

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



**Twins offer
double dose
of freethinking**

PAGE 2



**The age of
appeasement**

PAGES 10-11



**Abortion is
compassionate
health care**

PAGES 12-13

Vol. 41 No. 1

Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

January-February 2024

FFRF 2023 year in review

Legal Team's swift, continued victories

By Rebecca Markert

Despite growing obstacles from an extremist majority on the U.S. Supreme Court in our fight to maintain a strict separation between state and church, FFRF's legal team did not slow down at all during 2023. In fact, we logged four litigation victories and 149 nonlitigation victories. Our attorneys' expertise and advice was continually sought not only by our members, but also by other lawyers working on religious liberty cases, and legal organizations planning continuing legal education courses for lawyers and judges.

Our work is more important than ever and the FFRF's attorneys are ready and prepared to represent the rights and views of nonbelievers in this continuing battle, and to fight for the freedom of conscience of all Americans. With more and more Americans becoming increasingly interested in the intersection of state/church separation and many other civil rights issues, we expect 2024 will be just as productive and

successful.

Here's an overview of the year's achievements.

Litigation

In the past year, we've filed three new lawsuits in addition to two ongoing cases, and we closed six cases, of which four ended with outcomes in FFRF's favor.

In August, FFRF and New Jersey taxpayer David Steketee filed to intervene in the lawsuit Mendham Methodist Church v. Morris County, N.J. FFRF previously litigated this issue and won in 2018 when the New Jersey Supreme Court unanimously ruled in FFRF's favor that public money could not be used to repair churches. At issue again is the funding of churches through Historic Preservation grants. The churches in this new case argue that recent Supreme Court decisions invalidated the decision that barred churches from participating in these funding programs and that the New Jersey Constitution's Religious Aid Clause violates the U.S. Constitution's Free Exercise Clause. FFRF's motion to intervene argues that the county is essentially looking for a "do-over" to relitigate claims already rejected by the

See *Legal Team* on page 14

Adventures in state advocacy

By Ryan Jayne

The year 2023 brought with it a new state legislative session, with lawmakers all over the country pushing for changes on myriad topics — for better or worse. The newly launched FFRF Action Fund was active in all 50 states, mobilizing our local advocates to advance good bills and to oppose bad ones.

Two states — New Hampshire and Minnesota — formed new state caucuses dedicated to secularism. This focuses attention on combating theocracy and gives rise to lesser-known state/church champions. We have been honored to work with these allies and we've been urging lawmakers in other states to follow suit.

Major progress was made toward ending child marriage in the United States, with Connecticut, Michigan and Vermont all passing bills setting the marriage age at 18 with no exceptions, including for religion. FFRF

Action Fund advocates helped to push these bills over the finish line, as part of a broad national coalition. Shockingly, there are still 40 states that allow the abusive practice.

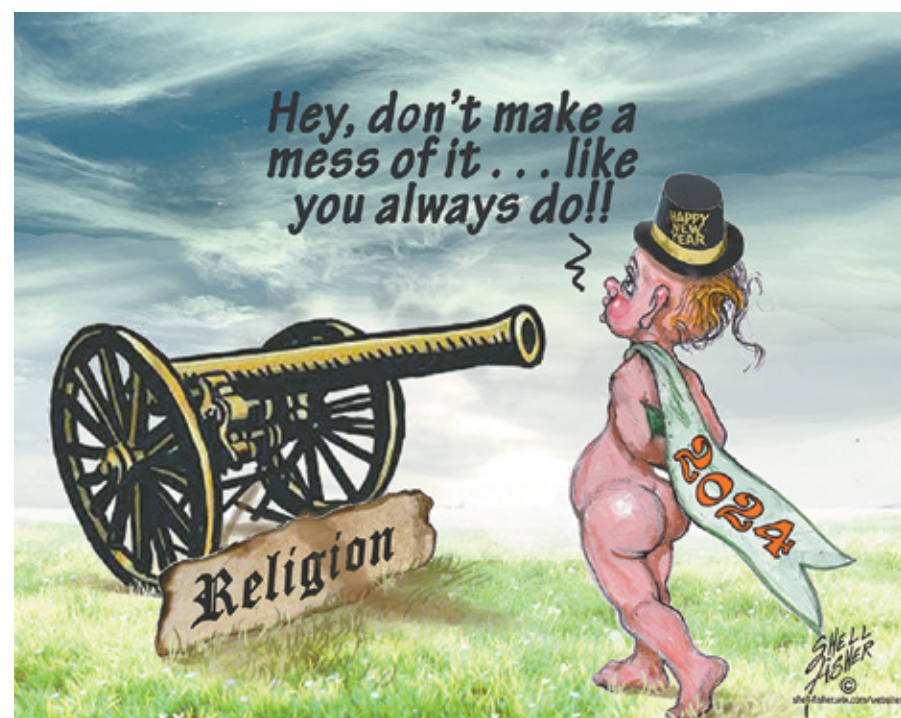
We also backed legislation in New York that would inform criminal defendants about nonreligious alternatives to 12-step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous. That bill has now twice passed the Legislature, and has met two misguided vetoes. The FFRF Action Fund put together a coalition to advance a similar bill in Michigan, and is working with allies to do the same elsewhere.

Fighting bad bills

Sadly, the bulk of our state work is defensive, trying to stop Christian nationalists from imposing theocratic policies onto their constituents. One notable victory was when Arkansas voters rejected an insertion of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act into the state constitution. Our action alert galvanized our advocates, more than 90 percent of whom are registered to vote, and this dangerous measure was rejected by a mere 7,500 votes.

We also testified in opposition to bills ex-

See *State Advocacy* on page 8



Cartoon: Holy Smoke

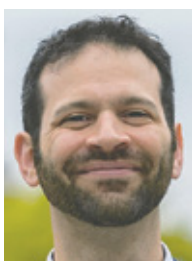
FFRF's Action Fund has been a game-changer

By Mark Dann

One of the many things I love about our annual convention is that I get to see many old and trusted friends. Some of you have been coming to our conventions for 10, 15, 20 years or more. One of the reasons why FFRF is so successful is that we can have honest conversations with our members about what is happening in the country regarding state/church separation and the rights of nonbelievers, and how we can move forward together.

And now, thanks to your support, we have formed the FFRF Action Fund. The new 501(c)(4) is a non-tax deductible organization which functions as the advocacy arm of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Because of the new Action Fund, we can now engage in limited electoral work and weigh in on partisan debates while keeping focused on our robust lobbying program.

Forming the Action Fund has been one of FFRF's biggest successes in governmental affairs. To wrap up 2023, let's talk about what we're doing with the Action Fund, why it's important and how we've been able to utilize new tools to bring you more victories.



Mark Dann



Operating solely as a 501(c)(3) was sometimes a limiting proposition for FFRF. The IRS restricts the amount of lobbying activity that 501(c)(3) organizations can engage in, and outright prohibits electioneering for these organizations. But now the Action Fund allows FFRF the freedom to step into partisan spaces.

Thanks to the leadership of FFRF's co-presidents, Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker, we started establishing the Action Fund during the pandemic. So many people at FFRF, including Rebecca Markert, Ryan Jayne, Ryan Dudley, Caitlin Berray, Scott Knicklebine, Greg Fletcher, Andrew Seidel, and our outside attorney Melissa Scholz, were instrumental in getting the Action Fund moving.

Two unsung heroes of the Action Fund are FFRF Operations Director Lisa Strand and FFRF Bookkeeper Eleanor McEntee. Creating the Action Fund was a big lift. It required a lot of compliance work, rethinking accounting systems and redesigning how both the Action Fund and FFRF itself work. There's no way we would have been successful without Lisa and Eleanor.

See *Action Fund* on page 8

Twins offer double dose of freethinking

Name: Maddie and Christine Hettinger (identical twins!).
Where we live: We both live in the Madison, Wis., area.

Where and when we were born: Madison in 1995.
Family: We are the youngest of five, with three older brothers who taught us how to be tough (intentionally or unintentionally). We also have six collective step-siblings who are all older, as well. We are pretty sure all but two of our collective siblings are freethinkers. Our mom was a teacher and our dad was a firefighter. A fun fact is that our parents had five children that were five years old and younger. “God” bless them.

Education: Both of us did our undergrad at UW-Madison. Maddie majored in biology and Spanish and Christine majored in human development and family studies and went on to get her master’s degree in social work, also at UW-Madison.

Occupation: Christine is a school social worker and Maddie is a scientist in the biotech field, both working in Madison.

How we got where we are today: We were lucky to have incredibly supportive parents, siblings and extended family to help us get to where we are today. We want to give a special shout-out to our dad for being an unabashed atheist and giving us the ability to question dogma and teaching us that “atheist” shouldn’t be a dirty word. Lots of deep conversation and civil debates took place at the dinner table growing up — and still do...

Where we’re headed: We both plan to stick in the Madison area and continue to grow our families (mainly cats and dogs, but maybe someday human babies).

Person in history we admire and why: We both LOVE Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. The idea of having politicians funded via grassroots movements warms our hearts. Having progressive politicians helps ensure we can maintain state/church separation and help defend us all from Christian nationalism.



Christine and Maddie Hettinger both considered themselves atheists by late high school.

A quotation we like: “So now the perception is, yes, women are here to stay. When I’m sometimes asked when will there be enough [women on the Supreme Court] and I say, ‘When there are nine,’ people are shocked. But there’d been nine men, and nobody’s ever raised a question about that.” — Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Things we like: Playing flag football, ultimate frisbee, disc golf, kickball, basketball. Watching any sport (especially supporting women’s sports, as we played basketball back in the day), hiking, fishing, foraging for morel mushrooms, euchre, beer, spending time with our pets, true crime documentaries.

Things we smite: Shows with laugh tracks, country music, the idea of another Biden vs. Trump election, eating flesh and drinking blood at church.

Our doubts about religion started: Around middle school when we started thinking critically about what the bible teaches. Our dad helped foster this doubt by asking genuine questions that really made us think twice about our beliefs. We were confirmed Lutheran, which was a pressure imposed on us by our family even though we had significant doubts before jumping through the hoops. We considered ourselves atheists by late high school.

Ways we promote freethought: We use the dirty A-word as much as possible. It’s the best way to normalize it. It is shocking (in a good way) how many other atheists you can meet by bringing up being an atheist in conversation.

Before we die: Maddie wants to visit every national park in the United States and Christine wants to spend each summer traveling somewhere new, since she is lucky enough to have summers off.

I wish you’d have asked us: Most people ask us twin-related questions, so here we go: Yes, we are identical; no, we don’t have twin telepathy; yes, we have switched places back in school (sorry Ms. Thompson!); yes, we are absolute best friends who have always challenged each other, which leads to us being more thoughtful in every facet of life.



The Hettinger twins, Maddie and Christine, enjoy some silliness as young kids.

OVERHEARD

Declaring the bible, as he [Speaker Mike Johnson] understands it, to be the “rule book” and not the Constitution is the very definition of “establishment of religion,” prohibited by the First Amendment. Contrary to the designs of White Christian nationalists, this is not a theocracy designed to protect their claims to supremacy.

Columnist Jennifer Rubin, in her weekly Q&A with her readers.
Washington Post, 11-22-23

It feels to me like an infiltration of the religious right — the conservative, Christian religious right — into our public schools. . . . I would absolutely call all of this Christian nationalism.

Rev. Cameron Vickrey, a Cooperative Baptist pastor, on Texas allowing chaplains to become public school counselors.
Religion News Service, 12-14-23

It seems like almost all discrimination against queer people is really tied up in religious belief.

Evan Moss, interviewed in the Jessica Grose article, “Americans under 30 don’t trust religion — or anything else.”
New York Times, 11-25-23



James Carville

Christian nationalism is a greater threat to America than al-Qaida.

James Carville, a Democratic consultant and strategist, in an interview.
The Guardian, 12-16-23

How many people can know the truth and choose to pretend they don’t and leave others at risk of the same abuse and

they know it and they just don’t care?

Lorraine Goodrich, mother of Chelsea Goodrich, who was sexually abused by a bishop in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, after hearing reports of how the church had downplayed or covered up past abuses.
Associated Press, 12-3-23

Subjecting my children to religious indoctrination while they’re at public school is a breach of my parental rights to decide when, where and how my children are exposed to religious ideology.

Lisa Lister-Browne, a parent in the Katy Independent School District in Texas, reacting to the district considering hiring chaplains from the community to work as school counselors.
ABC-13, 12-5-23

Freedom of speech must include the freedom to blaspheme. To mock gods, prophets, bibles. To lampoon Muhammad, put a likeness of Christ in piss. To call bullshit on anything and everything. Yes, some will feel offended, but that’s an infinitesimally small price to pay for the preservation of everyone else’s right to think and speak as they see fit.

Brendan O’Neill, in his column, “It isn’t free speech that causes violence — it’s censorship,” regarding Denmark’s ban on defacing or destroying religious texts.
Spiked, 12-9-23

The state cannot, and should not, compel an individual to certain beliefs nor restrain free exercise of religion. This necessarily includes all belief systems, even atheism and the right to believe there is no God. The question

is, who has the right to govern my conscience? World history has shown an enduring conflict between the state and the church. Our founders created a system whereby the state cannot infringe on an individual’s right to freely exercise religion or compel religious practice, and also enforcing that right in civil law when an individual seeks to violate another individual’s rights.

Jenna Ellis, former lawyer for President Trump, in an interview.
Newsweek, 12-17-23

Everything started to unravel for me rather quickly. The challenge of that was still going up and preaching a sermon every Sunday, when on the inside I was doubting the legitimacy of the whole thing.

Heartway pastor Danny Prada, in an interview for the article, “Church for ‘nones’: Meet the anti-dogma spiritual collectives emerging across the U.S.”
Religion News Service, 12-21-23

Easter is when Jesus comes out of his tomb, and, if he sees his shadow, he goes back in and we get six more weeks of winter.

Tom Smothers, who died at age 86 on Dec. 26, as quipped on the original “Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour” in the late 1960s.
New York Times, 12-28-23

Perhaps the only thing more dangerous than authoritarianism is authoritarianism infused with religious justification.

Tim Alberta, in his column, “The only thing more dangerous than authoritarianism,” regarding Christian nationalism.
The Atlantic, 12-25-23

ffrf

FREETHOUGHT
TODAY

Published by Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

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

Madison WI 53701
FFRF.org
F 608.204.0422

EDITOR
EDITOR EMERITUS
EXECUTIVE PUBLISHER
GRAPHIC DESIGNER
COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR
CONTRIBUTORS

PJ Slinger
Bill Dunn
Annie Laurie Gaylor
Roger Daleiden
Amit Pal

editor@FFRF.org

Dan Barker, Jeremiah Camara, Jen Castle, Mark Dann, Greg Fletcher,
Ryan Jayne, Chris Line, Rebecca Markert, Brent Nicastro, Sadie Pattinson

The only freethought newspaper in the United States

FFRF | FREETHOUGHT TODAY | Madison, Wisconsin | January-February 2024

Page 2

Texas abortion case should enrage everyone

The tragic abortion case playing out right now in Texas reveals how the religious anti-abortion movement has perverted the term “pro-life.”

What is “pro-life” about forcing a Texas woman and mother, Kate Cox, to carry a wanted pregnancy that is doomed, where the fetus is incompatible with life? What is “pro-life” about gambling with her health by forcing her to continue a pregnancy going nowhere, which could jeopardize her ability to have more children in the future, as she desires?

The Texas abortion ban, one of the most draconian in the nation, allows for an exception when “in the exercise of reasonable medical judgment, the pregnant female ... has a life-threatening physical condition aggravated by, caused by, or arising from a pregnancy that places the female at risk of death or poses a serious risk of substantial impairment of a major bodily function unless the abortion is performed or induced.”

Nevertheless on Dec. 11, the Texas Supreme Court, in a unanimous decision, cruelly and cavalierly overturned a lower court order allowing Cox to obtain an abortion in the state. While the Texas abortion ban allows for exceptions, said the state high court, the “good faith belief” by Cox’s doctor that the procedure was medically necessary was not enough to qualify for the exception. No, Cox must be in literal danger of losing her life for an abortion to be permissible, goes the court’s logic. Once more we see doc-



Image from Shutterstock

trinaire judges practicing medicine without a license.

Under the Texas law, a doctor convicted of performing an illegal abortion faces a prison term of up to 99 years and minimum fines of \$100,000. Cox, who was more than 20 weeks pregnant, therefore announced she would be going out of state to procure her medically necessary abortion. But how many women in Texas have the wherewithal to do the same? Prior to the abortion ban, there were 50,000 abortions annually in the state. This year through September, the New

York Times reports, there were only 34 recorded abortion procedures.

Already, we are seeing bills being contemplated in some state legislatures that would bar women from traveling across state lines to procure abortions, or seek to punish those helping them do so, as Idaho’s currently litigated law does.

“The decision to decide if and whether to continue a pregnancy and become a mother or parent is a human right that must not depend on one’s ZIP code,” maintains FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

Among the villains in this miscarriage of justice is Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, who immediately urged his state’s Supreme Court to overturn the lower court ruling that upheld Cox’s right to a medical exception. (FFRF has been a recipient of Paxton’s ire, including in 2017, when Paxton unsuccessfully attempted to interfere in FFRF’s litigation against a prayerful Texas judge, even holding a press conference targeting the state/church watchdog.)

But the biggest villain is the U.S. Supreme Court. Its Dobbs ruling pretended that in overturning *Roe v. Wade*, it would stop all the litigation and controversy by giving power to state legislatures to determine the fate of pregnant Americans. Instead, in overturning abortion as a federal right, it has unleashed ever more chaos and controversy, emboldening Christian nationalist legislatures and courts to deny basic medical care even to people like Kate Cox, with her wanted pregnancy gone wrong.

Commenting on the Texas Supreme Court ruling, Molly Duane, an attorney with Center for Reproductive Rights, says: “This ruling should enrage every Texan to their core.” Duane is wrong: This ruling should enrage every American to the core.

All Americans who care about our democracy and basic individual liberties must condemn this ruling and make protecting abortion rights their 2024 New Year resolution.

