

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



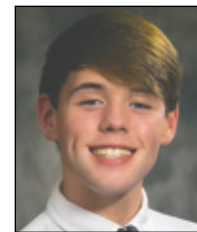
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Cartoon by Steve Benson

A secular history lesson for Constitution Day

This op-ed first ran on Sept. 17 (Constitution Day) in the Birmingham News.

By Chris Nelson

As we observe the 235th anniversary of Constitution Day, public schools across the nation are required to educate students on America's founding document. Unfortunately, this year, the adults on the Supreme Court are most in need of a constitutional lesson.

On Sept. 17, 1787, delegates to the Constitutional Convention gathered in Philadelphia to sign a document that would become the world's first secular Constitution. Until then, world rulers reigned hand in hand with priests and holy men, conducting crusades and persecuting religious minorities in the name of divine justice.

Thankfully, our Founders, while far from perfect, were the Enlightenment thinkers of their era. In line with "No taxation without representation," they believed that compelling citizens to support a faith they did not follow violated their liberty.

Thus, they created a uniquely secular Constitution. They removed the power from those kings and holy men and instead gave it to "We the People." The Constitution promised those fleeing persecution around the world freedom of religion through a new government that would be free from religion.

"[The Constitution] gives the pres-

ident no particle of spiritual jurisdiction," wrote Alexander Hamilton.

"State and church will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together," added James Madison.

Sadly, a group of conservative justices recently began reuniting religion and government in an unholy matrimony not seen since the days of King George III. Over the summer, the high court ruled in favor of tax dollars for private religious schools, prayer during school football games, and against a woman's right to choose.

These rulings surely left our Founders rolling in their graves.

In 1791, they ratified the First Amendment to the Constitution, stating "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion," known as the Establishment Clause.

Thomas Jefferson, in his 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, declared that when the American people adopted the Establishment Clause, they built a "wall of separation between church and state."

Today, this wall is crumbling at the feet of those Supreme Court justices and powerful theocratic advocates who be-

See pages 10-11 for more on FFRF's "I'm Secular and I Vote" ad campaign.

See Constitution on page 7

FFRF files lawsuit against S.C. funding of religious school

The Freedom From Religion Foundation on Sept. 20 filed a major lawsuit against South Carolina officials on behalf of four Palmetto State citizens challenging the unconstitutional funding of a private religious school.

"An upstate Christian organization that's raising money to build a \$14 million residential school for disadvantaged and at-risk youth has a surprising benefactor: the state of South Carolina," reports the daily newspaper of Columbia, the capital city. "In a move that legal scholars say raises constitutional questions, state lawmakers included a \$1.5 million earmark in this year's budget to help Christian Learning Centers of Greenville County get its new school off the ground."

FFRF's assessment goes beyond what the publication describes: The funding is not only questionable, it is downright unconstitutional.

"The South Carolina Constitution

prohibits public funds to be used to directly benefit any private educational institution (Article XI, Section 4)," reads the legal complaint that the state/church watchdog filed in the Court of Common Pleas in the Fifth South Carolina Judicial Circuit. "Additionally, the South Carolina Constitution contains an Establishment Clause that mirrors the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which prohibits the General Assembly from making any 'law respecting an establishment of religion' (Article I, Section 2)."

The case is being filed on behalf of four South Carolina taxpayers — Christopher Parker and Ian Whatley, both Greenville County residents, and Gere Fulton and Michael Brown, both Richland County residents — against defendants South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster, Comptroller General Richard Eckstrom, Treasurer Curtis Loftis Jr. and Education Superintendent Molly Spearman. Three of the plaintiffs are members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and Parker, who

See Lawsuit on page 7



S.C. Gov. Henry McMaster

FFRF unveils 'Know Your Rights' student campaign

FFRF is kicking off a national drive to make students aware of their continuing right to be free from religious coercion in public schools, with a billboard message in Bremerton, Wash., site of the notorious lawsuit by prayerful Coach Kennedy.

Putting the spotlight where it belongs in the new school year and football season, FFRF is placing a billboard this week that reads "Wishing Bremerton High School a safe, secular & successful season," close to Bremerton High School. The billboard message adds: "Know Your Rights" and provides a link: [FFRF.us/rights](https://ffrf.us/rights).

This is the first of a multipronged FFRF reaction to the U.S. Supreme Court's Kennedy v. Bremerton decision last June, which ignored the rights of students by siding with a public school coach who insisted on abusing his position of authority to proselytize. The justices turned a blind eye to the serious harm caused to students when the boundaries between religion and public schools are blurred. Notably,



however, the court ruled only that Coach Joseph Kennedy could pray privately at the 50-yard line following the conclusion of the game, not that he could lead students in prayer as part of school events.

Anticipating confusion over the ruling, however, FFRF has charted a course of action to ensure public school students know that they still have rights to a secular school and playing field. The campaign includes an online "Know Your Rights" resource webpage

See Campaign on page 2

Texas posters push lie of Christian nationalism

Many Texas public school students are being greeted this school year with new “In God We Trust” posters in their schools. This is not the fault of schools, but of the state Legislature that has passed a law requiring these displays, and of bad-faith actors who donated the posters in order to indoctrinate students into a false narrative of Christian nationalism.

FFRF condemns this extremely un-American effort, which is counter to our founding principles of religious liberty and secular government. Public school students have a right to a secular school, and these posters seek to undermine that right.

The law behind the posters is part of the nationwide legislative push known as Project Blitz, which seeks to inject state legislatures with a whole host of religious bills, imposing the theocratic version of a powerful few on We The People. It is an unvarnished attack on American secularism and civil liberties — those



things we cherish most about our democracy and now must tirelessly defend. FFRF has been opposing Project Blitz bills all over the country and expects to see more next year with new legislative sessions.

While politicians claim that these laws are intended to showcase the national motto or inspire patriotism, it is clear that their true purpose is to peddle religiosity to a captive audience. These laws are about advancing the lie that the United States was “founded on God” or Christianity, dismantling the wall of separation between religion and government.

The motto “In God We Trust” is inaccurate, exclusionary and aimed at brainwashing American schoolchildren into believing that our nation is a theocracy.

FFRF is committed to defending public school students’ rights of conscience, which includes the right to be free from government-imposed religious messaging.

ca Markert. FFRF Counsel Liz Cavell adds, “FFRF hears from thousands of students and parents each year who are harmed by First Amendment violations in our public schools.”

FFRF is also informing public school administrators that they still have an obligation to respect the rights of students to a public school education free from school-sponsored religion even in the aftermath of the Kennedy v. Bremerton judgment.

This decision does not give carte blanche to public school employees, including coaches, to engage in religious activity with their players or other subordinates, nor does it allow school districts to impose prayer on all students, parents, and community members gathered for school-sponsored events.

Public schools have a constitutional obligation not to coerce students into participating in religious rituals like prayer.

“There’s never been a more urgent time for an educational campaign of this type than now,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “We need more than ever to make certain that students ‘Know Their Rights.’”

OVERHEARD

Let’s be honest: These lawmakers aren’t sponsoring education with this \$1.5 million. They’re sponsoring Christianity. With little state oversight of private schools, there’s no way to ensure the curriculum will teach these kids anything.

David Travis Bland, in an op-ed, regarding how South Carolina lawmakers have sent \$1.5 million in a state budget earmark to Christian Learning Centers of Greenville.
Yahoo News, 8-23-22

Alito has warned that, as Americans become more secular, the U.S. may become less attuned to the constitutional rights of religious citizens. But when he makes this argument, a curious elision sometimes occurs, and he seems to be saying that the growing percentage of secular people is in itself a form of religious persecution.

Margaret Talbot, in her column, “Justice Alito’s crusade against a secular America isn’t over.”
The New Yorker, 9-5-22

I don’t care that you’re a Christian. I don’t care what the bible says. . . . I don’t believe in Christianity, which means that you do not get to dictate the way I live my life based on your religion. I don’t care what the bible says. I’m so tired about having nonstop conversations about what the bible says.

Ana Kasparian, political commentator, media host, university instructor and journalist, during her online political news show.
“The Young Turks,” 9-11-22



Britney Spears, speaking out about how her religious beliefs have been impacted by her experience of her conservatorship.
CBS News, 9-5-22



Katha Pollitt
Louise Melling, deputy legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union, in an op-ed.
Washington Post, 9-8-22

The idea that religion should be protected from disagreement — that’s the problem. Why should the holdings of any faith be beyond critique, satire, even mockery? Religion is not a hereditary trait. It’s a set of ideas and behaviors and social practices. Those can be changed, and have been repeatedly throughout history. Blasphemy is part of that process, because it encourages questioning and independence of spirit and resistance to obscurantism and unjust authority. We progressives are supposed to take a side. Galileo or the Inquisition? Rushdie or the ayatollahs?

Katha Pollitt, in her column, “The left has a responsibility to side with Salman Rushdie.”
The Nation, 8-17-22

Much of what considers itself Christian America has assumed the symbols and identity of white authoritarian populism — an alliance that is a serious, unfolding threat to liberal democracy.

Michael Gerson, in his column, “Trump’s populism should enrage Christians. How come it doesn’t?”
Washington Post, 9-1-22

As time goes on, America will become even more culturally and ethnically diverse. Will religious diversity be part of that mix? Will it be home to nonbelievers and secularists? Or would they have to be closeted for their own safety?

Akhil Ramesh, in his column, “Religious persecution is closer to home than most Americans realize.”
The Hill, 8-28-22

Campaign

Continued from page 1

and brochure for students.

FFRF’s short Know Your Rights advisory reminds public school students that they still have the right to be free from religion in their public schools, including the right to:

- Be free from coach or teacher prayer.
- To be free from bullying or harassment.
- To be free from religious coercion.

And, FFRF advises students, “You have the right to complain about violations.” The online resource encourages students to report Establishment Clause violations to FFRF at ffrf.org/legal/report.

Teachers and coaches are given enormous influence over our children as authority figures in control of their academic and extracurricular success, the Know Your Rights guidelines advise. “No student should have to feel like an outsider on their school sports team or in their classroom because teachers and coaches insist on pushing religion and prayer at school,” says FFRF Legal Director Rebec-

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

What are you missing?

There’s so much more that FFRF offers its members than just what’s in Freethought Today each issue. Go online to read (or listen or watch) FFRF’s various media offerings, including:

Ask an Atheist: Each week at noon (Central) on Wednesdays, FFRF discusses a topic of the day and answers your questions on Facebook Live. Or, if you can’t catch it live, go to FFRF’s YouTube channel.
youtube.com/user/FFRF.org

Freethought Matters: Tune in on Sundays in your home market (or watch on YouTube afterwards) FFRF’s lively television show dedicated to

freethought and state/church separation.
ffrf.org/news/freethought-matters

Freethought Radio: Listen each week as Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker discuss relevant issues and interview interesting guests. Also available as a podcast.
ffrf.org/news/radio

Blogs: Read blog posts on various FFRF-related topics, written by FFRF staffers or special guests.
freethoughtnow.org

Social media: Become friends with FFRF on Facebook and follow us on Twitter to stay up to date on everything FFRF is working on.

Celebrating Dissent 2022

Celebrating Dissent — a two-day conference and the largest gathering of ex-Muslims, freethinkers and intellectuals championing freedom of thought since the pandemic — took place in Cologne, Germany, on Aug. 20-21, to coincide with International Apostasy Day.

FFRF was proud to be a co-sponsor, and Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor were participants.

Co-sponsor Maryam Namazie, after citing the brutal Aug. 12 attack on Salman Rushdie, best expressed the conference theme by quoting Chilean poet Pablo Neruda: “You can cut the flowers, but you cannot stop the spring.”

Scientist Richard Dawkins, in attendance, described the movement as “one of the most important political movements of our time” and praised it as one of the “decisive forces in defense of freedom of expression worldwide.”

Co-sponsor Sami Abdallah, president of Freethought Lebanon, said: “We stand for ideas and words while they stand for daggers and guns; we stand for humor and satire while they stand for state sponsored incitement to murder . . . We are the future, and they are the past.”



Richard Dawkins (center) and other participants march “In Defense of Salman Rushdie,” who was brutally stabbed at a New York talk.



Conference co-organizer Maryam Namazie gives the conference’s opening speech.



Richard Dawkins (at podium) and Mazen Abou Hamdan (far right) both receive a Freethought Champion Award (presented by Sami Abdallah, center) as did Iranian political prisoner and atheist Soheil Arabi in absentia.



Algerian secularist Marieme Helie Lucas also received the Freethought Champion Award, speaking on how “Secularism Is a Women’s Issue.”



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker performs on the piano.



Shelley Segal plays the guitar during the conference.



Ensaf Haidar, wife of Saudi blogger Raif Badawi, gives an update on the status of her husband, who was finally freed from prison in March after 11 years, but remains under house arrest.



Victoria Gugenheim stands behind the banner in support and solidarity with Raif Badawi, who is still not allowed to leave his country.



Ex-Muslim, Kenyan-Somali poet Halima Salat, now living in the Netherlands, gives a poignant poetry reading.

Freethought Today Cryptogram

ZNX RMSZXI FZEZXF DW EHXVSTE FNDRJ I

NEYX E WDRMIEZSDM WVXX WVDH ZNX

SMWJRXMTX DW TJXVKB.

— KXDVKX LEFNSMKZDM

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

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4			5	6	7			8	9	10
11						12					13	14	
15						16					17		
	18				19						20		
				21						22			
23	24	25						26				27	28
30					31		32	33				34	
35				36			37				38		
39						40				41		42	
43					44					45		46	
				47				48	49				
		50	51				52					53	54
55							56					57	
59							60					61	
62							63					64	

Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

- Across

1. Crude group, acr.

5. Lt.’s subordinate

8. Finance person, acr.

11. Grand Theft target

12. Jon of “Game of Thrones”

13. Boston hockey player

15. French Bulldog plus Pug

16. Turkish honorific

17. Full of passion

18. *Albert ____: “God does not play dice with the universe.”

20. Oscar of sports

21. Like Tower of Pisa

22. Precedes humbug

23. Cup holder

26. Early 20th century design style (2 words)

30. Wine cask

31. Astronomer’s sighting

34. Religious leader in Islamic country

35. Gem State

37. Old age, archaic

38. Hollow rock

39. Baltic capital

40. Not wholesale

42. Jack’s inferior

43. Cavalryman’s foot holder

45. Nine voices, pl.

47. European tax

48. Smooth

50. CAT or PET
- Down

52. *Freethinking “Cat’s Cradle” author Kurt ____

55. Pavlova’s rail

56. Like some threats

57. Like Arizona in summer

59. Oxygen-containing compound

60. Bear’s hang-out

61. Mexican cuisine staple

62. *Freethinking civil rights leader Du Bois

63. New York time

64. More

1. Dunce

2. Unadulterated

3. Tiny purse

4. Brandy, in France

5. * ____ v. Vitale, 1962 Supreme Court case regarding school prayer

6. Result of pitcher’s dominance

7. *Freethinking composer Tchaikovsky’s fowl

8. Intersection of two arcs

9. Commiserate

10. One or some or all

12. Witty language

13. Barn sound

14. *Salman ____,

stabbing victim with fatwa against him

19. Dictation taker

22. Lingerie staple

23. Mixes up

24. Tax evader’s fear

25. Sushi restaurant staple

26. *Irreverent Hawkeye Pierce portrayer Alan ____

27. Overact

28. West Pointer

29. *Black cats and other “divine” messages

32. Car horn sound

33. Last, abbr.

36. *Ivy League school with a Humanist chaplain

38. Gauntlet

40. Hard to escape routine

41. Comparatively crazy

44. Raja’s wife

46. Nullify

48. Shasta and Tab

49. Without illumination

50. Original home of the Saxons

51. Bed with bars

52. Morally reprehensible

53. Europe/Asia mountain divide

54. Habitual twitches

55. Front of boat

58. Rudolph’s Clarice



Margaret Sayre and Lee Leimberg enjoy some French fries. Margaret died in 2020.

My deconversion from faith began early

By Lee Leimberg

I inherited Judaism from my parents. Dad was Orthodox, Mom was conservative. But my first memory of religion was in kindergarten. Some old woman would start each session by reading the 23rd Psalm at us kids from a big black book. “Yea, though I travel through the valley of death,” she warned. Why was she trying to scare the crap out of a bunch of 5-year-olds? What did we ever do to her?

I grew up two blocks from a large Roman Catholic church and most of the other neighborhood kids went to the parochial school. When I was about 8, an older boy from parochial school told me that he was taught that agnostics had no religion and atheists worshiped the devil. I did not question that until he told me something else. He claimed the Catholic sisters taught him that Jews did the same atrocities to Christians that scared Japanese civilians into jumping off South Pacific cliffs when we retook islands late in WWII! I knew that wasn’t true. Technically, they were not lying if they believed their falsehoods. But, what other nasty propaganda were nuns spreading?

At age 12, I researched peanuts before confronting my rabbi with a question: “On Passover, we are not to eat foods that the Israelites did not have when they fled Egypt. Peanuts came from the New World centuries later. Why do we fry everything in peanut oil on Passover?” His response was an arbitrary, “Don’t ask questions.” That spoke volumes to me. People should question authority. And authorities should be accountable. Instead, I wondered if the peanut oil lobby had donated to kosher causes.

