

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



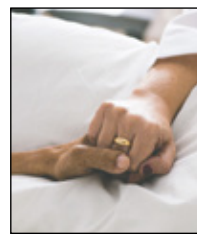
**Young sisters fight
against proselytizing
bus driver**

PAGE 10



**'We must unite
to defend freedom
of conscience'**

PAGE 11



**It's our right
to die on our
own terms**

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August 2023

Ruth Bader Ginsburg bust dedication



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Co-President Dan Barker unveils the bust of Ruth Bader Ginsburg on June 21 in the lobby of Freethought Hall in Madison, Wis., during FFRF's summer solstice celebration. The bust was created by renowned sculptor (and FFRF member) Zenos Frudakis.

'Advocate for true religious liberty'

This is the speech given by FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert on June 21 at FFRF's Freethought Hall in Madison, Wis., to dedicate the Ruth Bader Ginsburg bust, which was unveiled during FFRF's summer solstice celebration.

By Rebecca Markert

Good afternoon, and happy summer solstice!

[FFRF Co-President] Annie Laurie Gaylor asked me to speak a few words about the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg today. She said I could share my favorite RBG quote, which is kind of like picking my favorite child. It's impossible. It literally depends on the day!

But it's really hard to find just one. I think it's because she wasn't only a brilliant legal mind, but she also was a very practical person. She put her head down, worked hard and became a justice on the highest court in the



land — and she wasn't even President Clinton's first choice! She just wanted to get the job done. She fought for equality and justice based on her own "outsider" experience, which led her to be a more empathetic justice. She understood the impact of her work on the real world.

That's what I find so appealing about her. She's relatable in so many ways. She's the only Supreme Court justice who also became a pop culture icon. The "Notorious RBG." There are posters and pins and apparel and glassware, all with her picture and

quotes on them. Many of the attorneys here have some displayed in our offices.

She was a working lawyer mom, like me. After her career took off, she faced all the struggles working moms have also experienced, even still today. So, when Annie Laurie asked me what my favorite quote was, my mind went immediately to the story she told at Sundance in 2018 about her "spirited" son, who had a habit of getting in trouble at school and they would always call her. This is what she said:

"I would get called by the head of the school, the school psychologists or the room teacher to come down immediately to hear about my son's latest escapade. Well, one day, I think I'd been up all night writing a brief. I was at my office at Columbia Law School. I got the call. And I responded, 'This child

See Ginsburg on page 9

Cross is removed from hilltop after FFRF complaints

After complaints by the Freedom From Religion Foundation and a sustained campaign by local freethinking groups, a hilltop cross has been removed from public property in California — at least for now.

FFRF was first contacted in 2015 by members of the East Bay Atheists about a cross in the Albany Hill Park, just north of Oakland. The 20-foot cross had been put up in 1971 on private property by a member of the Lions Club. He later gave the club an easement (a legal right to access to the property) to continue to maintain and illuminate the cross. The land eventually ended up as a public park as part of a development deal, though still burdened with the Lions Club's easement.

In 2016 and 2017, FFRF lodged complaints with the city of Albany about the cross' presence on public property. The Albany City Council agreed and indicated a unanimous desire to take down the cross but needed to work out the property law issues with the Lion's Club, which vehemently opposed the removal of the cross. The Lions Club

sued in 2017, objecting to the city's challenge of its easement. After several years of litigation, the case was settled in 2019 with the cross still up and the easement remaining in place, upheld by the courts as valid. FFRF filed an amicus brief during this litigation in support of the city before the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

The federal district court judge, affirmed by the 9th Circuit, had indicated that while the easement was valid, the cross was unconstitutional and the city needed to find a way to remedy the constitutional violation, suggesting eminent domain as one possible solution. In 2022, the city began the process to resolve the Establishment Clause violation by taking possession of the Lions Club's easement via eminent domain so the cross could be finally taken down.

Finally, the city of Albany removed the cross from the property on June 8, following state court orders upholding a "prejudgment possession" in the eminent domain action. A trial set for mid-July will

See Cross on page 4

Kentucky Pride



FFRF members Beneil Watts, left, and John Sutton of FFRF's Kentucky chapter staffed the tent at the Kentuckiana Pride Festival on June 17 in Louisville. They handed out FFRF literature and spoke with those who stopped by to ask questions or seek more information.

Summer Solstice Celebration 2023

Photos by Chris Line



FFRF Member Jeff Brinckman, left, is deep in conversation with Freethought Today Editor PJ Slinger and FFRF Bookkeeper Eleanor McEntee.



Nancy McClements chats with FFRF members Stef Moritz and Vince Jenkins during FFRF's Summer Solstice celebration at Freethought Hall.



A nearly full house listens to FFRF Co-President Dan Barker play summer-themed musical compositions on the piano.



From left, FFRF's Editorial Assistant Danielle Acker, Events and Outreach Manager Sadie Pattinson, Director of Operations Lisa Strand and Director of First Impressions Lisa Treu take a break from preparing and hosting the Summer Solstice gathering.



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker, center, converses with Tom Cara, former head of FFRF's Metropolitan Chicago Chapter. Playing piano is FFRF Attorney Ryan Jayne.

ffrf

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TODAY

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Freethought Matters returns Sunday Sept. 3

Go To: ffrf.org/freethought-matters or visit FFRF's YouTube Freethought Matters playlist at bit.ly/37yVce9

FFRF convention, Oct. 13-15

Drag queens to introduce student activists

FFRF is announcing two Madison-area drag queens who will introduce the two student activist awardees as part of the great line-up for FFRF’s 46th annual convention, taking place Friday, Oct. 13, and Saturday, Oct. 14, at the Monona Terrace Convention Center in Madison, Wis.

With the convention getting close, we encourage you to reserve rooms *now*. For the first time in FFRF’s 46-year history, the convention will take place on a “Football Saturday,” meaning convention-goers are competing with Wisconsin Badgers fans. Plan ahead so you are not disappointed. All details, including hotel contacts and deadlines, can be found on the back page or at ffrf.org/convo2023.

The convention will not only showcase FFRF activism, but will place special emphasis this year on the threats of white Christian nationalism and to abortion rights. It will also include “godless” entertainment.

The student activist awardees — **Bear Bright** and **Laur Stovall** — are suing over cancellation of a drag show sponsored by student clubs on the West Texas A&M West campus. After university President Walter Wendler canceled a campus drag show set up as a benefit, they became the plaintiffs. The students, fittingly, will be introduced by two local drag queen performers — **Bryanna Banx\$** and **Latina Envy**.

Bryanna Banx\$ has been performing across the state of Wisconsin, entire Midwest and the rest of the country for almost 20 years, and has also produced and hosted events. She has also back-up danced and helped many others for different pageant systems throughout her career. She won Miss Gay Wisconsin USofA 2011 & Miss Club Wisconsin 2018.

Latina Envy is a growing artist who has had the pleasure of traveling around the state of Wisconsin in an all-Latina group with her drag sisters, and has also performed as a backup dancer at a na-



Bryanna Banx\$

tional pageant with Wisconsin’s 2023 Entertainer of the Year. She is known to be a sassy Latina on stage, but she is more than that behind the scenes, working as a 4k teacher and acting alongside a local theater group.

Other confirmed convention speakers include:

- **Elie Mystal**, receiving FFRF’s Clarence Darrow Award. The Harvard Law School grad is author of the bestselling *Allow Me To Retort — A Black Guy’s Guide to the Constitution*.
- **Robert P. Jones**, founder and president of Public Religion Research Institute and author of two books on white Christian supremacy.
- **Andrew Seidel**, author of *The Found-*

ing Myth: Why Christian Nationalism Is Un-American and American Crusade: How the Supreme Court is Weaponizing Religious Freedom.

- **Bradley Onishi**, on the faculty at the University of San Francisco, is author of the new book, *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism — And What Comes Next*.

Abortion rights will be addressed by at least three expert speakers:

- **Jen Castle**, national director of abortion service delivery at Planned Parenthood Federation of America, will accept on behalf of Planned Parenthood the \$35,000 Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award.
- **Mary Ziegler**, a noted abortion rights legal expert and advocate, will receive FFRF’s “Forward Award,” given to those who are moving society forward. She is the author of many articles and six books on social movement struggles around reproduction, autonomy and the law, most recently, *Roe: The History of a National Obsession* (2023).

- **Lizz Winstead**, a political satirist, will receive FFRF’s “Emperor Has No Clothes Award.” Winstead is a prominent abortion rights activist and a founder of Abortion Access Front. She will be the Saturday night keynote speaker.

Other speakers and events include: **Godless Gospel**, which will perform an encore of its acclaimed debut at the 2022 national FFRF convention.

- **Kate Cohen**, who writes elegant, freethinking columns as a Washington Post contributing writer exposing America’s reflexive deference to religion and its effect on education, health care and human rights, will receive the Freethought Heroine Award.

- **Emily Olson**, a member of the city council in Owosso, Mich., who will receive FFRF’s “Nothing Fails Like Prayer” Award for bravely attempting to persuade the council to discontinue prayer.

A secular legislative panel, which will include Wisconsin state **Sen. Kelda Roys**, and Minnesota state **Rep. Mike Freiberg**,

A third panelist will be announced soon.

Also featured will be the usual “Highlights of the Year” from Co-Presidents **Dan Barker** and **Annie Laurie Gaylor**, the legal report by FFRF Legal Director **Rebecca Markert** and staff attorneys, and a report from the new (c)(4) FFRF Action Fund by FFRF Governmental Affairs Director **Mark Dann** and Senior Policy Counsel **Ryan Jayne**.

FFRF’s untraditional “traditions” will likewise take place: the Non-Prayer Breakfast with its popular “Moment of Bedlam,” the drawing for “clean,” pre-“In God We Trust” currency, musical interludes by musician Dan Barker, book and product sales tables, and chances to socialize.

An open house will be held on Thursday, Oct. 12, at FFRF’s impressive office, Freethought Hall, in downtown Madison from 4-6 p.m., with complimentary refreshments and a self-guided tour.

The annual membership meeting takes place on Sunday, Oct. 15, beginning at 9 a.m., followed by the annual meeting of the State Representatives, with adjournment about noon.



Latina Envy

2023 Convention Schedule*

Thursday, October 12
4-6 pm Open House, Freethought Hall <i>Early registration, appetizers, self-guided tour</i>
Friday, October 13
8:00 am Registration opens Monona Terrace Community & Convention Center <i>Complimentary continental breakfast, coffee & tea begins</i>
8:55 AM “Die Gedanken Sind Frei” Dan Barker at piano
9:00 AM Welcome Lisa Strand, director of operations
Year in Review Dan and Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-presidents
9:30 AM Nothing Fails Like Prayer Award Emily Olson
9:45 AM Freethought Heroine Award <i>“We of Little Faith: An Atheist Comes Clean (And Why You Should Too)”</i> Kate Cohen
10:30 AM COFFEE & TEA BREAK

11:00 AM “Forward Award” Mary Ziegler
11:45 AM Book signings in lobby Kate Cohen and Mary Ziegler
12:00 PM NOON LUNCH BREAK (<i>on own</i>)
1:30 PM Ballroom re-opens
2:00 PM Legal Highlights Rebecca Markert & legal staff
3:30 PM FFRF Action Fund Report Ryan Jayne, Ryan Dudley & Mark Dann
3:50 PM BREAK
4:15 PM Student Essay Winners
4:30 PM Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award Planned Parenthood, Jen Castle
5:15 PM Cash bar opens
5:15 PM BUFFET DINNER (<i>ticketed</i>)
7:00 PM Speaker(s) TBD
8:00 PM Godless Gospel
9:00 PM Complementary cake and Beverages
Saturday, October 14
8:00 AM NONPRAYER BREAKFAST (<i>ticketed item</i>)

Moment of Bedlam Nothing Fails Like Prayer Award invocation
9:00 AM Ballroom, tables re-open
9:25 AM “Nothing Fails Like Prayer” song, Dan Barker
9:30 AM Student Activist Awards Laur Stovall, Bear Bright <i>Introduced by local drag queens Bryanna Banx\$ & Latina Envy</i>
10:00 AM Christian Nationalism Experts “American Crusade” Andrew Seidel
10:20 AM “Preparing for War” Bradley Onishi
10:40 AM Champion of the First Amendment Amanda Tyler, Christians Against Christian Nationalism
11:00 AM Panel Q & A from audience
11:30 AM Book signings Andrew Seidel & Bradley Onishi
12:00 PM BUFFET LUNCH (<i>ticketed</i>) NOON CHAPTER LUNCH
1:30 PM Ballroom re-opens

2:00 PM Secular Legislative Panel Minn. state Rep. Mike Freiberg, Wis. state Sen. Kelda Roys, TBA
3:00 PM “The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy” Robert P. Jones
3:45 PM STRETCH BREAK
4:00 PM “Clarence Darrow Civil Liberties Award” Elie Mystal Book signings Robert Jones & Elie Mystal
5:30 PM Cash bar opens
6:00 PM DINNER (<i>ticketed</i>)
8:00 PM Drawing for Clean Money, emceed by Buzz Kemper
8:30 PM “Emperor Has No Clothes Award” Lizz Winstead
Sunday, October 15
8:00 AM Coffee, tea, light breakfast fare
9:00 AM Annual Membership Meeting
11ish State Representatives Meeting ADJOURN BY NOON
<i>*Schedule is subject to change</i>

Freethought Today Cryptogram

YOWAIJ CLAJOLJ, LVJXSABOACQ LXOOBS

UVJNALS XOMSPAOH, XON AS LXOOBS UVBZANJ

CXSACEXLSBVM XOCRJVC XFBYS SPJ UXCS.

—FAWW OMJ

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					13	14	
15						16					17		
	18					19					20		
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30						31		32	33			34	
35						36		37				38	
39						40					41		42
43						44					45	46	
						47				48	49		
						50	51				52		53
55											56		58
59											60		
62											63		

Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

- Across

 - Faucet option
 - Qty.
 - Food safety agency, acr.
 - Creamy cheese
 - Gin flavor
 - Diving duck
 - Narcissist's love
 - Flu symptom
 - TV doctor (2004-2012)
 - *Freethinking "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" author
 - Litter member
 - Mature, as in fruit
 - Clingy plant
 - Moderate heat
 - Hot sauce brand
 - "What?"
 - Valuables storage
 - Steps to the river, in India
 - 3/17 celebrants
 - Fleur-de-_____
 - False move
 - Hindu princess
 - Related to teeth
 - Joker to Batman, e.g.
 - Resembling the king of the animals
 - Sheen
 - Carte start
- *Freethinker and Winnie the Pooh creator
 - Goes with interest
 - *Arthur C. Clarke: "...morality has been hijacked by _____"
 - *Rationalist and agnostic Jawaharlal _____
 - In neutral
 - Winter precipitation
 - Content of cognition, pl.
 - What Pinocchio did
 - Collier's work place
 - *Anne Nicol Gaylor to Annie Laurie Gaylor
 - Hearing organ
 - Proofreader's mark
- Down

 - "60 Minutes" network
 - Metal-bearing minerals
 - Jaunty rhythm
 - Twist out of shape
 - Pond buildup
 - Lament the deceased
 - Past tense of tee
 - Half-man, half-goat
 - Cloud above racetrack?
 - *Human's cousin
 - Greek poet from Lesbos
 - Not full-sized tree
 - *Avijit Roy _____ Award
 - "_____ Perfect," movie
 - "Cheers," e.g.
- *Atomic _____, American Atheists' official logo
 - Same as auras
 - Large endangered ungulate
 - *U.S. Constitution's No Religious _____ clause
 - Move
 - Dugout vessel
 - Weasel's cousin
 - What refugees do
 - Shark part
 - *Irreverent "Fly Me to the Moon" performer
 - Threw
 - *Watson/Crick/Franklin's concern, acr.
 - Like U.S. and U.S.S.R. in WWII
 - Intestinal obstruction
 - Earth quakes
 - TV, radio, etc.
 - More sick
 - Do over
 - Attention grabber
 - Rub the wrong way
 - Fonzie: "Sit _____!"
 - *Religiously-unaffiliated one
 - *Freethinking Jodie Foster's movie "_____'s Island"
 - Drenched

Cross

Continued from page 1

determine whether the eminent domain action is valid, with the possibility remaining that the city could have to return the cross to the property if it is found invalid. Meanwhile, the city has placed the cross in storage.

"The city has actually put its money where its mouth is, and our city looks a little bit more accepting now in a way that we think is consistent with our values," Albany Mayor Aaron Tiedemann has stated. "For the small local group of people that really want to see the cross stay, when you've had such privilege for so long, losing it feels like being oppressed. That's going to be an adjustment for folks, but I think we will all get used to it, and I think it's a real benefit."

FFRF is very pleased by the city of Albany's determined defense of secularism, as FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor told the local publication.

"It's very gratifying and satisfying news to see the city do the right thing, even in a political climate that



This 20-foot cross that sat atop Albany Hill Park in California was taken down June 8.

isn't very supportive of separation of church and state," Gaylor said. "Kudos to Albany and their governance for fighting this and being so adamant."

