

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



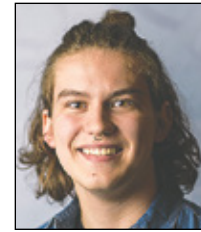
**Trans rights
bills are a
state/church issue**

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**The assault
on democracy
in Texas**

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**Youth are more
educated, involved
than ever**

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Vol. 40 No. 1

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January-February 2023

Judge: Families can sue over W.Va. religious revival

A federal judge ruled on Dec. 12 that families in Huntington, W. Va., can proceed with their lawsuit against a school district for hosting a religious revival during the school day. The Freedom From Religion Foundation represents the group of students and parents, who filed suit in February.

U.S. District Judge Robert Chambers issued a decision saying that the plaintiffs properly alleged violations of their First Amendment rights by the Cabell County Board of Education (BOE) and two school system employees.

"Plaintiffs clearly allege that the BOE has a long-standing custom and practice of allowing staff and outside adults to initiate, lead and promote evangelical Christianity as part of programming within the schools in the district," Chambers wrote in his opinion.

Chambers found that the "plaintiffs have adequately alleged that the pervasive and unabated actions of defendants in violation of the Establishment Clause are sufficient to show there is a 'real and immediate' risk of repetition that S.F. will be forced to attend other religious events at school." The judge also determined that at least one of the student plaintiffs, identified by the initials S.F., has standing to bring the lawsuit and to pursue an injunction.

Chambers dismissed claims against school officials that were brought in their "official capacities" because those claims are redundant to claims against the Board of Education. That determination will have little effect on the case as it proceeds.

The revival was put on by evangelist Nik Walker, who runs Nik Walker Ministries. Although the event was billed as voluntary, two teachers escorted their entire classes to the revival, where students were instructed to bow their heads in prayer, raise up their hands, and were warned to follow Jesus or face eternal torment.

More than 100 students, led by Huntington High School senior Max Nibert, staged a dramatic walkout on Feb. 9 to protest some students being forced to attend the evangelical Christian revival at the school on Feb. 2. The walkout, with students chanting "Separate the church and state" and "My faith, my choice," was covered not only nationally by the Washington Post, NPR and CNN but also internationally.

The legal complaint in the case, *Mays v. Cabell County Board of Education*, notes, "For years, school system employees have violated the constitutional rights of students by promoting and advancing the Christian religion,

See Revival on page 15

Letter perfect

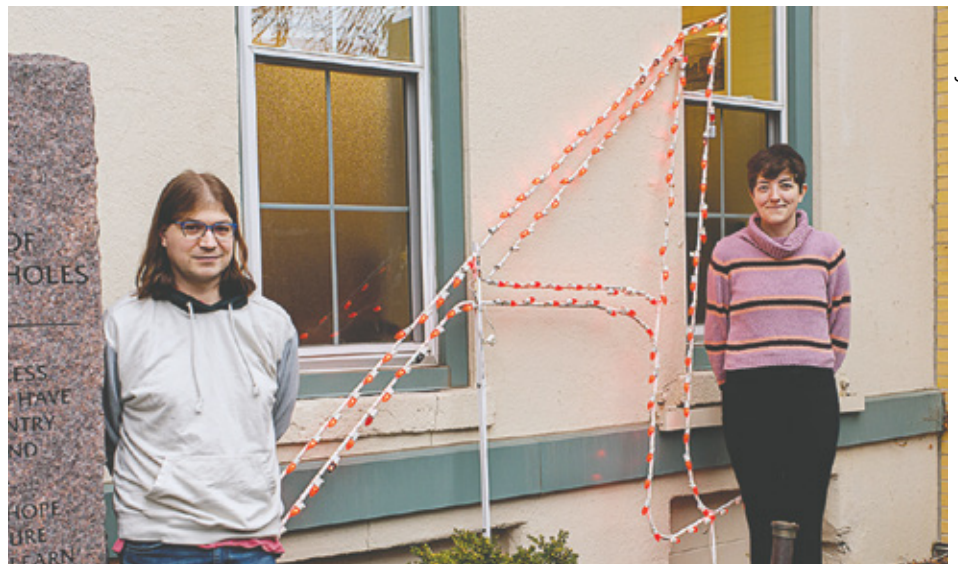


Photo by Chris Line

FFRF's Editorial Assistant Greg Fletcher and Digital Communications Manager Danielle Acker show off the lighted "A" display outside of Freethought Hall in Madison, Wis. The distinctive letter, standing for "atheist" or "agnostic," was popularized by Richard Dawkins.

S.C. funding case advances

The Freedom From Religion Foundation's case against the South Carolina state government's proposed unconstitutional funding of a private Christian school is proceeding on course.

"The judge largely sided with our perspective," says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "The case will now move forward, full steam ahead."

"South Carolina won't disburse a \$1.5 million budget earmark awarded to a religious education nonprofit unless a court orders it to," reports The State, South Carolina's capital newspaper, about what happened in court on Dec. 1. "Lawyers for the state comptroller general, treasurer and superintendent of education vowed Thursday to heed the court's wishes while

taking no position on the legality of the contested earmark."

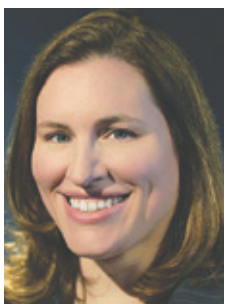
FFRF filed its lawsuit earlier this year on behalf of four South Carolina taxpayers — Christopher Parker and Ian Whatley, both Greenville County residents, and Gere Fulton and Michael Brown, both Richland County residents — against defendants South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster, Comptroller General Richard Eckstrom, Treasurer Curtis Loftis Jr. and Education Superintendent Molly Spearman. Three of the plaintiffs are FFRF members, and Parker, who has children in the Greenville County Schools, is familiar with the purpose of Christian Learning Centers (the intended

See Funding on page 2

FFRF's legal team faced tough challenges in 2022

By Rebecca Markert

It was a difficult year to be a civil rights attorney, especially one who fights for secular government. The first half of the year was marked by abysmal decisions from a hostile, ultra-conservative Supreme Court: overturning the constitutional right to abortion, upholding a public high school football coach's practice of praying at the 50-yard line, permitting a Christian flag to be flown at city hall in Boston, and



Rebecca Markert

Top 10 issue areas:

1. Schools
2. Elections
3. Government prayer (tie)
3. Social media (tie)
5. Religious events
6. Religious displays
7. Crosses
8. Legislative prayer (tie)
8. National Day of Prayer (tie)
10. Government funding to religion

requiring the state of Maine to fund religious education at private religious schools.

The second half of the year has been dedicated to analyzing these decisions, strategizing in the aftermath, and resolving to continue the fight for separation

of state and church.

Our work is important — now more than ever — and the attorneys at Freedom From Religion Foundation are ready and prepared to represent the rights and views of nonbelievers in this continued battle, and to fight for the freedom of conscience of all Americans.

Here's an overview of FFRF's accomplishments in 2022.

Staff changes

In July, we said goodbye to our intake legal assistant, Stephanie Dyer, who started law school at Marquette University. We welcomed our new intake legal assistant, Matt Langer, who graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a degree in philosophy and has spent the last 10 years working in intake and case management for behavioral

health institutions in Wisconsin.

FFRF currently has seven permanent attorney positions. Our legal fellow program continues to attract talented new attorneys, who are short-term, two-year employees. In June, after graduating from UW Law School, Sammi Lawrence joined the legal team as the Anne Nicol Gaylor legal fellow.

In September, we welcomed FFRF's first Equal Justice Works fellow, Kat Grant. Equal Justice Works is a highly competitive "design-your-own fellowship" program. Kat's fellowship project seeks to improve the legal landscape for LGBTQ+ Americans through advocacy based on the Free Exercise and Establishment clauses of the First Amendment. They graduated

See Challenges on page 16

Fighting Christian nationalism in Congress

D.C. lobbying efforts paid off in 2022

By Mark Dann

In 2022, FFRF made a lot of strides in governmental affairs to blunt the impact of Christian nationalism.

When we saw what happened at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, we quickly reoriented FFRF's Strategic Response Team to fight white Christian nationalism. We produced, with our partners at the Baptist Joint Committee, a blockbuster report on how Christian nationalism was a contributing factor in the Jan. 6 attack. The report was co-authored by some of the leading thinkers on this subject, including Anthea Butler, Samuel Perry, Jemar Tisby, Andrew Whitehead, Andrew L. Seidel, Katherine Stewart and Amanda Tyler.

We were able to highlight the report with a public webinar, numerous episodes of "Freethought Matters," "Ask an Atheist" and Freethought Radio, and a briefing with members of Congress. U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman announced the report on the House floor, crediting FFRF and BJC, saying "their new report shows that this movement was at the heart of the Jan. 6 insurrection." All of that played into the Jan. 6 committee hearing showing Roger Stone espousing Christian nationalist beliefs as a motivating factor in attacking the Capitol. On the legislative front, FFRF has been



Image by Shutterstock

leading on two bills for the first time in its history. One of the bills reins in health care sharing ministries, and the other authorizes a memorial to Thomas Paine in the nation's capital, which President Biden signed, meaning the memorial could be unveiled as soon as 2026.

FFRF has also been in the vanguard on court reform and court expansion, where we've helped to increase the amount of support in Congress and with the public for both of these measures. We work closely with allies such as Demand Justice and other members of the Unrig the Courts Coalition. On top of this, FFRF helped decrease congressional participation in the National Prayer Breakfast. All of this activity is showing that FFRF is becoming a major player on the Hill, and we are in a much stronger position than we were two years ago.

118th Congress

What is going to change in the 118th Congress (2023-2024) is that a lot of our allies in the House are not going to have their gavels.

Americans are waking up to the threat of Christian nationalism, but it is unclear if enough members of Congress are. We need to be ready to work with our allies in Congress to protect

the separation of state and church from Christian nationalist attacks.

The opportunity for us is that we can reinforce the importance of separation of church and state with our allies in D.C., such as how it safeguards our democracy, and how theological exemption bills seek to undermine our democratic institutions. If the theological exemption bills advance to hearings, markups or floor debates, we'll be able to provide a full defense of the separation of church and state against Christian nationalism. Furthermore, we plan to diligently work to build support for the Health Share Transparency Act, judicial reform and decreased backing for the National Prayer Breakfast.

There will be more opportunities to engage the executive branch on white Christian nationalism and enforcing the Johnson Amendment. More resources have been allocated to counter domestic terrorism and white supremacy, and to boost IRS enforcement. We plan to engage the relevant offices and agencies at the Department of Justice, Treasury, Homeland Security, and the IRS.

Future dangers

The danger out there is for 2024 and beyond. The Trump administration was dangerously close to achieving wide-rang-

ing theological exemptions in the last few months of 2020. If someone is elected who is indebted to the Religious Right, I have no doubt that within the first few days of that administration, there will be an executive order issued giving blanket theological exemptions to all areas that the federal government touches (health care, government contracting, commerce, civil rights laws, etc.) based on Supreme Court cases such as Hobby Lobby, Fulton and Bremerton that have consistently favored theological exemptions.

To prevent that scenario from happening, FFRF is forming a 501(c)(4) that will allow us to enhance our lobbying efforts, and enable a franker discussion with you about what is happening in D.C., and in state capitals across the country. We could also participate in the 2023 Wisconsin judges elections. These elections are vital because Wisconsin judges decide on access to abortion, gerrymandering, the power of Wisconsin's heavily gerrymandered Legislature, and the role of the separation of state and church. Plus, FFRF is headquartered in Madison with a strong base of support, and we have a really good insight into Wisconsin politics and its national implications. The 2023 judges elections in Wisconsin are often overlooked, and it will be an excellent opportunity for FFRF to exert its influence.

Conclusion

Thanks to you and the entire team at FFRF, we've grown our membership from 30,000 members to nearly 40,000 members in the past three years. I cannot thank you enough for that remarkable accomplishment. The larger our membership number becomes, the more our voice will be heard in D.C. Please encourage your friends and family to become part of FFRF because that investment is paying out tremendous dividends in Washington.

I'm thrilled that you are working with FFRF, and we look forward to a very productive 118th Congress.

Mark Dann is FFRF's director of governmental affairs.

Funding

Continued from page 1

beneficiary organization) to evangelize students.

"The South Carolina Constitution prohibits public funds to be used to directly benefit any private educational institution (Article XI, Section 4)," read the legal complaint that the state/church watchdog has filed in the Court of Common Pleas in Richland County. "Additionally,

the South Carolina Constitution contains an Establishment Clause that mirrors the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which prohibits the General Assembly from making any 'law respecting an establishment of religion' (Article I, Section 2)."

Christian Learning Centers of Greenville County is a private religious educational institution whose mission is to "provide biblical instruction for public school children at no cost." Students are encouraged to "spread the news" to others to "ELECT JESUS."

McMaster filed a motion to get himself dismissed from the case and to oppose the preliminary injunction against the \$1.5 million funds being disbursed. FFRF filed a response to his motions in late November. On Dec. 1, Judge Jean Toal, who formerly served as chief justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court, denied McMaster's motion to dismiss.

The South Carolina governor's involvement gets to a deeper constitutional problem, as the Columbia, S.C., newspaper reports.

"Regardless of McMaster's role in the process, the governor's attorneys assert the state's funding of Christian Learning Centers is permissible because the religious organization plans to use the money for secular purposes," its article states.

Since it was announced that the state

budget had earmarked \$1.5 million for Christian Learning Centers, the ministry has issued conflicting announcements about what it would do with the taxpayer funds. Although the purpose of the earmark was to build a residential school for students to receive biblical instruction, the ministry soon claimed it never planned to build a school, later announcing it would build a charter school. FFRF wrote in its briefing that it is beyond comprehension how the organization, which according to its website, "exists to provide biblical instruction to school-aged children," could legally operate a charter school.

South Carolina attorney Steven Edward Buckingham represents the plaintiffs, with FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott and FFRF Legal Fellow Karen Heineman serving as co-counsel.



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The only freethought newspaper in the United States



The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible

By Ruth Hurmence Green

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

—Published by FFRF. 440 pages / PB

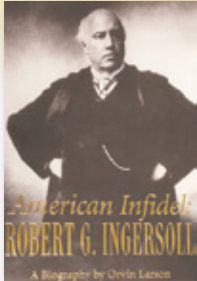
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American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll

By Orvin Larson

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

—Published by FFRF. 316 pages / PB



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FFRF’s Strategic Response Team gets it done

By Ryan Jayne

FFRF’s Strategic Response Team (SRT) continued its crucial work in 2022 — and is looking forward to new endeavors in 2023 and beyond.

The SRT handles FFRF’s rapid response, legislation and lobbying work. The SRT is tasked with:

- Lobbying at both the state and federal levels.
- Tracking, analyzing and educating about pending legislation.
- Providing testimony on relevant bills.
- Mobilizing FFRF’s membership with action alerts.
- Drafting regulatory comments to help educate federal administrative agencies on secular concerns.
- Responding to current events for FFRF with statements, letters and articles.
- Shaping public opinion with articles, editorials and letters to the editor.
- Stopping imminent violations and correcting the public record with letters.

The team’s federal activities are spear-



Ryan Jayne

headed by FFRF Director of Governmental Affairs Mark Dann in Washington, D.C., while FFRF Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne leads on state-level issues and regulations. The team is excited to announce its newest full-time member, State Policy Manager Ryan Dudley. Coming on board with a wealth of legislative experience and a passion for local activism, Dudley has hit the ground running and is looking forward to a productive upcoming legislative session.

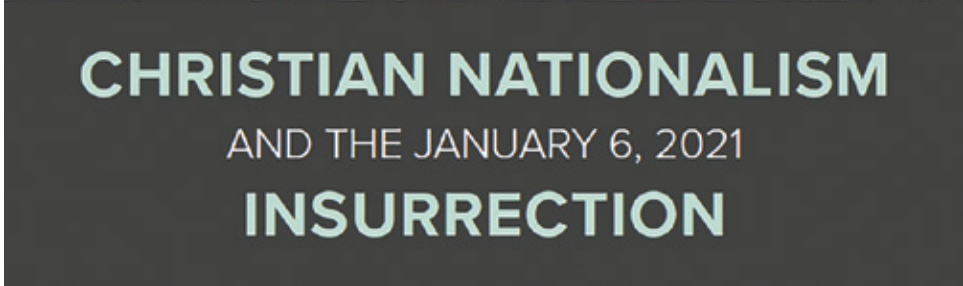
The SRT team also works closely with FFRF communications team members Amit Pal and Greg Fletcher, FFRF’s legal team and FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker.

It was a year with many accomplishments and a stage set for even greater heights moving forward.

Jan. 6 report

The Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and FFRF in February released a joint exposé, “Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021, Insurrection.”

Additionally, at year’s end, Rep. Jamie Raskin, as chairman of the House Oversight Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, invited Amanda Tyler, ex-



ecutive director of BJC, to testify before Congress about the dangers of Christian nationalism, and much of her remarks were taken directly from the report co-authored with FFRF.

As consequences from the Jan. 6 attack continue to trickle out over time, SRT will be there to highlight the insurrection’s theocratic underpinnings.

Federal lobbying

From our nation’s capital, Mark Dann has been advancing FFRF’s mission with our congressional allies at a steady pace. Dann has been aided in these efforts by a stellar new intern, Caitlin Berray.

Multiple congressional offices now see FFRF as a reliable go-to organization when they are contemplating a state/church issue and need expert input. When one member of Congress wanted to take action on a report that Christian nationalist advocacy organizations were rebranding as “associations of churches,” or when another wanted to crack down on religion-based sham insurance products, they consulted with FFRF as an early step. This is the result of years of relationship-building, and allows our decades of experience to inform federal policy decisions.

FFRF has worked to advance the Congressional Freethought Caucus (CFC), where like-minded members of Congress discuss issues and priorities related to keeping our government secular and our policies evidence-based. CFC membership is at

By the numbers

- 35 statements for FFRF on a variety of issues.
- 6 articles, op-eds, blogs & letters to the editor.
- 22 press releases for FFRF on legal & legislative issues.
- 41 rapid response letters.
- 44 letters to secular state legislators with model legislation.
- 540 bills analyzed & 828 tracked.
- 63 action alerts that connected more than 8,500 FFRF supporters & legislators more than 37,000 times.
- More than 800 separate SRT projects.

an all-time high, and includes several highly influential lawmakers who will keep these issues in the front of congressional minds.

A huge congressional achievement is the passage of the Thomas Paine Memorial Bill in less than a year. It was introduced in 2022 by Rep. Raskin, D-Md., with Rep. Victoria Sparks, R-Ind., adding bipartisan support. The project to place a long-overdue memorial to freethinker and forgotten founder Thomas Paine in Washington, D.C., received unanimous approval by the National Parks, Forests and Public Lands Committee, and then passed as part of the end-of-year omnibus bill.

FFRF worked closely with the Thomas Paine Memorial Association and other allies to drum up support for this bill. After hearing FFRF’s case for a Paine memorial, the most common response was surprise that such a memorial doesn’t already exist. Passage of the legislation is just the beginning, with many D.C. hurdles to clear including the apportionment of federal land for the project. FFRF will be shepherding the process.

State-level advocacy

If this year’s overturning of Roe v. Wade taught us one thing, it’s that state laws matter. The U.S. Supreme Court has taken a “let states decide” approach to many of our most basic human rights, and so long as that is the case we must vigorously fight on that front.

Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne organized FFRF’s state-level advocacy in 2022, tracking and analyzing more than 800 bills across all 50 states, plus Puerto Rico and

the District of Columbia. Of those, about 66 percent were bad bills, 31 percent were good bills, and 3 percent were neutral. Less than 10 percent of the tracked bills became law, including both good bills (7.8 percent) and bad bills (8.9 percent).

By far the greatest volume of bad bills are religiously based assaults on reproductive health care, LGBTQ rights and public schools. We helped to stop bills that would have placed “In God We Trust” on public buildings, allowed fundamentalist parents to ban books from public school libraries, prevented doctors from providing care for young transgender patients, and much more.

At the same time, we helped to push good bills over the finish line all over the country. They include bills creating abortion safe harbors, holding religious pseudo-insurance called “health care sharing ministries” accountable, and ensuring that menstrual products are freely available at public schools and free of sales tax elsewhere. Our New York membership also supported a great bill through the Legislature that would require judges to inform criminal defendants of secular alternative to religious 12-step programs, but sadly that bill ran into a surprising gubernatorial veto.

With Ryan Dudley joining the team, SRT is excited to meet the upcoming legislative session. We are organized and ready to mobilize all of our activists in all 50 states.

SRT on the road

Members of the team helped to promote FFRF’s mission and activities around the country at various events. An FFRF first, Mark Dann and Ryan Jayne attended a legislative summit hosted by the National Conference of State Legislatures in Denver. They connected with multiple new legislative allies and shared model legislation and FFRF literature with dozens more.

Jayne traveled to Des Moines to speak at a secular rally hosted by Iowa Atheists and Freethinkers. IAF were gracious hosts and the event at the state Capitol had a solid turnout, encouraging Iowans to get actively involved in secular issues while condemning discriminatory bills passed by the state Legislature, just feet from legislators’ office doors.

An increasing number of meetings and presentations are conducted virtually, which eliminates the need for travel and allows for many more attendees. One such presentation last year was put on by a coalition called Unrig the Courts, which invited FFRF to participate. Jayne spoke to a crowd of activists about the upcoming Supreme Court case, 303 Creative v. Elenis, and its First Amendment implications. In December, Jayne and Dudley hosted a webinar to equip our membership with the tools needed for effective advocates during the next legislative session.

Exciting developments

SRT has been working behind the scenes to prepare a formal launch of a new, dedicated lobbying arm for FFRF. The FFRF Action Fund, a 501(c)(4) organization, will allow us to expand our lobbying efforts at both the state and federal levels, and will open new advocacy doors as well.

Don’t miss any developments with the new Action Fund: Make sure you are signed up for FFRF’s action alerts and keep your eye on your email. The entire Strategic Response Team is looking forward to this exciting new chapter in our ongoing fight to stand up for secular values and to keep state and church separate.

