

# FREETHOUGHT TODAY



**'Everybody  
needs their  
own spaces'**

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mess around,  
we organize!**

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Clarence Darrow Award winner



Photo by Chris Line

Populist firebrand Jim Hightower speaks at FFRF's national convention in San Antonio on Oct. 28, 2022. "It makes me happier than a mosquito in a nudist colony to be standing up here."

## Hightower: Progressives need more agitators

*This is the (edited) speech given by Jim Hightower at FFRF's national convention in San Antonio on Oct. 28, 2022. You can watch the full speech here: [ffrf.us/convention-2022](https://ffrf.us/convention-2022). He was introduced by David Tamayo, an FFRF board member.*

**David Tamayo:** I am delighted to introduce this year's honoree of FFRF's Clarence Darrow Award. This is a pure bronze statuette that is an exact miniature of the 7-foot-tall statue created by Zenos Frudakis that FFRF erected on the courthouse lawn where the Scopes "Monkey" trial was held in Dayton, Tenn.

In keeping with the convention theme, "DO Mess with Texas," this year's honoree, Jim Hightower, has spent four decades battling the powers that be on behalf of the powers that ought to be — consumers, working families, environmentalists, small business owners and just plain folks.

The two-time Texas agriculture commissioner is a national radio commentator heard on more than 150 stations. He's been dubbed "America's most popular populist." He writes a rousing newsletter, "The Hightower Lowdown," which has more than 135,000 subscribers. A New York Times bestselling author, he's

written seven books with very entertaining titles, most recently, *Swim Against the Current: Even a Dead Fish Can Go with the Flow*.

Please welcome Jim Hightower.

**By Jim Hightower**

**T**hank you, David. And thanks to all of you. What a joy and what a special treat this is. It's kind of coming full circle. A few years ago, I got the Eugene Debs Award, who, of course, Clarence Darrow represented in a couple of cases. I also have something else in common with Clarence Darrow, which is he's a distinguished lawyer, and I went to law school for a week and a half.

It's a special joy because, while I'm nowhere near worthy of this award because of Clarence Darrow's distinguished history, he represented the people rather than the powerful interests. I've been in the same kind of fights that he was in, and with the same sort of spirit that he had and that you have.

When I was agriculture commissioner, we were promulgating some regulations to

*See Hightower on page 14*

## FFRF wins suit against Texas Gov. Abbott

The Freedom From Religion Foundation on Jan. 27 won its case before an appeals court against the Texas governor's censorship of its Capitol display.

After Gov. Greg Abbott and the State Preservation Board blatantly and illegally censored FFRF's display in the Texas Capitol in 2015, Abbott and the board have fought every step of the way to delay the ultimate resolution of FFRF's now six-and-a-half-year lawsuit, engaging in protracted, entirely avoidable litigation at taxpayer expense.

FFRF, with help from members and with requisite permit and sponsorship by a legislator, had placed a Winter Solstice display in the Capitol building in December 2015 to counter a Christian nativity there. FFRF's whimsical exhibit depicts the Founders and the Statue of Liberty celebrating the "birth" of the Bill of Rights (adopted on Dec. 15, 1791). Abbott, as chair of the Preservation Board, while permitting the Christian



exhibit, ordered FFRF's display removed only three days after it was erected, lambasting it as indecent, mocking and contributing to public immorality. FFRF initially won its lawsuit at the district court level in 2018.

Abbott and the Texas government have lost at every level in the case. A district judge granted FFRF permanent relief in May 2021, ordering declarato-

*See Abbot on page 3*

## FFRF aghast over Iowa's new school funding law

FFRF is appalled at Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds signing legislation that will funnel over \$340 million in taxpayer dollars to private, mostly religious schools.

The new law is an egregious decimation of the public school system in the name of "school choice." The "Students First Act" creates an education savings account redirecting taxpayer funds to private school education. The newly enacted law makes these funds available to families who make 300 percent of the poverty income guidelines for the first year. The following year, the availability of the funds will be expanded to families making 400 percent of the poverty income guidelines. After that, the funds will be available to all families, regardless of income. Eventually, all Iowa

families can use up to \$7,598 a year for private school tuition.

In short, even if a family is fully financially capable of sending their children to private schools, and even if they have always planned to utilize private schools, they will soon be eligible to receive taxpayer-funded assistance for that purpose.

In addition to being bad policy, the law runs counter to the Iowa Constitution. Article 1, Section 3 of the Iowa Constitution states, "... nor shall any person be compelled to . . . pay tithes, taxes, or other rates for building or repairing places of worship, or the maintenance of any minister, or ministry."

FFRF has long held that where public tax dollars go, public accountability must follow. But there will be little pub-

*See Iowa on page 7*



# William Missouri Downs is prolific playwright

**Name:** William Missouri Downs.  
**Where I live:** Denver, Colo.  
**Where and when I was born:** The Midwest, a long time ago.  
**Education:** MFA in acting from the University of Illinois, MFA in screenwriting from UCLA. I learned to write plays at the Circle Rep Theatre in New York.  
**Occupation:** Playwright.  
**How I got where I am today:** I got here by writing six to eight hours a day. I was an actor, but bad at it, so I began writing. It took decades, but I eventually got jobs writing for NBC sitcoms in Hollywood. I was a staff writer on the NBC sitcom “My Two Dads” and a freelance writer on “Fresh Prince of Bel-Air” and “Amen.”

There have been more than 350 productions of my plays and musicals. The play that FFRF members would enjoy most is my comedy, “The Exit Interview,” published by Concord, an existential romp through atheism. I’ve also written four books, including *The Art of Theatre*, a textbook now in its fourth edition, which 100,000 college students have used. I’ve directed 40 plays and have won many writing awards. You can check out my website ([williammissouridowns.com](http://williammissouridowns.com)) for more information.

**Where I’m headed:** I have no idea. I don’t have goals. Every time I set a goal, I fail. Instead, I wait for something good to happen and, after the fact, say it was my goal and where I was heading. This guarantees success!

**Person in history I admire and why:** Voltaire and Madame du Châtelet. They were the ultimate enlightenment power couple. Viktor Frankl because his book *Man’s Search for Meaning* gives the clearest thoughts on how to live life. Buster Keaton because he makes me laugh at the absurd.

**A quotation I like:** “Live as if you were living already for the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now.” From *Man’s Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl.

**Things I like:** Getting up at 3 a.m. and writing. Intelligent conversation. Well-written practical philosophy books. Reading William and Ariel Durant. A good movie that doesn’t follow tired Hollywood formulas. Seeing my plays produced by good directors and actors. Dogs.

**Things I smite:** Living in the gutted world of the Corporate States of America, where everything is judged by its dollar value. Monthly wars. The Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade being an advertisement for Wheaties and wetland preservation.



William Missouri Downs

Fend-for-yourself megastores. People who ride motorcycles and snowmobiles in the mountains. Bizarre presidents. Trash on Mount Everest. Sirens and backup alarms.

**My doubts about religion started:** At birth. No, really, I’ve never had a foot in religion. Sometimes I’ve leaned toward deism, but that’s about as close as I’ve ever gotten. Several girlfriends tried to convert me, but even the lure of sex wasn’t enough for me to accept that

a perfect sky god designed the highly flawed human body. An average undergraduate engineering student could design a better human body than “God” did. A great writer doesn’t write crap, and a great god couldn’t have designed the male prostate gland.

**Before I die:** I’d like to get a little better at living a life of the mind.

**Ways I promote freethought:** For many years, I taught a class at the University of Wyoming on atheism, agnosticism and deism, which covered everyone from Robert Ingersoll to Ayn Rand and Thomas Paine to Ayaan Hirsi Ali. It was one of the few such classes in the country. (It is no longer being offered.) In my plays, I sometimes write about people who question. Perhaps if I hadn’t, I would’ve been more successful.

**I wish you’d have asked me:** My philosophy of life is that humans cannot derive meaning by looking at the universe. Meaning for us, temporary tiny beings on this lonely planet, can only come day to day and hour to hour. Here’s what all world religions never understood: You can’t extract meaning from vastness.

## OVERHEARD

A fetus is potential life, and that is worthy of great respect and is not to be taken lightly, but it does not supersede the life and health of the mother, period.

**Cara Berg Raunick, a women’s health nurse practitioner, who was struck by how frequently faith was cited in the arguments to ban abortion in Indiana.**

*Associated Press, 12-27-22*

Political demagogues in Tallahassee periodically threaten academic freedom and use professors as props in their efforts to fabricate an imagined internal enemy for their political gain. Whether it be the teaching of evolution in public colleges, offering vocal support for the Tallahassee Bus Boycott, or being terminated or expelled for being a gay or lesbian student or teacher, we’ve seen this all before.

**Robert Cassanello, a professor of history at the University of Central Florida and a plaintiff in the first legal case against the so-called “Stop WOKE” Act.**

*Orlando Weekly, 1-19-23*

I’m not opposed to faith-based schools. If parents want to send their children to faith-based schools, they should have that option. . . .

But I don’t see any circumstance in which some parents’ choice to send their children to faith-based schools should erode the separation of church and state on which Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and others built our country.

**Victoria Riley, Greene County (Iowa) News publisher, in her column, “Using public funds for faith-based education is just plain wrong.”**

*Greene County News, 1-18-23*

Leave it to Missouri’s radical-right Legislature to say the quiet part out loud. Their strict new abortion ban plainly declares that lawmakers are serving “Almighty God.” It was approved after floor debate that was equally proselytizing. Pro-choice faith leaders are now suing to overturn the law. They allege it violates Missouri’s Constitution, which, like its federal counterpart, explicitly prohibits government promotion of religion. It’s a strong case.

**St. Louis Post-Dispatch editorial, “Missouri’s abortion ban reads like a sermon. That’s a constitutional problem.”**

*St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 1-21-23*

Defending and protecting reproductive rights is essential to our nation’s health, safety, and progress. It is the policy of my administration to protect against threats to the liberty and autonomy of those who live in this country.

**President Biden, in taking additional steps to ensure access to mifepristone, an abortion pill, in a “Memorandum on further efforts to protect access to reproductive health care services.”**

*Religion Clause, 1-24-23*

If you’re asking how that momentous decision affected me, my word description would have varied from day to day. Sometimes I was shell-shocked. Other times, I was just deeply, deeply sad. And many times I did have a sense of despair about the direction my court was going. . . . Yet I realized that one doesn’t have an option to fall prey to despair, that I have to get up and keep on fighting.

**Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, responding about the high court majority’s reversal of Roe v. Wade, after the question, “How are you doing?,” was posed by Berkeley Law School Dean Erwin Chemerinsky at an American Association of Law Schools event.**

*Associated Press, 1-19-23*

Instead of debating bills of substance that would alleviate poverty, improve children’s lives, enhance citizens’ health, create affordable housing or address the existential issue of climate change, some legislators seem more invested in imposing their brand of Christianity on the rest of us.

**Sonny Albarado, in his op-ed, “Arkansas’ would-be religious tyrants gather steam with ‘culture-war’ bills.”**

*Arkansas Advocate, 1-23-23*

No individual under 19 years of age shall be present at a religious indoctrination camp. Any person 19 years of age or older who knowingly brings an individual under 19 years of age to a religious indoctrination camp shall be guilty of a Class I misdemeanor. . . . There is a well-documented history of indoctrination and sexual abuse perpetrated by religious leaders and clergy people upon children.

**Megan Hunt, Nebraska state senator, in her amendment to a proposed bill that would make it a crime for children to attend a drag show.**

*OnlySky, 1-29-23*

### MEET A MEMBER

## FFRF FREETHOUGHT TODAY

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

### 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.”



March in January



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor (above) hold FFRF’s banner at the National Women’s March in Madison, Wis., on Jan. 22, on what would have been Roe v. Wade’s 50th anniversary. Madison was chosen as the “marquee” targeted location for the march. The message of the rally was on the importance of an upcoming state Supreme Court election that will impact the success of the Wisconsin attorney general’s lawsuit against the state’s 1849 abortion ban, which is now in effect.

Dan and Annie Laurie were invited by the march’s local leaders, who liked FFRF’s message, to jump to the head of the line (to deflect attention from a distracting anti-abortion protester). After marching up State Street, Madison’s main drag from campus to the Capitol building, speeches were held inside the Capitol Rotunda.

Americans and feminists are waking up to the fact that the ruthless campaign to deny reproductive, women’s and LGBTQ rights is a religious crusade, as these two Madison protesters (right) show.



Photo by Annie Laurie Gaylor

Abbott

Continued from page 1

ry and injunctive relief to ensure that Abbott and the State Preservation Board would not violate FFRF’s free speech rights in the future.

In Abbott’s third appeal in the case, he argued that since the Preservation Board changed its rules, the case had become moot. The rule changes declared that all exhibits placed in the Capitol were now “government speech.”

In a unanimous decision written by Circuit Judge Jennifer Walker Elrod, with Chief Judge Priscilla Richman and Judge Patrick Higginbotham joining, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals decision does not agree with Abbott’s “government speech” analysis. But it does conclude that this latest amendment has effectively closed the Texas Capitol as a forum for private speech. The court explains, “Instead of allowing the Foundation to participate in the limited public forum, the state elected to . . . close the forum altogether.” For this reason, the appeals court reversed one aspect of the district court’s judgment, eliminating its order for injunctive relief.

The appeals court goes on, however, to warn the state that closing its forum in the Texas Capitol does not mean the state has free rein to discriminate when displaying exhibits in the future: “If the board adopted an unwritten policy of accepting exhibits from members of the public and, in determining which exhibits

to accept, discriminated on the basis of an exhibit’s viewpoint, such a policy would almost certainly violate the First Amendment.” Moreover, the court notes, “The Foundation is in no way precluded from filing a new lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of such a policy, should one be established.” For these reasons, the appeals court concludes, the district court’s order and declaratory judgment should remain in place, as “this precedent is particularly valuable because it might bear on future state policies respecting a similar subject, and any related disputes.”

The case will now return to the district court for resolution of FFRF’s outstanding claim for attorneys’ fees and costs.

“We’re very happy that our victory in the lower court has survived Gov. Abbott’s latest appeal,” notes FFRF Associate Counsel Sam Grover, who argued the case before the 5th Circuit. “The governor’s stubborn refusal to admit his wrongdoing throughout this litigation has been baffling, and it is unfortunate that Texas taxpayers may ultimately bear the costs of his repeated appeals.”

Comments Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president: “While Abbott called our display celebrating the Bill of Rights ‘offensive,’ it is his autocratic actions that are offensive. It is Abbott who offensively even once told FFRF that we and other nontheists should stay out of Texas.”

FFRF is represented by Associate Counsel Sam Grover and Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott in the case, with attorney Rich Bolton of Boardman and Clark LLP serving as litigation counsel.

Save the dates!

FFRF convention will be back in Madison

The Freedom From Religion Foundation will hold its 46th annual convention at the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center in Madison, Wis. The city is home to FFRF’s Freethought Hall, the impressive building which houses the FFRF offices.

The convention will be held over two full days on Friday, Oct. 13 and Saturday, Oct. 14. (An optional early registration and evening tour of Freethought Hall, with its auditorium, library and studio, will take place that Thursday night, Oct. 12.)

The annual membership and State Representatives meeting will take place Sunday morning, Oct. 15.

Registration and hotel information will be forthcoming. Early awardees and speakers already include:

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

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

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

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

Roys, who was first elected to the Wisconsin state Assembly in 2008, served as minority caucus chair in 2011 and was elected to the state Senate in 2020. Kelda earned her BA in drama, politics and cultural studies, magna cum laude, from New York University in 2000, and her JD, magna cum laude, from the University of Wisconsin Law School in 2004. She has worked as an attorney, a small business owner, and former nonprofit executive. She has served as a board member on a number of diverse civic and nonprofit groups, ranging from Common Cause of Wisconsin to Madison Repertory Theatre. An ardent supporter of abortion rights, she currently serves on a number of committees, such as Administrative Rules, Finance and Judiciary.



Kate Cohen



Mary Ziegler



Mike Freiberg



Kelda Roys



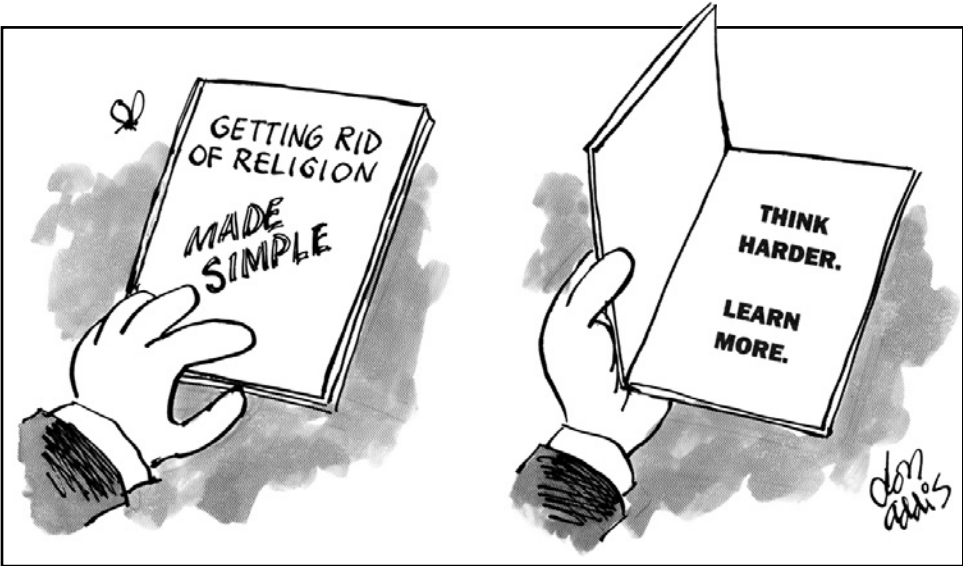
Photo: Monona Terrace

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



Freethought Today Cryptogram

IFN YKT B SN KJABNDLNB FMLN ZANMINT  
AJDNT JB QKA ZNGIJARNB! SFMI M YANMI  
ZKXNTU! MGT SFMI M YANMI IAMYNTU!  
— XNFXNI XJAMI RDTMG



Don Addis, editorial cartoonist for the St. Petersburg Times and Tampa Bay Times in Florida, started contributing cartoons to FFRF in the early 2000s. A Lifetime Member, he died in 2009. FFRF published *Cartoons for the Irreverent: Celebrating the Wit of Don Addis* in 2019. It features 150 of his cartoons..