My brother and I went to Sunday school, where we heard the same bible stories every year. Shouldn’t once be enough? We went to Hebrew school after public school two days a week. This was to teach us a foreign language in a strange alphabet used in ancient rituals and in a foreign country I had absolutely no desire to visit. At age 12, my father (who taught physics) and I agreed that I could continue to eat and sleep in his house if I went through with a bar mitzvah. Also, I could quit attending immediately thereafter. Such traditions just meant inertia to me.

Fast forward about 55 years. I attended a county-owned and operated senior center for lunch. There I met Margaret A. Sayre, who became my closest friend. She told me that she was a vegetarian and an atheist. But Marge was an exceptionally decent person. So, I checked out agnostic and atheist in the dictionary. Apparently, one need not be religious to be decent!

Somebody demanded we have Christian grace or she would quit. (She quit anyway.) The former center director was only too pleased to comply. We endured these rude impositions for far too many years until the county replaced the senior center staff. (Google “Margaret Sayre and Don Dwyer.”) I want to thank American Atheists, Americans United and FFRF for their help in ending this travesty. Margaret died in 2020 at the age of 86.

Lee Leimberg is an After-Life Member originally from Philadelphia. He has lived “from New Jersey to California, from Montreal Island to Rio de Janeiro.” He has been retired from engineering for 40 years and resides near Baltimore.

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: F => S .

IN THE NEWS

Abortion rights will be on ballot in Michigan

The Michigan Supreme Court on Sept. 8 ordered a proposal enshrining the right to an abortion in the state’s constitution be added to the November ballot.

The decision from the state’s highest court came after a four-member Michigan elections board deadlocked over whether to allow the initiative. Two Republican members on the Board of State Canvassers declined to certify the question, which required three votes, citing objections to the spacing and readability of the proposal text.

In her majority opinion, Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Bridget M. McCormack called the actions of the opposing members on the elections board “a sad marker of the times.”

“They would disenfranchise millions of Michiganders not because they believe the many thousands of Michiganders who signed the proposal were confused by it, but because they think they have identified a technicality that allows them to do so, a game of gotcha gone very bad,” she wrote.

Bible museum’s Dead Sea Scrolls are forgeries

All of the Dead Sea Scrolls held by the Museum of The Bible in Washington, D.C., are forgeries made to resemble the actual scrolls, most of which are held in the Shrine of the Book in Israel. The actual scrolls were discovered in 1947.

The museum opened in 2017, with 16 fragments claimed to have been found in the Qumran caves close to the Dead Sea. But there were always questions about their authenticity. The following year, the museum admitted five of the fragments were forged and removed them from display, but still had faith in the other 11.

But, a team of independent researchers compiled a report showing that the remaining fragments were all forgeries, as well. The investigation spanned six months and saw the contested scrolls undergo examination with a battery of advanced technologies, including 3-D microscopes, scanning electron microscopy and microchemical testing.

The Museum of the Bible was established by Hobby Lobby founder Steve Green.

Report: Nonreligious LGBTQ people hide beliefs

A survey of nonreligious people reveals that LGBTQ persons regularly conceal their nonreligious beliefs and are more likely than their non-LGBTQ peers to encounter stigma and discrimination in nearly every aspect of their lives — education, employment, mental health services and within their families — due to their beliefs.

The report, “Nonreligious Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer People in America,” released Aug. 16, details the extent to which nonreligious LGBTQ people experience both religious oppression and anti-LGBTQ sentiment, as well as the level of depression among those raised in religious households.

The research, based on a survey of nearly 34,000 nonreligious people in the United States, found that LGBTQ participants were about 16 percent more likely than non-LGBTQ respondents to mostly or always conceal their nonreligious identities from their families of origin.

Larger than life

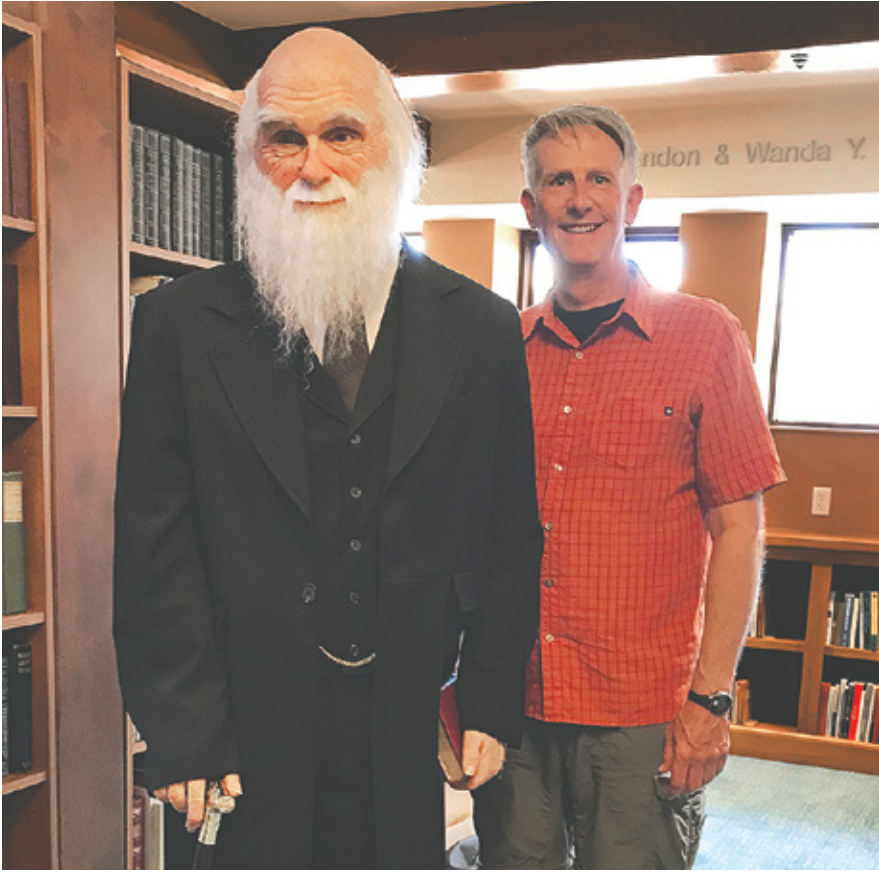


Photo by Chris Line

Kirk Lamb, an FFRF member from New York, stopped off to visit Freethought Hall in Madison, Wis., this summer, where he got to share a moment with the life-like silicon model of Charles Darwin by artist Csam Wheatley that graces the Joel B. Landon and Wanda Y. Beers Freethought Library.

Turkish star jailed over religious schools joke

A Turkish court has placed pop music singer Gulsen under house arrest, the state-run news agency Anadolu said Aug. 29.

The pop star was jailed pending trial on charges of “inciting or insulting the public to hatred and enmity” after she made a joke about religious schools in Turkey, according to Anadolu.

On Aug. 29, the Istanbul criminal court released Gulsen on the condition of “not leaving the residence” after her lawyers appealed her arrest.

Charges against the singer have not been dropped, however, and the prosecutor will write an indictment asking the judge to launch hearings.

In April during a concert, Gulsen spoke of one of her musicians: “He graduated from Imam Hatip (religious schools). That’s where his pervert side comes from.”

Gulsen apologized for the offense the joke caused, but said her comments were seized on by those wanting to deepen polarization in the country.

Judge unseats official who trespassed at Capitol

A judge in New Mexico on Sept. 5 ordered a county commissioner convicted of participating in the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol removed from office under the 14th Amendment, making him the first public official in more than a century to be barred from serving under a constitutional ban on insurrectionists holding office.

The ruling declared the Capitol assault an insurrection and unseated Couy Griffin, a commissioner in New Mexico’s Otero County and the founder of Cowboys for Trump, who was convicted earlier this year of trespassing when he breached barricades outside the Capitol during the attack.

On Jan. 6, 2021, Griffin and a vid-

eographer clambered over barricades at the Capitol and made their way onto the inauguration stage in front of the building. There, Griffin spent more than an hour addressing the mob, at times speaking through a bullhorn. He later said that he had been attempting to lead them in prayer.

Atheist fired after not attending prayer session

A North Carolina company’s mandatory daily Christian prayer sessions for its employees were becoming “less tolerable” for an atheist who refused to continue attending, resulting in his firing, federal officials said in a lawsuit.

The worker’s boss told him that “he did not have to believe in God, and he did not have to like the prayer meetings, but he had to participate” before the worker was fired in the fall of 2020, according to a complaint filed by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission against the home repair business.

The company is being sued for religious discrimination and is accused of punishing workers who did not want to attend the meetings, which also involved bible readings, the agency said.

This comes after another worker was fired in January 2021 after she felt the prayer meetings, which went on for nearly an hour, were becoming “cult-like” and stopped attending due to her agnostic beliefs, according to the lawsuit.

Michigan court: Abortion ban unconstitutional

A Michigan Court of Claims judge ruled Sept. 7 that the state’s 1931 abortion ban violates the state Constitution, according to a copy of the ruling obtained by ABC News. The ruling permanently bars the attorney general and county prosecutors from enforcing the ban in the state, effectively legalizing

abortions in Michigan.

The ruling from Judge Elizabeth Gleicher came as part of a lawsuit brought by Planned Parenthood of Michigan and Dr. Sarah Wallett, the organization’s chief medical officer, against Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel and the Michigan state House of Representatives and Senate, challenging the ban.

The 1931 law makes it a felony to provide an abortion unless it is medically necessary to save the life of a pregnant person. The law does not make exceptions for rape or incest. The law also states that if the pregnant person dies, the provider would be charged with manslaughter.

The ruling found the state’s abortion ban unconstitutional as it violates the due process and equal protection clauses of the Michigan Constitution and would deprive pregnant women of their right to bodily integrity, autonomy and the equal protection of the law, Gleicher wrote in the order.

Judge: HIV drug mandate violates religious freedom

A federal judge in Texas ruled Sept. 7 that requiring employers to provide coverage for PrEP medications — which prevent the transmission of HIV — violates the religious rights of employers under federal law.

U.S. District Judge Reed O’Connor said that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act provides a religious exemption from purchasing health insurance that complies with the Department of Health and Human Services’ preventive care mandate under the Affordable Care Act, which requires PrEP coverage.

O’Connor said the government must provide this religious exemption to eight defendants — six individuals and two businesses — who claim that being required to provide such insurance coverage violates their “sincerely held” Christian and “nonreligious” beliefs rejecting “homosexual behavior, intravenous drug use, and sexual activity outside of marriage between one man and one woman.”

By requiring them to provide insurance that covers PrEP, as well as the HPV vaccine and sex education, the government “would make [them] complicit in those behaviors,” O’Connor concluded.

Fargo reinstates pledge after public backlash

Following a public outcry, the Fargo (N.D.) School Board voted 8-1 to resume reciting the Pledge of Allegiance at the start of board meetings.

The decision, made during a special meeting Aug. 18, was prompted by the backlash that followed a decision by the board on Aug. 9 to stop reciting the pledge. Board President Tracie Newman recommended the board reinstate the pledge.

Prior to the vote, several board members mentioned they had received hateful and sometimes threatening calls and emails from all over the country.

Board member Nyamal Dei, who cast the lone “no” vote at the meeting, shared a voicemail recording in front of the board. The recording contained vulgar, hateful and racist language throughout.

Board member Katie Christensen, who attended the meeting by phone, said she had been called disgusting things and received threats. She said she had reported some of the threatening messages to the police.

Transparency not enough for yeshiva problem

By Ryan Jayne

The New York Times recently published a blistering exposé on Hasidic Jewish yeshivas in New York that have failed students to a staggering degree. At Hasidic boys’ schools in particular, so much of the high schoolers’ days are spent studying religious texts that there is virtually no time left for basic academics. Graduates are reportedly so bereft of education that their only option for work is to preach the religion they spent all of their school time studying.



Ryan Jayne

This much was already well known to those of us who follow state/church news, since these schools rake in taxpayer dollars while committing this educational catastrophe. But the New York Times piece revealed the staggering extent of this abuse: Over the past four years, New York yeshivas have received more than \$1 billion in taxpayer funds, through various programs at the federal, state and local levels.

Compounding the problem is a total lack of transparency. For years, government officials have tried to hold the yeshivas accountable for their obligation to provide basic education to their students, but those efforts have been largely rebuffed. This week, the state Board of Regents voted to require that instruction in nonpublic schools be at least “substantially equivalent” to that in public schools in the same city or district.

This sounds like a much-needed lifeline to yeshiva students, or at least those among them who are not already so far behind that they cannot hope to catch up. But there’s another roadblock in the way: Many of the schools at issue are openly defiant to state oversight, refusing to equip their students to survive in the outside world and daring the state to do anything about it.

“We will sit in jail rather than change our childrens (sic) education,” a sadly ironic sign read at a protest of this week’s vote. “We will not comply, and we will not follow the state education commissioner under any circumstances,” a rabbi bluntly stated in 2018. “We will go out to war against the commissioner in every way.” There is little point in passing rules to improve the transparency and performance of Hasidic schools when those rules are certain to be ignored.

The New York Department of Education could try withholding funding from schools that fail to meet the new standards, but any Supreme Court watcher



Image by Shutterstock

Hasidic Jewish students spend so much studying religious texts that there is virtually no time left for basic academics.

can predict the phony religious liberty arguments that would be made, echoing arguments that have persuaded the court in recent years: The state is persecuting these schools because of their religion! The schools are being forced to choose between their sincerely held religious beliefs and the tyrannical rules of the state!

The sad reality is that today’s Supreme Court might buy these arguments and force the government to continue funding the yeshivas, although, to be fair, the court’s most favored treatment only goes to their favorite plaintiffs: evangelical Christian, church-going, God-fearing corporations.

But after the court’s recent ruling in Carson v. Makin, states that give taxpayer funds to private secular schools may be forced to fund religious schools, as well. This forces the hands of not just New York, but every state that offers vouchers or otherwise funds private schools. The only way to avoid forcing taxpayers to pay for religious instruction is to stop funding private schools altogether. Supporters of private college prep schools might not love that solution, but it’s the only option until we fix the Supreme Court.

Abandoning private school voucher-like schemes is the right move anyway. Vouchers are an objectively failed experiment academically, and violate religious liberty by forcing taxpayers to pay for religious instruction, a core concern of the Framers when the First Amendment was drafted.

The path forward, therefore, is for New Yorkers to convince their elected representatives — local, state and federal — that public funds should go to public education. This is no easy task in New York, in part because the yeshivas themselves reportedly tell their educationally neglected families how to vote. “Before elections, teachers often give students sample ballots with names of the grand rabbis’ chosen candidates filled in,” the New York Times reports.

Still, this is what must be done, and FFRF recently sent a letter to the New York City Council making this argument. Transparency is not enough. To ensure equitable, adequate and secular education for all students, public funds must go to public schools.

Ryan Jayne is a staff attorney for FFRF and heads its Strategic Response Team.

Pew report: Nones could be majority in 50 years

By 2070, the religiously unaffiliated (“Nones”) could make up half the population in the United States, according to a new report from the Pew Research Center.

And it’s possible, if not likely, that Christians could make up less than half of the population — and as little as a third — in 50 years. Also, the percentage of Americans who identify as Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and followers of other non-Christian faiths could double.

The Pew researchers projected possible religious futures for the United States using a number of factors, including birthrates, migration patterns, demographics, including age and sex, and the current religious landscape. They also looked at how religion is passed from one generation to another and how often people switch religions — in particular, Christians who become Nones, a number that has been increasing in recent years.

One reason for the decline in the

proportion of Christians and the growth among the Nones in the models is age. While Christians have more children than Nones, they also skew older.

“The unaffiliated are having and raising unaffiliated children while Christians are more likely to be near the end of their lives than others,” Stephanie Kramer, a senior researcher at Pew, wrote to the Religion News Service.

In the report, researchers note that “there is no data on which to model a sudden or gradual revival of Christianity

(or of religion in general) in the U.S.”

“That does not mean a religious revival is impossible,” they wrote. “It means there is no demographic basis on which to project one.”

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Freedom depends on freethinkers

Constitution

Continued from page 1

lieve America was founded as a “Christian nation.” This does not represent the intention of our Founders or even the demographics of our nation.

In the early years, Americans were overwhelmingly Protestant, with Catholics making up the second major demographic, but much has changed in the nearly 250 years since. A major shift away from religion in the millennial generation has led to 29 percent of Americans now identifying as having “no religion,” according to Pew Research. This makes secular Americans the largest single “religious denomination” in our country for the first time.

In Shelby County, 15 percent of the population identifies as religiously unaffiliated, according to PRRI Research. I’m proud to count myself as one of the more than 75 million secular Americans who are not religious. Furthermore, I’m thankful for groups like the Freedom from Religion Foundation, which has been fighting to protect our cherished separation of church and state.

Last year, my wife and I signed on as plaintiffs in a FFRF lawsuit against the state of Alabama challenging its unconstitutional voter registration requirements. Previously, Alabama residents were required to sign an oath to God in order to register to vote. Following the lawsuit, the secretary of state amended all forms to include a checkbox for those who wish to opt out of the religious oath.


