives with a deadly disease because of their belief in something they can't even prove the existence of. But my life is not as sacred as their faith, according to the ARC.

I'm an atheist. Why should I have to suffer or die for that? If they are the ones who think our public health measures aren't holy enough for their sacred bodies, then they should be the ones who have to do whatever is necessary to uphold those beliefs without risking the lives of others — like not working in the medical profession. It's abhorrent that their God beliefs (and all the other lies they have bought into) are threatening me. I, and many fellow co-workers, are quite angry and frightened.

New Hampshire

Morality and empathy are in our genes

A recurring theme in Freethought Today is the idea that the religious believe that the nonreligious cannot be moral because morality comes from religion. We counter that belief by saying we are moral even without religion, but, by doing so, we are merely expressing an opinion. The religious are understandably concerned that, if everyone determines morality for themselves, then any person can decide that murder, for example, is perfectly moral. How do we counter that concern? Where does morality come from if it doesn't come from religion.

In his essay in the November Freethought Today, Shreyas Karki says good is defined by actions, not beliefs, and he doesn't cheat, steal, lie or kill because he doesn't want to cause harm to others. The implication is that empathy is the root of morality, and in fact, the Golden Rule is accepted by U.S. Christians (and many other religions) as the very epitome of morality. In actuality, morality (or empathy) has genetic underpinnings altered by environmental influences.

Many moral precepts are the same regardless of the religion (or lack of it). For example, "murder is bad" is a

universal precept. Such universal precepts are based on empathy and are the genetic underpinnings of morality. It is our environments that teach us that it's OK to murder someone not in our tribe. Humans are social beings, and in order to exist in a social setting, empathy is a prerequisite.

So, the religious need not worry that the nonreligious are determining morality based simply upon our own selfish desires. The Golden Rule is literally in our genes. So, where does morality come from? It comes from evolution.

Colorado

Thomas Paine deserves a memorial

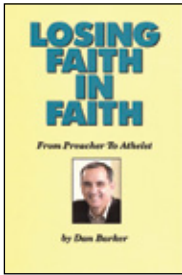
I'm thrilled to read about the planned memorial for Thomas Paine. My husband and I are considering just how much to give and will do so. My life was utterly changed by reading *The Age of Reason* when I was 34 years old. I'm 64 now. I grew up in the home of a fundamentalist Nazarene pastor, but I've been an atheist for 30 years.

Iowa

New website functional, easy to use

Congratulations on the new *FreethoughtToday.com* website! Not only does it look good, but is functional and easy to use. Every item I selected (and I tried many) worked flawlessly. Let's go out there and wow the world.

Arizona



Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist

By Dan Barker

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

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

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

Why is indoor worship so important to believers?

It truly astonishes me that so many Christians oppose the temporary restriction on indoor worship services that was enacted for the sole purpose of protecting them from a deadly virus.

Matthew 5:3-10 contains one of the most inspiring passages in Christian scripture, which is familiar for its beauty even among non-Christians. It's known as the "Beatitudes" or as the "Sermon on the Mount." Christ allegedly delivered that cherished sermon outdoors — on a mountain.

Why is it, I wonder, that Christian ministers and their flocks balk at following their savior's example and aren't willing to wait until the health crisis is over before going back indoors to speak and hear the word of God?

California

December issue was a pleasure to read

It was a pleasure to read the December issue of Freethought Today, including the colorful photo section on the Boston convention. Linda Greenhouse's excellent article introduced a serious problem with a humorous title ("Cheesecake, anyone?"). Linda certainly deserves the Clarence Darrow Award.

I very much appreciated your publishing the informative article by Cynthia McDonald regarding the secular case for reparations for American Descendants of Slavery.

In addition, I can't resist the Brooks Rimes cryptograms. I've already purchased his delightful puzzle books.


I'll keep this issue for re-reading, and watch for more in 2022. Thank you!

New Jersey

Crankmail is deserving of space in the paper

I would like to quickly add my "vote" to keep the Crankmail section of Freethought Today. It is entertaining, shows that we have been noticed, and they might even present something new — not likely, but one never knows for which we could prepare arguments. Thank you.

Minnesota



Include FFRF In Your Estate Planning

Arrange a bequest in your will or trust, or make the **Freedom From Religion Foundation** the beneficiary of an insurance policy, bank account or IRA.

IT'S EASY TO DO!

For related information (or to receive a bequest brochure), please contact:

Annie Laurie Gaylor
at (608) 256-8900
info@ffrf.org

Freedom depends on freethinkers

Tarico’s advice can be used everywhere

Thank you for publishing the article by Valerie Tarico, “Religious thought habits are hard to break,” in the December issue. What struck me most about this thoughtful article about thinking is that it isn’t just about religious thought habits. Tarico’s advice can also be applied to relationships, child rearing, health, politics, coping with a pandemic. There are so many ways we all fall into knee-jerk responses that don’t serve us well. We need to step back, question and regroup periodically throughout life, and Tarico’s points are a great guide for doing that.

