FFRF eyes suit over Georgia school prayer abuses

“One of Georgia’s most charming cities” is how Swainsboro (pop. 7,600), which is between Atlanta, Augusta and Macon, bills itself. But its school district, Emanuel County Schools, appears to have a most uncharming habit: inflicting daily prayer upon its captive audience of children.

“Jamee Doe,” a kindergartner at Swainsboro Primary School (motto: “Where Cubs Become Tigers!”) was singled out by the teacher after Jamee’s parents, “Jane and John Doe,” complained about daily classroom prayer. The Does pulled Jamee out of school by the end of the year.

Jamee’s first-grade sibling, “Jesse Doe,” was also subjected all semester long to pressure to pray. Jesse’s teacher said outright that Jesse’s mother was a bad person for not believing in God.

The parents are FFRF members who contacted FFRF for legal support shortly after the 2014-15 school year started. Letters from FFRF and complaints by the parents have not ended the violations. A lawsuit, as this goes to press, is being prepared for federal court. The Establishment Clause violations were daily. Before lunch, Jamie’s teacher also unnecessarily singled Jesse out by telling the class that Jesse can’t recite the Pledge of Allegiance since it contains the words “under God,” although the parents had not discussed the pledge with the teacher.

When the Does renewed their objections a few days later, the principal said other parents who didn’t want their children to participate in prayer had been “OK” with the “solution” of leaving the room. The Does explained that was unacceptable, but daily prayers continued.

Jamee’s teacher next announced to the entire class that Jamee wasn’t allowed to pray to God, which resulted in Jamee being tagged. FFRF objected strongly in an Aug. 29 complaint letter, pointing to more than 65 years of Supreme Court precedent against religious devotions and proselytizing in public schools. Despite a promising reply from the district’s attorney, the school continued to organize Christian prayers. Eventually, the parents withdrew Jamee. Home-schooled Jamee has substantially burdened Jane Doe, who has three younger children to supervise at home.

Pressure on Jesse escalated in December. Jesse’s science teacher encouraged Jesse to “make a good decision” regarding prayer in the classroom. Jesse’s physical education teacher likewise encouraged Jesse to begin praying. The teacher even held Jesse back from recess to talk about Bright’s views of God, explaining that God loves Jesse and made the world. The teacher instructed Jesse that Jesse’s mother was a bad person for not believing in God. Around this time Jesse gave in and started participating in classroom prayers.

“If anyone needs a picture drawn on their face,” added Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. “The fact that such abusive practices are continuing in our public schools 55 years after the first Supreme Court decision against school prayer shows how important FFRF’s legal work is.”

Bola Olaniyan was the first official visitor to FFRF’s “reborn” Freethought Hall addition. Bola, a University of Wisconsin-Madison graduate student, signed the first line of the guest book in early January. At left is Charlotte Stein, receptionist and assistant, who says Bola is her best friend.

Vol. 32 No. 1 Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc. January-February 2015

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Free of faith, fear and superstition 30

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Freethought Hall wing to be named for Lonsdale

Harry Lonsdale, 82, a prominent Oregon scientist, politician and philanthropist, died of heart failure Nov. 11, 2014, at John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Indio, Calif. He was an FFRF Lifetime Member who had given $100,000 to FFRF’s building fund.

A wing of the new Freethought Hall addition is being named the “No Hell Below Us” Harry Lonsdale Wing. “We were so very sorry to learn of Harry’s death and had been in correspondence to obtain his portrait for the wall and feature him in our ‘Meet a Member’ section in Freethought Today,” said Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. “We were so impressed with Harry’s achievements, reported in numerous articles about his life appearing in many West Coast dailies.”

Lonsdale was born in Westfield, N.J., the son of a Sicilian immigrant mother and a Welsh father, earned a bachelor’s degree in chemistry from the University of Minnesota and later taught English, Spanish, history and political science, Spanish and French at the University of Minnesota and taught English, Spanish, history and French at various schools. He also ran as a Democrat for the state Assembly and on the Socialist-Labor Party ticket for the U.S. Senate and lieutenant governor.

In a “Getting Acquainted” piece published in Freethought Today in March 1984, Bob, a Korean War veteran, noted he served “four inglorious years in the United States Air Force,” where he wrote a history of the USAF Flight Test School still in print. Bob was a great debunker of myths, including the myth that there are “no atheists in foxholes.”

He wrote that his first memory of religion was going to church and seeing “a very angry man in the pulpit who rejected the myth that there are ‘no atheists in foxholes.’”

A memorial to celebrate his life was held Jan. 17 at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Appleton, Wis., the only son of Swedish immigrants. He lived in the area all his life. His obituary said his only biological family are cousins living in Sweden. He earned a B.A. in history with minors in political science, Spanish and French at the University of Minnesota and taught English, Spanish, history and French at various schools. He also ran as a Democrat for the state Assembly and on the Socialist-Labor Party ticket for the U.S. Senate and lieutenant governor.

Freethought Hall wing to be named for Lonsdale

In Memoriam

Saying goodbye to Bob

A Note to Members

Notify Us of Your Address
Change Promptly!

Email: info@ffrf.org

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

The only freethought newspaper in the United States

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January-February 2015

FFRF is so grateful that this distinguished entrepreneur, activist and philanthropist rated FFRF and freethought high on his scale of causes.

Robert Nordlander 1932–2014

The Appleton Post-Crescent, a Wisconsin daily newspaper, called Robert Nordlander, who died at 82 on Dec. 11, 2014, “likely the most prolific letter writer in Post-Crescent history.” In fact, wrote Larry Gallup in a Memoriam to celebrate his life was held Jan. 17 at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Appleton, Wis., the only son of Swedish immigrants. He lived in the area all his life. His obituary said his only biological family are cousins living in Sweden. He earned a B.A. in history with minors in political science, Spanish and French at the University of Minnesota and taught English, Spanish, history and French at various schools. He also ran as a Democrat for the state Assembly and on the Socialist-Labor Party ticket for the U.S. Senate and lieutenant governor.

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A memorial to celebrate his life was held Jan. 17 at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Appleton, Wis.

He’ll be missed by us at FFRF, and his strong network of friends and organizations,” said Gaylor.

in the early 1980s. “They put together a plan that relied on the Silicon Forest.”

Survivors include his daughter, Kar- en, and his son, Harold. FFRF is so grateful that this distinguished entrepreneur, activist and philanthropist rated FFRF and freethought high on his scale of causes.

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FFRF, ACLU sue over Indiana courthouse crèche

A large Christian nativity scene on the Franklin County Courthouse lawn in Brookville, Ind., was removed the day after Christmas instead of staying up through at least mid-January, as has typically been the case for the past 50 years. The early removal came pursuant to a federal lawsuit filed by the Freedom From Religion Foundation and the American Civil Liberties Union in late December.

The county had also added a disclaimer to the courthouses for what appears to be the first time.

The ACLU of Indiana, which is representing FFRF and its courageous local plaintiffs, Scott Kristoff and Rena Gross, sued the county Dec. 16, four years after FFRF first complained on behalf of local residents about the annual violation. The life-sized nativity scene was once even erected at the foot of a flagpole, attempting to tie religion to patriotism. FFRF kept complaining, with the county moving the religious scene even closer to the courthouse entrance in 2011.

Plaintiffs are represented by ACLU Senior Staff Attorney Gavin Rose. FFRF Staff Attorneys Rebecca Markert and Sam Groom are co-counsel.

In response to the suit, the county adopted Jan. 12 its first codified policy for erecting courthouse displays. The policy specifies that “a permit for use of the courthouse grounds will be made on a nondiscriminatory basis and will not be based on the religious or political content” of a display.

Peter Breen, Thomas More Society special counsel, said, “With the enactment of this ordinance, the allegations of the lawsuit brought by the ACLU and Freedom from Religion Foundation are moot.”

To that, FFRF had this to say: “Hold on just a minute, for Pete’s sake.”

FFRF’s claim that the county’s continued, seasonal display of the nativity violated the rights of non-Christians remains a live issue in the case.

Litigation will continue on that issue in order to establish that the county violated the rights of its citizens and to better restrict what sort of involvement the county can have in endowing displays in the future.

Moving forward will also allow FFRF to uncover just how much preferential treatment the county has given to the display and to depose Commissioner Tom Wilson, who ranted to a reporter last year: “If we don’t start standing up for our rights, we’re going to lose them. The atheists and the liberals are taking over our country. They are the ones demonstrating and doing everything, and we’re the ones sitting back and doing nothing.”

Wilson added, “Pretty soon, one morning we’re going to wake up and our freedoms are going to be gone. We’ll have a socialist government or a dictator telling us what to do.”

Ever since FFRF’s first complaint in 2010, locals have rallied by the nativity to support keeping Christian worship scenes at the seat of county government.

“We are not a Christian nation, Indiana is not a Christian state, and Franklin County is not a Christian county,” said FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Government needs to stay neutral and should not be turning Christians into insiders and the rest of us into outsiders.”

The discovery phase of the suit is under way and should be completed by early April.

The case, No. 1:14-cv-02047-TWP-DML, is in U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Indiana, Indianapolis Division.

At FFRF’s 2015 convention:

Hewett to receive ‘Atheist in Foxhole’ honor

Steven Hewett, an FFRF Lifetime Member, will receive the 2015 “Atheist in Foxhole” Award at FFRF’s national annual convention in Madison, Wis., the weekend of Oct. 9-11 at Monona Terrace Convention Center.

In January, the city council in King, N.C., settled Steven Hewett vs. City of King/Steven Hewett’s favor, agreeing to stop flying a Christian flag and to remove a cross from a kneeling soldier statue at a veterans memorial.

Hewett is a former police officer and Afghan war veteran with a Combat Action Badge and Bronze Star.

He returned home from the service to find a Christian flag flying at the King Veterans Memorial.

The city in December agreed to repeal a policy under which a flag flown on one of several poles was selected for each week of the year by lottery. The policy, inaugurated after Hewett’s first complaint, let people choose a disapproved flag representing their religion of choice or to fly no flag at all.

After the suit was filed on Hewett’s behalf by Americans United by Separation of Church and State, a sculpture of a kneeling soldier with a cross was added.

Hewett, under a gag order earlier, is now free to talk about the controversy, which made him the focus of intense attack.

North Carolina Lifetime Member Scott Burdick produced the documentary “In God We Trust?,” about the state/church battle. (It can be viewed at ber Scott Burdick produced the documen-

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Early-bird registration

The convention formally opens Fri., Oct. 9, with an after-dinner program, but preconvention tours of the “reborn” Freethought Hall/addition in downtown Madison will take place Friday and Saturday. The addition legal workshops and appetizers at Monona Terrace Convention Center, 1 John Nolen Drive. The program continues into Saturday, with an agreement membership day and state representatives’ meetings, adjourning by noon.

Friday workshops adjourn at the convention center at the Hilton Madison Monona Terrace, 9 E. Wilson St. Convention room rate is $159 (king and double/double), plus tax. $189 for king corner room and king/doubles

Recruit a Member: Sample Copies for $2

Send $2 with the name and address of each person you wish to receive a sample copy of Freethought Today to:

FFRF, P.O. Box 750, Madison WI 53701

(Trash specify whether the individual is a freethinker.)

