

# FREETHOUGHT TODAY



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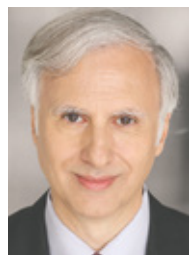
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## FFRF sues New Jersey secretary of state over religious oath

The Freedom From Religion Foundation in early October filed a lawsuit on behalf of a New Jersey resident against the secretary of state for forcing public office candidates to swear a mandatory religious oath.



James Tosone

James Tosone, the plaintiff, has run for public office in New Jersey several times. Since 2022, Tosone has sought to run for office and has been unable to do so because the Division of Elections will not allow him to verify his candidate form via a secular affirmation in place of a religious oath. Due to his sincerely held convictions, Tosone has been unwilling to swear “so help me God,” since he is a nontheist.

The secretary of state and the state of New Jersey are coercing a statement of belief in a mono-

theistic deity by requiring nontheists or those worshipping more than one deity to swear “so help me God” in order to run for public office, FFRF asserts. Not only is Tosone, as a nontheist, barred from running for public office under this policy, but other New Jersey citizens who have no religious affiliation (24 percent of the New Jersey population) are also affected, among others. Additionally, the secretary of state and the state of New Jersey are coercing Christians who belong to sects that eschew swearing oaths to a deity, such as some Mennonites or Quakers, to violate both their religions and their consciences in order to run for public office.

The secretary of state’s official policy, as implemented through the Division of Elections, hinders candidates for public office who are unable to swear a religious oath. This policy violates the

See Oath on page 2

### Eyes on the prize



Photo by Chris Line

Bronze Quinton (left) of Iowa and Lynn Bieritz of Wisconsin show off the prizes they acquired in the silent auction at FFRF’s national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 14. Quinton had the winning bid on the complete set of books (“The Works”) by Robert Ingersoll, and Bieritz acquired the “Beware of the God” print by artist Jack Kloppenberg. For more photos from the convention, see the eight-page special section included in this issue. To watch videos of the convention speeches, go to [ffrf.us/con23](http://ffrf.us/con23).

## U.S. Rep. Mark Pocan ‘I stand by our Bill of Rights’

*This was the pre-recorded speech given by Rep. Mark Pocan, D-Wis., on Oct. 13 at FFRF’s national convention in Madison, Wis. He was introduced by FFRF Governmental Affairs Director Mark Dann.*

**Mark Dann:** One thing that’s really important about Rep. Mark Pocan is that he’s a champion for us. Rep. Pocan prioritizes separation of church and state, and he prioritizes the Freedom From Religion Foundation and its Action Fund. That’s a big deal. And, here in Dane County [Wis.], it’s probably one of the few places in the entire country where the U.S. representative says they are religiously unaffiliated. That’s something very unique to hear.

I’m pleased to announce our fantastic member of Congress — Mark Pocan.

By Mark Pocan

What are we facing in Congress these days that is relevant to why you’re all in Madison? Well, we have people like Marjorie Taylor Greene, who’s a proud white Christian nationalist, although largely keeps the white part to herself, but advocates for a divorce of red states and blue states



Photo by Chris Line

**U.S. Rep. Mark Pocan speaks (via a pre-recorded speech) to the audience at FFRF’s national convention on Oct. 13 in Madison, Wis.**

in a call for a division in this country that’s not been advocated for since the time of Abraham Lincoln.

The amount of religious bigotry is at an all-time high, including anti-diversity equity inclusion, anti-choice, anti-LGBTQ, plus anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant and other attacks. Unfortunately, religion is sometimes wielded like a weapon, not the “love thy neighbor” parts of the bible which are ignored while the “fire and brimstone” parts are celebrated. But despite these headwinds, we’re working toward successes, especially with the help of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

We now have a Freethought Caucus with 19 mem-

See Pocan on page 2

## FFRF, donor set up professorship in secular studies

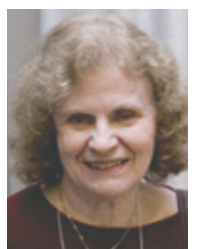
The Freedom From Religion Foundation proudly announces a pioneering professorship in secular studies at a Wisconsin university — only the third such professorship in the nation.

The Brian F. Bolton and Anne Nicol Gaylor Endowed Professorship in Secular Studies of \$500,000 is being set up at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. FFRF is creating the endowment in coordination with Brian F. Bolton, a generous FFRF member who has provided the funds in part to memorialize FFRF principal founder Anne Nicol Gaylor, who died at age 88 in 2015.

Secular studies involve the interdisciplinary examination of religious, philosophical, social, historical and political issues based on reason, science and evidence. The professorship will focus on quality research and intellectual engagement within the context of an access-driven, public institution that reaches first-generation students, students with disabilities, and adult learners. The UW-Whitewater Departments of Philosophy and Religious Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies will closely collabo-



Brian Bolton



Anne Nicol  
Gaylor

See Professorship on page 2



# Former educator keeps pushing for freethought

**Name:** Jim Smith.  
**Where I live:** Colorado, where I was born 88 years ago.  
**Family:** Family unit of 10, with me being the oldest and the youngest a freshman in college where he will quite probably become our 10th college graduate.  
**Education:** Master's degree.  
**Occupation:** Public school teacher and school principal, then later a real estate developer.  
**How I got where I am today:** Work.  
**Where I'm headed:** Hopefully to be happy tomorrow.  
**Person in history I admire and why:** There are many, but Annie Laurie Gaylor would be among them for what she has accomplished through FFRF.  
**A quotation I like:** I have many, but Christopher Hitchens would have claim to many of them.  
**Things I like:** Thoughts that are rationally based.  
**Things I smite:** Before Donald Trump, I never "smited."  
**My doubts about religion started:** When I started to find answers to what my two pre-teen-aged children were asking.



Jim Smith

**Ways I promote freethought:** I have supported FFRF. I helped form a small group of local freethinkers, have written more than my share of letters to the editor, and have served on a significant number of appointed and elected boards where I represented the freethinker process.

## Oath

Continued from page 1

rights of the plaintiff and countless others under Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution, which bars religious tests for public office, as well as the First Amendment, FFRF contends in the complaint filed before the U.S. District Court for the District of New Jersey.

In late 2021, Tosone contacted the Division of Elections by phone and requested that he be allowed to strike out "so help me God" from the oath in order to complete the candidate petition. The Division of Elections responded that the Oath of Allegiance is dictated by statute and that a version of the oath without "so help me God" would not be accepted.

In early 2022, Tosone accessed the candidate petition from the Division of Elections' website ahead of the 2022 filing deadlines and discovered that the 2022 petition once again contained the same requirement. FFRF sent a letter regarding the religious oath required by the candidate petition to the New Jersey attorney general on May 5, 2022:

"Article 6 of the United States Constitution prohibits the government from requiring any kind of religious test for public office. . . . The U.S. Supreme Court held that this requirement was a violation of both the First and Fourteenth Amendments of the Constitution. Likewise, requiring someone who is running for elected office in New Jersey to profess to a god in which they do not believe would make a mockery out of the oath and the solemn promise to support the Constitution.

"In addition, the New Jersey Constitution mirrors the federal Constitution by prohibiting a religious test 'as a qualification for any office or public trust.'"

"The secretary of state and the state of New Jersey have no valid reason or interest in requiring all citizens who wish to run for public office to take an oath that requires them to swear 'so help me God,'" the suit asserts. "The state of New Jersey, the Division of Elections, and the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission have adequate means of ensuring the truthfulness of candidate information without requiring citizens to violate their conscience by swearing 'so help me God.'"

The complaint requests a permanent injunction (a) prohibiting the secretary of State from requiring citizens running for public office to swear "so help me God," and (b) ordering the secretary of state to provide candidate petition forms that permit the plaintiff to run for public office without swearing "so help me God." The plaintiff is also requesting a declaratory judgment that the secretary of state has violated, and is continuing to violate, the U.S. Constitution by promulgating candidate petition forms that require all candidates to swear "so help me God" without the option of a secular affirmation. And the plaintiff requests an order awarding him the costs of this action, including reasonable attorneys' fees and expenses.

"It's an egregious violation of freedom of conscience — as well as our Constitution — to compel nontheists to take a religious oath," says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "This legal challenge seeks to put an end to this discriminatory and anachronistic practice."

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

## Pocan

Continued from page 1

bers. We've led on multiple religious issues and generated a Government Accountability Report. And we're actively helping shape policy. On the Appropriations Committee that I serve on, we've had successes over the years working with the Freedom From Religion Foundation on language that respects the separation of church and state. And regarding chaplains, we're trying to get a non-religious person to lead the opening of Congress, like other religious leaders do.

But, I think ignoring events in the world right now would be a disservice, especially to what's happening in a place so significant to so many religions as the Middle East. And, the fact that we're in the state of affairs we are is largely due to religion. The small parcel of land where ideally there would be peace between Israelis and Palestinians, instead, thanks to all the religious battles, we have one of the worst places to live on the planet — Gaza. And the bloodshed of thousands, it looks like it's not going to end anytime soon.

Now, I'm not saying we can simply ignore religion, even though the separation of church and state is an absolute, as much as the founding of this nation.

The first clause of the Bill of the Rights says Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of a religion. The reality is there is no real line denoting separation in practice, which is why the Freedom From Religion Foundation's work is more important than ever, despite the fact that in this country we're shown to

have 30 percent of our population listing no religious affiliation, which encompasses a broad number of us, from atheists and agnostics to those who don't practice any particular religion or are secular.

I took my oath of office on the Constitution, our nation's founding set of principles that should be essentially considered the bible to anyone in government. I stand by our Bill of Rights. Everyone should be able to believe what they want when it comes to religion, as long as it doesn't interfere with other people's beliefs and lives. But respecting other religions, as well as those who don't follow a religion, needs to be absolute.

And following law, science, reason and facts has to supersede all else. Thank you for being at this conference. And again, I wish I could be with you, but I know you're going to get a lot out of the weekend and I wish you the very best.

## Professorship

Continued from page 1

rate with the dean to leverage the funds in a manner that has the most impact.

Bolton, a professor emeritus, in 2020 previously endowed a secular study professorship at the University of Texas-Austin. And a \$2.2 million donation from Louis J. Appignani in 2016 established the nation's first academic chair "for the study of atheism, humanism and secular ethics" at the University of Miami. FFRF in 2021 also gave a \$300,000 endowment for Pitzer College's trailblazing secular studies program, in memory of the late Kenneth L. Proulx.

Brian Bolton is a longtime Lifetime Member, for whom the executive wing of FFRF's office, Freethought Hall, is named, due to his support of FFRF's headquarters expansion. For more than a decade, Bolton also underwrote FFRF's essay contest for grad/older students. FFRF recently published Bolton's timely book, *The (Not So) Good Book: What Does the "Holy Bible" Really Teach?* Bolton is a retired psychologist, humanist minister and university professor emeritus at

the University of Arkansas.

"We're so grateful to Brian Bolton for seeding secular studies at a University of Wisconsin System, and for generously suggesting the professorship be in both his and Anne Nicol Gaylor's name," says Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president and daughter of Anne Gaylor.

Anne Gaylor, who was a lifelong Wisconsin resident and graduated from a University of Wisconsin college, was the principal founder of FFRF. A feminist activist, she cofounded the Women's Medical Fund abortion fund and administered it as a volunteer until just before her death at age 88.

"The professorship is a way for Anne's legacy to thrive and live on," adds Annie Laurie.

FFRF praises the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater for making an ideal home for this professorship. It's the state's largest education college, licensing the most teachers in Wisconsin. The university emphasizes a teacher/scholar model heavily emphasizing teaching.

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TODAY

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# FFRF members’ higher powers (in 7 words)

By Bill Dunn

Well, no one picked Homer Simpson, but the brothers Coen got a vote.

Freethought Today asked in September for seven-word stories on the topic “What, if anything, is your higher power? Meaning, instead of an Abrahamic god, what gets you through the night, so to speak?”

That elicited only about half the submissions that a previous call for six-word memories did. Maybe next time, we’ll ask for only five! But readers still dispensed plenty of wit and wisdom. Here it is:

- Fear subsides with knowledge, serenity and love.  
*Linda Allewalt, Shelbyville, Ky.*
- People, Love, Power of the Human Mind.  
*Kate Amon, Fremont, Calif.*
- REAL wellness — reason, exuberance, athleticism and liberty.  
*Donald Ardell, Florida*
- In Me and My Wife I Trust.  
*Mike B., Garland, Texas*
- My higher power? Fellow freethinkers and FFRF!  
*Jehnana Balzer, Arizona*
- Prayer: Heads, God wins, tails, you lose.  
*Latty Batson, California*
- Religion encumbers, logic and empirical evidence emancipate.  
*Gary S. Beer, Illinois*
- I punched the illusion of my marriage.  
*Leigh-Anne Burley, Virginia*
- Sun beaming through fog in redwood forest.  
*Gladys Burritt, Eureka, Calif.*
- My religion is Don’t Be An A\*\*hole.  
*Kate Cammarata, Highland Lakes, N.J.*
- My soul lives on — here on Earth.  
*Bob Carstens, Sedalia, Colo.*
- Dancing, using my electric toothbrush, I transcend.  
*Andrea Caruso-Berkowitz, Vero Beach, Fla.*
- Truth be told, thanks, Robert Green Ingersoll.  
*Robert Christiansen, Healdsburg, Calif.*
- Only my humanity, there is nothing higher.  
*Kevin Denham, Arizona*



“Tranquility, 250 miles up and 17,150 mph.” – Jon Alexandr, Pleasant Hill, Calif.

Aboard the International Space Station, Italian astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti tweeted this photo and gave a Vulcan salute in 2015 to honor Leonard Nimoy of “Star Trek,” who had died the previous day. (The ISS is about 250 miles above Earth and travels at 17,150 mph.)

- Atheist writing letters to editor and smiling.  
*Nancy H. Dollard, Uniontown, Ohio*
- The unexamined life is not worth living.  
*Tom Drolsum, Jefferson, Wis.*
- The highest power to me: the Cosmos.  
*William Dusenberry, Broken Arrow, Okla.*
- Beer and ice cream satisfy my needs.  
*Tony Eisele, Orlando, Fla.*
- Stop, smell the roses, you’ll be happier.  
*Gary Erb, Idyllwild, Calif.*
- Long, strong, song: Bishop John Shelby Spong.  
*Larry E. Farr, Jeffersonville, Ind.*
- To best understand the universe, trust science.  
*Eric Flyer, Phoenix*
- My higher power? A doorknob. What’s yours?  
*Stephen Glick, Chicago*
- Science, first. "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny." Mind-blowing!  
*Vicky Hagens, Minnesota*
- As Tahoma rises above, so do I. Peter Hall, Haines, Ore.  
*[Ed.: Tahoma is another name for Mt. Rainier.]*
- Sapiens think with “languages”; therefore, we survive.  
*Ernie Harburg, New York*
- Pity poor old Joe; cuckolded by God!  
*R. Steven Heaps, Spokane Valley, Wash.*
- Sun-dappled leaves flutter; my spirits lift.  
*Incorporeal Being, New York*
- Intelligence, confidence, and rationality — just like FFRF!  
*Steve Jacobs, Rancho Cucamonga, Calif.*
- Epicurus: Live for today; there’s no afterlife.  
*Richard Keene, Florida*
- Avoid belief, follow evidence to hypothesis, theory.  
*Karel Merlin Kretschmar, San Francisco*
- All religions evil: some more than others.  
*Don Krueger, California*
- Believing in religion requires believing in hearsay.  
*Emily Krueger, California*
- What keeps me goin’, brothers named Coen.  
*Laurence, New Jersey*
- Thanks Jimmy! It’s Five O’Clock Somewhere. Cheers!  
*Bill Lawson, Kentucky*
- Love of family and wonders of science.  
*Ken Lefkowitz, Medford, N.J.*
- Chores done. It’s the weekend. Nap time.  
*Jim Loew, Milwaukee*
- Kindness and reason are all that matter.  
*Tracy Long, Pfafftown, N.C.*
- I pray: “To whom it may concern.”  
*Gerald Meade, Greenville, Mich.*
- Sorry, my karma ran over your dogma.  
*Robert Moulton, Florida City, Fla.*
- Higher power unneeded. My cat is Sunshine.  
*Gayle Myrna, Oregon*
- No gods needed; gravity powers the universe.  
*Steve Neubauer, Mount Wolf, Pa.*
- Refined music alleviates recurrent feelings of doom.  
*Cliff Nielsen, Las Vegas, Nev.*

- In the zone during a guitar solo.  
*Chris O’Connell, Calif.*
- Don’t  
Need  
Seven  
Words,  
Only  
One:  
Universality  
*Robert Payne, Sacramento, Calif.*
- Skepticism leads you closer to the truth.  
*Robert Pearson, Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.*
- Human species survival; past, present and future.  
*Dave Petrashek, Madison, Wis.*
- Laughter, kindness, and discovery fuel my life.  
*Jane Russell, Pleasant Hill, Calif.*
- Higher power resides in my own self.  
*Sue Schuetz, Cross Plains, Wis.*
- Acknowledging the power of reason plus evidence.  
*Salvador F. Solá III, Bloomfield, N.J.*
- Chris Hitchens, Richard Dawkins. Dame Judi Dench.  
*Rob Sholar, Kansas City, Mo.*
- Religion follows ancient myths; science seeks evidence.  
*Michael Skolochenko M.D., Simpsonville, S.C.*
- Science embraces facts, religious faith denies them.  
*George Snow, San Luis Obispo, Calif.*
- Music has always been my higher power.  
*Craig Thiessen, Nevada City, Calif.*
- The most morally impressive persons I’ve known.  
*Ron Thompson, Fairfax, Va.*
- Rationality and secular humanism — together reliable guides.  
*Stephen Van Eck, Pennsylvania*
- Escaping religiosity, my higher power is me!  
*Karen W., Dahlonge, Ga.*
- An atheist 12-stepper  
35 years  
goddam sober  
*Sharon W.W., Portland, Ore.*
- My overwhelming ’tude: My higher power’s food.  
*Markell R. West, Maryland*
- Sunbeams land on stuff  
That’s quite enough.  
*TS Williams, New Carlisle, Ohio*
- William Shakespeare, Mark Twain, Carl Sagan. Prophets.  
*Ken Younger, Bozeman, Mont.*

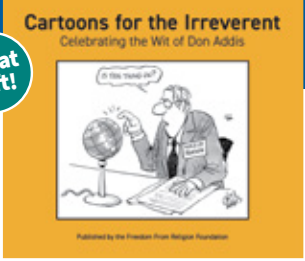
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Freethought Today Cryptogram

EHAJSJRTL GRDXVSH LFVQUAHL VDX XHGJAJYVY  
  
HL YFH WJDX, VDX TDOJYL JY ORE HPHEI DRGAH  
  
HDYHENEJLH, HPHEI HCNVDXHX NERLNHQY.  
  
— ZVWHL WVXJLRD

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

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8		9	10	11	12	
13						14				15				
16						17				18				
19						20			21	22				
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		57	58	59				60				61	62	63
64						65	66			67				
68						69				70				
71						72				73				

Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Across

1. Fountain order

6. The facts of life

9. Balcony section

13. It “makes the world go round”?

14. Caribou kin

15. Echo sounder

16. Grossly unconventional

17. Rap sheet abbreviation

18. Come to pass

19. \*Comedian Kathy who once refused to thank Jesus for her Emmy

21. \*Irreverent Stone’s irreverent partner of “Beavis and Butt-Head” fame

23. \*It was once believed that it revolved around the earth

24. Kite driving force

25. Bldg unit

28. Siren’s song, e.g.

30. Like broadband predecessor

35. Certain undergarments

37. Iranian coin

39. Moving crowd

40. Yesteryear

41. “Bravo! Bravo!” e.g.

