

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



Wis. board member gives secular 'inspirational'

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Understanding Christian nationalism

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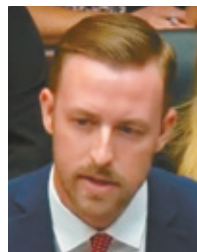
College student essay winners announced

PAGES 12-18

FFRF petitions to stop Okla. bible mandate

The Freedom From Religion Foundation and several other groups are representing more than 30 Oklahomans in a lawsuit urging the state's Supreme Court to block state Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters' mandate that all public schools incorporate the bible into their curricula.

The lawsuit, Rev. Lori Walke v. Ryan Walters, also asks the court to



Ryan Walters

stop the state from spending millions of taxpayer dollars on bibles to support the mandate.

The 32 plaintiffs include 14 public school parents, four public school teachers and three faith leaders who object to Walters'

extremist agenda that imposes his personal religious beliefs on other people's children — in violation of Oklahomans' religious freedom and the separation of church and state. The plaintiffs come from a variety of faith traditions, and some identify as atheist, agnostic or nonreligious. Some are of Indigenous heritage, and some have family situations — such as LGBTQ-plus members or

children with special educational needs — that cause particular concerns around teaching the bible in public schools, especially around bullying.

The plaintiffs are represented by FFRF, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU

See Bible on page 9



Photo by Steve Solomon

New York Times columnist Charles Blow raises his Emperor Has No Clothes Award after concluding his speech on Sept. 27 in Denver at FFRF's 47th national convention.

FFRF's convention was inspiring, enlightening

By Sara Tetzloff

The Freedom From Religion Foundation's 47th annual convention in Denver was a weekend filled with passionate speeches, enlightening presentations and an unmistakable sense of community among secular freethinkers. From the welcoming address on Friday, Sept. 27, to Saturday's closing on Sept. 28, attendees were treated to a series of engaging events, celebrating the mission of FFRF while also addressing some of today's most pressing issues regarding the separation of church and state.

The convention kicked off with a warm welcome from Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker, co-presidents of FFRF. In true FFRF fashion, Dan serenaded the crowd with "Die Gedanken sind frei," a historical freethought anthem, setting the tone for a weekend dedicated to celebrating the freedom of thought. Sadie Pattinson, FFRF's events manager, welcomed attendees from all over the country (and world!) with a spirited state roll call, encouraging everyone to cheer for their home states. Denver residents cer-

tainly made their presence known as the host city's attendees greeted fellow members with enthusiasm.

Throughout the weekend, a series of notable speakers addressed issues at the heart of FFRF's mission. To kick off the convention, sociologist Ryan Cragun presented data on secularization and the causes of religious decline, drawing from his latest book, "Goodbye Religion: The Causes and Consequences of Secularization." His engaging presentation challenged the often-claimed superiority of religious people in terms of happiness, civic engagement and morality, presenting compelling evidence to the contrary.

Washington Post columnist Kate Cohen, highlighted the increasing influence of Christian nationalism in U.S. politics, particularly its impact on public education and reproductive rights. Cohen's remarks emphasized the challenges posed by religious groups seeking to erode the separation of church and state, making a powerful case for ongoing vigilance and activism.

New York Times opinion columnist

See Convention on page 2

Survey: FFRF members more liberal than Nones

This article was written prior to the Nov. 5 election.

By Ryan P. Burge

I learned a term in graduate school that I probably use too much now in my everyday life: "a self-selection effect." It's something that the average person does all the time and doesn't realize — they choose to be part of something. It could be a sports team, a political party or a religious organization. They aren't randomly chosen to participate; they make an inten-



Ryan P. Burge

tional effort to join a social group.

Other significant demographic factors like age and race are immutable facts of a respondent. Whether they identify as Prot-

estant, Hindu or atheist is completely up to the person answering the survey question.

Of course, in the world of religion, almost everything is self-selection when you become an adult. It's a voluntary choice whether to attend church, what church to attend, and how often to attend.

That's why I like studying an organization like the Freedom From Religion Foundation. It's a self-selected collection of individuals who become members and pay dues because they feel it's a good use of their time and resources. But how much do members of a group like FFRF represent the larger nonreligious group they come from?

Paul Djupe and I are lucky enough to be able to answer that question because we partnered with FFRF to do two surveys.

One, which was administered by Qualtrics, was a random sample of nonreligious Americans. The other was a survey of FFRF membership. This article will focus specifically on the political views of FFRF and how it compares to different types of nonreligious Americans, as well as other groups like Catholics and Latter-day Saints.

First, let's just get to the most basic question: How do folks plan to vote in November? We fielded this survey before Joe Biden decided in July not to seek reelection.

See Survey on page 3

Convention

Continued from page 1

Michelle Goldberg's talk on "The Rise of Christian Nationalism" dug into how Christian nationalism is reshaping politics in the country and beyond. New York Times columnist Charles M. Blow warned of a growing threat to American democracy in his speech, linking Christian nationalism, white supremacy and systemic inequality.

In the afternoon, state legislators Judy Amabile, Brianna Titone and Mickey Dollens discussed their experiences navigating the intersection of religion and politics. They shared their motivations for running for office, challenges faced from religious influences on legislation, and efforts to uphold the separation of church and state. Despite facing opposition, they emphasized the importance of grassroots activism, bipartisan collaboration, and practical, science-based approaches to governance.

To close out the first night, Ron Reagan spoke with a mix of humor and urgency about the fragile state of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism. He criticized slow responses to global issues like climate change while emphasizing the need to protect democratic values. Reagan stressed that authoritarianism thrives on division and bigotry, and he

called for collective action to defend democracy. His message to the audience is clear: Vote, participate and don't take democracy for granted because the future depends on it.

Launching the second day of the convention, Bradley Onishi's speech tackled the rise of Christian nationalism and how it threatens American democracy. Professor and author Josh Cowen then spoke out against school voucher programs, warning that they undermine public education and exacerbate inequality. Author and investigative reporter Katherine Stewart's speech emphasized the importance of maintaining the separation of church and state, particularly in the face of rising Christian nationalism. Brandon Wolf, national press secretary for the Human Rights Campaign, gave a moving speech that touched on his journey as a queer Black man and his fight for equality and acceptance. Best-selling author Bonnie Garmus humorously reflected on her journey from a skeptical child in a Presbyterian choir to becoming an atheist.

To close out the convention, actor and atheist Jon Huertas delivered a witty and thought-provoking speech, "Blacks and Latinos: Unshackling Ourselves from Holy Handcuffs," where he humorously explored the role of religion in Black and Latino communities. He re-

flected on the irony of these communities holding on to a religion once forced on their ancestors through colonization and slavery. Through personal stories, like his childhood in a Catholic family and amusing encounters with religious hypocrisy, Huertas emphasized the importance of breaking free from these religious chains. He argued that instead of defending outdated doctrines, these communities should focus their energy on education, economic independence, and political engagement. With humorous anecdotes and a call to action, Huertas urged the audience to rethink religious control and embrace a future shaped by inclusivity, progress and freedom from dogma.

A major highlight of the convention was the announcement of FFRF's continued growth. The organization, which had a modest 1,800 members in 1987, now proudly boasts nearly 40,000 members. Dan Barker emphasized the importance of this growth, with a goal to reach 50,000 members.

FFRF's legal team members gave an update on their ongoing battles to maintain state/church separation, showcasing their impactful lawsuits against unconstitutional religious displays and practices in public schools. The convention-goers learned about the success of the FFRF's efforts to remove religious symbols from public spaces and the importance of con-

tinuing to challenge religious overreach in government institutions.

FFRF also emphasized the importance of media and outreach in its work. Popular weekly programs, "Ask an Atheist" and "Freethought Matters," continue to air, reaching a growing audience on YouTube and in major cities across the country. The "Vote Like Your Rights Depend on It" voter awareness campaign was announced, rallying members to participate in the upcoming elections to safeguard secular values.

The convention wrapped up with a powerful reminder of the importance of the FFRF's work. A reimagined ad by Ron Reagan, proudly stating "Lifetime atheist, not afraid of burning in hell," was once again played to much applause. As Dan and Annie Laurie closed the event, they reinforced that freethought is essential in defending freedom and democracy.

The 2024 convention was a celebration of secular activism, filled with education, camaraderie and a shared commitment to ensuring that reason, not religion, guides public policy. FFRF's members left inspired, ready to continue the fight for a secular government and to push back against religious encroachment in public life.

Editor's note: FFRF will be publishing the transcripts of the convention speeches in this and future issues of *Freethought Today*.

OVERHEARD

What I experienced, there is tremendous psychological pressure to conform. You have to either leave or you have to be willing to abandon your reason, because you can't hold onto both.

David Fiedler, who taught violin at Dragon Springs from 2013 to 2016 on behalf of the performance troupe Shen Yun Performing Arts. The Chinese dancing troupe has ticket sales on five continents and holdings of more than \$265 million and is operated by the religious cult Falun Gong. It faces allegations that its largely teenage performers are manipulated, underpaid, denied routine medical care and subjected to emotional abuse and grueling hours.

New York Times, 8-18-24

Some people worship in a church, others in a temple or mosque. I attend the cathedral of the wilderness, for among wildflowers in an alpine meadow we can all connect to something grander than ourselves. . . . Wilderness still fills me with semireligious awe.

Nicolas Kristof, in his column, "The best travel is on foot . . . through the wilderness."

New York Times, 9-8-24



Becca Balint

These plans spelled out in Project 2025 are sinister, and they have very real consequences, which is why it's so important that we gather tonight to shine a light on this extreme plan. . . . It's time Republicans abandon their obsession with controlling women's bodies.

U.S. Rep. Becca Balint, D-Vt., in a speech on the House floor. Balint earned the FFRF Action Fund's "Secularist of the Week" honor for her remarks.

9-19-24

We educate everybody that shows up. [Religious instruction should be] up to the family, up to the parents and up to the church, whatever that looks like for them. That's none of our business.

Chuck McCauley, superintendent of Bartlesville (Okla.) Public Schools, who opposes state schools Supt. Ryan Walters' mandate to put a bible in every class and teach from it.

New York Times, 9-16-24

We don't just have the Free Exercise, but we have the Establishment Clause. So, we don't want to coerce anybody toward any religion at all. We are a secular nation. We're not a sectarian nation. We're not a theocracy.

Chief U.S. Magistrate Judge Michael E. Hegarty, speaking at Colorado Christian University for a Constitution Day event.

Colorado Springs Gazette, 9-18-24



Meryl Streep

Today in Kabul, a female cat has more freedom than a woman. A cat may go sit on her front stoop and feel the sun on her face, she may chase a squirrel in the park. A squirrel has more rights than a girl in Afghanistan today because the public parks have been closed to women and girls by the Taliban. A bird may sing in Kabul, but a girl may not in public. This is extraordinary. This is a suppression of the natural law. The way that this culture, this society has been upended, is a cautionary tale for the rest of the world.

Actress Meryl Streep, speaking at an event to raise awareness of Afghan women's rights at the U.N. headquarters in New York.

BBC, 9-23-24

God doesn't need these people. I mean, let's talk about narcissism. For these men to think that they are so important to the mission, to God, to the nation. Give me a break.

Jules Woodson, who was abused as a teen by a pastor, speaking in the new short film about the connections between abuse and Christian nationalism, "For Our Daughters." In the film, abuse survivors argue that if pastors can't keep their own churches safe, they should not be running the country.

Religion News Service, 9-19-24

One of the gravest dangers isn't spelled out, but can be discerned by reading between the lines: a dream to turn the United States into a religious monolith, where far-right interpretations of the bible dictate every aspect of our lives.

Wa'el Alzayat, in his column, "Project 2025 is a death sentence for religious freedom."

Religion News Service, 9-23-24

Take the issue of abortion. In pro-choice states, the government does not compel anyone to have an abortion, whereas in anti-abortion states, everyone is prevented from having an abortion. That, my friends, is fascism, just as much as forcing people to attend a church.

S.T. Joshi, in the column, "The Torment of Samuel Alito."

Free Inquiry, 9-23-24

Our nation was founded on the principle of the separation of church and state — a phrase that comes from Thomas Jefferson's own explanation of the First Amendment — and it has defined our country ever since. Forcing our faith on others is theocracy, and such coercion is not what Christ-like love looks like.

Wording on a petition by Faithful America, an organization of Christians supporting social justice causes while opposing "Christian nationalism," opposing a proposal from the Texas Education Agency for elementary school teachers to include the bible in their state reading and language arts lessons.

Newsweek, 9-28-24

Blasphemy codes are remnants of medieval thought, designed to enforce conformity to religious dogmas and suppress dissent. They stand in stark contrast to the values of tolerance, pluralism and critical thinking that modern Britain should be a standard bearer for.

Stephen Evans, CEO of Britain's National Secular Society, in his column, "Blasphemy is a catalyst for progress. Let's celebrate it."

Secularism.org, 9-30-24



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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Survey

Continued from page 1

tion. So, just keep that in mind.

Here's the headline statistic: 94 percent of FFRF members said they planned to vote for the Democrat on Election Day. In the total sample of 11,422 members of FFRF, just 56 said they planned to vote for Donald Trump. That's 0.5 percent. Among the rest of the FFRF sample, just 1.6 percent said they would vote for a candidate not listed, 1.3 percent wanted to vote for Jill Stein, and 0.8 percent liked Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

There's undoubtedly a leftward tilt among the random sample of nonreligious Americans, but it's not that strong. Among all Nones (those who are religiously unaffiliated), about 60 percent said that they wanted to vote for Biden, while 16 percent intended to support Trump. That other big story is that 9 percent of nonreligious folks said they would vote for RFK Jr. Of course, that will not happen now as he has dropped out of the race. However, according to this poll, he received reasonably strong support for a third-party candidate.

Let's pivot to other metrics now, like political partisanship. This question had seven response options ranging from Strong Democrat to Strong Republican.

FFRF members are comfortable identifying as Democrats. About 43 percent said that they were strong Democrats. In total, 91 percent of FFRF members said they more closely aligned with the Democrats. Just 6 percent said that they were independents, and almost none were Republicans. Remember that discussion of a self-selection effect? FFRF is drawing not just from nonreligious Americans, but specifically Democratic Nones.

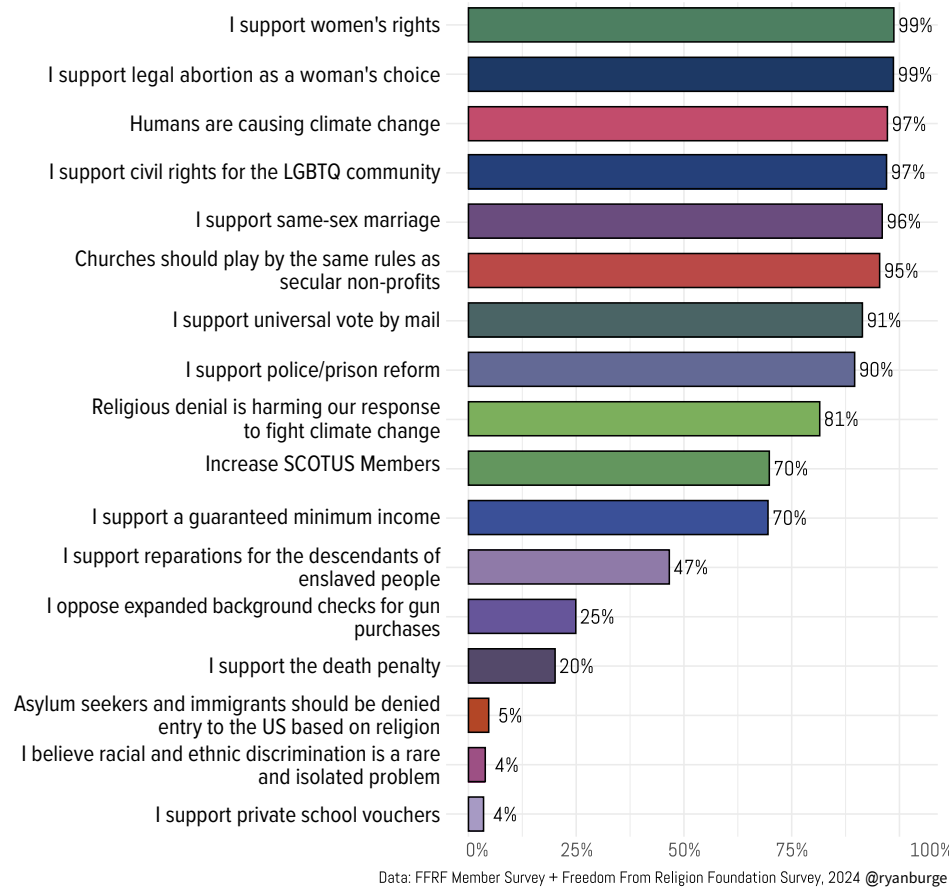
How does that compare to the random sample survey of Nones? Well, FFRF members align more with the Democrats than other groups. Among all Nones, 64 percent were Democrats, and 21 percent were independents. Approximately two in three atheists in our random sample said that they were Democrats, and 19 percent were independents. Agnostics looked more like the entire sample of Nones, while the "nothing in particular group" had the lowest share of Democrat identifiers at 57 percent. The "nothing in particulars" were the most likely to be Republicans, but let's be clear on that — just 16 percent of them chose to associate with the GOP. No group in this survey leans right of center on partisanship.

What about political ideology? This was also measured on a seven-point scale, running from very liberal to very conservative.

The survey showed that 88 percent of Freedom From Religion Foundation members said they were liberal, while 31 percent identified as very liberal. How does that compare to the rest of the country? In a sample of all Americans collected in 2023, 11 percent said that they were very liberal, and a total of 34 percent were liberal. Clearly, FFRF members are far to the left of the average person in the United States.

What about other types of Nones in our

Share of the FFRF Members Who Agree With the Following Statements



sample? It does look like atheists are the most likely to be left-leaning. Among this group, 67 percent were liberal, but that's still 20 points left of the FFRF membership. Again, FFRF is a specific subsection of nonreligious folks. Among agnostics, 62 percent were liberal, and it was 53 percent of "nothing in particulars."

Let me throw the last two metrics into one visualization and a bunch of other religious groups so you can easily understand how FFRF stands out from the crowd.

Obviously, partisanship and ideology are deeply related to one another, but some groups are far off the trend line. A good comparison is between Black Protestants and FFRF members. In terms of political partisanship, they don't differ that much. Black Protestants are a 2.2 out of 7. FFRF members are 2.04. They both are strongly aligned with the Democrats. However, there's a chasm in political ideology. The average for the FFRF sample was 2.16 on a scale from 1 to 7. Meanwhile, Black Protestants are 4.34. That puts them right of center on ideology.

You can also see how the FFRF point estimate is even further left than the average atheist in the sample on both ideology and partisanship. It's staggering to consider how far apart FFRF members are compared to white evangelicals — two completely different parts of the political world.

In our survey of FFRF members and nonreligious folks, we also asked them to place a bunch of groups on the ideology scale. It's a really telling look at how FFRF members see the world compared to other Nones.

FFRF members see themselves to the left of the ideological spectrum. They place themselves to the left of atheists, as well as the Democratic Party and President Biden. Then there's a huge gap, and then you can see how they put Trump at about 6.3 on a 7-point scale, the Republican par-

ty at 6.5, and evangelicals at 6.7. In other words, members of FFRF see evangelicals as about as conservative as it gets.

How does that compare to other nonreligious folks? One big difference is that in the random sample of Nones, the average person sees themselves slightly to the right of the Democratic Party. But, in this sample, they cluster Biden, the Democrats, atheists and themselves all in pretty close proximity. Another notable finding is that Nones see evangelicals as a lot more moderate than FFRF members. In fact, the random sample sees all right-leaning groups as more moderate than members of FFRF.

What about FFRF members' positions on issues?

This data makes it even more apparent how politically unified the members of FFRF are on most issues. They are nearly unanimous on things like supporting women's rights, support access to abortion services, climate change, equal rights for the LGBTQ community and limits on religious freedom. They are also unified on topics like their view of racial discrimination and private school vouchers.

What struck me were the issue areas in which FFRF members were less homogeneous. For instance, they were basically split on the idea of reparations for the descendants of enslaved people. They were also less aligned on a guaranteed minimum income or increasing the number of seats on the Supreme Court.

But, I think it's very fair to say that based on these results, FFRF folks are largely of one mind when it comes to the major public policy debates of the day.

We also asked FFRF members to review a list of possible concerns facing the United States and asked them to select the three that they thought were the most important.

The number one choice was reproductive rights. Half of FFRF members believed it was one of their top three concerns. It

was followed by civil rights/racial equality. Then, there was a huge gap. Only a third of respondents believed women's rights were among their top concerns, and just 28 percent felt that environmental quality was among the top three.

I was also struck by what didn't rank that high. For instance, just 10 percent of people in FFRF believed that being anti-war was one of their most pressing concerns and even fewer were deeply concerned with animal rights (6 percent) and charity to help the needy (3 percent).

One final battery of questions focused on a critical topic to groups like FFRF — political activity. We asked if they had engaged in a number of activities in the prior 12 months (which ran from June of 2023 through June of 2024). I compared the responses of the FFRF sample to the random sample of nonreligious Americans.

There are areas in which FFRF folks are incredibly politically engaged. Nearly 60 percent of FFRF members said they had contacted a public official in the prior year. That's double the rate of the Nones in the other sample. Also, two-thirds of FFRF members had made a political donation. That was 40 points higher than the other nonreligious folks in the random sample. FFRF members are also much more likely to display a political button or yard sign.

