

# FREETHOUGHT TODAY



**Freedom from  
shame led to  
freedom of thought**

PAGES 10-11



**Book makes  
humanism  
accessible to kids**

PAGES 12-13



**Abortion battle  
is deep in the  
heart of Texas**

PAGES 14-15

Vol. 40 No. 5

Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

June-July 2023

## The many faces of Christian nationalism

By Ryan Jayne and Ryan Dudley

As the dust settles on many states' legislative sessions, and legislators across the country prepare for summer vacation, we must take stock of what has changed over the past five tumultuous months. While there have been some positive developments, the overall picture is decidedly grim: Christian nationalists managed to push their agenda in a wide variety of forms in state legislatures all over the country. Here are some of the biggest trends we've seen, and how they are related.

### Abortion

The first shocking advancement of Christian nationalist ideology is the predictable assault on reproductive autonomy, especially abortion access, since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* last year. So-called "trigger" bans sprang into effect in many states, including FFRF's home state of Wisconsin, and many other states rushed to pass new bans. In these states, the terrifying reality is that anti-abortion legislators are only open to debate on whether the ban should be set at 12 weeks or six, or perhaps whether the ban should begin at conception or at fertilization. Oklahoma's ban, for instance, is so sweeping that it may even include some forms of contraception.



Kenneth Ferriera/Lincoln Journal Star via AP

**Protesters gather in a prayer circle in the Nebraska Capitol rotunda on May 13 during a final reading on LB574, which includes a 12-week abortion ban and a ban on gender-altering surgeries for minors. Gov. Jim Pillen signed the bill into law on May 22.**

Late-session bans passed in both North and South Carolina leave those in southern states particularly vulnerable, where individuals may have to travel thousands of miles to receive care. And this is all despite the fact that *voters don't want this*. Nearly 60 percent of Kansas voters rejected a proposed anti-abortion constitutional amendment last fall, yet

Kansas legislators still passed a 22-week abortion ban this legislative session. Legislators know their policies do not align with the will of the people. This is how you can tell it's truly Christian nationalism at work: Theocratic legislators know that inserting their religious beliefs into state law is bad politics, but they're doing it anyway. To them, the

This article is from the FFRF Action Fund, a 501(c)(4) lobbying entity which reimburses FFRF for the space in Freethought Today. For more information about the FFRF Action Fund, go to [ffrfaction.org](http://ffrfaction.org).

**ffrf ACTION FUND**

opportunity to regain dominance over women's bodies and reproductive autonomy is too alluring to pass up.

### LGBTQ rights

Another relentless assault from Christian nationalists is aimed at the LGBTQ community, and against trans individuals in particular. While last year's obsession with banning trans athletes from public school sports has persisted, this year saw an increased focus on banning gender-affirming care, which is to say that even if a transgender patient, their parents and their doctor all agree that hormone therapy (for example) would be beneficial, the state is inserting itself into that medical discussion and prohibiting that type of care.

See Legislation on page 9

## 60th anniversary of *Abington v. Schempp* decision

## Schempp family endured years of harassment

By Lewis Beale

Mornings at Abington Senior High School involved a numbing daily ritual: 10 verses of the bible were read over the school intercom, then students had to stand and recite the Lord's Prayer.

Despite appearances, this was not happening at some small-town high school in the Bible Belt. Abington was a solidly middle class, very large and academically elite public high school in suburban Philadelphia, the kind of place where the quarterback and star running back on the football team in my senior year attended Princeton and Michigan, and went onto become a pediatric surgeon and lawyer, respectively. You get the idea.

Nevertheless, Abington was forced to conform to a Pennsylvania state law requiring the reading of bible verses at the beginning of every school day. This mandate did not sit well with a freethinking

student named Ellery Schempp, who decided to bring the Quran to school and not only peruse it during the bible reading, but refuse to stand during the Lord's Prayer. The school, confused about its response to this act of defiance, decided to excuse Ellery from the daily prayer for the rest of the year. But the following year, when he was a senior, the school mandated his participation.

That's when the Schempp family decided to pursue the matter in the courts.

Sixty years ago, on June 17, 1963, in *Abington School District v. Schempp*, an 8-1 majority of the Supreme Court ruled that public schools cannot sponsor bible readings and recitations of the Lord's Prayer under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause.

"In the relationship between man and religion," said Justice Tom C. Clark, writing for the majority, "the state is firmly committed to a position of neutrality. [The bible-reading practices] are religious exercises, required by the states in violation of the command of the First Amendment that the government maintain strict neutrality, neither aiding nor opposing religion."

See Schempp on page 2



Photo by Chris Line

**Ellery Schempp attended FFRF's 2021 national convention in Boston, where he spoke with FFRF reproductive rights intern Barbara Alvarez during a dinner break.**



# Schempp

Continued from page 1

I had a particular interest in this case, since I was a senior at Abington High School when the decision was announced, and had a few classes with Donna Schempp, the family's daughter. (Ellery had graduated a few years previously, but because Donna and brother Roger were still in school, the case had moved forward).

This led me, nearly 20 years later, to write a follow-up piece for the Philadelphia Inquirer, in which I tracked down members of the Schempp family to find out what it had been like to be part of such an important court case.

Some of what they told me was no surprise at all: Donna and Roger had been harassed at school and threatened with violence; animal waste had been mailed to the family; their sleep had been disturbed by filthy phone calls in the middle of the night; and busloads of school kids used to pass their home, shouting that they were going past "the Commie camp."

Bigots harassing brave people standing up for their rights? What else is new?

But my investigation back then uncovered a secret that seemed to have been buried for years, one which gave me a lesson in the totalitarian mindset of right-wing religious types.

It seems that our school principal, a man named W. Eugene Stull, turned out to be a supporter of the pro-creationism and pro-school prayer movements. He was so incensed by what the Schempps had done that he called Tufts University, where Ellery had applied for admission, called him a "troublemaker," and put pressure on the university to reject him. When the university accepted him anyway (this "troublemaker" went onto earn a Ph.D. in chemistry), Stull called the admissions office and asked why his recommendation had been ignored.

Now, here's the thing: 20 years after the court decision, the man who had answered that call was still at Tufts, and confirmed not only receiving it, but the content of the conversation. Yet, when I confronted Stull about this (he was retired at that point), he denied trying to interfere with Ellery's admission, and claimed he had no knowledge of any call with a Tufts admissions officer.

So, a fundamentalist bigot and liar was my high school principal. Maybe I should have known this all along, since Abington, despite its stellar academic reputation, was also a conservative, very WASPy school with a dab of anti-Semitism thrown into the mix. I was a Jewish kid with a smart-ass attitude, so the anti-Jewish thing rolled right off me. In fact, the only time I noticed it was when a classmate signed my yearbook "to the coolest Jew I know." But close friends attested to this not-so-subtle bigotry, and some of it came out at our 25th reunion, when a speaker noted what an intelligent class we were because we "elected a Jew as class treasurer." Always wonderful to hear that old "Jews are good with money" stereotype.

So, religious intolerance was always stalking Abington's hallways, either in the undercurrent of anti-Semitism, or in a particularly boring way — the daily bible reading, which basically no one paid attention to — which then became the Super Bowl of issues with the Schempp case.

If nothing else, it helped me realize that organized religion is a crock, and I left it behind by the time I got to college. (I now identify as a Deist).

But researching and writing the Schempp story also helped me get in touch with an ugly reality — the ways in which those fighting for religious freedom are ferociously resisted, despite the righteousness —and legality — of their cause.

I especially felt for my classmate Donna Schempp (who had a graduate degree in social work and was working at a Montessori school at the time of our interview), who told me that all through high school she was a pretty scared kid, someone who just wanted to relate, but was ostracized and told she couldn't be friends with certain kids. "Lots of kids saw me and my brother as weird, unacceptable," she told me. "It was real traumatic."

Yet, Donna's trauma meant nothing to her tormentors. And, despite the fact that there is no law anywhere that says a student can't pray or read the bible in school, the religious fascists keep trying to mandate prayer in the schools by introducing a constitutional amendment to that effect on numerous occasions. (President Reagan proposed one a month before my piece appeared.) They've had no luck so far, but like all fanatics, they keep on trying.

So, on this 60th anniversary of the Schempp decision, I think it's important to acknowledge the bravery of the family: Donna, Roger, Ellery, mom Sid, dad Ed. They stood up for what is right, faced down the bigots, and won in the end.

With the rise of Christian nationalism, it's obvious the fight against the Religious Right is far from over, but there is no doubt that the Schempp clan belongs in the Religious Freedom Hall of Heroes.

*FFRF Member Lewis Beale is a journalist who has worked for newspapers in Los Angeles, Detroit and New York.*

# THEY SAID WHAT?



Dan Patrick

Allowing the Ten Commandments and prayer back into our public schools is one step we can take to make sure that all Texans have the right to freely express their sincerely held religious beliefs.

**Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, in a statement discussing three bills in the state that would inject religion into public schools.**

*Huffington Post, 4-27-23*

Sin is real. Sin. S-I-N. Is real. Sin is evil. Sin can exist in any institution. And we need to work hard, as the Minnesota Senate, to protect our young, vulnerable children's minds against these terrible, wicked, evil practices.

**Minnesota state Sen. Eric Luce-ro, while discussing his proposed amendment to the finance and policy bill HF-1999, which would "Prohibit funds to be used for any activities related to the occult, divination, necromancy, soothsaying, Satanism, pedophilia."**

*Daily Kos, 4-19-23*



Mark Steffen

Well, I'd be happy to try and convert you.

**Kansas state Sen. Mark Steffen, when asked by a Muslim woman how he would serve non-Christian constituents after he stated he legislates from a biblical background. When asked by a reporter if that's what he actually said, Steffen remarked, "I don't remember the meeting well at all, but I would be happy to convert anybody." He then asked the reporter if "you are interested in being converted? . . . Would you like to talk about God and the emptiness in one's life?"**

*Topeka Capital-Journal, 4-27-23*

It is not controversial for us to boldly declare that we want Christians to be writing the laws of the land according to the Word of God. . . . When bold believers take a stand for the biblical, moral law to be applied to our society, things change, and there is "rejoicing in the land." We will continue to do this from capital to capital all across America.

**Sean Feucht, a self-described "missionary, musician, activist, author and speaker," in his column, "The righteous must seize cultural authority."**

*Charisma News, 5-5-23*

Any parents that would have their child have a transgender surgery done on them? Any parent that would do that? They just need to be shot in the back of the head. They need to be convicted in trial and immediately shot in the back of the head, okay? And then we can string them up above a bridge . . . so that the public can see the consequences of that kind of wickedness.

**Preacher Jason Graber speaking at Sure Foundation Baptist Church, a New Independent Fundamental Baptist church in Spokane, Wash.**

*The Friendly Atheist, 5-17-23*



Kerri Seekins-Crowe

[I] spent hours on the floor in prayer because I didn't know that when I woke up if my daughter was going to be alive or not.

**Montana state Rep. Kerri Seekins-Crowe, who said she would rather have her daughter be suicidal than allow her to transition.**

*The Advocate, 4-30-23*

I was probably speaking more from a Christian perspective. I also went on to say we need real revival in this country.

**U.S. Rep. Tim Burchett of Tennessee, in an interview with Jim Acosta, on why he said, "We're not going to fix it," referring to gun violence in schools.**

*CNN, 4-30-23*

Every child is God's child, whether we like it or not.

**South Carolina state Sen. Rex Rice, while discussing the state's proposed six-week abortion ban. Rice has said if it were up to him, he would pass a bill banning abortion with no exceptions.**

*Washington Post, 5-22-23*

Our terrorist enemies hate homosexuals more than we do.

**Florida Republican Rep. Jeff Holcomb, speaking on the floor of the Florida Legislature.**

*Twitter, 5-2-23*

These are the people God has his hands on. They're actually used by God more powerfully than a lot of preachers. The devil wants to silence these voices. . . . Tucker is a casualty of war. I don't like it when the devil wins.

**Lance Wallnau, who has a seven-part plan for Christians to capture America, after longtime Fox News host Tucker Carlson was fired from the network.**

*Rolling Stone, 4-26-23*

ffrf

FREETHOUGHT  
TODAY

Published by Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

P.O. Box 750  
info@FFRF.org  
P 608.256.8900

EDITOR  
EDITOR EMERITUS  
EXECUTIVE PUBLISHER  
GRAPHIC DESIGNER  
COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR  
CONTRIBUTORS

Madison WI 53701  
FFRF.org  
F 608.204.0422

PJ Slinger editor@FFRF.org  
Bill Dunn  
Annie Laurie Gaylor  
Roger Daleiden  
Amit Pal

Dan Barker, Lewis Beale, Greg Fletcher, Alice Greczyn, Guido Guintini, Amy Hagstrom Miller, Elle Harris, Bruce Maiman, Chris Line, Elizabeth Reiner Platt

The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Freethought Matters returns Sunday Sept. 3



Photo by Chris Line

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





DeAngela Morant



Robert P. Jones



Amanda Tyler



Mark Dann



Bradley Onishi



Lauren Stovall



Barret Brown



Jen Castle



Emily Olson



Rogiërs Fibby



Lizz Winstead



André Forbes



Elie Mystal



Mary Ziegler



Candace Gorham



Dan Barker



Tahira Clayton



Cynthia McDonald



Kate Cohen



Rebecca Markert



Mike Freiberg



Annie Laurie Gaylor



Kelda Roys



Andrew Seidel



Ryan Jayne

# FFRF convention, Oct. 13-15

## Christian nationalism, abortion topics on tap

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is announcing a riveting line-up for its 46th annual convention, taking place largely on Friday, Oct. 13 and Saturday, Oct 14 at the Monona Terrace Convention Center in Madison, Wis.

We encourage you to reserve rooms now. The convention will take place for the first time in FFRF's 46-year history on a "Football Saturday" and convention-goers are competing with Wisconsin Badgers fans. Plan ahead so you are not disappointed. All details, including hotel contacts and deadlines, can be found on the back page.

The convention will not only showcase FFRF activism but will place special emphasis this year on the threats of white Christian nationalism and to abortion rights. It will also include "godless" entertainment and cameos by two drag queens!

- Newly confirmed speakers include:
- **Elie Mystal**, receiving FFRF's Clarence Darrow Award, a bronze statuette. The Harvard Law School grad and author of the bestselling *Allow Me To Retort — A Black Guy's Guide to the Constitution* is the justice correspondent for The Nation, and appears regularly as a commentator on MSNBC. He's executive editor of Above the Law, a website with about two million unique visitors focusing on law, courts and justice.
  - **Robert P. Jones**, founder and president of Public Religion Research Institute and author of two books on white Christian supremacy. PRRI is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that conducts independent research on religion, culture and public policy. He has a Ph.D. in religion from Emory University and an M.Div. from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, but left the Southern Baptist Church, writing *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*. He will also sign copies of the September 2023 release, *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and the Path to a Shared American Future*.
- A trio of other experts on white Christian nationalism will dominate the Saturday morning program. Joining announced "Champion of the First Amendment" honoree **Amanda Tyler**, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and or-

ganizer of Christians Against Christian Nationalism, will be two authors:

- **Andrew Seidel**, author of *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism Is Un-American* and *American Crusade: How the Supreme Court is Weaponizing Religious Freedom*. He worked for FFRF as a constitutional attorney and director of strategic response, and is now VP of strategic communications at Americans United.
  - **Bradley Onishi**, on the faculty at the University of San Francisco, is author of the new book, *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism — And What Comes Next*. Originally a Christian evangelical himself, he co-hosts the popular religion and politics podcast, "Straight White American Jesus."
- Two students who are suing West Texas A&M for violation of their free speech rights will be named student activist awardees. After university president Walter Wendler canceled a campus drag show set up as a benefit, they became the plaintiffs. The students, fittingly, will be introduced by two local drag queen performers. They are:
- **Lauren 'Laur' Stovall**, who runs a secular club at the university, and will receive the Diane and Stephen Uhl Out of God's Closet Student Award of \$5,000.
  - **Barrett Brown** will receive the Beverly and Richard Hermsen Student Activist Award of \$5,000.

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

- **Jen Castle**, national director of abortion service delivery at Planned Parenthood Federation of America, will accept on behalf of Planned Parenthood the \$35,000 Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award. Castle leads a team that supports the delivery of abortion care by staff across the nation, and is one of the few nurse practitioners trained to perform procedures later in pregnancy. She will report all that Planned Parenthood is doing to continue to provide access to abortion.
- **Mary Ziegler**, a noted abortion rights legal expert and advocate, will receive FFRF's "Forward Award," given to those who are moving society forward. She is the author of many articles and six books on social

movement struggles around reproduction, autonomy and the law, most recently, *Roe: The History of a National Obsession* (2023) and *Dollars for Life: The Anti-Abortion Movement and the Fall of the Republican Establishment* (2022). A graduate of Harvard Law School, she is a professor at the University of California-Davis and contributor to The New York Times, the Atlantic, PBS News-hour, CNN and the Washington Post.

**Lizz Winstead**, a political satirist, will receive FFRF's "Emperor Has No Clothes Award." Winstead is a prominent abortion rights activist and a founder of Abortion Access Front, a team of comedians, writers and producers who use humor to destigmatize abortion and expose the extremist forces working to destroy abortion rights. She was co-creator and head writer of Comedy Central's "The Daily Show," and a co-founder of Air America Radio. Her book of essays is called *Lizz Free or Die*. She will be the Saturday night keynote speaker.

Other speakers and events include:

- **Godless Gospel**, which will do an encore of its acclaimed debut at the 2022 national FFRF convention. **André Forbes**, a former gospel producer, is artistic director and **Dan Barker**, who formerly had a musical ministry background, is executive producer. Vocalists include **Rogiërs Fibby**, president of Black Nonbelievers of DC; **Candace Gorham**, author of *The Ebony Exodus Project*; **Cynthia McDonald**, an activist with Freedmen of Chicago; **DeAngela Morant**, a businesswoman from Florida, and **Tahira Clayton**, a jazz vocalist. All singers have a gospel music background.

**Kate Cohen**, who writes elegant, free-thinking columns as a Washington Post contributing writer exposing America's reflexive deference to religion and its effect on education, health care and human rights, will receive the Freethought Heroine Award. Her book, *We of Little Faith: An Atheist Comes Clean (And Why You Should Too)* will be out just in time for her to sign books for convention goers. She is the author of two previous books and her essays also appear in Slate, Salon, BuzzFeed, Bustle, Vox and Fine Cooking.