New York

Christopher Hitchens’ statement was prophetic


I’ve recently become interested in the work of Christopher Hitchens. I believe he was an important public intellectual who was (and still is) widely misunderstood by the general public. His work is extremely relevant today.

While on a tour to promote his book *God is Not Great*, he gave a short talk at a bookstore in Washington, D.C. During the Q&A session that followed his talk, someone asked him if he appreciated the difference between religiously motivated terrorists (and clerical child abusers) and the average believer with a simple, benign faith. Hitchens answered that there’s a difference, but that it’s still important to rid the world of superstition and credulity because millions of individuals with simple credulity can be motivated to do a lot of harm collectively.

Hitchens died in 2011, so he never lived to see the Trump presidency or the rise of militant Christian nationalism. The point he made in the paragraph above now seems prophetic.

Millions of previously harmless individuals of simple credulity, after being fed a multitude of lies by Fox News, QAnon, etc., voted for Trump. That led to three right-wing extremists on the Supreme Court and many

Have you herd?



The Karen Heineman column in the January/February issue was spot on. She wrote: “A personal decision to avoid vaccination affects us all. . .Trust the science. Get vaccinated to protect our herd.” How true!

Back in April 2021, we were fully vaccinated and had a neighborhood get together — 6 feet apart, of course. All our neighbors were part of the vaccinated herd.

We’ll see you in Texas!

George and Julie Iddon
Washington

more on federal benches across the country, public funding of sectarian education, draconian abortion restrictions, and the Big Lie about the 2020 election. It’s all connected.

Hitchens’ ideas seem more important than ever.

Wisconsin

Clergy abuse survivor is fed up, wants to help

Thank you for all you do. I joined FFRF today because I am so fed up. I am a survivor of clergy sexual abuse in the Milwaukee Archdiocese. If there is anything you need, please let me know. I am happy to share all of my experiences dealing with the archdiocese and its lies.

Wisconsin

If somebody “passes,” what did they pass?

In regard to Craig Barto’s recent letter (“‘Pass away’ is a terrible euphemism for death”), some of my Southern relatives don’t even say “passed away.” They just say, “Oh, so-and-so passed.” When I hear that, I always think, “Passed? What did he pass? A kidney

stone or” . . . let your imagination fill in the blank! Then I have to struggle to keep a straight face.

Michigan

FFRF’s letter helped end board’s public prayer

I just wanted to close the loop on the letter your legal department sent to the Leelanau County Board of Commissioners here in Michigan on Sept. 9, 2021.

Of course, it was public pressure from local residents that persuaded the county board to reverse its decision to include prayer on board agendas. FFRF’s letter certainly helped, however, and gave weight to what the board kept hearing from the public, including several members of our local clergy who also thought the board’s prayer policy was wrong.

As a bonus, the commissioner who proposed and pushed the prayer policy, Chairman Will Bunek, will face a special recall election on May 3 for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is his demonstrated willingness to force his religious beliefs on everyone.

Your letter had a positive impact on our community. Good job! Thank you!

Michigan

Thanks to FFRF for supporting rationality

My appreciation and gratitude for FFRF, for all its staff and supporters, and for all the work that it does, knows no bounds. I am very proud to be a Life Member and am very glad to be able to offer this tangible expression of my support.

Thank you, thank you, thank you for your dedication to ensuring the separation of church and state and to helping support rational thinking, especially in these most difficult times.

Maryland

Catholic justices need to choose Constitution

Andrew L. Seidel, in his marvelous book *The Founding Myth*, shows that Catholic canon law requires that: “A religious submission of the intellect and will must be given to a doctrine which the Supreme Pontiff or the college of bishops declares concerning faith or morals.” It’s Catholic law!

Five Catholic members of the Supreme Court are assiduously following that dictate as they determine the fate of *Roe v. Wade*. Only Justice Sotomayor is willing to lay aside her Catholicism in order to respect her duty to the Constitution. She alone among Catholics on the court recognizes that she is making decisions based on constitutional law, not for the pope or the college of bishops.

These five justices must decide between Catholic dogma or the Constitution. If they choose Catholicism, they should leave the court.

Colorado

FFRF’s work is more important than ever

Keep up the good fight, FFRF! Your work is more important now than it has ever been. Thanks so much for all that all of you do each and every day. It matters!

Washington D.C.

CRANKMAIL

Here is your March installment of Crankmail, correspondence received at FFRF from various holier-than-thou (and likely less-educated-than-thou) Americans. Printed as received.