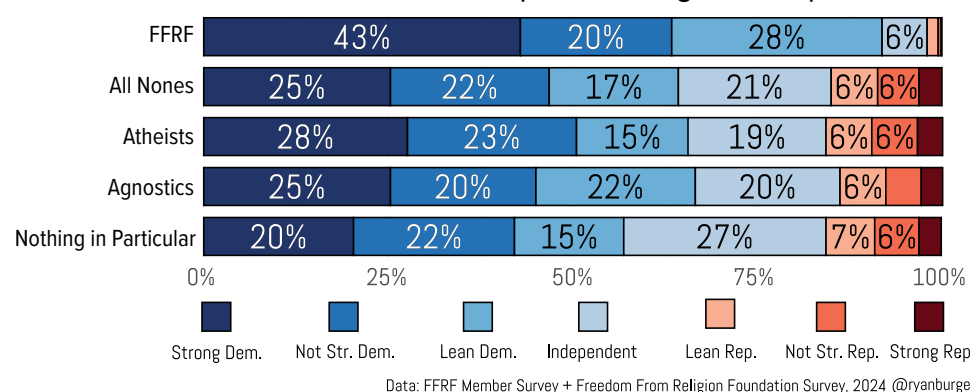
However, there were other activities with only a small gap between the samples. Both groups were nearly as likely to attend a protest or rally, there were no differences in the rate of talking about politics with a stranger, and it was surprising to see that members of FFRF were slightly less likely to post about politics on social media compared to the random sample of Nones.

In 1831, the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville came to the rapidly growing United States to observe how our culture differed from his native France. He wrote, "Americans group together to hold fêtes, found seminaries, build inns, construct churches, distribute books, dispatch missionaries to the antipodes. They establish hospitals, prisons, schools by the same method. Finally, if they wish to highlight a truth or develop an opinion by the encouragement of a great example, they form an association." (Tocqueville 1840, 596)

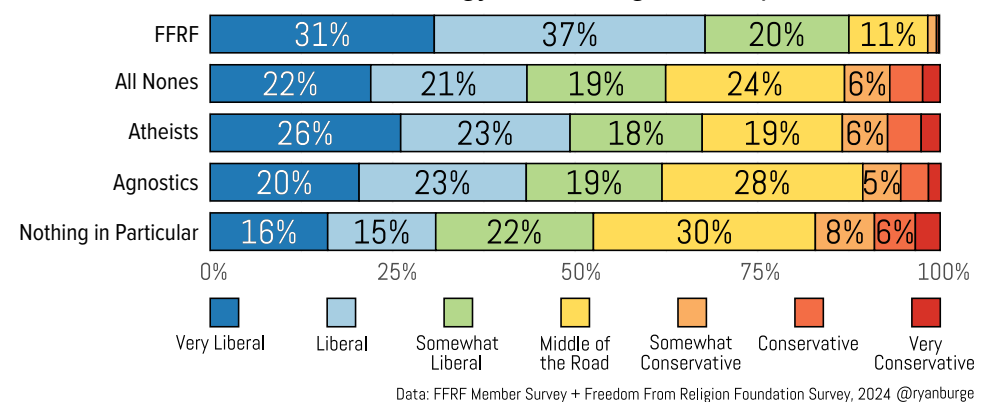
When we think about these voluntary associations, our minds tend to drift to groups like the Boy Scouts, the Elks Club or the local Methodist church. However, in the future, there will be a proliferation of groups like the Freedom From Religion Foundation. They are an organization that understands a growing number of Americans share their concerns about issues facing the country. Joining together to advocate, organize and strategize is vital in a healthy, pluralistic democracy. What made America great 200 years ago continues to endure in the United States today.

Ryan P. Burge is an associate professor at Eastern Illinois University, political scientist, statistician and former Baptist minister.

The Political Partisanship of Nonreligious People



The Political Ideology of Nonreligious People



- Across**
- Duds
 - Bonfire leftovers
 - *Freethinker Frank Sinatra's "___ Got the World on a String"
 - Homer's "The Odyssey"
 - Target of grand theft
 - Fool's Day month
 - Spanish sparkling wine
 - Major Russian river
 - 5 o'clock diversion, for some
 - *Project 2025 organization ___ Foundation
 - Rhymes with peasy
 - Out of place
 - 007
 - *Jackson Women's Health Organization's recent opponent
 - Muse of music in Greek mythology
 - *Anne Gaylor to Annie Laurie Gaylor
 - Baseball official
 - Seabiscuit control
 - Candidate's concern?
 - *FFRF, e.g.
 - Very, in music
 - List of dishes
 - European breakfast staple
 - Tight one in football
 - Cut from text (2 words)
 - *#23 Across Decision author Samuel ___
 - Owned
 - Did what sirens do
 - Not his
 - *Freethinker Herman Melville's masterpiece (2 words)
 - Half of diameter, pl.
 - Desktop picture
 - Like storytelling tradition
 - Brown, Dartmouth and Yale, e.g.
 - Sweet-talk
 - What cerebellum and ceremony have in common
 - Manhattan's famous ___ Gala
 - Boston time
 - Sasquatch's cousin
 - *Religious "panacea," pl.
 - Suffuse
 - *Irreverent Jane Lynch's "Glee" character
 - Like U.S. Capitol, architecturally speaking
 - Muscat native
 - Work units
 - Set to zero
 - *Atheist Dmitriy Shostakovich's instrument of choice
 - Wednesday Addams' werewolf roommate
 - *Irreverent Charlie Chaplin, e.g.
 - Displeasure display
 - Anger
 - *Freethinking Woody ___ of "This Land Is Your Land" fame
 - Was sick
 - ___ pie in a sand box
 - Voice box
 - Desert wanderer's hope
 - Foolish behavior
 - El Pollo ___, pl.
 - Lusitania's destroyer
 - Possess
 - Leave on the cutting room floor
 - Three blind ones
 - First Nation nation
 - Go-___
 - Part of basketball hoop
 - Hula dancer's wreath
- Down**
- Short for detective
 - a.k.a. redfin ocean pan
 - Better than receive, for some
 - King Tut's beetle
 - Sensation coming from a person
 - Bambi and Rudolph
 - Golfer's destination
 - *Freethinking Murdoch of "The Sea, the Sea" fame
 - Like a plant on a trellis
 - Caribou kin
 - Disease formerly known as Kanner's syndrome
 - Highly skilled

Freethought Today Crossword

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Answers on page 21 Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Note to members

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

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

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

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

In order to do that, follow these simple steps:

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

Wis. board member gives secular 'inspirational'

FFRF got special mention during the Dane County (Wis.) Board's Sept. 19 meeting when Supervisor Michele Ritt offered a secular message to open the meeting of the 37-member board.



Michele Ritt

Ritt, a "very proud" FFRF member since 2008, is in her sixth term representing District 18 on the north side of Madison.

During each meeting, one member, going in alphabetical order, gives an "inspirational" at the start. A proposal in April 2022 to remove the Pledge of Allegiance from meetings due to its mention of God and perceived divisiveness failed 29-8.

But the board also voted then, 24-13, to no longer list a prayer on its agendas and to replace it with an inspirational message, which could include a prayer if a supervisor so desired.

District 28 Supervisor Michele Doolan said, although she's a practicing Christian, "The first step in religious oppression is designating an official religion, and that's what we are doing by having prayer. I want to make clear that we were founded on religious freedom, not required religion based on one God."

Here is Ritt's inspirational:
I am inspired by people who are kind.
I am inspired by women who lift up other women.
I am inspired by people who display integrity, even during challenging situations.

I am inspired by people who do the right thing, even when no one is watching and there is nothing to gain personally.
I am inspired by people who share the air in a room, recognizing that there are other valid opinions.
I am inspired by those who engage in healthy dialogue instead of lashing words and bullying.
I am inspired by honesty, especially when one needs to admit a mistake.
I am inspired by those who do not hide behind religion, but live love and acceptance like Jesus, Muhammad, Siddhartha, Annie Laurie Gaylor and so many others.
I am inspired by leaders who intentionally create room for those whose voices are not already at the table.
I am inspired by those who work for peace and justice who also live that ideal.
I am inspired by folks who use their power and privilege to make others stronger and more connected.
I am also inspired by my husband, my children, my beautiful grandbaby, my dog and my hummingbird Jimmy, who flies over 600 miles to see me each year. They love me, support me and encourage me to be my best self.



Ritt will be retiring in June as a special education teacher in the Madison Metropolitan School District. She also works as a reiki practitioner.

Freethought Today Cryptogram

UFHVDAMMAEK Q NHFVV AV EF YAJJLHLEB

BDQE UFHVDAMMAEK Q BHLL, Q HFNC

FH BDL VBQHV. — FXAILH TQHC OV TQXXFG

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: J => F. Answer is on page 20.

This puzzle is from *Freethinking Cryptograms* by FFRF member Brooks Rimes, available on Amazon.com for \$13.95.

IN THE NEWS

LA archdiocese must pay \$880M to abuse survivors

The Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles, the nation's largest, agreed in October to pay \$880 million to 1,353 survivors of sexual abuse by clergy and other individuals associated with the church to settle lawsuits. It's the highest single payout by a diocese and brings Los Angeles' cumulative total to over \$1.5 billion.

"I am sorry for every one of these incidents, from the bottom of my heart," Archbishop José Gomez said in a statement. The previous high was a \$660 million settlement in 2007 that affected 508 survivors, Terence McKiernan of *BishopAccountability.org* told the New York Times.

"There are a lot more dominoes in California to come down," McKiernan said, referring to other dioceses that have not settled or have protected themselves by filing for bankruptcy.

Gomez said the new settlement would be paid through "reserves, investments and loans, along with other archdiocesan assets and payments that will be made by religious orders and others named in the litigation." He said donations to parishes, schools and specific mission campaigns would not be used.

A 2019 law opened a three-year window for revival of claims previously barred by statutes of limitation. "We have clients who are in their 60s and 70s who were never able to bring a case before," said plaintiffs' attorney Morgan Stewart, adding that a key concern was ensuring that a settlement was one that the archdiocese could pay without going bankrupt and delaying payments to survivors for years.

The archdiocese has over 4 million Catholics and nearly 300 parishes.

SBC to sell Nashville HQ to defray sex-abuse costs

An investigation into how leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention have dealt with sexual abuse by clergy has cost more than \$12 million over the past three years, causing the nation's largest Protestant denomination to put its Nashville, Tenn., headquarters up for sale, the SBC's Executive Committee announced Sept. 17.

The expenditures, which include \$3 million spent fending off a lawsuit filed by a former SBC president, have led the committee to spend down its reserves in what its auditors have called an unsustainable manner.

Gen Z women losing religion, finding politics

After decades of men leading the way in becoming "Nones," or religiously unaffiliated, young women are now tak-

ing up that charge. According to PRRI, nonreligious Gen Z women outnumber nonreligious Gen Z men, 39 percent to 31 percent.

More than 60 percent of Gen Z adults (those born between the late 1990s and early 2010s) who had left organized religion said they did so in part because of its poor treatment of LGBTQ individuals.

As Gen Z women are leaving religion at higher rates than young men, they're also not going quietly. They're channeling their values into political action. With the millennial generation, women first closed the gender gap in political engagement, achieving parity with men. With Gen Z, though, a reverse gender gap has appeared in which young women now surpass young men's political involvement, according to political scientist and PRRI CEO Melissa Deckman.

"For a lot of Gen Z women, the current intermingling of religion and politics on the political right is very unappealing because they're more progressive on many issues, including support for LGBTQ rights and abortion rights," Deckman said. "I think many young women see the church or organized religion as being — if not hostile, then certainly not supportive of their political values."

Brain damage linked to increased fundamentalism

A new study suggests that specific networks in the brain, when damaged, may influence the likelihood of developing religious fundamentalism.

By analyzing patients with focal brain lesions, researchers found that damage to a particular network of brain regions was associated with higher levels of fundamentalist beliefs. This finding provides new insight into the potential neural basis of religious fundamentalism, which has long been studied in psychology but less so in neuroscience.

Prior research suggested that damage to the prefrontal cortex could increase fundamentalist attitudes, but this work was limited to small sample sizes and focused only on one part of the brain. The authors of the study hypothesized that instead of a single brain region being responsible, religious fundamentalism might arise from damage to a distributed network of connected brain regions.

The study was published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

Calif. sues hospital for denying ER abortion

In February, Dr. Anna Nusslock, 36, went to the nearest emergency room at Providence St. Joseph Hospital after her water broke just 15 weeks into pregnancy. Doctors said one of the twins she was carrying would not survive and the other

had almost no chance. They said that if the pregnancy was not terminated, she could face infection, hemorrhaging and threats to her future fertility.

But because fetal heart tones could still be detected, a doctor at the Catholic-affiliated hospital said the institution's policy prohibited providing abortion unless her life was at risk. After several hours, her husband drove her to the next closest hospital, where she arrived hemorrhaging and passing a blood clot the size of an apple. She expelled one fetus and was rushed into the operating room so the other fetus could be removed.

On Sept. 30, California Attorney General Rob Bonta filed suit against the company that operates Providence St. Joseph, charging that the hospital violated a California law requiring hospitals with emergency rooms to provide care to prevent not only death, but "serious injury or illness."

Officials in the AG's office say they believe this to be the first lawsuit California has filed against a hospital under the Emergency Services Law, which says hospitals have to provide care "necessary to relieve or eliminate the emergency medical condition." The attorney general said he was doing so partly because of uncertainty about the fate of a similar federal law, the Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act or EMTALA, which has become a lightning rod in the national abortion debate.

Judge: Catholic employers can deny fertility care

A federal judge has allowed more than 8,000 Catholic employers nationwide to reject government regulations that protect workers seeking abortions and fertility care.

U.S. District Judge Daniel Traynor, of Bismarck, N.D., granted a preliminary injunction on Sept. 23, ruling that the Catholic Benefits Association and the Diocese of Bismarck were likely to succeed in proving that a final rule adopted by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in April violated their freedom of religion. The regulations are meant to enforce the federal Pregnant Workers Fairness Act. The act passed with widespread bipartisan support in December 2022. It was widely considered a victory for women who are low-wage workers and have routinely been denied accommodations for everything from time off for medical appointments to the ability to sit or stand on the job. But controversy ensued when the EEOC adopted an expansive view of conditions related to pregnancy and childbirth that required accommodations, including for abortion, fertility treatment and birth control. While the rule includes an exemption for religious employers, it says determinations must be made on a case-by-case basis.

Okla.'s Walters wants \$6M for bibles in classrooms

Oklahoma state schools Superintendent Ryan Walters called Sept. 19 for another \$3 million to provide a bible in every public school classroom.

Walters said during the monthly meeting of the Oklahoma State Board of Education that the funds would be coupled with \$3 million from last year for a total of \$6 million to provide bibles for public schools throughout Oklahoma.

He said he wanted to purchase New King James Version editions that were free from commentary, although he noted it would be fine if the books included other

key historical documents, such as the U.S. Constitution.

Walters said a specific allocation to buy bibles would be a "significant step" in ensuring that Oklahoma was not allowing the left to "censor" American history.

"Adherence to this mandate is compulsory," Walters' letter to the school districts said. "Immediate and strict compliance is expected."

The directive prompted at least a dozen of the state's largest districts to announce they have no intention of altering their curriculum to incorporate the order.

Judge blocks Wisconsin clergy abuse review

Court documents tied to sexual abuse by Archdiocese of Milwaukee clergy and laypersons will remain sealed, ruled U.S. Bankruptcy Judge G. Michael Halfenger, who oversaw the archdiocese's 2011 bankruptcy filing. Halfenger ruled in October against allowing access to documents sealed in the filing.

The request was made by state Attorney General Josh Kaul as part of the Department of Justice's Clergy and Faith Leader Abuse Initiative launched in 2021. Halfenger said the agency failed to make a valid case to revisit the bankruptcy decision and did not provide a sufficient plan to notify abuse survivors of its request for access to sealed records.

Kaul argued that the archdiocese had not voluntarily provided records sought by the DOJ and wouldn't be released publicly. The DOJ motion sought to reopen the case that closed in 2016 and resulted in a \$21 million settlement with over 300 survivors.

According to Halfenger, over 580 claims were filed by survivors, and 550 of those remain under permanent seal. He called the magnitude of the state's request "staggering . . . without even considering the substantial logistical hurdles that would need to be cleared."

Kaul argued that credible claims that weren't part of the settlement meant abusers could escape justice to the detriment of some survivors. The bankruptcy filings would provide a "unique opportunity to corroborate," he said.

Ohio school rescinds religious release policy

The Westerville (Ohio) City School District has rescinded a policy that allows absences for religious instruction during the school day.

In a 4-0 vote, with one abstention, the Westerville School Board voted to halt the practice, with members saying previously that pulling students from the school day was a disruption and distraction for all students.

Before the Sept. 30 vote, a bible-based education program called LifeWise Academy took about 300 Westerville Elementary School students out of recess and lunch once a week for religious instruction. It was the only religious education-based group operating in the Westerville School District and had been in the district for two years.

"This isn't about religion," Westerville parent Jaclyn Fraley said. "This isn't about one religious group against another religious group, believers versus nonbelievers. This is about having our students united together during the school day, learning from our educators for the entire school day."



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FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

California

FFRF convinced the Holtville (Calif.) Unified School District not to allow representatives from the Fellowship of Christian Athletes to lead students in prayer.

FFRF learned that adult representatives from the Imperial Valley ICA had been allowed to preach and pray with students in the Holtville High School wrestling, softball, cheer, golf, cross country, volleyball, basketball and football programs. These representatives were acting as de facto chaplains and had been allowed to conduct Christian devotionals and prayers with students while having special access to students during practices and games.

“Student athletes are especially susceptible to coercion,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district. “When their school’s athletic program allows adult representatives of a religious organization to spread religious messages or lead student athletes in prayer, the students will no doubt feel that participating in that religious activity is essential to pleasing their team’s coach and being viewed as a team player.”

District Superintendent Celso Ruiz informed FFRF that an investigation had included individual interviews with district employees and other individuals. Ruiz told FFRF that district employees were advised that they may not participate in or lead student group prayers on campus or at school sponsored events.

Colorado

After hearing from FFRF, the Englewood (Colo.) Schools system recently took action to ensure that a school counselor wouldn’t preach to students and colleagues.

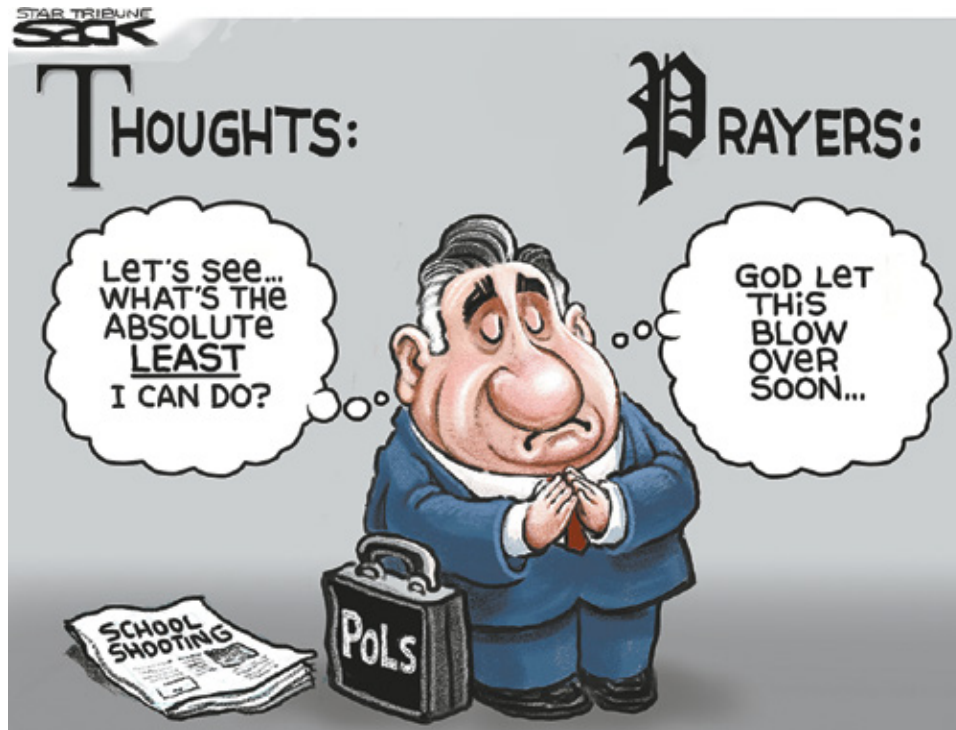
A district employee reported that a school counselor at Englewood High School had been using his position to promote his personal religious beliefs to students and coworkers. FFRF’s complainant reported that the counselor had a bible quote in his email signature, “For as people think in their hearts, so they are.” Proverbs 23:7.”

“When district employees use official channels of communication to promote their religious beliefs, it sends a message of exclusion that needlessly alienates the students and families who are among the 37 percent of Americans who are non-Christians, including the nearly one in three adult Americans who are religiously unaffiliated,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district.

The district’s legal counsel, Coulter M. Bump, from Caplan & Earnest Attorneys at Law, responded to FFRF’s concerns, reporting that action had been taken. “Upon receipt of your letter, the district’s deputy superintendent investigated the allegation and directed the employee to remove the Proverbs quote from the signature block of his email,” Bump wrote.

Correction

In thanking the volunteer FFRF members who helped judge the high school essay contest in the October issue, Jon S. Galehouse was inadvertently not included on the list. FFRF apologizes for the oversight.



Florida

FFRF worked with the Collier County Public Schools in Florida after a teacher mistakenly showed students a video about pollination that took a proselytizing turn.

A concerned parent reported that on Sept. 12 their child’s fourth-grade teacher at Osceola Elementary School showed students a YouTube video that included religious messages and proselytizing. The video, which was ostensibly focused on explaining the flower pollination process, directly mentioned God and Jesus. The video presenter quotes Luke 12, after saying that, “we have an awesome god, a god that loves us so much he even loves, he even cares about teeny tiny bees.”

“The district has an obligation under the law to ensure its teachers are not violating the rights of its students by proselytizing or using their position to push their personal religious beliefs,” Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

District General Counsel Jon Fishbane reached out to FFRF after the district had investigated the matter. He reported that the district accepted responsibility, as the video had not been fully vetted by staff before presentation from beginning to end. “The religious component that you referenced was not intentionally used by the teacher to advance her religious beliefs or try to proselytize students,” Fishbane wrote. “In fact, the instructor stopped the video when she saw the religious content being presented. Indeed, she and her curricular leaders were distressed and embarrassed by not having carefully reviewed the entire segment.”

Georgia

Calhoun (Ga.) City Schools had to take lessons from FFRF after a teacher placed religious fliers in students’ folders.