Taking a shine to Darrow



Members of the East Tennessee Chapter of FFRF traveled to Dayton, Tenn., to clean the statue of Clarence Darrow in front of the Rhea County Courthouse, site of the famous Scopes trial in 1925 in Dayton.

In this photo, chapter President Aleta Ledendecker holds the ladder for Eliot Specht, while Don Deakins works behind the statue. Also helping with the cleaning was Carl Ledendecker (not pictured).

Aleta Ledendecker writes: "While in Dayton, Carl and I spoke with Jacob Ellis, the president of the Rhea County Historical Society, about getting the Darrow statue illuminated. We are thrilled to report that if our chapter provides a new fixture, the Historical Society will purchase an identical one for the William Jennings Bryan statue and pay for installing both. This initiative will be complete in time for the 2025 centennial celebration of the Scopes trial."

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: N => D .

OVERHEARD

Quite frankly, for too many young people, religion means embracing weapons that kill their peers. It means stopping them from having control over their bodies. It means restricting people from loving who they want to love. . . . Young people can see through the facade of restrictive policies clothed in the guise of religion.

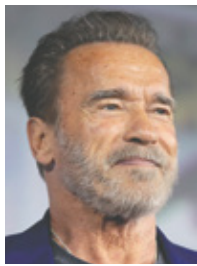
Rev. Serene Jone, president of Union Theological Seminary, in her column, “Young people aren’t buying far-right religious beliefs.”

Religion News Service, 5-26-23

When you hear Nick Fuentes — a white Christian nationalist who had dinner last year with former President Trump — say, “We’re having something like Taliban rule in America, but in a good way,” believe him. And when his fellow white supremacist Vincent James Foxx says, “We will not stop until *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a reality,” believe him.

Stephanie Schwinn and Suzanne Perry, in their column, “Christian nationalism: A threat to democracy.”

Minnesota Reformer, 5-26-23



Nothing. You’re 6 feet under. Anyone that tells you something else is a f’king liar.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, in an interview with Danny DeVito, on what happens after you die, as he remembered responding when Howard Stern interviewed him previously.

Huffington Post, 6-6-23

The numbers don’t lie: America’s children seem at far more risk in some places of worship than they would be at a drag show.

Ja’han Jones, ReidOut Blog writer, about the report by the Illinois attorney general in late May finding almost 2,000 children suffered sexual abuse by 451 Catholic clergy between 1950 and 2019. Jones is referring to widespread pushes to bar minors from attending drag shows.

MSNBC, 5-26-23

This isn’t a legal fight to some of these people. This is a religious war. This is a fight for the heart and soul of the country.

Jeb Baugh, one of the successful parent plaintiffs in the case against pervasive religion in Bossier Parish schools in Louisiana, from the news story “Inside the Christian legal campaign to return prayer to public school,” by Linda K. Wertheimer, examining push-back since the Bremerton decision.

The New Republic, 5-30-23

Every abortion denied is a tragedy. You don’t have to go into sepsis to be forever harmed by an abortion ban. You don’t need to be raped to have control of your body stolen from you.

Jessica Valenti, who writes “Abortion. Every day,” a daily update on the status of abortion rights in the United States, from her column, “How to talk about abortion.”

Substack, 5-20-23

In the United States of America, we are not led by prophets, but by elected officials whose job is to follow, make and adjudicate the law of the land, not the laws of Scripture or the word of God.

Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, in his column, “Religious freedom was meant to protect, not bludgeon. What happened?”

Religion News Service, 5-22-23

[Florida’s voucher plan] seeks to bolster the spread of private schools, especially those offering a Christian, “values-based” education, at the expense of supposedly amoral public schools. Ideology, not academics, seems to fuel the most fervent conservative supporters of school choice.

Columnist Lizette Alvarez, in her column, “In DeSantis’ Florida, it’s vouchers-for-all, even the wealthy.”

Washington Post, 6-5-23

I am guessing most books are banned because they tell the truth — and the truth is that humans are complicated.

Novelist Jane Smiley, “What are the book banners afraid of?”

The Nation, 5-30-23



Frankly, I don’t think they even need a moment of silence. But if you’re going to have a moment of silence, be silent. Just don’t push your religion on anyone else and I think this does all that.

Sheryl Monk, who called out people who were reciting the Lord’s Prayer during a moment of silence prior to the Berkeley County, (S.C.) School Board meeting. Monk was escorted out of the room for interrupting the interruptive prayer.

Live5news.com, 6-8-23

The separation of church and state is one of the most essential principles of our nation. The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work. Separation protects religious liberty and ensures that the government cannot interfere with our religious beliefs.

We must protect the separation of church and state by opposing any attempt to use public funds to support religious schools.

Rev. Clark Frailey, pastor of Coffee Creek Church in Edmond, Okla., in his op-ed “We’ve heard much about ‘indoctrination.’ What do you call a Catholic charter school?”

The Oklahoman, 6-7-23



Larry D. Moore / CC BY 4.0, Wikimedia Commons.

Susan Stubson

Christian nationalists have hijacked both my Republican Party and my faith community by blurring the lines between church and government and, in the process, rebranding our state’s identity.

Susan Stubson, a member of the Wyoming Republican Party, in her op-ed, “What Christian nationalism has done to my state and my faith is a sin.”

New York Times, 5-2-23

The idea that God’s law trumps man’s law absolutely saturates [Pat Robertson’s] world. Along with [Jerry] Falwell, he’s most responsible for turning Christianity into Christian nationalism and Christian nationalism into insurrectionism.

Historian Rick Perlstein, in an interview with columnist Greg Sargent, in the article, “How Pat Robertson created today’s Christian nationalist GOP.”

Washington Post, 6-8-23

Christian nationalism links being Christian to being American. In the view of many Christian nationalists, this linkage is threatened by secularization and other social changes. Biblical literalism is the belief that each word in the bible should be accepted as God’s word spoken directly to readers, not to be filtered through religious elites.

Using survey data, we find that the sense of a threatened nation inherent in Christian nationalism and the anti-elite tendencies in biblical literalism amplify conspiracy thinking, and that the two have

especially strong effects when they occur together. We conclude that Christian nationalist and biblical literalist support of Covid-19 and the 2020 election conspiracy theories are not a one-off — Christian nationalists and biblical literalists are likely to buy into future conspiracy theories, too.

Brooklyn Evann Walker, instructor of political science at Hutchinson Community College, about Walker’s new study, published in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion.

PsyPost, 6-11-23

Should the Oklahoma arrangement pass muster in the courts, conservatives would probably soon dispense with vouchers, scholarships and other roundabout ways of subsidizing religious schools (though they presumably would still need such expedients to subsidize homeschooling), and just begin directly setting up religious “charter schools” that aren’t really public in any respect other than funding. Such a development would also show that the “wall of separation” between church and state has crumbled into dust.

Columnist Ed Kilgore, in his column, “Oklahoma’s religious charter school aims to break church/state separation.”

Intelligencer, 6-12-23

Less well understood, though, was [Pat] Robertson’s significant contribution to the Christianization of the legal profession, and the development of a Christian nationalist legal brigade that has set its sights on ending the separation of church and state, abortion and LGBTQ rights.

Sarah Posner, author of the book *Unholy: How White Christian Nationalists Powered the Trump Presidency and the Devastating Legacy They Left Behind*, in her column, “How Pat Robertson helped create the Christian nationalist lawyer brigade reshaping American life.”

Talking Points Memo, 6-9-23

The online school is Roman Catholic, which gives it an added inducement before a right-wing high court: All six conservative justices are Catholic. Perhaps that’s why the Oklahoma Statewide Virtual Charter School Board chose to approve the school, even though Oklahoma is hardly an overwhelmingly Catholic state. The members of the board knew their decision was sure to end up in a battle before the Supreme Court.

I don’t want tax dollars supporting any religion, much less one that is overtly homophobic and less overtly misogynistic. With all due respect to Pope Francis, who has tried to embody the philosophy of Jesus Christ, the church is still tied to traditions and teachings that I cannot stomach. It not only fights abortion, but it also resists contraception. Women are not allowed in the priesthood.

Syndicated columnist Cynthia Tucker, decrying the decision by the Oklahoma charter school body to approve for the first time ever a sectarian school as a public-supported charter school.

Wisconsin State Journal, 6-11-23

The [hard-right Law and Justice] party’s success has been built on targeted social transfers, genuflection to the country’s Catholic identity and avowed nationalism. But it also owes a lot to skillfully played campaigns of collective fear and demonization. For much of the party’s eight years in office, migrants, women and sexual minorities have been the chief targets.

Jaroslav Kuisz and Karolina Wigura, in their guest essay, “Poland isn’t the friend the West thinks it is,” mentioning how Poland wrote the anti-abortion play script.

New York Times, 6-13-23

And if there is one lesson we should take from “Shiny Happy People,” it’s this: When people claim to personally light the path and clear away the darkness, you know they are leading you astray.

Columnist David French, reacting to “Shiny Happy People,” the Amazon Prime four-part series that details Bill Gothard and his Institute in Basic Life Principles cult, which is followed by the reality-TV Duggars family, whose oldest son molested four of his sisters and is in prison for possession of child pornography.

New York Times 6-16-23

IN THE NEWS

Various reports show decline of religion

Data from the General Social Survey by NORC, the research organization at the University of Chicago, found that only half of respondents say they are confident in the existence of God — a decline from more than 60 percent in 2008.

Also, in a recently released report from the Public Religion Research Institute, 27 percent of Americans claimed no religion in 2022, up from 19 percent in 2012.

And, Pew Research Center data also indicate that those who identify as Christian have declined from 90 percent of U.S. adults in the 1990s to roughly two-thirds currently, with a majority of the change coming from those raised in the church becoming dissociated from Christianity as they have grown up.

Report: Atheists least likely to have children

Atheists are the least likely to be parents compared to any other “religious group” and “it’s reasonable to infer that some of the drop in American fertility is due to rising secularization,” according to research and reports by Ryan Burge, a political scientist and statistician.

Burge reports that about 60 percent of 30-year-old Latter-day Saints are currently parents to young children, which is the highest among religious groups. For atheists, it’s just below 25 percent.

“Religious people are more likely to be parents — that’s unmistakable in this data,” Burge writes. “The same general trend is here: Republicans have more children than Democrats. . . . A Protestant Republican has over twice as many children as a Democrat atheist/agnostic. Rich, educated, left-leaning folks are just less likely to have children. Atheists check a lot of those boxes.”

SBC takes step to name only men as pastors

Southern Baptists, after a lengthy debate June 14, voted on new language for their constitution that would state only men can be pastors of the nation’s largest Protestant denomination, according to a report by Religion News Service.

The wording, which must be approved two years in a row, would be added to an article of the constitution, stating that Southern Baptist Confer-

ence “affirms, appoints, or employs only men as any kind of pastor or elder as qualified by Scripture.”

Also, thousands of Southern Baptists voted overwhelmingly to affirm the expulsion of Saddleback Church from the SBC because Saddleback Pastor Rick Warren has ordained women, SBC officials said June 14.

Gallup reports most in U.S. say abortion is OK

A majority of Americans for the first time say that abortion is “morally acceptable” and that abortion laws are too strict, according to Gallup surveys. Also, for the first time in more than 20 years, a majority of U.S. residents are more likely to identify as “pro-choice” over “pro-life.”

Gallup reports that 52 percent of Americans say abortion is morally acceptable, which is 10 percentage points above the historical average since 2001.

Also, more voters than ever say they will vote only for a candidate who shares their views on abortion. In the past, Republicans and those identifying as “pro-life” have historically been most likely to see abortion as a litmus test. However, they are now less motivated by it, while Democrats and those identifying as “pro-choice” are far more so.

“This is a paradigm shift,” said Lydia Saad, director of United States social research for Gallup. There is much more support for abortion rights than there was, and that seems to be here to stay.”

Study: Many atheists don’t disclose their nonbelief

Research revealed that because atheists continue to experience a variety of social challenges, many are uncomfortable about disclosing their nonbelief.

Dena Abbott, assistant professor of counseling psychology at the University of Nebraska, recently completed a yearlong study to investigate the psychological well-being of two groups of atheists — rural-residing and woman-identified atheists — in the context of anti-atheist discrimination in the United States.

Abbott’s data show that for many women raised in or around Christianity, they found atheism to be “liberating.” While it was uncommon to experience anti-atheist discrimination, they cited Christian authority and the expectation to adapt to Christian norms as more distressing than individual acts of anti-atheist

discrimination.

Rural atheists reported different challenges than their urban counterparts.

“Atheists living in small towns — which tend to be more religious and politically conservative — often reported experiencing a heightened sense of danger because of their non-belief,” Abbott said. “Rural atheists talked about a fear of violence more than urban atheists did.”

Mich. council bans LGBTQ flags from city property

The Hamtramck City Council in Michigan voted unanimously June 13 to ban LGBTQ+ Pride flags from being displayed on all city properties, according to the Detroit Free Press.

The resolution also prohibited the display and flying of flags with racist and political views.

Mayor Pro Tem Mohammed Hassan and other members of the council said the LGBTQ+ community and others are welcome in Hamtramck but that they need to respect religious freedom. Some proponents of the resolution said the Pride flag clashes with their faith.

No gender-affirming care at Catholic hospitals?

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops vote on June 16 set in motion a process that could bar Catholic hospitals from providing gender-affirming treatment to transgender people, according to Religion News Service.

The vote, held during the USCCB’s spring meeting in Orlando, Fla., passed via voice vote, with no audible dissenters.

The procedural vote doesn’t specifically bar gender-affirming care, but rather allows the USCCB’s Committee on Doctrine to begin the process of amending the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services — the “authoritative guidance on certain moral issues” for Catholic health care institutions.

The statement, known as a doctrinal note, argued that while medical science should be used to “repair a defect in the body,” procedures that fall under the category of gender-affirming care are “not morally justified.”

Bibles return to the shelves in Utah district

In a reversal, officials in Utah from the Davis School District, which educates 72,000 students north of Salt Lake City, said at a board meeting June 20 that the district had determined the bible was age-appropriate for all district libraries. In allowing the bible to be accessible to students regardless of their grade level, the board sided with 70 people who filed appeals after it was banned last month.

“Based on their assessment of community standards, the appeal committee determined that the bible has significant, serious value for minors which outweighs the violent or vulgar content it contains,” the committee wrote in a decision published along with school board materials.

The committee’s reversal is the latest development in the debate over a Utah law allowing parents to chal-

lenge “sensitive materials” available to children in public schools. Parents’ rights activists successfully lobbied for the legislation in 2022 amid a wave of new laws targeting the materials accessible in schools and libraries — particularly about race, gender and sexuality.

Study: Pastors’ health, respect are declining

The overall health of pastors in the United States has declined markedly since 2015, with increasing numbers who say that they face declining respect from their community and a lack of true friends, according to a recent study.

Data collected by the faith-based organization Barna Group showed a significant decrease in pastors’ spiritual, mental and emotional well-being, as well as their overall quality of life, between 2015 and 2022.

Pastors who reported that their mental and emotional health was below average spiked from 3 percent in 2015 to 10 percent in 2022, and those who said they were in excellent mental and emotional health cratered from 39 percent in 2015 to 11 percent last year.

Pastors who described themselves as “emotionally or mentally exhausted” jumped from 21 percent in 2015 to 32 percent in 2022, and those who described the respect they receive from members of their community as excellent dropped from 22 percent to 10 percent.

Arizona House censures rep who hid bibles

Members of the Arizona House of Representatives voted 30-28 to censure Democratic Rep. Stephanie Stahl Hamilton on June 13.

The censure was in response to Stahl Hamilton taking bibles from the Arizona House members’ lounge and hiding them in different locations — allegedly as “playful commentary” on the separation of church and state, according to the House Ethics Committee report.

However, the vote to expel her from the house did not meet the two-thirds majority required for expulsion, according to National Public Radio.

Stahl Hamilton is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church, according to her website.

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.”

We’ve joined Instagram!

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has listened to your requests and is excited to announce that it has officially joined Instagram.

Please follow us at [@ffrf_official](#) for weekly updates and content.

We look forward to connecting with you there!



FFRF, others challenge Ten Commandments monument in Arkansas

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is one of three sets of plaintiffs that made the case for removal of a Ten Commandments monolith from the grounds of the Arkansas Capitol in the federal courtroom of Judge Kristine G. Baker on July 7. FFRF Legal Counsel Sam Grover and local counsel Gerry Schulze are representing FFRF member Anne Orsi, three secular organizations and other individual plaintiffs in oral arguments.

Another set of four plaintiffs are represented by the Arkansas Civil Liberties Union Foundation, and the Satanic Temple has intervened in the case as a third plaintiff party.

Former state Sen. Jason Rapert, founder and president of the National Association of Christian Lawmakers, sponsored the bill to install the biblical edicts in 2015. The law states that the Ten Commandments “are an important component of the moral foundation of the laws and legal system of the United States of America and of the state of Arkansas,” and “represent a philosophy of government held by many of the founders of this nation.”

The first monument, installed in 2017, did not survive being crashed into by a car driven by a mentally ill believer. But that monument was replaced, prompting the secular groups to file multiple lawsuits in 2018, combined as *Cave v. Thurston* and *Orsi v. Martin*.

