

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



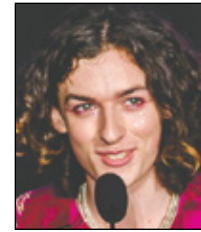
**Nonbelievers
have to opt
out of religion**

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**Education,
not religious
indoctrination**

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used to uphold
oppression**

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Vol. 40 No. 3

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April 2023

FFRF establishes advocacy 'Action Fund'

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has created an affiliated organization that will allow it to more directly advocate for legislation.

While FFRF is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, a status which limits direct lobbying (and where all donations are tax deductible), the new FFRF Action Fund holds a 501(c)(4) tax designation, which allows unlimited lobbying and some use of donations (which are not tax deductible) for election-related activities (such as backing candidates seeking public office).

FFRF has been fighting for the rights of nonbelievers and to defend the

constitutional principle of separation between state and church since 1978.

With the changing judicial and political landscapes and shifts to extreme views on the Establishment Clause, a key component of protecting true religious liberty for all Americans — including the growing number of nonreligious Americans — involves increased advocacy in all branches of government.

The mission of the FFRF Action Fund is to develop and advocate for



between state and church, to secure the rights and views of nonbelievers and to publicize the views of elected officials affecting our constitutional rights. The Action Fund works to hold elected officials accountable on religious liberty issues.

The FFRF Action Fund maximizes advocacy for atheists, agnostics and other freethinkers by lobbying on the

legislation, regulations and government programs to preserve the constitutional principle of separation

local, state and federal levels. From supporting bills in Congress and in state legislatures, to submitting public comments for new rules and public policy initiatives, to developing model legislation, FFRF Action Fund works to ensure that our elected officials understand the issues important to the "Nones." Today, the "Nones," otherwise described by Pew Research Center as "atheists, agnostics and nothing in particular," are 29 percent of the adult population — numbering more than 75 million Americans. Secular voters

See 'Action Fund' on page 6



Art by Steve Benson

FFRF tracking onslaught of bills

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is tracking more than 1,000 bills across the United States — and every one of them impacts the fight to keep religion out of our federal and state governmental policies.

A large number of these bills — more than 45 percent — are follow-ups to the theocratic Dobbs decision that overturned Roe v. Wade, either seizing the opportunity provided by the Supreme Court to expand religious control over reproductive rights, or else sometimes engaging in desperate attempts to safeguard abortion access that so many had taken for granted. The strategy from anti-choice lawmakers seems to be to push so many bills that they become hard to keep track of.

FFRF is proud that it is even then able to keep tabs on such legislation and stand up for the vital separation of religious dogma from government. In fact, the New York Times recently printed a

page-one story pointing out there are more than 300 pieces of legislation in 40 states on abortion, with a majority seeking to restrict access, and some to punish providers.

In addition to banned or endangered abortion access, FFRF is cognizant that Justice Clarence Thomas signaled the Supreme Court's likely next targets: contraception and same-sex marriage. States should pass safeguards for both without delay.

LGBTQ rights are another extremely high-volume issue in front of state legislatures. Focusing particularly on making life miserable for trans children and their families, lawmakers have advanced bans on gender-affirming health care, bans on drag shows broad enough to include trans performers not dressed in drag, and myriad bills aimed at stigmatizing children in public

See Bills on page 16

Commandments display averted thanks to FFRF

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has successfully prevented a Ten Commandments display from going up in a courthouse in Kanabec County, Minn.

A concerned community member reported that the Kanabec County Board of Commissioners had voted in December to put on view a copy of the Ten Commandments in the Kanabec County Courthouse lobby.

Such an exhibit by a governmental body would favor religion, specifically Christianity, over nonreligion, thus violating the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, as well as the Minnesota Bill of Rights.

"We write to inform the board that it cannot display the Ten Commandments on public property," FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott and FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote in a letter to Kanabec County Chair Rickey Mattson. "Displaying the Ten Commandments in the county courthouse is not only an unconstitutional display of favoritism towards religion, it needlessly alienates and excludes county residents who do not share the religious beliefs that the Ten Commandments embody and represent."

Exhibiting the Ten Commandments in government buildings

See Commandments on page 16



Image from Wikimedia

Kanabec County Courthouse in northern Minnesota.

Legal assistant wants to help alleviate suffering

Name: Matthew M. Langer
Where and when I was born: Janesville, Wis., in 1989.
Education: I graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2012 with a B.A. in philosophy. To my surprise, there were no philosophy factories hiring at the time, so I also spent some time in grad school studying behavioral health.
Family: I am the youngest of four siblings, all of whom are first-generation college students and UW-Madison alumni.
How I came to work at FFRF: After working in behavioral health for several years and helping people with symptoms primarily caused by faulty social infrastructure, I became more interested in rectifying the institutions that cause suffering in the first place. As an atheist, naturally, I was most interested in preventing suffering caused by religion. Although I was aware of FFRF's existence, it wasn't until an online job search that I realized it was based locally. I applied immediately. Roe v. Wade was overturned the week before my interview, and I came here ready to work.
What I do here: I'm the intake legal assistant. I spend most of my time processing incoming state/church complaints, researching violations, sending letters of complaint to government actors, keeping our complainants up to date, tracking complaint/letter/victory metrics, and overseeing our winter solstice display season.
What I like best about it: The people. It's easy to stay motivated when I'm surrounded by like-minded colleagues and regularly communicating with our supportive members.
What gets old about it: Occasionally we'll receive complaints about violations that are so egregious that I temporarily lose hope for humanity.
I spend a lot of time thinking about: The definitions of "cult" and "religion."
I spend little, if any, time thinking about: Unfortunately, I think about most things. Too much. All the time. It's a problem.
My religious upbringing was: Catholic. My family regularly attended church for most of my childhood, and I was also enrolled in "Catholic Religious Education" classes from ages 5



Photo by Chris Line

Matthew Langer

to 12. However, there was virtually no practice of religion at home, and my parents gave us just enough freedom to think for ourselves.
My doubts about religion started: Around age 12 after learning about the many reports of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. I stopped attending church and started grappling with the many hypocrisies and fallacies of organized religion. I started identifying as an atheist and humanist during my freshman year of college after taking my first philosophy course.
Things I like: Fender guitars. Boss pedals. Orange amps.
Things I smite: The U.S. health care system. The U.S. housing market. Wealth inequality. Politicization of religion.
In my golden years: "Golden" sounds a little too optimistic given the current state of the world. However, I hope I'll be able to spend my time playing music, carpentering, painting, and merely existing in what's left of our natural environment.
My favorite quote: "It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society." — Jiddu Krishnamurti

MEET A STAFFER

FFRF FREETHOUGHT TODAY

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

THEY SAID WHAT?

[God will] put godly people in places of authority . . . remove people that are ungodly from places of authority. Put them out to pasture.

Rep. Diana Harshbarger, R-Tenn., during the "National Gathering for Prayer & Repentance" at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C.
Right Wing Watch, 2-1-23

[This nation has] lost our way because we have rejected you as Creator, Lord and Savior.

Rep. Mary Miller, R-Ill., who, along with dozens of members of Congress, joined an audience of religious-right activists and Christian nationalists at the Museum of the Bible for a "National Gathering for Prayer and Repentance."
Right Wing Watch, 2-1-23

Clearly, God knows what he's doing. But, many times, it doesn't agree with my expectations or what I would have liked to have happened.

Kirk Cousins, NFL quarterback with the Minnesota Vikings, at the 36th annual Super Bowl Breakfast, an NFL-sanctioned event hosted by the Christian nonprofit Athletes in Action.
Christian Post, 2-11-23

Sickness, disease, pain, suffering and death are a consequence imposed by the creator of complex living organisms.

Republican state Sen. Glenn H. Gruenhagen, in a bill to "advance critical thinking skills" in school.
Friendly Atheist, 2-15-23



Photo: Gage Skidmore CC BY-SA 2.0

Sarah Huckabee Sanders

Most Americans simply want to live their lives in freedom and peace, but we are under attack in a left-wing culture war we didn't start and never wanted to fight. Every day we are told that we must partake in their rituals, salute their flags, and worship their false idols. . . . We know not what the future holds, but we know who holds the future in his hands.

Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, in her rebuttal on behalf of Republicans to President Biden's State of the Union Speech.
Fox News, 2-7-23

We seem to all be practicing the Christian religion, which is important. It's what the nation was founded on, and we need to continue what our founding fathers set into motion. There's a lot more religion in government than anybody is willing to admit.

Beaufort County (N.C.) Board Com-

missioner Hood Richardson, after a complaint led to the board changing how the opening prayer was delivered. The prayer is now given by a local pastor or resident rather than a board member.
WITN News, 2-6-23



Eric Adams

I can't separate my belief because I'm an elected official. When I walk, I walk with God. When I talk, I talk with God. When I put policies in place, I put them in with a God-like approach to them. . . . Don't tell me about no separation of church and state. State is the body, church is the heart. You take the heart out of the body, the body dies.

New York City Mayor Eric Adams, speaking at an interfaith breakfast function.
HuffPost.com, 2-28-23

The Church of England . . . has now departed from the bible and their message is the opposite. They are even offering to bless that sin. That is wrong. As the Church of Uganda, we cannot accept that. God cannot bless what he calls sin.

Archbishop Stephen Samuel Kaziimba Mugalu of Uganda, in his statement condemning the Church of England's decision to offer prayers and liturgies at civil LGBTQ marriages (but still not perform them.) Other African Anglican archbishops joined Kaziimba in saying of the Anglican hierarchy, "we pray for them to repent."
Religion News Service, 2-20-23

I reject that being a Christian nationalist is somehow unseemly or wrong.

Jason Rapert, former Arkansas state senator, now founder and president of the National Association of Christian Lawmakers.
Rolling Stone, 2-23-23

[Annie Laurie] Gaylor, and her gang of godless thugs, were reportedly triggered because the Christian children "participated in the shoebox ministry outreach."

Conservative columnist, author and radio host Todd Starnes, on his radio show discussing the topic of "Atheists shut down school's Christian history class."
ToddStarnes.com, 2-28-23

I can boldly proclaim that I have no love for nonbelievers. I will not pardon any power that threatens to harm the rights of a believer. I'll pray for their total destruction before the "sreekovil" (sanctorum). Everyone should do that.

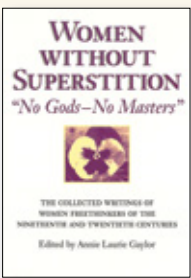
Indian actor-politician Suresh Gopi, during a speech on the occasion of Shivaratri celebrations.
Onmanorama.com, 2-19-23

Women Without Superstition "No Gods—No Masters"

Edited by, Annie Laurie Gaylor

Collected writings of 50 women freethinkers of the 19th & 20th centuries (51 photographs).

—Published by FFRF.
696 pages / HB

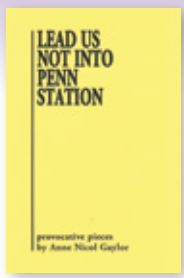


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Lead Us Not Into Penn Station Provocative Pieces

By Anne Gaylor

A must-have for any freethinker, this gracefully readable book contains Gaylor's classic writings.



—Published by FFRF. 80 pages / PB

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Nonbelievers have to opt out of religion

This article first appeared in the Washington Post on Feb. 3 and is reprinted with permission.

By Kate Cohen

If you are a defendant in the state of New York and a judge requires you to attend an addiction recovery program, you have the right to request a secular program — one that does not center on God. Many recovery programs do have religious underpinnings; six of Alcoholics Anonymous’s 12 steps to sobriety refer to a higher “Power” or “God.” But the state must provide a nonreligious option if you ask for one.



Kate Cohen

If you’re a defendant in New York, however, you might not know that. You might think that your only option, if you don’t believe in God, is to pretend you do.

That’s because, despite the promise of our Constitution, we don’t really live in a secular nation. In a secular nation, nonreligious recovery would be the default option, and a citizen who felt the need to seek God’s help would have the right to ask for AA instead.

But in our country, religion is the default, and the burden of opting out — even the burden of knowing you have the right to — falls on the nonbeliever.

The New York Legislature tried to shift the burden a little last year by passing the Nonreligious Recovery Options bill, which required judges to inform defendants of their right to secular treatment. “It should be a priority of the court,” the Legislature said, “to ensure that a defendant’s treatment matches their preferences so they can actually benefit from the treatment.”

Democratic Gov. Kathy Hochul demurred, claiming the law set an “uncomfortable precedent” in which judges might have to inform litigants of “their



Image by Shutterstock

Nonreligious students can opt out of saying the Pledge of Allegiance and its “under God” phrase, but it’s not the default position.

rights to opt out of other mandates.” And so, her veto saved New Yorkers from a dystopian future in which citizens are, willy nilly, informed of all their rights. And it left nonbelievers, once again, with the burden of opting out.

The first time I remember opting out was in elementary school in rural Virginia, when my classmates went to learn about Jesus every week in a trailer off school grounds. I got to stay behind in an empty classroom because I was Jewish.

Now, I’m an atheist and I live in New York state, which requires public schools to lead students in the Pledge of Allegiance every day. In theory, when my children were younger, they had the right to get out from “under God” as long as they didn’t mind being, you know, those kids. The only way not to stand out was to stand and recite, like everyone else.

The Supreme Court doesn’t think I should mind. In 2014, Justice Anthony M. Kennedy, in *Greece v. Galloway*, up-

held the constitutionality of prayer at town board meetings, no matter that religious prayer might exclude some people. “Should nonbelievers choose to exit the room during a prayer they find distasteful,” he wrote, “their absence will not stand out as disrespectful or even noteworthy.” No problem, nonbelievers: You are free to leave.

I am grateful for my civil rights and am keenly aware that many countries afford no such escape clause. But mine is supposed to be a nation whose laws and institutions do not endorse any religion, even as they offer protection to those who believe.

In a secular nation, if your public school required you to get your children vaccinated, but your religious beliefs prevented you from doing so, you could get an exemption — not from lifesaving public health regulations, of course, but from public school.

In a secular nation, if you believed Islam prohibited you from seeing an

“In our country, religion is the default, and the burden of opting out — even the burden of knowing you have the right to — falls on the nonbeliever.”

Kate Cohen is a contributing writer for the Washington Post. She will be speaking during FFRF’s national convention in Madison, Wis., the weekend of Oct. 13-14. See back page for more convention information.

image of the prophet Muhammad, you could choose not to look.

That’s what an art history professor at Hamline University in Minnesota apparently assumed, when she warned students in her syllabus and in her class last fall that she intended to show a 14th-century painting of the prophet. Thinking she was living in a secular nation, she offered her students the chance to opt out and then showed the image. She was fired.

Of course, people can always sue; the professor is. But that seems backward, like having to take special steps to make your phone protect your privacy. Our rights should come standard right out of the box.

In January, Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the National Women’s Law Center filed suit in Missouri, arguing that the state’s extreme abortion ban imposes a narrow religious belief on everyone else. Indeed, lawmakers had cited religion as motivation for restricting the reproductive choices of the people of Missouri, and the law itself refers to “Almighty God” as “the author of life.”

In a secular nation, a legislator who thought abortion was a sin would absolutely have the right not to have one.

In our nation, by contrast, after that religious belief is enshrined into law, someone has to make the legal argument that Missourians “have the absolute right to live free from the religious dictates of others.”

They do — they have that right. We all have that right. It’s right there in the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. But as long as this country’s default setting is religious — both culturally and politically — we have to fight for it.

Thoughts on mortality on my 91st birthday

By James A. Haught

I have just turned 91. It may be my last birthday, or one of a final few, because my actuarial table is relentlessly ticking away.



James A. Haught

I have no fear of death. It’s simply the natural end of every life. It awaits all 8 billion of us. Nobody can escape it. For now, I’ll just keep flailing away, writing as well as I can, until it becomes impossible.

We science-minded people are confident that no heaven or hell lurks thereafter. Every human personality is created by a brain, the most complex object in the universe. When the brain dies, it’s logical that the personality does likewise; it’s not plausible that it would travel out of the dead body and make a magical journey elsewhere.

Literally hundreds of my friends and colleagues have slipped away. They’re so numerous I keep a “gone” list in my computer to remember them all. I can’t stay off the list much longer.

Just before she died of ovarian cancer, one of my Unitarian friends, Marty Wilson, wrote: “I often think of humankind as a long procession whose beginning and end are out of sight. We the living have no control over when or where we enter the procession, or even how long we are part of it, but we do get to choose our marching companions. And we can all exercise some control over what direction the procession takes, what part we play, and how we play it.”

Writer James Baldwin stated in *The Fire Next Time*, “Life is tragic simply because the Earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death,

which is the only fact we have.”

Legendary lawyer Clarence Darrow wrote: “When we fully understand the brevity of life, its fleeting joys and unavoidable pains; when we accept the fact that all men and women are approaching an inevitable doom; the consciousness of it should make us more kindly and considerate of each other. This feeling should make men and women use their best efforts to help their fellow travelers on the road, to make the path brighter and easier ... for the wayfarers who must live a common life and die a common death.”

Here’s a reason I feel inner peace about my approaching end: Our secular humanist cause has won hundreds of victories during my nine decades, and I have a wishful faith that it will continue to win after I’m gone.

The movement surged three centuries ago with the Enlightenment, when radical thinkers challenged the divine right of kings and the stupid tyranny of the church. America’s Founders transformed those ideas into the first modern secular democracy. Ever since, there have been marked improvements in human rights,

increased equality and a better life for everyone. Slavery was wiped out, women gained the right to vote, couples were allowed to use birth control, Social Security pensions were created for retirees, labor unions were allowed to organize, job protections of many sorts developed, gays first escaped prison, then were allowed to marry, stores were allowed to open on the Sabbath, Blacks defeated segregation and won equal legal standing, Medicare and Medicaid brought medicine as a human right, religious indoctrination was banned from public schools, etc., etc. Secular humanists fought for all this progress.

Now, supernatural Christianity is collapsing rapidly in Western democracies. I have hopeful confidence that the struggle to help humanity and wipe out fairy tales will keep on winning, without me.

A final frustration, though: Existentialism says we are doomed to live our entire lives and die without knowing why we are here or why the universe is here. Today, in these superscientific times, we still don’t know, and I’ll never know.

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

Freethought Today Cryptogram

YNFCVBS NF FCBDJE JNCY NHDOF
CYOC JDBD NECTNCNGD OEH ROHD
FDEFD OC CYD CNRD, ATC JDBD
OWFV YVUDWDFFW SJBVEL.
— FCDGDE EVGDWWO

This puzzle is from *Freethinking Cryptograms* by FFRF member Brooks Rimes, available on Amazon.com for \$9.95. See bottom of page for description and hint for this puzzle. Answer is on page 21.

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8		9	10	11	12	
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69						70				71				
72						73				74				

Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

- Across

1. *"On the first day, God created..." - true or ___?

