



FREETHOUGHT TODAY



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Triumphant trifecta

Freedom From Religion Foundation succeeds in three cases



Photo by the Associated Press

Max Nibert holds up signs prior to a student walkout at his high school in early 2022 in Huntington, W.Va.

South Carolina Backing lacking

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has obtained a significant victory for South Carolina taxpayers.

FFRF filed a suit last year on behalf of four South Carolina taxpayers against state officials, including South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster, challenging the state's unconstitutional \$1.5 million funding of a religious group. Christian Learning Centers of Greenville County, a private religious educational institution whose mission is to "provide biblical instruction for public school children at no cost," withdrew its funding request after pressure from FFRF's lawsuit.



Gov. Henry McMaster

On Nov. 9, after hearings on multiple motions from both sides two weeks earlier, Judge George McFaddin decided that Parker v. McMaster was moot and the case was dismissed. Because Christian Learning Centers withdrew its request for the funds, the judge found that there was no other action a court could take to resolve the case. The withdrawal of the request effectively ended the violation.

On July 25, the Christian Learning Centers board voted to abandon its plans to build a school with the funds and withdraw its request to the Department of Education for the \$1.5 million. This was the same day the plaintiffs were scheduled to take the deposition of an officer from the organization to explain how it had come to receive an appropriation from the state. Although an order from the court declaring the appropriation unconstitutional would have been the ideal resolution, this is a win for FFRF and its plaintiffs

See South Carolina on page 4

West Virginia Education validation

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has secured a constitutional win for families in a West Virginia school district whose students were subjected to a religious revival.

Four families in Huntington, W.Va., have settled their lawsuit against the Cabell County Board of Education after it agreed to significant changes in policy that would prevent future such violations. The parties jointly dismissed the lawsuit on Oct. 26 after settling. The board also agreed to settle up for \$1 in nominal damages to each plaintiff and nearly \$175,000 in attorney fees, which were paid by the board's insurer.

FFRF had filed the lawsuit on behalf of parents and students against the board over a Christian revival held at Huntington High School on Feb. 2, 2022. "We are pleased with the result of the lawsuit and are confident that other students will not have to endure similar problems in the future," says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

The revival was put on by evangelist Nik Walker, who runs Nik Walker Ministries. Although the event was billed as voluntary, two teachers escorted their classes to the revival, where students were instructed to bow their heads in prayer, raise up their hands, and were warned to follow Jesus or face eternal torment. In response to the revival, more than 100 students participated in a walkout in protest one week later. This was led by a former student and named plaintiff, Max Nibert.

This lawsuit challenged not only a revival event held at the school but the school system's history of disregarding the religious freedom of its students and promotion of Christian religious practices. The plaintiffs'

See West Virginia on page 4

New Jersey Election correction

Thanks to a Freedom From Religion Foundation lawsuit, the electoral system in New Jersey is becoming markedly more inclusive.

FFRF in early October filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of a New Jersey resident against the New Jersey secretary of state for forcing candidates for public office to swear a mandatory religious oath in order to appear on the ballot.



James Tosone

James Tosone, the plaintiff, had been unable to run for office in recent years because the Division of Elections would not allow him to verify his candidate form via a secular affirmation in place of a religious oath. A significant chunk of New Jersey citizens, such as Tosone, who have no religious affiliation (almost one-fourth of the state's population) were potentially affected by this policy.

Not any more. From now on, political candidates in the Garden State won't have to unwillingly take a religious oath. Things moved quite rapidly after FFRF filed its suit. Thankfully, the state of New Jersey proved willing to comply with the U.S. Constitution and resolve the issue. It agreed to create and adopt a secular affirmation for candidates. The state also sent a memo to all New Jersey county clerks with updated and clear guidance on secular affirmations.

FFRF is pleased at the outcome and has filed to voluntarily dismiss the case. And Tosone is elated at the way things turned out. "I'm very happy with the state's response to my lawsuit and their commitment to follow the Constitution's 'no religious test for pub-

See New Jersey on page 4

Enter FFRF’s 2024 Law Student Essay Contest

FFRF is proud to offer, for the sixth straight year, its annual Stephen and Diane Uhl Memorial Law Student Essay Contest, with a top prize of \$4,000!

If you are a current law school student at a North American school, we urge to write an essay on this topic and prompt:

If you could create a 28th Amendment, what would it be? During its most recent terms, the Supreme Court has issued decisions that basically ignore the Establishment Clause and favor an extreme interpretation of free exercise rights. Propose language for a constitutional amendment that would bring the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses back into balance and then analyze how your proposed language would alter the result in a recent Supreme Court case.

Deadline is March 15, 2024.
The first-place winner will earn \$4,000, second place \$3,000 and third place \$2,000. Any honorable mention(s) will get \$500. The prizes are generously donated by the late Diane and Stephen Uhl.

All eligible entrants will also receive a full 1-year complimentary student membership to FFRF, which includes a digital version of 10 issues of Freethought Today, FFRF’s newspaper (which publishes the winning student essays).

The grading of essays will be blind-ed to avoid unintentional bias. A se-



Stephen and Diane Uhl

lection of FFRF attorneys will be on the review panel.

The contest is open to all ongoing law school students attending a North American law school. You remain eligible to enter this contest if you will graduate from law school by spring or summer of 2024. You are not eligible to enter if you will be starting law school for the first time in the fall of 2024. You may not re-enter if FFRF has already awarded you for a law student essay.

Essay must be no longer than 1,500 words (not including footnotes), double spaced, standard margins, and font size 11 to 14 point. Include page numbers and the title of your essay on each page. Choose your own title. Indicate word length at end of essay. To apply, go to ffrf.us/lawstudentessay.

Donate to FFRF through CFC

If you are a federal employee, you may make donations to FFRF through the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC) until Jan. 15, 2024. If you wish to help FFRF through this campaign, the CFC code to designate your contribution to FFRF is 32519. Federal employees can donate through an Online Giving System, a Paper Pledge Form, Text-to-Donate, or on the CFC Giving App. Visit givecfc.org/donors/how-to-give.

It is recommended that all CFC donors check the box to include their name, mailing address and

email with the donation. Donors will then receive an acknowledgment from FFRF when we receive pledge notification.

The CFC is the official workplace giving campaign of the federal government. The mission of the CFC is to promote and support philanthropy through a program that is employee focused, cost-efficient and effective in providing federal employees the opportunity to improve the quality of life for all. The CFC is the world’s largest and most successful annual workplace charity campaign.

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.”

OVERHEARD

Perhaps the most striking comparison is education. Creationism is embraced by twice as many people with no more than a high school degree than those with a master’s or other advanced degree — but they report going to church weekly at relatively equal rates.

Phillip Bump, in his column, “A plurality of Americans believe God created humans without evolution.”
Washington Post, 10-3-123

When a sizable portion of one of the major political parties, aided by a right-wing propaganda machine and infused with religious fervor, rejects the basis for multiracial, multicultural democracy, we face a severe crisis.

Jennifer Rubin, in her column, “Republican radicalization takes its toll.”
Washington Post, 10-25-23

I certainly want the speaker to know we appreciate his prayer, his thoughts. I know I’m going to meet

a lot of families and others that say: “You’re in Congress. We need more than thoughts and prayers.”

Rep. Chellie Pingree responding to comments from House Speaker Mike Johnson following the mass shooting that killed 16 in Maine on Oct. 24.
Washington Post, 10-25-23



Mitt Romney

No one had been more loyal, more willing to smile when he saw absurdities, more willing to ascribe God’s will to things that were ungodly, than Mike Pence.

Mitt Romney, as told to McKay Cop-pins, author of the new biography, Romney: A Reckoning.
New York Times, 10-20-23

White evangelicals are no longer embattled and thriving. They have

crossed over the embattlement tipping point and have begun a process of subcultural decline that has left them smaller, more politically radical and more desperate to hold onto their power at any cost.

Ruth Braunstein, in her article, “Mike Johnson embodies evangelicals’ embattlement strategy. It may be backfiring.”
Religion News Service, 11-6-23

I’m not a religious person or anything and if there was a God, like, this is proof that there isn’t.

U.S. soccer star Megan Rapinoe, after she tore her Achilles tendon during the National Women’s Soccer League Championship, which was to be her final game before retiring.
Huffington Post, 11-13-23

He is from a place where people use religion to brand their hatred as love so that they act on it cheerfully and without guilt.

Columnist Charles Blow, referring to Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, who grew up in the same part of Louisiana as him.
New York Times, 11-2-23

Oakland could get together enough money to build a \$200 million cathedral not too long ago, but they can’t get the money together to pay the child victims whom they raped for decades. They’re morally and ethically bankrupt, but they’re not financially bankrupt.

Joseph Piscitelli, a survivor of abuse from Catholic clergy, in the article, “Catholic dioceses are declaring bankruptcy. Abuse survivors say it’s a way to silence them.”
The Guardian, 11-12-23

If people stop eating candy corn at Halloween because they don’t like it, does that mean candy corn is under attack? No one is forcing them [Christians] out. No one’s punishing them. No one’s persecuting them.

Phil Zuckerman, professor of sociology and secular studies at Pitzer College, in response to the idea that “Christianity is under attack” in the United States.
Roll Call, 11-16-23



Ryan Burge

White evangelicals still have a very strong hold on the modern Republican Party. They are losing overall market share in the larger culture, but they are certainly taking on an outsized role in Republican politics.

Ryan Burge, political scientist at Eastern Illinois University, in the Thomas Edsall column, “The embodiment of white Christian nationalism in a tailored suit.”
New York Times, 11-1-23

The separation of church and state is not an arbitrary notion; it serves as a protective barrier against the abuse of power and the potential marginalization of religious minorities. By upholding a distinct boundary between religious institutions and governmental bodies, we ensure that public policies are developed impartially, grounded in reason, evidence and the best interests of all citizens.

Editorial, “By maintaining the separation of church and state, we preserve our democracy.”
South Florida Sun Sentinel, 11-15-23


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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

A Christian nationalist is now House speaker

The continuing near-daily revelations about the religiously extreme views of new House Speaker Mike Johnson should be cause for concern for any American who values our secular democracy.

As one Christian nationalist exulted after the vote elevating Johnson to his current position: “No piece of legislation can come to the floor unless he wants it to.”

That is a chilling fact. Johnson will have total control over which bills receive a vote on the House floor. He’ll be a final gatekeeper, ensuring the death of any bills inconsistent with his ideology. This is a travesty for state/church advocates. After then-President Trump and Sen. Mitch McConnell packed the federal judiciary with religious ideologues, we could no longer count on the courts to protect this foundational American principle, and with Johnson driving the House agenda, another door slams shut.

Michael Farris, co-founder of Convention of States Action, is elated at that aspect of Johnson’s speakership.

“This is the highest-ranking, serious, biblically trained person with a clear Christian worldview . . . the highest-ranking government official we’ve ever had in my lifetime,” he said. “The speaker has incredible power — and the number one power is to set the agenda.”

Since becoming a member of Congress in 2017, Johnson has opposed legislation that codified protections for same sex-marriages, sponsored a federal version of Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill, and supported a nationwide abortion ban. He believes that women must be forced to give birth in order to supply “able-bodied workers” to support Social Security and Medicare.

Rolling Stone also revealed that Johnson flies an “Appeal to Heaven” flag — used as a symbol of Christian nationalism (including on Jan. 6) — outside his congressional office.

Johnson said on CNBC that “separation of church and state . . . is a misnomer.” When asked on “Squawk Box” about why he was praying on the House floor, Johnson derided the phrase as originating with a letter from Thomas Jefferson, who, of course, in an official communication as president, used the metaphor of a “wall of separation between church and state” to explain the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause. Johnson also insulted the 29 percent of the U.S. adult population today that has no religious affiliation by asserting that “faith, our deep religious heritage and tradition is a big part of what it means to be an American.”



Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, front center, prays with other congressional members on the floor of the House. He is now second in line to the presidency.

When asked for his views on issues, the newly minted House speaker infamously replied, “Well, go pick up a bible off your shelf and read it. That’s my worldview.”

He is already peppering his remarks as speaker with religious references and attributes his promotion as being due to an act of God: “I believe that scripture, the bible, is very clear: that God is the one who raises up those in authority.” His wife, Kelly Johnson, told Fox News, “I believe that God has placed him here; that’s biblical.”

Johnson has worked as an attorney for multiple Christian nationalist groups, including Alliance Defending Freedom and First Liberty Institute, nemeses of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

After working with those Christian extremist organizations, Johnson decided to create one of his own — the Freedom Guard. There, he represented Answers in Genesis, the fringe creationist outfit behind the Creation Museum and the Ark Encounter, in its attempt to avoid paying taxes in Kentucky.

He dedicated his legal career to advancing efforts to interfere with others’ rights in the name of Christianity — in his own words, he focused on “religious freedom, the sanctity of human life, and biblical values, including the defense of traditional marriage, and

other ideals like these.”

In practice, this meant trying to criminalize homosexuality and prohibiting same-sex couples from getting married. He also worked to make it harder for married couples to get divorced, and, of course, fought against women’s reproductive health care.

“Well, go pick up a bible off your shelf and read it. That’s my worldview.”
— House Speaker Mike Johnson

It’s not surprising that extremist evangelicals are celebrating Johnson’s promotion.

Johnson is a friend of pseudohistorian and Christian nationalist David Barton of Wallbuilders, who has praised his ascension. So has Patriot Academy founder Rick Green, who says, “This man has a biblical worldview. I’m in tears. We’ve been praying for leaders that have a fear of God, that we know have a foundation of biblical truth.”

On Oct. 3, just days before he was elected speaker, Johnson said on the “World Prayer Network” program, “Is God going to allow our nation to enter a time of judgment for our collective sins? . . . Or is he going to give us one more chance to restore the foundations and return to Him?”

When he was a Louisiana state legislator in 2015, this Southern Baptist gave a sermon at First Baptist Church in Haughton, La., in which he said the United States was founded to be a “Christian nation.” He urged congregants to “put

on the full armor of God,” citing one of Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis’ favorite bible verses, adding, “This is war imagery, my friends, because we are in a war. It’s a spiritual battle.” At a return visit to the church in 2019, Johnson referred to the “biblically sanctioned government.”

Johnson, of course, drafted the constitutional challenge of Trump’s 2020 election loss. The Brennan Center for Justice has called him “the most powerful election denier in Washington.”

In a video seminar put on by Johnson and his wife, Johnson said potential politicians should be vetted based upon their Christian bonafides.

“You better sit down any candidate who says they’re going to run for legislature and say, ‘I want to know what your worldview is. I want to know what, to know what you think about the Christian heritage of this country. I want to know what you think about God’s design for society. Have you even thought about that?’”

Most insidious, Politico reports that Johnson is a supporter of the religion-based “Convention of States” movement seeking to rewrite the Constitution and “force a tea party vision of the framers’ intent upon America.” He’s promoting an Article 5 constitutional convention, whereby states can convene a constitutional convention if two-thirds petition Congress.

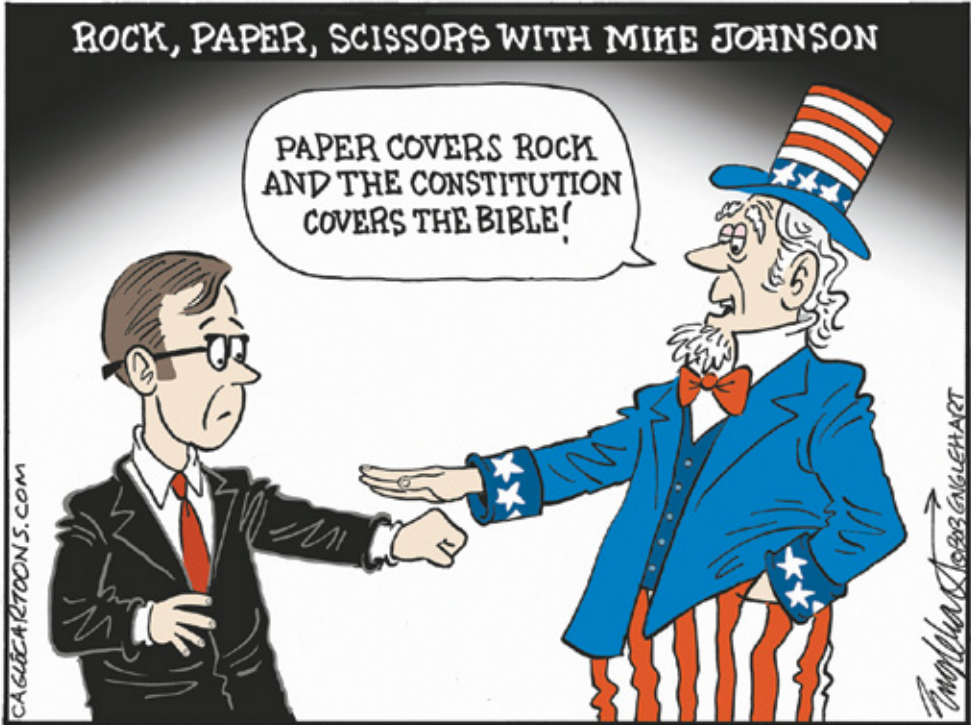
But there are some who are pushing back on Johnson’s overt religiosity.

Rep. Mark Pocan, a member of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, said Johnson is “essentially a cleaned-up version of Marjorie Taylor Greene. He’s presentable, he smiles, he comes across as congenial. But his views are probably some of the most extreme around — especially around gays and lesbians — that I’ve seen in all of Congress.”

Historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez commented that Johnson’s “commitment is not to democracy. He’s not committed to majority rule. He seems to be saying he’s committed to minority rule, if that’s what it takes to ensure that we stay on a Christian foundation.”

A speaker who puts Christian supremacy above the Constitution is an urgent threat to our secular democracy. FFRF will keep fighting despite these obstacles — and will continue to sound the alarm on the rapidly encroaching threat of Christian nationalism.

This article was compiled from articles written by FFRF Counsel Ryan Jayne and Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.



Freethought Today Cryptogram

FIWJEJYQ JC PRQEIFYTC DISRTCI JO RWWYNC

BTXRQ DIJQEC NBY PYQ'O BRHI RWW OBI RQ

CNIFC OY OBJQV OBRO OBIG PY.