Free lunch; $199 deluxe doubles; $219 king deluxe. Phone 1-866-403-8838 or 414-655-5941 (local number is 608-255-5100) and please be sure to mention “Freedom From Religion Foundation.”

The cut-off is Sept. 7 while rooms last. The Hilton has also created a separate and private reservation website personalized for FFRF. Find link at: ffrf.org/outreach/convention/.

If you need special accommodations, please let us know when you register.

Additional rooms are being held at the Sheraton Madison Hotel, 706 John Nolen Drive (several miles away, close to the Madison Beltline.) at $139 (king and double/double), especially convenient for those who are driving. Phone 1-888-507-7077. Future issues will update the schedule and speakers and include the registration form.

Plan ahead not to be disappointed!

Listen to an interview with Steven Hewett on Freethought Radio (scroll to Jan. 24, 2015 show at ffrf.org/news/radio/).
I think that I shall never see a poem as ugly as a flea, a flea whose hungry mouth is pressed against a buttock or a breast, a flea that spreads disease all day and lifts its little claws to prey: poems are made by you and me, but only God can make a flea.

I think that no one ever made a poem as powerful as AIDS, or plagues that may in summer kill half the bishops in Brazil and share the good Lord’s Final Answer with clots and cholera and cancer—for God concocted pox to mock us, staph and syphilis and streptococcus: poems are made by bards or hacks, but only God makes cardinals.

I think that I shall never smell a poem as pungent as a hell, where grinning devils turn the screws on saintly Sikhs and upright Jews, giving them the holy scorcher, timeless, transcendental torture: poems can make you want to yell, but only God can give you hell.

<image>

© 1991 by Philip Appleman. Based on “Fleas” by Joyce Kilmer
From the book Let There Be Light
Available as a song on FFRF’s ‘Beware of Dogma’ CD


For the past week, Charlie, an atheist newspaper, has achieved more miracles than all the saints and prophets combined. The one we are most proud of is that you have in your hands the newspaper that we always made. Charlie Hebdo’s editors, announcing a run of 3 million copies a week after 12 people died in a terrorist attack at its Parisian magazine office
The Associated Press, 1-14-15

They shouted “We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad.” Some useful idiot will claim it had nothing to do with religion.
Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, on the deadly attack at Charlie Hebdo in Paris
Tattoo, 1-7-15

Apologists for religion blame fundamentalism for these despicable acts. Really? Well the one thing fundamentalism to fundamentalism is belief in a god. Former Catholic seminarian Alex Mooney, column headlined “Religion belongs to Dark Ages: Atheist says terror attacks reinforce his belief all faiths are nonsense”
Scottish Daily Record, 1-20-15

I may not agree with you, but I will defend your right to die my divine right to kill you.

Perversion of a Voltaire quote attributed to a terrorist in a smoking gun in a cartoon drawn by Steve Benson about the Charlie Hebdo massacre
Arizona Republic, 1-8-15

We must also recognize and loudly proclaim the quest for any and all “Islamic State(s)” has no place in modern times. Theocracy, particularly Islamism, is a proven failure.
Excerpt from a full-page ad by the Gatestone Institute, a conservative think tank, signed by 22 Muslims about the Charlie Hebdo massacre
The New York Times, 1-11-15

The signs were designed to restrict women from using public spaces simply because they were women . . . and constitute a severe injury to the rights of women to equality and respect.
Ruling by the magistrate court in Beit Shemesh, Israel, ordering removal of ultra-Orthodox signs warning women to dress modestly and not loiter in certain areas and awarding each plaintiff

$3,750
Jerusalem Post, 1-15-15

|The sweet life and the beauty of the meatless diet|

[T]his Christmas season we’re asking YOU to nominate the Number 1 “Scrooge” that deserves “recognition” for seeking to stamp out religious expression across America. So please choose the Number 1 “Scrooge” with your vote below!

Liberty Institute’s 2014 Scrooge Awards announcement, which includes FFRF as a nominee for contesting Texas as cheerleaders’ football banners with bible verses
libertyinstitute.org, 12-22-14

I still believe that Islam often stands in opposition to human rights and women’s rights. I believe that the Quran reveals that Muhammad demanded death for nonbelievers. Many Muslims may disagree with my view, or interpret Islam in a more moderate way, but I cannot accept this religion myself. That is what my conscience tells me.

Waleed Al Hussein, who was beaten by guards while serving 10 months in a Palestinian prison for blasphemy and now lives in France
The Daily Beast, 12-8-14

Crazy things you can’t easily put out of your mind, like “I’m going to chop your head off and put it on a stick and carry it around the town square.”
Scottish Daily Record, 1-7-15

I believe that the local church is the answer to the world and not the laws and politics, and all those things.
Sean Edwards, Birmingham, Ala., who will keep his job as a police lieutenant after founding Empowerment Word Church, where he will serve as pastor
WBRC-TV, 12-8-14

Those of us with a secular worldview are coming together online, talking, in some countries meeting in secret. The noreligious are raising their heads above the parapet.
Bob Church, International Humanist and Ethical Union communications director, on the Netherlands-based group’s 2014 “Freedom of Thought Report” which shows seculars increasingly viewed as threats to the established order
Religion News Service, 12-17-14
Chico City Council Chico, Calif., Jan. 6, 2015

Good evening Mr. Mayor, members of the city council:

I’m George Gold, coordinator of the Butte County Coalition of Reason, and I’m president of the Atheists of Butte County.

Rather than bowing our heads and closing our eyes in deference, we want to encourage you to open your eyes wide to face the reality that confronts us. We should do this without losing sight of our ideals and what we might achieve.

When this body comes together to govern, you do so with the consent of the citizens of Chico, a diverse community with many different views and opinions. This eclectic community, according to the Pew Research Center, includes 20% of the population living secular lives. In the city of Chico, that means for the first time ever, I’m here representing over 17,000 secular Chico citizens with this invocation.

Communitarians, nonbelievers, agnostics and atheists by their very nature believe that we have the power to solve all problems within ourselves, amongst ourselves, through science and reason, and that by applying this science and reason with the strength found in sympathy and compassion, we can overcome any hurdle we encounter.

It is incumbent upon this council to make the best decisions for the entire community. In this regard, I ask that you use wisdom, common sense and empathy in your deliberations.

In your work here, take into account the implications your decisions will have now and in the future. Be reminded of the joyous laughter of children playing in the comfort of the shade of our trees. You are planting seeds for the benefit of future generations.

When there are problems, when there is debate, let us be accountable for our own actions. Let’s not point to the shortcomings of others. Let us behave morally and judiciously.

We’d like to see secular citizens flood government meetings with secular invocations that illustrate why government prayers are unnecessary, ineffective, embarrassing, exclusionary, divisive or just plain silly.

The “best” secular invocation will be invited to open FFRF’s annual convention, receiving an all-expenses-paid trip (this year at the Monona Terrace Convention Center, Madison, Wisconsin, October 9-11, 2015), a plaque and an honorarium of $500.

Learn more at: ffrf.org/outreach/nothing-fails-like-prayer

George Gold

The U.S. Supreme Court unwisely “blessed” sectarian prayers at local government meeting in its Town of Greece v. Galloway decision. If the Supreme Court won’t uphold our godless and entirely secular Constitution — adopted at a prayerless constitutional convention — it’s up to us.

It’s up to you!

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George Gold

The Inspirational Atheist: Wise Words on the Wonder and Meaning of Life in Boul-der, Colo., author Buzzy Jackson’s new book, Jackson, an atheist with a Ph.D. in theoretical astrophysics, works as a researcher at the Center of the American West at CU-Boulder. She includes a thoughtful insert in the book (which she originally want- ed to title Chicken Soup for the Soulless) called “The 11 Commandments for Atheists.” They are: “Do not destroy what you cannot create.” — Hungarian-American Physicist and inventor Leo Szilard “Do unto others 25 percent better than you expect them to do unto you. The 25 percent is for error.” — Ameri-can biochemist Linus Pauling “Alcohol is your enemy. Take them out onto the verandah and beat them with a cricket bat.” — Australian comed-iain Tim Minchin “This is the world a better place than when we entered it.” — Mikko Kaku, City College of New York theoretical physics professor “A man’s duty is to find out where all crime starts. We must try to make ourselves unhappy is where all crime starts. We must try to make the best decisions for the entire community.” — Russian novelist and historian Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn “You cannot save people, you can only love them.” — author Anita Niss “To make others less happy is a crime. To make ourselves unhappy is where all crime starts. We must try to contribute joy to the world.” — film critic Roger Ebert “The best thing you can possibly do with your life is to tackle the [expletive deleted] out of love.” — Cheryl Strayed, American author of the best-seller Wild “Try to be nice to people, avoid eat-ing fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and na-tions.” — Monty Python’s “The Meaning of Life” “There are far too many command- ments and you really only need one: Do not hurt anybody.” — Carl Reiner, actor, director, movie producer

I did not die. I did not go to Heaven. I did not die. I did not go to Heaven. I did not die. I did not go to Heaven. I did not die. I did not go to Heaven. I did not die. I did not go to Heaven. I did not die. I did not go to Heaven. I did not die. I did not go to Heaven. I did not die. I did not go to Heaven. A drunk trying to get the doors off the Wild
dette’s Catholic Church in Nunthorpe, UK, estimating that fewer than 25% of people now offer Christmas Eve Mass

Ecumenical News, 12-22-14

In an annual index of the reputations of the nation’s churches and other religious organizations, the Salvation Army fell from 10th last year to 27th this year.

News story attributing the decline to allegations that boys were dragged from their beds and raped in Salvation Army facilities in New South Wales and Queensland and that children at a Syd- ney home were “rented out” to strang-
**Protest in Georgia, Minn., ended**

Elementary school faculty in the Whittenfield County School District, Dul- ton, Minn., notified an FFRF staff attorney not to proselytize students. FFRF received a report from a parent whose Antioch Elementary kindergarten teacher was told that December 17 was “Jesuss’ birthday” and that “Jesus is the reason for the season.”

The subject in the child’s class involved making a nativity scene from construction paper while the teacher read the story of the nativity. When the parent complained about the school, the solution offered was to remove the stu- dent “whenever anything religious was brought up” and to ask the parent what she would do with the child “when they do activities for Easter.”

Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel sent a complaint letter to Superintendent Judy Gilchrist on Dec. 23. Gilchrist responded Jan. 5, saying that she met with the Antioch principal and “made heck sure” that the complaint and the legal restrictions concerning teaching religion in a public school.” She in- structed the principal to talk with the teacher who did the nativity project to “make sure she understands it she is not to celebrate religious holidays with her students.”

The superintendent responded Dec. 2, saying that the city would be moving 2015 graduation ceremony. Staff Attorney Sam Grover wrote the school district in 2013 after learning the school choir was scheduled to perform at the festival. The Marin County [Calif.] Athletic League, which includes public and private schools, will no longer allow a Catholic school to impose prayers on public school attendees. Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel wrote a letter Feb. 25, 2014, to the Tamalpais Union High School District, which participates in the league. Justice/Santa Catholic High School, another league participant, regularly had a priest offer a prayer before home games.

