

# Freethought Today

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Vol. 29 No. 10

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December 2012



FFRF returned its golden Winter Solstice sign, erected to protest religion in the Wisconsin Capitol, for the 17th year in a row. The message, by FFRF President Emerita Anne Nicol Gaylor, reads: "At this Season of the Winter Solstice, May Reason Prevail. There are no gods, no masters, no angels, no devils, no heaven or hell. There is only our natural world. Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds." FFRF erected a whimsy "natural nativity" for a second year in a row to counter more religion. Designed by Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel, the nativity features three wise men (Darwin, Einstein, Mark Twain) plus one wise woman, Emma Goldman. Thomas Jefferson is the

Founding father. Venus, symbolizing the solar system, is the mother saying, "It's a Girl!" The adored baby is black and female. An astronaut and the Statue of Liberty instead of angels appear. The sign reads: "Celebrate the Solstice; The Reason for the Season." See more, Page 7 and back page.

FFRF staff, kneeling from left: Annie Laurie Gaylor, Katie Daniel, Dan Barker, Melanie Knier, (back) Andrew Seidel, Katie Stenz, Stephanie Schmitt, Patrick Elliott, Scott Colson, Bill Dunn, Rebecca Markert, Jackie Douglas and Wendy Goldberg. (Photo by Andrew L. Seidel)

## Inside This Issue



**Student stops prayer at University of Windsor**

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**Max Nielson challenges graduation prayer**

Pages 12-13



## Mountaintop statue on slippery slope

## Judge rules Jesus shrine suit can proceed

The Freedom From Religion Foundation's closely watched lawsuit against the U.S. Forest Service and the Catholic Knights of Columbus council in Kalispell, Mont., got a green light Nov. 27 from U.S. District Judge Dana Christensen.

FFRF sued in February 2012, seeking a declaration that the "continued presence of a six-foot-tall statue of Jesus Christ in the Flathead National Forest, on a 25-by-25-foot plot owned and administered by the United States Forest Service, violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States."

The Knights placed the shrine in 1954 after receiving a special-use permit from the government. The For-

est Service continued to sanction the shrine overlooking the Big Mountain ski run until the most recent lease ran out in late 2010. FFRF filed a complaint in early 2011 and was informed that summer the Forest Service wouldn't renew the permit.

After U.S. Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont., made a fuss, essentially running for Senate on a "save the Jesus statue" platform, the Forest Service quickly reversed the denial. (Rehberg, by the way, lost his Senate bid in November.) FFRF had received such nasty e-mails and phone calls in response to publicity that it chose not to name FFRF members in the initial legal complaint.

After several defendants sought to

*Continued on page 7*



**Skier Bill Cox, Montana plaintiff in FFRF's lawsuit contesting a Jesus statue in the Flathead National Forest, calls the statue "an absurdity."**



# Meet a Member

## Fully fit member in mind, body

**Name:** Donald B. Ardell.  
**Where I live:** Downtown St. Petersburg, Fla.  
**When and where I was born:** July 18, 1938, Philadelphia, Pa., in a hospital named Misericordia (a wobbly start for a future freethinker).  
**Family:** Wife, Carol; daughter, Jeanne; son Jon; and grandchildren, Charles Grant, 8, Cadence, 8, and Buddy Miles, 6.  
**Education:** George Washington University (sociology), University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (urban planning), Stanford University (business) and Union Institute & University, Cincinnati (doctorate in health and public policy).  
**Occupation:** Promoter (as essayist, author and speaker) of exceptional physical and mental health based upon reason, exuberance, athleticism and liberty.  
**Military service:** Three years in the U.S. Air Force.  
**How I got where I am today:** Contingencies as unlikely if less consequential than those described by Stephen Jay Gould of how we all got to be here in



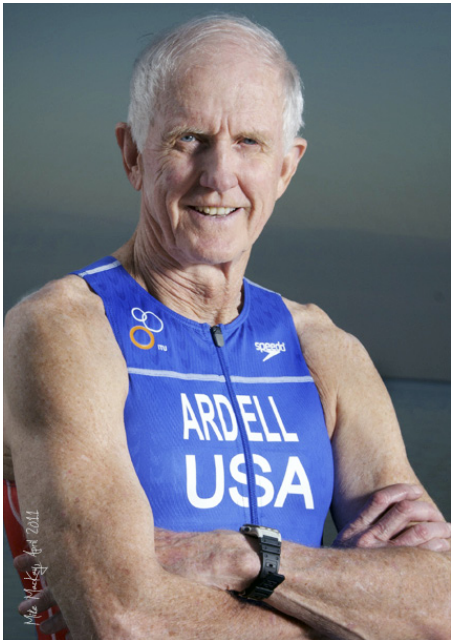
**Don Ardell holds an “orange of life” from his favorite quote by Robert Ingersoll.**  
his glorious opus *Wonderful Life*.  
**Where I’m headed:** More or less in the same direction I’m going, for pretty much the reasons that got me on this path, including but not limited to trial and error; reading, asking questions and taking notes from the profiles of the glorious infidels featured in Freethought of the Day.

**Person in history I admire and why:** Robert Green Ingersoll (1833-99) for the life he led and the body of work he left behind. His speeches still dazzle, inform, inspire and motivate. His passions, themes and causes we, too, embrace and seek yet — secular democracy, emancipation of the oppressed, justice for all, reason as the best guide, joy the highest virtue, happiness the greatest good, science the truest source and natural wonders the only worship.  
Ingersoll’s genius guided secularists then and still to this day on how to be free, rational and appreciative of science and nature.

**A quotation I like:** My favorite comes from a speech Ingersoll delivered at the Lotos Club in New York City on March 22, 1890: “And yet, after all, what would this world be without death? It may be from the fact that we are all victims, from the fact that we are all bound by common fate; it may be that friendship and love are born of that fact; but whatever the fact is, I am perfectly satisfied that the highest possible philosophy is to enjoy today, not regretting yesterday, and not fearing tomorrow. So, let us suck this orange of life dry, so that when death does come, we can politely say to him, ‘You are welcome to the peelings. What little there was we have enjoyed.’ ”

The last sentence of the quotation appears in large letters on the back of the cycling jersey I wear that my wife made for me. It has generated many an affable conversation during post-ride coffee breaks.

**These are a few of my favorite things:** Writing essays on politics, sex, religion and *real* wellness; vegan din-



**Don Ardell has won numerous national and world championships in triathlon and duathlon competitions and is still competing. His website is don-ardell.com/.**

ing; time with my wife, children and friends; classical music; novels; biographies; red wine; triathlons and road races (for starters on things I like).

**These are not:** I try not to pay attention but if pressed would certainly have to mention anything associated with religion, environmental degradation, animal husbandry, hunting for sport, the fact that the 1% control too much of society’s resources.

**My doubts about religion started:** When I learned to think for myself, even a little bit (approximately around age 12).

**Why I’m a freethinker:** I can’t envision any other options that seem sensible, attractive and conducive to the way I choose to think and live.

**Ways I promote freethought:** In my conversations, the essays and books I write, the speeches I give and the life I lead.

## Welcome to new “After-Lifer,” 18 Lifetime Members

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is delighted to announce one new “After-Life” Member, David Ricks, and 18 new Lifetime Members. New Life Members are:  
Anne Alexander, B. Babow & Mike Kirkland (*B. Babow paid for a gift Lifetime Membership for Mike*), Blair Boze, Michael Bucchino (*gift from Adam R. Rose*), Max Cantor (*gift from Adam R. Rose*), Deborah Castleman, Patrick Collins (*gift from Stuart and Laura Litwin*), Louise Ellen Dotter, Brian Fetherstonhaugh, Joel Farzin, Lance Hoshiko, Jay Jones, Rob Manegold, Scribner Messenger, Professor Steven Pinker, Dr. Marjorie Schulman and Ashok B. Varma.  
B. Babow kindly writes: “After buying Mike Kirkland’s Lifetime Membership, we received the FFRF newspaper. I was so impressed with it, how upbeat it was and all the great work FFRF is

doing that I contacted FFRF to buy my Life Membership. Keep up the great work!”  
States represented are California, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Texas, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin.  
Individual “Lifetime Memberships” are \$1,000 designated as a membership or renewal. Individual “After-Life” Memberships (slightly tongue in cheek) are \$5,000, for those who know the value of compound interest and want their gift to “live after them.” Both forms of membership guarantee never another renewal notice and go into a rainy day (safe) endowment.  
Dues and donations to FFRF are deductible for income-tax purposes and are gratefully accepted! Our warmest appreciation to our newest Lifetime Members and new After-Life Member.

### Preying priests?



**Harper Gould, Delaware, said his first reaction when he saw this “Pray for priests” ribbon was “Really? I thought priests are the ones who are supposed to pray for their sinful parishioners. Then I wondered if they meant we should pray for those poor priests who just can’t seem to resist the temptation to abuse children.”**

### A Note to Members

Your address label shows the expiration date of your membership in FFRF, which includes your subscription to Freethought Today and “Private Line.” If it says any month in 2012, please renew! Your prompt renewal (\$40-single membership; \$50-household; \$100 sustaining; \$25-student) saves us time and postage, and is tax-deductible. Freethought Today is published 10 times a year, with combined issues in Jan/Feb and June/July. Send to FFRF, Box 750, Madison WI 53701.

### Send Us Your Address Change Promptly!

Don’t miss a single issue! If you move, notify us directly and promptly. **The Post Office does not forward third-class mail.** FFRF cannot be responsible for replacing back issues if we have not been notified prior to your move. Back issues, while they last, may be ordered for \$2 each.

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December 2012  
*The only freethought newspaper in the United States*



## Thanks to FFRF's seventh 2012 student activist awardee:

# 'Secularism prevails' at University of Windsor

Shawna received a \$1,000 cash scholarship from FFRF.

By Shawna Scott

At my 2010 convocation (or "graduation") for my B.A. at the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada, all attendees were asked to stand in prayer. This was unexpected to me because this is a public university. Also, the concept of a God had otherwise been absent from our learning experiences.

This was the prayer:

*"Eternal God, the source of all goodness, discipline, and knowledge: We pray you to bless this assembly, gather to recognize achievement and celebrate life. Bless this and all universities in their quest for excellence. Be with teachers and students everywhere, that an unending search for truth and justice may be awakened in them. Inspire all researchers, philosophers and writers to provide resources for searching minds. Enable all who discern truth to make the wholeness of human kind their life's goal. Amen."*

Being asked to stand in prayer to acknowledge a God I did not believe in made me feel excluded and disrespected. The ideals mentioned in the prayer did not fit with me or with many other students, so why were we all asked to pay lip service? Why was I not given the freedom to acknowledge the unique

With a moment of reflection, nothing is being imposed on anyone and neutrality is maintained.

factors that helped me in my own personal achievement?

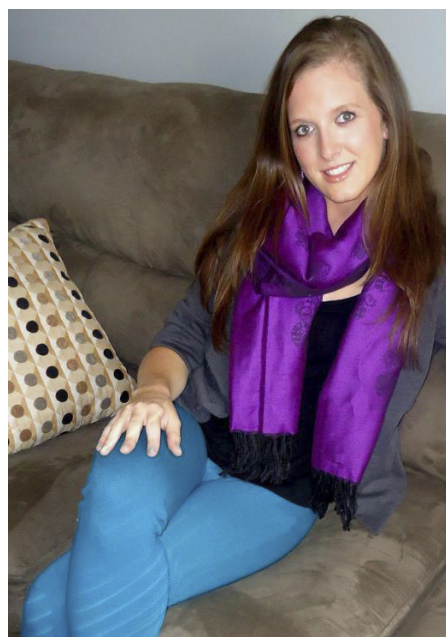
I consulted with members of the Windsor/Essex County Atheist Society. With their encouragement, I wrote an email to university administrative staff to address my concerns and asked that the prayer be replaced with a moment of reflection. I did not receive a reply. I tried again a year later but again received no response.

I attended a Secular Student Alliance conference in July 2012 with several club members. During a presentation, I found myself seated next to Annie Laurie Gaylor. Afterward, I asked her for her recommendations about the prayer at convocation issue. She showed a great deal of passion for supporting our cause.

I jotted down some key phrases that she advised me to include in another letter to the University. I felt empowered to be persistent in advocating for change. Our club membership increased significantly around that time, and I knew that I would have support from club members as well. I decided that I was not going to give up and would try a slightly different approach.

In September 2012, I wrote a third email to the university. We asked that a group prayer would no longer be dictated to us. We urged the university to offer a moment of reflection which would allow convocation attendees to make their own decision as to whether they want to pray, reflect, think about people who helped them along the way, and/or remember their experiences at the university.

A faculty member recommended I also send it to the Office of Human Rights, Equity and Accessibility. Within one month,



Shawna is in a doctoral program in child clinical psychology.

I was informed by OHREA that our request was being discussed at the presidential level. Within a few days, it was announced that the convocation prayer would be permanently replaced by a moment of reflection:

*"This day marks a new beginning, particularly for those about to celebrate their graduation. It is only fitting that we come together to recognize your achievements and commemorate your successes as you continue to your lifelong quest for knowledge and excellence. I ask that you take a moment to reflect on those who guided you along your path of learning, to appreciate our families, our teachers, our peers, the world in which we live, and all that inspires us."*

Secularism prevailed, and I could not have been more relieved. I received my M.A. at the October 2012 convocation, which was the first time in the school's history that prayer was absent. What did I think about during the moment of reflection?

I thought about the wonderful professors, teaching assistants and staff who helped me along the way. I thought about my family, classmates and friends. During the moment of reflection, each convocation attendee was granted the space to be true to his or her own conscience.

### Public reaction

The prayer removal was well-received by students and faculty. Many described the change as "long overdue." But a local newspaper received some letters criticizing the change. Some people were upset that the atheists "win" again.

What they failed to recognize is that

no atheist will be approaching the podium to present a statement about his or her lack of belief in god(s). With a moment of reflection, nothing is being imposed on anyone and neutrality is maintained.

Some argued that the prayer should not have been removed because it is part of a tradition. But with our ever-changing student population, it is imperative that the university continue its dedication to celebrating diversity.

Other critics have argued that the "minorities" have no right to speak out. Similarly, one woman wrote to a newspaper that I "could have simply stayed away from the convocation ceremonies and collected [my] diploma at the office."

Those individuals seemingly support segregation, and that is alarming. The concept of "majority rules" can lead to an abuse of power, violating the basic and inalienable rights of nondominant groups. How much power should the majority have over the minority in the public realm?

Clearly, my journey had its ups and downs, but it was entirely worthwhile. I learned a lot about myself, how to work with others and how to create change. I learned that if you want to make change, you definitely need these two ingredients: a plan and perseverance.

In creating the plan, it is important to consult and network with others. I found it helpful to discuss my plan with club members, faculty members, other club leaders and Annie Laurie.

In being persistent, it is important to modify your approach as needed. In order for society to advance, we must harness our complaints, work together, and advocate for change.

*Shawna Scott is a doctoral student in the child clinical psychology program at the University of Windsor. She has an M.A. in clinical psychology and is president and founder of the 220-member Windsor/Essex County Atheist Society, which is affiliated with Secular Student Alliance and Centre for Inquiry.*



Shawna Scott kept pursuing her goal of replacing prayer with reflection. (Alexandria Photography)

## What Is a Freethinker?



**free-think-er n.**  
A person who forms opinions about religion

on the basis of reason, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief.



FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

P.O. Box 750 • Madison WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • [ffrf.org](http://ffrf.org)

### What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

Founded in 1978 as a national organization of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics), the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc., works to keep state and church separate and to educate the public about the views of nontheists.

The Foundation's e-mail address is [info@ffrf.org](mailto:info@ffrf.org). Please include your name and physical mailing address with all e-mail correspondence.

Foundation members wishing to receive online news releases, "action alerts" and "Freethought of the Day" should contact [info@ffrf.org](mailto:info@ffrf.org).

## Include FFRF In Your Estate Planning

Arrange a bequest in your will or trust, or make the Freedom From Religion Foundation the beneficiary of an insurance policy, bank account, or IRA. It's easy to do.

For related information (or to request a bequest brochure), please phone Annie Laurie Gaylor at (608) 256-8900.

FFRF  
P.O. Box 750  
Madison WI 53701

*Freedom Depends on Freethinkers*



# Heads Up

A Poetry Column by Philip Appleman

## Night Thoughts

Black on black, from Maine to California:  
the starshine is too precious now to keep.  
I'm staking all my luck on one more morning  
while everyone I love is sound asleep.

Suppose tomorrow were the last clear dawning,  
painting the sky with glimmers of desire,  
the last pale cloud, the last bright eagle soaring,  
before the final blossoming of fire—

the last green pine, and one more blue wave breaking,  
the long farewell in one last robin's song,  
teaching us the keenest kind of aching,  
to love that well which we must leave ere long.

They'd feel it come in Washington and China:  
the poison rain, the murder in the snow,  
endless winter, birdless and benighted,  
and sickness in the fields, where nothing grows.

From Paumanok it's black to the Pacific:  
a nightbird says too late, you're in too deep.  
Red telephones are jangling their dark traffic,  
while everyone I love is sound asleep.

© 1996 Philip Appleman  
Reprinted from *New and Selected Poems, 1956—1996*.



Philip Appleman is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Indiana University. His published volumes of poetry include *Perfidious Proverbs and Other Poems: A Satirical Look at the Bible* (2012), *Darwin's Ark* (new 2009 edition) and *Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie* (2009). His nonfiction work includes the widely used *Norton Critical Edition, Darwin*, and the *Norton Critical Edition of Malthus' Essay on Population*. His poetry and fiction have won many awards, including a fellowship in poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Castagnola Award from the Poetry Society of America, the Humanist Arts Award from the American Humanist Association and the Friend of Darwin Award from the National Center for Science Education. His work has appeared in *Harper's Magazine*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, *The Paris Review*, *Partisan Review*, *Poetry*, and *The Yale Review*.

He and his playwright wife, Marjorie Appleman, are both "Afterlife" Members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. They recorded an excerpt of "Noah," *New and Selected Poems*, which is available for sale from FFRF for \$23 ppd., *The Norton Critical Edition, Darwin*, is \$22 ppd., *Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie*, \$27 ppd., *Darwin's Ark*, \$23 ppd., and *Perfidious Proverbs*, \$20 ppd. ([ffrf.org/shop/](http://ffrf.org/shop/)).

### YOUR WEEKLY ANTIDOTE TO THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

#### TUNE IN TO FREETHOUGHT RADIO

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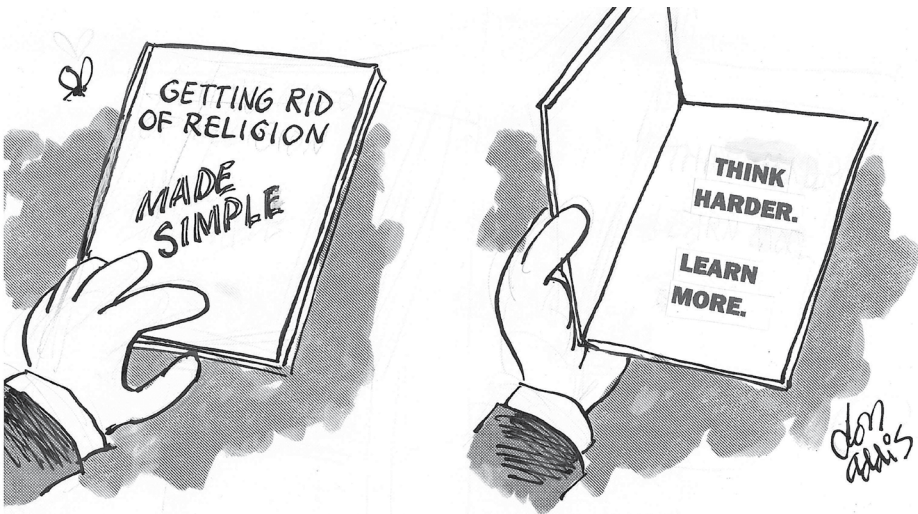


Hosted by Dan Barker and  
Annie Laurie Gaylor

Broadcasts and streams Saturdays at 11 a.m. Central, Progressive Talk The Mic 92.1 FM, Madison, Wis., and over several other stations.

iTunes or podcasts archived at: [ffrf.org/news/radio](http://ffrf.org/news/radio)

Slightly irreverent views,  
news, music & interviews



## Overheard

God's wishes are cited in efforts to deny abortions to raped women and civil marriages to same-sex couples. In our country God doesn't merely have a place at the table. He or She is the host of the prayer-heavy dinner party. And there's too little acknowledgment that God isn't just a potent engine of altruism, mercy and solace, but also, in instances, a divisive, repressive instrument; that godliness isn't any prerequisite for patriotism; and that someone like [resigning West Point Cadet Blake] Page deserves as much respect as any true believer.

