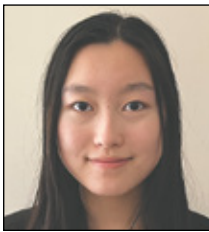


FREETHOUGHT TODAY



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Vol. 40 No. 8

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October 2023

FFRF counters praying coach's theocratic antics

The Freedom From Religion Foundation issued a strong response to a disturbing publicity stunt on the part of prayerful Bremerton (Wash.) High School Coach Joe Kennedy, which included placing a billboard near the school.

Kennedy returned to the Bremerton High School football field on Sept. 1 — accompanied by a blaze of publicity. Hying his comeback, First Liberty (the Christian nationalist legal outfit behind him) launched the “First Freedom Challenge: Take a Knee with Coach Kennedy” campaign, which called on “Americans nationwide to take a knee in personal, private prayer on that day.”

In an appropriate counter to such cynical public relation ploys, FFRF placed a billboard that reads: “Wishing Bremerton High School a safe, secular & successful school year,” adding, “Know Your Rights” and offering a link: ffrf.us/rights. The billboard was located about a two-minute drive from the high school and was up through Sept. 24.

As the FFRF warned in its amicus brief after Kennedy took his fight to pray at the 50-yard line to the U.S. Supreme Court, Kennedy never really intended to go back to coaching. Kennedy resigned from his assistant coaching position at Bremerton High School after

just the first game, confirming that his motive was to performatively promote religion rather than coach students.

FFRF has been engaged in a series of actions ever since the Kennedy v. Bremerton decision came out in June of last year, infamously ignoring the rights of students by siding with a public school coach who insisted on abusing his position of authority to proselytize. FFRF’s campaign includes an online “Know Your Rights” resource webpage and brochure for students. FFRF’s website also offers a handy wallet-size card for students to print out.

Meanwhile, FFRF’s team of attorneys have informed public school administrators that they still have an obligation to respect the rights of students to a public school education free from school-sponsored religion, even in the aftermath of the Kennedy v. Bremerton judgment. FFRF is making administrators in such instances aware that this decision does not give carte blanche to public school employees, including coaches, to engage in religious activity with their players or other subordinates, nor does it allow school districts to impose prayer on all students, parents, and community members gathered for school-sponsored events.



FFRF placed this billboard close to Bremerton (Wash.) High School at the start of the school year.

Coercive prayers are still unconstitutional

This column first appeared in the Seattle Times on Sept. 5.

By Elizabeth Cavell

On Sept. 1, Coach Joe Kennedy returned to the Bremerton High School football field and, as always, he brought publicity with him. Hying his return, First Liberty — the conservative Christian legal outfit behind him — launched the “First Freedom Challenge: Take a Knee with Coach Kennedy” campaign. The challenge called on “people of faith from coast to coast” to make it “a national night of prayer” by joining Kennedy in his postgame short, private, personal

prayer; by sharing a video explaining why prayer is important to them; and challeng-



Elizabeth Cavell

ing others to pray at football games at public schools. Kennedy gave an interview to The Associated Press the morning of the game and his memoir comes out in October. If all this sounds not so personal and private to you, you’re not alone.

This doublespeak is no accident. In its 2022 ruling in Kennedy’s favor, the ultra-

See Prayers on page 18

Photo by Chris Line



Happy heathens

Archreactionary commentator Todd Starnes, a longtime nemesis of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, earlier this year wrote a column attacking one of FFRF’s legal complaints, calling FFRF staff members “Gaylor’s godless gang of thugs.”

Proudly embracing that epithet are FFRF staffers pictured in front of the digital marquee at Freethought Hall, FFRF’s office in downtown Madison, Wis.

Many staff members are wearing new T-shirts proclaiming “Freedom From Religion Foundation,” which are available for purchase through shop.ffrf.org for \$30 (postpaid) or hoodies for \$50.

Pete Facione: ‘Critical thinking is truth seeking’

Name: Pete Facione.
Where I live: Hermosa Beach, Calif.
Where and when I was born: Detroit, 1944.
Family: Noreen Facione, also a staunch FFRF member.
Education: Ph.D. from Michigan State University.
Occupation: CEO Insight Assessment and Principal Strategic Planning Consultant for Measured Reasons LLC.
How I got where I am today: Hard work, good luck and white male privilege.
Where I’m headed: I’ll know when I get there.



Pete Facione

Person in history I admire and why: Hypatia of Alexandria. She was the greatest mathematician and astronomer of her time. Head of the world’s then-greatest library and center of learning in Alexandria, she was able to overcome the profound sexism of her society. In 415, she was murdered by a mob of Christian men.

A quotation I like: “Every system is perfectly designed to produce exactly the results you are getting,” and “Insanity can be defined as doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results.”

Things I like: Family, shooting baskets, playing the keyboard, long walks with my wife and rooting for the Detroit Lions (“Rebuilding since 1957”).

Things I smite: Racists, demagogues, close-mindedness, thoughtless repetition of failed flawed practices, opinions presented with neither reasons nor evidence.

My doubts about religion started: In college, when I was studying to become a priest.

Before I die: Who knows?
Ways I promote freethought: Strong critical thinking is an absolutely essential tool for freethought. Otherwise, where is the “thought” in “freethought”? Research shows that strong critical thinking results in deeper learning, better problem-solving and more thoughtful decision-making in every aspect of life. Critical think-

ing is an engine of the human mind that cannot be turned off once it is activated. It will not permit itself to be contained within only one field of study or areas of activity. That is why a good education is such a threatening thing to any group of religious extremists and political true believers who want to control how other people live. Strong critical thinking is truth-seeking that courageously follows reasons and evidence where ever they lead, even when this results in challenging cherished preconceptions and beliefs.

For over 35 years our company, Insight Assessment, has offered critical thinking skillset and mindset assessments to all levels of education, health care agencies, businesses, military and government clients, etc. In 2023, we began offering online critical thinking personal development materials at insightbasecamp.com. Our belief is that by advancing critical thinking, people will strengthen their ability and their consistent internal motivation to ask difficult questions and to pursue more truthful and complete answers to all questions, including those personally and socially challenging questions relating to religion and politics.

I wish you’d have asked me: “Why do you care?” Answer: Children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, community, science, nation, peace, learning and social justice.

MEET A MEMBER

Critical thinking is skeptical without being cynical. It is open-minded without being wishy-washy. It is analytical without being nitpicky. Critical thinking can be decisive without being stubborn, evaluative without being judgmental, and forceful without being opinionated.

This excerpt is from the book *Think Critically*, written by Pete Facione and Dr. Carol Ann Gittens. Facione says to “read it with the rhythms of Paul’s poetic letter in 1 Corinthians about the importance to Christians of love in mind.”

OVERHEARD

Instead of addressing people’s legitimate grievances, the regime continues to obsess over the hijab and act as if its very survival depends on whether women dress modestly.
Haleh Esfandiari, a fellow at the Washington-based Wilson Center and an Iranian-American dual national who was held by Tehran in 2007, on the country’s theocracy enforcing the law on women covering their hair.
Religion News Service, 8-10-23

Oklahoma’s decision to authorize an explicitly religious charter school reads like the next incremental step in a broader legal campaign to eliminate the Establishment Clause’s restrictions on public schools altogether. And it is far from clear where this Supreme Court will draw the line and say that there are limits to the government’s ability to promote religion.
Ian Millhiser, in his column, “The Supreme Court is taking a wrecking ball to the wall between church and state.”
Vox, 8-13-23



Donald W. Beatty
South Carolina Chief Justice Donald Beatty, in his dissenting opinion against a decision in late August upholding South Carolina’s abortion ban.
Center for Reproductive Rights, 8-23-23

Religious charlatans like [Jerry] Falwell may have meant to usher in a new Great Awakening, but, in fact, they taught millions of Americans to be wary of preening ventriloquists who claim to speak for God.
Nicholas Kristof, in his column, “America is losing religious faith.”
New York Times, 8-23-23

I cannot believe we live in a country where this court-ordered indoctrination is tolerable.
Ruth Marcus, writing about how federal judge Brantley Starr isn’t backing down from his order that lawyers for Southwest Airlines undergo “religious liberty” training from Alliance Defending Freedom, “a full-throated, highly effective combatant in the culture wars, with particular — and to many people, particularly offensive — views about abortion and LGBTQ+ rights.”
Washington Post, 9-3-23

This taxpayer-supported Catholic school justifies the decades of skepticism about charter schools — an approach that has never been a panacea for what ails public education, even as it strips resources from it. It’s all part of a decades-long strategy to get taxpayers to fund exclusion, undermine public education and, as a friend put it, create “separate but equal 2.0.”
Michael Paul Williams, in his column, “Mixing public education and religion debases both, and our democracy.”
Richmond Times-Dispatch, 8-23-23



Andrew Whitehead
After years of examining Christian nationalism as a social scientist, I’m convinced the greatest threat to Christianity in the United States is not outside forces. Instead, it is white Christian nationalism. Over and over, I find evidence that the practical fruit of Christian nationalism is not love; it is power, control, domination, fear and violence.
Andrew Whitehead, associate professor of sociology at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, in his column, “Why Christian nationalism makes American Christians less Christ-like.”
Religion News Service, 8-18-23

The majority’s decision in 303 Creative is, in fact, an expression of the Christian right’s constitutional sour grapes. The Supreme Court majority has deconstructed the First Amendment to fit their bibles.
Marci A. Hamilton, professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania, about the ruling that a website design business owned by an evangelical Christian could refuse service to same-sex couples, in her column, “Warped history’: How the U.S. Supreme Court justified gutting gay rights.”
The Guardian, 8-26-23

A growing push by American conservatives to remove books from libraries and public schools on grounds of morality or contested history reminds me of when I was 11 and Taliban sympathizers came to our home to tell my father that if my sisters and I returned to school, we would have acid thrown in our faces. . . We should ask ourselves: Are we really free, or do we live in someone else’s idea of freedom, one driven by religious or nationalist myths? Does my freedom to stay ignorant deny your place in history, your identity? Do my rights diminish yours?
Sola Mahfouz, co-author of Defiant Dreams: The Journey of an Afghan Girl Who Risked Everything for Education, in guest essay, “‘Freedom’ is a word I no longer trust.”
New York Times, 8-31-23

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States	

Note to members

For those of you who get the PDF version of Freethought Today, there have been a few changes to the content you can see.
Because of privacy concerns — the PDF can be easily forwarded to non-members — FFRF has stopped including in the PDF version the Black Collar Crime report, names of new Lifetime members, and the names of the Letterbox contributors.
The online version at freethoughttoday.com 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.”

Politics stay same for those who leave church

This article first appeared in the Atlantic on Sept. 3 and is reprinted with permission.

By Daniel K. Williams

Millions of Americans are leaving church, never to return, and it would be easy to think that this will make the country more secular and possibly more liberal. After all, that is what happened in Northern and Western Europe in the 1960s: A younger generation quit going to Anglican, Lutheran or Catholic churches and embraced a liberal, secular pluralism that shaped European politics for the rest of the 20th century and beyond. Something similar happened in the traditionally Catholic Northeast, where, at the end of the 20th century, millions of white Catholics in New England, New York, and other parts of the Northeast quit going to church. Today most of those states are pretty solidly blue and firmly supportive of abortion rights.



Daniel K. Williams

So, as church attendance declines even in the southern Bible Belt and the rural Midwest, history might seem to suggest that those regions will become more secular, more supportive of abortion and LGBTQ rights, and more liberal in their voting patterns. But that is not what is happening. Declines in church attendance have made the rural Republican regions of the country even more Republican and — perhaps most surprising — more stridently Christian nationalist. The wave of states banning gender-affirming care this year and the adoption of “proud Christian nationalist” as an identity by politicians such as Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (who even marketed T-shirts with the slogan) is not what many people might have expected at a time when church attendance is declining.

Still, what’s going on in the South and Midwest is consistent with what happened in the Northeast: People hold onto their politics when they stop attending church. Just as liberal Christians in Massachusetts and Connecticut stayed liberal when they dropped off their church’s membership rolls, so conservative Christians in Alabama and Indiana stay conservative even when they’re no longer part of a congregation.

In fact, people become even more entrenched in their political views when they stop attending services. Though churches have a reputation in some circles as promoting hyper-politicization, they can be depolarizing institutions. Being part of a religious community often forces people to get along with others — including others with different political views — and it may channel people’s efforts into charitable work or forms of community outreach that have little to do with politics. Leaving the community removes those moderating forces, opening the door to extremism.

More entrenched

It seems clear that Christian nationalism attracts a lot of adherents who rarely go to church themselves. A PRRI survey published earlier this year showed that only 54 percent of Christian nationalists — and just 42 percent of those who are “sympathizers” with the ideology — attend church regularly. While that’s still



Image by Shutterstock

significantly higher than the rate of regular church attendance among the general population (which is 28 percent), it still means that roughly half of all Christian nationalists rarely, if ever, go to church. So even as church attendance declines, Christian nationalism is likely to remain alive and well.

Indeed, in their new book, *The Great Dechurching*, Jim Davis and Michael Graham draw on new survey data to show that dechurched evangelicals — especially those who retain evangelical Christian beliefs — remain Republican, with conservative views on most issues. Other researchers have found that Christian nationalism may produce even more extreme right-wing political manifestations in those who don’t go to church than it does among people who do go to church. “At a time when fewer Americans attend religious services, religious narratives about Christian nationhood may have their strongest political effects when, and perhaps because, they are detached from religious institutions,” one 2021 sociological study concluded.

Seems counterintuitive

This may seem counterintuitive if you assume that people take their religious and political cues from church, and that when they leave church, they abandon convictions of the Christian faith and perhaps also the politics that go with them. But according to Davis and Graham’s research, something else seems to be happening.

When people leave church, they don’t typically become atheists or agnostics. They don’t even necessarily join the growing ranks of the religious “Nones,” those who no longer identify with any religion. Instead, millions of Americans who leave church continue to identify as Christians, and many retain theologically orthodox beliefs. They continue to view Jesus as their savior and retain a high respect for the bible.

But without a church community, in many cases, the nation’s political system becomes their church — and the results are polarizing. They bring whatever moral and social values they acquired from their church experience and then apply those values in the political sphere with an evangelical zeal. For many of those leaving church traditions that place a strong emphasis on concern for the poor

and marginalized, the values they retain from church translate into socially liberal political positions. Davis and Graham found that dechurched Christians who came from liberal mainline Protestant or Catholic traditions were likely to be political progressives. A quick glance at the politics of historically Catholic (but no longer heavily churched) areas of the country bears this out.

The nation’s most historically Catholic states, such as Massachusetts and Rhode Island, have retained the Democratic leanings that they had half a century ago, when more residents went to church. As white Catholics left church, they continued to practice the values of the Social Gospel that perhaps they or their parents or grandparents had learned there, and they channeled those energies into the political community. Although perhaps breaking with the church on issues of sexuality, gender and abortion, they continued to embrace the ethic of concern for the poor and marginalized, and insisted that the government champion these causes. But among dechurched white evangelicals (a group heavily concentrated in the South and rural Midwest), the political values that remain are focused on culture wars and the autonomy of the individual.

Whether inside or outside of church, evangelicals in conservative regions of the country have lined up in support of gun rights and restrictive immigration policies — even though these stances run directly counter to the official views of several mainline Protestant denominations, as well as the statements of American Catholic bishops. When evangelicals leave church, they don’t abandon these political views; they instead continue voting for politicians who champion the Second Amendment and tighter border security.

My own analysis of General Social Survey data has suggested that white Southerners who identify as Christian but do not attend church are overwhelmingly conservative in their attitudes on race and social welfare (just as church-attending southern white Christians are). A majority of southern white Christians who never attend church (or attend only once a year) also support restrictive abortion laws. Many are liberal or libertarian on matters of personal liberty, such as marijuana and premarital sex, but they’re still strongly conservative on issues of race, gender and Christian nationalism.

The reasons people who identify as Christian and hold Christian beliefs choose not to attend church vary. For some, dissatisfaction with their church options and the behavior of church members is a key factor in their decision to leave church, but for a sizable number of others, there is no single catalyst — they simply fall out of the habit of going, according to Davis and Graham’s research. The hectic pace of contemporary life, complete with Sunday work schedules, makes it difficult for some people to attend church if they want to keep their jobs.

Sundays are busy

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, on an average weekend day, 29 percent of the workforce is at work. Restaurants, supermarkets, convenience stores and retail outlets are staffed each Sunday morning by a lot of people who might identify as Christian but who definitely won’t be at church that day.

The result is that a lot of people who still identify as Christian no longer go to church. Even as early as 2014, the Pew Research Center’s Religious Landscape Study found that 30 percent of self-identified Southern Baptists “seldom” or “never” attended church — and that was before the “great dechurching” accelerated after the disruptions of the coronavirus pandemic. The exodus of millions of Americans from churches will have a profound influence on the nation’s politics, and not in the way that many advocates of secularism might expect. Rather than ending the culture wars, the battle between a rural Christian nationalism without denominational moorings and a northern urban Social Gospel without an explicitly Christian framework will become more intense.

Only half a century ago Christian denominations acted as politically centrist forces. Southern Baptists such as Jimmy Carter and Al Gore ran politically moderate campaigns that appealed to their fellow church members on both the right and the left, and devout Catholics such as then-Sen. Joe Biden could still combine relatively moderate positions on abortion with a liberal-leaning Catholic social ethic to win Catholic votes. But those days are disappearing.

Denominations and church commitments once preserved a set of broadly shared Christian moral values that transcended the right-left divide, but now that some of the loudest supporters of Christian nationalism have left these denominations behind, there is little to stop them from refashioning the Christian faith in their own image, with potentially heretical results. And, in contrast to the days when both Republicans and Democrats — and Northerners and Southerners — shared a common religious language despite their differences, little common ground is now left between the post-Christians of the urban North and the post-churched Christian nationalists of the rural South. The decline of churchgoing in America, it seems, has not eviscerated Christianity, it has simply distorted it. And that distortion will have politically unpleasant implications that go far beyond church walls.