43. Second to last word in a fairytale

44. Three-toed tree dweller

46. Largest volcano in Europe

47. Singe, as in ahi tuna

48. Methane derivative

50. Dickens!

52. Like a fox

53. Group of something

55. Word between dogs

57. \*One of the Four Horsemen of Atheism Sam \_\_\_\_\_

60. \*Weekly Facebook live show “Ask an \_\_\_\_\_”

64. One born to Japanese immigrants

65. It is

67. Lacking justification

68. Like a Harvard building?

69. Breach between generations

70. “\_\_\_\_\_ in sight”

71. Folio page

72. What sinusitis and manuscript have in common

73. Fermented molasses liquor, pl.

Down

1. Urban haze

2. Daylight savings saving

3. Con

4. Notches made with saw

5. Attractive to look at

6. \*Freethinker Rowan Atkinson’s character Mr. \_\_\_\_\_

7. Type

8. Giraffe’s striped-leg cousin

9. Locket content, traditionally

10. Popular fairytale opening

11. India’s wild ox

12. Make a blunder

15. Like a dirty affair

20. Become hardened to

22. A in FANBOYS

24. Healthy and wise companion

25. Unfathomably deep chasm

26. Proletarian, for short

27. Fortune-teller’s card

29. \*Gothic novelist Anne \_\_\_\_\_: “In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity”

31. Aphrodite’s lover

32. Ox-eye daisy game verb

33. Relating to uvea

34. Singer Katy \_\_\_\_\_

36. \*Podcaster \_\_\_\_\_ Andrews, a.k.a. The Thinking Atheist

38. Bowling ball path

42. Musical direction indicating silence

45. Crossbred variety

49. Hawaiian welcome

51. Moloka’i V.I.P.

54. Peace, with fingers

56. Andrea Bocelli, e.g.

57. Honey-producing facility

58. Home to Maldives and Nepal

59. Chain of coral

60. Nile reptiles

61. What’s the big one?

62. What Titanic did

63. \*Baseball player \_\_\_\_\_ Williams, a.k.a. the Splendid Splinter and CNN founder \_\_\_\_\_ Turner

64. Nada or nothing

66. “T” in Greek

# School prayer is just belief manipulation

By Barbara G. Walker

During my school years, academic prayer was always there. It was not an issue; no one was granted any right to object. God was incessantly called upon to bless assemblies, school ceremonies and sporting events.

Teachers seemed to claim the power to compel God’s attention, or to change his mind for him in case he hadn’t been planning to bless their occasion in the first place. They gave the distinct impression that they had God’s ear.

Barbara G. Walker

This impression is one of the hidden motives of school-prayer advocates. They feel that children should be made aware of adults’ apparently direct line to the mind of God, a little step up from the threat “I’ll tell your father on you.” No matter how trivial or dire the subject, God was listening. Whether you feared failing a test, or your little brother had a serious case of rheumatic fever and might die, in either case you were supposed to get help if you were sufficiently and properly abject. If it didn’t work, well, it wasn’t his will.

This conclusion always made me wonder: why bother with prayer at all, since God was going to do whatever he wanted to do anyway? I was always bemused by the implication that God was malleable, so open to manipulation by humans. Along with Omar Khayyam, I wondered, “Who art thou to teach, and he to learn?” 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, what

ever was the point of all the prayer? It was an insoluble puzzle.

In my case, school prayer served little purpose other than to bore me, and to hear those sonorous academic voices with something like pity, because I thought they might be trying to convince themselves that they were being heard by someone other than an audience of itchy, impatient children who were just waiting for it to be over. Of course, as churchmen through the ages have known, God must be presented and presented and presented ad nauseam to children in their formative years if they are to become truly believing adults. What sinks into the child even through boredom can become fixed, and the resulting adult never really knows the origin of the concept that he thinks self-evident.

School prayer is really belief manipulation. Advocates think children ought to hear grownups expressing belief in God, never wondering where the concept came from, or how there could be so many portraits painted of the bearded man in the sky, when no one had ever really seen him. In thus brainwashing children by rote and repetition, we have forgotten how evil a dominant, domineering, legislated religion can be.

Separation of church and state was one of the best ideas put forward by the Founding Fathers, who knew all too well the horrors perpetrated by European theocracy. Unfortunately, many Americans today have lost touch with this history. Children need to be protected from forced beliefs. Instead of training them to call on an outmoded emotional construct, they should be taught to trust their own foresight and responsibility, to change what they can change, and to accept what they can’t — and, naturally, to teach them the wisdom to know the difference.

Lifetime Member Barbara G. Walker is author of the book, *The Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (1983).

Celebrating Freethought Day

Photo by Judy Saint

The Greater Sacramento Chapter of FFRF showed off its new blue table throw emboldened with the same stained glass “Imagine No Religion” decoration as its overhead banner, getting lots of attention at the recent annual California Freethought Day, held on the grounds of the State Capitol. Pictured are, from left, Board Member Erin Louis and Kathy Johnson, helping give away noncontracts and other goodies to those stopping by.



# IN THE NEWS

## Funding for anti-abortion centers is on the rise

So far in 2023, GOP-majority legislatures in 12 states have passed 25 bills providing at least \$250 million in new taxpayer funds or tax credits for crisis pregnancy centers, according to data collected by the Guttmacher Institute and Equality Now, nonprofit organizations that support abortion rights. That contrasts with seven similar bills passed in seven states totaling at least \$115 million in 2021, before the Supreme Court’s Dobbs decision last year.

These largely Christian crisis pregnancy centers have offered services including pregnancy tests and, more recently, ultrasounds, typically coupled with antiabortion messaging. But abortion rights advocates and mainstream medical groups see the centers as deceptive and accuse them of misleading women into thinking they offer abortion services to get them in the door.

The centers now outnumber abortion clinics nationally by a three to one margin, according to the University of Georgia’s Crisis Pregnancy Center Map, and have flourished in states where there are no longer any abortion clinics, such as Tennessee, which has 60, and Texas, which has 198 centers.

## More Asian Americans religiously unaffiliated

A growing percentage of Asian Americans are not affiliated with any religion, and the share who identify as Christian has declined, according to a new Pew Research Center survey exploring religion among Asian American adults.

Today, 32 percent of Asian Americans are religiously unaffiliated, up from 26 percent in 2012. Christianity is still the largest faith group among Asian Americans (34 percent). But Christianity has also seen the sharpest decline, down 8 percentage points since 2012.

The survey also shows that 40 percent of Asian Americans say they feel close to some religious tradition for reasons aside from religion. For example, just 11 percent of Asian American adults say their religion is Buddhism, but 21 percent feel close to Buddhism for other reasons, such as family background or culture.

In Sagan we trust



Photo from NASA/Joel Kowsky

NASA Administrator Bill Nelson swears Charity Weeden into office as associate administrator for the agency’s Office of Technology, Policy and Strategy with her hand on Carl Sagan’s 1985 science fiction novel *Contact*. The person on the right is Charity’s husband, Brian Weeden.

## Educator can proceed with lawsuit over dismissal

A former Hamline University adjunct art professor can proceed with her lawsuit against the private Minnesota school but only on the basis of religious discrimination, a federal judge has ruled.

Erika López Prater sued Hamline University earlier this year after she was dismissed following a complaint from a Muslim student that she showed ancient images of the Prophet Muhammad in a global art course last year.

López Prater’s attorney has argued that the school would have treated her differently if she were Muslim.

U.S. District Judge Katherine Menendez noted that López Prater’s religious discrimination argument is novel and that it will likely be hard to show that the university would have treated her differently if she were Muslim. Nevertheless, she rejected Hamline University’s request to dismiss the claim entirely.

The controversy began in October when López Prater showed a 14th-century painting depicting the Prophet Muhammad to her students as part of a lesson on Islamic art. She had warned them beforehand in the class syllabus, giving them an opportunity to opt out.

## New Rob Reiner film looks at Christian nationalism

“God & Country: The Rise of Christian Nationalism,” a new documentary produced by filmmaker Rob Reiner, will be released early in 2024.

The movie will look at the implications of Christian nationalism and how it distorts our constitutional republic and Christianity itself.

It features numerous faith leaders, but also includes journalist and free-

thought advocate Rob Boston; sociologist and journalist Andrew Whitehead; historian and author Anthea Butler; journalist and author Katherine Stewart; and attorney and author Andrew Seidel.

## 22% of Mormon students say they’re LGBTQ-plus

More than one in five Latter-day Saint college students (22 percent) say they are something other than heterosexual, according to a new survey from FIRE (Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression).

The survey shows Mormons to be in the middle of the pack in terms of heterosexual orientation, below Muslims and Protestants (85 percent and 84 percent, respectively), but significantly higher than atheists (53 percent).

Among the Mormon/LDS respondents, 78 percent said they were heterosexual, 6 percent bisexual, 3 percent gay or lesbian and 13 percent something else (which can include asexual, pansexual, queer, questioning and others).

Political scientist Ryan Burge was surprised by the findings about LDS students, since their 78 percent rate of self-reported heterosexuality was only six points higher than the sample as a whole — 72 percent of the college students surveyed said they were heterosexual, while 12 percent identified as bisexual, 5 percent gay or lesbian and 11 percent something else.

## Only 47% are religious, 33% are spiritual

Less than half of Americans (47 percent) describe themselves as religious and another 33 percent say they are spiritual but not religious. Although the vast

majority of U.S. adults have one of these orientations toward the nonphysical world, the 18 percent who say they are neither religious nor spiritual is twice the proportion Gallup measured when it first asked this question in 1999. Over the same period, the percentage identifying as religious has declined by seven percentage points.

All told, 82 percent of Americans have some type of spiritual belief system. This proportion is down from 90 percent in 1999 and 87 percent in 2002.

Among party groups, Republicans are the most likely to identify as religious, with 61 percent doing so, while 28 percent say they are spiritual. More independents say they are religious (44 percent) than spiritual (32 percent), while Democrats are about equally as likely to say they are spiritual (41 percent) as religious (37 percent).

Twenty-one percent of both Democrats and independents say they are neither religious nor spiritual, compared with 8 percent of Republicans.

## Supreme Court approval remains below 50%

A new Marquette Law School Poll survey shows that only 43 percent of American adults approve of the job the U.S. Supreme Court is doing, while 57 percent disapprove. Approval of the court has remained below 50 percent since May 2022, when it stood at 44 percent.

Approval among Republicans declined by 3 percentage points, to 66 percent in September, down from 69 in July. Approval among independents declined 7 percentage points, while among Democrats it rose 1 percentage point from July to September.

## Climate change a crisis? Religious groups say no

Few religious Americans view climate change as a crisis, according to a new PRRI study.

Overall, 27 percent of Americans say climate change is a crisis, just a few percentage points up from 23 percent in 2014. Among the nation’s religious groups, beliefs on the severity of climate change have not shifted significantly. In fact, among white evangelicals, the view that the Earth is in crisis actually dropped — from 13 percent in 2014 to 8 percent today.

No religious group topped one-third of respondents agreeing climate change is a crisis. American Jews were the most likely to say so at 32 percent, followed by 31 percent of Hispanic Catholics, 22 percent of white mainline Protestants, 20 percent of white Catholics, 19 percent of Black Protestants and 16 percent of Hispanic Protestants who say there’s a climate crisis.

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By Ruth Hurmence Green

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# FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

## Calif. school district nixes Christian music

The Enterprise Elementary School District in Redding, Calif., has taken action after hearing from FFRF about keeping Christian pop music out of mandatory assemblies.

A concerned district member reported that Parsons Junior High School held a mandatory assembly for students and staff where the principal played the Christian music video “Joy” by King and Country, a Christian pop band.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Heather Armelino to point out the problem. Shortly thereafter, Armelino informed the state/church watchdog that the principal had chosen the song as a reminder of expectations for positive behaviors, but Armelino then reminded the principal to maintain religious neutrality at school.

## ‘Devotional’ ended in Miss., thanks to FFRF

FFRF successfully was able to get a Christian “devotional” removed from a school in the Jackson County School District in Vancleave, Miss.

A community member reported to FFRF that on Sept. 23 East Central High School’s football coach invited Assemblies of God pastor Robb D. Reiser to lead a Christian “religious devotional” for students at the school’s football stadium. According to the pastor, the purpose of the “devotional” was to discuss “spiritual fitness.”

FFRF Equal Justice Works Fellow Kat Grant wrote to then-Superintendent John Strycker about the unconstitutionality of the “devotional.” FFRF received a response from district legal representation Jack C. Pickett, who informed FFRF that each of the district’s attendance centers received updated instructions on religious ceremonies on school grounds.

FFRF also successfully persuaded the Jackson County School District to reprimand a teacher and update staff training after a middle school teacher placed “prayer cards” under students’ desks.

Pickett then detailed action that the district has taken since it received the letter from FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence.

“Upon confirmation that the conduct had occurred, the teacher in question was officially reprimanded on Sept. 13, 2023, by the principal of East Central Middle School,” Pickett wrote. “Among other things, the letter of reprimand stressed the seriousness of the teacher’s misconduct and expressly stated that teachers are prohibited from using their positions to promote personal religious beliefs. The letter also stated any expressions of religious viewpoints in the classroom and like settings is considered a constitutional violation and must cease immediately.”

## FFRF gets W. Va. school board prayers halted

The Wetzel County School Board in West Virginia has agreed to put a stop to opening meetings with prayers.

A community member reported to FFRF that the board opens each meeting with a Christian prayer, led by a

## Marital (law) bliss



Members of the Michigan Coalition to End Child Marriage, of which FFRF Action Fund is a member, pose with Gov. Gretchen Whitmer at the bill-signing on Sept. 26. FFRF Action Fund is celebrating and thanking our Michigan advocates tomaking their state become the 10th to mandate age of consent as 18 years.

board member. On Aug. 28, the meeting opened with a prayer delivered “in Jesus’ name.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line then contacted Board President Linda M. Fonner. In response to FFRF’s complaint, legal representative Richard S. Boothby responded, stating, “At this time, the board plans to cease the practice of offering a prayer/invocation at its official public meetings.”

## School logo won’t be part of religious fliers

FFRF has made sure to keep Columbus County Schools in North Carolina free from constitutional violations.

FFRF heard from a district community member that the “Swap Keepers” and “East Columbus Education Foundation” was holding a “Night of Worship” at East Columbus Jr./Sr. High School in late September. The promotional flier included the school’s logo, giving the appearance of school promotion of the event.

FFRF sent an open records request to Superintendent Deanne Meadows to verify that the district was truly violating the law through sponsorship of a religious worship event.

In response, Meadows provided additional context, explaining that several parent groups in the area serve as “unofficial general support” for the school. “The publication referenced in your letter was created by a community member who did not receive permission to use the school name and logo,” Meadows wrote. FFRF has been informed that steps have been taken with the local groups to ensure that the school’s images and logos are not used in the printed materials.

## District ends partnership with evangelical ministry

FFRF has worked with Bolivar R-1 School District in Missouri to keep evangelical Christian ministry from imposing religion on students during student mixers.

A concerned district community member reported that a Christian youth group, K-Life, recently DJ’d at the Bolivar Middle School back-to-school student mixers. K-Life’s mission statement is “to point students to Jesus so they will

know Him, Love Him, walk in surrender to Him and be equipped to point others to Him also.”

FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Richard Asbill, who detailed for FFRF the steps the district is taking to ensure that students will be free from proselytization.

## FFRF stops prayer at assembly in Alabama

FFRF has made sure that the Alabaster City School District in Alabama is aware that public schools are unable to include prayers in mandatory assemblies.

A Thompson High School student reported to FFRF that the school held an official school prayer during a mandatory Veterans Day assembly that took place during the school day. The complainant reported that on Nov. 11, 2022, an administrator at the school introduced a student representative of First Priority to lead everyone in prayer.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line, who wrote to the school district’s legal representatives, heard back from Melissa B. McKie of Bishop, Colvin, Johnson & Kent, LLC, who wrote, “Please be advised that the school system has never had a policy allowing or endorsing an ‘official school prayer’ at a school assembly and the school system has spoken with administrators at Thompson High School to remind them of that fact.”

## FFRF helps correct Tenn. district’s violations

The Monroe County Schools district in Tennessee has been brought back into constitutional line after FFRF worked with legal counsel for the district.

In May 2023, the Sweetwater High School graduation ceremony included a student-led Christian invocation that began with “Let’s pray,” and made several references to “Lord,” “God” and “Jesus Christ.” Additionally, several MCS high schools promoted senior baccalaureate ceremonies alongside other events for graduating high school seniors.

FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Director of Schools Kristi Windsor, stating that “baccalaureate ceremonies are religious services with prayer and worship. Schools may not encourage at-

tendance at or otherwise facilitate baccalaureate ceremonies.”

Chris McCarty, legal representative for the school, called Lawrence and discussed the violations in detail. McCarty assured FFRF that there will be no issues with prayers at graduation going forward, promising to address the matter with the superintendent and the school board. He also promised to bring up the baccalaureates issue, as well.

## Religious sermons canceled in Missouri jail

The Newton County Jail in Missouri will not feature religious services without accommodations after FFRF took action.

A former inmate reported that on April 23 at Newton County Jail, two Christian clergy members were allowed to enter the block where the complainant was being held to deliver an explicitly Protestant Christian sermon. New inmates, such as the complainant, were not informed that the sermon would be happening nor were they given the option to opt-out of attending. The sermon occurred in the block’s common area and the complainant, who is an atheist, had no way of exiting the block.

The complainant also stated that there was only one intercom in the block that inmates could use to communicate with jail authorities, and that intercom was located in the block’s common area. The complainant felt that they could not safely use the intercom to ask to be held in a different location for the duration of the sermon because other inmates would inevitably overhear their request. Some of the inmates were known to be violent and had fundamentalist Christian iconography tattoos. The complainant reasonably feared that if they openly admitted to being an atheist in front of the other inmates they could be attacked.

FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Sheriff Chris Jennings, who informed FFRF that “religious services have been suspended until such time that accommodations can be made to separate them from anyone not wanting to attend.”

## FFRF stops prayers at football games in Ohio

FFRF convinced the Symmes Valley Local School District in Ohio to no longer broadcast prayers over the loudspeaker at football games.

A district parent reported that a football scrimmage in August included an adult-led Christian prayer prior to the national anthem. Everyone in attendance was asked to stand for the prayer.

Upon being informed of the constitutional violation, FFRF took action.

Public school events must be free of religion and welcoming to all in order to protect the freedom of conscience of all students, FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Greg Bowman.

“Prior to the next home game, we will direct the PA announcer that he is to refrain from leading prayer henceforth and will also ask for his assistance in relaying that refrain to other adults that may be in the press box — I expect his full cooperation,” Bowman responded.



Project 2025

# Roadmap for Christian nationalist presidency

The FFRF Action Fund is sounding the alarm on a massive, well-funded theocratic effort to influence a future U.S. presidential administration.

The right-wing collaboration, called “Project 2025,” recently published a 920-page “Mandate for Leadership” that instructs how to implement an agenda of autocracy in the first 180 days of a presidency. PBS News Hour described it as a goal to restructure U.S. government and “replace it with Trump’s vision.”

“The president, Day One, will be a wrecking ball for the administrative state,” claims Russ Vought, a former Trump administration official who’s now president of the conservative Center for Renewing America.

“The unabashedly theocratic recommendations that are part of Project 2025 haven’t received the media attention they deserve,” warns FFRF Action Fund President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Voters who value our secular U.S. Constitution and its foundational principle of guaranteeing a secular government, must take heed.”

The mandate, based on the theory that Article 2 of the Constitution gives the presidency complete control of the executive branch, recommends



stripping power from, or entirely dismantling, virtually all federal agencies. In addition to putting the Justice Department under the political control of the White House, this would help undermine public education, jeopardize health care protections guaranteed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and much more. The general goal seems to be to eliminate any federal programs that “provide for general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity,” while consolidating as much power as possible into the Oval Office.

Project 2025 was convened by the Heritage Foundation and has a reported a whopping \$22 million budget and an “advisory board” that consists of dozens of notorious organizations. Some are well-known for advancing policies that favor wealthy corporations over the American people, such as the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). But the advisory board also includes Christian nationalist groups committed to promoting Christian supremacy and dismantling civil rights for everyone else — groups such as the Alliance

Defending Freedom, First Liberty Institute, Moms for Liberty and Turning Point USA.

The participation of these Christian nationalist groups explains Project 2025’s consistent pattern of favoring Christian religious privilege over the constitutional separation of state and church. For example, in addition to eliminating the Department of Education — effectively weakening public schools across the country — Project 2025 calls for mandatory religious exemptions from accreditation “standards and criteria” for private schools. In other words, religious private schools and universities that fail to meet accreditation standards would be entitled to claim accreditation anyway, simply because of their religious beliefs.

Project 2025 also urges the next administration to remove an Obama-era list of private schools that have applied for Title IX exemptions. This list informs prospective students if a school has “opted out of” sex discrimination protections for religious reasons, and Project 2025 wants to make sure those exemptions are kept a secret via execu-

tive order. Project 2025 pushes for the Department of Health and Human Services to adopt a “biblically based” definition of “marriage and family,” and for the Department of Labor to force employers to incentivize employees to take the Christian sabbath off of work.

The recently published mandate shows a plain sectarian preference, advocating for religious favoritism only for those who believe a particular conservative form of Christianity. While repeatedly touting a supposed “Judeo-Christian tradition” and bemoaning alleged assaults on the religious liberty of Christians in the United States and abroad, the only mentions of Islam in the 920-page publication are references to Islamic terrorism and concerns over the Islamic Republic of Iran’s nuclear capabilities.

The Heritage Foundation, according to the Guardian, has ties to fossil fuel billionaire Charles Koch, thus Project 2025 takes aim at climate-change mitigation. Crucial agency offices related to energy transition would be eliminated in the Department of Energy. The Environmental Protection Agency’s focus on climate change would be gutted and those favoring drilling and selling off public lands would be in charge, in keeping with climate-change denial by Christian nationalism.