**Athletic league says no to prayer**

The Marin County [Calif.] Athletic League, which includes public and private schools, will no longer allow a Catholic school to impose prayers on public school attendees. Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel wrote a letter Feb. 25, 2014, to the Tamalpais Union High School District, which participates in the league. Justice/Santa Catholic High School, another league participant, regularly had a priest offer a prayer before home games. athletic league says no to prayer

Oklahoma school art will be secular

Teachers in Chandler [Okla.] Public Schools will not create religious pro- jects with their students in the future. Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel sent a letter to the district in 2013 after learn- ing of an auction at which two items were religious art projects created by students: a poster with a bible verse, “Blessed are the pure in heart,” and a poster with the words “say your prayers cause Jesus and gurus are everywhere.”

Coach warned about soliciting prayer

Oentangy High School, Lewis Cen- ter, Ohio, stopped letting solicitors from church-sponsored events af- ter getting a Nov. 29 FFRF complaint letter from Senior Staff Attorney Re- becca Markert. A 10-year-old country team’s coach had reportedly invited a student to deliver a prayer at an end-of-season banquet.

**City says brochure cross was careless**

After getting an FFRF complaint let- ter, the city of Rice, Minn., will not in- clude religious symbols on newsletters.

The city’s Spring 2014 newsletter included a picture of the cross and the motto “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” next to the notice that city offices would be closed Memorial Day. “Including a Christian cross with the announcement of the Memorial Day closing excludes any non-Christian or non-believing veter- ans. It perpetuates the myth that there are no ‘atheists in foxholes’ and that civil governments are worthless memorialis- ing are Christians,” wrote Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert.

An attorney for the city wrote back on Dec. 2, saying that the city would be careful about using religious symbols in the future.

Kinder gardeners reportedly learned a song about a child getting lost in the woods and being saved by an angel af- ter kneeling and praying. The chorus was something to the effect of “I believe in angels sent down from heaven.”

**FFRF letters clip angels’ wings**

Gulf Coast Charter Academy South in Naples, Fla., removed a song from its repertoire after Staff At- torney Andrew Seidel sent a complaint letter Nov. 24.

Kindergartners reportedly learned a song about a child getting lost in the woods and being saved by an angel af- ter kneeling and praying. The chorus was something to the effect of “I believe in angels sent down from heaven.”

“the music described above has a devotional message and thus would be appropriate in a church setting but not in a public school,” Seidel wrote.

An attorney for the school responded- ed Dec. 1. “Thank you for your con- cern. This matter is being addressed and the song will be removed from all classes. We are also reviewing the bal- ance of the curriculum to ensure fur- ther compliance.”

The superintendent responded promptly, saying she met with the groups leading child hell they could not have a presence in the schools. “I was clear that under no circumstances may religious groups solicit the par- ents to Young Life or Wyldlife, nor any discussion of religion or activities sponsored by Young Life or Wyldlife with our students.”

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promptly, saying she met with the group’s leader and told him they could not have a presence in the schools. “I was clear that under no circumstances may religious groups solicit the par- ents to Young Life or Wyldlife, nor any discussion of religion or activities sponsored by Young Life or Wyldlife with our students.”

“Students and parents have the right, and often have reason, to go before or participate in school board meeting and deliberations. Fully 70 percent of the firm’s lawyers are reli- gious believers who believe that religious indoctrination and rituals from public schools for the purpose of protecting the rights of conscience of impressionable schoolchildren,” wrote Seidel.

FFRF’s complaint emailed Dec. 10 to report that the school voted Dec. 9 not to pray before meetings.

**Complaint stops prayer at assembly**

A teacher at Green Forest [Ark.] High School led a prayer at the Veter- ans Day ceremony. Staff Attorney Sam Grover sent the school district a letter Nov. 25. “While it is available for Green Forest High to organize an assembly to honor veterans, it is unconstitutional to allow any religious prayer or prayer to be part of a school-sponsored event.”

A school district attorney respond- ed Dec. 10, saying the school had not sus- pended anyone of its staff would lead a prayer at a student assembly in the future.

**FFRF not answer to coach’s prayers**

Amston, Ala. [High School’s foot- ball coach will no longer organize and lead team prayers. After reading a local news report that Coach Eddie Bullock asked for a student a “prayer leader,” Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel wrote Su- perintendent Darren Douthit on Oct. 31. “We have informed our coaching staff that they cannot initiate a prayer by the embers of our athletic teams. It is also our plan to remind all faculty and staff of all our schools that they cannot initiate nor [sic] participate in such prayer.”

School choir was prohibited

The new administration of Worth County Schools in Sylvester, Ga., said there’ll be no repeat of a religious as- sembly conducted by previous admin- istrators. Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel wrote Superintendent Barbara Thom- art on Nov. 20, after receiving a complaint that an assembly included the principal prompting a student to lead a prayer followed by a speech by a pastor who talked to students about “finding Jesus Christ.”
After unproductive correspondence with Thomas, who stated that “it was the consensus of the Board [of Education] that no one’s rights would be infringed by religious assemblies, a new superintendent, Kay Smith Mathews, eventually responded Nov. 20. She stat- ed she could not confirm that the as- sembly had occurred, but said she was “most concerned about this incident” and had discussed it with the district’s principals and gave them guidelines about religion in public schools.

FFRF stands up for Nevada students

The Washoe County School District in Nevada distributed a memorandum reminding principals that students must not be compelled to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance.

After a student was ordered to stand for the pledge and to leave class after refusing, Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel sent a letter Oct. 22, 2013, reminding the district that numerous courts have consistently ruled “that students have a constitutional right not to be forced to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance or to be compelled to stand for its recita- tion.”

The school district’s attorney re- sponded Nov. 24 that he had sent a district-wide memo about students’ right to decline participation without harassment.

No more staff-led prayer at school

Staff at the Haskins Learning Cen- ter in the Pratt [Kan.] Unified School District will no longer lead students in prayer. FFRF received a report that be- fore a school-wide Thanksgiving lunch, the principal asked everyone to bow their heads while a teacher delivered a prayer.

After Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel sent a complaint letter, a school dis- trict lawyer responded Dec. 18, saying he “[did] not disagree” with FFRF’s ac- count of what happened at the lunch. “It is now acknowledged that prayer offered by staff members of a public school entity may not be appreciated by all students and parents, and it is not anticipated that this will occur in the future.”

Pole prayer limited in Alabama

Staff and church groups will not be permitted to lead religious events at Athens Elementary School in Athens, Ala. In 2013, a church group was per- mitted to lead a “See You At The Pole” gathering, a Christian prayer event, at the school. The school’s athletic coach reportedly led students in prayer.

Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel sent Superintendent Tommy Holladay a letter Oct. 9, 2013, noting that public school employees “must refrain from actively participating in religious activities while acting within their governmental role to avoid any perception of govern- ment endorsement of religion.”

An attorney for the district respond- ed in December, informing FFRF that no similar violations had occurred since FFRF’s letter.

Maryland DNR ends Boy Scout ties

The Maryland Department of Natu- ral Resources has ended a partnership with the Boy Scouts of America, which discriminates against atheists and ag- nóstics, as well as LGBT adults.

The DNR previously had an annual charter agreement with the Baltimore Boy Scouts in which the DNR agreed to conduct a scouting program in ac- cordance with the Boy Scouts’ policies. “The DNR cannot continue to sponsor this discriminatory program,” wrote Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott in a letter Oct. 22, 2013, reminding principals that students refusing, Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel reportedly led students in prayer.

The DNR responded Dec. 22 that the charter agreement had expired and would not be renewed.

Gideons banned from Michigan school

Zeeland [Mich.] Public Schools will not allow Gideons to distribute bibles on school grounds in the future. After an Oct. 17 distribution, a parent in- formed FFRF that a teacher reportedly told students she would like each one to take a bible home.

“There is no excuse or justification for this practice. It is unnecessary, of- fensive and illegal,” wrote Staff Attor- ney Sam Grover.

Assistant Superintendent Jon Voss responded Dec. 22, saying that the dis- trict would make it clear to all building administrators that “third parties with- out a connection to the school — like Gideons — are not allowed on school property to distribute information to our students.”

Voss also said the district would con- tact the Gideons directly to let them know about the ban.

Fire department deletes bible verse


The verse had also objected to the de- partment’s employment of a chaplain. The department removed a photo of the chaplain from the website’s “Mem- bers” section, while claiming the chap- lain had “not been associated with our department for quite some time, thanks for your concern.”

Michigan district cuts religious music

Brighton Township Schools, Kings- ford, Mich., is diversifying its music selections. A parent reported to FFRF that the district’s 2013 Christmas con- cert included many religious songs such as “Silent Night,” “Joyful, Joyful” and the “Hallelujah Chorus.”

Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor in a letter Dec. 19, 2013, wrote that “No religious song gives any education- al benefit to public students for which an inclusive secular alternative cannot be found.”

Superintendent Craig Allen finally responded in November, saying that the district would “ensure that there are a variety of songs from various ori- gins to promote inclusion rather than alienation of non-Christian children.”

The district also decided to refer to the concert as a holiday program instead of a Christmas program.

Ohio schools end bible handouts

Mad River Local School District and Miamiusburg City Schools in Ohio are no longer hosting bible distributions.

Both districts had hosted a group called “Shoes 4 the Shoeless” that held events to fit children with new shoes, then directed them to a table where they were given bibles.

The group described itself as “a faith-based nonprofit” that “include[s] a Christian New Testament in every box of shoes [they] deliver.”

Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert wrote to both districts, noting that bible distribution as part of the public school day is unconstitutional.

After FFRF followed up, both dis- tricts’ superintendents responded Jan. 15. “We no longer hold these events in any of our buildings,” said Mad River Superintendent Chad Wyen. During a subsequent visit from the group to Miamisburg City Schools, “no Bibles or New Testaments were distributed with the shoes and socks,” said Superinten- dent David Vail.

—Compiled by Maddy Zieler

Dog, not dogma

It took about two months for a deputy to notice what was either a misprint or a great practical joke on a $500 rug in the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office in Largo, Fla. Department spokeswoman Cecilia Barreda told The Associated Press that the “In Dog We Trust” rug in the office from the same company didn’t contain. The rug later sold for $9,650 in an online auction in which 83 people bid. Proceeds went to Canine Estates, a Palm Harbor animal shelter.

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**Crowd loves Lucy scientific sleuth Johanson**

By Donald C. Johanson

Standing the deep roots of human-ity, and the very simple fact that we now know it is based on an ‘out of Africa’ experience, is vital to knowing who we are.

For so many years, beginning in 1856 with the discovery of Neanderthal skull in Germany, all these white European males got together and figured out that Euro- pe was the missing link for humanity. Well, that’s all, as we say, ancient history.

A guiding principle for me throughout my career has not neces- sarily been discovery-driven, to find a specimen, although I did, on the 24th of November, 40 years ago. Somebody asked me, “What’s the big difference between you and Lucy?” I said, “Well, when I look at Lucy, she doesn’t look a day older.”