Daniel K. Williams is a senior fellow at the Ashbrook Center at Ashland University. He is the author of *The Politics of the Cross: A Christian Alternative to Partisanship*.

Freethought Today Cryptogram

IB ZPB ZRR ZDFBELDL ZAYGD NYLD YX DFB
VYWL DFZD FGNZCEDH FZL BOBP ABREBOBW
EC. LYNB YX GL QGLD VY YCB VYW XGPDFBP.

— PEUFZPW WZIMECL

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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25	26	27		28		29			30		31	32	33
35			36		37			38		39			
40					41				42		43		
44				45		46				47			
48					49		50			51		52	
				53		54			55		56		
57	58	59	60					61				62	63
65						66	67			68			
69						70				71			
72						73				74			

Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

- Across

1. *"Tragedy of Dr. Faustus" and "Inherit the Wind"

6. Bearded antelope

9. 1.3 ounces, in Asia

13. Stitch again

14. Abbreviation on a bathroom door

15. Mia ____

16. Sheep-like

17. Down Under runner

18. Radioshow host: "Hello, you're ____"

19. *Voting Rights Amendment number

21. *Botanist Jean-Baptiste ____, early proponent for the theory of evolution

23. Application, for short

24. Wide river valley

25. Opportunities for a selphie, abbr.

28. ____ good example

30. *Ferguson's 1896 opponent

35. "Sad to say..."

37. European sea eagles

39. Search helper

40. Undertaking

41. Put together (2 words)

43. Puppet precursor, sometimes

44. *Principal of right and wrong

46. Ready and eager

47. *Freethinking Charles

Dickens' "A ____ of Two Cities"

48. Time of the year

50. Wheel inside old clock

52. ____ Aviv

53. Fireman's gear

55. The NHL's Stanley ____

57. *Seneca Falls Convention (1948) location

61. *Poet and "The Necessity of Atheism" author Percy Bysshe ____

65. Theater guide

66. School of thought, suffix

68. Part of life

69. Tease or harass

70. Fine print surprise

71. Same as rip

72. Eats a late meal

73. Small number

74. City in northern England

Down

1. *Noam Chomsky's title, abbr.

2. Jeans maker Strauss

3. "Clueless" catch phrase (2 words)

4. Gossipmonger, in Yiddish

5. Fall on TV

6. Mountain valley

7. "Platoon" setting, for short

8. Palate lobe

9. Chicken of the sea

10. Having wings

11. Homer's "Iliad", e.g.

12. Carefree or "on a ____"

15. Attractive

20. The Three Musketeers' swords

22. One of a range in Europe

24. Good viewing position

25. *"them" author and 2007 Humanist of the Year Joyce Carol ____

26. Part of a service

27. Barack's and Michelle's daughter

29. Three-point shot

31. *Irreverent John Steinbeck's novel "____ of Eden"

32. Young hog

33. Plinth supporting a column

34. Bumpkin

36. Sleigh runners

38. Certainly

42. "Do I dare to eat a ____?"

45. *Group of people in scientific research

49. Neither here ____ there

51. Remorseful

54. Small boat

56. JFK to ORD ride

57. Brazils or filberts

58. What applesauce and thesaurus have in common

59. Beat

60. Strong desires

61. Eurasian duck

62. A siren's song, e.g.

63. Bagnold or Blyton

64. Puppy barks

67. Observe
- # Join us on Zoom for Day of the Dead celebration
- Please join FFRF and other secular groups for the 2023 Secular Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) Zoom event on Thursday, Nov. 2 at 7 p.m. (Eastern).
- Author Hector A. García will be the keynote speaker. García is the author of *Alpha God: The Psychology of Religious Violence and Oppression and Sex, Power, And Partisanship*.
- Actor Jon Huertas will open the program with a special message. He has starred in the television series "This is Us," "Castle," and many others.
- The program will also include musical performances and unique presentations by Rolando Ávila, Martin Bonfil, Abraham Lopez LeFuente, Daniel Zepeda and Salvador Leon Beltrán.
- Sponsors of this year's event include FFRF, Hispanic American Freethinkers, Center For Inquiry, the Freethought
-
- Society and Black Nonbelievers.
- The event will include many secularly designed Hispanic traditions and rituals that celebrate life legacies, cultural heritage, and our one and only life.
- Nontheist Hispanics view the Day of the Dead as a perfect way to remember the legacy dead loved ones in a way that does not require prayer, church or any religious dogma. To nontheists, our legacies are our afterlife.
- Attendees are encouraged to participate in the honoring ceremony. Prizes will be awarded for the best Zoom box decor, face painting, honoring table and hair/hat adornment.
- ## THEY SAID WHAT?
- The Democrats and the Fulton County DA are criminalizing the practice of law. I am resolved to trust the Lord and I will simply continue to honor, praise and serve Him.
- Jenna Ellis, former attorney for President Trump, who was charged with violation of the Georgia RICO Act and solicitation of violation of oath by a public officer.**
- X (formerly Twitter), 8-15-23*
- Humans aren't going to destroy themselves or the Earth because God is in complete control, and he will determine when the ultimate catastrophic climate change will occur.
- Ken Ham, CEO of Answers in Genesis, on why humans need not concern themselves with climate change.**
- Righting America, 8-14-23*
- The Constitution was constructed to protect the church from government, not the government from the church.
- Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, back when he was a Republican councilman in Charleston County.**
- MSNBC, 8-22-23*
- We're in an internal sort of cold cultural civil war, and we have to recognize that.

Presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy at first GOP debate on Aug. 23 in Milwaukee.
- Fox News, 8-23-23*
- People are going to freak out that I'm bringing God back into public schools.

Joe Kennedy, the Bremerton (Wash.) High School football coach who won a Supreme Court victory over post-game midfield prayers, as he prepares for a book tour.
- PBS Newshour, 9-1-23*
- God has a way of making sure everyone knows who God is.
- Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, in an interview on Alex Jones' "InfoWars," regarding the heavy rains that mired the annual Burning Man festival in thick mud in the desert of Black Rock City, Nevada, stranding thousands of attendees.**
- Rolling Stone, 9-4-23*
- The agenda of the KGB [was to] divide the United States, divide the citizens of the United States, through the press, through the schools, take God out of the schools, and divide the country by race and age and gender. . . So we have atheism that's come forth. Now, we have an amazing, you know, appearance of Satan in our community now.
- Actor Jon Voight, in an interview with Newsmax host Rob Schmitt.**
- Christian Broadcast Network, Sept. 5, 2023*
- God doesn't make junk. God doesn't make mess-ups. God doesn't make people that way.
- Pastor Rick Morrow of Beulah Church in Richland, Mo., during a sermon where he said autism is caused by the devil and can be healed through prayer.**
- The Friendly Atheist, 7-11-23*
- This is a war for the souls of our kids. I will do all I can to fight to get that nonsense out of schools and to put God back in schools.
- Ryan Walters, Oklahoma's superintendent of public instruction, at a 2022 banquet for City Elders, a national group that advocates for Christian-based government.**
- NBC News, 8-23-23*
- ### Cryptogram hint
- A cryptogram is a substitution puzzle in which one letter stands for another. If U equals T, it will equal T throughout the puzzle.
- Example:
- UOG RLQTM HYVBF DVP SLACN VWGY UOG KJEZ XVI.
THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPS OVER THE LAZY DOG.
- This month's clue: C => N .

Muslim call to prayer is religious privilege

This column first ran on FFRF's blog site, [FreethoughtNow.org](#).

By Chris Line

The “adhan,” or the Islamic call to prayer, is meaningful only to Muslims. Recited in Arabic, it translates as: “God is most great, God is most great; I testify that there is no god but God; I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God; Come (alive) to the prayer; Come (alive) to flourishing; God is most great, God is most great; There is no god but God.”

In many predominantly Muslim countries, the call to prayer is broadcast over speakers five times each day from the minaret of each mosque, but in the United States, most Islamic Centers and mosques have issued the call from within their buildings to those already gathered for prayer. Cities in the United States haven't traditionally allowed the call to prayer to be broadcast over speakers, potentially disturbing large swaths of the population with its distinctly religious message. Those cities that have allowed amplified broadcasting of the call to prayer have always imposed reasonable restrictions, including barring the earliest call and the latest, which can occur as early as 3:30 a.m. or as late as 11 p.m.

But more recently, the call to prayer has been receiving exemptions from noise ordinances in more and more cities across the country, including Hamtramck, Mich., Astoria, N.Y., and Paterson, N.J. This change has been hailed by some as a “victory for religious freedom.” However, allowing religious exemptions to neutral laws meant to protect everyone's rights is not a victory for religious freedom; rather it's a display of religious privilege.

Earlier this year, Minneapolis be-



Image by Shutterstock

Muslims pray at Abubakar As-Saddique Mosque in Minneapolis.

came the first major U.S. city to allow the Muslim call to prayer to be broadcast from mosques five times a day. The Minneapolis City Council unanimously approved a change to the city's sound ordinance, eliminating time constraints that previously prevented the pre-dawn and evening prayer calls from being broadcast. The city had in 2020 allowed an exception for the call to prayer during the month of Ramadan but has now expanded it to be year round.

FFRF immediately sent a complaint letter challenging the change, which allows religious organizations, including churches and mosques, to broadcast bells, chimes and amplified messages at all hours of the day. While the statute ostensibly allows any religious group to broadcast amplified messages to their community, it's clear this change was made to specifically allow mosques to broadcast an amplified call to prayer as early as 3:30 a.m. and as late as 11 p.m. The change was

pushed for by local mosques and Muslims and, tellingly, the ordinance was signed into law inside Dar Al-Hijrah Mosque.

The city of Minneapolis claimed that this change “ensures equal access for all people” and that it “benefits people of all faith,” but all this religious exemption has done is to carve out an exemption for the call to prayer, providing a special benefit to some members of the Muslim community at the expense of all those, including non-practicing Muslims, who don't want to endure forced prayer throughout the day. This is not neutrality or a celebration of religious freedom but an imposition of one religious view and message onto all community members.

Rather than uniting diverse communities, as some have claimed, allowing religious organizations to disturb residents in the middle of the night with amplified calls to prayer alienates not only the nonreligious but also non-Muslims and even those Muslims who don't

wish to abide by the call. Those who benefit from these prayers are most often vastly outnumbered by those who are disturbed by them. For instance, Muslims make up just 1 percent of Minneapolis' Hennepin County residents while 30 percent of Hennepin County residents are religiously unaffiliated.

Unfortunately, Minneapolis' exemption has already led to strife and a series of attacks on mosques some believe to be a backlash to the exemption for the call to prayer. These attacks are disturbing and FFRF does not support the targeting of Muslims or any religious group. The problem isn't Muslims; the problem is the privileging of religion. While the issue here revolves around how mosques are using noise exemptions, church bells played loudly at 3 in the morning would be just as worthy of condemnation.

In our modern age of cellphones, alarm clocks and all manner of digital devices, broadcasting a loud, amplified message to an entire community in order to facilitate the religious practices of a select group of members of that community is unnecessary on top of being unreasonable.

Many news stories note that this is the first time that a call to prayer has been permitted to be broadcast in such a fashion in the United States in a big city. If worshippers have always managed to pray on their own without this exemption, they don't need it now.

Since broadcasting an amplified call to prayer five times a day is not necessary for Muslims to practice their faith, the exemption is not reinforcing religious liberty, but is just another instance of favoritism for religious citizens. There is no need for a city to exempt the call to prayer from noise ordinances and I hope that other cities don't follow in Minneapolis footsteps, although I fear they will.

Our laws should treat religion neutrally — with neither hostility nor favoritism, as the Constitution requires.

Chris Line is an associate attorney at FFRF.

Pregnant workers need workplace protections

By Barbara Alvarez

Pregnant workers should be granted workplace accommodations — regardless of whether they carry their pregnancy to term or have an abortion.

In August, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) included language that would do just that. By incorporating abortion as a medical condition for which employers may have to make workplace accommodations, including rest breaks, the EEOC has provided an overdue and necessary platform for the rights of those who choose to end unwanted pregnancies.

Unsurprisingly, conservative lawmakers and the Catholic Church are objecting to this inclusion. Sen. Bill

Cassidy, R-La., said that including abortion was a “political agenda” and “illegal.” The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops claim that such inclusion is “promoting abortion.” And the Christian conservative legal group, Alliance Defending Freedom, said that such a move “force[s] employers to facilitate abortions.”

None of this is accurate. The Pregnant Workers Fairness Act, which went into effect on June 27, requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations “to a worker's known limitations related to pregnancy, childbirth or related medical conditions.” Such accommodations may include flexible work hours, additional break time to use the bathroom, closer parking spaces, and time to eat and rest. This landmark law should be applauded, considering women could be fired for being pregnant prior to the Pregnancy

Discrimination Act of 1978.

And why should the option of abortion be excluded? After all, about one in four women will have an abortion before they are 45 years old. This statistic does not include trans, non-binary and gender nonconforming people who also often choose abortion care at some point in their lives. Therefore, abortion undoubtedly impacts millions of workers throughout the United States.

Abortion is a medical procedure, and the language of the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act explicitly states “related medical conditions” for pregnancy. Does that not include abortion? Why is abortion vilified and derided instead of being treated as a legitimate medical procedure? Furthermore, are anti-choice legislators prepared to deny all abortions from worker protections? What about instances in which abortion is necessary

to save the life of the pregnant person or pregnancy is no longer viable? Will they tell people who have been carrying their pregnancy for five or six months that their potentially intensive procedure does not qualify for workplace accommodations? But more to the point, who gets to decide which abortion is “worthy” of workplace protection or not?

The overarching theme of those seeking to deny abortion accommodation as part of the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act is based on Christian nationalism — not medical evidence. The medical community has determined that abortion is a legitimate medical procedure related to pregnancy termination. Nobody who has an abortion should be excluded from reasonable workplace accommodations. Such accommodations are necessary for physical and emotional recovery for those who do not continue their pregnancy — for whatever reason.

Barbara Alvarez is a contributing writer for FFRF.



Barbara Alvarez

“Why is abortion vilified and derided instead of being treated as a legitimate medical procedure?”

IN THE NEWS

Survey: Atheists more likely to vote than Nones

People who identified as atheists and agnostics were more likely to vote than both religiously affiliated respondents and the Nones, the general term for the religiously unaffiliated, according to data gleaned from the Cooperative Election Study and analyzed by Evan Stewart, a professor of sociology at UMass-Boston.

After controlling for key demographic predictors of voting — like age, education and income — Stewart found that atheists and agnostics were each about 30 percent more likely to have a validated record of voting in the 2020 election than religiously affiliated respondents.

Also, about seven in 10 agnostics and atheists had a validated voter turnout record versus only about half of the Nones. Controlled for other predictors of voting like age and education, the “nothing in particulars” had a turnout record about the same as religiously affiliated respondents.

Baylor exempted from harassment provisions

The Department of Education accepted Baylor University’s request for exemption from Title IX’s sexual harassment provision after the private Baptist school asked to dismiss discrimination complaints filed by LGBTQ-plus students that the university said were “inconsistent” with the institution’s religious values.

“For the first time in Title IX’s history, a federally funded university has been given special permission, by the Biden Administration, no less, to allow its LGBTQ-plus students to be sexually harassed,” wrote Paul Southwick, director of the Religious Exemption Accountability Project, in a statement.

In 2021, Baylor filed a Title IX complaint on behalf of former student Veronica Bonifacio Penales, in which she accused the university of tolerating sexual harassment after the school failed to address homophobic slurs she received from other students on campus and social media.

Ethics questions arise for anti-abortion judge

One of the judges who issued a federal court ruling that could significantly reduce access to medication abortions has close ties to the conservative legal advocacy group that argued the case, according to records, reports Jacobin.com.

A three-judge panel in the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that regulators have improperly expanded access to mifepristone, the main pill used in more than half of abortions in the United States. The ruling preserves the legality of mifepristone but prohibits sending it through the mail or prescribing it through telehealth appointments.

Judge James Ho, who was nominated in 2017 by President Trump, wrote his own opinion, agreeing with the majority in part but going even further to argue that the FDA’s approval of mifepristone in 2000 should be invalidated, removing it from the market — as the lower court had concluded.

Ho did not recuse himself from the case even though his wife, Allyson Ho, has regularly participated in events with

and accepted speaking fees from the Alliance Defending Freedom, the conservative Christian legal group whose lawyers argued the mifepristone case before his court, according to the judge’s financial disclosures.

Experts say the judge’s participation in the mifepristone case raises the appearance of impropriety, even if he was not technically required to recuse under existing federal ethics laws.

Chaplains urge Texans not to hire school chaplains

More than 100 chaplains signed a letter urging local Texas school boards to vote against putting chaplains in public schools, calling efforts to enlist religious counselors in public classrooms “harmful” to students and families, according to the Religion News Service.

The letter was sent just days before a bill allowing public schools to hire school chaplains became law in Texas, the first state in the country to pass such a measure. The legislation, which had been pushed by activists associated with Christian nationalism, gives the state’s nearly 1,200 school boards until March 1, 2024, to vote on whether to employ chaplains.

The letter was organized by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and Interfaith Alliance as well as local advocacy group Texas Impact.

The chaplains who signed the letter, released Aug. 22, bemoaned the lack of standards for potential school chaplains aside from background checks, contrasting it with the extensive training required for health care and military chaplains.

“Because of our training and experience, we know that chaplains are not a replacement for school counselors or safety measures in our public schools, and we urge you to reject this flawed policy option: It is harmful to our public schools and the students and families they serve,” the letter read.

Mexico’s Supreme Court decriminalizes abortion

Mexico’s Supreme Court decriminalized abortion nationwide Sept. 6 in a sweeping decision that builds on an earlier ruling giving officials the authority to allow the procedure on a state-by-state basis.

The court struck down the federal penal code that criminalized abortion, deeming it “unconstitutional” and making abortion legally accessible in all federal health institutions across the country. It also ruled against bans on medical providers, including midwives, who perform the procedure.

The ruling in Mexico, a predominantly Catholic country of 130 million

people, points to how nations in Latin America are taking a leading role in broadening abortion rights.