Freethought Matters

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

Watch our show every Sunday!

Photo by Chris Line

Visit FFRF's YouTube Channel to watch the shows.

Freethought Matters TV talk show airs in:

| | | | |
|------------------|----------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Chicago | WPWR-CW | (Ch. 50) | 9 am |
| Denver | KWGN-CW | (Ch. 2) | 7 am |
| Houston | KUBE-IND | (Ch. 57) | 9 am |
| Los Angeles | KCOP-MY | (Ch. 13) | 8:30 am |
| Madison, Wis. | WISC-TV | (Ch. 3) | 11 pm |
| Minneapolis | WFTC-29 | (Ch. 29) | 7:30 am |
| New York City | WPIX-IND | (Ch. 11) | 10 am |
| Phoenix | KASW-CW | (Ch. 61 or 6 or 1006 for HD) | 8:30 am |
| Portland, Ore. | KRCW-CW | (Ch. 32) | 9 am (703 on Comcast for HD or Ch. 3) |
| Sacramento | KQCA-MY | (Ch. 58) | 8:30 am |
| Seattle | KONG-IND | (Ch. 16) | 8 am (Ch. 16 or Ch. 106 on Comcast) |
| Washington, D.C. | WDCW-CW | (Ch. 50) | 8 am |

Go to: ffrf.org/freethought-matters for more information

Freethought Today Cryptogram

ZYXIR, JDYWEZCYO YB KESIO COZJWWCVJOUJ
KIG IXDIOUJX EG ZY ZKJ GZIVJ LKJQJ SYGZ
YB EG IQJ ZYY GSIQZ ZY CODJOZ OJL VYXG,
NEZ IQJ QJWEUZIOZ ZY VCDJ EH ZKJ YWX
YOJG.—QEZK KEQSJOUJ VQJJO

This puzzle is from *Freethinking Cryptograms* by FFRF member Brooks Rimes, available on Amazon.com for \$8.95. See bottom of page for description and hint for this puzzle. Answer is on page 21.

Freethought Today Crossword

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| 62 | | | | | | 63 | | | | | 64 | | |

Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

- Across
1. Brinker, of the silver skates fame

5. Band aid

8. *Copernicus’ center of the universe

11. Eye part

12. Faithful and true, archaically

13. Sheep-like

15. “____, Interrupted,” movie

16. Ned Stark’s daughter, “Game of Thrones”

17. African grassland

18. *Theory of ____ by natural selection

20. “I’m ____ you!”

21. Twig of a willow tree

22. Last month

23. *”Atonement” autho and atheist Ian ____

26. Type of iron

30. Wild ox

31. Acquired

34. Last row

35. Palm grease

37. Three

38. Haile Selassie’s disciple

39. *FFRF founder Gaylor’s first name

40. Punish

42. 1/60th of min

43. Put down

45. What paparazzi often do

47. General Post Office
48. North Pole’s fictional resident

50. Partner of circumstance

52. *FFRF’s home state

56. Pertaining to ear

57. “La donna È mobile” of “Rigoletto,” e.g.

58. International Civil Aviation Organization

59. Part of a play

60. Campus head

61. *Italian skeptic organization co-founder Umberto Eco’s book “The ____ of the Rose”

62. “For ____ a jolly ...”

63. Overnight lodging

64. What outgoing tide does
- Down
1. Bigger than big

2. Tel follower

3. Agrippina’s slayer

4. Sick-looking

5. Falcon’s nest

6. Eric Adams of New York City, e.g.

7. ____ B, emergency contraceptive

8. Bank deposit

9. Backward arrow command

10. Surfer’s turf

12. Hispanic American

13. Convex molding
14. *Ex-WWF wrestler & 1999 Emperor Has No Clothes Award recipient Jesse ____

19. Expenditure of electricity, e.g.

22. Crematorium jar

23. “I am to blame” (2 words)

24. Meat, in Mexico

25. Augmenting

26. Low dam

27. Canvas prep

28. Can’t stand

29. Parcel of land

32. *Irreverent Stephen Hawking’s “Brief History of ____”

33. Not a win nor a loss

36. *Freethinking movie director of “The Seventh Seal” fame

38. Right-hand page

40. Stir or fuss

41. Montparnasse dance

44. Jobs’ creation

46. Eyetooth

48. Femme fatale

49. Hailing from the East

50. Color of a bruise

51. Miner’s bounty, pl.

52. Dry riverbed

53. Strikebreaker

54. Shakespeare’s metrical unit

55. Denials

56. Campfire leftover

OVERHEARD

The Court reverses course today for one reason and one reason only: because the composition of this court has changed.

U.S. Supreme Court Justices Stephen Breyer, Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan, in the dissenting opinion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, which overturned *Roe v. Wade* on June 24.

Shortly before leaving the court, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor powerfully observed: “Those who would renegotiate the boundaries between church and state must therefore answer a difficult question: Why would we trade a system that has served us so well for one that has served others so poorly?” The conservative justices have no answer to this question.

Erwin Chemerinsky, dean and professor at the UC Berkeley School of Law, in his column, “Here’s what Supreme Court conservatives are ignoring in their crusade to protect religion.”
Sacramento Bee, 12-23-22

Most Americans today support Supreme Court term limits. . . . Looking back to early America, I think there is a better reason to want to pull the judiciary, and the Supreme Court, a little closer to the people. As the antifederalist writer Brutus observed in the midst of the battle to ratify the Constitution, an independent judiciary of this strength, power and lack of accountability is “altogether unprecedented in a free country.” “This power in the judicial,” Brutus warned,

“will enable them to mold the government into almost any shape they please.”

Jamelle Bouie, in his column, “The case for Supreme Court term limits just got a lot better.”

The New York Times, 11-27-22

I find more and more young evangelicals who think the church itself is immoral.

Russell Moore, editor of *Christianity Today*, as quoted in Michelle Goldberg’s column, “The empty gestures of disillusioned evangelicals.”

The New York Times, 12-5-22

As always, the conservatives on the court have seemingly bottomless sympathy for Christian plaintiffs who say their right to the fullest expression of their religious beliefs is being hindered. . . . For the conservatives on the court, however, religion — in particular, conservative versions of Christianity — changes everything, even how we should think about commerce. They’ve been steadily carving out more and more spaces where religious claims under the First Amendment trump every other right or law, whether it has to do with health-insurance regulations or Christian prayer in schools.

Paul Waldman, in his column, “The Supreme Court keeps coddling the Religious Right. It shouldn’t.”

Washington Post, 12-7-22

This is basically the argument the religious right continues to make: You can’t make me do something (make a website) because it offends my religion, but I can force you to do something (have a baby) because my religion says you have to.

Shelley Roberts Bendall, in her op-ed, “What about my personal right to be free from your religion?”

Lexington Herald-Leader, 12-17-22

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.”

Cryptogram hint

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

Example:

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

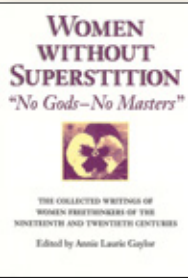
This month’s clue: S => M .

Women Without Superstition “No Gods—No Masters”

Edited by, Annie Laurie Gaylor

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

—Published by FFRF.
696 pages / HB



Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

Mandatory assembly prayer in Indiana ended

A mandatory assembly containing a prayer will not occur again, thanks to FFRF.

On Nov. 11, students at Knox High School in Knox, Ind., were reportedly required to attend an assembly in which a pastor quoted scripture and led the audience in prayer toward the beginning and end of the assembly. The prayers were reportedly overtly religious and delivered in Jesus’ name, leading secular students and family members of the community to feel uncomfortable.

“It is well settled that public schools may not violate the First Amendment rights of students by showing favoritism toward or coercing belief or participation in religion,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote in a letter to Superintendent William Reichhart.”

The district responded to FFRF, writing, “After careful consideration, we will abandon the past practice and tradition of having a prayer and benediction as part of our Community Veteran’s Day Program at Knox High School.”

Mississippi judge’s religious proselytization reprimanded

FFRF’s complaint to a Jackson, Miss., judge resulted in corrective action.

On July 5, 2022, a judge reportedly invited a chaplain to give a prayer before the court in regard to Mississippi’s controversial abortion “trigger” laws. The prayer asked the court to “seek [God’s] truth, not our own,” and encouraged members of the court to be “blessed and inspired” by the Christian God’s wisdom. The prayer itself is highly unusual, and appears to have violated sections 2A and 3B of the Mississippi Code of Judicial Conduct, stating that a judge should act in a way that promotes public confidence in integrity and impartiality as well as performing duties without bias, respectively.

“The prayer calls for God’s ‘truth,’ not the secular truth of a neutral arbiter,” wrote FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne in a letter to the Mississippi Commission on Judicial Performance. “It calls on lawyers to address the court ‘with a sense of [God’s] presence,’ implying that God will look unfavorably on those who advocate for abortion.”

In a response to FFRF from Rachel L. Wilson, executive director of the commission, the judge has reportedly been informed of the potential violations, and a corrective resolution occurred. She stated, “As a result of your complaint, the commission has communicated with the respondent judge and has resolved the complaint through informal action.”

Offensive display removed in Texas high school

FFRF persuaded a high school to change a Christian themed display in Harlingen, Texas.

On Aug. 24, 2022, FFRF received information about Harlingen High School, where a room displayed the word “Commitment” painted on the wall with the first “t” represented by the Christian cross. Photographic evidence was provided, showing staff members and students in front of the display.

“The district violates the Constitution when it allows its schools to display reli-

The best attorneys, bar none!



Photo by Chris Line

Several FFRF attorneys participated in a panel discussion regarding “The Establishment Clause as Recently Interpreted by the Supreme Court” on Dec. 8 at the Dane County (Wis.) Bar Association for those looking to earn continuing legal education (CLE) credits. FFRF attorney panelists were, from left, Sam Grover, Ryan Jayne, Rebecca Markert and Liz Cavell, along with Americans United attorney Andrew Seidel.

Markert said there were about 40 people in person and many more participating online via Zoom. “We were told it was the biggest CLE turnout they had in years!” she said.

gious symbols or messages,” FFRF Equal Justice Works Legal Fellow Kat Grant wrote in a letter to Superintendent Alicia Noyola. “It is well settled that public schools may not show favoritism towards or coerce belief or participation in religion.”

FFRF received an emailed response from Noyola: “In response to your letter dated Sept. 21, 2022, we have responded by adjusting the design of the letter “t” so that it does not resemble a Christian cross.”

Religious conversion attempts ended in Georgia

FFRF took action against frequent unconstitutional religious proselytization at Richards Middle School in Suwanee, Ga.

A concerned resident of Gwinnett County contacted FFRF in regard to a teacher abusing their position to attempt to convert students to their personal religion.

“[The teacher] cannot be allowed to lead or participate in any religious clubs in the district, and must immediately cease [their] efforts to convert students,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote in a letter to Superintendent Calvin Watts.

FFRF received a written response from the law offices of Thompson, Sweeny, Kinsinger & Pereira P.C., representing the Gwinnett County Board of Education and Gwinnett County School District. The law offices confirmed that action had been taken, stating, “My client investigated the allegations and took corrective action to ensure compliance with Gwinnett County Board of Education policy, applicable federal statutes, and constitutional principles.”

School Board prayers ended in a W. Va. county

FFRF put a stop to opening prayers at the school district board meetings in Sutton, W. Va.

A concerned district parent informed FFRF that the Braxton County School District had been opening School Board meetings with a prayer led by board members. The report was then confirmed by official meeting agendas from the school board, listing “Opening Prayer” at the beginning of each meeting.

“The Supreme Court has consistently struck down prayers offered at school-sponsored events,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote in a letter to Board of Education President DeAnna Whipkey in April. “It is beyond the scope of a public school board to schedule or conduct prayer as part of its meetings.”

After following up with the school district in early December, FFRF received a reply from the new Board President Evelyn Post. Post confirmed that three new members were admitted to the board in July, as well as the inclusion of a new superintendent. Additionally, “[a]fter receipt of your communication last spring, our Board of Education never placed our nondenominational prayer on our meeting agendas.”

Pregame prayer stopped in West Virginia

FFRF intervened after a high school in West Virginia started a high school football game with a prayer.

A concerned parent notified FFRF that a football game at Wayne High School on Oct. 21, 2022, broadcast a prayer over loudspeakers before the game started. The parent brought their child to their first football game, but did not want or expect to expose their child to religious ideology at a school-sponsored event.

“We write to ask that the district immediately cease opening its football games with school-sponsored prayer in order to uphold the rights of its students,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote in a letter to Superintendent Todd Alexander.

Alexander responded to FFRF in a formal email, informing it of a policy review in regard to religious ceremonies. “It is the district’s intent to comply with the policy which is based upon the case law outlined in your letter,” he wrote.

Religious painting altered in California school

FFRF commends the Chico Unified School District in Chico, Calif., for painting over an inappropriate religious text on a mural at a public school.

A concerned parent reported seeing a mural with the words, “Praise God from

whom all blessings flow” in Pleasant Valley High School. The parent became aware of the mural through their child’s information, as well as through a first-hand account on back-to-school night.

FFRF received a written response through Kingsley Bogard Attorneys, representing Chico Unified School District. The reply stated that, “The district has determined that it is able to remove the reference to a deity from the display without altering the art piece,” as well as confirming that work on the piece would be conducted shortly after the response was sent.

Religious promotion stopped in Kansas school

FFRF stopped a teacher from punishing a student based on private religious beliefs.

On Nov. 9, a student at Lakewood Middle School in Salina, Kan., reportedly said “god damn” in front of their teacher. The teacher responded harshly by demanding the student to come forward. When the student explained that they did not believe in God, the teacher carried out a discussion about religious beliefs, before singling out the student by removing them from class.

“While teachers can, of course, enforce rules related to cursing or inappropriate language, they cannot impose the rules of their personal religion onto students or argue with students regarding their personal religious beliefs,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Salina USD 305 Superintendent Linn M. Exline.

A response from Exline stated that “I can assure you that the parent’s concerns were taken seriously, were investigated, and that the teacher was reminded that she must refrain from engaging in the business of the district in a way that could be construed as an attempt to impose her own personal religious beliefs on her students.”

Additionally, the district took the position that any discussion of religion is to be strictly limited to serving an academic purpose and must be consistent with approved school curriculum.

Guest speaker prayer in Ohio school reprimanded

FFRF was able to ensure that guest speakers will no longer conduct public prayers at an Ohio middle school.

FFRF was informed by a concerned school district member that on Nov. 10, 2022, Wilson Middle School students attended a mandatory assembly in which a guest speaker instructed students and staff to bow their heads in prayer. The incident occurred at two separate assemblies to the 7th and 8th grade students.

“If guest speakers engage in inappropriate conduct at a school event, then school administrators must intervene,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote in a letter to Superintendent Mike Holbrook.

FFRF received a written response from Bricker and Eckler Attorneys at Law, representing the Hamilton City School District. The letter stated that administration had not pre-approved nor were they aware of the guest speaker’s plan. “In addition, the School District plans to review the events of Nov. 10 with district-wide building administration as part of regularly occurring professional development. This will include conveying administration’s expectation that guest speakers refrain from leading students in prayer at future school-sponsored events.”

FFRF NEWS

Paine memorial moves forward

President Biden on Dec. 27 signed a congressional bill to endorse a monument dedicated to the life and work of Founding Father Thomas Paine. Under the leadership of Rep. Jamie Raskin and Rep. Victoria Spartz, House Bill 6720 was included in the 2022 Omnibus Package. The package was passed by both the House and Senate in late December. The Thomas Paine Memorial Association will now begin working with the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission (NCMAC) on advancing the project with a goal of unveiling the monument in 2026, which would coincide with the 250th anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. TPMA seeks to memorialize Thom-



as Paine in a way befitting his central role in the founding of the United States of America, as well as his worldwide call for liberty, justice and equality. FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, secretary of TPMA, said, “Were Thomas Paine alive today, he would surely be saying ‘These are the times that try men’s and women’s souls.’ Thomas Paine’s pro-liberty, democratic vision is the antidote for our fractured nation.”

Amanda Tyler @AmandaTylerBJC · Dec 13
I testified before Congress this morning that “#ChristianNationalism often overlaps with and provides cover for white supremacy and racial subjugation.”

Thank you @RepRaskin for the chance to highlight the work of Christians Against Christian Nationalism.



FFRF applauds historic congressional testimony on Christian nationalism

Christians Against Christian Nationalism lead organizer Amanda Tyler made history when she recently testified before Congress about Christian nationalism. “Christian nationalism often overlaps with and provides cover for white supremacy and racial subjugation,” Tyler told members of the House Oversight Committee’s Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, which is chaired by Rep. Jamie Raskin. Her oral testimony on Dec. 13 lasted about five minutes, and she also submitted 13 pages of written testimony on behalf of Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, much of which was based on the joint report published by the group and the Freedom From Religion Foundation earlier this year about Christian nationalism’s role in the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection. Christian nationalism “creates and perpetuates a sense of cultural belonging that is limited to certain people associated with the founding of the United States — namely native-born, white Christians,” Tyler stated during a hearing on “Confronting White Supremacy,” the final in a series of hearings on the evolution of anti-democratic extremist groups and the ongoing threat to democracy. Tyler defined Christian nationalism as a “political ideology and cultural framework that seeks to merge American and Christian identities.” She added, “It suggests that real Americans are Christians and that true Christians hold a particular set of political beliefs.” Tyler emphasized that criticism of Christian nationalism is not criticism of Christianity, and that Christian nationalism “is a gross distortion of the Christian faith that I and many others hold dear.” “Christian nationalism is not patriotism,” Tyler noted. “Patriotism is a healthy love of country; nationalism is an allegiance to country that demands supremacy over all other allegiances.” She noted that “the Christian nation myth” necessarily downplays or ignores the role of indigenous communities, Black Americans, immigrant populations, religious minorities and secular Americans because they “undercut the false narrative that the U.S. is special because it was founded by and for white Christians.” Another major mention of Christian nationalism in Congress this year has been when Rep. Jared Huffman from the floor some months ago touted FFRF’s and Baptist Joint Committee’s Jan. 6 report. “We commend Rep. Raskin for inviting Amanda Tyler to testify about the role Christian nationalism plays with white supremacy movements — and Ms. Tyler for her outstanding advocacy to call the alarm on Christian nationalism’s continuing threat to democracy,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president.

What is . . . ?

THIS CLAUSE BARRING A STATE RELIGION: RATIFIED AS PART OF THE FIRST AMENDMENT, 1791; CITED IN EDWARDS v. AGUILLARD, 1987

On the Dec. 19 edition of the game show “Jeopardy!,” this was the \$1,000 clue in the “Life Snapshots” category in the Jeopardy round. Miranda Onnen, an assistant attorney general from Astoria, N.Y., answered correctly (as we hope all FFRF members would!) with the question: “What is the Establishment Clause?”

WHAT ARE YOU MISSING?

FFRF offers much more than just **Freethought Today** for news, information & lively banter about freethought & state/church separation.

Check out these other offerings!

- Ask an Atheist online weekly show ffrf.org/ask-an-atheist
- Freethought Matters TV weekly show ffrf.org/freethought-matters
- Freethought Now blogs freethoughtnow.org
- Freethought Radio weekly show ffrf.org/radio
- FFRF press releases ffrf.org/releases
- FFRF action alerts ffrf.org/action
- Freethought of the Day
Daily online calendar of famous freethinkers ffrf.org/day
- We Dissent monthly podcast we-dissent.org



We’ve joined Instagram!

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has listened to your requests and is excited to announce that it has officially joined Instagram.

Please follow us at @ffrf_official for weekly updates and content.

We look forward to connecting with you there!

FFRF’s ‘Freethought Matters’ mug

Celebrate FFRF’s TV show.... because freethought matters! Ivory imprint on burgundy with a glossy finish. 8 fl. oz. American made mug.

\$25 each, 2 for \$40
Item# MU02

Price includes over \$10 in shipping cost.



Order online at ffrf.org/shop

THEY SAID WHAT?

Please repent and accept Jesus Christ as your lord and savior.

Gab founder Andrew Torba, who has said “unapologetic Christian nationalism is what will save the United States of America,” to the New York Times, which had reached out to him for comment on its article on the harm of extremist social media in increasing Covid-19 spread and deaths.

The New York Times, 11-25-22

“[The] people killed in the nightclub that night, there is no evidence/that they were Christians. Assuming they have not accepted the truth/affirmed Christ as the lord of their life, they are now reaping the consequences of eternal damnation.

Former Trump lawyer and conservative Christian Jenna Ellis, on the five people killed in the mass shooting at Club Q in Colorado Springs in November.

OnlySky, 11-24-22

Jews have too much power in our society. Christians should have all the power, everyone else very little.

White supremacist Nick Fuentes, who dined with former President Trump at Mar-a-Lago.

The New York Times, 11-26-22

All the harassment I receive makes me wonder if it would be easier to stay quiet about my values and beliefs. But then I remember that God sent his son Jesus, who experienced the hatred of the world first.

Kyle Rittenhouse, who shot three men, two fatally, during the civil un-

rest in Kenosha, Wis., in August 2020, when he was 17. A jury found Rittenhouse not guilty of murder.

Twitter, 11-27-22

The fact that three of the five justices who joined that [Dobbs] opinion [overturning Roe v. Wade] were appointed during the Trump-Pence administration makes all the hardship we endured from 2016 forward more than worth it.

Former Vice President Mike Pence, in the epilogue of his book *So Help Me God*, as cited in columnist Carlos Lozada’s article, “Mike Pence is having a moment he doesn’t deserve.”

The New York Times, 12-3-22

Parents have little or no responsibility for the actions of their children. If we are serious about addressing gun violence, we need to first get serious about bringing the paddle and prayer back to our public schools.

Jack Brewer, former NFL player, testifying to the House Judiciary Committee on Dec. 14. The committee was examining the tragic Uvalde, Texas, elementary school shooting that left 19 students and two teachers dead.