As I was saying, it wasn’t neces- sarily that I was hoping to make this colonial discovery of a crea- ture that has become pretty much an icon in terms of paleontology or pa- leoanthropology, but it was to under- stand our place in nature. The book that launched my intrigue about where we’ve come from was a book entitled Man’s Place in Nature by Thomas Henry Huxley, who was a tea-drinking buddy of Charles Darwin.

They often sat and noodled on the question of human evolution. I can see them in Darwin’s garden in Kent while they discussed how they were going to bring this shocker to the Victorian world of Great Britain, that we actually descended from the apes. Darwin, as you well know, was very reluctant to do that because he didn’t want to upset the household, as his wife Emma was very religious.

And he only said that light would be thrown on the origin of man, unil 1871 in his Descent of Man, when he articulated a number of scenarios for that. I read Man’s Place in Nature and realized the importance of this subject, for which paleoanthropology wasn’t really a moniker until the late 50’s or so. I realized that we have a remarkable record preserved in Earth’s geological strata that connects us with the past, with each other, and I think very im- portantly, connects us with the natural world.

We know, every single one of us in this room, who the creator was — Mother Nature. I will have much more to say about that as we get into this discussion.

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**Dinosaurs ‘left behind’**

Someone said, “What was the most surprising thing about discovering Lucy?” I said, “Well, nobody even knew she was missing.”

I’ve also been asked to comment on why I’m an atheist. I’ve always been an atheist. I didn’t have to be converted to atheism. I went to church when I was about 12 years old. I remember it distinctly in Harvard, Conn. Some friends, who were Scandinavians, too, convinced me. They said, “You should come to the Swedish Lutheran Church here on Sunday to see vat they are talk- ing about.”

So I got up unusually early, disturb- ing my mother, who said, “Are you going?” I said, “I’m going to church.” She said, “Are you doing that for?” Anyway, I went to church and came home, and then she said, “Deed they ask you fer money?” I said, “Yeah, they did.”

And she said, this little uneducated housekeeper from Sweden who im- migrated when she was 16, deciding the New World was somewhere was everything was happening. “The first thing they’ll do is control you, then they will instill fear in you, and then they will take your money.”

So at about 11 or 12, I went to see my mentor, who was a German anthropolo- gist (big surprise) whom I’d met one day, and he gave me a short course in comparative religions, how every society has, does and will have some sort of cre- ation myth. Of course lots of them were much more intriguing than a virgin birth or Noah’s ark — how’d you like the job of cleaning the poop up on that — or original sin. In my experience, the one thing most about Noah’s ark was that if this creator and Noah were such wonderful people, why did they have to clean his hands of —? I began to realize that believing in a creator being — someone I couldn’t see, someone who’s keep- ing track of me, someone I’d be afraid of — was really not my cup of tea. I was much more of a free-thinker, capable of rejecting my objective and logical and leap into total fantasy. I just couldn’t see the benefit of that.

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**Why did Noah leave the dinosaurs behind?**

Crowd loves Lucy scientific sleuth Johanson...
I’m talking about tonight is to reawak- en a “reverence” for the natural world and our place in it. [We have a duty] to respect the creativity of the true cre- ator, Mother Nature, to protect her, to take seriously our responsibilities as the most creative, but also the most destructive species that’s ever lived on Earth.

The future is in our hands, and it is time that we stop turning our back on the planet and start listening to her and working with her.

The Creation Museum [in Petersburg, Ky.] is one of our favorite places. Where else can you witness the science of caverms coveting with their favor- ite pet dinosaur, Skippy, 5,000 years ago?

Is this a time warp and we’re back in the Dark Ages or something? This is lying, cheating, deceiving, warping and perverting the word, to make what? Money. How much money does the Creation Museum make at the same time it destroys young peo- ple’s sense of wonder, to look at the works through an open mind. That’s what upsets me probably more than any- thing else about the museum.

Of course I thought I’d show you the great breakthroughs in science, from Marie Curie to the great accelerators and the Linac, and all the rockets. That’s the most interesting about that morning when I was given 20 minutes to talk about 6 bil- lion years of evolution — I spoke very quickly — was the tea time. Collins, whom I knew and had debated, and I had a huge interchange where he said, “Well, there are just some things that science can’t explain.” I said, “Yes, then it’s not science.”

Yet in his liberated world invited me to participate in the debate through the radio nametags. But the most important part of that exposure was the tea, a couple of old ladies outside the museum, and the radio nametags and all that came over. They said, “We just wanted to tell you how much we enjoyed your talk. We had no idea there was this much evidence for human evolution. Because all we do is peer through these electron micro- scopes at microscopic things, you look at the big picture. Thank you for coming here and helping us understand who we are, where we come from and we should be so grateful to be human.”

That was unbelievable satisfaction.

Finding Lucy

This is the first shot [slide projec- tion] of Hadar, Ethiopia, that I saw in 1973. It was a spiritual moment for me, looking out on these vast badlands, heavily dissected, eroding, layer after layer. Dr. Donald Johanson, the graduate student, in the foreground, was for me. Tonight I was asked to say a few words about it, and it will only be a few words because it is sitting here a lot more in my mind than it is in your mind. Last time that we stop turning our back on the planet and start listening to her and working with her. The Creation Museum [in Petersburg, Ky.] is one of our favorite places. Where else can you witness the science of caverms coveting with their favor- ite pet dinosaur, Skippy, 5,000 years ago?

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That was unbelievable satisfaction.
A child goes in, sees this and is impressed by it. The child doesn’t know one way or another. And when the grandchild, Brendan, went to the California Academy of Sciences — he’s 3 years old — with his father. His father says, “Let’s take a picture next to Lucy, the thing your grandfather found.” He refused to get his picture taken until I came and stood next to it. He knew that Lucy walked upright, doesn’t bother him. It doesn’t bother him that she’s very old. He thought it so neat that she came from apes.

It’s terribly important that we don’t shut these minds down so early. The longer you have a mind that is shut down the more time there is to develop and reinforce bigotry.

Make real sacrifices

“The anti-science aspect of religion is what bothers me most intensely.”

Here [in a cartoon] he’s saying, “Look, it’s not personal, it’s religious.”

There have been so many sacrifices in religion — burning at the stake, beheading people, stoning people to death or ripping their hearts out and eating a live pumping heart (if you’re an apes) — with a bunch of dead bodies.

It didn’t do much to stop the volca- nic eruption, the drought never ended, it didn’t dispel the locust invasion, did it? No, it didn’t nothing. Yet you’re going to be surprised that tonight I’m going to propose that all of us begin to make some real sacrifices.

What might those sacrifices be? Clean up the oceans. Quit throwing everything just because it disappears into oceans. Stop overfishing species that you hope will forever be present and available to you. When was the last time you saw orange roughy on a menu? Twenty years ago, and now it’s gone.

Make some real sacrifices, sacrifices to Mother Nature, who will, unlike the false gods to whom we have made sacri- fices, reward you. I guarantee that. Clean up the oceans, and you will live a healthier life. You will reduce the carcinogenic toxins that pollute our water and poison us. Clean up our air, reduce carbon emissions and make a sacrifice. Buy a car that doesn’t go as fast, that doesn’t look as jazzy. Find alternate sources of power and build more efficient cars.

We will be rewarded with what? Healthy clean air with reduced pul- monary disease, and we’ll all breathe a sigh of relief. I could go on and on about this, but I think you all get the gist. We live in a beautiful world.

Here [photograph] I was at Bryce Canyon not long ago. It is stunning to see the natural world in the way the earth is, as I said. Each and every human being is, because we were born. It’s our primary duty on this planet to be the guardians of its future for our chil- dren, grandchildren and many generations beyond that.

We need to stop be- ing Homo economicus and start to become a more deeply contemplative species that makes deci- sions intelligently, not out of fear or self-interest and not because of how much money we’re going to make. Make decisions that will help us regain the balance between our- selves and our creator, Mother Nature.

It’s time, really, that as we look back on 4 mil- lion years of evolution, 3 million with Lucy. She is a link, not the missing link but one that reminds us of our link to the natural world.

Lucy didn’t know where she was go- ing; we don’t know where we’re going. She didn’t know that her descendants would end up as Homo sapiens, but it’s an interesting perspective to know that

My grandson thought it was ‘so neat’ that Lucy came from apes.
An FFRF complaint letter went out about this nativity scene at the Fayette County Courthouse, La Grange, Texas.

Problem: A teacher at Park View Elementary School taught students the Christian nativity story and made them draw part of the nativity. Another teacher polled students about whether they were Christians.

Contact: Copperas Cove ISD, Texas
FFRF moves into expanded Freethought Hall, Madison, Wis.

The growing staff of the Freedom From Religion Foundation gather in front of the brand-new entrance to Freethought Hall, FFRF’s expanded office in downtown Madison, Wis. Staff moved into the five-story addition adjoining the original two-story building in January. The addition, which quadruples space, includes the fourth-floor Charlie Brooks Auditorium and the “No Hell Below Us” Harry Lonsdale lower level wing.

Pictured are Attorneys Andrew Seidel and Sam Grover, Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker, Bookkeeper Katie Daniel, Law School Extern Jarvis Idowu, Attorney Liz Cavell, Communication Coordinator Lauryn Seering, Freethought Today Editor Bill Dunn, Law School Extern Ryan Jayne, Legal Fellow Katherine Paige, Legal Assistant Calli Miller, Editorial Assistant Dayna Long, Director of Operations Lisa Strand, Legal Publicist Maddy Ziegler, Office/Membership Manager Jackie Douglas, Receptionist/Assistant Charlotte Stein and Attorney Patrick Elliott.

Administrative staff overlook Charlotte Stein and the Anne Nicol Gaylor Lobby, which has a 14-foot ceiling. From left are Katie Daniel, Lauryn Seering, Dayna Long, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Lisa Strand and Jackie Douglas.

Calli Miller joined the staff in January as the legal department’s first legal assistant, deferring her own foray into law school for a year to help out.

Photography by Andrew Seidel

Another view of the Anne Nicol Gaylor Lobby and security-locked front entrance. Walls await a portrait of FFRF’s founder, plus recognition plaques and tiles.

Bookkeeper Katie Daniel, busy with year-end work in her new office.
Before and after: A “before” photo of Staff Attorneys Patrick Elliott, Sam Grover, Rebecca Markert, Liz Cavell and Andrew Seidel on the open-air concrete structure last year. After, joining the attorneys at the conference table in the same spot in the Diane Uhl Legal Wing (standing from left): Legal Fellow Katherine Paige, Legal Publicist Maddy Ziegler, Legal Assistant Calli Miller and Extern Ryan Jayne. Ryan is working for credit in his final semester through Lewis and Clark Law School.

Left: Charlotte Stein, Lauryn Seering and Chelsea Culver assemble one of the 28 shelving units in the basement. (Photo by Dan Barker)

Co-President Dan Barker by the spiral staircase in the “Above Us Only Sky” Kenneth Proulx Cupola, which can be accessed from the auditorium. Its staircase leads to the Joel B. Landon & Wanda Y. Beers Freethought Library (see photo below).