6. *Irreverent Julia Sweeney's TV gig, acr.

9. Cause of Titanic's demise, for short

13. *Atheists Sacco and Vanzetti's home country

14. Gardening tool

15. Half of perimeter, pl.

16. Less bright than supernovae

17. Boiling emotion

18. ___person, city council member

19. *Atheist Ivan ___ of classical conditioning fame

21. *Freethinker Tony ___ of "The Odd Couple" fame

23. Captain's turf

24. Eight bits

25. Like low relief

28. One of Romanov's dynasty

30. Field of grass

35. Again

37. Think, archaic

39. Tall military hat

40. Lake ___caca, Peru

41. 18-wheelers

43. Dutch cheese

44. Muscat resident

46. Use a sieve

47. Have the blues

Down

1. Diver's aid

2. Crowning

3. Groovy lamp

4. Poles and Serbs, e.g.

5. Shoelace passage

6. Inmate's blade

7. And not

8. Openly distrustful

9. Like white-headed eagle

10. Medieval Icelandic literature

11. Cambodian money

12. Young woman

15. Raja's wives

20. Hop-drying kilns

22. Cash machine, acr.

24. Br in Periodic table

25. Relay object

26. Japanese cartoon

27. Bristles

29. Bellicose deity in Greek mythology

31. Throat-clearing sound

32. Carpenter's groove, pl.

33. Giraffe's cousin

34. *March 8, International ___'s Day

36. *#21 Across' first major Broadway play "Inherit the ___"

38. *Bible: "You shall not covet your neighbor's ___...his ox or donkey..."

42. "Up the Down ___case"

45. Get a lungful

49. Beach-goer's possible goal

51. Wanderers

54. Parkinson's drug

56. Female water-elf

57. Gray-haired

58. Egg on

59. Make children

60. "Where's the ___?"

61. One on a list

62. Inconclusive

63. Narrow valley

66. Type of conifer

68. Old fashioned "before"
- # OVERHEARD
- I didn't have any religious construct, but I think nature and God are the same thing.

The mysterious origin of life — science tells us how it happened, prophecy tells us another story. I found that everything in nature — the complexity, the biodiversity, the symbiotic relationships — is the same thing other people attribute to God.

Actor Harrison Ford, in an interview with the Hollywood Reporter.
Fox News, 2-11-23
- The radical transformation of Israel's judicial system that Netanyahu's ultranationalist, ultrareligious coalition is trying to slam through the Knesset could seriously damage Israel's democracy and therefore its close ties to America and democracies everywhere.

Columnist Thomas L. Friedman, criticizing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's radical plans to strip the Israeli Supreme Court of its independence.
New York Times, 2-13-23
- The B.J.P.'s ideology of Hindu primacy has infiltrated the justice system and the media, empowering party supporters to threaten, harass, and attack religious minorities, particularly Muslims, with impunity.

Human Rights Watch report on Hindu nationalism in India, analyzing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.), and its role with Modi in slaughtering over 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, in the Indian state of Gujarat in 2002.
New York Times, 2-16-23
- Indoctrination rarely takes place by allowing the free flow of ideas. Indoctrination instead rather takes places by banning ideas. Celebrating the banning of authors and concepts as "freedom from indoctrination" is as Orwellian as politics gets.

Jason Stanley, in his column, "Banning ideas and authors is not a 'culture war' – it's fascism."
The Guardian, 2-14-23
- Fuck your thoughts and prayers.

Michigan state Rep. Ranjeev Puri, in an official statement, following the shooting that killed three Michigan State University students and injured five others.
Yahoo News, 2-16-23

There is no state — there is no place — that is safe. Everything is at risk right now.

Dr. Jamila Perritt, an ob-gyn and president of Physicians for Reproductive Health, on the surge of more than 300 mostly anti-abortion bills motivated
- by religious opposition to abortion introduced in 40 states, including bills to punish providers.**
New York Times, 2-16-23
- When we're facing down a wave of censorship inspired by religious fervor, is a good time to quash the notion that people have a right to be shielded from discomfiting art. If progressive ideas can be harnessed to censor feminist work because it offends religious sensibilities, perhaps those ideas bear rethinking.

Columnist Michelle Goldberg, writing about the firing of a Hamline University art history professor for showing a 14th century painting of Muhammad in an art history class, and the temporary shrouding of a feminist art show, "Blasphemy X," by Macalester College.
New York Times, 2-14-23
- Continuing to exempt religious activity that can give coverage to abuse is to encourage complicity. As long as religious leaders are seen as trusted adults in the community, they must be held to the standards that come with that privilege and responsibility.

We should be disturbed that those often seen as authorities on morality are not only failing to lead but actively fighting against basic social responsibility.

Kristiana de Leon, in an op-ed, "To know abuse without taking action is to condone abuse," regarding the exemption of "confessionals," also known as clergy-penitent privilege.
Seattle Times, 2-21-23
- Are we just so accustomed to the anti-LGBTQ stances of conservative religious institutions that they don't even register? Are we so used to church-sponsored homophobia that we ignore the vast, forbidding landscape of prejudice while celebrating the tiniest signs of change?

Kate Cohen, in her column, "Why are we so tolerant of church bigotry?"
Washington Post, 3-6-23

I believe very strongly in the separation of church and state not only because it's important to protect people who are of religious minorities, but because religion doesn't do a good job of running a state.

"The Last of Us" creator Craig Mazin.
TheMarySue.com, 3-10-23
- Note to members

For those of you who get the PDF version of Freethought Today, there have been a few changes to the content you can see.

Because of privacy concerns — the PDF can be easily forwarded to non-members — FFRF has stopped including in the PDF version the Black Collar Crime report, names of new Lifetime members, and the names of the Letterbox contributors.

The online version at freethoughttoday.com also follows this protocol. Only the actual print newspaper contains all of these items.

If you would like to continue reading Black Collar Crime, see the names of FFRF's newest Lifetime members, or see the names of those who contributed to our Letterbox, you will need to change your preferences in how you receive Freethought Today.

In order to do that, follow these simple steps: Log into your FFRF.org account. Click on "Update your contact information." Go down to "Deliver Freethought Today by" and click on either "Newspaper by mail" or "Both PDF and paper copy." Click "Submit."
- Cryptogram hint

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

Example:
UOG RLQTM HYVBF DVP SLACN VWGY UOG KJEZ XVI.
THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPS OVER THE LAZY DOG.

This month's clue: H => D .

FFRF STATE/CHURCH VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

No more distribution of bibles at Ala. graduation

FFRF successfully stopped Opelika City Schools in Alabama from distributing bibles at future graduations. FFRF received a complaint from a concerned parent that large envelopes had been handed to graduates after the last graduation ceremony. Reportedly, the envelopes contained Gideon bibles among the contents.

“When a public school distributes religious literature to its students, it entangles itself with that religious message,” wrote FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence to Superintendent Farrell Seymore. “Distributing bibles needlessly alienates students who are non-Christians, including those belonging to the almost 30 percent of Americans who are not religious.”

FFRF received a letter in response from school district legal counsel Robert T. Meadows, stating that, “Gideons has been advised that no bibles will be accepted for distribution from this point forward.”

Church promotion barking up the wrong tree

When a Christian organization began promoting a local church at Davis High School in California, FFRF successfully stepped in and prevented it from occurring again.

On Sept. 21, 2022, the LLC K9 Comfort Ministry reportedly brought a comfort dog to Davis High School. Along with the dog, the ministry handed out materials to students listing the address and website of the church. The use of a comfort dog was justified as “a bridge for compassionate ministry, opening doors for conversation about faith and creating opportunities to share the mercy, compassion, presence and proclamation of Jesus Christ.”

“It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for the district to offer religious leaders unique access to students,” wrote FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line in a letter to Superintendent Matt Best. “While schools can certainly bring in comfort dogs for students, they must not be used as a means for church recruitment and to advance a religious mission.”

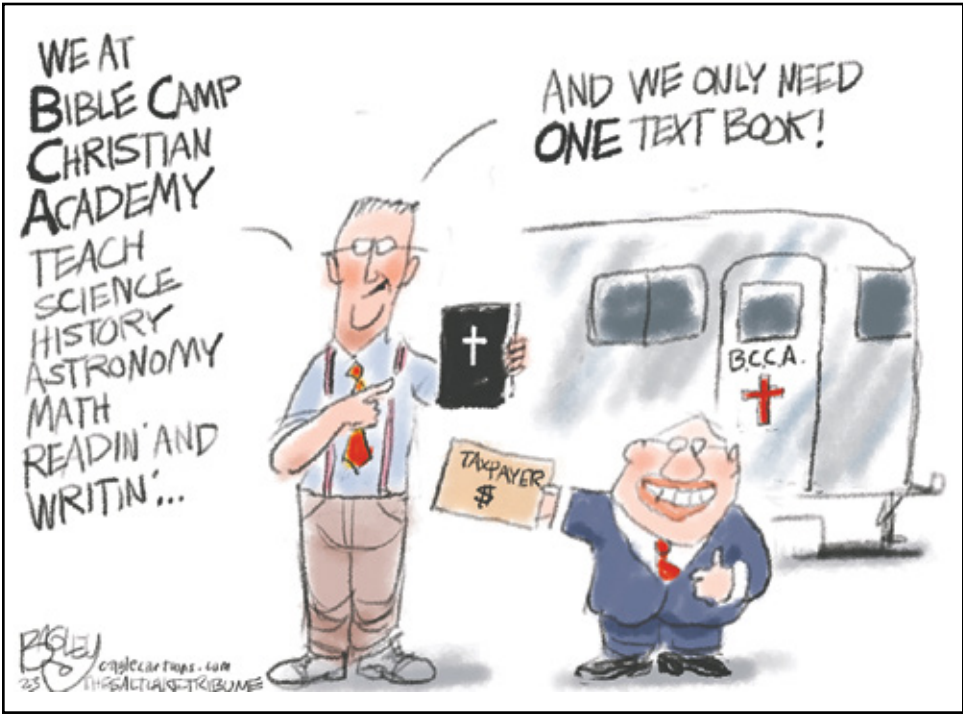
FFRF received a response from Associate Superintendent Laura Juanitas, stating that, “in recognition of your concerns, I have asked the school to stop this activity and the dog will no longer be coming on campus.”

FFRF stops distribution of religious-coded coin

A Washington police department will no longer distribute coins with Christian iconography and bible verses on them after FFRF got involved.

A concerned resident of West Richland, Wash., informed FFRF of a coin that had been minted by the West Richland Police Department. The coin featured a Latin cross on one side, as well as a list of several bible verses on the other side underneath “Chief Tom Grego.”

“While you are certainly entitled to hold whatever religious beliefs you want, you cannot use your position as police chief to advance those beliefs using the



resources of the police department,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote in a letter to Police Chief Tom Grego.

In early February 2023, FFRF received a letter from Bronson Brown, legal counsel representing the West Richland Police Department. Brown assured FFRF that the city took steps to ensure that no city funding was spent to produce the coins, as well as assuring that distribution of the coins had ceased. “The city and Chief Grego never intended to create any divisive message or alienate any portion of city residents,” Brown wrote.

Opening prayers at W.Va. school board halted

The Summers County School Board in W.Va. will no longer open school board meetings with prayer after FFRF responded to a district resident’s complaint.

FFRF was notified that the board had been opening meetings with prayer. The prayers were reportedly undeniably Christian in nature, and being delivered by members of the school board.

“We write to request that the Board immediately cease opening its meetings with prayer in violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Summers County Board of Education President Greg Angell.

FFRF received a letter from Angell in late January, stating that, “The Summers County Board of Education does not institute or schedule prayer during its meetings.”

Religious ‘influencer’ violated school policy

The Clayton County Public Schools in Jonesboro, Ga., properly addressed concerns raised by FFRF regarding a religious speaker proselytizing high school students.

FFRF was informed that, on Jan. 5, “social media influencer” Victoria Rose Waldrip, known online as “Woah Vicky,” was invited to speak to the Jonesboro High School girls basketball team. Reportedly, Waldrip’s speech included promotion of her church, disparaging remarks about the LGBTQ+ community and urging the students to save themselves for marriage. Additionally, Waldrip reportedly spread misinformation involving gay preachers and that molestation caused individuals to “turn gay.”

“We don’t know who was involved in bringing in this religious speaker, but we understand that several of the students involved in this incident have expressed their outrage that it was allowed to occur,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Interim Superintendent Anthony Smith.

FFRF received a response from Smith in late February indicating an investigation was conducted, and Waldrip’s comments were verified to violate the Clayton County Board Policy. “Accordingly, appropriate disciplinary and/or remedial action(s) have been identified,” Smith responded.

FFRF stops Christian class at Ohio school

A legal complaint by FFRF has halted an unconstitutional sectarian Christian class at an elementary school in Leipsic (Ohio) Local School District.

Leipsic Elementary School had reportedly been holding a weekly sectarian Christian class since at least 2018, in which Christian beliefs were taught and promoted. Although it was titled a “Christian History Class,” it was similar to bible study. These classes were held on school grounds during school hours, as well as publicized on the school’s official Facebook page. FFRF was notified about these classes by a concerned parent, who reportedly had to personally request their child not be included, which led to bullying, isolation and even physical assault of the child.

Public schools may not provide religious instruction, FFRF emphasized. A seminal Supreme Court case in 1948 specifically held that religious instruction classes in public schools are unconstitutional. More than 70 years of Supreme Court precedent protects the secular character of public education, as well as the rights of conscience of a captive audience of young students.

“It does not matter that Leipsic Elementary School allows parents to opt their children out of the religious class,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Greg Williamson. “Voluntariness does not excuse the constitutional violation.”

Williamson recently reported back to FFRF that “The Leipsic Local School District will no longer offer the Christian history class on campus during the school day.

“A public elementary school is no place for bible study or any other religious evangelism,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Schools exist to educate, not indoctrinate. We’re glad the district is now ensuring a captive audience of small children will no longer be proselytized.”

Religious signs removed from OK city property

FFRF successfully persuaded Lawton, Okla., to remove several disrespectful religious displays from city property.

A local atheist veteran notified FFRF of the unconstitutional displays, which included a sign on the information desk of City Hall that read “One died for your soul and the other died for your freedom” picturing a soldier and a Latin cross.

FFRF asked for the displays to be removed, noting they violate the constitutional separation between state and church, as well as to respect the religious and nonreligious diversity of Lawton’s residents, including its veterans.

FFRF received a positive reply from City Attorney John Ratliff shortly after it expressed concern.

“Upon receipt of your letter, the religious signage was immediately removed from City Hall and city property,” Ratliff wrote. “The city of Lawton greatly respects the religious diversity of its residents, including its veterans.”

FFRF keeps religion out of Chino Valley schools

The Freedom From Religion Foundation commends the Chino Valley school district in California for acknowledging a recent First Amendment violation by a board member — and working to correct it.

Two concerned Chino Valley USD employees reported to FFRF that school board member James Na distributed Christmas cards with a religious message to employees, which were printed and delivered to teachers’ boxes using school resources. The card included a poem advancing Christianity: “May peace be before you at every meal /And faith ring through every song /For Christ is alive the light of the world /May he bless you all season long.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote a letter to the school district’s legal counsel. “As the Supreme Court has put it, ‘The First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.’”

As the cards were produced and distributed using school funds, and created by a school board member, FFRF was concerned that the Chino Valley USD was actively promoting Christianity.

The district’s legal counsel has responded to FFRF’s concern in a sincerely remedying way.

According to a letter from the legal counsel, the district conducted a direct investigation, and concluded that the card should not have been distributed using district resources. Additionally, FFRF was assured that the district has taken steps to prevent future such incidents.



FFRF supports new rules for faith-based providers

FFRF has signaled its backing of new rules for handling of government services by faith-based providers — while suggesting how they can be further improved.

“These proposed rules largely undo the damage of the current regulations, which are hostile to true religious liberty, contribute to a dangerous mixture of religion and government, and sacrifice the well-being of service beneficiaries for no good reason,” FFRF Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne writes to various federal departments in a formal comment on the Biden administration’s proposed rule changes. “We appreciate the agencies’ efforts to instead strengthen protections for nonreligious beneficiaries who object to the religious beliefs or practices of their government-funded service provider.”

The new rules will positively impact nonreligious beneficiaries in particular. Nonreligious Americans are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification — 35 percent of Americans are non-Christians, and this includes the more than three-in-ten adult Americans (29 percent) who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.

FFRF supports, for instance, the requirement that religious service providers give beneficiaries clear notice of their rights and assist beneficiaries in finding alternative providers when requested to do so. This requirement restores an important protection for beneficiaries and creates no substantial burden on providers. Fundamentally, this proposed rule corrects the governmental perspective by focusing primarily on the rights of beneficiaries rather than sacrificing those rights based on the religious preferences of service providers.

The proposed rule narrows the religious exemption that inexplicably allows for employment discrimination. It would be preferable to eliminate this unwarranted government-funded discrimination entirely, but the proposed rules at least move in the right direction.

However, FFRF has some recommendations on how to make things even better. “The rules could be strengthened by prohibiting employment discrimination with federal contracts and, most importantly, by providing a clear and effective enforcement mechanism for these rules,” it states in its communiqué to the Biden administration.

And last but not the least, the one glaring weakness of the proposed rules is the lack of an effective enforcement mechanism. FFRF regularly receives complaints from beneficiaries who are harmed by faith-based organizations contracting with the federal government. Instead of coming to a private nonprofit organization like FFRF, these beneficiaries should be made aware of a transparent complaint process, and agencies should have the ability to promptly and effectively enforce these rules against faith-based organizations that disregard them. Even the strongest beneficiary protections would be hobbled without robust enforcement.

FFRF asks council to remove courthouse religious display

FFRF is urging the Laurens County Council to remove a Ten Commandments display from its courthouse.

A concerned resident reported to the national state/church watchdog that the county courthouse has a Ten Commandments plaque on display in the hallway next to its courtroom. According to the display, the plaque was erected by the Laurens County Council in 2001. FFRF is calling on the county to remove the plaque immediately.

It is well settled that public property cannot be used to advance or affiliate the government with religion, FFRF reminds the County Council. A Ten Commandments display in a county courthouse violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

In *McCreary County v. ACLU* (2005), the Supreme Court ruled that displays of the Ten Commandments in two Kentucky courthouses violated the Constitution. The court discussed at length the requirement of government neutrality on matters of religion.

“When a government body takes the initiative to display a religious text in the hallway of the county’s courthouse, it demonstrates a plain and undeniable preference for religion over non-religion, and for those religions which subscribe to the Ten Commandments



above all other faiths,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line writes to County Council Chair Brown Patterson.

FFRF states that by including an explicitly religious display in the courthouse, this needlessly alienates all non-Christians, including the approximately 30 percent of Americans who identify as religiously unaffiliated.