A student’s parent reported that during the second week of September,

Calhoun Elementary School distributed fliers for a religious organization to all students. The fliers promoted attendance at the Heritage Baptist Church of Calhoun’s “Ignite 3:16” club. The complainant had to speak with their children about how inappropriate the flier was, and how other religion’s pamphlets shouldn’t be handed out at school.

“School-sponsored distributions of religious material carry the stamp of official school approval,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

Hieu M. Nguyen of the Pereira, Kirby, Kingsinger, & Nguyen law firm represented the district when replying to FFRF. Nguyen clarified that only one class of students received these fliers, and that the district normally only sends home materials related to school events or school-sponsored events. “The teacher in this case inadvertently sent this flier home with students in her class. School administrators have already spoken with the teacher about her mistake,” Nguyen wrote.

The Jordan Vocational High School College and Career Academy (Jordan High School) has taken action to no longer promote or hold a religious event during school hours, thanks to FFRF.

A concerned district parent reported that the school was promoting, organizing and hosting a religious-based “See You At the Pole” (SYATP) event on Sept. 25. A post on the high school’s official Facebook page stated that the religious event was to take place during first block, which is reportedly instructional time, and the event would include a guest speaker. The post featured pictures of students bowing their heads in prayer.

SYATP is a “global day of student prayer.” SYATP is meant to be student-led and organized, and students are encouraged to meet at their school’s flagpole and pray before school. SYATP is an explicitly Christian event and organization. In

contrast, Jordan’s SYATP event appeared to be adult-led and organized, and was taking place during school instructional time rather than before school.

“Public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

The district’s attorney, Gregory S. Ellington, wrote back after FFRF’s complaint, confirming that the district would not only not be hosting the event during instructional periods, but no longer promoting it as well. “The school district’s superintendent has directed the school principal to notify people via the same Facebook page that the event will not take place during first block tomorrow. Future communication about the event, if any, will come from students (not the school) and the event, should it occur, will not be during school hours.”

The Dalton (Ga.) Public Schools recently took instructions from FFRF on how to remain neutral toward religion after a teacher promoted a Christian athletic club to district parents.

A concerned DPS parent reported that on Sept. 3, they received a text message from a teacher at Hammond Creek Middle School promoting the Fellowship of Christian Athletes club. The text stated that the FCA meeting would be before school, and that snacks, games and devotional would take place.

“We ask that DPS investigate this matter and ensure that its schools and employees comply with the Constitution’s First Amendment and the [Equal Access Act],” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district’s legal representative Cory O. Kirby.

Kirby responded after receiving FFRF’s letter. “The superintendent intends to meet with all administrators, including middle school administrators, no later than Oct. 1, 2024, to discuss issues related to the First Amendment, including Establishment and Free Exercise Clause,” he wrote. “The district is confident that all of its schools make good faith efforts to fully comply with the requirements of the Constitution and protect the rights of all parties.”

Illinois

FFRF spent over a year fighting to protect the First Amendment rights of students in Illinois’ Anna-Jonesboro CHSD 81.

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Freedom depends on freethinkers

In May 2023, FFRF learned from a district parent that the Anna-Jonesboro Community High School graduation ceremony included student-led prayers. Students delivered a pre-planned opening invocation and closing benediction at the graduation ceremony. Additionally, a Christian flag was apparently displayed on the stage that graduates walked across when receiving their diploma.

FFRF’s complainant stated that their children felt they had to hide the fact that they are atheists when participating in school-sponsored activities, such as the graduation. One of their children, in particular, feared they would be retaliated against when participating in school athletics programs if they are “outed” as an atheist in a public school district that has a custom and practice of openly promoting and favoring Christianity.

“It makes no difference how many students want prayer or wouldn’t be offended by prayer at their graduation ceremony; the courts have continually reaffirmed that the rights of minorities are nonetheless protected by the Constitution,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

FFRF wrote to the district several times over the course of 2023 and 2024 before finally receiving a response in September, wherein a representative of the district confirmed that the 2024 graduation program, “did not include an invocation or benediction. The only flag that was on the stage at the graduation ceremony was the American flag.”

Missouri

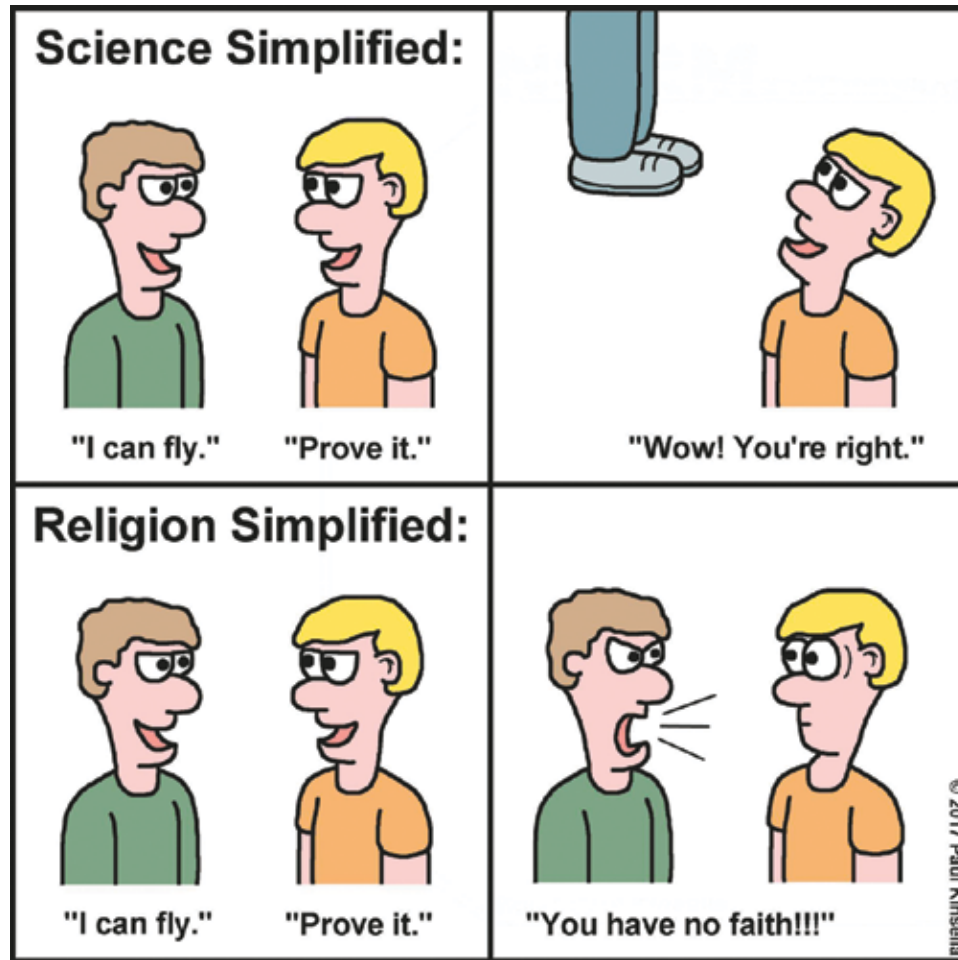
FFRF ensured that the constitutional rights of students will be respected — this time in Missouri’s Steelville School District.

A community member informed FFRF that a sixth-grade teacher promoted to students a personal bible study taking place every morning before school. The teacher appeared to be orchestrating and teaching the meetings. Additionally, the teacher read as part of the curriculum a book about witches, during which she denigrated witches and witchcraft (since it conflicted with her personal religious beliefs) and told students that Christianity does not look kindly upon witches.

“Public officials may not promote or advertise religious ceremonies when acting in the course of their official duties,” FFRF Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to the district.

After FFRF’s action, the district decided to correct the violations at hand.

The school’s legal counsel, Emily Omohundro, wrote back, informing



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FFRF that while an investigation did take place, it involved confidential student and personnel information that could not be shared. “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,” Omohundro wrote.

North Carolina

The N.C.-based Davie County Schools system removed a post promoting an inherently religious event after being contacted by FFRF.

A district community member reported that Cornatzer Elementary School was organizing and promoting on the district’s official Facebook page the religious prayer event, “See You at the Pole,” in which students gather around the flagpole to pray.

“To avoid further Establishment Clause concerns, the district must cease all efforts to promote this event, remove any social media posts promoting the event, and ensure that its schools refrain from promoting religion and religious activities on its official social media pages in the future,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to district Superintendent Jeff Wallace.

In early October, Wallace got in contact with Line to inform him that the district had worked to correct their violation. In their conversation, he stated that the post had been removed, and that staff had been directed to refrain from making similar posts in the future.

Pennsylvania

After months of FFRF’s hard work, the Pennsbury School District in Fallsington, Pa., will no longer be primarily promoting student participation for a Christian organization.

In January, FFRF contacted the district after a community member complained of the school’s advertising of the Salvation Army and “Ring the Bell” campaign during winter holidays. Students from all grades in the district were reportedly exposed to advertisements, reminders and solicitations to ring bells to fundraise for the Salvation Army. The Salvation Army, however, is not a secular organization. By its own admission, its “mission is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.” The Salvation

Army has also been in controversy over its past anti-LGBTQ-plus stance — which contradicts the district’s diversity policy.

“It is a fundamental principle of Establishment Clause jurisprudence that a public school may not advance, prefer, or promote religion,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote to the district.

After not receiving a response, FFRF sent two follow-up letters to the district before finally hearing back in September. Erin K. Aronson with Eastburn and Gray law firm, wrote that, “the district has no intention of knowingly violating the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution, or any other applicable authority.” Aronson also promised that the district will treat secular and non-secular organizations equitably.

Tennessee

FFRF worked with the Lebanon (Tenn.) Special School District to ensure that bus drivers would not be allowed to play religious music while driving students to and from school.

A student’s parent reported that a bus driver in the district played a Christian radio station every day while driving students. Furthermore, the complainant stated that the Christian radio station directly countered what students were being taught about religion and morality at home.

“If the driver of bus wants to play music while driving students, there are a multitude of secular options to choose from,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district. “A public school and its bus drivers should be eager to set an example of acceptance and inclusion, especially for those students like our com-

plainant’s children who do not belong to the majority religion.”

FFRF heard back from the school’s Director of Operations Mike Kurtz, who acknowledged receiving FFRF’s initial complaint. “At your request, this matter was addressed with all of those who drive and provide transportation to our students,” Kurtz wrote. Additionally, he extended the opportunity for FFRF to contact him directly if FFRF received additional information or complaints.

Texas

FFRF successfully fought for the First Amendment rights of cheerleaders in the Amarillo Independent School District in Texas.

A concerned parent informed FFRF that the Tascosa High School cheerleading coach was posting bible quotes in messages to cheerleaders. FFRF learned that the coach was encouraging prayer circles with the cheerleaders, as well.

“It is unlawful for public school athletic coaches to lead their teams in biblical instruction, lessons or prayer,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to the district.

Religious coercion occurring within school districts is particularly troubling for parents and students who are not Christian or the nonreligious, who comprise nearly half of Generation Z (those born after 1996).

A legal representative for the district confirmed that corrective action had been taken.

“District and campus administration reviewed your letter and relevant case law decisions with the staff member,” Andrea Slater Gulley of Walsh Gallegos writes in a recent letter to FFRF. “The district is confident the staff member now has a better understanding of applicable law, and has discontinued the use of bible verses in communications with students.”

Wisconsin

The Germantown (Wis.) Police Department removed religious scripture from a social media post promoting a job listing after FFRF and the American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin sent a joint letter to the police chief warning that signaling religious preference in hiring for a government job is unconstitutional.

After a resident of Germantown brought the organization’s attention to the social media post on Sept. 13, FFRF and the ACLU sent the letter on Sept. 26.

“The separation of church and state is a bedrock principle of our Constitution and identity as a nation,” says FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi. “Favoring religious viewpoints sends an improper and exclusionary message in the hiring process and alienates individuals who do not share those religious beliefs.”

The department has since removed the biblical text.

A note to FFRF Members

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Musicians wanted



Dan Barker

FFRF Co-President Dan Barker is looking for musicians — especially pianists and singers — to proofread and comment on the arrangements he is compiling for FFRF’s “Tunes For The Irreverent” songbook. If you are interested in helping (and having your name

listed in the Acknowledgments), send an email to tunes@ffrf.org.

He is also looking to gauge demand for such music — e.g., are you with a chorale group that wants freethought arrangements? Please let him know.

IN MEMORIAM

Chandler Berliner

FFRF Member Chandler Wilson Berliner, 98, formerly of Canfield, Ohio, died Dec. 31, 2022, at Wickshire Senior Living of Poland, Ohio. He left FFRF a bequest of more than \$20,000.

“Mr. B” was born July 25, 1924, in New York City, son of Gustav and Alice Berliner. He attended Riverdale Public Schools, and upon graduating from George Washington High School, he attended Columbia University. While enrolled, he was called to



Chandler Berliner

serve in the U.S. Army in 1944 to fight in WWII. He is a survivor of the Battle of the Bulge. He then studied at the Shrivensham America University in Berkshire, England. After he returned to the States, it became clear to him that his passion was to lead a professional life that was dedicated to helping children. To further this enthusiasm, he enrolled and graduated from Springfield College in Springfield, Mass., with a teaching degree.

His first job opportunity to work with youth was a position at the YMCA in Cleveland, Ohio. He transferred to the Youngstown, Ohio, YMCA and opened the Robinhood Swim Club in Canfield. He taught fifth grade and middle school math at Western Reserve Local Schools from 1958 to 1985. He also coached basketball and golf. He introduced many youngsters to golf with his self-proclaimed BGA (Berliner Golf Association). He was an accomplished pianist, loved to travel and appreciated the finer things in life.

He will be remembered for his smile, humor, nature loving, and his lifelong love of animals, especially dogs. He was never without the companionship of either a German shepherd or Labrador retriever.

Harvey and Bettye Gossard

Harvey E. (Jim) Gossard and Bettye (Henson) Gossard were Lifetime members and Immortals of FFRF and left a very generous bequest to FFRF.

Bettye died Feb. 2, 2024, at her home in Pennsylvania. Jim died on July 22, 2022, also at their home in Pennsylvania. They were married for nearly 75 years.

Jim was born in Hagerstown, Md., the son of the Isaac Gossard and Helen Elliott.

Jim graduated from Greencastle High School in 1942 and went to work in the family business, Chambersburg Motor Parts, until his enlistment in the U.S. Navy in 1943. After his honorable discharge from the U.S. Navy in 1946, he returned to the family business, ultimately retiring from there as managing partner.

Bettye was born in Greencastle, Pa., the daughter of Earl Henson and Edith Henson. Bettye graduated from Greencastle High School and continued her education at Washington County Hospital School of Nursing in Hagerstown, Md. Bettye fulfilled her childhood dream working as a nurse and was employed at Waynesboro (Md.) Hospital until her son was born. Years later, she worked as office manager for her husband's auto parts business until their retirement. Bettye loved traveling, cooking, cats, and, most of all, spending time with her family and friends.



Don Fedock

Lifetime Member Don Fedock, better known as “Desert Don,” died Aug. 31, 2024, and left FFRF a generous bequest.

He was a resident of Ajo, Ariz., in the Sonoran Desert. Don had a degree from Arizona State University and earned a master's degree in electrical engineering from the University of California at Berkeley. Over 50 years ago, Don decided that he wanted to live a nontraditional lifestyle and moved to the desert of America's Southwest.

Don exemplified a genuine respect for the land and this delicate environment. He lived in harmony with the terra, vegetation and the animals.

Like many others, Don had seen the Southwest and other desert-like areas

of American succumb to population growth and urban development. Don wanted to keep individual and urban development from endangering or destroying indigenous plants when land is cleared and to work within the topography of the land surrounding development. He wanted to see plants moved and utilized again.

The state of Arizona appreciated Don's dedication, study and application. In 1999, then-Gov. Jane Dee Hull presented Donald Fedock an environmental achievement award. The award stems from Don's study and application of being able to move indigenous plants with a high degree of success. He chose to share his methods at no cost to other landscapers. Fedock's methods are being used throughout the Southwest today.

John Mosley

FFRF After-Life Member and Immortal John Mosley died Nov. 5, 2023. He left FFRF a generous bequest.

John had been interpreting the sky to family, friends and the public since he got his first telescope in 1956.



John Mosley

He earned a degree in astronomy from the University of Michigan in 1970. Upon graduation, he turned from research to public astronomy and, during his 35-year professional career, worked in two public planetariums: the historic Hansen Planetarium in Salt Lake City from 1970-1977 and the world-famous Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles from 1977-2006. He then retired to St. George, Utah.

John became an authority on the Star of Bethlehem — his first book was “The Christmas Star,” published in 1987. In the 1990s, John wrote four additional books on the sky: “The Ultimate Guide to the Sky” for children in 1997, “Stargazing for Beginners” also in 1997, “Stargazing with Binoculars and Telescopes” in 1998, and “Starry Night Companion” in 2000.

John was also in charge of Griffith Observatory's educational activities, and he wrote and produced over 50 planetarium shows (and presented them live), developed museum exhibits, was responsible for the operation of the telescopes, and provided astronomy information to the public and the news media. He was interviewed over 100 times on local and national television and appeared in more than a dozen

documentaries.

John was called on regularly by media to explain eclipses, discoveries in astronomy, and to be an authority in documentaries, and he has appeared on “CNN Headline News,” “Tom Snyder Show,” “Good Morning America,” “AM Los Angeles,” “Dan Rather Evening News,” “Today Show,” “Jim Lehrer News Hour,” as well as the local evening news countless times.

John led expeditions to South America and the Caribbean to watch eclipses and to see Halley's Comet, taught astronomy at the college level and to teachers, and conducted weekend astronomy workshops for families on Palomar Mountain and elsewhere. He edited magazines and a professional journal, wrote a biweekly column on the sky that appeared in the Los Angeles Times for six years, and recorded a weekly Sky Report that was very popular for 26 years. He coordinated public star parties sponsored by Hansen Planetarium and Griffith Observatory for 35 years.

Stephen Kern

Lifetime Member Stephen Jeremy Kern died recently and left a bequest to FFRF.

His obituary included no personal information, but instead said to “consider the thoughts of Roman philosopher-poet, Lucretius.”

“Life is a gift to no one. It is merely a loan. Look back in time. How untroubled, how carefree before our birth. In this way Nature holds before us a mirror image of our future after death. Is that so grim? So dreary? Is it not a rest more free from care than any sleep?”

Mark Smith

Mark Gregory Smith, 49, died unexpectedly of natural causes on Sept. 23, 2024, in Valrico, Fla.

Born on April 20, 1975, Mark grew up to be a person admired for his kindness, intelligence, humor and unique sarcastic wit. He cherished his family, friends and his dogs, showing immense love and generosity toward them all. A true supporter and listener, Mark had a knack for lifting spirits and making people smile. He never met a stranger and should have been referred to as the pied piper. His passions included Broadway musicals, cheering for the Tampa Bay Lightning and embracing all things related to technology.

Mark graduated from La Junta High School in 1993 and

went on to earn a bachelor's degree from Art Institute of Tampa. His commitment to service was evident as he dedicated 20 years to the United States Navy, achieving the rank of Navy chief. Following his military career, he explored his culinary passions and later joined Baycare Health Systems.

In his leisure, Mark was an avid cook, enjoyed 3D printing, photography and traveling. He also loved riding motorcycles, embracing the freedom and thrill it offered.

He is survived by his wife, Lisa; mother, Renee Tracy; and father and stepmother, Bob and Linda Smith.

In lieu of flowers, contributions can be made in Mark's memory to Koshare Indian Dancers and Freedom From Religion Foundation, organizations he deeply cared about. These gestures would honor his generous spirit and commitment to the values he held dear.

Dr. Richard Fletcher

Richard Wayne Fletcher died Feb. 7, 2024, making a provision for FFRF in his estate plans.

He was born Sept. 14, 1941, in Winchester, Va., where he graduated from James Wood High School in 1960. He attended Shenandoah College in Winchester for two years and received a liberal arts degree in 1962.

He enrolled in The National College of Chiropractic in Lombardi, Ill., (a suburb of Chicago) in 1962 and graduated in 1967, receiving his Doctor of Chiropractic degree. He then taught at National for one semester after graduation. (It is now the National University of Health Sciences.)

In 1968, he moved to San Francisco and practiced there until 1977, when he moved to Houston. He then practiced in Houston for 28 years, until 2006, whereupon he retired and moved to San Antonio, Texas. He resided in San Antonio from 2006 until his death.



Mark Smith



Dr. Richard Fletcher

Bible

Continued from page 1

of Oklahoma Foundation and Oklahoma Appleseed Center for Law & Justice.

On June 27, Walters issued a mandate unilaterally requiring every public school in Oklahoma to “incorporate the bible, which includes the Ten Commandments,” into the curriculum for grades 5-12, an abuse of power that ignored state laws. Walters then fast-tracked plans to spend \$3 million of taxpayer money on an expensive, Christian nationalist version of the King James Bible that includes the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, Pledge of Allegiance and Bill of Rights, another abuse of power and gross violation of Oklahoma taxpayers’ religious freedom. Walters wants to spend another \$3 million on bibles next year.

The lawsuit asserts that the bible-education mandate violates the Oklahoma Constitution’s religious

freedom protections because the government is spending public money to support religion, as well as favoring one religion over others by requiring the use of a Protestant version of the bible. The mandate also violates the Oklahoma Administrative Procedures Act and other state statutes because officials did not follow required rules for implementing new policies and for spending public money.

“Superintendent Ryan Walters cannot be allowed to employ the machinery of the state to indoctrinate Oklahoma’s students in his religion,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. “Thankfully, Oklahoma law protects families and taxpayers from his unconstitutional scheme to force public schools to adopt his preferred holy book.”

The attorneys and legal staff on the team representing the plaintiffs include FFRF Legal Director Patrick Elliott and FFRF Senior Litigating Attorney Samuel Grover.



Bible art by Steve Benson

Ask Biden to pardon D.M. Bennett

The FFRF Action Fund is asking you to please call on President Biden to posthumously pardon 19th-century freethought publisher D.M. Bennett, a victim of the Comstock Act.