What is wrong with you?: What is wrong with you? Why are you so confused. That is the most important thing you should consider... — Robert Shields

Heaven: If you believe in Hellas your commercial states, you admit there is a heaven. That’s a start. God Is Goog — Betsy Winthrop

Praying for you: I am fine. Am praying for you. We are in the end times. — Lori Brauchle

Stupidity: You people are so stupid leave people alone! This comes from some one smarter then you and foundation .Nothing can be created from nothing everything has a beginning and a end God. You

people are complete moronss — Charlie Shesko

Columbus County Sheriff’s Office: Mind your own business. Find something productive to do. My Post Office has a plaque that says ‘In God We Trust’. Every piece of money I have says the same. What are you going to do about that? Get a life and leave the rest of us alone. We’ll have none of your nonsense. — Steve VanOverbeke

Idiot!: Go fuck yourselves you brainless piece of shit morons and stay out of our lives! — George R. Dunlap

Cancelling Christmas: Why do you have such hatred against Christianity? If Christianity is false, then challenge it. Yet why so much hate? Especially when that hate seems to backfire because christianity is the true religion, and you shouldn’t have

to persecute any Christian to debunk it. Yet you do. Why? Maybe you should do some research into why we are Christians. As well as be warned about the existence of Hell. Repent therefore for you’ll answer one day before the Eternal Judge for your hate. — Andrew Viola

North Carolina: Stay out of NC business and let us worship whatever god we choice. And if we choice not to, that is fine also. But stay in your state and leave our alone. You do nothing but breed hate! — Michael Jacob

Heaven: Imagine the best day ever in your life, now multiply that by 10000...that is what heaven is like. Now Imagine the absolute WORST day of your life, multiply that by 10000..thats hell. Where do you hope to be one day????? Worry about your wrongs before you go expecting businesses to take down scripture from the Bible. — Lisa Maness

Your ignorance: Mind your own business! Your group just looks to cause trouble. A Bible verse on the wall is not hurting anybody or excluding anybody. You don’t have to go to the NC sheriffs office or look at the verse. There will come a day and soon that you will wish you had embraced Bible verses. — KT Walker

Removing a bible verse?: EXCUSE ME BUT THAT BIBLE VERSE TO WHICH YOU HATE ON THE SHERIFF’S OFFICE WALL AND WANT TAKEN DOWN IS NOT COMING DOWN YOU GOT THAT .THAT BIBLE VERSE IS ONE OF MY FAVORITES SO YOU DO NOT LIKE IT YOU CAN JUST LEAVE THE COUNTRY YOU STUPID HATEFUL MORONS. JUST BECAUSE YOU HATE EVERY THING THAT HAS TO DO WITH GOD DOES NOT MEAN YOU CAN INFRINGE ON MY RIGHTS OR ANY ONE ‘ESLE ‘S RIGHTS SO DRY UP. LETS GO BRANDON!!! — Stephanie Young

Crossword answers

B	E	R	G		V	A	S		A	R	E				
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D	A	N				L	E	E			S	A	L	K	

Cryptogram answer

With or without religion,
good people can behave well
and bad people can do evil;
but for good people to do evil
— that takes religion.

Steven Weinberg

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**

Save the dates: Oct. 28-30

‘DO Mess with Texas’

FFRF convention to meet in San Antonio

The Freedom From Religion Foundation announces that its 45th national convention will meet in San Antonio 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 representative 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.

The convention registration will be online by early March at ffrf.org/convo-2022, along with links to make hotel reservations. The April and future issues of Freethought Today will carry more details and updates.

Invitations to speakers and honorees are underway, but confirmed speakers to date include:

• **John Irving.** The novelist of 14 books, including *The World According to*



John Irving

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

Garb 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

religion practiced on us. Freedom of religion in the United States also means freedom from religion.”

• **Daniel Mach.** Director of the ACLU Program on Freedom of Religion and



Daniel Mach

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, with 5 percent of the interest going annually to the award. 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.

• **Elle Harris.** FFRF will be awarding its debut “Out of God’s Closet” \$5,000

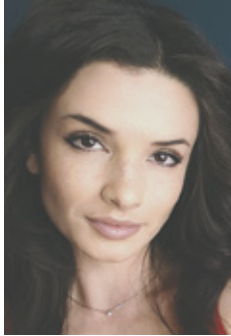


Elle Harris

student scholarship, given by Diane Uhl in memory of her late husband Stephen Uhl, to 11-year-old Elle Harris, author of two books, including *Elle the Humanist*. Elle is a fifth-grade student living in California. As a third-grader, Elle became aware that most of her classmates were religious and “had a hard time imagining someone who didn’t go to church or pray.” Her conversations with classmates resulted in a book to clearly and warmly introduce humanism to young read-

ers. Elle is the sister of Bailey Harris, who won a previous student scholarship award for her series of “Stardust” books.