The FFRF Action Fund urges voters and policymakers alike to pay close attention to the coordinated efforts of the extremist groups involved with Project 2025. For the sake of preserving true religious liberty, and resisting a slide into theocratic autocracy, we must not allow those behind this egregiously un-American wish list anywhere near the levers of power.

## FFRF’s joint statement on OK AG’s school suit

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the American Civil Liberties Union and the Education Law Center – the organizations litigating a lawsuit to stop Oklahoma from sponsoring and funding the nation’s first religious public charter school – issued the following joint statement in response to the new lawsuit filed Oct. 20 by Oklahoma Attorney General Gentner Drummond:

“We applaud Attorney General Drummond for his efforts to protect church-state separation and public education in Oklahoma. The law is clear: Charter schools are public schools that must be secular and serve all students. St. Isidore of Seville Catholic Virtual School plans to discriminate against students, families, and staff and indoctrinate students into one religion. Allowing a religious public charter school like St. Isidore to operate would be a sea change for our democracy.

“Our clients filed OKPLAC Inc. v. Statewide Virtual Charter School Board because they are committed to ensuring that our public schools welcome and serve all Oklahomans. The lawsuit filed today demonstrates that AG Drummond shares this commitment.”

On July 31, 2023, AU, the ACLU, ELC and FFRF, supported by Okla-

homa-based counsel Odom & Sparks PLLC and J. Douglas Mann, filed a lawsuit, OKPLAC Inc. v. Statewide Virtual Charter School Board, on behalf of nine Oklahoma residents and a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting public education in Oklahoma. The plaintiffs are faith leaders, public school parents, and public education advocates who object to their tax dollars funding a public charter school that will discriminate against students and families based on their religion and LGBTQ+ status, fail to adequately serve students with disabilities, and indoctrinate students into one religion.

The lawsuit charges that the Oklahoma Statewide Virtual Charter School Board violated the Oklahoma Constitution, the Oklahoma Charter Schools Act, and the board’s own regulations when it approved St. Isidore’s application for charter-school sponsorship on June 5, 2023.

The plaintiffs in OKPLAC Inc. v. Statewide Virtual Charter School Board include OKPLAC (Oklahoma Parent Legislative Action Committee), Melissa Abdo, Krystal Bonsall, Leslie Briggs, Brenda Lené, Michele Medley, Dr. Bruce Prescott, the Rev. Dr. Mitch Randall, the Rev. Dr. Lori Walke, and Erika Wright.



### Note to members

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

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

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

If you would like to continue reading

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

In order to do that, follow these simple steps:

- Log into your FFRF.org account.
- Click on “Update your contact information.”
- Go down to “Deliver Freethought Today by” and click on either “Newspaper by mail” or “Both PDF and paper copy.”
- Click “Submit.”



A message for all



FFRF put up two billboards in October in its home city of Madison, Wis., near the Dane County Airport to greet convention attendees. From left, Legal Assistant Matt Langer, Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, State Advocacy Specialist Ryan Dudley, Co-President Dan Barker, Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne and Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence.

# FFRF cheers activist student’s efforts to move grad ceremony



Eli Frost

FFRF is delighted that Minnesota’s Eastern Carver County Schools district is moving its high school graduations out of Grace Church in Eden Prairie. At a special school board meeting on Sept. 6, the board was told by its legal counsel that “ECCS faces a substantial risk of litigation if it chooses to continue to use Grace Church’s facilities for its graduation ceremonies.” This is true, since FFRF was preparing legal action had the district not made the move. FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote a legal complaint letter in June backing up students and other community members who had demanded the change and requesting that the district “select a secular facility in order to respect the diversity and constitutional rights of its students and their families.” Chaska High School began to use Grace Church’s Eden Prairie location for graduation in 2004, and Chanhasen High School was using it since it opened in 2009. The petition campaign to move

the graduation venue from a church was started by Eli Frost, then a Chaska High sophomore, about the time of the spring graduation. Frost was named the FFRF Student Activist 2023 honoree for his outstanding activism, receiving \$2,000 in a scholarship that a generous West Coast couple has set up. Frost told FFRF that he was first “confused and annoyed” to learn that a megachurch was his high school’s graduation venue. His concern deepened when he realized the church had a “long history of making derogatory, public statements against the LGBTQ+ community” and even opposed divorce in cases of domestic abuse. Frost pointed out that his school district was violating its own anti-discrimination policy. “I personally believe we should be welcoming and accepting of all, especially marginalized groups like the LGBTQ+ community,” Frost explained. In response to the change, Frost told FFRF: “I would like to thank our superintendent, Lisa Sayles-Adams, for making the choice to move graduation from Grace Church. There are hundreds of students, parents and educators, past and present, that will benefit from this change. The district with this decision has shown its commitment to being an inclusive school district for everyone regardless of unchosen differences. It means the world to the students who were most negatively affected by the past venue and it’s really just incredible.” Frost was equally gracious about FFRF’s role, writing, “I can say with confidence that this result would not have happened had you not gotten involved. I am endlessly grateful that you played such a major part in helping me and other students not have to graduate in a bigoted church. The district’s lawyer repeatedly cited your letter as evidence that it’s unconstitutional.”

## OVERHEARD

We mainly think of Christian nationalism as a theology or at least as a philosophy. In reality, the Christian nationalist movement that actually matters is rooted in emotion and ostensibly divine revelation, and it’s that emotional and spiritual movement that so stubbornly clings to Donald Trump. **David French, in his column, “Why the Trump fever won’t break.”** *New York Times, 10-1-23*

The niqab, the veil, the burkini, the abaya and even the head scarves worn by Muslim women accompanying children on school trips have all been pored over in France to a degree unusual in Europe — and much more so in the United States, which posits freedom of religion in contrast to French freedom from religion. No French president would ever suggest that God bless France. The country’s lay model supplants any deity. A 2021 survey from IFOP, a leading French polling group, found that half of French people identify as atheists, a far greater proportion than in the United States.

**Richard Cohen, in an analysis about how abayas worn by Muslim students signify the latest fault line for French identity.** *New York Times, 9-16-23*

I’ve written extensively about religion, although I’m not religious myself. I’ve always been curious about why people believe one thing rather than another, especially in America, where you can believe anything you want. Journalists underestimate the power of religious belief. We spend so much time writing about politics, neglecting the fact that people can have very strong political views without it affecting their behavior at all, while strong religious views tend to dominate people’s lives. **Journalist Lawrence Wright, author of the novel, Mr. Texas.** *New York Times, 9-24-23*

If you asked me 10 or 20 years ago, I would probably have said that the main problems facing freedom of expression emanate from religious extremism. I think now we’re facing another old enemy, which is authoritarianism. I think there’s a real rise in authoritarian movements around the world, populist authoritarian demagoguery. **Salman Rushdie, at a forum in Philadelphia to discuss the threats against free speech in the US and around the world.** *The Guardian, 9-13-23*

We need Americans who demand — as atheists do — that truth claims be tethered to fact. We need Americans who understand — as atheists do — that the future of the world is in our hands. **Kate Cohen, in her column, “America doesn’t need more God, it needs more atheists.”** *Cohen spoke on this topic at FFRF’s convention on Oct. 13.* *Washington Post, 10-3-23*

I was very upset at how the situation was handled. I don’t think anybody should be speaking about faith in any form. They don’t know my beliefs, and it’s a public school. **Rachel Timonet, mother of Kaylee Timonet, who was stripped of her title as student government president in Walker, La., and denied help obtaining college scholarships by the principal after he saw a video of her dancing with her friends at a post-homecoming party. The principal, Jason St. Pierre, told Kaylee that she wasn’t “living in the Lord’s way.” St. Pierre later apologized and asked for a leave of absence for the remainder of the school year.** *The Advocate, 10-6-23*

## FFRF seeks student activists!

FFRF salutes the growing number of religiously unaffiliated students, with reputable polls and surveys putting Generation Z “Nones” at between 35 and 49 percent. FFRF offers freethinking student support in a variety of ways, including:

- Student activist scholarships, typically \$1,000, for exceptional activism. Nominate yourself or another student at [ffrf.us/nominate](https://ffrf.us/nominate).
- Student essay contests, including five contests for: college-bound high school seniors; ongoing college students, BIPOC students; graduate or “older” undergrad students and law students. Most topics and prompts are announced by March 1, except for law student competitions, which are announced in late fall.
- Limited needs-based tuition scholarships, the “Forward Freethought” stipends, in conjunction with Black Skeptics Los Angeles for those who are first in their family to attend college. See BKLA.
- Several scholarships for student majors or interests offered in conjunction with Secular Student Alliance. See SSA’s spring announcements.
- FFRF offers student clubs speakers. FFRF staffers are offered to speak at events, live or remote. FFRF Co-President Dan Barker also does debates. If the SSA Club does not have funding to pay transportation or accommodations, FFRF will pay that in order to provide student clubs with a complimentary speaker.

Vote like your rights depend on it — because they do.



# FFRF brief sides with Southwest

FFRF on Oct. 19 filed an appeals court amicus brief against a district judge’s order compelling Southwest Airlines attorneys to attend “religious liberty training” by a controversial Christian advocacy organization.

A flight attendant sued Southwest with the claim that she was fired for expressing her opposition to abortion rights — and a jury found in her favor. After the trial concluded, Brantley Starr, a President Trump appointee, ordered the airline to circulate a memo stating that “it may not discriminate against Southwest flight attendants for their religious practices and beliefs.” He subsequently found three lawyers for Southwest in contempt for sending out a notice saying that it “does not” discriminate in such cases. As part of contempt sanctions, he issued an unusual order requiring Southwest’s lawyers to attend training conducted by the Christian nationalist organization Alliance Defending Freedom.

The district court’s diktat that Southwest’s attorneys attend religious liberty training by a controversial Christian advocacy organization is highly unusual and an abuse of the court’s discretion, FFRF contends in its brief submitted before the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

Additionally, FFRF asserts, if courts are allowed to order attorneys to attend training by a specific ideological advocacy group, they must be allowed to order attorneys to attend training by any other advocacy organization as well.

“The district court broke from centuries of tradition and betrayed the trust that our citizens and system place in the judiciary by ordering Southwest’s attorneys to attend religious liberty training conducted by a controversial and agenda-driven Christian advocacy organization,” FFRF’s



Image from Shutterstock

brief states. “This [appeals] court now has the opportunity and duty to overturn the district court’s order that Southwest’s attorneys attend this training, and by doing so affirm the trust that Americans place in their judges to act with dignity and fairness in accordance with law.”

The Alliance Defending Freedom is a controversial, agenda-driven Christian legal advocacy organization that “advances the God-given right to live and speak the Truth.” The organization has been involved in numerous Supreme Court cases over the last 30 years in an ongoing effort to shape federal law to fit its religious worldview.

When district courts order attorneys to attend training as part of sanctions, the courts, wisely, exercise their discretion temperately and refrain from ordering attorneys to attend training conducted by specified advocacy organizations — until now. Further, FFRF maintains, the district court’s order was an abuse of discretion. “Our adversarial legal system allows attor-

neys to disagree with a judge’s personal views regarding religious liberty, thus it is inappropriate for a judge to castigate the losing side of a case by requiring attorneys to attend training with the apparently punitive intention of re-educating or shaming the attorneys for holding viewpoints that do not align with the judge’s,” says FFRF’s brief.

And if a court may order attorneys to attend training conducted by a group such as Alliance Defending Freedom, there is no principled distinction that would prevent courts from similarly ordering attorneys to attend training conducted by other advocacy organizations, such as, say, Lambda Legal, the ACLU, the National Women’s Law Center or FFRF itself. Any attempt to argue that a district court may order attorneys to attend Alliance Defending Freedom training but not from other advocacy organizations (such as those listed above) would run afoul of the First Amendment, FFRF underscores.

## THEY SAID WHAT?

There is no separation of church and state.

**Cochran County (Texas) Commissioner Eric Silhan, who sponsored an ordinance that prohibits traveling through the county or driving on its roads to obtain an abortion in another state, when asked by County Clerk Lisa Smith if the ordinance could open the county up to legal action for failing to maintain separation of church and state.**

*Lubbock Avalanche-Journal, 9-29-23*

We not only prayed for our commu-

nity, we prayed for our leaders. And last night, the Spokane City Council decided to issue a decree, a denouncement, of that prayer and some of those who prayed it. For the first time in modern history, a governmental entity decreed the persecution of Christians.

**Expelled Washington state legislator and Christian nationalist pastor Matt Shea, after he and self-described Christian nationalist Sean Feucht prayed at a Christian nationalist prayer event with Spokane Mayor Nadine Woodward. The fallout from Woodward’s appear-**

**ance at the event has led to calls for her resignation.**

*Right Wing Watch, 9-30-23*

The morals of the bible, of Jesus Christ, is something that our country was founded on, and that should be put into code, into law, and that should be a benchmark for lawmakers around the country on the state and federal level.


**North Dakota state Rep. Brandon Prichard, when asked why he doesn’t consider himself a Christian nationalist.**

*Right Wing Watch, 10-11-23*

But, I wanted to, and had to, stand up to the communists, the Marxists, the atheists and the evil and demonic forces that want to destroy our country. They’re destroying our country.

**Donald Trump at a speech in Washington, D.C.**

*Meidas Touch Network, 9-17-23*



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

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

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

**Freedom depends on freethinkers**

**A note to FFRF Members**

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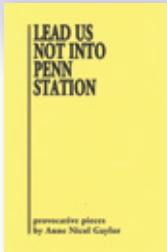
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By Anne Gaylor

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



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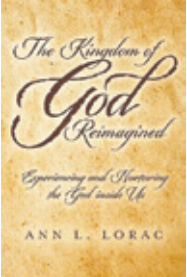
## FREETHOUGHT BOOKS

The following books are by FFRF members on the topics of religion or freethinking. FFRF does not do book reviews. These books are not offered through [ffrf.org/shop](https://ffrf.org/shop).

### The Kingdom of God Reimagined: Experiencing and Nurturing the God Inside Us

By Ann L. Lorac  
Kindle \$9.99  
Paperback \$25.99

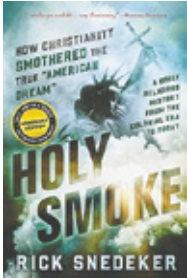
As a unique and intelligent survey of religious thought, this one-of-a-kind book about faith strives to engage the reader in critical religious thinking (the other CRT) as opposed to herd-mentality religious conformity. The book also reveals how one can attain personal non-religiously aligned spiritual empowerment.



### Holy Smoke

By Rick Snedecker  
Kindle: \$4.99  
Paperback \$8.50

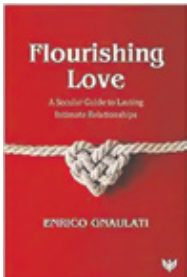
Christianity has become increasingly embedded in the nation’s social and cultural fabric, contrary to the Founding Fathers’ original vision of America; it was designed by them to be a secular democratic republic built on evidence-based Enlightenment values, emphatically not religious faith. But Christians with theocratic dreams keep trying to breach the wall.



### Flourishing Love: A Secular Guide to Lasting Intimate Relationships

By Enrico Gnaulati  
Paperback \$19.95

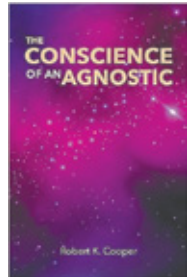
Flourishing Love is a secular defense of marriage and long-term intimate partnership. It rejects a moral-religious code to govern love lives and instead puts its faith in the human potential for couples to be benevolent, loyal and forgiving to preserve and enhance their romantic union.



### The Conscience of An Agnostic

By Robert Cooper  
Kindle \$4.99  
Paperback \$11.99

It is simply impossible to determine, with any degree of confidence, as to whether there is a transcendent, creative being which is responsible for the existence of the universe. The conclusion is that agnosticism is the most intellectually honest position to espouse.





# Belief in afterlife is corrupting, unhealthy

This is adapted from a speech delivered at the BAHACON August 2023 conference in Sarnia, Ontario, convened by Bob Barnes and Bluewater Atheists, Humanists & Agnostics. It also appears on FFRF’s blog site, *FreethoughtNow.org*.

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

My topic is heaven and hell — and my proposal is that believing in heaven can be as corrupting, unhealthy and damaging as believing in hell.

First, I’d like to talk about hell, and to introduce that subject, I’m sure most of you have seen the TV commercial Ron Reagan so graciously has recorded for the Freedom From Religion Foundation, in which he says:

“Hi, I’m Ron Reagan, an unabashed atheist, and I’m alarmed, as you may be, by the intrusion of religion into our secular government. That’s why I’m asking you to support the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the nation’s largest and most effective association of atheists and agnostics, working to keep state and church



Photo by Chris Line  
Annie Laurie Gaylor

separate, just like our Founders intended. Please support the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Ron Reagan, lifelong atheist, not afraid of burning in hell.” The improves from Ron are what make this commercial so memorable. When the text ran a bit short, he improvised “. . . not afraid of burning in hell” right on the spot. When I first approached Ron about recording a TV commercial back in 2014, I explained that my goal was to get the ad on “60 Minutes.” I had every expectation of being able to do this, as we’d run an FFRF spot on some other CBS news shows. I thought the hard part would be raising the funds to pay for such an ad, not getting it past network censors. But when I tried to place it on CBS, and many other stations, it was turned down flat. Only Comedy Central’s “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart” and CNN were willing to run it at the beginning. In fact, it took a few years before MSNBC’s “Rachel Maddow Show” relented and accepted the ad, and gradually CBS’ “Late Show with Stephen Colbert” and CBS’ “Sunday Morning” also OK’d it. Finally, only last year did “60 Minutes” deign to accept our ad. It’s still being rejected by Discovery Science and ABC TV, among others.

Why has it been so controversial? It’s because of Ron’s punchline: “Not afraid of burning in hell.” NBC openly told us they’d run the ad if we just lopped that bit off. As if. We were told this tagline insulted believers. Why would a believer be “insulted” by that little bit of insouciant irreverence? After all, it’s those of us who are regularly told we’re going to hell to be burned, tortured and punished forever in an “unquenchable fire” just for being heathens, who ought to be insulted — not hell-believing Christians.

Corporate networks are so worried about offending believers. Yet how many times have we been preached at from Psalms 53:1, which says: “Only fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, and their actions are evil; not one of them does good!” Why should it be perfectly acceptable to embrace that barbaric and malicious belief of damning nonbelievers to everlasting torment, yet be socially unacceptable to gently rib the idea of such primitive and retributive beliefs?

Ambrose Bierce’s definition of “faith” from his *Dev-*

“As much as I want to believe that, and despite the ancient and worldwide cultural traditions that assert an afterlife, I know of nothing to suggest that it is more than wishful thinking.

Carl Sagan



il’s *Dictionary* is instructive: “Belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge, of things without parallel.” Really, could there be anything more juvenile than sentencing someone to hell for an eternity simply for rejecting a belief that is without evidence, spoken by someone without knowledge, of things without parallel?

“I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true,” wrote Darwin, “for, if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my father, brother and almost all of my friends, will be everlasting punished.” With a memorable pun, Darwin deemed hell “a damnable doctrine.”

## Raised without religion

I was lucky to be raised without religion, but I’ve often wondered: What about the unlucky children whose parents teach them hell is real? There are parents and guardians who still indoctrinate children to believe they deserve to end up there, who take them to church and Sunday school where other authority figures tell them that if they’re not the right kind of Christian, or commit a so-called sin, when they die they will be tortured and burned eternally, and that such treatment is the just judgment of a loving God. As Thomas Paine wisely put it in *The Age of Reason*, “Any system of religion that has anything in it that shocks the mind of a child, cannot be true.”

Feminist and agnostic Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote in her autobiography: “I can truly say, after an experience of 70 years, that all the cares and anxieties, the trials and disappointments of my whole life, are light, when balanced with my sufferings in childhood and youth from the theological dogmas which I sincerely believed. . . . I believed myself a veritable child of the Evil One, and suffered endless fears lest he should come some night and claim me as his own. To me he was a personal, ever-present reality, crouching in a dark corner of the nursery. The memory of my own suffering has prevented me from ever shadowing one young soul with any of the superstitions of the Christian religion.” Think of the neuroses religion is responsible for implanting.

The 19th century is full of literature dwelling on the psychological blight of hell. One of my favorite passages comes from *Jane Eyre*, who, as a young, rebellious, unloved orphan, is being catechised by the character Mr. Brocklehurst, a horrid minister who runs a school for girls. He asks Jane Eyre: “Do you know where the wicked go after death?” “They go to hell” was my ready and orthodox answer. “And what is hell?” “A pit full of fire.” “And should you like to fall into that pit, and to be burning there forever?”

“We are tired of hearing about the golden streets of the hereafter. What we want is good paved and drained streets in this world.