FFRF is joining an official pardon campaign filed by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE). The campaign to pardon Bennett will not only provide important symbolic justice to a wronged freethinker, but will call attention to the continuing dangers of the religiously motivated Comstock Act. FIRE Chief Counsel Robert Corn-Revere, who is leading the pardon repeal, was the guest recently on FFRF’s “Ask An Atheist” program.

Bennett, who founded and published the most famous and influential freethought newspaper of the 19th century, The Truthseeker, was arrested and convicted for violating the Comstock Act in 1879. He was sentenced and served 13 months of hard labor simply for mailing a copy of “Cupid’s Yokes, or the Binding Forces of Conjugal Life,” which questioned patriarchal marriage and said women should have the right to control their own bodies.

Anthony Comstock, the zealous fundamentalist charged with enforcing the eponymous federal law he persuaded Congress to pass, first arrested Bennett



D.M. Bennett

for publishing “An Open Letter to Jesus Christ.” Undoubtedly, the motivation to go after Bennett was his active work to repeal the Comstock Act, which criminalized the mailing of so-called “obscene” materials, including contraception and abortifacients. That “zombie” statute was ominously called “good law” by Justices Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas.

Please go to ffrf.us/bennett.

ffrf ACTION FUND

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

Enter FFRF’s 2025 law student essay contest

FFRF is proud to offer, for the seventh consecutive year, its annual Stephen and Diane Uhl Memorial Law Student Essay Contest, with a top prize of \$4,000!

If you are a current law school student at a North American school, we urge to write an essay on this topic and prompt:

Under the First Amendment, may states require religious organizations that receive government funding to comply with anti-discrimination laws? Following the Supreme Court ruling in Carson v. Makin, religious organizations seeking to participate in government funding programs have argued that requiring them to comply with anti-discrimination laws in order to receive public money violates their constitutional rights. Respond to the argument that anti-discrimination laws cannot be enforced against religious schools receiving public funds. Your argument must be supported by clear well-researched legal analysis, including case law.

Deadline is Jan. 27, 2025.

The first-place winner will earn \$4,000, second place \$3,000 and third place \$2,000. Any honorable mention(s) will get \$500. The prizes are generously donated by the late Diane and Stephen Uhl.

All eligible entrants will also receive a full one-year complimentary student membership to FFRF, which includes a digital version of 10 issues of Freethought Today, FFRF’s newspaper (which publishes the winning student essays).

The grading of essays will be blinded to avoid unintentional bias. A selection of FFRF attorneys will be on the review panel.

The contest is open to all ongoing law school students attending a North American law school. You remain eligible to enter this contest if you will graduate from law school by spring or summer of 2025. You remain eligible if you graduated law school in December 2024. You are not eligible to enter if you will be starting law school for the first time in the fall of 2025. You may not reenter if FFRF has already awarded you for a law student essay.

Essay must be no longer than 1,500 words (not including footnotes), double spaced, standard margins, and font size 11 to 14 point. Include page numbers and the title of your essay on each page. Choose your own title. Indicate word length at end of essay. To apply, go to ffrf.us/essay.

Donate to FFRF through CFC

If you are a federal employee, you may make donations to FFRF through the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC) until Jan. 15, 2025. If you wish to help FFRF through this campaign, the CFC code to designate your contribution to FFRF is 32519. Federal employees can donate through an Online Giving System, a Paper Pledge Form, Text-to-Donate, or on the CFC Giving App. Visit givecfc.org/donors/how-to-give.

It is recommended that all CFC donors check the box to include their name, mailing address and

email with the donation. Donors will then receive an acknowledgment from FFRF when we receive pledge notification.

The CFC is the official workplace giving campaign of the federal government. The mission of the CFC is to promote and support philanthropy through a program that is employee focused, cost-efficient and effective in providing federal employees the opportunity to improve the quality of life for all. The CFC is the world’s largest and most successful annual workplace charity campaign.

Freethought Matters
An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

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

Changes for 2024 in FFRF broadcasting.

Watch our show every Sunday!

Photo by Chris Line

Watch Freethought Matters anytime on FFRF’s YouTube channel!

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

Freethought Heroine Award

Understanding Christian nationalism



Photo by Steve Solomon

Katherine Stewart talks about Christian nationalism during her speech at FFRF's national convention in Denver on Sept. 28.

This is an edited version of the speech given by Katherine Stewart at FFRF's national convention in Denver on Sept. 28. To watch the speech, go to ffrf.us/con24. She was introduced by FFRF Member and artist Kelly Houle, who created the beautiful Freethought Heroine Award. (This speech was given a month before the 2024 election, so some references may be dated.)

Kelly Houle: It has been my honor to create the Freethought Heroine Award for the Freedom From Religion Foundation — first for Kate Cohen, who received the award last year, and now for Katherine Stewart.

The design of the award was inspired by the Art Nouveau movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s. With whiplash curves and broken frames, Art Nouveau celebrated the power of strong women at the turn of the century and again in the 1960s and '70s on music posters and album covers during the sexual revolution, times when women were breaking free from cultural norms, using their voices to defend women's rights.

I illustrated the award with a few symbolic items — pansies and apples.

Pansies are a recognized symbol of freethought. Their name shares a root with the French word “pensée,” meaning “thought” or “remembrance.” The pansy is a larval host plant for the blue pansy butterfly, which I included in honor of Butterfly McQueen, the first recipient of the Freethought Heroine Award in 1989.

Apples are a symbol of the fruit from the tree of knowledge in the bible, but also as a gift for the teacher.

I have learned a lot from previous recipients of the Freethought Heroine Award, and today's honoree is no exception.

A heroine is a woman who is admired for doing something extremely brave. Today in America, journalism is a courageous act.

In her two previous books “The Good News Club: The Christian Right's Stealth Assault on America's Children” and “The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous

Rise of Religious Nationalism,” which was made into a documentary feature produced by Rob and Michele Reiner, Katherine Stewart courageously exposed the dangers that religion poses to democracy, environmentalism, education, women's health and scientific truth.

Her books are extensively researched and her new book will be no exception. “Money, Lies and God: Inside the Movement to Destroy American Democracy” is due out in February.

It is my honor to present the FFRF's Freethought Heroine Award to Katherine Stewart.

By Katherine Stewart

Thank you Annie Laurie Gaylor, Dan Barker, FFRF staff and everyone here today. I am incredibly honored to receive this award. It is such an encouragement and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you.

I want to say a little bit about the threats we face generally. Then I want to talk about why it's so important for us to keep fighting for the separation of church and state, and for democracy, especially at a time when the legal landscape can be so challenging.

If you spend some time in the world of Christian nationalist activists, you'll find yourself in a world where the so-called “deep state” is bent on arresting true believers — where public schools are communist indoctrination factories; where the past three and a half years of robust economic growth, low unemployment and investment in new energy technologies has been a total hellscape and the worst period in American history; where depriving women of their most intimate and impactful decisions is the ultimate expression of religious freedom; where Donald Trump is not an isolationist and a criminal but the president our allies crave and the innocent victim of a diabolical conspiracy. That is the world as they see it.

How did they arrive at this state of con-

spiracism and disinformation and, frankly, delusion? We can't understand this predicament unless we understand the role of Christian nationalism in cultivating that worldview.

Let me say up front that when I use the term “Christian nationalism” here, I am referring to a political phenomenon, and not just to an ideology or to a religion — because the movement contains a multitude of denominations and ideas, not all of them mutually consistent. As Michelle Goldberg pointed out yesterday in her convention speech, the movement has changed significantly from the old days of the Moral Majority, but our understanding has not always kept up. So, I want to highlight some key aspects of this movement and its transformation.

Political movement

First, this is a leadership-driven, organization-driven political movement, not just a social movement. Its leaders want political power and all of its perks. They want to use that power to impose their vision on every aspect of government and society. Sure, some of them claim to be just focused on, say, abortion policy. But abortion politics is just one means to an end. Even if movement leaders get everything they want on reproductive rights, which is, by the way, a total national ban, they will quickly pivot to something else. And, in fact, the movement has been successful in generating other culture war issues to fixate on. They are using the politics of outrage to deflect attention from their radically antidemocratic and unpopular agenda.

It is important to grasp how well-funded this movement is. It receives the largest share of funding from a subset of America's plutocratic class that has decided to invest its fortunes in the destruction of democracy. To give but one example, a couple years ago, a secretive Chicago billionaire named Barre Seid donated \$1.7 billion to form the Marble Freedom Trust and put it under the direction of Leonard Leo, the ultraconservative Catholic mon-

eyman who has played an outsized role in shaping the courts through right-wing and Christian nationalist legal organizations. That amount, large as it is, is unfortunately just one piece of the much larger financial resources the movement has at its disposal.

A lot of money buys a lot of law and policy. And, by the way, a lot of the funders aren't especially religious themselves. They may not care in any sincere way about religion. Instead, they want far right economic policies and deregulatory policies that will justify and increase their own fortunes. But, and this is important, they certainly understand the utility of religious nationalism in getting the rank and file on board. So, sometimes they cultivate an aura of sanctimony to lend legitimacy and respectability to their efforts.

Cultivating, exploiting

Christian nationalism succeeds in part by cultivating and then exploiting a certain mindset. That mindset has certain key features:

- First, there's the apocalypticism: Once America was great. Now, thanks to the secularists and woke liberals, we are facing an absolute emergency. To borrow the language of contributors to Project 2025, we have one shot to save our country — and, if we fail, it is all over for America.

- Then there's the persecution complex. It is easy to think of many types of people who suffer some form of discrimination. Christian nationalists can often name only one such group: themselves. At their conferences, you often hear people say that if they don't win the next election, the bible will be banned and churches will be outlawed. The paranoia really is extreme.

- The third feature is something that honestly reminds me of what my daughter had to deal with in middle school. It's mean-girl stuff. You're in or you're out. One of us or one of “them.” You're pure and worthy, or impure and deserving of contempt. Christian nationalist leaders promote the idea that people like themselves are the only true and authentic representatives of the nation.

- And finally, there's the strongman reflex. Movement leaders reject the ideals of pluralism, equality, justice and rule of law upon which the institutions of democracy



Photo by Chris Line

The Freethought Heroine Award, given this year to Katherine Stewart, was designed by FFRF Member Kelly Houle.



Photo by Chris Line

“Leaders want political power and all of its perks. They want to use that power to impose their vision on every aspect of government and society.”

depend. In fact, they believe we are too far gone to follow the rules anymore, and so they long for someone willing to flout the rules of democracy in order to defeat the supposed “internal enemy.”

The persecution narrative and paranoia are driving forces and I can give any number of examples. But, I believe it’s a mistake to think that all the paranoia is driven by external factors. I would suggest that much of what drives it comes from within. It is the consequence of adopting and committing oneself to what is, from a logical standpoint, a belief system that is vulnerable to reason, and, as a consequence, takes a lot of work to sustain.

Throughout history, one finds that the most zealous and oppressive enforcers of belief are often the ones who themselves harbor inner and unacknowledged doubts, or are living a double life. So, they lash out at others, try to force them to believe and obey, in hopes that that will help them believe and conform.

It is for this reason that avowed non-believers, atheists, secularists, outspoken freethinkers are often the most hated targets. It’s why religious authoritarians focus much of their persecution narrative on them.

Foundations of morality

I want to say something about the conflation of atheism and “amorality.” Do you guys remember former Attorney General Bill Barr’s speech at Notre Dame? In that speech, he said America is going to hell be-

cause liberals are nihilists and secularists are the source of our problems. I want to note something important here: Running underneath this line of thinking is confusion about the foundations of morality.

I can assure you that many people in the Christian nationalist movement haven’t thought it through. They don’t examine the false assumption that morality only works if it’s a fixed, absolute value system imposed by command from on high. Their only conception of morality is obedience. They can’t imagine that human beings might actively pursue the good on their own and on the basis of reason. This drives the religious right to attempt to legislate their own particular moral codes. And it makes them poor candidates for compromise.

Much is at risk in the outcome of the 2024 election, and I’m going to skip over the obvious issues, like women’s rights, voting rights, public education, and, of course, the courts. Instead, I’ll note just a couple of areas that Americans tend not to talk about as much.

The first is that the Republican front-runner and the people behind him have promised to destroy what the right calls the “administrative state.” The big money interests that back the GOP love this plan because they resent the federal bureaucracy. More exactly, they loathe the regulatory parts that interfere with often dubious business practices, like polluting and degrading the environment, or various monopolistic practices. But they have great affection for those parts of the state that help protect their interests. So really, it’s “administrative state for me, but not for thee.”

In the event of a second Trump presidency, MAGA cronies will occupy positions in every major department of the federal government — and they will make sure that federal money and power is devoted not to improving life for all Americans, but to enriching Trump’s political backers. This is the way corrupt dictatorships always work.

Americans also tend to overlook the issue of international relations and international security. Many of America’s closest allies are horrified by the prospect of the Republican nominee winning the election. They know he will undermine the relationships and agreements upon which our national security — and theirs — depends. A Trump win would be a major victory for Russian strongman Vladimir Putin and dictators around the world who want to diminish America’s economic and geopolitical

power.

To put it simply, Trump is the biggest national security risk that the United States faces right now. He is a convicted felon who needs money, he is open to bribery in many different forms, and he has zero respect for the handling of classified information. He could not get a job as a low-level operative in any national security organization in the United States. And, yet, many Americans seem prepared to make him president.

Tools of democracy

With the stakes this high, we need to remember that the basic tools of democracy are still available to us. We need to make use of them, not just for ourselves, but for future generations.

To conclude, I would like to turn to a subject that is more important than ever: the separation of church and state. I hardly need to remind you how central this principle was to the founding of the American republic, how often and how flagrantly it has been betrayed throughout our history and how important it is for our future. But I do want to make a couple of suggestions about how we should think about this issue.

First, let’s not forget that the separation of church and state is about money, too. There is a simple motive driving many of the people working to fuse church and state, and it isn’t religious fervor. It’s money. The push for the privatization of the public school system through vouchers, unregulated char-

ters and outright subsidies to religious schools is a giant corruption machine. It takes taxpayer money and funnels it through religious organizations, which don’t have to report how they spend the money, and from there it can flow into the pockets of corrupt politicians, demagogues and religious leaders.

The second point I would make is that we should think about the separation of church and political party, too. Now, all parties have political outreach, and many religious organizations, of all types, favor this or that political position, and we’re not going to change that. But, the reality is that a huge network of conservative religious institutions have become a tax-subsidized branch of one political party. Your tax dollars and mine are not just paying for these religious establishments, but paying for their partisan political campaigns, too.

The third point I would make is that we can’t leave it all to the courts. We have this idea that because the separation of church and state is in the Constitution, it all comes down to appointing reasonable justices to the Supreme Court. Good luck with that, as they say. But there are three branches of government, and then there are the state and local governments, too, and they all have a part to play. We need laws, not just decisions, from Congress and from state legislatures and, yes, from the executive branch, to help guard against the destruction of our democracy.

Thank you for listening.



Photo by Chris Line

Katherine Stewart talks with a convention attendee during her book-signing event following her speech.

More ‘Voter’ billboards go up in swing states



Mandisa Thomas, left, and Charone Pagett show off FFRF’s “Be a Voter” billboard in Georgia prior to the Nov. 5 election. Thomas is founder and president of Black Nonbelievers.

Chapters of FFRF all over the nation launched a second round of a voter awareness billboard campaign in swing states in October.

Red-white-and-blue billboards proclaiming “Be a Voter — Save Democracy” and personalized to each swing state have gone up in all seven of these states. Most of the billboards are located near major public universities, with the chapters aiming their message at Gen Z students, who historically need more encouragement to vote and are more likely to belong to the growing number of religiously unaffiliated Americans with secular values.

The billboards exhorting swing states to vote are now on display in:

- Las Vegas — Tropicana east of Paradise, west of Tourist Rotary, near the University of Nevada
- Atlanta — Marietta Street 125 feet east of Centennial Olympic Park, near Morehouse College
- Ann Arbor, Mich. — Liberty Street West, west of First Street, near the University of Michigan
- Charlotte, N.C. — US 49 0.2 miles north of US 29, near the University of North Carolina
- Philadelphia — a prominent bridge on Banksville Road a quarter mile south of Parkway West, near

Temple University

Billboards with similar themes were previously erected in Madison, Wis., Phoenix and Pittsburgh. A total of 10 billboards (including a “bonus” billboard in the important-but-not-swing state of Florida) have been placed, thanks to the generosity of 20-some FFRF chapters in a campaign spearheaded by Judy Saint, director of the Greater Sacramento Chapter of FFRF. The chapters contributed \$32,000, with the national FFRF almost matching.

FFRF thanks its chapters around the country. Although most chapters are not in swing states, they nevertheless raised the funds to make possible this vital outreach to young voters in pivotal areas of the nation.

The billboards are the most visible part of a multimedia “Vote like your rights depend on it — because they do” campaign that FFRF has undertaken this fall aimed at mobilizing young and undecided voters, especially the growing population of Gen Z “Nones.” That campaign includes ads on SiriusXM programs such as “The Stephanie Miller Show” and targeting content across social media platforms. The voter awareness ads send listeners to a webpage describing how they can make their voices heard in this election.

FFRF awards \$19,400!

2024 college student essay contest winners

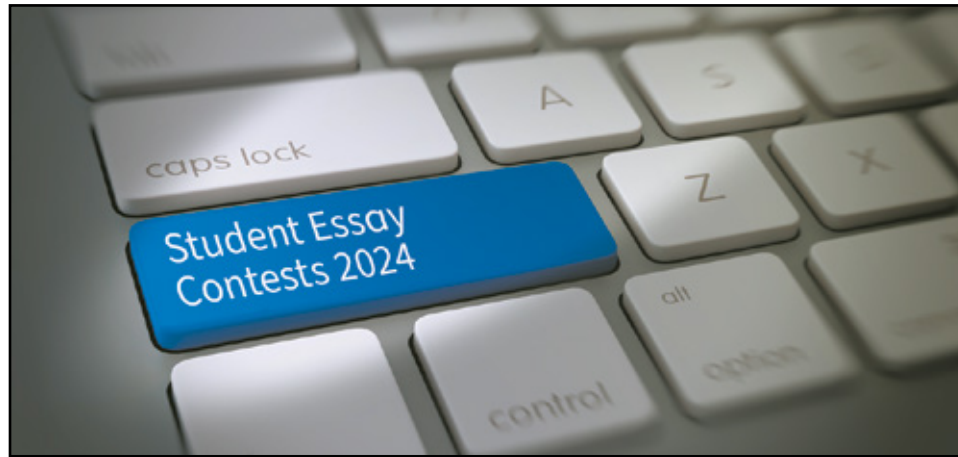
The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 12 winners and six honorable mentions of the 2024 Kenneth L. Proulx Memorial Essay Contest for Ongoing College Students. FFRF has paid out a total of \$19,400 in award money to this year's college contest winners.

Currently enrolled college students (up to age 24) wrote on the topic of **"Why is Gen Z the least religious generation?"**

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

The \$1,000 prize for sixth place in the ongoing college competition is generously endowed by actor and FFRF Lifetime Member Mr. Madison Arnold. Madison, who is 88, has given a \$30,000 endowment as a living bequest, what he calls a "pre-quest."

Essay contest winners, their ages, the colleges or universities they are attending and the award amounts are listed below. (FFRF seeks to distribute essay scholarship monies to a higher number of students, so ties — such as fourth place in this contest — are not regarded in the typical tie fashion, where, in this instance, fifth place would be skipped.)



FIRST PLACE

Sylvie Leyerle, 20, University of Illinois, \$3,500.

SECOND PLACE

Daksha Pillai, 18, Columbia University, \$3,000.

THIRD PLACE

Elias Abadi, 22, University of Southern California, \$2,500.

FOURTH PLACE (tie)

Armin Kiffmeyer, 19, University of Wisconsin, \$2,000.

Luke Ortiz-Grabe, 21, Colorado College, \$2,000.

FIFTH PLACE

Atira Claude, 21, Florida Atlantic University, \$1,500.

SIXTH PLACE

(MR. MADISON ARNOLD AWARD)

Kayleigh Clark, 20, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, \$1,000.

SEVENTH PLACE (tie)

Zoe Lilly, 21, University of Virginia, \$750.
Riley Barker, 22, University of Florida, \$750.

EIGHTH PLACE

Cassidy Taggart, 21, Rutgers University, \$500.

NINTH PLACE

Danae Daniels, 23, University of South Carolina-Upstate, \$400.

TENTH PLACE

Ta'Liyah Darden, 19, Fort Valley State University, \$300.

HONORABLE MENTIONS (\$200 each)

Hannah Bartoletti, 19, Penn State University.

Braelyn Caldwell, 21, Texas A&M University.

Jasper Chiguma Jr., 20, SUNY Broome Community College.

Melia Moorman, 19, University of Louisville.

Nicholas Spinetta, 23, University of Rhode Island.

Michael Whittaker, 24, South Mountain Community College.

FFRF thanks Lisa Treu for managing the details of this and FFRF's other student essays competitions. We also would like to thank our volunteer and staff judges, including:

Don Ardell, David Chivers, Eric Evans, Richard Grimes, Tim Hatcher, Dan Kettner, Jeffrey LaVicka, Sammi Lawrence, Katya Maes, David Malcolm, Kurt Mohnsam, Chris O'Connell, Andrea Osborne, JoAnn Papich, Brooks Rimes, Sue Schuetz, Rose Mary Sheldon, PJ Slinger, Kimberly Waldron and Karen Lee Weidig.

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

FIRST PLACE

Gen Z: We can believe our eyes

FFRF awarded Sylvie \$3,500.

By Sylvie Leyerle

I freely admit to being part of the large coalition of American youth with no religious affiliation. I attribute this choice both to my upbringing and to my personal consideration of the role religion plays in our society. My father expresses outright hostility toward religion of any stripe and what he refers to as "religious idiots," and my mother is also a lifelong nonbeliever, albeit a quieter one. However, I like to think my outlook is largely based on a reasonable interpretation of my own observations. As with many of my peers, my rejection of religion emerged as I watched religious fundamentalists attack individual rights, wage war on science and undermine our democracy.