# Freethinkers: Send us your six-word stories!

**Dear Readers:**

Have you ever heard of six-word stories? Sometimes they’re called memoirs. Googling the terms reveals numerous on-line mentions and examples.

Editor Larry Smith challenged readers in 2006 in his eponymous storytelling magazine to describe their lives in six words and cited one attributed, perhaps wrongly, to Ernest Hemingway: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.”

The Marin Independent Journal in San Rafael, Calif., runs variations featuring different topics. The prompt: “Please make it a story with a beginning, middle and end — not six adjectives, a cliché or advice. Make it personal. Make us laugh or cry or at the very least feel something.”

Submissions for the topic of mortality included “Six feet under. Off you go.” “Truth be told, we’re all terminal.” “Kaiser missed my cancer. Bye bye.” “Brendan, our son, gone too soon.” “Full life, no regrets. It’s time.” “Ain’t no time to wonder why.” (The last precedes “Whoopee, we’re all gonna die” in Country Joe McDonald’s “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag.”)

Your mission, FFRF members, is to reflect about your reliance on or journey to nonbelief/freethought. Examples: “Gods flourish where reason is scant.” “First gods, then reason, then freedom.”

This isn’t a contest. Submissions, limited to one per person, will be printed in the paper and online. Deadline is March 30.

To submit, write “Six-word story” in an email subject line. Include your name and state of residence. Email to [memiors@ffrf.org](mailto:memiors@ffrf.org).

Or, mail it to FFRF, Attn: Bill Dunn, Box 750, Madison, WI 53701.

Have fun!

# New website for author, columnist Barbara Walker

Lifetime Member Barbara G. Walker, a formerly frequent columnist for Freethought Today, has a new website linking to and showing her former writings, books and other musings.

In the mid-1970s, she became part of the “new feminist wave,” writing the monumental feminist/freethought sourcebook, *The Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (1983). Her many other books include *The Skeptical Feminist* (1987), *Man Made God: A Collection of Essays* (2010) and *Belief and Unbelief* (2014). An atheist, she has also specialized in debunking irresponsible, New Age assertions about crystals.

She is also a knitting expert, writing 10 volumes, including the classics *Treasury of Knitting Patterns* and *A Second Treasury of Knitting Patterns*.

She pulled no punches when it came to criticizing religion, including prayer: “I was always bemused by the implication that God was malleable, so open to manipulation by humans. If God had made up his mind to do things a particular way, to lead us into temptation on that particular day, for example, who are we to talk him out of it? Was he really so weak and malleable that a few words from some insignificant humans could change his intentions? And if he was not so, whatever was the point of all the prayer? It was an insoluble puzzle.”

The American Humanist Association named her “Humanist Heroine” in 1993, and in 1995, she received the “Women Making Herstory” award from the New Jersey NOW.

You can access her website here: [bgw.works](http://bgw.works).



Barbara G. Walker

Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Across

1. Party animal?  
5. Stir fry pan  
8. Breach between generations  
11. Load sixteen tons, e.g.  
12. \_\_\_\_-carotene  
13. Fighter jet button  
15. Pakistani language  
16. \*It doesn’t have to be taken on a bible  
17. Fixin’ to  
18. \*Irreverent Ludwig van \_\_\_\_  
20. Clarified butter  
21. Like a beaver?  
22. \*Freethinker Peter to a freethinker Henry Fonda  
23. Ripe cherry color  
26. Cover for a camera (2 words)  
30. High or low card  
31. Not comic  
34. Cantina pot  
35. Autocratic  
37. \*Atheist \_\_\_\_ Child, Jack Reacher creator  
38. Freshwater eel, in Japan  
39. Deplaned  
40. Old-fashioned nut sweet  
42. Isle of \_\_\_\_ in Irish Sea  
43. \*Subset of the evolutionary tree of life

Down

45. Paper clip alternative  
47. Three, to Caesar  
48. Suitor  
50. Mafia heads  
52. \*Like FFRF, financially speaking  
56. A.k.a. motor lodge  
57. Guesstimate phrase (2 words)  
58. Forearm bone  
59. “PokÉmon,” e.g.  
60. Like something vintage, usually  
61. Email folder  
62. Lake, in France  
63. Volleyball divider  
64. Allay  
22. 1/60th of min  
23. Secret clique  
24. Cause for food recall  
25. Pine juice  
26. Gladly, arch.  
27. Chip clip, e.g.  
28. Relating to pond scum  
29. \*Subject of the future memorial in Washington, D.C.  
32. Medicinal plant  
33. Engagement rock  
36. \*”Ms.” magazine co-founder and feminist icon  
38. Give voice to  
40. Some special effects, acr.  
41. Certain crustacean  
44. Supermarket pathway  
46. Kindle  
48. Unfavorable prognosis  
49. Outbreak  
50. Lady, in Spain  
51. Related to ear  
52. Type of word  
53. Bloodsucking hopper  
54. Travelers’ stops  
55. What state and tater have in common  
56. \*Irreverent Charles Baudelaire’s “Les Fleurs du \_\_\_\_”  
19. Rash

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: S => W .



# IN THE NEWS

## One-third of Americans now not attending church

A new report, which looked at in-person worship attendance patterns before the beginning of the pandemic and again in 2022, found that a third of those surveyed never attend worship services. That’s up from 25 percent before the start of the pandemic.

The pandemic has likely led people who already had loose ties to congregations to leave, said Dan Cox, one of the authors of the new study and a senior fellow in polling and public opinion at the conservative American Enterprise Institute.

Researchers compared answers from between 2018 and 2020 to answers from 2022 to understand how attendance patterns changed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The new study focused on attendance at in-person services versus on-line services.

The report also noted the decline in attendance most affected groups that had already started to show a decline before the pandemic — particularly among younger adults, who were already lagging before the pandemic and showed the steepest drop-off since.

## New Congress is still overwhelmingly Christian

Since 2007, the share of Christians in the general population has dropped from 78 percent to its present level of 63 percent, yet Christians make up 88 percent of the voting members of the new 118th Congress, which is only a few percentage points lower than the Christian share of Congress in the late 1970s, according to a report by Pew Research Center.

Only one member of the new Congress — Sen. Kyrsten Sinema — identifies as religiously unaffiliated. Rep. Jared Huffman describes himself as humanist, and 20 are categorized as having unknown religious affiliations. Most of these members declined to state a religious affiliation when they were asked by CQ Roll Call.

But, the 469 Christians (out of 534 total members) at the start of the 2023-24 session comprise the lowest number since Pew began analyzing the religious affiliation of the House and Senate for the 2009-10 session.

## Clergy sue to block Missouri’s abortion ban

A group of religious leaders who support abortion rights filed a lawsuit on Jan. 19 challenging Missouri’s abortion ban, saying lawmakers openly invoked their religious beliefs while drafting the measure and thereby imposed those beliefs on others who don’t share them, according to the Associated Press.

The lawsuit filed in St. Louis is the latest of many to challenge restrictive abortion laws enacted by conservative states after the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade last year. That ruling left abortion rights up to each state to decide.

The Missouri lawsuit brought on behalf of 13 Christian, Jewish and Unitarian Universalist leaders seeks a permanent injunction barring the state from enforcing its abortion law and a declaration that provisions of its law violate the Missouri Constitution.

Some want to refuse customers based on their beliefs ...



Colorado baker loses appeal in another case

The Colorado baker who won a partial U.S. Supreme Court victory after refusing to make a gay couple’s wedding cake because of his Christian faith lost an appeal on Jan. 26 in his latest legal fight, involving his rejection of a request for a birthday cake celebrating a gender transition.

Religion News Service reports that the Colorado Court of Appeals ruled that the cake Autumn Scardina requested from Jack Phillips and Masterpiece Cakeshop is not a form of speech. The cake was to be pink with blue frosting.

The appeals court said Phillips’ shop initially agreed to make the cake, but then refused after Scardina explained that she was going to use it to celebrate her transition from male to female.

“We conclude that creating a pink cake with blue frosting is not inherently expressive and any message or symbolism it provides to an observer would not be attributed to the baker,” said the court.

Phillips, who is represented by Alliance Defending Freedom, maintains that the cakes he creates are a form of speech and plans to appeal.

## Church wants members to sign anti-gay pledge

A Jacksonville, Fla., Baptist Church is making members sign an oath against LGBT relationships as part of church membership.

Heath Lambert, First Baptist Church’s senior pastor, has been an outspoken proponent of “traditional” family values. Now, his church has given members until March 19 to sign the “Biblical Sexuality Agreement” oath or to immediately resign their membership. Lambert says that real Christians do not have a problem with it.

According to Lambert, he did not make the decision on his own and that the entire congregation wanted to move forward with the agreement.

The “Biblical Sexuality Agreement” states: “As a member of First Baptist Church, I believe that God creates people in his image as either male or female, and that this creation is a fixed matter of human biology, not individual choice. I believe marriage is instituted by God, not government, is between one man and one woman, and is the only context for sexual desire and expression.”

## Faculty wants prez to resign over controversy

The faculty of Hamline University have called on President Fayneese Miller to resign, saying they no longer have faith in her ability to lead the St. Paul, Minn., school after what they see as the mishandling of a Muslim student’s complaint about an instructor showing a painting of the Prophet Muhammad.

Meeting Jan. 24, the faculty voted 71-12 to ask for the president’s resignation in what has become an interna-

tional scandal over academic freedom and Islamic art.

The university was criticized for not renewing the contract of the instructor who showed a 14th-century painting of the Prophet Muhammad in her online art history class last semester.

During the class, adjunct professor Erika López Prater showed students a treasured painting depicting the prophet receiving a revelation from the Angel Gabriel. The professor notified students, both in class and on her syllabus, that she would show the image and allowed those students who believe images of the prophet are forbidden not to participate. Student Aram Wedatalla, however, complained to administrators that the showing of the painting was offensive and hurtful and that the instructor’s “trigger warning” was proof she shouldn’t have shown the images.

## Federal court dismisses LGBTQ students’ lawsuit

An Oregon federal district court ruled Jan. 12 that there is no legal remedy for LGBTQ students who claim they were discriminated against at their religious universities.

The judge dismissed the class-action lawsuit filed in March 2021 on behalf of about 40 students and former students at religious schools nationwide. The case, Hunter v. the U.S. Department of Education, claimed that the department failed to protect LGBTQ+ students at religious schools from discrimination.

Federal District Court Judge Ann Aiken of the U.S. District Court in Eugene, Ore., ruled the plaintiffs had “satisfactorily alleged” that they had been injured by religious exemption.

Aiken ruled that the plaintiffs had

not “alleged the elements necessary to state a legal claim on the merits of their action,” and cited previous federal court rulings that religious exemptions are constitutional and rejected the idea that such exemptions are motivated by an intent to discriminate.

## Christians were large part of Brazil riots

The storming of the capital city of Brasília on Jan. 8 by thousands of supporters of Brazil’s former president, Jair Bolsonaro, demonstrated that a “well-organized segment of the country’s citizenry is willing to see a military dictatorship take power,” according to a Religion News Service report.

Following the destructive riot, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s administration has detained around 1,800 people who invaded government buildings.

Hundreds of Christian organizations were involved with or had members take part in the attempted coup. Numerous videos posted on social media showed rioters praying, shouting Christian slogans and singing gospel hymns as they stormed the buildings.

“Those are people who think they are heroes, so they recorded their actions and showed their faces. They had a clear religious rhetoric. We can see them citing the bible or speaking in tongues in different videos,” said Vinicius do Valle, a political scientist.

## W.Va. Senate OKs ‘IGWT’ displays in schools

Public schools in West Virginia may be required to display the phrase “In God We Trust” in every building if a bill passed by the state Senate on Jan. 31 becomes law.

“We know there’s a lot of kids that have problems at home, tough times at home that we don’t know anything about,” said Sen. Mike Azinger, who introduced the bill. “Maybe they’ll look up one day and say, ‘In God We Trust’ and know they can put their hope in God.”

The bill now goes to the state’s House of Delegates. It would require public K-12 schools and public institutions of higher learning to display the official U.S. national motto on durable posters or in frames placed in a “conspicuous place” in each building.

FFRF sent out an action alert to its members in West Virginia asking them to tell their senators to vote it down.

## Pakistan increases penalty for blasphemy

The National Assembly of Pakistan has passed legislation that imposes life imprisonment for insulting the Prophet Muhammad’s companions, family and wives.

The bill was met with unanimous approval by the members. Under the new law, those found guilty of insulting Muhammad’s companions, family and wives will face a minimum of 10 years imprisonment, with a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. This marks an increase from the previous maximum punishment of three years.

The Pakistani Senate also unanimously passed a resolution that made the teachings of the Quran mandatory for all university students.



# FFRF celebrates Prayer Breakfast changes

FFRF is delighted that the pressure placed by FFRF and a broad coalition of civil rights, religious and secular organizations was able to alter the National Prayer Breakfast, which was held on Feb. 2.

For the first time in 70 years, since that first National Prayer Breakfast was called by the Fellowship Foundation (aka “The Family”) in 1953, the event’s attendees have distanced themselves from their original sponsor. A new group, the National Prayer Breakfast Foundation, announced it was created for the sole purpose of putting on the annual breakfast, and for ethical reasons is separated from The Family.

But the separation between The Fellowship and this new version of the prayer breakfast appears to be a subterfuge, FFRF says, with members of Congress who are connected with The Fellowship still running the new group.

FFRF’s basic concern remains: This is still an event involving the most powerful U.S. public officials endorsing religion. The president and members of Congress should not be at the beck and call of Christian groups summoning them to pray. They take an oath of office to defend our godless Constitution — a Constitution adopted without prayer at the Constitutional Convention, and which explicitly prohibits religious tests for public office. Yet, the National Prayer Breakfast has served as a de facto religious test, with members of Congress genuflecting before it out of fear of being perceived as impious.

And in a truly lovely twist of the knife, the new foundation found it necessary

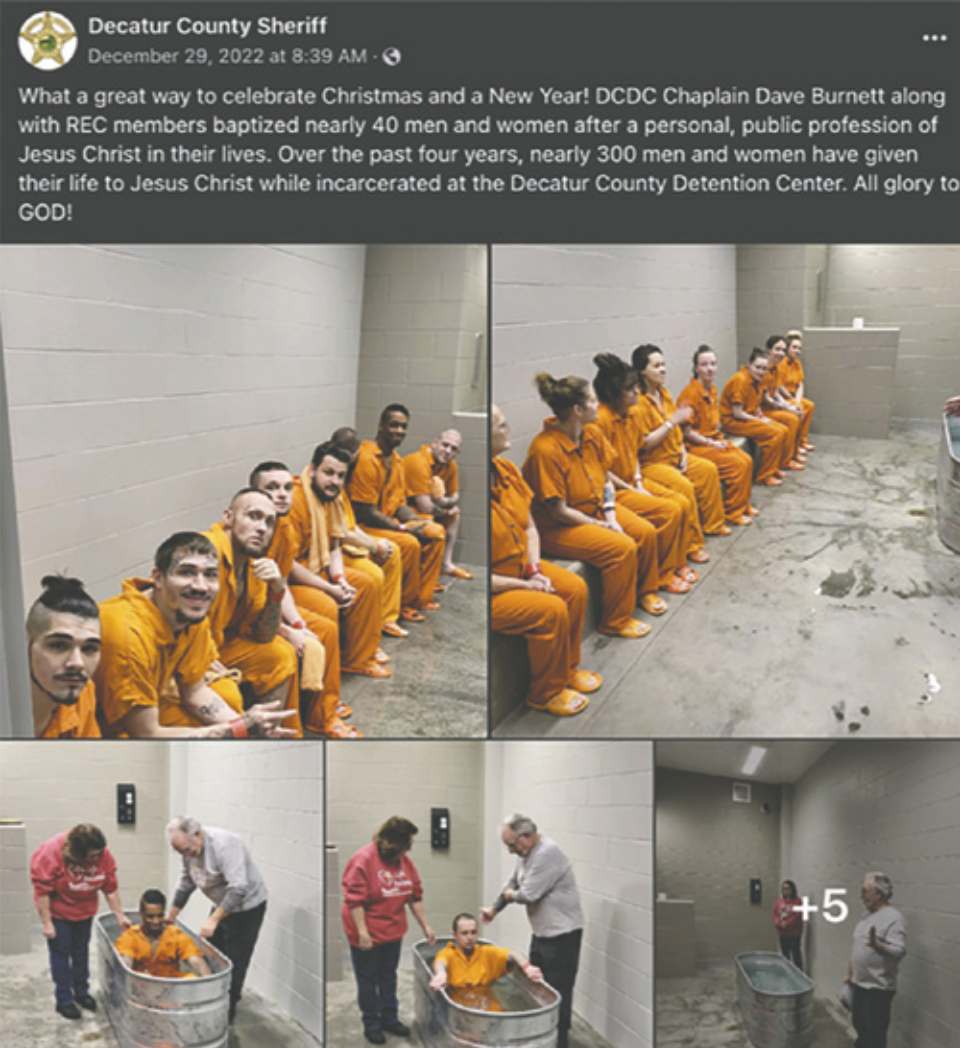
to announce it had refused funding by the breakfast’s main funder in recent years: Rev. Franklin Graham. Graham had openly admitted to The New Yorker, “Everybody in that room has the same agenda. They’re wanting to be able to rub elbows with somebody that they normally couldn’t rub elbows with.” For Graham to hear “your money’s no good here” is music to our ears.