The ruling has no effect on local laws, and abortion remains illegal in 20 of the country’s 32 states, but even in those states, abortions can now be sought legally in federal hospitals and clinics.

Judges revive suit over Tenn. adoption bias

Appellate judges have revived a couple’s lawsuit that alleges a state-sponsored Christian adoption agency wouldn’t help them because they are Jewish and argues that a Tennessee law protecting such denials is unconstitutional, the Associated Press reports.

A three-judge panel of the state Court of Appeals on Aug. 24 ruled that Elizabeth and Gabriel Rutan-Ram have the right as taxpayers to sue in the case, as do six other taxpayer plaintiffs in the case. The ruling overturns a lower court’s determination in June 2022 that none of them had legal standing. The case can now proceed in the trial court.

The lawsuit against the state challenges a 2020 law that installed legal protections for private adoption agencies to reject state-funded placement of children to parents based on religious beliefs.

Much of the criticism of the law focused on how it shielded adoption agencies that refuse to serve prospective LGBTQ parents. But the Rutan-Rams alleged they were discriminated against because they are Jewish, in violation of their state constitutional rights.

16% of churchgoers have had, pushed abortion

One out of every six regular churchgoers in the United States has had, paid for or encouraged an abortion, while one-fifth doesn’t believe the bible identifies when life begins, a new study suggests.

The Family Research Council’s Center for Biblical Worldview released the “Survey on Adult Churchgoers on Social Issues and Worldview,” which examined respondents’ views on abortion.

It found that 16 percent of respondents “admitted to having ever paid for, encouraged or chosen to have an abortion.”

While nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of those surveyed stated that the bible identifies when human life begins, 21 percent

disagreed, while 14 percent did not know.

When asked what the bible teaches about abortion, 35 percent of respondents said that abortion is not acceptable under any circumstances. Nineteen percent contend that the bible teaches that abortion is only acceptable when the woman’s life is endangered, while 10 percent thought the bible leaves decisions about abortion up to the couple involved. Seven percent believe it permits abortions if the fetus is determined to have physical or mental disabilities, and 6 percent think it allows abortions under all circumstances.

Four Muslims sentenced to death for blasphemy

A court in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, sentenced four Muslim suspects to death after finding them guilty in a blasphemy case, the Daily Pakistan reported.

Judge Ahsan Mahmood Malik also gave a seven-year imprisonment to the fifth suspect in the case.

The judge stated that blasphemy against the Holy Prophet and desecration of the Quran were heinous and unforgivable crimes. He added that there was no leniency for the perpetrators of such crimes.

The four convicts given the death sentence are Wazir Gul, Muhammad Amin, Faizan Razak and Muhammad Rizwan.

Denver Archdiocese sues over LGBTQ exclusions

The Denver Catholic Archdiocese, along with two of its parishes, is suing the state of Colorado, alleging its First Amendment rights are violated because its desire to exclude LGBTQ parents, staff and kids from Archdiocesan preschools keeps them from participating in the state’s new universal preschool program.

The program is intended to provide every child 15 hours per week of state-funded preschool in the year before they are eligible for kindergarten. To be eligible, though, schools must meet the state’s non-discrimination requirements.

The Denver Archdiocese said in the suit it does not believe adhering to their religious beliefs against accepting LGBTQ people qualifies as discrimination.

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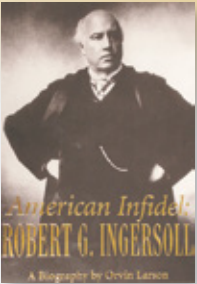
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FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

FFRF ends promotion of Ala. church events

FFRF was able to get the Alabama-based Dale County Schools to stop promoting events sponsored by local churches.

A concerned district community member reported that South Dale Middle school appeared to be organizing and sponsoring a prayer walk event on Aug. 6. It had previously promoted a similar event at a local high school on July 31. The school additionally promoted a religious event taking place at Free Will Baptist Church on its official Facebook page.

“The district must cease organizing, promoting and encouraging attendance at religious events,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Benjamin Baker.

Baker responded to FFRF with a letter describing the school system’s response to the request. He wrote that the school districts were not organizing these events, but assured that promotion of events held by outside organizations would be ending. “I have placed this topic on the administrative meeting agenda to make sure all building level administrators across the district are informed of proper procedures in using school social media to notify the public of events that are not school related,” he wrote.

Florida grad ceremonies now free from prayer

FFRF has worked to keep Florida’s Lake County Schools free from indoctrinating prayers during graduation ceremonies going forward.

FFRF was informed that East Ridge High School schedules and hosts prayer at graduation ceremonies each year. It was understood that the prayers were being delivered by a student, but the prayer is an official part of the ceremony planned by the school.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district, and James A. Myers, general counsel for the district, wrote back informing FFRF that the superintendent had addressed the concerns with the school’s principal. “The prayer in question was apparently a tribute to an East Ridge student who passed away and was delivered as part of the speech given by the school’s student government association president.” Expectations have been set to prevent further prayer at graduation in the future.

Religion removed from Ala. wrestling program

The Alabaster City School District in Alabama has taken steps to keep religion out of its schools’ wrestling programs after FFRF intervened.

A parent reported to FFRF that the wrestling program for Thompson Middle School and Thompson High School used a religious mantra for the team which appeared on official team documents and on social media. The mantra was “#LiveRightPrayWorkHard.” Additionally, the team also participated in Operation Christmas Child, a charity project sponsored by Samaritan’s Purse. Samaritan’s Purse is a pervasively sectarian religious organization.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Dr. Wayne Vickers. The school district’s legal representative Melissa B. McKie responded, explaining that the wrestling program had par-



ticipated in various community service projects sponsored by both religious and nonreligious organizations over the years, though none was mandatory.

“Nevertheless, the school system has spoken with the coach to remind him that while students may independently participate in service projects sponsored by religious organizations, he should not select projects that require students to participate in or endorse religious activity in the future,” McKie wrote.

In regard to the hashtag, McKie reported that the school system had never officially approved the hashtag, but it had been widely adopted by coaches, parents and students in the wrestling program. Fortunately, “the school system is taking steps to ensure that the hashtag does not appear on the official social media accounts that it controls and that it is not used on official documents utilized by the wrestling program in the future.”

FFRF ends W.Va. school’s prayer walk promotion

FFRF has put a stop to unconstitutional promotion of a religious event from the Preston County Schools in West Virginia.

A district community member reported to FFRF that the district was organizing, promoting and encouraging attendance at a religious “prayer walk” event at Terra Alta East Preston School on Aug. 18. The school’s Facebook page posted that the event is school-sponsored and will be led by a local religious leader.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line contacted Superintendent Bradley R. Martin, who responded to the state/church watchdog with the following: “I have advised the school to immediately remove any advertisements or promotion of the event on any school-sponsored websites or social media sites.”

FFRF stops public funds for religious foster care

A Christian foster care community will not be getting requested funds from the city of Northport, Ala., thanks to FFRF urging against it.

In June, representatives from the “Freedom Farm” asked the city to give taxpayer funds to the organization so that it could fulfill its Christian mission and construct a new compound, which would include a chapel. Freedom Farm describes itself as “a Christian home where children are introduced to God using the bible as a roadmap in hopes

that each child will develop an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ.”

“While we certainly understand why the city would be interested in the noble cause of supporting kids in foster care, it cannot do so by providing funds to a religious organization that intends to indoctrinate children when they are at their most vulnerable or for the purposes of building a religious chapel,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Northport City Council President Jeff Hogg.

Thankfully, the city made the right decision. “The Northport City Council has not funded either the foster care project or religious organization that are the subject of your communications,” Assistant City Attorney Chris Cunningham wrote.



Religious display removed from Calif. high school

FFRF had California’s Victor Valley Union High School District remove religious messages from the girls bathroom at Adelanto High School.

A concerned student reported that the bathroom nearest to the high school’s front office contained a religious message on the wall. The complainant reported that the display said, “Wash your HANDS and say your PRAYERS because Jesus and GERMS ARE EVERYWHERE.” The complainant found the message to be bizarre, creepy and confusing.

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Carol J. Coles and received a message from Assistant Superintendent Ratmony Yee, writing “The content referenced in your communication has been removed as of Monday, August 28, 2023.”

FFRF ends graduation prayers in Ohio district

Thanks to the work of the FFRF, New Riegel Local Schools in Ohio will no longer include prayer at graduation ceremonies.

FFRF was contacted by a community member who informed it that the New Riegel High School commencement ceremony included a student-led invocation. The student speaker asked attendees to stand and bow their heads before delivering a prayer.

“Students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools, including when participating in commencement ceremonies,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent David Rombach.

An email from Rombach informed FFRF that the violation has been corrected.

“The district does not intend to permit a prayer to be offered in upcoming graduation ceremonies,” Rombach wrote.

N.C. county cancels religious senior outing

FFRF was recently informed that it successfully thwarted a planned North Carolina county religious outing for seniors.

Davie County Senior Services was organizing and sponsoring a trip to the Creation Museum, Ark Encounter and St. Mary’s Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption in Covington in May. The Ark Encounter and Creation Museum are part of a Christian ministry run by the creationist Ken Ham.

The Davie County Senior Services program is funded by federal and state grants and county funding, FFRF pointed out. Some of this funding comes from the Older Americans Act. Under this act, programs that receive federal grants may not use the funds, including local matching funds, “to support inherently religious activities, such as worship, religious instruction, or proselytization.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Davie County Senior Services Director Kim Shuskey. FFRF’s advocacy on behalf of the Constitution had the desired effect.

“Please be advised that the trip outlined in Mr. Line’s letter of Jan. 18, 2023, did not occur after the county received his letter,” the senior services’ legal counsel recently emailed FFRF.

FFRF gets prayer removed from Conn. meetings

The Enfield Public Schools system has removed the offensive practice of opening its board meetings with a prayer after FFRF objected.

A community member reported to FFRF that members of the Enfield Board of Education regularly open meetings with prayer.

“It is beyond the scope of a public school board to schedule or conduct prayer as part of its meetings,” FFRF Equal Justice Works Fellow Kat Grant wrote to Board Chair Tina LeBlanc.

In response to FFRF’s diligent efforts, LeBlanc informed it of a policy change that directly addresses the concerns outlined in the letter.

LeBlanc emailed, “The Board of Ed met and changed our policy on what was formerly called the Invocation/Moment of Silence with a clear definition of the meaning.” Now, a moment of silence will be held instead without endorsing any particular religion, LeBlanc told FFRF.

FFRF fights for your constitutional rights

The following are recent reports from FFRF that show how the state/church watchdog is fighting for your (and every-one's) constitutional rights.

FFRF chastises president of Ala. community college

FFRF admonished the president of Snead State Community College to stop foisting his religion upon his public employees.

An employee of the college informed FFRF that President Joe Whitmore has been imposing his personal religious beliefs on Snead State employees and treating Snead State as a Christian college — rather than the secular public college it is. Our complainant has been required to partake in Christian prayer before meals and at staff events. Each year, Whitmore reportedly presents a “guiding bible verse” for the staff. Being forced to participate in Christian prayers has left the FFRF complainant feeling uncomfortable and excluded.

FFRF has asked in writing that the college immediately cease holding prayer at staff events or meals, and that Whitmore halt his practice of including religious messages in official communications to staff members.

Florida needs to keep religion out of football

FFRF told Charlotte County (Fla.) Public Schools to immediately end coach-led religious activities, including Christian baptisms, from a high school football program.

A concerned community member told FFRF that the Port Charlotte High School football team has become deeply entangled with religion because of the team's Christian chaplain (Tom Parker), who regularly engages players in religious exercises and prayers. Most shocking, this has included a baptism ceremony for players in Boca Grande. The lead pastor at New Day Christian Church, Rusty Russell, is an assistant coach for the team who has also been using his position to promote religion within the football program.

Russell regularly boasts about baptizing players on his Facebook page. On July 24, Russell shared a post from New Day Christian Church that brags about baptizing 13 players.

FFRF has asked the district to investigate the matter and take immediate action to protect its students. The team's coaches must be directed to cease including coercive religious activities and practices in the football program.

Pull religious broadcast privilege, FFRF tells mayor

New York City should rescind its special privileging of the Muslim call to prayer, FFRF has insisted to the mayor.

The city has granted special permission for mosques to amplify their call to prayer on Fridays and at sunset every night during Ramadan without a permit. On Aug. 29, New York City Mayor Eric Adams' office released new guidance stating:

“A mosque or masjid can broadcast the call to prayer every Friday between 12:30 p.m. and 1:30 p.m. as well as during the sunset prayers every evening during Ramadan.”

Adams explained this decision as specifically meant to benefit the members of one religious group.

We've been framed!



Paul Warrick of California sent us a photo of his recently installed custom license plate frame. Looks great, Paul! FFRF also sells “In Reason We Trust” license plate frames at shop.ffrf.org.

While Adams may believe that this exemption creates “equality” and ensures that Muslim residents will now be “treated equally,” that is not the case. Under New York City law, the use of a sound device such as a loudspeaker, megaphone or stereo requires a permit, but Adams is allowing mosques to receive special treatment and broadcast amplified messages without a permit. This special treatment already extends to churches; any nonreligious entity is required to obtain a permit in order to do the same thing that mosques and churches are being allowed to do. Allowing religious organizations a special carve-out from the city's noise ordinance is the opposite of equal access, FFRF points out.

FFRF has asked New York City to end its practice that privileges Muslims and other religious groups and ensure its laws apply to religion neutrally — with neither hostility nor favoritism, as the Constitution requires.

Denmark's proposed ban on burning Quran is wrong

FFRF deplores the announcement by Denmark's government that it wants to make it illegal to desecrate any “holy book.”

The proposal follows a series of violent reactions in the Muslim world to several public burnings or so-called desecrations of Qurans in Sweden and Denmark this summer, with hundreds of Muslim protesters storming the Swedish Embassy in Baghdad and trying to invade the Danish Embassy.

The proposed legislation would curb free speech, making it punishable by fines or up to two years in prison to burn the Quran or other religious scriptures in public. Denmark appears on the brink of reversing its 2017 repeal of longstanding blasphemy laws. Although it was rarely car-

ried through to prosecution, Section 140 of the Danish penal code stated: “Anybody who publicly mocks or insults the religious doctrine or worship of any religious community lawfully existing in this country will be punished by fine or imprisonment for up to four months.” Shortly after a man posting a video of himself burning a copy of the Quran to social media was prosecuted, the Danish Parliament overwhelmingly voted to repeal the archaic and nonsensical statute. Now that progress is in jeopardy. The new proposal is a markedly more severe punishment than the one that got repealed.

Denmark is not alone in its quest to renew blasphemy laws in the name of public safety. Sweden, another country that consistently ranks among the “freest” nations in the world, has also proposed a ban on issuing permits for anti-Quran protests, citing fear of retaliation from radical Muslims, although it repealed its anti-blasphemy laws in the 1970s.

Burning books is a cheap publicity stunt but resorting to archaic blasphemy laws is even more reckless. While FFRF believes that book burnings are counterproductive for freethinking protesters, reinstating laws to prohibit such conduct in order to capitulate to religious extremists is not the answer.

FFRF to Ohio schools: No released time bible study

FFRF has urged more than 600 Ohio school districts not to be pressured into allowing released time for students to attend bible study programs.

The state/church watchdog was contacted by concerned Ohioans regarding LifeWise Academy's increasing presence in Ohio's public school districts. Public school districts under Ohio law aren't legally required to authorize release time

for students to attend religious instruction off-campus during school hours. However, districts throughout the state have unfortunately begun approving release time for LifeWise's bible study classes, without fully understanding constitutional concerns and how large-scale released time religious programs like LifeWise can negatively impact educational goals.

LifeWise Academy is a released time bible study program that, according to its own website, seeks to provide “bible-based character education to public school students” during regular school hours. The curriculum is “designed to take students through the entire bible” over a period of five years, which requires students to miss roughly an hour of class each week for half a decade.

Released time programs can also lead to negative consequences for students who do not participate, FFRF points out. In communities where a significant portion or majority of students participate in such bible classes, the students who do not join are inevitably singled out in the eyes of their peers. Moreover, nonattending students often are not provided with adequate substantive lessons while their peers attend the released time bible classes.

FFRF warns about PragerU student misinformation

After purging its public school of books and reality-based curricula, Florida is now seemingly trying to fill that void with hand-picked propaganda — and Oklahoma is going even further.

FFRF is warning that an industrial-scale disinformation campaign by the deceptively named PragerU — which is not a university and seems to be little more than a YouTube channel — includes lies about America's foundational principle of keeping government secular.

First, Florida brought in Michigan-based Hillsdale College, an ultraconservative Christian college with ties to the Trump administration Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. Now, Florida has reportedly approved of teachers supplementing their lessons with online videos by PragerU — known for high-quality production and garbage-level content. And, in Oklahoma, the state's Christian nationalist superintendent of public instruction, Ryan Walters, announced an “ongoing partnership with PragerU Kids.”

PragerU offers a video providing misinformation on the separation between state and church, delivered by disgraced former law professor John Eastman, who was recently featured as “Co-Conspirator No. 2” in Donald Trump's indictment for attempting to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. In that video, Eastman repeats the tired argument that since the phrase “separation of church and state” is not literally in the Constitution, “the Founding Fathers never intended for church and state to be completely separate.”

Nonsense. The Constitution's Framers, cognizant of the history of warfare, persecution, schisms and bloodshed over religious differences, explicitly rejected the European tradition of uniting government with Christianity. The separation of state and church — a shorthand phrase coined by Thomas Jefferson and later adopted by the Supreme Court — is an American original.

FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker have written to Walters and the Oklahoma State Board of Education, urging them to ditch the partnership.

Ohio billboard defends abortion rights

FFRF recently put up a billboard in Ohio’s capital saying “Abort Theocracy: Keep Abortion Safe & Legal” ahead of the crucial referendum on the issue.