• **Alice Greczyn.** She will be named FFRF Freethought Heroine 2022. She



Alice Greczyn

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*, a resource site for people detaching from belief systems they come to find harmful.

• **Hector A. Garcia.** He is the author of *Alpha God and Sex, Power and Partisanship: How Evolutionary Science Makes Sense at Our Political Divide*. He



Hector A. Garcia

has given a TED Talk. Garcia is a clinical psychologist and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Texas at Health Science Center in San Antonio. • **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. Among the expected members of the choir will be Black Nonbelievers President Mandisa Thom-

as, Black NonBelievers of D.C. activist Rogiérs, jazz vocalist Tahira Clayton and Freedmen of Chicago organizer Cynthia McDonald.

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. The convention includes several optional group meals, book and sales tables, the Nonprayer Breakfast and the drawing for “clean,” pre-In God We Trust currency.

The 2020 convention was originally to take place at the San Antonio hotel, but the pandemic, of course, forced the postponement.

“We’ve heard from a few members who, due to various Texas policies including S.B.8, the draconian abortion ban, wonder why FFRF is holding a convention in Texas at all,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. “We not only feel our ‘DO Mess with Texas’ can raise awareness, but are contractually obligated, due to the negotiations required in 2020 to postpone. FFRF will be making the most of the venue to get out our point of view.”

For updates, see ffrf.org/convo-2022.

Hotel information

Hyatt Regency San Antonio Riverwalk
123 Losoya
San Antonio, Texas 78205
(210) 222-1234

Room rates

Single occupancy: \$205
Double: \$205
Triple: \$215
Quad: \$225

Standard internet is included in the group room rate.

To make a room reservation at the Hyatt, go to ffrf.us/hotel or call (210) 222-1234.

Closing in on the end times for religion?

This column is adapted from a piece that originally ran in the May-August 2017 issue of *The Truth Seeker*.

By James A. Haught

These could be the end times for religion in the West. We’re entering a new Secular Age when magical supernatural beliefs cannot be swallowed by educated people.



James A. Haught

Religion is fading in America, as it has done in most Western democracies. Dozens of surveys find identical evidence: Fewer American adults, especially those under 30, attend church — or even belong to a church. They tell interviewers their religion is “none.” They ignore faith.

Since 1990, the “Nones” have exploded

rapidly as a sociological phenomenon — from 10 percent of U.S. adults to 15 percent to 20 percent. Now we’ve climbed to 25 percent, according to a 2016 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute. That makes us the nation’s largest faith category, outstripping Catholics (21 percent) and white evangelicals (16 percent). We seem on a trajectory to become an outright majority. The Secular Age is snowballing. Among young adult Americans, the “none” rate is nearly 40 percent, which means the coming generation will be still more secular.

Various explanations for the social transformation are postulated: The internet exposes young people to a wide array of ideas and practices that undercut old-time beliefs. Family breakdown severs traditional participation in congregations. The young have grown cynical about authority of all types. Fundamentalist hostility to gays and abortion has soured tolerant-minded Americans. Clergy child-molesting scandals have scuttled church claims to moral superiority.

Faith-based suicide bombings and other religious murders horrify normal folks.

All those factors undoubtedly play a role. But I want to offer a simpler explanation: In the scientific 21st century, it’s less plausible to believe in invisible gods, devils, heavens, hells, angels, demons — plus virgin births, resurrections, miracles, messiahs, prophecies, faith-healings, visions, incarnations, divine visitations and other supernatural claims. Magical thinking is suspect and ludicrous. It’s not for intelligent, educated people.

Significantly, the PRRI study found that the foremost reason young people gave for leaving religion is this clincher: They stopped believing miraculous church dogmas.

Maybe young people discern that it’s dishonest to claim to know supernatural things that are unknowable. The church explanation — that Planet Earth is a testing place to screen humans for a future heaven or hell — is a silly conjecture with no evidence of any sort, except ancient scriptures.

I’m a longtime newspaperman in Appalachia’s Bible Belt. I’ve watched the retreat of religion for six decades. Back in the 1950s, church-based laws were powerful. Even writing about sex was illegal.

In 2016, National Geographic online bannered a story titled: “The world’s newest major religion: no religion.” The revered magazine said:

“There have long been predictions that religion would fade from relevancy as the world modernizes, but all the recent surveys are finding that it’s happening startlingly fast. France will have a majority secular population soon. So will the Netherlands and New Zealand. The United Kingdom and Australia will soon lose Christian majorities. Religion is rapidly becoming less important than it’s ever been.”

Supernatural religion is dying in the West. It took humanity several millennia to reach the Secular Age. Now it’s blossoming spectacularly.

James A. Haught is editor emeritus of the *Charleston Gazette*.