**Frank Bruni, column headlined "The God Glut," in which he also notes that Bob Kerrey, former Nebraska governor and senator, told Bruni he's agnostic**  
*New York Times*, 12-10-12

All the pope's tweets are the pope's words. Nobody is going to be putting words into his mouth.

**Greg Burke, senior Vatican media adviser, announcing Pope Benedict's handle on Twitter will be @pontifex (combining "pope" and "bridge builder")**  
*Reuters*, 12-3-12

I'm very pleased that it's one of the 10 words that got picked out. I'm delighted. I hope it may bring more people to understand something about evolution.

**Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, on "meme," a word he coined in 1976, being one of Merriam-Webster's 10 most looked-up words online in 2012**  
*Associated Press*, 12-5-12

Imagine how much easier things would be if Christians who respected separation of church and state took a stand against the illegal actions of some school administrators instead of letting atheists go at it alone.

**Hemant Mehta, column headlined "Why we need to help young atheists"**  
*Washington Post*, 12-5-12

I do not wish to be in any way associated with an institution which willfully disregards the Constitution of the United States of America by enforcing policies which run counter to the same. Examples of these policies include mandatory prayer, the maintenance of the 3rd Regiment Shield, awarding extra passes to Plebes who take part in religious retreats and chapel choirs, as well as informal policies such as the open disrespect of nonreligious new cadets and incentivizing participation in religious activities through the chain of command.

**West Point Cadet Blake Page's letter of resignation from the U.S. Military Academy 174 days before graduating and after he was medically disquali-**

**fied from receiving a commission as a second lieutenant because of clinical depression and anxiety**  
*Huffington Post*, 12-3-12

I think he's guilty, but it's a matter of what he's guilty of.

**Alternate juror excused before deliberations in the trial of Orthodox Rabbi Nechemya Weberman, Brooklyn, N.Y., charged with sustained sexual conduct against a child younger than 13 over a period of three years, starting when the girl was 12**  
*New York Daily News*, 12-7-12

The exciting part is that all the various civic, quasi governmental and religious groups are coming together to make this happen.

**Jeff Corcoran, on a live nativity scene Dec. 8 in a Goshen, Ohio, public park, an event that FFRF attorneys are investigating**  
*cincinnati.com*, 12-6-12

Wouldn't it be useful for a presidential candidate to publish his or her own list of answers to moral questions rather than hide behind the vague generality that religion equals morality?

**Op-ed by Steve Huthman, Brigham City, Utah, who holds a degree in physics and works as a software consultant at Hill Air Force Base**  
*Salt Lake Tribune*, 12-8-12

If it wasn't for your building up the Santa-industrial complex over the years, Christmas would be just another lame holiday like Easter. Christians would then be mucking about talking about Jesus and making the rest of us miserable. Thanks to your organization, Christians are relegated to obsessing like the rest of us on what Kardashians-inspired product/brand to waste our money on.

**Blogger LiP, Mass., letter to Santa**  
*laughinginpurgatory.com*, 11-17-12

Jiizas baal.  
**The bible's shortest verse** ["Jesus wept," John 11:35], in the Bible Society's first-ever Jamaican patois translation  
*Associated Press*, 12-18-12

I am not saying that President Obama is the Antichrist, I am not saying that at all. One reason I know he's not the Antichrist is the Antichrist is going to have much higher poll numbers when he comes. President Obama is not the Antichrist. But what I am saying is this: The course he is choosing to lead our nation is paving the way for the future reign of the Antichrist.

**Robert Jeffress, senior pastor, First Baptist Church in Dallas, in a Nov. 4 sermon**  
*The Christian Post*, 11-8-12



## 2012 Brian Bolton Graduate Student/Mature Student Essay Award winners

# \$9,100 in prizes awarded to graduate students

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has awarded graduate students (or any students 25 or older) \$9,100 in this year's essay competition. Students were asked to describe "Why God and government are a dangerous mix, especially in an election year" in 850- to 1,000 words.

There were six major winners with a tie for fourth place, plus seven honorable mentions. The top six essays can be found on pages 9, 10, 14, and 15.

First place (\$3,000): **Elizabeth Pipal**,

Harvard Graduate School of Design.

Second place (\$2,000): **Wilson Melón**, Purdue University.

Third place (\$1,000): **Lynn Wilhelm**, North Carolina State University.

Fourth place (tie, \$500 each): **Bryan Johnson**, Colorado State University; Vicky Weber, Colorado State University.

Fifth place (\$300): **Jemille Bailey**, Columbia University.

Honorable mentions (\$200 each): **Anastassia Smorodinskaya**, Colum-

bia University.

**Antwon Kennedy**, Kennesaw State University.

**Ashley Miller**, University of South Carolina.

**Justin Vacula**, Marywood University.

**Kristina Beverlin**, University of Kansas.

**Maria Rodriguez**, University of Connecticut School of Law.

**Wanda Thompson**, Western Governor's University.

The awards are made possible by

the generosity of FFRF Lifetime Member Brian Bolton, a retired psychologist, humanist minister and university professor emeritus at the University of Arkansas.

FFRF would also like to extend a warm thank you to FFRF members Dean and Dorea Schramm for providing the honorable mention awardees and the fifth-place winner with a \$50 bonus.

## Pennsylvania commission settles discrimination case

# Freethought Today gets 'church discount'

FFRF helped one of its Pennsylvania members obtain a favorable ruling for nonbelievers from the state Human Relations Commission.

After John Wolff of Lancaster was unable to get the owners of Prudhomme's Lost Cajun Kitchen in Columbia to stop discriminating against atheists and agnostics, he enlisted FFRF's help. The restaurant was offering an illegal 10% discount for customers who brought in a church bulletin.

On April 11, 2011, FFRF Senior Staff

Attorney Rebecca Markert wrote the first of three letters to owners Sharon and Dave and Sharon Prudhomme. Markert pointed out that the discount "violates the federal Civil Rights Act in addition to provisions of state



John Wolff

Attorney Rebecca Markert wrote the first of three letters to owners Sharon and Dave and Sharon Prudhomme. Markert pointed out that the discount "violates the federal Civil Rights Act in addition to provisions of state

civil rights statutes.

"The Civil Rights Act states in relevant part, 'All persons shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, and accommodations of any place of public accommodation . . . without discrimination on the ground of race, color, religion, or national origin,'" wrote Markert, adding, "As a place of 'public accommodation,' it is illegal for Lost Cajun Kitchen to discriminate, or show favoritism, on the basis of religion."

After getting no response, Wolff filed a complaint with the state Human Relations Commission. On Sept. 24, the commission approved the following terms of settlement:

"Respondent will continue to give a discount for any bulletin from any

group oriented around the subject of religious faith[,] including publications from the Freedom From Religion Foundations[,] as long as they maintain the Sunday discount program."

Wolff was notified Nov. 21 by letter of the disposition of his complaint.

Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor noted that FFRF publishes a monthly newspaper, Freethought Today, and several irreligious "nontracts" that apparently now qualify as church bulletins. "We have titles such as 'Why Women Need Freedom From Religion,' 'Is America a Christian Nation?' 'What's Wrong With the Ten Commandments?' and 'What Does the Bible Say About Abortion?'"

Congratulations to John for his persistence and activism!

## Kansas mayor to remove cross from city logo

FFRF has successfully petitioned the city of Buhler, Kan., to remove a cross from its official seal.

After receiving a complaint from an offended Buhler citizen, Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott wrote Sept. 14 to Mayor Daniel Friesen, pointing out it's unlawful for a city to use a Latin cross as part of its official symbol. Elliott cited seven federal court decisions that held crosses on municipal seals and logos to be unconstitutional.

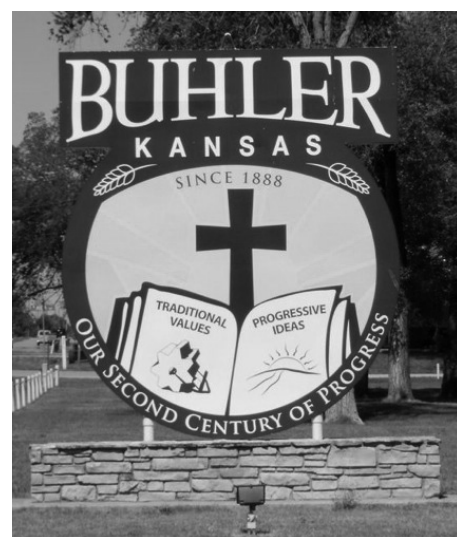
Friesen told reporters that "the city consulted several law firms, which said the city would most likely lose if it took this to court."

"The endorsement of religion in the Buhler seal is particularly egregious because the cross is prominently featured and used to symbolize the 'Traditional Values' portion of the town motto. Courts addressing less prominent depictions have found that the inclusion of a Latin cross among other symbols on government seals and logos violates the Establishment Clause," wrote Elliott.

The mayor correctly noted that if the city were to fight the case it would be wasting taxpayer money.

The story erupted in Kansas and nationally in late November.

The Fox News Channel, in its coverage of what it called "culture war news," relentlessly pummeled FFRF on various nationally broadcast programs and on Facebook. Eric Bolling, who replaced Glenn Beck and kicked FFRF Co-President Dan Barker off the air



The city seal is displayed on a large sign in Albert Becker Park and on official city forms.

last year, said during a segment of "The Five" that the city had a "free speech" right to endorse religion: "Back off, Freedom From Religion. Can't stand that group, by the way. . . . It's groups like Freedom From Religion that are the problem."

The mayor announced the seal will be redesigned without the cross.

Please contact the mayor to thank him for his responsible decision and to affirm why cities can't endorse religion:

**Mayor Daniel P. Friesen**

**602 N Main**

**Buhler, KS 67522**

**Email: daniel@buhlerks.org**

## State/Church Bulletin

### 'Choose Life' plates struck down in N.C.

CNN reported that U.S. District Judge James Fox ruled Dec. 7 that North Carolina's "Choose Life" license plates are unconstitutional.

"The state's offering a Choose Life license plate in the absence of a pro-choice alternative constitutes viewpoint discrimination in violation of the First Amendment," Fox wrote.

Republican state Rep. Mitch Gillespie, who sponsored the bill for the plates, wants to appeal the decision.

Lawmakers voted down amendments that would have created pro-choice alternatives such as "Trust Women. Respect Choice."

### Judge charged for religion in courthouse

The Florida Judicial Qualifications Commission has filed notice of formal charges against Leon County Judge Judith Hawkins for allegedly running a religious materials business out of the courthouse, WCTV reported Dec. 6.

Hawkins is accused of using her county email account, judicial assistant and her office spaces and equipment to create, edit and promote Gaza Road Ministry products "to the detriment of

the prompt and efficient administration of justice."

She makes \$142,000 annually as a judge.

### Texas student refuses school's 'beastly' ID

Northside Independent School District in San Antonio, Texas, which started requiring students to wear radio frequency identification tracking chips this year, is being sued in federal court by sophomore Andrea Hernandez, who refuses to wear the ID tag on biblical grounds.

The Rutherford Institute, an evangelical legal group in Charlottesville, Va., is representing Hernandez. Institute President John Whitehead told the Washington Post that, according to the Hernandez family's beliefs, "any kind of identifying badge from the government is the mark of the beast, which means that you pay allegiance to a false God."

District officials have repeatedly offered to let Hernandez come to school wearing an ID card without the chip and battery. Her lawyers have filed a motion claiming that a badge with no tracking capabilities still runs counter to her Christian principles.



# Real ‘reason for the season’ is astronomical holiday

Dan Barker’s column, headlined ‘We atheists love this time of year like everyone else,’ first appeared Dec. 5 in the Washington Post’s “On Faith” section.



Photo: Brent Nicastro

This season of the year has been celebrated for millennia before the Christian Church usurped it.

By Dan Barker

Charles C. Haynes, in his “Christmas wars” column [Nov. 27 Washington Post], acknowledges that atheists have achieved a victory in the battle to keep religious symbols from dominating certain public property during December. He astutely outlines the reasoning of the courts and municipalities that are opting for fairness and inclusivity for all Americans.

But then, like a sore loser, he calls on nonbelievers to “stay home for the holidays. Let Christian groups set up Nativity scenes in public spaces unanswered in December, and save the atheist messages for another time of year.”

Haynes complains that the “in-your-face tactics” of people like [FFRF mem-

ber] Damon Vix, who organized the nonreligious displays in Santa Monica, Calif., including a Winter Solstice banner from the Freedom From Religion Foundation, have become “counter-productive and needlessly divisive.”

Counterproductive of what? Isn’t diversity — with freedom and justice for all — what America is all about? And if there is divisiveness, who is to blame? Does December belong only to Christians?

Haynes is certainly aware that this season of the year has been celebrated for millennia before the Christian Church usurped it for its own agenda. No respectable scholar thinks Jesus was born in December, if he was born at all.

Many other pagan sun gods and resurrected “saviors” had been purportedly born on Dec. 25, long before a sect of messianic Jews came up with their own version of the story. The Romans celebrated the Saturnalia during December, leading up to the New Year, *Dies Natalis Sol Invicti*, the “Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun,” on Dec. 25, which was the date in the Julian calendar of the Winter Solstice, the actual new year.

The real “reason for the season” is the natural astronomical holiday. We all like to honor the shortest day of the

year with lights, food, gifts, fun, music, and family gatherings, as it signals the return of the sun for another year. While everything in the upper northern hemisphere is dark and colorless, the evergreen signifies hope for a returning spring. None of this is supernatural. It has nothing to do with the birth of a god.

In America, Christians are welcome to celebrate whatever they want. We are happy to share the season with them. They just can’t use the government to privilege their party over everyone else’s.

I understand how Haynes might feel that nonreligious displays during December “ridicule” the precious beliefs of Christians, but what is wrong with ridicule? What is wrong with protest, in this great country that cherishes the freedom of speech and the freedom of religion? Protestantism, for example, is based on protest — it’s right there in the word itself. The Puritans (who eschewed Christmas) based their entire flight to the new world on their ridicule of the Roman Catholic faith. And Catholics have had their inquisitions and holy wars. Religion, at its core, is fiercely divisive, criticizing and ridiculing all other faiths and nonfaiths.

To us nonbelievers, the nativity scene is a ridicule of human nature.

We are all damned sinners who need to be “saved” by bowing down to the baby in the manger who grew up to become a king and dictator who threatens us with eternal torment if we do not submit like slaves to his authority. A popular Christmas carol claims that Jesus came “to save us all from Satan’s power while we were gone astray.” Believers might see a cute baby in a manger, but most nonbelievers see an in-your-face put-down of humanity.

We are not sinners or slaves. We live in a proudly rebellious country that fought a divisive Revolutionary War to get rid of kings and lords, establishing a nation that disestablishes religion.

Nobody should have to stay home for the holidays. We atheists love this time of year like everyone else, and we actually know what we are celebrating: the rebirth of the sun, not the birth of the son. Christians can do whatever they like in their churches and private property, but in the American public square, there is room at the inn for all of us.

Dan Barker, a former minister, is co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and author of *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America’s Leading Atheists* and several other freethought books.

## Countering crèche in Milwaukee



Ed Susterich, who is a recently retired FFRF officer, returned the Foundation’s Winter Solstice sign to the Milwaukee County Courthouse in early December for the second year in a row. A nativity scene began appearing in the courthouse lobby in 2009 with the help of then-County Executive Scott Walker, now Wisconsin governor. FFRF’s letters of complaint went unanswered. With Ed’s help, FFRF placed its sign by the Christian devotional scene. FFRF’s sign says in part:

“At this season of the Winter Solstice, may reason prevail,” and points out there are no gods, devils, angels, heaven or hell but only “our natural world.” The other side of the sign says, “State/Church: Keep Them Separate.”

### State/Church Bulletin

#### Louisiana vouchers ruled unconstitutional

Louisiana State District Judge Tim Kelley ruled Nov. 30 in Baton Rouge that the expanded voucher program in Act 2 of Gov. Bobby Jindal’s educational reform package put into effect this school year is unconstitutional.

Kelley ruled that the program improperly diverts tax dollars from the state’s public school funding formula to private schools, reported Ponchartrain Newspapers.

About 4,900 students have enrolled in 117 private schools with taxpayer dollars. More than 10,000 students applied.

#### New backdoor effort to teach creationism

Indiana State Sen. Dennis Kruse, R-Auburn, who earlier failed to get a bill passed letting schools “teach the controversy” about evolution, has a new idea: Requiring teachers to provide evidence if students challenge their

science lessons. The chairman of the Senate Education and Career Development Committee calls it “truth in education.”

Kruse said, “If a student thinks something isn’t true, then they can question the teacher and the teacher would have to come up with some kind of research to support that what they are teaching is true or not true.”

Gerry Wheeler, National Science Teachers Association executive director, called it a “a creative new evolution that the creationists are going to” and one of the “very insidious ways of trying to get nonscience into the science classroom.”

#### Oklahoma high court reverses voucher ban

In a 7-2 decision, the Oklahoma Supreme Court on Nov. 20 reversed a lower court decision that struck down the state’s school voucher program for special needs students because it used public money to benefit sectarian institutions.

Continued on page 17



## FFRF Legal Victories

### Rock the cradle; save the Constitution

FFRF convinced the town of Century, Fla., to halt a proposal to put a nativity scene on public property.

FFRF took issue in July with the Century's planned erection and maintenance of a nativity scene at Town Hall. Council President Ann Brooks initially told reporters "we all want a manger scene," and said that the council had been budgeting funds to purchase such a display.

In a July 20 letter to Brooks, FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel pointed out that "not all Century residents want a manger scene."

Century has fewer than 2,000 residents

"There are ample private and church grounds where religious displays may be freely placed. Once the council enters into the religion business, conferring endorsement and preference for one religion over others, it strikes a blow at religious liberty, forcing taxpayers of all faiths and of no religion to support a particular expression of worship," added Seidel.

Although no town official has responded to FFRF, a Dec. 6 news story on NorthEscambia.com confirmed a victory: "The Town of Century has declared their nativity scene as surplus property and will sell it to the highest bidder, months after an attorney for a Wisconsin group that represents agnostics and atheists sent letters to the town claiming that a nativity display on public property is illegal."

The nativity scene was later put on private church property "just yards from" Town Hall, the paper reported.

The high bid for the display was \$5 from Faith Bible Baptist Church. Abundant Life Assembly of God bid \$2, and Tabernacle Baptist Church bid \$1.

On Dec. 12, the paper quoted an unidentified town official saying the sale of the nativity scene was not a response to FFRF's complaint, "but was due solely to the aging condition of the manger scene." [You'd have to believe in the Tooth Fairy to swallow that.]

### FFRF limits church sign to Sundays

Endeavour Elementary School in New Haven, Mich., took down a lawn sign promoting a church that rents the school's cafeteria every Sunday.

After receiving a complaint from a local resident, Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert wrote New Haven School District Superintendent Keith Wunderlich on Oct. 11 about the impropriety of keeping a permanent sign promoting a church on school property.

Wunderlich responded Oct. 12, acknowledging that keeping the sign up all week was a problem. He said the church complied with the district's request to only keep the sign up on Sundays.

### FFRF ends Kentucky prayers, church fliers

Elkhorn City Elementary School in Elkhorn City, Ky., will no longer allow organized prayer or display religious ads or fliers in the building.

The school principal and Pike County Schools Superintendent Roger

Wagner took this action as a result of a July letter from FFRF Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert.

A concerned parent had told FFRF that his 5-year-old daughter's teacher had been instructing her students to pray. His daughter told him she'd been praying every day before lunch for the past two years. The parent also told FFRF that the school had posted Christian and church event fliers.

Markert wrote that the school should educate the teacher "about why public school authorities may not abuse positions of trust to proselytize 4-year-olds or any students."

Wagner and the principal each responded in Oct. 30 and Nov. 1 letters to affirm that organized prayer and religious fliers in the schools had ended.

### Proselytizing teacher instructed to stop

A teacher at Carver Middle School in Monroe, Ga., "turned her public school classroom into a Sunday school," preaching to students and talking about the importance of Christianity.

A local family was appalled by this blatant violation of the First Amendment and contacted FFRF.

Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel wrote Superintendent Gary Hobbs on Oct. 24, asking him to investigate and take the appropriate disciplinary action. Not only did the teacher reportedly talk about "knowing god," she did not offer a discussion of any other religion or religious preferences aside from Christianity.

Seidel pointed out that the teacher said that "each of her students 'needs to be saved.'" He also called her daily sermons an assault on "vulnerable children."

Hobbs replied Dec. 4, writing that the principal directed the teacher to "eliminate personal discussion of religion, her church and her beliefs with students."

### L.A. sheriff addresses FFRF concerns

Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel contacted Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca on Nov. 5 about religion being pushed in Vital Intervention and Directional Alternatives, a four-month program to help at-risk youth.

A local complainant said program participants were taken to an event Oct. 12 at a martial arts studio and forced to listen to a preacher and asked to "accept Jesus."

Baca responded with a Nov. 26 letter which said that in the past, participants exercised and learned about martial arts and responsibility at the studio. The VIDA program is updating its manual to include a section that reinforces the prohibition of prayer or proselytizing with the VIDA participants, Baca wrote.

He said he appreciated FFRF bringing the issue to his attention. VIDA personnel and volunteers received specific instruction on the issue at a meeting on Nov. 16.

"It is not appropriate for VIDA personnel to place the VIDA participants into a situation where any form of religion is endorsed," Baca wrote.

### FFRF letter stops religious newsletters

A principal will no longer be able to proselytize to the staff at Deaf Smith Elementary School in Rosenberg, Texas, in weekly newsletters.

FFRF Staff Attorney Stephanie Schmitt sent a letter Nov. 12 to Lamar Consolidated Independent School District Superintendent Thomas Randle alerting the district to the principal's First Amendment violation. Schmitt wrote that the newsletters, called Friday Focus, "regularly include bible verses, biblical references and sermon-like discussions that reference Jesus and present biblical stories as fact." The staff member complained to FFRF that the newsletter had turned into a "Sunday sermon."

Randle responded Nov. 15 to say the district investigated the issue and found the newsletters contravened district policy. The principal was instructed to stop putting religious references in staff communications. The district will review his newsletters before they are sent to staff, Randle said.

### FFRF's 'Hawaiian eyes' silence concert

The Moanalua High School Music Department (Honolulu, Hawaii) has canceled a concert in response to an complaint by FFRF and Hawaii activist Mitch Kahle.

For four years, the school had partnered with New Hope Church to put on a holiday concert. Students and families had to purchase tickets from the church. Several complainants reported that they had to attend a church service before they were allowed to buy the tickets.

In a Dec. 3 letter to state Department of Education Superintendent Kathryn Matayoshi, Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel pointed out that "all payments are made to New Hope Church, not the school," adding that past concerts included prayers and proselytizing by New Hope's pastor.

Matayoshi contacted Seidel on Dec. 3 to tell him the concert had been canceled.

## Mountaintop statue on slippery slope

*Continued from front page*

have the suit dismissed, FFRF submitted a declaration by FFRF member and local resident William Cox, who asserted he "had and will continue to have direct and unwelcome contact with the statue."

In his Nov. 27 ruling, Christensen said: "Cox's declaration meets [standing requirements]. He is a member of FFRF, he lives 15 miles from Whitefish Mountain Resort, he is a frequent skier at the resort who has skied past the statue many times previously and intends to again this winter, and he is a non-believer who considers the statue religious in nature and offensive."

The judge added, "Cox would have standing to sue in his own right if he were a named plaintiff."

Cox, who has skied past the shrine at Whitefish Mountain Resort, known as Big Mountain, his entire life, was interviewed Dec. 3 about the controversy by Melissa Block, host of "All Things Considered" on National Public Radio.

"I've regarded the statue as an absurdity," Cox said. "I resented it the first time I saw it, and it's just kind of a bizarre thing to discover Jesus standing there in the snow. So I thought to myself, I think I'll join this organization [FFRF]. I'm no longer a person of faith, and subsequently, they contacted me and asked whether I would care to be a witness."

He added, "You know, we live today in a religiously diverse and multicultural society, and it's offensive to many people, some of whom I know intimately. My wife is Jewish, and it's worrisome to them that religion, particularly Christianity, plays such a prominent role in our political life. Often, it appears to me to be a somewhat hypocritical role. In any event, the Constitution provides that in essence the federal government shall not establish religion, and this is a clearly religious shrine."

The Knights of Columbus are intervening as defendants and are being represented by the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, which filed a motion to dismiss the suit. Eighteen members

of Congress filed an amicus brief seeking to dismiss FFRF's lawsuit in August, with the help of Pat Robertson's "American Center for Law and Justice."

Members of Congress who opposed FFRF's suit were Rehberg, Dan Burton (Ind.), Michael Conaway (Texas), Chip Cravaak (Minn.), J. Randy Forbes (Va.), Virginia Foxx (N.C.), Vicky Hartzler (Mo.), Bill Johnson (Ohio), Walter Jones (N.C.), John Kline (Minn.), James Lankford (Okla.), Cathy McMorris Rodgers (Wash.), Jeff Miller (Fla.), Sue Myrick (N.C.), Alan Nunnelee (Miss.), Dennis Ross (Fla.), Steve Scalise (La.) and Lynn Westmoreland (Ga.).

FFRF's complaint and litigation over the "Big Mountain Jesus" has prompted international coverage, as well as religious hysteria. The Nov. 28 news story in the Daily Mail in London was headlined: "Hearts of ice! Atheists campaign to remove six-foot tall Jesus statue erected a WAR MEMORIAL at ski resort."

FFRF has pointed out a Christian shrine would not be an appropriate war memorial on federal property, but calls the claim a sham anyway. Returning Catholic soldiers from Kalispell got the idea after seeing shrines to Jesus in the Alps.

FFRF is asking the court to enjoin the defendant from continuing to approve the shrine for federal property and ordering the Forest Service to direct the Knights of Columbus to remove it.

The case, *FFRF, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Anne Nicol Gaylor and Dan Barker v. United States of America*, was filed on FFRF's behalf by attorney Richard L. Bolton and local counsel Martin S. King. Christensen, who was confirmed as an Obama appointee in December 2011, had practiced law in the Kalispell area since 1977. Read the decision at:

[ffrf.org/images/uploads/legal/MontanaOrder.PDF](http://ffrf.org/images/uploads/legal/MontanaOrder.PDF)







A Christmas parade Dec. 1 in New Kensington, Pa., where FFRF is suing the public school district for a Ten Commandments monument at Valley High School, featured (what else?) but Commandments on Wheels. Children from Harvest Baptist Church in nearby Harrison pulled the hard-foam Commandments made to look like stone in wagons. “I heard so many cheers as we walked through,” said Dan McAndrews, dressed as Moses. “People were saying, ‘Yeah, Ten Commandments!’ and that’s not something you hear every day.”

# Towns mount crusades to ‘Save Our Stone’

Two school districts and towns in Pennsylvania are aggressively fighting FFRF’s federal challenges of Ten Commandments markers at public schools.

Marie Schaub, a New Kensington-Arnold parents who joined FFRF as a plaintiff in one of the lawsuits, reports that a “Thou Shall Not Move” movement is growing louder. “This time of year makes us feel marginalized and like second-class citizens,” she said.

Children were lined up to pull Commandments mounted on wagons as part of a “float” at New Kensington’s Christmas parade. A “Save Our Stone” rally in New Kensington organized by a man who says the United States is “Christian” led to mass distribution of “Save our Stone” lawn signs.

FFRF sued the Connellsville Area School District on Sept. 12 over an Eagles bible monument at a middle school. Two days later, FFRF sued New Kensington-Arhold School District over a 6-foot-tall bible marker in front of Valley High School.

The Supreme Court ruled in 1980 that the Ten Commandments can’t be posted inside schools: “The pre-eminent purpose for posting the Ten Commandments on schoolroom walls is plainly religious in nature. The Ten Commandments are undeniably a sacred text in the Jewish and Christian faiths, and no legislative recitation of a supposed secular purpose can blind us to that fact. The Commandments do not confine themselves to arguably secular matters.

The New Kensington district has asked the court to strike from the lawsuit the plaintiffs’ mention of school board President Bob Pallone’s pro-monument comments on a Facebook page, “Keep the Ten Commandments at Valley High School.” The page, which has been “liked” by about 1,200 people, including several school board members, was created last spring by New Kensington Controller John Zavadak.

In early December, FFRF’s motion to allow pseudonyms for several plaintiffs in its New Kensington challenge was granted. A similar motion will be filed in the Connellsville case. FFRF

submitted as evidence comments from Facebook posts, website comments, email and letters to the editor, which included:

- “Maybe we should get that lady’s phone number who is (a) participant in the lawsuit and have everybody call her and give he(r) our opinion.”
- “I’m sure if we look up the (expletive) she probably has a facebook account or a facebook page for her ridiculous group and we can slam the (expletive) out of the (expletive).”
- “Have the families involved in the lawsuit been identified? I cannot believe anyone living in the community would participate in such a worthless cause. Someone needs to send that group back to Wisconsin with several black eyes.”
- “These people need drug onto the street and shot.”

“I have been particularly alarmed by the reaction to the filing of this lawsuit by community members,” Marie Schaub, the only local plaintiff whose identity has been revealed, told the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review. “I am aware of numerous hateful messages that have been posted online, either as comments to newspaper articles about the lawsuit or on social media websites.”

“The continued anonymity of my child and I is important to me because I fear that if our involvement were made public, both my child and I would experience social ostracism, harassment or threats from community members,” said the other parent suing the district, who is identified as Doe 3.

“It amazes me to see people willing to come together in order to support something that’s clearly in violation of the law,” Schaub recently told the Tribune-Review. “I would encourage our school board and community to adhere to the Constitution, which will save our district from a very expensive court case.”

“Relocating this religious monument will not prevent anyone from practicing their faith, but it will send a message that the school district includes people of all religions — in addition to those who choose none,” Schaub added.

## FFRF Legal Victories

### FFRF stops Oklahoma graduation prayer

Seniors at Tahlequah High School in Tahlequah, Okla., will be able to walk across the stage and receive their high school diploma without being subjected to a prayer first.

A senior at Tahlequah informed FFRF about the violation that occurred at graduation every year.

The prayer received support from much of the school’s staff, many of whom bowed their heads and prayed during the 2011 graduation ceremony. The prayer, which included references to “Our Lord,” was part of multiple practice graduation ceremonies.

FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel wrote a Nov. 9 letter to Superintendent Lisa Presley outlining the violation. “By delivering such graduation prayers, the Tahlequah Public Schools abridges its duty to remain neutral.”

Presley responded Nov. 20: “Tahlequah Public Schools will take the appropriate steps to ensure that religious rituals are not apart of future graduation ceremonies or any other school-sponsored events.”

ly, it has unconstitutionally entangled itself with a religious message, in this case a Christian message,” wrote Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott on Oct. 26 to Superintendent James Thornton.

Thornton answered Nov. 7 and said all school personnel had been informed of the district’s policy. In a memo to staff, Thornton advised: “If the purpose of the activity is not secular, if the effect of the activity is to advance or inhibit religion, or if the activity involves an excessive entanglement, then the activity is unconstitutional and will not be permitted.”

### Religious emails to be reviewed

Wichita Public Schools in Wichita, Kan., is revising school policy after Staff Attorney Stephanie Schmitt’s Nov. 8 letter to Superintendent John Allison. Two staff members at Wichita West High School had bible quotations in their official district email signature.

Schmitt reminded Allison that was offensive and unconstitutional.

General Counsel Thomas Powell responded Dec. 7, writing that the email situation will be addressed along with separation of church/state in revisions of school policy.

### School’s football prayer is no more

FFRF enforced the Constitution at East Poinsett County High School in Lepanto, Ark., by successfully ending pregame football prayer led by a pastor over the public address system.

Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott wrote to Superintendent Michael Pierce on Nov. 19: “Public high school events must be secular to protect the freedom of conscience of all students.”

Pierce replied Nov. 27 that the prayer has stopped.

### Police Latin crosses out in Texas

The Cedar Park, Texas, Police Department will remove Latin cross depictions after getting FFRF’s letter. FFRF also took issue with the city’s “Police Chaplain,” especially since he drove a vehicle with an official department seal and the words “Chaplain, City of Cedar Park.”

Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel wrote to Mayor Matt Powell and the council in July asking for removal of the cross on all city items. He also pointed out the impropriety of even having a chaplain program. “[T]hey are unnecessary, because unlike prisons or the military, the government is not burdening anyone’s religious practice.”

In a Dec. 6 phone call with the city attorney, Seidel learned that police badges, cars and shirts will no longer feature a Latin cross by the end of January.

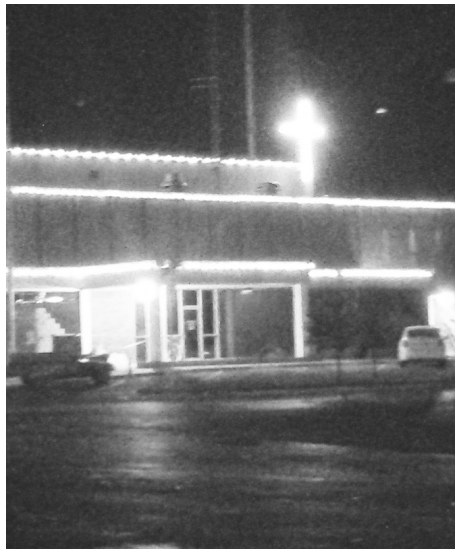
### Gideons not welcome in Virginia school

Park View Middle School in Boydton, Va., will no longer allow Gideons International to have access to students. A local complainant reported men were distributing bibles and a teacher even told students “don’t forget to get your bibles” as they boarded the school bus.

“When a school distributes religious literature to its students, even passive-

## Egregious Texas violation protested

FFRF Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert wrote a letter of complaint Dec. 5 to city officials in San Angelo, Texas, urging removal of an illegal lighted Latin cross atop the Police Department. According to FFRF’s local complainant, the cross adorns the building only during the holiday season. “The building is clearly marked ‘San Angelo Police Department,’ which allows all passersby to identify it as a city building,” Markert wrote. “Its hosting of a powerful sectarian symbol cannot be seen as a traditional decoration of the holiday season, but instead can only be a message of government support for Christianity.”





## First place: Brian Bolton graduate/mature student essay

# Religion stifles democracy's growth

FFRF awarded Elizabeth a \$3,000 scholarship.



By Elizabeth Pipal

Politicians like to deify our nation's founders. Asserting that the founders would have wanted this, or would not have recognized America today because of that, is one of the quickest ways to add authority to any claim.

Mitt Romney did this, for example, as concerns gay marriage. He said that "at the time the Constitution was written, marriage was between a man and a woman," implying that this is why marriage should continue to be defined this way. The nation's founders lived like this, so we should too, the argument goes.

In fact, we know that our founders were imperfect. Some held slaves, were bigots and didn't want women to vote. But what makes them greater than their flaws is that they recognized that they were not all-knowing, that they could not predict the future and what changes it would bring.

Instead of leaving us with a Constitution that dictated their beliefs on every subject, they left us with a succinct document and simple instructions. They left room for change and reinterpretation. It was this humility that makes them seem omniscient.

The ability to change is what makes our republic great. It's precisely the reason why religion and the state are institutions fundamentally at odds with each other. We are where we are today despite the dead weight of religion.

As a country, we have recognized the equality of (almost) all people, we have ended slavery, given women the right to vote. We are in the process of asserting the total equality of gay men and women. The Judeo-Christian holy books, on the other hand, are saying the same things they have always said: Women are property, slaves are useful, sex is evil and sodomy is even worse. The holy books cannot change; that is their nature.

Religious doctrine is meant to be eternal. It set out to legislate the lives of people centuries from the time it was written. It leaves no room for growth and enlightenment, no room for change. Our nation, on the other hand, has a Supreme Court that once upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and then completely reversed that decision

60 years later in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

No matter how important change is, or how embedded it is in our government, it can be scary. That is why religiously flavored politics are so dangerous, especially in an election year. An election offers the chance to revert to times previous.

There are those who are convinced that the best way to solve the nation's problems is to go back to the good old days. In an election year, their flawed logic is turned up to deafening levels. One of Mitt Romney's main super PACs is called "Restore our Future," implying that the future is safe if we revert to the way things were.

This type of thinking is not conservative. It is regressive, and religion is the backbone of the voices for regression. People rally to bring America back to glory using biblical teachings, to reboot the nation in terms of the founders' religious beliefs.

Suddenly, we are talking about contraception again. Didn't we settle this in the 1960s? Isn't stirring up this debate a little — regressive? The most fundamentalist believers want to move our laws backward, not forward.

Because religion is purportedly tied to morality, some Americans pay close

## We are where we are today despite the dead weight of religion.

attention to candidates' religious ties. Religion becomes a moral litmus test, a cheat sheet for comparing values. It distracts us from substantive issues. Its institutions — church, synagogue and mosque — take on dangerous powers in an election, because they can tell their congregants how God would want them to vote. Suddenly, our democracy is beholden to the stubborn dogmas of the distant past.

Many will argue that religion is a moral anchor for the government, telling us what is right and good and making sure that in our progress, we never lose sight of our core values. This is patently false. I agree that religion offers valuable moral teachings, but these teachings are not monopolized by the faithful.

These ideas are just as strongly held by nonreligious people. Morality was not invented with the writing of the

Old Testament. In its most basic forms, it is programmed into us as a cooperative species. The religious and nonreligious simply trace the roots of their morality differently.

I like to think of our government as a tree. The founders planted a very small seed hundreds of years ago for the benefit of future generations. They had no way of knowing where its branches would emerge and what shape they would take, so they gave the seed ample room to grow.

This tree has been watered by generations of Americans and has been shaped by the winds of change, by flood and drought. We have grown and become strong.

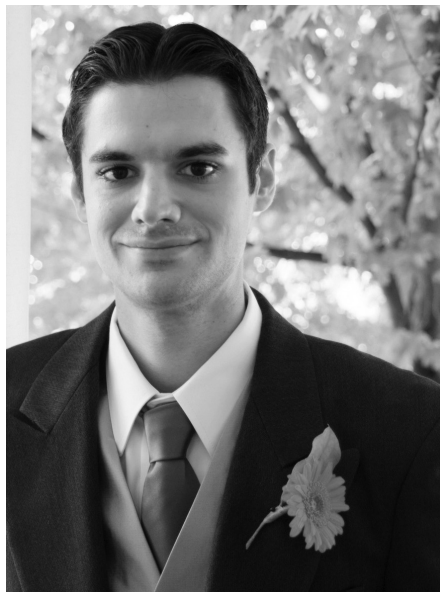
Religion in government is an axe aimed at the base of this tree. Religion believes that reducing it to its roots is the only way to save it. To me it sounds like a good way to kill it.

*Elizabeth Pipal, 23, was born in Oklahoma City and moved to California when she was 4. She's a proud atheist who loves dogs, drawing, cooking and collecting maps. She graduated in 2011 with a bachelor's in linguistics from Columbia University and is pursuing a master's in architecture at Harvard's Graduate School of Design.*

## Second place: Graduate/mature student essay contest

# The First Amendment and democracy

FFRF awarded Wilson a \$2,000 scholarship.



By Wilson Melón

Religion and American politics are thoroughly intertwined. There even exists within the electorate a pervasive belief that the accomplishments and the very existence of the United States are more attributable to providence than to humanistic achievement.

This idea, along with a faith in the infallibility of a divine being, often leads to public policy informed more by religious interpretations than reasoned debate.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified over 220

years ago: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

We can either accept its modern relevance and explicit dogma as articles of faith, or we can question how its concepts should apply to the present and be adjusted for current values while allowing for future change. In this way, the Constitution necessarily draws us into choices between faith and reason.

Originalists imply that the righteousness of their legal interpretations emanates from their ability to divine immutable and incontrovertible religious values in our Constitution. These individuals disregard the Establishment Clause and seek to interpret law in a manner that promotes faith-based principles and practices. Such unsound circular jurisprudence paradoxically seeks to find justification for desired religious outcomes while asserting original intent.

In the Supreme Court, several modern-era appointees have supported blending religion and politics. Evidence of this abounds. William Rehnquist, in *Wallace v. Jaffree*, a school prayer case, argued against a Jeffersonian wall between church and state.

Similarly, in his speech to the Catholic Knights of Columbus, Antonin Scalia criticized the 9th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals for allegedly attempting to excise God from public life in *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow*, a case

## Democratic government must protect each individual's freedom of thought.

about requiring students pledging allegiance to the United States "under God."

