

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



**Christian
nationalism's threat
to democracy**

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moment in
our history'**

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essay contest
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Vol. 42 No. 3

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April 2025

FFRF gets involved in Oklahoma bible case

The Freedom From Religion Foundation and several other groups are representing the plaintiffs who are trying to block Oklahoma Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters' latest scheme to distribute bibles to schools.

The lawsuit, *Rev. Lori Walke v. Ryan Walters*, is before the Oklahoma Supreme Court.

The plaintiffs asked the court to halt Walters' attempt to spend millions of taxpayer dollars to buy bibles, as well as a plan by Walters to buy bible-based instructional materials.

After additional pushback from the Legislature, Walters dropped the bible-purchase plan. Then, earlier this week, the Oklahoma Supreme Court temporarily blocked any other attempts to buy bibles and the plan to buy bible-based instructional materials.

But the same day that he dropped his plan to buy bibles, Walters announced a Bibles Back in School Campaign, which is yet another plan to distribute bibles to Oklahoma public schools. Walters has partnered with entertainer Lee Green-

wood to ask people to buy through a special website Greenwood and Donald Trump's "God Bless the USA Bibles" for \$71.50 per bible. The bibles — widely panned for advancing Christian nationalism — are then automatically donated to the Oklahoma Department of Education, which Walters runs, and then distributed to public schools. The website tells people to give money for the bibles because "GOD, CHRISTIANITY AND MORAL VALUES ARE OF THE UTMOST IMPORTANCE."

In the filing, the plaintiffs ask the court to stop Walters' latest scheme — again. Specifically, plaintiffs are asking the court to issue an order prohibiting Walters and other state officials from taking any action to implement the Bibles Back in School Campaign and from otherwise distributing bibles to public schools.

The plaintiffs are represented by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Americans United for Separation of

See Oklahoma on page 2

Mary Trump to speak at FFRF convention in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation invites you to celebrate its 48th annual convention and its "Forward!" theme in a unique setting — an oceanfront retreat at the Hilton Myrtle Beach Resort, 10000 Beach Club Dr., Myrtle Beach, S.C. After enjoying FFRF's line-up of inspiring and informative speakers, you'll find beaches to comb, an indoor pool and can walk the boardwalk or take a shuttle or Uber to nearby attractions during the convention's off-hours.

Our trump card, so to speak, will be author and honoree **Mary L. Trump**, a sharp critic of the current administration, who will be receiving FFRF's Emperor Has No Clothes Award, reserved for public figures who make known their dissent from religion.

Trump will be joined by other honorees including:

- **Dr. Maggie Carpenter**, a brave abortion rights activist under prosecution by Louisiana and Texas for dispensing medication abortion pills to patients there, who will receive FFRF's "Forward" Award.

- **Jamelle Bouie**, the distinguished New York Times columnist, receiving FFRF's "Clarence Darrow" Award.

- **Mubarak Bala**, the Nigerian atheist and human rights activist recently released from prison in Nigeria after five years' detention for committing "blasphemy," receiving FFRF's "Avijit Roy Courage Award."

- **Nancy Northup**, president of the cutting-edge Reproductive Rights Center, which is receiving FFRF's Henry Zumach Free-

See Convention on page 3

Secular stalwarts



During a break in the Secular Coalition of America annual meeting in Washington, D.C., FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, actor Julia Sweeney and freethought activist Margaret Downey stopped off at the Holodomor memorial, which is dedicated to the millions of Ukrainians who died in the Stalin-made famine of 1932-1933. As board members of the Thomas Paine Memorial Association, Gaylor, Sweeney and Downey on this trip were also scouting various sites for the proposed memorial. (For a photo of the attendees at the Secular Coalition of America meeting, see page 3.)

Nones are now the largest 'denomination'

There's good news for freethinkers in the form of a just-released survey.

According to the latest Pew Religious Landscape Survey, 29 percent of American adults have no religious affiliation, continuing to be the largest segment of the U.S. population by religious identification. Among adults ages 18 to 24, a whopping 43 percent have no religion.

Pew framed the results of the 35,000-person survey as showing that the decline of U.S. Christians has "stabilized" at 62 percent after dropping from 78 percent in 2007.

"But the huge revelation," says Freedom From Religion Foundation Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, "is that the Pew study finds the largest number to date of atheists, agnostics and 'nothing in particulars.' And there are more of us than Catholics (at 19 percent) or evangelical Protestants (at 23 percent) or any single Christian denomination."

Of those with no religious affiliation, 5 percent identify as atheists, 6 percent as agnostics and the rest as "nothing in particular." However, Gaylor notes that the study shows that 17 percent of adult Americans

are atheists by definition, if not by label, as only 83 percent of respondents overall believe in "God or a universal spirit."

This is the third in a trio of significant surveys by Pew over the past 17 years, which surveyed 35,000 randomly sampled respondents nationwide. Its first Religious Landscape Survey in 2007 found that 78 percent of U.S. adults were some sort of Christian, which declined to 71 percent in 2014 at the time of the second survey.

If Protestants are lumped together, they comprise 40 percent of the population. However, only 33 percent of those

surveyed indicate they attend religious services monthly.

The number of U.S. adults identifying with a religion other than Christianity has grown to 7 percent: 1.7 percent Jewish, 1.2 percent Muslim, 1 percent Buddhist and 0.9 percent Hindu. Other non-Christian religions comprise 2.2 percent.

The survey found that 86 percent believe "people have a soul or spirit in addition to their physical body," and 79 percent believe in "something spiritual"

See Nones on page 4

100th anniversary of historic trial

Don't miss the Scopes Centennial event

The evolution revolution began 100 years ago with the trial of John Scopes, and FFRF and the Center for Inquiry are hosting a celebratory conference in July to mark the centennial.

The Scopes trial was a landmark legal case that pitted biblical literalism against evolutionary science and argued whether American schools would be places of science education or religious indoctrination. The special event to mark its 100 years will be held Friday, July 18, through Sunday, July 20, at the Chattanooga Hotel in Chattanooga, Tenn. It will explore the trial's history and its lasting impact on science, education and the law. Attendees will hear from renowned speakers from the fields of evolutionary biology, law and history, and will have the opportunity to visit the site of the famous trial, the historic Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton, Tenn., as well as the statue of Clarence Darrow created by Zenos Frudakis and installed by FFRF several years ago.

The Chattanooga ballroom capacity is limited, so only 250 seats are available. Please register right away to avoid disappointment. Go to ffrf.org/scopes-con.

The Scopes Trial Centennial conference will feature talks by **Judge John Edward Jones III**, who presided over the landmark 2005 Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District case in which teaching "intelligent design" in public school science classes was ruled unconstitutional; actor **John de Lancie**, who will present live and on stage his acclaimed audio play "The Dover Intelligent Design Trial"; and author **Brenda Wineapple**, whose recent book "Keeping the Faith: God,



The Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton, Tenn.

Democracy and the Trial that Riveted a Nation" offers a magnificent historical exploration of the Scopes Trial.

Edward Larson, who wrote the 1998 Pulitzer Prize-winning "Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion," will be presented with the "Clarence Darrow Award," and Judge Jones will receive the "Defender of the Constitution Award."

Additional featured speakers include **Richard Katskee** of Duke's Appellate Litigation Clinic and former vice president and legal director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, who helped argue against intelligent design in the Dover case; **Katherine Stewart**, award-winning journalist and author who has covered religious nationalism for over 15 years; Bertha Vazquez,

the award-winning science educator who heads the Teacher Institute for Evolutionary Science (TIES); **Susan Jacoby**, New York Times bestselling author and secularist; and **Chris Cameron**, history professor and author of "Black Freethinkers." The marvelously funny **Leighann Lord** will entertain and also emcee the event. Other entertainment will include internationally known jazz singer **Tahira Clayton** singing popular songs from 1925, accompanied on the piano by FFRF Co-President **Dan Barker**.

In a CFI-only hosted event that all conference-goers are invited to attend that will take place separately Sunday morning, famed evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins will present the eponymous Richard Dawkins Award on behalf of the Center for Inquiry to Columbia University linguistics pro-

Hotel information

July 18 – 20 (Friday – Monday)

The Chattanooga Hotel,
Curio Collection by Hilton
1201 Broad Street
Chattanooga, TN 37402
\$189/night: Standard King,
Standard Double, King Bed
Mountain View Suite, or King Bed
Courtyard View Suite

Reserve your room

Attendees can call the hotel directly at (423) 756-3400. Provide the front desk the arrival date and group name: "FFRF/CFI SCOPES TRIAL" or group code: "GSCOPE."

Or, go to ffrf.org/scopes-con and click on "Hotel reservations."

Guests are responsible for making their own reservations with the correct arrival and departure dates.

Reservation cut-off date

The cut-off date is Friday, June 27. Reservations must be made prior to the cut-off date and/or before the block is full, whichever comes first, in order to guarantee the availability of the rooms and discounted group rate that was contracted. Reservations made after the cutoff date will be accommodated based on availability, at the best available rate, and at the discretion of the hotel.

fessor and New York Times columnist John McWhorter. The two will engage in an on-stage conversation.

Full event details, speaker information and a link to register can be found at: ffrf.org/scopes-con.

Oklahoma

Continued from page 1

Church and State, the American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU of Oklahoma Foundation and the Oklahoma Appleseed Center for Law & Justice. The organizations offered the following statements:

Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation: "Oklahoma families should not have to contend with religious promotion in their children's public school classrooms. And Oklahomans should not have to watch their tax dollars be used by their state to promote Ryan Wal-

ters' preferred holy book."

Rachel Laser, president and CEO of Americans United: "Another week, another attempt by Ryan Walters to abuse his power and impose his personal religious beliefs on other people's children. When will the superintendent learn? Parents, judges, legislators, clergy, students and families aren't interested in public schools peddling Christian nationalism."

Daniel Mach, director of the ACLU Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief: "Yet again, Walters is trying to use his preferred scripture to divide public-school students and their families along religious lines. But government officials should not be playing favorites with

faith, and Oklahomans deserve better."

Megan Lambert, legal director of ACLU of Oklahoma: "The First Amendment promises that we all get to decide for ourselves what religious beliefs, if any, to hold and practice, without pressure from the government. Politicians have no business imposing their preferred religious doctrine on students and families in public schools. All students should feel safe and welcome, regardless of faith, but the Oklahoma Department of Education continues to undermine this critical goal. Oklahoma communities are religiously diverse, and we will not allow our religious freedom to be undermined."

Colleen McCarty, Esquire, executive director of Oklahoma Appleseed Center for Law and Justice: "The costs of these outlandish actions by our state superintendent continue to climb and he shows no signs of slowing. We're facing a budget shortfall and Oklahomans simply cannot afford these stunts for much longer. Oklahomans need a leader who will maintain the rule of law and educate our kids."

Case background:

Walters issued a June 27, 2024, mandate unilaterally requiring every public school in Oklahoma to "incorporate the Bible, which includes the Ten Commandments," into their curricula, an abuse of power that ignored state laws. Walters then fast-tracked plans to spend \$3 million of taxpayer money on 55,000 King James Bibles. Walters said he wanted to spend another



\$3 million on bibles next year.

The lawsuit Walke v. Walters was filed Oct. 17, 2024, on behalf of 32 Oklahomans of diverse faiths who object to Walters' extremist agenda that imposes his personal religious beliefs on other people's children. The lawsuit asserts that Walters' plans to distribute bibles to public schools violate the Oklahoma Constitution's religious freedom protections because the government would be using state-funded resources to support religion, as well as favoring one religion over others by requiring the use of a Protestant version of the bible.

The attorneys on the team representing the plaintiffs include FFRF attorneys Patrick Elliott and Samuel Grover.

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

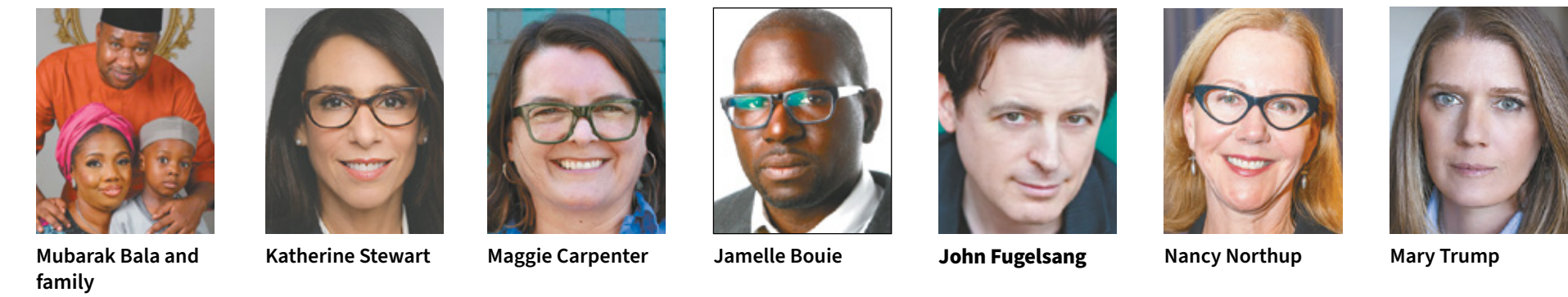
Madison WI 53701
FFRF.org
F 608.204.0422

EDITOR
EDITOR EMERITUS
EXECUTIVE PUBLISHER
GRAPHIC DESIGNER
COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR
CONTRIBUTORS

PJ Slinger editor@FFRF.org
Bill Dunn
Annie Laurie Gaylor
Roger Daleiden
Amit Pal
Dan Barker, Charles Blow, Jim Curtis, Chris Line, Bradley Onishi
The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Myrtle Beach resort, Oct. 17-19

Life’s a beach (at FFRF’s convention)!



Continued from page 1

dom From Religious Fundamentalism” award of \$50,000.

- Two student activists, **Bailey Harris**, 19, who is receiving the Diane and Stephen Uhl Out of God’s Closet Scholarship of \$5,000, and **Eli Frost**, 18, who is receiving the Beverly and Richard Hermen Student Activist Award of \$5,000.

Other powerful speakers include **Katherine Stewart**, last year’s “Freethought Heroine” honoree, returning to talk about her chilling tour de force, a new exposé, “Money, Lies and God: Inside the Movement to Destroy American Democracy.”

FFRF’s new Regional State Manager **Mickey Dollens**, a seated state representative in the Oklahoma Legislature, will be speaking directly on the convention theme with his talk, “F.O.R.W.A.R.D.: Your Blueprint for Effective Citizen Lobbying.” If you’re feeling powerless in today’s political landscape, Dollens will

explain how to Find key lawmakers, Organize your strategy, Reach out with impact, Watchdog accountability, Adapt to challenges, Raise awareness, and Drive change. With real-world stories and actionable tips, Mickey will offer hope and a clear path to influence policy at the grassroots level.

Speaking of secular state legislators, the convention also will host FFRF’s third annual panel made up of such representatives. **Dr. Herb Silverman**, who overturned South Carolina’s unconstitutional religious test to run for office, will give a short welcoming address. Radio and television personality and entertainer **John Fugelsang**, whose forthcoming book is called “Separate Church and Hate,” will be the Saturday evening final speaker.

Other presenters include students winning FFRF 2025 essay competitions, and reports on the year’s highlights by FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, by FFRF’s legal

team led by FFRF Legal Director Patrick Elliott and Deputy Legal Director Liz Cavell, and by the legislative team, led by Director Governmental Affairs Mark Dann and State Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne.

Other speakers will be announced in subsequent issues and online at ffrf.org/convention2025.

Five ticketed meals, including FFRF’s popular “NonPrayer Breakfast,” will be offered this year, more than usual, in part because — aside from two in-house restaurants — meal choices outside the resort will be limited, unless you have a car or use Uber. A small-capacity shuttle that can be ordered ahead can take some participants to nearby restaurant strips in Myrtle Beach.

Early birds can check-in on the afternoon of Thursday, Oct. 16 and enjoy light appetizers and a cash bar before relaxing on their own. The convention opens formally at 9 a.m.

on Friday, Oct. 17, following a complimentary continental breakfast. Friday evening ends with the traditional complimentary dessert reception and cash bar. The convention runs through Saturday evening, with FFRF’s annual membership and state representatives’ meetings taking place on Sunday morning, Oct. 19, ending by noon.

Book your own rooms at the Hilton Myrtle Beach Resort, 800-876-0010 (option 3 for Hilton Myrtle Beach) identifying yourself as an attendee of the “Freedom From Religion Foundation Annual Convention” using the code “FFR.” Or find the online direct link under “Hotel” at ffrf.org/convention2025. The favorable off-season rate is \$165/night plus tax for a standard room, reserved on or before Monday, Sept. 22.

Please turn to the back page for more details, menus and the registration form. Or register online at ffrf.org/convention2025.

A secular gathering



The groups that make up the Secular Coalition for America, which includes FFRF, held their annual meeting in Washington, D.C., in early March.

Freethought Matters

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

Freethought Matters TV talk show airs in:

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

Watch our show every Sunday!



Watch Freethought Matters anytime on FFRF’s YouTube channel! 

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

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.”

Across

1. *Atheist Andrew Sean Greer’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel

5. Time std.

8. Pronoun

11. “That hurts!”

12. Pi times square of the radius

13. Up and about

15. Troublesome child

16. Singe, as in ahi tuna

17. Waxing crescent, e.g.

18. *Atheist W. _____ Maugham, “Of Human Bondage” author

20. Simon does what?

21. Hoity’s partner

22. Lady lobster

23. *Freethinking Patrick Duffy’s TV show

26. Reiterate

30. Rap sheet abbreviation

31. Daze

34. Female bighorns

35. “Tales from the _____”

37. “New” prefix

38. Sandwich alternatives

39. Coconut fiber

40. Unwaveringly

42. “_____ Spot Run!”

43. Band around a column

45. Westernmost city in

Germany

47. Sushi sauce

48. Powerball, e.g.

50. Like Curious George

52. *Atheist actress Marlene _____ of “Shanghai Express”

56. Photo tint

57. Field mouse

58. Thespian’s part

59. “He loves me…” flower part

60. Word before sesame

61. Nucleus plus electrons

62. Online pop-ups, e.g

63. Roll of bills

64. Load up

Down

1. Over-the-head shots

2. Maastricht Treaty (1992) currency

3. Phishing attack

4. Jewish village

5. Roll out the red carpet

6. Substantial

7. Feather’s partner

8. Dog command

9. Serpenterium noise

10. Old-fashioned “before”

12. Enabler on a court

13. Architectural recesses

14. *Freethinking Robert Burns’ poem “Tam o’ _____”

19. Comedy Central’s public humiliation

22. *Atheist Joaquin Phoenix’ 2013 movie

23. Capital of Bangladesh

24. Ohio metropolis

25. Hoard like a squirrel (2 words)

26. *Freethinking Virginia Woolf’s “A _____ of One’s Own”

27. Inundated

28. Conical dwelling

29. Ruhr’s industrial center

32. Ton, e.g.

33. _____ annum

36. *Freethinking Friedrich II’s domain

38. Earp of the American West

40. Funny Poehler’s funny friend

41. Triangular sail

44. Like best friend

46. Cattle pen

48. Parkinson’s drug

49. Well-_____ machine

50. Not want

51. Prefers

53. Just a little

54. Doofus

55. Part of hemoglobin

56. Kind of resort

57. Solemn pledge

Freethought Today Crossword

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Answers on page 25

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Freethought Today Cryptogram

IVPCJCBS...LEME QE AB GVPCWVILAVPU GVZVCKV

BQIEVPKVE — AB IVHPLZV IVLEBS OCAT CAE

BHHBECAY, YLCAT. LSG OTVS XVS BHVILAV BS

YLCAT, ATVU ZLS SB PBSJVI WV IVLEBSVG OCAT, OTCZT

XMLVE ATVX XBIV GLSJVIBQE ATLS LSU ELSV XLS,

JBBG BI VKCP. — DLXVE P. EQAAVI

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: K => V. Answer is on page 25.

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

Nones

Continued from page 1

beyond the natural world, even if we can’t see it.” These findings, too, may reflect confusion over definitions, such as the meaning of “spiritual,” which technically means something supernatural.

However, the study clearly shows that younger Americans remain far less religious than older adults. Those 18 to 24 are less likely to identify as Christian, pray daily or attend religious services.

One reason for the growth of Nones among younger Americans could be that the study found they are less likely than older adults to have been raised in a religious household. But there is also a movement away from religion by those raised with religion. More than a third of U.S. adults have switched religions since childhood, which Pew said leads to net gains for the unaffiliated and net losses for Christianity. The Pew report says the “stickiness” of a religious upbringing seems to be on the decline, while the “stickiness” of a nonreligious upbringing appears to be rising.

Breaking the Nones down by race, 22 percent of Black adults have no religious affiliation (up from 18 percent seven years ago), 33 percent of Asian Americans, 27 percent of Hispanic adults (up from 20 percent in 2017) and 31 percent of white adults (compared with 24 percent in 2017).

Secular strongholds include Portland and Seattle, where 44 percent have no

Religious affiliation of U.S. adults

% of U.S. adults who are ...

	2007	2014	2023-24
Christian	78%	71%	62%
Protestant	51	47	40
Evangelical	26	25	23
Mainline	18	15	11
Historically Black	7	6	5
Catholic	24	21	19
Orthodox Christian	1	<1	1
Latter-day Saint (Mormon)	2	2	2
Jehovah’s Witness	1	1	<1
Other Christian	<1	<1	1
Other religions	5	6	7
Jewish	2	2	2
Muslim	<1	1	1
Buddhist	1	1	1
Hindu	<1	1	1
Other world religions	<1	<1	<1
Something else	1	2	2
Religiously unaffiliated	16	23	29
Atheist	2	3	5
Agnostic	2	4	6
Nothing in particular	12	16	19
Don’t know/Refused	1	1	1
	100	100	100
Sample size	35,556	35,071	36,908

Note: Figures may not add to 100% or to subtotals indicated due to rounding.