The national state/church watchdog group and its Columbus chapter designed the billboard message in support of an upcoming November referendum to provide state constitutional protections for reproductive rights — and specifically to call attention to the religiously motivated crusade behind anti-abortion bans and restrictions. It was a 14-by-48-foot bulletin on Hudson Street, 100 feet east of Summit Street facing west, in Columbus. The billboard went up in August and stayed up at least through Sept. 10.

“The fight to reaffirm abortion rights is really about the need to buttress the wall separating the state from the church,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “The religious dogma of the few should not be allowed to deny rights to the rest of us.”

The proposed amendment in November specifically states that every person in Ohio has the right to “make and carry out one’s own reproductive decisions, including but not limited to decisions on contraception, fertility treatment, continuing one’s own pregnancy, miscarriage care, and abortion.” Ohioans overwhelmingly rejected in August an attempt (formally termed Issue 1) that would have made it much harder to place such amendments on the ballot.

“To keep abortion safe and legal in Ohio is of paramount importance,” said FFRF Columbus chapter member Ed



Members of the Central Ohio Chapter of FFRF helped place FFRF’s “Abort theocracy” billboard in Columbus, Ohio. Chapter members in attendance were (left to right) Les Kleen, Ed Sweeney, William Fullarton, Brenda Penn, Bill Russell, Anita Bucknam, David Krohn, Alan Hirsch, Jennifer Webster.

Sweeney. “I believe the billboard will bring attention to this, and the ‘Ohio Right to Make Reproductive Decisions Including Abortion Initiative’ will receive a positive vote on Nov. 7.”

Currently, a six-week abortion ban signed into law by Gov. Mike DeWine is blocked in response to litigation by Ohio abortion clinics in a case destined for the Ohio Supreme Court.

This is why FFRF did its bit by displaying a pro-choice billboard message in one of Ohio’s most important cities warning of the link between theocracy and the

suppression of abortion rights. In fact, FFRF started in Madison in the late 1970s after the experience of FFRF’s principal founder, Anne Nicol Gaylor, in crusading for abortion and contraceptive rights, which opened her eyes, as well as that of her daughter Annie Laurie, to the dangers of religious control of government.

“We realized that the battle for women’s rights would never end, unless we got at the root cause of the denial of those rights — which is the unwarranted influence of religion over our laws and social policy,” Gaylor said.

Trump judges inject bible verse into case

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is rebuking two President Trump-appointed federal appeals court judges for gratuitously injecting a bible verse into a debate about an unrelated legal question.

The judges, who both sit on the arch-conservative 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, unnecessarily cited a verse from the Christian New Testament and one even added a pious declaration of belief in God.

At issue in Louisiana v. 13 Verticals is a class action challenge regarding allegedly defective software. A nuanced rule involves the question of whether plaintiffs were “seeking significant relief” from a defendant, specifically when they may have known the defendant had no assets.

The majority opinion, authored by Judge James C. Ho, in considering the definition of “seek,” turned to the New

Testament, citing Matthew 7:7, and noting that “although the bible teaches that those who seek from the Lord shall find, when we seek something from our fellow man, we don’t always get it.” Not to be outdone by this religious showboating, Judge Andrew Oldham countered in his dissent by writing, “The Bible says ‘seek, and ye shall find’ precisely because God gives us hope and faith . . . two things that plaintiffs do not have in ‘seeking’ to recover from a defunct shell company.”

While these biblical references were not the only sources considered, and were not the legal basis for either judge’s conclusion, the gratuitous religious references are nevertheless cause for concern. Both judges have a history of giving religion undue treatment under the law.

Federal judges using biblical verses like

references or citations in their opinions gives fodder to those who dishonestly proclaim that the United States is a Christian nation. While this notion is long debunked and devoid of historical support, the same theocrats who point smugly at “In God We Trust” on a U.S. bill (added in 1957) can now say that their favorite holy book is cited in American judicial opinions.

In 2020, FFRF published a report on the alarming trend of Christian nationalists inserted into the federal judiciary by Trump, Sen. Mitch McConnell and the Federalist Society.

“This biblical debate is a stark reminder that religion, and specifically a particular brand of Christianity, holds unwarranted prominence in the minds of some powerful federal judges,” comments FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

FREETHOUGHT BOOKS

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

A Humanist Path: Confucius and Lao Zi for Today

By Wei Djao

Paperback \$13.49

Kindle \$4.37

Confucius and Lao Zi were the originators of the two major philosophical traditions in China, Confucian and daoist. They formulated their viewpoints without any claim to divine or supernatural revelations, and without any invocation of religious authority.

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



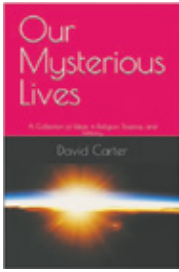
Our Mysterious Lives: A Collection of Ideas in Religion, Science and History

By David Carter

Paperback \$14.95

Kindle Free

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



Jebediah Vs. The Flood

By Scott Myrick

Paperback \$9.99

Kindle \$6.99

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



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

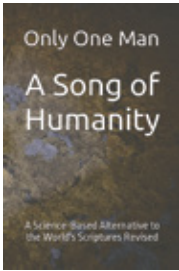
By James Clawson

Hardcover \$30

Paperback \$22

Kindle \$9.99

This book gives an easy-to-read science-based alternative to the mountains of regional mythological misinformation perpetuated by the world’s scriptures. It is written as a conversation between parent and child, and outlines our world from the very beginning of the universe until the end of our solar system.



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Photo by Chris Line

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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 for more information

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Why secularization is good for democracy

This column first appeared on the Religion News Service site on Aug. 2 and is reprinted with permission.

By Phil Zuckerman

The decline of religion in America continues. Gallup recently released new data showing that standard Christian beliefs are at all-time lows. Back in 2001, 90 percent of Americans believed in God; that figure is now down to 74 percent. Belief in heaven has gone from 83 percent down to 67 percent; belief in hell from 71 percent down to 59 percent; belief in angels from 79 percent down to 69 percent; belief in the devil from 68 percent down to 58 percent.

These declines in personal belief are tracking with church attendance, which is at an all-time low (even when accounting for the pandemic’s social distancing). Religious wedding ceremonies are similarly at an all-time low, as the percentage of Americans claiming to have no religion has hit an all-time high.

Some people will despair at this sweeping secularization. They know the value of strong congregational community, the meaningfulness of sacred rituals, the comfort of spiritual solace and the power of religiously inspired charitable works.

But even those who experience and treasure these benefits of belief should take solace in the fact that the decline of religion in American society is nonetheless good for our democracy.

There are two basic types of secularization: The first type is the oppressive kind that comes from the barrel of an atheist dictator’s gun. Think of the former U.S.S.R. or Khmer Rouge Cambodia, where the communist regime, seeking to stomp out any and all ideological rivals, repressed religion systematically and often violently. Such forced secularization is to be resisted and condemned.

The other type of secularization is organic. It emerges naturally as societies become more modern, educated, prosperous and rational. Think of Scandinavia or Japan. When secularization occurs naturally within free societies and people simply stop being religious of their own volition, such a change comes with many positive correlates — not



Phil Zuckerman, on the isle of Skye in Scotland.

least healthier democratic values and institutions.

This is what we are seeing here in the United States: No one is being forced to become secular. Millions of Americans are simply choosing to do so. And this will be good for our republic, as the existing data shows.

A healthy democracy requires active participation in the very enterprise of self-governance. On that front, atheists and agnostics stand out. When it comes to attending political meetings, protests and marches, putting up political lawn signs, donating to candidates, working for candidates or contacting elected officials, the godless are among the most active and engaged. Americans who are affirmatively secular in their orientation — atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers — are more likely to vote in elections than their religious peers.

Another crucial pillar of democracy is toler-

ance, the acceptance of people who are different from us, or behave and believe differently. In a diverse and pluralistic nation such as ours, civic tolerance of difference is essential. In study after study, nonreligious people are found to be much more tolerant than religious people.

For example, when Americans are asked if they are willing to grant the same rights that they enjoy to political groups they personally oppose, secular people are much more likely than religious people to say yes. When it comes to supporting civil liberties for various stigmatized minority groups, the secular are, again, notably more tolerant than the religious.

Additionally, atheists have markedly lower levels of in-group bias than religious people, which actually makes them more accepting and tolerant of religious people than religious people are of them.

A third necessary component of a healthy democracy is for its citizens to be informed and knowledgeable about current events, to be critical thinkers and to be able to differentiate between fact and fiction. This is especially in our social-media-saturated world, in which we are bombarded with fake news. Research shows that secular people are on average more analytically adept than religious people. Religiosity, especially strong religiosity, is significantly correlated with greater acceptance of fake news.

The very first sentence of the U.S. Constitution’s very First Amendment states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This fundamental principle of our democracy, which bars the government from either promoting or persecuting religion, is essential in a society that contains millions of people with multiple religious faiths, and no religious faith at all. In recent years, the U.S. Supreme Court has shown a willingness to bulldoze this safeguard, threatening one of the founding premises of our nation.

The best hope for our democracy may be the growing number of secular Americans, who are by far the most supportive of repairing this principle.

FFRF Member Phil Zuckerman is a professor of sociology and secular studies and associate dean of faculty at Pitzer College. He is the author of several books and, most recently, is a co-author of *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society*.

“In study after study, nonreligious people are found to be much more tolerant than religious people.”

FFRF ON THE ROAD



Vivekanand Palavali, M.D., and FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker enjoy a boat tour as a formal conclusion to the BAHACON 2023 conference in Ontario, Canada. (Palavali, a brain surgeon from Michigan, produced the film “The Creator.”) The conference, held Aug. 25-27 in Sarnia/Point Edward (where Lake Huron meets the St. Clair River northeast of Detroit) was labeled as the “premier conference of atheism, humanism, skepticism and freethinking.” Speakers included Gaylor and Barker, Aron Ra, Matt Dillahunt, Hemant Mehta, Seth Andrews, Jeremiah Camara and Gretta Vosper, among others.



Kat Grant (front center), FFRF’s Equal Justice Works fellow, traveled to Bloomington, Ind., to speak on a panel about the 303 Creative decision, in which the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a web designer who did not want to service same-sex couples because she said it infringed on her First Amendment rights. The event was sponsored by the LGBTQ+ Pro Bono Project at IU Maurer and the IU Maurer chapter of the American Constitution Society.



Image from Shutterstock

Humanity could have prevented overpopulation and global warming, but, as Dan McCollum writes: “Our plight was inevitable. We are defenseless against ourselves.”

A failure of intelligence on a planetary scale

By Dan McCollum

Some years back, in a complete fit of anger and disgust with the human race over its sordid record of stupidity, violence and destruction, I began an essay that I titled, “Homo Sapiens, the Stupidest of the Great Apes.” After a dozen or more failed starts over the years, I found that I was unable to come to a coherent understanding how such a promising evolutionary start for a human race that could develop such beauty and brilliance could yet descend into a continuing state of chronic depravity. Finally, I have come to some possible understanding as to how this could have come about, somewhat alleviating my outrage.



Dan McCollum

We find ourselves on a miniscule planet in a seemingly infinite universe on which conditions existed that allowed life, living organisms, to develop — liquid water surrounding solid land masses with abundant mineral resources at a proper distance from a star that provided energy. After many millions of years, from the simplest of early life forms, in a process we have come to call evolution, a complex of diversified organisms has come about, eventually including mammals — and us. Absolutely no scientifically verifiable evidence exists regarding any supernatural power playing any part in the above circumstances.

In human evolution, our closest living relatives are chimpanzees. We, as they, are members of a group known today as the Great Apes. A break occurred when our

ancestors diverged, becoming bipeds when our former front legs became arms. For the first time, the evolutionary, natural process creating life on Earth chanced to produce a race of creatures eventually equipped both physically and mentally to become a force for change quite apart from the process that had created it. Like our cousins the chimps, we are social creatures, but unfortunately, like our ape ancestors, we are also burdened with a predisposition toward male-oriented dominance, partly owing to size, but with an inadequate counterbalance to male aggressiveness.

Most of humanity’s 200,000 years on the planet were spent in a slow process of expanding over virtually all inhabitable surfaces. Discovering the Promethian gift of fire, humans formed into bands and then tribes, and developed primitive skills for survival. As groups disbursed in relative isolation from one another, they developed unique peculiarities in culture and language. Over time and geographic dispersal, differences and conflicts were inevitable.

For most of humanity’s time, we have been a benign presence in regard to our load on the planet, gradually allowing us to become increasingly competitive as we sought to survive. It was only after the early development of agriculture, likely just 13,000 years ago, that settled populations of humans began to collect. These assemblages of human intellectual interchange accelerated change, innovation and technology. The result gave humans increasing access to the wealth of the planet, expanding competition among our kind for control of space and resources.

City states morphed into regional empires, creating what has come to be called “civilization.” As human populations increased and dispersed, differences in culture and languages were inevitable. All this “progress” was marked by a growth in what Robert Burns called “man’s inhumanity to man” — the expansion of interspecies rivalry, warfare, subjugation of women and slavery.

No command from on high was necessary for humans to be fruitful and multiply. Fast forward to 1798, when a numbers guy anonymously published his “Essay on the Principle of Population.” Thomas Malthus predicted that the growth

of food production could not indefinitely support the disproportionate birth rate of his fellow humans. His second statement, following in 1803, brought additional credibility to his predictions. While alarming far more people than actually read his writings, the world did not end. All this even before Charles Darwin figured out how we really got here.

I was born barely less than two years before the German invasion of Poland, the start of World War II, and four years and two months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, putting my country into the most murderous war in human history. While the war ended in 1945, we have lived under the threat of nuclear annihilation through the Cold War from two powers with atomic capabilities to eight or more today.

All the while there was more bad news: In 1896, Swedish geophysicist Svante Arrhenius was the first scientist to identify the relationship between the amount of

carbon dioxide in the earth’s atmosphere and global temperatures, that a rise in the percentage of carbon dioxide would be related to a rise in temperature. Rapid increases in access to and use of fossil fuels in the last 250 years is directly related to human activity. Global warming has led to glacial melting and consequent release of the stored methane present in arctic permafrost, which has now become another major greenhouse gas, promoting rising ocean levels.

Some experts believe that the possibility for collective human action to arrest the mounting catastrophe of global warming must occur this century or the problem will be irreversible. Given the current antagonistic state of human affairs, that possibility seems remote.

The human population, facilitated by technology, ballooned to an estimated 8 billion people in this 21st century! In no way can our planet indefinitely and comfortably support anything remotely close to that load at any level of ongoing sustainability. Thinkers over time have raised concerns only to be blithely ignored, confronted by a general weakness in both human judgment and reflection. Progress, driven unwittingly by intelligence and opportunity, but without the ability to anticipate long term consequences, has led to where we now are.

I have lost my anger. Our plight was inevitable. We are defenseless against ourselves. It is a classic Greek tragedy, played out from its onset 200,000 years back to the present, a situation not destined to end well. Pogo was right, “We have met the enemy and they are us.”

FFRF Member Dan McCollum was one of the children at the heart of the landmark court case, McCollum v. Board of Education, in the 1940s that halted religious indoctrination classes in public schools.

“ Thinkers over time have raised concerns only to be blithely ignored, confronted by a general weakness in both human judgment and reflection.

CRANKMAIL

Welcome to the October installment of Crankmail, where we publish correspondence from those who take issue with FFRF’s work. Printed as received.

To Ron Reagan: Do your advertising privately You all don’t know the Bible and think everyone has a religion We don’t but we have our faith over hate! STOP please You have enough money and properties from your parents to do it privately not on tv that our children watch and I pay for How dare you invade my home You are a criminal for invasion of my personal proper Why don’t you dig ditches and make any man proud if you and CHANGE Your NAME please — Tom Parchinko

Faith: Why are you guys so wacked out? You don’t understand the implications of sin and the destruction it brings. It’s something you cannot see. Or that you really don’t pay attention to. Sin brings destruction to mankind. Pay attention to the evil in today’s society. Murder, thievery, immoral acts being considered normal. That’s why we are to follow God’s word. There’s nothing wrong with it for it preserves our souls and our mental well being. To fully understand you have to believe and have faith. You cannot understand without genu-

ine belief and faith. — Amy Erickson

Get crushed: I’m praying that Jesus crushes your efforts and the efforts of you conspirators. — Ty Holdenbeck

Terrible ad: I am writing in protest if the commercial by Ton Reagan. It is extremely offensive and the part of not being afraid of burning in hell is childish and very cocky! I just feel it is very bad influence on our society and especially the youth. Why hurt people who have faith in a beautiful God. That is all of the hope many people have. I wish I could see him burn in hell but that is not very Christian behavior. — Tanya Olsen

Embarrassing: I would be ashamed. If you can prove to me 100% there is no God I will join, which will never happen. I will be praying for all of you. May God have mercy on your soul — Ed Standfuss

You guys got another thing coming!: Christians created the US and we said you don’t have to believe in God if you don’t want to but if atheist created the US he would say you can’t believe in God... So therefore based on that alone... You guys are a bunch of pieces of crap and you’ve got another thing coming, buddy! The more you

take God out of everything in the more Shooting spree’s people have! If you keep acting like that... Don’t be surprised if one day people come for you people like they did on the capital building two years ago! Keep it up! Yes you’ll be afraid run after your left behind in the rapture in around 10 years from now! — Suzanne Rome

Hell is real: I was literally HORRIFIED at the commercial from Ron Reagan yesterday on our CBS station. The mocking at the end about “not afraid to burn in hell” or something close to that scared me to death b/c he DOESN’T HAVE A CLUE WHAT IS IN STORE FOR HIM OR ANY OF THE REST OF YOU if you don’t turn to Jesus for forgiveness and his salvation. All you have to do is ASK Jesus to explain your misconceptions - pray for understanding and guidance and for Jesus to show you the true way — Kim Tuthill

Facts: God is the singularity responsible for the Big bang and according to the laws of conservation that means the singularity had to have been equal to or greater than all of the mass energy and information/intelligence in the universe past present and future combined. and since things are

neither created or destroyed only transferred or transformed this means that God became the universe. God is everything everywhere. God is omnipresent omnipotent and omniscient. — Ben Uriel

God is forever: Atheism can’t explain existence. Atheists live by science, but science (always) changes. God and the Bible (always) remain the same. u all know there is a God. If Atheists believe there is no God why are they always so obsessed with Him? Why are they worried about Christians? Why do they view things about Christianity just to mock? Why are there atheist conventions? — Peter Ingvald

This is not free thought!: YGIS IS THE MANIPULATION OF SATAN TO DECIEVE YOU ATHIESTS TO THINK YOUR THOUGHTS ARE FREE....BUT THATS OK...YOU ARE FREE TO BELIEVE AS YOU BELIEVE...ITS TO BAD YOU PEOPLE DO NOT BELIEVE THAT CHRISTIANS ARE NOT FREE TO BELIEVE.... AND THATS THE WAY IT IS...YOU ATHIESTS WILL BE WARM DOWN THERE IN THE LAKE OF FIRE.... BURNING FOR ETERNITY....SO MUCH OF FREE THOUGHT...YOU PEOPLE ARE IN THE BONDAGE OF SATAN HIMSELF! — Brett Oakes

FFRF awards \$19,050!