Fox News, 12-15-22

I am Catholic. Because I learned my maternal family had a Jewish background I said I was ‘Jew-ish.’

U.S. Rep. George Santos, who was caught in a multitude of lies and embellishments of his background after he was elected to the House.

NPR, 12-29-22

FFRF urges IRS to look into church electioneering

FFRF is asking the IRS to investigate electioneering by church groups in four states. Multiple churches in Alaska, California, New Mexico and Texas have engaged in politicking, according to an investigation in the Texas Tribune.

As nonprofit organizations, churches are given a 501(c)(3) status, allowing for donations to be tax exempt. However, keeping this status requires a nonprofit organization, either secular or religious, to refrain from engaging in directly encouraging members of their organization to support one political party over another. FFRF has compiled a series of letters detailing churches that have engaged in electioneering and politicking, and is asking the IRS to determine if these churches are no longer suitable for a 501(c)(3) status.

FFRF Equal Justice Works Fellow Kat Grant wrote IRS Commissioner Douglas O’Donnell that such conduct is a violation of IRS Code.

Pastor Greg Fairrington of the Destiny Christian Church, based in Rocklin, Calif., reportedly conducted a service with blatant politicking on May 16. Fairrington prayed in front of his congregation, stating, “Lord God, that you would inspire voters here in the state of California to cast their vote for the sanctity of life. Lord God, that they would get behind a conservative Christian candidate.”

Several Texas churches also were reported to have engaged in electioneering. On April 7, Carver Park Baptist

Church Senior Pastor Gaylon Foreman explicitly voiced support for Waco Independent School District school board candidate Marlon Jones. First Baptist Grapevine Senior Pastor Doug Page in Grapevine, Texas, and Gateway Church Senior Pastor Robert Morris in Southlake, Texas, made statements asking their respective churches to support multiple candidates as part of their “church families.”

These examples, and many others, would disqualify each church from retaining 501(c)(3) status as a nonprofit organization, which allows donations to these institutions to be tax exempt. “The Internal Revenue Code states that to retain their 501(c)(3) status an organization cannot ‘participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office,’” FFRF writes to the IRS.

FFRF takes its status as a nonprofit organization very seriously. The state/church watchdog is careful to avoid dispensing endorsements to any candidate in any political race.

“Tax-free status is a huge benefit, a public subsidy that is awarded to nonprofit organizations contingent in part on a lack of electioneering,” FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor says. “Secular nonprofits are well aware of this fact while many churches are overtly flouting the law. The IRS must set an example by penalizing them for this abuse of public trust.”

No ‘preaching while driving,’ FFRF urges Uber and Lyft

Uber and Lyft need to stop drivers from preaching to passengers, the Freedom From Religion Foundation is urging in open letters to the ride-sharing companies.

FFRF has contacted Uber and Lyft officials to request that the companies bar their drivers from turning the ride-hailing businesses into ride-hailing ministries.

A major Associated Press piece documents how some Uber and Lyft drivers have been directly imposing their personal religious views on unsuspecting clients and playing gospel music for purposes of conversion. Such unprofessional conduct harasses secular and religious minority passengers, the national association of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics) contends. Passengers will not feel comfortable if they are forced to fend off unwanted preaching or may be put at potential risk due to distracted drivers more intent on winning souls than providing safe transportation.

“No one should have to pay to be missionized against their will,” write Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-presidents. “Nonreligious and minority religious riders do not feel safe, welcomed or respected when they are confronted with proselytizing while stuck in a moving vehicle with a driver preaching at them.”

Both Uber and Lyft have anti-dis-

crimination policies that forbids drivers from discrimination based on religion, but neither service explicitly bars drivers from using their vehicles as a personal pulpit. Though both businesses state they commit to creating safe and inclusive workspaces, allowing drivers to create a mobile church against the will of passengers is insensitive and inappropriate.

“Nonreligious or minority religion users should not be made to feel ex-

cluded, or like outsiders because a driver is allowed to push personal religious beliefs upon passengers,” FFRF states. “Currently, about three-in-10 U.S. adults (29 percent) are religious ‘nones’ — people

who describe themselves as atheists, agnostics or ‘nothing in particular’ when asked about their religious identity. More than a third of the population falls into one of these two categories and that’s a lot of people to offend.”

That’s why both companies need to enact policies that will forbid drivers from attempting to convert paying customers to their personal religion, FFRF insists.

FFRF urges the companies to uphold their commitment to maintaining an inclusive and welcoming community by implementing clear policies prohibiting its drivers from proselytizing, preaching or otherwise utilizing its services to advance their personal religious viewpoints.

“No one should have to pay to be missionized against their will.

— Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor

FFRF asks Wis. AG to escalate clergy probe

The official investigation into sexual abuse among clergy members needs to be escalated, the Freedom From Religion Foundation is urging Wisconsin Attorney General Josh Kaul.

“We urge you not to give the Catholic Church the opportunity to cover up for its own clergy,” FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor write to Kaul.



Josh Kaul

The investigation was opened in April 2021, wherein the Wisconsin Department of Justice committed to investigating allegations of sexual abuse among clergy members and other faith-based community leaders in the state. After a year, it was downgraded to “review,” leaving officials unable to conduct a thorough investigation.

“Clergy abuse has long infiltrated religious institutions in Wisconsin, much like the rest of the country,” writes FFRF. “Survivors deserve an investigation that holds perpetrators — and those who provide them a safe

haven — accountable.”

More than 200 reports of clergy abuse had been filed in the year with the Wisconsin DOJ since the investigation had been launched. Just last month the Diocese of Superior released 23 names of alleged abusers, prompting FFRF to seek a reopening of the attorney general’s independent investigation.

During similar investigations in other states, independent, secular investigations have revealed many more perpetrators than the church has owned up to. In Illinois, for example, advocates for clergy abuse victims named twice as many offenders as did the Catholic Church. An independent investigation free from the influence of abusers is required to bring justice to perpetrators.

Ensuring that every potential recourse remains on the table is vital to offering healing to survivors and their families, as well as sending a message that such abuse will not be tolerated in the state of Wisconsin, stresses the national state/church watchdog, based in Madison, Wis.

That’s why it’s crucial for the investigation to escalate from its current state in order to put an end to continued abuse, FFRF insists.

“We ask that you continue to use every resource at your disposal to investigate these claims of abuse in the state of Wisconsin, bring justice to survivors and their families and name and prosecute those who perpetrated and facilitated this abuse,” the FFRF-authored letter states.

IN THE NEWS

Faith-based provider defrauded employer

The executive director of a Wisconsin faith-based provider of homeless services faces five criminal counts for allegedly defrauding her former employer by illegally diverting school lunch money meant for economically disadvantaged children.

Connie J. Vacho, 40, is charged with three counts of misdemeanor theft and felony counts of fraudulent writing and theft by false representation, according to the Wisconsin State Journal in Madison.

Vacho was hired in July 2022 as executive director of Shelter From the Storm Ministries (SFTSM), which provides housing and life-skills training for homeless women and their children in Sun Prairie, Wis. She is accused of misappropriating money from the Waunakee School District and Taher Inc., a Minnesota company that contracts with schools to manage their lunch programs.

It's alleged that the thefts and monetary diversions by various means from October 2019 to June 2022 amounted to more than \$8,000. Some of that benefited her own children's lunch fund balances and those of other students and staff who didn't qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Taher fired Vacho in June after 14 years of employment, the last six as Waunakee director.

An SFTSM press release a month later detailed the hire and noted Vacho was a "faithful member" of the non-denominational Blackhawk Church outside Madison, where she also served in the youth ministry.

Census: Christians now a minority in England

Fewer than half the people in England and Wales consider themselves Christian, according to the most recent census — the first time a minority of the population has followed the country's official religion.

Britain has become less religious — and less white — in the decade since the last census, figures from the 2021 census released Nov. 29 by the Office for National Statistics revealed.

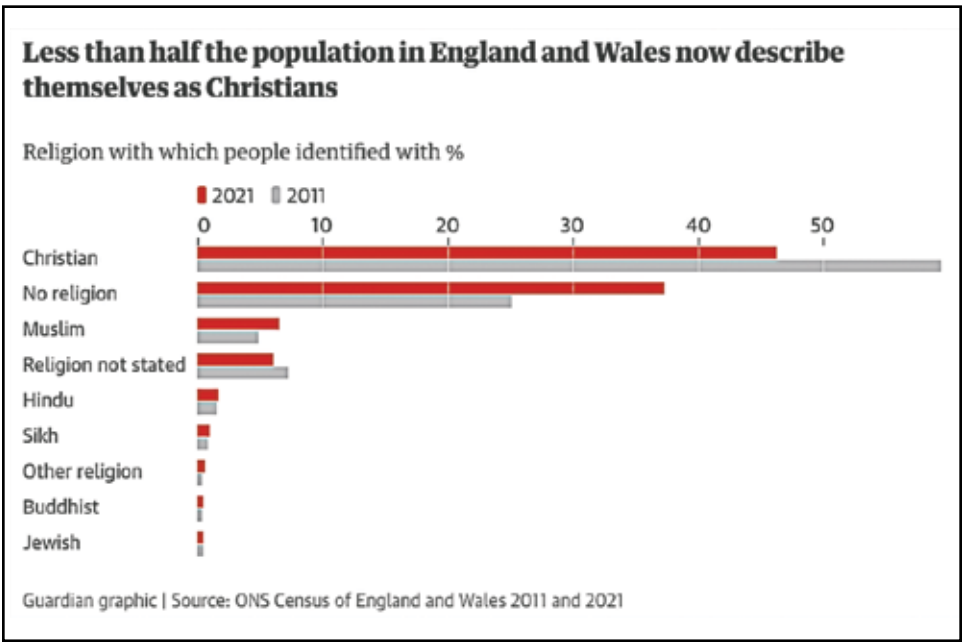
Only 46.2 percent of the population of England and Wales described themselves as Christian on the day of the 2021 census, down from 59.3 percent a decade earlier. More than one in three people — 37 percent — said they had no religion, up from 25 percent in 2011.

According to the AP, secularism campaigners said the shift should trigger a rethink of the way religion is entrenched in British society. The U.K. has state-funded Church of England schools, Anglican bishops sit in Parliament's upper chamber, and the monarch is "defender of the faith" and supreme governor of the church.

Religious are less worried about climate change

Highly religious Americans — those who pray daily, regularly attend religious services and consider religion crucial in their lives — are far less likely than other U.S. adults to express concern about global warming, from a new report by the Pew Research Center.

Religious Americans who show little or no concern about climate change also say "there are much bigger problems in the world, that God is in control



of the climate, and that they do not believe the climate is actually changing," according to the report.

The report says the religiously unaffiliated are much more likely to say that climate change is an extreme or very serious problem (70 percent) than religiously affiliated Americans (52 percent). The report says they are far more likely to say the Earth is getting warmer mostly because of human-induced activity (66 percent) than those who are religiously affiliated (47 percent).

Ky. court strikes down school choice measure

A school choice program that would have provided dollar-for-dollar tax credits to those donating money for nonpublic school tuition is unconstitutional, the Kentucky Supreme Court ruled Dec. 15, according to a report by the Lexington Courier-Journal.

The program, blocked by lower court proceedings for more than a year, could have cost the state up to \$25 million in its first year of implementation. Both individuals and corporations would have been able to write off up to \$1 million on their state income taxes.

In a unanimous opinion, the court's seven justices cited a section of the Kentucky Constitution that prohibits the state from raising funds for nonpublic schools.

The court declined to speak to the intent of the 2021 law creating the tax credit program — namely, whether the goal of raising money for more children to have the choice of attending nonpublic schools is with or without merit, though the justices did cite precedent from a 1983 case: "We cannot sell the people of Kentucky a mule and call it a horse, even if we believe the public needs a mule."

Turkish creationist gets 8,658 years in prison

Televangelist and cult leader Adnan Oktar has been sentenced to a record 8,658 years in prison, following a retrial in Turkey on charges of sexual assault and depriving someone of their liberty.

Oktar, 66, fronted his own television channel, through which he delivered religious sermons. He is a fierce opponent of the theory of evolution, and wrote a widely mocked book on creationism.

He was originally given a jail sentence of 1,075 years but an appeal court ordered a retrial involving 215 defendants.

Oktar and hundreds of his followers were arrested in 2018 from his home on a litany of charges, including running a criminal organization, tax offences, sexual abuse and counterterrorism laws.

Report: Atheists just as healthy as the religious

The nonreligious are just as healthy and satisfied with life as their religious counterparts, according to new research published in Journal of Religion and Health.

The findings cast doubts on the theory that religion and spirituality enhance personal well-being. Study author David Speed, associate professor at the University of New Brunswick, sought to test the belief-as-benefit effect, which describes a broad pattern of findings where religious beliefs and behaviors are positively associated with health outcomes.

Speed used data from Canada's General Social Survey to examine whether religion predicted physical and/or psychological wellness in a representative sample of Canadians. The survey collected data regarding religious identity, religious attendance, prayer frequency, and religiosity. The survey also included assessments of self-rated stress, self-rated physical health, life satisfaction, and self-rated mental health.

Eatery refuses service to Christian group

A restaurant in Richmond, Va., in early December canceled a reservation for a private event being held by a conservative Christian organization, citing the group's opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion rights, according to a report in the Washington Post.

"We have always refused service to anyone for making our staff uncomfortable or unsafe and this was the driving force behind our decision," read an Instagram post from Metzger Bar and Butchery.

The group, the Family Foundation, was set to host a dessert reception for supporters on Nov. 30. About 90 minutes before it was slated to start, one of the restaurant's owners called to cancel it.

The Family Foundation advocates for "policies based on biblical principles." It has lobbied against same-sex marriage and abortion rights.

While it's illegal to discriminate against someone because of their race or religion, the restaurant's refusal had to do with the group's actions, said Elizabeth Sepper, a professor at the University of Texas. "It's about the overall positions and policies the group has taken — it's not about Christian vs. non-Christian," she said. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, D.C., Seattle and the Virgin Islands specifically protect people from being refused service because of their political affiliation or ideology.

After School Satan Club delayed in Virginia

The Chesapeake, Va., School Board raised safety and security concerns regarding the proposed After School Satan Club (ASSC).

On Dec. 12, the board spent several hours listening to split public comments about the program. The Satan Club was scheduled to have its first meeting three days after the school board meeting.

Chesapeake Public Schools Superintendent Jared Cotton indicated that further review and a safety assessment are needed before making a decision on whether to approve the ASSC's resubmitted application.

Members of the Satanic Temple expressed that their First Amendment rights should not be up for debate.

"My religion does not need your approval to exist. My beliefs are not subject to your approval," said Rose Bastet, a Satanic Temple volunteer.

"The Satanic Temple does not worship the devil. We are not demons. We do not believe in demons, because neither exists," said June Everett, campaign director of the ASSC and ordained minister with the Satanic Temple.

Diocese seeks protection before clergy abuse trials

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Santa Rosa plans to file for bankruptcy protection in advance of the first clergy abuse trials resulting from a three-year period that gives adult survivors of child sexual abuse in California until Dec. 31 to file civil suits related to their experiences.

Critics immediately framed the move as an effort to prevent the disclosure of sensitive, embarrassing details about priest abuse and the measures they believe church officials took to hide misdeeds over decades.

They also chastised the diocese for choosing a route that would ensure there was no settlement money left for claimants who might yet be abused or who might legally file a lawsuit after the claim deadline established by the bankruptcy court.

Filing for bankruptcy would freeze at least 130 new cases involving the Santa Rosa Diocese. Those cases have already been added to a consolidated case list administered through the Alameda County Courthouse, which includes lawsuits from the rest of Northern California that have been filed since the three-year window opened at the beginning of 2020.

The Santa Rosa Diocese has already paid about \$33 million in settlements related to the clergy abuse scandal that erupted on the North Coast in the early 1990s as survivors of sexual grooming and assault at the hands of priests began coming forward around the nation.

Ukraine may bar church that answers to Moscow

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky called for lawmakers to prevent the branch of Orthodox Christianity that answers to Moscow from operating in Ukraine, according to The New York Times.

His administration is drafting a law "making it impossible for religious organizations affiliated with centers of influ-

ence in the Russian Federation to operate in Ukraine,” Zelensky said Dec. 8. In addition, he directed the government to conduct an inquiry into the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and its ties to Moscow, “and, if necessary, to take measures provided for by law.”

Several religious and legal scholars said it could face legal challenges.

For centuries, the ancient Ukrainian branch of the church has been subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church, based in Moscow. The leader of the Russian church, Patriarch Kirill, has strong ties to President Putin, whose long tenure he has called “a miracle of God.”

But that branch of Orthodoxy is rapidly losing support, while many Ukrainians now adhere to a newer Orthodox church, based in Kyiv, created specifically to be independent and not answer to Moscow.

Nearly 40% think we’re living in the ‘end times’

In the United States, 39 percent of adults say they believe “we are living in the end times,” according to a recent Pew Research Center survey.

Christians are divided on this question, with 47 percent saying we are living in the end times, including majorities in the historically Black (76 percent) and evangelical (63 percent) Protestant traditions. Meanwhile, 49 percent of Christians say we are not living in the end times, including 70 percent of Catholics and 65 percent of mainline Protestants who say this. Viewed more broadly, the share of Protestants who say we are living in the end times is greater than the corresponding share among Catholics (55 percent vs. 27 percent).

About three in 10 or fewer people from non-Christian religions (29 percent) and those with no religious affiliation (23 percent) say we are living in the end times. (Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and other smaller non-Christian religious groups are included in the survey and represented in the “other religions” category, but there were not enough respondents in these groups to analyze separately.)

Americans without college degrees are more likely than college graduates to believe humanity is approaching its end, as are Americans with lower income levels when compared with those with higher incomes. And Republicans and Republican-leaning independents are more likely than Democrats and Democratic leaners to express this belief.

Texas AG office sought data on transgenders

Employees at the Texas Department of Public Safety in June received a request from Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton’s office to compile a list of individuals who had changed their gender on their Texas driver’s license and other department records during the past two years, the Washington Post reports.

“Need total number of changes from male to female and female to male for the last 24 months, broken down by month,” the chief of the DPS’s driver license division emailed colleagues in the department on June 30, information which the Post obtained through a public records request.

After more than 16,000 such instances were identified, DPS officials determined that a manual search would

be needed to determine the reason for the changes, DPS spokesman Travis Considine told The Post.

The behind-the-scenes effort by Paxton’s office to obtain data on how many Texans had changed their gender on their license came as the attorney general, Gov. Greg Abbott and other Republican leaders in the state have been publicly marshaling resources against transgender Texans.

Earlier in 2022, Abbott signed a bill banning transgender youths from participating in sports that align with their gender identity at K-12 public schools and ordered the state to investigate the provision of gender-affirming care as potential child abuse. State lawmakers have already proposed more than a dozen anti-LGBTQ measures ahead of the next session, including criminalizing gender-affirming care and banning minors at drag shows.

S.D. clarifies religious expression in Capitol

South Dakota lawmakers can adorn their office with a crucifix, but they can’t pound the nail into the state Capitol’s wall, a legislative oversight board clarified Dec. 6 as part of a policy regulating how religious symbols can mark the state’s seat of government, according to a report by the Associated Press.

The Legislature’s Executive Board took up the issue after two Republican lawmakers stained five chairs in a Capitol meeting room with oil as they marked chairs with crosses ahead of a meeting in November to elect caucus leaders. It took the Capitol’s groundskeepers about three hours to clean, but five chairs were left slightly discolored.

But the episode also raised questions about who had access to the Statehouse rooms where laws are formed and to what degree lawmakers, often compelled by their Christian convictions, can leave a mark in the Capitol.

Republican state Rep. Sue Peterson told The Dakota Scout that she marked chairs with oil crosses as an act of prayer before the Republican caucus meeting. She said many lawmakers often pray as they craft state laws.

Teacher sues after not using preferred names

An Ohio teacher is suing her former school district for allegedly forcing her to resign when she refused to participate in the “social transition” of students.

According to a federal lawsuit filed by the attorneys for Vivian Geraghty, the school district required teachers to use a students’ preferred names and pronouns.

Her attorneys with the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) said Geraghty’s “sincerely held religious beliefs and scientific understanding govern her view that a person is male or female based on sex, not personal identity, and participating in a student’s social transition violates those beliefs by forcing her to communicate messages she believes are untrue and harmful to the student.”

Geraghty, who taught English at Jackson Memorial Middle School in Massillon, resigned in August.

In a lawsuit filed Dec. 12, she alleges that while teaching at Jackson Memorial Middle School, she was instructed to address two students by their preferred pronouns and names. Feeling that doing so would violate both her Christian faith and “scientific understanding,” Geraghty approached principal Kacy Carter to discuss “a way to move forward

consistent with her conscience and her professional obligation.”

“But as soon as defendants found out that Ms. Geraghty had a religious basis for resisting their attempt to implement an orthodoxy, they forced her to resign,” the lawsuit reads.

55% of adults think Jesus will return to Earth

A new Pew Research survey shows that more than half of all U.S. adults (55 percent), including three-quarters of Christians, say they believe Jesus “will return to Earth someday,” also known as the “second coming.”

Protestants in the evangelical (92 percent) and historically Black (86 percent) traditions are more likely than other Christians to say there will eventually be a second coming of Jesus. Roughly four-in-10 Americans either do not believe Jesus will return to Earth (25 percent) or say they do not believe in Jesus (16 percent).

Respondents who said they believe Jesus will return to Earth were also asked how certain they are that this will happen during their lifetime. One-in-ten Americans say they believe the second coming of Jesus will definitely or probably occur during their lifetime, 27 percent are not sure if Jesus will return in their lifetime, and 19 percent say the return of Jesus will definitely or probably not occur during their lifetime

Nonreligious voters lean heavily Democratic

Voters with no religious affiliation (“Nones”) supported Democratic candidates and abortion rights by staggering percentages in the 2022 midterm elections.

And they’re voting in large numbers. In 2022, 22 percent of voters claimed no religious affiliation, according to AP VoteCast, an expansive survey of more than 94,000 voters nationwide. They contributed to voting coalitions that gave Democrats victories in battleground states such as Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Arizona.