Source: Religious Landscape Study of U.S. adults conducted July 17, 2023-March 4, 2024.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

religion; Boston and San Diego, where 40 percent are unaffiliated; Columbus, Ohio, and Denver at 39 percent; and Baltimore and Austin at 36 percent.

This is indeed something to cheer about.

What are you missing? Check out our other offerings!

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

Ask an Atheist online weekly show
ffrf.org/ask-an-atheist

Freethought Matters TV weekly show
ffrf.org/freethought-matters

Freethought Now blogs
freethoughtnow.org

Freethought Radio weekly show
ffrf.org/radio

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

FFRF press releases
ffrf.org/releases

Legislative action alerts
Check out FFRF Action Fund, our Advocacy arm
ffrfactionfund.org

We Dissent monthly podcast
wedissent.org

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Create a **WILL FOR FREE** using FFRF’s trusted partner at FreeWill.

Create a Freethought Legacy Today.
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FFRF FOREVER!

IN THE NEWS

Court rejects challenge to clinic ‘buffer zones’

The U.S. Supreme Court on Feb. 24 declined to take up two cases involving “buffer zone” ordinances, which limit protests around abortion clinics and which anti-abortion activists have spent years trying to dismantle.

The two cases dealt with buffer zone ordinances passed by the cities of Carbondale, Ill., and Englewood, N.J. In filings to the Supreme Court, which is dominated 6-3 by conservatives, anti-abortion activists argued that these ordinances ran afoul of the First Amendment’s guarantees of free speech. They also asked the justices to overturn a 2000 ruling called *Hill v. Colorado*, which upheld a buffer zone law in Colorado.

The justices didn’t explain why they declined to hear arguments in the cases.

The Illinois case involved a 2023 ordinance that limited people from getting within 8 feet of another individual if that individual is within 100 feet of a healthcare facility, such as Carbondale’s multiple abortion clinics. In the wake of Roe’s demise, Carbondale’s clinics had become a haven for people fleeing the abortion bans that now blanket much of the South and Midwest.

Ala. bill would require decalogue in all schools

A bill was introduced Feb. 6 in the Alabama House of Representatives that would require the display of the Ten Commandments in public schools across the state.

Under HB 178, all local boards of education and public colleges must display the commandments and a context statement. The bill requires the display to be at least 11 inches by 14 inches and be placed in a common area, such as a library. The bill stated that donations could be received to fund the display and no board of education would be required to use funds to pay for it.

Alabama voters approved an amendment to the state Constitution in 2018 that allows public display of the Ten Commandments. However, it is not required, with legal scholars arguing the federal litigation that could ensue from it.

Freethought Caucus adds two more members

The Congressional Freethought Caucus is now up to 24 members after adding two new representatives: Rep. Andrea Salinas, D-Ore., and Rep. Emily Randall, D-Wash. All 24 of the members are Democrats.

Salinas is in her second term in Congress after first being elected in 2022. She began her political career in the office of Sen. Harry Reid and later worked for Rep. Pete Stark, Congress’ first openly Humanist member. She eventually landed in the Oregon House of Representatives before running for Congress herself. Pew Research Center cites her religion as Catholic.

Randall is a first-term lawmaker whose religion is officially listed as “none.” She is also the first openly queer Latina in Congress. Before entering Congress, she served in the Washington state Senate.

Darwin Day celebration



FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor was asked to give the annual “Darwin Day” lecture before the Dubuque (Iowa) Area Humanists in mid-February. Photographed from left: FFRF Co-President Dan Barker, who’d previously given a “Darwin Day” address and provided some musical entertainment at the piano this year, Humanist Director Frank Potter and Annie Laurie. The event took place on Feb. 17 at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in downtown Dubuque with about 50 in attendance. FFRF thanks the humanists for their hospitality as well as for giving several gift FFRF memberships to attendees.

Idaho bill would require school bible readings

In Idaho on Feb. 9, a bill was introduced by the state Legislature that would require bible reading in all public schools.

The bill, sponsored by Rep. Jordan Redman, would require verses of the King James Bible to be read daily, “without comment,” in all “occupied” classrooms at public schools. The proposal would allow teachers to dismiss themselves from the readings if they have a “conscience” objection and allow students to skip participation if they have a note from their parents.

Parents could sue if they believed the law was not being enforced, according to the bill.

The U.S. Supreme Court in 1963 barred school-sponsored prayer and bible reading in public schools.

Diocese settles for \$31M for clergy abuse victims

The Diocese of Norwich, Conn., has announced a settlement for survivors of clergy sex abuse, part of an ongoing bankruptcy process the diocese entered into several years ago.

In a joint statement, the diocese — along with a committee of abuse survivors and the Catholic Mutual Relief Society of America — said they had reached “an agreement on a \$31 million compensation fund,” one that will allow “meaningful recovery to survivors of sexual abuse and for the diocese to emerge from bankruptcy and continue its mission.”

The Norwich Diocese filed for bankruptcy in 2021, with then-Bishop Michael Côté stating that the bankruptcy would “centralize all litigation and oversee a settlement that ensures that all survivors are included and treated fairly.”

According to the proposal, the funds will include \$2.7 million from diocesan parishes, \$5.3 million from Catholic Mutual Relief, and about \$6.5 million from the sale of the former St. Bernard School in Montville.

Ex-megachurch pastor indicted for child abuse

Robert Morris, the founder of a Texas megachurch and a former faith adviser to the Trump White House, was indicted March 12 on charges that he molested a girl over several years in the 1980s, the Oklahoma Attorney General’s Office said.

Morris resigned as the senior pastor of the Dallas-based Gateway Church last summer shortly after Cindy Clemishire publicly accused Morris, 63, of having abused her when she was a girl.

On March 12, a grand jury indicted Morris on five felony counts of lewd or indecent acts to a child after concluding that he had used his hands and body to touch the girl’s private parts when she was 12 until age 14, according to the indictment. The indictment refers to the girl only as C.C.

Clemishire, 55, of Oklahoma, told The Dallas Morning News last year that the abuse had begun when her family invited Morris — then a young, traveling preacher — to stay at their home in Oklahoma on Christmas Day in 1982. It took her decades to realize that what had happened to her was abuse and a crime, Clemishire told the newspaper.

Private school choice bill passes in Idaho

A \$50 million school choice bill long in the works is awaiting approval from Idaho’s governor after the state Senate passed the measure on Feb. 19.

The bill would establish a \$50 million parental choice tax credit beginning in the 2025-26 school year, helping parents send their children to nonpublic schools, including private religious schools. After years of attempts by school choice advocates in the Idaho Legislature, the bill passed in a 15-10 vote in the Senate.

If approved, qualifying students would be able to claim a refundable tax credit worth up to \$5,000 to attend a nonpublic school. Students with disabilities could qualify for up to \$7,500.

N.Y. yeshivas lose funds over lack of education

A decade after allegations first surfaced that schools operated by New York’s Hasidic Jewish community were denying children a basic education, the state government is for the first time cutting off funding for schools it says have refused to improve.

The New York State Education Department will no longer provide crucial funding for two all-boys Hasidic schools in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and will ensure that all of their students are enrolled in different schools by the fall. The effective closure of the two schools, which are known as yeshivas, is the strongest action taken in New York to crack down on schools over their failure to comply with education law.

The insular community’s yeshivas, which rely heavily on taxpayer dollars, teach religious lessons in Yiddish and Hebrew for most of the school day, and offer little instruction in English or math.

Wis. bill would require ‘IGWT’ in classrooms

Republicans in the Wisconsin Legislature want to display “In God We Trust” in all public K-12 classrooms. The bill would also require charter school classrooms to display the motto, along with any public buildings.

The motto could be displayed in the form of a poster, a framed document, or inscribed on a wall.

FFRF is firmly opposed to such a bill.

“We live under a godless Constitution. There is no god or religion, or Ten Commandments in our U.S. Constitution. It gives sovereignty not to a deity but to we the people,” said FFRF Co-President Gaylor.

Other states have a similar law in place, including Arkansas, Florida, South Carolina and Louisiana.

N.J. gov. wants to bring in abortion providers

The New Jersey governor’s new budget proposal includes \$52 million to fund abortion, reproductive health and family planning, including a \$2 million incentive program designed to bring “reproductive health care providers” to the state.

In his remarks for the 2026 budget on Feb. 26, Gov. Phil Murphy made clear the initiative was designed to bring obstetricians, gynecologists and other providers of women’s health care from pro-life states. He said the program would attract reproductive health care providers “targeted by politicians elsewhere.”

Murphy also pledged to stockpile abortion pills during his State of the State address in January.

Mormon leaders face 100 sex abuse allegations

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) has been hit by dozens of sexual abuse allegations launched against it in California.

A three-year look-back legal window that allows adult survivors of sexual assault to file claims in California has produced almost 100 allegations of childhood sexual abuse by Mormon leaders.

The lawsuits against the LDS church have become so numerous, and with so many common threads, that attorneys want to consolidate the actions into a single multidistrict litigation in the central district of California.

FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

Arizona

The Prescott (Ariz.) Unified School District 1 will no longer allow teacher attendance in student-led religious clubs.

A district parent reported to FFRF that Abia Judd Elementary School was promoting and hosting a Good News Club for pre-K through fourth-grade students. Per a schedule of official school-sponsored, teacher-led activities sent to parents, the club took place after school on Wednesdays and was hosted by a first-grade teacher with the district.

“Students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious promotion in their public schools,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district. “Public elementary schools may not show favoritism toward or coerce belief or participation in religion.” Along with the letter, FFRF submitted a records request to learn more information about the club.

After FFRF’s letter, Dave Pauole, the district’s legal counsel, emailed FFRF while also providing the records without hesitation. “The Good News Club is sponsored and operated by an outside organization, Child Evangelism Fellowship of Arizona. This organization rents a classroom at Abia Judd ES on a weekly basis under a facilities use agreement,” Pauole wrote. “A Prescott USD teacher had attended the club as an observer only. The teacher will no longer attend the club at all.”

Arkansas

The superintendent of the Green Forest School District in Arkansas was guided to end the practice of advocating for Christianity after FFRF’s action.

A community member informed FFRF that Superintendent David Gilmore promoted Christianity several times during the 2023-2024 school year. FFRF learned that Gilmore prayed over a professional development breakfast on Aug. 6, 2024, which staff were required to attend. Gilmore also promoted a “prayer walk” which took place on Aug. 11, 2024, sending an email to attendees inviting them to join.

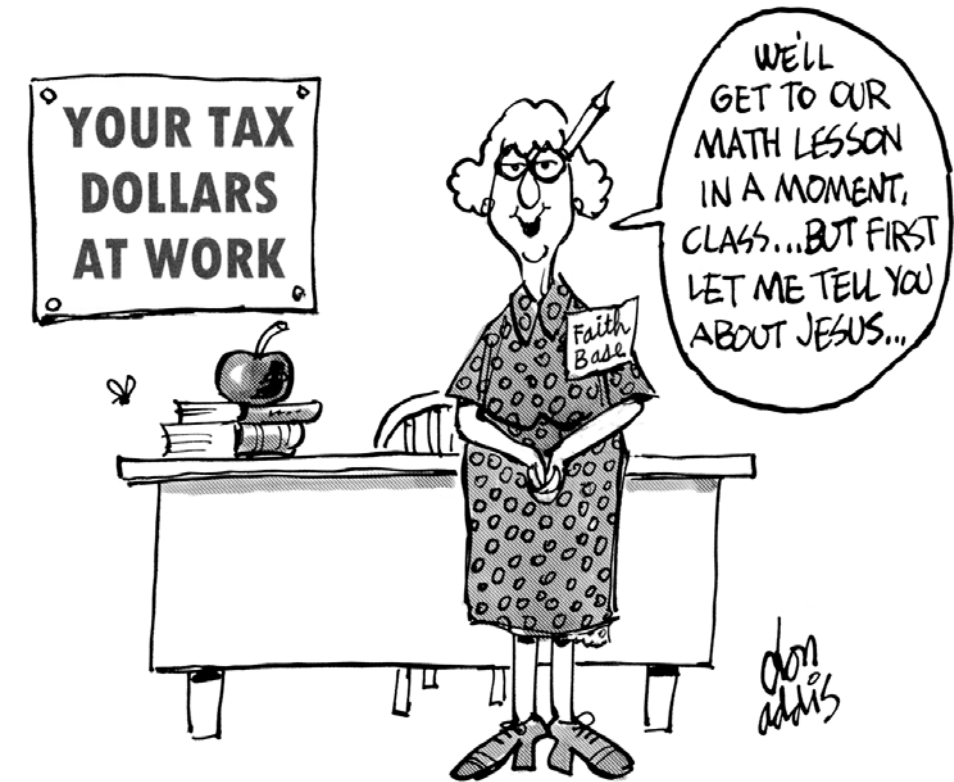
“By praying over a captive audience and then promoting a prayer event, the district demonstrates a preference for religion over nonreligion, and Christianity over other religions,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to Gilmore.

After FFRF’s letter in March, the district reached out to the Crouch, Harwell, Fryar and Ferner law firm, where Charles L. Harwell responded to FFRF’s concern. “The prayer you reference was spontaneous and a single incident,” Harwell wrote. “Mr. Gillmore is now aware that he should not be praying at faculty meetings. He also recognizes that his invitation to a prayer walk was ill-advised. I am confident he will not repeat that in the future.”

California

FFRF stepped in to protect student rights after learning that a football coach in the Napa Valley (Calif.) USD was leading student athletes in prayer.

FFRF learned that American Canyon High school’s head football coach seemed to be leading student athletes in a locker room prayer prior to the team’s Dec. 14, 2024, game. FFRF’s complainant provided a photo that showed players gathered around the coach with their heads bowed, while the coach stood in the middle of the players’ huddle.



“When a coach leads the team in prayer, students will no doubt feel that participating in that prayer is essential to pleasing their coach and being viewed as a team player,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

FFRF heard back from the district’s legal representative Rebecca Nelson. Nelson investigated the district’s conduct and confirmed that the coach did indeed lead the team in a prayer before the game. “Because the coach prayed aloud with the football team during the pregame huddle, his actions could be found inconsistent with the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution despite his best intentions,” Nelson wrote. Nelson confirmed that corrective action had been taken, and that the district had ensured that the coach had guidance and information needed to comply with the relevant First Amendment requirements.

Georgia

The Dublin City Schools in Georgia learned a valuable lesson about staff not participation in private religious baccalaureates, and will not be allowing employee-led religious preaching at graduation events going forward.

In May 2024, a concerned parent reported that the district had organized, sponsored and promoted a religious baccalaureate ceremony for students. A Facebook post from the district’s official page posted photos from the event, which included a keynote address from the DHS 9th Grade Academy principal. The post detailed the principal’s religious message, in which he warned against distractions, describing them as “tricks of the enemy designed to deter one from hearing the voice of God.” Further, the principal stressed that time “is a precious gift from God.”

“By sponsoring this baccalaureate ceremony and then promoting its religious media on its official Facebook page, the district demonstrates clear favoritism toward religion over nonreligion, and Christianity above all other faiths,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district.

The district did not respond to FFRF’s initial letter, causing several more to be sent throughout the year. Finally, in January, legal representative Cory O. Kirby from the Pereira, Kirby, Kinsinger & Nguyen law firm contacted FFRF. “Dr. Williams, superintendent, has met with 9th Grade Academy personnel to discuss the changes required for baccalaureate

next year,” Kirby wrote. “Those changes include no school employee active involvement.”

Georgia

The Charlton County Schools system in Georgia took FFRF’s advice and removed explicitly religious gospel music from gym class warm-ups.

A district parent reported to FFRF that a P.E. teacher at Bethune Middle School was playing Christian gospel music every class during warm-up exercises. FFRF was informed that this had been going on since at least the start of the 2024-2025 school year. The complainant stated that they are not raising children to believe in any particular religion, and the overtly religious music in gym class was making their child uncomfortable.

“[The teacher] should strive to ensure his gym class is welcoming and inclusive of all students, not just those who practice Christianity,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

FFRF received a response to the letter from Brian C. Smith, from the law firm Pereira, Kirby, Kinsinger & Nguyen. “School district administration is meeting with the P.E. teacher to remind them of the requirements of the First Amendment as it relates to the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses,” Smith wrote. “Every effort is made at the school level to ensure that the rights of all stakeholders are protected.”

Georgia

FFRF worked to see a display referencing “God” taken down from the Bryan County Schools’ (Ga.) Community Education Program.

A district parent reported concerns with a religious message on display as part of the Bryan County Schools’ Community Education Program. FFRF’s complainant reported that the gymnastics director for the program had a plaque on the wall reading: “Your talent is God’s gift to you. What you do with it is your gift back to God.” The complainant’s child felt uncomfortable seeing this religious message as part of a public school program. An article published about the director discussed her plaque, which appeared to have been moved from the gym to her office. FFRF asked the district to investigate the complaint and to remove any offensive displays being used as part of programming in order to protect students’ First Amendment rights.

“As you are aware, the district violates

the Constitution when it allows its schools to display religious symbols or messages,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district’s legal representation.

After FFRF’s letter, district attorney Cory O. Kirby confirmed that action had been taken to ensure that students’ rights were being observed and protected.

“School administration has reached out to the director of the gymnastics program and explained to her the federal law regarding public schools promoting a particular religious belief,” Kirby wrote. “The gymnastics instructor has removed the religious display.”

Illinois

FFRF confirmed the removal of a religiously themed banner from an Illinois post office.

A concerned community member informed FFRF that the O’Fallon, Ill., post office had a large banner reading “Jesus is the reason for the season” at the entrance.

“United States postal regulations prohibit the display of religious materials, other than stamp art, on postal property,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to Postmaster Cleveland T. Williams.

A month after FFRF’s letter, Williams emailed back, writing, “that signage was immediately taken down after some concerns were brought to my attention.”

Maryland

Thanks to the efforts of FFRF, promotion of religious events has ended in the Calvert County (Md.) Sheriff’s Department.

An area resident reported that on Oct. 4, 2024, the department hosted a religious worship event, “Faith and Blue.” The event was held in partnership with Chesapeake Church and invited citizens to “Join us as we pray God’s blessings upon those who have chosen to stand upon the Thin Blue Line.” FFRF also learned that the department frequently posted religious imagery on its official Facebook page.

“The Department’s apparent promotion and favoritism of religion poses serious constitutional concerns,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote in November. “By hosting and promoting ‘Faith and Blue,’ the Department signals a clear preference for religion over nonreligion.”

After FFRF’s letter, the Kaprinski, Cornbrooks & Karp law firm responded on behalf of the department in January. Kevin Karpinski apologized for the delay, noting that Sheriff Cox had forwarded FFRF’s letter the day it had been received, and he had merely forgotten to respond. “As requested, the Calvert County Sheriff’s Office personnel have been directed to refrain from hosting religious events and promoting religion on the Sheriff’s Office’s social media page,” Karpinski wrote. He encouraged FFRF to reach out if there were any further issues.

Michigan

Thanks to FFRF’s watchdog work, prisoners of the Isabella County Jail in Mount Pleasant, Mich., will not feel pressure to conform to Christianity due to a religious quote posted at the entrance of the facility.

FFRF was informed that the wall of the entrance to the new Isabella County Jail prominently featured a quote from the bible. The quote, from Matthew 5:9, read, “Blessed are the peacekeepers for they shall be called the children of God.” FFRF pointed out that religious signage on gov-

ernment property such as county jails ran counter to the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

“We hope you will agree that law enforcement should be even-handed and avoid any appearance of bias toward some citizens, and hostility toward others,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence explained in a letter to the jail administration.

While FFRF did not receive a direct response from the county, an article published by the Michigan news organization Morning Sign confirmed that the lettering had been removed. The article quoted Isabella County Sheriff Michael Main, stating that the quote “was not intended to promote or highlight any religion.”

New York

After a bus aide shared religious scripture with students, FFRF corrected the violation, and ensured that students will not be forced to accept Christian literature candy bundles.

A district parent reported to FFRF that on Dec. 20, 2024, a district school bus aide distributed a packet of “Scripture Candy” to students riding the “lizard” bus at Milton Terrace Elementary. The front of the plastic-wrapped packet featured a red stocking with a piece of candy sticking out of it. Emblazoned across the stocking was the text “JESUS Sweetest Name I Know.” The back of the packet featured a drawing of a nativity scene with the biblical story of Jesus’ birth written above it, as well as a cut-out bookmark with numerous biblical references, including a cross and the full biblical text of John 3:16.

“The distribution of candy with religious messaging is coercive and alienating,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote. “Students riding the bus are forced to either take religious literature they don’t want or publicly refuse in sight of other students.”

After FFRF outlined the violations seen on the bus, the district took note, and worked to end the discriminatory practice.

“The district spoke with the bus attendant referenced in your letter and learned that she had engaged in an innocent error by handing out the material you referenced in your letter,” wrote Jeffrey D. Honeywell, legal counsel for the district. “She indicated that she obtained the items at the Dollar Store. She stated she did not notice the religious messages on the back of the packages until the bus was almost at the last student’s house.” The bus aid apologized for the mistake and was told not to hand out any further religious scripture to students.

North Carolina

The Graham County Schools system in Robbinsville, N.C., has ended the practice of opening school board meetings with prayer after FFRF got involved.

A Graham County Schools parent reported that the board began meetings with a Christian prayer led by a school employee, frequently the assistant superintendent. FFRF learned of a prayer in February 2024 that featured multiple references to a “Lord” and “Jesus Christ.” FFRF also discovered that young students were visible in the front row of that meeting, and that a meeting in March 2024 featured several young students standing near the board as another prayer was delivered.

“Board members are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote in February 2024. “Needlessly including prayer at board meetings excludes those who are among the 37 percent of Americans who are non-Christians, including the 49 percent of Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated.”

FFRF continued to reach out to the district to urge them to respect the Constitution. In January, Superintendent Robert Moody reached out to FFRF, apologizing for the delay in response. “The letter you sent addressing ‘Unconstitutional Prayer at School Board meetings’ was presented at the previous school board meeting held Jan. 7, 2025,” he wrote. “The School Board members along with the school’s attorney addressed this concerned about the prayers during the meetings will not be an issue in future out of respect for the First Amendment Rights of and the diversity of the students and community.”