Meanwhile the Satanic Temple asked to place its monument to Baphomet on the Capitol grounds.

FFRF, along with the Arkansas Society of Freethinkers and the American Humanist Association, filed a summary judgment motion earlier this spring asking for removal of the religious display. The Satanic Temple asked that either the monument be removed or the temple’s statue also be installed, or even replace the Ten Commandments and stay up for the same duration.

The Ten Commandments are undeniably religious in nature, FFRF’s brief notes, and its placement has created precisely the kind of religious divisiveness the Establishment Clause was intended to prevent. The religious message “is an archetypical violation of the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause,” charges FFRF’s brief. The use of our secular government for the advancement of one religion’s beliefs above all others is, to put it plainly, un-American.

“Of course, there’s no reference to the bible or God, much less to the Ten Commandments, in our secular Constitution, which is the foundational document that governs our nation,” says FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. “The First Commandment alone — dictating which deity alone must be worshiped — is in clear and direct contravention of our First Amendment.”



Standing next to the Ten Commandments monument on the Arkansas Capitol grounds are, from left, lead plaintiff and FFRF Member Anne Orsi, FFRF Counsel Sam Grover and local counsel Gerry Schulze.

Cartoons for the Irreverent: Celebrating the wit of Don Addis

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Michael Mercer stands beneath the FFRF billboard he funded in Chico, Calif.

Chico billboard calls out God intrusion in Little League

FFRF, with the help of an area member, has rented a billboard in Chico, Calif., to send a message to the local Little League team about its exclusionary religious player pledge.

The billboard carries a cartoon by Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist Steve Benson pointing out the foibles of forcing religious litmus tests upon a captive audience of children, such as the Player Pledge or the motto “In God We Trust” — a Red Scare-era slogan Congress misguidedly adopted. The cartoon depicts a teacher throwing up her arms as she tries to amend the phrase “In God We Trust” to be inclusive. The billboard says, “Children over dogma — keep God out of Little League!”

At issue is a Little League Player Pledge mentioning God that is supposed to be optional. At the end of the Little League season in Chico, District 47 holds the annual Tournament of Champions and the All-Star Tournament. At the opening of each game of these tournaments, the players line up on the field and are instructed to recite the Player Pledge:

*I trust in God
I love my country
And will respect its laws
I will play fair
And strive to win
But win or lose
I will always do my best*

Michael Mercer, the local FFRF member who generously underwrote the cost of the billboard explains: “As a secular member of the community, I found it disappointing that youth Little League baseball would subject kids to such a coercive and divisive ceremony.

“After doing research, I learned that this has been a controversial practice occurring all over the country. I also learned that Little League International’s official position on the Player Pledge is that no player is required to participate in the pledge and the use of the pledge is entirely up to individual leagues and districts,” the Little League dad continues.

He contacted District 47 in Chico to express his issues with the pledge, to explain the impact the pledge has on secular members of the community and to ask that if they insist on including the Player Pledge they should at least inform the kids that their participation is optional.

Unaccountably, District 47’s response was that this solution was “untenable” and “not as productive.”

The Little League dad concludes, “My hope is that District 47 starts treating secular members of the community with respect and dignity, I believe ALL Little League players deserve that.”

Volunteer effort!

Photos by Carl Ledendecker

The East Tennessee Chapter of FFRF had this billboard on display in May.

Members of the East Tennessee Chapter of FFRF include, left to right, Aleta Ledendecker, Sam Lenoci, Terri Lenoci, Eliot Specht and Max the dog!

The banner says: “Keep the wall strong and tall.”

FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

Religious displays taken down from Hawaii office

FFRF was notified by a concerned community member that a clerk at the O’ahu Family Court Service Center in Hawaii prominently displayed countless Christian decorations, including multiple Latin crosses, figures of Christian saints, bible verses, prayers, and a rosary, in a public-facing workstation. The religious decorations and messages were unavoidable to any member of the public who would interact with the clerk and seek services from the center.

“We urge the O’ahu Family Court Service Center to recognize its obligation to provide the people it serves with an environment free from religious messaging by removing these exclusionary displays,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Deputy Administrator Dwight Sakai.

FFRF has since been notified that the cubicle in question is no longer employee facing, and all the decorations have been removed.

Tenn. school bus drops religious signage

A school bus will no longer carry an offensive religious sign after FFRF contacted the school district.

A Scott County Schools parent noticed that one of the district’s buses had a rear license plate reading “God Bless America,” as well as a sign on the back of the bus claiming, “Our government makes sin legal — Our God does not! Jesus is coming soon and boy is he mad!” The complainant noticed this bus while picking up their child from elementary school.

“By allowing an official SCS bus to display blatantly proselytizing messages, SCS fails to remain neutral toward religion and shows clear favoritism toward Christians who subscribe to this particular religious message,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote in her letter of complaint.

“In recognition of SCS’s constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion and in order to respect the right of conscience of all students and their families, these religious messages must be removed immediately.”

FFRF received a response from Billy M. Hall, director of schools with the Board of Education Central Office, stating that the signage had been removed the following day.

Mandatory attendance of prayer nixed in Texas

A concerned Tomball ISD parent reported that on Nov. 11, 2022, Grand Lakes Junior High School in Texas held a mandatory Veterans Day assembly that included prayer. The assembly took place in the school gymnasium during the school day, and students were not allowed to opt out of attending the assembly or the portion that included prayer. FFRF was additionally informed that the school board vice president delivered a prayer at the district’s May 2023 A+ Award Ceremony for outstanding students.

“These multiple incidents are especially concerning as they suggest the Dis-

Honoring a founding member



Members of the Grand Rapids Area Freethinkers (GRAF) in Minnesota gathered June 6 to honor GRAF founding member Jacqueline Hope Dowell, who died last year, with a bench and plaque.

GRAF chapter leader Julie Legg writes: “Jackie was an outspoken atheist and advocate for the separation of government and religion. . . . She addressed women’s reproductive rights with time and money. She served on many local commissions regarding human rights and public safety. Most impressive were her tireless efforts to personally influence those in power. She would call and write letters to the police chief, the mayor, the sheriff and her elected representatives.

“In short, she inspired everyone around her to get more involved.”



GRAF used a portion of an FFRF grant to create and install the bench and plaque. Dowell was a founding member of GRAF.

trict has a custom and practice of facilitating pre-planned prayers at its official events,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Martha Salazar-Zamora.

In response, FFRF received a letter from TISD legal representative Holly A. Sherman, writing, “The district is aware of the parent’s concerns regarding these specific events. The district ensures that it will comply with applicable federal and state law and any applicable TISD board policies regarding prayer at school-sponsored events in the future.”

Oklahoma school nixes prayers at graduation

The Oklahoma-based Keystone Public Schools has removed prayers from its graduation ceremonies after getting a letter from FFRF.

A Keystone Public Schools parent informed FFRF that the district’s eighth-grade graduation ceremony on May 4 included an opening and closing prayer. The complainant reported feeling uncomfortable with this religious ritual, and feared being ostracized if others noticed they were not participating.

“A public school may not violate the constitutional rights of graduating students and their families by subjecting them to prayer,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Rhett Bynum.

FFRF has received a penitent letter from Superintendent Bynum in response, reporting that the district will no longer include opening and closing prayers at any graduation ceremony. “I am truly sorry to anyone that was in a difficult position of deciding to stay or leave this eighth-grade graduation ceremony,” he writes.

FFRF ends religious music at Miss. school district

St. Martin East Elementary School in Mississippi has agreed to play sec-

ular music on outdoor speakers after FFRF took action.

A local parent reported that staff at St. Martin had begun playing Christian worship music outside of the school every morning during drop-off. The complainant reported hearing staff play the song “I Can Only Imagine” by MercyMe, which contains lyrics in reference to Jesus.

“If St. Martin East Elementary wants to play music during morning drop-off, there is a multitude of secular, school-appropriate songs to choose from,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent John Strycker.

FFRF received a written response from Jackson County School District Attorney Jack C. Pickett, detailing an extensive investigation performed by Assistant Superintendent Todd Boucher. “School staff have been directed that the music selections being played were to be non-Christian and/or non-religious based songs. The staff has since created a new playlist of music to ensure compliance with the aforementioned directive,” he wrote. He additionally assured that the most recent JCSD principals/administration meeting instructed all district leaders to follow the same guidelines at their respective schools.

No more principal prayers in Tennessee ceremony

A principal’s proselytizing remarks, including a prayer, will no longer be a part of Battle Creek Middle School’s eighth-grade awards ceremony.

A Maury County Public School parent reported that Battle Creek Middle School promotion and awards ceremony featured a speech from the principal which included several bible verses as part of his closing remarks. He stated that he regularly reads the bible to students and recommends that students read the bible as a good guide for their lives. The complainant further reports that the principal closed the ceremony with an explicitly Christian prayer, prefaced by stating that he was honored to be principal, but he was still going to pray. The complainant took this to mean that the principal was aware that it is unconstitutional for a public school district’s principal to deliver prayers at a school-sponsored event.

FFRF’s complainant reported feeling uncomfortable as part of a nonreligious family, and did not participate in the prayer or stand to applaud the principal. The religious remarks made them and their children uncomfortable, as the prayer and proselytizing remarks were unconstitutional, but they also felt singled out and excluded at a school-sponsored event.

“School officials, including principals, may not invite a student, teacher, faculty member, or clergy to give any type of prayer, invocation, or benediction at a public school graduation nor may they deliver one themselves,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Lisa Ventura.

FFRF received a swift response from Ventura, notifying of actions taken. “I have investigated this incident and spoken with [the principal]. The actions of [the principal] violated the school district’s policies and procedures. I have issued a private letter of concern, and he has been instructed not to repeat this behavior going forward.” FFRF was additionally notified that in response to the incident, further training will be provided to the staff to prevent similar occurrences in the future.

School partnership with Florida church ends

FFRF was informed by a member of the Seminole County Public School District that administrators at Casselberry Elementary School invited representatives of Action Church to pray over the school. The church then posted about the event, thanking the school administrators for the opportunity to “pray

over the building, students and staff.” The complainant also reported that Lake Howell High School’s football team attended a gathering at Action Church where student athletes were led in prayer and encouraged to convert to Christianity, which Action Church again posted on social media about. Action Church is a Protestant ministry with a mission of “reaching people where they are and connecting them to everything God has for their life.”

“It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for the district to offer religious leaders unique access to student athletes in order to indoctrinate them and lead them in prayer,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district’s legal counsel Stephanie K. Stewart.

In response, Stewart wrote an email to FFRF regarding discussions held with the offending principals. “Both principals have addressed the matter with Action Church. Additionally, the assistant superintendents of elementary schools, middle schools and high schools have been retrained on engagement with religious groups.”

Ohio school board nixes opening prayer

FFRF’s letter of complaint has been heard by the Ohio-based Norwalk City Schools, leading to the Board of Education ending the practice of opening meetings with a prayer.

A community member reported to FFRF that the board opened the March 14 meeting, held at Norwalk High

School, with a prayer prior to reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. The complainant reported that this was the first instance of prayer being included in the meeting, and as such, it made them feel very uncomfortable.

“The fact that the prayers are not on the meeting minutes or agenda do not make prayer at a public BOE meeting constitutional. Students and parents have the right — and often have reason — to participate in school board meetings,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Board President Lisa Wick.

In response, Wick made comments to the media indicating that the letter was received and the message was heard. “It was not the intention for us to make anyone feel uncomfortable.” Wick has confirmed that they will no longer open meetings with prayer.

School admin staff to no longer play worship music

FFRF has ensured that only secular music will be played at the Nadine Johnson Elementary School in Hutto, Texas.

FFRF was informed by a district parent that staff at the school regularly played Christian worship music during morning arrival time. Additionally, the front office staff consistently played Christian pop and worship music during the school day. The complainant reported feeling angry and concerned over the school faculty and staff’s custom and practice of playing overtly religious music during the school day, saying that it signals a clear

lack of inclusivity. “Playing Christian worship music carries with it the risk of ostracizing non-Christian students, which may lead to bullying — a risk not shared by most secular alternatives,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Celina Estrada Thomas.

Thomas wrote a letter in response to FFRF, informing of an investigation that took place. “The campus principal responded immediately and has assured me that the front office staff will be more mindful about playing music that is inclusive and representative of the students who attend school,” she wrote.

Religious promotion through podcast ends

The “Tiger Talk” podcast, the official podcast of Northeast Mississippi Community College, will be free from future references to religion after FFRF wrote a letter to the college president.

A member of the community reported that during the closing of the Dec. 7, 2022, episode, the president urged students and staff “not to forget the reason [for the season] and of course that’s the birth of our savior Jesus Christ. I want everybody to remember that.” The podcast is used to keep students and staff informed about new programming and partnerships at the college.

“We ask that in the future, you and other college employees refrain from engaging in religious promotion when acting in your official capacities,” FFRF Equal Justice Works Fellow Kat

Grant wrote. Legal Counsel Daniel K. Tucker responded with a letter, stating that after discussing the matter with the president, he was informed that the president merely got “caught up in the season” and apologized to any who were offended. He assured that the situation would not happen again.

Texas district removes religion from graduations

The Dickinson Independent School District in Texas will no longer include proselytizing remarks in future graduation ceremonies after hearing from FFRF.

A district parent reported that Principal Billye Smith delivered a speech in which she quoted scripture during the 2023 Dickinson High School graduation ceremony. FFRF was informed that graduating seniors, including the complainant’s child, were not aware that Smith would be delivering a religious speech during the ceremony.

“Public school students have a constitutional right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools, including while participating in graduation ceremonies,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote.

FFRF received an emailed response from Superintendent Carla Voelkel, promising action in regard to the violation. “Dickinson ISD will promptly address this concern, and we will ensure that all future school-sponsored events respect the First Amendment rights of students and their families,” she wrote.

Ginsburg

Continued from page 1

has two parents. Please alternate calls. And it’s his father’s turn.”

She’s primarily known for her work for women’s equality, and founding the ACLU’s Women’s Rights project. Arguing to end sex discrimination in cases before the Supreme Court (she argued five times before the Supreme Court and won four of those). She was famously asked how many women would be “enough” on the Supreme Court, and she responded, “When there are nine.” That’s another favorite quote of mine (that I also have on a T-shirt).

Some of you may be wondering why FFRF is putting in our building a bust of a Jewish Supreme Court justice known mostly for her work on women’s equality. I admit, I was also wondering if it was appropriate. Not because of her work, but, because is it OK for us to pick a favorite justice? As a lawyer, it didn’t quite feel right. But as an advocate for state/church separation and the right of true religious liberty for everyone, even nonbelievers, it absolutely is.

She understood the importance of our godless Constitution and our secular democracy. Her approach to justice was shaped by her experience as a religious minority — and thus she cared deeply about the impact of the law on minority groups. She said once, “It makes you more empathetic to people who are not insiders, who are outsiders.”

Here’s another story that may not be as well known, and might seem to have a small impact on the separation of state and church. Justice Ginsburg was the one who got the Supreme Court to stop automatically putting “In the Year of Our Lord” on certificates issued to attorneys admitted to the Supreme



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert speaks about Ruth Bader Ginsburg prior to the unveiling of the bust of RGB in the Anne Nicol Gaylor Lobby at Freethought Hall.

Court bar. It was a change so small that people probably barely noticed, but it ensures that all the FFRF attorneys who’ve been eligible for the SCOTUS bar have godless certificates hanging in their offices. She understood what those words meant — and how they felt — to someone who didn’t adhere to the majority faith.

Ginsburg dedicated her entire career, on and off the court, to providing “equal protection of the laws,” not just for women, but for LGBTQIA+ individuals and religious minorities, and advancing justice for people of color and preserving our democracy. She knew that the separation of church and state was a crucial underpinning to preserving those rights too and she

understood the dangers of elevating religious belief above all else.

In her final dissent, in a case known as Little Sisters of the Poor v. Pennsylvania involving the contraceptive mandate in the Affordable Care Act, she warned that this “accommodation of religious beliefs” hurts the rights of others. She wrote,

“In accommodating claims of religious freedom, this court has taken a balanced approach, one that does not allow the religious beliefs of some to overwhelm the rights and interests of others who do not share those beliefs. Today, for the first time, the court casts totally aside countervailing rights and interests in its zeal to secure religious rights to the nth degree.”

Of course, in the three years since her death, we’ve seen just how far the court will go to privilege religious belief — Christianity in particular — above all else.

We’ve also seen theocratic legislators take aim at the most vulnerable of our population under the guise of religious freedom. This is why FFRF has been so active in many fights involving the right to abortion, equality for LGBTQIA+ community, racial justice and many other civil rights issues that may not seem at first to be our core issue. As RBG knew well, our secular democracy depends on laws that are based on reason, humanity and science, not religious ideology.

FFRF has always been dedicated to defending our secular nation, our godless Constitution from religious zealots who would see it destroyed to secure their own religious privilege. As the movement to preserve our secular democracy grows, and we see more and more people talking about the separation of state and church and what it means to have true religious freedom, we find it imperative to join with other civil rights groups who are also fighting theocratic laws and policies that threaten civil liberties for everyone.