Don’t be fooled by this angle. The new library, with beautiful woodwork, built-in shelving and lighting, will be very spacious after the boxes of books are unpacked and shelved. It’s 900 square feet atop the original 1855 two-story Freethought Hall, which is currently undergoing renovation in phase II of the project.

An artistic shot of Dan Barker at the open Steinway.

Legal Extern Jarvis Idowu’s work station is such an improvement from his previous improvised one. Jarvis is a third-year law student working for credit from the University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School.

Legal Extern Ryan Jayne performing Beethoven on the gorgeous Diane Uhl Steinway concert grand in the Charlie Brooks Auditorium on the top floor (pretty curtains to be installed). (Photo by Dan Barker)

Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, already at home in her very own office (previously shared) in the Brian Bolton Executive Wing. Not pictured: the lower level, named for the late benefactor Harry Lonsdale; the third-floor Harold Erickson Public Relations Wing; the Steven Uhl “Friendly Atheist” Studio and the Rose Zerwick Memorial Garden and Courtyard, to be planted in the spring.
Meet a Nebraska member

Name: Robin Buckallew
Where and when I was born: Alameda, Calif., 1960.
Family: My husband, Fritz, a retired librarian who shares my love of good books, art movies and theater; my son, Chris, 32, who now lives in Alameda and works with computers; my Irish stepsister, M.P.H., who never demands to be the center of attention and has managed to prevent the postman from breaking into the house and killing us.
Education: I have bachelor’s degrees in political science and biology, an M.S. in biology, a Ph.D. in environmental science and a master of fine arts in playwriting.
Occupation: I teach environmental science and other science courses to college students.
Military service: None, but I did volunteer with Service to Military Families at the Oklahoma City Red Cross for three years.
How I got where I am today: It was a combination of genetics and environment, and my family can take substantial blame (or credit) for both! I was raised in a fundamentalist Christian family but created havoc by starting to ask questions when I was 10. I stopped praying, but continued asking questions. Instead of going to heaven, I decided to go to college.
Where I’m headed: I hope I’m headed for Broadway (as a playwright, not actor), but I’d be content with the small stage. Then, when it’s all over, I plan to be fertilizer. That seems to me the most fitting end for someone who has spent years studying plants.
Person in history I admire: Robert Ingensoll — not only a great thinker but a great orator and an all-round good guy. Charles Darwin, who was willing to set aside what he thought is about a woman who believes in anymore, caused me to wonder about “my” god. I wrote a letter to the ancient Greeks to explain what we believed, and realized it sounded as weird as what they believed.
I also like Carl Sagan’s answer to a previously unknown species of dove, which she nursed back to health.
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I respect, people always said, “Surely you mean agnostic,” which only made me more likely to use atheist, because I will no longer let other people define me and works with computers; my Irish stepsister, M.P.H., who never demands to be the center of attention and has managed to prevent the postman from breaking into the house and killing us.

Ways I promote freethought: I am the faculty adviser for the secular student club at my college, and I have brought in speakers. I have a local atheist meet-up that currently has about 32 members. I wear my freethought T-shirts around locally and on trips to Lincoln and have had conversations with people about freethought as a result. I write freethought novels. I am currently working on starting a freethought play festival, and as soon as I find a venue, I have some theater professionals who are willing to help me.

I wish you’d have asked me: What freethought books have I written? I have written two novels that are freethought fiction. Four are currently in print. The first I wrote was called The Diary of Mrs. Noah. It is a new take on what is obvious in a myth. The second is called Transformation. It takes place in a world where the church has taken over, banned books, control pills and women working, and just in general made a nuisance of themselves. Yesterday & Tomorrow is about a woman who meets a man claiming to be the devil, which leads to a rethinking about who

Secular Humanists of Puerto Rico applied in early December to have in its solstice message displayed in courthouses on the island along with the nativity scenes that have been placed in many regional and appellate court buildings for years.

Tory Member of Parliament James Arbuthnot, coming out as an atheist during a House of Commons debate on allowing prayers at council meetings.

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‘Instead of going to heaven, I decided to go to college.’

‘Rather hokey but fun,’ says Robin Buckallew (between Eve and Adam) of the late S.P. Dinsmoor’s Garden of Eden in Lucas, Kan.

is really good and who is evil.

So many gods, most of whom no one believes in anymore, caused me to wonder about “my” god. I wrote a letter to the ancient Greeks to explain what we believed, and realized it sounded as weird as what they believed.

I also like Carl Sagan’s answer to a previously unknown species of dove, which she nursed back to health.

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Secular Humanists of Puerto Rico applied in early December to have in its solstice message displayed in courthouses on the island along with the nativity scenes that have been placed in many regional and appellate court buildings for years.
States’ godly preambles are relics of another time

By James A. Haught

D id you know that nearly all 50 states have religious preambles affixed to their constitutions, in clear violation of the First Amendment’s decree that government cannot dictate supernatural faith? Some of these holy declarations date back to the 1700s. They’re little-noticed, because hardly anyone reads state constitutions. Yet they exist as official government proclamations.

Four states (New Hampshire, Oregon, Tennessee and Virginia) don’t use preambles but include “worship maxims” within their constitutions.

Court challenges to them could fail, because judges often pretend that governmental religious declarations aren’t actually religious. For example, after members of Congress pandering to religious believers branded “In God We Trust” on money and inserted “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, federal courts shrugged off these church-state breaches, saying they’re merely “ceremonial deism” with no “significant religious content.”

In May, the Supreme Court said it was OK, for the town of Greece, N.Y., to open council meetings with prayers exalting “the saving sacrifice of Christ on the cross.” Five conservative justices ruled that such invocations are merely “ceremonial.” (Perhaps, privately, they understand that public praying are meaningless lip service that nobody believes.)

Any intelligent person can see that official government decrees of supernatural belief are gross constitutional violations. Court rulings to the contrary are absurd, almost comical.

If anyone wants to tackle the holy preambles and worship clauses in the 50 states, I wish them god(less) speed. Here’s an alphabetical list of the relevant clauses.

Alabama 1901: We the People of the State of Alabama, invoking the favor and guidance of Almighty God, do ordain and establish the following Constitution.

Alaska 1956: We, the people of Alaska, grateful to God and to those who founded our nation and pioneered this great land.

Arizona 1911: We, the people of the State of Arizona, grateful to Almighty God for our liberties, do ordain and establish the following Constitution.

Arkansas 1874: We, the people of the State of Arkansas, grateful to Almighty God for the privilege of choosing our own form of government.

California 1849: We, the people of the State of California, grateful to Almighty God for our freedom.

Colorado 1876: We, the people of the State of Colorado, acknowledging with gratitude the good Providence of God in permitting them to enjoy.

Delaware 1897: Through Divine Guidance, to all men, by nature, the rights of worshipping and serving their Creator according to the dictates of their consciences.

Florida 1845: We, the people of the State of Florida, grateful to Almighty God for our constitutional liberty.

Georgia 1777: We, the people of Georgia, relying upon the protection and guidance of Almighty God, do ordain.

Hawaii 1895: We, the people of Hawaii, grateful for Divine Guidance, establish this Constitution.

Idaho 1899: We, the people of the State of Idaho, grateful to Almighty God for our freedom, to secure its blessings.

Illinois 1870: We, the people of the State of Illinois, grateful to Almighty God for our freedom, to secure its blessings.

Indiana 1851: We, the People of the State of Indiana, grateful to Almighty God for the free exercise of the right to choose our form of government.

Iowa 1857: We, the People of the State of Iowa, grateful to the Supreme Being for the blessings hitherto enjoyed, and feeling our dependence on Him for a continuation of these blessings.

Kansas 1859: We, the people of Kansas, grateful to Almighty God for our civil and religious privileges.

Kentucky 1851: We, the people of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, grateful to Almighty God for the civil, political and religious liberties we enjoy.

Louisiana 1921: We, the people of the State of Louisiana, grateful to Almighty God for the civil, political and religious liberties we enjoy.

Maine 1820: We, the People of Maine, acknowledging with grateful hearts the goodness of the Sovereign Ruler of the Universe, and imploring His aid and direction.

Maryland 1776: We, the people of the state of Maryland, grateful to Almighty God for our civil and religious liberty.

Massachusetts 1780: We, the people of Massachusetts, acknowledging with grateful hearts the goodness of the Great Legislator of the Universe, in the course of His Providence, an opportunity and devoutly imploring His direction.

Michigan 1908: We, the people of the State of Michigan, grateful to Almighty God for the blessings of freedom.

Minnesota 1857: We, the people of the State of Minnesota, grateful to God for our civil and religious liberty, and desiring to perpetuate its blessings.

Mississippi 1890: We, the people of Mississippi in convention assembled, grateful to Almighty God, and invoking His blessing on our work.

Montana 1889: We, the people of Montana, grateful to Almighty God for the blessings of liberty.

Nebraska 1875: We, the people, grateful to Almighty God for our freedom.

Nevada 1864: We, the people of the State of Nevada, grateful to Almighty God for our freedom.

New Hampshire 1792 (Part I. Art. I. Sec. V.): Every individual has a natural and unalienable right to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience.

New Jersey 1844: We, the people of the State of New Jersey, grateful to Almighty God for civil and religious liberties which He hath so long permitted us to enjoy, and looking to Him for a blessing on our endeavors.

New Mexico 1911: We, the People of the New Mexico, grateful to Almighty God for the blessings of liberty.

New York 1846: We, the people of the State of New York, grateful to Almighty God for our freedom, in order to secure its blessings.

North Carolina 1868: We, the people of the State of North Carolina, grateful to Almighty God, the Sovereign Ruler of Nations, for our civil, political, and religious liberties, and acknowledging our dependence upon Him for the continuance of those.

North Dakota 1889: We, the people of North Dakota, grateful to Almighty God for our freedom, to secure its blessings and promote our common welfare, do ordain this Constitution.

Oklahoma 1897: Invoking the guidance of Almighty God, in order to secure and perpetuate the blessings of liberty.

Oregon 1857 (Bill of Rights, Art. I. Sec. 2): All men shall be treated equally before the Natural right to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of their conscience.

Pennsylvania 1776: We, the people of Pennsylvania, grateful to Almighty God for the blessings of civil and religious liberty, and humbly invoking His guidance.

Rhode Island 1842: We, the People of the State of Rhode Island, grateful to Almighty God for the civil and religious liberty which He hath so long permitted us to enjoy, and looking to Him for a blessing.

South Carolina 1778: We, the people of the State of South Carolina, grateful to God for our liberties, do ordain and establish this Constitution.

South Dakota 1889: We, the people of South Dakota, grateful to Almighty God for our civil and religious liberties which He hath given us.

Tennessee 1796 (Art. XI): That all men have a natural and indefeasible right to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of their conscience.

Texas 1845: We the People of the Republic of Texas, acknowledging, with gratitude, the grace and benefits of freedom.

Utah 1896: Grateful to Almighty God for life and liberty, we establish this Constitution.