It is unsurprising that young Americans are arguably the least religious generation in the history of our country. The internet provides unparalleled access to information, including competing beliefs and their consequences. I and many young people are angered by our political leaders' tepid response to climate change, and we are especially horrified by inaction based on the assurance that God is in control of the climate or on the promise that Jesus is coming to establish God's kingdom on Earth. We are outraged by the war on science being conducted by the religious right, as well as efforts to undermine our educational system by banning books and forbidding the teaching of "controversial" subjects,



Sylvie Leyerle

such as sex education.

We have also witnessed countless acts of aggression rooted in religious differences, ranging from the attack on a Sikh man aboard a New York City bus to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict currently raging in the Middle East. Violence and hate speech have also been directed toward members of the LGBTQ-plus community, actions that are arguably encouraged by anti-LGBTQ bills being introduced in state legislatures by religious extremists. Entire societies are built on systemic religious persecution, such as the relegation of Rohingyas in Myanmar to second-class status and the persecution of Christians in Iran and other parts of the Middle East.

Religion is also the motivation for attacks on the rights of women

here and around the world, including access to reproductive health care that became threatened when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. Immediately following that decision, more than a dozen states activated trigger laws already on the books to ban or restrict abortion. The decision was not only an attack on women's rights — it was an attack on science that has potential to reshape medical education, undermining the quality of care provided by future practitioners. The *Dobbs* decision also has potential to threaten access to birth control, especially intrauterine devices (IUDs) and emergency contraception, with the religious right characterizing both as forms of abortion.

In view of these negative consequences, it is undoubtedly a good thing that my generation shuns religion. Religion threatens the health of our nation because the viability of our democracy depends on an informed and freethinking populace. My generation wants an inclusive society that embraces differences and avoids the insular constraints of religion. We are also passionate about access to education, and we are committed to scientific discovery and innovation. We view freedom from religion as the path to combating prejudice and eliminating conflict created by religious difference.

Our rejection of religion also bene-

fits us as individuals, whether as a gay man, a person with a uterus, or someone who believes people are causing the Earth's atmosphere to warm.

If you are a young parent who wants your children to be educated in science, exposed to alternative points of view and free to explore the world of books, freedom from religion is imperative.

Our rights as Americans are based on separation of church and state, and evangelical Christians are painting the 2024 election as a battle of God against Satan. This is perhaps the main reason the rejection of religion by America's youth is good for our nation — we comprehend the war being waged on our democracy by the religious right, and we will vote to stop it.

Sylvie, 20, is from Champaign, Ill., and attends the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, majoring in graphic design.

"I am a studio artist whose most interesting and impactful pieces include an element of social commentary," Sylvie writes. "As an immigrant and transracial adoptee, I create work that attempts to share both the trauma and the wonder of my adoption experience. My experience as a member of the chronic disease community also informs my work, and I recently participated in Rare Disease Week in Washington, D.C., where my artwork was featured in an exhibit on Capitol Hill."

“ We are especially horrified by [climate] inaction based on the assurance that God is in control of the climate or on the promise that Jesus is coming to establish God's kingdom on Earth.

SECOND PLACE

Why Generation Z rejects religion

FFRF awarded Daksha \$3,000.

By Daksha Pillai

The time I spend contemplating God isn't during a church service, temple puja, or early salah — it's during a debate round. Rather than being an inflexible truth, God exists for me as an idea to be interrogated. I have spent hours dissecting what collegiate debaters call the 3-O God (omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient), offering support for its existence through the ontological and cosmological proofs, rebutting it with the problem of evil, and promptly forgetting whatever position I held by the next round.

But there is one argument that has stuck with me through all of these debates — Pascal's wager. Proposed by French mathematician Blaise Pascal, the "wager" is the idea that if God doesn't exist, there are no consequences for the believer, whereas if God does exist, the believer is promised eternal pleasure in an afterlife. From this cost-benefit analysis, it becomes clear that religious belief is the best choice an individual can make in this spiritual gamble. If this is the case, why am I and so many other young people acting against our best interests by rejecting religion?

Growing up in the 21st century means bearing witness to the cost that Pascal's wager does not account for — the harm that organized religion creates in communities. Every day, we read headlines of sectarian violence around the world, scroll through testimonials of ex-believers, and hear our loved ones being demonized by religious leaders. Thus, we understand that religious affiliation doesn't just affect our own spiritual jour-



Daksha Pillai

neys, it means supporting structures that impede progress on a global scale.

Furthermore, these structures have been increasingly using the power of the judiciary to impose their dogma onto others. Earlier this year, the Alabama Supreme Court invoked "the wrath of God" as a justification for declaring frozen embryos had legal rights, a decision that imperiled families undergoing fertility treatments, as well as unforgivably blurred the lines between church and state. Even at the highest levels of the law, religious influence abounds, such as when the "Appeal to Heaven" flag, a symbol of Christian nationalism, was flown outside of the

house of Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito. While religious authorities take great pains to depict their believers as noble underdogs, it has become clear that they exist at the highest echelons of power. No one is in a better position to recognize this than the Gen-Z'ers who are having their autonomy restricted by these Goliaths.

In addition to resenting how doctrine determines policy,

many of us also understand the folly of waiting for an omnipotent entity to save us from our own actions. As climate change ravages communities with sweltering heat waves and destructive flash floods, sitting members of Congress

“ I would argue that rejecting religion is evidence of our heightened sense of responsibility to our community. Rather than blindly accept the structures around us, we are interrogating the ideas that have propagated injustice.

have cited passages from the bible as evidence that our inaction is ordained. As school shootings become terrifyingly common, gun violence is still met with "thoughts and prayers" rather than policy proposals.

This avoidance is appalling to me and other teenagers who have marched in the streets for fossil fuel divestment and sheltered in place during active shooter drills. I believe that religion at its best can act as a comfort during challenging times. However, as this comfort morphs into apathy, relying on a higher power means failing to use our own power, exacerbating these challenges for future generations.

Some pollsters may look at the declining religiosity among Generation Z as a symptom of our youth, an anti-establishment costume that will be shed when we enter "the real world." Instead, I would argue that rejecting religion is evidence of our heightened sense of responsibility to our community. Rather than blindly accept the structures around us, we are interrogating the ideas that have propagated injustice and are setting them aside. Instead of believing out of self-preservation, I and many other young people are walking away from the wager, making our own path to a safe, secular world.

Daksha, 18, is from Lexington, Ky., and attends Columbia University, where she is majoring in political science and economics.

"I have a strong passion for community-building, as well as public speaking, with the latter being informed by my prolific high school and collegiate debate career," Daksha writes. "At Columbia, I continue to search for different perspectives as a senior staff writer at the Columbia Daily Spectator."

THIRD PLACE

Rebellion against religious contradictions

FFRF awarded Elias \$2,500.

By Elias Abadi

I am a part of a movement aimed at stopping contradictions — contradictions that state Jesus preached love, kindness and grace while his followers currently preach hate, selfishness and shame. Contradictions that glorify charity missions to poorer nations while turning their backs on the starving and poor living right next door. Contradictions that ask you to believe and place trust in a system that breeds abuse and sexual assault of its youth.

Generation Z is rejecting the contradictions surrounding religion. In America, religion is used as a cudgel against the marginalized, those with the fewest protections in society. It was used to justify mass hysteria against those groups, such as the slaughtering of Salem "witches," the "satanic panic" of the 1980s, and the current-day hysteria around transgender rights.

In our increasingly diverse society, it seems odd that the teachings of religion have become disfavored. Jesus preached to love thy neighbor, not to wield fear's might. Yet, Jesus alone isn't stopping the hate crimes, stopping the hateful Republican legislation or stopping the widespread child abuse happening in churches across the world. The teachings of Jesus ring hollow when they are twisted and abused by



Elias Abadi

so many without accountability.

Religion has become a tool of oppression — a tool used to produce complacency. You are asked to believe in astonishing feats of God by foolishly placing your trust in storytellers who have no interest in your financial or physical well-being.

Generation Z is fed up with the harmful effects of religion on our lives. It has become an all-encompassing public toxin free from taxation or accountability — all while filling its coffers with donations. This rebellion from religion is bound to be positive in numerous ways, especially for marginalized people. Conversations around poverty and homelessness can be focused on the economic reality of the impoverished instead

of a detached and ahistorical lens of sins and sinners. While promising, the service work done by religious organizations has done little to fix the lack of social mobility in America. However, many policy-based organizations and grassroots movements have recently identified and researched systemic issues plaguing our institutions as the root cause of many social ills.

The beneficial effects extend beyond simply service work. Religious legal crusades have eroded the distinctions between church/state and minority rights simultaneously. As society shifts away from a dogmatic lens of religion, citizens will feel empowered to use their voices and leverage economic boycotts against discriminatory companies. They can enshrine stringent protections for a secular government. Eventually, shifts in public opinion will catch up to the Supreme Court, and hopefully, nonreligious citizens will be able to enjoy their rights once again.

Freedom from religion should not come at a cost. Sadly, LGBTQ+ individuals are turned away from public accommodations, women are denied life-saving abortions and contraception, and immuno-compromised people must interact

with unvaccinated religious individuals. We cannot become cynical enough to the current legal landscape that treats religious liberty with the utmost respect while stepping all over the Establishment Clause.

The social justice rebellion against institutions of oppression sweeps broadly,

including religion. As our society progresses, the need for organized religion that teaches conformity and blind obedience will be gone. In its place, a new form of communal network will take place — one that involves all people of different races,

classes and incomes. I hope our current rebellion against religious contradictions morphs into a lasting infrastructure for social change. The threat to freedom from religion remains ever-present, but this time, we will be equipped to confront it.

Elias, 22, is from Bakersfield, Calif., and attends University of Southern California, where he is majoring in public policy. "I have been president of the Undergraduate Moot Court Program, where I won multiple speaker awards and qualified for the national tournament three times," Elias writes. "I am also the editor-in-chief for USC's premier undergraduate law review and a senior editor of another interdisciplinary journal."

“ [Religion] has become an all-encompassing public toxin free from taxation or accountability — all while filling its coffers with donations.

FOURTH PLACE (tie)

Religion: An outdated ideology

FFRF awarded Armin \$2,000.

By Armin Kiffmeyer

One of the most influential reasons for my peers' and my shift away from religion can be attributed to the numerous failures of theistic religions in recent years. The benefit in this shift is easy to see when one considers these failures. The quick summary of theistic religions' shortcomings is that they are continually revealing their inadequacies in their explanations for the universe, moral codes and necessity for community. Through this, religion is becoming a very outdated ideology.

To explain this further, theistic religions have a long history of explaining away life's biggest questions with arbitrary claims. Whether it be "where are we?"; "what is our purpose?"; or "where did we come from?"; a theist will answer it by invoking their god(s), using blind faith as their evidence. However, as our scientific understanding continues to advance, we not only find nothing that necessitates or suggests the existence of any god, much less any one specific flavor of god, but we actually see evidence that directly contradicts specific theistic stories and explanations.

In light of new godless scientific discoveries, theists immediately form two distinct groups — those who move the god-post, redefining their theology in a way that fits scientific observation, or those who flatly refute well-supported evidence on the basis of their baseless god. This is increasingly evident to newer generations and casts a dubious light on the value of theology and faith in answering important questions. Rejecting outdated theology and faith as a basis for knowledge will prove to be incredibly beneficial for our society. It prompts us to evaluate and adjust our fundamental epistemology to better approximate truth, which is useful when we try to answer life's biggest questions, evaluate empirical data and fight against misinformation.

In addition to conflicting with science, theistic re-



Armin Kiffmeyer

ligions are increasingly more often coming into conflict with our modern sense of moral truth. While moral facts can be considered to be more subjective than scientific ones (depending on the philosopher), I can still say with near certainty that most of the religious texts that claim to codify morality are actually morally bankrupt. Any person with a reasonable moral sense should agree that a text that directly or indirectly supports slavery, misogyny and/or murder cannot be the ultimate moral authority. Apologetics will hem and haw over reasons for humanity's worst actions being justified in their holiest of books, but what is most telling is how there are still religious fundamentalist movements who double down and unapologetically condone these actions.

Ironically, it is these fundamentalists who are doing

some of the greatest damage to their religion's credibility in the eyes of new generations. Religious fundamentalists expose the extremely outdated nature of their religion, which leads to reevaluation of belief from less religious individuals and increases our societal well-being.

A final aspect of religion's obsolescence is it no longer being crucial for community building. Religious institutions have been, and still are, seen as vital centers for cohesion and socialization in many communities. One could argue that, while religion is flawed in information gathering and morality, it still serves a necessary and invaluable service to its community and cannot be removed. However, this argument fails when newer generations embrace other, newer community tools. The unleashing of the internet has caused many obsolescences, and religious community building is no exception.

A community is no longer only found in people who were indoctrinated into the same fictitious religious belief, but rather can be made from any shared interest in a hobby, sport, or art. This new community-building tool is both appealing to new generations and societally beneficial as it gives individual's control over their community. When communities are based around interests, it gives people control to participate in the communities that they enjoy being in, rather than what they were indoctrinated into. Thus, religion is yet again simply out of date.

Armin, 19, attends the University of Wisconsin-Madison where he is majoring in philosophy.

"I joined the school's Gender

Sexuality Alliance and became very involved in LGBTQ-plus activism in my community, participating and organizing many social events and protests," Armin writes. "I am a prospective law student who is currently studying philosophy. I intend to be a lawyer, and my primary motivation for this is wanting to be a part of the positive social change I see around me."

“ Any person with a reasonable moral sense should agree that a text that directly or indirectly supports slavery, misogyny and/or murder cannot be the ultimate moral authority.

FOURTH PLACE (tie)

Religious unaffiliation for a better America

FFRF awarded Luke \$2,000.

By Luke Ortiz-Grabe

In contemporary American society, religion has become a tool for legitimizing efforts to hinder or reverse significant social progress aimed at creating a more equitable society. Some of the most recent challenges against equity-oriented progress, namely the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* and the proliferation of anti-DEI legislation, all maintain a uniquely religious component to their arguments.

In seeing all the hate, bigotry and discrimination that lie behind religion, I recognize the power that secular action possesses to fight for a more equitable America while also solidifying my identity as an agnostic person. Therefore, I am a part of the nonreligious cultural transformation in America because empowering secular change has the strongest possibility to fight against the use of religion to prevent progress and preserve discriminatory systems.

Exploring my agnosticism with other aspects of my identity has led me to additional factors that affirm my beliefs. As a Mexican American, I am aware of the imposition of Christianity on my community through colonization, and that the legacy of violence in the name of re-



Luke Ortiz-Grabe

ligious conversion continues to have devastating consequences. As a queer person, I found that agnosticism has helped me reckon with the use of religion to condone discrimination against fellow LGBTQ-plus people. In intertwining my agnosticism with my other identities, I find myself further committed to my beliefs and better able to tackle current issues stemming from colonization and discrimination as I can use secular forms of community engagement to begin to repair harm to my community.

In my conversations with fellow religiously unaffiliated Gen-Zers, the reason for their lack of belief also stems from a similar disdain and disillusionment with the role that religion plays in American politics and society. Especially among those forced to attend religious services as a child, many have witnessed the continual linkage between tenets of faith and the preservation of systems of oppression and division within the United States. Additionally, many Gen-Zers now realize that the utilization of religion to legitimize hate has been central to many historical and contemporary atrocities that we continue to reckon with. In searching for ways to fight against inequality in America, many are aware that they no longer want to participate in a system that divided and condoned discrimination against people for centuries.

In considering the power secularism has to spur positive social change and the harm that religion has caused as a tool for hate, the benefits of this religiously unaffiliated movement for an individual are plentiful. In rejecting religious affiliation, humankind can cast aside many biases society uses religion to justify. Moving beyond any religion-imposed morality creates the opportunity to see the harm that those biases have created and to develop a motivation to make the world a better place, especially for those

suffering under systems of oppression.

Moreover, the religiously unaffiliated movement also offers great benefit for American society as a whole. By shifting the focus away from religious forms of community engagement, the lessons from nonreligious disciplines such as sociology become integral to creating positive secular change. With more people choosing to adopt nonreligious beliefs, the systems of oppression and the divisive nature of social transformation within America gradually lose the support of an institution that has always been a locus of hate and violence.

It is only through Gen Zers and future generations continuing to reject religious affiliation that the United States will have the power to begin to heal from the harm and oppression that religious affiliation has created and to bring about a new America, one that focuses on uplifting all people.

Luke, 21, is from Highlands Ranch, Colo., and attends Colorado College, majoring in international political economy.

"I am extremely committed to LGBTQ-plus activism, where I work with local organizations to increase access to affirming health care services in my college community," Luke writes. "I hope to eventually go to law school and go on to work on protecting marginalized communities from systems of oppression in the hopes of creating a better America for all people."

FIFTH PLACE

Why should we trust a silent god?

FFRF awarded Atira \$1,500.

By Atira Claude

I lost God when I was 17 years old. For context, I was raised in a Christian religious household since birth and had always identified with my family's religion. (The realization in early adolescence that I was queer had only slightly affected the foundation of those beliefs.) But then came the summer of 2020. Growing up as a Black person in America, I already understood that there were numerous forces in the world that would hate me simply because I draw breath. Being raised by educated, conscientious parents, I understood the long and painful history of my people's suffering at the hands of the police, the government and domestic terrorists. But in a year where a pandemic had already stolen our collective sense of normalcy (and the lives of my loved ones) I saw a Black man once again be murdered, and no real justice dealt.

My people marched, protested, appealed to local politicians and the president himself. But when the year was over, one more murderer might've been found guilty, but nothing had changed. And I had prayed. We'd all prayed, as Black people so often do — pray for protection, salvation,



Atira Claude

retribution. And nothing changed. That makes a kid think. And it made me start to unravel all the moments I'd trusted God and cried out on bended knee for help, only to be met with an echo. And I'm not the only one.

My generation was raised with the promise that we would inherit the Earth, that our future was bright, and that if we kept the faith and stayed pure, everything would be OK. But here we are, barely grown, and we are

watching the world burn all around us. We watch global temperatures continue to rise, we see our rights being stripped away, we see cops assault people protesting tyranny, we see war and genocide go unchallenged, and the power of billionaires grow while we are dying. These things have damaged our hope. And in the midst of all this, why would we beg the help of any god? When so many of our prayers went unanswered as children, why would we waste time on religion as adults? Real life, and all of its intricacies, is warping before our eyes; we don't need to grovel aimlessly.

Because of this rejection of religion, I can see my generation heal so many old wounds. Because many of us stopped putting our faith in a god to save us, we have begun to place faith in each other, building community and extending an empathy toward our peers that is transformative. I have seen my generation mobilize many times to get money, food and many other kinds of aid to those in need across the globe. I have watched my peers, since the summer of 2020 and to this day, put their bodies on the line again and again to protest injustice and hold

those in power accountable for their corruption. When we stop waiting on a god for salvation, we realize we can save ourselves.

I also see my generation turning inward to embrace therapy, deeper interpersonal relationships, radical honesty and pride in individual identity — all things that religious culture warned us against. And while we are still deeply flawed as people, these trends in behavior

and community care bring some of my hope back. I might've lost God when I was 17, but I gained a sense of self and belief in those around me that has made me a more grateful and impassioned human being. And this is where my belief lies now, that humans owe each other safety, empathy and mutual aid. And when we rise to meet these needs, we can make the world a better place. Religious or not.

Atira, 21, is from Hollywood, Fla., and attends Florida Atlantic University and is majoring in multimedia studies.

"Writing was one of my earliest forms of self-expression but now I paint, photograph, act, the works," Atira writes. "Filmmaking is my biggest passion. It encompasses all the forms of art I love, with room for ever-evolving ways to make more unique projects."

“When so many of our prayers went unanswered as children, why would we waste time on religion as adults?”

SIXTH PLACE (Mr. Madison Arnold Award)

The shift from sacred to secularism

FFRF awarded Kayleigh \$1,000.

By Kayleigh Clark

When I think of this generation's separation from organized religion, I begin to draw on my own life experiences.

When I was growing up, going to church was an almost daily activity. Sunday services with my dad, Monday Pioneer Girls meetings and activities, Wednesday counseling for children of divorce, Saturday church service with my mom. The cycle continued up until my mom died and going to church multiple times a week was no longer a priority.

However, my mom's death did not just limit my time spent at church, but also led to my own questioning of religion and God. If God is so powerful and everything is in his plan, why do I no longer have my mom? At 8 years old, why do I have to worry about my growling stomach, unsure of where my next meal will come from? Why is everyone telling me that "she is in a better place" in a heaven that they find personal comfort in, which minimizes my own grief?

This questioning, coupled now with a lack of connection to a church community, led me to begin finding a

life that is "good without God."

While my experience is vastly different from many others in my generation, I believe those who are also a part of Gen Z have found similar paths through different ways of questioning. We live in an era where the biblical worldview cannot keep up with scientific breakthroughs and developments. This generation is also the first to grow up with the answers to most questions directly at their

“I believe facts and science can provide a higher level of comfort beyond what is found in a storybook.”

fingertips, with a heavy emphasis on the quick spread of information through social media platforms. While what is being posted on said platforms may not always be factual, it causes one to reflect on what they are exposed to in daily life, leading to further questioning of the organizations and institutions in charge of daily life.

The mass publicization of the war in Gaza, for example, has brought many Gen Z people to realize the negative impact that organized religion has on the world as a whole and its polarizing longterm effects.

To me, a world where everyone is without religion is almost incomprehensible. As I have grown in my own questioning and atheism, I realize that there are those who feel religion can be a source of comfort against the unknown. However, I believe facts and science can provide a higher lev-



Kayleigh Clark

el of comfort beyond what is found in a storybook.

Religious influence on government affairs in the United States is highly problematic, resulting in mass protests advocating for the regulation of bodily autonomy, the banning of valuable literature, as well as false and downright dangerous "facts" be-

ing pushed by lawmakers who are voted in for their beliefs, not their qualifications or dedication to the good of all.

I believe that many members of Gen Z recognize the importance of the separation of church and state because of the direct impact it has had on their own personal freedom and realize that we are living in a broken system. Religion may bring people together physically, but does not build true community and compassion for others when only those who decide to conform can reap the so-called "benefits" of the organization. While a world completely without religion will likely never be a reality, for myself and many other members of my generation, strengthening the wall of separation between state and church is a most worthy endeavor for a brighter and safer future.