“The First Commandment alone is reason why government buildings may not endorse the Commandments,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Americans are free to have any god they like, as many gods as they like — or none at all! We live under the First Amendment, not the First Commandment.”

FFRF to Ga. school board: No more Christian prayers

FFRF is urging the immediate end to the practice of an opening religious invocation at meetings of the Ben Hill County (Ga.) Board of Education.

FFRF received a complaint from a community member reporting that the board has been opening every meeting with a sectarian Christian prayer. This is confirmed by the board’s agenda, which indicates each meeting begins with an “invocation.”

“We ask that the board immediately cease imposing prayer upon students, staff, and community members, and instead consider a moment of silence or no board-sponsored religious activity at all, which would comply with the Establishment Clause and protect the constitutional rights of students and parents,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line writes.

FFRF notes that the Supreme Court has struck down prayers at school-sponsored events multiple times, ruling that school-sponsored prayer violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment by showing governmental favoritism toward religion. The Ben Hill County Board of Education is additionally promoting and showing favoritism for Chris-

tianity over other religions.

FFRF has successfully sued in the past to keep prayer out of school board meetings, as seen in its case, *FFRF v. Chino Valley Unified School District Board of Education*. The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in 2018 ruled the board’s promotion of Christianity unconstitutional.

It is coercive, insensitive and intimidating to force nonreligious individuals to show obeisance to or participate in a practice they do not believe in, or else “out themselves” as religious nonconformists, FFRF emphasizes. While school board members are perfectly free to practice their beliefs on their own time, using their civil powers to coerce community members to follow them in prayer is unconstitutional, and alienates the 37 percent of Americans identifying as non-Christian, including the nearly one-third of American adults who today identify as “atheists, agnostics or nothing in particular.”

In order to keep the Ben Hill County Board of Education in line with the Constitution, the practice of opening prayer must immediately be ended, FFRF states.

Freethought Matters

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

Watch our show every Sunday!

Photo by Chris Line

Visit FFRF's YouTube Channel to watch the shows.

Freethought Matters TV talk show airs in:

Chicago	WPWR-CW	(Ch. 50)	9 am
Denver	KWGN-CW	(Ch. 2)	7 am
Houston	KIAH-CW	(Ch. 39)	11 am
Los Angeles	KCOP-MY	(Ch. 13)	8:30 am
Madison, Wis.	WISC-TV	(Ch. 3)	11 pm
Minneapolis	WFTC-TV	(Ch. 29)	7:30 am
New York City	WPIX-IND	(Ch. 11)	10 am
Phoenix	KASW-CW	(Ch. 61 or 6 or 1006 for HD)	8:30 am
Portland, Ore.	KRCW-CW	(Ch. 32)	9 am
		(703 on Comcast for HD or Ch. 3)	
Sacramento	KQCA-MY	(Ch. 58)	8:30 am
San Francisco	KICU-IND	(Ch. 36)	10 am
Seattle	KONG-IND	(Ch. 16 or Ch. 106 on Comcast)	8 am
Washington, D.C.	WDCW-CW	(Ch. 50, 23, 3)	8 am

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

‘Action Fund’

Continued from page 1

trust in reason, science and America’s godless Constitution and want Congress, state legislatures, public officials and our courts to:

- Keep religion out of government and social policy
- Keep religion out of public schools
- Keep religion out of bedrooms, personal lives and health care decisions, including when or

whether to have children, and whom to love or marry.

- Use tax dollars only for evidence-based, not faith-based purposes.

True religious freedom and the separation of state and church is under attack. FFRF Action Fund’s work — now more than ever — is crucial to ensure the freedom of conscience of all Americans.

For more information, please visit FFRF Action Fund’s website: ffrfaction.org.

‘Daily Show’ co-creator to speak at convention

Lizz Winstead, political satirist and co-creator of Comedy Central’s “Daily Show,” has been added to the list of speakers and awardees for FFRF’s convention.

FFRF’s 46th annual convention will be held at the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center in Madison, Wis. The city is home to FFRF’s headquarters, Freethought Hall.

The convention will be held over two full days on Friday, Oct. 13 and Saturday, Oct. 14. (An optional early registration and late afternoon tour of Freethought Hall, with its auditorium, library and studio, will take place that Thursday, Oct. 12.) The annual membership and State Representatives meeting will take place Sunday morning, Oct. 15.

For registration and hotel information, please turn to the back page.

Winstead, who will be given FFRF’s “Emperor Has No Clothes Award,” was co-creator and head writer of Comedy Central’s “The Daily Show,” forever changing the way Americans get their news. She also co-founded Air America Radio in 2004, co-hosting “Unfiltered” every morning with Rachel Maddow and hip hop legend Chuck D. Her book of essays, “Lizz Free or Die,” was published by Riverhead Books (2012). She writes satiric commentary for a number of newspapers, does regular commentary on MSNBC and makes appearances on HBO, CNN and Comedy Central Presents. A prominent abortion rights activist, Lizz is one of the founders of Abortion Access



Lizz Winstead



Photo by Chris Line

The Godless Gospel singers first performed in 2022 and will do a 2023 encore.

Front, a team of comedians, writers and producers who use humor to destigmatize abortion and expose the extremist forces working to destroy reproductive rights access in all 50 states.

Other convention speakers, award winners and entertainers will include:

The Godless Gospel, which performed for the first time at FFRF’s convention in San Antonio in 2022.

Emily Olson, a member of the city council in Owosso, Mich., a town of 15,000 residents, will receive FFRF’s “Nothing Fails Like Prayer” Award. She is small business owner and new member of the city council. Her refusal to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance and her brave motion to discontinue prayers to open city council meetings failed by a vote of 5-2, and resulted in a serious death threat.

Kate Cohen, who will receive FFRF’s “Freethought Heroine” Award. She is a



Kate Cohen

columnist for the Washington Post, where she has written about America’s reflexive deference to religion and its effect on education, health care and human rights. Kate is the author of *We of Little Faith: An Atheist Comes Clean (And Why You Should Too)*, forthcoming from Godine Press. She will sign copies of her book at the convention.

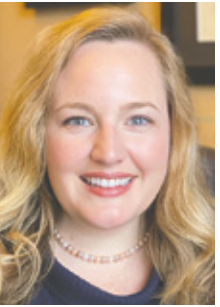
Mary Ziegler, a noted abortion rights expert and advocate. Her newest book is *Roe: A History of a National Obsession*. Ziegler is a law professor at the University of California-Davis and will receive FFRF’s “Forward Award,” given to those who are moving society forward. She will also sign copies of her books.

There will be a panel of secular, nonreligious state legislators. Already confirmed for this panel are Minnesota state Rep. **Mike Freiberg** and Wisconsin state Rep. **Kelda Roys**.



Mike Freiberg

Freiberg has served as a Minnesota state representative since 2013, after serving on the Golden Valley (Minn.) City Council for nine years. He is a founding member of the Secular Government Caucus. As a legislator, he has focused on issues related to health care, local government, the environment and election policy. Freiberg works as an attorney for a nonprofit organization committed to improving public health. He has also worked as an adjunct law professor, teaching courses in legislation and public health law.



Kelda Roys

Roys, who was first elected to the Wisconsin state Assembly in 2008, served as minority caucus chair in 2011 and was elected to the state Senate in 2020. She has worked as an attorney, a small business owner, and former nonprofit executive. She has served as a board member on a number of diverse civic and nonprofit groups, ranging from Common Cause of Wisconsin to Madison Repertory Theatre. She currently serves on a number of committees, such as Administrative Rules, Finance and Judiciary.

FFRF puts ‘indoctrination’ ad in Florida papers

FFRF ran a full-page ad in both the Tallahassee Democrat and the Miami Herald on March 19 with a surprising headline: “Yes, Governor DeSantis — You’re Right: Our schools *are* for education, not indoctrination.”

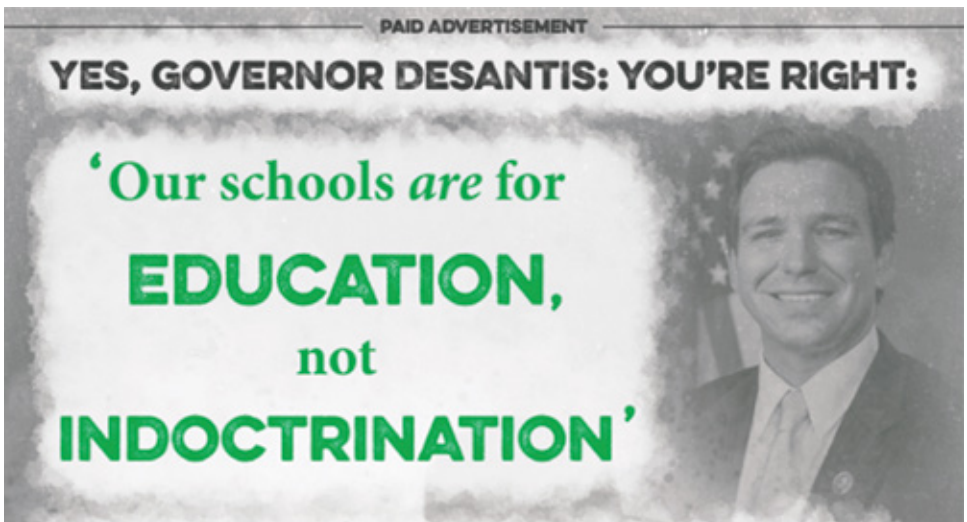
But there the agreement ends.

It is DeSantis, FFRF charges, who wants to use public schools to indoctrinate Florida students. He is censoring books, free inquiry and classroom debate over gender, sexual orientation, race and Black American history. He’s allowing a minority of extremists to impose their views on other parents with his so-called “Parents Bill of Rights.” For good measure, FFRF mentions proposals to hobble freedom of speech and the press.

DeSantis notably has decreed sev-

eral times that “our rights come from God, not government.” Au contraire, FFRF says. “Gov. DeSantis, our rights come from ‘We the People,’ not your god.” While FFRF concurs with DeSantis that “The Founders rejected the divine rights of kings,” FFRF’s ad reminds him that “they threw out divine rights altogether” by adopting an entirely godless Constitution.

While Desantis has oft-repeated that “Florida is the place where woke goes to die,” FFRF urges Floridians to “wake up.” Exhorts FFRF: “Don’t let Florida become the state where the First Amendment goes to die.” As DeSantis promotes his book, “The Courage to Be Free,” FFRF urges Florida citizens to “embrace the courage to be free . . . from inquisitional intrusion into free inquiry and debate, what students may read, learn and how they grow into themselves in our public schools and



universities.”

DeSantis won’t “say gay,” the ad charges, but he does say “God” altogether too much in his official capacity, thereby entangling religion with government and public schools, says An-

nie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president.

FFRF urges Floridians to “Help FFRF keep our government and public schools free from religious control, indoctrination and censorship.”

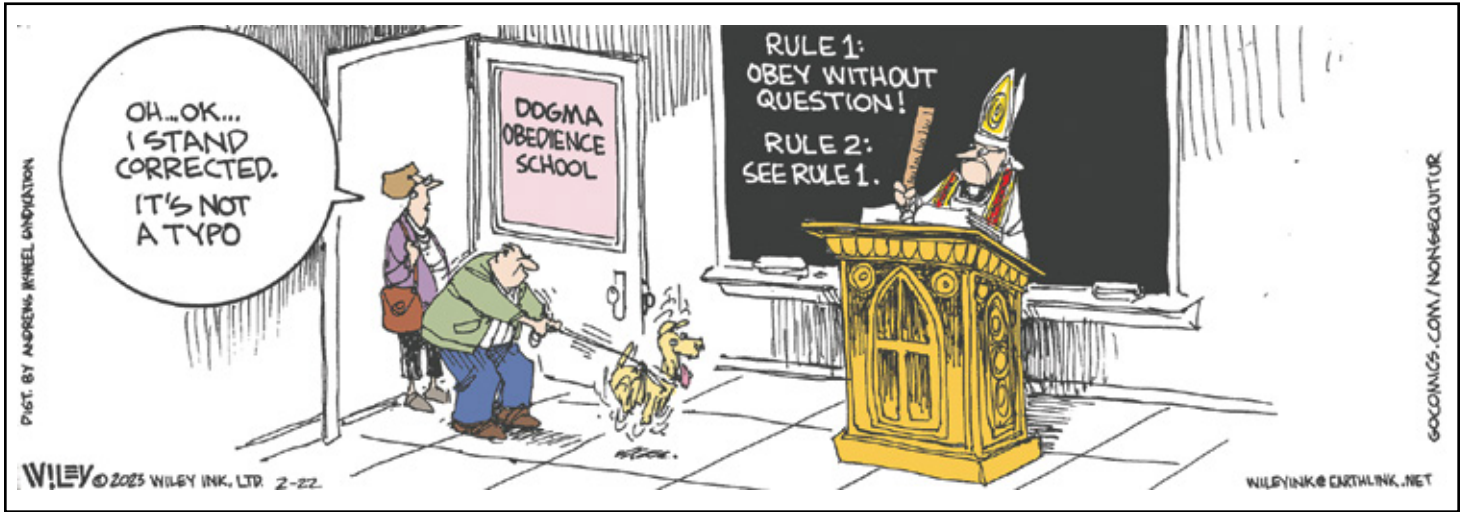
Just Pretend: A Book For Young Freethinkers

By Dan Barker
Illustrated by Kati Treu

Revised and adorably illustrated classic. This fun book explores myths and religion from a freethought point of view, and promotes critical thinking.

Color Edition! Published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online
shop.ffrf.org



IN THE NEWS

Judge: Funds can be used for religious schools

Vermont must reimburse parents denied state tuition benefits based on their decision to send their children to a religious school, per a settlement approved by a federal judge on Feb. 16.

Under the settlement, the state is prohibited from continuing to deny parents access to tuition based on a school’s “religious status, affiliation, beliefs, exercise, or activities,” and residents of districts that previously denied funds on this basis must be reimbursed. District Judge Christina Reiss cited the Supreme Court’s ruling last summer in *Carson v. Makin*, a case that similarly found Maine could not exclude religious schools from its tuition program without violating First Amendment religious liberty protections.

Vermont’s town tuitioning program, like Maine’s, exists to help educate children in rural areas where public schools may not exist or cover all grade levels. Where the district has no available option in a town, it pays to send students to a private or public school of the parent’s choice.

Tennessee to insert religion into government

The Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, the religious arm of Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee’s administration, is on the verge of getting state money to fund operations and provide grants to groups across the state.

The House Departments and Agencies Subcommittee approved HB 327, sending it to the State Government Committee for a Feb. 15 vote.

The measure removes the requirement that nonprofit partners use their own revenue to cover costs and ends a prohibition on a state employee benefiting from the nonprofit partner’s activities.

The governor put \$1.2 million into his fiscal 2023-24 budget plan to run the office.

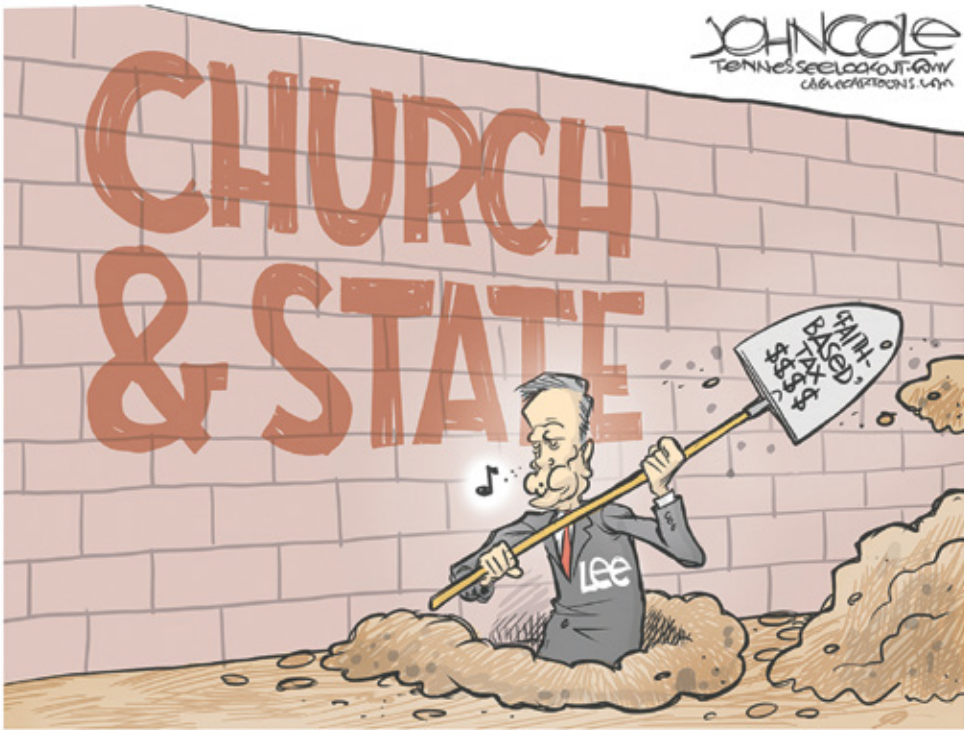
After state Rep. Jason Zachary argued the U.S. Constitution does not include language on the separation of church and state, state Rep. Bill Beck replied — referring to the colonists’ escape to pursue religious freedom centuries ago — “This is not England, this is the reason we left England.”

S.D. law will force trans kids to detransition

South Dakota is the first state to pass legislation that would effectively force trans kids to detransition. The legislation bans all gender-affirming care for patients under 18 years of age.

Republican Gov. Kristi Noem signed the bill into law Feb. 13. South Dakota’s law is the first of its kind: Health care professionals have until the end of the year to stop treatment for patients currently receiving gender-affirming care, from hormone therapy and surgery to puberty blockers. Doctors who don’t comply will be at risk of losing their medical license or could be sued.

Last February, South Dakota was the first state to pass a law banning transgender women and girls from competing on sports teams consistent with their gender, according to CNN.



Catholics seek loophole in child abuse reporting

As Washington state lawmakers look to advance legislation that would require clergy to report child abuse or neglect, the Catholic Church’s lobbying arm in the state has come out in support of the bills — but only if they provide a loophole for confessions.

Two bills in the state Legislature — House Bill 1098 and Senate Bill 5280 — would add clergy to the list of mandatory reporters of abuse or neglect. Currently, Washington is one of a handful of states not to list clergy as such.

But debate has begun to swirl over whether Washington should keep a clergy-penitent privilege, which allows clergy to withhold information revealed during confession or another privileged conversation. Child advocates argue it provides a gaping loophole allowing churches to hide sexual abuse by loosely defining certain communications as protected.

San Diego diocese may declare bankruptcy

The Roman Catholic Diocese of San Diego said Feb. 10 it may declare bankruptcy in the coming months as it faces “staggering” legal costs in dealing with some 400 lawsuits alleging priests and others sexually abused children.