Lucy Parsons



“No, sir.” “What must you do to avoid it?” “I must keep in good health, and not die” was Jane’s classic reply. The great agnostic Robert Ingersoll recalled being in church with other children, where the minister asked them if they knew they all deserved to go to hell. Ingersoll wrote, “We all answered ‘yes.’ Then we were asked if we would be willing to go to hell if it was God’s will, and every little liar shouted ‘YES.’” Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a turn-of-the-last-century freethinker and feminist, asked in her 1923 book, *His Religion and Hers*: “What glory was there in an omnipotent being torturing forever a puny little creature who could in no way defend himself? Would it be to the glory of a man to fry ants?”

## Belief in damnation

It’s worth pondering the role that belief in damnation and eternal torture has played historically in instigating or excusing atrocities, such as the Inquisition, Crusades, tortures, witch-burnings. And why did the Inquisitors so often favor burning at the stake to kill women and other heretics? Perhaps to replicate the idea of deserved hellfire? The Torquemadas out there could justify setting to flame sinners, as, after all, being nothing compared to an eternity of torture. A belief in hell dehumanizes those you think belong there, and can justify committing abominations against them. I would not be the first to wonder what role the concept of hell played for Catholic Adolph Hitler and his iniquitous Final Solution. After all, what were the concentration camps, genocide and ovens compared to an eternity of righteous torture of Jews, gypsies, political dissidents and other non-Christians?

Sadly, we’re not just talking about hell belief confined to the Dark Ages, or even the 19th or 20th centuries. Associated Press released a poll in July showing that a whopping 58 percent of Americans still believe in hell and 69 percent believe in heaven. Perhaps those TV network agents who continue to censor our commercial have read these polls! (I looked up how Canada fares in comparison. According to the Angus Reid Institute in partnership with Faith in Canada, 57 percent of Canadians in 2017 believed in heaven, but only 41 percent in hell. So, once again, Canada shows up the United States.) Still, we’re at an all-time low in the United States for such beliefs, so that’s progress.

Of course, it’s belaboring the obvious to talk about the unwholesome or toxic ramifications of this pernicious idea of hell. And, it goes without saying that traditional Christianity’s morality is skin deep — incentivizing one to be good and do good only to avoid hell or gain eternal rewards. But that’s a topic for another talk. Which brings me to heaven, and my thesis that, in its own way, heaven is as harmful a notion as hell. Sure, it might seem like a good sign that more Americans believe in heaven than hell. Is it so bad to want to believe in paradise? For starters, how about 9/11? These Muslim believers were recruited with the promise that if they martyred themselves, Allah would reward them with 72 virgins and everlasting happiness. The kamikaze pilots in World War II thought they too would go to heaven and were dying for their god, the emperor.



Christianity, with its empty promise that “You will have your reward in heaven,” was used to enslave people in the American colonies and United States for 400 years, and justify Jim Crow. Billy Graham, asked to comment on Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, responded: “Little white children of Alabama will walk hand in hand with little Black children only when Christ comes again.” Translation: NEVER, if Graham had had his way. Then there are those horrible, tragic cases of religious, often psychotic parents who kill their small children, saying they wanted them to go to “a better world.”

Harm of belief in heaven

But aside from such extreme examples, the philosophical harm of heaven and belief in an afterlife is the underlying problem. It teaches believers that this life, this world, doesn’t really matter. There’s an old hymn that goes: “This world is not my home, I’m just a-passing through . . . And I can’t feel at home in this world anymore.” In other words, our real home is heaven and our objective should be to prepare for life after death. As Gloria Steinem put it: “It’s an incredible con job, when you think of it, to believe something now in exchange for life after death. Even corporations, with all their reward systems, don’t try to make it posthumous.”

By the way, heaven ain’t no paradise. The bible depicts it as a spirit realm where the lucky few selected spend eternity praising a jealous God who requires unrelenting displays of sycophantism.

Belief in an afterlife is the ultimate form of death denial, which gives rise

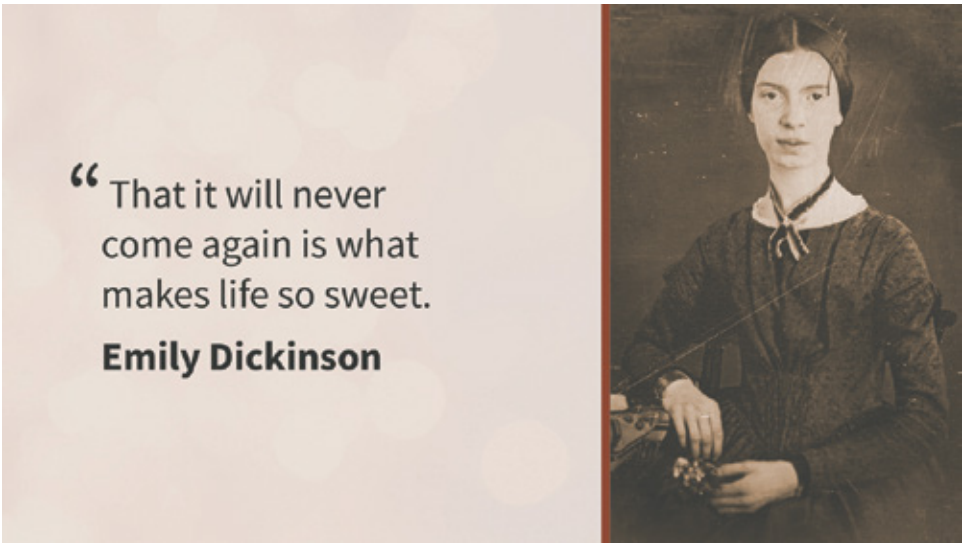
to a whole host of problems with the lack of control over one’s death. There are only 10 states (plus the District of Columbia) with medical-aid-in-dying laws, and opposition to them is almost entirely religious, especially in the form of the Catholic Church, which labels assisted suicide and euthanasia “a crime” and a “mortal sin.”

The delusion that this world is just a stepping stone to an afterlife not only demeans our only life, but it’s dangerous. It’s jeopardizing our planet’s very survival. Pew Research Center found last year that the more religious Americans are, the less apt they are to accept human-made climate change. A majority of evangelical Protestants are least likely to view global climate change as a very serious problem. Meanwhile, 90 percent of atheists understand that human activity is causing climate change, compared to a narrow majority of Americans overall.

The late James G. Watt, President Reagan’s notorious secretary of the interior, infamously testified about his anti-environmentalism: “I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns.”

The idea of pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die is a very perilous concept, especially in a world racked by floods and wildfires caused by human-made climate change.

If you don’t believe in an afterlife, you necessarily value this life more. Women freethinking writers have made this point for a long time. Helen H. Gardener, a freethinker and suffragist in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, wrote: “I do not know the



needs of a god or of another world . . . I do know that women make shirts for 70 cents a dozen in this one. I do know that the needs of humanity and this world are infinite, unending, constant and immediate. They will take all our time, our strength, our love and our thoughts, and our work here will be only then begun.”

Lucy Parsons, who was a Chicago radical and probably had been formerly enslaved, gave a speech called “The Religion of Humanity,” in which she said: “We have heard enough about a paradise behind the moon. We want something now. We are tired of hearing about the golden streets of the hereafter. What we want is good paved and drained streets in this world.”

And let’s get real about eternity. Writer Susan Ertz pointed out in her novel, *Anger in the Sky*, “Millions long for immortality who don’t know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon.”

Human race continues

However regretfully, we nonbelievers face up to the fact of death. We individuals will all die, but we can find comfort that the human race continues. Oliver Sacks, the famous neurologist who was an honorary FFRF director, penned a column poignantly announcing he had terminal cancer: “When people die, they cannot be replaced — they leave holes that cannot be filled, for it’s the fate — the genetic and neural fate — of every human being to be a unique individual, to find his own path, to live his own life, to die his own death.” Bertrand Russell wrote, “I believe that when I die I

shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive. I am not young, and I love life. But I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation. Happiness is nonetheless true happiness because it must come to an end, nor do thought and love lose their value because they are not everlasting.”

A fool’s paradise is no paradise; it’s willful self-deception. While the fallacy that death is not final may offer band-aid comfort to some, in fact, it cheapens the loss.

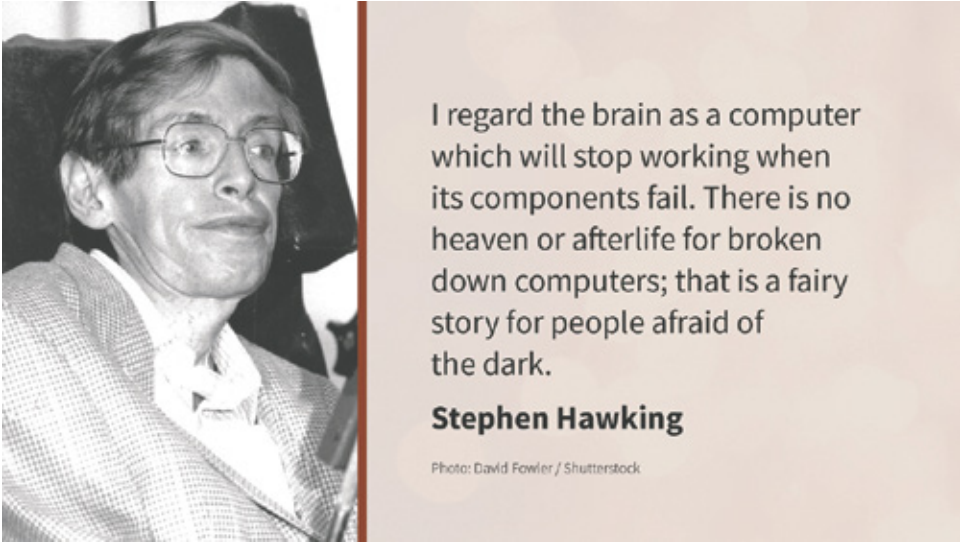
As Emily Dickinson beautifully expressed:

“That it will never come again  
Is what makes life so sweet.  
Believing what we don’t believe  
Does not exhilarate.”

Religion’s preoccupations sadly keep the human race from making a paradise of this, our only world. And that’s a tall order today in this time of frighteningly rapid human-made climate change, and so many difficulties getting the human race to change so we can mitigate global warming. A reminder is in order: Two-thirds of evangelicals, aka Christian nationalists, deny human-made climate change, but nine-in-10 atheists accept it. In many ways, it’s up to us nonbelievers to make sure that religion isn’t allowed to get in the way of true salvation — saving our planet for future generations.

Humanism postulates our real purpose in life: to take care of each other. The “tribe” of Nones knows that the only afterlife that ought to concern any of us is leaving our descendants and our planet a secure and pleasant future.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.



FFRF ON THE ROAD



At FFRF’s booth at the National Conference of State Legislatures, FFRF attorneys Ryan Jayne and Chris Line share a moment with Association of Secular Elected Officials President Leonard Presberg and Board Member Sherry Dutzy.



FFRF Counsel Ryan Jayne, center, spoke in Iowa to the Humanists of Linn County and is shown with the group’s board members.



FFRF awards \$17,400!

2023 college student essay contest winners

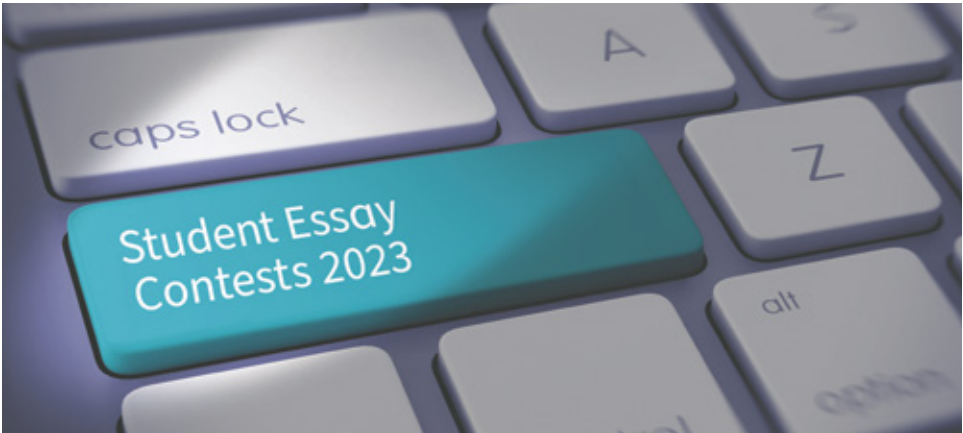
The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 11 winners and six honorable mentions of the 2023 Kenneth L. Proulx Memorial Essay Contest for Ongoing College Students. FFRF has paid out a total of \$17,400 in award money to this year’s college contest winners.

Currently enrolled college students (up to age 24) wrote on the topic of “What I would tell Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene about the harm of Christian nationalism.” They wrote essays, in the form of a letter, telling Greene why her espousal of Christian nationalism is antithetical to secular American principles.

This contest is named for Kenneth L. Proulx, one of FFRF’s most generous benefactors, who died in 2019. The cupola at Freethought Hall, FFRF’s office in Madison, Wis., is called the “Above Us Only Sky Kenneth L. Proulx Cupola,” or “Ken’s Cupola” for short.

The \$1,000 prize for sixth place in the ongoing college competition is generously endowed by actor and FFRF Lifetime Member Mr. Madison Arnold. Madison, who is 87, has given a \$30,000 endowment as a living bequest, what he calls a “pre-quest.”

Essay contest winners, their ages, the colleges or universities they are attending and the award amounts are listed below,



low, and winning essays are reprinted or excerpted in this issue.

**FIRST PLACE**  
**Skylar Blumenauer**, 18, George Washington University, \$3,500.

**SECOND PLACE**  
**Brooke Langis**, 19, Clark University, \$3,000.

**THIRD PLACE**  
**Jessica Oakes**, 21, Ferris State University, \$2,500.

**FOURTH PLACE**  
**Catherine Laver**, 19, University of British Columbia, \$2,000.

**FIFTH PLACE**  
**Sophie Godin**, 20, St. Francis Xavier University, \$1,500.

**SIXTH PLACE (MR. MADISON ARNOLD WINNER)**  
**Peter Huerta**, 24, Guttman Community College, \$1,000.

**SEVENTH PLACE**  
**Valentina Jaeger**, 20, University of Central Missouri, \$750.

**Montana Stake**, 24, Southern New Hampshire University, \$750.

**EIGHTH PLACE**  
**Sophie Olson**, 21, University of Minnesota, \$500.

**NINTH PLACE**  
**Ted Kwee-Bintoro**, 19, University of Pennsylvania, \$400.

**TENTH PLACE**  
**Aubrey Echard**, 22, Kennesaw State University, \$300.

**HONORABLE MENTIONS (\$200 each)**  
**Evan Brown**, 19, University of Missouri – Columbia.  
**Matthew Quall**, 21, University of Washington – Seattle.  
**Gary Ramee, Jr.**, 23, Louisiana State University.  
**Katherine Shaw**, 20, University of Kentucky.  
**Jeremy Yiu**, 20, University of California-Davis.  
**Madison Zitlaw**, 20, Indiana University.

FFRF also thanks Lisa Treu for managing the details of this and FFRF’s other student essays competitions. And we couldn’t judge these contests without our volunteer and staff judges, including: Don Ardell, Dan Barker, David Chivers, Jon S. Galehouse, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Russell Gibson, Ricki Grunberg, Tim Hatcher, Linda Josheff, Dan Kettner, Brianna Knopow, Sammi Lawrence, Gloria Marquardt, Chris O’Connell, Andrea Osburne, JoAnn Papich, Sue Schuetz, Rose Mary Sheldon, PJ Slinger and Chance Wimberly.

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

FIRST PLACE

A rebuttal of Christian nationalism

FFRF awarded Skylar \$3,500.

By Skylar Blumenauer

Dear Rep. Greene,

I am reaching out to you today to discuss your identification as a Christian nationalist. This concept, I understand, is broadly defined as the belief that our government should declare that America is a Christian nation, meaning Christianity would become integral to the American identity.

I have numerous issues with this, namely that it fundamentally contradicts and opposes the First Amendment. As you know, the First Amendment is widely, and, in my opinion, correctly, perceived as one of the most crucial amendments. It ensures our personal freedoms and upholds our democracy. The freedom to exercise religion at one’s choosing is essential to democracy, and your espousal of Christian nationalism as an elected official is antithetical to America and its secular principles.

If the Founding Fathers intended for America to be a Christian nation, the Free Exercise Clause would not exist within the First Amendment. It was always their hope that Americans would be able to freely shape their identities through the separation of church and state, instead of allowing oppressors to enforce a single way of life. After all, history proves that governments that align with nationalist causes not only become inherently forceful, but also ultimately fall.

Additionally, I would like to remind you it was Christianity that authorized and exacerbated the segregation, suppression, and enslavement of Black Americans until the Civil War and through the Jim Crow era. As an overwhelmingly white religion, the full enforcement of Christianity would harm religious, nonreligious and non-Christian minorities. Regardless of the arguments otherwise, the Constitution prohibits Christian nationalism and its denial of religious liberty.

I would like to direct your attention to 1 Corinthians 13:4-5: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not



Skylar Blumenauer

dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.” According to the bible, Christians are loving, kind, peaceful and humble. They do not judge; they welcome all with open arms.

However, Christian nationalism inherently opposes all of these qualities. Jesus should be followed through true faith, not through forced establishment and American citizenship. Furthermore, the bible explains that only the Church has the authority to teach God’s word, and governments should solely enforce justice. Christian nationalism seemingly uses Christianity as a cover for a political agenda that directly opposes mandated Christian qualities.

You have previously claimed that Christian nationalism should not be feared and that it will solve school shootings and sexual immorality. But does that not oppose everything Christianity represents? To follow Jesus for solely hateful political purposes, to spread hate instead of love?

I want to share my experience with the Church. During a rough period of my life, I was enticed to join the Church by Christianity’s promises of a loving, caring and judgment-free community. However, I found the complete opposite: I was told that my friends are not worthy of their lives because they preferred other genders. They laughed at me, telling me that because I am a girl, I have no future. I saw them harass and berate people for nothing but the color of their skin. They called themselves Christian nationalists.

This is Christian nationalism — a movement that has likened itself to the Taliban and threatened to make *The Handmaid’s Tale* a reality. In a world such as this, Rep. Greene, you will lose your position, your voice and everything that your religion is supposed to represent.

After my experience, I renounced my faith and joined the millions who now find themselves in danger from Christian nationalism — anyone who is not a straight, white Christian, religious or nonreligious. Secular principles are essential to American freedom, making Christian nationalism antithetical to America’s future. I urge you to renounce your identification as a Christian nationalist and recommit to religious freedom. Only then can you faithfully follow God’s word and dutifully serve your people.

*Skylar, 18, is from Massillon, Ohio, and attends George Washington University, where she is majoring in political science.*

*“I have donated over 200 service hours back to my community through various organizations. In my senior year of high school, I was chosen to be one of 100 representatives at the annual Disney Dreamers Academy and received mentorship from professional business leaders across all fields. I was selected as an Akron Beacon Journal Star Student for graduating a year early at the top of my class.”*



SECOND PLACE

Christian nationalism spreads division

FFRF awarded Brooke \$3,000.

By Brooke Langis

Dear Rep. Greene,

I was 3 years old when I began my Catholic instruction. I’ve attended Catholic schools for my entire life, and my thorough Christian education has only enabled me to look upon Christian nationalism with more fear and opposition. The very meaning of this worldview — that Christianity is at the core of the United States and should therefore be accounted for in public policy — contrasts with the secularism that has been a key piece of our country since before it was even founded.

“A wall of separation” between church and state, as described by Thomas Jefferson, ensured to those who had experienced religious persecution that the new nation would not yield religion as a weapon against its own citizens, forcing compliance with the ideas of a select few on all people. However, with your misguided advocacy for this anti-American ideology, the fear of entanglement between religion and state remains today.

Christian nationalism taking root within the federal government would bring about the destruction of American values



Brooke Langis

and constitutional principles that emphasize the extensive separation between church and state.

How can a nation be free if one of our most basic freedoms — freedom of religion — is not protected and upheld to the highest extent? How can we even pretend to serve as a beacon of democracy if our democracy caters to the beliefs of only some Americans? How are

non-Christians, agnostics and atheists meant to feel respected if their country begins to implement laws that directly contrast with their own beliefs?

Not only do your beliefs not align with those of vast number of American citizens, but they also misconstrue Christian ideals in such a way that even the title of Christian nationalism seems unfit. As an atheist who has delved into the Christian faith for 15 years, I simply cannot comprehend how your stances are supposed to align in any manner with the teachings of Jesus Christ. As a subscriber to a faith that affirms the necessity of serving, assisting and providing for others, why have you denounced sending aid to Ukraine, a country in which human beings are suffering and dying due to circumstances completely beyond their control? Why have you labeled fellow human beings and Americans as if they are not equal to you, when Christianity emphasizes the equal nature of being children of God?