We are squarely in the dissent now, but we will fight as passionately and as fiercely as RBG did to someday have these dissenting voices be the prevailing voices. We can’t do it alone.

I’ll end with another favorite quote of mine from Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and one that I have said to our attorneys many times in our meetings and in emails, “Fight for the things that you care about. But, do it in a way that will lead others to join you.”

\$1,000 Strong Backbone Award

Young sisters fight against proselytizing bus driver

Two young elementary school students in Portland, Ore., have received \$500 each by earning FFRF’s annual \$1,000 “Strong Backbone Award” for calling out (and recording on video) a proselytizing Christian bus driver.

Tim Bartholomew was alarmed to learn from his children — Tillie, 8, and Izzy, 7 — that their public school bus driver would “talk and sing about God and Jesus” and would encourage students to join in. But, the Portland (Ore.) Public Schools district ignored these serious concerns. Bartholomew said he needed to reach out to the American Civil Liberties Union and Oregon Department of Education in order to get the school district to take this matter seriously.

After the video was released of the bus driver’s unconstitutional conduct, the driver’s assistant reportedly “asked students on the bus who had an issue with their singing,” a disturbing attempt to identify which students were not willing to participate in the bus driver’s daily religious rituals. Due to the proselytizing — and the subsequent attempt to seek out nonconforming students — Bartholomew no longer felt comfortable putting his children on the bus and had been driving them to school the remainder of the school year.

Bartholomew, who founded Rational Atheists United, is now filing a discrimination case with the support of the Oregon Department of Education.

On May 31, Bartholomew wrote to FFRF with an update, saying that the school district left the driver on the same route, but assigned a separate bus for his kids on that same corner, while moving the bus driver and that bus stop down a few blocks.

“So, this morning, the bus driver made sure the other kids and their families knew that they could blame my kids for them having to walk down two or three blocks to his new stop,” Bartholomew writes. “He



The Bartholomew family — Tim and his wife Ashley, and children Tillie and Izzy.

literally stopped his bus to tell them at my kids’ stop with my wife and kids there. It’s honestly infuriating. My youngest burst into tears when he stopped to announce to the other kids that he had to move the stop due to my kids reporting him.”

Bartholomew is also working with FFRF to resolve the situation. FFRF has contacted Portland Public Schools to remind it that public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion.

“Students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools, including while riding on the school bus,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Portland Public Schools Superintendent Guadalupe Guerrero.

The following was written by Tillie, who recorded the video of the driver leading the kids in worship songs:

“Me and my sister were riding the bus until the bus driver was saying prayers and singing God songs. We are taught to believe in facts and proof and not believe in magic ideas like a god. We told

Dad this was happening. It made us sad and feel anxious because the driver was making us sing, but we had to fake sing. Then I recorded it, and I hoped that he would stop. My little sister Izzy was scared of him, mostly after he made all the kids know we made him stop. He asked all the kids who wanted no more singing, and we raised our hands. Only me and Izzy and maybe one other kid.

“My Dad has had to drive us to school, then leave work on break to get us and go back to work in our old town. He did this for a while. But today we got to go to the bus stop because the school said they fixed the problem. But all they did was put us on a different bus away from our friends on the bus.

“Today, we were about to get picked up, then our old bus stopped and the bus driver yelled about us and Izzy was crying. I was so mad he did that.

“The bus driver can’t do that because there are kids that are atheist and kids that believe in other gods. We have a wall, says Dad, between those things so that kids don’t get bullied or forced to feel their

way is bad. That’s not fair and no teacher or school worker should do that. We hope it doesn’t happen to other kids anymore.”

FFRF’s “Strong Backbone Award” is endowed by an anonymous FFRF member each year on his birthday. He is now 91 years old and, when told of this situation, said, “Keep going forward.”



Izzy and Tillie Bartholomew

Minnesota teen earns \$2,000 FFRF activist award

A Minnesota high school student has earned a \$2,000 activist award from FFRF for his efforts to get his high school to move its graduation ceremony from a local church, where it has been held for more than a decade, to a secular venue.

Eli Frost, who attends Chaska High School, led the charge to get more than 600 signatures on a petition asking the school district to respect the separation of state and church by moving future graduation ceremonies from Grace Church in Eden Prairie.

For his efforts, Eli has earned the Freedom From Religion Foundation Student Activist Award of \$2,000, endowed for many years by a generous West Coast couple who are FFRF members.

In backing up the petition, FFRF has requested in writing that the Eastern Carver County Schools district cease holding graduation ceremonies at the church.

“While the district states that Grace Church is able to meet the district’s needs for the graduation ceremonies, there appear to be secular options available that other districts have contracted with, including the Minneapolis Convention Center,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence writes. “Additionally, it apparently costs the district close to \$28,000 to host the graduation ceremonies at Grace Church, which sug-

gests that the location is not being used for financial reasons and the district can likely afford to explore secular venues.”

High school graduations are viewed as special, once-in-a-lifetime moments for graduating students and their families, FFRF contends. Students should not be expected to choose between being forced to graduate in a church or to forgo this momentous occasion. This is especially true in light of the fact that nearly half of Generation Z is nonreligious and about two in 10 non-Christians are members of the LGBTQ community, including 19 percent of the religiously unaffiliated.

Here is what Eli Frost had to say:

By Eli Frost

First, I’d like to say that I am honored to have received this award from The Freedom From Religion Foundation. It is really amazing to be recognized for my work even though I was just trying to make my school community better for everyone.

I first realized graduation was held at Grace Church, a megachurch, about a year ago. I was confused and annoyed that the school district would choose to host graduation at any church since it felt like a clear violation of the separa-



Eli Frost

tion of church and state. I was also dismayed that the church was being paid a large sum of money to host this event. My annoyance changed to anger when I found out about the views Grace Church holds. As my petition states: “Grace Church has a long history of making derogatory, public statements against the LGBTQ+ community. Further, they do not support divorce even in situations of domestic violence.”

My school district claims to be against discrimination of LGBTQ+ people. Its anti-discrimination policy states: “It is the policy of Eastern Carver County Schools to provide students and employees with an environment for learning and working that is free from discrimination, harassment or violence on the basis of race, color, ethnicity, creed, religion, culture, national origin, citizenship status, economic status, veteran’s status, academic status, marital status, disability, family structure, sex, sexual or affectional orientation, gender identity or expression, etc.”

Hosting graduation at a church that preaches against the identities of members of our school community feels like a violation of the district’s own policy. I personally believe we should be welcoming and accepting of all, especially marginalized groups like the LGBTQ+ community. We must change the venue to show that we care about the struggles these groups go through.

I have seen support from many in my community and my schoolmates over this venue fight. That has been very heartening to see. However, the school district has not yet publicly shown any support for actually moving the venue. I am wondering if they are waiting for the issue to blow over and I don’t want that to happen.

‘We must unite to defend freedom of conscience’

This is the speech given by Ensaf Haidar at FFRF’s national convention on Oct. 28, 2022, in San Antonio. She was introduced by Steve Salemsen, treasurer of the FFRF Board and an FFRF State Representative. She gave the speech in Arabic, but an English translation accompanied her words on the screens in the convention hall.

Steve Salemsen: Raif Badawi, who will be receiving in absentia FFRF’s Avijit Roy Courage Award, was released this year after 10 years in Saudi Arabia for apostasy. He was sentenced to receive 1,000 lashes. But after 50 lashes, an international outcry halted that punishment. Saudi Arabia is holding him in house detention for the next 10 years and imposing massive fines. His writings are collected in the book *A Thousand Lashes: Because I Say What I Think*. However, we are delighted that his wife, Saudi activist Ensaf Haidar, is here to accept the plaque and award in Raif’s absence.

If you attended the 2018 convention in San Francisco, you may recall that Ensaf received the FFRF Henry Zumach Freedom From Fundamentalism Award. She and her children fled to Quebec, where they have been given political asylum.

She established the Raif Badawi Foundation for Freedom to spread progressive values in the Middle East and to work for Badawi’s release. “Freedom of speech is the air that any thinker breathes; it’s the fuel that ignites the fire of an intellectual’s thoughts,” Badawi has said.

It’s now my great pleasure to invite Ensaf Haidar up on stage and accept the Avijit Roy Courage Award, as well as a check for \$5,000 on the behalf of Raif.



Ensaf Haidar delivers her convention speech in Arabic at FFRF’s national convention in San Antonio on Oct. 28, 2022.

Photo by Chris Line

By Ensaf Haidar

Officers, directors and members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and distinguished guests, I am deeply grateful to you for the immense honor that you are bestowing on Raif and me — the Avijit Roy Courage Award.

My husband, Raif Badawi, was imprisoned in Saudi Arabia for 10 years and remains subjected to a travel ban for another 10 years. We have kept hope alive, day after day, and have never given up.

These past few years have been filled with painful questions, especially when my children ask: “When is daddy coming home?” Or, when they say to me, “We’ve read that

only criminals go to prison. Is Daddy a criminal?” Believe me, I don’t know how to answer them. I don’t know where to start.

It is the message of my husband, as well as that of my three children, that I wish to convey to you today. Najwa, 19, Dudi, 18, and Myriam, 15, are deprived of their father simply because Raif exercised his basic human right: the right to express his ideas.

I’m sending you a message of hope that one day Raif will once again be among us and will speak to you on the subject of freedom and

human rights. My message is that of a determined woman, a Québécoise, who stands firm and speaks out loud and strong to say that peaceful change is possible in all authoritarian and repressive countries.

My message can be summarized as follows: The peaceful exercise of freedom of expression and freedom of thought is a basic, universal right. It is a right intended for all of humanity, without exception. There can be no compromise. Many have paid with their lives to defend this principle at the heart of democracy. I am thinking, in particular, of Avijit Roy, whom we lost in a terrible terrorist attack in Dhaka on Feb. 26, 2015. A few days earlier, in Djeddah, at al-Jafari mosque, my husband received the first 50 lashes in public. The commitment of Avijit Roy, as well as that of Raif, allows it to affirm that freedom has no borders.

We must unite to defend freedom of conscience.

Raif’s case is not an individual matter. It concerns a whole society. It concerns the entire world.

I wish to thank the bravest woman in the world: Bonya Ahmed [Avijit Roy’s wife]. I thank her first for her courage, and for nominating Raif to receive this prestigious award.

Finally, I wish to thank the Freedom From Religion Foundation for their warm reception, this award, and their support.

“The peaceful exercise of freedom of expression and freedom of thought is a basic, universal right. It is a right intended for all of humanity, without exception.”

THEY SAID WHAT?

“God has blessed us with freedom, and our country’s Declaration of Independence is one of the few that recognizes that our God-given rights pre-date the government, and that government’s creation is to protect the rights we already have because of God’s hand. So we have a responsibility to preserve the freedom that has been endowed to us by our Creator. . . . Get ready. Put on the full armor of God.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, speaking at the Religious Broadcasters Association conference.
CBS News, 5-22-23

Christians are supposed to be at the tip of the spear in alleviating poverty, especially when it comes to other

believers. That doesn’t mean, however, that we are under any obligation to help indolent bums. Such people are not entitled to our generosity. They have chosen the path of poverty.

Jason Mattera, in his article, “Some people deserve to starve: A biblical view of work and welfare.”
StandingForFreedom.com, 5-31-23

We’ve already won. It’s just [that] every person needs to go in their own community and say, “Why don’t we have prayer at the school board meeting? Why don’t we have a Nativity scene?” . . . We’re always complaining about being on defense. We finally can be on offense. We’ve already won. It’s just a matter of if we’re willing to take the ground or not. This is us go-

ing on offense and they can’t stop us. **Kelly Shackelford, who leads the group First Liberty, which has argued several cases before the Supreme Court, on how the court has already given religious right activists the green light to push the envelope on state/church cases.**
MSNBC, 6-8-23

I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns. **Infamous statement by President Reagan’s Interior Secretary James G. Watt, who died at 85 on May 27. Watt made the statement at a 1981 hearing of the House Interior Committee about his exploitation of public lands, increasing industry access to wilderness, curtailing protec-**



James G. Watt

tion of endangered species, opening up America’s coastal watering to drilling leases and otherwise degrading the environment before being forced to resign in 1983. He later was fined over actions as a lobbyist for builders.
New York Times, 6-10-23

This is not just offensive and painful to Christians everywhere; it is blasphemy. **Timothy P. Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services, Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York, and Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, in a joint statement, as the Los Angeles Dodgers were set to feature the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a satirical performance and activist organization, for its annual “Pride Night” game on June 16. Members don drag-style makeup, religious habits and names such as “Sister Jezebel.”**
The Catholic Spirit, 6-12-23

In the name of Jesus Christ. **What the assailant who knifed six people, including four children age 3 or younger, in Annecy, France, on June 8, was overheard on video saying as he attacked. The Syrian refugee was allegedly wearing a cross at the time of the attack.**
New York Times, 6-10-23

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

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

The Born Again Skeptic’s Guide to the Bible

By Ruth Hurmence Green

A Missouri grandmother debunks the bible as no one has debunked it since Thomas Paine.

—Published by FFRF. 440 pages / PB

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

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.

A conversation with Julia Sweeney

‘You know better than Thomas Aquinas?’



Actress/author Julia Sweeney and FFRF Co-President Dan Barker sat down for a humorous and insightful conversation on Oct. 28, 2022, in San Antonio.

This is an edited and condensed version of the conversation between FFRF Co-President Dan Barker and actress and author Julia Sweeney on Oct. 28, 2022, at FFRF’s national convention in San Antonio. To watch the full conversation, go to ffrf.us/convention-2022.

Dan: Ladies and gentlemen, Julia Sweeney.

Julia: Hello. I’m so happy to be here. I don’t ever want to miss another FFRF convention. It’s so important, now more than ever, sadly. But I couldn’t be happier to be here.

Dan: Just in case you don’t know, Julia Sweeney is an actress. She’s a comedian. She’s a playwright. She was a former “Saturday Night Live” cast member. She’s appeared in many movies, including “Pulp Fiction,” “Clock-stoppers,” “Stuart Little.” And she produced and acted in “That’s Pat.” I really liked it.

Julia: You and eight other people in the world can get together and sing its praises.

Dan: She’s written a lot of monologues, and maybe you have seen them: “God said Ha!” and “Julia Sweeney: Older and Wider.”

Julia: That’s the latest one, yes.

Dan: Of course, my favorite is “Letting Go of God,” which tells your story of going from devout Catholic to atheist.

Julia: I wouldn’t say I was a devout Catholic. I was just a Catholic. I didn’t look into it that much. I used God when it was convenient for me and I lived a secular life when it wasn’t convenient for me. I think that’s how most people probably use the idea of God.

But then I went through a personal crisis where I experienced this thing where I felt like God came to me and said that this situation was gonna be all right. I feel like I had a really full-on religious experience.

Dan: You really believed that God was talking to you?

Julia: Well, I didn’t think there was a guy coming down and saying things. Every time I try to describe it, it seems

like I’m making it up and it isn’t accurate. I just had this feeling that it was going to be all right. It was powerful and I did make a big leap into feeling better. The idea of God worked — the idea that I felt loved and everything was gonna work out. But afterward, I was very curious about that experience. Like, what actually happened? Was it really God? And then I decided I should take it more seriously. I joined the local Santa Monica church, and I took a bible studies class. I was in my 30s.

But reading other books, such as *How We Believe*, by Michael Shermer, which also referenced other books, had me going from one book to another. So, I did learn more about what happens in the brain and why that thing might have happened to me. Anyway, “Letting Go of God” is that story, but with jokes.

Dan: You did say for a while you thought you might want to be a nun.

Julia: Yes, absolutely, I wanted to be a nun. To me, I just love the glamour of the nun life. I think it had a lot to do with all the nun movies I watched. “The Trouble with Angels” was a big one for me. I wanted to be like Rosalind Russell. It was like the movie version of Catholicism is what I wanted to be. I didn’t realize I just wanted to be an actress.

And, also, when I was growing up, and I think it’s still partly true, the nuns were the feminists. The nuns were the women who chose not to be married, who chose to be activists. I thought if you only had two roads to choose between, motherhood and being a nun, I mean, being a nun seemed quite great.

Dan: You did say in the play that you had a picture of Jesus on the wall that you fantasized about. So, being married to Jesus, you’re a woman with

feelings.

Julia: I’m still marveling at how religion works on so many levels. Like, it really delivers on so many levels. And yet, it’s so wrong and so insidious and so corrupting of our society all at the same time. But, as an institution, you can be not a bright person and be in it. You can be a smart person and be in it. You can have an emotional relationship with it. Like, it’s a big spectrum of things. And yeah, the whole idea of Jesus loving you. This person in the sky, make him attractive, looking out for you, knows all your trials and tribulations and he’s there to comfort you. Of course, that’s like the perfect boyfriend.

Dan: Another line I like in “Letting Go of God”: “Humor and laughter give a drug kick to the back of the brain.” And when you’re in front of an audience and the audience laughs, you get this kind of . . .