So is the fact that the Family, Rev. Graham and other white Christian nationalists behind the annual breakfast have become political hot potatoes, if not pariahs. This annual spectacle had kicked off scandal-ridden days of influence-peddling, rubbing shoulders with foreign despots and lobbying in Congress for reactionary and anti-LGBTQ policies far

less benign than the vaunted togetherness of political pandering.

Besides all that: Nothing fails like prayer, which is one of the mottos of FFRF, coined by its principal founder Anne Gaylor. Congress doesn’t need a prayer, it needs to double down to do what it takes an oath to do: Form a more perfect union, establish justice, promote the general welfare and “secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” That’s a “hymn” even FFRF can get behind.

While it took far too long, decades of complaints by FFRF and others, plus all the investigative books, documentaries, and dogged reporting, finally got action. The secular movement can indeed celebrate.



## FFRF: Ind. sheriff must halt inmate baptisms

FFRF has insisted that an Indiana sheriff’s department immediately cease its unabashed Christian proselytizing.

On Dec. 29, the Decatur County Sheriff’s Facebook page posted a series of photographs displaying Decatur County Detention Center inmates being baptized. The post shows a clear association with Christianity, reading, “Over the past four years, nearly 300 men and women have given their life to Jesus Christ while incarcerated at the Decatur County Detention Center. All glory to GOD!” The demeaning religious ceremonies take place in an unhygienic shared tub and are led by a Christian evangelizing group.

This egregiously violates the First Amendment, FFRF points out.

“It is a basic tenet of Establishment Clause jurisprudence that the government is prohibited from taking action that advances, shows preference for, or coerces individuals to participate in religion,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line writes to Sheriff Dave Durant.

By holding sectarian religious events in the detention center, the sheriff’s department shows a clear allegiance to the Christian religion, putting the depart-

ment in direct violation of the Establishment Clause. Prisoners will feel pressured to participate in these events when the sheriff himself is organizing them, creating a literal captive audience for Durant.

Residents of Decatur County depend on the sheriff’s department during potentially life-threatening situations, FFRF emphasizes, and rely upon the department to act impartially. By repeated promotion of his own personal religion on official social media pages, the sheriff sends the message that he and the entire sheriff’s department have a preference for Christian community members, expect inmates to kowtow to his religion to the point of undergoing baptisms and would prefer to exclude the approximately 30 percent of Americans who identify as nonreligious.

FFRF warns that if the sheriff insists on continuing religious proselytization of inmates, he is inviting legal liability, as seen in *American Atheists v. Watson*, in which the Bradley County Sheriff’s Office in Tennessee agreed to pay over \$40,000 in damages and attorney’s fees for promoting religion on social media despite objections.

## Medical aid-in-dying laws are necessary

The tragic recent case involving the arrest of a 76-year-old woman in Florida for fatally shooting her terminally ill 77-year-old husband at his request would not have happened if Florida had rational medical-aid-in-dying laws, FFRF asserts.

In fact, those types of laws are only legal in 10 states and the District of Columbia. The following U.S. jurisdictions have enacted legislation that allows terminally ill patients to choose how to end their lives in a dignified manner: California, Colorado (by ballot measure in 2016), Hawaii, Oregon, Maine, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, Vermont, the state of Washington and Washington, D.C. (Montana allows the practice through case law.) Several enlightened nations allow medical aid-in-dying or euthanasia to varying degrees, sometimes including physician-assisted suicide, including Australia, Canada, Colombia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Spain and Switzerland.

All of the U.S. aid-in-dying laws have in common certain requirements that must be met before the act can be administered. For example, patients seeking this aid must be adults living in one of the previously mentioned states with a terminal diagnosis, and a prognosis of six months or less to live. They must also be

mentally capable and able to self-administer and ingest the medications.

These practices, if legal in Florida, would have saved tremendous heartache and suffering. Upon her arrest, the woman told police that she had made a promise to her husband that if his condition worsened, she would alleviate him of his misery. Her terminally ill husband intended to fire the weapon himself, but, according to Daytona Beach Police Chief Jakari Young, “did not have the strength, so she had to carry it out for him.” Now she is locked in a nightmare, including being charged with first-degree murder. No terminally ill person or their loving family members should be faced with such a dilemma. Medical-aid-in-dying laws promote dignity and rational death with individual control over one’s departure from life — and prevent tragedies like this one.

Much of the opposition to medical aid-in-dying laws is based on religiously motivated beliefs that end-of-life care encroaches on “God’s Will” or jurisdiction. The Vatican has reiterated its dogmatic opposition to assisted suicide and euthanasia, calling it “intrinsically evil ... in every situation or circumstance” and labeling it “a crime.”

## FFRF lauds Biden proposal to restore religious liberty protections

FFRF is encouraged to see the Biden Administration’s announcement that it proposes restoring religious liberty protections for beneficiaries of federally funded social services. FFRF, along with a coalition of service and advocacy organizations, filed a lawsuit at the end of President Trump’s term against eight federal agencies for undoing rules to protect individuals receiving social services from such discrimination.

All proposed rules would roll back discriminatory practices from the Trump administration. Taking these steps would protect beneficiaries by requiring that they be notified of their right to be free from discrimination on the basis of religion, making clear that all covered social service programs may not discriminate on the basis of their religion. The agencies would be encouraged to fund domestic programs that help beneficiaries identify alternative secular service

providers in their area if they object to a faith-based provider.

Previously, federal rules had required faith-based organizations providing critical, taxpayer funded services to inform recipients of their legal right to not be discriminated against, not to have to attend religious programming, and to be given the option for a referral to an alternate provider. The rules helped protect the most vulnerable from being forced to attend a bible study or join in a prayer in order to access basic services, such as food or shelter. Under the current rules, those seeking these services may needlessly opt into religious activities or forgo assistance altogether in order to avoid religious coercion.

FFRF’s lawsuit seeks to have the Trump administration’s rules declared a violation of the Administrative Procedures Act and reverse the rollback of these important protections.





Joseph Richardson, a director of the Central Florida Freethought Community, gave a secular invocation at the Lake County Board of County Commissioners meeting, which was immediately followed by a “corrective” Christian prayer.

# Florida county insults FFRF, local chapter

FFRF and its Florida chapter are still seeking resolution after being publicly insulted by the Lake County Board of County Commissioners.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote a letter in December to the Board of County Commissioners after a secular invocation delivered at the Dec. 6 meeting by Joseph Richardson, director of the Central Florida Free-thought Community, was immediately followed by a “corrective” Christian prayer. FFRF requested either that invocations be respected regardless of content or the practice be discontinued entirely.

The Board of County Commissioners has neither acted to correct this mistake nor has it made any official comment regarding the insult.

Richardson returned to address the board at its Jan. 23 meeting to protest the inequitable treatment.

“I’m here today because the situation remains unresolved,” he said. “There

has been no response to FFRF’s letter of complaint. Further, I emailed Commissioner Sean M. Parks in December offering to meet with him and also received no response. Finally, another CFFC [Central Florida Freethought Community] board member, Mr. David Williamson, came here asking for clarification and he was referred back to the Sentinel article where Commissioner Parks said, through a spokesperson, ‘He would apologize.’”

FFRF and Richardson are renewing their demands for the Board of County Commissioners to acknowledge the mistake, apologize for said mistake and assure that it will not happen again.

If the board insists upon having invocations before meetings, it must straightforwardly accept secular invocations, too. Failing to do so will run the risk of lawsuit, as FFRF and other groups successfully sued the Brevard County Board of Commissioners in 2015 for censoring invocations by nontheists.

## Iowa

Continued from page 1

lic accountability for funds going to these religiously segregated and unaccountable parochial schools.

“Forcing taxpayers to pay for the religious education of others is a fundamental violation of religious liberty,” comments FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. “Public education funds should be utilized solely for secular, public education.”

Reynolds, and others who seek to privatize education with public funds, will undoubtedly tout this new law as a win for children across Iowa. However, it is clear that the children of Iowa are the ones who will suffer. Iowa children will face

fewer resources in their public schools. They will face being denied admission to private schools because of their religion, their disability or any other arbitrary variables that private schools wish to discriminate against. At least 84 percent of Iowa’s private schools are religious and more than half are Catholic.

“This legislation is a blank check to private schools in Iowa’s biggest, wealthiest cities with no oversight, no accountability,” says state Rep. Sami Scheetz. “And when it all falls apart, rural schools that close as a result of this legislation cannot just reopen easily.”

# FFRF: More religious privileging likely in USPS case

FFRF is disheartened that the U.S. Supreme Court is set to hear yet another case involving a Christian plaintiff seeking to broaden religious exemptions in the workplace.

On Jan. 12, the high court granted review in a case, *Groff v. DeJoy*, involving a disgruntled religious postal worker, in which it will reconsider the longstanding doctrine concerning accommodation for religious practices and what constitutes undue hardship for employers.

First Liberty Institute, a radical Christian nationalist legal outfit in Texas, has reached the Supreme Court with another case that has the potential to upend decades of settled law regarding religious freedoms, this time in the workplace. Oral arguments are likely to be held in April, with a decision expected in June.

The plaintiff is Gerald Groff, a former postal worker who accepted a position to work on an as-needed basis, necessarily tending to involve weekends, who requested not to work on Sundays be-

cause it was his sabbath. The U.S. Postal Service had accommodated Groff’s request by scheduling co-workers to work Groff’s shifts on Sundays, but the much smaller station he chose to then transfer to could no longer accommodate him.

Groff lost twice, before both the Eastern District Court in Pennsylvania and the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which decided that the USPS didn’t have to accommodate Groff because doing so placed an undue hardship on USPS — in part because of the burden placed on other employees.

The case hinges on the interpretation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits religious discrimination in employment. It requires employers to accommodate religious practices of employees as long as doing so does not result in “undue hardship on the conduct of the employer’s business.” Four decades ago, in the *Trans World Airlines v. Hardison* case, the Supreme Court defined “undue hardship” as anything that would require more than a trivial or minimal cost. By taking this case, the high court appears poised to once again overrule decades of precedent to benefit religious plaintiffs.

Title VII can prevent religious employment discrimination without imposing burdens on other employees. For example, by allowing someone to wear a hijab, no burden is placed on other employees. By accommodating private prayer practices that do not require other employees to adjust work schedules or cover for praying co-workers, no burden is placed on other employees. A religious accommodation should not inevitably impose a burden on other employees — or on any third parties.



# Remove Christian nationalist flag, FFRF tells U.S. Rep. Grothman

FFRF is appealing to a home state member of Congress to get rid of a Christian nationalist flag associated with the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection.

Rep. Glenn Grothman, R-Wis., has a flag reading “Appeal to Heaven” flying from the flagpole outside of his congressional office. As a member of Congress who took an oath to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic,” Grothman has sworn to uphold a godless and entirely secular Constitution, stresses the national state/church watchdog.

The inherent religious significance of the “Appeal to Heaven” flag is undeniable, FFRF points out. Members of the Appeal to Heaven movement, in their own words, “honor the Lord by supporting candidates for public office who are believers in Jesus Christ, who regularly attend and display a commitment to an evangelical, Gospel-centered church and who will commit to live and govern based on biblical principles.” The mis-

sion is clearly sectarian, and flying the flag is a tacit endorsement of evangelical Christianity.

And the flag has acquired highly troubling connotations in recent times.

“The ‘Appeal to Heaven’ flag was proudly carried by many rioters and insurrectionists during the Jan. 6 putsch,” FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor write to Grothman. “FFRF, along with the Baptists Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, published a report detailing the link between Christian nationalism and the Jan. 6 insurrection. The report documents how members of the mob carried the ‘Appeal to Heaven’ flag as they marched to storm the Capitol.”

Thus, placing this flag in front of his office sends an unfortunate message to Grothman’s peers in Congress who, like him, were under siege on Jan. 6, that he seemingly supports those who sought to effect a coup to subvert the will of the people as well as the peaceful transfer of power.

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.



# FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

## FCA club removed from elementary school

FFRF was successfully able to stop a Fellowship of Christian Athletes club from being promoted and practiced at a public elementary school in South Carolina.

On Feb. 28, 2022, a concerned parent from South Carolina Public Charter School District reportedly received an email inviting them to “Please join” the school’s Fellowship of Christian Athletes Club. The complainant also reported that teachers at the school were encouraging elementary students to attend the club.

“The district may not allow teachers to use public schools to proselytize,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote in a letter to Superintendent Chris Neeley. “Given the school’s promotion of this club and the fact that it is run by teachers, a reasonable student or parent will perceive this religious club as ‘stamped with [their] school’s seal of approval.’”

FFRF received a response from the district stating the issue has been resolved. “The district has confirmed with the school that FCA for elementary students no longer meets at the school or is promoted by the school.”

## FFRF ends pre-event prayers in Wash. school

FFRF was able to end repeated school prayers by a wrestling coach in Burbank, Wash.

On Dec. 1, 2022, a wrestling event at Columbia High School was reportedly opened by the coach informing the audience that a prayer was scheduled to take place prior to the match. Attendees were told they could opt out before the microphone was handed to a student, who led everyone in a Christian prayer delivered “In Jesus’ name.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote a letter to Superintendent Todd Hilberg, who responded to FFRF in a formal email, outlining a full action plan for the coach. “The CSD Athletic Director has taken immediate action and met with [the coach] over two occasions to review expectations moving forward that would eliminate religious activities within the wrestling program,” he wrote.

## Religious assignment stopped by FFRF in W.Va.

An assignment questioning students’ religious beliefs in regard to Christianity was removed from a West Virginia district, thanks to FFRF’s intervention.

A concerned district community member reported that an English teacher at Jackson Middle School in the Wood County School District provided an assignment to students that would “determine the degree to which [they] agree with Puritan beliefs.” Questions heavily relied on Christian ideology, such as “Do you believe strongly in the existence of God?” and “Do you believe it’s more important to glorify God than to express yourself?”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote a letter to Superintendent Christie Willis, who responded to FFRF in an email, stating that steps have been taken to prevent further distribution of the assignment.



Photo by Annie Mulligan for The Texas Tribune

After hearing from FFRF, West Sabine (Texas) ISD Superintendent Carnelius Gilder has removed this religious plaque from his desk.

## Texas superintendent removes religious quotes

In the West Sabine Independent School District in Texas, a display featuring religious quotes was removed, thanks to FFRF.

Superintendent Carnelius D. Gilder prominently displayed a plaque on his desk with the words “Trust in the Lord” facing outwards. The sign also quoted Proverbs 3:5-6.

“We write to remind you that you cannot use your position as superintendent to advance your personal

religious beliefs and to ask that this, and any other prominent, publicly displayed religious messages be removed from your office immediately,” wrote FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line in a letter to Gilder.

FFRF received a message back from Gilder, stating that the sign had been removed. “I appreciate the enlightenment. Action taken and now you may consider the request met,” he wrote.

## Invocation at teacher event halted in Arkansas

After hearing from FFRF, religious invocations at mandatory teacher appreciation events will no longer happen in the Springdale Public School District in Arkansas.

A district employee reported that a mandatory teacher appreciation event featured an invocation in Jesus’ name, given by a reverend. According to the employee, all district employees are required to attend the event and their presence is verified by sign-in sheets passed around by school principals. Despite being hosted by the Arkansas Chamber of Commerce, the event took place on school grounds during contract hours.

“It’s unlawful for a school district to include prayer at a school-sponsored event,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Jared Cleveland.

FFRF received an email response from Cleveland, stating that the situation had been addressed. “I have sent notification to the Springdale Chamber of Commerce asking for them to refrain from the practice in the future,” he wrote.

## Alabama bible club no longer led by parents

After a parent-led bible club and a discriminatory apparel policy were brought to FFRF’s attention, action was taken to bring the Alabaster (Ala.) City School District in line.

Concerned parents in the district reported a “First Priority” bible club at Thompson Intermediate School run by a parent.

Additionally, the dress code guidelines were also brought into question. The code bans students “from wearing any sign, symbol, logo or garment which has become synonymous with . . . Satanism.”

“Schools should not allow non-school persons to treat schools as a recruiting

ground for their religious mission,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote in a letter to Superintendent Wayne Vickers.

FFRF received a letter from Melissa B. McKie, legal counsel representing the Alabaster City Board of Education. McKie wrote, “The school system has spoken with each of the adults who supervise the First Priority groups that meet on its campuses and has reminded them that the groups must be student-led.” Additionally, the letter stated that the references to Satanism in the dress code have been removed

## FFRF ends council-led invocations in Pa.

FFRF successfully intervened to halt religious invocations prior to council meetings in Columbia Borough, Pa.

A concerned resident of the town contacted FFRF to report the Columbia Borough Ad Hoc Committee meetings repeatedly opened with an invocation, led by a council member. The practice began in November 2021, wherein the council member would request all attendees stand before being led in a recitation of the Lord’s Prayer.

“Prayer at government meetings is unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to the Columbia Borough Council President Heather Zink. “We write to request that the Ad Hoc Committee and Borough Council refrain from opening meetings with prayer and instead solemnize meetings with the much more inclusive practice of observing a moment of silence.”

FFRF received an email response from Zink addressing the situation. “The Columbia Borough Council discussed this and we agree the leader of the ad-hoc committee should not have led a meeting with the Lord’s Prayer. All committee chairs have been advised they (or any

member of their board) cannot lead any invocation at their meetings.” Additionally, Zink confirmed that meetings are now opened by asking if any attendees would like to deliver an invocation. There are no restrictions on who can deliver an invocation, except that it may not be by a member of the board.

## Bible verse removed from Florida parking lot

A Land O’ Lakes, Fla., high school parking lot will have a painted bible verse removed after FFRF sent a letter to the district.

A Pasco County resident saw a parking space at Wiregrass Ranch High School with the bible verse Philippians 4:13 painted on the ground, reading “I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line contacted Superintendent Kurt S. Browning regarding the situation.