**Emily Olson**, a member of the city council in Owosso, Mich., who will receive FFRF's "Nothing Fails Like Prayer" Award for bravely attempting to persuade the

council to discontinue prayer.

A secular legislative panel, which will include Wisconsin **Sen. Kelda Roys**, first elected to the assembly in 2008 and the senate in 2020. She is an attorney, small business owner, and ardent supporter of abortion rights. **Rep. Mike Freiberg** has served as a Minnesota state representative since 2013, is an attorney for a nonprofit committed to improving public health, and is a founding member of the new Secular Government Caucus in the Minnesota Legislature. A third panelist will be announced soon.

The convention will feature appearances by some of the as-yet-to-be-awarded student essayists from its 2023 essay competitions.

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

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

An open house will be held on Thursday, Oct. 12, at FFRF's impressive office, Freethought Hall, in downtown Madison from 2-4 p.m., with complimentary refreshments and a self-guided tour. The office quadrupled in size, thanks to generous donors, in 2015, and includes an auditorium, library and many freethought artifacts.

Hot beverages and continental breakfast will start the Friday opening program, and complimentary cake and hot beverages will conclude the first day of the conference.

There will also be optional meals: a Friday buffet, and three group meals on Saturday.

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

See menu, hotel and registration details on back page or sign up at [ffrf.org/convo2023](http://ffrf.org/convo2023).



Freethought Today Cryptogram

KZ IMPCEVWB IMPI UQW MPFZ P BRVZ,

PCN VQGYPEZ UQWG FPRC PCN

DGZYWSDIWQWY NZYRGZ VQG P YZJQCN QCZ.

—GRJMPGN NPOERCY

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

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4			5	6	7		8	9	10	11
12					13					14			
15					16					17			
18					19					20			
			21						22				
23	24	25						26			27	28	29
30				31		32	33			34			
35			36			37				38			
39					40				41			42	
43				44					45		46		
				47			48	49					
	50	51				52					53	54	55
56						57				58			
59						60				61			
62						63				64			

Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

- Across
1. Farm calls

5. Network with an eye

8. Archaic “Listen!”

12. Female gamete

13. Distinctive atmosphere

14. Burj Khalifa location

15. Customary practice

16. Common black bird

17. Make corrections

18. \*Charles Darwin’s theory

20. \*Freethinking Groening or Dillon

21. \_\_\_\_-and-true

22. Ballerina’s do

23. “Get a move on!” (2 words)

26. Sail-holding ropes

30. Opposite of hence

31. Make wealthy

34. Daytime drama

35. Programs, for short

37. Exclamation of amazement

38. Handy

39. Looking for aliens org.

40. Like a celebrity

42. Behold

43. Attributes of an era

45. Be imminent

47. Antonym of keep

48. Aerosol can emanation

50. Infamous pirate Captain
52. \*Christian Bohr, or Alan Hale, or #5 Down

56. Secret clique

57. Field worker

58. Shoshonean people

59. Dress with a flare

60. Rainbows and such

61. Related to ears

62. Acapulco money

63. Itty-bitty

64. Grannies, in UK
- Down
1. Make someone yawn

2. Tel \_\_\_\_

3. Mercury or Saturn

4. Refines, as in ore

5. \*Physicist Marie \_\_\_\_: “Nothing in life is to be feared; it is only to be understood”

6. Progeny

7. Like a cut log

8. \*Believer in the agency of human beings, not God

9. Aid in crime

10. Deliver a tirade

11. Cassidy’s partner in crime

13. \*\*Take \_\_\_\_: urge your federal representative...”

14. Formal objection

19. Desires
22. Humbug lead-in

23. Oversight

24. Everglades wader

25. Canine, e.g.

26. Sound reflection

27. It’s measured in decibels

28. \_\_\_\_ of Pergamon, ancient Greek anatomist

29. \*Freethinker Keanu Reeves’ 1994 action thriller

32. Fish eggs, pl.

33. Positive or negative particle

36. \*Victim of inquisition \_\_\_\_ Bruno

38. Unnerve

40. Bloodshot

41. Telegram-senders

44. Move furtively

46. \*Irreverent Terry Jones’ “Monty \_\_\_\_’s Flying Circus”

48. Game outcome

49. Part of a whole

50. Leafy green

51. Wading bird

52. \*Irreverent “Pygmalion” author

53. I, to a Greek

54. What DJs do

55. Habitual twitches

56. Gown partner

# Singer Harry Belafonte, a nonbeliever, dies at 96

Singer, activist and nonbeliever Harry Belafonte died at age 96 from congestive heart failure on April 25 at his home in Manhattan, N.Y.

He was born March 1, 1927, in New York City to Melvine “Millie” (Love) and Harold Bellanfanti Sr., and attended Catholic services and parochial school. After



Photo by Shutterstock  
Harry Belafonte

Sunday Mass, his mother took him to the Apollo Theater to hear Cab Calloway or Count Basie or Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday or Ella Fitzgerald: “As suffocating and interminable as Mass seemed, I could endure it if I knew that a few short hours later I’d be in the real cathedral of spirituality,” he wrote in *My Song: A Memoir*.

“As my parents drifted apart, my mother grew more religious, which had direct implications for me,” Belafonte wrote. “My mother’s religion became everybody’s burden, especially my father’s.”

Though he frequented churches throughout his life, it wasn’t about religion. “He’s not a believer, never was,” wrote author Jeff Sharlet, who interviewed Belafonte at age 84. “For him it’s political. He can’t forgive the church the slave catechism taught by traders of the flesh. . . Every spiritual he sang on TV or in a concert hall was a message about this world, not the next.”

He began taking acting classes at the New School in the late 1940s alongside Marlon Brando, Tony Curtis, Walter Matthau, Bea Arthur and Sidney Poitier. He had started singing in nightclubs to pay for acting classes, backed in his first appearance by the Charlie Parker combo. He signed a recording contract with RCA Victor in 1953.

Belafonte’s breakthrough album “Calypso” (1956) became the first million-selling LP by a single artist, spending 31 weeks at No. 1 on the Billboard charts. It included “Day-O” (The Banana Boat Song) and lines like “Lift six foot, seven foot, eight foot bunch/Daylight come and we want to go home.” Before long, he was making

\$50,000 a week with his Las Vegas show.

He had married Marguerite Byrd in 1948 and they had two daughters, Adrienne and Shari, but separated with Shari in utero. They divorced in 1957, the year that Belafonte and Joan Collins had an alleged affair during the filming of “Island in the Sun.” “One reason, for Marguerite, was her newfound Catholicism. . . She knew how much I resented my Catholic education, and how fiercely I’d rejected the Church.”

Before the year was out, he married Julie Robinson. They had a son, David, and in 1961 a daughter, Gina, the last of his children. They divorced in 2004 after 47 years of marriage. He married Pamela Frank, a photographer, in 2008.

His artistry from the 1950s onward put him among fewer than two dozen EGOT recipients who have won Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony awards for achievements in television, recording, film and Broadway theater. He recorded in genres from blues, folk, gospel, show tunes, jazz and American standards. He recorded two live albums at Carnegie Hall, performed at President John F. Kennedy’s 1961 inaugural and included harmonica player Bob Dylan on his 1962 LP “Midnight Special.”

He became friends with Martin Luther King Jr. and was deeply involved in the struggle for civil rights in a dangerous time. “For Martin the tenets of nonviolence aligned with his deep religious faith — and that I would struggle with, for unlike Martin, I questioned the honesty of the church and the existence of God. We’d talk a lot about that,” he wrote.



Photo by Shutterstock  
Harry Belafonte’s star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

FFRF’S

Ask an Atheist

Wednesdays at Noon (Central)\*

On Facebook Live

Send in your comments & questions via Facebook or AskAnAtheist@ffrf.org

\*With occasional reruns.

Cryptogram hint

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

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

This month’s clue: M => H .



# FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

## FFRF gets VA center in W.Va. to remove cross

A VA facility in West Virginia got rid of a large cross from a screening room after FFRF objected on behalf of a veteran.

A disabled veteran informed the FFRF that on a March visit to the Louis Johnson VA Medical Center in Clarksburg, W.Va., they observed a large wooden Latin cross affixed to a mirror hanging on a wall in the Covid-19 screening room. The person had to undergo a screening prior to undergoing surgery at the hospital and explained to FFRF that the religious display made them “very uncomfortable” due to past religious trauma and abuse. Further, the person stated: “I fought for my country so that I, and others, would not have to witness state/church entanglement as a captive audience.”

Our Constitution’s Establishment Clause dictates that the government cannot in any way show favoritism toward religion, FFRF reminded the VA medical center.

FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Louis A. Johnson Veterans’ Administration Medical Center Executive Director Barbara Forsha: “By displaying a Latin cross in a location that hospital patrons like our complainant will inevitably observe, the hospital signals blatant favoritism towards religion over nonreligion, and Christianity above all other faiths.”

FFRF asked that the medical center remove the cross from the Covid-19 screening room — and it graciously complied.

“The Latin cross has been removed, the employee has been counseled on the display of personal faith symbols, and the Executive Leadership Team is in the process of reemphasizing the importance of maintaining a professional atmosphere to all employees at Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center,” Forsha responded. “To the veteran patient who experienced the feelings of trauma caused by the Latin cross, we sincerely apologize. In addition, we are grateful for you bringing this to our attention, so that we were able to remedy this incident and ensure that future veteran patients find our hospital to be a safe and welcoming environment, regardless of faith or lack thereof.”



## Prayer removed from Ind. school board meetings

A concerned FFRF member reported that members of the Crawford County (Ind.) Board of Education told those in attendance to stand during a prayer that immediately followed the Pledge of Allegiance.

FFRF Equal Justice Works Fellow Kat Grant wrote a letter to the district, requesting that the practice be immediately ceased. “The fact that the prayers are not on the meeting minutes or agenda do not make prayer at a public board meeting constitutional. Students and parents have the right — and often have reason — to participate in school board meetings,” Grant wrote.

FFRF heard back from Karen Sheller, president of the Crawford County Community Corp Board of Trustees. “I, too, have questioned this practice, but was assured that because prayer took place before the meeting started and not during the meeting, it was acceptable,” Sheller wrote. Sheller thanked FFRF for bringing the situation to her awareness and assured that the practice has been discontinued.

## FFRF Florida chapter no longer censored by team

After months of silence, the Central Florida Freethought Community’s Twitter account is no longer being blocked by a high school football team from the Seminole County Public School district.

In September 2022, FFRF was alerted that the CFFC had been blocked by the official Oviedo High School football team’s Twitter account. Though the exact reason as to why the chapter’s account was blocked is unknown, it is suspected that the censorship was viewpoint discrimination based on the chapter’s representation of the non-religious.

“We ask that the Oviedo High School football team unblock “@cflfreethought” on Twitter as well as any other accounts that

may have been inappropriately blocked,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote in a letter to the district’s legal counsel.

The counsel responded to the letter via email, informing FFRF that the Oviedo High School football account has unblocked the CFFC, an FFRF chapter.

## FFRF stops teacher’s religious questioning

A Texas elementary school in the Mineral Wells Independent School District has taken action to prevent teachers from discussing religion with students after a discriminatory lesson occurred.

A concerned Houston Elementary School parent contacted FFRF to report that on Nov. 7, 2022, the physical education teacher, as part of a lesson on diversity, asked third-grade students to raise their hands if they went to church. When a student did not raise their hand, the teacher reportedly directed sad looks at the student for the rest of the lesson, causing the student to feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. As a result of the lesson, fellow students asked throughout the rest of the day if the student really did not attend church or believe in God. Additionally, FFRF was informed that at least one other teacher promoted religion via options in their classroom prize box.

“Religion is often a divisive force in public schools, with minority religious and nonreligious students experiencing ostracization and even bullying for publicly identifying themselves as non-Christian,” FFRF Equal Justice Works Fellow Kat Grant wrote in a letter to Superintendent John Kuhn.

Kuhn replied to FFRF via email: “The principal informed the teacher that she should not inquire about students’ church attendance or religious beliefs. The teacher apologized for her error and said she did not mean to offend anyone.”

## Teacher involvement in religious club ends

After FFRF got involved, a middle school in the Corcoran Unified School District in California has moved to ensure that teachers will have no part in the student religious club.

An employee of John Muir Middle School reached out to FFRF in regard to a staff-wide email from one of the teachers encouraging staff to donate and help send students to the Christian youth ministry’s Young Life Wildlife summer camp. Two other teachers cosigned this document.

“We write to request that the district immediately investigate this situation and ensure that all religious clubs are run by students and not adults in accordance with the Equal Access Act and the United States Constitution,” FFRF Equal Justice Fellow Kat Grant wrote in a letter to Superintendent Eduardo Ochoa.

Ochoa responded to FFRF via email, stating that he has spoken with the principal of the middle school. “He is addressing the situation so that a repeat action of what took place does not happen again. He is speaking with all three of the adult staff members listed on the email as to why the adults need to be in a nonparticipatory capacity and what that translates to in real action.”

Ochoa assured FFRF that all religious clubs on campuses will be completely student-run in the future.

## No more religious remarks from school board members

The Chino Valley Unified School District in California has taken action to prevent board members from making religious comments during meetings, after receiving a warning from FFRF.

On April 6, a board member engaged with a community member regarding a resolution requiring staff to inform parents within three days if they became aware that a student might be identifying as a gender other than their sex assigned at birth. The community member was gay, to which the board member implied that the community member had been confused about his sexuality while growing up, before stating, “I was reflecting on what you were saying. I do love one man. I really love this man and that is Jesus Christ. It’s in my head.”

“[The board member]’s inappropriate proselytizing alienated our complainant and may constitute a violation of the injunction against the board,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote in a letter to the Chino Valley legal representative.

Attorney William A. Diedrich wrote to FFRF, stating that he had met with the board, and said that, “we believe the board is aware of its rights and obligations concerning the Establishment Clause and expression of religious beliefs during meetings of the Governing Board.”



### Include FFRF In Your Estate Planning


Arrange a bequest in your will or trust, or make the **Freedom From Religion Foundation** the beneficiary of an insurance policy, bank account or IRA.

**IT'S EASY TO DO!**

For related information (or to receive a bequest brochure), please contact:

Annie Laurie Gaylor  
at (608) 256-8900  
info@ffrf.org

**Freedom depends on freethinkers**



### 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](mailto:info@ffrf.org). Please include your name and physical mailing address with all email correspondence.

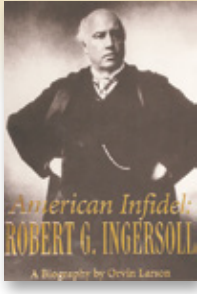
FFRF members wishing to receive online news releases, “action alerts” and “Freethought of the Day” should contact [info@ffrf.org](mailto:info@ffrf.org).

### American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll

By Orvin Larson

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

—Published by FFRF.  
316 pages / PB



Buy it from FFRF online  
@ [ffrf.org/shop](https://ffrf.org/shop)



# FFRF: Catholic charter school alarming

## State/church watchdog likely to take direct legal action

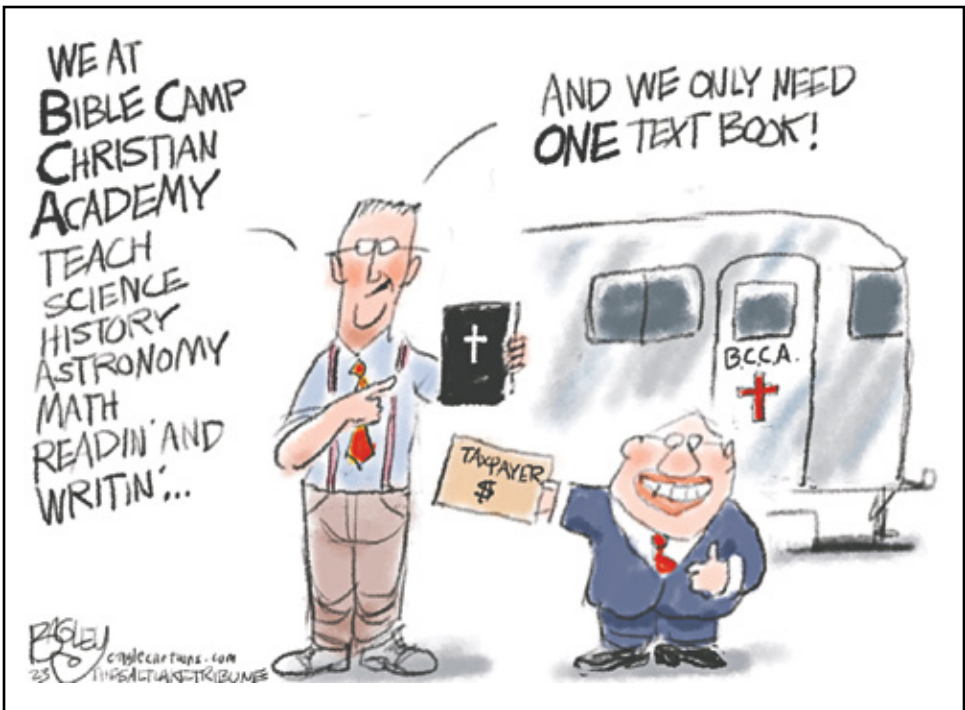
The Freedom From Religion Foundation is appalled that an official Oklahoma educational entity just approved the establishment of the first publicly funded religious charter school in the nation.

In violation of basic constitutional principles and Oklahoma statutes, the Oklahoma Statewide Virtual Charter School Board on June 5 gave the go-ahead to the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City and Diocese of Tulsa's application to run a religious charter school — St. Isidore of Seville Catholic Virtual School.

“State officials have allowed their personal religious preferences to take precedence over the Constitution by voting to force taxpayers to support a Catholic charter school,” says FFRE Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “The Notre Dame law clinic, which is leading the assault, intends to overturn laws around the country requiring public charter schools to be secular.”

FFRF has learned from the application that the Catholic charter appears to want to follow state laws and regulations only as long as they do not conflict with Catholic law. In other words, Catholic entities in Oklahoma are not hiding that this will be a pervasively Catholic religious school in all respects, and they plan to ignore any laws or policies that they determine don't align with their doctrine.