The Nones voted for Democratic House candidates nationwide over Republicans by more than a 2-1 margin (65 percent to 31 percent), according to VoteCast. That echoes the 2020 presidential election, when Democrat Joe Biden took 72 percent of voters with no religious affiliation, while Republican Donald Trump took 25 percent, according to VoteCast.

In several bellwether races this year, the secular vote made its impact felt, according to AP VoteCast.

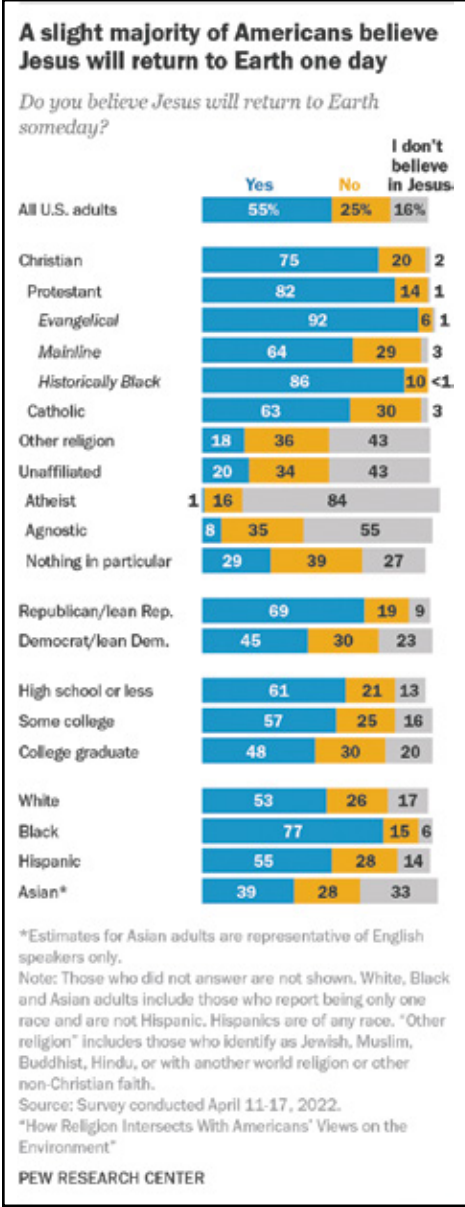
About four in five people with no religious affiliation voted against abortion restrictions in referendums in Michigan and Kentucky.

Between two-thirds and three-quarters of Nones supported Democratic candidates in statewide races in Arizona and Wisconsin.

About four in five people with no religion voted for Josh Shapiro and John Fetterman, Pennsylvania’s newest governor and senator, respectively, both Democrats.

Texas VA nurse sues to stop abortion services rule

The U.S. Veterans Affairs Department’s new rule requiring its medical centers to offer abortions and related counseling infringes health professionals’ religious liberties, a new feder-



al lawsuit says.

Stephanie Carter, an Army vet and a nurse at a Temple, Texas, VA facility, sued the agency on Dec. 13 in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas. She’s seeking an injunction barring the VA from compelling her and her colleagues at the facility to participate in providing any abortion-related services.

This is the first case challenging the VA’s allowance of abortions at its health facilities in very limited circumstances. Under the rule, pregnant veterans and some of their direct family members can get abortions at a VA health facility if carrying the pregnancy to term threatens the patient’s life or health.

Carter said that her Christian beliefs prevent her from performing, prescribing, or counseling for abortions and from working in a facility that offers nonemergency abortion services. The VA rule doesn’t account for religious objections, and there’s currently no process for considering accommodation requests, she says.

OK AG: Religious charter schools legal

In an official legal opinion, Oklahoma Attorney General John O’Connor says a state law that prohibits religious entities from operating a public charter school likely violates the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and “therefore should not be enforced,” based on rulings from both the U.S. Supreme Court and the Oklahoma Supreme Court.

Official opinions issued by the attorney general are normally treated as legally binding unless a court declares otherwise.

The opinion opens the door for various religious entities, including churches, to operate public charter schools in Oklahoma. Public charter schools are open to all students, but no child is required to attend a charter school, unlike traditional public schools where attendance may be compulsory based on geographic proximity.



Court ending constitutional provisions

While Donald Trump’s remarks in December calling for “termination” of constitutional provisions rightly created consternation, the Freedom From Religion Foundation must point out that many constitutional provisions are already being “terminated” . . . by the ultraextremist Supreme Court fashioned by Trump.

Trump, in claiming that he won the 2020 presidential election, wrote on Truth Social in December: “A Massive Fraud of this type and magnitude allows for the termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution.”

Even many conservative politicians — mostly after media called attention to their silence — criticized the remarks, such as Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and former Vice President Mike Pence.

More outspoken was Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, who tweeted: “Suggesting the termination of the Constitution is not only a betrayal of our Oath of Office, it’s an affront to our Republic.”

FFRF, which works to uphold constitutional dictates, agrees it is an affront. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court shaped by Trump, who appointed one-third of it, is meanwhile assiduously and successfully “terminating” many constitutional provisions.

Although voting rights and strict state/church separation were already being chipped away at for years by the increasingly extremist high court, the Trump Court has actually begun dismembering major parts of the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

The court did the once-unthinkable and “terminated” *Roe v. Wade* in June. Out went decades of privacy precedent found in the Bill of Rights. This was far more than an “affront,” creating legislative hand-to-hand combat in most states, with abortion care already criminalized in more than a dozen states and endangered in many others. Next on the chopping block are privacy rights such as contraception, marriage equality and possibly even the *Loving* decision, invalidating anti-miscegenation laws.

Last summer, the high court also summarily “terminated” the *Lemon* test. This wise analysis held a governmental action constitutional if it had a secular purpose, its primary effect did not advance or inhibit religion, and it did not foster excessive governmental entanglement with religion. Nixing the *Lemon* Test was certainly an affront, as this 1971 “test” did not come out of the blue, but was a careful synthesis of decades of high court rulings on the Establishment Clause. Now the current court has adopted a lame “history and tradition” test that promises to cherry-pick “facts” in such a way that religious freedom becomes a license for government promotion of religion and discrimination done in the name of religion.

We can see the writing on the wall in how the majority will rule in the *303 Creative* case. It certainly appears the court majority will side with a conservative Christian who absurdly claims her free speech is imperiled because Colorado has an anti-discrimination law. Ordinarily, such a challenger would be thrown out of court on the issue of standing — which requires litigants to jump through hoops showing they have actual injury or harm.

This is not the only case the Supreme Court has accepted in which the Christian plaintiff doesn’t even have legal standing. We saw the same double standard in the *Kennedy v. Bremerton* case, where the litigant no longer had a live case or controversy.

In the Trump Court, the rules that apply to the rest of us don’t necessarily apply to Christian conservative litigants. This was also shown in analysis of the court’s “shadow docket” cases, which have generally favored religion and Trump challengers.

Many of the rights established in the Constitution and Bill of Rights are in fact being “terminated” in front of our eyes. That’s why FFRF is working for court reform and expansion, before it is too late.

“Next on the chopping block are privacy rights such as contraception, marriage equality and possibly even the *Loving* decision, invalidating anti-miscegenation laws.”

FFRF: Court appears willing to sanction discrimination

The U.S. Supreme Court held oral arguments in December in a case brought by an anti-gay business owner against the state of Colorado — and the signs don’t look too promising.

In *303 Creative v. Elenis*, the Supreme Court will decide if a Christian website designer, citing her religious beliefs, must be exempted from Colorado’s Anti-Discrimination Act because she would refuse to provide wedding websites to same-sex couples.

A majority of the justices appear poised to rule in favor of the business owner under an expansive theory of free speech. The Freedom From Religion Foundation is sounding the alarm over the potential fallout from this case.

“Today it appears that the extremist majority on the Supreme Court has signaled its intent to bless discrimination as long as the business owner cites religion as the rationale,” comments FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

Justice Neil Gorsuch questioned Colorado Solicitor General Eric Olson over the state’s enforcement history and the Supreme Court’s 2018 case involving *Masterpiece Cakeshop*. After Gorsuch charged that the state put the baker through a “reeducation program,” Olson responded that he “strongly disagreed” with that characterization, saying rather that the baker was familiarized with Colorado law.

Justices Elena Kagan, Ketanji Brown Jackson and Sonia Sotomayor questioned the scope of discrimination that would be permissible. Sotomayor asked, “What about people who don’t believe in interracial marriage, and people who believe that disabled people shouldn’t get married?”

The argument was full of hypotheticals by the justices posed to lawyers from all sides.

Justice Samuel Alito asked in one hypothetical, “If there is a Black Santa at the other end of the mall and he doesn’t want to have his picture taken with a child who is dressed up in a Ku Klux Klan outfit, that Black Santa has to do that?”

Olson responded, “No, because Ku Klux Klan outfits are not protected characteristics under public accommodations laws.” Justice Elena Kagan chimed in, “And presumably that would be the same Ku Klux Klan outfit regardless of whether the child was Black or white or any other characteristic.” Alito joked, “You do see a lot of Black children in Ku Klux Klan outfits, right? All the time.”

These inappropriate and contrived hypotheticals by Alito and some other justices underscore a major problem with the case, charges FFRF.

“The Supreme Court never should have taken this manufactured case, and the argument underscores that this case is detached from reality,” says FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott.

FFRF filed a friend-of-the-court brief in the case earlier this year, which argued that the challenge was manufactured from the outset. The brief argues that the wannabe wedding website designer is seeking to sidestep the Constitution’s “case or controversy” requirement because she has never actually designed wedding websites and therefore has never been subject to a complaint under the Colorado Anti-Discrimination Act.

“Lorie Smith may dislike that loving same-sex couples in the United States are afforded the right to marry,” states the brief. “Her religious disagreement with marriage equality, however, does not magically transform a speculative chain of events into an imminent injury.”

FFRF warns that the decision is likely to go much further beyond the *Masterpiece Cakeshop* decision and inflict lasting damage. Judges have largely viewed the *Masterpiece Cakeshop* case, which had as its focus claimed “hostility” to religion by the Colorado Civil Rights Commission, as a narrow decision.

In the case before the court, businesses may be permitted to broadly assert the right to discriminate as a matter of free speech against any number of protected classes, especially on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

“The Supreme Court never should have taken this manufactured case, and the argument underscores that this case is detached from reality.”

— FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott.

Trans rights bills are a state/church issue

By Patrick Elliott

In November, the Freedom From Religion Foundation signed on to a friend-of-the-court brief in a case challenging Indiana’s ban on trans girls playing sports and the law’s “grievance procedure” requirement. The National Women’s Law Center wrote the excellent brief and nearly 60 organizations joined. After FFRF announced that it had signed on to the brief, some of its supporters wondered about the state/church connection to this issue. I hope to shed some light on the background of this case and why anti-trans bills and laws are indeed attacks on the separation of government and religion.

Religious groups are pushing bills that target transgender people.



Patrick Elliott

Alliance Defending Freedom, a wealthy Christian nationalist legal outfit that the Southern Poverty Law Center deems a hate group, is a huge force behind the national effort to enact trans sports bans and to otherwise target LGBTQ-plus kids and their families. The group consistently pushes for religion in government and bills itself as “the world’s largest legal organization committed to protecting religious freedom, free speech, the sanctity of life, parental rights, and God’s design for marriage and family.”

As reported in the Washington Post, Alliance Defending Freedom is significantly involved in drafting and pushing anti-LGBTQ bills, opposes marriage equality and has even worked to criminalize sex between consenting adults of the same sex. The organization collaborated with Idaho legislators to enact a trans sports ban and has joined other groups to push many anti-LGBTQ state bills. The coalition says that these are aimed at “restoring traditional family values.”

We are familiar with this playbook. The Religious Right finds issues to push their religious agenda, but it doesn’t come out and say “religion!” We see this with issues such as abortion, gay marriage and, now, bans of LGBTQ books. Religion-minded groups and lawmakers are fighting a religious fight but they have wised up and are not pointing to the bible as the source of their concern. Instead, they feign concern for competitiveness in girls sports (why have they never cared before?) and the “appropriateness” of school library materials.

In terms of the separation of state and church, we should care about the use of government power and resources not only to push religious activity, but also governmental abuses seeking conformance



with someone else’s religion. Today, many recognize that bans on gay marriage fall into the latter category. We appear to be on the front of a new wave of state legislation that wants to reinforce “traditional” and biblical gender roles and stereotypes. That is a problem for the separation of state and church, especially when public schools are involved.

Indiana’s ban is extreme.

Alliance Defending Freedom worked with Indiana legislators to enact the ban. It even filed an amicus brief in the district court seeking to defend it.

It is telling that this proposal was so extreme that the Republican governor of Indiana vetoed the original bill, HB 1041. The Legislature overrode that veto and enacted a highly contentious law that targets a vulnerable population to seemingly score religious and conservative points.

As the governor’s veto and the National Women’s Law Center brief point out, the “grievance procedure” in the law is hugely problematic for all athletes who play on a team that is designated “female, women’s or girls.” The law requires schools to implement an undefined system to allow a student or parent to submit a “grievance” about other athletes.

The National Women’s Law Center brief says that these procedures “could mimic the outdated and harmful sex verification procedures historically present in some women’s sports.” It then gives examples of a troubling history of women being accused of not being appropriately feminine and being subjected to invasive and harassing sex verification procedures. And it provides specific examples of women of color being especially susceptible to accusations.

The current lawsuit

The Indiana lawsuit is noteworthy because it will: 1) benefit students who

are under attack from religious organizations; and 2) reaffirm legal precedent that protects people from religiously motivated stereotyping surrounding gender.

First, this case is not just about allowing the 10-year-old plaintiff to play a particular sport. The challenge is also about striking down the overall law.

Second, the district court’s decision issuing a preliminary injunction correctly analyzed the case under current Supreme Court and 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals precedent. The court said: “Applying *Bostock* and *Whitaker* — both of which are binding on this court — to the facts of this case leads to a result that is not even a close call: A.M. has established a strong likelihood that she will succeed on the merits of her Title IX claim.”

The 7th Circuit ruled in a prior case, *Whiteaker v. Kenosha Unified School District*, that a school’s ban on a transgender boy from using the boy’s restroom based on the school’s sex-stereotyping violated Title IX. This background is useful in understanding the legal landscape. Religious groups want to establish precedent that allows sex-based discrimination, which would then be used to undercut the rights of LGBTQ-plus Americans.

Where do we go from here?

As this case proceeds in the courts, we can expect Alliance Defending Freedom and other religious groups to continue to press legislation that they believe will undercut LGBTQ-plus equality. It is worthwhile for secular groups to keep a watchful eye and to join friend-of-the-court briefs in court challenges. Religious organizations have a long

game that seeks to dismantle the wall of separation, heighten the free exercise rights of Christians, and to impose their religion via our laws. In the context of sports, religious groups are looking to create a legal framework that allows for transgender discrimination.

FFRF was in good company when it joined almost 60 other organizations in signing on to the National Women’s Law Center brief. Those groups include the Anti-Defamation League, American Atheists, American Humanist Association, Human Rights Campaign, Interfaith Alliance, and the Secular Student Alliance.

The laws targeting transgender individuals and their families are a replay of how religious coalitions have attacked the right to an abortion. Prior to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the high court, our nation saw an unprecedented attack on abortion rights at the state level, ranging from harassment and TRAP laws to outright bans. All were calculated not just to deprive citizens in those states of their reproductive rights, but to test the changing Supreme Court. In Texas, both reproductive rights and gender-affirming care have come under attack via legislation and regulatory action. Creating a tsunami of hostile legislation ensures that eventually challenges of some of these laws will make their way before the ultraconservative Supreme Court, which is inviting litigation that will give it the opportunity to overturn progressive precedent.

And this is already under way. In early December, the high court held oral arguments on what is being dubbed “Masterpiece Cakeshop II,” a challenge by a religious businesswoman who insists her religious beliefs against same-sex marriage makes her above the law. These challenges will create general precedent to privilege religious citizens and corporations, weaponizing religious liberty at the expense of our vaunted principle of separation between state and church. The cases involving trans rights, in short, are in response to a highly calculated line of attack by religious groups that want their religion to dictate our laws.

Patrick Elliot is FFRF’s senior litigation counsel. He oversees litigation for FFRF, including important First Amendment cases involving religion in schools, religious displays, and free speech violations. Patrick has served as the chair of the Civil Rights & Liberties Section of the State Bar of Wisconsin.

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Activists hold up a sign during the National Trans Visibility March in Washington, D.C. in 2019.

Champion of the First Amendment Award

The assault on democracy in Texas

Dr. Anthea Butler gave this speech at FFRF’s national convention in San Antonio on Oct. 29. (To watch the speech, go to ffrf.us/convention-2022.) She was introduced by FFRF Board Member Sue Kocher.

Sue Kocher: I am so pleased to introduce Dr. Anthea Butler, winner of this year’s Champion of the First Amendment Award. She’s the chair of the Religious Studies Department at the University of Pennsylvania. A historian of African American and American religion, her research and writing spans African American religion and history, race, politics, evangelicism, gender and sexuality, media, and popular culture. Butler is a sought-after commentator on the BBC, MSNBC, CNN, History Channel and PBS. Her books include *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*. FFRF is especially grateful to her for being a contributor to the landmark report on Christian nationalism at the Jan. 6th insurrection, which was jointly produced and published [in 2022] by FFRF and the Baptist Joint Committee.

Please welcome a true champion of the First Amendment, Dr. Anthea Butler.

By Dr. Anthea Butler

Awards are something, but what’s more important is the work that we do. What’s important to you is that I am a native Texan and what that means is I continually stay embarrassed about this damn state. I mean, how much am I supposed to take? We have a bunch of guys who thought that they should hold up guns and just stand in front of a school for 74 minutes and let a bunch of children die in Uvalde.

We got a governor [Greg Abbott] who thinks he’s the most religious person on Earth, but will not pay attention to the people who need health care or the education system, and he continuously lies about the border, and at one point stopped trucks from coming in because he wanted to check them and that made all the lettuce prices go up.

I need to tell you that the people of Texas are turning ignorant. And they are becoming ignorant because of the ignorant politicians and school board leaders and local leaders in this state who don’t give a damn about anything except themselves and making money.

So, when Elon Musk, up the freeway in Austin, finishes tearing up Twitter and everything else, what are we going to be left with? A bunch of religious yahoos who don’t care about you. This is ground zero for democracy being broken. It is ground zero for the building of theocracy.

Let me say that again to you: Texas is ground zero for the building of theocracy. And, if you don’t understand that, you need to understand the history of what has happened here in Texas. It is the place where the Southern Baptists broke apart, it is the place where you had textbook problems, and it is now the state that has taken away most of the books out of the libraries. Did you know that Texas is the number one state in the country for taking books off library shelves, not just in public libraries, but in educational systems K-12?

I want to talk a little bit about history, but a lot about present day. A lot about a present day in which we’re watching



Photo by Steve Solomon

Anthea Butler talks about book banning in Texas schools and libraries and how that is one more step in creating a Christian theocracy in the Lone Star State.

things erode, and a lot of it has to do with religious people who think about this as morality. It is not morality. It is a power grab. I know all of you in this room, you kind heathens, you know. This is the kind of group I like to talk to, because you get the jig, you know what’s up. You know what’s at stake.

If some of these [religious] folks get into office, our lives are going to be even more miserable than they could possibly be right now. I want to let you think about a few things and I want to finish it up by tying this all together with Christian nationalism, which is why I have bags underneath my eyes — because I’ve been talking about it so damn much and now everybody wants to listen and now everybody else who doesn’t want to listen wants to be a Christian nationalist. It’s a sad state of affairs in this country, but don’t think it’s just here.

Let’s start off with some facts. One of the things I think you should realize about Texas banning books is that this has happened a lot. This has happened because state Rep. Matt Krause from Fort Worth, who last October said, “I’m going to send a list of 800-plus books out to all of the school boards in and around Texas and ask how many of these books are on the shelves of your libraries.” These kind of books are *The Bluest Eye*, books about sexuality, books about LGBTQ things, books about most anything that most conservative Christians would think is inappropriate, including interracial marriage. Now, you might think, oh, God, they can’t possibly be against this, but let me tell you that Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas will keep his interracial marriage but not keep anybody else’s. He will grandfather himself in.

According to PEN America, which is

a free speech organization, 801 books across 22 school districts were banned between July 2021 and June 2022. And 174 of those books were banned twice.

If you manage to get on that book-banning list twice, that’s great. They don’t know my book yet and it’s not in the libraries yet, so I’m hoping to get on that list, just so I can just talk about them a lot.

What this means is that this is a present-day thing. Everybody gets upset. But these panics are manufactured to do two things. One is to get the everyday parent who’s got their kids at the school, picking their kids up every day, to get them incensed about what they think their kids are learning. Then, the second part is to control the school board.

What began in Texas was actually controlling the textbooks. Now, if you know anything about the state of Texas, it is really important for one big thing. We have a state Board of Education, which controls all the books that are read in Texas, all the books that you buy for different school boards and districts.

When I was growing up, I had to read those books, right? What I didn’t know at the time was that, starting in the 1970s, white Christians flooded the state board. They captured it. Remember that word “captured.” Captured is important.

There are all kinds of streams that go into capturing a school board. Sometimes it’s about textbooks, sometimes it’s about what people are learning in the classrooms, other times it’s about science, because sometimes people want to teach creationism. I could give another whole talk on the history about creationism.

Now, this gave a template to the rest of the nation. When these school boards started to be captured in the ’70s and this big Texas Education Board, and the

15-member committee, preset the kinds of things they wanted to see in books. Let me describe to you what that was.

They want the “positive aspects” about America and its heritage. Yeah, you know that’s a lie, right? I’m in *The 1619 Project* book, people are like, “But it wasn’t like this. Slaves were happy, they became Christians.” I’ve told my students if anybody ever writes in a class that I’m teaching about slavery that Christianity came because it was supposed to free the slaves, I am flunking them for the entire semester. You will not do that kind of crap in my class, because that’s not the kind of history we teach. We teach the truth. And I am invested in the truth about what this country has done.