When this case reached the Supreme Court, Rehnquist argued that references to a monotheistic God in the pledge, on federal currency, on government buildings and elsewhere do not violate the Establishment Clause. He claimed that it is permissible for government institutions to declare the existence of God, especially if they do not favor a specific denomination.

In that same case, Clarence Thomas even suggested that the Establishment Clause was merely a protection against federal interference in the religious affairs of states and that it neither guarantees rights for individuals nor should it be incorporated at the state level.

These few examples demonstrate a larger trend within part of the judiciary to undermine the Establishment Clause. As lifelong appointees, Supreme Court justices exert a tremendous influence over the trajectory of American society.

For this reason, jurists should interpret the Establishment Clause broadly,

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thereby circumscribing faith to the private sphere where it can be practiced freely. In this way, the freedom of thought of all Americans would be protected from the religious predispositions of merely nine judges.

Separating religion from government is appropriate for all three branches of government. In the recent past, there's been a resurgence of religious zeal across the political landscape.

In the recent Republican presidential primary, religiously charged social issues were brought to the fore. Each candidate who led in the polls took great pains to proclaim his or her religious fervor and scripturally-based opposition to aspects of gay marriage, abortion and contraception.

Similarly, congressional and state legislators have, of late, made ostentatious attempts to publicly defund the health care provider Planned Parenthood on the basis of religious opposi-

tion to family planning.

In Mississippi, legislators theologically opposed to abortion have foisted restrictions upon the last remaining in-state clinic in an effort to circumvent protections acknowledged since *Roe v. Wade*.

With regard to the Affordable Care Act, the Catholic Church's public criticism of the employer requirement for contraceptive coverage riders led the Obama administration to make exemptions for religious denominations. Concessions to mollify religious critics disenfranchised employees who do not subscribe to the same theology as their employers.

Support of teaching intelligent design in public schools and opposition to the teaching about evolution, obstruction of stem cell research, taxpayer-funded subsidies and vouchers for parochial schools and their students, and tax and employment nondiscrimination exemptions for religious groups are a few examples of religion's heavy

hand.

Despite what is enunciated in Article VI of the Constitution, even presidential elections are thoroughly subjected to religious influence. During the 2008 presidential primary, the accusations that then-Senator Obama was a Muslim underscored the de facto requirement by part of the electorate that American presidents share their Christian faith.

Conclusions

Democratic government must protect each individual's freedom of thought. Government must not promote theism, be it denominational or not. Theocracies are inherently anti-democratic because they demand faith in divine infallibility and endeavor to impose unquestionable religious beliefs and policies.

In contrast, our federalized republic is best served by its citizens voting for elected representatives on the basis of reasoned and informed debate.

Both secular and religious values can be components of deliberations regarding policy, but their merits must be justifiable on the basis of logic, not blind trust.

Thoughtful, nuanced, nondogmatic debate is most suited for selecting officeholders and for creating sound public policy that balances preservation of personal choice with protection of secular values that citizens arrive at through careful consideration.

For freedom of thought to flourish in the U.S., belief and nonbelief must be protected by the government. Politics must be shielded from the influence of religion. To achieve this, we must elect individuals dedicated to disentangling religion from politics.

*Wilson Melón, 27, was born in Concord, Mass. He's a Ph.D. student in Spanish literature at Purdue University. He earned a B.A. in Spanish and French at Middlebury College, Vermont, and an M.A. in Hispanic literature at Boston College.*

Third place: Graduate/mature student essay contest

Thinking critically for my daughter's sake

*FFRF awarded Lynn a \$1,000 scholarship.*

By Lynn Wilhelm

The night of May 8, 2012, my young daughter and I awaited the election results of North Carolina's proposed constitutional amendment. Most of the early results were promising.

Sadly, our hopes turned to dismay as county after county declared "that marriage between one man and one woman is the only domestic legal union that shall be valid or recognized in this state."

We had both worked the week before at phone banks urging voters to get out and vote against the amendment. While making calls, it had been clear that those supporting the amendment were doing so for religious reasons. Many said things like, "God meant for marriage to be between a man and a woman."

Amendment One was the result of the Republican-dominated General Assembly and its surge of conservative legislation. As the proposal for the marriage amendment was debated, many legislators asked why social issues were dominating the Assembly while our state had a 10.5% unemployment rate and many other concerns.

It was heavily supported by conservative religious figures and groups throughout the country. Bibles and preachers featured prominently in many TV ads. Voter approval of the amendment brings a new era of discrimination against citizens based on religious principles.

Although my daughter and I constitute a nontraditional family, I am not likely to be directly affected. So why did I take time to work phone banks and get pledges from voters? Why



did I spend some of my already thinly stretched income purchasing "Vote No" materials?

One reason is my daughter. Being a mother has made me even more aware of the threats religion poses to our freedoms. What future can my daughter, being raised without religion, expect to find in an overwhelmingly religious political atmosphere? What rights will she have to live, love and learn as she grows as a U.S. citizen? What will her education be like if religious zealots manage to defund public schools and ensure that pseudoscience makes its way into classrooms?

During this election season, we have been subjected to Rick Perry's comments about teaching creationism, Michelle Bachmann's belief that her God called her to run for president, and Rick Santorum's idea that teaching evolution has been used to promote atheism.

We hear revisionists claim that America was founded as a Christian nation and needs to be returned to that ordained state. Public school systems in Louisiana, Kansas, Florida and other states are experiencing challenges to their curriculum led by those who wish to see theologically based ideas taught. The Texas GOP platform states, "We

One way to curtail religious indoctrination is to focus on reality.

support school subjects with emphasis on the Judeo-Christian principles upon which America was founded and which form the basis of America's legal, political and economic systems."

Don't they know that America's legal and political systems are rooted largely in ancient, non-Christian Roman and Greek systems? Have they forgotten that our founders were not all Judeo-Christians?

These conservatives oppose teaching "critical thinking skills" which "have the purpose of challenging the student's fixed beliefs and undermining parental authority."

The Republican platform in North Carolina says, "We oppose efforts to remove the recognition of Almighty God from our schools, courts, currency and Pledge of Allegiance. We oppose efforts to remove prayer from our public meetings and governmental institutions."

In Louisiana, a push to allow religious education to be publicly funded backfired on at least one legislator. Rep. Valarie Hodges said, "I liked the idea of giving parents the option of sending their children to a public school or a Christian school."

Louisiana's voucher program attracted applications from a Muslim school and 123 other religiously based schools. Regarding the Muslim school, Hodges said, "Unfortunately [the funding] will not be limited to the Founders' religion. ... I do not support using public funds for teaching Islam anywhere here in Louisiana."

So, will Louisiana fund all religious

schools or will it discriminate against certain religions?

Last year I realized that I had to find my own way to combat the growing religious influence in the public sphere. One way to curtail religious indoctrination is to focus on reality.

An important facet of reality is that our universe seems to work quite well without the interference of supernatural beings. How could I speak out in favor of reality? Participating in politics, far from my purview, was not a likely option.

After carefully evaluating my skills and talents, I came to realize that a career in science education would provide a way for me to teach others about reality. I know it is possible to combat pseudoscientific claims of all types through education. After learning how science unearths wholly natural explanations for phenomena, many people begin to question the supernatural explanations they've been taught.

If our opinions are grounded in reality, religion will lose some of its luster and the desire to have it permeate every aspect of public life may be reduced. One day, religious belief as a desirable societal guide may be regarded as a ludicrous idea.

One day, maybe I won't have to worry how religion will affect my daughter's future.

*Lynn Wilhelm, lives in Cary, N.C. She is a single mother to Aiden, 8. She worked 10-plus years as a landscape designer and taught horticulture in a public school after getting a B.S. in agricultural education and extension in 1999 from North Carolina State University. "My teaching experience was riddled with difficulties partly due to the very religious atmosphere I found at the rural North Carolina school. I only taught for one year and thought I would never teach again." With a recently renewed interest in education, she is pursuing a master's in teaching science at NCSU and will graduate in May 2013.*



## Freethinker of the Year

# Teen relates hate she endured for contesting school prayer

*Jessica Ahlquist, plaintiff in a successful federal lawsuit challenging a prayer banner at her high school in Cranston, R.I., gave this speech [edited for print] October 12, 2012, at FFRF's 35th national convention in Portland, Ore. Jessica stood tall in the face of adversity and became the first recipient of FFRF's Atheists in Foxholes Support Fund, a \$10,000 award. She also received two Thomas Jefferson Student Activist Awards (a \$2,000 award in 2012 and a \$1,000 award in 2011).*

By Jessica Ahlquist

First, let me give my biggest thanks to the Freedom From Religion Foundation and to everybody here, with special thanks to the Eisenbergs, who really help support students like Max and me. I can give you my thanks all day, but I will never be able to fully express how wonderful and supportive FFRF has been.

The story I am going to tell you was certainly no walk in the park for me, but it was made possible by the people who came to fight at my side, and that was Annie Laurie and Dan and all of you. You are some of the coolest, bravest people I've ever met.

Everything has changed for me in the last few years. I'd like to reflect on what's happened. I was born and raised in Rhode Island. I started attending Cranston High School West when I was 14. Cranston and Rhode Island are overwhelmingly Catholic.

I always knew I wasn't welcome to share my real beliefs and continued to call myself a Catholic until the day I came out as an atheist. Near the end of my freshman year in spring 2010, I saw the prayer banner [actually a painted mural] for the first time in the school auditorium. I knew almost immediately it was wrong to have it in a public school.

I thought of going to the principal's office to remind him it was there. I did a lot of research on the Constitution and American history, and by the time I finally decided that I wanted to report this to the school administration, school had already gotten out for the year.

But that summer, a private group rented out the auditorium for a recital. The mother of one of the girls in the recital noticed the prayer. As a secular Jew, it was unsettling for her. Her mother-in-law, a Holocaust survivor, was also

During the pledge, all of the students turned and screamed 'under God' at me.

in the audience. (And they don't tell this in school, but Hitler was a Catholic.) The mother decided to write to the America Civil Liberties Union, which sent a letter to the school that the prayer needed to be removed because it violated the Constitution.

That summer the school committee [of the city of Cranston, i.e., the school board] put together a subcommittee to discuss its options. Of course there really weren't options. In this country, we vote on many things, but we don't vote on people's rights — we do, but we shouldn't.

The subcommittee scheduled public meetings. I was so happy and relieved. I thought, "How awesome, now I don't have to do anything." But I was really invested and I wanted to reach out to that mother and show her that she wasn't the only person who felt the way she did about the prayer.

I didn't know the atheist community existed. I didn't know what the ACLU was. So I did the only thing I could think of. I created a Facebook group specifically about removing the prayer. I would come home every day to see if anyone had joined, and no one did for months. But I was excited and really wanted someone to join my group.

In November 2010, the school committee had a second public meeting. I was naïve. I believed that when I got to the meeting, these educated administrators and lawyers and politicians were going to say, "Oh, we forgot it was there. We'll take it down because of course that's illegal."

Only about 15 people were there. I've absolutely hated public speaking all my life, but I was so upset and confused by what people were claiming about our country's history and Constitution that I decided that I had to speak. I was literally shaking, and my voice was so soft it's amazing that people were even able to hear me.

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, someone let out an audible gasp and another person whispered, "That little witch." I was shocked, in-



Photo: Andrew Seidel

timidated and scared, but I was also really angry. The people that followed me to speak were lying through their teeth.

I had said that the prayer didn't follow the concept of separation of church and state, that in this case, prayer was the church and school was the state. I thought that was pretty simple, but a priest smirked at me and said "Honey, Russia had state schools; we certainly don't want that."

It made me so angry that I decided to speak again that night. I noticed how good it felt to say, "I don't believe in God" and to just let them squirm and to not care.

### No more pretense

I'd been pretending all my life. That night a video camera was stuck in my face and I was on the local news, just for being an atheist. It's really that easy. I'd honestly thought the meeting was just a formality, that no one would actually say the prayer should stay up because they're educated adults and stuff.

But I learned what easily was the biggest lesson I learned in all of this: There's a difference between an adult and a grownup.

I went online and found my Facebook group had exploded in a few hours. Over 150 people had joined and were wishing me support. The group eventually reached over 6,000 members. That's a big part of how I got through this.

The average high schooler doesn't exactly watch the news and keep up-to-date with what's going on in their community, so few people in school knew what was happening and no one really brought it up. But silly me, hearing about our rights, I kept researching and speaking at meetings to convince them to remove it. That's when everything started getting crazy.

The next meeting in February 2011 was much larger, maybe a hundred people. I don't think most of them knew why they were there because a lot of them were talking about abortion and America's borders and random stuff, the economy. An older woman said how prayers in school remind kids

to be good and not get pregnant. She pursed her lips and looked over at my friend and me.

At the last meeting in March, the full school committee voted 4-3 to keep the prayer up. Over 250 people attended and all but six were wearing signs that said "Keep original banner." I was devastated.

Just because some people tried to vote on my rights does not mean I was going to settle for that. I was faced with this issue and decided to see it through. With help from the ACLU, I filed a lawsuit, *Ahlquist v. City of Cranston* in April 2011.

The morning after we filed, I came into homeroom, like I do every day. The morning announcements came on and everyone rose to say the Pledge of Allegiance. During the appropriate moment, all of the students turned and screamed "under God" at me. I was actually surprised by that but I should have expected it. The teacher did nothing. I knew that reporting it was useless because most of the administration hated me anyway. From that morning on, I refused to say the pledge, refused to take part in something used as a weapon.

It's utterly sick that on the first day of kindergarten, 5-year-olds memorize how to pledge their allegiance. They don't know what allegiance means. And, as I'm sure you know, "under God" wasn't even added until the 1950s.

### Under siege

The administration and members of my community were inexcusably unconcerned about my daily treatment and often made things even worse. During diversity week, the school has little presentations about discrimination — bullying, racial topics, etc. The diversity week team invited the mayor, Allan Fung, to speak about minorities and how as a Chinese American, he had succeeded in the world of politics.

After he finished giving his nice little speech, someone asked, "How do you feel about the prayer?" We were in the auditorium, and he pointed to it

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Photo: Andrew Seidel

In solidarity at the Reason Rally, this fan wears an "Evil Little Thing" T-shirt, after a Rhode Island State Rep.'s ad hominem on-air attack on Jessica.



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and said, “I want to see that prayer stay exactly where it is. I have a law degree. This doesn’t discriminate against anyone and I’m Catholic.”

The students jumped up, cheering and clapping. Then an autistic student raised his hand and tried to explain why the prayer was illegal. The mayor just kind of dismissed him, and none of the 10 or so teachers in the room offered to let me leave or do anything to calm anyone down. I had to sit there and let them all stare at me for the rest of the presentation.

One day in English class, my friend’s boyfriend texted her to tell her that they were debating “the prayer.” Kids in his class were threatening to beat me and my friend up. We’ve been best friends since seventh grade. I think her parents blame me for her being an atheist. This obviously scared us, so we went to guidance and got dismissed early from school.

There were afternoons when I would come home crying. Acquaintances wanted nothing to do with me. I didn’t even see my friends very much, because even though they still liked me, they didn’t want people to hate them for associating with me.

Even just walking down the hall to use my locker was a struggle because people would yell things and stop me in the hallway. But things would get much, much worse.

I received a phone call in January from Steven Brown, the executive director of the Rhode Island ACLU. He simply said, “Hey Jess, we won.”

I was so thrilled I said, “Shut up” to this esteemed lawyer. More than excited though, I was relieved to have won the lawsuit, but more relieved that it was finally over. This nightmare experience was done, and everyone could forget about what happened and go on as normal. But that’s not what happened.

‘Sincerest hate’

The very night I won, the craziness started. People took to social media to express their sincerest hate toward me. Twitter and Facebook absolutely exploded with death threats and rape threats and other terrible things.

My favorite, and I mean that ironically of course, was “OMG she is almost as bad as blacks.”

Kids whom I had known since kindergarten were threatening my life and insulting my character, saying I

The community as a whole was doing everything it could to make me feel hated and out of place.

was a freak and should die. People said I should be gang-raped and my family should lose their home and live out of boxes in the street.

Some of the kids warned me they were going to throw things at me if I came to class. Other people claimed to know license plate numbers of the cars my family members drove. My home address was posted online. I have an 11-year-old brother and a 7-year-old brother whom I worried about every single day.

I have a little sister who’s 15 whom I worried about the whole time I was in class because these people seemed to have no limits.

One day I was walking up my driveway and a group of kids drove by screaming out the window that they hoped I burn in hell. They had followed me home. The threats became so terrible, in fact, that the city decided to provide me with police officers who followed me around from class to class every single day for weeks.

I don’t need to explain to you how that made learning and having a normal high school experience impossible. The community as a whole was doing everything it could to make me feel hated and out of place. They wanted me to leave and literally said “Get the hell out of here.”

There was this organization that tried to send me flowers, the Freedom From Religion Foundation or something like that [laughter]. They contacted four different flower shops and they all refused to send me flowers. But you know, Annie Laurie and Dan don’t give up, and they were mad and eventually found a flower shop in Connecticut [Glimpse of Gaia] that agreed to send me, the “evil little Satan girl,” flowers.

The atheist community was so glad that someone had not been a bigoted jerk that they sent me so many flowers that I was not able to see my floor. I’m amazed that I didn’t suffocate in my sleep. The owners are really nice people, and they recorded something like “We’re thankful for the business and praise, but this is our job. We don’t need to be praised for not discriminating against people.”

I know them personally now. They are really good people and I believe they’re atheists, too.

‘Evil little thing’

Of course you all know about “evil little thing.” [Democratic state Rep. Peter Palumbo called her that on a radio show.] I can’t seem to get away from that. I was actually introduced as an “evil little thing” at the Reason Rally in front of 25,000 people. They presented me with a check for \$60,000. That was a scholarship fund that Hemant Mehta, the Friendly Atheist, started so that I can go to college.

It was really meaningful to have the people who had donated in front of me. JT Eberhard had made “evil little thing” T-shirts to sell, with the profit going to my scholarship fund. I thank all of you who did that for me. That’s one of the greatest things that has



Jessica Ahlquist poses with Max Nielson in front of Multnomah Falls.

Photo: Andrew Seidel

come of all of this.

Eventually, the subcommittee held the final meeting to discuss whether to appeal our victory. In the weeks leading up to that meeting, my wonderful uncle Steve (who everyone thinks is my father) and who founded the Humanists of Rhode Island, sent out email and Facebook alerts and did everything he could to explain that we really need people to come to this meeting to show support for the court’s ruling.

The school was already in debt and had spent over \$100,000 on this lawsuit, paying my lawyers because they had won. And, of course, who got blamed for the cost of the lawsuit? I did.

My uncle was successful though. People even came from out of state, driving for hours just to be at that one meeting. They stood out in the rain just so we could all get into the meeting.

Police searched the building for bombs before the meeting. I’m not kidding; it was that ridiculous. There were hundreds of people, and it was just as hilarious as it was scary. There were signs everywhere, screaming people, lunatics, all you can imagine.

After hours and hours of people speaking — it was more people on our side than the other side this time — they decided not to appeal. The vote was 5-2. We won, and it’s over now!

The hate continued for a little while after that. Overall, I came out of this far more positive than negative. The support I received was infinitely stronger than the hate.

Again, thank you for all of that. This is a great group of people, and I’m so glad for this community because they’ve given me a lot more than I would have expected.

Student Activist Award winner  
*Senior did his best trying to stop graduation prayer*

At FFRF’s national convention in October in Portland, Ore., Len Eisenberg, who with his wife Karen endows FFRF’s Thomas Jefferson Youth Activist Award, introduced Max Nielson, student plaintiff in FFRF’s ongoing South Carolina lawsuit over a school district policy that sanctions graduation prayer. Max received a \$1,000 Catherine Fahringer Memorial Student Activist Award from FFRF.

Hello, everyone. It’s really great to be among such admirable and wonderful people. Don’t you feel that energy when we’re all in the room together? We’d like to thank Annie Laurie and Dan and all the people at FFRF because, even though we provide a little financial help, they’re the ones who have to talk with Sean Hannity and take a shower afterward. They’re doing all the hard

work. Max Nielson is a pretty amazing person. He’s not only a black belt in karate and an Eagle Scout, he’s earned the equivalent of an international high school diploma. He’s won not one but two board of director seats for secular coalition groups in the Carolinas area, and he’s also the founder and president of the Secular Student Alliance group at his college, the College of Charleston.