It seems as if you are not seeking to promote your religion in government, but rather aiming to spread division and further separate the United States from

its secular foundation. Secularism is a key factor in what has made the United States able to welcome citizens of varying ethnic, religious, linguistic and racial backgrounds. This diversity of backgrounds, perspectives and views is an essential piece of what it means to be American. We are not made up of a dominant background, ideology or religion — and we are not meant to be.

Please, feel free to make and join civil groups with others who agree with you, but do not force your opinions that violate the principles of our Constitution and nation as a whole onto the rest of the American people. Maintain the “wall of separation” between church and state to protect American values and citizens.

Brooke, 19, is from Lynn, Mass., and attends Clark University, where she is majoring in political science. “I currently tutor a 13-year-old boy who lives in Vietnam in English as a Second Language,” Brooke writes. “I have attended Catholic schools since I was 3, and have been a proud atheist since I was 17. At my Catholic high school, I ranked fourth in my class and received numerous scholastic honors.”

“How can we even pretend to serve as a beacon of democracy if our democracy caters to the beliefs of only some Americans?”

THIRD PLACE

The wrong side of history

FFRF awarded Jessica \$2,500.

By Jessica Oakes

Dear Rep. Greene,

I am writing to expose the façade on which you have built your career and the danger it poses. You call for Christian nationalism in the United States as if it will liberate us from our modern-day horrors. There is nothing free about this ideology. Pitting the bible against our textbooks, science, history and journalism is a battle you can only win through deception and censorship. Such is the nature of Christian nationalism. It is the belief in the superiority of Christians in America and the distorted history of unwavering belief in Jesus Christ by every generation of our nation’s leaders. It places relentless priority and protection onto the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant and discards the rest.

Comprehensive history education is threatened by revisionists like yourself; you have no new ideas. The Christian faith has been characterized by a deep-seated and often misguided sense

of persecution for millennia. What makes your modern brand of extremism even slightly unprecedented is that you know that you are losing. You say that “most Americans” are Christian nationalists, even when U.S. church membership now falls below the majority for the first time. The percentage of Americans who identify as Christians has dropped nearly 20 points in 20 years. This country becomes more secular every year. Your philosophy can only exist within the false narrative of religious strength.

With every wave of invention and scientific discovery, humanity sheds religion. Education rids us of the need for spiritual fill-in-the-blanks. This is why Christian nationalists resort to banning books and manipulating school curriculum. Your movement would rather make idiots of our nation, rob citizens of the endless information at our fingertips in the 21st century, than allow institutional power to fall out of your white hands.

Christian nationalists fear what

would happen if they allowed their followers to see the truth about persecution in the United States. Today’s truth is the existence of systemic racism, the validity of LGBTQ-plus identity, the atrocities that occur when a government curtails reproductive rights, and the mortality rate of Covid-19.

You, Rep. Greene, peddle the myth that Christians are under attack while consistently partaking in the very rhetoric used to attack our nation’s people of color, queer people, women and the immunocompromised. These groups know what oppression is in the United States. Every time you raise the flag, you soil the fabric with their blood on your hands.

Every day, the citizens of Georgia pay you to lie. While I will not waste time analyzing your policies, I will focus on the grotesque exaggeration of you being the “most attacked” member of Congress this country has ever seen. One thing is true — millions of people think you are a joke. If laughter were considered an attack, I am certain you would no longer be standing. I, however, do not think your philosophy is comical. You are starting down a dark path in this nation’s history.

“Your philosophy can only exist within the false narrative of religious strength.”



Jessica Oakes

I write as a woman, a student of history and a journalist who greatly values her rights to choose, to learn and to tell the entire world what a bad omen you are. I also have the right to say that the bible is a work of fiction that was never meant to touch American legislation. I cling to these rights and dare you to come and take them.

Jessica, 21, of Rockford, Mich., attends Ferris State University and majors in technical and professional communication/history.

“I am editor-in-chief at the Ferris State Torch and I’m proud of my work as community outreach chair and co-founder of our Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance,” Jessica writes. “Student activism is one of the most impactful ways I can spend my time in a small, conservative college town.”

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.

FFRF'S

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Wednesdays at Noon (Central)\*

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FOURTH PLACE

America’s downfall in the mirror

FFRF awarded Catherine \$2,000.

By Catherine Laver

Attention Rep. Greene,

I have no intention of starting this letter with customary kind greetings or hopes of finding you well. I have no kindness to share or respect to give for Christian nationalists, an identity you have claimed proudly as your own. An identity that aims to foster hate and intolerance. An identity that is an existential threat to secular democracy and the American Constitution. An identity shared by the Ku Klux Klan.

By aligning with Christian nationalism, you willingly embrace a regressive worldview steeped in archaic moral policing and oppressive tendencies reminiscent of a medieval era. Let me be clear: Christian nationalism is a gross affront to justice, domestic tranquility, general welfare and the blessings of liberty.

Christian nationalism posits that American identity is inseparable from a Christian identity, thereby advocating for a central role of Christianity in both policy and public life.

Adherents contend that true Americanism necessitates adherence to Christian values, excluding other faiths and atheism. This viewpoint directly opposes the principle of the separation of church and state, rather advocating for the governance of America as an exclusively Christian nation. Distortion of historical narratives is a common tactic employed by Christian nationalists to assert that America was founded upon Christian doctrine, and therefore must be preserved as a nation unified by Christian faith.

“Distortion of historical narratives is a common tactic employed by Christian nationalists to assert that America was founded upon Christian doctrine, and therefore must be preserved as a nation unified by Christian faith.”

The beliefs held by Christian nationalists are deeply problematic for a multitude of reasons. Secular democratic values are critical to the prosperity and progress of modern nations, for they protect human rights, equality and social cohesion. A true democracy should function to serve and protect all citizens, regardless of their religion or lack thereof. A Christian democracy would actively work against these values. Favoring one religion would result in even higher rates of religious intolerance and discrimination, jeopardizing the safety and rights of non-Christians. Modern America is plagued with social animosity and radicalization, and endorsing an ideology that idealizes Christianity’s place in Americanism only serves to worsen an



Catherine Laver

already volatile social climate. Policies should not be made based on religious values, as advocated for by Christian nationalists. The beliefs of Christians should have no right to dictate how non-believers are permitted to lead their lives. America has been experiencing a frightening rise of policies that endanger minority rights, all under the guise of virtuous Christian American values.

For example, after the overturning of Roe v. Wade, multiple states have criminalized abortion due to unjust Christian influence in legislation. This is a severe imposition upon women’s reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, and access to safe health care. There has also been a concerning influx of near-genocidal anti-trans bills that threaten the rights of

transgender Americans. These laws are systematically targeting transgender people’s rights to life-saving healthcare, education, legal recognition and the ability to publicly exist. Christian nationalism uses the front of godly morality and patriotism in order to deliberately target and endanger atheists, non-Christians, women, LGBTQ-plus people and other minorities. Rep. Greene, I urge you to reflect upon this overview of the dangers that Christian nationalism holds and to see how your endorsement of this belief is antithetical to secular American values. Such espousal serves to normalize a radical ideology that systematically marginalizes non-Christians and gives a legal basis for corrupt morality laws that target minority groups. Christian nationalism is not only detrimental to non-believers, but to all citizens who enjoy the rights and freedoms provided under a secular democracy. It is imperative that you reconsider your position and reject a regressive ideology that fosters intolerance. Instead, embrace the inclusivity and diversity that form the foundation of a just democratic society.

Catherine, 19, is from Vancouver, B.C. and attends the University of British Columbia with plans to major in biochemistry. “I am very passionate about sustainability and environmentalism, and I hope to use my education to pursue research and do science communication work,” Catherine writes. “I work very hard at school and was awarded the Frank and Betty de Bruyn Memorial Essay Prize for first-year English.”

FIFTH PLACE

Christian nationalism affects more than you think

FFRF awarded Sophie \$1,500.

By Sophie Godin

Dear Rep. Greene,

What is it about the United States that makes you so gratified with your place of origin? Is it the stunning natural landscape? The centers of blended cultures? The American influence that reaches beyond borders? What about the striking sound of “We the people,” so cherished by millions?

As a constitutionalist, you must be aware of the fundamental values upon which the United States was built. However, declaring yourself a Christian nationalist directly challenges that notion. Are you not versed in even the very first of the amendments? You know, the one that says that Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof?

Forgive me for all my questions, but a personified contradiction like yourself is simply fascinating. See, I understand the term “Christian nationalism” as being imposing, shackling and exclusionary. In the American context especially, it’s racist, bigoted and riddled in thoughts of supremacy. For a nonreligious non-American like me, the rise of Christian nationalism in America is not a welcoming prospect. I thought that crossing the border meant entry into the land of the free, where dreams come true. According to you, it still does, but only when specific criteria are met. The



Sophie Godin

welcome wagon will not be waiting for me, I suppose. Equality is a primary American value and even a single exception to this can create a slippery slope. Hypothetically, if Christianity did receive the distinction you so desire, what might be the next group to demand superiority and exclusive rights? Would it be right-handed people? Senior citizens? Those who prefer dogs over cats? There is no rhyme or reason as to why a person believing in Jesus Christ, or any figure for that matter, should find their religious homeland in the United States of America. As seen elsewhere and in history, nonsecularization does not mix with equality and inclusivity.

We have already seen the impact of choosing morals over ethics when deliberating human rights issues. LGBTQ-plus equality? Roe v. Wade? What would have been the outcome of these unjustifiable debates if religion were never in the picture? If this is how things work when the government is technically secular, imagine when the façade is officially dropped. Once again, slippery slope.

I’m concerned for my American peers, but I’m also concerned for my own country. The United States is a world stage powerhouse and exercises a high degree of influence. Canada, my place of origin, has long succumbed to Americanization and will keep doing so for a long time. Though there are some things that will likely always remain inherently Canadian, politics, as they continue to morph into the twin of our southern neighbor, are not one. The high volume at which American Christian nationalists shout has made it be heard by like-minded Canadians and has encouraged the emergence of our own supremacy groups.

Because monkey see, monkey do, the increasing use of religious values in American governmental spaces has me fearful, as a nonreligious person, for the future of my country and our wider society. I fear the world that may emerge where doctrine instead of reason dictates law. Where diversity is condemned.

Where rights are given on the basis of beliefs and not by being born human. Where we ultimately move backward in our development as a society. Christian nationalism affects more than you think. Sophie, 20, from Hanwell, New Brunswick, Canada, attends St. Francis Xavier University and is majoring in public policy and governance. “I plan on pursuing journalism with the goal of promoting ethical politics and research-based policy throughout my career,” Sophie writes. “I’m keenly interested in health care policy and its connections to the social and economic well-being of communities.”

“I fear the world that may emerge where doctrine instead of reason dictates law.”

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SIXTH PLACE — Mr. Madison Arnold Winner

# Why Christian nationalism undermines freedom

FFRF awarded Peter \$1,000.

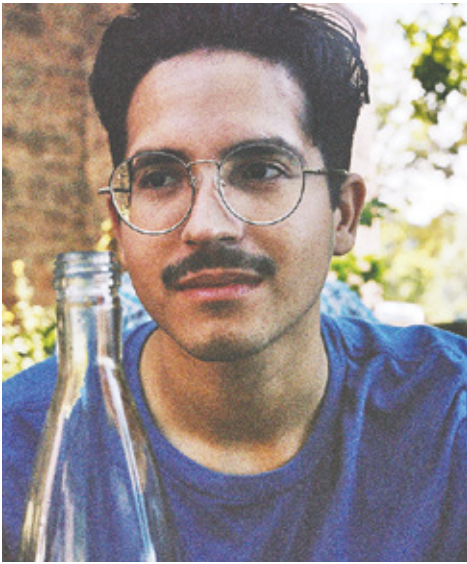
By Peter Huerta

Dear Rep. Greene,

I am writing to express my concerns regarding the ideology of Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism merges Christianity with national identity and promotes the notion that the nation is fundamentally or exclusively Christian. This ideology is exclusionary and divisive, marginalizing and discriminating against religious minorities and those who do not adhere to any religious beliefs.

The principle of separation of church and state was established to protect religious freedom for all individuals, irrespective of their beliefs. However, policies and practices that grant preferential treatment to Christianity blur the line between religious belief and governmental authority, potentially marginalizing non-Christian citizens and undermining the principle of religious neutrality. This can create an environment where individuals feel pressured to conform to a specific religious worldview, limiting their freedom of conscience and their ability to practice their own faith or lack thereof. Such a situation undermines the secular principle of ensuring religious freedom for all individuals.

Having grown up in New York with deaf parents, I understand the importance of community and the value that religion can add to people’s lives. It can



Peter Huerta

offer protection from the isolating nature of the modern world and provide a sense of purpose. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this function is shared by many religions, not just Christianity. Endorsing Christian nationalism means endorsing the exclusion and discrimination of other beliefs and the people who hold them.

Personally, I became disillusioned with my beliefs when I found that my pastor was unwilling to entertain any questioning of the factual nature of the bible. I became wary of the controlling and manipulative nature of those who dictate what is considered good or bad.

Growing up with deaf parents, I had to form my own interpretations of the

world because their explanations did not always align with my experiences.

I would like to highlight an example from my own life that demonstrates the potential negative consequences of certain religious beliefs. The church taught my father that God was more important than his family, resulting in him making significant weekly donations to the church. Meanwhile, I grew up without an allowance and rarely had the means to buy school lunch. Even when I voiced concerns about the financial strain on our family, my father would simply respond that God works in mysterious ways. My parents felt no need to justify their actions because, in their minds, God provided sufficient justification. I do not hold my father solely responsible for his choices. I understand that it was his faith that enabled him to care for three children in New York as a single parent.

However, I cannot support or entertain Christian nationalism as it would mean justifying and endorsing the discrimination, exclusion and negligence inherent in upholding and promoting specific beliefs without considering dissenting viewpoints.

Secularism does not seek to be an-

“Secularism does not seek to be anti-religious; rather, it aims to ensure a fair and equitable society where individuals are free to practice their religion or no religion without interference or coercion from the state.”

ti-religious; rather, it aims to ensure a fair and equitable society where individuals are free to practice their religion or no religion without interference or coercion from the state. Secularism recognizes the importance of separating religious beliefs and institutions from the governance of public affairs while safeguarding the rights and freedoms of all individuals, regardless of their beliefs. Embracing an ideology of Christian nationalism would undermine the sovereignty of the individual and the principles of secularism that are integral to American society. Therefore, I urge you to reject this divisive ideology and instead embrace the inclusive principles of secularism.

Peter, 25, is from Brooklyn, N.Y., and attends Guttman Community College, where he is majoring in psychology and finance.

“To ensure a brighter future, I made the decision to join the military,” Peter writes. “This allowed me to acquire the means to pursue education later on. During my six years of service, my unwavering focus remained on my ultimate goal: pursuing higher education. It was this strong determination that propelled me to fulfill my military obligations, knowing that it would pave the way for my college education.”

SEVENTH PLACE (tie)

# How violence and hate manifest

FFRF awarded Valentina \$750.

By Valentina Jaeger

Dear Rep. Greene,

As a Christian nationalist, you believe that America is a Christian nation and that the government should take action to enforce Christian beliefs and laws onto the citizens of our country. Children in school recite the Pledge of Allegiance that states that we are “one nation under God,” “In God We Trust” is printed on our currency, and our presidents even swear on a bible

before they enter office. To you, this may seem like solid evidence for your case. However, I’m writing this letter to explain why you are simply wrong and that your beliefs about this country are harmful.

While it is true that the majority of Americans identify as Christian (roughly 63 percent in 2020), that number has been declining for decades. As Christianity in the United States declines, the number of people who identify as nonaffiliated, agnostic or atheist increases. People leave religion for many reasons. For me, I left because of how much shame is involved in Christianity. As a queer woman, I was told that I would burn in hell. When I was raped, I was told that it was part of God’s plan. Everything good that came my way was because of God and not the hard work I put into achieving those goals. Even my own mother told me that my life must be sad and lonely simply because I’m a nonbeliever. Being a Christian brought no value to my life and only made me feel small and unworthy.

To add to this, people from all over the world come to America for different reasons and they have their own culture, languages and religions that they will continue to practice here. That said, there are more religions than just Christianity and we will start to see a rise in them as people continue to immigrate to the United States. Governing our country by the rules of the bible won’t make that number go down. Banning books that are “anti-Christian,” ban-



Valentina Jaeger

ning abortion, taking away the rights of LGBTQ-plus citizens and people of color who have fought hard to gain them, and pushing abstinence-only sex education will not only encourage discrimination and violence, but completely ignores one of our First Amendment rights — freedom of religion.

I would expect you, as a member of Congress, to be familiar with the Bill of Rights. The First Amendment states that citizens have the right to freedom of religion. However, freedom of religion also means freedom from religion.

Christian nationalism is a direct contradiction to our rights and is the single biggest threat to religious freedom in modern times. As I previously stated, there are many more religions that people practice all over the country. You would be essentially erasing

the value of freedom in this country, which is the very reason that some people immigrate here.

If Christian nationalism takes over, would people be prosecuted for following a different faith than you? Will you attempt to eradicate that part of the First Amendment? If you’re so against indoctrination when it comes to things you don’t agree with, why is it suddenly OK to believe that everyone should follow Christianity?

Christian nationalism manifests in many ways such as what we saw during the Jan. 6th Capitol insurrection and in subtle ways like promoting prayer and teaching the bible in public schools, which is inherently unconstitutional. Although it’s been nearly three years since the raid on the Capitol, it’s an event this country will never forget. Christian nationalism helped fuel that event, which promoted nothing but violence and hate that further separated the citizens of this country. What happened to love thy neighbor?

I hope this helps you open your eyes about the harm that Christian nationalism has done to our country, to our people and to American values as a whole.

Valentina, 20, is from Warrensburg, Mo., and is majoring in instrumental music education at the University of Central Missouri.

“I plan to teach orchestra at the beginning and intermediate levels,” Valentina writes. “I play the double bass, viola, piano and clarinet. Aside from music, I like to dance ballet, take care of my farm, draw cartoon ducks, and read nonfiction. I have a genuine love of learning and I want to be a lifelong learner.”



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SEVENTH PLACE (tie)

# The danger of Christian nationalism

FFRF awarded Montana \$750.

By Montana Stake

Dear Rep. Greene,

I am writing to you today as a concerned citizen and nonbeliever. You are the first member of Congress to identify as a “Christian nationalist,” and to openly urge your party to become the “party of Christian nationalism.” I believe it is important for me to share my thoughts on this matter with you.

Christian nationalism is the belief that the United States is, or should be, a Christian nation, with its laws and policies rooted in Christian principles. This idea is not only antithetical to secular American principles, but it also jeopardizes nonbelievers and non-Christians like myself. It promotes the idea that one religion is superior to all others and has a special place in our society.

It is crucial that you, as an elected official, understand that promoting Christian nationalism is not only divisive but also a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. The Constitution is a secular document, and our

“ One of the most insidious aspects of Christian nationalism is the way it promotes the idea that some individuals are more deserving of rights and freedoms than others based solely on their religious beliefs.

government should remain neutral on matters of religion. By endorsing Christian nationalism, you are advocating for the government to favor one religion over others, which is a clear violation of the Constitution.

Furthermore, this harmful ideology has deep roots in white supremacy, and it has been used to promote the notion that certain groups of people are inherently superior to others. This has led to widespread discrimination against marginalized groups such as racial and ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ-plus community and non-Christians.

One of the most insidious aspects of Christian nationalism is the way it promotes the idea that some individuals are more deserving of rights and freedoms than others based solely on their religious beliefs. This creates a dangerous environment where discrimination is not only tolerated but encouraged. When those in positions of power and authority espouse such beliefs, it sends a clear message that discrimination and marginalization are acceptable. This can have devastating consequences for those who are already marginalized and vulnerable.

For example, in the past, Christian nationalists have used their beliefs to



Montana Stake

justify slavery, segregation and the denial of basic human rights to minority groups. In recent years, we have seen the rise of white nationalist groups that use Christian nationalism as a rallying cry. This has led to a rise in hate crimes against marginalized groups, including attacks on mosques, synagogues and other places of worship.

Christian nationalism is not just a threat to non-Christians. It is a threat to all Americans who value equality and democracy. The United States was founded on the principles of religious freedom and the separation of church and state. When these principles are eroded, it puts the rights and freedoms

of all Americans at risk. As a nonbeliever, I fear that if Christian nationalism is allowed to take hold, my rights and freedoms, along with those of other nonbelievers and non-Christians, will be threatened. We should all have the freedom to believe or not believe as we choose, without fear of discrimination or persecution. I am not advocating for the removal of religion from public life. Everyone has the right to practice their religion and express their beliefs. However, it is not the role of the government to promote or endorse any specific religion. Our government should remain neutral on matters of religion, and uphold the principles of equality and freedom for all.