U.S. now has Supreme contempt for women

This article first ran in the New York Times on Dec. 16 and is reprinted with permission.

By Maureen Dowd

The Irish expect the worst to happen at any moment. And they have what my colleague Dan Barry calls “a wry acceptance of mortality.”

Still, Ireland was shaken to its core in 2012 by the death of Savita Halappanavar, a beautiful, sparkling 31-year-old Indian immigrant, a dentist married to an Indian engineer. Savita was expecting her first child. She wore a new dress for the baby shower and prayed for the future. But that night she got sick. She went to a Galway hospital, where she was crushed to learn that her fetal membranes were bulging and her 17-week-old fetus would not survive.

Knowing her life was at stake, she begged the medical staff to remove the fetus. As Kitty Holland wrote in *Savita: The Tragedy That Shook a Nation*, a midwife explained to her, “It’s a Catholic thing. We don’t do it here.” Ireland had a long history of punishing women, sending them to religious asylums if they were pregnant out of wedlock or deemed “fallen.” Savita developed septic shock and died four days after her baby girl, whom she named Prasa, was stillborn.

That tragedy jolted the turbulent



Maureen Dowd

debate in Ireland about the right of women to control their bodies. Savita’s story was vividly evoked by women and men when I covered the 2018 referendum to revoke the Vatican-approved Eighth Amendment of the Irish Constitution, which made abortions illegal, even in cases of rape or incest. That draconian amendment had women selling their cars and going to loan sharks to get the money to fly to England for procedures. It stamped women with a Scarlet Letter and psychological trauma because they felt their country had turned its back on them.

I remember, as I reported on the vote, having a flash of gratitude that I lived in America and not Ireland. I thought to myself that I would hate living in such a benighted country shaped by religious fanatics.

But now I am. Religious fanatics on the Supreme Court have yanked America back to back alleys. American women are punished, branded with Scarlet Letters, forced to flee to get procedures.

And we have our own fraught case of a 31-year-old begging for a termination: Kate Cox, a married Texas mother of two who was thrilled to be pregnant until she was told that her fetus had a deadly chromosomal abnormality. Continuing the pregnancy could also keep Cox from getting

pregnant again.

“I kept asking more questions, including how much time we might have with her if I continued the pregnancy,” Cox wrote in *The Dallas Morning News*. “The answer was maybe an hour — or at most, a week. Our baby would be in hospice care from the moment she is born if she were to be born alive.”

Cox, more than 20 weeks pregnant, had to leave Texas to have an abortion because the state’s boorish, mega-MAGA attorney general, Ken Paxton, gleefully threatened to prosecute “hospitals, doctors or anyone else” who helped her, even floating first-degree felony charges. The case has become so politically toxic that even the voluble Ted Cruz, who is running for re-election next year, has clammed up about it. The Republican pollster Kellyanne Conway, playing school nurse, warned Republicans on the Hill to talk less about banning abortion and more about the benefits of contraception.

I’m sure even Donald Trump, who was once pro-choice but now panders to evangelicals, has qualms about criminalizing abortion. It’s a political loser and could cost him the election if women are supermobilized. He called Ron DeSantis’s six-week abortion ban in Florida “a terrible thing and a terrible mistake.” Once Trump

bragged about appointing the conservative justices on the court who were pivotal in overturning *Roe v. Wade*. But that won’t be a great sales pitch in the general election.

It is outrageous that such an important right in America was stripped away by a handful of cloistered, robed zealots, driven by religious doctrine, with no accountability.

But the Savonarola wing of the Supreme Court — all Catholics except Neil Gorsuch, who was raised Catholic and went to the same suburban Washington Catholic prep school as Brett Kavanaugh — could go to even more extreme lengths. The court announced Dec.13 that it will consider curtailing the availability of a pill used to terminate first-trimester pregnancies. Soon, it’ll be mandating the rhythm method.

An explosive new Times article by Jodi Kantor and Adam Liptak revealed that Justice Samuel Alito was even more underhanded than we knew as he plotted to engineer “a titanic shift in the law” by vitiating *Roe*. Conservative judges who assured the Senate that *Roe* was settled law in their confirmation hearings could barely wait until Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died to throw it in the constitutional rights rubbish bin.

The more we learn, the more infuriating it is that our lives and choices about our bodies are determined by conniving radicals. The Supreme Court is way, way out of order.

Maureen Dowd is an opinion columnist for the New York Times.

“It is outrageous that such an important right in America was stripped away by a handful of cloistered, robed zealots, driven by religious doctrine, with no accountability.”

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8		9	10	11	12	
13						14				15				
16						17				18				
	19				20			21	22					
			23				24							
25	26	27		28		29			30		31	32	33	34
35			36		37			38		39				
40					41				42		43			
44				45		46				47				
48					49		50			51		52		
				53		54			55		56			
	57	58	59					60				61	62	
63						64	65			66				67
68						69				70				
71						72				73				

Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Across

1. Deep cavity (poetic)

6. Et cetera

9. Meat and potatoes, for brunch

13. Raccoon’s South-American cousin

14. Jersey call

15. Not piano

16. ____ Gray or Sophia ____

17. Mischief-maker

18. Intestinal obstruction

19. *Producer Rob ____ of “God & Country: The Rise of Christian Nationalism”

21. *Irreverent Rushdie’s first name

23. Pres. elec. mo.

24. Lincoln coin

25. Military hospitals

28. Make-A-____

30. Mosquito-borne disease a.k.a. breakbone fever

35. Absorbed by

37. Decked out

39. Kingdom

40. Iranian money

41. Tori, singular

43. Italian spumante-producing region

44. *What I would tell Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene about the harm of Christian nationalism,” e.g.

46. Make a Sketch

47. Opposite of knit

48. Undo a bustle, e.g.

50. Augments

52. Settle a debt

53. Frown

55. 2nd largest bird

57. *”The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” author Ursula ____

60. *Americans ____ for Separation of Church and State, non-profit organization

63. Discussion site

64. Pen juice

66. “Swan Lake” skirts

68. Type of deadly flu

69. Little piggy

70. ____ & Young

71. Often precedes “necessary”

72. Lt.’s inferior, in the Navy

73. Serpentine

Down

1. Unstable knee preventer, acr.

2. Ill-mannered one

3. Ready and eager

4. Beer garden mug

5. S.S. ____ of “Gilligan’s Island”

6. Dubai dignitary

7. *Freethinking author of “Jitterbug Perfume” ____ Robbins

8. Bush thicket

9. Islet in a river

10. Length times width

11. Flabbergast

12. “For ____ a jolly...”

15. Photo effect, on Instagram

20. Put out on a curb

22. Common conjunction

24. Controversial type of school

25. Connoisseurship

26. Opposite of cation

27. Locker room infection

29. Gin flavor

31. Half-moon tide

32. Fill the tank (2 words)

33. Extremist

34. *Freethinking ____ Dickinson: “That it will never come again is what makes life so sweet”

36. Hodgepodge

38. Sitting one is a target

42. Shininess

45. *Barbara G. Walker’s contribution to Freethought Today, e.g.

49. Ornamental carp

51. Inflicts a blow

54. Join forces

56. Driver’s 180

57. Cobain’s love

58. Great Lake

59. U.S. territory

60. Luau strings, pl.

61. Highest volcano in Europe

62. Opposite of dawn

63. Temporary craze

65. Not, prefix

67. Pig’s digs

Join us for Paine celebration

Every Jan. 29, the official birthdate of Thomas Paine is recognized and celebrated.

With this celebration of Thomas Paine coming at the end of January, we are preparing for Black History Month by focusing on his abolitionist work. The theme for the day is “The Anti-Slavery Efforts of Thomas Paine.” We want to feature the voices of Black community leaders, elected officials, entertainers, social influencers and celebrities.

The event starts at 7 p.m. EDT, and pre-registration is required. To register, use this link: rb.gy/tcrm3n.

Thomas Paine

Sponsors of this year’s event are the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the Secular Coalition for America, Black Nonbelievers, Center for Inquiry, the Thomas Paine Memorial Association (TPMA) and the Freethought Society.

Actor Ian Ruskin will present a letter that Paine, posing as a slave, wrote to Thomas Jefferson. Paine wrote using this persona in order to emphasize the urgency in ending the practice of slavery. The letter reveals Paine’s insight into the immorality of slavery and his frustration about President Jefferson doing nothing to stop it.

The 1809 letter (written seven months before his death) will shock and amaze the Zoom audience. Paine’s words reveal a frustrated and angry abolitionist who had lost patience with those who participated in

the debauchery. Paine stood for equality like no other Founding Father.

Event planners Margaret Downey (Thomas Paine Memorial Association president) and Christopher Cameron (TPMA board member) have enlisted the voices of Black leaders who are impressed with Paine’s foresight and warnings of civil unrest to end slavery.

Below is a list of some of the scheduled commentators who will appear. More commentators will be added as they are confirmed: Ty Barnett, Rep. Jamaal Bowman, Dom Jones, Wil Jeudy, Dr. Anthony Pinn, Rep. Jamie Raskin and Rep. Victoria Spartz.

Musical performances by Cynthia McDonald will open and close the event. McDonald is a social worker, author, public speaker, podcaster, musical artist and freethinker. She is a member of the Godless Gospel.

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.”

ffrf

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

P.O. Box 750 • Madison, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • [FFRF.org](https://ffrf.org)

What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

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

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

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

Freethought Today Cryptogram

FTA BHOXTMZI YGMSGMX SGM LXMFN HI GMFQMU

FUL PXMFSUMTT TGH0ZL RM YFESEUP IHX OT EU

HOX PXFQMT — HX YGMSGMX ES TGH0ZL RM

HOXT GMXM FUL UHY FUL HU SGET MFXSG.

— FBU XFUL

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

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: I => F .

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 Item #FB30

WOMEN WITHOUT SUPERSTITION

“No Gods—No Masters”

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

Edited by Annie Laurie Gaylor

Buy it from FFRF online ffrf.org/shop

IN THE NEWS

Study: Most are spiritual but not religious

A new Pew Research study shows that 22 percent of Americans call themselves “spiritual but not religious.” The study of American adults found that 70 percent consider themselves spiritual.

Those who are “spiritual but not religious” believe people have a soul or spirit in addition to a physical body. They say there is something spiritual beyond the natural world. Among the spiritual but not religious, 38 percent say religion does more harm than good, while just 7 percent of religious Americans share this view.

“That label ‘spiritual but not religious’ really describes a kind of negative identity more than it describes a particular positive identity,” said Nancy Ammerman, a retired professor of sociology at Boston University. “It describes people who are turned off by organized religion. The ‘not religious’ part of the identity is the real key to the identity.”

In Denmark, it’s illegal to burn religious texts

A new law was passed in Denmark’s parliament Dec. 7 that makes it illegal to desecrate any holy text in the country, after a string of public desecrations of the Quran by a handful of anti-Islam activists sparked angry demonstrations in Muslim countries.

Denmark has been viewed abroad as a place that facilitates insults and denigration of the cultures, religions and traditions of other countries. The purpose of the law was to counter “the systematic mockery” which has contributed to intensifying the threat of terrorism in Denmark, the justice ministry has said.

The new legislation will make it a crime “to inappropriately treat, publicly or with the intention of dissemination in a wider circle, a writing with significant religious significance for a religious community or an object that appears as such.”

Inger Støjberg of the anti-immigration Denmark Democrats said that the new law was a capitulation to Islam and a bowing down to countries that “do not share (our) set of values.”

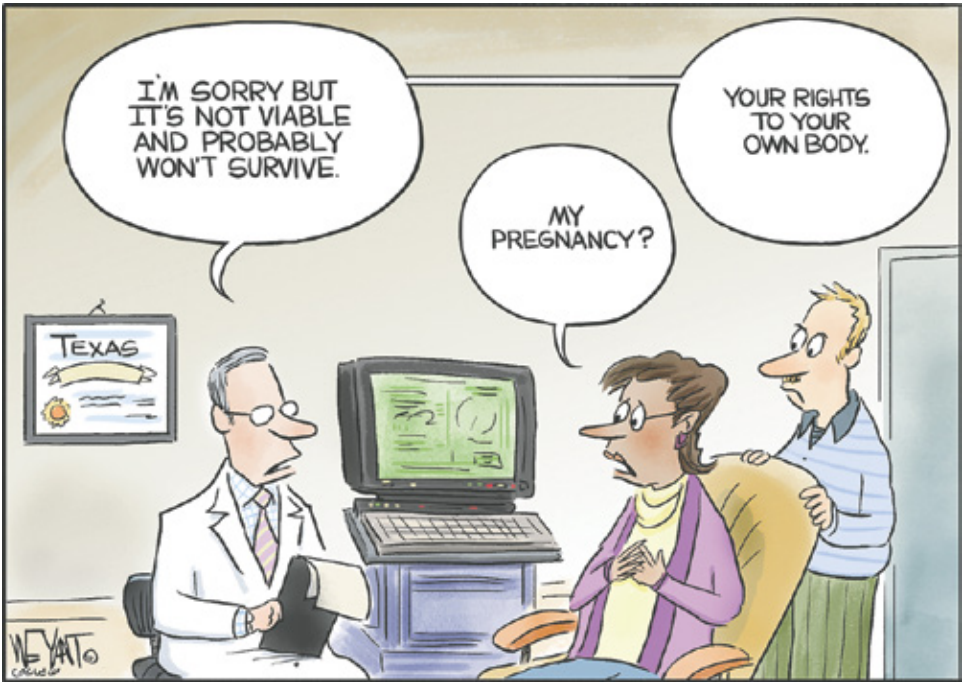
“A restriction of freedom of expression is wrong in a modern and enlightened society like the Danish one,” Støjberg said.

Religious organizations not at top of trust list

Since 2017, the Better Business Bureau has surveyed people to see how people feel about charity, trust and generosity. During the first five years of donor trust surveys, religious organizations were considered the most trusted charity category. However, in the most recent survey (from December 2022), it was the first time that religious organizations were not at the top.

The most trusted charity categories were veterans organizations (27.9 percent), not-for-profit hospitals (27.1 percent), religious organizations (26.1 percent), animal welfare (25.9 percent) and social service charities (24.9 percent).

Older generations are more likely to highly trust religious organizations and veterans charities. Younger generations are more likely to trust international relief organizations, civil rights and community action charities, and educational organizations.



Judge: Kim Davis must pay \$260K in fees, costs

Former county clerk Kim Davis, who refused to issue marriage licenses in Kentucky to same-sex couples, must pay a total of \$260,104 in fees and expenses to attorneys who represented one couple, according to a federal judge’s ruling.

That’s in addition to \$100,000 in damages a jury said the former Rowan County clerk should pay the couple who sued.

Attorneys for Davis were expected to appeal the ruling.

Davis drew international attention when she was briefly jailed in 2015 over her refusal, which she based on her belief that marriage should only be between a man and a woman. Davis was released only after her staff issued the licenses on her behalf but removed her name from the form. The Kentucky Legislature later enacted a law removing the names of all county clerks from state marriage licenses.

Study: Religiosity doesn’t stop cognitive declines

A study of people aged 50-plus from 11 European countries and Israel from the Survey of Health, Aging, and Retirement in Europe shows that cognitive function scores were negatively related to praying. According to the report, “our evidence shows a negative, non-trivial association between intelligence and religiosity in elderly participants. . . . We failed to show evidence for positive associations of praying or religious participation with healthier cognitive aging. Instead, our results suggest that small negative association of intelligence and religiosity remains. The negative link between religiosity and intelligence remains stable over time in older adults.”

In EU, religious symbols can be banned at work

The top European Union court has ruled that member states can prohibit their employees from wearing signs of religious belief.

The Court of Justice ruling came after a Belgian woman alleged the local municipality where she worked had infringed her religious freedom by telling her she couldn’t wear a hijab. The court added such measures must be limited to what is strictly necessary.

In 2021, the court ruled that women could be fired from their jobs for refusing to remove their hijab if they work in a job that deals with the public. The latest case

arrived at the court after a Muslim employee was told she could not wear a headscarf at work. The woman, who works as head of an office and is not in a public-facing role, launched a legal challenge.

The municipality then amended its terms of employment, saying they required employees to observe strict neutrality, which means any form of proselytizing is prohibited and the wearing of overt signs of ideological or religious affiliation is not allowed for any worker.

Vatican OKs blessings of same-sex couples

On Dec. 18, the Vatican issued formal, definitive permission for Catholic priests to bless same-sex couples, as long as those benedictions are kept separate from marriage.

The guidance from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, issued after papal review and approval, reverses a 2021 ruling and expands on a statement of support for such blessings issued by Pope Francis in September in response to questions raised by conservative clerics.

The new document says that blessings of same-sex couples should not suggest even the trappings of sacramental marriage or even ceremonies formalizing same-sex unions. But it offers guidelines for offering benedictions, and explicitly gives permission to “ordained ministers” to conduct them, while asking priests to use their own “prudent and fatherly discernment” to decide when doing so is appropriate.

In Colo., ‘IGWT’ signs ‘encouraged’ for schools

An El Paso County school board in Colorado voted 3-2 on Dec. 14 to approve a resolution encouraging its schools to display the national motto “In God We Trust” in classrooms, along with other historical displays depicting the founding and heritage of America.

The district is the 11th largest in the state with more than 26,000 students.

Board Vice President Jamilynn D’Avola first advanced the resolution during a board meeting in November. The measure initially required teachers to display “In God We Trust” in every classroom, but modified the language to “encourage” rather than mandate the displays, mirroring a resolution passed by the Colorado State Board of Education in 2000.

The three members who voted in favor of the resolution argued the motto is part of the nation’s history and should be

included in historical displays alongside the Constitution and the American flag.

Cary Carr, who described herself as a Christian, said, “I’m very concerned about and opposed to the resolution on tonight’s agenda proposing to encourage the display of this motto in our schools. I see nothing of benefit for our schools, and I see the harm that could occur. My faith does not lead me to believe that I need God placed on the walls in order to show my faith.”