Julia: It’s addictive. It is great. It’s funny, because on March 26 [2022], I filmed “Julia Sweeney: Older and Wider” in Spokane, at the theater where I had my first job and saw my first movie. I thought a lot about that experience. To me, that was what church was, it was theater. And there was actually a theater and then there were movies. How powerful that was to me. I just wanted to be part of it. And, of course, I like being funny and I like being on stage and making people laugh. But that is the last show I’m gonna do like that. And I don’t have the need for it like I used to have to get those laughs.

Dan: You wrote the book *If It’s Not One Thing, It’s Your Mother*. Are you gonna write more?

Julia: Yes. I have a few ideas for books in my head. If I could get myself to do it.

Dan: Tell them about the title.

Julia: That came from a pillow my mother gave me that said, “If it’s not one thing, it’s your mother.” It’s not that funny. Then I became a mother myself and it was suddenly hysterical. And then I gave it to my daughter. She’s like, “This is not that funny.” And I was like, “Oh, it will be.” So, that’s where that came from.

Dan: Are you working on something else?

Julia: Writing-wise, yes. I spent the pandemic reading. For various reasons, I fell into this whole Cass Elliott craziness. She was in the band the Mamas and the Papas. I started obsessively reading about her life and I wanted to write a screenplay about her life. I worked for a year on that. And then I got it to several producers who all said it should be more straightforward. But I feel like it should be more magical realism. So, I’m continuing to work on that. And I really do like the writing.

Dan: In the entertainment industry, TV and movies, is religion a problem? I mean, is atheism a problem in Hollywood?

Julia: Well, no. Of course, Hollywood is a huge business with all kinds of people and all kinds of religious feelings, so it’s impossible to say everyone is one way or another. What I noticed the most when I did “Letting Go of God” was all my Hollywood acquaintances said, “Oh, I can’t believe you were ever a believer. That was ridiculous. But I want you to meet with my astrologer.” So, I realize, they have



Julia Sweeney tells Dan Barker about how her mother found out she was an atheist and says she regrets the way it happened.

just as many superstitions, but they just aren't religious. I mean, traditionally religious. But they're still superstitious.

Dan: Can you tell the story about how your mother learned you're an atheist? She read it in the paper, right?

Julia: In a way, that was terrible of me. I was losing my faith and I was doing stand-up. So, I was just talking about what was happening in my life. I was explaining my questioning of it, and what I learned in the bible and what I learned from my reading. And then I kind of started putting it together into a show. And I spoke in D.C. and that was the first time I kind of put it all together. My hometown paper, on an inner page, had the story, "Julia Sweeney comes out as an atheist." I had no idea there was a reporter there.

First of all, it never occurred to me that would be a headline in the Spokane paper. But it was. And it was really humiliating for my parents. It was really upsetting. But, as I get older now, because now it's been 20 or so years since I did that, I do feel bad about it. I wish I had protected them a little more.

My mother called up and was like, "You are not an atheist." And I was like, "What are you gonna do about it?" And then she said the priests at Gonzaga are gonna talk to you and you're gonna come to Spokane and you're gonna go have dinner with the priests and they're gonna explain to you. And I said, "Bring it on. Convince me. Is there some information I don't have that I need?"

So, I went to Spokane and went to that dinner. I didn't put this in my show because I kind of wanted to protect the priests because they were so inept. The whole idea that I had of these priests was that these were Jesuits, the smart priests. But, they basically were like, "You don't believe in God?"

"No."
"You know better than Thomas Aquinas?"

"Well, I actually think Thomas Aquinas would be an atheist if he were around now. He just didn't have the scientific information."

"Oh, you know more than St. Augustine?"

"Well, I have more access to more information than he had."

I didn't know where it was going. And then one of the priests said, "What's it like to live in Hollywood?"

They just wanted to ask me if I had met so and so? One of those priests, who I still follow on Twitter, has become a crazy right-wing Catholic nutcase. And yet he's so into Hollywood. But I realize they had nothing. I mean, they really didn't have any arguments.

I left there and my mother said, "So, are you a Catholic again?"

"No, they don't know anything. And they can't even argue with you about it."

She was so upset and then she wouldn't speak to me for nine months.

Dan: But it wasn't just Gonzaga. Didn't you talk to someone high up in the Vatican, actually?

Julia: I had correspondences with a couple of priests at the Vatican. They don't have anything, either. The thing is, it's based on nothing. They give up very quickly. I really was looking forward to a good debate. They kind of make it like, "How could you know anything?" A little bit like that. And a little bit of flattery and a little bit of, "Oh, I'm just the old parish priest." Or, "This is a great institution that's helped a lot of people." In some ways, it probably has helped some people. But, it's done a lot more damage than good, I would say. But I can't deny that it isn't



Photo by Chris Line

Julia Sweeney enjoys watching the Godless Gospel performance at FFRF's national convention, which immediately followed her conversation with Dan Barker.

helpful to some people.

But, yeah. I talk to a Vatican priest and sometimes we DM each other. He said I should come to the Vatican this time and he'll show me around?

Dan: Would you go?
Julia: Oh, my god. Of course, I'd go.

But, I was so horrified with what was happening with the Catholics. My assessment is that all of the normal people left and all the crazies stayed. And the right-wing authoritarian, patriarchal people with the worst of the worst is left. I think Pope Francis is trying to do what he can. But I think when the next pope comes, he'll be more of a right-wing pope.

And then the Supreme Court was so upsetting. There's so many Catholics. The cabal on the Supreme Court is mostly Catholic. I just couldn't believe this religion that I grew up with — this kind of social justice Catholicism of the '70s, this kind of kumbaya stuff, the priests that were really great — has now just become horrible, right wing, punitive, angry. It's just upsetting.

Dan: Politics or abortion or gay rights, were any of those an issue in Spokane in your upbringing?

Julia: No. Because there's nobody gay and there's no abortions. My mom would say, "No one is gay. Being gay is a fad. People are gay to become popular. And then when they get in their 30s, they realize and they just marry someone so they can have a family. Which is what everyone wants."

And then abortion. It took me so long to understand that D&C [dilation and curettage] was code for abortion in Catholic hospitals. You can't do an abortion. But you can have this procedure. We had five kids in my family and we were the smallest family I knew of. The smallest of everyone around us, including the people three doors down who had 17 children.

Dan: Like shanty Irish Catholics.

Julia: Yeah, lots of kids. And sometimes mothers would go need a D&C and they would go to the hospital and get a D&C. I didn't realize until later that was all code language for getting an abortion. The wives knew. The husbands didn't know what was happening.

Dan: Why do you think they care so much now?

Julia: Because they like the secrecy. You say this, but you do that. That's the most interesting thing. There's something about hiding what you really do that is part of the system that they like. It's not that they don't do those things. Of course, there are people who are gay and people acting out on it. And people who were couples who were gay, but no one would openly acknowledge it, and that was kind of part of it. We all know that's true, but we all know not to

say anything about it.

Dan: At a former meeting, you told us about an experience where you were visiting a different church every Sunday and writing a book about it?

Julia: Dan, all I do is talk about the books I want to write and not write them.

Dan: That would be an amazing book.

Julia: Ha! That's true. I moved to Chicago for 10 years and had never lived there before. Every Sunday, I'd go to a different church. You walk in, it's like being in somebody's living room. You see it, how everyone interacts. I did that for a year and it was enlightening. That's how I discovered the Unitarians. And I joined the Unitarians in Evanston (Ill.). I got choked up at the Unitarian church. It was the first time I was in a church where I didn't disagree with everything that was said. It was emotional for me and I really liked that experience. And I found another Unitarian church in Pasadena when I moved to L.A.

At the Unitarian church in Evanston, I became part of the committee that welcomed a religious Syrian family that was fleeing. I was part of the group taking care of this seven-person family. That got me into understanding the refugee situation and working with Secular Rescue. I know you guys support Secular Rescue, too.

Right now, I'm working with a guy from Bangladesh. He's actually in hiding in India right now, but he's from

Chittagong [in Bangladesh]. I interviewed him thinking I would write a book about it. Clearly, I don't write the books. I just interview people. I started interviewing this guy, who's about 30 years old. He was living in Chittagong and just started having a Sunday afternoon "let's talk about the Quran" chat. He was becoming an atheist. He did that for two years. The version of ISIS over there started threatening him. He got afraid. They put an "X" on his family's door, saying this is where he lives, which is frightening. And his brother became an atheist, an out atheist. Three years ago, he was at a mall where three guys with machetes attacked him. He was stabbed many times. It's amazing he survived. They severed the sciatic nerve in one of his legs. A tuk-tuk driver came, and the public hospital wouldn't get involved in that. So, he went to another hospital, and ended up living, but they were coming back to finish the job. Through the work of Secular Rescue — the money and the help — he got to Calcutta, India, on a medical visa.

I became close to him, and I talk to him three times a week. In fact, I just sent him pictures from this convention. He's really become like a son. He's in line to go to Canada. He might be having to wait another year until he actually can get to Canada, but that helped me get into Secular Rescue and then really reading about what was happening in these different countries.

Now I'm thinking that I want to do an ad that I could do to raise money for Secular Rescue that could be like FFRF's Ron Reagan Jr. ad. If it was funded, it could be on TV. But you only have 30 seconds. And I don't want to say "Islam." I don't want people to think it's Islamophobia. When I stopped believing in God and left the Catholic Church, my parents were so mad at me they didn't speak to me for nine months. But they didn't try to kill me. You know what I mean? Something along the lines of saying the freedoms we have here, you could still have a lot of emotional cost, but you're not gonna be killed for it. But there are places where you can be killed for doing that. And this is an organization that helps! That's where I want to put my energies.

Dan: Amazing. Thank you.



Photo by Gonzo Pozo

Julia Sweeney talks about how she wanted to be a nun when she was younger. "I just love the glamour of the nun life," she said to laughs from the audience.

Medical aid in dying

It's our right to die on our own terms

By Ken Burrows

Personal autonomy is one of the most cherished rights of an individual, and this right is particularly crucial in the context of end-of-life planning. The national nonprofit Compassion & Choices (C&C), a leading organization that advocates for end-of-life autonomy, cautions that the right of a person to have end-of-life preferences honored regarding medical treatment — or the cessation of it — is constantly under attack and sometimes undermined.

“Death is universal,” C&C wrote to supporters in 2022. “And the desire not to suffer is shared by many, no matter their beliefs.” In fact, majorities in America favor having the option of medical aid in dying, and this is true across different ages, different geographic regions, and across political party lines. According to C&C, as of 2022, 11 U.S. jurisdictions had approved medical-aid-in-dying measures, covering about 20 percent of the nation’s population.

In only one state so far — Nevada — has a governor vetoed a medical-aid-in-dying bill passed by its legislature, and this veto was done in spite of polling that showed Nevada’s citizens overwhelmingly approved of the bill.

In my home state of Colorado in 2016, approximately 65 percent of voters approved Proposition 106, known as “Access to Medical Aid in Dying.” Statistical reporting through 2021 showed that since this measure passed, 222 Coloradans had received prescriptions for medical aid in dying, written by 198 physicians. Median age of the requesting patients was 73; some were as young as their 20s, others as old as their 90s. Common conditions these people were suffering from included cancer, progressive neurological disorders such as ALS (also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease), Parkinson’s disease, and severe heart disease and COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease). Records are not required or kept on how many patients actually use their prescribed medications. It is known that a certain percentage request and receive such meds largely for the reassurance they will have them if needed.

Patient autonomy

C&C asserts that “any ruling that undermines patient-directed care undermines all patient medical decision-making.” Examples of such undermining efforts C&C has faced include physicians or medical facilities ignoring the decision-making authority of a patient’s health care proxy or medical power of attorney, insidious schemes to redefine the legal definition of death in order to keep patients on life support against their will, and allowing physicians opposed to medical aid in dying to refuse to make a referral or transfer patient records to another physician willing to provide this option. One lawsuit against medical aid in dying contended a physician need not tell a patient such an option is even



Image from Shutterstock

available, thereby denying that patient knowledge needed to make informed decisions about care and treatment.

How serious and widespread are attacks on end-of-life autonomy? One answer to that is to consider the scope of religiously affiliated health care facilities across the country and the extent of their rules and practices as dictated by their faiths. As far as religions’ numbers and positions on medical aid in dying are concerned, the vast majority of denominations oppose what they call “euthanasia and assisted suicide,” and they tend to view “medical aid in dying” as equivalent to those terms, the main reason being that they see all three actions as “hastening death” through unnatural means.

For example, according to the Pew Research Center, the Southern Baptist Convention “generally opposes any action that may hasten death.” This position largely holds true for Lutherans, Episcopalians, Jews, Presbyterians, Mormons, Muslims, Methodists and a number of others. Certain religions add additional considerations, such as Hindus believing that prematurely ending one’s life could negatively affect their karma, and Buddhists believing it morally wrong to end a life even if the intent is to prevent suffering. And yet some Hindus believe there are circumstances that could justify a hastening of death “if you have reached a stage in your life when you can no longer worship properly.”

Notable exceptions to blanket bans on hastening death are the United Church of Christ (UCC) and the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). UCC states, “We believe that each of us approaches God on our own terms, and this includes at the end of our lives.” Similarly, UUA advocates for “the right to self-determination in dying” and supports laws that “enable terminally ill patients, under carefully defined circumstances, to seek physician assistance in hastening their own death.” UUA adds: “These ultimate questions of life and death belong with the person most intimately affected, not with the church.”

However, almost without exception, the various religious traditions largely agree that one need not employ extraordinary means to keep someone alive if they are determined to be in a natural dying process. This is particularly so if such extraordinary measures would impose additional discomfort or indignity for the patient and merely extend life completely artificially. Not

surprisingly, there may be points of distinction in how each faith defines a patient’s condition and what means are “extraordinary” or not. As just one example, is a patient in a persistent vegetative state in a natural dying process? Are artificially provided hydration and nutrition “extraordinary” measures if that is all that is keeping someone alive? Not all faiths agree on the answers to such questions.

Role of Catholicism

Although it is not the only faith tradition that diminishes people’s health-related autonomy in end-of-life care, Catholicism plays a significant role due to its broad presence in the health care industry. We know, for example, that roughly 17 percent of all care facilities in the U.S. (hospitals, nursing homes, hospices, etc.) are Catholic affiliated, with even higher percentages in close to half the states. A 2016 ACLU report titled “Health Care Denied” put the Colorado figure at more than 30 percent. The number of U.S. hospitals with a Catholic affiliation has increased 22 percent since 2001. In many instances, a Catholic facility is the only one serving a given geographic area within a reasonably proximate distance.

(Demographic note: Pew Research finds that Catholics number over 60 million in the United States, dwarfing the largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, at about 16 million. Catholics comprise the largest denomination in more than half of the states.)

There is also a steadily increasing number of non-Catholic hospitals and clinics that are merging with Catholic health care entities. When such acquired facilities are brought under the Catholic umbrella, it is most often the case that the entire merged entity must abide by the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services (ERDs; more on these in a moment.) This further constricts the number of beds available for patients who want their end-of-life preferences honored that are not Catholic-compliant.

Free conscience?

In some locations in the past, when a non-Catholic or secular health care entity merged with a Catholic one, flexibilities allowed for creating a “hospital within a hospital” — a separate unit or floor where health services the church disapproves of could still be provided to patients. But now the ERDs strive to

severely restrict, or effectively eliminate, that option after a merger, forcing previously non-Catholic facilities to adhere fully to Catholic dictates. The ERDs additionally prohibit health care staff in a merged entity from making referrals to other facilities for patients needing care that goes against Catholic teaching.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in 2018 updated the ERDs to prohibit health care actions deemed to be “intrinsically immoral” as defined by the church. High on the list of such actions are birth control, sterilization, abortion, infertility treatments, some miscarriage management techniques, and, of course, medical aid in dying. These are prohibited even if — as is the norm — the majority of admitted patients are themselves not Catholic and do not see these health care interventions as “immoral.”

As for individual autonomy, the ERDs literally state: “We are not the owners of our lives.” Rather, the USCCB says, God is. So, the ERDs dictate that a Catholic facility will not honor even a patient’s advance health care directives if they are “contrary to Catholic teaching.” DNR (do not resuscitate) orders and stipulations in living wills can be similarly dismissed. Artificial nutrition and hydration (e.g., tube feeding) can be continued against a patient’s expressed preferences, depending on the criticality of the patient’s prognosis as determined by the medical facility.

This calls into question the directives’ professed commitment to respecting a patient’s “free and informed conscience” and protecting the inherent dignity of every person. Health care choices made by an adult patient should be respected, the ERDs state, “unless it is contrary to Catholic moral teaching.” That teaching apparently takes precedence over personal autonomy and free conscience and inherent dignity.

Other violations

In the eyes of some, this can result in needless suffering, tantamount to cruelty. The ERDs say if denial of autonomy results in prolonged trauma or humiliation for the patient, such patients “should be helped to appreciate the Christian understanding of redemptive suffering.” Never mind that suffering is precisely what these patients made conscientious choices to avoid in the first place and never mind if these patients are themselves not Christian. Such a “solution” for their trauma adds the burden of unwanted proselytizing.