Bishop Robert McElroy said the cases were filed after California lifted a statute of limitations on childhood sexual abuse claims. Most of the alleged abuse cited in the suits took place 50 to 75 years ago, and the earliest claim dates to 1945, said Kevin Eckery, communications director for the diocese.

Eckery predicted that it would cost the diocese \$550 million to settle the cases, none of which has gone to trial.

Bill would ban teaching of scientific theories

A bill in the Montana state Legislature seeks to ban the teaching of scientific theories because, according to the bill’s sponsor, it may teach children things that aren’t true.

More than 20 people testified against Senate Bill 235, concerned that it could keep teachers from including gravitational theory, evolution and cell theory.

The bill is sponsored by freshman state Sen. Daniel Emrich, who said in

his testimony that the bill would make sure students are taught what a scientific fact is.

The committee did not take immediate action on the bill.

35% want kids to have same religious beliefs

About a third (35 percent) of U.S. parents with children under 18 say it’s extremely or very important to them that their kids have similar religious beliefs to their own as adults, according to a recent Pew Research Center survey. But attitudes on this question vary by the religious affiliation of the parents.

White evangelical Protestant parents (70 percent) are twice as likely as U.S. parents overall to say it’s extremely or very important that their children grow up to have religious beliefs that are similar to their own. Only 8 percent of religiously unaffiliated parents — those who describe their religious views as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular” — say the same.

Overall, parents are more likely to say it’s important that their children share their religious beliefs as adults than to say the same about their kids’ political views. Just 16 percent of parents say it’s extremely or very important that their children grow up to have political views that are similar to their own.

Atheists, ‘very religious’ at bottom of dating pool

Single Americans who describe themselves as “very religious” could struggle to find a match on the dating market, according to new research.

The Survey Center on American Life found that 42 percent of U.S. adults are less likely to date someone who describes themselves that way, compared to 20 percent who would be more interested in such a match.

However, not believing in God is an even bigger liability for single adults, since nearly half of Americans (49 percent) are less likely to date someone who identifies as an atheist. Only 12 percent say not believing in God would make them more inclined to date someone.

Many more religiously unaffiliated adults express concern about dating a very religious person (76 percent) than express heightened interest in dating someone who doesn’t believe in God (31 percent).

Pakistani mob hangs man over blasphemy charge

A mob of Muslims descended on a police station in Pakistan Feb. 11, dragged a man out, and lynched him outside for allegedly desecrating a copy of the Quran.

Senior police officer Babar Sarfaraz Alpa said the man — only identified as Waris — had been in police custody after allegedly posting images of himself, his wife and a knife on several pages of Islam’s holy book. Alpa said Waris desecrated the Quran and people who saw it grabbed him and started beating him. However, police rescued Waris and took him into custody.

Alpa said an enraged mob of hundreds stormed the police station where some protesters used a wooden ladder to climb a wall and opened the main gate for the angry mob. He said the group ransacked the entire police station and took Waris from his cell.

Charges of blasphemy carry the death penalty under Pakistani law.

Dems condemn ‘white religious nationalism’

The Democratic National Committee passed a resolution condemning “white religious nationalism,” declaring that “theocracy is incompatible with democracy and religious freedom.”

The resolution was approved Feb. 11 as party officials met in Philadelphia. The resolution linked forms of religious nationalism to racist ideologies, arguing that “one of many heinous elements of white nationalism is its perversion of religion to make their hateful message more palatable.”

The authors noted that faith leaders from across the religious spectrum have condemned religious nationalism — particularly Christian nationalism or white Christian nationalism — in recent years. They said its influence was visible during the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

SBC ousts megachurch for having woman pastor

The Southern Baptist Convention on Feb. 14 ousted its second-largest congregation — Saddleback Church, the renowned California megachurch founded by pastor and author Rick Warren — for having a woman pastor.

The vote by the convention’s Executive Committee culminates growing tension between the nation’s largest Protestant denomination — which officially opposes women as pastors — and a congregation whose story has been one of the biggest church-growth successes of modern times.

The committee cited Saddleback’s having “a female teaching pastor functioning in the office of pastor,” an allusion to Stacie Wood, wife of the current lead pastor of Saddleback, Andy Wood.

The Executive Committee took the vote without public discussion after meeting in executive session.

Arizona House votes to require pledge in school

Arizona lawmakers voted Feb. 21 to require students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance each day.

Existing law spells out that schools

have to set aside time each day “for students who wish to recite the pledge.” But HB 2523, approved by the House on a 31-29 party-line vote, adds language that says each student “shall recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States flag during this time.”

The only exceptions would be for students who have a written request from a parent to opt out, or for students who are at least 18, who could refuse. The measure now goes to the Senate.

Teaching of ID gets OK from W.Va. committee

The Senate Education Committee in West Virginia passed a bill on Feb. 21 that would allow the teaching of “intelligent design.”

SB 619 would let teachers in public schools and charter schools teach intelligent design as a theory of how the universe and humanity came to exist.

Committee chair Amy Grady is lead sponsor and told the committee that the idea was brought to her by student Hayden Hodge.

Citing writings by intelligent design advocate Stephen Meyer, Hodge said the theory challenges some aspects of evolution; in particular, it challenges the idea that change is blind and undirected.

Much of the discussion dwelt on the 2005 Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District case where a federal judge said intelligent design is religious and ruled against the school district mandating its instruction.

In U.S., strong support for abortion rights

Nearly two-thirds of Americans support legal abortion, including those who are religious, according to a new study by the PRRI.

Those views have not moved much since the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade.

Majorities of religious Americans also support legal abortion. The outliers are white evangelicals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Latter-day Saints and Hispanic Protestants.

The survey also finds overwhelming opposition to a federal abortion ban. Just 12 percent of Americans said Congress should pass a national law banning abortion. In fact, 53 percent of Americans say Congress should pass a national law preserving a right to abortion.

“Support for banning the procedure is not popular at all with most Americans, not even Republicans,” said Melissa Deckman, CEO of PRRI.

Today, 64 percent of Americans say abortion should be legal in most or all cases, up from 55 percent in 2010.

Mass killings linked to extremism has spiked

The number of U.S. mass killings linked to extremism over the past decade was at least three times higher than the total from any other 10-year period since the 1970s, according to a report by the Anti-Defamation League.

The report also found that all extremist killings identified in 2022 were linked to right-wing extremism, with an especially high number linked to white supremacy. They include a racist mass shooting in Buffalo, N.Y., that left 10 Black shoppers dead and a mass shooting that killed five people at an LGBT nightclub in Colorado Springs, Colo.



Between two and seven domestic extremism-related mass killings occurred every decade from the 1970s to the 2000s, but in the 2010s that number skyrocketed to 21, the report found.

The trend has since continued with five domestic extremist mass killings in 2021 and 2022, as many as there were during the first decade of the new millennium.

The number of victims has risen as well. Between 2010 and 2020, 164 people died in ideological extremist-related mass killings, according to the report. That’s much more than in any other decade except the 1990s, when the bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City killed 168 people.

McCarrick tells court he’s incompetent for trial

Attorneys for former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, 92, said that he’s no longer mentally competent to stand trial for child sex abuse and that the charges should be dismissed, according to a report in the Washington Post.

In the motion filed Feb. 27, the lawyers said that he has “significant, worsening and irreversible dementia” and that, thus, his constitutional rights would be violated if a trial went ahead.

The three counts of indecent assault and battery, based on allegations that McCarrick molested a 16-year-old family friend at a Wellesley College wedding reception in 1974, are the only criminal charges he faces. Fourteen minors and at least five adults have accused the former D.C. archbishop of sexual misconduct. The first one came in 2018, shocking the church. But because of statutes of limitation for alleged incidents, it was long assumed that McCarrick would never be criminally charged.

OK AG: No funds for religious charter schools

Oklahoma Attorney General Gentner Drummond withdrew an opinion issued by his predecessor that enabled state-funded religious schools. The opinion was originally issued by then-Oklahoma Attorney General John O’Connor in December 2022.

“Religious liberty is one of our most fundamental freedoms,” Drummond wrote, announcing his withdrawal of the opinion. “It allows us to worship according to our faith, and to be free from any duty that may conflict with our faith. The opinion as issued by my predecessor misuses the concept of religious liberty by employing it as a means to justify state-funded

religion.”

The Statewide Virtual Charter Board is currently considering an application for a religious virtual charter school in Oklahoma City. Drummond said that approval of an application that is overtly religious in its teachings and operations will set a “dangerous precedent.”

Christian shelter sues over hiring practices

In Washington, the Yakima Union Gospel Mission filed a federal lawsuit on March 2 against state officials to protect its constitutional right to hire employees who share the ministry’s religious beliefs.

Mission officials say recent changes to the Washington Law Against Discrimination have unraveled protections allowing religious organizations to carry out their beliefs through services they provide.

The mission requires its employees to abide by Christian beliefs, including abstaining from sexual conduct outside biblical marriage between one man and one woman.

Named in the lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court are state Attorney General Bob Ferguson, state Human Rights Commission Executive Director Andreta Armstrong and Human Rights Commissioners Deborah Cook, Guadalupe Gamboa, Jeff Sbaih and Han Tan.

Ferguson released a statement accusing attorneys representing the mission of being on an anti-LGBTQ crusade.

“We routinely defeat the Alliance Defending Freedom in court. We are not investigating Union Gospel Mission. Consequently, I can only assume that this anti-LGBTQ law firm is desperate for any way to push its extreme theories in court,” the statement said.

Ala. bill would protect student-led prayer

An Alabama lawmaker wants public schools to allow religious prayer to be broadcast through microphones and public address systems.

Alabama House Bill 35 states: “A local board of education shall allow any student or students who are leading a prayer pursuant to this section to use school property, such as a microphone or public address system, to facilitate the prayer and communicate the prayer to those in attendance.”

The bill also states that no board of education or association inside or outside of Alabama “may prohibit, impede or deter a student-initiated and student-led voluntary prayer.”

In 2022, the Freedom from Religion Foundation complained about broadcasted prayers before school football games in Jefferson County. The organization claimed the practice forced religion on nonreligious attendees. Jefferson County Schools initially said it would stop the practice. Superintendent Walter Gonsoulin later said he planned to still let students offer voluntary prayers.

The U.S. Supreme Court banned school-sponsored prayers and bible readings in the 1960s, but federal policy still protects voluntary prayer that does not disrupt instruction.

Pro-LGBTQ Christian school forced to close

A conflict over what it means to be Christian is forcing a school in Kansas City, Mo., to close.

Urban Christian Academy is a private, K-8 school with an enrollment of 100 that describes itself as providing “a tuition-free, high-quality, Christ-centered education for low-income students.”

The school’s mission statement stresses inclusivity in general terms, noting that following Jesus “opens up doors and makes room at the table.” But last year it added a paragraph to its website, which read in part, “We are an affirming school. We stand with the LGBTQIA+ community and believe in their holiness. We celebrate the diversity of God’s creation in all its varied and beautiful forms.”

According to the school, that update prompted donors to stop contributing, many of them citing their interpretation of Christianity as the reason. Now, UCA has announced it will close at the end of the school year due to the loss of financial support.

Messages from individuals were often blunt. One read, “Do not call yourself a Christian school if you are affirming sin. Jesus died to set us free from sin, not so we can die in it. You abuse kids by telling them sin is good. You are wicked.”

Religious freedom rule may be rescinded by Biden

The Biden administration’s Education Department has recommended rescinding a portion of the so-called “Free Inquiry Rule” related to the religious freedom debate within institutions of higher education.

“The department proposes to rescind the regulations because they are not necessary to protect the First Amendment right to free speech and free exercise of religion; have created confusion among institutions; and prescribe an unduly burdensome role for the department to investigate allegations regarding treatment of religious student organizations,” it said in an announcement in February.

The Education Department wants to remove portions of the rule about public student religious organizations at some colleges and universities that call for the department to enforce grant conditions related to adherence to First Amendment principles by those groups if they receive a grant from the department or a state-related program.

The department said it has heard concerns from faith-based and civil rights organizations worried that aspects of the rule could allow discrimination against “vulnerable and marginalized students,” including LGBTQ students, while other faith groups argue those parts of the rule “ensure religious students feel welcome on public college campuses.”

Rep. Jamie Raskin convention remarks

‘We’ve got to stand strong for reason’

These are the prepared remarks given by U.S. Rep. Jamie Raskin via a pre-recorded video to the FFRF convention on Oct. 28, 2022.

By Jamie Raskin

Hey, everybody, it’s Congressman Jamie Raskin from my congressional district. Sending greetings to all my friends in San Antonio at the FFRF convention. And thrilled you’re there and fighting for freedom and democracy and progress in Texas and supporting all of our friends there. We’re in some tough fights.



Jamie Raskin

I’m a founding member of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, which promotes public policy on the basis of reason, science and moral values and protects the secular character of our government and the rights of religious free exercise for everyone. I should start out by saying that there’s no freedom for religion or freedom of religion unless there’s freedom from religion. Because what happens in a theocratic state, one captures the power and uses it to stop the free exercise of everybody else. That’s the history whenever we allow one church to capture state power. Then it oppresses and



Rep. Jamie Raskin speaks via pre-recorded video to the crowd at FFRF’s national convention on Oct. 28, 2022, in San Antonio.

marginalizes and extinguishes the other religious sects, as well as the rights of freethinkers in the society. The cause that you have assembled for is of essential importance to American constitutional democracy. Our framers were Enlightenment liberals who rebelled against thousands of years of theocracy and religious domination of government and inquisition and crusades and witchcraft trials and all of their maladies that come from allowing particular religious sects or cults to take over state power. America was founded on the principle of the separation of church and state. That was the great breakthrough and epiphany and idea

of Ben Franklin and Thomas Paine and James Madison and those who fought for an Enlightenment Constitution. We’re still in the struggle for that today. It seems like a week doesn’t go by when one of my colleagues doesn’t get up on the floor of the House and starts denouncing the Supreme Court’s decision in Engel v. Vitale and says that was the moral downfall of America when it banned prayer in the public schools. I always need to point out at that moment that the Supreme Court never banned prayer in public schools. As long as there are pop math quizzes, there will be prayer in the public schools. And Engel v. Vitale was actually the beginning

of muscular enforcement of what Jefferson, in his famous letter to the Danbury Baptists, called “the wall of separation between church and state.” So, we’re still fighting for that every day. We are fighting against the theocrats and the autocrats and the kleptocrats — all trying to overthrow American democracy. We have to hang tough against the forces of white Christian nationalism that arrayed against us alongside the Proud Boys and the 3 Percenters and the militia groups and the QAnon networks. We’ve got to stand strong for reason, we’ve got to stand strong for science, we’ve got to stand strong for constitutional democracy and we’ve got to stand strong for progress — empirical progress for everyone in the country. I want to thank you guys for hanging tough for those basic organizing principles of democracy and civilization. Overhanging everything is the threat of climate change. We have no hope of turning things around on climate change and saving our species if we can’t operate based on science and reason. And we’re not going to be able to do that until we rescue our democracy from the clutches of those who would try to devour it. That means the theocrats and the kleptocrats and all those in league against freedom and democracy in America. Hang tight, everyone. Thank you for the fight, and I look forward to hearing about all the things that have taken place at your conference.

What’s wrong with being a ‘cafeteria Klansman’?

By Roger Lindsay

A relative once told me he is a “cafeteria Catholic,” meaning that while being an active, contributing member, he follows church doctrines with which he agrees but does not support other, harsher ones.



Roger Lindsay

This conversation was during a pleasant meal out, not a time for debate, and I only remarked that his own church wouldn’t officially recognize his selectivity as appropriate. My mood determines how I embellish a mental replay and extension of this discussion. On a good, cheerful day, I imagine telling this kind, open-minded man that, as a cafeteria Catholic, he’s already admitted to possessing his own superior internal moral yardstick by which external religious commands are measured and sometimes rejected, so why go to this “cafeteria” every Sunday when his home cooking is actually much better? He might reply that he likes meeting people at this cafeteria, the staff are nice, and so on, and I’m very understanding. It’s a lovely conversation. Then, there are bad days. Most likely, I’ve just heard news of some vile act by Christian nationalists. My analogies grow darker.

I imagine telling this decent person that his membership confuses me, just as he would (I hope) be confused if I told him I am a member of the Ku Klux Klan, but that I belong to a really progressive local chapter with a very sophisticated Grand Dragon; that I’m a member more because of family tradition and the appeal of robes and ritual; that I most definitely do not agree with violent prejudice and oppressing others; that, in fact, when I pay my dues to the KKK, I always insist they not use mine for discriminatory purposes or reactionary lobbying and always believe those who assure me they won’t. Sure, you could argue that, cash being fungible, my harmless contribution to, say, the Klan’s dry cleaning fund merely frees up other moneys to be spent on the very policies and activities I deplore. You could argue that, however I support the KKK — whether it’s with my time, my money or just my good name as a member — I’m giving legitimacy to and helping prolong the existence of a contemptible institution (quaint as it may seem at the local level), an entity which, occasional community service for PR/recruitment purposes aside, remains quite dangerous. Nevertheless, I’d maintain that I’m not promoting the actual harassment and hate directly. My hands are clean. I’m a cafeteria Klansman. This conversation isn’t so lovely, and I’m using my relative as both straw man and punching bag. But, it’s all in my imagination anyway on



Image from Shutterstock

a bad day. Perhaps I’ve read about recent Supreme Court shenanigans and am more irritable than usual. When I’m feeling more generous, I recognize some might say it’s unfair to compare the KKK with a church. After all, on one hand, you have an organization which opposes civil rights for certain populations and has a history of bigotry and violence. And, on the other hand, you have the Ku Klux Klan. FFRF Member Roger Lindsay is a retired public librarian and lives in Minneapolis with his wife.

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll
By Orvin Larson
Prof. Larson writes with affection and respect of this illustrious 19th century freethinker.
—Published by FFRF.
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Strong Backbone Award

‘Education, not religious indoctrination’

This is the speech given by Adrienne Quinn Martin at FFRF’s national convention on Oct. 28, 2022, in San Antonio. She was introduced by FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor. To watch the speech, go to ffrf.us/convention-2022.

Dan Barker: Concentrating on our theme of “Do mess with Texas,” we want to introduce a special award. In August, a moving video of a young mother telling off her local school board over its book bans, and its promotion of Christianity, went viral.

