Churches exempt from filing fee, annual reporting

FFRF sues IRS over preferential treatment of churches

Ending 2012 with a bang, the Freedom From Religion Foundation filed a federal lawsuit Dec. 27 to challenge the Internal Revenue Service’s preferential treatment of churches in applying for and maintaining tax-exempt status. The IRS exempts churches and certain other religious organizations from paying expensive application fees and filing the onerous annual Form 990 required of nonchurch nonprofits. FFRF and Triangle FFRF v. the IRS was filed in U.S. District Court, Western District of Wisconsin.

FFRF, a national state/church watchdog with more than 19,000 nonreligious members, and its chapter, the Triangle Freethought Society in North Carolina, are challenging the preferential application and reporting exemptions to churches. FFRF and its North Carolina chapter are 501(c)(3) nonprofits that paid fees of several hundred dollars in order to apply for tax-exempt status and must annually file the annual Form 990.

The IRS requires nonchurch tax-exempt nonprofits to file “detailed, intrusive, and expensive annual reports to maintain tax-exempt status, but such reports are not required for churches and certain other affiliated religious organizations,” the complaint notes.

“Why should churches be exempt from basic financial reporting requirements?” asks Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF copresident. “Equally important, why would churches not wish to be accountable?”

Gaylor adds, “Having tax-exempt status is a great privilege, and in exchange for that privilege, all other groups must file a detailed report annually to the IRS and the public on how we spend donations.”

“The unfairness of this is overwhelming,” says FFRF President Emerita Anne Nicol Gaylor, who in FFRF’s early years personally prepared the annual forms. “Churches are allowed to play by different rules.”

Form 990 requires detailed reports on revenue and functional expenses, activities, governance, management, how groups fulfill their mission and what proportion is spent on programs, management and fundraising.

FFFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker show off the mountain of 990 Forms FFRF has filed, which churches are exempt from.

The “preferential treatment of churches” directly benefits churches, while discriminating against other nonprofit organizations, including the plaintiffs, “solely on the basis of religious criteria,” FFRF’s complaint asserts. This “results in obligations imposed on secular nonprofits, including the plaintiffs, that are not imposed on churches.”

FFRF asks the court to find the church exemptions a violation of the Establishment Clause of the Constitution’s First Amendment and the equal protection rights of the Due Process Clause of the Fifth Amendment. FFRF seeks to enjoin the IRS from continuing to exempt churches and related organizations from the application and annual reporting required of all other 501(c)(3) nonprofits.

This is FFRF’s third ongoing lawsuit against IRS practices involving preferential treatment of churches.

In January/February 2013, FFRF filed a high-profile lawsuit seeking to enforce the IRS’ non-electioneering code against churches.

In late August, U.S. District Judge Barbara Cabra ruled that FFRF and three of its directors have standing to proceed in a challenge of the 1954 “parish exemption” act of Congress. That law, enacted to reward ministers for fighting what the law’s author, U.S. Rep. Peter Mack, called “a godless and antireligious world movement,” permits “ministers of the gospel” to deduct payment designated as a housing allowance from taxable income.

All three lawsuits were filed in U.S. District Court, Western District of Wisconsin, and were brought on behalf of FFRF by attorney Richard L. Bolton.

“We thank the Triangle Freethought Society for joining FFRF in this important challenge,” adds FFRF Co-President Dan Barker.

FFFRF’s ‘Jackson Jesus’ protest makes waves in Ohio

The Freedom From Religion Foundation’s formal request that a middle school in Jackson, Ohio, remove a prominent painting of Jesus from its entrance has created shockwaves locally.

Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert wrote a letter of complaint Jan. 2 to the Jackson City Schools on behalf of a complainant protesting the painting’s presence at Jackson Middle School. Since sending the letter, FFRF has been contacted by other families with children in the schools distressed over the violation.

“Courts have continually held that public schools may not display religious messages or iconography. It is illegal for Jackson Middle School to post religious images on the walls of its schools. The district must remove the picture of Jesus at once,” Markert wrote.

Her letter cited a 1994 decision by the 6th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, which ruled that an identical portrait of Jesus could not be displayed in a public school. Ohio is part of the 6th Circuit.

The Jackson School Board decided Jan. 8 to not remove the devotional image. Superintendent Phil Howard told more than 300 emotional backers of the painting who attended a board meeting that the picture would stay. He claimed it was lawful because it was a gift from a student group and “has historical significance.”

Channel 10 News reported on the
Meet a Staffer

Name: Scott B. Colson.
Where and when I was born: Neenah, Wis., 1984. I’ve spent most of my life in Appleton and Madison.
Education: University of Wisconsin-Madison, B.S. in philosophy.
What I want to be when I grow up: The Don, El Jefe, El Capo.
I spend a lot of time thinking about: Progressive politics, brewing beer, revolutionary economics, music.
I spend no time thinking about: I guess I haven’t thought about it. No topic is off limits.
My religious upbringing was: Barely Catholic. My catechism teachers were parents of other students who had a hard time answering so many of my “gotta” questions and double binds.
My doubts about religion started: Very early. I think it was during second grade that I told my parents I thought the whole thing was some weird power grade that I told my parents I thought “gotcha” questions and double binds. I produce the newspaper (not the content, except for this gem). I build Web pages, manage the artwork for campaigns and occasionally work on ads. I help with the radio show and podcast.
What I like best about it here: Tea time, all of the time; random acts of jazz and baking.
What sucks about it: There are not enough hours in the day to fight all that’s crazy out there.
Things I like: Peanut butter, post-modernism, prog rock.
Things I smile: Peaty, papacy, pelf-tocracy [p(eal) (n.) money, esp. when gained in a dishonest or dishonorable way]
Favorite quote about freethought: “Atheism is not a drama, but the philosopher’s serenity and philosophy’s achievement.” (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, What Is Philosophy?)

FFRF intern brings write stuff

No stranger to speaking out

Scott Colson introducing ‘Emperor Has No Clothes’ recipient Cenk Uygur at the 2010 National Convention in Madison, Wis.
FFRF releases its third music CD

Barker grounded in reality while ‘Adrift on a Star’


The album’s showpiece is “Poor Little Me,” a collaboration between Barker, who wrote the lyrics, and Charles Strouse, the Broadway icon (“Annie,” “Bye Bye Birdie”), who’s also an atheist who received FFRF’s Emperor Has No Clothes Award in 2011.

“I had the pleasure of sitting next to Dan at the 2011 FFRF convention dinner,” says Dan. “We chatted about music, the many Broadway and other composers who are nonreligious, and he said if I sent him some lyrics, he would put them to music. So I did and he did. It’s truly a collaboration, because Charles threw away about half of what I did. It’s truly a collaboration, because it isn’t me — it’s you.”

Susan Hofer, a talented jazz vocalist in Madison, Wis., performs Dan’s jazz ballad, a love song. “It’s Only Natural,” inspired by Richard Dawkins’ book *Unweaving the Rainbow*, which makes a plea to integrate science and art. The song has been oft-requested since Dan wrote it in 2006.

He’s also set to music several poems by Harburg from *Rhymes for the Irreverent*, a collection of verses reprinted by FFRF. Another musical icon, Harburg, a nonbeliever who openly scoffed at religion, wrote “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and “It’s Only a Paper Moon,” among many, many enduring classics.

To showcase many of Harburg’s wittiest rhymes about religion, Dan set them to music in “Somewhere Over the Paper Moon,” performed as a duet with Hofer.

Dan also performs Harburg’s song “One Sweet Morning,” a lovely but rarely recorded peace anthem with a freethought perspective. The music is by Earl Robinson (“Joe Hill”). Dan set plaintive music to poet and lyricist Philip Appleman’s cautionary “In a Dark Time,” written in the mid-2000s.

Other new songs in the album include “Get Off Your Knees (And Get to Work),” dedicated to “Gov. Rip Van-Wrinkle, who has slept not 20 but 2,030 years,” “Reason,” inspired by the D.C. Reason Rally, and Dan’s humorous “Unfaithful.” Dismissing belief in a deity, the lyrics say: “I want you to know it isn’t me — it’s you.”

Dan also recorded “Experiment,” a little-known parable to science and critical thinking by Cole Porter, who was nonreligious. By popular request of FFRF’s staff, Dan recorded a G-rated version of “Merry F*#king Christmas” from “South Park.”

Cameo appearances include Australian freethought/feminist troubadour Shelly Segal, who graciously gave FFRF permission to include her haunting song “I Don’t Believe in Fairies,” and Joe Taylor, formerly a Christian rock-er, who recorded his first freethought song, “Be Still My Child,” for the album.

Also included is “It Ain’t Necess­arily So,” sung by Hofer and arranged by Dan with a local band. Bonus tracks include a few extras.

FFRF Bob Shepherd plays the saxophone on several songs, and FFRF member Buzz Kemper, announcer of Freethought Radio, engineered the album at Audio for the Arts in Madison.

FFRF members may order the CD “Adrift on a Star” for a discounted $15 postpaid ($20 postpaid for nonmembers). “Adrift on a Star” joins FFRF’s two previous CDs, featuring Barker and friends. “Beware of Dogma” is also available for $15 to members.

The 34-song “Friendly Neighborhood Atheist,” with many contemporary and historic freethought songs, also featuring Kristen Lems, is available for $20 to members via the mail or ffrf.org/shop/music. (Note: The online shop calculates postage based on weight and location, so final online price may vary slightly from mail catalog price.)

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

What Is a Freethinker?

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

Information & Alerts...
To the River

(Varanasi)

For one burning moment we were snarled together under the wind and sheet you, the boy with blistering eyes, the brown water-carrier, the milky lady who walked like a run and stiffened, and all of us.

The sun was burning through the sheet, through our eyelids. Strapped cold to the litter, we hunched on hired shoulders downhill toward the river, where, in the whitest white we ever wore, skinny legs fretting the husky legs, we would flame to a fine gray ash.

To the equanimity of peacocks our passing made no tremor; under the rim and tamarind burnt eyes died in dusty faces, monkeys cried abstract abuse, temples turned their walls on us, camels wet the earth, and only children stared, that games and sun could come to this.

All of us suddenly shrieked through the sheet: My voice is the language of God! My skin is the color of heaven! My knowledge makes towers and temples! My pity, My passion, My deeds!

My skin is the color of heaven!

shrieked through the sheet:

camels wet the earth,

our passing made no tremor;

To the equanimity of peacocks

we would flame to a fine gray ash.

skinny legs fretting the husky logs,

in the whitest white we ever wore,

toward the river, where,

we hunched on hired shoulders downhill

through our eyelids. Strapped cold to the litter,

The sun was boring through the sheet,

and all of us.

and sniffed,

rani

the milky lady who walked like a

the brown water-carrier,

the boy with blistering eyes,

we were snarled together

For one burning moment

To the River

Perfidious Proverbs

, $23 ppd., and

The Yale Review.


He and his playwright wife, Marjorie Appleman, are both “Affilite” Members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. They recorded an excerpt of “Noah, ‘Nou and Selected Poems, which is available for sale from PPD for $23 ppd., The Norton Critical Edition, Darwin, is $22 ppd., Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie, $27 ppd., Darwin’s Ark, $23 ppd., and Perfidous Proverbs, $20 ppd. (jffr.org/shop/).

I have prayed before not to have another child, but the condom worked better.

Giselle Labrador, roadway vendor in Manila, on a new law opposed by the Catholic Church in the Philippines that provides public funding for contraception.

Honolulu Star-Advertiser, 1-8-13

While I was younger, my father drank a lot. There was abuse in the home. My brother committed suicide in 2001. So at some point you start to say, “Why does all this stuff happen to people?” And if I pray and nothing good happens, is that supposed to be I’m being tried? I find that almost kind of cruel in some ways. It’s like burning a Magnifying glass. Eventually that gets just too hard to believe anymore.


Between banning gay marriage and requiring school prayer, too many legislators are intent on turning Indiana into a religious state as repressive, intellectually stultifying and ultimately insulting of their own God as any on the planet. It’s time for them to learn a new Reality:

Columnist/reporter Phil Wieland, opposing a bill by the state Senate’s Education Committee chairman to let public schools require daily recitation of the Lord’s Prayer.

Northwest Indiana Times, 1-11-13

Wise atheists make no moral claims, seeing good and bad randomly spread among humanity regardless of faith. Humans do have a hardwired moral sense, every child born with an instinct for justice that makes us by nature social animals, not needing revelations from ancient texts. The idea that morality can only be frightened into us artificially, by divine edict, is degrading.

Polly Toynbee, outgoing president of the British Humanist Association The Guardian, 12-16-12

I noticed something interesting. Those two guys disagreed on everything, except the fact that I was going to hell.

Doug Krueger, an atheist and professor at NorthWest Arkansas Community College in Bentonville, on sharing an office with a Catholic and a Baptist when he was a Ph.D. student.

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, 1-10-13

Commonly known to biographers but often surprising to most Christians, King James I was a well-known bisexual. Though he did marry a woman, his many gay relationships were so well-known that amongst some of his friends and court, he was known as “Queen James.” It is in his great debt and honor that we name the Queen James Bible so.