FFRF received a letter from Dennis J. Alfonso, legal counsel to the School Board, who reported that the bible vers had been removed. “The display depicted is not one created by or at the direction of the School Board,” Alfonso wrote.

## Religious group nixed from Tennessee district

Proselytization of students in Rogersville, Tenn., was put to an end, thanks to FFRF.

A community member of the district reported that Hawkins County Schools allowed an evangelical Christian group to speak to students at various schools in the district throughout the day to encourage attendance at a religious event — the Upper East Tennessee Go Tell Crusade. The group posted about it on Facebook, thanking principals and superintendents of the county for allowing them to speak at HCS schools.

FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Director of Schools Matt Hixson, who emailed explaining that, as the group met all requirements on the facility use form, they were allowed to use school buildings for events. However, he wrote, “I have ceased any and all relations with this group (Go Tell), as well as any other religious group (no other group previously sought such use and access, nor have any other organizations sought such access since.”

## FFRF records 2 victories in Alabama county

FFRF successfully worked to keep religion out of Shelby County Schools in Birmingham on two separate matters.

The first situation was brought to FFRF’s attention from a parent of an Oak Mountain Middle School student. The parent reported that its child was required to participate in a prayer led by the coach before their first cross country meet of the year.

Additionally, FFRF was alerted to a policy in Columbiana Middle School that students were not allowed to promote Satanism through their attire. FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Anne Knox Averitt, the legal representative of Shelby County Schools.

Averitt emailed FFRF back stating that, “This and the coach issue have been addressed.”



# How I once debated Cardinal George Pell

By Dan Barker

Since losing faith in faith and becoming a spokesperson for the Freedom From Religion Foundation, I've participated in 139 public debates over religion. I've debated Christian theologians and apologists, rabbis and Islamic scholars. I even did eight debates with Dinesh D'Souza (whom I no longer associate with), plus many rank-and-file preachers and evangelists. But one of my most unexpected encounters happened in 2010, when I was invited to debate Cardinal George Pell in Australia on the very silly topic of "Without God, we are nothing."



Dan Barker

Pell, former Archbishop of Sydney who became a cardinal who served as the Vatican treasurer, died on Jan. 10 at age 81, reminding

me of that odd debate and the sorry saga of this high-ranking Catholic.

At the time of our debate, there had been allegations of cover-up and negligence, in addition to rumors against him that went nowhere. However, in 2018 he became the most senior Catholic official to be convicted of child sex abuse. The conviction was overturned in 2020, but questions linger. As bishop, Pell obviously knew of child sexual abuse by clergy starting in the 1970s. In 2016, he refused to return to Australia to testify to a royal commission in person regarding allegations against him, which is why atheist and songwriter Tim Minchin wrote his memorable song, "Come Home, Cardinal Pell." Later that year, Pell was accused of exposing himself to young boys in the 1980s and then was found guilty. While out on bail, the Vatican offered him a sinecure, to serve as treasurer in Pope Francis' Council of Cardinals. In March 2019, he was sentenced to six years in prison, serving about 400 days before the high court dismissed his charges in 2020.

When I debated George Pell, he was still Archbishop of Sydney. That debate was broadcast live on ABC Radio (Australian Broadcast Corporation). If you'd like to watch it, you can search for it on YouTube.



This photo from 2010 shows Reidar Lystad, president of the Macquarie University Atheist League, Dan Barker, and Chris Gordon, Catholic chaplain at Macquarie University. Cardinal George Pell was absent from the photo because he refused to be photographed with Dan.



Cardinal George Pell

In my book *Life Driven Purpose*, written before Pell moved to the Vatican — apparently to escape legal action — I include this passage:

During my very first visit to Australia — in fact, my very first day, the morning after I arrived in Sydney in March 2010 — I debated Cardinal George Pell at MacQuarie University on the topic of "Without God, we are nothing."

Pell is the Roman Catholic Arch-

bishop of Sydney, and as a member of the College of Cardinals, he would be in the running to become the next pope. If anyone is an expert in the faith, it would be "His Eminence Cardinal Pell." (I couldn't bring myself to use that title: he called me "Dan," so I called him "George.") During the debate, he used the word "spirit" and "spiritual" a number of times, so during cross-examination, I asked him this question:

**Dan:** "Can you define for us, using positive terms, what is a 'spirit,' and how that would differ from nothing at all?"

**George:** "I just said that I can't define 'God,' but I can say something useful about 'spirit.' I believe in the reality of love. I believe it's a spiritual quality. I believe honor is something that is real. Disgrace is real. Forgiveness is real. Something spiritual is invisible, but sometimes it can be very powerful. The love of a husband and wife, the love between parents and children, they are probably the most important realities in many people's lives. They are spiritual realities."

**Dan:** "Let me follow up. I can define all of those things, like love, family, and feelings, in purely natural terms, as functions of an organism. But why were you not begging the question by saying that the definition of 'spiritual' is love, which is spiritual? I want to know what it is. Does it occupy space? Does it occupy time? Does it have a weight? Can you measure it along a dimension? How would you know that your 'spirit' is not just a concept as opposed to an actually existing thing in reality?"

**George:** "Well, you can't measure a spirit. It is certainly not material. But the examples that I have given are very real and very powerful. Once there was an Australian poet who said that sometimes people can be at a concert and be like dogs at a concert. They hear every sound but have got no understanding of the music, because the music is something that is spiritual and beautiful and real. They can't be reduced. They are connected with physical activities, but they can't be reduced to those physical activities."

So, I'm a dog, but I take that as a compliment.

The topic of Pell's alleged sexual abuse of children did not come up during that debate — if I had raised it, that might have amounted to ad hominem. But everyone in the audience, especially the atheist students, knew of the charges. When Pell spoke of "the love of a husband and wife, the love between parents and children," he neglected to include the "love" of a priest for the children of his parish. He also admitted that "disgrace is real," but I doubt he was talking about himself. He would not have known that after his death, Australia refused to give him a state burial.

Annie Laurie Gaylor, in her early book on Catholic crimes against children, *Betrayal of Trust: Clergy Abuse of Children* (the first nonfiction work on the topic, published in 1988), describes the sinister tactics of priests and ministers who pray, and prey, using the prestige and power of their position to groom victims.

I think that is the real problem — the fact that we even have clergy, an allegedly special caste of actors (mostly men) who expect to be viewed as "above" the rest of us in an insulated and often untouchable class. This unnatural hierarchy of unearned respect creates a dangerous dynamic between shepherd and sheep. "The privilege, prestige and power of pedophilic priests and pastors has been maintained at the expense and pain of children, who may suffer all their lives because of this betrayal of trust," writes Annie Laurie. "People should withdraw support from any religious institution which has harbored molesters or neglected or mistreated victims."

After the debate was over — during which I had challenged the greatness of Mother Teresa and affirmed a woman's right to control her own reproductive future — the organizers called us participants together to take a group photo, as we had earlier agreed. But George Pell walked away, saying, "I don't want my picture taken with that man."

Again, I take that as a compliment.  
*Dan Barker is co-president of FFRF.*

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### 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 39,500 members. FFRF is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and donations are tax deductible for income tax purposes.

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# Black Activist & Nonbelief Panel

## ‘Everybody needs their own space’

A panel of Black activists and non-believers gathered on stage at FFRF’s national convention in San Antonio on Oct. 28, 2022, and discussed their journeys to atheism and the challenges of being a Black atheist in America.

Leading the panel was moderator Mandisa Thomas, founder of Black Nonbelievers. Joining Thomas on stage were Candace Gorham, author of *The Ebony Exodus Project*; Rogi rs Fibby, president of Black Nonbelievers of DC; Andre Forbes, music producer; Cynthia McDonald, activist with Freedmen of Chicago; and DeAngela Morant, singer and businesswoman.

The following are excerpts from each of the panelists during their hour-long discussion and Q&A. To watch the panel discussion, to go [ffrf.us/convention-2022](https://www.ffrf.us/convention-2022).



Members of the Black Activists and Nonbelievers Panel are, from left, moderator Mandisa Thomas, Candace Gorham, Rogi rs Fibby, Andre Forbes, Cynthi McDonald and DeAngela Morant.

### Candace Gorham



Candace Gorham said that her journey to nonbelief came as a result of reading. “I slowly but surely studied my way right out of Jesus. And now I’m here.”

A big part of becoming a nonbeliever was the result of just studying. I was going through a lot of things in my life and my life wasn’t matching up with what the promises were — you know, what God and the bible and my pastor and everybody was telling me my life should look like. I thought I must be doing something wrong, so I went into more studying, and I slowly but surely studied my way right out of Jesus. And now I’m here.

...

I think that when you actually get into conversations with Black folks, you find a lot of people have a lot of skepticism. A lot of people have a lot of questions. So, it’s important for us to be out, to be visible, to wear sweatshirts so that people stare at us in the airport, to be visible, because there’s always going to be somebody who’s going to say, “Oh, I didn’t know,” or “I thought I was the only one” or something like that. The more that people see us, then the more it becomes just normalized. “Oh, I didn’t realize that this wonderful, amazing coworker of mine was an atheist.”

...

I am a big proponent that everybody needs their own space. Men need men-only spaces and women need

women-only spaces and queer people need queer-only spaces and Black people need Black spaces. I feel something like Black Nonbelievers is essential because as you hear all these stories, it’s a unique experience. There will be plenty of white people who say, “No, I identify with that, too.” I get it. That does happen. But it is still a unique experience to be Black and religious in America.

...

I think it’s important that anybody who values humanism, anybody who values secularism, anybody who values any form of bettering ourselves by getting away from religion, should support an organization like Black Nonbelievers. This is a niche organization that addresses a niche population in a unique, special kind of way. I think it’s very important that people value that, and, if you say, “I value that,” if you say “I want to see better for all of these people,” then support those types of organizations. Give financially to help the organization, but then also give of your time and your heart and your spirit to the organization to help it grow and be stronger.

...

The healthier the Black community is — guess what? — the healthier all the communities are gonna be!

### Andre Forbes

I’ve just always been around church my whole life, so I really got to a point where it was not working for me, but I didn’t know who to talk to. It was a really hard place in my life because that was all I knew. Church was all I knew. Trying to believe in God was all I knew. I really wasn’t trying to become atheist, but I was really trying to seek God. I was praying, reading my bible, fasting, everything. I was going at it really hard and I kept hitting a brick wall. The very last prayer that I really prayed was like, “God, I need you to reveal yourself to me in a way that I can comprehend, because this is not working for me right now.” So, I kept on pushing that prayer, and nothing happened. Nothing happened.

...

I’m sitting up here questioning everything that my parents taught me, everything that my family instilled into me and wondering, “Does this make sense? Why am I even still believing this?” I had to ask myself these questions without anybody else’s input. I came to the conclusion that I was only trying to make myself believe in this. I really don’t believe in this. When I had that epiphany, it was like my life fell apart. There’s just no other way to put it. My life just fell apart because my foundation

had just left. So, now I’m in limbo, trying to figure out: Who am I? Where do I go? What community am I a part of? I didn’t know any atheists when I was a Christian. I can’t really stress how much I was really sheltered as a child until early college. It was just nothing but church.

...

It was hard because everybody knew me for believing in God, being a musician and all that stuff, and I had to come out and say “No, I don’t.”

And all of this [Godless Gospel] just came together and I’m happy I could play my role in it because music was my whole life and I did all of this stuff in gospel music. I’m a great musician in gospel, but I don’t want to have anything to do with the [religious] lyrics anymore, so I think this was the perfect opportunity to keep the actual genre going as far as the music, but just put something I can relate to on top of it as far as secular lyrics.

...

My life was good in the belief of Christianity, but coming out was so much more peaceful because I’m not worried about going to hell, [getting into] heaven. It doesn’t matter. I’ve learned to be a good person just for being a good person.



Andre Forbes (right) said he found peace when he became a nonbeliever. “My life was good in the belief of Christianity, but coming out was so much more peaceful because I’m not worried about going to hell, [getting into] heaven.”



## DeAngela Morant



Photo by Steve Solomon

DeAngela Morant said she doesn't try to engage family or friends in discussions about religion. "I don't kowtow to their edicts and their craziness, but, at the same time, I don't go looking for fights with them because some relationships are important to maintain."

## Rogiérs Fibby

It is true that Blacks have the largest proportion of Christian folks out of all the racial and ethnic demographic backgrounds or breakdowns. But that's not to say that we don't have skepticism. It's not to say that we don't have a tradition of doubt. In the tradition of Black power, in the tradition of uplift and community along racial lines that are trying to break free from bondage of white supremacy and trying to reconnect with our lost histories, and trying to really organize, essentially, for political thrift, we have long-established traditions of skepticism.

There's a fourth wall in this community where they say it's OK to be skeptical about this, it's OK to be skeptical about Republicans, it's OK to be skeptical about patriarchy. We're skeptical. But there's that fourth wall of "Oh, you can't be skeptical about God because God is real." That is a huge barrier holding us back into our higher thinking and our liberation, which is one of the things that

When I meet other nonbelievers, everybody talks about how, when they were children, they were asking questions, and how things like Noah's ark just didn't make sense. But I was happy to believe all of it. We were just in a bubble, and I was like "Yeah, that's fine." It was all presented as if it was true, so I didn't even question until I was an adult, a wife, a mother.

...

I wasn't looking to leave religion. I wasn't looking to leave my church, necessarily, but I just wanted to make sure that I was really following the scriptures. So, I started studying and finally got over the biggest hurdle, which was the fear of hell. That was what was keeping me from even really looking into it.

...

To this day, 100 percent of my family and about 98 percent of my friends are all still very deeply religious. I definitely went through my firebrand evangelical atheism when I first deconverted, and I

thought, "They just don't know! If I just tell them, they'll all deconvert with me or get the point!" That was a disaster, needless to say.

Now, I deal with different people in different ways. Your mileage may vary. It's going to depend on the way your relationships are structured. I don't go looking for debates with my friends and my family because it's not productive. I don't kowtow to their edicts and their craziness, but, at the same time, I don't go looking for fights with them because some relationships are important to maintain. I do maintain a standard in terms of what they can and can't say to me, how they can and can't engage my children, and so on.

I try to live peaceably among my family and friends. But the internet and places like that are free game and we can debate endlessly there. That's my approach. For you, it will depend on your personality, it will depend on how your relationships are structured and what works for you.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Rogiérs Fibby (right) said that, despite Blacks being overwhelmingly Christian, "we have long-established traditions of skepticism."

## Cynthia McDonald



Photo by Steve Solomon

Cynthia McDonald said that for Black people, it's difficult to break away from religion. 'A lot of us do question, but we are afraid to question or afraid to say anything, because being Christian and being Black is synonymous.'

I started ministerial classes and that's when we really got into the bare bones of the bible and we started to actually study the problematic stuff of the bible that I did not know was there. I started asking questions to my ministerial teachers. "Hey, how do we reconcile with this? Hey, how about that slavery stuff? Hey, how about that God killing everybody because he's mad and stuff?" They would try to answer my questions, but then they would say to me, "Sister Cynthia, you just need to pray more and have more faith."

By the time the ministerial classes ended, I did all of my tests and I did really well because I actually like studying and reading and doing research. Then I was told, "Everybody's going to get their collar except for those two," and it was myself and a doctor. They said that God said that we were not ready to get our collars. So, I said, "Was it God or was it you?"

...

I started exploring other things — I started looking

at ancestral worship, and crystals, and a little Wiccan here and there, and spells and schmells and things of that nature. Then I was like, "Yeah, this is bullshit, too."

...

A lot of us do question, but we are afraid to question or afraid to say anything, because being Christian and being Black is synonymous. And we don't want to leave family, community, etc.

...

There's still an intersection of racism, white supremacy, and things of that nature that still exist, that really do affect us as a group of people.

Thinking about the dynamics of church, it's very hierarchical and very patriarchal, and a lot of times, especially when you have women in the church, they're worked to the bone in order to keep that ministry going. To even really be able to have space for them where they can talk about these things and not be demonized is so important.



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# Convention speech

## As politicians mess around, we organize!



Photo by Chris Line

**“The Texas Freedom Network, and every one of you in this room, have been doing our part to piss off the Religious Right,” Val Benavidez said at FFRF’s national convention.**

*This was the speech (edited for space) given by Val Benavidez on Oct. 28, 2022, at FFRF’s national convention in San Antonio. (To watch the speech, go to [ffrf.us/convention-2022](https://ffrf.us/convention-2022).) She was introduced by Cheryl Kolbe, an FFRF board member.*

**Cheryl Kolbe:** The Texas Freedom Network (TFN) was founded in 1995 by Cecile Richards after Richards became aware how the state Board of Education was being hijacked by the Religious Right. So, we are very pleased to have here today Texas Freedom Network’s current president and executive director, Val Benavidez.

She became president in November 2020 and was previously the Texas Freedom Network’s chief program officer. Val has worked for numerous nonprofit advocacy organizations including the Texas Immigrant and Refugee Coalition, League of Young Voters, Generational Alliance, as well as serving as executive director of ProTex: Network for a Progressive Texas.

Please give a warm welcome to Val Benavidez, who is the embodiment of FFRF’s convention theme, “DO Mess with Texas,”

By Val Benavidez

Hello. I am proud to be in a room with you all, because you are like-minded people who believe that we can be the change that we need to see in this world. We are the people who push our states and our nation to uphold their promise, and that this promise is that we can be the best version of a democracy that we can be.

Here in Texas, our last Democratic governor, our beloved Ann Richards, left the stage in 1995. Texas Freedom Network was founded that same year by her daughter, Cecile Richards, and for the last 27 years, Texas Freedom Network has been fighting for our shared beliefs in equality and social justice and pushing back against the far right’s weaponization of faith in Texas.

The Texas Freedom Network, and every one of you in this room, have been doing our part to piss off the Religious Right ever since then. They would like us to stop, and we will not. Instead, we will all be relentless.

So, how did we get here? Since 1994, a wave of religious extremism has washed over Texas politics, creating the false narrative that we’re a deeply red state. In many ways, what we are is a non-voting and a non-civically engaged state, and that is by design. It is by design of voter suppression.