Kayleigh, 20, attends the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where she is majoring in environment and sustainability.

"During the school year, I work as a peer mentor for students in the Guarantee Scholars Program at UNCG, which has allowed me and many others to attend college, something that I never thought was financially feasible for myself," Kayleigh writes. "I also work as the community outreach assistant for the Office of Sustainability at UNCG, educating students, faculty and staff about the importance of living sustainably and the efforts made by the university to promote sustainability."

SEVENTH PLACE (tie)

An individual's search for understanding

FFRF awarded Riley \$750

By Riley Barker

In many ways, the youth of today, known commonly as Generation Z, are seen in sharp contrast to previous generations. Growing up in a swiftly changing world flooded with the technological advances of the early 21st century has had a profound impact on the views and understanding of this generation.

With such rapid changes, previous norms and cultural practices have been put under a microscope or, in other cases, flat-out rejected by Gen Z. Of hot topics, religion comes to the forefront of scrutiny as many of my generation find themselves distancing from religious affiliation and questioning the doctrine preached as truth to us.

From my perspective as a member of Gen Z, I believe that modern-day usages of religion as justification for oppression have ignited a sudden change in the youth mindset that is leading toward a future focused on the power

of the individual shaping their own life.

Religion has traditionally served as a basis of morality and lifestyle in a way that dictates one's actions or thoughts. In many cases, the justification of religious reasonings has been increasingly stretched to cover broader and much more sensitive topics in a way that oppresses an individual or a group of people.

One such justification is used by opponents of the LGBTQ-plus community. From some traditional religious readings, a clear black-and-white depiction of gender and love is set as binary and only heterosexual. However, many members of my generation (as well as some members of previous generations) find themselves at odds with such hard-set definitions of who we are from people who don't truly know us. While

“From my perspective as a member of Gen Z, I believe that modern-day usages of religion as justification for oppression have ignited a sudden change in the youth mindset that is leading toward a future focused on the power of the individual shaping their own life.”

trying to discover themselves, members of my generation have become targets of hate and injustice by institutions of religion and those using religion as their justification. Persons in power have limited the freedoms of those finding themselves not fitting into the option of traditional gender types by forcing them to adhere to this system through limitations on bodily autonomy, informational applications, and explicitly targeting the discussion of LGBTQ-plus topics within education systems. With such staunch opposition to an individual trying to understand who they are separate from being told who they are, many have turned away from the origin of these antagonistic viewpoints.

In retaliation to the harshness expressed by those justifying themselves in religion, I have observed a focus on the individual self and what I believe to be a modern understanding of humanism taking shape. Put simply, humanism is a philosophy about people, the rights of people, and the individual is among and a part of a larger humanity. Beyond being just a philosophy, I have seen it become a beacon of light for individuals to express themselves

as they wish and understand that they have a right to express themselves as such.

Rather than us being dictated to by a power beyond our understanding and the interpretations of such a being's will, we are our sole voice of destiny and seekers of understanding. To me, it affirms that, in some cases, there is currently no set answer to the questions that we pose ourselves, and due to this we are forced to discover this answer by ourselves for ourselves.

With this new understanding emerging in myself and many of my fellow Gen Zers, I cannot help but marvel at the future that does not impose or oppress the individual, but, instead, asks them to question and seek meaning solely unique to themselves. Continuing down the current path of applying a singular answer



Riley Barker

to a wide range of individuals dismisses one's sense of self, but allowing each person to seek their own understanding strengthens both the power of the individual as well as the power of humanity, made up of every generation.

Riley, 22, attends University of Florida, where he is majoring in architecture.

“From a young age, I have been a deeply inquisitive and curious person,” Riley writes. “My primary curiosities include architecture, philosophy, history, sociology, nature, literature and design. Due to some volunteering in my teenage years (food banks and libraries), as well as being a part of a variety of social circles through my education, I have been exposed to an expansive group of individuals who remind me that everyone is unique.”

SEVENTH PLACE (tie)

The flower lost its power

FFRF awarded Zoe \$750.

By Zoe Lilly

At the age of 14, I made a decision that would shape the course of my life: I embraced atheism. Raised in a religious household, my departure left me feeling like an outsider.

To mask my divergence, I continued presenting myself as a Christian to my family and peers. However, as I grew older and explored the intricacies of my beliefs, I stumbled upon the statistical landscape of my generation. I found comfort in the shared experience of atheism and agnosticism among my Gen Z peers.

I was considering this when I began to think of a short poem, a reflection on our collective journey, the generational disparity in perspectives and meaning:

“How I envy the Boomer.

The flower lost its power
When we found it wasn't ours,
So we suffer the hours
Desperate to unsee
What the Boomer never saw.”

This poem is meant to speak to the contrast between the spiritual pas-



Zoe Lilly

sion of previous generations and the existential disillusionment pervasive among today's youth. While our parents and their parents enjoyed the comforts of faith and divine purpose, we have been forced to confront the harsh reality of our existence. We are the inheritors of a rapidly evolving technological landscape and a world that is burning before our eyes. The flower that was Hope lost its power.

In the face of this existential crisis,

we are confronted with a choice to address the void. Our pursuit of meaning becomes a relentless endeavor, a daily struggle to find purpose in the absurd nature of existence. Because when times get hard, which they often do, our willingness to hope is not a constant, it undulates with the ripples of our circumstances and emotions, and as a result, we are in a constant and vulnerable state of uncertainty.

But amidst the despair, a glimmer of hope emerges from the realization of our agency. Freed from the shackles of eternity, we are empowered by mortality. We are now guided by compassion, empathy and an appreciation for the fleeting beauty of life. The care that was meant for the afterlife is now meant for this life. This life that's so absurd is our only, so we fight for what we believe in, we take ourselves less seriously and we realize our interdependence.

In embracing our insignificance, we find liberation. Within the finitude

of our mortality, we can discover the value of life, the beauty of its impermanence, and its fleeting moments.

While our journey may be tainted with uncertainty, it is also inspired by a sense of inherent value, forged not in religion, but in the depths of humanity, a love for this life and our planet. My generation realizes one thing that previous

generations missed: we all need each other. So, while the flower of divine faith that guided generations before us lost its power, our generation found a new hope: in existence, nature, community and a raging passion for this life.

Zoe, 21, attends the University of Virginia, where she is majoring in human biology after earning her associate's degree in applied science from Laurel Ridge Community College.

“I was awarded Outstanding Science Graduate of the Year [at Laurel Ridge], given to one student graduating with a degree in the sciences,” Zoe writes. “I ultimately plan to attend optometry school and become a practicing pediatric optometrist.”

“While our journey may be tainted with uncertainty, it is also inspired by a sense of inherent value, forged not in religion, but in the depths of humanity, a love for this life and our planet.”

EIGHTH PLACE

The dichotomy of tolerance and religion

FFRF awarded Cassidy \$500.

By Cassidy Taggart

I am a part of the portion of Gen Zers today that identify as religious Nones, and for a reason that I feel many of us can identify with.

I grew up as an autistic queer person in a small town that was suffocatingly Christian. I was ostracized and bullied for being queer, often by the kids from the more religious families. I watched others receive the same treatment as well.

The bullying had gotten to me when I was younger, and I eventually confided in a friend that I was considering harming myself. When I was in a classroom with her sometime later, she had announced to the whole class what I said, and she and another student told me — in these exact words — “You will go to hell for being suicidal.” No concern, no sadness, nothing but the most virulent hatred coming from their mouths.

Through the most critical years of my life, I was taught about my worthlessness under this supposed God that I never really learned about, to the point where I would end up rejecting it altogether in adulthood.

Funnily enough, I witnessed the same people who would reject queerness under the guise of religion come to embrace it later on in life, while straying further away from what they



Cassidy Taggart

initially believed as children. In fact, this isn't an uncommon occurrence. Findings from the Public Religion Research Institute show that 28 percent of Gen Z adults identify as LGBTQ+ plus, nearly twice that of millennials. On top of that, studies from the Pew Research Center have found that only 52 percent of Gen Zers are non-Hispanic white, with the rest of the population identifying as a racial minority.

As the members of the generation of today become more diverse, they are less likely to conform to the rigid standards that religious majorities in the United States may try to impose. Internet access is most definitely an aid in this.

Research done by Aislinn Adding-

ton, discussed in the book “Organized Secularism in the United States,” suggests that online exposure has made young atheists find like-minded people to counteract any religious pressure to conform and further stray away from religious standards. As the internet has become more accessible with its insurmountable loads of unrestricted media and content, young people have been more able to identify the injustices within their country, how they suffer from them, and what they are able to do about it.

The resulting radicalization of Gen Zers toward left-wing politics is a net positive for the country when you consider

that the United States government is steadily becoming more influenced by Christian nationalism: An Alabama Supreme Court justice cites biblical moralism in his reasoning for the decision on the living status of frozen embryos used for in-vitro fertilization; the Supreme Court opinion on the Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization that resulted in the subsequent overturning of Roe v. Wade was largely approved by conservative Christian justices; and a lesser-known national religious psychological operation is being performed by several

conservative Christian lawmakers and organizations to steadily ban transgender health care across the country and criminalize the existence of transgenderism.

As the lines separating church and state become more blurred, and as efforts to blur these lines become increasingly extreme, we need proper pushback to ensure the stability of our people's rights. The new generation that will be replacing the older lawmakers in due time may be fit for the job.

A divorce from the intolerant status quo suggests that Gen Zers are more willing to stand up for themselves and what's right. If

“As the lines separating church and state become more blurred, and as efforts to blur these lines become increasingly extreme, we need proper pushback to ensure the stability of our people's rights.”

we keep holding our ground and refuse to tolerate intolerance, we may be able to win the fight against the Christian nationalism sweeping our government.

Cassidy, 21, attends Rutgers University where she is majoring in biological sciences.

“I am a member of Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society,” Cassidy writes. “I attended Atlantic Cape Community College from 2022 to 2024 and received an associate's degree in general studies, graduating with highest honors. I was chosen to represent the school as a member of the 2024 NJ All-State Academic Team.”

NINTH PLACE

The Gen Z's religion

FFRF awarded Danae \$400.

By Danae Daniels

I am a part of a generation that is routinely referred to as the least religious generation in U. S history and, therefore, I find myself at the epicenter of a cultural shift. The growing lack of religious practice in my generation and among my peers is multifaceted — social, cultural and philosophical.

The first one is that, due to the development of the internet and social

media, we are constantly exposed to the world and alternative ideas. We are no longer required to be confined within the beliefs and customs of society. We are exposed to views from all over the globe. This has allowed us to reason critically, and this has made many of us

start challenging the ideas that religious institutions have considered sacrosanct.

Furthermore, the rise of pluralism and diversity in modern societies has also brought about tolerance

and acceptance of different religious beliefs. The benefit of living in and studying multicultural societies has allowed our generation to do away with the ideals of religious supremacy. This has generated a culture of acceptance and compassion, which causes some of us to refrain from religious identities that can cause division and discrimination.

In addition, science and technology also provide other explanations for natural occurrences that were previously attributed to the hand of God. The more we discover about the universe using the concepts of cosmology, evolution and neuroscience, the less we need explanations in terms of the supernatural. For many young people, science and evidence are far more im-

“The more we discover about the universe using the concepts of cosmology, evolution and neuroscience, the less we need explanations in terms of the supernatural.”



Danae Daniels

Secularism is a very positive change in our culture, and that cultural change is beneficial to both the individual and the country in general. Through our neutral worldview, we promote critical thinking and rationality. This empowers people to make their own decisions because they believe it is what needs to be done, not because someone simply told them to. This understanding also includes the concept of diversity in that it recognizes and tries to incorporate the wide range of human experiences and what each person encounters in his or her life. In addition, it will be possible to create a civilized and just society that does not strive to divide people into classes and trap them in the limits imposed by religions and the conflicts they have initiated.

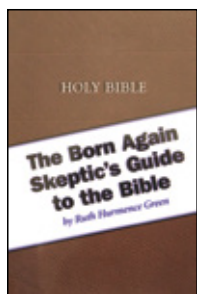
As a member of Gen Z, I encourage the transition from religion to secularism. This trend away from religion is favorable as it shows progress toward a well-informed and awakened society that will be sensitive and accepting of different people.

Danae, 23, attends the University of South Carolina-Upstate, where she is majoring in business management.

“I grew up in a low-income home with a single mother,” Danae writes. “I have done very well academically. I volunteer in my community with food banks, back-to-school givebacks, and even painting houses. I am a licensed esthetician in both South Carolina and Georgia.”

portant than religion.

Young individuals who abandon organized religion do not necessarily abandon spirituality or morality, but rather re-educate themselves in their self-determined way outside the boundaries of traditional religious institutions. Most of us find our meaning and purpose through secular rather than religious means. Individuals develop relationships and achieve a sense of belonging through non-religious groups and movements that focus on shared humanity, equality and collectivism.



The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible
By Ruth Hurmence Green
A Missouri grandmother debunks the bible as no one has debunked it since Thomas Paine.
Published by FFRF

— 440 pages / PB Item #FB12

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

TENTH PLACE

Gen Z's decline in religious affiliation

FFRF awarded Ta'Liyah \$300.

By Ta'Liyah Darden

Sociologists and culture watchers have noticed a noteworthy trend in recent years: Generation Z, or people born roughly between the mid-1990s and the mid-2010s, is frequently described as the least religious generation in contemporary history. There have been many discussions and disputes about this move away from traditional religious identification and activity.

The extraordinary access to information made possible by the digital age is one of the main factors behind Gen Z's waning religiosity. In contrast to earlier generations, who might have relied on conventional sources of religious authority and knowledge, Gen Z has grown up with access to an almost infinite amount of information. With a few clicks on a computer or a few taps on a smartphone, individuals can access different spiritual sources, challenge preconceived notions and investigate several points of view. Because of their easy access to knowledge, Gen Z members are more capable of questioning religious ideas and practices, which has increased their skepticism and, in many cases, led them to abandon organized religion.

Furthermore, a great emphasis on diversity and inclusivity shapes the ideals of Gen Z.

This generation may regard conven-



Ta'Liyah Darden

tional religious institutions as exclusive or discriminating, and they are more likely to value equality and acceptance. For many members of Gen Z, issues like racial justice, gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights are major concerns. They may discover that certain religious practices and beliefs run counter to these ideals. They might therefore choose more open-minded and progressive belief systems in place of organized religion as a result of feeling alienated from or disillusioned with it.

Another important aspect that is contributing to the diminishing religiosity of Gen Z is the rise of secularization. There has been a steady fall in religious engagement and adherence to conventional religious norms in many societies. This

larger tendency is a reflection of how morality, spirituality and community are being viewed in culture more and more. Growing up in a culture that is becoming more and more secular, Gen Z is impacted by this cultural change, which causes many of them to doubt the value and applicability of organized religion in their life.

Additionally, a major influence on how Gen Z views religion is individualism. This generation may be less likely to follow strict religious teachings that prescribe how people should live their lives because they place a higher priority on authenticity and personal autonomy. Rather than following religious establishments' dictates, they place more value on self-expression and self-discovery as a means of pursuing spirituality.

Another aspect that contributes to Gen Z's disinterest in organized religion is social and political. Trust in traditional religious authorities has been undermined by the politicization of religion, scandals within religious institutions, and tensions between religious convictions and progressive social goals. Organized religion is viewed as antiquated or unnecessary by many members of Gen Z, especially in light of current social and political discussions.

Furthermore, Gen Z is clearly witnessing the emergence of the "spiritual but not religious" issue. This generation has a large number of self-identified spiritual seekers who choose a more varied and individualized approach to spirituality over established religion. In their spiritual journeys,

they could include aspects from many religious traditions, as well as techniques like yoga, mindfulness and meditation.

Moreover, the diminishing religious affiliation of Gen Z can be attributed to postponed adult milestones. Events like getting married, having children and owning a property have historically been linked to higher religious participation. But many members of Gen Z are delaying getting married, beginning families later, and postponing becoming homeowners, which is causing them to experience delayed adult transitions. The sense of connection to religious organizations, which have historically been important in these milestones, may decline as a result of this delay in reaching traditional markers of adulthood.

Though organized religion might be losing ground on this generation, spirituality is still a very personal and developing part of life for a large number of Gen Zers. The influence of spirituality and religion on the construction of generational identities will surely change further as society develops.

Ta'Liyah, 19, attends Fort Valley State University with a major in nursing.

"Outside of school, I dedicate my time to volunteering at Hope Haven, a nonprofit organization close to my heart," Ta'Liyah writes. "My passion lies in nursing, particularly in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), where I aspire to make a difference in the lives of newborns and their families."

FFRF's 2024 college essay honorable mentions

The following are short excerpts from those who earned honorable mention status in this year's competition.

Hanna Bartoletti

For many like me, the disconnect between who you are and what the church needs you to be is painfully obvious. As more Gen Zers seek their affirmation elsewhere, religions risk alienating their next believers. It's no wonder Gen Z is turning their backs on religion; it's already turned its back on us.

Hanna Bartoletti

So, there is hope, despite all. As humanity continues to move forward and further from religion, many will begin to understand and accept others more freely because they will no longer have an excuse to be bigoted. Our evolution away from religion holds the promise of a more understanding and inclusive future for all.

Hannah, 19, attends Penn State University and is majoring in biotechnology.

Braelyn Caldwell

The decline in religious engagement might be due to the distrust of religious institutions. Over the years, reports of sexual abuse from clergy members have been increasing. No one wants to be a part of an institution that frequently involves itself with sexual abuse.

The religious double standards and moral inconsistencies are another issue. Numerous instances exist when Christians be-

have negatively against those who defy their beliefs, whether it be in relation to the person's gender identity or sexual orientation. To describe how Christian "love" may take the form of hatred, the expression "There's no hate like Christian love" was created.

Braelyn, 21, attends Texas A&M University and is majoring in psychology.

Jasper Chiguma Jr.

As a young Black gay man, I've witnessed the damage that religion has done in the Black community firsthand, Christianity and Islam especially. It is way too common for Black gay men to adopt trauma from the church, forcing them to stay inside the closet for years. They've internalized the ram-

Jasper Chiguma Jr.

blings throughout their childhood from parents, friends, and churchgoers about the bible and Quran condemning homosexual acts, so much to the point where they can't find it in themselves to live in their truth as gay men.

Just last week, I came across a viral video of a priest degrading rape victims during a sermon, claiming they deserved to be violated because of the revealing clothes they were wearing. I was left stunned and disgusted, reminding me of why I never allowed myself to be brainwashed by Christianity. Homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, racism, rape culture and plain bigotry run rampant in the church — an institution built on faith, love and eternal salvation.

Gen Z refuses to be indoctrinated by lies any longer.

Jasper, 20, attends SUNY Broome Community College.

Melia Moorman

Unlike earlier generations when religious identity was frequently inherited or culturally forced, a lot of young people today feel free to define their own views rather than society expectations. The personal tendency creates an atmosphere in which challenging and rejecting belief systems is not only acceptable but also praised as a sign of genuineness.

Young people now lack confidence and credibility in religious institutions because of scandals, arrogance and disagreements. Numerous incidents of clergy abuse, prejudice and politicization of religion have turned many people off of conventional religious institutions. As such, Gen Z is moving more and more away from religious organizations to the advantage of more social and inclusive belief systems.

Melia, 19, attends University of Louisville, where she is majoring in dental hygiene and public health.

Nicholas Spinetta

Highly multicultural societies tend to trend toward secularism, and the amount of information an average Gen Z individual is exposed to is much larger than almost everyone experienced even a generation ago. This flood of differing viewpoints may make it more difficult to maintain strong religious beliefs, or it

may increase an individual's faith in them, due to the rebound effect.

Of course, Gen Z must have more of a say in the ruling political classes of America — a role which is likely impossible to achieve while the Baby Boomer generation still holds such a large degree of economic and political sway.

We are currently entering into a new era of American politics — one hopefully defined not by traditionalism, but by a coalition of secular interests working for the betterment of everyone, no matter their religious status.

Nicholas, 23, attends University of Rhode Island and is majoring in interdisciplinary neuroscience.

Michael Whittaker

Religion is nothing but an institution that is used by powerful people to control

Michael Whittaker

others, and I think that it is very important that my generation has realized this. Gen Z is already starting to make waves in society with our more practical worldview. We are shifting the power dynamic in the workforce because we do not subscribe to the Christian moral philosophy of blind servitude.

Gen Z has realized the truth behind how religion is used to control and oppress people, and we are unafraid of altering societal standards and practices in accordance with our secular values. We are a generation of great self-reflection and we take action.

Michael, 24, attends South Mountain Community College and is majoring in biomedical engineering.

Students earn FFRF cash awards through SSA

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

This year's winners are:

Eli — Al Luneman Student Activist Award (\$1,000).

Humberto — Cliff Richards Memorial Student Activist Award (\$1,000).

Oluwaseye — Cliff Richards Memorial Student Activist Award (\$1,000).

Ve — Cliff Richards Memorial Student Activist Award (\$1,000).

Mira — Yip Harburg Lyric Foundation Student Scholarship (\$1,000).

FFRF has a variety of scholarships available to give directly for exceptional student activism, as well. If you know of any student who is actively helping to uphold state/church separation or fighting for the rights of nonbelievers, please use the form at ffrf.us/nominate.

Al Luneman Student Activist Award

Eli

Chaska (Minn.) High School

Eli is a passionate student at Chaska High School who plans to graduate college with a degree in political science and potentially attend law school to become a politician.



Eli

His ultimate aim is to use his political influence to bring positive change, particularly by standing up to Christian nationalist politicians and promoting respect and kindness for all people — not for religious rewards, but because it's simply the right thing to do. Eli's commitment to social justice drives his desire to make people feel valued and to fight against the persecution of minority groups.

Raised in a world where religion often justifies bigotry, Eli became disillusioned by the way religion is used to target marginalized groups, especially the LGBTQ+ community. This deepened his secular beliefs and solidified his commitment to fighting religiously motivated hate. He believes that secularism, free from religious doctrines, provides a more inclusive and accepting environment for everyone, particularly for LGBTQ+ individuals like himself.