[Video begins] “We know that books are continuing to be purged. We know a group of non-parents have been pushing for these book removals and continue to do so. Being a taxpayer does not grant special privileges over students, staff and parents. I do not want random people with no education background or experience determining what books my child can read, what curriculum they learn, and what clubs they can join. Just because you can get up at every meeting and rant and rave does not give you authority over my child’s education. Your personal religious beliefs, people in this room and on this board, should not be affecting my child’s education either. Our schools are not to be used for personal political agendas. Our children are here for an education, not religious indoctrination. I implore the board to try to appease these extremists, focus on retaining staff, focus on providing excellent public education and a safe and welcoming learning space for all students. Students, [regarding] the speakers speaking about what great Christians they are? Great. Go tell your pastor. *Our schools are not your church.* Thank you.” [Video ends]

Annie Laurie Gaylor: Adrienne Martin is a lifelong Texan, mother, and chairperson of the Hood County Democratic Party. She’s been fighting book-banning, advocating against discrimination and organizing to promote equality in conservative rural Texas and she’s here today. We are pleased to give her FFRF’s Strong Backbone Award.

Let’s hear it for Adrienne and how she messes with Texas.

By Adrienne Martin

Hello! Thank you y’all so much for that warm welcome. I don’t think I’ve gotten an award since elementary school! It’s a little intimidating speaking in a room full of lawyers, authors and professors



Adrienne Martin received two standing ovations when speaking about her activism over book bans at FFRF’s national convention in San Antonio on Oct. 28, 2022.

when I’m a dyslexic hair stylist from Granbury, Texas.

In August, I gained attention for speaking out at a local school board meeting. I was fed up, and I still am. I’d like to go back a little and explain what led up to that moment.

In late 2021, Texas state Rep. Matt Krause published a list of 850 books that he said should be banned from Texas libraries. Now known as the “Krause list,” this list targeted books containing stories about diversity, inclusion, history and equality. His list of potential banned books never had legal standing. But that did not stop certain districts from taking action. My small Texas town was one of them.

Granbury ISD quickly gained national attention for book-banning. Our school superintendent made news when he was caught on tape instructing librarians to get rid of books with transgender and LGBTQ material and telling staff: “We are a conser-

vative community and if you are not conservative, you better hide it.”

The district then removed over 100 book titles.

The headlines caught the attention of a group of evangelical activists, who began showing up and pushing for more and more book removals. The school district bent to many of their demands, even though not a single one of these activists had children attending our schools. This group has taken over our school

“As Americans, we know the fight against religious extremism is on our doorstep, but as a Texan, we know the door’s already been kicked in.”

board meetings month after month, getting up one after another and demanding that their Christian conservative values be given ultimate authority in our public school system.

They have threatened our school board members and targeted teachers. They even filed a criminal complaint accusing our librarians and school staff of distributing pornography to children. The investigation remains open to this day, and we wonder why there’s a teacher shortage.

Scariest of all is that we are not alone. This isn’t just happening in one small town in rural Texas. Over the last year, hundreds of books have been removed from dozens of Texas school libraries, depriving thousands of students from seeing themselves, their cultures and their histories reflected on the written page.

Every day, we hear about another school district, religious group or politician imposing their white Christian nationalist agenda on our communities, on our schools and on our bodies.

As Americans, we know the fight against religious extremism is on our doorstep, but as a Texan, we know the door’s already been kicked in.

The Christian nationalist agenda is at our state Capitol when men write laws that take away our bodily autonomy. The Christian nationalist agenda is at our border when human beings are treated like cattle. The Christian nationalist agenda is in our classrooms when they protect our children from books instead of guns.

We cannot count on the systems we thought were in place to protect our freedoms. No hero or politician is coming to fight religious extremism for us. We have to.

We must use our collective voices, whether it’s at a local school board meeting, in a courtroom or the voting booth.

We must send a message to those who want to control us, take away our rights and end our democracy. We say: *Our schools, our state, our country and our bodies are not — and will never be — your church.* Thank you.



Adrienne Martin is given FFRF’s Strong Backbone Award from FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.



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

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

Join us @ we-dissent.org

Convention speech

Apes, gods and reproductive health policy

This is the speech given by Hector Garcia at FFRF's national convention on Oct. 28, 2022, in San Antonio. He was introduced by FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. To watch the speech, go to ffrf.us/convention-2022.

Dan Barker: Hector Garcia is a clinical psychologist, researcher and an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Texas Health Science Center right here in San Antonio. He specializes in the treatment of PTSD. One of my favorite books of all time is a book by Hector Garcia called *Alpha God*. He also wrote the book *Sex, Power and Partisanship*. He's published extensively on evolutionary psychology of religion, warfare, politics, PTSD.

By Hector Garcia

Good morning, everybody. I live here. I just want to thank everybody for showing up because we are in a fight. It's good to see that we're not alone in that fight, so thank you.

I have to start out with something rather scandalous, so brace yourselves: God appears to want our women! And many women appear to want God. This psychology is crucial to understand, because downstream, it results in human suffering, including violence and the loss of our reproductive freedoms.

Before I can begin to explain, we must reconcile a fatal contradiction. Across the world's religions, God is described as having all the omnis — omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence. Unlike his mortals, this god is not bound to biology, nor does he have a need to reproduce. Yet, his psychology, as described, strongly suggests that he does. He experiences sexual jealousy, he polices the sex lives of his followers, and he punishes the sexually unfaithful.

But why? And why, despite the ability to take on any conceivable shape in the universe, he tends to look like this. [Shows photos of gods in the form of muscular men.]

We've known at least since the ancient Greeks that we look into the ether and we project ourselves. But you should also know that we project the ancient legacy of instincts that we inherited from our primate ancestors, and most times, we are blind to those instincts; we simply enact them.

And this is the source of countless human anguishes. To understand and to correct that blindness, we must see how our instincts move from apes to men to gods and into our public policy. The best tool that I know for this is evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary psychology is a lot like good psychotherapy. It might not always show you what you want to see, but it will show you what you need to see. With that, you can build a better life, however difficult that is.

That being said, one thing we know about male primates is that they prefer numbers of females because male reproductive fitness is directly tied to number of copulations. But this is not a biological reality for females.

[Photo shown of male baboon with several female baboons near him.] Now, here is a dominant male baboon, surrounded by a harem of females who are very interested in him. That this dominant male would want his harem is uncontroversial.



Psychologist, researcher and assistant professor Hector Garcia speaks at FFRF's national convention in San Antonio on Oct. 28, 2022.

Marketing sex

But what do men want? Because sex is so crucial to our species' survival, it's often surrounded by powerful moral emotions: Guilt, shame, outrage, even denial and repression. But I tell you who has no problem: Marketing executives. The bottom line motivates them to know and target that psychology. Let's have a look at what they have to say about our reproductive psychology and about male preference.

[Video shows dozens of scantily clad women running through forests and plains and others swimming to shore, all converging to where one man is standing on the beach. It's an ad for Axe body spray.]

I should mention that the company that makes Axe deodorant spray made \$62 billion last year, so what works in the business world often follows the research. The research finds that across every culture on Earth, men prefer more sexual partners than women. Women, on the other hand, who tend to invest far more in offspring, tend to be far choosier. This is not to say men and women should prefer this — they can — but this is perhaps the most robust finding in the empirical literature in our mating psychology, and

it affects the way we humans are bound to biology.

But what about an omnigod? Does he prefer numbers? Here's an example for us to contemplate. [Shows photo of large group of nuns.] In this photo, we have 92 women completely devoted to their male God, and I assure you they are not the only ones. But the question is: Is all this devotion to God really sexual? Have we really projected into infinite space our pedestrian animalistic sexuality?

Well, the Greek god Zeus, for example, was a notorious womanizer who had multiple affairs with goddesses and mortals alike. The god Krishna, it is said, had relations with 16,000 maidens, and the bible is full of references to God's sexuality. The bride of Christ, for example, is a dogma in which the human soul is made female so that it can more easily sexually submit to God.

No more explicit is this connection than in the Song of Solomon, where God — or Christ, actually — does this thing with the human soul that you just wouldn't believe unless you heard it. Here, it's read from my book *Alpha God*, by Seth Andrews: Have a listen. And brace yourselves, once again.

[Audio plays.] "Let him kiss me with

the kisses of the mouth, for thy love is better than wine. Because of the savor of thy good ointments, thy name is an ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee. I sleep, but my heart waketh. It is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled, for my head is filled with dew and my locks with drops of the night. My beloved put in his hands by the hole of the door and my bowels were moved for him. I rose up open to my beloved and my hands dropped with myrrh and my fingers with sweet-smelling myrrh upon the handles of the lock." [Audio ends.]

Wow. So, why should we care? High demand for females and low supply created by dominant males who keep harems creates violent competition. The baboons fighting for their harems; the hunter/gatherers raiding their neighbors, killing all the men and kidnapping the women; the gods, commanding the same in their followers and their followers listening as we see even in contemporary times with Boko Haram and ISIS.

What is also very important for you to know is the defensive game of mate competition: Avoiding cuckoldry. Now, the term comes from the cuckoo bird, who lays its eggs in other species' nests. That other bird gets duped into spending all kinds of energy and takes all kinds of risk caring for offspring that isn't theirs. Evolutionarily, this is dangerous. It could mean total reproductive failure. The stakes are especially high for males that invest in their offspring, and human males compared to other animals invest by far the most.

This evolutionary pressure has led to adaptations to deal with cuckoldry threats. One is sexual jealousy, which both sexes experience, but men with greater intensity in every culture on Earth. Because, before testing, a man could never be 100 percent sure that a child was his, whereas a woman always knew.

Also, before testing, one of the best ways to ensure paternity was to have a virgin bride, and this is why virgin brides have been prized throughout our history.


But what about an omnigod? Practically ubiquitous.

The male Incan and Aztec sun gods had virgins dedicated to them, Krishna and the divine father of Jesus preferred to impregnate virgins.

According to Paul, Christ prefers vir-

Yip Harburg,
from his book:

Rhymes for the Irreverent



Shall I write a letter to my Congressman?

Each Congressman has got two ends,
A sitting and a thinking end,
And since his whole success depends
Upon his seat — why bother, friend?

Written by "Over the Rainbow" lyricist Yip Harburg. Illustrated by Seymour Chwast, published by FFRF.

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gins. It says, “For I have espoused to you one husband that I may present to you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” Corinthians: “Now, the body is not for fornication but for the Lord and for the Lord, the body.”

But here’s the thing. An omniscient god would already know if a child was his. An omnipotent god who could speak a billion children into being wouldn’t really care.

Mate-guarding

But this is how we project. Now, another defensive strategy we see is mate-guarding — obsessively following fertile females and blocking them from other males. Now, this also happens among men. Research finds that men can unconsciously smell fertility, and will call and check up on their mates more often within their fertile phases and will get angry with mates when they talk to other men more often when in their fertile phases. We are animals. No surprise, we’ve projected this, as well.

[Photo shown of five nuns in cloister.] Here’s an example of God guarding his virgins from other males behind the steel cage in the cloister. Now, at other times, women are not hidden behind bars, but covering. [Photo shows woman in full body covering.] Now, ultimately, covering is the output of mate-guarding, enacted by male primates and sanctioned by the most powerful male in the universe.

This is the law in certain countries. Now, lest we confuse the ultimate purpose for covering, it’s often accompanied by other forms of mate-guarding, such as restriction to the home, or requiring permission from a male guardian to study, to work, to travel or to access contraceptives.

Today, these laws occur mostly in Islamic nations and religious dicta play a key role. Those dicta are based on mate competition. More evidence: Islamic nations have the highest male-to-female sex ratio, and what we know from the animal world is that when sex ratios are skewed, mate-guarding increases to contend with the surplus of rivals. The psychology on which we base our religions is ancient.

Now, before we heave all of the blame on men, women are in this game, too. Because sons spread a mother’s genes, mothers have a genetic incentive to ensure that their sons don’t get cuckolded. Indeed, research finds that mothers are especially interested in chastity among their daughters-in-law, and in some places will use violence and oppression to ensure it.

Though rarely discussed, our reproductive health policies are also built on mate competition. This is crucial to understand, because another way humans mate-guard is by maintaining the negative costs of cheating, namely unwanted pregnancies and STDs, and this is among the ultimate reasons why birth control is so often a target.

During the Comstock era, when you could serve hard time for using birth control, cuckoldry concerns were expressed very openly. They said, “If we allow this, what would keep our daughters chaste, and our wives faithful?”

Shockingly, it wasn’t until 1965 that the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional to prevent married couples from accessing birth control and ’72 for nonmarried couples, reflecting just how central birth control is to our competitive instincts. The great irony is that birth control would prevent actual cuckoldry, where an affair resulted in one man rearing another man’s child, but primate male’s evolved concern over cuckoldry predates any form of contraception by millions of years.

Today, male brains remain exquisitely primed for sexual jealousy, which makes even non-procreative cuckoldry emotionally threatening.

Occasionally, you can still hear men today linking birth control to cuckoldry threat. More often, however, it is simply said of birth control that our dominant male God forbids it.

The dominant behaviors we’ve been discussing are so prevalent because they give a competitive advantage. Preferring numbers, men with this trait pass on genes for this preference at a greater rate than men who don’t. Non-jealous males got cuckolded more on average and those genes got weeded from the gene pool.

Even the use of violence to acquire mates has an evolutionary advantage. But the big question is — why would females mate with these jerks?

‘Sexy son’ hypothesis

The answer is one of those therapy moments. Sons have an exponentially greater ability to pass on a mother’s genes than daughters, so females may prefer traits in mates that produce competitive sons. This is critical when mate competition is intense and bloody, as it has been throughout our history, because sexually timid, awkward, submissive sons are not good at passing on a mother’s genes, and this is the cold reality of evolution.

Now, there’s a mountain of evidence for this “sexy son” hypothesis.

Female apes and monkeys, for example, prefer to mate with dominant males, especially when ovulating.

Research finds that straight women generally prefer the same thing. When ovulating, women prefer to mate with dominant males. Women rate the smell of T-shirts sexier when worn by socially dominant men. In other words, women can smell dominance and they prefer it. Y’all are animals, too. Women also rate pictures of men more attractive when surrounded by beautiful women, once again, because of the potential for competitive sons.

What we take from all of this is a hidden difficult, yet critical, insight. We may have preferences that hurt us in this lifetime, but that help our genes in future generations, and we need to know that.

Here is how this dynamic plays out in religion. In the 1500s, Spanish nun Saint Teresa Avila infamously wrote in her diary about her experience with God.

[Audio plays of female speaker.] “I do not know how to explain it. It was as if an

invisible hand had plunged me wholly in the fire. Oh, what fire and what sweetness at the same time. I was burning with love, and I thought one minute, nay, one second more, I will not be able to support such ardor without dying. I understand then what the saints said of those states which they have experienced so often. For me, I have but experienced it that once. Only for an instant and afterwards I fell back again into my habitual dryness.” [Audio ends]

Is there any question what kind of experience Saint Teresa was having with God? This also plays out in politics. The “sexy son” hypothesis explains how a large loud male who surrounded himself with beautiful women, who bragged about grabbing women by the genitals and who happened to appoint an anti-abortion Supreme Court justice gained nearly half of the women’s vote?

Meet the Trumpettes. [Video plays of two women wearing red shirts with the word “Trumpette” on them.]

Woman: “So we finally have this God that’s going to come down and help us.”

Interviewer: “You just referred to Trump as a God.”

Woman: “Yeah, he is. Like she said, ‘Jesus, then Trump.’” [video ends]

Another defensive strategy that we see is punishing females. Male apes will bite, drag and hit females for interacting with other males. In humans, spousal abuse is vastly disproportionately committed from men to women, and sexual jealousy is a key component of that.

Once again, our mating instincts make their way into public policy. Here in Texas, it was legal to murder your wife if you caught her cheating as late as 1974. And we were not the only state. Shockingly, in Uruguay, you could get away with this until 2017.

Perhaps not surprisingly, God used similar strategies. In the Book of Revelation, God rained down a horrid, violent fury on Earth. First, he floods the Earth with blood, then he sends disease to all the people, then he makes the sun burn everyone alive and the tortures go on and on. Why would God do this? It was to punish a female who was considered one of his wives for fornicating with the beast.

In another startling verse, God goes on a rampage against Samaria in Jerusa-

lem ewho were seen as his wives, and in Ezekiel it says: “I will direct my jealousy against you that they may deal with you in fury. They shall cut off your nose and your ears. They shall seize your sons and your daughters and your survivors shall be devoured by fire. Your lewdness and your promiscuity have brought this upon you.”

Now, what happens when that barrier between church and state is compromised? All of this talk of cutting off noses and ears becomes a reality.

[Photo shown of cover of Time magazine with a young woman missing her nose.] On this Time magazine cover, we have an Afghan girl who ran away from her abusive husband, and this is what he did to her. . . with the help of his male relatives and the dictates of male mate competition, baked into religion and policy.

Ultimately, all of these inhumanities are not about religion. They are about us.

Human instincts

We awaken to this world as human beings with a set of instincts — instincts that helped us to survive, and sometimes those instincts amplify human suffering. What religions do is they concretize. When we use our instincts to create oppressive policy and we tell believers that the most powerful male in the entire universe, who cannot be questioned, deems it so, we lock ourselves into cycles of pain.

But our instincts, they’re not going away. We do have the power to transcend them and for this we must have the freedom to understand them and right now we’re in a fight for that. We are in a fight to teach natural selection, the very mirror to our self-defeating behaviors in place of the ludicrous idea that all of humanity descended from Adam and Eve’s three male offspring.

Seeing our instincts takes inquiry, and inquiry requires the protection of a wall between church and state. I am just so proud to be in a room full of people who understand this, and who each in their own way is working for this essential human right. I’m confident that together, but only together, we can unmask the alpha gods who live in our psyches, expose them for what they really are, and decide for ourselves which of our instincts to embrace and which to leave behind. This is the way to greater human thriving.

Thank you so much.



Photo by Gonzo Pozo

Members of the Freethinkers Association of Central Texas (FACT) get together for a group photo with FFRF convention speaker Hector Garcia. FACT volunteers, from left, are Katie Gaines, Karen Stone, Deborah Ragan, Phil Session and Jackie Nelson.

Religious deference has no place in higher ed

This article first appeared in *The Nation* on Feb. 2 and is reprinted with permission.

By Katha Pollitt

I had never heard of Hamline, a small private liberal arts university in St. Paul, Minn., until it burst into the headlines after a fracas over a picture of the Prophet Muhammad. In brief, Erika López Prater, an adjunct professor of art history, showed a celebrated 14th-century Persian miniature in her online class, having prepared her students ahead of time. Prater warned them in the syllabus that pictures of holy personages, including Muhammad, would be shown. (No one complained, she says.) She introduced the class by talking about the history of such images, which some but not all Muslims regard as blasphemous, and inviting anyone who didn't want to see it to turn



Katha Pollitt

off their video. No one did, but after class, Aram Wedatalla, a business major and head of the Muslim Student Association, complained to the administration.

In an e-mail to students, David Everett, the university's vice president of inclusive excellence, described showing the picture as "undeniably inconsiderate, disrespectful and Islamophobic." In an e-mail to faculty, Everett and Hamline President Fayneese Miller wrote that "respect for the observant Muslim students in that classroom should have superseded academic freedom." López Prater was told she would not be rehired for the next semester. After a national uproar with assists from PEN America, the ACLU, and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, Muslim organizations weighing in on both sides, and a looming lawsuit from López Prater, the administration backed down. ("Like all organizations, sometimes we misstep.")

