

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



Climate change denial persists among religious

PAGE 10



High school essay contest winners announced

PAGES 12-17



Forward Freethought winners

PAGE 18

Get out the vote!



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Events Manager Sadie Pattinson wears an FFRF “I’m Secular and I Vote” shirt and holds a similar placard outside the Madison, Wis., state Capitol building. FFRF urges all members (and all Americans) to make sure to vote in the general election on Nov. 5. Vote like your rights depend on it — because they do!

Age biggest factor between Nones, FFRF members

By Ryan P. Burge

In May of last year, Tom Edsall, a columnist at the New York Times, asked me a question that I had never thought about before: Given the rise of the Nones, why aren’t Democrats winning most elections?



I mean, it’s a really obvious query and I am kind of ashamed that it hadn’t crossed my mind at least once before that moment. The Nones were 5 percent of the United States in 1972. They are now about 30 percent of the population. They are overwhelmingly voting for Kamala Harris in 2024. They are a very reliable voting bloc for the Democrats. Yet, Trump might very well win the 2024 election.

sons why this is the case, but there’s one possible explanation that was looming in my head that I just couldn’t answer very well with the data that I had at the time.

The Nones just aren’t a coherent “thing” like Catholics or evangelicals. They are united by what they are not. They don’t have regular worship services. I think it’s fair to say that there isn’t a dominant worldview among the nonreligious. They are a herd of cats, to put it bluntly. And that weakens their political power.

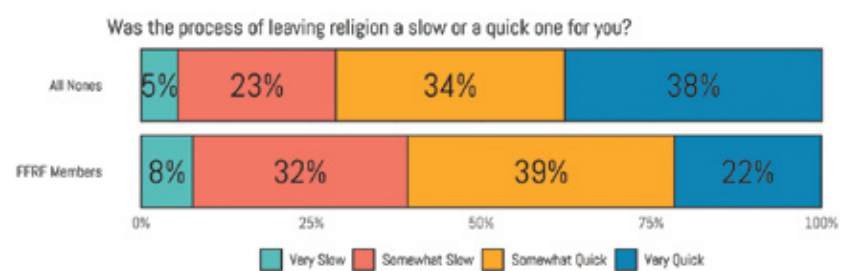
But, now, because of a collaboration between the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Paul Djupe and myself, we can have an unprecedented view into the differences in organized Nones vs. Nones in general.

Here’s what we did. We conducted a survey of nonreligious Americans using the Qualtrics platform and got about 2,400 responses. The only thing

Survey analysis

There are several different rea-

See Members on page 3



Data: FFRF Member Survey + Freedom From Religion Foundation Survey, 2024

FFRF chapters erect billboards in swing states

More than 20 volunteer chapters of the Freedom From Religion Foundation pooled their resources in order to erect voter awareness billboards on behalf of FFRF in all seven swing states.

These messages are a Freedom From Religion Foundation public voter awareness campaign, and are kicking off a multimedia voter campaign.

The swing state campaign is the brainchild of Judy Saint, who runs the Greater Sacramento Chapter of FFRF, who says she was losing sleep wondering how her California chapter and others could help get out the vote in crucial swing states. “This was the best thing I could do with our donors’ earnest contributions,” she said. “We have to save democracy.”

Saint adds, “As we fight Christian nationalism in this next election, our chapter decided to pull together all the national chapters of FFRF to put up at least one billboard in each swing state.”

This is the first time all FFRF chapters in FFRF’s nearly 47-year history have coordinated on a campaign.

Not just seven but 10 “Be a Voter” billboards are going up (including a “bonus” billboard in the important-but-not-swing state of Florida), thanks to the chapters’ impressive fundraising efforts, which yielded \$32,000. FFRF almost matched that total. FFRF and its chapters sited the billboards near major public universities, to encourage Gen Z voters, almost half of whom have no religious affiliation but who are less likely to vote.

“Be a Voter — Protect Democracy, Wisconsin” was the first billboard to go up in August, just two blocks from Camp Randall Stadium in Madison, Wis., in time to greet students moving back to campus and those attending September’s over-



Central Florida Freethought Community FFRF Chapter Co-Founders David and Jocelyn Williamson show off the Florida voter billboard.

See Billboards on page 2

Billboards

Continued from page 1

flowing home football games.

A similar message in Pittsburgh, “Be a Voter — Protect Democracy, Pennsylvania” is up on Banksville Road. An identical message will soon go up on a billboard at a prominent bridge in Philadelphia near Temple University.

Two billboards saying “Be a Voter — Protect Democracy, Arizona” are already up in the Phoenix area, including a highly visible 12-foot x 12-foot board in front of a Whole Foods store at the corner of University Drive and South Ash Avenue in Tempe, close to Arizona State University. An identical message can be found on a digital billboard on Loop 202, west of Scottsdale. Mars de la Tour, who directs the FFRF Valley of the Sun chapter,

helped choose the locations and arrange a group photo.

The final “Be a Voter” billboards will be going up by late September or early October in Ann Arbor, Mich., Charlotte, N.C., Las Vegas, Nev., and Atlanta.

The “bonus” billboard in Florida can be found at Colonial Drive, west of Alafaya Trail, Orlando. Thanks to Central Florida Freethought Community Co-Founders David and Jocelyn William-

son for their help.

“We’re so grateful to Judy and the Sacramento chapter for their amazing initiative, and for the generosity of all of FFRF’s other chapters around the country, as well as for some non-chapter donors,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Our message to voters is: Vote like your rights depend on it — because they do.”



FFRF’s Valley of the Sun Chapter placed its billboard near Arizona State University. Chapter members showing off the billboard are, from left to right, Jelani Logan, Pam Morgenstern, Mars de La Tour, Janet Johnson, Whitney Johnson, Tim Bremm, Sherron Lentz, Philip Lentz and Philip Carman.



FFRF’s billboard in Madison, Wis.



FFRF’s sign in Pittsburgh, Pa.

THEY SAID WHAT?

Eighty percent of my time is working on the plans of what’s necessary to take control of these bureaucracies. And we are working doggedly on that, whether it’s destroying their agencies’ notion of independence . . . whether that is thinking through how the deportation would work.

Russell Vought, one of the key authors of Project 2025.
CNN, 8-15-24

For too long, churches have been instructed to remain silent on pressing matters of conscience and conviction

during election season or risk their 501(c)(3) status.

Troy A. Miller, president of National Religious Broadcasters, suing over a law that says churches can’t endorse candidates for public office.

Religion News Service, 8-30-24

Christian nationalism is not a threat to our democracy. Quite the opposite. Christian nationalism founded our democracy. . . Conservatives must defend the common man’s religion. Of all the affections that bind together society, none is more powerful than religious

affection, a shared vision of transcendent truth. Every nation observes a civil religion. Even the left wants religion: witness their insistence on Pride Month and pronouns. We want the old-time religion of the bible.

Sen. Josh Hawley, in his column, “The Christian nationalism we need.”

FirstThings.com, 9-4-24

I know Jesus is coming back one day and we’ve all got until that day to figure out our own eternities. And so, on the grand scale of things, today, I would rather be concerned with that than anything else.

Monroe County, Miss., Sheriff Kevin Crook. [FFRF has since sent a letter to

Crook, stating “It is an abuse of power for you to use your position and the Monroe County Sheriff’s Office’s resources to promote your personal religious beliefs and proselytize to Monroe County’s citizens.”]

Friendly Atheist, 9-13-24

I think it’s also important to accept that the Trump era will end when God decides that it’s going to end. And God only knows when that will happen.

Ross Douhat, in his column with David French on how Christians should think about voting in the November election.

New York Times, 9-9-24

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Freethought Matters

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

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

Changes for 2024 in FFRF broadcasting.

Watch Freethought Matters anytime on FFRF’s YouTube channel!

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

Members

Continued from page 1

that unified them was that they identified as atheist, agnostic or claimed no religion in particular. We also conducted a survey of members from the Freedom From Religion Foundation. The response rate was incredible — we collected over 11,400 responses.

We asked a bunch of the same questions in both surveys, which means we can now understand how organized Nones look compared to those who were non-religious but not part of any formal organization like FFRF.

Let's get to it.

Both samples were asked a series of questions about the household that they grew up in. People who are currently non-religious are more likely to have a non-religious father than a non-religious mother. Here's what really jumps out at me: FFRF members are much more likely to have grown up with a religious mother or a religious father compared to the random sample of Nones that we collected.

That's especially true when looking at the question about siblings. In the random sample of Nones, about half of them said that they had at least one sibling who was nonreligious. That was 20 percentage points higher than the FFRF sample. It looks like FFRF folks grew up in much more religious households than unorganized Nones. Hold that thought for a minute, I will circle back to it.

We also asked them about the process of leaving religion — was it a slow or quick one? (See chart on Page 1)

Among the Qualtrics sample of non-religious folks, 72 percent said that their departure from faith was somewhat quick or very quick. Among the FFRF members, that share was significantly lower (61 percent). I don't know if I would have guessed that before I actually did the analysis.

That got me thinking through what factors could lead to these two results. After poking around the demographics

of the two samples, I hit absolute paydirt. This is the biggest upshot for me from this project: Members of the Freedom of Religion Foundation are significantly older than the average non-religious person in the general population. The average adult None in our sample is 47.6 years old. The average member of FFRF is 67.6 years old.

In our random sample of the Nones, over half of them had not seen their 45th birthday. About 16 percent were between the ages of 18 and 29 years old. Another 36 percent were between 30 and 44 years old. In comparison, only about 1 percent of the members of FFRF are in that lowest age bracket and just 6 percent are 30-44 years old.

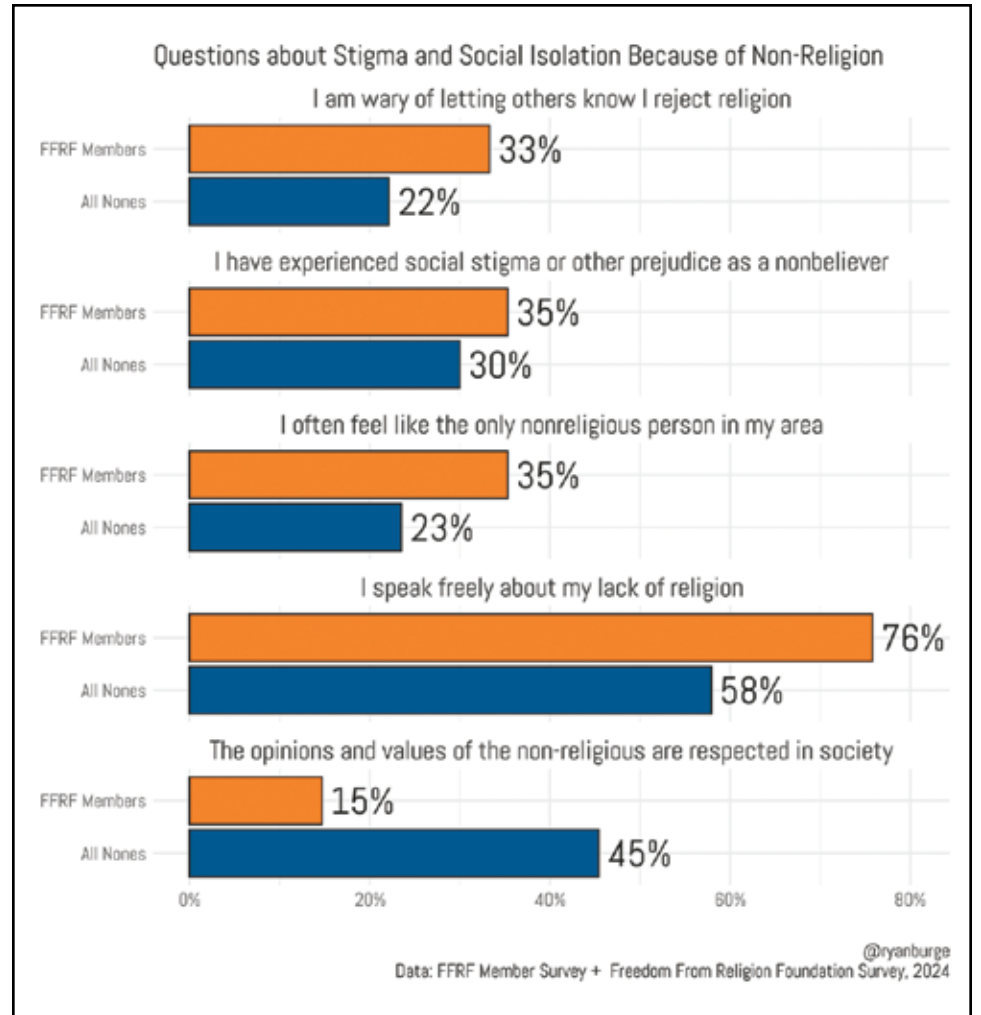
Nearly half of the members of FFRF are between the ages of 60 and 74 years old (46 percent). That's double the rate found in the random sample of the Nones. And, three in 10 members who filled out the FFRF survey have celebrated their 70th birthday compared, to only 6 percent of the folks in the random sample.

This is why the FFRF folks are so much different than the other Nones when it comes to questions about religious upbringing — 75 percent of them were born before 1965, when the United States was almost entirely Christian.

How about why they left religion?

As you can tell by just glancing at the graph at the bottom of this page, the FFRF folks were much more likely to check a lot of boxes compared to the random sample of Nones. There's not a single reason that was clearly chosen more by the Qualtrics sample compared to the membership of FFRF. But that doesn't mean that we can't learn some things about these two groups from this data.

It's notable that there wasn't a huge gap on religious hypocrisy between the two groups (55 percent vs. 42 percent). But there were other reasons that were much more compelling for the FFRF crowd. For instance, members of the organization were twice as likely to say that "religion doesn't make sense," compared to the Qualtrics sample (61 per-



cent vs. 35 percent). They were nearly three times more likely to say that reading the bible led them away from religion, too (24 percent vs. 9 percent). And they were 4.5 times more likely to say that "reading skeptical authors" was a cause for them to leave religion.

We also included a series of questions about the amount of stigma and social isolation that they feel because of being non-religious. (See chart at top of this page.)

It's striking here that the members of FFRF are 50 percent more likely to agree that "I am wary of letting others know I reject religion," compared to Nones as a whole. I would have assumed that being members of FFRF meant that they were open about their religious status, but the data points to the opposite conclusion. Additionally, 35 percent of FFRF folks said that

they often felt like they were the only non-religious person in their area, compared to just 23 percent in the random sample.

Before I move on, I have to point out the results of that last question: "The opinions and values of the nonreligious are respected in society." The gap between the two samples is huge. While among the random sample of Nones, 45 percent of them agree with that statement, while just 15 percent of FFRF members agree. Again, this may have something to do with age, but it also seems like that folks join an organization like FFRF precisely because they want to see their views to get a louder hearing in the public square.

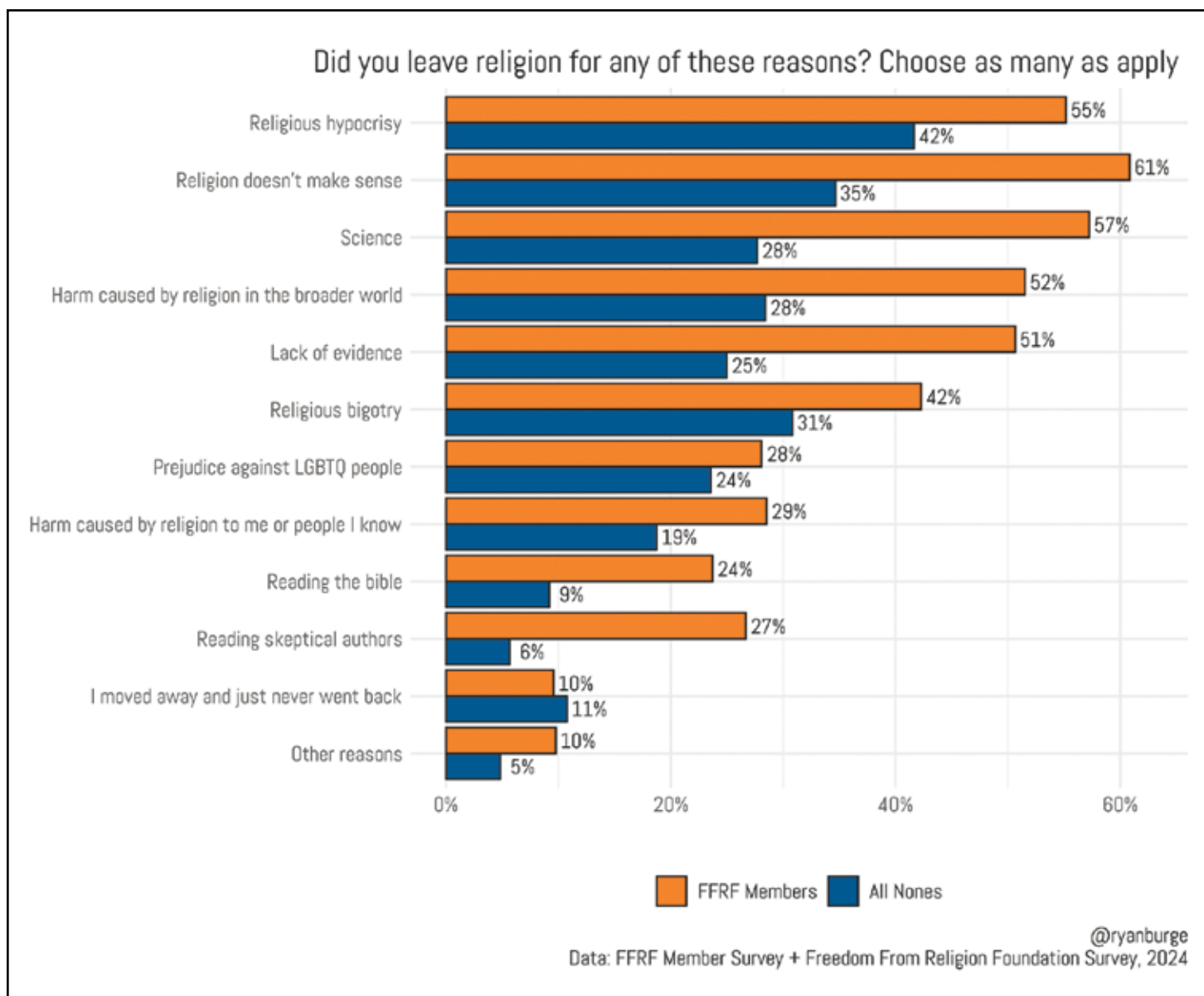
Our unprecedented surveys of FFRF members and unaffiliated Nones have revealed striking differences between organized and unorganized nonreligious individuals in America.