Eli has already proven himself to be an effective advocate for secular and inter-sectional causes. For over a year, he has worked tirelessly to move his school district's graduation ceremonies away from a discriminatory megachurch. Through petitions, school board meetings, and engaging with local media and advocacy organizations like the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Eli successfully pushed the district to change the graduation venue to a more inclusive, secular location. Additionally, he has been an active ally in the fight against racial injustice in his community, even speaking at school board meetings and sharing his thoughts with Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison during a discussion about racism in his district.

Through his activism and knowledge of politics, Eli is determined to protect minority groups and contribute to a future where everyone is treated with respect, without the influence of religious bigotry.

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

Cliff Richards Memorial Student Scholarship

Humberto

University of Houston

Humberto, a student at the University of Houston majoring in biomedical engineering, is driven by a passion for research and a commitment to improving



Humberto

human well-being through technological advancements. They aspire to work in bioengineering, a field that has already enabled breakthroughs like helping paraplegics walk and the blind see. Humberto's dream is to contribute to this innovative field by developing technologies that enhance the quality of life for people around the world.

Humberto's journey toward secularism began during their teenage years in Venezuela, where they grew up in a Catholic household. Despite being immersed in religious traditions, Humberto's growing curiosity about science and the empirical approach it offered led them to question the religious doctrines they were raised with. As their interest in scientific inquiry deepened, Humberto found themselves increasingly at odds with the dogmatic beliefs of their upbringing, leading them to embrace secularism. For Humberto, secularism provides a philosophical framework that values reason, evidence-based knowledge, and the freedom to explore ideas without religious constraints.

Founding the Secular Student Alliance chapter at Lone Star College was a turning point for Humberto's activism. The chapter became a platform for advocating the separation of church and state and fostering open dialogue about secular values. Humberto organized speaker panels on topics ranging from science literacy to the importance of evidence-based decision-making in public policy. They also led student forums where participants could openly discuss religion, secularism, and contentious issues like abortion in a safe, respectful environment.

Humberto's advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights is closely tied to their secular identity. Having grown up in a deeply religious environment where homophobic attitudes were prevalent, Humberto experienced the painful intersection of personal identity and societal expectations. Their commitment to secularism stems from the desire for a society where individuals are not judged or discriminated against based on their sexual orientation. This belief has driven their efforts to promote inclusion and equality through workshops, collaborations with LGBTQ+ organizations, and participation in Pride events.

Humberto's activism extends beyond LGBTQ+ and secular issues. They are deeply committed to humanitarian causes, including raising awareness about the ongoing conflict in Gaza.

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

Cliff Richards Memorial Student Scholarship

Oluwaseye

Morgan State University

Oluwaseye is a dedicated student at Morgan State University, pursuing a bachelor of science degree in biology while maintaining a stellar 4.0 GPA. Having



Oluwaseye

earned an associate degree from the Community College of Baltimore County, she has further enriched her academic experience through participation in the Summer Premedical Academic Enrichment Program at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. There, Oluwaseye honed her skills in scientific writing, public speaking and collaborative learning. Her research has focused on critical issues like racial disparities in maternal health and the mental health of Black women during the Covid-19 pandemic, reflecting her passion for addressing societal inequities through science.

Oluwaseye's secular identity is deeply intertwined with her commitment to scientific rationality, human-centered ethics, and a rejection of supernatural explanations. She arrived at secularism through a careful examination of evidence and reason, believing that empirical knowledge should guide decisions, particularly in science and medicine. This secular outlook informs her approach to her studies, her activism and her community engagement, where she advocates for evidence-based solutions that promote well-being and equality.

As a Black woman in STEM, Oluwaseye's identity intersects with her secularism in profound ways. Her experiences navigating systemic challenges and biases have heightened her awareness of social justice issues, inspiring her to advocate for marginalized communities. This intersectionality fuels her commitment to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion within both the scientific and secular communities.

Oluwaseye's activism extends beyond STEM. She is actively involved with the Students Open to Unique Love (SOUL) organization and the NAACP, where she advocates for LGBTQ+ rights and civil rights. As president of the Women in Pre-Med Chapter at Morgan State and vice president of mentorship at the Student Research Center, she has organized initiatives to support women in science and promote diversity in research.

By championing secular values, Oluwaseye hopes to foster a more inclusive, evidence-based, and humanistic society.

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

Cliff Richards Memorial Student Scholarship

Ve

Howard University

Ve, a journalism major at Howard University, is driven by the mission to use their journalistic skills to amplify marginalized



Ve

voices and fight for social change. As a Black-Trinidadian American of Indian descent, and a non-binary person living in South Florida, Ve witnesses first-hand the increasing threats to the rights and visibility of LGBTQ+ people of color. This personal experience fuels their commitment to spread awareness of these injustices and work toward ending them.

A dedicated humanitarian, Ve is passionate about equality and believes in the power of storytelling to effect positive social change. Through their podcast, "Happy

Black Narrative," Ve highlights and uplifts the experiences of Black, queer women and nonbinary individuals, creating a platform that empowers those whose voices are often silenced. One of their most impactful contributions to activism was attending a protest outside the Capitol following the overturn of Roe v. Wade. Leveraging their journalism skills, Ve interviewed activists and published their stories on the podcast to raise awareness about how this issue disproportionately impacts people of color and other marginalized communities.

At Howard, Ve is also involved with the unofficial chapter of Action Activists, a nonprofit organization that empowers youth activism. Currently, they are working with the group to organize protests in support of Palestine, collaborating with other campus organizations to further the cause. With Howard's prime location in Washington, D.C., Ve and their peers plan to take to the streets, ensuring their voices are heard on the national stage.

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

Yip Harburg Lyric Foundation Scholarship

Mira

Rhode Island School of Design

Mira, a new student at the Rhode Island School of Design, spent the first 12 years of her life in Turkey before moving



Mira

to the U.S. to pursue her passion for the arts. Raised in a family of musicians, Mira has always felt drawn to creative expression and has now begun her journey at the RISD, her dream institution. Mira plans to major in painting and later pursue a master's degree that deepens her expertise in the field, with a goal of becoming a professional artist.

Mira's secular identity has been shaped by her experiences growing up in Turkey, where she was required to take mandatory religion classes focused solely on Islamic teachings for six years. She believes this curriculum deprived students of religious freedom and failed to reflect the diversity of beliefs in the world. Mira believes that her peers should have the freedom to explore various faiths through optional courses, rather than being forced to study Islam for the standardized university exam. Her frustration with the limitations of this curriculum fueled her activism from an early age. She joined protests alongside educators and fellow students, advocating for the government to make these classes optional, include courses on other religions, and create a more inclusive curriculum. Although the issue remains unresolved, her activism has solidified her commitment to secularism.

Having lived in both Turkey and the United States, Mira's perspective has been broadened by meeting people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. These experiences have reinforced her belief in the importance of promoting a secular government that protects religious freedom for all, ensuring individuals have the right to practice or abstain from religion. On and off-campus, Mira continues to support initiatives that foster understanding of different beliefs and encourage tolerance in diverse communities.

FFRF thanks the Yip Harburg Lyric Foundation for this scholarship.

LETTERBOX

Expectations exceeded at Denver convention

Many kudos on a wonderful convention in Denver. I'm so happy I finally got to my first one, thanks to your bringing it to my hometown. My expectations were high, but were exceeded. The speakers were inspiring, knowledgeable, passionate and moving — to both laughter and tears. It's so nice to be able to relax among kindreds and not have to monitor my every word.

Gosh, you guys really work hard! [Next year's convention in] Myrtle Beach is on my calendar.
Colorado

FFRF ad, index listing were pleasant surprises

Hey, what a surprise! While looking at the current issue of *The Nation*, I saw the gorgeous FFRF advertisement on the back page. What a beauty!

Then, while scanning the Harper's Index listings from its September issue, I saw these words/number listed: "[Percent] who describe themselves as freethinkers: 36."

Pennsylvania

'Fantasy-free' also a good freethinker term

While I like the term "religion-free," sometimes I've used the term "fantasy-free." I'm defining a fantasy as a belief in something, the existence of which hasn't been proven either true or false. A belief in any of the many gods, Santa Claus or Mickey Mouse fall into this category.

Overall, a religion, to me, is a fantasy world. The Vatican, for example, is a theme park for Catholicism. Going there is on the same level as visiting the Creation Museum, the Ark Encounter or Disney World.

Michigan

'Tax the church' T-shirt gets positive responses

I've been wearing atheist T-shirts for 30 years, but I have never experienced the overwhelming positive responses I've received from wearing FFRF's "Tax the Church" T-shirt. In one day, while out and about, six different people said "great shirt" or words to similar effect.

I think the boldness and brevity of the message, combined with the general mood of citizens, has struck a nerve. . . and the shirt looks and feels good!

Now, some people might say: "Well, if you tax the church, the church might get involved in politics." To which I would reply: "Oh, yeah, like they aren't already?!"

Texas

All of us imbue the world with our spirit work

Like many of us, I wanted to experience the spiritual aspects of my life, but couldn't buy the stories that came along with any of the many religions out there. I have decided that the human spirit, our nonmaterial essence,

Friendly neighborhood atheists



On Aug. 25, a few of FFRF South Central Wisconsin chapter members marched in the Good Neighbor Festival parade in Middleton, Wis., including, from left to right, Flynn Dustrud, Bob McLaughlin, Tom Cara and Sue Schuetz.

"Though we heard a 'boo' and noticed one person giving us a thumbs down, the overall response was very good from parade watchers," chapter President Tom Cara writes. "Of course, those who were not in support of our message obviously do not understand the importance of maintaining state/church separation."

is that energy we give to the Earth with every action we take. When we smile at someone or plant a flower or design a city, that action carries with it our personal spirit, our soul work, and that energy stays in the world forever. It is that part of us that lives on long after our body is gone and may even multiply through time.

More than 100 billion people have walked on this planet and every one of them has left a spiritual legacy that still lives on. Almost everything that we depend on in the modern world is the personal and spiritual soul work of those people that came before us.

We may seek new experiences and accumulate things to make life easier, but I think our spirit self is only experienced through the process of giving to the world or just to be in the moment, with body and mind open to your environment — for that is where the spirit of the ages exists.

I think that a sufficient and sum total of the spiritual world is contained in the people and environment around us. And on occasions when I realize this, the world takes on a special glow.

Colorado

Donation is because of FFRF's dedication

Thanks to the IRA RMD/QCD charitable donation option again this year, I'm happy to be making a special one-time donation to FFRF.

I'm pleased to be doing this because of the outstanding work FFRF is spearheading in so many areas. Please look at this contribution as a "thank you" for your dedication.

You make me proud to be a Lifetime member of FFRF! I read all of your emails and I read *Freethought Today* from cover to cover.

Thanks for making FFRF such a smart, active, passionate leader of American atheism.

Georgia

Will we ever put gods, religion behind us?

Religious conflict has been a worldwide reality — Buddhist vs. Muslim, Catholics vs. Jews, Protestants vs. Catholics, Hindu vs. Muslim, and so on through the ages. For thousands of years, religions have played a role in oppression and war.

Can humanity move beyond this phase of development and recognize that we are more similar than different?

Is it time yet to consider all of humanity equally worthy? When will it be time for cooperation, not competition and war? Are we able to leave gods behind and step into a new phase of human development?

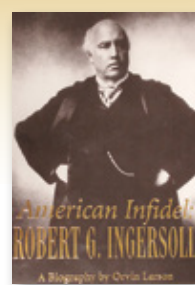
California

Glad to read Trump adviser outed as child offender

It made my day to read in the Black Collar Crime section in the September issue about Robert Morris, founding pastor of Gateway Church in Texas, who was on Donald Trump's 2016 "evangelical advisory board." How appropriate that Morris was "outed" as a child sex offender and was ultimately forced to resign. Thank you, FFRF, for digging up this information. I'm still smiling!

Florida

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll



By Orvin Larson

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

— 316 pages / PB

\$15 Item #FB18

Published by FFRF

Buy it from FFRF online
@ ffrf.org/shop

FFRF steps in so we don't face retaliation

I wanted to send my personal thanks to FFRF for identifying a widespread issue in my county school system. I am a college instructor in the county, and my husband is a high school teacher in the system. We have three daughters currently in the system, at an elementary school, middle school and high school. They are not, nor is my husband, at one of the [name withheld] schools, but my girls come home at least once a week appalled.

One week, an elementary science teacher told my daughter's class that the textbook might say Earth is approximately 4.5 billion years old, but the teacher said she didn't believe that, and therefore they didn't have to either because the bible says otherwise.

Another daughter came home telling us that a middle school teacher got into it with a girl for a minor dress code violation and scolded her while quoting scripture and shaming her for tempting boys sexually. My daughter in high school is lucky enough to have her dad's class as a safe space and is also fearless in sharing her own strong views.

All of my girls have witnessed, experienced and been made to feel silenced and othered, and have had to watch everything they say for fear of retaliation on grades or social interactions — not from students, but from teachers in this school system.

My husband and I have always been open with them that this is the culture where we live, we are members of a fairly progressive Episcopal church, specifically so our girls can tell proselytizers they have a "church home" and were baptized as infants. Also, it allows them to become fluent in the language of Protestant, evangelical Christianity that my husband and I have both left, so they can code switch as needed.

It is exhausting living, working, teaching and parenting in our county. But, if all of us progressives left, those who speak up against religious, mental, emotional and constitutional abuses would have no allies. My husband and I are known as "the liberals" at our schools, but we are very careful because we need to pay bills and feed our kids.

So, thank you so much to FFRF for doing something neither of us can

Pansy Freethinker Mug

Glazed brilliant blue ceramic handcrafted mug with pansy medallion (symbol of freethought). American-made. 12 fl. oz.

\$35 each

Item #MU04

\$60 for two



Prices include substantial shipping costs per mug.

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

do without extreme retaliation. I just wanted to make sure you had a positive response to this from someone who actually lives in our county.
Name and state withheld

There were so many great columns in Sept. issue

I always enjoy Freethought Today, but the September issue was a masterpiece. Barbara Walker's "How patriarchal religion suppressed sexuality" article was fascinating, and I especially appreciated the info about fish-eating Friday. I knew that the Catholic Church adopted many pagan holidays (e.g., making the winter solstice celebration into Christmas), but I didn't know that fish on Friday was originally a fertility rite. That one had me laughing hard enough to cry. The column "U.S. secularists are unique political force" was also enlightening. I knew secular and nonreligious were more different than most people think, but the article made many things clear. As I expected, I am definitely in with the secular group, except for one thing — I do endorse free speech for all, but I do not endorse having social forums for dangerous groups. We do not need places for people to get together and plan, or even just encourage, violence. (I don't endorse shouting "fire" in a crowded theater, either.)

Roger Lindsay's article ("Discussing religion isn't all pie in the sky") also resonated, with one exception. I never told my parents I lost my belief in God, but it had nothing to do with hurting their feelings by seeming to condemn them. It was simply because it would have hurt them to think I "lost my way." I think you can explain your differences with religious doctrine without implying that you condemn the religious. People are entitled to have their own opinions about how to respond to the problems with religion, and some religious people are very good people indeed. My mom would not have been angry with me, or felt I was condemning her, she just would have been made very sad by my choice, and I did not want to make her sad.

Finally, the article by Steven Green ("How two friends shaped state/church separation") was a thought-provoker. If James Madison thought that freedom of conscience is an absolute right, he might have been on the side of the bak-

Rep. Lofgren speaks at SF Bay Chapter




Photos by Dana Treadwell

Rep. Zoe Lofgren, center, chatted with SF Bay Chapter leaders Walt Bilofsky and Dana Treadwell following her speech.

Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., one of the new members of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, spoke to members of FFRF's San Francisco Bay Chapter on Sept. 7 in San Jose.

The event was co-sponsored by the Atheist Community of San Jose and hosted by the Billy DeFrank LGBTQ+ Community Center, which is also the recipient of the SF Bay Chapter's 2024 charitable grant.

FFRF Member Dick Hewetson enjoys his meeting with Rep. Zoe Lofgren.

LGBTQ-plus folks are natural partners for FFRF, since they are among those most victimized by the intrusion of religious beliefs into government.

About 60 members of all three organizations heard Rep. Lofgren discuss the dangers of Christian nationalists, who seek unconstitutional privilege over other religion followers as well as nonbelievers.

ers, etc., who do not want to serve gays. I believe that your freedom of religion ends when it might harm me, but defining harm has proven difficult. I think the only clear case is something like the doctors who want to refuse to treat emergency cases if the patient is gay. I can't understand that degree of hatred, but such bigots do exist. The problem is in what happens if you force people to do what they don't want to do. How well will that doctor care for that patient? How good of a cake will that baker make? Why would someone want to buy a cake from a bigot anyway? However, in

an emergency, beggars can't be choosers. If we're going to insist that doctors provide care, we should specify that it must be quality care — and be prepared to enforce that requirement — and as soon as another qualified doctor is available, the patient should be transferred. I would not want to depend on fear of punishment to ensure the quality of MY medical care. Anyway, once again, the September issue of Freethought Today was fabulous. I'm even more impressed than usual. Keep up the good work!
Colorado

Bibles, commandments won't stop violence

Headline: "Minnesota man gets 33 years for fatally stabbing wife at bible study." Yet, states like Oklahoma (because of state schools Superintendent Ryan Walters) think that forcing the bible into the curriculum is inherently a good idea. And governors such as Louisiana's Jeff Landry think that merely posting the Ten Commandments will magically prevent violence.
Pennsylvania

CRANKMAIL

In this special edition of Crankmail, we are presenting comments from just one person, who calls himself "Dave from Canada." Each of these missives was from separate phone calls all made within 24 hours of each other in September.

Stop trying to impose your beliefs on everyone else. You're preying on innocent people by taking their money.

Drop dead.

...
 Atheists are fools. The fool says in his heart "there is no god." You ever hear that before?
 ...

If it wasn't for us philanthropists, you people would be bankrupt. If this was a communist nation, you wouldn't have freedom of thought if you're a thinking person, but you're stupid!

What are you going to do when you die. Nothing?

We have answers. We are the creatures of God. You're atheist, skeptics or agnostics. All three of you are gonna die. We Christians come back from the dead and we rule the world. We're the first and you're the last.

I would like to talk to you and we'll argue about why you are wrong. Christianity is not a religion. It says that in James, which is a book in the book of books. Obviously, you're not interested in that. You ever heard of spiritual doctors? Witch doctors? You are not educated.

...
 You do not know education. You do not know charity. You haven't studied the bible.
 ...

Do you know in Futurist magazine, they said in a book that libraries were started by Christians. Not by atheists. Do you claim to be intelligent? You are not.

The Soviets went up to space to look for God and said there is no god there. Why? They didn't go high enough. They should have gone higher in space. They could have found him, but they didn't.

...
 I think we have touched a nerve in you. Why are you against Christians? Why? You should be together in the same planet and not be irritated by each other. What's your reason for not believing in God? Whatever your reason is, it's wrong.

Crossword answers

T	O	G	S		A	S	H		I	V	E			
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FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION
 P.O. Box 750 • Madison, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • ffrf.org

What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

Founded in 1978 as a national organization of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics), the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc., works to keep state and church separate and to educate the public about the views of nontheists. FFRF has more than 40,000 members.

FFRF is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and donations are tax deductible for income tax purposes. FFRF's email address is info@ffrf.org. Please include your name and physical mailing address with all email correspondence.

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

Cryptogram answer

Worshipping a cross is no different than worshipping a tree, a rock or the stars.
 — Oliver Markus Malloy

Project 2025 wants to bring back ‘blue laws’

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” — Exodus 20:8–11

Sunday used to be the dreariest day of the week. Ask me.

I was a child in the 1960s when “blue laws” made everyone blue. I remember, especially in the coldest days of winter, feeling like I was under house arrest on Sundays. Now the creators of scary Project 2025 want to close down Sundays again, and America should be forewarned and refuse.

Blue laws started to be repealed by the 1970s, and life opened up. Sunday went from a day where the only thing



Annie Laurie Gaylor

we children could look forward to was the “Wonderful World of Disney” on TV that night to a second day of the “weekend.” More importantly, working folk didn’t have to do all their grocery shopping, errands, prescription-filling or couch-hunting over one very busy Saturday — also the only day they could take school-aged children out for ice cream, amusement rides or to buy new shoes. Americans could now run errands, pick up prescriptions, fill fridges and even go to the movies on Sundays.

I was rudely reminded of how awful Sundays could be on a cold summer day in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1975, where it was my misfortune to end up on “the Sabbath” when traveling with my cousin. Blue laws still prevailed in that rigid then-Protestant stronghold. The youth hostel kicked everyone out almost as soon as we were woken up very early, and we couldn’t get back in until dinnertime. We wandered along the cobblestones past closed tea shops along the Royal Mile, growing hungrier, colder and thirstier. Finally in the late afternoon, we realized the train station was open, where we got some of that stewed tea Scotland excels in. We gratefully filed back into the youth hostel 12 hours after we left it, happy to say goodbye to Sunday in Scotland.

Today, we take for granted that you can do many of the things on Sunday that you can do on other days, perhaps reduced hours notwithstanding. Will this still be the case if Project 2025 becomes a reality? Not if the Heritage Foundation gets its way. Let’s turn to page 589 of Project 2025, to a subsection titled “Sabbath Rest.”



“God ordained the Sabbath as a day of rest, and until very recently the Judeo-Christian tradition sought to honor that mandate by moral and legal regulation of work on that day,” states the document. “Moreover, a shared day off makes

it possible for families and communities to enjoy time off together, rather than as atomized individuals, and provides a healthier cadence of life for everyone. Unfortunately, the communal day of rest has eroded under the pressures of consumerism and secularism, especially for low-income workers.”

The document continues: “That day would default to Sunday, except for employers with a sincere religious observance of a Sabbath at a different time (e.g., Friday sundown to Saturday sundown); the obligation would transfer to that period instead.”