In a better world, Hamline would be famous for other things, such as the fact that 40 percent of its undergraduates received Pell Grants (government funding for low-income students) in the



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2020–21 academic year. That warmed my heart. Nationally, for public and private colleges, only 33.6 percent of students received Pells in 2020, and, according to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the rate is much lower among private colleges. At Oberlin, one of the most left-leaning campuses in the country, only 8.4 percent of students have them. In a better world, we'd also pay more attention to the fact that, in 2021, Hamline eliminated its art history major, part of the general starvation of the humanities happening throughout higher education. Still, here we are. I have questions.

Have we really reached the stage where accusations of blasphemy can get a professor fired? Seriously, blasphemy? In a secular college? In the United States? What century is this? When it comes to being offended on religious grounds, anyone can play the game. A Catholic student can accuse his history professor of bigotry for speaking with insufficient respect for the doctrine of papal infallibility. A fundamentalist Protestant can insist that a biology professor accept an exam answer claiming that dinosaurs and humans co-existed. A Jewish foreign-relations student can insist on an "A" for a paper claiming that God gave Jews the land of Israel. Left meets right; deference to religion meets the cult of My Feelings.

Speaking of critical thinking, can we stop applying the word "Islamophobia" indiscriminately? "Phobia" is a psychological term that means irrational fear. If you think a Muslim family moving into your neighborhood means tomorrow you'll be living under sharia law, that's Islamophobia. Back in 2015, a Texas high school had 14-year-old Ahmed Mohamed arrested as a bomb maker after he proudly showed his teacher a clock he'd made out of a pencil case. That was Islamophobia. It is not Islamophobic to publicly doubt that Muhammad flew to heaven and back on a magical horselike creature or to conclude that the Quran is the work of human beings, not the direct word of God. The same thought process applies to Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Greek myth. Islam is a religion like other religions, and as such should be open to critique and dispute. It's hardly racist or bigoted to believe we have the right not to live according to religious beliefs we don't share. That would be true even if every single Muslim who ever lived had banned depictions of Muhammad, which they haven't. In fact, the miniature in question was painted by a Muslim artist for a Muslim ruler.

One of the problems with the way we think about diversity is to assume vulnerable social groups are monolithic and not

themselves diverse. Islam is the world's second-largest religion, and it's centuries old — the beliefs of some individuals within it shouldn't be mistaken for the whole. Some of the strongest critiques of Hamline's attack on academic freedom have come from Muslims. After the local branch of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the premier Muslim American civil rights organization, accused López Prater of engaging in "hate speech," the national office issued a statement on the incident that defended her, as did the Muslim Public Affairs Council. "Nothing could be more devotional to Mohammed than depicting him at the very moment of the birth of the religion of Islam," the journalist Hisham Melhem wrote at *ForeignPolicy.com*.

Among the Muslim academics defending López Prater was Lake Forest College Professor Ahmad Sadri, who wrote in the *Dallas Morning News* that he was offended not just as a scholar of Muslim history but "as a practicing Muslim who loves the Persian visual tradition of illumination and miniature painting. A global understanding of Islam is impossible in absence of the Islamic art, mysticism and poetry that includes portrayals of the Prophet." On Al Jazeera's website, the Rutgers law Professor Sahar Aziz argued that the real problem is "the systematic adjunctification of university faculty." Untenured faculty on short contracts are now the norm, and their relative powerlessness promotes the mentality that the customer — i.e., the student — is always right, especially at struggling institutions like Hamline.

López Prater showed kindness in preparing her students so carefully, not that it mattered. But where does it end? Art history is full of disturbing imagery. Torture, brutality, murder, war, rapes, anti-semitism and racism and misogyny galore. We need — students need — to look at art in all its beauty and horror and humanity and complexity if we are ever to understand ourselves.

Maybe the best thing that could come out of the Hamline controversy would be for the university to bring back the art history major, and have the administrators audit it.

Katha Pollitt is a columnist and poet, and an honorary director of FFRF.

CRANKMAIL

Here is your April installment of *Crankmail*, which shows off the lesser side of humanity. Printed as received.

Sign: you should be ashamed of yourselves. your stupid sign at the courthouse saying winter solstice instead of christmas season is what brings me here. lololo the audacity! very distasteful and veryyyy disgraceful. — *Jamie Carson*

FFR: What a disgusting, vile organization you are!!!! America is a religious country and God is the leader. You are just soulless Leftists ruled by Satan, may God have mercy on your pathetic souls. — *Nicole Nelson*

Repent!: I don't need assistance. Exodus 20:3 states thou shall have no other gods before me. This foundation is an abomination to the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Hell is a real place and anyone stating they don't mind burning in hell is truly ignorant and has been blinded by satan. Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand. — *William Johnson*

USA: You have some nerve attacking others for their religious views not only their views BUT THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA! You're group is anti American and unconstitutional don't you think maybe it's time to find another home since AMERICA has always been one nation under god indivisible with liberty and justice for all!!!! It's on our money it's in the pledge of allegiance it's what this country was founded on- you wanna be atheist then that's fine means you don't believe in anything so

why are you attacking those who do? If you don't believe then it shouldn't make a difference if someone flies a one nation under god flag in the country that was founded on GOD! This is Gods country and groups like you are the Marxist fascist radicals who are attacking our very existence! We are gonna put your group on the map and get you the attention you've always wanted very soon- cause this won't continue in America — *Arnold LaPlace*

Hell: well , Ron have at it ... because , believe me eternity in Hell is no paradise ... at death your soul will be judged and , if you've been in denial of God's love for us denounced Him you will be going to Hell . . . so , if your thought of joy and glory is going to Hell and burning for all eternity in the everlasting lake of fire having the devil and demons do whatever they please with you stay on the path your on and that's where you'll going after your life on earth ends . — *Harry Gomez*

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

Freedom?: "freedom from religion" is by definition a specifically religious ideology entirely focused on spreading a specific religious opinion of spiritual matters, with emphasis on prosely-

tizing converts for gaining political influence as a religion-focused organization (all things filtering through spiritual belief system as first & foremost determining factor of all decisions ever made). This foolishness, is a waste of time. On top of dumb front, it's a shame such lies are hid behind by ppl too weak & dishonest to admit they are obvious whole-hearted satanists. I predict this will be censored, not that I care. — *Ron Mefferts*

Ad: I hate this public service announcement by Ronny atheist forked tongue reagan — *Ebony McDonald*



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Catherine Fahringer Student Activist honoree

Religion is a tool used to uphold oppression

This was the speech given by student activist Will Larkins on Oct. 28, 2022, at FFRF's national convention in San Antonio. Will was introduced by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. To watch the speech, go to ffrf.us/convention-2022.

Annie Laurie Gaylor: I would like to introduce Will Larkins. Will led a walk-out of 500 students against Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law at Winter Park High School called "Say Gay Anyway." Will also testified in person before the Florida Legislature, trying to stop the punitive measure. Will's moving guest essay, titled "Florida's 'Don't Say Gay Bill' will hurt teens like me," ran in the New York Times in March. Since then, Will has been in constant demand to speak to media and groups. I even recently turned on "PBS News Hour" and there was Will, confidently doing an in-person studio interview!

Will is an atheist, naturally, and is president and co-founder of the school's Queer Student Union. Please welcome the 2022 Catherine Fahringer Student Activist Awardee, Will Larkins.

By Will Larkins

Hil! My name is Will Larkins and I use any pronouns . . . with respect. I am a 17-year-old senior in high school from Winter Park, Fla. I am one of the student leaders fighting Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill and am a plaintiff in a lawsuit challenging this law.

I have spent the past six months focusing on my classes while simultaneously advocating for the LGBTQ+ community. I was in biology honors when I found out my op-ed was published in the New York Times. I missed junior prom because I was speaking at Harvard Law School. Last month, I was working on college applications in Washington, D.C., in between meetings with legislators and with the White House. And, the first time I said I was nonbinary out loud was on the floor of the Florida state Senate.

I was thrown into activism and advocacy out of survival. Being outwardly gay and nonbinary, I have faced bullying, harassment, discrimination and threats to my safety almost my whole life. Being filmed at lunch, threatened in school bathrooms, and getting called slurs in the hallways was a daily occurrence for me at Winter Park High School. It is not uncommon that these bullies bring up scripture after telling me to kill myself or calling me the f-slur. I reported everything I experienced to the administra-



Photo by Chris Line

High school student Will Larkins is a plaintiff against Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law. He spoke at FFRF's national convention on Oct. 28, 2022, in San Antonio.

tion at my school and was met with only victim blaming and homophobia.

A year ago, in October 2021, my friend group and I attended a Halloween party and were surrounded by a group of guys from my school who hurled vile, unrepeatable, awful insults at us. We were compared to pedophiles, had our appearances made fun of, and were told that WE were going to hell. Yeah, WE are the people in this situation that are going to hell. We were told that if we did not leave, we would be beat up.

After the school took no action, we formed the Queer Student Union with the goal of protecting other queer people from hate at our school. I went on to lead the biggest walkout in Florida. At 9 a.m. on March 7, 2022, 500 students walked out of class chanting "We say gay" and "Trans lives matter." I stood in front of the same school that had broken me down so badly that last winter I almost ended my life and led a protest of hundreds.

We are living in an unusual time in history. For the first time ever, LGBTQ+ people are mainstream and people en masse are questioning the legitimacy of religion. It has been strange growing up seeing my classmates, family and friends become addicted to their phones while watching every generation develop a different relationship with social media. For the first time ever, the average citizen is exposed to people, lifestyles and cultures all across the planet, while at

the same time an algorithm is putting people in echo chambers, allowing them to be radicalized by disinformation. These technologies of mass communication are the vessels that Gen Z will use to change the way the world works.

From an early age, I knew I was different. I wasn't interested in the things

other boys my age did. I didn't really feel comfortable in the clothes my parents bought me. The struggle for acceptance was not just internal, it also felt as if my classmates didn't know what to make of me. By fourth grade, I was convinced that I was broken. I didn't know how to defend myself when other kids made hateful comments or bullied me — I didn't know why I was the way that I was. Without the vocabulary to articulate why I felt and acted like this, I assumed what they said about me was true.

Most of the bullying I have faced during my lifetime has been disguised under the false pretense of religious "love." It is frankly disturbing how many times people have called me "faggot" or said that there was something wrong with me and then followed it up saying "It is just my belief" or "I am trying to help you." In no way was making me feel unsafe in my school and bullying me to the brink of near suicide helpful. Religion gives these people an out. I vividly remember visiting St. Augustine in middle school and having an adult man approach me to tell me that I was sick and could be saved. Adults affirming the idea that queer young people are broken causes irreparable damage and scars that will never fully mend.

I feel for these people, though. Living with hate in your heart is not easy. This past July, I attended a rally for LGBTQ rights in downtown Orlando. I was wearing a cute skirt, glitter and fun makeup. A Christian woman and counter-protester walked up to me and, I kid you not, started crying. She got down on her knees, crying, praying and muttering about how the world was ending. Imagine living a life where you see a queer person in a cute outfit and cool makeup

and cause yourself so much distress you break down crying on the floor. That sucks for her way more than it does for me.

Religion served a purpose by giving humanity an explanation for existence and consciousness. Modern science has shown us that we simply do not know what life means, what death means, or what any of this is. Religion takes away our ability and right to explore spirituality by our own volition. Now, religion is a tool used by fascists like Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and Texas Gov. Greg Abbott to uphold systems of oppression, reenforce the hetero-patriarchy, and target LGBTQ+ children.

Here's a fun fact for you: Queer teens are four times more likely to die by suicide than their straight counterparts, and Florida has the highest LGBTQ+ teen suicide rate of any state. Queer people make up 40 percent of the teen houseless population while only making up 5 percent of the general population. This is a direct result of Christian and Muslim religious dogma.

As the president of the WPHS Queer Student Union, I frequently meet queer students who cannot be themselves at home because their religious parents would become angry, abusive, and even kick them out and force them into homelessness. In fact, last year I had a friend who was outed as trans to his family who promptly threw him out because their own child's existence went against something they chose to believe. We cannot let this normalized abuse continue.

So, thank you. Thank you all for working to dismantle belief systems created to harm us. Thank you for being on the frontlines of the fight for our right to freethought. Thank you, Annie Laurie Gaylor and everyone at the Freedom From Religion Foundation for the scholarship, the invitation to speak, and thank you for the absolutely vital and indispensable good that you put in the world. Together, we will create a world free from the grips of religion, a world where nobody has to grow up fearing God because they were born queer, a world where true equality reigns. Let us come together to create a world driven by peace and by love. Thank you. And I love you all.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Will Larkins finishes with a heart gesture.

The Not So Good Book: What Does the 'Holy Bible' Really Teach?



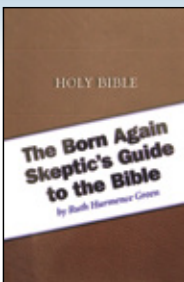
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FFRF ON THE ROAD



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker (right) debated Andrew Knight (left) of Apologetics Now on the topic “Is God to Blame for Suffering?” on Feb. 17 as part of a Central Florida Freethought Community event. Moderating the event was Chris Morrison (center).



Meeting recently in Washington, D.C., to celebrate the fact that a major piece of legislation passed last year in Congress to erect a long-deserved monument in D.C. to “forgotten founder” Thomas Paine, are boosters of that project. Seated: Rosalie and Zenos Frudakis with Frudakis Studios and FFRF Governmental Affairs Director Mark Dann, who helped shepherd the bill to passage. Standing: Donor Todd Stiefel, Thomas Paine Memorial Association President Margaret Downey and TPMA Secretary Annie Laurie Gaylor, who also serves as FFRF co-president.



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker (right) enjoyed a dinner with members of the Ethical Culture Society of Bergen County, N.J., after speaking to the group on the topic of “Is the Separation of Church and State Coming to an End?” on Feb. 19. The day prior, Barker performed a freethought concert at the Ethical Culture Society.



Jocelyn Williamson takes a selfie with members of the Central Florida Freethought Community after a debate on Feb. 17 between FFRF Co-President Dan Barker (center) and Andrew Knight (not pictured).

Commandments Bills

Continued from page 1

violates the principle of state/church separation, conferring favoritism to biblical teachings and disregarding individual freedom of conscience. If Kanabec County were to post one religion’s so-called “holy edicts,” it would not only exclude nonreligious and non-Christian members of the community, but send a message that such citizens are second-class. As many as 20 percent of Kanabec County identify as religiously unaffiliated (the national average being three in ten adults).

County Coordinator Kris McNally responded to FFRF with a note that a decision at the Feb. 7 board meeting rescinded the December vote to display the Ten Commandments.

“Courthouses are meant to be places of secular rule of law; they aren’t governed by biblical commandments,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “The First Commandment alone makes it obvious why the Ten Commandments may not be posted on governmental property. The county has no business telling citizens which god they must have, how many gods they must have, or that they must have any god at all.”

Continued from page 1

schools. Some bills copy Florida’s infamous “Don’t Say Gay” law, under the guise of protecting parental rights, while others encourage anti-LGBTQ discrimination among religious student groups, require teachers to misgender students and “out” trans children to their parents, and more.

Also focusing on public schools are bills allowing the teaching of “intelligent design” (creationism by another name), designating time for daily prayer, requiring placement of “In God We Trust” in every public school classroom and library, and injecting historically dubious bible classes into public school curricula. Religious zealots know that they must indoctrinate children while they’re still young, which is the transparent and unconstitutional motivation behind all of these bills.

But the most immediate religiously based threat to public schools is an ongoing attempt to privatize education, funneling taxpayer dollars that should go

to public schools into the bank accounts of private religious schools and scholarship organizations. Iowa and Utah have already enacted legislation expanding their voucher programs to be statewide, or making them “universal,” meaning even billionaires who already send their children to private religious schools can rely on taxpayers to pay for tuition. Lawmakers in many other states have introduced similar legislation. The lie of “school choice” has effectively masked this assault on secular education for all Americans, and it is crucial now more than ever that we work together to educate the public about this rapidly expanding danger.

And these are just some of the major issue areas seen by FFRF’s policy team. There are many other threats, including state Religious Freedom Restoration Acts, attempts to place “In God We Trust” on state seals and state buildings, state constitutional amendments, plus some good legislation, such as medical aid-in-dying bills.

“FFRF is committed to monitoring and taking action on these crucial issues, offering expert testimony and mobilizing our 40,000 members to contact their lawmakers

and stand up for secularism,” says FFRF Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne. FFRF’s legislative team is sending out daily alerts to its membership about state/church legislation and connecting them to legislators. It will soon be announcing the creation of a lobbying arm: the FFRF Action Fund.

While nonreligious Americans now account for a dominant force of the electorate, at the same time a shocking number of Americans believe the United States should be a Christian theocracy. Legislators must hear from well-informed constituents who want their government to serve all Americans, and stand up for true religious liberty, by keeping our laws secular and evidence-based

What Is a Freethinker?

freethinker n.

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

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Failed prophecy: Three days and three nights



Image by Shutterstock

By David Lee

Imagine you are a hard-working employee at a factory and your foreman calls a meeting to inform everyone that if they meet a certain quota this week, everyone will earn a three-day, three-night vacation to begin immediately after work on Friday. Now, imagine that sometime about noon on Friday, word begins to circulate around the plant that the quota has been met and everyone has earned the vacation. As everyone begins clocking out about 5 p.m., there is much excitement as happy employees prepare for that much anticipated three-day, three-night vacation.