Vermont 1777: Whereas all government ought to enable the individuals who compose it to enjoy their natural rights, and other blessings which the Author of Existence has bestowed upon man.

Virginia 1776 (Bill of Rights): Religion, or the Duty which we owe to our Creator, can be directed only by Reason, and that it is the mutually due of all to practice Christian forbearance, Love and Charity towards each other.

Washington 1889: We the People of the State of Washington, grateful to the Supreme Ruler of the Universe for our liberties, do ordain this Constitution.

West Virginia 1872: Since through Divine Providence we enjoy the blessings of civil, political and religious liberty, we, the people of West Virginia, reaffirm our faith in and constant reliance upon God.

Wisconsin 1848: We, the people of Wisconsin, grateful to Almighty God for our freedom, domestic tranquility. Wyoming 1889: We, the people of the State of Wyoming, grateful to God for our civil, political, and religious liberties.


What Is a Freethinker?

free-think-er n. a person who is not worried about religion on the basis of reason, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief.
Meet a civil libertarian member

Name: Matthew Stark. When and where I was born: New York City, Jan. 27, 1930. I lived in New York until I went to school at Ohio University, Athens, Ohio. Where I live: My wife, Terri, and I have two homes, one in Minneapolis and the other in Fort Myers, Fla. We’re snowbirds. Education: Two degrees at Ohio University: English and B.S. in education, 1951. I earned a master’s in educational psychology in 1959 from the University of Minnesota. I immediately changed the “house mother” title, with their agreement, to “house directors.” Labeling them “house mothers” was insulting. I developed programs where they could take any course they wanted for free. I stayed at the U of M as adviser to Students’ Extracurricular Activity, reporting to the dean of students and president. We developed programs to involve students in extra curriculum, including for extra credit. Then I set up the Office of the Coordinator of Human Relations Programs. Martin Luther King Jr. and I developed a program where students at University of Minnesota were trained by me and others to go down South to Montgomery, Selma, etc., live there and work with black and white people positively concerned about race relations. I met Dr. King through the ACLU and was his legal liaison. When I retired from the university, I became the first paid director of the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union (1973–87), after having serving as volunteer president. I did what executive directors do: I dealt with the media, schools and colleges, etc. I was either the plaintiff or recruited plaintiffs for litigation and recruited lawyers to do volunteer work for the MCLU. Person in history I admire: Donald G. Patterson, head of the psychology department at the University of Minnesota, and one of the main founders of the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union, and Earl Larson, now a federal district judge, also involved in the original founding of the MCLU. These are a few of my favorite things: I love to fish, walk in the woods and around the lakes in the Twin Cities. I’ve done a lot of fishing in Canada and Minnesota. I love to sit with my friends in a tented area outside, enjoying the lake and sunset, talking and drinking cold beer. These are thin smiles: Teachers at public schools who impose their religious views on their students. The most serious problem we’re facing in this world is overpopulation — the Earth cannot sustain the millions upon millions of people living on it. A quotation I like: Coined myself: Civil liberties are essential if we’re going to have a democracy. My doubts about religion started: When I was a kid. My family was primarily Unitarian. I was astonished by what I read and saw about religion and how people I liked were treated because of their diverse religious views, or their sexuality. It always bothered me. There’s a book written by Dick Hewston [a longtime FFRF state representative] about the MCLU and my role in it: History of the Gay Movement in Minnesota and the Role of the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union. Ways I promote freethought: I have and will continue to support public education and my belief that all students ought to go to public schools. I support organizations with which I have fundamental agreement, such as FFRF, and I think what you guys are doing is absolutely wonderful. I helped take cases to keep religion out of government as director of the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union. I’m proud of being grand marshal in the Twin Cities Gay Pride Parade in 2008 and to have received a variety of local, educational, humanist and atheist awards. I was always extremely interested in separation of church and state. When I was in public school, they had the kids praying, so I blew the whistle as a student. Later in my life, when I came across FFRF, of course, I was absolutely delighted. I worked with Anne Nicol Gaylor and even sent FFRF a check to help put up a portrait of her in the new lobby!

‘Reformed’ Catholic tells off pope

Wisconsin FFRF member Ken Proulx, who is 90, notes: “The pope was saying it’s wrong to kill in the name of God. Why, the Catholic Church got where it is by killing people, with a history as black as the ace of spades. In Spain it is by killing people, with a history likeable atheist,” for a chance to win $15,000 (for a sitcom) or $25,000 (for a completed webisode for the internet, plus outlines for 11 more episodes). The contest, which is sponsored by the Center for Inquiry and the Freethought From Religion Foundation, seeks a teleplay for a half-hour TV sitcom pilot, plus outlines for 11 more episodes. Calling all writers, producers and funny freethinkers! The “No God But Funny” contest open to promote a positive view of atheism.

Producers’ contest: Submit a completed webisode for the internet, plus outlines for 11 more episodes. The contest deadline is May 1, 2013. Entry fee is $40. For more information, go to nogodbutfunny.com. If you’d like to enter, click here to view contest rules and guidelines. Or follow along by liking the Facebook page “No God But Funny Contest.” FFRF would like to thank Life Member Pamela Koshen for her generous donation of $6,000 that makes this contest (her creative brainchild!) possible.

Panela notes that on Feb. 3 there were 297 Facebook “likes,” 200-plus Twitter followers and, best of all, over 50 entrant registrations.

Hosanna in the highest

The Daily Herald reported that police in Wausau, Wis., executing a search warrant Nov. 17, encountered this prayer above a bed in a residence where they arrested two people, a 34-year-old man and an 18-year-old woman. Police, who said they confiscated drug paraphernalia and about 50 grams of marijuana, posted this photo on Facebook and this comment: “Lt. Matt Barnes, who supervises our [Community Service Officers] unit, quoted the lyrics from a Garth Brooks song “Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers.” “

Ken Proulx and Annie Laurie Gaylor (photo by Dan Barker)

Matt Stark

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Recent FFRF Action Alerts

FFRF urged members to get involved with state/church issues in their areas by contacting local officials to put forth the secular viewpoint:

• The Clark County Board of County Commissioners in Vancouver, Wash., is considering a proposal to post “In God We Trust” in the county’s main public hearing room. “A lot of times we drift away from it,” said County Commissioner Tom Mielke, who suggested the display.

• Mayor Lupe Ramos Watson of Indianapolis, Ind., offered that since Missississippi is proposing to make the bible the state book, Tom Miles and Michael Evans, members of the council, were proposing to make the bible the state book.

• Two Mississippi state representatives, Tom Miles and Michael Evans, are proposing to make the bible the state book. Miles said that since Mississippi has a state bird, a state flower and even a state song, it is only proper that the state should have a state book, reported The Clarion-Ledger.

• New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo stopped by a Sunday service at Mt. Vernon’s Grace Baptist Church on Jan. 18 to announce the creation of the Office of Faith-Based Community Development Services. The office’s first effort will be a $50 million grant program.

• Ohio recently unveiled plans for Community Connectors, a program that provides funds for local networks of volunteers and organizations to mentor students in disadvantaged schools. Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Richard A. Ross, whose department is charged with administering the program, added an unnecessary requirement: any organization that wants to participate must partner with “a faith-based organization.”

• Feeling the pressure from FFRF and others, the state “clarified” its requirement to include “organizations whose mission is based on the belief that every child’s life has a purpose.”

• The change doesn’t clarify anything, it just makes the program’s requirements more confusing,” noted FFRF Legal Fellow Katherine Paige. “The principle that our lives have a purpose is distinctly religious, and ‘values’ is usually code for Christian Right values.

• This is just as absurd as it would be to require all faith-based organizations to partner with atheistic groups that believe there is no cosmic ‘purpose of life,’ ” added Co-President Dan Barker.

• The Easton [Pa.] Area School Board voted 5-4 on Jan. 13 against starting meetings with prayer, reported the Express-Times. Solicitor John Freund said 3rd Circuit appeals decisions are clear: Prayer will open the district up to legal challenges.

• “My next mission will be to oppose the nativity display,” said Mielke, who suggested the display.

• “A lot of times we drift away from it,” said County Commissioner Tom Mielke, who suggested the display.

• FFRF thanks its kind building fund donors.

This listing reports donations for FFRF’s Building Expansion Fund received from Dec. 11, 2014, to Feb. 2, 2015. It’s not cumulative except for the total.

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<th>Donor</th>
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Eric Michel, Georgia, $40
Wendy and Alexander Corby, California, $25
Alice M Kachman, Michigan, $20
Anonymous, Virginia, $20
Subtotal: $26,745

New Cumulative Total: $2,029,894.12

(for those keeping track at home: Due to unfulfilled donations, the new cumulative total is less than the most recently published cumulative total plus the current list. UPDATE: Joyce Arthur, British Columbia, recently granted permission to publish her $50 donation from August 2013. See pages 12-13 for photos of the addition. FFRF is embarking on Phase II of the project (renovating the original 1855 building to which its new addition is attached).)

Donations received before Dec. 11 will list subsequent donations in future issues. Donors are not identified by name (hence all the “Anonymous” listings). If you made a donation that does not appear to be reflected in this list or in prior issues, please contact us so we can check our records and publish your gift. Contact Katie Daniel, donors relations manager, (608)296-8900 9-5 CDT weekdays or email katie@ffrf.org. Thank you!

AAVFRF thanks its kind building fund donors.

Reason’s greetings

Standing up for reason in December at the Bulloch County Courthouse, Statesboro, Ga., near a nativity scene “Presented by Local Churches Celebrating the Savior’s Birthday” were (front, left) Patsy Thompson Bucky, Dayna Goldstein, Don Armel, (back) Lee Davis, Daniel Hunter and Paul Zeigler.
Michael W. Hill, 52, Charunte, KS: Sexual battery of a child, 7 counts of indecent liberties with a juvenile, and 1 count of sexual interference under the age of 14. Hill, pastor of Charunte Seventh-Adventist Church, was arrested on a Florida warrant charging him with molesting a minor over the ages of 12 and 16 in 2002.

The arrest report said Hill apparently consented to a taped interview in Daytona Beach. Authorities monitored and recorded the meeting, which Hill’s wife also attended, and later charged Hill with counts of sexual abuse and indecent liberties.

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In a taped statement, Hill admitted to two assaults against a minor and one against a woman in 2004.

He also admitted to assaulting a 16-year-old girl in 2005 and to molesting a minor in 2006.

Hill was sentenced to 7 years in prison. The Catholic priest, who also admitted to molesting a minor in 2006, was released from prison in 2012.

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in prison, 3 years' probation, restitution of $933,507 and forfeiture of his house, a Rolex watch and fur coat. Jones, pastor of Greater Pensacola Baptist Church, was sentenced to 6 years in prison, 3 years' probation, restitution of $933,507 and forfeiture of his house, a Rolex watch and fur coat. Jones, pastor of Greater Pensacola Baptist Church, was sentenced to 6 years in prison, 3 years' probation, restitution of $933,507 and forfeiture of his house, a Rolex watch and fur coat.