FFRF is not taking the Oklahoma Statewide Virtual Charter School Board's religious vote lightly, given



that this is a test case for the Catholic Church with national import. FFRF is considering a range of options, such as a direct legal challenge. Basic issues of law and fairness, as well as the future of secular public education, are at stake here — and the state/church watchdog will respond accordingly.

Since Oklahoma charter schools are state actors, they are restricted by the Oklahoma Constitution and the United States Constitution, FFRF asserted in a 10-page memo it published at the beginning of the year. Furthermore, the memo cited court decisions affirming that charter schools are public schools and, therefore, they cannot violate the constitutional rights of students. The Oklahoma Charter Schools Act specifically states that a private school cannot

be converted to a charter school, that the charter school must be “equally free and open to all students as traditional public schools” with public oversight, and that charter schools cannot be religious.

“The implications of today’s decision are quite serious, particularly for our rural schools and communities,” said Erika Wright, founder of the Oklahoma Rural Schools Coalition, during the meeting on June 5. “As rural Oklahomans, we want more support for our existing public schools. Oklahomans are not clamoring for this. This is the proverbial camel’s nose under the tent. And everyone in this room knows full well that this will not stop with a virtual charter school.”

What's baffling is that the applica-

tion clearly stated its intent to establish a religious charter school, as FFRF Legal Fellow Karen Heineman pointed out in a letter to the Oklahoma Statewide Virtual Charter School Board. This includes admitting “any” students so long as they are willing to adhere to the beliefs of the Catholic faith. Additionally, the curriculum would require religion and theology classes in students’ schedules. And hiring policies indicate that the school will retain its rights to consider religion in employment-related decisions.

A hearing session at an April board meeting made it clear that the public overwhelmingly opposes this scheme. It is unfortunate that Oklahoma Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters, who issued a diatribe against “radical leftists” opposing this approval because they “hate the Catholic Church,” seems set on tearing down secular, public education and replacing it with exclusionary, religious indoctrination at the public’s expense. The current Oklahoma Attorney General Gentner Drummond reversed his predecessor’s opinion in saying that such a charter school “misuses the concept of religious liberty by employing it as a means to justify state-funded religion.”

The charter school approval also brings to the fore tax inequity issues. Only 10 percent of Oklahoma taxpayers are Catholic, FFRF emphasizes, and yet all taxpayers would be forced to contribute to a Catholic virtual charter school siphoning taxpayer funds away from public schools to implement Catholic doctrine, robbing students of a secular education.

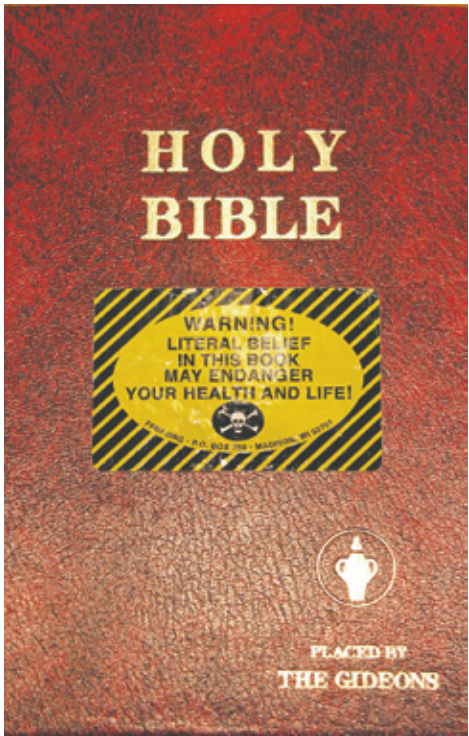
# FFRF helps get bible banned in Utah school district

A Utah school district in late May has banned the bible in its elementary and middle schools after a local parent complained and FFRF officially backed the complainant.

After the Davis School District in Farmington, Utah, began purging books containing so-called “pornographic or indecent material” under a state law passed last year, an anonymous parent in December contacted the district to point out that the bible likewise needed to be removed, since it contains “inappropriate and pornographic” material. The law considers something to be indecent if it includes explicit sexual arousal, stimulation, masturbation, intercourse, sodomy or fondling, according to the Salt Lake Tribune.

The 72,000-student district north of Salt Lake City in late May removed the bible from its elementary and middle schools while keeping it in high schools after a committee reviewed the Scriptures in response to a parental complaint. The district review committee found that while the bible does not contain sensitive material as defined by state law, it includes elements of “vulgarity or violence” that are not suitable for younger students.

“Incest, onanism, bestiality, prostitution, genital mutilation, fellatio, dildos, rape, and even infanticide,” said the parent in the official request. “You’ll no doubt find that the bible . . . has ‘no serious values for minors’ because it’s pornographic by our new definition.”



FFRF agreed with the parent and wrote a letter to the district.

“The parent rightly noted in their petition that, ‘If the books that have been banned so far are any indication for way lesser offenses, [the bible] should be a slam dunk.’ We agree,” writes FFRF Attorney Chris Line to Liz Mumford, president of the Davis School District Board of Education. “The district must enforce the law equally and may not extend a ‘get out of jail free card’ to books in violation of the law simply because they are religious.”

Line rebutted an April 24 letter

sent to the district by First Liberty, a Christian nationalist legal outfit, which warned that if the school removes the bible from libraries, it would present “serious constitutional concerns.” First Liberty erroneously claims that removal of the bible would “constitute hostility toward Christianity,” FFRF charges. “The district must hold religious texts to the same standards it holds all other library books, review them, and, if they contain the same inappropriate content as the bible, must also remove them under the district’s standards. Removing the bible for its obscenity or graphic sexual content based on neutral criteria is not religious discrimination and First Liberty’s specious concerns can easily be alleviated.”

Among the purged books is Nobel Literature Laureate Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, a sensitive portrayal of a Depression-era child enduring racism, incest and other abuse. FFRF contends that the bible's references to sex abuse, racism and incest are not at all sensitive by contrast.

FFRF's letter documents several bible verses displaying a pornographic view of sex and women, lewdness, depravity and sexual violence often ordered or countenanced by the biblical deity. These include sordid tales of victims forced to marry their rapists, graphic sexual depictions, and countless references to sperm, intercourse, menstruation, homosexuality, bestiality, adultery and "whores." Among one of many de-

scriptions inappropriate for the eyes of children is a bible story about a prostitute who “lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses,” who “longed for the lewdness of your youth, when . . . [her] bosom was caressed and your young breasts fondled.” (Ezekiel 23:20-21)

“We want to make it clear that we are adamantly opposed to banning books,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “But the religious zealots can’t have it both ways. They can’t scour books looking for sexual references or content to offend them — regardless of literary or social value and context — then say that the true obscenity found in the bible must be judged differently.”

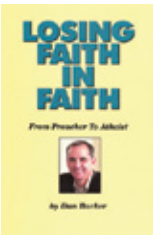
FFRF has written the district to appeal its decision to leave bibles in high school libraries while removing other so-called “obscene” works.

## **Losing Faith in Faith: *From Preacher to Atheist***

*By Dan Barker*

How Dan “threw out the bathwater and discovered there is no baby there.”

Published by FFRF



**Buy it from FFRF online**  
*[ffrf.org/shop](http://ffrf.org/shop)*



# Vouchers for religious schools expanding

Laws to put into place vouchers for religious schools, perhaps the most insidious encroachment of religion into our government, are being quietly expanded all over the country, warns the FFRF Action Fund.

Under the guise of “school choice,” voucher schemes and similar measures transfer taxpayer funds directly to private religious schools, simultaneously defunding public education and forcing taxpayers to subsidize religious indoctrination. (When voucher programs began to lose public favor, they were rebranded as Scholarship Tax Credits, Education Savings Accounts or other similarly named programs. While each kind of program operates slightly differently, the bottom-line accounting is the same: Taxes collected for public education are instead given to private schools to pay for tuition or other expenses. For simplicity, this statement is referring to all such schemes collectively as “vouchers.”)

Currently, 31 states, as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, have some form of a voucher program. That leaves only 19 states fully dedicated to the principle that public funds should go solely to public education.

This year has already seen voucher expansion in many states, but there is one piece of tentatively good news: Illinois’ existing voucher program is scheduled to end this year. Lawmakers are under pressure to renew the program from entities such as the Archdiocese of Chicago that are predictably not wanting to give up a stream of taxpayer funds into their bank accounts. However, the prospects seem bright that Illinois legislators will do the right thing to stand up for public education and against government-funded religious indoctrination.

Elsewhere, the situation is bleaker. State lawmakers have created or expanded voucher programs in Arkansas, Florida, Kansas, Indiana, Iowa,



Studies of voucher schemes in several states have repeatedly shown no evidence that the academics of voucher students are improved compared to public school students.

Montana, South Carolina and Utah. One recent trend is to transform existing voucher programs into “universal” vouchers, meaning every child in the state qualifies. Such expansion undercuts the central rationale used by pro-voucher forces: that they supposedly rescue low-income children from “failing” public schools. Universal vouchers allow billionaires’ kids, as well as all students who already attend private schools, to divert public funding. How can our public schools be expected to survive such assaults?

Meanwhile, there are ongoing efforts to create or expand voucher programs elsewhere, including in Alabama, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio and Texas.

There is certainly no convincing evidence that students who use vouchers to transfer from a public school to a private school benefit academically. Studies of voucher schemes in several states have repeatedly shown no evidence that the academics of voucher students are improved compared to public school students. This is despite the fact that voucher schemes directly harm public schools, which nevertheless still perform better.

Voucher schemes have proven to be ripe for fraud and abuse, often designed to generate profits for wealthy bureaucrats rather than to help stu-

dents. Private schools are, by design, less accountable than public schools, creating easy openings for corruption and malfeasance. In just one example, the New York Times covered how Steve Yarbrough, as president of the Arizona Senate, both promoted and personally profited off the state’s voucher program. Yarbrough reportedly pushed for a system where his own “tuition organization” was allowed to keep 10 percent of its donations to pay for overhead. The same organization funneled millions of dollars to a private company owned by Yarbrough, paid Yarbrough rent and bought Yarbrough a car.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which has been openly hostile to secular public education, has been agitating for non-Catholic taxpayers to pay for its religiously segregated schooling for more than 140 years. Enrollment in Catholic schools has been described as “hemorrhaging students for decades.” Catholic students make up the single largest number of students enrolled in private schools, so Catholic schools are eagerly waiting to cash in as the biggest beneficiaries of voucher schemes.

Vouchers are on the wrong side of the ongoing battle for racial equity. The precursor to modern vouchers was a series of attempts to keep

This article is from the FFRF Action Fund, a 501(c)(4) lobbying entity which reimburses FFRF for the space in Freethought Today. For more information about the FFRF Action Fund, go to [ffrfaction.org](http://ffrfaction.org).



schools segregated in direct response to Brown v. Board in 1954 and similar later decisions. Facing an order to integrate its public schools, Prince Edward County in Virginia slashed public school funding — then closed the schools completely — and offered white students private school tuition vouchers for use at an all-white private school in the area. Diverting funding from public schools to unaccountable private schools is steeped in a blatantly racist history that is antithetical to American values of fairness and equal justice under the law.

Finally, voucher programs are fundamentally un-American. In practice, the vast majority of voucher funds go to sectarian religious schools. This taxpayer-funded indoctrination is something the U.S. Constitution’s Framers considered, discussed and vehemently opposed. James Madison and Thomas Jefferson both argued that forcing taxpayers to pay for religious education was inappropriate government coercion. “Sinful and tyrannical,” Jefferson called it. Diverting public funds to pay for religious education violates the religious freedom of every taxpayer.

The Supreme Court recently ruled that if a state funds private secular education, a rare occurrence, it must also fund private religious education. Now, the Catholic Church is even arguing that it is entitled to taxpayer funds if a state decides to finance public charter schools. The silver lining is that this makes the only remaining solution clear and undeniable: Public funds should be used for public education only. As the Supreme Court wrote in the landmark *McColum* decision, “The public school is at once the symbol of our democracy and the most pervasive means for promoting our common destiny.” It must be protected.

The FFRF Action Fund will continue to fight to stop voucher expansion, and to end existing voucher schemes, in order to preserve our secular government and to protect high-quality public education throughout the United States.

## Reason Station returns



The Reason Station returned to the Warren (Mich.) City Hall for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic, according to FFRF Member Douglas Marshall. “We reopened to protest the city holding a National Day of Prayer event in City Hall,” Marshall said. “We had about 15 to 20 protesters.”

Natalie Palmer, left, joins Maggie Huntine and FFRF member Lee Helms in front of the Reason Station. In the other photo, standing outside Warren City Hall are Reason Station volunteers Jackie Dale and FFRF Member Ronnie Harvey.

Marshall earned FFRF’s Freethinker of the Year Award in 2015 as the plaintiff in FFRF’s federal court victory, forcing Warren to let him put up a Reason Station to counter an ongoing prayer booth.





# IN THE NEWS

## Christian nationalists make up 29% of population

A new survey by the Public Religion Research Institute and Brookings Institution shows that 29 percent of Americans qualify as Christian nationalists, and, of those, two-thirds define themselves as white evangelicals.

It finds that 10 percent of Americans are avowed Christian nationalists, what the survey calls “adherents,” while an additional 19 percent are sympathetic to Christian nationalist ideals.

Christian nationalists also tend to be older, with about six in 10 Christian nationalists and their sympathizers over the age of 50, the survey said. They are also far less educated than other Americans. Only 18 percent of Christian nationalism supporters have a four-year college degree, compared with 36 percent of those who were labeled skeptics and 48 percent of Christian nationalism rejecters.

## Illinois Catholic clergy abuse higher than reported

A probe by the Illinois Attorney General’s Office found that, between 1950 and 2019, 451 Catholic clergy abused 1,997 minors, far more than the church’s official number of 103 abusers when the state review started in 2018. Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul released the results May 23.

According to a preliminary probe conducted by Raoul’s predecessor Lisa Madigan, the state’s dioceses deemed only 26 percent of the allegations they received to be “credible,” while either not investigating or deeming the remaining 74 percent to be unsubstantiated.

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests in a statement called the report “stunning” and emphasized that the numbers of victims and abusers are likely undercounted, PBS reported.

“There is no questioning the facts of the report — until 2018 when the investigation began, hierarchs in every Illinois diocese kept known abusers under wraps, declined to include them on their accused lists, and refused to acknowledge the truth that survivors of abuse who came forward to make a report shared with them,” the statement said. “It is to us, in a word, disgusting that these supposed shepherds would lie so blatantly.”

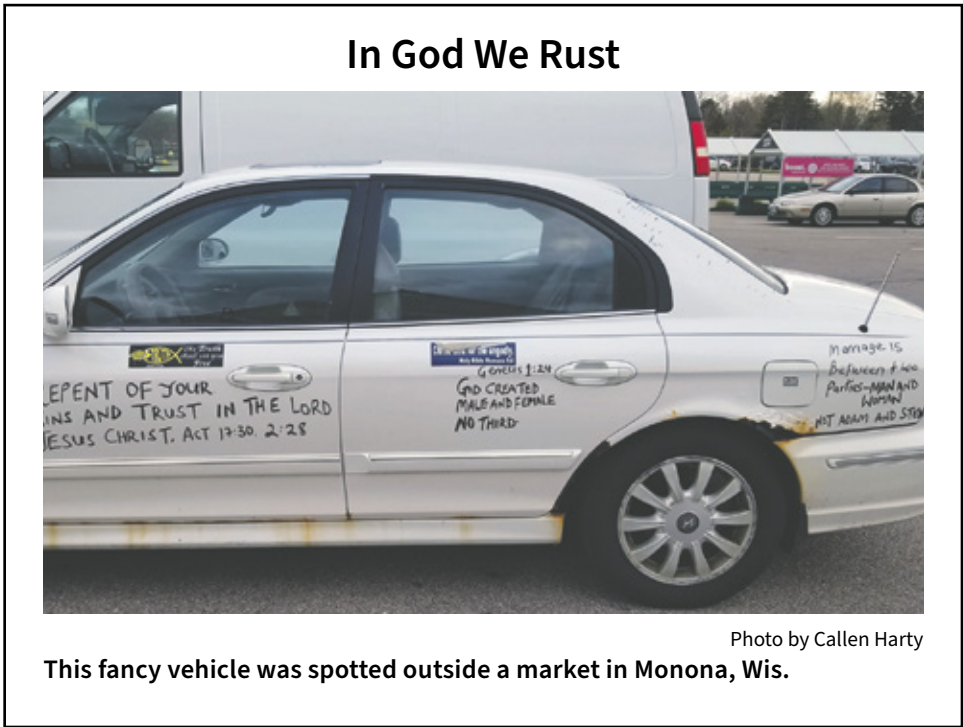
Madigan’s office said the problems went beyond a lack of effort by the church, and that in some cases, the church sought to work against the accusers.

“The preliminary stages of this investigation have already demonstrated that the Catholic Church cannot police itself,” she said.

## Poll: Belief in God not needed to be moral

Most Americans say it’s not necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values, according to a Pew Research Center survey. About two-thirds (65 percent) of Americans say this, while about a third (34 percent) say belief in God is an essential component of morality.

Roughly nine in 10 who say religion is not too or not at all important to them believe it is possible to be moral without believing in God, compared with only about half of Americans to whom religion is very or somewhat important (92



percent vs. 51 percent).

Politically, Democrats and those who lean Democratic are more likely than Republicans and Republican leaners to say it is not necessary to believe in God to be moral (71 percent vs. 59 percent).

Also, Americans under 50 are somewhat more likely than older adults to say that believing in God is not necessary to have good values (71 percent vs. 59 percent). Those with a college degree or higher are also more likely to believe this than those with a high school education or less (76 percent vs. 58 percent).

## Pa. district must allow After School Satan Club

A school district in Pennsylvania must allow students to convene an After School Satan Club, a federal judge ruled on May 1.

“In a victory for free speech and religious freedom, a federal court has ruled that the Saucon Valley School District must allow the After School Satan Club to meet in district facilities,” the ACLU announced.