David Lee

The foreman stands up to address the group: “I am very happy to tell you that the quota has been met and my boss has agreed to give you the three-day, three-night vacation!” The crowd cheers. “But, remember, you must be back here Sunday morning at 6 a.m. to begin work again.” There is a stunned silence. What kind of three-day, three-night vacation is that? The foreman continues: “The boss says that, in his culture, any part of a day, no matter how small, counts as a whole day and a whole night. Therefore, what’s left of today will count as the first day and night, after midnight tonight and day-

light tomorrow will count as the second night and day, and Saturday night and the first few minutes of daylight Sunday morning will count as the third night and day. Enjoy your three-day, three-night vacation. We’ll see you Sunday at 6 a.m.” Does anyone see something wrong here? Well, in the supposedly inerrant bible, we find that Jesus of Nazareth staked his messiahship on the claim that he would be three days and three nights “in the heart of the Earth” (Matthew 12:38-40). This is crucial. It wasn’t the resurrection itself that would demonstrate the messiahship of Jesus to the generation of that time, but a precise period of time that he would be “in the heart of the earth.” Theologians debate whether “in the heart of the earth” refers to the mythical Hades or the sepulcher Jesus was buried in. Since being interred in a tomb would be an empirical demonstration, most Christians have opted for that theory. Regardless, whether the prophecy refers to Hades or the rock-hewn sepulcher, there is a problem. The gospels of Mark, Luke and John clearly show Jesus died on the cross the afternoon before the Jewish Sabbath (Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54-56; John 19:14, 31). This would be what we call Friday afternoon. The gospels go on to show Jesus was already risen from the dead early the morning after the sabbath (Matthew 28:1-6; Mark 16:1-2; Luke 24:1-3; John 20:1-2). This would be what we call Sunday morning. Now, by no manner of reasoning can

one fit three nights into this scenario. The prophecy clearly failed. Keep in mind, the resurrection itself was not the sign. It was the amount of time Jesus was to repose in the heart of the earth that was significant. There may not even have been three days. According to Luke, as Joseph was rushing to bury the body before the sabbath, we read in Luke 23:54 that the sabbath was already “dawning” (Greek). If the heart of the earth meant the tomb, then we cannot even count the first day with any certainty. Likewise, the third day is elusive. Since Mary came to the tomb while it was still dark (John 20:1) and the tomb was already open, then we may not even have the third day. At best, we have only three days and two nights, at worst, two nights and one day. This prophecy was a total flop, and it was the only one Jesus supposedly gave as evidence of his messiahship. Some apologists will try to tell you that in the Jewish milieu that Jesus lived in, any part of a day, no matter how small, could count as a whole day AND night. They will assert with much certitude that this was an idiom of the day and we are not to question it. They go on to assert we should never use 21st-century methods of reckoning time and apply them to first-century Palestine. They will usually buttress this claim with appeals to a more ancient scholar or scholars to make their claim sound impressive and intimidating to those not schooled in the practices of first century Judaism. However, orthodox Jews today boldly tell us there was no such method of reckoning time among the Jews in first-century Palestine. They tell us the Christian apologists are pulling our collective legs when they make these claims. The apologists are counting on our reverence for their scholarship and on our reluctance to challenge their claims. The Jews make the claim there is absolutely no evidence of a “two day and two night” period being reckoned as a “three day and three night” period in either the Tanach, the Talmud or any Jewish writings of the first century. They also assert there is no evidence of a Jewish mode of reckoning that stated any part of a day, no matter how small, as both a whole day and a whole night. They have asked Christian apologists for proof, but any quotations the apologists offer are easily shot down. What would be interesting is to go to the “Jews for Juda-

ism” website and post a question to have it answered by a Jewish rabbi. Or, if you live in a big city with a synagogue, pay it a visit and inquire of the leading rabbi for some information. I have found the three most common examples offered are: 1. The passage from Esther 4:16-5:1. Esther does not prove three days and three nights is an idiom. For convenience, let’s say Esther began her fast on Thursday at sunset, the beginning of the Jewish day. If she went to the king on Sunday afternoon, not only would it be the third day, the third night would have already been past. So, there is no proof that Esther fasted less than three days and three nights. 2. The passage about the abandoned slave from I Samuel 30:11-13. In the case of the abandoned slave, the slave had claimed that he had not eaten in three days and three nights and had been abandoned by his master “three days ago.” Let’s say, for convenience, that the slave was discovered on Sunday afternoon. Three days ago would have been Thursday. Three days and three nights from Sunday afternoon would have been Thursday at sunset. 3. The infamous Talmud quote that states “a day and a night are an Onah and any part of an Onah is reckoned as the whole.” However, Onah is a rabbinical term used to determine time periods of a woman’s menstrual cycle and is also used in reference to a man’s sexual obligations to his wife (Exodus 21:10). It also means either a day or a night, not both. One rabbi in the Talmud did claim it could be a day and a night, but most rabbis disagree with him. Furthermore, Jesus did not use the rabbinical term Onah in his prophecy, but the common language of the people, “three DAYS and three NIGHTS.” Jesus did NOT say he would be in the heart of the earth three Onahs. In the Talmud, rabbis reckoned that three days consisted of four to six Onahs. Some Christians claim that Jesus was crucified on a Wednesday afternoon and resurrected on Saturday afternoon just before sunset to account for the three days and three nights (72 full hours), but this view doesn’t hold up under scrutiny and has as many holes as the Friday crucifixion theory. Just remember, Mark 15:42 says Jesus was crucified the day before the Sabbath. And Matthew 28:1 says Jesus was risen early morning of the first day of the week. The prophecy failed. David Lee is an FFRF member from North Carolina.

“The apologists are counting on our reverence for their scholarship and on our reluctance to challenge their claims.”



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Transgender reality, not religious fiction



Left: Kat Grant in high school with their parents Paula and Michael Grant. Right: Kat Grant now as FFRF’s Equal Justice Works Fellow.

This article first appeared on FFRF’s blog site, Freethought-Now.org.

By Kat Grant

Ten years ago, on Feb. 16, 2013, I sat down in my living room to have one of the scariest conversations a child can have with their parents.

I had from a very early age struggled to understand how I fit into being a girl, yet at the same time knew that I wasn’t a boy either. I spent much of my childhood fighting the depression and anxiety that comes with gender dysphoria — the formal term for the distress a trans person experiences as a result of their gender and body being out of alignment — long before I knew any of the terminology surrounding trans people.

I was lucky enough to have a relative abundance of exposure to gay people, at least for someone growing up in small-town rural Indiana. I had gay relatives. Like any good theater-obsessed middle schooler, I watched “Glee” with my family as it was airing. My parents made consistent efforts to make sure my sister and I knew not to listen to the constant chorus of homophobia surrounding us, and raised us to constantly question authority when it sounded like hate and bigotry. When I told my parents about my first girlfriend, I was a little nervous, but ultimately confident that I wasn’t going to face any violence or be kicked out of my home.

Still, I had never met any trans people.

Being a queer teenager in the early 2010s was a unique experience, to say the least. Visibility and knowledge of being gay or lesbian or bisexual or pansexual was more mainstream than it had ever been. Gay characters in movies and television were finally starting to branch out from just being objects of ridicule or victims of violent crimes. The “It Gets Better” campaign was everywhere, sending a message to LGBTQIA+ youth that our lives had value, that people like us could be successful, happy, healthy adults someday.

Today, we often look back at media from those years and cringe at some of the ways gay people were represented, and much of that is certainly warranted. But I also think it’s important to remember that for the time, these depictions and efforts were absolutely revolutionary — especially for kids growing up in places where it seemed like gay people couldn’t possibly exist.

The internet also played a major role in this shift. Social media sites allowed me to connect with a wide variety of other queer people, and begin to find educational resources. I remember the moment in the summer of 2012 when I stumbled upon information about transgender identities, and more specifically, information about being nonbinary. It was like finding the last piece of a puzzle that had slid under the couch. Finally, for the first time in my life, I had words to describe what I had known about myself since I was 4 years old. It was exciting, and also terrifying.

As I researched and learned more, I realized how much more dangerous being openly trans could be. I was already facing bullying and harassment and violence for being openly gay, much of which was based on the idea that I needed to be saved as someone “actively living in sin.” I wasn’t sure if I could handle or survive what might happen if I came out as nonbinary. While my parents had made sure that I knew they loved me regardless of my

sexual orientation, both before and after I had come out, they had never once said anything about gender identity.

I silently agonized over this revelation for months, while the symptoms of my dysphoria continued to worsen. My grades started slipping, I had worsening behavior issues in school, and my physical health rapidly deteriorated as I struggled to find the energy to take the steps to manage my chronic illnesses through the depression. Eventually, I realized I had to say something. That if I didn’t take that next step, I was going to continue to spiral.

So, just two weeks after my 16th birthday, I told my parents that I needed to talk to them, and explained what was going on. I told them that I wasn’t a girl, and I didn’t think I could ever be a girl after trying for so long, but I also wasn’t a boy. I told them that I wanted to start using they/them pronouns, and change my gender presentation. I remember a beat of silence that seemed to last forever, and then my parents saying “OK, we love you, thank you for telling us,” followed by “We’re not sure what that means exactly.”

My parents and I learned what it meant to be a trans teenager together. We sought out what would now be referred to as “gender-affirming care,” though I don’t recall it ever being called that. We talked it through with my family doctor and therapist, who were supportive and made my wellbeing and health the number one priority, and gave me health care that aligned with medical standards. I had been on the pill since I started my period due to having Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder, and when I explained that menstruation was a pretty major gender dysphoria trigger, my family doctor helped me switch to a form of birth control that stopped my periods completely. My therapist at the time helped me build a toolkit for coping with the gender-related anxiety and depression that was severely impacting my life.

I began to really dive into what gender presentation actually made me feel better. I had been wearing my hair short for years out of convenience for marching band and winter percussion, but my parents started letting me explore more masculine styles. I started wearing clothes from all sides of the store, mixing and matching feminine and masculine pieces to see what felt best. I bought a chest binder with some birthday money. Somewhere in the depths of Facebook there is a now private album of concert band photos that document me as a teenager in everything from floor length dresses to a shirt and tie and everything in between.

I was, within reasonable guidelines set by my parents and my school’s dress code, given the freedom I needed to explore and learn and find out what made me finally feel like me. I cannot emphasize enough that these choices quite literally saved my life.

It took a while for my family to adjust to they/them pronouns, and while some of my teachers did try to understand, more point blank refused. I had amazing friends who also did their best to support me through this process, even though it made them targets of bullying just as much as I was. There’s a saying amongst many

“Gender is a complex and beautiful thing, and people who we would, in the modern western context, refer to as trans, have existed for all of human history. We’re not some modern trend, or threat to society.”

LGBTQIA+ people that “There’s no hate like Christian love” and if the amount of vaguely threatening bible verses shoved into the slots of my locker and passive aggressive invitations to youth bible studies are any indication, there’s plenty of truth to that statement.

Throughout all of this, I constantly repeated the mantra of “It gets better.” I kept holding on to the idea that society was making progress, and that when I was older, I wouldn’t have to spend all my time explaining who I was to people. This was also the time that I first became an activist, and began entertaining the idea of going to law school after college. I thought that if I kept speaking up and pushing, surely it would be far easier for the kids who came after me.

A decade after that conversation with my parents, I’m sitting here in my office at the Freedom From Religion Foundation trying to wade through the flood of anti-trans legislation that’s come down in the past month and a half.

Hundreds of bills have been and continue to be introduced in state legislatures across the country, primarily targeting the rights of trans youth to receive life-saving health care, play on sports teams, and safely exist in their schools and communities. Trans adults are being targeted through bans on drag performances. Other legislative assaults include state constitutional amendments that define us out of the law, “Don’t Say Gay/Trans” bills — and, in at least one state, there has been a bill introduced that would make it a sex crime for a trans person to even enter a bathroom if there is a minor present.

Attacks on LGBTQIA+ communities have always been rooted in religion over reality, but never have legislators said the quiet part out loud quite this much. Bills in Oklahoma and South Carolina were titled “Millstone Acts” — a direct reference to Mark 9:42 (“whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea”) in an effort to ban gender-affirming care to anyone under the age of 26.

In other states there are bills that are explicitly attempting to allow religious health care providers to full-stop discriminate against trans patients. Christian nationalist organizations like the American Principles Project and the Alliance Defending Freedom have outright stated that their goal is to eliminate the rights of trans people in the United States.

While some of these bills will fail to pass, many of them will, and in fact, already have. Utah and South Dakota have both passed gender-affirming care bills for minors — with the South Dakota bill going as far as to forcibly detransition any minor on puberty blockers or hormones.

This isn’t just at the state level. Here at FFRF we’re seeing an increase of complaints about public school students being exposed to transphobic and homophobic preaching at school events and school board meetings, religiously motivated restrictions on drag story times, and more. My entire legal fellowship, in fact, centers on the fact that there is a massive intersection between LGBTQIA+ and Establishment Clause issues.

I’ve shared the story of the early years of my gender transition here, because unlike the sensationalized stories of genital surgeries being performed on minors, or claims that children are being given hormone replacement therapy like candy, my story represents the actual reality of the majority of trans youth with affirming parents in the United States, and what these laws are attempting to ban. Gender transitions happen slowly, with the assistance and guidance of health care professionals who go through years of schooling in order to understand the science that allows them to give appropriate care.

Gender is a complex and beautiful thing, and people who we would, in the modern western context, refer to as trans, have existed for all of human history. We’re not some modern trend, or threat to society. There are no roving bands of transgender missionaries trying to recruit your children. We’re just people who want to live our lives without fear of violence and discrimination.

There is no reason for it to be more difficult for trans people to exist now than it was 10 years ago. We have a responsibility to these kids to stand up against religious organizations and politicians that have chosen to vilify them and make them pawns in their ongoing quest for power and control. It could just save their lives.

Kat Grant is FFRF’s Equal Justice Works Fellow.

IN MEMORIAM

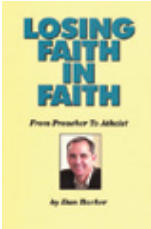


Les Bothast

Les Bothast was Air Force veteran

Leslie Robert Bothast of Westerville, Ohio, died at home on April 23, 2022. Les was born in Toledo, Ohio, on May 18, 1947. He graduated from Libbey High School with many honors. After graduation, Les served in the United States Air Force, receiving an honorable discharge on Jan. 5, 1972. After the Air Force, Les earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Toledo, where he would go on to receive a master's degree in industrial engineering. Les was a member of Mensa International. He worked for the University of Toledo, National Family Opinion, and Libby Owens Ford (now known as Pilkington North America). In 2006, Les made his home in Westerville, where he was a member the Citizens Police Academy, and volunteered every Memorial Day at the Field of Heroes.

Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist



By Dan Barker
How Dan “threw out the bathwater and discovered there is no baby there.”
Published by FFRF

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Rita Swan was CHILD founder and activist

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is saddened to report the death last fall of a longtime religious ally, Rita Swan, founder of Children's Healthcare Is a Legal Duty (CHILD), who served as its president until she retired. Rita died on Oct. 22, 2022.

Much of CHILD's work and even its logo has been incorporated by Child USA, directed by attorney Marcie Hamilton. "I was very concerned that her decades of progress for the sake of children's health care would disappear," writes Hamilton. "Our society so often sweeps women's achievements under the rug, and I simply could not let that happen with her groundbreaking work for children." CHILD USA is preserving CHILD's research and archives.

Swan graduated with a B.A. in English from Emporia State University in 1963, receiving a Master's in English from the University of Wisconsin in 1965, and a Ph.D. in English from Vanderbilt University in 1975. She appeared on "Donahue," "PBS Late Night", NBC's "Today," "NBC Nightly News," ABC's "20/20" and "Good Morning Britain." She made many presentations before symposia, academic and social, on the dangers of religious medical exemption laws for children, and has testified before several state legislatures.

Rita addressed national FFRF conventions on two occasions, once in 1994, and then in 2015, when she received FFRF's Lifetime Achievement Award.

"My husband and I were devout, lifelong Christian Scientists until 1977, when we lost our only son Matthew to a treatable illness because we followed the church's beliefs against medical care," she told attendees at the 2015 convention in Madison, Wis. Matthew, 16 months old, died of spinal meningitis after 12 days of fever, much of that in

a near coma. Relying on faith and prayer from a Christian Science practitioner in accord with their church's doctrine, they finally rushed their dying son to a hospital, but it was too late to save him.

"I will always feel that guilt," Swan said. They left the church right after his death and became nationally prominent advocates for protecting children from abuse and neglect related to religious beliefs and other strongly held belief systems. "Thirty-eight years and scores of national media appearances later, we remain the only people willing to speak publicly about the loss of their child because of Christian Science beliefs," Swan told 2015 convention attendees.

Rita learned that, in 1975, the federal government had enacted a requirement that if states wanted federal money for child protection programs, they had to enact a religious exemption from child neglect statutes.

"The feds admitted to us that the Christian Science Church was the only party that asked for this remarkable policy," Swan related. After she waged a major campaign, the federal government rescinded the policy in January 1983, but didn't require states to repeal their laws.

By 1983, every state except Nebraska had a religious exemption to neglect either in the civil or criminal code or both, leaving CHILD with the "the herculean task of repealing religious exemptions state by state." CHILD was able to repeal religious exemptions to medical care of sick and injured children in Oregon, where at least 78 children born to Followers of Christ had died without medical care, including of readily treatable illnesses. No Followers of Christ child has died of medical neglect since 2009. Oregon was one of six states with no religious exemp-



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Rita Swan holds her Lifetime Achievement Award from FFRF during the national convention in 2015.

tion for care of children in 2015.

"Though it would seem like madness to you," she told FFRF members during her speech, "many parents in the faith-healing sects do not comprehend the risk they're taking with their child's life when there's a state law allowing them to withhold medical care. They perceive exclusive reliance on religious ritual to be not only legal but safe when the state endorses their behavior.

"The Christian Science Church in particular has told its members that legislators give them religious exemptions because legislators agree that Christian Science heals disease just as well as medical science does."

"Rita Swan devoted her life to ensuring that children's health care is a legal duty, as the name of her organization stated so clearly," says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "The Freedom From Religion Foundation is determined to do what we can to get rid of these exemptions and make Rita's goal a reality."

Stephen Miller lived life to the fullest

FFRF Member Stephen Miller, 59, died at home with his family near him on Feb. 22, 2023.

Stephen was born in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 3, 1963. He and his family lived in Silver Spring, Md., where he was the third of four children of Carol and Elaine Miller. In 1967, the family moved to Madison, Wis., where he graduated from Madison West High School.

Stephen spent his post-high school years working, going on train trips, skiing trips and attending music shows. In 1983, he started working at the Plaza Tavern, which became the center of his work and social life during this period.

In December 1984, Stephen was in an accident that left him with multiple broken bones and internal injuries. He resided at Methodist Hospital for much of the next year. In 1986, his dad donated one of his kidneys to Stephen. This gift freed him from dialysis and allowed him to resume his life.

Once mobile, he pursued years of higher education at Madison Area Technical College, University of Minnesota, and finally UW-Madison to study geology, biology and education. He participated on "Dino" digs in Kansas and Iceland. He graduat-



Stephen Miller

ed from UW-Madison in 1995 with a bachelor's degree in geology and biology. He eventually earned a Master's degree in education from UW-River Falls in 2003.

He then began teaching Earth science and math at Mt. Horeb High School and transferred to Kromrey Middle School in Middleton, Wis., where he worked until he retired in 2019.

In 1994, he met Amy Simon. They were married in 2000 and had two children (Mallory in 2002 and Maisie Mae in 2004). His girls were his world.

Stephen was a traveler. He took numerous excursions around the United States and beyond. He rode across the country on Amtrak multiple times, and motorcycled cross country (his first break-out solo excursion after the accident). He lived in Jackson, Wyo., for a year (fulfilling his pre-accident plan) where he skied (on a mono-ski) and worked full time. He roamed the country by bus while marching in the Madison Scouts in '77 and '78. As an adult, he bumped about the Midwest attending drum and bugle corps contests and visiting many small towns in the Upper Midwest. He traveled to China with Amy (2007) and took the family to the London Olympics (2012). Recently, he toured Scotland and Northern England. His last adventure was to Pittsburgh and back to ride the train and see the bridges and architecture.