He also told me he’s an amateur contortionist. He’s going to turn himself into a human pretzel up on the stage here — or maybe not. He’ll tell you all about his saga with trying to get the school graduation prayer stopped, and how this has been a really transformative event in his life. So will you please welcome, Max Nielson. — Len Eisenberg

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Photo: Andrew Seidel





Photo: Andy Ngo

By Max Nielson

**H**i Mom. That's Mom [in audience]. She's great. So, like they said, I'm Max Nielson. I grew up in South Carolina for the most part.

I was born in Atlanta, moved away when I was 4. Canadian father, rural South Carolinian mother, and so if I say, you know, the "sooth," or "oot and about," feel free to laugh, just laugh, it's very comic.

Growing up in South Carolina, you might not think it, but I had a really secular upbringing. I attended the Unitarian Universalist congregation of Columbia. Many times, the pastor when I was going was regularly Mister Reverend Patrick, or something like that. He was a pagan. It wasn't this idea that "Oh, there's one true religion." That was never really introduced to me in any solid way.

As I was going through school, I encountered a lot of people who were very fundamentally religious — like the kind of a goofball kid in seventh grade who rejected the science lesson because he knew Earth was 6,000 years old. And I was like "Weird! What *are* you doing?!"

That kind of got me interested, so I started studying counter-apologetics through middle school, and that was fun. I really enjoyed getting to rationalize things that were not rational.

Another big part of my youth was Boy Scouts of America. I stayed in the closet long enough to get the Eagle Scout. That was good, but kind of ironic. My entire troop knew I was an atheist, but they went ahead and made me chaplain's aide. So, yeah, I can sympathize with Dan, I've led a few prayers, too.

High school was great. No it wasn't. But in ninth grade I was in Irmo, South Carolina, and the Pastafarians at USC just brought in a pretty amazing speaker, Richard Dawkins. I got to see him in ninth grade, and I was young and didn't know anything. I kind of formulated this idea, like "Oh hey, I should probably be a scientist, so that I can help humanity." Another thing that happened early in high school is someone wanted to form a Gay-Straight Alliance, and the principal resigned over it. He walked out. He retired early because he didn't want to be the principal at a school with a Gay-Straight Alliance. That was also weird.

Later in high school, I got into the international baccalaureate program. It's a smaller program at most high schools, and especially mine, so I was around 30 of my really close friends, and in the classroom, day to day, religion just stopped being a topic. I was that mildly articulate atheist kid who would shoot down your argument, and that was fun, but it never came up

After I qualified for the internation-

al baccalaureate diploma, I was pretty much the paragon of post-high school apathy. I did not care about anything, and it was fantastic! But 10 days before graduation [at which Christian prayer would be recited because a majority of seniors voted to have prayer], my good friend Kelly Freeman linked me to an interview with Harrison Hopkins on a podcast called "A Matter of Doubt."

He challenged almost the exact same policy at his high school in Lawrence County, S.C. It was 10 days before graduation, but I knew I had to do something, because I *could* do something, and that made all the difference. Kelly walked me through it.

She basically pointed me at the most important button on any activist website ever: Contact Us. So I did, and FFRF got back to me very fast, either that same day or the next day. Through that, I scheduled meetings through the principal, and FFRF sent legal letters to the school district to back me up.

### Mom: 'Yeah, go ahead'

Right about this time, my mom comes home from school. She's a teacher at that school. Yeah, she's been teaching English at Irmo High School for seven years. So, she gets into the computer room, and I'm just covered in sweat, out of my mind, deliriously excited that I can fight injustice as I saw it. She can tell I'm visibly disturbed, and I lock eyes with her, and I'm, "Mom — can I stir shit up?"

And she's like, "Yeah, go ahead," which was amazing. She had my back, she was with me. She had always felt uncomfortable with the public prayers they had at graduation.

I met twice with my principal, Mr. Weinkle. The first time, he just wanted to make sure I wasn't crazy. He made this really bizarre reference, looking down and holding his belt, "I'm from a town in North Carolina. I totally see where you're coming from with this, it's a pretty a metropolitan area, but I can't help you because this is the bible belt." That was shocking.

It seemed like he understood the issue. He understood why it was wrong but still wasn't willing to help because of where we were [in the bible belt]. To me, that just wasn't acceptable. So I contacted the superintendent and FFRF got me an amazing lawyer, Aaron Kozloski. It was great to have Aaron on the case; he's a brilliant guy. It's been really fun working with him.

The second time I met with my principal, he handed me the district policy. What it basically said was they could have prayer if it was nonsectarian and non-proselytizing. Nonproselytizing public prayer, folks; you heard it here first.

Leading up to meeting with my superintendent, I knew that if I walked in as one voice, I would probably be dismissed as one voice, because that's what tends to happen. So I got pretty



Photo: Andrew Seidel

Len Eisenberg shaking Max's hand.

busy.

In one night, I talked to 150 people online — friends, strangers, people who were my friends on Facebook, it didn't matter. I heard some strange things, but every single person I talked to supported my actions. They all trusted me enough as a person, and understood the issue well enough to see that what the school was doing, even if they agreed with it, wasn't constitutionally sound.

### Amazing support

I met with Steven Friedman, who had pushed the issue of starting a Gay-Straight Alliance at Irmo High School that caused Mr. Walker to walk out. I sat down with him at a coffee shop, and we wrote a nice little letter to [Superintendent] Stephen Hefner.

When I walked into Mr. Hefner's office, I gave him the letter. Mr. Kozloski was also there. It was a productive, friendly meeting. Mr. Hefner said he'd get back to me later that day. And so, I received this famously quotable email:

"While I am a staunch supporter of separation of church and state, I do not believe that freedom of religion should be interpreted as freedom from religion within public schools."

That's one hell of a proposition. The next day was graduation, and I walked across, and they prayed, and I didn't remove my cap, and I did lock eyes with the superintendent.

A lot of news interviews followed, and from what I've heard, the comments got nasty. The only one particularly scary kind of event or comment was online, someone who posted my home address and cell phone number.

That was sandwiched between two mildly aggressive people blurting out anger at me. So, as Len said, I do have black belt in karate, and I was walking around the house with my bow staff like "I'm not going die today."

I was pretty convinced I was going to live. Nothing happened, of course, so I was fine. What was so weird and crazy to me about my case was that the moment it was a story, so much support

came out of nowhere — the community, the national atheist community, FFRF, Friendly Atheist, Secular Student Alliance, Center for Inquiry.

I had no idea any of this existed, and they were all within an instant surrounding me in support and compassion and reason, and it felt amazing because on no level of this issue was I, the kid, doing the terrible thing. I was the person standing up, and everyone saw that, and it was great.

Most recently, we've had the North Carolina Student Secular Summit, which is a terribly long name, and it was great. It was supported by the Triangle Freethought group, which I believe is an FFRF group, right? Yes.

We also have the Carolina Secular Association now, and the Secular Coalition for South Carolina, and Harrison Hopkins has a student group at Presbyterian College in South Carolina. Harrison has already raised more than \$2,000 at Presbyterian College, a school with fewer than like 5,000 kids, for the Leukemia Lymphoma Society. That's amazing!

In this lawsuit, to maintain legal standing [because he'd graduated], I had to get two co-plaintiffs, two good friends of mine. Dakota McMillan, one of them, just this past week, I believe, started the Secular Student Alliance at Irmo High School, the 400th SSA affiliate.

The final point I'd like to make: I feel like, maybe, that bible belt Mr. Weinkle was referencing is starting to get unbuckled. And I think we in the freethought movement throw around the term a lot when we're talking about the South. From what I've seen, using that term did nothing but support the Religious Right's claim in my case.

I think this is the rise of the "secular South." Thank you all. Thank you all so much!

*Matthew "Max" Nielson is principal plaintiff in FFRF's federal lawsuit against School District 5 of Lexington and Richland Counties, S.C. Jacob Zupon and Dakota McMillan are co-plaintiffs who will graduate respectively from Irmo High School in 2013 and 2014, keeping the lawsuit ripe. A district policy titled "School Ceremonies and Observations" sets guidelines for benedictions and invocations at graduations and athletic events: Use of prayer "will be determined by a majority vote of the graduating senior class with the advice and counsel of the principal."*

*The prayer, written by the district but delivered by a student "volunteer," was addressed to "Father" and asked for the "Lord's guidance, protection and mercy," asked students to be "touched" by "the Lord," to be led "on the path you intend for their lives to lead" and thanked a deity for "the teachers, parents and administrators that were here through our 12 years of school."*



Photo: Andrew Seidel

Max and his mother, Jeanette Miles.



Fourth place (tie): Graduate/mature student essay contest

Make state-church separation absolute

FFRF awarded Bryan a \$500 scholarship.



By Bryan Johnson

In a speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association in 1960, presidential candidate John F. Kennedy said “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute . . . where no Catholic prelate would tell the president how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference.” Kennedy emphasized that there were “far more critical issues” that faced the nation than his Catholicism, and the same thing holds true today. In an age where unemployment and poverty are rampant, overseas wars kill our citizens and raise our deficit, and the world’s richest country also has its largest prison population, religion has become a driving force in American politics. God’s name is used to justify policies in arenas as diverse as health care, civil rights for women and minorities, and even education. Yet invoking the bible does nothing to address the issues behind our country’s problems; it only serves to muddy the waters with arbitrary loyalties, xenophobia, and unwillingness to compromise. The separation of church and state is essential for creating effective, rational policies and ensuring freedom and equality for all. Government is most effective when it uses empirically proven, logic-based methods for solving real-world problems. These methods can be debated using facts learned through scientific research, from carefully recorded observations and from successful tactics used in other countries. But supernatural justifications for policy require no such vetting process; once God comes to the table, the issue becomes a matter of faith, not fact. Supernatural solutions do not solve real-world problems. In August 2011, Texas Gov. Rick Perry convened a daylong event in Houston called The Response, a call for Americans to “to pray and fast like Jesus did” to combat Texas’ crippling drought and economic problems. It did nothing, of course, to ease economic and drought woes. His April day of prayer for rain was similarly ineffective.

Supernatural solutions do not solve real-world problems.

tive. The funds and time used to promote these events could have been used to research realistic methods of combating drought and deficits, but instead it was used to create a conservative soapbox that did nothing to solve the problems faced by Texans. Religion is an entirely subjective way to create policy, since doctrine and beliefs differ between religions. Even Christian denominations disagree on the exact nature of the god they worship. In American history, this has manifested itself in countless ways. For example, slave owners and abolitionists both used the bible to defend their position in the 19th century. In modern times, the LGBTQ movement’s fiercest critics often use God as their primary reason for fighting against marriage equality, yet there are plenty of progressive Christians who support marriage equality and use the bible to justify their claims.

Which God?

You cannot debate the idea of God in a courtroom or statehouse. You cannot objectively weigh the advantages and disadvantages of a policy that has been dictated by a higher power. When we use unverifiable, subjective reasoning to make decisions, we create unjustifiable, ineffective policy. With God involved in policy-making, the question becomes “which God?” In the U.S., Christians make up the vast majority of the population, but our country is also a melting pot of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, atheists, agnostics and everyone in between. Indeed, America was founded in part on the freedom to worship or not worship any way you please, and it’s this diversity that makes America what it is. Part of freedom *from* religion is protecting freedom *of* religion. When the majority religion makes its way into government, it does so not by reconciling itself to all other faiths and nonfaiths, but by the power of demographics. This leads to unequal representation, which creates a government that cannot or will not hear the needs of all its citizens. Religion-based rule is tribalism at its purest and enforces divisions that are based on arbitrary cultural labels. Recently, Louisiana passed a law allowing public funds to be used on vouchers to send children to a school of the parent’s choosing. But lawmakers didn’t realize those funds could also be used for non-Christian schools: “Republican state Rep. Kenneth Havard objected to the [Islamic School of Greater New Orleans’] request for 38 government-paid student vouchers, saying he opposed any bill that ‘will fund Islamic teaching.’” Inevitably, the rights of minorities

are trampled by the majority, especially when beliefs in an exclusive deity are used to justify that power. Fifty-two years after Kennedy’s historic speech in Houston, separation of church and state brought “vomit” to the mouth of presidential candidate Rick Santorum: “I don’t believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute. The idea that the church can have no influence or no involvement in the operation of the state is absolutely antithetical to the objectives and vision of our country.” Santorum couldn’t be further from the truth. This is a country founded on freedom of religion, not domination by religion. We need equal rights for

all, not just for the majority. We need a country free from the tribalism and petty divisions that politicized religion breeds. If we are to ever separate ourselves from our country’s economic, social and ideological woes, we need a country where separation of church and state is absolute. Bryan Johnson, 26, a native of Raleigh, N.C., is a first-year graduate student at Colorado State University in Fort Collins and is pursuing an MFA in creative writing. He has an English degree from Purdue University and worked as a copywriter while writing fiction.

Fourth place (tie): Graduate/mature student essay contest

I’m a family values voter



FFRF awarded Vicky a \$500 scholarship.

By Vicky Weber

I’m an atheist, and this election year, I’m a family values voter. Families are one of the most important institutions in any society. The way we are raised as children influences our views on important issues such as morality, politics, sex, money and religion. As an atheist, I vote to value the families in which we actually live: single parent households, LGBT partnerships, multigenerational homes and any other configuration that exists. My family values extend beyond families that are healthy and functioning to those that are struggling through poverty, domestic violence, mental illness and other issues. My family values extend to those men and women who are not yet ready to start a family and want to protect themselves or terminate an unplanned pregnancy. I’m a family values voter because I support the rights of individuals to live in a safe, healthy family environment and make their own choices.

America cannot ignore these blatant attempts to enforce their religious viewpoints on everyone.

Some politicians, however, foist their religious ideology onto their legislation and decision making, telling the rest of us what we should want and how we should live our lives. In Wisconsin, Sen. Glenn Grothman proposed Senate Bill 507, which named “nonmarital parenthood as a contributing factor to child abuse,” a slam at single mothers. In Michigan, Rep. Lisa Brown was censored for using the word “vagina” during a debate on an abortion bill, when she stated, “I’m flattered that you’re all so interested in my vagina, but ‘no’ means ‘no.’” Fellow Rep. Mike Callton said in response: “What she said was offensive. It was so offensive, I don’t even want to say it in front of women. I would not say that in mixed company.” On the national stage, presidential candidate Mitt Romney pledged to ensure that his version of marriage is practiced throughout the land. His platform includes support for the Defense of Marriage Act and for an amendment to the Constitution defining marriage as between one man and one woman. These are people who could be making decisions about how all Americans, secular and nonsecular, live the most intimate parts of their lives. People like



state Rep. Don Pridemore of Wisconsin, who told abused women that “If they can refind [sic] those reasons and get back to why they got married in the first place it might help.”

Instead of suggesting a way for women to get out of their abusive relationships and providing support for them and their children, Pridemore encourages them to go back based on his definition of what it means to be a family.

It is one thing to espouse a view against abortion or gay marriage. It is another thing to tell someone else how they should live their lives, and it's completely unacceptable when it comes from our elected officials.

America cannot ignore these blatant attempts to enforce their religious viewpoints on everyone. The so-called “family values” espoused by the Religious Right are not the values of the families that actually exist. God and government are a dangerous mix in our schools, public meetings, legislation, health care and tax code.

It's time to fight back, and there's no place better than at the ballot box. It's time for the secular community to step up and reclaim “family values” for all families.

Perhaps we should pay more attention to what Brown, who is Jewish, said before her censorship-inducing use of

the word “vagina.” She explained her position on the bill, stating, “Judaism believes that therapeutic abortions, namely abortions performed in order to preserve the life of the mother are not only permissible but mandatory. . . I have not asked you to adopt and adhere to my religious beliefs. Why are you asking me to adopt yours?”

She shouldn't even have to ask. Her Judaism, Grothman's Christianity and my atheism are all equally valid. The only way all people can maintain their freedom of choice is to separate god and government and elect those who will maintain this separation.

Therefore, this election year, I am

an atheist voting for the values of all families. Are you?

*Vicky Weber, 22, graduated with honors from Ripon College in Ripon, Wis., with a degree in communication and a double minor in politics and government and non-profit business management. She's pursuing an M.A. in communication studies at Colorado State University in Fort Collins. At Ripon, she co-founded a Secular Student Alliance and plans to be active in the SSA chapter at Colorado State. Another laudable life goal she has set is to eventually enjoy a beer at all 30 Major League Baseball parks.*

## Fifth place: Graduate/mature student essay contest

# Religion seduces a secular nation

*FFRF awarded Jemille Bailey a \$350 scholarship.*

By Jemille Bailey

Modern America has an unhealthy love affair with religion. In recent years, U.S. government leaders have invoked God when addressing their constituents in speeches and writings. For those who don't believe in a deity, or don't agree with government's interpretation of or interference with religious matters, there exists an uncomfortable relationship.

While Americans generally have great respect for the fundamental ideals of the founders, it is obvious that the secular ideological underpinnings so eloquently codified in the U.S. Constitution are frequently contested, circumvented or disregarded for political gain.

Two issues in particular are of concern nationwide: The right of women to exercise physical sovereignty vis à vis their reproductive systems and capabilities are once again being hotly debated. In January, presidential hopeful Rick Santorum gallingly proclaimed in a CNN interview that victims of rape should “accept what God has given to [them].”

Despite that issue having already been addressed and settled by the U.S. Supreme Court for almost 40 years, Santorum dangerously and irresponsibly asserts his religious beliefs as justification for setting or changing public policy.

He also single-handedly reinterprets the Constitution, arguing that “life begins at conception.” Santorum is free to argue his position, but his stance is based not on reason, science or social responsibility but on his religion.

Secondly, thinly veiled government promotion of religion has also seeped into the lives of ordinary Americans through their maltreatment of sexual minorities. The civil rights of lesbians, gays and bisexuals, as well as people who are gender nonconforming or transgender, are too frequently set aside, unrecognized or challenged.

Religion has frequently been a reason why the aforementioned Americans are marginalized and disenfranchised. Speaking to the graduating class of 2012 at Liberty University, a Christian university in Lynchburg, Va., Mitt Romney, then the presumed Republican nominee for U.S. president,

## Such rhetoric implies a divide between religious and nonreligious citizens.

reaffirmed his opposition to marriage equality:

“It strikes me as odd that the free exercise of religious faith is sometimes treated as a problem, something America is stuck with instead of blessed with.” He went on, “Perhaps religious conscience upsets the designs of those who feel that the highest wisdom and authority comes from our government.”

Using language such as “blessed” is a clear signal to Christian believers in the audience that they and Romney are on the same team. If he were running for president of Liberty University, he would be well within his bounds to use such language. This speech also doubled as a campaign event.

Such rhetoric implies a divide between religious and nonreligious citizens. Further, it's concerning that Romney doesn't trust legislators, judg-



es and other public servants. We elected them presumably because of their perceived wisdom. Logically, as those leaders have been given responsibility through the ballot box or appointment, they are the highest authorities in the nation.

But Romney then shamelessly pronounced that “there is no greater force for good in the nation than Christian conscience in action.” What disappointing news for the nation's many atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews and Muslims.

Often, after all other ineffective social and moral arguments are exhaust-

ed, religion is the last, and incidentally, the most illegitimate justification for the restriction of rights or release of responsibilities. It is on the emotionally tempting but judicially irrelevant leg of religion that Romney stands to assert his opinion on what makes a family.

Every year in the U.S., a National Prayer Breakfast is held and televised, attended by Democrats and Republicans alike. While some may view it as mere tradition, its implicit nature makes clear that we are under an ever-growing threat of moving toward theocracy.

When reason and objective analysis are pushed aside or ignored and replaced with tribal and theocratic allegiances and dogma, the resulting separatism can provoke the same unseemly acts of marginalization or restrictions of civil liberties that have led toward slavery, genocide and other atrocities throughout modern history.

Those acts may, in turn, be irrationally justified as divinely inspired or even virtuous at the expense of the physical and intellectual sovereignty of dissenting citizens.

*Jemille Bailey, 32, is a Los Angeles native pursuing an undergraduate liberal arts degree with a concentration in financial economics at Columbia University.*

## Member tries to rid Iowa city park of nativity

FFRF member Aiyanna Looney did stellar work in Oskaloosa, Iowa, trying to rid City Square Park, which is a public park, of a nativity scene. After she photographed it Dec. 5, she contacted FFRF Staff Attorney Stephanie Schmitt, who responded promptly: “If you could forward me those photos, that would be very helpful. Are there other nonsectarian displays up? Context is extremely important in these cases — also if there is a sign or something that indicates this was put up by anyone other than the city.”