FFRF announces high school essay winners

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the winners of the 2023 William Schulz High School Essay Contest. FFRF has awarded \$19,050 in scholarship money for this year’s contest!

College-bound high school seniors were asked to write a personal persuasive essay based on this prompt: “As a member of Gen Z, describe your experiences growing up or becoming a ‘None,’ explain why you reject religion, and how the growth of the religiously unaffiliated is a positive development for progress.”

Out of 234 entries, FFRF awarded 12 top prizes and 11 honorable mentions.

Winners are listed below and include the college or university they are now attending and the award amount.

- First Place**
Michelle Liao, 18, University of Michigan,
\$3,500.
- Second Place**
Jacob Williams, 18, Rice University,
\$3,000.
- Third Place**
Claire Kim, 19, Northwestern University,
\$2,500.
- Fourth Place**
Jessica Cheng, 18, University of California
- Davis, \$2,000.



- Fifth Place**
Maggie Davis, 19, Colorado College,
\$1,500.
- Sixth Place (tie)**
Jeremy Carbo, 18, Fordham University,
\$1,000.
Kamali Jangha, 18, Spelman College,
\$1,000.
- Seventh Place**
Andrew Christy, 18, University of Florida,
\$750.
- Eighth Place**
Evan Weinraub, 18, Michigan State
University, \$500.
- Ninth Place (tie)**
Nolan Booth, 18, Wayne State University,
\$400.

- Timothy Hill, 18, Valencia College, \$400.
- Tenth Place**
Marina Bardon, 18, Kenyon College, \$300.
- Honorable mentions (\$200 each)**
Manveen Bhela, 17, University of British
Columbia.
Owen Blumenfeld, 18, Pennsylvania State
University-Altoona.
Gillian Boudreau, 19, Montclair State
University.
Cathryn Bennie, 19, University of
Michigan.
Ethelea Caldwell, 19, Texas Christian
University.
Layla Gardner, 18, University of
Pennsylvania.
Carlos Lazo, 18, Northwestern University.

Riley Mulhollan, 18, Florida State
University.
Emelie Nguyen, 18, Brown University.
Laura Towner, 18, University of Georgia.
Isabel Williams, 18, Michigan Tech.

The high school contest is named for the late William J. Schulz, a Wisconsin member and life-long learner who died at 57 and left a generous bequest to FFRF.

FFRF also warmly thanks FFRF’s Lisa Treu for managing the infinite details of this and FFRF’s other annual student competitions. And we couldn’t judge these contests without our volunteer and staff readers and judges, including: Danielle Acker, Don Ardell, Dan Barker, Bill Dunn, David Chivers, Kate Garmise, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Richard Grimes, Ricki Grunberg, Linda Josheff, Dan Kettner, Brianna Knoppow, Sammi Lawrence, Gloria Marquardt, Brent Messer, Andrea Osburne, Sue Schuetz, PJ Slinger and Chance Wimberley.

FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994, grad students since 2010 and one dedicated to students of color since 2016. A fifth contest, open to law students, began in 2019.

FIRST PLACE

Growing up with theology

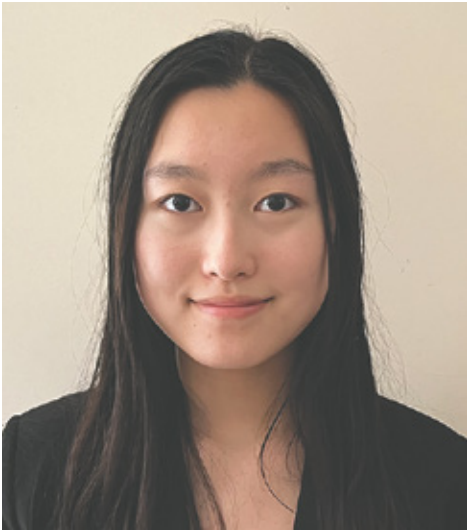
FFRF awarded Michelle \$3,500.

By Michelle Liao

I grew up attempting to stay as far from religion as possible. This proved difficult, of course, in my rural Midwestern town, where it seemed most people were religious (and half of the livestock, too).

I remember learning about our impressive collection of churches: over 60 for a total population of nearly 8,000. I would walk around town and see the rising church spires, one after the next, towering over the smaller houses. Several friends were homeschooled Christians, their mothers preaching to me at the breakfast table. These experiences follow me even now: I can still summon the dread I felt as the interviewer for my dream university sat down, looked up, and asked, “Have you ever read the bible?”

To me, it felt as though everyone knew something I didn’t. I was the person who, when everyone else had their heads bowed in prayer, opened my eyes and wondered who we were praying to. I could not blindly engage in what could be nothing better than a delusion. There was no basis for anything written in the bible, Quran or any other religious text. The promise of heaven



Michelle Liao

did nothing to entice me, not when it meant control over my present life. The punishment of hell did nothing to persuade me, either. Simply put, I believed in facts: in the vacuum outside our atmosphere, the soil beneath my feet, and the eventual death of our sun. I did not believe in religion.

Even worse, I soon realized how religion was wielded as a weapon to suppress other opinions. Abortion and

female health care have become intertwined with religion, two topics that should never have been mentioned in the same sentence. Educational plans in public schools have been scrutinized again and again. National policies have been rooted in religion. I listened to people discuss their religious beliefs at length, knowing that if I shared mine, we could not remain friends.

But things have changed with Gen Z, and I’ve noticed. I’ve caught the glances my homeschooled friends give their parents, ones they thought were subtle. I’ve seen fewer bible verses in notebooks and silver crosses around necks.

Honestly, the growth of the religiously unaffiliated has brought one word to mind: finally. Finally, we can discuss policies based on merit, free from a religious doctrine dictating what we should support.

Finally, we can listen to others’ views without dismissing them based on the

moral superiority of one’s religion. Perhaps we can even begin to embody the separation of church and state written into our Constitution.

Maybe I didn’t know, as a young child growing up in a Midwestern town, that I was a Gen Z “None.” But now I do. And not only that: I know for the first time in a while, I’m one of many. Our generation has the potential to reshape the very fabric of our society with our changing religious beliefs and challenges of the status quo. I’m proud to simply be a part of it.

Michelle, 18, is from Albion, Mich., and attends the University of Michigan, where she plans to major in psychology and political science. In high school, Michelle was the treasurer of the National Honor Society and a member of the 360 Dance Studio and Student Advisory Council. Michelle was a part of the math research group and the lead student author of a paper currently under review at the College Mathematics Journal.

“Simply put, I believed in facts: in the vacuum outside our atmosphere, the soil beneath my feet, and the eventual death of our sun. I did not believe in religion.”

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.

Women Without Superstition
“No Gods—No Masters”

Edited by, Annie Laurie Gaylor

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

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FREETHOUGHT RADIO

PODCASTS AND BROADCASTS

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Slightly irreverent views, news, music & interviews

FFRF.ORG FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

SECOND PLACE

‘None,’ not ‘nun’

FFRF awarded Jacob \$3,000.

By Jacob Williams

Both of my parents grew up in Christian households and, once they each moved out, concluded that they were atheists. This has caused me to wonder if I would still be an atheist if my parents were religious, and I believe I would be. Unlike many, my parents never forced their beliefs on me. They gave me information from all sides and allowed me to come to my own conclusion.

Without much influence from others, I have realized that religious beliefs don’t make logical sense. If we burned every book on science and religion, over time the science books would be rewritten as they were, but not the religious ones.

In many scenarios when people around me pray, I wonder what they’re praying for. If you’re praying for your football team to win, aren’t you asking God to make the other team lose? Isn’t



Jacob Williams

the other team praying, as well? I’ve come to realize that most of what allows religious people to ignore reason is the support they feel from God when times are hard, and they find their strength in faith. I think members of Generation Z have shown that they have been able to find support and strength from other sources, likely ones that don’t

place restrictions on their behavior and make them feel guilty for their decisions and mistakes. Hopefully, this means Gen Z will develop closer relationships with real people and be able to count on tangible things in life to support them.

I’m proud to be a part of Gen Z because our lack of religious affiliation represents our unwillingness to accept the empty words of others as truth. It shows that we doubt, question authority and aren’t afraid to express our controversial beliefs. Refusing to accept what someone tells you without proof is an essential part of being free.

This development also signifies that Gen Z is finding new ways to deal with the problems of society instead of just turning to God. “Thoughts and prayers” will become a thing of the past as we look for real-world solutions to problems. Society needs to recognize that God will not fix the damage humans have done — we must step up and do it ourselves.

“Refusing to accept what someone tells you without proof is an essential part of being free.”

Politically, this shift in thought will hopefully result in greater bipartisan support for a stronger separation of church and state and the passage of laws and regulations that ensure this. This is essential in a time when books are being banned in schools and children’s ability to explore all sources of information is being severely limited. Our generation of “Nones” must fight for the freedom of thought for the new generations, without which societal progress in all forms will certainly be halted.

Jacob, 18, is from Gresham, Ore., and attends Rice University with plans to major in biosciences on the pre-medical track. He has volunteered at a hospital and with organizations such as TOPSoccer, which helps children with disabilities participate in sports. He won state recognition for creating a volunteer online tutoring program for his school district during the pandemic. Jacob hopes to become a physician.

THIRD PLACE

Both atheist and moral

FFRF awarded Claire \$2,500.

By Claire Kim

Aimlessly looking down into my lap during church service, I felt profoundly out of place. I never felt the religious connection that others claimed to have. I never understood the basis of bible verses or the meanings behind the lengthy passages. I realized my parents also feigned their dedication because by my 10th birthday, our attendance at church slowly faded to nothing.

In later years, I would question the basis of everything that Christianity had taught me.

How can others claim that religion is necessary for morality, when white Christians used the bible to justify slavery? How can religion be used as a moral compass, when it breeds prejudice against the LGBTQ-plus community for who they are from birth? I watched religious conservatism hurt those I cared about and couldn’t

fathom how one’s faith — supposedly a positive guiding force — could be used as a weapon against the innocent.

While the United States is theologically diverse, Christianity is the leading religion in older generations and dominates both political parties. The Christianization of American politics hurts all who do not adhere to the desired standards of the scripture, pervading social views, voting and policy making. It has set back abortion rights and public education, among many of today’s hot-button issues.

Climbing the ranks as the most educated and diverse generation, Gen Z has also become the least religious. As more “Nones” pass into the voting age, there comes greater defense for the Establishment Clause, as the Founding Fathers intended.

Without the influence of religion on a growing number of Americans, political ideologies will largely become based upon individual judgments. When science and reason take precedence over religion, political constituents no longer push an agenda based

“True to their name, freethinkers are fundamentally liberated. They are not governed by stringent commandments or fear.”



Claire Kim

on an uncompromising belief. Pro-life proponents cite the bible for banning abortion, without regard for scientific data corroborating its role as safe, essential health care. However, the unaffiliated are more likely to combat religious prejudices and be more open-minded.

As religious arguments subside in politics, logic-based perspectives will rise. This inverse relationship indicates significant societal progression, especially with concern to respecting the personal autonomy of others. The

separation of religion and government does not persecute, but instead protects atheists, agnostics and other religious minorities.

True to their name, freethinkers are fundamentally liberated. They are not governed by stringent commandments or fear. Rather, they assess realistic outcomes based on empirical evidence. This frees them to think for themselves and urges them to defend against church/state violations, which affect not only them but all other underrepresented groups.

As the population of the unaffiliated in our country expands, the First Amendment itself strengthens. The constitutional separation of church and state must be strictly upheld in order to maintain faith-based freedom and protect religious minorities. The irreligious resist the imposition of religion and the infringement upon individuals’ rights, advocating for all.

Claire, 18, from Suwanee, Ga., is attending Northwestern University, with plans to major in cognitive science and minor in French. In high school, she was involved with National Honor Society, French Honor Society and Active Minds. Claire has also volunteered for community events, an educational summer camp and a meal distribution program.

FFRF'S

Ask an Atheist

Wednesdays at Noon (Central)*

On Facebook Live

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

*With occasional reruns.

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FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

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

What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

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

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

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

FOURTH PLACE

The truth for some Americans, but not all

FFRF awarded Jessica \$2,000.

By Jessica Cheng

Growing up in a religious family, I’ve gone to church almost every week of my life. My mom is a Christian, deeply involved in our Taiwanese-Methodist church. My dad, however, is agnostic. Skeptical of all things that lack concrete proof, he encouraged me, from a young age, to always think analytically about issues, and always ask why. What I didn’t know was that this would cause Sunday school to be counterproductive, at least from my mom’s point of view.

While each morning session would expose me to many new awe-inspiring stories, it would later result in an equal amount of afternoon questioning. Did Moses actually part the Red Sea? How did Noah’s Ark make sense in terms of evolution? How was it possible for water to turn into wine? Soon enough, my curiosity cultivated a strong doubt toward religion — and later led to trouble. During a vacation bible school camp I attended in fourth grade, I was strongly rebuked by an adult member of the program when I expressed skepticism



Jessica Cheng

toward the logistics behind “Jonah and the Whale.” This made me, for a very long time, despise religion.

Although I later would learn that it was a one-off experience — many members of religious groups are actually quite open-minded and supportive — being berated as a fourth-grader for expressing non-conforming views left a bitter taste in my mouth. Since then, I’ve solidified my identity as an agnostic atheist.

This doesn’t mean that I detest religion now, however. On the contrary, I very much respect it and its ability to empower, to unify, to kindle hope and to keep individuals grounded during the hardest of times.

Yet, I hold that while religion may be a way of life for some, it should not be promoted as the absolute truth for all.

Like many “Nones,” I reject religion due to the fact that it simply isn’t grounded in logical reasoning. And, not only that, religion is also known to impose values that aren’t conducive to promoting freedom and equality of opportunity, two of the most defining traits of life in America. Many interpret passages within the bible as condemning homosexuality, and opposing abortion, views that prevent progress in many areas. But most importantly, religion’s requirement for conformity often prevents individuals from thinking for themselves, and forming beliefs independently of societal or familial expectations.

Thankfully, led by a group of Gen Zers

“Religion is also known to impose values that aren’t conducive to promoting freedom and equality of opportunity, two of the most defining traits of life in America.”

that I’m proud to be part of, religious unaffiliation is growing, which encourages open dialogue and tolerance, and at the same time advocates for diverse beliefs. In turn, this fosters a culture of respect and understanding, bridging gaps and building more inclusive communities.

The growing freedom from religion also serves as a catalyst for secularism, critical thinking and evidence-based decision-making. Plus, the decreasing reliance on religion as a guiding force can further allow for a clear separation of church and state. By removing religious biases from important social and political issues, decisions can be made in the best interests of all Americans, promoting faster and further progress.

Jessica, 18, from Fremont, Calif., attends University of California–Davis with plans to major in mathematical analytics and operations research. In her free time, Jessica enjoys cooking, spending time with her family, playing fetch with her dog and exploring different topics within economics.

FIFTH PLACE

From despair to hope

FFRF awarded Maggie \$1,500.

By Maggie Davis

I wasn’t raised religious. I knew about God, but every time I asked God a question, he never answered. I had an analytical mind even in first grade, and I thought if God couldn’t send me a sign that he existed — like making the faucet drip when I asked — he must not exist. And that was the end of it for me.

Then I met Margret in middle school. She parroted her parent’s words and spouted off vitriol at the LGBTQ kids in our grade, including me. She said how she loved all of us, but we were hellbound. Her hate was deep, but I knew that, like me, she was just a 13-year-old kid. She wasn’t born this way. She was indoctrinated by her parents and the strict

“As America becomes less religious as a whole, I see a nation that represents me.”

church she attended. She is currently working to receive her ministry certificate, and I know she will go on to spread these thoughts to the next generation.

I despised the circumstances that created Margret. She was a product of her environment and she had been brought up in hate and fear and she spread that through our school. Religion had shaped her parents and then shaped her, and to say otherwise is ridiculous.

I feel that a basis in many religions is fear. Some believe we are born in sin and must cleanse ourselves until we die. Others, like Margret, embrace Jesus’ love of everyone by instead hating already marginalized groups. I don’t want to live my life like this. I want to approach my life with an open mind. I want to love all those around me and learn from other cultures. Why is it that I see these religious people in my community reject those ideals? Why do



Maggie Davis

they close themselves off in fear?

As America becomes less religious as a whole, I see a nation that represents me. I see a nation of people who are accepting their identities when previously they hid them in fear of their life. I see cultures interacting and mixing tradi-

tions. I see the past ideal of religious freedom coming to life as a place where people are free not to subscribe to any belief and instead live their life on Earth to the fullest.

There will always be people like Margret, but there are just as many people who are open and loving and embracing a world free of the shackles of strict religion. I’m excited to be one of them.

I wish I could go back and tell myself that I wouldn’t go to hell for loving someone. I wish I could go back and tell myself that Margret would eventually move and her abuse would stop. I wish I could tell myself just how promising the future is and how excited we should be for it.

Maggie, 18, is attending Colorado College with plans to major in mathematics. In high school, she was a member of Girls of Steel Robotics, which is a FIRST Robotics team comprised of women and gender minorities. Maggie also was a Zoo Teen at the Pittsburgh Zoo. She also worked as a garden intern at North Hills Community Outreach’s garden, where all the produce is sent to local food pantries.