Md. referendum proposes right to abortion

Voters in Maryland will take part in a statewide referendum in November to decide whether to make abortion access a constitutional right. A simple majority will be required to pass the amendment.

The vote comes as a wave of states attempt to expand abortion access by amending their constitutions following the overturning of Roe v. Wade in 2022, which ended several decades of the constitutional guarantee to abortion. Ohio is the most recent state to make abortion a constitutional right, with voters in the swing state overwhelmingly voting to pass an amendment in November.

Maryland’s proposed amendment says that “every person, as a central component of an individual’s rights to liberty and equality, has the fundamental right to reproductive freedom, including but not limited to the ability to make and effectuate decisions to prevent, continue, or end one’s own pregnancy.”

“The state may not, directly or indirectly, deny, burden, or abridge the right unless justified by a compelling state interest achieved by the least restrictive means,” the amendment says.

The bill was overwhelmingly approved by the state House of Delegates and the Senate, both of which are controlled by Democrats.

Study: Utah is no longer a majority-Mormon state

Latter-day Saints make up much less of the population of Utah than previously known, basically because of the source of those numbers.

According to a new study published in the Journal of Religion and Demography, just 42 percent of the population of Utah are Mormons. That is far lower than the 60 percent cited just a few years ago in the Salt Lake Tribune, which used 2019 data from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

They’re measuring different things, say the three sociologists who fielded the sample of 1,909 Utah residents. The church counts as members anyone who’s ever been baptized, even if they haven’t been to a meeting in years. Social scientists, however, measure how many people “self-identify” as belonging to a religious tradition — in other words, those who check the “Mormon/Latter-day Saint” box on a survey, regardless of whether they attend church.

“Migration is contributing the most,” said Ryan Cragun, one of the study’s authors and a sociology professor at the University of Tampa in Florida. Whereas in the past, Latter-day Saints would try to find ways to move to Utah, and other people would find ways to avoid moving there, that’s no longer the case. The state’s flourishing economy and proximity to the mountains have proved to be a draw for many who are not Mormon.

VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

Religious fundraising halted in Calif. schools

FFRF has persuaded a California school district to no longer permit religious fundraising in its schools.

A concerned Castaic Union School District parent reported to FFRF that Castaic Middle School was holding a fundraiser for “Three Angels Haiti,” a Christian ministry, organized and promoted by administrators and teachers at Castaic Middle School. Three Angels Haiti’s mission is “to help children in Haiti escape poverty so that they may experience God’s love.” It also describes its goals as “to help [children] escape poverty, encounter Jesus and become part of a healthy home.” Students in the Christian school supported by the ministry “line up by class every school day and recite Psalm 23 and the Lord’s Prayer and then sing the national anthem and some worship songs before heading to their classrooms.”

Organizing a fundraiser that employs school staff and resources to proselytize children in Haiti violates basic constitutional principles, FFRF attorney Chris Line wrote to Castaic Union School District Superintendent Bob Brauneisen.

FFRF requested that the school district end the religious fundraiser, redirect its charitable efforts to a secular organization, and refrain from all future promotion and coordination of fundraisers for religious ministries such as Three Angels Haiti.

The Castaic Union School District superintendent recently sent the following response: “The district has looked into the concerns raised in your correspondence and will be taking the following corrective actions. The district will immediately end the fundraising initiative related to ThreeAngelsHaiti.org. No such further efforts will be made. No further requests for donating to this charity will be made. Moreover, any funds collected will not be distributed to the Three Angels organization.”

FFRF gets Ill. school to end proselytizing events

School District U-46 in Elgin, Ill., has taken action to ensure students will no longer be proselytized through events held during school hours.

A community member reported that Elgin High School (EHS) Bible Club was hosting a religious event in the EHS auditorium on Nov. 15, 16 and 17, including events on the 15th and 16th that were held during school hours. At least one district teacher was promoting the event and invited students to attend while acting in official capacity.

“District promotion of a religious event sends an official message that excludes all nonreligious district students and community members,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Suzanne Johnson.

After receiving the letter, Johnson wrote to FFRF, stating that “the district intends to ensure that employees will not compel, coerce, persuade or encourage students to join in any prayer or religious activity. The district intends to take reasonable measures to ensure that students are not pressured or encouraged to join in any private prayer that may be occurring.”

Arkansas activists



The Ozarks Chapter of FFRF participated in its first Bentonville, Ark., Christmas Parade on Dec. 9, with a float displaying a beautiful, brightly lit scene of nature, and a sign wishing people a “Happy Solstice.”

“Our group largely received a warm welcome as we walked through the parade, with many people even going out of their way to thank us for being present,” wrote Chapter President Chris Sweeny. “And, as a cherry on top, a local citizen wrote an editorial to the local Arkansas Democrat Gazette on the idea of separation between church and state, which was motivated by the Ozarks Chapter of FFRF display he viewed in the Bentonville Christmas Parade!

“A special thank you goes out to LaDonna Powell, Kirsten Hawkins, Juli Odum, George and Gail Naidl, James Brazeal, Stacy Zink, Megan McGuire and others who made this Christmas parade event possible!”

Minn. teacher to stop promoting religious events

A Menahga (Minn.) Public Schools teacher will no longer use her position to participate and organize a Christian event.

A community member reported that a teacher at Menahga High School helped promote and run a religious student event, See You at the Pole, on Sept. 27, 2023. The event was described as a “global day of student prayer,” in which students are encouraged to meet at their school’s flagpole and pray before school. The event is run by a Christian organization and is explicitly Christian in nature. The teacher posted on their personal Facebook page promoting the event and implied that other school staff would be participating.

“While MPS cannot prohibit students from organizing or participating in a prayer event, the Supreme Court has stated that public school staff members must refrain from participating in the religious activities of students while acting within their governmental jobs,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Jason Kjos.

In response, Kjos conducted an in-

vestigation into the event. “I have interviewed and met with the staff member who posted about the “See You at the Pole” event and we have reviewed policy requirements together,” he wrote.

FFRF stands up for Texas public school students

Students in the Reagan County ISD in Big Lake, Texas, are free from a teacher’s frequent attempts to indoctrinate them into Christianity, thanks to FFRF’s diligent work.

A fourth-grade social studies teacher was promoting personal religious beliefs in the classroom and teaching the Christian bible to students. FFRF’s complainant reported that on Oct. 20, 2023, the teacher explained in a Facebook post that they checked out two Christian bibles and permitted students to read them during class time rather than teaching students actual social studies lessons. The teacher had a history of promoting religion on their Facebook page, including referring to being a public school teacher as a “ministry outside of church,” having their students write about Jesus because “they know who their teacher serves,” and sharing

a graphic that implied homosexuality is an “abomination.”

“The district has a duty to ensure that its teachers are not using their positions to indoctrinate students,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Eric Hallmark.

Upon receiving the letter, the Underwood Law Firm, serving as general counsel to the district, responded to FFRF. Attorney Fred A. Stormer informed that Hallmark conducted an investigation into the matter and discovered that the teacher claimed that they had no intention of promoting or endorsing religion in the classroom, and requests to read the bible were initiated by the students and occurred during free time. Additionally, Hallmark directed the teacher to refrain from expressions of religious viewpoints in the future. “[The teacher] acknowledged these limitations for public schools and chose to tender [their] resignation, effective as of the end of school today, Dec. 1, 2023,” Stormer wrote.

Your weekly antidote to the Religious Right

FREETHOUGHT RADIO

PODCASTS AND BROADCASTS

FIND OUT MORE: ffrf.org/radio

— Hosted by Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor —
Slightly irreverent views, news, music & interviews

FFRF.ORG

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

FFRF'S

Ask an Atheist

Wednesdays
at Noon (Central)*

On Facebook Live

Send in your comments & questions via Facebook or
AskAnAtheist@ffrf.org
*With occasional reruns.

No more prayers before S.C. district games

The Kershaw County School District in Camden, S.C., will no longer be broadcasting prayers before football games.

A concerned community member reported that the district had been imposing prayer on students, parents and community members before its football games. Reportedly, on Oct. 6, 2023, a preacher from a local church delivered a Christian prayer over the loudspeaker before a football game at North Central High School. The prayer was delivered “in Jesus’ name” and made requests to “our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” The complainant was an atheist and felt alienated by this official school-sponsored Christian prayer.

“The Supreme Court has specifically struck down invocations given over the loudspeaker at public school athletic events, even when student-led,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent J. Harrison Goodwin.

In response, FFRF received an email from legal representative for the district, John Reagle. “It appears that the prayer at issue was not consistent with the district policy regarding messages at athletic events,” Reagle wrote. Reagle thanked FFRF for the continued interest in the rights of students and families.

Texas school social media pages free from religion

The Lewisville ISD in Texas will refrain from posting religiously motivated media to its Facebook page after FFRF called a religious post into question.

A concerned alumni and community member reported that on Oct. 24 the official Lewisville High School Facebook page shared a post that included a photograph of the football coach and players, with the bottom of the photograph reading: “When all is said and done, and you are standing before our creator, he’s not going to ask you how many state championship rings you have, but rather ‘How many lives have you impacted in a way that brings honor and glory to him?’”

“In order to protect students’ First Amendment rights, we ask that the district investigate this matter and ensure that Lewisville HS removes the post and refrains from promoting religion via its social media channels moving forward,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Legal Counsel D’Ann Lacey Bey.

Bey then informed FFRF that an investigation had taken place. “In the interest of resolving this matter, the above

image has been removed from the Lewisville High School Facebook page and the campus has been reminded of its obligation to comply with district policies regarding religion,” Bey wrote.

Iowa school’s football program removes religion

The Pella CSD in Iowa has taken steps to ensure that the Pella High School football team will no longer be infused with Christianity.

A concerned parent reported that the Pella High School football team’s official motto was “TLCBF,” which stood for “Trust, Love, Commitment, Belief and Faith.” The official website included a description of “faith” as “What is the only thing in life that cannot be taken away from you? Take a look at Job’s life for the answer.” Additionally, during the Oct. 6 freshman football game’s half-time show, the school broadcasted overtly Christian music with numbers references to Jesus Christ.

“The district’s actions send an official message that excludes all nonreligious and non-Christian district students and community members,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to district legal counsel Danielle J. Haindfield.

After receiving the letter, FFRF was informed by Haindfield that district Superintendent Greg Ebeling investigated the situation, directly meeting with the coach to discuss these concerns. “Pella High School football team’s official motto has been modified to eliminate references to the biblical story of Job,” she wrote. Additionally, after reviewing the concern regarding halftime show music, the district will be more mindful of its music selections.

Football pregame prayer ended at Neb. school

FFRF took action to ensure that student athletes at Omaha Westside High School in Nebraska would not be coerced into prayer before games.

Reportedly, the head football coach directed students to pray before the Nov. 21 Class A state championship game. A report and video from a local reporter confirmed the complaint. In the video, the coach ordered all the student athletes to kneel around him and participate in a sectarian prayer led by a student.

“Student athletes have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination when participating in their public school’s athletics program,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

After receiving the letter, Superintendent Mike Lucas emailed FFRF, informing of the coming change. “We will

make sure that all coaches and sponsors understand this important issue and that requiring prayer is not appropriate,” he wrote.

No more religious trips at Texas school district

Santo ISD in Santo, Texas, learned a valuable lesson about taking students to indoctrination museums, and will plan secular student outings in the future, after receiving a complaint from FFRF.

A concerned community member reported that on Nov. 8, 2023, Santo High School students took a field trip to the Enduring World Museum, a museum founded “to teach Christians the history of their bible and to teach the history of written communication.” Ostensibly, the purpose of the trip was for students to view a replica of the Gutenberg printing press. However, the museum featured primarily Christian messages, symbols and iconography on display throughout the museum. One complainant reported that one wall display inside the museum stated that “facts disputing Christianity have been proven wrong and Christianity is 100 percent proven and is the most accurate recounting ever.”

“Even if attendance on the field trip was voluntary — though our complainant states that students and parents were not given a chance to opt-out of attendance — voluntariness is not a safeguard against violating students’ First Amendment rights,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote.

Superintendent Greg Gilbert reached out to FFRF shortly after. “Your communication is received without opposition,” he wrote. “The intent of campus participation was believed to be historical and secular in nature.” Gilbert concluded that the district will aim to be more cognizant in the future of the principle of state/church separation.

FFRF ends pastor-led prayers at S.D. school

FFRF successfully intervened to keep religion out of assemblies in South Dakota’s Miller School District.

A concerned district employee informed FFRF that a pastor opened and closed the district’s Veterans Day assembly on Nov. 9 with prayers. The assembly reportedly took place during the school day on district property and required compulsory attendance by the entire student body, grades pre-K through 12. The pastor asked the audience of students and staff to stand before he began the assembly with the following prayer:

“Father, we thank you that we were formed as one nation under God with liberty and justice for all. Thank you for those principles and Lord, we just ask you today that you just guide and direct the leaders of this country. Father, I pray for those in service that were disabled in

one way or another that you would just bring peace to them, Lord. Just be with them and touch them, guide them and direct them in Jesus’ name Amen.”

The pastor also gave the second prayer in Jesus’ name. Additionally, the pastor made religious remarks throughout the assembly.

In a letter to Miller School District Superintendent Eric Norden, FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote, “In order to comply with the Constitution, the district must investigate this matter and ensure that no future school-sponsored events include prayer.”

Additionally, the district displayed clear favoritism toward religion over nonreligion and Christianity over all other faiths. The district serves a diverse population with diverse religious beliefs, including Jews, Muslims, atheists and agnostics.

Following FFRF’s letter, the district took action.

“I want to assure you that we have discussed this issue with our attorney, and we are committed to ensuring that there will be no future violations of the constitutional principle of separation between state and church in the Miller School District,” Norden wrote in reply.

W.Va. recovery programs have secular options

After FFRF’s intervention, a West Virginia judge has modified the language used by his drug court to ensure it is clear that participants have secular options.

The state/church watchdog was contacted by someone required to attend Judge Jason Wharton’s Mid-Ohio Valley Adult Drug Court, who reported that the program mandated participation in Alcoholics Anonymous/Narcotics Anonymous. The complainant provided paperwork from the court listing the requirements for each phase of the treatment program, which clearly indicated that participation in Alcoholics Anonymous/Narcotics Anonymous was compulsory. The FFRF complainant requested an alternative secular recovery treatment (SMART Recovery) but this request was denied by Mid-Ohio Valley Regional Day Report Center Executive Director Hernando Escadon.

The central components of 12-step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous/Narcotics Anonymous, are religious in nature, FFRF pointed out. These programs require recognition of a higher power and require participants to turn their lives over to a personified, gendered “god.” While requiring a religious addiction recovery support program as one of multiple options is permissible, the Mid-Ohio Valley Adult Drug Court violated the First Amendment when it requires participation in solely religious programs, FFRF Attorney Chris Line wrote to Wharton.

FFRF’s insistence yielded the desired results.


“I have reviewed the documents that you submitted and directed the drug court probation officer to modify the documents to reflect ‘a program such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Smart Recovery or other program approved by the court,’” Wharton responded. “I was not aware of the specific language on the form you included, but I believe that the modified language will make it much more clear to the participants from the onset that they have other options besides Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous.



We Dissent is a monthly podcast by three secular women, who also happen to be powerhouse attorneys at the major U.S. secular organizations, including FFRF.

Join us as we discuss developments affecting the separation of church and state in the US Supreme Court and lower federal courts.

Join us @ we-dissent.org



The Not So Good Book: What Does the ‘Holy Bible’ Really Teach?

By Brian Bolton
Foreword by Dan Barker
Illustrated by Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Steve Benson

A sourcebook for all Americans who consider fundamentalist Christian zealots to be a threat to religious freedom.

—Published by FFRF. 368 pages / PB \$15 Item #FB147

Buy it from FFRF online ffrf.org/shop



The Born Again Skeptic’s Guide to the Bible

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

By Ruth Hurmence Green

— 440 pages / PB \$15 Item #FB12

Published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online @ ffrf.org/shop

Action fund

Continued from page 1

Theocrat and Secularist of the Week

With the Action Fund’s “Secularist of the Week” and “Theocrat of the Week” segments, we are able to tell you who is working overtime to threaten the separation of state and church and who is working to protect it. Some of our notable theocrats have been the Texas Supreme Court, U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson and New York City Mayor Eric Adams. And some of our outstanding secularists have been LeVar Burton, Wis. Sen. Kelda Roys and U.S. Rep. Maxwell Frost. The most important thing about these folks is that many of them have been or soon will be running for election or re-election.

Dynamic Scorecard

Because we now have the Action Fund, we were able to roll out our new Dynamic Scorecard for the U.S. House. Unlike typical end-of-Congress assessments, we aimed to make ours a proactive lobbying tool. While many members of Congress support the separation of state and church, not all prioritize it. Our goal is to utilize the Action Fund’s Dynamic Scorecard to encourage more members to champion our cause. As a result, the scorecard helped to boost cosponsorship for crucial bills and expand the Congressional Freethought Caucus, which now boasts 20 members — twice its size since its inception in 2018. Among them are 15 members with perfect 100/100 Dynamic Scorecard scores, including Reps. Susan Wild (Pa.), Hank Johnson (Ga.) and Sean Casten (Ill.).

Members are currently scored on factors such as their membership in the Congressional Freethought Caucus, and co-sponsoring key bills such as the Do No Harm Act, Women’s Health Protection Act, and the Supreme Court Ethics Recusal and Transparency Act.

Endorsements

Now, with the Action Fund, we’re able to do something we’ve never done before — endorse candidates. In 2023, we felt it was necessary to weigh in on the state Supreme Court race here in Wisconsin and endorse Janet Protasiewicz.

The Action Fund allowed us to get involved with organizations like America Votes, which acts as an organizing body for civil rights groups. We can now work in concert with other C4s and PACs dedicated to abortion rights, LGBTQ rights, the environment and labor. We’re able to share resources, polling data and intelligence to win races like Protasiewicz’s.

Look for more Action Fund endorsements in marquee races for president and for the Congressional Freethought Caucus. We’ll be able to aid in the election of vulnerable incumbents. We can also begin to flex our political muscles and weigh in on critical races and endorse candidates at the state and local level, especially in school board races, and uplift a new generation of secular leaders.