Aiyanna noted in response that there were no other religious displays present. “There is a faux lighted pine tree with a star topper by the nativity, but no sign that states it's a holiday tree or Christmas tree, or who placed the tree in the park. There is no sign that states the nativity was placed by anyone other than the city.”

She contacted Oskaloosa City Manager Michael Shrock Jr. about the religious display on public property. Her

letter included this: “The use of government property to promote Christianity as superior to other faiths, religions and secularism is abhorrent. The city of Oskaloosa needs to take responsibility for this discriminatory display and remove the nativity or create an exhibit that is representative of everyone who lives in Oskaloosa and Mahaska County.”

On Dec. 7, Aiyanna emailed FFRF that the nativity was removed the day before and that Shrock told her that he didn't want an open forum and had the nativity removed.

**UPDATE:** Right before Freethought Today went to press, Aiyanna shared a voice mail left on her phone from council member Aaron Ver Steeg, who said, “I seen your letter. . . I just feel that people like you — if you don't want to look at something, look the other way — and you still have the freedom to move out of Oskaloosa.”

**UPDATE 2:** At a special Dec. 12 council meeting for “discussion and

possible action on establishing a policy for decorations and event use in the city square,” Shrock backtracked.

The Oskaloosa Herald reported that the City council voted to return the nativity to the park: “They voted to add to the decorations within the city square so that it's not just a nativity scene, but is accompanied by a Christmas tree as well as other secular holiday decorations.”

After the meeting, Aiyanna emailed: “I get the impression that no other faiths, or nonfaiths (atheists and agnostics), will be represented when the nativity is replaced in the park, and the city is going to use a ‘three reindeer rule’ regarding the city square: The 1985 Supreme Court ruling known as the ‘reindeer rule’ requires any religious display on public property to be balanced by secular displays in order to avoid any hint that the state is endorsing religion.”



# Helping our school board with its ‘Gideon problem’

By Suzanne Lamb

In the fall of 2011, I read in my small-town Kentucky newspaper how the Freedom From Religion Foundation had convinced the Muhlenberg County Board of Education to end Gideon bible distribution in local schools. I immediately checked out the FFRF website and decided then and there to become a member.

Six months later, curious about how our board of education was handling a different issue, I went online to review the minutes from the most recent board meeting. To my surprise, the board had unanimously approved “plans for collaboration and efforts to support the Gideon’s [sic] organization.”

Would a school board recently in trouble for allowing the Gideons into classrooms actually be pledging its support to Gideons International?

I spent nearly a month considering the matter. Though I found the board’s actions outrageous, I knew that pushing the issue could have huge consequences. We live in a highly religious community where grievances are not easily forgotten.

And while it was widely known that our family did not attend church, most didn’t know I was an atheist. I also knew that some would argue that I had no business criticizing public school policy, as we home-school our children.

Ultimately, I decided I could not let the matter go. I called a board member and asked him to explain the decision to collaborate with the Gideons. He insisted that the board’s vote actually meant that now any nonprofit group would be permitted to distribute literature at after-school events.

Of course, his explanation of the district’s new “open forum policy” was at odds with the official meeting minutes, so I emailed the district superintendent. He gave a similar version of events. When I asked to see the written policy, the superintendent told me that there wasn’t one.

After a great deal of research into the legality of “limited open forums,” I wrote the board and superintendent a detailed letter outlining the problems I saw with the policy, which appeared to have been adopted for the sole purpose of letting the Gideons back into



“Tabling” at Muhlenberg County [Ky.] High School were (left) SSA member Walter Petit, FFRF member Suzanne Lamb and SSA member Jeff Toy. (Photo by FFRF member Josh Casey.)

the schools. I made it clear that if the board opened these doors, it would have to allow in other groups offering Muslim, pagan and even atheist literature.

I cited two school districts in North Carolina that abruptly ended their “open” policies as soon as pagans asked to distribute their books. After mailing the letter, I published it on my blog, hoping that going public might encourage the board to do the right thing. Unfortunately, the superintendent responded to say that the board was content with the policy as it stood and had no plans to put it in writing.

Dissatisfied with this response, I decided to attend a couple of school board meetings to see if the issue would come up. Little did I realize that I was about to stumble on another problem. It turns out that the board was also accustomed to starting its meetings with a student-led prayer.

## Winning secular access

Shortly after attending a second board meeting, I made contact with Walter Petit, a Muhlenberg County High School graduate who is now president of the Secular Student Alliance

at Western Kentucky University, about an hour from Muhlenberg County. He and a few others were eager to remedy the situation.

Our primary goal was to convince the board not to allow any outside groups to distribute literature at official school functions; however, if the board insisted on allowing religious groups, then we wanted to have a secular presence.

We sent separate requests to every public school principal in the county asking to distribute literature at upcoming after-school events. As an FFRF member, I said that I would be distributing a variety of materials, including Dan Barker’s books *Godless* and *Just Pretend: a Freethought Book for Children*.

We didn’t know what to expect, but our requests were quickly accepted, and the various school principals started the process of scheduling us for specific after-school events. When I blogged about our upcoming appearances at local schools, comments began pouring in from local citizens who were outraged that atheists would be allowed to hand out materials. The story eventually made the evening news.

The first event we chose to attend was Parent Night at the county’s only

When I asked to see the written policy, the superintendent told me that there wasn’t one.

high school. Despite the negative backlash on my blog, the event was quite pleasant. About two dozen people — a mixture of students, parents, and staff — stopped by our table to pick up literature or ask questions. Several people said they were glad to see us there.

At the board meeting two weeks later, Petit repeated our request that the board end its policy of allowing outside groups to distribute literature in the schools. He firmly stated our demand that school board prayer be discontinued. Highlights from the meeting included a highly sectarian opening prayer that took swipes at our activism, and an anti-evolution rant from a board member who is also a Baptist minister.

FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott has sent the board a letter outlining the problems with both the literature distribution policy and school board prayer. We are awaiting the board’s response. In the meantime, I am enjoying networking with the many free-thinkers I’ve met over the past few months, including several who live in Muhlenberg County.

In fact, our efforts have brought enough atheists and agnostics out of hiding that we hope to start a Muhlenberg County Freethinkers Group early next year.

*Suzanne Lamb is a secular home-schooling parent, a former Catholic and the author of “What to Tell the Neighbors,” a blog about “unschooling” (an approach emphasizing children’s natural desire to learn that helps them become independent thinkers) and living as an atheist in the bible belt. Her fiction and creative nonfiction have appeared in the Los Angeles Review, Nano Fiction, Wigleaf and other journals. She lives with her husband, Steve, and their three children in Central City, Kentucky.*

## Lakeside Freethinkers counter Baptist ‘science’ course

By Dr. Ken Crosby

The Lake Chapala area, south of Guadalajara, on Mexico’s biggest natural lake, hosts the largest concentration of Americans living outside the U.S. The area’s ex-pats are estimated to number between 6,000 to 10,000 — the latter during the winter months when people from north of Mexico escape the cold. They are mostly retired and include, in addition to Americans, a large number of Canadians and people from many other countries.

Freethinking ex-pats in the area commonly called Lakeside live in a very religious community. Some 17

area churches advertise their services, not to mention bible study and prayer meetings, and missionaries go door to door to try to spread “the good news.” The Baptist church has given a “course” on “How Science Points to the Existence of God.” In such an environment, freethinkers were largely invisible and found it difficult to find others who share their views.

Dr. Ken Crosby, a retired psychologist and After-Life Member of FFRF, had founded a Freethinkers chapter within the Family Motor Coach Association, the association of motorhome owners. But after living at Lakeside for nine years, he knew only four fellow ex-pats who were freethinkers. Frustrated by his inability to find fellow atheists,

agnostics, humanists, and other who reject belief in the supernatural with whom to socialize, and inspired by his attendance at the FFRF-sponsored Reason Rally in March, he placed ads in the weekly English language newspaper inviting freethinkers interested in forming a group for fellowship and discussion to contact him.

The ads produced an unexpectedly large response, resulting in an initial mailing list of 30 persons. No one had imagined that there were so many freethinkers at Lakeside. Many at the group’s first meeting were surprised to find that people they knew were also freethinkers.

The Lakeside Freethinkers, now numbering 60, began with month-

ly meetings and now meets twice a month for socializing and discussion. The steady growth of the group demonstrates that it is meeting a real need, and members, perhaps encouraged by knowing that they are not alone, are becoming more outspoken on issues concerning the imposition of religion in their community, such as the attempted takeover by evangelicals from the U.S. of a facility for abandoned and abused children.

The Baptists should not expect to offer their “course” again without it being countered by accurate information.



## Ask a Skeptic

### Inhaling spirituality's heady fumes

George Saunders, New York, sends a USA Today clipping in which Ed Stetzer, LifeWay Research president, says "a majority of the population is spiritual but not religious." George asks, "Does anyone really understand what it means to be 'spiritual but not religious?'"

**KATIE DANIEL:** Spiritual means you believe in ghosts, but don't organize rituals around them or proselytize. Religious means that you believe in ghosts, organize rituals around them, and think everyone else should too!

**PHYLLIS ROSE:** I don't — "spiritual" seems to have the same connotation as the unknown quality of "religious."

**PATRICK ELLIOTT:** This is how I perceive it: "Organized superstition isn't my thing, but I don't mind doing it on my own." Which is equivalent to: "You won't find me running with the bulls in Pamplona, that is crazy! But, I'm not opposed to trying my hand at running with the bulls on my own."

**WENDY GOLDBERG:** To me, it means to be in tune with nature and especially with all the winter birds that "flock" to my feeders. "... and the little brown birds, which stirred occasionally in the hedge, looked like single russet leaves that had forgotten to drop." (from *Jane Eyre*)

**ANNIE LAURIE GAYLOR:** I've never read a definition of "spirituality" that was comprehensible. It stems from the word "spirit" and pertains to an imaginary "spirit world." The word "spirit" can have secular connotations today, such as "team spirit" or "keep up your spirits." But "spiritual atheist" seems like an oxymoron. I feel it's a mistake for atheists and other nonbelievers to adopt language that clearly has a religious genesis. (That's a joke!) Doesn't this just contribute to confusion, as in Einstein's metaphorical and unfortunate "God does not play dice with the universe" kind of language?

I am guessing that most nonbelievers who are using the term "I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual," probably mean that they are moved or awed and have emotional responses to music, artistry, nature or being part of the community and the universe. So why not say that? Why muddy the waters by using a religious term to describe a natural (not a supernatural) feeling, emotion or sense? People should say what they mean. It seems like a good policy for atheists and agnostics to take care that their pronouncements are not misunderstood by believers.

**BILL DUNN:** It means, if you're being truly honest with yourself, that you're more of a sociopath than a psychopath.

**ELAINE HAMPTON:** "Spirit" has so many different meanings, from supernatural beings to very natural beings — as in a high-spirited horse, or a great single-malt Scotch! Or genuine Napoleon brandy. I like to inhale the fumes.

When I first learned the Latin meaning of the original word, I had to laugh. "The spirit left him" = he stopped breathing. Or "holy spirit" = heavenly halitosis.

It's like using "heart" to mean anything connected with emotions. "And then my heart stood still" is a lovely song, but if the singer's heart had really stopped, they would have needed CPR immediately, or they'd be dead. Slippery, slippery words. I love to play

with them.

**JOAN REISMAN:** I think people hasten to say "but I'm spiritual" in reaction to the (entirely mistaken) notion that atheists are dull, pragmatic people who only believe what can be proved, and who have no sense of awe or wonder or imagination. By claiming spirituality, they are asserting that while they don't follow any organized religion or believe in any gods, they are still multifaceted individuals who are able to sense and experience "higher" feelings and concepts and possibilities beyond mundane reality.

**NORA CUSACK:** I'm neither, because neither is fact-based. They're weasel words for people who don't want to acknowledge that when they're dead, they're dead.

**ANDREW SEIDEL:** To be religious is to believe in widely held, factually unsupported dogma. To be spiritual is to believe in factually unsupported dogma that is all your own. To alter the Robert Pirsig quote which gave Richard Dawkins' *God Delusion* its name: "When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called spirituality. When many people suffer from a delusion, it is called religion."

**DAN BARKER:** I think when people say they are "spiritual but not religious," they mean one of three things, depending on how "spiritual" or "religious" are defined.

Some of those people believe in a god, or gods, or a transcendent world populated by invisible personalities that have some kind of influence (they think) over their lives, but they are not members of any organized or recognized religion. They are going it on their own, defining "God" or "spirit" in their own way, and don't think they lack anything that is claimed to be possessed by members of religion.

For these people, "religion" is nothing in itself — it is just an artificial human-made way of organizing those who hold similar beliefs into a common group. Religion adds nothing to spirituality, they think. To my mind, these people are indeed religious, though not part of any organized religion.

Others think "religion" is indeed a claim to a transcendent reality, but they reject that claim and think "spiritual" is simply a personal way to experience feelings of the sublime, to meditate, to enjoy aesthetics and positive emotions, to appreciate the finer qualities of art and music, to contemplate "higher values," to breathe deeply and take the focus away from the mundane.

These might be atheists or agnostics who define "spirit" in a nonsupernatural manner, interpreting their "numinous" feelings in purely physical, neurological terms. They agree that others interpret the word "spirit" differently, but feel that their own material definition lacks none of the value or beauty of those who are religious. To my mind, these people are neither religious nor spiritual, even though they do try to redefine "spirit" in a nontranscendent manner.

There is a third group, comprised mostly of evangelical Christians, who define "religion" as "man reaching up to God," but define true Christianity as "God reaching down to man." (The sexist language is theirs, not mine.) I used to think like this; indeed, I preached sermons about it.



These people don't eschew religion, and even agree they are part of a religion — of course they are, if they go to church, pay tithes, support missionaries, promote a Holy Book, and so on — but feel that "spiritual" is more than an attitude or emotion.

To them, the "spirit" is the Holy Spirit, an actual person, the "spirit of God" with whom they have a personal relationship. Some of them think they are possessed by this spirit. When they say "Jesus came into my heart," they are not talking metaphorically. Pentecostals and charismatic types believe they have been "filled with the Spirit," and feel very sorry for the (mainly) mainstream denominations that have "a form of godliness but deny the power thereof." (2 Timothy 3:5)

When they say they are "spiritual but not religious, what they mean is that what matters to these people is "spiritual but not religious."

If I were forced to fit into one of those groups, I would have to choose

the second one — except that I don't like the word "spiritual." I don't think the word "spirit" has ever been coherently defined. Every attempt to define the word ends up telling us what it is not, not what it actually is. It is the intangible essence or a nonphysical presence. A noncorporeal personality. An immaterial mind. None of this tells us anything.

In positive terms, what exactly is a spirit? If something exists, then it can be measured — it must be measured, or be measurable. How much does spirit weigh? How much space does it take up? When does it start to exist and when does it die or disappear? How does it differ from the "ether," which we now know does not exist though we continue to use the word "ethereal"?

Until the word "spirit" is defined, and it never has been, then to say you are "spiritual but not religious" is to say nothing at all. Except maybe that you don't like religion very much, and that is something I can agree with.

## State/Church Bulletin

*Continued from page 6*

tutions. The Supreme Court ruled that the school district plaintiffs lack standing because they are not taxpayers, and that the funding is not from local tax dollars but from the Legislature's general grant to the districts through the state Department of Education.

### Judge mandates church for convicted teen

When District Judge Mike Norman, Muskogee, Okla., sentenced Tyler Alred, 17, on a vehicular manslaughter conviction in November, he included Sunday church attendance for 10 years as a requirement of a deferred sentence. The District Attorney's Office is supposed to monitor Alred's church attendance, the Tulsa World reported.

Randall Coyne, University of Oklahoma College of Law professor, said the church condition would likely not stand if challenged, but someone would have to complain. Norman expressed doubt anyone would challenge it.

Enter the ACLU of Oklahoma, which on Dec. 4 filed a complaint with the state Council on Judicial Complaints, asserting that the sentence violates the Code of Judicial Conduct. Brady Henderson, ACLU legal director, said giving a defendant a choice between church and prison can't be enforced without illegal government intrusion.

"I firmly believe in going to church, but the bible also tells you to obey the laws of the land," said Muskogee County District Attorney Larry Moore. "You can obey the laws of the land and still be a Christian. In this case, the laws of

the land do not permit a judge to order you to go to church."

### Turkey fines channel for 'Simpsons' blasphemy

The Telegraph reported Dec. 3 that Turkey's Supreme Board of Radio and Television fined CNBC-E for "making fun of God, encouraging the young people to exercise violence by showing the murders [in a 'Simpsons' Halloween episode] as God's orders."

The episode, "Treehouse of Horrors XXII," has a segment titled "Dial D for Diddy" in which Ned Flanders goes on a killing rampage after hearing what he thinks is the voice of God. Later in the episode, the devil demands God bring him a cup of coffee. "Yes sir," God responds, revealing it's actually the devil who runs the world.

Turkey is officially secular, but most of its 75 million people are Muslim.

### Diocese's 'Obamacare' lawsuit dismissed

U.S. District Judge Terrence McVerry on Nov. 27 dismissed the Pittsburgh Catholic Diocese's lawsuit against the Obama administration for requiring it to offer birth control services to employees as part of the federal health care mandate.

McVerry said in his 28-page opinion that the diocese has not been harmed by the law because most of its provisions don't take effect until 2014. "[D]efendants have actively begun the process of amending the regulations to address the specific religious objections which plaintiffs raise in this litigation."







## In the News

### Where atheism gets you a death sentence

A new study by the International Humanist and Ethical Union in Switzerland shows that atheists and other religious skeptics suffer persecution or discrimination around the world and in at least seven countries can be executed if their beliefs become known. The IHEU issued the report on the United Nation's annual Human Rights Day on Dec. 10.

The report, "Freedom of Thought 2012," said "there are laws that deny atheists' right to exist, curtail their freedom of belief and expression, revoke their right to citizenship, restrict their right to marry."

According to the survey of about 60 countries, nations where atheism or defection from the official religion can bring capital punishment are Afghanistan, Iran, Maldives, Mauritania, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Sudan.

The report also notes policies in some European countries and the U.S. that favor the religious while excluding nonbelievers.

In the U.S., a social and political climate prevails "in which atheists and the nonreligious are made to feel like lesser Americans, or non-Americans," the report said.

In at least seven U.S. states, constitutional provisions bar atheists from public office. One state, Arkansas, has a law that bars atheists from testifying in court, the report said.

### Judge to archdiocese: Give up abuse files

Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Emilie Elias on Dec. 10 ordered the Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles to turn over secret files it's had for decades on 69 priests accused of sex abuse. Elias gave the archdiocese until Dec. 27 to give her the files. She set a date for early January to hear arguments from priests who want to keep their files private.

The Los Angeles Times reported that the order came five years after the 2007 settlement of \$660 million with more than 550 alleged victims of 245 priests.

Ray Boucher, lead plaintiff's attorney, estimates the archdiocese has files on 80 more priests that it is not turning over to the judge. He also said documents on priests who belonged to Catholic religious orders are also missing.

### Film documents abuse by Wis. priest

"Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God" opened in U.S. theaters in November and will air on HBO in February. The film centers on four men who attended St. John's School for the Deaf in St. Francis, Wis., as boys and were sexually molested.

"A lot of individual stories had been done about clerical sex abuse, but I hadn't seen one that really connected the individual stories with the larger coverup by the Vatican, so that was important," director Alex Gibney told Reuters.

In a letter to the Vatican in 1998, the year he died, Fr. Lawrence Murphy admitted molesting some 200 deaf boys over two decades beginning in the

1950s.

### 'No faith' gains in United Kingdom

The Independent reported Dec. 10 that the number of persons with no religious faith in the U.K. rose from 14.8% in 2001 to 25.1% in 2011.

During that period, the number of Christians fell from 37.3 million to 33.2 million. The proportion of Muslims rose from 3% to 4.8%. Hinduism claims 1.5%, Sikhism 0.8% and Judaism 0.5%. About 180,000 claimed to be followers of the Jedi religion featured in "Star Wars," down from 400,000 in 2001.

### Mothers 'maimed, forgotten' in Ireland

"The imperative to bear as many children as possible crippled hundreds of Irishwomen," Marie O'Connor writes in a column titled "The maimed and forgotten mothers" in The Irish Times. Catholic hospitals encouraged doctors to treat difficult childbirths with a symphysiotomy, a procedure that severs the pelvic joint, instead of doing a caesarean section.