SIXTH PLACE (tie)

The rise of ‘None’ is good for all

FFRF awarded Jeremy \$1,000.

By Jeremy Carbo

When I was a child, I was exposed to a lot of religious ideas. My mother was Jain, while my father was an atheist who became disgruntled with the Christian faith due to the abuse he received as a child.

Beyond my parents, religion surrounded my life. My maternal grandmother’s apartment, where I often

stayed during my childhood, was brimming with religious literature from India. During elementary school, I was surrounded by Catholic students who attended CCD. They would form a choir of defensive voices whenever I or anyone else questioned the existence of God. My uncle taught me about Ramadan and other Muslim traditions long before I actually understood what they meant.

With all these different faiths and beliefs surrounding my life, I learned to be respectful of the traditions and values of others from an early age.

At the same time, however, I also learned to be skeptical. Because of this, I became very inquisitive, refusing to just believe whatever I was told at home or at school without further inquiry. I began exploring different philosophies and ideas and, after years of personal exploration, I have come to the conclusion that my own values — my belief in the existence and power of human agency, my trust in the empiricist view of knowledge, and my utilitarian position that holds happiness as the ultimate good — are incompatible with religion.



Jeremy Carbo

There are three main reasons why I reject religion. The first is that I value individuality and the ability of individuals to live their lives without the constraints of organized religion. The second is that I love being able to define my own principles without fully subscribing to one belief system. The final reason is that religion is an inevitable source of tension and division. Just look around the world today. You'll find the Israel-Palestine and India-Pakistan conflicts, the genocide of the Muslim Rohingya

people at the hands of Buddhist nationalists, the proliferation of Islamic extremism and terrorism in the Middle East, or the rise of Christian nationalism here in the United States as a means of oppressing minority groups. Secularism creates a less divided society and reduces the chance of conflict between different groups of people.

“ I have come to the conclusion that my own values . . . are incompatible with religion.

For these reasons, I view the rise of the religiously unaffiliated population in the United States as a fantastic development. A religiously unaffiliated population encourages a tolerant society. The growth of the unaffiliated population also brings new hope for the spread of policies based on empirical evidence instead of religious beliefs. At a time like this, when our

planet is burning and the rights of minorities are being stripped in the name of “Christian values,” it is crucial to replace policies based on faith with policies based on cold, hard facts. *Jeremy, 18, is from Yorktown Heights, N.Y., and attends Fordham University with plans to major in political science. He worked on two political campaigns during the 2022 election cycle and was president of the Lakeland High School Gay-Straight Alliance.*

SIXTH PLACE (tie)

First, second, third

FFRF awarded Kamali \$1,000.

By Kamali Jangha

I truly cannot imagine a world where I wouldn't have grown up religious. First, I am Black. This means going to church most Sundays, buying dresses specifically for church, and participating in youth choir and play productions. It means going to religious summer camps, where I met church girls whose mothers canvassed for Obama, and others whose mothers voted for Trump. It also means that my exposure to Christianity was predetermined for me not by my parents or grandparents, but by the choice of slave masters and colonizers to indoctrinate those considered their property in hopes for a prosperous crop that season. Yet, the pain of my ancestors isn't here with the congregation this morning. Instead, I am greeted by celebration, and the vitality of composers, dancers, musicians and a sea of people a hue not so far off from mine. For a long time, church was my best under-



Kamali Jangha

standing of Black culture. Second, I am a woman. I can distinctly remember my pastor encouraging women to reject promiscuity, and my mother's words about my braless outfits ring clearly in my head. I could not understand how my “God-given” body could bring so much shame. I can't remember when I realized that most wom-

en in the bible were side characters to men, or that in some parts of the world women are arrested and beaten for simply a stray strand of hair. I did begin to understand, however, that religion is not made equal for all of its believers, including me. Third, I am queer. Like many issues in the Black community, I have never heard the queer community addressed in church. At a Chick-fil-A-sponsored sleepaway camp in rural Georgia, I ask my camp counselor the big question: What about gay people? She essentially told me queer people will have to apologize for their sins to reach heaven, or are otherwise going to hell. I was freshly 12 years old, and didn't know I was gay, but did know it was unfathomably cruel. It is cemented in me again: Religion is not made equal. This is when I separated the cultural practices of my church from the religion

“ I could be proud of my people and our strides, while still acknowledging the damage Christianity had done to me, us, and others globally.

itself. Yes, there was a reason I stepped into the sanctuary and felt a part of something bigger than myself, but that something was not God. That feeling was the success of my ancestors, turning their pain and manipulation into celebration. I could be proud of my people and our strides, while still acknowledging the damage Christianity had done to me, us, and others globally. My generation, Gen Z, has already been monumental in effecting change. Not only in practice, but in ideas and the culture. Freedom from religion isn't synonymous with damning yourself to hell, but to expansion of perspective and acceptance of all. *Kamali, 18, from Silver Spring, Md., attends Spelman College. In high school, she was active in student advocacy, and was secretary in her school's Student Government Association and her countywide SGA.*

SEVENTH PLACE

The rise of the ‘Nones’

FFRF awarded Andrew \$750.

By Andrew Christy

We live in a time of profound change, a tectonic shift in belief systems. As part of Generation Z, I have seen the contours of this shift firsthand. I am part of the 48 percent who identify as religiously unaffiliated or “None.” Becoming a None is a unique adventure, a journey toward self-discovery and authenticity that has led me, and many of my peers, to reject traditional religious structures. Growing up as a None, my experiences have been distinctly shaped by a persistent desire to question and critically evaluate the world around me. This inclination has been fueled by the digital era in which we reside, which has democratized access to information, expanded worldviews, and thrown open the doors to diverse beliefs. Instead of inherited ideas being bestowed, my generation has had the rare privilege of

“ The rise of the Nones . . . announces an era where spirituality is personalized, ethical behavior is democratized and the universal yardstick of human rights and scientific rationality measures progress.

investigating, exploring and coming to conclusions. This journey of unguided exploration has often led to the rejection of the structures and doctrines of religion. Why do I, and many of my fellow Nones, reject religion? The answer, though multifaceted, fundamentally revolves around the demand for rationality and equity. The inconsistencies, contradictions and inherent patriarchal and discriminatory structures found in many religions have resulted in disillusionment. This disillusionment is not to be mistaken for an outright rejection of spirituality or morality. Instead, it is an insistence on finding a spiritual path that resonates with personal experiences and upholds the values of equality and justice that we cherish deeply. Additionally, the ostentatious display of religious symbolism that often masks underlying corruption, the appropriation of religion for political purposes, and the weaponization of faith to instigate conflict have only strengthened our decision to stay unaffiliated. My genera-



Andrew Christy

tion seeks a spiritual pathway where ethical actions hold more weight than symbolic rituals, where religious edicts do not limit love and acceptance. Lastly, rejecting religious affiliation can lead to a more equal society. By refusing to adhere to doctrines that promote inequality, Gen Z is shaping a future that values every individual, regardless of gender, race or sexual orientation, free from the confines of religious prejudices. The rise of the Nones does not signal an age of nihilism or moral bankruptcy,

as some might fear. Instead, it announces an era where spirituality is personalized, ethical behavior is democratized, and the universal yardstick of human rights and scientific rationality measures progress. The shift from religious adherence to religious nonaffiliation reflects a profound transformation, signifying a generation's pursuit for authenticity, informed by ample access to information and a readiness to question the status quo. The emergence of the Nones is not indicative of a loss, but rather symbolizes an epoch of deeper introspection, comprehension and acceptance. This development signals a transformative wave within the United States and beyond, propelling us toward an era where faith is regarded as a personal odyssey rather than an inherited doctrine, and where spirituality draws on the broad reservoir of universal human values, free from the constraints of religious dogma. *Andrew, 18, attends the University of Florida with plans to major in international relations and pre-medicine, and hopes one day to join Doctors Without Borders. He founded and manages his own business, Andrew's Vending LLC, and co-owns a company at the Niceville Farmers Market. He was president of the Speech & Debate Club in high school and has volunteered at both a homeless shelter and thrift store.*

EIGHTH PLACE

An atheist in America

FFRF awarded Evan \$500.

By Evan Weinraub

As with many like-minded individuals, I have been asked often why I am an atheist. My response is simple: I was born one. Since then, I have never been exposed to any evidence that suggests a supernatural presence. My parents, although raised in separate religions, now identify as agnostic. Religion has never been a part of my upbringing. Still, I quickly became aware of how present religion is in the world. I always knew that Christianity existed, but was surprised to discover how prominent it is in American society. When I discovered that the entirety of my first-grade class was Christian, I felt like a child gawking at a new creature in a zoo. I am sure the feeling was mutual. Curious by nature, I am fascinated by the thought processes of others, especially when I disagree. I enjoy involving religious people in friendly yet spirited



Evan Weinraub

debates on the topic of religion. My critical thinking skills are almost insulted by others’ attempts to convert me. I am shocked how, when engaged in debate, religious people refuse to accept documented and empirically observed phenomena in favor of their inconsistent

stories. As an atheist, I do not have all of the answers about the universe, but I do not claim to. On the other hand, religion does claim to have the answers, yet fails to provide them consistently and convincingly. Learning more about religions further solidifies my atheism. Although critical of religion, I respect everyone’s right to their religion and beliefs. They can assert their supernatural beings with the same enthusiasm as I deny them. However, I strongly believe that one’s rights end where another’s begin. Time and time again, this line is crossed both socially and politically. Attacks against others’ health care, marriage, clothing and innumerable other rights are justified by people’s personal religion. Fortunately, the backlash to this is growing as more and more young people see the immorality of allowing religion to strangle the rights of innocent people. I am proud to be Gen Z, knowing

“I strongly believe that one’s rights end where another’s begin.”

that my generation is the least affiliated religious generation in the history of the United States. When religion is removed from the equation, many forms of bigotry are left undefined, thus easily defeated. The unaffiliated members of Gen Z see through this charade and the harm that religion causes. This allows us to be the generation that breaks the cycle of abuse of religion. We will hold people accountable for the harm they cause others and society, not allowing them to shield themselves with religion. Gen Z will bring a revolution, not with guns, but with minds. Tearing down the foundations of religious oppression will be a multi-generational endeavor, shepherded by Gen Z. Evan, 18, is from Brighton, Mich., and attends Michigan State University. In high school, he was part of his school’s Science Olympiad in three events, and as a senior coached the Codebusters team.

NINTH PLACE (tie)

Proud to be a ‘None’

FFRF awarded Nolan \$400.

By Nolan Booth

There is something in my life. Something all-encompassing, something omnipresent, something grand, something I have devoted myself to. This thing guides me. It keeps me moving. This thing is not God. I really like science. I love it, in fact. Ever since I was little, science has been a keystone, something without which my life would be a lot duller. Science acted as my window into the world. I became fascinated with the natural world, and geology fascinated me the most. I was captivated. Rocks, minerals and fossils became integral aspects of who I was, and am. The colors and shapes of minerals moved me. How could something as simple as a rock provide such an intricate picture of the world?

“God has always been on the sideline while humans discover the universe.”

How could something formed not by the hand of a divine creator, but by the blind motion of the planet, be so intricate, so amazing, so beautiful? The more I asked, the more I learned. I didn’t stop at rocks. I needed to know. I needed to know how everything worked. How do stars work? How are there so many types of animals? How do the planets move, and how did they get there? For many, there is a simple answer to all these questions. God. God is a cop out. God is something one invokes when they don’t know. But I need to know. My world is shaped not by scripture and prayer, but by sticks and stones. Everything around me has a naturalistic explanation. Everything we know about the world can be derived from the methods and tools of science and not once has God stepped in. God has always been on the sideline while humans discover the universe. Humans are the way we are because of discovery.



Nolan Booth

But I get it. God is easy. It’s easy to say that something is the work of God. It’s easy to invoke God’s name. Humans are always looking for answers. We are uncomfortable being in the dark, and God provides an easy way to have answers and be done. But

I don’t want to be done. I need to know. When one is on the frontier of what is known, on the border between the dark and light, there is no room for God. When one invokes God, they are giving up. The universe is so grand and wonderful, and the only way to learn about it and ourselves is to leave God behind and move to a new era of discovery. We must live in a world guided not by church and miracles, but by school and experiments. The more people we have who realize this, the more discoveries we can make. Humans are the way we are because of discoveries. I do not want to say “God” and be done. There is no need for God. I do not need God. I need to know. Nolan, 18, is from Troy, Mich., and attends Wayne State University. “I am intimately interested with existential questions as well as simpler things, like geology and music,” he writes. “I am in National Honors Society and thus have volunteered a number of times. I want to be a geologist, but also want to pursue other things like art and music-making.”

NINTH PLACE (tie)

The unaffiliated generation’s journey to progress

FFRF awarded Timothy \$400.

By Timothy Hill

In a world shaped by traditions and beliefs, the rise of religiously unaffiliated individuals, particularly within Gen Z, presents a unique and transformative phenomenon. As a member of this generation, I have embarked on a personal journey that led me to reject religious affiliation, seeking a deeper understanding of the world. By embracing reason, tolerance, and the unleashing of human potential, the unaffiliated generation challenges societal norms and fosters a more inclusive society. Growing up amid the influence of religious narratives, I questioned the

dogmas and doctrines that governed many lives, craving answers that resonated with my experiences and values. This journey involved introspection, research and conversations with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Rejecting religion does not mean rejecting spirituality or morality; instead, it signifies a commitment to exploring the complexities of existence without the constraints of dogma. Through my personal exploration, I discovered the importance of personal conviction and a sincere search for

“By nurturing skepticism and relying on evidence-based approaches, we can address societal issues with logic, unburdened by biases imposed by religious dogmas.”

truth, allowing me to forge my own path. The rejection of religion within Gen Z is actually an embrace of reason and critical thinking. We recognize that reason and empirical evidence are essential tools for progress. By nurturing skepticism and relying on evidence-based approaches, we can address societal issues with logic, unburdened by biases imposed by religious dogmas. This commitment to reason empowers us to challenge prevailing norms, forge new paths and pave the way for groundbreaking



Timothy Hill

advancements in science, technology and social progress.

The growth of the unaffiliated in the United States signifies a significant shift toward a more inclusive and tolerant society. Our generation recognizes the importance of embracing multiple perspectives and promoting harmonious coexistence.

Rejecting religious affiliation enables us to transcend divisive narratives and foster an environment where acceptance and respect for individual beliefs

flourish. By valuing diversity, we encourage dialogue and understanding, facilitating collaborative efforts to address global challenges such as climate change, social inequality and political polarization. Our generation’s openness to different worldviews cultivates empathy, creating bridges of understanding that propel us toward a brighter future.

The rise of the unaffiliated generation marks a significant turning point in American society. Rejecting religious

affiliation does not negate the presence of values or spirituality. Instead, it reflects our collective pursuit of authenticity, reason and tolerance.

As a member of Gen Z, I have embarked on a personal journey driven by a commitment to individuality and the pursuit of truth. The growth of the unaffiliated in the United States is a positive development for progress, enabling the unleashing of reason, the fostering of pluralism, and the celebration of diverse perspectives. Together,

let us embrace this transformative era, where the unaffiliated generation sets the stage for a future built on intellectual curiosity, inclusivity and boundless possibilities.

Timothy, 18, is from Orlando, Fla, and attends Valencia College and plans to major in English or journalism. “Whether it’s volunteering as a mentor to younger students or actively participating in environmental initiatives, I am driven by a desire to make a positive impact on the world around me,” he writes.

TENTH PLACE

I sleep in on Sundays

FFRF awarded Marina \$300.

By Marina Bardon

I’ve grown up in one of the more Catholic communities in Indianapolis. Recently, one of my neighbors, a 9-year-old girl, asked me if I went to church. When I told her no, she asked why, and I replied with the best answer you could give a 9-year-old: “I like to sleep in on Sundays.”

My father’s side of the family is Catholic. My mother’s side is Southern Baptist. When my parents got together, they both decided they’d rather spend Sunday mornings playing with their kids than sitting quietly in a church for two hours. They raised both me and my sister as agnostics. I remember being 6 and my mother reminding me that she would take me to church if I wanted to go. But between the choices of playing Legos and sitting in church, I picked the Legos.

I’m one of the lucky individuals in Generation Z whose parents openly support my atheism. Many of my secular classmates continue to discuss the pressure they experience from their parents to go



Marina Bardon

to church. The common ground of our struggles is on the battlefield of events with extended family.

I remember the first time one of my Southern Baptist relatives in North Carolina asked me about church. When I replied with my quip, “I like to sleep in on Sundays,” I was met with this expression: a turning of the eyes, raised

brows, pursing lips and a hum.

They acknowledge what you said, but deep down in their hearts, they are questioning whether you deserve their respect. It’s sneaky. It’s hurtful. It’s divisive.

We seem to all know the expression our relatives give when we voice our secularism. We feel each other’s pain, a united suffering caused by religion, and together we want it to come to an end.

It’s disappointing to say that so many of Generation Z have been kicked down by religion, but the good news is we are moving toward making the world better for our children and grandchildren. So many of Generation Z continue to rally for abortion rights, LGBTQ-plus rights, and the importance of the separation of church and state.

In Indiana, it’s been an uphill battle with the state government recently banning the discussion of sexuality in grades












“It’s disappointing to say that so many of Generation Z have been kicked down by religion, but the good news is we are moving toward making the world better for our children and grandchildren.”

K-3 with plans to add more grades in the future. Indiana has also banned gender-affirming health services to transgender minors entirely.

I am sick and tired of our government officials using their religion to defend homophobic, transphobic and sexist legislation.

I will continue fighting for the separation of church and state because I am proud to be that 48 percent of Gen Z that’s chosen secularism. I am proud to be an atheist and activist. And I am proud to say that I sleep in on Sundays.