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.



ACTION FUND

The articles on this page are from the FFRF Action Fund, a 501(c)(4) lobbying entity which reimburses FFRF for the space in Freethought Today. For more information about the FFRF Action Fund, go to ffrfaction.org.

Health Share Transparency Act

Thanks to the Action Fund, we’ve been able to increase our lobbying efforts. In the past few weeks, the Health Share Transparency Act has been reintroduced.

As you may know, the Health Share Transparency Act protects consumers from the deceptive practices of Health Care Sharing Ministries (HCSMs). HCSMs are junk products meant to mimic insurance in which members, who typically share religious beliefs, make monthly payments to cover health care expenses of themselves and other enrolled HCSCM members. HCSMs are not considered insurance, and they can arbitrarily deny claims at their discretion, so there is no guarantee that members’ claims will be paid, even for expenses that meet membership guidelines for “covered services.” It goes without saying that abortion and contraception for most HCSMs are non-starters and are not covered by most HCSMs. Plus, stories continue to emerge about how consumers are being duped into joining HCSMs.

The Health Share Transparency Act is one of our marquee bills and we are the primary organization that is taking responsibility to gain support in Congress for it. We’ve been able to double the number of cosponsors on the bill and we plan to add the bill to the Dynamic Scorecard in the near future. We have been working with our allies on the Hill, with other secular and health care groups, and storytellers to advance it. We also hope to introduce numerous state Health Share Transparency Acts in 2024 as well.

Conclusion

The formation of the Action Fund has been a game-changer. This has enabled us to endorse candidates, advance critical bills, and increase the size of the Congressional Freethought Caucus. Looking forward, we’ll continue to use the Action Fund to expand FFRF’s impact, introduce new legislation and endorse candidates in key races, all while advocating for secular values and the rights of nonbelievers.

Mark Dann is the director of governmental affairs for the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

State advocacy

Continued from page 1

panding private school vouchers, plastering “In God We Trust” in public schools, broadening abortion restrictions, and trying to make life miserable for transgender youth — just to name a few issues. We issued more than 150 action alerts to our nearly 50,000 advocates. Most of these were limited to a specific state, but others were nationwide. In total, more than 16,000 advocates took action, contacting government officials more than 152,000 times.

None of this would have been possible without our newest addition to the team, State Policy Manager Ryan Dudley, who has become an integral part of the team. We monitored bills in all 50 states, tracking and reviewing nearly 2,000 bills.

The new Ryan was given a proverbial trial by fire, taking charge of our efforts regarding a head-spinning legislative session in Texas. Theocrats there tried to “religicize” public schools with bills requiring daily time for prayer, placing Ten Commandments displays in every classroom, allowing school districts to hire chaplains in place of licensed counselors, and creating a private school voucher scheme. The first two of these were defeated (although we’re already seeing a copycat of the Ten Commandments bill in Oklahoma).

Incredibly, Texas’s chaplain bill was signed into law by Gov. Greg Abbott, who has never made a secret of his own religious favoritism. FFRF is closely monitoring school districts who take up the reckless invitation to hire chaplains, inviting a state/church catastrophe for no reason whatsoever. But Abbott’s big push in 2023 was for private school vouchers, diverting taxpayer dollars from public schools to private religious schools. We’ve seen similar programs fail to help students academically all over the country, besides forcing taxpayers to fund religious instruction. Abbott has vowed to call repeated special legislative sessions until the ill-conceived scheme passes, and to primary any legislators in his own party who stand up for reason. Fortunately, so far, his efforts have failed.

In other states, vouchers and the myth of “school choice” have been spreading like wildfire, in what may well be the greatest single threat to state/church separation in the United States today. The current trend is for “universal” vouchers, meaning removing all income limitations. For example, with universal vouchers, billionaires who already send their children to private schools will now get that tuition paid for by taxpayers. The fact is that the majority of voucher recipients already attended or planned on attending religious schools, and, on average, voucher recipients do not perform better than their public school counterparts.

Educating the public, lawmakers

I argued the case against vouchers in an op-ed to a prominent newspaper in Ohio, which was debating making their

long-standing voucher program universal. A few days later, I was surprised to receive a handwritten thank-you letter from Ohio’s highly esteemed U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown! Even though our efforts were unsuccessful in this instance, with Ohio’s voucher expansion passing, it is a good reminder that prominent and influential figures are taking note of the important work we’re doing.

We’ve also partnered with various organizations to host content-based webinars on topics ranging from medical aid in dying — overcoming religious testimony that allowing terminally ill adults to control their end-of-life care is impermissibly “playing God” — to blasphemy, which remains on the books in six states. Those blasphemy laws are unenforceable, of course, but with long dormant abortion bans from the Civil War era recently springing back to life, we have learned that such archaic laws must be repealed, not ignored.

Rapid Response

In addition to juggling this chaotic swirl of issue areas, our team takes the lead on responding to current events requiring an immediate response. If the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives says that state/church separation is a “misnomer,” or if a top state education official describes the Ten Commandments as a founding document of America, we jump in to correct the record. In 2023, we sent about 20 such letters, and sent out 66 similar press releases. We also began a fun tradition of naming a weekly “Theocrat of the Week” and “Secularist of the Week,” which we feature on social media and on our website to give credit (and discredit) where it is due and to keep our advocates informed.

Looking ahead to 2024


Going into a presidential election year, the FFRF Action Fund is eager to investigate candidates, including at the local and state level, and endorse those who are committed to upholding the constitutional separation between state and church. We made a few endorsements last year, including the highly consequential race for Wisconsin Supreme Court, in which we proudly urged Wisconsinites to elect Janet Protasiewicz. Make sure to pay attention in 2024 as we seek to make many more endorsements, and, if you know anyone running for office who would be a state/church champion, please urge them to seek an endorsement from the FFRF Action Fund.

For those of you dear readers who participated in our legislative action alerts, we offer our genuine gratitude — we could not do our work without you. If you are not receiving these alerts, you can sign up at ffrfaction.org/join-us/. We look forward to another year of educating lawmakers and fighting for our cherished constitutional rights in the sphere where it has maximum effect, which is at the state and local level.

Ryan Jayne is FFRF’s senior policy counsel.

Just Pretend

A Book For Young Freethinkers



By Dan Barker
Illustrated by Kati Treu

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

Published by FFRF \$12 Item #FB103

Buy it from FFRF online @ ffrf.org/shop



Unabashed Atheist Mug

Sunfire red, glazed ceramic handcrafted mug with Unabashed Atheist medallion. American-made, 14 fl. oz.

\$35 each Item #MU03
\$60 for two

Prices include over \$10 shipping per mug.

Buy it online @ ffrf.org/shop

Oxford debate

‘This house believes God is a delusion’

By Dan Barker

In November 2012, the same week President Obama won his second national election, I was at Oxford University to debate the proposition “This house believes in God” for the Oxford Student Union. Along with me were philosopher Peter Millican and skeptic Michael Shermer. Our opponents were Peter Hitchens (brother of Christopher), mathematician John Lennox and Anglican priest Joanna Collicut. At the end of the debate, the students voted with their feet by exiting through either the Proposition or Opposition door. The vote was 143 to 168, which means we won by a greater margin than Obama did that week.

Eleven years later, on Nov. 23, 2023 (Thanksgiving Day in America), I was invited back for another Oxford debate. Since the Oxford debate tradition started in 1823, this was its 200th anniversary.

This time the proposition was reversed: “This house believes God is a delusion.”

I was joined by sociologist and author Phil Zuckerman and by Oxford graduate Alex O’Connor, founder of the “Cosmic Skeptic” podcast. Our opponents were African Catholic Cardinal Peter Turkson (who some say is in the pool of potential future popes), Hindu author Amish Trepathi and Indarjit Singh, a Sikh who is a member of the British House of Lords. Kicking off the debate were two eloquent statements by Oxford students Chloe Davis for the proposition, who argued that most god arguments can be replaced by



Photos by Cynthia Struye

From left: debaters Dan Barker, Phil Zuckerman and Alex O’Connor and special guest Richard Dawkins inside the Oxford Union hall.

science, and David Logan for the opposition, who argued that the appearance of “fine tuning” is evidence for a designer.

Phil, Alex and I had coordinated our remarks. Phil energetically introduced the topic from a sociological perspective by asking: If god belief is not a delusion, why is there so much suffering in countries with high levels of theism? Alex also articulately addressed the problem of suffering from a scientific perspective.

It appears that none of the invited speakers on the other side had communicated with each other, much less organized to put up a united front. They gave unconnected independent lectures on the virtues of their respective faith traditions that barely made reference to the topic.

My job, as the final speaker for the

proposition, was to rebut arguments raised by the other side. But the only serious argument came not from any of the invited speakers but from the student David Logan’s defense of “fine tuning.” Trepathi did insist that God cannot be a delusion because, ultimately, we are all gods, but I considered that more a statement of Hindu faith than an intellectual argument. Cardinal Turkson and Lord Singh, who put up no arguments, essentially asserted that there is no conflict between their faith and science.

In my opinion, the whole debate came down to “fine tuning” — the idea that the initial constants of the universe appear exquisitely tuned to permit life. Since my next book *Contraduction* (to be published later this year by Hypatia Press) is about that topic, I was prepared. After briefly telling my preacher-to-atheist story and offering six quick reasons why “God” is a delusion, I likened the “fine tuning” argument to the person

who is amazed at how so many rivers were made to flow along state borders. Of course, that is backward. The rivers came first. As astrophysicist (and late friend of FFRF) Victor Stenger wrote: “The universe was not fine tuned for us. We were fine tuned for the universe.”

Phil, Alex and I (as well as Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, who was present) were feeling very positive about our performance, until the surprising result was announced. Our side lost by a vote of 125 to 160.

That outcome seemed impossible, not because of our performance or the other side’s lack of performance (you can be the judge of that by watching it online at youtube.com/@OxfordUnion), but because more than half of young people in Britain today are not religious. How could 56 percent of an educated Oxford audience vote for the existence of a god? One of the organizers, who seemed as surprised as we were, suggested that the room was packed with students from religious colleges in the area who were attracted by the topic. Another organizer told me that even some atheists did not want to go so far as to accuse their religious friends of being delusional. I don’t know if that is true, but the topic was indeed much narrower than the “Does God exist?” debate 11 years ago. A false belief may not necessarily be a delusion.

In any event, 44 percent is much higher than we atheists usually get at an American debate. For that many people anywhere to agree that God is a delusion is a vast improvement from even a decade ago.

Dan Barker is co-president of FFRF. Bruce Johnson, FFRF’s video director, accompanied Barker on the trip and filmed much of the event. A future “Freethought Matters” episode will be devoted to that debate.



The outside sign on the wall of the Oxford Union hall.



FFRF Video Director Bruce Johnson films a discussion between Dan Barker, left, and Phil Zuckerman prior to the Oxford debate on Nov. 23, 2023.



The Oxford Union has “Noes” and “Ayes” doors for people to exit to vote for the winner of the debate.



The debate team members, including Dan Barker, enter the Oxford Union in front of a packed hall.

THEY SAID WHAT?

To strengthen our families, we must dedicate ourselves to upholding true freedom of religion — rather than freedom from religion — and rediscover the fundamental importance of faith to our country.

Mike Pompeo, former secretary of state, in his op-ed, “This Thanksgiving, remember what makes America strong: Our people and our families.”

New York Post, 11-23-23

I think if you had a real election and Jesus came down and God came down and said, “I’m gonna be the scorekeeper here,” I think we’d win [in California], I think we’d win in Illinois, and I think we’d win in New York.

Donald Trump, speaking at an event in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Rolling Stone, 12-2-23

I believe that chaplains will greatly benefit our school students, teachers and other school district staff. Our schools are not God-free zones.

Texas state Sen. Mayes Middleton, a Republican who authored the bill that would allow clergy members to act as school counselors in the Katy School District.

ABC-13, 12-5-23

I think that if we find these kinds of people in Burundi, it is better to take them to a stadium and stone them. That’s what they deserve.

Burundi President Evariste Ndayishimiye, a Catholic, speaking about gay people during an event where he answered questions from journalists and members of the public.

New York Times, 12-31-23

I want to encourage people to run for office. . . We need people that fear God, that believe they can’t hide from God, and ultimately they’re going to give account to God; those are the best people to hold positions, whether it’s local or in the federal government.

U.S. Rep. Mary Miller of Illinois, explaining in an interview that God called her to public office.

TonyPerkins.com 12-25-23

FFRF convention hotel rooms now available

Join the Freedom From Religion Foundation at its 47th annual convention from Sept. 26-29, 2024, at the Sheraton Denver Downtown Hotel. Hotel reservations can now be made online or by phone.

If you need an accessible room, please state your needs when you book the reservation.

Address: The Sheraton Denver Downtown, 1550 Court Place, Denver, CO 80202.

Book online: ffrf.us/hotelffrfcon2024

Call: (303) 893-3333. Make sure to state that you are with the “Freedom From Religion” room block.

The most current convention information can be found at ffrf.org/outreach/convention.

Convention speech

Jeremiah Camara: ‘The Age of Appeasement’

This is the speech (edited for length) given by Jeremiah Camara at FFRF’s national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 13. To read the entire speech, go to freethoughttoday.com. He was introduced by FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. You can watch the video of the speech (and all other convention speeches) at ffrf.us/con23.

Dan Barker: I first met Jeremiah Camara in 2012 in Manila, Philippines. We were both invited to speak there at the Filipino Atheist and Agnostic Society. Soon after, he wrote and directed “Contradictions: A Question of Faith.” Then, he directed and produced “Holy Hierarchy: The Religious Roots of Racism in America.” These documentaries follow Jeremiah’s very popular YouTube series, “Slave Sermons,” and a book that he wrote, called *The New Doubting Thomas: The Bible, Black Folks and Blind Belief*. He and his wife Granada Higgins lend their time and expertise to FFRF’s Executive Board. Jeremiah is finishing up a new documentary called “The Age of Appeasement,” and he’s going to give you a sneak preview of that. Please welcome the multit talented Jeremiah Camara.

By Jeremiah Camara

Greetings, everyone.

The title of this talk is the same, of course, as my upcoming documentary, which I hope to have ready in March. It’s called “The Age of Appeasement.”

They say that change is the only constant in the universe. But, the world has dramatically changed in mass media, movies, commercials, marketing ads, in terms of the inclusion of African Americans in all areas of mass media.

It’s now estimated that Blacks make up 90 percent of all the commercials. So, if you guys watch television, you’ve seen it. You can’t ignore it. How is that possible when Blacks are 12 percent of the population, but are in 90 percent of the commercials? We have never experienced such diversity in American mass media — or what appears to be diversity.

Black representation seems to be everywhere. Many are scratching their heads and very quietly wondering what on Earth is going on? Have Blacks now risen to prominence? Is it because we live in a world where social media can make or break us in an instant?

This is where appeasement comes into play. Here’s a definition of appeasement: It’s giving people what they want to prevent them from harming you or being angry with you. Appeasement is an old political strategy that’s been used by many countries throughout world history.

Individuals as well as companies can be

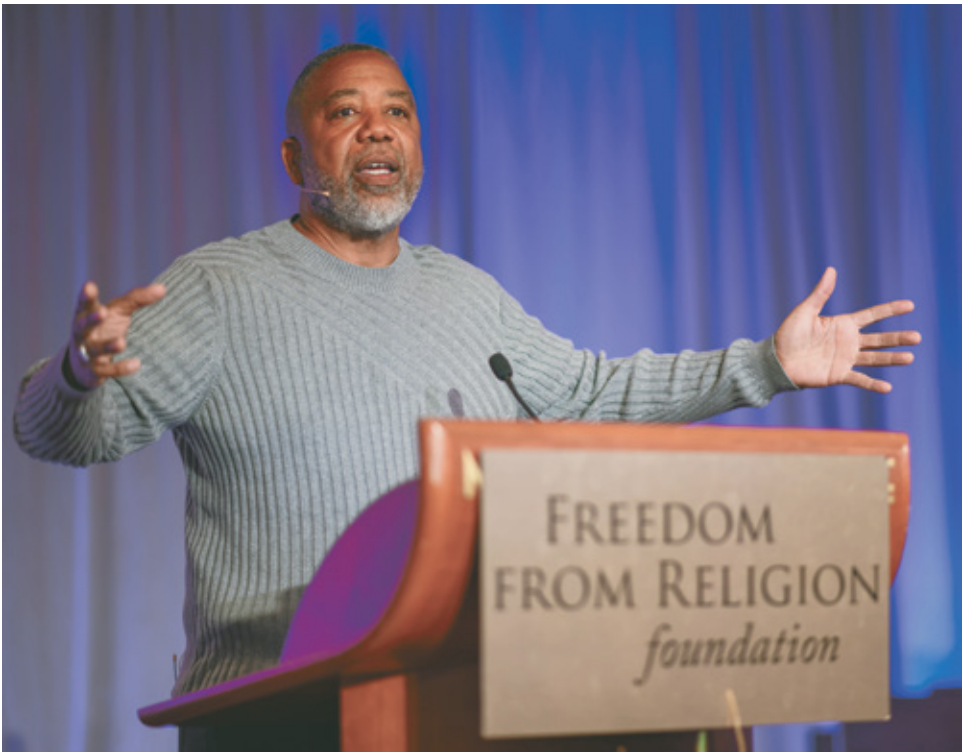


Photo by Chris Line

Writer, film director and producer Jeremiah Camara speaks about the “Age of Appeasement” during his speech to the FFRF audience on Oct. 13 in Madison, Wis.

restored or ruined in an instant nowadays. So, maintaining a wholesome, racist-free, diverse, inclusive representation seems to be in the best interest to the bottom line of most companies. Companies appear to be launching what I refer to as preemptive strikes by placing Blacks as the face of their advertising campaigns so that any claims of racism can be immediately squashed by pointing out that their ads actually use Blacks as the face of their marketing campaigns. It’s nearly impossible to see three commercials in a row that don’t have Blacks in them.