According to O'Connor, the church preferred the symphysiotomy because it could widen the pelvis, "enabling an unlimited number of vaginal deliveries."

"But when it went wrong, which was often, the women suffered chronic pain and incontinence, and many could barely walk. . . . Doctors in every other Western country shunned the operation, but in Ireland it was performed on some 1,500 women between 1944 and 2005. About 200 victims survive today, most of them disabled. Yet they can't seek redress in the courts, because it only recently became public that these operations were unnecessary, long after the statute of limitations expired."

### Bible favorite book, child favorite porn

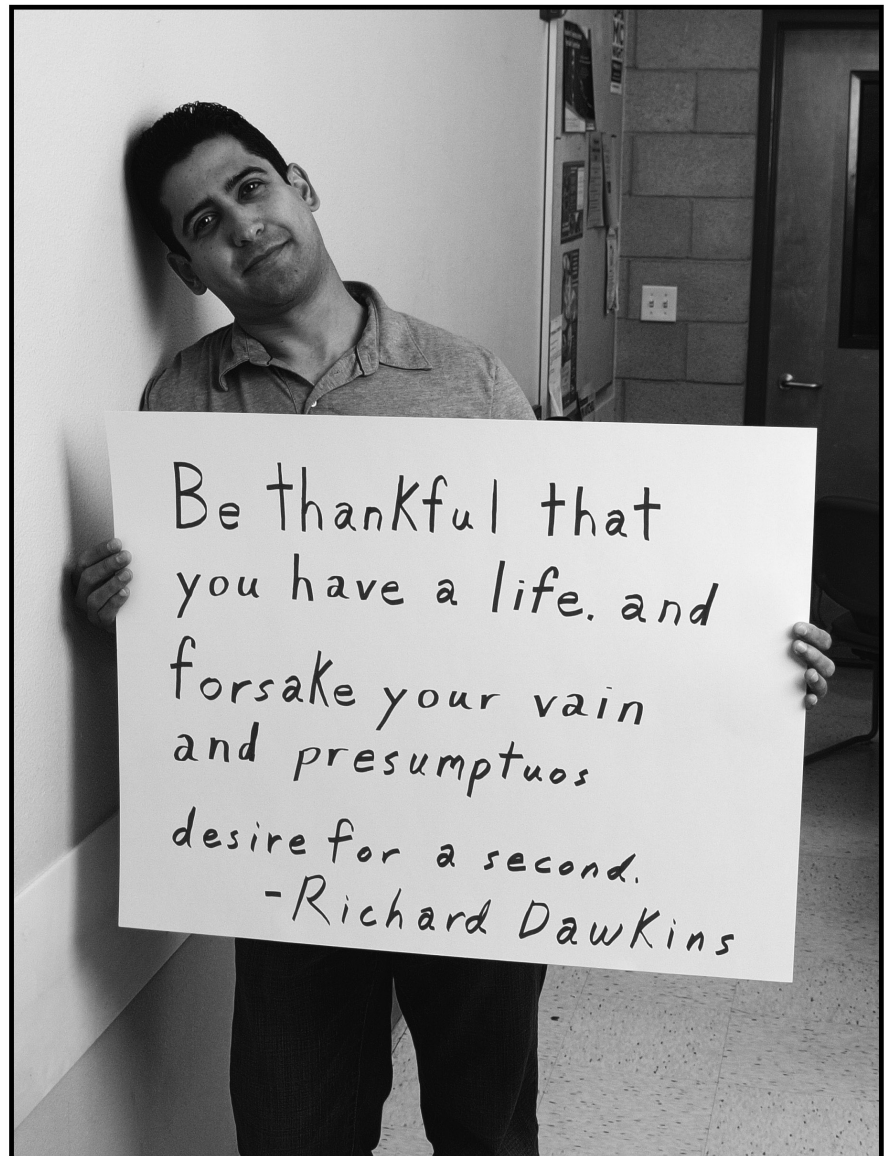
A Manchester, N.H., lawyer with ties to a conservative Christian law firm took a teen girl to Canada, had her engage in sexual activity and convinced her to let it be filmed, according to federal indictments reported Nov. 17 by the Concord Monitor.

Lisa Biron, 43, is charged with transportation with intent to engage in criminal sexual activity, seven counts of possession of child pornography and five counts of sexual exploitation of children.

Biron is associated with the Alliance Defending Freedom, which, its website says, is committed to keeping "the door open for the spread of the Gospel" by advocating for "religious liberty, the sanctity of life, and marriage and family." In Concord, she worked with ADF to defend a Pentecostal church in its tax fight against the city.

She recently served on the board of directors at Mount Zion Christian Schools in Manchester. On her Facebook page, which was been removed, she listed the bible as her favorite book.

Police began investigating after receiving a tip from a man who said he'd seen child porn on Biron's computer.



This photo of Cesar Valdez is included in Eric Paul Erickson's book, *Atheist Bliss*, available at [ffrf.org/shop](http://ffrf.org/shop).

### Priest on abuse list now that he's dead

Fr. Donald Musinski has been added to the Archdiocese of Milwaukee's list of clergy restricted because of substantiated allegations of sexual abuse of children, 15 years after the victim first accused him, the Journal Sentinel reported Dec. 1.

The archdiocese did not announce Musinski's addition to the list, possibly because he is deceased, said spokeswoman Julie Wolf. He died at age 69 in 2006. He was ordained in 1962 and served parishes in Milwaukee, Belgium and Johnsbury before retiring in 1999.

The victim, Karen Konter, now 54, reported Musinski to the archdiocese in 1997. She said Musinski began molesting her when she was 8, progressing to rape by the time she graduated from eighth grade. She said the priest took advantage of her, "an isolated and ostracized little girl, hobbled by polio and numerous surgeries," as the Journal Sentinel put it, at St. Adalbert's on Milwaukee's south side.

### U.K. Scouts mull atheist membership

The Telegraph reported Dec. 3 that the British Scouting movement is working on plans to draft an alternative godless oath and let atheists become full members and group leaders for the first time. For more than 40 years, versions of the promise have existed allowing Muslims to pledge allegiance to Allah and Hindus to substitute the words "my Dharma."

The traditional pledge mentions "duty to God and to the Queen, to help other people and to keep the Scout Law."

Scouting founder Robert Baden-Powell in his book of advice for boys, "Rovering for Success," compared atheism to gambling, excessive drinking, smoking and syphilis as a danger to be avoided.

### Bible played role in boy's death

Police said 7-year-old Roderick Arrington was beaten to death by his parents because he didn't read the bible and do his homework, the Las Vegas Sun reported Dec. 3. The boy's stepfather, Markiece Palmer, 34, and mother, Dina Palmer, 27, were charged with murder, child abuse and neglect.

Roderick died after being taken to the hospital on Nov. 30. A doctor reported he had fixed pupils, bruises all over his body and buttocks showing "fresh open wounds. Markiece Palmer told police he spanked his stepson because he lied about reading a chapter in the bible and didn't do his homework. He admitted he hit the boy on multiple occasions with his belt, a spatula, a wooden paddle and his hands.

On one Facebook photo, Markiece Palmer wrote, "My babies they make me happy. GOD bless the children!!!"

On another photo of the boy, Dina Palmer wrote, "I wanna do better 4 my son, my family, myself, 4 you LORD!!!!!!!!!!!"

## They Said What?!

You know what do you do with a bully? If a bully keeps getting his way and intimidating kids on the playground and nobody stands up for themselves, then the bully is encouraged and emboldened and continues to bully more and more people. But when a little kid is being bullied and he turns around and punches the bully in the mouth — metaphorically speaking, of course — then the bully is oftentimes proven to be a paper tiger.

**Matt Barber, attorney and conservative Christian radio host, attacking FFRF for contesting an illegal nativity scene in the public median in Michigan**  
[rightwingwatch.org](http://rightwingwatch.org), 12-10-12



# Letterbox

## Why are Christians so easily threatened?

The day before Thanksgiving, stressed out that we had to feed over 20 people the next day, I walked into a store to buy a vacuum cleaner belt. Waiting in line, I heard the shop owner say to the customer in front of me, “God Bless and Happy Thanksgiving.” When my transaction was over, he said the same thing to me, an atheist.

As an atheist, did I automatically assume that he was waging a war against me? Of course not. In fact, I was grateful, over the course of a busy, stressful day, that someone I didn’t even know took the time to wish me well. I smiled back and wished him a Happy Thanksgiving.

So why do Christians get so upset when someone doesn’t respond with “Merry Christmas?” Is their faith so insecure, so lacking in substance, that they take every seasonal greeting, in whatever form, as a threat to their faith? As a *war* on their faith?

O they of little faith.  
**Matt Birkenhauer**  
**Kentucky**

## Keep Constitution safe from zealots

The economy is picking up, I’m back to work and it’s time I contribute to the effort to keep the Constitution safe from religious zealots. The problems America faces will never be resolved using superstition as a guide.

Enclosed you will find my check for \$1,000 to become a Lifetime Member.

Thank you for the wonderful work you do,  
**Brian Fetherstonhaugh**  
**California**

## Atheist appreciates Foundation’s work

Over the course of this election season, I felt the urge to donate to FFRF on such a regular basis that I may as well just upgrade to a Lifetime Membership! Though I’m an atheist and rabidly anti-religion, I must confess to the following:

I love Christmas trees and singing Christmas carols, I say “bless you” when someone sneezes, I use several expressions and swear words with “god” included, I have an angel collection and numerous other religion-related habits that, like old superstitions, are hard to overcome.

These proclivities remained secret for the years of my regular membership and will hopefully be forgiven of me as a Lifetime Member.

I do not always have the courage to speak out as an individual, so I rely on your organization. Along with my

membership contribution, you all have my thanks and admiration. I fear your perseverance will be sorely needed in the near future.

**Yvonne M. Nantais**  
**North Carolina**

## Sending our support from Pennsylvania

I contacted Dan Barker and FFRF previously to thank you for helping us make the 2012 Pennsylvania State Atheist/Humanist conference a success, but I’m also pleased to write to let you know that our board of directors has decided to send a donation to FFRF as additional thanks for your help.

Please accept the enclosed \$1,000 donation and our gratitude for all that you did to support the conference. We couldn’t have done it without your support, and we hope that the foundation can use this donation to further protect the civil rights of nonbelievers on the national level.

**Brian Fields**  
**President**  
**Pennsylvania Nonbelievers Inc.**

## Contributor impressed with legal team

I continue to be impressed with FFRF’s effectiveness, especially, but not limited to, the work of the legal department.

Enclosed is a donation in the amount of \$1,000. My experience is that restricting donations to particular purposes is an administrative nuisance and is to be discouraged. Therefore, other than to say that this donation is not intended to go into an endowment, feel free to use it in whatever way you feel is most productive.

Of course I would love to see this help support the work of your legal team, but if what you really needed was, for example, funds to buy comfortable chairs and lamps for a reading room, that would be fine with me.

**Professor Paul Newman**  
**Indiana**

## Commandments’ Moses was wholly Jewish

The Christian brouhaha over the Ten Commandments is amazing. It is, after all, a Jewish document.

Three cheers for the work you do.  
**Marillyn Owens**  
**Michigan**

## Black collar crimes leave impression

One thing puzzles me, how do you gather all those “black collar” crimes? By computer?

Keep up your good work. It’s teaching a lot of people what religion really is! The problem is that your members already know what religion really is. How do we get others to read what is on the wall?

I just had the local sign company paint the tailgate of my truck with the following message: The world’s #1 problem is — Too many people.

**Bernie Schatz**  
**Minnesota**

*Editor’s note: Helpful readers send in black collar clippings from newspapers, but we also find scads of them online just by searching for words such as “pastor, rabbi, imam and priest.” There are also websites*



**Charles Fletcher Thompson, Massachusetts, says his next rubber stamp (available from various sources) will say FAITH IS FOR FOOLS. “I’ve put thousands of these ‘fixed’ bills in various denominations (ha!) into circulation. If the Supreme Court refuses to even consider the matter, we rational folks have to take it upon ourselves to fix this egregious violation of our rights.”**

*that focus on crimes by clergy.*

## What would Freud think about hate mail?

As a recovering Catholic, I say keep up the good work in holding the Catholic bishops accountable for their electioneering sins.

I love the crank mail, so keep publishing those “love offerings.” I especially love the letters from those Klan-inclined folk from Alabama, Tennessee, Texas, etc., complete with all the misspellings and poor grammar. It’s amazing what a fixation these Christians have with shoving things “up your ass.” I wonder what Freud would think.

As a nurse who works in psych, I *know* what I think of such scatological writers. I see fear, hate, anger and much imbalance, because they see their xenophobic and ethnocentric way of life fading away, with the ever-changing demographics.

**Darren Foster**  
**Wisconsin**

• • •

I really do enjoy the crank mail, great for a slow negative head shake, then a smile, then a full horse laugh. How wonderfully distressed would the writers be if they knew how entertaining some of us find their bluster? These crank messages do, indeed, support the notion that less education is associated with more religion.

It appears that the writers live in great fear and feel compelled to make sure everyone else does, too. I don’t, but I do feel sorry for those many who do not quite trust their savior, fear that they have offended him and believe they may be on their way to hell.

Our cranks did not invent hell. Rather, fear of hell is a prominent part of the Abrahamic culture in which they were born. To be acceptable to the culture, to fit in, they have to believe, or appear to believe, what their tribe believes. Questioning the precepts of their culture is a threat to the culture and their acceptable place in it. Hence, they, in turn, threaten and curse anyone who questions their beliefs.

In contrast, I like Apple’s advertising slogan in 1997: “Think different.” It’s different thinking that created the iPhone, iPad and Androids, created not by a god but by hundreds of thousands of people around the world who “think different.”

Thinking differently, as we do, without fear, gives us good reason for a jolly laugh. Thanks, cranks!

**Ray Moody**  
**Honolulu**

## Biblical tale stinks, as boat would have

My objective is to ridicule one of the significant stories in the bible:

Once upon a time there was a 600-year-old man who had three sons. All four were married.

This family built a very large boat, which had three decks and a platform area about half the size of a football field. After the boat was loaded with animals, it proceeded to rain heavily for just under a thousand hours. During this period, the rain rate was equivalent to over 3 million inches per year over the whole Earth’s surface. At the flood’s height, the amount of water (about a billion cubic miles) was four to five times that which presently exists on Earth.

The family watched as their relatives and acquaintances drowned, as well as trillions of animals. The dead would include all the birds not onboard and most fish. The salt from the rising ocean waters would kill all freshwater fish, and at the height of the flood, the seawater was diluted with fresh water from the rain such that the amount of salinity was reduced by roughly 75%. This would kill off most marine animals. All this would have caused the atmosphere to become very aromatic with decaying bodies.

This family must have been very busy feeding all the millions of animals. They would be required to toss tons of urine and scat overboard every day for about a year.

This family was not totally hard-hearted. They housed hundreds of poisonous snakes, rats and fleas, which spread bubonic plague, and mosquitoes that spread malaria and kill over a million people a year. Over the millennia, malaria has killed more than a billion people.

One result of this flood was that all vegetation above present-day sea level and not on the boat would have been destroyed. There are at least three reasons for this:

Sea saltwater would destroy land vegetation, vegetation would be underwater for up to a year, and perhaps most importantly, the water pressure acting on the vegetation would be up to 13,000 pounds per square inch. No life above present-day sea level can withstand this pressure. As a result, when the animals were released, they would not have anything to eat except each other.

To state an obvious fact, ice floats in water. This flood would have destroyed all glaciers and the ice on the North and South Poles. From ice core samples (using tree ring type dating), polar ice is known to have existed for at least 400,000 years.

After the flood, how did the hundreds of kangaroos get to and end up only in Australia and flightless kiwi birds end up only in New Zealand, etc.?

Interestingly, before the flood, there were no wars, but afterward, almost continuous battles. After the flood, the hero of this story got drunk and fell down on the ground naked.

**Ronald L. Pelley**  
**California**

*Editor’s note: Objective met, quite convincingly.*

## What Is a Freethinker?



**free-think-er n.**  
A person who forms opinions about religion on the basis of reason, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief.



## Sharing the Crank Mail

*My, aren't we cranky this month, the very month Jesus their savior was born? Hit and missives are printed as received.*

**You piece of shit Marxist Communist!** Go live in Russia. Get the fuck out of here! Can't wait to see you burn in hell!!!! — *Joann Stump*

**FFRF Information Request:** You people are sick, lonely, pieces of excrement. OK, it's your right to be stupid enough to not believe in God, but to FORCE YOUR SICK EVIL WAYS on others through legislation, pressure, and attempted intimidation is EVIL and WRONG. Almighty God DOES exist, although not in YOUR lifeless, soulless eyes. I would NOT want to be you come the day of judgement. — *"Suck-my Schwang"*

**ridiculous:** I find you people to be out of line and unpatriotic. This nation was found as One Nation "Under God" and if you don't like it move to another Country. Having served this Country along with a lot of fellow Veterans we will put God on our side anyday, and if you don't like God used in the military or anywhere else keep it to yourselves or move. You are a minority but can believe what you like, but abortion is against God's will and it folks like you that have made it a political issue. Your organization is no different than the KKK. — *Tom Lemmer*

**Freedom From Religion:** You people make me fucking sick. You all don't need any organization your just a bunch of attention-whores crying like an infant who needs attention. I hope you all realize how pathetic you all are and just crawl back in your fucking caves. Yes that is my real address and anyone who comes to meet me there in a trespassing fashion will also meet my vast gun and ammo collection in a unfriendly way. — *Steven Main*

**morons:** r u clowns 4 freaking real when im up in heaven ill b looking down at u freakin morons burning in hell id like 2 c u on judgement begging god and his son jesus 4 forgiveness but then its 2 late burn in hell 4ever r tell god u r sorry and ask 4 forgiveness

**You're watertower terrorists!** I've concluded that your organization is deliberately targeting the water supply of an entire community by threatening its water tower and what they do with it. That makes you terrorists. You are just evil, not to mention that you have no regard for the safety of low flying aircraft in the darkest

months of winter near an area where the Great Lakes exist that can perpetuate adverse weather conditions. Any kind of marking lights on that water tower is a good thing. It's a small town. They have what they can afford. Shame on you. Why don't you go to Colorado and attack the cross on the side of the Rockies that is lit up at night? Get a life! — *Mary Adler, Waldorf, Ill.*

**Sickening Joke:** You sick cunts are a fucking pestilence. My hope is that God is real, and you find out in the most awful way possible. Secondly, I hope each one of your deaths is slow, painful and cancer riddled. Fuck the lot of you. — *Marcus Armstrong*

**UP YOURS:** Your full of shit up yours ass holes. — *Tony Roberts*

**assholes:** why dont you idiots mind your own business.stay in wisconsin and leave everyone else alone.u are liberal assholes. — *"Bendover Jerks"*

**Statue in Montana:** You people are absolutely out of your mind. You are all sick and mentally handicapped in my opinion. You can all go to hell. — *David Dempsey, Homer, Mich.*

**Then get out of the USA:** If you don't like living in the USA, then get out. We have freedoms too. All ragheads, and people that don't believe in Christ should be shot. This makes me so mad, it has been fine up until a bunch of you self righteous dick wads want us all to be fair, well life isn't always fair, so buck up, shut up, and kiss my ASS! — *James Williams*

**You are all assholes:** You fucking people ought to mind your own business and let people express their own beliefs - if you don't agree with it keep your fucking mouths closed and don't worry about it.....you are not the majority. What a bunch of low life losers. — *Stan Rohde*

**Hallelujah:** You fags need to get a life, or just do the world a favor and kill yourselves. Is a statue on a ski slope really that offensive to you? Seriously you all must be the most over sensitive pussies in the world. Merry Christmas Bitches — *John Nelson, Houston, Texas*

**You are human trash:** Just because one of your stupid assholes doesn't like a statue then it must be removed for everyone? IDIOTS you sub-humans are! — *Rick Lane*

**Evolution?** Does your organization believe in "The THEORY of Evolution" ? If we have evolved, explain why so many people are so stupid as to vote for Barack Hussein Obama. If we have evolved, why do so many people murder their unborn? I can't think of any animal that does that, can you. — *Britt Whit*

**no one:** who the FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? There is a God. And I think all of you will be going to HELL. — *"I love God"*

**Scum:** I look forward to pissing on your grave, as well as all your children. Your nothing but a bunch of little spoiled dbags . . . get a fucken life!! — *Mike Kelley— Travis Peebles, Texas*

**Texas:** Don't mess with Texas. We don't need your Bullshit here.

**Freedom From Religion!** HEY, MERRY CHRISTMAS....YOU COMMUNIST ASS HOLES! — *Stan Knowles*

**Haralson County High School:** The people of west Georgia have a way of life and for you people up there in that dismal state of ugly girls, snowdrifts, and millionaire athlete worship to try to tear it down is disgusting, sad, repugnant and insulting to every peace loving comm unity on the planet. I'm sure you'd love to pick on some Muslims but you four-eyed, dope smoking geeks are too chicken shlt. — *Jesup Gentry, Atlanta, Ga.*

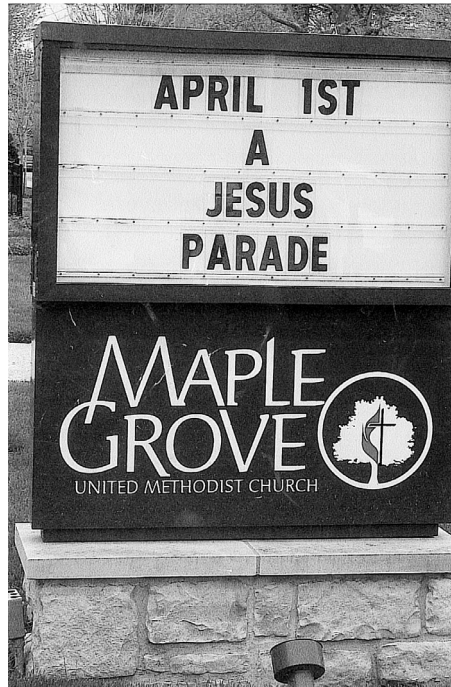
**Your Star:** You should be sued for your interference of an organization to exerceise its right of freedom of religion. If you don't like it here in the US, then leave dummy!!! — *Leroy Smith*

**OF OF OF OF OF:** IT'S FREEDOM OF RELIGION NOT Freedom FROM Religion you freaks! Read the Constitution! By asking government to HIDE religious events you are asking them to VIOLATE THE CONSTITUTION! YOU ARE IDIOTS! PS: GOD WILL GET YOU EVENTUALLY.