North Carolina

The Columbus County Schools system in North Carolina addressed a concern related to a teacher leading students in prayer before lunch that allowed religious peers to bully a student who refused to participate.

A district parent reported that teachers at Old Dock Elementary and other schools within the district instructed students to practice reciting a prayer and then lead them in the prayer before lunch. FFRF’s complainant reported that they had been bullied by their peers for refraining from prayer during these times.

“In this case, the district is violating both students’ First Amendment rights, and parents’ rights to determine which religion, if any, to raise their children in,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote.

The district contacted the Phipps Law Firm after Ziegler’s letter. William W. Phipps wrote back, confirming that action had been taken. “The Columbus County Schools were unaware of any teachers at Old Dock, or any other school within the district, instructing the students to practice reciting a prayer, while being led by the teacher in the prayer before lunch,” Phipps wrote. “We are also unaware of any children being bullied by their peers for refraining from prayer during these times.” Phipps confirmed that the superintendent was directed by the board to address the situation at the principals’ meeting the next day, reviewing the law relating to the adherence of the Constitution and strict rules against school-hosted prayers.

Ohio

After a sign promoting a religious event was seen at East Knox Local School District in Howard, Ohio, FFRF complained and is pleased to learn that the district is dedicated to keeping their grounds secular.

A local parent reported that on May 20, 2024, a yard sign promoting a religious event was displayed on school district property. According to the sign,

the event was an ice cream social and silent auction hosted by the East Knox chapter of LifeWise Academy to be held in early June at Journey Church. Printed on the sign in large letters was the phrase “Ice Cream for JESUS!”

“It is constitutionally problematic for a public school district to advertise a religious organization’s sectarian event on school property,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence informed the district.

The district contacted legal counsel in order to determine the best course of action.

District attorney Derek L. Haggerty wrote to FFRF, stating that the superintendent had only recently begun working with the district, and as such, was unaware that the violation had taken place. “Additionally, while we could not ascertain exactly when the sign was placed on the district’s property or when it was removed, its placement does not appear to have been approved through any of the district’s formal policies or procedures,” Haggerty wrote. The letter stated that the district maintains a full complement of policies and procedures which prohibit advertising of outside religious events on district property. Haggerty stated that the district intends to continue implementing existing policies and ensuring that all members of the district follow proper procedures before advertising events on district property.

Oregon

The Oregon City’s Pioneer Community Center hosted a holiday program that celebrated Christmas exclusively, causing FFRF to stand up to defend senior citizens from religious coercion.

A community member reported that the center’s Dec. 20, 2024, holiday lunch program was exclusively Christmas-themed and overtly Christian. Per a program from the event, the “Sing Along” portion of the holiday lunch included a performance of “Angels We Have Heard on High,” “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” “Let There Be Peace on Earth,” and “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” among other religious Christmas songs. The event program featured a picture of the nativity and the phrase, “Jesus is the reason for the season.”

FFRF’s complainant stated that, in previous years, the center’s holiday program was more inclusive and featured songs that recognized other winter holidays, including Hanukkah. While the complainant reported being nonreligious, they expressed that they came from a Jewish background and that the Christian and Christmas-exclusive holiday event was upsetting.

“Hosting a government-subsidized holiday event for seniors that exclusively recognizes Christmas, has a sing-along including Christian hymns and states that

‘Jesus is the reason for the season’ places the center in direct violation of federal regulations,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

The center’s Social Service & Community Center Manager Cecily Rose wrote back after the complaint, thanking FFRF for reaching out. “We want to clarify that the inclusion of the referenced material was an oversight on the part of one of our vendors and was not approved by the city of Oregon City or its Parks and Recreation Department in any way,” Rose wrote. “We provided directions to our vendor for the sing-along portion of our all-inclusive holiday luncheon to provide holiday music and carols, with the expectation that secular music would be provided.”

Tennessee

FFRF successfully removed a biblical reference from the Kingston Police Department’s letterhead in Kingston, Tenn.

A community member informed FFRF that the department placed a bible reference in official press releases. KPD’s Aug. 15, 2024, press release notes included “Proverbs 20:7” right beneath Kingston Police Chief Jim Washam’s name. That reference in the New International Version reads, “The righteous lead blameless lives; blessed are their children after them.”

“Citizens interact with and rely on law enforcement officers during some of the most urgent and vulnerable times of their lives,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote. “These citizens should not be alienated, like political outsiders, because their local tax-supported government oversteps with religious messages.”

While FFRF initially contacted the department in September 2024, the department did not respond until this February. City Manager David L. Bolling confirmed to FFRF that the police department would no longer be sending exclusionary religious messages going forward. “Please allow this email to serve as official notification that the reference to Proverbs 20:7, as addressed in the attached letter, has been removed from department letterhead,” Bolling wrote.

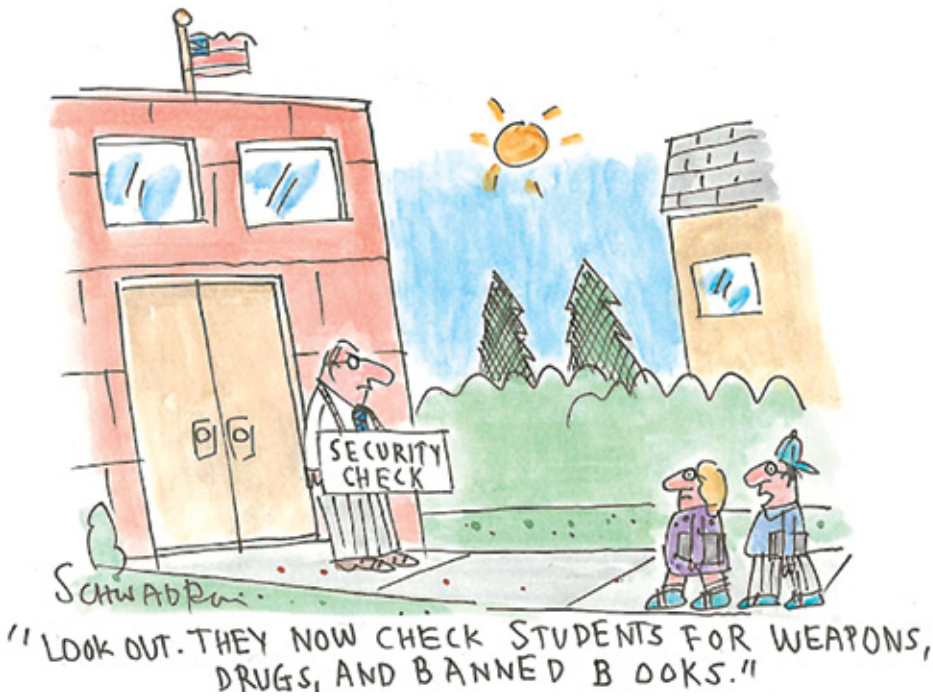
Tennessee

The Anderson County Sheriff’s Office in Clinton, Tenn., has agreed to end public promotion of baptisms.

In December 2023, FFRF reached out to the Anderson County Sheriff’s Office after learning that the office was promoting Christianity on its official Facebook page. A post from August 2023 celebrated the baptism of nine women, as well as referencing the bible verse Romans 10:9-10. Commenters similarly wrote messages affirming the Christian faith, including “Praise the Lord” and “Praise God.”

“The Sheriff Office’s motive in promoting inmate baptisms on social media is not to accommodate inmates, but to advance Christianity and coerce inmates and the broader Anderson County community to adhere to the tenets of Christianity,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote.

FFRF received no initial response, which led to letters sent throughout 2024. Finally, after FFRF sent one final letter in 2025, Sheriff Russell Baker apologized for not responding. “As soon as I received the first letter, we stopped posting all religious events related to this office,” Baker wrote. “Additionally, I think it’s worth noting that local churches provide these services and organize these events. Participation is entirely up to the individual inmate.”



Religion deserves no legal protections

By Jim Curtis

The vast majority of the world’s population has some kind of belief in a deity (god) or deities. They’re all almost certainly wrong, of course, and there’s wild disagreement among them about the nature of the gods whose existence claims they have accepted, or, to use the common term, “believe in.”

A majority believing any claim has never been evidence for the truth of the claim, or even a good reason to believe that claim. It’s been demonstrated that the majority has been wrong about a variety of claims.

Sticking to Western history, the vast majority believed in a geocentric universe and a flat Earth up until a few centuries ago. Most people believed this because that’s what they were told by authority figures, who may or may not have earned the title of “authority,” but were considered such nonetheless, usually by other “authorities” in well-established institutions, like the Roman Catholic Church that dominated Europe for about a thousand years.

Most people have their supernatural beliefs imposed on them as children by parents and culture. Some cultures impose beliefs by coercion — by threats of punishment for failing to fall in line. Only putative free nations notably in the West allow their citizens to pick and choose what beliefs to hold, or whether to hold any at all. Coerced beliefs in theocratic Islamic states that criminalize apostasy, blasphemy and heresy should be the apparent inverse.

Consider whether it’s even possible to choose what to believe. This is controversial, although it shouldn’t be. Some say that beliefs are a result of a rational evaluation of claims, and their evidence and logic, or lack thereof. Others claim they can choose their beliefs, often based on desire and/or fear, wishful thinking and/or peer pressure and threats.

The infamous “Pascal’s Wager” is based on making a choice of what to believe predicated on fear and desire — wanting to live forever in heaven and fearful of an eternity in hell. The mind game presumes we can, or rather *should* “choose to believe” certain claims in order to win heaven and avoid hell.

The case of Bill Cosby

Up until around 2014, many, if not most, Americans had a sincere belief that Bill Cosby was a model father, citizen and human being. The evidence for this was likely primarily due to a character he played in a TV series. He received several honorary degrees and awards for being an exemplar of morality and, dare I write, “family values” for his portrayal of Dr. Cliff Huxtable on “The Cosby Show.”

Then, the accusations and revelations manifested that alleged he was a moral monster who drugged women and raped them. Around three dozen women alleged they were his victims,



Image by Shutterstock

who emerged in a cascade of allegations once the first was made public.

Suddenly, this widespread sincere belief in Cosby as a role model evaporated. Why? Evidence. The evidence was all testimonial (not physical, such as DNA, etc.). But, the number and consonance of the testimony by the accusers created a convincing case that “Dr. Huxtable” was a sexual predator. People who had “a sincerely held belief” changed their belief. They didn’t choose to change their belief. The evidence (such as it was — testimony) compelled them to change their belief.

The consonance of the testimony against Cosby is worth considering. Nearly all religious claims are testimony. Either they come from a book of claims, or through a long chain of oral history claims, or both. History is primarily testimony, or attestations (claims) of the who, what, where, when and why of past events. Testimony can be validated by physical evidence — artifacts, spent ammunition, damage, monuments, graves, fingerprints, blood spatter, DNA and so on.

There is, in fact, no physical evidence thus far made public in the history of purely religious claims, such as that any deity exists, or miracles happen. If there is such evidence, it’s remained unknown to the vast public. If such evidence was made public, everybody who’s not delusional would believe it. When we have evidence and ethics, we change our minds from pre-existing misconceptions every time.

There have been plenty of miracle claims, but there is no evidence to prove a miracle happened. Plus, if any miracle had a natural explanation, it wouldn’t, by definition, be a miracle. What miracle claimants have to offer is that they can’t explain something, so they jump to the explanation that a miracle must have transpired.

Testimonial consistency

Testimonies of religious claims are rarely consonant. Consider the popular claims prevalent in the United

States that Jesus paid somebody a visit. Does he look the same to all the claimants? Is he Caucasian, as he appears in most Western art? Or, does he resemble a Middle Eastern male of Jewish descent? Tall? Short? Does he wear the same attire? Speak in the same language, and use the same terms? Does he speak at all, or use telepathy? Does Jesus appear to Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Zoroastrians? If not, why not?

One of the few explanations for any consonance between differing visitation testimonies would be conditioning — the ones claiming to be visited having previously heard details from other claims. Since those claims are not uncommon, we can’t honestly rule out conditioning. Conditioning satisfies the “law of parsimony” (“Occam’s razor”) to not unnecessarily complicate explanations. Conditioning is common, natural and explanatory. No need to resort to the supernatural when a natural explanation is sufficient. So, in the battle between factual supernatural vs. conditioning, conditioning wins as the more likely explanation.

If Jesus was visiting people, and he wanted their testimonies to be convincing to others, it is reasonable to infer he’d present himself consistently so that the testimonies were all consonant with one another, like the testimonies of Bill Cosby’s alleged rape victims. If there was solid evidence for any deity, everybody who wasn’t nuts would

believe in that deity, just as nobody sane doubts the existence of the sun. If there was evidence, there wouldn’t be thousands of different opinions on the deity’s nature, actions, words, desires, etc. There would be one true set of facts or a body of knowledge about the deity, each fact supported by evidence.

It’s fairly common among U.S. Christians and few other sects in the country to have claimed to have some type of personal religious experience. A claim is also called “testimony.” Some refer to their claimed experience as a “revelation” or an in-person visit with God, Jesus, or, if Catholic, Mother Mary or some other “canonized saint” that’s unique to Catholic mythology. Some claim to have had visits from the devil or Satan, or see those characters personified or inhabited in other humans.

It’s not irrational to infer that many of these alleged experiences are the result of traditional, cultural and familial indoctrination and conditioning, or, in other words, having this system of beliefs thrust on them, and not by choice, and not by the preponderance of evidence.

Coercion is strong

The coercion is very strong in many religiously adhering tribes or cultures. Some Protestant adherents claim that some type of “manifestation of the spirit” is required, and it’s far preferable that your experience is witnessed by a congregation (fairly typical in so-called “fundamentalist” and “charismatic” sects), and that you “give witness” of your experience to others. That makes you accepted as a fully-fledged, bona

“What miracle claimants have to offer is that they can’t explain something, so they jump to the explanation that a miracle must have transpired.”



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fide member of the tribe. There’s a dear price to pay for not going along to get along with the cultural unit (“tribe”) that often results in banishment, rejection, blacklisting and occasionally much worse, such as violence. Some adherents don’t want their beliefs (however obtained) challenged, repudiated or scoffed at. And, they especially don’t want their children, who they’ve worked hard to indoctrinate, getting any “bad ideas” contrary to their dogma and doctrine.

It’s no secret that indoctrination is far easier to accomplish when victims are young, credulous and trusting of authorities. Aristotle, echoed by St. Ignatius Loyala, reportedly said, “Give me a child until he’s 7, and I will show you the man.” There are multiple versions of this axiom, and its truthfulness is well attested throughout history as a foregone conclusion. “Get ’em while they’re young.” There’s currently a skirmish going on in the United States as to which of our tribes gets to indoctrinate our children in schools with their preferred doctrine.

Religious beliefs propagate via language and culture, and not because of evidence. What evidence there is for the propagation of beliefs by individuals and institutions is voluminous.

Bigotry and claims of race superiority and inferiority are propagated the same way, by language and culture, without evidence, and often with a high degree of overlap with religious beliefs. That’s odd, given that the most popular religion in the country is one whose icon promoted brotherly love above all else. That disconnect is related to a point I will make about whether some people really believe what they claim to believe.

In free nations, people are free to change their beliefs. Pew Research reports that nearly half of all Americans have or will change their religious beliefs at least once in their lifetimes. Why they do this is a good topic for another discussion, but, to cut to the chase, the primary reason is to be accepted into a pre-existing tribe.

Sidebar: It’s not essential that these belief changers *actually* change their beliefs. What is essential is that they *claim* to share the beliefs of the new tribe.

I would love to see somebody devise a method to determine whether and to what degree people truly believe what they say they believe. Watching people 24/7 to see if what they do squares with what they claim would work, because actions are predicated on beliefs, but obviously, that’s not practical.

There have been studies showing that most people behave better when they know they’re being watched. Given that “God” is claimed to keep tabs on all of us 24/7 and is taking notes for our personal “judgment day,” I’d think that most who claim to be believers in judgment and heaven and hell would behave better all the time. That’s a reason I have doubts about whether many people who claim to believe in certain dogmas actually do.

Changes in belief

It should be obvious a pretty significant percentage of “believers” are phonies who go along to get along, to gain acceptance or to “virtue signal,” based on a myth created exclusively by religious believers that religious beliefs are necessary for morality. The data on criminality and imprisonment refutes such a crazy claim. But, that also is a separate discussion.

If we were to set aside the notion of changing beliefs for acceptance, then we must consider that these belief

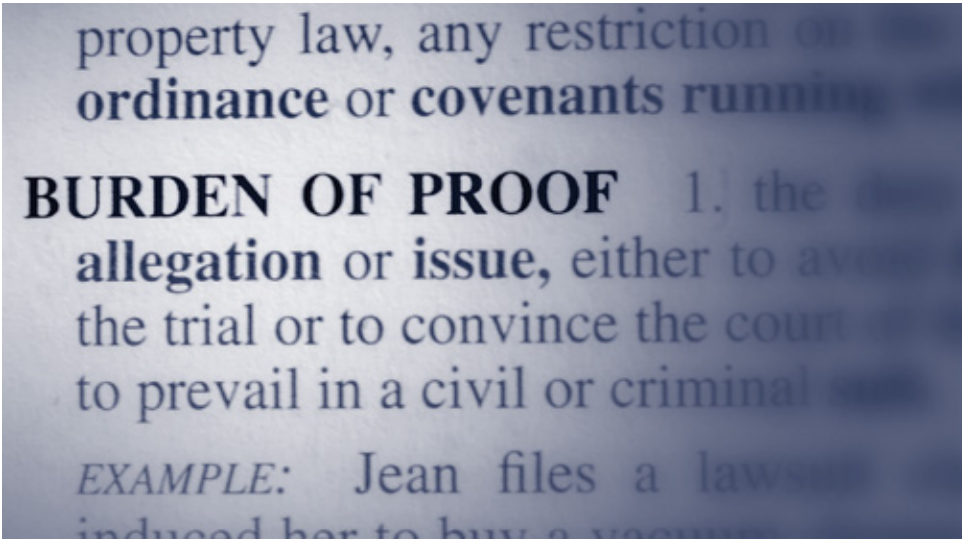


Image by Shutterstock

changers evaluated the claims by different religions and sects, and were persuaded not by evidence, because there isn’t any, but by different claims of features and benefits of a different set of claims, and personal preferences (fear and desire).

Maybe the new church was closer to home than the old church. That’s practical, in a sense, but fraught. According to Susan Jacoby in her book “Strange Gods,” most Americans who change their faiths do so when marrying a person of a different faith for reasons of marital harmony and so as not to confuse their children. Again, that’s practical, but makes a mockery of the idea of “sincerely held religious beliefs,” if they can be changed for convenience other than where the evidence leads.

Presumably, Ivanka Trump once believed Jesus Christ was the son of God, but after marrying Jared Kushner, a Jew, Jesus was downgraded to a mere prophet. How sincerely held can such malleable beliefs be?

All this so far is to demonstrate using reason that religious beliefs are not inherent characteristics like skin tone, place of birth or other immutable characteristics that our government and Constitution have used to protect certain demographics.

Our highly political Supreme Court has been, since around 2000, expanding the concept of legal exceptions to civil rights laws to claimants of “sincerely held religious beliefs,” as if religious beliefs were immutable and inherent, like skin tone and place of birth. I can’t emphasize how boneheaded and unethical this is, especially given that most of these claims are simply a gambit to legalize discrimination based on bigotry, ignorance and/or indoctrination. Those who are making these claims are demanding preferential treatment for what are, to most ethical and objective people, delusions.

Delusions of religion

In his book, “The God Delusion,” Richard Dawkins did a fine job of explaining that religious beliefs are delusions. I also suggest you read the American Psychiatric Association’s DMA-5 (“Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition”), and its definition of the symptoms of delusional disorder.

The definition of delusion, according to the American Psychiatric Association

is: “False belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that persists despite the evidence to the contrary and this belief is not ordinarily accepted by other members of the person’s culture or subculture.”

According to the DSMMD, delusions can be characterized in six different ways. (I have added examples to each.)

- Persecutory — “You’re going to burn in a lake of fire.”
- Referential — Belief that a deity speaks to one, has visited one, has advised one, etc.
- Grandiose — Belief that an all-powerful being who created the cosmos cares about one’s self.
- Erotomaniac — “Jesus loves me. This I know.”
- Nihilistic — End Times belief, Armageddon, belief in eternal punishment.
- Somatic — Belief in feeling a “spirit” or having a “spiritual” experience.

What the APA did here that I find unconscionable, yet somewhat understandable given tribal bigotry, is to

exempt from the delusion diagnosis ideas that are popular. What we can infer from this is once religious beliefs reduce to the 50 percent threshold indicating popular acceptance, *only then* will they consider them a delusional disorder. Extrapolating data collected by PRRI

and Pew Research Center charting the rise in the abandonment of religious beliefs, that threshold will occur in the near future — likely years, not decades.

There’s a story about Albert Einstein, who allegedly said in a response to hearing about a book titled “100 Authors Against Einstein,” “If I were wrong, then one would have been enough.” Whether this story is true is irrelevant. The content of the quote is a valid rejection of the argumentum ad populum fallacy.

Even if there is a deity or deities whose existence was proven by evidence, each further claim on the nature of that deity, such as its desires, motives, actions and anything else one could claim about it each require their own separate burden of proof and evidence to make them valid. Even if we were to hypothetically accept some deity exists, the panoply of further claims are almost as numerous, incoherent and contradictory as

there are people making them (excluding those who are coerced and inculcated into parroting established dogma or be killed or ostracized), and, importantly, they are all absent any evidence. In other words, they’re very likely all wrong.

Miracles don’t happen

A great number of claims are, frankly, idiotic, based on what we sapiens can justifiably say we’ve learned about our cosmos and how it works. Dead people stay dead. Horses don’t have wings. Turtles don’t hold up the Earth. Miracles don’t happen. We call “universal constants” and the “laws of thermodynamics” by those terms because they don’t have exceptions (although there are some lines of thought and study, such as in quantum mechanics and dark matter cosmology, that propose some exceptions). To “sincerely believe” otherwise is clearly delusional (even according to the DSM) regardless of the intent or motives of those harboring them.

