

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



Lessons in Chemistry
author headlines
2024 FFRF convention

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The tiny, titanic
act of telling
the truth

PAGES 10-11



'Do whatever
you wish, just
not in this office'

PAGES 12-13

Vol. 41 No. 2

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March 2024

FFRF victory Kindergartners no longer being led in class prayer

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has ensured that kindergarten students in the Newton County School District in Decatur, Miss., will no longer be led in daily prayer by their teacher, in violation of more than a half-century of court precedent.

A concerned parent informed the state/church watchdog that their child's kindergarten teacher at Newton County Elementary School had been leading the class in reciting a Christian prayer before meals each day. Additionally, in late November, the teacher taught kindergarten students that God has a naughty and nice list, just like Santa Claus, and that students have to be good in order to stay on God's nice list. FFRF's complainant told the organization that they were "very angry and disturbed that someone in an authoritative position over 5-year-olds was pushing [their] own thoughts and beliefs on [kindergartners] as truth."

FFRF took swift action to protect children's rights.

"The district has an obligation to ensure that its teachers are not misusing their positions to indoctrinate students," FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

Students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools, FFRF emphasized. When a kindergarten teacher abuses their position to coerce young students to pray and promotes their personal religious beliefs

For more victories by FFRF's legal team, see pages 8-9.

in the classroom, that teacher violates students' First Amendment right to freedom of conscience. Additionally, parents have the constitutional right to determine their child's religious or nonreligious upbringing. This teacher violated the trust that FFRF's complainant and all other parents place in district teachers to follow the Constitution and refrain from imposing their own religious beliefs on children they teach.

After the state/church watchdog sent a demand letter, the district rectified its error.

"We assure you that steps are being taken to prevent incidents described in your letter in the future," Superintendent Tyler C. Hansford responded. "Our district remains committed to upholding the constitutional rights of all of our students, fostering an atmosphere of inclusivity, and respecting the diverse beliefs within our community."

FFRF is always pleased when a district is willing to learn from its mistakes.

"School districts exist to educate, not indoctrinate students into religion," says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "Kindergartners are the ultimate captive audience, and it was imperative that this damaging religious predation was halted."

Mile-high meeting!



Sign up today to attend FFRF's 47th national convention in Denver the weekend of Sept. 27-29. See page 3 and back page for convention info and the registration form, or go online at ffrf.org/convention2024.

FFRF files two amicus briefs over legal standing

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has filed two amicus (friend-of-the-court) briefs, one before the Supreme Court and the other before the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

In the case before the Supreme Court, FFRF jointly filed the brief with American Atheists, and contended that the litigants who are challenging medication abortion lack standing to sue.

In the other case in front of the 9th Circuit, FFRF says a church's court challenge of a 2018 Washington law giving citizens access to abortion and contraceptive coverage also lacks legal standing.

Mifepristone case

Last August, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a district court injunction restricting mifepristone, part of a two-drug protocol used for medication abortion. The appeals court ruling limited abortion medication to just seven weeks of gestation and also banned telemedicine and mail-order shipments for abortion pills. This decision was appealed both by Danco, the drug manufacturer, as well as the U.S. Food and

See Briefs on page 2

Does religion make people kind, generous?

By Barbara G. Walker

This is an excerpt from her book *Belief and Unbelief*.

The world has millions of kindly, generous, loving people who attribute their own good qualities to an abiding belief in a religion — usually one that features an equally kind and loving god. The world also has millions of kindly, generous, loving people who reject religion because they find a god either insufficiently loving or insufficiently credible. Each



Barbara G. Walker

side may be more or less tolerant of the other, believers perhaps less so because many fear the wrath of their purportedly loving god if they should seem too soft-hearted toward his alleged enemies.

Sometimes God seems not quite as forgiving as advertised.

Believers often assume that theirs is the majority opinion, but rarely know or care about theological particulars.

They don't examine their own beliefs, but follow their sect's rituals largely out of habit and social considerations, attending the same services as their friends and/or family, not because they have chosen them from the vast smorgasbord of available sects in any conscious or deliberate way, but just because it is their only experience.

The impression that people have to be religious in order to be good is earnestly promulgated by religious organizations, which have a vested interest in denying all evidence to the contrary. Fundamentalists like to define atheists

as evil, or at least misguided. "I'll pray for you" says the condescending believer to the nonbeliever, thus asserting his own opinion that God will listen to him and do as he directs. It's the ultimate ego trip for its practitioner.

But is it really true that religion makes people more kindly, generous or loving? History tends to disprove this. The worst wars, the most vicious inquisitions, the cruelest pogroms and persecutions were both fomented and supported by religion. Soldiers and cru-

See Religion on page 14

Briefs

Continued from page 1

Drug Administration in separate cases. The plaintiffs are anti-abortion physicians and anti-choice organizations that claim injury based on manufactured and hypothetical scenarios and are represented by the Christian nationalist outfit Alliance Defending Freedom.

The anti-abortion groups and physicians lack standing to challenge the FDA's regulatory decisions in 2016 and 2021 concerning mifepristone, the amicus brief asserts.

The U.S. Constitution "requires a 'proper party' to bring suit, which ensures that federal courts resolve only real cases or controversies," the brief states. "In this instance, anti-abortion advocates seek to use the courts to limit access to a safe and effective medication used for abortion." The anti-abortion plaintiffs have sought to reverse-engineer a way to challenge the use of mifepristone, but those attempts fall well short of constitutional requirements.

First, the brief points out, the physicians have not demonstrated a "certainly impending" injury. Their religious or moral objections require a highly speculative chain of events and rely on hypothetical injuries. The other alleged injuries are just a proxy for what the physicians really care about: trying to ban the most popular form of abortion care because they have a so-called moral and religious objection to abortion. Under their standing theory, doctors who have a mere possibility of treating patients who may suffer from improbable complications from a drug may utilize the courts as a proxy for the doctor's religious objections to the use of the drug. The sweeping breadth of this theory would permit suits for concocted and theoretical injuries.

"The Constitution does not permit plaintiffs to invent speculative injuries as

a basis for a 'case or controversy,'" says the brief. "The Constitution also does not permit plaintiffs to litigate claimed moral or religious injuries via proxy by way of other speculative claims."

Second, the physicians' standing theory would grant judicial review over any number of implausible and hypothetical injuries. Within the ambit of the FDA, doctors could wield religious or moral objections as a basis for standing if they might treat a patient someday who might be harmed by an FDA-regulated medication. This is not only contrary to the Constitution, but is untenable in a secular nation where science, not dogma, must guide the FDA's regulatory decisions.

The FDA regulations in question do not require the physicians to do anything. The FDA has taken no regulatory action relating to these doctors that threatens their rights of conscience. And the physicians have not identified when their rights of conscience would be harmed.

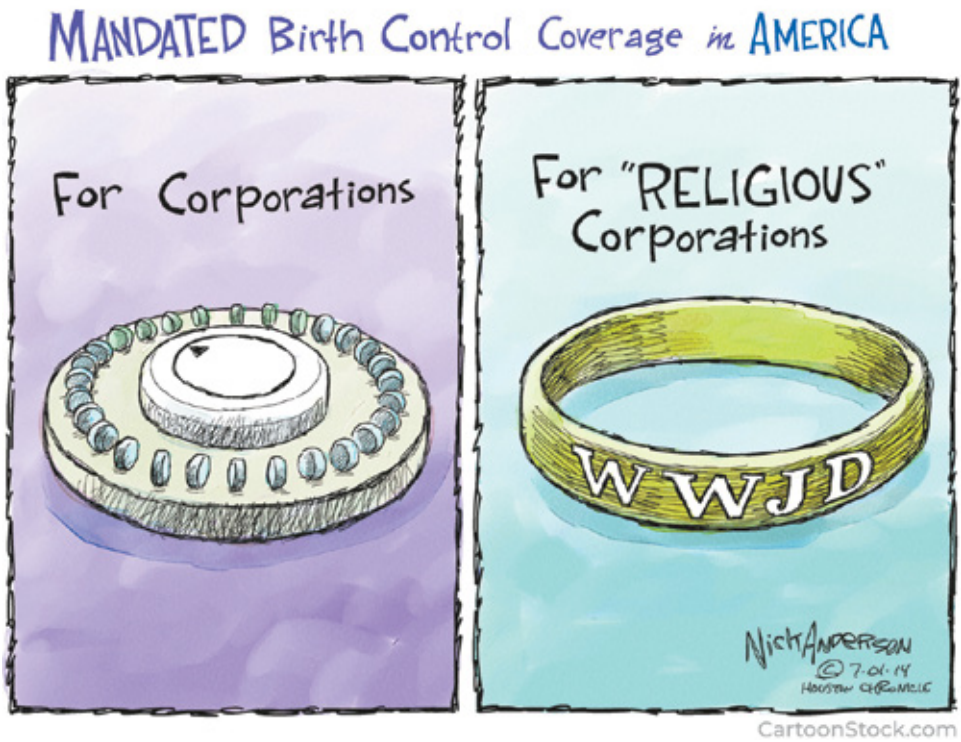
Finally, FFRF and AA are concerned about manipulation by courts of their jurisdiction in order to favor preferred litigants. The Supreme Court has often turned away challenges that involve alleged violations of civil rights, the First Amendment's Establishment Clause and environmental protection on the grounds that injuries are too generalized or too speculative, or that cases have been rendered moot by subsequent state action. Yet, the Supreme Court has increasingly failed to scrutinize these limits on its own jurisdiction in cases involving Christian litigants who assert constitutional violations. The court must decide such issues in a uniform and impartial manner.

"Not only is the judiciary's impartiality at stake, but access to justice for all citizens is at stake," the brief warns. "By design, the question of standing is a prerequisite for judicial intervention that closes the courthouse door to some litigants. Any manipulation by courts on the basis of standing becomes a means to issue favorable decisions on the merits to one side."

The 5th Circuit's handling of this case stands as an example of jurisdiction manipulation. While it found standing here on the basis of the doctors' speculative future injuries, it has in the recent past declined to engage in the same treatment of those who are far more likely to suffer (such as in the case of students with disabilities challenging an order that prohibited school districts from requiring students to wear masks during the Covid-19 pandemic).

For all these reasons, FFRF and AA conclude, the Supreme Court should reverse the judgment of the 5th Circuit and the case should be dismissed.

FFRF Senior Litigation Counsel Pat-



rick Elliott, FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence and American Atheists lawyer Geoffrey Blackwell prepared the brief. Elliott is the counsel of record for the brief.

Abortion access case

A church's court challenge of a 2018 Washington law giving citizens access to abortion and contraceptive coverage lacks legal standing, asserts FFRF's amicus brief.

The Cedar Park Assembly of God, the plaintiff, contends that a state law requiring all health insurance companies to provide citizens access to abortion care coverage and contraceptives, even when their employer's health insurance doesn't cover those services for religious reasons, violates its First Amendment rights. Cedar Park, based in Bothell, claimed that the law, SB 6219, requires exempt religious organizations to "facilitate" access to abortion and contraceptives in violation of their religious beliefs. The state of Washington says that Cedar Park's Free Exercise rights are not violated since Cedar Park falls under an exception to the law for religious organizations and is not required to purchase abortion or contraceptive coverage.

A district court ruled in favor of the state, holding that the law does not violate Cedar Park's Free Exercise rights or its rights under the church autonomy doctrine. Cedar Park has appealed to the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

Cedar Park doesn't have standing because it hasn't shown that it has actually been injured or will be injured by the state law, maintains the FFRF friend-of-the-court brief. It is plain that the injuries Cedar Park initially alleged are, at best, attenuated hypotheticals lacking a concrete factual basis in reality; therefore, this case must be dismissed. At the summary judgment stage, it is the plaintiff's duty to produce sufficient admissible evidence in the record to show that it has suffered a concrete injury that is actual or imminent. Cedar Park has not met this burden, FFRF convincingly asserts.

"On this second appeal, Cedar Park has whittled its claimed injury down to an allegation that SB 6219 violates Cedar Park's Free Exercise and church autonomy rights because it (a) allows employees to access abortion care and contraceptives even when their employer-provided health insurance does not directly cover those services; and (b) may theoretically allow health carriers to charge employers a nominal fee increase for covering the costs of services not included in the employer's plan," states the brief.

The primary injury that Cedar Park claims is the possibility that one or more

of its employees will access health care services of which Cedar Park disapproves. Cedar Park protests in its filings that its employee health insurance card might briefly be used in the process of an employee theoretically accessing that care. However, it has not set forth evidence that any of its employees (or their spouses or dependents) have accessed abortion care or contraceptive services; it has not set forth evidence that any of its employees intend to access these services; and it has not set forth evidence that any of its employees have attempted to access these services since SB 6219 went into effect nearly five years ago.

And Cedar Park has made it extremely unlikely that any of its employees will ever attempt to access such services. Each Cedar Park employee "signs a statement agreeing to 'conduct their professional and personal lives in a manner'" that is consistent with Cedar Park's religious beliefs and they "agree 'to refrain from behavior that conflicts or appears inconsistent with evangelical Christian standards as determined in the sole and absolute discretion of Cedar Park.'"

Cedar Park's second basis for its alleged injury is its assertion that health carriers may perhaps "pass along the cost" of covering abortion care and contraceptives to Cedar Park in the form of "increased premiums, administrative, or overhead expenses" or other costs. To support this assertion, Cedar Park cites only a 2002 Washington attorney general opinion that offered a nonbinding interpretation of the conscience clause.

"But Cedar Park's worry that its health carrier might pass along the costs of covering these services is a hypothetical that relies on a highly attenuated chain of events, insufficient to confer an injury," states FFRF's brief. Without supporting evidence, Cedar Park's conclusion that health carriers will pass along the cost of uncovered health services is unpersuasive and insufficient to establish an injury in fact.

Finally, Cedar Park cannot establish standing by showing that Washington will enforce SB 6219 against it because the law regulates health insurance companies, not employers. Cedar Park is free to negotiate for and purchase health insurance that doesn't cover services that it objects to on religious grounds.

Since Cedar Park lacks standing, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals should dismiss the appeal for lack of jurisdiction, FFRF's brief concludes. Alternatively, the appeals court should affirm the district court's ruling.

FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence was the lead attorney in preparing the brief. FFRF Associate Counsel Sam Grover is the counsel of record for the brief.



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The only freethought newspaper in the United States	

Denver, Sept. 27-28

Convention to feature avalanche of talent



Bonnie Garmus

The 47th annual national convention of the Freedom From Religion Foundation in Denver is shaping up to be a Rocky Mountain highlight. During the two-day extravaganza on Friday, Sept. 27, and Saturday, Sept. 28, our speakers include a bestselling novelist, a rich panoply of expert commentators on religion, politics and Christian nationalism, and a popular actor who is outspoken about his atheism.

Bonnie Garmus will be on hand to accept FFRF’s Emperor Has No Clothes Award. Garmus’ charming and thought-provoking novel, *Lessons in Chemistry*, has sold in the multimillions. The award-winning global phenomenon, which has been translated into 42 languages and has been on the bestseller list for more than a year, was recently turned into a series on Apple TV starring Brie Larson. The novel, part romantic comedy and part satiric commentary, is about a determined chemist who encounters so much sexism in the 1950s that she turns to hosting a highly scientific TV cooking show. While the book’s feminism has been much-remarked upon, almost every main character in it is a pronounced atheist.

FFRF is also delighted that “unabashed atheist” **Ron Reagan**, who recorded



The Denver skyline, with the Rocky Mountains in the distance.

FFRF’s long-playing TV commercial and last spoke at a conference in 2015, will return to speak about religion and politics. Reagan, a political commentator and broadcaster, is the freethinking son of President Ronald and Nancy Reagan.

Another crowd-pleaser returning to speak about religion and politics will be New York Times columnist **Michelle Goldberg**, whose book *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* in 2006 was an early warning call. Goldberg, who is also an online contributor to MSNBC, will receive FFRF’s Clarence Darrow Award and statuette.

Also addressing Christian nationalism is **Bradley Onishi**, who is on the faculty of the University of San Francisco and co-host of the top-ranked religion and politics podcast, “Straight White American Jesus.” He is author of the timely book, *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism — And What Comes Next*.

FFRF, which held the first-ever pan-

el of nonreligious state legislators at its conference last year, is assembling for 2024 a panel of secular Colorado state legislators. Confirmed are: **Rep. Judy Amabile**, a businesswoman and progressive advocate who represents the 49th district, and **Rep. Brianna Titone**, a geologist who represents the 27th district and is the state’s first openly transgender state legislator.

“The Consequences of Religious Decline in the U.S.” will be the topic of University of Tampa sociology Professor **Ryan T. Cragun**. Cragun, who served as a Mormon missionary before leaving religion, is an expert on the rise of the “Nones” (religiously unaffiliated) and author or co-author of a host of books including *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society*, *What You Don’t Know About Religion (But Should)*, *How to Defeat Religion in 10 Easy Steps* and *From One Missionary to Another*.

Actor **Jon Huertas** is best known for starring as Miguel Rivas for six seasons on NBC’s popular “This Is Us.” Audienc-

es also know him as Detective Javier Esposito from ABC’s hit dramedy “Castle,” as well as for a stand-out performance as Sgt. Tony “Poke” Espera in HBO’s limited docudrama series, “Generation Kill,” where he offered a streetwise view of the Marine Corps invasion of Iraq. As an Air Force veteran himself, Jon calls that his most meaningful role. He is one of the few Latinx actors who has broken the ceiling in mainstream TV, portraying characters telling diverse but universal stories. He’s an open atheist and will be speaking on “True Freedom: Breaking the Shackles of Religious Indoctrination.” Jon explains: “Blacks and Latinos in the Americas have long been two of the most religious groups. I want to talk about how we can help people of color feel safe about facing their skepticism and allow people like me to feel free enough to be open about being nonbelievers.”

Last, but not least, FFRF Co-President **Dan Barker** will be speaking about his forthcoming new book, *Contraduction: The Hidden Fallacy that Inverts Reality*. After 140 debates for FFRF, Dan proposes a new way of looking at assumptions behind “fine-tuning” arguments for the existence of a god.

The convention will feature its usual reports by the co-presidents, the legal staff and legislative/lobbying team, plus a chance to peruse FFRF book and product tables and mingle with other freethinkers. The annual meetings of the state representatives and membership take place on Sunday morning, Sept. 29.

Other speakers will be announced in future issues of Freethought Today.

Turn to the back page to register and find complete information or check online at ffrf.org/convention2024.



Ron Reagan



Michelle Goldberg



Bradley Onishi



Judy Amabile



Brianna Titone



Ryan Cragun



Jon Huertas



Dan Barker

FFRF blasts ‘corrective’ Christian prayer in Florida

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has written to the Tavares City Council in Florida to complain, after it arranged a “corrective” Christian prayer to follow a Central Florida Freethought Community member’s secular invocation at a council meeting.

FFRF’s Central Florida Freethought Community Board Member Joseph Richardson was invited to deliver the opening invocation before the coun-

cil on Feb. 7. Richardson delivered a respectful secular message of equality and diversity, encouraging members of the public and the City Council to reflect the wisdom of reason and empathy that binds all together. He asked that the council be guided by the principles of inclusivity, fairness and respect for the autonomy of every individual, and celebrated the city’s shared values transcending creed, culture and conviction.

However, immediately following the invocation, Mayor Bob Grenier directed Tavares’ Utilities Director Phil Clark to deliver a Christian prayer, explicitly asking that God “forgive us for our sins. ... In Jesus Christ’s name.”

Scheduling a Christian prayer after Richardson’s secular invocation is a discriminatory and unconstitutional practice.

“As Mayor Grenier’s conduct at the meeting demonstrated, prayer at government meetings is unnecessary, inappropriate and divisive,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line writes.

FFRF asserts that the best solution to the situation is to discontinue invocations altogether. City Council members are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way. They do not need to worship on taxpayer’s time. Citizens, including Tavares’ nonreligious citizens, are compelled to come before local government bodies like the City Council on important civic matters, to participate in critical decisions affecting their livelihoods, property, children

and quality of life.

Prayers are coercive and intimidating when nonreligious citizens come to a public meeting and are required either to make a public showing of their nonbelief or to show deference to a religious sentiment they do not believe in, but which council members clearly do. If the board insists on continuing its unwise policy of hosting prayers at public meetings, it may not discriminate on the basis of religion against any person delivering an invocation. Secular invocations must be treated the same as Christian prayers. Treating an atheist or nonbeliever who delivers an invocation differently from a Christian citizen constitutes discrimination.

FFRF is urging the Tavares City Council to concentrate on civil matters and to leave religion to the private conscience of individuals by ending the practice of hosting prayers at meetings. As long as the council continues to invite citizens to deliver invocations to begin meetings, it must treat all invocations the same.

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

Across

1. a.k.a. moonfish of kingfish

5. Blade drops

8. *Freethinker Norman Lear’s TV show “_____ in the Family”

11. Aquarium dweller

12. The Grammys host since 2021

13. *Growing segment of U.S. population

15. Torus, pl.

16. “Cogito, _____ sum”

17. Roundish

18. *Atheist Charlie Parker’s nickname

20. Mums’ mums

21. 40-40, in tennis

22. Over, poetically

23. Promenade

26. Vaccine content, sing.

30. Leaf beverage

31. Hot red candy

34. Canal in a song

35. Antrum, pl.

37. Not outs

38. Digression

39. Post-It _____

40. Reenact (2 words)

42. U.S. central bank

43. Ship-repairing site

45. *Freethinker Robert Burns’ genre

47. Hudson’s Bay Company’s

original ware

48. Cloned sheep’s name

50. Mother Goose’ “Dame _____ and Her Cat”

52. *_____ Bonaparte: “Religion is what keeps the poor from murdering the rich”

55. *Atheist in Foxhole, e.g.

56. “Tosca” tune, e.g.

57. *Nonclerical

59. Type of dwelling unit

60. Darn a sock, e.g.

61. _____-a-Sketch

62. Time in NYC

63. Before, poetically

64. Short for Dorothea

Down

1. Popular breakfast grain

2. Clever tactic

3. Taj Mahal city

4. Bob, e.g.

5. Not Ionic or Corinthian

6. Tidal bore

7. Who would

8. Soon, to a bard

9. Luau necklaces

10. Dropped hallucinogen

12. Interstellar cloud

13. Group of nine singers

14. *”Keep your rosaries off my _____”

19. 4th letter in Greek alphabet

22. *Freethinker Ken Kesey’s book “_____ Flew Over the

Cuckoo’s Nest”

23. *Freethinker Stephen King’s novel “The _____”

24. Between countertenor and baritone

25. Shabby and tatty

26. Additionally

27. Short-change

28. Comforter stuffing

29. Down and out

32. *Freethinking lead singer of The Rolling Stones

33. *Rocker Adam _____: “I could be religious, if they sang the hymns to disco”

36. *Freethinking “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid” actor

38. Wake Island, e.g.

40. Acronym, abbr.

41. Send to a cloud

44. Beat the Joneses

46. Shoelace place

48. Truth or Dare player?

49. Offer two cents

50. Rare bills

51. Deliver a tirade

52. *Italian sceptic Umberto Eco’s novel “The _____ of the Rose”

53. *Thomas Jefferson did not use the bible for this

54. French Riviera city

55. Highest or lowest card

58. Repeated Cuban dance step

Freethought Today Crossword

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Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

THEY SAID WHAT?