People outside of Texas, and, sadly, far too many people living here, have been inundated with this lie

that we all hold the same conservative values. Perhaps the most devastating lie is that we all believe in one religion and we should be governed by Christianity. The result has been the injection of the Religious Right’s extreme, unpopular agenda into every corner of our lives.

This agenda is in our science lessons, social studies curriculums, the hallways of our public schools where they’ve been forced to now hang donated “In God We Trust” signs, public libraries, doctor’s offices, kids’ sports teams, public bathrooms. We see their influence literally everywhere in this state.

Under the guise of religion, conservatives and far-right Christian nationalists have used their power to strip us of our freedoms, including the religious freedoms they so often claim, while spewing cruelty and hate speech. The radical right and religious extremists have been attempting to control Texas for decades. TFN was created to fight back against this very thing.

I truly believe that Ann Richards did her part to piss off the far right, because, since then, radical extremists have been attempting to control the state. In 1995, Cecile Richards attended her first Texas State Board of Education meeting. As the daughter of the last Democratic governor and a progressive in her own right, Cecile was no stranger to the radical right’s censorship.

One month later, she founded a group to be a counter to the Religious Right in the state, to be a place where Texans could organize and show what the vast majority of us do believe in.

### Texas Freedom Network

Almost three decades later, TFN is still that counter to the far right in Texas, but we have become so much more. For almost 30 years, we have been this watchdog organization in Texas. Our work seeks to bring together faith leaders, young people and communities of color in support of a broad progressive agenda in Texas.

With roots as an educational advocacy organization, our reach has grown to encompass organizing on a broad range of issues, from textbook censorship and book banning to LGBTQA+ equality, reproductive freedom, criminal justice reform and voting rights.

We ensure that progressive voices, especially the voices of young people, people of color and progressive people of faith are leading our movement. Through political endorsements, legislative organizing and testimony, robust voter registration drives and grassroots organizing, we are at the forefront of the issues impacting Texans today. Our work is actively reshaping the political landscape of a new Texas that is younger, incredibly diverse and more progressive. We’re making sure that all Texans are represented, from the school

board to the state Capitol. Texas Rising is our youth organizing program that’s geared toward young Texans of color, and that was one of my earlier initiatives at TFN. That initiative was really important to me, because growing up here, going to the University of Texas, I learned what a profound change in my trajectory occurred because of that work. Before that, I was going to go into science work and then, after that, I was going to be an organizer and work for political organizations. Prior to becoming the head of the organization, I served as TFN’s chief program officer, and I’ve worked for numerous nonprofit advocacy organizations, including the Texas Immigrant and Refugee Coalition, the League of Young Voters, and ProTex: Network for Progressive Texans.

Each of those experiences brought back and has driven my passion for this work, and as I’ve seen the immense cruelty and constant assaults at the hands of the right wing in Texas, these are the types of organizing efforts and the people and the community that show me the opposite of that, that bring me back, just like you all here do, that what we are what we are fighting for.

I was born in Austin, but raised in the small town of Kerrville. I’m a fourth-generation Mexican American. My family were farm workers, railroad builders, shop keepers, members of the military and, most of all, they were civically engaged. I grew up seeing a newspaper cutout of Ann Richards’ victory on our fridge. These were things that I saw, so I grew up with that and I learned from my family. My grandparents would make me call their congressperson for them. I would have to be a part of them hosting back backyard fajita plate fundraisers. And that’s where I learned how my voice and vote were powerful.

We at the Texas Freedom Network, and I’m sure everyone in this room, find ourselves in a political moment where the far right’s influence over our daily lives feels stronger than ever, despite society’s increasingly less religious population. We know that 60 percent of Texas voters support access to abortion and do not see abortion as a religious issue. Yet our freedoms over our own bodies and futures have been taken away from us, against the will of the people. What is our reaction to what politicians are doing? Go ahead, mess with Texas. While you do that, we will organize.

How has our work evolved to meet this moment? As we engaged in educational advocacy and fought the barrage of censorship from religious extremism at the State Board of Education, we saw how education was just one piece of the Religious Right’s assault on our democracy and our freedoms. When we began to expand our focus to a wider slate of progressive issues, it became overwhelmingly clear that the beginning of grassroots organizing that we have done is the fundamental piece to keep winning and to move forward.

Whether we’re lending our leadership abilities to creating new coalitions or building connections with Texans across the state, we know by investing in communities, we uplift the voices that need to be heard and stir progressive change.

### Texas Rising

Our deep focus on organizing and expansion of issues has led to the creation of three focus areas of our work: Texas Freedom Network, which is the umbrella, Just Texas and Texas Rising.

Texas Rising is an organizing project recognizing and uplifting young people of color who are continuously impacted by the draconian laws that Texas politicians are pushing today. The program runs robust voter registration drives, endorses chosen candidates, candidates that are chosen by the student leaders, and empowers the next generation of activists to lead our movement.

Through our student chapter model, we’re touching college campuses across the state, and the power of young people’s voices in our state’s democracy is growing every year. Every electoral cycle, young people in Texas have record youth voter turnout. Every cycle.

Right now, Texans under the age of 30 make up 43 percent of the population of this state, and soon they will be one-third of all eligible voters. This [2022] election cycle, we’ve registered about 15,000 young Texans this year. Collectively, since we started this program sev-



eral cycles ago, about 100,000 in total.

Texas Rising has also engaged in local advocacy across the state, fighting for climate justice, advocating for decriminalization policies, demanding that district attorneys not prosecute people for accessing health care, including abortion, and so much more. They are truly an inspiration.

Just Texas

In a room where we are talking about being free from religion, I’m going to talk a little bit about religion. What I want to talk about is Just Texas. It was founded in 2013, the same year as Wendy Davis did the 13-hour filibuster to prevent a vote on a restrictive abortion vote. We had thousands of people in our Statehouse that night when Wendy was speaking, and many of those folks were clergy that TFN had brought in to testify. Via our project, TFN has built connections with clergy and faith communities that are dedicated to social justice. The Just Texas team in 2016 created a process to educate congregations on the need to speak about abortion access and reproductive freedom to destigmatizing shame.

We’re particularly proud of how Just Texas brings people of faith and non-faith together to combat the harmful narrative that all religious people support censorship and oppression. All religions are welcome and we fight to destigmatize abortion, lift up LGBTQ equality and uphold other progressive values that have been demonized by the Religious Right.

Texas Rising and Just Texas live under the complete umbrella that is the Texas Freedom Network. While we now work on abortion advocacy, criminal justice reform, climate justice, LGBTQ equality and so much more, education is still one of the cornerstones of our bold work to defend democracy.

This year was no exception. Through our Teach the Truth campaign, we spent countless hours empowering communities to take action for public education. We recruited Texans from all walks of life to testify at the SBOE. We advocated tirelessly for more inclusive social studies standards, pushing against the narrative of CRT, and next year — this will be no shock to you all in the room — we will have our hands full monitoring science textbooks. We will follow the review process. We will make sure that there is adherence to the standards. We have fought — as many of you remember from about a decade ago — a very hard fight for many, many years in the battle over creationism and evolution.



Photo by Chris Line

Val Benavidez

However, we are now dealing with a board that has just elected, and will elect, at least three more very, very conservative Republicans.

The battle is far from over, but I know that activists and coalition members who have been our partners in these trenches for decades will never stop fighting.

I am now going to show you all a video from the Texas Freedom Network.

[Video begins]

“For many of us, this year, 2021, held promise. To breathe a little easier, for more stability, and time to move forward. But the constant crusades of disinformation over the pandemic, vaccines and elections, it has been anything but a sense of calm. In Texas, we’ve seen the ugliest, never-ending legislative session in our history. Our state leadership exploited the Covid crisis and a deadly winter storm, adding cover to appeal to the ugliest impulse of their base and eroding the very fabric and foundation of our democracy. Despite all that, the Texas Freedom Network continues our unwavering commitment to fighting back. For more than 26 years, we have been on the front lines for change, for equality, for social justice.

“These are the moments that fortify, the sparks of hope that will remind us that Texas and Texans deserve better. We are resolved to continue to work for a better future. These moments serve as

paving stones for the road ahead, whether it’s our young Texas Rising leaders, our Just Texas clergy or the powerful network of grassroots activists and allies, we are forging a different path forward. At the Texas Freedom Network, we fully understand the challenges that we are facing and we are determined to persist and push back.”

[Video ends]

Texas Republicans and the Religious Right are terrified of us, and for good reason. We know dogs bark the loudest when you’re closest to the door.

The tactics used by those in power and the Religious Right in our state are just bids for power and control. It’s their fearful response to a world that is becoming more liberal and accepting of all religious and nonreligious views every day. But we’ve seen time and time again that our mission to build and deepen our base is working, and even during what can feel like dark political moments in Texas history, our communities are embracing progressive values and our grassroots organizing is yielding results, cycle over cycle. And as we continue to close this electoral gap in Texas, we’re excited about what this election brings and what we’ll see.

Roe v. Wade overturned

In June, a day came that we had seen on the horizon for years: Roe v. Wade was overturned. And while our devastation

to that is still very palpable, powerful local advocacy has been happening in Texas as we fight for reproductive rights in a post-Roe world. Several Texas cities have held city council meetings to hear from the public and vote on a slate of policies geared toward decriminalizing abortion.

Texas Freedom Network and Texas Rising have been on the ground, speaking, mobilizing and advocating for the passage of these pro-choice city resolutions. In El Paso, and in Austin, and while supporting fellow advocates in Dallas and San Antonio, each of these cities has ultimately passed their resolutions.

Young people are mobilizing for criminal justice reform. Through this whole process, what we found is that if we can elect progressive champions into district attorney positions, they can definitely help with decriminalizing and making certain offenses less of a criminal offense. Those are the solutions that we’ve been focusing on. Last year, our organizing was instrumental in San Marcus, Texas. It was the first city in Texas to implement an ordinance that requires police to issue citations instead of arresting people for certain low-level nonviolent crimes, such as marijuana possession. In Austin, our activist work helped stop Proposition A, which would have increased the city’s police presence while gutting funding from the EMS and also from the firefighters.

In addition to that, some vital work we do is democracy from the ground up. What I mean by that is that voting is not easy in Texas, and neither is voter registration. As we saw in our last legislative session, our leaders were determined to make it even more difficult this time around as our numbers continue to grow. That’s part of that — when the dogs are barking, we’re closest to the door.

What we’ve done there is form a coalition to advocate pro-voter reforms at the local level. The very things that we saw in the bill that they ultimately passed and took out were the reforms that we had passed. And now we’re doing it again. We are a very creative bunch of individuals in Texas and there are lots of ways to increase access to voting, so by doing this work, our campaigns have successfully implemented more than 10 of the reforms that we proposed in various counties, benefiting more than 50 percent of the state’s population. Some of those wins include things like gaining community input about planned locations for polling places in El Paso County, mailing postage-paid vote-by-mail applications to voters in Harris County who were over 65, and making sure poll workers have things to protect themselves during the pandemic. We continue to advocate across the state and in some cases, most recently, we have been able to have county elections administrators support more polling locations in different areas.

Another big area is protecting our planet and communities from the climate crisis. Climate change is here, and we’re fighting against harmful policies and speaking out against politicians who put profits over people. In Corpus Christi, we’re educating community members against harmful dredging and we’re endorsing candidates for city council who will launch a city-wide climate action plan to mitigate impacts of climate change.

In San Antonio, right here where we are today, our organizers are continuing efforts to hold the Spruce Coal Plant accountable for its role in the lives that were ultimately lost during winter storm Uri and the environmental damage that it continues to cause to this community. We’ve demanded that the company finally commit to seek equitable energy solutions that would make it possible to shut down this dangerous plant by 2030.

And speaking of winter storm Uri, we are doing what we can to ensure that Texans’ lives are not lost again because of an inadequate power grid and an inept railroad commission. We are proud to support a full slate of candidates and endorsements up and down the ballot, and we are out there, knocking on doors, making phone calls, sending those text messages and running lots of digital ads. These are busy weeks, but we are doing everything that we possibly can to make sure that we bring everyone to the polls.

There is one thing I will give Texas Republicans and the Religious Right — and only one thing: They have a good reason to be terrified of us, because we are powerful. They see our progress and our hunger for a better Texas, and, in response, they use cheap political tricks to infect Texans with fear and hate, creating distractions and sowing division, and they are distracting us, and as they distract us, they attack our freedoms and they continue to dismantle and undermine this democracy. It is easy to feel like we are surviving through unprecedented dark times, but being in this work and fighting alongside activists like you, who value genuine religious freedom, I cannot help but see all of our slivers of light.

Right-wing politicians can keep messing with us, but we are ready. We will keep organizing. It is the people of our movement, you, who will create the change we need, and together, I will be right with you, and we will be relentless in defending democracy for all Texans!

Thank you.

## Freethought Matters

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

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# Hightower

Continued from page 1

protect farm workers from pesticides, to protect consumers, to protect the people living up against the cotton fields and to protect farmers themselves. My top aide on pesticides said, “Well, the odds are against us on this one.” And I said, “Some of the evens are against us, too.” I think y’all know what that fight is like.

I will accept this award as a symbol of principled defiance, which I think you represent here in this room, so I’m proud to be here with you. Thanks to the Freedom From Religion Foundation Board to allow a scruffy Texas populist like myself to come in here and be a part of this Do-mess-with-Texas-freethinking-palooza that you’re having. It makes me happier than a mosquito in a nudist colony to be standing up, looking out at all of you — challengers of conventional wisdom, challengers of conventional ignorance, challengers of myths, right-wing butt-kickers, and champions of America’s fundamental progressive values, which are economic fairness, social justice and equal opportunity for all people. That is pretty much what that progressive movement stands for.

I’ve come chiefly to applaud you for the great work that you’re doing and building, the way that you’re gaining strength and putting issues out there, mobilizing, organizing. That’s what it takes to build a movement that actually moves. We have a lot of movements, they but they don’t do much moving. That’s what we have to be about — intentional politics that moves our country forward. America needs your integrity, needs your crustiness, needs your agitation more than ever.

### We need agitators

The powers that be try to make that term “agitator” a pejorative. “Oh, those union agitators, you know, they’re just toying with the minds of those workers.” “Oh, those Freedom From Religion people, they’re messing with the minds of our children.” Well, horse hockey. Agitation is what America is all about. Were it not for agitators, we’d all be wearing white-powdered wigs, singing “God Hail the Queen” here today.

Agitation, as Jessie Jackson put it, says that agitator is that center post in the washing machine that gets the dirt out. We need more agitation. Because it’s no longer enough to be progressive, we’ve got to become aggressive, because the powers that be have become radically regressive.

Bill Moyers said it well: “The delusional is no longer marginal; it has come in from the fringe to sit in the seat of power.” And that’s why you folks are so important — your thoughtfulness, your thoroughness, your dedication. Constantly pushing forward.

I come to you just down the road from here — Austin, actually South Austin. We have a little different attitude on the south side of the river up there. A little more iconoclastic, a little more funkier, a little more freethinking. [The late author and columnist] Molly Ivins lived over on the south side, as I do. [Storyteller and radio host] John Henry Faulk lived over on the south side. So, we’ve got this attitude, and, in fact, our unofficial slogan in South Austin is “We’re all here because we’re not all there.” — which I think is what brings us together.

But it’s the powers that be who are not all there, in terms of grasping the true nature of the American people and the possibility that the American people represent little-d democratic potential. We’re a long ways from it, but we’re striving, and have been striving for a long time, to get



Photo by Chris Line

Jim Hightower accepts FFRF's Clarence Darrow Award from FFRF Board Member David Tamayo.

there. When I say the powers that be, I’m talking about the six B’s — the bosses, the bankers, the billionaires, bigshots, bastards and bullshitters. They think they’re the top dogs and we’re just a bunch of fire hydrants out here in the countryside.

## The trouble with Abbott

Well, that’s why our fight, as progressives, as Americans, our fight is not about issues, but it’s about values. Who are we? Who are we going to be? Who do we want to be? Greg Abbott? Is that the best we can do?

Our governor here in Texas is a hell of a speech nanny. He admonished all of you, as you know, and been told earlier today, too, not to mess with Texas. So, he’s trying to deny you a freedom to express yourselves in public places, while he puts “In God We Trust” in every school room in the state, as he puts the 10 Commandments on the grounds of the Texas Legislature, a body that should never claim any godly purpose at all.

And he wants to be a little potentate of right-wing political correctness — Don’t say gay, don’t teach history that might offend white Republicans, don’t criticize oil and gas corporations, don’t allow textbooks that use words like “social justice” in them. Don’t be woke. The opposite of which is asleep, right? Woke or asleep. They would prefer you be asleep.

And don’t even say the word “abortion,” much less offer to try to help some woman in need. That is not only against the law, but you can be arrested for it,

jailed and fined. In fact, posses are being organized by the right wing to chase down people who might be going to New Mexico or Oklahoma to try to get the health care that they need.

But, Greg Abbott says that’s not a problem, because no woman will be a victim of rape because, he says, we will eliminate all rapists from the streets of Texas by aggressively going out and arresting them before they rape.

Pretty astonishing. I hear a guy like Greg Abbott say something like that and I think, “100,000 sperm, and you were the fastest?”

Well, don’t mess with Texas. Too late! Greg Abbott has already messed up Texas. Abbott and his lieutenant governor and his attorney general. We’ve got an attorney general who has two indictments. He’s under indictment at present and under FBI investigation at the same time. But this is the crew who is running and ruining Texas. Basic competence doesn’t count and doesn’t even exist.

You might recall just a couple of years ago, the winter of 2021, when Texas froze, basically, because they could not keep the energy grid running in our state. A state that is the major energy producer in the country could not turn on the lights or turn on the heat. Hundreds of people died in that. Billions of dollars were lost in economy, particularly by farmers. Yet, Abbott not only had he refused to protect the grid before that storm, but after the storm he did nothing to punish those who helped cause it.