Accept reality. I did. I was indoctrinated into Catholicism as an innocent and trusting child, and I eventually got over it because I care about what is logical and evidential over what may comfort me. My confidence in what I believe is subject to change in light of better logic or evidence. Proportioning belief to evidence and reason is how we all determine what is rational in most aspects of our lives, even those of us with delusions.

It’s rational to accept that many people with religious delusions who were indoctrinated or coerced into them are victims of a very old and well-established conspiracy, euphemistically called “tradition.” Because they are victims, I think they deserve a certain amount of empathy and understanding. However, if that eventually turns them into victimizers, that should earn them less empathy and understanding.

Our government and system of laws once dispensed legal exemptions for sincerely held racist beliefs. They don’t do that currently, inasmuch as quite a few racists would like to “Make America Great Again” by returning to that sad state of affairs that was egregiously unjust. We can look at racism as a form of delusion that one can adjudicate the worth of a person based on their skin tone or place of birth.

Our laws and Constitution don’t dispense legal exemptions for sincerely held Bigfoot beliefs, or extraterrestrial beliefs, or QAnon beliefs, Loch Ness monster beliefs, flat Earth beliefs, or any number of other clearly delusional beliefs, and for very good reasons.

Given that religious beliefs are clearly delusional, and not immutable or inherent and freely changeable, they also deserve no legal or constitutional protection either. They are on the exact same level as racist beliefs.

I propose we amend the Constitution and laws to reflect this fact.

In the meantime, we should educate our entire system of jurisprudence that delusions should not be protected by our system of “justice,” which I put in quotes because giving preferential treatment to the delusional, especially as permission to persecute or victimize, no matter how sincerely they may believe, shouldn’t conform to anybody’s notion of “justice.”

Jim Curtis is an FFRF member who lives in Texas.

Convention speech

Christian nationalism’s threat to democracy

This is an edited version of the speech delivered by Bradley Onishi on Sept. 28, 2024, at FFRF’s national convention in Denver. To watch his speech (or any of the convention speeches), go to ffrf.us/con24.

Bradley Onishi is a faculty member at the University of San Francisco and a research associate at the UC Berkeley Center for the Study of Religion. He co-hosts the top-ranked religion and politics podcast “Straight White American Jesus” and is the author of “Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism — And What Comes Next.” His work has appeared in the New York Times, NBC News, HuffPost, Religion + Politics, among others. A former Christian nationalist pastor, Onishi speaks around the country about the dangers of Christian nationalism.

By Bradley Onishi

It’s such an honor to be here. I want to talk about why white Christian nationalism and Christian nationalism in general is a threat to democracy. I’ll talk a little bit about how I know this because I was part of the movement for a long time as a minister in Southern California at a megachurch.

The way I like to envision Christian nationalism is this: Some folks say, “Hey, I’m a Christian and I love America. Does that make me a Christian nationalist? What’s the big deal?” And my response to that is, “Look, I have no issue. I lose no sleep over people of faith who love this country and proclaim to love their God.”

But, I lose sleep over the people who say, “Because I love my God, I am more part of this country than anyone else. Because I love God, I’m more of an American than you.”

That’s where things get dangerous. So, let’s imagine the United States where every demographic is represented around a round table featuring folks from every geographic location. We have folks who represent every racial demographic in our country, every ethnic demographic, every secular, atheist, agnostic, free-thinking demographic, every Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim demographic.

At the start of that round table meeting, which is supposed to be a group of citizens getting together in a democracy, one person stands up and says, “Hey, it’s great to be here with you all. But before we start, I need you to know something. I’m a Christian. This country was founded as a Christian nation, and as a result, I’m always going to have a different place at this table than everyone else. I’m always going to have an elevated status. I’m always going to be afforded an authority that you don’t have. As long as you understand that and you abide by it, then we’re going to be OK. If you don’t, we might not be. It’s your choice.”

That’s Christian nationalism. It’s the imposition not only of religion, but of authority and power over all others.

Accelerated pace

This has come to the fore in our politics in incredibly dangerous ways, not only over the last decade, but in accelerated manners over the last six months. I want to share some of those examples with you.

“I hate to say it, but this country needs a dictator.” This sound bite made the rounds in the days after the Iowa caucuses in late January [2024]. The caucuses



Bradley Onishi speaks to the crowd at FFRF’s annual convention in Denver on Sept. 28, 2024.

Photo by Kyle Hilker

serve as a visual reminder of how democracy is supposed to work. Each year, news programs film Iowans, whom Americans from Anaheim to Boston to Baton Rouge assume are all corn farmers casting their votes in a ritual that emblemizes the sharing of power and cooperation demanded of those who want to live in a democracy.

This year was different. A correspondent for “The Young Turks” interviewed the man at a “Team Trump” Iowa caucus event in Coralville. He’s middle-aged and wearing a red Trump hat. His face is weather-worn, leathery as the jacket he wears.

[Video plays] “The other day, Donald Trump said on his first day he is going to be a dictator for a day.”

“I like that, yeah, I like that.” “Would you rather have Donald Trump as a dictator for four years or re-elect Joe Biden for four years?”

“I would rather have Donald Trump. I’d like to see the repeal of the Roosevelt law so that he can be a president for a lot more than four years. But, this country needs a dictator. I hate to say that, but it’s the truth.” [Video ends]

It’s easy to write off a man-on-the-street interview as an expression of the fringe, a fanatic who made his way into television, someone made for the social media age where you could capture the clip, send it around and it would be seen by millions of folks on Instagram and TikTok over the next couple of weeks. But a month later, another man said this:

[Video plays] “I just wanted to say welcome to the end of democracy. We are here to overthrow it completely.

“We didn’t get all the way there on Jan. 6, but we will endeavor to fight to get rid of it and replace it with this right here. We’ll replace it with this. [Holds cross.] That’s right. Because all glory, all glory is not to government. All glory to God.” [Video ends]

Now, there’s no writing off this man as a blowhard on the street, some extremist of no consequence. Make no mistake, the man who said it is an extremist. The Southern Law Poverty Center has documented how he has worked with a network of extreme far-right actors. He’s published books in conjunction with white nationalists. He is one of the people who popularized the Pizzagate conspiracy, often promotes other conspiracy theories and can be understood as one of the most influential provocateurs on the

American right. His name is Jack Posobiec, a right-wing provocateur affiliated with Turning Point USA, and he has over 2 million followers on Twitter. He proclaimed his desire for the end of democracy at CPAC, the Conservative Political Action Conference, in February [2024]. That conference showcases the vanguard of American conservatives at its gatherings here and abroad.

Extremist, mainstream

Now, it may host extremists like Posobiec, but it is not fringe. Extremists can and often do take political power. Expressing a desire to overthrow democracy is an extremist position, but it is also now a mainstream one in the United States.

When I began researching my book “Preparing for War” in 2019, making a statement like that might have still gotten you in a lot of trouble as an elected official or leader if you had dared to share the same conference stage with someone who expressed their desire to overthrow democracy. They might have been forced to answer to the media or others. Do you feel like it’s a good idea to share a stage with that person? Do you think it’s a good idea to be on the same platform as them?

It’s no longer the case. There were many other speakers at CPAC, including elected representatives, those who are running for vice president and a current presidential candidate in this election. None of them disavowed Posobiec or any of his statements.

The Jan. 6 insurrection was, simply put, an attempt to end democracy. Those insurrectionists might have done so in the name of justice for a stolen election, or a rigged process, or a deep-state conspiracy. But if we ask what it was meant to do, not what the people there believed, we arrive at a straightforward conclusion. Jan. 6 was engineered to stop the democratic election of the president of the United States of America.

It was an attempt to overthrow democracy. It was an attempt to say to that roundtable of Americans who gathered, that because you didn’t listen, we’re now going to have to take action and come across the table and force you into submission.

Since I wrote this book, Jan. 6 has become an Alamo moment for MAGA nation. For many Americans, from sea to shining sea, there are martyrs of Jan. 6. Ashley Babbitt lost her life that day, but

they say it was not because she was doing something wrong, but because the deep state assassinated her. We’ve witnessed border convoys led by some of those present at J6 caravaning to the southern border in order to prevent the country from, quote, “being overrun by globalists” who they claim are conspiring to keep U.S. borders open and destroy the country.

Some elected members of Congress have called the J6 folks who have been jailed for their actions “hostages” or “political prisoners.”

Just this year, a man who did everything he could to overturn the 2020 election and, who is close to those who mobilize supporters to be there, became speaker of the House. State courthouses have been evacuated. Federal judges have been doxed. A state representative in Arizona proposed a bill that would have declared Donald Trump the winner of the presidential election in the state before the election even took place.

Theologians, historians, think-tank pundits and philosophers have published books and papers arguing that perhaps a post-constitutional America with a “Red Caesar” or Christian prince would be a better way forward for the country. Pastors and provocateurs have expressed a desire for blasphemy laws and other measures that would punish Americans for not obeying what they take to be biblical law.

Small fires everywhere

These are the small fires everywhere that the unextinguished embers of Jan. 6 have left to burn. They are reducing our democracy to ashes, and they’re doing it order to build something else. In my view, much of that movement in that history can be traced to a six-decade mobilization effort to overthrow American democracy as we know it.

What happened on Jan. 6 was shocking, but it was the outcome, in my view, of 60 years of Christian nationalists organizing to, quote, “retake the country from those who they think don’t deserve it.” Those people around the table who they think should have less of a place in this nation than them; the ones that don’t understand that you need to sit down and be quiet if you’re not one of us, and everything will just be fine in the country. Those of us who clamored for civil rights and representation, those people that demanded the right to be free and equal in the democracy in which they supposedly live. Those folks, in their minds, are the enemies that need to be overcome. For them, power, rather than democracy, is the sacred value because they believe that God has chosen them to order the country according to his vision. If God has dominion over all the Earth, they see themselves as the dominators of human society, the enforcers of God’s plans. I know that because I used to be one of them.

Now, the hits keep coming. I’ve talked about January — a man in Iowa who says we need a dictator; in February — a very influential man who says we’re here to end democracy and overthrow it completely. Well, this summer there was NATCON, a national conservatism conference that happens every year. According to its statement of principles, NATCON maintains that public life should be rooted in Christianity and its moral vision. It’s backed by the Edmund Burke

Foundation. And, in recent years, the conferences have become a place to be for Christian nationalists and right-wing speakers and elected officials to articulate their visions, to quote, “recover and reconsolidate the rich tradition of national conservative thought.”

Room for others?

Well, this year was something altogether different. It was in Washington, D.C., in July, and at the close of one particular session, the moderator, a man named Yoram Hosseini, asked these questions: When you think of this coming state where the Christian commitments are maximized, is there room for Jews or fellow bible believers? Is there room for Muslims or Hindus?

Who was on the panel that Hosseini was moderating? It was a duo once thought to be unlikely, in terms of appearing on stage together, but whose political commitments and visions now seem eerily resonant. One was Al Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Another was Doug Wilson, the pastor, publisher and podcaster headquartered in Moscow, Idaho.

For those attentive to partisan politics, this was a watershed moment. The figurehead, Al Mohler, of the largest Protestant denomination in the country, sharing a stage with the firebrand provocateur who once praised slavery and has labeled himself the spokesperson of American Christian nationalism. Doug Wilson once said that the time of enslavement in this country was the time of the most harmonious race relations we’ve ever had.

Mohler holds sway over millions of Southern Baptists as the leader of their most important institution. Wilson reaches millions through sermons, his publishing house, his podcast, his media empire and his network of churches.

By the time Hosseini asked the question, the two men had been discussing their political theological visions for nearly an hour, but it all came to a crescendo once he asked about who would be included in this theoretical Christian nation.

[Video begins] Yoram Hosseini: “When you think of this coming state where the Christian commitments are maximized, is there room for Jews or fellow bible believers? Is there room for Muslims, Hindus? How do you approach thinking about a maximally Christian committed state in a world in which you’re the partners for getting there? You know, quite a few of them are not going to be Christian.”

Doug Wilson: “I would say briefly that that Jews in this ideal republic that I would envision, or that we’d hammer out, Jews would be more welcome than they currently are here.”

Al Mohler: “Yeah, I would say enthusiastically so. And so, for instance, among my tribe, so to speak, theologically, it would be seen as a matter of absolute divine responsibility to be fully respectful of the Jewish people, fully protective, and to have the Jewish people fully integrated in the entire project. And I think this is where also, quite honestly, where you have traditional Roman Catholics, conservative Protestants and conservative Jewish people who basically already live in the same world and acknowledge that and have a mutual dependance and appreciation. And, you asked the question, though, you broadened it, and you said Hindus and Muslims and others. I don’t think a nation can survive without theological commitments. That does not mean it cannot allow others to be a part of the community, and even invite others, in a certain sense, into the community. But, it does mean that there has to be the

explicit acknowledgment that this is a nation with specific theological accountability and theological commitments. Those coming should respect that, must respect that, understand that. So, the kind of modern secularists dream is, I believe, a constitutional nightmare.”

Doug Wilson: “I agree with all of that.” [Video ends]

So, Muslims, Hindus and others, oh my. Most of you are probably the others. But they said what I tried to illustrate at the beginning. If you are around the table as an American and you don’t fit into the Christian identity, then you can still be here. You just need to acknowledge where you are. That’s a Christian nation. Everybody needs to publicly acknowledge our God, even if we can’t always force them to believe and pray to that God. That’s the vision.

Singing off same sheet

This aligned with what Wilson said in an interview from earlier this year [2024] that this is a Christian republic and you’re not singing off the same sheet of music that we are, so, no, you can’t be mayor. If you’re not singing off the same hymn sheet, whether you are Hindu or agnostic, atheist, freethinker and so on, you can’t be mayor. Maybe not principal, certainly not governor, certainly not a state representative. Now, he’s been a controversial figure for decades, but he also has several influential proteges — pastors who also reach hundreds of thousands of people in their ministry through sermons and churches, but also through social media.

One of them is a man named Joel Webbon from Austin, Texas. He’s the founder of Right Response Ministries. He holds conferences and conducts interviews with Wilson all the time. Keep in mind the man that I’m talking about often shares the stage with the man who’s on the screen right now. That man who’s on the screen right now just shook hands and shared a stage with the leader of the largest Protestant denomination in the country. These are not fringe people. They are mainstream.

In this video, he’s going to explain why America is terrible and degenerate. When he was asked what a Christian revival would look like in the country, here’s what he said:

[Video begins] Joel Webbon: “My hometown and my neighborhood.

“A true revival of the American populace in the heart, what it would then look like in the application, the political. It would look like millions of people being

deported. It would look like mothers getting death row for murdering their children.” [Video ends]

First, he says our country is under the judgment of God because there are so many folks here who worship false gods. He’s really mad that when he goes to the park, there are people there who are not white and not Christian. And he says that is a sign to him the country has really come under the judgment of God. Because in ancient Israel, whenever there were people present in the nation who did not worship their God, that was a sign of judgment.

So, if you’re not a Christian — and he says it pretty explicitly — you’re not a white person, there’s a pretty good chance that you’re a sign of judgment from God on this country. He then says revival would look like 10 million or 20 million people getting deported, and women getting the death penalty for murdering their “children.”

You want to hear more from him? Probably not. But, here’s what he says about where we are in the country:

“We are degenerates. The Constitution is not suited for governing degenerates. But I think for our population that is degraded morally and culturally, religiously, as far as we have, you need power. Men must be governed. You need a Caesar type. I don’t think constitutioning even harder is going to get us out of our current mess.”

Do you all see a theme from today? We need a dictator. We’re here to overthrow democracy. You’re not allowed here if you’re not a Christian, and if you’re not worshipping the right God. And you know who might just need to fix this? Caesar.

Now there’s another, even more influential protege of Doug Wilson’s, Stephen Wolff, the author of “The Case of Christian Nationalism,” a book that was ranked in the top 100 on Amazon upon release.

I’m an author. I have, from time to time, checked Amazon ranking lists. It’s never been in the top 100. His was there for quite some time. In his mind, nations can only be founded on a shared ethnicity. He talks about kin. He argues that nationalism is based on the shared ethnicity of a volk, based on blood relations.

He says, “I am male and am rooted ancestrally in Western Europe, and I’m speaking largely to a Western European male audience.” We’ve now got to volk in homeland in the case for Christian nationalism.

On the ground, Steven Wolff thinks that interracial marriage is almost always a sin. Women should willingly give up the

vote in order to ensure the nation is run by men, as God intended. In a nation run by a hierarchy of Christian leaders, with the Christian prince at the helm, Wolff also advocates for the enforcement of Sabbath laws and the punishment of false religion. Anything outside of the state-approved Christian practice. There goes the 19th Amendment.

[Video begins] Stephen Wolff: “We, the unhyphenated, those who trace their ancestry to Western Europe, whose roots extend beyond the Immigration Act of 1965 and Ellis Island, and once unite to this soil, we, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who founded, built and died for, and led this country for most of its history, we are not permitted in this new America to have a people or a place that is distinctly ours. There’s no distinct place that we call home. We have nowhere else to go. But, this is our home. This is our native land. We are native Americans, born of those who didn’t immigrate, but who settled here. We are the sons and daughters of the people who settled this land. To describe America as a nation of immigrants, writes the great Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, is a stretch, a partial truth into a misleading falsehood and to ignore the central fact of America’s beginning as a society of settlers.” [Video ends]

We started today with a man on the street saying, “We need a dictator.” It’s easy to write that guy off, right? Then we got to Jack Posobiec’s 2 million followers on Twitter. An incredibly influential person who says, “We’re here to overthrow democracy.” Then we got the two overwhelmingly important Christian leaders shaking hands on stage, saying, “If you are a Muslim, Hindu or other, you need to acknowledge our Christian God. Otherwise, there’s going to be trouble.” And we got to Joel Webbon saying, “We might need a Caesar because we’re so degenerate and we’re under God’s judgment because of all of these others that are in our midst.” And finally, we have the articulation that really is the crescendo of all of this, that we as the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, the white Anglo-Christians, are native Americans. That, when I look at the round table, I am looking at a table of folks that are different than me. “You immigrated here. I settled here. You have a story of making your way to the greatest nation on Earth. I founded the greatest nation on Earth.”

Now, it’s comical, but it’s also frightening because what I’ve been trying to convince you today is these are not folks with six parishioners in an obscure church somewhere. These are people that reach tens of millions of folks every week, every month, all the time.

So, where do we go from here? There are way more of us than them. We have to realize that we are in a place where it is now mainstream to say the overthrow of democracy is something we might need. There’s a lot of people calling for a Red Caesar. There are more of us than them. We have to realize we have a story that’s better than theirs, that democracy is a story that says we are all created equal. When we think of everyone else around the table, whether they are in this room or not, all those Americans around that table are people we’ve agreed to share power with and say, “we are the people” and we will live by that agreement.

That is a powerful story. That is a common story, and that’s a story that we all need to lean into and build coalitions around. Because, if we don’t, there are other stories that will threaten us, and there are people across the table from us willing to riot again in order to take what they think is theirs.



Photo by Chris Line

Bradley Onishi has a laugh with Oklahoma state Rep. Mickey Dollens during Onishi’s post-speech book-signing event. (Dollens has since become FFRF’s regional government affairs manager.)

Why so few reported Christian nationalists?

By Scott Knickelbine

The results of Pew Research Center’s latest study, “Comparing Levels of Religious Nationalism Around the World,” seem downright baffling in light of the current political landscape.

According to Pew, only 6 percent of U.S. adults qualify as “religious nationalists.” That’s a tiny fraction, even smaller than the 10 percent of Americans who identified as atheists or agnostics in 2024.



Photo by Chris Line
Scott Knickelbine

But, if religious nationalists are such a rarity, how did they manage to achieve political dominance in the United States? Well, just look at the current presidential administration. President Trump has stacked his cabinet and departments with unapologetic Christian nationalists, including Pete Hegseth at the Department of Defense and Russ Vought at the Office of Management and Budget. He has even tapped a televangelist (Paula White-Cain) to spearhead a White House Faith Office and has tasked Attorney General Pam Bondi with exposing “anti-Christian bias.” Meanwhile, Republican lawmakers in statehouses nationwide are pushing bills to hammer the Ten Commandments into classrooms and force every citizen to acknowledge the “Kingship of Jesus.”

When taking all of this into account, the study’s numbers just don’t seem to add up. But, a closer look at the study’s methodology reveals why that 6 percent number is so low. For one thing, Pew’s



Image by Shutterstock

definition of a “religious nationalist” is astonishingly rigid. To qualify, a person must agree with all four of the following statements:

1. Being part of the country’s majority religion is essential to being a “true” citizen.
2. A national leader should share your religious beliefs.
3. Your religion’s sacred text should heavily influence government policy.
4. If the will of the people clashes with your religion, your religion should win.

This definition sets a ridiculously high bar. Many would argue that agreeing with even one of these propositions is a theocratic red flag. Accepting two or three? That’s textbook religious nationalism. Yet, under Pew’s narrow standard, rejecting just one means you’re not a religious nationalist at all.

No wonder the 6 percent figure

seems reassuring. But, it shouldn’t be, because Pew’s numbers betray a much darker truth.

- As many as 52 percent of U.S. Christians believe that to be a “true American,” you must be Christian. That means over half of American Christians consider the 36 percent of people who are religiously unaffiliated or follow other faiths as outsiders unworthy of full citizenship.
- Half of American Christians think it’s important for the president to share their religious beliefs.
- An astonishing 76 percent of Christians say the president should stand up for people with their faith; 40 percent say it’s very important.
- A staggering 40 percent of Christians not only believe the bible should influence legislation — they say it should override the will of the people when there’s a conflict.

Let that last number sink in: A full 40 percent of American Christians believe theocracy should override democracy.