I think our kids need something to unify around, to know that God can be mentioned in the classroom.

W.Va. state Sen. Mike Azinger, lead sponsor of a bill that would require public elementary and secondary schools and higher education institutions to display in a conspicuous place in each classroom a poster or framed copy of the national motto — “In God We Trust” — if the poster or framed copy has been donated, or purchased with private funds and made available to the school.

Metro News, 1-16-24

The Lord said: I want you to build this. We took God at his word and sold a cryptocurrency with no clear exit. . . . Either I misheard God . . . or two, God is still not done with this project.

Eligio Regalado, an online pastor who was charged with civil fraud for selling a cryptocurrency that regulators described


as “practically worthless.” He and his wife made \$3.2 million from the scam.

Washington Post, 1-22-24

I would listen to this music and I would get angry at him, for saying that he didn’t believe in God . . . and that he didn’t believe in the Beatles. This was another thing that angered me, even though this record had been done at least 10 years previously. I just wanted to scream out loud, “Who does he think he is, saying these things about God and heaven and the Beatles?” Saying that he doesn’t believe in Jesus and things like that.

Mark Chapman, who shot and killed John Lennon in December 1980, talking about why he decided to kill the renowned musician and nonbeliever. Chapman, a former fan, was referring to the singer’s claim that the Beatles were “more popular than Jesus.”

Farout Magazine, 10-7-23



Joseph Ladapo

Florida Surgeon General Dr. Joseph Ladapo, in an interview on Steve Bannon’s podcast.

Daily Beast, 1-5-24

These vaccines are honestly — they’re the Antichrist of all products. . . . It’s just complete disrespect to the human genome and the importance of protecting it and preserving it. And that is our connection to God.

They’re elevating her to an idol. Idolatry. This is a little bit of what idolatry, I think, looks like. And you’re not supposed to do that. In fact, if you look it up in the bible, it’s a sin!

Newsmax host Greg Kelly, speaking about Taylor Swift and her fans.

Newsmax, 1-30-24

I don’t think it’s the church that needs to be reminded about the separation of church and state, I think it’s the state that needs to be reminded. It’s the state that’s overreaching. That encroachment is continual, it is consistent, it is under the radar. We as regular folks play checkers, but the devil plays chess. The devil has checkmated us.

Memphis politician and minister John DeBerry, at the “Faith and State Panel.”

The Tennessean, 1-10-24

I’m trying to find a new way to make it more accessible and take away the negative onus of what has been associated with organized religion.

Martin Scorsese, who is making a movie from an adaptation of A Life of Jesus by writer Shusaku Endo.

The Guardian, 1-9-24

I saw this blasphemous statue and was outraged. My conscience is held captive to the word of God, not to bureaucratic decree. And so I acted.

Michael Cassidy, after he was charged with third-degree criminal mischief in violation of individual rights — a hate crime — for damaging the Satanic Temple’s holiday display in the Iowa Capitol.

BBC, 1-31-24

It must have been God’s will, then. That’s my belief.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, when asked by a reporter if “Joe Biden’s presidency is God’s will,” after Johnson said early in his term as speaker “that scripture, the bible, is very clear that God is the one that raises up those in authority.”

MSNBC, 1-17-24

The people who produce and distribute it should be imprisoned. Educators and public librarians who purvey it should be classed as registered sex offenders.

From the Heritage Foundation’s document “Project 2025,” which declares that books bans don’t go far enough and that “pornography, manifested today in the omnipresent propagation of transgender ideology and sexualization of children,” should be stripped of First Amendment protection and outlawed.

New York Times, 2-3-24

We’ve taken the bible out of school, Ten Commandments out of schools, anything referencing religion . . . we’ve got separation of church and state, as the courts called it. We’ve got this moving away from God. . . . so we’ve got this condition that we see today when pastors feel like they can say whatever they need to say inside the walls in their church, but we can’t go to the government because there’s a separation.

Rev. James Buntrock, associate pastor of Glorious Way Church in Houston, and executive director of My God Votes, which started at the Texas Capitol with worship services to encourage Christians to become more engaged in government and politics, and which recently spread to the Oklahoma and Louisiana statehouses.

The Oklahoman, 2-7-24

Freethought Today Cryptogram

OKQMVZ YAKY QHJ KBF NHBKU LFWKJOF QHJ

LFUMFPF MV K ZHG MO UMXF OKQMVZ QHJ KBF

KV FWHVHNMOY LFWKJOF QHJ EUKQ NHVHEHUQ

— BHLFBY I. WHC

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: B => R. Answer is on page 21.

This puzzle is from *Freethinking Cryptograms* by FFRF member Brooks Rimes, available on Amazon.com for \$9.95.

Freethinker seeks to reduce suffering

Name: Steve Siebold.
Where I live: Gainesville, Ga.
Where and when I was born: Chicago, 1964.
Family: Dawn, my wife.
Education: University of South Alabama.
Occupation: Author.
How I got where I am today: Mentorship.
Where I'm headed: Building a non-profit organization to help reduce human suffering around world through personal development.
Person in history I admire: Dr. Martin Luther King.
A quotation I like: "The world you desire can be won. It exists . . . it is real . . . it is possible. It's yours." — Ayn Rand.
Things I like: Honesty. Integrity. Kindness.
Things I smite: The religious indoctrination and systemic brainwashing of children into supernaturalism.
My doubts about religion started: In sixth grade during weekly confirmation classes in the Lutheran Church in the 1970s.
Before I die: I want to distribute my fortune to worthy causes and build an organization that helps reduce hu-



Steve Siebold is the author of 12 books, which have sold over 1.6 million copies, including the top-selling book of 2020 on personal finance, *How Money Works*.

man suffering around the world.
Ways I promote freethought: I promote freethought and critical thinking in my books, media interviews, social media, speeches and in as many social situations as possible.

MEET A MEMBER

FFRF welcomes newest 23 Lifers, 16 Immortals

FFRF would like to thank and welcome its two newest Beyond After-Life members, its 21 newest Lifetime members and its 16 new Immortals.

The two Beyond After-Life members are Walter Bilofsky and John H. Claassen. Beyond After-Life is a tongue-in-cheek-named \$10,000 membership category where membership will live on after them . . . and beyond!

The 21 new Lifetime members, which is a \$1,000 membership category, are Patricia Acks, Warren Anderson, Carol Ardell, John Byers, Lincoln Christensen, Robert Civiak, Jennifer Cohn, Derek Cook (gifted by Lora Yonkman), Carol Dann, Les Gehman, Robert Hood, John Ingold, David Barr Kirtley (gifted by Kathryn Kirtley), William Lorentz, Jack Machen, William Nelis, Darcie Polzien, Cecile J. Provencher, Jeremy Scofield, Troy A. Sholar (gifted by Gwendolyn F. Sholar) and Ted Spetnagel.

And the 16 newest Immortals are Dr. R.J. Baken, Dianne Centa, Carol Ann Clark, Beverly C. Damm, Allen Dines, Edward Eskdale, Will Fellows, Michael Fullmer, Raymond C. Mastalish, Mitch S. McCain, Charles R. McDonald, Bronze Quinton, Billie D. Sieg, Celeste Smither, Grant Taylor and Tom Tongier. Immortals is a category for those who have made arrangements in their estate plans to include FFRF.

States included are: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Vermont, Washington and Wisconsin and one from the Philippines.

FFRF Greater Sacramento chapter adds two new divisions, leaders

The Greater Sacramento Chapter of FFRF has announced two new divisions for 2024, chapter President Judy Saint reports.

"In this crucial election year, we are adding to our current programs with a new Education Team, which will firmly set things straight with local school administrators, and a new Visibility Team, well-equipped to pop up at local events to let the public know we are here, we know the law and we are watching out for them," Saint writes.

The new Education Team leader is Angela Garvie. "We have lots of ideas on how to educate our local school



Angela Garvie

administrators on their responsibilities regarding church/state separation and helping them stay in their lane," Garvie writes.

The new Visibility Team leader is Erin Louis. "I hope with increased visibility, making face-to-face connections, our chapter's Pop-Up team will help others who have been impacted by religion creeping into our secular schools and community," Louis writes. "Our goal is to provide comfort from knowing that they can help, and also that they are not alone in the fight to preserve our right to freedom from religion."



Erin Louis

OVERHEARD

Faith-based groups are using their tax-exempt status to reach too many people and give themselves too much political power. People do not have the same crack at the pie.

N.H. state Rep. Catherine Sofikitis, who is the sponsor of a proposed constitutional amendment that would tax churches.
New Hampshire Business Review, 1-10-24

I was raised in this environment where if you're not a Christian, you're probably a bad person because no one's holding you accountable. In clubs, I found a lot of these people [non-Christians] are more empathetic and kinder and open-minded than people I've been around. Far less judgmental in the stand-up world.

Comic Taylor Tomlinson, who took over the late-night television slot that follows Stephen Colbert's "Late Show" on CBS.
New York Times, 1-14-24

I decided, it makes more sense to me to hate a god that does not exist than to be slave to one. The weight of the world came off of me. Because I wasn't concerned about this maniacal, narcissistic, omnicidal psychopath. . . . I want more than anything to believe in something other than this. I just can't do it though, lacking evidence.

Phillip Hancock, a death row inmate executed on Nov. 30 in Oklahoma, who lost his religion in prison and requested an atheist chaplain, Devin Moss, be present at his death.
New York Times, 1-22-24

God had nothing to do with this.

Devin Moss, a Christian who later rejected belief in God, became an atheist and a chaplain and counseled atheist death row inmate Phillip Hancock [see quote above].
New York Times, 1-22-24

Today, the Nones kind of look like everybody else. At some level, we're saying, hey, actually, this is just your neighbor.

Sociologist Ryan Cragun, a professor at the University of Tampa, who was an adviser on the study showing that Nones make up 28 percent of the U.S. population, which is the largest group by religious indentification. Cragun will be speaking at FFRF's convention in September in Denver.
Religion News Service, 1-25-24

In its worst manifestations, it's basically a mind rape. These doctrines that are taught to you over and over are so damaging and so hideous and so hard to weed out. In many cases, you have been violated, you have been abused or you have been shamed, and the impact is very deep and can be everlasting.

Marlene Winell, a psychologist who coined the term "religious trauma syndrome" in 2011, from the article, "Religious trauma still haunts millions of LGBTQ Americans."
NBC News, 1-28-24

Every loss truly traumatizes me. . . . What choice do you have but to fight the good fight?

Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, in response to a question about how the conservative justices have moved the country to the ideological right.
The Hill, 1-30-24

Thanks to the religious freedom they enjoy in this country, they're all perfectly free to offer prayers to whoever they want for whatever they want — on their own.

Editorial calling out Prosser, Wash., School Board member Frank Vermulm, who proposed that the board start opening its meetings with a prayer. The editorial also pointed out that FFRF "wasted little time calling the idea 'unlawful.' The unspoken warning there is that the foundation would likely sue if Prosser were to decide to pursue Vermulm's proposal."
Yakima Herald, 2-8-24



Sonia Sotomayor

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'Nones' remain largest single group in the U.S.

Within the Nones, atheists and agnostics are more likely to be politically and civically engaged, whereas those who responded that their religion is “nothing in particular” are far less likely to vote than atheists. The new report also shows that Nones are made up of younger Americans, with 69 percent of them under the age of 50.

In 2019, OCR issued a sweeping final rule that was held unlawful by three federal district courts. The Final Rule partially rescinds the 2019 rule, restores the longstanding process for enforcing federal conscience laws, and strengthens protections against conscience and religious discrimination.

Some of these struggles are trends that long predated the pandemic. Median in-person attendance has steadily declined since the start of the century, the report said, and with fewer younger participants, the typical age of congregants is rising.



The pope called for a global ban on surrogacy, which he said turns the child and the mother into “an object of trafficking.” The

“Like Pope Francis, I don’t want women to be exploited,” said Brandon Ambrosino, a theologian and ethicist at Villanova University. “But I also know, from personal experience, that it’s possible to pursue third-party reproduction in nonexploitative ways.”

The Charleston Gazette-Mail editorially commented that in passing the bill, “The Republican supermajority controlling the West Virginia Senate struck another blow against education and further proved their own staggering lack of foresight.”

The site reported that Escambia County School District has relegated to storage the American Heritage Children's Dictionary, Webster's Dictionary for Students, and Merriam-Webster's Dictionary.

They are among the more than 2,800 library books that have been removed in Escambia County under HB 1069. The bill, signed into law in May of last year, allows residents to have books removed from school libraries within their district if they contain depictions or descriptions of sexual conduct. Dictionaries fall under this criteria because of their definitions of words of a sexual nature.

Generation Z adults are less likely than older generations to join an established religion, far more likely to identify as LGBTQ and generally are less likely to be Republican, a new survey by the Public Religion Research Institute shows.

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.

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ffrf.org/shop

Gen Z adults are notably less likely to identify as white Christians (27 percent) compared to baby boomers (54 percent), and more likely to identify as religiously unaffiliated (33 percent) than every generation except millennials.

The project explores how Christian nationalism “is not only a danger to our country, but to Christianity itself.” Among other things, the documentary features images of the attack on the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, along with self-described Christian nationalists such as Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene.

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Daily online calendar of famous freethinkers
ffrf.org/day

We Dissent monthly podcast
wedissent.org

Minn. DOC sued for ending Christian prison program

The leader of a Christian class is suing the Minnesota Department of Corrections for ending his program at the St. Cloud state prison.

Anthony Schmitt led hundreds of inmates at the prison through a 12-week orthodox Christian class titled “The Quest for Authentic Manhood.” Schmitt and his colleagues say they helped more than a thousand men rehabilitate and transition back to the community through teaching them how to lead lives “of ‘authentic manhood’ as modeled by Jesus Christ.”

But, after finding that it “directly conflicted” with the department’s “diversity, equity, and inclusivity values” by defining manhood in a way that excluded gay men and cast women as “weak” and best suited as submissive to husbands in charge of households, the Minnesota DOC ended the program.

Schmitt, with the backing of the conservative nonprofit Upper Midwest Law Center and True North Legal, sued Corrections Commissioner Paul Schnell and Assistant Commissioner Jolene Rebertus in a bid to resume the program while arguing that the state DOC is violating his free speech rights.

Nonprofit status helped boost Christian rock

Christian rock can now be heard on more than 1,000 radio stations across the country, due mostly to the Educational Media Foundation becoming a nonprofit business.

EMF’s decision to become a nonprofit radio conglomerate allowed the organization to not only avoid paying taxes, but to take advantage of long-held FCC policies intended to keep the radio dial from being sold to the highest bidder, such as waiving application costs and other fees for nonprofits due to their inherently “limited funding.”

EMF has become the country’s fastest-growing radio chain and second-largest station owner in the country, second only to iHeartRadio. With hundreds of stations branded as “K-LOVE,” as well as its smaller chain of “Air1” stations, EMF broadcasts on more than 1,000 signals, reaching about 18 million listeners a week.

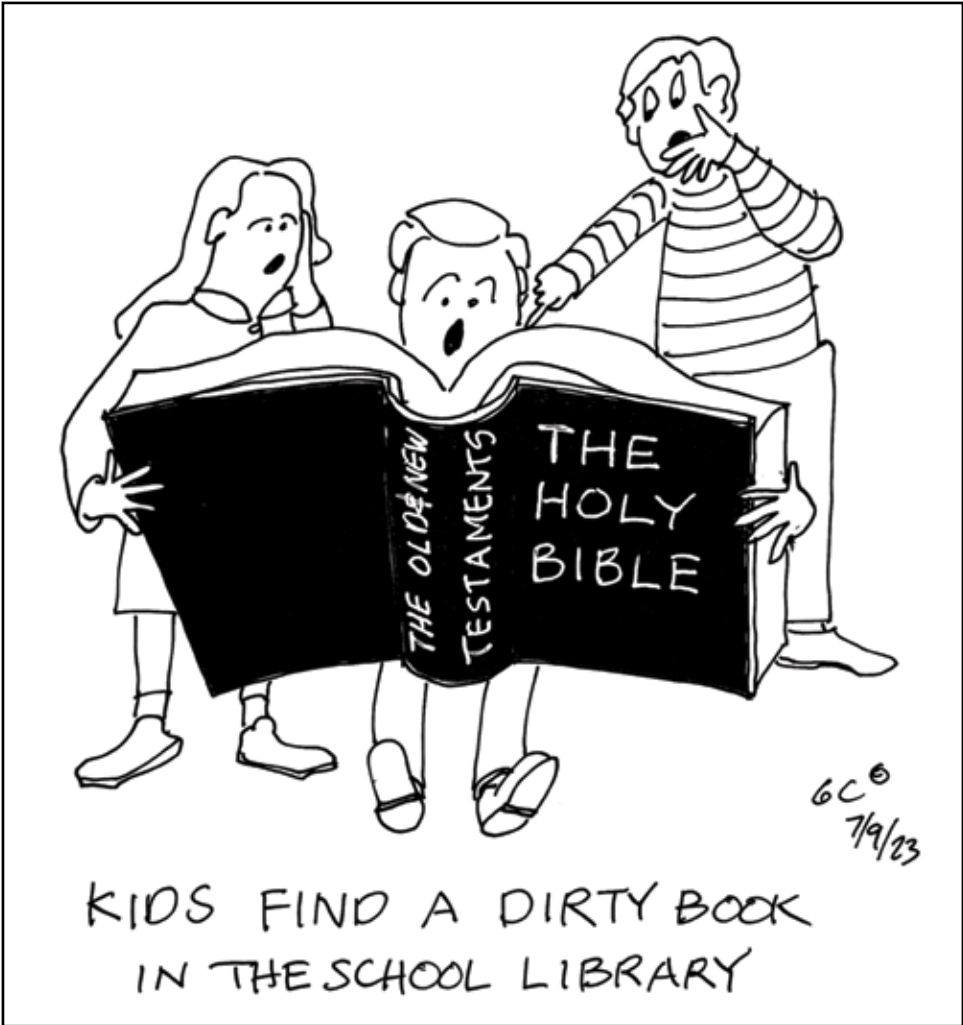
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This cartoon was submitted by FFRF member Greg Cahill.

Satanic Temple vandal charged with hate crime

Michael Cassidy, a former congressional and legislative candidate from Mississippi, is being charged with a hate crime for destroying a statue put up in the Iowa Capitol by the Satanic Temple.

The statue was erected during the holiday season as allowed by Iowa law. On Dec. 14, the figure depicting the horned deity Baphomet was “destroyed beyond repair,” according to the group.

Polk County prosecutors have charged Cassidy with felony third-degree criminal mischief, which alleges the act was committed “in violation of individual rights” under Iowa’s hate crime statute.

“Evidence shows the defendant made statements to law enforcement and the public indicating he destroyed the property because of the victim’s religion,” Lynn Hicks, a spokesman for the Polk County Attorney’s Office, said in a statement.

Nebraska bills would mix religion and education

Conservative lawmakers who want to intertwine religion with school curriculum in Nebraska presented several bills Feb. 5 to the state Legislature’s Education Committee.

The list includes a bill that would give parents more control over their

local school’s library books and curriculum and another that would allow public school students to receive school credit for attending religious classes outside school. Another measure would change school funding to loop in private school tuition while forbidding the state from interfering in private schools’ curriculum or beliefs.

Those bills are part of a broader conservative push nationwide to target a variety of culture issues in education, including diversity, equity and inclusion programs and the type of books allowed in school libraries. Conservative officials across the country have increasingly tried to limit the type of books that children are exposed to, including books that address structural racism and LGBTQ+ issues.

Texas ‘book ban’ law blocked by appeals court

The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled Jan. 17 that a Texas law, which would have required book publishers and sellers to provide content ratings for books, is an unconstitutional breach of the First Amendment protection against compelled speech.

The appellate court, one of the most conservative in the nation, sided with booksellers who sued the state after claiming House Bill 900 violated their First Amendment rights. The court affirmed a lower court’s deci-

sion to prevent Texas Education Agency Commissioner Mike Morath from enforcing the 2023 law.

The decision was somewhat surprising since the appellate court blocked the lower court’s ruling in November. Addressing the reversal, Judge Don Willett with the 5th Circuit wrote that a “different panel of this court” had granted the state’s appeal to block that ruling.

The plaintiffs — which include bookshops in Houston and Austin, the American Booksellers Association, the Association of American Publishers and the Authors Guild — argue that it is logistically impossible and cost-prohibitive to comply with the law.

CVS being sued for firing non-compliant employee

A nurse practitioner in Florida has filed a lawsuit against CVS Pharmacy for failing to grant her a religious exemption from the requirement to provide contraceptives.

The First Liberty Institute announced in a statement Jan. 23 that it filed a lawsuit on behalf of Gudrun Kristofersdottir, who was fired from her position at a CVS MinuteClinic in Tequesta after refusing to dispense hormonal contraceptives because she said it violated her Catholic beliefs.

According to the complaint, CVS had given Kristofersdottir a religious accommodation to not personally prescribe such drugs. When a patient wanted such a prescription, she referred them to another MinuteClinic provider. However, CVS changed its rules in 2021, adopting a new policy that denies “all such religious accommodations without considering the particular circumstances of the employee requesting the accommodation, including to determine whether that employee could be accommodated without undue hardship.”

“It is not possible to grant an accommodation that exempts an employee from performing the essential functions of their job,” said CVS Executive Director of Corporate Communications Mike DeAngelis.

Religious trauma haunts millions of Americans

One in three adults in the United States has suffered from religious trauma at some point in their life, according to a 2023 study published in the Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry Journal. That same study suggests up to one in five U.S. adults currently suffers from major religious trauma symptoms.

Religious trauma occurs when an individual’s religious upbringing has lasting adverse effects on their physical, mental or emotional well-being, according to the Religious Trauma Institute. Symptoms can include guilt, shame, loss of trust and loss of meaning in life.

Experts say LGBTQ people — who represent more than 7 percent of the U.S. population, according to a 2023 Gallup poll — experience religious trauma at disproportionate rates. A 2022 study found that LGBTQ people who experience certain forms of religious trauma are at increased risk for suicidality, substance abuse, homelessness, anxiety and depression.

“The church has been the villain in my life story,” said Kellen Swift-Godzisz, who is gay and grew up in an evangelical Baptist church in rural Michigan.

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Photo by Chris Line

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FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

FFRF keeps Texas district free from indoctrination

After FFRF intervened, the Texas-based Tomball ISD will no longer allow staff members to run overtly religious extracurricular clubs.