These findings have important implications for understanding the political landscape of nonreligious Americans. While the Nones have grown to represent nearly a third of the U.S. population and tend to support Democratic candidates, their lack of cohesion as a group may indeed be limiting their political influence. FFRF, with its older and more organized membership, represents a small but potentially influential subset of Nones who are more likely to speak out about their views, despite feeling greater stigma.

As we approach the 2024 election, these insights into the diversity within the nonreligious population could be crucial. The challenge for political strategists and social scientists will be to understand how to engage with both the older, more organized Nones, and the younger, less cohesive majority.

The rise of the Nones is undoubtedly one of the most significant shifts in American religious and political life in recent decades. As their numbers continue to grow, particularly among younger generations, organizations like FFRF may play an increasingly important role in mobilizing this diverse group. However, the question remains: Will the Nones ever become a unified political force, or will their diversity continue to be both their strength and their limitation in the political arena?

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



- Across**
- *Freethinker Neil deGrasse Tyson's ___ Exceptional Public Service Medal
 - Tax pro, acr.
 - Fish of liver oil fame
 - Biology lab supply
 - Farm tools
 - Less than 90 degrees
 - Something standard
 - 90 degrees on compass
 - Not Ionic or Corinthian
 - *Actor Paul ___ of "Sideways," atheist
 - Bad wishes
 - Kim Carnes' "Bette ___ Eyes"
 - PGA peg
 - *"Mythbusters" co-host Adam ___, atheist
 - Neither right nor left
 - "Four score and seven years ___"
 - Issue an injunction
 - Forum wear
 - French city, tourist destination
 - Activities, as in military
 - Roebuck's partner
 - Cusco valley dweller, once
 - Comic routine
 - Be a witness
 - Popular cowboy hat
 - Headgear for a horse
 - It would

- Hotel room option
- Tear down
- *"Breakfast of Champions" author Kurt ___ Jr., atheist
- Bodies
- Long narrative poem
- 20-20, e.g.
- Ruminant's stomach
- Shakespearean "does"
- Whiskey without water
- Word for a nod
- Is is to she as ___ is to we
- Mr. Incredible's so

- Down**
- Bread served with saag paneer
 - Eagerly excited
 - Delhi wrap
 - Naval unit
 - Raccoon's South American cousin
 - Mice in a house, e.g.
 - ___ Spumante
 - Ringlet
 - First name in elevators
 - *Christmas inspiration Saturnalia mo.
 - *John Lennon: "Imagine there's no ___"
 - *Farewell, to atheist Gabriel Attal
 - *Irreverent "Gigi" author, was denied funeral rites by Catholic Church

- Magicians, archaic
- Sophomore's grade
- Plural of #3 Down
- ___ provocateur
- *#46 Down's 2025 TV gig, with The
- Not yet final
- Comedy Central's public humiliation
- Come to terms
- Red-dot pointer, e.g.
- * ___ de Lancie of "Star Trek" fame, atheist
- Get off the fence
- *French painter Henri ___ of "Joy of Life" fame, atheist
- Winter glider
- Grass carpet
- Pesky North American insect
- Beer garden mug
- *"All of Me" singer John ___, freethinker
- Deep sleep
- Get together
- Casanova, e.g.
- Picture on a coat?
- What Aveda and vedalia have in common
- Eye layer
- Black and green, hot or cold
- The old college one
- Certain degree

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4		5	6	7		8	9	10	
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15					16				17			
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55						56				57		58
59						60				61		
62						63				64		

Answers on page 20 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."

A trip to the Ozarks



On Aug. 8, FFRF Attorney Chris Line spoke to the FFRF Ozarks chapter in Bentonville, Ark. The talk was titled, "Christian nationalism in Arkansas and beyond." Chris Sweeney, right, president of the Ozarks chapter, presented Chris Line with one of the group's T-shirts. Afterward, the chapter members and Line went out for lunch at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and took a group photo in front of the "We The People" installation.

Freethought Today Cryptogram

FC FG GEQPJ TEG GRVG GRBQB FJ V HTI...GRB
 XTQJG GRVG ZTE LVP JVZ VKTEG RFS FJ GRVG
 KVJFLVMMZ RB'J VP EPIBQVLRFBQBQ.
 —XTTIZ VMMBP

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: L => C. Answer is on page 20.

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

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.

Oslo hosts ‘Celebrating Dissent’ conference

Photos by: Haram Doodles, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Maryam Namazie, Siyavash Shahabi, Kai Erik Westergaard



More than 50 freethinkers, mostly ex-Muslim nonbelievers who’ve fled Islamist nations, representing 30-plus countries, met for the “Celebrating Dissent Oslo” conference Aug. 31-Sept. 1. FFRF was a major co-sponsor. The conference memorialized Pakistani-born Norwegian comedian and activist Shabana Rehman, shown here in a convention slide.



Pictured with a “doodle” painting she gifted to FFRF is “Haram Doodles,” an ex-Muslim artist and activist.



FarAvaz is a singer and women’s rights activist from Iran who fled to Berlin after facing persecution for singing as a woman. She now combines pop and Middle Eastern elements to advocate for women’s empowerment.



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker chaired a plenary session, “Science and Rationality Challenging Dogma.”



Veedu Vitz, an ex-Muslim YouTube comedian, chaired a panel on “Laïcité as a Cornerstone of Free Expression and Rights,” which included panelists FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor and Croatian activist Nada Topić Peratović.



A “Blasphemous Women” panel, from left, chaired by conference convener Maryam Namazie of Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, included Egyptian composer Yasmine El Baramawy, anti-hijab activist Zara Kay, Tunisian-French feminist filmmaker Nadia El Fani, Somali-Dutch poet Halima Salat and Turkish-Dutch actress Nazmiye Oral.



Zara Kay, head of Faithless Hijabi, joyfully throws a hijab into the air during an irreverent throwing of the traditional Muslim male turban and female covering.



Getting into the spirit was Fariborz Pooya, Iranian political activist, founding member of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain and conference emcee.

FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

Alabama

A Wetumpka, Ala., community member reported that the school district was organizing, promoting and encouraging attendance to a religious prayer walk event. A post on Wetumpka Elementary School's official Facebook page detailed the event, explaining that attendees would "pray for our school faculty, staff, students and community" as they prepared for the 2024-2025 school year.

"The district must immediately end its participation in this prayer walk event and cease organizing, promoting and encouraging attendance at religious events going forward," FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Richard E. Dennis.

Dennis contacted FFRF via email to clear up the situation. "I reviewed the posting from the Wetumpka Elementary School website that you shared in your letter and, out of an abundance of caution, I directed the school administration in the future not to include it on the school's website to avoid any confusion about the origin of the event," he wrote.

Arkansas

FFRF has ensured that young children will be free from future religious art assignments in the Gosnell School District, Ark.

A district parent informed FFRF that an art teacher who teaches kindergarten through sixth grade at Gosnell Elementary School had students paint the crucifixion scene for Easter. The school's art show from May 24 proves this claim, showing some of the crucifixion paintings. This is reportedly also not the first year that the assignment has been given to students.

"If the district turns a blind eye to overt proselytization in its classroom, it becomes complicit in an egregious constitutional violation and breach of trust," FFRF Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to the district.

FFRF received a letter from the District Legal Counsel Phillip M. Brick, Jr., who wrote that, "to avoid any ongoing issues, the district art teacher will not assign a project that includes drawing a crucifix in the future."

California

A community member from Hart-Ransom Academic Charter School in Modesto, Calif., reported that the school's eighth-grade graduation ceremony included a scheduled prayer. The invocation was listed in the graduation program, and the complainant reported that the school principal welcomed the audience with a speech containing multiple religious references, including a reference to "the grace of God."

"The district must ensure that all future graduations do not include school-sponsored prayers or inappropriate religious remarks in order to respect the First Amendment rights of students and their families," FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Matthew Shipley.

Shipley wrote back in August, addressing the concerns of FFRF's complainant, and thanking FFRF for bringing the situation to his attention. "We have consulted with legal counsel regarding your concerns. Future commencement ceremonies in the district will not include school-sponsored prayer, and will include

Kentucky Freethought



Photo by Jen Scott

FFRF Deputy Legal Director Liz Cavell, second from left, spoke Sept. 7 at the Kentucky Freethought Convention, where about 120 freethinkers attended. Cavell spoke on the topic of "The Supreme Court vs. the People." Also speaking at the convention were FFRF Board Member Jeremiah Camara, middle back, and Sikivu Hutchinson, far right, among others.

only appropriate remarks," he wrote.

Georgia

FFRF worked to ensure that a "character coach" from the Heart of Georgia Fellowship of Christian Athletes would no longer be allowed to proselytize student-athletes in the Johnson County School District in Wrightsville, Ga.

FFRF was informed that an adult "character coach" was allowed to preach and pray with students in the district's soccer program. The character coach was acting as a de facto chaplain, and had been allowed to spread Christian messages to students while having special access to the team's locker rooms, training and games.

"It is beyond the scope of a public school system to institute a position which conflates character and religiosity, and which will inevitably involve advocating Christianity to students," FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to District Superintendent Christopher Watkins.

Watkins detailed actions the district had taken in a letter to Line a week later. The letter had been shared with the athletic director, the school principal, and the coach to inform them of the violations committed. The coach then contacted the coordinator from the Heart of Georgia FCA, serving the connection between the organization and the school. "I have also communicated to our district employees that we must adhere to the provision of the Equal Access Act and not allow 'nonschool persons' to 'lead, organize, or regularly participate in student religion clubs.'"

FFRF convinced the Vidalia City School District in Vidalia, Ga., not to promote religious worship events on official district channels.

A community member reported that the district organized and promoted a religious worship event on July 21, 2023. A post on the district's official Facebook page invited students, parents and staff to participate in a religious worship event.

"The district must cease organizing, promoting and encouraging attendance at religious events," FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district.

The Vidalia City School District's at-

torney, Daniel J. O'Connor, addressed FFRF's complaint in August of this year, noting that the delay in response was due to a change in superintendents. Nevertheless, O'Connor affirmed that the district had worked to remedy the situation. "I have reviewed the referenced post and consulted with the school district about avoiding official endorsements of religious viewpoints," he wrote.

FFRF worked to remove a religious representative from the Elbert County Comprehensive High School (Ga.) football program.

FFRF learned that an adult "character coach" from the Granite City FCA was allowed to preach and pray with students in the district's football program. They had been acting as a de facto chaplain and had been allowed to spread Christian messages to students while having special access to the team's locker rooms, training and games.

"It is beyond the scope of a public school system to institute a position which conflates character and religiosity, and which will inevitably involve advocating Christianity to students," FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district.

In response to FFRF's criticisms, legal representative for the district Cory O. Kirby wrote back to inform FFRF that the First Amendment would be respected in the future. "The superintendent met with each principal as well as the high school and middle school athletic directors to discuss the issues," Kirby 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."

Indiana

FFRF has ensured that the Warrick County Sheriff's Office in Boonville, Ind., removed a display promoting Christianity from its front office.

A county citizen reported that the official sign outside of the Warrick County Sheriff's read "God Bless America." FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence contacted the sheriff's office in October 2023 regarding the display.

"As sheriff, you serve a diverse popula-

tion that consists of not only Christians, but also minority religious and nonreligious citizens," Lawrence wrote to Sheriff Michael Wilder. "We hope you will agree that your office must be even-handed and avoid any appearance of bias toward some citizens or hostility toward others."

FFRF reached out to the sheriff twice after the initial letter, once in May, and once in August. After the second follow up, Wilder finally responded, writing, "It's been down for months."

Mississippi

FFRF brought Madison County Schools in line after a basketball coach was reported to have been bringing students on school-sponsored mission trips.

A district parent reported that from Nov. 18 to 20, 2022, the boys basketball coach was allowed to take the Madison Central High School team on a school-sponsored Christian mission trip. The coach's intention was reported to make the team's student athletes "servants of Jesus Christ." According to the official itinerary for the mission trip, the trip included religious devotional and church services.

FFRF's complainant stated that the coach never told the parents of student athletes that attending the mission trip was optional as none of the other official team events for the 2022 season were optional. The complainant states that they and their child did not speak out against the mission trip because their child feared retaliation.

"Even if attendance on the mission trip was truly voluntary — which does not appear to be the case — voluntariness is not a safeguard against violating student athletes' First Amendment rights," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

After FFRF following up with the district, Assistant Superintendent Austin Brown reached out to FFRF to assure that action had been taken. "We have confirmed that upon investigation of this matter the school administration addressed this with the basketball coach at Madison Central High School at the time it took place," Brown wrote. "No other trips of this nature have taken place since, nor will there be approval for any such trips of this nature for any of our athletic teams in the future."

A Hancock County School District (Miss.) resident reported that Hancock Middle School allowed religious messages to be posted on classroom doors. Multiple doors featured displays reading "The Lord bless you and keep you. Numbers 6:24," signed with a heart from Refuge Church, referring to Refuge Baptist Church.

"Courts have continually held that public school districts may not display religious messages or iconography in public schools," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote in August 2022.

After following up in 2024, the district's new superintendent, Rhett Ladner, reported back to FFRF. "I was not the superintendent when the event occurred, but it has been handled," he wrote.

Missouri

FFRF ended the distribution of Gideons bibles in the Hannibal School District #60 in Missouri.

A district parent reported that, in February 2023, representatives of Gideons International were allowed to hand out

bibles to all fifth-grade students in the district. The district reportedly allowed Gideons to approach elementary school students on school property during fifth grade recess in order to distribute bibles. FFRF's complainant reported that a teacher pressured their fifth-grade child into accepting a bible, and that their child reluctantly took a bible despite initially refusing one.

"The district cannot allow its schools to be used as recruiting grounds for religious missions," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

FFRF was informed in August that Superintendent Susan Johnson had taken action the same month as the complaint, but had mistakenly not informed FFRF.

Ohio

FFRF successfully convinced the Hilliard City Schools in Columbus, Ohio, not to allow LifeWise to hold meetings with staff regarding a bible school program for students.

A parent in the Hilliard City Schools reported that, in September 2023, staff were required to attend a training session conducted by LifeWise Academy representatives in which the representatives promoted LifeWise's released-time bible study program. LifeWise is a program seeking to provide "bible-based character education to public school students" during regular school hours. Curriculum lasts five years, taking students through the entire bible.

"In order to respect the First Amendment rights of all its employees, HCS must ensure that all employee meetings are completely secular going forward," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

After a year without response, FFRF reached out to the district again, to which Superintendent David Stewart addressed the concern.

"The local Lifewise director asked the principal if she could speak to the staff as part of their back-to-school meetings to explain what Lifewise is and how the logistics of the program would work. The principal, wanting to be helpful, agreed," Stewart wrote. "We later learned about this and instructed both the principal and Lifewise that this should not have happened and, moving forward, they would not have access to staff or staff meetings during the school day. We also informed principals of other schools where Lifewise is operating of the same to avoid this occurring in other buildings."

Oklahoma

In Oklahoma, Lone Grove Public Schools staff will no longer be distributing bibles to students after FFRF fought to protect students' First Amendment rights.

A Lone Grove Intermediate School parent reported that on May 13 their child brought a bible home from school. The complainant reported that a teacher distributed bibles to students during class time. The complainant is not Christian and was concerned that the district allowed its teachers to distribute religious materials to students against the wishes of parents.

"When a teacher distributes bibles to students, those children will not reasonably believe that they have a choice to decline taking a bible," FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district.

District legal counsel Kent B. Rainey responded. "District administrators conducted an investigation, and the following day the district's superintendent wrote to the parent advising them that receipt of a bible by a student has



always been voluntary, and procedures have been modified to ensure that this does not happen in the future."

An adult "huddle leader" from the Oklahoma Fellowship of Christian Athletes was reportedly allowed to preach and pray with students in multiple Jay Public Schools district athletic programs. The FCA representative had been acting as a de facto chaplain and had been allowed to spread Christian messages to students while having special access to the team's locker rooms, training 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."

John E. Priddy, the district's legal representative, responded to FFRF regarding corrective actions that were taken to remedy the violation. "After receiving your letter, the district investigated this matter and discovered that FCA representation did pray at certain events," Priddy wrote. "The superintendent and I have discussed this, and she informed me that she has spoken to her administrators and coaches about this situation and the constitutional prohibition against public prayer in school or at a school event by a FCA representative or anyone else. She has assured me that this will not happen again."

South Carolina

A painting containing multiple bible verses has been removed from the Wall-halla Post Office in South Carolina.

A concerned community resident and taxpayer reported that the post office displayed a large painting of "The Lion of Judah" and multiple bible verses.

"Displaying religious iconography in a post office violates post office regulations and the U.S. Constitution," FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to Postmaster Willie E. Jacobs.

Jacobs wrote back, trying to defend the painting by claiming that it has "nothing to do with religion." Regardless, Jacobs promised to replace it with a different painting of a lion in order to ensure it cannot be misconstrued by anyone entering the office.

Tennessee

FFRF has ensured that Tennessee's Franklin County School District community members will no longer be subjected to Christian proselytization.

A parent informed FFRF that a principal at Broadview Elementary School in Winchester, Tenn., concluded a meeting with parents, teachers and students on Aug. 2 with Christian prayer. The complainant recorded audio of the prayer, which was addressed to the Christian god and which ended: "We pray to you father in heaven for your wonderful blessings and we ask those things in God's name. Amen."