For purposes of comparison, it’s instructive to look at related studies by PRRI, (Public Religion Research Institute), which is led by Robert P. Jones and does important research. In February, PRRI updated its major survey of Christian nationalism across all 50 states, finding that three in 10 Americans continue to qualify as either Christian nationalist adherents (10 percent) or sympathizers (29 percent). PRRI measured Christian nationalism by asking respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with five statements, including “The U.S. government should declare America a Christian nation.” PRRI found that 37 percent of the population is skeptical of Christian nationalism and 29 percent reject it. (Incidentally, Christian nationalism is linked to being Republican, attending religious services weekly or more, and following far-right TV news sources.)

Pew’s 6 percent figure is a mirage obscuring the real crisis: a vast and motivated Christian nationalist movement shaping American policy at every level. Christian nationalism isn’t a fringe ideology — it’s distressingly prevalent. It’s why Trump was reelected and why he feeds his religious base a steady diet of Christian nationalist red meat.

So, despite the seemingly small number that Pew came up with, a closer look reveals why Christian nationalism isn’t just alive in America, it’s running the show.

Scott Knickelbine is FFRF’s director of information technology. As part of his role, he performs frequent data analysis.

THEY SAID WHAT?

They can still apply to renew their passport — they just have to use their God-given sex, which was decided at birth.
White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt, explaining how passports going forward may not reflect transgender identity.
NOTUS, 1-21-25

How did America get to the point where we’re sending hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars abroad to NGOs that are dedicated to spreading atheism all over the globe?
Vice President JD Vance, in what appeared to be a reference to a conservative argument criticizing work done by the U.S. State Department to promote a version of religious freedom that includes protecting the rights of nonreligious people.
Religion News Service, 2-6-25

From the earliest days of our republic, faith in God has always been the ultimate source of the strength that beats in the hearts of our nation. We have to bring religion back. We have to bring it back much stronger.
President Trump, in his first appearance in front of a gathering of lawmakers in the U.S. Capitol’s Statuary Hall.
Religion News Service, 2-6-25

All glory to God . . . I think the single dumbest phrase in military history is “our diversity is our strength.”

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, opening his first public address to the Pentagon work force on Feb. 7 and, according to reports, addressing a room filled with whites, African Americans, Asian Americans and Latinos.
New York Times, 2-8-25

Since I have been in [the Legislature], I have fought to force our teachers to actually use primary sources to teach our Christian heritage and its impact on our founding documents. [Superintendent Ryan Walters has] been fighting that fight through his implementation of the bible in schools. And I think that there’s a lot of benefit to looking at that. We need to be specific there. I don’t want some pink-haired person who doesn’t believe in God to start trying to teach the bible. So I want to make sure we’re teaching it specifically.
Oklahoma state Sen. David Bullard, speaking on “The Wallbuilders” podcast with David Barton. Bullard was named FFRF Action Fund’s “Theocrat of the Week” on Feb. 21.
The Friendly Atheist, 2-17-25

Just because you have a government job doesn’t mean it’s a lifetime appointment like a Supreme Court. So, I would encourage anyone who finds themselves in this situation to realize that we are going to get this economy turning again. There are jobs available. God has a plan and purpose for your life.

U.S. Rep. Mark Alford, at a town hall meeting where angry constituents shouted their displeasure with Alford over indiscriminate job cuts to the federal workforce by Elon Musk and President Trump.
St. Joseph (Mo.) News-Press, 2-25-25



Kevin Stitt

I’m sure most kids have the bible app on their phones.
Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt, who, amazingly, did not support Oklahoma Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters’ plan to spend \$3 million of public tax money on bibles for public schools.
Religion News Service, 3-7-25

I just found out we are the No. 1 school in Texas for least vaccinations. And I guess the news got a hold of it, and they were trying to spin it like it was some awful thing, but I just want to congratulate all the family members of MC Prep that embrace freedom of health, and they’re not allowing government or science projects to affect how you live and lead your life.
Pastor Landon Schott, the head of Mercy Culture Church in Texas, which runs the Mercy Culture Prep School, amid a measles outbreak in the state.
The Friendly Atheist, 3-7-25

I think Jesus is a lot better than a psychologist.
Arizona state Rep. David Marshall, during an Arizona House of Representatives’ Education Committee meeting. State Senate Bill 1269 would give school districts the option of allowing volunteer religious chaplains to provide counseling and programs to public school students.
Arizona Mirror, 3-12-25

God used Donald Trump to save me. . . I always felt like God was going to provide a miracle, and he had provided so many before.
Former Tennessee state Sen. Brian Kelsey, who was given a pardon by President Trump 15 days after he began serving a 21-month prison sentence for a campaign finance criminal conviction.
New York Times, 3-12-25

Losing Faith in Faith:
From Preacher to Atheist

LOSING FAITH IN FAITH

From Preacher to Atheist

By Dan Barker

By Dan Barker

How Dan “threw out the bathwater and discovered there is no baby there.”

— 392 pages / PB

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Charles Blow: ‘A fraught moment in our history’

“I want to use my acceptance speech to deliver a warning. We, as a country, are at a fraught moment in our history.”

This powerful opening statement by former New York Times columnist Charles Blow at FFRF’s national convention on Sept. 27, 2024, in Denver, was timely, and, unfortunately, utterly prescient.

Blow was the recipient that day of FFRF’s “Emperor Has No Clothes” award, which has been given since 1999 to public figures who, like the child in the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, “tell it like it is” about religion. Past recipients include Salman Rushdie, George Carlin, John Irving, Ann Druryan, Ron Reagan, Daniel C. Dennett, Steven Pinker and Christopher Hitchens, among many other notable individuals.

Blow left the New York Times in February after being a columnist for the paper since 2008. In his columns, he opined on topics such as social justice, racial equality, LGBTQ rights, mental health and national politics. He is the author of the New York Times bestselling book “Fire Shut Up in My Bones,” which was developed into an opera, the first by a Black composer to premiere at the Metropolitan Opera. His new book, “The Devil You Know,” has been developed into a feature-length HBO documentary called “South to Black Power.”

In his FFRF speech, Blow talked about our “fraught moment” and how it has direct ties to the growing Christian nationalism movement that seems to be sweeping through our country.

“We are now having to fight the rise of Christian nationalism, a pernicious idea that is spreading, in part, because it is misunderstood and unrecognizable to many Americans, even the ones who practice it. Indeed, Christian nationalism is a subset of white supremacy that holds that God has ordained America as a Christian nation.”

He spoke about how Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis used his Christian nationalist bona fides during his inept and failed run for the presidency.

“He decided to make his entire campaign about being a Christian nationalist,” Blow said. “In February 2020, in a speech at Hillsdale College, a private Christian college in Michigan, DeSantis said, ‘Put on the full armor of God. Stand firm against the schemes. You will face flaming arrows, but if you have the shield of faith, you will overcome them. And in Florida, we walk the line here.’”

“DeSantis’ anti-woke crusade was a manifestation of the intolerance and battle thirst of the Christian nationalists, and Florida’s distortion of Black history, and its attempt to rehabilitate the image of slavery was part of that,” he added.

Blow then talked about how slavery has been soft-pedaled in history books. He mentioned Doald Yacovone, an associate at the Hutchins Center of African and African American Studies and Research at Harvard, and his book “Teaching White Supremacy: America’s Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity.”

“He told me American textbooks, especially those published before the middle of the 20th century, were notorious for being rife with the idea that people of African descent were brought to America as a benevolent act on the part of whites,” Blow said. “Slavery was missionary work. Some of the books outrageously positioned the enslaved as the main beneficiaries of slavery, while white people were cast as having been saddled

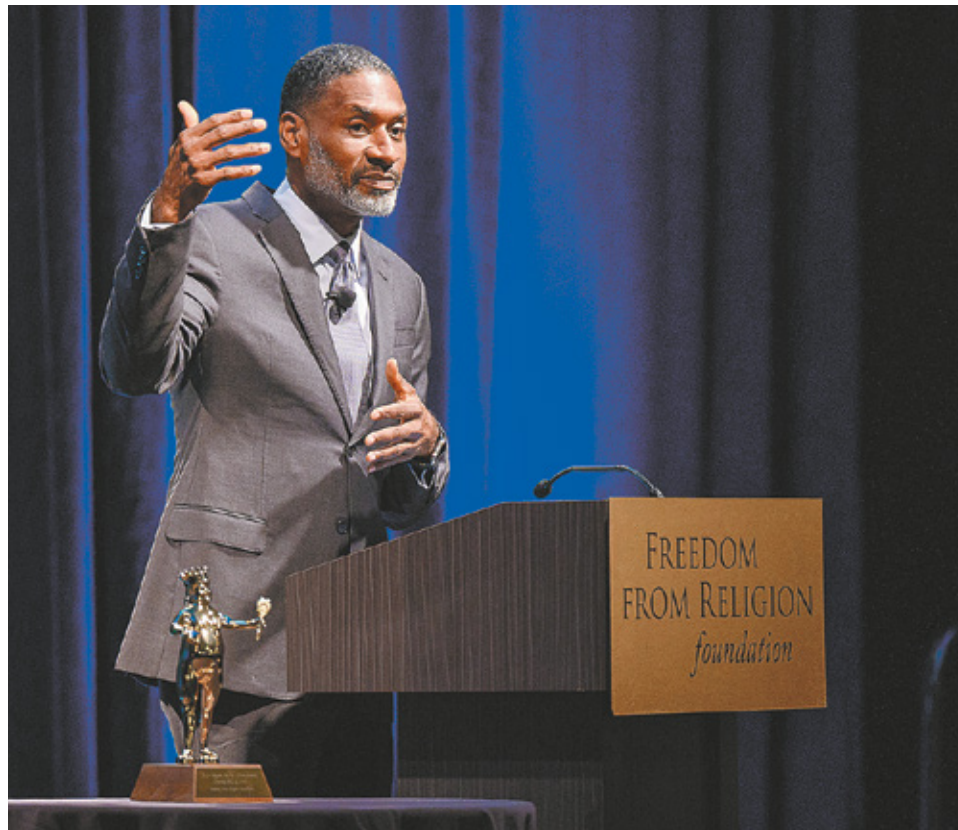


Photo by Chris Line

At FFRF’s national convention on Sept. 27, 2024, in Denver, former New York Times columnist Charles Blow talked about how Christian nationalism (and other factors alongside it) are a cause for concern regarding the survival of our nation’s democracy. Blow was given FFRF’s “Emperor Has No Clothes” award.

with the burden of slavery.”

Blow said that a 2021 analysis of American textbooks by The Guardian found that private schools, especially Christian schools, use textbooks to tell a version of history that is racially biased and often inaccurate, including those that whitewash the legacy of slavery.

“Political mythmaking is precisely what Christian nationalism aims to do,” Blow said.

He then talked about how President Trump, in his first administration, “turned the presidency into a money-making enterprise.” He mentioned the “God Bless the USA” bibles that Trump hawked, “coming from a man who wouldn’t or couldn’t name his favorite bible verse, even though he said that that was his favorite book.”

The Trump Bible includes copies of the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, and the Pledge of Allegiance, as well as the lyrics to Lee Greenwood’s song, “God Bless the USA.”

“This not only made the text American, it made it partisan,” Blow said.

He then mentioned that the blending of politics and religion is happening more often recently, and sometimes with a subtlety that many might not notice.

“Last year, while visiting my mom in North Louisiana, I started to listen to a church service that was being broadcast on Sunday morning,” he said. “And, as I’m listening, I’m shocked because the pastor drifts effortlessly, without objection, back and forth between religious teachings and Christian nationalist political fire-stoking.”

It was the banality of the way that it was integrated that Blow found so interesting and so frightening. “I could understand how people could, upon hearing this, not notice or understand that a line was being crossed.”

And, seeing the near future clearly, Blow talked about a “slow-moving constitutional crisis, some of which can be exacerbated by Christian nationalism.”

He spoke of “four great migrations” of populations happening now that are affecting America — climate migration, foreign immigration, mass urbanization and reverse migration of Black people.

Blow says climate migration is where people are increasingly leaving uninhabitable zones to more hospitable zones. Foreign immigration, he adds, is where many people around the world and the Global South move north. He said that mass urbanization is where (mostly) college-educated white millennials are moving into city centers. And that reverse migration of Black people means people from cities in the North and West move back down to the South.

Blow says these migrations will only exacerbate the inequalities of the Electoral College and Senate, where “the minority in this country increasingly has outsized control of what the majority can accomplish.”

Blow pointed to a study that showed that by 2040, 70 percent of the population is going to live in 15 states with just 30 senators.

“That means that 30 percent of the country, which is growing whiter and more rural, more conservative, is going to elect 70 percent of the U.S. Senate,” Blow said. “So, every time a kid from the Midwest moves to Brooklyn or to Denver or to West Hollywood, they weaken their voting power and increase the voting power of the people they are leaving behind. So, the trend in the Senate is becoming more

imbalanced and more undemocratic.”

Blow suggested an overhaul of the Electoral College, but also pointed out that it would be nearly impossible, given that it requires a constitutional amendment and that the smaller states would never vote to “give up their outsized power.”

Blow then moved onto describing how the courts and criminal justice system work against minorities and the poor.

“They use the criminal justice system to disproportionately target poor and minority populations, and then use the convictions that targeting produces to lock them out of the political process and prevent them from voting to fix the system that targeted them in the first place,” he said.

And, as the country becomes more secular and as minorities will eventually become the majority, Blow says controlling the courts is the best way the Christian nationalists have to hang on to their power.

“This is about power for a group of people who feel their grip on power is slipping away,” he said. “They are trying to reshape the courts for a generation, if not longer. This is why they will move heaven and Earth to control the courts, particularly the Supreme Court, because it is the surest way for them to continue to wield power, even as their ranks shrink.”

Blow then said that Trump’s support is so resilient because authoritarian rule is in line with minority rule.

“It is all undemocratic,” Blow states.

Blow then talked about Tim Alberta’s book, “The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory,” and how the author explains that many evangelical Christians have developed an “under-siege mentality that has allowed them to embrace Trump, whose decadent CV runs counter to many if not all, of their stated values. It allows them to deploy Trump as the muscle in their battle against a changing America. This kind of thinking gives license or turns a blind eye to Trump’s authoritarian impulses.”

Blow then closed out his speech by warning that our nation’s democracy currently faces “a clear and present danger.”

“The country is clearly fracturing, and America may well be in a position where, depending on the state that you’re in, you feel like you’re living in a separate country already. Any student of history, or anyone who even took a world history class in high school, knows that empires don’t remain in their primes forever. They fall or they are diminished. We are trying to maintain this empire in its prime for as long as possible. But the first step is coming to terms with just how close we are coming to losing it.”



Photo by Steve Solomon

Charles Blow shows off his “Emperor Has No Clothes” award prior to giving his keynote speech on Sept. 27, 2024, in Denver at FFRF’s national convention.

Convention speech

‘Contraduction’ is not a contradiction

This is the speech given by FFRF Co-President Dan Barker on Sept. 28, 2024, at FFRF’s 47th annual convention in Denver. He was introduced by David Tamayo, a member of the FFRF Executive Board. To watch the video of this speech (or any convention speech), go to ffrf.us/con24.

David Tamayo: I have the privilege to introduce Dan Barker, who, after 19 years of preaching the Christian gospel, finally left the faith and announced his atheism in January 1984, something that not even George Orwell could have predicted.

Eight months later, after joining the Freedom From Religion Foundation, he gave his first talk at the FFRF convention in Milwaukee in September 1984. That is 40 years ago. In 2004, he and Annie Laurie Gaylor became co-presidents of the Freedom from Religion Foundation. That was 20 years ago. Since leaving the ministry, he has participated in 140 public debates and has written 11 books.

As a way of introducing this amazing person and his latest book, I would like to dedicate to him this very short poem.

“There was once a preacher, Dan Barker, whose sermons in Mexico were sharper from induction to instruction and spiritual production, but his faith faced a swift reduction.

He preached once of sin and seduction, now he writes on religion’s destruction.

From obstruction to function, God lost his conduction, and then found pure joy in reduction.

With abduction of faith in the night, he embraced reason’s bright reconstruction.

No more church instruction, Dan’s journey, a unique conduction from preacher to atheist production.

And that is not a contraduction.”

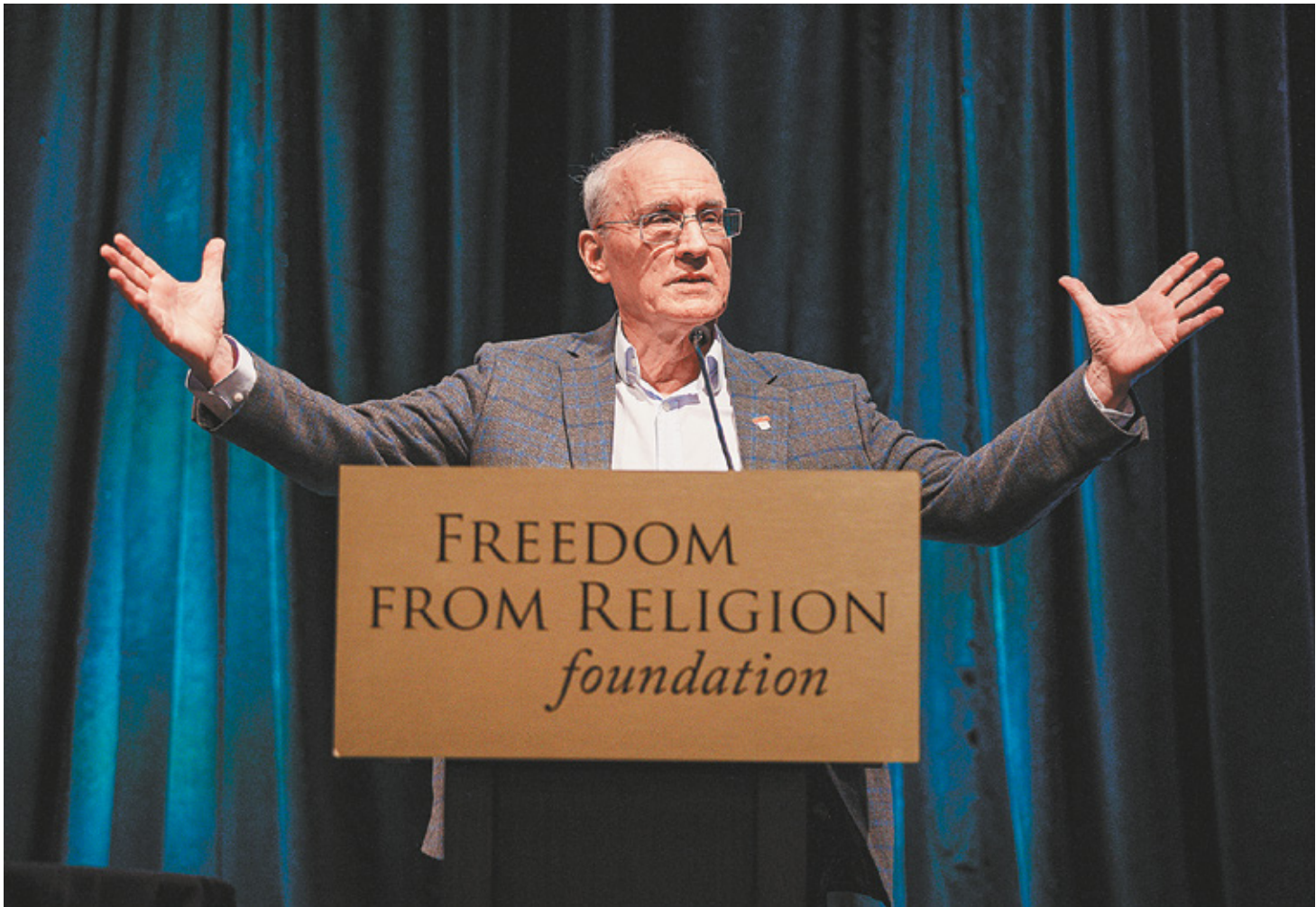
For more on this new word, I present to you my most admired friend,

Dan Barker.

By Dan Barker

My talk is “Contraduction.” If you looked at your program, you might have thought it was a typo since the “I” and the “U” are right next to each other on the keyboard. That happens sometimes, but it’s not a typo. We actually have a new word, and it’s a little bit bold to suggest I’m going to introduce a new word to philosophy because how often does that happen?

Do any of you get the “Word of the Day” that Anu Garg puts out every morning? You should sign up for that because he explains a new word and a certain theme. In the first week of September the theme was “newly coined words.” And he started the week with my newly coined word “contraduction.” He thinks someday it could end up in the dictionary. So do a number of other people; people who have blurbed the book and have said they’ve read it and said yes, in-



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker describes to the audience at FFRF’s national convention in Denver on Sept. 28, 2024, the meaning behind his new word and new book, both called “Contraduction.”

Photo by Kyle Hilker

cluding Steven Pinker, who happens to be the editor of the New American Heritage Dictionary. Others include the British philosopher A.C. Grayling, who’s well-known all over Europe. He read the book in one afternoon, and he is now recommending it. Ron Reagan gave it thumbs up. Ann Druyan, the wife and widow of Carl Sagan, said, yes. Robert Sapolsky, the skeptic Michael Shermer, and, of course, the famous David Tamayo, read the book and gave an endorsement. The sociologist Phil Zuckerman. Kate Cohen said she read the book and said it made her laugh. “The Thinking Atheist” Seth Andrews, Matt Dillahunty and many others have read this and said, yes, we think we do actually have a new word.

Hidden fallacy

So, what is “contraduction”? In brief, it’s a hidden fallacy that happens to all of us. Usually, it’s an innocent hidden fallacy that completely inverts reality, a 180-degree reversal of reality based on us assuming everything from our human point of view.

Have you ever been sitting in a train that’s not moving when the train next to you starts to move and you briefly think it’s you who’s moving. *Has that ever happened to you?* That happens to me a lot. And then you realize, oh, I’ve got it backwards. Well, that’s one example of contraduction. It’s a 180-degree reversal of what we thought was true. But, actually, the inverse is true. And this has real implications with theology and apologetics. It has a lot to do with the design argument, and especially the fine-tuning argument for the existence of God.