Twenty-year-old black man with a night stick. He didn't testify at his trial. He pleaded guilty to simple assault and possession of child pornography. Balyo hosted in Foley. The suit accuses the diocese of creating a cover-up by not investigating priests who allegedly molested children.

A police investigation is ongoing. They are looking for Balyo's whereabouts. Balyo seemed to be the main force behind the cover-up. He has refused to answer any questions about the allegations.

Suzanne Greer, 20, the daughter of former pastor, was killed in 2013 after her and her mother's bodies were found in a house in Helena. The investigation was ongoing for months, but it appears to have been closed.

Three women are suing Rabbi Shlomo Chiton, 41, of Temple Emanu-El in Kansas City. They were allegedly molested by him when they were children. The suit claims that the rabbi used his authority to seduce the girls.

A federal judge later reduced the award to $543,803. Here expressed his regret for what he has done. He said he was sorry as a church. "We are sorry as a church for what we have done," the rabbi told the court.

A witness who saw the girl with her pants down and underwear said Jimenez told her he was going to take the money in 2009-12 from St. Patrick's Church. The suit claims that the diocese knew about the abuse but did not investigate it.

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Place for religion isn’t government

Thanks for all the great work you FFRF realists do. It’s sad we have to have a group as such, to bring sanity to the world, but I am afraid if we don’t there will be more 9/11’s and worse (even from the Christian religion). They must stay in their place, and out of government. I am enclosing a check for $500 toward a Lifetime Membership. I will be sending another check for the same amount next month.

At the age of 77, I’ll keep reading as long as the eyes hold out and I am breathing.

Bob MacArthur
Massachusetts

Appreciate ‘fine job of educating’

I would like to change my membership in FFRF to Lifetime. You will find enclosed a check for $1,000.

The best way to describe my feelings is that I am proud to be a member. I feel that pride every time I read about how FFRF takes action against the unending efforts by those who want to impose their religious beliefs on others through government action and/or at publicly funded venues. It is amazing to me how insensitive and uninformed many religious people are as shown by their behavior. FFRF does such a fine job of educating all of us on issues of separation of church and state and other matters concerning religious belief and lack thereof.

I have changed the way I think about religion by having me how to have an intelligent discussion about the separation of church and state with others and made me feel good, even anxious, to come out of the closet as an atheist.

Thank you!

Rob Haworth
Maryland

Congratulations to FFRF on being identified by Jerry Falwell’s Liberty Counsel as one of the staunchest supporters of the separation of church and state.

Ken Crosby, After-Life Member
Texas

As an active member of FFRF I have five words to submit to the Letterbox: Socrates died for our sins.

Best wishes.

George Singer
Rhode Island

Thanks for Charlie Hebdo donation

I am so proud of you for your donation to Charlie Hebdo, I am sending you a check for $100 in support of your efforts.

Your courage should set the example for those who write about the tragedy.

Charlie Sitzes
Lifetime Member
Indiana

Here’s to health, happiness in 2015

As the old year ends, I look back on some quotes and sayings, some unattributed, that I found throughout the past year that will follow me into the new, providing guidance and some smiles. Hopefully, you will find one that starts 2015 off well for you.

“We must become the change we want to see in the world.” (Mahatma Gandhi)

“Show me a person who has never made a mistake and I will show you someone who has not achieved much.” (Joan Collins)

“If you tell the truth, you don’t have to remember anything.”

“If you lend someone $20 and you never see that person again, it was probably worth it.”

“A society grows great when old people plant trees whose shade they know shall never sit in.”

“Only the guy who isn’t rowing has time to rock the boat.” (Jean-Paul Sartre)

“The best theology is probably no theology, just love one another.” (Charles Schulz)

“Nothing is impossible. Some things just are less likely than others.”

“I can explain it to you. I can’t comprehend it for you.”

“Do not speak unless you can improve the silence.”

“Reason makes me an atheist; community makes me a humanist.”

“Religion is indulged rather than discussed.”

“Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again more intelligently.” (Henry Ford)

“The deepest sin against the human mind is to believe things without evidence.” (Thomas Edison)

Arizona

Fire station Jesus sign was offensive

I live about a half mile from Utica, N.Y., where FFRF contested the “Happy Birthday Jesus We Love You” sign outside a firehouse. I do not belong to a formal synagogue, church or mosque. I am offended by the firehouse sign.

I very much appreciate and support your actions with the mayor regarding the sign.

Nathan Rosenthal
New York

What would Jesus drive? Dollar rental!

While renting a car recently at the airport in Jacksonville, Fla., I noticed a sign in the booth of the Dollar rental office that read “God Bless You!” I spoke to the manager and told him that I did not think that mixing religion with business was a good idea, and that the sign may be offensive to others of different faiths and beliefs. I said that I did not need to be “blessed.”

After picking up my rental, as I was driving out, I noticed that the sign was taken down. Keep up the good work.

Phil Kellerman
New York

Remembering Rushdie in Hebdowake

The day that they put a fatwa on Salman Rushdie was the day 27 years ago that I ordered The Satanic Verses. I hope you saw the wonderful quote from Salman after the terrorism in Paris:

“Religion, a medieval form of unreason, when combined with modern weaponry becomes a real threat to our freedoms. This religious totalitarianism has caused a deadly mutation in the heart of Islam and we see the tragic consequences in Paris today. I stand with Charlie Hebdo, as we all must, to defend the art of satire, which has always been a force for liberty and against tyranny, dishonesty and stupidly. ‘Respect for religion’ has become a code phrase meaning ‘fear of religion.’ Religions, like all other ideas, deserve criticism, satirization, and, yes, our fearless disrespect.”

I miss Christopher Hitchens terribly, but he couldn’t have stated it any better than his friend Salman (but I’m probably wrong; Hitchens would have no doubt been better). Free press is a must in our society!

Greg Stuart
Indiana

Hotel bible inserts a wonderful idea

I was so impressed with the “Whoever opens this bible” insert that I ordered copies to do the same in my travels. I recently stayed at six hotels in California, Nevada and Utah and, to my surprise, I found a bible in only one.

“We’re making progress! Keep up the good work.”

Don Stockard
California

Mich. college students appreciate FFRF

I am honored to share some wonderful news about a First Year Experience (FYE) course that I teach at Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant.

Last semester, I had the pleasure of working with 40 students entering their first year of college. My class, FYE 101, is considered an introductory course for first-time students (freshman and transfer). I work with students who have shown in high school, and desire to continue to show in college, an interest in diversity, multiculturalism and inclusion.

During the semester, I’ve asked the students to complete a major community service project. This assignment allows groups of students to coordinate all aspects of creating a project, from creation to involvement to execution and presentation. Steps included, but were not limited to: 1) research/knowledge/service; 2) awareness; and 3) fundraising. They were also asked to write a five-page paper about their experience.

I’m excited to say that your organization was chosen as a recipient of one of the eight group’s fundraising efforts! On behalf of Amanda Corde, Lauren Ouellette, Sydney Alexander, Jasmine Smith and Husayn Jabar (Multicultural Advancement Scholars), please accept this check for $43.52 to use toward the continued success of your organization. In addition, I have included and mailed under separate cover a banner the students signed.

We appreciate your work and the services you provide to make someone’s life just a little bit better.

Traci L. Quinn, Ed.D.
Michigan

‘Death with dignity’ an important fight

Barbara Mannuci’s story [Dec 14] about her struggle, and sad failure, to achieve a “death with dignity” for her father brought me back to my own story. My father, who was dying of ovarian cancer, wanted desperately to die, and I found a way to help her do that.

After writing about this in my book Last Wish, I heard from many people with a dying loved one who had the same reasonable wish: a swift, painless death. Anyone who has been through this understands the good sense in allowing physicians to help. It’s the safest way to make sure the passage from life to death goes smooth. I, too, am a member of Compassion and Choices, an organization that assists people who are in this situation and fights for legalization. Many religious people are in favor of such change. Some of them are Catholic. A major foe of physician-assisted death, however, is the well-funded Catholic Church.

The word “mercy” comes up often in Catholic teachings. Unfortunately, it is not applied in cases of dying patients, who simply, and reasonably, want a decent way out.

Betty Rollin
New York

Good day at Black Rock

George and Julie Iddon (aka Braveheart and Artemisia), Washington state, have a freethought moment on their motorized couch in front of the center camp at Burning Man 2014 in the Black Rock Desert in northern Nevada. The week-long annual event is “an experiment in community, art, radical self-expression, and radical self-reliance.” George adds, “We’ll see you in October 2015 at the convention in Madison.”
Pope off the mark on insulting religion

Thanks, Annie Laurie [for her blog “We can and we must make fun of faith”), right on the money! The Pope opposes negative comments about religions because he doesn’t want bricks thrown at his glass house. So while it seems clear if he is defending the idea of respect, he is really trying to protect Catholics from being a target.

When people hate religion to excuse extreme behavior, it is well past the time to be polite in our denunciation of this façade. Popes are considered infallible to orthodox Catholics, but we say that no one is entitled to respect simply because they hold a title (let alone be considered infallible).

Respect is earned by deeds. When religious leaders earn our respect, we value it. Religious themselves — that’s another matter.

Jerry Gilbert
Colorado

Terror threat requires rethinking tactics

Though I am a Life Member committed to a secular society, I have come to the conclusion that it is immediately imperative for the secular community to reach across the aisle and build strong bridges with theists from the currently predominant religion in America in order to stop the growth of the immeasurably greater threat to civil liberties that will manifest from the inevitable rise of radical Islam within American borders.

I am deeply thankful to FFRF for its indefatigable pursuit of secular liberty, but I don’t want to look back with regret 30 years from now at all the time we squandered writing to local governments about [what to me are relatively inconsequential things like nativity scenes and religious mythology that are in no doubt].

As my heroes Annie Laurie and Dan well know, fighting militant them with reason is not like fighting fire with fire. It is not even like fighting fire with water. It is like fighting fire — with a flashlight. We have no time to fight this fire with flashlights.

All theism, as unchecked, leads to theocracy. But not all theocracies pose the same danger. We needn’t look too furiously tested scientific theories are more often as scientific research and discovery fill in gaps in our knowledge. For example, we now know that the Earth is not flat and that natural phenomena like earthquakes and lightning are not caused by temper tantrums of imaginary beings.

In human cultural evolution, superstitions and religious mythology fit the “vestigial” category. Over time they will disappear from human experience altogether, if our species survives long enough. I find it very encouraging that the membership of FFRF and other freethinking groups is growing and, in polls, more and more people are publicly professing no religious belief.

I began to see what little I had in religious mythology when I went to college and began an extensive study of biology and evolution. As my knowledge increased, my amazement of the silliness, and the destructiveness, of the biblical Genesis story also increased.

Elsberry because of what I’ve learned through FFRF and the stories told by others who have put aside their vestigial belief in ridiculous mythology, who have come to believe that there is no reason to continue the conversation I no longer just say that I’m not religious. I state that I am an atheist.

I think it’s important that we “come out” to show others that we have no shame in our choosing knowledge over ignorance and blind obedience to stuff we just know can’t be true.