Publisher’s statement on new bible translation, “edited to prevent homophobic misinterpretation” amazon.com, 11-27-12

This report confirms that the code is 10 times the size of the bible of none of the good news.


Man, this is weird for me too — to be in a room where I don’t recognize a single person. And you call yourself a Christian nation. . . . I am totally cool with hookers. Fishermen and hookers. I got a whole fishnet mustard going.

Mary Beth Tinker portraying Jesus in the “Holiday Heathens” comedy show at the Punch Line in San Francisco Religion News Service, 12-13-13

The bible has outsold Fifty Shades of Grey and Justin Bieber’s autobiography to top the Norwegian bestseller charts this month for a second year in a row.

The new Norwegian translation of the bible has held the top spot for 54 out of the last 56 weeks.

Christian Today, 12-18-12

I’ve explained to them that some people believe God is waiting for them, but I don’t believe that. I believe when you die, it’s over and you live on in the memory of people you love and who love you. I can’t offer them the comfort of a better place. Despite all the evils and problems in the world, this is the heaven — we’re living in the heaven and it’s the one we work to make. It’s not a paradise.

Julie Dritzin, Takoma Park, Md., quote in “ Atheists parents comfort children about death without talk of God or heaven” Washington Post, 12-22-12

It’s an opportunity to get out of the cold, have a cigar and learn some bible. Larry Gilbert, member of a Missouri Synod Lutheran bible study group that meets at Cigar Cigars, Rocky River, Ohio Cleveland Plain Dealer, 1-18-13
Top 10 states for violations

(see FFRF’s most recent complaint letters)

1. Florida
2. Texas
3. Tennessee
4. Georgia
5. North Carolina
6. California
7. Wisconsin
8. Ohio
9. Alabama
10. Pennsylvania

Top ten issue areas:

1. Schools
2. Government Prayer
3. Miscellaneous
4. Holiday Displays
5. Religion in the Workplace
6. Election Law Complaints
7. Taxes
8. Prayer Breaks
9. Church Bulletins
10. National Day of Prayer

2012 legal victories

These include but are not limited to:

• The Federal Election Commission, in response to a complaint filed by FFRF in 2008, found that the Colorado Radio Development Council, an organization of Colorado citizens, had violated election laws in issuing a robocall by a priest who advocated for the chaplain of John Cain.

• The Kitsel Area School District Board of Education (Wis.) voted down a proposal to teach “alternative theories of the origin of humans within the science curriculum” after FFRF pressured the board to follow case law prohibiting creationism in public schools.

• An FFRF complaint prompted Henrico County (Va.) officials to drop the 25-year-old tradition of offering morning prayers before Board of Supervisor meetings.

• The Kampouris City Council (N.C.) ended prayers before meetings, replacing the prayers with a moment of silence.

• FFRF secured the right of students at Walton High School in Marietta, Ga., to start a “FACT” group (Free-thinkers for Cooperation, Acceptance and Trust) after the school had denied their right to create the student group.

• After months of debate, the Ellwood City Board of Education (Pa.) voted to end a long-standing nativity display in front of the borough’s municipal building.

• Five Pennsylvania school boards (Big Spring, Octorara, Greencastle-Antrim, Eastern Lancaster, Grove City) stopped prayer before board meetings after letters from FFRF.

• FFRF stopped future religious assemblies by Dave Walton (swagglingjoe-sus.com) at a Tennessee middle/high school.

• FFRF’s letter of complaint resulted in removal of a cross from a Nebraska state park and outside a park ranger’s home in George Wyth State Park on Iowa state property.

• FFRF’s letter of complaint resulted in Weshoe County Libraries in Nevada remaining open on Easter Sunday.

• FFRF issued a national sponsor-ship and coordination of monthly prayer breakfasts in Augusta, Ga.

• The City of Tucson, Ariz., rescind-ed a grant to the Catholic Church of $1.1 million to fix a building it had abandoned after FFRF’s letter of complaint, records request, and action alert to FFRF members in Arizona.

• In another faith-based victory, the West Linn, Ore., City Council rescind-ed a $1.50 grant to a local church and removed past, government employees from the church’s advisory board after a letter from FFRF.

• Thanks to FFRF, Catholic Social Services of Augusta, Ga., will no longer receive free lawn maintenance from the U.S. military.

• A family-court in Jackson, Mo., has reprimanded a pastor for hijacking a secular court meant to teach divorced parents how to help their children and injecting it with his religious rant. The court is looking for other teachers and sites other than his church.

• Bret Harte Union High School (Calif.) will no longer receive student information to the local Catholic diocese.

• Peach County senior center em-ployees will no longer pray with their charges or read the bible to them at meal times and special occasions.

• The Assessment Appeals Board in San Francisco implemented procedural changes to eliminate the use of a religious oath when swearing in parties at hearings.

• A Colt bus system in Scranton, Pa., discontinued the practice of displaying “God Bless America” on their electronic tickers after FFRF wrote to them in Electron.

• FFRF halted (or stopped for the future) illegal Gideon bible distribu-tion in public schools in Magnolia, Ark., Boydton, Va., Robertson County, Tenn., and Grant County, Ky., among other public school districts.

• The University of Tennessee-Chattanooga discontinued its long tradition of prayer before its football games after the Supreme Court’s action.

• FFRF persuaded the Colleskill-Richmondville Central School district (N.Y.) from using school faculties for religious worship.

• FFRF was able to address several complaints regarding the inappropriate use of government emails, putting a halt to religious messages at four different agencies.

• FFRF stopped numerous prayer vigils and other religious indoctrination at schools around the country.

• FFRF had a total of 11 victories in 2012 ending church bulletin dis-counts, in which restaurants or places of public accommodation were illegally discounting meals or tickets for those bearing church bulletins. These are violations of the Civil Rights Act.

• Many complaints from 2012 and earlier are still actively being pursued, with other victories pending.

Although not all complaints can be acted on, FFRF’s attorneys try hard to respond to bona fide state/church queries. FFRF also hosts an extensive State/Church FAQ link to check out the FAQ. Complaints over state/church violations may be sent via the online complaint form: ffrrf.org/legal/report

Ongoing litigation

These victories are in addition to FFRF’s litigation. FFRF has filed well over 60 lawsuits since it began, winning many significant victories, and through December 2012 had nine ongoing lawsuits. In 2012, FFRF successfully settled two additional lawsuits: its challenge of a cross on a water tower and other city property in Whitestile, Tenn., and its challenge removing a Ten Commandments poster from a high school in Giles County, W. Va., brought with the ACLU of Virginia.

FFRF last year won an appeals court decision in Colorado state court in which a judge agreed with FFRF that the governor’s Colorado Day of Prayer proclamations are inappropriate.

Last year, FFRF filed four new lawsuits challenging Ten Commandments monuments in front of two schools in Pennsylvania (two separate federal lawsuits), challenging graduation prayer in a South Carolina high school, and its highly popular challenge of non-compliance by the IRS of its ban on church enforcement by the IRS of its ban on church enforcement.

FFRF works with a number of litigation attorneys, including some pro bono, with staff attorneys providing help.

Congratulations to FFRF’s diligent and committed staff attorneys Rebecca Markert, Patrick Elliott, Andrew Seidel, outgoing attorney Stephanie Schmitt and new intake attorney Liz Cavell. Also deserving of much credit are FFRF’s 2012 law clerks: Ken Earl, Susan Lund, Dustin Clark, Maddy Ziegler, JJ Rolling, Ben Zich, and undergraduate volunteer interns Svein Hoester, Brendan Moriarity and Calli Miller.

Your membership and additional donations designated for the Legal Fund help pay for this substantial litigation and the work of staff attorneys. Special thanks to Board Member Lester Goldstein, who created an internship endowment with the help of other FFRF members setting aside a minimum of $5,000 a year to help pay for internships.

Many thanks to Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert for her very thorough legal report which provided the details for this article.
Making math and atheism friendly

Person in history I admire: It’s always inspiring to hear about those who challenge the status quo to make things better for various minority groups. I’ve been fortunate to meet a number of atheists who have done sort of consciousness-raising in my own movement.

A quotation I like: “If you want to get something done, ask a busy person.”

These are a few of my favorite things: My students, great books, crossword puzzles, “The Daily Show,” Tom Selleck.

These are not: People whose sole purpose in life is to put other people down.

My doubts about religion started: When I started high school. It turned out my parents’ religion (Jainism) couldn’t withstand tougher scrutiny.

Instead of “thank God” or “God bless you,” I say: Gratitude.

Why I’m a freethinker: It’s empowering when you know the truth about something the majority of the country is completely wrong about.

Where I’m headed: Thankfully, not downward.

How I got where I am today: After leaving medical school in order to become a teacher, I had some free time.

Occupation: High school math teacher.

Why I serve on the Advisory Board of the Secular Student Alliance because: I represent a large, growing, and varied group of young freethinkers.

My favorite bible verses: For instance, served by five area public stations in the Salt Lake City area, as New York City and Los Angeles, as well as a diversity of smaller markets nationwide. In the Salt Lake City area, for instance, served by five area public TV affiliates including in Provo, FFRF’s spots ran 62 times last fall.

Meet a Friendly Member

FFRF welcomes 33 ‘Lifers,’ 2 ‘After-Lifers’

The Freedom From Religion Foundation gratefully announces two new “After-Life” Members: Justin Huckley and Susie J. York.

FFRF is also delighted to welcome 33 new Lifetime Members joining at year’s end or to start the New Year on the fullest extent of the law.

According to a Jan. 5 story in The Christian Post, out of nearly 7 million visits last year to King James Bible Online, the most-viewed bible verse was Psalm 23:4 — “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

No. 2 was Philippians 4:13 — “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”

No. 3, in third was the New Testament’s John 3:16 — “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

The rest of the top 10:

- 1 Corinthians 1:1 — “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”
- 2 Chronicles 7:14 — “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”
- Jeremiah 29:11 — “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.”
- Ephesians 6:12 — “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”
- 2 Timothy 1:7 — “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”
- Genesis 1:2 — “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”

FFRF ‘Spotlight’ airs thousands of times on public TV

The Freedom From Religion Foundation’s inaugural feature production for use as educational filler on public television affiliates aired more than 1,430 times over three months in 2012. This is the first such segment featuring discussion of freethought, atheism and focusing on the specific dangers of mixing state and church.

The four-minute “Spotlight on Freethought and the First Amendment” featured interviews with FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor. The longer version, over five minutes, included a bonus interview with “secularity” expert, sociologist and author Phil Zuckerman, professor at Pitzer University, Claremont, Calif. Local public TV affiliates were given the option to use either spot, or both, as fillers. 

For the first time in the history of Spotlight Productions, more affiliates ran the longer version, “a compliment to Phil Zuckerman,” says Gaylor. The longer version aired 731 times in 136 station airings. The short version aired 699 times with 142 station airings.

The two shows each reached more than 3.6 million public TV viewers, according to the Nielsen ratings. Markets airing one or both of the spots included high population airings such as New York City and Los Angeles, as well as a diversity of smaller markets nationwide. In the Salt Lake City area, for instance, served by five area public TV affiliates including in Provo, FFRF’s spots ran 62 times last fall.

The broadcasts are audited by Nielsen only for the first 3 months after the show is released. But FFRF’s two “Spotlights” may continue to air for years as filler.

View the videos at FFRF’s YouTube Channel. The shorter “abridged” version is at bit.ly/WmTCP2 The longer “TV” version with Zuckerman is at bit.ly/P8TZfT. A “bonus track” version of nearly seven minutes, which includes additional footage with Dan Barker, is prominently featured at FFRF’s website, ffrf.org and at bit.ly/VVkan5.

Psalm 23:4 piques most online interest

The website shipbuddies.com, which pokes fun at Christianity, asked readers in 2009 to submit their favorite “worst” bible verses in a project called Chapter & Worse.

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Editor’s note: The website shipbuddies.com, which pokes fun at Christianity, asked readers in 2009 to submit their favorite “worst” bible verses in a project called Chapter & Worse.

No. 1: St. Paul’s advice in 1 Timothy 2:12, in which he says: “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.”
Imagine standing in front of your child’s elementary school classroom and explaining to 30 kids why you don’t think there’s a universe or that there is no afterlife. I spoke first in general terms about whether or not atheism is a religion. For some kids, that’s not an easy hard concept to take on. Several asked up until the end of my presentation, “Now, which god do atheists believe in?” I didn’t answer the concept quickly enough, and I had some unexpected suggestions from the kids when I said, “What are some reasons why people choose not to believe in a god or a religion?”

One boy enthusiastically ventured that I was a “liberal gay atheist” and someone might not know which one is “right.” A girl said that people may have never seen a god in front of them. I agreed with the kids about these ideas and also added a bit on philosophical arguments, though perhaps surprisingly this aspect didn’t take too much time with the young kids.