A concerned district parent reported that Oakcrest Intermediate School was allowing a staff member to organize, lead and run a religious club for students called “Cats for Christ.” The staff member additionally organized the religious event “See You At the Pole” at the school, as well, an event that brings students to their school’s flagpole in prayer.

“We ask that the district ensure that ‘Cats for Christ’ is disbanded,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district. “Going forward, all religious clubs and events must be genuinely student-initiated, and organized, led and run by students.”

Upon receiving FFRF’s letter, General Counsel Holly Sherman reached out, informing FFRF that staff members in the future would respect the First Amendment by taking a monitoring role rather than an active one. “TISD will take steps to ensure that all non-curricular student organizations, regardless of any religious affiliation, are supervised by a staff member who serves in a monitoring role in accordance with Board Policy FNAB (Local) and applicable law.”

Missouri district to remove divisive prayers

The Independence School District in Missouri had to be reminded by the FFRF that prayer during school assemblies is a constitutional violation.

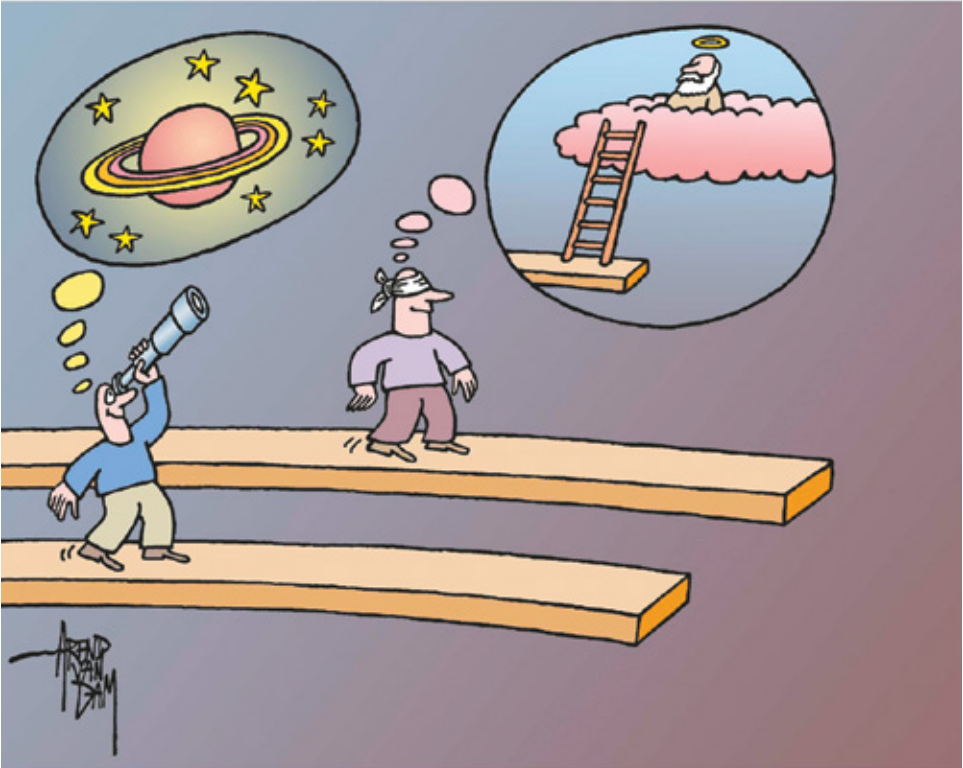
A district parent reported that the Nov. 12, 2022, Truman High School Veteran’s Day assembly included a prayer led by an ROTC student who began the invocation with “Let us pray.” The complainant stated that they spoke with the high school’s principal and were assured that a prayer would not happen at future Veterans Day assemblies. Unfortunately, the Truman High School’s 2023 assembly again included a prayer led by an ROTC student.

“Students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools, including when participating in school-sponsored events,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote.

In response, J. Drew Marriott, legal counsel for the school, wrote to FFRF, confirming the district would not violate student rights any longer. “The district has taken steps to remind district staff of the district’s policies, including the requirement that staff avoid the promotion of religious views at school and that, to the extent that student speeches may include religious conduct, district staff are required by policy to state, orally, in writing, or both, that the student’s public speech does not reflect the endorsement, sponsorship, position or expression of the district,” Marriott wrote.

Ohio holiday program no longer overtly sectarian

FFRF coached the Ohio-based Oak Hill Union Local School District on acceptable holiday choir programming for students after it learned of a school’s



science and religion

Cartoonstock.com

Christian-heavy program.

A concerned district parent reported that the holiday program on Dec. 13 at Oak Hill Elementary School featured primarily Christian songs. Per the concert’s program, the first-grade concert featured six songs, five of which were Christian-based. The program additionally featured an image of the biblical manger scene, depicting the Christian story of the birth of Jesus Christ. The fourth-grade concert featured exclusively Christian songs, with the program also featuring a nativity scene.

“Teaching public school students Christian worship music in a devotional manner violates the First Amendment,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote.

After receiving the state/church watchdog’s letter, Superintendent Susan L. Oppenheimer contacted FFRF to inform it that teachers would be instructed on the school policy more closely.

“It is apparent to the district, after review of this matter, that certain staff could benefit from a reminder about board policies and guidelines,” Oppenheimer wrote. As part of these guidelines, principals have been instructed to review and approve programs for holiday concerts, and elementary music teachers will be instructed specifically to plan holiday concerts with a mix of secular songs and songs from various religious traditions instead of overtly Christian traditions.

No more baptisms as part of Mo. basketball program

FFRF fought successfully to keep baptisms out of the Missouri-based Dixon R-1 School District girls basketball program.

FFRF received a report that the Dixon High School and Middle School girls basketball coach baptized a student-athlete at the end of a team practice. An accompanying Facebook post by an account named “Dixon Lady Bulldogs Basketball” confirmed the baptism took place. FFRF wrote to the district to ensure that students weren’t being coerced into baptisms.

“Student baptisms are not an appropriate event to include in student basketball practices, which are school-sponsored events,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

Margaret A. Hesse, legal representative for the district, informed FFRF that, while the event did take place, the baptism was performed by a former coach of the district, not the present coach. “Nevertheless, the district superintendent has discussed your concerns with both [coaches] and cautioned them against religious coercion when acting as district employees,” Hesse wrote. Additionally, the Dixon Lady Bulldogs Basketball Facebook page now contains a disclaimer informing the public that it is not officially affiliated with the district.

FFRF keeps prayer out of Fla. school board meetings

FFRF has kept the District School Board of Collier County in Florida from violating the Constitution by preventing them from opening board meetings with prayer.

A concerned district parent reported that at the board’s meeting on Sept. 11, 2023, board member Jerry Rutherford presented a proposal to open meetings with a religious prayer, which would replace an existing measure that opens meetings with a moment of silence. FFRF was informed that Rutherford had a history of pushing his personal religious beliefs onto others, and that he had been trying to impose prayer on the school board students and parents since at least 2016.

“The board’s current practice of holding a moment of silence allows those who wish to pray to do so without coercing students, staff, and community members into participating,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Chair Kelly Lichter.

FFRF kept in contact with the complainant, who reported in early January that there was good news to the situation. “The school board voted 3-2 against the invocation,” they wrote in an email.

Proselytizing ends at Texas State University

FFRF wrote to Texas State University when it came to its attention that an instructor was using their position to force students to pray.

A student reported to FFRF that during the fall 2023 semester, students were required to observe and partic-

ipate in a Christian prayer as part of the course “Leadership Development: Business As Unusual.” The complainant explained that due to the time of the class, students were provided a meal on-site during class. Prior to each meal, the instructor led students in a Christian prayer before students were allowed to eat and that women were told to line up for dinner prior to men. An audio recording from the class held on Nov. 6, 2023, showed that the pre-meal prayer was given as “thanks to the Lord.” Furthermore, the class primarily used course materials from the Relational Values Association, an affiliate of the evangelical Christian organization, the Great Commandment Network.

“It is constitutionally problematic for a public university to utilize course materials created by an evangelical Christian organization,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Dr. Sanjay Ramchander, dean of the McCoy College of Business.

After receiving FFRF’s letter, Ramchander responded, informing it of changes to the course going forward. The five-point bulleted list included, “Class prayer or religious activities will not be part of the course curriculum and class discussions and learning activities will leverage multiple perspectives that are considered to be germane and appropriate for the course subject matter and curriculum.” Additionally, Ramchander stated that faculty would be conducting a comprehensive review of the course content.

Pregame prayer canceled at Indiana school

FFRF reached out to Crothersville Community Schools in Indiana to warn against the district scheduling pregame prayers before girls basketball games.

A community member reported that Crothersville Jr./Sr. High School regularly scheduled prayers at athletic events. Reportedly, at the Jan. 9 Crothersville Jr./Sr. High School Girls’ basketball game, the official announcer delivered a Christian prayer over the PA system immediately following the national anthem. The complainant additionally stated that school-sponsored prayers have regularly been a part of athletic events since at least 2020.

“The district must investigate this situation and ensure that Crothersville Jr./Sr. High School ceases scheduling prayer at school-sponsored events,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Chrystal Street.

In response, Street emailed FFRF, writing, “We have received your letter. We are no longer doing prayer at school events.”

No Jehovah’s Witnesses at Calif. post office

FFRF took action to ensure that the Paso Robles Post Office would no longer be host to religious proselytizers on official state ground.

A concerned patron contacted FFRF to report that the Jehovah’s Witnesses have been setting up their pamphlet stand outside the entrance to the post office nearly every day and had been proselytizing patrons. The complainant reported that their presence made visits to the post office very uncomfortable.

“Giving a religious organization special permission to set up a stand and dis-

tribute literature on post office grounds violates the First Amendment to the United States Constitution,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Postmaster Shelly Larsen.

Promptly after FFRF brought attention to the issue, Larsen sent back an email notifying the state/church watchdog about a change in practice. “This will cease and desist as of today. This was grandfathered in as past practice from previous Postmasters,” Larsen wrote.

FFRF keeps religion out of Vegas district’s email

FFRF successfully stopped a Clark County School District teacher in Las Vegas from using the official school email to promote their personal religious beliefs.

A community member contacted FFRF to report that a district employee included religious messages in their official Clark County School District email signature. FFRF’s complainant reported that they received an email including the religious message: “God’s love is like an ocean; you can see its beginning but not its end. — Rick Warren.”

“We understand, of course, that the district cannot monitor every email sent by employees,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district. “But we do ask that it take the appropriate steps to ensure that employees are made aware of their constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion while acting in their official capacity.”

After FFRF sent the letter of com-

plaint, legal representation for the district reached out to FFRF to inform it of its remedying actions.

“We have completed our investigation and updated our Acceptable Use Policy regarding taglines and email signatures,” the district’s Assistant General Counsel Alexandre M. Fayad wrote. The school’s updated policy prohibits usage of email signatures completely.

No more pre-meal prayers at N.C. senior center

A North Carolina senior center has replaced its lunchtime prayer with a moment of silence after FFRF contacted it about its unconstitutional practice.

A community member informed the state/church watchdog that a Currituck County Senior Center employee was leading an explicitly Christian prayer before every lunch served at the public-supported center. The seniors were reportedly not allowed to eat lunch until an employee finished blessing the food. The center’s lunchtime prayer practice made FFRF’s complainant feel pressured to participate in prayer.

Federal regulations prohibit senior centers receiving federal funding to engage in religious activities at government-sponsored functions, FFRF informed the senior center.

“The Code of Federal Regulations is explicit and unequivocal in its prohibition on religious activities as part of any program funded through the Department of Health and Human Services,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Currituck County Aging/Senior Services Director Stacy Joseph.

“Requiring seniors to observe and participate in a coercive prayer practice at government-subsidized activities places your agency in direct violation of the federal mandate.”

Currituck County immediately modified its lunch practice in response to FFRF’s objection (after disputing some of the details).

“Even though the Senior Center is not condoning an unconstitutional prayer practice alleged in your letter, there will be an immediate shift from a voluntary prayer to a moment of silence prior to lunch,” the county attorney wrote back.

Ala. school district removes religious display

The Mobile County Public School District in Alabama has painted over a divisive religious display on Theodore High School’s baseball dugout after FFRF cautioned it about the constitutional violation.

A Mobile County Public Schools community member informed FFRF that Theodore High School displayed a bible verse on the dugout of its baseball field: “Whatever you do, do it for the Glory of GOD. I Corinthians 10:31.”

“To protect students’ First Amendment rights, the district must remove this religious display from its baseball field immediately, as well as any other religious displays it becomes aware of in its schools,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line advised the district’s legal representative.

In response, the district’s legal counsel promptly responded, “The bible verse has been painted over.”

Decalogue removed from Kentucky courthouse

FFRF has successfully gotten an unconstitutional Ten Commandments display inside a Kentucky county courthouse taken down.

A Kentucky resident contacted FFRF to complain after encountering the Ten Commandments on display inside the Spencer County Courthouse during a visit there. FFRF requested that the county cease displaying the bible edicts, since such a display in the county courthouse was not only an unconstitutional show of government favoritism toward religion, but needlessly alienated and excluded county residents who do not share the religious beliefs of the Ten Commandments.

“A Ten Commandments display in a county courthouse violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment,” FFRF Legal Fellow Sammi Lawrence wrote to Spencer County Judge-Executive Scott Travis. “In *McCreary County v. ACLU* (2005), the Supreme Court ruled that displays of the Ten Commandments in two Kentucky courthouses violated the Constitution.”

FFRF asked that the religious display be removed from the Spencer County Courthouse out of respect for the Constitution and the rights of conscience of the county’s residents. FFRF’s reasoning prevailed.

“This email is intended to notify you that the display referenced in the letter has been taken down,” the county attorney recently replied.

Churches: We can’t pay for the harm we’ve caused

By Ryan Jayne

It’s no secret that religion is great for making money — convincing people they are sick and selling an invisible cure is basically pure profit.

The Vatican’s opulence is legendary. The Mormon church has allegedly built up around \$100 billion in hidden assets. Scientology continued to rake in untold amounts of money, even as membership has reportedly plummeted. Considering how much these giant church conglomerates have spent on real estate and proselytizing, in addition to simply hoarding cash, the conclusion seems simple: They have long had more money than they know what to do with.

And, yet, a curious trend has emerged when churches are forced to consider the cost of paying damages to victims of their abuse: Surveying the damage they’ve done, many large



Ryan Jayne



Image by Shutterstock

churches have run to bankruptcy court arguing that they can’t possibly come up with the funds to give even a semblance of justice to survivors.

In August 2023, the Archdiocese of San Francisco filed for bankruptcy after reportedly facing more than 500 lawsuits alleging child sexual abuse by church officials. Two other California dioceses, in Santa Rosa and Oakland, did the same earlier in 2023. This follows a 2019 California law that temporarily allowed survivors to bring previously barred claims. In November 2023, the Archdiocese of Baltimore declared bankruptcy on the eve of a similar law becoming effective.

These bankruptcies show two things. First, these churches have no choice but to publicly acknowledge

that they have caused more harm than they can ever hope to mend (keeping in mind that no amount of money can undo this type of damage). Second, even facing the immeasurable harm resulting from a culture of secrecy, the underlying problem remains: While always insisting that clergy abuse is a problem of the past, the church’s top priorities remain their bank account and their reputation.

Amid hollow sympathies for survivors and promises of greater transparency, churches remain committed to secrecy.

The Southern Baptist Convention recently asked the Kentucky Supreme Court to invalidate a law providing a cause of action for its past victims, after a 2022 bombshell report detailed the

church’s pattern of abuse and cover-up. And in Wisconsin, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, which settled its bankruptcy in 2015, is currently fighting the state’s attempt to confidentially review sealed documents from that case to corroborate a list of abusers from the church. The cover-up seems never-ending as churches fight for secrecy at every turn. That culture of secrecy fosters more abuse, and the cycle continues.

Clergy abuse is a longstanding, ongoing worldwide problem. A recent report on Catholic clergy abuse in Spain concluded that the number of victims could be hundreds of thousands. This is only the latest in a long list of shocking reports — and it will not be the last.

Unlike many for-profit businesses where filing for bankruptcy is essentially the company’s final action, for many wealthy churches bankruptcy is primarily a way to avoid paying survivors what they would otherwise be entitled to under the law.

The churches will endure — so long as churches have congregants, the money for their invisible product will continue to flow, and with that cash comes an incentive to continue covering up abuse. This problem cannot be adequately solved until fostering abuse becomes a bad business decision for churches, which requires congregants to condition their donations on total transparency and cooperation with secular authorities to hold abusers accountable.

Anything short of threatening a church’s bottom line will be ineffective.

Ryan Jayne is FFRF’s senior policy counsel.

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Freethought Heroine Award

The tiny, titanic act of telling the truth

This is the speech (lightly edited) given by Kate Cohen at FFRF's national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 13. She was introduced by FFRF Board Member David Tamayo. You can watch the video of the speech (and all other convention speeches) at ffrf.us/con23.

David Tamayo: It's my pleasure to introduce FFRF's 2023 "Freethought Heroine," which, over the years, has gone to many fascinating individuals, including Eleanor Smeal, Katha Pollitt, Ann Druryan, Barbara Ehrenreich, Robin Morgan, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, Sara Paretsky and Mandisa Thomas.

Our Freethought Heroine this year is the celebrated Kate Cohen, a contributing columnist for the Washington Post, whose new book, *We of Little Faith: Why I Stopped Pretending to Believe (And Maybe You Should Too)* is creating a huge buzz, not just among nonbelievers, atheists and freethinkers, but in the Washington Post! I hope you read the column, titled "America doesn't need more God. It needs more atheists." It's an eloquent and elegant treatise on why we atheists and nonbelievers should come out of the closet.

Kate Cohen lives on a farm in New York with her husband and three kids. She has a degree in comparative literature from Dartmouth, and soon after graduating, wrote her first book, *The Neppi Modona Diaries: Reading Jewish Survival Through My Italian Family*. It's about Jews under fascist racial laws in Italy who went into hiding, and explores her own perspective as a post-Holocaust, nonbelieving Jew. She also wrote a book, *A Walk Down the Aisle: Notes on a Modern Wedding*, examining the American wedding ritual. She is an Emmy-award winning documentary script writer and her essays have appeared in Slate, Salon, BuzzFeed, Bustle, Vox and Fine Cooking.

Please welcome our Freethought Heroine Kate Cohen!

By Kate Cohen

I want to thank Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker for getting in touch with me a little over a year ago, when I was just a glimmer in the eye of some angry Washington Post letter writers. They have been steadfast supporters and fans, and it is one of the honors of my life that they have invited me into this community.

My talk today is called "The Tiny, Titanic Act of Telling the Truth," because, number one, what writer wouldn't want to wedge in any available alliteration?

And because, number two, I wanted to talk about how very little it takes to do something big.

As documented in my book *We of Little Faith: Why I Stopped Pretending to Believe (and Maybe You Should Too)*, here is a list of the heroic acts I have taken to further the cause of freethought. These are all spoilers. Please buy the book anyway.

- I told my children that religions were the same as myths. They were stories people made up to explain how the world works.
- I told another mom at a first-grade Halloween party that we didn't send our kids to a religious preschool because, and I quote, "We don't believe in God or anything."



Kate Cohen is presented with the Freethought Heroine Award by FFRF Board Member David Tamayo. The award was designed and hand-crafted with gold leaf by artist and FFRF member Kelly Houle.

- I told my son that heaven was just as true as anything else we could make up about what happens after you die, but no more true than that.
- I told an acquaintance of my mother's, when he asked if I was still Jewish, that I still liked the food but I "don't believe in any supernatural beings."
- In the dramatic climax of my super-dramatic memoir, I told my father-in-law that no, my son would not be having a bar mitzvah.

You see, I was raised a Reform Jew and though I never really believed in a supreme being, I sure acted like I did. As many, many, many people do. *We of Little Faith* traces my hero's journey from not telling to telling the truth. The book begins, though, with someone else's truth-telling moment: the moment in 2013 — 10 years ago — when Rebecca Vitsmun, a tornado survivor, is interviewed by CNN's Wolf Blitzer. Have you seen this clip? They're standing in the wreckage of her neighborhood. He tells her that she is blessed for having evacuated just in time. "You gotta thank the Lord, right?" he asks. She pauses. He pushes: "Do you thank the Lord for that split-second decision?" And she says: "I'm actually an atheist."

Steering small talk with strangers in an unexpected direction is, objectively, a tiny act. Saying "no" out loud to a religious ritual your father-in-law insists on, is, in the grand scheme, not much bigger. Gently correcting a TV reporter is probably pretty low on the list of courageous things that Rebecca Vitsmun did that day.

Still, it's scary. There's a reason only 74 to 81 percent of Americans believe in God. But just 4 percent say they are atheists. All

those other people? They are not telling. There's a reason that, although we have a fantastic Freethought Caucus in Congress, we don't have a single acknowledged atheist. Do we think there are no atheists in Congress? No. We know that the ones who are there have made the political calculation that telling the truth is too risky.

I spent years avoiding it myself. I was raised Jewish and went to synagogue and was bat mitzvah'ed and had a Jewish wedding, and I let people assume whatever they assumed my behavior meant about my beliefs. Why? Because I didn't want to make things awkward. Because I wanted to be liked. Because it was my job, obviously, to make everyone else comfortable.



At FFRF's national convention in Madison, Wis., on Oct. 13, 2023, author and columnist Kate Cohen spoke about why it's important not to hide your atheism from others.

Pressure on women

A sidenote here on the topic of not heroism but heroinism, the female kind. That job of making everyone else comfortable is, I believe, a job that our culture expects women especially to do. I was trained to make nice, to tell people what they wanted to hear. When I made my first hesitant attempts to tell the truth instead, I often heard the response, "Now, are you an atheist or an agnostic?"

As I wrote in the book, "Obviously, they wanted to give me, a person who seemed nice, a nicer word." And then I go on to talk about why I'm not an agnostic. It's a fun chapter.

But when my editor read it, he was incensed on my behalf. He said that would never happen to a man, that if a man said, "I'm an atheist," people would at least believe him. I think he was right.

There is extra pressure on women not to say anything too disruptive. To keep our thoughts to ourselves. To smooth things over. My husband would get into a fight with his dad about synagogue, but not me. I would make the challah!

Women also, I think, experience greater social pressure to care for and raise children, not just physically, but morally, spiritually. At least according to the stereotype, we're the ones who make sure they get dressed and get to church. Seth Andrews of "The Thinking Atheist" told me that when he was working in Christian radio in Tulsa, the station had a specific target audience of females 18-34 because young mothers were expected to refocus on church and religious influences to be "good parents" of young children.

When my husband and I had kids, for me, those twin cultural expectations on women — to be pleasant and to be a good parent — came into direct conflict. I felt driven to give my children everything I had, including all the information they needed to see the world clearly and navigate inside it. But I couldn't do that and teach them the hazy religious beliefs I had tacitly endorsed my whole life. I was determined to treat their developing brains with respect.