FFRF Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi sent a complaint letter to Franklin County Schools Director Cary Holman noting that "government officials may not deliver an official, sectarian prayer to a captive audience."

"Based on the recording, the principal acknowledged it was her voice," Holman wrote back in a recent email. "I had my deputy director participate in the meeting with the principal. During this time, I provided the Tennessee Code referencing prayer in schools. The principal understands what is expected and will lead accordingly moving forward." Holman closed by promising that all officials in the district would be reminded of the law.

FFRF has ensured that Tennessee's Cocke County School District will no longer unconstitutionally organize baccalaureate ceremonies.

FFRF wrote to the district after being informed that Cosby High School had held a baccalaureate service at Northport Baptist Church in Newton, Tenn., on May 5. The event was hosted by a district elementary teacher after being promoted on the district's Facebook page.

"It is well-settled law that public schools may not show favoritism toward nor coerce belief or participation in religion," FFRF Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to the district's Director of Schools Manney Moore.

Baccalaureate programs are religious services with prayer and worship and that's why schools may not plan, design or host baccalaureate programs, FFRF emphasized.

"CCSS does plan to pay particular attention to instruct their employees to not be overly assertive with regard to their religious beliefs when acting in their official capacity as a government employee," the legal counsel for the Cocke County School District recently responded. "Further, CCSS plans to refrain from posting any announcement of a baccalaureate service on their official Facebook page or any other CCSS social media platform."

Texas

After hearing from FFRF, the Wellborn Middle School in College Station, Texas, has reined in a coach continually using Christian messaging in his official communications.

A WMS parent informed FFRF that the WMS's boys' athletic coordinator ends mass emails sent to parents in his official capacity with a New Testament quote in bold font: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes..." — Romans 1:16." The coordinator also serves as the sponsor for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, head football coach and physical education teacher.

"When their school's athletic program continuously praises the Christian god via email, student athletes will believe matching that open praise is essential to pleasing their team's coach," FFRF Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to Superintendent Tim Harkrider.

Austin Dunson, College Station Independent School District's director of communications, reached out to FFRF. "We have recently provided district leaders with guidelines to follow and communicate to their staff regarding our updated brand," Dunson wrote. "This includes all staff adhering to a consistent email signature that only includes their name, title, campus/department and contact information."

Virginia

A banner for Bedrock Church was removed from the Linkhorse Elementary School grounds in Lynchburg, Va., after FFRF urged the district to respect its constitutionally required secularity.

A Lynchburg City Schools community member reported that Linkhorse Elementary School was renting out space on Sundays to Bedrock Church, which was allowed to permanently display a banner advertising the church's worship services and website on its fence.

"Public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion," FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district.

Legal representative for the district Hope R. Townes wrote back after the district had taken action on the situation, despite having not informed FFRF about it. "The banner associated with the organization during non-contracted hours was removed on June 29, 2023," Townes wrote.

Washington

The Central Kitsap Fire & Rescue team in Silverdale, Wash., agreed with FFRF that secularity at future public events was necessary in order to create a more welcoming community, regardless of religious affiliation.

FFRF learned from a Central Kitsap community member that a Central Kitsap Fire & Rescue station leader and the lead pastor of Hillcrest Church delivered a Christian invocation as part of a ribbon-cutting ceremony for Station 45. The complainant reported that the station leader asked the audience to bow their heads before leading them in a Christian prayer delivered in Jesus' name.

"We hope you will agree that Central Kitsap Fire & Rescue must be even-handed and avoid any appearance of bias toward some citizens or hostility toward others," FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the Fire Chief Jay Christian.

Christian later informed FFRF of corrective action that had been taken in order to avoid the appearance of preferential treatment toward Christianity. "We decided to support removing the Christian prayer and will modify the program to include a nonreligious message of community safety and togetherness."

IN THE NEWS

Teaching of evolution upheld in Indiana

Indiana’s teaching of the theory of evolution does not violate the state or U.S. constitutions, a federal judge ruled on Aug. 30.

Judge Sarah Evans Barker dismissed a lawsuit filed in May 2023 against Penn-Harris-Madison School Corporation and state education leaders.

The plaintiffs, parents of five children who lived in the Mishawaka-based district, claimed the state’s requirement to teach evolution in high school classes violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

They argued major portions of evolutionary theory, including the big bang theory and the fossil record, have been scientifically disproven and advance positions taken by atheists.

“Because the atheistic theory of evolution specifically attacks the Judeo-Christian origin story,” the plaintiffs argued, “it has the purpose and effect of advancing the atheist religion.”

Barker rejected those arguments, finding Indiana’s science education standards do not amount to the endorsement of a specific religion.

The lawsuit had sought to block the teaching of evolution in all Indiana public schools and to remove books and literature that discuss evolution from those schools.

Court: Fetuses can be called ‘unborn humans’

The Arizona Supreme Court has ruled that informational pamphlets sent to all voters can use the phrase “unborn human being” to refer to embryos or fetuses. Arizona is preparing to give voters in November the choice of whether to enshrine abortion as a constitutional right.

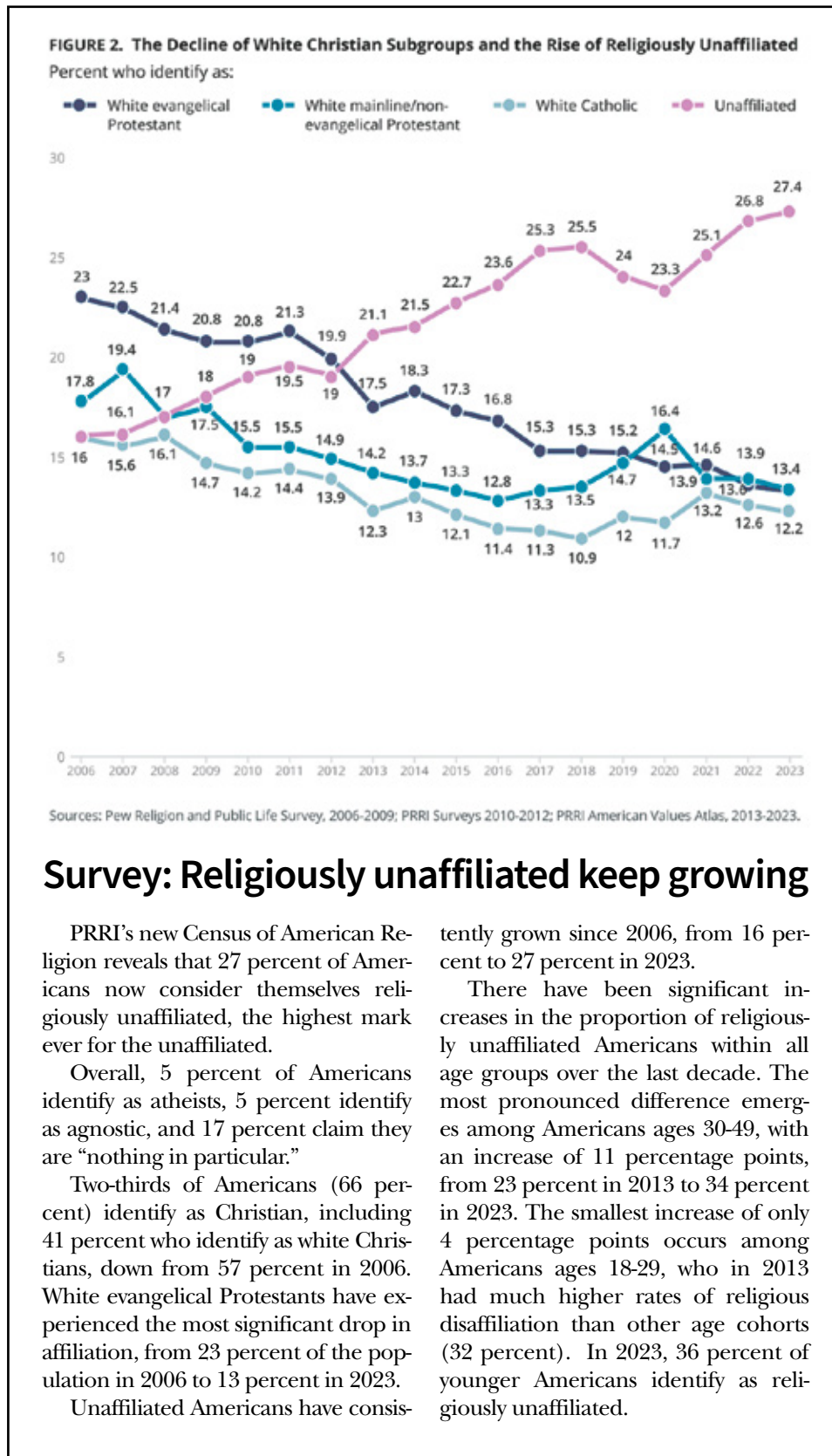
The court said that the language “substantially complies” with impartiality requirements, backing the majority-Republican Legislative Council that drafted the language. Two justices dissented.

Arizona for Abortion Access, which is leading the ballot-measure campaign and sued to change the language, said in a statement posted on social media that the court’s decision “means that Arizona voters won’t get to learn about the questions on their ballot in a fair, neutral, and accurate way but will instead be subjected to biased, politically charged words.”

Judge lifts injunction over book ban in Iowa

A federal appeals court on Aug. 9 lifted a temporary injunction against the enforcement of a law in Iowa that led to over 3,000 books being removed from public schools.

Signed into law in May 2023, SF 496 requires all public school library materials to be “age-appropriate” and prohibits any texts that include descriptions or depictions of a “sex act.” The law also includes a “Don’t Say Gay” provision that prohibits instruction related to sexual orientation and gender identity in grades K-6. According to reporting by the Des Moines Register, public schools across the state began removing books in the fall to comply with the law before it was originally to take effect in January 2024. That month though, a district court issued a preliminary injunction against the enforcement of what is



Survey: Religiously unaffiliated keep growing

PRRI’s new Census of American Religion reveals that 27 percent of Americans now consider themselves religiously unaffiliated, the highest mark ever for the unaffiliated.

Overall, 5 percent of Americans identify as atheists, 5 percent identify as agnostic, and 17 percent claim they are “nothing in particular.”

Two-thirds of Americans (66 percent) identify as Christian, including 41 percent who identify as white Christians, down from 57 percent in 2006. White evangelical Protestants have experienced the most significant drop in affiliation, from 23 percent of the population in 2006 to 13 percent in 2023.

Unaffiliated Americans have consistently

grown since 2006, from 16 percent to 27 percent in 2023.

There have been significant increases in the proportion of religiously unaffiliated Americans within all age groups over the last decade. The most pronounced difference emerges among Americans ages 30-49, with an increase of 11 percentage points, from 23 percent in 2013 to 34 percent in 2023. The smallest increase of only 4 percentage points occurs among Americans ages 18-29, who in 2013 had much higher rates of religious disaffiliation than other age cohorts (32 percent). In 2023, 36 percent of younger Americans identify as religiously unaffiliated.

Maryland county most religiously diverse

Montgomery County, Md., a Washington suburb, was the most religiously diverse county in the United States last year, according to a census released Aug. 29 by the Public Religion Research Institute.

PRRI’s Census of American Religion, which focuses on U.S. adults age 18 and over, calculates religious diversity by analyzing 18 different religious and racial groups in counties with more than 10,000 residents.

Montgomery County, with a population of more than 1 million, is significantly more educated and wealthier than the U.S. average. One in six county residents has a bachelor’s degree or higher, and the median household income is \$118,323. It is also home to at least one Supreme Court justice, Brett Kavanaugh.

New rules by Taliban bans sound of women’s voices

Afghanistan’s Taliban rulers are cracking down on the sound of women’s voices in public, under a strict new set of vice and virtue laws under the Islamist regime.

The laws were issued Sept. 4 after

they were approved by supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, a government spokesman said, and cover aspects of everyday life like public transportation, music, shaving and celebrations. The 114-page, 35-article document constitutes the first formal declaration of vice and virtue laws in Afghanistan since the Taliban seized power in 2021.

Among the new rules, Article 13 relates to women: It says it is mandatory for a woman to veil her body at all times in public and that a face covering is essential to avoid temptation and tempting others. Clothing should not be thin, tight or short.

Women are also obliged to cover themselves in front of non-Muslim males and females to avoid being corrupted. A woman’s voice is deemed intimate and so should not be heard singing, reciting or reading aloud in public. It is forbidden for women to look at men they are not related to by blood or marriage and vice versa.

S.C. court rules against school voucher program

The South Carolina Supreme Court struck down a key part of the state’s school voucher program in a 3-2 decision Sept. 11.

Through this program, known as the Education Scholarship Trust Fund, students below certain income thresholds could receive \$6,000 a year. What that money could be spent on included, but was not limited to, private school tuition.

The Supreme Court found this part of the program violated a ban in the South Carolina Constitution prohibiting public money from directly benefiting private and religious schools.

Parents, along with the South Carolina Education Association and the NAACP, challenged its legality — which eventually led to the ruling. South Carolina State Superintendent Ellen Weaver and Gov. Henry McMaster were among the names listed as defendants.

‘Shocking’ abuse at Ireland’s religious schools

The new report in Ireland, released Sept. 3, documented 2,395 allegations of historical child sexual abuse involving 884 alleged abusers in 308 schools

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across the country.

Most of the allegations were reported from the records of 42 religious orders that currently run or previously ran schools in Ireland. The scope of the allegations ranges from 1927-2013. More than half the men accused — which include teachers and priests — have died, it said.

Ireland's Minister for Education Norma Foley said Tuesday that the level of abuse detailed in the report was "truly shocking — and so is the number of alleged abusers."

More than 140 survivors provided harrowing testimony for the report, describing being molested, stripped naked, raped and drugged in "an atmosphere of terror and silence."

Erdogan: I'll purge grads who took pro-secular oath

Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Sept. 7 said that military graduates who took a pro-secular oath during their graduation ceremony would be "purged" from the military.

Erdogan described those involved as "opportunists." He added that an investigation was under way and vowed that "the few impertinent individuals responsible will be purged."

"Whoever they are, it is not possible for them to be part of our military," Erdogan said.

Valedictorian Ebru Eroglu led the 960-strong graduating class in reciting the official military oath about defending Turkey. But video footage from about an hour later shows about 400 of the graduates gathered in a field, raising their swords and chanting "We are the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal" — a reference to the secular founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

'Cow vigilantes' have India's Muslims on edge

A recent series of so-called "cow vigilantism" attacks by Hindus on Muslims in India have highlighted how sectarian violence remains a serious problem.

Despite a close election victory in June by Prime Minister Narendra Modi that many interpreted as a rebuff, there have been numerous instances of such violence, according to



Ed Hensley, left, and John Sutton volunteer at the booth for the Kentucky chapter of FFRF during the Kentucky State Fair in August. "I included the psychic booth next to us because it seems funny," said Hensley, president of the Kentucky chapter.

India-focused human rights organizations. At least a dozen involve cow vigilantism — violence related to the slaughter or smuggling of cows, or the suspicion of such acts.

The cow issue is deeply divisive because it pits the religious beliefs of one group against the diet of another. Cows are sacred in Hinduism, and many Indian states ban their slaughter, as well as the sale or smuggling of beef. But beef is consumed by many Muslims.

Cow vigilantism is a subset of religious violence, where squads of "gau rakshaks" (cow protectors) act as a de facto police force. Laws on cattle slaughter are set by states, but Modi has made cow protection a cornerstone of his national political strategy.

From 2019 until just before India started going to the polls in April, more than a fifth of reported attacks by Hindus on Muslims were related to cow vigilantism, the largest single category, according to an analysis by ACLED, an independent nonprofit that monitors crises and analyzes data.

Fla. school board votes down chaplain program

For the second time, the Osceola County School Board in Florida on Sept. 10 voted down a chaplaincy program that would have allowed clergy to act as school counselors.

Dozens spoke both for and against the program during public comment.

David Williamson, co-founder of the Central Florida Freethought Community, testified against it. Williamson pointed out the "significant legal liability" that school chaplain programs create. "Chaplaincy has work experience that can be verified with employment and training records and education units from professional organizations. Your policy has none of those requirements," Williamson said. "The only thing that the untested law that has us here now does is attempt to permit volunteers to do that which is unconstitutional: the promotion of religion by school-sanctioned volunteers — something that your policies currently prohibit."

Mo. court lets abortion measure stay on ballot

The Missouri Supreme Court ruled Sept. 10 that a measure to enshrine abortion rights in the state Constitution is specific enough to present to voters in November.

The decision came after a short but politically fraught hearing before all seven judges — four of them women, five of them appointees of Republican governors. Days earlier, a lower-court judge had ruled the ballot measure invalid because it does not identify which laws it would repeal.

"By a majority vote of this court, the circuit court's judgment is reversed," Chief Justice Mary R. Russell wrote.

The outcome means that Missouri will remain among more than half a dozen states with measures to protect abortion rights on their ballots this fall, including in presidential battleground states such as Arizona and Florida. Since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, every ballot measure that has sought to preserve or expand abortion access has passed in red and blue states alike. Measures that have sought to restrict access have failed, including in conservative Kansas.

Poll: Leaders should back others' religious beliefs

In a new Pew Research Center study, 64 percent of adults in the United States say it is important to have a president who stands up for people who share the respondent's religious beliefs. Fewer (48 percent) say it's important that a president has their own strong religious beliefs, even if the beliefs differ from those of the respondent. And even fewer Americans (37 percent) say it is important for a president to have religious beliefs that are the same as the respondent's.

In countries where religion is perceived as very important, people are generally more likely to value each of these qualities in a leader. For example, 94 percent of adults in Indonesia say religion is very important in their lives, and 86 percent there say it's important for their president to have strong religious beliefs. This is among the highest levels found in the 35 countries surveyed.

FFRF's Jayne speaks at Upstate New York Freethinkers meeting

Members of the Upstate New York Freethinkers, the newest chapter of FFRF, gathered Aug. 25 for its first statewide meeting, where more than 50 freethinkers from throughout Upstate New York assembled at the Matilda Joslyn Gage Museum in Fayetteville, N.Y.