— DJWW XRBIF

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			
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48					49		50			51		52	
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57	58	59	60					61				62	63
64						65	66			67			68
69						70				71			
72						73				74			

Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

- Across
1. More than bad

6. Pillbox, e.g.

9. *Freethinking “The Graduate” director ____ Nichols

13. Did like a star

14. Campfire residue

15. Like Cujo

16. Southern cuisine pie filling

17. Eisenhower nickname

18. Napoleon’s stay on St. Helena, e.g.

19. *Irreverent Paul Winchell voiced him on TV’s “Winnie the Pooh”

21. *Site of 2023 FFRF Convention

23. It would

24. Chipper

25. Toward the stern

28. Not there

30. Spider’s creation

35. Castle defense

37. Friend from Down Under

39. *Atheist Billy Joel’s “____ Man”

40. Spiritedness

41. Japanese cartoon

43. Not many (2 words)

44. Pelted with poultry products

46. In ill humor

47. Highway hauler

48. Traveling entertainer’s helper
50. Law school test acronym

52. Whiskey grain

53. Tibia/fibula hinge joint

55. Grass “carpet”

57. *Pastafarians’ Church of Flying Spaghetti ____

61. *Howard Zinn’s “A ____’s History of the United States”

64. Throat dangler

65. Relative of an ostrich

67. Not here

69. Wooden shoe

70. Pop container

71. Jungle vine

72. “If all ____ fails...”

73. Crack, so to speak

74. Senior
- Down
1. Poisonous slitherer

2. Sharpen

3. Central points

4. Sushi restaurant staple

5. Pants measure

6. The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical

7. Pose a question

8. Unifying idea

9. Skirt length

10. Wading bird

11. Narc’s unit

12. *Freethinking John Steinbeck’s “East of ____”

15. Cow’s favorite grass?

20. Swelling of human organs
22. Eyebrow shape

24. Leafstalk

25. *Irreverent Philip Pullman’s “The ____ Spyglass”

26. Forfeit

27. Boreal forest, in Russia

29. *Freethinking “Atlas Shrugged” author Ayn ____

31. *Religious rights movement concern

32. Nilla serving

33. Japan to U.S. in WW2

34. *Freethinker “Star Man” David ____

36. Three-____ sloth

38. #65 Across, pl.

42. Remove, as in wrong answer

45. Stalin’s order, e.g.

49. Compass bearing

51. Gertrude Crampton’s famous “Little Golden Book” title

54. Not slouching

56. PhD in Great Britain

57. Dali’s Gala or Dante’s Beatrice, e.g.

58. Like West Wing’s office

59. Central points

60. Blackthorn fruit

61. Pint-sized

62. Pb

63. Marine eagle

66. Equinox mo.

68. Canal locale

South Carolina

Continued from page 1

because an unconstitutional appropriation to a private religious organization to expand its mission of religious education was stopped.

“The South Carolina Constitution prohibits public funds to be used to directly benefit any private educational institution (Article XI, Section 4),” read the legal complaint that the state/church watchdog filed in the Court of Common Pleas in Richland County. “Additionally, the South Carolina Constitution contains an Establishment Clause that mirrors the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which prohibits the General Assembly from making any ‘law respecting an establishment

of religion’ (Article I, Section 2).”

“This was a blatantly Christian outfit that was unconstitutionally aiming to become the beneficiary of a huge public giveaway,” says FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. “We were able to ensure with our lawsuit that this didn’t happen.”

South Carolina attorney Steven Edward Buckingham represented the plaintiffs, with FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott and FFRF Legal Fellow Karen Heineman serving as co-counsel. Three of the plaintiffs were FFRF members, and the fourth, who has children in the Greenville County Schools, is familiar with the purpose of Christian Learning Centers.

West Virginia

Continued from page 1

Amended Complaint asserted that they “seek significant policy changes, training of employees, and supervision of employees in order to protect the constitutional rights of Cabell County Schools’ students.”

As part of a settlement, the board agreed to amend its policies relating to religion in schools. The board voted on Oct. 17 to adopt the policy revisions. Significantly, those changes require annual training of teachers about religion in school.

School administrators also are tasked with greater monitoring of school events. Finally, the policy provides greater detail to ensure that employees do not initiate or lead students in religious activities.

Herman Mays, who is the father of one

of the students forced to attend the revival, says, “This settlement with the Cabell County Board of Education enacts meaningful policy changes and enforcement and training for staff and teachers on their constitutional responsibilities to ensure that what happened in Cabell public schools in February 2022 will not occur again.”

FFRF is awarding \$2,000 scholarships to six of the student participants in the case in honor of their activism.

Former student Max Nibert previously was awarded an activist award in 2022.

The plaintiffs were represented by attorney Marcus Schneider, FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott and local counsel Kristina Thomas Whiteaker.

“We are pleased with the result of the lawsuit and are confident that other students will not have to endure similar problems in the future.”

— FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

New Jersey

Continued from page 1

lic office,” he says. “Thanks to the support of FFRF and the work of their attorneys, candidates in New Jersey now have the option of a nonreligious affirmation when submitting their affidavit to run for office.”

If New Jersey fails to follow through with these fixes in 2024, the state/church watchdog can refile the lawsuit. The dismissal will be without prejudice, which means that FFRF will not be precluded from refile. However, it appears that state officials will do the right thing and adhere to these changes.


The policy prevalent till now had violated the rights of the plaintiff and countless others under Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution, which bars religious tests for public office, as well as the First Amendment, FFRF asserted in the com-

plaint filed before the U.S. District Court for the District of New Jersey. FFRF contended in its suit that “the secretary of state and the state of New Jersey have no valid reason or interest in requiring all citizens who wish to run for public office to take an oath that requires them to swear ‘so help me God.’”

“We’re glad that the state of New Jersey saw the error of its stubbornly non-inclusive ways,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Residents will now not have to choose between lying or not running for office.”

New Jersey Attorney Paul Grosswald filed the lawsuit, with FFRF attorneys Patrick Elliott and Samantha Lawrence acting as co-counsel. The case was filed in the Trenton Vicinage of the U.S. District Court for the District of New Jersey.

Yip Harburg, from his book: Rhymes for the Irreverent



And Never The Twain Shall Meet

Some are born in palaces,
Some are born in mangers,
Not all of the Church’s chalices
Nor all the Hebrew tallises,
Can heal the psychic calluses
That separate these strangers.

Illustrated by Seymour Chwast, published by FFRF @shop.ffrf.org

Peanuts getting a bit salty!



The Freedom From Religion Foundation’s increasing public sway has made its way into mainstream comics, as seen in this syndicated cartoon from Oct. 30 by “Prickly City” cartoonist Scott Stantis, who used Charles M. Schulz’ Linus character from his “Peanuts” cartoons.

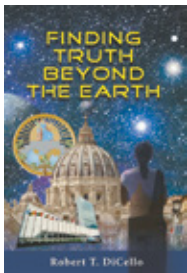
FREETHOUGHT BOOKS

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.

Finding Truth Beyond the Earth

By Robert T. DiCello
Peppertree Press
Hardcover \$29.95

This novel is a sequel to *Hidden Truth*, occurring five years later. Religious dogma forces believers to reject science, but without the dark energy machines that were brought to Earth in a gesture of altruism, Earth will fall back into the old ways of poisoning our biosphere, and the Earth will be dead in 550 years. There is one avenue out of this man-made death spiral, a program that is dubbed, “Operation New Earth.”



The Satanic Chronicles: The Dark Con of Man

By J.J. Randall
Kindle \$9.99
Paperback \$22
Hardcover \$36

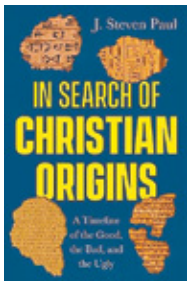
If you do choose to read this book, and you continue on spreading the lies of your religion, then you are part of the problem. To be knowledgeable of your deceptions and yet still spread them, is worse than those who spread them and don’t know that they are deceptions. Take responsibility for your actions.



In Search of Christian Origins: A Timeline of the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

By J. Steven Paul
Kindle \$4.09
Paperback \$18.95

A fascinating history that reveals Christianity’s roots, its often unknown and surprising traditions, and its influence on the world today. How did Christianity originate? Who created its earliest writings? Who decided which books would be in the bible? Paul’s detailed account sheds light on doctrine, dogma and traditions.



Christianity According to Christ: A Gospel Primer for Nonbelievers

By Dan Davis
Paperback \$17.95
Kindle \$3.99

To believe the gospels is to believe that they portray Christianity as taught by Jesus himself. This book is an atheist’s presentation and critique of the gospels’ stories and messages, including Jesus’ teachings about heaven and hell, his quarrels with the Jewish clergy, his questionable choices of apostles, the alleged miracles, and events preceding and following the crucifixion.

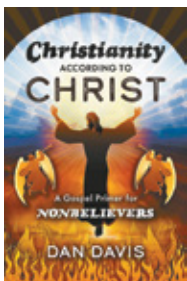


Photo: Oklahoma.gov

Rather than enshrine atheism as a state-sponsored religion, we are blessed that our Constitution guarantees religious liberty. Oklahoma state schools Superintendent Ryan Walters, who has asked the Oklahoma Supreme Court to allow the state’s Department of Education “to defend its interest in distributing state aid without religious discrimination” by allowing the nation’s first religious charter school.

The Oklahoman, 11-9-23

I come to this from God’s side. This is very dear to God. Life is everything.

Tonya Gilliam, speaking to the Lubbock County (Texas) Board, which made it illegal for anyone to transport a pregnant woman through the county, or pay for her travel, for the purpose of seeking an abortion.

New York Times, 10-24-23

Saved by the grace of God.

Will Lutz, kicker for the Denver Broncos, after he missed a 41-yard field goal attempt as the clock expired against the Buffalo Bills, but then was given a second chance after Buffalo was penalized for having too many players on the field. Lutz then made the 36-yard field goal to give the Broncos a 24-22 victory.

Denver Post, 11-14-23

If the pain were a bug and not a feature, then you’d be like, “This is a really crappy life.” But if it’s a feature, then you can see its fruits. And in my life, without a doubt, the fruits of suffering have been really good. They’ve been things that I need.

Melissa Inouye, in an interview talking about her book, *Sacred Struggle*, which talks about suffering as it pertains to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Religion News Service, 10-26-23



Photo: Keith Allison, CC BY-SA 2.0

Carson Wentz

God’s timing is always perfect.

NFL quarterback Carson Wentz, whose wife gave birth to their third child the same week he was signed by the Los Angeles Rams.

People, 11-13-23

I think he’s an honorable man and a man typical of the cloth.

Larry Smith, chair of the Republican Party of LaSalle Co., Ill., affirming his support for indicted pastor Stephen C. Lee. Lee is charged with conspiring to unlawfully keep Donald Trump in power after losing the 2020 election. The Illinois-based Lutheran minister traveled to Georgia, where he is accused of intimidating two Black election workers, one of whom had to move out of her home for weeks. Lee faces five felony charges, including violating Georgia’s racketeering law and has sought evangelical support.

New York Times, 11-12-23

We’re battling an enemy that will use lies and words against you, and



Jason Rapert

these lies, by the way, in Proverbs we know that God hates a lying tongue, and people that plan to do wicked things in their heart, and they say, “he disgracefully showed off an Appeal to Heaven flag.”

... C’m on now. What are you doing, FFRF? You’re nothing but a bunch of folks trying to accuse and stir trouble with lies.

Jason Rapert, the former Arkansas state lawmaker who founded the National Association of Christian Lawmakers (NACL), in his “Save the Nation” Facebook Live show, going over an FFRF Action Fund press release from Sept. 20 denouncing the NACL.

Facebook, 11-8-23

I’m not a big climate change guy. It’s about my faith — God is in charge of this.

Iowa farmer Steven Boender, on dismissing climate change as something to be worried about.

Washington Post, 11-10-23



Mike Johnson

They took me in as their own and helped set me on the path God had planned long before.

Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, reminiscing about his first legal job, which was in a Louisiana firm run

by a Roman Catholic attorney active in anti-abortion circles.

New York Times, 11-15-23

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IN THE NEWS

Jailed atheist released after winning lawsuit

A West Virginia inmate who was forced to participate in religious activities in order to be eligible for parole has been released from jail after winning his case earlier this year.

A federal judge in West Virginia had ruled in July that the state corrections agency can't force an incarcerated atheist to participate in religiously affiliated programming to be eligible for parole. Saint Mary's Correctional Center changed its policies after the ruling.

U.S. District Court Judge Joseph Goodwin said inmate Andrew Miller "easily meets his threshold burden of showing an impingement on his rights."

The state's "unmitigated actions force Mr. Miller to choose between two distinct but equally irreparable injuries," the judge wrote. He can either "submit to government coercion and engage in religious exercise at odds with his own beliefs," or "remain incarcerated until at least April 2025."

33% of evangelicals OK with political violence

Support for political violence and concern over the state of American democracy are both on the rise, with 75 percent of Americans believing the future of democracy is at risk in the next presidential election, according to a report released Oct. 25 by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution.

Support for political violence has peaked above 20 percent, with 23 percent of Americans believing "true American patriots may have to resort to violence to save the country," versus 15 percent in 2021.

One-third of white evangelical Protestants support the idea, significantly more than any other religious group. Americans who believe the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump are more likely to support the use of political violence than those who don't think so (46 percent versus 13 percent).

The survey also delves into Americans' adhesion to white Christian nationalist ideology. According to 33 percent of Americans, God gave America to European Christians as a promised land where they could create an exemplary society. More than half of white evangelical Protestants agree with this statement; 77 percent believe the Founders intended to create a Christian nation.

Americans who believed God wanted the United States to be a promised land for European Christians in turn are more likely (39 percent) to support the use of political violence to save the country than those who disagree (16 percent).

Mo. AG sues FDA over abortion-pill-by-mail

The attorney general of Missouri announced on Nov. 6 a lawsuit against the U.S. Food and Drug Administration over the agency's approval of shipping abortion drugs through the mail.

Republican State Attorney General Andrew Bailey claims that the FDA had "unlawfully approved the shipment of chemical abortion pills in the mail."

That case first drew national attention when federal Texas judge Matthew Kacsmaryk issued a controversial ruling on April 7 that suspended the FDA's approval of the abortion drug mifepristone.

After the April decision, the Biden administration immediately issued an emergency appeal to block the ruling, first to a three-judge panel in the 5th Circuit. In August of this year, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in that suit that the FDA must reinstate restrictions on abortion pills in place before 2016, with the decision banning administering the pills through the mail or via telemedicine.

The case is still pending. The Biden Justice Department in September asked the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn that ruling.

Young people define 'sacred moments' broadly

A majority of young Americans from a variety of faiths and no faith say they have experienced a sacred moment, according to a new survey, but their definitions of what is sacred may not line up with those of their parents or grandparents.

Springtide Research Institute's "The State of Religion & Young People 2023: Exploring the Sacred" shows that 55 percent of the more than 4,500 people ages 13 to 25 who were surveyed said they have discovered what Springtide called "experiences that evoked a sense of wonder, awe, gratitude, deep truth and/or interconnectedness in your life."

Of those who had, 69 percent said they had experienced a sacred moment more than once in nature, 68 percent said they'd done so in the privacy of their home, and 55 percent said at a place of worship. (Respondents could select more than one option.)

Nearly a third of those surveyed — 31 percent — said they had never participated in a spiritual or religious community. Also, there is a lack of trust among young people in organized religion, with 45 percent saying they only trust it "somewhat" and another 27 percent who trust it "not at all."

Younger generations are leaving religion earlier

Children born in the 1980s and 1990s never absorbed faith in their home, so they walked away from it at an earlier age than most parents and leaders suspect, according to new analysis published at the Institute for Family Studies.

In the early 1990s, no more than 16 percent of 8th-, 10th- and 12th-graders said religion was not important to them at all, according to the study. By the early 2000s, however, the percentage of high school seniors who completely dismissed the importance of religion to them began to increase dramatically.

In the latest study, close to 30 percent of seniors and sophomores and almost 25 percent of 8th-graders said they didn't consider religion to have any importance.

Survey: Belief in QAnon rises, even among Nones

There's been an ominous uptick in the belief of QAnon-related claims between 2021 and 2023 spanning every demographic measured, reveals a recent survey from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI). This includes the religiously unaffiliated, although they still score better than any other religious demographic.



The percentage of Americans labeled by PRRI as "QAnon believers" has risen from 14 percent to 23 percent over the past two years.

White evangelical Protestants are the most likely to believe these claims (30 percent) while the religiously unaffiliated are the most likely to reject them. Still, the percentage of religiously unaffiliated Americans who are QAnon believers has doubled over the past two years, from 9 percent to 18 percent.

Iranian teen dies after alleged assault by police

A teenage Iranian girl who fell into a coma after she was allegedly assaulted by the country's morality police for not wearing a headscarf died Oct. 30, according to Iranian state media.

Armita Geravand, 16, was declared "brain dead" despite the efforts of medical staff to save her. She was hospitalized with head injuries following the alleged assault at a Tehran metro station in October, according to activists, just weeks after Iran passed draconian legislation imposing much harsher penalties on women who breach the

country's already strict hijab rules.

United Nations officials and rights groups have previously accused Iranian authorities of pressuring families of killed protesters to make statements supportive of the government narrative.



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Freedom depends on freethinkers

Iran’s Parliament in September passed a so-called “hijab bill” on the wearing of clothing — which if violated can carry up to 10 years in prison — following the first anniversary of mass protests sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini.

Bill to disestablish Church of England set

A bill to disestablish the Church of England is expected to be introduced in British Parliament, after being selected from the House of Lords private members’ bill ballot.

The Disestablishment of the Church of England bill would formally separate the Church of England from the British state. It is expected to be introduced in Parliament on Dec. 6.

The Church of England’s established church effectively means it is the state religion of the United Kingdom.

British monarchs carry the title “Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church of England.” They must be full members of the Church of England and must take an oath to maintain the Church during their coronation.

Additionally, 26 Church of England bishops are given seats as a right in the House of Lords. Iran is the only other sovereign state which reserves seats in its legislature for religious clerics.

For the first time, less than half of the population of England and Wales — 27.5 million people — described themselves as Christian, 5.5 million fewer than in 2011.