So, I told my kids that God was a human invention. And little by little, through them and for them, I gathered the courage to tell other people.

I'm here today not because of what I said to that other mom in Mrs. O'Brien's first grade classroom — although wouldn't that be awesome? — but because of what I told a newspaper audience. I told The Washington Post that though I admired then-presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg, I was nervous about his using any appeal to religion, even for a good cause, even to fight Christian bullies. I asked how exactly posting the Ten Commandments in schools could stop school shootings. I pointed out that the reason some people think aborting a six-week fetus the size of a blueberry is the same as killing a baby is because they believe babies exist before they're even conceived — as souls in heaven that God sends down. I argued that hospitals that receive public money should make medical decisions based on medicine, not the bible.

Bravery to tell the truth?

In our culture right now, one where the prevailing assumptions are that people believe in God and that religious belief is the foundation for moral authority, taking these positions in public may seem brave.

But, all I am trying to do is tell the truth in 800 words. To state what is obvious to me in a way that makes it obvious to others. To treat my readers' developing brains with respect.

It's not like I read the comments — that would be brave.

In my book, I tell a story about being at the grocery store with my daughter right after Christmas. She was a preschooler. Her little body still fit in that child seat of the cart, with room to spare. Little brunette with a bob and bangs. We were waiting in line at the deli and another shopper, pushing a cart with a couple of kids of his own, asked my daughter if Santa brought her anything good for Christmas. I thought this was a really dumb thing to ask a kid you don't know. I mean, this was in Albany, N.Y., where schools close for Yom Kippur. And I was trying to think of a way to tell him off but, you know, nicely, when my daughter said to him, "Santa Claus is just pretend." Just like that. No attitude, just handing over information.

I think about that sometimes when I write or speak about being an atheist. My daughter wasn't being brave; she was just telling the truth. And she didn't know yet it was a truth she was supposed to hide. I do my best writing



Photo by Steve Solomon

"I do believe the more we say nicely, but unapologetically, that we are atheists, the more atheists we inspire to do the same," Kate Cohen remarked during her speech.

about atheism and religion, I think, when I manage to channel the matter-of-factness of a 4-year-old, when I don't stop to soft-pedal or apologize.

That poor dad lost all the color in his face and begged my daughter to keep quiet. "Don't tell my kids," he said.

"Don't tell."

OK. I don't recommend telling other people's kids that Santa Claus is just pretend. But I do believe that telling the truth, even in tiny moments like these, can be a titanic act.

I do believe the more we say nicely, but unapologetically, that we are atheists, the more atheists we inspire to do the same. The more we say, and make it normal to say, that "God is just pretend," the more we push back against the idea that God should have anything to do with our laws or our tax dollars, that my neighbor's religious belief should have any effect on me.

Beneath the layers

This weekend [at the convention] there will be plenty of speakers talking about rise of Christian nationalism, the rightward, pro-religion tilt of the Supreme Court and the consequences that has for our democracy and our citizens. There may be more Nones in America than ever before, people may be leaving their churches in droves, but religion is, at the same time, claiming and gaining an astonishing amount of political power. And that's a problem. Because, as I wrote last week in a column for the Post:

"Peel back the layers of discrimination against LGBTQ-plus people and you find religion. Peel back the layers of control over women's bodies — from dress codes that punish girls for male desire all the way to the Supreme Court striking down Roe v. Wade — and you find religion. Sometimes you don't even have to peel. According to the bill itself, Missouri's total abortion ban was created 'in recognition that Almighty God is the author of life.' 'Don't say gay' laws, laws denying trans kids medical care, school-library book bans — motivated by religion.

"And when religion loses a fight and progress wins instead? Religion then claims it's not subject to the resulting laws. 'Religious belief' is — more and more, at the state and federal levels — a way to sidestep advances the country

makes in civil rights, human rights and public health.

"In 45 states and D.C., parents can get religious exemptions from laws that require schoolchildren to be vaccinated. Seven states allow pharmacists to refuse to fill contraceptive prescriptions because of their religious beliefs. Every business with a federal contract has to comply with federal nondiscrimination rules — unless it's a religious organization. Every employer that provides health insurance has to comply with the Affordable Care Act's contraceptive mandate — unless it's, say, a craft supply store with Christian owners.

"Case by case, law by law, our country's commitment to the first right enumerated in our Bill of Rights — "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion" — is faltering. The Supreme Court has ruled that the citizens of Maine have to pay for parochial school, that a high school football coach should be free to lead a prayer on the 50-yard line, that a potential wedding website designer can reject potential same-sex clients. This past summer, Oklahoma approved the nation's first publicly funded religious school. This fall, Texas began allowing schools to employ clergy members in place of guidance counselors."

Say it out loud

I am honored and moved to be here in Madison with people who are pushing back against all of this.

They — some of you — are the real heroes. They — some of you — file lawsuits and launch publicity campaigns and lift up politicians who are trying to keep religion out of our schools, support clergy who lost their jobs when they lost their faith, fight for reproductive rights and against censorship. They — some of you — stand sentry over that wall of separation between church and state.

All I do is say out loud what's in my head.

I say this not because I am hopelessly self-deprecating but because I am hoping that the very smallness of the actions I took — first as a mom and then as a writer and a columnist — will encourage other people to act. We all talk to people, every day. Sure, of course, I do it for a living and with huge helpings of halliteration, but basically it's the same.

We all talk to people. And that means all of us can do something heroic.

Maybe we can't all get law degrees or work for Planned Parenthood. But we can all take a chance and when our culture says "don't tell" — tell anyway.

I'll end with a little bit from my book. The chapter is called "We Are Not Alone."

In this part, I have just taken that tiny, terrifying step of telling, in a conversation with an acquaintance near my hometown in the Shenandoah Valley, a white-haired Southern gentleman. He had given me no indication that he was anything other than a believer — and in fact, our conversation stemmed from my expressing admiration for a statue of a saint he had in his garden. And when I told him I didn't believe in any supernatural beings, he told me that he had a lot of trouble believing the stories of the bible, and that he was troubled with how his church treated women and gays. His son was gay.

"We all go around — I once did, too — assuming that everyone else is a believer. I'll bet every private atheist in America knows someone who thinks they've never met an atheist before. I'll bet every private atheist in America sometimes feels like the only atheist in the room while chatting with another atheist who feels like the only atheist in the room.

"We won't know the truth until we tell the truth."

A tiny act.



Photo by Chris Line

Kate Cohen signs copies of her latest book, *We of Little Faith: Why I Stopped Pretending to Believe (And Maybe You Should Too)*.

An atheist's impassioned call for nonbelievers to be honest with themselves and their families about their lack of belief — and help change the American cultural conversation.

— 248 pages / Hardcover

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Nonreligious legislative panel discussion

‘Do whatever you wish, just not in this office.’



Photo by Kyle Hilker

From left, FFRF State Policy Manager Ryan Dudley and FFRF Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne moderate the discussion with Minnesota state Rep. Athena Hollins, Wisconsin state Sen. Kelda Roys and Minnesota state Rep. Mike Freiberg. This was the first-ever panel of nonreligious state legislators.

This is an extended excerpt from the secular legislative panel discussion held on Oct. 14, 2023, at FFRF’s national convention in Madison, Wis. To read the full transcript of the discussion, go to freethoughttoday.com. To watch the full discussion, go to ffrf.us/con23.

Ryan Jayne: We are really excited to have a secular legislator panel today. I’m Ryan Jayne, senior policy counsel, and joining me to host this panel is Ryan Dudley, our state policy manager. The two of us handle state legislation in all 50 states, and that includes developing relationships with and working with state legislators to help to advance legislation that helps us achieve our mission of keeping religion out of the government.

Ryan Dudley: On the end down there, we have Rep. Mike Freiberg. He has served as a Minnesota state representative since 2013 after serving nine years on the Golden Valley City Council. He’s a founding member of the Minnesota Secular Government Caucus. In addition to serving in the Legislature, Rep. Freiberg works as an attorney for a nonprofit organization committed to improving public health. He graduated from William Mitchell College of Law.

Ryan Jayne: Sitting next to Rep. Freiberg is Sen. Kelda Roys. Sen. Roys is a small business owner and attorney and a women’s right advocate. She was first elected to the Wisconsin State Assembly in 2008. She quickly made her way to leadership serving as the Minority Caucus Chair in 2011. In 2020, Sen. Roys was elected to the state Senate where she has served in the very district that we are in today. And she earned her JD from the University of Wisconsin School of Law.

Ryan Dudley: And last we went back to our neighbor in Minnesota, Rep. Athena Hollins. Rep. Hollins was elected as state representative in 2020 and serves as vice chair on the Rules and Legislative Administration Committee and is a member of the Minnesota Secular Government Caucus. She earned her JD from the University of St. Thomas School of Law.

Ryan Jayne: We want this to be conversational and flexible, so feel free to jump in and share when you have thoughts, as needed. Feel free to completely override us.

Rep. Hollins, was your nonbelief ever a hindrance when you were running and has it ever been a hindrance in office? And then also has it been seen on the other side in a favorable light?



Photo by Steve Solomon

Minnesota state Rep. Athena Hollins.

Nonbelief a hindrance?

Rep. Hollins: As I mentioned, my district is very blue. I think we vote 82 percent Democrat. And while it is a really diverse district, it’s also very progressive. I actually haven’t received any pushback when I was running around my secularism. I was laughing with my husband right before I came up here because probably the most common thing that happens is that any Unitarians when they learn I’m secular are like, “You should join my church.”

Sen. Roys: When I first ran for office, I was running to represent a solidly Democratic district, but it had urban, suburban and rural. A lot of people said that I couldn’t win because I was young. When I actually did win, I became the youngest elected legislator at the time in Wisconsin, not in history, but at that time, because I ran an abortion rights organization and they thought that my thinking that women are people was too radical for the blue-collar district, which I always thought was nonsense. I was very vocal in my support for gay marriage, not just not banning civil unions, but actually for gay marriage. And I talked about a lot of things like criminal justice reform and things that just were not that popular but, over the intervening 15 years, have become much more mainstream, at least on the left.

It felt like there were a lot of things against me and people didn’t really ask about religion, but I definitely felt like I maybe wouldn’t want to mention it at the doors to people just proactively. Then I’ve run for higher office twice. I ran for U.S. Congress for an open seat and I also ran for governor. In both of those races, it was a little bit more of an issue, but I also felt like it was really important to be out as an atheist and secular because, number one, it’s who I am, it’s what I believe.

And number two, I think it’s really im-

portant that we not just take for granted the religiosity of public figures. I think it’s offensive, it’s exclusionary and it’s un-American. I want to be part of pushing back in the gentlest possible way, which is just to say, “I’m your friendly neighborhood nonbeliever and I still value a lot of the important things that you value, kindness, respect, tolerance, love, support for the poor, charity, all the good values. There’s nothing religious about those.”

Rep. Freiberg: Honestly, my lack of belief hasn’t really come up one way or the other. Generally, in my elections, I represent a pretty progressive and welcoming inner-ring suburbs. There’s a very large LGBTQIA community in the cities I represent. We formed the Secular Government Caucus, and we’ll talk about that more in this session.

We do actually have religious legislators in the Secular Government Caucus, but we all believe strongly in the separation of church and state. Occasionally, I’ll get some compliments from constituents about it, and I do think there’s a growing number of people who are willing to kind of embrace the nonreligious label. I’d just point out there are progressive religious groups out there that are good natural allies for us. I spoke a few days ago to a group called Faith in Minnesota and they advocate for issues like housing for all rights for undocumented immigrants and universal health care.

When I spoke to them, I mentioned that I’m not religious, but then I said how important it is that they advocate for the issues that they care about at the Capitol to let legislators know that religious people aren’t monolithic, they aren’t all Christian nationalists, Trump acolytes. They seemed incredibly receptive to that message. It may mean even more so just because I’m a nonreligious person who values their involvement in civic affairs. I’d say keep an open mind to working with allied groups even if you think you might not have much in common with them.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Wisconsin state Sen. Kelda Roys.

Secular policy-making

Ryan Dudley: I’m going to go to Sen. Roys to start off this one. Can you explain how your secular worldview influences your policy-making decisions?

Sen. Roys: Having a secular worldview, is nice because I feel like I can approach issues with rationality and an open mind. Although, I have to think that most of my colleagues assume that they’re doing the same thing, too, there is a bias that we all have from our own personal experiences, and it’s just that I am not going to reflexively oppose something because I have some kind of religious baggage or dogma attached to it.

I do think in terms of working with interfaith groups or religious organizations that want to have an impact on public policy, it might make them a little bit more skeptical to approach me. But I will meet with anybody. I meet with anti-choice groups and they know they’re not going to change my mind on abortion rights, but I think it’s really important that they know that they can come to me and that I will listen and be respectful.

That’s true if you’re somebody that’s coming to testify or if you’re a paid lobbyist or if you’re just a group. I’ve had groups of religious leaders come and say, “We want to pray for you, may we?” And I said, “You may do whatever you wish, just not in this office. Please knock yourself out.” I’ve tried to be a little bit of a non-threatening kind of atheist, even though I’m a pretty strong atheist.

There are some things that I do that are more of a personal protest. We still start every day in the Senate with a prayer. That can be anything from a member getting up and talking, but it’s always, always Christian and maybe once you get a rabbi. To me, it’s just inappropriate. I don’t like it. I will not be present on the Senate floor when that happens. I go for roll call and then I leave and I stand out in the hallway and then I go back in afterwards. It’s just a small thing that I do and I don’t stomp my feet. When I was in the Assembly, there were a number of other legislators, many of them Jewish, who would join me in doing that. But I think I’m the only one who does it in the Senate now, and I’d love to see that tradition change. I mean, I just don’t think we should be opening governmental bodies with prayer.

Rep. Freiberg: I was actually going to touch on that as well. I think it must be universal among legislative bodies. But in the Minnesota House, we also start every

session with a prayer, which is kind of unfortunate. I think there's a variety of ways you can deal with it. I don't usually leave during it. Sometimes, I like to actually just stay and see what they're going to say because there are rules they're supposed to follow. They're supposed to be nonsectarian, but occasionally somebody will either slip up either accidentally or deliberately mention Jesus or something along those lines during the session. When Congressman Mark Pocan spoke here yesterday, he said he was trying to get a nonreligious person to kick off a session of the United States House. We actually did that once in Minnesota.

I think it does help that we're under Democratic control right now in both the Minnesota House and the Minnesota Senate. But they do actually make a point to bring out a variety of religious views. They do have rabbis occasionally, they have imams, they have Hindu people giving the opening prayer or invocation. We had created the Secular Government Caucus and the majority leader asked if I knew any humanist officiants who could deliver a secular invocation. I said yes. We did actually have somebody do that. Granted, it was one time this year, but I do think it's a start. She didn't say anything inflammatory or revolutionary or anything like that, but she talked about the secular roots of the country and the secular values that we all share.

I could sense, especially on the Republican side, there was kind of a murmur, like, "What is going on here?" They were uncomfortable with it, but it was really good. Then, somehow, the clerk of the House asked me, "Hey, can you get a Hmong shaman to come and talk?" I'm like, "Why are you asking me this?" So, ironically, I sort of became the person the House clerk would go to if she wanted a person expressing a different religious viewpoint to come give the opening invocation. And as a nonreligious person, this is a little weird for me, but I guess we all have our roles to play in government.

Then we created the Secular Government Caucus. Initially, we were talking about calling it the Secular Caucus, but as I mentioned, there are religious people who belong to it, too. So, we decided on the Secular Government Caucus because we all share the goal of ensuring that there's a separation of church and state.

There have been plenty of examples, even under Democratic control in Minnesota where those values have not been advocated for. Anyone can introduce a bill. There have been bills allowing prayer on the school sidelines. Of course, not to mention just all the anti-choice, anti-trans bills that we see there. I kind of try to look for issues where there is a religious viewpoint being expressed and present the secular viewpoint. Under Democratic control, it's been a lot easier. I mean, this year, just to list a few things, we've enshrined reproductive freedom into Minnesota state statutes. We repealed some of the anti-choice laws that were on the books in Minnesota. We passed a trans refuge bill. So, we actually have trans people coming to Minnesota from states where they're being told that they can't access the medical care that they need. I just wish every state were like that. I think you'll get there in Wisconsin soon.

Rep. Hollins: One thing I wanted to mention about the prayers. The funniest moment for us was the tribal drummers that we had. We had Native American drummers in lieu of a prayer one day, and one of our colleagues on the other side of the aisle was shaking her head in disgust and anger. I was like, "You are a Latter-Day Saint. You believe you get your own planet after you die. Really, you're going to look at these people and shake your head in disgust. Give me a break."

I'm a lawyer, but I've been working in



Photo by Steve Solomon

Minnesota state Rep. Mike Freiberg.

the area of diversity, equity and inclusion in the legal sphere for the past six or seven years. So, for me, diversity is important also because I am a Black woman, I am a queer woman. It's important that we are well-represented in the legal industry. When I think of secularism, what I really think about is how the folks who were advocating a separation of church and state and are advocating secular law and secular government were actually religious people. The reality is there are so many different religions and there are so many different factions that were fighting against each other because of tiny differences between those beliefs that it becomes complete chaos. So, historically, some of the biggest advocates for secularism have been religious organizations and religious individuals because they want to make sure that they get to be able to access this as well as a Presbyterian and not just as a Methodist. When we tap into that idea of being secular actually means diversity, it actually means that we have a lot of people who get to be included in what we are doing. When we build laws, we want

them to be as secular as possible because that means it will apply to everybody. It will apply to my Jewish friends, my Muslim friends, my Christian friends, my Catholic friends, everybody. And for me, that's the most important thing because I think we all do better when we all do better. When we have laws that incorporate everybody, then we're truly representing the beautiful states that we represent.

If we pick and choose and we start going down a path where there are certain aspects of religiosity that are more represented or better represented, it's a slippery slope where we are going to start excluding people. I am proving this every day because folks will come to me and they're religious groups that I didn't even know existed, right? And it's like, OK, I could never try to adequately represent just your faction or just your ideals or just your group's morals. What I have to do is represent the values of all Minnesotans because in doing that, you are included in what we're doing.

State/church issues

Ryan Jayne: Turning to Rep. Freiberg to start this one, we've talked about legislative prayer and you also listed some of the other things that the Secular Government Caucus has been working on. Are there any other significant state/church-related issues that you've worked on that you could share with us?

Rep. Freiberg: Sure. Maybe I'll just talk about one. We have this program in Minnesota called the Post-Secondary Enrollment Option Act, where high school students are able to get college credit at accredited colleges and the tuition is actually paid for by the state. These are publicly funded classes. Some of the classes are at sectarian colleges, which is fine, but the statute says that the classes have to be nonsectarian. You could take a math class at a college that aligns with the Catholic Church or the Lutheran Church or something along those lines. However, there are a couple very conservative Christian colleges that actually require all of their students to sign what they call a faith statement, saying that the student there believes basically what the church or that college believes. Generally, the schools that require that are very conservative. They don't support LGBTQIA equality, they don't support gay marriage, they don't support reproductive freedom. It seemed kind of wrong that public financing is going to a program that requires students to sign these because they might just want to take a math class and it's only offered at a school that requires that. The education committee actually passed a law this year saying any school that partici-

participates in the post-secondary enrollment option program can't require a faith statement of its schools. It seems to make perfect sense.

You wouldn't know that it's a perfectly reasonable policy approach, though,

based on the caliber of the discussion on the House floor. There was lots of discussion, mainly from the Republican side, about how this is discrimination against Christians and so forth. I spoke up on it on the House floor and just said, "Nobody's being excluded, nobody's being discriminated against. The faith statement is discriminating against nonreligious students or students or even religious students who just don't follow that particular branch of it."

Sen. Roys: I've worked on a number of things, but two stand out. One is working on the Child Victims Act, which would lift the statute of limitations for people who were abused as children. We know that clergy abuse is a huge problem, not just in the Catholic Church, but in many different religious organizations, especially clois-

tered groups. We have had an incredible community of victims working on this for many, many years, and we've had a few Republican people willing to sign on over the years. It fluctuates, but the main opponent is, of course, the Catholic Church here in Wisconsin. So that is a continuing struggle.

Another thing is that I found out when I was in the Assembly that we still have an obscure exception to the child abuse and neglect statutes in Wisconsin that basically says, "If something would otherwise be considered abuse and neglect, it's not if you're doing it for a religious purpose." This comes into play with people who deprive their children of medical care. A child who has a treatable condition and then dies because their parents wouldn't take them to a hospital or to a doctor and get them the care that they needed. Obviously, that's incredibly tragic. My view is that parents should have a wide berth in how they raise their children, but you shouldn't get a de facto exemption from the law. If you want to bring it up at trial that you did all the things that you thought you should do, then I think it's fine if a fact finder wants to take that into consideration. But I don't think our law should say you get an exemption from taking adequate care of your children because of your religious tenets. And we haven't passed that yet. So still working on it.

Rep. Hollins: I think it's actually funny because when I first saw this question, I was like, "Oh, I haven't done anything. I don't know what I've done." I was running that by my husband, and said "Can you think of any bills that I carried?" He was like, "Are you kidding me? All of the work that you've done with the Queer Caucus is applicable in this situation." So, I guess the one I'm going to choose is the Trans Refuge, because I think it is the most, I wouldn't say it is secular in nature, but it's certainly a separation of church and state because we're really talking about people who are doing what they feel is right with their own bodies and with their own livelihoods and being told that they are not allowed to do that and that we are going to prevent them from doing it.

By creating the Trans Refuge and making sure that this is a place where parents, kids, adults feel like they can get the gender-affirming care that they need and that they deserve was really important. It was a great achievement for me, even though I didn't carry the bill, because I know part of the benefit of being in leadership and being the third in charge in the House is that you get to be privy to all these conversations that maybe other members don't.

The Trans Refuge Bill was one that I got a lot of pushback from our leadership, saying that there was no way this would pass. It was just going to make people upset. It would make our party a punching bag for the Republicans, where they can just rail on us for trying to allow people to get the medical care that they need.

I really pushed hard against that with our leadership. I said, "This is really important, and if we're not going to stand with our values during this moment when people are taking advantage of a minority group and exploiting them for political gain, if we don't take charge of this moment, they will use it against us forever. If we don't stand up for folks, even if it's going to be difficult, even if it's going to be a fight, what does that say about us? And what does that say about our party? That we're scared that we're not willing to move forward, that we're not willing to defend people who need defense? That's not an acceptable way for us to behave." I was really happy that we got it across the finish line, not only in the House, but also in the Senate, doing their part. And now Minnesota is a place of refuge for all trans people in the state and country.

“When we build laws, we want them to be as secular as possible because that means it will apply to everybody. It will apply to my Jewish friends, my Muslim friends, my Christian friends, my Catholic friends, everybody.”
— Rep. Athena Hollins



Photo by Chris Line

Rep. Hollins, Sen. Roys and Rep. Freiberg enjoy a lighter moment during the panel discussion.