In fact, one of his supporters, a guy named Kely Warren, made \$2.4 billion because of the storm. He’s a gas pipeline operator. Then, two months later, he wrote a little \$1 million dollar check to Abbott’s re-election campaign, a little thank you kiss from Warren.

And so awful much more, such as refusing to expand Medicaid for the poor people in our state. We have more people without health care than any other state in the union. We have a million children without health care. He could have fixed that by extending Medicaid. He did not do so.

And racist voter suppression, banning books and censoring teachers, Covid deaths — thousands and thousands of people died of Covid in this state because of his mandate. Four major mass murders in our state in the last year and he has done nothing to try to adjust that. In fact, he went to Uvalde, just down the road from here, where the horrible murder of 26 children took place, and he said, “Well, it could have been worse.” I guess they could have been Anglo kids. I don’t know what it was that could have made it worse.

He attacks LGBTQ parents, as well as children, accusing the parents of child abuse, on and on. And some people say, “Greg Abbott is his own worst enemy.” I say, “Not while I’m alive, he’s not!”

But you’re probably thinking, “Lucky us, we don’t live in Texas, it’s not our problem.” Guess what? Greg Abbott wants to be your president and he’s currently in a right-wing kook-off with Ron DeSantis over in Florida as to which one can be the meanest and stupidest and most right wing.


Molly Ivins, leading up to George W. Bush’s election in 2000, wrote what a folly it would have been to put George W. in the presidency and then people found out she was right. George W. is just disgusting, and Molly then wrote a column that said, “Next time I tell you someone from Texas should not be president, pay attention!” And Molly’s not here, but I think she would allow me to pass on the warning: Do not allow Greg Abbott to become the president.

### Texas isn’t right-wing

So, the question then arises: Is Texas nuts?

Yes! Yes. As presently governed, it is totally nuts. But we’re working on that. And here comes the good news part of the little lecture here. Texas is not a right-wing state. It is mostly a nonvoting state these days. And we’re working on

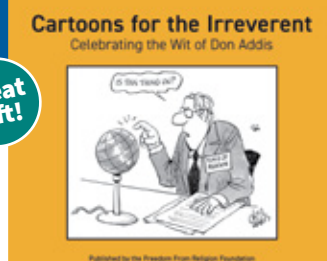
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Photo by Gonzo Pozo

**Jim Hightower says that Texas isn't a red state, but is more of a "nonvoting state," and that progressives can be found everywhere.**

that. Texas, in fact, has a noble history of progressive populism.

It was founded by debtors and iconoclasts and malcontents and mavericks. Literally mavericks. Samuel Maverick was a cattle rancher who lived here in San Antonio and he had a progressive program in which he refused to brand his cattle. Seems like a noble gesture. And the result was that any steer roaming on the range that had no brand on it was a maverick, so that's where that term comes from.

And, some say that Sam Maverick did not brand his cattle because therefore any cattle that was on the range without a brand was his, so he could claim it. Anyway, for whatever reason, maverick is a noble name in American vocabulary and in history, but also here in Texas. And, in fact, Maury Maverick, a descendant, was a mayor. He thought Roosevelt was too right wing and wasn't doing enough for people. One night, Maury Maverick was drunk and going from a honky-tonk bar over here to his home and stumbled down into the ravine that was the San Antonio River, dry at the time. He said something ought to be done with this, and so Maury Maverick created the Riverwalk that is right out here today.

And then in the 1950s, we had another rebellion. We had had a downturn again toward the right and run by the corporate interests, oil and gas and what are called plantation people down in the Rio Grande Valley. They had a guy named Shivers who was the governor, but we had a guy named Ralphie Yarborough, who would run for governor three different times. He was an indefatigable campaigner. But the progressive movement came together at

that time, and they used Ralph Yarborough's campaign to help stir people up and they created the Texas Observer to be a medium of progressive news.

Yarborough could get 3,000 people at a rally in Dallas and the next morning the Dallas Morning News would not have any mention of it. So, they came up with a slogan for the Dallas News: "If it happens in Dallas, it's news to us!"

They had to create their own media and they did, and this was the time of the poll tax. Larry Goodman, who wrote the great book on populism, was an organizer who went into East Texas and paid the poll tax of primarily Black people, but poor people, generally. That poll tax would be the equivalent of \$25 today. It's hard enough to get people to vote, much less to say, "By the way, it will cost you \$25 to do it."

This was a big change, and Frankie Randolph, over in the Houston area, was a woman of some wealth. She put up money for him. The labor unions got involved and did some organizing. The result of this movement building was that we elected Ralph Yarborough to the U.S. Senate, and right around 1960, we elected Barbara Jordan to Congress, Bob Eckhart, Henry Gonzalez, the first Mexican American to go to Congress. A movement was built and it had great success. And then we fell down again.

So, in the 1970s, the right wing had taken it back and even the Democrats were saying, "Well, we have to nomi-

nate corporate candidates or corporate-friendly candidates. That's the only way we can get elected."

But then we put together a campaign in 1982 that challenged that wisdom. I was part of it. I was running for agriculture commissioner, Ann Richards was running for treasurer, Jim Mattox for attorney general and Gary Mauro land commissioner. And we all four won because we campaigned overtly progressively and campaigned as a unit so people could believe it wasn't just one person, but a change in government.

We defied conventional wisdom, which was that, in the rural areas, Texas had turned conservative and we had lost all those people. Well, I knew they were talking about people like my own father, who would not call himself a liberal, but he was not a conservative, either. He hated corporations for what they were doing to small businesses like his, in Dennison, Texas. He hated the oil giants and how they controlled the Legislature. He hated the Walmarts, etc., so he was a William Jennings Bryan when you actually talked to him about the issues.

I campaigned on those issues. I was over in Tyler, Texas, which is an area that has known quite a bit of racism, to say the least, over the years. But, I was running on straight-up populist issues with Black and Mexican Americans, gays — I was the first statewide candidate ever to speak to a gay meeting — so we got to Tyler, and the guy who was showing me around, the local guy, said, "Well, let's go up here to the courthouse. We'll go up here on the fifth floor, where there's this old judge, and you can talk to him, but don't dump your whole load on him, he's very conservative."

One of the big issues I was running on was natural gas prices that had gone out of sight and people's utility bills were exploding. So, I'm talking to the judge, his feet up on the desk, his hat tilted back, he's listening to this young punk, and I'm telling my story, and I'm being cautious and finally I say, "So, judge, in conclusion, it just seems to me that these gas companies are not being entirely fair to the consumers of our state." And the judge's feet came off that desk and hit the floor with a big bang and he leaned over right into my face and said, "Hightower, in your private moments, wouldn't you say they're fucking us?"

And I said, "Yes, sir, I have said that. And I will again."

And he said, "Then I'm going to be for you. Any time you come into Tyler, you can use my office here and help organize, and I'll be for you."

So, we can't make assumptions about who people are just based on location or some reputation or something that somehow or other they're conservative or even more than conservative, that they're right wing.

we're rebuilding again. Back to the grassroots.

We even have a MAGA organization: Mothers Against Greg Abbott. And we're electing little-d democrats to big-D democratic positions. We're about to send you two new members of Congress, one in a new district and another one replacing a Democrat, but both overtly progressive.

Greg Casar and Jasmine Crockett. Very, very progressive people. They're not just going to be another vote, they're going to be leaders in the Democratic caucus, encouraging them to have a little bit of backbone. I often thought we need a Viagra for backbones.

What we know to be true is that Texas has been a non-voting state, but turnout is based on turn-on. If you keep nominating mealy-mouthed Democrats, then you're going to elect Republicans, and that is what has been happening to us. So that's so we're pushing forward with this, with great progress, I think, just as FFRF has gained tremendous strength in your numbers, we're gaining strength, as well, in our party. And part of it is just perseverance. You know, Willie Nelson told me once, "Hightower, the early bird might get the worm, but it's the second mouse that gets the cheese."

Go where the need is

I'm here to thank you for coming to Texas. I know there are probably more comfortable regions, ideologically speaking, for you to be in, but progressive groups, and Democrats in particular, have got to go where the need is. You know, the need is not in Greenwich Village. The need is in Tyler, Texas, the need is in Iowa, rural counties. The need is out there where open minds and progressive values and an agitating spirit exists. In every red dot in America, there are open minds and progressive spirits and willing people to be a part of the kind of movement and kind of world that we're working toward.

That's where we're needed to be. Particularly in the rural areas, particularly in the red areas. Just like that judge in Tyler, Texas, they can become allies if we reach out to them. But they're not going to if we don't show up. And the national Democratic Party has made a conscious decision over the last few years to say that we're not going into the rural areas, and we're not going where Trump won big. We're going to concentrate on the inner cities and the inner suburbs, where our strength is. Well, that hasn't been working out that well, either.

It seems to me we've got to get out there and reach out to people, and then to try to unify them, because whether our particular issue is our labor rights or women's rights, or climate change, abortion, or freedom from religion, our fundamental values come down to those issues of fairness and justice and opportunity for all.

Again, Jessie Jackson said it well. He said, "We might not have all come over on the same boat, but we're in the same boat now." That's a powerful political reality when you begin to understand it. So, if a progressive future is possible, it is possible only if we have intentional politics that drives toward that future.

I'll leave you with this thought. It's from Lewis Grizzard, the late, great Southern humorist, who once explained something that we in the South have always known to be true, and that is there's a great big difference between being naked and being nekkid. Being naked means you have no clothes on. Being nekkid means you have no clothes on and you are up to something. So, we've got to get nekkid together. Thank you very much.

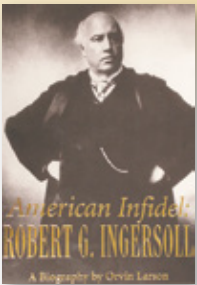
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# Rationalism in Hindu-nationalist India

By Dan Barker

Religious nationalism is rearing its hideous head all over the world. In the United States, it is Christian nationalism. In India, it is the Hindu nationalism of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s ultraconservative Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that is currently dragging the country back to sectarian divisiveness and religious (some even say “semi-fascist”) strife. Fortunately, there are many committed rationalists in both countries working hard to stem the tide.

In India, groups like MANS are fighting superstition and ignorance in the state of Maharashtra. (MANS stands for Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti, “The Maharashtra Committee for the Eradication of Blind Faith.”) The current leader of MANS, Avinash Patil — who succeeded founder Narendra Dabholkar after a far-right group assassinated him in 2013 for being “anti-Hindu” — was awarded FFRF’s “Avijit Roy Courage Award” in 2019 for his brave activism fighting irrationality, witchcraft and godmen well beyond just the borders of Maharashtra.

Between Dec. 31 and Jan. 13, FFRF’s Director of Communications Amitabh Pal and I visited India at the invitation of Avinash, who arranged a jam-packed “Knowing India & Indian Rationalists” tour for us. The two-week trip involved 10 events where we met with freethinkers and activists in five different Indian states and territories who are battling superstition and ignorance.

It was my first visit to the country, and I was astonished at the diversity of cultures, foods and languages. Even Amit, who often visits family in the north of the country, said he saw more of India on this tour than he has during all his previous trips. We met with people who spoke Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Punjabi and, of course, Hindi and English.

The first morning, a few hours after we landed in Mumbai, Avinash — who was usually accompanied by an armed state security police officer because of the threat to his life — took Amit and me to the prestigious Mumbai Press Club to meet with thinkers, activists, authors, professors, and lawyers (including a former state supreme court judge) about the growing problem of religious nationalism and “ethnic democracy.”

It was at that meeting that I learned that the Indian Constitution contains these amazing words:

*“[It shall be the duty of every citizen of India] To develop scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform.”* — Forty-second Amendment (1976) Article 51 A(h)

Imagine that! Science, humanism, inquiry and reform in the country’s governing document. Many of the speakers at the Press Club lamented the fact that so



FFRF’s Dan Barker and Amitabh Pal with ceremonial turbans and shawls presented to them at a function in Mumbai, India.

many Indian citizens, especially members of the BJP and the government it leads, are failing in their constitutional duty to develop a scientific temper. India, they complain, is currently being wrested away from its proud secular heritage.

The next day, we celebrated the new year and the 75th anniversary of Indian independence at the Ravindra Natya Mandir Performing Arts Center, where we were treated to cultural dance, music and dramatic skits focusing on liberty and diversity. (Our arrival, greeted by the blowing of a Maharashtrian tutari horn, was slightly delayed due to long lines of worshippers entering the Siddhivinayak Temple of Ganesh.) We met some freedom fighters from the Indian struggle for independence, one who was 99 years old, and another who was 100 years old!

Amit and I were the perfect team to compare India and the United States. Since he is an immigrant to the United States and I belong to a tribe of indigenous Americans, we were able to introduce ourselves as an Indian American and an American Indian.

In Mumbai, we visited the charming Mani Bhavan Gandhi Sangrahalaya (a museum and library in the house where Gandhi stayed when he visited Mumbai) and the seaside memorial to India’s “Father of the Constitution” B. R. Ambedkar.

Next, we drove up to the headquarters of MANS in Dhule. After meeting with activists and authors from the area, including the staff of MANS, we took a side trip to see the ancient Ellora Caves by Aurangabad that, for all their beauty, also harken back to a time when Buddhist, Hindu and Jain temples could be built side-by-side in a spirit of tolerance and diversity.

On the other side of the subcontinent

in the state of Tamil Nadu, in the city of Chennai on the Bay of Bengal, we visited and spoke at the Periyar Centre, an incredible atheist/feminist/scientific/anti-caste “self-respect” institution founded by the social reformer and politician Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy (known as “Periyar,” whose face was on a national Indian postage stamp) and now led by the 89-year-old Krishnasami Veeramani. The center houses a medical clinic, printing press (where a daily newspaper, Modern Rationalist magazine and books are published in many languages), library, research center, bookstore, marriage bureau and lecture hall. Periyar’s Dravidar Kazhagam social movement has spawned the two major political parties in Tamil Nadu, both of which have put into place various progressive policies that have ensured a much higher state of well-being for Tamils than most of the country’s population.

Then we went to a place I had been dreaming of visiting for many decades — the Atheist Centre in the city of Vijayawada on the Krishna River in Andhra Pradesh. The Atheist Centre is a member of the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations, which currently boasts 83 rationalist, atheist, skeptic, secularist and science organizations, including MANS. Like the Periyar Centre, it occupies a prominent property in the city. It houses a medical clinic, science center, capacious library, research center, broadcast/podcast center, criminal and jogini (prostitute) rehabilitation house, women empowerment and child development program, trade school, historical displays of science and freethought history, and a large open meeting area where lectures and cultural events are staged.

The Atheist Centre was founded in the 1940s by Gora, an atheist friend of Gandhi. (One of the legends is that Gandhi said to Gora: “God is truth.” Gora replied: “Truth is God.”) Gora’s face was also on an Indian postage stamp.

One of Gora’s sons, Lavanam, had visited FFRF in the 1990s, which prompted my hope of one day seeing the place. Because of its social work, the Atheist Centre is highly respected in the city and the state. Two different governors have spoken there. When Avinash, Amit and I gave our talks on Jan. 7, we were joined by a member of the state Legislature and a former deputy speaker of the state Assembly. Then we were treated to a spectacle of dance, culture and music celebrating the birth anniversaries of Gora and his wife, around which the conference was organized.

After spending two days visiting Amit’s mother in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh (where temperatures in the 40s

caused schools to close), we flew to the state of Punjab. The Tarksheel Society is a Punjabi rationalist group (tarksheel means “reason” or “rationality”) based in Barnala, a city situated in the center of Punjab. The group is “committed to the objectives of inculcating scientific and rational thinking among the people,” combating superstitions, rituals, charms, fortune-tellers, godmen, religious fanatics and occult practices.

With a colorful van covered with quotes and pictures, the society drives around the state visiting schools and public meetings to promote science and reason and has actually instituted a rationalist syllabus for schoolchildren. The van unfolds into a library with literature for all ages, including many books published by the society. Amit and I spent a happy afternoon touring the organization’s grounds and talking with its dedicated leaders and authors in the large conference center with pictures and quotes of influential (and some martyred) freethinkers. Education, Tarksheel activists told us, makes a solid difference in the mental health of a society.

Before flying to Delhi the next day, Amit and I had a wonderful three-for-one tour of the famous Golden Temple (a very prominent and ornate Sikh structure), the new Partition Museum, and the sad-but-beautiful memorial park commemorating the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of Indian protesters by the British, all within walking distance of each other in Amritsar.

In Delhi, our final stop of the tour, we had three important events. We met with people involved with Studio Safdar. The studio is named after the playwright, director and actor Safdar Hashmi, a founding member of the Jana Natya Manch (People’s Theatre Front), who was assassinated by members of the Indian National Congress in 1989 while performing the street play Halla Bol (Raise Your Voice!) outside a factory.

The People’s Theater Front creates an alternate and affordable space in Delhi for staging and experimenting with the arts. Safdar’s widow Moloyashree Hashmi, who helps run the studio, told us that she and most other members of the group are outspoken atheists who want to obliterate caste and religion, making all people equal.

The next morning, our last day in the country, Avinash took us to the distinguished Press Club of India in the nation’s capital where print and TV journalists (many from Maharashtra) attended our remarks and asked many questions about religious nationalism in India and the United States. Before heading to the airport, we stopped at the Gandhi Peace Centre to interact with activists, authors and reformers who are propagating Gandhian thought across the country. The grassroots social activist and human rights campaigner Shabnam Hashmi, the sister of Safdar Hashmi (the murdered theater personality mentioned above), was at that meeting, insisting that India is currently becoming a “semi-fascist state.”

And what is the solution? We learned from our many new activist Indian friends during this tour that while confronting superstition and fundamentalism is necessary, it is not enough. Before any progress toward enlightenment can be made, the needs of the people must first be addressed. It is hard to think about philosophy when you are hungry, cold and oppressed. Using a bottom-up strategy of winning hearts before changing minds, many intelligent and brave Indian rationalists are indeed focusing on making this world a better place.