Ryan Jayne, FFRF's senior policy counsel, spoke to the group about the importance of voting, stressing the need to help get out the vote in nearby swing states, including Pennsylvania.

"Turning up for the vote in New York itself is incredibly important because of the Equal Rights Amendment that's going to be on the ballot this November," he said. "This is a hugely consequential amendment [to] the state Constitution." In addition, Jayne talked about FFRF's efforts to support a bill in New York that would require judges to inform criminal defendants of alternatives to

faith-based 12-step programs. FFRF is trying to work with the governor's office to get the bill ratified.

Also speaking to the gathering was Colin McNamara, a staff attorney with the Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York and former FFRF legal fellow. McNamara reminded the group of the importance of secular government.

"Established clergy is a convenient auxiliary," he said. "Think about this for a minute. Religion and the law are the two greatest sources of authority that govern people's daily lives for almost every person on Earth. For many people, the law tells them how to live in this life, and religion tells them how to get to the next. And for that reason, it is extremely dangerous for one authority to hold both."

Watch videos of speakers and a tour of the Gage Museum Religious Freedom Room at unyft.org/gatherings.



Members of the Upstate New York Freethinkers attended their first statewide meeting Aug. 25 at the Matilda Joslyn Gage Museum in Fayetteville, N.Y.

Climate change denial persists among religious

This article first appeared on FFRF's FreethoughtNow.org blog site.

By Sammi Lawrence

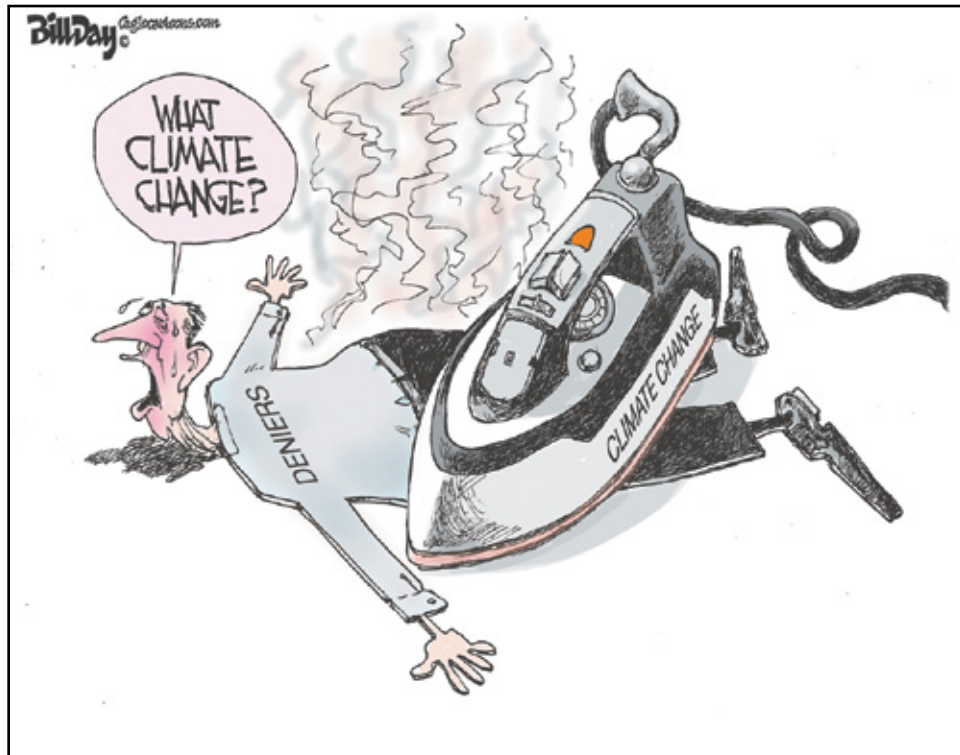
As severe heat plagues the globe, climate change is rapidly escalating to climate crisis. Scientists agree that these extreme heat waves and their deadly effects are just one of the many consequences of human-made climate change. However, one of America's most vocal and politically powerful religious groups continues to largely preach a gospel of environmental havoc and apathy, contradicting science and opposing efforts to stem climate change.



Sammi Lawrence

Since the beginning of July, countless cities have seen previous daily heat records broken. For instance, over the Fourth of July weekend, Death Valley reached 128 degrees Fahrenheit, breaking its previous record of 127 degrees. Days later, for the first time in recorded history, Las Vegas hit 120 degrees. And globally, in the final full week of July, four of those days were the hottest days ever in recorded history.

This extreme heat is not only unprecedented; it's also horribly deadly. According to the National Weather Service, extreme heat is the number one weather-related killer in the United States. Not to mention that these ever-increasing heat waves fuel wildfires, which ravage ecosystems, claim homes and end lives. The effects of climate



change, if left unchecked, will become ever more pronounced in this country. Unfortunately, a prominent existing force is religious ideology that preaches science denial — and its grip on too many politicians and voters. White evangelical Christians, a vocal and politically powerful minority, are particularly influential in deterring and preventing steps to address the climate crisis.

According to a 2023 study from PRRI, the religious views of Americans influence whether or not they believe climate change is happening, whether they believe climate change is entirely or mostly human-caused, and whether they believe climate change is even a real problem. For instance,

the study found that 49 percent of white evangelical Protestants “believe that climate change is caused by natural patterns in the environment.” Further, “Nearly two in 10 white evangelical Protestants (19 percent) believe there is no solid evidence of climate change, which is slightly higher than” other religions.

Even more disturbing, the 2023 study revealed “35 percent of Americans agree that the severity of recent natural disasters is evidence that we are in what the Bible calls ‘the end of times.’” This is frightening. The notion that the human-created climate crisis we are living in is indicative of the Christian apocalypse is not only absurd, it's dangerous.

Claims that climate change is inevitable and dictated by a god's will do nothing to motivate change but instead encourage apathy toward the environmental catastrophe that humans are responsible for. At best, people who buy into the idea that climate change is a sign of “the end times” will continue to turn a blind eye to what's happening to our planet. At worst, this ridiculous lie leads people to disregard the need to preserve and protect the planet's resources for future generations, because why does the Earth's health matter if Jesus will arrive soon to set up the Kingdom of God?

In contrast, 2022 survey data from the Pew Research Center shows that “atheists are the most likely to be concerned with climate change — nearly two-thirds think that it's an extremely serious issue.” Nine in 10 atheists understand that human activity is causing climate change, compared to 53 percent of Americans overall. That same data also reveals the undeniable political component: Evangelicals primarily vote for conservative candidates who do not support taking action to fight climate change. Whether or not white evangelical Christians personally believe climate change is a problem, they overwhelmingly choose candidates who ignore the problem, or would make it worse.

Last year was the hottest summer on record so far, but 2024 is already giving it a run for its money. If all Americans alike don't wake up soon to the realities of the environmental crisis we face, then we will find ourselves living in a hell of our own making right here on Earth.

Sammi Lawrence is an FFRF attorney.

CRANKMAIL

Here is this issue's installment of Crankmail, where we publish the unpublishable; well, maybe not, but we do print the letters exactly as we received them.

Catholic league: I'm all for freedom from the freedom from religion foundation, that's what the Catholic league is all about! Your anti-christian is an anti-catholic religious profiling organization.

Anti-American: You have no federal backing on anything that's religious, but rather masquerade yourself as a Neo KKK anti black, anti-catholic and anti Jewish organization, and you think the IRS and the American people should stand up and salute you.

Baptisms: As much as FFRF would like to stop the move of God, they cannot stop any move of God! It amazes me that for atheists who do not believe there is a God seem to have a problem with God or Jesus Christ. Why are they afraid of something they do not believe in? This reminds of the verse in scripture that says, “a fool says in his heart there is no God.” This people are just fools!

Stop the hate: Stop harassing Bill Donohue and the Catholic League. FFRF ought to know by now it's a losing battle because you are wrong. Hating Catholic thought and action in the public square always loses in the end.

Catholic League: You and your very small org will never shut us up! Why don't you use your time for something productive like thinking about where you will be after death.

Get real!: Once again you are targeting the Catholic Church via Bill Donohue at the Catholic League, for stating the obvious, which is his First Amendment right. No one is asking you to agree with him, but a lawsuit to the IRS? Get real! It has no basis and is being done just to stir your anti-religion pot. As if anyone pays attention to you anyway. You forget that Americans are guaranteed freedom OF religion, not FROM religion.

Donahue and God: The path you have chosen is demonic and you will pay at your demise. Of course, you don't believe in religion or heaven and hell. You will never stop Mr. Bill Donohue, he's doing the Lord's work. I imagine when your

organization attempts to destroy Mr. Donohue he says, Get behind me Satan” or “I am the storm”.

Islam: Do you after the Muslims and Muhammad? That's what I thought. Because you and your buddies would be dead.

You will fail: Your attempts to intimidate the Catholic League won't work. Your anti-American, anti-Constitution, anti-Catholic bigoted hate group will continue to fail.

Answer this: I need to know something about what you support and how your personal ideas are justified in court you know that Satan is attacking people yes

For more than 30 years, there have been many attempts made to hound me from public life. Some have gotten to the point where I have had to contact law enforcement, at the federal and local level, and bodyguards. This latest effort—the militant atheists would like to take away the Catholic League's tax-exempt status—will fail, just like the rest of them. My foes should have learned by now that no one can shut Bill Donohue up. We will continue to publicly hammer anti-Catholic bigots. We will be de-

terred by no one. Bet on it. — Bill Donohue

Hell: God loves all of you so dearly, despite your rejection of Him. He died personally for each and every one of you. From personal experience, it is the best decision I have ever made. He gives us our every breath, what you are doing now is temporary, it won't last. Only what you do for Christ will last. Your life will either be a testimony for Christ, or your life will condemn you if you do not choose Him. Think long and hard about your life, do you really want to go to Hell? I encourage to read the scriptures on Hell. God created Hell for Satan and His angels, it is also the consequences of dying without Christ. Think about it, it is permanent, for an eternity.

Idiots: Y'all are the biggest idiots I have ever seen in my life. America was founded on religion, on God. It's idiots like you from the devils heart that try to fight against god. You gotta read the bible cuz the devil never wins against God.

Sorry: May God's blessing be upon you when you burn in hell.

FFRF: You people should be illegal. You should be banned.

ffrf FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION
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What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

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

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FFRF offers much more than just Freethought Today for news, information and lively banter about freethought and state/church separation.	FFRF press releases ffrf.org/releases
Ask an Atheist online weekly show ffrf.org/ask-an-atheist	Legislative action alerts Check out FFRF Action Fund, our Advocacy arm ffrfactionfund.org
Freethought Matters TV weekly show ffrf.org/freethought-matters	We Dissent monthly podcast wedissent.org
Freethought Now blogs freethoughtnow.org	
Freethought Radio weekly show ffrf.org/radio	
Freethought of the Day Daily online calendar of famous freethinkers ffrf.org/day	

Action Fund supports pro-abortion referenda

“Your Body Belongs to You — Not the Church, Not the State,” reads a new billboard placed by FFRF Action Fund in the Orlando, Fla., area in support of Amendment 4, the vitally important Nov. 5 ballot initiative to overturn Florida’s draconian abortion ban.

FFRF Action Fund isn’t just expressing the views of its advocates, but has gifted a total of nearly \$55,000 among 11 abortion referendum advocacy groups courageously working to overturn bans and/or enshrine the right to reproductive liberty in state constitutions. (Amounts varied depending on reporting requirements in the state.)

“Our advocates are committed to reproductive rights, which should be no surprise, as surveys and polls have found that atheists are the strongest supporters of abortion rights by religious identification,” comments FFRF Action Fund President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “We believe that neither the church nor the state should be intruding on that most private and personal decision of if, when or whether to prevent, continue or end a pregnancy.”

Gaylor added that the FFRF Action Fund Board was in unanimous agreement to support the referendum campaigns, and is grateful for the awe-inspiring work represented by the collection of hundreds of thousands of signatures overall. In states where bans are in place, the groups have had, in many instances, to overcome multiple court or other challenges, and nefarious schemes to misrepresent the referendum language.

Polls have shown that atheists are the single group most supportive of abortion rights, at 91 percent, with agnostics close behind at 83 percent. This compares to 77 percent of Jewish people and 76 percent of Buddhist. “Nonreligious Americans are the new abortion voters,” reads the headline of a FiveThirtyEight article. FFRF’s 2024 membership survey shows 98 percent in support of abortion rights.

FFRF Action Fund has donated to groups in 11 states. Initiatives will be on the ballot in 10 states, but the fund also gave \$5,000 to Arkansans for Limited Government, which fought hard to get its protections on the ballot. In August, the Arkansas Supreme Court ruled against the group in rejecting signed petitions. The group has incurred legal expenses and plans to persevere in the future to overturn the state’s harsh ban.

The groups successfully getting referendum on the ballot and receiving major support from FFRF Action Fund are:



Central Florida Freethought Community Co-Founder Jocelyn Williamson shows off the FFRF Action Fund billboard in the Orlando, Fla., area.

- **Arizona for Abortion Access**, which received \$4,900 from FFRF Action Fund to support Proposition 139. The Arizona Supreme Court in April notoriously reinstated an abortion ban from 1864 that predated statehood. The legislature quickly repealed that statute. Abortion is currently banned at 15 weeks with other restrictions. Proposition 139 would prevent the state from banning abortion until viability, and would allow later abortions to protect a woman’s physical or mental health.

- **Coloradans for Protective Reproductive Freedom**, which received \$5,000 from FFRF Action Fund to support Colorado Amendment 79, the Right to Abortion and Health Insurance Coverage Initiative. A “yes” vote not only supports creating a right to abortion in the state constitution but approves use of public funds for abortion care for individuals on Medicaid and requires state and local government health insurance plans to cover abortion care. Colorado bishops issued letters “to the faithful” telling them “It is imperative all faithful Catholics vote to oppose ‘The Right to Abortion.’”

- **Floridians Protecting Freedom**, which received \$1,200 from FFRF Action Fund (with the Freedom From Religion Foundation adding \$3,800 for a total of \$5,000) to support Amendment 4. The ballot initiative, which needs 60 percent of voters

to vote yes, is desperately needed after abortions were banned on May 1 at six weeks (before most women know they’re pregnant).

Florida clinics had been providing abortion care for most of the South. Amendment 4 would bar any prohibition, delay or restriction before viability or when necessary to protect the patient’s health. The Florida ACLU is preparing to sue Christian nationalist Gov. Ron DeSantis for misusing public funds to run TV ads saying the amendment “threatens women’s safety.”

- **Freedom in Reproduction – Maryland**, which received \$5,000 from FFRF Action Fund to support Question 1. Although abortion is currently allowed until viability, the referendum would ensure that right continues, by enshrining the right for women to end pregnancies in the state’s constitution.

- **Missourians for Constitutional Freedom**, which received \$5,000 from FFRF Action Fund to support Amendment 3. Missouri has one of the most restrictive bans. The group has overcome numerous obstacles, most recently winning a last-minute reprieve after the state Supreme Court overturned a county circuit judge’s ruling against the initiative. Amendment 3 would create a right to abortion until viability, with exceptions as deemed necessary to protect the life or physical or mental

health of the pregnant woman.

- **Montanans Securing Reproductive Rights**, which received \$5,000 from FFRF Action Fund to support Montana CI-128, the Right to Abortion Initiative. Currently, abortion is legal until viability, which is threatened by active Christian nationalism in the state. The measure would enshrine abortion rights in the state constitution.

- **Protect Our Rights in Nebraska**, which received \$5,000 from FFRF Action Fund to support Initiative 439, the Right to Abortion Initiative. Abortions in Nebraska are currently banned after 12 weeks with some exceptions. The initiative would amend the state constitution to protect abortion rights until viability.

- **Nevadans for Reproductive Freedom**, which received \$5,000 to support Question 6, the Right to Abortion Initiative. Although abortion is currently legal in the first 24 weeks of pregnancy, the constitutional amendment would enshrine that right in the state constitution.

- **New Yorkers for Equal Rights**, which received \$5,000 from FFRF Action Fund to support Proposal 1. Although abortion is permitted until viability, referendum supporters note that 53 anti-abortion bills have been introduced into the state legislature in the past decade alone. Prop 1 would enshrine the right to abortion and close loopholes in the constitution to bar discrimination.

- **Dakotans for Health**, which received \$5,000 from FFRF Action Fund to support Amendment G. It would ban any restrictions on abortion in the first trimester, but allow regulation of abortion in the second trimester only related to the physical health of the pregnant woman. While more controversial because it is not as sweeping as the other referenda, it would help overcome much of the state’s current ban on all abortions with narrow exceptions.

It is cause for optimism that voters in all seven states that have held abortion referenda since Roe v. Wade was overturned in 2022 — California, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Montana, Ohio and Vermont — have sided with abortion rights supporters.

“But we can take nothing for granted,” warns Gaylor. “The organized opposition to abortion rights, almost exclusively religious in nature, is wealthy and fierce. We urge our advocates to do everything they can to support these measures and help overcome the harmful, unjust Supreme Court Dobbs decision overturning Roe vs. Wade.”

ffrf ACTION FUND

The article on this page 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.