Religion

Continued from page 1

saders have always been taught that the enemy consists of people who lack the true faith, and so deserve to be massacred. The biblical God who supposedly said “Thou shalt not kill” ordered hundreds of genocidal slaughters and summary executions (including the blood sacrifice of his allegedly beloved son). No war has ever been perpetrated without the full support of religious authorities. Chaplains are made handy to the battlefield, to assure soldiers that God says it’s OK to kill as many of the enemy as possible. Hitler was a Catholic, who assured his troops that God was on their side: “Gott mit uns.”

Religion a potent force

As a means of motivating people to be cruel or inhumane, there is no more potent force than religion. Men have been committing heinous acts in the name of God ever since they created a God for themselves. It seems that the earlier, goddess-oriented, nature-centered religions were far less cruel. Many of the Native American tribes had such a culture. In California, the Spanish Inquisition remained active up to the late 1800s, torturing and killing natives for crimes against the true faith, such as not believing in it.

From the slaughters recorded in the bible, early Christians’ butchery of European pagans, and later European Christians’ genocide of New World natives, to the 20th-century holocaust in Nazi Germany, religion has been a major rationale for every kind of inhumanity. It has been the cause of preposterous witch hunts and heretic-burnings — over 9 million tortured and slain by the Catholic Inquisition alone — and the monstrous two-millennium abuse of women on the specious ground of a mythic original sin committed by Eve.

Since St. Augustine announced collective woman’s responsibility for the presence of sin and death in the world, rabid sexism has been a major pillar of patriarchal religious tradition. Clement of Alexandria said every woman should be ashamed of being female. The Gospel of Thomas said in so many words that women are not worthy of life. St. Thomas Aquinas said every woman is defective from birth, and lower than a slave, only meant by God to be “in subjection” to her husband. St. Odo of Cluny said a woman is “a sack of dung.” A 19th-century Anglican churchman wrote that a woman is “intrinsically inferior in excellence, imbecile by sex and nature, weak in body, inconstant in mind, and imperfect and infirm in character.”

In the 1890s, the president of a leading theological seminary noted that the bible commands “the subjection of women forever.” Orestes Brownson said a woman must be under male control, otherwise she is “out of her element and a social anomaly, sometimes a hideous monster, which men seldom are, excepting through a woman’s influence.” The holy father John Scotus Erigena wrote that when the heavens finally open in glory, women will be eliminated, because God embodied the sinless part of humanity in men and the sinful part in women. According to the official handbook of the Inquisition, the Malleus Maleficarum (Hammer for Witches), “all wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman.” Even the modern Catholic Encyclopedia asserts that the female sex is inferior to the male sex in both body and soul.

Marriage to a woman was not recommended by early Christian fathers. St. Ambrose called marriage a crime against God. Tatian called marriage “a polluted and foul way of life.” According to Origen, matrimony is impure and unholy; and according to St. Jerome, the purpose of every godly man should be “to cut down with the ax of Virginity the wood of Marriage.” Tertullian called marriage a moral crime, “more dreadful than any punishment or any death.” St. Bernard opined that it is easier to bring the dead back to life than for a man to live with a woman without endangering his own soul. For the first half of the Christian era, marriage was a civil ceremony only, having nothing to do with religion. It was not until the Council of Trent in 1538 that a Christian ceremony was considered essential to a valid marriage. The church had discovered an additional source of income.

Marriage finally became acceptable to the



Photo by Associated Press

A man holds a Christian bible while partaking in the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

churches when laws were established that could make it a means of depriving women of incomes and property, and making wives the equivalent of slaves. Some of the Eastern churches made it a wedding custom for a bride to kneel and place her bridegroom’s foot on her head, and accept a stroke from a fancy ceremonial whip.

Wife-beating was so routine in Christian countries that the Alsatian decorative symbol for “marriage” was a toy man beating a toy wife. Martin Luther thought himself a very lenient husband because he didn’t beat his wife with a stick, but only punched her in the head to prevent her from “getting saucy.” In Victorian times, Blackstone’s legal “rule of thumb” decreed that a man could beat his wife with a stick as long as it was no thicker than his thumb, apparently since beatings with thicker clubs had been shown to result in broken bones that tended to interfere with wives’ getting their work done. Only in the last century did most Christian countries finally get around to declaring wife-beating a crime, though it is still acceptable under Islam.

Obedience of women

A slave may be defined as a person who is forced to work, but receives no payment other than food, shelter and clothing; who is expected to be obedient, and may be beaten or otherwise abused at the discretion of the master; who is legally immobilized and considered to be property. Under patriarchal religion, this definition applied equally to a wife. In addition, female slaves were freely used as sexual objects by their masters and forced to bear the master’s offspring. This equally applies to wives under a religious system that denies them access to birth control or abortion.

Religion not only taught men that they may enslave women with God’s blessing; it also taught believers that they are God’s chosen ones, greatly superior to those of other colors or other beliefs; therefore the latter may be slaughtered or enslaved, with God’s blessing. The Old Testament God condoned slavery, and Jesus said it is permissible to whip your slaves “with many stripes” (Luke 12:17).

According to the Baptist Faith and Message, Article 18, of the Southern Baptist Convention, “A wife is to submit graciously to the servant leadership of her husband.” One minister explained to a sociologist: “Wife beating is on the rise because men are no longer leaders in their homes. I tell women they must go back home and be more submissive.” One battered woman was told by her pastor: “No matter what he is doing to you, he is still your spiritual head. . . Remember, no matter what, you owe it to him and to God to live in submission to your husband. You’ll never be happy until you submit to him.” According to polls, worldwide, the murder of such “happy” women by husbands or ex-husbands is the leading cause of death for those between the ages of 14 and 44.

The duality implicit in heaven-and-hell belief leads to an elitism that assures the believer of his own superiority and the general unworthiness of The Other.

Religion greatly enhances the “we/they” syndrome. “We” are destined for eternal bliss, while “they” merit eternal agony — which has been exhaustively described, although the bliss remains undefined.

There may be vague references to the joy of spending all eternity singing the praises of an incredibly vain and praise-hungry God. But after an hour or two of that, might not one become bored and wish to move on to some other entertainment? What if there is no other entertainment?

The idea put forth by several ancient pagan societies, that paradise involves an eternal orgasm, was soon shot down by sex-phobic patriarchies, even though some traces still exist in the Muslim concept of the post-mortem houris for heroes (only male ones, of course. Muslim women are not rewarded with post-mortem lovers). Usually, patriarchal religions have seriously distrusted sensual pleasures because of their association with femaleness. Western attitudes toward sexuality have suffered many poisonous suppressions and misinterpretations as a result.

More war than peace

Over the centuries, religion seems to have generated more hatred than love, and more war than peace.

We might wonder, then, are people good because of religion, or in spite of it? Is it religiously generated fear that keeps most people from harming others, or is it simply a natural respect for one’s fellow beings, such as demonstrated all the time by animals? Do people really need the paranoia generated by horrendous descriptions of the tortures awaiting them in hell, in order to treat their fellow human beings decently? Or might these dreadful if imaginary fears tend to make people behave more cruelly toward others?

Indeed, Christianity’s idea of hell seems to have inspired a truly horrifying degree of sadism in its adherents, as shown by the fiendish tortures routinely used by the Inquisition and other Christian authorities. Even revered Church Fathers showed a certain repellent lip-licking anticipation when they envisioned the agonies of hell. Tertullian wrote, “How I shall laugh and be glad and exult when I see these wise philosophers, who teach that the gods are indifferent and men soulless, roasting and browning before their own disciples in hell.”

And the blessed Saint Thomas Aquinas promised similar pleasures to all faithful Christians: “In order that the happiness of the saints may be more delightful and that they may give to God more copious thanks for it, they are permitted perfectly to behold the sufferings of the damned.” As Joseph McCabe remarked, “Any body of men who believe in hell will persecute whenever they have the power.”

Religion seems infinitely accommodating, in that its interpretations take the shape of whatever personality types are adopting it. Kindly people, raised

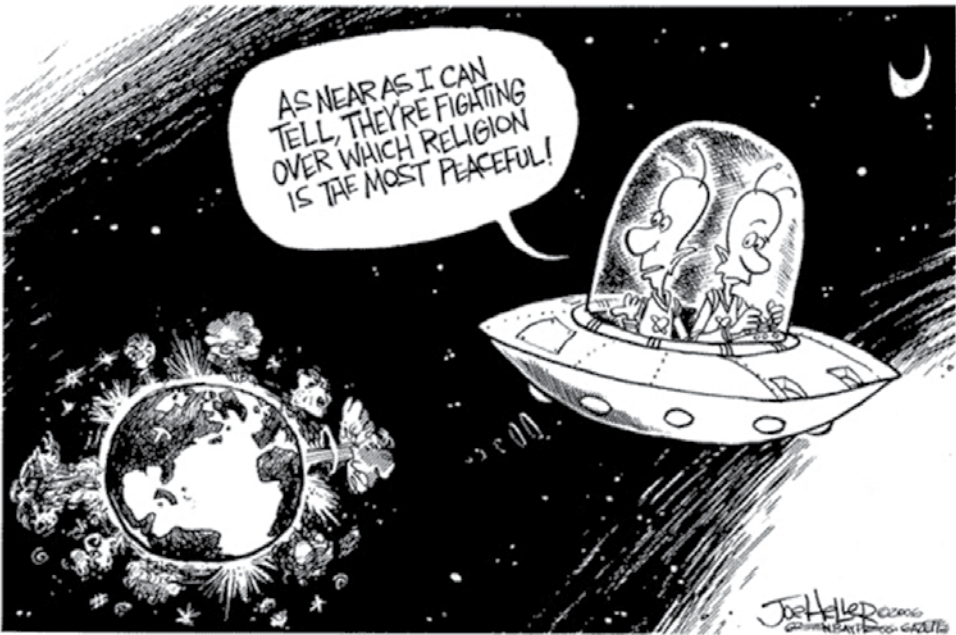
by affectionate parents and taught altruistic values, embrace a religion of goodwill and view love as a primary virtue. Those who are harshly treated in childhood tend to become more rigid, righteous, and prone to worship a god who hates and punishes. Religious scriptures, notoriously self-contradictory, have plenty of sanctions for either point of view. In condemning the cruelty of medieval and Renaissance Christianity we might do well to remember that “spare the rod and spoil the child” was the watchword of most families. And not only women, but also children were routinely beaten for the slightest offenses.

Culture shapes religion

So, it may appear that culture shapes religion, rather than the other way around. Through the centuries up to modern times, the bible has been extensively revised and reinterpreted to sweeten its nastier passages and give its God a better profile. The barbaric central idea of the bloodthirsty Father demanding the sacrifice of the blameless Son is still intrinsic to Christianity, but, in time, even that may be found unacceptable and “reinterpreted” into an altogether different scenario.

Religious people often protest that it is wrong to attack religion, because religion alone can make people virtuous. History shows that this is hardly the case. Every improvement in criminal law and every progress in social humaneness has been opposed by organized religion, just as much as our progress in scientific understanding of our world has been so opposed.

It would seem that religion does not initiate moral virtue in the community, but rather grudgingly reflects it, once the community has sufficiently overcome religious objections to its progress and become somewhat more enlightened. We should remember that in our country, church-



es endorsed slavery, public lynching, wife-beating, whipping of school-children, and many other abuses. To this day, the faith called Islam, which translates “submission” — of women in particular — still allows “honor killing” of women who are deemed insufficiently submissive.

Religion may pretend to be all things to all people, but it might be beneficial to consider its costs. Huge amounts of time, and attention, and tax-free money are spent on religious trappings that might be better spent on improvement of living conditions for more people, or on genuine education rather than on mythical shadowlands.

It is surely unfortunate that the religious imagination can so easily justify war, hatred and cruelty. H.L. Mencken once remarked: “The most common of all follies is to believe passionately in the palpably not true. It is the chief occupation of mankind.” As Stephen Weinberg said: “With or without religion you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.”

20th century evil

What was arguably the greatest evil of the 20th century was helped along by the Catholic Church, which “signed a concordat with Adolf Hitler as soon as the chancellor took office in 1933. The Catholic Church provided the Nazis with genealogical records, supported, defended, and aided the pro-Nazi Ustashe regime in Croatia. The Catholic Church, although fully aware of the policy of extermination set in motion in 1942, did not condemn it in private or in public, and never ordered any priest or bishop to condemn the criminal regime in the hearing of his flock. The Catholic Church, in the person of Cardinal Bertram, ordered a requiem mass in memory of Adolf Hitler. Even better, the Catholic Church did

“ Every improvement in criminal law and every progress in social humaneness has been opposed by organized religion, just as much as our progress in scientific understanding of our world has been so opposed.

for the Nazis what it had never done for a single Jew — it set up a network designed to smuggle war criminals out of Europe. The Catholic Church promoted into its hierarchy people who had performed important tasks for the Hitler regime. And the Catholic Church will never apologize for any of these things.

The greatest 20th century war crime of the United States was solemnly blessed by Father George Zabelka as he called down God’s benediction on the crew of the Enola Gay, as they were taking off to drop their atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

As children naturally outgrow Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy and the ogre under the bed, so humanity in general may need to outgrow its gods and devils.

Our collective imagination could be much better employed in finding ways to understand our world more clearly, to help rather than harm, and to halt the runaway overpopulation and pollution that threaten our planet’s food and water sources. Nature’s

retribution is much more certain than God’s, and it requires us to think rather than imagine.

FFRF Life Member Barbara G. Walker is a researcher, lecturer and author of 24 books on comparative religion, history, mythology, symbolism, mineral lore, knitwear design, the tarot, the I Ching, a collection of original Feminist Fairy Tales, an autobiography, a novel, and two essay collections: *Man Made God* and *Belief and Unbelief*. Her *Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* has been in print since 1983 and was named Book of the Year by the London Times.

CRANKMAIL

This month in Crankmail, we are printing only phone messages that we have received at the FFRF offices. Caution: Extreme language.

- I would encourage all of you to accept Jesus as your savior, and then you will have a home in heaven forever. God promises that. If you’re so damn stubborn, then go to hell and burn, you stupid bastards. Do it. You’re pathetic. And don’t get on Sunday night TV and ruin our Sunday night TV putting your stupid idiot thing on. Just advertise in the paper. You don’t need to do that. You need to get saved or go to hell. That’s the way it is, so have fun in hell.
- Tell Ron Reagan since he’s not afraid to go

to hell, I’m sure his journey there will be without any issues, other than when he gets there. And he will get there.

- You take your atheist bullshit and shove it up your ass. Arkansas doesn’t need Wisconsin values, you cocksuckers. Go fuck yourselves.
- I wish your organization would stop interfering with people of faith. Enough is enough. Do us all a favor and mind your own business. I’m fed up with you people interfering with the First Amendment. The very first right is freedom OF religion. Knock it off. Goodbye.
- Merry Christmas, you butt-fucking pedophile pussies.
- We are very aware that you are part of a satanic group and you are uprooting the very foundation that built America. Just know that you will be in court. Everything you do will come back to you. The disrespect you have toward Jesus is appalling. That shows me that you are with the homosexual act, you are with pedophilia, you are with all these heinous things. You help no one. You speak for no one. I will see you in court. I promise.
- You will burn in hell with your Godless

Gospel. You will burn in hell with your Scientology. You will burn in hell with your drag-ology.

- Why don’t you all move to a communist country in Russia, all right? Believe me, you people are so wrong, it’s unreal.
- You don’t even know how to understand that the Constitution just says that they cannot tell you WHICH religion you have to follow. You are so screwed up. I’m sorry, but you will go to hell.
- May God take your first born, and your second.
- Yeah, I seen your commercial on TV. Yeah, we need separation of church and state. God is gonna separate the church from the state. The King is coming!
- I’m gonna be in heaven forever. And if that spoiled rotten Reagan kid...it’s fitting that he should burn in hell. If he rejects Jesus, and spits in Jesus’ face, he will burn in hell. It’s his choice. I beg you to get saved, believe in Jesus and live in heaven. But if you wanna go to hell, go to hell!
- I think you guys are a bunch of idiots. Stop preaching hate.

• Lucky for us the Constitution of America affords everyone the freedom “of” religion. Everyone! Learn the difference between the two words.

• If you don’t like our religion, ignore it. Has it hurt you? Did it cause you harm? Why protest in communities you are not part of? Our nation was founded on Christianity and the teachings of God. A simple nativity scene used to celebrate Christmas has hurt no one! I have no understanding why a group like yourselves would create such a stir. I am pleased to see this display back in Toledo. It hasn’t hurt you. I’m sure it caused you no harm. Is your life so insignificant this has become your cause? Why not channel your time to cancer research or to feeding the hungry?

- I hope you all fucking die or are assassinated. You bunch of motherfuckers.
- You and your organization will burn in hell for this mockery on religion. Stop promoting this trash!
- We want our god damn nativity scene back at the firehouse in Toledo and have no use for Wisconsin liberal pukes.

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Parsing Pew data

Are atheists 4% or 18% of U.S. population?

By Ryan T. Cragun

In its recently released article titled, “8 facts about atheists” (see sidebar), researchers at the Pew Research Center did something strange. While the characterization of atheists was not particularly problematic, the way Pew selected atheists was.

Pew reported that atheists make up just 4 percent of the U.S. adult population. But in its own surveys, Pew asks a separate question, “Do you believe in God?” (from the 106th wave of the American Trends Panel). The response options are simply “Yes” or “No,” although they also allow people to refuse to answer the question. In April 2022, 18.2 percent of Americans chose “No,” 80.4 percent chose “Yes,” and 1.3 percent refused to answer. Based on this



Ryan T. Cragun

question alone, at least 18.2 percent of Americans are atheists. There are at least two ways to ascertain who is an atheist in the United States. One is to ask people their religious affiliation and include “atheist” in the list of options. The other is to ask the question in a way that reveals their views about whether a god exists. The first approach is wrong for both methodological and conceptual reasons. The second approach is much more efficacious.

Why is the first approach wrong? Atheism is not a religion. Atheism is the lack of belief in a god. It’s the equivalent of trying to classify someone’s car’s make by the following question:

Who is the manufacturer of your car?

- Toyota
- Honda
- Ford
- BMW
- I don’t have a car
- I object to the concept of driving
- Other

One of those response options doesn’t belong in the list. Can you guess which one?

From a validity standpoint (meaning: Is the question measuring what it is supposed to be measuring), the purpose of the question is to ascertain the make of someone’s car. The question doesn’t ask whether someone drives or whether they reject cars as a mode of transportation. The question assumes that the survey participant drives and has a car. For those who don’t have a car, they do have the option of responding, “I don’t have a car.” Rejecting the concept of driving is not an answer to this question. It’s an answer to the question, “Do you think people should drive vehicles?” Including that option in response to this question allows participants to answer a different question, which makes this question conceptually invalid.

Additionally, from a purely methodological perspective, including the option “I object to the concept of driving” is problematic because the option is not exclusive. Someone could own a BMW and drive it regularly but still object to the concept of driving because they want all vehicles to be autonomous. Thus, technically, they could



answer this question by selecting BMW and “I object to the concept of driving” but are forced to choose just one of those options. Good survey design means that, with a single response option question, just one option should apply to a survey participant. The options should be exclusive.

Considering how Pew asks participants about their religious affiliation, included in the list of options are “atheist,” “agnostic” and “nothing in particular.” As the above example makes clear, atheist and agnostic are not religious affiliations. They are positions on the existence of a god (atheism) or the ability to gain knowledge of a deity (agnosticism). There is no religion of atheism or agnosticism. There are no clergy. There are no tithes. These are philosophical positions, not organized religions, like the other options in the list (e.g., Roman Catholic, Mormon, Jewish, etc.). Additionally, these introduce an exclusivity problem. Most atheists are also “nothing in particular” when it comes to their religious affiliation. Relatedly, many Jews are atheists when it comes to their belief in a god. Which response option does a secular or atheistic Jew choose: “Jewish” or “atheist”?

In Pew’s follow-up to its question about whether or not a god exists in the American Trends Panel, there is a series of questions about whether people believe in a higher power or the god of the bible, eventually categorizing people into one of four groups: 57.8 percent “believe in the God of the bible,” 31.7 percent “don’t believe in God of the bible but believe in something else,” 10.2 percent “don’t believe in anything,” and 0.4 percent are “unclear.” While these labels are problematic, what this final categorization shows is that at least 10.2 percent of Americans are atheists in the sense meant by the word itself — not believing in a god. In short, the recent article claiming that just 4 percent of Americans are atheists underestimates the number of atheists in the United States by at least half, according to Pew’s own

data. And, if we go off of the first question that asks just about belief in a god, it would suggest there are at least four times as many atheists in the country as is claimed in the recent Pew article: 18.2 percent versus 4 percent.

This raises a second issue: It is not at all clear what people mean by a “force or higher power.” In the “8 facts about atheists” article, Pew’s last point is that 23 percent of these atheists believe in a higher power and 1 percent believe in “God as described in the bible.” This finding is bizarre but makes sense when you realize that Pew selected participants

as atheists based on their claiming it as their religious affiliation and not based on their lack of belief in a god or higher power. Had Pew used the question that actually measures atheism, then they could have accurately reported that 100 percent of atheists are atheists.

Disregarding the problematic way that Pew researchers selected atheists, we do not currently know what people mean by “higher power” or “force.” For at least some of those people, that higher power or force may be completely secular, as in “nature” or “life.” This is less a problem with the work that Pew has done, which we value and appreciate, and more a future direction that scholars need to take. By suggesting that a large percentage of Americans believe in a higher power when we don’t know whether that higher power is supernatural or natural, the implication is that a large percentage of Americans are at least spiritual, if not religious, when, in fact, they may be quite secular in their understanding of the universe.

Ryan T. Cragun, a professor of sociology at the University of Tampa, will be a speaker at FFRF’s national convention in December in September. He is the author or co-author of many books, including *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society, What You Don’t Know About Religion (But Should)* and *Christianity and the Limits of Minority Acceptance* subtitled *God Loves (Almost) Everyone*.

8 facts about atheists

This is a condensed version of the Pew Research Center’s article on atheism in America, based mostly on its 2023 National Public Opinion Reference Survey (and some data from earlier surveys).

1. In the U.S., atheists are mostly men and are relatively young. The survey shows 64 percent of U.S. atheists are men, and 70 percent are age 49 or younger. Atheists also are more likely than the general public to be white (77 percent vs. 62 percent) and have a college degree (48 percent vs. 34 percent).

2. Almost all U.S. atheists (98 percent) say religion is not too or not at all important in their lives. Also, 79 percent of American atheists say they feel a deep sense of wonder about the universe at least several times a year.

3. U.S. atheists and religiously affiliated Americans find meaning in their lives in some of the same ways. However, atheists (26 percent) were far more likely than Christians (10 percent) to describe their hobbies as meaningful or satisfying.