The National Health Law Program (NHLP), which litigates to protect access to health care when it sees it being unjustly withheld, alleges that the Catholic ERDs “substitute religious doctrine for the standard of care” by “placing religious beliefs ahead of patients’ health and lives.”

When Nevada’s Gov. Joe Lombardo vetoed the state’s recently passed medical-aid-in-dying bill, he said in his veto message that he was “not comfortable” signing the bill and argued that “expansions in palliative care services and continued improvement in advanced pain management make the end-of-life provisions in SB239 unnecessary.” Advocates for medical aid in dying would dispute that by citing documented cases where even the best in palliative care and pain management could not adequately alleviate suffering, resulting in prolonged,

traumatic, undignified dying processes.

The Nevada Catholic Conference had opposed the medical-aid-in-dying measure, taking out full-page ads in Reno and Las Vegas newspapers with signatures from other faith leaders denouncing the bill. Geoff Sugerman, a campaign strategist for Death With Dignity, noted: “Lombardo . . . refuses to give dying patients who meet the strict guidelines of the law the power to control their own end-of-life choices. With this veto, Lombardo clearly listened to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and not the people of Nevada.”

It is, finally, also worth noting that in violation of the medical ethic of informed consent, patients are often not clearly apprised of how Catholic teaching may override medical decision-making in their health care. The online site Rewire.News, which focuses on reproductive rights, has noted that less than a third of Catholic hospital websites nationwide mention how the facility’s religious affiliation may affect reproductive health care.

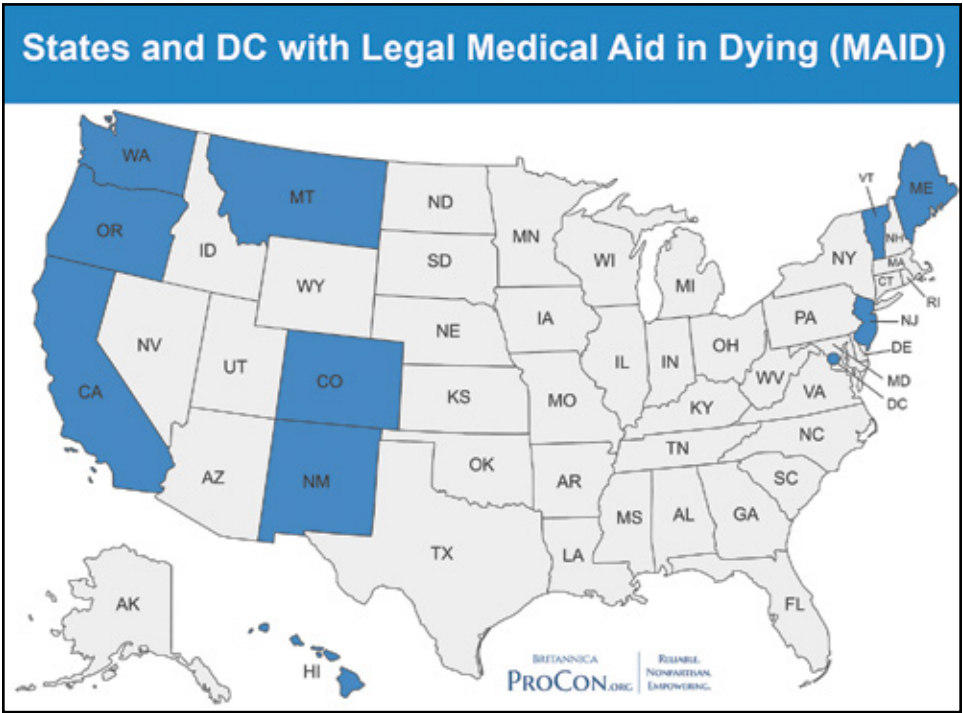
Colorado’s move

On this point, Colorado recently took steps to address such information gaps. Among the various bills passed during this year’s legislative session in Colorado is one titled the “Patients’ Right to Know Act” (HB 23-1218). This bill will require hospitals, community clinics, freestanding emergency departments, and rehab hospitals to clearly advise patients — as part of the informed consent process — about health care services a facility refuses to provide for nonmedical reasons, most often due to religious objections to such services, even if the facility is licensed to provide such services.

This bill is important simply because patients deserve to know when a facility will deny them health care options they need or want and are otherwise entitled to. The transparency the bill requires enables patients to make informed choices and helps them preserve personal autonomy about their care.

Real world examples

“Because we are the only national organization with a legal advocacy program focused on end-of-life choice and care,” C&C states, “our role as an amicus curiae (friend of the court) is significant. By weighing in as an amicus, C&C has the potential to positively impact the direction of a case. Just as lawmakers’ perspectives change after hearing their



constituents recount (or experiencing first-hand) the horrific death of a loved one, we could find similarly unexpected support from judges.”

How have these autonomy issues played out in real life? Here are a couple examples of legal cases Compassion & Choices has been involved with.

Glassman v. Grewal

In 2019, New Jersey passed the Aid in Dying for the Terminally Ill Act, legalizing medical aid in dying for qualifying New Jersey residents. Just over a week after the law took effect, Dr. Yosef Glassman filed a challenge to the law, alleging that it violated his religious free exercise rights. This was despite the fact that physician participation in medical aid in dying is entirely voluntary under the act. Glassman argued he had a fundamental and even constitutional right to protect or defend the lives of others and the state’s medical aid in dying law was in violation of that right.

Following some contrasting rulings by different courts, a judge eventually dismissed all claims because he said the plaintiffs lacked standing, due to the fact they were not suffering any harm. The court went on to say the New Jersey Constitution “does not establish a constitutional or fundamental right to protect or defend the lives of others . . . it would curtail the rights to privacy of capable terminally ill patients to determine the course of their own medical treatment.” The ruling added that the state actually has a compelling interest in establishing a safe and effective procedure for qualified terminally ill patients to experience a humane and dignified death.

When the losers in the case appealed, C&C submitted an amicus brief, urging

the court to affirm the dismissal of the case. The amicus brief stated the plaintiffs were seeking to limit an individual’s right to self-determine their end-of-life medical care and alter the traditional patient-physician relationship. “Appellants may disagree with the end-of-life choices granted by the Act,” the brief stated, “but those choices are the individual’s alone to make.” The New Jersey Appellate Court upheld the medical-aid-in-dying law.

Greenberg v. Montefiore New Rochelle Hospital

Dr. Gerald Greenberg completed a living will and health care proxy form in 2011. In his living will, Greenberg specified that in the event of irreversible brain damage, he did not want to be provided medical treatment beyond that which would ensure his comfort. He named his wife as his designated health care proxy and authorized her to make all medical decisions on his behalf in the event he was incapacitated.

Greenberg subsequently developed advanced Alzheimer’s disease and no longer had the ability to make his own medical decisions. In November 2016, Greenberg was transported to a hospital with severe sepsis. The hospital was provided with copies of Greenberg’s living will and health care proxy form. Greenberg’s wife, acting as her husband’s health care proxy, instructed the hospital to only provide comfort care and no other treatment.

Despite the instructions in Greenberg’s living will, and despite the decisions voiced by his health care proxy, the hospital proceeded to treat Greenberg’s sepsis, administering antibiotics and other curative treatments on multiple occasions. As a result of this unwanted treatment, Greenberg lived an additional 30 days in immense pain and suffering. Had his living will and proxy’s requests been respected, Greenberg would have died peacefully within a day or two.

Greenberg’s family subsequently filed a lawsuit on his behalf against the hospital for the unwanted medical treatment he received at the end of life. A lower court dismissed the case, but the plaintiff subsequently appealed, and C&C submitted an amicus brief in support. The amicus brief focused on the importance of advance care planning documents and the rights implicated when an individual receives unwanted medical care at the end of life. The Supreme Court of New York ultimately allowed the plaintiffs to hold the hospital accountable for the pain and suffering Greenberg endured because of the unwanted medical treatment. C&C concluded, “This victory ensures that advance planning documents are legally enforceable and will be respected by doctors. C&C fully believes in the autonomy

of all people to direct their own end-of-life care and is working diligently to ensure that end-of-life decisions are respected by health care providers.”

Cautionary tale

What might the future hold regarding the vulnerability of your right to exercise your end-of-life preferences? Lawsuits regularly arise to challenge measures like Colorado’s “Access to Medical Aid in Dying.” If a challenge were one day to reach as high as the U.S. Supreme Court, how might it fare?

It’s impossible to predict, but at least one justice, Neil Gorsuch, who happens to hail from Colorado, has made his personal views on medical aid in dying explicitly known. In 2006, the year he was nominated to the federal bench, he released a heavily researched book on the subject titled *The Future of Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia*. This was a cerebral overview of the ethical and legal debate surrounding the practices. In the book, he argues against “death with dignity” laws, citing his belief in the “inviolability” of human life. (It is important to note here that medical aid in dying is not equivalent to euthanasia or assisted suicide, because medical aid in dying, by law, must be unassisted and self-administered.)

“All human beings are intrinsically valuable,” Gorsuch wrote in the book, “and the intentional taking of human life by private persons is always wrong.” What some readers saw in the book was Gorsuch already anticipating that the option of medical aid in dying might one day reach the highest courts. For instance, he wrote about the growing number of states passing or considering death with dignity measures and litigation surrounding them. In his view, “Far from definitively resolving the assisted suicide issue, the court’s decisions seem to assure that the debate . . . is not yet over — and may have only begun.”

C&C said the 2022 U.S. Supreme Court ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade* is reaching beyond the matter of abortion, “fueling attempts to strip away our fundamental rights to medical decision-making. It is clear from this decision and previous cases that this Supreme Court is hostile to patient-directed care.”

Indeed, with its *Dobbs* decision, the Supreme Court has already disallowed women significant autonomy affecting their health in their own lives. Would the justices similarly negate autonomy for all of us in our end-of-life planning? C&C noted in late April that a federal lawsuit had been filed against California’s End of Life Options Act, and it has the potential to take away medical aid in dying on a national scale if it should eventually be appealed to the Supreme Court. (You can stay abreast of developments by visiting compassionandchoices.org.)

Our American tradition famously esteems our inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. There may be times when circumstances should equally give us a “right to death,” in the sense of being able to choose how we die. Such a right would allow us a different “pursuit of happiness,” by assuring us the “liberty” to choose a peaceful, dignified and comfortable exit on our own terms as opposed to enduring a prolonged, painful and humiliating one imposed by the dictates of others. These unique rights require that we have the autonomy to make vital decisions on such matters, and to have those decisions honored, in our life’s final act of freedom.

FFRF Member Ken Burrows of Colorado Springs is also a member of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the American Humanist Association and Colorado Springs Freethinkers.

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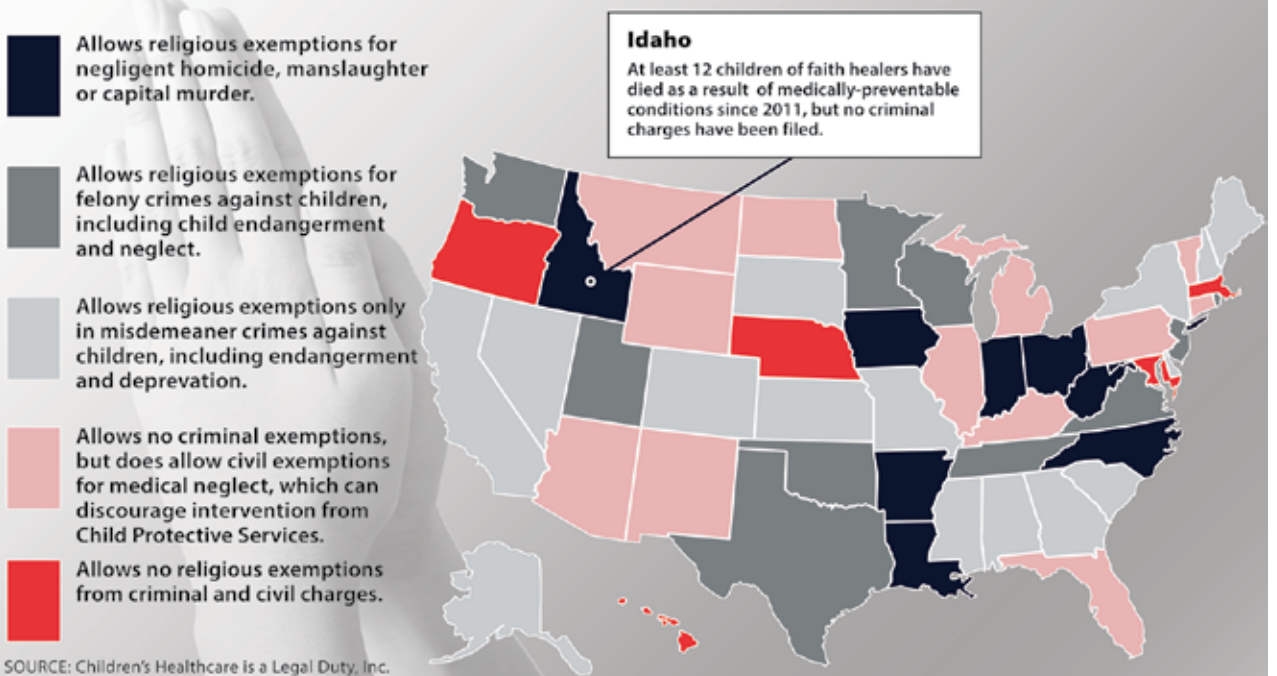
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By Guido Giuntini



Guido Giuntini



I’m childless due to anti-abortion movement

This article first appeared in Newsweek on June 2 and is reprinted with permission.

By Andra Watkins

Recently, Judge James Ho, a Trump-appointed judge on the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, spoke for many on the religious far-right when he said: “Pregnancy is not a serious illness.”

I view his argument with irony. I grew up within the South Carolina Moral Majority-led anti-abortion movement. I have always treated pregnancy as a disease to be avoided at all costs. I am childless because of the anti-abortion movement.



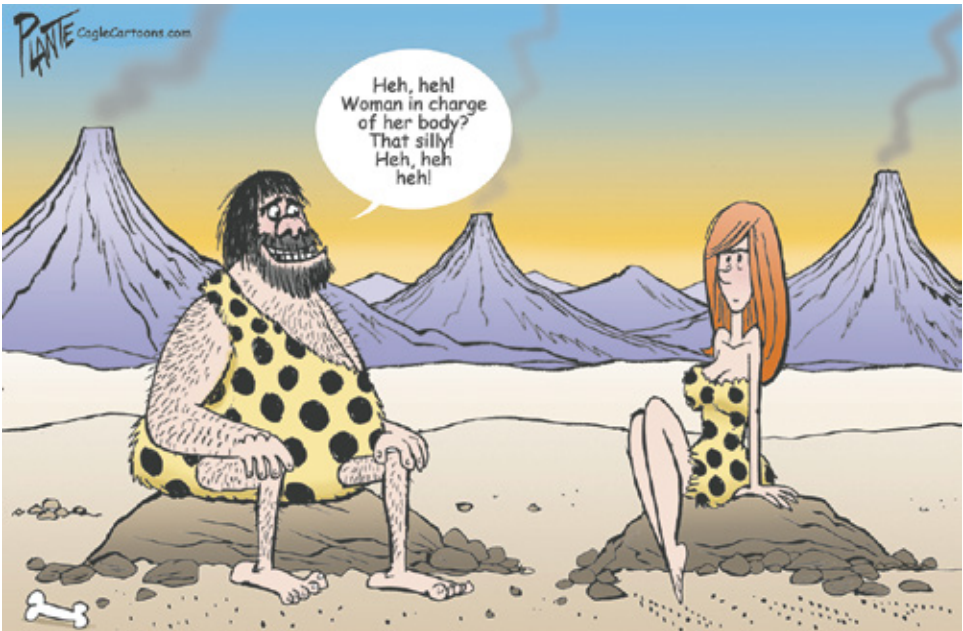
Andra Watkins

In the far-right church of my youth, I was indoctrinated to believe I had one God-given duty: my female duty to reproduce. Motherhood was not an option or a choice; it was my duty to bear as many children as my “Good Christian husband” demanded.

If God gave me a pregnancy, even if I was raped at 11 or 12 years old, who was I to choose to terminate God’s holy gift?

I heard variations on this refrain starting in Christian school kindergarten. In elementary school, I was forced to watch blood-soaked anti-abortion films. When I hit puberty, I attended mandatory girls-only chapel services, where I was lectured on how to avoid tempting men and boys with my body.

When I got my period at the age of 10, I didn’t know it was part of the baby-making cycle. I bumbled into my teens, clueless about how babies happened until a random encounter with a bookstore copy of *The Joy of Sex Illustrated* enlightened me. Penis and vagina equals baby.



My mother insisted that birth control pills aborted babies, a common refrain on the far-right. But, had I been given birth control as a teen, I would not have trusted it. If I had sex, I was certain my birth control would fail and I would get pregnant. I forbade boys to put anything — fingers, accessories, sex organs — into my vagina.