**stay the hell out of my religion:** bELIEVE WHAT YOU WANT, BUT STAY THE HELL OUT OF MY RELIGION AND WHAT I BELIEVE. GO BACK IN YOUR SEWER AND STAY THERE — *Mickey Mathis, Brownwood*

**Freedom from religion:** You're a bunch of idiots. You will lift up your eyes in hell! Enjoy! — *Glen Kinard*

**stay within in you own state:** mind your own house. your work is ignorant, intrusive, and serves no divine purpose. — *Tawni Flick*



The crank mail from Greg Thomas (below) has it backwards. Janice Fry, Ohio, spotted this last spring in Columbus.

**National Holiday:** I'd like to suggest April 1st as your group's national holiday. — *Greg Thomas*

**assholes:** Are you the Anti-Religion Nazi's that fucked over that town over it's cross ? What a bunch of fucking assholes. fuck off and die! — *David DeSau*

**Kansas Town Forced to Remove Cross:** Nothing but a group of progressive thugs. YOU PEOPLE SUCK — *Chris Marshall*

**Freedom:** This is America so you are free from religion. Your childish borish behavior towards people of faith is really quite telling to your character. This e-mail is sent with neither malace or respect as I have none of either for you. Oh who am I kidding "GO FUCK YOURSELVES" — *Michael White, Green Bay, Wis.*

**Your Org:** Your fucking existence is offensive to me, does my opinion matter? Or does only your opinion matter? Also it is freedom from the establishment of a state religion not freedom from religion you psycho fucks. — *Miles Bouck, Carpenter, Va.*

# Getting school to act on rental charge for church

By Jeff Albright

Shortly after I got back home from the FFRF convention in October in Portland, Ore., I started hearing advertisements on the radio where I live in Clarkston, Wash. The ads were for a church called Canyons Church and its services at the Clarkston High School auditorium.

This is our public high school of which I am a 1980 graduate. I thought this was curious — having church at the public high school. When, eventually, I saw a huge billboard advertising Canyons Church at Clarkston High School (with no disclaimer by the school), I decided I should look into this situation.

I went to "Legal" at [ffrf.org/](http://ffrf.org/) and clicked on "State/Church FAQ" on the dropdown. I scrolled down and found "Churches Meeting at Public Schools." FFRF said I could do a public records request and would have to pay for copies of the information I am requesting.

The FAQ said to (1) ask the school district for a copy of the rental con-

tract; (2) ask for verification that rent has been paid up to date; (3) ask for a copy of the school district's rental rate schedule to confirm that rent is reasonable.

I emailed the superintendent with the public records request on Nov. 11. He replied on Nov. 13 that he would have the information to me by Nov. 20. On Nov. 19, I received a phone call from Wendy, the executive director for financial services, who said I could pick up the information at the school district office.

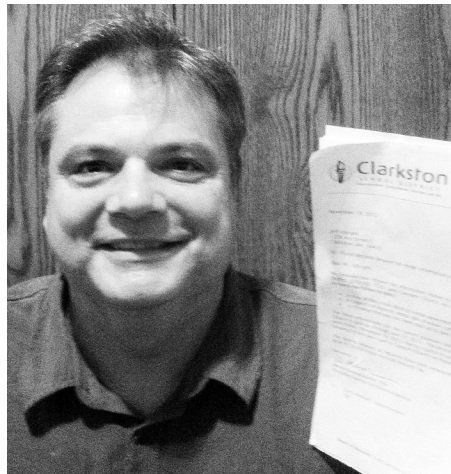
I paid \$1.05 for the copies (eight pages) and went home to study them. A cover letter was attached and in part said, "The third request asks for the current payment status of the Canyons Church account. Canyons Church is paid up through June 24, 2012. The district is at fault for not billing beyond this date (up until Friday, Nov. 16, 2012) due to a glitch in our system that we corrected on Friday. Invoices totaling \$4,648 were sent to Canyons Church on Nov. 16."

Hopefully, the church is up to date and will stay that way.

FFRF's FAQ also advised to monitor

signs and disclaimers. I did not find any signs at the school other than on the day of the service. There was, however, no disclaimer on the billboard in neighboring Lewiston, Idaho.

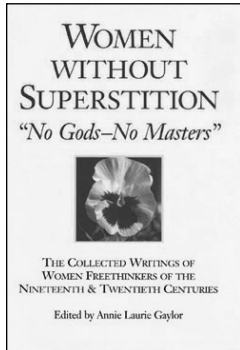
One last thing: The contracts state that all charges associated with use of facilities will be paid in full within 10 business days of receipt of invoice from the district. Yet the June 24 billing invoice date was 8/31/12, it was mailed on 9/11/12, due date was 9/30/12, and finally the invoice was paid on 10/15/12 (15 days late and apparently without penalty).



Jeff Albright with the school district letter saying the district was going to bill a church for use of a public school auditorium.

This whole process was quite exciting, I must admit. What shall I do next?

*[Editor's note: You're doing fine, Jeff, but keep your powder dry. We try to gear FFRF's FAQ to citizen activism as much as possible, depending on the situation.]*



## Women Without Superstition No Gods — No Masters

Edited by Annie Laurie Gaylor  
The Collected Writings of Women Freethinkers of the  
Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

The first anthology of women freethinkers, featuring more than 50 activists and writers critical of religion. Includes biographical sketches, selected writings, 51 photographs, and full index.

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**Happy ‘high’ holidays**

So says Chaz Stevens, who successfully lobbied the city of Deerfield Beach, Fla., to allow his Festivus pole made of 23 Pabst Blue Ribbon cans next a nativity scene at the main fire station. Asked “why 23?” Chaz says, “It’s a nice prime number (I’m a former rocket scientist math nerd), and during the research/build phase, we lost (belch) one!” His website is [myactsofsedition.com/](http://myactsofsedition.com/).

# FFRF on the road



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker (front, center) spoke Oct. 26 in Ohio at Kent State University at an event sponsored by the Kent State Freethinkers. The group’s motto is “We don’t want to *believe*; we want to *know*.”



“Does God Exist?” was the topic of a debate Oct. 26 at the University of Akron, Ohio, between FFRF Co-President Dan Barker and Howard Ducharme, a doctor of philosophy. The event was sponsored by the Secular Student Alliance, a campus freethought club. From left are Dylan Morris, Dan Barker, Bob LaBounty, Craig Bauman, Bryan Poole and Rob Frase.



FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor spoke Oct. 23 at Ripon College, Ripon, Wis., about “Religion, Women and Politics” at an event sponsored by the Secular Student Alliance. Co-President Dan Barker performed freethought songs. From left are Dan Barker, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Brian Fritsch, Adam Myers, Elly Davis, Samantha Sotiropoulos and SSA adviser Steve Martin. Martin and SSA are trying to get the private school’s motto changed from “Fides Christi Scientia” (Faith in Christ is knowledge).



**Irving Berlin: ‘There were never such devoted sisters’**

FFRF Officer Phyllis Rose, a retired librarian and university administrator, has been a “faithful faithless” volunteer for more than a decade. Phyllis (right) poses with sister Connie Sutton, visiting from New York City, in Freethought Hall, FFRF’s offices in Madison, Wis. Connie, an anthropologist, is also a firm freethinker. (Photo by Katie Daniel)



FFRF Attorney Andrew Seidel gave a presentation entitled ‘Debunking American Creation Myths’ to the Ethical Humanist Society of Chicago. He’s pictured with the FFRF Metropolitan Chicago Chapter, from left to right: Brian McCaskill, Board Member, Steve Foulkes, Webmaster, Andrew Seidel, Evan Kane, Vice President, Elizabeth Cavell, FFRF part-time attorney, Tom Cara, President.



**‘A Civil Discourse’**

Staff Attorney Stephanie Schmitt (at right, center table) ably represented FFRF in Greenfield, Wis., at a forum Nov. 19 on “Religious and Cultural Diversity and Tolerance.” It was part of “A Civil Discourse” series sponsored by the Greenfield Listening Debates Alliance. Topics included nativity scenes, prayers in school, FFRF’s IRS lawsuit and the health care mandate. Several FFRF members came to learn and show their support, Schmitt noted. Other participants were moderator Bill Stevens and panelists Zulfukar Ali Shaw, Muslim Society of Milwaukee; Karl Fabrizze, Our Savior’s Lutheran Church pastor; and Robert Shellady, Catholic Archdiocese of Milwaukee.



## Meet an Intern

### Legally bland, Calli is not

**Name:** Callahan (Calli) Hyde Miller.

**When and where I was born:** Dec. 30, 1992, in Waukesha, Wis. I've lived my whole life, up until moving to Madison, in Wauwatosa.

**Family:** My mom (Kari), my dad (Patrick), my little brother (Charlie, 16), my little sister (Michaela, 14), and, of course, most importantly, my golden retriever Murphy (10).

**Education:** I'm currently enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and majoring in sociology with a certificate in criminal justice. I plan to double major, but I'm not sure in what yet. I graduated from Wauwatosa West High School in 2011.

**My religious upbringing was:** Lutheran, but my formal religious association never went beyond baptism as a baby, besides the occasional forced Easter/Christmas services.

**How I came to work as an FFRF legal intern:** I heard about the opportunity through the UW-Madison student organization Atheists, Humanists and Agnostics, of which

I am treasurer. We've worked with FFRF pretty frequently. For example, FFRF generously helped fund our inaugural free conference, Freethought Fest, in 2012, where Annie Laurie Gaylor gave a speech entitled "God Fixation Won't Fix This Nation." Dan Barker is speaking at Freethought Fest 2013 in March, and we've hosted him as part of our Freethought Speakers Series in the past.

**What I do here:** I do whatever the staff attorneys need. Mostly, I help write letters and follow-up letters to various people and organizations nationwide who are committing state-church violations, as well as do research on some of the tips sent in from FFRF members on potential violations. I also help drink the coffee, out of the kindness of my heart.

**What I like best about it:** The coffee (just kidding)! I'm really enjoying all of the formal writing experience, as well as learning more and more about constitutional law. It has definitely been, and continues to be, a very valuable experience that I'm thankful

for.

**Something funny that's happened at work:** I find it endlessly amusing how someone is almost always offering me food. And by "endlessly amusing," I mean "the best thing ever."

**My legal interests are:** I like the more sociological aspects of law, meaning the law in action versus the law on the books. I'm really interested in the field of criminology. I plan to go to law school after I graduate from UW.

**My legal heroes are:** Elle Woods. (Just kidding! OK, I'm not kidding.) But I think I'll have to go with my dad on this one, since he's a lawyer and thus really was the driving force behind my interest in law and politics. [Elle Woods is a character played by Reese Witherspoon in "Legally Blonde."]

**These three words sum me up:** Easily distracted, sleepy.

**Things I like:** Dogs, *Lord of the Rings*, folk music, boots.

**Things I smite:** Bugs, the meat industry, sinus infections.

**Fun fact:** I worship macaroni and cheese.



Calli Miller

Photo: Andrew L. Seidel

## DARKTOLIGHT: A secular coming together



By Fred Strong

In Portland, Ore., the city that Huffington Post considers America's least religious, we seculars have a plethora of meetups, discussion groups, potlucks, talent programs and lectures throughout the year. In recent years, we've seen the emergence of more large-scale undertakings such as the annual Portland Humanist Film Fest.

Another event, in its third year, that's gaining national attention is DARKTOLIGHT.

DARKTOLIGHT is the manifestation of an idea that came to me many years ago concerning a desire to have a secular event to celebrate in December, the month when the world around us goes mad with hyper-religiosity. As a composer and arts lover, I knew that music and art would definitely be a part.

I decided to center the event on the Winter Solstice, a natural, celestial occurrence that carries with it very deep symbolic implications having to do with the very essence of the cycle of life itself. The emergence from darkness and death into the seasons of light

and life became, in my mind, a metaphor for a paradigm shift in human attitudes from myth-based thinking to an enlightened world of scientific reason.

In 2008, working with a soprano duo and a roster of musicians and performers who would work for little or nothing, I booked the 140-seat theater of the Portland Music Community Center for Dec. 21. I'd written a work called "Songs for Winter Solstice," consisting of three contrasting songs. But when Portland was hit by an unusual cold front that essentially crippled a city ill-equipped to deal with radical weather conditions for close to two weeks, DARKTOLIGHT 2008 became a casualty.

In 2009, working with Center For Inquiry—Portland and the Humanists of Greater Portland, we held a joint potluck and interested several performers. DTL had its "sort of" debut.

The above groups approached me in 2010 and agreed to fund a small DARKTOLIGHT. I booked the 140-seat theater again, got the sopranos back on board and assembled a very accomplished group of actors, singers, songwriters and musicians. Kol Shalom, a secular Jewish group, helped with an ad in the program. We were all nervous — no secular event like this had ever been attempted here.

Then the crowd started coming. Couples, families, children, teens, small groups and, before long, we realized we had a hit. DTL 2010 was standing room only! And, with the donations received and the sale of refreshments, the new event was fiscally almost a break-even affair.

I took 2011 off for personal reasons while receiving a fair number of inquiries about whether there'd be a solstice show in December. Early in 2012, CFI-Portland agreed with my vision of a much larger, bolder event, one truer



The cast of BANG! ranges in age from Maeve O'Connor, 11, to Joyce Lackie and Kay Byerly of the Spring Chickens, an Americana roots duo in their 70s. (Andy Ngo photo)

to my original vision but also with a higher price tag.

I began putting together the newest incarnation of DTL called BANG! We booked a 200-seat, professional theater space and are doing three shows with a cast of 14 and four instrumentalists. BANG! takes the audience on a trip through time and space from the big bang to present-day Earth, with a humanist message about our choices and responsibilities. The music ranges from doo-woop to hip-hop and folk to jazz.

DARKTOLIGHT is a special time of secular togetherness, a cultural tether to fill us with a sense of pride, purpose and community. We encourage all locales to celebrate the solstice in their own way. We need to start establishing our own culture, arts and traditions, and it can certainly be done in ways that reflect individual locales.

We'll perform BANG! at Portland Metro Arts on Friday, Dec. 21, at 7 p.m.

and on Dec. 22 at 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. Go to [darktolight.org/](http://darktolight.org/) for more information.

As a proud member of FFRF, I am very honored that you have allowed me this chance to be spotlighted in Freethought Today. Please say "hi" if you attend BANG! By supporting each other, we support the greater cause.

*Fred Strong lives in Portland with his partner, Sandra Brown, and her five cats. He holds a B.A. in composition from Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Va. As he works toward making his avocations (writing, composition, songwriting) his vocation, he owns and operates a small but popular sustainable irrigation company.*

*In 2011, his humanist choral piece "The Well" was performed in the U.S. Capitol by the Women's Vocal Ensemble of Clark College, Vancouver, Wash.*





## Men in Black: Bill of Rights ‘nativity’ honored in Niles

Members of the FFRF Metropolitan Chicago Chapter gathered by their new Winter Solstice sign in Niles, Ill. From left are Rocco Gilio, Brian McCaskill, Bob Elmore, Steve Foulkes, Evan Kane, Mark Roffle and Frederick Rhine. McCaskill, Foulkes and Kane are board members. The colorful image depicts the founders reverently standing or kneeling before a manger containing the Bill of Rights. The chapter, directed by Tom Cara, posted the secular display to counter religious displays in the Village of Niles Plaza, which regularly include a life-size nativity scene in December. Warm thanks to Jake Fortin and Rimon Bar for the sign idea and artwork. Jake hosts “The Good Atheist” ([thegoodatheist.net/](http://thegoodatheist.net/)), a Canadian podcast about all things atheist.

# Away with the manger, in with the solstice!

*Statement by the Freedom From Religion Foundation on placement of its Winter Solstice nativity at the Wisconsin Capitol:*

For a fact, the Christians stole Christmas. We don’t mind sharing the season with them, but we don’t like their pretense that it is the birthday of Jesus. It is the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun — *Dies Natalis Invicti Solis*. Christmas is a relic of Sun worship.

For all of our major festivals, there were corresponding pagan festivals tied to natural events. We’ve been celebrating the Winter Solstice, this natural holiday, long before Christians crashed the party. For millennia, our ancestors in the Northern Hemisphere have greeted this seasonal event with festivals of light, gift exchanges and seasonal gatherings.

The Winter Solstice is the reason for the season. The Winter Solstice, on Dec. 21 this year, heralds the symbolic rebirth of the Sun, the lengthening of days and the natural New Year.

We nonbelievers are quite willing to celebrate the fun parts of anybody’s holidays. We just want to be spared the schmaltz, the superstition, and the state/church entanglements.

The customs of this time of year endure because they are pleasant customs. It’s fun to hear from distant family and friends, to gather, to feast, to sing. Gifts, as freethinker Robert Ingersoll once remarked, are evidences of friendship, of remembrance, of love.

The evergreens displayed now as in centuries past flourish when all else seems dead, and are symbols, as is the

returning Sun, of enduring life. In celebrating the Winter Solstice, we celebrate reality.

We are unveiling a tableau that celebrates the human family, reason and the Winter Solstice.

- Our wise-people depict the atheists and scientific giants, Darwin and Einstein, who have enlarged human understanding of the natural world far more than the bible or any “holy books.” They were both nonbelievers as was progressive reformer Emma Goldman, representing wise women everywhere. The irreverent literary genius Mark Twain is added for good measure.

- Although Venus, like Mary, was a mythical fertility figure, this image, after which a planet was named, represents our solar system.

- Thomas Jefferson, a Founding *Father*, was a passionate advocate of separation of religion and government and would have disavowed Christian devotional scenes on state property.

- Our “angels” are also natural. The Statue of Liberty symbolizes freedom, and the astronaut represents the human achievements of science unfettered by religious dogma.

- Our baby was chosen partly for simple egalitarianism, and partly because it’s high time we adore female children as much as male children, and to acknowledge that humankind was birthed in Africa.

FFRF would vastly prefer that government buildings and seats of government be free from religion, and irreligion. It is divisive. The rotunda

is getting very cluttered. But if a devotional nativity display is allowed, then there must be “room at the inn” for all points of view, including irreverency and freethought.

*FFRF gratefully acknowledges the exceptional carpentry work and enthusiasm of*

*Andrew Seidel. Thanks also to Katie Daniel, Melanie Knier and Scott Carney for their invaluable help in creating the natural nativity on very short notice. Part of this statement was adapted from a 1985 Winter Solstice speech by Anne Nicol Gaylor, FFRF president emerita.*



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