Amitabh Pal and Dan Barker are happy to be included in a selfie that their host Avinash Patil took at the entrance to the Atheist Centre in Vijayawada, India.





A sign at the Atheist Centre in Vijayawada, India, details all the exhibits during a conference held to commemorate the birth anniversaries of its founders.



Amitabh Pal talks with U.S.-based friends, who he ran into unexpectedly at the Ellora Caves.



Dan Barker and Amitabh Pal enjoy a lighter moment at the Mumbai Press Club.



FFRF's Dan Barker enjoying the breeze at a Chennai beach on the Bay of Bengal.



An ancient statue of the Buddha carved out at the Ellora Caves, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Dan Barker and Amitabh Pal with their India host Avinash Patil and two Dravidar Kazhagam office-bearers at the Periyar Centre in Chennai.



A South Indian classical dance was performed at the Atheist Centre as part of the conference celebrations.



Activists from tour host Avinash Patil's home area pose with FFRF's Dan Barker and Amitabh Pal.



A sign at the Periyar Centre makes clear the ideology of the person, rationalist and reformer Periyar, to whom it is dedicated.



# Hal Saferstein was generous FFRF supporter

The Freedom From Religion Foundation sadly reports the death of longtime FFRF member Harold L. (“Hal”) Saferstein, M.D., at his Scottsdale, Ariz., home on Jan. 19. He was surrounded by family when he died at age 89, following a five-year battle with cancer.

He was born in Elizabeth, N.J., and earned his medical degree at the University of Illinois, Chicago. He practiced dermatology in Wheeling, W.Va., for 30 years until retiring to Scottsdale in 1992.

Hal and his wife Doreen joined FFRF in 2001. They were among many major donors to the expansion of Freethought Hall, and their names are on a plaque in the lobby. Hal also made it a generous habit to typically gift at least one Lifetime Membership a year, and sometimes as many as five!

At heart a philanthropist, Hal supported a wide variety of causes too numerous to mention. He had a passion for the opera and symphony, as well as a flair for writing clever poetry. A longtime Steelers and Suns fan, his primary hobbies included

poker and bridge, tennis and traveling. In his later years, he championed the separation of church and state.

He and Doreen were both Lifetime Members of FFRF. Hal also played an instrumental role in the founding of the Humanist Community Center in Mesa, Ariz. Hal was a beloved figure among humanists and freethinkers in Arizona.

In 2008, Hal helped fund five FFRF “Imagine no religion” billboards in the Phoenix area.

He said of the billboard message: “I once prayed to an invisible deity when my wife was desperately ill, but I’m quite certain she was saved by modern medicine and some caring health workers. My life took a turn for the better when I freed my mind from religious belief.”

In the June/July 2008 issue of Freethought Today, Hal wrote the column, “Why we chose humanism.”

He wrote: “Why did we practice Judaism for 40 of our 48 years of married life? The reason is the same for us as for almost

everyone: Our parents were Jewish! Had they been Muslims, we would have grown up as Muslims. Our religious choice is almost always decided by our birth rather than by any intellectual decision based on a study of religious choices.

“I realize now that I was always a skeptic, doubting the existence of a god, angels, devils or miracles. Having a scientific education, I was hesitant to accept the supernatural without evidence. I did not believe that prayer accomplished anything and was, for the most part, bored by the repetitious ritual.

“When we moved to Arizona, we joined Temple Chai in Phoenix. My wife liked the service and the music. We were disappointed in the less-than-friendly atmosphere, but stuck with it until we learned about humanism. I was turned off by the almost frenzied religious enthusiasm of some members. After encouraging my wife to attend some of our humanist meetings, it was she who suggested we resign from the Temple. We have found our new humanist



Doreen and Hal Saferstein

friends to be much warmer and caring.” Hal was preceded in death by his wife of 61 years, Doreen Kaufman Saferstein, and is survived by sons, Aaron (Lynn), Bennett (Sandra), Eric (Georgiann), and two granddaughters, Shira and Amy.

In lieu of flowers, donations in his memory may be made to FFRF, the Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix or Saint Mary’s Food Bank of Phoenix.

## IN MEMORIAM

## THEY SAID WHAT?

He loves God.  
**Joseph D. McBride, lawyer for Richard Barnett, who posed with his boot propped on a desk in Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office during the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol. Barnett was convicted by a federal jury on Jan. 23 on eight counts.**  
*The New York Times, 1-24-23*

It’s a very shallow and glib and liberal and modern idea that you should never ban or suppress any book. It is an idea that is completely out of keeping with the entire Western tradition. Catholics, Protestants, ancients, even many secularists — everyone agrees that certain books should not be taught. . . . We naturally ban certain books. The liberals ban books. They banned the bible in classrooms.

**Michael Knowles, host of The Daily Wire’s “Michael Knowles Show.”**  
*Media Matters, 1-24-23*

God designed marriage. Marriage refers to Christ and the church. That’s why there’s no such thing as homosexual marriage.

**Jacob Kersey, a Georgia police officer, in a Facebook post. Kersey was put on paid administrative leave after refusing to remove his Facebook post. He then quit the Port Wentworth Police Department.**  
*Fox News, 1-29-23*

He had become convinced it was a religious obligation for him to commit a martyrdom attack to avenge the killing of Muslims around the world — and that it was God’s will to do that. And as we sit here today, he still believes that.

**David E. Patton, the lawyer for Sayfullo Saipov, who killed eight people and wounded more than a dozen more while driving a rental truck down the Hudson River bike path in 2017.**  
*The New York Times, 1-10-23*



Office of Nancy Pelosi

Alexandra and Nancy Pelosi.

I think that weighed really heavy on her soul. I think she felt really guilty. I think that really broke her. Over Thanksgiving, she had priests coming, trying to have an exorcism of the house and having prayer services.

**Alexandra Pelosi, daughter of Nancy Pelosi, a staunch Catholic, talking about Nancy’s reaction after her husband was attacked in their home.**  
*The New York Times, 1-21-23*

If you want to live here, be a Christian.

**Karla Johnson, chapter president of the Montana Federation of Republican Women, in the article, “How Montana took a hard right turn toward Christian nationalism.”**  
*The New York Times, 1-11-23*

He’d see that as part of his reshaped destiny. But at the same time, he’s pragmatic. So, what can we get away with? Whatever he can get away with, he’ll get away with in shaping a Christian society. Because he believes that’s a true society.

**Alan Rassaby, former general counsel of Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte’s company, Right Now Technologies, saying that Gianforte would gladly take down the wall between church and state.**  
*The New York Times, 1-11-23*

## CRANKMAIL

Here is your March installment of Crankmail, the not-so-friendly mail we get at FFRF. Printed as received.

**Wrong:** You need to understand the writings of our fore-fathers. It is NOT Freedom FROM religion it is freedom OF religion. Why are you changing a word in the amendment to change the meaning OF the amendment? I can’t believe you are actually use this wording in your tv add. You and I both know you are wrong and giving false information. Stop and think about what you are putting out there! Believe or don’t believe, that is your right But don’t be so desperate to try and change the wording of an amendment that was written 100’s of years ago. It is insulting. Your Coined phrase on your home page says it all. It makes you add look foolish. — *Karla Brenckman*

**You lie!:** Please REFUTE, delete, or correct your article as it is an outright LIE. The United States of America is in fact, a CHRISTIAN Nation. Do your homework and at least look at it’s founding documents. — *Mike Couture*

**No mandate:** You clowns are idiots as I am a combat veteran dying because of the military vaccines given to me which were experimental just like this civic vaccine that contained biological agents inside of them. I now suffer from skin cancer with the VA malpractice on me each time I go because I know why I am sick so they are out making me look bad. Co president Annie Laurie Taylor said this would of been unconstitutional had court let them go unprotected! — *Josh Howell*

**Heathens:** I assume you don’t celebrate any form of Christmas..... no presents or parties or taking any days off from work for Christmas considering it wouldn’t exist if Christians didn’t start it with the celebration of Christ’s birthday. If you are an atheist you should not benefit from anything that has started due to Christianity or Islam either. I assume you don’t follow Any laws related to the Ten Commandments? This country’s rights say..... founded by our creator so you don’t take benefit from any laws here either rights? — *Seth Marsten*

**Dumbasses:** Just seen your commercial on TV. Funniest thing I have seen in a while, our founding fathers founded the nation on freedom of religion which means the government does not have a religion citizens



A possible Crankmail writer?

are required to follow or be a member of. Quite a different thing than freedom from religion as you people are trying to sell. It shows how dumb you are and sadly how ignorant the people of this country has become. We are in a sad time in this country and you are selling lies there is no God. Quite Pathetic. Your commercial said you are not afraid to burn in hell, it is a good thing. — *Jerry Uptain*

**FFR:** Fuck off with your religious bullshit you fucking cunts. — *Ter-rance Englert*

**Why do you do it?:** Many of us fully understand that the motive for your actions is the resolution of the United States and turning our free

nation enslaved by Marxist globalism. Maybe I should care that your a atheist but frankly I don’t give rats ass. It does bother me that your an org of self focused god hating intolerant people who are more interested in disrupting . Pathetic. Have a swell day. — *Steven Van Brown*

**Sin:** Why are you guys so wacked out? You don’t understand the implications of sin and the destruction it brings. It’s something you cannot see. Or that you really don’t pay attention to. But just because you don’t notice it, because you cannot simply know every man and woman on earth and their hearts or motivations, doesn’t mean it’s not there. Sin brings destruction to mankind. Pay attention to the evil in today’s society. Murder, thievery, immoral acts being considered normal. The bar with liberal society is set extremely low. People have no shame. Thats why we are to follow God’s word. There’s nothing wrong with it for it preserves our souls and our mental well being. It prevents us from suffering inside. Many people are suffering inside. Are angry. Because of sin. To fully understand you have to believe and have faith. You cannot understand without genuine belief and faith. — *Dave Thomas*

**God is real:** Your article speaking to abortion and the Bible is wrong. The verse you quoted is out of context. God breathed life into ADAM. This is not when life begins for us today. If baby’s in the womb are not alive, how do they move, kick, etc.? — *Mike Daniel*

**Petty sign:** I saw your banner in Balboa Park in San Diego. I find it interesting that your home page says, “Love Conquers Religion” while you go to Balboa Park and intentionally stick your finger into the eyes of people who want to celebrate Christmas. You don’t have the slightest clue what love is. People who truly have love in their hearts would not do this. Your banner reads that “God does not exist.” Your banner is not meant to persuade people. It is intended to mock people who believe in God? No one is forcing religion upon you. You have concocted a boogeyman. You’re a bunch of insecure children who are desperate to be relevant. You’re smug, unhappy people who have declared yourselves morally & intellectually superior to make up for your self-inflicted shortcomings. Your banner is neither moral nor intellectual. It is petty. — *Chris Edwards*



# Five reasons why all abortion bans are harmful

By Barbara Alvarez

I'll occasionally speak to people who support abortion rights but who think that there are certain areas in which abortion bans make sense. It typically has to do with gestational age; such folks believe that abortion bans "after a certain number of weeks of pregnancy" are permissible. That's problematic for many reasons. I'll outline just five of them.



First of all, no pregnancy is the same and therefore we cannot treat gestational age with a broad brush. Pregnancy is a highly individual experience, and complications in pregnancy, including life-threatening ones, can happen throughout. Decisions on how to proceed must be based on comprehensive options and what is best for the individual involved — not on the legal mandates of politicians whose loyalties are to the Religious Right.

Second, some people may not know that they are pregnant until much later. While it is true that over 90 percent of abortions occur in the first trimester — less than 13 weeks of gestation — there are people who simply do not know that they are pregnant until much later.

er. For example, 30 percent of women have irregular menstrual periods, so a missed period or going months without one may not raise a red flag. Meanwhile, women in their late 30s or early 40s may mistake pregnancy for early signs of menopause; others may never have gotten any of the classic pregnancy symptoms. Why should their options be limited because of how their body did or did not respond to pregnancy?

Third, not knowing that one is pregnant is especially true for minors who are still learning about their body and its natural functions. Minors who are pregnant may have the added stress of being in a state that requires parental consent to receive an abortion. Such laws delay abortion care because young people may be afraid to tell their parents or guardians or, alternatively, they're required to go through the court system to appeal for a judicial waiver. Research has shown that parental involvement puts the youth in grave danger: They risk being disowned, physically harmed or forced to carry the pregnancy. Imagine a pregnant teen telling ultrareligious parents about being pregnant: Do you think that the parents will offer support for an abortion? I doubt it. As such, minors have some of the highest rates of abortion at later stages. Abortion bans with gestational limits prevent young people from receiving the care that they want and deserve.



Shutterstock

pregnant people about their options, often telling them that they have plenty of time to make a decision. Wisconsin also has one of the highest concentrations of Catholic hospitals, which prohibit abortion care.

The fifth reason is that abortion bans of any kind deny bodily autonomy. Since each person, situation and pregnancy is unique, we cannot have sexual and reproductive health laws that treat everyone broadly. The ability to have an abortion should be the individual's decision alone. By limiting abortion at certain stages, we completely play into the Religious Right's handbook that views a woman's or pregnant person's body as a vessel of God.

History shows us that if you give the Religious Right an inch, they'll take a mile. This is especially true with abortion laws. There is no common ground when it comes to imposing abortion bans. The Religious Right only uses those as stepping stones to normalize the vilification of comprehensive abortion care. Don't buy into it.

The next time someone says to you "I support abortion, but . . .", I hope that you're able to explain to them why there is no such thing as a justifiable abortion ban. All abortion bans cause harm. That's why abortion should be legal without exception.

*Barbara Alvarez is a contributing writer for FFRF.*

## FFRF ON THE ROAD



Centre for Inquiry Canada started the Vancouver, British Columbia, branch, which held a panel discussion on Jan. 28, with Dan Barker moderating a group of ex-clergy talking about their experiences of losing their beliefs.

Members of the panel were (front row) Mohamed Cisse, an ex-Muslim muezzin; and Shlomo Levin, an ex-Jewish rabbi; (back row) Dan Barker; Duane Grady, an ex-Christian minister; Lon Ostrander, an ex-Christian pastor; and John Lombard, an ex-Christian missionary



While in Vancouver, Dan Barker caught up with Lynn Lau, former FFRF employee.



Liz Cavell, associate counsel at FFRF, led a Zoom meeting on the topic of "Students: Know Your Rights" for the Secular Student Alliance on Jan. 25.



Following a chapter meeting of the Unfettered Freethinkers of South Sound on Jan. 29 in Olympia, Wash., director Lewis Foerster, former director Darrell Barker, and FFRF Co-President Dan Barker posed with FFRF's Winter Solstice sign that used to be displayed in the state Capitol. This sign, as evidenced by the crease in the middle, had been stolen, vandalized and dumped in a ditch several years ago.



# LETTERBOX

## Why am I paying for religion with my taxes?

I'm an atheist and have enclosed a small contribution to your worthy cause.

Perhaps you can explain to me, as a nonbeliever, why I have to support religion through tax increases? Every time the church of any recognized religion is exempt from paying property tax, my taxes go up to make up for the shortfall. And the IRS is the sole arbiter that decides which organization is a religion? Am I the only one who finds this troubling?

Florida

## Many Tennessee cities still ban blasphemy

After months of research, I discovered at least 107 Tennessee cities and towns that ban blasphemy somewhere in their municipal codes. Most municipalities banned blasphemous language during court proceedings, while at least one town (Ripley) defined blasphemous language in any public place as unlawful disorderly conduct. In March 2022, FFRF wrote a letter to the city of Sparta for banning blasphemy on handbills or signs and during court proceedings.

Over the summer, the city of Algood amended its municipal code to remove prohibitions against blasphemous language. In March, I wrote to the Algood mayor about this ban and how this change represented one step toward greater progress for civil liberties.

In August, I wrote to the city of Crossville — where I live — urging our council to remove its blasphemy ban. To date, the city has not removed the ban.

But I will never stop fighting for the freedom to debate, criticize, or reject all beliefs and opinions, including religious ones. As FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor said about blasphemy when discussing the ban in Sparta: "Blasphemy laws have no place in a secular country like the United States. Blasphemy is a victimless crime, but it creates a lot of victims."

Tennessee

## Crankmail shows where education is lacking

Your Crankmail is a perfect example of how our school systems have failed to teach the proper use of the English language.

Pennsylvania

## FFRF donations courtesy of crosses, billboards

My spouse and I recently took a drive from Michigan to New Orleans. We passed these enormous crosses that are apparently erected just for the highway traffic to view. After the third one, I declared that I would donate \$10 to FFRF per cross. Then I decided to add \$5 for any billboards about Jesus.

So, I am sending you \$60, brought to you by the five crosses and two billboards. Thank you for all your work maintain the separation of state and church against unending opposition.

Michigan



## FFRF's work is needed and much appreciated

Thank you deeply for the work you do. Western society has been so heavily religious for so long that many don't even realize that the thoughts they were taught in their earliest years sprang from a faith. As the slow groundswell of reason backs the misguided into reactionary legal action, you stand as a watchdog and shield against them. You are appreciated and needed in your struggle.

I find myself at the end of the year donating a tenth of my income to your most-worthy cause. Though I have freed myself from the Christian-cult shackles of my upbringing, I am amused by the thought. Just as I am heartened by the knowledge that this "tithe" will be put to much better use.

Kansas

## Religion is the original conspiracy theory

In the last few years, the term "conspiracy theory" has become quite common in the media, as millions of Americans gravitate toward theories like QAnon, for example. In search of an objective definition of "conspiracy theory," I looked to Wikipedia.

The second paragraph on that page contains this: "Conspiracy theories resist falsification and are reinforced by circular reasoning: both evidence against the conspiracy and an absence of evidence for it are reinterpreted as evidence of its truth, whereby the conspiracy becomes a matter of faith rather than something that can be proven or disproven."