But it’s not just religion. Contraduction is a reversal of any kind of order. It can be time or position, or it can be cause and effect. It can be relationships.

I think the most ancient, most powerful contraduction is the sunrise. Does the sun rise? Why do we call it sunrise? It’s because from our point of view, when we’re looking at it, it looks like the sun is rising, when, in actuality, it’s completely reversed. It’s not the sun; it is we who are rising. So, it’s a complete reversal. And the correction of that contraduction in history cost some people their lives.

Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for going against the Church’s teaching that the sun goes around the Earth. Of course, Galileo and others were persecuted because of that belief, and yet they realized things were totally backwards.

Contraduction can happen with relationships. In the book “Killers of the Flower Moon” by David Grann, there’s a photo of an Oklahoma homeowner and her servant. This white woman is standing by the door of a summer retreat and next to her is this very dark-skinned Osage Indian woman. Many people who view that photo would just assume that the white woman was the homeowner, but it was the other way around. The Osage woman had become wealthy from oil rights, and she had hired the white woman.

So, that’s an example of getting a relationship totally backwards. There might be many reasons why you would assume the reverse, and we can imagine why, but whatever the reasons are, the reversal of the relationship is a reversal of a contraduction.

Need for a new word

This whole book started basically because I was invited to a debate in March 2022 put on by the Central Florida Freethought Community. One of the hosts of the debate was David Williamson, and he and a local pastor had become friends. They wanted to have a debate, and they had this Free

Flo event. One of the events was my debate with Adam Lloyd Johnson.

During Adam’s opening statement, he was arguing that the strongest argument for the existence of God is the “fine-tuning argument.” He said, “I’m going to be using abductive reasoning tonight to argue an inference to the best explanation.” He said, “I’m not arguing for the god of the bible. I’m arguing for mere theism.” He used that phrase, and I was thinking about abduction. Abductive reasoning is basically your best guess.

Sounds like a fancy word, but it just means you’ve got all these possibilities and hypothetical explanations. So, what one is the best guess? Investigators use it when they’re examining a crime, for example, to maybe come up with a prime suspect. But, you still haven’t convicted the person, you’re just coming up with your best guess.

Contraduction: The Hidden Fallacy that Inverts Reality

“AN INGENIOUS WORD FOR AN INVALUABLE CONCEPT”
Steven Pinker

CONTRADUCTION
Dan Barker

“A DELIGHTFUL READ AND A MUST-HAVE BOOK”
A. C. Grayling

Dan Barker’s latest book is “Contraduction.” Go to ffrf.org/shop to purchase a copy. Dan donated all book sales to profit FFRF.

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So, as I stood up at the podium there in my opening, I said, “I think Adam’s reasoning is backward. He’s got it reversed. And instead of abduction, I think we need a new word.” I was thinking on my feet. I was just ad-libbing, and I said, maybe we should call it “postduction.”

Well, the audience didn’t seem very impressed with that, and they shouldn’t have been because postduction is not the right word. A couple of months later, Annie Laurie [Gaylor] and I were driving down the coast highway in California, and it dawned on me: I need a prefix that doesn’t mean after, but a prefix that means inverted.

So, the concept of contraduction was born. I sat down to write what I thought was going to be a short article. No magazine would take it; they said it was it was too long. I finally found a publisher, Hypatia Press, who said they would take it. So, it became the book “Contraduction.”

In the debate, after I made that silly comment, I said, “The fine-tuning argument, people are so impressed about how all of these constants and parameters and ratios of the universe have to be exact. You talk about the force of gravity, the electroweak force, the strong nuclear force, the cosmological constant. These exact values, if any of them is off by even the slightest amount, life would not be possible in the universe. We’d be in a dead, still-born universe.”

So, Adam, in his argument, in his abductive reasoning, asked, “What’s the best explanation for this appearance of exquisite fine tuning?”

In fact, if you take all of these variables and assume correctly that they can’t vary by very much, it’s estimated that the chances of life appearing are one over 10 to the 60th. That’s a teeny, teeny, teeny tiny number. It’s a number. It’s not zero, but it’s so tiny that, well, chance doesn’t seem to be the best explanation.

Adam says, “Well, the best explanation then must be the design argument.”

I got up and said, “I think this reasoning is backward. It’s kind of like the guy who’s so impressed that all of those rivers were made to flow right along the state border? How do you explain that? You know, if you think about it, it must have been a huge, massive civic undertaking, and expensive, to get each of those rivers to be exquisitely fine-tuned to match the border. What’s the best explanation for that?”

Well, of course that’s backward, isn’t it? The rivers came first and the borders came later. Or, it can be like the guy who says, “Look at the shape of the human nose. Look how perfectly shaped it is to support a pair of eyeglasses. How do you explain that?” I think the fine-tuning argument is like that. On its face, it’s very seductive.

But if you flip it around, you can see that there’s a backward kind of thinking.

More than just religion

In my book, I do talk about religion, but really “Contraduction” has a broader application. It can apply to time itself. Is time flowing or are we flowing? Is the sun rising or are we rising?

I also have a chapter on sleep. Should we ask what is the purpose of sleep or flip it around? Should we ask what is the purpose of wakefulness? Maybe sleep is the default and wakefulness is what needs to be explained. I also have a whole chapter on mirrors, which I don’t have time to go into, but if you ever look in the mirror, it looks like it’s reversed. You’re right and

left in reverse. They’re not. The right and left are not reversed. Your right hand is to the east, that right hand is to the east and the left is to the west. What mirrors reverse is not left and right, but front to back. If you point to yourself north, it looks like it’s pointing south.

It’s a 180-degree flip. And, by the way, have you noticed that although left and right seem to be reversed, top and bottom doesn’t? Why is that? Einstein even started thinking that years ago. How? Why is that? Even if you’re lying on your side, why is it that mirrors do it? Well, it’s because mirrors aren’t reversing that way. They’re reversing front and back.

And the way to unreverse this paradox in your mind, is to imagine that you’re looking at a picture of yourself on a piece of paper, in which case you do see it like another person sees it. But if you turn the paper around and hold it up to the light and look at yourself through the back side, well, then it does line up.

So, when you look at a mirror, do the same thing. That image in the mirror is not looking at you. That image in the mirror is looking with you through you, and you can reverse it around. You know that that plays into the chapter on free will, which I don’t have time to talk about today. But if you’re looking backward in past, we see strict determinism. But, if you’re looking forward into the future, like looking into the mirror, we don’t know the future. So, we have this illusion that arises that we have free will and I think, by the way, that free will is an illusion, but it’s a beautiful illusion. While others think maybe it’s a pernicious illusion. Many of the readers of the book disagreed with me on some of these chapters, and I’m glad some of them said, “No, that’s not a good example,” but none of them disagreed with the whole idea of “contraduction” itself.

Design argument

So, you may disagree with a chapter or two. I have a chapter on design, pointing out that most design arguments look valid and strong. The basic design argument says we’ve never observed design without a designer. The universe appears to be designed. Therefore, the universe had a designer. That looks like a seductive argument, doesn’t it?

But, science proceeds from what we do observe, and the design arguments go from what we don’t observe. We could use that logic with all sorts of things. We have never observed an intelligence outside of a physical brain. God is intelligent. Therefore, God must have had a physical brain. Why? You can use that logic to produce all sorts of meaningless conclusions.

The fine-tuning argument is seductive. Christopher Hitchens said he thought it was the best argument they have because of this scientific veneer to it. The late Victor Stenger, the astrophysicist who was a member of FFRF, wrote a book, “The Fallacy of Fine Tuning,” in which he concluded the universe was not fine-tuned for us. We were fine-tuned for the universe.

Think about evolution, how we evolved to fit. If the universe had been different, we would have been different. If the river had flowed differently, the border would have been different.

I also talk a little bit about the Kalam argument, which has some contradictory fallacies within it. The Kalam is the cosmological argument that says everything that begins to exist has a cause. The universe began to exist. Therefore, the universe had a cause. That sounds kind of cool, doesn’t it? Well, yeah. And so that argument, they call it the Kalam. It’s an ancient Islamic word for the idea that there could not have been an actual infinity. There had to be a beginning, because if there were an infinite number of preceding

events, we never could have traversed it to get to now.

But, we have arrived at now. Therefore, there couldn’t have been an infinite number, there had to be a beginning. You combine that with Big Bang cosmology to come up with this Kalam cosmological argument. But, I don’t have time to destroy that. There’s five killer arguments against it, which I put in the book.

So, one hypothesis other than chance or a supreme being is a multiverse. I do not argue for a multiverse. I even said during the debate that we don’t know. A multiverse at this point in time is a hypothesis. However, it’s plausible. It doesn’t contradict any known laws of physics. Many physicists are concluding that there must be or could be a multiverse, meaning a multiple collection of universes.

If that’s true, then that raises the numerator in the fraction that produces the probabilities in the fine-tuning argument. So, if you have a higher numerator, you have more rolls of the dice, so there’s more chances to have a life-permitting universe, in which case we happen to be in one of those. What I point out is not so much that the multiverse is a factual argument, but it’s a hypothesis, and so is the idea of a supreme being.

So, if Adam is going to argue that his hypothesis has some probability to it, I would say, “Well, then we can counter this hypothesis with this hypothesis.” It’s like imaginary numbers that cancel out in an equation or like matter and anti-matter. And we need to wait until someday when either the supreme being or the multiverse has evidence for it. Then we can ask whether one of those is the cause of the appearance of fine-tuning.

When ancients were looking at the sunrise, they came up with all sorts of explanations. The bible even says the sun rises and sets. And in the second century, Ptolemy said “Look at the sun and the stars and the planets and all this stuff. How do you explain it?” And he came up with what’s called the Ptolemaic solar system, which was this weird Rube Goldberg kind of machine of spheres within spheres in retrograde. That kind of explained it all, but it was so complicated. And, if he had just reversed the contraduction and realized it’s not the sun that is rising, you wouldn’t even need to answer the question, because it wouldn’t even be a question to ask in the first place.

And a lot of these debates that theologians and apologists are raising are trying to answer these questions that are kind of like Gilda Radner on “Saturday Night Live.” “Never mind!” You don’t even have to argue it anymore.

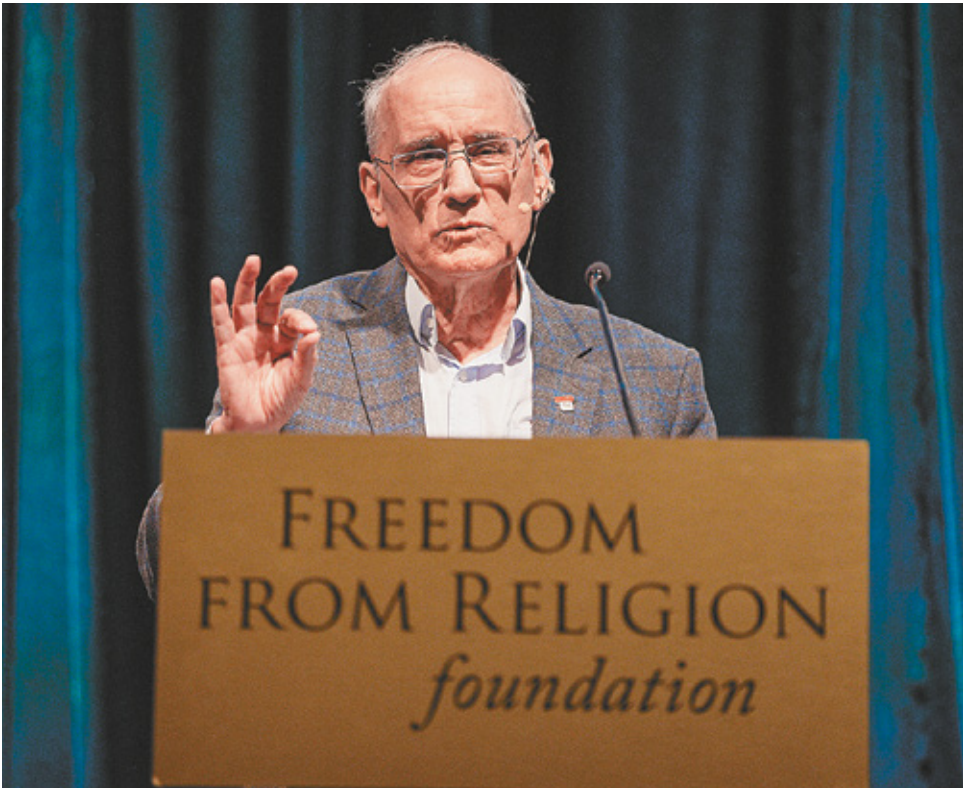
So, a word for that is “waldo.” Robert Heinlein, the science fiction author, wrote a 1942 short story called “Waldo.” This guy named Waldo was a physical weakling, but he builds this huge, fantastic Waldo pantograph machine that makes him look really powerful.

Today, the word “waldo” has come to represent any unnecessarily complicated, overly convoluted explanation. A lot of these theistic arguments are waldos.

A woman called her husband. He was traveling. And she said, “Honey, I just heard a report that there’s a vehicle going the wrong direction on the interstate.”

And he said, “I know! There’s dozens of them!”

I think a lot of these apologists are like that driver. There’s all these Waldos coming at him. The correct answer is not to just continue plowing headlong into those Waldos. The correct answer is to pull over, turn around and head back to the natural world.



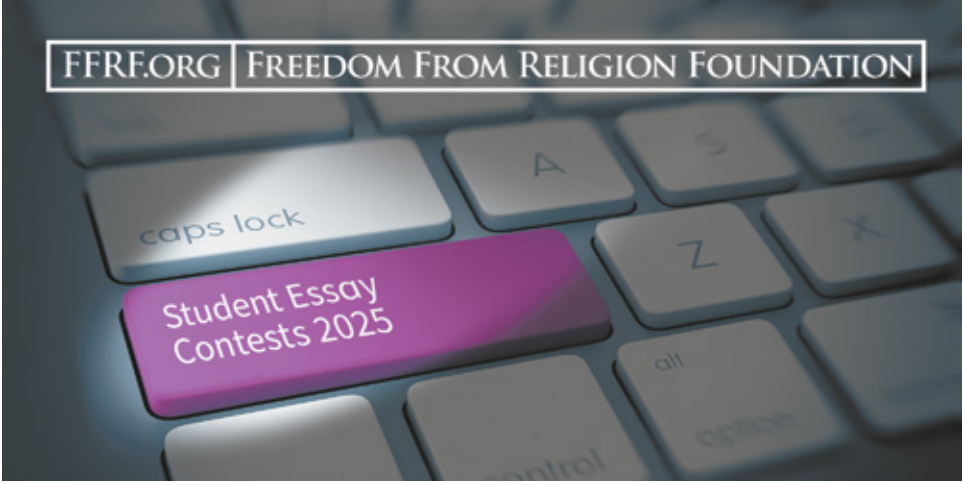
Dan Barker says the design argument for God is an example of contraduction.

FFRF’s 2025 law student essay contest winners

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the three winners of the Diane and Stephen Uhl Memorial Essay Competition for Law Students.

FFRF paid out a total of \$9,000 to the winners of this year’s contest.

Law school students were asked to write an essay on this topic: Under the First Amendment, can states require religious organizations that receive government funding to comply with anti-discrimination laws? Following the Supreme Court ruling in *Carson v. Makin*, religious organizations seeking to participate in government funding programs have argued that requiring them to comply with anti-discrimi-



nation laws in order to receive public money violates their constitutional rights. Respond to the argument that anti-discrimination laws cannot be en-

forced against religious schools receiving public funds.

For ease of reading, the essays published here do not include the footnotes and citations that were included in the authors’ submissions. Grading and selecting of the winners were done by the FFRF Legal Team.

Winners are listed below and include the law school they are attending and the award amount.

First place: Michael O’Key, UCLA School of Law, \$4,000.
Second place: Vasili Sgourakis, Iowa Law School, \$3,000.
Third place: Nerma Pasic, University of Houston Law School, \$2,000.

Diane and Stephen Uhl Memorial Essay Contest winner Perpetuation of educational segregation

By Michael O’Key

The tension between religious liberty and anti-discrimination requirements in school voucher programs represents a critical national challenge with profound implications for educational equity and civil rights. Nowhere is this tension more evident than in North Carolina, where the recently expanded Opportunity Scholarship Program serves as a compelling case study in how seemingly neutral policies can perpetuate systemic barriers to educational opportunity.

In 2023, through legislation codified at N.C. Gen. Stat. 115C-562.1, North Carolina committed approximately \$4 billion in public funding to private schools over the next decade — a massive investment that threatens to exacerbate rather than ameliorate educational inequities.

The state’s historical experience with segregation academies, combined with its current minimal oversight of participating religious schools, presents an urgent example of how voucher programs can reinforce patterns of educational segregation under the guise of expanding choice.

Historical context

Following *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), North Carolina witnessed a proliferation of private religious schools explicitly established to maintain racial segregation. As documented in state archives and contemporary scholarship, these “segregation academies” operated under the banner of religious freedom while receiving various forms of public support to facilitate white flight from integrating public schools.

By 1970, North Carolina had seen a 95 percent increase in private school enrollment, with most of these schools being religiously affiliated institutions serving predominantly white students.

The structural mechanisms that enabled segregation academies to perpetuate educational inequality find stark parallels in today’s voucher program. Despite its facially neutral presentation, the current program perpetuates barriers to access through minimal oversight of participating schools. Under N.C. Gen. Stat. 115C-562.5, these institutions face virtually no accountability requirements regarding curriculum, teacher



Michael O’Key

qualifications, or student outcomes.

They retain broad discretion to deny admission based on various criteria, including religious beliefs, academic performance, disciplinary history, and family characteristics.

The program provides no transportation support, effectively excluding many low-income families who cannot arrange private transportation across North Carolina’s sprawling school districts.

Constitutional framework

Recent Supreme Court decisions require careful analysis to understand their scope and limitations relative to anti-discrimination requirements. While *Carson v. Makin* (2022) and *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* (2020) prevent excluding religious schools based solely on their religious identity, these rulings do not create a constitutional right to receive public funds while engaging in discrimination. Chief Justice Roberts, writing for the majority in *Carson*, explicitly noted that the decision addresses only “discrimination based on religious identity” — not religious use.

“The court emphasized that states may still impose neutral, generally applicable requirements on all funding recipients.

The foundational case *Bob Jones University v. United States* (1983) provides compelling support for states’ authority to condition public benefits on compliance with anti-discrimination requirements.

The Supreme Court unequivocally held that religious institutions have no constitutional right to receive public benefits while maintaining discriminatory practices. Chief Justice Burger’s majority opinion declared that “not all burdens on religion are unconstitutional” and emphasized that the government’s fundamental interest in eradicating racial discrimination in education “substantially outweighs whatever burden denial of tax benefits places on petitioners’ exercise of their religious beliefs.”

This principle takes on renewed urgency in the context of North Carolina’s voucher program, where public funds directly subsidize institutions that may exclude or discriminate against already marginalized students.

This authority gains additional force from *Employment Division v. Smith* (1990), where Justice Scalia, writing for the majority, affirmed that the Free Exercise Clause does not relieve individuals of the obligation to comply with “valid and neutral law[s] of general applicability” simply because they run counter to religious practices. Even the Court’s recent decision in *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia* (2021) maintained this basic framework, turning on the presence of a system of individualized exemptions rather than rejecting the validity of neutral, generally applicable requirements.

Educational segregation

North Carolina’s voucher program operates with remarkably little oversight compared to other states’ programs.

The Department of Public Instruction’s own data reveals troubling patterns: participating private schools serve disproportionately fewer students with disabilities (only 3.2 percent compared to 13.1 percent in public schools), English language learners (less than 1 percent compared to 8.9 percent), and students from low-income families.

This disparity stems directly from the program’s structural flaws — specifically, N.C. Gen. Stat. 115C-562.2(b) allows schools to require substantial tuition payments above the voucher amount and provides no support for essential services.

The practical effects of these policy choices become clear in the geographic distribution of participating schools and the barriers facing potential students. A comprehensive analysis of program par-

ticipation reveals that private schools cluster predominantly in more affluent areas, creating “education deserts” in lower-income and rural communities.

The absence of transportation support, combined with North Carolina’s expansive school districts, effectively places participating schools out of reach for many families who cannot arrange private transportation. Schools may require additional fees for books, materials, uniforms, extracurricular activities, technology, and application processing — costs that can amount to thousands of dollars beyond the base tuition. These financial barriers, though facially neutral, disproportionately impact students of color and low-income families, effectively replicating patterns of segregation through economic means.

Applied to North Carolina’s voucher program, established Supreme Court precedent provides clear authority for imposing anti-discrimination requirements on participating religious schools. Such requirements would not target religious institutions for disfavored treatment but would represent neutral conditions advancing compelling state interests in educational equity. As the court noted in *Norwood v. Harrison* (1973), “discriminatory treatment exerts a pervasive influence on the entire educational process,” making state efforts to prevent such discrimination particularly compelling in the educational context.

North Carolina possesses broad authority to condition voucher participation on compliance with comprehensive anti-discrimination requirements. The state can and should mandate that participating schools address discrimination across multiple dimensions: race, ethnicity, religion, disability status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and family structure.

Such requirements find firm support in both federal precedent and North Carolina’s own constitutional obligations under Article IX, Section 2(1) of the North Carolina Constitution, which guarantees the right to a “sound basic education” to all children. The North Carolina Supreme Court’s landmark decision in *Leandro v. State* (1997) emphasized that this right extends to all students, regardless of their geographic location or socioeconomic status.

Necessary reforms

North Carolina must implement comprehensive oversight mechanisms to prevent its voucher program from facilitating modern forms of educational segregation. The state should amend N.C. Gen. Stat. 115C-562.5 to require that participating schools demonstrate compliance with rigorous academic standards, including mandatory reporting of student achievement data, teacher qualifications, and curriculum alignment with state educational goals.

Empirical research from other states demonstrates that strong accountability measures significantly improve educational outcomes for historically marginalized students in voucher programs.