Now all Alabamians are worthy of the same voter rights regardless of their religious (or non-religious) beliefs.

“I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and constitutions, but laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind,” states Thomas Jefferson’s memorial in Washington, D.C. “As new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change . . . institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times.”

This Constitution Day, let’s keep educating our students, friends, neighbors and leaders on our uniquely secular Constitution. Because more than two centuries after our Founders met in Philadelphia, we must again reaffirm our commitment to keep religion out of government.

There is no freedom of religion without a government that is free from religion.

FFRF Member Chris Nelson is a lifelong Alabamian and secular activist.



‘We Dissent’ is a monthly podcast by four women who are powerhouse attorneys at the major secular organizations in the U.S., including FFRF’s Rebecca Markert and Liz Cavell.

Listen in as they discuss developments affecting state/church separation in the U.S. Supreme Court and lower federal courts.

Join us @ we-dissent.org

Tax ’em, Texas!



Joe Zamecki of Texas sent us this photo of his one-person (for now) protest of Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church. “For the third time in a few years, I recently picketed that church and got some video and photos,” Zamecki writes. “It’s located next to a busy highway, so it’s high visibility, and of course, it’s a very well-known church. There’s a large sidewalk and free parking nearby, so it’s always easy. I’m currently trying to get others to join me.”

CRANKMAIL

Welcome to the latest installment of Crankmail, where we print letters and emails from those who don’t subscribe to FFRF’s philosophy of state/church separation or godlessness. Printed as received.

Atheists Target Police Chaplains: Police chaplains are not unconstitutional. If you do not believe a God exists then why does this bother you? Let me guess, you just want to get rid of the Christian police chaplains am I right? Jewish and Muslim chaplains are okay I bet for you. Do you even know what a police chaplain does in the first place? I bet you don’t. So, kindly take your demands and put them in your anal cavity. — Freddie Scarsdale

IRS Complaint: Your organization disgusts me. I’ll pray for your salvation. — Janel Ernster

Alabama: We want you and this organization to keep your SATANIC like beliefs out of our schools and out of the GREAT STATE OF ALABAMA where we are CHRISTIANS. Have fun burning in HELL — Jon Cammon

Satan: You can stop trying to force your satanic views on others. Yours is not some noble calling. It is not your destiny to save the world. You willingly allow yourselves to be used as puppets of evil, and despite your own delusional opinions to the contrary, you WILL stand before God one day, and your knees will bow and your tongues confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Now is the day of salvation. You need to repent and believe before the day of wrath. — Paul Martin

Free will: America Nationalism is not Religious. God gives us Free Will to think outside Dogma Religion’s. In God We Trust, not “In Religion We Trust.” God gives his faithful the gift of discernment. You can still have faith in God and be sceptical. It’s called Free Thinking. Naivety does not find you God. Free thinking does. Atheist Dogma Religion’s must deny God. Atheism is the biggest Religion, their church is Communist Socialism society. Hell is death. Heaven is afterlife. God is pro common sense. — Jeremy Two

Watch out!: Atheists are perfectly free to believe in nothing according to the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America. Have a nice life. All atheists will be shocked at death. — Thomas Ziegler

Good luck: well, Ron have at it ... I, pray you find your way to the truth, light and life of our Creator ... our Lord God, Heavenly Father ... because, believe me eternity in Hell is no paradise ... at death your soul will be judged and, if you’ve been

in denial of God’s love for us denounced Him you will be going to Hell . . . so, if your thought of joy and glory is going to Hell and burning for all eternity in the everlasting lake of fire having the devil and demons do whatever they please with you stay on the path your on and that’s where you’ll going after your life on earth ends . . . for the salvation of your soul “repent, ask for forgiveness and believe while you still have a chance the opportunity to change your life and save your soul from eternal salvation . . . may God have mercy on you ... God bless . . . Peace — Henry Gomez

Not yours: I think you got it wrong and I think you’re mad and you’re angry because the god of the universe did not choose your race of people you don’t have salvation you have nothing everything you got you have taken from the indigenous people of this land and now the table is turning because now you got to give it back — Julius Lovejoy

Police chaplains: Police chaplains are not unconstitutional. If you do not believe a God exists then why does this bother you? Let me guess, you just want to get rid of the Christian police chaplains am I right? Jewish and Muslim chaplains are okay I bet for you. Do you even know what a police chaplain does in the first place? I bet you don’t. So, kindly take your demands and put them in your anal cavity. — Jeffrey Schoen

Jesus is lord: Im not into religion im a lover of jesus christ an our creater. i was a none believer until i felt the creator power. An jesus sprit. these are puppets from the devil. too lead you away from god. God is real .heaven is real so is Hell .think when your flesh die .your sprit what gives you life will be judge .please dont follow this fools .pray too highest power who created life in all of the unvierse .there is a god TRUST.. — Donnell Smith

Eternity in hell!: Look up the accounts of folks on their death beds regretting their choice to join Satan and his wickedness. If you have ever experienced darkness imagine that for eternity, not to mention the fact that your in flames for all eternity with not a drop of water ever your permanently there no one will pray you out of there you have sealed your fate. If you have low tolerance of pain hell is not the place for you. — Debbie Guinn

AETHISTS: This Reagan Freak has lost his mind!! He looks like he is ready for the Grave and HELL will be a Big surprise for his Wretched Soul!! He is a disgrace to his father!! Of course, ALL these woke and demonized persons will be in HELL with him!! A country that hates JESUS will be destroyed by our Enemies!! — Bill Hill

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.”

Lawsuit

Continued from page 1

has children in the Greenville County Schools, is familiar with the intent of Christian Learning Centers to evangelize students.

Christian Learning Centers of Greenville County is a private religious educational institution whose mission is to “provide biblical instruction for public school children at no cost.” Its faculty is a “group of Christ-centered educators who have a passion for teaching and sharing God’s Word with our youth,” to quote the organization itself. Students are encouraged to “spread the news” to others to “ELECT JESUS.” For 25 years, the Christian group has provided biblical release-time instruction to students in Greenville County schools. Two private Christian colleges in Greenville County — North Greenville University and Bob Jones University (infamously fundamentalist) — also have ties to Christian Learning Centers, as The State newspaper reports.

The organization announced plans to build a residential school in Greenville County, and its CEO Janice Butler sent a proposal for building the “state-of-the-art residential school” to the South Carolina governor in May of this year. The South Carolina appropriations bill for 2022–23 now includes a \$1.5 million handout to the organization in a measure co-sponsored by state Reps. Mike Burns and John McCravy.

“The South Carolina appropriations bill for 2022-23 violates the South Carolina Constitution, as well as the rights of all citizens and taxpayers of the state of South Carolina, including plaintiffs and those who are similarly situated,” asserts FFRF’s complaint.

McMaster’s similar attempts in the past to fund private religious entities have fallen afoul of the courts.

“South Carolina’s Constitution expressly prohibits the state from directly funding religious or other private educational institutions, and the state Supreme Court has, as recently as two years ago, upheld that prohibition,” reports The State newspaper. “In the 2020 case, Adams v. McMaster, the state’s highest court found unanimously that the governor’s plan to use \$32 million in federal COVID-19 relief money to provide tuition grants for students to attend private schools violated the state Constitution.”

Due to the state’s \$1.5 million award to a local Christian education institution, the plaintiffs, who identify as atheists, agnostics or secular humanists, feel like outsiders in the community, FFRF contends. They do not wish to subsidize any religious groups that indoctrinate students, including Christian Learning Centers. And the defendants’ financial appropriation directly contravenes the South Carolina Constitution.

That’s why the plaintiffs are asking for a judgment and order declaring that the financial appropriation violates Article XI Section 4 and Article I Section 2 of the South Carolina Constitution, a temporary restraining order and a permanent injunction enjoining the defendants from providing funds to Christian Learning Centers and an award of attorneys’ fees in the favor of the plaintiffs.

FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott and FFRF Legal Fellow Karen Heine-man are co-counsel on the case with South Carolina attorney Steven Edward Buckingham.

FFRF VICTORIES

By Matt Langer

Tenn. district to end religious commencement

A concerned employee contacted FFRF regarding the religious nature of a graduation ceremony at Jellico High School in Tennessee. The employee reported that the commencement seemed to be a religious ceremony more than a graduation. In a video recording of the ceremony, the podium is shown emblazoned with a Latin cross. Reportedly, the program included a scheduled scripture reading, and the Christian god was referenced throughout the ceremony by many speakers, including the principal.

“The school district has a duty to remain neutral toward religion,” Legal Fellow Karen Heineman wrote to Campbell County Public Schools Director Jennifer Fields. “Commencements are for celebrating the accomplishments of all students, not for excluding some on the unconstitutional basis of religious belief and suggesting that their accomplishments and futures are actually the result of supernatural intervention, not hard work.”

A response from legal counsel assured FFRF that the issue has been addressed with the director of schools. Attorney Dail R. Cantrell responded, “We will make sure to correct for future graduations.”

Displays removed from clerk’s office in Tenn.

A concerned Rutherford County (Tenn.) resident contacted FFRF regarding religious messaging on display in the county clerk’s office. The resident reported seeing the phrase “He is Risen” displayed on an employee’s glass partition. Additionally, behind the counter, there was a sign displayed on the wall facing customers that read, “The joy of the Lord is my strength.”

“By displaying religious messages in the County Clerk’s office, you send an exclusionary message to non-Christians, including the almost 30 percent of the population who are not religious,” FFRF Legal Fellow Karen Heineman wrote to Rutherford County Clerk Lisa Duke Crowell. “It is inappropriate and needlessly divisive to send a message that alienates a significant portion of your constituency, effectively turning them into political outsiders.”

A response from legal counsel notified FFRF that the issue has been resolved. Attorney Nick C. Christiansen wrote, “Please be advised that the items described in your letter have been removed.”

Straight talk



“I live three miles away from the site of the ghastly Highland Park, Ill., Fourth of July shooting,” Lifetime Member Ricky Cooper wrote. “I went there recently to observe the memorials and pay my respects. On one of the metal structures at the train station, people were invited to write a note on a card and affix it to the structure. Several of the notes said things like, ‘Trust God.’ This is the note that I wrote.”

W. Va. school district to halt bible distribution

The parent of a child in a Wood County School District elementary school in West Virginia reported to FFRF that tables with bibles were set up next to each teacher in every 5th-grade classroom across all of the district’s elementary schools. Another parent alleged that a group of teachers at Jefferson Elementary Center set up a box of Gideon bibles during an assembly involving multiple 5th-grade classes. It was also reported that the group of teachers presented and discussed the bibles prior to offering and distributing them to students. A parent also reported that the school has allowed other religious materials to be distributed, specifically flyers from a local church inviting students and their families to an Easter egg hunt.

“Advancing, preferring and promoting religion is exactly what a school does when it distributes bibles and other religious materials to students during the school day,” FFRF Staff Attorney Christopher Line wrote to Wood County Schools Superintendent Christie Willis. “The actions of the district are especially egregious, as teachers not only distributed bibles, but discussed and promoted them, as well.”

A response from the district assured FFRF that the issue will be addressed.

“It is apparent upon this investigation reacclimating our administrators and teachers to policies and procedures is im-

perative,” Willis responded. Willis assured FFRF that the issue will be addressed at a district seminar, stating, “The guidance regarding distribution of bibles will be on the agenda and presented to administrators.”

FFRF halts religious music in Oklahoma class

A concerned parent reported to FFRF that a sixth-grade math teacher at Oakridge Elementary was regularly playing Christian music during the class period while students were working. Reportedly, this teacher also told students that “everyone needs a little Jesus in their life.”

“No public school employee may urge religious points of view on students. Elementary school children are especially susceptible to the coercive influence of religious messaging. When teachers promote their own religious beliefs to their students, they usurp parental authority,” FFRF Legal Fellow Samantha Lawrence wrote to Moore Public Schools’ legal counsel Phyllis L. Walta. “Students feel immense pressure to act like their instructors and peers and do as their teachers tell them. Public school staff and administrators should be aware of these concerns and ensure that all students are made to feel welcome in all classrooms.”

A response from Walta acknowledged the district’s violation and assured FFRF that it will not recur. “The teacher has reported that she did, in fact, let the stu-

dents listen to a Christian station during class but that it will not continue in the future,” Walta wrote.

Ohio school district ends graduation prayer

A concerned district parent reported to FFRF that a teacher had delivered a Christian prayer during Ottawa (Ohio) Elementary School’s eighth-grade graduation ceremony.

“Requiring nonreligious students and attendees to make a public showing of their nonbelief by not participating in a prayer or else to display deference toward a religious sentiment in which they do not believe is coercive, embarrassing and intimidating,” FFRF Legal Fellow Karen Heineman wrote to Ottawa-Glandorf Local Schools Superintendent Don Horstman.

A response from the district assured FFRF that the issue will be taken care of.

“I want to let you know that I have informed the Board of Education and our administrative team of your email, and I informed all of them that the district has clear guidance and policies against this type of activity,” Horstman responded. “I can assure you this will not be a part of the program at Ottawa Elementary going forward.”

Tennessee school to end prayer at ceremony

A concerned district parent contacted FFRF regarding prayer at the fifth-grade “promotion ceremony” at Ooltewah Elementary School in Tennessee. Reportedly, the school’s principal introduced a pastor to “lead us in our invocation.” The Christian prayer invoked “the Heavenly Father and God.” The pastor asked that God “be honored here tonight as we honor these graduates.”

“Scheduling prayer at Hamilton County School District graduations is unconstitutional and a violation of school policy,” FFRF Legal Fellow Karen Heineman wrote to the district’s legal counsel D. Scott Bennett. “Please take the necessary steps to ensure that the rights of conscience of all participants and attendees will be respected at future district events.”

A response from Bennett acknowledged the district’s violation and assured FFRF that prayer will not be a part of future ceremonies.

“We have discussed your concerns with the principal, and we have confirmed that someone did offer a prayer,” Bennett responded. “The principal understands that federal law and board policy prohibit these prayers, and she has assured us that this same oversight will not recur.”

THEY SAID WHAT?

That’s how I know you still poor, broke, busted and disgusted, because of how you been honoring me. I’m not worth your McDonald’s money? I’m not worth your Red Lobster money? I ain’t worth your St. John Knit — y’all can’t afford it no how. I ain’t worth y’all Louis Vuitton? I ain’t worth your Prada? I’m not worth your Gucci?

Rev. Carlton Funderburke of the Church at the Well in Kansas City, blaming his parishioners for not lavishing gifts on him.
Washington Post, 8-18-22

We want to take back the country and reestablish a Christ-like nation. A nation where the national religion is Christian.

. . . Where you will never see a college that isn’t a Christian college. The only college acceptable that you are able to go to is a Christian school because every school in these United States should teach Christian values. Every school should teach the Ten Commandments in elementary school. Every school should promote what it means to be a Christian to the youth of America. It cannot be any other way. There should be no secular teaching in the schools.

Dalton Clodfelter, a white Christian fascist, speaking on the show, “The Right Dissident.”
Right Wing Watch, 8-22-22

I invite you to repent before God and trust Christ for forgiveness . . . I promised that when I came here that I was going to do everything within my power, and for God to help me, to not compromise.

Rep. John Jacobs, who condemned fellow Republicans for including exemptions in the bill that may allow abortions in instances of rape, incest or to protect the health of the mother.
Indy Star, 8-7-22

I have never in my life been in such a satanic warfare, spiritual warfare, that I’ve felt the past two years on the

board, especially during this election season. We need a breakthrough. We have not had a conservative, God-fearing majority on the board.

Jill Woolbright, Flagler County (Fla.) School Board member.
Palm Coast Observer, 8-16-22

I think God is using this to bring awareness to people who had no clue what was going on. It’s a battle between good and evil.