Florida can’t enforce drag show ban (for now)

The U.S. Supreme Court said Nov. 16 it will not allow Florida to enforce its new law targeting drag shows, while a court case proceeds.

The justices refused to narrow a lower court order that has prohibited the law from being enforced statewide.

Florida had asked the court to allow its anti-drag show law to be enforced everywhere except at the Hamburger Mary’s restaurant in Orlando, which challenged the law’s constitutionality.

Three justices — Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch and Clarence Thomas — said they would have granted the state’s request.

In October, a panel of the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a lower court’s order stopping the law from being enforced. The district court found that the law likely restricted free speech and couldn’t be enforced anywhere in the state.

Hamburger Mary’s regularly hosts drag shows, including family-friendly performances on Sundays that children



are invited to attend. The restaurant’s owner said the law was overly broad, was written vaguely and violated First Amendment rights.

The new law championed by Gov. Ron DeSantis, who is running for the 2024 GOP presidential nomination, punished venues for allowing children into what it called “adult live performances.” Though it did not mention drag shows specifically, the sponsor of the legislation said it was aimed at those performances.

Pa. district to pay \$200K to settle Satan Club suit

A Pennsylvania school district has reached a settlement with the Satanic Temple in a lawsuit alleging the district discriminated against students by barring them from allowing an After School Satan Club to use a school building earlier this year.

The American Civil Liberties Union said on Nov. 14 that The Satanic Temple, Inc., reached a settlement with Saucon Valley School District, and that the district agreed to pay \$200,000 in attorney fees. The fees will be paid by the district’s insurance, and not the taxpayers, according to the district solicitor.

Under the settlement, the district must give the Satanic Temple and the After School Satan Club, which the Satanic Temple sponsors, the same access to school facilities that other similar organizations have. The ACLU filed the lawsuit in March, after the district did

not allow the club to meet. The club says it does not believe in Satan, but uses the figure as a symbol of reason, independence and free thought.

Initially, Superintendent Jaime Vlasaty allowed the group to meet at a district space, but rescinded that after claiming the club violated board policy by not communicating it was not sponsored by the district. She originally said the club could use the facility because the district had allowed other religious groups to use rented space in the past.

The agreement also prohibits the district from retaliating against The Satanic Temple, the club, its members or volunteers, according to the ACLU.

Survey: Americans’ trust in science declining

Americans’ trust in science and scientists has dropped since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, according to a report by Pew Research Center.

The percent of American adults who say science has a “mostly positive” effect on society fell to 57 percent, down 8 percentage points since November 2021 and 16 percentage points since just before the pandemic, according to the survey of more than 8,800 U.S. adults.

More than a third of respondents believed that the impact of science has been equally positive and negative, while 8 percent think science has a “mostly negative” impact on society. Trust in science wasn’t the same

across the political spectrum: The survey found that Republicans had less confidence in scientists and the benefits of science than Democrats. Less than half of Republicans (47 percent) said science has had a mostly positive effect on society, a decline from 70 percent in 2019. Sixty-nine percent of Democrats say science has had a mostly positive effect on society, although that has also declined by 8 points from 2019.

Mo. lawyers say abortion bans aren’t religious

Attorneys for the state of Missouri argued Nov. 15 that abortion bans aren’t inherently religious, even if lawmakers pass them because of their faith.

Lawyers for Missouri Attorney General Andrew Bailey’s Office asked a St. Louis circuit judge to make a ruling on his own, before a trial, against 13 religious leaders who sued earlier this year to block the state’s abortion ban.

The suit argued lawmakers imposed their religious beliefs on others in violation of the Missouri Constitution. But Maria Lanahan, with the Missouri Attorney General’s Office, said there are several reasons why someone may vote to ban abortion that have nothing to do with religion.

“Everyone has different reasons for passing a bill,” she said.

In their lawsuit, filed in January, Missouri Christian, Jewish and Unitarian Universalist leaders sought to block the abortion ban and stop local prosecutors from enforcing it.

U.S. bishops: Abortion a ‘pre-eminent priority’

The U.S. bishops will continue to highlight the threat of abortion as a “pre-eminent priority” in the introduction to a guide they’ll disseminate to Catholic voters ahead of the 2024 election.

That designation, the source of debate among some bishops in recent years, was retained when the bishops voted overwhelmingly (225-11, with seven abstentions) to approve a revised introduction to the guide, “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” at their annual fall assembly Nov. 22 in Baltimore.

The bishops also voted to approve several brief excerpts from the guide to be inserted in parish bulletins during the upcoming election cycle.

“The threat of abortion remains our pre-eminent priority because it directly attacks our most vulnerable and voiceless brothers and sisters and destroys more than a million lives per year in our country alone,” the new introduction to the guide says.

The revised introduction also now states that the “redefinition of marriage and gender ... threaten[s] the dignity of the human person.”

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FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

Religious poster removed from California school

A religious poster in the San Bernardino County School District in California has been taken down after FFRF took action.

A community member reported that a display at Colin L. Powell Preschool included multiple bible verses hanging in the school’s front office. The display contained 26 verses, one for each letter of the alphabet.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Ted Alejandre asking him to take action.

The district responded: “As of Sept. 27, 2023, the poster has been permanently removed,” the district stated. Additionally, the district is providing staff training to promote a more inclusive environment in the future.

S.C. academy graduations will now be secular

FFRF has ensured that the South Carolina Criminal Justice Academy will no longer force prayer at future graduation ceremonies.

An academy parent has reported that the school included Christian prayer and preaching as part of its graduation exercises on May 26. The complainant described the graduation ceremony as a Christian church service. They reported that there was a prayer at the beginning that quoted the New Testament, a guest speaker who spoke about God and included quotes from the New Testament and a prayer at the end. The complainant also reported that the “Law Enforcement Code of Ethics” included on the graduation program requires graduates to “dedicate [themselves] before God.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line contacted Academy President Lewis J. Swindler Jr. regarding the situation. Swindler responded, indicating that future graduation ceremonies would be secular. “Please allow this to serve as written assurance that future graduation ceremonies will not include scheduled prayers or other religious exercises,” he wrote.

Proselytization ends on school’s social media

The East Central Independent School District in Texas accepted constitutional counseling from FFRF after the district promoted a student-led prayer on official social media.

A community member reported to FFRF that on Sept. 28, the official district Facebook page shared a post that could be construed as the district promoting and encouraging prayer. The post linked to a video of a sectarian Christian prayer, including statements directly invoking East Central ISD, such as “Jesus designed this building right here. He hand-picked all of these teachers, all of these administrators.”

FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Roland Toscano with FFRF’s concerns, and Toscano wrote an apologetic response back to FFRF, indicating that the district regretted the offense and had no intention of causing harm. In addition to the post being removed promptly, Toscano detailed future action to be taken to avoid similar

FFRF on the road



FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert spoke at the Notre Dame Law School during a meeting of the American Constitution Society. Rebecca and Bradley Girard (purple shirt) from Americans United spoke on the topic of “Separation of Church and State.” Tristan Mullen, vice president of the ACS chapter, is on the left and Adem Osmani, president of ACS chapter, is on the right. There were about 25-30 students in attendance.

situations.

“In light of this incident, we will be conducting a comprehensive review of our social media governance and guidelines to ensure that such posts that promote prayers or any religious affiliations are not published in the future,” Toscano writes.

Christian bible removed from Ohio courthouse

FFRF has successfully intervened to remove a display containing a bible from the Monroe County Courthouse in Ohio.

FFRF received a report that a large display on the ground floor of the courthouse included a Christian bible laid open. The display had reportedly been up since at least 2022. The display was located inside the courthouse’s public entrance.

FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Monroe County Board of Commissioners President Diane Burkhart, who then had the county attorney look into it.

According to the original complainant, the letter and local reaction to the display made Monroe County headlines. The bible was removed from display while the county attorney investigates the matter.

FFRF again works to keep prayer out of OK ceremony

For the second time, FFRF worked with the Guthrie Public Schools system in Oklahoma after being informed that the National Honor Society induction ceremony included an unconstitutional scheduled prayer.

FFRF was informed by a district parent that the National Honor Society induction ceremony at Guthrie High School included a scheduled prayer. The complainant felt unwelcome and alienated by the inclusion of a scheduled Christian prayer at the school-sponsored event.

“As you are aware, public school students have a constitutional right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools,” FFRF Staff Attorney

deny the being of Almighty God” is disqualified from office.

While the provisions are still included in the North Carolina Constitution, they are not reflected in practice, supported by the candidacy forms that the website links to from the North Carolina State Board of Elections. The forms allow for the candidate to simply “swear or affirm” to the truthfulness of the statements on the form. Additionally, the North Carolina Constitution requires members of the General Assembly to take “an oath or affirmation” to support the federal and state constitutions and faithfully discharge their duties without any reference to a god.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Craven County Board of Elections Director Susan R. Williams about the issue. In response to FFRF’s concern, Williams reported that, since taking office in February, she is currently still reviewing everything put on the website before she entered office. “I hope that you can let the citizen know that I will have the N.C. Constitution PDF removed, it is unnecessary as the fact sheet link directs the user to the N.C. State website and has everything that is needed,” she writes.

‘End times’ substitute won’t be rehired by school

FFRF stood up for student rights in the Jacksonville ISD in Texas after a substitute teacher spent classroom time preaching about the end of days rather than teaching art.

A concerned parent reported that on Oct. 17, a Jacksonville High School substitute teacher proselytized students during class time. The substitute preached to students about the biblical story of Revelation and told students that they need a personal relationship with Jesus Christ because “the end is coming.”

FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Brad Stewart, writing: “We ask that the district cease working with this substitute teacher.”

After the incident, legal representation John C. Hardy of Hardy Cook & Hardy wrote back to FFRF. “The district investigated the situation and concluded that the substitute teacher was

See Victories on next page

Chris Line wrote in a letter to legal representation for the district John G. Moyer.

Moyer wrote back, informing FFRF that the matter will be resolved. “Dr. Simpson, Superintendent, believed that the issue of including a prayer had been resolved in 2020 and was dismayed to learn that it was not removed from a form that was subsequently relied upon,” Moyer wrote. “Superintendent Simpson has directed me to assure you that this matter will be addressed at the district’s Administrative Council meeting this month and that everyone understands that this must not happen again.”

Religious oath removed from N.C. county website

A North Carolina citizen found information on the Craven County website regarding running for office, including running and filing information from the North Carolina Constitution, that included a religious oath. The information provided included Article VI from the North Carolina Constitution, which says that concluding an oath of office with “So help me God” is required before anyone can take office. The next section, titled “Disqualifications for office,” states that “any person who shall

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Voting rights are a state/church issue

By Sammi Lawrence

A vibrant, fully franchised electorate is the best guarantee to protect our secular Constitution and government. Without a functioning democracy, the wall of separation between state and church cannot be protected or rebuilt. A diverse and fully enfranchised electorate ensures that no single religion, sect or group can take charge of government and privilege itself or discriminate against others. Protecting voting rights, and thus our democracy, is therefore a state/church issue that should concern all secular Americans.



Photo by Chris Line
Sammi Lawrence

Recently, the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals dealt a stunning and disturbing blow to voting rights. A three-judge panel in Arkansas State Conference of the NAACP v. Arkansas Board of Apportionment has ruled that private parties, including membership organizations, cannot sue to enforce Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. Judge David Stras, a President Trump appointee who FFRF highlighted in its 2020 report on the Christian nationalist takeover of the federal courts, wrote for the majority, saying only the federal government may sue to enforce Section 2. For context, Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act prohibits states from creating voting laws that discriminate against voters on the basis of race, and it has become one of the cornerstones of our country’s civil rights laws since it was enacted in 1964.

Unfortunately, the slow erosion of the Voting Rights Act, and Section 2 in particular, began decades ago when the Supreme Court first began chipping away at it. In 1980, the Supreme Court held in *Mobile v. Bolden* that Section 2 required a plaintiff to prove that a government’s discriminato-



Photo: Shutterstock

ry voting law was enacted or maintained at least partially for an invidious purpose. A facially neutral law would be upheld even if its effect was to disadvantage voters of a minority race or other protected group. This ruling quickly made it significantly more challenging for plaintiffs to prove that a discriminatory voting law violated Section 2. In 1982, Congress amended the Voting Rights Act in response to the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Bolden*. The 1982 amendment made it clear that a plaintiff can show a violation of Section 2 through evidence establishing that the challenged law has the effect of denying racial or language minority voters the “equal opportunity to participate in the political process.”

Sadly, the Supreme Court has been otherwise successful in whittling away the Voting Rights Act through attacking Section 5 of the act. Section 5 froze in place election practices and procedures in certain predetermined jurisdictions. While Section 5 was originally enacted with a “sunset provision,” meaning it would expire after a certain number of years, Congress renewed Section 5 and extended the sunset provision several times. Most recently, in 2006 Congress extended Section 5 for another 25 years, meaning it would have expired in 2031. Alas, the Supreme Court halted Section 5 long before 2031.

In its 2013 decision, *Shelby County v. Holder*, the Supreme Court rendered Section 5 inoperable. The court held, 5–4, in its ruling that the formula used to determine which jurisdictions must seek approval of proposed election law changes is unconstitutional. The practical effect of this ruling is that the previously affected jurisdictions, such as Texas and Alabama, no longer need to seek approval before making changes to their election laws. Jurisdictions with a long history of enacting racially discriminatory election laws are now free to alter their election laws and procedures without any federal oversight. In the decade since *Shelby County*, Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act is now the main mechanism for plaintiffs to challenge, and hopefully end, discriminatory election laws.

In a more reassuring development, the Supreme Court in June issued a surprising but welcome decision in a crucial voting rights case, *Allen v. Milligan*. The majority opinion held that Alabama’s redistricting plan was likely invalid under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act because the plan harmed Black voters’ rights. However, dissents by four of the court’s members made clear that the Supreme Court is not guaranteed to uphold democracy and rule in favor of voters when future voting rights cases come before it.

For now, the 8th Circuit’s ruling only applies to Arkansas, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota. However, this ruling will most likely be appealed to the Supreme Court, meaning that the high court will have another opportunity to further erode the Voting Rights Act by imposing the 8th Circuit’s deeply undemocratic holding on the rest of the country, rolling back decades of civil rights victories in the process.

In recent years, states have passed and continue to attempt to pass laws seeking to suppress voting rights. These laws are rooted in Christian nationalist ideology, as their goal is to restrict voting by minority and progressive-leaning populations. For instance, laws restricting voting on Sundays are motivated by the desire to enshrine Christian teachings regarding the Sabbath into the law and negatively impact minority voters, especially Black American communities, who often hold community voting events on Sundays. Last August, Ohio’s conservative Legislature attempted to make it more difficult to pass ballot initiatives in an effort to prevent reproductive rights advocates from getting a pro-choice constitutional amendment on the state’s ballot.

Christian nationalists want to suppress the votes of nonwhite and nonevangelical Christian Americans knowing that voters, if given full and equal access to vote, have the power to thwart the Christian nationalist agenda on both the state and national level.

The 8th Circuit’s distressing ruling should serve as a reminder — or perhaps a wake-up call — that voting rights, and thus our democracy, is at peril. The wall of separation between state and church cannot be retained, let alone rebuilt, if states and the judiciary continue to allow the slow and steady erosion of the laws protecting citizens’ right to vote. For this reason, all Americans who care about state/church separation should also care about voting rights.

Sammi Lawrence is FFRF’s Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow.

Victories

Continued from page 8

inappropriate in his comments to the students,” Hardy wrote. In addition, the substitute teacher was removed from the list of acceptable substitutes.

Praying football coach steps down in Florida

The head football coach of Duval County Public Schools’ Andrew Jackson High School in Florida stepped down after FFRF urged the district to take action following reports of multiple religious injections into the football team.

Reportedly, the coach leads the team in prayer, as well as allowing an outside individual to act as a team chaplain. Additionally, the former head coach and current athletic director gave a speech to students regarding a Latin cross he was given by a priest before asking students to wipe their sweat onto the cross.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line contacted Superintendent Diane Greene, who then informed FFRF that the coach had received coaching/counseling. The district athletic director reviewed “School Board Policy 10.40 — Religious Expression in Public Schools” with all school-based athletic directors during their October meeting. Since the completion of the investigation, the coach has resigned.

Ohio school’s promotion of prayer taken down

After FFRF took issue, an elementary school in Ohio’s Greenfield School District removed a post that urged children to pray together for their school.

A concerned district parent reported that on Sept. 27, Rainsboro Elementary School promoted a religious event enti-

tled “See You at the Pole,” in which students were to meet around the school flagpole to “lift up their friends, families, teachers, school and the nation to God.”

“In the context of elementary schools, religious events and activities like SYATP are prohibited by the Constitution,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

Superintendent Quincey Gray wrote back to FFRF, informing it that the post had not been planned. “Neither the Board of Education nor I were aware of the post you identified until I received your letter. The post has since been removed from the Rainsboro Elementary Facebook page,” Gray wrote.

Texas AD can’t lead religious events, clubs

Thanks to FFRF’s intervention, the San Felipe Del Rio CISD in Del Rio, Texas, has removed the director of athletics from organizing and leading religious clubs and promoting religious events.

FFRF received a report that the district’s director of athletics had been organizing, leading and running Fellowship of Christian Athletes clubs at Del Rio High School and Del Rio Middle School. The director promoted the Del Rio High School FCA club on his official Facebook

page on multiple instances. Additionally, the director promoted and encouraged student attendance at a religious event, “See You at the Pole.” Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district regarding the situation.

General counsel for the school district from Schulman, Lopex, Hoffer & Adelstein, LLP responded to FFRF’s letter. “The district has provided [the director] with directives to remind [them] that [they] cannot lead or promote the FCA or See You at the Pole events,” Ricardo R. Lopez wrote. Additionally, all future meetings of the FCA club will be student organized and led, a point that will additionally be reiterated with the students.

FFRF gets daily Lord’s Prayer halted in La. class

FFRF has brought the Calcasieu Parish School District back in line with the Constitution. A concerned parent reported that their child’s kindergarten teacher at Bell City High School in Lake Charles, La., had been leading the class in reciting the Lord’s Prayer every school day before lunch.

FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence contacted Superintendent Shannon LaFargue, who then confirmed in an email that the teacher was instructed to cease leading the kindergarten students in prayer.