Then I turned to the things that atheists do “believe” in, with a caveat that there isn’t a universal view I talk about a bit about science and its ability to empower people to understand the mysteries of the universe around them on their own, without some godly explanation. I talked about humans having rational thought processes, which is right and good to treat people kindly and with respect — all without needing a religion to point the way. The most rewarding were the 20 or so enthusiastic questions that the kids raised, along with their expectant hands. They asked about my upbringing and what I do for a living. They wanted to know about heaven and what I think about heaven and people who have died (where, that’s a tricky one with kids you don’t know!) and also a bit about the history of atheism.

One girl gasped in shock when I said that I don’t pray. I spoke what was somewhat uncertain as the first time that I would speak publicly about my non-affiliation with a particular belief or faith. Knowing how impressive I am capable of feeling (particularly for children this age), I felt I needed to tread carefully so as not to make an unintended attack on any child’s faith. I did a bit of research, turning to the Internet for simple definitions and resources about explaining atheism to kids. I found some sites and videos about freethinking parenting, but I think this is an area that we as nonbelievers could develop further.

I would speak publicly about my non-belief, I was more hesitant, feeling that this is an area that we as nonbelievers could develop further.
Honorable mentions: High school essay contest

The students all received $250 awards. Special thanks to John Moo and Dean and Development Committee.

Mission for humanity

My knees were sore. I got down and prayed for wind, joining hands with dirty-faced working men and the long-skirted women. And the wind came.

It was a miracle, I convinced myself, that the wind had come. It was a miracle, I convinced myself, that I was on a mission, but I am not a missionary.

Cheyenne Tessier, 18, Hudson, N.H., is enrolled at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C., to study international affairs and Arabic.

Light bulb in the pews

I was raised by my mom, who never exposed me to a particularly religious environment. As a result, I never really formed any religious beliefs from that time on. I evaluated this later in life when I was asked, “Are you doing it for your purpose, which is ‘to share the love’ and thus the ‘foreclosure’ argument is unavailing at this time. The court issued an order in December that allowed three of the plaintiffs to proceed using pseudonyms, finding that there was a substantial public interest in protecting them from retribution from upset members of the community. The court will hold a scheduling conference in February.

Madison committee rejects funding of religious ‘pregnancy center’

A city committee of the community Development Block Grant Committee on Jan. 17, to oppose the government financial assistance to CareNet for a new pregnancy counseling center. The committee voted 5-2 against funding the project. City staff has initially recommended committee approval.

Even if the financing had been approved, it would be unclear how CareNet would abide by nondiscrimination provisions required for city contracts.
Michigan letter results in prompt solution

After an early childhood program assistant sent home an inappropriate religious gift with students, the Michigan City (Mich.) Intermediate School District is ensuring that school policy will be followed by the assistant and other staff in the future.

The faculty member works with children as young as 4, some of whom are disabled, and distributed a gift of Play-Doh to children, along with a letter containing religious references and urging people to pray.

The letter was titled “CHRISTmas is Jesus’ Birthday” and opened, “So for the Jesus gift you could be like this play dough, and let Jesus mold & shape Your Life so Jesus can use you for His Greater Good” urging students to find a church that teaches about Jesus.

Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert wrote Jan. 7 to Superintendent Randy Monday about the illegality of proselytizing to children in public schools, and noted it was irrelevant that the assistant included the disclaimer “this is my belief & my gift & is not pro-motional in any way.”

Assistant Superintendent Elizabeth Taylor replied the next day to say that the employee was told about the inappropriateness of her actions and her violation of school policy that states teachers or supervisors must approve items sent home with students.

Parents were also notified that the staff member had violated school policy.

Gideons groups out after FFRF complaints

Gideons International representatives will no longer be allowed in Grant County Schools, Williamstown, Ky., to distribute bibles as a result of a complaint from FFRF Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert. A concerned parent contacted FFRF after learning her child’s religious items were left scattered around a public school setting.

FFRF contacted the schools on Dec. 13 pointing out that “while it is laudable for a public school to encourage young students to become active and involved in their community,” the Salvation Army is “an overtly Christian organization.”

The district let Alma Vineyard Alma (Mich.) Public Schools will no longer be allowed to use bibles as a result of a complaint from FFRF Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert. A concerned parent contacted FFRF after learning her child’s religious items left scattered around a public school setting.

FFRF was able to intervene before students at the Medford (Wis.) Area Middle School were sent to ring bells to raise money for the Salvation Army.

The Salvation Army’s stated mission is “to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in His name without discrimination.” It has 11 Christian “arts and faith” and blantly discriminatory to gay people.

According to a concerned parent contacted FFRF, the district contacted an FFRF member, Patrick Elliott sent District Administrator Pat Sullivan a letter Dec. 13 pointing out that “while it is laudable for a public school to encourage young students to become active and involved in their community,” the Salvation Army is “an overtly Christian organization.”

Elliott asked Sullivan to inform staff “that they may not continue with their plans to solicit funds for the Salvation Army during the school day.”

Sullivan responded Dec. 17 that the school was no longer planning to send students to ring bells.

FFRF tackles coaches’ prayers in Ohio

Coaches at Spencerville High School in Ohio will no longer pray with their students after Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert’s Nov. 6 letter to Superintendent Joel Hatfield, informing him that “a public school coach’s participation in a team’s prayer circle is illegal and inappropriate.”

Hatfield responded Dec. 17, “As superintendent, I have informed our coaches that they are no longer to lead their athletes in prayer.”

School changes policy after FFRF complaint

The Coblis-Skill-Richmondville Central School District in New York banned groups from using school facilities for religious worship after FFRF urged it to adopt a revised policy.

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor sent a Dec. 3 letter informing the school board that prohibited use of school buildings for worship was “in line with current law (as applied in the 2nd Circuit) and is the best policy option.”

Gaylor detailed how start-up churches often take advantage of low rental fees to “get a foothold” while collecting church donations on public property, which amounts to “what many of us consider taxpayer subsidy of religious worship.”

A church that had been using school facilities retained the American Center for Law & Justice, a Religious Right lega

FFRF stops Wisconsin student bell-ringers

FFRF Senior Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott sent District Administrator Patrick Elliott sent District Administrator Pat Sullivan a letter Dec. 13 pointing out that “while it is laudable for a public school to encourage young students to become active and involved in their community,” the Salvation Army is “an overtly Christian organization.”

Elliott asked Sullivan to inform staff “that they may not continue with their plans to solicit funds for the Salvation Army during the school day.”

Sullivan responded Dec. 17 that the school was no longer planning to send students to ring bells.

FFRF letter gets Iowa park cross removed

A house inside George Wythe State Park near Waterloo, Iowa, will no longer include a display of a lighted Latin cross.

A local complainant reported to FFRF that a large cross was affixed to the garage of a park ranger’s home owned by the state in the park. The cross was highly visible at night from the highway and within the park.

Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert wrote Dec. 14 to the Iowa Department of Natural Resources: “While it is appropriate for the park ranger to display personal religious items inside his home, it crosses the line when he chooses to display Christian symbols on the exterior of his home,” Markert said.

Markert received a phone call Dec. 19 from the DNR that the ranger had been directed to remove the cross.

School replaces hymns with secular songs

Main Street K-3 School in Shively, Ill., removed two Christian hymns from its holiday concert after receiving an FFRF letter. A concerned parent contacted FFRF after learning her four-year-old son’s holiday concert included “Mary Had a Baby” and “Go, Tell it on the Mountain.”

In a Dec. 17 letter to Superintendent Irene Bruns, FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylord said it’s “wholly inappropriate for public schools to perform songs of Christian worship in a public school setting.”

Bruns responded Dec. 21 that the songs would be taken out of the program and replaced with secular holiday music.

FFRF stops church’s free school ‘lunch’

Alma (Mich.) Public Schools will now require a church using its facilities to pay a rental fee and remove religious items left scattered around a district school.

The district let Alma Vineyard Church hold Sunday services and frequent events at Republic Alternative High School. The church was allowed to use the kitchen, gym, stage and extra rooms. It also had free use of building supplies and custodial services and was allowed to store religious items, including an 8-foot wooden cross that was left on display in the cafeteria.

Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert sent a letter Oct. 19 to Superintendent Sonia Lark, pointing out that the religious symbols left in the school demonstrated "district preference for religion over nonreligion, and Christianity over other religions."

The school district responded Oct. 23 that the cross and other religious items were removed or covered. The district further informed FFRF on Jan. 5 that the church would now have to pay for custodial services and rental of space.

3 boards ditch prayer after FFRF letters

Three governmental bodies, two in California and one in Georgia, have halted meeting prayers after receiving letters from FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel.

Seidel wrote the Plumas County Board of Supervisors, Quincy, Calif., in August and sent several followups before receiving a reply from the county’s counsel Jan 16 that the board voted Jan. 15 to stop the practice. “[The invocation will be removed from the agenda, and the county will not solicit invocation speakers.”

The city of Santa Clara, Calif., which previously had sectarian Christian prayers and excluded a Hindu officiant, has abandoned its practice for a “values statement” after getting a November letter from Seidel.

The language is pious but doesn’t overtly address a supernatural being: “As we gather, we humbly seek blessings upon this meeting. May we act with strength, courage and the will to perform our obligations and duties to our people with justice to all. Let us seek wisdom so that we may act in the best interests of our people, our neighbors and our country. All this we ask so we may serve our community with love and grace, putting our needs before all.”

The city of Forest Park, Ga., received an FFRF letter in September and several followups before City Manager John Parker replied Jan. 16. “The city of Forest Park no longer participates in prayer during meetings of the City Council.”
Debunking the Christian nation myth

By Andrew Seidel

Andrew Seidel, FFRF staff attorney, gave this speech accompanied by PowerPoint (edited here for text) in October at FFRF’s 35th annual convention on Oct. 13, 2012 in Portland, Ore.

I’d like to thank Dan and Annie Laurie for asking me to speak here today. It’s quite an honor to share the stage with such illustrious speakers. I’d also like to take a moment to thank all the FFRF members out there: Your generosity and support make my job possible, and I absolutely love my job.

Today I want to discuss two things: One, the idea that we’re founded as a Christian nation. When you hear that argument, you may debunk it using, say, the Treaty of Tripoli, which most of you are probably familiar with, which says we’re not founded in any sense on the Christian religion. Or maybe you cite the First Amendment or the fact that religious oaths are constitutionally prohibited or that the Constitution is entirely godless.

When you use those facts to refute their first argument, your opponent will fall back on the second argument, which is that we’re founded “on” God. Christian principles. Typically, you’ll hear three arguments as to why we are founded as a Christian nation. “In God We Trust” or “One nation under God” (these silly little phrases always seem to come up), the Declaration of Independence made us a Christian nation, and the claim that the founders were all Christian.

You obviously know that “In God We Trust” and “One nation under God” are not from the founding era. The former first appeared on one coin in 1863 and was required on currency only in 1956 and the latter was added to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954.

The timing of these late additions is telling. Lincoln had declared martial law in 1863, the year the battle of Gettysburg was fought. Habeas corpus was suspended in that same year in U.S. history. Brothers were killing brothers, and the country was literally tearing itself apart. It’s at this “propitious” time that Christian nationalists — a phrase I’m going to use to describe anybody who claims that we’re a Christian nation — push their religion on us.

When Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase ordered James Pollock, U.S. Mint director, to make the change on one coin, he wrote: “We claim to be a Christian Nation. . . . The time for this or the introduction of a similar motto upon the silver dollar — ‘Our National peril and danger, an hour in which man’s strength is weakness, when our strength and our nation’s salvation must be in the God of Battles.’”

The same thing happened in the 1950s during the height of McCarthyism, when anti-communists, blacklists, loyalty oaths and arrests, Chief Justice Earl Warren at the time, were in the White House. Rules were put to a vote it would lose.

The second thing to note about these changes is their effect. That religion is divisive is probably not a controversial claim to make here. The founders were well aware of this. James Madison in the “Federalist Papers, Number Ten” wrote that the zeal of different opinions concerning religion has divided mankind into parties and enflamed mutual animosity. This is one of the reasons the founders wanted to keep religion out of government. The original motto was “E pluribus unum” (from many, one). The Christian nationalists erased that unifying theme and put their divisive, religious theme in its place.

The same thing happened with the pledge. It’s even more striking because they actually divided the indivisible and then injected religion.

Natural law

When discussing the Declaration of Independence, the Religious Right typically focuses on four phrases from it: “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God,” “their Creator,” “the Supreme Judge of the world” and “Divine Providence.” Notice that not a single one of these is Christian. There’s no mention of Jesus or Yahweh or the God of Abraham.

There are two competing views on natural law. The first is that laws or rights are given to us by a divine being. The second is that we have rights because we’re human.

We know which one of these Thomas Jefferson was talking about because he wrote about natural law in several other places. A great quote from his opinion of the French treaties: “Questions of the natural right are triable by their conformity with the moral sense and reason of man. Those who write treaties on natural law can only declare what their own moral sense and reason dictate.

Human rights — natural law — are discoverable by reason. This is most certainly not a divine idea of natural law. Jefferson also said in 1774 that “a free people claim their rights” — they are “not a gift of the chief magistrate.” I think that would also include they are not a gift from God. People have to assert those rights.