Texan Eva Carter, who spurred a book banning crusade against children’s books at her school library in Llano.
The New York Times, 9-11-22

Kansas gives us hope in abortion fight

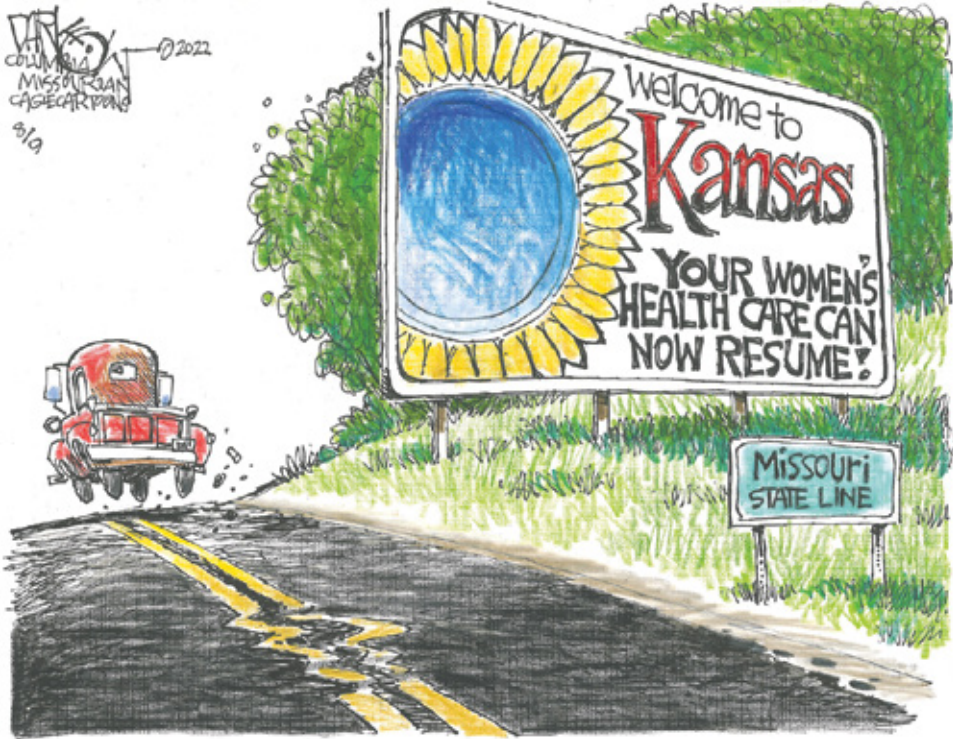
By John Pratt

Kansas voters rejected, 59-41, a proposed amendment to our state Constitution on the subject of abortion. This amendment, which was certainly intended to pave the way for an outright ban on the procedure, was couched in deliberately confusing language and was timed in such a way as to make it less likely that those who would oppose the motion would come out to vote. The proposers gambled that, as William Butler Yeats wrote, “The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” Fortunately, their calculations did not work out,



John Pratt

and I felt pleased to have had a part, albeit very small, in helping get out the “No” vote. It should be noted that abortion is already regulated by the state. If one wants an abortion, there are a good many hoops one has to jump through. The obligatory “counseling” is hardly abortion-neutral and is definitely designed to discourage the patient from terminating the pregnancy no matter how good her reasons for doing so might be. This is then followed by a 24-hour waiting period — just another obstacle thrown in the patient’s path for no reason other than to be an obstacle. The ultrasound requirement, too, is not there to convey to the patient any information of



which they may have previously been unaware, it is simply an appeal to emotion, rather than reason. All of us at times, even the most rational, can be moved by the psychological impressiveness of images or facts, rather than by the careful reflection of reason upon them. In a sense, this matter should never really have been on the ballot at all. Reproductive freedom is an individual choice, a basic right, like the freedom to marry who one chooses (provided they agree, of course). The continuance (or not) of a pregnancy is, or should be, a matter between the woman concerned, her partner, if any, and her physician, and in that order, and is

certainly not the business of any priest or politician. And individual rights are not up for popular vote. I should remark also that this enthusiasm for letting the people decide by majority vote on this matter reveals its counterfeit quality when it is well known that a substantial majority of Americans favor at least some access to abortion. To a cynic, it would appear that these people just cannot take “no” for an answer, and approve of majority rule only so long as it coincides with their agenda! The hopeful side to the picture is that self-administered medication, to the extent that it is widely and readily available, will enable most people to circumvent

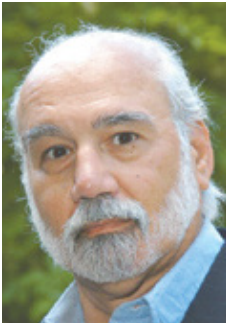
these obstacles, and supportive organizations like Whole Women’s Health are trying to expand their “Wayfinder” program which provides financial and other assistance to women who live in states hostile to abortion and need to travel out of state for the procedure. I would urge readers to make a donation to this program, or one like it. Hopefully, good networking and coordination between these organizations can effectively nullify the efforts of the antiabortion extremists and those Supreme Court justices who aided and abetted them. Then, they may as well try and keep water in a sieve. However, while certainly better than nothing, these should be regarded as stop-gap measures until the right to full reproductive freedom can be fully and finally entrenched in law, which in the current political climate, is not likely to happen anytime soon. But abortion is one of those things with a “best before” date, and people need help now. It is my hope that this unexpected result here in Kansas (almost everyone, on both sides thought that the percentages would be very much closer) will motivate people to get out and vote in every election they can, big or small. One has only to read the “Crankmail” section of Free-thought Today to see what those of us who value reason, evidence, the scientific method and the separation of church and state are up against. The disdain of these cranks — and, alas, there are millions like them — for all of the above reasons (as well as for spelling, grammar and punctuation) should concern us all. These people vote. So should we. *John Pratt is a member from Kansas.*

The Catholic Church has a lot to answer for

This column first appeared in the New York Daily News and is reprinted with permission.

By JT Barbarese

When I was 11, my father traveled from Philadelphia to Florida for a job he never got. My family was already large: five people living on one floor of a row house with a breadwinner who had, alas, trouble holding down a job. So when Pop got home, with the Florida move obviously off the table, we stayed put in Philly. What I found out decades later, after both my parents were gone, was that my mother, shortly after that, got an abortion. It is pretty clear why: it’s the same reason many lower-middle class parents decide not to add another family member they can’t afford to feed, shelter and clothe. The decision was both perfectly natural and rational based not on the status of the aborted fetus but on the welfare of the living.



JT Barbarese

Raised a cradle Catholic, I remember finding condoms in the top drawer of my father’s dresser. I was probably looking for something else — his Army Air Corps patch, or the penknife his father gave him. I didn’t know what I had in my hand until I told a friend. “Rubbers,” he said. “For catching babies.” Which led to a longer conversation. By then it was apparent to most Catholics that the rhythm method, advertised in the



Image by Shutterstock

’50s and based on lunar cycles, was a fiction cooked up by the celibate and the childless. Our story can’t be unique. For decades, Catholics have been supporting their parishes, sending their kids to Catholic schools and making their Easter duty. At the same time, they have been in willing, if covert, violation of the Vatican’s ban on all birth control. We know what the church’s position is on abortion — a mortal sin that condemns the sinner, absent forgiveness given by a celibate priest, to eternities in hell. With the recent news that Kansans voted to protect abortion rights came the revelation that the Catholic Church was backing a phony email campaign in Kansas designed to confuse voters by manipulative language guaranteed to turn a “yes” into a “no,” and vice versa. The churchmen who preach and enforce these dogmas do so with no experience of marriage, raising families, paying mortgages on a 40-hour work week, or rais-

ing kids. They live on the tab of the Vatican, which separates them from most evangelical pastors who, whatever their other faults, get too much of the blame for the present predatory and ghoulish form of Christianity. Priests live rent-free on land not taxed by the government, often go unprosecuted when accused of serious crimes, and hardly know what it means to raise a family. Yet these are the same men — they’re all men — who confidently declare that people like my late parents are spending an eternity in hell beside the other sinners — the cops, teachers, firemen and hairdressers, longshoremen and members of the middle class who steadily attend and tithe their churches. They do so with arrogant indifference to circumstances and little or no compassion. And, because the Catholic Church is possibly the last of the totally top-down religious entities, with a continuous history of influence and power going back nearly

two millennia, it apparently feels no need to justify its actions or angst over doctrinal fissures, which is the height of institutional arrogance. Instead, it issues apologies for the deaths of indigenous children in Catholic boarding schools, or for only lately admitting they were “wrong” about Galileo. Evangelism, on the other hand, is like all Protestantism in that it is healthily sect-ridden and lacks a papacy that authorizes doctrinal uniformity. The present constitution of the Supreme Court should give many of us pause, given how much the Catholic Church has to answer for. Ask yourself, if you haven’t already, how you would feel if there were six Jews, six Muslims, or for that matter, six Druids in the ruling majority? The U.S. Constitution has the force of both law and human precedent; a Papal Bull has no legal basis, yet wields great power over the faithful. The Catholic jurists, of course, justify their position by appealing to legal precedent dating to the 18th century. The implication is that their legal training overrides their religious beliefs, which, given the ruling, is difficult to accept. This is not an attack aimed at the rank-and-file Catholic parishioner, but at the papacy and the credulity that it inflicts on ordinary churchgoers, who were human beings before they were baptized into a faith that turns them into involuntary hypocrites, forced to contribute to the church’s greater and more influential hypocrisy by covertly using birth control or getting abortions. Why a family’s sexual economy must be regulated by the unmarried who live in enforced celibacy is an insult to objectivity, common sense and to morality — and ultimately, to American democracy. *JT Barbarese is a professor of English at Rutgers.*

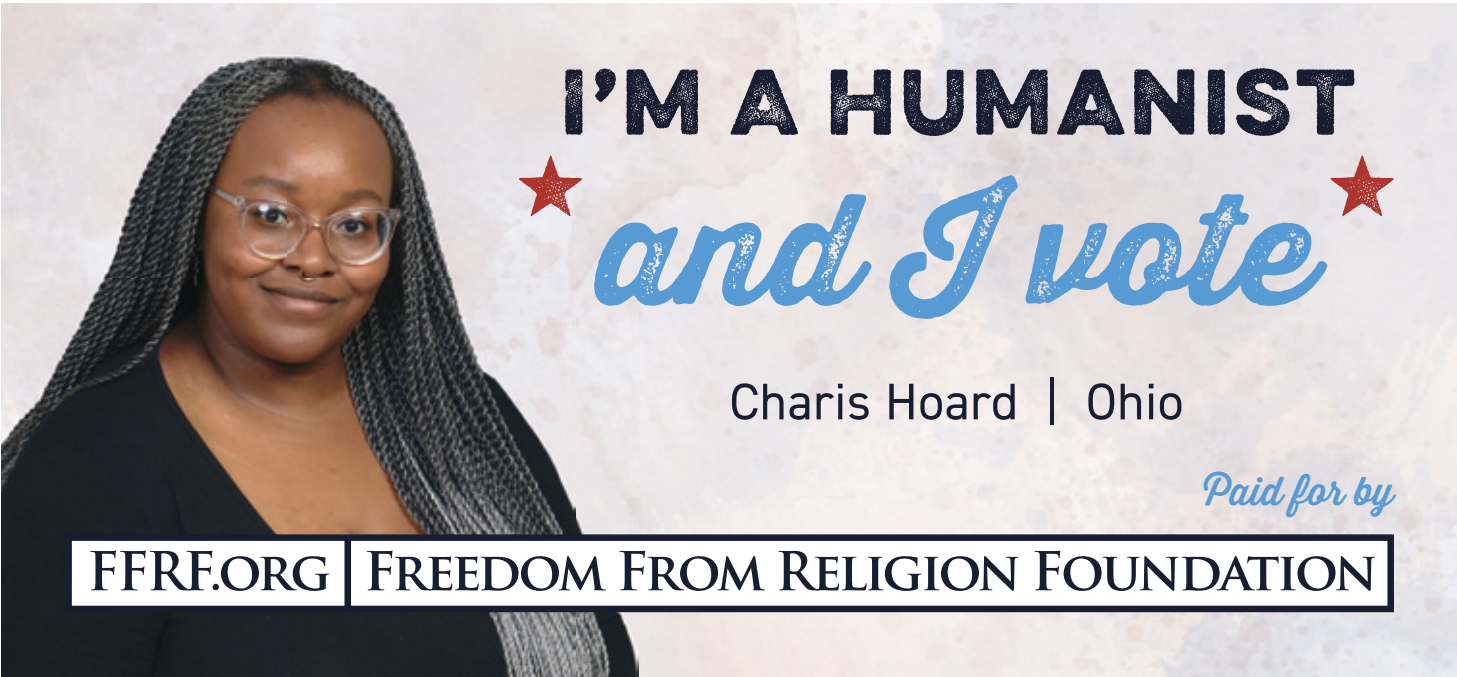
'I'm Secular and I vote'

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has just concluded its timely and vital national “I’m Secular and I vote” ad campaign that began the Fourth of July weekend and ended around Constitution Day, Sept. 17.

FFRF featured one member per state (or couples, in some cases) in full-page ads in 45 daily newspapers in state capitals and many larger-circulation Sunday dailies. Companion billboards also went up in those cities.

“The midterm elections will be critical to policies affecting the separation of state and church and individual liberties,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president.

Each ad featured the photo of a local FFRF member, most taken in front of their state Capitol building, and a description about them. The ad encourages secular voters to join FFRF. It also links to the results of FFRF’s impressive secular values voter survey. (ffrf.org/valuesvoter)



Ohio

Former FFRF legislative intern Charis Hoard appeared on a billboard in Ohio, stating that she is “a Humanist and I vote.”

The text reads:

“I’m one of more than 75 million secular Americans who are not religious. The ‘Nones’ (those of us unaffiliated with religion) are now 29 percent of the U.S. population. We’re the largest ‘denomination’ by religious identification!

“As a secular voter, I trust in reason, science and America’s secular Constitution.

“I want Congress, my state Legislature, my public officials and our courts to:

- “Keep religion out of government and social policy.
- “Keep religion out of public schools.
- “Keep religion out of bedrooms, personal lives and health care decisions, including when or whether to have children, and whom to love or marry.
- “Use my tax dollars only for evidence-based, not faith-based, purposes.

“If you agree with me, please vote your secular values.”



Washington, D.C.

FFRF’s Sadie Pattinson is featured in the full-page ad that ran in the Washington Post on the weekend of Sept. 17-18.



West Virginia

FFRF Lifetime Member Jim Haught’s ad ran in the Charleston Gazette-Mail, where he identified as a “retired newspaper editor and a lifelong Mountain Stater . . . and an Atheist.”



Wyoming

Lifetime Member Marci Shaver of Wyoming appeared in both the Casper Star-Tribune and Wyoming Tribune Eagle in Cheyenne as “mother, grandma, great-grandma, retired business owner, actor, longtime Equality State citizen . . . and an Atheist.”



South Carolina

FFRF Member Melissa Evans was featured in the Charleston Post and Courier and Columbia State as “an executive, student, longtime South Carolinian . . . and an Atheist.”



New Hampshire

FFRF Member Jack Shields appears on a billboard in Manchester, stating that he is “an Atheist and I vote.”



New Hampshire

The Manchester Union Leader ran the ad on Sept. 18 with FFRF Sponsoring Member Charles Townsend, showing him as “an advocate for public health, longtime Granite Stater . . . and a Freethinker.”



New Mexico

In the ad that appeared in the Albuquerque Journal, Lifetime Member Weldon Merritt is shown as a secular values voter who is “a Vietnam veteran, New Mexican . . . and an Atheist.”



Alaska

“I’m a retired business owner, volunteer, friend, long-time Alaskan . . . and an atheist,” says Lifetime Member Julie A. Olsen in her ad that was published in both the Anchorage Daily News and Juneau Empire.



Rhode Island

The Providence Journal ran the ad with FFRF Member Todd W. Ellison, who says he is “a friend, traveler, cancer survivor, volunteer, longtime Rhode Islander . . . and an Atheist.”



Louisiana

FFRF Member Joe E. Mills was featured in the ad that ran in the New Orleans Times-Picayune and Baton Rouge Advocate, stating he is “a father, engineer, Louisianan . . . and an Atheist.”



New Mexico

In the ad that ran in the Santa Fe New Mexican, Lifetime Member Sean Gardner is featured, stating “Sean is trans, a writer, and long-time New Mexican . . . and an Atheist.”



Idaho

Lifetime Member Bruce Johnson appeared in the Boise Idaho Statesman.

FFRF awards \$18,350!

2022 college student essay contest winners

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 11 winners and 13 honorable mentions of the 2022 Kenneth L. Proulx Memorial Essay Contest for Ongoing College Students. FFRF has paid out a total of \$18,350 in award money to this year's college contest winners.

Currently enrolled college students (up to age 24) wrote on the topic of "In God I Trust — NOT!" They wrote personal essays about why they have faith not in a supernatural deity but in themselves.

This contest is named for Kenneth L. Proulx, one of FFRF's most generous benefactors, who died in 2019. The cupola at Freethought Hall, FFRF's office in Madison, Wis., is called the "Above Us Only Sky Kenneth L. Proulx Cupola," or "Ken's Cupola" for short.

The \$1,000 prize for sixth place in the ongoing college competition is generously endowed by actor and FFRF Lifetime Member Mr. Madison Arnold. Madison, who is 91, has given a \$30,000 endowment as a living bequest, what he calls a "pre-quest."

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



- FIRST PLACE**
Caleb Buell, 19, University of Alabama, \$3,500.
- SECOND PLACE**
Maia Willis-Reddick, 20, University of Arizona, \$3,000.
- THIRD PLACE**
Ethan Haight, 21, Western Carolina University, \$2,500.
- FOURTH PLACE**
Liliana Austin, 20, University of Ottawa, \$2,000.
- FIFTH PLACE**
Ashley Huh, 22, University of Houston, \$1,500.
- SIXTH PLACE**
Eleanor McHugh, 20, Long Island University, \$1,000
- SEVENTH PLACE**
Lydia Woolwine, 19, University of Houston, \$750
- EIGHTH PLACE**
Rio Velasco, 22, University of Louisville, \$500.
- NINTH PLACE**
Anjalay Nagarajan, 20, University of Pennsylvania, \$400.
- TENTH PLACE (TIE)**
Andrea Gutierrez, 23, Texas A&M University, \$300.
Aubrey Reese, 20, Western Oregon University, \$300.
- HONORABLE MENTIONS (\$200 each)**
Kye Binik, 23, Rowan University.
Robert Ebersole, 22, University of Arizona.
Abigail Jablon, 21, Texas A&M University.
Jana Kimball, 19, University of Pittsburgh.
Jonghyuk Park, 20, University of Washington.