Addendum and correction

- Unintentionally and regretfully omitted from November’s seven-word stories was one from Dennis Middlebrooks in New York, who notes music’s charms as a higher power: “A Mozart Serenade gives me nocturnal bliss.”
- A letter writer in the November issue incorrectly listed a book of the bible that should have been Ezekiel 23:20, not Ecclesiastes.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Drag queen Bryanna Banx\$ introduces student activist winner Marcus Stovall at FFRF’s national convention on Oct. 14.

Drag queen Bryanna Banx\$ gave this speech as part of the introduction of Marcus Stovall, who earned the Stephen and Diane Uhl “Out of God’s Closet” Student Activist Award of \$5,000 as a plaintiff challenging censorship of a drag show at West Texas A&M University. To watch the video of the speech (and all convention speeches), go to ffrf.us/con23. (The speeches have been edited for space and clarity.)

By Bryanna Banx\$

Good morning. You know, drag queens love a loud thunderous introduction. Let’s try that one more time. Make some noise, you guys! [cheering and applause]

Y’all look so beautiful. How do I look? Fabulous is the right word.

Good morning, Freedom From Religion convention-goers. My name is Bryanna Banx\$. I’m 41 years of age and I’ve been in drag for 19 years. I travel all over the state of Wisconsin, Iowa, Minneapolis, Chicago. I’ve been to West Hollywood, Dallas, Miami, you name it. So, if you’re looking for a fabulous drag performer in your city, you let me know, OK?

Throughout performances, activism and participation in Pride events, drag queens have become powerful symbols of LGBTQIA-plus empowerment. Their presence serves as a reminder that everyone deserves to be seen, heard and celebrated, regardless of gender identity and/or sexual orientation.

Drag queens, like myself, play pivotal roles in the resistance against violence and discrimination. Our activism and resilience helped elevate drag as a form of resistance and empowerment within our own LGBTQIA-plus community. Yes, whoo! We do a lot.

Whether you know it or not, we do more than just events on a stage. We like to empower our community, speak up and stand up for what’s right. Any attempt to ban or restrict these drag performances is, in my opinion, against the First Amendment and the principles of free expression that allow culture and the arts to flourish right here in our own country.

I’m here to welcome Marcus Stovall. They are from West Texas A&M University and, with others, have sued the university over the university president canceling a drag show that was sponsored by other groups and participants on campus. Texas’ ban on certain drag shows has been ruled unconstitutional. A federal judge stated that federal Bill 12 prohibited performances of dancing suggestively or wearing certain prosthetics in front of children, which is not what we do. I’m not here to groom you, I’m not a pedophile, I’m just here to live my life, pay my taxes and have a good time.

So, along with Marcus and a bunch of other people in their local area, they have sued the university, saying it violated their First Amendment rights. We have work to do for the continued fight for what is ours in our very own community and beyond. So please rise and help me welcome our first award recipient from Texas, Marcus Stovall.

‘Out of God’s Closet’ Uhl student activist award

Being an out trans man: ‘Is that safe?’



Photo by Chris Line

At FFRF’s 46th annual convention in Madison, Wis., Marcus Stovall describes how police had to escort him around the West Texas A&M campus for protection.

By Marcus Stovall

A little over a year ago, at my new student orientation for college, I attended the organization fair. I was anxious and alone and acutely aware that I was uncomfortable in my own skin, but determined to find somewhere I would fit in.

First, I went up to every single religious group that was set up and asked them all the same question: “Are you OK with gay people?” Every group — every single one — said no. They’d say I was welcome to come and change my ways, at best, flat out “no” at worst, but each one hurt a little more. Once I ran out of religious groups, I walked up and down the rows of tables, eyes on one table covered in colors and flags, trying to build up the confidence to go up and talk to them. After making at least four or five passes, I built up the courage to go up and ask that one question: “Are you guys gay?,” followed by a question that makes my heart break to think about: “Is that safe?”

Now, it’s a funny story of how I met one of my closest friends (and fellow plaintiff Bear Bright) and got involved to begin with, but I think the choice of those two specific questions speaks for itself.

I’ve lived in the Texas panhandle for my entire life. For those who have never been, you’re not missing out on much. It’s unbearably hot in the summers, but freezing cold in the winters, and, in the fall and spring, swaps between the two

on the same day. The amount of dirt that the wind picks up poses a convincing argument that the region never actually left the Dust Bowl, and the handful of times we get rain every year, it floods. The nature tends to reflect the inhabitants, as well. Our little part of the state is one of the most conservative regions in Texas, and, by extension, the country. For just shy of 20 years now, I’ve lived in the Amarillo area, and experienced the culture there.

“The people who have had the biggest positive influences on my life have been the people the church told me to be afraid of. The first people to show me true kindness, empathy, understanding and love were the queers, the atheists and the “sinners.”

From billboards on major roadways claiming that vaccines cause autism and that evolutionists go to hell to having my car trashed while in high school and having “fag-got” screamed

at me on my college campus, I’ve seen and lived the hate and intolerance the region produces.

While asking “Is that safe?” seems like a very silly question, I still remember the fear that gripped me that summer afternoon as I built up the courage to take that step away from religion and toward myself.

Unfortunately, from what I’ve experienced the past six months, if I had to answer my own question now, I’d tell myself “no.”

After our university’s president Walter Wendler, who students have started calling “Wendy,” canceled our drag show based on little more than his own religious superiority, I witnessed a surge of hate I could have never imagined. I’ve been called a pervert, a degenerate, delusional, mentally ill, an enemy of the state, a freak. People sent us threats, hate comments saying that

our country needs to “bring back asylums and place these people in them where they belong,” that “Not submitting to the gender assigned to you by God is rebelling against God’s natural order,” and, one of my favorites, that “the only kind of drag show we need around here is 50 miles per hour down a back country road behind a truck.”

The weeks around the show, I couldn’t walk across campus without a police escort, and, as we gathered to peacefully protest, state troopers surrounded us on the roof of Old Main with rifles in case one of the countless threats we received came true. I couldn’t sleep, couldn’t focus, couldn’t muster the courage to leave my dorm and go to class because all I could feel were eyes on me, judging me, hating me, damning me.

Do I regret it? Not at all. Did it affect me? Absolutely.

When I found out the award I was receiving was called the “Out of God’s Closet” activism award, I remember laughing at just how accurate that name was. I feel like my life has been a series of battles between the expectations of the religion I was raised in and the person I am inside. Religion used to be a huge part of my life. I’m not sure if I ever believed in God, but boy, was I scared to death of him. I was raised religious, grew up in church, won a pair of headphones in the sixth grade at my youth group for being an active and enthusiastic participant. By all accounts, I played the part of a devout believer. I went to youth group, invited my friends, looked down on my peers who didn’t go to church, made a point of carrying my bible around and praying in the school cafeteria, and always wanted to be in the clique of the cool girls in the youth group. (I never got in).

I’m not sure when that changed for me. Maybe it was when I was 13 and I kissed my best friend, hidden away from the eyes of the world (and our parents) behind her closet door. The irony was lost on me at the time. Maybe it was when I became acutely aware that I was uncomfortable in my own body, and when I imagined myself all grown up, that I saw a man for some weird reason that probably doesn’t mean anything. It could have been when I figured out that I was queer, and by definition, was now doomed to an eternity in hell with no hope of redemption as long as I still had gay thoughts. I never believed in a loving god, I believed in the boogeyman. Getting over that fear and finally leaving God’s closet once and for all is a journey I’m still in the midst of.

While writing this speech, I realized that despite everything I’ve done, there is still a part of me that is afraid of being controversial. I’m afraid of offending religion. I’m out of God’s closet, but like some kind of black hole, I can still feel it pulling me toward it. I’ve been told my whole life that my existence is inherently political. I’m the scary transgender person the media is warning you about. I like cooking and embroidery and my aquarium, and always cry when the dog dies in movies. You obviously should be very, very afraid of me!

I can’t tell you what God is. What I

See Stovall on next page



Photo by Chris Line

Before introducing student activist Bear Bright, drag queen Latina Envy spoke of how she learned to love and appreciate herself.

Drag queen Latina Envy gave this speech as part of the introduction of Bear Bright, who earned the Richard and Beverly Hermesen Student Activist Award of \$5,000 as a plaintiff challenging censorship of a drag show at West Texas A&M University. To watch the video of the speech (and all convention speeches), go to ffrf.us/con23. (The speeches have been edited for space and clarity.)

By Latina Envy

Good morning! Good morning! I love a responsive audience.

Yes, I am a local drag queen, but besides that, I'm also an educator and a mentor in the community. It is very hard to exist in this world where so many systems are created to be against you just because you're different. There's nothing wrong with the color of my skin. There's nothing wrong with what's inside of me. There's nothing long with putting on a little eyelash and lip gloss to stand here and look great for y'all.

I can get a little political, because as a drag queen, it is our job to advocate for equal rights, and not only do we advocate for queer rights, but women's rights and immigration rights. As drag queens, we are given a platform, and if we are not using this platform for good, then why are we doing what we do?

There's also another answer to that. Another reason why we do drag is because drag helps teach you self-love. When I first started doing drag two years ago, I was still a closeted kid. I wasn't very closeted, because you could spot me a mile down the road, bouncing around, super-flamboyant, but to my family I was very closeted. I grew up in a very conservative Christian household, and I learned to love and appreciate myself for who I am.

When I was asked about being nominated to be a presenter here today, I didn't know what I was getting myself into. I was doing research and I came across a little ad by Mr. Ron Reagan, and he ended his statement with, "not afraid of burning in hell." I was just kind of wondering, what does this mean? Is this really a thing that we're still afraid of? And I said, "You know what? Same, Sis. I'm also ready to burn in hell." I would not be standing here, 6-foot-2 with my little kitten heels looking this gorgeous, had I not been in love with the idea of burning in hell.

I do drag because it has helped heal me in numerous ways. It has helped me appreciate life in more ways than I can count, and it has given me this newfound passion to be alive, to be representing not only myself, the trans community, the Latina community, but also to be representing people such as Bear Bright.

Bear and his colleague, Marcus, are awarded the scholarship for their bravery, but no amount of money is enough to award them for the sacrifice they made. It is very selfless for them to advocate and stand up for the rights of their peers. It's because of people like Bear and Marcus who help to create safe spaces for us and for their peers. It is with great privilege and honor to be standing here to honor and welcome Bear Bright from Texas.

Richard and Beverly Hermesen Student Activist Award 'We decided to do something about it'



Photo by Chris Line

Student activist Bear Bright speaks to the audience at FFRF's national convention on Oct. 14 in Madison, Wis.

By Bear Bright

West Texas A&M President Walter Wendler used his Christian beliefs to cancel a drag show that me and my friend and a bunch of other friends decided to put on for charity.

There was a whole protest about it. We marched around the fountain and we chalked up the sidewalk around the fountain, but it got washed away every single day. All the other chalk drawings were there, except ours.

This is a little taste of what Wendler is like. He posted his feelings about what drag shows are as a message to the en-

tire university, faculty, staff, alumni and students. Here's an excerpt of what he said. "I believe every human being is created in the image of God and therefore has dignity. Does a drag show preserve a single piece of this dignity? I think not."

So, we decided to do something about it. We helped facilitate the protests that Buffs for Drag, a student group, started. They helped us set it up. They were behind us the whole time, protesting for the drag show to be hosted on

“Anyone should feel safe and be allowed to go to a public university without fear of backlash.”

public university without fear of backlash.

We plan on putting on another drag show in the spring called the Don't Be a Drag Drag Show. I'm really excited. We're going to try to host it

on campus and we can't wait for Wendler to try to shut us down, because it will add more fire to the case saying that it wasn't a one-time thing. Thank you.

Stovall

Continued from page 10

can tell you is that the people who have had the biggest positive influences on my life have been the people the church told me to be afraid of. The first people to show me true kindness, empathy, understanding and love were the queers, the atheists and the "sinners." I don't believe in hell, but if I'm wrong, there's gonna be some damn good company down there.

This is why what we are doing is so important. Despite the hatred and push-back from religious zealots like West


Texas' own lovely Wendy, if I'm able to show just one person that it is possible to live your life how you want and be genuine to yourself, it's all been worth it.

I remember what it felt like to be the closeted kid, alienated in his own skin, but too afraid to be able to do anything about it. I remember what it was like to fight against everything I was taught my entire life to go up and ask Bear, "Is that safe?"

If the protests we held showed even

one student that queer people are welcome at West Texas, it was worth it, just like if the money we raised for the Trevor Project helped save one life, it was worth it. The fact that I am able to stand here in front of you all as myself makes it worth it.

My name is Marcus.
I'm a queer trans man.
I'm an atheist.
And I'm done hiding in God's closet.



FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

P.O. Box 750 • Madison, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • FFRF.org

What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

Founded in 1978 as a national organization of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics), the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc., works to keep state and church separate and to educate the public about the views of nontheists. FFRF has more than 40,000 members. FFRF is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and donations are tax deductible for income tax purposes.

FFRF's email address is info@ffrf.org. Please include your name and physical mailing address with all email correspondence.

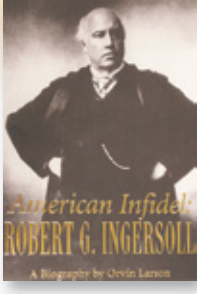
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American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll

By Orvin Larson

Prof. Larson writes with affection and respect of this illustrious 19th century freethinker.

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Grad/older student essay contest winners

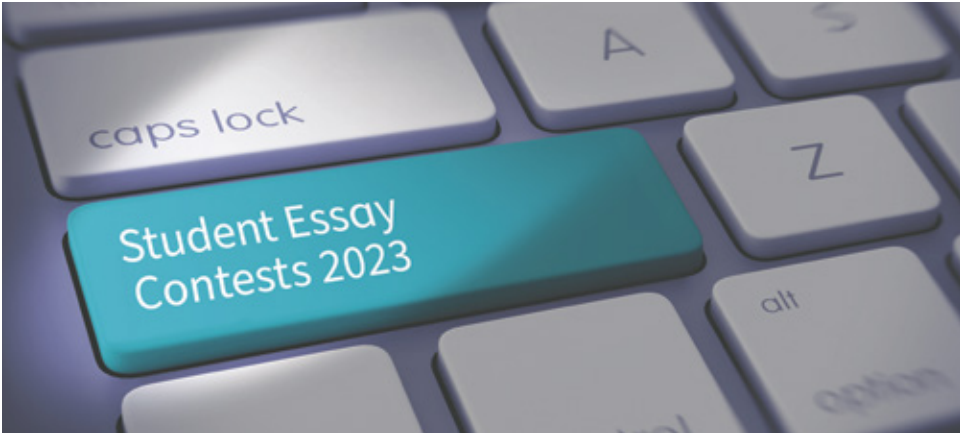
The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 11 top winners and eight honorable mentions in the 2022 Cornelius Vander Broek Graduate/Older Student Essay Competition.

FFRF has paid out a total of \$18,050 in award money for this contest.

This year's topic is, "Is secularism the 'savior' of American democracy?" Students were asked to write an essay focused on controversies or issues in which Christian nationalists are denying or threatening rights or reforms in America.

Winners, their ages, colleges or universities they are attending and the award amount are listed below.

- FIRST PLACE**
Sung Bin Roh, 24, University of Vermont
Larner College of Medicine, \$3,500.
- SECOND PLACE**
Sam McCullough, 25, University of Washington's Information School, \$3,000.
- THIRD PLACE**
Shea Dunlop, 24, Pace University, \$2,500.
- FOURTH PLACE**
Stephanie Zamarripa, 27, Harvard Divinity School, \$2,000.



- FIFTH PLACE**
Sukhvir Singh, 25, Rutgers Law School, \$1,500.
- SIXTH PLACE (tie)**
Katelyn Grant, 23, La Roche University, \$1,000.
- Jacob Jackson**, 27, Blinn College, \$1,000.
- SEVENTH PLACE**
Marah Sabbah, 23, UCLA, \$750.
- EIGHTH PLACE**
William Rabbermann, 23, Missouri University of Science and Technology, \$500.

- NINTH PLACE**
Zachary Mota, 29, Case Western Reserve University, \$400.
- TENTH PLACE**
Ryan Slaughter, 24, Texas A&M University, Bush School, \$300.
- HONORABLE MENTIONS (\$200 each)**
Jesse Chen, 30, Wayne State University.
Anthony Corbo, 29, Florida Atlantic University.
Dylan Custer, 26, Daytona State College.
Karla Goodwin, 29, Southern New Hampshire University.

Alexia Shand, 28, Bourough of Manhattan Community College.
Zoe Sirotiak, 26, Iowa State University.
Bo Thompson, 28, Sonoma State.
Sabrina Whitney, 26, California State University, Sacramento.

FFRF thanks Lisa Treu for managing the details of this and FFRF's other student essay competitions. FFRF would also like to thank its volunteers and staff for reading and judging the essays, including Don Ardell, Paul Baker, Dan Barker, David Chivers, Kate Garmise, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Russell Gibson, Tim Hatcher, Linda Josheff, Brianna Knoppow, Sammi Lawrence, David S. Malcolm, Chris O'Connell, Andrea Osburne, Jo Ann Papich, Sue Schuetz, Rose Mary Sheldon, PJ Slinger and Mandisa Thomas.

FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994, grad students since 2010, one geared explicitly for students of color since 2016, and a fifth contest for law students since 2019.

FIRST PLACE

Overreach: Christian nationalists in democracy

FFRF awarded Sung Bin \$3,500.

By Sung Bin Roh

Christian nationalism has had a stronghold in American democracy for generations. In recent years, however, it has become more mainstream and threatens the secular democracy our nation was founded on, with the goal of turning the United States into a Christian theocracy.

Christian nationalism is the belief that a nation is a Christian one, where the government should promote and mandate Christian beliefs and practices throughout the legal system. This belief directly contradicts the separation of church and state and is currently taking away the rights of people across America. While Christian nationalism is certainly not a new endeavor for American Christians, it's on the rise and as "Nones," a growing group in this country, we must fight to prevent American democracy from becoming a Christian theocracy to protect everyone's rights, not just our own.