Moreover, the Declaration of Independence has two principles that Judeo-Christianity is directly opposed to: When you have a tyrannical government, it’s a “duty” and a “right” to throw off that government; and it explicitly states that governments are instituted by the people, not by the magistrate, not by the king. The bible directly contradicts these two ideas.

The Book of Romans in the New Testament says, “There is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.” The Old Testament Book of Daniel says basically the same thing: “The Most High has sovereignty over the reign of mortals and gives it to whom he will.”

These principles behind Judeo-Christianity are fundamentally in conflict with the principles that the Declaration of Independence lays out.

Founders’ faith

George Washington died in 1799. The next year, Mason Weems, a parson, wrote a book about him, a book in which we get the myths about the cherub tree and about Washington praying in the snow at Valley Forge. There’s no evidence to suggest either happened, and the prayer story didn’t actually come out in Weems’ book until something like the 34th edition.

These claims are reminiscent of Mormons posthumously baptizing people — claiming that the founders were all Christian and therefore we’re a Christian nation. It’s also incredibly rude. These men and women sacrificed an awful lot — lives, blood, treasure — and it just ignores that and attributes to God this monumental achievement.

More importantly, what the founders thought personally about God or Jesus is irrelevant to the nation itself. Religion does not claim ownership over other ideas generated by a mind. For instance, there’s no such thing as Jewish blue jeans. We just call them blue jeans, even though they were invented by Levi Strauss. Same thing with vaccines. They’re not Jewish vaccines, they’re just vaccines. Algebra is just algebra, not Muslim math.

Whatever the founders chose to do in their private lives, publicly they chose to erect the wall of separation between Church and state. If we’re a Christian nation, you might as well call us a white nation. That’s a very effective Christian nationalist fallback argument, that we were all Christian and therefore founded us as a Christian nation is absolutely nonsensical.

When I set out to debunk the Christian nationalist fallback argument, it took me a while to discover what a Judeo-Christian principle is. It turns out the best answer comes from Harry Truman, president during McCarthy’s reign of terror. In a speech to a plain speaker, he occasionally used vulgarity.

Arguably, the most vulgar thing he ever said was, “The fundamental basis for all government is in the bible. It started with Moses on the mountain.” He then mentions the New Testament and the Ten Commandments.

Let’s compare the Judeo-Christian principles in the bible and the Ten Commandments to our nation’s founding principles.

The commandments

First, which commandments? There are four different sets of Ten Commandments in the bible. The first set is given to Moses on the mountain. He comes down the mountain and finds his followers worshipping a golden calf. They are breaking one of the commandments, a commandment they don’t know about yet. His response is to smash the commandments on the ground in anger and slaughter 3,000 of his friends, brothers and neighbors. Mark that term for later — friends, brothers and neighbors.

The next year, Moses makes a new set and promises to sweep all of the current residents off the land in favor of the Israelites. So the second set is sealed with the promise of genocide, and in that set, God lays claim to all the firstborn of Israel. The third set is substantially similar to the first, and the fourth set is just a list of people who are cursed.

Any given bible cannot agree on which 10 are the 10. Actually, different religious traditions do not agree on how the commandments should be numbered or translated either. Such discrepancies are legion and can be resolved by simply looking at the differences, but when you couple unshakable certainty with a claim to hold the ultimate truth, everything, no matter how small. Matters. We have no such thing as a small religious difference.

Which set? I’m going to use the first set, the one that people are most familiar with because of Charlton Heston. We’ll use the Protestant version.

First Commandment: “I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me.” This obviously conflicts
with the First Amendment’s guarantee of free exercise of religion, but it also conflicts with Article VI of the Constitu-
tion, which mandates that ‘the Supreme Court shall specifically says that it’s not, God is the supreme law of the land.

This commandment conflicts with the principle of justice that only the guilty are punished.

Thou shalt not take the name of thy Lord thy God in vain. I claim that this is void for vagueness. Under the 14th Amendment, laws have to be simple enough for people to understand them, so that they know what action is being prohibited.

I’ve asked this of a number of people and get different answers. The best I’ve heard is that it prevents people from saying an oath and then not fulfilling it. It fails to give adequate guidance. Quite obviously, this also runs afoul of freedom of speech.

Thou shalt not take the name of thy Lord thy God in vain.

Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Thou shalt not murder.

Thou shalt not bear false witness.

Thou shalt not covet.

I hope that I’ve given you some insight into why I’m not a Christian. I hope you get the sense that my motivation every day is the Golden Rule. Here’s a list of Golden Rules from different traditions.

Delaware artist Jessi Taylor’s painting makes the point that “the God Fearing Freedom Loving American” is a mythical creature. This super-eagle symbolizes all the preceding commandments.

Six through nine

I’m going to group these next few together and come back to adultery at the end: “You shall not kill; don’t steal; and don’t bear false witness against your neighbor.”

These commandments are not Judeo-Christian at all. They are universal principles that apply to absolutely everyone. All successful societies have incorporated them.

Secondly, the Judeo-Christian interpretation is actually less moral because it is not universally applied, but applied only to one’s neighbor.

In the original Hebrew translations, there are no punctuation marks, no paragraph breaks, no line breaks. These commandments could be read so that “against your neighbor” applies to all the preceding commandments starting with “you shall not murder.”

So it could mean, you shall not murder your neighbor, you shall not steal from your neighbor, you shall not lie to your neighbor. I submit to you that that’s actually the better reading.

Who is your neighbor? In Leviti-
cus, “any of your people” is how they define neighbor. “Stand against the blood of your neighbor,” “your people,” “the sons of your own people,” “your countrymen.” It’s only the people who believe in the same God as you, your co-religionists. That’s what neighbor means in the Old Testament.

Immediately after getting these commandments, the Israelites commit genocide after genocide. But none of the laws are Jewish. So they are not actually breaking the “don’t kill” commandment if it only applies to Israelites.

“Thou shall not commit adultery.” The Seventh Commandment actually did have an influence. I don’t think there can be any doubt that Christianity has an incredibly powerful history

I don’t really like this commandment, not because I don’t want to honor my mother and fa-
deliberate.

Most importantly, this commandment sanctions slavery. We do have to concede the bible has had a severe influence on the history of slavery. Every original justification for continu-
ing the practice came from the bible. We can concede that to the Christian nationalists. They are welcome to this shameful influence.

Honor thy father and mother.” I don’t really like this commandment, not because I don’t want to honor my mother and fa-
th, but I think it should simply be to honor people. This really didn’t have an effect or influence on our nation’s principles, unless somebody can correct me later.

Second Commandment: “You shall not make for yourself an idol.” But read the unabridged commandment, which continues, “for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God punishing the children for the inequity of the parents until the third or fourth generation.” This conflicts with the First Amend-
ment again. You can make as many idols as you want, but the Constitution also directly prohibits punishing chil-
dren for their parents’ crimes. Article III: “No attainer of treason shall work a corruption of blood.” That means if you are guilty of treason, only you will receive punishment, not your children, and certainly not your grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

This also conflicts with our prin-

ence.

To sum up the Ten Commandments and their influence on our nation’s founding: they either have no influ-
ence, being in conflict with our found-

ing principles or have a shameful influ-

ence.

Hell crucul, unusual

Obedience is a theme that runs through the whole bible. In the annihili-
ation of Sodom and Gomorrah, when Lot and his wife are fleeing, Lot’s wife disobeys the angelic command to not turn around and look. She disobeys and is turned into a pillar of salt.

And obviously, Isaac and Abraham, the sacrifice, the murder of a child, is often held up as the ideal for obeying God. This is fundamentally opposed to our nature and founding principles.

Edmund Burke wrote: “In this character of the Americans, a love of freedom is the predominating feature which marks and distinguishes

the whole.” In Common Sense, Thomas Paine wrote about the importance of “securing freedom and property to all men, and above all things, the free ex-
ercise of religion, according to the dic-
tates of conscience.”

People are required to believe this nonsense by their bible, but they are allowed to believe nonsense because our nation cherishes freedom and has enshrined it, not obedience, in our founding documents.

The Golden Rule? Here’s a list [PowerPoint slide] of Golden Rules that predate the Judeo-Christian prin-
ciples. Is there a difference in how a God who is all-powerful took six days to make the earth and on the seventh day he had rested? I call this celebrating lazy om-

This commandment conflicts with the principle of justice that only the guilty are punished.

Third Commandment: “Thou shalt not bear false witness.” I’d like to leave you with this quote from James Madison. It’s my favorite quote to use in my speeches.

The Supreme Court has actually said that saying a lie in a jail cell with a five-pack-a-day smoker is cruel and unusual punishment. I think that hell most cer-
tainly qualifies.

For American principles, I think that Jesus died for your sins. This is a total and complete abrogation of personal re-
sponsibility. Our entire system of jus-
tice is founded on the idea that people are responsible for their own actions.

But abrogation of personal responsibility is the central tenet of Christian-
ianity. It’s the central tenet of our system of justice and govern-
ment. You can imagine how this would go. The defendant gets on the stand and admits to raping children but says, “It’s OK, your honor, I’ve accepted Je-
sus as my savior and he forgave my sins, so you don’t need to punish me.”

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I’d like to leave you with this quote from James Madison. It’s my favorite quote to use in my speeches.
Think: What would make you into a believer?

Atheism is not an immutable, timeless truth. Atheism is a conclusion.

By Peter Boghossian, Ph.D.

Thank you. It’s a true pleasure to be here, and I’m incredibly grateful for the work of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and for you here today. Earlier speakers talked about an audience full of their best friends. I feel that I’m among my people and among people that I like and respect. Thank you also for the work that you do in your communities to make them more thoughtful and rational. I have over two-and-a-half decades of experience teaching in prisons and crowded public universities and in the streets. I call it street epistemology.

One lesson I’ve learned is walking the talk. That’s what I’m going to talk about today.

Street epistemology

What would it take for you to believe? Well, to believe in what? What would it take for you to believe in a particular religion? What would it take for you to be a believing Christian? Or what would it take for you to believe that the communion wafer that Catholics use transmutes into human flesh and becomes the physical body of Christ? Or that some should be put in cloth bags and occasionally beaten? What would it take for you to believe that through faith, Jesus Christ can heal people of any and all ailments? Or that the Easter bunny is a real entity that hides colored eggs? Or that you go to a happy place after you die?

Why is it important to answer the question, “What would it take for you to believe?” There are two reasons. First, it’s important so that we don’t become what we’re fighting — doggedly certain, closed-minded, epistemologically arrogant, dogmatic and religious. Being genuinely open to revise or to change your beliefs is an attitudinal disposition.

The second reason being able to answer this question is important because it helps us to model the behavior that we want the faithful to emulate. If we want the faithful to be less doggedly certain, less closed-minded, less dogmatic, then this is the behavior that we need to model. If we want the faithful to be trustworthy of reason and willing to revise their beliefs, then we need to show them by example.

There’s an entire line of literature on change and modeling behavior. Sometimes it’s referred to as prosocial modeling. It shows that modeling is a key component in eliciting behavior change. One of my favorite questions to ask believers is a variation of Matt McConnell’s Deceivability Test: What would it take for you to lose your faith? This is a reasonable question, and when I ask it, I expect a clear answer. It’s also a diagnostic tool that enables me to quickly ascertain the degree to which one is dogmatically closed.

But beyond this, when I’m asking what it would take for me to have faith or to believe in God, I respond that these are reasonable questions. I always give a direct, blunt and honest answer.

In order for us to answer this question, we must first make sure that we’d never hold a person of faith to a different epistemic standard than I would hold myself. Neither should you.

I want to be clear that there are obviously no guarantees. Just because one can state what it would take to believe or disbelieve a particular proposition doesn’t mean they’ve suddenly experienced some doxastic openness and are willing to revise their beliefs.

Sometimes we engage someone who’s argued poorly for their position, but because of dialectical training, we can immediately think of a counterargument to offer for the same conclusion or a better argument, a much stronger argument. We should provide people with arguments for their conclusions that are even better than the ones they’ve offered.

When I’m having a discussion about faith, I don’t want to have a conversation with a straw man. I want to have a conversation with a real person who’s giving me powerful arguments that have emerged from their experiences. If they can’t provide that, then I’ll provide it for them.

One of the strengths of philosophical training is that it enables you to do this. It’s also one of the strengths that comes from leading an examined life. This is the thing that we should try to model. This is another component of street epistemology.

Matter of attitude

Having a closed belief system is a complex problem. One part of it is that our brains trick us into thinking that we’re open-minded. Michael Shermer has some wonderful work on this in The Believing Brain. Our brains trick us into thinking that we’re willing to revise our beliefs, that we’re willing to reconsider when we’re not.

Confirmation bias is part of this. We have a natural predisposition to go with our own ideas, to go with the way things appear to us, but we get stuck.
We don’t believe in God because there’s a complete lack of evidence.