Have you ever noticed that when Blacks and whites are together in commercials, especially in comedic situations, that Blacks are always — I said always, not 99, not 98, but 100 percent of the time — portrayed as the smart ones, the ones that seem to have it together, and whites are portrayed as the goofy ones, the clumsy ones, the ones that just don’t seem to get it. I know you guys have noticed that. You’ve seen it! That’s appeasement.

Let’s show these commercials, and this is just a smidgen. I have so many that I just can’t show them all.

[Video shows dozens of television ads featured Black and white actors.]

OK, cut! I could have gone on for the next hour. I’m serious, this is just a smidgen, and I’ve never seen the reverse.

Something is going on.

When we consistently see this kind of blatant appeasement, we know for certain that there is an agenda. I’m not saying that it’s something sinister, but there is an agenda that’s taking place. It’s an agenda that attempts to make us believe that racism has now somehow evaporated into the wind.

Let’s move on to Part 2.

Changing Cadillac models

Malcolm X said that racism is like a Cadillac, that it only changes models over the years. And when George Floyd was publicly executed in this digital society, our mobile phones captured this senseless act in real time. The harrowing footage of George Floyd pleading for the breath of life made America and many parts of the world pause and think about what racism, hatred and bigotry actually look like up close and personal.

Something had to be done, not necessarily to make Blacks better, but to make Blacks FEEL better.

So, the Cadillac industrial complex had to hurry up and change its model. The media began to bend over backwards to make Black people feel better about living in a society replete with racism. What kind of Cadillac model do we find ourselves in now? I call it the age of appeasement.

Are we all just hoodwinked and bamboozled with the illusion of inclusion trick? The harsh and undeniable fact is that there’s quite simply an impossibility of equality.

Why? Because Blacks were excluded from many of the early wealth-building industries in this country — the cotton industry, the textile industry, the steel industry, the food industry, the automobile industry and, in many respects, the technological industry. All these things helped to build the wealth of this country and Blacks were excluded from that.

But where else would we expect Blacks to be in terms of collective economic wealth? No competitor chooses to come in last place, or to hover around the bottom rungs of society. Although African Americans are being vastly overrepresented in terms of mass media, Blacks are

light years from so-called equality, justice and economic independence. Although Black actors and actresses may be overrepresented in films and commercials and whatever, Blacks make up only 6 percent of the writers, directors and producers of U.S.-produced films.

Blacks still have roughly the same collective wealth today as they had nearly 150 years ago. This is amazing. In 1863, Blacks owned one half of 1 percent of the nation’s wealth. Today it’s slightly over 1.5 percent. Only 22 percent of Black households make \$100,000 or more per year. The abundance of Black representation in mass media does not reflect the true state of Black America.

What we are experiencing in mass media is simply appeasement tactics. We’ll give you the illusion that you are part of all of this, that you’re doing well.

Black net worth is \$24,000 per household. White net worth is \$189,000 per household. There’s an \$11 trillion racial gap in wealth. One out of every five Black families has a negative net worth.

Now, here comes the juicy religious stuff that ties into all of this. The stuff that will prove that America has only changed its model of Cadillac.

Every bleeding-heart liberal, every so-called nonracist advertiser or business, nearly every liberal white who plants a “Black Lives Matter” sign on their lawn, no matter how much one may stand against racism, most will have a line in the sand that they draw somewhere.

There’s one area where whites will continue to rule exclusively. Many humanists, atheists, agnostics or freethinking groups are very proud of their inclusive stances — and they should be. They tend to stand against racism, sexism, etc. People who attend antireligious conferences like FFRF’s and many others are predominantly white, but one common reason why so many drop religion and become freethinkers is because they are dead set against the violence that characterizes this God of the bible.

But, throughout history, it seems that violence has kept our stomachs full. If it weren’t for the violence projected upon Africans during the colonization period and the violence of chattel enslavement, whites would not have many of the privileges that they’ve enjoyed for centuries. Where would this country actually be without violence?

Am I saying that violence would be accepted by whites today in order to maintain a system of white over non-white? No, I’m not saying that. So, what exactly is this line that most liberal whites tend to draw to keep at least the psychological supremacy over Blacks is the line of white biblical iconography in mass media and public places? No one, not even our secular groups, are saying a word about it. It’s so normal that it’s not even noticed.

White Jesus

I have on my phone at least 100 videos that somewhere shows white religious iconography, whether it be Moses or Jesus or whatever. We just take it for granted. We don’t even notice it.

But, no matter how diverse the media wants us to believe things are, they draw a line when it comes to diversity in all things biblically related.

Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime and all the other networks that have biblical films all project Jesus and his disciples and all the other men of the bible as white. No one says anything about it, not even the Blacks. Do we even understand the devastating psychology of all of this?



Photo by Chris Line

Jeremiah Camara talks with other convention attendees at his table during the Saturday evening dinner in Madison, Wis.

When we subject Blacks and other non-whites to biblical images that reflect an ethnicity different than their own, we inherently do a psychological disservice to that individual.

The nonwhite often perceives this depiction as authentic and subconsciously sees themselves as subordinate, and sometimes even as inferior. So much of what we believe as individuals starts with the imagery of what we've been exposed to. Imagery is much, much more powerful than the written word.

When nonwhites see images of a Jesus and other white biblical imagery, the brain concludes that God must be white.

My wife had a hospital visit in Atlanta, and, as soon as you walk in the door, you can see it's saturated with white biblical imagery. I hope we can appreciate the psychology of that. This is just public iconography that you'll see everywhere — Lowe's, Home Depot, Walmart.

If this non-historical Jesus is portrayed as a white man, then white supremacy must be justified. If he's portrayed as a white man everywhere you go, I don't blame white supremacists, it's gotta be justified. Because if God and Jesus were portrayed as Black, as a Black person I would kinda have my chest stuck out a little bit, because no matter what you say, I know Jesus is Black, so whatever!

But what if white Jesus and all the other biblical characters reflected Black people? Hmm. Things would change.

The most liberal of whites would probably not stand for this, even though these biblical images do not reflect any proof of history. We might not believe white iconography is everywhere, but it is. It's like when you buy a car and then you see that car everywhere? That's how I am. I see white Jesus everywhere. Why? Because I'm looking for him.

White religious iconography is routinely seen at Walmart, Walgreens, CVS, churches, hospitals, airports, billboards, books, movies, doctor's offices, schools, universities, everywhere. I just want you to walk now with your eyes open, OK?

Now, if Jesus did exist, which we all know he didn't, for a thousand reasons beyond the scope of this talk, if he did exist, he definitely would not be white in the part of the world where he was allegedly born and speaking that particular language.

But how very human it is of us to actually assign an ethnicity to a god. That is insane. And a language predicated upon a human alphabet.

We accept and we tolerate people believing in a god in the privacy of their homes and churches, but we take a stance against public displays, right? Why isn't white Jesus considered a public display? Why aren't we offended by this like we are against other displays of religion? We're secularists and we don't take umbrage against not only seeing the existence of a lie, but seeing this lie portrayed as a white man at the same time pretending that this is such a diverse and all-inclusive society. Is this because most secular groups are white?

Jesus, as we know, is not history. We have no historical portraits of this biblical Jesus or any other biblical figure because they're not historical in the first place. White biblical Jesus in mass media is simply a matter of subconscious acceptance and historical parroting. It has nothing to do with freedom of speech or expression. The character of Jesus is projected as white because that's what history has always done, so we accept it.

You see this kind of stuff so often that you don't even pay attention to it. Now, if I ask everyone here to paint a house or to draw a house, everyone's house is going to look a little different. Or, if I ask you to paint a landscape, your landscape is going to look a little different. But if I say, "Draw



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Jeremiah Camara talks about how religious iconography almost always includes a “white Jesus.”

a picture of Jesus,” those pictures are going to look pretty much the same.

In order to change the law, I've been told that we must prove that damage has been done. I mean, there are thousands of Black churches that have white Jesus fans, and white Jesus stained into the glass windows. How is that for psychological damage?

Black people have been exposed to this white Jesus, but it causes cultural dissonance. Many so-called conscious people in the Black community call themselves conscious. They have let go of Jesus because they see him as white, but they've kept God, so they've let go of one tooth fairy for another tooth fairy.

So white Jesus in society that is pretending to be so inclusive and diverse to me is hypocritical.

Dr. Robin DeAngelo, who I had in my second film, talked about this. We can have a discussion about white monuments, confederate monuments, but we don't have a discussion about white Jesus? This is crazy.

But, let's get one thing clear: I'm definitely not talking about a Black Jesus, either. Please don't get me wrong. There's nothing so insulting as a Black person seeing a Black Jesus. That is so insulting that you have a Black Jesus, but your people are on the bottom. There are many places, especially in D.C. and Baltimore, these Black cities that have these Black Jesuses and to me, I'm offended more by that than I am the white Jesus.

Google ‘god’

We're going to do something fun right now, OK? I want you to take out your cell phones and just Google the word “god.” Then hit “images.” You see what I mean? There's no censorship there. If I Google the word “god” and then I hit “search” and then I hit “images,” it's just all white men. That's all you're gonna see. Everything is white men. That's it. There's no censorship here. So that means that it's almost by default. This country is for whites, psychologically speaking. But there's no effort to censor that. When you hit God, there should be no whites that come up on that, no ethnicities at all.

Now, we clearly see that Black minds don't matter much. Google doesn't step in

here, which it should.

Do you remember the movie “A Time To Kill”? Do you remember the lawyer played by Matthew McConaughey, who said there was a man who was going to jail for raping his daughter and they were going to put him in jail and throw away the key. And his lawyer said, “I tell you what . . . what if she was white? Close your eyes and imagine her white.” And the jury paused and they wind up setting free Samuel Jackson, who played that role. I always remember that was a very powerful scene in a movie. I want you to close your eyes and imagine that all the Jesuses that you see in Baylor and Holy Cross and Notre Dame and all the Catholic schools that you've ever attended and all the billboards and that book that's

in the dentist's and doctor's office that you see, imagine all the movies, your “Ten Commandments” and “Passion of the Christ,” imagine all of them having a Black

Jesus. Whoa. You see how you would feel? You wouldn't accept that.

And that's the way I feel. And that's the way many Black people feel. And that's the way many white people feel, but not nearly enough. So that's where the most bleeding-heart liberal or even all-inclusive secularists would draw the line.

I would love to see this biblical iconography in public places become illegal in this country. I know that's far-fetched, but I like far-fetched things. If you go in in Walmart around this holiday season, you're going to see candles, you're going to see nativity scenes, you're going to see all kinds of white biblical iconography. Why? In a world that is supposed to be so diverse, you can't trick me with these commercials, because my eyes are wide open and I see the games that are being played and I realize this is just a new-model Cadillac.

There may never be Black economic equality, but we certainly can draw attention to the fact that white biblical iconography creates a thin line between believing in a supreme being and believing in a supreme human being.

The implication of white Jesuses and the white biblical iconography are enormous, and it speaks directly to white supremacy. The question is not whether whites believe they're superior; the question is how could they not think that way? You know how

the dollar used to be backed by gold and that gave the dollar its value? The dollar could stand proud because it's backed by gold. Something has to back the belief that you're better or superior, something to make you think that way or to believe that way. And, whether it's subconscious or conscious, you have white Jesus right there. All over this country. All over the world, really. You go to Brazil, you go everywhere. We went to the Dominican Republic. My wife and I, we're not really tourist people, we do our own thing when we go out of the country. But they wanted to actually give us a tour, and when I looked at some of the tour places, half of them were churches.

When I went to some of the churches — there was nobody but Black people and brown people in that village — inside the church it was all-white Jesuses, all-white biblical iconography. That is psychological damage, people. There's something wrong with that picture and it's happening all over the world. Something is wrong.

No economic gains have been made because if the money is not integrated, we're still not integrated. The money has to be integrated. We wouldn't have most of the problems in the Black community if we had the access to the economics.

I've said this at the last three talks and I'm going to say it again, not because I'm pissed about it, but it just needs to be said. My wife and I went to the bank to get \$30,000. We were fixing up a rental property. We didn't get \$30,000 and we own commercial property outright. We own our residence outright. We couldn't even get the loan. And that is the case with many Blacks, so red-lining is still going on.

Now, without the psychological gains, especially when it pertains to this so-called God, no gains have really been made, either. It's just the illusion that these gains have been made. If Black lives truly mattered, then Black minds must matter, also.

So who other than us secularists are going to do that, take the initiative? Well, we've taken the first step and we're going to continue to fight. We have a nonprofit organization that we just started. It's called ERICA. ERICAnonprofit.org. It stands for Ending Religious Iconography in America. Please visit and let's find out if we're really sincere about changing racism, or if this age of appeasement is really just a new-model Cadillac.

I thank you guys. I appreciate it.

Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award

Abortion care is compassionate health care

This is the speech (lightly edited) given by Jen Castle at FFRF’s national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 13. She was introduced by Erin Heisler Wagner, the granddaughter of Henry Zumach, who has endowed the Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award. You can watch the video of the speech (and all other convention speeches) at ffrf.us/con23.

Erin Heisler Wagner: I lead the communications team at Planned Parenthood North Central States — a Planned Parenthood affiliate that provides expert health care, comprehensive sex education, innovative research and fierce advocacy in Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota.

Since the fall of Roe, the fight against religious fundamentalism has become a daily act at Planned Parenthood as politicians and judges have forced their religious beliefs into our health care exam rooms.

That’s why I’m honored to be here today — to represent my grandpa and present Planned Parenthood Federation of America with a \$35,000 donation from the Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award. I grew up listening to my grandpa’s stories of fighting religious fundamentalism. Whether it was founding the La Crosse Area Freethought Society or suing the city of La Crosse for allowing a Ten Commandments monument on city property, he has been active in this work for decades.

This award is his legacy, and in this eighth year, it is only growing stronger. He will be investing another \$100,000 to ensure the award can make an even stronger impact in the future.

I will always remember what I was doing when the Supreme Court leaked its decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Center*. I got a call from my grandpa. He was full of ideas for how to build up attention around the cause — some of them included calling out the Catholic Church in very creative ways. He knew this horrendous decision would put so many Americans’ rights and lives in danger. It’s truly a gift to have grandparents so involved in the fight for sexual and reproductive rights. I’m sure that’s part of why I am where I am today.

Now, a year later, he’s supporting Planned Parenthood and the fight again. I’m so happy to be here today, less than a month after abortion services were reinstated in Wisconsin, to welcome Jen Castle to accept the award on behalf of Planned Parenthood this year.

Jen Castle helps these providers across the country. As the national director of abortion service delivery at Planned Parenthood Federation of America, she leads a team that supports the delivery of exceptional abortion care through training, mentoring and consultation. Jen has worked and provided training in all abortion care clinical roles, and has been doing her heart’s work as an abortion provider since 2005. She is also one of a very few nurse practitioners in the country trained to perform procedures later in pregnancy, allowing her to provide health care that is nuanced, empathetic and sometimes even lifesaving.

Welcome, Jen Castle.



Erin Heisler Wagner, granddaughter of Henry Zumach, introduced convention speaker Jen Castle.



Jen Castle spoke at FFRF’s national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 13, 2023. Photo by Steve Solomon

By Jen Castle

Hi, everybody. Thank you, Erin, for that kind introduction, and an especially heartfelt thank you to the Freedom From Religion Foundation’s members for their continued support to Planned Parenthood, to reproductive freedom and to a better future.

I’m really honored to be here with you all today on behalf of Planned Parenthood Federation of America to accept the Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award.

As I’m sure many of you know, the resurgent white supremacist movement and its co-conspirator religious extremism are among the greatest threat the country faces. These are truly frightening times.

As Erin mentioned, my title at Planned Parenthood is national director of abortion services. When I was a young person, I felt so strongly that I wanted to do work that made a difference and given the events of the past few years, there are some times where I am reminded to be careful what you wish for. Despite my lofty title, I am just a small part of a 19-million-strong national movement made up of Planned Parenthood health centers, providers, staff, organizers and supporters. And in our work to ensure as much abortion access as possible, we are joined by many more partners. In this moment in time, doing right by people truly does take a village and then some.

Our fight is fueled by this incredible community and friends. We have been fighting like hell for the last 16 months. I’d like to start by sharing a bit about Planned Parenthood’s broad scale work which has become even more imperative since the *Dobbs* decision was handed down on June 24, 2022.

I think you know that we’ve been fighting in state and federal courts challenging abortion bans, especially where state constitutions might offer better protection for abortion rights. Of the approximately 30 cases on our litigation docket, in almost two-thirds of them the challenge has been blocked, allowing people to access the care they need. But, we aren’t just playing whack-a-mole, we are eyeing system-wide changes, as well, because we know that we can’t rely on the courts to protect our rights.

Antiabortion politicians have stacked all levels of the federal judiciary with judges hostile to reproductive rights and tilted the playing field against us. To secure our right to abortion and to restore the credibility of the judicial system, there are structural changes that need to be made. Planned Parenthood is working hand in hand with civil rights, democracy reform and reproductive justice partners, those who have led this work for decades, on key reforms to all levels of judiciary, including expanding the numbers of justices and instituting term limits for the Supreme Court, strengthening judicial ethics rules, creating additional judgeships on our lower courts and preventing single-judge districts.

Three cases

This work becomes all the more important in light of three cases filed by our opponents to undermine pillars of our country’s sexual and reproductive health care infrastructure: Title X, medication abortion, and the care provided by Planned Parenthood health care centers.

These lawsuits are a result of decades-long planning by anti-abortion organizations, politicians and individuals, not only to eliminate the federal constitutional protections for abortion under *Roe v. Wade*, but to impose their own beliefs on all of us and prevent people from controlling our own bodies.

We are bringing the full power of our movement to this existential fight — because we have to. The majority of people in this country support abortion access. They support access to birth control. They support reproductive health care and they support Planned Parenthood.

I want to pivot for just a minute and talk about something that I know folks are excited about on our action funds front: ballot measures. Last year, through ballot measures in several states, including my home state of Vermont, one of the least religious states in the country, voters resoundingly showed that the ability to control their own bodies, lives and futures is non-negotiable.