OVERHEARD

If you say something against the church, it’s like saying something against God. **Felix Fremlin, who said he was abused as a child by New Zealand missionaries working in Fiji. His father didn’t believe his accusations, instead beating him. The Pacific islands have become a “dumping ground” for Catholic priests accused or even convicted of child sexual abuse, with at least 34 such priests and missionaries transferred to the Pacific.** *New York Times, 6-6-24*

The state has become a testing ground for conservative policies and now ranks as the worst state for public education. US News & World Report puts it at No. 49. That’s by design. That’s what it looks like when Project 2025 takes over public education. Project 2025 is Christian nationalism. If Project 2025 becomes a reality, your

state will look like Oklahoma. **Andrew L. Seidel, author and constitutional attorney, in his column, “Want to know what public education would look like under Project 2025? Just take a look at Oklahoma.”** *Religion Dispatches, 8-19-24*

Republicans, take it from me, if you’re below the atheists, you’re having a major brand perception crisis. **Danny Westneat, a nonreligious Seattle Times columnist, referring to a poll in Washington state based on a 0-100 scale of how warmly one feels toward a specific group. Republicans were at the very bottom of all the groups included in the survey, including atheists, who were five points “warmer” than Republicans.** *Seattle Times, 8-24-24*

Texas is suing now, not because of its concern with state sovereignty, but because of its hostility to reproductive health. **Liz McCaman Taylor, senior federal policy counselor at the Center for Reproductive Rights, responding to a lawsuit by the state of Texas to try to block a federal rule that shields the medical records of women from criminal investigations if they cross state lines to seek abortion where it is legal.** *Associated Press, 9-6-24*

When politicians affirm the idea that a country belongs to a particular religious group, their beneficiaries may arrive at the reasonable conclusion that the state implicitly approves of discrimination, harassment, and even violence against nonprivileged faiths. Thus, the

language politicians use can fuel tribalism, reduce inhibitions, and reduce the perceived costs of engaging in majoritarian violence, even if this is not the intention of the said speech. **Nilay Saiya and Stuti Manchanda of Nanyang Technological University, researchers who found that those who ascribe to Christian nationalist principles led to greater violence against non-Christians.** *The Friendly Atheist, 9-10-24*

The assault on democracy takes many forms and has many names in countries around the world. In the United States, its name is Project 2025. **John Nichols, in his column, “Project 2025 would dismantle democracy as we know it.”** *The Capital Times, 9-4-24*

FFRF announces 2024 high school essay winners

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the winners of the 2024 William Schulz High School Essay Contest. FFRF has awarded \$19,850 in scholarship money for this year's contest!

College-bound high school seniors were asked to write a personal persuasive essay based on this prompt: "How can young 'Nones' help transform the United States with their secular values, such as by voting?"

FFRF awarded 12 top prizes and 14 honorable mentions. (FFRF seeks to distribute essay scholarship monies to a higher number of students, so ties — such as fifth place in this contest — are not regarded in the typical tie fashion, where, in this instance, sixth place would be skipped.)

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

FIRST PLACE

Finn Mosher, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, \$3,500.

SECOND PLACE

Garrett Hartfelder, University of Southern California, \$3,000.

THIRD PLACE

Ashkon Shirazi, Brown University, \$2,500.

FOURTH PLACE

Toby Shu, Georgetown University, \$2,000.



FIFTH PLACE (tie)

Olivia English-Saunders, Michigan State University, \$1,500.

Lynn Sepersky, University of Wisconsin, \$1,500.

SIXTH PLACE

Ivy Nichols, Colorado State University, \$1,000.

SEVENTH PLACE

Natalie Mendoza, Arizona State University, \$750.

EIGHTH PLACE

Quinn Weidner, North Carolina State University, \$500.

NINTH PLACE (tie)

Evelyn Dietz, Rollins College, \$400.

Brandon Norman, Mercer University, \$400.

TENTH PLACE

Emily Turner, Case Western Reserve University, \$300.

HONORABLE MENTIONS (\$200 each)

Brietta Chen, Georgia Institute of Technology.

Anushka Chillale, University of Michigan.

Jayla Cole, Colorado College.

Abraham Drake, Dickinson State University.

Ellie Emmelhainz, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

Emily Fadgen, University of California-Riverside.

Tyler Howell, University of Florida.

Sarah Lam, UC-San Diego.

Samuel Lund, Colorado State University.

Jaiden Maltbia, Fisk University.

T Schiding, West Chester University.

Elijah Shewell, St. Mary's College of Maryland.

Jacey Tanioka, Lewis & Clark College.

Aaminah Zeinelabdin, Howard University.

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

FFRF warmly thanks FFRF's Lisa Treu for managing the infinite details of this and FFRF's other annual student competitions. And we couldn't judge these contests without our volunteer and staff readers and judges, including: Don Ardell, Dan Barker, David Chivers, Eric Evans, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Richard Grimes, Tim Hatcher, Dan Kettner, Jeffrey LaVicka, Sammi Lawrence, Katya Maes, David Malcolm, Kurt Mohnsam, Chris O'Connell, Andrea Osburne, 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 and one dedicated to students of color since 2016. A fifth contest, open to law students, began in 2019.

FIRST PLACE

The Good Book or the textbook?

FFRF awarded Finn \$3,500.

By Finn Mosher

From the beginning of our history, humanity's greatest asset has been curiosity. It turned a species of forest-dwelling apes into a world-spanning civilization, took us from the depths of the ocean to the reaches of space. But, for almost as long as we've had curiosity, it's been restrained by another invention of humanity: religion. Whenever we've run into a phenomenon exceeding our capacity for comprehension, we've explained it with religion and spirituality. This is what makes religion a burden to a modern, progressive society like the United States, and why youth leaving organized religion en masse marks an upturn in humanity's fortunes.

My history with religion serves as a perfect microcosm of why religious decline is important. Although raised agnostic, I converted to Christianity from ages 13–15, reverting to agnosticism before turning 16. During my most devout phase, I hoped to seek a career in corporate law. Since reverting, my ambition has shifted, and I'm



Finn Mosher

now working to become an engineer in the field of astronautics, helping humanity understand the stars above.

These two phases of my life serve as a microcosm of the distinctive mindsets of religious people and "Nones." When I was religious, I pursued study of a preordained system, a life entirely within the

known, learning the intricacies of an inscrutable box crafted by a higher authority. This mindset originated from my religion, which told me there was no reason to attempt further understanding of the world. All necessary answers were found in the bible; anything not contained within was not ours to know. Now, two years apart from religion, I want to help humanity understand the universe, expand our limitless potential into the stars. Now, I believe that nothing in this universe falls outside of the human capacity for comprehension, as long as we keep our curiosity and drive for scientific progress fierce.

This newfound curiosity and respect for science is not unique to me. According to Pew Research, "Nones" are 275 percent as likely as the religiously affiliated to believe in a scientific explanation for everything, even one beyond current understanding, and 140 percent as likely to say science does more good than harm in American society. These numbers increase even further among atheists, agnostics and the highly educated, with seven-tenths of college graduates and four-fifths of atheists believing science

does more good than harm.

The implications of this data are tremendous. With increasing "None-ism" among younger generations, the data predict a tremendous spike in both pursuit of and trust in the sciences. As Generation Z and beyond abandon religion, we will continue turning to science to understand the world around us. Our enduring human curiosity, the drive that's taken us this far, is finally freeing itself from the haze of religions that told us we already knew everything we needed. As we stare down generational crises — antibiotic-resistant bacteria, new forms of warfare, climate change — this boost in curiosity and pursuit of science will prove crucial in keeping humanity thriving for generations to come.

Finn, 18, is from Walla Walla, Wash., and attends Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University with plans to major in aerospace engineering. "I received the President's Volunteer Service Award as a result of my time spent as the vice president of Washington State Future Business Leaders of America Industry Relations," Finn writes. "I also spent some time in high school involved in environmental activism through my school's Green Club, at which I served as treasurer."

SECOND PLACE

Our fight for freedom

FFRF awarded Garrett \$3,000.

By Garrett Hartfelder

I vividly remember one summer when I was very young, I was at a summer camp at a local church. I remember a teenage boy lecturing us with a puppet show on how sinning would condemn us all to hell, a "dark void" where I would "be alone forever."

Me, being a freaked-out 5-year-old, bolted out of the room bawling. I felt a straitjacket of morality wrapping itself around me. I found myself

dreading damnation above all else.

For a few more years, the chains of fear were dragging me down with every decision I made. I dreaded sin — a nebulous specter haunting every corner of my life that was going to cause me everlasting pain. I was overwhelmed at what felt like a wall of guilt closing in around me. To be a good person is to be religious, no?

No. No, it isn't.

Fortunately, I, and many my age, have become rather disillusioned with religion. We've realized that the philosophy peddled to us was obsolete. We've realized blindly fearing sin at

every corner wasn't a healthy way to live. We've witnessed massive swaths of people seeking to deny civil rights and liberties in the name of some so-called God. "Love thy neighbor," they preach, while practicing malice toward the most vulnerable among us.

So many people I love are queer. They're my closest friends and family, not "abominations." So many religious people shield themselves from this reality, placing themselves in a prison of pretension they want everyone else to be an inmate in.

Seeing people masquerade as spreaders of love and virtue beat



Garrett Hartfelder

down innocent people because some book said so made me realize that something had to give. Fundamentalists seek a world where they control women’s bodies, people’s sexuality and gender and where they persecute those who dare to be different.

That world can never exist. Luckily, there’s hope that it won’t — hope that our generation of Nones sees through the hollow worldview of fundamentalists, thinking independently of inane ideas of sin, paving a bright future liberated from self-righteous bigotry. The Nones of our generation already support the

rights of women to control their own bodies and protecting the right for queer folk to simply live.

I’ve had the pleasure of seeing us in action. I’ve worked on a successful recall effort to oust bigoted fundamentalists from my own school district. I’ve seen my fellow students — people who have seen the harm of religious extremism for themselves — make a mark in the most con-

servative parts of Orange County. Religion should never be used to limit someone’s humanity or obstruct an open mind. Nones like myself will fight for a world where everyone can live free from fundamentalist extremism, even fundamentalists themselves! It’s why I want to become a civil rights attorney. I want a world that practices the “love thy neighbor” that fundamentalists preach, not one

“I dreaded sin — a nebulous specter haunting every corner of my life that was going to cause me everlasting pain.”

where “The Handmaid’s Tale” is a documentary.

Garrett, 18, is from Anaheim, Calif., and attends University of Southern California, where he plans to major in political science with the intent to go to law school.

“I’m grateful to have worked within my community to combat fundamentalist overreach, including a successful recall election of two transphobic board members in my own school district,” Garrett writes. “I also volunteer for U.S. Rep. Lou Correa and work to rescue homeless dogs in my spare time.”

THIRD PLACE

On embracing the rational

FFRF awarded Ashkon \$2,500.

By Ashkon Shirazi

My parents raised us without religion; their country had seen too much of it. The secular shah was replaced with an authoritarian theocracy. My mother’s normal school clothes became veiled by a hijab. Less time in school was devoted to math and science and more was given to lectures of Islamic martyrdom and the evils of the West.

So, when my parents raised my siblings and me in America, they did so without forced religion. My father still prays privately, but the family Quran lies next to the more-opened books of Persian poetry and literature. The principles of my family were centered around reason. Study of science was encouraged, not shunned or treated as a social taboo. God was not a frequent visitor in our dreams, and he never provided any unsolicited spiritual advice. So, I am among many other Gen Z “Nones” that hold values of empiricism in highest regard.

According to a survey from Pew Research, American Nones are far more likely to hold their faith in the natural



Ashkon Shirazi

world. Nine percent of religiously affiliated adults believe that the natural world is all there is, compared to 35 percent of Nones. A majority of Nones (56 percent) believe that science does more good than harm in society, compared to 40 percent of the religiously affiliated. These values, rising in prominence among Gen Z, help shift American society to value evidence-based critical thinking.

Although there is still risk of misinformation and bias, greater trust in science among Nones creates more popular support for research and public health. A

population that evaluates evidence above faith is far more likely to adopt vaccinations and follow public safety measures in a country that still exists in the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic.

More striking is a second Pew Research survey stating that 62 percent of the religiously unaffiliated believe that the world is too complicated to be strictly divided into “good” and “evil,” compared to only 44 percent of Christians. Religious thinking divides the world into good and evil and therefore begets an unwillingness to compromise and listen to other perspectives. After all, who would want to compromise with “evil”?

A society increasingly made up of Nones will be far more likely to engage in bipartisan conversation and informed debate, furthering acceptance of minoritized groups like the LGBTQ community. In political participation, Gen Z Nones will hold the greatest sway. We have far less tolerance for candidates who dismiss and deny science,

“We have far less tolerance for candidates who dismiss and deny science, making funding for health, science and education more likely.”

making funding for health, science and education more likely.

Through voting for candidates who support the separation of church and state, our votes help preserve the original vision of American democracy. As we grow older, we will increasingly participate in both local and national politics. As future members of our city councils, state senates and federal legislatures, our values will see more direct application in government. Increased trust in scientific evidence and willingness to compromise with those of different beliefs will form a political culture that is more trustworthy, empirical and open to all.

Ashkon, 18, is from Jacksonville, Fla., and attends Brown University with plans to major in biochemistry. “A lifelong violinist and singer, I was named salutatorian of my high school class,” Ashkon writes. “I have been performing with the Jacksonville Symphony Youth Orchestra for four years and have been performing in the high school chorus for many years.”

FOURTH PLACE

Defending a secular America

FFRF awarded Toby \$2,000.

By Toby Shu

In March, I cast my first ballot in Colorado, voting in the 2024 presidential primary. And appearing on the ballot for the Republican party was Donald Trump. When I voted, the Supreme Court was considering the case of Trump v. Anderson, which was whether Trump could remain on the ballot or if he was disqualified by Section 3 of the 14th Amendment for aiding an insurrection.

Shortly after I voted, the Supreme Court handed down its decision. Unsurprisingly, six Republican-appointed justices, all Christian, ruled that Trump could remain on the ballot. But they did not stop there. They went further, ruling that legislation would need to be passed to even consider his disqualification.

The same Supreme Court, two years earlier, struck down Roe while weakening the wall of separation between church and state in Carson v. Makin and Kennedy v. Bremerton School District. The same Supreme Court last year held that my state’s anti-discrimination law could not be applied to a religious

website designer, letting her deny service to gay couples.

The common thread among all of these cases is the entanglement between Christian nationalism and conservatism. And it is no surprise that this thread exists, when Christian nationalist ideology was one of the strongest indicators for voting for Trump (PRRI, Feb. 24, 2023).

Conversely, the “Nones” make up around 30 percent of the Democratic voter base (PRRI, Feb. 24, 2023). However, the Nones, especially young Nones, vote in lower percentages than those who are religiously affiliated. In 2022, 22 percent of Nones aged 18-29 voted, much lower than the 39 percent of overall Nones who voted and 51 percent of religious people who voted (PRRI, Jan. 2024).

In other words, we, the young Nones, are not doing the bare minimum. We are not doing the bare minimum to prevent the present slide into Christian nationalism, which is working to bring back school prayer, outlaw abortion, and curtail LGBTQ rights. Christian nationalists tried to steal an election in 2020, and yet Gen Z Nones barely reacted.

To see our values enacted, we should be voting at equal rates to those who are



Toby Shu

religiously affiliated. We cannot stand idly by as our country becomes unrecognizable. We should be proud that we don’t support pseudoscience and oppressive hierarchies and are not religious. Our beliefs in following science, giving women the right to choose, and equality for all, including LGBTQ individuals, would find broader support gov-

ernmentally if we actually voted.

But our involvement cannot end there. We lack representatives in the corridors of power, and we must continue fighting until we have equal representation. We must help campaigns, phone our representatives, participate in local politics, and advocate for our policies. We must fight back against the threat that is currently posed to a secular America, using social media to reach young Nones, creating engagement and reshaping the Nones into an important bloc of voters.

By organizing and showing up, we will become a constituency with voices that are taken seriously. We will be able to defend a secular America. We cannot let America become unrecognizably entangled with religion.

Toby, 18, is from Englewood, Colo., and attends Georgetown University, with plans to major in math and economics.

“[In the summer before college,] I interned at Metro Volunteer Lawyers, a group that connects indigent people to legal help,” Toby writes. “In high school, I won several awards both in math and social studies for my academics and participated in theatre tech for six shows, leading in four.”

FIFTH PLACE (tie)

Raised without a god

FFRF awarded Olivia \$1,500.

By Olivia English-Saunders

I always tried to be religious. In Texas, I grew up watching my friends pull out their pink bibles inscribed with a glittery cross, flipping through its thin pages for nighttime prayer, and sometimes showing me some of their favorite lessons and stories from it. This was a routine for every single sleepover — I so desperately wanted to be a part of it. And, not only to own one of those girly holy books, but to be a part of something that seemed to make everyone else so happy. I wanted to understand what it was like.

My parents are devout atheists. My father, in particular, was all too familiar with organized religion's predatory techniques. He grew up in a conservative Catholic family in rural New Mexico, where the church expected tithes of at least 10 percent from an incredibly



Olivia English-Saunders

impoverished community while planting seeds of guilt and shame through sermons. After he left the Army, he tried to rekindle his faith with Baptist Christi-

anity — only to find the same pattern of manipulation. He quickly threw away the idea of following an organized religion.

So, with that, I was raised without the idea of a god or a fiery hell waiting for me if I dare make a mistake. It has protected me from many dangerous ideals and has allowed me to form into my own person, even if I never got a sparkly bible.

Many other people of my generation can relate to my story and, despite it sometimes making some of us feel left out of something much bigger, I think it will change America for the better. We don't feel a need to follow a system that demands complete control of our lives, while it finds ways to extort its followers even more. We can be more accepting of others, we can make decisions with our personal values, we can be more empathetic. These are all aspects we have needed to see in our people, especially these past few years.

The political landscape has turned to something reminiscent of the Crusades:

a desire for a religion to completely take over our country, and that total domination must happen no matter the cost. It is a truly frightening thing to watch unfold, to watch as we shuffle away from a secular government and turn our backs on our founding ideals.

My generation is here to defy that, however. We were able to learn from our parents' experiences with religion and improve our beliefs, becoming critical of anything that requires blind trust and unwavering faith. We are driven enough to help this country steer toward a future where everyone can exist and believe in what resonates with us, without forcing our neighbors to have the same beliefs.

Olivia, 18, is from Leesburg, Va., and attends Michigan State University with plans to major in game design. "I love to travel and experience new perspectives, and I love to incorporate those views into my art," Olivia writes. "My goal is to help others learn about people much different from them, and how to understand them."

FIFTH PLACE (tie)

Self liberation

FFRF awarded Lyn \$1,500.

By Lyn Sepersky

I was supposed to feel heard. I was supposed to feel loved. But in the pews of the Catholic Church that raised me, I felt nothing at all.

For so long, I was told that God would listen to and provide for my needs. In return, I was supposed to listen to him: follow his will, listen to his words, play by his rules.