Marina, 18, is from Indianapolis and attends Kenyon College, with plans to major in creative writing. “Writing became my home because it was the intersection between every activity and or interest that I wanted to pursue,” Marina writes. “I am also a circus artist, a gamer, a theater nerd and a reader. I’m a frequent advocate and activist for public education, women’s rights, and LGBTQ-plus rights.”



Manveen BhelaOwen BlumenfeldGillian BoudreauCathryn BennieEthelea CaldwellLayla GardnerCarlos LazoRiley MulhollanEmelie NguyenLaura TownerIsabel Williams

High school essay contest honorable mentions

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

Manveen Bhela

Religious texts and ideas are centuries old and I believe that as times change, people should too and holding on to obsolete perspectives sets the world back. The outdatedness and contrast to reason in religion are just two of the many reasons that have led me to embrace a secular worldview.

Manveen, 17, is from Abbotsford, Ala., and attends the University of British Columbia with plans to one day become a secondary school teacher.

Owen Blumenfeld

The gradual infusion of religion into politics has allowed leaders to preach values which are the antithesis of our national creed. Are we to sacri-

fice our democracy and institutions on the altar of religious liberty?

Owen, 18, is from Pittsburgh and attends Penn State University-Altoona with plans to major in rail transportation engineering.

Gillian Boudreau

If our world continued to grow in unaffiliated numbers, it would lead to our world being a more accepting and open place for marginalized peoples. With the world becoming more accepting, it would lessen the amount of harmful legislation that is plaguing America currently. The rise of the unaffiliated will usher in a new age and the downfall of hate.

Gillian, 19, is from Lincroft, N.J., and attends Montclair State University.

Cathryn Bennie

This increasing trend of rejecting religion is incredibly promising, as far too often in politics and crises the answer from many is just to pray, for God will create change if beckoned. However, without a higher power, many re-

alize that they are the only ones who are capable of the change they want to see. There is no destiny, no predeterminism, just us and our hopes for the future.

Cathryn, 19, is from Rockford, Mich., and attends University of Michigan with plans to major in environmental sciences.

Ethelea Caldwell

In no way am I saying hatred is exclusively promoted through Catholicism, but religion is the only practice in my life that has perpetuated ignorance — through avenues of childhood grooming — so effortlessly and with such long-lasting repercussions.

Ethelea, 19, is from San Antonio and attends Texas Christian University and plans to major in business and communications.

Layla Gardner

My experience growing up without religion has allowed me to question anything and everything around me without fear of persecution or repercussions. I choose to be unaffiliated to explore the depths of the universe. I

reject religion to accept myself.

Layla, 18, is from Glen Allen, Va., and attends University of Pennsylvania with plans to major in economics.

Carlos Lazo

I’ve found the biggest advantage to being free from religion: My purpose in life is to flow wherever life takes me, and in that way I am free but with purpose. I’ve found strength not just from belief and a community, but from within.

Carlos, 18, is from Marana, Ariz., and attends Northwestern University with plans to major in materials engineering.

Riley Mulhollan

Regardless of what the general population would like me to believe, I would rather take a master’s level calculus test over a test of faith any day, because at least with one of these tests I have something to show for my progress.

Riley, 18, is from Panama City, Fla., and attends Florida State University with plans to major in psychology.

IN MEMORIAM

Charles Stiefel was lauded by dermatology businesses

Charles Werner Stiefel died peacefully of multiple illnesses on July 31 in Raleigh, N.C.

He was born Oct. 30, 1950, in Catskill, N.Y. to Werner K. Stiefel and Catherine Pierson Stiefel. Charles (“Charlie,” “Chas,” “Buddy”) grew up in Oak Hill, N.Y., built a home in Catskill, thrived in Miami, and retired to Raleigh. He was an Eagle Scout, a graduate of Yale University (1972), and valedictorian of his class at Albany Law School (1975). He practiced law for several years before becoming a successful businessman. He was general counsel to and then ultimately helmed the world’s largest privately held dermatology company, Stiefel Laboratories. His contributions to the world of skincare and dermatology are unprecedented.

Charlie was brilliant and had a wicked sense of humor. His patience, strength, kindness, and empathy were inspiring. He authored the book *Skin Saga* and invested in over 15 feature films. He was a life-long musician and art appreciator. He was a member of several bands including The Four Sharps and Words Such As Burn. He was a sports enthusiast and he was an athlete who excelled at basketball, tennis and golf. There was never a major sporting event



Charles Stiefel

that he didn’t want to view.

He helped a number of causes and regularly contributed to his community. He was deeply passionate about curing cancer and skin disease. He helped support the endowment of three chairs in the University of Miami Dermatology Department. He earned the 2006 Ernst & Young Florida Entrepreneur of the Year Award and was a national finalist in 2009. He was honored at the 2009 South Florida Business Journal’s Ultimate CEO Awards. The American Skin Association presented him with the 2015 Distinguished Service to Humanity Award. The Dermatology Foundation of South Florida awarded him the Lifetime Achievement Award. He was the only nonphysician to be inducted into the inaugural class of the Dermatology Hall of Fame.

Siobhan Buckley was respected CPA

FFRF Member Siobhan Buckley, 46, died Feb. 14 after a three-year battle with colon cancer.

Originally from Weymouth, Mass., Siobhan was born in 1976 and graduated from Notre Dame Academy in Hingham, Mass. in 1994. She graduated from American University in 1998 with a B.A. in history and American studies.



Siobhan Buckley

Siobhan worked for many years in Washington, D.C., most notably as the national program director at the America the Beautiful Foundation. After moving back to Massachusetts, she graduated in 2008 from the University of Massachusetts with a Master’s degree in accounting. She achieved her certified public accountant (CPA) designation and her Chartered Global Management Accountant (CGMA) certification. A consummate professional, she was a respected CPA at several companies, including Wolf & Company (Boston) and most recently VHB (Wartertown, Mass.).

A kind, gentle and positive-natured soul, Siobhan loved travel, nature, childhood camping trips to Nickerson State Park on Cape Cod, her cat Sage, watching “White Christmas” during the holidays with her family, playing LEGOS with her nephew.

Prayers

Continued from page 1

conservative Supreme Court majority based its decision on a fictional version of the facts. The court claimed that all Kennedy sought to do was engage in “short, personal, private prayer” at mid-field after games. However, as Justice Sonia Sotomayor put it in her dissent, “the record before us . . . tells a different story.”

In truth, for years Kennedy sermonized the team in the locker room before games, and stood at the 50-yard line afterward, beholding up the helmet of each team, beckoning students to kneel around him for prayer. During the 2015 football season, administrators learned of this practice and were rightly concerned about the pressure that coached prayers placed on players as well as the potential liability threatening the Bremerton School District.

The district required him to stop praying with his players, but repeatedly sought to accommodate Kennedy’s desire to pray, even on duty, in a way that did not exert pressure on players and did not interfere with his official school duties — in other words, short, private, personal prayer. Kennedy insisted through lawyers at First Liberty that he would continue to pray publicly at mid-field. Then he went on a national media tour, crying persecution by the district and riling up supporters. The effect was anything but short, private and personal — the moment the next game ended, crowds jumped fences to swarm Kennedy as he defiantly knelt and prayed at

“Students still have the right to a public school experience free from religious coercion. Kennedy’s antics haven’t changed that.”

the 50-yard line in front of the cameras.

In the Supreme Court’s telling, there was no “evidence that students felt pressured to participate in these prayers.” The reality was quite different. One student’s experience was presented to the court in an amicus brief. He recalled, “I always listened and did as I was told. I wanted to play football and treated [Kennedy’s] prayer time as any other order from a coach such as to exercise, attend study hall, or execute a play.”

The court casually ignored the harm Kennedy caused to players and wrote the indirect coercion they experienced out of existence. But the power dynamic between players and coaches is inherently coercive. Players do what the coach wants, on and off the field, whether or not they receive a direct command or verbal threat of punishment. Players know that if they please the coach, they get to play.

That same player told the court how Kennedy’s prayers took all of the focus away from players. As he recalled, “To this day, I don’t remember who we played or if we even won, . . . all I remember is the aftermath of that game.”

Kennedy’s case undermined the cherished principle of separation between state and church. But the court’s insistence that the coach’s practice was “private, personal, prayer” means that his performative, coercive prayers with players remain unconstitutional. Students still have the right to a public school experience free from religious coercion. Kennedy’s antics haven’t changed that.

Elizabeth Cavell is associate counsel at FFRF.

Essays

Continued from page 17

Emelie Nguyen

The growth of the unaffiliated — whether atheist or agnostic — is a positive direction for the United States. Whether it is Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, or Judaism, the cult of religion has provided an escape route for those in positions of influence to abuse their power. Liberation from religion is a shift toward critical thinking.

Emelie, 18, is from Roslyn, N.Y., and attends Brown University with plans to major in computational biology.

Laura Towner

With my generation of lesser religious affiliation on the rise, the United States has a better outlook for politics and science based on an empirical footing which will improve its objectivity and possibly repair some of the recent growth in political divisiveness around the country.

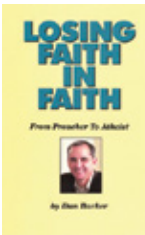
Laura, 18, is from Milledgeville, Ga., and attends the University of Georgia with plans to double major in dance and exercise science.

Isabel Williams

Being unaware of the dangers of placing certain religious texts on a pedestal has invited an insidious danger into our nation. We debate on how the text of the Constitution, written a mere 236 years ago, translates to today, while a book written a millennium ago is considered immutable by many. The beliefs of the society that wrote the bible cannot possibly reflect the values of our nation today.

Isabel, 18, is from Fort Leavenworth, Kan., and attends Michigan Tech with plans to major in mechanical engineering.

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

Yip Harburg, from his book:

Rhymes for the Irreverent

Illustrated by Seymore Cwast, published by FFRF



Less Majeste

No matter how high or great the throne,
What sits on it is the same as your own.

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FFRF awards \$30,000!

Forward Freethought scholarship winners

FFRF has awarded \$30,000 in First in the Family Humanist Forward Freethought scholarships to seven students, thanks to the generosity of FFRF benefactor Lance Bredvold. The students were selected by Black Skeptics Los Angeles (BSLA), an African American humanist-atheist-based organization.

BSLA is the first secular humanist atheist organization to specifically address college pipelining for youth of color through its ongoing scholarship, college and K-12 youth leadership partnerships. FFRF has proudly partnered with BSLA for 10 years to provide tuition grants, gradually increasing the funding and number of scholarships. The BSLA review committee is Imani Moses, Darrin Johnson, Deana Williams and Sikivu Hutchinson.

The following are the 2023 First in the Family Forward Freethought scholarship winners. (The first five are this year's first-year college student awardees and the last two are multiyear winners.)

- Amir Asadi, University of California-Santa Cruz, \$5,000.
- Nevaeh Brown, University of Illinois, \$5,000.
- Joseph Carter, Texas Southern, \$5,000.
- Nathan Concepcion, Texas A&M, \$5,000.
- Janaye Silva, Emerson College, \$5,000.
- Kaylin Nelson, University of Central Florida, \$2,500.
- Belen Padilla, Scripps College, \$2,500.

Here are excerpts of the essays from the five first-year awardees.

By Amir Asadi


I identify as a humanist because humanity alone has the power to create social change.

As a queer person who was raised Muslim, I am passionate about eliminating homo/transphobia in religious communities and protecting marginalized queer people of color around the world. As a Black person, I have seen the ways institutionalized religion has torn apart our community. I have seen the Black community regurgitate the same rhetoric used to enslave us under the guise of religion. As an American, I am passionate about protecting my physical and medical autonomy. From gender transition to reproductive health



Amir Asadi

Just Pretend: A Book For Young Freethinkers



By Dan Barker
Illustrated by Kati Treu

Revised and adorably illustrated classic. This fun book explores myths and religion from a freethought point of view, and promotes critical thinking.

Published by FFRF \$12 Item #FB103

Buy it from FFRF online

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care, no religious organization should have the power to tell me what decisions I can make with my body.

Secular humanism can make a positive difference in creating social change by rejecting the structural power many religious institutions have in our government. There are no logical arguments against issues like LGBTQ rights or the right to abortion that do not use a religious text as a source. Secular humanism also gives humanity agency over our decisions and our world. By believing that all our choices are our own, that gives us the power to choose to improve the world around us. I have participated in pro-choice, pro-LGBTQ, and anti-racist praxis within my community.

Science is the greatest asset of the secular humanist cause. In the search for an objective truth, you must forfeit your biases. I am a humanist because I have hope. I have hope that radical change is possible. I have hope that the issues that plague our society have solutions. I have hope that my actions can make the world a better place.

By Nevaeh Brown

As a young Black person who identifies as pansexual, non-binary and lives with autism, my journey of self-discovery has been one filled with questions,

Nevaeh Brown

uncertainty, and an unwavering commitment to open-mindedness. This is why I proudly identify as agnostic, as it allows me to navigate the complexities of existence without subscribing to any specific religious doctrine or dogma.

Living in the body of someone perceived to be a Black woman has shaped my perspective in profound ways. It has made me acutely aware of the societal expectations and stereotypes that accompany such an identity. From the assumption that I am strong and resilient to the fetishization of my Blackness, my experiences have revealed the urgent need for inclusivity, understanding and equality.

My journey has also taught me the importance of embracing my own unique identity.

Identifying as agnostic allows me to explore and question the nature of spirituality and existence without subscribing to rigid beliefs. It provides me with the freedom to critically analyze various religious and philosophical perspectives, while remaining open to the possibility of something beyond our current understanding. By acknowledging the limitations of human knowledge, agnosticism fosters humility, curiosity, and an appreciation for the vastness of the universe.

While agnosticism forms the foundation of my worldview, secular humanism is the guiding light that shapes my values and passions. As a philosophy centered around the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every individual, secular humanism has the power to create positive social change.

Furthermore, as someone with autism, I advocate for the rights and inclusion of individuals with neurodivergent conditions. I aim to challenge the stigmas and misconceptions surrounding autism, promoting a society that values neurodiversity and provides equal op-

portunities for all.

By Joseph Carter

In a world shaped by diverse beliefs, I proudly identify as nonreligious and wholeheartedly embrace secular humanism.

Joseph Carter

My embrace of a nonreligious/secular identity stems from an unyielding quest for personal autonomy and an unwavering commitment to critical thinking. By freeing myself from the shackles of religious dogma, I embrace a worldview driven by evidence, reason, empathy and the profound beauty of human connection.

As a passionate advocate of secular humanism, my heart burns with fervor to address a multitude of humanist issues in my community. Foremost among these is the pursuit of social justice — a cause that resonates deeply within me.

I am resolute in my commitment to fight against discrimination, advocate for equality, and forge a path toward an inclusive society where all voices are heard and celebrated.

Another flame that ignites my humanist spirit is education — a beacon of hope and empowerment. I staunchly believe that every person deserves access to quality education as an inalienable human right.

Secular humanism is not a mere intellectual exercise but a transformative force capable of instigating profound social change. Embracing secular humanism invites us into a realm of open dialogue, respect for diverse perspectives, and the pursuit of shared ethical values. Through these principles, we can bridge divides, foster understanding, and construct a society that thrives on harmonious co-existence and inclusive growth.

By promoting critical thinking, we can dismantle unfounded beliefs, challenge prevailing narratives, and create a society that values intellectual curiosity and rational inquiry.

Armed with knowledge, we are equipped to confront challenges like climate change, public health crises, and technological advancements with an informed and responsible approach.

Together, let us unleash the transformative power of secular humanism and forge a future where reason, compassion and collective progress reign supreme.

By Nathan Concepcion

I identify as nonreligious/secular because I believe in the principles of humanism, which prioritize the equitable treatment of every human being regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, class or disability status.

Nathan Concepcion

Humanism, to me, represents a moral framework that is based on reason, empathy and the inherent worth and dignity of all individuals. By embracing secular humanism, I reject the notion that social change should be driven by

divine authority or supernatural beliefs. Instead, I recognize that it is human beings themselves who hold the power and responsibility to create a more just and inclusive society.

One humanist issue that I am deeply passionate about addressing in my community is social and economic inequality. I firmly believe that every individual should have equal opportunities to thrive and succeed, regardless of their background or circumstances. In my community, I have actively engaged in initiatives that aim to address this issue. For example, I have volunteered at local organizations that provide resources and support to marginalized communities, such as food banks and homeless shelters. By offering assistance and advocating for policies that promote social and economic justice, I strive to create a more equitable society where everyone can access the resources they need to lead fulfilling lives.

Furthermore, I have been involved in environmental conservation efforts in my community, which align with the humanist values of preserving and protecting the natural world. I have participated in local clean-up activities, tree planting initiatives, and educational programs that raise awareness about the importance of sustainable living. By taking action to protect our environment, we not only contribute to the well-being of current and future generations but also recognize our responsibility as stewards of the planet.

By Janaye Silva

I am a major advocate for self-love and care. I believe you are responsible for your own happiness, and while others can help with your general mood, you are the person in the end who decides how you want to look at things.

The idea of there being a higher power controlling what happens in my life directly conflicts with my belief that I am in charge of my own thoughts, feelings and perceptions. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community and a Black woman, I have been hit hard with racism and homophobia. I want to shed light on those issues, and I believe secular humanism will help with that.

With secular humanism, people will see that they are the ones that can help face their problems and they won't need to wait around for a god to fix everything.

My family is heavily religious and by default, I also used to be. I prayed every night and went to church. I put my faith in Jesus and I waited for him to save me from the bad things in life. I was kind to everyone, prayed, went to church and I didn't curse or bad mouth anyone. Despite this, I still faced a lot of racism. When I came out as pansexual, I was faced with homophobia as well, even from my own family. They used God against me, saying my sexuality was a sin. It was from then my beliefs changed. Why would I believe in something that didn't agree with who I was? As soon as I let go of religion, I felt happier. It was then I realized that I was in charge of my happiness. I want other people to have the same realization that I did.

Janaye Silva

LETTERBOX

FFRF does great job helping everyone

Your decal saying “The Supreme Court is not a church!” is on my wall at the front door. It’s hard to believe that in 2023 the church is still ruling over us.

The worldwide campaign to hold down women and gays has come to the United States with a vengeance with the Supreme Court.