Planned Parenthood national and local organizations are continuing that momentum by supporting ballot initiatives in key states in 2023 and 2024 election cycles, including in Arizona, Florida, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Maryland, Colorado and Illinois. To be clear, they’re not a silver bullet to undo the damage the Supreme Court has caused, but they are a key part of defending or enshrining reproductive rights toward a constitutional amendment.

I want to give a huge shout-out to the state we’re meeting in right now — Wisconsin. Because of successful legislation against a law dating back to 1849, Planned Parenthood centers in Milwaukee and Madison are now once again able to provide abortion.

Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin’s organizations deserve all the credit in the world for their role in restoring patients’ access to abortion, their role in the recent state Supreme Court ideological shift and for their incredible partnership to ensure that Wisconsinites were able to get the health care they needed, even if it was across state lines. Beyond our legal and policy efforts, the work my colleagues at Planned Parenthood focus on is patient care, navigation, funding, workforce, strategy, clinic legal assistance and training.

New focus, new thinking

I hope you will indulge me in doing a little bit of bragging about some of our work in just the last year, which has required new focus and new thinking and new efforts as we do all we can to maintain access to health care that people need as bans have been enacted in almost half of our states.

We continue to focus on expanding the use of telehealth in abortion care to increase capacity to serve a surge of patients in our access states. In some places, that care can now be provided asynchronously, so a patient can request a medication abortion appointment online, they can complete their paperwork at a time that works best for their lives — maybe that’s lunchtime in the work parking lot, maybe it’s late at night after they’ve put kids to bed — and a provider can review their information at a later time and, if it’s appropriate, mail them their medication and instructions, which would include a way to contact us as needed.

In another avenue to assist our health centers with the challenges of staffing shortages that we’ve seen across health care since the pandemic, we’ve created and launched a standardized and centralized training curriculum which provided foundational training and abortion care content to over 300 new-hire individuals across over 30 of our affiliates in the last year, and beyond introductory content about abortion care, it provides sessions about anti-Black racism, about caring for LGBTQIA-plus patients and reproductive justice. Because we truly believe that in order to provide exceptional care, we need to understand our history, which is the same history that our patients collectively overcome and bring with them to our health centers. Through this work we endeavor to advance and sustain a reproductive health landscape by fostering a skilled workforce, enhancing patient care and combatting stigma.

Maybe most significantly, we have pretty quickly stood up a nationwide network of patient navigators who truly are heroes without capes. These are folks who collaborate across Planned Parenthood affiliates, abortion funds and truly across miles and states and sometimes a lot of the country to do all they can to ensure that patients, no matter where they live, can secure an appointment. This looks like someone in Texas reaching out and a patient navigator connecting them with a health center in Illinois, perhaps also arranging for gas money, a childcare subsidy and hotel.

Challenges increasing

As the number of places to access abortion care grows smaller and smaller, you can imagine the challenges that are compounding in terms of people accessing care, even for people who live in states where abortion continues to be legal. I might live in Kansas, where there are a number of providers, but those providers’ schedules are very likely full for the next three to four weeks, because that’s the closest place for people from Texas, Missouri, Louisiana to go to. So now the decisions of lawmakers in those states have carried over into mine.

An example of how important our navigators are: We had a patient navigator in an Eastern seaboard state have a patient call who was a Spanish-speaking 12-year-old needing care later in the second trimester. This is care that not everyone provides. It can be challenging to access. The patient’s mom was her support and would accompany her, but the providers in the closest city were booked out for more than three weeks and neither could travel by plane due to being undocumented, so our navigator reached out to the patient navigation community for help with other options and immediately colleagues across the Northeast gave options of places to access care in New York City and Boston and offered to cover travel and procedure cost. I truly cannot imagine how patients with so many compounding injustices and barriers would find care without our amazing navigators. They see cases like this every day and we are so fortunate to have their compassionate support during this time.

While we share our appreciation for the time, talent and expertise of our patient navigators and our patients and our staff, I also want to recognize and share with you that a lot has changed for them.

Abortion, the work of their hearts, has gone from being a nominally protected right to being ever-further out of reach for too many patients.

The clinical care to which they’ve dedicated their skills, their compassion, their sense of justice and their belief in bodily autonomy has been criminalized, vilified and in some places, eradicated. Their positions have been lost, relocated and overwhelmed. There are fewer places for more patients to access care. Waits for appointments are long, as are travel times and later care needs are expanding. The stakes are so high for so very many people and the obstacles that patients must now overcome to get to care also mean that their emotional needs are much higher, as well.

A lot has changed. But many things have not. My colleagues continue to believe people need and deserve their skills, compassion, sense of justice and belief in bodily autonomy.

They continue to walk through groups of sidewalk bullies just to enter their workplace, eat lunch in bites between seeing patients and sit quietly holding a hand because someone needs them in the moment, even though at least an hour’s worth of charting awaits. They continue to manage emergencies, take a big breath, and then walk in fresh to care for the next patient. They continue to propose and carry out vital research. They continue to learn, to train, to train others. They continue to testify, to write editorials, to stand up, to speak out. They continue to serve as mentors. They continue to show up to, for and with their teams, colleagues and patients.

Compassionate group

Simply put, there is not a more courageous, compassionate and committed group of health care providers in existence. Trust that when you support Planned Parenthood organizations, this is who you are supporting.

Yes, we are a mission, and yes, we provide compassionate care to millions of patients every year, but we are also thousands of passionate supporters who have dedicated our lives to this cause and, as I stand here thanking you for your support, I want you to know that I, too, am a lifelong supporter of Planned Parenthood. I’m proud to say that I’ve worked as an abortion provider at Planned Parenthood for the past 22 years.

About a month ago, while I was in clinic, I saw a patient — a transgender man, who, at the age of 27, had never had a pelvic exam or interacted with the gynecological world. We took some time, we took our time, lots of time, to show him the instruments and make sure that he knew he was in charge of taking breaks, of having more chit-chat or less, or what kind of music we would listen to. As his procedure neared the finish, he said: “I really freaked out when I found out I was pregnant, but I knew that if I called Planned Parenthood, they would take care of me, and you did.”

And this is the power of Planned Parenthood. You could say I’m a fan. I have seen firsthand what our care can give people and often that is the keys to their lives back. And this is the impact that nourishes me.

Given the setting that we’re in, I’d like to share that across my time in this work, I have drawn on both my Catholic past and my current Buddhist practices and their shared belief in the imperative to offer oneself in service to ease the suffering of others. I don’t need to tell you all that this is an imperative that does not need theological dogma to be understood or effectual.

I know firsthand that people seeking abortion care deserve compassion. There is no requirement that abortion care must involve suffering, other than what years of stigmatization and shame by our country’s culture demands. That is not a world that Planned Parenthood imagines, nor is it a belief that we subscribe to.

So often our patients come to us expecting to be judged and shamed and I am often saddened at the extent to which they’re surprised to be cared for by a kind, compassionate, professional staff, who are ready to share a joke, a hug, a tissue, as each situation requires.

In the media, abortion is often portrayed as an option of last resort, of desperation, the work of cold or invisible providers, when, for many people, it’s simply the best decision for them. It is quite simply health care.

Right now, we have far too many politicians making false and inflammatory claims about abortion and abortion providers, purely for political gain. So much of the conversation about abortion in this country is predicated on misconceptions and lies.

‘Nothing short of a miracle’

The reality is that abortion, like most other medical interventions, is nothing short of a miracle in many ways. It saves lives and not just physically, but also emotionally and financially and spiritually.

It creates opportunities for education and career and relationships and future children. For growth. For learning. It protects the well-being and future opportunities of living, breathing children.

Abortion can and should be understood as the medical intervention that has the power to do great good. Is it the right choice for everyone? Of course not. Should everyone be able to determine for themselves what is or is not the right choice for where they are as unique individuals in their unique moment in time? Absolutely!

But the stigma persists, in large part led by religious fundamentalists who would deny the beauty, reality and complexity of our existence. They demand that we flagellate and punish ourselves simply because we bold-



Photo by Chris Line

Jen Castle

ly, unapologetically choose to live in harmony with our bodies and our sexuality, because we dare experience our bodies for the sake of pleasure and connection and not simply for procreation. The fee demanded for all that is a demonstration of shame. I know how my patients feel. I myself felt shame as a patient. I didn’t find a birth control method that worked for me until I was 31. I thought that to be pregnant when I didn’t want to be was a reflection of my failure as a person rather than a simple fact of biology.

When I was 26, I came across a newspaper photograph of a woman who was the same age as me. She was a single parent surrounded by four very young children and I remember thinking that she looked exhausted and overwhelmed. I was preparing for a big life change, moving away to attend a degree program that would allow me to have a career in health care, and this shift was possible only because of my life circumstances. The care of others meant that I had been able to have four abortions by

this point in my life, rather than four children. I cut the photo out of the paper, filed it away, packed it up and brought it with me over the next several moves and 22 years of my life. Over that time, I became a mother to two children.

The notion that my life might have played out differently, that I might not have ended up parenting these two beautiful, brilliant and exasperating human beings is terrifying to me. They are my world. I would do anything for them.

Patients frequently express similar thoughts to me. They want children or want more children, but don’t feel ready for them yet. They are often struggling to take care of the children they already have, and want to be the best parents possible. Isn’t that what we all want for our children? To those patients I say: It sounds like you are an incredibly loving parent.

I provide abortions confidently and compassionately precisely because I know that they have the power and potential to ease the suffering of the person who is pregnant. The person who’s come to the decision that being the best parent possible at this point in time means having an abortion.

At a meeting a few years ago, we were asked to come prepared to show a meaningful representation of our work in abortion care and so I dug into my desk drawer to find the photograph of the woman and her children, but what I ended up finding was an old card from my son that said: “Not many other kids can say their mom helps the lives of young women on a regular basis. Since I was a baby, you’ve been a guide, a nurturer, a hero, but most importantly, my mom. So, on your birthday, I just wanted to remind you how much you mean to me, and how proud I am to be your son.”

I brought this card with me to the meeting instead, because nothing I possess better reflects my gratitude for being able to do this work.

And of what a profound gift it was that someone else did the same work for me.

At Planned Parenthood, we hold the blessing of our work close to our hearts, with gratitude and solidarity for everyone who’s a part of it and everyone who supports it.

We know that the road ahead is likely to be difficult in the short term, and community support, like this, is what enables us to continue, to have the strength to provide care for many days to come so I hope you know how much your support means and how much we and our patients are grateful. Thank you everyone once again for your support of Planned Parenthood.

“I thought that to be pregnant when I didn’t want to be was a reflection of my failure as a person rather than a simple fact of biology.”

Legal Team

Continued from page 1

New Jersey Supreme Court.

FFRF and a coalition of groups (including Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the Educational Law Center) and plaintiffs filed a lawsuit in July challenging the nation’s first religious public charter school, St. Isidore of Seville Catholic Virtual School. The coalition represents nine Oklahoma residents and a nonprofit organization that is committed to protecting Oklahoma’s public school system. The lawsuit asserts that the Oklahoma Statewide Virtual Charter School Board violated the Oklahoma Constitution, the Oklahoma Charter Schools Act and the board’s own regulations when it approved St. Isidore’s application for charter school sponsorship.

In perhaps the quickest litigation victory FFRF ever received, FFRF filed a lawsuit on Oct. 3 on behalf of New Jersey resident James Tosone against the New Jersey secretary of state for forcing public office candidates to swear a mandatory religious oath. Tosone identifies as a non-theist and is opposed to swearing “so help me God” as part of the candidate oath. He has run for public office in New Jersey several times. Since 2022, he has sought to run for office and has been unable to do so because the Division of Elections will not allow him to verify his candidate form with a secular affirmation in place of the religious oath.

Just a month later, the state of New Jersey proved willing to comply with the U.S. Constitution and resolve the issue. It agreed to create and adopt a secular affirmation for candidates. The state also sent a memo to all New Jersey county clerks with updated and clear guidance on secular affirmations.

This swift victory added to the three other cases that were resolved favorably. These cases included a lawsuit filed on behalf of parents and students against the Cabell County Board of Education in West Virginia after Huntington High School hosted a Christian revival, another filed in 2022 on behalf of four South Carolina taxpayers challenging the funding of a private religious educational institution in South Carolina, and a lawsuit against Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas challenging his removal of FFRF’s

approved Bill of Rights “nativity” display from the Texas State Capitol back back in 2016.

FFRF enters 2024 with five ongoing cases, and further plans to secure the wall of separation where we can through litigation.

Non-litigation victories

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 2023, our intake attorney processed 2,112 incoming state/church contacts. Our attorneys sent 707 letters of complaint to government agencies across the country, and an additional 628 letters in the form of mass mailings. Our two mass mailings involved advocating for 17 school districts in Utah to stop participating in an annual religious event, and sending a letter to every school district in Ohio warning of the rapidly-growing release time religious education program LifeWise and asking them to disallow this program in their schools.

In 2023, FFRF was able to achieve 149 victories through nonlitigation efforts. Those victories will continue to come in through 2024.

Education

FFRF, 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 was busy educating the public on matters relating to state/church issues and educating our legal peers on changing case law under the First Amendment.

An important effort in fighting back against Christian nationalism is to make sure that lawyers and judges understand what’s at stake. Therefore, FFRF attorneys have spent considerable time this past year presenting at continuing legal education (CLE) courses.

- In December 2022, FFRF attorneys joined AU’s Andrew Seidel in teaching recent Supreme Court cases involving the

Ten years after: They’d love to change the world



Ten years ago, the Sacramento Chapter of FFRF placed 55 billboards in the city, each with a different local atheist who shared their individual thoughts.



“Our local TV stations sent news crews to my house for live interviews, which were rebroadcast all over the nation so many times I stopped counting,” said Judy Saint, chapter president. “Local church leaders looked silly on TV claiming we must be lonely. We had a big meet-and-greet event which drew even more TV news cameras.”

Establishment and Free Exercise clauses to the Dane County Bar Association. That event led to an invitation to present that same CLE to the Dane County Legal Association for Women. In March 2023, FFRF attorneys were invited to discuss the impact of the court on the Establishment Clause before the American Inns of Court, which is a professional network of lawyers and judges.

- The State Bar of Wisconsin invited an attorney to present for their “This Just In” series breaking down the big SCOTUS cases handed down during the summer. On June 26, FFRF Senior Litigation Counsel Patrick Elliott joined a panel of experts to present “This Just In: Significant 2023 U.S. Supreme Court Decisions.”

- FFRF Legal Fellow Kat Grant returned to their alma mater (Indiana University School of Law) twice: once to speak to the school’s National Lawyers Guild chapter about anti-trans hysteria and state/church separation, and one to be on a panel with law professors about LGBTQ+ Rights and the First Amendment.
- FFRF Attorneys Sam Grover and

Ryan Jayne were invited to speak to a class at UW Law School after an adjunct professor there saw them speak with me at Inns of Court. They talked to the class about separation of state and church issues in employment law.

- Finally, FFRF Associate Counsel Liz Cavell gave a presentation on student rights in the aftermath of Kennedy and Bremerton to the Association of Secular Elected Officials.

Also noteworthy, FFRF and American Atheists continued their joint production of the podcast, “We Dissent,” this past year. It is a podcast featuring secular women attorneys discussing religious liberty issues in the state and federal courts and our joint work to keep religion and government separate. The podcast has 25 published episodes and over 53,000 downloads.

What’s in store for 2024

The legal department at FFRF is marching into 2024 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 secure and advance the freedom of conscience for all Americans.

Rebecca Markert is FFRF’s legal director.

Official letters sent by FFRF staff attorneys 2023

Total letters: 707
Total victories: 149 (includes 29 victories from 2022)
Mass mailings: 2 totaling 628 letters

Top Ten States

1. Texas
2. Alabama
3. Florida
4. Tennessee
5. Georgia
6. Ohio
7. North Carolina
8. South Carolina
9. California
10. Arkansas/Wisconsin (tie)

Top Ten Issue Areas

1. Schools
2. Government Prayer
3. Electioneering
4. Religious Displays
5. Social Media

Top Ten School Complaints

1. School Board Prayer
2. Graduation Prayer
3. Bible Distribution
4. Prayer – Miscellaneous
5. Prayer at Teacher Meetings
6. Religious Displays
7. Religious Events
8. Prayer – Coaches (tie)
9. Prayer – Teachers (tie)
10. Religious Clubs (tie)

6. Prisons
7. Government Funding to Religion
8. Legislative Prayer
9. Chaplains (tie)
10. Religious Events (tie)

WHAT ARE YOU MISSING? Check out our other offerings!

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

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
ffrfaction.org/action-alerts

Freethought of the Day
Daily online calendar of famous freethinkers
ffrf.org/day

We Dissent monthly podcast
wedissent.org



MOVING?



Don’t miss your next issue of
Freethought Today

Please notify us of your address change promptly!
email: info@ffrf.org
or phone: 1-800-335-4021

FFRF cannot be responsible for replacing back issues if we have not been notified prior to your move.

The U.S. Post Office does not forward third-class mail.

FFRF’s French connection



The UK’s Victoria Gugenheim, a multimedia artist and activist, sang a moving Iranian protest song and led other “happenings.”



The Freedom From Religion Foundation was one of the major cosponsors of an international conference of “laïques” (secularists) titled “Secularists of all countries, Unite!,” held in Paris Dec. 8-9. FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker are pictured with Parisian conference-goer Renaud Ferly, who subscribes to FFRF’s YouTube channel. Annie Laurie participated in a panel called “Laics of all countries Unite!”



Dan Barker shows off the impressive conference site, the Hotel de Ville de Paris.



Participants from 28 countries celebrating the end of the conference in Paris with (what else?) Champagne. Their reflection was caught on the mirrored ceiling of the conference site.



A powerhouse of international activists: Fariborz Pooya, political activist of Iranian origin who cofounded the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain; Nina Sankari, vice-president of the Kazimierz Lyszczynski [atheist] Foundation of Poland; Fauzia Ilyas, an EU human rights activist who, as an open atheist, had to flee Pakistan; Mohammad Hisham, who, as an atheist, had to flee Egypt; and Maryam Namazie, Iranian-born spokesperson of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain.