Shelby Rhoades, 19, Kennesaw State University.
Richard O., 19, University of Delaware.
Virginia Sands, 19, Belmont University.
Xavier Thompson, 20, Governors State University.
Lennon Turner, 20, Jones College.
Katie Aaluk Watts, 20, San Jose State University.
Kami Weinstein, 21, Rutgers University.
R.W., 20, Western Governors University.

FFRF also thanks "Director of First Impressions" Lisa Treu for managing the details of this and FFRF's other student essays competitions. And we couldn't judge these contests without our volunteer and staff judges, including: Dan Barker, Jon S. Galehouse, Kate Garmise, Brian Gillaspie, Richard Grimes, Ricki Grunberg, Joe Hendrickson, Dan Kettner, Gloria Marquardt, Brent Messer, Dave Petrashek, Chris O'Connell, Rose Mary Sheldon, PJ Slinger, Karen Lee Weidig and Casandra Zimmerman.

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

FIRST PLACE KENNETH L. PROULX MEMORIAL ESSAY CONTEST

The glass veil and the pious prison

FFRF awarded Caleb \$3,500.

By Caleb Buell

The pious reserve of my grandmother always astounded me. She was unfaltering in her faith, wholly devoted to the teachings of the Pentecostal church, which translated into every aspect of her life. From the ankle-length jean skirts to the bible she kept stowed in her purse, it was as if an aura of holiness surrounded her at all times, one that would assuredly protect her from any torment that the devil may inflict upon her. Thus, when the Covid-19 vaccines became readily available to the public, she refused the injections, trusting that God would shield her from this "demonic virus."

However, those claims could not be heard behind the glass veil of the hospital room she soon found herself in. Neither could the coughing spurts or the soft moans, which came in inconsistent intervals, but nevertheless displayed her consistently decaying state. Instead, I could only watch in horror as my grandmother's silent bout with the coronavirus unfolded over the next four days. There I stood, separated from my grandmother by the clear partition as she muttered prayers under her breath — but they soon fell just as flat as the EKG in that barren hospital room.

This is one of many reasons why I have placed my confidence in myself rather than some supernatural being. It doesn't matter how devoted, obedient or trusting you are to that deity — what doesn't exist cannot honor your



Caleb Buell

faith, and my grandmother discovered this the hard way. Had she forgone her religious pride and opted to take the vaccine, perhaps she would still be with us today. Rather, my tear-stained eyes were forced to watch with blurry vision as we lowered her casket into the ground. How ironic that the mahogany was brandished with a cross.

Now, all I can do is implore others not to make the same mistake as my grandmother. While the grief of her loss may be confined to me and my family, the world is bound to experience agony on a much greater scale if people continue to put blind faith in divine entities.

We are already seeing the inklings of intense societal pain due to such actions — loss of homes due to rising sea levels, crop and food shortages, endless mass shootings — all of these are happening due to a lack of trust in science,

logic and basic human empathy. Even worse, when they do occur, they are met with public cries to count on God and pray for the victims.

This creates a vicious cycle of harm all across the planet, because — NEWSFLASH — these are not effective solutions, just hollow words draped in a cloak of deceitful care and sorrow. If we truly wish to prevent such tragedies, then we have to stop them at the source, and there's only one way to do that — by redirecting our trust in supernatural beings toward ourselves.

Until then, those who follow in my grandmother's footsteps will find themselves trapped behind a similar glass veil. They will continue to experience pain and anguish due to their misguided faith, while those of us with personal trust watch from the other side, unable to help. However, unlike my grand-

mother, it is not too late to free themselves from their pious prison. All they have to do is realize that their prayers have reached empty ears, because when they do, they will finally find the strength to shatter the glass once and for all. There they will stand, free from the burdens their faith has shackled to them, as we welcome them to the side that makes effective change through reason and self-confidence, and join them as they confidently say, "In God I Trust — NOT!"

Caleb, 19, attends the University of Alabama and is majoring in chemistry. He is a member of Alabama's Randall Research Scholars Program and Blount Scholars Program. Caleb also serves as an assistant team leader at the West Alabama Food Bank and volunteers at the local hospital. He plans to attend medical school in hopes of becoming a dermatologist or a neurologist.

“It doesn’t matter how devoted, obedient or trusting you are to that deity — what doesn’t exist cannot honor your faith.”

FFRF'S

Ask an Atheist

Wednesdays at Noon (Central)*

On Facebook Live

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

*With occasional reruns.

SECOND PLACE

My uterus is named Mine

FFRF awarded Maia \$3,000.

By Maia Willis-Reddick

I'd be underestimating the power of the Church in Northern Ireland if I were to say we were a God-fearing society. We are not just God-fearing — we are God-living, God-obeying, God-submitting. It's a hateful place to be when your mother, a New Yorker now living in Belfast, puts you through the societal humiliation of walking out of your assembly hall before the required prayer begins.

I am an unbaptized woman who grew up in the Bible Belt of Western Europe. My little corner of the island of Ireland is a backward, oppressive, misogynistic place. There, women belong in the kitchen, without access to abortion, obeying their husbands and praying to the Free Presbyterian Church. Because, God forbid, you were a Catholic who aligned yourself with the others, the South, those who had the balls to stand up to colonialism and won. Everything there revolves around religion, whether it be if your high school was named Coláiste Bríde or Methodist College, your street, your after-school sports activity, your name.

So, for someone like me, someone who rejected religion as the controller of my life, more like the oppressor, I was outcast by those who deemed me too "weird" or "unsanitary" for inclusion into their personal circles. It's no surprise I went abroad to school in Arizona then, where church and state are separated



Maia Willis-Reddick

more than at home and I could just exist without someone asking me if I was Catholic or Protestant. Now, when people ask me what I am, I can proudly say I am a research assistant at the Lunar and Planetary Laboratory and a geology undergraduate. That's actually interesting, instead of just blankly responding "Lutheran" and leaving it at that.

God is not real. Everything I believe in, understand and research is or can be explained by scientific principles and application. There is nothing in this universe that was made and created by a higher being, generated by ancient consciousness to soothe and pacify real fears instilled by the world around them. I understand where they were coming from, but to dispute the entire geological record that explains that the Earth is far more than

6,000 years old? Come on! Get out of the church! Pick up a rock, look at it, and conclude it's sandstone made by the wind and Earth 45 million years ago instead of by a floating bearded man in the sky!

Those who ignore the scientific record and conclude that Adam and Eve are the original humans are ignorant of the fact that their idea may be challenged at any time by any sort of outside entity who isn't their pastor. Relying on ancient texts to drive your worldview in an age where we know so much about the planet we inhabit is ignoring the existence of outside opinion.

Speaking of outside opinion, this brings me to the topic of abortion. I am incredibly angry over the recent opinion from the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn Roe v. Wade, especially as a woman who lived in a country without access to abortion until 2019 (and there are still barriers).

When asked about the true origin of their anti-abortion (and, frankly, anti-woman) opinion, I can make a very educated guess that most of those Republican senators opposing abortion will quote the bible. What is this? An outside opinion trying to determine what I can do with a parasitic clump of cells in my uterus? It's mine! I can do what I want with it! And I can, if I choose, nurture it within those

confines into a whole human.

If they want to ban abortion, they must also ban other things, like Viagra. If abortion is not God's will, neither is a sustained erection for an old rich man from Kentucky.

Christianity does nothing but want to impose restrictions on us, and it's far from the only one. Religion, when picked up willingly, can be a wonderful source of spirituality when appropriated correctly. When forced upon a 7-year-old Irish girl, however, it's dictatorship.

I hope we come to a point in society where we accept the fact that religious opinion should be kept to ourselves and not forced upon others. Until then, I'm going to keep fighting against those who deem it appropriate to oppress me in the name of their lord and savior Jesus Christ. I'm sure that's not what he would have wanted.

Maia, 20, attends the University of Arizona, where she is majoring in geology.

"I am from Belfast, and pride myself in identifying as Irish," Maia writes. "I work as a research assistant at the Lunar and Planetary Laboratory at the university, working on mapping and characterizing a number of subsurface icy deposits in the north polar regions of Mars, using ground-penetrating radar on-board the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter."

“I am an unbaptized woman who grew up in the Bible Belt of western Europe. . . There, women belong in the kitchen, without access to abortion, obeying their husbands and praying to the Free Presbyterian Church.

THIRD PLACE

The prophet who wasn't

FFRF awarded Ethan \$2,500.

By Ethan Haight

When I was younger, my father was very insistent about the power of prayer and divine intervention. He once brought me along on a trip, ostensibly to help the homeless, during which we provided no resources except flyers for church and prayers for help from God. I especially remember being told that the leader of the mission could prophesy, and I remember how he talked at length about seeing divine help on the horizon. "God will provide for you." He said that a lot. I suppose it was meant

“I was told from a very young age that my soul was tainted by sin. I was afraid of myself and my own free will. I was afraid of being cast into the lake of fire when I died.

to exempt us from providing for them.

To my surprise, I was asked to prophesy. I was curious and excited to give it a try. I closed my eyes and listened for the voice of God to appear. I reached out for divine inspiration. But nothing happened.

I started to worry. Why didn't he speak to me? Was I not good enough? I thought God was supposed to love me no matter what. He was supposed to provide me with insight, just like he

provide these people with shelter and good health. But there was nothing.

Eventually, I resorted to making something up, disguising my shame under a veneer of false revelation. The adults smiled and nodded and praised the Lord. And for the first time, I found myself questioning them. They responded to me in just the same way they had responded to the prophecies of the other adults. Could they not tell the difference? Were they pretending, just like I was?

These questions led me, eventually, to what should have been the obvious question from the beginning: Why weren't we helping these people?

When I asked that question of my father later on, he told me that those in need wouldn't appreciate having their needs met if we did it for them, and that they would have to earn God's gifts



Ethan Haight

by accepting him in prayer. I think that answer is what finally drove me away from his mentality. These were people who needed help. Why should they have to earn it?

My life up until that point was often defined by shame and fear. I was told from a very young age that my soul was tainted by sin. I was afraid of myself and my own free will. I was afraid of being cast into the lake of fire when I died. I remember crying when I started struggling in school. God was supposed to bring me success in all things. Was I not being pure enough? Was I being punished?

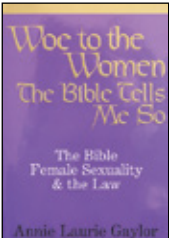
It would be almost a decade before my learning disability was diagnosed, and I was able to take my success into

my own hands. When I was trusting in God, I was living a life of self-doubt and self-hatred. Any time things went wrong, rather than learning from my mistakes and coming back stronger, I receded further into negativity, believing that I had failed God and lost his favor. I rarely, if ever, made any sort of personal progress when I was living in that mentality. I was stagnant and afraid.

But it can also have the opposite effect, as it did with my father. He expected God to solve his problems, and it made him overconfident. I never tried because of my fear; he never tried because he thought he didn't need to. Both are reductive and dangerous ways of thinking.

We need to be able to recognize our own power to create positive change, and that we should use that power. We can't just wait for God to fix our problems, and we can't hold ourselves back in fear from doing the work ourselves. We can do incredible things. I believe that about myself now. I want to see all of humanity believe that about each other. Only then will we move forward together into new and better things.

Ethan, 21, attends Western Carolina University and is working toward a degree in English and philosophy. "I am studying English in the hopes of becoming an author and reaching out to others through my writing," he writes. "I am an Eagle Scout, and currently a member of student government, as well as involved in student organizations focused on climate action, disability access, and LGBTQ+ issues."



**Woe to the Women:
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By Annie Laurie Gaylor

A concise, easy-to-read book that will challenge your concept of the bible as "a good book." Illustrated.

—Published by FFRF. 264 pages / HB

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FOURTH PLACE

God is the ultimate fall guy

FFRF awarded Liliana \$2,000.

By Liliana Austin

I have a very clear memory of the first time I questioned God’s existence. I must have been about 5 or 6, hiding behind my mother in the narrow corridor that separated the church’s sanctuary from its office. This was the church that I had spent nearly every Sunday of my life praying in, the church that my mother had grown up in, gotten married in. My mother was speaking with the priest and the office manager.

It was not a Sunday, and we had not come to the church to worship. We had come to ask for help. My father had left us before that winter started, and as it came to an end, the pit of debt he had left behind threatened to swallow us whole. My mother was juggling two jobs and still we were barely staying afloat. We were living off of no-name soup and toast, with the accounts in the red more frequently than black. When we got to the point where we could no longer afford to buy diapers for my baby sister, my mom knew that we could not continue on our own.

So, she had gone to the church. The church, which she had known her whole life. The church, which she had always donated to whenever the plate



Liliana Austin

came around during Mass. The church that refused to help a single mother begging for help. “God will provide,” the priest had said to her, before turning us away.

That experience has lingered in my mind throughout every interaction I’ve had with religion since, like a bitter taste in the back of my mouth. How could anyone, I’ve wondered, have so much faith in something improvable that they would let real people suffer before their eyes? It wasn’t until I learned in college about the bystander effect that I started approaching an

answer to that question: It isn’t about faith, but responsibility.

The bystander effect is a psychological phenomenon where, in the face of an emergency, a bystander is less likely to offer assistance to a person in distress if there is another person present that responsibility for the situation can fall on. Faith, in my opinion, is like the bystander effect on steroids. Since God is always there, he can always take responsibility for the situation so that those who believe in him don’t have to.

For those who believe in him, God plays the role of both savior and punisher. He’s someone to blame when things go awry, and someone to push our problems onto when we don’t want to solve them. God becomes the ultimate fall guy, and in doing so, stifles personal growth.

His believers no longer need to take responsibility for their actions, or lack thereof, when they can double back and pin it on the Big Guy Upstairs.

Belief in God gives you an out to owning up to your mistakes, and a way to back out of the responsibilities we have to each other as members of humankind. When you remove God from

the equation, everything becomes a lot more personal. Your mistakes become your own, your responsibilities unquestionable. At first, the reality of that can be uncomfortable, but that discomfort is proof of the personal growth that is occurring.

If humankind were to put its faith in itself, rather than some supernatural deity, the world would be a much better place. We would be able to learn from our mistakes because we would be able to claim them as ours. We would be forced to take responsibility for the world around us. Every action would be our own; our lives would finally be our own.

Instead of putting our faith in some supernatural deity, we would be putting our faith in ourselves and each other, and in doing so, revive the real human connection that religion stifles.

Liliana, 20, attends the University of Ottawa and is majoring in translational and molecular medicine. She aspires to become an OB-GYN and work in remote communities in the North, with the goal of improving women’s access to healthcare.

“When you remove God from the equation, everything becomes a lot more personal. Your mistakes become your own, your responsibilities unquestionable.”

FIFTH PLACE

It starts with you and ends with society

FFRF awarded Ashley \$1,500.

By Ashley Huh

“I pray you die before you turn away from God!” “I pray your life falls apart and you face every struggle necessary to bring you into submission to God!”

Those are phrases that I thought I’d never hear coming from my father. They deeply wounded me, sending me into a panic attack with painful, temporary paralysis that I was treated for in an emergency room in 2021. Those abusive words marked the decision to finally turn away from believing in a god to believing in myself.

As early as the age of 4, I trusted in the Christian God, Jesus, to carry me through my life. He earned the money I made and the grades I studied for. He owned the brain I had and the emotions and intelligence I possessed. It was made clear to me that my body was not my own and my accomplishments were his. This affected my mental health negatively since the age of 16, coincidentally, the age I was baptized. I was depressed, lonely and ashamed of myself for having doubts. I needed a way out.

During deconstruction, many verses in the bible plagued me on my journey to believing in myself. An excerpt from John 15:5 specifically haunted me: “Apart from me, you can do nothing.” To me, this was a challenge to prove to myself that I am

“This past spring semester, I passed five STEM classes, four of which were upper-level mathematics. I cried from pure joy on May 16. I had succeeded in school on my own, without a single prayer being uttered from my lips.”

the writer of my own story and that I am responsible for my accomplishments.

One year ago, I vowed to never pray for help again. I have found trust in myself after deconstructing, taking antidepressants and expressing myself through clothing and piercings. I have overcome anxiety, depression and shame by finally loving myself enough to trust my judgment and intuition. This past spring semester, I passed five STEM classes, four of which were upper-level mathematics. I cried from pure joy on May 16. I had succeeded in school on my own, without a single prayer being uttered from my lips. In the past, this would not have been possible without nights of prayer in tears on my bedroom floor and “speaking in tongues” at my Pentecostal church.

In the same way as I was held back by my belief in God, society is also held back.

Roe v. Wade has been overturned. This raises the question: What human rights are next on the agenda for religious politicians? Banning birth control, taking away the ability for a woman to have an education, career, and vote, stripping LGBT+ rights, and banning gay marriage all come to mind. We are moving backward as a society.

To quote Blaise Pascal, “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.” The world would have fewer wars and strife, abuse, and turmoil if humankind believed in itself. Instead, by believing in a god, everyone is turned against each



Ashley Huh

mines science, promotes holy wars like the Crusades and the war in Iraq, promotes terrorist groups like al-Qaida and QAnon, reduces women to baby-making machines with no right to family planning, and destroys the Earth.