In the filing, issued in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, a judge found that “here, although The Satanic Temple, Inc.’s objectors may challenge the sanctity of this controversially named organization, the sanctity of the First Amendment’s protections must prevail.”

The school district must allow the club, which is sponsored by The Satanic Temple, to meet during the school year on three previously agreed-upon dates, but it won’t have to distribute permission slips for the club for students to take home, according to the filing.

## Mississippi license plates free from IGWT

Mississippi’s license plates will no longer feature the words “In God We Trust.”

Gov. Tate Reeves unveiled a new design featuring a white background with a single white magnolia flower like the one on the state flag at its center.

Reeves asked Mississippians to help design the new license plate in November 2022. The License Tag Commission selected the winning design from more than 400 submissions.

Since 2019, Mississippi license plates have featured an off-center image of the Mississippi State Seal, which includes the words “In God We Trust.”

In June 2021, American Atheists and three plaintiffs sued the state over the plates, arguing that requiring nonreligious residents to display the words “In God We Trust” or pay a fee for an alternative tag violated their rights. American Atheists withdrew its suit after the plate changes were made.

## Judge: Miss. must allow religious exemptions

Mississippi must join most other states in allowing religious exemptions from vaccinations that children are required to receive so they can attend school, a federal judge has ruled.

U.S. District Judge Sul Ozerden handed down the decision April 17 in a lawsuit filed last year by several parents who say their religious beliefs have led them to keep their children unvaccinated and out of Mississippi schools.

Ozerden set a July 15 deadline for the Mississippi State Department of Health to allow religious exemptions. The state already allows people to apply for medical exemptions for a series of five vaccinations that are required for children to enroll in public or private school. The immunizations are against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis; polio; hepatitis; measles, mumps and rubella; and chickenpox. Mississippi does not require Covid-19 vaccinations.

## Texas passes bill to let chaplains in schools

The Texas Legislature has passed a bill that would allow schools to employ chaplains instead of school counselors, with Republicans overriding objections by Democrats to send the proposal to the governor’s desk.

The bill will permit school districts to hire chaplains who, unlike school counselors, are not required to be certified by the State Board for Educator Certification. A version of the bill already sailed through the state Senate in April, and the Texas House passed an amended version on May 9 in a vote that appeared to fall largely along party lines, with 89 voting in favor and 58 opposed.

“I worry that this bill will lead to Christian nationalists infiltrating our public schools and indoctrinating our students,” Democratic Rep. James Talarico, a Presbyterian seminarian, told Religion News Service.

## Southern Baptists lose 457K members in 2022

The Southern Baptist Convention has lost 3 million members since 2006, about half of that in the last five years.

The decline of the nation’s largest Protestant denomination continues as membership in the Southern Baptist Convention was down by nearly half a million in 2022, according to a recently released report.

Lifeway Research reported on May 9 that the SBC had 13.2 million members in 2022, down from 13.68 million in 2021. That’s a loss of 457,371 members.

Once a denomination of 16.3 million, the SBC has declined by more than 3 million members since 2006.

The denomination has also been in a continual state of crisis in recent years, including a major sex abuse scandal, controversies over race and an ongoing feud over the denomination’s leadership and future direction.

## Iran executes 3 for ‘waging war against God’

The Islamic Republic of Iran said it executed three men on May 19 on charges of “waging war against God” and collaboration with terrorist groups.

The judiciary’s website claimed that Majid Kazemi, Saleh Mirhashemi and Saeed Yaghoubi’s charges were based on their confessions that they were involved in killing three members of the regime’s forces during protests in Isfahan last November.

Protests in Isfahan and other cities across the country erupted in September after 22-year old Mahsa Amini, who was arrested for not fully abiding with the mandatory hijab rule of the country, died in police custody.

At least 22,000 people had been arrested across the country in the ensuing protests, according to the Islamic Republic News Agency.

Amnesty International said the men’s fast-tracked trial was flawed and pointed out there were significant procedural flaws, lack of evidence, and torture allegations that were never investigated.

## Education Dept. updates prayer in schools policy

On May 15, the U.S. Department of Education issued an updated “Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer and Religious Expression in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools” to clarify what is allowed or not allowed when it comes to religious expression in public schools.

The document reads, in part: “Teachers, school administrators, and other school employees may not encourage or discourage private prayer or other religious activity.

“The Constitution does not, however, prohibit school employees themselves from engaging in private prayer during the workday where they are not acting in their official capacities and where their prayer does not result in any coercion of students. . . . Employees engaging in such expression or observance may not, however, compel, coerce, persuade, or encourage students to join in the employee’s prayer or other religious activity, and a school may take reasonable measures to ensure that students are not pressured or encouraged to join in the private prayer of their teachers or coaches.”



Reason to celebrate!



**Proclamation**

*WHEREAS, the application of reason has been important for humanity's extraordinary scientific, medical, technological, and social progress; and*

*WHEREAS, reason provides vital hope today for confronting the environmental crises of our day, including the civilizational emergency of climate change, and for cultivating the rule of law, democratic institutions, justice, and peace among states and nations; and*

*WHEREAS, America's Founders drafted the Constitution to prevent official establishment of religion and to protect freedom of thought, speech and inquiry in civil society; and*

*WHEREAS, the Day of Reason focuses on the central importance of reason, critical thought, the scientific method, and free inquiry to resolving social problems and promoting the welfare of humankind;*

*THEREFORE, I, Jared Polis, Governor of the State of Colorado, do hereby proclaim*  
*May 4, 2023 as*

**DAY OF REASON**

The Metro Denver Chapter of FFRF, headed by Claudette StPierre, requested that the state make May 4, 2023, an official “Day of Reason.” Colorado Gov. Jared Polis approved the proclamation request.

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](http://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.”



**Cartoons for the Irreverent**  
Celebrating the Wit of Don Addis

Great Gift!

This unique collection published by FFRF celebrates the wit and irreverence of Don Addis, a legendary editorial cartoonist and atheist. Don's toons will make you laugh, then make you think.

—153 pages / PB

**\$15** ppd    Item # FB109



GOING NOWHERE

**Cartoons for the Irreverent: Celebrating the wit of Don Addis**

Buy it from FFRF online | [shop.ffrf.org](http://shop.ffrf.org)

‘Legislation’

Continued from page 1

Currently, 19 states restrict best practice medical care for at least some transgender people, and another 20 have considered such bills recently. As with abortion restrictions, we see lawmakers, who often claim to champion individual freedoms and “small government,” butting into individual medical decisions.

And for what? It’s certainly not for the well-being of patients involved. It is beyond dispute that failing to provide gender-affirming care is seriously dangerous to trans kids, and the whole point of medical autonomy is that patients and doctors can weigh benefits and risks based on the latest research. The real motivation is obvious if you listen to legislators behind these bills, and it’s the same reason they have always opposed same-sex marriage: They believe in a binary world where the notion of gender deviating from one’s sex assigned at birth, such as same-sex attraction, is unacceptable. And the root of this anti-scientific view is, of course, religious.

Vouchers

One threat to Christian nationalists is a well-educated populace that can see through their vacuous rhetoric and vote them out of office. It’s thus only logical that they seek to undermine secular public education and to promote religious indoctrination. Vouchers are a perfect fit. They divert taxpayer money from public schools into the bank accounts of private religious schools, under the unassuming banner of “school choice.”

In addition to the obvious state/church implications of forcing taxpayers to pay for sectarian religious education, we have no convincing evidence that vouchers help students academically. But, we do know that existing voucher schemes primarily benefit students who already attended private schools and are susceptible to fraud and abuse, enriching private schools and lawmakers alike with taxpayer dollars. We also know that modern vouchers grew out of an attempt to maintain racial segregation in American schools.

Still, many American voters fall for the warped perspective that voucher programs help low-income students escape failing public schools. That inaccurate sales pitch has led to new voucher programs, or expansions to existing programs, in at least nine states this year. In a transparent money grab, Catholic schools in Iowa instantly raised their tuition to match the amount of public funds made available under the new scheme.

Parental rights

Another assault on public schools is conducted under the false banner of “parental rights.” First championed in Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis’ “Don’t Say Gay” law, many other states have followed suit. The prohibition on discussing sexual orientation in any capacity has proven to be a winning idea in conservative states. Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed into law an education overhaul bill that, among other awful provisions, prohibits classroom instruction on gender identity or sexual orientation before fifth grade. Iowa, Missouri, North Carolina and Oklahoma are just a few of the other states that have either passed, or introduced, similar bills this session. FFRF Action Fund warned of these bills earlier this year.

Copycat laws, like Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” law, not only place a prohibition on classroom discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity, but they often allow for the censorship of books that are

perceived to be inappropriate for students. The effects of the reckless law were seen recently in Florida when a mother, who admitted she hadn’t read the book she was attempting to ban, successfully petitioned a library to remove a book because of an objectively innocuous poem.

PEN America reports over 1,400 book bans, affecting 874 unique titles, implemented or introduced during the 2022–23 school year. According to the report, 74 percent are the result of organized efforts of advocacy groups, elected officials and/or enacted legislation. A group called Moms for Liberty is connected to 58 percent of all advocacy-led book bans around the country. PEN America says there is an expanded censorship of themes centered on race, history, sexual orientation and gender. Christian nationalists associated with groups like Moms for Liberty have become increasingly emboldened by state laws that tout parental rights. Make no mistake about it, however: So-called “parental rights” bills are detrimental to our public education system and do a disservice to our children.

Texas

And then there’s Texas. The only good thing about the Texas legislative session is that it’s over, and we don’t have to worry about it until 2025. Christian nationalists, such as Sens. Mayes Middleton and Brandon Creighton and Reps. Briscoe Cain, Cole Hefner and Steve Toth, were working hard this session to turn Texas into the Christian theocracy they so deeply desire. They tried to enact a law that would require a version of the Ten Commandments to be displayed in every public school classroom. They sought to allow public school employees the right to engage in religious speech or prayer while on duty. And they successfully passed a bill that would allow school districts to employ, or accept as volunteers, uncredentialed chaplains to take the place of school counselors and social workers.

Promising trends

The 2023 state legislative sessions weren’t all packed with doom and gloom. Legislators in some states decided to counter the Christian nationalist agenda by introducing or passing legislation that would do good things. Vermont became the eighth state to ban marriage for anyone under 18 years of age, and Michigan and Connecticut are on the verge of following suit. Nevada passed a medical-aid-in-dying bill, although it’s likely to be vetoed. These bills allow terminally ill patients to die on their own terms and with the dignity they deserve. Many other states are considering similar bills.

In addition to supporting these legislative trends, FFRF Action Fund proactively took on the issue of secular recovery in Michigan. It worked closely with legislators in Michigan to draft a bill requiring judges to offer secular options alongside traditional 12-step substance abuse recovery programs. The bill was recently introduced in the Michigan House of Representatives. The Michigan Legislature is one of 10 full-time legislatures, so time is on our side in getting this bill passed.

Looking ahead

Christian nationalists know that demographic trends are against them, and they are scrambling to pass long-lasting bills that will allow them to cling to power and control other people’s lives. Secular voters and activists must stand at the vanguard of the opposition, and we must vigorously advance proactive legislation where we can. It’s going to be a long fight ahead, but it’s a fight worth the effort to win.

Ryan Jayne is FFRF’s senior policy counsel and Ryan Dudley is FFRF’s state advocacy specialist.



Freethought Heroine Award

Freedom from shame led to freedom of thought

*This is the speech given by Alice Greczyn at FFRF's national convention on Oct. 29, 2022, in San Antonio, Texas. She was introduced by FFRF State Advocacy Specialist Ryan Dudley. You can watch it at [ffrf.us/convention-2022](https://ffrf.us/convention-2022).*

**Ryan Dudley:** Alice Greczyn is this year's Freethought Heroine.

Alice has appeared in many movies and TV series, including "Dukes of Hazard," "Lincoln Heights," "The Lying Game," "The Young and The Restless," "Sex Drive," "Fat Albert" and "Shrooms."

She was raised in the Midwest, but Alice's nomadic childhood moved her around the United States until her modeling career as a teenager led to an acting career in Hollywood. She is author of *Wayward: A Memoir of Spiritual Warfare and Sexual Purity*, which tells her own story involving a painful but rewarding transition from evangelical Christianity to atheism. After her traumatic experience of escaping religion, which she will be talking about, Alice started the group Dare to Doubt, a resource for people who are leaving harmful belief systems. On behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, we thank you, Alice, for your candor, activism and for providing a resource for others who "dare to doubt."

Alice, please come up and accept your award.

By Alice Greczyn

Thank you so very much to Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker, and to the Freedom From Religion Foundation for this very special honor.

I'm here to tell you what freethought means to me, but before I do that, I'd like to make a confession. I sometimes feel like a bad atheist. Like, I'm supposed to be a humanist but I'm really a nihilist. Like, I'm expected to be a Democrat but I'm really a Libertarian. Like, I'm supposed to shun all things that might be "spiritual," but I'm really intrigued by the possibility of consciousness in trees and what we call near-death experiences.

I grew up in a strain of Christianity that taught me there was only one way to think — one good way, one true way, one right way. I memorized bible verses like the one that said, "Lean not on your own understanding," and another which said, "The heart is deceitful above all things."

From a young age, I learned that my mind was dangerous and that my desires were sinful. My obedient nature compelled me to conform to ideology rather than challenge it, at least too much. Questions were always welcome as long as one accepted the right answers. Because the hunger of my rational mind wasn't easily satisfied, I learned it was best to keep my doubts and ideas in a prison of my own making. My thoughts felt anything but free.

The particular strain of Christianity that shaped me is tricky to pinpoint because my family and I did not consider ourselves religious. We called ourselves nondenominational, but I knew from magazines my mom kept in the bathroom that Christian media outlets considered my family Charismatic. I wouldn't know until I was an adult that the secular media would have considered us evangelical — or



Photo by Steve Solomon

Actress Alice Greczyn spoke to the FFRF convention audience about growing up in a highly religious environment and how she was able to become a freethinker.

worse, fundamentalist.

All I knew as a homeschooled child was that our lives were led by what God told people. If God put something on someone's heart, like giving my dad a job, it happened. When God put on my dad's heart to give away his job, it happened. Eventually, God put on my parents' hearts to remain jobless, to sell our house, and to live in campgrounds across North America indefinitely. We called it living by faith. The secular media would have called us homeless.

Betrothed at 17

God never put anything on my heart. For reasons I didn't know — reasons I blamed myself for — God never spoke to me, and so my life was governed by what he told others. When God told a pastor that secular music was evil, I broke my favorite CDs. When God told a friend to call me out for wearing shorts, I repented and put on a long skirt. When God told a guy from my youth group that I was his future wife, our parents affirmed God's will, and I was betrothed to marry him. I was 17 years old.

God didn't tell me about this betrothal. Instead, he told the man who was to be my future husband. This was not uncommon in our world. What was uncommon was that I didn't love him. He was just a friend and I was just a girl, so it made sense that God would tell him and not me. As a female, it was my duty to submit to the headship of a man. My conditioning was such that I did so unquestioningly. I wanted to cry at the thought of marrying him, but I was so accustomed to obeying God's will that I didn't even question what people said God's will was. So, I lied about how happy I was to my fiancé, my parents and myself.

My betrothal at 17 was the pinnacle of my mind's imprisonment. By that point in my life, I had trained myself to suppress my own thoughts and heed the thoughts of others. I'd learned to trade the desires of my heart for the desires of other people's hearts, to re-

place my ideas with the ideas of those around me, and to repent for thoughts that didn't align with what I was told God wanted. If God wanted me to marry a man I didn't love, so be it.

But somewhere inside me was a woman on the verge of setting herself free. I eventually found the courage to break off my betrothal. It was the hardest thing I've ever done and remains so to this day. I didn't know it then, but ending my betrothal began the end of my faith. It's a long story, and I wrote a book about it, if you're interested. But what I feel is important to share with you now is how I came to be a freethinker.

I moved to Los Angeles by myself at the age of 17 to pursue acting. I believed with all my heart that God was calling me to the mission field of Hollywood. To say my Christian values were shaken upon moving to L.A. would be nothing short of an understatement. I didn't know where to look when men held hands. I had to practice saying, "Fuck," because an audition re-

quired it of me, and the word wouldn't get comfortable in my mouth. My first kiss happened in acting class when my teacher assigned me and a boy the roles of Laura and Jim from "The Glass Menagerie." I remember feeling sick afterward and avoiding my scene partner's eyes, for I had broken my vow to save my first kiss for my wedding day.

But my Christian values were shaken

in good ways, too — ways that, at the time, felt scary. The world outside the church wasn't broken. In fact, it didn't look like anything I'd been taught it was, all lost and empty and sinful. No, the nonbelievers I met seemed happy — genuinely happy — and they were as good and moral as any Christian I'd known. Maybe even more so.

As the years of my late teens passed, and as my circle of friends widened, the concept of hell began weighing on me in ways it hadn't before. None of my friends were Christians. Well, one was, but she was having sex with her boyfriend, so she didn't count. The rest of my friends were mostly secular, while a few fell into the hell-bound brackets of Scientologist, Jewish and gay. They were the kindest, most accepting, and most tolerant people I had ever met. I sometimes felt overwhelmed by them, by their bawdy freedom and irreverent sense of humor. What I never felt around them was shame.

Shame fit me like a cozy sweater. If I felt shameless, I felt naked, for there must be something I wasn't repenting for. One must always be in a constant state of repentance to be clean in the eyes of God, and if one didn't feel shame, how could one be truly repentant?

Used to feeling shame

I was very used to feeling shame around my church friends. I honestly don't think any of them meant to shame me, but shame was the emotion I felt when I was called into righteousness in the name of love. To love meant to hold one another accountable. It meant to point out each other's sins so that we might be corrected. It meant policing our words and actions, and even our thoughts. For thoughts, as the saying went, led to words which led to actions. No one told me this wasn't always true, and so I policed my mind with a hyper-vigilance I have still not recovered from. The neural pathways of my brain matured under a microscope of morality that I surrendered to, for surrender to shame meant surrender to God.

My faith would not have changed without the shame-free love of my non-Christian friends. This is how I came to be a freethinker. My friends did not hold one another accountable. They did not require me to agree with them about everything — or anything — in order to love and accept me. My secular friends never pressured me to see things their way. They never threatened to disaffiliate from me if I said something they found problematic. They never used words like "problematic" or "harmful" or "sinful." They never called me out on anything, and they never made me feel anything remotely close to shame.