In conclusion, Rep. Greene, I urge you to reconsider your stance on Christian nationalism. As an elected official, it is your duty to uphold the Constitution and protect the rights and freedoms of all Americans, regardless of their religious beliefs. By promoting Christian nationalism, you are doing the opposite.

Montana, 24, is from Athens, Ohio, and attends Southern New Hampshire University, majoring in computer science – data analytics.

“My ultimate goal is to utilize cutting-edge technologies to positively impact the lives of many individuals worldwide,” Montana writes. “Alongside my technical pursuits, I prioritize leading a healthy and fulfilling lifestyle, with nutrition and exercise as key factors in enhancing my physical, mental and emotional well-being.”

EIGHTH PLACE

# Divided we fall under Marjorie Taylor Greene

FFRF awarded Sophie \$500.

By Sophie Olson

Dear Rep. Greene,

I hope you are doing well. I’m writing to you today as a concerned citizen and fellow American who holds the ideals that underpin our magnificent country in the highest regard. I recently saw a statement of yours in which you claimed to be a “Christian nationalist” and urged your party to become the “party of Christian nationalism.” I must respectfully voice my strong disagreement with your viewpoint and explain why it is incompatible with our society’s secular values for an elected official to advocate Christian nationalism.

A nation should be founded on a particular interpretation of Christian ideals, according to the definition of Christian nationalism, which is the belief that religion should be essential to governmental activities. Christian nationalism poses serious threats to the ideas of religious freedom and equality that our country holds dear, even while it is vital to recognize and accommodate different religious beliefs.

Christian nationalism violates my rights and the rights of many other non-Christians and non-believers in numerous ways. First and foremost, it strikes at the foundational tenet of our secular democracy’s separation of church and state. To ensure that all



Sophie Olson

citizens, regardless of their religious or nonreligious convictions, receive equal treatment and freedom of conscience, our Founding Fathers understood the need of keeping religion apart from the functions of government. You are effectively ignoring this fundamental premise and alienating non-Christians by arguing for the integration of Christianity with our democratic structure.

Christian nationalism also encourages a culture of exclusion and marginalization. It conveys the idea that people who do not share Christian ideals are somehow less patriotic or deserving of the same chances and rights. This goes against the egalitarian and inclusive values that have shaped our country. Our society is made up of peo-

ple from different ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds, and it is in this diversity that we find our strength. By giving one particular theological viewpoint precedence, Christian nationalism establishes a hierarchy of citizenship that threatens the fundamental foundations of our pluralistic democracy.

In addition to the risks it poses to religious freedom and inclusivity, Christian nationalism can obstruct progress on significant social concerns. No matter their religious affiliation, it is your responsibility as an elected official to represent all of your constituents’ interests. You disregard the needs and viewpoints of others who do not share your faith by promoting policies that are primarily based on Christian values. This limits our ability to collectively handle urgent issues like income inequality, healthcare reform, and climate change in a way that takes into account the many voices and viewpoints in our country.

Rep. Greene, I implore you to think twice about your position on Christian nationalism. The devotion to the values of religious freedom, equality, and inclusion is what makes our coun-

try strong. It is your duty as an elected person to stand up for and defend the rights of all Americans, regardless of their religion or nonreligious beliefs. Adopting Christian nationalism weakens these fundamental ideas and imperils our secular democracy’s very foundation. Instead, let’s try to promote respect, empathy, and understanding among our fellow citizens, regardless of their place in the theological spectrum. We can only genuinely assure liberty and justice for all by embracing our diversity and respecting the secular ideals that have governed our country. Leaders who defend the principles that have sustained our nation’s strength are essential to our democracy. Sophie, 21, is from Otsego, Minn., and attends the University of Minnesota and is an elementary education major with music and Spanish minors.

“In my free time, I volunteer in a Spanish Immersion Kindergarten classroom, teach private music lessons, and spend time with my family,” Sophie writes. “I work as a restaurant server during the summer and school year.”

“ By giving one particular theological viewpoint precedence, Christian nationalism establishes a hierarchy of citizenship that threatens the fundamental foundations of our pluralistic democracy.



NINTH PLACE

Believer or nonbeliever, I’m a patriot

FFRF awarded Ted \$400.

By Ted Kwee-Bintoro

Dear Rep. Greene,

I’m a 19-year-old Indonesian-American studying political science and mathematical economics at the University of Pennsylvania. Your open identification as a Christian nationalist has left me and many others concerned about the trajectory of our democratic nation. My concern comes not from partisan identification, but from a deep-seated belief that democracy and religious freedom are inseparable.

The Christian nationalism you profess asserts that only Christians can be true Americans. It demands a legal order ripped from the pages of the bible.

Of course, the United States is a secular nation, in which religious beliefs are divorced from government policy. You’re quite fond of defending the First Amendment, but I think you need a refresher on it.

It protects freedom of expression as well as freedom of belief. In this country, we are free to believe, or not believe, as we choose. Our Founding Fathers fought to ensure that no single religion monopolizes the political, social or cultural life of the nation. They



Ted Kwee-Bintoro

knew that the marriage of state and faith could lead to oppression.

Your position as an elected official who openly espouses Christian nationalism is a threat to these secular principles. Your call for your party to become the “party of Christian nationalism” is a threat to all Americans and the fabric that holds us together. It’s not just a concern for nonbelievers like myself, but for Americans of all faiths, who

can’t see themselves in the America you hope to build.

As a person of color, I believe that this country’s greatest strength is its diversity. And yet Christian nationalism favors a homogenized view of American identity, deliberately marginalizing minority groups, both racially and religiously.

Moreover, the narrative of Christian nationalism oversimplifies the diverse spectrum of Christian belief itself, imposing a monolithic understanding that does not reflect the wide range of Christian perspectives across the nation. This can lead to intrafaith conflicts and further social division.

In spite of my irreligiosity, I still hold a profound respect for this country and my fellow Americans. A nation where all can come together, irrespective of religious expression, in hopes of forging a brighter future. That is the America I seek, and this is the America of which our Founding Fathers dreamt. My patriotism isn’t defined by religious affiliation. It’s a patriotism that recognizes the innate potential within each and every one of us.

“My patriotism isn’t defined by religious affiliation. It’s a patriotism that recognizes the innate potential within each and every one of us.”

Rep. Greene, I implore you to recognize the diversity of your constituency and the nation as a whole. Religious beliefs are personal and they are private. While we as individuals may be guided by them, these beliefs should not dictate public policy. And they should never be used to look down upon your fellow citizen.

I believe the only way we can move forward as a democracy is if we hold mutual respect as a guiding light in our lives.

The Founding Fathers left us a nation where all could serve all — believers and nonbelievers alike. Will we do the same for our children?

*Ted, 19, is from Katy, Texas, and attends University of Pennsylvania, where he is majoring in political science and mathematical economics.*

*“I’m the son of two immigrants from Indonesia who came here to find a better life,” Ted writes. “They’re Catholic; I’m not. We’ve learned to accept each other for who we are. I play cello and love going on walks in my spare time. I one day hope to be involved in D.C. as an advocate for human rights and the equal recognition of all in our society.”*

TENTH PLACE

A letter to Marjorie Taylor Greene

FFRF awarded Aubrey \$300.

By Aubrey Echard

Dear Rep. Greene,

I write to you as a concerned citizen who values the principles of a secular democracy, which I believe is the foundation of our great country. I understand that you identify as a Christian nationalist and encourage the idea of the Republican Party becoming the “party of Christian nationalism.” I find this statement deeply troubling. As an elected official, your espousal of this ideology is antithetical to the secular American principles that our nation was founded on.

To begin, it is important to define what exactly Christian nationalism is — it’s an ideology that seeks to merge Christianity and American nationalism

into a singular, exclusive identity. This ideology views the United States as a “Christian nation” and argues that the country’s laws and policies should be based on biblical principles. It posits that Christianity is the only legitimate religious faith and that Christians are the only rightful citizens of the United States.

As someone who converted from Christianity to atheism, I find the concept of Christian nationalism deeply troubling. It is antithetical to the principles of a secular democracy, which values the diversity of beliefs and protects the freedom of conscience of all citizens. It promotes a narrow-minded and exclusionary worldview that is completely at odds with the pluralistic society that we live in today.

Christian nationalism creates a hierarchy of citizenship, where non-Christians and nonbelievers are considered second-class citizens or even foreigners in their own country. This ideology threatens my ability to participate fully in the democratic process and to enjoy equal rights and protections under the law.

Moreover, Christian nationalism undermines the fundamental values that make America a great country. Our Constitution guarantees the separation of church and state, which means that the government cannot establish or promote any religion. This principle protects not only the religious freedom of individuals but also the integrity of our democratic institutions.



Aubrey Echard

When religion becomes entangled with politics, it can be used to justify discrimination, oppression and persecution of minority groups. This is not only morally wrong but also a violation of our Constitution. As a nonbeliever, I have the right to live my life according to my own beliefs and values, free from government interference or coercion. If the government were to adopt Christian nationalism as its guiding principle, my rights and freedoms could be threatened. I could be denied access to certain services or opportunities simply because I do not share the same religious beliefs as those in power. Is this not the same religious persecution that our ancestors came to this country to escape?

Furthermore, Christian nationalism distorts the teachings of Christianity itself. The bible teaches us to love our

neighbors as ourselves, to welcome strangers, and to care for the poor and marginalized. These values are not exclusive to Christians but are shared by people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all. Christian nationalism, on the other hand, promotes a narrow, exclusionary version of Christianity that ignores the diversity and richness of human experience. Christian nationalism creates an us-versus-them mentality that can be incredibly dangerous. It promotes the idea that Christians are superior to non-Christians and that those who do not conform to Christian values are somehow less deserving of rights and protections. This kind of thinking can lead to discrimination, persecution, and even violence against minority groups.

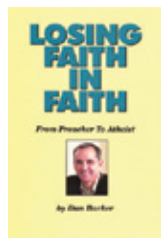
I urge you to reconsider your support for Christian nationalism and embrace a more inclusive and diverse vision for our country. As an elected official, it is your duty to represent all Americans, not just those who share your religious beliefs.

Our country is strongest when we respect the diversity of beliefs and uphold the rights of its citizens. I hope that you will take this message to heart and work toward a better future for all of us.

*Aubrey, 22, is from Acworth, Ga., and attends Kennesaw State University, where she is majoring in graphic communications.*

*“I was born into a long line of Mormons dating back to the pioneers,” Aubrey writes. “I left the church in 2019. Growing up as a Mormon, I felt very isolated, as I felt othered even among other Christians. Now, as an ex-Mormon, I feel even more isolated. My goal is to help other people who also left the church feel less alone than I did.”*

Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist



By Dan Barker

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

Published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online  
ffrf.org/shop



# College essay contest honorable mentions

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

## Evan Brown

As a nonbeliever, I am deeply troubled by the implications of Christian nationalism for my own rights and freedoms, as well as for those of other non-Christians in this country. The movement sends a message that we are not welcome in America, that our beliefs and values are somehow less valid than those of the majority, and that we are not entitled to the same protections and rights as our Christian counterparts. This is unacceptable and goes against the very principles upon which our country was founded. We must strive to create a society where everyone feels included, valued and respected, regardless of their religious beliefs or lack thereof. This is the only way to ensure that we continue to uphold the ideals of liberty, equality and justice for all.



Evan Brown

*Evan, 19, is from Wentzville, Mo., and attends University of Missouri where he is majoring in political science, criminology and constitutional democracy.*

## Matthew Quall

Christian nationalism is anything but constitutional. Despite standing behind a conservative rhetoric, it seeks to simply ignore the Constitution so as to benefit



Matthew Quall

both the institution of Christianity as well as Christians in power. The First Amendment clearly states that citizens of the United States of America have the freedom to practice whatever religion suits them, as well as not practicing any religion. Your Christian nationalist stance is a direct contradiction to the first section of the most important document in our country's history.

*Matthew, 21, is from Bremerton, Wash., and attends University of Washington where he is majoring in civil engineering.*

## Gary Ramee Jr.

Do you think it's fair to use your freedom of speech to infringe upon my freedom of religion? You believe having faith and leaning into Christian principles will make America great again. Who and what are you comparing America to? America has always strived for greatness! It is a beacon of hope for people all over the world. We have people fighting to get into this country and to protect this country every day. With all due respect, greatness has never been a problem for America.



Gary Ramee, Jr.

*Gary, 23, is from Marrero, La., and attends Louisiana State University, where he is majoring in electrical engineering.*

## Katherine Shaw

Denying others the same rights as given to you is unethical and barbaric. Your beliefs are a threat to the very foundation this country was built on. Religion has no place in governmental decisions. I understand you hold firm in your beliefs and believe them to be what is best for the country, but that is purely your opinion, nothing more.



Katherine Shaw

If the United States were to involve Christian nationalism within laws, then we are no longer the land of the free, but rather the land of the scared. Scared to explore religious freedom and expression, but more importantly, scared to act as a free individual.

*Katherine, 20, is from Hudson, Ohio, and attends University of Kentucky, majoring in accounting and economics.*

## Jeremy Yiu

If our government were to be based on biblical principles, it would mean that my beliefs and values would be marginalized and even criminalized. It would mean that my right to practice my own religion, or lack thereof, would be in jeopardy. It would



Jeremy Yiu

mean that my worth as a citizen would be determined by my adherence to a particular religion, rather than my contributions to society.

As an elected official, your responsibility is to represent all of your constituents, not just those who share your religious beliefs.

*Jeremy, 20, is from Oakland, Calif., and attends UC-Davis where he is majoring in computer science.*

## Madison Zitlaw

I have become aware you identify as a Christian nationalist and are openly urging your party to become the "party of Christian nationalism." According to Evangelicals for Democracy in their article, "The Truth About Christian Nationalism," you are identifying with a group that comprises only 20 percent of America's population and is represented by mostly white people.



Madison Zitlaw

If identifying a political party with a religion isn't bad enough, it is alarming to watch the Christian nationalists try to strip rights away from the American public that do not support their particular beliefs. Examples include taking away abortion rights and promoting the banning of books in the classroom because they don't support Christian tenets.

*Madison, 20, is from Fort Wayne, Ind., and attends Indiana University, where she is majoring in marketing.*

## CRANKMAIL

Welcome to another batch of Crankmail, correspondence to FFRF from those who seem to have missed quite a few days of school in their time. Printed as received.

**Die already:** if you don't believe in God then why do you have to advertise get off our TV and airways I am so sorry for you because really none of us know if there's a heaven and hell but you're sure going to feel it lwhy don't you just kill yourself now ? Swim with fishes now scattered in the oceanYou have chosen hate over faithDo your campaigns off the air I pay for RON — Mark Garratt

**Founders were Christians:** You're woefully-misguided about the founding fathers. None were atheists, and were responsible for important additions to the USA: including the inscriptions on our currency, such as, "In God we trust".To be clear, you people are entitled to no special considerations, and in fact, are responsible for the degeneration of American society. Indeed, the downward spiral started when I was a we one with one of your heros, Madeline Murray O'Hair. It's also worth noting that toward that she was murdered: a violent end to ve certain.In closing, you people are clowns, and are a dangerous segment of society. It's my fondest wish that your, "OrgNization" crumble, and my belief is that you people are liars, cheats, and thieves. BTW - all of you will go to Hell for your beliefs. — Nick Baranyk

**Afterlife:** The pursuit of the truth is the main argument of atheists, while they appear to be far far far away from reality because the only interpretation of life is that it is going to end for good with no afterlife. For many, the idea of an afterlife is just an illusion, for such a belief, there is the only solution

which is death. Just die and see by yourself. Hmm. — Mallory Jones

**The True God:** God is God even if it offends proud, self-deceived humans. These atheist guys want us to look up to them and follow their "commandments". Atheists want us to follow them and not the true God. I follow the true God not sorry, weak, conceited, deceived, human wannabe-gods. Atheists say they see when they really don't, they are spiritually dead, blind. They are the blind leading the blind with their big heads and lies right into a hopeless dark hole of eternal perdition. They reject the mercy of God by refusing to repent of their sins to receive forgiveness through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ. Too bad for them, they will die in their sins, unrepented, unforgiven and lost for eternity. They thinks that is the smart way to go. Terrible bad example! They believe their little brains have figured it all out and that human reasoning is infallible. Their weak, sorry, human reasoning is their idol, and as any idol, it is a fake god that cannot save to give eternal life. That is how I see it. — Jeffrey Chancellor

**Hell is real:** You may noy be afraid to "burn in hell" now as you quoted on tv but you cant erase the fact that there is a hell. If you refuse to believe in Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, your sending yourself to hell. God gives you the free gift, you either take it.....or leave it, seems you have made your choice, but i do pray you change your mind one day, you really think your here by chance, theres nothing after, then why do you have emotions, love? God is love, not goop you think we may have grown from, think about it, your soul depends on it, God bless you. — Kelly Tankersly

**Stop it!:** Nasty, ugly, bigots and intolerant hypocrites is what you are. Don't practice religion if you don't want to, but quit insulting those who do. — Bruce Slaughter

**Christian nation:** When atheist attack Christian's....I as a Christian attack back!! The United States was founded as a Christian Nation. So move to another country that is not based on Christianity. — Angelique Barrows

**Never-ending pain:** If there is no God, why do you live so short...pinch yourself, does it hurt, now

imagine that pain thousand times more painful and endless...atheist...you'll realize when you're in Pain AGONIZING PAIN! — Logan Dumas

**Free speech:** You dont tell america what to do. If we want to pray in school, hand out bibles in school, have a christian club in school, we will. You are infringing on our 1st amendment right to free speech and our right to assemble. You are an illegal federal agency. Go after Islam. I dont see none of ya'll sending muslims any letters. — Charity Smith

Watch our show every Sunday!

Visit FFRF's YouTube Channel to watch the shows.

Freethought Matters

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

Freethought Matters TV talk show airs in:

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

Go to: [ffrf.org/freethought-matters](http://ffrf.org/freethought-matters) for more information



# Students earn FFRF cash awards through SSA

FFRF, with the financial backing of the individual donors, has collaborated with the Secular Student Alliance to select, announce and distribute these student awards. (As per SSA policy to help protect the students' identities, only the students' first names are used.)

- This year's winners are:
- Tatiana** — Al Luneman Student Activist Award (\$2,000).
  - Katherine** — Yip Harburg Lyric Foundation Student Scholarship (\$1,000).
  - DaMarion** — Cliff Richards Memorial Student Activist Award (\$1,000).
  - Kourtney** — Cliff Richards Memorial Student Activist Award (\$1,000).
  - Ve** — Cliff Richards Memorial Student Activist Award (\$1,000).

FFRF has a variety of scholarships available to give directly for exceptional student activism, as well.

If you know of any student who is actively helping to uphold state/church separation or fighting for the rights of nonbelievers, please use the form here: [ffrf.us/nominate](http://ffrf.us/nominate).

## Al Luneman Student Activist Award

**Tatiana**  
**St. Mary's University**

Tatiana is an English literature major at St. Mary's University and her educational aspirations are grounded in a desire to become a teacher. Being a child of an immigrant herself, Tatiana understands the challenges communities can



Tatiana

face and aims to provide them with opportunities for a better future. Tatiana's humanist values are closely tied to her secular identity as an agnostic. Her upbringing in a private Christian school eventually led her to question the existence of God, given the cruelty she witnessed in the world. Tatiana also recognized the presence of interwoven patriarchy in religious institutions, particularly in Christianity and Catholicism. This shift to agnosticism has allowed her the freedom to explore the different aspects of herself and her core beliefs around advocacy, equal rights, and love.

Tatiana is a vocal advocate for reproductive rights, understanding that these rights cannot be regulated or dictated by religious beliefs.

In the fall of 2022, Tatiana helped to establish the group "Fangs Out Reproductive Rights In" (FORRI) at St. Mary's University, challenging the status quo on one of the oldest Catholic college campuses in America. FORRI joined a national charter of unofficially recognized reproductive rights clubs in America, becoming the first chapter in Texas since the overturning of Roe v. Wade.

The club aims to educate students about their innate rights to reproductive and sexual health, emphasizing love, education and science over fear, hatred and hypocrisy. She encountered opposition, even from the university's president, who sent a mass email defaming the club's name out of fear. Undeterred, FORRI partnered with nonprofits to distribute sexual health resources to students and addressed issues such as the lack of free menstrual products, high rape cases on campus, and overall

shaming of freedom of speech on sexual health topics on campus. FORRI also received support from the Texas Women's Health Caucus and members of the Texas House of Representatives.