Halima Salat, an ex-Muslim from Kenya, who is a spoken word artist and journalist, is pictured with Inna Shevchenko, who survived a gunfire attack alongside cartoonist Lars Vilks in Copenhagen in 2015 and is a secular feminist who writes for “Charlie Hebdo.”

Read the conference’s resolution on secular demands at bit.ly/3S7AJft.

CRANKMAIL

Welcome to the latest installment of Crankmail, where talk is cheap, proper grammar is cheaper and common sense is missing. Printed as received.

Repent: Unless you repent from your persecution of Christians, you and everyone who works in your organization will spend eternity alone in eternal darkness. What that coach did was lead those 20 young people to Salvation through Jesus Christ. You punished him for that. Ask yourself why? I believe you are demon possessed that you would stand against God in such a manner..I feel sorry for you. Repent and be saved or spend eternity in the pit. — Gregg Mann

Interference: Keep your stupid beliefs in Wisconsin and stay out of ours! — Cindy Taylor

Christianity: Please be honest by re naming your organisation “destroy Christianity”. You clearly DON’T GIVE A FUCK about the evils and misogyny that is so prevalent in Islam. You clearly love Islam whilst promoting the LGBT cause; irony doesn’t even begin to describe your hypocrisy. So just continue to play it safe by shitting on Christians because you know that we will not come to your office and start stabbing or blowing stuff up. — David Lillicranz

You: Close up shop you people are evil. — JR Haddan

Karens: Dear Religaphobes, You people are the biggest bunch of whiners on the planet. Why don’t you let people make their own decisions about religion without your interference. But then,

you don’t want people to hear both sides, do you? You are Nazi-like. — Larry Weidick

Really?: I sincerely doubt you took time to investigate how many of the players felt intimidated or shunned by the coach if they did not want to participate in the baptism. Facts and truth mean nothing at all to you, you simply hate and seek to destroy what you hate. Anyone with any integrity and character, anyone with a real job for that matter, would not be harassing teachers and coaches and anyone who believes something you hate. This organization is nothing short of evil. You are full blown hypocrites, trying to restrict others from believing what we want while believing whatever you want. — Wayne Holiday

Your sick: a coach participating in a voluntary baptism, off campus, you people are really sick human beings... your wager against god will require payment some day.... — Fred Velez

Bullies: Why does your religion of anti-religion overrule those with religion? The Constitution was written by religious men, even a few ministers. The first amendment applies to stop bullies such as you. — Tara Smythe

FFR: Freedom is just that, FREEDOM. Which means is goes both ways. Someone choosing to play over their food in public is just that freedom. All of you atheists need to mind your own business. Pray in public us still freedom to do so and those of you that are trying to stop it are in fact infringing on a person’s right to do so. MI D YOUR OWN BUISNESS! — Greg Kelley

True church: Your just as deceived as they are, but neither you nor they will know it, until it’s too late. The true church has NOTHING to do with this world or mans politic’s. They live quiet and peaceful lives out from among the things of this

world and or mans affairs. God never said this country was a Christian country, man did. The folks you are referring to are NOT a part of the true church, there the tares’s and apostate church of the doctrines and traditions of men, not of God. — Ambrose Gregory

Bible is Truth: Watch the Dr Kent Hovind creation seminar asap. The Bible is the truth about our reality and you all need to lay off the prisons that are allowing inmates who’ve has their hearts changed by Jesus Christ to be baptized. Jesus forgives sin, changes hearts and saves from Hell. Look how the word of God (Bible) transformed Angola prison under warden Burl Cain back in the day. One of many miracles staring you all in the face. You Atheists believe in the scientific impossibility that nothing created everything. Love you all. Jesus saves. Someday there will be a reality free from the terrors and genocide caused by atheists. — Phil Villwock

Jesus saves: Blah, blah, blah, blah blah and more of intellectual void. Your world is almost finished. Only few more prophecies from Jesus to be fulfilled. This world will never continue as it is now. By the time your empty heads and stupid hearts see it, it will be upon you. I live for that moment. Nothing else is better, nothing. — Ben Swanburg

Cult: it seems that you are like any other cult and try to impose your thoughts and opinions on others. Certainly you do no have to use any objectionable oath. But it is criminal when one of your representatives tried to convince my daughter not to use the phrase “so help me God” in her oath of office. Strong arm tactics can trigger a RICO Act filing. I have filed a civil rights complaint with the U S Attorney in Newark and I will sue you into bankruptcy. You do your thing but don’t try to strong arm others into your philosophy. — Max Bernstein

Freethought Matters

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

Freethought Matters TV talk show airs in:			
Chicago	WPWR-CW	(Ch. 50)	9 am
Los Angeles	KCOP-MY	(Ch. 13)	8:30 am
Madison, Wis.	WISC-TV	(Ch. 3)	11 pm
New York City	WPIX-IND	(Ch. 11)	10 am
San Francisco	KICU-IND	(Ch. 36)	10 am
Washington, D.C.	WDCW-CW	(Ch. 50, 23, 3)	8 am

Changes for 2024 in FFRF broadcasting.

Watch Freethought Matters anytime on FFRF’s YouTube channel!

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

Watch our show every Sunday!

Photo by Chris Line

FFRF CHARITABLE GRANTS

FFRF offers chapters a \$1,000 grant per FFRF chapter, per year, to be used for direct charity and chapter charitable activism. This grant money may not be used for advertising or other expenses. The grant should be used for a local cause that will positively impact the community through an act of service.

San Francisco Bay Chapter



Photo by Joyce Richards

The SF Bay Chapter’s 2023 Community Grant, in partnership with the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, was announced by Sister Kay Sera (second from left) and SF Bay Chapter members Steve Johns, Walt Bilofsky and Dana Treadwell.

When the San Francisco Bay Chapter of FFRF, still in a startup mode, looked for a local nonprofit partner for its 2023 community grant, it decided to help families with LGBTQ members. The San Francisco-based Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a self-proclaimed order of queer and trans nuns, uses humor and irreverent wit to combat bigotry and guilt through exuberant mockery. The “Sisters” are devoted to community service, ministry and outreach to those on the edges. They raise funds and make annual grants to support small community groups ministering to LGBTQ and marginalized minorities in the Bay Area and beyond.

The SF Bay Chapter of FFRF joined with the Sisters to fund bilingual workshops helping adult family members better support and affirm their transgender, nonbinary and gender expansive children. Chapter members announced this partnership of the “Nones” and the nuns at a drag fashion show celebrating 45 years of the Sisters.

“The LGBTQ community is a natural partner for FFRF. They understand the danger of religion in government. They suffer from it every day,” Chapter President Walt Bilofsky said.

Lake Superior Freethinkers



From left to right: Julias Salinas, Rod Froseth, Charles Gessert, Jeff Corey, Mary McMahan, Tom Patten. (Jeff Corey is the executive director of One Roof and Mary McMahan is One Roof’s administrative associate. The others are members of the Lake Superior Freethinkers’ Planning Committee.)

The Lake Superior Freethinkers donated \$2,190 to its 2023 community partner, One Roof Community Housing.

The funds to One Roof included the \$1,000 community partnership grant from FFRF and \$1,190 in matching funds donated by Lake Superior Freethinkers members.

One Roof is a nonprofit organization committed to providing housing services and to building and sustaining

affordable homes and healthy neighborhoods.

The Lake Superior Freethinkers is delighted to support One Roof Community Housing, as the two organizations have a good working relationship. One Roof has provided space for the Lake Superior Freethinkers to convene its monthly “First Sunday” programs over the last year. Several LSF members have worked with One Roof staff to maintain appropriate building security, to arrange audio-visual equipment for LSF programs, and to assure that the community center meeting room is set up for the next users.

Cincinnati Metro Chapter



Pictured are Michelle Santorsola, Steve Colliflower, Jonathan Mann (Freestore executive), Mark Lightfield and Mark Davis. Jill Shuller is also on our Board.

FFRF’s Cincinnati Metro Chapter used its charitable grant donation to help the Cincinnati area Freestore Foodbank’s Powerpacks program, which provides children with a container of food to take home for the weekend.

John Mann, executive development officer of the Freestore Foodbank, gave chapter members an extensive tour of the huge facility. Chapter President Mark Davis said his group talked with Mann about how it could schedule times to volunteer and use their conference rooms for meetings.

Grand Rapids Area Freethinkers



Members attending the event included, from left to right, Nick Thompson, Aron Schnaser, Russ Swenson, Julie Nichols Legg, Tom Legg, Ken Eck and Carolyn Eck. Not pictured are Paula Nix Brian, Mary Nix and Nick Vroman.

Ten members and guests of Grand Rapids (Minn.) Area Freethinkers (GRAF) attended the annual “Home Is Where The Heart Is” fundraiser for Grace House, a shelter for homeless individuals and families, which serves the city of Grand Rapids and surrounding communities in Itasca County. Using \$500 received from FFRF’s charitable grant, and \$350 donated by members, we enjoyed a prime rib buffet, silent auction and live music event that included testimonials from business partners and formerly homeless clients about the successes Grace House reached over the past year. The other recipient of \$500 from the FFRF charitable grant was Advocates for Family Peace, a nonprofit agency

providing support to people in abusive situations and working to reduce spousal abuse and family violence.

The annual charitable grant from FFRF has allowed our small group to help the community in big ways. Our local agencies serving rural communities with limited resources consider us partners in taking care of those in need. And notably, without the umbrella of religion!

Sacramento chapter



Adding a plaque on the bookcase at a teen shelter were Greater Sacramento Chapter’s Kathy Johnson, President Judy Saint, Vice President Barri Babow and Secretary Judy Roberson.

The Sacramento Chapter of FFRF used its charitable grant to allow local young adults who have aged out of the foster care system or are otherwise homeless to go to a used bookstore two blocks away to purchase any book for themselves. This began a weekly program at the center focusing on life-long learning and reading. We installed a bookcase at this facility with a plaque at the top showing our chapter name, and a second similar bookcase and plaque at a different teen shelter.

Central Florida Freethought Community



Boxes of meals for kids are waiting to be loaded onto the Second Harvest Food Bank truck in Orlando.

The Central Florida Freethought Community used its FFRF charitable grant to purchase Hi Five Snack Packs for kids who sometimes don’t eat on the weekends, Chapter President David Williamson said. Through the Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida, the program provides meal packs to kids on Fridays for consumption on the weekend, when they lack access to the school cafeteria.

The service project was hosted at FREEFLO, the Freethought Florida Conference, on March 10-12 in Orlando.



CFFC’s Mali Harden packs meals for children who may not have access to food during the weekends when school cafeterias are closed.

IN MEMORIAM

Remembering the truth-telling Betty Rollin

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

First you cry. The world said goodbye to TV correspondent and right-to-die advocate Betty Rollin, 87, on Nov. 7. Betty ended her life as she lived it — on her own terms via voluntary assisted suicide in Basel, Switzerland.

Betty first came to the Freedom From Religion Foundation's notice as the feisty PBS "Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly" correspondent who covered one of the "Glorious Fourth" gatherings put on by our plucky Alabama chapter back in the day. The extended family headed by Patricia and Roger Cleveland had generously deeded some of its land to FFRF, where we built what was called an "advance, not retreat!" at Lake Hypatia, Ala., near Talladega.

FFRF first raised funds to help build a meeting room with kitchen and showers. Then, in 1999, to accommodate the crowds, FFRF, with its donors and sweat equity from the chapter, eventually built a true auditorium in this woodsy, rural buckle of the bible belt, adjoining Talladega National Forest and Lake Joan ("Lake Hypatia"). In its heyday, it was an amazing undertaking, attracting many volunteers, activists and freethinkers not just from the South but around the nation.

Betty, a gracious professional, flew down with a crew to do a story about Lake Hypatia, also interviewing Dan Barker, who was speaking at the July Fourth event that year. It was hot and humid, and Dan returned home to report that she had dubbed Alabama "a bad hair state," a droll observation that has stuck in our family lexicon.

Betty trailblazed a distinguished career as a young female news correspondent on national NBC-TV. She made international headlines when she wrote a book, *First You Cry*, about having a mastectomy at age 37 in 1976, at a time when breast cancer still wasn't spoken about much, Betty Ford's earlier revelation notwithstanding. *First You Cry* was turned into a CBS movie in 1978, starring Mary Tyler Moore as Betty Rollin. It was a big deal back when cable TV was just beginning and there were still mostly only four main TV networks available.

In her memoir, Betty confided, "I stopped believing in God at about the



Photo by Brent Nicastro

Betty Rollin spoke at the FFRF convention in Washington, D.C., in 2003.

same time I stopped believing in Pinocchio, when I was about 8. It upset my mother because her father was an Orthodox rabbi. My mother blamed herself for not emphasizing religion enough and for not keeping a kosher house. (She couldn't do that, she said, because the housekeeper was a German Catholic and didn't know how. Even at the time, that struck me as a limp excuse.)"

She was a graduate of Fieldston Ethical Culture School in Riverdale, N.Y., an appropriate spot to matriculate as a freethinker, then Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville.

Betty worked for ABC News' "Nightline" and wrote another bestseller, *Last Wish*, in 1985. It's a moving memoir about the lengths she and her mother's close friends had to go to honor her mother's "last wish" — to control her own death before the suffering from ovarian cancer became unendurable. This, too, was turned into a TV movie by ABC in 1992, this time starring Patty Duke as Betty and Maureen Stapleton as her mother.

In 2003, we managed to persuade Betty

to come and speak to the Freedom From Religion Foundation at our annual convention in Washington, D.C. She said yes — so long as her beloved husband, mathematician Harold Edwards, could accompany her. She gave an important speech about physician-assisted suicide, an issue that almost all FFRF members strongly support. She noted in that speech, "It's not good policy to have people so desperate to die that they're forced to ask their children or their mates to help them out of life. Such people are amateurs, and, to put it crudely, they often muck it up. That can be terrible, and even if the person dies, there can be psychological damage."

She and Harold attentively attended the entire conference. After the conference's final entertainment that year, the irreverent and topical "Tunes 'n' Toons" show put on by Dan (the tunes) and then-Arizona Republic cartoonist and ex-Mormon Steve Benson (the toons), she came up to me, eyes shining, praising the performance and saying it deserved a much wider audience.

I'm indebted to Betty for helping to

first put me in touch with Ron Reagan. After freethinking remarks he made at his father's funeral in 2004 and later interviews, we wanted to offer him our Emperor Has No Clothes Award. Knowing it takes a celebrity to reach another celebrity, I reached out to Betty. She delivered. She knew a third party who then vetted FFRF and consented to forward my email to Ron, who accepted the award.

In the first year we debuted "Free-thought Radio" in 2006, Betty came on the show to talk about physician-assisted suicide. At the time she spoke, only Oregon provided for a terminally ill person to have the possibility of assisted suicide. Progress has been slow, but there has been progress, with 10 other states plus the District of Columbia joining Oregon. Nevertheless, Betty was forced to travel to Switzerland to end her life as she saw fit. I'm sure she realized that her final exit would be reported, would make a statement and help educate our nation on the need to move forward, despite the religious opposition, to adopt this human right.

The New York Times obituary cited a statement she'd made to the Philadelphia Inquirer in 1976 about why she was so open about her breast cancer. "I do not enjoy the fact that everyone who's read my book knows everything intimate about my life. But I think it's important for people to tell the truth," she said.

The Times also reported (this is the part that made me cry) that a friend explained Betty "had been dealing with pain from arthritis and a gastrointestinal condition and had been broken-hearted since the death of her husband in 2020." This close friend, Ellen Marston, said, "True to form, she was resolute in her decision; Betty made it clear she did not want to hear our objections to her plan. She felt she didn't have much more to contribute."

Betty Rollin contributed so much to the world — to journalism and to better and more compassionate understanding on many controversial issues, including physician-assisted suicide — because she told the truth.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-president of FFRF.

Rhymes for the Irreverent

by Yip Harburg

"Over the Rainbow" lyricist

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.

Celebrating the life of Dianne Centa

FFRF State Representative and After-Life Member Dianne Centa died Dec. 3 in Kent, Ohio. She was born Oct. 14, 1946, in Wadsworth, Ohio to Mike and Mary Centa.

The following memorial was written by her daughter, Ellen Flick:

Dianne had an unwavering lifelong dedication to science and fact, to nature, to art and music, and to the quest for knowledge through adventure.

Her life was marked by amazing travels across the globe, including China, Nepal, Iceland, Antarctica, Cuba and the Galapagos Islands, to name a few. She shared her passions with her two daughters through experiences like camping, hiking, collecting fossils, attending film festivals, concerts and more. She was a talented photographer and a gifted intellectual. She was known and valued in her community for her support of local business and music.

Dianne was passionate in her dedica-

tion to maintaining separation of state and church. She was a lifetime member of several organizations focused on maintaining this separation. She was a lifelong member and After-Life member of FFRF, including having a brick on the FFRF courtyard patio, and she loved wearing her FFRF gear regularly. Her courage as an "out of the closet" atheist was unflappable, and she learned that the conversations sparked by the messages she displayed openly were valuable and frequently positive.

As a senior library associate at the Kent State University library until her retirement in 2020, she was able to encourage investment in nontheistic material for the university collections, and she regularly purchased and donated additional materials, including several books by Dan Barker.

Dianne will be remembered by those who knew her as a brave, intelligent, and fascinating woman. She will be missed.



Dianne Centa, a longtime librarian in Kent, Ohio, enjoyed wearing irreverent clothing, including FFRF's "Unabashed Atheist" T-shirt.

Celebrating the Winter Solstice Season 2023

FFRF’s whimsical Bill of Rights “nativity” cutout by artist Jacob Fortin depicts Founders Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington gazing in adoration at the “baby” Bill of Rights while the Statue of Liberty looks on.