The Earth is going uncared for due to the religious imposing their harmful “dominion” and “afterlife” views on the government. Why care for the world when the religious are required to dominate it and simply return to their home in the sky once it is destroyed? All religious beliefs have contributed to a toxic society and future for our children. Trusting in a deity is harmful, but by believing in oneself we can bring about peace, which will in turn promote the advancement of society.

Ashley, 22, is a senior at the University of Houston, majoring in mathematics-data science and computer science. “For the past two years, I have struggled with being accepted by my strict, Pentecostal family,” she writes. “I have faced opposition from my father in the form of no financial and emotional aid. This has shaped me into who I am and I have come out stronger for it.”

‘IN SCIENCE WE TRUST’ Self inking stamp



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SIXTH PLACE — MR. MADISON ARNOLD AWARD

Religion: A promise or a threat

FFRF awarded Eleanor \$1,000.

By Eleanor McHugh

They walk asleep — their heads stuck in tomorrow. Children wait at the injustice of the present, but they pay no mind. “Everything is fine,” they think. “Justice will be served in the afterlife.” Religion poisons the masses into violent inaction. The belief in an afterlife, a God, discourages the urgent action necessary to solve the world’s biggest challenges. John Lennon’s words echo in the caverns of my mind, “Imagine there’s no heaven, it’s easy if you try. . . Imagine all the people living for today.” Unfortunately, this reality is difficult to realize given the overwhelming comfort that believing in God provides. I have often found myself leaning toward this comfort during times of strife, only to be reawakened by reality.

“When will the American moment of reckoning occur where we shun the veiled theism forced upon us in pursuit of true liberty? A nation that extolls the right to religious freedom has yet to grant freedom from religion to its citizens.

The concept of a god allows empathetic people to sleep soundly knowing the extent of the human rights atrocities occurring outside their very doors. Who would want to give that up? The concept of a god is forced upon the citizens of the United States. Even the Pledge of Allegiance reads like a perverted nationalistic prayer. “One nation under God” a choir of school-children chants, and, if you listen carefully, you may even hear an “Amen” at the end. Before children are even taught to read, they are conditioned to believe in God. Of course, this violates the precedent set by the Supreme Court case Engel v. Vitale, banning school prayer. Yet children are far too young to know their rights in the face of the impending theistic machine. Even our money is religious advocacy. “In God We Trust” is printed on our dollars and coins. This is a very intentional method of theistic propaganda. In the



Eleanor McHugh

hands of millions of people, the currency of one of the most economically influential nations in the world extolls the merits of “God.” This is reminiscent of the imperialistic nature of U.S. mercantilism in forcing evangelism on peoples of other countries. The economy is a tool carrying the plague of theism to unsuspecting victims. What is the purpose of this heavy-handed American theism? It is far from an indication of the devout

religious tendencies of the U.S. government. This propaganda is far more deliberate and sinister. The purpose of this is to persuade the masses into passivity. Religion is a sedative that prevents the organized action of the people against the injustices of the world and the injustices of their own government. When will the American moment of reckoning occur where we shun the veiled theism forced upon us in pursuit of true liberty? A nation that extolls the right to religious freedom has yet to grant freedom from religion to its citizens. “In God We Trust” is not a virtue, but a threat. A threat against action, that has thus far been successful. I urge the theists to wake up. For too long I have walked among the sleeping masses, the passive. It is only when we rebel against our forced delusions of God that we can truly begin to see the world for what it is and correct injustice instead of waiting for an imagined force to do it for us. Eleanor, 20, attends Long Island University. “I am an avid environmentalist and enjoy climbing, art and travel,” she writes. “I am invested in international public policy surrounding environmental issues and am majoring in global studies to find nuanced international solutions to global problems.”

SEVENTH PLACE

The impact of religion on progress

FFRF awarded Lydia \$750.

By Lydia Woolwine

People often use religion to find guidance and meaning in their life. Some people truly need to believe in an omnipresent and omnipotent deity to guide them through tough times, give them purpose and teach them morality. Sadly, with religion comes power, and with power comes corruption. Belief in a strong hierarchical religion leaves the common person vulnerable to those in power. Any omnipresent being would be completely aware of this injustice and would still choose to turn a blind eye to the suffering caused by belief in their existence. From the outside looking in, it is easy to see the negative impacts religion has had on humankind. From Galileo to LGBTQ+ rights, religions have held humanity back from cultural and scientific advancement. All religions promote the idea that ancient stories and myths should be believed as true, with absolutely no



Lydia Woolwine

justification. A past example of religion interfering with scientific progress is the infamous Galileo affair. Galileo was told to stop teaching, defending or sharing his research, which defended the theory of heliocentrism. In 1633, Galileo was tried and convicted of heresy for publishing a book that advocated for heliocentrism. This time period could

have been an era of great improvement in our knowledge of astronomy and physics, but, instead, the church halted and delayed that progress because it believed scientific advancement to be punishable as heresy. In the modern day, an example of religion interfering with the advancement of science is found in stem cell research. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops opposes embryonic stem cell research. Appeals to religion are central to many arguments against stem cell research. Stem cell research is important, with great potential to advance humankind that is currently being slowed due to the opinions of many religious powers. Religion promotes the destruction of societal evolution through ancient standards and divisive tactics. Historically, traditional religious values have conflicted with the human rights of some people. For instance, the rights of people who identify as LGBTQ+ are still a controversial topic in several countries. In the 10 countries that still hold same-sex relationships punishable by death, the official interpretations of Sharia, or Islamic canonical law, are used as justification for this violation of human rights and personhood. I am a nonbeliever. I am the keeper of my actions. I believe not in destiny or in fate but in myself. Because of this belief, I have been able to accomplish more than an average person my age. This belief helped me to understand

“From the outside looking in, it is easy to see the negative impacts religion has had on humankind. From Galileo to LGBTQ+ rights, religions have held humanity back from cultural and scientific advancement.

that I have to work for the things that I want. I cannot rely on a higher power to help guide me through tough situations. It is entirely up to me to make myself into the person I want to be. For example, by doubling my workload in my freshman year and working hard through every summer, I graduated high school with an associate’s degree at 17. During my senior year, I started my own small business while working full-time. Now, I am happy to finally pursue higher education at the University of Houston. I attribute my achievements to my faith in myself and not in destiny or any supernatural deity. Though, I must always acknowledge the privilege I had to end up where I am today. I am immensely grateful for the supportive people I have who raised me and facilitated my growth as an individual. If we, as humans, put the time, energy and resources we currently pour into religion into ourselves and our knowledge, we would improve our society and create a more welcoming environment for our future generations. Lydia Woolwine, 19, attends the University of Houston, majoring in physics, with plans to get a master’s degree in medical physics. “In my free time, I enjoy painting and making art,” Lydia writes. “Designing jewelry is another passion of mine, and I have even started my own small business dedicated to selling my designs. I volunteer as much as I can at a small wildlife rehabilitation center near my home.”

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EIGHTH PLACE

The fog of religion

FFRF awarded Rio \$500.

By Rio Velasco

I believe in myself and people I trust, not a mythical being. I know from experience that I can depend on myself, my judgment and my own powers of reason. Belief in a mythical being strips one of not just the ability, but even the right, to their own thoughts, desires and passions. When a person puts all their faith into another, whether a person or a god, they are no longer capable of making fully rational decisions. I do not need the crutch of faith in an all-powerful, omnipotent deity in order to live an ethical life. Without the ability to think rationally, the individual and all of society suffer, as history has shown many times, and as epitomized by current events.

My parents, both scientists, were raised Roman Catholic but left the church, freeing themselves from the strictures of theology. I was raised nonreligious, but not without knowledge of different faith systems. My parents made sure I was educated about religions to protect me. With this knowledge, I am prepared to see through the facade, with an understanding of why religious people think the way they do.

My sister and I grew up in rural Kentucky. It was great living on a farm, raising livestock, learning to hunt and



Rio Velasco

fish, and building robots. My parents wanted us to have as many experiences as possible and the freedom to travel and to not be indoctrinated by public school teachers, so we were homeschooled.

The first question that people in our town would ask is, “What church do you go to?” This is a very uncomfortable question because to say “None” leads to “Why?” It is difficult to co-exist in a small, rural, religious community as an atheist. Being an “out” atheist/freethinker closes many minds and doors. Some friends told my sister and me that we were awfully nice people and wondered, “How can you be atheists?” It seemed incongruous to them that we could be eth-

ical people without believing in God. This, for me, sums up the overarching problem — to religious people, one can’t be an ethical, moral person without religion.

Religiosity has affected the American political system throughout its history. I agree with Robert Ingersoll and Barry Goldwater, along with many others, who were afraid of the influence of religion in politics. People who believe that they have God on their side will not compromise, and governing requires negotiation and compromise.

When those in positions of political power refuse to reach across the aisle to craft solutions, then society as a whole suffers.

Our current political system cannot control the negative influence of religion on society, specifically pressure being brought to bear by the Christian right, which is advocating Christian nationalism. This push by a subset of religious politicians to make all aspects of American life be governed by the Judeo-Christian narrative is a prime example of how blind faith overrules reason, with disastrous consequences, both environmentally and socially.

Besides historically marginalized groups such as Blacks and other people of color suffering more injustices, women, Native Americans, LGBTQ+

and anyone not within the cult of Christianity will lose rights they have fought long and hard for.

Imagine what humanity could accomplish if even a portion of the energy spent on religious activities went toward solving problems such as climate change, poverty, war and discrimination, to name a few. Without religious ideology in the way, humans would have the mental and emotional freedom to more clearly assess the existential issues facing humanity. Without the fog of faith, fewer wars would start, since many are faith-based disagreements.

Religious tax exemptions would not exist and more money would go toward infrastructure, health care, education and other social needs. Charitable giving

would be diverted from religions and go to other humanitarian organizations. In short, the world would be a better place for all.

Rio, 22, attends the University of Louisville, where she is majoring in liberal studies, although she is currently studying abroad in Pau, France. She is a member of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars, the campus French club and the Freedom in Chance club. Her background includes over 10 years of training as a ballet dancer, while being homeschooled, raising and showing dairy goats, and building robots for academic competitions.

“I do not need the crutch of faith in an all-powerful, omnipotent deity in order to live an ethical life.”

NINTH PLACE

Religion limits capacity of humanity

FFRF awarded Anjaly \$400.

By Anjaly Nagarajan

In a town filled with Christians, I felt out of place as my classmates proudly discussed their church retreats and confirmations. Growing up in a Hindu Indian community, I never identified with family members who sought out arranged marriages based on star orientation. Even among my Muslim friends, I admired but could never imagine memorizing the entire Quran or fasting for a full month.

For the longest time, I thought something was wrong with me because I struggled with placing faith in a deity over my own choices and drive. However, after relying on myself to achieve my goals of getting into my dream school from a small town in Wisconsin and eventually landing my dream internship in the finance industry, I realized that trusting myself is an actionable, concrete method that always will triumph over faith in a deity.

My faith in myself over any supernatural beings stemmed not from a large, life-changing event, but rather a series of smaller experiences where I can trace

all of the outcomes of my life to my own personal decisions and character.

As a result of people trusting deities instead of themselves, individuals in religiously heterogeneous communities and between religiously homogeneous communities foster less trust. Thus, they are not as willing to work together and put together their resources. For instance, looking at the Israel-Palestinian conflict. The two ethnic groups

are arguing over their claim to the land based on religious rights, which can never truly be ascertained. However, if, instead, the two groups combined their minds and resources, they could turn into a

thriving republic rather than one ravaged by war and distrust. Extrapolating this further, think about all the time devoted to religious activities, such as the millions who attend churches, mosques, temples, etc., as well as all the time people devote their lives to their religion, such as priests or nuns. If that time, energy, fervor and passion was directed toward science or improving society, humanity would advance at an exponential rate.

In addition to being more efficient, the world would simply be a better place with humankind trusting them-



Anjaly Nagarajan

selves over faith. Religiously inspired inhumane acts and wars would not occur because there would not be as much distrust between groups.

For instance, from the Crusades a thousand years ago to the recent Afghanistan and Iraq wars, all had root causes of religion fueling the deaths of thousands, if not millions, over time. While greed and power imbalances are often true motivators of most wars, religion is often something that can be used as a justifier for these acts of violence. Furthermore, decisions would be based more on fact and science rather than beliefs, so worries about political problems like the separation of church and state would not occur.

For women in extremely religious

societies, they are even more limited in their clothes, marriage, school and other basic life choices. By handicapping half of a specific society with religious restrictions, these communities are also capping their potential.

Drawing this back to my own life, in elementary school, I struggled with my weight and appearance, so I tried my hand at praying to various Hindu deities. Nothing changed for years because I wasn’t making any actual changes. Once I took my personal issues into my own hands and made tangible changes to my diet and workout regime, I started getting results and developed a passion, now as a national competitor on an Indian-Raas dance team.

Looking back on my religious experiences and my childhood, I am grateful that my parents always prioritized science over everything. They gave me the opportunity and space to come to my own realizations about religion. By constantly reminding me to place more emphasis on my own abilities and decisions, they instilled a strong work ethic and sense of self that I carry into every endeavor of my life.

Anjaly, 20, attends the University of Pennsylvania, where she is majoring in finance and behavioral economics. “I hope to combine my academic, social and personal interests to start my own educational nonprofit that helps entrepreneurs in Third World countries and underrepresented areas in First World countries navigate the complex business and financial world,” Anjaly writes.

TENTH PLACE (tie)

Accountability, not God

FFRF awarded Andrea \$300.

By Andrea Gutierrez

Growing up, I was a devout Catholic for approximately 16 years. Then, I renounced God and my faith in anything above myself as an experiment. While deprogramming myself from everything I had been taught, I realized that religion is fictional and I became much more grounded in reality and my physical environment. In this process, I learned that there is no savior, no higher power to help me with my problems. I must be a self-responsible human and turn to myself if I want to resolve or solve simple and complex issues in my own life.

Prayer and worship resulted in low self-confidence, as did not believing in myself to accomplish my goals, and believing I needed a god to give me the life I wanted. That is no longer the case.

When human beings turn to prayer and other forms of worship, we surrender self-responsibility to solve our created problems. We hope that a god will come through supernatural means

“Do not pray to God to land your dream job. It will not get you anywhere, for nothing is being done.”

and fix issues. Humans pray to God for fear of death. They fear eternal damnation or pain of death, perhaps. This distracts us from being present and attempting to fix what is here and now. People pray for tolerance and acceptance of others; however, nothing is more divisive than religion.

Faith will tell you, “I am right, and they are wrong,” and “Homosexuality is a sin and unacceptable.” It pushes people apart instead of together.

When humankind turns its back to God belief and places trust and confidence in themselves, we find solutions — having self-trust forces one to be creative and determined to solve real-world problems. By deleting the idea of heaven or hell, humans will look at Earth and society and focus on creating the best world for ourselves and all those in it.

For example, by removing the option of God to make our world a better place, we are forced to come together to solve our environmental issues, socio-economic issues, and personal relationships. We cannot rely on outside forces to intervene.

An unfortunate example is that in the United States, school shootings



Andrea Gutierrez

are a recurring issue. Too often, post shootings, we see on social media a call for prayer and faith that things will change. Nothing debunks God or the taught nature of what God is more than this. God is not a loving parent, nor does any god care. We as Americans must turn away from God belief on this issue and find the solution to this evil phenomenon. Abdicating the answer to this issue through prayer to God only delays a solution, whatever that solution may be.

Many people pray to a deity to solve their monetary and economic status. If

one removes faith in God, they can see that they are fully capable of developing themselves and personal skills that make themselves competitive for employment in highly desired careers. Do not pray to God to land your dream job. It will not get you anywhere, for nothing is being done.

In summary, faith in God, prayer and worship is the lack of action. It is the abdication of self-responsibility to do something ourselves and better our world. By placing the world’s issues on our shoulders, in our laps, we are forced to find solutions. We are forced to look at the world’s problems here and now and deal with them. We can no longer pray and attempt to live a good life in the hopes of having a better afterlife. We have one life, it is here, and we must constantly work to improve it for ourselves and others. No one is coming to save us, and we are already here. It must be us.

Andrea, 23, attends Texas A&M International University and is majoring in kinesiology. “I’ve been training people for five years,” Andrea writes. “I love to share my knowledge and help people improve their health and reach their fitness goals. My goal is to become a physical education teacher, inspire and educate many children on how to become more active, and hopefully contribute a little to fighting the obesity problem my country faces.”

TENTH PLACE (tie)

Female sexuality: A sticky issue

FFRF awarded Aubree \$300.

By Aubree Reese

“Girls who have sex with multiple people are like tape. They not only lose their stickiness, but they become dirty from sticking to other pieces of tape.”

Known as the sticky tape analogy, this innovative measurement of social control is one of many metaphors weaponized against women’s sexuality. Being a former Christian, I was 13 years old when I heard this analogy for the first time. In a space where I was supposed to be learning about safe sex, I was told to practice abstinence. To do anything else would result in my “purity” becoming dirty, sullied and devalued.