“I learned it was best to keep my doubts and ideas in a prison of my own making. My thoughts felt anything but free.”

Women Without Superstition

"No Gods—No Masters"

Edited by, Annie Laurie Gaylor

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

—Published by FFRF.

696 pages / HB

WOMEN WITHOUT SUPERSTITION

"No Gods—No Masters"

THE COLLECTED WRITINGS OF WOMEN FREETHINKERS OF THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

Edited by Annie Laurie Gaylor

Buy it from FFRF online

[ffrf.org/shop](https://ffrf.org/shop)

The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible

By Ruth Hurmence Green

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

—Published by FFRF. 440 pages / PB

HOLY BIBLE

The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible

By Ruth Hurmence Green

Buy it from FFRF online

[ffrf.org/shop](https://ffrf.org/shop)





Photo by Chris Line

Alice Greczyn is given FFRF’s Freethought Heroine Award by FFRF State Advocacy Specialist Ryan Dudley on Oct. 29, 2022, in San Antonio.

It was freedom from shame that led to my freedom of thought. Being around my non-Christian and secular friends — friends who were non-judgmental, compassionate and empathetic; friends who valued difference and diversity; friends I never saw publicly humiliate one another — being around these individuals showed me an entirely different way of existing. The world outside the church was not only unbroken, it was whole — full of grace, laughter and love. This defied everything I’d been taught about the fleshly realm I’d been told to fear.

It was shame and fear, and fear of shame, that kept me in religion as long as I was. And I can’t tell you how concerned I am to realize that, had I been a 17-year-old moving to Los Angeles today, I may never have left the faith that kept my mind imprisoned. I may never have summoned the courage to break off my arranged betrothal. I may never have found secular friends who didn’t hold one another accountable for perceived moral sins.

Secular shaming

If I had moved to Los Angeles as a teenager today, I might have found that the non-Christian world was just as harsh and unforgiving as I’d been taught to believe. I might have experienced the secular world to be just as shame-inducing as the world of the church, but scarier, because at least Christianity offered a path to redemption when one was accused of committing a wrong. At least Christians pretended to extend grace to those accused of harmful words and actions.

In large parts of the secular world today — present company excluded — grace is not only withheld, it doesn’t seem to exist.

Even when someone says they are sorry and repents the ways they are demanded to, the scolding continues, with

self-righteous caller-outers issuing a callous, “Do better.” Christ at least said, “You are forgiven.”

I don’t observe such grace in the Los Angeles I live in today — nor in much of the America I live in today. The liberal, secular world where I once found acceptance is now where I find myself walking on eggshells, just as I did in the church. The liberal, secular world is where I now find myself censoring thoughts before they dare lead to words or actions. The liberal, secular world is where I am now terrified to ask a question, to counter a point, or to show evidence contrary to a story we’re all supposed to believe. The liberal, secular world where I once found freedom from shame is now quick to heap shame on the masses — shame so internet-thunderous that it’s led to people taking their own lives.

In the secular world of my youth, a world before social media, my friends asked gentle questions in the privacy of our hikes and dining rooms. Sometimes they challenged me, particularly on my pro-life stance and my belief in hell, and when they did, I always felt their love and curiosity. When we disagreed, they did not blast our differences to the world.

It was the shame-free acceptance of my friends that made me feel safe enough to have conversations that slowly changed my beliefs. It was a lack of accountability, a lack of being called-out, that led to my lack of fear. This freedom to question and share without fear or shame led me to ponder things I would never have dared.

I observe fear and shame to be the most powerful inhibitors of freethought. Together, fear and shame arrest us from empathy, from curiosity, and from the pursuits of liberty and love that give our lives meaning. When we are afraid to think, for our thoughts might lead to the words and actions we are told are

condemnable, we trap ourselves and each other in cycles of ever-increasing dogma and obedience. No one may question whether the dogma is sound or the obedience blind.

It troubles me, deeply, to observe cycles of fear and shame being wielded outside of the religious sphere. People are being shamed for their ignorance, their disagreement, and often for simply being misunderstood. The ones who haven’t been shamed yet wait fearfully for their turn to be called out, to be cancelled, to be publicly held accountable for daring to think differently and not going along with the program. I don’t observe this to win hearts and change minds.

Maybe some of you are thinking, “But what about the very real need for accountability?” I think public accountability has its time and place, especially for crimes of a violent or violating nature. But I also think there is a very real need for compassion and understanding, especially toward those we disagree with. There is a need for patience, for a long-game approach to the long-lasting goals we wish to see. It’s hard to change a long-held view when the whole world is watching and waiting for you to mess up. It’s hard to make mistakes in public and mistakes are often how we learn.

I don’t think it’s far-fetched to say that I would not have left my faith had I moved to Los Angeles today. I don’t think I would have found the grace for my ignorance and the acceptance of my difference that I found there 20 years ago. I think the non-Christian world I might have encountered as a teenager today would have pushed me right back into religion’s folds, because the grace of Christianity may be based on a mythological tale, but at least there is grace.

So, what freethought means to me is quite literally everything. Freedom of thought is what allowed me to claim my freedom from religion, which allowed me freedom in every aspect of my life that was once controlled by fear and shame.

Meaning of freethought

Freethought, to me, means the freedom to question and learn. It’s the freedom to seek out multiple points of view without fear of condemnation and to share ideas without the risk of ostracism. Freethought, to me, means the acceptance of diversity — including the diversity of thought, belief and opinion. Freethought, to me, means the bold courage

to resist peer pressure, to counter shame with grace, and to give ourselves and each other permission to change our minds with encouragement rather than righteousness.

My friend Dave Warnock, who some of you may know, once said that we who are secular need to be better than the church. If we hope to encourage more people to leave the church’s fear-driven folds; if we hope to loosen the theocratic hold Christianity has on our Supreme Court, on our public schools, and on our fellow citizens; and if we hope to live freedom of thought by example, we must be better than the church. We must differ with respect and disagree with curiosity. We must not shun and shame each other for differences of perspective as the church so often does. We must not hold one another accountable in public spotlights the way Christians call out one another’s sins.

As secular folk, we are at risk of alienating people who may very much want to leave their religions and de-convert. They are watching us, wondering what it will cost them to leave and weighing whether the price is worth it. These people, like my younger self, are afraid of losing the only community they may know, however stifling and shaming it might be. They might stay right where they are when they see our communities stifling and shaming each other just as harshly. Worse, we who are secular are at risk of wielding shame without hope for forgiveness, grace, or redemption. I believe we can be better than that. I know we can.

So, freedom of thought, to me, ultimately means freedom from fear and freedom from shame. It means sharing my ideas knowing that I’ll be wrong sometimes — and that my mistakes will only make me wiser, especially when met with compassion. Freedom of thought, to me, means encouraging others to think freely, too. It means helping them resist the shackles of fear and shame, both in and outside of religion. It means asking dangerous questions, sharing taboo thoughts, and advocating for mercy in a world that’s screaming for justice. Justice is sorely needed, but we cannot forget the value of mercy, too. It was the mercy of my secular friends that allowed me to flourish into the freethinking woman you see in front of you today.

This is what freethought means to me. Thank you.



Photo by Chris Line

Alice Greczyn chats with an FFRF member during her book signing event at FFRF’s national convention.



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

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

Join us @ [we-dissent.org](https://we-dissent.org)



Out of God’s Closet scholarship award

Book makes humanism accessible to kids

*This is the speech given by Elle Harris at FFRF’s national convention on Oct. 29, 2022. She was introduced by Greg Uhl, who is the nephew of the late Steve and Diane Uhl, two major supporters of FFRF. To watch Elle’s speech, go to [ffrf.us/convention-2022](https://ffrf.us/convention-2022).*

**Greg Uhl:** I’m so truly honored to be here to represent the Uhl family. I suspect some of you had the pleasure of knowing my favorite aunt and uncle, Diane and Steve Uhl. Uncle Steve died at the age of 90 in February 2021 and Aunt Diane in April 2022 at the age of 85. They lived up to their motto of “Live long and die short.”

They devoted their lives to education and to secular causes and were particularly ardent supporters of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. In 2004, they asked me to be the executor of their estate, and so it is with immense pride that I tell you that the Uhl family trust just wired \$1,301,937 to FFRF.

In 2006, Uncle Steve wrote a book titled *Imagine No Superstition* and then retitled it, *Out of God’s Closet*, in a later printing. The book is a personal chronicle of his journey from Southern Indiana farmboy to priest to atheist.

Before Aunt Diane died this past April, she created an “Out of God’s Closet” \$5,000 student scholarship in the memory of Uncle Steve. She intended for the scholarship to be awarded each year to a freethought nonbelief activist. This year, I have the pleasure to honor a delightfully bright young author who, at the age of 11, has already written two books.

The idea behind her latest book, called *Elle the Humanist*, came about when she had a friend come to her and say she had a hard time imagining someone who didn’t go to church or pray. My middle son’s preschool teacher said, “Jesus died for our sins.” After which a classmate said, “No! He’s not dead, Jesus lives!” And our boy said, “Uh-uh, Jesus is dead. They nailed him to the T.” True story.

This year’s award winner’s conversations with her third-grade classmates resulted in her book to introduce humanism to young readers. Our scholarship winner is also the



Elle Harris speaks at FFRF’s national convention about how she came to write, with her father, the book *Elle the Humanist*.

younger sister of Bailey Harris, who previously won a scholarship award from FFRF for her series of Stardust books. Please welcome our 2022 Out of God’s Closet student scholarship winner, Elle Harris.

By Elle Harris

Hello, everyone! First of all, thank you so much to Greg and his family for this very special award and scholarship in memory of their amazing uncle, Stephen. I am so honored. One of the things that Stephen said that I love is, “I respect people for their deeds, not their creeds.” Thank you, FFRF, for the opportunity to speak with you today. I’m happy to be messin’ with Texas with y’all!

I will start off by telling a little bit about myself. I have two brothers, one sister and two dogs. We live in

Santa Barbara, Calif. I love concerts, surfing and soccer.

My family also loves science, and we grew up watching shows like “Cosmos,” “PBS Kids” and “Bill Nye the Science Guy.” My family is also secular and I grew up learning about the seven secular virtues and the Platinum Rule. Many of you probably know my sister Bailey. She is also a secular activist. She spoke at FFRF conference in San Francisco in 2018.

I have grown up traveling around the country, watching Bailey at her speaking events. I dreamed of being on the stage myself someday and today you have made that dream come true.

I wrote my first book when I was on a flight from China back to the United States. I always wanted to write my own book like my sister and I had the idea of my first book in the middle of the night on that flight. This book was very simple and it was about all the things I love most in the world.

Now, I will talk to you about my latest book, *Elle the Humanist*.

I attended an elementary school in Salt Lake City, Utah, when I was 8 years old. That year, many of my school friends started talking to me about religion. Mormon children are baptized when they are 8, so they started talking about their religion and baptisms with me at school that year. I loved these conversations.

For example, one of my friends, Penny, asked me what church I go to. I told her I didn’t go to any church. She didn’t even know that was possible. She said I was the first person she knew that isn’t religious.

So, I went home and talked to my parents about this. They taught me about the thousands of different religions and gods that people have believed in throughout history. They taught me about the different gods that people believe in today around

the world and that almost all people believe in a religion that their parents taught them to believe in when they were young.

I wonder what gods people will believe in a hundred years from now? I hope it’s Harry Styles.

They told me that there are more and more people every day who aren’t part of a religion. My mom calls herself a humanist and my dad calls himself an atheist. They said I could choose to call myself whatever I would like. After talking with my parents about the word “humanist,” I decided that I liked that one.

Because I enjoyed my conversations with my friends at school, I asked my dad to help me write a book this to share my experience with children and families. We spent the next nine months writing this book.

For the release of the book, I got on Utah news talking about humanism, which was so cool. I was on so many podcasts and shows, including Freethought Radio with Dan and Annie Laurie. We were so excited that the amazing philosopher and author Daniel Dennett was willing to write the foreword to my book. I am so fortunate to have the support of people like Dan Barker, Margaret Downey and many others who wrote blurbs to support my book.

This book was translated into German. We also donated the rights of *Elle the Humanist* to the Translation Project. This project allows people in Muslim-majority countries to download books about science and freethought for free. My book was the first children’s book in the program. I’m so happy to know that thousands of children around the world will be able to read my book and help them learn about ethics and humanism.

Earlier this year, I read my book to children in a village in Peru, where I did my humanitarian trip with my family. This was so much fun.

But not everyone loves my book. This is my favorite one-star review on Amazon: “They should rename this book *Elle the Snowflake*. I would strongly discourage anyone from purchasing this book unless you run out of wood for your fireplace and need something to burn.”

But, I prefer to focus on the people who are helping with my book. For every negative comment, there are 30 positive comments. And this makes me so excited to continue

See Elle on page 13



Elle Harris shows off her two books during a book-signing event after her speech.



Elle Harris and Greg Uhl.



# We’re done with ‘thoughts and prayers’

This article first appeared on FFRF’s blog site, *FreethoughtNow.org*, on May 8.

By Barbara Alvarez

Another week in the United States, another mass shooting. This is a public health crisis, making it long overdue that we start legislating from facts — not the bible.

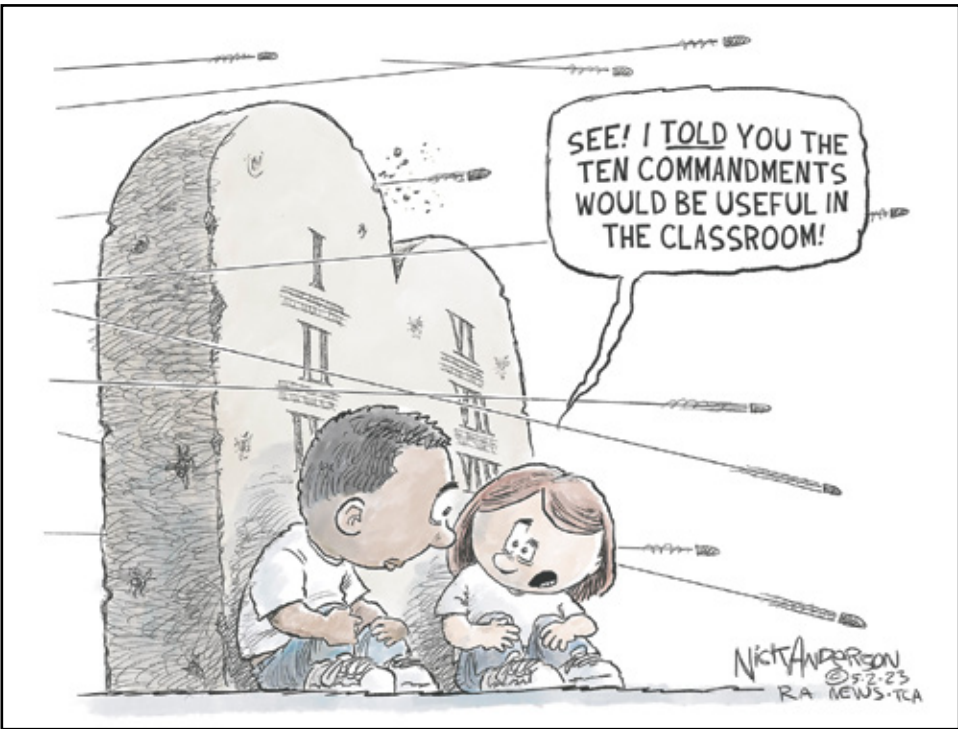
Recently, my husband, Nick, and I were in Texas. He had arrived in Dallas on May 1 for a work trip, and I joined him later in the week. We went to the spot where President Kennedy was assassinated. We also visited the Sixth Floor Museum, the former Texas School Book Depository building from which Lee Harvey Oswald fired at and killed the president.



Barbara Alvarez

While we were in Texas, I received a text from my mother alerting me about a shooting near Dallas. However, it wasn’t until the following day, en route to the airport, that we learned more about the eight killed and seven wounded at the Texas outlet mall on May 6. Nick gasped loudly, “Which mall was this?” I replied that the news reported it to be Allen Premium Outlets. Shocked, he said that he had been at that exact same mall earlier in the week to buy gifts for Mother’s Day. Nick and I were both silent. He was particularly startled that the place he had gone to so casually a few days ago was now the site of a mass murder. As we pulled into the airport car rental lot, I read a quote from Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who described the shooting as “this unspeakable tragedy.” Nick remarked, “You can’t keep calling it a ‘tragedy’ if you never do anything about it.”

But, sadly, this is what is expected of us: Be sorrowful for a moment, shrug our



shoulders, say “Well, that’s life in America” and carry on. I don’t know about you, but I refuse to live like that. However, that’s what Christian nationalist legislators expect from us. After all, it was only three hours after the shooting that U.S. Rep. Keith Self went on CNN and scolded those who wanted sensible gun laws, stating, “Those are people that don’t believe in an almighty God who is absolutely in control of our lives. . . . I’m a Christian. I believe that he is.” Self continued, saying that attempts to raise the age to buy assault-style rifles was a “knee-jerk reaction that does not stop criminals.”

He’s not alone in this backward ideology. While President Biden pleaded that Congress pass sensible gun bills, Sen. Ted Cruz said that he and his wife were praying for the families and offered no realistic solutions. What else can we expect from a man who has received more than \$442,000 from organizations that support making guns as accessible as possible. Cruz, Self

and Abbott have blood on their hands because they refuse to take reasonable steps toward curbing gun violence.

To be clear, this is not a “Texas problem.” This is a U.S. problem. After all, the United States has among the highest number of gun-related deaths per capita in the world, and guns are the leading cause of death for U.S. children and teens.

This crisis is made even worse due to Christian extremism. For example, Wayne LaPierre, the executive vice president of the National Rifle Association, has said that the Second Amendment is not a right “bestowed by man, but granted by God to all Americans as our American birthright.” Others quote scripture saying that Jesus permits deadly force in the Book of Luke: “Let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one.” Sometimes guns are glorified because of Islamophobia, such as by Jerry Falwell Jr., the then-president of Liberty University who stated in 2015, “I’ve always thought that

if more good people had concealed-carry permits, then we could end those Muslims before they walked in.”