A sign beside the tongue-in-cheek nativity reads:

“At this season of the Winter Solstice, join us in honoring the Bill of Rights, adopted on Dec. 15, 1791, which reminds us there can be no religious freedom without the freedom to dissent. Keep religion and government separate!”

These FFRF displays are set up to counter Christian nativity scenes on the respective sites.



Tom Picquet and Conni Conner set up FFRF’s Bill of Rights display in the North Hall of the Minnesota State Capitol, where it remained through the month of December.



FFRF’s annual Winter Solstice exhibit at the Wisconsin Capitol has now been displayed there for 27 years. Setting up the exhibit were FFRF staff members Sadie Pattinson and Rowan Hahn.



Alex Shellhamer (and his father Ted, not pictured) placed FFRF’s solstice display in the Milwaukee County Courthouse for the 13th year.



Shawn Kelly, left, Jack Shields, sitting, and Hank Quitter pose with the Bill of Rights nativity cutout in Concord, N.H. outside of the State Capitol on the Concord City Plaza. The display was up from Nov. 25 Dec. 31.



Volunteers Daniel Hogan and Patrick Hogan traveled to the Capitol State House in Richmond, Va., on Dec. 21 to install the display on the actual date of the Winter Solstice.



The Reason Station in Warren (Mich.) City Hall, which features the “May Reason Prevail” sign from FFRF, was open two days a week during the same times the “prayer station” was open at city hall, reports Douglas Marshall.



Members of the Ozarks Chapter of the Freedom From Religion Foundation — from left, James Brazeal, Chris Sweeny and Juli Odum — placed the FFRF Bill of Rights nativity display on the grounds of the Capitol in Little Rock, Ark. It was the first time the group put up the display.



For the 12th year, FFRF’s Metropolitan Chicago Chapter placed FFRF’s Bill of Rights nativity display at North School Park in Arlington Heights, Ill. Setting up the cutout were FFRFMCC members Kathi Wise and Fred Dix. The display was up from Dec. 1-31.



At the Grundy County Courthouse in Morris, Ill., volunteer Will Meyer placed the Bill of Rights cutout and a Winter Solstice sign. The display was up until Jan. 2.



FFRF's Bill of Rights nativity display has been installed in the Iowa Capitol now for seven straight years, thanks to Lifetime Member and State Representative Paul Novak.



The Oly Grail, a secular group of friends, placed our new winter solstice display on the Washington State Capitol grounds in Olympia. Out of frame to the left are a Christian nativity scene and Jewish menorah. Pictured, from left to right, are Priscilla Rose, Darrell Barker, Deb and Rod Tinnemore, Peter Johansson, Linda and Lewis Foerster and Matt Simons.



From left, Steve Foulkes, Bob Hunter and Shane Stapley of the FFRF Metro Chicago Chapter set up the "Joy to the World" display at Chicago's Daley Center Plaza.



FFRF's Greater Sacramento Chapter Board Members John Lucas and Erin Louis show off the FFRF Bill of Rights nativity display on the grounds of the California State Capitol Building in Sacramento. The FFRf cutout, which was placed next to a Christian display, was up from Dec. 17 through Jan. 7.



Bob Hunter, left, Shane Stapley and (not pictured) Steve Foulkes set up the Winter Solstice banner and scarlet "A" sign at the Glenview, Ill., Village Hall. It was up from Dec. 10-27.

LETTERBOX

We should start using the term ‘religion-free’

A frequent topic of letters to Free-thought Today is what term non-religious people would prefer to be used to denote their nonbelief. There have been many suggestions, and I would like to add one more.

When asked about your religious beliefs, you could reply, “I’m religion-free.”

This terminology echoes such phrases as “lead-free,” “sugar-free,” “salt-free,” “talc-free,” “fat-free,” “cruelty-free,” and even “tax-free.” In each case, it is being said explicitly that the thing named is not present, and implicitly that the thing named is something to be avoided, maybe even something harmful.

While I would hope that this term would be accurate and non-confrontational, it would be interesting if a number of people were to start using it in conversation and reporting their experiences.

Anyway, that’s my suggestion.

Ohio

How could Ayaan Hirsi Ali become religious?

What has happened to Ayaan Hirsi Ali? She suffered terribly under the Muslim religion and completely realized that there is no sky god and yet she has now stated that she needs religion and supernatural faith to add purpose to her life. She must be hanging out with the wrong crowd. How can a rational critical thinker return to religion?

Paul Kurtz, founder of the Center for Inquiry, asks, “Why are humans inclined to believe in the supernatural?”

New York

My thoughts on the 1797 Treaty of Tripoli

Article 11 of the 1797 Treaty of Tripoli between the United States and the Muslim Barbary pirates in the Kingdom of Tripoli explicitly states that the government of the United States is “not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.”

I have long wondered why the Muslim leaders of Tripoli would have needed to be informed that the U.S. government was not founded “in any sense” on Christianity. The Barbary pirates regarded the United States as an infidel nation, and I am sure they were well aware that most Americans identified as Christians. Moreover, the Kingdom of Tripoli had signed treaties over the years with various European nations with established Christian churches and had even exchanged ministers with some of them.

I suspect that Joel Barlow, who was appointed by President Washington to negotiate the treaty, inserted Article 11 not to appease the Muslim leaders, but to refute any potential criticisms of the treaty on the part of Christian clergy, journalists and political figures back home on the grounds that it was inappropriate for a “Christian nation” to sign a treaty with a Muslim state. In other words, I believe Article 11 was intended primarily for domestic consumption.

New York

Mark of the Bezos

The Washington Post

First things first — this year, you read

666 stories

That's like reading a 1,796-page book — 51% more than you read last year!

Frequent Washington Post readers got an email recently detailing the number of stories they clicked on and other details about their WaPo reading habits. FFRF Member Jon Alexandr of California got a chuckle out of his.

Here’s my own essay to Marjorie Taylor Greene

Inspired by the thoughtful essays to Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, I thought I’d write one of my own.

Dear Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene,

Instead of arguing until blue-faced about who has the “truer” ideology, I wish to ask you about how you want your Christian nation to deal with those on the receiving end of its policies.

I see genocide, both cultural and actual, embedded in your movement’s intentions in dealing with those who do not conform to your religious beliefs. You may not openly advocate atrocities against those whom you rail against, but I do believe that your Christian nation will enable those who would commit atrocities through your own willful ignorance of them.

You may clutch your pearls and gasp that you would NEVER go that far against non-Christians and sexual minorities. But when you advocate for making America a Christian nation, there are logistics you need to consider in implementing it policies. Among them:

- The amount of people who will be rendered unemployable.
- Where are those people going to physically go?
- How much time, money and resources will be used in eliminating all non-Christian influence in the public sector?
- The quality control over those who agree to convert to America’s national religion. After all, you don’t want any sociopathic grifters gaming your system, do you?
- How dissent will be dealt with without infringing upon the dissenter’s free speech.

As long as there are judges who are not “owned” by the Federalist Society, you’d better also consider this: Those who commit hate crimes are prone to citing their resources to justify their actions. Those whose on-record words are quoted by those who commit atrocities may not be indicted for the crimes themselves, but could be subpoenaed as expert witnesses in order to clarify what action they want their followers to take against perceived enemies. On the witness stand, Rep.

Greene, you would be ordered to face both those you have incited and those you have demonized, and your complicity would be exposed.

My gut tells me that you will keep spewing toxic rhetoric as long as you are profiting from it. A demagogue is nothing but a meth dealer posing as a pharmacist.

Oregon

This poem has both rhyme and reason

This is from my fourth book called *Learning Through Rhymes*.

Reality of Evolution

Evolution is a truth that religious groups call a lie and deny.

Deny and lie seems to be the big irrational myths as they are the original lies.

Political/religion groups support the mythical religious poop.

Keep people ignorant and humble causes humans to fumble.

Political and religious control keeps the human group in tow.

It is true some people try to help out but they are controlled by their mythical cult clout.

Non-profit churches don’t pay the tax fee but enjoy the style or rank and fail to file.

Some churches preach political view to control you.

Over three thousand gods have come and gone and have been wrong as they don’t survive very long.

Secular humanists in our midst find religions violent resist.

Look at human’s past, religions don’t last as they cause deadly clash.

Humans like to believe in fantasy and myths as they don’t understand evolutionary change is it.

Hawaii

‘Freethinking Follies’ had me laughing

I typically read all that is contained in each issue of Freethought Today and am very happy when it arrives in the mailbox.

I noted that for the first time (I think) there appeared in the November issue a section entitled “Freethinking Follies.” I really, really enjoyed reading every word in the Heathen Humor and Pagan Puns sections, in addition to the cartoons. I found big laughs and on-the-mark satire to be contained therein.

Thanks for all that you do to promote rational thinking!

South Carolina

Attending the convention was revitalizing for me

Wonderful job, everybody. God (with a small “g”), I needed that. Do you realize how hard it is to get some really uplifting news these days? Damn hard. You guys are the best.

I absolutely loved Elie Mystal’s comment: “The Constitution was written by a bunch of rich, white, Christian, racist males making deals with each other.”

Michael Allsup
California

Journey to enlightenment had many steps

I am pleased to thank you for an immediate and pleasurable phone response today from FFRF. And, as usual, I have devoured the latest issue of Freethought Today.

Here is my brief but spectacular journey to intellectual enlightenment:

- I was born a Southern Baptist and forced to attend Sunday school and worship; not a happy remembrance.
- Then it was off to the USMA at West Point, where I was required to attend religious services on Sundays.
- I was then fortunate to obtain my engineering degree; which consequently made me question biblical events and miracles.
- I got my first engineering job in Utah and, therefore, exposure to a total theocracy, thus making me a persecuted minority.
- I was fortunate to marry a Ph.D. atheist professor.
- I was again fortunate to lastly marry an agnostic professor.
- I am, as Ron Reagan said, “not afraid of burning in hell.”

Virginia

Trump persecutions seen as persecutions of them

I was watching MSNBC recently, when I saw an interview with Tim Alberta, staff writer for The Atlantic and former chief correspondent for Politico. He was discussing his recently published book, *The Kingdom and the Power and the Glory — American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism*.

The author provided some fascinating — and very disturbing — insights into why a corrupt hate-monger like Donald Trump has managed to curry such devotion and unflinching support with white evangelical Christians, and why he has been successful in deriding Mike Pence, who has long been a bonafide crusader for evangelical Christian values. Pence is simply seen as not aggressive or strong enough when compared with Trump.

Trump’s overall ratings were falling after Jan. 6, 2021, a trend which was

reversed when state and federal indictments began to be filed against him because the prosecutions were instead seen as persecutions not only of the former president, but also his base of white evangelical Christians/white Christian nationalists and their vaunted belief in America as a Christian nation. Trump, of course, has continued to portray himself in the role of both martyr and protector: “They’re coming for you, but they’ll have to go through me first” and “I am your retribution.”

Alberta, whose late father was an evangelical pastor, has turned away from what he sees as the perversion of the religion he was raised in because of the influence Trump has had in rallying evangelicals and bending them to his political will. Alberta’s book goes a long way in explaining the profound schisms which exist among adherents of Christianity in the United States and why evangelicals continue to dig in and defend the indefensible.

California

What’s up with the New Apostolic Reformation?

On Dec. 5, National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered” flabbergasted me with a story about New Apostolic Reformation and its Dominion program, whereby Christians would take over the world. It’s like the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, except it is not a forgery or secret or necessarily antisemitic. Do NAR members drink the blood of non-Christian babies? Eat brains? Or just increase pressure on nonevangelical Protestants?

California

Keep up the fight against Christian nationalism

We worry about our nation’s (if not the world’s) future as citizens of other countries elect fascist leaders, and the United States grows ever closer to achieving the vision of the white Christian nationalists.

We follow your work closely and champion the victories FFRF achieves in defense of our Constitution.

Thank you.

Ohio

Cryptogram answer

Ask yourself whether the dream of heaven and greatness should be waiting for us in our graves — or whether it should be ours here and now and on this earth.

— Ayn Rand

Crossword answers

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

The shroud of the kitchen hood



In taking this panoramic picture of my recently remodeled kitchen, I was amused and delighted by a trick of a ceiling light causing a distorted reflection in a stainless steel hood fan, loosely resembling a stylized human figure.

Some who have seen the picture are convinced Jesus descended upon my family in my kitchen. Yeah, I don’t think so. To my eye, it looks more like David Byrne of Talking Heads came to visit me in his “big suit.”

I am convinced of only one thing: that it’s quite the coincidence, especially since the reflection is only visible from a very small viewing angle in the kitchen, otherwise, you would never see it.

Virginia

Science deniers no doubt thrive because of science

Regarding the article about Americans’ trust in science declining (which was in the December issue), it cites a survey of 8,800 U.S adults. My guess is that most, if not all, of these people have cellphones, computers, the internet, TVs, drive cars, fly in planes, have appliances, have access to safe prescription drugs, and are relatively disease-free compared to their parents and grandparents. They trust their money to electronic banking, ATMs, etc.

Every time they get in a car, they are trusting their lives to science. Every time they fly or take a train, they are trusting in science to keep them safe from harm. Every time they fire one of their beloved guns, they are trusting the science that goes into designing the gun and ammo to keep them from having an accident.

They trust science to improve their lives and keep them safe whether they admit it or not, and, quite frankly, they have to be pretty clueless to not know this.

Without the advances in science, we would be living in the 19th century with

an average life span of 40 years or less. No electricity, no air-conditioning, no automobiles, etc.

My belief in the common sense of certain Americans is what is declining and much of that I attribute to the fairy tale called religion and the irrational fear that goes with it.

Arizona

Why is bible not among books to be banned?

Whenever I read about legislators, prosecutors and groups of concerned citizens who want to ban books that 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 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

Write to us

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

charitable after absorbing them?

The bible features incest (Genesis 19:30-36), incestuous rape (2 Samuel 13:1-14), death by gang rape (Judges 19:22-26) and human dismemberment (Judges 19:27-29), all of which, of course, scholarly doctors of divinity will explain as profound lessons that will elevate our spirit.

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

California

AI knows the bible was written by many authors

As a writer, I was working on an article about what ChatGPT has to say about religious belief, and, lo — in the December issue is a great piece by Brooks Rimes on that topic!

I think AI has grasped the significance of religion to believers in a way that makes sense to me and how to respect people who need it. I further respect the way ChatGPT answered my query that Mr. Rimes didn’t cover: How do I respond to a friend who believes in everything about the bible and that Moses wrote it?

The truth, says AI, is that Moses is depicted as the author in the Torah but that historical evidence shows that the texts were compiled by various sources and edited over the centuries by multiple authors. Same thing for the bible, although over a longer period than Moses’ lifetime. (Note: We who became atheists long ago learned this from research about the origins of comparative religions.) AI points out that we should approach the subject with respect and sensitivity to the evidence supporting multiple authorship. Good suggestion. I’d like to keep my friends.

California

Fighting to keep state/church separate

You might say I was guilty of name-dropping Abington and Schempp. It was at a meeting at the Memphis Jewish Community Center in 1979 when Willie Herenton, superintendent of the Memphis City School system (where I was teaching), was speaking on the advantages of keeping one’s children in the public schools.

When Herenton ended his talk, he invited questions, so I mentioned the violations I’d witnessed (including that of the Abington v. Schempp ruling) during my time in the public school system and asked if they were still going on. Knowing he was “preaching to the choir” with the majority of his audience being Jews, he said that if it was, he would put a stop to it. When the meeting ended, two reporters came over and asked my name, which I naively gave to them.

The next morning at 4 a.m., my phone rang. I didn’t pick up, but listened in horror to the message: “Hitler was right” and “we can get rid of people like you.” Obviously, I couldn’t go back to sleep, but my question as to what had prompted the caller to say those words was answered quickly when I heard the newspaper being delivered into the outside hallway of my apartment. I quickly retrieved it, opened it and read the bold print on the front page saying: “Herenton to ban prayer and bible reading in the public schools.” My name was included in the article, and, unfortunately, the new phone books had just come out with my name and address listed. The only “saving grace” was that, as an apartment dweller, the apartment number wasn’t printed.

You can imagine what kind of calls I continued to receive. I didn’t bother picking up and simply changed my outgoing message to say that all incoming calls were being voice-printed so that the identity of the caller would be known whether they left a name. The ugly messages finally stopped.

Several years later, I was a substitute teacher for a short period, and on one occasion, our congressman, Harold Ford Jr., spoke at an assembly program at an elementary school during which he told the kids to stand up and pledge a cheer saying, “Put God first.” I found him afterwards and pointed out the error of his ways regarding coercion and stigmatizing children who might not choose to join in. He was unrepentant.

Another time, I was subbing at a middle school, and when it was my group’s turn to go to lunch, one of the kids reminded me that it was customary for them to say grace together before going to the cafeteria. I pointed out that any one of them could say grace individually before or after they had lunch, but that it could not be an organized activity, and it certainly couldn’t be led by the teacher. They were flabbergasted and automatically accused me of being anti-religion.

The moral of the story? I can’t think of one, except that we should all be like the “Whos” in *Horton Hears a Who* when they shout “We are here, we are here, we are here!”

Tennessee



Stephen Procs and Jim Bredeson chat prior to the start of FFRF's annual Winter Solstice program in Freethought Hall in Madison, Wis.



Darcy Johnston sings holiday music with slightly altered lyrics while being accompanied by FFRF Co-President and staff musician Dan Barker on the piano.



A member signs the FFRF guestbook.

Photos by Chris Line

2023 Winter Solstice celebration



FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor shares the words of her mother, the late Anne Nicol Gaylor, to start the annual event for local members.



Paul Turpin grabs some light snacks.



Paul Turpin and Eric and Marian Matthews have an in-depth discussion.



Dan Barker regales the crowd with piano music before the Winter Solstice program begins.



FFRF Graphic Designer Roger Daleiden "moonlights" as the event bartender, serving up mimosas to the party attendees.



FFRF Events Manager Sadie Pattinson introduces the Solstice event.



Nancy McClements (facing away) gets Darcy Johnston to laugh prior to the musical program. To the right are Steve Procs and FFRF Program Manager Lisa Treu, who arranged the party decorations.