The word "religion" could replace the words "conspiracy theory" in that text without changing the nature of the statement in any way. Isn't religion the original conspiracy theory? And if it is, shouldn't it be discredited in the court of public opinion and policy as such, in the same way that QAnon generally is?

The paragraph at the bottom of the same page contained this:

"Interventions to reduce the occurrence of conspiracy beliefs include maintaining an open society and improving the analytical thinking skills of the general public."

It could be that the efforts of those who work for the separation of church and state, and a diminished influence of a cultural conspiracy theory on a societies' lives affected by policies anchored in a conspiracy theory, would be best addressed by promoting standard classes in logic, in all public elementary

schools. Call it the four Rs: Reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic and reason.

If you are curious about what might be a potentially negative influence in your community, watch for the groups objecting to that effort.

California

## Most people won't care if you are 'out'

I just wanted to respond to the letter from Bronze Quinton in the December edition, where it mentioned how many at the convention hide their identity of nonbelief.

I live in a small conservative town in Northeast Oregon where I am a city council member and well-known as a Democrat and nonbeliever. I am well respected for my focus on real issues affecting our town. If anyone came after me for my beliefs, there would be many Christians coming to my defense. There is always the fear of the radicals who rant the loudest, but most people do not care what you think because they have bigger things to worry about. In some ways, people may be nicer to you in hopes of converting you down the line. If you just state your beliefs without making a big deal of it and show you care for others regardless of religious beliefs, you will find most people accepting of you. So go ahead and be who you are and watch most just shrug their shoulders and ignore the few jerks who give you crap.

Oregon

## Anti-abortionists are both absurd, arrogant

On several occasions, I've observed bumper stickers on passing cars that read: "Aren't you glad your mother chose life?" or "Life is a gift from God"

or "Abortion is murder!"

Those who are against abortion invariably repeat the mantra that if their mother hadn't given them birth, they would never have experienced the joy of life. Well, if some cells never became people and are never born, they obviously have no consciousness of what life is. So how can anybody who never came into existence reproach anyone for their nonexistence?

How absurd. If people believe that abortion is murder, that's exactly how they should say it: "I believe abortion is murder." Such a statement is perfectly understandable, since so many still cling to such beliefs.

But people who utter the authoritative statement, "Abortion is murder!" represent, in my opinion, the pinnacle of arrogance. Their adjudication of abortion as murder is based on a belief which has no foundation or truth. Their hubris is unsurpassed.

California

## Our 'religious beliefs' should count, too

There may be some utility in the trope that atheism is a religion. I suggest that FFRF members write to Justice Samuel Alito with something similar to this (obviously, in your own words):


"Dear Justice Alito, I believe strongly that you, together with Clarence Thomas, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett, should resign before the end of this term. This belief is bound up in my religion and is non-negotiable. It is precious. It is my sincere religious belief, and I believe it deeply, deeply, deeply. I ask you to uphold my religion. Faithfully yours, Name."

Ohio

## Public education in Ohio starting down a bad path

The Ohio Legislature is undermining public education. It appears that the Legislature agrees with Rod Paige, secretary of education, appointed by George W. Bush, to advocate for the public schools. Paige said: "All things equal, I would prefer to have a child in a school that has a strong appreciation for the values of the Christian community, where a child is taught to have a strong faith. . . That's not the case in a public school where there are so many different kids with different kinds of values."

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!

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Adolph Hitler said: “Secular schools can never be tolerated because such schools have no religious instruction, and a general moral instruction without a religious foundation is built on air; consequently, all character training and religion must be derived from faith. . . we need believing people.”

Robert L. Thoburn, author of *The Children Trap*: “I imagine every Christian would agree that we need to remove the humanism from the public schools. There is only one way to accomplish this: to abolish the public schools.”

Gary Bauer, former director of the Family Research Council, a fundamentalist Christian advocacy group stated: “We are engaged in a social, political and cultural war. There’s a lot of talk in America about pluralism. But the bottom line is somebody’s values will prevail. And the winner gets the right to teach our children what to believe.”

Mark Twain said: “In the first place, God made idiots. That was for practice. Then he made school boards.”  
Ohio

San Antonio convention featured much diversity

As I read the December issue of *Freethought Today*, I was struck by the diversity — age, race, sexual orientation, gender identification, ethnicity — of people and ideas at FFRF’s San Antonio convention. I see this as a very positive sign that there is a very strong movement toward a more civilized society here and, hopefully, a slow but sure erosion of the divisions that have been created by the ruling class — primarily rich, white men — who have subverted our country’s spoken — but, at best, only partially realized — intentions to create a society which recognizes and respects all people regardless of dehumanizing labels.

I have been a FFRF member for over 25 years and I am happy to support your work to stop the imposition of religious superstition on others in our public institutions. I have become more open about my atheism as religious fanatics have become more aggressive in their bigotry and hate of people for whom they have no respect. That bigotry has now escalated to words and actions of violence against “others” by extremists who justify their hate by quoting this or that bible verse. I think their extremism is a sign of desperation as they realize that their base of support is dwindling. I think a day will come when “religion” will be noted only as a footnote in history.

I will continue to support the vital work that you do in any way that I can.  
California

Crossword answers

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

A message from above




Photo by Sarah Elliott

Steve and Shirley Petersen of Minnesota, as of late January, were still featured on FFRF’s billboard in St. Paul, which went up in June. Steve writes: “There is a church on the next block and I found this photo to be humorous. Because parking is at a premium in downtown St. Paul, it is probable that the lot this billboard is at is used by church attendees. Would love to listen in to a conversation of those church members when they see the atheists on the billboard are up above keeping vigil over vehicles when they are at church?”

Still difficult to come ‘out’ as atheist

In the December Letterbox, one member stated that only a small percentage of FFRF convention attendees were “out” as atheists. (*Editor’s note:* That was a personal anecdote, not from a study.)

I was at a recent family religious event and when I shared my nonbelief, I was met with complete silence and a quick end to the conversation. This is the sad reality of what we are up against!  
California

Thanks to FFRF for full-page ad in NY Times

How pleased I was to see in the Dec. 21 issue of the *New York Times* the full-page ad from FFRF.

I cut it out and sent it to Hobby Lobby and invited the company to make a donation. Every Easter and Christmas that company publishes Christian-oriented full-page ads in newspapers across the country.  
New York

Finite suffering isn’t enough, make it infinite!

Christian fundamentalists threaten nonbelievers with infinite suffering over infinite time. Being an engineer, I know that infinities don’t exist in the physical world. Nothing is infinite. So, when I hear people vainly tossing infinities around, I get very annoyed!

Was there a time, let’s say a few hundred years ago, when the Christians threatened people with a finite level of torment? And, then, a few of them sat down and decided, “You know, we’re not getting enough con-

Cryptogram answer

The gods we ourselves have created ruled us for centuries! What a great comedy! And what a great tragedy!

— Mehmet Murat Ildan

verts here! Why don’t we just pull out all the stops and make it infinite suffering? That way, more people will become believers!” Do you suppose this is the way we got to the deplorable state we’re in today?

As a side note, I really enjoy watching your “Ask an Atheist” YouTube videos, which are very entertaining and educational. I think your organization is doing a wonderful job!  
Arizona

FFRF members can be found all over

My husband and I are in California until March, and we love to go to the Huntington Beach pier on our frequent walks. Recently, we passed a small group of Jehovah’s Witnesses giving away bibles. We did not stop, of course, but I soon heard the loud voice of a bicyclist coming up behind us. He yelled at the group: “You need some freedom from religion!” Join the Freedom From Religion Foundation, you dumb lambs!”

I started clapping and yelled to him, “I agree! I’m a representative!”

He was going rather fast on his bike, but he turned his head and said, “It’s a great group!” He was gone in a flash, unfortunately. I would have liked to talk to him.

This encounter confirms that FFRF is big, valued and supported. Keep up the good work! (I’m watching “Freethought Matters” as I write.)  
California

Rep. Hartzler’s speech spurred me to donate

After watching Republican Rep. Vic-ki Hartzler’s congressional floor speech on the Respect for Equal Marriage Act, I had to do something. She said, “Protect religious liberty. Protect people of faith. And protect Americans who believe in

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.

the true meaning of marriage. I hope and pray that my colleagues will find the courage to join me in opposing this misguided and this dangerous bill.”

I wish I could donate more, but I’m not rich. I guess I should have prayed on it. Thanks for what you do.  
Washington

Will humans ever realize religion is superstition?

I loved your full-page ad in the *New York Times* in December.

The world needs to learn that there is no god, no heaven, and no hell. They are imaginary. They are not real. There are also no devils and no angels. Maybe in 5,000 years, humans will realize that religion is just a superstition that millions of people believed without evidence. God has never answered any prayers or done anything.

I am a 100 percent atheist, a Humanist, and a member of the Unitarian Fellowship of Houston.  
Texas

Lifetime membership is my ‘coming out’

I have decided to become a Lifetime Member. I consider this my “coming out” as an agnostic. (I will always identify as ethnically Jewish.) I stopped believing in the religion decades ago, and I’m tired of pretending.

Keep up the good work. Thanks for doing it.  
New Jersey

Pope holds contempt for abortion doctors

Pope Francis has shown his contempt for those who perform abortions, comparing them to a “hitman,” while ignoring the fact that most people who belong to his religion disagree with him on this issue.

The writer John Irving says that denying access to abortion is “forced birth” and calls it what it is — the “religious persecution of women and girls.” He wrote a book about this subject: *The Cider House Rules*.  
New York

Christian nationalists are threat to democracy

Keep up the great work countering the Christian nationalist movement, which I believe is the most dangerous threat to democracy now. It controls the Republican Party and the U.S. Supreme Court.

I have personally seen it in action and have known ministers who have joined the movement.  
Washington

Freethought Today always a pleasure to read

I look forward to reading *Freethought Today* every month. It’s the most intellectually stimulating periodical I’ve ever had the pleasure of receiving. I particularly enjoy reading *Overheard*, *Crank-mail*, *Letterbox*, the essay contest winners and the cryptogram!

Here is a poem I wrote:  
**Endure**  
Why do we exist? I implore nightly when it is calm and quiet. I meditate about life and its meaning. I distill my poems from random reflections. I think its simple memes and alleles just want to survive.  
Pennsylvania



# FFRF wedding: A match made in reason

Lifetime Members Richard and Jana Halasz share the story that led to their 2013 FFRF Madison, Wis., convention wedding.

By Richard & Jana Halasz

I promise to have and hold you  
Near and dear  
With love  
More than time and space,  
More than rhyme or reason.  
I promise to hold and have you  
Dear and near  
With love  
In the now and here,  
In free verse and in insanity.  
We shall have no gods before us,  
And together we rule.”

The 2013 FFRF national convention in Madison, Wis., where those words were spoken, wasn’t where we started, but it was a pivotal point in our journey together through time and space and the here and now.

**RICHARD:** I lived in Milwaukee and worked as a stand-up comedian. I traveled a lot throughout the years; I got married and divorced. Along the way, I would somewhat regularly see the very interesting font signage reading “Free-thought Hall” on the building in Madison, Wis., that I assumed was an extension of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It was only later that I learned that building was the headquarters of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, of which I had been a member since 2005. I became aware of Jana in the original FFRF online forum. I noticed her cute picture was bathed in a soft purple with her comments drenched in intelligence!

**JANA:** As I grew more comfortable with my atheism, I busted out of my natural introversion and started traveling by myself to mingle with other nonbelievers, which was both scary and exciting. My first convention was the 2010 FFRF convention in Madison, a long way from southeast Texas.

**RICHARD:** At the 2010 convention, Jana and I somehow missed each other, like ships passing in a foggy night. But, even now, at conventions, I’m like a squirrel with attention deficit disorder, distracted by every other squirrel.

**JANA:** In April 2011, I went to the American Atheists convention in Iowa, followed in June by the World Atheist convention in Dublin, Ireland. A highlight of the convention in Iowa was when a friend took a picture of me with Lawrence Krauss, for whom I had a terrible case of hero worship. I’d bought three copies of his book *Quantum Man: Richard Feynman’s Life In Science* for some new atheist friends, including that fellow Richard Halasz, who I still didn’t know well at all, only that I thought he was funny in the forums and he wrote well.

**RICHARD:** Years after we had married, I met Krauss at the 2016 Pittsburgh convention and had him sign his book *A Universe From Nothing*. I told him about how a woman on the FFRF private forum sent me an autographed copy of his book, *Quantum Man*, and how she and I exchanged emails, phone calls and eventually visited me in Milwaukee. I told him how Dan



Jana Weaver and Richard Halasz prepare to get married with Dan Barker as officiant at the start of the 2013 FFRF national convention in Madison, Wis.

Barker presided over our wedding at the FFRF convention in Madison and how all of that came about partly because of his book. Krauss thanked me for that “great story.”

**JANA:** After I’d sent *Quantum Man* to Richard, I got a package in return, which was one of his self-designed T-shirts that said, “50% Cotton, 50% Shroud of Turin.”

**RICHARD:** I first wrote the “50% Cotton 50% Shroud of Turin” joke after reading a story about the shroud in *Omni* Magazine. *Omni* was initially a science and science fiction magazine before resorting to stories of woo woo, including alien abduction, crop circles and burial cloths of manufactured messiahs. I turned that shroud joke into a T-shirt, selling them with much of the profit going to FFRF. And, I sent one to Jana, in an effort to “woo” her!

**JANA:** I’d been in my new place only a month when Richard contacted me. I think from that first phone call, our future was set. From my journal: “We talked, I asked questions about how he came to be available and why his past relationships had died. He — and I love the way he deliberately chooses his words and doesn’t, “um, um, ya know”— described some of them as with women who, unlike me, didn’t “value intelligence.” He said one of his girlfriends got really angry when she asked what he would do if he won the lottery and he said he’d buy hardback books instead of waiting for the paperbacks to come out.” This was ear music to a bibliophile!

**RICHARD:** I remember what a joy it was talking with Jana! And it was so very much fun observing her fully embrace atheism and all that entailed. She was like a newly bloomed flower turning to the dawn of a new sun, with a smile bright enough to embarrass a constellation of novas.

**JANA:** I’d hoped Richard could attend the Texas Freethought/Atheist Alliance of America convention with me in Houston in October 2011, and even bought him a ticket when I registered. However, since he was expecting to have some comedy gigs lined up around that time, he couldn’t make it.



Jana Dubke wears one of Richard Halasz’ humorous T-shirts while protesting with Annie Laurie Gaylor at Texas Gov. Rick Perry’s prayer rally in 2011.

I was still desperate to see him, though, so I made plans to fly to Milwaukee before that convention.

**RICHARD:** I regretted not being able to see Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins speak at the convention in Houston, which — if memory serves and it usually does, but it doesn’t wait — it was Hitchens’ last convention before his death.

**JANA:** We finally met on Sept. 8, 2011, and it was everything I’d hoped for and more. We enjoyed a few blissful days together finding out we meshed just as well in person as online and over the phone. I flew to see Richard one more time late in 2011, but then neither of us had any extra money to splurge on visits. I finally convinced Richard he’d just have to move down to Texas. Then, in March of 2013, I picked him up from the train station and brought him home to my little apartment.

**RICHARD:** Yes, I moved from Milwaukee, on a day that was filled with ice and snow and hail and sleet and every other piece of wintry gunk imaginable, to Texas, to live with Jana, the woman I’ll love until the Big Bang stops echoing.

**JANA:** After the usual adjustments to living with someone else, we knew we were committed to making us work. We started making plans with the

goal of getting married at the FFRF convention.

**RICHARD:** I never thought I would ever get remarried. I always looked at people getting married AFTER getting divorced like those who reburned the scar tissue on the roof of their mouths because they couldn’t wait for the pizza to cool down!

**JANA:** I was thinking that since we were to be married before the start of the morning meetings at the convention, there wouldn’t be many people there, so I started out calm and not too nervous. That didn’t last!

From my journal: “We went down for breakfast and when Dan came into the room to do the Moment of Bedlam, he also said they had a surprise — that there would be a freethought wedding before the official start of the program and everyone was invited.

“I immediately lost my appetite and started furiously repeating the words I was supposed to say to myself. Richard, of course, was all happy and not at all concerned — at least he appeared to be. We left the breakfast and waited around for the doors to the ballroom to open. One guy, Ray, who’d sat beside me at breakfast — and who I told I was the one getting married — asked to get his picture with us.

“The doors finally opened and we sat down right in front. Dan came up and talked to us a little bit. We told him our plans and he told us he was required to say some things. He said he’d call us up to the stage right after he played some love songs.

“I don’t know what time we got started, but we had a pretty full house. Dan played the piano, playing freethinking songwriter tunes, then said that Richard and I met through FFRF and called us up on the stage. Or something. I don’t remember. Richard said something about us meeting in the private forum, then we exchanged emails and phone numbers, and kind of left it at that.

“Dan then asked if we had something to say. Richard said his lines, but too quietly and not in front of the microphone. People yelled, “Louder!” So, when it was my turn, I stepped up, said my lines while looking at him and got a laugh at the “in insanity” thing. Then Richard said, “We shall have no gods before us,” which brought down the house and kinda drowned out my, “and together we rule!” But the high five and the kiss after got applause.

“Then we put the rings on each other and Dan presented us as husband and wife. Richard then gave Dan the check of \$2,000 for two Lifetime memberships — marriage gifts to each other. There was delight and more applause. Dan filled out the paperwork, Annie Laurie hugged me and signed as a witness, and Brent Nicastro, the photographer, signed as the other one. It was BOSS!

“Dan gave us back the form to mail and we went back to our seats in front and I could breathe again.

“We got congratulations all day! I made a copy of the form for us in the hotel’s business center, then dropped it off at the front desk to go out in the mail. Whew!”

**RICHARD and JANA:** It’s fun to go back and identify butterfly wing-flapping moments that led to our Happily Ever After, such as Lawrence Krauss writing a book and Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor meeting on AM Chicago with Oprah in 1984.