Or maybe if I could be shown that I was harboring a mistaken view about reality in regard to women. Maybe, for example, if they were malevolent entities, some kind of extraterrestrial bent on destroying humanity. This is the sort of evidence that one would need to warrant belief in these claims.

Regardless of the specific belief that’s being examined, in all of the cases, what’s important is to sincerely think about answering the question. This is a way that we can usuage ourseves to think more clearly and more rationally. Just stating that we’re willing to revise our beliefs if shown sufficient evidence, or if given sufficient reason, is not enough. We must be able to state exactly what it would take for us to believe or to disbelieve a given proposition. We need to model the change that we want to see in the faithful. There’s a lot of work to be done to help people to lose their faith and to embrace reason. This is one step in that direction. It’s possible for virtually everyone to lead a life free of delusion.

To facilitate this, think back to one of the definitions of belief from the Greek. We need to move from appearance and opinion to knowledge. We also need to model the attitudes that are necessary to provide people with hope.

But the hope we offer is a tough hope. It’s not born of platitudes. It won’t make you feel better right away. But it takes away a false view of reality and offers a genuine hope, a hope that’s based on reason and rationality and the tools of science.

It’s a hope your own efforts of thoughtfulness and an examined life will help contribute to that — a hope offered through walking the talk.

Thank you.

FFRF member Peter Boghossian is an instructor of philosophy at Portland State University. His main focus is bringing the tools of professional philosophers to people in a wide variety of contexts. Email: ffrf@pdx.edu; Twitter: @peterboghossian

What is atheism?

I’m not arguing that this is something that has to be immediate. If someone asks you what would it take for you to believe, if you don’t know, just say you don’t know, that you’ll think about it and get back to them.

An indispensable goal is to be free from bad reasoning, faulty epistemologies and from the attitudes that lead to religious delusions. It’s important to be a person who trusts reason, who formulates one’s beliefs on the basis of reliable evidence and who’s genuinely willing to reconsider.

Atheism is a natural consequence of possessing these skills and attitudes. Yet one could be an atheist and not possess these skills and dispositions. That is, one could be a doctrinally closed atheist. This should not be an intellec- tual or attitudinal aspiration.

Atheism is not an immutable, timeless truth. Atheism is a conclusion. It’s a conclusion one comes to based on an honest and thoughtful examination of reasons and evidence.

In the next [PowerPoint] slide I’ve compiled a comprehensive, histori- cal and contemporary list of all of the evidence and all of the reasons that one should consider when examining whether or not there’s a god or gods. [Blank slide, laughter and applause.] There is no evidence. Nada. Zip. Noth- ing.

This is why I don’t believe in God. It’s not for ideological reasons. Dan mentioned his debate with Dinesh D’Souza recently. We don’t not believe in God, as D’Souza claims, because we’re angry. I’m not angry. Dan, are you angry?

Dan: "Not with you." [Laughter.]

We don’t believe in God because there’s a complete lack of evidence. But this shouldn’t deter us from providing answers as to what it would take to believe in God, to believe in lepre- chauns, or to believe in any other prop- osition.

So let’s revisit the questions, the is- sues that we’ve looked at this morn- ing. I will honestly say what I would take for me to believe in these things. Physicist Lawrence Krauss has an interest- ing debate with William Lane Craig, where Krauss said, “If God wanted you to believe in his existence, you’d walk outside, you’d look up at the sky and there it would be. And the stars would realign themselves and say something like, ‘I am God. Believe in me.’ ”

If that happened to me, I would doubt my sanity. I would think that somehow I was the victim of a delusion, or one of my students spiked my cof- fee with LSD. The philosopher David Hume has an interesting comment on miracles. He says that there’s stronger reason to doubt the testifier than to trust the testimony. I’m not sure I would trust this per- ception. It may be that no perception, or no feeling state, would lead me to conclude that God exists. Instead, I would need argument or reason.

What would it take?

But let’s suspend that for a moment and go with the example. What would it take for me personally to believe in God? Well, the stars spelling things out to people in different languages would be interesting. “I am God, believe in me” in Arabic. I also want predictions. I’d want, I don’t know, something about the future, someone to solve Goldbach’s [mathematical] conjecture, I’d want something that I could latch my hands on to. This is the way I would approach the problem. These are the tools that I would bring to bear on how to think through the problem.

The communion wafer transforms into the body of Christ. I’m going to combine this with the next one of faith healing. We can turn the tools of sci- ence on these questions very easily.

There’s a famous line, “Why doesn’t God heal amputees?” The tools of sci- ence are quite easy in these cases. What is more difficult is when we enter the moral realm. What would it take for me to believe that we should put half of our population in cloth bags and beat them? Well, this is an astonish- ingly difficult question.

If I could be shown that my core value of gender and racial egalitari- anism was a cultural artifact, and that somehow forcing women into bags and beating them was actually in their own interest, and somehow contributed to the well-being of society, that would re- ally be something.
Humanity, individuals over religion

An example of this process of constraint: religious organizations fighting not just local but to include contraceptive coverage in insurance plans for their employees. These organizations are forgetting about the right of the individual to make her own choices. They are confining their employees to limited choices in the types of health services available to them.

If politicians continue to show favoritism to religious groups, citizens risk losing the rights that generations have fought hard to keep just as the Pilgrims did centuries ago from England.

We do not need to repeat a past that did not work. That is why in this election year, we need separation between religion and government.

Theocracies are deadly to freedom

During the recent presidential election, religion was at the forefront of political debates. The fear that one nation is moving further and further away from our constitutional right to separation of church and state: Most disturbing is that with too many examples of failing theological governments throughout the world, the Church of England and the United States, “All men have a natural and inalienable, fundamental right to rebel against a government that is doing so under the guise of defending religion.”

In turn, the church has shocked the international community by siding with Putin’s dictatorial regime instead of practicing the Christian notion of forgiveness. This secular group shows how mixing religion and politics can lead to loss of civilian freedom and to the corruption of religious institutions themselves.

In America, the lines are blurring, as made evident by nearly every hot-button issue debated by rival political parties. The most obvious example is legalization of same-sex marriage, an issue that should be treated as a question of human rights, but instead has been argued by politicians on the basis of populist religious morality, showing blatant disregard for the Establishment Clause.

Women’s rights to birth control and family planning have also come under scrutiny from conservative Christians who, tragically, are gaining leverage in the Republican Party.

When I see religion making its way into political debates, scenes from the dystopian novel “The Handmaid’s Tale” come to mind. It depicts a world in 2550 after it has been taken over by an extreme fundamentalist Christian group that strips women of their rights and forces them into roles of pious servitude.

It is ironic that while many Americans fear losing their freedom to Islam-based groups like ISIS and al-Qaida, they are blind to the fact that Christianity is slowly seeping into the pores of government, with equal potential to do serious damage to constitutional rights.

It would behoove all Americans to keep in mind that we must vote for the candidate who best protects our constitutional liberties and not for someone whose decisions will be based on the moral compass of a particular religion. Rev. Otis Moss III said it best in a sermon delivered to his Baptist congregation in Chicago: “To claim that the president of the United States must be a practicing Christian or bishop of the sanctified church. He is called to protect those who are Jew and gentile, male and female, young and old, gay and straight.”

That powerful statement perfectly sums up the way Americans need to look at government. Sadly, the fact that Moss felt compelled to make the plea shows that too many are still inclined to vote in the name of God.

Atanasia Smorodinskaya, 25, was born in Moscow, Russia. She moved to the U.S. at age 6 and grew up in the quiet college town of Middletown, N.Y. She graduated from Eckerd College in 2008 as a communications major and theater minor. She’s enrolled in Columbia University’s master’s program for broadcast journalism.

Honorable mentions: Graduate/mature student essay contest

The need for separation between religion and government is as important today as it has been since the introduction of the Establishment Clause in 1789. History shows that combining the two entities can have dangerous consequences. The Pilgrims, for example, when King James came into power, almost lost their lives after voicing their concerns about the Church of England and had to flee to avoid persecution.

Today, religious interests still want to influence public opinion and politics. A preacher recently spoke out in favor of physically abusive corrective actions toward children, backed by biblical teachings. Religious organizations are opposing contraceptive coverage in their employees’ insurance plans. These actions endanger our youth and strip individuals of their right to choose in family planning by placing the decision-making process in the hands of religious groups.

CNN reported: “Sean Harris, the pastor of Berean Baptist Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina, told his congregants in his sermon on April 28, ‘Dads, the second you see your son dropping the limp wrist, you walk over there and crack that wrist.’ He continued, ‘Man up, give them a good punch, OK. You’re not going to like it that way. You were made by God to be a male and you’re going to be a male.’

The pastor later claimed he was misunderstood, saying he wasn’t advising abuse of homosexual children. What is certain is that combining church and state would give the government power to support and defend religious groups.

Most disheartening is that with too many examples of failing theological governments throughout the world, the Church of England and the United States, “All men have a natural and inalienable, fundamental right to rebel against a government that is doing so under the guise of defending religion.”

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By Justin Vacula

Justin Vacula was the sole protester at the June 8 Catholic rally at Courthouse Square in Scranton, Pa.

Wanted: Separation of state, church

Four recent Establishment Clause issues in Pennsylvania — legislation declaring 2012 “The Year of the Bible,” sectarian governmental prayer, coercion of citizens who dare to remain seated for governmental prayer, and intentions to fund religious schools with taxpayer monies — should convince Pennsylvanians that they need separation of religion and government.

Lawmakers seemed to neglect Section 3 of the state Constitution, which states, “All men have a natural and indefeasible right to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of their own consciences, and “no human authority can, in any case whatever, control or interfere with the rights of conscience, and no preference shall ever be given by law to any religious establishments or modes of worship.”

The “noncontroversial” resolution declaring “The Year of the Bible” said there was a “national need to study and apply [its] teachings,” and claimed that “renewing our knowledge of and faith in God through holy scripture can strengthen us as a nation and a people.”

The “dictates of conscience” in the Constitution were trampled on because the resolution took sides on theological issues and recommended religious actions.

Another obvious example of religious and government being a dangerous mix is the constant stream of unconstitutional sectarian governmental prayer during House of Representatives sessions. Many contain specific references to Christianity, with Jesus
Christ dying on a cross to save people from sin, Jesus Christ as “Lord and savior,” “God in heaven” and “the maker of heaven and earth. Unconstitutional prayers also exist in a background of coercion directed at citizens seeking to remove mandated daily prayer. Individuals, before entering the guest chambers, view a prominent sign which encourages people for free: the House speaker asks people to stand. On one occasion, I was made to feel alone while taking notes on a tablet. An anti-security officer approached me and repeatedly asked me to stand “to show respect.” Two requests—from the House speaker and a sign—were enough.

Another insidious foray by lawmakers concerned a school voucher program in which public funds, instead of funding public schools which must educate children regardless of their religious upbringing or belief, would fund private schools, including religious and exist primarily to indoctrinate impoverished, mindless students to pander to the will of the donor and teach “young Earth creationist” doctrine instead of sound science. When I peacefully protested a rally, holding a sign calling for separation of church and state, at which pious politicians assembled to urge lawmakers to vote for the school voucher program, I was told that I should go back to my “community of privilege” and send my children “to whichever school I wanted because I was afraid of the repercussions of upsetting the gods.” This has nothing to do with separation of church and state, at which pious politicians admit to being a non-believer speaks volumes about the usefulness of professional religious devotion for those seeking office.

Politicians fall all over themselves to prove their support of religion. In the past decade, Congress has unanimously reaffirmed “In God We Trust” as the national motto three times. Countless bills are presented with hopes of winning the religious base. Even if sponsors don’t think they will pass, they want credit for proposing them. Sincere or cynical, politicians know that pandering to the religious gets them votes and, just as importantly, gets them money. The relationship between religious money and the state has always been problematic, but never more so than it is today. And fighting against that relationship is never more important than in an election year. Every year, the churches of America get $71 billion in tax breaks thanks to very generous exemptions. The American taxpayer has to cover the lost revenue forcing the population to pay more in state and federal organized religion. Churches pay no property taxes, write off housing expenses for their clergy; do not pay sales tax on anything they sell, and do not pay taxes on the money they earn. US churches own $400 billion in untaxed land and the Church of Scientology is using its untaxed dollars annually. Donations to these churches are written off individuals’ taxes, even if those churches support groups that support for example, that would encourage girls to have sex; in South Carolina, the governor vetoed a bill that would allow schools to simply say, “it would encourage women to want to receive the vaccine.”

Churches use this money to push religion into the public classrooms of America, to make sure after-school programs have access to children. We have to remove evolution and Thomas Jefferson from schoolbook, and to force non-religious students to listen and participate in prayers on secular campuses. Religious exemptions don’t just hurt the education of young people; they can also lead to disease and death. In many states, religious schools are exempt from government oversight, which has led to deaths of children through poor care and negligence.