On June 24, 2022, 49 years of precedent came crumbling down as five Catholic Supreme Court Justices ruled to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, eroding the legal framework protecting unenumerable rights, including birth control access, same-sex marriage and interracial marriage. As someone who is attending medical school and who will one day be a doctor, responsible for my patients' health, I find it quite worrying and offensive that individuals who are trained in law are seen as fit to have the final say over medical issues. Because I am a person of color in an interracial marriage, the *Dobbs* decision, which has been discussed by Christian nationalists as a way to undermine the legality of same-sex marriage



Sung Bin Roh

and interracial marriage, threatens the legality of my own marriage with far-reaching consequences.

Since before our nation's founding, Christian nationalists have abused religious freedom to continually undermine civil rights. In the ongoing case of 303 Creative LLC v. Elenis, Lorie Smith is using the premise of religious freedom to bypass anti-discrimination laws. Her case will open the door for any business to freely discriminate against certain vulnerable groups as rooted in their specific Christian beliefs. Under the guise of religious freedom, Christian nationalists are undermining the separation of church and state in an attempt to strip away the rights of LGBTQ-plus people.

The majority of Americans identify as Christians, with both the Democratic and Republican parties vying for their favor. Hardly any attention is given to the "nones," even as our numbers have grown from 9 percent to 29 percent in just the last 30 years. Today, only two members of Congress openly identify as

Nones — a statistical anomaly — both publicly identifying as "unaffiliated" and "humanist" but not "atheist," likely out of fear of discrimination and judgment.

I was once asked by a patient with whom I worked: "Why are you so nice? Are you a Christian?" He was shocked to learn that I was an atheist as he associated my kind behavior with Christianity.

After continued conversation, it was clear that expressing my atheism helped him feel more comfortable as he revealed his true agnosticism to me. He says he now identifies as a "recovering evangelical."

Positive representation of atheists and "Nones" is key in the fight to defend secular democracy, as research has shown that exposure and education both decrease prejudice and discrimination.

According to a 2015 Gallup poll, 40 percent of Americans wouldn't vote for an atheist to be president. Many Christians and religious folks alike judge atheists as being immoral and often evil because they trust and follow whatever they hear coming from the pulpit. If the secular movement is to progress, this pervasive stigma which runs deep throughout American society must be addressed. The secular movement, especially atheism, is currently viewed with a negative lens in the country. In order to defend secular democracy, we must also defend ourselves and increase positive

representation and visibility of Nones throughout U.S. society.

The purpose of religious freedom is to protect the right of all individuals to freely practice their religion, or lack thereof, and prevent the government from favoring one religion over another.

Fortunately, Nones are not alone in the fight against Christian nationalism. There are many religious folks who understand intersectionality and respect the separation of church and state.

In the face-off for U.S. democracy, the fight is not between the Nones and Christian nationalists, but rather the Nones along with religious folks who support the separation of church and state and Christian nationalists. The secular movement must appeal to a broader audience than just the Nones in order to defend secular democracy and protect the rights of all Americans.

Sung Bin, 24, attends the University of Vermont Larner College of Medicine. He received the Kevin K. Gong Memorial Scholarship at UC-Berkeley for his work with CalMentors. Already fluent in Korean and English, Sung Bin advanced his Spanish language skills through medical Spanish courses after witnessing the lack of available translators when he worked as a medical scribe in a California border town. As a result of his efforts, he was able to translate for both providers and patients and provide more equitable access to health care.

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SECOND PLACE

Free to read, free to think

FFRF awarded Sam \$3,000.

By Sam McCullough

Throughout history, there are countless examples of ecclesiastical governments fueling division, paranoia and violence. From the Holy Wars to the Crusades to the Inquisition, religious fanaticism as a political platform has only ever brought intolerance and bloodshed.

During the Age of Enlightenment, rationality inspired the idea of a society based on reason, natural law and science. The United States was established with these ideals in mind, as many colonists crossed the Atlantic to escape religious persecution in England. The Founding Fathers inked them into the Constitution through the First Amendment, which states “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.”

Despite the values this country was founded upon, Christianity is never completely isolated from politics. During the 1980 presidential election, Christian voters became particularly valuable allies to conservative politicians, helping Republican nominee Ronald Reagan win the White House. This success was partly thanks to the Moral Majority, a religious lobbyist group founded by televangelist Jerry Falwell. Touting its beliefs as “pro-American,” it helped sow division and increase religious influence in policy. The Reagan era is considered by historians to be the catalyst for a major political shift, a concatenation of actions which can still be felt today.

Christian nationalism is used to denote those who believe the United States should be governed as a “Christian nation,” which some claim was the original intention in



Sam McCullough

1776. Currently, the term is being embraced as an identifier by those who believe Christianity is the default of American culture. It was thrust into the general vocabulary on Jan. 6, 2021, as many rioters claimed to march for both Trump and Christ. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene is a vocal supporter, urging the GOP to be “the party of nationalism” in an interview.

In a recent study, 45 percent of participants wanted the United States to be a “Christian nation,” fitting the definition of a Christian nationalist. But there was no clear consensus on what that would actually mean, as none could offer an example. No matter what it entails, it’s a clear attack

of our free exercise of religion. It’s just an example of theocracy by a different name.

In the bible, Daniel 1:17 says “God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning.” Despite this, a common tactic in religious extremism is the suppression of knowledge.

Within the Christian nationalist movement, we can see this through a sharp increase of book bans. According to the American Library Association, there was a record 1,269 censorship attempts in 2022, compared to 729 in 2021. Data shows that 17 percent of challenges come from coordinated groups, like Moms for Libraries.

Moms for Libraries is a book-banning campaign by Moms 4 Liberty, a conservative lobbyist masquerading as an education-based nonprofit. Like the Moral Majority, the group conflates Christianity with liberty, claiming it’s fighting for the “survival of America.” In addition to pushing for bans, they call for disinvestment and privatization of public libraries, directly violating librarianship ethos.

In 2022, a member advocated for violence against librarians, saying that they should “all be plowed down with a freakin’ gun.” Unfortunately, attacks are on the rise, from hate mail and harassing phone calls to wrongful termination and armed intimidation. Some even have utilized law enforcement, trying to hold librarians criminally liable for distributing “inappropriate” materials.

Pursuing my master’s in library sciences, this issue is extremely relevant to my future career. As a librarian, it’s

“A common tactic in religious extremism is the suppression of knowledge.”

not my place to judge what anyone wants, but to make those resources easily and discreetly accessible. Librarians and secularists are similar in that both advocate for our freedom of thought. To combat Christian nationalism, they need to work together to secure our liberties.

Firstly, we need to reinforce the First Amendment. In *Island School v. Pico* (1982), the Supreme Court was split on the issue of book banning. We need the court to revisit this ruling as unconstitutional and set precedent that aligns with *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969). Then, we need to pass legislation that expressly protects our libraries, like the Right to Read Act, which protects students’ intellectual freedom, or the Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act, which improves students’ critical thinking.

Safeguarding libraries protects us from attempts to suppress information, thereby promoting reason and rationality. Employing these strategies will provide us with the necessary tools to be an informed society, the key to defending our pluralistic democracy. Information is nondiscriminatory and powerful, strong enough to reinforce the “wall of separation” between church and state.

Sam, 25, attends the University of Washington’s Information School.

“I believe libraries are the cornerstone of a just and informed society, which is why I’m so eager to pursue a career in public librarianship,” Sam writes. “As a Seattle native, I’m especially excited to complete my master’s studies at the University of Washington.”

THIRD PLACE

A dangerous obstacle

FFRF awarded Shea \$2,500.

By Shea Dunlop

The cultural divide between Christian nationalists and the “Nones” has become more apparent in recent years, particularly in the United States. Although America was supposed to be founded on the idea of keeping church and state separate, many politicians adhering to the ideology that seeks to promote and emphasize a Christian identity for the nation have unfortunately risen to power. Those with these beliefs are called Christian nationalists. With every passing day, many Nones and folks of other religions, and even just reasonable Christians, have become concerned about the fate of our country’s democracy and the impending face-offs between the Christian nationalists, and, well, everyone else.

In their ideal world, Christian nationalists would see Christianity become embedded in public life and government here in America. In my opinion, it already is — how many times did I blindly recite the Pledge of Allegiance in grade school? Doesn’t the president swear into office with his hand on the bible?

The call for a deeper integration of the nation with Christianity invokes the idea

“The beliefs of Christian nationalism have caused the government to take some serious steps back from modern progress.”

that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and should remain one, despite the ways laws and messaging have developed to claim to welcome all to this country. The beliefs of Christian nationalism have caused the government to take some serious steps back from modern progress, including the recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the increase in states protesting marriage equality and the banning of drag performances.

Christian nationalists are often the ones creating the debates over abortion rights, doing their best to restrict access to abortion for women from all walks of life. They completely disregard women and uterus-owners wanting to have control over our own bodies, arguing that abortion is a sin and attempting to restrict or entirely ban the practice. However, it is a crucial medical procedure that saves the lives of uterus-owners and will only become more dangerous as safe practices are closed. Uterus owners will always find a way to get abortions, but keeping them legal and safe is the best way to protect folks from harm.

In a similar quest for control, Christian nationalists continue to oppose LGBTQ+ rights and are attempting to reverse the progress made by the queer community in recent years. They vehemently oppose



Shea Dunlop

marriage equality and transgender rights, going so far as to legally restrict access to life-saving health care for these individuals. Gender-affirming care is crucial to lowering the high rates of transgender suicide.

Christian nationalism threatening this progress is a direct threat to me. As a bisexual uterus owner, I have made decisions I would rather not in fear of what the political climate may become. I tried for years to use hormonal birth control, but it negatively affected my mental health. While I would prefer to simply use condoms, I am too afraid of getting pregnant to take the risk of just that one form of protection. To ensure my own

safety, I got a copper IUD (which will last for 10 years), and therefore experience horrible menstrual symptoms. Many others like me put up with extreme measures like this in fear of what Christian nationalism will do, and is doing, to our nation.

The secular movement must take strategic action to defend secular democracy. We must elect and support leads who respect and value the separation of church and state. We must advocate for policies that promote a more inclusive culture and protect the rights of marginalized groups. We have to work to dispel the misinformation and myths propagated by Christian nationalists online. We can do this by doing what we can to educate the public, particularly young people online who might be raised by Christian nationalists, on the dangers of that ideology and its impact on our democracy.

On a similar note, we can work to build connections between different communities and promote understanding and tolerance vs. violence. The goal is a united and inclusive society, not broken fragments of people unwilling to understand or help one another. By working together, we can foster a thriving, diverse community for all residents of the United States of America.

Shea, 24, lives in Killington, Vt., and attends Pace University, where she is pursuing a master’s degree in publishing. Shea works as the assistant manager for the volunteer program at Killington Ski Resort. In 2022, she graduated from Castleton University’s School of Resort and Hospitality Management.

FOURTH PLACE

A plea for patriotism

FFRF awarded Stephanie \$2,000.

By Stephanie Zamarripa

From the 2016 election to the Jan. 6th insurrection, America witnessed an uncanny definitional transmutation of the word “patriot.” The term is seemingly everywhere — in the battle rallies of conspiratorial mutineers, the tweets of the former president, and the sermons of far right religious leaders who weave anti-LGBTQ-plus rhetoric into lines about Jesus’ universal love. However, those who use the term as an extremist dog whistle to mobilize the religious right are in no way patriots: They are Christian nationalists.

Patriotism and nationalism, though often used interchangeably, have very different meanings. The former is predicated on community, the latter enmity.

Christian nationalism in America is defined by its conflation of racial, religious and national identity and in-group out-group mentality. Racially, the in-group is white, native-born Americans. Religiously, it’s those who believe that America is a “Christian nation” defined by “Christian values.” Nationally, it’s those who believe America should be an international superpower homogenized along racial and religious lines. Christian nationalism’s version of democracy is based on a very narrow definition of “the people,” which excludes millions of Americans, such as me, a queer Chicana known for her adherence to atheism. It is us — the opposition to their grab for power — who make up the out-group.

Conversely, American patriotism, as I see it, is an investment in the future of this



Stephanie Zamarripa

country and a desire for pluralism, diversity, freedom and change. It is a plea — a call for those who take the First Amendment to mean freedom from religion to continue efforts of establishing a liberal democracy: a government system for all “the people,” and in which there is universal suffrage, equality under the law, a commitment to human rights, and the total separation of church and state. However, this plea is not a war cry. To take it as one is to wrongly understand what the democratic project is, has been and should be.

Philosopher Martin Heidegger wrote: “War — the securing of peace; and peace — the elimination of war. How is peace to be secured by what it eliminates? Something is fundamentally out of joint here, or perhaps it has never yet been in joint.”

The line between our current moment and civil war blurs with every passing day

and human rights violation. But we must not meet instigative assaults on our bodily autonomy, right to vote or ability to love with further weaponry. If the objective is to save secular democracy, an offensive attack is not the method.

The current era feels unprecedented, but not unpredictable. America fought an internal war in the name of falsely promised peace. We inched closer to equity, but the fighting was never eliminated. Christian nationalism is the specter of America’s past and a symbol of our out-of-jointness, a dishevelment weaved into the very fabric of our political ideology at its inception.

As anthropologist David Graeber once said, “Democracy is both the ideal that people should be participating in decisions affecting their own lives and a set of institutions that were designed to make that as difficult as possible.” The system in place urges for the dissolution of tension in the name of peace but offers no viable routes for its establishment that don’t involve war. Christian nationalism is confederate white nationalism’s younger sibling dressed in Sunday’s best, carrying a bible and an assault rifle. What do we then anticipate will arise tomorrow if we approach today’s problems with the failed solutions of yesterday?

The idealized version of secular democracy that we, the “Nones,” are defending needs to be addressed, defined, and considered against this country’s historical backdrop, a scene littered with

“American patriotism, as I see it, is an investment in the future of this country and a desire for pluralism, diversity, freedom and change.”

“othering.” To secure the continued betterment of democracy, we need to establish a patriotism that rejects tribalism and upholds secular pluralistic society. It will require those without religion to realize that non-affiliation isn’t synonymous with secularism — indeed, many deeply religious Americans believe in a separation of church and state. To this point, Graeber said, “Who’s going to be better able to solve a problem? Eight people who are so similar they might as well be clones, or eight people with different experiences and perspectives? Clearly, you’re going to have more creativity and insight with the latter.” Christian nationalism aims to dissolve difference; democracy should engineer its creative flourishing.

Democracy is not an end to a battle of means; it is not an object, nor a static state. It is itself a plea. Patriotism, thus, is the affective manifestation of democratic ideals and the first step toward democratic possibility. Secular democracy need not be salvaged but birthed.

Stephanie, 27, is from Brooklyn, N.Y., and attends Harvard Divinity School, where she is studying the history of Christianity.

“My research interests lie in the intersection between religion and politics in American modernity, particularly the collective shifts in understanding surrounding secularism’s paradoxical promise(s): freedom from and of religion,” she writes. “I have long been captivated by the variety of the human religious experience despite, or perhaps, because of, my commitment to atheism.”

FIFTH PLACE

A path forward

FFRF awarded Sukhvir \$1,500.

By Sukhvir Singh

Yes, secularism is the savior of American democracy. Just as secularism rejects the elevation of one religion above others through the medium of government, American democracy rejects the notion that one subset of people is better than and above others. However, the fate of our democracy will not be a face-off between secularists/Nones and Christian nationalists, but rather a face-off between Christian nationalists and everyone else.

The basic proposition of this theocratic ideology is that the beliefs of a few should dictate the lives of all. Christian nationalism is the belief that our nation should adhere to Christianity as the basis for our laws and culture. This ideology is promoted in complete disregard to the fact that there is so much religious diversity in the United States and dismisses many existing constitutional protections and rights that people have against exactly this dangerous behavior. As a result, Christian nationalists put themselves at odds with not just Nones, but anyone who has a different belief than them. There is no wiggle room or exceptions

“Christian nationalists attempt to rewrite history, ensuring that children do not obtain a holistic education and exposure to ideas.”

when negotiating with them. You either kneel optionally or will be forced to comply through legislation and the judiciary.

The tendrils of Christian nationalism spread far and wide, but are most prominent in two socially dividing issues today: book bans and anti-trans legislation.

To gain control, Christian nationalists attempt to rewrite history, ensuring that children do not obtain a holistic education and exposure to ideas. Book bans are nothing new, and each time they are imposed, the motivation is the same — the suppression of information and ideas.

Christian nationalists know that books featuring characters of different races, religions, sexual orientations or gender identities expose children to views different than their own. Moreover, it’s no coincidence that coupled alongside book bans are pervasive attempts to push Christianity onto children, such as by requiring public schools to display the Ten Commandments and the promotion of the bible as a substitute for literature banned from school and public libraries. Regardless of how it is achieved, the goal is clear: deprive students of intellectual diversity during their most formative years, and instead replace education with religious ideology meant to indoctrinate, not educate.



Sukhvir Singh

Christian nationalists do not plan to stop with book bans, but seek to advance their crusade by pushing anti-LGBTQ-plus legislation across the country. Banning books is not enough, because ultimately, Christian nationalists seek to ban certain people from existing all together.

Books need to be banned and hidden to prevent the spread of ideas, but then why target people? Because people are living, physical manifestations of the ideas they believe in. As long as trans people exist, there is undeniable proof that there are people in the country and world who think, believe and live differently than Christian

nationalists and still live happy lives. The existence of individuals and groups so opposite of what Christian nationalists promote has the best potential to shatter the reality Christian nationalists push on their followers: that only those who agree and align with them are good people.

At the heart of both book bans and anti-trans legislation is denying people the freedom and right to believe in what they want and to express who they are. To fight Christian nationalism, the secular movement must demonstrate that everyone is at risk — including religious individuals. Defenders of American democracy come from all walks of life and it is this cohesion and diversity that will make the best shield against Christian nationalism, while also serving as the best weapon to undo the harm already done by the Dobbs decision and the “Don’t Say Gay” laws. The secular movement must explain that there is no area of life this fight will not affect. To protect democracy and access to justice for all, the ideas of Christian nationalists must be wrestled head-on to ensure a free America for all Americans.

Sukhvir, 25, is from Morris Plains, N.J., and attends Rutgers Law School.

“I was accepted into the Minority Student Program, and recently completed a year as co-chair of the American Constitution Society. As a member of ACS, I pitched, organized and moderated an engaging panel about the separation of church and state, which included Rep. Jamie Raskin.”

SIXTH PLACE (tie)

The battle royale for democracy

FFRF awarded Katelyn \$1,000.