4. Atheists make up a larger share of the population in many Western European countries than in the United States. For example, 23 percent of French adults identify as atheists, as do 18 percent of adults in Sweden, 17 percent in the Netherlands and 12 percent in the United Kingdom.

5. Most U.S. atheists express concerns about the role religion plays in society. An overwhelming majority of atheists (94 percent) say that the statement “religion causes division and intolerance” describes their views a great deal or a fair amount. Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) say religion does more harm than good in American society.

6. Atheists may not believe religious teachings, but they are quite informed about religion. In Pew’s 2019 religious knowledge survey, atheists were among the best-performing groups. On average, they answered about 18 out of 32 fact-based questions correctly, while U.S. adults overall got roughly 14 questions right. Atheists were also at least as knowledgeable as Christians on Christianity-related questions.

7. Most Americans don’t think believing in God is necessary to be a good person. When Pew asked people which statement came closer to their views, 73 percent selected “it is possible to be moral and have good values without believing in God,” while 25 percent picked “it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values.”

8. About three-quarters of U.S. atheists (77 percent) do not believe in God or a higher power or in a spiritual force of any kind. At the same time, 23 percent say they do believe in a higher power of some kind, though fewer than 1 percent of U.S. atheists say they believe in “God as described in the bible.”

Wake up to the danger of Christian nationalism

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

Almost 20 years ago, the Freedom From Religion Foundation inaugurated a campaign “to wake up the nation to the growing dangers of theocracy.” We ran commercials using that terminology over Air America Radio, recited by talents like Rachel Maddow and Ron Reagan, ran a “Theocracy Watch” column in Freethought Today and included a special segment called “Theocracy Watch” when we first launched Freethought Radio in 2006.

Among the few individuals calling attention to that particular iteration of Christian nationalism under George W.



Annie Laurie Gaylor

Bush was Michelle Goldberg, who wrote an early-bird warning, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism*, in 2006. When we invited Michelle Goldberg to address our national convention that year, she explained about Christian nationalism

that “Their idea from the beginning has been to undermine the Enlightenment.”

The Obama administration provided a reprieve that fooled many of us into thinking we had dodged the theocratic bullet. Then came the 2016 election. We invited Michelle Goldberg back to speak in 2017, where she warned us, “The Christian right, the Christian nationalist movement that I wrote about in this book, it’s a minority of this country, but it’s now the minority that’s in charge.” I’m delighted to announce that Michelle will once again address our annual national convention this year, receiving our Clarence Darrow Award for her outstanding commentary on Christian nationalism and other threats to liberty.

Even though Joe Biden’s certification was marred by the horrifying insurrection of Jan. 6, 2021, with its Christian nationalist underpinnings, as FFRF and BJC’s collaborative report documents, the 2020 election gave us yet again some breathing space. But the damage done was daunting, particularly the Christian nationalist capture of the federal judiciary, including one-third of the Supreme Court. Trump’s three additions turned the court extremists into a ruthless supermajority. Next came the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and many alarming decisions or actions ever since.



As someone in my sixth decade, I’ve witnessed the political pendulum swing back and forth and forth and back. Yet I’ve never witnessed anything quite like what we are seeing today: Open Christian nationalism being espoused by so many at different levels in government, from school boards all the way to presidential candidates. As a minority, Christian nationalists aren’t fully in charge at the moment, but intend to be — and appear willing to do whatever it takes to gain that power, including voter suppression, even future insurrections, as a recent PRRI poll shows.

We currently have a Christian nationalist House speaker two heartbeats away from the presidency, as we and many others, including the Congressional Freethought Caucus, have pointed out. At the state level, the legislative attacks are unabated: 21 states have banned or almost banned abortion rights, many legislatures are going crazy targeting a small minority of trans students. We’ve seen 150 bills to ban books introduced in the past year, plus punishing assaults on teaching Black history and the alarming adoption of voucher legislation subsidizing religiously segregated schools. Outrageous legislation is being introduced at an alarming pace, as FFRF Action Fund documents.

Every day the Christian nationalist noise machine becomes louder and more strident and that ought to alarm any American who reveres our secular democracy. Below is but a mere sampling from this year:

- **“Christian nationalism? Yes, please.”** The Christian Post published an op-ed in late January, “Christian nationalism? Yes, please (and thank you for the compliment)” by Alex McFarland, with American Family Radio Network, embracing Christian nationalism: “Fellow Christian, be not afraid to own the term, ‘Christian nationalist.’ We believe in and acknowledge God, and we care about the future of America.”

- **“I’m wearing the armor of God.”** Gina Swoboda, the new chair of the Arizona Republican Party, told Steve Bannon in late January: “I’m Wonder Woman. I’m fueled by God. . . . I’m wearing the armor of God.” She vows to restrict access to voting in Arizona (because Christian nationalists do not believe in democracy).

- **Who else is invoking the armor of God?** Beloved of Christian nationalists like Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and others, the New Testament bible verse, Ephesians 6:10–11, is surfacing everywhere, including on sheriffs’ vehicles in Kinney County, Texas, a violation FFRF is pursuing. After wall-to-wall bipartisan prayers to Jesus at the Feb. 1 National Prayer Breakfast, Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand shockingly invoked the same bible verse, praying for Biden to put on the “full armor of God” and the “breastplate of righteousness.”

- **Christian nationalist opening prayer.** Speaker of the House Mike Johnson invited extremist pastor Jack Hibbs (an old nemesis of FFRF’s) to deliver the opening prayer in the House on Jan. 30, where he prayed to Jesus to repent our “national sins” and insisted, “There is no wisdom but that which comes from you.”

- **“Chaplains represent God in government.”** After Texas passed a law last year to allow chaplains to serve as social workers or counselors, minus academic credentials, at least six other states are contemplating similar legislation. Texas Sen. Mayes Middleton, author of the original bill, told David Barton’s “Wall-Builders Show” that the law allows for “someone to talk to from a godly perspective, because chaplains represent

God in government.”

- **“America’s ideal has been the religion of the bible, Christianity in particular.”** So begins a piece by U.S. Sen. Josh Hawley, published in *First Things* in January. “America has been a Christian nation. We can be again — if Christians will recover again their confidence that the gospel of Jesus Christ speaks to every facet of our common life.”

- **Creationism rears its head again.** “Teachers in public schools . . . may teach intelligent design as a theory of how the universe and/or humanity came to exist,” states Senate Bill 280, introduced in January to inject “intelligent design” into public school science classrooms in West Virginia.

- **“You don’t want an atheist in public government.”** “You don’t want a materialist. You don’t want an atheist. You don’t want a Muslim. You want somebody who understands what truth is and understands the nature of man, the nature of government, and the nature of God,” contended Oregon state Rep. E. Werner Reschke, state chair of the National Association of Christian Lawmakers, on Jason Rapert’s “Save the Nation” program Jan. 17, 2024. (FFRF sent a strong public rebuke.) Ditto earlier in January to U.S. Rep. Mary Miller, who told Family Research Council President Tony Perkins that only Christians are best equipped to hold public office.

But the biggest threats come from the Christian nationalist political campaigns, such as the Heritage Foundation’s 2025 Project, and a new scheme to recruit conservative churches in swing states to help elect Trump president, in violation of the IRS codes.

Turning Point USA will collaborate with self-described Christian nationalist “apostle” Lance Wallnau, who sought divine intervention to keep Trump in office at the Jericho March in December 2020. A “Courage Tour” will push churches to endorse from the pulpit. Turning Point USA itself is launching a 50-state prayer tour to state capitols. Rolling Stone reports that Turning Point has already recruited 2,500 churches and will also work with Moms for America and Concerned Women for America, which is dedicated to “biblical values and constitutional principles” (a bit of an oxymoron).

The truly alarming Project 2025, overseen by the Heritage Foundation, which raised more than \$150 million in 2023, would give the presidency complete control over the executive branch, dismantle civil service and put cabinets under the political control of the White House. It would eliminate federal support for public education, jeopardize health care protections and favor Christian privilege over the constitutional separation of state and church. If the Supreme Court doesn’t ban mifepristone first, its demise is called for in a 920-page document of destruction of our democracy. Project 2025 is an alliance between the Heritage Foundation, American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and Christian nationalist groups.

By the time you read this, a whole new list of Christian nationalist utterances and campaigns will undoubtedly supplant or join those cited above. For that reason, FFRF is officially reviving our campaign to wake up America to the growing dangers of Christian nationalism, starting with this regular column. View it every month at freethoughtnow.org.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-president of FFRF.



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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.

Mom was an atheist; now I understand why

This column first appeared on katiecouric.com on Nov. 24, 2023, and is reprinted with permission.

By Nancy Travis

I couldn't help feeling that I had betrayed her.

An image on the news and in social media haunts me. A woman is being dragged by a fistful of wild, frizzy hair from a car by a raving terrorist and shoved into another vehicle. I can only see her from behind, but her bare feet are cut and bloodied and her hands are bound. The word "inhumanity" is too vague for this violence — for this sorrow I have stuck in my throat, for the throbbing in my gut, for the rage in my head. I never imagined that such barbarism could happen in today's world. This woman has the same hair as me and is wearing what I wear: She could easily be me or you.

In times like these, I am glad my mother isn't alive to witness such things. But my ludicrous reasoning that death somehow protects her — as if she never saw horror or experienced tragedy in her own life — doesn't prevent me from knowing exactly what she would say: "How can there be a God that turns his back on such suffering? Where was God when all of these horrors were being committed?" It's hard to refute her point. Everything I thought I believed in has been shaken by the events in Israel.

I never knew my mother to be anything other than an adamant atheist. She was raised Roman Catholic, which I believe had more to do with superstition than dogma. She grew up in an Italian home with crucifixes of emaciated Jesus on the walls and macabre statues of the Virgin Mary crying blood tears in corners. Heaven and hell and angels were part of the lore in her family, yet God was never mentioned specifically, except to use his name in vain.

At some point, my mother stopped believing in God. She thought organized religion was "horseshit," and had no problem saying so. Maybe it had to do with being diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis at a young age; with suffering so much chronic pain that God was only found in Vicodin. Maybe it had to do with deep philosophical conversations with my English grandfather, a man who fought in two world wars and saw enough to know there is no God on a battlefield; that a dying soldier cries out for his mother, not God. Maybe it had to do with the shame of being a Catholic girl getting pregnant out of wedlock at 22, and for whom a coat-hanger abortion was not an option. The entire course of her life would be dictated by this pregnancy, by a desperate moral choice that miscarried. As firmly as I believed she turned her back on God, I suspect she felt he'd turned his back on her.

When I was growing up, my mother wanted my brother and me to be raised with some kind of religious instruction, a point of reference that we could choose to accept or reject. I started going to Catholic Sunday school at age 7, just before my First Communion. My mother dropped me off and picked me up in her white Corvair, but rarely stepped inside the church. She would not go to the altar with me to receive the wafer that symbolized the body of Christ, because it meant that she would have to go to confession and, well, it was just too complicated with all that sin stuff. She thought it was absurd that



Nancy Travis on her wedding day with her mother, an ardent atheist.

a priest hidden behind a panel could wave his hands, issue a penance, and free you of any festering guilt.

"What did the nuns have to say today?" she not-so-innocently asked me one day, as she handed a Burger King bag over the car's red-leather seat. "They said it's important to be good and not sin because when you die, there is a judge in the sky in a robe with a long beard who has two lists — one of all your good deeds and one of all your bad," I explained. "And if the bad is more than the good, then you go straight to hell and burn there forever."

"What a load of horseshit!" she said, slamming the steering wheel with her hand. "Children don't sin and there is no heaven or hell. When you die, that's it. Nothing. You just die." I have to admit, it was easier for me to imagine and accept heaven and hell than nothingness, an idea too esoteric and scary for my young brain.

My mother and I continued our discussion of religion and the existence of God into my adulthood. As I grew up, I pivoted frequently: I'd disassociate myself from Catholicism and choose to call myself "spiritual" instead. I would settle on God being an energy or life source rather than a bearded benevolent man at a judgment table. I would offer that nature was my God; that I felt the most awestruck in the woods, looking out at the ocean, or on a mountaintop, where I sensed the presence of something bigger than myself. To this, my mother would say, "Maybe, but I am telling you there is no God. There's nothing benevolent watching over us. There's no order or fairness or karma. Bad shit happens to good people, and sometimes evil wins."

I married a Jewish man for whom reli-

gion is not just worship, but his identity. His father narrowly escaped from the Nazis in Vienna just after Kristallnacht, but six million Jews died — more than half of the Jews in the world. Where was God?

We married in a Jewish ceremony outside on a cliff overlooking the glorious Pacific Ocean. I did not convert, but had rejected Catholicism and God. Still, I believed in the sanctity of marriage as a commitment, as a public promise. My mother stood under the chuppah with me. I knew she thought Judaism was horseshit just as much as any religion, but when I looked in her eyes, just over my new husband's shoulder, there were tears that expressed her immutable love for me. If there was anything I could wholly and unreservedly believe in, it was this.

I agreed to raise my children in the Jewish religion; in the same way I was raised with some sort of theology, I thought my children should have something to embrace or scorn. A point of reference for their philosophy or spiritual ideas. In-depth conversations about religion and God continued with my mother, only now we talked about Judaism.

I told her she might like it much more than Catholicism, since in Judaism, there is no heaven or hell, and God can be an idea. She looked at me shrewdly, knowing that for some reason I hadn't accepted the vital lesson she was trying to teach me — knew that I was still searching. "If this is what you want and it has meaning for you, then I am happy for you. For me, there is no God," was all she said.

In trying to convince me that there was no God, my mother sought to disabuse me of the notion that the good guy always wins — to brace myself for horrors and brutality that can be inflicted in unimaginable ways, the fact that women can be raped and babies butchered all in the name of a god. She wanted me to believe that there is no one watching over us — that the responsibility for your one and only life is your own. I couldn't help feeling that I had betrayed her.

My mother has since died. Some people seek God when they know the end is near. Suddenly, they become believers — in anything — just to have a spiritual hand to hold through the valley of death. But when my mother was dying, she did not ask for a priest or ask for forgiveness, and she did not go quietly. In her final moments, she took care of business and made lists of things to be done in her absence: "Remind your father to take out the garbage on Tuesdays. Don't lay me out, I don't want anybody looking at me. No mass, no prayers. That's all horseshit. Tell dirty jokes and have a party." And then she waited for the darkness. For the Nothing.

She would not have been surprised to know that I did not turn to God for comfort, but to my family and friends who held me and helped me through my grief. Strength and empathy came from the people around me. The meaning I was searching for in God was really in my fellow human beings. For all the good and bad in life, at least we have each other. My mother didn't believe in God, but she believed in people.

Now, as I watch in horror at the barbaric atrocities we're inflicting on each other, at the senseless bloodshed of scores of children trapped in a situation not of their making, at the abject hate with which we so easily strike each other, at the scorn and prejudices we hold, one chilling fact shocks me to my core: Many of us simply don't care about the suffering of others.

And worse, we ignorantly and boldly champion our hatred, only causing more pain. If my mother was still alive, I would tell her that I'm not so sure there is a God. But more importantly, I'd explain that I'm searching for our shared faith in humanity. I'm just not sure what she would say.

Nancy Travis is an actress who has appeared in many films and TV series, including "Last Man Standing" and "The Kominsky Method."

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Is Christianity really under attack?

This article first appeared on Medium.com and is reprinted with permission.

By Dr. Bruce

Have you ever heard American Christians complain that their religion is under attack? That someday it will even be outlawed? That we're no longer a Christian nation? That they're oppressed? Yet, how often do we encounter Christians openly wearing crosses, having religious iconography in their offices at work, Jesus fish on their cars, and fearlessly expressing their views? In my experience, regularly.

And, what is this nonsense about us being founded as a Christian nation? Many of our founders, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Ben Franklin and



Dr. Bruce

Thomas Paine were not Christians, but deists. What is that? It's a philosophy that claims God as a creator, not a personal divinity. It also considers Jesus as a prophet, not God. But God is mentioned in the Constitution, isn't it? Neither God nor Jesus is mentioned in the Constitution. It contains only one divine reference to "the year of our Lord," a common expression for dating documents at that time.

The Declaration of Independence contains several references to divinity, but none to Christianity nor to Jesus Christ. In the Declaration, references to divinity are generic, such as God, the Creator, Nature's God, and the Supreme Judge of the World. And those are common terms in deism. Yet, the lack of federal recognition of Christianity certainly hasn't stopped zealots from trying to tie government and Christianity together.

In our republic's infancy, Patrick Henry wanted Virginia to financially support all Christian institutions. To which James Madison responded, "Who does not see that the same authority, which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other sects?"

Case in point: Not much later, Baptists in Connecticut were being persecuted by the Puritans and appealed to Presi-



Image by Shutterstock

dent Jefferson for help. This is exactly the kind of sectarianism Madison had warned about. And it was in a letter to the Baptists that Jefferson explained the intention of the Constitution in regard to religion. He reminds us of the constitutional imperative that the legislature shall "make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Then he continues, "Thus building a wall of separation between church and state."

There you have it. Neither the Declaration of Independence nor the Constitution shows any evidence that we were founded as a Christian nation. And Jefferson, a prominent figure in the writing of both, confirmed it. Yet, Christianity was the majority religion in the colonies. So, it's not surprising that Christians feel entitled. But are they oppressed in the United States as they claim?

No, not at all. We see evidence of this every day. Recently, I was in a meeting and a member of upper management praised Jesus that her family had been spared during the pandemic. It seemed a very random comment. Perhaps she was trying to witness to us? Or, perhaps she just felt that she had the right to say it, just because she's in the religious majority.

A couple of years ago, I attended a meeting in a person's office. Immediately upon entering, I noticed no less than three crosses adorning her walls. Hmm. Worried about vampires, perhaps? When we reviewed a document on her computer, I couldn't help noticing a book of Jesus quotes directly above the screen. No effort to hide her belief. And, just like the prior example, it spoke to her sense of entitlement, not oppression. When I told my officemate, who was an atheist, he laughed and asked, "Would it be acceptable if I had an 'Atheists Rule!' poster in our office?"

No, we quickly decided, it would not.

Another co-worker was part of a Christian denomination whose members were expected to be available every Wednesday afternoon. What they did, I don't know, but it was really important to her to be there. The problem? Her job was 8-5. Her absence after 2 p.m. on Wednesdays would have placed an undue stress on the office. Still, even after company policy was explained to her, she would complain that her right to worship was being impeded. Oppression or entitlement?

What about when Christians are preachy, especially at work? Is that a sign of the danger they're in? Are they merely using a good offense as a defense?

Meet Sherrie, a former co-worker and evangelical Christian. When she and I were working on a project together, she broached the subject of religion. We were in her office a couple of weeks before Christmas. Her walls were decorated with crosses, little plaques about Jesus hung here and there, Christian music was playing, and a news article was prominently displayed. News article? About her, no less!

"Hey," she says, pointing out the story. "Did you know that I play the Virgin Mary in a living nativity scene at my church?"

"No," I responded. "Well, you should come by some time and check it out."

"No thanks," I told her. "Not my thing."

"Why?" she asked. "Because I'm not a Christian," I answered.

"Oh, no!" she responded. "Now I'll worry about you."

"No need," I reassured her.

When she next spoke, the pitch of her voice increased and tears formed in her eyes. "But what if you die without knowing Jesus? You'd go to hell, and that would make me so sad!"

Deciding to be playful, I asked, "Have you ever heard of Pascal's wager?"

She sniffled and said no. "Well," I told her, "Pascal became a Christian just in case God exists."

"That's a great idea," she squealed enthusiastically.

I wondered to myself: "Great idea? Where's the sincerity?" I sighed and continued, "I am adopting the anti-Pascal's wager."

She frowned. "What's that?" "That, Sherrie, is not becoming a Christian because I don't believe God exists."

She just sat there silently, glaring at me.

Isn't it interesting how easily Christians become offended when one rebuffs their advances? In this case, perhaps because she had taken my salvation so personally? She did cry after all. And, over what? A work acquaintance who isn't captivated by her religion nor guilted into compliance? What gives her the right to try to save my soul? You guessed it. Entitlement, not oppression.

"But, we're a Christian nation." No, we're not.

"We believers are persecuted." No, you're not. If you were, would you be so open about your beliefs? I can't imagine any of those mentioned willingly giving their lives as martyrs.

Yet, let's be fair and consider some of the Christians' examples of their oppression. No "Merry Christmas" on Starbucks cups? Workers in private businesses not saying "Merry Christmas"? Schools renaming "Easter break" to "spring break" and "Christmas break" to "winter break"? Oh! The horror! How do Christians manage to survive?

But wait! There's more. Even though they have been able to reverse Roe v. Wade, they haven't yet been able to stop gay marriage. Yet, were they being forced to have an abortion or are they being forced to marry a same-sex person against their will? No. So, what's all the whining about?

Wait, there's more! They're not able to have nativity scenes, or the Ten Commandments displayed on public property. And, this one is unbelievable, they're not even allowed to hold prayer meetings on school grounds. Correct! Because not every person who frequents private businesses or pays taxes is Christian. But don't Christians realize that they're free to do their own thing in both public and private spheres, as long as they don't disturb others? On more than one occasion, I have gone into coffee shops and seen someone reading the bible. Or heard those at a table in a restaurant on Sunday afternoons talking about a minister's message. Have they been arrested? No. Has the bible been burned or banned from public libraries? Nope, that was Harry Potter. Have movies like "The Ten Commandments" been banned from TV? No.

Again, I see no merit to their complaints. Not being able to have everything you want is not the same as being oppressed. My message to Christians is this: Chill out. You're fine. You're still in the majority. Many people who don't go to church still give lip service to your beliefs. One of the best things our founders did, in order to keep us from the pain of sectarian violence, is to create us as a secular nation, tolerant of all religions, but sponsor of none.

Thomas Jefferson explained the reasoning behind this protection in this way: "The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."

So, Christians, quit playing the victim and enjoy the freedom to worship that you have. And let go of the sense of entitlement to spread your beliefs. It's really annoying to those of us who value the humanistic principles on which this country was founded.

Dr. Bruce has a Ph.D. in Classical studies and became a religious skeptic when he left the evangelical church at the age of 16. He lives in the American Southwest with his wife and a silly dog.

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LETTERBOX

Police cars shouldn't have religious phrases

FFRF's letter to Oklahoma's Superintendent of Public Schools Ryan Walters was spot on! Thank you!

It's more than clear that Walters is a manipulative weasel and so-called "Christian" who seeks to inflict his personal agendas on innocent school children — require them to go to school then force them to listen to prayers.

I'm a retired teacher from Oklahoma City Public Schools. Teachers already have enough to worry about in the classroom than some snake like Ryan Walters. Our illustrious governor, Kevin Stitt, isn't any better. They make quite a team.

But I have another concern.