I was living for someone else, a deity who I believed would fix me — yet it was when I left his church that I learned I could change it myself. I learned that I, on my own, was enough to change the world, a lesson that many other Americans are currently learning.

When I embraced my life as a "None," I embraced a life of change. When I was a Catholic, I believed wholeheartedly that simply praying would fix my problems. Even as I struggled in my own life, I did not believe it necessary to put in work to

fix things. I believed God would do it for me. But that is just the trap that religion brings people into — the trap of perpetuity. They believe that someone else will save them, and so they never even try to save themselves or their world.

The year I labeled myself as a None was the year I finally decided to become engaged in my community. After years of prayers — prayers that went unheard — I finally stepped out and began protesting, calling to those who I knew had to listen. It was 2022, and I went into the streets, arm in arm with my fellow citizens, and caused a disruption.

As a child raised Catholic, I had been trained to accept the rules laid down by someone else. As I became a None, however, I was able to make my own rules and fight for the future I wanted to see, hand in hand with the people my church had taught me were evil. I was able to do something. And that feeling was liberating.

That liberating feeling is exactly why the Nones will be able to change America. In modern politics, religion has been fiercely



Lyn Sepersky

weaponized to halt progress and keep the world stationary. But, as people break free from religious traditions and beliefs, they can find and fix the issues in the world.

I suspect that in most progressive protests, a majority of those pushing

for change would identify themselves as Nones of some sort. This is no coincidence. Nones know that their futures are up to them, and that they need to work to get what they want. That is how the Nones will change the world. They will be the people who fight to make a change, rather than relying on the whims of a deaf God.

As I have taken responsibility for my own life, for my own joy and happiness, I have looked toward the future with a smile. It will be what I make it. And I plan to make a change.

Lyn, 18, is from Schofield, Wis., and attends the University of Wisconsin, where she plans to major in history and Spanish before attending law school.

"Between working my job at a gas station, being an avid participant in my school's ecosystem, and volunteering at my local historical society, I keep myself busy on days off through writing and reading," Lyn writes. "After college, I intend to use my degree to help anyone in a tough spot through my legal services. Until then, I plan to do whatever I can to buy my cats, Sam and Deede, a cat tree. They deserve it."

SIXTH PLACE

One less barrier

FFRF awarded Ivy \$1,000.

By Ivy Nichols

A glance into the values of religious "Nones" reveals the potential of this growing demographic to build a more inclusive, adaptable society. Whether the beliefs of Nones are described as being in support of "increased secularism, abortion rights, and LGBT rights" (Kiesel), being "strongly progressive," or simply being against the sexist and racist rhetoric that is increasingly associated with the "religious right" (Grossman), it is clear that this worldview has one characteristic: the acceptance of people and ideas that are rejected by the status quo.

Research into the values and beliefs of religiously affiliated people supports the idea that this is unique to Nones. A 2023 survey by Pew Research Center asked respondents what factors played into their determination of what is right or wrong. Seventy percent of religiously affiliated respondents said that the way they were raised helped dictate their moral decisions, as opposed to only 56 percent of Nones.

This reveals that religion encour-

“In the age of climate change & technology, American society will be greatly served by a population that listens to the findings of science rather than reject them as dangerous if they do not fit with the teachings of their religion.”

ages people to accept what they are told without much questioning — a big deterrent to social and political change. Without this stationary view, Nones are more willing to adopt new ways of life.

How Nones go about adopting change will also be more fact-based. When the Pew Research Center asked about attitudes toward science, 56 percent of Nones said science does more good than harm (and that went up to 79 percent among atheists), compared to



Ivy Nichols

40 percent of religious respondents. In the age of climate change and technology, American society will be greatly served by a population that listens to the findings of science rather than reject them as dangerous if they do not fit with the teachings of their religion.

The benefits Nones provide to society will be evident in the cultural sphere. As an atheist myself, I know

that a lack of a religion positively impacts my life by making me more tolerant of others. I do not have a religion teaching me that my worldview is the only correct way of life, or that anyone who does not follow my religion is an outsider.

In other words, I have one less attribute creating divisions between myself and others, which means one less barrier to having understanding and

empathy for others. Paired with the secular values of upholding rights and acceptance for all, a widespread adoption of this view will lead to a less xenophobic, less conservative approach to decision-making. When religion is absent, there is one less barrier to building a more accepting society.

Ivy, 18, is from Greeley, Colo., and attends Colorado State University and plans to major in Middle Eastern and

North African studies.

“I think it was this interest in Middle Eastern and North African studies that first motivated me to become more involved in volunteerism and activism,” Ivy writes. “I hope to go to Morocco for one semester and Jordan for a second. I will learn Arabic, gain exposure to the cultures I’ll work with in the future, and take internships and volunteer opportunities in these countries.”

SEVENTH PLACE

Building secular communities

FFRF awarded Natalie \$750.

By Natalie Mendoza

I am one of the lucky ones. My parents did not brainwash me in religion. Growing up, my atheist parents nurtured my curiosity and desire to learn. My parents’ encouragement had a profoundly positive impact on every aspect of my life. Specifically, atheism leaves me free to learn about the world, create and engineer new ideas to benefit the world, and to experience joy, pride and confidence while doing so.

Indeed, the lack of religion shapes the values of “Nones,” like me. We value science, logic and reason far more than religiously affiliated individuals. For example, 56 percent of Nones believe that “science does more good than harm” according to a Pew Research Center study. In contrast, only 40 percent of religiously affiliated adults believe that “science does more good than harm.”

However, according to a Pew Research survey, only 39 percent of Nones reported voting in the 2022 elections. This is a



Natalie Mendoza

problem. To reinstitute and maintain the secular ideals of our constitutional republic, Nones must advocate for pro-liberty and pro-science policies by signing petitions, writing letters to their politicians, and voting for politicians and ballot measures that align with secular ideals. The

question becomes: “How do we increase the number of Nones who vote?”

The Pew Research survey found that the disparity in the religiosity of voters stemmed from differences in engagement within a religious community. To combat this disparity, Nones must form communities and affiliations that work to make science and truth the driving forces in politics. The Nones must continue to build adjacent organizations that similarly advocate for science-backed and freedom-based policies that protect the rights of all Americans. Since the number of Americans identifying as “none” is increasing rapidly among individuals in Gen Z, college-aged Nones should work together and across campuses to advocate against religious tyranny and for individual rights.

Although the religious right has

worked to erase American freedoms and secular ideals for decades, the growing number of Nones have the power to fight back against the religious right and support legislation based on science, reason and individual rights. To do so, we must build communities centered on our secular values.

Natalie, 18, is from Tempe, Ariz., and attends Arizona State University, where she plans to major in biomedical engineering and computer science. “I have served as a commissioner on my city’s Sustainability and Resilience Commission, and I hiked and backpacked 44 percent of the Arizona Trail with my mom,” Natalie writes. “After I earn my undergraduate degrees, I plan to earn a master’s degree in biomedical engineering. After that, I hope to pursue a career as a biomedical engineer working for a large pharmaceutical or biotechnology company.”

“Nones must form communities and affiliations that work to make science and truth the driving forces in politics.”

EIGHTH PLACE

Religious predisposition to prejudice

FFRF awarded Quinn \$500.

By Quinn Weidner

At its core, religion was created in the hopes of establishing unification of the spiritual mind, thus promoting times of peace and cooperation — a rare asset in ancient times filled with constant battling and human blood loss. Stories of all-knowing beings reduced anxiety about the future and afterlife. However, what once was created for all-encompassing unity has only created devastating division. Mass genocide, social ostracization and modern warfare all have roots in debates over religious values using death as their argument’s closer.

Even in the United States, religion causes division in its “melting pot” culture that theoretically should allow religious freedom of choice. How can a religiously representative country have a total of 29 percent of nonreligious Americans and only be represented by 0.2 percent of the 118th Congress? This alone says enough about how our government

is controlled by religion and does not abide by the principle of separation of church and state.

Seventy-four percent of American nonreligious voters are in support of the legal right to abortion and 81 percent are in support of same-sex marriage.

How can the Supreme Court overturn essential court cases such as *Roe v. Wade*? How can same-sex marriage be legalized by *Obergefell v. Hodges*, yet be questioned through various supplementary pleas to the court? The Nones’ viewpoints are cast aside because of humanity’s predisposition to ostracize those who do not conform to their religion or, often viewed as more extreme, have no religion at all.

Personally, I can attest to this. Growing up in the South, not feeling as though I believe in Christianity (or any religion) caused me to feel disparate from my peers. I questioned why I thought an ambiguous figure overlooking my actions was unbelievable. I felt confused when my peers talked of church, stories found in



Quinn Weidner

their scripture and allusions to biblical characters in books.

However, since those days of inner turmoil, I have observantly watched how religion can decay parental relationships with children, cause pressures in women being judged as “impure,” and watched friends battle with thoughts that, due to mental health issues, their faith wasn’t strong enough.

I’ve never used my religious values to judge others because I have no religion. What I once was afraid to ad-

mit, I am now proud to say: I have no religious affiliation. I will never “find God” nor will I ever feel ashamed for not being part of an institution I believe harms our unification as humans.

I am proud to be a part of the 29 percent of nonreligious Americans, to represent the 24 percent of registered young voting Americans, to be a part of the 74 percent in support of legal abortion rights and the 81 percent who believe in same-sex marriage.

I am excited to be at the forefront of change through voting and to use the positive attribute of nonreligion to encourage my fellow Americans to establish unification without the addition of the conforming spiritual mind.

Quinn, 18, is from Mooresville, N.C., and attends North Carolina State University, with plans to major in animal science.

“I was an A-honor roll student (4.0 GPA on a 4 scale), vice president of Science National Honor Society, a member of National Honor Society, a Mooresville High School Link Leader, and have taken eight Advanced Placement classes,” Quinn writes. “I have worked for the past nine months as an office assistant at Homesley & Wingo Law Group, helping the lawyers with discoveries, contacting clients and running errands to the courthouse.”

“What I once was afraid to admit, I am now proud to say: I have no religious affiliation I will never ‘find God,’ nor will I ever feel ashamed for being part of an institution I believe harms our unification as humans.”

NINTH PLACE (tie)

The benefits of ‘Nonehood’

FFRF awarded Evelyn \$400.

By Evelyn Dietz

As a general rule, religious “Nones” have the potential to protect pressing rights regarding bodily autonomy in the United States, whether it relates to reproductive rights, gender affirming care or restricted access to information and books.

According to the Pew Research Center, 86 percent of religiously unaffiliated people hold the belief that abortion should be legal in all or most cases, as opposed to just 25 percent of white evangelical Protestants. With atheists and agnostics going out to vote at similar or higher rates than those who are religiously affiliated, there is the potential to counteract or reverse the dangerous six-week or total abortion bans that have been plaguing the nation.

Additionally, with the higher number of individuals coming out as transgender, particularly in Gen Z, gender-affirming care and access to facilities and youth activities (sports teams, bathrooms, etc.) is



Evelyn Dietz

becoming increasingly important.

As I learned from the National Library of Medicine, those holding conservative religious beliefs or identifying as religious are more likely to display transphobic

behaviors and language. Oftentimes, homophobia and transphobia among religious communities is rooted in the fear of their belief systems, such as entrenched roles within the gender binary or a grand divine plan, collapsing. Professionals in the medical, educational and social work fields who identify as Nones are more likely to be unprejudiced and unbiased toward queer individuals within their work, and thus perform at a higher level of professionalism.

Personally, a lack of religion has been a positive attribute in my life for a variety of reasons, some of which I did not even realize until recently. For example, I have an utter lack of spiritual angst, and the idea that the universe is inherently meaningless has always appeared to be common sense for me. This is partially attributed to a lack of childhood influences referencing fate, destiny, God’s will, a defined purpose for life, or what have you.

The existential notion that you yourself are responsible for making meaning out of your life is incredibly freeing, rather than being a burden. Diversity of thought

is one of the most wonderful things humankind has to offer. Furthermore, my mother’s spiritualism combined with my father’s atheism has created an interesting blend of realism and curiosity within me. I have had the opportunity to explore and experiment with different religious beliefs and scientific concepts, while secure in the knowledge that my moral code is not dependent on an ancient text.

Being able to explore ties between science and religion, my own body, emotional processing, and the other shenanigans of life with very limited shame is highly attributed to being raised nonreligious, and I will always be immensely grateful for that.

Evelyn, 18, is from Gainesville, Fla., and attends Rollins College, with plans to major in international relations. “I hope to have a career in public relations or some variety of diplomacy,” Evelyn writes. “My interest in travel and global community building was piqued not only by my family’s decision to live in Costa Rica for two years during my childhood, but also due to being accepted into Camp Rising Sun, a leadership initiative that brings together teens from all over the world to engage in projects.”

NINTH PLACE (tie)

Making a difference as a ‘None’

FFRF awarded Brandon \$400.

By Brandon Norman

If you watch or read the news or follow social media regarding politics, eventually you will see something mentioned about falling religious affiliations. Gallup has noted that the number of religiously unaffiliated has grown to 22 percent since the 1970s, while PRRI puts the number at 26 percent.

Recent surveys by the Pew Research Center show how partisan religion and its influence on society and politics has become, with stark differences between secular and religious as well as liberal and conservative. Each side points the finger at the other for the nation’s ills.

At the same time, the “Nones” are still concerned with morality and engaged on specific issues. In addition, atheist and agnostic Nones are actually engaged at similar levels to religious people when it comes to civic involvement, voting and other measures. You must be careful when looking at the data, but what does all this

mean for the United States in the future?

Gen Z and other young adults represent a huge voting bloc, but are just starting to make their mark across America, economically and socially. Young Nones can transform the United States by engaging on local, state and national levels. A secular view does not mean an anti-religion one. Rather, it emphasizes the separation of church and state enshrined in the founding documents of the United States. To ensure that a single religion does not become a “state” religion, young Nones must change the narrative in the media to one in which moral, social and economic issues are discussed and debated without being framed with religious undertones.

Voting is key, for sure. While a protest vote or not voting at all may feel good in the short term, it might result in an outcome that further restricts freedom while promoting partisan policies. Finally, young Nones can establish platforms to grow a sense of community among non-religious Americans. Religious citizens share views across a wide range of



Brandon Norman

topics, but it is much harder to pin down what connects the nonreligious. Finding connections is crucial if young Nones are to protect secularism in the United States or to transform the nation. Anything from social media to meetups is fair game.

For me, being a None does not mean I

am not spiritual or cannot find common ground with those who follow religion. Rather, being nonreligious allows me to take a more measured, thoughtful and inclusive approach to key issues, whether that is homelessness or immigration, the economy or abortion. I can “walk in another’s shoes” more easily since I do not feel bound by religious doctrine. And, I do not feel the need to judge people, instead welcoming different points of view, life stories and cultural influences. A willingness to learn and adapt is critical for the future, whether we are fighting for equal rights for minority groups or pushing for action on climate. Being a None means I can see the big picture, translate it to my local community, and then make things happen.

Brandon, 18, is from Cumming, Ga., and attends Mercer University, with plans to major in international business. “I hope to leverage a world-class education to build a successful career in a technology business catering to global markets,” Brandon writes. “In addition, I plan to lead by example in my community through service and volunteerism.”

TENTH PLACE

From a dream to reality

FFRF awarded Emily \$300.

By Emily Turner

In a world where religion is considered the norm, the principle of “separation of church and state” has never been a reality. This is evident even today, as proven through recent decisions on women’s and LGBTQ rights. The government was never truly secular, but as the younger generation enters adulthood and the workforce, the future may be promising. Gen Z has more individuals who identify as religiously unaffiliated than any other generation, and this can change our

world and shape the future.

Perhaps the most effective transformation will come through voting. According to surveys done by the Pew Research Center, religiously unaffiliated voters tilt strongly toward the Democrats as opposed to Republicans. Therefore, they are more likely to support civil rights, universal health care and environmental protections. They are in opposition to religiously affiliated people, who tend to tilt toward the Republicans. As Gen Z continues to bring more religiously unaffiliated voters to the table, this will lead to changes in policies and laws and can transform the United States as we know it.

Additionally, according to a study by the Pew Research Center, the majority of “Nones” state that logic and reason are very important when they decide between right and wrong, as opposed to religiously affiliated people, who are more likely to say that their religious beliefs and the way they were raised plays a very important role when making moral decisions. This approach to decision-making is crucial. A world run by logic and reasoning is much more stable and promising than a world led by the beliefs of several different religions, some of which may be contradictory and extremely outdated. By being secular, Nones will lead the Unit-



Emily Turner

ed States down a path that will ensure equality for everyone without religious beliefs and morals underlying our laws and the actions of those in power.

As a None, I approach all my decisions with logic and rationality, which has led me to form political and personal beliefs that are different from the majority of my community. I am not influenced by religious ideas or messages, which has been a positive attribute in my life. By believing in

science rather than the bible, I can approach the world with a more open mind. I love to seek knowledge, and my curiosity has become my most beneficial quality. I am more understanding of others, and I possess a strong sense of justice. I do not judge others based on religious ideas, which has led to more friendships and deeper connections.

Gen Z, with its high numbers of Nones, will transform the world. Our

ability to embrace secular values and use logic will help create a more inclusive and just society. And, perhaps, it will lead us to an age where the separation of church and state is not just a dream but a reality.

Emily, 18, is from Washington Court House, Ohio, and attends Case Western Reserve University, with plans to major in astronomy and engineering physics.

"I was awarded the Franklin B. Walter Scholar Award, which is given to one

student from each county in Ohio," Emily writes.

"I was a commended student for the National Merit Scholar Competition and am a part of our school's National Honor Society. I own my own baking business, Delicious Delights, which I started when I was in fifth grade. Through my business, I have led three fundraisers that produced over \$1,000 for the families of cancer patients, and I have donated to several local charities."

FFRF's 2024 high school essay honorable mentions

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

Jayla Cole

The majority of Gen Z has been passionate about protecting reproductive rights and LGBTQ-plus rights, standing up for equality and social justice, protecting the environment and encouraging positivity of the individual in the face of ridicule. My morals as an atheist reflect these same goals, proving it doesn't matter what religious beliefs anyone has, we can all come together and agree to better the world despite our differences.