By Katelyn Grant

With the increasingly divisive political climate in the United States in recent years, the fight to uphold democracy has seemed like an eternal battle. One antagonist in this struggle that has been gaining traction lately is the typically conservative ideal of Christian nationalism. Individuals and parties that subscribe to this system of belief practice a type of warped patriotism, such that they believe the United States should be defined as a Christian nation, and that Christian values and traditions are what will make this country exceptional.

Christian nationalists find it a worthy endeavor to fight to strip multiple communities of their rights based solely on a biblical framework. These basic human rights — health care, love, freedom of speech and religion — are the ones most frequently put on the chopping block. These rights are in no way liberal, radical, or even dangerous, despite what Christian propaganda has convinced millions of Americans.

Christian nationalist ideals have already robbed individuals with uteruses of their rights to bodily autonomy at the federal level. If these radicals infiltrate our government even further, perhaps tomorrow I will not be allowed to marry my girlfriend. Perhaps my dear friend will not be allowed to celebrate Rosh



Katelyn Grant

Hashanah. Perhaps they will ban even more books aimed at teaching children inclusivity and tolerance. Christian nationalists' ideal America would have all individuals and communities who do not fit within their doctrinal architecture completely stripped of their rights. It is evident that despite their lack of self-awareness and insistence of the contrary, Christian nationalism is the death of basic human rights and democracy. The solution to this problem is one that may seem obvious and is allegedly what the United States was founded on from the beginning: secularism.

Secularism is the principle that the state should operate independently of religious institutions, including Christianity. With this ideal, it is assumed that an entirely secular democracy would not find its policies dictated by religious texts, and therefore religious morals and values. The fight for a secular democracy starts at home, by educating yourself and those around you. Secularists are up against a behemoth and must come armed with facts if we want to restore true democracy. We must look at where such movements originate, and Christian nationalism, although it has evolved into a much larger threat, starts at church. Christian churches build strong, albeit repressive, senses of community and sanctity in factions that have little to no social or intellectual opportunities. One way that I believe secularists must fight back against this authoritarian force is to give these individuals another sense of community and trust. We must introduce to these communities new moral standards, ones of suffering and willingness to learn. By introducing the idea of nonbiblical morality, policy will no longer be driven by religious ideals, but rather an equal, egalitarian point of view.

According to textbooks, the U.S. government is a prime example of a

secular institution. A more detailed look, however, reveals that Christianity has tainted U.S. democracy since its inception, starting with the very document that declared American independence. It should not be an outrageous thought that citizens of a country whose principle freedoms include religion should not be subject to oppressive and intolerant policy at the hands of a Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism is sewed into the very seams of this country, but

the tyrannical rein is coming to an end at the hands of secularists willing to fight for freedom. The simple fact that secularists are fighting for is this: Freedom from religion in policy is freedom of religion in life, and that is true democracy.

Katelyn, 23, is from Pittsburgh, Pa., and attends La Roche University where she is working toward a master's degree in nursing.

"I obtained my bachelor's degree from Pitt in emergency medicine in 2022 and have been working full-time as a paramedic," Katelyn writes. "From there, it is my dream to become a nurse practitioner and open a health clinic specializing in women's health and harm. I have attended multiple protests in Pittsburgh, Washington D.C., and even lobbied against the Catholic Church's abuse in Harrisburg."

“The fight for a secular democracy starts at home, by educating yourself and those around you.”

SIXTH PLACE (tie)

Lead us not into authoritarianism

FFRF awarded Jacob \$1,000.

By Jacob Jackson

America as a concept was revolutionary in its time. Being the first nation in the world to adopt a secular Constitution, it was considered a safe haven for those seeking to escape religious persecution. It's an ideal that many of us still try to uphold today. But, as we watch those in power inject their ideologies into our politics, we're realizing we may have taken it for granted. Feeling emboldened, religious extremists have given rise to Christian nationalism, a propaganda machine that runs on fear-mongering and false narratives. The name

stems from their belief that the United States was created by a covenant with God, wholly redefining America as a "Christian nation." Secularism, being a direct threat to their doctrine, is then seen as both anti-Christian and anti-American. The implications of what this could mean for our future is dire, and it's no exaggeration to say that our rights and freedoms are in danger. American politics, as it stands now, is very much a war on democracy.

The party that is supposedly all about limited government is doing everything in its power to interfere with our personal lives and decisions, taking away our autonomy in whatever way possible; from omitting parts of human sexuality, identity and expression from public spaces, to

criminalizing basic bodily functions. They especially have a history of oppressing the LGBTQ community, and it continues today through policies like the infamous "Don't Say Gay" law, which outlaws any discussion about LGBTQ identities or issues in Florida classrooms.

Transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, in particular, seem to be the right's newest obsession, with hundreds of laws being introduced to police what bathrooms they can use, control who gets to play sports, and deny them life-saving health care. The youth of today

get caught up in the midst of it all, becoming a weapon for religious extremists to use in furthering their agenda. They say it's all to "save our children," and yet don't see that they are the ones putting kids in danger. Christian nationalists treat them like freaks and predators, and if they could get away with it, Christian nationalists would love to make them disappear altogether.

Another insidious way Christian nationalists threaten our secular foundation is through infiltrating our education system. Truth itself is being altered, and contrary to what they claim, feelings are put over facts to suit their worldview.

One of their biggest missions is to delegitimize the theory of evolution while inserting creationism into schools' science curriculums, implying that made-up stories should be held to the same regard as a concept that has mountains of evidence to



Jacob Jackson

support it. Critical race theory is deemed anti-American because it contradicts their vision of a perfect God-given country. They would like to teach future generations the white-washed, Christian nationalist-approved version of history. Restricting access to any media that goes against their belief system is already being enacted, hence, the current book bans being enforced. It's not enough that Christian nationalists want to clear schools of anything that goes against their religion; they're actively trying to subject all students to their Christian traditions by campaigning to bring mandatory prayer into public schools, and display the Ten Commandments on classroom walls in Texas. In doing so, their beliefs are made superior to everybody else's. What they see as fighting for their religious liberty is really imposing

religious oppression onto the rest of us.

Through their actions, Christian nationalists have shown us time and time again that what they truly desire is a theocratic dictatorship, where the only ones with privilege are those that believe in their god. It goes against everything this country stands for, and it isn't hard to see why action needs to be taken to stop them from succeeding. At a basic level, we as a country need to destigmatize non-Christians holding public office. We need a diverse body of government where everyone feels represented, but nobody gets special privilege based on their beliefs. Additionally, we must expect better of our elected officials, and hold them accountable to all of their constituents.

Secularism won't solve all of our nation's problems, but it is essential in maintaining our democracy. If Christian nationalism is allowed in our government, it could lead us down a road to becoming an authoritarian theocracy. It's in everybody's best interest (including Christian nationalists) that the United States remains secular, because if the government sanctions a specific religion, anyone not of that faith becomes a second-class citizen.

Jacob, 28, is from Bryan, Texas, and attends Blinn College, where he is pursuing a degree in radiologic technology.

"I developed a passion for helping others, partially influenced by my mother, who is a respected caregiver," he writes. "I'm also a passionate humanist that cares deeply about equality, education and secularism. After high school, I've worked as a long-term care provider for seven years, and a phlebotomist and lab tech for two years."

“What they see as fighting for their religious liberty is really imposing religious oppression onto the rest of us.”

SEVENTH PLACE

Hands off our books!

FFRF awarded Marah \$750.

By Marah Sabbah

The first chapter book I ever bought was *Charlotte’s Web*. Scanning the aisles of children’s books at Barnes and Noble, I caught a glimpse of the iconic book cover decorated with images of the beloved characters. Earlier that week, my teacher had read the first chapter in class. Eager to continue the story, I begged my parents to buy me that book. This was in 2006.

Little did I know that in the same year I purchased *Charlotte’s Web*, there were other students in the country who would be denied the opportunity to read it. In 2006, several parents at a school district in Kansas sought to ban *Charlotte’s Web*. Why? The crime was that these parents found the concept of talking animals to be “unnatural.” Although banning *Charlotte’s Web* is a less extreme example, it symbolizes how Christian nationalism can impact all aspects of society.

While controversy around *Charlotte’s Web* has died down, the pattern of book banning has unfortunately persisted.

As a hallmark of American conservatism, Christian nationalism overlooks the secular underpinnings of our Constitution, instead believing that the United States is a Christian nation founded on Judeo-Christian values. Consequently, we see Christian nationalists advocate for the inclusion of religion in education, health care, government, media etc. Oftentimes,



Marah Sabbah

we hear Christian nationalists legitimize their policies as a push for religious freedom — a mere cover for the dangerous white supremacy, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia that underpin Americans’ conservative politics.

As an incoming master of social welfare student, the encroachment of Christian nationalism in our K-12 system is of particular significance. Upon earning my degree, I plan on pursuing school social work. My passion for working in public schools stems from a mission to ensure that all students feel safe, respected and empowered. Yet with the continued rise of book banning in schools, I fear this mission will be difficult to realize. From banning novels such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* about a dystopian misogynistic society

to *The Hate U Give* which discusses police brutality and racial justice, Christian nationalists target any book they deem as a threat to their religious and conservative worldview. They cry out religious discrimination while continuing to silence already marginalized communities. But have these Christian nationalists ever stopped to consider the impact of these book bans on LGBTQ+ students or students of color? Have they ever considered the ramifications of preventing an entire generation from learning about history and social justice issues? By censoring discussions of racial justice, LGBTQ+ issues or comprehensive sexual education, they ultimately deny students from marginalized communities the opportunity to feel represented in curriculum and receive a humanizing education that fosters belonging on school campuses. Moreover, they blatantly threaten the freedom of speech that is integral to any democracy.

Amid countless videos of angry parents at school board meetings, you will notice that there is one voice that is often missing: the students’. Thus, progressive and secular people should employ a two-part strategy that stresses youth outreach and policy advocacy. With access to a wealth of knowledge in their pocket, the tech savvy Gen Z youth are crucial allies in this fight against Christian nationalism in public schools. By encouraging progressive advocates and professionals across various sectors to utilize social media platforms, it will ensure youth are taught not only

about their constitutional rights, but also the ideas that are being censored in schools. For instance, suppose that parents at a school district object to a history teacher introducing the 1619 Project to teach students about the history of slavery in America. Even though students may be learning a sanitized version of American history at their school, they can still gain access to this information if they were to come across a TikTok or Instagram account that educated followers about the history of race in this country.

Moreover, progressive and secular advocates can also encourage popular influencers to utilize their platforms to raise awareness about pressing social justice topics. Naturally, social media activism is not sufficient to address the structural inequalities that embolden Christian nationalists to influence local and national policies. We need to continue to push for younger and progressive representation in all levels of government. While the fight for safe and secular public schools can seem like a daunting task, we must remember that Christian nationalists do not represent the younger generations. This is what gives me hope for the future.

Marah, 23, is from Rancho Cordova, Calif., and attends UCLA, where she is working toward a master’s degree in social welfare.

“I spent my gap years after undergrad working as a teacher at a learning center and a mentor for an Upward Bound chapter where we help first-generation high school students get into college,” Marah writes.

EIGHTH PLACE

Safeguarding secular democracy

FFRF awarded William \$500.

By William Rabbermann

The fate of U.S. democracy is currently entangled in a confrontation between the “Nones” (including atheists, agnostics and those unaffiliated with any specific religious belief), who advocate for a secular government, and the growing influence of Christian nationalists. By examining specific controversies such as state/church separation and LGBTQ-plus rights, we can understand how Christian nationalist actions pose a threat to these rights and reforms. There are compelling arguments for strategic actions that the secular movement can take to defend secular democracy.

Christian nationalism is an ideological stance that merges Christian religious identity with American nationalism. Its proponents seek to integrate specific interpretations of Christianity into governance, potentially undermining the fundamental principles of pluralism, inclusivity and the separation of church and state that underpin American democracy.

Christian nationalists pose significant threats to several rights and reforms in America. One area of contention revolves around the principle of state/church separation. Christian nationalists often advocate for policies and legislation that blur the line between religion and government, potentially infringing upon the essential separation enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. By eroding this separation, they undermine the secular foundation of democracy and jeopardize the rights of individuals with diverse religious beliefs or those who identify as nonreligious.

Another critical area where Christian

nationalists threaten rights and reforms is LGBTQ-plus rights.

They often oppose equal rights for the LGBTQ-plus community, contesting same-sex marriage and promoting discriminatory practices under the guise of religious freedom. These actions perpetuate inequality, impede progress towards inclusivity, and deny LGBTQ-plus individuals their fundamental rights.

As an advocate of secular democracy, I am acutely aware of how Christian nationalist actions can personally affect me. Their efforts to blur the line between religion and government endanger the principle of state/church separation, which is vital for protecting the rights of all citizens, irrespective of their religious or nonreligious affiliations. The erosion of this separation threatens the autonomy of individuals to practice their own beliefs or to hold no religious beliefs at all. Furthermore, the denial of LGBTQ-plus rights perpetuates inequality and undermines the principles of equal treatment and non-discrimination, impacting the lives and well-being of individuals within this community, including my friends and family members.

By actively advocating for a clear boundary between religious beliefs and government affairs, the secular movement can safeguard the rights and freedoms of all individuals. This defense preserves the inclusive nature of democracy and prevents any single religious perspective from dominating public policy.

Forging alliances with organizations and individuals committed to civil liberties and equality is another crucial step. By collaborating with like-minded groups, the secular movement can amplify its voice, foster unity and effectively counter the influence of Christian nationalism. These alliances



William Rabbermann

build broad-based support for secular principles and generate collective action in defense of secular democracy.

Additionally, prioritizing public education and raising awareness are crucial in defending secular democracy. By promoting critical thinking, religious literacy and comprehensive sex education, the secular movement can counteract misinformation and challenge oppressive religious ideologies.

Equipping individuals with the tools to think independently, evaluate information critically and engage in respectful dialogue empowers citizens to make informed decisions and protect their rights. Education and awareness serve as catalysts for change, enabling individuals to understand the importance of secularism and actively participate in defending its principles.

Secularism stands as a crucial pillar in safeguarding American democracy from the encroachment of Christian nationalism. By defending the principle of state/church separation, forging alliances, and promoting education and awareness, the secular movement can effectively counter

the threats posed by Christian nationalists. Upholding the principles of secular democracy ensures the inclusivity, equality and pluralism necessary for a thriving democracy that respects and protects the rights of all individuals, regardless of their religious or nonreligious beliefs.

Strategic actions are instrumental in shaping the future of American democracy. Active engagement in dialogue, fostering cooperation and advocating for policies that protect secular values are paramount. By doing so, the secular movement can create meaningful change and navigate the face-off between the Nones and Christian nationalists. By reinforcing the foundation of secular democracy, the movement ensures the preservation of individual rights and the advancement of social reforms.

The future of U.S. democracy hangs in the balance as the influence of the religiously unaffiliated clashes with that of Christian nationalists. Recognizing the significance of this moment, it is imperative for the secular movement to rise to the occasion and strategically defend secular democracy. By upholding the principle of state/church separation, forging alliances, promoting education and awareness, and actively advocating for secular values, the movement can build a future that upholds the values of inclusivity, equality and religious freedom for all. By taking these actions, we ensure the continued progress and prosperity of American democracy, safeguarding it from the threats posed by Christian nationalism and preserving the rights and freedoms of every individual in our diverse society.

William, 24, is from St. Louis and attends the Missouri University of Science and Technology, where he is working toward a degree in electrical engineering.

NINTH PLACE

The threat of Christian nationalism

FFRF awarded Zachary \$400.

By Zachary Mota

In the modern United States, there has been an alarming resurgence of Christian nationalism. By “Christian nationalism,” we mean the effort to enact an institutional bias for Christianity and for legislation to be in accordance with that dogma. With the newfound aggression of the conservative Christian base, the issue has become more dire. Intentional radicalization of Americans has allowed for rapid advancement of the Christian nationalist agenda, and shifted the country in a direction that will be difficult to recover from. Only through recognition of this problem, and the damage it has already caused, will the freethinking citizens of the United States be able to resist this descent into fascism and religious tyranny.

The most powerful tool of the Christian nationalist initiative is the fierce and unwavering fealty that it can muster. I believe that abortion is a chief driver of this devotion. The universality and intensity of the subject lends it to be an area in which many passionate opinions are formed. The concept of “saving human lives” is accepted as a “black and white” issue where they conclude they maintain the moral high ground. The religious right views its “pro-life” (or anti-choice) stance as a matter of life and death. This relation to the idea of the human soul promotes a strong connection to its religion, despite this not being a subject in the bible. Abortion has been



Zachary Mota

successfully tacked onto the docket of the religious right’s crusade.

There are many facets of the Christian nationalist agenda, but abortion has stood out as one of the highest priority items. I believe this is because it is an area where their movement had faced a loss. “Religious freedom” should be the most important issue, but, fortunately for the Christian nationalists, they have been granted far more freedom than the Founding Fathers intended. On the other hand, with the Supreme Court declaring abortion a nationwide right in 1973, the Christian nationalist agenda suffered a tremendous blow. The crusade had been disrupted, but this presented a uniting front for radicalization. The pro-life political agenda merged with Christian doctrine and became utilized by malicious

actors in the U.S. government.

Under the direction of people such as Mitch McConnell and Donald Trump, the Christian nationalist agenda has become a situation where the ends justify the means. For them, even the dissolution of democracy would be acceptable for the triumph of their holy cause. And, unfortunately, they succeeded. With the anti-democratic installation of conservatives onto the Supreme Court, Roe v. Wade has been overturned. But even so, the religious fervor behind that victory has not dissipated, and the rational majority of Americans are left to contend with a religious, fascist uprising.

With an empowered base of Christian nationalists installed into the U.S. legislative infrastructure, all those that exist in opposition of their agenda have reason to be concerned. As a gay man and person of color, I have observed threats to my livelihood arise from the conservative Christian wing, with no other rationale than the demonization of the other. Like their “defeat” in Roe v. Wade, the federal legalization of gay marriage has prompted a shift of the rampant homophobia of the 2000s to an unprecedented agenda of transphobia. An issue that has no relation to Christianity has become another target of their crusade. With suicide and hate crime rates among the transgender com-

munity being tragically high, this self-righteous war against trans rights and dignity is unfortunately proving to be effective.