Many police vehicles (city and county) in Oklahoma display the slogan "In God We Trust." If that doesn't smack of promoting religion, I don't know what does. It's bad enough that the phrase appears on our money. The Founding Fathers would never have approved of promoting religion that way.

The police should be trusting in the laws of the land as given in the Constitution. The phrase on public vehicles bought with taxpayer money offends me.

And my final thought in this letter: Why would we worship someone who sat around in the dark for unknown eons before suddenly having the inspiration to create light?

Thank you for all you do and all you represent.

Steve H. (last name withheld)
Oklahoma

Lack of reverence for Thomas Paine disgraceful

I find it appalling that, in our history, Thomas Paine, one of the most inspiring American patriots, is not given the recognition he deserves, only because he disdained organized religion, and considered the union of church and state "an adulterous connection."

And despite President Theodore Roosevelt calling him "a dirty little atheist," he wasn't a nonbeliever. His religion, like the one held by our first three presidents, was Deism, which is a belief in God based on reason rather than revelation.

After more than 200 years of misguided education in American history, the memory of that great patriot should not only be revived, but glorified.

Isn't it a disgrace to America that Thomas Paine died in calumny?

David Quintero
California

Our souls are for the here and now

I think religion divides, while reasoned understanding joins together. Religion tries to take the soul hostage, while I know mine stays right here on Earth. My soul flows out of every action I take and lives on forever through the generations. Every smile, every deed, my work, if I plant a flower, even if I hurt somebody's feelings, this soul work lives on. My body dies AND I live on. Being mindful that I am surrounded by the work of billions of souls adds a spiritual richness to everyday life. The promised land is right under my feet, right now.

Bob Carstens
Colorado



"I already know about religion. That's why I'm an atheist."

Humor page was a welcome reprieve

Thanks a million for the Freethought Today humor page in the November issue. Crankmail is always amusing, but the Heathen Humor and Pagan Puns had me howling out loud. When I tried to read them to my husband, I couldn't. . . I just kept cracking up until I had to hand him the page to read for himself. Just when I thought Freethought Today couldn't get any better!

Please keep the hilarity coming. It's a welcome reprieve from the serious business at hand.

Heidi Juhl
Colorado

Editor's note: The pun is mightier than the sword.

The Catholic Church is like a turtle

The following letter to the editor by FFRF Member Jimmy Dunne was published in the Houston Chronicle.

The Catholic Church is like a turtle. It moves very slowly, dropping poop along the way that followers must step in. Occasionally, they do the right thing, such as Pope Francis saying that priests "may offer blessings to same-sex couples." The Church made it clear that a blessing must not be confused with a wedding. So, they will not be conducting same-sex marriages in Catholic churches. Nevertheless, Pope Francis is to be commended for moving the church inches forward.

It's sad that the church in 1968 declared that "birth control is a terrible sin." It's good that we have "cafeteria Catholics" who pick and choose which pope pronouncements they will honor. The Vatican needs to allow women to become priests and end their discrimination against women, once and for all.

The church has lied for centuries claiming that there is a God, a heaven and a hell, when there is no evidence that they exist. In my humble opinion, they are all imaginary.

Jimmy Dunne
Texas

Free thinking still exists to us freethinkers

I very much enjoyed the recent Sunday "Freethought Matters" show with Robert Sapolsky discussing free will. I feel my atheism is a product of free thought, even though it is not, according to Dr. Sapolsky. I guess freethought does not exist, but to all of us freethinkers it does! As you say at the end of each episode: "Freethought matters!"

David Hirshfield
California

Playing the 'why' game with God on your side

A longer version of this letter by FFRF Member Marty Rush appeared in The Mountain Mail in Salida, Colo., on Dec. 8.

I don't know about you, but I went through a "why" phase as a kid. Anything my parents told me would be met with "Why?" Even the most obvious truths would be challenged with that one word: "Why?" ad infinitum. The point, of course, was to drive my parents nuts. To force them to abandon logic and reason and finally sputter in frustration, "Because it just is!"

What if we played the "why" game with current events — the Israeli-Palestinian war, for instance?

Israelis and Palestinians are going medieval on each other. Why? Because when Israel was created in 1948, it contained a fatal flaw. Why? Because a million people already occupied that same

tiny land, the size of New Jersey. People of a whole different culture from the European Jews who founded Israel, including a different religion, which makes the current conflict partly a religious war. And religious wars are always the ugliest. Why?

Because when God is on your side, it's easy to dehumanize your enemies as evil-doing vermin who need to be exterminated, especially if you believe in a single, individual God with a personal name. Why?

Because monotheistic religion naturally inspires irrational extremism its true believers, from Muslim fanatics in suicide vests to xenophobic Jewish settlers in the West Bank to Christian fundamentalists messing around inside a woman's uterus. Why?

Because religious zealots who worship the One Named God are always 100 percent certain of their God's — and their own — moral righteousness. Why?

Because they have God's word for it, written down in holy scripture, in black and white, just like God said. And if you don't believe it, you're evil, and you need to be exterminated. Why?

Because God says so, so that's the way it is. Why? Because it is. Why? Because it is. Why? Because it just is!

Marty Rush
Colorado

Judge told clerk to give me a secular oath

I read with interest the letter from Kate Retzlaff in the Letterbox section of the December issue in which she laments the fact that she "never got the chance to request a secular oath" when she was called for jury duty.

Unlike her, I once actually got that chance. When I was in college, I was selected for jury duty in a malpractice case. While the court clerk was swearing-in the jury, I stood up with them, but did not repeat her words. After the swearing-in, the rest of the jury sat down, but I remained standing. I told the judge that I could not in good conscience take the oath because I was an atheist, and, consequently, I could not make an affirmation that ended with the words "so help me God."

Surprisingly, he wasn't the least bit fazed by my announcement. He simply told the clerk to give me the secular oath. Unlike the judge, she was so nonplussed by the situation that she started swearing me in like I was a witness in the case. After she started by saying "do

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you swear to tell the truth,” the judge intervened and told her to give me the same oath that she had administered to the other jurors, but simply leave off the last part.

Later, apparently not recognizing me, a woman approached me in the jury room seething with rage about that abhorrent man who refused to swear to God. Looking into her eyes, I could see a female Torquemada, a bloodthirsty crusader against the godless. Sad to say, I fear that she is far from alone.

Tom Drolsum
Wisconsin

I have a lot of questions for Christians

An open letter to all Christians:
I, too, would like to live forever, so I want to make sure I thoroughly understand the ground rules and get this right, because one-third of the world’s population must know something that I don’t, and I need to get my head straight.

You say all I have to do is ask forgiveness from the God that planned and orchestrated the torture and murder of his own son to make up for MY sinfulness? And that in exchange for my belief that this torture and murder was actually a very good thing, I get to live forever without the nuisance of maintaining my physical body while living in paradise in an invisible place in the sky? And that this quid pro quo believe-it-and-live-forever deal is exclusive to all other qualifications, human virtues and good works that people aspire to in merit, charity and justice? And that this is true despite the fact that this reward system bestows the grand prize openly to the most vile, wicked and evil believers among us over those most virtuous skeptics?

Well, I must say, I don’t think I totally understand, but again, all I have to do is say I believe that the divinely planned torture and murder was for my immortality? That’s it? Oh, but wait, tell me again about that word “tithe.”

Jay R. Singer
Florida

Direct democracy only feared by reactionaries

From the Jan. 28 N.Y. Post: “When asked if the GOP proposal (to ban pro-abortion ballot initiatives on the part of voters) was an attempt to get rid of direct democracy, Missouri Republican state Rep. Ed Lewis said, ‘I think that our Founding Fathers were about as fearful of direct democracy as we should be. That’s why they created a republic.’”

In other words, in addition to voter ballot initiatives, Lewis is saying that we should also be fearful of local and state referendums, town hall meetings, and recall elections. All are time-hon-

Crossword answers

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The BART stars

SF Bay Chapter members Dana Treadwell, Steve Johns, Dick Hewetson and Jenny Hammer show off the sign that was posted in the San Francisco Embarcadero BART Station during November 2023. Embarcadero Station is the busiest of the Bay Area BART system, which serves about 4 million riders each month.

ored examples of direct democracy. So is trial by jury.

The claim that the United States is not a democracy but a republic is being increasingly advanced by reactionaries like Lewis who want to destroy our democracy since they understand a majority of the American people do not support their repressive views on abortion, LGBTQ rights, separation of church and state, and taxpayer funding for religious schools.

Dennis Middlebrooks
New York

Meteorologist should stick to weather

This is a letter written by FFRF member Dan Barski to a local meteorologist.

I am writing to express my sincere disappointment with your pre-recorded weather forecasts as presented on the telephone. Are you aware that you are the only meteorologist in Western New York who chooses to embarrass himself (and his employer) by injecting religion into his forecasts?

Have you considered how inappropriate — no, absurd — it is for someone who purports to be a scientist to evoke magical thinking after presenting a report on the weather? Just what exactly do you mean by “God bless”? Why not “Allahu Akbar” or “Abracadabra”?

When people call in seeking a weather report, they expect information on an aspect of the real world — the weather. They are not interested in being pitched or evangelized by a pseudo-scientist who couldn’t quite outgrow his childhood proclivities for an “imaginary best friend.”

Are you aware how presumptuous it is to describe the weather on Sundays in terms of the listener’s “drive to church”? Indeed, you are apparently ignorant of the fact that the percentage of U.S. adults who regularly attend reli-

Cryptogram answer

Saying that you are moral because you believe in a god is like saying you are an economist because you play Monopoly.

— Robert. W. Cox

Write to us

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

methadone is far superior to other (or no) treatment for most patients. Persons with alcohol use disorder are also likely to benefit from medication.

However, patients, family, therapists and friends frequently have the misplaced morality-based attitude with religious overtones that persons with substance-use disorders should not accept medical treatment, but rather should somehow develop the “willpower” and moral strength to stay “clean.” Peers, courts and therapists often encourage or require this approach and are lukewarm or even dismissive of treatment for a medical condition. This approach is responsible for many patients having ineffective treatment, often with dire consequences.

Narcotics Anonymous says all are welcome, but it philosophically opposes medication treatment. This is despite the clear efficacy of medication for opioid use disorder.

John Asriel
Washington

Limerick puts spotlight on Lazarus resurrection

A clever young feller of Nazareth
Resurrected a dead man named Lazarus
“What giveth?” sayeth he
I was comfortable, see
But now I must die again. Jesus!
Don Hayes
Texas

The term ‘religion-free’ is a good suggestion

Stephen Walrath’s Letterbox suggestion in the Jan./Feb. issue makes sense to me. Although I have no problem telling others I am an atheist, I agree that the term “religion-free” is less confrontational, and I will begin using it. I am child-free, car-free, debt-free and religion-free. Sounds good.

Kate Retzlaff
Wisconsin

Dictionary demonstrates human beings made gods

Here’s a great quick way to demonstrate religions and gods are mere creations of human beings. Just check out definitions of a few words in most any dictionary:

Religion: The **belief** in and worship of a **supernatural** or **superhuman** power or powers, especially a god or gods to be obeyed and worshiped as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe.

Belief: The state of accepting that certain things are true or real.

Supernatural: An event, action, object or being attributed to some force beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature.

Superhuman: Having powers or a nature above that of man.

Faith: Unquestioning belief in God or gods, religious tenets, etc. that does not require proof or evidence.

As Mark Twain said, “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.” In short, religions are human creations lacking scientific, observable, provable evidence.

Paul Morsey
Kentucky

BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

Richard S. Shaw, 69, Riverton, WY: 1st-degree lewd molestation. Shaw, worship leader at Under Command Ministries (“Where you are welcomed, wanted, needed & Loved”), is charged in Lakeland, FL, where on a visit last December he is accused of touching a girl’s private parts inside and outside her clothing.

The girl, who is younger than 12, told her mother, who confronted Shaw, who denied being a sexual predator. Asked if he could be trusted with the girl again, he allegedly said, “No, I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t be alone with her again.”

An affidavit said detectives interviewed Shaw, who told them he is addicted to pornography and touched the girl after he “gave in to temptation.” *Source: polksheriff.org, 1-10-24*

Catholic priest **Tomasz Z.** (last name withheld under privacy law), Dąbrowa Górnicza, Poland, has been charged with “crimes against sexual freedom and decency” for allegedly hosting a drug-fueled “sex party” in his church-owned apartment in August 2023. He is also charged with furnishing drugs and failure to provide assistance to a person in medical need.

After its own investigation, the Catholic curia of Sosnowiec confirmed that “Father Tomasz Z., together with two other lay people, committed a very serious violation of moral norms.”

A man reportedly lost consciousness during the party due to a combination of potency medication and alcohol. His friend called an ambulance, but Tomasz Z. allegedly refused to let paramedics in the apartment until police intervened. *Source: Polish Press Agency, 1-10-24*

Andrew Piczer, 56, Newbury, OH: 4 counts of 3rd-degree sexual battery. Piczer, a teacher at Lake Catholic High School, is accused of alleged incidents last October with a student at the school in the Cleveland suburb of Mentor, where he also coached the girls lacrosse team from 2007-11.

The Diocese of Cleveland placed him on administrative leave after learning of the allegations and contacted law enforcement, a statement said. He was fired Dec. 21. *Source: Fox 8, 1-10-24*

Clarence Reed, 54, and Brandon Odom, 37, Alexandria, VA, are charged with aggravated 2nd-degree battery. Odom is also charged with simple robbery. They turned themselves in to police after a large fight Dec. 27 that sent another man to the hospital.

Reed is pastor at an unidentified church and founder of the C and R Mentoring Foundation, a nonprofit that serves youth. He previously ran for a seat on the Alexandria City Council and on the Police Jury District. *Source: KALB, 1-8-24*

Clinton John, 43, Ifo, Nigeria: Sexual assault. John, pastor of Mega World Healing Ministry, is accused of having unlawful carnal knowledge of a girl starting in 2022 when she was 14.

Ogun State Police officer Omolola Odutola said the girl’s parents became suspicious after she had to be treated for reoccurring infections. John allegedly threatened to kill her if she reported the assaults. *Source: Punch, 1-7-24*

Dwayne Waden, 57, High Point, NC: Assault and battery. Waden, a pastor at Elevated Life International Ministries and part-time truck driver, is accused of attacking his wife’s co-worker in December at McDonald’s for “disrespecting” her while she was training to be a manager.

It’s alleged he came to the restaurant and punched the 34-year-old co-worker in the face and pushed his head down toward a deep fryer. First responders were called to the scene. The incident was captured on a security camera. *Source: WKRC, 12-31-23*

Richard L. Sentell, 64, Cleveland, TN: Sexual exploitation of a minor. Sentell, pastor at Cornerstone Church of God, was arrested Christmas night after authorities received a cyber tip that led to a search of his home and computer, which allegedly contained over 100 images depicting child sex abuse.

A now-deleted post on the church website said “Pastor Rick has made a lifelong commitment to find the paths of life that bring peace and a closer walk with God.” *Source: WRCB, 12-27-23*

Elbert E. “Buddy” Goins, 39, Beckley, W.VA: Patronizing a minor victim of sexual servitude. Goins, lead pastor of Mt. Hope Christian Church, allegedly responded to a “mama bears with cubs” sting ad placed by police on a website they were monitoring.

A state trooper testified that last December, Goins met an undercover officer at a Ruby Tuesday restaurant, thinking she was a single mother of girls ages 11 and 13. He was fired the day after his arrest. *Source: WOAY, 12-19-23*

Albert B. Wharton, 86, Pickens County, SC: 22 counts of taking indecent liberties with a child under the age of 13 while in a custodial position and 8 counts of aggravated sexual assault. He’s accused in over 2 dozen incidents allegedly occurring between 1981-97 at Victory Baptist Church’s Bereah Christian Academy in **Warsaw, VA.** He was the church’s lead pastor there from 1976-2002.

“Wharton has lived and served seven churches



in Virginia, South Carolina, Alabama and Florida over the past four decades,” Sheriff Stephan Smith said. *Source: WRIC, 12-19-23*

William Damroth, 64, Port Jervis, NY: 2nd-degree grand larceny. Damroth is accused of thefts from his former parish, St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta Catholic Church in Newburgh. He was ordained in 1993.

The Archdiocese of New York said in a statement that Damroth volunteered to take a leave of absence during the investigation. *Source: News12, 12-18-23*

Jordan B. Shortridge, 28, Dallas, NC: Felony larceny. He’s accused of embezzling over \$470,000 from the Dallas Church of God in 2018-23, the church his grandfather Daniel Shortridge leads. The church website said Jordan Shortridge was “very active in the church, playing the drums and working in the A/V department.” It’s unclear if he’s a paid staff member.

The church ordered an audit in 2021 after discovering money missing and payments made through PayPal. Police Chief Robert Walls said the investigation continues into why the church waited years to involve law enforcement. *Source: Gaston Gazette, 12-15-23*

Seferino Tosie, 46, Aurora, OR: 3 counts each of 1st-degree rape and 1st-degree sexual penetration, 4 counts of 1st-degree sex abuse and 6 counts of 1st-degree sodomy. It’s believed many of his alleged victims, all of Micronesian descent, attended Missionary Memorial Church in 2008-16.

Tosie has worked in other area churches and in Kansas, Minnesota, Hawaii and Iowa. Another accuser came forward after his indictment was made public. *Source: KOIN, 12-17-23*

Sergio Guardia, 48, Lynchburg, VA: Stalking/placing another person in reasonable fear of death or assault and 2 counts of breaking and entering. Guardia, Spanish language pastor at Thomas Road Baptist Church, is accused by parishioner Marie Columna of breaking into her home in November when she and her 2 children were out of town.

Security video allegedly showed Guardia sneaking into the basement through the backyard. Columna said he has engaged in stalking behavior for several years. *Source: WSET, 12-17-23*

Trashawn Abram, Omaha, NE: 3 counts of 1st-degree sexual assault of a child. Abram, a pastor who has preached at several local churches, is known to his accuser, police said. One of the incidents is alleged to have occurred at an unidentified church. *Source: WOWT, 12-15-23*

Kyle T. Poff, 36, Little Elm, TX: Possession of child pornography. Poff, technology director and student minister at The Branch Church campus in Vista Ridge, studied Christian leadership at the Dallas Theological Seminary. *Source: KDFW, 12-15-23*

Cole Altizer, 34, Maggie Valley, NC: Larceny by an employee. Altizer, pastor of Maggie Valley United Methodist Church, is accused of stealing \$540 from church coffers. Church board chairman Ken Brown told the congregation that “our church has fallen victim to a series of criminal activities.”

Altizer, who has been with the church for about 3½ years, told a reporter he was not at liberty to discuss the allegation but plans to share his side of the story at some point. *Source: The Mountaineer, 12-8-23*

Virgil Marsh, 72, Independence, MO: 1st-degree statutory sodomy and 2 counts of 1st-degree child molestation. His initial accuser told police that when she was under age 14 in 2011, she would stay over at Marsh’s house when he was pastor at her church, which was not identified.

Another accuser later came forward with similar allegations about incidents in 2016-18. Marsh allegedly told detectives he had asked God for forgiveness and said he was no longer the man who “had previously done things to the victim.” *Source: WDAF, 12-7-23*

Ian Maphet, 39, Centralia, IL: 2 counts of reproduction of child pornography and 2 counts of possession of child pornography. He was arrested at Calumet Street Christian Church, where he was associate minister of music and worship until being fired after his arrest. *Source: WJBD, 12-7-23*

Herman C. Rushing Jr., 67, Portersville, PA: Corruption of minors, endangering the welfare of children and indecent assault. Rushing, pastor at By His Grace Christian Ministries in Butler, is accused of assaulting a girl starting about 3 years ago when she was 10. Another accuser alleged that 2 incidents involving Rushing occurred when she was 15.

Court records show an adult member of the congregation alleged to police that she was assaulted at the church. *Source: WTAE, 12-7-23*

Victor M. Hernandez-Pineda, 53, Oakland, CA: 16 counts related to rape, child molestation and kidnapping involving at least 4 victims. After Hernandez-Pineda, pastor of Iglesia Pentecostes Movimiento de Gloria, was charged, 3 more girls under age 16 came forward.

“He took me to a hotel near the school and at that moment I told him that I didn’t feel safe, I didn’t feel good and that we shouldn’t do it, but he made me do it,” alleged Karen Cifuentes, the 13-year-old daughter of a church elder.

Now 21, she said he tried to convince her it was God’s will that they have sex. *Source: Mercury News, 12-6-23*

George Athanasiou, 38, Canonsburg, PA: 223 counts of theft by unlawful taking, forgery, insufficient funds checks and access device usage. Athanasiou, pastor of All Saints Greek Orthodox Church, is accused of over 200 unauthorized ATM withdrawals in 2022-23 totaling about \$117,000. He started as a pastoral assistant in 2019 at the church and was ordained in 2020.

“He had a gambling problem. He alluded to that in the statement he gave to police,” said his attorney Pat Thomasse. “We already have a lot of money ready to make restitution in this case.” *Source: KDKA, 11-30-23*

James P. Randolph, 57, Midland, MI: 1st-degree criminal sexual conduct involving a relationship, accosting children for immoral purposes and 4 counts of 2nd-degree criminal sexual conduct. Randolph, pastor at Living Word International Church, is accused of crimes in 2011 involving a person under 13 years old and 2 incidents involving a relationship. He is the son-in-law of Mark Barclay of Mark Barclay Ministries, which operates Living Word Church. *Source: Midland Daily News, 11-29-23*

David Lancini, 77, a retired Catholic priest in the Diocese of Townsville, Australia, faces 8 counts of indecent treatment of boys under age 14. Charges pertain to alleged abuse of a child in 1969-71. *Source: ABC, 11-29-23*

Luis Mendoza, 29, Clinton Township, MI: Contributing to the delinquency of a minor and 2 counts of criminal sexual conduct. Mendoza, a youth leader at Stoney Creek Community Church, is accused of giving a girl marijuana and grooming her for sexual contact when she was 15. She eventually told her parents, who contacted authorities. *Source: Macomb Patch, 11-15-23*

Jonathan S. Russell, 42, Saginaw, MI: 10 counts, including 2nd-degree criminal sexual conduct with a victim 13 years old or younger involving sexual touching. Russell was accused of molesting at least 8 children he met at the First Baptist Church of Bridge-

port, where he was a volunteer youth organizer.

Russell was sentenced to 60 days in jail in 2016 when he lived in Hendersonville, NC, and pleaded guilty to 4 misdemeanor counts of assault on a child under 12 for incidents at his home. He was arrested for spanking the bare bottoms of boys aged 8-9 whom he coached in Little League baseball and were friends with his son. *Source: WJRT/WXII, 11-9-23*

Pleaded / Convicted

Brandon Saylor, 44, Midland, MI: Pleaded guilty to 3 counts of 2nd-degree criminal sexual conduct with 3 children under age 13, admitting he did it for his own sexual gratification between 2010-23. Saylor, a volunteer at Living Word Church, is accused of touching the genitals of 3 clothed and unclothed children.