The other thing the State Board said is it didn’t want any material that undermines authority. No material — this is back in 1979 — no material that under-



You can buy a hardcover copy of Dr. Anthea Butler’s book, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* at ffrf.org/shop for \$24 postpaid.

mines authority, no violent context. (Oh my god, this is the state that has the most guns on Earth.) And not to represent any lifestyles that deviated from generally accepted society. I believe that sodomy still was on the books then. Unfortunately, it doesn't matter, because people do what they want to do behind closed doors and they should be able to do what they want to do in front of closed doors, behind them, everywhere. But in the state of Texas, they wanted to tell you what could be in a textbook.

This kind of varnished, whitewashed history, and I do mean the word "whitewashed," changed textbooks. The people who wrote those textbooks had to write in that manner, so long before anybody started yelling about CRT, we already had textbooks that were tainted.

Fast forward to 2018 when we find out that one of the school boards here has a book that said "Slavery was just like indentured servitude. It was just a thing that people did. And that it didn't have any harm." It was labeled immigration. Maybe that's why they keep hollering about immigrants, right? Because it messes with their learning. This is the stupidest thing I've ever heard.

MLK with the civil rights movement was reduced to an American story of progress. I could go on, but what I mean by that is, yes, civil rights was progress, but they just made it sound like this was another wonderful thing that happened, not the fact that this man was assassinated. Not the fact that he had to fight, they had to march and boycott and everything else. No, no, no, it was a story of progress. The only person they actually were willing to admit was assassinated was Malcolm X, and that was because they thought he was bad.

This is what was in Texas textbooks. Everything that is happening in the state of Texas today, it has already had the groundwork laid for it. It has already happened. It's not something that you have to think about as the past. It is the past and the present.

The past and the present are coming together in certain kinds of ways, and I think it's really important for you to see the connections, to see what it is we're actually fighting against, and what we're up against.

This has not been a two-year project. It's not a project that began with Donald Trump. It is a project that began in the '70s, and yes, even before that, because you had people fighting for prayer in schools. And when prayer in schools went away, with Engel and Vitale and all the other court cases that happened, what you had was a mobilization of conservative Christians. And this mobilization of conservative Christians had several prongs to



Photo by Gonzo Pozo

Anthea Butler poses with FFRF Member Anthony Magnabosco of Texas following her speech on Oct. 29.

it. It's even before abortion. One was to tear down education.

Those of you who are old enough will remember that there were such things called segregation academies. These segregation academies were built by predominantly Christian schools in order to take their children out of the way of being integrated after Brown v. Board of Education in 1954. Textbooks are just a part of this program. "Let's have our own schools, let's destroy the public school system." You begin to have all the testing and everything else that happens, with the kinds of tests and the kinds of questions that are designed to trip up folks. You have the books that you're banning from people learning real history. You have advocates who take over school boards and capture them. When that doesn't work, you decide to do school vouchers. See, now, you get to the school vouchers and who gets the school vouchers? Religious education, right?

Everybody else has to get flooded into the public school where you got the bad books. Now, those kids are reading the bad books, too.

To top it off, let me give you the layer on top of this that will make everybody crazy — homeschooling. Oh, if you think you've had problems this year, the number one article that I wrote about, that I got the most flak about and all the hatred about, was about homeschooling. What did I have the audacity to say? Homeschooling is racist and that homeschooling started off with R.J. Rushdoony and other very fundamentalist people in the 1950s forward, and the materials that they publish are even worse than the Texas textbooks.

So, what you have is this morass that's happening in Texas. You've got the dissemination of libraries and learning and

textbooks. You have the undercutting of public funds for public schools. You have charters schools that have risen and are mostly religious in nature and people think they are better for their kids, so they put them in charter schools or then they put them in Christian academies, and all the materials are designed to tell a lie. So, what you're faced with is an educational system that, by the time the students get to me in college, it's a mess. You have people crying because they don't know anything about slavery. My African American students are always upset because they're like, "I never learned this." And I'm like "You didn't learn it because you probably had really crappy books. Where you from?" Half the time, it's somewhere in the South. Some of them were in private schools. One summer, I did a short one-week course about African Americans to get people ready for school, and they didn't know anything about lynching.

I had to stop everything and basically say, "I'm sorry, but this is going to feel like terror to you for the next two hours. I want you to understand what that terror was like for African Americans in the late 19th and early 20th century. I want you to understand what people in this country have done because they didn't want to be with us or they did not want us to be integrated into this society. You need to understand the kind of violence that has happened in America."

What you have in this denigration and destruction of the educational project is a way in which Christians have tried to flood the zone, as we say. That flooding the zone is creating not just the problems that we've had with education, but it's creating problems with something else right now, so let's talk about weaponization, because that's where I want to end.

One way things get weaponized is to take a term and use it for something else. In the education battle, the term "critical race theory" has been used as a weapon. [Conservative activist] Christopher Rufo took that term, CRT, and bandied it about everywhere. What you had is denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention saying, "Well, we don't know if we should be about race. We think that this is a bad thing." Never mind that this was just right around the time that George Floyd was murdered and that they had promised to do better and think about, yes, Black Lives Matter. That was just a whisper.

You can see how these terms start to be used so that when you get school board meetings, like ones that have happened in North Texas and around the state, you get people having hours and hours of meetings, screaming and yelling.

You have places like Tennessee and others dealing with this. You have "Don't say gay" in Florida. See, this stuff doesn't

stay in one place. It goes everywhere. How is this all coming together right now? Here's the bad part. We have a serious situation in this country. Not only do you have people who don't have enough of an education, so when they get out of school, the next education they get is from people like David Barton, who write trash histories of America and religion and have people believe this. David Barton has made more money off books than I will ever be able to make in a million years. These books get sold because there's a romanticized history of America. They even hate Thomas Jefferson, y'all. It's amazing.

But it's appalling to me that they have lied about American history. And they do it because of religious means. And they use religion as a way to weaponize and keep you subjugated. This is why, when Dobbs happened, I was not surprised. This has been the other 50-plus-year-long project. Get rid of abortion. So now what you have are places where you can't get an abortion, you can't talk about certain kinds of parts about American religious history or history. You can't be able to see what kind of textbooks are having, you are being ringed in by propaganda. So, now what you face is something very different. You face the specter of nationalism in this country. You face a religious nationalism that is loud and proud and does not care. God, they believe, is on their side. And, as a result of that, all these bad histories and everything else go into what Gen. Michael Flynn said, which is, "This country should be a Christian nation."

We know that's not the way that they believed this country, when it was founded, was supposed to be. But you now have millions of people who believe this. And they're learning it in school. See how I tied this together? What you have is a way in which kids have been told, "Don't buck up to authority. We don't want gays and lesbians and we don't want anybody who's trans. They are bad people, they're not in the bible."

What you have now is a recipe for persecution, nationalism and authoritarianism. We are on the brink in this country. I cannot stress it to you enough. All I have been doing since Jan. 6, 2021, is talking nonstop about Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism is going to destroy this country if we do not stand up and stand up in the places we need to about education, about what is going on in our politics, about what is going on at your job.

While I know we are all having fun here in San Antonio, I want to remind you of something: Democracy is not promised. Black people have been fighting for democracy in this country for over 200 years. We know we don't get it. We know we have to fight for every inch we get. But what I won't do, and what I hope you won't do, either, is stand here while a bunch of religious folks tell me how to live my life and how to do things the way that they want, because they want power. This country is not a theocracy, it is a democracy, but it is slowly slipping into theocracy, and if we don't have your help, it is going to be there.

If I do nothing else for you in this short little time I've had with you, I hope I've scared the shit out of you! And I mean that sincerely, because as a historian, we are on a precipice, and we're about to fall over in this country, and these folks are armed and ready to go.

How are we going to respond? How are we going to make change where we are? How are we going to confront these things? I hope you ponder these words and I hope they resonate with you.

Thank you.



Photo by Chris Line

Anthea Butler signs a copy of her book, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*, for a convention attendee.

Richard and Beverly Hermesen student activist honoree

Youth are more educated, involved than ever

Student Max Nibert gave this speech at FFRF's national convention in San Antonio on Oct. 28. He was introduced by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

Annie Laurie Gaylor: I would like to introduce an indomitable youth activist, Max Nibert, an agnostic who lives in Huntington, W.Va., and graduated from high school last spring. Max is receiving the \$5,000 Richard and Beverly Hermesen Student Activist Award endowed by Richard Hermesen. Beverly recently died but her name lives on in this award.

Max gained notoriety following his initiating and organizing a walkout at Huntington High School last spring to protest a religious revival sermon held on campus with students forced to attend. Since that walkout, Max has become our lead student plaintiff in the FFRF's lawsuit against his school. Please welcome our 2022 Richard and Beverly Hermesen Student Activist, Max Nibert.

By Max Nibert

First and foremost, I would be completely remiss if I did not say just how grateful I am to every person in this room, to the Freedom From Religion Foundation, to Annie Laurie and Dan Barker. You guys are awesome.

[Video plays of religious speaker at Huntington High School assembly.]

"You will sit there in that place apart from God and you will remember this service. You remember this moment. You remember this opportunity where you had this chance to make it right. And you'll be tormented with this memory, over and over and over and over. It never ends, like it's eternity. And then it's done.

"So, I present you with a fork in the road this morning. Don't be too cool for it, don't be too prideful for it. This is what you were created for, guys. That's why revival is coming to Huntington, because you were created for this. I wanna have an opportunity to pray with you, though, for the few minutes we have left. If you're standing in this room right now, I want you to picture, with your eyes closed, that your moment has come, and you are standing before Jesus, and he's looking at you. What's he gonna say to you? Is he gonna say, 'Well done,' or is he gonna say, 'I don't know you?'

"Right now, in this room, is you know there's some stuff you need to lay down, something you need to get rid of, and you're ready to follow this man Jesus. You're ready to give your life over to him. I wanna pray with you in this moment.

"I'm not gonna make you come down here and call your name out and embarrass you. But I can see it on your faces, some of you are ready to give it up and follow this man who brings purpose to your life. And if that's you, on the count of three, I just wanna see your hand up in the room.

"One, two three . . . let me see your hands up, right now. My God, thank you, thank you, Lord. As we pray, I'm gonna send some people from Christ Temple to with you where you stand. So, if you feel a hand on your shoulder, they're just gonna come and pray with you and agree with you that that it's time to follow Jesus right now.

"Father, I thank you for Huntington High School. I thank you that you have not forgotten this place. I thank

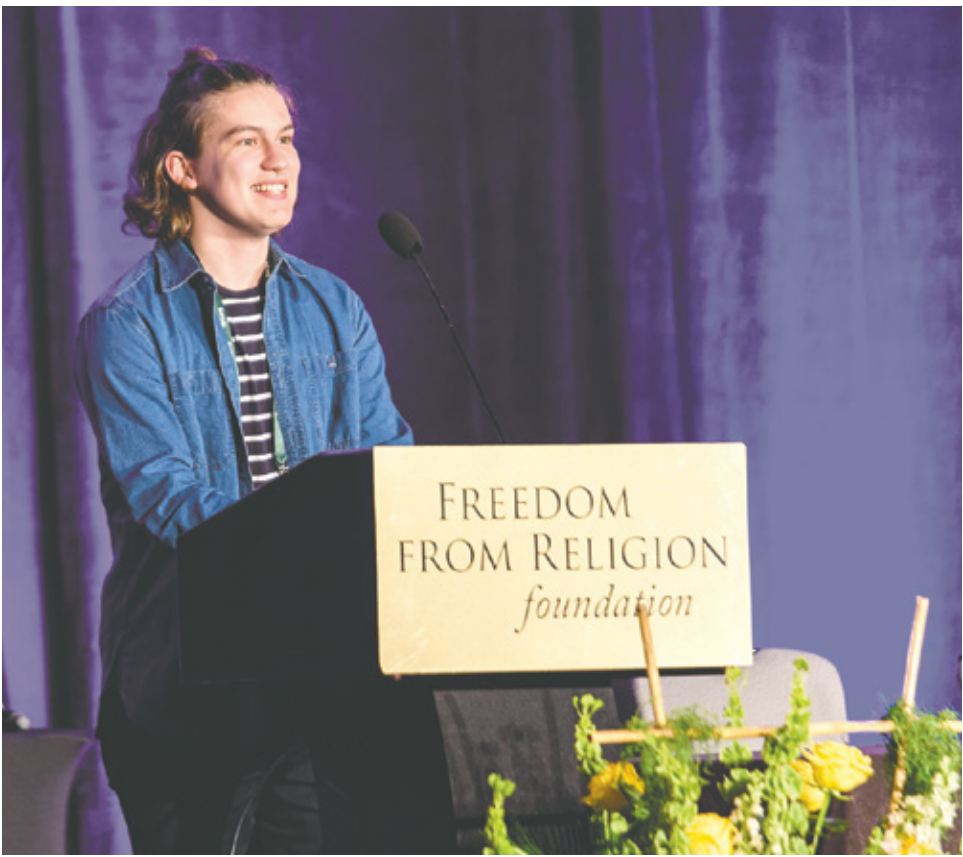


Photo by Chris Line

Max Nibert speaks to the FFRF convention crowd on Oct. 28, 2022, at the Hyatt Regency in San Antonio.

you, Lord, for your spirit, it's heavy in this room. I thank you that you're not gonna let these students leave without knowing you.

"Listen, nothing else matters. All the other stuff [unintelligible], nothing else matters. This is all you've got, right here. I want you to imagine and envision that there is a box in your hand. I want you to put everything in that box that's kept you from following Jesus. Then, I want you to take that hinge and shut that thing and put a lock on it. In Jesus' name we pray. Everybody say amen in this place!"

[Video switches to TV news report of Nibert leading a student rally outside his school.]

TV anchor: "A backlash is brewing after a religious revival held in West Virginia because it happened at a public high school and some students say they were forced to attend."

Herman Mays, parent of student at event: "And [my son] asked, 'Is this legal?' He was sort of confused as to why he was there. At one point, I said, 'Well, I'm definitely going to call the principal about this.' And he said, 'Well, the principal's here!'"

Max on megaphone outside school: "When ordinary citizens find their circumstances to be unfair, they face them. And that's exactly what we're doing today."

Students chanting outside school: "Separate the church and state, separate the church and state. . ."

[Video ends.]

My name is Max Nibert. I'm from a town called Huntington in West Virginia. And earlier this year, as you've just seen, I and other students at Huntington High School walked out in protest of an event we saw as brazenly ignorant.

You see, Huntington and Appalachia as a whole are filled with folks who would despise what we're accomplishing and working toward with our pres-

ence here today. Things are improving, minds are opening. But home is still a far cry from utopic.

One such individual, the one preaching in that video, fronts an organization that has a repugnant habit of setting up shop in towns foreign to them and infiltrating their schools in an attempt to convert students. That individual is Nick Walker, and that organization is Nick Walker Ministries of Cleveland, Tenn.

To the average observer, Mr. Walker seems to just be a link in the absurdly popular chain of evangelists attempting to dress and act like their target audience — teenagers. However, his forward and aggressive means of conversion became painfully clear to my peers and me in February [2022]

when he was welcomed with open arms into our school and collective conscience.

Welcomed by a school board in the county that has been investigated on multiple separate occasions by the very folks graciously hosting us here this afternoon. That's right. Prior to the Nick Walker incident, the Campbell County Board of Education had been examined and warned by FFRF concerning several separate occurrences. Once in 2017, at Huntington High, for reasons very similar to the situation we protested in February. Once in 2019, expressing worry that the adults in the school system were founding religious clubs, and once, most notably when FFRF formally condemned the board after one of its teachers told her middle school class that she didn't believe in same-sex relationships and that non-Christians are incapable of holding morals or values.

But these were neither here nor there for the board, as evidenced by their complete lack of accountability in the aftermath. The Nick Walker incident was no exception. Upon widespread discovery of this event and the non-Christian students who were not permitted to leave,

the board members displayed an attitude all too common in American education — apathy. A sudden rush to cover their tracks and keep the event as quiet as possible, yes, but apathy about the real injustice of the situation. Apathy toward anything that didn't serve their own bureaucratic interests.

When I caught wind of what happened, in all honesty, it joined a proverbial laundry list of heartbreaking grievances that come standard with the Appalachian package — scenes of addiction, abuse and poverty. The incident was all anyone could talk about the following days. Inquisitions, both formal and not so formal, ran rampant.

Among those I felt closest to, the conversational focus shifted from what a shame this occurrence was to what can be done about it.

Native soil being ever important, we mulled over the calculated nature of West Virginians such as Mother Mary Jones, an immigrant from Ireland, who spent her days organizing labor strikes in the all-consuming coal sector. Or Ken Hechler, West Virginia's former secretary of state, who fought through extremely corrupt state government for environmental protections. And Bill Withers, who overcame a lifelong stutter at 28 years old to become one of the most emotive singers of the 1970s, as well as a personal favorite.

It was these leaders, my fellow students, and the restlessness typically induced by an aimless world that drove me to author this letter in the home of a dear friend — a walkout letter. It detailed what we took issue with and coordinated our response, all wrapped in a tail feather, ruffling bow and "indignantly yours." We agreed "indignantly yours" was appropriate.

And then we executed. Hundreds of students — from across the spectrums of power and privilege, in the face of a news media horde and the disparaging school leaders tasked with containing us — took action. And it felt good.

In retrospect, I failed to absorb many of these trials of character and the lessons they begat. Lessons about honesty, integrity and how far one might push the envelope of the brutally bureaucratic American education system without it tearing. Amidst these lessons with the faces of Huntington High students, myself included, adorning headlines nationwide, the situation began to feel a little bit fake.

I, an objectively inconsequential person, at least from a national perspective, was receiving call after call, doing interview after interview about injustices that occurred right there in my inconsequential town. I consider these things inconsequential only to a point, however, because on that day, my inconsequential self, armed with a speech I wrote on my way down the hall, addressed the very young folks who made that protest happen.

[Video begins.]

"I have never been prouder of a group of my peers than I am right now.

"When ordinary citizens find their circumstances to be unfair, they change them. And that's exactly what we're doing today. That's why we're here. So I say 'stay strong in your passion, calculated in your actions and pure in your heart, and together there's nothing we can't accomplish. Thank you.'"

[Video ends.]

What did we learn from this event?



Photo by the Associated Press

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

What’s the takeaway? After all, disregarding FFRF’s ongoing litigation, this story is a relatively self-contained one. But in a world run by the uberwealthy elite to whom senescence is as integral as their very wealth itself, these questions become all too easy to answer upon reflection.

Please do not mistake the events at Huntington High School for an outlier in their youth-led, protest-driven nature. The recent heinous overruling of *Roe v. Wade* and its aftermath prove that young people are more educated and involved than ever.

Student protests raged daily in this country over the persecution of transgender youth and the presence of pride

flags on school grounds, among other hot-button issues. And, often, the institution rages right back. Last year, right here in Texas, police tasered and pepper sprayed students in an on-campus protest of the school’s response to a sexual assault. Student activists nationwide were hounded by police, and that same year as they protested the Minneapolis Police Department’s murder of George Floyd.

History is drenched in the blood of our youngest and most vulnerable, who sought to create change to make the world they would grow into just a little bit more like the one in their hearts. This conflict between the steadfast nature of

the establishment and those who wish to advance, produced by natural progression and change, is not at all limited to street-level beliefs.

All levels of power are stained with obstinance. At the beginning of the 117th Congress, the average age of a United States senator was 64.3, with members of the House of Representatives at 58.4. We are also currently under the administration of our oldest president ever at 79 years. For reference, the average American today is 38 1/2. How are folks from two different worlds, hyperbolically speaking, supposed to feel adequately represented by one another? That quandary, paired with the proclivity of more

fortunate members of our society to shut others out, represent the reason for my endless gratitude toward FFRF for having me here today. Thank you.

In my own home state, the Legislature is widely despised across party lines by sensible folks who just want to see solutions. They are to us as I sense Greg Abbott is to Texans. They spit out one law, as well as 14 proposed bills, infringing on the basic rights of trans folks. Not to mention the complete abortion ban signed into action in my state in September, or the insanely contentious education laws pervasive in that institution, now and always.

This is just one example of how outdated modes of thinking can and do harm the community. Also, it doesn’t help that our secretary of state was seen on the Capitol steps with the “Stop the steal” sign.

My thinking is this: The transition and redistribution of governmental and financial power should be a natural process. But our cultural system glorifies and rewards extreme wealth-seekers in spades. It takes the combination of multiple generations, working harmoniously with common goals in mind, while gauging the world and moment they both inhabit.

But beyond the age-induced rift we feel, at our core we are people. People that can be productive and politically savvy given an opportunity. So, I encourage all of us to make an attempt to understand those we’re guarded against, using those relationships to make this life we share fit for everyone, so the stories you exchange may continue. I wish my peers globally all the best in our inheritance of this world.

In the words of West Virginia author Pearl S. Buck, “The young do not know enough to be prudent, and therefore they attempt the impossible and achieve it, generation after generation.”

Thank you so much.

Revival

Continued from page 1

as well as by coercing students into participating in Christian religious activity.”

The lawsuit charges that two Huntington High School teachers during homeroom on Feb. 2 escorted their entire classes to the revival. Students, including a Jewish student who asked to leave but was not permitted to do so, were instructed to bow their heads in prayer and raise up their hands and were warned they needed to make a decision to follow Jesus or

face eternal torment. Adult volunteers from a local church went into the crowd to pray with students. Plaintiff students observed teachers and administrators praying with church volunteers. Huntington High Principal Daniel Gleason was present at the assembly along with assistant principals.

Bethany Felinton, mother of the Jewish student, is one of the plaintiffs, along with three of her children. Most student plaintiffs are identified only by initials, with the exception of Max Nibert. They are suing the Cabell County Board of Education, its superintendent and Huntington High School Principal Daniel

Gleason. Plaintiffs are seeking a permanent injunction enjoining the district from sponsoring any religious worship services, adult-led religious activities during the school day or participating in such events with students during the school day. Plaintiffs are seeking nominal damages in the amount of \$1 per plaintiffs, plus costs and attorney’s fees.