I did not have to imagine the consequences of my potential teenage pregnancy. My parents and my pastor preached it. I would be expelled from Christian school and would not be allowed to complete my education. My pastor would parade me before my church of thousands and call me a harlot, a modern-day Hester Prynne. Friends would shun me. My parents would be humiliated. Everyone would avert their eyes and talk behind their hands as my belly grew.

No matter how it happened or whose fault it was, I would be forced to mother that baby.

From the time I was 10 until I mar-

ried at 23 years old, I stopped my horny, hormonal body from having intercourse by repeating the following mantra: “Pregnancy is a disease to be avoided at all costs. It will ruin my life before my life even starts. I cannot allow myself to get pregnant.”

I had my first gynecologist appointment before I married. His first comment upon seeing my nethers was: “Let me get a smaller speculum.”

I defied my mother’s campaign against birth control pills and asked my doctor for a prescription. He offered them, with a candid discussion of how to avoid a most painful wedding night. I left his office with one more thing to dread.

Almost 15 formative years of telling myself pregnancy is a disease had consequences. I became obsessive about contraception. I carried my pills on my person and swallowed them at the same time every day. I panicked if I took a pill late, and I never missed a day.

“Several years of bible reading and prayer failed to heal me.”

Whenever I could pleasure my husband without intercourse, I gave dutifully, relieved for one more release anywhere but inside me. Many things contributed to that marriage’s demise, but my stunted approach to sex and abject horror at the possibility of pregnancy were factors.

My divorce at 27 years old was the perfect prompt to seek therapy. But I grew up in a home and church where I heard: “Christians do not need therapy. Why seek worldly advice when one can read the bible and pray?”

Several years of bible reading and prayer failed to heal me. At every turn, I heard this regimen wasn’t working because I attended the wrong church. Or I did not spend enough time on my knees with my bible. Or God knew my heart and saw how misguided and insincere my prayers were.

Still, I was convinced a switch would flip in my brain on my 30th birthday, and I would suddenly see pregnancy as a miracle, not a disease. Not that I longed to reproduce.

In my 30s, the thought of pregnancy gave me panic attacks. My fear of pregnancy did not abate after I married a man who loves me despite my emotional wreckage.

Exhausted from decades of meltdowns every time my period was late, my husband and I both opted for sterilization in our 40s.

The anti-abortion movement taught me to view pregnancy with horror, dread and fear. I never unraveled those decades of religious abuse.

My heart hurts for potential pregnant people across the United States who will be forced to take similar measures. Some will avoid pregnancy as I did; others will become mothers against their will.

We will all carry the damage and pass it on to future generations. That’s the real disease, isn’t it?

Andra Watkins is a bestselling author who lives in Charleston, S.C.

Freethinking in Columbus



The Central Ohio Chapter of FFRF had a booth at Comfest, a music and arts annual festival at Goodale Park in Columbus, Ohio, from June 21 to June 25. Chapter leader Ed Sweeney was stationed at the tent for a portion of the weekend.

Sweeney writes: “The festival stemmed from community concerns and political activism. A cadre of social justice advocates champion causes including women’s reproductive freedom, affordable housing, environmental protection, capital punishment laws and others.”

Oklahoma AG defends state/church separation

The Republican attorney general of Oklahoma stood up strongly for state/church separation recently when he penned an op-ed for The Oklahoman against what would be the nation’s first Catholic charter school.

Gentner Drummond’s column, which ran in the Sunday, June 18 paper, laid out why the proposed school was a bad idea.

“Forcing Oklahomans to fund religious teachings with their tax dollars is not religious freedom — it is state-sponsored religion, which violates the first clause of the First Amendment,” Drummond wrote. “The state of Oklahoma would not be free to pick and choose which religions receive state funding. If we fund one religion, we are legally bound to fund them all.”

The Oklahoma Statewide Virtual Charter School Board approved the application for the Catholic school, knowing it would likely end up in a lawsuit.

“The establishment of a public school that teaches Catholicism, or any other faith, infringes on the rights of all taxpayers of all faiths and clearly violates the U.S. Constitution and the Oklahoma Constitution,” Drummond writes. “The law simply does not allow for a re-



Gentner Drummond

ligious school to be funded with public dollars. . . . I have a solemn obligation as attorney general to uphold those founding documents.”

Drummond ended his column on a strong note.

“I will continue fulfilling my duty to the people of Oklahoma by upholding the law and defending the Constitution. The protection of religious liberty depends on it. My oath requires it.”

FREETHOUGHT BOOKS

Freethought Books
The following books are by FFRF members on the topics of religion or freethinking. FFRF does not do book reviews. These books are not offered through ffrf.org/shop.

A Humanist Path: Confucius and Lao Zi for Today

By Wei Djao
Paperback \$13.49
Kindle \$4.37
Confucius and Lao Zi were the originators of the two major philosophical traditions in China, Confucian and daoist. They formulated their viewpoints without any claim to divine or supernatural revelations, and without any invocation of religious authority.

World events, historical and contemporary, discussed in connection with the ancient thinkers' teachings demonstrate their relevance in the 21st century.

Our Mysterious Lives: A Collection of Ideas in Religion, Science and History

By David Carter
Paperback \$14.95
Kindle Free
This book discusses many aspects of human existence, with an agnostic bent. Included are topics such as "Is there a God?," "Faith," "What is Life?," "Prayer, Religion, Free Will and Teleonomy." The latter parts of the book move to science and history, with such topics as "The God particle," "In God We Trust," "The Shroud of Turin" and "The Council of Nicaea," among many others.

Jebediah Vs. The Flood

By Scott Myrick
Paperback \$9.99
Kindle \$6.99
In an alternate version of the biblical story of Noah. Jebediah overhears God instructing Noah to build an ark to save Noah, his family, and a breeding pair of every land creature on Earth from a flood. Jebediah is skeptical. As he listens and later watches the progress of the ark, he is forced to conclude that the plan is indeed legitimate. Jebediah reluctantly concludes that he must oppose God and save humanity. To do so he recruits the gods of Olympus. Surprisingly, there are angels willing to join the struggle as well.

A Song of Humanity: A Science-Based Alternative to the World's Scriptures

By James Clawson
Hardcover \$30
Paperback \$22
Kindle \$9.99
This book gives an easy-to-read science-based alternative to the mountains of regional mythological misinformation perpetuated by the world's scriptures. It is written as a conversation between parent and child, and outlines our world from the very beginning of the universe until the end of our solar system.

IN MEMORIAM

Jack Monroe was teacher, protester

FFRF Member John "Jack" Monroe died March 31 in Claremont, Calif.

Born Oct. 22, 1938, to John and Dorothy Monroe in Girard, Ohio, Jack was the oldest of six siblings. After graduating from Ursuline High School and working for Ohio Leather Works, he decided to attend college, and enrolled at University College of Notre Dame of Saskatchewan, Canada (now Athol Murray College of Notre Dame). There he learned about the Canadian educational system that then included "grade 13" and "senior matriculation." He was a member of the 1957 Notre Dame Hounds football team that won the provincial championship. Transferring to the University of Ottawa, he earned a B.A. in 1961, and later an M.A. from the University of La Verne.

He and his wife Carolee married in 1962 and traveled from Ohio through Canada to his new teaching position in San Gabriel, Calif. They celebrated their 60th anniversary last year. With their children, Murray, Gabe, and Mary, they frequently vacationed in "the incredible slow-mobile" across the United States and into Mexico.

He taught at Nogales High School in La Puente for 38 years. For many of those years he was known as "the voice of the Nobles," as he announced the school's home football games.

His years of activism began with anti-Vietnam War demonstrations. He was there in 1967 at the Century Plaza



Jack Monroe

demonstration, when the "police riot" of heated motorcycles drove into the protesters. Active in Bobby Kennedy's California campaign, he was present at the Ambassador Hotel on June 5, 1968, when Bobby was killed.

Locally, he demonstrated for progressive causes. "He had strength of belief and the willingness to act upon it," his family shared. He continued to be present at rallies and demonstrations and, as he could not attend, sat on his porch

in support of the Claremont Change demonstrators walking by.

"A lively conversationalist, Jack could talk with people for hours," his family said. "He practiced the art of questioning and valued dialogue. He practiced what he preached: a proponent of exercise, he walked on land, meeting the neighbors and, in water, he once met up with a manatee in Tampa Bay. He kept a journal and chose not to eat red meat. Jack mastered the phrase, 'What can I do to help?'"

Dick Boardman was accomplished professor, building contractor

FFRF Member Richard P. Boardman, 83, died March 5 at Briarwood Assisted Living in Worcester, Mass., after a brief illness.

He was born in Bristol, Conn., son of Frank G. and Nancy (Doane) Boardman. His beloved wife of 59 years, Judith "Jaye" (Brightman) Boardman, died in 2020.

Dick, as he was known to friends and family, grew up in Plainville, Conn., and Woodstock, Vt. During his youth, he spent time at his family's farm in Hartland, Vt., working with his father and learning carpentry skills that he would use his whole life. He graduated from Vermont Academy in 1957, where, at 6 feet, 8 inches tall, he proved to be an accomplished basketball player. He earned his bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College, his master's degree from Chicago University, and his doctorate in education from Columbia University. While at Columbia, he worked with his mentor, Robert Dentler, the director of Columbia's Institute for



Dick Boardman

Urban Studies, to co-author a report for the New York State Education Commission on "Desegregating the New York City Public Schools" (1964). Commonly known as the Allen Report, it was intended to provide the data and research to support the desegregation of the New York City public school system, then the nation's largest school district.

After finishing his doctorate, he taught at the college level for several years. In 1970, he and Jaye moved their family to Princeton, Mass., where they had a small farm and practiced homesteading. Soon after that, he left teaching to start his own general contracting business, Boardman Builders. His lifelong passion for building and renovating homes spanned more than 50 years and resulted in custom built homes throughout Worcester County and many other towns where he lived throughout his life.

Dick loved animals and had a special affinity for Old English sheepdogs, which he and Jaye raised for many years. He also loved music. He played the double bass and amassed an impressive record collection of every genre. He enjoyed watching sports, basketball in particular, and was a big fan of the Celtics and the UConn women's team. After retiring, he and Jaye enjoyed traveling, relaxing at their Florida and Cape Cod homes, and spending time with family and friends.

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll
By Orvin Larson
Prof. Larson writes with affection and respect of this illustrious 19th century freethinker.
—Published by FFRF.
316 pages / PB

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Meet FFRF’s law student summer interns

Each year, FFRF hires grad (or undergrad) students to work throughout the summer as interns. This year, FFRF hired five students (four law school students and one undergrad student).

Here’s a look at each of this summer’s interns.

Name: Emma Breault.
Hometown: Charlottesville, Va.
Religious upbringing: Evangelical Christianity (ex-fundie!).
Undergrad school: James Madison University.
Grad school: University of Baltimore School of Law.
Why did you want to intern at FFRF? I am passionate about the organization’s mission of advocating for separation of church and state. I think that the weaponization of religious freedom by Christian nationalists is currently the biggest threat to democracy and human rights. I appreciate FFRF’s commitment to fighting against that force.
Favorite part of working here? I have enjoyed the research projects I’ve gotten to work on so far, specifically one related to LGBTQ rights. I also really appreciate the office environment and how friendly everyone is!
Career goals: I want to continue working in First Amendment law. I would love to do some sort of education related to the rise of Christofascism along with impact litigation.
Something interesting about you: I am interested in the psychology behind why/how people fall into cults and extremist thinking.

Name: Tyler Kochman.
Hometown: Wilmette, Ill.
Religious upbringing: Reform Judaism.
Undergrad school: Eastern Michigan University.
Grad school: Eastern Michigan University (grad degree I already hold); University of Wisconsin Law School (law degree I am currently working toward).
Why did you want to intern at FFRF? I wanted to help safeguard the First Amendment.
Favorite part of working here? The office atmosphere and interactions.
Career goals: To make a difference in people’s lives, whether through legal practice, policy work or some other field.
Something interesting about you: I have



FFRF’s legal team’s summer interns are, from left, Maddie Naisbitt, Tyler Kochman, Emma Breault, Peyton Williams and Emily Romero.

met at least five current U.S. senators.

Name: Maddie Naisbitt
Hometown: Woodridge, Ill.
Religious upbringing: Nominally Catholic.
Undergrad school: Georgetown University.
Why did you want to intern at FFRF? I have been a passionate atheist since eighth grade, so the prospect of working with nonreligious people to protect church/state separation really appealed to me. The recent surge of anti-LGBTQ and anti-trans legislation struck me and revealed the continued importance of fighting the influence of conservative Christianity on our culture and government.
Favorite part of working here? I really enjoy the relaxed atmosphere in the office. Everyone I work with is friendly!
Career goals: My dream job would be a

union lawyer on behalf of the MLB Players Association.
Something interesting about you: I am minoring in theology and have done several research projects on the rise of Protestantism in Latin America.
Name: Emily Romero.
Undergrad school: University of Colorado.
Grad school: University of Wisconsin Law School.
Why did you want to intern at FFRF? I am passionate about health equity. The trend of legislation related to birth equity, life-saving medication availability, insurance benefit revocation, physician transparency, etc., is alarming. At the root of that appears to be self-interested groups promoting their personal religious beliefs, and I knew I would learn more about how to disrupt the trend

from the legal team at FFRF.
Favorite part of working here? I’ve really enjoyed getting to know the legal team. Everyone is smart and fun to work with.
Career goals: Health law litigation or regulatory health law work.
Something interesting about you: I have gone for a run every single day since starting law school. (As of today, that’s 288 consecutive days).
Name: Peyton Williams
Hometown: Herriman, Utah.
Religious upbringing: I was raised in a devout Mormon household and did not question Mormon truth claims until I was in high school. During my senior year of high school, after intense research and personal reflection, I became the first in my family (including extended family) to leave the religion.
Undergrad school: University of Utah.
Grad school: Yale Law School.

Why did you want to intern at FFRF? I was impressed by the organization’s emphasis on protecting children. While I am passionate about the separation of state and church at all levels of government (and FFRF does plenty of work at all levels), I am particularly concerned when children are subjected to religious exercises in school. Looking back, I can remember many times where religion was promoted in my public school classrooms in Utah. When I looked into FFRF’s extensive advocacy throughout the country on behalf of children, I knew it was the place I wanted to intern.
Favorite part of working here? It has been great to get to know all of FFRF’s staff. Everyone is so friendly and helpful. Because FFRF has a relatively small staff, I’ve worked closely with most of the attorneys, and it has been awesome to learn about how they all decided to pursue a career fighting for secular rights. I’ve also enjoyed getting to know the other interns!
Career goals: I hope to remain involved in state/church separation in some capacity throughout my career. However, I am also passionate about other career paths, such as supporting small businesses and entrepreneurs.
Something interesting about you: I have a weird skill: I’m pretty good at unicycling! I’ve even done “mountain unicycling,” which is like mountain biking, but on a unicycle.

FFRF places full-page ads in two newspapers

On Sunday, June 18, FFRF ran full-page ads in the New York Times and the Salt Lake City Tribune on the topics of Christian nationalism and banning the bible, respectively.

In the New York Times, FFRF’s ad warned: “Christian nationalists are endangering our secular democracy.”

The ad, urging “Stem the tide of white Christian nationalism,” features a drawing by Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Steve Benson depicting the Statue of Liberty holding a cross with a tidal wave of “theocracy” flooding over the United States.

It lists a series of assaults on American liberty, including abortion bans, targeting of LGBTQ youth and “book bans, hecklers’ vetoes and laws against teaching facts that don’t square with white Christian nationalism.”

Aimed at the 29 percent of Americans today who have no religion, FFRF’s ad states: “Democracy needs



you and so does FFRF.”

“By joining together to stand up for human rights, we secular Americans can reclaim our Divided States of America for E Pluribus Unum.”

In the Salt Lake City Tribune, FFRF’s provocative full-page ad pictured a bible and the Book of Mor-

mon with a headline saying: “BAN THESE BOOKS.”

FFRF is raising the stakes in its campaign to compel Utah to treat so-called “holy books” like the other literature some of its school districts are now recklessly removing from school libraries in the wake of a book-banning law.

“If the state of Utah and its school boards insist on censoring ‘sensitive’ material in our public schools,” the FFRF ad states, “then they must start with the bible and Book of Mormon.”

FFRF jumped into the fray after bolstering the complaint of a district parent in Farmington, Utah, whose request to ban the bible in light of numerous book removals in Davis County Schools ended in a controversial vote May 31 to remove the King James Version from lower grade libraries. FFRF maintains the district did not go far enough and prodded Davis Coun-

ty Schools to remove bibles from all school libraries. However, the school board capitulated after public pressure and returned the bibles to the libraries.

The ad notes that the bible is “replete with violent, graphic, degrading descriptions as well as age-inappropriate stories.” These include descriptions, FFRF says, of “sperm, menstruation, intercourse, rape, incest, masturbation, homosexuality, fornication, adultery, sadism, sexual mutilation and ‘harlots’ and ‘whores.’” Sordid tales of incest, voyeurism, pimping, plural marriages, concubinage and more are told, often approvingly, within its covers, continues the ad.