*FFRF thanks FFRF Member Al Luneman for making possible this scholarship.*

## Yip Harburg Lyric Foundation Scholarship

**Katherine**  
**University of Pennsylvania**

As she embarks on her academic journey majoring in design at the University of Pennsylvania, Katherine's artistic exploration has evolved to encompass real-world issues. She aspires to use her creative talents to address contemporary



Katherine

challenges, such as environmental and cultural issues. Katherine's evolution as a secular humanist reflects her commitment to critical thinking and questioning. Growing up exposed to diverse religious beliefs, she discovered a more human-centered worldview that prioritizes reason, compassion and the value of every individual. Her journey led her to join the Camden County Humanists, where she found a sense of belonging and empowerment among like-minded individuals dedicated to creating a more compassionate and rational world.

As a woman of Chinese descent from a lower-class background, Katherine faced discrimination across various dimensions of her identity. Her secular humanism became a wellspring of strength and resilience, reinforcing her belief in the inherent worth of every individual. It ignited her determination to challenge discrimination not just for herself but for others facing similar struggles. Katherine actively advocates for the rights and dignity of individuals facing discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, or class.

Her activism takes the form of challenging discriminatory attitudes and promoting understanding and inclusivity through education and empathy. She has co-published and illustrated children's books addressing critical issues and organized events promoting interculturality. In the UNICEF Club, she advocates for children's initiatives and extends kindness to the less fortunate through blanket-making events and card-writing for hospitalized children. She provides academic support through school-wide peer tutoring and fosters kindness through the Random Acts of Kindness Club. She also plans to establish a chapter of the Secular Student Alliance, fostering critical thinking and open dialogue.

*FFRF thanks the Yip Harburg Lyric Foundation for this scholarship.*

## Cliff Richards Memorial Student Activist Award

**DaMarion**  
**Morehouse College**

Aspiring to be a world-renowned artist and performer, DaMarion specializes in painting, ceramics and collage work at Morehouse College. His artistic influences include renowned figures like Aar-



DaMarion

on Douglas, Augusta Savage and Mickalene Thomas, reflecting his ambition to leave a lasting impact through his creative expressions. DaMarion's secular identity is rooted in open-mindedness and nonjudgmental acceptance of how others live their lives. Having grown up in a church environment, he made the decision to become more "secular" as a gay man due to the discrimination he observed within religious institutions.

As the president of Morehouse ADO-DI, DaMarion plays a crucial role in planning events, fostering connections with students, alumni, and potential sponsors. His leadership within the LGBTQ-plus community showcases his dedication to advocating for the rights and well-being of marginalized groups.

DaMarion's personal experiences as a gay individual and minority have driven him to choose advocacy as his path. He actively speaks out against injustices faced by the LGBTQ-plus community, collaborating with organizations like the Mocha Center and the Shade Project. For him, authenticity and courage in the face of adversity are more important than living in fear.

*FFRF thanks the estate of Cliff Richards for this scholarship for HBCU students.*

## Cliff Richards Memorial Student Activist Award

**Kourtney**  
**Spelman College**

Majoring in sociology and anthropology with a minor in public health, Kourtney is committed to the social well-being of Black communities through secularism. Her mission revolves around reproductive justice, menstrual equity, and healing for the



Kourtney

Black community, demonstrating her proactive engagement with pressing social issues. Her thirst for knowledge drives her ambition to pursue a Ph.D. in African American and Women & Gender Studies, aiming to become a college professor.

Kourtney's secular identity is deeply rooted in the separation of morality and political activism from religious influence. She emphasizes the importance of secularism in navigating inherently political aspects of her identity as a Black woman in the United States. Her approach combines compassion with social action, drawing inspiration from Buddhism and spiritual practices to address social justice issues affecting Black populations.

Her involvement in Spelman College's Unite for Reproductive and Gender Equity (URGE) chapter reflects her commitment to advocating against abortion bans and restrictions on women's rights. Kourtney's initiatives aim to ensure free and safe abortions for all who choose them and to promote menstrual equity and education in academic settings. She actively

participates in programs such as Spelman College's Social Justice Program and the UNCF/Mellon Mays Fellowship. She also creates spaces for healing and creative liberation through initiatives like URGE and Knittens, the first yarn-working club on campus.

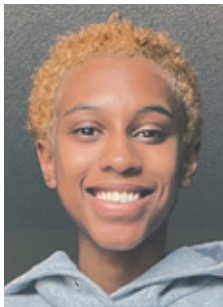
Her dedication extends to community building and space-holding efforts, including partnering with Seed Life Foundation to address teen dating violence and sex trafficking within academic settings. Kourtney's involvement with B.L.I.S.S (Beauty, Light, Inspiration, Self Love, & Self Care) emphasizes the importance of accurate Black girlhood representations and mindfulness activities, empowering young Black girls.

*FFRF thanks the estate of Cliff Richards for this scholarship for HBCU students.*

## Cliff Richards Memorial Student Activist Award

**Ve**  
**Howard University**

As a journalism major at Howard University, Ve wants to use their education as a powerful tool to advocate for marginalized and oppressed groups. Through their writing and in-



Ve

vestigative skills, Ve aims to shed light on everyday issues that impact minority and oppressed communities, striving to shape a better world through awareness and solutions to global and national

social injustices.

Their secular identity is deeply intertwined with their racial, gender and sexual identity. As a Black, South-Asian-American, nonbinary, lesbian individual, they have witnessed the use of religious beliefs to justify oppression against people like them. Ve sees secularism as a means to combat this oppression by advocating for the separation of church and state, ensuring equal rights and opportunities for everyone, regardless of their beliefs or identities.

Ve's activism is particularly focused on reproductive rights. They actively spoke out and participated in protests when Roe v. Wade was overturned, using their voice to raise awareness about the importance of bodily autonomy as a fundamental human right.

Their podcast serves as a platform to uplift and empower queer, Black womxn while addressing critical issues impacting their community. Their activism aims to enlighten people about the challenges their community faces, fostering awareness and driving change to secure equal rights and privileges.

In addition to their advocacy work, Ve volunteers with various non-profit organizations, including the Social Impact Movement, Stonewall National Museum and Archives, and the Voter Empowerment Project, to directly contribute to positive change in her areas of focus. Their dream is to work for organizations like the ACLU and NAACP, where they can further their mission of social justice and equality.

*FFRF thanks the estate of Cliff Richards for this scholarship for HBCU students.*



# LETTERBOX

## Sacramento chapter gets proclamation rescinded

Our local El Dorado County Board of Supervisors rescinded its proclamation making July “American Christian History Month”!

FFRF attorneys sent a pointed letter to several key members of the board, and a local television news station quoted the Greater Sacramento Chapter of FFRF as saying the proclamation (which contained historical errors) should be “embarrassing.” Then, after public petitions and outcry, the El Dorado Board voted on Sept. 19 to rescind the unconstitutional proclamation. El Dorado County is known as a primarily conservative enclave up in the beautiful foothills outside of Sacramento, making this win all the more visible and noteworthy!

It might seem daunting, but together we can make a difference. Just imagine how many freethinkers living in this area are feeling the sudden surge of freedom seeing they are not alone in this battle. Thank you, FFRF! **California**

## Son’s question spurred me to questioning

Having my 88th birthday recently was a reminder that one of the things I wanted to accomplish before my birthdays were over was to express a deep appreciation to Annie Laurie Gaylor and Anne Nicol Gaylor by forming FFRF in the 1970s.

It was during that period of time when my wife and I were teachers in the local public school system and were raising our two young children in the same Methodist Church traditions in which we were raised. We were both very active in the church where my wife ran the nursery and I was the Sunday school superintendent.

One Sunday, while on the way home from church, our son said that he questioned his fundamentalist Christian teacher (whom I had recruited) about a “hell-related” situation. It is very difficult for me to realize that event as being my first recognition that such a religious concept should be questioned. Wow!

It was that single event that spurred my mind to seek help, and it was not long before I found your young organization and, in turn, began to discover the Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Robert Ingersoll, Dan Barker, etc. contributions in books, lectures and YouTube debates. Within a year, our family was feeling the comforts of being free from religion. Today, our family unit has grown to 10 adult individuals living in the comfort of FFRF. **Colorado**

## More people should share worldview of Hackworth

Martin Hackworth’s “30,000 days to count your lucky stars” in the September issue made a compelling case for an enlightened worldview that I wish more people shared. **Maryland**

## I celebrate Banned Books Week



My local library actively participates in Banned Book Week with displays, discussions and activities for both adults and children. Although many seem to be unaware of the event, it is another critical reminder that no one group (religious, political, governmental or private) should have the right to control and dictate what people are allowed to read. In 2023, there has been an avalanche of books being banned in schools, and, at the same time, the promotion of one-sided religious materials and activities to a captive audience.

It is obvious that anytime you limit information and push only one point of view you move toward an authoritarian society. All religions that I am aware of promote this idea and it is in direct opposition to a free society and the fundamental principles of democracy.

**Ron Brennian**  
**Maryland**

## Student essayists again make great points

Once again, the student essays got me to thinking, this time about the recurring themes over the years. Two themes in particular stood out for me.

One is the theme of people, as Rae Davis said, choosing what “material” in religion they agree with, which is what many of the religious would say is the problem with atheism. If you can pick and choose whatever values you want, rather than having to live by imposed values, then what is there to ensure that your values are good values? However, uniformly, the values the students pick involve empathy for others, which even the religious agree is a good value.

As Vivien Talon notes, religion is said to nurture empathy, and sometimes it does, but how good is empathy if it’s imposed on you with an underlying threat of what happens if you aren’t empathic? Is it not better if, as TJ Black notes, you choose to be empathic by your own volition, based on critically thinking about your value system, not being forced into a “premade” one — especially when that “premade” one is used to support prejudices that are the exact opposite of empathic?

The lack of true empathy among many of the religious is the second recurring theme I see in the student essays. For example, a large number of the student atheists were driven away from religion because they are LGBTQ+ plus, which is a perfect example of a “premade” prejudice. Unthinking adherence to grossly outdated standards results in mistreating other human beings for qualities that critical thinking tells us there’s no good reason to outlaw.

Also, as many of the Black students have noted, the Christian bible was used to justify slavery, which certainly demonstrates a huge lack of empa-

thy. In this case, I think there are two “brands” of Christianity. There is the brand that provides hope for a better future (if only after you’re dead) that helps sustain people whose current quality of life is terrible.

Then, there is the brand that, as Talon notes, justifies considering yourself as part of a superior class, which was “made for” people like Christian nationalists, justifying their prejudices against Blacks, gays, immigrants, Jews, etc.

If even the religious can pick and choose their values, wouldn’t the use of critical thinking to make those choices have better results for society? **Colorado**

## The devil only exists in our imaginations

I recall reading that 55 percent of the American people believe in the literal existence of a devil. What I know about a devil I first learned as a child in Sunday school. He had horns, hooved feet, a tail and was often pictured holding a trident and wearing a scarlet cape.

And, I’ve been told the devil is something that I should be aware of and concerned about. With all the things I have to worry about, an invisible devil is not one of them.

Mark Twain was once asked what he thought about the existence of Satan: “It took several thousand years to convince our fine race, including every splendid intellect in it, that there is no such thing as a witch. It has taken several thousand years to convince our fine race, including every splendid intellect in it, that there is no such thing as Satan.”

The devil can be found in our ignorance, fear and in our imagination. As it has been said before, the invisible and the nonexistent look very much alike! **Florida**

## Write to us

To send a letter to the editor for Freethought Today, please email it to [editor@ffrf.org](mailto:editor@ffrf.org).

## FFRF continues to be an inspiration to many

I’ve been a member of FFRF for several years. I wanted to thank you for introducing me to Lerone A. Martin and his book *The Gospel According to J. Edgar Hoover*. When I was a teenager, I was forced to watch several Hoover/FBI-produced films on godless communism, and that stench is as pungent today as then.

In fact, your programs “Ask An Atheist” and “Freethought Matters” are always anticipated and informative. I watch them on YouTube.

Also, some time ago, I ordered *Women Without Superstition* and Annie Laurie Gaylor was kind enough to autograph it to me. I try to purchase the books through your organization whenever possible. And I have, naturally, several music CDs by Dan Barker.

Thank you for your work, dedication, wit, sagacity and charm. While the country may seem to be slipping backward, FFRF has been an inspiration to greater multitudes than ever fed on fishes and loaves or watched a Galilean deus ex machina lift a zombie beyond the ozone. **Arizona**

## “Beliefs,” a poem by FFRF Member Allan Provost

For trusting children everywhere  
There always come that day  
When logic complex them to  
Put fairy tales away.  
Sad it is, I must admit,  
When they accept the truth  
That no generous fairy  
Rewards each missing tooth.  
No Easter Bunny hops along  
On fat, white, furry legs  
With an incongruous treasure  
Of pastel candy eggs.  
And, alas, must come that Christmas  
When suddenly they see  
That Santa Claus and reindeers  
Just simply cannot be.  
“Bringing toys to children everywhere  
On a single tiny sleigh.”  
Is absurdly impossible  
In every single way.  
Yes, it’s true, all children  
Will soon discard themselves  
All belief in fairies,  
Goblins, ghost and elves.  
Yet while giving up all fantasies  
Without another nod.  
For reasons inexplicable  
Most still believe in god. **Florida**

## There are benefits to a nonreligious view of life

Thank you for the article “30,000 days to count your lucky stars.” This is a very positive article about the benefits of a nonreligious view on life. I recommend an article like this in each issue, to illustrate the value of a nonreligious view. Atheists are not the non-contributing



mean, ugly purposeless people as others are wont to portray us. That a productive life brings meaning, happiness and satisfaction, benefits of a religious-free life.

My historical research was only possible because I was unhampered by beliefs. My predecessors, European gentlemen “antiquarians” held religious views of the depth of time, the origins of man, and so on which interfered with their thinking, even though they may have thought they were free of the Church.

By the way, I bought Alice Greczyn’s book *Wayward*. It taught me how deeply troubled a fundamentalist upbringing can cause a person to be, even when blessed with beauty and intelligence.

Thanks for the always-interesting newspaper.  
**Washington**

## Celebrating a decade free from religion

Indoctrinated from birth into a Pentecostal pastor’s home (I was my dad’s assistant and pianist for decades), I finally left it all in 2013.

Celebrating 10 years out and still wondering how it held me for so damn long. But, happily, my spouse and all three adult children and their partners are secular, as is my only granddaughter. She is able, for instance, to break into dance (she’s 4), something we were never allowed to do. There’s never a day when I do not marvel that she is being raised with a winsomeness, curiosity and enjoyment of life I never knew. My life slogans are “No gods, no superstitions, no bumps in the night,” and “I left it all for a better moral ethic than my faith ever provided.”

Thanks much for keeping up the pressure on religion. I am furious about the Dobbs decision and will never stop working to get out the vote. Women, I feel, will save us.  
**Alaska**

## Get these two books for readers on your list

I emailed FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor a suggestion that she read *Starstruck: A Memoir of Astrophysics and Finding Light in the Dark* (by Sarafina El-Badry Nance) because I thought she’d really enjoy it (as would, perhaps, most other FFRF members).

She thanked me for my recommendation, then suggested that I read *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus, which, after I began reading, I neglected all the other works in my “must read” pile until I’d finished it.

Both of these books would make great “solstice season” gifts, especially if you give them to someone close enough to you, so that you can borrow them, as needed.

Crossword answers

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

Pros with the hose



Photo by Chris Line

The beautiful gardens and flower beds around Freethought Hall in Madison, Wis., need continual care. These FFRF staffers take turns watering the roses, geraniums, petunias and other shrubs and flowers on the premises. Front row from left, Lisa Treu, Sadie Pattinson and Lily Pocs. Back row from left, PJ Slinger, Ryan Jayne, Roger Daleiden (and Chris Line, who took this photo).

*Starstruck* (nonfiction, female written) is an enjoyable jargon-free read, and I’d recommend it to any woman involved with any of the hard sciences, or to anyone who has, in any way, been involved with such a woman. Ditto, *Lessons in Chemistry* (fiction, female written) for which a TV series is being released in November by Apple TV.

For those, who might be looking for a book to give to anyone who still attends church services, both would be excellent choices. They’re interesting, fun to read, and shouldn’t upset anyone, unless they read *Lessons in Chemistry* to its easily misunderstood provocative conclusion.  
**Oklahoma**

## Essay winner gratified over FFRF scholarship

I am writing to express my gratitude for the generous scholarship you have provided to me. I’m studying health sciences and biochemistry at Rice University and this scholarship will make it easier for me to focus on keeping my grades up and getting into medical school. I really appreciate that you have funded a scholarship for those like me who are ineligible for many religiously oriented scholarships.  
**Oregon**

*Editor’s note:* Jacob earned second place in FFRF’s high school essay contest and was awarded \$3,000.

## I’m very happy to have learned of FFRF

I learned of the FFRF within just the past few weeks. I am in awe of what I’ve been missing. I feel like I was wandering around looking for an organization that

Cryptogram answer

Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind, and unfits it for every noble enterprise, every expanded prospect.

— James Madison

thought like me and I’ve finally found it. Keep up the excellent work!  
**North Carolina**

## Turn from Blume’s smut to wholesomeness of bible

Praise be our leaders who shall turn our children from smut by the likes of Judy Blume and unto the wholesomeness of the Holy Book. Through their wisdom and action, may our youth keep their minds straight and pure.

May they absorb the beauty of our Lord’s love as instilled through the imagery of Ecclesiastes 23:20 (“There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses.”); Genesis 29:23 (“And it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her.”); and of sportsmanship as shown in Genesis 34:25 (“On the third day, when they were sore, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, took their swords and came against the city while it felt secure and killed all the males.”).  
**Maryland**

## Awareness is the key to unlocking the future

From the moment of our birth until the day we die, we will never again receive anything that will compare to the gift of life. As small children, we are conditioned to believe whatever we are taught by our parents. As our world expands, we are influenced by our neighbors, schools, governments, churches and interactions with just about everyone and everything.

Before we are capable of forming rational thoughts and making decisions based on knowledge and experience, we are indoctrinated with many falsehoods and beliefs that prevail in the overwhelming majority of the world populations.

The main ingredient in these falsehoods and beliefs is both the subtle and not-so-subtle omnipresence of religion. From our early ancestors until now, in one form or another, it has gained and retained, at all costs, power.

Those of us who have come to realize through knowledge, thought and awareness of what is going on are in no position, yet, to successfully challenge and change the powers that be. Such is the world a child is born into today and will spend its lifetime.

It saddens me to realize that the average person in our lifetime will not see the beauty of their existence on our planet. They will live their lives unaware that they have every right to live a more meaningful, aware, and freer life.

Awareness is the key to unlocking the future to bring about change. We can, as more people become secular, bring a new school of thought to the forefront and implement changes for a better and freer life, without religious indoctrination and corrupt government control.  
**California**

## FFRF prepared me for this interaction

Thanks to FFRF, I was calmly prepared recently for an exchange with a woman in the housewares aisle of a local Goodwill store.

I started down the aisle, pushing my cart and looking for things I didn’t really need. Ahead of me, I spied a woman deep in conversation with a fellow, who had the look in his eye of a deer in the headlights. They were blocking the aisle, so I stopped and waited for them to move on. It became apparent they were talking about religion and faith — she was proselytizing him. I waited and waited; finally, she turned to me and asked, “Do you agree”? As her attention turned from him to me, the fellow grabbed his cart and fled.

“No,” I said.  
She asked me why not.  
“Because I’m an atheist,” I replied.  
She raised her arm and gestured all around her, and asked me, “Well, who do you think made all this?”  
I wasn’t sure if she meant the housewares department at the Goodwill store, or some scenario only she could see.  
“Certainly not some invisible sky god,” I told her.  
“But you have to have faith!” she exclaimed.

I was happy to tell her that “Faith is believing what you know ain’t true.”  
Thanks to FFRF for giving me the courage and the words to deflect this kind of encounter.  
**Wisconsin**

## Cross removal was also aided by volunteers

John and I continue to enjoy the newspaper, and would like to add something to the August article about the cross on Albany (Calif.) Hill.

We are indebted to FFRF’s work, and to that of Albany’s municipal government, in getting the cross removed. But, let us also praise the many volunteer activists who patiently worked on this project since at least 2015, especially Rochelle Nason (Albany native, attorney, and former Albany City Council member), who kept locals in neighboring cities well-informed with her detailed posts and links on Nextdoor, et al., urging us to call, e-mail and otherwise nag the Lions Club.

Also important: Albany is north of Oakland, true, but it is immediately north of Berkeley, a small city swarming with dedicated freethinkers.  
**California**



# Freethinking follies

## Heathen humor

These notes (allegedly) have appeared in church bulletins or were announced in church services. Thanks to Marian Wiggins, who forwarded them to us.

The Fasting & Prayer Conference includes meals.

The sermon this morning: "Jesus Walks on the Water." The sermon tonight: "Searching for Jesus."

Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Bring your husbands.

Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our community. Smile at someone who is hard to love. Say "Hell" to someone who doesn't care much about you.

Ladies Bible Study will be held Thursday morning at 10 a.m. All ladies are invited to lunch in the Fellowship Hall after the B.S. is done.

Don't let worry kill you off — let the church help.