Nibert passed around a petition during the rally, getting about 75 signatures. During the protest, he said: “I have never been prouder of a group of my peers than I am right now. When ordinary citizens find their circumstances to be unfair, they change them. And that’s exactly what we’re doing today.”

Nibert spoke at FFRF’s convention in San Antonio in October. You can read

his speech on pages 14-15.

This revival is not the first time that FFRF has contacted the school system regarding religious entanglement issues. The national state/church watchdog has written several legal complaint letters about adult proselytizing, prayer and religious practices aimed at students within Cabell County Schools. The lawsuit challenges not only the revival event, but also the school system’s history of disregarding the religious freedom of its students and its promotion of Christian religious practices.

The plaintiffs are represented by attorneys Marcus Schneider and Kristina Whiteaker, as well as FFRF attorneys Patrick Elliott, Sam Grover and Christopher Line.


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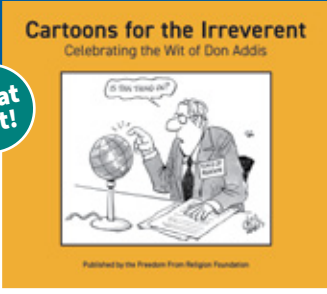
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Challenges

Continued from page 1

from Indiana University Maurer School of Law in May 2022.

Including Dr. Karen Heineman, our Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow, FFRF now has three legal fellows for the first time. FFRF's legal internship program remains robust.

During 2022, we were lucky to have assistance from seven dedicated law students from law schools across the country including University of Wisconsin, University of Kansas, University of New Hampshire and Loyola University School of Law in Chicago.

Litigation

In 2022, FFRF filed two new lawsuits on top of our four ongoing cases. We also closed two cases with favorable outcomes.

We filed a new suit on behalf of parents and students against the Cabell County Board of Education in West Virginia after Huntington High School hosted a Christian revival. The event was billed as voluntary, however, two teachers escorted their entire classes to the revival. The case challenges not only the revival event held at the school, but the district's history of disregarding the religious freedom of their students and promotion of Christian religious practices.

FFRF also filed a case in September on behalf of four South Carolina taxpayers challenging the funding of a private religious educational institution in South Carolina. State lawmakers earmarked \$1.5 million in the state budget to go to Christian Learning Centers of Greenville County to help get its new facility off the ground. CLC is a private religious educational institution whose mission is to "provide biblical instruction for public school children at no cost." For 25 years, the Christian group has provided biblical release-time instruction to students in Greenville County schools.

FFRF successfully settled two lawsuits in West Virginia:

- FFRF and a parent filed a civil rights lawsuit against Mercer County Schools in 2017 over the school system's egregiously unconstitutional "Bible in the Schools" classes for elementary school students. Due to the lawsuit, the school system suspended the Bible in the Schools classes. On Nov. 14, 2017, the district court dismissed the case on jurisdictional (standing) grounds. FFRF and the family appealed. On Dec. 17, 2018, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of FFRF and found that the plaintiffs had standing. The school board then voted to permanently end Bible in the Schools classes. Pursuant to a settlement, Judge David Faber dismissed the lawsuit on May 16, 2022. The Mercer County Board of Education, through its insurance coverage, agreed to pay \$225,000 to cover the costs and plaintiffs' attorneys' fees.

- FFRF and two residents, Eric Engle and Daryl Cobbranchi, sued the city of Parkersburg, W.Va., challenging the City Council's practice of reciting the "Lord's Prayer" at each meeting. On May 17, Judge John Copenhaver ruled that the council's prayers violated the Establishment Clause and permanently enjoined the practice. On Oct. 6, the city was ordered to pay nearly \$60,000 to cover the plaintiffs' attorneys fees and costs.

Our attorneys were also asked to join as co-counsel with the Center for a Sustainable Coast and its local member in a lawsuit challenging a land exchange and road construction project approved by the Board of Commissioners of Glynn County, Ga. The plaintiffs sued Glynn County after it approved a project to relocate a road through protected wetlands in order to assist the Episcopal Church of the town



This visual aid was used among more than 60 images to help teach elementary school students in Mercer County (W.Va.) Schools the Ten Commandments as part of its Bible in the Schools classes. FFRF sued, and in 2018, Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of FFRF. In 2022, a judge finally put the case to rest. The Board of Education, through its insurance program, had to pay FFRF \$225,000 to cover the costs and plaintiffs' attorneys' fees.

of Frederica, called Christ Church. The plaintiffs further challenge the county's decision to give Christ Church a valuable piece of land in exchange for a less valuable parcel, while claiming that the parcels were of equal value. After the district court denied plaintiffs a preliminary injunction to stop the road construction from proceeding during the lawsuit, the road was completed, and this fall the plaintiffs then decided to voluntarily dismiss the lawsuit.

FFRF's attorneys have also been consulted and provided litigation support to attorneys in cases challenging Wisconsin's abortion ban statute.

Non-litigation advocacy

FFRF's legal intake team handles incoming complaints over constitutional violations from FFRF members and members of the public, at no cost to complainants. In 2022, our intake attorney processed 2,136 incoming state/church contacts. Our attorneys sent 515 letters of complaint to government agencies across the country, and an additional 6,301 letters in the form of mass mailings. Our mass mailings

involved letters such as educational memos to government bodies informing school districts of their obligations to students in the aftermath of the Kennedy v. Bremerton decision by the Supreme Court.

In 2022, FFRF was able to achieve 112 victories through nonlitigation efforts. Those victories will continue to come in through 2023.

Education

FFRE, as a 501(c)(3) educational nonprofit, has always recognized the importance of educational efforts as a key component in keeping religion and government separate. That's why a few years ago, FFRF's Legal Department was restructured and a team dedicated to "legal education" was formed. This year our legal education team spearheaded two major initiatives to reach these goals.

Know Your Rights campaign

FFRF launched a multi-pronged campaign in reaction to the U.S. Supreme Court's Kennedy v. Bremerton decision in June 2022. The decision dealt a blow

to state/church separation in schools, ignoring the rights of students and siding with a proselytizing public school coach. The Know Your Rights campaign includes an online "Know Your Rights" resource webpage and brochure for students, featuring a digital wallet-size version, posting a billboard near Bremerton High School wishing students a secular school year and directing them to our student resources, and continuing social media messaging highlighting the impact on students when teachers/coaches push religion on students.

We Dissent podcast

FFRF's Legal Director Rebecca Markert proposed a podcast featuring four women attorneys from the three major U.S. secular organizations: FFRF, the American Humanist Association and American Atheists. The podcast discusses religious liberty issues in the state and federal courts and our joint work to keep religion and government separate. The purpose is also to elevate women's voices in the secular movement and to highlight women lawyers who work on constitutional issues. Given that all our organizations were founded by and/or are currently run by women, we thought it was time to hear more from these powerhouse attorneys. We Dissent's first episodes dropped in May 2022 and new episodes are available monthly. The podcast has already had more than 10 episodes (there were shorter "emergency" episodes to discuss court rulings over the summer) and the podcast will end the year with more than 25,000 downloads. This is quite the accomplishment for a new podcast that has virtually no promotion outside of our organizations. FFRF's Legal Assistant Greta Martens is key to ensuring the episodes are published and a transcript is made available every month. James Phetteplace, FFRF's former IT Director, was instrumental in designing the We Dissent website, we-dissent.org. New episodes will continue to be dropped in 2023.

Looking ahead

The legal department at FFRF is marching into 2023 with a deeper commitment to our organization's mission and a greater resolve to fight for your rights. We will continue to work hard to keep the wall of separation between church and state "high and impregnable," as Justice Hugo Black once described the First Amendment's Establishment Clause.

Rebecca Markert is FFRF's legal director.

Official Letters Sent by FFRF attorneys 2022

Total letters sent: 515.
Total victories: 112 (includes 33 victories from 2021 and before).
Mass mailings: Four, totaling 6,301 letters.

| Top 10 states: | Top 10 school complaints: |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Texas | 1. School board prayer |
| 2. Tennessee | 2. Religious displays |
| 3. Alabama | 3. Religious clubs |
| 4. Florida | 4. Bible distribution (tie) |
| 5. California | 4. Graduation prayers (tie) |
| 6. Georgia (tie) | 6. Multiple violations |
| 6. Wisconsin (tie) | 7. Miscellaneous prayer (tie) |
| 8. North Carolina (tie) | 7. Prayer at teacher meetings (tie) |
| 8. Virginia (tie) | 9. Assemblies |
| 10. Missouri (tie) | 10. Preachers in school |
| 10. Ohio (tie) | |



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Yip Harburg, from his book:
Rhymes for the Irreverent

Written by "Over the Rainbow" lyricist Yip Harburg.

Before And After

I cannot for the life of me
Recall at all, at all
The life I led
Before I tread
This small terrestrial ball.

Why then should I ponder
On the mystery of my kind?
Why bother with my great beyond
Without my great behind?



Illustrated by Seymour Chwast, published by FFRF.

Buy it online @ ffrf.org/shop

Rep. Jared Huffman convention remarks

‘Continue to make your voices heard’

These are the prepared remarks given by U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman via pre-recorded video to the FFRF convention on Oct. 28 in San Antonio.

By Rep. Jared Huffman

I’m Rep. Jared Huffman, representing California’s beautiful north coast. Beyond this beautiful district, I’m the surrogate representative for countless folks across the United States who identify as nonreligious. I’m the token humanist in Congress. A few others are coy about how they describe their religious views, but I’ve come out and said it — I’m a humanist. I don’t believe in God.

I first dropped this bombshell in 2017 because, frankly, I was tired of avoiding the question. I believe my constituents need to know where I stand on not only the separation of church and state as issues, but the moral framework by which I try to live my life and informs the work I do in Congress.

At the time, it was pretty novel, to say the least, that a member of Congress would publicly acknowledge they don’t believe in God. Unfortunately, it is still extremely rare — as in, it’s just me, so far. But, I’m hardly alone. Many members of Congress share my views, and a large swath of my constituents share my views. And the Nones are the fastest-growing religious demographic in America. My constituents keep re-electing me, which suggests they’re comfortable with my humanist values and appreciate the hard work I do for the district, which is way more important than religious labels, anyway.

For me, being a humanist is not a political liability, it’s somewhere between irrelevant and actually positive. I’m doing my part to bring Congress closer to the secular institution that founders like Paine, Jef-



Photo by Chris Line

U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman, shown delivering a pre-recorded speech to the attendees at FFRF’s national convention in San Antonio on Oct. 28, said, “For me, being a humanist is not a political liability, it’s somewhere between irrelevant and actually positive.”

erson and Madison envisioned, and that the Constitution is supposed to require.

I helped found the Congressional Freethought Caucus in 2018. We’re an ever-growing group and now up to 17 members. Our work is driven by key pillars. First, promoting public policy based on reason and science. Protecting the secular nature of our federal government. Opposing discrimination against individuals for their faith or lack of faith. And providing a forum for Congress to discuss ethical frameworks and personal religious journeys.

The work of our caucus is more important than ever as our radical Supreme Court and an emboldened MAGA Republican base brings us to a dystopic theocracy. And white Christian nationalism is on the rise. We don’t need to look far for the proof of their intent. The Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol made it clear that this vi-

olent ideology is a serious threat to our democracy.

I’m happy for the report from Freedom from Religion Foundation and the Joint Baptist Committee, showing the role white Christian nationalism played, not only during the Jan. 6 insurrection, but the months leading up to it, propelling disparate groups together.

I urged the report, and, after it was released, the Congressional Freethought Caucus held a briefing on its findings. It has informed my caucus members on the dark day and the work we need to do in response. I encouraged Congress to not only familiarize themselves with the insidious ideology of white Christian nationalism, but to stand up against it.

There’s no doubt that for many, religion plays a vital role in their lives, but using state and government resources, it’s entirely unacceptable and illegal. It’s time

for us to wake up to this danger. I have undertaken two other actions into the incursion of religion on the public sphere. I introduced the Health Share Transparency Act, limiting Christian so-called “health shares.” They peddle fraudulent, unregulated health products under the guise of religion. With my bill in place, we can protect consumers from the predatory practices and make sure they can make better health care decisions for themselves and their loved ones. Health shares will be forced to disclose a range of information to inform future regulation and they’ll be fined if they don’t comply. It’s a really good bill.

I also recently wrote a letter to the IRS, requesting they review the tax status of the Family Research Council and whether existing guidance is enough to prevent groups like this from abusing their IRS church status. Family Research Council claims it’s an association of churches, despite not having services and other characteristics the IRS requires for a church. They engage explicitly in political activity. There was an amicus brief for overturning Roe v. Wade, and sought religious exemptions to civil rights and on and on. Churches, by law, must not engage in politics. It is really clear that the IRS needs to do a lot more oversight and diligence to make sure political advocacy groups are not falsely qualifying at churches.

So, these are just a few of the things that we’re working on in Congress. There’s a lot more ahead of us. And I am so thankful to all of you for your partnership. Your voices are critical in this fight for, as President Biden puts it, the soul of our nation. Please continue to make your voices heard with your members of Congress. I think together we can protect our secular democracy and I look forward to continuing this important work with you. Thanks.

Jorg Aadahl wants to spread his progressive wisdom



Jorg Aadahl’s new book is available on Amazon.com.

Name: Jorg Aadahl.
Where I live: San Mateo, Calif.
Where and when I was born: Trondheim, Norway, June 16, 1937.
Family: Son Erik (46, sound designer in Hollywood), daughter Nina (44, international marketing manager for a German medical firm), grandson Lukas, 8, and my wonderful Swedish wife, who died of Alzheimer’s in 2020.
Education: Master of science in me-

chanical and industrial engineering (Norway), MBA from the University of San Francisco, life.
Occupation: Retired, formerly a mechanical engineer and software developer. I started as a scientist to explore what I discovered while working on my engineering thesis — that a supercharged plasma-conducting alternating current has a rectifying effect that varies with the static and dynamic characteristics

of the power source. It resulted in a report discussed at annual International Institute of Welding meetings in Paris, Prague and Helsinki.

Military service: Norwegian army, transferred to NATO-affiliated Defense Research Establishment after boot camp.

How I got where I am today: I was curious about America, so I came over for a couple of years to find out more. I’m still here and wondering about where the country is headed. Doesn’t look so good!

Where I’m headed: Even older age!

Person in history I admire: President Obama.

A quotation I like: “Common sense isn’t all that common.” — Voltaire.

Things I like: Reading, music, nature.

Things I smite: Religion, Republicanism, people talking about things they know nothing about. Dunning-Kruger victims — when people talk about things they know absolutely nothing about, without understanding that they don’t understand that they don’t understand! The Dunning-Kruger effect seems to be more and more prevalent.

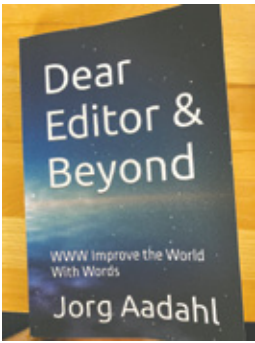
My doubts about religion started: Very early in life. I realized early that the stories were made up. I was born atheist, and stayed pure.

Before I die: I hope to write more, and spread my progressive, democratic opinion.

Ways I promote freethought: I write letters to newspaper editors, especially about religion and other forms of superstition, most of which I have collected in my new book, *Dear Editor & Beyond*. The book is offered as a source, free to be copied, changed and embellished upon, then re-published, all with

the intent of spreading progressive, democratic points about equal rights, freethought and social values to enhance enlightenment and counter the darker and destructive forces of religion, right-wing politics and inhuman forces that at times seem to take over and prevent development of a better society for us all.

I wish you’d have asked me: What was my first book? *Strength Analysis of Welded Structures* in Norwegian (1969), based upon a series of articles I had written for a technical journal.



MEET A MEMBER



For the 11th year, FFRF’s Metropolitan Chicago Chapter has erected a display at North School Park in Arlington Heights, thanks to the work of chapter board member Tom Cara and others. The Bill of Rights Nativity display was put up Dec. 1 by FFRFMCC Members Kathi Wise and Fred Dix (pictured).



FFRF’s secular winter solstice exhibit was set up at the New Hampshire Statehouse for the fifth year in a row, thanks to Member Jack Shields and other volunteers.



FFRF’s Bill of Rights “nativity” display has been installed in the Iowa Capitol for the sixth year in a row. FFRF thanks Lifetime Member and State Representative Paul Novak for his help in putting up the display.



FFRF’s “Let Reason Prevail” sign and Bill of Rights nativity display were installed at Balboa Park in San Diego in December, thanks to volunteer and member Katie D., who asks to be identified without her full name. The display was vandalized days later.



The Unfettered Freethinkers of South Sound chapter put up this FFRF solstice display on the Capitol grounds in Olympia, Wash. From left to right are Linda Foerster, Lewis Foerster, Darrell Barker and Rod Tinnemore.



Outside the California Capitol, members of the Greater Sacramento Chapter of FFRF placed the Bill of Rights nativity display on Dec. 12. Sacramento chapter members who helped install the display are, from left, Barri Babow, Erin Louis, Judy Roberson, John Lucas, Judy Saint (and her dog Jo-Jo).



FFRF’s 2016 Activist of the Year and Humanists and Freethinkers of Fairfield County member Jerry Bloom placed FFRF’s sign at Huntington Green in Shelton, Conn., on Dec. 10.

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On being right for the wrong reasons

By James M. Kauffman

W e freethinkers have a common interest in thinking anything within the boundaries of Enlightenment thought.

Our freethinking knows limits and does not include things like schizophrenic rambling, “alternative facts” and irrational assertions. A basic assumption is that we do not think something is true because a presumed authority says it or writes it. This applies to people who exist as well as to deities who don’t, to textbooks and treatises as well as all writs called holy or god-inspired. And if someone speaks or writes something for which there is scientific evidence in



James M. Kauffman

the Enlightenment tradition, we don’t refuse to believe it because their reasons for believing it are wrong.

In short, we trust empirical evidence, and we do not believe speculation or ideology should carry the day. As a Lifetime Member of FFRF, I embrace these basic principles of freethought. Sorting through scientific evidence is hard, and it is made harder by ambiguities, qualifications, contingencies and mixtures of truth and falsehood. This is especially the case for some areas of science and for particularly complex problems. An old saw is “teaching isn’t rocket science.” Actually, teaching is more complicated. In much of the physical sciences, variables are fewer, measured with greater precision, and more easily and precisely controlled. In the social sciences, including education, measurement is more difficult, controversial and imprecise (i.e., prone to error). Therefore, drawing conclusions about cause and effect is harder, replication is more difficult, and conclusions are more open to suspicion, argumentation and dismissal as irrelevant.

The Religious Right has tried to opt-out education, and many of its tenets are outrageous and in need of forceful rejection. Among its most malodorous features are its homophobic, anti-Darwinian, anti-mental health and social-emotional learning, book bans, topic prohibitions, and anti-mask and anti-vaccination sentiments and proclamations.

In a recent issue of Scientific American (November 2022), Camilla Griffiths and Nicky Sullivan explain how telling teachers not to discuss racism and bias actually works to increase those social blights. In the same issue, historian of science Naomi Oreskes mentions how scientists may



Photo by Shutterstock

downplay evidence of global warming, likely at least in part a response to conservative (especially religious conservative) opinion that it is not as bad as it seems.

Nevertheless, the Religious Right’s embrace of certain educational principles is, I think, right — but for the wrong reasons. Teaching phonological awareness is based on science, even if some people like it for religious or political reasons that are wrong. God has nothing to do with learning to read. Phonics and phonological awareness have no legitimate relationship to politics. Even if people on the religious or political right — or those with any other religious or political slant — try to explain away scientific evidence or bend education to their will, we need to agree with them when they are correct, even if they are so for wrong reasons. But, alternatives to phonics in reading instruction, whether “whole language” or another alternative, have all been shown to be a “bill of goods” that has been very successfully sold to many educators.

Direct instruction, teacher-controlled learning, sound-symbol correspondence, and many aspects of effective, direct and explicit instruction have nothing to do with deities or politics and everything to do with empirical evidence. Vaccination against Covid-19 and other diseases and wearing masks to deter the spread of them are not important because of any religious or political belief, but because of scientific evidence. Neither are they open to explanation by “alternative facts.” We could say the same for reading instruction.

The current concern for the Religious Right’s embrace of some aspects of education likely has the unfortunate effect of delegitimizing effective instructional techniques. It gives those opposed to effective instruction aid and comfort in pushing alternative instruction such as “whole language” reading, “balanced literacy,” “student-centered” education, and “discovery learning.”

Yet, science suggests these are most ef-

fective for the greatest number of students: direct instruction and use of phonics in teaching reading, direct and explicit instruction in other academic areas and in behavior, teacher direction and control.

Just as people can be right for wrong reasons, they can be wrong for reasons that aren’t quite right — hold onto ideas that are essentially ascientific or even anti-scientific because they ignore reliable scientific data. Sometimes, science tells us what we do not want to hear.

Furthermore, especially in education and other social sciences, “that depends” is particularly important. For example, who are we talking about (i.e., students of what age and with what learning-related characteristics)? What is being taught (e.g., reading, math, physics, personal preferences)?

In education, perhaps as much or more as in other endeavors, veracity or truth is contingent, not always the same. As I have often told my students about educational methods or instructional techniques, nothing always works, but everything appears to have worked at least once. Teachers must find what usually works for teaching particular skills to groups of comparatively homogeneous

Students. (Yes, homogeneous vs. heterogeneous grouping is a hotly debated issue in education, and homogeneous and heterogeneous are not dichotomous variables — on/off, yes/no, 1/0).

Science, logic and experience suggest that the more heterogeneous the group of students in what they know and need to learn, the harder the task of teaching.