We as a country are then left with the question of what to do. Most citizens of the United States will suffer with the current descent of the conservative Christian machine into fascism. Will we stand by and allow democracy give way to theocracy? Unless bold and courageous action is taken

against religious interest groups and manipulative politicians, Christian nationalists will only gain more traction. On federal, state and local levels, both citizens and politicians will need to stand in

“The secular movement must be reframed as not the machinations of insidious atheists, but an attempt to preserve the principles that the United States was founded on.”

opposition to the legalization of Christian supremacy, and advocate for the repeal of anti-democratic legislation. The secular movement must be reframed as not the machinations of insidious atheists, but an attempt to preserve the principles that the United States was founded on. There is an uphill battle against an entrenched Christian institution, but it is one that must be fought if America is to survive.

Zachary, 29, is from Erie, Pa., and attends Case Western Reserve University, where he is working toward a degree in social work.

“Having grown up as a gay atheist Latino in a rural community, I learned early on the importance of mental health and compassion,” Zachary writes.

TENTH PLACE

Action to counter Christian nationalism

FFRF awarded Ryan \$300.

By Ryan Slaughter

In today’s polarized political climate, the driving wedge in society is not a face-off between the “Nones” and Christian nationalists. Rather, our divisions are the result of dwindling trust in our institutions, anti-establishment sentiment, anti-intellectualism, and simple self-interest as a consequence of our constitutional freedoms.

Christian nationalism is a symptom of our democratic decay, not its cause. It does, however, still pose a great threat to democracy and there are a few steps the secular movement should be taking to address this threat.

In its most extreme form, Christian nationalism “is a political ideology and cultural framework that seeks to merge American and Christian identities and demands a privileged place for Christianity in public life, buttressed by the active support of government at all levels,” writes Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. With proponents ranging from political commentator Nick Fuentes to Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, this form of Christian nationalism poses the greatest threat to democracy.

The most prominent way Christian nationalism erodes the foundation of American democracy is by promoting a worldview fundamentally at odds with liberal democratic thought.

Christian nationalism operates, assumedly, through democratic systems in

order to achieve a state that fully endorses the values of the Christian faith. However, due to the fact that its preferred system of governance is derived from Christianity, it is fundamentally contradictory to liberal ideas of governance. Christian nationalism is fundamentally based on presupposed thought. If the divine word of God as revealed to Christians through the bible is meant to be the basis for our law, then how could a Christian nationalist claim to be any more right than someone of another faith who claims their holy work is also the result of divine revelation? It is all circular logic.

Conversely, liberal democracy acknowledges certain assumptions made to support its system, such as inherent human rights. It supports the individual pursuit of happiness without the hindrance of an overbearing state. This protects minority groups and, when complemented with a democratic government, simultaneously creates a firmer social contract by using majority-based consensus to create laws to govern the majority. Christian nationalism would propose a system based on the wills and ideas of a minority unjustly infringing on the rights of others. Nowhere is this infringement more evident than on the topic of abortion.

A society based on the ideas of a fundamentalist Christian population would consequently place further restrictions on bodily autonomy throughout the nation to fit with the religious notion that life begins at conception. In recent months, particularly after the Dobbs v. Jackson decision, which was hailed as a victory by self-pro-



Ryan Slaughter

claimed Christian nationalists, 14 states have either banned or mostly banned abortions with other states likely to follow suit. Legislation such as blanket abortion bans affect birthing people most directly but also have ripple effects on the entire country. Restricting abortion access has “a devastating impact on state economies and the financial security of women and their families” and can cost states billions of dollars over time by hurting women’s earning potential and lowering labor force participation. Restrictions on abortions may also cause increases in crime over time. In both the short and long term, all of society could be impacted by further pushes to restrict abortion access. While I, as a man, may not be directly affected by these bans, it is nonetheless in my interest as a citizen of this country to oppose Christian nationalists in their pursuit of power.

Strategic efforts by the secular movement to combat Christian nationalism should take place at the individual, non-governmental and governmental levels of organization. Individually, secularism proponents should advocate for policy change, write to representatives, petition and vote for candidates who support their interests. Beyond the individual level, the secularist movement should officially organize, construct a formalized policy agenda and invest in media to grow awareness. Once organized, the secularist movement can begin garnering influence in government through lobbying, official endorsements of political candidates and fundraising for issue-related campaigns at the local, state and federal levels.

As it stands, the secularist movement is losing while Christian nationalism, with its specific political goals, is succeeding. Christian nationalism presents a dangerous alternative to our current liberal democratic system. There is no silver bullet “savior” for American democracy, but the secularist movement should have specific policy goals. Only then can it make any progress.

Ryan, 24, is from Arlington, Va., and attends Texas A&M University, Bush School in Washington D.C., where he is working toward a master’s degree in national security and intelligence. “I have interned with the city of Kirksville’s assistant city manager and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars’ Africa Program,” Ryan writes. “My goal is to one day support the federal government’s national security efforts through work in the intelligence community.”

Grad student essay contest honorable mentions

The following are excerpts taken from the essays of those who earned honorable mention distinction.

Jesse Chen

Our problems and differences feel hopelessly and pathologically ideological because the debate over what should constitute the American identity is driven by the assumption that a unique heritage is somehow unquestionably at stake. By their lights, they seek not to enrich the American experience within a pluralistic democracy but to institutionalize theocratic principles into law and create a new political order based on a specious religious worldview.

The threat of Christian nationalism is against the democracy of every American, religious and atheist alike, as the fate of our democracy is solely in the hands of those who deeply care to defend it.

Jesse, 31, attends Wayne State University and is seeking a master's degree in counseling psychology.

Anthony Corbo

One could blindly pick an issue out of a hat regarding rights being denied and threatened in Florida, but two that are topical and relevant in my life are vaccination policies and LGBTQ rights. It is easy to see the religious motives for these actions, and numerous legislators behind these policies boast being proud Christians, often citing their religion as a motivator for the laws they pass. The viral society we live in today sees the rapid and mass spread of both in-

formation and misinformation. Without better control of the information highway, it would be difficult to stand up against these religious fanatics. Anthony, 29, attends Florida Atlantic University where he is pursuing a master's degree in artificial intelligence.

Dylan Custer

Christian nationalists generally aim to undermine the separation of church and state by striving toward establishing a Christian hegemony in public life. They advocate for the integration of religious symbols and prayers in public institutions, and push back against restrictions on religious practices that impede on others' rights. Promoting awareness and education about the importance of secular democracy is vital. By disseminating accurate information, debunking misconceptions and engaging in respectful dialogue, the secular movement can counter the narratives pushed forth by Christian nationalists. Pushing the values of freedom and equality can help bridge the gap and garner public support for a secular government.

Dylan, 26, attends Daytona State College and is majoring in electrical engineering.

Karla Goodwin

Secularism has been a pillar in maintaining our democracy because it serves to protect individuals with different beliefs from being ruled by a government dominated by a certain religion. Having one hold power over an entire government diminishes a democracy. I am outraged by the current state of reproductive rights in this country. However, I do understand that simple anger is not the best tool at my disposal for true

change. The facts behind the cases cited by the Supreme Court in its rulings show the disconnection and external religious influence impeding the ability for it to produce rulings supported by the First Amendment which does directly separate the government from religious influence. Karla, 29, is working toward her graduate degree in data analytics from Southern New Hampshire University.

Alexia Shand

Guns are the number one leading death of children in America, yet these Christian nationalists who believe life begins at conception will not support gun control. What about the lives of thousands of children dying because of gun-related incidents? They'll say abortion is murder but support the death penalty, where studies estimated that 1 out of 20 individuals might be wrongfully convicted. They can't even use the bible to oppose it. "Thou shalt not kill" did not apply to many men, (pregnant) women and children in the bible.

Let's be honest. It was never about the right to life but the right to control — the right to control women. Alexia, 28, attends the Borough of Manhattan Community College and is working toward a master's degree in pathology assistance.

Zoe Sirotiak

As a health care science student, I know that religion has frequently been used throughout history to increase feelings of control over disease, medical hardship and personal control. However, the response of politicians and many religious figures to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent precautions stood out to me as distinctly different. Not only was religion used to cope with a disease that society did not have control over, but it was also used to justify a lack of personal responsibility and was directly tied to nationalist calls.



Zoe Sirotiak

Being a good Christian in certain circles was associated with pressure to not wear masks or take precautions, with the perception that to be nationalistic was to "choose" not to wear a mask or take other precautions.

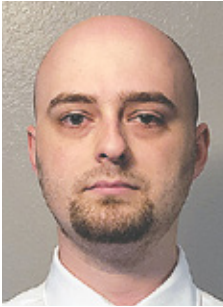
The anti-vaccination campaign, like the anti-masking campaign, was another example of Christian nationalist advocacy. Again, religious imagery and themes were used to argue against vaccination mandates and encouragement of vaccines; God was enough protection, and vaccination would not be "natural."

Zoe, 26, attends Iowa State University, and is seeking an advanced degree in kinesiology.

Bo Thompson

The government's failure to uphold secularism has contributed to political polarization and the erosion of trust in government institutions. When the government takes sides on religious issues, it alienates large segments of the population who hold different beliefs. The empowered religious minority continues to grasp at power while the disenfranchised majority bothers to vote less and less. This can lead to political gridlock and a breakdown in the democratic process.

Secularism is the way to save American democracy from this force. By separating church and state, secularism prevents the government from imposing the beliefs of one group on the rest of society. Those of faith are free to practice, and those without are free to live their own happy and healthy lives. This promotes tolerance, diversity and pluralism, all of which are necessary for a functioning democracy. Bo, 28, attends Sonoma State, where he is working toward a degree in computer science.



Bo Thompson

CRANKMAIL

Welcome to the December edition of Crank-mail, where we publish letters and social media comments from our detractors. Printed as received.

Christianity: So why are you Fedoras pumping up #christiannationalism as your latest bogeyman? — Timothy Schultz

Repent now: You're cowards, and your heretical views will send you to Hell. Repent of your sins, Freedom From Religion Foundation. — Tami Purchis

Too Funny: YALL ACT LIKE U ALLERGIC to GOD! Too funny when u think about it. Most are too busy to BELIEVE in anything other than TV or CELEBS. Doesnt offend me. Sad for those ALLERGIC TO GOD. Smh — Pete Donnelly

GOD is everywhere!: DISGUSTED by GOD? CREEPY when talking about GOD? WOW. PISSES You off hearing about GOD??? Interesting.....got it. DANGEROUS when hearing about GOD??? dang I Apologize that GOD offends So many. I Personally...KNOW Who to NOT mention GOD to. It's not against Me personally. GOD is TOTALLY in All things...Nature, ppl, babies being born etc. But, HEY Maybe You are right to be FEEL-

ING DISGUSTED, SCARED, CREEPED OUT, TRAPPED When hearing about GOD. It's ok to tell someone to STOP TALKING ABOUT GOD. They will TOTALLY Understand. No NEED TO SUE. We get it. — Michelle Tobias

U R DEMONS: POOR U, DEMON.. IMMA PRAY FOR U. DO NOT TRY TO BELITTLE ME. DEMON. I WILL PRAY FOR U. DEMON SEED. YOUR DEMON AINT HIDING. GO SEEK HELP TO GET THAT DEMON OUT OF U. IM SERIOUS. ITS UGLY. — Jeff Burmaster

Disgusting messages: Don't tell me my Lord and Savior is a myth, and that my religion hardens hearts and enslaves minds. Just because you are blind doesn't give you the right to publicly insult our Creator and those who follow Him. — Talia Bancroft

Evil: You're Pagans and complisent with a Culture of Death and Murder. May God save your souls. God Bless You. — Robert Westin

Get out: I'm not an atheist but a STRONG believer in THE LORD who has gotten attacked by atheist (Satanist, witches and warlocks) by means of witchcraft. If you all want our religious beliefs out of politics and schools then stop harassing Christians and get out of our bodies. Atheist (soul

invaders) do not belong inside the bodies of Christians trying to steal our energy, soul, and mind... — Angelique Jonas

Bible is true: There is only one true living God, Jesus Christ. Don't you think it's interesting how everything in the Bible is coming to life, I heard things from my mom as a kid, now I am seeing them happening, now I know the Bible is a book of history and things that are now starting to happen. Rivers drying up, more earthquakes ever recorded. The Bible explains everything that is taking place in the world. The exact countries that go to war. Only a true God can predict future. I was shocked, everything my mom talked bout as a kid is happening. Down to the day. Explain that. — Bobbie Docher

Atheism: Science proves the existence of God and so does modern scientific philosophy/theology. Smart people believe in a creator, dumb people believe in evolution theory. Atheism is the most destructive religion in existence. — Joe Labb

Please repent!: The Freedom From Religion Foundation cult must repent of their sins. I do not support atheism, nor abortion. Lord Jesus, open their eyes. Amen. — Marcus Temp

Reagan ad: Lil Ronnie junior..bb. yu cant Burn in hell Without God from Heaven...juss/say'n..yu snot nose punk.... — Phil Jeppson

Hell: That's Gods sound, if your in Hell for not believing you will ONLY HEAR WEEPING AND GNASHING OF TEETH — Matt Fogleson

My odds are better: I'd rather take my 50/50 chance that I'm right about God. If I'm wrong I wind up wherever you do. If I'm right and you're wrong, then you wind up with 100% of going to hell. I'm sincerely sorry for you all. Faith cost someone nothing. Not having faith will cost you everything. — Lucian Miller

America is Christian: Fore fathers built America on Christianity so screw your dumb idea that religion was meant to be separate. "Under god for which it stands" words ring a bell I'm that thick skull? You dont have to be a christian and can practice whatever you want in your own home or community if it's built around that but when it comes to America it was built on Christianity so you just have to accept that fact and work around it just like others work around your beliefs when interacting with you — Freddy Borlap

LETTERBOX

Thanks so much to FFRF for El Dorado victory

I heard about the work FFRF did in El Dorado County, Calif., recently. I want to say thank you so very much for the work you've done here, and the work you continue to do across the country every day. It does not go unseen or unappreciated. I'm a member from Natomas, Calif. Some think California does not face the same religious infringement issues as other parts of the country, but this fight exists in every city, in every state in the country. It may never end, but freethinkers must always push back against religiosity and cherish our society of atheistic values. Thank you again. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

California

Madison convention was inspirational, impressive

Doubting Thomas for much of my life, I was raised in that dreadful Catholicism, but finally felt free enough at age 38 to leave all belief systems and call myself an atheist. I'm now 62. I recently joined FFRF, attended the convention and was so impressed. It felt so good to be in a room with so many like-minded people of atheists, agnostics, Nones, etc. I learned a lot, and what wasn't new just reaffirmed my truths. The young essay winners were inspirational and give me hope for the generations below me! Thank you for an awesome event with so many incredible speakers and merchandise! Thank you, thank you! Oh, I especially enjoyed all the piano playing by Dan Barker!

Wisconsin

Freethought Today can help teach young boy

Two years ago, I saw the Ron Reagan commercial on MSNBC. I just about fell off my sofa. I joined FFRF pretty much immediately. I have not been unhappy with that decision. I am excited with how much hell the organization raises all over America.

I'd like to tell you about the inspiration you gave me. I have a strong, aggressive and active brain tumor that I've battled for 10 years. (I'm 53.) As I was out walking my dog one day, a 4-year-old boy was on his front lawn with his parents. He wanted to make a friend, so, within a week, he and his mother had come to my house to get to know us all better. That young man is now 12. In all those years, however, our friendship has deepened. We are both sick. We have different illnesses, but both are rather bad.

A couple nights ago, he wanted to talk to me because he was in so much pain and was wondering about life after death (which, of course, is complete bollocks). I told him he was smart enough to make up his own mind. The following day, I brought him a back issue of Freethought Today. I will be giving him all the issues when I am done with them so he can discuss what he reads with his parents.

Michigan

What's good for the goose . . .

As an atheist business owner, can I refuse service to racist, homophobic, transphobic, pedophile Catholics? Would the Supreme Court uphold my First Amendment rights?

— John Quigley, Massachusetts

There are many questions for an all-loving God

Religious people say that “God” is a loving god, an all-powerful, all-knowing creator of everything in the universe. I have questions.

Why doesn't he smite the evildoers, such as murderers, so that his “good” creations don't have to suffer?

Why are innocent children still-born or born with terrible abnormalities, making their lives so much more challenging? What good is religion if it causes death and destruction?

Why did God drown all those millions of people and animals that he supposedly loved?

Of course, the answer is that there is no god. Does anyone really think some imaginary being sits in the heavens and controls billions of stars and planets to keep himself entertained. If so, I have a bridge to sell you . . . it was made by God.

California

Honored to be a winner in FFRF essay contest

I'm honored to have been chosen a winner in the 2023 Cornelius Vander Broek Memorial Essay Contest for Grad/Older Students. [See pages 12-16.] Upholding the separation of church and state is very important to me, and I'm fortunate that my paper was able to convey that in a way that resonated with your organization. I will continue to fight for our rights in the ways that I can, by speaking out against injustice and holding our elected officials accountable.

Thank you so much for investing in my future, as well as the futures of other students like me.

Texas

Why don't all Christians follow God's commands?

Those who say they follow the bible, and claim to act in accordance with it, have they really read it, or just certain parts picked by their minister? And if you really have read it all, can you still call yourself a Chris-

tian if you don't follow the killing commands? Or, if a Christian really read it all, will they still claim to be a Christian, or finally realize the fallacy of it all?

Fortunately, I live in a safe, well-educated community, but if I lived among devoted Christians as an “out-of-the-closet atheist,” should I worry about my life? Just wondering.

California

How about freethinking public announcements?

This is regarding the great article (“Muslim call to prayer is religious privilege”) in the October issue by Chris Line. Here's my suggestion of what is fair, regarding public loudspeaker announcements of religious opinions.

Until we get equality, there should be freethought centers in Minneapolis (and elsewhere) where public loudspeakers announce five times a day: “God is imaginary. God is fantasy. I testify that there is no God; no God. I testify that nobody is the messenger of any gods. Come alive to thinking. Come to freethought. God is not real. God is imaginary. There is no God; no God.”

Arizona

You aren't born atheist, but you learn to think

I enjoyed reading Evan Weinraub's essay, “An atheist in America” in the October issue, but I'd like to convince him that he wasn't born an atheist.