Robert C. Van Fleet
California

Michigan Athiests celebrate decades of activism

Michigan Atheists celebrate decades of activism

July 4th, 2015

Michigan Athiests celebrate decades of activism

FFRF Co-president Dan Barker spoke at the 28th annual statewide convention of Michigan Atheists in Auburn in December. He is pictured at left with Doug Marshall, the courageous plaintiff in FFRF’s lawsuit challenging religious discrimination.


Dan also performed a few freethought songs.

Tom Patrick

Marie stands behind Dan as organizers and board members of the festivities, MA, founded in 1975, is one of the oldest continuously operating atheist groups in the country.
Meet a member

Name: James Downard.

Where I live: Spokane, Wash.

Where and when I was born: Spokane, Wash., 1952.

Family: Two sisters and a brother still living, plenty of nieces and nephews far and wide.

Education: B.A. in history, Eastern Washington University.

Occupation: former inventory/supply worker, now retired.

How I got where I am today: Muddling along one day at a time as I can.

Why I’m here: I admire Jay Gould, as prickly a “paying attention” “fool” as there ever was. It seems a good idea for us to play those cards right off the bat.

Personal history I admire: Stephen Jay Gould, as prickly a “paying attention to details” guy as ever there was, and whose ideas from spandrels to NMDA have sparked my others’ thinking. For example, my pocket definition of religion (“a neotenous span-spanning”) owes a lot to Gould’s concepts and terminology.

A quotation I like: William James, saying “there are no religious beliefs of prominent persons and their dependence on “the authority of the bible,” replied succinctly: “No. No. No. It is so human a book that I don’t see how belief in its divine authorship can survive the reading of it.”

What’s My War on Christmas? Minnesota Atheists raided my home for a Twin Cities food bank on Thanksgiving Day. I was served a warrant on the 5k Walk to End Hunger and was named volunteer coordinator of the month by the Foundation Beyond Belief. In December, 24 activists were arrested and 7 cited after over $1,000 worth of toys and games to the Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin. I was named Volunteer of the Year by the Minneapolis-Saint Paul Medical Center, Minnesota, said Eric Jayne, MA president and FFRF member, center, arms spread in this photo at the Mall of America. “In 2014, we had over 10 volunteers donate over 1,600 hours of service for our monthly food bank packing event and had about 130 volunteers serve meals on 14 occasions to over 300 people without permanent housing at the Family Place Shelter,” Jayne said.

Black Collar Crimes

Havel was accused of raping a 13-year-old girl in his hospital, where he has worked since 1980 and is an electro-convulsive therapy specialist.

“Why the news of Jared Sandusky broke, we heard of victims of coaches and victims of teachers,” said SNAP’s Barbara Dorris. “You can’t come to terms with something like that,” said SNAP’s Barbara Dorris.

Values website (www.values.com) has over 35,000 sources and about 6,000 anti-creationism projects, which has expanded to cover over 35,000 sources (including over 13,000 technical science works aimed at “flattening” over 6,000 anti-evolution sources). Nothing on this scale has existed before. Those who want to help the TIP baby grow and will find this project, which has grown to cover more than 100,000 sources.

“Are we taking this matter seriously and addressing the situation carefully,” the hospital said in a statement.

The Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, now led by a concerned citizen, urges Havel’s presence at the hospital, where he has worked since 1980 and is an electro-convulsive therapy specialist.

A statute of limitations prevents cases of accused sexual abuse of a minor by Havel in the early 1980s has been substantiated. Source: Arizona Republic, 12-17-14

It seems a good idea for us to play those cards right off the bat.

The big thing they made at Sun- day school, though, was giving me a nice Revised Standard Version of the bible complete with a plethora of bottom-of-the-page cross references. That’s how I first spotted that the Da- vidic theology of the book was listed in the index but they didn’t match the one given in Luke. I notice that not all bibles make the mistake of putting cross references right where they’re no good for people like me to follow up even more easily!

Before I die I would like to enjoy a bit of wrestling with posthumous fame I may have earned.

Ways I promote freethought: Over the years, I’ve become active in the Spokane Society for Reason and the Idaho Northwest Freethought Society, the lat- ter now an FFRF chapter. I’ve helped organize and staff the annual Darwin Day display at the downtown RiverPark Mall. I’m also the atheist blogger on the award-winning Spokane Faith & Values website (www.spokanefaithandvalues.com) because I can’t quite do it alone (it takes a secular village sort of thing). I’m also on Facebook and Twitter, where I’ve been usefully applying TIP methods to short-circuit anti-evolutionist

James Downard

its baneful influence on me already.

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Churches in schools debated on MSNBC

The National Labor Relations Board ruled against Pacific Lutheran University’s claim that it’s exempt as a religious institution from NLRB jurisdiction. The decision allows contingent faculty (non-tenure track) to unionize at the school in Tacoma, Wash., reported the Chronicle of Higher Education in December.

By Jennifer Wilson

My parents raised me with a profound respect for science but not religion. My physicist taught me that there are certain laws of nature that the universe abides by, and even though we cannot understand everything, these laws exist and allow us to survive. My respect for science has never led me to belittle religion or those who believe. It simply allows me to justify a world in which the answer to “What is the meaning of life?” is just as easy nothing as it is God, nirvana or the number 42.

I had a Catholic friend in junior high who tried to pique my curiosity. She talked about religion a lot. I only mentioned my nonbelief when I was asked what church I went to. When we were 14, out of the blue, she told me I could come to Mass with her anytime and said, “I pray for you a lot because I’m worried that you’re going to hell.”

The sentiment came from her heart, a place full of compassion for others, but I was taken aback. In my head I told her she should save her prayers for people who actually want them, but aloud I just said, “Thank you, that’s very thoughtful.”

Whether it was by telling me about Jesus Christ in the middle of an abstinence debate or trying to debunk decades of scientific inquiry while discussing creationism, my classmates found me to be the atheist in my first-semester class called “Bible and Creationism.” My physicist had gotten me to join “The Christian Right’s Stealth Assault on America’s Children,” FFRF’s complaint over such an entanglement at Apopka High School in Orange County Public Schools, has repeated complaints to the district about the creationism. The church vows it will never own its own building. Its motto is “Partnering with schools and communities to serve students and families to gain the privilege of sharing the love of Jesus for eternal impact.”

FFRF complained, among other things, about Todd Lamphere. Venne’s co-founder and pastor, being designat- ed as the school football team’s “chap- lain” (as well as chaplain of its bowling team!). The district subsequently re- named him “life coach” and continues to justify Lamphere’s active school presence, which includes organizing “mission trips” for students. Harris and Gaylor debated the topic with a Methodist evangelist.

College essay contest honorable mention

Unleashing the atheist within

By Jennifer Wilson

Believing in God to raise our hands. I was the only one who didn’t. He then asked me to justify my nonbelief.

Two weeks into college, in a room full of strangers (and my roommate), I froze up, unable to justify myself or even ask the simplest of questions as a rebuttal: “Why do you believe in God, professor?” For the rest of the semes ter, my peers met my opinions with glares of disdain and immediate counterattacks.

That first semester was rough, but I’ve become more confident in expressing my opinions. I’ve used my nonbelief to instigate discussion rather than argument.

I’ve always been an atheist, and I all ways will be, no matter how many of my peers poke at the atheist within me, trying to stamp it out.

Jennifer Wilson, 21, was born in Ge neva, Switzerland, and lived in France the first eight years of her life but considers Lawrence, Kan., her hometown. She’s a senior majoring in English and mathematics at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn. She was awarded $200 for this essay.


you people are asshole You people are absolute losers, the bottom of the barrel of humanity. Tol erance only goes in one direction for moslems like you, and the only reason you get away with it is because in the end you will answer to God. — Dick Head, loveChristians@schools.com

MSNBC: Snee your tepic on MSNBC with MEP.

FFRF complained, among other things, about a number of problems.

WHERE JESUS DIED: RELIGION AS JESUS BREATHED AT THE CITY OF GOLGOtha, AND CURRICULUM in the CITY of GOLGOLtha, BUT JESUS AND THE BAPTIST DIED TOGETHER ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS AND THEY WERE KILLED ONLY TWICE. — DONNA RINKE, ANDOVER, MA

Questions: What do we do with practicing religion is our business whether it’s partnering in a prayer before a football game or not filling in government WHO THE FUCK DIED AND MADE OUR RELIGION HAS BUSINESS BEING? No one so guy jamp a couple fingers up your narrow ass sit the fuck down shut the fuck up and stop making a mockery of traditions no one goes a fuck and the only reason they act like they do is because of persistent nagging by your foundation trying to get you to shut the hell up! We’re football players we pair before every game and our coaches are apart of that family tradition you but if you want to fight to keep something out, you should be working on what is on the TV, the Games of violence the kids play today... you represent a world without GOD. YOUR SO ROCKY. — LP Gunn

A Religious Right scheme to “plant churches in schools” on MSNBC-TV’s “Melissa Harris-Perry Show,” featuring FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor and Katherine Hill, (religion is the reason for CHRISTMAS! Get over it. White Christians are supposed to be tolerant of everything but we can’t do anything because it might offend some camel humpers. Groups like yours will be the reason for the 2nd civil war!! MERRY CHRISTMAS asshole’s. — Ane Nolander, Wisconsin

Growing up: Take a good look at the world now and what it was when you were young. Did your parents do drugs? Where there as many murders, rapes, crimes, were there wholesale programs on tv? Did people lock those doors? If you want to fight to keep something out, you should be working on what is on the TV, the
Freethought billboards blanket Chicago area

FFRF and its Metropolitan Chicago chapter put up 14 freethought billboards in Chicagoland in December and January, with six more scheduled to be placed in March. Eleven went up in December and three in January. (All are shown here, along with Evan Kane’s on this issue’s front page. Billboards featuring “Friendly Atheist” Hemant Mehta and Tom Cara, chapter director, were featured in December’s Freethought Today.)

Bob Elmore, photographer and chapter board member, commented: “As Tom Cara might attest, there isn’t much I wouldn’t do for the cause of FFRF, and providing some decent photos of the billboards was a true pleasure. We’re all really proud of Tom’s commitment to furthering the message here in the Chicago area and look forward to recruiting more new members who might respond to our efforts and aren’t afraid to show their true colors.”

One billboard was somehow deemed “offensive” by a landowner whom Clear Channel was leasing space from and had to be moved to a different location. It featured Alan Wagner and his message, “I put my faith in science.”

“It’s hard to believe someone would be that offended by a slogan that says that,” commented Cara.

FFRF, which has more than 800 Illinois members, debuted the “Out of the Closet” billboard campaign in 2010 in Madison, Wis. Chicago is the 12th city for the campaign.

Mark your calendar!
38th Annual National FFRF Convention
Weekend of October 9–11, 2015
Monona Terrace Community & Convention Center
1 John Nolen Drive
Madison, Wisconsin

Tour expanded Freethought Hall Friday morning. Tour Frank Lloyd Wright convention center Friday afternoon, enjoy appetizers, workshops.

Formal program begins 7 p.m Friday continuing all day Saturday.