He was originally charged with 6 counts of criminal sexual conduct (2 counts involving a relationship) and 3 counts of accosting children for immoral purposes. A plea bargain dropped 6 charges.

Circuit Court Judge Michael Beale told Saylor he was subject to a minimum sentence of 60 months in prison and up to 15 years. One victim was 5 when the first sexual conduct occurred. Two other victims came forward with complaints from about 20 years ago. Prosecutor Courtney Driscoll said charges were not levied in those cases due to the statute of limitations.

James Randolph, 57, Living Word’s pastor, was charged last November with 7 felonies for molesting children as far back as 2011. *Source: Midland Daily News, 1-9-24*

Gershon Selinger, 41, Brooklyn, NY: Pleaded guilty to 1st-degree sexual abuse of a minor under age 11 involving a 2008 incident. A plea deal seeks a 5-year prison sentence, said public defender Seth Gallagher, Selinger’s attorney.

Selinger grew up in an observant Jewish household and worked as a lifeguard and in Hasidic schools in Brooklyn. He was convicted in 2015 of molesting a 6-year-old in a separate incident in 2008 and was sentenced to 10 years’ probation.

Selinger sat for a tape-recorded interview last July with Hasidic comedian Mendy Pellin and spoke about his abuse of children in explicit terms, his treatment for pedophilia and his relationship with his wife.

Watching the video led to another victim recalling her repressed memories and filing of a new charge leading to a guilty plea. *Source: NY Jewish Week, 1-4-24*

Dakota A. Kennemer, 31, Twin Falls, ID: Pleaded guilty to sexual battery of a minor 16 or 17 years of age. “I solicited a 17-year-old minor to commit a sexual act,” admitted Kennemer, a youth pastor at Grace Baptist Church. A plea bargain dismissed another count.

An investigator wrote in an affidavit that she recovered over 13,000 text messages between Kennemer and the girl in 2019-22 in what started as a nurturing relationship after the death of her father. *Source: Times-News, 12-27-23*

Thomas Wall, 60, Paint Lick, KY: Pleaded guilty to 1st-degree sexual abuse. He was initially charged with 13 counts for incidents while he was pastor at Pentecostal Fellowship Church in Lancaster and an administrator at Fellowship Christian Academy. He was accused of molesting at least 7 girls in 2007-17, most under age 12.

Prosecutors recommended a sentence of confinement of 1 year, which he has already served while awaiting the outcome of his case. *Source: lex18.com, 12-20-23*

Dean A. Smith, 67, Lame Deer, MT: Guilty by a jury after a 6-day trial on charges of aggravated sexual abuse, abusive sexual contact by force and 2 counts of abusive sexual contact by force involving a child. Smith, pastor at Morning Star Baptist Church for over 20 years, was banished from the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation following charges he molested 4 girls from the Northern Cheyenne and Arapahoe tribes at his home.

Three of the girls were under age 12. Smith and his wife housed several foster children during the time of his alleged crimes in 2017-19. *Source: KTVQ, 12-12-23*

Stephen McCurtis, 69, Maricopa, CA: Pleaded no contest to a charge alleging he kissed and inappropriately touched a 12-year-old girl outside her clothing about 2 years ago. When questioned, McCurtis, pastor of Maricopa Community Church, told investigators the girl declared her love for him and “it messed my head up.”

“I’m not the pursuer,” McCurtis said in a report filed in Superior Court. “That’s important, I need you to write that down. I was the pursued.” *Source: KGET, 12-7-23*

Sentenced

Zachary L. Petree, 25, Markle, IN: 2½ years in prison (1 year incarceration and 1½ years on probation) after pleading guilty to felony dissemination of matter harmful to minors. Petree, pastor of The Field Church, was accused of asking a 16-year-old girl to have sex and send him “sexy” photos and showing her nude images of another woman.

He still faces a felony count of obstruction of justice and misdemeanor invasion of privacy for breaking a no-contact order to keep him away from the

girl. He’s accused of sending her pizzas while he was free on bond and asking a couple looking after her to convince her to recant her accusations.

“I don’t understand why she’s wanting me to be put in prison and be a sex offender for the rest of my life,” he wrote to the woman the girl was staying with. “It’s a shame that me and my wife and children are having to go through this hell because of a girl who is known to be a pathological liar. She is lying.” *Source: WANE, 1-8-24*

Adam N. Vines, 29, Lenoir, NC: 45 days in jail (deferred on completion of 12 months’ probation), complete a firearms safety course and pay \$203 in court costs and \$200 fine after pleading guilty to misdemeanor failure to store a firearm to protect minors.

Vines, a pastor at River Valley Baptist Church in Morganton, was leaving services with his sons last October when the older sibling shot his 2-year-old brother in the head with a gun that was in the back seat of the van.

The boy was airlifted to a hospital, where he was later listed after surgery in stable condition. “It did go in behind his ear, but it went across the corner on the lower side instead of going through the brain,” Vines said at the time. “Trusting in the Lord. God has him in his hand. God has a perfect plan. It was an accident.” *Source: WBTV, 1-5-24*

Edward M. Waters, 74, Winter Park, FL: 15 days in jail after pleading no contest to driving under the influence of alcohol in November near the entrance to the village of DeLuna, where dispatch received a call that a blue Ford Mustang was going very slowly “all over the roadway.” Behind the wheel was Waters, a retired Catholic priest.

A news story said “Waters was invited to participate in field sobriety exercises. The deputy had to repeat instructions many times, prompting Waters to announce, ‘I have to pee.’ Waters provided breath samples that registered .192 and .189 blood alcohol content.”

He was also convicted in 2020 of DUI and in June 2023 of driving with a suspended license. *Source: Villages-News, 1-5-24*

Angelo Becciu, 75, Vatican City, the first Catholic cardinal ever prosecuted by the Vatican criminal court, was convicted of embezzlement and sentenced to 5½ years in prison in a complicated financial trial involving 10 defendants and lasting 2½ years.

The trial focused on the Vatican’s €350 million (\$384,000) investment in developing luxury apartments. Prosecutors alleged high-ranking clerics and brokers fleeced the Holy See of tens of millions of euros in fees and commissions.

“I want to shout to the world that I am innocent, that I absolutely did not commit these crimes of which I am being accused,” Becciu said in an interview with Italian public television. *Source: Reuters, 12-16-23*

Austin W. Perkins, Rome, GA: 15 years in prison and 25 years’ probation after pleading guilty to child molestation and possession of child sex abuse material. Perkins, volunteer youth minister at Grace Fellowship Baptist Church in Cave Springs, was arrested in 2022 in a sting targeting child sex abuse materials.

He was charged with victimizing a minor living with him and recording explicit videos of Perkins molesting him. At the time of his arrest, the church had no lead pastor or other paid staff. He also drove for the church’s bus ministry serving nearby communities. *Source: Rome Tribune, 12-16-23*

James W. Jackson, 68, Providence, RI: 6 years in prison for receiving child pornography. Jackson, pastor at St. Mary’s Catholic Parish, was arrested in 2021 after a search of the St. Mary’s rectory where he lived. A computer IP address was “used multiple times between September 26 and October 17, 2021, to view and share videos consistent with child sexual abuse material,” authorities alleged.

In a sentencing memorandum, prosecutors detailed 12,000 images and 1,300 videos found in Jackson’s possession. They featured 190 prepubescent girls, some engaged in sadistic and masochistic abuse. Letters from some of the 18 victims who submitted impact statements were read in court.

While free on bond and living with relatives in Leawood, KS, Jackson accessed child porn and was returned to jail. *Source: Providence Journal, 12-13-23*

William B. Oswald, 62, Lexington County, SC: 40 years in prison after a jury found him guilty of 3 counts of criminal sexual conduct for the sexual abuse of 2 daughters. The women testified the abuse started in the early 1990s and continued into the early 2000s during their early childhood when Oswald was pastor at Dunn’s Chapel Church in S. Congaree.

He was also volunteer chaplain at the fire station. *Source: Post & Courier, 12-5-23*

Fred M. Gammon Jr., 43, Miami, OK: 1 year in jail, \$5,000 fine and sex offender registration after a jury found him guilty of child sexual abuse.

Gammon is accused of molesting a family member starting when she was 15 and he was pastor of Wayside Assembly of God in Wyandotte. Testimony included text messages between Gammon and the teen.

Prosecutor Chris Garner asked Gammon’s wife Tonya about the text messages on his phone that said things like “You are like a fire to me” and “You are hot.”

Asked about references to smelling the victim’s underwear, Tonya Gammon said it was because Gammon did the family’s laundry and would smell clothes to see if they needed washing: “He was always smelling socks and shoes.”

The alleged victim’s sister took the stand to call her sibling “a liar” and praise their father. Prosecutor Garner disagreed, telling the court that “Behind closed doors, Fred Gammon was a different person.” *Source: KSNF/KODE, 11-30-23*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

Phoenix-based Grand Canyon University, the largest Christian college in the U.S., is accused in a suit by the Federal Trade Commission of deceptive advertising and illegal telemarketing. It’s alleged the school misled prospective doctoral students about the time it takes to finish its accelerated program, deceptively marketed the school as a nonprofit and illegally called prospective students who submitted their contact information on the school’s website but asked not to be contacted.

About 20,000 attend classes in Phoenix, with about 80,000 enrolled online. Last October the U.S. Department of Education fined the school \$37.7 million, alleging it lied to over 7,500 former and current students about the cost of its doctoral programs.

University President Brian Mueller called the fine “ridiculous” and questioned whether the school is being targeted because of its faith affiliation. It is appealing the fine. *Source: Fox Business, 12-27-23*

The Catholic **Diocese of Rochester, NY,** and **Matthew Jones** are defendants in a suit alleging

Jones, 41, a priest at All Saints Parish in **Corning** until being placed on leave in 2022, sexually assaulted a male parishioner. Jones later resigned his pastorate.

It’s alleged the parishioner sought counseling from Jones in 2020 and was subsequently “manipulated for purposes of [Jones] own sexual gratification” by plying him with alcohol and dinners paid for with a church credit card over a 6-month period. *Source: OSV News, 11-29-23*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

The Catholic **Diocese of Fall River, MA,** reached a “five-figure settlement” in a suit alleging sexual abuse by retired priest **Edward J. Byington,** who died in December at age 84.

“I don’t want a child going through 40 years of spiritual turmoil and hell, feeling ashamed to seek out the help they need,” plaintiff Daniel Lewis of Taunton said at a press conference.

Lewis was 12 in 1976 when Byington started giving him wine and grooming him sexually, he alleged. Byington was suspended in 2020 after sexual abuse allegations from Richard Eldridge, who alleged molestation in 1971 when he was a teen attending a Catholic retreat. *Source: Daily Gazette, 12-21-23*

The Catholic **Diocese of Dromore and St. Colman’s College in Newry, N. Ireland,** settled a suit for £500,000 (\$639,000) for sexual abuse by pedophile priest **Malachy Finnegan,** who died in 2002. Finnegan was president at St. Colman’s, a grammar school for boys.

The plaintiff alleged abuse during a 5-year period when he was a student in the 1980s. The diocese settled an earlier claim for \$490,000 in a suit filed by a different man, now 51, who alleged abuse by Finnegan over a 3-year period in the mid-1980s. *Source: Belfast Telegraph, 12-21-23*

Finances

The Catholic **Franciscan Friars of California** filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy on Dec. 31 in Oakland, citing a change in state law in 2019 that allows abuse survivors to file complaints previously prohibited due to expiration of statutes of limitations.

Most of the friars named in the 94 claims dating back to the 1940s are deceased. The Franciscan order has between \$1 million and \$10 million in assets and between \$10 million and \$50 million in lia-

bilities, according to its petition. “Of the six living friars, all have been long removed permanently from all public ministry and ministerial environments, and are living under strict third-party supervision.”

The order is known for operating the St. Anthony Foundation in San Francisco’s Tenderloin district, providing food, clothing and addiction counseling. *Source: Reuters, 1-3-23*

The Catholic **Diocese of Sacramento, CA,** will seek Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in the wake of over 250 lawsuits claiming sexual abuse by clergy and other staff. Bishop Jaime Soto said about 80% of allegations relate to claims from 1980 or earlier.

In a statement, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) criticized the bankruptcy move. “It is simply not true that bankruptcy is the only way to achieve a ‘fair consideration’ of all of the survivor’s lawsuits.” What is true, SNAP said, is that survivors’ settlements are usually reduced in bankruptcy. *Source: CBS Sacramento, 12-11-23*

Legal Developments

901 Church in Bartlett, TN, paid \$6,410 to resolve allegations of identity theft and theft of merchandise against lead pastor **Steven Flockhart,** 39, who was arrested last November. Mark McCall, church finance director from 2015-22, accused Flockhart of opening a PayPal account under Mc-

Call’s name without his knowledge and running up \$6,410 in charges.

“When confronted by the victim, both parties agreed to settle the account per the victim’s request,” stated a spokesperson for the Shelby County district attorney’s office. “After reviewing the statements from the victim, defendant, and a witness, our office concluded that the State would not be able to carry our burden of proof beyond a reasonable doubt.”

McCall disputed that Flockhart has answered for his “unethical actions” in the situation. “The church ended up paying the bill, not Flockhart.”

Flockhart is the son of prominent Southern Baptist Convention pastor Steven Flockhart Sr. of Hiram, GA. The younger Flockhart pleaded guilty in 2020 to multiple counts of forgery during his tenure as lead pastor of Mosaic Church in Woodstock, GA. He was accused of signing the name of congregation members and others on a property lease and was ordered to pay \$12,690 restitution. He is still on probation in Georgia. *Source: Roys Report, 1-3-24*

Joshua Oddsen, 43, Oconomowoc, WI, previously charged with felony theft, had the charge amended to misdemeanor theft at a court hearing. He is accused of stealing \$3,750 from Lord of Life Church while serving as its president in 2022, including \$581 from a church bake sale.

Oddsen was ordered to have no contact with Lord of Life Church witness “AD” listed in the criminal complaint. He told the court he is no longer affiliated with the church, is working as a truck driver and is rarely home. *Source: Oconomowoc Enterprise, 12-21-23*

Patrick S. Miller, 37, Little Rock, AR, is seeking to have his criminal record permanently sealed. He resigned in 2016 as Immanuel Baptist Church’s assistant director of children’s ministry and pleaded guilty to misdemeanor harassment in 2022 after being originally charged with 2nd-degree sexual assault. He received a 1-year suspended sentence with no sex offender registration required.

Miller routinely played “hide and seek” with students when he would hide in a dark closet. A student accused him of setting her on his lap after she found him in the closet, then placing

his hands inside her pants and shirt.

Another girl came forward after Miller was convicted in 2022 to accuse him. The pastoral staff informed law enforcement but withheld the news from the congregation, admitted lead pastor Stephen Smith, who has now apologized to congregants.

Attorney Joseph Gates, an Immanuel member with 3 young daughters, is representing both accusers. Smith not only withheld the truth from congregants but gave them false assurances about their children’s safety, Gates said. *Source: Democrat-Gazette, 12-11-23*

Allegations

Allegations about **Ari Segal,** a Modern Orthodox rabbi in Houston who served in 2004-11 in senior positions at the Robert M. Beren Academy, are credible, it said an email to parents and alumni from Ethan Ludmir, the school’s president.

Segal “engaged in sexualized, persistent, emotionally charged communications” with multiple students. An outside investigator “determined that these reports are credible,” Ludmir said.

A 1997 graduate of Yeshiva University who holds degrees in social work and business administration, Segal worked in Orthodox high schools until 2023. After leaving Beren Academy, he served as head of school at Shalhevet High School in Los Angeles until 2021 and then as a consultant there.

Ludmir asked alumni with similar experiences with Segal to write to the law firm of the investigator, Ellen Spaulding. He said Segal declined to cooperate with the investigation. *Source: JTA, 12-20-23*

Removed / Resigned

Alex Crow, 30, Mobile, AL, has been formally laicized — removed from the Catholic priesthood — by Pope Francis, the Archdiocese of Mobile announced in a statement. Crow and Taylor Victoria Harrison, 18, were the subject of a scandal after leaving Mobile for Europe after she graduated from McGill-Toolen High School, which Crow attended in 2007-11 and where he later served as a guest lecturer.

They remained in Europe for about 4 months before returning to Mobile and marrying last November. Archbishop Thomas Rodi said in August that he “saw no way back to the priesthood for Crow, considering his scandalous behavior.” *Source: al.com, 1-5-24*

Ignazio Medina, retired pastor of Our Lady of the Lake Catholic Parish in **Lake Ozark, MO,** was sanctioned by the Diocese of Jefferson City after a church tribunal found him guilty of soliciting sex from an adult during the sacrament of confession. He is barred from hearing confessions and being alone with anyone other than family on church properties.

He is also barred from celebrating Mass without the bishop’s permission and can never again hold a church office.

Medina was investigated in 2022 for allegedly embezzling \$320,000 from St. Stanislaus Parish in Wardsville. A tribunal found him guilty of “abuse of ecclesiastical power” due to financial misconduct and he was allowed to retire and repay the \$320,000 without being charged criminally. He continues to receive diocesan support as a retired priest. *Source: KOMU, 1-4-24*

Allegations about **Mark Payne,** Archdiocese of Milwaukee judicial vicar and pastor of parishes in **Fox Point and Whitefish Bay,** resulted in his placement on administrative leave. He is also chaplain of the national TV and online Mass produced by Milwaukee-based Heart of the Nation at Sacred Heart Croatian Parish.

The Pillar, a Catholic news site, reported allegations that Payne was in an apparent relationship with another man and hired him to teach at St. Monica Elementary School. City of Milwaukee property records show Payne and the man have co-owned a duplex since 2003.

Court records show the man had OWI convictions in 2016 and 2018 and that a possession of cocaine charge was dismissed as part of the 2018 plea bargain. Archbishop Jerome ListECKi has launched an investigation to be led by a person from outside the archdiocese. *Source: Fox 6 Milwaukee, 12-4-23*

Other

Jarrett Booker, 37, Nashua, NH, pastor of student ministry and worship at Nashua Baptist Church, died by suicide 2 days after being fired for allegedly sexually abusing minors. Church elders and deacons said in a statement: “Regrettably, ... Jarrett Booker took his own life, refusing to face the consequences of his actions. This event added immeasurably to the complexity and pain of the situation.”

Booker was adopted at 18 months and attended Liberty University in Virginia. He described himself on Facebook as “just an unfaithful and unholy sinner changed by a faithful and Holy God.” Survivors include a son.

“JB had his demons, I won’t pretend that he didn’t,” his wife Rachel posted on Facebook. “His choices caused harm. The hard truth I am learning is that there are questions for him that will go without answers in my lifetime.” *Source: Nashua Patch/Christian Post, 12-7-23*





The convention will be held at the Sheraton Denver Downtown.

FFRF convention, Sept. 27-29

Denver, here we come!

Join the Freedom From Religion Foundation in Denver for its 47th annual convention from Sept. 27-29 at the Sheraton Denver Downtown. For information about the convention speakers, turn to page 3, or go to ffrf.org/convention2024.

General schedule

There will be a Thursday afternoon Welcome Reception, which is complementary (see registration form). Convention registration will re-open at 8 a.m. Friday morning. The program will begin at 9 a.m. that morning and will run through Saturday evening.

On Sunday morning, the membership and State Representatives meetings will take place, ending by noon.

Registration

Registration for the convention is \$100 per FFRF member, \$105 for a companion accompanying a member, \$160 for nonmembers (or, you can save money by becoming a member for just \$40). High school students or younger are free and the college student rate is \$25.

Return the registration form on the right, or sign up at ffrf.org/convention2024.

Optional Group Meals

For organized group meals, there will be a Friday dinner buffet, a Saturday “Non-Prayer” breakfast and a Saturday dinner.

The Saturday dinner will consist of a choice of Wisconsin Cranberry Chicken, Champagne Tilapia or Vegetable Portobello. The full menus will be available in future editions of Free-thought Today.

Vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free menu options are available. Please specify specialty requirements on the registration form.

Hotel

We encourage you to register and book your hotel room as soon as possible. If you need an accessible room, please state your needs when making the reservation.

The Sheraton Denver Downtown
1550 Court Place, Denver, CO 80202
Phone: 303-893-3333. State that you are with the “Freedom From Religion” room block.
<https://ffrf.us/hotelFFRFCon2024>
Rates are \$249 for a standard guest room.



The scenic outdoor patio at the Sheraton features gas fire pits and comfortable chairs to relax on.

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

2024

NATIONAL CONVENTION

DENVER

SEPTEMBER 26-29

CONVENTION REGISTRATION FORM

Or register online: ffrf.us/convention2024

REGISTRATION FEES

	Number Registering	Cost
Member	___ \$100	\$ ___
Spouse or Companion (Non-member accompanying member)	___ \$105	\$ ___
Child (High school or under accompanying registrant)	___ Free	\$ ___
College Student with ID	___ \$25	\$ ___
Non-member	___ \$160	\$ ___
<input type="checkbox"/> Or, I will join FFRF for \$40 (and save \$20)	___ \$140	\$ ___

OPTIONAL MEALS / EVENTS

Please specify your dietary requirements below, under ADA or food allergy accommodations. FFRF does not make money on convention meals. Prices include the 8% sales tax and 27% service charge.

Thursday, September 26th

Welcome Reception [Must register to attend] ___ Free

Check box if attending ☐ Registrant 1 ☐ Registrant 2

Friday, September 27th

Friday Night Plated Dinner ___ \$95 \$ ___

Registrant 1 ☐ Chicken ☐ Fish ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan

Registrant 2 ☐ Chicken ☐ Fish ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan

Saturday, September 28th

Non-Prayer Breakfast ___ \$55 \$ ___

Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Saturday Night Plated Dinner ___ \$100 \$ ___

Registrant 1 ☐ Beef ☐ Fish ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan

Registrant 2 ☐ Beef ☐ Fish ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan

► Total \$ _____

Please describe your ADA or food allergy accommodations needed in order to fully participate:

Registrant 1 ☐ None ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

☐ Other (Please specify): _____

Registrant 2 ☐ None ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

☐ Other (Please specify): _____

(Make check payable to FFRF) Return with payment to:

FFRF, Attn: Convention | P.O. Box 750 | Madison, WI 53701

☐ I attest that I and my guests will be fully vaccinated for Covid-19 as of 9/12/24.

☐ I attest that I have a physician's order against my Covid-19 vaccination.

Name of Registrant 1

Name of Registrant 2

☐ I am including additional registrants (enclose your additional list, with meals, if any).

Address

City State / ZIP

Phone* Email*

Credit Card Number Expiration Date / Security Code

Billing Name / Signature *Contact information for in-house use only

Registration and cancellation deadline is September 13th, 2024 (Unless event is sold out)

Registration cancellations received after September 13th, 2024 will not be refunded.