The project calls for Congress to encourage “communal rest” (sounds kinky!) by amending the Fair Labor Standards Act to repeal overtime, except to require time-and-a-half pay for working on “the Sabbath” regardless of whether someone is truly working overtime. It concedes this would “lead to higher costs and limited access to goods and services and reduce work available on the Sabbath,” but after all, “the proper role of government in helping to enable individuals to practice their religion is to reduce barriers to work options and to fruitful employer and employee relations.”

Project 2025 assures us that churches, naturally, would, in most instances, be exempt from this rule! It pretends to care about workers, but clearly the real goal is to get more bodies back into churches because of less competition.

The freethought movement has

played a historic role in fighting blue laws. In researching “Women Without Superstition: The Collected Writings of Women Freethinkers of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” I came across “Shall the World’s Fair Be Closed on Sun-

day?” by pioneering 19th-century feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Congress had voted to withhold appropriations to the 1893 Fair in Chicago if it opened on Sundays, after being petitioned by 100,000 Americans, mostly — to Stanton’s chagrin — “concerned women.”

Stanton felt so passionately about this state/church problem that she undertook a personal crusade to circulate her pamphlet objecting to the Sunday closing of the fair, which was reprinted in various newspapers. She ably mustered quotes and opinions from the New Testament and church leaders such as Calvin and Luther, as well as from contemporaries, to disprove the claims of the Sabbatarians. Neither Jesus nor Paul advocated keeping the Sabbath, Calvin deferred a sermon to attend a Sunday play and Martin Luther favored dancing on Sunday rather than observing a Jewish code. The Sunday closing laws, she averred, were antithetical to family happiness and morality. She launched her broadside at a time when the vote was being reconsidered — and her efforts paid off. Although many exhibits were closed, the World Fair as a whole stayed open on Sundays.

As Stanton wrote, “It is in very bad taste as well as grossly unjust, for Christians, comprising as they do, so very small a portion of the human family, to force their religious observances on representatives of all the nations on the Earth.”

“It has been our boast that we have no state religion, that here all sects oc-

“It’s fine if fanatics take ‘the Sabbath’ seriously, but they can’t legislate it in a secular democracy.”

cupy a common ground, that all faiths are equally respected,” Stanton added. “Then why should the Sunday of the Christian be more binding than that of the Jew, the Quaker, the Seventh-day Baptist, or of that increasingly large class of educated, liberal-minded people who do not believe in any penal Sundays, or imposed religious test, but who do believe in a change of employment one day in seven, when those who do the hard work of the world shall have free access to all the libraries, the galleries of art, the museums, the concerts and the public parks, there to enjoy whatever innocent amusements they may desire.”

She concluded: “This act of Congress is a fatal blow at one of the vital principles of our Government and should be resisted by all who know the danger of recognizing any union in State and Church.”

Sabbath laws of course have their origins in the bible. The version of the Fourth Commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,” quoted at the start of this essay goes on to say: “Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God; in it thou shalt not do any work . . . For in six days the Lord made heaven and Earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it.” Yes, the biblical deity has an uneasy vanity and narcissistically needs to be worshiped and obeyed by compliance with his Sabbath requirements. But that’s not all.

As most freethinkers familiar with the bible know, there are several versions of the Ten Commandments. The version of the Fourth Commandment laid out in Exodus 34 is followed by more detailed instructions in the following chapter, to wit: “Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be to you an holy day, a Sabbath of rest to the Lord: Whosoever doeth work therein shall be put to death.” (Exodus 35:2)

And that’s precisely what happens to an unlucky man found gathering sticks on the Sabbath, according to Numbers 15:23–36. The Lord says to Moses, “The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones.” The passage duly reports that the congregation stoned him, “and he died.”

When Dan was researching his book “GOD: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction,” he discovered that next to idolatry, the second most common “evil” referred to in the Old Testament is breaking the Sabbath. (The third was interreligious marriage; none of these is immoral, much less evil.)

I suppose we should feel fortunate that Project 2025 doesn’t command the death penalty . . . yet, for working on “the Sabbath.” It’s fine if fanatics take “the Sabbath” seriously, but they can’t legislate it in a secular democracy.

Who has the time to plow through 900-plus pages of the bureaucratic authoritarianism that is Project 2025? Not many of us — and that’s what its creators are banking on. The dire political consequences of Project 2025, such as eliminating checks and balances and amassing all regulatory power in the White House, may seem like remote threats. But the threat to our Sundays is personal. Please help the Freedom From Religion Foundation get out the word about what will happen to our weekends if we fail to stop Project 2025.

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

FFRF'S

Ask an Atheist

Wednesdays
at Noon (Central)*

On Facebook Live

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Slightly irreverent views, news, music & interviews

FFRF.ORG **FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION**

To watch videos of the speeches, or to see more photos from the convention, go to: ffrf.us/con24.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

During a break in the FFRF convention, about 60 members walked to the nearby site of FFRF's "Keep Freedom Alive" billboard in downtown Denver on Sept. 27. FFRF's 47th annual convention had 666 (!) attendees from 46 states, Canada, UK and Nepal. (And special thanks to the Denver chapter, which underwrote this billboard!)



Photo by Chris Line

Chauncey Williams (Colo.) and Mars de la Tour, who directs the FFRF Valley of the Sun chapter in Phoenix, chat during a break at the convention.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

A teenage member keeps her cute little dog in her backpack as she makes her way through the crowd.

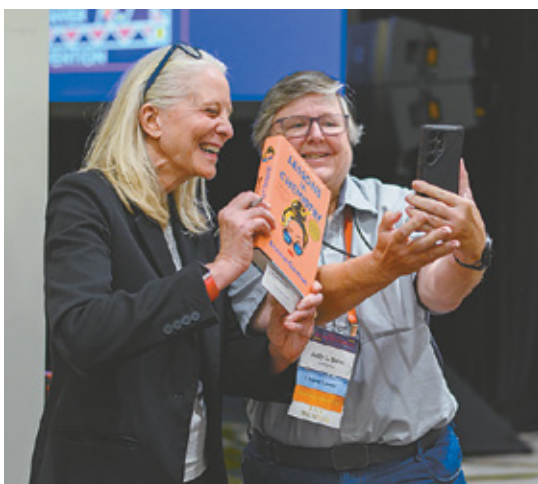


Photo by Chris Line

Author Bonnie Garmus poses with her best-selling novel for a selfie with FFRF Sacramento Chapter President Judy Saint.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Convention attendees talk with Brandon Wolf, who spoke at the convention on behalf of the Human Rights Campaign, and signed copies of his book about surviving the Pulse nightclub mass shooting.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Sheila Hoover (Pa.) and Jessie Effing-Devine (Ariz.) pose for a photo during a reception.

AWARDS



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Author and columnist Katherine Stewart, left, earned FFRF's Freethought Heroine Award, which was designed by FFRF Member Kelly Houle, right.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Best-selling author Bonnie Garmus, right, was presented with the Emperor Has No Clothes Award by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

New York Times columnist Charles Blow, right, is handed the Emperor Has No Clothes Award from FFRF Co-President Dan Barker.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

New York Times columnist Michelle Goldberg, right, receives the Clarence Darrow Award from FFRF Director of Operations Lisa Strand.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Brandon Wolf, right, accepts the Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism Award and \$50,000 on behalf of Human Rights Campaign. FFRF Board Member Todd Peissig presented the award.

CANDIDS



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF's Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh Joshi helps a member get her registration materials.



Photo by Chris Line

Margaret Downey (Pa.) gets a hug from FFRF Bookkeeper Eleanor McEntee at the start of the convention.



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF IT Director Scott Knickelbine keeps an eye on the technical aspects of the convention.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Jessie Effing-Devine (Va.), Steve and Pam Solomon (Mo.) and Kelly Houle (Ariz.) gather for a portrait. Steve Solomon was one of the photographers at the convention.



Photo by Chris Line

The path from the convention hall to the hotel rooms was linked by a street overpass.



Photo by Chris Line

Convention speakers Prof. Josh Cowen, Dr. Bradley Onishi and Katherine Stewart chat during the Friday dinner.

SPEAKERS

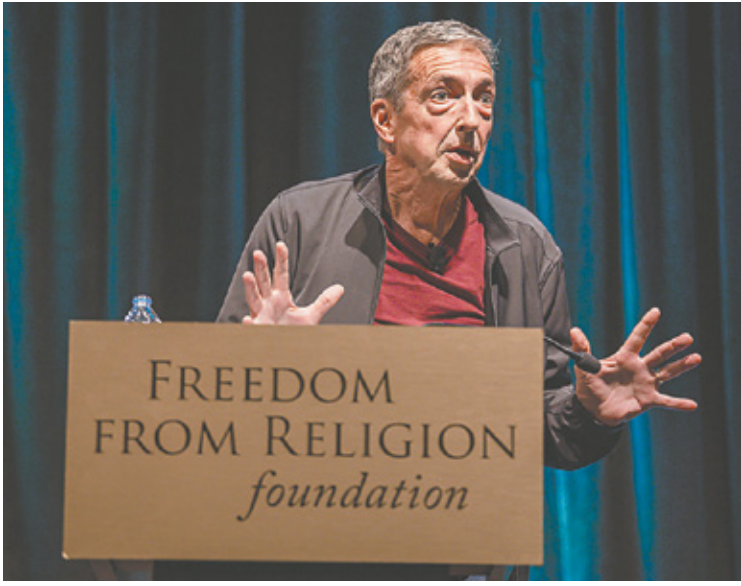


Photo by Kyle Hilker

Political commentator and broadcaster Ron Reagan closed out the Friday program with his speech, "The Present Moment," which was both enlightening and entertaining.

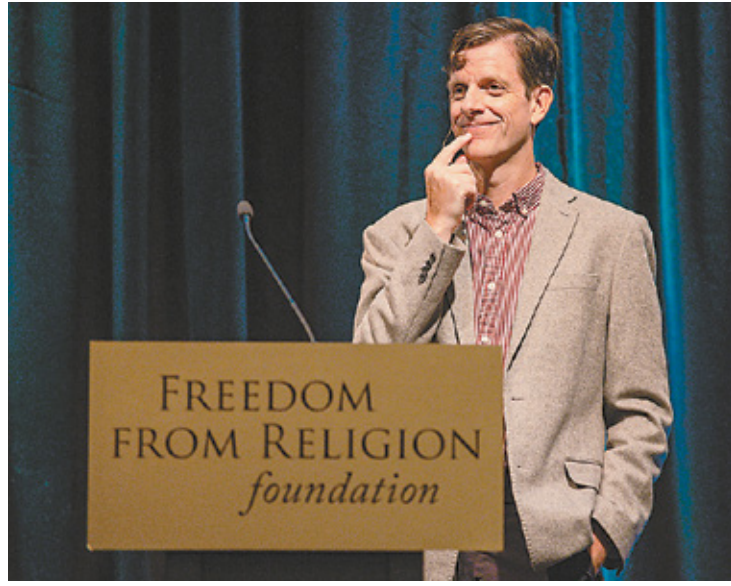


Photo by Kyle Hilker

Sociologist and University of Tampa Professor Ryan T. Cragun's speech was titled, "Goodbye Religion: The Causes and Consequences of Secularization."



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Michigan State University Professor Josh Cowen spoke about "The Privateers: How Billionaires Created a Culture War and Sold School Vouchers."



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne, left, and FFRF State Advocacy Specialist Ryan Dudley, right, bookend the three members of the secular legislative panel: Oklahoma state Rep. Mickey Dollens and Colorado state Reps. Judy Amibile and Brianna Titone.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Actor Jon Huertas spoke on the topic of "Blacks and Latinos: Unshackling Ourselves from Holy Handcuffs."



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Washington Post contributing columnist and author Kate Cohen spoke about "Tampon Tim and the Long Reach of Religion."



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Educator and author Dr. Bradley Onishi talked on the topic of "Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism — And What Comes Next."

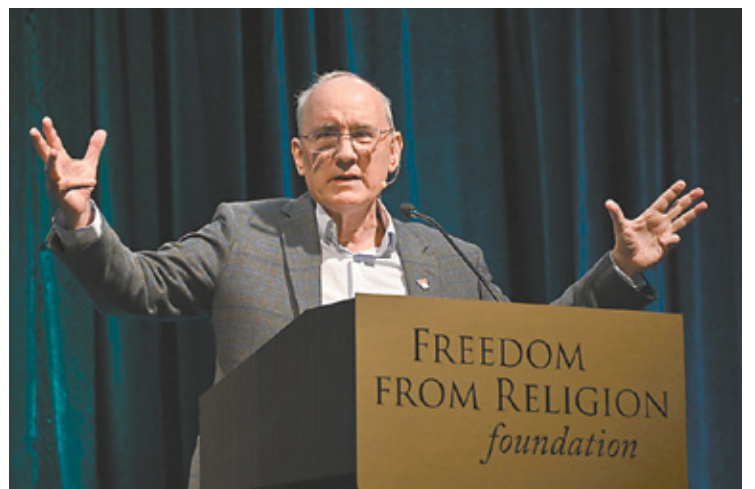


Photo by Steve Solomon

FFRF Co-President Dan Barker discussed his new book, "Contraduction."



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Finn Mosher, winner of FFRF's 2024 high school essay contest, read his award-winning essay, "The Good Book or the textbook?"



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Ivy Nichols, one of the top winners in FFRF's high school essay contest, read her essay, "One less barrier."



Photo by Steve Solomon

Rita Nyamkimah, who took first place in FFRF's 2024 BIPOC student essay contest, read her award-winning essay, "Gods of her people."

THURSDAY RECEPTION



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Nancy McClements (Wis.), Murray Urquhart (Wash.), Dr. Grisel Lopez-Escobar (Fla.) and Ian Gaylor (Wis.) smile for the camera.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

David Jon Krohn (Ohio), Larry R. Wright (Ill.) and Grace Shaver (Wyo.) enjoy the convention's opening reception on Sept. 26.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Dana Treadwell (Calif.), Shana Fields (Pa.) and Judy Saint (Calif.). Judy directs the Greater Sacramento chapter.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Doug and Deborah Hilpipre (Ill.) and FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, center.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

FFRF IT Helpdesk Specialist Sheryl Lindmeier and Nick McManus (Mich.) give a thumbs up to the convention.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Convention speaker Kate Cohen chats with a member while in the food line.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Convention attendees fill their plates with delicious food.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Pat Broadbent, Claudette StPierre and Michael Weber worked the welcome table for the Metro Denver Chapter.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Aleta and Carl Ledendecker are regulars at FFRF conventions. Aleta directs the FFRF East Tennessee chapter.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Mark Davis (Ohio) holds up one of the convention T-shirts, designed by FFRF Graphic Designer Jake Swenson.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

FFRF staff are busy helping get members signed in to the convention.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Rick and Annie Hill made their way from California to attend the convention.

CLEAN MONEY DRAWING

Photo by Kyle Hillker



The winners of the “clean money” drawing are: Front row — Shirley Scribner (Mo.), Kate Dieble (Ohio), Marilyn Nienkirk (Minn.), Aleta Ledendecker (Tenn.) and Jo Halverson (Ga.). Back row — Mark Haskett (Calif.), Larry R. Wright, Chauncey Williams (Colo.), Jack Church (Iowa) and Izzy Salcedo (Ill.)



Photo by Chris Line

“Clean money” drawing emcee Buzz Kemper holds up a bill to be won as student essay winner Finn Mosher calls out the winning name.



Photo by Chris Line

Kristina McHaney (Calif.) pulls a winning ticket out of the drum to announce a “clean money” winner. (Behind Buzz is FFRF Bookkeeper Eleanor McEntee, who keeps the “clean money” records.)

Denom	Year/Series	Donor(s)	Donor’s State	Winner!
\$1	1934	Anonymous	Unknown	Larry R. Wright
\$1	1935 series C	Raymond Greenbank	Ohio	Larry R. Wright
\$1	1935 series A	Beatrice Maslowski	Connecticut	Mark Haskett
\$1	1935 series D	Linda Palter	Michigan	Kate Dieble
\$1	1935 series E	Marie Donnel	California	Shirley Scribner
\$2	1953 series C	Norman Chab	Texas	Larry R. Wright
\$2	1928 series D	Larry Tanner	Connecticut	Marilyn Nienkerk
\$5	1934 series D	Dennis Wendt	Wisconsin	Chauncey Williams
\$10	1934 series D	Susan Blake	Nevada	Jack Church
\$20	1950 series D	Lynne Hills	Connecticut	Aleta Ledendecker
\$50	1950	Michael Jacobson	California	Jo Halverson
\$100	1934 series A	Anonymous	Tennessee	Izzy Salcedo



Photo by Steve Solomon

FFRF Board Member Todd Peissig and Eric Lawrence have handled the ticket sales for the “clean money” drawing for many years at FFRF conventions. “Clean money” is a term used by FFRF to denote currency printed before 1957, which did not contain the words “In God We Trust.”

FFRF CHAPTER LEADERS

Photo by Chris Line



FFRF’s 2024 chapter leaders met during the lunch break on Sept. 28.

Not all chapter leaders were present, and some chapters had more than one person attend the meeting. Here are the chapter leaders (whether in the photo or not):

Walt Bilofsky (San Francisco Bay Chapter), Andrew Bushard (Austin Area Chapter), Bonnie Buth (Colorado Springs Chapter), Tom Cara (South Central Wisconsin Chapter), Mark Davis (Cincinnati Metro Chapter), Mars de la Tour (FFRF Valley of the Sun), Steven Foulkes (Metropolitan Chicago Chapter), Allen Galante (Upstate New York Freethinkers), Charles Gessert (Lake Superior Freethinkers), Ed Hensley (FFRF Kentucky), Eric Hildeman (Kenosha Racine Atheists and Freethinkers), Jim Hudlow (Inland Northwest Freethought Society), Matthew Krevat (Triangle Freethought Society), David Jon Krohn (Central Ohio Chapter), Aleta Ledendecker (FFRF East Tennessee), Julie Legg (Grand Rapids Minn. Atheists and Freethinkers), Steven Neubauer (Central PA Rationalists), Judy Saint (Greater Sacramento Chapter), Claudette StPierre (Denver Chapter), Chris Sweeny (Ozarks Chapter), Ray Vensel (Maine Chapter) and David Williamson (Central Florida Freethought Community).

CANDIDS



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Claudette StPierre, president of the Denver Chapter of FFRF, has a friend take her picture with convention speaker Ron Reagan.



Photo by Chris Line

Becky Greben (Colo.) is the proud owner of this quilt, which was auctioned off during the convention. Becky won the quilt with a bid of \$550. Member Diane Chait, who was not in attendance, made the quilt and generously donated it to FFRF.



Photo by Chris Line

Desserts were made available for convention guests following the opening evening session.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker presented FFRF's highlights of the year.



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Legal Data Entry Assistant Daniel Dossey chats with a member at a sales table.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

FFRF Editorial Assistant Greg Fletcher helps get a member checked in at the start of the convention.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

During a break in speakers, the merchandise sales tables were in full swing.



Photo by Chris Line

A salad awaits members to arrive prior to the Saturday dinner.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Dr. Bradley Onishi speaks to a packed auditorium on Sept. 28.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Speaker Kate Cohen gestures to the crowd as she walks out on stage to give her presentation on Sept. 27.

CANDIDS



Photo by Chris Line

Kelly Paige (Ore.) hears from Margaret Downey about the Thomas Paine Memorial proposed for Washington, D.C.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Pam and Steve Solomon (Mo.) flank Ron Reagan during a break.



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Board Members David Tamayo (Va.), left, and Jeremiah Camara (Ga.), right, pose with actor Jon Huertas (Calif.) and attendee Hypatia Alexandra (Va.).



Photo by Steve Solomon

A group of FFRF members enjoy each other's company during some down time.



Photo by Chris Line

Carolyn Golouch (Hawaii) takes a moment to talk with Brandon Wolf, who was signing books for members.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Rozlynn Worrell (Calif.) and FFRF Director of Governmental Affairs Mark Dann stop to pose for a photo.



Photo by Chris Line

Margaret Downey talks to some members about the campaign for a Thomas Paine memorial.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

FFRF members make some noise during the annual "moment of bedlam" during the Non-Prayer Breakfast on Sept. 28.



Photo by Steve Solomon

FFRF IT Helpdesk Specialist Sheryl Lindmeier hawks bumper stickers to guests during a convention break.



Photo by Steve Solomon

FFRF Co-President Dan Barker performs "Die Gedanken Sind Frei," a historic freethought anthem, to open the convention.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Izzy Salcedo (Ill.) and Mark Harrison (Calif.) get their photo taken in front of the quilt that was being auctioned off.



Photo by Steve Solomon

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor gives a big hug to Jon Huertas following his convention-ending speech.

FFRF STAFF



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Director of Governmental Affairs Mark Dann gave a legislative report, along with Ryan Jayne and Ryan Dudley.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

The audio-visual team consisted of Norma Miller, Bruce Johnson, Stephanie Benicek, Scott Knickelbine, Tori Neels, Meggie Gilfillan, Buzz Kemper and Mallory Johnson.



Photo by Chris Line

Events Manager Sadie Pattinson.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Shop Manager Katina Gehn, Digital Communications Manager Rowan Hahn, Intake Attorney Maddy Ziegler and Marketing and PR Director Sara Tetzloff.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

IT Helpdesk Specialist Sheryl Lindmeier.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Legal Fellow Hirsh Joshi, Legal Data Entry Assistant Daniel Dossey, Editorial Assistant Greg Fletcher and Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence.



Photo by Chris Line

Front row: Bookkeeper Eleanor McEntee and Membership Manager Lily Pocs. Back row: Shop Manager Katina Gehn, Director of Operations Lisa Strand and Director of First Impressions Matt Kenyon.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Convention photographers Chris Line (who is also an FFRF attorney) and Kyle Hilker.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Communications Director Amit Pal, Deputy Legal Director Liz Cavell, Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence and Freethought Today Editor PJ Slinger.



Photo by Chris Line

Senior Litigating Attorney Sam Grover, Legal Director Patrick Elliott, Deputy Legal Director Liz Cavell and Intake Attorney Maddy Ziegler gave the legal report.



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Front row: Intake Legal Assistant Matt Langer and Litigation Legal Assistant Greta Martens. Back row: Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne, State Advocacy Specialist Ryan Dudley and Legal Data Entry Assistant Daniel Dossey.