Most critically, the state must address the practical barriers that currently exclude many of its most vulnerable students. This means requiring participating schools to provide transportation assistance, limiting additional fees beyond the voucher amount, and mandating support services for students with disabilities and English language learners.

The current system’s failure to provide these basic supports has created what one federal court described in a similar context as “a modern form of separate but equal.”

Conclusion

The North Carolina case illuminates a fundamental tension in voucher programs across the United States: balancing religious liberty with the imperative to prevent public funds from enabling discrimination in education. The state’s experience demonstrates how voucher programs, without proper safeguards, risk transforming the laudable goal of educational choice into a mechanism for perpetuating educational segregation through more sophisticated and less overt means.

With minimal oversight and accountability measures, the state’s Opportunity Scholarship Program exemplifies how the absence of anti-discrimination requirements can effectively recreate segregation academies with public funds, merely cloaked in the modern language of choice and religious freedom.

The constitutional principles at stake extend far beyond North Carolina’s borders. While Carson prevents religious status discrimination nationwide, it does not — and cannot — preclude states from ensuring that public education funds serve truly public purposes.

As more states expand their voucher programs, North Carolina’s experience offers a crucial warning about the necessity of robust oversight and anti-discrimination requirements. The fundamental question is not whether religious schools can participate in public funding programs, but whether states can allow any school, religious or secular, to receive public money while engaging in discriminatory practices that undermine the core promise of equal educational opportunity.

The answer must be no. States not only possess the constitutional authority to impose meaningful accountability measures but have a compelling interest — indeed, a moral obligation — to do so.

The alternative, exemplified by North Carolina’s current approach, risks using billions in public funds to

subsidize and legitimize educational segregation under the guise of choice. At stake is not just the integrity of public education funding, but the fundamental promise of equal educational opportunity that has animated civil rights struggles for generations. Without immediate reform, North Carolina’s voucher program threatens to unravel decades of progress toward educational equity, creating a state-funded system of separate and unequal schools that betrays our highest constitutional and moral principles.

Michael O’Key is a first-year law student at UCLA School of Law, where he is a Public Interest Law Fellow, and a fourth-year Ph.D. candidate student in education at Stanford University. Michael holds an M.A. in sociology from Stanford, a Master of Regional Planning from Cornell University, a B.A. in public administration from Auburn University, and a B.S. in environmental design from Auburn University. In 2020, Michael was appointed by North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper to serve on the Juvenile Justice Planning Committee of the North Carolina Governor’s Crime Commission.

Second Place

Antidiscrimination laws and religious schools

By Vasili Sgourakis

Because antidiscrimination laws are neutral and generally applicable laws governing outward physical acts, they may, in accordance with the Constitution, be enforced against religious schools receiving public funds.

“The Free Exercise Clause protects religious observers against unequal treatment and subjects to the strictest scrutiny laws that target the religious for special disabilities based on their religious status.” As such, “the government, if it is to respect the Constitution’s guarantee of free exercise, cannot impose regulations that are hostile to the religious beliefs of affected citizens and cannot act in a manner that passes judgment upon . . . religious beliefs and practices.” The First Amendment’s Free Exercise Clause thus protects the religious against improper discrimination by government.

But the “right of free exercise does not relieve an individual of the obligation to comply with a valid and neutral law of general applicability on the ground that the law proscribes (or prescribes) conduct that his religion prescribes (or proscribes).” Indeed, “conscientious scruples have not, in the course of the long struggle for religious toleration, relieved the individual from obedience to a general law” because “the mere possession of religious convictions . . . does not relieve the citizen from the discharge of political responsibilities.” In other words, a law may mandate religious people or institutions behave in a certain manner, even contrary to their religious beliefs, so long as the law is neutral and generally applicable.

Antidiscrimination laws meet the neutrality requirement because they do not single out religious practices or institutions for unique burdens. When “the object of a law is to infringe upon or restrict practices because of their religious motivation, the law is not neutral.” And the neutrality requirement is similarly violated when institutions are disqualified from a public benefit “solely because of their religious character.” Accordingly, a “nonsectarian requirement for otherwise generally available tuition assistance payments” was held to “violate the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment” because it discriminat-



Vasili Sgourakis

ed against an institution’s religious character. However, when a law’s adoption is unrelated to “the object of suppressing the exercise of religion,” it will satisfy the neutrality requirement. In the case of antidiscrimination laws, this condition is generally satisfied. Antidiscrimination laws apply to all persons, regardless of their religious inclination. They possess a “broad scope” and their “objective” is deterring “the act of discriminating against individuals . . . on the proscribed grounds.” As opposed to other non-neutral legislation, antidiscrimination laws were not “enacted because of their suppression of religious practice.” Instead, these laws seek to discourage discriminatory practices, irrespective of their religious backdrop. “The object of Title VII” “is not to target religion, but rather to eliminate discrimination in employment.” It is evident, therefore, that antidiscrimination laws generally do not target religion in an unneutral manner.

Likewise, antidiscrimination laws are generally applicable because there is no mechanism for individualized exemptions, and they seek to proscribe discrimination writ large rather than only in the religious context. “A law is not generally applicable if it invites the government to consider the particular reasons for a person’s conduct by providing a mechanism for individualized exemptions.” Moreover, “a government policy will fail the general applicability requirement if it prohibits religious conduct while permitting secular conduct

that undermines the government’s asserted interests in a similar way.” Antidiscrimination laws aim to promote equality and apply universally. Title VII, for instance, broadly prohibits employment discrimination because of “race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.”⁴ To be sure, Title VII and Title IX contain “categorical exemptions” but “[t]heir application does not depend on individualized discretion” so “they do not invite ‘the government to decide which reasons for not complying with the law are worthy of solicitude.’” Moreover, these exemptions largely apply to religious institutions and therefore do not operate in a manner which “favors comparable secular activity” to the same activity in a religious setting. It is evident, therefore, that antidiscrimination laws meet the general applicability requirement since they apply to employers broadly without any process for individualized exemptions.

Still, when antidiscrimination laws provide mechanisms for personalized exemptions, they are not generally applicable. For instance, in *Fellowship of Christian Athletes v. San Jose Unified School District*, the Ninth Circuit held that a school district’s antidiscrimination policies were “not generally applicable because the District retain[ed] discretion to grant individualized exemptions for its own programs and students alike.” But antidiscrimination laws are laws of general applicability so long as they neither permit individualized exemptions nor draw a distinction between discrimination in the religious versus secular context.

Nevertheless, religious institutions may, in some instances, be exempt from neutral and generally applicable laws because “the First Amendment protects their right to decide for themselves, free from state interference, matters of church government as well as those of faith and doctrine.” Although “[t]his does not mean that religious institutions enjoy a general immunity from secular laws, it does protect their autonomy with respect to internal management decisions that are essential to the institution’s central mission.” Accordingly, the “ministerial exception” “precludes application of [employment discrimination] legislation to claims concerning the employment relationship between a religious institution and its ministers.”

Critically, however, the court’s ministerial exception doctrine distinguishes between “government regulation of only outward physical acts” and “government interference with an internal church decision” because the latter “affects the faith and mission of the church itself.”

Like the permissible prohibition on the ingestion of Peyote in *Smith*, antidiscrimination laws govern “only outward physical acts.” They proscribe the “act” of discriminating based on a given characteristic. Title VII, for instance, prohibits “treating a person worse because of sex—such as by firing the person for actions or attributes it would tolerate in an individual of another sex.” And rather than interfering with decisions central to a religious sect’s identity, such as the selection of its faith leaders, applying antidiscrimination laws to religious schools merely obligates the schools to refrain from certain discriminatory actions. After all, the exception “was not developed to provide protection to individuals who wish to contravene a generally applicable law” but instead to preserve the notion “that churches are to be free from government interference in matters of church governance and administration.” Although some positions might meet the ministerial exception standard because they are “essential to the institution’s central mission,” the application of antidiscrimination laws to religious schools generally comports with the Free Exercise clause.

In sum, antidiscrimination laws may constitutionally be applied to religious schools receiving public funds. First, antidiscrimination laws may be enforced against religious schools because they are neutral and generally applicable to both religious and non-religious institutions alike. Furthermore, their application to religious schools does not per se offend the ministerial exception since antidiscrimination laws govern outward physical acts and do not generally interfere with matters of faith and doctrine.

Vasili Sgourakis is a 3L at Iowa Law School. He plans to practice corporate law at Mayer Brown in New York. “My background in political science and constitutional law courses have instilled a strong interest in constitutional law,” Vasili writes. “I plan to continue to pursue this interest going forward through pro bono work and personal study.”

Third Place

When Jesus takes the wheel (and your taxes)

By Nerma Pasic

Growing up in Pearland, Texas, I am unfortunately familiar with the homophobia reflected in Bangor Christian School's (BCS) code of conduct — a school that sought to be included in the stipend program outlined in *Carson v. Makin*. In 2016, the superintendent of my public high school used religion to justify his harmful beliefs about transgender students.

Among his statements, he implied that legalizing gay marriage “redefin[ed] marriage” and attempted to provoke fear by warning that pedophilia and polygamy would be legalized next.

I was horrified. My parents, refugees from a small country where few openly identified as gay, were equally appalled. Despite their limited exposure to LGBTQ communities, they understood that ignorance is never an excuse for prejudice. Nonetheless, our taxes supported a superintendent who consistently failed to do what our Constitution requires, separate church and state.

The outcome in *Carson* also fails to do this. BCS prohibited gay students from attending the institution (and even declared being gay an “immoral activity”) effectively banning support for same-sex relationships.

Moreover, the school's employment agreement required teachers to acknowledge “that the Bible says that ‘God recognize[s] homosexuals and other deviants as perverted.’”

Allowing a family to receive a tuition stipend to attend BCS expends taxpayer money — including contributions from individuals who would be barred from attending or working at BCS — to support the school's anti-LGBTQ policies. The aftermath of the Supreme Court's decision in *Carson* has exposed a constitutional vulnerability that could allow religious schools to avoid anti-discrimination laws while still receiving public funds. In this paper, I will argue that such an outcome is not supported by the Constitution nor case law.

The First Amendment was written in absolute terms, providing a safeguard for religious freedom while maintaining the separation of church and state. It is notably one of the only parts of the Constitution in which we can decipher the intent and meaning of the founding fathers who understood the benefits of religion while treating it distinctly from other activities.

Although the Establishment Clause and Free Exercise Clause are often in tension, the text at the very least prevents a state from aiding or opposing religion.

In fact, the Supreme Court has long stated that if funds are used to assist sectarian schools, the funds must be strictly confined to the secular functions of the school, such as providing non-religious reading material.

Allowing a religious school to use public funds to promote their secular beliefs while being exempt from anti-discrimination laws would fundamentally promote religion. Such conduct is contrary to the intent of the First Amendment.

Even if anti-discrimination laws disturb a religious group's beliefs, there is longstanding precedent that allows laws to incidentally burden religion without requiring them to meet the demanding standard of strict scrutiny.

Under strict scrutiny, the challenged government action must be narrowly



Nerma Pasic

tailored to achieve a compelling state interest—a high bar that many laws fail to clear.

To avoid being subject to this analysis, a law must be neutral and generally applicable.

A seemingly simple requirement that has been recently reinvented by the Supreme Court making it increasingly difficult for legislators to draft neutral and generally applicable laws.

This is further complicated when considering *Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. City of Hialeah* where the Supreme Court acknowledged that while a law may seem neutral and generally applicable, hidden animosity may inadvertently promote the analysis to strict scrutiny.

This occurs when there is evidence that the objective of the policy is to discriminate against particular religions.

Therefore, to ensure that religious institutions are subject to anti-discrimination laws, the law should be neutral, generally applicable and the legislation process should appear unbiased towards religion.

These principles informed Maine's legislature when they anticipated the Supreme Court's ruling in *Carson*. Lawmakers then amended the Maine Human Rights Act to block public funding from any school that discriminates on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

The law is general, applying equally to all schools regardless of their affiliation, neutral in that it does not single out or target any specific religious beliefs, and there is no evidence of hidden animosity in its legislative history. A similar regulation was upheld in *Christian Legal Society Chapter v. Martinez* where the Supreme Court denied a student religious organization's argument that being required to comply with the school's anti-discrimination policy constrained their right to free exercise of religion.

The court reasoned that the policy

did not impede on the organization's rights because the policy did not target any specific religious beliefs and applied to all student groups making it neutral and generally applicable.

If Maine's new law persists through its current legal challenges (where it has so far been affirmed by a federal court in Maine), it will achieve the same goals as the legislation in *Carson* with a much stronger legal basis.

Religious institutions will undoubtedly argue that not allowing them to discriminate against certain groups restricts their right to free speech. However, laws regulating discriminatory conduct are expressly prohibiting acts, not speech.

Specifically, a law like the one Maine passed prevents a private school from denying an individual from attending just because they are gay. However, the law does not prevent the school from teaching that homosexuality is wrong thus leaving the school's freedom of speech intact. This reasoning is parallel to the Supreme Court's analysis in *Rumsfeld v. Forum for Acad. & Institutional Rights, Inc.* where law schools that prohibited military recruiters were denied federal funds.

The schools argued that this law violated their First Amendment rights by requiring them to assist in military recruitment.

The Supreme Court disagreed, finding that requiring schools to provide equal access to military recruiters only regulated conduct—the act of allowing recruiters on campus—and did not force the schools to express any particular message or endorse any military policies.

This distinction between regulating conduct and compelling speech was further reinforced in *Christian Legal Society*. Specifically, the court held that requiring the organization to accept all students as a condition of receiving university recognition and funding regulated only the act of membership selection, not the group's expression of its beliefs.

Further, the government is permitted to attach reasonable conditions on funds.

In *Bob Jones University v. United States*, the Supreme Court upheld the IRS's revocation of tax-exempt status from a private school maintaining racially discriminatory policies despite their religious justification.

The court explained that the government's interest of eradicating discrimination in education was compelling enough to outweigh the burden on the school's exercise of their religious beliefs.

Further, in *Prince v. Massachusetts*, the Supreme Court held that child labor laws prohibiting the sale of printed materials on public streets could also be applied to religious material.

The court explained that there was no constitutional basis in allowing “[Jehovah's Witness children] from doing there what no other children may do.”

These cases illustrate that freedom of religion is not absolute and may be burdened to advance important government interests, such as maintaining an inclusive environment in schools.

Though the drafters of the Constitution intended for religion to be treated differently than other activities, the Supreme Court's recent decisions consistently reject this notion.

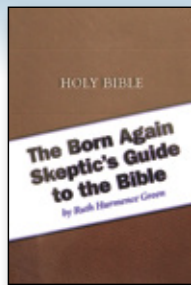
In *Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia, Inc. v. Comer*, the Supreme Court held that churches could not be excluded from a grant program solely because of their religious affiliation.

This point is further reinforced in *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* where the Supreme Court held that once a state decides to subsidize private education, they may not exclude certain schools because of their religious affiliation.

These decisions establish a clear rule: Religious institutions must be treated the same as their secular counterparts in accessing public benefits. This principle, however, cuts both ways. It would be wholly inconsistent for a court to find that a religious institution deserves equal access to public funding while simultaneously giving them a unique exemption to avoid adherence to anti-discrimination laws that bind all other recipients of public funds. This would not only violate the First Amendment's neutrality requirement but also create a paradox in which religious institutions would enjoy the advantages of public funds without bearing the same responsibilities as secular recipients.

The Supreme Court's recent decision in *Espinoza*, *Trinity Lutheran*, and *Carson* have dangerously extended the Free Exercise clause while narrowing the boundaries of the Establishment Clause. The aftermath of these cases demands immediate and decisive action, primarily through state legislatures. As Maine's response to *Carson* demonstrates, lawmakers can craft legislation that both respects religious liberty and upholds anti-discrimination principles. Such action is necessary to ensure the separation of church and state.

Nerma Pasic is a third-year law student at the University of Houston. During her time in law school, she has enjoyed practicing analytical writing and building creative arguments to complex legal problems, highlighted by her publication in the Houston Business & Tax Law Journal. After graduation, Nerma is excited to join a boutique estate planning law firm in Houston, where she hopes to continue developing these skills.



The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible
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By Ruth Hurmence Green

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FFRF CHAPTER UPDATES

Upstate New York Freethinkers



Upstate New York Freethinkers achieved rapid growth by prioritizing infrastructure before its public launch. By carefully reviewing the websites of established chapters and receiving invaluable mentorship from key chapter leaders across several states, we gained insights that allowed us to create a robust website, donation platform and communication tools before our public launch. This “reverse launch” strategy enabled immediate engagement and growth.

- Key takeaways:
- Build first, launch second: Establish essential systems before announcing your chapter.
 - Leverage community: Learn from and collaborate with existing FFRF chapters, and foster collaboration with atheist and secular humanist groups in various regions, finding FFRF members within those groups by asking them to announce us in their news and social media.
 - Resource sharing: We serve as a resource for new chapters, offering guidance on processes and procedures. Contact us at info@unyft.org or phone/text (585) 454-9921 for assistance.
 - Data-driven results: While our first annual report (<https://unyft.org/>

annual-reports/) reflects the accomplishments of our chapter’s initial setup phase, we’ve experienced significantly increased activity and growth throughout 2024.

- Expand our reach: Encourage new chapter formation, particularly in underserved areas like New York City and other downstate areas, and across the nation. We have engaged with leaders in other states, providing guidance and support for their chapter development. We are committed to fostering a stronger FFRF presence nationwide.
- By implementing this strategic approach, new chapters can achieve a “quick and robust beginning,” fostering a stronger FFRF presence nationwide.
- Exciting upcoming events: We are honored to be hosting FFRF leadership for two special events: In late March, FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor will be joining us in our Western New York region (visit unyft.org/go). In August, we will host FFRF Co-Presidents Gaylor and Dan Barker, along with renowned author and journalist Kate Cohen, at our 2nd Annual Chapter Gathering (visit unyft.org/gatherings).

Ozarks Chapter of FFRF

The cold weather did not stop the Ozarks Chapter from getting together on Feb. 16 to address the current Arkansas legislative session and the proposed bills that violate state/church separation. From chaplains in school to religious “freedom” bills, politicians continue to push Christian nationalist policies. But our chapter has rallied and underscored the importance of not just emailing, but calling state representatives to oppose these outrageous pieces of legislation.

Capping off the winter season, the Ozarks Chapter met in Fayetteville on March 1 to watch Amanda Tyler deliver her speech, titled “Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy.” Amanda is the ex-



ecutive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, lead organizer of BJC’s Christians Against Christian Nationalism campaign and co-host of BJC’s “Respecting Religion” podcast. She is also a recipient of FFRF’s Champion of the First Amendment award and spoke at FFRF’s national convention in 2023 in Madison, Wis. Afterward, several Ozarks FFRF members came together to enjoy dinner at a nearby Thai restaurant. Contact OzarksFFRF@gmail.com for more information about the Ozarks Chapter of FFRF.

Valley of the Sun

The FFRF Valley of the Sun Chapter returned to the Melrose Street Fair on March 1, engaging with attendees about the importance of secular government. Set in the heart of Phoenix’s lively Melrose District — home to many LGBTQ-owned businesses, creative spaces and a fabulous rainbow crosswalk — the annual fair provided the perfect opportunity to connect with a diverse and welcoming community.

With hundreds of vendors and organizations lining the streets, the event was packed with local businesses, unique artisans and groups sharing information about their causes — including FFRF Valley of the Sun’s

upcoming Annual Chapter Forum and Neighborhood Hangouts! Our booth welcomed visitors eager to learn more about our work, sign up for our newsletter and explore ways to get involved.

We also held a drawing for four thought-provoking books: Dan Barker’s “Losing Faith in Faith,” Kate Cohen’s “We of Little Faith,” Amanda Tyler’s “How to End Christian Nationalism,” and Annie Laurie Gaylor’s “Woe to the Women — The Bible Tells Me So.” Attendees left with free materials, including FFRF noncontracts and bookmarks, “Get Out of Hell Free” magnets, and membership information — because advocating for reason and secular values should always come with great resources!

The Melrose Street Fair was a fantastic opportunity to engage with people who value critical thinking, equality, and a secular government. With so many great conversations and new connections, we were reminded once again why this event is such an important space for freethinkers. We’re already looking forward to next year!

Contact info@ffrfvs.org for more information about the Valley of the Sun Chapter of FFRF.



FFRF Valley of the Sun’s board members — Mars de La Tour, Philip Carman, Whit Johnson, Janet Johnson — greet the crowds at Melrose Street Fair.

OVERHEARD

It’s the best scam that money can buy. **Tennessee state House Minority Leader John Ray Clemmons, opposing a universal private (read: religious) school voucher bill that was bulldozed through the state legislature in late January. This makes Tennessee one of a dozen states allowing families, regardless of income, to siphon off tax dollars to pay for vouchers for religious schools or other alternatives to public education.**

Chalkbeat.org, 1-30-25

In just its first few weeks since taking office, the Trump administration has quickly become the most harmful to religious freedom in modern American history. **Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, in the article, “Trump isn’t defending religious communities — he’s waging war on them.”**

Religion News Service, 2-11-25

Donald Trump and the Christian nationalist movement that put him in the White House (twice) are seeking to transform public education into something similar to what I was reared on, where science, history and even economics are taught through an evangel-

ical conservative lens, while prayer and bible reading are foundations of the curriculum. **Josiah Hesse, in his column “Evangelical education nearly ruined me. Now the Christian right is coming for public schools.”**

The Guardian, 2-12-25

The administration’s shock-and-awe affront to trans and nonbinary people capitalizes on an election season that scapegoated trans Americans and encourages a continued barrage of anti-trans legislation.