Churches use this money to promote their hatred for women. In 2011, there were 1,100 bills about reproductive rights introduced at the state level. There were bills that force women to receive a transvaginal exam to get an abortion; that have over $700,000 in church donations; that would charge women with manslaughter for having miscarriages; that allow doctors and pharmacists to refuse to give birth control to women. All of this in a country where being pregnant is more socially acceptable than being gay, in a country where many other industrialized nations. Even bills to make the life-saving, cancer-fighting drugs affordable mandatory have been vetoed out of fear that it would encourage girls to have sex; in South Carolina, the governor vetoed a bill that would allow schools to simply tell parents the vaccine exists. These bills are so cavalierly anti-woman, women.assertEqual

Government for the people, not the god

By Ashley Miller

Religion, in the hands of the power hungry, is a dangerous thing, and not only through the power hungry or more religious than U.S. politicians. That only one member of Congress admits to being a non-believer speaks volumes about the usefulness of professional religious devotion for those seeking office. Politicians fall all over themselves to prove their support of religion. In the past decade, Congress has unanimously reaffirmed “In God We Trust” as the national motto three times. Countless bills are presented with hopes of winning the religious base. Even if sponsors don’t think they will pass, they want credit for proposing them. Sincere or cynical, politicians know that pandering to the religious gets them votes and, just as importantly, gets them money. The relationship between religious money and the state has always been problematic, but never more so than it is today. And fighting against that relationship is never more important than in an election year.

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Churches use this money to promote their hatred for women. In 2011, there were 1,100 bills about reproductive rights introduced at the state level. There were bills that force women to receive a transvaginal exam to get an abortion; that have over $700,000 in church donations; that would charge women with manslaughter for having miscarriages; that allow doctors and pharmacists to refuse to give birth control to women. All of this in a country where being pregnant is more socially acceptable than being gay, in a country where many other industrialized nations. Even bills to make the life-saving, cancer-fighting drugs affordable mandatory have been vetoed out of fear that it would encourage girls to have sex; in South Carolina, the governor vetoed a bill that would allow schools to simply tell parents the vaccine exists. These bills are so cavalierly anti-woman, women are dying in this country because of religious interference.

And, before you blame this entirely on the religious right, the Democrats are guilty as well. President Obama prevented Plan B from becoming over-the-counter, despite the recommendations of the medical community, primarily because he wanted to avoid the Christian backlash. Democrats are just as afraid of the repercussions of upsetting the gods, and just as interested in getting their money. Before you despair, there is good news. The non-religious population is growing and becoming more vocal and actively fighting the destruction of separation of church and state. There are things we can do to fight back. We can support organizations like the Secular Student Alliance, Secular Coali- tion for America, Freedom From Re- ligion Foundation, and the many other secular institutions in our country. We can vote for the candidates that don’t pander to the religious, if they can be found. And, if they cannot be found, we can follow the lead of people like Pete Stark and Cecil Bothwell, and run for office ourselves. Our Constitution clearly states that God and government do not go together, and we must fight for a government that is truly represen- tative of “we the people.” all of us, not just those under the command of a fic- ticious and very wealthy deity.

Ashley Miller, 28, grew up in Litchfield, S.C., and attends the University of South Carolina as a second-year Ph.D. candidate. She holds a master’s in radio, film and tele- vision production from Florida State Uni- versity and B.A. in film studies from Emory University.

Send $2 with the name and address of each person you wish to encourage to apply for Freedom from Religion Foundation, P.O. Box 750, Madison WI 53701

Freedom depends upon freethinkers
(Prospective only if the individual is a freethinker.)

No clue

Texan Tracie Harris’ “Atheist Eve” cartoons are featured on the Atheist Community of Austin website: atheist-community.org/atheisteve/
Arrested / Charged

Jeffory N. Callicoat, 45, Kansas City, MO: Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. sentencing date: 4/23/13

William Alston, 40, Altamonte Springs, FL: Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. sentencing date: 10/29/13

Robert A. Oehler, 47, Kenhorst, PA: Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. sentencing date: 2/19/13

Marcos Demichelis, 28, Miami, FL: Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. sentencing date: 7/23/13

Vincent Merco, 66, Kokomo, IN: 39 counts of sexual assault. Mercer, a Dominican citizen, was arrested and charged with molesting a juvenile between the ages of 11 and 17 from 1986-94 in Cork and County Limerick, Source: Irish Times, 1-10-13

Aryeh Goodman, 30, East Brunswick, NJ: 12 counts of indecent assault of a child under the age of 13 years old. Goodmen, the son of a rabbi, is accused of molesting a boy when he was nine years old at the Maneshein in Pike County, PA, where Goodman was a counselor. Source: Times of Israel, 1-10-13

M.M. Sharma, 55, East Delhi, IN: Rape, Sharma, a Hindu priest, summoned the alleged victim, a 14-year-old, and married to another priest, to his home on the pretext of preparing sweetmeats. The alleged rape happened on New Year’s Day, 2013. The police alleged that the woman afterward “evidently” consented to the sexual intercourse. Source: BBC, 1-10-13

Bruno M. Tucci, 70, Salisbury, MD: 49-degree sexual abuse of a child. Tucci, a priest with the Allentown [PA] Catholic Diocese, was accused of molesting a child at Gardendale-Mt. Vernon United Methodist Church. Source: The Examiner, 12-10-12

Terry Greer, 54, Gardendale, AL: Murder and attempted murder. Greer, senior pastor at Gardendale-Mt. Vernon United Methodist Church, is charged with murdering his wife, Lisa, 57, and shooting his mother-in-law, Suzanne, 88, at her house. Greer then stabbed himself in the chest and neck and fled the residence. Greer told police that he was trying to recover his wallet. Source: Times Daily, 1-14-13

Charles Agbu, 66, West Islip, NY: Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. sentencing date: 1-14-13

Larry M. Bollinger, 69, Miami, FL: Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. sentencing date: 5-1-13

Terry Brassfield, 28, Charlotteville, VA: Guilty by jury of 3 counts of embezzlement. Brassfield was accused of taking more than $2.5 million from the church. Source: newsplex.com, 12-21-12

Charles Demps, 52, Blue Springs, MO: Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. sentencing date: 5-23-13

Larry M. Bollinger, 69, Marion, AL: Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. sentencing date: 5-23-13

James Bollinger, 27, Atmore, AL: Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. sentencing date: 5-23-13

Michael Roseman, 59, West Valley City, UT: Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. sentencing date: 5-23-13

Jeffory N. Callicoat, 45, Kansas City, MO: Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. sentencing date: 5-23-13

Eugene Teenie, 75, Cary, NC: Misdemeanor larceny. Teenie, a former pastor at Teenie’s Church of God, formerly in Weldon, NC, is charged with stealing an undetermined amount of money from collection baskets. Source: WNCN, 10-18-13

Sarah Y. Myers, 54, Charleston, SC: Return and Refund Fraud and credit card theft and mail fraud. Myers, worked as a youth pastor at Christ the King Lutheran Church. She is also charged with theft of more than $2,500, and mail fraud. Source: Myrtle Beach News, 1-9-13

Jason Laws, 44, Albin, WY: Theft of more than $500 from a place of worship and 2 counts of embezzlement. Laws, an usher at the First Presbyterian Church of the House of Prayer, is accused of embezzling more than $300,000 from his church. Source: Courier & Press, 12-18-13

Emilio D. Forrest, 57, Naples, FL: Indecent liberties with a child. Forrest, a priest of National Catholic Chapel. Source: WAVY, 12-17-12

James Bollinger, 69, Miami, FL: Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. sentencing date: 5-23-13

Cheryl Potts, 37, Brooklyn, NY: Felony and misdemeanor assault, menacing, criminal mischief and criminal possession of a weapon. A minister at Hazzard Street Church of God in Harlem, was accused of throwing trash in Black on November 12, 2012. The victim, 62 year-old Nechuya Wehmeier was convicted of 9 counts of child sexual abuse. [See conviction story on next page.]

Rosenberg is an outspoken advocate in the ultra-Orthodox community for sexual abuse victims. In January 2013 he was accused of molesting a 13-year-old boy while working in the same position at a church choir. Source: nydailynews.com, 1-13-13

Jeffory N. Callicoat, 45, Kansas City, MO: Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. sentencing date: 4/23/13

Emeritus Bishop William Hughes, 78, Eufala, AL: Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. sentencing date: 4/23/13

Jeffory N. Callicoat, 45, Kansas City, MO: Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. sentencing date: 4/23/13

Francine Demps, 38, Palm Beach Gardens, FL: Misdemeanor larceny. Demps, a pastor at Poinciana Baptist Church, is alleged to have embezzled more than $8,000 from church. Source: The Palm Beach Post, 12-17-12

Stanley Wilkinson, 71, Spanabanburg, SC: Sexual criminal conduct with a minor and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Wilkinson, a former parishioner of St. Augustine Catholic Church, was accused of molesting his 17-year-old granddaughter. Source: The Post, 1-13-13

Kevin Wallin, 61, Bridgeport, CT: Conspiring to distribute 500 grams or more of a substance involved in a criminal offense. Source: The New York Times, 1-12-13

A Muslim woman was allegedly offered to Catholic youths in exchange for 155,000 rupees ($3,000) each. The Kerala Catholic Bish-
I was, uh, hot. I like to drive around naked.

— Fr. Peter Petrosek
Indiana rep pushes school Lord’s Prayer

Indiana state Sen. Dennis Kruse, R-Auburn, filed a bill which would let public schools have students recite the Lord’s Prayer daily. The bill received first reading Dec. 19.

SB 251 states that “the governing body of a school corporation or the equivalent authority may require the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer at the beginning of each school day. The prayer may be recited by a teacher, a student, or the class of students.”

It further states, “If the governing body or equivalent authority requires the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer under subsection (a), the governing body or equivalent authority shall determine the version of the Lord’s Prayer that religion, belief in a school corporation or charter school.”

The bill lets students or “the student’s parent” choose not to participate.

The South Bend Tribune in a Jan. 11 editorial called the bill a bad idea and urged, “If he [Sen. Kruse] wants to veto it if the Legislature passes it, predicting that “long years of legal challenges would certainly drain the state treasury and end in defeat” if it became law.

Domino’s founder: Birth control ‘immoral’

Tom Monaghan, devout Catholic and founder of Domino’s Pizza, is suing the federal government over mandatory contraceptive coverage in the new health care law. Monaghan called contraception a “gravely immoral” practice, according to the suit, in which he and Domino’s Farms, Ann Arbor, Mich., are plaintiffs.

According to a Dec. 15 post on Domino’s Facebook page, Monaghan said the company in 1998. “His views are not our views, nor are his actions in any way related to our actions.”

A Wikipedia entry says Bain Capital, which purchased Domino’s in 1998, netting Monaghan about $1 billion, before it went public in 2004.

Egyptian atheist gets three-year sentence

A Cairo court sentenced atheist Alber Saber, 27, to three years in prison Dec. 12 for blasphemy and contempt for religion. Saber was accused of posting clips online of the short film “Innocence of Muslims,” which sparked the “Arab Spring.”

Some seniors living at La Costa Glen retirement community in Carlsbad, Calif., told KERO News they’re being targeted by residents for their nonreligious beliefs, the station reported Dec. 26. “They said, ‘She is a sinner. She’s going to hell and she’s going to burn forever,’” said Brigit Smith-Clarke, 84, who started a group called Atheists Anonymous.

Monaghan, with 16 members two years ago and has grown to nearly 100 members, said people are calling her things such as “anti-Christian” and “jew-lover.” She said she was raised Christian but “is tired of pretending.”

“I think it’s a big place and people do all sorts of things,” said activities coordinator Michelle Chaffee. “It’s not typical of what we see here normally.”

Chaffee says it’s the A-word that is the problem. “That has turned a lot of people off.”

U.S. House proclaims Darwin Day


Holt, who has a doctorate in physics, introduced the resolution to honor Charles Darwin’s 204th birthday. “Whereas Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution by the mechanism of natural selection, together with the monumental amount of scientific evidence he compiled to support it, provides humanity with a logical and intellectually compelling explanation for the diversity of life on Earth . . .

Obviously!

Deb and Paul Lindsey comment on this scene in Marathon, Fla., “Full of nuts? Really! No kidding!”

Marquee Madness

Holt, who has a doctorate in physics, introduced the resolution to honor Charles Darwin’s 204th birthday. “Whereas Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution by the mechanism of natural selection, together with the monumental amount of scientific evidence he compiled to support it, provides humanity with a logical and intellectually compelling explanation for the diversity of life on Earth . . .

Mixed message

Ellen Lewis took this photo in Minnesota in summer 2011. “The message might just cause any reasonable, thinking Christian (is there such person?) to reconsider and question their faith. For this atheist, it reaffirms my nonbelief with an exclamation point.”
In Memoriam

Michael Deanahardt, 1936–2012

Michael Christopher Deanahardt, 76, Anderson, S.C., died Dec. 19, 2012, at the Rainey Hospice House. He was born Oct. 7, 1936 in Anderson to Melvin and Ellen (Wilson) Deanahardt and worked as a self-employed mason. Deanahardt, a longtime FFRF member and man of good humor, was for years called “the most prayed for man in FFRF” due to his ongoing campaign to get local government boards to stop praying at their meetings. He was also a committed activist on behalf of civil rights, abortion rights, labor rights and separation of state and church.