It’s been over 10 years since the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, which claimed 26 victims, the majority of them 6 and 7 years old. Since then, we have had countless more preventable shootings. But legislators who cling to their bibles and guns lie to us and tell us that nothing can be done.

Meanwhile, at the Sixth Floor Museum, I learned how Secret Service funding was expanded after the JFK assassination to protect presidents and their families even after their time in the White House. Additionally, it became a federal crime to kill or attempt to hurt the president, and presidential cars became heavily armored.

It strikes me that common-sense solutions were rightly implemented after the tragedy of JFK’s killing, and yet we are told that such solutions are not possible for our children, teachers and everyday citizens in the United States.

I think about how many people live in fear on a daily basis. My sister told me how she is afraid every day when she drops off her children at school that something bad will happen. I know of other people who have insisted on homeschooling their children because the fear is too great.

We are not meant to live like this. More than 70 percent of Americans want sensible gun laws, including 80 percent of white evangelicals who also want stricter gun laws. Gun control is not controversial. Rather, we are held back by a very small but powerful group of legislators who are funded by special interests and Christian extremists.

I’m done with “thoughts and prayers,” and I know you are, too. Let’s enact sensible gun laws now.

*Barbara Alvarez is a contributing writer for FFRF. Previously she had held the role of FFRF’s Anne Nicol Gaylor Reproductive Rights Intern.*

## Elle

Continued from page 12

to use my book and experiences to help others.

For example, my science teacher got a copy of my book earlier this year and read it to his two young children.

Last week, he told me that his family isn’t religious and he didn’t know how to talk to his children about this. He said that my book made it simple for him to have meaningful conversations

about religion and ethics with his children. This made me so happy.

I hope that this book can help children and families learn about diversity and ethics and for secular children

and families, I hope this makes them feel like they’re not alone. It also helps them know that they can talk about religion with their friends. Thank you all so very much.

“Hello my name is Elle. It’s nice to meet you. I’m a humanist. A humanist is a person who tries to be good because they want to make the world a better place for everyone. Have you heard of a humanist? Most of my friends at school haven’t, so they ask me questions to understand. Most of the time these questions start when my friends ask what church I go to. I tell them that I don’t go to any church. There are many humanist groups that give us a chance to be part of a community, the same way a religious church is a community. Some humanists choose to be part of an organized group.

My family’s community comes from our friends and families, school and local soccer club that we love.

Some of my friends ask me how I know what is right and wrong if I don’t go to church and study books

### Elle the Humanist

Foreword by Daniel Dennett  
Written by Elle Harris and Douglas Harris

Rule — Treat others the way they would like to be treated. Rules like this have been taught for thousands of years. The Platinum Rule is very much like other golden rules. The humanist version of the Platinum Rule is fun and easy.

“Here’s how I use it. Would my friends like me to steal their toys? No, so I don’t steal their toys. Would my friend like me to share my treats with them? Yes, so I share my treats with them. Would my mom like me to clean up my room and help with the dishes after dinner? Yes, so I clean up my room and help with the dishes after dinner.

“I have to remember that some people don’t like to be treated the way I like to be treated because we’re all very different. This is why the Platinum Rule teaches us to treat other people the way they would like to be treated, not the way we would like to be treated. Here’s how it works.

I like to be tickled on my feet. My brother, Bryson, doesn’t like being tickled on his feet, so I don’t tickle Bryson on his feet, but I love it when my mom tickles my feet.

“Some of my friends ask me questions about like, ‘How do you know if you’re good enough to get to heaven when you die?’ I don’t know anything about this, but I know that being a good person and helping others makes the people around me happier and that makes me feel happy.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re Chinese, Pakistani, German, Mexican or if you’re from the United States, like me. Or if you believe in Krishna, Poseidon, Jesus, Muhammad, or you don’t believe in any gods or prophets, like me. We are all trying to our best to be happy as we live on this wonderful Earth, and being a good person and loving others makes us all happier than anything else.”



Forward Award

# Abortion battle is deep in heart of Texas

*This is the speech (edited for length) given by Amy Hagstrom Miller at FFRF's national convention on Oct. 29, 2022, in San Antonio, Texas. She was introduced by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. You can watch it at [ffrf.us/convention-2022](https://ffrf.us/convention-2022).*

**Annie Laurie Gaylor:** On Sept. 1, 2021, before the Supreme Court's infamous ruling overturning abortion as a constitutional right, a dastardly bill known as Senate Bill 8 took effect in Texas. This bill was a harbinger of things to come. It was tied to a civil bounty law, whereby anyone, even strangers, could sue someone who performed or even indirectly facilitated an abortion after six weeks with a minimum of \$10,000 in penalties per abortion. This law, which immediately halted most abortions here in Texas, was quickly challenged.

We have here today the principal plaintiff in that legal challenge against SB 8. This person has been a fierce defender of abortion rights for several years, including this case. She brought the case in which the Supreme Court in its previous iteration, back in 2016, ruled in her favor. The court that year issued a 5-3 decision that Texas couldn't restrict delivery of abortion care through TRAP laws that place an undue burden on the woman.

This plaintiff is today's 2022 Forward Award honoree, Amy Hagstrom Miller, who founded, in 2003, Whole Woman's Health, which is a series of clinics that provide abortion and gynecological care in many parts of the nation, including Texas.

I am honored to give this award to Amy Hagstrom Miller.

By Amy Hagstrom Miller

Thank you so much. I brought notes because I'm going to take you to abortion school. Are you ready? Good!

This year has been quite a gut punch. Normally, Whole Woman's Health is described as resilient, as brave, as heroic. But this year has had a lot of trauma, it's had a lot of tragedy, it's had a lot of grief and despair, and it's from those combined complex emotions I come to you today.

It is the first time I have come to Texas since Roe fell. I no longer live here, so I wasn't sure how it would feel to be back, but I was reminded last night walking along the Riverwalk that these kinds of laws don't represent the majority of Texans. I'm emboldened how the majority of people in this country live and believe and support safe access to abortion.

Some good stuff does come from Texas. Keep in mind Roe v. Wade came from Texas. Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt in 2016 was seen as the reproductive rights case for a century. We were able to use — drumroll — science to roll back people's feelings and beliefs and illustrate that restrictions on abortion damage families and communities.

Basically, we sort of slapped down the powers that be in Texas. I believe one of the justices in the majority decision said antiabortion politicians can't insert themselves willy-nilly between a woman and her right to seek an abortion without supporting those restrictions by medical evidence and scientific fact. That's huge.

But, we sort of missed our opportunity for swagger, because a certain someone was elected a few months later in 2016 and there's been sort of a downslide



Amy Hagstrom Miller, founder of Whole Woman's Health, speaks at FFRF's national convention in San Antonio on Oct. 29, 2022.

ever since when it comes to reproductive rights in this country.

There's bad stuff that comes from Texas, too. An enormous number of abortion restrictions come from Texas, and it is true that what happens here does not stay here.

## Fight over HB 2 in 2013

I'm going to take you on a journey of a few years' time to set the tone. I'm going start in 2013 so you have a sense what was before HB 2. Before that, we had all of these restrictions — we had a two-visit requirement, mandatory 24-hour delay, patients had to be seen in two different visits, sometimes three or four different visits before they could complete their abortion. Abortion facilities were highly regulated such that there were hardly any facilities left.

That was a precursor of what happened in 2021. HB 2 in 2013 served to shutter all but five clinics in Texas. Prior to HB 2, there were 44 clinics. A year before that there were 60.

Keep in mind that you can fit seven Virginias in Texas. Texas has four of the top 10 cities as far as population in this country. Ten percent of this country's population of reproductive age lives here in Texas. It is not a small fraction of people.

That's the sort of groundwork that went into our challenging HB 2. We were able to make the argument that it was an undue burden for millions of people, and that it unduly affected lots of people who lived in parts of the state that were well over 150 miles each way to be able to get care.

It took three years. Lawyers say that's fast. But, if you're answering the phone from people who are seeking abortion care, it felt like an eternity that we were not able to see people until we were able to get justice in the Supreme Court in 2016.

We knocked down the notion that anti-abortion people had women's health and safety in mind when we illustrated that restrictions on abortion actually rolled

health and safety backwards. We put forth medical evidence, etc., as soon as we won the Whole Woman's Health case.

The antiabortion movement took a pivot away from a concern about the pregnant person and focused on the fetus. Texas introduced a law that required every fetus or product of conception to have a funeral or cremation. We had to start a new lawsuit literally five days after we won one. They restricted gestation, they tried this heartbeat stuff. There's a trend nationally with gestational bans, whether it's 20-week ban, 15-week or 6-week ban. What they're doing is focusing on the fetus and have started to call the pregnant person a host.

## New court landscape

The landscape has been forever changed in this country by the appointees that the former president was able to make. We have some remarkable zealots on the Supreme Court at this point. It's not only the Supreme Court that the Trump administration changed. It changed forever the appeals courts and the federal court system in this country.

One of the first signs of this was when Texas Gov. Abbott used the Covid-19 pandemic to restrict abortion. He tried to say abortion was not essential medical care. But abortion is extremely timely, and when people lose their jobs and their health care, their need for abortion skyrockets.

And, Abbott said that we were somehow stealing PPE from the hospitals. It was an interesting time. Whole Woman's Health figured out how to do a medical abortion without using any PPE at all and we stayed open and resisted that ban. But, the chilling effect that Abbott and Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton were coming after abortion providers was pretty profound.

So, we found ourselves suing again, and this time we did get an injunction and were able to illustrate that the executive order was not in the best interest of people's health and safety. It was about

three weeks of back and forth, where hundreds of patient appointments were canceled, and then we called them and rescheduled them. It was horrific to see that the dignity and the respect that was lost from people who deserved access to health care during a pandemic, especially access to safe abortion care.

Then we get another version of an attack on books. In March of 2021, the Texas Legislature introduced a 6-week ban on abortion, which the antiabortion folks called the heartbeat ban. Science will tell you there is not a heartbeat before there's a fetus. This law was the most restrictive abortion ban that this country had seen at that point in time.

The other part of the SB 8 that was terrifying is what they call "vigilante justice," that it incentivized people to report any person who not only gives an abortion, but who gives somebody a ride, gives somebody money. It terrified everybody. People were afraid of helping folks get to the abortion care that they deserved and needed. I remember people at that time called it the Texas Taliban. But, this isn't the Taliban. This is home-grown, United States Christian extremism.

But we need to take responsibility. This has happened on our watch where these extremists have been able to pass laws like this. We fought until the last minute on Aug. 31, the night before that law went into effect.

At our Fort Worth clinic, the parking lot was packed with patients. People were aware that this might be the last day they could get access to safe abortion. We decided to care for as many people as we could, and we stayed open until midnight. The antiabortion people came and brought big lights and they shined them at the clinic to try to see if they could catch us providing any care after midnight. It was an incredible standoff. Some of those patients in the clinic were very aware that they were receiving care that their friends and colleagues and sisters might not be able to receive the next day in Texas.

## Back and forth in courts

We tried to get an injunction to block SB 8 from going into effect. Again, we experienced this back and forth. We got an injunction in Austin in federal court, but it gets overturned by the 5th Circuit, and we have to appeal to the Supreme Court. It gets bounced back and forth.

So, the Supreme Court refused to grant us an injunction for relief from SB 8, allowing the law to stay in place. This led to a scathing dissent from Justice Sotomayor.

Soon after that, after we got denied the injunction, Vice President Harris invited me and some other providers to the White House. It was the first time an abortion provider had been invited to the White House since 1992 when Clinton was there. On the day that we were there, the Department of Justice announced its case against Texas. It was pretty cool to be in the White House when they announced a case called the United States v. Texas.

The White House finally started to say "abortion." I hadn't heard it from President Biden until Roe fell, until the Dobbs decision was leaked, but Vice President Harris said it in that little room that I was in.

I want to point out why that's important. It's because a lot of the people who have abortions find themselves sort of



invisible in our public rhetoric, when people talk about abortion as a choice, as a reproductive decision. Our patients don't call us and say, "I'd like to make an appointment for a reproductive decision." Our patients don't call us and say, "I'd like to exercise my civil right to have an abortion."

It's very important that the millions of people who've had abortions in this country — and the millions of people who have been part of that abortion, whether they are the man who got the person pregnant or whether they're a loved one of that person — see their experience reflected in the way that we talk. It's very important to hear the people we elected use the language that's really necessary.

Bounty hunting

Pre-compliance or overcompliance is one of the first signs of authoritarianism. It's understandable, though, because they were bounty hunting physicians. There was this terror and fear of this vigilante justice system going against the work that we love, and against helping the people we are highly trained to help.

So, hardly anybody provided abortions when we had this injunction because, for retroactive lawsuits, if an injunction was lifted and you provided any care during that period, it allows people to go back and sue you after the fact. It's amazing that this law got passed.

Of course, I think there were maybe 10 procedures provided during that really short injunction period. Once again, the Fifth Circuit reversed the injunction and SB 8 has been enforced ever since.

During this time period, we ended up challenging that reversal of the injunction and bringing it back to the Supreme Court. The court chose not to step in, so we had to get a hearing at the Supreme Court. I never thought I'd end up at the Supreme Court again so fast, but there we were with our own case, Whole Woman's Health v. Jackson on Nov. 1, 2021, trying to knock down SB 8.

One month later, the court heard the Dobbs case from Mississippi. The Mississippi case was originally about a 15-week ban. But, once the Supreme Court made-up changed with President Trump's new justices, Mississippi added Roe to that case and asked the court to look into the argument that Roe was argued on.

Listening to the oral arguments in the Dobbs case, we knew we were in trouble. It was a completely different court than my Whole Woman's Health case just five years before. This was where Amy Coney Barrett suggested that women just drop off babies at fire stations as a solution to

unplanned pregnancy. I was gobsmacked listening to the kinds of things that the new justices were suggesting.

U.S. v. Texas and Whole Woman's Health v. Jackson were both dismissed shortly after the Dobbs case was heard. We didn't get justice in either of those cases.

Then comes May, and the draft decision was leaked in the Dobbs case. It was very obviously a draft where Justice Alito, the lead writer, was very interested in overturning Roe. Then the country went into a tailspin. Folks were no longer "What if, what if, what if?" It was like "When? When is this decision going to come down and how are we going to prepare for it?"

I have never spent so much time as I have in the last year and a half staring at the map of the United States. I can tell you every single rule in every single state, which states are haven states, which states are ban states, which interstate goes from one part of the country to another part of the country, which airports have the best access, which airlines have nonstop flights, which ones are cheaper, which ones get canceled less often. It's amazing the amount of work abortion providers had to do to try to figure out to prepare for what was to come.

So, here we are. Whole Woman's Health of McCowan was the last clinic standing south of San Antonio. We served people for the radius of about 250 to 300 miles. We had to stop providing abortions on June 24, when Dobbs came down. We had to close all of the clinics operated by Whole Woman's Health in Texas. That was Austin and Forth Fort Worth and McKinney, McCallum.

Every single abortion provider ceased the operations when Roe fell in Texas, including about 10 other states that also had what are called trigger bans, which are abortion bans that existed with the provision that if Roe fell at the federal level, abortion would be banned instantly in that state. Texas was one of them.

No arc of redemption

I want to take you now into the present. Whole Woman's Health sued Texas no less than 11 times during the time that we were open. We'll see what happens in the long-term future, but I think one of the most challenging things for people right now is that there isn't this narrative arc of redemption that I think we've gotten used to in the reproductive rights movement.

It used to be where they passed a bad



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor presents Amy Hagstrom Miller with FFRF's 2022 Forward Award.

law, you can prove it's crazy, or you can get an injunction or temporary restraining order, or you can sue or you can get justice. That narrative arc is no longer here, so we rely either on the legislative branch or the executive branch, but we're not going to hold our breath on the federal level from the justice system.

But that's what we're dealing with. We're dealing with a state-by-state kind of interaction right now. The majority of people seek abortions because they don't feel ready to parent, they don't feel ready to have another child. It's oftentimes an economic issue, so any time you see somebody discussing the upcoming election and separating economics and abortion, please write an op-ed, give them some feedback,

because you can't separate those issues in the eyes of people who are parenting and navigating those issues.

We had to close the four remaining Texas clinics. We sued to block the ban in Indiana and we got an injunction, which surprised all of us. We were like, "Holy mackerel, we didn't expect that." We can stay open in our clinic in South Bend, Ind., right under the shadow of Notre Dame. There are lots of folks that need our help there. We're stable in Virginia, Minnesota and Maryland.

Florida added a 15-week ban, Georgia added a 6-week ban, Ohio has a 6-week ban, and Indiana is going back and forth.

But somebody from Texas or Louisiana or Mississippi has to travel to hundreds of miles either to reach New Mexico or Kansas or Illinois. But the vast majority of people can't take multiple days off, travel out of the state, arrange for childcare, etc. Many people are being forced to carry pregnancies against their will. Some people are taking matters into their own hands, and other folks are able to figure out how to travel.

We launched abortion pills by mail, thanks to the Biden administration for opening up the FDA's restriction on medication abortion and allowing medication abortion to be mailed during the pandemic because it's much safer. Medication abortion is safer than Tylenol, but it's also much more accessible this way, so that folks don't have to go into clinics during a pandemic. And we do a telemedicine visit for a patient and then we're able to ship medications to them at an address in a state where abortion is legal and telemedicine is allowed. Telemedicine for abortion care is available in 22 states. Folks can travel into New Mexico, for example, from Texas, if they're Tex-

ans and they can do the telemedicine visit from New Mexico and receive the medication at an address in New Mexico, so it helps some.

And we've launched a program called the Wayfinder program to help people find their way. We started it through the nonprofit, Whole Woman's Health Alliance. People were being denied abortion care and we had to figure out how to help them travel, with either travel support or support to pay for the abortion. Of course, our program grew exponentially during SB 8, where no less than 80 percent of Texans normally have abortions after six weeks, and so many people were being denied access to care we had to help them travel. Now the program really has become national because of all the states where abortion has been banned.

I think it's important for us all to remember that abortion is a moral and social good. Access to safe abortion improves communities, it improves economic health, it improves mental health, physical health. The data to support that since Roe is exponential. Talk to any economist, talk to anybody who studies the statistics about how access to safe abortion has improved our society writ large.