This slew of attacks is inseparable from the rise of Christian nationalism in recent years and closely parallels the strategy used to politicize and restrict abortion access, which had been largely apolitical until the time of the Roe v. Wade ruling. Christian nationalists are now deploying eerily similar arguments about “defending innocent children” in their war against gender-affirming care. **Moses Hernandez McGavin, a minister with the Freedom Church of the Poor, in his column, “Trump 2.0’s scapegoating of trans people is a Christian nationalist distraction.”**



JB Pritzker

Religion News Service, 2-14-25

My oath is to the Constitution of our state and of our country. We don’t have kings in America — and I don’t intend to bend the knee to one . . . It took the Nazis one month, three weeks, two days, eight hours and 40 minutes to dismantle a constitutional republic. All I’m saying is when the five-alarm fire starts to burn, every good person better be ready to man a post with a bucket of water if you want to stop it from raging out of control.

Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker
Facebook, 2-19-25

Alabama lawmakers have wasted no time in 2025, rushing to replace governance with gospel. Once again, they wield religion — not as a guiding light, but as a political weapon. **Bill Britt, editor of Alabama Political Reporter, in the op-ed, “Alabama’s**

Ten Commandment’s bill: A power grab disguised as faith.”

Alabama Political Reporter, 2-24-25

As if it isn’t enough for some legislators to try showering millions of dollars of taxpayer money into religious education, they now want to bring religious instruction into public schools. All of this, of course, flies in the face of the strict separation of church and state required by the Idaho Constitution. **Former Idaho Supreme Court Justice Jim Jones, in his op-ed, “There’s a raft of unconstitutional, religion-based legislation in the Idaho Capitol.”**

Idaho Statesman, 2-24-25

Part of why we’re seeing a particularly virulent strain of Christian nationalists’ fight for power in American society right now is because, deep down, they know that they’re losing the long game. **Jessica Grose, in her column, “The share of religious Americans will continue to decline.”**

New York Times, 3-13-25

LETTERBOX

Words of praise for Okla. state Rep. Dollens



This letter was left on the desk of Oklahoma state Rep. Mickey Dollens, who also recently became FFRF’s regional governmental affairs manager.

Representative Dollens,
Thank you for fighting against Christian nationalism, particularly in our school system. It is paramount that schools remain neutral, keeping ALL faiths out of the classroom. I’m a proud product of public ed here in OK — where I was taught the value of religious freedom. Our nation was founded upon such values. Why are we not focused on improving testing scores, counseling, and better funding for resources? Keep fighting to stop these power-hungry, un-American movements.
We are a melting pot. Diversity is a founding identity of our nation. All religions must be respected; but more importantly, kept out of government.

the value of religious freedom. Our nation was founded upon such values. Why are we not focused on improving testing scores, counseling and better funding for resources? Keep fighting to stop these power-hungry un-American movements.

We are a melting pot. Diversity is a founding identity of our nation. All religions must be respected, but more importantly, kept out of government.

Circumcision is abuse under guise of religion

Mentioned in early religious texts, including the bible, it must have meant that God made a mistake when he created boys, a mistake that must be fixed ASAP by circumcising them. This should be considered serious child abuse.

Although slowly becoming less popular even here in the still rather religious United States, it is still done routinely by parents who either don’t care or who simply do it blindly for religious reasons. How many intact men want it done later in life, except for some rare medical reasons? No one in their right mind!

Even the Hippocratic Oath (“First, do no harm”) is being violated routinely by harming innocent little boys for life! Early religious indoctrination can be overcome, but such surgical violation of a little person’s genitals is just another example of how harmful religion can be, and why such superstition has long since been abandoned in the more progressive and better educated countries. Are we such slow learners, that boys must pay dearly for it, for the rest of their lives, while also indirectly affecting their later partners, girls and women?

California

Freedom of religion includes no religion

In the United States, freedom of religion doesn’t apply only to your religion or mine, but to all religions, including those with no religion, ergo, freedom from religion.

The First Amendment of our Constitution states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” That’s why we’re free from government interference or intervention when we gather to worship. By the same token, it means one religion will not be imposed upon those of other religions or no religion.

That’s why we don’t pray aloud in publicly funded schools or post religious propaganda on school property or websites, because the taxpayers who fund our schools believe in different gods, or no god.

It’s why employers can’t pressure you to subscribe to their religious views and certainly why American governments, whether federal, state or local, can’t show favor or deference to any religion when they pass laws, make decisions or render legal judgments.

California

Another unique take on the nation’s pledge

In the March issue Letterbox, I enjoyed the entry, “A new pledge for a disunited country,” by Chuck Berry of Pennsylvania.

I found it intriguing since I, a couple weeks ago, had conjured up my own version of the Pledge of Allegiance:

“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America,
And to the Republic for which it stands,
One nation, divisible, with liberty and justice for all . . . white male non-incarcerated Christians.
All others will be considered on a case-by-case basis.”

I appreciate the work your organization does and find it very encouraging and even surprising that there are so many freethinkers out there. I hope we get through this awful present crisis with some semblance of our democracy intact.

The journalist Rebecca Solnit, as quoted in Harper’s Magazine, said, “Our mistake was to think we lived in a better country than we do.”

Oregon

Pleased to hear the FFRF ads on the radio

I’m an old man at 94, and, as I use up my remaining time on Earth, I write hundreds of letters regarding my causes and passions. Every morning, I wake up and listen to Radio WCPT out of Chicago. I’ve been pleased to hear the ads from FFRF during the program.

In this nightmare of Trump 2.0, millions of people are going to suffer from a malignant narcissist and sociopath. We all knew this, but in this dark year it will maybe finally dawn on the MAGA cult that he doesn’t really care for the millions of them in deep red states. I do remember one of my high school history teachers describing an election campaign where the slogan for the Democrats was, “Had enough?”

California

Sending warm hugs to FFRF from California

Just sending a warm hug for all that you guys do. A very warm hug. Keep it up. Don’t back down. We so need you all to continue your work. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

California

CRANKMAIL

Here is this month’s collection of correspondence and voice messages from some of our more vocal detractors. Published as received. Warning: Strong language.

Truth: There is an ENORMOUS amount of scientific evidence that the Kong James Bible is 100% true. Check it out...hopefully before the rapture.

Your ad: Your television ad, with Ron Reagan gleefully welcoming an eternity in hell, is sad. God is great. Life is great. Nihilism is not.

Sinners: Stop advertising such sinfulness. Your hearts will come to the truth. You must go back and correct yourself. Stop misguiding people.

Wrong!: Why don’t you move to communist countries, like in Russia. You people are so wrong.

Death to atheists: I hope you all fucking die or are assassinated.

Beware: I believe in God and what you are doing on television is a shame and god will punish y’all.

Reagan: Tell Ron Reagan since he’s not afraid to go to hell, he will get there.

God is real: It’s so sad that you have made this choice. I’m an older person and lived through life and I can tell you that there is a god. I’m praying for you.

Fools: Youse guys are total fools. A total fool. I suggest you get that stupid tv commercial off the screen. You don’t even realize how big of a fool you are. You’re a fool.

God created us: You guys are ignorant. You give us one in a trillion trillion trillion chance of life, you’re idiots. You’ll pay for that someday. God is gonna get you.

Shame: You are the utmost disgrace to America. Every one of our founding fathers was a Christian. There’s something that’s touching you inside that doesn’t make you feel right. You’re not in terms with your death and life and after-life. You just want everything to be anarchist, chaotic lawless society. Christianity is not a religion, it’s a relationship with a living God. All of you need to go home, sit down close your eyes and ask if God is real. I want you to dig deep and find him. You will find him. Do something that is productive and good for society. Have you not read the Bible? I despise people like you, but I still love you. All this other hogwash is nothing. Everything was created to a specific micron. It was all designed. You cannot call yourself an atheist and believe in evolution at the same time. You are inherently supporting white supremacy. Christ was a freedom fighter. But you are

living and were born in a Christian country.

Not too late: Hello there, Ron Reagan. I’ve been a lifelong Catholic. I will live and die as one. I pray for you every night, Ron. I ask forgiveness for you. Please, please, believe. Maybe you weren’t indoctrinated like I was, but I went to Catholic school. Your father was a believer. As far as hell goes, a priest said there are very few people in hell, so hopefully you won’t go there. I’ve been Catholic my whole life and will remain so. Gary Cooper converted to Catholicism on his deathbed. He got an Oscar in High Noon. Life is so much easier when you believe. Jesus rose from the dead and we can look forward to seeing our relatives in heaven. I would like to think our Jewish brethren get into heaven too.

Communists: I’m watching your commercial. You are definitely communist democrats. Communists are bad.

Hell is waiting: You guys disgust me. You need a relationship with God like I do. Get your head out of your hind end. I’m sure your dad was ashamed of you. You’re all ridiculous. You’ll burn in hell all right.

Library is burning: Your dad’s library in California is burning down. Freedom from religion, in California, go with the library that burns down. In Jesus’ name.

Obviously, I believe in the United States of America. What do you believe in? Now, get out of my fucking life. I will burn your fucking ass into the dead salt sea. Any questions? I didn’t think so! You dumb-ass atheist motherfucker.

Women Without Superstition
“No Gods—No Masters”

Edited by Annie Laurie Gaylor

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

Published by FFRF

— 696 pages / HB
\$20 Item #FB30

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ffrf.org/shop

Why doesn't God reveal itself to humans?

By PJ Slinger

The religious person's mindset has always been an enigma to me in the way that they can contort reality to fit their worldview. I've listed a few questions I have and tried to come up with the most plausible explanations.

Why doesn't God reveal itself to humans in a way that can be verified and documented?

Basically, why is God hiding? Believers say it's because God wants to find out who the truly faithful are. It takes faith to believe in something you can't see or hear or even prove to exist. God apparently wants those kinds of people, those who can be convinced to believe without facts or evidence. But, since God is allegedly omniscient,



Photo by Chris Line
PJ Slinger

doesn't it already know who the true believers are? Why all the secrecy? Really, though, it's the churches that want those people, because who would tithe 10 percent of their income if they knew they were being hoodwinked? So, the churches continue to peddle the idea that faith is the ultimate (and impossible to disprove) way into God's heart.

But, if God really wants to make believers out of people, it could just show us in no uncertain ways. Why is faith the crucial ingredient?

If God truly wanted every human to know it was real and powerful and just and benevolent, it could easily show us without ambiguity. It could end world hunger in a flash by making food plentiful and readily available to every human, no matter where they live. Or, using his superpowers as an omnipotent being, he could just allow all humans (and all life forms) to survive without the need for sustenance. Might as well eliminate pain and suffering, too. Now, that would be credible evidence of a god.

Of course, we all know the reason it doesn't reveal itself . . . because it doesn't exist.

Where do people draw the line at what supernatural entity they believe in?

A recent poll shows that 70 percent (!) of adults in the United States believe



in angels. That's crazy to me. Even crazier, 2 percent of atheists, 25 percent of agnostics and 50 percent of those identified as "nothing in particular" believe in angels. What?

Almost half of the population believes in ghosts, despite zero evidence. If there were actual evidence (not just some paranormal hunters getting some electromagnetic readings in an old house), it would be trumpeted across the globe, just as if there was real evidence for God or whatever other beings are out there in people's imaginations.

What about leprechauns, trolls and gnomes? People don't believe in them, at least not in the same way or levels they believe in angels or ghosts. But why not? What is different about the makeup of a ghost that makes believing in it credible versus that of a gnome? Why would a person believe in angels but not trolls?

My guess is that it's because angels and ghosts are invisible (just like God!), whereas trolls and gnomes and leprechauns are all (allegedly) material beings. It's much easier to say an invisible (and silent) being is real when there is absolutely no way to disprove it.

What about a magician? Do people really think a magician is doing things outside the laws of our universe? I doubt that many people believe that the magician is actually doing some paranormal activity when he pulls a rabbit from a hat or saws a woman in two. They know the magician is just doing some form of sleight of hand or something that can be explained through rational reasons.

So, why don't these same people use those reasoning powers to reject other paranormal or superstitious beliefs?

Why do believers think having the "fear of God" is a positive quality?

Christianity.com says that fearing God means "both bowing in utter reverence and respect before the One who created the world and all things in it and cowering on trembling knees at the prospect that He could if He so chose, destroy us all in a moment. Fear is rooted both in awe and in terror, and this is not a bad thing. God, the almighty ruler of the universe, is indeed all-powerful. He can create heaven and earth, and we certainly are no match for Him."

Wow — "Cowering on trembling knees" and "destroy us all in a moment." I don't understand how people can be both in awe and terror from the same entity. I guess an abusive parent or spouse comes close to this. Fortunately, I have not been part of an abusive relationship as such, so I can't speak from experience. But I truly don't understand how one can be so fearful of someone (God) because of the negative things they can do to you and yet be so awed, appreciative and reverent of that same being.

Why is God not only the creator of universe, but also omnipotent/omniscient/omnibenevolent?

Sure, a god could create an entire universe. But could this god have lesser qualities than the ones bestowed upon it by believers?

Imagine a student in a biology lab who manages to create some form of life — perhaps even by accident. Now, say this life form ends up becoming sentient over time. Would those beings then ascribe to the student such powers as omniscience or omnipotence, when really, it was just a student's clumsy mixing of chemicals? How do we know the god who created our universe wasn't just a clumsy student from a different universe?

Well, we know the answer. If you're gonna worship something, you'd better make sure it's the best, most powerful

god possible, right? I mean, who's gonna worship a god that spilled some chemicals onto a Petri dish?

Or, what if this god created the universe and then left it to evolve on its own? That certainly seems to be the most robust argument (that incorporates a god), since the way the universe works sure seems as if there is no one guiding it.

Again, the same response works here. Why have a god who is only good enough to create life (or a universe), but isn't necessarily benevolent or all-powerful or all-knowing? Because without those qualities, another god who does have those qualities would be a "better" god. So you might as well go for the best possible god of all, right?

Why do people think "everything happens for a reason"?

I am dumbfounded whenever I hear someone say this. There are two ways to look at this.

On the logical side, yes, everything does happen for a reason. It's because of the laws of nature. If I drop a glass, it will fall to the floor and most likely break.

But people don't say "everything happens for a reason" when someone drops a glass on the floor. They say it when something unexpected happens. Perhaps someone they loved died in a car accident at a young age. Because they can't fathom losing this person for what amounts to a pure chance occurrence, they wish to believe that it happened for an ultimately good reason, although they admit that that don't know what that reason is.

It is almost assuredly because that person believes in a higher power (specifically, God), who has a master plan. God has set everything in motion according to its will and the plan is infinite and unchanging.

Because they don't know the reason why God would let that young person die, they say, "God works in mysterious ways." Now they have the peace of mind that somehow this person's death is for the greater good at some level (because God is omnibenevolent) that is beyond the capacity of us mere humans to discern.

Of course, the idea of a universal master plan by God also eliminates the idea of free will. The universe will unfold the way that is preordained, even though it may feel to you like you have agency over your thoughts and movements.

What about those who say there are no such thing as coincidences?

Again, I think anyone who says this is relating it to some higher power. That, or people just don't understand the laws of probability.

How many times have you thought of someone and then, perhaps even minutes later, that person contacts you or you see them at a random place? Do you immediately think there is some higher power guiding those chance encounters?

But how many times do you think of someone and they don't contact you or you don't see them for a significant amount of time? That happens orders of magnitude more often, although you don't think about it during those times. It's only when they do pop up in your life shortly after thinking about them that you think there's a higher power guiding that interaction, when, in reality, it is pure coincidence.

PJ Slinger is editor of Freethought Today.



Include FFRF In Your Estate Planning

Arrange a bequest in your will or trust, or make the **Freedom From Religion Foundation** the beneficiary of an insurance policy, bank account or IRA.

IT'S EASY TO DO!

For related information (or to receive a bequest brochure), please contact:

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Crossword answers														
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Cryptogram answer

Religion . . . asks us to deliberately deceive ourselves — to replace reason with its opposite, faith. And when men operate on faith, they can no longer be reasoned with, which makes them more dangerous than any sane man, good or evil.

— James L. Sutter

FFRF convention, Oct. 17-19

Meet us in Myrtle Beach!

Join the Freedom From Religion Foundation on the beautiful eastern shore for its 48th annual convention from Friday Oct. 17 to Sunday Oct. 19 at the Hilton Myrtle Beach Resort at 10000 Beach Club Dr., Myrtle Beach, S.C. 29572.

General Schedule

Convention registration will open during a complimentary Thursday Early Bird Welcome Reception in the afternoon. Registration will re-open the following morning at 8 a.m. The convention programming will begin in the Palisades Ballroom at 9 a.m. and will run through Saturday evening. On Sunday morning, the membership and state representatives meeting will take place, ending by noon.

Registration

Registration for the convention is \$100 for an FFRF member, \$105 for an accompanying non-member, \$160 for non-members (or save money by joining FFRF as a member when registering).

High school students and younger can register for free, and college students can register for the discounted price of only \$25. To register, complete and return the registration on the right, or register online at ffrf.org/convention2025.

Optional Group Meals

Five ticketed meals, including FFRF’s popular “NonPrayer Breakfast,” will be offered this year, more than usual, in part because — aside from two in-house restaurants — meal choices outside the resort will be limited, unless you have a car or use Uber. A small-capacity shuttle that can be ordered ahead can take some participants to nearby restaurant strips in Myrtle Beach.

The ticketed meals are: Friday lunch and dinner and Saturday breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The complimentary Thursday Reception will offer light hors d’oeuvres and a cash bar.

There will also be a complimentary continental breakfast on Friday morning and dessert reception Friday night.

Vegetarian, vegan and gluten free options are available for the ticketed meals. Please specify your ADA needs on the registration form.

Friday Buffet Lunch

Flamed broiled beef on bun with toppings, grilled kielbasa with caramelized onions and local beer, marinated grilled zucchini and portobellos, buttered corn on the cob, Southern egg potato salad, housemade barbeque chips, classic garden salad & dessert.

Friday Plated Dinner

Your choice of three main dishes:
Chicken: Grilled Marinated Chicken Breast (GF).
Fish: Pan Seared Mahi.
Vegan: Marinated Grilled Portobello Steak.
Beverage options include sweet and unsweet tea, water and agua fresca.

Saturday Plated Breakfast

Buttermilk biscuits and gravy, scrambled eggs, applewood smoked bacon, and roasted red skin potatoes. Served with fruit juice, regular and decaf coffee and hot tea.



This is the design for the convention T-shirts.

Saturday Buffet Lunch

Grilled center cut boneless pork chops with melted onion and mushroom gravy. Buttermilk fried chicken, sour cream mashed potatoes, bacon brown sugar green beans, roasted buttered corn, tossed garden salad, sweet and spice slaw, mini cornbread loaves with whipped butter & desserts. Served with sweet and unsweet tea, water and agua fresca.

Saturday Plated Dinner

Your choice of three main dishes:
Chicken: Cast Iron Airline Chicken Breast (GF).
Fish: Pasta con Pesce with Halibut, Salmon & Local Shrimp.
Vegan/Vegetarian: Roasted Acorn Squash Stuffed with Quinoa.
Beverage options include sweet and unsweet tea, water and agua fresca.

Hotel Amenities & Dining Options

The oceanside Hilton Myrtle Beach hotel houses a heated pool, spa, gym, golf simulators and access to the Myrtle Beach boardwalk. The hotel also boasts two in-house restaurants: Cafe Amalfi — open for breakfast, lunch and dinner; Black Drum Brewing — open for lunch and dinner; a cafe: The Shores Marketplace Cafe — open all day; and two cocktail bars: The Wet Whistle and the Veranda Bar, open in the evenings.

Note: There are no readily walkable restaurant alternatives from the resort.

Hotel Booking

FFRF offers a discounted room block at the Hilton Myrtle Beach Resort. We encourage you to book your hotel room soon.

Reservations must be made on or before Monday, Sept. 22, to receive FFRF’s discounted room rate of \$165/night plus tax.

If you need an ADA accessible room, state your needs when making the reservation. Check-in time is 4 p.m., and check-out time is 11 a.m.

You can book your hotel room online or over the phone.

Online: visit ffrf.us/hotel2025
Phone: call reservations at (800) 876-0010 and Select Option 3 for Hilton Myrtle Beach. To receive FFRF’s room discount, you must **identify yourself as attendees of ‘Freedom From Religion Foundation Annual Convention’** and use the following code: **‘FFR’**

ffrf

2025

National Convention

MYRTLE BEACH

October 16–19, 2025

CONVENTION REGISTRATION FORM

Or register online: ffrf.org/convention2025

REGISTRATION FEES

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

OPTIONAL MEALS / EVENTS

No programming will occur during group meals. Meals are offered for socializing and convenience. FFRF does not make any money on the meals, and charges the hotel's prices which includes a 35% service and tax fee. Please specify your ADA needs and dietary requirements below.

Thursday, October 16th

Evening Welcome Reception [must register to attend]

Check box if attending ☐ Registrant 1 ☐ Registrant 2

___ Free

Friday, October 17th

Friday Buffet Lunch

Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

___ \$65

___ \$ ___

Friday Dinner (plated)

Registrant 1 ☐ Chicken ☐ Fish ☐ Vegetarian/Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Registrant 2 ☐ Chicken ☐ Fish ☐ Vegetarian/Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

___ \$75

___ \$ ___

Saturday, October 18th

Saturday Nonprayer Breakfast (plated)

Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

___ \$35

___ \$ ___

Saturday Buffet Lunch

Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

___ \$65

___ \$ ___

Saturday Dinner (plated)

Registrant 1 ☐ Chicken ☐ Fish ☐ Vegetarian/Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Registrant 2 ☐ Chicken ☐ Fish ☐ Vegetarian/Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

___ \$75

___ \$ ___

Optional Commemorative 2025 Convention Logo T-shirt (Black)

S-XL \$25, XXL-XXXL \$30 (Pick up at convention)

Size(s) _____

Quantity _____

Cost _____

___ \$ ___

► Total \$ _____

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

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

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

Name of Registrant 1 _____

Pronouns (optional) _____

Name of Registrant 2 _____

Pronouns (optional) _____

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

Address _____

City _____

State / ZIP _____

Phone* _____

Email* _____

Credit Card Number _____

Expiration Date / Security Code _____

Billing Name / Signature _____

*Contact information for in-house use only

Registration Deadline is on or before Tuesday, September 30th (unless the event is sold out)