The Anderson Independent Mail in a profile mentioned “the faded bumper sticker on his pickup read: ‘When the rapture comes, can I have your truck?’”

In a 2008 column in that paper, Deanahardt wrote: “We are not willing to cede the moral high ground to the fundamentalists of the religious and political right who are using the language of faith, religion and politics to advance a narrow-minded, mean-spirited agenda, which is built on what we consider to be immoral values of intolerance, exclusion, division, discrimination and persecution.”

He is survived by his wife of 55 years, Anita Story Deanahardt, five children, nine grandchildren, five great-grandchildren, two brothers and two sisters.

FFRF offers its sincerest condolences to Michael’s family.

James Schiller, 1937–2012

James Joseph Schiller, Denver, died Dec. 6, 2012. He was born in 1937 in St. Louis, Mo.

He attended New York University, where he met his wife, Susan. They lived in New York while he attended the New School for Social Research, where he obtained his master’s degree. He earned a post-graduate’s at Johns Hopkins University.

His first teaching position was in Atlanta. James and Susan lived in Baltimore for 23 years and then in the Denver area for 22 years. Their daughter, Julia, and grandson, Nicolas, live in New Zealand, which was a favorite vacation destination for James and Susan for many years.

James was a member of the Humanists of Colorado and the Freedom From Religion Foundation. “FFRF was very important to James and remains very important to Susan,” notes Tim Bailey, Humanists of Colorado president and FFRF member.

A humanist celebration of life memorial is being planned for March and will be announced. Condolences can be mailed to Humanists of Colorado, Box 461112, Glendale, CO 80246, or emailed to humanistsinfo@humanists­spring.com.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to FFRF, Box 750, Madison, WI 53701.

FFRF’s sincerest condolences go out to the Schiller family.


Ann Elizabeth Zindler, 77, Columbus, Ohio, died of metastatic breast cancer at her home after a heroic battle of more than four years’ duration.

Ann Hunt was born Feb. 25, 1935, in Ann Arbor, Mich. She studied art and biology at Eastern Michigan University. She managed a women’s dormitory at the University of Michigan before moving in 1967 after her marriage in 1964 to New York, where she worked as a glasswright known for her acid-etched stained glass creations.

She served as joint director of the Central Ohio Chapter of American Atheists after moving to Columbus in 1983. Ann became the principal artist and art and layout editor for American Atheist Press. She dedicated her life to the advancement of reason and with her husband, Frank, labored to guard the wall of separation between state and church. She was a member of Planned Parenthood and NARAL, Zero Population Growth, the Audubon Society and American Atheists.

In 2012, a Sunoco pipeline included her husband’s 48 years, Frank, an FFRF member; a daughter, Catherine; and three grandchildren; all of Columbus.

In the spirit of 19th century freethinker Robert Green Ingersoll, who wrote, “Hands that labor and hearts that pray,” FFRF annually challenges freethinkers to set an example for religionists by ‘doing good on Good Friday.’

The annual challenge was inaugurated in the early 1990s by Pat Clarend, a founder of the Alabama Freethought Society, FFRF’s longest-running existing chapter.

“It’s not that freethinkers aren’t good every day,” says active volunteer Pat. “But this will be a way to make it a truly good day, if all freethinkers in the country would be visibly helping.”

On March 29, the day known as Good Friday to Christians, public and private, popular discussion, social practices and media coverage worldwide will focus on the Christian myth — Jesus dying on the cross, then rising from the dead to save human-kind from sin. Most of us don’t get this at all, but what an opportune time for nontheists and secularists to plan, organize and publicize a nationwide, or even worldwide, effort to encourage those of like mind to “come out” en masse.

We can create a back story now to next year’s Good Friday, one which encourages public discussion, facilitates conversations and provides nontheists with the opportunity and moment to openly join us in this most important and crucial change movements.

Good Friday? No, it will be a Great Friday! We can own this. Great Friday can become our annual, purposeful, secular response and alternative to yet another religious holiday.

We have the message. We have the resources. We have this opportunity.

Gary McIntyre, a Kentucky resident most of his life, was “saved” while growing up a Baptist. He started to question religion in college and remembers giving a Speech 101 presentation on “something you feel strongly about.” It was titled “Why I Am Not A Christian” and drew mostly negative reactions.

He considered himself an agnostic much of his adult life but now says atheist and humanist more accurately describes his worldview. Gary joined FFRF in the mid-1980s after seeing Dan Barker on a television morning show.

‘Do good on Good Friday’
3 troublesome themes permeate crank mail

In reading the November crank mail, three principal themes seemed to permeate almost all the letters. First, no argument is made and no evidence given about whether religious belief; in fact, no letter even addressed the question of how truth is to be determined.

Second, the main thrust of letters is that “I have the way we’ve always done things around here,” with no mention of reason or moral value. This is the same line that was offered in defense of segregation (recall our Southern way of life), and is descended from the defense of slavery.

Third, many of the letters either implicit or explicit threats of physical violence against anyone who might venture into this supposedly religious territory. This reinforces the age-old relationship between religion and power: those who win the battles or wars proclaim that a deity supported them, which, by twisted logic, is sufficient to establish the reality of their deity.

David Bussher
New York

The latest issue was another winner, both amuse and enlighten. I enjoyed the crank mail which you so boldly reprint showing these incredibly insignificant people for what they clearly are. If they represent religion, I’ve made an excellent choice.

Don Blair
Florida

Calif. retirees donate 2012 surplus to FFRF

We are a group of elderly people (average age 75) who believe that religion is, on balance, not good for children and other human beings. We live in Rosmoor, Calif., a retirement community of 9,000 people. Our group has 98 active members, and our email list has 116 names of other “interested” people.

At the end of each year we donate whatever is in our treasury, after expenses, to an atheist cause. Some of our members already belong to FFRF. At our last meeting, we voted to contribute $300 (check enclosed) to FFRF to recognize what you are doing to free American minds from the fog of religion.

Please accept our congratulations on your good work. We hope next year’s contribution will be larger.

Richard Golden
Ohio

‘Outsiders’ force locals to obey the law

I am so disappointed by stories about unenlightened and unrepen- tant local officials who complain about those “outsiders” (FFRF) who “force” the community to end some local vio- lation. Of course, it’s the First Amend- ment (not FFRF) which “forces” the result, and it is the First Amendment which the local opposition denigrates when it dismisses the result as some sort of bizarre massapation of jus- tice.

After a church-state violation is rem- edied, these communities have an op- portunity (and in this country of laws, a civic duty) to turn the resolution of a contentious dispute into a learning moment for the citizens who must live with the result. They would do well to try to heal the rift caused by the conflict and to remind the citizenry of the very American values embodied in our First Amendment.

Instead, to their enduring shame, these strident individuals, immune to the notion that they might not speak for God, and oblivious to how un- American their intolerance is, follow their loss by doubting down on their spiritual and vitriolic demonization of outsiders.

To FFRF members in such commu- nities, I say: Please don’t let the re- pugnant provincialism of unbecloud- bles resonate throughout the region as a final declaration of local intolerance and xenophobia on the part of your voice, nor theirs, be the last one heard on the opinion pages.

Also, if a school in involved, urge them to invite credentialed speakers to a school assembly after the dispute is over so that the spirit and function of the First Amendment might be better understood and respected by thinking people.

Fred Shortz
Life Member
Connecticut

God either heartless or imaginary figure

I am happy to learn that FFRF’s building expansion can go forward. Two years ago I gave $500 for the ex- pansion. Here is another $500. I’d give more if I could. The work you do to keep religion out of government is so important.

I have been an atheist most of my life. Even if there were a God, what is good is “He or She” to just ignore all this awful stuff going on like the school shootings? Surely, He’d do something if He were real. Need no Ph.D. to see that.

Charles Saxton
Arkansas

Wondering about future of our species

‘Tis the season for Reason’s Greet- ings again, and for another modest do- nation to your most worthy cause, that of intelligence and sanity. Someday, I hope, will reach a level where you more, such as $666, ho ho ho.

It’s hard to believe the tiresome re- ligious bigotry and ignorance reported in the October Freethought Today and to tell if we’re making much head- way from year to year. Is there any fu- ture for a species that, despite having a complex brain, feels the need to invent an imaginary being and then lives in fear of being punished and eventually sacrificed by a delusional invention?

Judy Loewen
Alberta, Canada

Shaking the piggy bank for worthy causes

The solstice card and Lifetime Member pin you sent really made me laugh by surprise: I do appreciate that badge of honor and will wear it proudly.

Now that you have quite a project at hand, I shank the piggy bank energeti- cally and, lo and behold, a few dollars toward the best wishes to all of you in your commendable pursuits.

Tom Johnson
Colorado

Religions are waging war on nonbelievers

Religious leaders complain of “the war on religion” whenever they can’t bully others into giving them what they want, even at the cost to everyone else’s civil and human rights. Let’s not for- get that religions started the “war” in the first place.

All our fair in religions wars, and the ends justify the means, to advance the kingdom of God. Whenever blind faith trumps reason and evidence, there are consequences. The costs can be so high that we must not allow them to be unchecked.

The addiction to and respect for re- ligions is disrupting education, critical thinking, rational discourse, our legal system and human rights. In intrusio- nism is blocking progress.

Carl Scheiman, Lifetime Member
Maine

Thank you for the best issue ever

I have been getting Freethought To- day for several years but find this last is- sue the best ever. As a member of a mi- nority (an atheist in the South), I often feel overwhelmed and downtrodden, but getting your publication always re-news my spirit, vigour and courage.

I was particularly inspired by the ar- ticle written by student activist Shawna Scott and continue to marvel at the strength of Jessica Alsatist, whom I had the pleasure of meeting at your convention in Hartford, Conn.

I got a kick out of Dan Barker’s ar- ticle about Christians “stealing” Christi- ans. It’s so amusing that Christians are so convinced they’ve got it, the little thieves! The crank mail always tickles me. By the last one, I’m usually in tears of laughter from the idiocy of the brainwashed bigots who are so con-vinced they have all the answers. What fun!

You’re always a welcome shot in the arm.

L. Reed
North Carolina

Pulpit politician

Amy Frakes spotted this church marquee in Cynthiana, Ky.

May be Mormons, Muslims should merge?

In his acceptance speech for the Em- porer Has No Clothes award [Nov12], Richard Dawkins said it made no sense for Mormon Bishop Mitt Romney to excommunicate a woman after she al- ready had the Mormon Church. She could not just leave the church; she had to be punished. By excommu- nicating her even after she left means all of her family and friends can have nothing more to do with her. It is like putting her in isolation.

Baptizing his long-dead atheist father-in-law is weird. Mormons are taught they have to be as many chil- dren as they can be because they are to take up the kingdom of God. Do you think they will pass the Catholics one day? They are not allowed to drink alco- hol, and they can hook up with the Muslims who are taught alco- hol and dogs are unclean. And so it goes, on and on.

Irene Stephenson, Lifetime Member
California

Zealots marred internshlp at Okla. water board

I was very interested to read in the October Freethought Today about prayers that were stopped at the Okla- homa Water Resources Board, where I worked for two years in the late 1990s.

It was almost like more working for a church than for a scientific agency.

It was very common when we were traveling for my boss to grab my hands before a meal and say grace. People there referred to each other as “broth- ers in Christ,” and there was no escape from the relentless torrent of religious piety that surrounded me. Since I was an intern hoping for a permanent job, I wasn’t in a position to say anything (the job was never forthcoming; I dis- covered that you had to give permanent jobs to people with two X chromo- somes, but that’s a whole other story).

I learned a lot during that intern- ship about what many might call an accommo- dationist when I arrived there, but not by the time I left. I wish I had known about you when I was trapped in my boss’s office listening to a long, gory, graphic description of “The Left Be- hind” series. Watching this mild-manned, kind man working himself into a froth of delight over the tortures that awaited many of his neighbors and friends was a real awakening for me.

I am glad that you have managed to put a stop to the illegal prayers at the

Letterbox
Owen, I just wish I thought it would bring more comfort to those individuals who have taken my place as the ones hiding under their desks (figuratively) to avoid our religious incident that could become unstable and dangerous.

Richard Buckelw Nebraska

Realizing ‘no good comes from blind faith’

This last year has been an awakening for my husband and me. Through much reflection and arguing and attempting to understand ourselves, we finally realized what we had forgotten about. Religion is for those who want to believe and not those who do not wish to think. Although this was a relief at first, the reality began to set in, so as many others have vocalized.

As time passed, more education and awareness began to open our eyes and the picture became uglier to the point of being grotesque. It is now difficult to not make the connection between religion and the difficulties we see everywhere. What once seemed harmless now has a virulent side and is polluting everything it touches.

One of our arguments would say, “No, it matters what people believe, and it matters when they believe it with themselves and is not so offensive.” That seemed narrow-minded to him (and sometimes even to me), but I am certain now that no good comes from blind faith. It took us several months to make the decision to donate to your funds. We were not sure that some of the battles being fought are real or not. But it has become apparent that a line must be drawn in the sand for the welfare of the country. If the vast majority of people’s belief systems teach them to live in a fantasy world, real world problems can’t be addressed, which in turn breeds ignorance, intolerance, hate and apathy.