Of course, this was certainly not



Aubree Reese

the last time I had heard similar messages being preached to me. Whether we are being compared to a flower, a chewed-up piece of gum, or a cup filled with spit, these shame-based metaphors are more than an admonition for virginity. In their canned and pre-rehearsed rhetoric, these rebranded biblical messages of female submission are merely molded into a more “palatable” form to maintain social conservatism.

Like tape, our modern comparisons derive from the biblical notion that women are not people, but bodies that are replaceable, dispensable and free to utilize by others. Just like Eve, our modern metaphors analogize the female body to an inanimate bone that requires a male gaze to validate her worth as a person. This phenomenon demonstrates a sado-masochistic

culture in which there are men who want objects and there are women who are these objects.

Outlined in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, “hee for god only, shee for god in him,” men are likened to God in their right to cast judgment regarding women’s personhood and worth. Eve is considered nothing more than Adam’s “latest found, / Heav’n’s last best gift, my ever new delight.” Her existence is derived from male possession with the sole purpose of satisfying Adam. Under male possession, the female body is subject to external validation to legitimize her sexual worth. In other words, the modern woman is born sinful, a half of the man who is whole.

The problem is not only that these messages are appalling, it is the lack of critical intellectual examination. Why is purity a value that we desire? Who does that benefit? The more we ask these questions, the more we can see the instability of this rationale. Outside of the bible’s text, notions of virginity and purity as we know it are an imagined reality. Purity is a notion that resides only in the imagination of those who utilize theology to determine female subjugation and sexuality. Subscribing to these deeply flattening ideas cheapens the human experience to be nothing more than how we choose to express our sexuality.

“Purity is a notion that resides only in the imagination of those who utilize theology to determine female subjugation and sexuality.”

If humankind were to put faith in itself rather than a supernatural deity, we would be able to turn our focus to people and concepts that are real, including women.

Liberated from the confines of biblical heteronormativity, the female body would not be inherently sexual, but a vehicle of desire with the consent of the individual. Like orgasms, liberation need not come from a man, but from the woman herself. Convinced of their worth as sexual beings, women would finally become as insatiable and greedy about orgasms, love and care as they have always been portrayed. Women would finally be able to enjoy all the luxuries men have been afforded since the dawn of time. Contraceptives, extensive sex education, and healthy sexual appetites would be permitted to flourish in the absence of purity. Ultimately, they would finally make the world theirs, too.

Aubree, 20, attends Western Oregon University where she is majoring in American Sign Language Interpreting Studies: Theory.

“One of my greatest passions is American Sign Language,” she writes. “I became passionate about sign language as a teenager when I stumbled upon a video of an interpreter signing a song. From that point on, I became transfixed and dedicated to not only mastering my ASL fluency, but becoming immersed within deaf culture.”

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College essay honorable mentions



Kye Binik



Robert Ebersole



Abigail Jablon



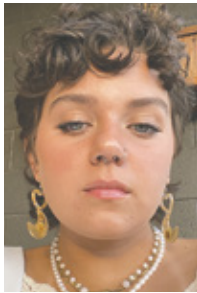
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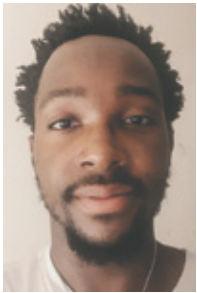
Jonghyuk Park



Shelby Rhoades



Virginia Sands



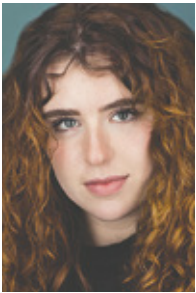
Xavier Thompson



Lennon Turner



Katie Aaluk Watts



Kami Weinstein

The following are snippets taken from the essays of those who earned honorable mention.

Instilling in a child that they are causing their own suffering because they sinned utterly destroys that child. It took me many years to build myself up, have faith in myself, and realize that I do not need religion to be a good person.

Kye Binik, 23, is from Medford Lakes, N.J., and attends Rowan University.

The idea that something was “God’s plan” is a convenient way for religious followers to justify any act, whether it be a tragic or fortunate event.

The time spent praying, worshipping, proselytizing, and studying a religious text utilized in organized religion could easily be spent on improving oneself and one’s own ability to actualize their hopes and achievements.

Robert Ebersole, 22, attends the University of Arizona.

In the eyes of many of our Christian citizens, it is more important to honor the will of a higher being, a God that provides no support for the children in foster programs, or the mothers in dire financial situations, or the survivors of sexual assault.

Abigail Jablon, 21, is from Liberty Hill, Texas, and attends Texas A&M University.

The world would be better without religious ideologies impairing our lives. Believing in ourselves can only bring change sooner because we aren’t relying on any miracles.

Jana Kimball, 19, is from Pittsburgh and attends the University of Pittsburgh.

The influence of a deity strips people of a degree of personal agency, and it entirely eliminates the idea of chance. This is problematic for individuals and society as a whole, not only because

of its inherent irrationality, but also because it encourages the absolution of responsibility in favor of unknowable, supernatural machinations.

Richard O., 19, is from Hockessin, Del., and attends the University of Delaware.

Science has grown leaps and bounds beyond that archaic institution [Catholic Church] that still has an immense hold to this day. It seems incredibly contradictory to take for granted our numerous societal improvements whilst clutching onto the medieval mindset of Christianity.

Jonghyuk Park, 20, is from Stanwood, Wash., and attends the University of Washington.

I know there are billions of women worldwide who are being taught that they are lesser and that their role in life is predetermined by a god who claims to love all his people equally. I also know many Christians who are only “believers” because they want to avoid eternal suffering in a fiery afterlife. I still cannot believe how normalized this kind of teaching is, and how regressive it is to our society.

Shelby Rhoades, 19, is from Woodstock Ga., and attends Kennesaw State University.

When I attended the counseling session, the therapist told me that I needed to read the bible and pray more in order to get better. Her faith was hindering her from helping me in any effective way and I was suffering as a result. Often, Christian therapists use faith as a lazy way of leaving real problems unaddressed.

Virginia Sands, 19, is from Claxton, Ga., and attends Belmont University.

These believers put all their faith,

responsibilities and shortcomings on a singular entity — one that hid certain truths and gave empty promises. I had to escape, and I did eventually. . . . The people I called my friends showed me that their love was conditional when all except for one cut all contact with me. The faith I was supposed to have in myself was completely stifled by the faith I was supposed to have in the so-called loving God that was Jehovah. But eventually, faith in myself began to reemerge.

Xavier Thompson, 20, is from Chicago and attends Governors State University.

A person who thinks the rapture is soon isn’t going to be making much progress in solving climate change. A person who believes that paradise awaits them in death isn’t going to make rational decisions regarding their safety. So, whenever strong faith in a deity comes to dominate the collective thinking of a society it reaches a point where advancement grinds to a halt and people are guided not by reason and truth, but by dogma.

Lennon Turner, 20, is from Shabuta, Miss., and attends Jones College.

I have found that having faith encourages people to relinquish agency in their own lives by insisting some deity has an all-knowing plan for every

human on Earth. There are no choices left to be made when every option is predetermined by a higher power.

Katie Aaluk Watts, 20, is from San Jose, Calif., and attends San Jose State University.

I could honestly say I don’t believe in God for any number of reasons. Partially it’s a belief that religion can’t exist without corruption and manipulation. Part of it is cynicism. Part of it is the desire to live my life in service to myself, not a higher power. But really, if you boil it down to its core, it’s because many religious people believe in their religion because they were raised to. Because their families did. Because they were exposed to it from birth.

Kami Weinstein, 21, is from Freehold, N.J., and attends Rutgers University.

Making the decision to leave the LDS church was easy. Figuring myself out and trying to fill the hole in my mind of who I am living for was hard. I searched time and time again with my family to find other religions, other versions of a God to believe in, but after a few long years, I realized that these variations of God and his expectations were derived from the human mind and were engraved in the heads of many to create a level of conformity.

R.W., 23, is from West Valley City, Utah, and attends Western Governors University.

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The religious right’s fight over education

By Alfie Kohn

Christian conservatives are banning books and censoring school curricula — and not for the first time. Materials dealing with sexuality and sexual orientation have always been popular targets for them; indeed, researchers have found that literally nothing outrages highly religious people more than “violations of conventional sexual morality.”

Their earlier attempts to restrict what can be taught in science class (such as how life evolves), meanwhile, have given



Alfie Kohn

way to prohibitions on what can be taught in history class (such as the prominent role that racism has played in American history). But the authoritarian impulse has not stopped there. For one thing, many of the same activists have simultaneously mounted a campaign of intimidation against school authorities for implementing public health measures to prevent the spread of Covid. For another, they have begun “targeting school initiatives centered on students’ mental health and emotional well-being” — until recently viewed as an uncontroversial and even “unifying idea” — claiming that social-emotional learning (SEL) programs are efforts to “indoctrinate” children.

Even more ominous is how the right-wing furor over these issues has been leveraged to attack democratic public schooling itself. The primary provocateur stirring up hysteria about teaching unsettling historical truths (and about LGBTQ educators) has acknowledged that these organizing efforts are ultimately intended to destroy public education — a “naked attack on the very existence of public schools” that has been actively abetted by leading Republican politicians.

Alongside new laws to ban certain works of literature or readings about race, 22 states passed laws to expand “school choice” measures just in 2021. And all of this — the censorship, the attacks on public schooling, the anti-vaccine and anti-masking protests — is defended in the name of “parental rights.”

Mindful of Mark Twain’s observation that history often rhymes, I decided to revisit the last major surge in the religious right’s efforts to muzzle educators. It turns out that quite a bit of material from the 1980s and ’90s was available on my bookshelves and in my file cabinets. (Apparently if you live long enough and resist the urge to throw stuff out, you are no longer a mere hoarder but an “archivist.”)

One source I found was an account of how conservative Christians fiercely opposed multicultural language-arts anthologies in the 1970s.



Image by Shutterstock

Alfie Kohn writes: “Legislation compelling teachers to rely on explicit phonics instruction was introduced by Republicans in many states — especially those in which the party was dominated by the Christian right.”

James Moffett spent time talking with the leaders of that movement and came to realize that the rich range of ideas and viewpoints in those books was exactly what fundamentalists don’t want. They believe that most of the topics English teachers think make good discussion are about matters they consider already settled. The censors really wanted to fill up schooling with rote learning of facts and avoid student thinking. They wanted, for example, more grammar, which has no subject matter, and less literature.

As I sifted through other books and clippings, I discovered something interesting. The last time around, groups like the Moral Majority and Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum were keen to control not only what students could be taught, but how they could be taught.

The most salient example of politicizing pedagogy concerned how children learn to read. A 1985 essay in *Education Week* explained that, to conservative activists, “only systematic phonics, employing sound-symbol decoding, is acceptable. . . . Reading comprehension is to be taught. . . . [using] didactic reading materials and literal-level questions.”

By the 1990s, Nicholas Lemann reported that reading instruction had become “one of the main organizing issues for the Christian Coalition.”

Legislation compelling teachers to rely on explicit phonics instruction was introduced by Republicans in many states — especially those in which the party was dominated by the Christian right.

Mel and Norma Gabler, known for their successful campaigns to censor textbooks in Texas (and then elsewhere), were also outspoken on this issue, as were Cal Thomas, James Dobson, John Rosemond and others. Pat Robertson announced that learning to read is “a breeze . . . if reading is taught the way God made us to talk — by syllables, by what is called phonics.”

The flip side of this defense of phonics was a coordinated attack on a model known as Whole Language, which critics sometimes confused with a “whole word” method of teaching reading and also falsely depicted as representing a complete repudiation of phonics.

Whole Language actually challenged the assumption that traditional phonics instruction is the only way to help kids learn to read and offered a broad array of strategies for decoding, typically teaching letter-sound correspondences in the context of making sense of engaging stories.

A child who is taught only phonics rules may be able to pronounce a word flawlessly without having any

idea how it’s related to the words on either side of it or the ideas those words are intended to convey.

(In the decades that followed, conservatives have continued to demand explicit phonics instruction for everyone, but ironically their activism has been amplified by efforts to rebrand this campaign as “the

Science of Reading” — even though good science actually fails to support it.) Viewed from a distance, it may seem odd that the way reading (or anything else) is taught would be as politically charged as curriculum content. I mean, you can see why conservatives might object to inclusive sex education or would prefer patriotic propaganda to a troubling discussion of historical realities, but why do they care about pedagogical strategies?

The answer turns on the central role that religious dogma has always played for social conservatives. That link was clear during the heyday of the Moral Majority, but these days less attention is paid to how religion continues to drive right-wing activism on a range of educational, social and political issues: the Jan. 6 mob attack on the Capitol (which has aptly been termed a “Christian insurrection”) and the broader movement to keep Trump in power after he lost the 2020 election, QAnon and similar conspiracy theories (which are “propelled by religious faith and the language of evangelical Christianity”), the Ottawa truckers’ protest, and, indeed, virtually every variant of extremism that has come to define the Republican party.

Just as social conservatism is all about religion, so religion — or at least this version of it — is all about not only order and obedience, but also faith (which means belief without evidence) in the conviction that truth resides, fully formed, in certain texts.

Carole Edelsky, an emeritus education

professor at Arizona State University, has explained that “the far right’s love affair with phonics” reflects its “universe of moral absolutes,” the goal being to decode “what is ‘there’ [and to affirm] appropriate hierarchies — the authority of text over interpretation and ultimately of (the Christian) God over man. To the theocratic right, promoting phonics is a tactic for asserting Christian control of schools.”

Whole Language, by contrast, not only encourages active interaction with texts but gives students choices about their reading and writing.

But to Phyllis Schlafly, any departure from strict phonics instruction makes it less likely that students will accept everything in the bible as literal truth.

Of course, obedience also figures prominently in the religious right’s insistence that parents should rely on corporal punishment to break a child’s will. Thus, it’s fascinating to hear conservatives talk about discipline and pedagogy in the same breath, as did one member of the Texas State Board of Education in the 1990s who put a list of rules for her four children “on the refrigerator, what they got a swat for and what they didn’t get a swat for. Those were the rules of the house. You obeyed those rules or you didn’t” — just as in school “we tell children what is right, how to spell a word, what the correct answer is.”

But reading was not the only example of how conservatives’ educational activism made the jump from curriculum to pedagogy. They were also enthusiastic about Direct Instruction, in which teachers read from prepared scripts, drilling children on the basics of each subject in a highly controlled, even militaristic, fashion, offering reinforcement for correct responses as if they were training pets.

In 1998, highly complimentary articles about this method (and its creator, the behaviorist Siegfried Engelmann) appeared in the *National Review* and the house organ of the conservative Heritage Foundation, while an endorsement of E.D. Hirsch Jr.’s *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* was featured in the Eagle Forum newsletter. (A “bunch o’ facts” conception of education pairs well with a teacher-centered, control-based form of instruction.)

Right-wing activists, in short, didn’t just insist that children must be protected from ideas that might lead them to question their parents’ worldview; they also wanted to make sure that learning itself is conceived as a fundamentally passive process. The teacher’s job is to transmit objective facts and absolute truths; the student’s job is to absorb them.

Educators who instead emphasize active learning, with children invited to construct meaning, pose just as great a threat to those on the right as those who reveal disturbing truths about racism or debunk a beloved fable about the origin of life on earth.

It’s entirely possible that religious conservatives will again decide that issuing education gag orders is not enough and will also demand traditional forms of teaching. That should alarm all of us who want students to read critically and with deep understanding, to think deeply, remain curious, and eventually participate in sustaining — or reviving — a democratic society.

FFRF Lifetime Member Alfie Kohn writes and speaks widely about education, parenting and human behavior. His 14 books include *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, *Punished by Rewards*, and *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*. This article is abridged from an essay that appears on his website, alfiekohn.org, and includes references to the material he cites.



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

LETTERBOX

Supreme Court has been acting as its own god

While Congress is prohibited from establishing a religion, the Supreme Court has been actively doing this with impunity since the 1950s — and behind closed doors. My guess is the supreme god of the court has a good-natured side called Jehovah and a bad-natured side called Yahweh, a construct for deciding legal issues like abortion.

Evidence of this new religion to eventually govern the United States follows from insertion of the word “God” into the Pledge of Allegiance and enacting the religious phrase “In God We Trust” on U.S. currency since the 1950s. The judge/priest Neil Gorsuch wants Ten Commandments displays, which would give the court much greater authority and powers through God-belief religion. While the “god” was not identified by the court, by default it is the Supreme Court God, since they are the ones who authorize it.

Missouri

Freedom of thought is paramount

Since extricating myself from the limiting perspective and beliefs of my religious birth culture, I have been writing to liberate others. It was not easy. My ability to communicate was, at best, mediocre, which was a valued condition (and conditioning) of Mormonism.

Millions of people are held captive behind the defensive mechanisms of religious cultures. Guilt and shame are yet the weapons of church. The mission? Stay in power. The means? Control the vote. The long term goal? Obliterate the wall.

The wall gone, no matter how small the number of radical religious people remaining, they will own the system and freedom of thought will be a thing of the past.

Human life is more important than religion.