Jayla, 18, is from Colorado Springs, Colo., and attends Colorado College, with plans to major in anthropology and museum studies.

Brietta Chen

Morality and ethics are nuanced subjects and oftentimes cannot be represented solely by right and wrong, but rather by a spectrum of morally gray. Religion, historically, has removed much of this nuanced discussion, painting a black and white image of what is right and wrong based on their religious values.

Brietta, 18, is from Oklahoma City and attends the Georgia Institute of Technology with plans to major in mechanical engineering.

Anushka Chillale

I live for myself without being beholden to a religious entity. I believe that it is powerful to gain strength by trusting in one's own capabilities rather than depending on a religious entity for hope and fortitude. I admire how secularity reflects the power of self-determination as it highlights the importance of the individual in shaping their own life.

Anushka, 18, is from Frisco, Texas, and attends the University of Michigan and plans to major in biology.

Abrahm Drake

Although, at times, I yearn to have a higher being to rely on and have faith in, I have no doubt I am better off and a better human with my atheistic views. Instead of a god, I turn to community and myself as a way of comfort and guidance and, with that, I feel more complete in the way that I obtain self-actualization.

Abrahm, 18, is from Dickinson, N.D., and attends Dickinson State University and plans to major in nursing.

Ellie Emmelhainz

I realized once I left the private school system that it does not matter what someone's religious affiliation is — it is simply how they act that matters in the long run. If you act with good morals, it should not matter to anyone how you worship, or do not worship, in your free time.

Ellie, 18, is from Freeville, N.Y., and attends Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, with plans to major in computer science and computer engineering.

Emily Fadgen

To protect the right to religious freedom — including the right to no religion — it is imperative that secular people, many of whom are Gen Z's "Nones," utilize their vote to keep government policies nonreligious. In order for the United States to be held true to its founding principles of freedom, it's imperative that Nones are encouraged to vote.

Emily, 18, is from Menifee, Calif., and attends the University of California Riverside with plans to major in biology.

Tyler Howell

I cannot wait for Gen Z to be a driving force in the United States. It will be up to us to bring morals, inclusivity, diversity and tolerance back into the government. Decisions need to be made not with religious overtones, but with logic, empathy and reason. We are

being raised to question the government and not stand for corruption or injustice.

Tyler, 18, is from Fleming Island, Fla., and attends the University of Florida with plans to major in biology.

Sarah Lam

Political candidates have begun incorporating religion into their ideological campaigns, appealing to the older generations who are more likely to be religious voters. As religious identity declines within the younger generations, it is important to recognize the power of voting to ensure the separation of church and state, and to address issues religious believers refuse to acknowledge as real.

Sarah, 18, is from San Francisco and attends UC San Diego, with plans to major in biology.

Samuel Lund

I am proud to be religiously unaffiliated. The religiously affiliated tend to be stuck in tradition and not open to new concepts. Those who are religiously unaffiliated take a more scientific approach to the world.

Samuel, 18, is from Walsenberg, Colo., and attends Colorado State University with plans to major in biomedical sciences.

Jaiden Maltbia

Our right to religious freedom is an American right that does not vary by age. Students deserve the right to attend school without being forced into a religion. The best way to make an impact on our rights is to use our voices and our voting abilities. Using our voices locally can make a difference in the entire world.

Jaiden, 18, is from Lees Summit, Mo., and attends Fisk University, with plans to major in journalism.

T Schiding

Entering elementary school, I noticed numerous fellow children discussed this bizarre, alien pastime that was "church." There was so much going on in the world around me,

so many very real and tangible things to think about, and even in youth I knew that what was ostensibly true took precedent over what couldn't be proven.

T, 19, is from Reinholds, Pa., and attends West Chester University with plans to major in forensic chemistry and toxicology.

Elijah Shewell

Though there is a growing political movement of Christian nationalists, there is also an up-and-coming generation of non-religious and minority voices who are ready to take a stand against the Christian nationalist movement. By joining with all allies, the Nones can have more representation to pass legislation to keep our freedom from religion cemented in the fabric of our nation.

Elijah, 18, is from Prince Frederick, Md., and attends St. Mary's College of Maryland, with plans to major in marine science and biology.

Jacey Tanioka

The people who are removed from religion can shift the focus away from religion by voting for candidates on the basis of their policy agendas rather than those who justify their views and actions with faith. As the values of its citizens change, the country as a whole will move closer to the secular vision it was designed to embody.

Jacey, 18, is from Camas, Wash., and attends Lewis & Clark College with plans to major in psychology.

Aaminah Zeinelabdin

The idea that religious faith is required to be a good person is outdated among many. Because of this shift in thinking, younger voters will vote based on their own moral compass, which will create a greater separation between church and state.

Aaminah, 18, is from San Antonio, Texas, and attends Howard University with plans to major in journalism, film and media.



Jayla Cole



Abrahm Drake



Ellie Emmelhainz



Brietta Chen



Emily Fadgen



Sarah Lam



Samuel Lund



Jaiden Maltbia



Elijah Shewell



Jacey Tanioka



Aaminah Zeinelabdin

What Is a Freethinker?

freethinker *n.*

1 A person who forms opinions about religion on the basis of reason, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief.

FFRF awards \$35,000!

Forward Freethought scholarship winners

FFRF has awarded \$35,000 in First in the Family Humanist Forward Freethought scholarships to eight students, thanks to the incredible generosity of FFRF benefactor Lance Bredvold. The students were selected by Black Skeptics Los Angeles (BSLA), an African American humanist-atheist-based organization.

BSLA is the first secular humanist atheist organization to specifically address college pipelining for youth of color through its ongoing scholarship, college and K-12 youth leadership partnerships. FFRF has proudly partnered with BSLA for 11 years to provide tuition grants, gradually increasing the funding and number of scholarships.

The following are the 2024 First in the Family Forward Freethought scholarship winners.

- Rubi Alvarez, UCLA, \$2,500.
- Denim Fisher, Spelman College, \$2,500.
- Jahliyah Johnson, UC Riverside, \$5,000.
- Xavier Johnson, Florida State University, \$5,000.
- Gabby LaCourse, University of Southern Maine, \$5,000.
- Alvaro Molina, University of Kentucky, \$5,000.
- Pierce Smallwood, California Polytechnic State University, \$5,000.
- Dulcinea Villareal, University of Washington, \$5,000.

Here are excerpts from this year's awardees' essays.

Rubi Alvarez

The question I often pose to those who wonder how I can be moral without a belief in God is this: If the fear of hell is the only thing motivating your goodness, then is your goodness truly genuine? Being a good person should come from a place of empathy and understanding, not fear.

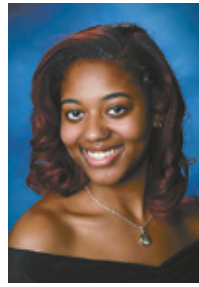


Rubi Alvarez

Secular humanism encourages us to take action based on reason and compassion rather than dogma. It calls for us to recognize our shared humanity and to work together to create a more just and equitable world. In addressing issues like transphobia, homophobia, classism, racism, and many others, it is crucial to engage with the underlying social and cultural factors that perpetuate discrimination. This means not only advocating for policy changes but also working to shift societal attitudes and beliefs. In my community, this has involved challenging harmful narratives and providing alternative perspectives that celebrate diversity and inclusivity. By fostering understanding and empathy, we can build a stronger, more cohesive society that values each individual for who they are.

Denim Fisher

I aim to contribute to a society where every individual is treated justly, regardless of their race, gender or sexual



Denim Fisher

orientation. Secular humanism posits that human beings, not deities, are responsible for creating social change. Marginalized human beings can make a difference in promoting meaningful social change by realizing that we are the bearers of our freedom. When advocating for a cause, passion and education are significant. An advocate is present, listens to learn and not to respond, and asks questions. Being an advocate requires an ego adjustment. Many of us enter a space and assume that we can speak to something because we are emotionally invested and charged, but the work of an advocate/activist is to train the mind by educating oneself on not just feelings, but facts. Education is a lifelong task. To ensure that history does not repeat, we must revisit the past.

Jahliyah Johnson

Secular humanism can make a difference in creating social change by promoting that being kind and equal to one another as humans is something we should do not because of a moral code created by a god, but simply because we are all human. Theism often relates morality to belief, and I've heard many theists argue something to the effect of "if you don't follow a god, how do you know right from wrong?" This line of thinking is flawed because it assumes that humans are naturally amoral and cruel, and that assumption is fundamentally negative toward social growth and change because of the fact that it discourages kindness and understanding to others who do not subscribe to a certain belief system. Their humanity comes after their theism. Secular humanism focuses instead on a person's humanity, no matter their religion, race, orientation, etc. This focus allows for meaningful change to be made because the mistreatment of our fellow human is condemned purely because it's mistreatment of another human being.



Jahliyah Johnson

"Yo momma" jokes, a staple of school humor, weren't my style. But one day, facing bullying because I was "different," I retaliated with a "Yo momma" joke. "Well, yo momma's so slow, she thought a hard drive was a rough road," I quipped, surprising them. This small victory made me feel empowered. Up until then, I found solace in my academic pursuits, but, in a moment of desperation, I was determined to stand up and

Xavier Johnson

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Xavier Johnson

"Well, yo momma's so slow, she thought a hard drive was a rough road," I quipped, surprising them. This small victory made me feel empowered. Up until then, I found solace in my academic pursuits, but, in a moment of desperation, I was determined to stand up and

confront my bullies. Surprisingly, the joke sparked their interest in my coding skills despite them initially shunning me due to my "difference." This led to the formation of Together We Build, a diverse group of individuals from all backgrounds, sexual orientations and beliefs, focused on Lego robotics, breaking down social barriers. Our camaraderie birthed the school's first Lego robotics club. The club extended beyond STEM, serving as a platform for discussing topics like bullying prevention and academic success. It evolved into a supportive community, prioritizing personal growth alongside robotics. Empowered by this experience, I honed my wit, using humor to foster connections and advocate for myself. This shift in approach propelled my acceptance and growth and paved the way for a future enriched with innovation.

Gabrielle LaCourse

I'm an African American deaf woman who was adopted into a white Christian family. My family has allowed me to not participate in their beliefs and have allowed me to pursue my own, which I have appreciated. The bullying and misunderstanding of deafness have made me aware that society in my local area is not as educated as one would hope.

I have multiple opportunities around me to spread awareness and I do it with compassion.

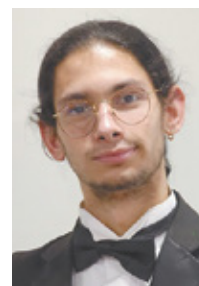
The bullying in middle school was by exclusion, which brought on depression, self-harm and thoughts of suicide. My mother and I decided to spend a lot of time at a barn riding horses. This really helped me realize that this time in my life didn't mean it was the end of my world. I used it as a learning experience.

As a result, I learned to befriend the so-called outcasts and become a safe place for them. I've learned not to judge people by their looks. I get to know them and find out that they are truly human.

Alvaro Molina

After several years of analyzing why I am not religious, I have found that it is primarily because I do not believe that God, or any god in general, is responsible for everything that happens around me. I think concepts like the bible and Christianity, specifically, are based on self-contradictory arguments. The use of the existence of hell and heaven and the belief that God is watching our every action is nothing more than a tactic to control the masses through fear and suffering.

As a member of the LGBTQ-plus community and an undocumented



Alvaro Molina

immigrant in the United States, I have succeeded, graduating with honors from my high school despite the difficulties with English, and I am now a fluent speaker of the language. However, I can also speak to how ugly it feels to be judged by someone who is not like you and does not know your story. I have received racist comments and ridicule upon arriving in the United States, as well as whispers and mockery for being part of the LGBTQ-plus community. If we were more mindful of how our words hurt others, we could have a healthier and better-functioning society, all striving for equity.

Pierce Smallwood

During my time growing up in various religious institutions — such as Baptist schools, Catholic churches and missionary programs — there was one factor of Christianity that led me to abandon my belief entirely: the self-righteous yet inconsistent attitudes and behaviors that many of its believers possess.

This isn't to say that Christians and other non-secular individuals simply decide to not to follow their religious disciplines perfectly, but especially in the West, modern Christianity has fueled some followers to deem others inferior and treat them as such, a completely backward attitude from what is taught in the bible. These mindsets played a strong role in building the United States and have imposed morally unjust and unfair treatment on its citizens, who are only now receiving the breadcrumbs of what they deserve.



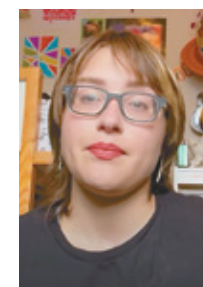
Pierce Smallwood

Dulcinea Villareal

The main thing I try to do to instill these morals is accept everyone. But beyond that, I try to tell other people to accept everyone. In my town, there

are a lot of conservatives with some very not nice things to say about queer people and those who aren't Christian. It is a human right to belong, be loved, and not be alone. I always remind them that God said "love thy neighbor." I tie these values back to their religious texts because I want to remind them that they don't get to just pick and choose what ideas they follow and what ones they don't. I've always seen a lot of hypocrisy when it comes to choosing what is right and wrong based on words in a book rather than what you feel is the right thing to do as a human being.

I've always followed the idea that you can control your own life based on your religion, but you cannot control my life based on your religion. I live by the notion that under all the layers of what makes us individuals, there is a base — human.



Dulcinea Villareal

FFRF Action Fund

Strategic goals turn into achievements

By Mark Dann

It's been a very busy few months at FFRF Action Fund, the advocacy/legislative arm of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. We have fully implemented our Dynamic Scorecard, finalized our endorsement process, developed an Express Endorsement Process for candidates who are incumbents or endorsed by key partners, rolled out key endorsements for federal, state, local and school board candidates, elevated and led on critical bills such as the Health Share Transparency Act, judicial reform bills, and repealing the Comstock Act. We



Mark Dann

have developed focus groups on Gen-Z nonreligious voters in the key swing state of Wisconsin, paved the way for FFRF to underwrite four campaign fellows at critical universities in Wisconsin to focus on voter registration and pledges to vote, celebrated our community and victories by establishing the first Congressional Reason Reception on the Hill with the Congressional Freethought Caucus, and provided support to the founding of the Project 2025 Task Force.

All of these achievements have been possible because we developed our strategic goals to engage and turn out non-religious voters, empower the Congressional Freethought Caucus, and increase FFRF AF's influence. We are well-positioned to have a strong influence in the 2024 election and beyond.

• Engaging and turning out nonreligious voters

In our debut year, we're targeting Gen Z voters, the least religious generation in modern American history, who will be a critical voting bloc in the 2024 election. We launched a series of focus groups to learn what influences non-religious Gen Z registered voters in Wisconsin. We discovered that Gen Z voters understand the importance of this election, and despite the lack of enthusiasm for the presidential candidates at the time of the focus groups (May), it did not quell their interest in voting in November. They were nevertheless committed to voting based on which candi-



date(s) best represent their values.

They fundamentally feel their voices are not heard in the current zeitgeist dominated by the loudest, most extreme voices. Gen Z voters are not apathetic but profoundly concerned about the direction of the country and remain cautiously optimistic that progress is still possible. They expressed strong interest in voting this year, seeing voting as the great equalizer to having their voices heard. They also believe their vote carries more weight as voters in a swing state — and this presents a compelling reason to vote.

To increase our targeted efforts in promoting voter awareness among non-religious Gen Z students, we did some legwork with some of our strategic partners in Wisconsin to make hiring four campus organizing fellows possible.

Because our parent group FFRF can engage in voter awareness, FFRF is underwriting four stipends for these campus organizing fellows, who started working in late August and will continue until the election to help with voter registration and pledge-to-vote cards. The fellows are targeting three key universities with historically low areas of voter participation in the past 10 years.

• Empowering the Congressional Freethought Caucus

The Congressional Freethought Caucus continues to grow. There are now 23 members, and no member has lost a general election. In the past few months, we worked with its co-chair, Rep. Jared Huffman, who has become outspoken on the dangers of Project 2025 and has formed the Stop Project 2025 task force, of which we are a supporting member. We helped elevate the issue, worked with members on joining the task force, and supported the task force's legislative program. Because of Huffman's work in leading the Project 2025 Taskforce, the Congressional Freethought Caucus has grown in influence on the Hill and with

the public as a whole.

We further empowered the Congressional Freethought Caucus by hosting the first annual Congressional Reason Reception on the Hill in early May for the National Day of Reason with our key partners at the American Humanist Association and the Secular Coalition for America. The event was an antidote to the doom and gloom and victimization that is rampant in Christian nationalist circles. Our event focused on the wit and joy of the secular movement, featuring Kate Cohen from The Washington Post. The event was standing room-only and was attended by key staffers and several members of Congress.

• Increasing FFRF AF's influence on the Hill

In the past few months, FFRF AF has finalized our endorsement process for federal, state, local and school board candidates. We made school board endorsements a critical part of our program because of FFRF's historic work in championing secular public education and legal work to combat forced prayer in schools.

We saw a strategic opportunity to bolster school board candidates where reliable information about candidates is often sparse, and FFRF AF can help shift some focus from the top of the ticket that often monopolizes the public's attention and resources.

We have developed key relationships with the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund, We the People for Education, and Our Schools USA to launch our Express Endorsement Program. These allied groups have values similar to those of FFRF AF and have a candidate viability requirement. This

program helps to leverage a campaign's scarce resources where we can work with candidates endorsed by our allied partners on their position on the separation of state and church. We have endorsed 11 federal, 16 state, one city/county, and four school board candidates to date. All advocates living in the states of endorsed candidates are directly notified by FFRF AF of these endorsements and receive background information.