If the very best that we can do is keep them from un sorrowing our freedoms, we have to fight on the front line with them with resistance at every battle line.

Darla Horn

P.S. My husband insisted on sending $104 because that’s $2 for every week in the year. I think this is left over from his change at the end of the year. By the way, your only other donations are to the Red Cross, SPICA and Get the Money Out (getmoneyout.com), a secular group dedicated to getting money out of politics.

Refreshing in D.C.: Nation not under God

I’m a Lifetime member of FFRF as my wife (who is 80) and I was born and as raised as an atheist, I listened to the prayer service at the National Cathedral in Washington, hoping to find a humanist on the rostrum of speakers but also hoping to hear President Obama speak. There was none and he did not.

But when Rev. Adam Hamilton, a United Methodist pastor from Kansas, said, “...one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all,” I was amazed. He was not reciting the pledge, but he was clearly making a point.

This was only one day after Myrle Evers-Williams, in her lammy’s invocation at the inauguration itself, said, “We now stand beneath the shadow of the nation’s Capitol, whose golden dome reflects the unity and democracy of one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

So that’s two Christian heroes in the space of two days, each willing to risk the wrath of the righteous.

Sigrid R.P. Smith

Connecticut

Clergy abuse documentary exposes corruption

The documentary “Mea Maxima Culpa” is an extraordinary film that exposes the moral bankruptcy of the Catholic Church in covering up sex abuse of children by clergy over the centuries. Subtitled “Signs in the House of God,” it focuses on the horrific abuse of deaf children in Wisconsin by Fr. Lawrence Murphy, who was protected by the church hierarchy despite the fact he molested an estimated 200 boys over 20 years. Murphy was never convicted and was barred from the priestly vestments after showing no remorse. Incredibly, he justified his crimes as “curing” his victim’s homosexual tendencies.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) is revealed as long complicit in the cover-up. His fury at reporters questioning him about his protection of a sex-abuser and morbidly alcoholic cardinal is telling. His predecessor, John Paul II, and the Church could as a whole, come across as no better.

William Donohue of the Catholic League is exposed as a liar and apologist of the church.

In a shocking scene, one of Murphy’s victims tells how a nun tricked him into signing a settlement document in which he stated he had sinned against the Michaelian Archdiocese for bringing the allegations to light. Most of the people in the film are Catholics, including clergy repulsed by the cover-up but stonewalled when they tried to stop the abuse.

Parts of the film are hard to take, but it’s worth the discomfort. It should be shown at every freethought convention.

Deborah Middlebrooks

New York
Despite being called “spoilsports” by a local resident, members of FFRF’s Metropolitan Chicago Chapter say that posting the banner in North School Park in Arlington Heights went without a hitch. Front, from left, are Bob Elmore, Bob Hunter, Liz Calato, Kathi Wise, Dan Hamilton, (back) Fred Dix, Steve Foulkes, Brian McCaskill, Tom Cara, Rich Pope and Chris Calato.

Thanks to Board member Darrell Barker, FFRF’s Winter Solstice banner was erected for a second year to counter a large nativity display outside the Washington Capitol in Olympia. Barker applied for and received a permit to keep the display up until the end of the year.

Religion “hardens hearts and enslaves minds” declared FFRF on its banner challenging a nativity scene on government property near City Hall in Prineville, Ore. Local supporter Sarah Fierbaugh erected the banner on behalf of FFRF and its Oregon members.

Three volunteers helped post FFRF’s solstice sign on Boston Common in Boston on Dec. 17. Zachary Bos (left), Gabriel McDonald and Ellery Schempp, Lifetime Member and Supreme Court victor, did the honors. Unfortunately, the banner was stolen a few days later. “Mary Dyer was hanged on Boston Common in 1660 for daring to preach tenets of the Quaker religion, and some residents perpetuate that tradition of intolerance by carrying off our Boston Common banner,” said FFRF Co-President Dan Barker.

FFRF received a permit from the city of Manassas, Va., for its “Let Reason Prevail” banner to counter a nativity scene. It was placed by a local supporter on Dec. 19 in Nelson Park next to a crèche. A report was filed with police Dec. 29 after the banner was stolen. Zip ties attached to the posts were all that were left.

Victory!

The city council in Cheboygan, Mich., moved a nativity display from public property instead of giving FFRF equal time during the winter holiday season. Rather than let FFRF’s “Let Reason Prevail” banner stand in a public park with the Kiwanis Club’s nativity scene, the council voted Dec. 18 to ban all displays in Washington Park — except for secular displays by the Chamber of Commerce and the Opera House. City Attorney Stephen Lindsay warned the council about denying FFRF’s request if it permitted the nativity and facing potential litigation which “the city cannot win.”
Justin Vacula, a graduate student, FFRF member and student essay honorable mention awardee, coordinated the placement of a solstice sign in Public Square in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. Shortly after a city worker placed FFRF’s banner, an identified man brazenly and in front of TV cameras cut the cords. Vacula immediately filed a police report. After he and FFRF repeatedly protested police and city inaction, Vacula was told by an officer that the vandal would be charged with disorderly conduct and criminal mischief. A police report verified the charges. The photo at right shows how FFRF’s banner was left dangling for 3 weeks before the city reattached it.

A thief or thieves in Warren, Mich., stole this solstice banner several days after it was placed on public property. It was vandalized the day after it was put up, when one of the steel fence posts it was attached to was removed. FFRF members Gary Fromm (left), Howard Flake, Douglas Marshall and Bruce Kopetz installed the banner before its theft. FFRF warmly thanks Douglas Marshall for all his hard work.

FFRF placed its solstice banner in City Park in Streator, Ill. Last holiday season, FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott protested the crèche being on public property. Locals took issue with the nativity itself and the blatantly Christian sign next to the display that read, “Unto you is born the Savior Jesus Christ the Lord.”
FFRF protests ‘Jackson Jesus’ in public school

Continued from front page

“tense” and heated meeting, with par-
ents booing those who opposed the
painting’s presence, and cheering and
applauding the board’s decision.

“It is still violating the United States
Constitution and must be removed in-
mediately,” said a parent, who was
loudly booed.

Since FFRF wrote its letter, the
ACLU of Ohio has joined the fight.
ACLU litigation coordinator Drew
Dennis said: “The fact that this portrait
has been hanging for many years does
not change the fact that it promotes
one set of religious beliefs at the ex-
pense of all others. Public school dis-
plays that advance one particular reli-
gious tradition are neither welcoming,
nor inclusive for those who may have
other beliefs.

The ‘Jackson Jesus’ painting is the
focal point, segregated by itself, of a so-
called ‘Hall of Honor’ at the school. It
reportedly was given to the school in
1947.

‘I’m certainly not going to run
down there and take the picture down
because some group from Madison,
Wis., who knows nothing about the
culture of our community or why the
picture is even there, wants me to take
it down,” Howard told WKKJ.

A Christian-right group based in
Texas known as the Liberty Institute
announced Jan. 11 that it had been
produced more than 500 million times.
The Gospel Trumpet County, later
Warner Press, became the principal
distributor of the painting and other
Sallman imagery.

Sallman also painted popular im-
ages titled “Christ at Heart’s Door,”
“Christ in Gethsemane” and “The Lord
is My Shepherd.” He enrolled in bible
school and was encouraged to paint
by a dean who said, “Sometime I hope
you give us your conception of Christ.
And I hope it’s a mainly one. Most of
our pictures today are too effeminate.”

Sallman said about his work, “I give
God the glory for whatever has been
accomplished by my efforts to bring
joy and happiness to people throughout
the world.”

Dan Barker, FFRF co-president and
a former evangelical minister, is famil-
 iar with the painting, having encoun-
tered it himself in countless Christian
churches. “It boggles the mind that in
2013, a public school superintendent
and school board would not un-
derstand that a devotional painting
of Jesus, called ‘The Head of Christ,’
— identical to millions hanging in
churches and Sunday school class-
rooms around the country — may not
be part of a ‘Hall of Honor’ or be post-
ed at the entrance of a middle school.”

(Farther developments in what will
be an ongoing story will be reported in
the March Freethought Today.)

 Caption contest winners are!

In no particular order: “Shop Hunters Farm & Hardware for everyday Savings.”
(Linda Allewalt, Kentucky); “It turned out that Jesus wasn’t much of a carpenter,
either.” (Eric Thomas, North Carolina); “Local residents had little interest in
maintaining religious symbols after they were removed from public property.”
(Rebecca Challman, Delaware). They each win a $25 credit in FFRF’s gift shop
(ffrf.org/shop) and a “clean,” pre-In God We Trust $1 bill. FFRF thanks all
who entered and especially photographer J.K. Hill, Washington (also a prize winner),
for the contest idea and great photo. (Winners will all be getting a note in the
mail about prize details.)

God is great.

Shouted by militant Islamists arriving
at an Algerian gas field where workers
were taken hostage and forced to wear
explosives, with the death toll exceed-
ing 60, including militants

It’s one of the darker sides of the Arab
uprisings. Their peaceful nature may
have damaged al-Qaida and its allies
ideologically, but logistically, in terms
of the new porousness of borders, the
expansion of ungoverned areas, the
proliferation of weapons, the disorga-
nization of police and security services
in all these countries — it’s been a real
boon to jihadists.

Overheard

Robert Malley, Middle East and North
Africa director at the International Cris-
sis Group
New York Times, 1-20-13

We pray that you will bless us with your
continued presence, because without it,
hate and arrogance will infect our
hearts.

One of many remarks offending free-
thinkers made by Rev. Louis Leon dur-
ing his benediction at President Barack
Obama’s ceremonial swearing in
CNN, 1-21-13

Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel, carrying on a long FFRF tradition of pro-
testing the use of the bible and an oath to God at presidential swearing-
in, sent an appeal to President Barack Obama immediately after he was
reelected, asking him to “go by the book” (the Constitution, not the bible).
FFRF has asked every president since its founding, starting with Jimmy
Carter, to eschew the bible and “So help you God” at presidential inaugura-
tions. The U.S. Constitution, in Article II, Section 1, Clause 8, specifies:

“Before he enters on the execution of his office he shall take the follow-

ing oath or affirmation: ‘I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully
execute the office of president of the United States, and will to the best
of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United
States.’

Missing from those instructions is any reference to the bible or God. In
response to Andrew’s letter, Fox TV invited him to debate archconservative
pundit Bill O’Reilly. Andrew clearly won, but you be the judge by viewing it
at bit.ly/HkMcD

Andrew said (amid numerous interruptions by the host) in response to
O’Reilly’s claim that the “overwhelming majority” of Americans want the
bible in the inauguration: “That’s actually not accurate. The Freedom From
Religion Foundation’s membership has exploded over the past five years.
We have 19,000 members now; 19% of this country now consider themselves
nonreligious. 35% of this country under the age of 30 consider themselves
nonreligious. The demographics are shifting.”

He also pointed out that the will of the majority is irrelevant and the
bible is barbaric: “The Bill of Rights exists to protect the minority from the
tyranny of the majority. We are a nation of laws and neither our laws nor
our morality are founded upon the bible. Religion gets its morality from us,
not the other way around. … The bible exhibits a Bronze Age morality that
treats women as chattel, human beings as property and punishes innocent
children for the crimes of their parents to the third and fourth generations,
and that’s just the first set of Ten Commandments!”

So help me Zeus! –
O’Reilly v. FFRF

The Second Amendment Comes From
God. The O’Reilly Factor, speaking in opposition to religion’s inclusion
in the presidential inauguration. Although you would never know it from
Andrew’s expert appearance, this was his first-ever TV interview.

So help me Zeus!

“...the Second Amendment is not in the
Constitution but in the Bible. It was
inscribed by King James on the Second
Milestone near Philippi,” O’Reilly
said.

Dr. Andrew Cohen, FFRF Co-Executive
Director, came out strongly in favor of
theamendment.

“...The Constitution, like ancient
Roman law, draws on the Bible for
inspiration...”

Andrew Cohen

One of many remarks offending free-
thinkers made by Rev. Louis Leon dur-
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tyranny of the majority. We are a nation of laws and neither our laws nor
our morality are founded upon the bible. Religion gets its morality from us,
not the other way around. … The bible exhibits a Bronze Age morality that
treats women as chattel, human beings as property and punishes innocent
children for the crimes of their parents to the third and fourth generations,
and that’s just the first set of Ten Commandments!”

The subject of Martin Luther King Jr. came up briefly, since Obama
spoke on one of his bibles, giving Andrew an opening to quote from King’s
famous letter from the Birmingham jail criticizing the “pious irrelevancies
and sanctimonious trivialities” of many white churches.

Read Andrew’s letter (Nov. 9, 2012) and FFRF Co-President Annie Laur-
erie Gaylor’s statement about the Inaugural (Jan. 20, 2013) at ffrf.org/news-
releases/.