There are many trapped in fundamentalist, religious cultures that want to be in control of their own destiny. They don’t have a clue how to go about self-liberation. My heart is linked with theirs. Their freedom, like mine, is paramount.

Washington

Dan Barker’s book changed my life for the better

This is a letter of thanks to Dan Barker for his wonderful book *Godless*. I used to be a fundamentalist Christian and it was that book which was the first of many that started me on the path toward atheism. As a show of my appreciation, I am becoming a member of FFRF.

The phrase “Christian nationalist” would have described me in the past. I am a graduate of Pat Robertson’s Regent University law school. Before I read Dan’s book, I wasn’t familiar with him as a person, but I was certainly familiar with FFRF. It was the “boogie man” at Regent University, and my professors would often derisively refer to your organization.

When I first came across your book in 2012 at the San Francisco Public Library, I was looking for something to help me in my outreach as an evangelical. I was trying to show Mormons how ridiculous Mormonism was and was looking for a book about someone

No cross to bear



FFRF Legal Assistant Greta Martens took a trip to Kentucky, and stopped in Effingham, Ill., on the way so she could get her picture taken in front of the mural that formerly had a Latin cross painted on it. In 2020, FFRF convinced the city to remove the cross.

“It was cool to be in Effingham, home of the world’s largest cross, and Kentucky, a place inundated with religion, and see FFRF’s impact,” Martens said. “I think we’ve all felt like lately it’s become harder and harder for us to win these battles, so it made me smile to see our successes in person.”

who had lost their religion.

I found your book and it stunned me! I had never been exposed to the arguments in the book. So, I researched more to prove you wrong, but was unable to. I drifted in liberal Christianity for a while, not wanting to throw the baby out with the bathwater, until, as Dan put it, “I discovered there was no baby.” The process took several years and dozens more books, but eventually I became an atheist.

I want you to know that the work you are doing is making a difference and it is appreciated. I never realized until I deconverted as to what a mental prison Christianity is. I have cherished my freedom ever since leaving. Congratulations, not only did you inactivate a Christian nationalist attorney, but you also convinced him to switch sides.

California

Curtis’ indoctrination column was excellent

Jim Curtis’ article “Religious indoctrination is child abuse” is spot-on. It was well thought out, well written and well presented. Cutting edge thinking like Jim’s is invaluable. Please make him a regular Freethought Today contributor.

California

Atheists are better for society than believers

This is a portion of a letter to the editor that appeared in the Muscoda (Wis.) Progressive.

America is easily the most religious among the wealthy democracies, and weekly church attendance is higher than

Europe. If religion actually brought safety and no crime, America would be the safest place to live. It is not. Rather, we are the only country where mass shootings occur on a frequent basis. As the Washington Post’s Paul Waldman put it, “If the United States is simultaneously the most religious wealthy country and the most violent, a lack of religion clearly isn’t our problem.”

Contrary to popular myth, studies found that atheists are more financially generous than Christians. On one hand, 75 percent of the Christian giving is to the church for religious activity and spiritual development, not helping the less fortunate. Of nonreligious people, 56 percent overall donate directly to feed the hungry, house the poor, and fight for the underprivileged.

Religion provides an external control for people. It establishes rules and laws, such as the Ten Commandments and Beatitudes, that create the guardrails for people’s behaviors, though they are often honored in the breach. These “laws” are an external guardrail.

Secular people operate from internal controls. Internal controls are far more effective, precisely because they are internal. We are good without God.

Believe what you want, but what you can’t do is force your belief on others. Look at the facts: It is not atheists or the absence of God that is birthing mass shooters. It is the fanaticism of Christian nationalists who claim to be acting on God’s behalf.

Arizona

Freedom of religion includes freedom from it

This is a portion of a letter to the editor that first appeared in the Albany Times Union as

a rebuttal to a previous letter.

The freedom of religion in the U.S. Constitution includes the freedom to NOT have a religion or NOT believe in a particular religion. So, yes, freedom of religion includes freedom from religion. I will not impose my belief that religion is a myth, so please don’t impose your belief that religion must exist for me.

New York

Talking over differences is best way forward

My dad was not only a devoted Catholic, born and raised within the fortress walls of Old San Juan Puerto Rico, but also a lifetime member of “The Rosicrucian Order,” a 17th-century European mystical Christian sect with claims to ancient times.

I sat respectfully through many of his talks on Christianity and its connections to the mystical ancient world. After all, what child does not want parental approval and love?

My father and I never had a nasty and loud argument over our differences, but in my teens, while explaining why I was refusing to go to the local parochial high school, I did have to be clear about my views. To his credit, he did not react with anger, but I could see that his feelings were very hurt. Yes, it’s a sad memory to have, but an acceptable and necessary one for the development of the self.

I did not volunteer my views to the subsequent generations in my family. Whenever the subject of religion came up and I was asked, I would share my views and explain why I held them, leaving it very clear that their choices were theirs to make.

Think of the vast increase of knowledge since my childhood. What conversations could be going on today in countless homes of many faiths and how are the current generations dealing with their gaps?

I can only hope that the discussions are healthy and any compromises made are reasonable.

Delaware

Overturning of Roe was dark day for freedom

Most historians regard the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision of 1857 as the most immoral ever enacted by the nation’s highest court. In that case, the court ruled that Dred Scott, an ex-slave who had lived in free territory, had no rights because (as Chief Justice Roger B. Taney proclaimed), Blacks, who are “beings of an inferior order had no rights that a white man was bound to respect.”

Do you see a parallel between the despicable Dred Scott decision and the decision to overturn Roe v. Wade? The former denied the rights of people because of the color of their skin, and the latter denies the rights of people because of their gender. Both trample on human dignity, and the latter cancels a woman’s right to decide what’s best for her health and welfare.

Roe v. Wade became a pivotal landmark toward women’s full emancipation. But, now, five people’s religious dogma (which has nothing to do with jurisprudence) have returned women to their mission of “childbearing,”

which St. Paul proclaimed as their path to salvation in I Timothy 2:15.

Before Roe v. Wade, countless women died because of the unsanitary conditions in which illegal abortions were performed. Now, thanks to those five people, the deaths will resume. Yes, they’ve taken away the rights of women to control their own bodies, and relegated that authority to 13th century theology.

Overturing Roe was not only a dark day for women’s autonomy, but also for all of us who cherish freedom.

California

School vouchers should not be used

Previously, if someone had asked me if I support school vouchers, I would have said, “No, I don’t think tax dollars should support sectarian religions.” But I would not have said so adamantly because I had never spent time thinking the issue through. Then I read the recent FFRF article on the state of Maine voucher ruling, and it made me think more about the issue.

At first, I thought, well, let’s say each student is allowed \$1,000 per year. If parents want their child to go to a religious school, why not? Everyone is getting the same amount of money. Isn’t that fair? And parents have the freedom to send their child to the school of their choice, whether public or sectarian. Where is the harm?

Then I recognized that some part of that money, let’s say 20 percent, will go to sectarian indoctrination. That means part of my tax money will be used for religious instruction, and an equal amount of money will not be used for foundational school subjects. That money is supposed to be for education, not indoctrination. So, the public is, in effect, forced to support religions they may not agree with.

If anyone asks me if I support school vouchers, I’ll now adamantly say no. And I’ll always be ready to ask the Christian if he would be comfortable having his money support daily prayer readings from the Quran. I don’t think so.

Massachusetts

Gov. DeSantis’ ideas are dangerous for country

I am a Lifetime Member. I recently watched a segment on MSNBC regarding the Florida governor’s training session for teachers. Gov. Ron DeSantis is trying to push the assertion that separation of church and state is not so much a separation as a fluid movement, that our country was founded on “Christian ethics,” and that slavery history is totally misleading and un-

Crossword answers

O	P	E	C		E	N	S		C	P	A				
A	U	T	O		S	N	O	W		B	R	U	I	N	
F	R	U	G		A	G	H	A		L	U	S	T	Y	
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Not going gently down that stream



Member Susan Murawski of Pennsylvania sent us this photo of herself in her new top. “Figured you all can use a chuckle these days,” she wrote. “I hope to wear out this shirt by the November elections by wearing it a lot! Thanks for all you do!”

true. This man, who may run for president, is dangerous.

Michigan

Crankmail shows true colors of many Christians

My favorite part of your newspaper is the Crankmail. The illiteracy of the writers is quite comical. Also, their vocabulary is — interesting. They claim to be devout Christians, but they seem to use more f-bombs than a sailor (and I was a sailor for years, so I should know).

Also, while looking through some back issues of Freethought Today, I re-read the article “Trump prophecy still believed by many.”

The article made an interesting point, that “a slim majority of Americans indicate that God is in control of events on Earth.” Some sects, including the one that I abandoned, go even further and believe that God micro-manages every detail of life and that everything that happens is sent from God and is God’s will.

If someone believes that every event on Earth is God’s doing, wouldn’t it follow that the Biden presidency is God’s will? Apparently not. We name it and claim it, and God must do it, and if events don’t fall into line with what we want, then Satan is interfering, and he must be defeated by powerful prayers that get the attention of God and move him to act.

Anyone reading the last couple sentences might think that I’ve been

Cryptogram answer

The United States of America should have a foundation free from the influence of clergy.

— George Washington

cluding private Catholic schools.

While I thought I had escaped relatively unscathed, the church has found a way to claw its way back in. Oh, they can’t force me to sit in a pew, but they can influence the world around me to make it look a little more like the place where I grew up. And I don’t like the look.

Arizona

FFRF’s work is more important than ever

I finally checked the “renew yearly” box for my FFRF membership instead of letting it lapse for years. I realized FFRF’s fight for freedom from religion for those of us who are nonreligious will not be finished in my lifetime. Thank you for the work you do promoting the “constitutional principle of separation of state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.” Your work is more important than ever, despite a third of the population saying they are not affiliated with a religion.

Also, I was visiting Nashville this summer and it warmed my heart when I spied an FFRF billboard with a humanist couple.

Georgia

Let’s try some updated terms for outdated words

I’m tired of hearing “religion” and “right wing.” Why don’t we call them “mythology” and “wrong wing”?

Maryland

Nonbelievers are just as good as the religious

I’m just an old country boy from Texas, raised on a farm and had to work to stay alive. Mama prayed for better, but she never got it. Then, I had an epiphany when I was 12 — God doesn’t exist. God couldn’t exist.

My greatest grievance with religious people is that they believe that you have to believe in God to be a good person. That’s bull. I am a good person and decent human being without God. How dare they hold themselves up as something better than me.

Texas

Brainwashing is tactic used by religions

Religions attempt to brainwash people into believing they’re sinners, that there’s something wrong with them and to deny aspects of their humanity. As a child, I was led to believe that humans don’t have instincts, and that only animals have instincts. Our sex drive is instinctual and it’s instinctual to learn how to talk.

I found out about “disbeliefer” in 2010 and it’s been a continual source of fresh air ever since.

I see red flags when I hear people using religious jargon as if it’s real.

Thank you for “Freethought of the Day” and for doing all the challenging work of these perilous days as the Christians try to bury democracy. Democracy gets in their way of getting their fix for their addiction to religion and their fix for power and control.

Ohio

FFRF convention Oct. 28-30

Deadline looms!

Join FFRF for its 45th annual convention from Oct. 28-30 at the Hyatt Regency San Antonio. But you need to hurry! The registration deadline is Oct. 10.



John Irving

Please return the form on this page or sign up at ffrf.us/2022convention.

Headliners include famed author **John Irving**, who will give the keynote Saturday night, and comedian/actor **Julia Sweeney**, who will deliver the keynote on Friday night. See below for the full convention schedule.

Early sign-in begins Thursday, Oct.

27, from 4-6 p.m., which coincides with an appetizer/cash bar reception.

Hotel deadlines are coming up fast, too, if you haven't yet booked your room. Go to ffrf.org/outreach/convention/2022-hotel to lock in your accommodations now.

Plan to come early and/or stay late if you want to sightsee in this exotic locale. The convention site is a five-minute walk to the Alamo and many other attractions, including the famous Riverwalk.

We'll see you soon in San Antonio!



Julia Sweeney

Convention Schedule

(Schedule is subject to change)

THURSDAY, OCT. 27

5 – 7 PM Pick up check-in materials
Complimentary appetizers & cash bar

FRIDAY MORNING, OCT. 28

8 AM Check-in re-opens & stays open

9 AM Welcome

- Die Gedanken Sind Frei**
Dan Barker
- Welcome Attendees**
Lisa Strand, Director of Operations
- Year in Review**
Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF Co-Presidents
- Nothing Fails Like Prayer Award**
Jason Benell
- Strong Backbone Award**
Adrienne Martin
- 9:45 AM “Do Mess with Texas”**
Val Benavidez, President of Texas Freedom Network
- 10:15 AM “Alpha God”**
Hector Garcia
- 10:45 AM Break**
- 11 AM Clarence Darrow Award**
Jim Hightower
- 11:45 AM Book signings | Break**

FRIDAY AFTERNOON

- 12 – 2 PM Lunch break with optional activities**
- 12 – 12:30 PM Pick up optional box lunches**
- 12:30 PM Two concurrent workshops**
“On Death, Dying, Disbelief” workshop
Candace Gorham
“What you can do to support abortion rights” workshop
Barbara Alvarez
- 1:30 – 2 PM Break**
- 2 – 3:15 PM Legal Legislative Lobbying Reports**
- 3:15 PM Freethinkers of the Year**
Daryl Cobranchi, Parkersburg court victor
- 3:30 PM Student Activist Honorees**
Will Larkins, Max Nibert
- 4 – 4:15 PM Break**
- 4:15 – 5:15 PM Black Activist & Nonbelief Panel**
Rogiérs Fibby, Andre Forbes, Candace Gorham, Cynthia McDonald, DeAngela Morant and Mandisa Thomas
- FRIDAY EVENING**
- 5:30 – 7 PM Optional Dinner Buffet Break**

- 7 PM Avijit Roy Courage Award**
Ensaf Haidar on behalf of Raif Badawi
- 7:30 PM Julia Sweeney**
- 8:15 PM Godless Gospel**
Dan Barker, Tahira Clayton, Rogiérs Fibby, André Forbes, Candace R.M. Gorham, Cynthia McDonald, DeAngela Morant, Steven Phelps, Mandisa Thomas, Charles Wilson, Amos Perry, and Aaron Hill.
- 9:15 PM Cake and beverage reception**
Autograph — Julia Sweeney

SATURDAY, OCT. 29

- 8 – 9:30 AM**
Optional Nonprayer Breakfast
“Moment of Bedlam”
- 9:30 AM Debut Out of God’s Closet Student Scholarship Award**
Elle Harris
- 9:45 AM Student Essay Winners**
- 10:15 AM Freethought Heroine Award**
Alice Greczyn
- 11 AM Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism**
Daniel Mach on behalf of ACLU
Book signing | Break

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

- 12 – 2 PM Lunch break on your own**
Chapter lunch
- 2 PM Champion of the First Amendment Award**
Anthea Butler
- 2:30 PM Champion of the First Amendment Award**
Nebraska state Sen. Megan Hunt
- 3:00 PM Forward Award**
Amy Hagstrom Miller
- 3:45 PM Book signing for Anthea Butler | Break**
- 4:15 PM “Ask an Attorney”**
Q&A with FFRF attorneys

SATURDAY EVENING

- 6:30 PM Optional Banquet Dinner**
- 8 PM Drawing for Clean Money**
- 8:30 PM Emperor Has No Clothes Award**
John Irving

SUNDAY, OCT. 30

- 9 AM Membership Meeting**
Open to all current FFRF members
- 11 AM State Representatives Meeting**
Adjourn by Noon

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

NATIONAL CONVENTION

SAN ANTONIO | OCTOBER 28-30, 2022

45TH CONVENTION REGISTRATION FORM

Or register online: ffrf.us/2022convention

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

OPTIONAL MEALS / EVENTS

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

Friday, October 28

- Grab & Go Box Lunch** ___\$60 \$___
Registrant 1 ☐ Chicken Salad (Gluten Free) ☐ Vegetable Wrap (Vegan) ☐ Turkey Sandwich
Registrant 2 ☐ Chicken Salad (Gluten Free) ☐ Vegetable Wrap (Vegan) ☐ Turkey Sandwich
- Friday Dinner Reception** ___\$65 \$___
Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free
Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Saturday, October 29

- Non-Prayer Breakfast** ___\$55 \$___
Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free
Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free
- Saturday Dinner** ___\$95 \$___
Registrant 1 ☐ Chicken ☐ Vegetarian Stuffed Squash ☐ Vegan/Gluten Free Ravioli
Registrant 2 ☐ Chicken ☐ Vegetarian Stuffed Squash ☐ Vegan/Gluten Free Ravioli
- Total \$___

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

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

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

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

Name of Registrant 1	
Name of Registrant 2	
<input type="checkbox"/> I am including additional registrants (enclose your additional list, with meals, if any).	
Address	
City	State / ZIP
Phone*	Email*
Credit Card Number	Expiration Date / Security Code
Billing Name / Signature	*Contact information for in-house use only
Registration deadline October 10, 2022 (Unless event is sold out)	
Registration cancellations received Oct. 11 through Oct. 23 may be refunded, less a \$25 cancellation fee. After Oct. 23, no refunds will be provided.	