Advertising to educate the public and recruit new members is made possible thanks to generous members who donate to FFRF’s advertising and PR fund.

LETTERBOX

Praying and reciting are not the same thing

The May article about school evangelizing in Kentucky took me back to my old elementary school days in the 1950s. We had bible classes, required reading of the Gospels, and prayer every morning. But, excuse me, we did not pray in school, we recited prayers. The teacher would say a few words of the Lord’s Prayer, and we would repeat them, without knowing what many of the words meant. I thought that “forgive those who trespass against us” meant that we shouldn’t get angry at people who hunted on our land without permission.

Whenever I read the phrase “God was kicked out of the schools,” I visualize a school principal sternly saying: “Jehovah, you were warned about your bullying, but you paid no attention. So, clean out your locker, take your plagues and famines and wars, and go. You are expelled!” If only it was that easy!

Indiana

State/church separation worth the legal fights

My primary FFRF interest is the legal work to maintain separation of church and state issues.

I know it is not easy in this time of Supreme Court decisions that are contrary to that founding principle, but eventually you will succeed!

Minnesota

Cities will benefit from loss of churches

This is a letter I wrote to the News-Register in McMinnville, Ore.

I have good news for McMinnville and Yamhill County. McMinnville needs to plug certain holes in its budget. Well, help may be on the way. The city may get a financial boost from a special and unlikely source.

For a variety of reasons, sinners are abandoning their churches and not looking back. Last year, according to LifeWay Research, more than 4,500 American churches closed their doors for good due to the loss of supplicants. In Columbus, Ohio, the Catholic Diocese is shuttering 15 churches this year alone. Even Pope Francis recognizes the threat of revenue depletion.

These former fortresses of faith may soon have “for sale” signs posted on their front steps. That means the new owners will have to pay property taxes. That’s good news for cities like McMinnville that are struggling with their budgets. Of course, it isn’t going to happen overnight. We must have faith.

Oregon

‘Sharing their beliefs’ means proselytizing

While reading “Kentucky legalizes school evangelizing” in the May 2023 issue, I noticed that the author wrote that, “The law is intended to expand public school teachers’ rights to share their religious beliefs with students.”

Proselytizing is, by its very nature,



disrespectful to the listener. It tells the listener, “Your beliefs are inferior to mine. You should abandon your beliefs and adopt mine.”

Evangelists try to cover up this disrespect by saying that they’re just “sharing” their faith, counting on the listener to acquiesce to the idea that “sharing” things with other people is something good. That use of “sharing” is dishonest. It needs to be exposed, rather than endorsed by using it the way the evangelicals do.

A better way to write that sentence would have been: “The law is intended to give public school teachers permission to proselytize a captive audience of students.”

Michigan

Kudos to all who work on Freethought Today

You are doing a splendid job. I read the Freethought Today from front to back. Love it! I really wish that FFRF weren’t necessary! I live in a very redneck part of Pennsylvania. Amazing times we live it. Again, pass my thanks on to all involved in the FFRF newspaper and mission! It is greatly appreciated!

Pennsylvania

Finally! Good riddance to Pat Robertson

Goodbye, Pat Robertson! I didn’t know you personally, but you certainly affected my life.

Because of you — and snake oil salesmen like you — my father was so brainwashed that he once wasted multiple years of his life calling every number in the Crestview, Fla., phone book to tell whomever answered, “Jesus loves you.”

Because of the likes of you, I spent much of my Florida childhood visits with my father with my stomach

churning, dreading that he would pray aloud in whatever restaurant he took me to, or make me feel obligated to pray with him once we returned to his apartment.

My father also sent you more money than I’ll ever know, for whatever Jesus scam you were running at that particular time. Largely because of you, and those like you, my father died penniless. In fact, when I, a critical thinker, had to give my father money to help pay bills near the end, my last ever argument with him was making him promise he wouldn’t turn around and give 10 percent of what I gave him to you or some other bullshit Christian con artist.

I truly wish there actually was a hell, because there would be an extra-hot room just for conmen like you. Instead, you will simply rot in the ground — if it’s possible for someone already rotten to the core to rot even more.

But one thing is for sure: you aren’t in any so-called heaven, where you could go f&%# yourself.

Montana

Authors’ quotes describe religion perfectly

Butterfly McQueen’s quote: “As my ancestors are free from slavery, I am free from the slavery of religion,” reminds me of Bertrand Russell’s “Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?” from 1930.

He writes: “The knowledge exists by which universal happiness can be secured; the chief obstacle to its utilization for that purpose is the teaching of religion. Religion prevents our children from having a rational education; religion prevents us from removing the fundamental causes of war; religion prevents us from teaching the ethic of scientific co-operation in place of the old fierce doctrines of

sin and punishment. It is possible that mankind is on the threshold of a golden age; but if so, it will be necessary first to slay the dragon that guards the door, and that dragon is religion.”

This quote is from Eric Hoffer’s *The True Believer* from 1951: “All true believers in any kind of orthodoxy — whether it be religious, political, social or even artistic orthodoxy — are distinctly disturbed, since they are obviously rigid, fanatic and dependent individuals. And, many liberal religionists of various groups are distinctly less, but still quite definitely, emotionally childish. For that, again, is what all manner of religion essentially is: childish dependency. Effective cognitive-behavior therapy, along with all the other healing arts and informative sciences, must continue uncompromisingly to unmask and eradicate.”

And this one from psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, author of *The Myth of Mental Illness*, where he stated: “Religions are like icebergs: a tip of love and compassion at the top, and a mass of hatred and contempt at the bottom.”

Ohio

‘Atheist’ term gives weight to idea of God

I listened to a Sam Harris video in which he questions the usefulness of the word “atheist.” He basically said that there is no word to describe nonbelievers in astrology. There is no word to describe nonbelievers in numerology. A word to describe nonbelievers in God is to raise the idea of God above the idea of astrology, numerology, parapsychology, etc. I will no longer call myself an atheist as I have never called myself an “atooth fairyist.”

Virginia

Pat Robertson didn’t end up where he thought

While the impious fires of Hell and Nova Scotia choked the souls and rusted the air of Manhattan and Philadelphia, Rev. Pat Roberston drew a breath and rang the bell at the door of heaven.

No one was home.

New Hampshire

RECRUIT A MEMBER

Sample copies for \$2



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

FFRF
P.O. Box 750
Madison, WI 53701

Or go to: ffrf.us/sample

Please send us only names of likely supporters.

Freedom depends upon freethinkers

School shootings are OK for Supreme Court

Hip, hip, hooray for the NRA
How many kids shall we shoot today?
Reading, ’riting, ’rithmetic
Dive under your desk and you better be quick.
Students, teachers, full of lead
Thirty rounds and 30 dead.
Supreme Court says it’s all OK
These shooters simply liked to play.
But priming flintlocks is much too slow
AR-15s are the way to go!

New York

Celebrities can add much to freethought movement

Every morning, I read the Free-thought of the Day, and often I’ve asked myself why so many celebrities are included with noble and trail-blazing contributors to the advancement of science, rationality and human liberty. What makes those popular singers, actors, comedians, etc., eligible to be included in such profound company? Is it because they have “come out” as nonbelievers, atheists, humanists?

But, I’ve done a 180-degree attitude turn on this: We need more of them to help counter the assaults of Christian nationalism on our secular government.

So why not have nonbelieving celebrities get together to specifically celebrate all the quiet or closeted “Nones” in the country? (We shall overcome?)

I think it’s time we have another “Woodstock” or “Concert for Bangladesh” type of concert, or, failing that, concerts in the parks throughout the nation, where freethinking, atheist or agnostic well-known entertainers get together to celebrate Darwin Day or First Amendment Passage Day (or

whatever)?

We might be in for pleasant surprises if we get the ball rolling and start by contacting those on the Free-thought of the Day listing.

Maine

Only Christians can end Christian nationalism

I see those who are pushing Christian nationalism not as followers of Jesus, but followers of Joshua. He was the one who committed the genocides in establishing Israel. In their minds, there is no crime they cannot commit as long as they do it at the direction of God. And in their minds, God has given them the right to cleanse America as Joshua did the Jordan valley. This is what happens when “good” Christians refuse to acknowledge the horrors within their so-called “holy book.” Christian nationalism can only end when Christians see the flaws within their religion and seek a different path.

Oregon

Some six-word stories were masterpieces

I just wanted to say I thoroughly enjoyed the six-word stories. Some were masterpieces! My favorite was the last one: “The gunman found them huddled, praying.” There are always excuses, of course — “It was God’s will” — but I think that one pretty well sums up the futility of religion to achieve one’s desires. Prayer might have comforted the huddled somewhat while they waited, but it did nothing to save them.

Colorado

Old letter unfortunately still accurate today

I recently read this letter to the editor from a high school student. The letter was in a student newspaper that I had saved from my high school days.

To the editor:

*My soul with Christ join thou in fight,
Stick to the tents that he hath pight.*

Within his crib, is surest ward, this little babe will be thy guard. If thou wilt foil thy foes with joy, then flit not from this heavenly boy.

These are the words to a song that was sung at the recent “Holiday Concert.” Of the 20 songs sung by the choirs, 19 of them dealt with either God or Christ. I feel that songs like these should be dropped from future concerts if for no other reason than courtesy to, and respect for, the religious beliefs of others. When I began to discuss this with people, their first reaction was “There aren’t that many songs about Channukah that they can sing.” These people are missing the point; religion, no matter what religion, has no place in a PUBLIC school (where there are bound to be diversified religious views).

The other response people have (the

one [principal] Dr. Grant had when confronted with the issue by a Whitefish Bay parent) is that “not much secular music has been written for choirs.”

Assuming that three-fourths of all choral music is religious (according to [choir director] Mr. Erickson), then what happened to the other fourth (secular music), the one-fourth that I feel has more place in public schools? It seems to have been totally ignored at the concert.

And what about modern music? Substantial amounts of choral music have been written by modern composers, more than sufficient for use in place of hymns, carols and psalms.

Finally, as I listened to some of the songs at the concert, I found them not only offensive to my Jewish faith, but insulting to my right as an individual to “freedom of religion.” The matter of church being separate from state has long been debated, trying to decide to what extent it should be upheld. I feel that in this case it is 100 percent valid.

— Judy Levine

What I found so incredible was the year the letter was written: 1975, which was 48 years ago, the year I graduated high school, and one year before FFRF was established.



Dave Glenn

I attended high school in Whitefish Bay, Wis., a suburb of Milwaukee. At the time, the village had a significant non-Christian population compared to the surrounding areas. Non-Christian (mostly Jewish) students could opt to be excused from school on their holidays. I recall a list where we simply printed our names. It was no big deal. Tolerance and acceptance were two of the reasons my parents chose to move to the village to raise their family.

In retrospect, I should not be surprised by Judy’s letter. Many of my fellow classmates have gone on to hold distinguished and important careers. Looking over my newspapers, I see many letters to the editor where students argued salient and controversial viewpoints. I wager these student writers have been forces of change for our society in the years since graduation. As they still say today, “Go Bay!”

FFRF Lifetime Member Dave Glenn, aka Volunteer Dave, is a professional volunteer, citizen scientist and caregiver. He is a retired business analyst and theater professional who lives in the Milwaukee area.

CRANKMAIL

Warning: The words you are about to read may not have any semblance of logic, reason, originality or grammar. Read at your own risk. Entries printed as received.

Freedom: The constatation says Freedom OF Religion, not Freedom From Religion! — Ken Hunkins

Liars!: Stay off the air your lies destroy and yes you will burn in hell like the lying joe biden your right to opinion but not to lie on air — Roland Smith

Stop: I wish your organization would stop trying to push minority views on wveryobe else. Prayer in school or i. Government forums hurts no one. You keep spouting “separation of church and state.” Well actually learn that meaning and why it was created. It was cteated to keep Government out of

the church not church out of government. Our laws, every one of them, stem from the 10 commandments. So keep you opinions snd threats out if my life. Prayer and bibles in svhool hurts not a single individual and people like your organization is the cause of frivolous law suits — Jim Holland

Prayer is good: Concerning Stark county local school board meeting’s beginning with prayer . Correct me if I’m wrong , I understand that a person or person’s has a problem with the prayer before meeting’s ? Plain and simple if this person does not like this than either they can go after the prayer or not go at all and get the minutes from the board afterwards . No one is holding a gun to there head . Religion is something this nation is missing . Even if you don’t believe in the catholic religion , take away the the moral lesson’s and positive thinking . Religion in itself has not hurt anyone . They are only words . What would you rather people especially kids believe in , money , corruption , stealing , murder , adultery , disrespect , video games , cell phones , facebook , tik-tok etc. etc. etc. ? People need to get there priorities straight , think about wives , mother’s who’ve lost a loved one protecting this nation . This

is what’s important . Thank God for religion !!!! — Frederico Crispino

Repent now: Extraterrestrials are also atheists. They “spark” (stabilize) their souls in order to have a significant afterlife. They say “Unsparked souls will dissipate upon death.” They say the only way a human can have a sparked soul is to take communion in a large Catholic church. Unfortunately, if you ignore their advice you are DOOMED! Sorry. — Bruce Hahn

FFR assholes: You people are just assholes. Feel free to “educate” people on nontheism or whatever, but HOW DARE YOU try to force your beliefs on others. That’s exactly what you’re accusing others of doing. So, fuck you. And by the way. FUCK YOU. — Armand Tenson

You’re pathetic: You people are taking atheist bs way to far making a high school graduation stop useing the lords preyer at. Graduation it’s not hurting you mind your own business and keep your big mouths shut and stop pushing your pathetic views on other people — Gerry Madden

Ha Ha!: I WANTED TO SAY HA, AND GO SCREW YOURSELVES!! That school in Ohio defied your bullshit complaint and said the Lords prayer! Suck it — James Padady

Satanists: You could not be MORE Wrong about your position on prayer in public schools, but you are not alone. The liberal ACLU, the Democrats, the Communists and all that are against God are currently winning this battle, but will not win in the end. This is exactly what Satan wants and you are now part of the problem instead of part of the solution. So sorry for your souls and all who follow you... Yuck! — David Holcamp

Help, don’t hurt: why dont yoy stop worrying about something so minor as an ancient sign in a town you don’t even live in and go fix a real problem like feeding the hungry. It’s sad that you don’t have anything better to do than pick on a little town that has nothing to do with you. May you one day find a real p urpose to life. — Kala Browning

Haters: Hello, I am appalled with you guys . Why do you have such hatred against Christianity? If Christianity is false, then challenge it. Yet why so much hate? Especially when that hate seems to backfire because christianity is the true religion, and you shouldn’t have to persecute any Christian to debunk it. Yet you do. Why? Maybe you should do some research into why we are Christians: as well as be warned about the existence of Hell; Repent therefore for you’ll answer one day before the Eter-nal Judge for your hate. — Andrew Baker

God is real: Our Country was established with the Freedom of Religion. The USA IS the only Country that embraced Christianity and Freedom from Government intervention into one’s Christian beliefs. Our Declaration and all Government policies have always put God as Number 1 in all that we do. The liberal’s, atheist’s, and now progres-sive movement still want more taken from Chris-tians. In the next 6 months, every American will believe in Jesus Christ as God moves his hand against corruption throughout our Government, Media, Corporate Billionaires, and all tyrannical Regimes around the globe. What we will see is tge breakdown of divisions, (Baptist, catholic, episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist and so on). Getting God’s People back in-line with him. — Greg Schroeder

Crossword answers

C	O	L	D		A	M	T		F	D	A
B	R	I	E		S	L	O	E		S	C
S	E	L	F		A	G	U	E		H	O
	S	T	O	P	P	A	R	D		R	U
			R	I	P	E	N		B	U	R
W	A	R	M	T	H				T	A	B
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I	D	E	A	S		L	I	E	D		M
M	O	M				E	A	R		S	T

Cryptogram answer

Unlike science, creationsim cannot predict anything, and it cannot provide satisfactory answers about the past.

— Bill Nye



Monona Terrace Convention Center

The Monona Terrace Convention Center will host FFRF’s national convention.

FFRF convention, Oct. 13-15

Don’t delay! Join us!

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 3.

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

member 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.

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	<input type="checkbox"/> Regular	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegan	<input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free
Registrant 2	<input type="checkbox"/> Regular	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegan	<input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free

Saturday, October 14

Non-Prayer Breakfast _____ \$25 \$_____

Registrant 1	<input type="checkbox"/> Regular	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegan	<input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free
Registrant 2	<input type="checkbox"/> Regular	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegan	<input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free

Enchilada Platter _____ \$25 \$_____

Registrant 1	<input type="checkbox"/> Regular	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegan	<input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free
Registrant 2	<input type="checkbox"/> Regular	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegan	<input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free

Saturday Dinner _____ \$50 \$_____

Registrant 1	<input type="checkbox"/> Wisconsin Cranberry Chicken	<input type="checkbox"/> Champagne Tilapia	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetable Portobello
Registrant 2	<input type="checkbox"/> Wisconsin Cranberry Chicken	<input type="checkbox"/> Champagne Tilapia	<input type="checkbox"/> 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)

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.