After all, to deny the existence of God requires thinking and making a choice, both of which faculties newborns lack. Thus, no one is born atheist any more than they are born Catholic, Lakers fans, or lovers of classical music.

Evan decided by himself to be atheist because, to him, nonbelief is the most sensible choice. In short, we are not born with the faculty to think. But we think as we grow . . . and become what we think.

California

Article on those who leave church was interesting

I want to say I really appreciated the article in the October issue on the politics of those who leave the church. It emphasized the fallacy of what seems to be a common misperception — that those who leave the church become freethinkers. Unfortunately, leaving organized religion does not mean losing religious beliefs, and it was interesting to read that the non-church-going religious may be even more strongly biased than church members.

As always, the recent newspaper was excellent and thought-provoking. Freethinkers are thinkers, indeed. It is good to be part of such a community. Thanks!

Colorado

Why have religious quotes in public schools?

This letter by FFRF member Bill Cain appeared in the Terre Haute (Ind.) Tribune Star on Oct. 24.

Rev. James H. Elliott seems to be saying in his recent Readers' Forum letter that Vigo students would “hardly notice the quote or cross” in their classroom. After all, it was a quote from some old prophet 500 years before Jesus. And it puts a positive spin on religion, so who cares?

What would he think if a teacher down the hall put Surah 9:5 from the Quran on the bulletin board? “Then kill the pagans (non-Muslims) wherever you find them, capture and besiege them, and lie in wait for them in each and ev-

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ery ambush.” There is even the death penalty for leaving Islam.

Rev. Elliott would probably have a hissy fit over the threat to students from an ancient text. But why let either threats, or religious promises, be placed in classrooms where attendance is mandatory? I could claim my invisible 6-foot rabbit friend, Harry, will save you from all misfortune, as long as you leave carrots on the doorstep, hop up and down three times, and pretend to pet his sacred bunny ears. How would you know that my savior bunny wouldn’t send you to be torn up by wild foxes, if you failed to leave carrots on the doorstep every night?

You can pretend religion all you want privately, but you shouldn’t put religious quotes in the classroom, positive or negative. FFRF is spot on.
Indiana

Eisenhower made two religious phrases law

“Our form of government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious belief.” — Dwight D. Eisenhower, a month before his inauguration in 1952.

A deeply religious man, Eisenhower was the first and only president to write and read his own prayer at his inaugural ceremony. In 1954, with the Cold War in the background, Eisenhower signed a bill to add the phrase “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance. At the bill-signing ceremony he said: “From this day forward, millions of our schoolchildren will daily proclaim . . . the dedication of our nation and our people to the Almighty. To anyone who truly loves America, nothing could be more inspiring than to contemplate this rededication of our youth, on each school morning, to our country’s true meaning. . . . In this way, we are reaffirming the transcendence of religious faith in America’s heritage and future; in this way we shall constantly strengthen those spiritual weapons which forever will be our country’s most powerful resource, in peace and war.”

Two years later, Eisenhower signed a law officially declaring “In God We Trust” to be the nation’s official motto (replacing “E Pluribus Unum”) and also mandating that the phrase be printed on all American paper currency.
Ohio

Convention speakers kept my attention all day

I just want to thank everyone at FFRF for such an amazing experience at the convention. I thought toward the late afternoon or evening I would be too tired for any more speakers or activities, but my energy never waned

Crossword answers

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and I was totally engrossed in each and every one of the presenters. I can only imagine the work that went into this. It was my first, but not last, convention. Thank you again!
Minnesota

Thanks for info on getting off list of Catholics

Some years ago, I went to a Catholic priest to try to have my name expunged from the Catholic list. His response was that not even the pope could do such a thing. It was with pleasure and excitement when I read the letter from Dan Wardlow in the October issue stating that it actually is possible. After a search to find the bishop representing the diocese from my birth, I wrote him a letter requesting my removal. Thank you Dan, and thank you FFRF.
Maine

Reading Crankmail was quite an eye-opener

This is the first time I’ve read the “Crankmail” section of Freethought Today. Fantastic reading. It’s shocking the perspectives that are displayed. Well, not shocking, just entertaining at the intensity of their beliefs. Methinks we are in trouble. I must admit that our Declaration of Independence does reflect religion being in mind — “endowed by our creator.” I’d say that our Founders had people to satisfy, too.

I may have to make plans to go to a FFRF annual convention. Sounds like a lot of fun.
California

Christian nationalism is un-American

This is a letter that FFRF member Wes Prichard wrote to the Colorado Springs Gazette in response to a guest editorial from evangelical pastor Lawson Perdue of Charis Christian Center. (The Gazette did not publish this response.)

Oh, poor Lawson Perdue, pastor of Charis Christian Center. He’s so perse-

cuted and his religious freedom is somehow diminished because the media calls out his ilk for being Christian nationalists. He calls Christian nationalism a vaguely defined term, yet he does a pretty good job of defining it in his editorial when he says Christian nationalists “simply desire godly men and women to be in positions of authority,” and “wanting godly ideas throughout our nation.”

What he doesn’t say is the reason they want to be in positions of authority is so they can impose their beliefs on everyone else. Examples include book banning, imposing religion in publicly funded schools, diverting public funds to religious schools, denying medical care for women and transgender people, Christianizing the courts and other institutions of government, and attacking the Johnson Amendment to name a few.

We’re seeing it in pockets all over the country and it’s a coordinated strategy by a declining movement to hold on to its waning influence in society. But it’s un-American and it’s dangerous. It’s not about religious freedom. All flavors of Christians have had the right to practice their religion all along. Rather it’s a movement that’s on the road to religious fascism — putting Christianity above all else by using government. Well, theocracies have worked well in Iran and Afghanistan, so I can see why they want to try it here. If you’re a Jew, Sikh, atheist, Buddhist or sun worshipper, the Christian nationalists are happy for you to be a second-class citizen in their world.

Religious freedom means all religions and no religion have equal rights to coexist. Your right to practice your religion ends where mine begins.
Colorado

Thanks for the column on the afterlife

To Annie Laurie Gaylor, thank you for the excellent article on belief in the afterlife in the November issue. I appreciate all the work FFRF does and wish everyone a healthy and safe 2024.
Georgia

‘Higher power,’ ‘heaven above’ aboard the ISS

I was delighted to see my seven-word “story” (“Tranquillity, 250 miles up and 17,150 mph.”) get top billing on page 3 in the November issue — with a great photo of astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti on the International Space Station giving her Vulcan salute in tribute to Leonard Nimoy, who had died the previous day.

I like thinking about the wonderful incongruity of the peacefulness of

Write to us
To send a letter to the editor for Freethought Today, please email it to editor@ffrf.org.

perspective that being in orbit around Earth allows, given the extreme speed and height that can be attained only with the “higher power” of orbital rockets, in a place that in the past would have been called “heaven above” — the general location of the International Space Station.
California

Radio show a contrast to religious horrors

I listen to all of FFRF’s weekly shows and just wanted to compliment you on the “For Heaven’s Sake” Freethought Radio episode, which I just listened to. It was very well done, with a perfect combination of logical commentary and good music by Dan Barker, which was all right on the money.

This show was very uplifting and provided a beautiful contrast to the horrors we are witnessing from “The Holy Land” and the religious animosity all around us. How much better off the world would be without the hatred caused by religion.
Florida

Arbitrary criteria basis for Middle East conflict

Once again, there is a raging conflict based on totally arbitrary criteria. Specifically, I am alluding to the Israel-Palestine skirmish. It is such an avoidable tragedy. Approximately 6,000 years ago, a group of people were led to believe that Moses was God’s messenger on Earth. About 1,500 years ago, a similar group of people felt the same way about Muhammad. The descendants of these groups are currently fighting each other.

Throughout history, more people have been murdered based on this arbitrary and easily eliminated scourge of organized religion. Fortunately, among the younger generations in America and Europe, people are abandoning organized religion.
New Jersey

Never got a chance to request secular oath

I read with great interest James To- sone’s account of his efforts to have alternate, secular oaths administered to those seeking public office.

As a court reporter, one of my duties was to swear in witnesses before their testimony. I generally used the “under God” version (it was my job), but, sometimes a witness requested a secular oath, which I was happy to administer.

When I was empaneled on a jury, we were all asked to stand, raise our right hand, and say “I do” after the “under God” oath was read to us. I stood, but did not raise my hand nor did I say “I do.” I was hoping someone would call me out on it, as I was prepared to ask for the alternate, secular oath, but, alas, no one did. I was not selected to be a juror, but if I had, I would have confessed and asked for the secular oath.
Wisconsin

AI answers questions about bible, religion

By Brooks Rimes

As a person who has had a career in software, I find the current topic of artificial intelligence (AI) to be of great interest and I use it for many purposes. I decided to ask it questions about the bible and religion. This is from Chat GPT version 3.5 (the free version).

What scientific facts are contained in the bible?

The bible is primarily a religious and historical text, and its primary purpose is not to convey scientific information. However, there are some passages in the bible that some people interpret as containing descriptions or references to natural phenomena that could be seen as early attempts to understand the natural world. It's important to note that these passages are often highly symbolic and may not align with modern scientific understanding. Here are a few examples:



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1. Creation story: The bible contains the story of creation in the book of Genesis, which describes the creation of the Earth, the heavens and all living creatures in six days. While this is a foundational narrative in Christianity and Judaism, it is not a scientific account of the origin of the universe or species. It should not be interpreted as a scientific fact.

2. Flood story: The story of Noah's Ark and the Great Flood is another well-known biblical account. Some people have tried to link this story to geological evidence of ancient floods, but there is no scientific consensus that such a global flood event occurred as described in the bible.

3. Astronomical references: The bible contains various references to celestial bodies like the sun, moon and stars. These references reflect the knowledge and understanding of the time when the texts were written. They are not meant to provide scientific details about these celestial objects.

4. Medicinal practices: In the bible, there are references to various medicinal practices and healing remedies. For example, in the Old Testament, there are instructions for using certain plants and substances for healing purposes. While these may have been early forms of folk medicine, they should not be considered scientific medical advice.

In summary, while the bible may contain references to natural phenomena and the natural world, it is not a scientific textbook. Its primary focus is on matters of faith, morality and spirituality. When interpreting the bible, it is important to consider the historical and cultural context in which it was written and to recognize that its purpose is not to convey scientific facts as we understand them today. Science and religion are different domains that serve distinct purposes, and they should not necessarily be in conflict with each other when approached with a nuanced understanding of their respective roles.

What writings are demonstrably wrong in the bible?

The bible is a religious text that is considered sacred by millions of people around the world. It consists of numerous

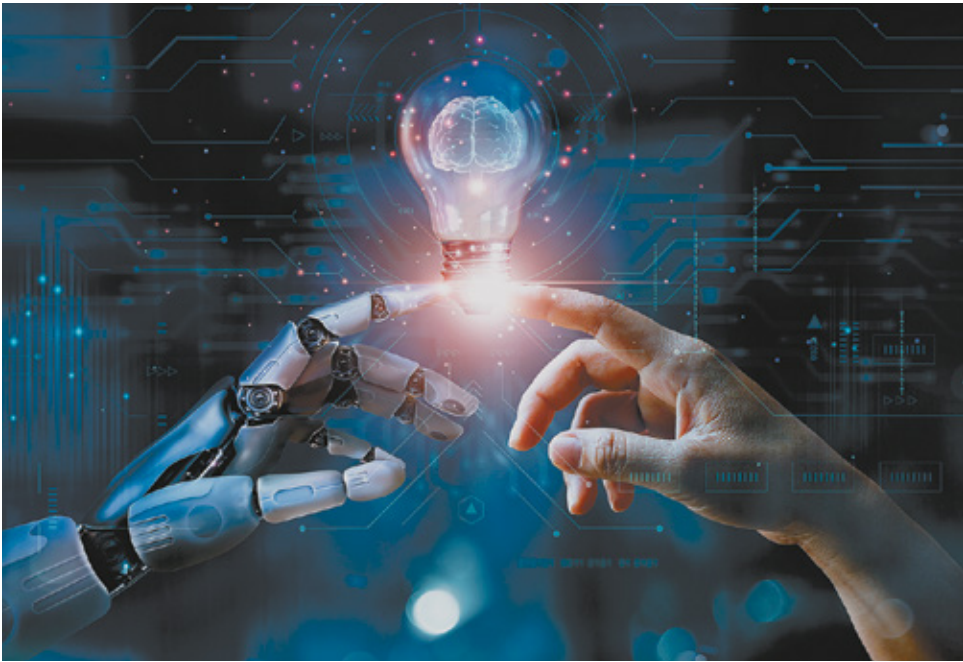


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books, written by different authors over centuries, and is the foundation of several religious traditions, including Christianity and Judaism. As such, discussions about what may be considered "demonstrably wrong" in the bible can be sensitive and vary widely depending on one's beliefs and interpretations.

Here are some examples of passages in the bible that some individuals and scholars have questioned or found to be problematic from a historical, scientific, or ethical standpoint:

1. Creation story: The bible's creation story in the book of Genesis conflicts with the scientific understanding of the origins of the universe and life on Earth.

2. Noah's Ark: The story of Noah's Ark is often questioned for its feasibility and the idea of a global flood.

3. Age of the Earth: Some biblical genealogies suggest an age for the Earth that contradicts scientific estimates.

4. Slavery: The bible contains verses that regulate slavery, which many people today find morally unacceptable.

5. Treatment of women: Certain passages in the bible have been criticized for their treatment of women, such as those that advocate for submissiveness.

6. Violence: The bible includes accounts of violence, including wars, genocides and instances of divine punishment, which some find troubling.

7. Miracles: Many of the miracles described in the bible, such as the parting of the Red Sea or Jesus' resurrection, are viewed skeptically by those who approach the text from a secular or non-religious perspective.

It's important to note that interpretations of the bible vary widely, and many religious scholars and believers argue that these passages should be understood in their historical and cultural context, rather than as literal, scientific or ethical statements. Others may view the bible as entirely symbolic or allegorical, while some take a more fundamentalist approach and consider it infallible.

Ultimately, discussions about the bible should be approached with sensitivity and an understanding of the diverse beliefs and interpretations surrounding this ancient text. What one person considers "demonstrably wrong" may be a matter of faith or interpretation for someone else.

How common is it that as people become older and wiser, they reject prior religious beliefs and become atheists or agnostics?

The relationship between aging, wisdom and changes in religious beliefs is complex and can vary widely among individuals. There is no one-size-fits-all pattern, and people's religious beliefs and affiliations can change for a variety of reasons. Here are some factors to consider:

1. Personal growth and exploration: Some individuals become more reflective as they age and may engage in a process of personal exploration and questioning. This can lead to changes in religious beliefs, including a shift toward atheism or agnosticism.

2. Social and cultural factors: Changes in religious beliefs can also be influenced by social and cultural factors. As people age, they may be exposed to new ideas and perspectives through interactions with diverse groups of people, which can impact their beliefs.

3. Life events and experiences: Life events, such as personal crises or major life transitions, can lead people to reevaluate their beliefs. Positive or negative experiences may prompt individuals to question their religious convictions.

4. Intellectual engagement: Some individuals, as they age, may become more intellectually engaged and curious. This may lead them to explore philosophical and theological questions in greater depth, which can result in a reevaluation of their religious beliefs.

5. Changes in community and peer influence: Changes in social circles and peer influence can also play a role. If someone's social network shifts to include more secular or non-religious individuals, they may be more exposed to atheistic or agnostic viewpoints.

6. Health and mortality: As people age, they may confront questions about mortality and the afterlife. These existential questions can prompt individuals to reassess their religious beliefs.

7. Generational differences: In some cases, generational differences can lead older individuals to question or abandon the religious beliefs they were raised with. Younger generations may have different religious or non-religious perspectives, which can influence older generations.

It's important to note that while some

individuals may become atheists or agnostics as they age and gain more life experience, others may deepen their religious faith or maintain their beliefs throughout their lives. The relationship between age, wisdom and religious beliefs is highly individualistic and depends on a multitude of factors.

Additionally, research on this topic is ongoing, and scholars in the fields of psychology, sociology and religious studies continue to study the dynamics of religious belief and change over the course of a person's life.

How common is it for atheists to become religious?

Conversions from atheism to religious belief do occur, but they are relatively less common than conversions in the opposite direction (from religious belief to atheism). The reasons for this are multifaceted:

1. Initial disbelief: Atheism is characterized by a lack of belief in gods or deities. Atheists often adopt this position after questioning or critically examining religious beliefs. Once someone identifies as an atheist, they have typically reached a point of skepticism or disbelief that can be challenging to reverse.

2. Epistemic barriers: Changing one's belief system can be psychologically difficult. People often have strong emotional and intellectual attachments to their beliefs, which can create barriers to accepting a new belief system, especially one that contradicts their prior convictions.

3. Social and cultural factors: In many cultures, religious beliefs are deeply ingrained, and leaving one's faith can have social consequences. On the other hand, adopting atheism may be seen as more socially acceptable in some secular societies. This can create a disincentive for atheists to convert to a religion.

4. Intellectual engagement: Many atheists are drawn to critical thinking, skepticism and the scientific method. These intellectual pursuits often align with atheistic beliefs. For someone who values these principles, converting to a religion may be challenging, as religious beliefs often involve faith in the absence of empirical evidence.

5. Personal experiences: While religious conversions often involve personal experiences or revelations, atheists may attribute similar experiences to natural or non-religious causes. This can make it less likely for them to interpret such experiences as evidence for religious belief.

6. Community and support: Atheists may be part of secular or atheist communities that provide social support and a sense of belonging. Converting to a religion can entail leaving behind such communities, which may be a significant deterrent.

While conversions from atheism to religion are less common, they are not unheard of. People's beliefs can evolve over time due to a variety of factors, including personal experiences, exposure to new ideas or changes in social and cultural contexts. Conversion stories from atheism to religion often involve profound personal experiences or encounters with religious communities that provide a sense of belonging and purpose.

It's important to note that individual experiences and belief changes vary widely, and some people may undergo significant shifts in their beliefs during their lifetime. Conversion is a deeply personal and individual journey, influenced by a complex interplay of factors.

FFRF Member Brooks Rimes is from South Carolina and contributes the cryptogram puzzle that runs in each issue of Freethought Today.