Those of us who began fighting to legalize abortion in the 1960s are starting all over again. You are doing a great job of helping everyone. Thank you.

Kentucky

Businesses should have to post their prejudices

Regarding the lawsuit in Colorado empowering bigots, here’s my thought: If any state wants to allow businesses to be so blatantly prejudicial in refusing service to some groups due to their “religious” convictions, then I think it only fair that they be required to post and state their particular prejudices on their front doors and website. For example: “We do not serve gays (we’re homophobic).” That way, people with brains, heart and decency can walk/scroll on by and refuse to give them their business. I truly feel it’s only fair if they are going to go down the slippery slope of letting people’s prejudice creep into public businesses, right?

Washington

My issue of newspaper gets read by many others

I just finished reading another interesting and informative issue of Freethought Today. I was especially pleased, once again, to see references to Compassion and Choices, another organization I wholeheartedly support. I also enjoyed Dan Barker’s interview with Julia Sweeney, and I applaud Andra Watkins for her brave accounting of her fear of pregnancy because of religious indoctrination.

I pass my copy of the newspaper on to neighbors and friends and then place it in a Little Free Library.

Wisconsin

Let’s use positive terms of self-identification

As usual, I devoured the entire August issue, including the Letterbox, which always contains nuggets of truth. For example, I wholeheartedly agree with Ralph Popp’s comment about avoiding negative or “anti” terms of self-identification. I’d rather focus on what I am rather than what I’m not, so instead of atheist or agnostic, I prefer secular humanist. (I also prefer “peace-maker” to “anti-war,” but am still anti-fascist and anti-racist.)

Similarly, I’d like to see the category “Nones” (for those with no religious affiliation) changed from a negative to a positive, and for that I’d choose “freethinkers.” Wouldn’t that be a wonderful switch?

California

Road trip highlight



Twin sisters Amy Valle and Kate Amon pose in front of Freethought Hall during a trip through Madison, Wis., last year.

Kate writes: “On an epic road trip we took from Michigan to Washington for Amy’s new job, one of our first stops and highlights was to visit the very cool headquarters of FFRF in Wisconsin. I wish to convey our gratitude for the lovely hospitality and tour we were treated to by the staff and Annie Laurie Gaylor. It was an honor to meet Dan Barker, too! There was so much history and art to see and absorb in every room. We appreciated Annie Laurie’s insights and had a very lovely time.”

Gaylor, Barker, others make for excellent reading

I recently re-read FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor’s book *Woe To The Women: The Bible Tells Me So* and was struck again with how powerful it is! It could be that my re-reading of that book hit me a little harder through the lens of the Supreme Court’s terrible Dobbs decision.

It is amazing what a young college woman, irked over a University of Wisconsin-Madison state/church problem, has accomplished with her organization, including the FFRF Action Fund all the way to working with Maryam Namazie against misogyny in Iran. If only we all had Annie Laurie’s resolve!

And FFRF Co-President Dan Barker’s books are so good, I would pay cash money to read his grocery lists!

Then there are those who aren’t as heralded, because, well, there’s only so much time in a day. The wise, wonderful Freethought Today editors Bill Dunn and PJ Slinger were/are two of the best hires made by FFRF. If Bill and PJ aren’t writing books, I’ll have them sign copies of Freethought Today they have edited.

If you’re an FFRF member who has written a book and if you’re coming to Madison in October for the FFRF convention, I will buy it as long as you sign it to Jana and Richard.

Texas

‘Nontheist’ is a better term than ‘atheist’

In my opinion, the term “atheist” is a label that suggests a thing someone believes in. It has negative connotations by many and it tends to be demonized unnecessarily by those unsophisticated religious folks and even by some who are

not theistic. So, we might say something like, “I am not a religious person.” Or, if a label is required, I would say “I’m a non-theist.” I feel that softens the response.

How about a T-shirt that says: “Being a nontheist makes sense to me.” That might sell even though it means the same thing.

Michigan

Abortion actually saved my mother’s life

This is my response to Amy Hagstrom Miller’s request in her convention speech (printed in the June/July issue) that we say, “Because of abortion, I was able to do X.”

Because of abortion, I was born. If my mother had been unable to get an abortion during her first pregnancy, she would have died in 1940. I was born in 1948.

Because of abortion, my mother was able to live another 47 years and give birth to three children.

My mother owes over half her life (and my brothers and I owe our entire lives) to the availability of abortion. We can’t be the only ones.

Indiana

Which Christ are they following?

After reading in the August issue about denying sick children much needed medical care, I was left wondering which Christ the Followers of Christ Church were following. It certainly wasn’t the one who said the following: “And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me. But whoso shall offend one of these little

ones which believes in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:5-6).

Wisconsin

‘Drag is not into temptation’

My message to those who oppose drag shows: Drag is not into temptation.

Texas

‘Nonbeliever’ is too negative of a term

While Sam Harris has an issue with the term “atheist,” I take issue with the term “nonbeliever.” Several years ago, I replaced the negative (“I don’t believe in God” with the positive (“I believe there is no god”). I have just as much belief as religious people — just in the opposite direction.

Georgia

Life is a crap shoot, so be kind, appreciative

I gave up believing in God in high school. It wasn’t until I read “Why I’m Not a Christian” by Bertrand Russell many years later that it all came together for me. My favorite part was when Russell questioned the “design” theory and stated something like: “You would think if an all-powerful entity like God had millions of years to perfect his design of the human race that he would eliminate suffering, poverty and all the awful aspects of human life that still exist today.”

One of my close friends asked me one day if I believed in God and I told him I didn’t. He then asked me how I would explain life and its meanings. I repeated what Russell had said and then offered that I really think that life is a crap shoot and that in most respects we don’t have a lot of control of many things in our lives, and that I can accept that and just do the best I can to live a good life, be kind to others and appreciate the good things I get to experience in my life.

Arizona

Overpopulation making planet uninhabitable

Our Earth spins on an axis of greed, profiteering and growth. Religions are a prime cause of excessive birthing. Since forever, they have demanded that women give birth until the womb fails or the mother dies in childbirth. These cults and sects worldwide command exponential birthing.

Every mayor in the world is hustling for population growth. Their reward is more tax revenue. Industry wants ever-increasing numbers of new customers, which results in more profits. Churches want their pews filled.

Our fertile famers that once grew produce for the people are now growing houses for the new billions arriving on Earth. Over 7 billion and counting fast. Of course there is climate change, as humans are gobbling up Earth’s resources.

We are in the midst of an extinction of our wild species. Humans are occu-

pying every acre of arable land on this earth. There is no longer room for other species on this planet.
Arizona

Freethought Today was excellent once again

This is just a compliment for another excellent issue of the newsletter.
Virginia

Christian nationalists have Bronze Age ideas

Have you ever been out on a trail and worried about getting bit by a rattler or a copperhead? That’s probably gone through the mind of a few hikers. But, say, if you did have the misfortune to be bitten by one, what would you do? Would you try to get medical help as soon as possible? Have a friend run ahead, to find a ranger with anti-venom? Or, would you gaze on a bronze serpent on a pole, and trust that your gaze would protect you from the pain and swelling from the bite? The bronze serpent was used by Moses (Numbers 20:8) to protect Israelites from bites: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’” But, more importantly, the bronze snake was quoted by Jesus in John 3:14: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up . . . so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” The promise of eternal life is based on a Bronze Age snake! So, the Christian nationalists who claim to have valid religious ideas are just living in the Bronze Age!
Indiana

Every ‘We Dissent’ podcast is worth a listen

I am a huge fan of the “We Dissent” podcast [featuring FFRF attorneys Rebecca Markert and Liz Cavell] and I have listened to pretty much all of them! In fact, I am going to go back and make sure that I caught them all. I will add that, as a result of listening to your podcast, I have also become a member of the sponsoring organizations: FFRF

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This cartoon was drawn by FFRF Member Guido Guintini.

and American Atheists. I am not an attorney, however, around 10 years ago, I started listening to oral arguments on the Oyez website. My number one concern is the separation of church and state. So, this is just to say thank you for all your good work!!
Massachusetts

Crankmail writers still full of surprises

I always love reading Crankmail! Thanks for including it! I’m not surprised that they can spell “fuck you,” but I am surprised that they can’t spell “Lord’s Prayer.” I guess I shouldn’t be.
Maryland

Thanks for the medical aid in dying column

Thank you for publishing Ken Burrows’ article on the issues surrounding end of life autonomy, what should be a basic right. When my late partner was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor, she opted for our state’s Death With Dignity program and I got involved in the movement. I have added my name to the Compassion & Choice site. After her death, an editorial appeared in our local paper about suicide, and it seems the Catholic Church has weighed heavily in suicide prevention. Of course, the idea of suffering was totally absent. I then composed an opposing editorial and it got printed in all three of our local papers.
Washington

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

John Adams foresaw dogma colliding with truth

I’d like to share a prescient quote of John Adams, as referenced by Matthew Stewart in his tome, *Nature’s God*. “Touch a solemn truth in collision with the dogma of a sect, though capable of clearest proof, and you will soon find you have disturbed a nest, and the hornets will swarm about your legs and hands, and fly into your eyes and face.” It seems many provable truths in our current days have “kicked the nest,” which makes it all the more important for FFRF and organizations like it to continue fighting to secure a protective netting for all of society against these disturbed hornets.
California

Atheists are good, even with no threats, rewards

Even an atheist like me must accept that some people need the threat of eternal hell to refrain from doing bad things, while some need the promise of divine rewards to do good. While the religious do good for an imaginary god’s sake, atheists do it for goodness’ sake, without expecting anything in return other than the satisfaction that someone was helped. And, atheists are less inclined to commit crimes, and are far less represented in prison than the religiously inclined, while generosity toward others are second to none. Look, for example, at the secular Nordic countries: Few contribute more to countries in need than they do.
California

September crossword answers

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

We should all donate to little free libraries

We love Greg Uhl’s idea of donating humanist books to little free libraries (as seen in the September issue). A humanist friend recently built one for a public park a two-minute walk from our house. We will get copies of *Elle the Humanist*, *Out of God’s Closet*, and also Dan Barker’s *Just Pretend*. We’ll probably get several of each and add them one by one over time. Maybe other FFRFers will join us in promoting this wonderful idea.
Pennsylvania

You can remove yourself as Catholic communicant

I read with interest Dennis Middlebrooks’ letter in the September issue. He’s right: The Catholic Church counts anyone who they baptized as a member, whether or not that person is an active communicant. One way that nonbeliever ex-Catholics can remove themselves from this Catholic delusion is by renouncing your baptism. Church canon law provides a process by which you can have your defection noted in the baptismal registry of the church where you were baptized. You must commit heresy and apostasy in writing to your local Catholic bishop and request to be removed from the baptismal rolls. While Rome decreed in 2010 that those sections of canon law were not to be utilized, I managed to accomplish the renunciation in 2013 in my letter to the archbishop of Santa Fe, N.M. He replied to my letter by confirming that my name would be removed from the registry, and promised to pray for my soul. How thoughtful! If you decide to write, be sure to include the year of your baptism along with the name and location of the church where it occurred. While I realize that the church undoubtedly still counts me, perhaps if more ex-Catholics acted to renounce their baptisms, it might have some impact, and, if nothing else, you’ll get the satisfaction of a bishop praying for your soul.
Michigan

‘God bless America’ not needed after speeches

After reading the “FFRF Victories” in the September issue, I wondered why U.S. presidents (and other political leaders) are allowed to end every speech with “God bless America.” Is there no legal way to prohibit this from happening? I find it to be very inappropriate. And when people are sworn into office (including presidents) or are about to testify in court, they are often required to place their hand on a bible and say, “So help me God.” Can these things be legally challenged? I hope so.
New Jersey

(Editor’s note: See FFRF’s legal FAQ at ffrf.org/faq/state-church for more on your rights.)

Cryptogram answer

We are all atheists about most of the gods that humanity has ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further.

— Richard Dawkins

A religious deconversion story

Nonbelief: The last piece of the puzzle

By Dylan Jack James

I remember the first time I heard it. “You were baptized a Roman Catholic. You’ll always be a Catholic.” My mother raised her voice at me in anger until my father interrupted, “You’ve been confirmed, made the sacrament of confession, and taken the Eucharist. You can switch religions, but a Catholic you’ll stay.” He shouted these words, the veins in his thick neck popping as he listed each sacrament. My



Dylan Jack James

parents were livid. Not only had I left the faith they raised me in, I started attending the Southern Baptist Church at the corner of our street. My eyes widened with fear as I sat at our kitchen table holding my tiny green Gideon’s New Testament, listening to my parents’ lecture. I was a teenager seeking a path to truth. A friend of mine in college gave me a Chick tract titled “Somebody Goofed.” It frightened me, so I started attending church with her. I was given a full immersion baptism soon after I stood up for the altar call to accept Christ. I thought I’d found my missing link.

Shamed for bisexuality

A couple years earlier, I had come out to my parents as bisexual. I was ostracized and shamed. My mom pulled my college tuition so I had to leave school. My parents made it perfectly clear to me that God was not pleased. They quoted the verses about homosexuality to me frequently.

Their bullying proved unbearable. I started feeling intense guilt from being shamed. I confided in a married couple at my church that I was bisexual. They put me on a bus headed to a conversion camp a few hours away from my house. My parents agreed to this.

The pastor of the camp picked me up from the bus station. On the car ride to the camp, he asked me questions about my genitalia that were improper for a grown man to ask a teenage girl. He couched them in religious terms in a vain attempt to mask his pedophilia. I ended up being thrown out of the camp for smoking cigarettes. I realized then something was very wrong with religion.

I left the Baptist church and eventually moved out of my parents’ house. I didn’t return to church un-



Image from Shutterstock

til I was in my 20s, but I still read the bible and believed I was going to hell for being bisexual. I struggled with this for many years.

As a child, I hated girl toys. I always played with stereotypical male toys and hung out with the boys. This was frowned upon by my mother and she pushed girl toys on me, many of which I destroyed. I never felt female. I married my best friend in my 20s. I was trying to please God by marrying a man, plus I already had a son from a former relationship who was 4 years old at that point. The bible became my constant companion, and I thought I was “safe” from the fires of hell in my present heterosexual situation.

Faith was strong

I followed all the television preachers — Pat Robertson, Oral Roberts, etc. I thought the bible was written directly for me, knowing nothing about its history. I had another son, and then my husband got cancer.

My faith was strong. I believed God would heal my husband of the illness if I prayed hard enough. Sadly, it was an aggressive form of cancer and killed him in less than two years.

My husband was agnostic. He became “born again” shortly before his death when the pastor of our church went to the hospital to see him. I tried to let this thought comfort me, yet he died and I was now widowed with two young sons to raise.

After that, I hated God! I screamed and cursed at him! What had I done wrong? I did all the right things. I tried to be straight and follow the bible. I questioned God’s motive behind my husband’s death. My faith started unraveling. After a few years, I began attend-

ing a reform synagogue with my girlfriend, who was Jewish. I amassed a decent-sized Jewish library and studied everything from Hasidism to the Kabbalah. I kept the high holy days, ate kosher and attended conversion classes. I thought: Judaism is the religion that my faith stemmed from, so it must be the true religion. My parents had drilled it into my head that Catholicism was the true and only religion. I wrote a letter to my parents telling them I was converting to Judaism. They shamed me for denying Christ.

I clung to Judaism, just as I had clung to Christianity. I read voraciously in my quest for truth. I started seeing a therapist during this time and came to the realization that I was transgender. However, I quickly shut the notion down. I had always known I felt male inside since age 4, but had acclimated to the female role that was expected of me.

My son, an atheist, opened my mind a bit with his explanation of why there was no God. That thought terrified me! Not believing was the greatest sin of all and surely would put me on the devil’s doorstep. My son and I had many debates on the subject. I was still under the impression of there being some form of punishment in the afterlife. My days as a Catholic and a born-again Christian cemented in my brain the idea of an eternal hellfire. I quickly dismissed the thought of a godless existence from my mind.

Rationality takes over

Several years later, I saw FFRF’s commercial on television. Ron Reagan’s words left me befuddled. “Unabashed atheist, not afraid of burning in hell.” I ruminated for months pondering what he had said. How can he not be afraid

of burning in hell? Does he want to take that chance? Through the fear, my thought pattern started to change. A bit of rational thinking crept inside. Ron Reagan is an intelligent man; he must know something I don’t. I went to the FFRF website and my mind expanded. The pieces of the puzzle started coming together. I read Dan Barker’s *Godless* and the puzzle made more sense.

Christopher Hitchen’s *God Is Not Great* came next. The nightstand beside my bed started to look like a library. Among the stacks were Dan Barker, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Bart Ehrman. I opened a Pandora’s box inside my mind and all the religious indoctrination that had been ingrained started flying out. I shut the box, but my hope that religion was a falsehood remained within. I struggled to grasp this new concept. Then, I became ill.

I left my puzzle behind and reverted back to the Christian and Catholic religions. I prayed constantly for healing; it didn’t come. I prayed harder. I believed in faith healing and, because of that lie, my illness grew worse. Hadn’t I learned my lesson from praying for my husband? Fear, due to my illness, held onto me and wouldn’t let go. I felt God had inflicted me with this illness so I would return to him. I repented for doubting God’s existence, recommitted my life to Christ, and kept praying for my recovery. My rational mind kept fighting with my religious mind.

My health didn’t improve. My prayers fell on deaf ears, so I flung faith and fear out the window and threw myself into researching again. I did an internet search on the origin of the biblical god I had believed in, Yahweh. When I discovered that the early Israelites were polytheistic and Yahweh was just one of many Canaanite gods and goddesses that were worshipped in the Levant during the Iron Age, it was the lightbulb-above-my-head moment that flipped my theistic thinking off!

My health started improving as I learned to trust my doctors and take care of myself instead of begging a deity. I came into my true authentic self and came out to family as a transgender man. They cast me from their tribe once again and shunned me, but my life finally made sense.

I put the last piece into the puzzle, stood back, admired my work and knew I was free.

Dylan Jack James is an FFRF member from New York.

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