I think it's important to look at abortion as a human rights issue, not only as a women's rights issue. Millions of men have benefited for access to safe abortion in this country and I think that it's time for all of us to embrace the fact that it's a human rights issue.

Now, there's a new frontier for anti-abortion forces. We're starting to see them foment antiabortion activity in the sort of red communities in blue states. More conservative communities in Virginia or New Mexico or southern Illinois are trying to get sanctuary city bans or local city councils to try to ban abortion care. Pay attention to that.

OK. You've done a good job at abortion school, y'all. My asks would be for you to follow us on social media — Whole Woman's Health and Whole Woman's Health Alliance — because we can give you lots of information on what to do. And, you could donate — not only to Whole Woman's Health Alliance, our nonprofit, but the GoFundMe that is funding the move of our Texas clinics to New Mexico.

I would ask you to speak about the positive aspects of abortion in your life, in people that you've known. Use the aspirational narrative: "Because of abortion, I was able to do X." "Because of abortion, someone I know or love was able to do X."

I think it's important to shift that rhetoric to the positive side of abortion rather than look at it through the framework of how the opposition looks at it through the stigma and through the shame.

Thank you.



Photo by Chris Line

Amy Hagstrom Miller was the winning plaintiff in 2016's Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt, in which the Supreme Court ruled that Texas cannot place restrictions on the delivery of abortion services that create an undue burden for women seeking an abortion.







# Ten Commandments bill

## FFRF to Texas: No decalog in public schools

The Freedom From Religion Foundation was primed and ready to issue a robust court challenge of a Texas bill requiring every public school classroom in Texas to prominently display a copy of the Ten Commandments. It passed the Senate in April, and was approved by a committee in the House, but thanks to some maneuvering by opponents, died there on May 23, shortly before the Texas session ended.

FFRF had put the Texas Legislature on notice that it would sue if the bill passed, had identified prospective FFRF parents with children in schools, and was part of an official coalition litigation team. FFRF had also sent op-eds around the country ready to be published had the bill passed.

“We have dodged this bullet,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, “but we expect the bill may be reintroduced or might inspire similar proposals in other states, so we are staying vigilant.”

The exceptionally bossy bill had mandated that public elementary and secondary schools display in a “conspicuous place in every classroom” a durable poster or framed copy of the Ten Commandments “legible to a person with average vision from anywhere in the classroom,” which must be at least 16-by-20 inches. Clearly no student was meant to escape the bible edicts during long years of pedagogical indenture.

The bill, according to the testimony of its sponsor state Sen. Phil King, “would remind students all across Texas of the importance of the fundamental foundation of America.” Au contraire, FFRF told Sen. King: There is no Ten Commandments at the U.S. foundation. We’re governed by an entirely secular Constitution whose only references to religion are exclusionary. The Texas state Constitution likewise guarantees that no one can be compelled to attend, erect or support any place of worship, and no preference be given by law to religion.

Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick expressed the most common excuse for justifying the Ten Commandments in schools: “Bringing the Ten Commandments and prayer back to our public schools will enable our students to become better Texans.” How so, lieutenant governor?

Only three of the 10 commandments have any conceivable relevance to U.S. law. The first four are entirely religious in nature: ordering which god to worship, barring graven images, barring taking the Lord’s name in vain, and, finally, remembering the Sabbath. All four of these commandments violate our First Amendment. The state of Texas and its public schools have no business telling students which god to have, how many gods to have — or whether to have any gods at all.

The Fifth Commandment, honoring



parents, is not legislatable. Anyway, isn’t it parents who have the duty of care to honor the children they bring into the world?

Every human society of whatever religious persuasion has adopted laws against killing (the Sixth Commandment) and theft (the Eighth), but in most societies they are wisely not couched in absolutes. Our civil laws recognize accidental killing and degrees of responsibility, such as manslaughter and self-defense.

Then there’s that Seventh Commandment so supposedly relevant to our K-12 classrooms: adultery. Let’s see Sen. King sit down and try to explain that one to kindergartners. The Christian nationalists who object to classroom discussion on sexuality now want to continually expose tots to the concept of adultery?! As for the Ninth against “bearing false witness,” the United States already has secular regulations against perjury and false advertising, thank you.

The Tenth Commandment must be condemned as both inane and sexist. King’s version reads: “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his cattle, nor anything that is thy neighbor’s.” (King left out “ass.”) This commandment insultingly is directed at men, and treats women as male property. Speaking of offensive, the words “manservant” and “maidservant” are bible-speak for “slave.” As for its prohibition against “coveting,” why on earth would the state of Texas care if you “covet” your neighbor’s house? The Freedom From Religion Foundation has joked for years that if we outlaw coveting, our entire free enter-

prise system would collapse.

And isn’t it rather blasphemous for King to decree which version of the Ten Commandments must be posted? There are three, found in Exodus 20, Exodus 34:28 and Deuteronomy 5, which are contradictory. Exodus 34:28, which is titled “the Ten Commandments,” has almost entirely different rules, mainly about feasts and sacrifices and such. Its 10th commandment is a winner: “Thou shalt not seethe a kid in its mother’s milk.” How could kids possibly grow up moral without seeing that rule every day on classroom walls?

Further, King, by employing excerpts of the commandments, not actual biblical text, appears to have created 11 commandments! His version is inconsistent with most traditions. It endorses Protestantism, because it includes a prohibition against graven images, which Catholic bibles traditionally delete.

“Texas legislators were coming together to tell other people’s children by law which are the true Ten Commandments,” observes FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott. “The government is weighing in on what is generally disagreed upon even by

various Christian sects, which is precisely the kind of government action the Framers of our secular Constitution sought to prohibit.”


“The bill in question is patently unconstitutional,” notes FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert. The U.S. Supreme Court issued a definitive decision, *Stone v. Graham* in 1980, noting that “the pre-eminent purpose for posting the Ten Commandments on schoolroom walls is plainly religious.”

The court held: “The Ten Commandments are undeniably a sacred text in the Jewish and Christian faiths, and no legislative recitation of a supposed secular purpose can blind us to that fact. The commandments do not confine themselves to arguably secular matters, such as honoring one’s parents, killing or murder, adultery, stealing, false witness, and covetousness. See Exodus 20:12–17; Deuteronomy 5:16–21. Rather, the first part of the commandments concerns the religious duties of believers: worshipping the Lord God alone, avoiding idolatry, not using the Lord’s name in vain, and observing the Sabbath Day. See Exodus 20:1–11; Deuteronomy 5:6–15.”

But Texas lawmakers behind the bill didn’t care what the Supreme Court used to say. They were counting on the new extremist majority on the high court to overturn *Stone v. Graham*, as it so cavalierly overturned almost 50 years of precedent in *Roe v. Wade*. King cited the court’s decision last year in the *Bremer-ton* case involving prayerful Coach Joe Kennedy, who sued to pray on the 50-yard line at the conclusion of games. But King overstated the import of that case and forgot that the court did not approve a high school official leading students in prayer. On the contrary, the court (in an admittedly disingenuous decision) said exactly the opposite: that this prayerful conduct was permissible precisely because the coach was not praying with students, but as a private citizen on down time after the game.

It’s dismaying that so many in the Texas Legislature could support this un-American bill. FFRF will continue to urge public officials in Texas and throughout the nation to instead “Honor thy First Amendment.”

Yip Harburg,  
from his book: **Rhymes for the Irreverent**



**Prayer For The Modern Campus Girl**  
*Found by chance in Anatole France*  
You taught us how to conceive without sinning,  
Mother Mary,  
And the outlook for the planet is foreboding.  
Had you taught us how to sin without conceiving,  
Mother Mary,  
We could stop the population from exploding.

Illustrated by Seymour Chwast, published by FFRF

Only the best at Springfest



Jim Potash and John Sutton from the FFRF Kentucky Chapter helped with tabling at Springfest in Louisville on May 20.



# Gettin’ things done in the Valley of the Sun



The Valley of the Sun Chapter’s “Get Out Of Hell Free” cards were very popular. FFRF’s Valley of the Sun Chapter set up a table at the American Atheists convention, which was held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in downtown Phoenix from April 7-9. Chapter President Whit Johnson (standing), Treasurer Philip Lentz and Vice President Janet Johnson helped distribute hundreds of FFRF’s “non-tracts” and sold many books, including children’s books by young authors Elle and Bailey Harris, and Annie Laurie Gaylor’s *Woe to the Women*.



FFRF’s Valley of the Sun Chapter President Whit Johnson (holding check on right) presents \$1,000 to Sheila Krueger, who heads the Phoenix branch of Atheists Helping the Homeless (AHH) on April 29.

## OVERHEARD

The Christian bible gets used like a weapon around this place. . . To my brain, it just felt like it’s a game — a peaceful, playful protest. I have long been frustrated by the blurred lines between separation of church and state. **Arizona state Rep. Stephanie Stahl Hamilton, who took bibles from the floor of the House chamber and hid them in a lounge in the state Capitol. Stahl Hamilton, who is an ordained minister, later apologized for her actions.** *Arizona Republic*, 4-27-23

I wanted to address my [Texas] senators, [Ted] Cruz and [John] Cornyn. I would like for them to know that what happened to me is a direct result of the policies they support. I nearly died on their watch and I may have been robbed of the opportunity to have children in the future. **Amanda Zurawski, who spoke at a congressional hearing about the lack of health care she received after nearly going into sepsis during her pregnancy. Cruz or Cornyn weren’t at the meeting.** *Washington Post*, 4-28-23

This man bought a Supreme Court justice. Do you understand how rich you have to be to buy a Supreme Court justice — a Black one on top of that? There’s only two in stock and Harlan Crow owns half the inventory. **Comedian Roy Wood Jr., speaking at the White House Correspondents’ dinner, regarding Justice Clarence Thomas.** *Yahoo News*, 4-29-23

Whether we like it or not, drag queen story hour is the focus of their rage at the moment. They see it as a symbol of LGBTQ around children and they use children as human shields for their bigotry, just like modern George Wallaces standing in the schoolhouse steps trying to protect “good white Christian kids” from the scourge of sharing public spaces with people not like them. They are raging against the dying of their privilege. Equality always feels like oppression to the privileged. **Aaron Reed, who helped organize the “Rock-n-Roll Humanist Drag Queen Story Hour” in Wadsworth, Ohio, where neo-Nazi protesters shouted, “There will be blood.”** *Newsweek*, 3-14-23

I decided I wasn’t going to just be a provider, I was going to be an activist. **Dr. LeRoy Carhart, 81, who died on April 28, reflecting on his resolve as a physician performing abortion care, after antiabortion arsonists destroyed his farm, killed his dog, cat and 17 of his 21 horses. He then decided to devote his career to abortion access, compared anti-abortionists to the Taliban and called them “religious terrorists.”** *New York Times*, 5-1-23

Churches that enjoy tax-exempt status while engaging in political activity are claiming a benefit for which they do not qualify, which is a form of tax fraud. It would be the same as someone claiming the tax benefit from having a dozen children, when in fact they had none. **Michael Bob Starr, in his column, “Tax-exempt status. Involved in politics. Churches can’t have both.”** *Abilene Reporter News*, 5-20-23

We live in a moment, I think, at which freedom of expression, freedom to publish has not in my lifetime been under such threat in the countries of the West. Now I am sitting here in the U.S., I have to look at the extraordinary attack on libraries, and books for children in schools. The attack on the idea of libraries themselves. It is quite remarkably alarming, and we need to be very aware of it, and to fight against it very hard. **Salman Rushdie, via video message to the British Book Awards, where he was awarded the Freedom to Publish award. It was his first public address since he was stabbed at a literary festival in New York last year.** *Associated Press*, 5-16-23

We strongly oppose laws that impede the ability of any individuals — irrespective of their national identity — to choose a faith, practice a faith, change their religion, not have a religion, or tell others about their religious beliefs and practices. **Vedant Patel, principal deputy spokesperson for the State Department.** *State.gov*, 5-1-23

Even as Texas is legislating how public school kids must worship, its Republican leaders, like those in Missouri and other red states around America, are pressing ahead with a “parent’s bill of rights” that would ensure that peoples’ kids aren’t being ideologically indoctrinated in the classroom. Sit with that for a moment. **Kevin McDermott, in his column, “The Republican theocracy project is not only unconstitutional, it’s unAmerican,” which discusses how Texas may require prominent display of the Ten Commandments in every classroom of every public school.** *St. Louis Today*, 4-29-23

The more the Christian right latches on to cruel men, the more difficult it becomes to argue that the cruelty is a bug, not a feature. **David French, in his column, “Tucker Carlson’s dark and malign influence over the Christian right.”** *New York Times*, 5-7-23

We are not concerned with preserving our legitimacy for our own sake but for the sake of the Constitution. Thus, when we speak of the principled character of our decisions, we mean that they are informed by precedent, logic and the traditions of our people, all with reference to our constitutional heritage. We must be clear that we are not guided by expediency, contemporary attitudes or our own morality. **Former Supreme Court Justice Joseph Kennedy, in a prescient 1992 memo to other justices with “late-night musings.” The memo is part of the private papers of Justice John Paul Stevens, released on May 2.** *New York Times*, 5-3-23

The Dobbs decision effectively exposes millions of American women to laws that force them to bear children, even those conceived through sexual assault, in states that do nothing to alleviate the burdens, disadvantages and risks stemming from both pregnancy and motherhood. It demonstrates the Supreme Court’s pinched view of the 14th Amendment’s commitments — essentially freezing the amendment’s meaning at the moment of ratification in 1868, before women could vote. Dobbs has further emboldened some judges to revive enforcement of 19th-century laws including the Comstock Act, which were intended to control women’s bodies

before the law regarded women as equal citizens. **Kate Shaw, professor of law at Cardozo Law School and Julie C. Suk, Fordham law professor, in their column about the need to pass the Equal Rights Amendment.** *New York Times*, 5-3-23

The movement to ban stories like mine [on sexual abuse of girls] betrays and endangers children. Books are not the problem. They are part of the solution. **Patricia McCormick, author of the book Sold, one of the books most frequently banned from public schools, after Moms for Liberty, a shadowy national group with links to the Heritage Foundation, put it on their ban book list.** *New York Times*, 5-12-23

Judge [Matthew] Kacsmaryk and the Fifth Circuit judges . . . are certainly entitled to their beliefs. What their lifetime commissions as federal judges do not entitle them to is to project those beliefs onto the rest of us. **Linda Greenhouse, in her column, “Religion has friends among judges in high places.”** *New York Times*, 4-22-23

Public confidence in the court has been shaken by two things: the breakneck pace of its conservative supermajority in moving the law to the right and its unwillingness to address questions about the justices’ ethical standards. That combination has left the court vulnerable to political attacks. **Adam Liptak, reporter for the New York Times who covers the Supreme Court.** *New York Times*, 5-22-23

The right is surely growing more focused on creating a kind of Christian cultural hegemony in public institutions in part because Christianity is in a steep decline. Three decades ago, about 90 percent of Americans identified as Christian. Today, the number has fallen to the low 60s and the decline is likely to continue. **Paul Waldman, in his column, “The Texas Legislature explores new frontiers of Christian nationalism.”** *Washington Post*, 5-9-23



# FFRF ON THE ROAD



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker spoke outside the U.S. Capitol on May 2, joining several major national groups at a Washington, D.C., press conference asking for judicial ethics reforms.

“We are alarmed that the current court is turning its back on decades of secular precedent in order to privilege religion,” Barker said during his stint at the microphone. “FFRF’s more than 40,000 members are mostly

atheists and agnostics. But we also represent the religiously unaffiliated who are now about a third of the adult population. But with no openly nonreligious justices on the Supreme Court, our government does not truly represent the rapidly changing demographics. We desire, and deserve, a truly secular government — not one captured by Christian nationalist and religious extremists.”



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker attended the Atheist Street Pirate Party, put on by Atheists United, in Los Angeles on April 23. Participating in the event were, from left, Christine Jones (president of Atheists United), Dan Barker, Joey Krueger (Jesus?) and Evan Clark (executive director of Atheists United).



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker, right, went to Helsinki, Finland, on April 8, where he was a panelist at the Spring of Reason conference, organized by Rationalist International. He spoke on the topic of “The Battle of Church and State.” David Rand of Atheist Freethinkers of Canada, left, was also a panelist. Behind him is Sanal Edamaruku, host and president of Rationalist International.



FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert, right, spoke on May 2 at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Honors College. Presenting with Rebecca was Anthony LoCoco, left, from the Institute for Reforming Government. (The two students in the middle are Samawia and Jake.)

The two presenters spoke to the honors class, Speech, Faith, Freedom: The First Amendment, on the issues pertaining to freedom of religion. Rebecca reports: “It was a great program — about 90 minutes — with very engaging questions and follow-ups. Many students came up to talk to me afterwards, very excited about our work and relaying more about what they’d studied this year. One student told me I brought up points she hadn’t considered and was excited to hear about cases she’d not heard of in the news.”



FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott and FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert attended the American Constitution Society national convention in Washington, D.C., from May 18-20. FFRF was one of the sponsors of the event. Pictured are, from left, Elliott, American Atheists Attorney Geoff Blackwell, Markert and American Atheists Attorney Alison Gill.



# LETTERBOX

## FFRF a needed lifeline in religious Texas

I received FFRF's Spring/Summer Appeal in the mail and am responding to that. I have enclosed \$200 toward the use of anything that FFRF may need it for, including doughnuts or lunch for the crew up there!

We're not all "church-o-vites" down here in Texas. Every time I see one of those good ol' boys trying to host a multi-ton cross to the top of the Capitol building in Austin, it makes me want to pack up and run to Oregon or New England or somewhere! At 71 years young, I think it's time to retire and start writing again from parts unknown.

FFRF is the only lifeline I have in this foundering sea of religious insanity down here. This is Texas, after all.

Keep up the good work and thank you all! Seriously, thank you!

Texas

## Secular freedoms are eroding before our eyes

As a graduate of two schools that required passing either a swimming test or a swimming class — Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan and Cornell University — I feel ambivalent about the accommodations now provided to Muslims at that high school [after it eliminated an all-girls swim class and made it co-ed]. They will be most harmed by their religious beliefs by not having the chance to learn a potentially life-saving skill, but they will also enjoy now a privilege not extended to other students — the choice to skip a class.