From the final paragraph of his obituary: "Please contribute to FFRF (Freedom From Religion Foundation) in Madison in lieu of flowers. He thanks you."

And FFRF thanks Stephen.

LETTERBOX

Life everlasting: We each live our own eternities

All the major Western religions promise their adherents everlasting life — that they will never die, but will persist through all eternity. It’s a quite absurd proposition. Nothing is forever, not even the universe. As far as we know, no new matter is being created. Over the eons, all the stars will die out and everything will drift off until nothing is left. And all the souls in the hereafter will still be around to witness the event? Not likely.

Another view of eternity is more likely. None of us can remember a time when we did not exist and we, of course, will not know times or events after our deaths. Our own little eternities.

California

First the rapture, then the zombie apocalypse

Freethought Today reported that 55 percent of adults believe Jesus will return to Earth. My concern is raised because I learned that in the cemetery across the path from my parent’s section is a section reserved for believers in what is called “The Rapture.” This, I am told, is what will occur upon Jesus’ return when he shall bring the dead to arise again.

I have also been told that upon death, the soul departs the body. So, when these long-dead arise, they will be without their souls. Such an occurrence would seem to be the beginning of the zombie apocalypse.

I sure hope that one or both parts of the hoped-for religious futures do not come to pass, as things are bad enough here already.

Maryland

As end of life nears, FFRF resonates with me

When deciding to donate, I selected FFRF based on its A+ rating on Charity-Watch.org.

Religion has been an odd issue throughout my life, having grown up in the Bible Belt of the South, routinely attending and participating in all the activities and ceremonies involved with such an existence. Ironically, there was something in the “message” I was exposed to in Sunday school and church which resonated with me, to the point my first ambition was to become a Protestant minister.

However, the hypocrisy of my fellow practitioners caused me to question it. Ultimately, the whole system of organized religion lost its appeal for me. I could not reconcile all the challenging questions I had for the simplistic doctrine of “belief” alone.

I wound up earning a degree in philosophy, which helped me further clarify my views on religion. I worked in the social services field, where I actually was helping others, striving to make a difference, human to human, not just “preaching” about mystical, supernatural powers.

Even at the end of my life, religion has proven to be an obstacle. I have been diagnosed with stage 4 esophaga-



Richard Lewis



Blake Moore @BlakeWriting · 1d
How do atheists decide between good choices and bad choices?

9,394 1,781 3,380



Corby Collins @crowguye

Replying to @BlakeWriting
If you need the threat of eternal punishment to be a good person, you are not a good person.
4:14 PM · 06 May 22 · Twitter for Android

geal cancer, and am now in hospice care. One of my sisters and her husband are evangelical Christians, and they constantly reference prayer and all the trappings of their beliefs. It is quite sad, really, because I have chosen for them not to visit me prior to my death, for fear they will bring their bibles and try to “save my soul.”

So, yes, when I discovered FFRF, it resonated with me on a very personal level, and I am more than happy to donate as I could to your efforts. I wish your organization all the best in the future.

Oregon

Why do people vote against their interests?

Why do people vote against their own — and their children’s — economic interest, something that seems so counter-intuitive? In particular, why do they vote for a party that opposes a social safety net? What can that party possibly offer that is more important to them?

Focusing on people who believe, rightly or wrongly, that the bible is the word of God, such people tend to believe, rightly or wrongly, that the bible — and therefore God himself — condemns abortion, gays and transgenders (the list is not exhaustive). As to the bible’s perceived position on a social safety net, one hears much less.

Montreal, Canada

Odd results from the ‘nothing in particulars’

I don’t know about you, but I wonder about the Nones, those secular Americans identified as either “atheist,” “agnostic” or “nothing in particular” on religious surveys. Nones are a fast-growing segment of the population — about one-third of the country now — and represent a major cultural shift in the country. It’s a trend being celebrated by humanists as a sign of hope that America is finally awakening from her 400-year-long Judeo-Christian coma.

Then, in the January/February issue of Freethought Today, I see this Pew Research poll. It asked a breathtakingly simple question: “Do you believe Jesus will return to Earth some-

day?” As you’d expect, a solid majority (75 percent) of all Christians said yes, as did a whopping 92 percent of evangelical Christians. No surprises there. What gobsnocked me was the category labeled “Nothing in Particular” — our very own Nones — 29 percent of whom answered “yes” to that question!

After many days of perplexed contemplation, I finally took refuge in a line from “Inherit the Wind,” from the wiseass reporter, E.K. Hornbeck: “We’re growing an odd crop of agnostics this year.”

Colorado

Please volunteer in a medical study

I always enjoy reading the blogs by James Haught in Freethought Today and on freethoughtnow.org. In a recent online piece, [which is printed in this issue on Page 3] he wrote, “Just before she died of ovarian cancer, one of my Unitarian friends, Marty Wilson, wrote . . .”

Ovarian cancer is the only female cancer that has no early diagnostic test, thus often being too far along once detected. Why do I mention this? As an organization that touts the large number of us utilizing the Covid vaccine, choosing reality over mythology, fact over fiction, we understand that it is humans, not a nebulous higher power, that led to medical advances.

I am currently a volunteer in an ovarian cancer-related five-year study led by the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. They are working to develop a detection method. During the course of the study, will I eventually be the control or the affected? I do not know. I do know they were looking for volunteers to donate a minor amount of blood twice a year. I encourage others, especially young members of FFRF, to volunteer as participants in medical research studies. For many (such as the one I am in), you do not even have to live in the same area as the research facility!

Call your local medical school, cancer institute, or post on a related message board. Join me in encouraging the very human advances in medicine.

Washington, D.C.

Religious art/music can still be beautiful

Just a comment about the recent letters having to do with Christian art and music. As a music lover, I hope that the world never loses the works of Handel, Bach, Beethoven, etc. Perhaps, there will come a time when people listen to their music as examples of art created by superstitious men in the Age of Religion, but to lose such magnificence because of prejudice against Christianity would be a tragedy. Sometimes, I wish someone would come up with secular words set to some of the Christian music I love so much (even Christmas carols), but if my wish never comes true, I’m still willing to sing along to beautiful music. It’s like reciting a famous piece of poetry. I don’t have to mean what I say. I just get to enjoy the loveliness.

Colorado

OK GOP wants tax credits for home-schooling

House Republicans in Oklahoma unveiled an education plan that includes “school-choice tax credits.”

GOP House Speaker Charles McCall wants to give tax credits of \$2,500 per homeschooled child, which, in some cases could total \$20,000 per family. The precise number can only now be guesstimated because no one in Oklahoma (including the governor) knows how many home-schooled students there are. At least now we might be able to determine how many home-schooled families there are, based on the number of those who apply for the tax credits.

It can also be guesstimated that at least 75 percent of the home-schooled children are being indoctrinated into the Christian religion, with the secularists amongst us being forced to pick up their tab.

What will McCall (and his ilk) do when every other religious group (Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, LDS, Wiccan, etc.) demands taxpayer funding, too?

Oklahoma

Freethought Today, FFRF ‘are the absolute best’

Your newspaper is worth a million!

You are doing fabulous, fabulous work. I cannot thank you enough. You are the absolute best.

Maine

Proselytizing drivers disrespect passengers

I had a couple thoughts while reading the “No preaching while driving” article in Freethought Today. The reason why Uber and Lyft drivers proselytizing to a captive audience is so offensive is that it intensely disrespects the listener. It tells the listener, “Your belief is inferior to mine.” That’s just plain rude.

In that situation, a good response is for the passenger to demand that the driver stop and let him/her out. If the driver refuses, call 911 and report you are being held against your will.

Michigan

‘Freethought Matters’ is intelligent, incisive

While I knew a little about FFRF, I really didn’t attend to it until I caught Ron Reagan’s “unabashed atheist” promo on Colbert’s “The Late Show.” I realized I hadn’t given FFRF enough credit for its efforts. I’ve already seen four episodes of “Freethought Matters” and Annie Laurie Gaylor’s interview with Barbara G. Walker was, as usual, enlightening and heartening. Thank you so much for outing such careful and provocative thinkers on the airwaves and pass on my appreciation to Ms. Walker — we need many more like her.

I am so pleased that there is one half-hour a week when I can watch/hear intelligent, incisive conversations on TV. Religion has gotten so many perks over the years that it’ll require concerted effort to rein it in.

I’m already looking forward to the next interview.

California

Earthquake deaths prove a caring god nonexistent

Echoing Voltaire’s reaction to the one that struck Lisbon in 1755, the February earthquake in Syria/Turkey that killed an estimated 47,000 people makes any notion of a benevolent god untenable.

Wisconsin

God never responded to my request

When I was 10 years old, I screamed in my bedroom: “Hey, God, if you’re real, let me feel you!” I never did feel God, even though I went to church and Sunday school throughout my childhood. I guess I did feel something “spiritual” when we sang the hymns in church.

By the way, I love your newspaper.

California

‘Out’ atheists need more courage than believers

It takes courage to say that you don’t believe in God.

It takes no courage whatsoever to say that you do.

California


Perception of ‘saints’ is from hype, not facts

To most of the world, highly revered figures such as Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi and the Dalai Lama are larger-than-life symbols of life, peace and charity. However, much

Crossword answers

F	A	L	S	E		S	N	L		B	E	R	G	
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R	E	E	F			A	R	M		S	E	I	N	E

Check out this LSF donation!



The Lake Superior Freethinkers (LSF), an FFRF chapter, donated \$2,090 to the Duluth Library Foundation (DLF) during the seventh annual Olga Walker Awards and Author Event (put on by the DLF) on Feb 26. The FFRF Partnership Grant funded \$1,000 and the other \$1,090 came from LSF members. From left to right, Erin Kreeger, DLF executive director; David Sproat, DLF Board of Directors past president; David Moeller, DLF Board of Directors president; Charles Gessert, LSF treasurer; Carla Powers, Duluth Public Library manager; and Matt Rosendahl, DLF Board of Directors vice president.

of our perception of “sainthood” is built on hype and not facts. Penn and Teller’s “What’s That Stench? Holier Than Now” segment on their “Bullshit” series reveals the dark side of the so-called enlightened ones and delves into why we are so susceptible to buying into their BS.

Also, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* by Christopher Hitchens is very perspicacious. Hitchens states: “Judge Mother Teresa’s reputation by her actions and words rather than her action and words by her reputation.” It was not the honest relief of suffering, but the promulgation of a cult based on death and suffering. Over \$50 million dollars were hidden. She had friendships with many despots.

It appears that “Christian America” cares for people before they are born and after they are dead. The intention is clerical coercion for the years in between. What is after life? Death.

Ohio

Freethinkers thrive in Arkansas, too!

I’m thrilled to become a Lifetime Member of FFRF, and to be celebrated as such in Freethought Today. But I was disappointed to see that my state of Arkansas was not mentioned among the states represented.

I would like to point out that we freethinkers thrive even here in the buckle of the Bible Belt (and give a shout out to the Arkansas Society of Freethinkers). I consider it especially important to call attention to my fellow freethinkers here, given the steps our new governor [Sarah Huckabee

Cryptogram answer

History is strewn with ideas that were intuitive and made sense at the time, but were also hopelessly wrong.

— Steve Novella

It’s time to stop the pre-meeting invocation

This is the transcript of FFRF Member Alex DeWitt’s public input to the Bay City (Mich.) Commission on Feb. 20.

I again want to bring up something about inclusion in the City Commission of Bay City. Every meeting, for way longer than I’ve been coming to these meetings, the Bay City opens its meetings with a prayer, which we call an “invocation” to try and keep it legal. It’s very tactically worded and identically repeated; but the subtext of this prayer was drawn up to exclude large parts of this city’s populace. Per the Public Religious Research Institute, 21 percent of Bay County residents are nonreligious. Adding in those who are non-Christian, you’re looking at 1 in 4 county residents who fit in that category. Yet, in this body, we’re reading a prayer that is in a book resembling a Christian bible, starting with calling out to a singular “almighty god.”

I’d like to remind this commission that the idea that America was founded on Christianity is false. The founders used language in the Constitution that reflects the prevailing view of the late Enlightenment period, deism. Deism is a philosophical belief in human reason as a reliable means of solving social and political problems. Not Christianity, but individual human impact. Were our Founding Fathers perfect? No, especially when looking at issues like slavery and women’s rights. But, did their deism help them come up with ideas of a modern democratic republic? To not build a government based on a king but on the will of a populace? Absolutely.

And this idea didn’t end in the 18th century. The losers of the Civil War were upset about the deistic sentiments that were socially pushing to finally abolish slavery, and fell back on the Christian bible to justify slavery’s continuance. The women’s suffrage movement was opposed by religious conservatives. The Americans that were against the civil rights movement were heavily influenced by conservative religious sects like the Southern Baptists, Catholics and Mormons.

Why am I rambling about this? Well, I believe it is time for the city to end the invocation. Not only should our city be doing what’s best based on provable evidence and information we have in front of us instead of hoping for something beyond proof to help us. I don’t want a spectacle where the city goes, “Well, OK, we’ll just allow anyone to give an invocation” because that just exacerbates the problem. In a period where Christian nationalism and Christian supremacy movements are getting mainstream coverage due to their access in government, we as a city need to take the minimum step to stop quietly excluding those who don’t look up to only one of the thousands of religions in the world. Considering the reputation of this town amongst a large portion of the citizenry, starting the meeting with a prayer hasn’t improved our reputation. Let’s spend that 30 seconds on better governing and discussions.

I’d like to finish with something that will be considered disruptive to certain sensitive people and could be grounds removed. In America, Christians want non-Christians to pray their prayers, practice their theocratic laws, and recite their pledges, but then claim that we are free to do as we please. Except we aren’t. When we try to promote our points of view, we’re mocked, slandered and prayed for. Well, those haven’t worked yet, and I can guarantee they never will on me, and that includes our opening invocation.

Michigan



Photo: Monona Terrace

The Monona Terrace Convention Center in Madison, Wis., is the site of FFRF's 2023 convention from Oct. 13-15.

FFRF convention, Oct. 13-15

Meet us in Madison!

Join the Freedom From Religion Foundation in its home city for its 46th annual convention from Friday, Oct. 13 through Sunday morning Oct. 15 at the Monona Terrace Convention Center in Madison, Wis. For information on convention speakers, see page 7.

General Schedule

The convention will offer an optional Thursday afternoon open house at the Freethought Hall, running from 4-6 p.m. Convention registration will re-open at 8 a.m. on Friday, Oct. 13, with the program beginning at 9 a.m. and running through Saturday evening. On Sunday morning, the membership and State Representatives meetings will take place, ending by noon.

Return the handy registration form on the right, or sign up at ffrf.org/convo2023.

Registration

Registration for the convention is only \$100 per FFRF member, \$105 for a companion accompanying a member, \$160 for nonmembers (or, you can save money by becoming a mem-

ber for just \$40). High school students or younger are free and the college student rate is \$25.

Optional Group Meals

Vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free options are available. Please specify requirements on the registration form.

Friday Dinner Buffet

- Beer Brats with Wisconsin Sauerkraut
- Grilled Chicken Breast
- Black Bean Burgers
- Baked Beans
- Assorted Wisconsin Salads

Saturday Non-Prayer Breakfast

- Cheese and Chive Scrambled Eggs
- Applewood Smoked Bacon
- Baby Red Potatoes
- Muffins

Saturday Lunch

- Two Chicken Enchiladas
- Refried Beans
- Fiesta Corn
- Spanish Rice

Saturday Dinner

- Wisconsin Cranberry Chicken
- Champagne Tilapia
- Portobello Wellington
- Dessert trio

Onsite self parking \$25/day.

Best Western Premier Park Hotel

22 S Carroll St, Madison, WI 53703
608-285-8000
Rates are \$209 for a standard guest room.
Hotel is 3 blocks from convention site.
Onsite valet parking \$25/day.

Sheraton Madison Hotel

706 John Nolen Dr, Madison, WI 53713
888-625-4988
Rates are \$269 for a standard guest room.
Hotel is 2.3 miles from convention site.
Free surface lot parking. Free shuttle service to downtown available.

Hotels

We encourage you to register and book your hotel rooms as soon as possible.

If you need an accessible room, please state your needs when making the reservation. Please make reservations by Sept. 1.

Make your room reservation directly by phoning or find online links at ffrf.us/hotels2023. (See information below). Indicate you are with "The Freedom From Religion Foundation" block.

Hilton Madison Monona Terrace

9 East Wilson Street Madison, Wisconsin, 53703
608-255-5100
Rates are \$189 for a standard guest room.
Hotel is attached to convention site.

FFRF 2023 NATIONAL CONVENTION MADISON OCTOBER 13-15

46TH CONVENTION REGISTRATION FORM

Or register online: ffrf.us/convention2023

REGISTRATION FEES	Number Registering	Cost
Member	___	\$100 \$___
Spouse or Companion (Non-member accompanying member)	___	\$105 \$___
Child (High school or under accompanying registrant)	___	Free \$___
College Student with ID	___	\$25 \$___
Non-member	___	\$160 \$___
<input type="checkbox"/> Or, I will join FFRF for \$40 (and save \$20)	___	\$140 \$___

OPTIONAL MEALS / EVENTS

We've provided meals with the most commonly requested dietary preferences. Please specify other requirements below under ADA or food allergy accommodations. FFRF does not make money on convention meals. Prices include the 5.5% sales tax and 22% service charge.

Thursday, October 12

Freethought Hall Open House [Must register to attend] ___ Free
Check box if attending ☐ Registrant 1 ☐ Registrant 2

Friday, October 13

Friday Dinner Buffet ___ \$35 \$___
Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free
Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Saturday, October 14

Non-Prayer Breakfast ___ \$25 \$___
Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free
Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Enchilada Platter ___ \$25 \$___
Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free
Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Saturday Dinner ___ \$50 \$___
Registrant 1 ☐ Wisconsin Cranberry Chicken ☐ Champagne Tilapia ☐ Vegetable Portobello
Registrant 2 ☐ Wisconsin Cranberry Chicken ☐ Champagne Tilapia ☐ Vegetable Portobello

► Total \$___

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

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

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

- ☐ I attest that I and my guests will be fully vaccinated for Covid-19 as of 9/28/23.
☐ I attest that I have a physician's order against my vaccination.

Name of Registrant 1

Name of Registrant 2
☐ I am including additional registrants (enclose your additional list, with meals, if any).

Address

City State / ZIP

Phone* Email*

Credit Card Number Expiration Date / Security Code

Billing Name / Signature *Contact information for in-house use only
Registration deadline September 29th, 2023 (Unless event is sold out)