A key part of stopping Project 2025 is to implement FFRF AF's legislative agenda. This includes repealing the Comstock Act, an "anti-obscenity" law from the 1800s that originally prohibited mailing equipment or medication used for abortion. Although it's a "zombie" statute, a future Trump administration, guided by Project 2025 and extremists on the high court, will undoubtedly enforce it. Our agenda also includes judicial reform, curbing religious influence in health care with the Health Share Transparency Act, codifying access to abortion and reproductive care with the

Women's Health Protection Act, and securing federal rights from religious influence with the Do No Harm Act. FFRF AF's Dynamic Scorecard includes all these bills. The Dynamic Scorecard has helped us increase co-sponsorship on key bills and has increased FFRF AF's influence and weight on the Hill.

FFRF AF is playing a leading role in the Stop The Comstock Coalition. We plan on lobbying for the bill, elevating fellow coalition members on FFRF's media channels, engaging our members and the electorate in Wisconsin with op-eds about the Comstock Act, and encouraging the Congressional Freethought Caucus members to support the bill.

We will continue to work with our key allies in the Unrig the Courts Coalition to bring the Supreme Court Ethics, Recusal, and Transparency Act to a vote in the Senate and to increase support for the Judiciary Act to check the Supreme Court's power and propensity to support Project 2025.

Since establishing the Action Fund, we have significantly expanded our capabilities. We have increased our lobbying efforts, endorsed candidates who align with our values, and advocated for them. Our Dynamic Scorecard allows us to track and influence vital legislative priorities, and our Express Endorsement Program helps us support viable candidates at all levels of government.

Creating the FFRF Action Fund has also enabled us to establish strategic partnerships, whose alliances amplify our impact and broaden our reach. Additionally, our work with the Congressional Freethought Caucus has strengthened our presence on the Hill, giving us a more prominent voice in the fight against Christian nationalism and Project 2025. We can now support nonbelievers' rights and the separation of state and church more effectively than ever before. We know that the 2024 election will be challenging, and we are well prepared to manage the election outcomes, no matter what they are.

Mark Dann is FFRF's director of governmental affairs.



The article on this page 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.

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

*With occasional reruns.

Religion in schools getting some pushback

This article first appeared on Politico on Sept. 4 and is reprinted with permission.

By Andrew Atterbury and Juan Perez Jr.

Florida now allows chaplains in public schools. Oklahoma and Texas are looking to infuse bible lessons into curricula. And Louisiana wants to set up Ten Commandments displays in classrooms.

But these efforts to push Christianity into public schools are hitting a wall of hostility in conservative-led states, including lawsuits, protests and resistance from local officials.



Andrew Atterbury



Juan Perez Jr.

The clash of religion, politics and local control represents an unusual challenge for a spreading education policy model led by influential conservative leaders. And it's sparking a legal fight over the separation of church and state that could end up before the conservative-controlled Supreme Court.

Republican officials including Louisiana Gov. Jeff Landry, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and Oklahoma state school Superintendent Ryan Walters are welcoming legal challenges, defending their policies and demanding local schools fall in line. Even former President Donald Trump has offered support for posting the Ten Commandments in public schools.

But a diverse range of opponents — including local school officials, civil rights organizations and the Satanic Temple — hope to stymie these initiatives.

“What we’re trying to do, honestly, is protect the religious freedoms of all of our students . . . from being improperly indoctrinated by teachers or by schools,” said Rob Miller, superintendent of the Bixby Public Schools district near Tulsa, Okla., who is defying orders from Walters to incorporate the bible and Ten Commandments into school curriculum. “There’s enough court precedent and historical evidence to show that the separation of church and state has worked well for quite a long time.”

State lawmakers from both major parties introduced more than 650 bills tied to religion in education this year, according to a report by Quorum, a software company that tracks legislation. But the movement for religious instruction in public schools is overwhelmingly driven by conservative Republicans. They argue kids can’t understand Western civilization without learning about Christianity and benefit from the lessons of biblical teachings.

“If we start from a moral perspective, then maybe we’d have a little bit more peace in our society and in this country,” Landry told reporters in August while defending his state’s embattled Ten Commandments law. “Many religions share and recognize the Ten Commandments as a whole. So, really and truly, I don’t see what the whole big fuss is about.”



Politico illustration

Fla.’s chaplain program

DeSantis has championed a new Florida law that allows religious chaplains in schools, saying that a bit of “soulcraft” could “make all the difference in the world” to some students.

But, so far, school boards are not creating chaplain programs, citing fears of possible religious freedom lawsuits if they restrict access to organizations like the Satanic Temple. Recognized by the IRS as a religious group, the Satanic Temple has been loudly declaring its intent to flood Florida with chaplains against the wishes of DeSantis, who has vowed to keep them out. Osceola County, a left-leaning enclave in central Florida, has been on the cusp of becoming the state’s first school district to allow chaplains. But two attempts to get a program off the ground have been narrowly defeated by local school board members. [On Sept. 10, the Osceola board voted against forming a committee to draft a policy that would allow chaplains into their schools, effectively ending the plans for the program.]

Florida education officials introduced a proposal last month to prevent organizations like the Satanic Temple from volunteering through a policy aimed at ensuring only “credible” chaplains are permitted on campuses. It suggests requiring participants to belong to a religious organization that meets in-person at least monthly within the boundary of the school district. It also calls on principals to beef up the qualifications for chaplains by requiring previous experience and a degree in counseling or theology.

“Florida welcomes legitimate and officially authorized chaplains to become volunteers at their local schools and to provide students with morally sound guidance,” Florida Education Commissioner Manny Diaz Jr. said in a statement announcing the model policy.

Still, the Satanic Temple — which didn’t respond to a request for comment from Politico — is showing no signs of backing down and has started selling merchandise heralding how “Florida welcomes” its chaplains in schools.

“The reality is you’ll have to accommodate religious identities you may not agree with,” Satanic Temple founder Lucien Greaves told Osceola’s school board on Aug. 27. “You will end up with Satanist chaplains.”

Legal fight in Louisiana

A few states over, Louisiana’s new law requiring public schools to post a version of the Ten Commandments is facing a significant legal test.

The ACLU and other religious free-

dom groups [including the Freedom From Religion Foundation] sued to have Louisiana’s law, which passed with some bipartisan support, overturned on First Amendment grounds. Representing a group of religious and non-religious plaintiffs, the civil rights organization contends that displaying a “specific” version of the Ten Commandments “runs afoul of the First Amendment’s prohibition against the government taking sides on questions of theological debate.”

Top state officials like Landry and Attorney General Liz Murrill expect schools to prepare to follow the policy despite the pending federal lawsuit.

The state has already produced several examples of posters schools could use to comply with the law, featuring Charlton Heston as Moses and Lin-Manuel Miranda from Hamilton to help signal the historical and cultural significance of the Ten Commandments to students.

The biblical signage, according to Louisiana Republicans like Landry and Murrill, is meant to help curb a “lack of discipline” in local schools and the “inability of the whole system to impose some rules of order.”

“If those posters are in the school, and they find them so vulgar, tell the child not to look at it,” Landry told reporters in August when asked about parents who object to the law. A court hearing at the end of September may determine whether the law will be allowed to take effect in January.

In a similar fight, a proposed new K-5 reading and language arts curriculum next door in Texas is facing criticism — and possibly a future lawsuit — over its “heavy coverage of religion” and prominent focus on the bible. State officials, though, are standing by the proposed curriculum, claiming that the lessons draw from a “wide range” of faiths and are not meant to “proselytize or present one religion as superior to another.”

Bibles in classrooms

In Oklahoma, Walters, the state superintendent, declared in June that the bible was a required “instructional support” for student curriculum in fifth through 12th grades. “Immediate and strict compliance is expected,” Walters said in a memo to su-

perintendents and lawmakers.

Yet, critics immediately dismissed the order as a paper tiger, saying Walters lacked legal authority to unilaterally require curriculum standards without approval from state policymakers. Oklahoma law also grants local school districts significant discretion to determine the instruction materials they use to meet state-approved academic standards.

“Superintendent Walters has no authority whatsoever to dictate curriculum to school districts and individual teachers under state law,” said Annie Laurie Gaylor, a co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, a nonprofit that is pushing to obtain records about the bible mandate with a group of other organizations. “His memo is reckless grandstanding that school boards should ignore.”

The state superintendent dug in. Walters’ office issued a more detailed July memorandum that extolled the bible’s influence on Western art and culture and said physical copies of the holy book and Ten Commandments must be provided in classrooms — but also noted the bible was “not to be used for religious purposes such as preaching, proselytizing or indoctrination.”

Several major Oklahoma school districts have said they will not alter their curriculum, prompting a defiant response from Walters.

“Some Oklahoma educators have indicated they won’t follow the law and Oklahoma standards, so let me be clear: they will comply, and I will use every means to make sure of it,” Walters said in a July 24 statement.

The superintendent’s office did not respond to questions regarding how many districts are following or refusing the biblical instruction demands, or what the state will do to enforce compliance.

“Biblical instruction in its historical and literary context was the norm in American classrooms prior to the 1960s, and its removal foreshadowed a decades-long decline in American education,” Walters said in a statement to Politico.

Miller, who is suing Walters for defamation as part of a separate and ongoing dispute over school funding that has entangled the state superintendent, suspects Walters could attack the state accreditation of school districts that refuse to comply, a move that would likely spark lawsuits.

“This is a state where religion is a very important part of most families’ lives. So, this idea that schools are the ones trying to keep God out, or keep the bible out — it’s a red herring, it’s not true and it’s designed to inflame people,” Miller said.

“I wish it was that easy that we could read some bible verses and kids would behave themselves. But society has changed an awful lot in the last hundred years since that was the norm.”

Cryptogram answer

It if turns out that there is a god . . . the worst that you can say about him is that basically he’s an underachiever.

— Woody Allen

Crossword answers

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LETTERBOX

Thank you for the right to be heard

Thank you once again for the scholarship award, but more importantly, for letting my thoughts be published! I definitely will be registering to vote and letting my voice be heard. This election is very important. I will carry the phrase "Freedom depends on freethinkers" with me — it's very powerful.

Maryland

Editor's note: Shaun earned honorable mention and \$200 for his essay in the 2024 BIPOC contest.

Freethought Today an invaluable tool for us

Freethought Today has helped me in dealing with annoying religious family members, friends and neighbors. It has given me the tools to get rid of a lot of religious fanatics without being rude.

As for the essay contest winners, I wish I was as smart as those students back when I was their age! I'm 62 and I'm still not that smart!

Illinois

It's an honor to be recognized by FFRF

I am incredibly excited and very grateful that FFRF liked my essay! Thank you so much!

Once again, thank you for this opportunity. Writing about subject matters this close to me is something I find incredibly important and rewarding, and it is an honor to be published through your organization. I hope to continue striving to disentangle church and state in my future.

California

Editor's note: Garrett earned second place and \$3,000 in FFRF's 2024 high school essay contest. You can read his essay on pages 12-13.

FFRF has been lifelong inspiration to me

In 2011, I earned honorable mention in the high school essay contest and in 2013 I went to FFRF's convention in Madison. As a little kid, my sister and I had our picture in Freethought Today, which was taken near the FFRF sign in the Wisconsin state Capitol with a Santa hat in the corner.

I wanted to write and thank you because I recently graduated from law school and took the D.C. bar. As you can probably tell from my experi-

Some states still allow corporal punishment



Jimmy Dunne, far right, is seen with Phil Donahue, second from right, during a break in the taping of the show in 1987.

I am sad that Phil Donahue has died. I was on the Phil Donahue Show in June 1987 to discuss corporal punishment in public schools. Back then, I was a middle school math teacher in Houston schools. We had corporal punishment and I swung the paddle on some of my students. I started wondering why we were doing this when we didn't do it at home?

I formed "People Opposed to Paddling Students" (or POPS) and, as a result, I was invited to be on the "Phil Donahue Show," "Good Morning America," the "The Shirley Show" in Toronto and three more TV shows in Detroit, Los Angeles and New York City.

School paddling is clearly child abuse as it leaves big bruises on children. We need a national law to ban it nationwide. To this day, 23 states either still allow, or haven't officially banned, corporal punishment to discipline children in public schools.

Jimmy Dunne
Texas

ence with FFRF, you have been a part of my life for a long time, and I believe that growing up reading Freethought Today helped me come to understand how people make change in the country for causes they believe in — and understand the long and difficult process behind making positive change. So, thank you! Keep inspiring people.
Washington, D.C.

Being a None or atheist is an acceptable stance

There was no bible in our home. We didn't pray, attend church, discuss religious topics or participate in a religious activity of any kind. We were not anti-religion, just non-religious. My brothers and I learned appropriate behavior based on common sense and the words and actions of our parents and other responsible adults. Religion was not part of our lives. As far as I know, we were respected by all whom we knew. We got along well with our neighbors, many of whom were actively/openly religious, including some who were actual clergy.

By the time I got to high school, I was aware that many of my friends and classmates were involved to some degree with a church. My best friend was a member of a Catholic family, and my girlfriend was Methodist. We never talked about religious issues — never. Occasionally, I did wonder if I

was, or should be, a Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.

One day I asked my mother if she believed in God, and she said she did. This led to her "twisting my arm" to get me to attend Sunday school. For several weeks, I did ride my bike to a church for Sunday school, and I even attended a church camp for a week in the California mountains that included bible study. But it didn't "take."

During my first term at college, I read Bertrand Russell's essay "Why I Am Not a Christian." It was an epiphany! Until then, I didn't know that disbelief in God was a respectable option. I hadn't even heard or read the words "atheist" or "agnostic" until then.

And my wife? She, too, was encouraged by her parents to attend church, but when she was a teen and read about the Holocaust, she concluded that no god would ever let this happen. Thus, no god.

I don't recall any occasion in which our lack of religious belief has had a negative impact on us. We have friends who are active in their Protestant churches. All our neighbors are Catholic, and we get along really well with all. I even taught school for three semesters at a Catholic high school. The subject of religion didn't come up in the job interview. They just needed a math teacher!

One has to wonder how many young people today are leading secular lives but experiencing the same

doubts (and possible anxiety) that I had and don't realize that "none" or "atheist" are acceptable options to the religion question.

Nebraska

Christians don't have rights to our rights

I have watched with interest as the debate goes on regarding the place of religion in the public and governmental sector. It is an entitlement debate. Some believe, since it has always been that way that it should always be that way. Therefore, those who would have it as they have always had it consider themselves in the right, while demanding that those who oppose, for example, religious displays on government property, are basically told to get out of the way. Sounds like bullying to me!

The rights of individuals, religious or not, do not come from a majority vote. If we took a vote on whether the country was founded as a Christian nation, Christians would very likely win that vote. I get that. But that does not make our Constitution Christian. It was not written to appease the Christian public, but rather, to protect everyone, religious or not, even minorities. When someone wants to sponsor a religious display of some kind on or in government property, it becomes an issue when a minority determines it to threaten the principle of equal treatment for all.

With permission of its owner(s), private and public marketplaces are open to any and all to display their religious thoughts and ideas. Rent a storefront, lease a sign, sponsor a radio program, build a church, mosque or synagogue, but don't expect the government to appear as a sponsor of your religion. The appearance of sponsoring one religious entity over another is akin to entitlement often resulting from years of intimate and impermissible affiliation with a friendly and misguided government.

If religious institutions have to manipulate or muscle their way into the forefront of governmental affiliation during various holy days of the year, then where did the Christian biblical edict go that encourages us to "love thy neighbor as thyself"?

Bullying is not an attractive look for a religious person. It leads to Christian nationalism — or worse!

Minnesota

Thanks to FFRF for its accomplishments, efforts

Thanks to FFRF for all of its accomplishments and continuing efforts to maintain the separation of religion and state, especially opposing Christian nationalism. I think it is important that the public be educated about the perils posed by Christian nationalism to our democracy. In support of that effort, I am contributing a check to further the actions of FFRF. I am confident that FFRF will continue its outstanding work from local levels to the Supreme Court.

California



FFRF calendar features member's paintings

FFRF's 2025 calendar features 12 paintings from award-winning artist and FFRF member Robert Richert. The calendars can be purchased for \$15 at ffrf.org/shop. On this page is a sample of the calendar's artwork.

Name: Robert Richert.
Where I live: Seal Beach, Calif.
Where and when I was born: Oak Park, Ill., 1947.
Family: My younger brother Jim, 75, lives in Southern California.
Education: BA in art at California State University-Long Beach. From 1970s to the 1990s, I served as a volunteer naturalist at Southern California nature preserves.
Occupation: Artist. I began my career specializing in wildlife subjects, and in the 1990s I turned to landscape and seascape painting.
Military service: U.S. Army, 1968-70. 23rd Infantry Division, Vietnam. Atheist in a foxhole.
How I got where I am today: Diligence and persistence at pursuing a career in art.
Where I'm headed: I'm 77 years old, but have no thoughts of retirement. I enjoy painting and writing.
Person in history I admire and why:



Robert Richert in his studio.

MEET A MEMBER

Charles Darwin for his profound insights into biological evolution.
A quotation I like: "I never met a man I didn't like." — Will Rogers.
 "Faith is believing what you know ain't so." — Mark Twain

five years.

Things I smite: Arrogant ignorance, like that spouted by Donald Trump and religious believers who claim to "know" God exists.

My doubts about religion started: I was raised free of religious beliefs. My parents didn't raise my older sister, younger brother and to be anti-religious, we were just raised without religion.

Before I die: I'd like to learn that life exists elsewhere in the universe.

Ways I promote freethought: Through my writings and through speeches to local groups. I am a professional-level writer and public speaker. I've won awards at the national Veterans Administration Creative Arts Competition (both winning essays are in my book, "Apple Pie Atheist"), and won many speech contests in Toastmasters.

I wish you'd have asked me: About my latest book, "Apple Pie Atheist." I appeared on "Freethought Matters" last April, and FFRF Co-President Dan Barker gave my book a glowing endorsement. (Dan and I grew up in the same neighborhood.) Members can view my art at rb.gy/sc0xac.

Things I like: Playing pool; I can still run the table. Birding and nature walks. Most of all, spending time with Rachael, the love of my life. We met at a writers' group after the death of her husband, and have been seeing each other for



"The Grandeur of Yosemite"



"Misty Fjord"



"Take the Back Road"



"It Calls To Me"