People can be “tricked” in a variety of ways, and sorting out what science tells us versus our own biases and beliefs is difficult. One “trick” is changing terminology or labeling, which often convinces people to believe something that is not quite true. Perhaps the most familiar example of this is calling creationism “intelligent design.” Although a judge was able to see the deceitfulness of this sleight of hand (or sleight of terminolo-

gy), many people were not able to or did not want to see or admit it.

In reading, the term “balanced instruction” is a euphemism for whole language. This fools some people into believing that “balanced” means they’re getting the best of both worlds, just as “intelligent design” means there was an intelligence behind nature and that evolution is a misnomer.

Another trick is to assert something that is partly but now wholly true. For example, one might say that “the teacher’s job is to transmit objective facts and students are expected to absorb them.” It’s impossible to say this is completely true or completely false. In fact, we might assume that only an unthinking person would say either. Yet, this kind of statement is often used to bash the idea of teacher-controlled instruction and tout the effectiveness of “active learning” as if, somehow, direct, explicit instruction does not involve students’ activity.

Teaching expertly is not a “seat-of-the-pants” activity. As much as surgery or orthodontia or airplane-flying or plumbing or the work of building structures, teaching has its basics. Like all complex activities or tasks, it needs its checklists (see Atul Gawande’s 2009 book, *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right*).

It is not surprising that teachers need scripts to guide them in their early work, and it is a given that as they become more artful in teaching, they will vary the script as necessary. But, like the surgeon who strictly follows others’ successful procedures (and for understandable reasons), teachers learn to judge when innovations and exceptions are warranted. For good reasons, we do not want pilots of the planes on which we fly to just be creative, to disregard the routines, checklists, ground control, and other basics they’ve been taught — essentially to go off script. In routine flight and in emergencies, we want them to follow the script. We want builders, electricians, and plumbers to follow the code.

A popular complaint meant to pooh-pooh behaviorism is that children are not animals, that we must not teach them as we teach pets. Once again, that assertion is partly true, and therefore particularly hard to dismiss. It is the kind of idea economist Paul Krugman has called a zombie, an idea that should have died long ago because of the evidence that it is false, but refuses to die because people want to believe it regardless of evidence. Yes, we do want our students to commit some things to memory, and some drill is to thrill not to kill, and humans, like all other animals (yes, science does put humans of all ages in the animal kingdom) do respond to rewards.

Rewards include not just material things like royalties, salaries, bonuses, objects and food, but immaterial things like success, praise and attention.

Poor science, lack of evidence, misinterpretation and misrepresentation, half-truths, misleading statements — all these and more are reasons for dismay. It is hard not to want to kill the messenger when science fails to support our beliefs. The Religious Right has honed that skill, of killing the messenger, with the help of its ministers. Unshakeable belief in a deity demands it.

Some nonbelievers in a deity or right-wing politics nevertheless indulge it.

Lifetime Member James M. Kauffman is professor emeritus of education at the University of Virginia and is co-author of numerous books about education.

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What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

Founded in 1978 as a national organization of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics), the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc., works to keep state and church separate and to educate the public about the views of nontheists. FFRF has more than 39,000 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.

Zan, Zendegi, Azadi: Women, life, freedom

The Freedom From Religion Foundation’s “secular underground railroad” has given a \$5,000 stipend to support the work of Faithless Hijabi. The following is an article explaining why the group was formed and what help it offers.

By Zara Kay and Nick Forbes

“Zan, Zendegi, Azadi” (“Women, Life, Freedom”) is the rallying cry that has been heard every day from Iranians following the death of Mahsa Zhina Amini, who was tortured by the morality police in Iran and died on Sept. 16. Her death has sparked national and international protests for the end of 43 years of Islamic dictatorship in Iran.

Iranian women have been taking the streets and leading the protests, supported by men from the younger to the older generations, making it clear that they want a leadership free of religious doctrine. The hijab clamped in their fists — many marchers setting the cloth alight as an act of defiance against a regime that demands they cover their “shameful” bodies — has been monumental as a symbol of freedom. The woman’s revolution happening in Iran right now encompasses the freedom for all people to live in a secular society with the separation of mosque and state, as women revolt against the hijab: the ultimate example of a woman’s bodily autonomy being stolen. Amini’s death has given rise to resilience against religious tyranny, but this revolution also represents the resistance against all forms of fundamentalism. Over the years, the laws have tightened so far as to restrict any form of freedom by the deployment of the morality police.

While the current situation in Iran has brought about awareness globally, the rest of the Muslim majority countries still have change yet to come. Last year, the world witnessed the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, where women have been prevented from working and young girls have been stopped from attending school. Egypt increasingly has had a large crackdown against apostates of dissenters from Islam, also seeking out LGBTQ+ individuals on dating apps to hunt them down and punish them.

Even countries that are regarded as more liberal — such as Lebanon and Jordan — have indirectly enforced restrictions similar to those of Saudi Arabia, with male guardianship laws that subject women to degrading practices like virginity tests and prohibitions on sex outside of marriage. Male family members report women for not following the authorities, who then face arbitrary detention along with physical violence from the authorities at the request of their male family members.

Most of these individual cases go unre-

About Faithless Hijabi

From September 2020 to September 2022, Faithless Hijabi, an organization that specializes in connecting ex-Muslims with therapists, thus supporting their journeys to healing, has helped 83 ex-Muslims receive at least eight one-to-one counseling sessions. More than half the clients are age 18-25. It works with 17 therapists across five partnered clinics in the U.K., Lebanon and the United States. Its purpose is to support ex-Muslims, especially women, overcome religious trauma and honor-based abuse.



Submitted photo

Maryam Namazie, center, looking down, and others protested in support of and solidarity for the overthrow of the government in Iran in the aftermath of the killing of Mahsa Amini.

FFRF donates to One Law For All

FFRF donated \$5,000 to One Law for All in support of solidarity protests in London organized by Maryam Namazie. As a result, One Law for All has been able to buy drums and equipment for a new Woman, Life, Freedom Group as well as a PA system, banners, and other materials for regular and ongoing protests.

The Woman, Life, Freedom Group, which was established in October, aims to mobilize solidarity for the women’s revolution in Iran through song, drumming, art, theatre and dance. The current revolutionary uprising, led by women and girls, has been sparked by the murder of Mahsa Jina Amini, a young Iranian Kurdish woman, killed by the Islamic regime of Iran’s morality police for ‘improper veiling.’ Since her murder, hundreds of protesters have been killed, tens of thousands arrested and several already executed in sham trials. Many more are at risk of execution.

The Woman, Life, Freedom Group provides cultural spaces for the public to join in as a way of raising awareness, showing solidarity and mobilizing support. Music and art have always been important aspects of protest and resistance.

In 2023, more protests are under way to ensure that the world doesn’t forget the women’s revolution in Iran and continues to support it. International support, including by FFRF members, will be key in maintaining pressure on western governments to stop all relations with the Islamic regime of Iran, expel its ambassadors and shut down its embassies and interest sections.

Like the racial apartheid regime of South Africa, the sex apartheid regime of Iran must be politically isolated so that the people of Iran can finally be rid of this medieval theocracy and look forward to a free Iran imprinted with Woman, Life, Freedom.

ported or unpublicized, despite Amnesty International conducting interviews and publishing reports on the violations of human rights in the Middle East.

The assaults on women’s rights in Muslim-majority countries and communities is what gave birth to our organization, Faithless Hijabi. As women who have renounced Islam continue to struggle to have their voices heard, Faithless Hijabi started working on amplifying the voices of ex-Muslim women to give them a platform in which they can recount their stories of religious abuse and trauma.

The platform allows ex-Muslim women to understand the trauma losing one’s faith can bring. Over time, Faithless Hijabi recognized the dire lack of mental health support for apostates from Islam, who struggle with living a double life due to the fear of ostracism by their families, but also risk psychological and physical violence as a result of exercising their human right to be free from religion. People in Islamic countries don’t have safe access to mental health support and have a very real chance of being reported to family or the authorities after exposing their apostasy or LGBTQ status.

Shortly after beginning the mental health program, Faithless Hijabi’s therapists became aware that many clients suffer from “religious trauma syndrome,” which describes the common experiences shared among many who have escaped cults, fundamentalist religious groups, abusive religious settings or had other painful experiences with religion.

In 2021, Faithless Hijabi, along with Secular Rescue and Amnesty International Australia, worked in joint efforts to evacuate an ex-Muslim LGBTQ activist



Photo by Shutterstock

Nearly 3,000 people marched in Brussels, Belgium, on Oct. 1, 2022, for Mahsa Amini and the hundreds of other victims murdered by Islamic Republic of Iran.

and Jordanian national who was detained in Lebanon due to their gender identity, sexual orientation and apostasy. While others across the globe celebrated New Year’s, Alshaima Alzubi was detained for nine days in Beirut over a yellow Interpol “missing persons” notice, then a red notice due to the abuse of the Interpol system by their well-connected and influential family. There were concerns over Alshaima’s forced repatriation to Jordan. However, with the help of the Australian Consulate and joint efforts of the three organizations, Alshaima safely arrived in Australia on Dec. 1. While homosexuality is no longer illegal in Jordan, most LGBTQ members face widespread discrimination from their families, communities and even workplaces.

While all eyes are currently on Iran, it is currently unclear what lasting changes

the widespread protests will bring to the Islamic regime. What is clear, however, is that the Islamic world still has a long way to go before it can hope to catch up to the progress humanism has made regarding the rights of women, homosexuals and apostates. Organizations such as Faithless Hijabi will remain crucial to support ex-Muslim women, help them share their stories, and navigate the religious trauma that they have experienced.

If Amini’s death is to mean anything, it means both the Islamic and Western world must no longer ignore or coddle those who wish to impose Sharia, and that the plight of individuals oppressed by Islamic doctrine is one of the most pressing human rights causes of our time.

Zara Kay is a human rights activist and founder of Faithless Hijabi and Nick Forbes is secretary at Faithless Hijabi.



Image by Shutterstock

You gotta walk that lonesome valley alone

By James A. Haught

I’ll be 91 in February. It may be my last birthday, or one of a final few, because my actuarial table is relentlessly ticking away.

I have no fear of death. It’s simply the natural end of every life. It awaits all 8 billion of us humans. Nobody can escape it. For now, I’ll just keep flailing away, writing as well as I can, until it becomes impossible. We science-minded people are confident that no heaven or hell lurks thereafter. Every human personality is created by a brain, the most complex object in the universe. When the brain dies, it’s logical that the personality does likewise; it’s not plausible that it would travel out of the dead body and make a magical journey elsewhere.

Literally hundreds of my friends and colleagues have slipped away. They’re so numerous I keep a “gone” list in my computer to remember them all. I can’t stay off the list much longer.



James A. Haught

Just before she died of ovarian cancer, one of my Unitarian friends, Marty Wilson, wrote:

“I often think of humankind as a long procession whose beginning and end are out of sight. We the living ... have no control over when or where we enter the procession, or even how long we are part of it, but we do get to choose our marching companions. And we can all exercise some control over what direction the procession takes, what part we play, and how we play it.”

Writer James Baldwin stated in *The Fire Next Time*.

“Life is tragic simply because the Earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have.”

Legendary lawyer Clarence Darrow wrote:

“When we fully understand the brev-

ity of life, its fleeting joys and unavoidable pains; when we accept the fact that all men and women are approaching an inevitable doom; the consciousness of it should make us more kindly and considerate of each other. This feeling should make men and women use their best efforts to help their fellow travelers on the road, to make the path brighter and easier ... for the wayfarers who must live a common life and die a common death.”

Here’s a reason I feel inner peace about my approaching end: Our secular humanist cause has won hundreds

of victories during my nine decades, and I have a wishful faith that it will continue to win after I’m gone.

The movement surged three centuries ago with the Enlightenment,

when radical thinkers challenged the divine right of kings and the stupid tyranny of the church. They trusted science. America’s Founders, mostly Deists, transformed those ideas into the first modern secular democracy. Ever since, there have been marked improvements in human rights, increased equality and a better life for everyone. Slavery was wiped out, women gained

the right to vote, couples were allowed to use birth control, Social Security pensions were created for retirees, labor unions were allowed to organize, job protections of many sorts developed, gays first escaped prison, then were allowed to marry, stores were allowed to open on the Sabbath, Blacks defeated segregation and won equal legal standing, Medicare and Medicaid brought medicine as a human right, religious indoctrination was banned from public schools, etc., etc. Secular humanists fought for all this progress.

Now in this 21st century, supernatural Christianity is collapsing rapidly in Western democracies. Intelligent people no longer swallow it.

I have hopeful confidence that the struggle to help humanity and wipe out fairy tales will keep on winning, without me.

A final frustration, though: Existentialism says we are doomed to live our entire lives and die without knowing why we are here or why the universe is here. Today, in these superscientific times, we still don’t know, and I’ll never know.

James A. Haught, who is syndicated by PeaceVoice, was the longtime editor at the Charleston Gazette and has been the editor emeritus since 2015. He also is a senior editor of Free Inquiry magazine and was writer-in-residence for the United Coalition of Reason.

“Our secular humanist cause has won hundreds of victories during my nine decades, and I have a wishful faith that it will continue to win after I’m gone.”

CRANKMAIL

Please enjoy this assortment of bad logic, poor grammar and unintelligible content from some of FFRF’s detractors. Printed as received.

God is here: Ron Regan, Satan wants you to believe Hell isn’t bad but could you imagine your worst nightmare to be your life forever. To have the worst thing you can imagine to happen to you over and over and over forever, that’s unimaginable. This country wouldn’t have been formed without God, I mean God is in every single document that made this country, he is in the anthem, he is even on all US currency. — *Nathan McFarland*

You need religion: Let’s see. Maybe not being a fascist wing of the leftists? Hhhmmm. Not sure your organization knows how to be inclusive of thoughts. Your professional attacks on small school prayer proves your intolerance. What’s your problem with God? Has your mantra of love is love is love found you to be pedophiles? What say you? What say the people void of moral standings? What say the heretics? — *Karrie Hollis*

My pronouns are Born again and child of God: I watched my father die this weekend. While your organization wants to prohibit prayer

and any form of the recognizance that an Ultimate Creator exists. I watched my daddy pass into the heavenly regions your organization says doesn’t exist. You are the most laughable of an organization. Mind your own business and we’ll continue to mind ours. Keep your heretic noses out of other peoples’ business. We don’t put ours in yours. Be still demons, and know the Lord is in control. — *Lou Piscotti*

We are Christians: We want you and this organization to keep your SATANIC like beliefs out of our schools and out of the GREAT STATE OF ALABAMA where we are CHRISTIANS. Have fun burning in HELL — *Jon Cammon*

Slavery: Hey listen a**** the Bible literally when it talks about slavery it’s talking about indentured servants who sell themselves into slavery for a time and then are set free when it comes to slavery when it comes to people against their will it outright condemns that. But again this a**** doesn’t actually study anything he’s just using manipulative tactics which I’ve seen my whole life he’s a f**** piece of s*** — *Timothy Baston*

Leave us alone: You can stop trying to force your satanic views on others. Yours is not some noble calling. It is not your destiny to save the world. You willingly allow yourselves to be used

as puppets of evil, and despite your own delusional opinions to the contrary, you WILL stand before God one day, and your knees will bow and your tongues confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Now is the day of salvation. You need to repent and believe before the day of wrath. — *Paul Martin*

Trust God: America Nationalism is not Religious. God gives us Free Will to think outside Dogma Religion’s. In God We Trust, not “In Religion We Trust.” God gives his faithful the gift of discernment. You can still have faith in God and be sceptical. It’s called Free Thinking. Naivety does not find you God. Free thinking does. Atheist Dogma Religion’s must deny God. Atheism is the biggest Religion, their church is Communist Socialism society. Hell is death. Heaven is after-life. God is pro common sense. — *Jeremy Tuppel*

No heaven for you: Atheists are perfectly free to believe in nothing according to the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America. Have a nice life. All atheists will be shocked at death. — *Thomas Ziegler*

He is the One: You poor things, nobody ever taught you how to correctly divide the word of God. How will you give thanks for water, heat and food among everything else? Or did you think people made these things? — *Carlos Hernandez*

HE is real: Just because you choose to not accept and acknowledge GOD/Jesus as Lord, Savior, and King doesn’t stop HIM from existing nor does it stop who HE is and the absolute power that HE has...you may boldly claim yourself as an atheist, but when your time ends the second you take your last breathe you will be in HIS presents bowing before HIM. You WILL bow and fully acknowledge HIM as the ONE and only GOD, LORD, and SAVIOR then hit Hell wide open to burn for eternity...I hope you come to Jesus before that happens. — *Brent Mahoney*

Praying you find Jesus: It’s not the eternal torment that I fear...it’s the eternal love my Savior Jesus Christ has for me and the personal relationship I have with my creator and King. If one doesn’t accept Jesus as Savior will spend eternity in Hell. That’s not my word that’s God’s word. Choosing to not acknowledge GOD’s existence doesn’t stop GOD or HIS absolute power from being real. — *Taylor Marshall*

Devil is coming for you!: The antichrist spirit rearing it’s ugly head .People still trying to debate God and be there own God .judgement is coming .seek jesus while you can .Satan has blinded so many and he’s leading them right to hell.wake up people. — *Nicole Valvano*

IN MEMORIAM

Geoffrey Braden was an accomplished woodworker

FFRF Lifetime Member Geoffrey Braden, 74, died on Jan. 11, 2022.

While a teenager, Geoff worked as a guide on Mt. Rainier, making it to the summit many times. Upon graduation from high school, he joined the Navy and served in Vietnam, crewing landing craft. After discharge, Geoff returned to Seattle and crewed on Alaska tugs, and then went to work on those tugs and other vessels as a shipwright.

He retired from the shipyards and went to work in the boat shop at the Center for Wooden Boats. He also remodeled the home he and Judith enjoyed for many years, and in his spare time earned a BFA in industrial design from the University of Washington.

After fully retiring, he loved to work in his basement shop, building

a canoe, furniture, and producing beautiful wood-turned vessels on his lathe. He considered his “finest hour” to be the two years he stayed home to finish the house remodeling and be a househusband and dad to his baby son. Geoff, with baby Duncan tucked in a backpack, were well-known at Dunn Lumber, Stoneway Hardware and the Wallingford QFC.

Geoff loved anything to do with woodworking, boats, mountaineering, history, old movies, classical music and crossword puzzles. He was a lifelong Democrat, union member, freethinker and feminist. And every day for over 20 years, he and Judith sat down at 4 p.m. to play a cut-throat game of cribbage.

He is survived by wife, Judith Rickard, son Duncan Braden, and a wide circle of family and friends.

Longtime engineer Gary Shulenburg dies

Gary D. Shulenburg, 84, died Oct. 20, 2022.

He was born July 21, 1938, in Gloversville, N.Y. to Ernest and Helen (Weaver) Shulenburg. After graduating from New York State Maritime College in 1960 with a bachelor’s degree in marine engineering, he sailed briefly on merchant ships. He moved to the peninsula in 1961 as a nuclear test engineer. He held various positions in engineering until his retirement in 1993 as director of commercial ship engineering. In 1995, he earned a master’s degree in education from Old Dominion University. In 1996, he started his “fun job,” running the steam engines at Busch Gardens Williamsburg, a job he continued each summer until his vision failed him.

He enjoyed many hobbies through-



Gary Shulenburg

out his life: racing cars, golf, boating, and running ¼-scale trains. He had a passion for steam engines as evidenced by owning a steam launch with a wood-fired steam engine and building a ¼-scale steam locomotive. And, of course, he also loved spending time with family and friends and sharing a story over a beer or two.

Gary is survived by his wife of 60 years Carol B. Shulenburg, son Karl Shulenburg (Ronda), daughter Kirsten Thomas (Richard) of Mathews.

Early FFRF backer Daniel H. Eis dies

One of the Freedom From Religion Foundation’s very first supporters and members, Daniel Hugo Eis, after living a very full life for 91 years, died on Jan. 22, 2021, in Manitowoc, Wis. Two of his children, Peggy and David Eis, recently hand-delivered a \$500 bequest that “their father, who art not in heaven,” as they put it, had so kindly put aside for FFRF.



Daniel Eis

Daniel was born on April 21, 1929, in Two Rivers, Wis., to the late Oscar and Evelyn (Hoffman) Eis. Dan grew up on the family farm and attended Crystal Springs Grade School, but dropped out in the eighth grade due to a poor fit between his inquiring free spirit and the local parochial school’s classroom rules. Despite his lack of formal education (with the exception of earning his GED years later), Dan was a lifelong learner and his college-educated friends nicknamed him the armchair philosopher (others knew him as Dynamite Dan).

Dan served his country at the close of World War II in the Army Corps of Engineers and was stationed at Fort Worden, Wash. Dan married Carol Demler in 1955. He did an amazing job raising four children, single-handedly, during their teenage years.

Despite his Catholic upbringing, he was a lifelong atheist, having reasoned out his philosophy on God and religion at the age of 18. Dan was actively involved in American Atheists, American Humanist Association, and he was proud to be one of the first to donate to Anne Gaylor’s Freedom From Religion



Daniel shows off FFRF’s solstice sign in the Wisconsin Capitol building during the holiday season many years ago.

Foundation. He also founded and ran his own local group, Freethought Forum, that hosted a variety of speakers.

Dan was kind and generous with his time, always willing to help out his kids and grandkids with various home, moving and school projects. His sense of humor was limitless. Dan was a prankster with a need for speed. He regaled his grandkids with stories about his numerous daredevil feats. He was known to do crazy stuff while riding his Harley and he drove stock cars, starting in 1948. Several minor and serious car accidents followed for Dan over the years, and, given his many close brushes with death, he was said to have nine lives (which maybe explains Dan’s affinity for cats, apparently his spirit animal).

Dan’s vocations over the years included cross-country truck driving, carpenter/craftsman, engineering and house moving with his brother Marvin, when they founded Eis Structure Movers, and later managed the Gas Hut up to his retirement.

People were drawn to Dan’s open-minded and positive attitude. Dan was the epitome of a free soul. In the words of fellow freethinker, Frank Sinatra, Dan was proud to say, “I did it my way.” In his own words that were his lifelong philosophy, “If it’s gonna be a problem, I’m outta here,” and so he is.