The debate and accommodation are but another sign that no one in power will stand up these days for the separation of state and church. As secular freedoms continue to erode under the onslaught of conservative, religious people — Christians, Muslims, and others — even the heads of New York City and the state of New York now suffer little or no political consequence for opposing secular ideas.

It's a dark age for American secularists.

New York

## I'm eternally grateful for what FFRF does

Thank you to FFRF for all you continue to do for us. Recently, a small number of us in our senior facility in Phoenix have started a freethinkers group.

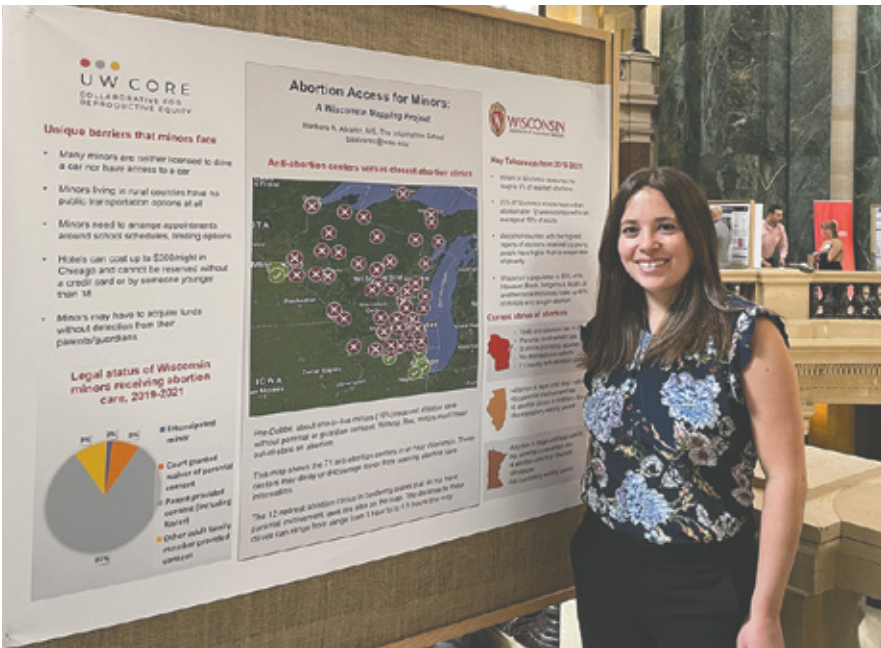
After the hard work of the 1960s, I think many of us breathed a sigh of relief, only to discover we still had racism, sexism and all the problems we had previously and that religious indoctrination began to take hold further. It saddens and angers me that we are still fighting this tyranny, and will be forever fighting it, apparently.

I'm a widow now, but I will always be grateful for what FFRF does, and I hope to get to a convention before I die because you are my peeps! I read Freethought Today from cover to cover and have for many years. And I'm so glad to have discovered "Freethought Matters" on Sunday mornings on TV.

Thanks again for all you do.

Arizona

## Mapping abortion access



Barbara Alvarez, FFRF contributing writer specializing in abortion rights, is pictured in front of her poster at a public event at the Wisconsin Capitol on April 26. She was selected as a grad student to display her Wisconsin mapping project, which demonstrates the impact of the ban on legal abortion in Wisconsin, particularly to minors. The red X's on the map show the alarming number of fake "crisis pregnancy centers" throughout the state. These centers are Christian-based nonmedical clinics that purport to provide objective information and medical services to pregnant people, but whose purpose is to promulgate anti-abortion disinformation. The green check marks show where the closest abortion clinics outside the state can be found, and the long distances most women must travel to receive legal abortion care. Unfortunately, while about a third of U.S. states now ban abortion care, Crisis pregnancy centers are increasingly receiving public funding throughout the nation.

## Even Mark shows Jesus as a powerless figure

In Mark 11:12, it says: "[Jesus] was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.'"

In other bible stories, Jesus allegedly fed 5,000 people from one loaf of bread and turned water into wine, so why didn't he order the fig tree to produce figs? That should have been an easy miracle. Instead, he cursed the fig tree and it died. He seems like a powerless pathetic figure to kill a fig tree when he didn't have to. Of course, it's all a myth!

And this means that the powerless myth figure is also powerless to fix anything having to do with the gun problem!

Indiana

## Everybody should read Barbara G. Walker's book

I just finished reading the book, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* by Barbara G. Walker. It's the most honest, well-researched/documented book about past human attempts to explain the universe from the beginning of humankind. The subsequent supplanting of all other religions by Christianity through terrorism, military conquest and Inquisition led to the false prophets and institutions plaguing humankind and the entire planet today. Governments still allow the Roman Catholic Church, born in the Roman Empire along with subsequent Christian sects, to collude with government agents to inflict maximum pain on humans.

Every human on the planet should read this book. Barbara was and is one of the most intelligent people on the planet.

Washington

## It was wonderful to read the six-word stories

I loved your six-word essay feature! Thank you for printing all of the contestants' entries. I also liked the cartoon image at the top of the page. Thank you and keep up all the great work you are all doing at FFRF!

Florida

## Yes, superstition can be overcome at any time

Shedding yourself of the superstition you were raised on and schooled on can be done. It may take 30 years, such as for former Catholic Tom Huening, author of *Spiritual Choices: Putting the Here in Hereafter*. But, it was well worth it, he explains in his book. It is actually very good reading, even for us freethinkers, where he, in

a very fun and entertaining manner, goes through all the major religions people have cooked up through the ages, and takes them all apart, one by one, with none spared.

Although religiosity is declining the world over, especially in the more progressive countries in Northern Europe, a wide variety of religions are still with us, still doing harm, and still hampering development of a better and safer world for us all.

California

## Parsing an unrecognized defect of Calvinism

To morally rational people, one of the most offensive concepts in any form of religion is the Calvinist notion of predestination. Calvin decreed that the notion of "If you're good, you go to heaven; if you're bad, you go to hell" is wrong. Instead, Calvinism says it is necessary that salvation be a matter of arbitrary choice by God, before the creation. Some are predestined to salvation, others to damnation. It produces the abominable notion of "Hitler in heaven, Gandhi in hell."

But there's more to it than that. The twisted logic behind predestination also leads to another abominable but necessary conclusion: It isn't just salvation/damnation that must be arbitrary, but what is good or bad must be arbitrary, as well. Otherwise, we have the same problem: It makes God subordinate to something greater than himself. In both cases, he is dependent on basic notions of right and wrong that exist independent of him. If so, then he is not almighty. Therefore, according to Calvinist logic, right and wrong must be a matter of arbitrary choice by God. What is right or good is whatever God says it is; what is wrong or bad is the same.

The implications from this are staggering. If God says that smashing kids heads in is good, then it is. In fact, the horrific verse 9 from Psalm 137 does imply that. To unbrainwashed, sane, rational minds, it may be the resentful revenge wish of ancient Judeans, but to the devout, it is "The Word of God."

A human-written bible presenting such defective moral thinking as divine provides a poor example for humans to follow. If God tells you to rape, kill, torture, then it is good. In fact, it is required. Of course, the directives of God always come through an elite priesthood, and it would be they who

## RECRUIT A MEMBER

Sample copies for \$2



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

FFRF  
P.O. Box 750  
Madison, WI 53701

Or go to: [ffrf.us/sample](http://ffrf.us/sample)

Please send us only names of likely supporters.

Freedom depends upon freethinkers

## Just Pretend: A Book For Young Freethinkers



By Dan Barker  
Illustrated by Kati Treu  
Revised and adorably illustrated classic. This fun book explores myths and religion from a freethought point of view, and promotes critical thinking.

Color Edition! Published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online  
[shop.ffrf.org](http://shop.ffrf.org)



issue the gruesome commands. But religion-besotted devotees are incapable of making that distinction, as well as any valid distinction between right and wrong. “Revealed religion” makes them susceptible to committing any moral depravity.

Here’s why we should worry about this: The push for theocracy, theonomy and Christian nationalism are expressions of Calvinism. **Pennsylvania**

How wouldn’t student prayer disrupt teaching?

This is regarding the news item in the April issue, “Alabama bill would protect student-led prayer.” Apparently, it’s all right to allow student-led voluntary prayer as long as it “doesn’t disrupt instruction.” How could it not disrupt instruction? Don’t the teachers wait for the prayer to end before teaching, or do they actually give their lessons during the prayers? And, if a student is leading or listening to the prayers, how could he be listening to the teacher? **Maryland**

I’ve been a lifelong ‘nasty’ nonbeliever

I turned 80 on May 6. That’s quite a milestone. I should be praying for salvation for all the sins I’ve committed over eight decades. Instead, I’m still pissing off any religious nut cases I can find, especially if they’re trying to shove their fantasy biblical bull crap down my throat! Yeah, I’m one of those “nasty” nonbelievers. **Oregon**

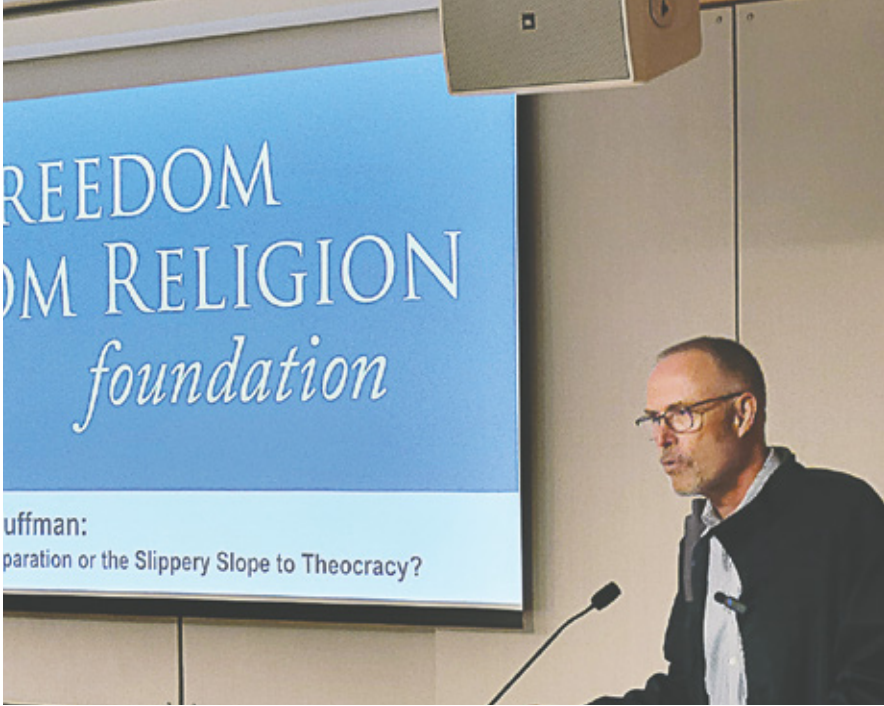
FFRF’s outstanding work deserves extra donation

I’m happy to be making a one-time donation to FFRF (in addition to my wife Pam Woodley’s and my regular annual donation). I’m pleased to be doing this because of the outstanding work FFRF is spearheading in so many areas — and especially because of the terrific leadership of Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker. Please consider this contribution as a thank you for your dedication, as well as that of the entire FFRF staff. You make me proud to be an FFRF Lifetime member. I read all of your emails and I read Freethought Today from cover to cover. So, for all of those reasons and many more, thanks for making FFRF such a smart, active passionate leader of American atheism. **Georgia**

Crossword answers

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

A representative sample



On April 8, the San Francisco Bay Chapter of FFRF hosted U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Calif., at the San Francisco Public Library. He gave a speech titled: “Church-State Separation or the Slippery Slope to Theocracy?” The chapter held a lunch social and Huffman answered questions after his speech.

Christian prayer not needed before meeting

This is the email I sent the mayor of St. Peters, Mo., Len Pagano, after attending a volunteer appreciation breakfast: Your Honor, thanks to you and the city for honoring our volunteer work this morning. It was an enjoyable meal. I noted that during the invocation that you, like I, did not bow your head. I think it is a little presumptuous to assume that all attendees are Christians and to lead off with a Christian prayer, invoking Jesus’s name several times. Not all of the attendees ascribe to that religion, or any, for that matter. A moment of silent meditation would be more appropriate, if that is needed. Likewise, I find the “In God We Trust” legend above the counter at City Hall could be offensive and divisive to some. “E Pluribus Unum” is a phrase that was used in years past that united us and did not exclude. **Missouri**

Black-and-white thinking harmful to democracy

Dichotomous thinking, also known as black-and-white thinking, seems to be common among the religious population. This is reflected in the monthly installment of Crankmail, in which we get a peek inside the mind of the pious. A common theme I read is the belief that atheists are “satanists and devil worshippers.” In the mind of the believer, either you are a devout believer or a devil worshipper. There is no middle ground. They don’t understand that the only people who believe in a literal Satan are the same people who believe in God. This reminds me of when I came out to my devoutly Catholic mother about being an atheist. The first thing

Cryptogram answer

Be thankful that you have a life, and forsake your vain and presumptuous desire for a second one.

— Richard Dawkins

she asked was, “So, do you worship Satan?” I remain incredulous regarding the ignorance of this question. We also see this erroneous way of thinking when it comes to politics. The religious classify people into either “good” or “evil,” not taking into account that “goodness” is a wide spectrum and not relegated to polar opposites. Hence, we see conservatives labeling democrats as evil and their own party as good, despite the insurmountable evidence to the contrary in many cases. Erroneous thinking such as dichotomous thinking is harmful to a pluralistic democracy and must be challenged. **California**

Thanks for producing ‘Freethought Matters’

I love the “Freethought Matters show.” It’s easy to watch and I feel like I learn something significant and new each time I do. You have some rather heady, distinguished guests. Thanks for producing such a high-quality show for our community. **New Jersey**

Coffee shop patron gets hooked in by FT

I leave back issues of Freethought Today in the magazine rack of my town’s coffee shop. I recently spotted a middle-aged non-townie deep in concentration with Freethought Today. From a distance, I saw that he was reading one of the full-page columns. If I read his face correctly, he was drawn in by the piece and had never encountered the kind of free-wheeling monthly that would run it. He finished the essay and his coffee. He paused, stared at the page for an extended beat, and slyly pulled the

double sheet out of the issue. Then he seemed to have a “thou shalt not” moment and replaced the page. I was disappointed until he took the whole issue, folded it and stuck it in his pocket. Perfect. Perhaps you got a new member from this incident. **Ohio**

It’s time to upgrade to a Lifetime Membership

I am making my membership renewal a Lifetime Membership! It’s high time. I love what you guys do and being a small part of your great work. FFRF’s legal efforts are especially necessary and appreciated. Keep it up! **Colorado**

FFRF at forefront of defending human rights

Usually, I do my charitable giving in January, but this year I couldn’t seem to get going. Finally, it dawned on me that almost every major problem I’m concerned about is either caused by or exacerbated by religion. So, rather than make a dozen individual donations, it seemed smarter to focus on FFRF, since you are dedicated to getting at the root cause. I’ll be pleased to see the continuation of your work to defend women’s rights, as well as protects LGBTQ individuals, especially trans kids and their parents, who are facing the brunt of religious bigotry, education and democracy. Thank you for all you do. I celebrate every victory and hard-fought step forward. **New Mexico**

Early bibles showed God with human body parts

In the April issue of the New York Review of Books is a review of the book *God: An Anatomy*, by Francesca Stavrakopoulou. It speaks of the words in early bible passages as saying that God has human body parts, such as feet that needed to avoid feces, and genitals that were actually used for copulation. If the bible literalists really took their bible literally, in the original intent and composition, their congregations would be taught of a very carnal god! **Kentucky**

Freethinkers support the right to choose

There were a lot of things I didn’t get to choose in my life. But I can choose how I relate to the world. I can choose to support such causes as FFRF, which tries to make my society better. I can support everyone’s right to choose, even knowing that some will choose poorly. That’s how I define “freethinker.” **Maryland**

Thanks for fighting Christian nationalism

I appreciate the wonderful work you are doing to fight Christian nationalism. It is out of control and your tenacity is to be admired. I am a lifelong atheist, even though I was raised in Europe in a very Catholic family. At the tender age of 6, I started doubting all the nonsense I was fed, and I am so glad that I never had to struggle with getting away from it all. Keep up the good work. You are so awesome. **Arizona**

What Is a Freethinker?

freethinker *n.*

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





Photo by Chris Line

There will be an open house at Freethought Hall in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 12.

# FFRF convention, Oct. 13-15

## Join us in Madison!

Join the Freedom From Religion Foundation in its home city for its 46th annual convention from Friday, Oct. 13 through Sunday morning Oct. 15 at the Monona Terrace Convention Center in Madison, Wis. For information on convention speakers, see page 3.

### General Schedule

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

Return the handy registration form on the right, or sign up at [ffrf.org/convo2023](http://ffrf.org/convo2023).

### Registration

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

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

### Optional Group Meals

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

#### Friday Dinner Buffet

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

#### Saturday Non-Prayer Breakfast

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

#### Saturday Lunch

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

#### Saturday Dinner

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

Onsite self parking \$25/day.

#### Best Western Premier Park Hotel

22 S Carroll St, Madison, WI 53703  
608-285-8000  
Rates are \$209 for a standard guest room.

Hotel is 3 blocks from convention site.

Onsite valet parking \$25/day.

#### Sheraton Madison Hotel

706 John Nolen Dr, Madison, WI 53713  
888-625-4988  
Rates are \$269 for a standard guest room.

Hotel is 2.3 miles from convention site.

Free surface lot parking. Free shuttle service to downtown available.

## FFRF 2023 NATIONAL CONVENTION MADISON OCTOBER 13-15

### 46<sup>TH</sup> CONVENTION REGISTRATION FORM

Or register online: [ffrf.us/convention2023](http://ffrf.us/convention2023)

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

### OPTIONAL MEALS / EVENTS

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

#### Thursday, October 12

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

#### Friday, October 13

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

#### Saturday, October 14

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

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

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

► Total \$\_\_\_

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

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

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

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

Name of Registrant 1

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

Address

City State / ZIP

Phone\* Email\*

Credit Card Number Expiration Date / Security Code

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

### Hotels

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

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

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

#### Hilton Madison Monona Terrace

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