Miss Charlene Mason sang "I Will Not Pass This Way Again," giving obvious pleasure to the congregation.

For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.

Next Thursday there will be tryouts for the choir. They need all the help they can get.

Irving Benson and Jessie Carter were married on Oct. 24 in the church. So ends a friendship that began in their school days.

A bean supper will be held on Tuesday evening in the church hall. Music will follow.

At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be "What Is Hell?" Come early and listen to our choir practice.

Eight new choir robes are currently needed due to the addition of several new members and to the deterioration of some older ones.

Scouts are saving aluminum cans, bottles and other items to be recycled. Proceeds will be used to cripple children.

Please place your donation in the envelope along with the deceased person you want remembered.

The church will host an evening of fine dining, super entertainment and gracious hostility.

The ladies of the church have cast off clothing of every kind. They may be seen in the basement on Friday afternoon.

This evening at 7 p.m. there will be a hymn singing in the park across from the church. Bring a blanket and come prepared to sin.

The pastor would appreciate it if the ladies of the congregation would lend him their electric girdles for the pancake breakfast next Sunday.

Low Self-Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday at 7 PM. Please use the back door.

The eighth graders will be presenting Shakespeare's "Hamlet" in the church basement Friday at 7 p.m. The congregation is invited to attend this tragedy.

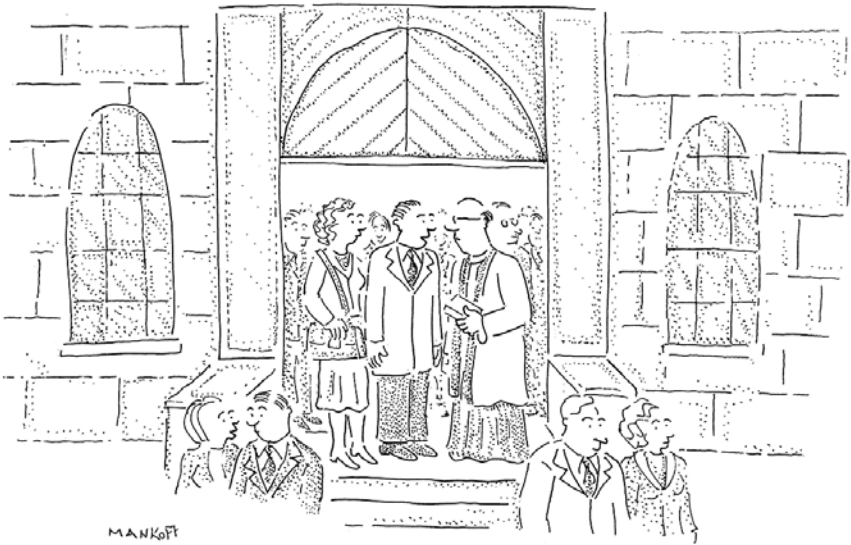
Weight Watchers will meet at 7 p.m. at the First Presbyterian Church. Please use large double doors at the side entrance.

The associate minister unveiled the church's new campaign slogan last Sunday: "I Upped My Pledge — Up Yours."

Potluck supper Sunday at 5 p.m. — prayer and medication to follow.



"Quit worrying about corroborating your sources—it's not as if anyone's going to take all this literally."



"Good sermon, Reverend, but all that God stuff was pretty far-fetched."

## Pagan puns

Have you heard of the Freedom From Religion Foundation? It's a non-prophet organization.

I wanted to be a Gregorian monk, but never got the chants.

Pope: There's an image of Jesus in the margarine!

Dalai Lama: I can't believe it's not Buddha!

Why do mantises pray? Because they are in sects.

My pink flowers died, but then they came back to life. They must be reincarnations.

They say the Sistine Chapel has the best ceiling. I don't know if it's the best, but it's certainly up there.

First two wise men: "We bring you gold and frankincense."

Third wise man: "But wait — there's myrrh."

I had a really stinky fart in church today. I had to sit in my own pew.

My friend didn't pay his exorcist, so he got repossessed.

If Jesus was real, they wouldn't call it the crucifixion, they would call it the crucifact.

Yes, I make a lot of jokes about religion. I'm a known sects offender.

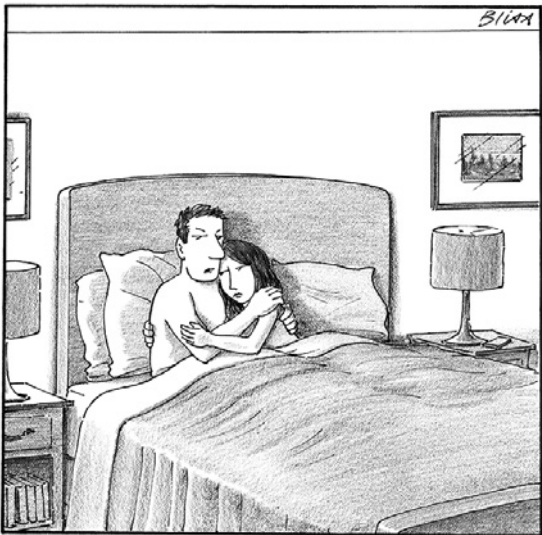
Friend: Thanks for coming to see my acting performance of the guy who puts Jesus up on the cross. How do you think I did?

Me: You nailed it!

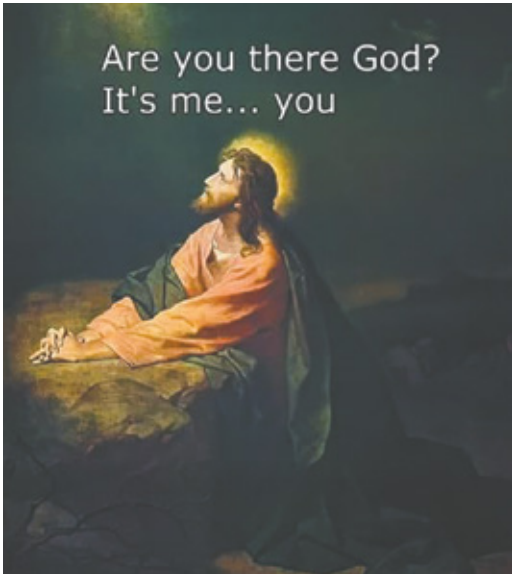
The nun was removed from the convent for her incessant violence toward religious headwear, including hijabs, turbans and yarmulkes. Ultimately, she kicked the habit.



"Once upon a time there was no scientific method. So people made up stupid shit. The end."



"Who's God?"





# 2023 NATIONAL CONVENTION MADISON



To watch videos of the convention speeches, go to: [ffrf.us/con23](https://ffrf.us/con23)

Photo by Kyle Hilker

Godless Gospel's DeAngela Morant calls out for audience interaction while Cynthia McDonald and Tahira Clayton sing backup vocals as the group closes out the first night of FFRF's national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 13.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Jocelyn and David Williamson (Fla.) check out the merchandise tables.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Kathleen Fender (Calif.) poses as the Forward Marching Band performs behind her.



Photo by Chris Line

Wisconsin state Sen. Kelda Roys reacts with excitement at seeing FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert walk toward her.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Craig Aykroyd (Ariz.), Candace Van Etten (Ariz.) and David Solomon (Md.) stop for a quick photo during a break in the action.



Photo by Chris Line

A line of more than 75 people awaited author Kate Cohen for her *We of Little Faith* book-signing event following her speech on Oct. 13.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Suzanne Perry (Minn.) and Terrance Madden (Mich.) share a laugh while getting their photo taken by an FFRF sign.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Carolyn Golojuch has a friend take a photo of her with Elie Mystal during his book-signing event.



AWARDS



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor presented political satirist Lizz Winstead with FFRF’s “Emperor Has No Clothes Award.”



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Elie Mystal poses with his new Clarence Darrow Award after being presented it by FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert.



Photo by Chris Line

Gordon Brown, left, received the “Nothing Fails Like Prayer” award from Freethought Today Editor PJ Slinger. Brown gave two secular invocations at public meetings in Florida this year.



Photo by Chris Line

Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, received FFRF’s “Champion of the First Amendment” award. She was introduced by FFRF Board Chair Stephen Hirtle.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Mary Ziegler shows off her Forward Award after having it presented to her by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. Ziegler spoke on the topic of “The Canary in the Coal Mine: What Does It Mean to Lose a Constitutional Right?”



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Jen Castle, national director of Planned Parenthood, accepts the Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award on behalf of Planned Parenthood, which came with a \$35,000 donation. She was presented the award by Erin Heisler-Wagner, Henry Zumach’s granddaughter.



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Board Member David Tamayo presents author and columnist Kate Cohen with the Freethought Heroine Award. She spoke on the topic of “The Tiny, Titanic Act of Telling the Truth.”



Photo by Chris Line

Emily Olson is all smiles after receiving FFRF’s “Nothing Fails Like Prayer” award from FFRF Board Member Sue Kocher. As a city council member, Olson pushed to discontinue city prayers in Owosso, Mich.

EXECUTIVE BOARD



FFRF 2023  
NATIONAL CONVENTION  
MADISON OCTOBER 13-15

The FFRF Executive Board members include, front row from left, Granada Higgins, Annie Laurie Gaylor and Sue Kocher, and back row from left, Stephen Hirtle, Cheryl Kolbe, Dan Barker, Lisa Strand (FFRF director of operations, not on the board), Steve Salemsen, Todd Peissig, Mike Cermack Jr., David Tamayo and Jeremiah Camara.



Photos by Chris Line

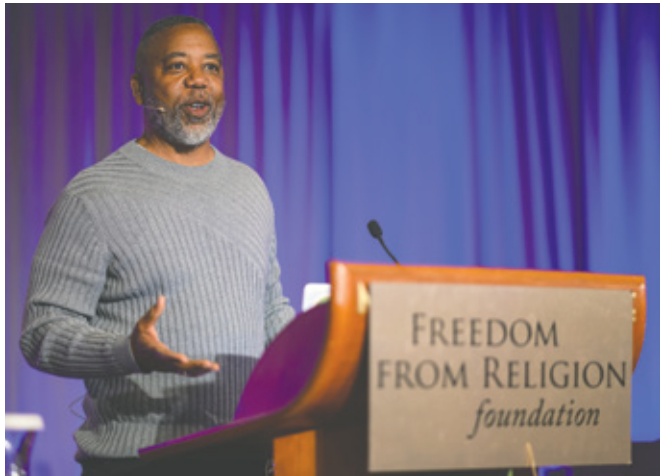
SPEAKERS



Student activist award winner Marcus Stovall, who was introduced by drag queen Bryanna Banx\$, earned FFRF’s Stephen and Diane Uhl “Out of God’s Closet” Student Activist Award of \$5,000.



Bear Bright, who was introduced by drag queen Latina Envy, earned \$5,000 as part of the Richard and Beverly Hermesen Student Activist Award. Bright and Stovall are suing West Texas A&M over censorship of a drag show.



Author and filmmaker Jeremiah Camara, an FFRF Board Member, spoke on the topic of “The Age of Appeasement” during the evening session on Oct. 13.



Former FFRF reproductive rights intern Barbara Alvarez (left) introduced student essay winners Luci Green, Michelle Liao and Skylar Blumenauer.



Founder and president of the Public Religion Research Institute Robert P. Jones spoke about his book, *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and the Path to a Shared American Future*.



Samuel Perry, a professor of sociology at the University of Oklahoma, spoke on the topic of Christian nationalism and his book, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*.



From left, FFRF State Advocacy Specialist Ryan Dudley, Minnesota state Rep. Athena Hollins, Wisconsin state Sen. Kelda Roys, Minnesota state Rep. Mike Freiberg and FFRF Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne held a lively discussion as part of a secular legislative panel.



Andrew Seidel, VP of strategic communications at Americans United, discussed highlights from his book, *American Crusade: How the Supreme Court is Weaponizing Religious Freedom*.

STATE REPS



Photo by Chris Line

The 2023 FFRF State Representatives are, alphabetically, Dan Barker (Wis.), Darrell Barker (Wash.), Charles and Sheri Bender (Ind.), Lance Bredvold (Mont.), Robin Buckallew (Neb.), Chris Calvey (Colo.), Jeremiah Camara (Ga.), Tom Cara (Wis.), John Cavin (Kan.), Dianne Centa (Ohio), Michael Cermak (Pa.), Sheridan Chapin (N.Y.), Dianne Cooper (Iowa), Margaret Downey (Pa.), Mike Dubik (Va.), Carolyn Golojuch (Hawaii), Annie Laurie Gaylor (Wis.), Kevin Gough (Conn.), Ken Gould (Ark.), Alice Heath (Mont.), Ed and Mikel Hensley (Ky.), Granada Higgins (Ga.), Stephen Hirtle (Pa.), Ken Hofbauer (Ill.), Linda Hollar (Texas), George and Julie Iddon (Wash.), Linda Josheff (Wis.), Sue Kocher (N.C.), Cheryl Kolbe (Ore.), Marc-Andre Lachance (Ontario), Aleta Ledendecker (Tenn.), Julie Nichols Legg (Minn.), Jodette Lenser (Mo.), Steven Lowe (D.C.), Douglas Marshall (Mich.), Rob Moore (Wis.), Paul Novak (Iowa), Julie Olsen (Ark.), Todd Peissig (Wis.), Robert Pierce (Idaho), Nancy Rattman (Colo.), Judy Saint (Calif.), Betsy Salemsen (N.H.), Steve Salemsen (Wis.), Tom Schottmiller (Pa.), Sue Schuetz (Wis.), Nick Sheridan (Md.), Steve Solomon (Mo.), Claudette StPierre (Colo.), Bonnie and Gary Stormo (S.D.), David Tamayo (Va.), Tom Waddell (Maine), David and Jocelyn Williamson (Fla.), Lisa Willman (N.M.). (Note: Not all State Representatives are pictured.)





FFRF IT Help Desk Specialist Sheryl Lindmeier takes a photo for Lisa Mavrotheris (Alabama) as she poses with the silicone mannequin of Charles Darwin in the Freethought Hall Library.



Marilyn Nienkirk (Minnesota) and Dana Treadwell (California) are all smiles during the FFRF open house.



Darrell Barker (Washington) chats with FFRF Communications Director Amitabh Pal.



FFRF Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne tickles the ivories as FFRF staff and members mingle in the Charlie Brooks Auditorium during the open house on Oct. 12 prior to the start of the convention.



Members crowd the Anne Nicol Gaylor Lobby of Freethought Hall as they check in for the open house and collect their name badges for the convention



FFRF Litigation Legal Assistant Greta Martens (red shirt) speaks with several members about the FFRF legal team.



FFRF Associate Counsel Liz Cavell (facing away) converses with (from left) Therese Chan (Washington), Pam and Steve Solomon (Missouri) and Jessie Ramsaran (Virginia).



Members and staff meet new friends and old acquaintances in the auditorium at Freethought Hall.



CANDIDS



Photo by Kyle Hilker  
Coyote Herron (Wis.) and Nick McManus (Mich.) are all smiles as they head back into the main ballroom.



Photo by Steve Solomon  
Steve and Pam Solomon (Mo.), Andrew Seidel (Wis.) and Jessie Ramsaran (Va.) enjoy a little levity during a break.



Photo by Chris Line  
Mars De La Tour (Ariz.) excitedly claps following the speech by Emily Olson.



Photo by Chris Line  
Lance Bredvold (Mont.) claps along with the Godless Gospel on Oct. 13. Bredvold is the generous benefactor of the Forward Freethought Scholarships.



Photo by Kyle Hilker  
Cynthia McDonald and the rest of her tablemates have a good laugh during the dinner on Saturday night, Oct. 14.



Photo by Kyle Hilker  
The Forward Marching Band performs during the Friday “Tailgate Party.”



Photo by Chris Line  
Fancy cupcakes were offered to convention attendees following the performance of the Godless Gospel at the end of the program on Friday, Oct. 13.



Photo by Chris Line  
Nearly 550 people attended FFRF’s 2023 convention in Madison, Wis., including members from 45 states, the District of Columbia and Canada.



STAFF



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Director of First Impressions Lisa Treu and Bookkeeper Eleanor McEntee.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Co-President Dan Barker.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Litigation Legal Assistant Greta Martens.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Associate Counsel Sam Grover, Director of Government Affairs Mark Dann and Government Affairs Intern Caitlin Berray.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Intake Attorney Maddie Ziegler, Senior Litigation Counsel Patrick Elliott, Associate Counsel Liz Cavell and Legal Director Rebecca Markert.



Photo by Chris Line

Events and Outreach Manager Sadie Pattinson.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Membership Manager Lily Pocs, Director of Operations Lisa Strand and Bookkeeper Eleanor McEntee.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Shop Manager Katina Gehn, Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne and Graphic Designer Roger Daleiden.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Legal Intern Aiden Culver and Intake Legal Assistant Matt Langer.



Photo by Chris Line

HR Specialist Stephanie Flowers, Editorial Assistant Greg Fletcher, Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence, Digital Communications Manager Rowan Hahn and Legal Fellow Kat Grant.



AUDIO & VIDEO



Photo by Kyle Hilker

FFRF Multimedia Producer Bruce Johnson, left, and his team of audio/video specialists provided the stage videos, sound and captioning. Also pictured, from left: Erin Johnson, Tori Neels, Stephanie Benicek, captioner Norma Miller, Mallory Johnson and Noah Gilfillan. Helping out the AV team, but not pictured, were FFRF IT Director Scott Knickelbine, IT Specialist Sheryl Lindmeier and Buzz Kemper.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Photographer Kyle Hilker smiles as he’s caught on the receiving end of being photographed.



Photo by Steve Solomon

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line also works as FFRF’s chief photographer.

CLEAN MONEY



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Events Manager Sadie Pattinson shows off a winning ticket as emcee Buzz Kemper calls out the name of the winner. Special thanks to Bookkeeper Eleanor McEntee for tracking the “clean money” drawing.



Photo by Steve Solomon

The winners of the 2023 “clean money” drawing are, from left: Mike Garstin, Joy Goldbaum, Nancy Rattmann, Jaime Zillmer, Alice Elliott Heath, Sue Steinkraus, David Carter, David Ford, Bob Newton, Jay Harel, Tom Snider and Ivy Garlynd.

Denom	Year/Series	Donor	Winner!
\$1	1935 series E	Joe LaBonte (Texas)	Nancy Rattmann (Colorado)
\$1	1935 series F	Doug Marshall (Michigan)	Jaime Zillmer (Wisconsin)
\$1	1935 series G	Kelly Houle & Ken Howard (Arizona)	Alice Elliott Heath (Montana)
\$1	1935 series D	Joseph Cunningham (Illinois)	Mike Garstin (Ontario)
\$1	1935 series E	Ann McCulloch (New York)	Joy Goldbaum (New Mexico)
\$2	1928 series G	Ron Frederickson (Wisconsin)	Sue Steinkraus (Wisconsin)
\$2	1953	Frank Prahl (Florida)	David Carter (Alaska)
\$5	1934	Dennis William Wendt (Wisconsin)	David Ford (New Mexico)
\$10	1934 series C	Lyle DeSpain (Illinois)	Bob Newton (California)
\$20	1929	Susan Blake (Nevada)	Jay Harel (California)
\$50	1929	Michael Jacobson (California)	Tom Snider (Virginia)
\$100	1934	Anonymous member (Tennessee)	Ivy Garlynd (Hawaii)

“Clean money” is a term used by FFRF to denote currency printed before 1957, which did not contain the words “In God We Trust.”



Photo by Kyle Hilker

“Clean money” ticket seller Eric Lawrence speaks about the drawing while ticket seller and FFRF Board Member Todd Peissig prepares the tumbler with the raffle tickets and Buzz Kemper cheers.



GODLESS GOSPEL



Photo by Chris Line  
Charles Wilson keeps the beat for the Godless Gospel.



Photo by Kyle Hilker  
Tahira Clayton performs the Dan Barker song, “Let’s All Give Thanks.”



Photo by Kyle Hilker  
Emily Sundin takes center stage while DeAngela Morant sings backup on “Never Be Ashamed.”



Photo by Chris Line  
Cynthia McDonald handles lead singer duties on the song “I Don’t Need Jesus,” written by Dan Barker.



Photo by Chris Line  
Godless Gospel music director and composer Andre Forbes waves to the audience after being introduced.



Photo by Kyle Hilker  
Emily Sundin, Mandisa Thomas, DeAngela Morant, Candace Gorham, Amos Perry, Charles Wilson and Aaron Hill gather for a group photo following Godless Gospel’s performance. Not pictured are singers Heather Kinley and Stephen Phelps.



Photo by Chris Line  
FFRF convention attendees dance and sway to the music of the Godless Gospel.



Photo by Chris Line  
DeAngela Morant belts out “I Believe,” written by Andre Forbes.



Photo by Kyle Hilker  
Mandisa Thomas, left, and Candace Gorham lead the procession to the stage at the start of Godless Gospel’s performance.