Retired lawyer Scott Neely had outgoing personality

Scott Calder Neely died in his sleep at his home in Redwood City, Calif., on Feb. 5, 2021.

Scott was born on May 9, 1949, in Oakland and was the first of three boys in his family. From early on, Scott demonstrated his trademark outgoing personality, starting with a leading role in his high school production of “Carousel.”

Scott earned his undergraduate degree in political science at UCLA, where he developed lifelong friendships with his Delta Tau Delta fraternity brothers. After he received his law degree from the University of San Francisco, Scott had an illustrious legal career, working for the prestigious Los Angeles firm of Riordan, Caps & Carbone and as in-house counsel at Unisys and other high-tech companies.

Scott balanced his work with a love for music and was a devoted follower of The Doors, ZZ Top and The Who,



Scott Neely

among others. This was equaled only by his love for several shelter-sourced golden retrievers, who brought him great joy.

After he retired, he continued to generously donate his time, volunteering at the YMCA and mentoring young readers.

Michael Walker had photography passion

FFRF Lifetime Member Michael Wayne Walker of Sylvania, Ohio, died Feb. 9, 2022, after a brief illness.

Michael graduated from Purdue University and attained a Master’s degree in audiology. He worked for more than 20 years at the Toledo Clinic, then owned his own business, Hearing Associates. Upon retiring, he pursued his passion of photography, especially that of nature, animals, old barns, farm machinery, and people. He won several awards,



Michael Walker

including the 2005 “Toledo Friends of Photography Award” at the Toledo Museum of Art.

Michael was dedicated to those he loved, and would share his time and talents endlessly, including spending countless hours restoring his significant other Nancy Shaver’s parent’s photos that had been damaged in a fire.

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.

LETTERBOX

Almost feel pity for the Crankmail writers

Over a year ago, I was immediately entranced when I saw the television ad featuring Ron Reagan’s deadpan delivery of his now oft-quoted line about not being afraid of burning in hell. Admittedly, before that time, I had no idea of FFRF’s existence. From that ecstatic moment forward, I’ve been a subscriber to Freethought Today, and thoroughly enjoy every edition.

For a “laugh,” I read the Crankmail section, but often, I end up not laughing. And while you shouldn’t eliminate it, it’s only that I am always astounded by the obvious lack of formal education and/or critical-thinking skills many of the writers display.

While I am aware that you print submissions to Crankmail exactly as they’re written, the more I read them, the more I actually begin to feel genuine pity for those who wrote them. Do I ever feel threatened by these people, as so many of them seem to rabidly feel toward FFRF? I would, except that the majority clearly suffer from pronounced atrophy above the neck, including being seriously allergic to grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Unfortunately, all it really does is highlight their pitiable inability to formulate their personal beliefs into intelligent, cohesive literate communication. It’s really a sad commentary about those individuals who are apparently so fearful of the FFRF, they’re willing to risk their ignorance being featured within its pages.

Anyway, keep up the good work. I am truly glad I found you!

Illinois

Noel Smith’s impact is greatly appreciated

I really appreciate the recognition that you gave Noel Smith in his obituary in the November issue. His accomplishments were exemplary.

I just want to elaborate on the brief sentences you gave to an accomplishment that has meant so much to those of us in Sarasota, Fla., which was the formation of the Humanists of Sarasota Bay in 1999. He gave those of us who are humanists and atheists a place to join with other like-minded people in our community. Thanks to his efforts, our organization has grown to over 100 members, where we can enjoy lectures by experts, luncheons with discussions and other activities. When he stepped down, we made him president emeritus, and he continued to advise us and give us direction. He was one of my mentors. His impact in a county dominated by conservatives and Christians was greatly appreciated by those of us who knew him.

Florida

Fighting to save every square inch from Stitt

I’ve contacted Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt to promise I would fight to my death to protect my square inch of Oklahoma and demanded he terminate his stupid Stitt crusade, where he said, “Father, we just claim Oklahoma for you. Every square inch, we claim it for you in the name of Jesus.” I also suggested that if he hadn’t done so,

Civil law shouldn’t be based on biblical morality

This letter was written by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor and appeared in the Dec. 7 New York Times.

Tish Harrison Warren’s defense of the website designer who wants to discriminate against same-sex couples is distasteful.

Although Colorado’s public accommodations law includes both race and sexual orientation as protected classes, Warren insists that discrimination against same-sex couples must be allowed under religious liberty because scripture condemns homosexuality.

Yes, the bible declares same-sex sexual contact to be “an abomination,” instructing, “They shall surely be put to death; their blood

shall be upon them” (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13). Paul blithely reiterates that people with a same-sex orientation are “worthy of death” (Romans 1:26-32).

This is nothing for Warren to brag about.

But then Warren claims that anti-racism civil rights laws are OK because they do not violate religious laws. Yet both the Old and New Testaments promote and countenance slavery, including allowing the rape, beating and torture of slaves. Such passages were touted incessantly to sanctify chattel slavery in this nation. Although Warren denies the bible’s role in slavery, by her logic, slavery would be a religious right.

Instead of condemning her bible’s barbaric homophobia, Warren misguidedly argues that U.S. civil law and citizens should be subject to her cherry-picked Bronze Age morality.

Annie Laurie Gaylor
Madison, Wis.

to read the U.S. Constitution. I also thanked him for provoking my FFRF contribution.

FFRF, keep on fighting for us, members of possibly the largest (non)religious denomination in the country, that is, those who do not attend or contribute to a church, do not read the bible, do not communicate with a ghost that created trillions of planets in the universe, and never base any decision on the whims of an invisible intelligence.

Oklahoma

Freethought Today filled with great reading

I smile in delight when Freethought Today arrives in my mailbox, knowing I will be informed by the news, impressed by the essay contest writers, stunned by the Black Collar Crime reports, amused by the illiteracy of the Crankmail writers, and grateful for your work.

Michigan

Artistic possibilities constrained by religion

In November’s Letterbox, one writer expressed appreciation for the “immense contribution of Christianity to art and music,” mentioning Handel, Leonardo and Michelangelo, in particular.

I feel differently about the subject. I’ve always wondered what such geniuses might have created if they had not been constrained by the Church.

The letter writer states: Though in no way atoning for its collective damages . . . this religion has brought beauty and perhaps kindness . . . to the world.”

I agree completely that Christianity’s damages outweigh its beauty and kindness. Some of the nastiest, meanest people I’ve ever met loudly proclaim their Christianity.

Colorado

Answers about religion weren’t satisfactory

I was brought up in a Christian home and even accepted Christ as my personal savior. Then I went to college and was challenged in my beliefs. I began to question my faith. My friend and I met with preachers and priests to discuss our doubts. We were never satisfied with the answers they gave, so, at that time, I left my religion.

Here’s some of what I learned that made me leave religion behind.

- Jesus was never really sacrificed. Sacrifice means you give up something permanently for a reason. You give it up, but don’t get it back. God never really gave Jesus up since he was risen in three days. How this all turned into a religion is beyond me.
- People argue that the universe is amazing in its “design” and that it must have a creator. But the concept of God is even more amazing. To think that one superbeing created everything makes no sense. What was he doing before he started?
- And, if he created everything, he created disease. About 2 million children under the age of 5 die of malaria each year. And that’s just one disease. Why does God allow this?

California

Freethought Today makes me think about things

I’ve realized that what I like so much about Freethought Today is that it makes me think about things. November’s issue was no different.

First, though, I want to say that I was delighted to see that one of the winning essays came from a student at Hillsdale College, an extremely conservative school. It’s wonderful to know that there are Hillsdale students who are not caught up in the move toward essentially establishing a theoc-

racy in this country.

James Haught’s article celebrated his belief that, as the “Nones” increase, people are seeing that gods, miracles and other church tenets are just fantasies. However, from what I’ve read, many (if not most) Nones still say they believe in a “higher power.” Not being a part of organized religion doesn’t necessarily mean they have given up on fantasies.

Barbara Alvarez laments the hold Catholicism has on health care, but as she points out, Catholic hospitals are often located in low-income, historically marginalized communities. They are providing a service those communities would otherwise lack. The problem isn’t that Catholics are providing restricted health care. It is that we, as a society, aren’t providing health care at all for many people.

As always, though, it was the student essays that really made me think. I have always thought that religion exists because it provided evolutionary benefits to early humans, and that idea meshed with much that was in the essays. As Sarah Petty noted, Voltaire said that it would be necessary to invent God if he did not exist, which is exactly what humans did. As Oliver Brown noted, religion just incorporated existing standards. The problem with incorporating standards into religion, is that they become “absolute and untouchable”, as Brown pointed out, and they cannot adapt as we lose our biases, as Morgyn Michelson noted; e.g., outdated religious ideas about women, LGBTQ people, slavery, etc.

The progress we have made in becoming truly humane humans is because we are gradually extending our in-group toward including all humans (and animals, as well). The Golden Rule is excellent moral guidance. It’s too bad not all Christians apply it properly.

Colorado

Who would let their kids read the bible?

Whenever I read about legislators, prosecutors and groups of concerned citizens who are determined to ban books which they consider harmful to children’s morality, it astonishes me that the bible is not among them.

When I first read Ezekiel 23:1-20, I was already an adult, but nevertheless

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I found in that pornographic masterpiece a cesspool of human sexuality described in the most indelicate language one can imagine.

Do pious parents actually encourage their children to read those “sacred” stories? And if so, have their children become kinder and more charitable after absorbing them?

The bible also features incestuous rape (2 Samuel 13:11-14), death by gang rape (Judges 19:22-26), men ordered by God to abandon their wives and children (Ez. 10:10-44), and human dismemberment (Judges 19:27-29) — all of which scholarly doctors of divinity will explain as lessons that, when well understood, will elevate our spirit.

Yes, many folks consider the bible to be their guide to virtuous living. But have they read it in its entirety without finding something they’d rather not have their children read?
California

Mass shootings not curbed by thoughts, prayers

My heart breaks for America. In 2022, there were more than 600 mass shootings. How is the pitiful public pronouncements of thoughts and prayers working? Here is my poem.

Thoughts and Prayers

The tears will flow,
As we watch the show.
Once again, insanity lays bare,
Once again, it’s thoughts and prayers.
Church bells will ring,
Families will sting.
Once again, it’s the same old fare,
Once again, it’s thoughts and prayers.
Silent vigils, with candles aglow,
All are sad, in their time of woe.
Once again, bullets will tear,
Once again, it’s thoughts and prayers.
Some will want the gun on trial,
Others remain, in stubborn denial.
Once again, the debate will flare,
Once again, it’s thoughts and prayers
“It’s people, not guns,” the NRA say,
But it’s people, not guns, that always pay.
Once again, the blame we must share,
Once again, we give only thoughts and prayers.
Nothing will change no matter what,
As America is governed by a gang of nuts.
Once again, not enough will care,
Once again, all we get is thoughts and prayers.
Surely by now, all must swear,
That nothing fails, like thoughts and prayers.
Once again, people have faith in these two pair,
Once again, we see the failure of thoughts and prayers.

Ontario, Canada

| Crossword answers | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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| H | A | N | S | | | A | M | P | | | S | U | N | |
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Appreciating Anne Nicol Gaylor on her birthday

Each year on the date of Anne Nicol Gaylor’s birthday (Nov. 25), I pause to appreciate her contributions to the world and to my life specifically. FFRF came into my life when I needed it the most. Thank you and RIP Ms. Gaylor.
Arizona

I’ll recite Constitution during prayers/hymns

It doesn’t seem likely that I will ever be present at a publicly sponsored/financed function where prayers or religious readings or hymns take place, but if that ever happens, it is my resolve to stand, hand to heart, and with my best classically trained voice and diction, recite an oath to the Constitution until it’s over.
Massachusetts

Bad case of state/church separation anxiety

I don’t know about you, but I’ve got a bad case of state/church separation anxiety.
November’s issue of Freethought Today featured a front-page article about a praying judge in Texas. Judge Wayne (Big) Mack begins every court session with a Christian prayer, led by a Christian chaplain, after the courtroom’s magnetic locks are activated by a presumably Christian bailiff. FFRF won a lawsuit in federal district court stopping Mack, but the ruling was overturned by the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. In a 2-1 decision, it found the judge’s conduct to be not only not coercive, but in perfect harmony with American history and tradition.
Gobsmacked, I began obsessing about Big Mack, about that ruling, especially about those two circuit judges. Could they, perhaps, be numbered among the hundreds of federal judges appointed by Donald Trump during

his reality-TV presidency? Judges vetted by Heritage Foundation, Becket Fund, et. al., well-funded groups of highly educated religious fanatics — evangelical Protestants and radical Catholics — quietly sowing judges throughout the federal judiciary for years. Were they now reaping the harvest in the lower courts, at the district and appellate levels? At the Supreme Court?

The Supremes rocked the state/church separation world in June with its Kennedy decision. This was the case of the praying high school coach in Washington state. A man whose free-speech rights were violated, according to the judicial arsonist formerly known as Clarence Thomas. Like in the case of Big Mack, the logic in Kennedy is addled and the legal foundation is weak, but the message is loud and clear.

Christian religious fanatics have seized control of an entire branch of our federal government. They’re out to establish Christianity as America’s state religion, and they’re on a roll. I may need to up my meds.
Colorado

My response to those who promote their gods

I love FFRF and feel that you are providing a great service to humanity by pointing out the fallacies of following a religion.
Whenever I see someone on Facebook saying something positive about their god, I respond with the following: “There is no god, no heaven and no hell. They are imaginary; they are not real. There is no evidence that a god has ever done anything or answered any prayers.”
It may take 5,000 years, but someday in the distant future, people will look upon belief in a god as a long-gone superstition that people held for centuries with no evidence or proof.
Texas

Religion has taken hold in Indonesia government

The recent changes to Indonesia’s criminal code make salient the pernicious effects of religious lobbying, particularly by state-funded religious groups.
Now, extramarital sex has been outlawed, which implies all homosexual relations, too, since gay marriage is not recognized in Indonesia. Moreover, apostasy is now criminalized, and blasphemy laws have been strengthened, which will undoubtedly affect

Write to us

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

not only atheists, but also members of religious minorities.
This is a not-at-all surprising but incredibly disappointing power grab by religion in what has been a light of moderation in the Muslim world. We always must be watchful for the encroachments of religion into the public sphere, which is why I’m an FFRF member. Congratulations on your work!
Connecticut

Population, climate change intrinsically tied

I just read Annie Laurie Gaylor’s excellent blog, “You’re 1 in 8 billion . . . and why that’s not a compliment” on FFRF’s FreethoughtNow.org site.
If we don’t voluntarily take steps to limit population growth, Mother Nature certainly will. The rapid increase in population will only fuel climate change, and we’ll start seeing more global pandemics, catastrophic flooding, droughts, famines, etc.
I believe that the total number of deaths so far due to Covid is around 6 million (with a million in the U.S. alone), but that’s just a drop in the bucket compared to what we can expect if the world’s population continues to increase exponentially. I see that as a self-regulating cycle, and when we push the planet beyond its limits to sustain the global population, nature will respond accordingly.
Unfortunately, religions, such as Catholicism, Islam and Orthodox Judaism, which promote large families, Elon Musk tweeting about “population collapse,” and pronatalist policies in many European countries, Russia, Canada, Japan, South Korea and others, are only going to exacerbate the problem.
Wisconsin

Way too many people with superstitious beliefs

I read in Freethought Today of a new study that shows nearly one in four U.S. adults believe superstition and ritual actually influences the outcome of sporting events.
Here’s the scary part: These people vote. They are electing people to office who make decisions about your welfare when they have no right to make a decision about their daughter’s pet fish. The critical need is for an informed citizenry at the voting polls.
Why did I join the Freedom From Religion Foundation? Every morning, the employees of FFRF awake dedicated to bringing enlightened meaning to the word “civilized.”
Utah

In the beginning, who was God talking to?

I was wondering: When God said, “Let there be light,” to whom was he making the request?
Florida

The United Nations, abortion and scary gods

By Darlene Prescott

The United Nations receives a lot of bad press — some deserved and most not. The U.N. does not have the power many think it has, but the organization has noble goals, including universal gender equality — a goal that is proving to be the most difficult to achieve, including in the United States.



Darlene Prescott

Gender inequality has been around since Year One and has continually burdened half the global population. There are many people who do not see gender discrimination as an important problem — even today, when the harm is more obvious — because of the rise of education and the sciences in modern society.

The United Nations Human Rights Council — which has “soft power” and cannot force any U.N. member state, or anyone else, to do anything — has come under scrutiny more than once. Americans have criticized the council when a U.N. member state known for its human rights abuses takes on the leadership role of the council. Many believe it is better to ignore misbehaving members, rather than try to persuade them to do the right thing.

Now, human rights monitors have condemned Texas for its 2021 anti-abortion law SB-8, which bans virtually all abortions, as well as medical counseling and support related to abortions, after six weeks. U.N. bodies warn that laws like SB-8 violate international law by denying women control over their bodies and endangering their lives. Criminalizing abortion, or by erecting other hurdles, can in certain circumstances amount to cruel, degrading and inhumane treatment. The U.N.’s special



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rapporteur on violence against women also condemns anti-abortion laws, because those anti-woman laws encourage more violence against women, as well as against abortion providers.

After the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* case by crusading justices on the Supreme Court, more anti-abortion laws are being passed around the country that do not include an exception for rape. The level of hostility toward women and girls was laid bare when fetus-worshippers wanted a 10-year-old child, who had been raped, to carry and give birth to the baby. The child had to travel to another state with fewer restrictions in order to obtain an abortion she and her parents wanted. The medical procedure saved her from months of increasing torture, and possibly death. Even for adults, legal abortions are far safer than pregnancy and birthing.

Conservative state legislators around the country are threatening to further intrude into women’s and girls’ private health care decisions, including — astonishingly — by banning the right to travel to another jurisdiction to seek medical care. Some also want to ban female contraceptives.

More troublingly are those anti-abor-

tion laws that are being passed that do not allow for abortions even if the pregnant female’s health and life are at risk! Not only are those barbaric laws in violation of the human rights of women and girls, but also could be considered a form of homicide of the pregnant female.

Interestingly, and sadly, femicide numbers are rising in the United States from situations other than allowing the pregnant female to die in order to save the fetus. A U.N. Women 2021 report states that, worldwide, 45,000 women and girls were murdered by intimate partners or other family members, and we would expect to see higher numbers for 2022. The fewer rights women have — the less respect — the more “attractive” target they are. What other group of humans are killed in such numbers on an annual basis? Not any political, religious, or racial group.

But, again, who do you choose to save in a dire medical situation — the pregnant woman or girl — or the fetus? Under Jewish law, you save the pregnant female. In a hospital setting, I would think that in accordance with proper medical protocols, the patient’s life would be paramount. However, a 2022 study by Netta Avnoon of Tel Aviv University concluded that because the fields of gynecology and

obstetrics had been masculinized (since the 16th century), the focus has been on the needs of the fetus over the well-being of the pregnant female.

I know who I would choose if one of my female relatives were in such an awful medical dilemma. And I cannot imagine anyone who would allow a loved one to even come close to dying in order to save her fetus. Perhaps the very religious are telling themselves that their god should choose.

Pregnancy and birthing have always been not only painful, but also have put the pregnant female (and the fetus) in life and death situations. What god created such a dangerous reproductive system? I prefer to blame it on mindless evolution rather than a scary misogynous god.

Considering all the religions that have come and gone over the ages — and more likely to appear in future ages — it takes the supremely arrogant to tell women what they must do according to a particular belief system. It is women who endure dangerous and painful pregnancy and birthing — they are to be in control.

FFRF Member Darlene Prescott retired from a 28-year career at the United Nations, and is now living in the Houston area, where she does pro bono legal work as an attorney. She continues to write legal articles, nonfiction and fiction stories, and has one published book.

A welcome new bill tackles abortion funding

This column originally was published on FFRF’s blog site, FreethoughtNow.org, on Dec. 19.

By Barbara Alvarez

Abortion funding is an imperative part of abortion rights — and a recently introduced bill aims to address that.

The Reproductive Health Travel Fund Act would set up a grant program, authorized at \$350 million a year through 2027, to help ease the financial burden associated with traveling long distances to access safe and legal reproductive health care.



Barbara Alvarez

With abortion care legally unavailable or severely restricted in nearly half the country, people must journey significant distances to access the nearest clinic. In FFRF’s home state of Wisconsin, residents must travel and spend anywhere between \$700 and



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\$2,000 on transportation, procedures and hotels. Such costs only exacerbate existing inequities for people who are already struggling to make ends meet.

Abortion is a common medical procedure that nearly one in four women will have by the time they are 45 years old. Research shows that abortion is an extremely safe procedure with major complication occurring in less than a quarter of 1 percent. For context, there are more complications

from wisdom tooth removals and tonsillectomies than from abortions. Furthermore, studies have found that 99 percent of women who have an abortion feel relief — not regret.

Indeed, there is no evidence-based reason to deny abortion care; only religion-based dogma can attempt to justify this. Abortion bans of any kind worsen maternal health outcomes. In fact, women are 14 times more likely to die during childbirth than they

are from any abortion complications. And without abortion care available in many states, birth rates are expected to rise. University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers predict up to a 4 percent increase in births in the Badger State. Pregnancy specialists assert that this will disproportionately harm Black women in a state that already has the highest Black infant mortality rate in the country.

FFRF has a long history of not only supporting the legalization of abortion, but also funding for abortion care. In fact, FFRF’s principal co-founder Anne Nicol Gaylor founded the Women’s Medical Fund of Wisconsin in 1972 for this exact purpose. As one of the oldest abortion funds in the nation, Women’s Medical Fund supports an average of 1,000 Wisconsinites per year.

Access to abortion is a core component of bodily autonomy and human dignity. Let’s not only fight for the legalization of abortion care, but also its accessibility. The Reproductive Health Travel Fund Act provides a glimmer of hope on this front during these bleak times.

Barbara Alvarez is a contributing writer for FFRF.